

FOURTEENER

FOUR CORNERS MYSTERIES

HP HANSON

**14 Complete Novels, Including For The First Time
CLIMATE FOR MURDER**

Fourteener: Four Corners Mysteries...

*...is dedicated to the memory of
Edwin E. Hanson (1926-2013),
whose voracious reading habits taught me
the beauty of literature and the fun of light reading,
which is the kind of fun these stories are meant to offer.*

Fourteener:

Four Corners Mysteries



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Lilies of the Valley

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The Dean's Murders: A Four Corners Mystery

First published by 1stBooks Library, ©2000, ISBN 1-58721-058-4

Classical Villainy: A Four Corners Mystery

First published by 1stBooks Library, ©2001, ISBN 0-7596-6718-7

Excess Homicide: A Four Corners Mystery

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Head for Murder: A Four Corners Mystery

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Murder Under Glass: A Four Corners Mystery

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Murder on the Rocks: A Four Corners Mystery

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Lilies of the Valley: A Four Corners [Historical] Mystery

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First Publication in this Volume

These are novels. The stories they tell, conceived and written purely for entertainment purposes, are completely fictional. All characters, except public figures mentioned in passing, are altogether imaginary and are not intended to represent any individuals, living or dead. Similarly, all events described are products of the author's imagination and, to the extent that they may reflect some basis in reality, are not intended to disparage or defame entities associated with those events.

Fourteener: Four Corners Mysteries

Foreword

In Colorado, where there are 53 of them, and in the mountaineering community generally, a “fourteener” (or, sometimes, “14er”) is a 14,000⁺-foot mountain. From my living room windows, I can see the very top of one of the more well-known fourteeners, Longs Peak (14,255'). A different view of Longs and the “Keyboard of the Winds,” its southwestern ridge, is shown on the cover.

Title and cover picture notwithstanding, such lofty topography is not what this book is about (although Longs plays a small role in the Prologue to *Wet Work*). Rather, *Fourteener* is an anthology of the fourteen novels I've written in my “Four Corners Mysteries” series, including a brand new one, *Climate for Murder*. So, sorry, no mountaineering here. There is, though, plenty of murder and mayhem, rollicking romance, food and fly-fishing, and southwestern scenery—nearly a million and a quarter words worth, in fact.

* * *

I began writing these novels some twenty years ago, as a sort of challenge to myself. At the time, I had been working in positions that required significant travel between Denver or Albuquerque and Washington D.C., usually to Reagan National Airport. Back then, such trips required changing planes, for reasons I've never understood, so the trip in either direction took six hours or so. I've never been able to get real work done sitting on an airplane, so I always stopped in the airport bookstores to find something to read. And because I've always been a mystery fan—I read *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* at least three times before I got my driver's license—I gravitated toward that genre.

At first, I read books by authors whose names I recognized. Eventually, however, I ran through those and began picking out books more or less at random, based on the covers, or the synopses, or the blurbs, or some flash of (flawed) intuition. In doing so, I had decidedly mixed success. Indeed, some of those books, published by respectable, big-name houses, were just awful. Terrible. They were boring, ridiculous, overly graphic in some way, horribly written, or just dumb—or, often, some combination of these.

“I can write better than that!” I'd say to myself, frustrated with what I'd picked out.

Now, scientists are trained to be skeptical of unsupported assertions. Consequently, it didn't take too many of those exclamations of frustration for a little voice in my head to say “Oh, yeah? Care to prove it, pal?”

Switching from writing factual, carefully documented, technical papers for scientific journals—and I've probably produced another million words of that sort of prose—to writing fiction wasn't without its little adventures. My first such experience came early in the first draft of *The Dean's Murders*—I'd written myself into a dead end. Like a novice floor painter who winds up in a corner, I was stuck. The solution, of course, was to back up—I tried a sentence, then a paragraph, then a chapter section before I

found that I had to return to the beginning of that chapter to get unstuck. To get unstuck, of course, I had to make up a new storyline. But I found myself in my technical-paper-writing mode: No, I thought, I can't change anything—that's the way it happened! It took quite a while before that same little voice reminded me that I'd made the first version up from thin air, and surely I could just do that again.

Eventually, that reminder soaked in and I managed to avoid the first-version pitfall of having to kill off Dean Hal Weathers. That he's survived for twenty years, providing support and even assistance to my lead detective, validates, I hope, that initial revision.

* * *

Hal may have survived for twenty years, but, through the miracle of literary license, he's not twenty years older now. Fourteen novels in twenty years is not quite three-quarters of a book per year, and at that pace it didn't take too long for me to realize that my characters were aging too fast for them to continue the lifestyles to which they had become accustomed early on. So I began writing "flashback" novels, stories that fill in gaps in their personal chronologies. Although there's no reason to be precise about it, it's fair to say, based on various bits and pieces of these stories, that they all take place in a six-to-eight year span somewhere during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Cell phones (always called "cellular" phones when all this begins) are evolving from in-car versions and dumb flip phones with towers few and far between to sort-of-smart touch-screen phones; the internet (used for "e-mail") is at first slow with difficult accessibility but becomes more and more of a real tool eventually; computer diskettes are still a thing; car models, locations (especially restaurants), and other hints point to this time period as well. I've also taken liberties with the timing of real events (such as the 2013 flood in Estes Park, a central character in *Wet Work*) to use them in these stories.

I mention this to emphasize that I've arranged the order of the novels here to match the characters' personal chronologies, rather than the publication order of the books themselves. (The publication order is shown above in the Publication History; the chronology is in the Table of Contents.) This means that *Nuclear Family*, FCM number eight in the publication order is included here third. And the newest FCM, *Climate for Murder*, first published here, is eleventh.

* * *

I've omitted here the many "Afterword" sections that appeared in the original novels, but I believe it's appropriate re-acknowledge Craig Tigerman and Julie McKie for their help and encouragement throughout my efforts. My wife Claire deserves special thanks for putting up with me for all these years and for providing me with the gratification of hearing her chuckles, giggles and, occasionally, outright laughter during her reading of these stories.

I'm not in a position to say whether or not I've succeeded in meeting the challenge I set for myself twenty years ago, to "write better than that!" I can hope, however, that some of the fun I've had writing these stories comes through, and that they're enjoyable to read. Thanks for taking the time to do so.

HP Hanson
Estes Park

The Dean's Murders

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



The Dean's Murders: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

Whitby Bradford finally exhaled a huge cloud of marijuana smoke, which mixed with the steam coming off the churning water and floated away into the Sunday night sky. He was sitting in a hot tub on the redwood deck of a condominium near the base of the Purgatory Ski Area, about 25 miles up the Animas River Valley from Durango, Colorado, pondering his good fortune and trying not to feel too smug. Which was the better score, he asked himself, the pound of Mendocino County flower tops that he'd managed to purchase just before Thanksgiving, or the athletic young lady he'd met in the moguls of Upper Catharsis earlier in the day? Her tolerance for high-grade cannabis being far lower than his, she had gone inside a while earlier to sleep, and he had the hot tub, the joint, and the stars above all to himself. Which was just fine, because he needed to think, difficult as it was in his fuzzy condition.

The new pound of smoke would see him through the rest of December, and maybe even for the next several months if he didn't sell any of it. Which meant he wouldn't have to worry about making a personal purchase again for quite a while—and a good thing, because the local distributor he dealt for down in Durango didn't like his street dealers using too much themselves. But Bradford had saved enough for at least a month of groceries, partly on the volume and partly because he had bypassed Frank, the middleman, and avoided the additional markup. No way did Bradford want to end up like Frank.

Despite the hot water, the thought of Frank, so newly imprinted on his memory, made him shiver. Better try harder to think more pleasant thoughts.

In contrast to the dope, he had no idea how long his new companion would last him. She'd certainly proved earlier that she could more than hold her own in the sack as well as on the snow. Pleasant thought, indeed! He'd have to wake her up later and see if she was ready for an encore.

But the purchase of a whole pound had put a big dent in his cash flow situation despite the savings, so maybe he'd have to make a sale or two just to get rent and gas money. If things got desperate, he had the use of his Mom's condo here at Purgatory, but if he gave up his apartment in Durango, he'd have to commute, and the additional gas bills would partly eat up the savings on the apartment. And it would sure cramp his style socially not to have a place in town. His other large expense for the winter, the season lift ticket, was already taken care of, but funds would still be a bit tight for a while. Maybe he could mix the leftover Colorado home-grown he had in with some of the new stuff and sell it at a profit. But he'd have to be extremely careful, given what happened to Frank. He shivered again, and, even in his fuzzy condition, the memory of the recent events culminating in last night's conversation came flooding back.

* * *

Bradford knew Ty Bortle's habits well enough that he'd had no trouble finding him the previous evening. Bortle liked to come into town every Saturday for supplies and a good drunk, and he rotated his business among several bars, all at the low end of the trendiness scale. Bradford had simply cruised past Bortle's various haunts until, at about 7:00, he'd spotted Bortle's battered pickup truck in front of the

Horse Gulch Saloon. Bradford had fed several dollars into the jukebox to provide some camouflaging noise, because he surely did not want anyone to overhear the conversation. His taste in music—new age jazz—did nothing to relieve the depressing atmosphere in the nearly deserted bar.

Unfortunately for Bradford, Bortle had been in the Gulch since mid-afternoon and was only marginally coherent. And the last thing he wanted to do was to discuss what Bradford had on his mind.

“Look, Ty, I know you don’t want to talk about what happened with Frank, but I’m worried that we could be next. I’m also worried about what’s going to happen next spring, when the snow melts.”

“Ahhh, don’t sweat it. Unless you’re trying to pull the same tricks that Frank did. Or you’re acting like a prima donna, like those people up on the campus.” He weaved on his bar stool and leaned his chin on his hand. “Besides, we’re just small-fry, not like Frank. And I’m going to worry about next spring next spring. Hey. How about buying a round for once?”

“I think what you need is some food, Ty. How about one of those pickled eggs? At least one good thing from all this is that we won’t have to buy from Frank any more. His prices were inflated and his stuff was cut. But I still don’t understand why Sal did what he did.”

“Because his prices were inflated and his stuff was cut, stupid. As a warning. For us and for Sal’s other people, here and down south and over in Cortez. And I sure got the message: Don’t mess with the quality at the street level. Sal’s worried about his reputation, or what his bosses will do, or something. Frank just got too greedy.” The very notion of a pickled egg seemed to have done wonders for Bortle’s thought processes. Unfortunately, his coordination was not similarly affected, and he had keeled over, face down on the bar.

* * *

Bradford’s reverie was interrupted by a beeping noise, and it took him a few seconds to realize that he had drifted off and the telephone was demanding his attention. He shook the water off his right hand, reached over to the redwood bench, and picked up a portable handset, pushing the “Talk” button.

“Yeah?”

“Bradford? So I finally found you. You sure are a pain in the ass to track down.” Bradford recognized the voice from his last meeting with his main connection in Durango. And it got his attention. Sal had imported muscle from out of town recently, and this one was scary.

“Hey, come on, man, this number’s on Sal’s list of where to find me. What’s the problem?”

“Where are you, anyway? What’s this ‘Purgatory’ place?”

“The ski area, way north of town. Sal told me to get out of town tonight.”

“Yeah, well, he wanted me to check on where you are, just to make sure you did what he asked. You staying there all night?”

“Until morning. I’ve got to get back to town by 9:00. That OK?”

“Just stay away from that campus office of yours until then. That way, Sal will stay happy. And you want Sal to stay happy, don’t you?”

“Hey, man, Sal’s happiness is my number one priority. And I’m not going anywhere tonight.” The phone went dead.

He reached over to the bench to set the phone down and watched in detached fascination as his hand shook uncontrollably. Maybe another joint would help.

* * *

Part I

Winter Break: A Very Merry Christmas...

One

Thinking about it later, it was pretty easy for me to reconstruct how the students found Ralph's body, based on what they told me and what I know about how students act.

It was the first Monday in December, the last full week of classes before final exams, and the students were arriving for Ralph's—that is, Professor Ralph Stiller's—course on Natural Chemical Systems. They took it in stride when the boy wonder of the chemistry department didn't show up on time, because this had happened before—as dean of his college, I got to be the one to remind him about his transgressions when his department chair got fed up. But it happened enough that the students were almost used to it, and they were usually able to find him just down the hall in his research laboratory anyway, deep into some experimental problem or other. Like many of our faculty members with esoteric research interests, Ralph was notorious for his absent-mindedness.

What they told me later was that their first concern was the set of chemical equations written in green marker on the white board behind the lecture table at the front of the classroom—the equations were far more complicated than anything discussed during the previous 14 weeks of the semester, and to make things worse, they were all one color. It seems Ralph normally used a variety of colors to illustrate the pathways of particular atoms as they were transformed through a sequence of reactions, and his lecture boards wound up covered with rainbows of the chemical elements. Absent-minded he may have been, but he was also an innovative and meticulous lecturer.

They probably gave him about ten minutes' grace, speculating about those equations all the while, before going to look for him. Finally, Fred Smits, a student of uncommon initiative, decided to check Ralph's lab. He told me that he walked down the hall and found the door to the lab slightly ajar, knocked and, when he didn't get an answer, peeked in. There was Ralph, sitting on a stool with his head down on the top of a lab bench, looking for all the world to be asleep. Smits tried to awaken him by calling his name, but that had no effect. He finally worked up the courage to try to shake the comatose form awake, only to have it spill unceremoniously off the lab stool and fall hard to the floor. Smits searched for a pulse, and when he didn't find one he dashed out to spread the alarm, first to the classroom and then to the chemistry department office, where he found me.

By some strange set of coincidences, I managed to be in on two of the gruesome discoveries in this strange episode, and this got me into the mode of feeling ownership, somehow. Not responsibility, just ownership. As if I should do something, figure things out, maybe. For one thing, they were sure a lot more interesting than the normal administrative foolishness I get to deal with. Gruesome, yes, but interesting, too.

The reason I was in the chemistry department office that Monday morning was for a visit with Prof. Linda Harmon. As the department chair, she had requested a meeting with me to open a discussion of the possibility of additional chemistry faculty positions, and I knew that I would have to say “no.” Of course, this was before I heard about Ralph's demise.

One of the first things I learned in my relatively few years as dean is that saying “no” to requests such as this is far less difficult, both for me and for the petitioner, on the petitioner’s home turf, so I had scheduled the meeting for her office. I’ve also learned that faculty expect their dean, on such occasions as this, to look authoritative but not to act like it, not too much at least. To play the part, I wore a three-piece suit, dark tan with subtle brown pin-stripes, a white shirt with a button-down collar, to acknowledge campus informality, and an understated green and brown club tie—a costume far more formal than my usual mode of dress. I knew that this would make me radiate the expected air to Linda and others, but it made me feel overdressed, like a lawyer trying to impress a jury. I tried to keep away from mirrors.

Anyway, Linda and I were pouring cups of coffee in the departmental kitchenette outside her office prior to our meeting, when a breathless student—Smits—burst in and announced, to no one in particular, that Prof. Stiller seemed to be dead on the floor of his laboratory and perhaps someone should do something. We had him lead us to the lab.

Striding down the stairs after Smits, with Linda scurrying close behind, I fumbled with my new cellular phone, first to call 911 and then to call my office to let Alice, my administrative assistant, know where I was headed and why. I knew that the call to Alice would also put the campus rumor mill into high gear and pave the way for official announcements to follow.

When we arrived at the laboratory, we found that about half the students were clustered in the hall outside, peeking in and whispering among themselves. I worked my way through the crowd, knelt to check for life signs, and, finding none, I stood and addressed the crowd through the open door.

“I’m not a physician, but it appears that Professor Stiller is dead. Uh, you may know that this is Professor Linda Harmon, the chair of the chemistry department, and I’m Dean Harold Weathers.” I looked around to find Smits. “What happened?”

Smits looked uncomfortable and seemed to be hoping that someone would rescue him, but no one volunteered. He wiped the mop of dark hair from his face and took a deep breath.

“Well, when he didn’t show up for class by ten after, I came here looking for him and found him sitting on that stool with his head down on the lab bench, and I thought he was asleep. I tried to wake him up and he fell off the stool to the floor, and when I couldn’t find a pulse I went looking for help.” He was clearly shaken.

I recognized confusion and incipient panic, in the group as well as in Smits, so I smiled gently and turned on my clergyman persona, trying to be as soothing and reassuring as possible.

“This is a terrible, terrible thing. I know that this has to be a huge shock to everyone, it certainly is to me. I’ve called 911, and the police or paramedics or someone will be here soon to take care of things. Why don’t we all go back to the classroom to talk about this.” I managed to shepherd them back into the lecture hall, carefully closing the laboratory door after everyone had left. Standing in front of the reassembled class, I maintained the clergyman approach.

“Now, I don’t quite know if I can help, but does anyone have anything to add to what’s been said or any questions?”

“Well, it *is* the end of the semester...” came a voice.

“Oh, yes: we will need to take care of some practical matters won’t we?” I knew that some students, at least, were focused closely on their course work, especially as the semester wound down.

“You will all certainly get credit for your work in this course this semester; to do anything else would be to dishonor Professor Stiller’s memory. Linda, do you have any suggestions about this?” She had followed me and the crowd of students back into the lecture hall.

It was interesting to watch the students separate into two camps, those who had done well in the course and wanted their high grades, and the others who hadn't and hoped that the course would mercifully be canceled, or that some other reprieve would emerge. It appeared that the students in the middle of the pack had departed. I was impressed with the workman-like way in which Linda took charge of the situation, the more so for her appearance. She was only about five feet tall, and very slight; with her strawberry blonde page-boy hair, freckles, and granny glasses, she looked to be younger than some of the students. But she changed to her classroom lecture voice and everyone paid attention.

I interrupted her ad-libbed remarks about the final exam and the grades for the course to ask a couple of questions, and found that the board had been touched only by Fred Smits. None of the students had the vaguest clue about the chemical equations on the white board, beyond the fact that they looked sort of like Stiller's equations, and the class seemed intimidated by them—a couple of the students seemed to be worrying that the equations were some kind of test. Linda, a crackerjack chemist in her own right, seemed surprised to see them but had little to say, beyond noting that they were badly out of stoichiometric balance.

"Looks like gibberish to me," she concluded. "Probably just an exercise for the students to work on, homework, or maybe something he was going to use as an example in this class. He must have had a heart attack just before class, while he was sitting in his lab thinking about his lecture."

"Was he a nervous lecturer?" I didn't think so but wanted to verify it with her.

"He took teaching very seriously, and prepared everything carefully to avoid slip-ups. I expect that it was pretty stressful for him." She had taken a white-board eraser from a pocket of her lab coat and was starting to erase the board, but I stopped her. It was a little strange: she acted surprised and somewhat annoyed at this, and I had to pull rank and remind her that nothing could be touched before the police were finished with a detailed examination. Besides, it looked to me as if something was strange about the white board.

About then, the paramedics and the campus police arrived, and things got busy. I showed them to the laboratory, and then returned to the lecture hall to get the names of the remaining students and to make arrangements to pass the entire class roster along to the appropriate authorities. By then it was nearing 10:00, but someone, probably Alice, had called classroom scheduling, and they had apparently made arrangements for alternative locations for the rest of the morning classes. A note to that effect had appeared on the lecture-hall doors.

It was about 10:30 when I was finally alone, sitting in the front row of seats near the door, looking around carefully and thinking. I was sitting in a typical chemistry lecture hall, with risers for the rows of theater seats, each with its fold-down desktop, all rather well-used and worn. At the front of the room there was a table, more of a counter really, waist high, with a lab sink in one end, for demonstrations and for the professors to sit on when they wanted to be informal. None of the drawers on the white-board side of the table had been open when I came into the room, and I discovered that they were all unlocked and empty except for a couple of white-board markers—orange and blue—in one of the top ones. Large copies of the Periodic Table of the Elements hung from the walls on either side of the room, near the front where everyone could see them. The projection screen was up, so Ralph had apparently intended to lecture in the traditional "chalk talk" mode—although chalk is an anachronism with the advent of the white boards, academic clichés die hard.

While typical, the room also held certain interesting indications. A white powder at the base of the wall under the white board where the chemical equations were written was curious. So were certain aspects of the equations themselves, as I'd noted to Linda. There had been no indication of foul play mentioned to the bystanders by the paramedics or the campus police, but there was still plenty of activity in the lab down the hall, I could tell. Everyone seemed to be assuming that Linda was right: Ralph had

been victim of a heart attack, despite his well-known athleticism and healthful lifestyle. I began to think about how we would manage to replace him, given our tight budget and the difficulty we have recruiting people as good as he was.

As I was thinking about this and pondering the white powder by the baseboard, my attention was distracted by a male voice.

“Oh, man, isn’t organic chem meeting today?” I turned to find a somewhat forlorn-looking figure standing in the doorway, tall and thin, but athletic; rather older than most of the students and dressed somewhat more carefully than the typical 20-year-old.

“I thought they’d be meeting in here,” he was nearly whining.

“Isn’t there a sign on the door?” I was curious about the appearance of this person at a time that normally would be about mid-class, particularly given the strange events of the morning. “Whose course are you not finding?”

The confused student had begun examining the notice of class relocation and seemed not to hear my last question.

“Oh, here. Far out. It says that it’s been moved to some room in the administration building. Where’s that?” This question raised my curiosity even higher, because an upper-division student (organic chemistry being an upper-division course, I knew) would surely know the administration building from having paid several semesters’ worth of tuition and fees there. But he dashed off before I could do anything else, so I went back to my speculations about the classroom and our future.

I was staring off into space thinking, when at the edge of my vision I noticed yet another figure enter the room, one that got my attention instantly. I looked around at a woman in her late 30s, tall and slender but with the right curves, and long, light-brown hair. She wore a well-tailored but decidedly conservative grey business suit and had her hair pulled back rather formally. Her shoulder bag looked heavy. It had a badge in a leather wallet showing prominently.

“You must be the university official who found the body.” She consulted a note pad. “Dean Weathers? Is that right?” She had a wonderfully fluid voice and, I realized, was drop-dead beautiful despite trying to hide it. I tried not to act smitten.

“It was actually found first by one of the students. He said it was sitting on a lab stool in that laboratory down the hall and he thought the professor was just asleep. So he tried to wake him up and the body fell to the floor. He, that is, the student, found me in the chemistry department office.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t run off like the students and probably other people, too. I’d hate to have to put out a warrant for you.” She smiled. “I’m Lieutenant Annette Trieri, investigations unit of the Durango police. I need to ask you a few questions.”

“When your people finish in that lab, you ought to have them look around carefully in here, too. He, I mean the professor, was going to lecture in here and it looks as if he was here sometime just before he died. The students said that stuff on the white board looks like something from him, sort of. I’ve been sitting here keeping tabs on things, since no one seems to have thought to secure this room along with the lab.”

She smiled even more, which made her face light up. “You trying to do our job for us, Dean Weathers? I’ll get someone in here and then we can talk.”

I decided right then I’d have to be very careful not to make a fool of myself with this beautiful creature.

* * *

We walked across the campus to my office in the natural sciences building, a pleasant stroll even in December. The variety of conifers keeps things reasonably green, and this year the November rains had helped the lawns maintain some of their summer color. Despite the season, the day was warm and sunny, with just a few high clouds. The low, winter sun angle cast crisp shadows from the buildings.

We got comfortably seated in the easy chairs in my office, drinking Alice's fresh coffee, awaiting the arrival of a pizza we'd ordered for lunch. Trying to be a gracious host, I absolutely insisted that Lt. Trieri order the toppings. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I fancy myself something of an epicure, so I was quite curious to see what a barbecued chicken and red onion pizza would be like.

"I grew up eating Italian food and had my fill long ago. Besides, it's way too rich for me now that I'm mostly behind a desk. It goes to all the wrong places," was how she explained the unorthodox combination.

Despite my attendance in recent years at a fair number of gender sensitivity training classes, sexual harassment awareness workshops, and other neutering propaganda sessions, I found myself wondering if she really had any "wrong places" and what they might look like. At least, since moving beyond Carol's death, I've been able to engage in such speculation guilt-free.

She proceeded to guide me through the process of making a formal statement. In the classroom, I'd shown her the powder on the floor and the curious aspects of the equations, and she had rewarded this contribution by mentioning that a puncture wound, as if by a stiletto or ice pick, had been found on the body and was the most probable cause of death, its being in the area of the heart. She then steered my statement toward my opinion of possible suspects, and I found myself speaking in my classroom lecture mode, sounding like a stuffed-shirt. It fit right in with my suit.

"If we limit the field to those with the skill to inflict such a wound, I should think that there are rather few on campus. If we include those who might be motivated to hire a killer, well... I don't want to slander a colleague, especially one who can't defend himself, but Professor Stiller wasn't universally loved. His brilliance engendered considerable professional jealousy among his departmental colleagues, I know. You should probably interview the department chair to find out if there are any real possibilities there."

"I should interview a piece of furniture?"

"Huh? Oh. Professor Harmon. She's the department chair right now." She continued to look puzzled, so I explained at some length how the campus gender-issue sensitivity committee, the honor of which service I'd managed to dodge so far, had set policy. After three years of often acrimonious deliberations, they had settled on "chair" to replace the horribly sexist "chairman" as an alternative to a proliferation of "chairman," "chairwoman," and "chairperson."

It had all come to a head in the theater and dance department, when an individual who'd had a sex-change operation wanted to be called a "chairtrans." The campus newspaper had carefully maintained a journalistically straight face while printing various letters pro and con. I pointed out that, if nothing else, "chair" saved on the cost of signage, given that the positions rotated among faculty members every couple of years. Her amusement was infectious, and I found that I was able to loosen up a little.

"Anyway, even if he was unpopular, I doubt that there is anyone on campus with the motivation to actually kill the man. And, as I said, I can't imagine anyone with the skill to do it this way."

"There are no medical doctors, surgeons, on campus?"

"Not on the faculty. There are some physicians at the student health center, but I don't think any of them are surgeons. And I have no clue about whether there was contact between them and Professor

Stiller. I think he was an eclectic sort of chemist. His brilliance and awards put him in the position of deciding what he wanted to teach and when he wanted to teach it and how much research he wanted to do in the meantime. Seems like he was mostly oriented toward physical and inorganic chemistry, though, so I don't know what contacts he might have had in the medical community. Again, Professor Harmon would have more to say about this."

"What about other people around here?"

"Well, in addition to the professional jealousy of his departmental colleagues, he seems to have made a variety of other folks mad at him as well. I got involved a while back in a complaint from the university library about overdue journals he'd checked out. They guard those carefully, and his cavalier attitude really disturbed them. And, when I was on the staff grievance committee, his name came up on a couple of occasions."

"In what context?"

"He was pretty arrogant when it came to his behavior with people he considered his inferior—which was just about everyone. I think that was partly his age. For a full professor, he was quite young and, well, immature. We try hard to be egalitarian by way of human resources policy around here, and staff members are encouraged to bring complaints about faculty behavior to the committee. He even offended Alice Swan, my assistant out front, who's about the most unflappable person on campus."

On cue, in walked Alice, with barely a knock.

"Lieutenant Trieri, there is a gentleman here to see you. What can I get you to drink? Your pizza has arrived. Dean Weathers, don't forget that you have the reception later this evening, but I've managed to cancel the rest of your afternoon schedule." She set down a Diet Pepsi on the coffee table in front of me, on a coaster, handed each of us a folded paper napkin (the big, expensive kind), and stood in front of Lt. Trieri looking expectant.

"Alice, why don't you send Lieutenant Trieri's visitor in, and she looks like a seltzer-water person to me." I'd noticed the confused expression and decided to rescue her from trying to keep up with Alice.

I continued, "Anyway, even if Stiller wasn't the most popular of guys, it's hard to imagine that someone on campus did the killing. Look, we're talking about murder here, and not a 'heat-of-passion' kind of killing, either, given the appearance of the crime scene. If I understand what you've told me correctly, this was premeditated and professionally executed; and the dead body was carefully arranged to appear to be asleep. I surely don't know of anyone who could have done all that."

"Um, yeah, right. Listen, did something just happen? Who was that?"

"Hmm?" I had begun looking at the sheaf of papers that Alice had handed me. "Alice? Oh, that's right: she wasn't out there when we came in. That was my administrative assistant, Alice Swan. And Alice was what happened. How, you ask, did she know that you were in here and who you are and that the visitor was yours and that we ordered the pizza? She does that kind of thing all the time. I have several theories, all revolving around the fact that she seems to be psychic, even though, as a scientist, I know that there's no such thing. Also, she operates in a mode that the computer guys would call 'multi-tasking.' Fortunately for me, she has to switch into single-task mode to talk, or else I'd be in big trouble. Come in, come in," this last I directed to a decidedly non-academic looking individual in a white lab coat with the word "POLICE" stamped across the front.

She turned around and seemed to get her bearings "Hi, Jack. All finished?"

"We think so, Lieutenant. We took a sample of that chalk dust, like you asked, and made careful pictures of the stuff on the board. With all the other traffic from the students and all in there, there

doesn't seem to have been much else. There are prints all over the place, of course, but I don't think anything will be helpful. We did find what looks like ashes on the floor of the second row of seats."

Chagrined at having missed the ashes in my inspection of the classroom, I gently cleared my throat to get into the conversation, and she nodded at me. "Did you take prints from the white-board markers? And, with all due respect, I don't think there's been chalk in there for years, since we switched over to the white boards."

"Well, whatever. And, yes, we got lots of prints from the markers."

"Thanks, Jack. I'll see you back at HQ later." At which point I walked Alice, with a pizza aloft on one hand, and in the other a small tray with a glass of soda water, with ice and a slice of lime. She set the pizza in front of us, handed the soda water to Lt. Trieri, and departed. "Thank you very much, Alice; I appreciate it," Lt. Trieri called after her. Then, more softly, she asked, "How does she do that?"

"You remember the character in the TV show M*A*S*H, Radar O'Reilly? He took lessons from her. Say, this pizza smells wonderful! Barbequed chicken and onions, huh? Who would have thought?"

* * *

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe that most of you are aware that I have an extremely painful announcement."

I had made the usual chiming noises on my wine glass and received in return the rapt attention of everyone at the reception. It was being held at the faculty club, an elegantly shabby building in the older part of the campus. Originally built several decades ago as living quarters for unmarried faculty, it had private rooms on the second floor and a dining area and large reading room on the first, where the reception was being held. The circumstances earlier in the day had been widely reported by the campus rumor mill, and, as a result, attendance was at least triple the usual for this sort of thing.

Now, I'm not an especially public person by nature, so I'm uncomfortable playing host and master of ceremonies at these sorts of gatherings. But this one was going to be particularly difficult. To make matters worse, no one but I knew that we were dealing not with a simple heart attack but more likely with murder. Every now and then I regret having given up drinking, and this was one of those times. A hefty shot of a good single-malt—that 12-year-old Macallan that my fly-fishing pal Jack Hardin carries—would have been helpful about then. I took a sip of my water as people composed themselves to hear what they thought they knew about.

"When we planned this reception to honor Professor Ralph Stiller, it was because his upcoming receipt of the Hedgeworthy Medal in Physical Chemistry was cause for celebration. Events today have dimmed the celebration, but we should remember that the honor, both for him and for our university, transcends his passing." There were murmurs at the last, and I realized that not everyone knew about the death. Despite its reputation, the rumor mill was not 100% efficient.

"For those of you who have not heard, Professor Ralph Stiller died this morning, in a place he loved and revered, his laboratory. We therefore are here to honor the memory of a brilliant colleague for one of his greatest triumphs, the Hedgeworthy Medal, and to remember a beloved friend and teacher as well." The hypocrisy worked as well in this setting as in church. I raised my glass in the traditional salute and was amused to see everyone in the room, even Stiller's worst enemies, follow my lead. "Linda, would you like to say a few words?"

Linda Harmon, in the middle of her first year in the rotation as department chair, was a typical middle-aged faculty member, which, given her gender and her small stature, meant that she was an assertive, no-nonsense scientist with considerable classroom and laboratory experience. But, like most

faculty members, she had almost nothing in the way of administrative or managerial training, and her public speaking experience was mostly limited to lecture halls and technical topics.

But I had warned her that I would be calling on her, so she was prepared. My puckish streak delights in asking people without warning to “say a few words” at receptions such as this, especially if they’ve had one too many glasses of wine. But it was just too unfair to Linda to do so on this occasion. As she launched into a careful and obviously prepared eulogy, I considered just how to present the rest of the information that I needed to convey. Faculty members are insatiably curious, making reporters look blasé by comparison, and this group wouldn’t be satisfied with half-truths or waffling. At least Annette had told me that there was no need to conceal anything.

* * *

I had to smile to myself when I remembered exchanging first names. Eating pizza with someone is a first-name kind of activity, so as soon as I’d had the chance I said, “Please, call me Hal. I get ‘Dean Weathers’-ed to death around here.”

“What? I’m supposed to call the dean—the person I was always deathly afraid of because of my lousy grades and who I always went out of my way to avoid—by a nickname? I don’t know if I can manage that one. Anyway, I’ll try, if you’ll call me Annette.”

“Well, I’m an academic dean, of the College of Natural Sciences. You probably worried about the Dean of Students, who’s a guy named Homer Tuckel on this campus. And, you’re right, nobody calls him “Homer,” it just doesn’t fit. But instead of dealing with students and bothering them about their grades and conduct like he does, my job is to listen to faculty whine and figure out how to tell them ‘no’ without really saying it in so many words.”

“How do you do that? ‘No’ is pretty succinct, after all.”

“I just turn it around and use lots and lots of words, mostly about policies and budgets—their requests always seem to involve bending rules and money in some way—and watch carefully until I see them glaze over, and then end up with something bureaucratic like ‘I’m sure you can see my situation here.’ By then they’re usually too confused to know how to rephrase their request in a reasonable way, so they leave.” I couldn’t help but notice again how beautifully her face lit up with her smile. The rest of our lunch went by far too quickly for me, and to my delight she also seemed reluctant to leave after the pizza was eaten, so we continued our conversation until she finally had to get back to the investigation.

* * *

I was startled to notice everyone looking at me—Linda, it seemed, was passing the baton of master of ceremonies back. Since Annette had told me that it was OK to inform the campus community of the wound, I was now about to change the reception in a way that would really give everyone something to talk about.

“Thank you, Linda. I’m sure that there will be a memorial service sometime in the next few days, and we’ll be certain to make the information about it widely available. Now, before you read it in tomorrow’s paper, I think I should pass along additional information that has emerged this afternoon. As I mentioned, Professor Stiller was found this morning in his laboratory, and, initially, it was assumed that he had suffered a fatal heart attack just before his 9 o’clock class this morning. In retrospect, that assumption was premature.”

If only I could get and maintain this level of attention from my students, what an exceptional teacher I could be! I let the pause go on long enough that several people began to shift from foot to foot and finally someone in the back let out a “Well?”

“What I’m about to say is going to shock you. However, please keep in mind that it doesn’t alter anything Linda had to say just now, and the honor and esteem in which we hold Ralph’s memory is also unaffected by it. What you will see in news reports is that Professor Ralph Stiller may have been murdered, by someone wielding a thin knife or similar weapon.”

There were gasps and several small screams, and one person dropped a glass on the ceramic tile floor out in the hall, the crash only increasing the level of tension in the room. Then, after a crescendo of conversation, the lull induced by my continued presence on the rostrum brought the questions. It turned out to be a long evening.

* * *

Two

By 7:15 the next morning, I was in my early-morning high-tech mode (or maybe I should call it my “computer weenie mode”), in front of my computer wearing an operator’s hands-free telephone headset, answering yesterday’s e-mail and simultaneously participating in a conference call. The laser printer hummed almost continuously as I cast the really important electronic messages onto a more permanent medium. Because of the conference call, which involved other natural-sciences deans around the country, I was being particularly vicious in my assignment of e-mail messages to the trash receptacle icon. But at least conference calls beat getting on an airplane.

I noticed my other telephone line blinking, and took the chance that the conference wouldn’t miss me for a minute or two. “This is Dean Weathers,” I said, after pushing the appropriate buttons.

“Hal? Annette Trieri. Geez, I thought I’d just be leaving you a voice mail message or something at this time of day. Don’t you academic guys keep bankers’ hours? How was the reception?” We had discussed it yesterday afternoon.

“No, don’t ask, and good morning indeed. This is about the only time I can get any real work done, so I try to get in before anyone else. Listen, I’d really love to talk, but I’m playing hooky from a conference call on my other line.”

“Oh. Well, I was going to ask if we could get together for one more conversation about yesterday. I didn’t quite get what you were trying to tell me about the scribbles on that white-board in the lecture room.”

“Uh,” I popped up a window with my daily calendar in it on the computer screen. “It looks like the gentle Alice has left me open for lunch. Can we do that?”

“Sure.”

“Great. It’s on in ink, and I’ll call you back later this morning about details, OK? Got to get back to the conference before they discover I left. ’Bye.”

She left a telephone number and I, with a considerably lighter heart, rejoined my distinguished colleagues in a discussion about relationships between faculty in the natural and the other sciences. The discussion, although smug, tended to be carefully diplomatic because there were several relative

newcomers whose trust we had not yet established. Even I, with three years as a member of the club, was still on a sort of probationary status. No one wanted to say anything about “unnatural” sciences and have it reported outside the clique. Fortunately, being from one of the smaller universities in the discussion, I didn’t have to say much. It was dominated by the deans from the bigger research factories, and I kept my peace.

At 8:15, Alice simultaneously sent me a computer notification and stuck her head in the door (how did she do both together? I wondered. It’s impossible to time the arrival of a computer packet) to tell me that the provost was here for our appointment. I cleared my throat.

“Gentlemen and ladies, excuse me. I’m afraid that my provost is waiting to speak with me, so I’ll have to leave you. This has been most interesting, and I’ll be thinking over the proposal for new interdisciplinary seminars for our next conversation. Have a good day, all.”

I heard a chorus of ‘Bye, Hal’s as I disconnected, unplugged myself, removed the headset, and walked out to greet the provost.

“Good morning, John. Come in. Alice will have a cup of coffee for you in a flash, I bet.”

Provost John Martin, tall and patrician, distinguished-looking with a crew-cut fringe of salt-and-pepper hair circling the top of his head and half-lensed reading glasses perched on his long nose, radiated an aura of aloofness and paternalism. He had a reputation on campus for being a master delegator, a trait not entirely inappropriate for someone in his position but one that put those who reported to him, including all the campus deans, continually on their guard. At least he was also fair and apportioned credit to the people to whom he assigned the work.

“Hal, I want to say that you did a wonderful job at the reception last night. Couldn’t have done it better myself, especially the question and answer session. That was a good idea, even though some of those questions got outright nasty. Officially, I have to ignore who asked them, of course, but sometimes I wonder about the level of collegiality around here. That question about whether this was being investigated as a conspiracy or whether it was a single killer was especially troublesome, given its implications. And source. Not that I’m too surprised, or even too upset, really, given the victim. After that son of a bitch seduced Terri, I was about ready to do something like this myself.”

I was not about to let a discussion of Martin’s daughter’s problems get started. “Well, I think we all know that there has been simmering resentment about Ralph’s behavior by a number of folks, and I expect that some was bound to come out last night. I imagine you’d like to talk about further damage control.”

“Yes, the flacks in the PR office are in a dither and don’t know quite what to do beyond saying that it’s a real shame and so on. Reporters are going to be asking things like ‘how are you going to replace him, given the budget crisis?’, and things like that, on top of questions about the circumstances. I wonder if you could stand double duty today and do a press conference this morning on behalf of the college?”

Great, just what I needed. “Well, I have a class to teach at 10:00, and that clearly has to be a top priority even in this time of crisis. And the police department has asked to talk with me again, and I can hardly say ‘no’ to them. Besides, I wouldn’t know how to answer questions about how to replace Ralph anyway, given how productive he was, unless you give me the go-ahead for at least two new faculty slots.” I just loved getting my boss over a barrel this way. “Perhaps you and President Black could appear together. The two highest-ranking university officials together would certainly show the press that we’re serious about this matter.”

“Hmm. Good idea. Alice!” Martin had moved up from being the natural sciences dean to his current position of provost and executive vice president, and he was quite unhappy that Alice had elected to

remain in the natural sciences office. She appeared almost before he said her name. “Could you please find out when President Black could be available for a press conference today? Given what happened yesterday, I should think he’d give it his top priority.” As astonishing as it might have seemed for him to expect her to demand a schedule change from the president’s office, he had seen her in action for years, and he knew it would happen.

“Now, Hal, about those questions last night. Officially, I’m going to forget that I heard them asked, like I said. But I wonder if we shouldn’t follow up with a little sleuthing of our own, to check possible motives and so on. I would hate to be informed by the police about something I should already know about. Do you think it’s possible that any of our people are involved?”

“I’ve been giving it a lot of thought, and I don’t think I can find any reason to change what I told the police investigator yesterday. It just doesn’t seem possible that anyone on campus would have the motive or skill to pull something like this off. It was obviously planned well in advance and carried out with a high degree of professionalism. Did you hear that whoever did it arranged the dead body to make it look like Ralph was just asleep? I think we ought to leave this in the hands of the police.”

“Well, I’ll be in touch after we get the press off our backs. Let me know if you find anything more from the police.” He strode out purposefully after confirming with Alice that she would find out when the president would be available for the press conference.

“Thanks, Alice,” I said as I headed out the door, toward my faculty office up on the fourth floor. “I don’t know that I could function here if you’d moved into the provost’s office. I’m sure glad you stayed here to take care of me.”

Alice smiled primly, “Me, too,” and reached for the phone.

* * *

The lecture that I had planned in my own course was to accomplish what Ralph’s students had been hoping for yesterday, a review of the first part of the course in preparation for next week’s final exam. But first, I had to figure out just how to make my lunch date—which I decided I’d better call an “appointment”—with Annette as effective as I could. I had begun to think of it as a “date” almost as soon as she had called, and I knew that I would have to keep reminding myself that the purpose of the lunch was only to discuss the murder some more. Still... I stopped in a men’s room on my way between offices to have a careful look at myself in a mirror. It was clear to me that she was a number of years younger than I, and I had to decide if I would make a credible suitor. The guy looking back at me from the mirror didn’t look too sure of himself. At least he didn’t look like a lawyer today, as I’d dressed in a variant of my more usual uniform, chino slacks and a blue blazer over a red/yellow on white tattersall button-down, collar open. I kept several ties on a hook on the back of the door of my office in case something came up that called for one, such as this lunch. Older than her I may have been, but I still had a full head of dark brown hair, and my wrinkles were limited to smile-induced crow’s feet around my eyes, which looked back at me gold-flecked and brown, still bright and full of humor, at least most of the time. And all that work staying in shape had really paid off.

I decided that if I didn’t give it a shot, I’d never know.

An “effective” lunch with Annette meant getting off campus, but not overdoing things. Up in my faculty office, I began composing a list of discreet, middle-of-the-road possibilities. Durango, although small, was both a college town and a tourist center, and I had a number of choices, including an overpriced seafood place, several health food restaurants, a new Tex-Mex place that I’d not been to yet, and, just in case she was really hungry, a steak house. I almost included an Italian restaurant with dark

corners and low lighting, but then I remembered her comment yesterday about having grown up on Italian food. I thought carefully about my choices and finally called the number she'd left.

"Trieri, investigations," was the curt greeting on the other end of the line.

"I like that. I think I'll start answering my phone 'Weathers, science' in the future."

She giggled unprofessionally. But very nicely indeed, I thought.

"So, Lieutenant, where should we have lunch? Are your questions going to be tough enough to make the Palace Grill appropriate?" Ouch. Too weird. Nerves?

"Good grief. I refuse to comment on the grounds that it could incriminate me. Well, you're not going to believe this, but the best place for me will be Fannie's Saloon. I have to be out there to finish off an investigation and it's the only place in the vicinity. Think you can handle it? Just so you'll know, it's all part of the job for me, and I'm used to it. And, believe it or not, the food's pretty good. I can bring you a blindfold, if your sensitive academic nature is aroused—er, offended, I mean."

I was flabbergasted. Like any good university town, Durango had its topless joints (and bottomless ones as well, during certain easy-going city administrations) where the fraternity boys could have their fun and the more adventuresome college girls could pick up spending money. To be sure, Fannie's had a reputation for being one of the less sleazy ones, but, still, I had been thinking along far more, well, genteel lines for our first time "out" together.

"Er, yes, well, as a scientist I'm used to maintaining a certain level of detached objectivity, so it'll be no problem for me, either. I think. I'm afraid I've never had the opportunity to go in there, though, so I don't know quite what to expect."

"Oh, they have burgers, a few salads, various other hot and cold sandwiches, pizzas, a bar; pretty much what you'd expect..." She was clearly going to have her fun with this.

My real concern was not so much with being in Fannie's; it was with getting in, and getting out. I had a brief vision of myself coming out of Fannie's Saloon, with an attractive woman on my arm, and being seen by President Black and Provost Martin driving by on their way to their press conference or somewhere. Or, even worse, by Alice. Whatever this lunch is like, I decided, it better be good. At least Fannie's was well south of downtown, out on the highway on the way to Bayfield. If it had been located downtown, even far up on north Main Avenue, I'd really have to worry about being seen.

* * *

It turned out that she was right. The menu looked as if the food would be fine, the place was clean and the decor was pretty generic, and the waitresses were not too distracting, as long as I stared carefully into Annette's eyes. Lovely green, I noticed, with at least as much humor as mine. She was already quite amused by my minor level of discomfort.

"Are you going to do OK with this? I'm really sorry that we had to meet here, but I was plugged into this investigation by the chief himself. Seems his other guys lose their objectivity out here, for some reason. He wants me to finish this little matter up today so I can concentrate on the killing."

"I'll be fine. It's strange, for sure, but fine. And you're right, the food looks good. I just hope that none of my students happens to work here. I imagine she'd be embarrassed beyond belief."

"Surely it would just give her a chance to get a better grade..."

"Ha! You, my good Lieutenant, need desperately to attend one of our gender sensitivity training sessions. Besides, I'm probably wrong. She wouldn't be embarrassed, working here all the time. She'd

just want to ask questions about the final next week and I'd end up in a discussion with a half-clothed young girl about how clouds influence the climate system, or something. Tell you what. If it happens, we ask her to sit down, so my face won't be at the level of her chest, OK?"

I was careful to study the menu as a young woman walked up behind Annette. "Hi! My name's Busty, and I'll be your server today? Um, somehow you folks don't look like our usual clientele?"

"No, probably not." I had decided that anonymity would be too hard to maintain and could even backfire, and my puckish streak had kicked in. I finally looked up. "I'm Dean Weathers from the university, and this is Dr. Trieri, a candidate for a faculty position whom I'm showing around town. I thought she'd like to see some local color." I watched the stain of a blush spread in interesting patterns below Busty's collar-bone.

"Oh. Um, does this mean that you'll be teaching at the university, ma'am?" It seemed that Busty was about to become extremely flexible in her future course scheduling.

"Don't worry about it. What's your real name, 'Busty'?"

"Lisa?"

"Lisa, I'm not going to be on the faculty. I'm really a detective from the police department and I'm looking into that harassment complaint you've probably heard about, so I'll be talking with you later. His Deanship here seems to have a mean streak, but don't worry, I'll take care of him. We really do want lunch, though. I'll have the grilled chicken Caesar salad with an iced tea."

Chastised, I resisted the temptation to order a chicken breast sandwich and asked for a soup and salad instead. "I didn't mean to be nasty, or anything," I said after Lisa had left. "Just trying to lighten things up," I added lamely.

She stared at me for a minute, her green eyes drilling into mine. "Look. I don't want to lecture, because I'm sure you get lots of that from the campus feminists. But these girls, even though they're pretty used to walking around with their shirts off, they tend to be close to the edge. Think about it. Most of the customers here are horny college guys or younger, blue collar workers from the community. Or stockbrokers and lawyers, for some reason. You're old enough to be Lisa's father, and a dean to boot. And you announced it. Don't you think she'd be embarrassed? Would you want your daughter to be working in a joint like this?" She reached across the table and put her hand on mine. "End of lecture. But it upsets me to see them here, when they should be in class, and fully clothed." She leaned back and cocked her head sideways, seeking understanding.

I found I'd been holding my breath, and let it out. "You're right. I'm sorry. Sometimes when I'm nervous, I screw up. But I have to say, if I had a daughter, I'm not sure but what I'd be proud to have her working in a place like this. Assuming, you know, that it's safe and all. And I bet the tips are a lot better than the usual fern-bar restaurant. The thing is, I'd want my daughter to have the self-confidence and inner strength to be able to handle this sort of thing. I'd like to think that I would raise her that well." I smiled. "Of course, I'm a great theoretician. My experimental abilities are a bit less well-tested. Who knows how I'd really react?" I was hoping that more hand-holding would be in our near future.

She studied my face carefully. "Apology accepted. And a graceful one it was. I'm not mad. Really. Now, maybe you can fill me in on your hints about those chemical equations before lunch arrives."

* * *

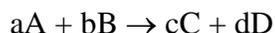
"I'm not a chemist, but I play one on TV, as the saying goes." I reached over to the next table and snagged a fresh napkin. "Just so I know where to start, what did you learn from Professor Harmon?"

“Well, she really didn’t have much to say about the equations. She thought they were just made up, for homework, and she didn’t seem to want to talk about them. She said something about their being an example of bad stoichiometry, or something.” She pulled a Polaroid photo out of her bag.

“Stoichiometry. As in stoichiometric balance. Making sure all the atoms add up right.”

“Huh? I have to warn you, I did very poorly in chemistry. Remember my comment yesterday about being afraid of deans? Present company excepted, of course.”

I pointed at the photograph. “It’s pretty easy. See what the first equation looks like? Not the details, but the overall form? It’s something like this.” I took out a pen and wrote on the napkin:



“Except the little a, b, c, and d are numbers and the capital letters are chemical formulas for molecules. Capital D is water, H₂O. Right?”

“Yeah, and this means that the stuff on the left reacts to make the stuff on the right, no?”

“Right. Now, the big A, B, C, and D are molecules made up of various kinds of atoms,” I pointed back at the photo. “See, here’s an N for nitrogen, here’s a C for carbon, H is hydrogen, O is oxygen, of course—what this says is that the A and B molecules react, which means that the atoms recombine, to make the C and D molecules. But unless this is a nuclear reaction—and let’s assume it isn’t, because the elements are all wrong for that—we have to end up with the same numbers of the same kinds of atoms that we started out with. Atoms don’t change unless there’s a nuclear reaction. You make them balance by adjusting the little a, b, c, and d to make it work out. Then, it’s in stoichiometric balance. A homework problem.”

“So, Professor Harmon was just saying that the numbers were wrong?”

“Yep. But I was more interested in something else. Here, look at this.” I pointed at the snapshot again. “I’m no handwriting expert, but it looks to me as if at least two different people wrote these equations. The molecular coefficients look like they’ve been erased and changed, and some of the atomic coefficients, these subscripts, looked messed with, too. And the atomic coefficients are what determine the character of the molecules involved, what’s reacting and being created. So someone was either trying to invent new chemicals or was trying to hide what they’d done by changing it.”

“Why didn’t they just erase the whole thing?”

“Yeah, I thought of that, too. But did you see a white-board eraser in there? There wasn’t one in the drawers, I checked. They have a habit of walking off, and savvy lecturers always carry one with them. Linda had one in a pocket that she pulled out to try to erase the board before I stopped her. And if there wasn’t one there, erasure becomes a problem. That marker ink rubs off easily, but it messes up your fingers quickly and then you just start smearing it around. And nobody wants it on their clothes. So it would be a lot easier for someone to cover his chemical tracks by changing a few numbers than by trying to erase the whole thing.”

“There was no eraser on Stiller’s body when we did the inventory yesterday.”

“I wondered about that. Despite his faults and foibles, he was always well-prepared for class. No way was he going to look foolish in front of a room full of students. So I’m sure he would have always carried an eraser into class.”

“So you’re saying that he wasn’t really ready for his class?”

“Looks to me like he and someone else were in there, I mean in the classroom, discussing chemistry sometime before he was killed in the lab, and they were using the white board in the classroom to illustrate their conversation to each other. Hmm. Although I suppose he could have been killed in the classroom and carried into the lab. Anyway, whoever the someone was, he didn’t want anyone else to know what they were talking about. Is the time of death fixed yet? I suppose it’s too soon to have word on the make-up of that powder.”

“I don’t think the coroner is finished yet, and chemical testing usually takes about a week. But, look, if you’re right, it means that Stiller and whoever were in the building well before the class, maybe before dawn. How would they be in there at night? Surely the buildings aren’t left unlocked?”

“Professors, especially ones who do research, get pretty much what they ask for in the way of keys, so I expect he had 24-hour access to the chemistry building. I think what will be interesting is the results of the chemical tests.”

* * *

Lisa/Busty came back with our lunch, holding the serving tray strategically in front of her. As she was distributing the food, I grasped the nettle.

“Lisa, I’m truly sorry if I embarrassed you. I was just trying to have some fun at the university’s expense. I think you can be assured that we’d never bring job candidates here for interviews, male or female. Although I may be wrong about the athletic department.” I smiled encouragingly.

She brightened. “Well, thanks, I’m, like, really glad because I worry, you know, about the women professors sometimes? The men are pretty easy to deal with, but the women can be pretty tough.”

“Lisa, listen. And tell the other girls this, too. If anyone from the university, faculty or staff or whatever, gives any of you any grief at all about your working here, I want you to let me know. I promise to do something about it. We’re here to educate people and to provide them with the tools to help them find rewarding lives in the future. Not to make judgements about what they’re doing to put themselves through school. OK?”

She walked away, her mood noticeably improved. I looked over to find Annette poking at her salad. “Better?” I asked.

She looked up and arched an eyebrow. “Let’s just say that you scored enough points to bring your total back up above zero.”

“Well, that’s a relief. And I’ll work hard to get it higher, believe me. Maybe this will help. Yesterday, I forgot to mention one additional thing about the time I was sitting in the classroom before you arrived. A guy, I assume he was a student, came to the door asking about an organic chemistry course. I guess he didn’t notice the classroom change note on the outside of the door, or something. I didn’t really think much of it at the time, but it was at about 10:30, in the middle of the class hour, and he didn’t know where to find the administration building, where the class had been rescheduled. It seemed to me at the time that anybody who’d been around long enough to get to organic would know such a thing. Maybe it’s no big deal.”

“You didn’t get a name, or anything?”

“No, he disappeared just as I was about to ask, but I could probably recognize him if I saw him again. Reasonably well-groomed as students go, athletic-looking. He had a sort of an older look, like what we call “nontraditional” students. People who don’t go straight from high school to college.”

Her green eyes stared into mine, and she smiled. “Looks like we’ve a reason to stay in touch, no?” For some reason, that made lunch taste especially good.

* * *

Three

As I walked through the door into my office suite, Alice looked up and asked dryly, “How was lunch? I’ve heard that the menu there is better than the atmosphere.”

I couldn’t believe it. How could she know where I had gone for lunch? It wasn’t possible that Alice would have had my telephone tapped, especially the one in my faculty office, but how else could she have known? Of course, I’d announced my presence to Lisa at Fannie’s, and no doubt others there had heard me, but how in the world did Alice find out so quickly? And who else knew?

“It’s strangely incongruous. Except for the dress code, it’s like any other yuppie chain restaurant. Lieutenant Trieri was out there investigating a harassment complaint. She’s sure a pro.” Maybe that would defuse matters.

“No doubt she feels the same way about you.” Now what the hell was that supposed to mean? I fled to the relative security of my office. As I was closing my door, she got in a final shot:

“Don’t forget your meeting with the sabbatical policy committee at 2:00, Dean Weathers.”

As I was digging out my sabbatical committee file in preparation for the meeting, I realized with glee that I had two separate, but not completely unrelated and by no means unpleasant, problems to mull over during the coming meeting. Maybe I could stretch them for the rest of the afternoon, which included meetings of the provost’s budget committee (at 3:00), the faculty of the physics department (at 4:00), and an informal gathering at the faculty club at 5:00 to discuss the future of athletic scholarships.

On the one hand, I had to figure out how to arrange for another meeting with Annette, or if I should just ask her out on a real date. I’d only met her yesterday, of course, so there was no real rush, beyond my rather boyish enthusiasm. But I didn’t want to wait too long. Lunch had been very, very encouraging, despite my gaffe with Lisa, and I wanted to maintain the momentum.

And on the other hand, I had to decide just how much additional eccentricity my campus reputation could stand. What if I became a semi-regular at Fannie’s for lunch? The food was good, and the scenery was truly outstanding. Such variety! Solving one problem could well solve the other, of course, because I suspected that Annette really didn’t like the food enough to go there.

As I was walking out the door, my cellular phone tweedled, startling me. I hadn’t remembered it was turned on. Only a few people knew its number (including, as of lunch, Annette), so the potential was limited. I fished it out of my jacket pocket and managed to work it open as I strode out the door past Alice.

“Hello? This is Dean Weathers.”

“Listen up! You’d be smart to keep your nose out of police business in the future. You academic types are out of your depth with this one, so butt out!” Click. I felt a chill slide up my spine, and I stopped cold, staring at my phone. Just then, classes burst forth (so, it was 10 minutes ’til 2:00, I noted absently), and I had to move or be trampled. As I walked, I punched in Annette’s number, which, I realized, I’d memorized from only one other call to her. Hmm.

“Hello, you have reached voice mail for Lieutenant Annette Trieri, investigations unit, Durango police. Please leave a message after the tone and I will get back to you as soon as I can. You can press one now for a human, but I don’t know who it will be.”

“Well, I wish it were you. Annette, this is Hal Weathers. I just got a threatening phone call, apparently related to the Stiller case. Could you call me on my cellular phone please? I’d really appreciate it. Thanks.”

It was during an especially pompous speech by one of the math professors on the sabbatical committee that Annette called me back. I always resent it when other people’s phones interrupt meetings, so now I felt like a jerk. I jumped up and, on the way out of the meeting room, answered in a stage whisper, “Weathers.”

“What, no ‘science’?”

“Uh, just a sec... There. I was in a meeting. Sorry.”

“What’s this about a phone call?”

I was much, much calmer than I had been when I left her the message, having had about 45 minutes of a soporific meeting to relax, so I was a little embarrassed that I’d called her at all.

“Well, I don’t know. I give you my secret phone number, and the next thing I know, some torpedo is telling me to butt out of police business if I know what’s good for me. Did you write the number on the wall somewhere, or what?” I hoped I conveyed a sense of lightness and humor.

“You’d be surprised to know how public these numbers really are. Who else knows it, officially, and what did he say exactly?”

“I told you the number at noon, and about a dozen other folks around here know it. I haven’t had it very long, so it hasn’t gotten around much. The provost. Alice. Nobody particularly threatening. And he said something like ‘you’d better keep your nose out of police business in the future. You’re out of your depth, so butt out.’ It was two sentences and click. No time for a response or anything. Hey, does this give me an excuse to come down to the station so I can make a statement and see you again?”

I could feel her smile over the phone, or at least so I imagined. One problem solved.

“I guess that would be a good idea. I’ll be here until about 8:00.”

I resisted the temptation to ask if she wanted to have dinner after that.

* * *

For the rest of the afternoon, I killed the time in my meetings by reconstructing the “incident,” as I began to think of it, as precisely as I could and writing it down. I managed this by pretending to take notes of the salient points (few and far between) made by various people at the meetings, and, when called on at the physics meeting to speak—that’s why I was there, after all—impressed all present with my commitment to the physics department, its outstanding faculty, and its ambitious teaching program. At least I knew exactly what time the thug had called. Maybe the cellular people could do a backtrack from their records and see where the call had originated.

That evening, after a light supper I drove downtown and parked across from the police station on Tenth. The front desk sergeant was not particularly impressed when I asked for Lieutenant Trieri, but he did look surprised when she showed up so quickly and greeted me so warmly.

“You know, your Deanship, we seem to be seeing a lot of each other lately.”

“I hope that’s OK with you. I certainly am enjoying it.”

“A meeting in a classroom at the scene of a murder; two lunches in two days, one in your office with no chaperone and one at a strip joint; and now this. At least I can’t suspect you of setting me up, though. Surely you’d do better than the police station for that.” She fairly twinkled. “And wipe that grin off your face. People will think I’m not doing my job and being serious enough.”

“Yes sir, ma’am. And I confess. To anything. Just promise me you’ll come and visit me in the stir.”

“Ha. You wouldn’t last ten minutes in prison, pretty boy. Have a chair—the kind you sit on. Now, do you want to make a formal statement, or what? I don’t know how long it will take to get a steno in here.”

“Well, actually, I’ve calmed down a lot since we talked about this before, but it is a little scary. I mean, all we’ve been doing is talking, and I’m not snooping around or doing any real investigating, or anything. I guess what’s the strangest thing is that someone would know that I’ve taken an interest in this case and have talked with you beyond my initial statement yesterday. But it looks like this person is threatened by me, and that’s real weird. Remember what I said to Lisa today at lunch, about letting me know if anyone from the university got out of line with her? Dealing with that would be about as threatening as I ever get with anyone.”

“Yeah, I’m puzzled, too. Not about the mechanics of someone getting your number or even having seen us together. But why the perp would be worried at all. We have basically nothing to go on, no one to suspect.”

“Uh, ‘perp’? Is that some kind of law-enforcement jargon?”

“‘Perpetrator.’ Bad guy. Killer, in this case.”

I gave her the reconstruction I’d written out, and she said it would get added to the case file. She was impressed with my thoroughness. “Can I hire you to do my homework assignments for me? How much do you charge?”

* * *

She walked me out of the station, continuing the conversation. We were standing on the sidewalk outside the front door, each trying to find an excuse to let the conversation continue, when I noticed her stiffen and stare over my shoulder toward the street. “Hal, I want you to sit down. On the sidewalk. Right now!” She wasn’t exactly whispering, but I’m sure no one else heard her.

“Huh?” I responded, in my usual highly intelligent fashion.

“Sit. NOW!” No whispering this time. Just as I started to crouch down, I saw her reach behind her back and pull out a service revolver. My sitting motion halted abruptly when her voice changed completely and, with astonishing authority, she commanded “FREEZE!!” as she aimed her weapon at something behind me. Then, even louder, “SERGEANT!” I sat down with a thud that jarred my fillings.

There was a popping noise from across the street, followed by several very loud booms from her revolver. The door to the station opened and a half dozen officers rushed out, weapons drawn. “Over there; I think he’s down for good,” I heard her say. Then, “Well, shit. Excuse me. Hal, you OK?” She was fiddling with her weapon, putting it in a baggie that she’d pulled from somewhere. “I just hate that. Some guys get off on the adrenalin rush, but I just get the willies. And that poor, stupid schmuck over there! Right in front of the station, no less. Where do they find these guys, anyway?” She was staring across the street.

I had risen, but found that my knees were strangely wobbly. I turned and saw, across the street, several officers bending over a prostrate form near my car. I noticed that my breathing was off kilter, too shallow and too fast, so I consciously took several deep, slow breaths.

“What...?” I was completely bewildered. To think, a couple of hours ago I’d been listening, not too carefully, but listening nonetheless, to Profs. Samuel Fix and Lewis Wilbanks bicker about how the athletic department was a bloodsucking leach on the university’s neck and only degraded the high academic standards of the institution they loved so deeply... I staggered slightly, then righted myself.

“Hal, are you OK? You look awfully pale.”

“Um, well, this is not my usual way to spend the evening. Is this something you do often?”

“Nope. My first time in anger. I don’t like the feeling. But you look awfully shaky. Can I do anything?” She stepped toward me and took my arm to help steady me. Her touch helped, probably more than she knew, and she guided me back inside the station.

* * *

In Annette’s office, they seated me in the same chair as before, only off in the corner. She walked over and asked me, politely and kindly, but very firmly, to sit and be quiet. “Listen and learn.”

I watched as they rustled up a stenographer and began the questioning of Lieutenant Annette Trieri concerning a firearms incident in which a civilian was killed. There was a lot of preliminary mumbo-jumbo, badge numbers and so on, and I drifted away for a while. I came back at the point that things had gotten interesting.

“Mr. Weathers and I were standing on the sidewalk in front of the station, face to face, I was facing the street. Over his shoulder I noticed an individual crawl out from under a car on the opposite side of the street.”

“What car?”

“I’m not sure of the make, but it’s dark green, a European-looking four-door mid-sized sedan.”

I was startled. “That sounds like my Audi.”

One of the others, an individual in street clothes who was clearly the senior person present, said “This sounds relevant. Be sure and get this, Millie. Mr. Weathers, I’m Captain Walter Jankowski, Lieutenant Trieri’s superior officer. Did you say you own an Audi?”

“Yes, dark green, four doors—it’s an A4, the little one—and I got lucky when I came down earlier and found a parking spot just across the street from the station.”

“Hmm. Millie, let’s put things on hold for a minute while we all troop outside and make a positive ID.”

Troop outside we did, and I found my car being swarmed over by two people in jumpsuits.

“Hey, what are those guys doing to my car?” I’m very possessive of it and tend to resent even a foreign fingerprint.

“Those guys’ are from the bomb squad, Mr. Weathers. Any more questions? And is that indeed your car?”

“It sure is my car. Um, do they need a key, or anything? It’s got a rather elaborate alarm system.”

“Looks like they’ve already got it open. Hey, Joe, find anything?”

“There’s about a pound of C4 wired through the ignition on a timer,” came a voice from across the street. “Looks like it was supposed to go off after about five minutes of driving.”

Five minutes, I thought, would have put me on my neighborhood street, or just at home in my driveway. “Excuse me. Is ‘a pound of C4’ significant somehow?” I asked meekly.

“Just about enough to put you into orbit, in tiny pieces, of course.”

My small squeaking noise was not up to my usual level of eloquence.

* * *

Back inside once more, the interview continued, after a plain-clothes officer summarized for the stenographer what had happened outside.

“So, Lieutenant Trieri, you saw an individual crawl out from under the car we’ve been discussing. What then?”

“Well, he looked up and noticed us, and while he was standing up he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a handgun. It looked like a small-caliber revolver, a .22 or .25, probably. Immediately, I ordered Mr. Weathers to sit down and reached for my service revolver. It took me a second try to get Mr. Weathers seated, and by then the perp had begun to raise his revolver in our direction. I gave the ‘freeze’ command, but he didn’t. I also shouted for the desk sergeant, but I don’t know if he heard me. The perp fired and I fired back, three shots, I think, and I saw him go down. If the desk sergeant hadn’t heard me yell, he must have heard the shots, because the next thing I knew the street was flooded with uniforms.”

“Why did you ask Mr. Weathers to sit, rather than getting him prone?”

“Well, it just seemed like a better thing to request of him. He works at the university and those folks are notoriously hard to command and control. Like I said, it took me two tries just to get him seated; I don’t think it would have worked fast enough to try to get him to lie down on the sidewalk there. He was facing me and didn’t know what was going on behind his back.”

“OK, thank you, Lieutenant. Now, Mr. Weathers, do you concur with this narrative?”

“Well, I can’t verify under oath what was going on behind me—the first I saw of the guy with the gun was after he’d been shot by Lieutenant Trieri. But everything else she said was dead-on accurate. And she’s right. The first time she asked me to sit down, my natural reaction was ‘huh?’ and ‘well, whatever for?’ Then, when she said it more firmly the second time, I started to. Then, when she hollered ‘freeze,’ I by-God froze, just for a second. Do you guys take command language 101 or something to learn to yell like that?”

“Mr. Weathers, this is very serious.”

“I understand, and I’m being serious. I never would have thought that such an authoritative command could issue from someone like the Lieutenant. However she learned to do that, it sure worked.”

“Now, Mr. Weathers, could you please state for the record why you were down here?”

I briefly recounted the telephone call, and Annette fetched my written account from the Stiller file and marked it for copying into the new file on the shooting. The plain-clothes officer looked satisfied, and released the stenographer. Captain Jankowski took the floor. “Annette, you know the drill on this. It looks pretty straight-forward, and I expect that internal affairs will put you back on active duty in only a couple of days. Meantime, you’ve earned a vacation. And you know how to find the shrink, if you want

to talk about it, OK? Based on what I've heard here, I'd say that you did an exceptional job, and prevented not only Mr. Weathers here from getting blown to pieces but also a big part of our town. Good work. I have to say, though, I'd sure like to have been able to question the perp to find out what's going on. In the meantime, while you're on leave, I'll take over the investigation of both this and the Stiller case, because it looks like they're connected, and we'll also have some lab results for you when you come back."

* * *

"So," she looked at me, hunkered down over in the corner, when everyone else had left. "I've heard that campus politics can be rough, but a pound of C4? Good Lord. Who have you offended lately, anyway?"

I looked up at her blankly. "I sure wish I knew what's going on here. And I sure wish I knew what to do to get these guys off my back. Somehow I don't believe that your poor schmuck out there is the only one after me. He's probably just a flunky, and the real bad guy, or probably guys, are even now sending out the second wave. What am I gonna do? I'm just an obscure dean at a mid-sized university in semi-rural America. Christ."

She walked over to me and took my hands. "Here. Stand up. You need a hug, and it wouldn't hurt me, either. Despite my tough exterior, I'm not used to this stuff."

I was more surprised, and delighted, by this development than I would ever be able to express. "Mmm. Your exterior doesn't feel so tough to me. I hope you know how much better this makes me feel."

"Don't worry, it works both ways. Now, then..." She squeezed me tightly, and leaned back and actually kissed me on the tip of the nose. "I don't do this with just anybody, you know. Ah, you romantic academics. Lunch at the strip joint, followed by a grope in a semi-public office inside the police station." I noticed sheepishly the several onlookers outside the glass walls of Annette's office. "One of these times," she grinned "we should consider finding a place that's a little more private."

"And a lot more romantic," I added. "I absolutely promise."

"But that means that we have to keep you alive in the meantime, no? Hmm." She stared off into space.

Just then, a young woman stuck her head in the door. "Annette? Can I have a word?"

"Oh, hi Amy. Come in. What's up? Have you met Dean Weathers, from the university?"

"Hello Dean Weathers. You probably don't remember me, but I took your earth science for journalists course, back before you became dean."

I didn't, of course, and had learned that it was better not to pretend, so I didn't say anything.

"Listen, Annette, the beat reporter for the *Herald* is outside asking all sorts of questions about what happened out there in the street. He's got a deadline shortly and is getting panicky for the story. I really don't know what happened either and don't know what to tell him."

"Well, I'm suspended because of the shooting, so I can't talk to him, at least not on the record. But wait a minute..." she reached for the telephone. "Hello, Captain Jankowski? Trieri here. I'm glad I caught you. I know I'm on admin leave, but I have one more problem to solve. Seems that Mr. Weathers has this strange preoccupation with staying alive. And I may have a solution, but I'll have to talk with Randy Fredericks to get it done. Can I go on leave, officially, after I do that?"

She listened for a minute. “Well, OK, how about if I get him not to quote me except on ‘deep background?’ He can quote Mr. Weathers, and will need to to get this done. What I figure is, if Mr. Weathers just says publicly that he doesn’t have any idea of what’s going on beyond having had one of his faculty members killed and he can’t imagine why people are trying to kill him, but that he has complete confidence in the police protection assigned to him... Well, maybe they’ll read that and figure he’s not worth the risk. And leave him alone.”

Pause. “OK, thanks. I’ll get to Randy in time for his deadline. Bye.”

And so it was, in the next morning’s *Durango Herald*, that I would find myself quoted with reasonable accuracy:

Bomb Suspect Shot

*By Randall Fredericks
Herald Staff Writer*

Durango — An unidentified man was shot and killed Tuesday evening by Durango Police Lieutenant Annette Trieri after he drew a handgun and fired at her. He is suspected of planting a car bomb before the shooting. The incident occurred on Tenth Street, across from Police Headquarters.

The DPD Bomb Squad later defused an explosive device attached to the underside of a car at the scene belonging to Harold Weathers, Dean of the College of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University. Weathers was at a loss to explain why anyone would want to bomb his car, although he speculated that it may be somehow connected to the murder of a Frémont State faculty member yesterday (see related story, below).

Mr. Weather’s involvement in that case is, however, minimal. “Of course I have an interest in it, because Professor Ralph Stiller was one of our most distinguished faculty members. I also happened to be the first university official to reach the body, and I was required to give a statement to the police. Naturally, they want my statement to be as clear as possible, so we have had more than one interview. But all I can tell them is that I found Professor Stiller’s body in his laboratory and it looked like a heart attack to me. I don’t know anything about murder. In any case, I have every confidence that the protection afforded me by the Durango Police is all I need for my safety.”

The suspect in the attempted... (continued inside on p. 7)

* * *

Four

I was in the habit of walking from home up the hill to the campus, so it didn’t bother me the next morning that my car was still impounded—it seemed like a good idea not to complain anyway, as they’d promised to remove the bomb. I made arrangements for it to be transported to my mechanic after the police were finished with it so that the electrical system could have a complete check-out. I folded the *Herald* under my arm, stuck a computer diskette in my pocket (the ultimate in miniaturized briefcases) and headed out the door. Outside, the air was cold and damp. The usual coal smoke from the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad was significantly enhanced by the smell of wood smoke; from

where I was, I could see a haze layer over the valley. So far, December had been kind, but people still liked the romance of fireplaces. Now, why was romance on my mind so early in the day?

I was simultaneously startled and pleased to see the police cruiser at the curb. So they really were providing protection. I had been relieved to wake up in a house that was not burned to the ground—hell, I had been relieved to wake up at all—but I had not given the protection issue much thought. I walked around to the driver's side window.

“Good morning. Nice to see you here! Is there anything special I should be doing?”

“Well, my orders are to watch your house for suspicious activity and to keep tabs on you. Or at least try to. Lieutenant Trieri seemed dubious about whether that would be possible.”

“I thought she was on leave because of the shooting.”

“Well, yeah, she is, but before she left the station last night, we were hit with one of her avalanches of paper. And so here I am with instructions from her. She probably also left instructions for everyone else, including Captain Jankowski on how to run her case load. What's your plan for the day?”

“I'm on my way up to the campus, to my office. I think everything on my schedule today is on campus, and I can't imagine that there'd be a threat there. Too many people around.”

“Hop in, and I'll give you a ride up. It wouldn't do for you to have an 'accident' on your way to work. Bad for my record and all, not to mention for you.”

Even with the delays associated with getting the police cruiser through the maze of parking gates guarding the outskirts of the campus, I managed to arrive at my office before anyone else and settled in to my morning routine of telephone calls and e-mail. I had the usual number of e-mail messages queued up, waiting for something to happen to them, and several of them were from someone new to my correspondence, with the address atl@pineserv.com. This was a bit strange. Most of my mail is from someone at “edu” or “gov”, the educational and federal government mail domains, and I'm always suspicious of anything from the business world. They're usually ads, electronic junk mail. What in the world was “pineserv?” A landscaping company?

Before I could really get started, there was a knock on my door, but nothing else happened. I'd gotten used to Alice's brief knocks immediately followed by grand entrances, so I forgot for a minute that I should do something.

Finally I woke up. “Come in, it's open.”

What in the world? It was Alice, waiting to be invited in. Had a very hot place frozen over, or something? She look as elegant as ever, but her demeanor was clearly sub-par.

“Dean Weathers, I wonder if I might speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course, Alice.” I sensed something was seriously amiss. “Please, come in and sit down.”

She did, and I could see that she was trembling. The unflappable Alice Swan was, well, flapped. She sat primly on the edge of the couch, back straight, and pushed a stray end of her grey hair into place.

“Alice you look upset. Now you sit right there and compose yourself, and I'll go out and get you a cup of tea. No, don't move. That's an order.”

I hustled out to the little staff kitchenette next door. Normally I would have splashed some water in a coffee mug to rinse out the dust and poured water from the simmering electric kettle into it and dunked a teabag, but this was Alice. So, I emptied and refilled the kettle with fresh cold water, turned it to high, found a real teacup with a saucer, washed and dried both, found and folded a tea napkin, rinsed the stainless tea ball and filled it with loose chamomile tea, and, when the water had come to a rolling boil,

poured some into the cup to heat it, emptied the cup, put the tea ball in the cup, and refilled it with hot water, gently raised and lowered the tea ball a few times, and then set it aside. I also grabbed a coffee mug, swished some water in it to get the dust out, and poured myself a cup of coffee from the community pot.

When I got back to my office, with the teacup and saucer in one hand and my coffee cup in the other, I gently kicked the door shut and carefully set Alice's tea on the coffee table in front of her, placing the napkin beside it. She was reading my *Herald*, eyes wide.

"This, Dean Weathers, is what I wished to speak with you about. I read it at home this morning."

I decided to let her take the lead. "Yes, Alice?"

She shifted on the couch, then picked up the saucer, and took a sip of the tea. "Well. Dean Weathers, I have worked for you now for just over three years, ever since you became dean. And, I don't know if I ever have said this is so many words, but, well, I have to say that I was overjoyed when the previous dean moved to the provost's office and you took the position here. Your style has allowed me to do my job to what I feel is the best of my ability, and I have been able to flourish, I believe, and this office, too."

"Thank you, Alice; I try. And you do an outstanding, a spectacular job. But what does all this have to do with the newspaper?"

She cleared her throat gently. "I realize that people in administrative positions here at the university tend to change jobs every few years, but I have been secretly hoping that you would stay in this position long enough for me to retire with you in this office. I'm only about five years from retirement, and I just don't like the idea of having to adapt to yet another new dean."

You mean train a new dean to adapt to you, I thought. But I was touched. "Alice, I'll make a deal with you. You keep me informed about your retirement schedule, and I'll stay in this job long enough to throw you a retirement party that'll be the envy of the entire university. And then you can retire, and that very same day I can go back to teaching. I'm certain that I couldn't function in this office without you here."

"Yes, well, we can discuss the details when the time comes." She seemed disturbed and somewhat put off her stride by the prospect of leaving the college in the lurch, as it were. "But my main concern just now is getting there. You seem, if you'll excuse my saying so, to be awfully casual about what happened last night. And, well, we have already seen violence on campus and the last thing we need..."

She trailed off, and I realized that she was on the verge of tears. And it also dawned on me that she was worried about me, not herself. Time for the clergyman persona again.

"Alice. Please listen carefully. If I seem casual, it's because, first, you know that's my style, and second, acting any differently would only make things worse. And you can be sure that I'm taking all this very seriously indeed. That long quote in the paper was carefully staged last night at the police station, designed to make the bad guys lose interest in me. And this morning, I rode to the campus in a police car, one that had camped outside my house overnight. Annette—I mean, Lieutenant Trieri—came up with the idea that open publicity is the best approach to my safety, and I think it was brilliant. I've not told anyone this, but I'll probably spend the night here: I have lots of work to catch up on anyway, and it'll be the safest place I can possibly be. During the day, there are people everywhere, and at night, things are pretty well locked down. OK? You can bet that I'm as concerned for my safety as anyone else is. Last night, when they found that bomb after Annette had shot that guy, I had a bad case of the shakes. But she got me calmed down and invented this publicity approach, and I feel a lot better."

I looked out the window. "She's quite an amazing woman."

“If you don’t mind my asking, will you be seeing her again?”

I could tell that the conversation had suddenly taken a right-angle turn. “Well, she’s on leave because of the shooting, and I think we’ve pretty much covered all the legal bases related to Monday’s tragedy, so I don’t know that I’ll have any reason to. Why? What do you think?”

Ha! Got her. I watched as she squirmed slightly in her seat on the couch.

“It’s not for me to say, sir. But, if I may, I can make a couple of observations. First, it’s been over two years since Mrs. Weathers passed away. And when you came back from lunch yesterday, I noticed a look in your eye and a lightness in your step that I haven’t seen for a long time. I don’t mean to pry into your personal life, but, well, life goes on, and all.”

How to get out of this one? “Well, you seem to have been aware of where we had lunch yesterday. And there’s just something about that place that could put a look in my eye, if you know what I mean, Alice.”

“Yes, well, there are different kinds of looks, if you know what I mean. And yesterday’s was more like Monday’s, when you were eating lunch in here with her.” She had me.

“Oh, I don’t know what to do. She’s a police officer, for heaven’s sake, and I’m a college dean. And I’ve forgotten everything I ever knew about dating. Will you be satisfied if I tell you I’ll think about it?”

She looked down at her teacup and smiled in her prim way. Then she looked up and began on the day’s schedule.

* * *

Forty-five minutes later we had dealt with the accumulated paper correspondence, and I was again contemplating my backlog of electronic messages. I had long ago discovered that it was imperative to read each and every message, because the “Subject” lines on the message headers were often no indication of their importance. And that it’s better to deal with old business first, then to move to new items. It was 9:30 by the time I got to those landscaping ads. I expanded the header list and found that the five messages from pineserv.com had arrived overnight, between midnight and 3 am. Probably one of those auto-mailers, designed to flood the network with advertising during slack times: a “SPAM” attack. The subject of the first message was “Hi! Found ya!” Yeah, right. If these folks thought they were gonna sell me any bushes...

Oh. Well, glory be. atl@pineserv.com was one Annette Trieri, mailing via her local internet/mail service provider, pineserv. Why “atl,” though?

Hello your Deanship! It only took me about 15 minutes to find Fremont State on the web and then to find your address. Probably too long, but I’m learning! My adrenalin level is still too high to sleep, so I’m trying to figure out how to tackle the Stiller killing when I get back to work. You can bet I’ll be in touch! :^) A.

I could tell that I was clearly going to have to do something about this “your Deanship” stuff. And, normally, I thought of people who use the little sideways faces in their messages as dolts. I’d have to make an exception here, even if it didn’t look at all like her (her nose was more of an apostrophe shape, I decided). The next message was only about 10 minutes later:

Hal: It occurs to me that your cellular phone is a clear player in this little drama of ours. It would help if you could do two things. Make a list of everyone you know who knows the number. And make a list of every call you made or received, with as much information as possible (who, when, summary of content) since Sunday night. :^) A.

Eminently sensible, I thought. Yes, ma'am, I'll get right on it. Then, only five minutes later:

Hal: I didn't mean to sound curt with that last message, like I'm giving orders. E-mail is so hard to put feelings into. I hope you're sound asleep right now. Sweet dreams. :^) A.

This took me only to 12:45; but the next message wasn't until 2:30:

Hal: Here's what I'm thinking. I want to get this written down now, before I forget it, and also before the lab results come in. Then, if they back me up, there will be two independent indications (the lab stuff and my suspicions) to point the way. Anyway, I'm thinking drugs. The white powder, of course, makes that pretty obvious. Stiller and the perp went to that classroom to do a drug deal, and something went foul. Stiller ended up dead. How, you ask, does the stuff on the blackboard fit in? Well, Stiller was a chemist through and through, you've told me. Maybe he sampled the merchandise and got high, and then went off on one of those drug-induced creativity jags that happens sometimes. This doesn't solve the crime, but it points to a specific direction. Also, the drug crowd is not to be messed with, and they could be the people after you. They know their explosives and so on. How does this sound? :^) A.

The kid's on a roll, now, I thought. Finally, at 2:55, there was this.

OK, the adrenalin is all gone and I'm sleepy. I wish you were here to give me one more big hug. In private. I'll think about that and have sweet dreams myself. Bye. :^) A.

I didn't let myself dwell on that last one too long, even though I knew it would feel good to, but rather I reminded myself that people often put stuff into e-mail messages that they later regret. Nonetheless, it was a wonderful sentiment, one that would sustain me through all the meetings of the day.

* * *

When I returned from my 11:00 meeting, having planned to answer Annette's messages over lunch when I had time to think, I was disappointed to find a new message from her, with the header "Last one for a while..." I popped it open at once:

Hal: I've just reviewed all my rantings from last night, and I hope you don't think I'm shameless. I have to keep reminding myself that we met only on Monday, barely 48 hours ago! Anyway, since I'm on suspension until next Monday (they told me this morning), I think I'll use the time to relax and get away for a few days. I've got an old friend in Miami I haven't seen since her divorce, and I bet we would both profit from some rum punches on the beach together. Hope to hear from you when I get back. And I do think those lists I mentioned would be a good idea. Also, it would probably be a good idea not to use your cellular phone until this is all cleared up. See ya next week. :^) A.

I was disappointed, relieved, and a little excited, all at once. She didn't exactly regret what she'd said in her e-mail last night, but was a little embarrassed by it. Fair enough. She was leaving town for a few days, which meant I couldn't see her, but she'd be back, and maybe I needed some time, too. But, then again, maybe not. I knew where she was going, it didn't seem to involve another man, and it classified as a romantic place, potentially at least. The outline of a plan began to form in my head. Meantime, though, there were more meetings to deal with, students to encourage, and some more detective work to be done, maybe.

I wandered over to the chemistry building to examine the state of affairs of the fatal lecture hall. Despite tight scheduling, it was empty during the lunch hour, and, not surprisingly given the university's budget, it had not been cleaned recently. Because it was out of the traffic flow, it was just possible that there was still some of the white powder left from Monday. Yep. I'd thought so, and used the fresh envelope I'd brought along to gather some up. I didn't know how much was needed to run a good sample on, but maybe there would be enough here.

The chemistry department supported, based in part on the urging of the late Prof. Stiller, a shared analytical laboratory, with state-of-the-art equipment including sophisticated mass spectrometers and high-performance gas and liquid chromatography systems. Faculty members who couldn't afford their own equipment, graduate students with specialized needs for their research projects, and a variety of clients from the real world outside the campus paid by the sample to find out the chemical composition of mystery substances they brought in. And, as a dean, I had a small slush fund burning a hole in my pocket. I happened to know the technician, Gil Taylor, from our work together on a research project with one of the atmospheric chemists on the faculty. Taylor was munching on a sandwich when I walked into the lab.

"Hello, Gil. Long time no see. What's the going rate for mass spec these days?"

Taylor, all 6'6" of him, stood up to shake hands. "Hal Weathers. What are you doing in these parts? Ah, it depends on what you think you've got, and whether it's radioactive."

"Well, it's probably not radioactive. I suspect that it's some sort of contraband, a white powder, probably with some common classroom floor dust thrown in. There's not much here, which is probably just as well if it really is a controlled substance. Hope there's enough for you to analyze."

"Does this have anything to do with the Stiller case?"

"Seems the police department neglected to sweep the floor when they were done with the crime scene. They're doing an analysis, too, but I figure an independent verification of their results by a state-of-the-art facility like yours would be useful. You need an account number up front?"

"Naw, I'll run it for free, considering it's sort of chemistry department business. The rumors have been flying thick and fast ever since Monday. I even heard that Stiller and our worthy department chair had a little fling a couple of years ago. Kind of strange, considering their age difference."

“No kidding? Ralph had a reputation as a womanizer, but I wouldn’t have thought Linda to be his type. He liked ’em young, real young. Anything else you need for this sample?”

“I am a little concerned about the illegality.”

“Got a piece of paper? I’ll just write out an instruction, noting that it may be contraband, to take the heat off you. And if it’s just the two of us who know about it, there’s nothing to worry about. If the police analysis matches yours, I’ll probably not say anything anyway. What’s a good time scale for this?”

“I’m motivated. Not by your being Mr. Bigshot Dean now, but by the detective work. I’ll see if I can figure it out by tomorrow.”

Excellent. One down and one to go. What do you suppose Amy-the-police-journalist’s last name is?

* * *

I didn’t know it, but I actually had two more items on my detective agenda. When I returned to my office, I found a student waiting in the foyer to see me, Fred Smits, the one from Stiller’s class who had spread the alarm. Smits stood up when I walked in.

“Dean Weathers, I’m Fred Smits. I was in Professor Stiller’s last class. Maybe you remember me from the chemistry office and the walk down the hall.”

“At the time, I thought it more of a ‘run’ down the hall, Mr. Smits. And I don’t think I ever commended you for your quick decision-making and your leadership. Thank you.”

Smits was dazzled, as I knew he would be. “Ah, well, thank you, sir. But I wonder if I could talk with you for just a minute. I know you’re real busy, but…”

“Surely. Come in and sit down.”

We settled ourselves in my office. “Now what can I do for you?”

“Well, some of us in the class study together. It was a bear of a course, and, since we’re chemistry majors, we need a good grade. Anyway, we heard about how Professor Stiller really died, and we’re wondering if there’s anything we can do?”

“As far as I know, the only thing that the police have to go on is the wound and those mysterious equations on the blackboard. Did you hear Professor Harmon’s comments about them?”

“Well, a bunch of us heard her say that she thought they were homework for us, and we’re all glad she didn’t assign them. They were very different from anything else that we’d had all semester, lots harder looking. The whole class was talking about them for the time before I discovered that he was, uh, dead.”

“Well, I thought they were strange looking, too, because it looked like more than one person had worked on them. Did they look like Professor Stiller’s handwriting?”

“I never thought of that. I don’t remember. But I know how we can find out. Professor Stiller always wrote chemical equations real fast, and he was hard to keep up with. So one of the guys in our study group, Bobby Garcia, got one of those digital cameras—the ones that take pictures you can load directly into a computer?—and he has been taking pictures of Professor Stiller’s equations all semester. Color pictures, so that we could follow the colors that Professor Stiller used. And I bet he took a picture of the equations on Monday, too.”

“Colors?”

“Yeah, Professor Stiller would use different colors in his equations so we could follow specific atoms through the reactions more easily. He was tough, but he was the best chemistry lecturer I’ve had. One of the things that threw everyone off Monday was that there was only the one color.”

“How were you doing in the course, Fred? Need me to put in a good word with Professor Harmon?”

* * *

It wasn’t hard to find that Amy’s last name was Hodges, or to get her on the telephone.

“Ms. Hodges, this is Dean Hal Weathers. I’m calling about last night.”

“Oh, Dean Weathers. How nice to hear from you again.”

“I didn’t say anything last night, because, you were right: I didn’t remember your taking my course. It was quite a while ago, I believe.”

“About six years, I think. I wasn’t expecting you to remember, or anything.”

“What did you think of the course?”

“Well, I got a ‘C’.”

“Ouch. Um, was that what you thought you deserved?”

“Well, actually it was probably generous. I was never very good at science and so I blew the factual parts of all the tests. But, really, the course was very good for me, because you spent a lot of time talking about how to apply the scientific method, scientific thinking, to earth science problems, and I did follow that. And that’s what the detectives do around here, is to use the scientific method, in their own way, to solve crimes. So your course really helped me understand how things work around here, if you can believe it.”

I was immensely relieved. I was probably going to have to ask her to bend, if not outright break, some rules and I needed her on my side. “Well, I’m sorry about the ‘C’, but I’ve never thought that grades are very important anyway. What’s important is that you actually learned something interesting and useful, and it sounds like you did. And, if I ever teach that course again, I’ll remember this conversation and emphasize process over factual content. Now. I really called because I need a favor.”

* * *

One of the perks of being dean is that I always get teaching assistants for the courses I teach. And, since I had run the review session on Tuesday, it was only fair that Roberta run the one on Thursday. The exam was already made up, on a diskette locked in my side desk drawer, and it wasn’t scheduled until a week from today in any case. Now, what else was on the schedule for tomorrow and Friday? And what about the weekend?

Alice was back to being her unflappable self when I emerged from my office at 4:30 and announced that I’d be out of town until Monday. Her blue eyes looked at me over her reading glasses with an “Oh? Who says?” kind of look, but, when I reassured her that I’d taken care of the various meetings on my schedule for Thursday and Friday, and that I’d talked with Roberta about taking the Thursday class, she was mollified enough to ask simply “Do you need any travel arrangements made for you, Dean Weathers? And I do hope you’ll leave a contact telephone number?”

I dropped an itinerary onto her desk, and was out of there almost before it landed. I walked home and took care of the little chores I needed to get finished ahead of time, and then found there was the rest

of the evening to occupy. I always have a hard time getting to sleep the night before a trip anyway, so I decided to tackle the puzzle of who at the university could have supplied information to the guy that Annette had shot. Her suggestion that I make a list of who might know my cellular phone number had started me thinking already, and now I knew it would gnaw at me all night.

The obvious people were those I had mentioned to Annette on the phone yesterday afternoon, faculty, staff, and administrators at the university. But anyone who would set me up to be killed would also have had to be a part of the Stiller killing. Maybe I could find out more about Stiller.

I sat down in front of my home computer—which was actually my old office computer, with the previous generation of processor, still serious overkill for home applications—and called the modem pool at the university. Once logged into the administrative fileserver, I had access to several large databases of personnel information, including one of recent faculty research and teaching activities and another of faculty curriculum vitae. Stiller, I discovered, figured prominently in both, and even had his own research home page.

Let's see. Ralph L. Stiller, born in Peoria, Illinois, undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (B.S., Chemistry, Highest Honors); graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley (Ph.D., Physical and Analytical Chemistry), graduating in only 3 years(!). Two-year post-doc at Harvard. Over 45 journal papers in the eight years since graduating, an astronomical publication rate. Full Professor for the past two years, meaning he'd been promoted to that level after only four here in Durango. I recalled vaguely that this had happened in order to entice Stiller not to accept an offer of a position at UCLA. No current graduate students (strange), but 5 active research grants (impressive, especially for us). No evidence of family life; apparently single (which would fit with his dalliances with students, including the provost's daughter a year ago). On the face of it, we were lucky to have someone at this level on our faculty, trouble-maker or no. In fact, it was rather amazing that Stiller had accepted a position here after the Harvard post-doc. He could have had about any position anywhere with those credentials. This implied that there was something a little off kilter about his background or his references. Or something.

But so what if he was an egotistical jerk? This made him no different from about a third of the faculty generally, and it certainly didn't lead to reasons for anyone to kill him. So the connection must be to his research work, or his technical expertise. This would fit with my discussion with Annette about the equations in the classroom. But how? That was over my head, and besides, it was getting late. But I knew I still wouldn't be able to get to sleep easily.

* * *

Five

Just after 2:30 the next afternoon, I was poking along at the speed limit, and thereby creating something of a traffic hazard, outbound on the Rickenbacker Causeway. My Hertz Gold Card had procured a bright yellow Mustang convertible, the top was down, Jimmy Buffett was blasting from the tape player, and life was good.

Yesterday, Amy Hodges had been a most willing conspirator and ferreted out the fact that Annette had registered at the Golden Palms Resort on Key Biscayne. And today, fifteen hundred or so miles later, the fine, flexible needles of the casuarina trees between the roadway and the beach rippled in the breeze. The weather was one of those made-to-order Chamber-of-Commerce days, with little puffy trade

cumulus clouds decorating an otherwise deep blue sky. Biscayne Bay on both sides of the Causeway sparkled and shimmered, occasionally making one of the many neophyte windsurfers pay the price of ambition with a big splash.

But it was so humid, compared to home. I'm always amazed to return to the Florida humidity. Just stepping off the airplane onto the airport jetway reminds me of walking into a steam room, and the airport is supposedly air conditioned. How could I possibly have survived living here without having been eaten by fungus, or slime mold, or something? And what's even more amazing, particularly in December, is the green. Durango has its share of coniferous forests, and practically everyone in town has a blue spruce or two, so it isn't as bad as the midwest. But it was definitely winter there, and the aspen groves on the mountain sides were brown-gray and most of the town was exceedingly dreary, Christmas decorations notwithstanding. But Miami was green, so green it almost hurt.

I was actually rather proud of myself for being here: I'd managed to follow through with my plan, which involved significant emotional risk and a considerable nuisance factor. Because of the time change, I'd had to get up at about 4:00 that morning to arrive in Miami in time to have some day left, the hop from Durango to the new Denver International Airport having taken off an ungodly hour before dawn. A cloud deck was pushed up against the Front Range, and the Denver area was in store for one of the wet, heavy snows the locals call "upslop." The dawn under the cloud colored everything with sunrise, casting a pink tint on the DIA terminal's circus-tent roof. I decided that the Denver pundits' claims that the building looked like nothing so much as a giant pregnant sow lying on her back, teats straining skyward, was not really all that accurate—too many nipples. I spent the layover between flights trying to imagine a better metaphor without much success. At least I'd been able to catch up on sleep on the flight to Miami, having remembered to bring ear plugs.

On arriving in Miami, my first visit in several years, I was astounded at the craziness of the airport and felt like a hick from the country, lucky to successfully negotiate baggage claim and the ride to the Hertz garage. At least I managed to find both a perfect car (except for the color) and an equally perfect room, on the twentieth floor of the Coconut Grove Hotel, with a balcony overlooking the marina at Dinner Key. From the balcony, the masts of the sailboats in the marina looked to be keeping time to the waves like a forest of out-of-sync metronomes. I could hear the squawks of the feral parrots in the ficus trees that lined Bayshore Drive, and the sea breeze smelled like ocean. After changing into my Miami uniform, loose, lightweight white cotton everything, with sandals, shades, and a University of Miami Hurricanes visor, I was ready. And now as I was cruising past my alma mater, the Rosenstiel School, and across the Bear Cut Bridge, the rest of the traffic whizzed by on my left.

Even as I was enjoying being back in Miami again, relishing the weather and the scenery, I was mentally rehearsing three different speeches I'd composed to cover upcoming bases. I hoped I'd have to use only two.

Traffic was relatively light, at least if the inherent differences between Durango and Miami were taken into consideration, and I made it out Crandon Boulevard to Key Biscayne in good time. Even though I'd been back to Miami on a couple of occasions since the big hurricane, I was still amazed at how different the vegetation looked. Just as green as before, but still shorter, as if it had been severely pruned. Some of the buildings, I recalled, got pruned as well.

I remembered the Key as a sleepy retirement community, before it became a Mecca for South American glitterati, but I was still able to find the obscure side street down to the beach and the Palms. I pulled in and parked in one of the restaurant spots and gave myself a little pep talk. If she seemed disturbed that I found her, or if she wasn't alone, I could excuse myself and spend a couple of days visiting with old friends. But maybe she'd be happy to see me. And I wasn't planning to hit on her, at least not without obvious and explicit encouragement. Of course, there was no reason to think that she'd

even be here at a quarter to three in the afternoon. All I knew was that she was registered here; I'd confirmed Amy's information earlier with a call from my hotel.

I didn't find her by the pool and was about to wander up to the second floor observation bar, when I spotted her on the ocean-side deck at one of the outdoor restaurant tables, under the coconut palms. Alone. It looked like she had an empty glass in front of her, and a soup bowl. I couldn't tell if it was also empty. My personal pep talk continued—OK, kiddo, just sit there for five more minutes, and then we'll see which speeches I get to use. As if to cooperate, she leaned forward, propping her chin on her hand, and stared out at the Atlantic.

I retraced my steps back around to the pool-side bar and got a rum punch for her and a seltzer for myself. Returning to the restaurant, I kept up the pep talk, and I stopped to pluck a garish red and orange hibiscus blossom from one of the dozens of bushes along the path. And then I walked carefully up behind her.

As anonymously as I possibly could I said, "Your rum punch, ma'am?" and set it down in front of her.

"Oh, thank you! But I didn't ord..." She looked up at me. "Hal! My God! What ... how ... oh ... but..."

While she searched about for her vocabulary, I rounded to the opposite side of the little table and sat down. Time for speech number one. I'd thought about being tritely flip ("Fancy meeting you here. Small world, huh?"), but finally I decided on full-out sincerity.

"Hi! You were pretty easy to find. You sent me all those e-mail messages and then ran off before I had a chance to respond. And I figured that you wouldn't carry a portable computer everywhere, unlike me. So, I really had no choice but to come find you. You certainly do look fetching." She was wearing a beach cover-up, probably over a swim suit, and no shoes, and her hair was pinned up. She'd painted her toenails bright red.

"Here." I handed her the hibiscus flower. "Put this in your hair over your left ear. That means you're single and the right ear means married, or else it's the other way around. I can never remember which. At least it'll match your toenails, sort of." I felt as if I were rattling on and on, but she seemed to appreciate the flower and wasn't talking much anyway.

"Hal! How wonderful! But..." Most of her vocabulary, except, I noted with gratification, my name, seemed still to be missing, so I plunged ahead while she fumbled with the flower and her hair.

"Anyhow, with regard to your last e-mail message yesterday, where you were worried about your mail of the night before. I need to say categorically that in no way, shape, or form do I think you're shameless. What I think is, or what I hope is, that you've been wrestling with the same little dilemma that I've been debating with myself about. You know, how quickly to let things develop between us and so forth. So what I finally decided to do was to stop debating, turn my brain off, and just follow my heart. And so here I am."

"Oh..." her eyes started to fill up with tears, and the left one overflowed down her cheek, so I unrolled the unused place setting and handed her the fresh napkin.

"I don't want to be too forward, or aggressive, or anything like that, so I'm going to make sure that you have all the space you need, for whatever reason, and I decided specifically not to stay here at the Palms because of that. But I hope it's OK that I'm in Miami. And that I looked you up."

"You're not staying here? Where...?" Her vocabulary was beginning to recover, little by little.

“I’m registered and checked in over at the Coconut Grove Hotel.” I chuckled. “It’s not like I wore these clothes all the way from home. Say, are you going to eat that conch chowder? They don’t serve real food on airplanes anymore and I’m famished. It’s still lunchtime at home.”

“Huh? How did you know what...? I think it’s probably cold. Where’s Coconut Grove? How far away?”

I saw my opening for speech number two, although it would need some editing on the fly, and smiled. “You’re the one who reminded me yesterday that we met each other only Monday, and a corollary of that is that we hardly know anything about each other. Tell you what. Unless you have a different idea, I propose that we spend some time over the next few days fixing that. I’ll start: I went to graduate school here, a few miles down the road. You passed it on your right just before coming over the last low bridge on the way out here. The place with the antennas and the geodesic dome—which is really a weather radar—on the roof. We grad students used to hang out at the bar here all the time, before, when it was a funky beach bar and fleabag motel. Your cold soup there, which should be hot, is one of the two best bowls of conch chowder in Miami, as far as I’m concerned. The other one is sort of across the street from my hotel in the Grove, at Monty Trainer’s.” I waved vaguely westward. “It’s over that way past the other side of the island, across the bay from here. Remember the toll plaza at the entrance to the Causeway? About two miles south of that. Miami is one of my absolutely favorite places anywhere, at least for visiting. Seen any local fauna yet?”

“You lived here? What fauna?” Before I could answer a waiter appeared behind her.

“Welcome to the Sand Bar, sir. Can I get you anything? Ma’am, are you finished with your chowder?”

“No she’s not, but it got cold waiting for me to show up. Damn traffic. How about bringing me a bowl of conch chowder, too, with extra crackers, and taking hers and heating it up in the microwave, or something? Or just getting her a new, hot bowlful? Thanks.”

“You lived here?” she repeated. “I’ve just been sitting here feeling like a stranger in paradise. I had no idea what to do next.”

“Oh, come on. I should think that all you have to do is snap your fingers and you’d be knee deep in beach hunks.”

She snorted, then burst out laughing. “Yeah, well, I like my guys to be able to speak in complete sentences. Besides, you haven’t been for a walk on the beach yet. It’s crawling with babes, 20-ish, silicon enhanced, wearing bikinis that seem to have been sized to fit a Barbie doll. There’s enough skin out there to keep the hunks away from me for a long time. It actually makes Fannie’s seem puritanical by comparison!”

“You mean I’ve got no competition? I guess I can live with that. But I thought you said something about a divorced friend down here.”

“Sherry and I got together for dinner in Little Havana, or whatever it’s called, last night, and we discovered that we really don’t have anything in common any more. She’s over her divorce with flying colors and has a new Cuban boyfriend with gold chains and something called a cigarette boat. We had a nice dinner and visit, but... Been there, done that, as they say. I really had no idea what to do tonight. Since I don’t know the area, I’m too intimidated to just jump in my car and go sightseeing, especially at night.” She reached across the table and took my hand. “Hal, I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you!”

I took a deep breath, relaxed, leaned back in the chair, sighed, and looked around in comfort. Speech number three, the face-saving one, would be unnecessary. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard anybody say all day. Including the person at the airport who told me that they’d have to upgrade me to

first class because coach was full. Even if all you need is a tour guide. You like seafood? Ever eat stone crabs?”

“Wait. Back up. You’re as bad as Alice. What local fauna am I supposed to have seen?”

“Oh. Well, you’d know if you had. The owners have probably upgraded this place too much to have them anymore. When Hurricane Andrew blew through here a few years ago, this place really got hammered, and they took the opportunity to rebuild just about all of it. But back when it was funky, it used to be famous for its palmetto bugs. Big cockroaches. That fly. Lots of them lived under the deck here.” I tromped on the flooring, and, obediently, a 3" long brown bug, with wings, crawled out from between the boards and waddled toward her feet. “Don’t worry, just give it a flick with your toe if it tries to climb on your foot. They’re harmless, really. If you live down here for very long you get used to them walking on you, at least if you live in graduate student housing. They tickle. What’s neat is to watch one of those little four-inch gecko lizards eat one.”

She tucked her feet up under her on her chair. “I’ve seen the lizards, over by the pool, doing push-ups. Please don’t thump the deck any more, OK? Yuck. Let’s see. Yes, I like seafood. And I’ve read about stone crabs somewhere but never had them. Can you get them around here?”

My contentment deepened, and I settled back into the chair even further. God, she has beautiful eyes.

“Annette,” I said softly, “I don’t have any idea about the future of our relationship—although I do have my hopes, and they’re growing—but I promise you that you’re going to have the time of your life until Sunday, or whenever you have to fly home. Ever since I got my degree and moved away from here, I’ve learned how to come back for visits and spend money really enjoying the place. And I’d like nothing better than to share it with you. How about this for tonight: we eat this conch chowder I see coming, then go for a long walk on the beach, down to the light house and back. Just past that last condo ’way down there is the state park, no more buildings for most of the walk, so it’s really lovely, about as close to ‘nature’ as anything around here. That’ll take the rest of the afternoon. Then you get dressed up a little—meaning casual evening wear instead of a swim suit—and we hop in my convertible, drive over to Monty’s and have stone crabs for dinner. All you can eat. That’ll take all evening, and if it doesn’t we can just go outside and listen to the reggae band and even dance. I’ll get you back here, all tucked in for a big day of playing tourist tomorrow, by midnight, so you won’t turn into a pumpkin. Then tomorrow morning we can get together here for breakfast and do some serious planning for the weekend. I’ll show you the real South Florida, along with the tourist stuff you’d probably miss otherwise. Sound OK?”

The chowder arrived, and so it began.

* * *

Noon on Sunday found us holding hands in the executive lounge at Miami International Airport, waiting to head back west. I had changed flights to be on hers and then, in a fit of vacation largesse, had upgraded both of us to first class. We were sunburned and slightly stupefied from a mutual sleep deficit. But very, very happy. Two days and three nights in Miami and the upper Keys had, as I had proposed, fixed the problem of our not knowing anything about each other. And I’d been right all along. No “wrong places” on this woman.

I was delighted to discover that she liked the same kinds of off-beat touristy stuff that I find so charming in South Florida. The baby macaws and cockatoos at the Parrot Jungle. The Fruit and Spice Park out in Redlands, where she was able to see the way that carambolas grow. The long drive down to Flamingo through the sweeping vistas of the Everglades. The tidal channels in the mangroves in Pennekamp Park, through which you could just fit a canoe. Dinner at the Lorelei in Islamorada,

watching the sunset over Florida Bay. Not once had she mentioned shopping, cruise ships, race tracks, jai-alai, or Miami Beach. And when she ate stone crabs, she didn't fuss about the mess or just pick at them trying to be neat, she dove in head first and hardly came up for air. This, I'd decided, was a keeper. And she seemed to feel the same about me, miracle of miracles.

My reverie was interrupted by business.

"So, you told me that you'd brought some stuff related to that case back home, but we never looked at it or anything. Real life begins tomorrow, but I'm beginning to be curious about it. What've you got?" She sipped at her Cuban coffee.

"Oh, yeah. Guess we must have been distracted or something. Well, first, there's a fax that came for me at my hotel Thursday, just as I got in."

I pulled out of my briefcase the information from the analytical lab. Gil Taylor had stayed up most of the night working up the analysis, and the results were revealing. "I don't really know how to interpret these graphs, but Gil's made notes on them. He says the powder, which Durango's finest left some of behind in the lecture hall, is some kind of strange alkaloid organic compound that he's not able to put a name to. He thinks it's one of the 'designer drugs' that have been coming out of California lately. So you were right. Drugs, but not the usual suspects. It'll be interesting to see how this matches up with your lab's results, and if the blood work from Stiller's body has any relationship to it."

"Geez, I leave the office for a day and people start doing my job for me. Hmmph." But she looked pleased to have been right. "What else?"

"Well, it seems that one of the students in Stiller's class was in the habit of photographing his lecture notes from the white board. So we have lots of examples of Stiller's handwriting to compare with those equations from last Monday. And there's more to this than just the handwriting, as you'll see. That's all in my computer, and we can fire it up on the plane. Except I want to snuggle under a blanket with you and take a long nap."

She giggled. "I know what you really want to do under that blanket, you old goat."

"Oh, no, not that again. You're gonna kill me yet. I'm an old geezer, you know. And I sit behind a desk all day and my heart's all flabby and just think of the headlines." I made framing motions in the air with my hands,

“ ‘Respected University Dean Found Dead
With Big Smile on Face In Arms of Sexy Police Woman’ .”

"Ha. Who woke up whom at 3 this morning? Hmm?"

"Well, I thought for sure you'd want to see the crescent moon rising over the Gulf Stream, and, as long as we were awake anyway..."

* * *

I woke up earlier than I'd intended the next morning, partly because of the time change and partly because my bed was empty again. Amazing how quickly I'd re-adapted to sharing it. We had reluctantly decided to go our separate ways the evening before, only because practical life beckoned. Laundry was a priority, and we both really needed a full night's sleep to be ready for work again. We checked in with the police desk and found that there had been no suspicious activity in the vicinity of my home. Her publicity plan had worked, at least for the present.

Rather than try to go back to sleep, I got up and spent some extra time on my Nordic Track ski machine, to work off the stone crabs (75% cholesterol-laden fat, I read somewhere), spiny lobster, and other rich South Florida food I'd indulged in.

On my walk to work, I had the impression that I was strolling along with a stupid grin on my face, whistling a silly tune, off key. But it didn't matter, somehow. I was actually looking forward to being confronted by Alice about my long weekend away. And I was already anticipating dinner. Annette and I were going shopping to find something to make together at her place.

Getting to work extra early turned out to be a bonus, because the e-mail had piled up beyond belief. And there were several phone calls I could deal with as well. I popped open my weekly calendar to see what new meetings had been scheduled in the past two days, and found that I was still free for most of the morning. Monday morning! It was only a week ago that Stiller had been found dead and I'd met Annette.

Alice arrived punctually at 8:00, and swept into my office with a fresh cup of coffee for me and, naturally, questions. "I hope your weekend in Florida was relaxing, Dean Weathers. And that Ms. Trieri is well. It looks as if you got some sun."

I had, of course, given her that itinerary, so she knew where I went, but I hadn't said anything about Annette. Was she bluffing?

"Lieutenant Trieri was fine when I saw her last week. And I did manage to stop worrying about my safety for the weekend and relax, so I think it was worth the trip. Even if it is something of a contradiction in terms to think of South Florida as a place to go to be safe. I presume you held down the fort here, Alice?"

My first sentence had stopped her cold, and while I was talking her look evolved from her usual detached politeness to one of skeptical incredulity. I began to feel like a second-grader caught telling a whopper by his teacher, but she let me off the hook by continuing as if nothing had happened.

"There was a memorial service on Friday, and some of the other normal events were canceled. The standard pre-finals-week jitters on the part of the students. Nothing unusual. Oh, Provost Martin wondered when you'd be able to meet with him, but I didn't schedule anything. He didn't say that it was urgent, so I thought I would consult with you first."

"Thank you. Maybe I can put it off for a couple of days, so that this sunburn will have a chance to fade a little. And, Alice? Remember our conversation Wednesday morning? Well, I decided to see Annette again. And you were right. It's been long enough. Thanks."

She actually blushed.

* * *

I was glad to have the morning free, because I still had not managed to put together Annette's lists, of who knew my cellular phone number and the calls of early last week. Of course, I couldn't know who knew the number, only whom I'd told it to. Let's see. There was Annette, of course, and Alice, and

Donna, who worked for Alice but was out on maternity leave just now, Provost Martin and his secretary, Jane van Boort in the President's office, and...who else? Well, anyway, the calls would be easier. I detested the little gadget, and it didn't get used very much. The calls to 911 and to Alice when I was on my way to Stiller's laboratory last Monday morning; the call from the thug and the subsequent call to Annette and back from her on Tuesday. Oh, yes, Linda Harmon had the number, or at least had had it at one point, and probably her secretary. I made a neat list on my word processor, and then copied it into a mail message to Annette:

Good morning, and I hope you got caught up on your sleep (because I have the idea that tonight may put us behind again...). By the way, why is your mail address atl? It threw me off last week. Anyway, the homework about my cell phone follows. See ya later. And I missed you last night. H.

Since I did not expect to hear back immediately, I went for a walk over to the chemistry building. Gil Taylor was preparing samples and looked up as I walked in to the lab.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Beach Bum. Looks like you hit good weather down there. Did you get my fax?"

"I did, thank you very much, and I came by to see if I could make a high-quality copy of your report, so that I can send it over to the police department. I think they'll be very interested. I don't suppose you have any other ideas, beyond the designer drug stuff? Like, what would this particular combination of chemicals do to someone who took some of it?"

"No, and I used it all up in the mass spec so there wasn't any for me to try. I was pretty surprised when it didn't turn out to be plain old coke. Generally, these new things seem to be depressant/stimulant combinations that produce a weird sort of euphoria. Like that one called 'Ecstasy.' But there's no way to know without experimenting. I guess it's still too soon to have anything from the police lab?"

"Probably; I just got back last night and haven't heard anything. Um, I don't want to ask the wrong question here, and so don't feel you have to answer if you're uncomfortable, but I really don't know anything at all about this designer drug stuff. I know that the South American cocaine trade is responsible for a really nasty underworld, and there's also some heavy-duty characters marketing marijuana. All because of the big bucks involved. But I've never heard anything like that about these designer drugs. I guess I thought that this was just penny-ante stuff."

"Well, I'm no expert either. Hell, I don't even know where to buy a good joint anymore. But this is a college town, and there's definitely a market for all sorts of chemicals that get you high. It could be that the local market is controlled by one group, so that the coke heads are running the frat-crowd designer-drug trade as well as selling joints to the junior high kids. Who knows? And who knows how to find out?"

"Yeah. I can just see myself, with my suit and my little Frémont State stickpin here, asking around up on Third Street. 'Uh, excuse me, I'm looking for information about illegal drugs and wonder if you could help me?' There are drawbacks to being a dean, that's for sure. On the other hand, there are also perks, and one is that I can return favors. Be sure to give me a call if your lab gets crosswise with the chemistry department budget, OK? And I'll send you back the original of this report. Thanks for your effort on this, Gil."

* * *

Back in my office, I fished the diskette that Fred Smits had provided me, the one with the photographs of Stiller's equations, out of my coat pocket, and plugged it into my desktop computer. The pictures had looked fine when Annette and I checked them out on my portable on the plane ride home, but they would be easier to see on the 21" monitor I had in my office. Also, I could print them out in color. I'd have to remember to put in a good word for that student, Fred's friend, what was his name?, who had taken them.

I found the equations from last Monday, and then found several sets from earlier in the semester that would make good comparison. And, even without being a handwriting expert, it looked to me as if the ones from last Monday were written by someone else, at least partly. And the Monday ones were all the same color of green, in contrast to those from earlier in the semester, which had been written using the entire spectrum of marker colors. The copy of the lab report and color printouts of these pictures would make a good present for Annette tonight. Along with a dozen red roses. Better yet, why not have them delivered to her office now? Give the guys in the station something to speculate about. I called a florist.

And I had a message from her:

Hal: I missed you last night, too. And I'm all caught up. Thanks for the lists. atl is Annette Trieri Lundberg. I signed up with this e-mail company back when I was married to Steve and just never changed it. Makes for a good disguise. I'm looking forward to tonight. See ya later. :^) A.

God help me, I was actually glad to see that stupid little smiley face. I should have made it two dozen roses.

* * *

She picked me up on the campus perimeter at 6:00 after I'd spent an uncomfortable 10 minutes standing in the dark and rain, wondering about the occupants of the few cars that drove by. One of the drawbacks of being chronically early for anything and everything is that I end up waiting a lot. At least she was punctual. As I climbed in, I noticed a vase of roses on the back-seat floor.

"Gee, where'd you get those? For me?"

"No, they came for me. At work. No note. Lots and lots of the guys hanging around, making wisecracks. Wanting to know who my secret admirer is, and so on." She didn't look as mad as she was trying to sound.

"A 'secret admirer?' Just how many guys have you got in your stable anyway, Lieutenant?" Oops. Now she was pouting. "Oh, they're probably just jealous. Nobody ever sends them roses. I got to thinking about you today and couldn't resist. Besides, I'll make it up to you with a really professional present when we get to your place. A clean copy of the chemistry lab report and printouts of those photographs of the equations. OK?"

"You old charmer you. You might be interested to know that while we were off frolicking in the sun the lab guys here were hard at work. Their read on the powder is similar to what you told me about your lab's, and the blood work from the body came in. Your esteemed colleague, the late Professor Stiller, was stoked to the gills on cocaine at the time of his death. The coroner even found some, of a very high

purity, unabsorbed in his nose. So, whatever was going on in that lecture hall didn't involve their trying out the powder on the floor. At least not in quantity enough to show up in Stiller's blood work."

I thought for a while. "Any word on that little guy you shot the other night?"

"Oh, yeah. A loser called 'Weasel,' name of Johnny Stogle. Lots of priors, but mostly pretty trivial stuff. Extortion, threats, a couple of hold-ups. No explosives history or anything, but our bomb guys said he knew what he was doing with your car. By the way, did you get it back yet?"

"I'm going to call tomorrow and see if it's ready."

"Stogle was tied into a rough crowd in the Denver metro area, but he was new to here. Must have been hired to get you out of the way. And thanks for sending me your list. I started running it down, and I bet you'll be amazed at some of the stuff I'm finding out. How many of the people on it do you suppose have an alibi for Sunday night a week ago?"

"Ahh, well I suppose it wouldn't be too hard to find out. But...well you're the crime expert here, but I'm not too sure that that's likely to be productive. I mean, hell, I don't have an alibi for that night. I was home in bed, alone. And I 'just happened' to be in the chemistry office the next morning and the first university person to find the body."

She looked sideways and grinned. "Well, I guess I could get a warrant for you after all."

* * *

I was sitting in an easy chair in her living room, glancing through her accumulated magazines. Very different from mine. So was her house, a renovated miner's two-bedroom cottage of early-century vintage, on the west bluff. More spartan than I would have thought, but then, I decided, police work was a huge time sink, leaving little time for home decorating.

She'd insisted on sitting me down while she cleaned up after dinner—it was her place, the kitchen was too small for the both of us, and so on. Strange how little incompatibilities crop up in the most unexpected places. She and I had opposite shopping and cooking styles. We spent about a half hour in the market finding ingredients for dinner, a task that would have taken me, alone, about 10 minutes. She seemed intent on trying to find the sale items, and we'd spent about 20 minutes saving about a dollar. Not even minimum wage.

Then I was surprised to find that she was completely ad hoc when it came to cooking. We decided to make braised chicken breasts in a light sauce with herbs, with new potatoes and asparagus, from Mexico this time of year, I guess. I would have researched the sauce in my collection of cookbooks and followed some recipe or other closely. She just threw things together. Maybe I could adapt to this approach to food preparation—it turned out to be wonderful—but from now on, we were going shopping separately.

She came up behind me and kissed me on the top of the head. "You said you had presents. Here's a cup of coffee. I want to finish our conversation about alibis."

I dug out the lab report and large-format printouts of the photos of the equations and handed them to her. "Like I said, I don't know how productive pursuing alibis for the people on my list will be. I think it's more likely that one of them unknowingly passed the number along to someone else, and then it somehow wound up in the hands of the bad guys."

"Well, now don't get your feelings hurt here; but you did say that I'm the crime expert. And your hunch looks right to me. It's quite clear from these pictures that there were at least two people working on last Monday's equations. We'll get a handwriting expert to figure out which parts of them were

written by Stiller. And the lab guys found his prints on the markers and the white-board. Some of them are smeared and some are only partials, especially on the white-board, so it looks like the other person was wearing gloves. But the thing about the alibis is, you have to remember that whoever was there with Stiller—and this person is probably the murderer—knew chemistry. So this gives us a factor with which to winnow your list.”

“That means Linda Harmon. But, come on, it couldn’t be her.”

“Why not? I bet that you didn’t know that she trained as a nurse before going into biochemistry. A surgical nurse. Also, this Provost John Martin is, or was, a chemist.”

“Oh, right, I’d forgotten about that, he’s been in the administration so long. And I didn’t know about Linda. But...well, I just have a hard time believing that one of our administrators stabbed one of our faculty members. It’s just too weird.”

“Anyway, this is why the alibis become relevant.”

“Is that the extent of your suspicions about the folks on my list?”

“The ones on the list, yes. But they could have told other people about your phone number, or left it lying around or something, so there’s a second-order group to think about, too. Did you know that one Francis Swan is a standing member of our dope-dealer suspect list? We’ve never arrested him, but we’ve been real close on a number of occasions.”

“Alice’s kid? No, I sure didn’t. But does he know any chemistry? I guess I remember that he graduated from Frémont State a couple of years ago, and Alice was certainly the proud parent. Wonder what his major was.”

“Pharmacology, with a minor in chemistry. Also, he was what you called a nontraditional student, with a hitch in the service between high school and college. The plot thickens, no?”

“There’s a big leap from smoking and selling joints to cocaine and murder, though. It would kill Alice if he’s the murderer.”

* * *

The next afternoon, it was raining again, but I knew that meant more snow in the high mountains. Late fall had been relatively warm and wet this year, which translated to cool, damp conditions in town and abundant snow at the ski areas. This was good news for the town, and for me personally. But from my dean’s perspective, it was a distraction, at best, for the students.

Durango was founded in 1880 by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad company as a reaction to the less-than-warm welcome to the region offered by the citizens of the five-year-old Animas City. The railroad wanted free land for its depot and expected it to be enthusiastically offered; when it wasn’t, they took their marbles elsewhere, specifically down the Animas River about two miles. Durango succeeded where Animas City didn’t, at the latter’s expense, speaking to the power and effectiveness of the corporate strategy. Blessed with a local supply of coal, Durango became the regional smelting center for the mining districts higher in the San Juans to the north and west. In the decades to follow, the fortunes of individual mining towns waxed and waned according to the richness of their lodes and the national economy, but Durango persevered, in no small part because of the nearby agricultural lands and the surprisingly mild climate, given its location deep in the Rockies. The current economy had evolved from depending on the historical extractive activities to being based on the government business of the county seat, a booming—too booming, according to some—tourist trade, and both the benefits and burdens of a typical university town.

Frémont State University began as a junior college in the 1950s in nearby Hesperus and then moved to Durango as a regional teachers' college, where it grew to become the premier public, four-year liberal arts college in Colorado. Then, during the go-go years of federal research spending in the '70s, the college's trustees hired a particularly ambitious university president with east coast connections. His "strategic vision" appealed to the dollar signs in the trustees' eyes, and he persuaded them to expand the college into a research university and to change its name. The more recent decline in the availability of research funding had validated the conservatism of much of the faculty, who had wanted to avoid the trap of investing in research infrastructure and stick with teaching instead. The ambitious president, meanwhile, moved on to greener, and more naïve, pastures, leaving behind a "success story" that he could tell over and over. The only real lasting marks of his administration were the name change and the heavy debt load that we have to continue to deal with.

But whatever the name, the institution had no problems attracting students, particularly students from other states who paid the private-college-level out-of-state tuition, thus subsidizing both the in-state students and the dwindling research budget. Durango's climate and proximity to world-class ski areas were major factors that attracted students and allowed recruitment of better faculty than is usual for such institutions. Frémont State fought a running battle against its reputation as a party school, in no small part because of Wolf Creek, Purgatory, and Telluride. As dean of the college at Frémont State with arguably the hardest curriculum, I'm an old soldier in the campaign to enhance the school's reputation, but I also appreciate the recreational opportunities of the area.

And this year, the early-season skiing was outstanding. Wolf Creek, always the snowpack leader in Colorado, already had something like 105", Telluride had 70", and it was only mid-December. With winter commencement coming up on Friday, it was time to plan for Christmas break, and so I called my old friend from Miami, Winston Fredrickson. Win had become respectable since graduate school, wealthy to boot, and he owned a place in Winter Park that he hardly ever had time to use. Even though it was the better part of a day's drive from Durango up and over to Winter Park, the ski area was outstanding (they probably had even more snow than Telluride) and Win's condominium was near the base of the high-speed lift with access to Mary Jane, the experts' side of the mountain.

Win and I had a deal: I drove up there every now and then and made sure that the toilet paper supply was adequate and that the plumbing was working, in case Win should happen to come for a weekend. Like other rich folks, Win had his eccentricities, and one of his was that he wanted his toilets to flush perfectly the first time, every time. In return for my trouble, I had a key and carte blanche to use the place when Win wasn't, which was mostly.

It turned out that this year, Win and his latest trophy wife were spending the Christmas season "on the continent." I expressed my deep disappointment at not being able to see my old friend, and immediately called Annette.

"Hello, m'dear. I know you're probably busy, but I want to try to get something on your calendar soonest. Got a sec?"

"I was just sitting here trying to decide whether to feed you my famous Hungarian goulash or to order Chinese tonight. It's been a hectic morning."

"What's the possibility that you can take some vacation before Christmas, like, this weekend and early next week? I want to spirit you away for a few days of skiing."

"What? And listen to you complain about being an old geezer and would I please ski the green runs with you and don't go so fast because you can't keep up? Sounds like a ton of fun. Where?"

"Now, now. I saw your skis and boots last night at your place, so I have an idea of your ability. You haven't seen mine. Ever skied Mary Jane? I have access to a condo there. Belongs to a rich friend of

mine from Miami. Private hot tub and sauna, ski out the door to the lift, all that good stuff. I thought we could drive up Saturday and ski until our legs fall off, and then come home in time for Christmas, like Wednesday or Thursday. I want to decorate a tree with you. We can flip for my place or yours.”

There was a long pause.

“You mean decorate a Christmas tree? This is sounding serious. Shacking up and vacations together are one thing. But a Christmas tree? Next thing, you’ll be proposing.” She was trying to sound like she was joking, but she didn’t completely succeed.

“Well, I thought I’d let you do that. And I figured we ought to get the argument about tinsel or no tinsel out of the way first. Anyway, what about your vacation situation? Can I bribe you with a new ski outfit? Or, better yet, how about some new skis and boots? The new parabolic side-cut skis are supposed to be very helpful for beginners and intermediate skiers...”

“‘Intermediate,’ huh? Beginner!! I don’t know if they can spare me around here or not, but they’re going to have to. You, my fine friend, are in big trouble, or will be when we hit the hill. Hmmp. And you can well bet you’re going to buy me a new outfit, after that. Did you say ‘private hot tub’? Does that mean that I don’t have to bring a bathing suit?”

“Your birthday suit will work just fine. And it’s not really a hot tub, more of a Jacuzzi, one of those things with all the water and air jets, to soothe stiff muscles from a day of trying to keep up with me skiing the bump runs at Mary Jane.”

“Keep it up, buddy. You’ll get yours. ‘Intermediate’ indeed.”

“Can’t wait. I may be an old geezer, but keeping it up is my specialty. See ya later...”

* * *

This made it imperative that I get my car back, so I called the mechanic. It had been delivered to the garage earlier in the week, and he had replaced some of the electrical wiring harness. I decided it would be a good idea to have some snow tires put on, even with its all-wheel-drive, so I made arrangements for some high-performance European winter tires with studs. Unless the snow got so deep that the car floated, I’d not be stopped for anything with those, even glare ice. And I’d have to get my skis tuned up. I hoped that I hadn’t teased Annette too much. Maybe she was good, after all. There was still so much I didn’t know about her. But our future together had been creeping more and more into my consciousness lately. And I wasn’t kidding about the Christmas tree.

* * *

Seven

We had finished lunch on Saturday, in Silverthorne, and had just hit the interstate eastbound when I studied my rearview mirror and asked, “Before you go back to sleep, what does it say in the law enforcement manual about how to tell if you’re being followed?”

My reference was to the fact that she had fallen asleep almost immediately upon getting into the car that morning, and I drove from Durango to Silverthorne as if alone. This was OK with me, because I liked to drive and the solitude allowed me to review events of the past couple of days. I spent Wednesday afternoon and most of the evening grading the final exams from my course, and I was

disappointed with the below-par performance of the class as a whole. It was not outside the range I was used to, but I want to see my students succeed. And no one had done well on the question about how to distinguish global warming from “natural” climatic variability. Of course, the professional scientific community doesn’t really know the answer either (“wait and see” being the most widely accepted approach), so I had not expected too much. But the degree of critical thinking I’d been looking for was missing. How could I improve the course next time to make this connection?

And winter commencement on Friday had been the expected mixture of looking back, including veiled references to the tragedy of the week before, and looking ahead with exhortations for the graduates’ futures. Annette’s speculations about the murder earlier in the week had made the speeches by Linda Harmon and John Martin especially interesting, and Harmon’s partial reiteration of her eulogy of Stiller had seemed doubly hypocritical given the information about his drug use. But I still had no particular reason to suspect either of them.

The trip from Durango east and then north to Silverthorne had progressed several times from dry road surfaces at the lower elevations through a wet surface to slush and finally to hard-packed snow and ice over the passes and then back to drier conditions again. The high passes were each well sanded, with the worst conditions correlated with the highest, Fremont Pass north of Leadville. I’m always amused when I’m reminded about the university’s retention of the European spelling of its namesake while the county and the pass in Colorado use the Americanized version. I was there when the university’s name had been changed, and the arguments over the spelling had been academically long and acrimonious, typical for such a trivial issue.

There were still two major ascents to come, however, to the Eisenhower/Johnson Tunnel and, later, over Berthoud Pass, each up to about 11,000 feet once again. And, since we were getting closer to the Denver area, traffic was beginning to be a nuisance. At least we were headed in the direction opposite to most of it, for now.

* * *

“What do you mean, ‘being followed’?” Annette was swiveled in her seat, staring out the rear window.

“Well, that brown sedan back there pulled out of the gas station next to the cafe right after we went by, and followed us onto the road here just behind me. And I could swear that he was behind us, within a mile or so, all the way from Durango this morning. I wouldn’t have said anything except that he’s there now.”

“I know how to follow people, discreetly or obviously, take your pick. But I don’t know anything about being followed. Can we try to lose him?”

By this time we had started up the long, steep grade to the Eisenhower Tunnel, and I was in the far left lane doing about 10 miles per hour over the speed limit, easily passing cars in the center and right lanes.

“Now there’s an idea. As long as you’ll promise to talk our way out of speeding tickets, I bet I can get up to the tunnel a lot faster than he can. That looks like a rental car, from the plates.” I downshifted to fourth, and the car shot forward.

“Whoa! What did you feed the hamster this morning, anyway? Even for a German car, this seems like a lot of uphill acceleration,” her eyes were wide, watching the upcoming curves.

“Well, I’ve had several of these cars, in various model incarnations, and each time they came with more and more power. And each time I was just never satisfied. But I finally found a company that sells after-market superchargers and had my mechanic put one on. A little self-indulgence. Or maybe a big

one. You know, guys my age have these mid-life crises and deal with them by getting toys. I tried to persuade my insurance company that it wasn't that big a deal, just something that's needed at high altitude, but they raised my rates anyhow. But I promise that those guys will not catch us going up this hill."

By now we were hurtling up the grade at about 90, slowing just a little to negotiate the snow-packed surface on the curves. The brown sedan was quickly falling far behind.

"Trouble is," I continued, "if he really is following us, it's downhill for about ten miles after the tunnel, all the way past Georgetown, and he'll be motivated to really fly to catch up to us. And even that rental car can probably go fast downhill."

We reached the tunnel at the top of the grade and had to slow down to deal with the merge into two lanes of traffic. Out into the sunlight on the east side of the Continental Divide, I was able to speed up again, but the road stayed at two lanes, limiting my maneuverability and options. We continued to pass the slower traffic, which was all the other traffic, without incident past the old Bakerville exit. A few minutes later, on the long, straight stretch down into Silver Plume, the brown sedan reappeared, still well behind us, going much too fast for conditions.

"Well, there he is and it looks like he's on the bare edge of control. So either he's following us or he's a seriously wild and crazy driver."

"We could pull off and stop, and see if he stops, too. That would resolve the matter pretty clearly, I'd think."

I looked at her with new respect.

"I wish I'd thought of that. We could have used the Silver Plume exit here." I watched it zip by. "Too late now. But there's a scenic overlook pullout halfway down the next grade."

We were in the left lane, passing an 18-wheeler carefully negotiating the 7% downgrade, when the exit for the overlook appeared. I accelerated, pulled across the front of the big truck, eliciting an irate blast from its air-horn, and onto the exit ramp. I couldn't see where it went because of the convex hillside and didn't remember how much stopping distance I had, so I immediately began braking, and the anti-lock brake system chattered nervously as the tires struggled for a grip on the snow and the gravel from the sand trucks. I managed to guide the nearly skidding car back toward the re-entrance ramp, and we saw the brown sedan, brake-lights ablaze, careen past down the hill. But it was only slowing down; it didn't stop. My Audi finally came to a halt, and we both took a deep breath.

Annette began to giggle. "Now you're really going to think I'm shameless. The reason I married Steve was because he had a Corvette and liked to drive like Mario Andretti. I'm a sucker for fast cars. They get me horny. Of course, that was a stupid reason to get married, but I was young and full of guilt, and it was the thing to do. Naturally I'm all grown up now, so there's no more guilt. But it still gets me horny."

I became quite interested in where this might go. "Well now. There aren't any other cars in this parking lot, and, like the sign says, it's a scenic view. What more could you want? I think there's even a blanket in the back."

It was her turn to make framing motions in the air with her hands.

“ ‘Respected University Dean
And Horny Police Lieutenant

Caught In Flagrante Delicto
In Interstate Parking Lot'

The perfect Christmas present for our respective bosses, no?"

"Tell you what. You just nurture that horniness for an hour or so, and by then we can be in the hot tub. We ought to be able to figure out a cure there. Hmm?"

* * *

We pulled back on to the highway and were approaching the Georgetown exit at the bottom of the grade when we both spotted the brown sedan, sitting on the east-bound entrance ramp. It pulled out behind us as we cruised by.

"Well, that would seem to be the proof we've been looking for. He's following us all right. Wonder who it is."

"If it's a rental car, it must be more out-of-town bad guys, like that Stogle character. Any more ideas?"

"We have one more pass to go over before Winter Park, and I can pull the same go-fast stunt there. And it'll be harder for him to catch us on the way down, because the road is twistier. But he must know that we know, so things could get unpredictable. Got your gun?"

"Great. A car-chase shoot-out. Like, I'm supposed to lean out the window and blast away, or what?"

"Just in case. I sure don't want to have any bullet holes in my car. And, by the way, I never thanked you for being such a good shot and hitting Stogle instead of my car. Good shooting!"

"Hey, come on. I killed the guy."

"Yeah, and he shot first. After planting a bomb in my car. I'd call that exemplary self-defense. And dean-defense. Hey, wait. Before Berthoud Pass, we've got to go through Empire. They've got a skier speed-trap there. Maybe we can use it to our advantage. Got your badge?"

"I've got both my shield and my service revolver. Now what are you thinking about?"

"It depends on whether the Empire town marshal is on the job or not. But it's Saturday, so he probably is. I'll see if I can entice him into stopping me for speeding. You can use your badge to explain the situation, and maybe we can talk him into following that sedan for a ways, which will slow them down, and we can get away. Even if he winds up writing me a ticket, it'll be worth it if we can get a good start on them up the pass."

* * *

We swept around the loop-the-loop curve taking us from the eastbound interstate onto west-bound US 40, toward Winter Park, and joined the cars headed in the same direction from Denver. I used the passing lane up the grade to Empire to improve my position, and noticed that the brown sedan lost ground on the hill. As the stream of cars slowed for the 35 mph speed zone in Empire—the speed trap was well known to local ski traffic—I began scanning both sides of the highway for the expected patrol car.

“There he is, just on the other side of that last building on the right. The front-end of his Blazer is sticking out.”

I checked the rearview mirror, downshifted, and pulled across the double yellow line into the left turn lane, leapfrogged two cars full of skiers and received a one-fingered salute from the one I had to pull back in front of. I then kept accelerating to about 60, and left Empire behind.

“Well, what’s he doing back there? Taking a nap? There’s never a cop around when you need one.”

“I’m right here. Want me to write you up? That was about four violations in one, depending on their ordinances around here.”

“Yeah, well, I drive fast sometimes but never, ever do stuff like that. Especially in small towns. They’ve got that speed limit and enforcement to make life easier for the folks who live there and have to cross the highway to get to the post office and so on, and I have to respect that. Now I feel like a real jerk, since I didn’t get caught.”

“So now what?”

“Where are we? Plan A, B, or what?”

“Well, if Plan A was trying to out-race them and Plan B was to stop at that overlook, the Empire marshal must have been Plan C. We’re getting pretty far down the list. Got your phone?”

“I thought of that, but I don’t know what to say. ‘Help, we’re being followed and we’re breaking every traffic law in the book and it’s not working’ doesn’t seem just right, somehow. I guess it’s back to Plan A. At least there’s lots of passing lanes uphill from here. I’m glad that Win’s condo has its own garage. We’re going to have to hide this car, not from the bad guys so much as from the irate skiers we’re going to have to pass. Hang on.” And I accelerated up the first grade toward Berthoud Pass.

* * *

Despite excessive speed and using the oncoming lane to pass traffic that was in the uphill passing lane, I was able to gain only a little ground on our pursuers. I was trying to be as careful as possible, whereas they seemed to have no compunctions about running people off the road, so they were able to keep up. I took a 180-degree hairpin curve to the right at a full sideways slide and she bumped into me.

“Sorry. Listen. I’m plenty horny, so you don’t have to work extra hard on that, OK? Do you really know what you’re doing, driving like this? There are cliffs here.”

“I’m being lots more careful than it probably seems to you. I know this road pretty well, and I’ve got these new tires that are better than what I’m used to. Besides, a few years back, Carol and I went to Steamboat Springs for a week of skiing, and we both took the Bridgestone Ice Driving course. What a blast, driving on a frozen lake and learning how to do controlled slides and just what it feels like when the tires begin to break loose. And Carol was amazing. You wouldn’t have believed how aggressive a quiet, reserved English literature professor could be, until you saw her on that frozen lake! Anyway I do know what I’m doing, pretty much. Although this is a little different from that lake. All we had to worry about there was orange cones. No cliffs or other cars.”

I knew that Annette was intensely curious about Carol, but she didn’t use the opportunity to ask questions. She was too preoccupied with the task at hand, and she turned around to look out the back.

“I think you’re gaining on them a little. Looks like they’re not getting sideways as much as you are, though.”

“That car is probably front-wheel drive, which is actually a little better uphill than this one, because the rear wheels don’t fishtail so much. But I know I’ve got better tires and even sideways I can go faster. Except for all this other traffic. Say, I just thought of a Plan D. Their car will do fine uphill, but front-wheel drive is lousy downhill, because the back wheels want to break loose and make the car swap ends. And we’ve a lot of that coming up. Maybe I can sucker them into a mistake on the way down.”

“If this traffic will let you.”

“The west side of the pass has an uphill passing lane for the entire grade, and there’s not much traffic coming at us, so I should be able to use it. And there are some deceptive curves that could be just the ticket.”

“Speaking of tickets, surely you’re not the only person with a phone. If I were in one of those other cars, particularly one of the ones those guys ran off onto the shoulder, I’d be trying like crazy to get the State Patrol involved in this thing.”

“Me, too. Maybe they’ll set up a road block somewhere and we can get them to delay our friends back there. Sounds like a modified Plan C. I’m glad we’re back to more options.”

* * *

At the end of a long passing lane, which I used to good effect by getting around a bus and several slow cars, we came to the crest of Berthoud Pass, at 11,315 feet. The parking lot of the old ski area was full, and families were using the beginner runs on the southeast side of the road for sledding and other low-tech winter fun. Snowboarders and backcountry skiers were crossing the road for access to the more demanding terrain on the northwest side of the pass. We would see many of these hearty souls farther down the road, hitchhiking rides back to the top. But up here, the pedestrian traffic only made the automobile traffic the more challenging. It was just as well that we had to slow for the congestion, though, because the road surface had been rippled by freeze/thaw cycles into a series of severe dips, which would have sent us airborne at high speed.

On the west side of the pass, the morning sun had melted the snow-covered surface and it was beginning to re-freeze in the shade, so the downhill traffic was extremely cautious. I took advantage of the oncoming passing lane to widen the road available to myself, and my studded tires began to pay dividends. Annette reported that the chase car was slewing more and more, on the edge of control, as it tried to keep up.

Even though I was concentrating on the driving and not a little worried about what might happen should they catch us, I was enjoying myself immensely. “Too bad I don’t have a switch to disconnect my brake lights. Then Plan D, the sucker gambit, would surely work. I have a friend who likes to tell a story about how he and his brother, back when they were in high school, put together an old jalopy hot rod and added a switch to disconnect the brake lights. They’d make somebody mad enough to chase after them, drive like crazy down some back road, come to a right-angle turn, switch the lights off, and slam on their brakes to make the turn. The guys chasing them wouldn’t see any brake lights to warn them and so wouldn’t see the turn until too late, and they’d end up in a field. That’s what we need just about now.”

We negotiated several hairpin curves and were on a relatively straight stretch, with a moderate downhill grade. Fortunately, there was a break in the traffic. I could see in the mirror that the chase car was about two blocks behind us. I sped up into a sweeping left curve that was deceptively sharp, with a decreasing radius throughout the curve, and I downshifted as the car settled into a four-wheel drift toward the outside of the pavement, approaching an abrupt edge. Annette looked at the treetops just outside her window and moaned quietly.

“It’s OK, I’ve got hold of it, and I didn’t want to use the brakes right here. Watch them for me, OK?” I had traffic ahead to deal with and needed to pay attention.

“Here they come, oh, but they’re getting sideways... I think he’s lost it. Now they’re backwards, headed for the edge... Now they’re sideways... And they disappeared in a big splash of snow. Over the edge.” I let out my breath, braked to the speed of the rest of the traffic, and, trying to look innocent, joined the single downhill lane, once again legal.

“There’s another switchback up ahead that goes down below there. We can stop and see if we can spot them.”

Two curves later, we were at the bottom of the grade, and I pulled out of the traffic to the roadside. I reached over and retrieved a pair of miniature binoculars from the glove box, and we got out and leaned on the car to scan the mountainside above us. It was easy to see where the other car had gone over the edge, because a small crowd had gathered and there was a break in the snowbank at the edge of the road above. The rocks on the steep, pine-covered mountainside below were covered with snow blown off the highway above by road crews.

“Up there, just to the left of that outcropping. Does that look like a tire?” I handed her the binoculars.

“Yeah, and it’s in a good place relative to where they went off the road up above. I hope none of those folks is dumb enough to try to climb down. That snow doesn’t look all that stable.” I realized that she might be a good skier after all, if she could read snow conditions like that. I’d been thinking the same thing.

Suddenly there was a huge poof of snow on the mountain side, a brief flare of flame, and, a couple of seconds later, the whump of a muffled explosion. “I thought that only happens in cheap action movies,” I remarked.

“I guess there was a gas leak that finally found a hot place. Look, the hillside’s letting go.” Sure enough, the explosion had broken the thick layer of snow loose from the rocks, and a wide mass of snow and ice slumped toward the highway below. Although we were out of the path of the slide, other cars were not so lucky, and several were partially buried.

“That’ll make their ski weekend a little more exciting. I hope no one is hurt. Listen, we probably ought to help them, but there are lots of people around and we aren’t really needed. Let’s get out of here.”

She was obviously feeling as if she should take charge of the situation, but then we heard sirens coming up the valley. Apparently, cellular phones had been in use, as she had predicted, so she climbed back in the car and shut the door. I started the engine and pulled onto the road, heading down the valley well below the speed limit.

* * *

We arrived at the condominium a few minutes later and were glad to get the car into the garage and the door closed. There would undoubtedly be descriptions of my Audi, license number and all, by witnesses of the chase, and the last thing we wanted was involvement in an investigation of the accident. And we really didn’t need the car for our stay anyhow. There were shuttle buses into town, and we could ski out the door of the condominium to the ski lift.

I unlocked the door and ushered Annette in. The lights were on, and the temperature was a comfortable 70°. I uncovered the hot tub, and saw the thermometer was reading 103°. The rich, indeed,

are different from the rest of us, I thought. Wonder when Win was here last. I wandered into one of the bathrooms and flushed the toilet. Yep, this one still works.

She was in the kitchen, looking in the refrigerator. “Hey, Hal. Look at this. Completely stocked. Even eggs and milk. You sure that your friend isn’t here and just out skiing?”

“Nope. He has this arrangement with the management to keep things stocked like that. I think that eggs and milk are the only perishables, though. For Win, it’s peanuts, and probably costs less than keeping the heat turned up all the time. Is there any NA beer in there?” I crossed my fingers.

“Ah...some Boulder Pale Ale, which looks like real beer, and something called Clausthaler.” Bingo. Win had good taste to go along with his money.

“Um, I’m still a little pumped up by all that excitement back there, so I’m going to open one of those Clausthalers and jump into the hot tub. Care to join me? There’s probably some white wine in there, too. And there’s a liquor cabinet just to the left of the ’fridge, if you want something truly medicinal.”

“Yeah, there’s some wine here. But, um, the explosion and all kind of took the romance out of all that fast driving for me, so, well, how about if we just soak and relax for a while?”

“Exactly what I had in mind. We’ve got lots of time. Although, with the car stuck in the garage, I guess I’ll just have to rely on my geezerly charms to re-ignite the romance.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just make some ‘vroom, vroom’ noises later, and see what happens. You might be pleasantly surprised.” And we weren’t going anywhere until next Thursday, I reminded myself.

Lots of time indeed.

* * *

Eight

“Well, Hal,” we were once again in my car, headed home at a far more reasonable speed. “I’ve been trying to think of a clever way to say this, but I guess I’ll just blurt it out. You certainly are a lot better skier than I ever would have thought. I can’t remember when I’ve had so much fun. And I wish I’d known about Mary Jane years ago before my knees started to give out. Back then I could have really skied Outhouse the way it should be.” She had finally admitted to being on the ski team in college.

“I still think they should have skull-and-crossbones pictures on those warning signs up at the top. There were some people on that run that clearly didn’t pay enough attention to the signs.” She chuckled. “And the path through the woods over to the top of Outhouse also needed better warnings. Remember that guy upside-down in the tree well?”

I looked over at her fondly and took her hand and squeezed it, also basking in the satisfaction of an outstanding few days of skiing. It had snowed from Saturday night through Monday, so we had two days of new, light powder, and then the sun had come out and the moguls had emerged. I’d been having a wonderful time following her down the bump runs, resting a lot so I could watch her from behind in the form-fitting ski suit I’d bought her. And a wonderful form it was.

After our arrival on Saturday, a long, relaxing soak in the hot tub had led to a mutual crisis of conscience, so Sunday morning we called the State Patrol to check in and admit to our role in the Berthoud Pass Tragedy, as the television news in Denver was calling it. By Monday, when we met with

the accident investigation team to discuss the matter, the identities of the two occupants of the brown sedan had been determined, and their relationship to the Denver and west coast drug crowds had given the TV people even more to speculate about. The explanation we offered the investigators, coupled with Annette's police credentials and the wide-spread publicity about her involvement in the Durango shooting of two weeks earlier, kept us out of trouble as well as the limelight. The credibility of our story was verified when the investigators found, amid the wreckage, two Uzis, a sniper's rifle, and several handguns. Consequently, my Audi and its license number were no longer on the State Patrol all-points bulletin list, and our trip home was leisurely.

"I can't remember when I've had a better time. Let's do it again real soon. Ever been up to Steamboat Springs?" I knew I would be able to get away again before the spring term began.

"Well, I talked my way out of work this time, but I think I'd better plan to buckle down and make some progress on this Stiller thing before I take any more time off. But there will probably still be time this ski season, maybe in the early spring."

"You know, the first few times we got together, it was to discuss that case. And then we continued to discuss it when we started seeing each other, ah, socially. But we didn't talk about it in Miami. I guess you could say that we had better things to talk about, getting to know each other and all. And we hardly talked about it at all this week. I like that. It means we have more in common than Stiller's murder. Like I told you in Miami, I have high hopes for the future of our relationship."

She took my right hand off the steering wheel and kissed it, taking my breath away for a second. "Me, too. And you know what I've been thinking about? Christmas trees. You still want to put one up? I haven't seen your place yet, and I'd like to. I bet you have the perfect location for a tree, unless it's buried in dirty socks and other bachelor debris."

"I can drop you off at your place and you can come by later if you'd like. I'll even leave room for your car in the garage. How about that for domestic bliss? And there'll be plenty of time for me to pick up the dirty socks. Don't know about the pictures of me and Carol, though. Is it OK if I leave them around?"

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "I'd be worried if you didn't."

I had finally satisfied her curiosity with a long conversation about my marriage and its unfortunate end, and she had become secure with my occasional references to the first love of my life. As I thought: a keeper, this one.

* * *

Back in Durango late that evening, real life intruded once again, and, even more reluctantly, we went our separate ways. We resolved to get together the following evening to find a Christmas tree, decorate it, and snuggle in front of the fire.

Although Christmas Eve was a university holiday, I went into my office on Friday to catch up with the correspondence from the first part of the week. The university might be on Christmas break, but an administrator's paperwork wasn't. Also, I had to admit, my office would be less lonely than my house. I had lived alone for the better part of two years and adapted well, but suddenly I was finding my house to be terribly empty.

Annette had warned me that the interviews conducted by her detectives might have caused some ruffled feathers on campus, so I wasn't too surprised to see several e-mail messages from Linda Harmon. Annette's investigating team had spent the week interviewing the various people on my list, and Harmon, given her background, was paid special attention.

The first message was from Monday, before her interview, and before, apparently, she knew I was going out of town again:

hal: got a call from the durango police today, asking to set up an interview. any idea what this is all about? linda

Linda took herself far too seriously to use smiley faces, but not seriously enough to use the shift key. The second message was a little more desperate:

hal: the police are coming to see me tuesday afternoon, and i'd really like to hear from you about this. i thought i made it clear to them that the statements i made the day of the murder included all i knew. what's going on? linda

The third message was from Tuesday afternoon, after her interview. Her formality undoubtedly matched her level of outrage, and I could tell that she was serious if only because she paid attention to her typing:

Dean Weathers: I have just concluded an interview with the Durango Police Department, in which it became clear that I am a suspect in the murder of Professor Stiller. Apparently, Ms. Trieri has made the decision to include me on the list of suspects. Because of your relationship with her, I believe that it is imperative that you step aside as Dean of the College until this is resolved. I will be calling a Department Chairs meeting to discuss this matter with my colleagues. Professor L. Harmon, Chair, Chemistry Department.

This one, I noticed, was copied to Provost Martin. Linda was new to the job of chair, and she had not yet figured out that she had a lot to learn about administrative life. Her little attempt at mutiny was bound to fail, if only because of the time it would take to mature: there was no chance of a department chairs' meeting for at least two weeks. And copying the message to the provost had been, well, a real blunder. I knew John Martin well enough to know that he would assume that I had everything under control, which, of course, I did. Or would, as soon as I met with the chairs' committee. And no department chair needed to have the provost think he or she was a trouble maker. From my perspective, one advantage of the rotating chair system was that the learning curve was pretty steep for newcomers to an essentially part-time job. They were no match for full-time administrators such as deans.

There was also a message from Alice, unusual, but not entirely unexpected after my four-day absence:

Dean Weathers: So you'll know, I'm certain that the only place that I have your cellular telephone number written down is here, at my desk, and Francis has never been in this office. Moreover, he has been out of town (and out of touch, I'm afraid), since before Thanksgiving. I made all this clear to the police detectives today. (And I understand perfectly why I was questioned, but I wanted to reassure you as soon as

possible.) Have a Merry Christmas and please pass along my best wishes to Ms. Trieri. I will be back in the office on Tuesday. Alice Swan.

I was immensely relieved that Alice's son was out of the picture. That would have been too hard on her.

So that left President Black, Martin, and Linda, and I would have to try hard not to suspect her despite her crankiness. And their respective office staff people.

No doubt the interviews with the provost and the president were on the two extremes. The provost would have behaved quite formally, in his usual pompous, stand-offish fashion, and the president would have turned up his folksy manner to full blast and probably acted confused as well. Given Linda's obvious pique, I didn't envy the detectives their jobs.

* * *

I got home just before 3:00 pm, and Annette arrived a while later. After considerable driving around, and plenty of critical discussion, we finally managed to find a not-too-scruffy Christmas tree in the left-overs at the fourth lot we visited. We took it back to my place, and then put dinner on to simmer and went for a walk.

It had started to snow, and the flakes made soft patterns in the streetlights. Christmas decorations on my neighbors' houses competed for our attention, and, looking back, we could see that my house was the only one on the block without strings of lights on the shrubs. Downtown was deserted and quiet, the last-minute Christmas Eve shoppers off on the other side of town, at the mall, and the lights were the only thing there to remind us of the season. We had our own little world to share, but it was cold, so we didn't stay long.

We got warmed up a little on the way back up the hill. When we got back to my house, the front porch light was out and, by the streetlights reflecting off the new snow, we could just make out two shadowy figures on my porch. One was vigorously shaking something. And they looked to be big, even taking into account their bulky clothing.

"I'm certain that light was on when we left," Annette whispered in my ear. "That shaking sounds like a spray-paint can. Strange weather for graffiti artists, no?"

I noticed that she had her service revolver in her hand. Did she carry that thing all the time? And where?

As we stole quietly up to the porch, we were able to hear big guy number one complaining that it was probably too cold to get the paint can to work and this was a stupid thing to be doing anyway. Big guy number two wanted to just get it done and get out of here.

Before Annette could do anything, I took the lead: "Evening, guys. What's going on? Did you break the light or just unscrew it? Easy, there. The lady has a gun aimed at you, and I can tell you from experience that she's a crack shot. Better chill out."

At my first words, the two young men, and they were indeed large, jerked around to look at us, poised themselves for flight, and then froze in place at the mention of a gun.

"Uh, we just unscrewed it."

"Well, OK, reach up and screw it back in and let's introduce ourselves."

They seemed receptive to instruction—it may have been the gun—and the taller of the two reached up and fiddled in the fixture. The light came back on.

“Hey, don’t I know you guys? You look familiar. Anyway, I’m Hal Weathers, a dean up at the university. And this is Annette Trieri, of the Durango police. What did you have in mind to spray on my door? Wait. I know, you’re the Twin Towers of the Marmots’ defensive line, Kolocek and, uh, Washington, right? Why don’t we all go inside and you can tell us what this is all about.”

Big guy number one, Kolocek, it seemed, had the presence of mind to respond to Annette’s introduction with a heartfelt “Well, shit.”

* * *

Annette was sitting in an overstuffed chair, her gun placed discreetly, but within easy reach, on the table beside her, and the Twin Towers were sitting nervously on the couch across from her. I was bustling about, lighting a fire in the fireplace, making chit-chat about the recent Marmots’ season to try to break the ice, and refilling the visitors’ glasses as soon as they were emptied. Even though I quit drinking years ago, I keep a full liquor cabinet for guests. I estimated that it would take at least three stiff shots each, with beer chasers, to begin to affect them, given their size. At least they didn’t seem as nervous as they had been at first.

“You know, I’ve never been concerned that Frémont State is a Division II school until this year. But having won the national championship in such handy fashion, you guys deserve to go to a major bowl game. It’s too bad that they’re all for the Division I schools.”

“Uh, yeah, well, from the bowl lineups it looks like we could have beat some of the teams. Maybe not in the big-time games, but in some of the other ones, like the Gator Bowl. Mississippi State doesn’t look like they’re all that good this year, and we would have had a good chance, I bet.”

“Yeah, or the Copper Bowl. Arizona is pretty weak.”

The liquor was having its desired effect, and they were getting loosened up.

“Anyway, the combination of you guys on the defensive line with that explosive offense made for as exciting a football season as we’ve seen around here in a long time. And I guess that almost everyone will be back next year, so that’s good news. Now, guys, I’m sure the Lieutenant here is just full of questions about what’s going on. And I hate to keep the lady waiting. What message were you going to leave me? A Christmas greeting? Or what?”

“Uh, we’re not supposed to say anything to anyone about it.”

“Well, let’s see. Do I remember that you were both red-shirted for a year, and that you both have another year of eligibility? Division II or not, I bet you’re both NFL material, if you have another year next year like you just did. But, come on, getting caught red-handed like this is bound to put a crimp in those plans. Look. I’m a dean and I’ve got lots of clout on campus, even with the athletic department. Why don’t you just fill us in, cooperate completely, and I can make sure that nothing gets in the way of your playing next season. Ahhh... Except grades. I really can’t help with those, unless you need tutoring in a subject I know something about. Anyway, I can’t believe that this was your idea. You’ve got no reason to muck up my house. So someone must have put you up to this. And it’s potentially serious, because somebody put a bomb in my car a couple of weeks ago. Did you see it in the paper? Anything strange happening to me is of interest to the detectives investigating that. So you’ll come out of this in much better shape if you just fill us in.”

They were both looking at Annette, and she smiled encouragingly back. “I’ve been thinking about this and, well, you’re not in any real trouble. Yet. I mean, you unscrewed a light bulb and shook up a can of paint. Nothing illegal there. But Dean Weathers is under police protection, and your actions could lead to charges related to that. And that’s related to the bomb, like he said. And it’s also related to the murder of Professor Stiller. So it probably would be a good idea if you cooperated. Once you tell us everything, we don’t need to bother you anymore. You can take off and try to get home for Christmas, or whatever. I need to emphasize that you don’t have to say anything, of course. But it will sure make your lives easier if you do.”

I was thinking what a good team we made, good cop and better cop, when Washington made his decision. “We were just gonna do a favor for the coach, but you came home too soon.”

“The football coach wanted my house tagged?”

“Well, no. The coach was doing a favor for the AD, see. And he was doing a favor for somebody else, who we didn’t meet. We just heard his voice, telling us what he wanted us to do. It was kinda strange.”

I translated for Annette’s benefit. “The athletic director? Sounds like a lot of hocus-pocus. What message were you supposed to leave?”

“The message was strange, too. It fits in with all the other strangeness. It was ‘Third time’s the charm.’”

Annette and I looked at each other. Well, this was not entirely unexpected. We spent some time with more detailed questions and discovered that the Twin Towers had been told to clean out their lockers at a specific time, and that their instructions came from someone a couple of rows over in the locker room, so they couldn’t see him. And that the voice, a deep raspy baritone without identifiable accent, definitely suggested a “him.” They had been told only the address, not whose house it was. They were supposed to have done the job the previous night, but they had stayed too late at a Christmas party and were too “out of it” to do it then. The mysterious voice tried to persuade them that this was all a harmless prank, but they were dubious. Nonetheless, they owed their coach a favor, and so they went along with it.

“So you were doing a favor for your coach, who was doing a favor for the AD, who was doing a favor for Mr. Mystery Man. Where’d you get the paint?”

Kolochek had also found his voice. “The mystery guy left it for us in the locker room. Uh, you can keep it.” He had set it on the end table next to him.

“Aside from your owing your coach a favor, do you have any idea why he asked you?”

It was Washington’s turn again. “Well, maybe because about everyone else has headed home for Christmas and nobody’s around. We were gonna leave tonight. I’m spending the holidays with Dink’s family back in Kansas this year.”

“Ah, Christmas in Kansas. Well, I hope you’re OK to put off the trip until tomorrow morning. I don’t think it would be wise for you guys to start driving tonight, not after that Jim Beam. OK?” I noticed that Kolochek had started to nod off. “Look. Why don’t you stagger home and leave in the morning, OK? And when you get back from break, come by my office and I’ll fill you in on what’s going on. Assuming that we figure it out. I’d like to see you guys have another great year on the field next fall. A repeat championship would be great.”

* * *

After they left, wobbling off in the direction of the campus, with profuse thanks and promises to come and see me after break, we collapsed together in laughter. “Well, nobody ever said that defensive linemen have to be rocket scientists. Who do you suppose our mystery man is?”

She had been thinking about that. “We can see if there are any prints on the paint can. And if we start with possibilities from your list, it looks like Linda Harmon is eliminated. Which leaves either Black or Martin, or someone from their staffs. Who would the athletic director be doing a favor for?”

“We can ask him next week, of course. Unless he’s off on a recruiting junket. He seems to like to recruit in South Florida or Hawaii this time of year, even though almost all of our players come from here or neighboring states. But I think I can get us a hint.” I reached for the phone and punched the buttons from memory.

“Hello, this is Dean Harold Weathers from the university. I wonder if I might speak briefly with Alice? Thank you, and Merry Christmas, Mr. Swan.” I winked at Annette. “Merry Christmas, Alice. I won’t keep you. And thanks for filling me in on your interview with the police. I’m glad that Francis isn’t involved. I hope that you weren’t too disturbed by their suspicions.”

I listened for a while.

“Well, I’m relieved, too, and I’m glad you didn’t take it personally. Linda Harmon seems not to have your level of self-confidence. Alice, I wonder if you could fill me in on some politics that I’m behind on. I recall that Provost Martin was consolidating power a while back and trying to get the athletic department back into his empire. But last I heard, the AD was still reporting to the president. Do you know if anything’s changed?” Annette was making the “OK” sign with her thumb and forefinger. “So he’s now reporting to the provost, eh? Well, that’s very interesting. I’ll have some gossip for you on Tuesday. You have a nice weekend, and convey my best holiday wishes to everyone...Thanks. Good night, Alice.”

“Good work, for a mere dean. Maybe we can put you on retainer. What’s your fee?”

“I’ll collect it later. One more thing. Remember they said that their mystery voice didn’t have an accent? Ever heard President Black speak? Way south, like, Texas and with marbles in his mouth. So that pretty much points the finger, doesn’t it?”

“And Martin doesn’t have an alibi for the night of the killing, either, although he seemed to assume that he wasn’t a viable suspect when my guys questioned him.”

“Typical of him. Also, did I mention that Stiller seduced Martin’s daughter, when she was barely 18? Can you say ‘motive?’ Anyway, there’s probably not much more we can do tonight, or this weekend. Right now, I’m thinking we should dig out the boxes of decorations and figure out what to do with that tree.”

“I brought some of mine, but they’re still in the car. Think we can mix and match?”

“I guess we’ll have to flip to decide on whose angel to put on top. Want to follow me up into the attic? It’s dark and spooky up there, but I can hold your hand...”

“Yeah, and dusty, too, I’ll bet. I’ll get mine and you get yours. I’ve got better things to keep me occupied than sneezing all night.”

* * *

It took longer than I expected to decorate our tree. Unlike her cooking style of just throwing everything together and seeing how it comes out, she took great care with the placement of each light, garland, and ornament. But I have to admit, when it was finally finished, it looked very nice, almost professional.

Balanced, well lit, and quite Christmasy. Who would have believed that the lop-sided, last-minute fir tree we managed to find could turn out to be such a delightful addition to the holiday? And best of all, she didn't like tinsel either.

* * *

...And a Happy New Year!

Nine

Even though the official Christmas Holiday for government workers, including City of Durango employees like me, was on Monday, I went down to police headquarters to try to catch up on my paperwork. Those two mini-vacations with Hal had not been a problem from the perspective of my leave time—I had more saved up than I would ever be able to use, and the Miami one had been involuntary, anyway—but I was in the middle of a high-visibility investigation that was beginning to demand my personal attention. My team of detectives had interviewed all the potential suspects on Hal's list, and the results from the lab, the coroner's office, and fingerprint analysis were all assembled. As the senior officer in the investigations unit, I was ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the case, and it was time to put all the pieces together and see what picture emerged.

Christmas with Hal had been quiet, relaxing, and deliciously romantic. I continue to marvel at how I was so lucky to find him. Even without my growing feelings for him, I would have been concerned for his safety, given the two attacks and third attempt at harassment; but since I was finding myself falling in love with the guy, I was becoming flat-out worried. Although he'd not said anything Friday evening, I knew that he had been surprised at how quickly I'd drawn my weapon on those two football players; for that matter, so had I. But the last thing my psyche needed now was for something bad to happen to him.

Ever since my divorce, I had lived for my career, for police work, and a combination of factors had resulted in my promotion to lieutenant well ahead of the normal curve for such things. I think the factors mostly had to do with the long hours I put in—everyone else had a real life to live—and the department's affirmative action program. The official paperwork talked about dedication and experience, along with oblique comments about intelligence and intuition. Whatever the reason, I was the first woman to be in charge of the department's investigations unit, and lately there were rumors about my being in line for a captaincy soon. But this workaholic approach had left my personal life in a total shambles, and what dates I managed were usually unmitigated disasters. I was aware that the relationship with Hal had happened too quickly, but it felt so good that I just couldn't resist. Neither, it seemed, could he. Besides, I wasn't getting any younger, and he was a catch to hold on to, even if he thought of himself as an old geezer. At 52, he wasn't, of course, and at this stage of my life the 15 years' difference wasn't really an issue, although there were bound to be more age-related differences of opinion like the one that came up yesterday.

For some reason the Sunday paper, usually devoted to end-of-the-year retrospective stories between Christmas and New Year's, also featured an article in the "investigative reporting" mode concerning recreational drug use in Durango and the Four Corners region. Because, inevitably, Frémont State students received a significant amount of attention in the article, Hal read it carefully, and he seemed take some of it personally. It definitely pushed his buttons.

It was interesting that he just assumed that I would agree with his comment that all drug dealers should be taken out and shot. He must have equated my career in law enforcement with a reactionary attitude toward drugs, and he had been surprised and more than a little offended by my relatively laid-back approach to the whole thing. When I suggested that the lessons of the prohibition era were being ignored by government at all levels, he clearly had to work to control himself.

“You’re saying that drugs should be legalized, like alcohol?”

“Well, that’s one of the problems. Some drugs, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and some others that are also pretty strong, already are legal and have all sorts of different controls and rules that depend on their action and potency. And some others, marijuana, cocaine, and so on, are all lumped together as illegal without regard for their potency. Society encourages alcohol and nicotine use through advertising, but tries to make it taboo to use pot. Kids see this, rightly, as hypocritical, and the adult world loses its credibility as a result. So the kids go ahead and try the stuff. Since we lump marijuana together with the more dangerous chemicals, including that stuff that you found on the floor of that classroom, why, naturally, they try anything and everything. It seems to me that we’d have an easier time controlling the hard drugs if we eased off on pot.”

“But pot leads to cocaine and other things.”

“Oh, come on Hal, you’re a scientist. You know that statistical connections don’t necessarily imply cause and effect. You could as easily argue that cigarette smoking leads to pot, or that coffee leads to cigarette smoking, or that cocoa leads to coffee, and so on and so forth, and pretty soon you’d have a direct set of linkages between mother’s milk and heroin. We both know that kids like to experiment with new experiences when they’re in college, and getting your mind altered is just part of that. Surely you did, and I know I did. You turned out OK, seems to me. Besides, you know the clichés as well as I do. Pot smokers don’t drive aggressively like drunks, they tend to go too slow and get picked up for that. And they don’t get into fights, they order pizzas. I have a lot of trouble getting worried about that kind of behavior.”

“Well, you’re right about alcohol being a bigger problem than marijuana, but that doesn’t make it justifiable to legalize marijuana.”

“No, but we tried making alcohol illegal and look what it got us. Al Capone and his pals. I just think that our society spends way too much money and people power dealing with marijuana. I bet that the vast majority of recreational drug users would be quite happy if pot were legal and wouldn’t have any motivation to use cocaine or anything else. And we in law enforcement could concentrate on the important stuff, like this Stiller murder, or the issue of these designer drugs that can kill people if they’re not designed right.”

Hal stopped looking mad and looked depressed instead. “The problem that I have is that drugs and alcohol make people stupid, and I’m in the business of trying to make them smart. I know what you mean about college kids experimenting, and, yes, I did, too. I spent my senior year of college in a marijuana fog and thought it was quite natural to go around stoned all the time. Looking back, it was pretty much of a wasted year. I hate to see kids today making that same mistake.”

“Well, you graduated, didn’t you, and got into grad school, too, no? And now you’re a college dean, for heaven’s sake, the epitome of academic success. Making mistakes is how people grow up. Like it or not, kids are going to do stupid things for fun, including things that make them stupid. I think we adults have the responsibility to make it possible for them to do that in as safe a way as possible. It seems to me that colleges and universities have a long tradition of tolerating a lot of student hijinks for just this reason. Compared to the real world, campuses are good places for such foolishness.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m sensitive to the issue. There’s so much of it in the world I spend most of my time in.” He had suddenly broken into a ear-to-ear grin. “To think. Here I am, a single guy with a good income and so on. I could have waited for a bimbo. But, noooo. I had to pick a smart one who wins all the arguments. Maybe some of that senior-year stupidity has stuck with me.” He had to duck the pillow I threw.

“I guess I shouldn’t remind you that you only think you picked me, when it was really the other way around, no?” And then it was my turn to duck.

* * *

But daydreaming about my love life wasn’t why I’d come in to the office on a holiday. My first order of business was to read completely through the files that had been assembled by the investigative team. I had started this on Friday, but catching up on phone calls and correspondence had killed most of the day.

The little adventure with the football players on Friday evening had pointed clearly toward Provost John Martin as being involved with the case somehow. I hadn’t said anything to Hal, but my detectives had pretty much cleared all the junior staff people at the university who had his cellular phone number. It seemed unlikely that Martin was the murderer of Ralph Stiller, but he couldn’t be eliminated. I had about decided that the murderer was one of the out-of-town thugs—either the unfortunate Johnny Stogle or one of the two equally unfortunate occupants of the brown sedan. Probably one of the latter, as both of them had much more extensive and violent criminal backgrounds than Stogle.

My working scenario—modified from the one I had described to Hal in that late-night e-mail—was that Stiller was somehow involved with the drug crowd, possibly as a designer drug consultant, with compensation in the form of cocaine. There had been a summit meeting to discuss chemical formulations the night before his body was found, with Stiller, the murderer, the drug ringleader, and possibly Martin present. It was possible that the ringleader was also the murderer, but I didn’t think so. The question now was how to use the physical evidence and results of the interviews to develop a case on which to make an arrest.

And how to keep Hal alive and well in the meantime.

The handwriting expert had decided that most of the chemical symbols in the sequence of equations had been written by Stiller, but some of the molecules, including the elemental symbols, had been modified by a second person. And it appeared that a third person had made other modifications to the numbers, both the subscripts defining the molecules and the stoichiometric coefficients. I suspected that person number two was Martin and person number three was either the murderer or the ringleader, assuming they were different.

As the crime scene technician mentioned, he’d had a very difficult situation to deal with because of the students and then the paramedics and campus police. However, several bits and pieces of physical evidence had been discovered. Interestingly, Stiller’s lab had been clean except for expected fingerprints. But the classroom had contained several clues. The dusting of ashes revealed that one of the participants had sat in the second row of seats, on the end away from the part of the white-board used for the equations, and smoked a cigar in flagrant violation of the various “No Smoking by Order of Fire Marshal” signs in the room. Yet no one had mentioned any residual smell. This implied that the meeting had begun well before the students had arrived for the 9 o’clock class. But the time of death had been fixed at between 5 and 7 that morning. So it was a long meeting.

But Stiller hadn’t planned on a long meeting, because there were no class notes nor, as Hal had pointed out, was there a white-board eraser on his person or in his lab. So he’d planned to be finished with the meeting in time to return to his office to prepare for class. This deduction was supported by

notes, an eraser, and a supply of new white-board markers—of all colors—found in Stiller’s office. Because there was no cocaine or other stimulant found in Stiller’s office or lab, it seemed probable that he’d planned to be finished with the meeting in time to take a nap before class, or perhaps even return home to sleep. But if the meeting had started so early, why had they assembled in the lecture hall in the first place, instead of some private location?

Of even greater significance were the fingerprints found on the arm of the chair where the cigar-smoker had sat. There were several sets, some no doubt belonging to students, but the computers had matched several prints with those of one Salazar Kelly, a colorful figure in our local underworld. My colleagues among Durango’s finest had never been able to convict him of specific criminal activity, but he had been arrested several times for a variety of suspicious circumstances. And he had a significant record from his days in Albuquerque. I suspected he was the ringleader, and possibly the killer. However, his prints were not on the white-board or the markers, so he wasn’t person number three. Unless he put gloves on in between smoking the cigar in that seat and messing with the equations. Which was possible, because I’d learned about cigar aficionados and their rituals on one of my disaster dates: they liked to roll their cigars between their fingers while smoking them, and gloves were not part of the ceremony. I contemplated arresting Kelly as an accessory at least, but I wanted to identify the other players first.

Even with them identified, however, it was going to be difficult to obtain a murder conviction unless one could be induced to testify against the others. And this was my real dilemma. If one of the others present at the meeting was one of the people on Hal’s list, he (or possibly she, I remembered) would be the obvious candidate to testify. But the physical evidence for an arrest of one of them was just not there. And Martin’s lack of an alibi for that night wasn’t good enough to get an arrest warrant for someone of his stature. What’s-her-name, the chemistry department chairman, or chair or whatever, Linda Harmon, didn’t have an alibi either. And, according to Hal, she was putting up a real fuss about being questioned again.

And why had they been on campus for this meeting anyhow? Maybe Hal would have an idea.

* * *

I called his number at work, where he’d said he’d be, and got, “Hello, this is voice mail for...,” so I hung up and tried his home number. “You have reached 724...,” so I hung up to think. Where could he be? I resisted the urge to call his cellular phone, and called his work number again instead.

After his greeting I left a message, “Hi, Hal, I’m going to leave this message for you at your house, too. I’d like to talk with you about a question that’s popped up about our investigation. Call me at work, OK? Talk to you later, bye.”

I left the same message on his home phone and tried not to worry. So maybe he went to the grocery store, or had a meeting on campus. No, it was a holiday there, too. I smiled at the thought of handcuffing him to me, so I’d know where he was and wouldn’t have to worry. Although I had played it cool with Hal, I had enough professional experience to know that an organization that tries twice is very likely to try a third time. And that was the substance of the Twin Towers’ aborted message.

Back to the various reports related to the case. The State Patrol had sent over their complete report on the Berthoud Pass accident, and it made for interesting reading. One of the two occupants of the brown sedan had died of a broken neck; he had not been wearing a seat belt. The other had been suffocated, presumably by the air bag that deployed when the car crashed into the rocks after going over the edge. This information was, literally, pieced together from the remains of the explosion. The fact that

the car had been nearly buried in snow at the time of the explosion had helped contain the debris and control the fire as well, although the debris situation was muddled up by the snow-slide.

The driver, the one who had suffocated, was identified as Big Mike Turner, a mob hit man from the west coast. He had a reputation for experience with a variety of methods of killing people and had done time for attacking a rival gang member with a knife. I dug further into the background material and found that the knife was a stiletto. So he's the probable murderer, I thought. None of the firearms in the car had serial numbers. And, as Hal had noticed, it was, or had been, a rental car, from the Avis franchise at the Durango – La Plata County Airport. This tidied up some aspects of the investigation, but there were still too many questions for me to take the case to the district attorney. Or even Captain Jankowski.

* * *

After lunch, my phone rang, and I felt much better to hear his voice. But just for a second.

“Hi, Annette. This is Hal. I'm told to tell you that I'm OK. And I really am. A little uncomfortable, but OK. There's someone here who wants to talk to you.” And a different voice came on the line.

“Listen good, lady. You want your smart-ass boyfriend here to stay OK and you'll do what we say. Hear?”

“I'm listening. Carefully.” I stretched my telephone cord fully out walking over to the office window, tapped on the glass to get attention and made the hand signs necessary to get a telephone trace going.

“We'll keep him alive and healthy as long as you cooperate. You're going to drop the murder case. Of that prof. The killer is dead anyway. There's no reason to bother with it any more. You keep investigating it and your boyfriend here is going to start losing body parts. We'll mail 'em to you. Got any preference for what part you want first?”

The telephone signal had been intermittently fuzzy, and I realized that the call was probably being made from a car phone. So the trace would be only marginally helpful, but I needed to try to keep him on the line anyway. And it would help me get more out of the conversation if he were somewhat off balance. I decided to gamble.

“Well, Mr. Kelly, I had about concluded the killer was dead myself. But there are still some loose ends to clear up before the department and the DA will let me drop the case. Can we talk about this?”

“What's this ‘Kelly’ crap? And it won't do you any good to try to keep me talking, because this is an untraceable call. What loose ends?”

“Right now the only thing I've got on you is violating fire regulations by smoking in that classroom. You were probably a witness to the murder, but I can't prove that. And you probably supplied Stiller with his cocaine, but I can't prove that either. So, if there's proof that the killer really was Big Mike, you're pretty much off the hook and the investigation will be dropped. Of course, if you detain Mr. Weathers much longer, this thing will involve kidnaping, and we'll have to bring in the FBI. I'm afraid that they would just insist. And you don't want to deal with them, do you? I mean, so far you're clear, if there's evidence pointing to Big Mike.”

“You call in the FBI and boyfriend here loses a real important body part. Very painful. What kind of evidence you need?”

One of the officers out in the main room walked over to my window and held up a piece of paper that said “Got it!” with a seven-digit number. My heart sank as I recognized it as the number of Hal’s cellular phone. I waved the officer into my office.

“It’s not a matter of choice, with the FBI. They automatically get involved with kidnaping. And all calls here are taped and monitored, so the news is out. If you don’t release him real soon, you’re going to have the Feds on your tail. Why don’t you let him out right now, where you are, and tell us where in a couple of minutes when you’ve driven someplace else? That’ll keep the FBI out of your hair. And so far, it doesn’t seem to bother you very much to have just my department in your hair.”

He paused long enough for me to know that he was taking the bait.

I continued, “And you know that if you harm Mr. Weathers in any way, it will just make the FBI more determined. Do you really want to deal with that? But what you don’t know is that if you harm Mr. Weathers in any way, it’ll become personal with me. And I know how to find you, Sal, believe me. You hurt Mr. Weathers and you’ll be begging me to hand you over to the FBI instead of what’ll happen to you, Sal.”

The use of the name infuriated him, but it also seemed to scare him enough to keep him talking. “Look. You’ll get Weathers back in one piece if the investigation is dropped. What evidence do you need?”

It occurred to me that if this conversation went on long enough, it might be possible to track the route of the car they were in by the various cellular repeater towers receiving the signal. I walked back over to my desk and scribbled a note to that effect and handed it to the officer, while stalling for time to think.

“OK, Sal, look. I think we can work this out, as long as Mr. Weathers stays healthy. I just want you to know how important that is. And I don’t know exactly what to tell you about the evidence because I don’t know what’s possible from your end. It has to be verifiable and, well, the truth. We can’t frame Big Mike posthumously. What about the murder weapon, the stiletto, with his prints on it? Or maybe some of his clothes with some of Stiller’s blood, or hair, or something? And, Sal, think about this. If you’re going to work with me on this, you really don’t need Mr. Weathers. Why don’t you let him go? Right now. Tell you what. You keep his phone so we can go on talking.”

“You know too much for your own good, lady. I’ll call you back in a while, so stay available. And Weathers stays healthy. For now.”

And he disconnected.

* * *

Ten

I hung up my phone and tried to stop shaking, then sat down and took several deep breaths, considering my next move. I couldn’t go anywhere, of course, in case Sal called back. Could there be any progress on the cellular trace? I got up and stuck my head out my office door.

“Bill? Any luck on their location or route or anything? I didn’t give you much time, I know, he just disconnected on me.”

“The trace initiated the process, so we know he was up on the north end of town, headed south. But that’s about all. If he stayed in one place for a while, we could probably get a triangulation, as long as it was in town. But he was moving.”

“He said he’d call back, so let’s be ready to jump when he does, OK?”

I went back to my desk and sat down again. Damn, damn, damn. Maybe Kelly will decide that the FBI just isn’t worth the risk. But if he hurts Hal, I’ll skin him alive. With a dull knife, the son of a bitch.

It was two hours later when my finally phone rang. I had enforced concentration on myself, but it was hard to keep my mind from wandering back to Hal’s situation. Still, I was able to read carefully the transcripts of the most recent conversations with the university people on Hal’s list. And my suspicions began to waver between Martin and Harmon. Were all academics this snotty?

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi, Annette. I’m still fine. Your last conversation with my friends here certainly stirred up a hornet’s nest. But I’m fine, really. I…” He was cut off.

I signaled frantically to the squad room to start the trace again.

“Your boyfriend is starting to really piss me off, lady. But he’s still in one piece. Listen. We’re going to let him out pretty soon, and I’ll let you know where after a while. Or he’ll probably call you first. So, no FBI, OK? And I’m gonna look into what evidence I can get to prove that Big Mike stabbed the prof. I’ll get back to you.” And he disconnected again, this time too soon for the trace to be effective, I was sure.

But they were going to let Hal go! I could have wept, but there was too much to think about. Like, who was involved in this? Kelly obviously had had to discuss the situation with someone before making the decision to let Hal go. But whom? And this meant that Kelly wasn’t the big cheese after all. Or maybe he was just a slow thinker.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang again, and I initiated the trace right away, and picked it up. “Trieri, investigations.”

“Hiya. Well, my new friends let me off downtown on Main Avenue, by the Strater. They told me to come into Diamond Belle’s here and wait to do anything for the time it took to have a beer. Except that they don’t know I don’t drink, so I just called you right away. They were headed north on Main, but I’m sure they’re changing direction a lot.” I was so glad to hear him talk that I just let him rattle on.

“Are you still OK? Got all your body parts?”

“Sure. From what I gather, they mostly wanted you off the case, and whatever you were saying about evidence with Stetson Man seemed to do the trick.”

“Stetson Man?”

“I didn’t get properly introduced to them, although they seemed to know me. So I had to invent names for them. They weren’t wearing disguises, though, so I can give you folks great descriptions. Stetson Man, Baldy, and Flat Nose. A really distinguished bunch. Should I call a cab, or walk home, or what?”

My other line was ringing.

“Hold on for a minute, OK? My other line’s ringing and it might be, um, Stetson Man and his buddies. And I’ll send a squad car over for you.”

I pushed the button for the other line.

“OK, lady, we let him out, safe and sound, at the Diamond Belle Saloon on Main, in the Strater. And we’re long gone, so don’t bother looking around. I’m taking you at your word here, that we won’t have any trouble about our little, uh, car ride and visit with your boyfriend. OK?”

“Like I said, Sal, the only evidence I’ve got right now has you smoking in violation of the fire marshal’s rules, and I’m not going to bother busting you for that. And what about the evidence? Are you going to call me later, or what?”

“You’ll be hearing from me. And, listen. I didn’t know anything about this until after it happened and Big Mike told me about it. I left before. So I wasn’t a witness or nothing. Got it?”

“I’ve got no reason not to believe you, Sal.” Beyond your sleazy character. “Give me a call whenever you want.”

And this time I had the pleasure of hanging up on him. After getting a car sent to pick up Hal, I went back to the phone.

“Hal, are you still there? I can’t tell you how relieved I am to hear you’re in one piece. You had me really, really worried, lover.”

“Yeah, well, me too, some. It was weird. They grabbed me on my way home when I was walking down Eighth Avenue and shoved me into this big car. It was all fairly civilized, except for the threats to you about my body parts. I hope he was talking about fingers, or toes. Whatever you said seemed to make him real mad, but also thoughtful. Who are these guys, anyway?”

“I assume it was a local hood called Sal Kelly, and some of his pals. We found his prints in the lecture hall, so he was in on Stiller’s last conference. But he says that he didn’t kill Stiller, and now I think I’ve got him working on proving that one of his torpedoes did it, one of the guys killed in the brown sedan on Berthoud Pass. Politics and crime both make for strange bedfellows, it seems.”

“Well, as soon as your guys pick me up, all I want to do is to be your bedfellow, OK? I think I could use a hug again.”

“All night long,” I replied.

* * *

Amy Hodges stuck her head in my door. “Hi. Got a minute? I just heard something about a kidnaping, and Randy’s going to be salivating for information. What can you tell me?”

Hodges’ background in journalism made her sympathetic to reporters’ needs, and her job as spokesperson for the department kept her own journalistic curiosity satisfied, mostly. I knew that the trick with Amy was to provide her with enough information to allow her to do her job but to avoid sensitive areas if possible.

“Well, now, I wouldn’t call it a ‘kidnaping,’ exactly because there was no ransom involved and it’s all over anyway. What happened is that someone went for a semi-involuntary ride around town with some shady characters for a couple of hours and then got let out at a different spot from where he’d been picked up. Sort of a long, round-about ride to a bar with some new acquaintances. Nobody’s any the worse for the wear, and there won’t be any charges filed, I’m sure. There’s no story in it.”

“Except that it’s a slow news day and Randy’s always looking for something, particularly since there’s been so little information coming out about the campus murder for the past couple of weeks. Anything more on that I can give him?”

“Hmm.” Better to toss them a bone if possible, if only to distract them from today’s events. “Tell them that we have developed a list of suspects, but that the murder case is complicated by the shooting I was involved in and by that accident up on Berthoud Pass a week before Christmas. Tell them that we have reason to believe that one or more of our potential suspects may have perished and that things are proceeding slowly because of that. Of course, if the primary suspect turns out to be one of the deceased, we won’t be prosecuting. It might be a good idea for him to prepare his readers for that possibility.”

“So one of the dead guys killed that professor? Any motive, or anything?”

“Be sure and emphasize that we have reason to think that one of them may have been involved in the killing, but no proof. And it appears that drugs were involved.”

Hodges grinned. “Somehow it ‘appears’ that you’re not telling me everything. As usual. Anything I should know that they shouldn’t?”

“I think I’ve told you everything that’s relevant. Remember, we haven’t cleared the case, and we don’t know for sure who did the killing.”

My phone rang, and I was rescued. It was Hal’s ride.

“Lieutenant Trieri, this is Officer Donlan in unit 37. We were sent to Diamond Belle’s to pick up a party for you, and he’s trying to get us to take him to his home instead of bringing him in. He said to call you for confirmation.”

I tried not to laugh. Maybe I should tell them to take Hal to the drunk tank. Or, better yet, to the city limits with instructions not to come back. Like my idea of handcuffing him to me, this would at least keep him out of trouble. But, with the reporters hanging around the station, sending him home really did seem like a good idea.

“Thanks, Donlan. You can take him home. And tell him to please stay there and to call me right away, OK?”

Since Hal’s house was just up the hill from downtown, it didn’t take long for the phone to ring again, with Hal on the line.

“Hi again. The guys in blue told me to call you. I’m home.”

“Good. I have to work for a couple more hours, so stay put, please. I’ll bring something to cook and we can have a quiet evening rehashing the day’s adventure. You’ll be glad to hear that I managed, at least I think I managed, to keep this out of the papers.”

“Oh, no. I don’t get to enhance my celebrity victim status with yet another tale of run-ins with the underworld? Geez, you’re taking all the fun out of this.”

“Well, I bet I could arrange for a TV news crew to come by and film you at home, if you really want.”

“I’ll be hiding under the bed. And how about something comforting for dinner, like macaroni and cheese?”

“Sure. I’ll make you the yuppie version, fettuccini Alfredo. With three varieties of Romano. See you about 6:30.”

We really were getting domesticated. I wondered if he needed paper towels or dishwasher soap.

* * *

Kelly hadn't denied what I had hinted to him, and he had seemed amenable to the plan to find evidence implicating the late Mr. Turner in the murder. Of course, he could be lying through his teeth, trying to protect himself by pinning the blame on a person beyond the reach of the law, but solid evidence implicating Turner would have to be seriously considered regardless of Kelly's lack of credibility.

I was pleased that my working scenario was generally supported by the conversation with Kelly, but I was also careful to continue, and nurture, my skepticism. It appeared that I might have to modify my hypothesis so that someone other than Kelly made the final changes to the equations. But there was really no solid evidence placing anyone other than Kelly and Stiller in the classroom, beyond the probability of a third person based on the handwriting analysis. And the question of this third person's identity was becoming more and more compelling.

Most relevant was the fact that it appeared as if it could be someone from the university. I knew enough about university/real-world relationships to know that this issue had bombshell potential. If the public—that is, the university trustees and the state legislature as well as the John Q. Public family—were to find that a university official was involved in drug trafficking, stuff would really hit the fan. The public entrusted these folks with their youngsters at a particularly vulnerable stage in their development. The last thing that Frémont State needed, and, by extension, the last thing Durango needed, was a scandal that might jeopardize the school's future.

Further, this university person was responsible for at least the phone threat and the first attack on Hal, and knowledge of this at the university would not bode well for internal relations. There must be something in those transcripts that would help differentiate between Martin and Harmon. Or at least lead to new questions that could be used in follow-up interviews. I turned back to the files.

Before I took off for Winter Park with Hal, I spent the week formulating strategy with my investigative team. We decided to interview each person on Hal's list using the same set of questions, in the same order, or at least try to. We all suspected that controlling the conversation with the university president, the provost, and possibly one or two of the others might be difficult. I had read all of the files before, but now I decided to read them in parallel, question by question, to see how the answers compared.

In order to set the stage for the important questions, the detectives had to explain to the interviewees the threatening call to Hal's cellular phone and its apparent relationship to the car bomb and shoot-out later that day. And the fact that their interview was based on their being one of the few individuals who knew the cellular phone number. So the beginning questions, the simpler ones designed to put everyone at ease, revolved around who else might know the number, people that Hal wouldn't know knew. But even this raised Martin's hackles:

I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know that telephone number, although I expect that my secretary has it somewhere in case I should need it. And if I don't know it, I couldn't tell anyone, could I? Or are you suggesting that it was I who made the threatening call? Obviously, I did not plant the bomb. I'm afraid this is all a waste of my valuable time.

Harmon, on the other hand, was still cooperative at this point:

I can't recall that number, but Dean Weathers might have given it to me in case there was an emergency of some kind. My secretary probably has it, if he did. And I suppose

that she could have passed it to someone else. I'm not sure I even was aware that he carried a cellular phone around, now that I think about it. Must be a nuisance.

Everyone had been reassured that everyone else on Hal's list was being questioned, too, and that this was all routine, for self-consistency, and so on. Martin had not been mollified.

The real objective of the interviews was to discuss alibis for the night of the killing, without making any of the interviewees feel so threatened that they stopped talking and demanded a lawyer. But even the most gentle of approaches to this issue could not disguise the fact that those being questioned were under some suspicion. Everyone had been told that the alibi questions were related to eliminating people from further consideration of everything associated with the investigation, and this bait was so attractive to most of the interviewees that they jumped at it. Besides, most of them had alibis. It had been Sunday night, and they were at home with family. However, Martin was coldly outraged, or at least pretended to be:

It's becoming clear that you suspect me of being involved with the murder somehow. These questions have nothing to do with telephone numbers. And they are highly intrusive. I am not answerable to you, or anyone else, for that matter, for how I spent my Sunday evening. It is outrageous that you would suspect me, the Provost and Executive Vice President of Frémont State University, of being involved in this sordid matter. You've wasted enough of my time. And any further questions will be passed to me only through my attorney. This interview is ended. The door is behind you. Good day.

If Martin had at least kept his cool, Harmon had lost hers:

You want to know what?! What kind of crap are you trying to pull here, anyway? You're asking me for an alibi, for Christ sakes! That means that I'm a suspect in Ralph's murder. Listen, assholes, that guy was the heart and soul of my department and no one is more upset at his killing than I am. Get the hell out of my office!

In between the opening and closing questions, both Martin and Harmon had progressed toward their respective levels of outrage without providing information that gave me any hints to help differentiate them. I began to hope that they'd both wind up being involved. They both deserved to be brought down a notch or two, that was for sure.

* * *

It was almost 7:00 by the time I got to Hal's place, with dinner ingredients. I had needed to check out two stores to find the right kinds of pasta and cheese, and a cheese that I bought in the first store was on sale at the second, so naturally I had to go back to the first and exchange the expensive cheese for something on sale. Which had taken a while to find. I was glad that Hal had not been with me.

It wasn't clear who was happier to see whom. He got his hug, a long, tight one that neither of us wanted to let go of, and we headed for the kitchen to make dinner.

"I took you at your word and got macaroni and cheese, sort of."

“Oh, Lord, not the stuff in the box. Please, at least tell me that it’s the frozen stuff. The gluey kind.”

“No, dummy, like I said on the phone, it’s the yuppie kind. You boil some water and I’ll grate this cheese. I hope you’ve got butter.” Since there were no sauces or other complicated things to assemble, we were entirely compatible, although out of the corner of my eye I saw Hal wince when I made the salad dressing. But he seemed to like it.

Our dinner conversation finally turned to the case, and Hal had some news. “I had the strange experience today of seeing that stuffed-shirted boss of mine grovel. He was on campus today, too, and he looked me up this morning, before all the excitement.”

“You mean Martin? I’m still trying to decide between him and Harmon for candidacy as the university connection in our case. What happened? It’s hard to picture him groveling.”

“I’m not sure he actually wanted me to tell you this, so it’s off the record. I guess he thought by telling me, it would allow me to persuade you to take the heat off him. Remember that he doesn’t have an alibi for the night of the murder? Well, it seems that his wife was out of town—and I suppose this could be verified—visiting her sick mother back east. So he decided he wanted a night out, a night out with some excitement, so he went to Sizzles. Seems he had been involved in a theater group back in his student days, and he learned how to use makeup and false facial hair for parts. So he figure he could go there disguised and watch the flesh without being recognized. He stayed until closing, he said, around two in the morning. So he claims to have an alibi although one that’ll be hard to prove. He volunteered to get made up again and go back, to see if he could get anyone to recognize him with that look and verify that he’d been there.”

“Sizzles?! You’ve got a dirty old man for a provost, my friend. Does he grope the students, too? God Almighty. That place makes Fannie’s look like church. We’ve got an undercover vice team that’s occupied almost full-time keeping tabs on the questionable activities there. I think we even busted them a while back for having real, actual, honest-to-God live sex on stage. What a sleazebag.”

“Yeah. But don’t let the humor in this escape you. You said you’ve read the interview transcripts, and I bet that you have a pretty good idea of what a pompous ass he can be. Maybe this is an example of karma, somehow. Anyway, this may eliminate him.”

“Not entirely, but it promotes Harmon to the head of the class, as it were. But what about the Twin Towers incident? We had him connected through that, since the AD reports to him now.”

“Don’t know. But the campus grapevine may have some information pertinent to that, and the vintner just happens to work for me. I’ll see what I can find out tomorrow. Now, my dear, I don’t think I’ve properly thanked you for extricating me from that little car ride today. And you look all tensed up. Did you know that one of my many talents is relaxation massage?”

Even then, so early in our relationship, the guy really knew how to make me melt.

* * *

Eleven

The next morning, I left Hal’s place early, so that I could make a run through my house, pick up changes of clothes and leave off dirty ones, rescue the newspaper, water my plants, and a host of other things. This two-household life was getting to be a real drag.

I began mulling over the question of actually moving in with him. If so, should I sell my house? Property values had appreciated tremendously since my divorce, so I'd be able to make a nice profit if I sold it now. Or I could rent it. But renting to college students was always iffy. They generally made lousy tenants, with no respect for property, and thought nothing of putting their fists through walls and other such things. And the guys were even worse. Maybe Hal could use his connections to get it rented to visiting faculty, or something like that. At least grownups would keep the bathroom clean.

All this presupposed that Hal would have me as a house-mate. What if he wasn't ready? And this also presupposed that I was ready. Was I? Hmm. At least he put the toilet seat down. Guys that considerate are really hard to find.

Except, we'd met only three weeks ago. Love at first sight I could believe in. But moving in together? Maybe we could work out an alternate visitation deal, so I could be home sometimes. But his place was so much nicer, more comfortable and cozy, and bigger. And in a nicer neighborhood.

Anyway, he ought to ask me. How could I ask him if I could just up and move in to his house with him? "Hal, how about if I pack up my stuff and move it over here?" "Hal, I want to share my life with you even more than I have been, and besides I can never remember which clothes are where?" "Hal, don't you think it's cute how nice our cars look together in your garage?" Or maybe a little white lie: "Hal, my parents are coming for a long visit and I figured I could move in here and just give them my place. I'll tell them I'm staying with a girlfriend." Except then he'd want to meet them. Well, hell.

* * *

At about 3:30 that afternoon, my telephone rang, and the front desk informed me that a courier had delivered a package for me, in one of those padded 9x12 envelopes. No return address.

"Has Roscoe had a look at it?" Although this was standard procedure, I was feeling extra cautious.

Roscoe, our department's bomb-sniffing beagle, had been rescued from likely euthanasia at the animal shelter by the bomb squad about 12 years earlier, when he was just a pup. He'd been trained in the art of discovering explosives and other nasty things, and had enjoyed a long and distinguished career. He was now semi-retired and lived at the station in royal splendor, gratefully and eagerly accepting the treats that just about everyone brought him.

"We're running it down to him now." In his semi-retirement, suspicious packages went to Roscoe, rather than the other way 'round, in no small part because of these treats. Combined with his habit of getting up only for his daily constitutional, the treats had led to Roscoe's carrying the weight of about two normal beagles, large ones. His belly dragged on the ground when he did manage to walk about. But his nose still worked fine.

Eventually the package found its way to me, and I put on latex gloves to examine it carefully. It was obvious that the sender was striving for anonymity. Inside, I found a stiletto in a plastic bag, Hal's cellular phone, and a note, written, apparently, using a word processor and printed anonymously on a laser printer. "So, crooks use computers, too," I mumbled to myself. It seemed to be from Kelly, or whomever I'd been talking to in the car yesterday.

Like you suggested, we looked into the matter of the knife used to kill that professor. We found this at Big Mike's place. We picked it up with a tissue and put it in the plastic bag without touching it, except for the very end of the handle. I'll call you later to make sure you got it OK. Your boyfriend's new friends.

I held the bag up to the light to look at the knife, and it seemed that there was residue of something at the base of the blade, where it was joined to the handle. If that turned out to be Stiller's blood, and if there were Turner's prints on the handle, the murder would be solved, notwithstanding some unanswered questions.

I had already researched the matter of how I might reach Kelly, if the need arose, and so I now dialed his number. No point in waiting for him to call me.

A different voice from yesterday answered with a "Yeah."

"Good afternoon. I'm calling for Sal Kelly. This is Lieutenant Trieri from the Durango police department. I'd like to continue our conversation of yesterday."

"Wrong number, lady."

"Now, now. I know he's at this number, and if you're there, he's there. Please tell him that I got his package, and that I'd like to thank him and ask an important question that will help keep him off the hook. Can you remember all that?" I heard the sound of the receiver being set on a table top, and waited patiently for several minutes. There was the sound of a conversation in the background, but I couldn't make it out.

"Hello?" Finally someone had picked the receiver back up, and it was the same voice from yesterday's car episode.

"Hi, Sal. I got your package, and it looks like we'll be able to get something off the knife. If there's blood on it that matches the professor's, and if there are Big Mike's prints on it, I think the murder investigation will be closed."

"How come you keep calling me Sal? You don't know who I am."

"We got your prints from the seat in the lecture hall, Sal. You must have taken your gloves off to smoke that cigar. We know you were there. Wouldn't our conversations be a lot easier if you just admit I know what I'm talking about? Now listen. I need one more thing from you. Turner's address. If you found the knife there, there may be more evidence that will strengthen our case. I don't think we'll be giving you a good citizenship medal or anything, but helping us will take the heat off you, like I was saying yesterday."

"So even though you know—er, even though you think I was there, I'm not a suspect."

"Well, that depends on what the lab guys find on the knife. I mean, if there's the professor's blood and *your* fingerprints, you'll be in big trouble. You were smart not to pick it up with your fingers. And if something comes up that puts you in the room when the murder happened, and we know what time that was, you'll be an accessory. You see, Sal, despite your less-than-upstanding reputation, I'm assuming that you're telling the truth for once and really didn't know about this until Mike told you. I figure Stiller was helping you with new and interesting chemicals and you really didn't want to lose him. So you left that meeting—all that chemistry talk was probably too boring for you to stay awake—and something happened and Stiller got dead."

"Lady, I got no idea whatsoever what you're talking about. But you won't find my prints on that knife. Or on the phone either."

"I hope you didn't wipe the knife off, Sal. We need Big Mike's prints on it, or we're still not going to be satisfied. Can I always reach you at this number, if I need to talk to you?"

"You sure are a wise-ass, lady. Does your boyfriend get it from you?"

“Actually it’s sort of mutual. You should hear us at home. Oh. One more thing. It would be very helpful to us if you’d tell us who else was at that meeting. You, for a while, the professor, Big Mike, and who else?” I decided to gamble again. “It’ll help your cause to tell me her name.”

“Ha! Don’t push it, lady. You think you know everything, don’t you?” And he hung up.

Rats. He might be a small-time hood, but he was no dope. He’d not given me any help at all by that response. But at least there was some progress. And we could find Turner’s address anyhow.

I reassembled the package and sent it down to the lab. It would be interesting to see whose fingerprints were to be found.

* * *

That evening, over a dinner built around sautéed prawns over linguini, Hal was full of news from the campus grapevine. “When the Twin Towers get back from Kansas, you’ll have to have another conversation with them about their meeting in the locker room with the mystery man. Maybe it was the AD, with his voice disguised. Alice tells me that he and Linda Harmon are an ‘item,’ as she put it.”

He laughed. “I told her I didn’t know exactly what that meant and asked her, for calibration purposes, what about you and me, and she looked over her glasses in that school teacher way of hers and said, ‘Oh, you’ve gone far beyond mere “item” status, Dean Weathers.’ I hope I didn’t turn too red.”

“So the AD could have been doing a favor for his squeeze. Is he back from his recruiting trip yet? We’ll have to question him as soon as we can.”

“No, and neither is the coach, who might know something. I think the AD is in Florida and coach went to Nebraska. Guess who’ll come up with more recruits. Also, remember I told you about that nasty e-mail from Linda, about my ‘stepping aside,’ as she put it, as dean for a while? Well, I’ve obviously got the provost on my side now, so he’s not going to let her force that to happen. But the interesting thing is that neither will the other department chairs. It seems they don’t trust her. I guess that deans can’t know everything about what’s going on with the rank and file. It was more or less her turn to do a rotation as chemistry chair, but I hear it was controversial within the department, and it was Stiller who was her champion. I’ll defer to your expert judgement, but it’s looking to me as if this is all starting to come together.”

“But we still don’t have any solid evidence pointing to her. I’m working on your friends in the car, but they’re not talking. They seem to think that they’re home free now that the murderer has been identified. Although that’s still on hold pending results from the lab. I have an idea, although I don’t know if it will work. From the interview transcripts, Harmon seems pretty volatile. She blew up at the detectives when she figured out they were asking about alibis. Martin just got coldly distant, and more arrogant, at that point in the questioning. Maybe we can turn up the heat and get her to blow her cool again, and admit somehow that she was in that classroom. And that she supplied Kelly with your cellular phone number. And so on.”

“You’ve suggested that Sal is a sort of ringleader in all this but not the mastermind. What’s her involvement, beyond this stuff? Could she be the mastermind?” He looked off into space. “Mistressmind? Aha! Another job for the feckless campus gender-issue sensitivity committee!”

“Oh, Lord. You and your political correctness. One thing I’ve thought about, and I talked with the captain about it, too, is the bigger issues involved with these designer drugs and their relationships to the cocaine and pot scene around here. He and the DA’s office think they’re all interlinked. Durango and the surrounding region are just too small a market to have more than one syndicate running drugs, even counting Cortez and Farmington. I’ve been concentrating on the murder and the attempts on you, the

bomb and so on, but there's this bigger matter to consider. If we could tie everything together and bring down Sal and his guys, we'd be doing the community a real favor."

"Not to mention getting you your captain's stripes, my pretty."

"Oh, yeah. Just what I need, even more of a desk job than I've got now. You keep feeding me like this and I'll turn out like Roscoe."

But I was flattered. And, of course, I had to explain about the department's favorite pooch.

"His belly drags on the floor? Um, if it's all the same to you, I like you the way you are. You want to use my ski machine?"

* * *

Making the rounds the next morning, first to my place and then to work, I was reminded once again of the dual household problem. What had started out as a humorous nuisance and grown into a real drag was obviously going to mature into a royal pain.

But that wasn't reason enough to make this big a change. And how would it work anyway? His house was big enough, but there would need to be some changes. I had discovered that his summer hobby was fly-fishing, and that half of his den had been converted to a fly-tying studio with gadgets galore and lots of dead animal parts lying around. With an old blender that he explained was for the purpose of chopping up rabbit and muskrat fur, with other stuff, to make something called "blended dubbing." Yuck.

After dinner, I had been reading, gotten absorbed, and not noticed that he had disappeared until I reached the end of a chapter. I went looking for him, wandering around in his not-entirely-familiar house in the dark, and discovered him in the den, hunched over an extremely cluttered table, with his reading glasses on, working at something clamped in a funny-looking vise. He must have heard me walk in, because he didn't jump when I kissed him on the back of the neck and asked what in the world he was doing.

"Just stocking up for the summer. I try to tie a half-dozen or so flies each evening. I'm not very fast, so that's about all I can do in a hour." By then I had seen him wrap thread around a tiny fishhook in the vise and lash on a little piece of fur of some kind at one end and some minuscule feathers toward the other. Then he twirled some fur—what turned out to be the blended dubbing—onto the thread and wrapped it onto the hook, making a fat little bug body.

"Does that thing have a name?" To my surprise, it was beginning to look something like a little insect.

"This is a local variation of a sort of generic mayfly called a pale morning dun. As opposed to a pale evening dun. These colors are a little darker than the classic PMD, but it works around here." He had begun winding a larger feather about the end of the hook near the eye, and something resembling a creme-colored collar appeared. "I go through about a two dozen of these in three different sizes—I mean about six dozen flies altogether—each summer, so I've actually gotten so I can tie the little suckers without too many mistakes. There." He held it up with a pair of tweezers, and it really did resemble a mayfly.

What kind of weird guy had I fallen in love with, anyway?

In any case, I was going to need some space for my computer somewhere. And my other stuff, too. At least the big closet in his bedroom was still about half empty. And his kitchen was sure a lot nicer than mine. But he was so anal about his cooking. Geez, he'd even measured the minced basil into a

tablespoon by packing it down carefully, and selected just-right “medium cloves” of garlic to dice. It had made me slightly crazy to sit and watch this foolishness. But the shrimp had turned out to be delicious. Just how was I going to get a discussion of combining households started without scaring him off?

Maybe I could talk him into staying over at my place tonight, to let him get a taste of this commuting baloney.

* * *

My agenda for the day included a meeting with the assistant district attorney, to discuss getting warrants to tap Harmon’s phones, to search her home, and, with the university’s cooperation, to search her office. To the extent that a search could be approved by the provost, it would be a snap, I figured. But persuading a judge to issue warrants on what we had could be a close call. In the afternoon, I was slated to visit the campus and discuss illegal chemical substances with the chemistry lab guy, Gil Taylor.

First, it would be helpful to get the provost’s cooperation for the warrant. I was aware that the university was, technically, state property and that jurisdictions were a little fuzzy on campus. I called Martin’s office.

“Hello. This is Lieutenant Annette Trieri at the police department. I wonder if I might speak with Provost Martin, please.” There was a delay.

“Hello Lieutenant Trieri. What can I do for you?”

“May I speak confidentially?” I waited for confirmation. “You may be interested to know that I’ve done some checking, entirely informally, you understand, and I’ve found that an Edith Martin flew from here to Newark on December fourth, via Denver. Also, one of the bouncers at a local nightclub recalls clearly a middle-aged gentleman wearing what appeared to be false whiskers and a toupée in his establishment until closing the night of December fifth. I appreciate your cooperation with our investigation of recent events, and I want you to know that I consider you to be a resource in helping us with the university-related aspects of the investigation. And that is the only role that I consider you to have in this investigation. Am I coming through clearly?”

“I believe that I understand exactly what you’re saying, Lieutenant, and I appreciate your candor. And discretion.”

“You should also understand that, as a citizen, a taxpayer, and a staunch supporter of Frémont State, I’m not entirely pleased with your choice of entertainment. But, from an official perspective, I consider the matter closed.”

I wondered how he would react to this criticism.

“Lieutenant, I am aware of both my position and my reputation on campus, the good and the bad of each, but I have never been one to try to duck responsibility for my mistakes.” He sighed. “I’d never been to a place like that, and, for some reason I can’t explain, I was overcome with curiosity that weekend. Maybe it was a kind of mid-life crisis, the kind that motivates some men my age to purchase red sports cars. In any case, I can’t believe I actually went there. You may be sure that I’ll never do it again.”

“Well, now you know the origin of that old saw about curiosity and cats. And let me suggest that if you do get curious again, try Fannie’s instead. That way, you’ll have far less chance of being present during a vice raid.” I could hear him gasp. “Anyway, like I said, I consider the matter closed. I’m calling because I’m assuming that you, as chief academic officer at Frémont State, are interested in having the matter of the circumstances of Professor Stiller’s murder explained as completely as possible.”

“Absolutely. And I can offer you the full power of my office for assistance, should you need it. I’ve heard the rumors about drugs, and I want this cleared up. The legislature is going to start working on our budget soon, and the last thing we need is for this to mushroom into a scandal.”

“I believe that my detectives mentioned that you were questioned because you were one of several individuals at the university on a list of names compiled by Dean Weathers. People who he believed knew his cellular phone number. All but one of those individuals has now been accounted for on the night of the murder. I wonder if I might enlist your cooperation in investigating further that remaining individual?”

“As I said, you have the full power of my office at your disposal. And, insofar as the campus is not fully within the jurisdiction of your department, that could be very helpful, I should think. In addition, there are special rules related to matters on campus that have been put in place over the years by the state legislature, things such as what’s public and what’s not, and so on. These rules are quite different from the rest of the world. For example, we have been told that our e-mail is in the public domain, should someone seek to read it, just as paper correspondence is. And offices, laboratories, and the like are also public property, except for certain personal possessions. I have been told by university counsel that I have the authority to enter and search any room on campus, as long as I do not break locks placed in authorized places, such as lockers and desk or file drawers labeled ‘personal.’ Also, private vehicles parked on campus require search warrants to enter. My understanding is that I have access to everything else, at will. I’ve been somewhat overwhelmed by the responsibility of this, and it’s affected my behavior. I think it’s made me standoffish.”

My heavens, the man’s human after all, I thought. “Provost Martin, it sounds as if you’re just the person I need to work with to solve this little mystery. We believe that we’ve figured out who did the actual killing. But we’d like to cast as wide a net as possible and round up everyone involved before we go public with that. You see, we believe that Professor Stiller was involved with a gang of drug pushers who were working on new chemicals to sell to the students. They’re called ‘designer drugs,’ perhaps you’ve heard the term. We know who the small fry are in the gang involved, but there is one more key person at the university that we believe to be involved. And it may be that there is evidence on campus implicating this person.”

“May I ask whom you suspect?”

“I discovered that you used to be on the chemistry faculty, before you joined the administration. Is that correct?”

“I still am on the chemistry faculty, although I don’t teach any more. I do have a graduate student. And I have the dubious honor of serving on the department’s space assignment committee, my one commitment to departmental service. Why?”

“Our prime suspect in this matter, not the killing but the connection of the drug pushers to the campus, is the chemistry department chair, Professor Linda Harmon.”

His silence spoke volumes.

* * *

Twelve

The meeting with the assistant district attorney went better than I had expected it to. I patiently and carefully laid out the entire story, including both facts from physical evidence and testimony as well as my inferences from various sources of information. He was persuaded that we could get warrants from Judge Sandose, one of the more conservative local jurists who had a particularly strong aversion to drug activity.

And the DA confirmed what the provost had told me about jurisdiction on campus. University officials had free reign there, with the exception of the locations the provost had noted as well as other private places such as residence halls and apartments.

After lunch I went through the rigors of finding parking on campus, a task simplified by the Christmas break calendar, but nonetheless a challenge, and made my way to Gil Taylor's laboratory in the chemistry building.

"Mr. Taylor?" I had found the door labeled "Analytical Chemistry Facility" open.

"Yeah, back here," came a voice from somewhere behind, and apparently under, a bank of exotic looking equipment. "Just a sec. I need to connect this one thing and then I'll crawl out of here."

I looked around as he finished up. The lab was full of things that I couldn't identify. It was not at all like our lab in the police department, which had three systems for analysis of blood samples and drugs, each self-contained and free standing. Everything here was hooked together with electrical cables and plastic tubes. There were at least four computer screens, in addition to read-out panels for the instruments. And all sorts of warning labels. I was a little surprised that such a professional report had emerged from a place like this.

Toward the back of the laboratory, a lanky figure began to emerge from the jumble of equipment as it unfolded itself into an upright position.

"Ugh. Well, I think I got it connected. I've found that the only way to get things hooked up the way I need them to be is to do it myself. Bet you'd never have guessed, though." He grinned and stuck out his hand. "You must be Lieutenant Trieri. I'm Gil Taylor. Glad to meet you."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Taylor. Down at headquarters, we were all very impressed with that report you did for Dean Weathers, on the substance found in the lecture hall near Professor Stiller's lab. In fact, my guys are interested in putting you on some kind of retainer for future sample analysis. It seems that your equipment found some things that ours missed."

"Well, I don't mean to sound smug or anything, but I'm not surprised. This equipment, even though it looks like a pile of junk, is really state-of-the-art, and I keep it carefully tuned up. The faculty and students here couldn't function with less. And, with all due respect, I bet your lab is so busy that your guys don't have the time or energy to tweak the equipment like I do. I'd be glad to be a resource for you. I do have to charge for samples, though, unless you can get the dean or someone in the university to subsidize it."

"We'll be glad to pay for sample analysis. What I'd like to talk about is that report you did, along with some other information from the case."

I pulled out the print-outs of the pictures of the equations that Hal had given me. "Hal, that is, Dean Weathers, told me that you couldn't put a name to the chemical you found but that it looked similar to that drug called Ecstasy. These equations were found on the white board in the lecture hall. They seem to have been written by more than one person, and perhaps they were changed to confuse things. But do you suppose there's any relationship between any of the chemicals in these equations and that substance you identified?"

“Hmm. Hard to say. Looks like this is the product of someone’s imagination, or, like you said, someone changed things to cover his tracks. See, some of these molecules just couldn’t exist, or else if they did, they wouldn’t be stable.”

“Hal said that Professor Harmon had pointed out that the equations weren’t, I hope I get this right, stoichiometrically balanced.”

“That’s true, too. But I’m referring not to the stoichiometry but to these molecules.” He pointed to the equations. “There are just not the right numbers of these various atoms present to have a stable molecule. I suppose that I could fiddle with these atomic coefficients until I got a molecule like the ones found by the mass spec. But I still wouldn’t know what to call it. And I still wouldn’t know what physiological effect it would have if you ate, or snorted or smoked, some. I suppose I shouldn’t say this, since you’re a cop, but, as I told Hal, I used up all of that stuff he gave me in the mass spec and didn’t have any left over to try on myself.”

“Would you have tried it if you’d had some left over?”

“Well, maybe, twenty years ago. Things were wilder and crazier for me then. I guess now I wouldn’t. That’s the trouble with growing up.” He laughed, and I joined in.

“There’s another thing that I’ve been wondering about, Mr. Taylor. We’ve about decided that there was some sort of meeting going on in that lecture hall the night of Professor Stiller’s murder, and these equations were a part of the discussion. But we can’t figure out why they’d have a meeting here, on campus. It just doesn’t make sense to me. We know that one of the people there was the murderer, who would never come to campus except perhaps to try to pick up girls, and another was a local two-bit hood. Any idea why they’d be here? On a Sunday night?”

“Certainly not for the lecture hall. Even though white boards aren’t widely available, the markers work fine on glass. So any window would work to illustrate things on. So if you’re talking about only a few people, about the only thing around here that’s unique is the labs. Maybe they were really here to see something in Stiller’s lab, and they needed to discuss stuff with a white-board so they went into the lecture hall. None of the labs has white-boards or windows, or anything like that. I think his lab is, or was, just down the hall from that lecture room.”

“We hadn’t thought of that. Thanks. And I think one of our lab guys will be calling you about sending over some samples. Nice meeting you.”

* * *

I’d resisted the urge to ask him if Harmon also had her own laboratory, and where it might be. But Provost Martin had said he was on a space assignment committee, so he’d probably know. Stiller’s laboratory had been searched along with his office, of course, but nothing unusual had been found. If Harmon’s lab were also in the vicinity of the classroom, that could explain a lot.

With the help of a campus map, I found my way over to the provost’s office, only to discover that he was in a meeting until 4:00. I told the secretary to let him know that I’d return, and walked over to Hal’s office. Alice looked up and smiled warmly as I entered.

“Hello, Alice. Nice to see you again. I’m waiting for a meeting with the provost and thought I’d stop by and say hi to your boss. Is he in?”

“Nice to see you again, Lieutenant. He’s on the phone, but I don’t think it will be much longer. I hope your holiday weekend was relaxing.”

I was just about to answer when Hal stuck his head out his door. “Alice...oh, hi Annette. What’re you doing here? Want to come in? Alice, the faculty senate wants me at their next meeting, the second Tuesday in January at 3:00. I told them I’d be there.”

He closed the door behind me, grabbed me in a bear hug and kissed me hard. “What a nice surprise to see you here. Mind if I tousele you up a bit?” He dove for my neck, and I got the giggles.

“I have a meeting with your boss at 4:00, so think about how touselled you want me to look.” I could tell he was not really as disappointed as he pretended to be. “I came onto campus to meet with Gil Taylor and Provost Martin, but I had some time and thought I’d stop by to see my tax dollars at work. Is this how you greet all your visitors? Or am I special?”

“Ooo. Fishing for compliments are we? You know you’re special. So special, in fact, that I’m going to give you a break and come stay with you tonight at your place. And pick up dinner on my way over. Chinese OK? What’s the meeting with Martin about?”

“Chinese? Hmm. Get chicken and snow peas and some soup. And I’m going to have him take me into Linda Harmon’s lab and office, if she’s not around. Gil pointed out something interesting. The only reason for that drug summit to have been on campus is the labs. And we didn’t find anything interesting in Stiller’s lab. Want to tag along?”

* * *

We were back in the provost’s office by 4:00 and found him waiting. He was more than willing to conduct a tour of Linda Harmon’s space holdings. She was away on a vacation between the holiday weekends, anyway, so the timing was perfect. And it turned out that her laboratory was next to Stiller’s, just down the hall from the lecture room. It seemed like a better place to start than her office, so we headed in that direction.

Martin let us in with a master key. “I don’t usually have a key like this, but after our conversation this morning, I got one from facilities. It’s supposed to open any door on campus. Only the campus police and the local fire house have them.”

He turned on a light, and now we found ourselves in a typical research laboratory, with a fume hood, chemical-proof benches, sinks, and several enclosed chambers with thermometers on the sides. The chambers held little flat glass dishes with strange blotches in them, and there was an accumulation of apparently dirty glassware in one of the sinks. Hal intentionally bumped the mouse of the computer, and the screen displayed a request for a password. The drawers to the desk were locked.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t know exactly what to look for, and I’m not sure that I want to poke around too much. It would be better if no one knew we had come in here, and, besides, there’s no reason to accidentally mess up her experiments. Too bad about the password. Do you know of any way to get around it?”

Hal followed the power cord to a wall outlet. “Well, we could cycle the power and see what happens. Sometimes these passwords are just built into a screen saver program and restarting the computer foils them. And there’s no UPS here, so she’ll probably just assume that there was a power glitch, when she comes back. This isn’t something I’m really comfortable with, you know. But, since we’re already in here... What do you think, John?”

Martin was looking at the contents of a chemical supply cabinet, at several shelves of brown bottles and jars with esoteric labels. “I have some responsibility here to make sure that we’re not snooping just to satisfy idle curiosity. We do need some probable cause to think that Linda’s a suspect. Maybe not

'probable cause' in the legal sense, but some reason nonetheless. However, I may have found it here. Go ahead and cycle the power, or whatever, Hal."

He did, and while waiting for the computer to think its way through its startup programs, he walked over to the supply cabinet. "What's here?"

"Well, Linda is a biochemist. I've forgotten what it is exactly that she's working on, what's growing in those incubation chambers over there. But you would expect that biochemists would have on hand a relatively limited and specific suite of chemicals for experimental purposes. I mean, if something unusual comes up, they can go to chemical stores downstairs and get what they need, fresh and in the right quantity. But what we have here is a remarkable collection, especially for a biochemist. I bet, with the right recipe, I could whip up a really potent batch of methamphetamine with this stuff. And Lord knows what else. Wonder if there are any interesting recipes in that computer?"

I found a telephone and dialed the DA's office. Maybe they hadn't been to see the judge yet.

* * *

"'Love comes your way.' A very nice sentiment, indeed. And I guess that I won't be too picky about verb tense in fortune cookies and I'll just assume the it's meant to fit the circumstances."

We had worked our way through egg rolls, hot and sour soup, the chicken and snow peas that I'd requested, along with some fried rice (he got the shrimp kind), and he had cracked open his American-style Chinese dessert.

"What's yours say?"

I broke mine in half and pulled out the little slip of paper. "'Business fortune rises.'"

I wondered to myself if that meant I was about to become a landlord, or what. "I like yours better."

I got up, walked around him and kissed him on the cheek, and started clearing up the boxes and other debris.

After Martin's discovery in Harmon's chemistry laboratory, Hal had been motivated to try to hack into her computer, so when a simple restart didn't work—the computer eventually came up with the same patient request for a password as before—he tried a couple of other tricks and finally called Alice. He caught her just as she was getting ready to leave and asked her to stop by the laboratory on her way to her parking lot with a diskette he kept in his desk. The computer obediently started using the software on the diskette, and he suddenly had complete access to the contents of Harmon's computer's hard disk.

"Passwords," Hal remarked, "are only as good as the computer they're installed on." With the encouragement of his boss, and with me as a witness, Hal assumed the role of computer detective and used the computer's software and his knowledge of the campus network to copy the entire contents of Harmon's hard disk to another location, where he could examine it at his leisure. And I could now see, with dinner over, that the leisure clock was running.

"Does your computer have access to the campus network? I mean, you've got a modem and all, don't you? You sent me those messages late at night from here a couple of weeks ago, right? I think I can find what we're looking for on Linda's disk pretty easily, if it's there."

It would be interesting to see if he really knew his computers. "It's in the spare bedroom, across from mine, and already turned on. Fire up the communications program, but you'll have to get the modem to dial whatever number you use to get to the campus manually. I'll clean up here and come in and watch over your shoulder in a minute."

I spent about fifteen minutes cleaning up and starting a load of laundry, and walked into my study in the spare bedroom. Yep, he knew his computers. He had not only figured out how to get to the campus using a point-to-point internet protocol connection, but he was sifting through the contents of Harmon's hard disk already, and had, apparently, found several items of interest that he had flagged. My printer had also spat several pages of information.

"Have a look at those pages in the printer. I think they'll be of interest. The first one looks like some kind of ledger, from a spreadsheet program in Linda's files. You, sweet thing, have a wonderful little computer here, with all the right utilities. I approve."

I resisted the urge to be offended by his paternalism, because he seemed to know his stuff. And I had seen his machines, all three of them. The least of them, his laptop, was actually more powerful than my desktop at work, which was a generation newer than my own home computer here. At least he approved of my taste in software.

The spreadsheet appeared to be a receivables account statement associated with Harmon's bank. There were a number of entries corresponding to the deposits of her university paychecks, and several others from the university apparently related to travel and other reimbursements. Of greater interest were two entries, each in five figures, with the cryptic notation "GD Enterprises."

"Any idea what this 'GD Enterprises' is? She's doing quite well by them, it would appear."

"No idea. The university allows, even encourages, faculty to do outside consulting, though, so they could be perfectly legit. But that's a lot of money for the time period of this particular ledger. Have a look at the other ones."

These were a series of text files that had been printed in a generic format, which destroyed their appearance so that they were somewhat obscure. I finally decided that I was looking at chemical recipes, just what Provost Martin had referred to. The molecular descriptions had their subscripts raised, so that water was abbreviated H₂O. That one was obvious, but the others were beyond me. Nonetheless, this was what we were looking for.

"Do you suppose that Gil Taylor would be able to decipher these?"

"Well, as much as I like and trust Gil, I think it might be a good idea for you to get someone inside your department to do that. This could be very sensitive stuff. I think that I can print this out at work using a word processor that will preserve the formatting, so the chemicals will be easier to read. I'll do that tomorrow, in a big font, and fax it over to you, OK?"

"I'll need to ask the DA what all this means, in terms of evidence. I'm not sure that having information stored on a computer can constitute an offense. At least not these recipes. The bank stuff could be evidence of something, but we don't know what. Are you finding anything else? Correspondence with, say, Kelly talking about how they're going to make big bucks together selling drugs to school kids would be pretty useful, for example. And I want to double check to make sure that this will be admissible. I'm worried about how we got it. And do you suppose that Linda will know that someone has messed with her computer?"

"If she notices anything, she'll probably think that there was a power surge that caused her computer to restart. I left it in exactly the same condition that it put itself in when I cycled the power the first time. It doesn't have any way to keep track of what it's been doing lately, like some other computers do, so there's no record of my activity. And I don't know anything about admissibility of all this, but our messing with her machine is not what I consider to be an example of how I like to conduct myself ethically. I wouldn't have done it without both you and John watching. Hmm. What's this?"

He had burrowed several levels down in a filesystem related to one of the software packages on Harmon's disk and opened a subdirectory that appeared to contain a number of small files, which looked to be letters. I watched as he used one of my utility programs to browse through these files, and saw that some were letters to Stiller discussing the cost of chemicals, travel to the west coast and Mexico, and airline schedules. He punched a key and my printer started humming.

I was working my way through the correspondence when I heard him say, "Oh, ho, what do we have here? Looks like Linda's address book."

The printer hummed again.

* * *

Two hours later, the stack of paper had grown dramatically, and a pattern was emerging. It appeared that much of the correspondence with Stiller concerned cost-cutting measures related to raw materials for making some un-named chemical substances. Harmon had been advocating certain suppliers, and it appeared that Stiller had expressed concern about their quality. Too bad that his responses weren't available, so that we could see both sides of the conversation.

The address book included a number of curious entries. Hal had checked off all the university people he knew, which eliminated most of it, but there were addresses in Mexico, Los Angeles, and San Diego that appeared to be, at the least, out of what might be considered Harmon's normal circle of professional colleagues.

I was getting tired and beginning to lose concentration, but I had also seen enough to become convinced that Harmon was the missing puzzle piece.

"It looks to me as if Harmon and Stiller were in the middle of a disagreement about the possible down-side of using inferior raw materials for making whatever they were making. Now, suppose they were making drugs to sell locally. This could put dangerous, not just wild-and-crazy, but dangerous, stuff out on the streets. She seems to be trying to persuade Stiller not to worry about that. But why would this stuff be in her computer? Why wouldn't she just talk to him about it? They worked in the same building all day, and their labs were next to each other."

"Do you suppose she could have been documenting the argument for someone else's benefit? What if she wanted Stiller off the project, and she needed to persuade Mr. Big, or whoever, maybe even Sal, that Stiller was detrimental to their enterprise? She could have sent copies of all this stuff to whoever that was, along with Stiller's side of the correspondence. Or here's another possibility. I don't know if you noticed, but this isn't formatted by a word processor, it's just text. It was in the 'out' subdirectory of an e-mail program, so these were probably outgoing e-mail messages to Ralph that she didn't know were saved. I haven't really been reading this stuff. What you're saying is that Linda has been trying to save the drug folks money on raw materials and trying to persuade Stiller to go along with it?"

"That's what it looks like. Your chemistry department chair is not only part of the manufacture and distribution of illegal drugs, but she's a cheapskate about it. Maybe we can figure out if one of the people in her address book is Mr. Big. I noticed that Kelly is in it. That's pretty damning right there. Are there any other subdirectories in that e-mail system?"

"There's one called 'trash,' but it's empty. The program was probably configured to automatically delete the trash when the computer shut down. Except that 'delete' doesn't really wipe things clean. We could go back tomorrow with another utility I've got at work and see if we could undelete the trash. Maybe there would be some of Stiller's responses there. If she left the system running for this vacation she's on, she's probably not turned it off all semester. So there may be lots of stuff there."

“Maybe we can get the provost to let us into her office one more time, tomorrow, with a warrant.”

“He was pretty pissed at what he found in that chemical cabinet, so I don’t think that will be a problem. Had enough for tonight?”

Enough of this, at least, I thought.

* * *

Thirteen

When I woke up the next morning, I was glad to find myself in my own bed. Hal was in the shower already, and I smiled to myself when I realized that he would be the one to have to deal with the dual household problem today. That must be why he’d gotten up early.

As if to validate my amusement, he came out of the bathroom grumping about having to go home to shave. Seems he’d forgotten his razor. “You can use mine, Hal. It’s in the shower, there.”

“You mean that pink thing with the funny handle? You want me to slice my nose off, or something? Besides, when’s the last time you put a new blade in?”

I was trying very hard not to laugh out loud. “Well, maybe you could grow a moustache. I think that might make you look sexy. Not a beard, or one of those van Dykes that are so popular just now, but a moustache.”

“Meaning that I don’t look sexy now, huh? You have any idea how much a moustache could tickle your more sensitive spots?” He knelt by my side of the bed and was beginning to grope around under the covers with his hand.

I giggled and squirmed away to his side of the bed, but misjudged my position and flopped onto the floor. “Ow. Now look what you’ve done. I’ll probably have a big bruise on my bottom, you brute.”

“How pleasantly alliterative. I can kiss it and make it all better...”

“Don’t you wish. No time for that now, you old goat. Go make coffee while I shower.”

I took my time getting to work, luxuriating in being at home in the morning without an extra commute for the first time in a while. When I finally got to the station, I found that Hal had been hard at work already, and an e-mail message was waiting.

Annette: I'll get some special, therapeutic massage oil and rub your bruise to help it heal. And, anyway, here's some good news to take your mind off it: I've moved all of the stuff we found yesterday to my computer here, and I'm planning to delete everything that's irrelevant (we really don't need a copy of her operating system or word-processor executable, for example) and look through what's left some more. I'll let you know what I find, and I'll call you before I fax anything over. And I checked and found that the server we had it stashed on last night didn't have a back-up, so there's no record of all this. Eat this message, OK? xxH.

I called the assistant district attorney to discuss the warrants he'd promised to try to get and discovered that Judge Sandose had issued the telephone tap warrants and had also provided warrants for Harmon's on-campus possessions as well as her home. There was a chance that these could be successfully challenged in court, given the judge's prejudices, but they were valid warrants that could be executed. The assistant district attorney also wanted to discuss the search of the laboratory.

"So you went into this lab with the provost. He's a university official, so that's OK, like we discussed yesterday. And, with him, you found questionable chemicals in an unlocked cabinet and called us. That's OK, too, and it helped get the warrants. And you found a computer, but it was protected by a password. And a locked desk."

"Right. And, based what we discussed yesterday, we didn't try to get into the desk. We can use the warrant to do that."

"Right. But this computer. You say you tried various ways to defeat the password and finally succeeded. And you're now in possession of new information that appears to implicate this person in illegal drug activity, including manufacture and distribution?"

"Right. We haven't looked at all of it, yet, but that's the pattern that's emerging. And there's an address book with names that could lead to the group that controls all the local distribution and then some."

"I have to do some research, but I'm worried. Ask yourself this: How is defeating a computer password different from breaking a lock on a desk drawer? That university official may have had authority to enter the lab and look in unlocked cabinets, but I don't know about this computer. You may have information in your hands that was obtained in an improper, and possibly illegal, manner. At this stage, I don't think you should even look at it any more, and certainly don't act on any of it."

"But the provost instructed us to crack that computer."

"Oh. Well, is he a lawyer?"

"Uh, no, he's a chemist. But he said he had discussed his authority in these things with the university lawyers."

"That helps, but without knowing what they'd have said about this specific matter, I don't have a lot of confidence in what you got from that computer. I can't promise that any of your information will be admissible in court. But with the warrants, you can do everything over again. Make sure that wherever you copy the information to, it's got a time and date stamp, to compare with the warrants. And I'll simply forget that I heard you mention that you cracked that computer last night, OK?"

* * *

I was too disgusted to want to talk to Alice, so I called the direct-line number Hal had given me, and he answered right away.

"Hiya, lover."

"Hey, you sound down. What's going on?"

"Remember last night I said I was worried about admissibility? Well, I was right. It looks like none of the information we got from Harmon's computer is available to us. We now have a warrant for it, so we have to go through the entire exercise again. The assistant DA was very worried about our cracking that password yesterday, and he wants time and date stamps on everything we copy today, so that they'll be consistent with the warrant. And I guess that this means that you should erase all other copies of what we got last night."

“That’s no big deal, either doing it all over again or erasing our tracks from last night. Remember what my e-mail said about the server? So, don’t worry. You meet me at the lab, and I’ll get the provost and we can start over. At least I know exactly what to do the first time, now. And I can undelete the trash and see what e-mail she’s received and tried to erase recently.”

I had warrants and time on my side, so I marshaled my forces. Conscripting a couple of my detectives, I paid a visit to the campus police and found them eager to cooperate. We were a contingent of a half-dozen officers and detectives that descended on the chemistry department and began a search of Harmon’s faculty office. I ascertained from the secretary in the department office that Harmon was due to return to Durango from her vacation in Nassau on Friday afternoon, so there was time to do the search right. After getting the search of the office started, I went to meet Hal and the provost at the laboratory.

I met them coming down the hall and showed them the warrants. Provost Martin was somewhat perplexed by the need for a second search.

“It was my understanding that my authority in these matters allowed our search yesterday in all of its aspects. The computer is university property, and I don’t know that Professor Harmon had specific permission to lock it with a password. So there is really no analogy to a locked desk. Rather, it seems to me that this is like someone putting an unauthorized lock on a locker in the gym, or something. We cut those off all the time. So what’s wrong with Hal’s activities of yesterday? This is critical to me, because I need to know what my limitations are.”

“Well, Provost Martin, I’m not sure that I can give you a clear answer. All I know is that the assistant DA was not pleased with our sleuthing yesterday. When I pointed out that it was under your instruction, all he did was to ask if you have a criminal law background. And he wasn’t satisfied that you had talked with the university lawyers. I guess that the bottom line for me is that I want this investigation to hold up in court, so there’s really no reason not to do it again.”

“Yes, but I’m supposed to be in charge on this campus, according to state law and various other legalities, and I want to do things right, too. So I need to know why there is a problem with this. What’s different about it from my locker analogy?”

Hal interceded. “John, with all due respect, I think that the problem here is that you’re trying to apply scientific logic to legal matters. That’s not going to work. If I understand the situation correctly, the information that we got yesterday out of that computer over there simply doesn’t exist, in legal terms. I mean, you know it’s there, I know it’s there, Annette knows it’s there, but the legal system denies its existence. Legally, there is simply no information. On the other hand, when I go over to that computer in a minute and get that same information now that Annette has a warrant, it will exist, in the sense that the legal system will admit to it. I’m having a lot of trouble understanding this, because it doesn’t make sense to me, either. I mean, information is information. Regardless of when it’s obtained or what paper you have in your hand when you obtain it. But the legal system isn’t scientific. It’s...ah...well, it’s the legal system.”

“Does this mean that the activities that I authorized yesterday were illegal? That you and I could be prosecuted for your sleuthing?”

“I don’t know that either, Provost Martin. When I talked with the assistant DA today, he told me that he was going to forget that I mentioned breaking that password, so it won’t happen. But I don’t know if it could happen.”

“Well, I need to find out, so I know what boundaries I’m subject to. I thought everything was done according to my authority and responsibilities as outlined by the university counsel. I think I’ll call them.” He reached for the telephone.

Hal walked over to the computer in question, and bumped the mouse to make sure that the computer was in the state that he expected. “Uh-oh. No password box. But it’s on, look at the lights.”

This immediately got my attention. “What’s this?”

Hal cycled the power and watched the computer check its circuits and announce to the world “boot disk not found.”

“Double uh-oh.” he said. “Now, why was the screen off?” He pushed the “reset” button and studied the screen as it changed, then suddenly pushed a couple of keys in combination. “Oh, it’s got a CMOS screen blanker. How strange. And this much of the system sees the disk.”

He inserted his diskette in the drive and hit the “reset” button again, and watched as the system came up as it had yesterday. But when he looked for directories on the hard disk, there were none to be found. No files, no directories, nothing. He started the undelete utility to see if that would find anything. Same result.

He looked up at me. “Well, my dear Lieutenant, it looks like someone came in here last night and formatted the hard drive on this system. All the little ones and zeros are gone to the great bit bucket in the sky. So we’ll never know whether there was interesting mail to Linda that we could have undeleted. And, officially at least, I guess you’ll never know about all the stuff that we found yesterday. Information that doesn’t legally exist.”

* * *

Seated at the window table of the Main Street Grill, I was glumly watching the few pedestrians on Main Avenue hurry by. The rains of two weeks earlier had given way to the snow of Christmas Eve, and winter had been continuous since then. It was beginning to snow again, light flurries of tiny snowflakes. Hal and I had ordered lunch and he had immediately disappeared into the men’s room. How he managed to persuade me to have lunch at such a busy time surprised me. But, he was right. There was little I could do now, except wait for my people to do their work.

Following the morning’s discovery in Harmon’s laboratory, I took the approach that someone was willfully destroying evidence related to the Stiller killing and to the local drug scene, and I pulled out all the stops. Phone calls initiated immediate searches by separate teams of all of Linda Harmon’s property. And, since I couldn’t be in more than one place at a time, and since I had to eat anyway, I let Hal bring me here.

After finding the re-formatted disk, we looked around the laboratory and discovered that the glassware had been washed. It was unclear if any of the chemicals in the supply cabinet were missing. We were just finishing up in Harmon’s lab when in walked a graduate student, surprised at finding anyone there. She, too, had heard that Harmon wasn’t due back in town until Friday and had come in to check on her experiments. It seemed that one of the incubators held some bacteria she was growing for her dissertation. And it turned out that the poor thing had also been using Harmon’s computer for her notes and dissertation draft, and she was devastated to find that someone had destroyed several semesters of her work. Hal had not been as upset as I would have expected, however, and I needed to question him about that. He was coming back, and there was no time like the present.

“Hal, do you remember our phone conversation this morning? I said that it would be a good idea to erase everything that we found last night, and you said it would be no problem. What’s the status of that?”

He was unable to meet my gaze. “Well, as far as the Durango police department is concerned, that information doesn’t exist. Except, I guess, for those pages we printed at your place last night, if you haven’t destroyed them.”

“Something tells me that you’re not being entirely, or fully, truthful here.”

“What I just said is true, isn’t it? I mean, that information is not legally in the public domain because it was destroyed before it could be obtained under a warrant, right?”

“Hal, look in my eyes and tell me if you erased that stuff off your computer.”

He sighed. “You’re putting me in a tough spot here. I have responsibilities to the university, to you as my...my ‘significant other,’ or whatever it’s called, and to you as an officer of the law. So, uh, maybe I better plead the Fifth Amendment.”

He sighed again. “Look. I sure don’t want to get into a fight with you over this. You’re far more important to me than this Stiller-Harmon-drug case thing. But I know it’s important to you. And as a university official, I have to protect the university’s interests here. For example, that graduate student who walked into the lab this morning. And there are other possibilities. So, as far as you’re concerned, when you’re wearing your Lieutenant’s hat, and as far as your department is concerned, that information is gone, OK?”

His eyes were pleading for understanding. I smiled, and took his hand.

“I’m glad you’re going to be able to bail out that poor student. And tell her as soon as you can, OK?” It was my turn to sigh. “And I guess that it may turn out that the provost is right, that the computer is university property and her unauthorized password was like an unauthorized lock, begging to be broken. So it’s probably a good idea to have the information unofficially squirreled away somewhere. But I sure can’t do anything with it for now. And that includes the address book. Damn.”

“Have you thought about who might have done it? Re-formatted the disk, I mean.”

“How hard is that to do? Is it as easy as I think it is?”

“Sure. I could have done it yesterday afternoon with a single command. Well, two or maybe three. I’ve forgotten how many dummy-savers there are in the ‘format’ utility that ask you if you really, really want to do this. But all you have to do is to boot the computer from a diskette and tell the format utility to do its stuff. You might not even need the diskette, depending on the version of the operating system installed on the hard disk. Her hard drive was big enough that it probably took that computer about an hour for it to actually do the re-formatting. Oh. I forgot to say anything this morning, but the re-formatting happened today at about 7 am. That much got written on the re-formatted disk. So someone came in early and did it.”

“All we know about Harmon’s schedule is that she told people she’d be back from Nassau tomorrow. She could have come in last night. I can check the airlines on that. Got your phone on you? Oh, no you don’t. I forgot. We’ve still got it downtown.” I walked back to the public telephones.

By the time I returned, it seemed that Hal had remembered what day it was. “While I’m thinking of it, I want to talk about tomorrow. It’s New Year’s Eve, after all. Um, I know it’s a little late to ask for a date for such an important occasion, and you may be booked already, but I’d sure like to spend it together. I feel a little foolish that I’d forgotten about it. But things have been, you know, hectic.”

“It is, isn’t it? I mean New Year’s Eve. And hectic, too. Listen, buster...”

“I love it when you talk rough like that, you sentimental fool, you.”

“Did you know that I thought about handcuffing you to me, the day you got kidnapped, before you called? I called you to leave you those messages, and you weren’t at your office where you said you’d

be, and you weren't at home, and I started to worry. For good reason, it turned out. You bet I'm a sentimental fool, for you at least. Now, where was I...Oh, yes. Listen buster. If you think I'm going anywhere tomorrow night with anybody but you, you've got another think coming. As far as I'm concerned, we can go to McDonald's, just as long as we're together. But I bet you had a better idea than McDonald's."

"Well, two, actually. One, we could rent a couple of romantic movies and sit at home and snuggle. When was the last time you saw *Casablanca*? And, two, I could spend some time this afternoon trying to get tickets to one of the big to-dos downtown. I think I could pull some strings and make that work. There's a pretty interesting looking New Year's Eve dinner-dance at the Strater, with a special room rate and dinner at Henry's. I don't really know if you like that sort of thing, but it could be fun."

"How about both, assuming you can get tickets. I'm not normally much for dinner and dancing, but I think it would be good for both of us. And we could spend the night on neutral turf. We've got a long weekend coming up, and Friday's only the beginning. We can always watch *Casablanca* on Saturday or Sunday. Unless, of course, you're going to be glued to all the football on TV."

"Nope. Speaking of football, though, look who just walked by. Our friends from Christmas Eve, back from Kansas."

He jumped up and dashed out the door, and soon came back with the Twin Towers in tow, both looking a little sheepish at being hauled into such a non-sports-bar kind of place. Hal got them seated around the little table and ordered them each a beer, so they began to look less uncomfortable. Free beer was a no-brainer for them.

"Listen guys, I don't want to bring up painful memories, but I need to ask you a question about your little escapade at my house. And, don't worry, I'm not mad or anything. I've just been wondering about the mystery man who talked to you in the locker room. You said it was a man's voice, kind of deep, but you didn't say if you recognized it or what it sounded like."

Kolochek seemed to be the spokesman today. "I thought it sounded sort of familiar but I couldn't place it, you know? And it had a kind of funny quality."

"Kind of like this?" Hal had changed his voice to be a little raspy, and deeper than normal.

Washington spoke up. "Yeah. Like he wasn't talking normally. You got any ideas about who it might have been?"

"I think maybe it was the AD, playing a little trick on me. I looked at that paint can, and, I don't know if you noticed or not, but it's washable paint. I mean, it washes off real easily. I got him with an especially wicked practical joke last fall, and he sort of owes me one. And he flubbed a couple of tries to get me back earlier last semester. So I bet he was just using you guys to get me back. Even we old farts fool around, if you can believe it."

They looked at each other.

"You mean it was all a practical joke? We were worried that it was something sinister, with that gun and all, uh, with all due respect, ma'am." Washington was still leery of Annette.

"You just caught us, or we caught you, I guess, at a bad time. That's all over, and we can laugh about it now. And, listen, don't tell the AD, OK? Or, if he asks, tell him everything went just like he planned it. Then you'll not get crosswise with him. Oh, good. Here comes our lunch. Listen, you guys work hard this semester and keep your grades up for next fall."

They took the hint and chugged the remainder of their beers, gratefully departing for more familiar territory.

“You little devil, you. Misleading those poor, innocent boys that way. But it sounds as if it was Harmon’s boyfriend that put them up to the paint job. One more piece of the puzzle.”

The pay phone rang, and the waitress who answered asked if there were a Lieutenant Trieri present. The place was small enough that I could see Hal listening to my half of the conversation.

“Tampa? OK, thanks. I’ll be out most of the afternoon, by the way, checking out these various searches.”

“Well,” I said as I sat back down at our table, “One L. Harmon flew in late last night from Tampa, via Denver. So she really didn’t go to Nassau. What’s in Tampa?”

“Probably the AD, recruiting. And she’s back in town. But something’s probably scared her, or else she wouldn’t have done that to her computer. Wonder if any of your guys have run into her anywhere. And who warned her.”

“I think I may know. I goofed and let slip to Sal that we were interested in a ‘her’ at the drug summit meeting. It’s time we picked up your new friend, Stetson Man. He needs to answer some questions. I wonder how much mileage I can get out of his fire code violation.”

* * *

Fourteen

My afternoon was full of details. I reminded Hal to get in touch with the graduate student to reassure her about her dissertation work, and we agreed to meet at my place at 8:00. His afternoon was full, too; he had said something about a probable meeting with the provost and the university lawyers concerning the Harmon situation. He’d promised to bring a pizza for dinner, one of those barbecued chicken and onion jobs that I had introduced him to, so long ago, it seemed.

I spent over an hour, sitting in my car in the university parking lot, on the car phone. The department kept promising hand-held cellular phones for senior officers like me, but the budget still hadn’t allowed it. The search team had found little of interest at Harmon’s home. It appeared that someone had been there before them, which fit the pattern of the laboratory. The clothes closets were almost emptied, and there was no sign of a car. It looked as if she’d flown the coop.

So all we had to go on was what we had found in Harmon’s laboratory yesterday, not including, of course, the information from the computer. That left the chemicals in the cabinet. The provost had been surprised that Harmon, a biochemist, would have those chemicals, and other chemists could probably be found to verify this. But that still didn’t constitute a criminal offense.

But, wait. Martin had been looking at the labels on those jars and bottles. What was really in them? If Harmon were involved in manufacturing contraband, could she be hiding something in mis-labeled chemical jars? I decided to call Gil Taylor. In my meeting with him yesterday, I had been impressed with his candor, and I was motivated to trust him. Hal had suggested using police department technicians to examine the recipes from Harmon’s computer, but I had the impression that this was as much to protect Gil as anything else. And Hal seemed to trust him.

“Hi, Mr. Taylor. Annette Trieri here again. Got a minute?”

“Ah, Lieutenant Trieri. Your people move fast. I have a meeting with your lab techs later this afternoon.”

“We may have more for you than they know about. I’m wondering how you find out what’s in chemical supply jars. I mean, I know you look at the label, but what if someone intentionally mislabeled things? Could your equipment find that out easily? I’m talking lots and lots of jars here, and some bottles of liquids, too.”

“Well, that would be a pretty stupid thing to do in the first place, and it violates a basic rule of lab procedure. Especially since it could be really, really dangerous. But the answer, in general, is ‘yes,’ except for the ‘easily’ part. In some cases, it could be trivial, depending on what you’re looking to do. I mean, if you want to verify that a chemical is mislabeled, it could involve a simple test, like trying to dissolve it in water. For example, suppose the label says that it’s something that will dissolve and what’s in the jar won’t. Or vice versa. That would answer that part of the problem. Finding out what’s actually in a mislabeled jar is more complicated, of course. Mostly, we just throw such things away, although it’s a lot harder to do that now, with the new environmental regulations and safety procedures. Most chemical supplies are pretty simple compounds, easy to identify. But if something else gets put into a jar, who knows what it could be?”

“And, like the water test, I suppose that color, texture, and smell could also be clues, in certain cases.”

“Sure. We’ll make a chemist out of you yet, Lieutenant. What’s this all about?”

“I’m calling from my car, which is parked out here by your building. Could you meet me at Professor Harmon’s lab in a couple of minutes?”

“Oh. The rumors have been flying thick and fast all day. I’ll meet you there.”

* * *

Taylor’s reaction to the chemical supplies that Harmon had on hand was even more astonished than Martin’s had been. He was not nearly as cautious. “Hell, there’s no way she’d need half this stuff. Ether, for heaven’s sake, in such large quantities? What’s she going to do, anesthetize those bacteria over there and take their tonsils out?”

“I’m glad to hear you say this, because it provides me with an independent verification of what I’d heard already. But the question is, what if some of this stuff is mislabeled. Would it be hard to find out?”

“What you mean is, how can we find out if one of these containers has cocaine or some kind of exotic happy dust in it? Aside from just sampling everything, I suppose. And that could be a big gamble. This stuff here, for example, would put you down in about 5 seconds if you ingested as little as a few milligrams.”

He was holding up a jar, conspicuously labeled with a skull-and-crossbones.

“You mentioned texture and color as tests. They’ll work on some of these. But the smell test, while it would work, too, could get you in big trouble.”

He pointed to another jar with a skull-and-crossbones, a chemical formula, and a complicated description including the word “cyanide” on the label.

“Do you need all these verified? It would take me a week, at least. And some of them would be quite a challenge.”

“I mostly wanted to know if it could be done. We can lock this stuff up in case we need to go to the trouble in the future. Um, on the phone, you mentioned ‘rumors.’ Mind repeating them?”

“Well, I went over to the department office to pick up my mail, and the place was abuzz. Some of your guys were going through Linda’s office, and I heard that another team was upstairs in her faculty office. She looks to be in some trouble.”

“Any idea what the speculation is?”

“I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me.” He laughed. “Naturally, everybody figures it’s related to the Stiller killing. He and she were buddies, and even more, a while back. I heard that he had a temper tantrum in a faculty meeting and that’s why she got her turn as chair. Otherwise, the rest of the faculty wouldn’t have elected her. I haven’t heard anyone talking about her being the killer, but everyone figures she was in on it, somehow.”

“That’s the general picture. She may even have been present when he was killed, although that’s unclear. What would you say about these chemicals here being used to make illegal drugs? How about their relationships to these equations?” I pulled out the printouts once again.

“Ah. Now we’re talking.” He studied the sheet and then the jars in the cabinet.

“Well, look. This stuff,” he picked up a jar, “could be this term in this equation, if this one subscript is changed. And this term could easily be modified to be this other stuff.”

He pointed to a bottle containing a clear liquid. “These people were making some weird shit, let me tell you.”

“I’ll make sure this room is sealed and get you access. How about doing an inventory of all this stuff and seeing just how many of these chemicals could be easily matched with these equations? I’ll make arrangements with...um, with somebody, not the department chair, maybe Hal, to reimburse your time. And we may want to have some of these things tested to verify the contents. OK?”

“This is a good time for me, between semesters. I don’t have a lot of samples backlogged, and I’ve been trying to catch up on paperwork, which is my least favorite thing in the world to do. So I’ll be happy to work on this for you. I’m sure that Hal can figure out the accounting, somehow. He’ll probably just have Alice do it anyway.”

* * *

I pulled a couple of police seals out of my bag, and placed them on the outside of the door to the lab. Along with the yellow crime scene tape, they made it obvious to casual passers-by to keep out. Then I found my way to the department office, where my team was just finishing up their search of Harmon’s office.

“Hi, Jack. Find anything interesting? Ron’s team, at her house, said it looks like she may have left town.”

“Nothing much. Except, in one of the bottom desk drawers, there were these, along with a bunch of other cast-off stuff. Looks like an old pair of disposable lab gloves. All stained.”

I pulled a similar set of gloves from my bag and put them on, spread the set from Harmon’s office out on a table top, and then carefully turned them right side out. “Looks like some kind of green dye. On the thumb, index, and middle fingers, with a little along the outside edge of the hand. Or hands. They’re both stained. There won’t be prints on these, will there?”

“Maybe, where you grab them to pull them on, but probably not. I suppose that these are pretty standard equipment around here.”

“Yeah, I saw some down in the lab I was just in. Say. Why don’t you go down there, it’s Harmon’s lab, by that classroom you guys checked out a couple of weeks ago. It’s all sealed up, so you can’t miss it. See if these gloves are the same size as the box in there, and if you can identify them as having come from that box. OK?”

I stripped off my gloves and went looking for the secretary. A little sign on her desk said “Gladys Smithers.”

“Gladys? Hi. I’m afraid I’m the one behind all this commotion today, and I want to apologize. But it’s been important to us, because we found some new leads related to Professor Stiller’s death. Could you tell me the name of the graduate student who had her experiment going in Professor Harmon’s laboratory?”

Gladys seemed happy that someone from the police department was finally talking to her, instead of just shooing her out of the rooms they were searching. “It’s been a little disruptive, but nothing much is going on now anyway. Umm, I think you must be asking about Holly Irving. She was using incubators in there, I think. She wasn’t really one of Professor Harmon’s students, though. She’s working with Professor Styles. I can get her telephone number, if it would help.”

“Yes, thank you, it would. And how about your chemical supply room. How does that work?”

“Well, each faculty member receives a small budget for supplies, with the amount depending on what course they’re teaching. And, of course, if one of them needs supplies for research that’s supported by a grant, well, they just buy stuff.”

“So, the storeroom, in effect, sells chemicals. And that means that they have records of who buys what, and so on. Whom does the store room person report to?”

“Well, I don’t know, now. He used to report to Professor Harmon, but, with all this, I don’t expect that will continue. The other faculty wouldn’t stand for it.”

“You may be right. And one more question: do you happen to know if Professor Harmon is right-handed, or left-handed?”

“Oh, that’s something we all know about. She likes to show off. She’s ambidextrous. She can write with either hand. She’s a little better with her left, though. That’s what she signs her name with.”

* * *

When I was finished with the chemistry department, I headed outside to my car to make more phone calls. I found that the snow that had begun to fall at lunch was coming down much faster, and my car was covered with about an inch of light, fluffy flakes. I dug out the brush from the back and cleared the windows before getting in. Then I called Hal.

“Hal? Annette. Do you know what the weather’s going to do? It’s gotten colder since lunch and now it’s snowing hard.”

“Um, well, let’s see. I may be an administrator now, but at one time I was a crack weather forecaster. And from what I see out the window, I’d say it’s likely to snow some more. For a while longer. It is almost January, you know. This kind of thing happens in this part of the world.”

“Thank you Mister Science Person. Geez. What I mean is, what’s the forecast? Like, for tomorrow and the weekend?”

“Oh. Well, now for that I have to consult my magic crystal ball. Or, in this modern day and age, my magic computer display. Let me see what I can find on the ’net.” I heard typing noises. “And, by the

way, I was able to get tickets and a room for tomorrow night. A deluxe suite, no less. So even if we get snowed in, we'll have a sitting room with a couch. Cool, huh? Now what do I see here. The good folks at the Weather Channel web site are saying that there's a big, wet winter storm moving in from Nevada on a trajectory that will bring it here from the southwest. It's going to hook up with a cold front moving down from Canada right over the Four Corners. So, my lovely, unless we were going skiing again, and we were already there, the weather for the next couple of days is going to suck. That's a technical term used by us professionals. Don't try it at home."

"So this snow is just the beginning?"

"Yep. And it's much worse right now farther west. And south, looks like. Their travel report says that I-70 is closed between Green River and Salina, Utah and that travel between Grand Junction and Green River is being discouraged because of heavy snowfall and high winds. US 550 south of Farmington is also closed, and 160 west of Cortez is, too. Flagstaff seems to be shut down completely. What the TV weather guys love to call 'blizzard conditions.' I'd suggest you ditch that big cruiser-mobile that the city makes you drive around in and go back to your Subaru for the next few days. You'll do a lot better in it. Hmm. Based on what they're saying for the forecast cities around this part of the world, it looks like we can expect somewhere between a foot and 18 inches of snow. Want to go cross-country skiing in my back yard this weekend? And what news from the crime scene?"

I had mentioned that I was going to spend some time in the chemistry building.

"I'll bring you up to date this evening. Don't forget that pizza. And stop at home and get your shaving stuff, OK? I don't want to hear you gripe about my razor again tomorrow." I surprised myself by calling his place "home." A Freudian slip?

"Will do. I need more clothes, too. Any other requests? Salad? Wine, beer, cocktails? Coffee, tea, me?"

"Definitely you. Maybe some salad, too. I'll probably get home earlier than I'd thought, with this weather. Bye."

At least the car was starting to warm up. What do you suppose they pay super-cops in Tucson? Now to deal with the matter of Mr. Salazar Kelly. I called the station and got the machinery started to have an arrest warrant for Kelly issued, based on his involvement in the killing and the drug dealing. Finding and bringing him in wouldn't be the hard part, it would be keeping him in custody that would require some clever tactics. His lawyer, Arthur Stepwood, Esq., was familiar to the department, and, in the past, Kelly had never stayed in custody for more than about six hours.

Maybe this weather would help. Stepwood was a well-known defense expert, who charged several hundred dollars per hour and managed to keep just about all of his waking hours fully billed to various slippery characters in the area. His income allowed him to live in a trophy house in the mountains north of town, up toward Purgatory. And the roads were going to deteriorate quickly with this snow. If Kelly could be brought in around 10:00 tonight, he might not be able to see Stepwood to get released until noon tomorrow. That way, after he spent a night getting softened up, I could spend the morning chatting with him. He owed me some explanations. Or else I was just going to have to throw the book at him for violating the fire marshal's orders.

Well, I thought, Dad always taught me that when you're playing poker, you play a lousy hand just like you play a good hand, right up to the point when you fold.

* * *

I spent the rest of the afternoon, until well after dark, back at the station working on reports. It looked to me as if the entire package was complete, except for the identity of the people up at the next level, Kelly's bosses. I had to keep putting Harmon's address list out of my mind, even though I knew it was sitting in a pile of paper in my study, next to my computer. The first order of business tonight would be to get rid of all that stuff. And, if by some miracle it was all declared admissible, Hal always had the copy that I wasn't supposed to know about when I was being a cop. Damn, this was confusing.

And where do you suppose, I wondered, that Professor and Chair of Chemistry Linda Harmon had got off to? Her car was missing, so she's probably somewhere out yonder, in the storm. And, even though I wasn't supposed to know it, I knew that most of the non-university addresses in Harmon's book were on the west coast. The fastest way to the coast was southwest to Flagstaff and then over on I-40, but that was now closed and it would also be pretty obvious. So would going south to Gallup. Another possibility would be north to I-70 and west through Utah, or maybe west to Cortez, then northwest through Moab to I-70. That way, Harmon would wind up stuck in Green River tonight. Suppose she finished with her computer at 7:00 this morning, like Hal said, and then took an hour going to her house and emptying her closets. That would put her at Green River by...let's see...about 3:00, three hours ago. Going the other ways would put her in Flagstaff or so, assuming she got through. Wonder when they closed the roads.

I called the police in Flagstaff and Green River and gave them the information about Harmon's car taken from the registration records and filled them in on the situation. They assured me that no one would be leaving either location this evening and that they could easily check parking lots. Harmon, it appeared, would not stand a chance. Thank you Mr. Weather Man. Oh, God, now he's got me making bad puns. And calling his place home. Trieri, you're a goner.

* * *

Hal arrived about 7:45, carrying, to my glee, a rather large overnight bag, a garment bag, and a bag of groceries. My very own transient, I thought. He had to make a second trip to his car to get the pizza.

I looked at the pizza and noticed something was wrong. "Hey, this thing's raw. It was cooked last time we had it."

"Well, the pizza place is on the other side of town from here and my place, so I went there first. I figured that since it was going to get cold anyway, we might as well just cook it ourselves. I even brought a pizza stone. Put the stone in the cold oven and turn it on to 400. We'll let it get good and heated up and then cook this thing for about 15 minutes. Or maybe more, depending on your oven. We can put a salad together in the meantime. How was your day?"

"I'll know tomorrow. If it was good, we'll have both Linda Harmon and Sal Kelly in custody. If not, they'll be somewhere else." I filled him in on Harmon's possible travel plans.

"Assuming she didn't head east. But I guess that's improbable. So, you've got her on a charge of destroying potential evidence?"

"And maybe we have some evidence of her in that summit meeting. And, if so, I think we have solved the problem of the third person's handwriting. Kelly, remember, had left, at least according to him." I told him about the lab gloves and Harmon's ambidexterity.

"This implies that Linda was in the lab when Ralph was killed. Do you suppose that she could have been mad enough at him for insisting on good-quality raw materials that she had him killed? Oh, wait. You're not supposed to know about that. Well, take it as a hypothetical question. Assume,

hypothetically, that they were arguing about raw materials. Aw, hell. This gets too complicated. But you know what I mean.”

“The word I’ve been hearing is that they were buddies, so that’s hard to imagine. Gil even told me that they’d been seeing each other at one point. But maybe they had a falling out, romance-wise, and she had some left over grudges.”

“Maybe they were still business buddies. He helped get her elected chair, for business purposes. I can ask around in the chemistry department. Anyway, she’s taken care of, assuming that the police over in Utah or Arizona find her. What about my friend Sal?”

“We should have him by later tonight. I got a warrant for his arrest based on being an accessory, and I also got the assistant DA to give me some leeway in questioning him. But all I’ve really got to hold him for is that fire code violation. And I rather expect that bail will be somewhat low for that one, pocket change for Kelly. What I’m hoping is that his lawyer won’t be able to get in to see him until tomorrow sometime. Because of the snow. I’m going to spend the morning in conversation with him, to try to get him to sell everyone else out, including his bosses. If I can get any names out of him at all, we can proceed from there to the next level.”

Hal sat and stared at me for a while, with a puzzled look on his face. “You know, this is all hard to believe. I’ve fallen in love with a brilliant police detective. I can’t tell you how amazed I am about how you put all this together. And in such a short time. It’s been completely opaque to me, except for a couple of things that sort of jumped up and bit me. And you pointed those out anyway.”

“Well, this is my job. And they say I’m good at it. Don’t you know your way around a committee meeting?”

“Yeah. I’m real good at figuring out how many parking places to allocate to the math department, and other stuff like that. But this is real. Important. It involves a murder and possibly stopping the sale of a whole suite of illegal drugs to the kids in our town.”

“I’ll be happy if it just puts a crimp in it. Especially this designer drug stuff and the harder things, cocaine and so on.”

The stove beeped, and Hal got busy with the pizza. While his back was turned, I threw together some salad dressing.

* * *

Fifteen

Sal Kelly was not a happy camper when I met him in an interview room the next morning. His night in the public accommodations offered by the police department was not up to his usual standards, and he was clearly feeling out of sorts. His sunglasses—with coke-bottle corrective lenses—were on straight, but otherwise his usual dandified self was, well, rumpled. His pony-tail was frazzled, and he needed a shave and a clean shirt. Half of his Zapata-style moustache was sticking out at a funny angle. I had checked the inventory of his belongings and found that he had been brought in wearing several gold chains, and, with his shirt half unbuttoned, he looked practically naked without them, I decided. And without his cowboy hat, his bald spot was showing.

I anticipated his state of mind and brought a large cup of frou-frou coffee—a triple mocha, with whipped cream—from one of the new coffee shops that had sprung up in town, along with a scone. My

offerings were of marginal help. At least Arthur Stepwood was nowhere to be found. Hal's prediction of lots of snow had been right. It was hard enough getting around town, and Stepwood was no doubt snowed in up in the mountains.

"So this is what I get for being cooperative and solving your murder for you, huh? Just see if I ever do that again, lady."

"Sal, Sal. Calm down. And at least it's warm, have you looked out the window lately? Oh, that's right, you didn't have a window. Anyway, you probably won't be here for very long. Arthur will get himself plowed out and be here any time, I bet. And I'm sorry about the accommodations, but we really, really needed to talk with you. We were worried that you'd skip town like your friend did yesterday. And it's too bad that you told her about our interest in her. It gave her time to destroy critical evidence that would have implicated her and probably helped to clear you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You got nothing on me, so let me out of here."

"Well, at the least we need to have a bail hearing on our possible charge of the fire code violation, so you'll have to stay for a while. But there's more. Remember Big Mike's knife? You said you picked it up with a tissue. Did you know that fingerprints can bleed through tissues, if your fingers are oily enough? What did you have for lunch that day? Pizza?"

"Are you telling me that you found my prints on that stiletto? Shit. Even if you did, they're only on the end, and Mike's prints are probably all over the rest of it. That's not gonna convict me of anything."

"Maybe not. But your prints along with Professor Stiller's blood, combined with your rap sheet and reputation, will give Judge Sandose the ammunition he needs to deny bail, or to set it so high that even you'll have trouble with it."

"I wanna talk to my lawyer."

"That's fine. But it'll be a while before he gets here, so why don't we just continue our conversation? This is being videotaped, as I'm sure you know, so nothing's going to happen that will violate your rights. Look. I'll be frank. We're very grateful to you for having sent us Mike's knife. And, whatever happens, that will come out in your favor. So I'm not looking to take you down for the professor's murder unless there's no alternative. And we probably can't prove your involvement with the local narcotics trade, although we can place you in that lecture hall where some very heavy-duty stuff was discussed. To tell you the truth, if we come out of all this with less coke and...well, whatever that new stuff is called, 'happy dust,' or 'Ecstasy' as one person said, on the streets, I'll be pretty pleased, and the DA's office will be ecstatic, no pun intended. Besides, we like having you around, Sal. If you're here in Durango and the street drug supply increases again, we'll know the first place to look. And I'm willing to forget about the fire code violation and overlook whatever prints of yours are on the knife, if you'll just answer some questions. Need more coffee?"

"How can I answer any questions without implicating myself in this drug stuff?"

"I talked with the DA's office, and we can offer you immunity with respect to the events of December. But only if you cooperate now. Before Arthur gets here. I don't need him mucking this up. And time's flying, Sal."

"OK, but I'm going to reserve the right to not talk about anything that seems to put me at risk."

"Not good enough. If you get immunity, you talk. Otherwise, I can use whatever you say, and what's recorded by the camera behind that mirror, against you. That's the rules, Sal. And remember, we have your prints from the desk in that lecture hall already. Prints on the knife can make you look real bad, here."

“So you’re saying that you’ve got my fingerprints on that knife, along with the prof’s blood?”

“Sal, I’m making an offer of immunity for the events related to the murder of Professor Stiller. Take it or leave it. And I’m going to be the one asking the questions. Now. I’m going to get myself some more coffee while you think about it. Want some?”

He was looking morose as I walked out. I went around the corner to the observing room, where the video camera was set up behind the one-way glass, and said “Keep rolling, guys. I want to see what he looks like when he’s sweating. I’ll be back in about ten minutes.”

Back at my desk, I found e-mail from Hal.

Happy New Year’s Eve! I just got back from the meeting we were finally able to arrange with the university lawyers, and I have interesting news. Give me a call when you get a chance. It’s complicated. xxH.

I called Alice this time. “Good morning, Alice. Hal wanted me to call him. I imagine that the university is just humming with gossip about yesterday’s events?”

“Good morning, Lieutenant Trieri. Yes, there is some talk about your peoples’ searches. My goodness, there hasn’t been anything like this on campus since I’ve been here, and that’s been a long time indeed. It’s so unfortunate that it involves such a scandal. I’ll put you right through.”

“Hal? Hi. And I’m looking forward to a Happy New Year’s Eve tonight, for sure. I’ve got Sal Kelly in a little room contemplating his future and have to get back. But you said you have some news from the lawyers.”

“I’ll pick you up at five, and we can get our room in time to freshen up for dinner, OK? Yeah, the lawyers were interesting. I’m sure that you know how cautious they can be. Well, university lawyers are doubly cautious. They were afraid to say anything, until John leaned on them. The crux of the matter is whether the password on Linda’s computer, and, by extension, on my computer or any other computer at the university, constitutes a ‘lock’ that is somehow implicitly authorized. I know I’m going to get John’s written authorization for my password now. The question they kept asking was whether Linda should have been reasonably able to expect privacy with respect to the information on her computer. If so, the password is authorized. But, even then, it’s not clear whether or not John, or I, as his delegated official for this kind of thing, have the legal right to crack the password like I did. There’s also the question of whether it was OK for me to do what I did to crack it. It was so easy that it could be interpreted that she had not intended for it to be completely private. And, if that student used the computer, she must have known the password. Maybe she even set it up for Linda. So then, the privacy issue becomes even more fuzzy. I finally asked them what about the data I copied off her disk, and they really started to waffle. Their bottom line was that it’s good to have a copy because the original was destroyed. But they’re going to have to research whether anybody, beyond the student, can use it for anything. Maybe your assistant DA should call them.” He gave me the number and, with a final tease about the coming evening, rang off.

* * *

Sal’s temperament was only slightly improved. It seemed that he had decided to cooperate, if I once again guaranteed immunity from prosecution. After some haggling about immunity with respect to precisely what events, real or imagined, we settled in to get my questions answered.

“Sal, even though I’ve guaranteed you immunity, I’m going to set up a hypothetical situation for the night that Professor Stiller was killed, just to make you feel better about talking on camera. You have told me that both you and Mike Turner, now deceased, were in the lecture hall in the chemistry building at the university with other people. Let’s assume, for purposes of discussion, that both you and Big Mike were there for remedial tutoring in chemistry, because you didn’t do too well at it in school. That way, whatever the real purpose of the meeting was, your role is innocent. Now, I need you to tell me who else was there and the time periods involved.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Me and Big Mike were there to learn about chemistry. It’s always been a fascination of mine, chemistry, you know? And Mike, he just loved thinking about those little atoms and all. Let’s see. We drove together in my car, not the limo, but the other one, and got there about midnight. And we first went to a laboratory near the classroom, for a...uh, for a demonstration, an experiment, that’s what it was.”

“Right. And who else was there?”

“The two profs that were gonna tutor us, the woman, Linda Harmon and the dead guy, Stiller.”

“And you have said that you left before the others.”

“Yeah, about 3:00. Uh...Big Mike needed more help than me, so I left before him.”

“Were there other occasions on which you and these two professors met? And I’m talking about any kind of meeting, for tutoring or anything.”

“We’ve been meeting for a while, maybe six or seven times. Uh, I’m kind of slow with science, you know? So they were working real hard to teach me about chemistry.”

“OK, good. What I want to know is, in these various meetings, what was your impression of the relationship between the two professors. Did they get along OK?”

“No, they were always arguing. There also seemed to be some kind of old anger between them, an old fight that never got settled, like. Umm...but mostly what they argued about was that he wanted to teach us different things from what she wanted to teach us. And they argued about it.”

“Were these arguments heated? More like fights? Or were they just friendly discussions?”

“They got real mad at each other a lot. Shouting. Name-calling. It was kind of surprising to me. I thought that profs were, well, mild-mannered.”

“Now. On the night of December fifth, or the early morning of the sixth, you and Mike were there for a tutoring session. But it was very late, and chemistry is not the most exciting subject in the world. Did you or Mike get sleepy? And did either of you have anything to help you stay awake? Like, coffee, or caffeine pills, or anything else?”

“Well, like I said, I left before Mike because I was ahead of him, but I was also getting sleepy and wanted to go home and go to bed. But, yeah, I know what you’re asking. Big Mike took some kind of thing to keep himself awake. Some kind of white powder. But not coke, because I asked him. I never want my guys to do coke. But Professor Harmon had some of this other stuff, that she said would help him stay awake. Mike made some lines on the table and snorted it. It made him sneeze and it went all over.”

“What about Professor Stiller. The coroner found cocaine in his nose and in his bloodstream.”

“I don’t know about that. Maybe he had some and did it after I left.”

“And you have no idea what the powder that Mike ingested was, or what its effect on him would be?”

“None whatsoever.”

The door opened abruptly, and in strode Arthur Stepwood, Esq., in high moral outrage. He raised himself onto his tip-toes, making him all of about 5'2", and announced “You are holding my client under highly improper circumstances, and I demand his immediate release!”

This pronouncement, while legally proper and even appropriate, was perhaps not as credible as it might have been coming from someone else. Stepwood, who, at his best, resembled a leprechaun—stature, red hair, and all—was bundled up in about a thousand dollars of goose down and Gore-Tex, a sort of short, wintertime version of the Michelin Man. He looked as if he'd bounce if dropped.

So I was rather less than perturbed. Somehow I managed to keep a straight face and talk to him. “Hi there, Arthur. We were just finishing up. And you'll be glad to hear that your client has been most cooperative and has immunity for the events for which he was brought in for questioning. So you can have him. Tell me. How much are you going to charge the poor guy for your little moment of glory there?”

Stepwood escorted his client out of the station, but not before I made it clear that the immunity I'd promised was for a specific time window, and that if Kelly so much as spat on the sidewalk in the future, my department would come down on him like a load of bricks. Stepwood made noises about harassment of his client, a pillar of the community and benefactor of widows and orphans, but I wasn't having any of it.

“Arthur, you pick the worst clients. Sal here gets lots of points for cooperating with us this time, but that's not going to make us cut him any slack in the future. And if you think we're harassing him, you're free to press your claim in the courts. I'm sure that a jury would love to contemplate all of the testimony about Sal's character that we would be able to get into the record.”

I went back to my desk and called Hal again, this time on his private line. “Hi, lover. Sal spilled. I think everything's a wrap on this one, except for where Harmon is, of course.”

“You didn't hear anything from the cops in Green River or Flag?”

“They called and said that her car, the one registered here, isn't anywhere in their towns. But that could mean a number of things. She went some other way, she beat the roadblock, whatever.”

“What about Sal's bosses, the Mr. Bigs?”

“Well, I don't know if you noticed, but somehow it slipped my mind about destroying the printout of Harmon's address book that I have at my place. And now I have on tape that Sal cooperated with us in return for immunity. There's no reason for anyone to know whether or not I've had additional conversations with Sal that aren't on tape. So maybe he's told me about his bosses, at least their names and where they live. I think that the narcotics units in San Diego and LA are going to be very interested in what he might have told me. And that could interrupt Sal's supply lines and clean up things around here for a while. And, at the very least, we're not going to be seeing any new designer drugs here. At least not locally made ones.”

“I was saying last night how impressed I am with your abilities. And now that goes double. I'm sure glad that we're on the same side.”

* * *

I was in front of the big mirror over the sink, applying just a touch of makeup. We had checked into our deluxe suite at the Strater so that we could have time to dress for dinner, and Hal was watching the 6 pm

news on one of the Denver stations. He was always wanting to see the latest pictures from the weather radar and satellites.

“Hey, Annette, quick. Come in here and look at this.” I stuck my head around the corner so I could see the TV. A miserable-looking talking head filled the screen.

“...and has trapped an unknown number of vehicles in the avalanche snow shed about five miles south of Ouray. It is not known how soon it will be possible to rescue them. Even though highway crews closed US 550 between Ouray and Silverton several hours ago, there are reports of a number of vehicles that left Silverton still unaccounted for. The large number of avalanches on Red Mountain Pass is being termed ‘the worst avalanche cluster in recent memory’ by one experienced snow-plow driver. This is Wendy Franchôn reporting. Now back to you in the studio.” The camera pulled back to show the unfortunate reporter leaning into the heavy, blowing snow, with the highway closure gate in the background.

* * *

Later, we danced.

It was closing on midnight, although more slowly than I remembered from years past. We had been dancing off and on, mostly the slower numbers, at the sides of the ballroom, in the dark corners, to stay out of the crowd, which had been getting rowdier and rowdier as the evening wore on. Up to Henry’s usual standards, the dinner had actually been quite good for this sort of thing, not hurried, and with several choices. I had the lobster, and remembered Miami. But the after-dinner coffee was wearing off, and the several glasses of champagne were beginning to catch up with me.

I leaned back and looked at him. “I haven’t danced like this in ages, and I forgot how much fun it is. I was a little worried, because I’m really not very good. But this is wonderful.”

“I’m not so hot myself, but I think we’re well matched. At least I haven’t tromped on your feet. Yet.” He smiled. “Say. I don’t know how you feel, but I’m not all that keen on staying around for what’s bound to happen at midnight. You know. Confetti, noise, singing, kisses from strangers. What say we slip out of here and go upstairs before all that?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. A good one. But let’s finish this dance first.” I snuggled back into his arms.

A few minutes later, it was his turn to lean back. “You know, I’ve been thinking. This two house business is a real pain, and I can see it’s just going to get worse. I can’t remember where my clothes are half the time. What do you think about doing something to fix that? I know we’ve only been seeing each other for a little while, but I feel like I’ve known you for...well, for a long, long time. And, hey, did you notice how comfortable our cars look together in my garage?”

* * *

Interlude

Commencement: Spring Thaw

Sixteen

The audience members who claimed to have perfect pitch were about equally divided as to whether Lillian Hoecht's shriek was a true high C or merely a slightly sharp B natural. Lillian was in the middle of her voice recital, the final hurdle to her qualifying for a master's of fine arts in music (performance), when the unseasonably warm late May heat in the recital hall finally got to her. About half way through her depressingly demanding program of Mahler's famous song cycle, having killed a number of *kinder* and catching her breath between *lieder*, she decided to open a window. It was the neatly severed arm, bruised and quite the worse for the wear, cradled in the branches of the lilac bush outside, that elicited the questionable shriek.

Fortunately, the lilac was in full bloom, and the richly sweet aroma of the blossoms masked whatever odor may have been associated with the arm. Hal was grateful for this, for he had a keen sense of smell. He was sitting in the first row on the end by the windows, trying with mixed success to stay awake in spite of the heat and the effects of a long week of end-of-semester meetings, when Lillian's scream jarred him fully awake and he jumped up to catch her in mid-swoon. It was fortunate that he kept in shape, despite his mostly desk job, because Lillian was well on her way to becoming a diva in terms of size as well as voice. Even so, as she slumped into his arms, her weight surprised him, and she got lowered to the floor rather more abruptly than Hal would have liked. Her ample bottom thumped onto the wood floor, shaking the old building.

He was the only non-music faculty member on Lillian's committee, service that he chose as a way of ingratiating himself to the music department so that he could also serve on committees for piano and string players, whose music he truly enjoyed. As Dean of Natural Sciences, he pretty much had his choice of committees in his own college, but he still had dues to pay in the College of Fine Arts.

Having caught Lillian, it was only natural that he would look out the window and be surprised by the appendage in the bush.

Before he could stop himself, he remarked "Well, I should think that the owner would have missed that by now. Assuming he's still alive. Perhaps someone would be good enough to call the police. 911 would be the fastest."

By then, other members of the audience had swept in to help and had seen the hand as well, and they were somewhat put off by Hal's casual attitude. Comes from living with a cop, he told himself.

In the time it took to get Lillian revived and calmed down, a process involving a wet handkerchief and reassurances from her committee chair that this would in no way hurt her chances of being awarded her degree, the telephone calls had been routed properly and there came a tweedling noise from Hal's pocket.

He extracted the phone and flipped it open, a gesture that he had finally mastered. "This is Dean Weathers."

"Hal? What in the world is going on over there? I remember you told me this morning that you were going to a recital today, and now I hear from the 911 operator that someone called in to report a human hand in a bush outside the music building."

Someone besides Hal had also decided that a severed hand implied a dead body and routed the 911 call to Annette's investigations unit.

"A lilac bush, one of the darker purple ones. Really spectacular, or would be, without the extra limb, pun intended. It looks not to be too new. The hand, I mean. Maybe you ought to send someone over to look at it *in situ*." Even though they had lived together for only a few months, she was already

learning his experimental jargon. “It’s a left hand and part of the arm, and it’s dressed. As in clothed, I mean. Red and green plaid flannel, looks like, part of a shirt sleeve.”

“The strangest things happen on your campus, my friend. I’ll call Lester and be over as soon as I can get there.”

* * *

Across campus, in his basement office in the Student Union building behind a door labeled

SCARAB
Students and Citizens for Animal Rights and Biodiversity
*“To Protect and Preserve Mother Earth
and All of Her Children”*,

Whitby Bradford was on the telephone with a reporter for the *Durango Herald*, trying to elicit a promise of coverage for an end-of-semester event he was involved with.

Bradford was SCARAB’s single permanent staff member. He had not been enrolled as a full-time student for the better part of ten years, and in addition to trying to keep interest high in the organization and to recruiting new SCARAB members, he also had to find students each year to assume the roles of the various SCARAB officers in order for it continue to qualify for funding from the student fees collected at the beginning of each semester. Between his modestly paid position as the SCARAB field coordinator, the small trust fund left to him by his grandmother, and the profit he made on his illicit activities, he managed to eke out enough of an income to be able to ski nearly 100 days each year and to spend another 100 or so in the summer backpacking in the high San Juan Mountains. He split the remaining time among smoking dope, seducing as many members of the female student population—the younger the better—as possible, and trying to raise the public’s consciousness about how humanity mistreated critters in general, and cute, furry ones in particular.

Each spring, he tried to end the school year with a protest of sufficient flamboyance to generate publicity and help sustain interest in the group’s activities throughout the summer term. Then, in the late summer when the academic year began again, he could use newspaper headlines and photographs from the protest in his recruiting campaign for the new students. First-year students from urban areas were particularly vulnerable to this tactic.

“Look, Randy. All we need is for you to write an article on our protest of the contest. I can provide you with quotes and background information, and I’ll get some pictures you can run, so neither you nor anyone else has to actually go up to Nucla to be there to cover the thing.”

For some time SCARAB had been planning a pilgrimage northwest to Nucla to protest the spring prairie dog shooting contest there, and this year they were publicly threatening to place themselves in harm’s way by standing between the shooters and their quarry. (The contest entrants who were willing to talk about it allowed as to how they really didn’t need the bigger targets that the protesters would present, because of their fine marksmanship and all, but they’d be glad to shoot at the protesters as well as at the rodents.) The fact that Bradford had not been able to enlist any Frémont State students so far was irrelevant, because he knew that other SCARAB chapters would be able to. But the local publicity was important, so he needed the *Herald*’s cooperation.

“That’s what you told me last year, Whit. And the pictures you provided were obviously from somebody’s file, not of the Nucla contest, and my editor scorched my butt. Besides, what’s going to be new this year? You folks threatened pretty much the same thing last year and nothing came of it. This doesn’t look like news to me. It looks like you’re just trying for more free publicity. Give me something that’s news for once, and I’ll cover it personally.”

Randy Fredericks, who covered outdoor and environmental issues in addition to the crime beat, was still young and eager, but he was quickly learning how to be cynical, in good part because he had to deal with Bradford and others like him.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t give you the first shot. I hear that the Denver TV stations are all going to be there. And all the other regional papers, too. If you’re not going to cover it, the *Herald* will look pretty lame.”

“Whit, you’ve got to remember two things. What’s news to the folks in the Denver area isn’t necessarily news here. And I’ve heard all this before. You’ve about used up your credibility even with me. If I tell my editor that I’m going to cover something of yours, he always, and I mean always, finds something more important for me to cover, like watching them install new filters at the sewage treatment plant. If there really is a story, I’ll watch it on TV and write it from there and the wires. Got to go. ’Bye.” And he hung up before Bradford could start talking again.

Bradford slammed his telephone down in frustration and stared at the maps on the wall. He had pasted together all the topographic maps of the upper parts of the Los Piños River and Vallecito Creek watersheds and used a fluorescent highlighter pen to mark the various trails he’d personally hiked. It always made him feel better, and calmer, to contemplate the yellow spider’s web of his back-country experience.

* * *

The last time that Annette had been on campus was the previous winter during the holiday season. With lilacs everywhere and all of the trees beginning to leaf out, the campus in May was a completely different place from the wintertime. Students were swarming over the open quadrangle in the middle of the campus, throwing Frisbees and balls to each other and to dogs. She happened to arrive between classes, and the foot and bicycle traffic made the place seem like those films she’d seen of the streets of Beijing in rush hour.

She’d called the campus police and arranged for them to meet her on the campus outskirts and to use their radio controllers to get her through the maze of parking gates into the central area. But there was still walking to be done. Lester St. Clare, the coroner, carried with him a large plastic bag, not a body bag with a zipper but more of a trash bag with a twist-tie.

“A parts bag,” he explained.

When they got to the music building, they found that the campus police had cordoned off the now-notorious bush. There was a crowd gathered around, straining to see whatever they could. Students inside the recital hall had the best view and, predictably, were making less-than-tasteful jokes about the hand, its battered appearance, and its shirt sleeve. Most of the jokes centered on possible supermarket tabloid headlines and how they would manage to work space aliens into the story.

Hal had used his influence with the campus police and was waiting inside the cordoned-off area for her.

She walked up to him and smiled. “Dean Weathers. How is it that you manage to be present at all of the crime scenes on the campus? A coincidence? I don’t think so. The detective manual says never to believe in coincidences, you know. Find any clues this time?”

“Ugh. This one’s all yours. I’m just an earth scientist, not a mortician. Body parts are, well, not my cup of tea.”

Their time together had shown her that he was, in fact, a connoisseur of body parts, at least hers, but Annette resisted the urge to ask him if he meant *all* body parts, or just selected loose ones in lilac bushes. She had far more experience with this sort of thing than he and recognized his obvious discomfort.

“Who found it, and how?”

“An unfortunate music student who was in the middle of her master’s recital. She opened a window and almost fainted. I saw it second. It was, and is, I guess, just sitting there in a branch of this lilac bush. Around on the side by those windows.”

Lester had wormed his way between the bushes and his voice now filtered through the shower of purple blossoms. “Lieutenant, here it is. A hand, just like they were saying, and part of the arm. Severed, um, about half way to the elbow. I don’t want to comment further until I can examine it in my lab. But you might want to have a look before I remove it.”

She pushed through the lush foliage and flowers, almost overwhelmed by the scent, and made her way to where Lester was peering at the wayward hand. It was straddling two rather slim branches, lying palm up and at a slight tilt as if waiting for someone to take the lilac petals it was offering; and it had knocked loose some of the lilac blooms so that there was a dusting of purple petals on the ground below. Kind of picturesque, actually, Annette thought. She examined the branches above and found several that were broken.

“It looks as if it fell out of the sky and finally came to rest on these branches. But they’re pretty small, so it couldn’t have fallen too far, otherwise it would be on the ground. Could it have fallen off the roof?”

Hal’s voice came from the other side of the wall of purple. “The eaves of this roof stick out so that the edge is right above you, and the pitch is pretty steep. Maybe it fell onto the roof and slid off into the bush. There’s no gutter up there. Want me to get facilities over here with a cherry-picker so you can look at the roof? It looks too steep to climb on safely, at least without special equipment.”

“I’m not climbing anywhere, thank you, but it ought to be looked at. I’ll get one of my guys over here to check it out. Lester, you can bag this thing up and take it in. Let me know if you can figure out how it got cut off, OK? See if there’s enough blood left to do a test. And have someone run the prints through the computer. I know you don’t want to comment now, but look at these puncture marks, here around the wrist. There’s some kind of pattern here. See if you can figure that out, OK?”

She took several Polaroid snapshots of the arm and its position in the bush and seemed ready to leave. “OK, people, show’s over. Back to class.”

The students in the room above were especially disappointed. Perhaps they were hoping that some other curiosity would slide off the roof for their amusement.

She wriggled back through the branches and found Hal waiting. “Want to go for lunch?”

He looked uncomfortable. “Uh, I’m not really so hungry right now, not that your company wouldn’t be nice. Maybe if we walk home together I’ll forget this and work up an appetite. Can Lester there drive your car back with his, ah, package? I can take you downtown later.”

* * *

That afternoon, Professor Lewis Wilbanks was holding the last class meeting prior to his final exam. He always obliged the students by using these last classes to review the important material that would appear on the final, and he also tried to take advantage of this last occasion to slip in as much propaganda as possible. This particular course, Wildlife and Forest Management in Sub-Alpine Ecosystems, provided the perfect opportunity for advocating his favorite cause, what he liked to call “natural” watershed management. The course was also closely related to his research specialty, so he was able to teach it without referring to his notes.

Wilbanks had recently organized the Durango chapter of the Freestone River Alliance, which advocated letting rivers flow without control structures, dams, or diversion projects. There were certain difficulties with this approach in the western U.S., but Durango was prone to neither excessive flash flooding nor catastrophic drought, at least not as much as other parts of the Colorado Plateau, so it was usually relatively easy to persuade his students of the validity of the Alliance’s position. This “natural” approach to water management had the advantage of being emotionally attractive, particularly to the environmentally inclined students at Frémont State.

However, he had been having quite the time of it with the forestry students in this particular course. They already knew that techniques of wildlife and forest management, in any ecosystem, depend critically on the desired goals. And, unless a significant fraction of the local population were to be deported back to the coasts, any practical set of goals had to include civilization in the mix. Recent growth in the Durango area had begun to bring to the forefront water management issues even more than they had been historically. Wilbanks’ students were keenly aware of this from their other courses, especially those in the business school. Even so, he had had some success with advocating the “natural” approach in the sub-alpine zone under consideration in this course, because relatively few people lived up there and because most of it was un-dammed anyway and things seemed to work.

Wilbanks was more impatient than usual for this school year to end, and he was almost there. Unlike many of his colleagues, he managed to live year-round on his nine-month academic salary, so his summers were free for other pursuits. And over the next couple of months, he had a number of projects to finish up, all involving field work high up in the Vallecito Creek watershed. Although his summer work was not funded, he brought to it the same scientific rigor that had earned him his degree and formidable academic reputation. He was eagerly looking forward to his summer in the high San Juans so he could make progress on his pet project on behalf of the Alliance, for which he used his scientific research as a cover.

* * *

The next evening Annette came home to find Hal hard at work in the kitchen making chicken cacciatore for dinner. He had one of the cookbooks from his library out and a row of little bowls on the counter, each with its carefully measured ingredients. Roma tomatoes chopped just so, some minced garlic (from precisely the correctly sized cloves, she was certain), a thinly sliced green pepper, and a measuring cup with diced herbs, another with chicken stock, and yet another with red wine.

He was carefully measuring flour into a larger bowl, no doubt in which to dredge the chicken before browning for exactly 5 minutes in 2 tablespoons—no less, no more—of virgin olive oil heated to precisely 375 degrees. She loved to eat his cooking, but it drove her up the wall to be in the kitchen with him, particularly when he was cooking something she had grown up eating and could make in her sleep. Without measurements.

He had discovered that she had been avoiding Italian cuisine for most of her adult life, as a reaction to her childhood. But she was really quite fond of it, so he had been putting the Italian section of his cookbook library to good use for the past few months. And she loved every meal, except when he was cooking it. She escaped to the living room.

After a while, it was time for the dish to simmer in a covered pot in the oven (at exactly 325 degrees), and he came into the living room, wiping his hands on an apron.

“Any results from the coroner’s office on that hand we found yesterday?”

He had found that it always took them more than a day to do anything and was hoping for something today. Having been in on its discovery, he sort of considered it his hand. Not that he really needed another left hand.

“Not really. The computer didn’t find any fingerprint matches and there’s nothing noteworthy otherwise. Lester thinks that it had been outside all winter, because of some freeze damage. Not really frostbite; more like freezer burn.”

“No idea of how it could have got there?”

“Oh, yeah. Lester had a look at the puncture marks I noticed yesterday and decided, because of their pattern, that they were from the talons of a large bird, like an eagle. So we figure that a hungry eagle found it somewhere and picked it up to take home for dinner. They’re opportunists and will eat just about anything they find, including carrion. It was probably just too heavy for the eagle to lug all the way home and it got dropped, coincidentally on the roof of the music building. Or maybe the eagle was being hassled by some smaller birds in town and dropped it. One of my detectives got up there today and found some evidence that that’s what happened, it dropped onto the roof and slid off. Anyway, we’ve got it in cold storage. Every now and then we can check the fingerprint database and see if there’s a new match. Otherwise, we’ve got to wait for someone, presumably missing his left hand, to come by and claim it.”

“What does Lester think about how it got removed? It looked pretty clean.”

“Almost surgically so. But Lester thinks it was done with a clean slicing chop from a very heavy, sharp knife of some kind, or an extremely sharp axe. It’s a clean slice right through both bones with no splintering. Not accidental. Or so he says.”

“So, last fall, some poor bastard gets his arm lopped off and stashed in a snowbank, where an eagle finds it this spring during the melt. And makes off with it for dinner, only to drop it on our music building?”

“Lester suggested the strong possibility that the guy was dead when the arm came off, either that or completely sedated. If not, he’d have probably fainted from the shock. That’s about all we know now. Say, the smell from the kitchen is wonderful. How much longer to dinner? I want to read the paper.”

She was in the middle of the *Herald’s* regional section when she almost jumped out of her chair. “So that’s what happened to her!”

She pushed the paper Hal’s way, and he read

Avalanche Victim Identified

Ouray (AP)—The Colorado State Patrol has identified yet another victim of the New Year’s avalanche cluster on Red Mountain Pass. The body of Professor Linda Harmon,

who was a faculty member at Frémont State University in Durango, was discovered in her car at the bottom of the Bear Creek avalanche chute, about 4 miles south of Ouray. The car was spotted Thursday by Mr. and Mrs. Herman Frondberg, of Great Falls, North Dakota, who had stopped to take photographs of the scenery along that portion of US 550. Mr. Frondberg related seeing a glint of sunlight off a chrome bumper, which had just begun to protrude through the melting pile of avalanche debris in the Uncompahgre Gorge. It took highway crews all of Thursday and Friday to dig the car out of the debris.

Professor Harmon, who was reported missing shortly before the end of December, was apparently headed north on US 550 during the New Year's blizzard, and was swept off the highway by one of the many avalanches that occurred. A number of cars were trapped in the snow shed for several hours by the same storm. Indications are that Professor Harmon survived the avalanche itself and succumbed to asphyxiation after depleting the oxygen inside her buried car.

Professor Harmon was chairperson of the Chemistry Department at Frémont State before her death. She is survived by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Alphonse Harmon of New York, and a brother, Alphonse, Jr.

“So one mystery gets solved just as another pops up, eh? The hand, I mean. At least there's no mention of your suspicions about her involvement in the Stiller killing.”

“It was more than suspicion, we had pretty solid proof. But there's no reason to bring it up now. Wonder what else will turn up this spring?”

* * *

Spring had come early and had progressed almost into summer in Durango. From up on the campus, the view over the valley was dominated by a pointillist impression of green and chartreuse pastels interspersed with the pinks of fruit tree blossoms and the purples of the ubiquitous lilacs. Lawns were green and most had already required two mowings. Through town, the Animas River was running nearly full, and it was opaquely muddy.

But up in the mountains, the seasons regressed into earlier and earlier spring. Up at Prof. Lewis Wilbanks' house by Chapman Lake, about 500 feet above town, the snow was long gone and hikers were told to watch carefully for ticks, which can carry Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Wilbanks had made sure that warning signs were prominent, as he valued his privacy. And this year, he didn't want anyone interrupting his special preparations.

What was locally called the “Mud Season” was in full swing beginning about 1000 feet above Durango, and the hardy souls that lived up there changed their shoes a lot. In the hamlet of Vallecito, on the western shore of Vallecito Lake, there was no snow left and the water level was still low, so outdoors activity was limited by the mud to watching for the first dandelion blossoms and guessing whether there would be another hard freeze. In a converted garage, Ty Bortle was trying to cook the books of TreeLine Outfitters, his nominal source of income.

Bortle's great-great-grandfather had founded the town of Bortleville as a mining camp up on the Los Piños River more than a century ago, but its legacy was now limited to providing homes for pike, trout, and kokanee salmon at the bottom of Vallecito Lake. The Bortle family had moved to the construction camp, which became the village, when the dam was built, and Ty was the last of the lineage, his parents having moved to a retirement home in sunny Florida.

TreeLine Outfitters specialized in big-game hunting during the fall, mule deer and elk, with an occasional bighorn sheep license, and Bortle began his fiscal year in July when deposits for the upcoming hunting season became due. The fishing season did not start until about then as well, so he was using this season of transition to invent creative ways to minimize his annual contribution to the federal treasury. He didn't care about dandelions, just clients, preferably from back east with lots of cash.

Around the other side of the lake, up the valley at the Los Piños Ranch, Jack Hardin was gearing up for the summer season, which would begin as soon as the mud firmed up enough for guests to negotiate his access road. Even the small bulldozer he used to maintain his road had trouble with the springtime goo every year, and this year was so bad that he'd just given up and parked his truck up by the county road. He used one of the horses to get from the ranch to the pickup when he needed to go into town, and getting the kids to the school bus was quite the adventure. The summer crew hadn't arrived yet, so it was just his family that was "mudded in." They seldom got snowed in, even during the worst of winter weather, because of the industrial-grade snow blower that was part of the ranch's suite of equipment. But there was simply nothing to be done about the mud, except gripe and wait. At least he had the summer season to look forward to. His ranch, a fly-fishing and dude ranch operation above Vallecito Lake, was always sold out, or nearly so, all summer from late May through early October, and there were many repeat visitors.

Higher yet, toward tree line, the seasonal slop gave way to the frozen ground and the ice of late winter. Snow squalls were common up there. Even so, on the south-facing slopes, the snow cover was beginning to disappear, and little rivulets of the spring thaw were making their way down toward the streams in the bottoms of the valleys. In the meadows, snow lilies were peeking through the edges of the more exposed areas.

In one of these, a small clearing amid a stand of tall spruce on the southern flank of Middle Mountain, the sun had heated a pile of rocks to the point that the snow had almost completely melted. The rocks had attracted the attention of a number of magpies, as well as two bald eagles, which were sitting high in a tree at the edge of the clearing watching carefully. Less reserved, the magpies were poking and tearing at objects between the rocks. The eagles were focused on one especially large crevice, in which could be seen an object that contrasted markedly with the white snow, dark gray rocks, and green shoots of the snow lilies. Their interest was riveted on a splash of red. Red, outlined by green squares.

* * *

Part II

Summer Term: Vacation

Seventeen

Annette couldn't understand how in the world anyone would need more than one fishing pole. But then, this was a guy who dyed pieces of elk hide different colors so the hair would match the wing colors of certain bugs and who thought nothing of paying \$60 or \$70 for a piece of chicken skin with the feathers still on it.

It was two months later to the day, and Hal and Annette were in his car, headed into the high country for a week at the Los Piños Ranch to relax, which he defined as “fly-fish” and she defined as “lie around like a slug.” The back seat of the car was folded forward, and entire area from just behind the front seats to the rear of the car was crammed full of duffel bags, suitcases, bags of books, and other gear.

Including ten fly rods.

He had explained the nuances of different fly rods to her, but she kept coming back to the central point: the fish didn’t care what the fisher was holding, just what it thought it could eat. And fish knew they could eat worms, so why not give up on all this foolishness, get rid of all the dead animal parts he kept around to tie flies with, and just go catch fish. He further explained that it wasn’t the catching, but rather it was the fishing that he liked. And she smiled and said that now she understood: standing all day in ice water trying not to get hooks stuck in your ears was good for the soul.

Hal had been spending about a week each summer at the Ranch for over a decade and had become good friends with Jack Hardin and his wife Pam and the kids. One of the few local residents ever to stay there—the Ranch was rather expensive and catered mostly to east-coast fly-fishers and families with too much money to know how to spend it wisely—Hal considered the cost an investment in good will. In addition to the week each summer, he made the 45 mile drive up from town on weekends frequently to fish on the Ranch’s private water and, occasionally, have dinner.

As a scientist, he sometimes got asked to talk with the guests about the environment and related issues, and he was an on-again, off-again fixture at the place. He knew he could have asked for and received a discount for his week-long stays, but since he was displacing full-rate guests, that didn’t seem fair. Besides, by paying the full rate, he didn’t feel guilty about acting like any of the other guests. Maybe he didn’t drink as much as they did, and maybe his questions weren’t as stupid, but he sure could take up lots of staff time with all sorts of long conversations and make full use of all the toys the ranch offered.

The Los Piños Ranch was well past Vallecito Lake on the boundary of the Weminuche Wilderness, and getting there required driving around the north end of the lake and then some, back south to the inflow of the Los Piños River and then upstream a way. Above the Ranch were only hiking trails, streams, and mountains. In addition to the Ranch’s private water, there were literally tens of miles of streams that saw perhaps one or two people per year. So, up there, the fish were hungry, dumb, eager, and very, very feisty.

Hal was sincerely hoping that Annette would like the Ranch. Their relationship was barely seven months old, and they were still learning about each other. At least she had expressed interest in the horses. And he secretly hoped that one of the guides could get her interested in fly-fishing. It would be worth a shot.

* * *

Basically a child of high civilization, Annette was excited and a bit leery of the coming week. She had very little experience with the high mountains, beyond riding up them in the winter on a ski lift—she especially liked closed, heated gondolas—and then sliding down them at high speed using plastic and metal equipment.

She liked horses and had taken equitation lessons as a child, using English saddles and so on. But these were mountain horses, with western tack, used to wandering around in the high Rockies. Hal had assured her that her childhood riding lessons would put her in the “expert” category relative to both himself and all the other guests, but she was enough of a perfectionist to worry. Her intention was

mostly to sit around, admire the scenery, and read the several best-sellers she'd brought. The Ranch had no TV nor very much in the way of telephones, and she had intentionally not brought a computer. And if Hal wanted to spend all day every day standing in ice water, that was up to him. At least he had convinced her that the food would be outstanding. She was contemplating how to get enough exercise to justify eating a lot.

She wasn't paying too much attention to the drive at first, as it wound up Florida Road. She used the time to repeat the mantra of its local pronunciation, stressing the Spanish "i"—Flor-ee-da—rather than watching the scenery, having been up that way on several occasions to visit friends with houses in the various subdivisions up in the foothills. But before long they came to unfamiliar territory, and she began to pay more attention. Gradually the subdivisions gave way to ranches, and, when they turned onto the Vallecito Lake Road, to more and more tourist accommodations.

After climbing the grade beside the dam, the highway wound around the west edge of the artificial lake, and it was obvious that a very scenic section of the valley had been drowned in favor of water resource management. Summer cabins, resorts, and lodges began to proliferate. Ahead, beyond the north end of the lake, she could see the valley winding upward, toward more and more rugged country and eventually tree-line, with year-round snow fields and the crags and cliffs that give the Rocky Mountains their reputation.

"Where up there are we going to, anyway? As far as tree-line?"

"No, but it's quite a way yet. We go around the north end of the lake, back south, and then up that valley over there." He gestured toward scenery to their right that she hadn't noticed yet.

"It looks pretty isolated up there."

"Well, there's this kind of development all the way around the lake to the river, just about, as well as more up the road from the north inlet. It's mostly summer activity, though, and things tend to close down in the winter, after the hunting season. Jack's ranch is isolated enough to make you feel as if you're away from it all. What it is, is quiet, especially at night. And you'll be astounded at the stars. I think there's a full moon this week, so they'll be washed out by moonlight, but you'll still be astounded. I expect that Jack will have a late night ride up the side of the valley. The view in the moonlight is exquisite."

"Riding a horse through the trees at night? Uphill, and back down? Are these people crazy?"

"The horses do it at least once a week all summer, with the greenest of greenhorns sitting on them. Hell, they probably do it in their sleep. You'll see. It's great."

She tried not to be too skeptical.

* * *

Whitby Bradford and friend had made an early start and, by the time that Annette and Hal arrived at the Ranch, they were already about eight miles up the Middle Mountain trail. Jennifer Mason, Bradford's friend, was going first so that she could set the pace and so that Bradford could watch her hindquarters and fantasize.

The pendulum motion of her blonde ponytail above the top of her backpack made a perfect counterpoint to the rhythm of her strides, and the alternating bunching and relaxing of her gluteus muscles under the tight shorts below the bottom of her pack enriched his fantasies in rewarding ways. He'd promised her a restful week of nature watching and camping under the stars and himself a daily

dose of hot sex. So far, things looked hopeful, because she had gushed with enthusiasm about the scenery and solitude on their drive up from Durango.

Bradford's plan was to walk far enough today to tire Jennifer out and then break down her reluctance to sleep with him by offering a massage when they reached the campsite. He'd chosen the first part of their walk with this in mind, including the unnecessary uphill stretch from the Los Piños River road toward the Tuckerville site, even though the place gave him the willies.

The plan for the first day was to head for a secluded grotto near a waterfall in upper Hell Canyon. It was universally accepted that good back country etiquette required camping at least 100 feet away from all water, to avoid contaminating it, but Bradford planned to bend the rules in favor of the romantic advantages of camping next to the stream. Between the stars, the sound of the white water, and the marijuana he'd brought along, he was confident that Jennifer's inhibitions would vanish.

He was carrying most of the shared equipment—the tent, the cooking gear, and his zip-together sleeping bags that may as well have had notches carved into the zipper handles for the use they'd had. He didn't know that she had brought her own, separate, sleeping bag along with a rain fly that she could turn into a makeshift tent if he got too forward. She had met him at the prairie dog protest in May and was well aware of his intentions.

Maybe she was only 19, but she had long ago become unimpressed with older guys' senses of self-importance and with their libidos. And, because to her "older" meant up to about 35 (older than that was getting too close to her father's age to hardly even count as a "guy" any more), Bradford was teetering dangerously on the edge of being forever classified as a platonic friend rather than as a potential lover, although he seemed unaware of this. Probably due to his horny ego.

This was Bradford's fourth week-long trip into the high country this summer, and the first into the Los Piños drainage. The horrible experience the previous fall had made him shy away from the Middle Mountain trail, but it led to such spectacular country that he knew that he couldn't avoid it forever. But now that Tuckerville was behind them, he was feeling better. And Jennifer, fresh, young, virginal (he thought; he wasn't sure, but he could hope) seemed to be just the sort of companion to dispel the demons. Maybe she'd want to take a shower in the waterfall, and he could wash her back. And other places. Yum.

* * *

Hal and Annette had arrived and checked in, and were settling in to their cozy little cabin. Annette was pleasantly surprised by the place, with its large, comfortable bed, plenty of blankets, small writing table, and dresser. The bathroom, by any standard at this altitude, was luxurious (especially the huge, fluffy towels, she thought), and the cabin had a covered porch with rocking chairs on it looking over a little lake, another water resource project but one that obviously had not caused such a huge portion of the valley to be lost. There were numerous sets of rings dimpling the surface of the lake, and she noticed Hal's hand twitching.

They were just down the hill from the main lodge, where there was a dining room along with a large commons area with leather couches and a fireplace. Upon checking in, they'd been informed of a pre-dinner orientation at 5:30. It had been years since Hal had been to one of these, so he planned to attend instead of immediately going out to fish, as was his habit. It took them until just after five to get the car unpacked and the gear stowed, so they walked up to the lodge a bit early.

Jack Hardin was building a fire in the huge fireplace, using scrap lumber for kindling to get the four-foot logs started. He hadn't been around when they had checked in, so he was enthusiastic with his greeting.

“Hal, great to see you again. Where’ve you been all summer? We’ve got to spend an afternoon up on Lake Creek this year, at a new spot I found. And this must be the friend you mentioned. I’m Jack Hardin, head wrangler, plumber, carpenter, electrician, story-teller, and all-around do-everything person here. Glad to meet you.” He stuck out a calloused hand in Annette’s direction.

“I’m Annette Trieri, Jack. And I’m delighted to meet you. Hal’s told me a lot about you and your place here. It’s wonderful. I’d never have thought such a level of civilization could exist way up here.”

“I’m glad you like it so far. And wait until dinner. We’ve got a new chef this year, trained in France with experience at a four-star restaurant in Aspen. He got fed up with the snootiness up there and decided to try us instead. Aspen’s loss is our gain in a big way. Can I get you anything? Glass of wine? Cocktail?”

She accepted the offer of a glass of wine, and he headed off toward what seemed to be the kitchen.

“Back in a flash.”

Other people began wandering in, and it was interesting to Annette to compare their clothes with hers. She’d lived in Durango for long enough to have fallen into the Colorado-mountain-town mode of casual dress, with jeans, flannel shirts, hiking boots, all faded and generally dinged up. After giving it some thought, she had decided, in deference to the horses, to show off a new pair of Nocona western riding boots, but she was still dressed like a local. The other guests looked as if they had just stepped out of the L.L. Bean or Orvis catalogues, new everything, in the latest outdoorsy fashions. So, she thought, in addition to the cost of staying here and the airfare and car rental to get here, these folks all have new wardrobes. Hal’s right, they do have too much money.

Pretty soon, Jack came back with Annette’s wine and a couple of opened bottles in his other hand. He began introductions and playing host. A woman who looked, somehow, more at home than the others came over to them, and Hal greeted her with a hug.

“Pam, it’s good to see you. Let me introduce you to Annette Trieri. I’ve told her that this will be the most relaxing week she’s ever had, as long as she can keep herself from falling prey to your horse program. Then she’ll be in need of one of your masseuses.”

“Glad to meet you, Annette. Hal’s been coming here for years, and the last couple of years it’s been alone. I can’t say how glad I am to see that he’s not this time. And I think you’ll have a very relaxing time here. Do you fish?”

“Uh, no, but I think I’m going to get some exposure here. I just never had the opportunity. I’ve been giving Hal a lot of grief about all his mountains of fishing stuff at home, but mostly it’s just teasing. And he’s brought about a dozen fly rods, so I expect he could afford to lend me one.”

At Annette’s use of “home,” Pam shot Hal a meaningful look and Annette knew she’d like her. And this is the first time anybody’s said anything about massage. This place could turn out to be just fine.

* * *

Bradford’s first hint of trouble came when he seemed to be more tired than Jennifer upon reaching their secluded camp site, and when she insisted that they make camp far away from the stream—too far to hear the waterfall very well—so they wouldn’t contaminate the water. And, she confided, so she could have more privacy in the morning to shower.

Given his year-round outdoors activity, he had thought that he would be able to walk her legs off, but she was full of energy and he was feeling, well, old. Maybe he shouldn’t have insisted on carrying most of the water and food, along with the other equipment. He knew that she was an aerobics

instructor—that was the basis for her exceptional hindquarters—but his ego had prevented him from thinking that she might just be in better shape for walking than he.

And the second hint of trouble was more than just a hint. When she opened her backpack and pulled out her own sleeping bag, it was not clear which fell faster, his spirits or his incipient erection.

Maybe he could salvage matters. “Jen, you know that it gets well below freezing at this altitude. Is that sleeping bag going to be warm enough? I’ve got a heavier one here I thought you’d like.”

“Oh, mine will be fine, I’m sure. I’ve also got a set of fleece long-johns if it gets really cold. I went camping in the back country last winter, up in the Needles on a ski trip, and it was warm as toast. I guess over there, around that set of boulders, would be a good place for a latrine, huh?” And with that she pulled a little shovel and a roll of paper out of her pack and wandered off.

Bradford busied himself morosely with the task of getting the campsite prepared for dinner and setting up the tent. Naturally she’d chosen a place for the tent with too many rocks to plant the stakes easily. And the wrong kind of rocks to build a fire ring easily. And no convenient trees from which he could hang the food easily. This was beginning to look worse and worse. He walked back to the stream, not a particularly easy walk, to fetch some water to begin reconstituting their freeze-dried dinners (macaroni and cheese tonight, with chunky applesauce and tea) and decided to try to cheer himself up with a few good hits off a joint.

Maybe his expectations were too high. It was the first night, after all. Strange, though. This place had never failed him before, with the lovely waterfall and the view down the valley. Maybe if he turned on the charm, she’d loosen up. And put out. He was going to be in no mood for a nocturnal visit by the local ground squirrels, though. If they showed up like the did the last time he was here with, what was her name?, the one with the big... well, he’d just have to strangle the little buggers. Wonder what squirrel chunks taste like in macaroni and cheese.

* * *

Back in Durango, Lewis Wilbanks was taking inventory of his equipment. He’d been up to the high country twice already this summer, on scouting expeditions, and he was now getting ready for his operational trip on behalf of the Alliance.

The Freestone River Alliance, founded by individuals with a variety of interests but little patience for the political process, was a radical offshoot of several other environmental advocacy groups. Trout Unlimited agreed with their basic premise of maintenance of minimum stream flows as a tool for enhancing trout habitat. The Sierra Club disapproved of drowning wild areas for reservoirs and had recently even come out in favor of draining Lake Powell to let the Colorado River flow freely through the Glen Canyon once again. The Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the Nature Conservancy were all vocally in favor of wildlife preservation and habitat restoration and improvement just about anywhere and everywhere.

However, none of these organizations was particularly in favor of the Freestone River Alliance’s main—if unpublicized—goal, to breach all dams wherever and whenever possible, and all other water management structures, too, using whatever tools were required, even explosives. Since the Alliance had never managed actually to do this, they had not had to face the ethical consequences of such actions, the effects of prolonged drought on cities, or the inevitable flash flood. Rather, they talked bravely about “karma” and other morally justifiable retribution. And they certainly didn’t talk about this goal openly. Instead, they advocated publicly all the goals of the organizations they’d broken away from. But the membership, to an individual, lived well above even the most conservatively estimated of flood plains.

Although the Alliance had vague plans to effect their goal of destroying dams, it was mostly talk. Wilbanks, however, had more concrete plans for some of the other water control structures high up in the Vallecito Creek drainage. He was a believer in starting at the beginning, and he had decided to get the Alliance's campaign to eliminate dams and other control structures off to the proverbial bang (he always grinned to himself whenever he thought of it this way).

His plan was to attack the Rock Creek diversion, a ditch/aqueduct/tunnel system put in place by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the '30s to supply water from the upper part of the Vallecito Creek drainage to the other side of the Continental Divide, into West Ute Creek in the upper Rio Grande system, for use by agricultural interests in the San Luis Valley. Not that the Alliance would take credit for this act of sabotage, but it could editorialize about the benefits of the strategy of returning nature to nature while superficially condemning the tactics of destruction.

His ecosystems research project had provided cover for him to spend some time in the vicinity of the various components of the diversion, and he had an elaborate plan formulated that would destroy its infrastructure completely. It could be rebuilt, of course, but the cost would likely be prohibitive and the environmental groups would put up such a stink about the wilderness designation that reconstruction would never fly. Wilbanks planned no less than four coordinated explosions, two within the tunnel, one at the head-gate that channeled water out of Rock Creek into the ditch, and one on the supporting structure of a trestle-borne aqueduct that carried the ditch across a side valley just before the diverted streamflow entered the tunnel.

He had managed to acquire a large amount of plastique, with radio-controlled detonators, and had received a crash course in how to deploy it to maximum effect. One advantage of the radical nature of the Freestone River Alliance was its connections to paramilitary fringe groups and both their connections for supplies and their expertise.

The explosions in the tunnel would be the most problematic. He had discovered that the flow through the tunnel was historically low in late July and early August, so it would be possible to wade through it. His plan was to spend a night (it would be dark anyway, so why not at night?) wading about two-thirds of the way through the tunnel to set a charge in place on the ceiling and then to set a second charge about one-third of the way through on his way back. Then he would use a radio signal to detonate both charges at the same time. That same signal would also set off charges on the trestle and at the head gates, and the diversion structures would come tumbling down.

Wading through the tunnel would mean several hours spent crouched over, carrying a load, but he'd trained for just this purpose for several months now. He was troubled by this necessity, as he was mildly claustrophobic, but he couldn't think of any alternatives. The possibility of floating the charges through on something like those little kids' swimming pool inflatable rafts that they had at the K-Mart had occurred to him, but he couldn't figure out how to be far enough away by the time they'd need to be detonated. The other end of the tunnel, the northeastern portal, was nearly as remote as the southwestern end, and he didn't want to spend the extra time trekking over to it. So he was stuck with carrying two charges and detonators for about two miles and then one back for a mile. He didn't want to plant the upstream one first because he was afraid of bumping his head on it on his way out.

The fact that the charges in the tunnel wouldn't be completely tamped was something of a concern, so he had decided to triple the suggested amount of explosive. He'd also remembered that car radio reception faded in highway tunnels, so he had also gone to some trouble to make sure that an extra transmitter/receiver was available, to be placed at the mouth of the tunnel as a repeater so that the detonation signal would reach both charges. And perhaps the fact that these charges wouldn't be tamped would be partially compensated by the fact that the shock waves of the explosive fronts would meet about in the center of the tunnel. At least they would if his calculations were right.

Naturally, he planned to be nowhere near either of the ends of the tunnel at the time of the explosion, and he assumed that no one else would be there either. If there were, they would witness what would effectively be the test firing of one of the largest caliber cannons ever devised, for the tunnel was 60" in diameter. If not for the logistical problems, it would have been interesting to devise a five-foot projectile and test his cannon's range, he thought.

In addition to the plastique and detonators, he had a miner's helmet and light, with extra batteries, a heavy-duty bolt cutter to take off the padlock from the southwest portal grate, a replacement padlock to make things look undisturbed, hip boots with felt-soled wading shoes and cleats, and a pedometer.

He also had to remember to preserve his cover as a researcher, so his inventory included notebooks, a portable computer with solar panels to recharge the batteries, a global positioning system receiver to keep precise track of the location of his research, and various instruments he used to measure the sizes of trees and shrubs, as well as instruments to measure soil properties and two shovels to dig samples. All in addition to standard camping equipment.

He made sure that his research equipment was just bulky enough to justify renting a pack horse, which he would need to carry the explosives in any case. He'd been cultivating a relationship with that guy up at the Los Piños Ranch for some time just for this purpose. That way, he wouldn't have to trailer a horse up from town.

* * *

Jack's orientation lecture at the Ranch dealt mostly with meal schedules, the timing of various events, and the times for additional orientation lectures related to fishing protocols and the horses. By then, several staff people, college students, had begun circulating with trays of hors d'oeuvres that turned out to be mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat and shrimp. Baked, apparently, because they weren't oily, but not dried out either. This, Annette thought, will be just fine indeed.

Hal had wandered over to talk with a weathered-looking young guy by the fireplace, so Annette, not feeling up to dealing with the L.L. Beanies just yet, headed that way. She overheard something about cutts and brookies this year being particularly hungry up on Vallecito Creek before they noticed her.

"Annette, this is Chuck Williams, the head fishing guide. Chuck, Annette Trieri. She hasn't fly-fished, but I have hopes for her. At least she's not been contaminated by warm-water fishing back east, like so many of the other folks that come here."

"Glad to meet you, Annette. Hal is a regular around here, although why we haven't seen him until now this year is something of a mystery to me. Run-off has been down for at least three weeks. You must be keeping him busy down in town."

"He's been talking about this trip for weeks. Tying flies like there was no tomorrow. Maybe, just maybe, one of the days this week he'll take off to fish somewhere all day and I can sneak off with you to learn what this fly-fishing stuff is all about."

A slow smile spread across Williams' sunburned face, causing crinkles around his eyes. "Ma'am, I can say from the bottom of my heart, from the soles of my shoes, that you're welcome to sneak off with me, any where, any time, any place. And I think that you'll be surprised by the grace and beauty of fly-fishing. Not catching fish, mind you, just the act of fly-fishing. There's an artistry to it. You don't have to get all obsessive about it like Hal and me to appreciate that."

"That's the first thing I've heard that makes it sound really appealing. I used to dance, modern dance. 'Grace and beauty' apply to that for me. I'd like to learn about how they apply to fly rods."

“I’ll make room on my calendar for you. I owe Hal a favor anyway, but even more than that, I’d feel privileged to introduce you to it from an artistic perspective. Worrying about actual fish can wait. Besides, it’ll be a helluva lot more fun and interesting than shepherding around these flatlanders. Not that I mind them, they pay the bills. But I get tired of listening to bass-fishing stories. The other guys can handle them.”

A bell rang, and dinner was served.

* * *

Eighteen

“In order to understand horses, it helps to keep in mind where they’ve come from, before they were domesticated.”

By the corral the next morning, Jack was just getting wound up into one of his twice-weekly horse orientations for new guests.

“Used to be, they, or their ancestors, lived on the plains in herds and all they had to worry about was not getting eaten, finding enough food, and making more horses. To avoid getting eaten they evolved a fantastic sense of smell and the ability to run fast. What used to eat them were critters that smelled like carnivores and jumped on their backs. Think about it. If your main fear was getting eaten and some other critter that smelled like a meat-eater jumped on your back, it’d make you nervous, right? Especially if you couldn’t see your back very well, like horses can’t.”

Hal and Annette watched the crowd of 20 or so L.L. Beanies shift from foot to foot, wondering where this was going. They didn’t realize that it had already got there.

“So,” Jack continued, “Wasn’t that bacon and sausage that we had for breakfast good? And what do you suppose that makes you smell like to a horse? My point is, of course, that horses and humans are not natural allies. So horses need to be acclimatized to people, all horses, or else they think we’re going to try to eat them. We smell like carnivores, and we get on their backs.”

Annette had enough experience with horses to be able to listen to this with only half her attention, so she took the opportunity to use the other half to re-examine her fellow guests in the light of day. Dinner the previous evening had been wonderful, food-wise, and a little strange, people-wise. It was served family style, at big tables, so everyone got a chance to visit with each other and meet new friends. Or at least that was the intent. Annette and Hal had agreed to try out some other new friends for dinner this evening.

“Anyhow, all of our horses are very well trained, and we are quite experienced with matching them up with you, in terms of temperament, both yours and the horses’, and your ability. They haul people like you around all summer, and they know their jobs very well. I do have to say, however, that there’s one thing that you need to keep in mind. And this will be brought home to you when you read the release form that our insurance company requires us to have you sign before you can ride. What you need to keep in mind is, if you spend very much time on a horse, sooner or later you’re likely to find yourself going very fast in a direction that you hadn’t planned on and probably don’t want to be going in. And there’s a possibility that you’ll fall off, even if you’re not going fast. That’s just horses. If this is too scary for you, now is the time to back out. I’m not trying to scare you folks off, because riding horses in these mountains is likely going to be one of the highlights of your vacation, this or any other

vacation, for that matter. We go places where you just won't have any other chance to go. But there is a risk. Now, does anyone have any questions?"

Someone asked about breaking the horses and how they were trained, and Jack launched into an explanation of his approach, which didn't involve "breaking" them, but rather the more enlightened and less stressful approach of positive reinforcement, communication, and patience. He then proceeded to demonstrate to them using his own horse, Matador, a 14-hand palomino stallion, by pressing gently, but steadily, on his flank. Matador at first leaned toward Jack, and then swung his huge head around to look at Jack, as if to verify that there was some point to this foolishness, chuffed in exasperation at being disturbed, and slowly moved sideways, chomping grass all the while. Jack used this demonstration as a launching point to explain how best to handle the horses on the trail.

Instead of fishing, Hal came along for the morning ride, which was down the valley toward the big lake and designed mainly to get the new guests familiar with doing what Jack had been talking about. The wranglers paid close attention to the human/horse matches that they had made, with plans to correct mismatches for future rides.

And Hal had been right. Annette's childhood lessons put her way ahead of the other guests. This became apparent when the group arrived at a large meadow, and the wranglers encouraged everyone to wander around, get a feel for the horses, and get them running if they wanted to. While everyone else was jouncing unrhythmically, hats flying in all directions, she fell right into a groove with her horse. Just like riding a bicycle again, she thought. As the group was reassembling for the ride back through the forest to the corral, she was flattered when one of the wranglers complimented her on her ability.

"Thanks. I rode when I was a kid. And was lots more flexible. I'm not sure how my knee joints are going to like this."

She hoped that the rest of the week would give her a chance to get in shape for the long ride planned for Friday, a 10-hour excursion up a ridge above the valley, with views of the high San Juans that Jack promised would make their week.

* * *

Ty Bortle was glad to have been called by Chuck Williams, because he was in a lull just now. Maintaining a steady flow of clients during the fishing season was more difficult than his hunting season business, for two reasons. First, the business tended to be day-by-day, rather than week-by-week, and it wasn't often that clients wanted to spend more than a single day with Bortle. He had convinced himself that this was because of the expense and because of the vast array of alternatives available to them. He guided only on and in the watersheds above Vallecito Lake, and a single day up there was enough for most folks who were traveling through the area.

He wasn't ready to admit that lack of return business could have anything to do with his personality or style. They all caught lots of trout, didn't they? Second, he had trouble making contact with clients in the first place, because the contacts were mostly to be made during the day when he was out guiding and what potential client wanted to talk to an answering machine?

The clients sent his way from the Los Piños Ranch tended to be a tad green for Bortle's taste, but they were better than nothing. In some ways they were easier than his usual clientele because they generally didn't demand to be carted too deep into the wilderness, and they were usually pleased with relatively fewer, and smaller, fish than more experienced trout fishers. What was most galling was that they were just too civilized for him. Who the hell cared if he spit big gobs of tobacco juice in the creek, for God's sake? The fish just probably ate it eventually, anyway, or the bugs.

Today, he had the dubious pleasure of providing not only a guide service but also fly-casting lessons. Bill and Marie Hinkle were from Atlanta by way of Chicago, and they had no experience whatsoever with fishing. It didn't help at all that Chuck Williams had suggested that Ty take them to an easily waded stretch of Vallecito Creek that also happened to be nearly enclosed by willows. Ty was going to spend most of the day extracting flies from the bushes, he could just tell. On the other hand, maybe he could get them excited about fly-fishing and sell them some equipment at a huge mark-up. That, plus a good tip, would make for a worthwhile day. And Marie's ass would be fun to watch all day, as a bonus.

* * *

At dinner that night, Hal and Annette sat at the same table as Jack and had a chance to watch his interactions with the other guests. He was a master raconteur and very adept at reading people to see just what kind of stories they would like and how much they liked to listen as opposed to talking themselves. One of the guests got him started on what he did during the off season.

"Well, lately we've decided to just close down between about Thanksgiving and Easter. We used to stay open year 'round, but then my accountant pointed out that we could save about \$50,000 a year, net, if we closed and didn't have to pay this big staff all winter. I tried to figure out how to make that work by staying closed for twelve months a year so I could take naps all the time, but the numbers just wouldn't cooperate."

He grinned and everyone laughed politely.

"A long time ago, before I wised up, we'd cater to folks like you during the summer and early fall, fly-fishers and families, and then, later in the fall, we'd play host to groups who'd come up for the big game hunting seasons. Then one year, I had a sort of epiphany, came on like one of those cartoon light bulbs over my head. It occurred to me that getting up at 4 am to saddle horses in the cold and snow and mud so that some guys could ride out and try to shoot elk was just not all that much fun. And every now and then, one of them would get lucky and accidentally shoot one. He'd come back here, about ten at night, all excited, wanting me to go find it and bring it in. So I'd be riding out in the middle of the night go find some guy's damn elk, dress it out and bring it here, get back all bloody by about two in the morning and then have to start all over again two hours later." He shook his head.

"Changing our fall marketing strategy turned out to be a no-brainer. Now what we do, after the snow sets in and nobody wants to fish, is to contract out to groups who want to come up here for conferences. We've even got a bunch of Hare Krishnas from somewhere in Ohio, I think Dayton, who come here for a week every year in November to chant and pray for the elk and deer. They bring their own cook—they don't eat stuff like this," he held up a chunk of beef Wellington on his fork, "and so all I have to do is to put up with the chanting. There's still plenty of hunters up around here, of course. I don't know if the Krishnas have had any effect on their success, though."

No one seemed to have questions, so he changed the subject.

"So what do you all have planned for tomorrow?"

The Ranch had more than enough things to do, and it required some coordination for Jack to arrange for the right number of wranglers to go off in the various directions people wanted to go and for the fishing guides to be matched up with clients. Besides, this gave his guests a chance to talk about themselves and him a chance to make whatever suggestions he could to make their stay better.

Hal was deep in conversation with another fisher, so Annette mentioned to Jack, and thereby the table in general, that she'd decided she ought to try fly-casting, just to see what it was all about. This

started a long discussion of the merits of various kinds of fish and ways to catch them, with just about everyone encouraging her to go for it.

Later, more privately, Jack took her aside and added his own quiet encouragement. "I was glad to hear you say you're going to try fly-casting, Annette. I suppose you know that Hal used to come up here with his wife Carol, and I think one of the saddest things for him since she died has been that he doesn't have anyone to go out fishing with. Even though it's a pretty solitary thing to do, company makes it a lot more enjoyable."

* * *

Bradford's camping trip was going from bad to worse, at least as far as getting Jennifer to cooperate was concerned. Every time last night when he'd tried to snuggle, a rather sterile snuggle because of the two layers of sleeping bag between them, she'd shoved him back to his side of the tent without, it seemed, waking up. This lady was strong. Nor did she want to linger in the tent with him in the morning; rather, at first light, she had crawled out the door, put on her jeans (over her long-johns) and announced that she was going to climb to the ridge top to watch the sun rise. She was gone before he could get his act together even to get out of his sleeping bag.

He'd eventually arisen and started water heating for coffee and breakfast, starting the day in a worse mood than he'd ended it the day before. Because she wasn't around, he fired up the joint he'd started yesterday and got royally stoned before the coffee was ready.

And then this afternoon, she'd taken a shower in the waterfall, and he couldn't resist the urge to watch her using his compact binoculars. It made him feel sleazy, but not sleazy enough to stop, because it did have its rewards. Until, that is, she must have seen a glint of sunlight reflecting off of a lens or something and began staring right at him.

Later, she'd not mentioned the incident specifically, but she seemed even more distant than before. And now she was preparing to sleep outside, under the stars next to the little campfire they'd made. His various warnings about wandering critters and the cold seemed not to have the least impact on her decision. This was looking like the start of a long, frustrating backpacking trip.

* * *

It was Wednesday before Lewis Wilbanks was able to leave town for his trip to Rock Creek. He had discovered a loose radiator hose in his old International Scout, the vehicle that he used for trips to the high country, and he decided to have additional maintenance work done while it was being repaired.

That shot Monday. And on Tuesday, he got roped into an event at the university by his department chair. Most of the faculty were off campus during the summer, and when visitors came to campus, those who were around were involuntary volunteers.

So on Tuesday, he'd spent several hours with a delegation of Chinese foresters, explaining through the interpreter how forestry management was done in the Rockies. And why. And why some more. There had been no end to the questions. He'd wanted to scream at them that their techniques would obviously have to be different, given the much larger population density in China and if they didn't stop breeding like lice things would only get worse. But that didn't seem just the right thing to say, somehow. He had a bad opinion of China anyway, because of the huge Three Gorges Dam project that they were in the middle of constructing. It would be the largest hydroelectric and water management project in world history, and it made his Freestone-honed sensibilities ache.

But on Wednesday, he was finally ready to go. He had food for two weeks, all his research tools, and the explosives, carefully packed and padded. He made the familiar drive up to the Los Piños Ranch on automatic pilot while he thought of all the details of his plan, looking once again for weak spots. But he couldn't find any.

At the Ranch, he loaded up the pack horse and saddled another, to ride. He usually walked on these trips, but he'd decided to pamper himself this time. Besides, a horse would provide a faster mode of egress should something go wrong.

Jack was somewhat curious about his riding this time, but he made the excuse that he'd twisted an ankle and didn't want to chance walking. All the patient years of cultivating Jack Hardin's trust paid off, and he was finally alone in the forest with his two horses and his cargo of lethal supplies.

It would take about a day and a half of steady riding to reach his destination at Rock Creek, but he'd planned to take it easy, to stop and gather some research data along the way. That would legitimize the trip by providing him fodder for research notes, from which he could prove that his purpose for being here was science. Not that he was expecting trouble, but it paid to be prepared.

* * *

By Wednesday evening, Whitby Bradford had just about given up on the idea of bedding Jennifer and was beginning to ponder how to end the trip early, so he could get back to town and look up an old girlfriend in the hope of obtaining some sexual relief. Jennifer had parried his every attempt at romance with a finesse and skill he would never have imagined in someone so young and innocent. And she had also, he was convinced, begun to tease him with her body.

Take today, for example. The route for their trip was planned to come out of Hell Canyon onto the Lake Creek trail, then up past Emerald Lake and over the Divide briefly to Twin Lakes, then down the Rincón la Osa to the trail along the Los Piños and back to the trailhead. They were now just below tree line, having crossed the alpine tundra for most of the day today. The weather was uncommonly hot, and she had decided to walk in one of her aerobics leotard thingies, which was really little more than the bottom of a thong bathing suit. So, if he had had wild fantasies watching her gluteus muscles work under her tight jeans before, watching them work with no covering at all produced near delirium, especially after two and a half days of being around her day and night.

And every now and then, she'd stop on the trail in front of him, and bend over to look at some flowers or lichens or something. He knew better than to try to take advantage of her, because he knew how strong she was and because she had casually mentioned something about her karate lessons. But his dreams tonight would be more agonizing than ever. They always seemed to stop just as he was getting his hands on her.

To make matters worse, she had shown him a side of herself that he didn't know how to deal with: her intellect. He had been waxing ecstatic about the possibility of reintroducing the grizzly bear into the Rincón la Osa valley—what more appropriate place could there be?—when she had innocently asked about his strategy for dealing with a griz should they encounter one on the trail. Was he carrying a gun? His evasive response about the natural fear of humans that would keep bear away from the trail only made her laugh. It seems she had experience hiking in Banff and knew better than to listen to his idealism. As much as he admired feminism in principle, he was beginning to hanker for someone with fewer brains. Who would have thought that an aerobics instructor would have the better of him?

* * *

On Friday, the long excursion on horseback was everything that had been promised. Including, Annette was noticing, a very long time on a horse. She had ridden at just about every opportunity all week to get used to it again, but she could have used at least another week before this ride to get her knees ready.

On one of those rides, Wednesday evening about dark, Jack had taken them up the side of the valley, straight up through an aspen grove across the county road up to where the trail intersected one of the jeep roads. They watched the full moon rise over the mountains and light the valley below them. And as Hal had predicted, it was indeed exquisite.

By then, she had come to trust to her horse's skill in the woods, but the ride down had still been, well, interesting. Today's ride had used the same trail, and it was much less intimidating in daylight. They had ridden far up the Middle Mountain ridge between the Los Piños and Vallecito Creek to look at the view of the Needle Mountains to the west, and it felt good to be on the way back to the Ranch. Maybe she could even get in an hour or two of fishing before dark.

Chuck Williams had turned out to be the perfect tutor for her. He emphasized the rhythmic aspects of fly-casting, first in the meadow behind the lodge and then on a section of relatively still water on the river. He maintained several sections of the river near the lodge as prime trout habitat, and it was unclear who was more surprised when, during one of her practice casts, a 20-inch rainbow took her size 16 elk-hair caddis fly in a splashy jump.

Hal had furnished her with a relatively light outfit, he'd said something about four-weight, and Chuck coached Annette carefully through the process of playing the big fish and bringing it in to his net. He showed her how to handle it gently and she had held it in the slow current until it revived and swam elegantly off. She was enchanted.

Even though she had enjoyed playing down the experience for Hal, who was plainly jealous of the fish and amazed that she'd do so well on her first try, this was all it took for her to become hooked more thoroughly than the fish she'd caught. She'd spent the rest of the week alternating between the horses and the fishing, and had even come to see why Hal had brought more than one fly rod, although ten still seemed over the top to her.

Now the excursion party was resting in the late afternoon in an aspen grove, having climbed to the ridge above and spent about an hour marveling at the spectacular views on both sides. From up there, Vallecito Lake, which had taken them the better part of a half hour to drive around, was just a puddle. The horses were munching contentedly at the grass and clover between the trees where they'd stopped, and one of the wranglers, Ben, was retrieving one of the L.L. Beanies, who had experienced the situation that Jack had described, of going very fast in an unwanted direction on horseback.

"Must have been spooked by that horse-eating stump over there," was Ben's explanation when the horse suddenly bolted, with the terrified guest hanging on for dear life.

Annette had taken advantage of the chance for a pit stop, along with most of the rest of the party. "Boys left, girls right" had divided the group appropriately, and people had wandered off in their respective directions to find bushes of sufficient opacity to fulfill their modesty requirements.

As Annette was re-entering the grove where the horses were grazing, she heard a scream behind her, from the direction toward which one of the more modest ladies had gone. She turned and dashed back into the forest, downhill through the spruce trees. She could hear others following her.

She knew she was headed in the right direction, but she was glad to hear the second scream to get a better fix. About a hundred yards down the slope, she ran into a very frightened L.L. Beanie, who was barely able to explain her fear and seemed to think that Annette already knew something about it.

“I was down in a clearing just below, you know?, and I was, well, you know, when I looked down and there’s this bone. A big one. Sort of right by where I was, you know, getting ready to, well, you know. And then I looked a little over to my left and there was a skull. Like a human skull, you know?”

By then some of the others had caught up to them and Annette took charge. One of the wranglers came puffing up—he was used to being on a horse and running was not his forte—looking very worried, so Annette put him to work on getting everyone calmed down and back to the meadow. She had to enforce this order on one of the men, a retired military officer, apparently, by using her shield to pull rank. Then she carefully approached the clearing.

It was small, surrounded by tall spruce trees, and it had a jumble of rocks in the middle. Annette immediately noticed that the frightened woman had dropped her roll of paper and walked over the spot, being careful of where she stepped because of both the bones and, well, you know. She picked up the paper and scanned the ground.

There was the bone, and there, about 15 feet away was indeed a human skull, both with flesh in an advanced state of deterioration attached. The skull also had some hair left and Annette nearly began to think of it as a head. She continued scanning the area and eventually began quartering it to search for additional items. She heard someone coming through the woods above, and Ben appeared at the edge of the clearing.

“Ben, don’t go any further, please. I don’t want more people than necessary tromping around here. It looks like we have the remains of a human body to deal with. Did they tell you that I’m with the Durango police in real life?”

“Yeah, that colonel, or whatever he calls himself, told me. You seem to have put him in his place real good. And don’t tell anyone, but that’s OK with me. I see a skull over there, is that what you’re talking about?”

“And there are other bones, too. I’m not enough of an anatomist to be able to identify them, though.”

“So what do you want us to do?”

“I think that the best thing would be for you to take the others back to the Ranch and let me continue to look around here. When you get back, see if you can find Hal, Hal Weathers, the guy I came with, or Jack, and tell them. Ask one of them to call down to Durango and talk to the La Plata county coroner, Lester St. Clare, and see how soon he can get up here. OK?”

“I’m not supposed to leave you here alone.”

“What the rule really is, is that you’re not supposed to leave me here alone with my horse, I heard the deal when Jack gave his orientation. So lead my horse back with the others, and then have Jack come back with it to get me. I’ll be OK in the meantime. Really. It’s not like there’s anyone else up here. And Jack, or someone, should be able to make it back before dark, no?”

He was dubious but had no other ideas. He had rescued the runaway horse and rider and wanted to get everyone back to the lodge, safe and sound. And she seemed like she knew what she was about, unlike most of the other guests he had to deal with. He promised to leave her knapsack so she would have some water and agreed to her plan.

She walked back with him up to the meadow where the others were waiting, all mounted and ready to go, and retrieved her knapsack and the yellow rain slicker tied onto her horse. This she draped over a branch of a tree where she had entered the woods. After everyone had said their goodbyes, she returned to the clearing.

On the way, she broke off a number of dead branches from the lower parts of the spruce trees. In the clearing, she stuck these in the ground next to the various bones she'd found. Finally, she was sitting on a large boulder in the center of the clearing, near the pile of rocks. To her eyes, the pile looked as if it had been bulldozed down the hill for a number of yards, from a spot up the hillside where the trees were especially sparse.

The clearing, she realized, had a large teardrop shape, with the pointed end at that sparse place in the woods. As if there was a tendency for avalanches to happen. So the rock pile could be the result of a snow slide. This wasn't a huge avalanche chute, or the trees above would be snapped off, but it was rather steep and could have seen smaller slides. In that case, perhaps the remains were those of someone who had been caught in the slide and perished, maybe an unlucky back-country skier. Animals would have scattered the remains. The pile of rocks suddenly became more interesting to her.

It didn't take long for her to notice the red coloring, and she realized that it was cloth, like flannel or wool. It was some time, however, before she connected it to the mystery left hand that had been found last spring. It was the pattern that finally made the connection in her mind. Red outlined with green squares.

And it took only a little longer for her to realize that her snowslide tragedy was really something else altogether. Neither snowslides nor hungry scavengers, after all, slice through bones with surgical precision.

* * *

Nineteen

"I think that those people are too isolated up there, and it's making them crazy. Not Jack and his family, but the summer help."

They were back in the car, headed home, and Annette was reviewing her week in paradise, Rocky Mountain version.

"I guess I didn't tell you the topper, though. It was Wednesday, when you went off with Chuck to somewhere and I did a lunch ride with Josie, Sandy, and some of the other folks. Led by the inestimable Ben the Wrangler."

"Wasn't he the guy that found me and Jack yesterday afternoon and had us come up and get you?"

"Yeah. Nice guy, but weird. Not someone you want to talk politics with. We went up the side of the valley to Coyote Basin, by that little spring, for lunch, a really nice ride. A lot more rugged than even the night ride, but beautiful. When we got there and he'd staked the horses and so on, he went over to the spring to wash his face. And to do that, he took off his hat and set it down, upside down. Josie noticed that it was lined with what looked like aluminum foil, so she asked, and he told her all about it. Yes it was aluminum foil. And I've read about this, but I thought it was satire, or a joke. But he actually believes that there are secret agents from the United Nations or something, he was a little vague, guys that fly around in black helicopters, really quiet ones that you can't hear, with special equipment that detects brain waves. So he keeps the foil in his hat so they can't read his thoughts. I refrained from asking him why they'd even want to. He admitted that the foil in his hat made wearing it hot, but he says it's worth the heat so the agents won't keep a file of his thoughts. It was wonderfully amusing to see how quickly Josie changed the subject."

“You should have asked him if the reflections make his thoughts echo.”

“Huh? Hey, wait. Is this another Mr. Science Person thing?”

“Think about it. Suppose he’s right, that the government, or the UN, has some kind of instrument that they fly around in a helicopter reading thoughts with. I mean, look at it from Ben’s perspective. The government has all sorts of other kinds of exotic instruments that they fly on planes and satellites and measure stuff with. I’ve used some of them for my own research. So maybe there’s a Brainwave Remote Sensing System, called B-R-S-S, pronounced ‘bris,’ like the Jewish circumcision ceremony, top secret and so on. OK?”

“Where is this ridiculous line of thought going? Bris?”

“Well, maybe it’s called something else. Like, ah, mmm, oh, something simpler, like the Brainwave Scanner, B-S. Anyway, suppose it exists. Now, there are two ways it could work, unless there’s some kind of new, unheard of technology involved. Either it’s an active remote sensor, like radar, which sends out a signal and measures what bounces back, or it’s a passive remote sensor, like satellite pictures, or photography, or your eyeball. Except that it sees brain waves instead of sunlight. Now, I don’t know what ‘brain waves’ really are, but they’re probably some kind of electromagnetic radiation, so you can’t use active remote sensing to see them. Light waves don’t interact, so you can’t measure light from one source with light from another, no matter if it’s sunlight or radio waves or brain waves. So this secret instrument has got to be a passive system. You with me so far?”

“Ahh, well, I will stipulate that this makes sense, but that doesn’t mean that I agree or anything.”

“Well, of course. But remember, we’re tackling this from Ben’s perspective, or at least his perspective if he actually thought this through. Never mind that the government or the UN couldn’t possibly be interested in him, or that flying helicopters around would be a stupid way to spy on him. Anyway, he wears aluminum foil in his hat to block his brain waves from getting out through his hat to this B-S instrument he’s so worried about. Now, if the foil blocks his brain waves, it must do that by reflecting them. Or I suppose it could absorb them, and maybe that’s why it makes his hat so hot. But it would probably reflect them, just like foil reflects almost everything else. So that means that all his brain waves are bouncing around inside his hat, and therefore inside his head. You’d think he’d hear echoes.”

She giggled. “Thank you Mr. Science Person for another enlightening lesson. But wouldn’t the echoes just make him confused? Oh…”

“Exactly! It’s self-explanatory and self-consistent, and truly beautiful. I’ll have to write a paper for the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* on this. I can always use another journal publication on my vita. Let’s see if I can get this right. Somebody told Ben about the black helicopters and he got a little confused. So he decided to put foil in his hat to block the helicopters from reading his thoughts. And the foil causes brain-wave reflections and the echoes make him more confused, and now he’s a true believer. Conversely, if the foil weren’t there, he wouldn’t be confused, and he wouldn’t care about where his brain waves go. But it is, and he is, and he’s stuck forever in this vicious positive feedback loop. We should go steal his hat to save him from himself. But then he’d probably just think that the black helicopter guys stole it and get confused all over again and have a relapse. Poor lad.”

Her giggling had progressed to a mild hysteria, and she was making little chirping noises while trying to get her breath, so he continued. “Maybe we could make a skull cap out of heavy-duty foil, but put a lot of pin-holes in it, and send it to him. The holes would keep the reflections from being so bad, so he wouldn’t be confused, or at least not as much. All we’d have to do would be to persuade him that the brain waves leaking out through the pin-holes would be scrambled by interference patterns so the black helicopter guys couldn’t read them. And maybe he’d wear it, be less confused, figure out that the whole thing is silly, and be cured. Voila! Another triumph for science!”

* * *

Hal drove in silence for a while, to let her regain her composure. Finally, his curiosity about her discovery in the clearing got the best of him. “So, now that I’ve solved Ben’s problem, how are you going to solve that little mystery you uncovered yesterday?”

They had discussed it, of course, but she was reluctant to get more involved. The coroner had arrived first thing that morning and Ben took them on horseback up to the site. They returned with a bag about noon, another one of the “parts bags,” a bigger one this time. The previous evening in the woods, she had carefully marked the placement of the skull with several sticks and had brought it back with her when Hal and Jack had returned with her horse. If the victim were to be identified, dental records would probably be the best hope, and therefore the skull was the most important piece of the remains. She had proposed keeping it refrigerated overnight, but Henri, the Ranch’s new French chef, was not about to let that happen in *his* kitchen, so they left it carefully wrapped outside, where the nighttime temperature was probably lower than the refrigerator anyway. Today’s trip recovered the rest of the remains, and they were on their way with the skull back to Lester St. Clare’s lab.

“Back in May, when we found that hand, Lester said something about its having been freezer burned, that it had probably been outside most of the winter. So the first step will be to check out missing persons reports from last fall. At first I thought that a cross-country skier had been caught in a snow-slide. But it may have been earlier, back in hunting season last fall, and not an accident. The clean work on getting that hand off argues for something like that. So if the hand and the remains can be matched up with a missing persons report, we’ll know where to start looking for suspects. I’m assuming they’ll treat this like a murder, like I told you last night.”

“Sorry this had to happen and spoil your vacation.”

“It hasn’t, really. We were going to come home today anyhow, sorry to say, and yesterday we were finished with the ride except for the last few miles. And I expect you noticed that the discovery didn’t upset my dinner like it did that woman who first found the remains.”

“Poor thing. I bet that she’ll never be able to pee in the woods again, ever.”

“Or at least she’ll look around very, very carefully, first. The worst for me was being the celebrity when we finally got back. All I wanted to do was get cleaned up and eat, and everybody wanted me to talk and tell the story and answer questions. What I really wanted was a massage. Being on that horse all day was rougher than I thought. And you did an admirable job of smoothing out my kinks. And at least we got back in time to have dinner. I wonder how many of those other folks will go back to the Ranch again.”

“Jack says that he has about 40% repeat customers, which is pretty good in that business, especially as the variety of stuff to do is limited. It’s one thing to go there for a week to fish and ride horses; it’s another to do it again and again. You’ve got to be a pretty hard-core fisher, like me, to want that.”

“Well, I’ll be more than happy to go back there whenever you want to. Jack and Pam are just delightful people. And I don’t think I’ll become a hard-core fly-fisher, but I sure enjoyed myself. Who’d have thunk it? I guess now I know why I see those guys fishing on the river through town all the time. I’ve never seen them catching anything, though. Are there any fish in there?”

“Sure. Lots. Trout, whitefish. But they’re not as naïve as the fish up where we were. That day we went way up the river, uh, Thursday I guess, and caught a cutthroat every five minutes for 3 hours is not something that happens just anywhere. Anyway, if you’re going to look into missing persons reports for last fall, during hunting season, it sounds like you’ve got a hypothesis.”

“Well, I don’t know that it’s going to be me doing the investigation. Not my jurisdiction, after all. Anyway, Lester said that the hand we have was probably taken off with a big, sharp knife. So it sounds like this guy either died or was killed, and the other guys he was with didn’t want to bury him whole, so they took his body apart. Maybe they thought that the pieces would be carried off by animals and there’d never be a body found. And just that almost happened, and probably would have by next year, if that lady hadn’t walked off so far and stumbled upon the bones. And of course the hand on the music building roof was a real coincidence.”

“Yeah? I thought you coppers didn’t believe in coincidences.”

“Well, now there’s something to think about. You were at the scene of the discovery of the hand, after all. And I have no idea of where you were last fall, but I do know that you go up to the Ranch a lot. And, say, didn’t I find you at the scene of the campus murder last Christmas? Coincidence? I don’t think so. I’d better take you somewhere I can question you carefully, pal. I might even have to get a little rough, if you don’t play your cards right.”

“Ooo... Promise? I can hardly wait.”

* * *

When they finally got back to town, Annette insisted on going to the morgue first, so she could check to be sure that the coroner had made it back with all of the remains, and then to the sheriff’s office so that she could find out about the missing persons requests.

Lester St. Clare was, as usual, in his laboratory, in the cold room, and they found him unpacking his latest treasures. He had unwrapped the skull and laid it at one end of an examining table. Other pieces were being put into place as he identified them. It was a grisly display, especially the two medium sized bones that were cut cleanly off.

“Ah, Lieutenant. Enjoying your return to civilization? I think you’ll be interested in something here.”

He picked up the skull and turned it sideways. “Notice anything?”

She was not the expert that he was, but something did seem amiss. There appeared to be some damage to the cheek bone on the right side, just above the upper right wisdom tooth. She said so.

“Very observant. Now, because this has been exposed to the weather and the critters for so long, I don’t know how much we’ll be able to really find here, but I think you’re right. I don’t expect you noticed this yesterday?”

“No, it was getting on toward dark, and I was tired. When we got it back to the Ranch, we just wrapped it up. What do you think of the damage?”

“Well, it could be just environmental damage, but it could also be the result of an intentional blow to the face, and possibly fatal. I’ll have to look at this damage with a microscope to see if there are any further indications.”

“You’re positive that this is the same body the arm came off?”

“Not one hundred percent until we get DNA corroboration. But,” he pointed to the two half bones, “these are the proximal halves of the left radius and ulna that match the arm in the freezer. So I’d say it’s 99.9%. It’s curious that the body was so completely dismembered, though.”

“I’m guessing that it was to get the bones apart so they’d scatter due to natural causes more easily. It was sure in a strange place, though. Hard to get to, even by that jeep road, I’m told.”

“I remember the ride in, believe me. And the natural scattering theory would be my guess, too. Now it’s your job to find out who.”

“Oh, no. I may have found this guy, but it was in the county, and I’m Durango, remember? And this also means that we can give you guys the hand to go with your, repeat, *your* bones. What a deal.”

Even if she didn’t want to get too involved, Annette couldn’t resist making a second stop at the missing persons desk at the police station to get the database query started, where she was told to expect a long list by Monday. Given the fact that, each fall, hunters came from all over the country for a chance to shoot an elk in the Rockies, the search would have to be nationwide. And it would have to cover a period of at least 3 months, to be comprehensive. And lots of people disappear.

But the dental records, combined with approximate age information that St. Clare would be able to provide, would be a good start. And since almost no one went hunting without the help of an outfitter, especially way up there, the potential players in the tragedy would become well defined rather quickly. Or at least so Annette hoped.

* * *

If Hal and Annette felt ambivalent to be returning to civilization, Whitby Bradford was overjoyed. Jennifer had driven him about as far as he could go without losing it altogether. This trip would require serious forgetting. The worst of it was that she had stopped treating him as if he were a man, or at least as if he were a sexually active one.

She had begun ignoring him while dressing and undressing, in front of him no less, and, yesterday, she had stripped down during a brief thunderstorm to shower in the rain, with him standing right there. He would have followed suit, but he was too embarrassed by his reaction to her nudity to do so. And she’d just sort of ignored him while rinsing off in the cold rainfall. This was just not fair.

But he couldn’t let this little setback taint his love of the back country experience. There would be other opportunities with other college girls, after all. He decided he would have to restock his food supply and set out again as soon as possible for the high country, like getting back on the horse after you fall off, to make sure that this miserable week was forgotten right away. Meditation, and medication via some serious dope smoking, that’s what he needed, and a week alone in the wilderness.

He didn’t know it, but Jennifer was also ready for another week in the woods, with someone else this time. When she’d spotted Whit peeping at her in the waterfall on Monday, something changed in her head completely. It was as if there had been a part of her that was considering making love with him but was still undecided.

After the peeping incident, that vanished, and he became just another person, de-sexed, platonic, and too old for her anyhow. She did enjoy teasing him, but that was just her nature. Mostly, she enjoyed the fact that he continued to insist on carrying most of the heavy gear, so that she had an easy time of it. In any case, she’d remember this route for the future, and use it with a boyfriend someday. That spot with the waterfall was indeed romantic, even if it hadn’t worked on her for Whit. Poor horny bastard.

* * *

While the two couples were on their way back to Durango that Saturday, Lewis Wilbanks was finally arriving at the camp site he’d picked out in the Rock Creek valley. He had taken three days to make the trip by using a round-about route that included several side-valley trips, planned in advance to look as if he were making a series of scientific measurements and also to throw off any possible followers, at least

any that he could conceive of. The extra distance involved was trivial because of the horses, and he actually enjoyed the chance to watch the scenery for once. And he'd built up an impressive list of measurements in his notebook, carefully including their precise positions from his GPS receiver to prove where he'd been.

Richard Hardin was having trouble understanding what the professor was up to. He'd been tracking the pair of horses for several days now, partly out of curiosity and partly to make sure that nothing bad happened to his favorite horse, Brownie, who was being used as a pack animal. At least the professor knew how to load a pack properly, and Brownie didn't look to be suffering. Tracking the horses was easy for Richard, and sneaking up to where the professor made camp was also not too hard, although the horses tended to get edgy if he got too close.

Richard, Jack Hardin's younger brother, was a sort of dark secret of the Los Piños Ranch. A farm accident involving a head injury years ago had left him partially disabled, mentally, and he'd had several bad encounters with the law as a result. It was not that he was a bad person, or a criminal, but he was "simple" as they used to call it, and he had an unfortunate tendency to get into trouble as a result of having more curiosity than good judgement.

Because his body was fully abled, hormonal urges were particularly troublesome, as women were not at all attracted to his unkempt appearance and the wild look in his dark brown eyes. With Jack's tacit approval, Richard had become sort of partly hermit, partly barn hand around the Ranch. He was forbidden from interacting with the guests and summer staff, except the wranglers, and he generally kept to himself.

Fortunately, he loved the mountains and spent most of the summer season in the wilderness, subsisting on the fish that he was so adept at catching, the occasional poached fawn, and other supplies provided by Jack. He spent the winters in the Ranch's barn, with the horses, so he was good friends with them.

Even though his intellectual capacity was at about the second-grade level, he knew the valleys and ridges in the Vallecito Creek and Los Piños watersheds like he knew the barn he spent the winter in. He enjoyed spying on backpackers and had learned their habits well enough to anticipate where they would stop for the night and, by how much they were carrying, how long they would be out.

Watching Jennifer shower at the waterfall—unlike Bradford, Richard had not been discovered by her—had been this summer's highlight, so far.

But this professor puzzled him. Richard had seen the scientific activity before, and even had Jack explain it to him last winter. Measuring trees, bushes, and the soil was easy to understand. But why would the professor need two horses this year? Last year he'd walked, just like the two earlier trips this summer, and once had taken a single horse. Why did he keep going back to the same place on Rock Creek? And what was that extra stuff that Brownie was carrying this time?

* * *

Ty Bortle usually spent Saturdays in town, stocking up on supplies and getting drunk. He'd been banned from the Jack Creek Saloon in Vallecito, so he had to drive all the way into Bayfield or Durango for his binges. Anyway, the prices for food were better down there than at the Vallecito General Store. Maybe the rich summer cabin folks could afford the stuff there, but he was a working stiff who had to watch his budget.

Unfortunately, this particular Saturday was different, because he had had a lousy week, guide-wise. The day on Vallecito Creek with the Hinkles was a disaster, pure and simple. They had both, *both*, fallen

in the river and got their waders filled with water. Marie had even started to float away before Ty could get to her. At least he'd copped a nice feel when he'd grabbed her. Then what's-his-name, Bill, had got a hook stuck deep into his thumb, a barbed one at that. Ty knew well the trick of extracting hooks using a piece of strong leader material and a quick jerk, but Marie wouldn't let him. So he'd just cut the line off and let Bill spend the rest of the day, until they could get back to the Ranch, with a parachute Adams dry fly, size 14, sticking out of the thumb on his casting hand. Serve him right if it gets infected.

Although Ty was disappointed, at some level he understood why there was no tip for him that day. What really pissed him off was that the Hinkles must have blamed him for everything and told the other guests, because that was the only work he'd had all week.

So not only did he not have enough money to go into town and get drunk, he was also going to run short of food. The only solution was to make a quick trip into the wilderness and poach a deer or maybe a young elk. He knew where to go, and all he'd have to do would be to get up and back without being seen. It would have to be done with his hunting bow, of course, because there were too many backpackers and day hikers up there to get away with the noise of a rifle. But he had acquired, from a client, a hunting bow that collapsed into a nice, unremarkable package. He could take his fly rod and some fishing equipment and pretend to be scouting new places to take clients. Because he never walked anywhere, no one would be surprised when he rode off trailing a pack horse. And they wouldn't notice when the pack horse came back carrying more than it carried out.

Bortle gave it some thought, and finally settled on trying for an elk from the herd that he knew summered near the headwaters of Vallecito Creek. There was a lake at the base of a horseshoe shaped cirque surrounded by meadow and, a little higher on the hillsides, forest for cover. The elk had shelter, water, a variety of food sources, and several escape routes both up the cirque and down the valley in the event of emergencies. Few backpackers went there, because it was just too far into the wilderness and not on a marked trail. He'd start first thing tomorrow. But tonight he had a bottle of Wild Turkey around somewhere that was begging for his attention.

* * *

Twenty

On Monday, Annette came home with a long mailing tube under her arm. When she walked into the house, her nose was assaulted by the combination of turmeric, cumin, coriander, and ginger that could only mean two things: Hal was in the kitchen with the counter tops covered with just about every little bowl in the house full of carefully measured stuff, and the house would smell like curry for the next week or so. He'd been threatening to make a chicken curry for some time, she remembered. She was looking forward to the results but decided to stay out of the kitchen.

Instead, she went into the dining room, cleared off the table, and expanded it to its dinner party configuration, with all the leaves. Then she took several U.S. Geological Survey 7.5-minute series topographic maps out of the mailing tube and unrolled them onto the table, folding and matching the edges, and holding them down with various salt shakers and pepper grinders from the sideboard. When she was finished, she had a large-scale, high-resolution view of the vicinity of the site where the remains had been discovered the week before.

Hal came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. "Oh, hi. Didn't hear you come in. Wow. What's this?"

“Quad maps of the area above Vallecito Lake, centered on where we found the remains last Friday. I want to get an idea of the terrain to go with what I remember from last week. What’s for dinner? Want me to thaw out some ground round for ’burgers?” She batted her eyelashes innocently.

He stuck his lower lip out and tried to pout, but he knew it looked ridiculous and gave it up at once. “Hmmp. If you can’t tell what I’m making, you must have the world’s worst cold. Maybe I’ll add more cayenne to yours. So, I thought this was in the county and not your worry.”

“Well, we found the hand last spring, and Lester thinks that it belongs to the remains I found, so the sheriff’s office has decided to defer to my ownership, or expertise, or something. The sheriff called my chief and he put me on it.”

“Oh. Well, I bet you didn’t know that I’ve got all these same quad maps upstairs in the attic. Although yours look like newer editions. I’ve also got a couple of large-scale LANDSAT images, too, and a SPOT image I bought. About the same scale as the maps, I think. I’m a map person and like to look at where I go fishing. And you know I go fishing up there a lot. I’ll dig them out after dinner. And if you really want a good look at this area, I can use my clout with the geography department to get access to their geographic information system. It has all this information, maps and pictures, overlaid, and you can zoom in, rotate it, and even make 3-D views.”

“The county has a GIS system, too, but I bet that the college’s is better. Just like the chemistry facility. You’re a very useful friend to have, you know that?”

“And I thought you loved me for my body. What a let-down. You want to help me with dinner?”

“Ohhh, you know that’ll just make me crazy...”

“I know, but I’m trying to reform. Really. I did measure the spices carefully, because I didn’t want to screw up the curry. But I looked at the recipe again and it seems like we could just put in whatever amounts of whatever seems good. It’s all got to simmer for a while anyway. So you can chop stuff up and I can throw it in and let it cook. Honest. I’m not going to measure anything. And, well, I like having you in the kitchen with me. And then we can study these maps after dinner.”

Annette was having trouble believing what she was hearing, but it sounded good. So she followed him into the kitchen and was amazed to find no little bowls or measuring cups. Just a pile of ingredients on the cutting board, and a chicken waiting to be cut up. “Does this mean that you’ll do OK with my just throwing stuff together?” She could hardly believe what was happening.

“Everything you’ve made for me has been so good, how could I object? And I’ll have to continue to measure some things, like the proportions for béchamel sauce, but I think it’ll be liberating to just cook, instead of making it into a chemistry experiment. Besides, you’ve eased off your shopping compulsiveness a lot, so I owe you one.”

She didn’t know whether to be gratified at his vow to change or offended at his cheap shot at her shopping habits. Hey, she saved money that way, didn’t she? But cooking together could actually be fun, so it would be worth ignoring the cheap shot and giving his vow a trial run.

And it was fun. He attacked the chicken, she attacked the vegetables and fruit, and they wound up with a curry that exceeded all expectations. They ate it in the breakfast nook, because of the maps on the dining table, but it still tasted heavenly.

* * *

By dinnertime on Monday, Ty Bortle had made it as far as the confluence of Rock Creek, what was left of it below the diversion, with the main stem of the Vallecito Creek. A late start on Sunday—his

hangovers were a lot worse than they used to be—had put him behind his tentative schedule, but that was OK. He'd trailered his horses up to the end of the county road at the campground above the lake and got on the trail by late morning, but even riding deep into dusk he would need a few more hours to get up to the cirque and the elk herd he was going to stalk. At least there were plenty of trout in the creek to provide dinner.

But he wasn't alone up here. That was smoke he was smelling. Now who the hell would be way up here on a Monday evening? Well, if he could smell the smoke here, maybe they were close by and not up by the lake. Campers up there would really cramp his style with the elk.

About a mile up Rock Creek, Lewis Wilbanks was responsible for the smoke that Bortle was smelling. Wilbanks had caught several trout and was roasting them for dinner. He'd spent the past two days reconnoitering the spots he planned to locate his explosives and continuing with his measurements for cover. Tomorrow he would begin to set up the bombs and be ready to do the tunnel slog tomorrow night. Then, on Wednesday he could leave by continuing up to tree line and across the ridge opposite the tunnel and coming down the next valley to the south. He could detonate the charges from up on the ridge, and, by Wednesday night, he would be a long way away from the scene of his sabotage.

Up on the side of the valley, Richard Hardin was also eating dinner, watching both Wilbanks and Bortle, and wondering what this was all about. Two guys, each alone, each with two horses? He should be so lucky. Richard was not using a fire, as he'd learned to like trout raw. When he had told his brother about this, Jack had laughed and taught him a new word, soo-she. If people in that other country, um, Japan, could eat raw fish, from the ocean yet, so could Richard, from the much cleaner streams of the high Rockies. What Richard really liked was the different tastes of the fish from the different parts of the streams. Jack said it was because of the different things that they ate, and from the different kinds of trout, too. But none of them tasted like grasshoppers, so Richard didn't quite understand it.

He had been watching carefully over the past couple of days as the professor re-examined the diversion structures and took his measurements. Richard was in no hurry to go anywhere, nor did he make plans very much, so he was waiting for the professor to do something different. His knowledge of backpacker behavior was being expanded by watching the professor. He knew that a man with two horses could stay in the forest longer than one with only a backpack, and he could cover more ground, too, but he didn't know how much. So his curiosity kept him watching.

But now there was this other guy, who looked familiar. One of the guides at Jack's lodge, one he'd met. But Richard wasn't good enough with names to remember. What was he doing up here? And how long could he stay out with his two horses? And how could Richard watch them both, if they went different ways? This sort of puzzle was enough to give Richard a headache.

Back down the valley, Whitby Bradford had settled in for the evening at a campsite under some cliffs well off the trail to contemplate his situation. He was alone, but compared to the last time he was up in the woods, that was a blessing. He had plenty of food and, having just eaten, was contentedly puffing on a joint under the stars in a place he truly loved. The lovely Jennifer was fading quickly into the fuzziness.

He had put in a long half day, trying to get himself into the kind of walking condition that she had been in and trying to forget her at the same time. Another day and he'd be nearing the end of the valley and would have to decide where to go next. Tomorrow night would put him at the mouth of Rock Creek, and he could wait for a decision until then. For now, life was peaceful and generally good.

* * *

After filling themselves with chicken curry and getting the kitchen cleaned up and the house aired out, as much as possible at least, Hal and Annette gathered magnifiers, Hal's photographs, and a small tool for estimating map distances and tackled the dining room table. Their first task was to locate as precisely as possible the clearing where the remains had been.

"I asked Jack, and he thought it was about three miles up the Middle Mountain trail. So let's use this little gizmo to see about where that is."

She was fiddling with the scale on the little device, which had a wheel on one end and a gauge. She set the wheel at the Ranch and began rolling it up the trail, watching the gauge carefully. When it got to the three-mile mark, she stopped and drew a light pencil circle at the spot.

"This white area straddling the trail must be the meadow where we stopped and tethered the horses. And here's the little stream we passed just below that meadow. So that puts the clearing right about here."

She drew another light circle just downhill of the meadow, in a green area on the map. The clearing was, apparently, too small to be shown in white.

"And look at this. It's not clear where it is, jurisdiction-wise. Even the county line here is labeled 'indefinite.' So not only am I out of my Durango jurisdiction, this might not even be La Plata county. I guess we should bring in the Hinsdale sheriff."

"So the only way to get there is up from the Ranch the way that you guys went or in from higher up on the ridge, from the Middle Mountain Road here to Tuckerville, or down this other trail." Hal was tracing his finger along the trail above the meadow. "Do you remember where it goes?"

"We rode well past this meadow, I remember, and then kept going on up the ridge here. Then we went up to somewhere up here, way up the ridge, and wandered through the forest over to somewhere up here."

She was pointing to a small peak labeled "Table Mountain."

"And then back, through a different part of the forest but finally down this same trail. Like I said, I want to get a better feel for the area, having been there and all. And now that there's this investigation. Can we find all this on the photos?"

It was fairly easy to match up the landmarks on the satellite photographs with those on the quad maps, and before long they had identified the meadow and convinced themselves that they could see the clearing as well.

"These shots are several years old, now, and there may be newer ones, especially with all the declassification of the spy satellites and the commercialization of the imagery that's going on. I'll check with the GIS people on campus to see if they have anything newer, and with better resolution."

Hal also had some other ideas about better imagery, but they would cost money, so he didn't mention them. The police department's budget was, like all such departments, chronically stretched.

"Any luck with the missing persons database search?"

"More than you want to hear about. The FBI has something over a hundred thousand missing people in their files. It seems like zillions of people are reported missing each month—most are found, but not reported. I'm hoping that by tomorrow a follow-up query will eliminate those that have been solved or withdrawn. Then we can cull the results of that for the physical characteristics that Lester's been able to deduce. Which are: white male, early 30s, about 5-8, thin, probably about 140 pounds, fair complexion, probably very light brown hair, good health, type O positive blood. You'd think someone would have reported him missing, like his wife or girlfriend or something. I'm hoping that there won't

be too many matches, or else I'll be spending a lot of time on the telephone. Not my favorite thing to be doing this time of year."

* * *

The next morning about ten, Hal was yanked out of his concentration on formulating a particularly delicate memo to his department chairs, concerning balancing diversity considerations when recruiting faculty during the upcoming academic year with fairness and political sensitivities, by a call from Alice.

"Dean Weathers, there are some gentlemen from the government here asking to talk with you. They said they were with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms."

He was surprised, but relieved to have something less divisive to think about, and went out to meet them. Field Agents McCauley and Deutsch appeared, at first glance, to be striving for a sort of Mutt-and-Jeff version of the "good-cop/bad-cop" image. They were both dressed in the standard government-issue, cheap gray suit, white shirt, and four-in-hand tie (one red, one blue, Hal noticed), with dark brogans. McCauley was the taller of the two by about a foot, and had kind, tired eyes; Deutsch, although short and round, had the look of a ferret. Hal led them into his office, got them seated and offered coffee, which was politely declined.

McCauley was the spokesman. "Mr. Weathers, I believe that the Department of Natural Resources is in your College of Natural Sciences? And that Lewis M. Wilbanks is a faculty member in that department?"

Hal was nodding, so he continued. "We're interested in any information that you can give us about Mr. Wilbanks' whereabouts and his activities on and off campus."

Hal had risen and moved to his desk, where he'd turned to his computer keyboard and begun typing, all the while glancing over at McCauley to encourage him to continue talking.

"It says here in the university database that he's an associate professor, has been for three years, and has been with the university for 10 years. He teaches and does research, but it's unfunded. Which means he doesn't have any grants. His research specialty is high-altitude ecosystems with emphasis on coniferous forests. Is there anything else I can tell you? Why are you interested in him?"

McCauley tried not to look too devious. "We have come upon some information about Mr. Wilbanks. I can't tell you the source, but we consider it to be unimpeachable. We have agents placed within various paramilitary groups around the country, and one has told us that Wilbanks took delivery of a fairly large amount of military explosive, the stuff commonly called 'plastique.' And some radio-controlled detonators. This is extremely dangerous material to have on the street or in the hands of anyone outside the military, and, naturally, we're concerned."

Hal was still unclear on the purpose of their visit. "I'm not sure why you're here, beyond getting the information I just read for you. What do you want to do, exactly?"

Deutsch seized the opportunity. "What do you think? To get the stuff back, of course. And to find out what he was going to use it for. And stop him. Do you know anything about his political affiliations? Any involvement with the patriot movement, or anything like that?"

Hal was not going to be offended by this unpleasant person, but he was going to be careful.

"There are about 125 faculty members in my college, so I don't know each of them personally. Wilbanks teaches resources management, I believe, and does his research up in the high country in the spruce forest ecosystems near tree line. I really don't know anything about his personal life. I think I met

his wife, once, years ago, and since then I believe they've parted ways. If he has children, I expect they're grown and on their own by now."

"We're going to need his personnel records."

"I can arrange for you to look around in his office and lab, but getting into anything locked or into his personnel records will require a warrant. We had a case here on campus last winter that clarified all the privacy rules very nicely, so I have a clear idea of what I can and can't do. One thing I can get you now is a copy of his latest FAR." Hal turned back to his keyboard and began typing.

"FAR? And we'll get whatever warrants we have to. And if you're trying to cover anything up, we'll get one for you, too."

Deutsch seemed intent on cultivating his bad-cop image, but Hal was a professional at dealing with unpleasant personalities. Some of his faculty members made this guy look like Pollyanna.

"Faculty Activities Report. Each year, faculty members fill out a form that details all the stuff they've been doing, including teaching, research, and service. We decided a couple of years ago that these would be public documents. Lots of times, their listings under 'service' include community activities. Maybe that will help." Hal's printer began humming. "Have you thought of just calling him and talking about this?"

"Right. And tip him off so he could dump the stuff somewhere. Good thinking."

What a truly unpleasant person. But Hal was not going to rise to the bait. His experience with this sort of personality was simply too broad. And, besides, there could be a real problem here, especially if Wilbanks had some of the stuff on campus.

"Would you like to look around in his office now? I can get the campus police over there with a master key."

* * *

It took only until mid-morning for Ty Bortle to reach the lake, where he found, to his relief, no other people. He'd stuck to the trail up to the diversion structure and then followed the creek through the woods. Whoever had made the fire last night was nowhere to be seen, although there were some signs of someone's presence recently just above the structure. Horse tracks, mostly, and evidence of someone walking along the ditch between the stream and the aqueduct. Must be people from the water board checking for obstructions, Bortle thought.

Richard Hardin was delighted when the guy whose name he couldn't remember continued up to the place that the professor was camped, because it meant that Richard would be able to keep track of both men. But then he continued on past, and Richard was disappointed. Meanwhile, he noticed that the professor had hurriedly packed up his campsite and looked to be ready to move on. But he didn't.

Instead, when the other guy was coming up the trail, the professor had moved his horses away from the creek, into the woods. So the other guy didn't see him. And now, the professor was climbing on that bridge that carried the water into the tunnel, where he had been looking around for the past couple of days. And he was fiddling with something, something from the bags that Brownie had been carrying. Richard would have to climb up there later on and see what it was. This was all very strange.

And now Richard would have to decide which of these guys to follow. It would depend on where the professor went next with Brownie. He knew that the other guy had gone on up to the lake, where the elk stayed all summer.

* * *

Wilbanks' office was pretty typical, Hal thought. Cluttered, full of books, manuscripts, reprints. Bookshelves with class notes organized by course in loose-leaf binders. Several-year-old computer, turned off. File cabinets, unlocked. Desk piled up with stacks of paper, somewhat shuffled looking. Hal had found out that Wilbanks didn't have laboratory or other research space, because his research wasn't sponsored. He managed to publish several papers each year and had to apply to the college for funds to support the page charges.

"We'll have to look at all of this to see if there are any records of his shipments." McCauley looked somewhat dismayed and intimidated by the amount of paper.

Despite Deutsch's unpleasantness, Hal wanted to be helpful. "Chances are that a lot of the stuff on the desk is more or less chronological. Memos and so on that he just puts on top of a pile. I bet there's a department pile, a college pile, a university pile. You can stop looking at those when you get down to a certain date, sometime before your informant's information, I'd think. Look at this like an archeological dig, and don't go deeper than the time you're interested in. The department told me he'd planned an extended field trip, so he shouldn't be back here for a couple of weeks. You've got time. Although I'll be amazed if there are any records here of what you're interested in. I think you ought to get a warrant and look over his house."

"That's in progress, but we wanted to get started here. Looks like nothing's locked, so we have access to anything here, is that right?"

"That's my understanding. I'm sure he'd appreciate it if nothing was disturbed, however."

"Well, we really aren't ready for him to know we're doing this, so we'll be careful to leave things as we've found them. Although I can't imagine he'd notice if a tornado went through here, it's such a mess."

Hal chuckled. "You guys know your criminals, but I know faculty. He'd notice, for sure. I bet he could find any single piece of paper you asked for, if it's here. I'll be back in my office, if you need me."

* * *

When he returned to his office, Hal noticed that Alice was hanging around in a mode that he'd learned to recognize as her signal that she wanted to talk. The trick was to pretend not to notice this, strike up a casual conversation, and see if she would open up. He chose the most obvious topic of the day.

"You know, it seems like we're having an unusual amount of police activity around campus lately. The investigation of Ralph's death last winter; that hand in the lilac bush last May, and now the ATF. Maybe I should just get deputized, or something."

"It certainly lends an air of excitement, and mystery, to our normally quiet existence, doesn't it, Dean Weathers? I hope that the federal agents were not investigating yet another death?"

"No, they just got a tip on one of the faculty members, something about explosives. It may have to do with an earth science research project, mining or something."

Like all faculty members, Hal was protective of his colleagues, even with Alice.

"Do you know if the ATF is involved with missing persons searches?"

"Ahh...well, the FBI gets involved if there is a kidnapping, I know that. Annette told me she used the threat of calling in the FBI to get me out of one of the situations that arose in connection with the investigation of Ralph's death, that car ride I told you about. I think that regular missing persons

searches are handled by the local authorities, at first at least. The ATF probably doesn't ever get involved. Why?"

"Well, it's probably nothing, really, but Leonard and I haven't heard from Francis since before last Thanksgiving, and we're wondering where he could be. He's been out of touch before, of course, but not for this long. We did notify the local police, but they have no information. I guess this isn't surprising."

Something was nagging at the edge of Hal's consciousness. "Um, when did you notify the police?"

"In February. Back in mid-November, he told us that he would be in Mexico for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and he called us from Cozumel on Thanksgiving. Which is why I told the police and you that he had an iron-clad alibi for the night of Professor Stiller's death, if you remember. But when we didn't hear from him again by February, we started asking questions. And we still haven't heard anything, and it is becoming more and more disturbing. I thought maybe the ATF agents would have some advice, perhaps."

"So on Thanksgiving, he called and said he was in Cozumel?"

"Yes, and we were surprised, because the connection was so clear. We'd thought that telephone calls from Mexico would be, you know, full of static, or something. He's never been out of touch for so long, and I'm getting worried. Probably just a mother's reaction to nothing."

Maybe, thought Hal. Maybe not. He made a mental note to mention this conversation to Annette.

To Alice he said, "I think that these guys are specialists in explosives, so they probably don't know much about missing persons."

Maybe that would get Alice's mind off the subject.

* * *

The professor and Brownie didn't seem to be going anywhere, at least not just yet, and it was starting to get dark. Just as Richard was thinking about slipping down to the creek to catch a trout for dinner, he saw coming up the trail another guy, on foot. The guy he'd seen with that pretty girl last week. What was he doing here? And now how was Richard going to get his dinner? Maybe, by staying high on the hillside, he could skirt around both of these guys and go find the other guy up by the lake. He'd have food, a hot dinner, probably. What was his name, anyway?

While Bradford made camp near the spot where Bortle had camped last night, Wilbanks was preparing for a long night of tunnel work. He fed and watered the horses and tied them closely to a picket line so they wouldn't stray or get tangled, and put on his gear, including a backpack with the explosives and detonators. He turned on his miner's helmet light and walked off toward the tunnel.

The grate over the southwest portal of the Rock Creek diversion tunnel was made of welded steel reinforcing bars, the heavy kind used in highway construction. There were three pieces, two semi-circles with a rectangle for a door in between, each piece consisting of four-inch squares. Small animals could therefore get in and out of the tunnel, but bigger critters, including humans, were blocked. The door had crude hinges and was padlocked.

Wilbanks used his bolt cutters to break the lock off, opened the door, went inside and, after some thought, locked it behind him with his own padlock. He pocketed the key very carefully and securely. He turned and looked down the gentle slope of the tunnel, into the darkness. His light seemed quite feeble, and, despite the spiked, felt-soled boots, the bottom seemed slippery. It was going to be a long, long walk, about four miles altogether, crouched over, yet. He set his pedometer on zero and started off.

An hour and a half later, his back was aching and his pedometer read two miles. He was where he wanted to be, if not how he wanted to feel. He'd noticed that there were convenient hand-holds in the concrete of the tunnel about every ten feet or so, to keep people who slip from being washed clean through, he supposed. He used some line he'd brought to fasten himself to the wall with a carabiner, and went to work.

The plastique was easily shaped and gooey enough that he had no trouble sticking it to the ceiling of the tunnel. He found a seam in the concrete that made the adhesion even stronger, and, satisfied with his effort, he inserted the detonator cap and clipped the radio receiver to the carabiner on the hand-hold. Having checked everything twice, he held his breath and flipped the "on" switch on the receiver.

When nothing happened, he let his breath out in relief and packed up for the long slog back up the tunnel. He had a mile up the slippery slope to go before planting the remaining charge. After that, he would place the repeater near the mouth of the tunnel, near enough to pick up and relay the radio signal, but far enough in to be hard to see, let himself out and re-lock the door behind himself, and, blessedly, sleep. And rest his back. His aching back.

* * *

Twenty-One

The next morning, Ty Bortle was astonished to find another person asleep by the remains of his campfire. He was also more than a little chagrined to realize that someone had been able to sneak up on him after dark. Even the horses had not raised an alarm.

But then he understood. It was Richard Hardin, curled up in his dirty sleeping bag. Bortle knew Richard to be a master outdoorsman, despite being something of a half-wit, to Bortle's way of thinking. At least he was a friendly, non-threatening half-wit. Richard must have been a light sleeper, because as soon as Bortle stirred, he woke up and looked around. When he saw Bortle he gave a sort of half smile and said, "Hi, I'm hungry. What's your name? I forgot."

Bortle told him and also told him that they'd have to catch their breakfast. Why didn't Richard do that while he stirred up a fire? Richard bounded off toward the stream. Bortle realized that this meeting was actually in his favor, because Richard would be quite helpful in the elk hunt to come later in the day, not to mention in catching trout.

Down the Rock Creek valley, Wilbanks was sleeping late, and Bradford, farther down at the Vallecito Creek confluence, was getting his morning started slowly. He'd put in a long, hard day yesterday and was planning to take it easy today. He was sitting on an outcropping with his legs folded into a yoga posture, meditating to the rising sun, and still trying to get the image of the naked Jennifer out of his consciousness. Later, he'd make tea and decide whether to explore the side valley (he couldn't remember when he'd been up it before) or to go on up the main stem of Vallecito Creek.

Up near the diversion, Wilbanks finally woke up about 9:00. He reviewed the day's plan carefully and realized that he was, if anything, ahead of schedule. He had to finish packing his camp and load the horses, turn on the receivers on the detonators for the charges at the head gates and the aqueduct, and get the hell out of there. He should be nearing the ridge top just after noon, which would give him plenty of day left to get across to the next valley after setting off the explosions. He crawled out of his sleeping bag and spent some time trying to stretch out his back while the water boiled. Next time, he'd figure out a better way than slogging four miles through a five-foot tunnel.

* * *

McCauley and Deutsch, the BATF agents, had returned for a second day of examining Wilbanks' office, having sent another search team to execute the warrants on his house. They had found nothing obvious the day before, but they wanted to look more closely at the various notebooks they'd found. The textbooks and the other paperwork, in the files and on the desk, were unremarkable, but the binders of class notes had been put together by Wilbanks based on his research for use in teaching, and they could contain information relevant to the search. If nothing else, they could help with the psychological profile that they were building of Wilbanks.

If Hal could have seen them working on Wilbanks' files, he would hardly have recognized them except for their appearance. The "good-cop/bad-cop" tactics were abandoned completely in favor of razor-sharp professionalism. They were both speed readers and, although they were not specialists in resource management by any means, their backgrounds were sufficiently broad that they had no problems with the undergraduate class notes that they were examining. So they were leafing through the notebooks with surprising speed and efficiency. Moreover, they had worked together enough to be tuned into each other's body language, so when Deutsch stopped reading and stared out the window, McCauley knew something was up, and asked what.

"Are you running into as much stuff about water control structures and dams and so on as I am? It made sense in one of these notebooks, ah, let's see...this one that says 'Water Resources Management,' but it's also spread all over these other ones I've been reading. Ones about plants and trees and such."

"Now that you mention it, I am. It's sort of been on the edge of my mind, you know? And one of these things goes into a lot of detail about one particular place. Let's see if I can find it here...yeah, here are drawings of some kind of aqueduct and tunnel, right in the middle of a discussion of how much sunlight and minerals stands of spruce need to grow optimally. Strange."

"Remember that file of newspaper clippings we found yesterday, for the Freestone River Alliance? That fits with this obsession with this control structure stuff. I wonder what they're finding at his house." They went back to their reading.

* * *

Hidden among brush and rocks at the bottom of the wooded slope in which the elk herd had bedded down, Bortle was more and more impressed with Richard Hardin and with the elk hunting team the two of them made. Richard had circled widely around and above the patch of trees on the hillside and was slowly and carefully herding the elk down the hill toward Bortle. So far Richard had managed to do this in a remote-control version of the demonstration that Jack Hardin had used with Matador for the new guests: slowly, steadily, gently. The elk didn't panic or run off; nor did they make a stand and try to run Richard off—even though the larger bulls could have stomped Richard into mincemeat if they'd wanted to.

Before he'd disappeared into the uphill side of the woods, Bortle had watched Richard meander slowly down the hillside toward the herd, stopping frequently and seemingly paying little attention to the big animals. Then he'd move closer. The elk would become just uncomfortable enough to stand up and move a few yards down the hill, toward where Bortle was waiting, but not uncomfortable enough to be startled into bolting. After about two hours of slow and careful herding, Richard's tactics were about to pay off.

As the elk began to become visible at the downhill side of the patch of trees, Bortle began looking for just the right target. A yearling cow, with enough meat to make the exercise worthwhile but not too big and tough, would be perfect. And he needed a good shot as well, because neither he nor Richard wanted to chase after a wounded elk until it bled to death.

Just as he had spotted his target and lined up a very promising shot, the ground suddenly shook and there was the sound of thunder. No, not thunder, but something else, like an avalanche or something. The elk, used to thunder, would have ignored that interruption of their rest, but the shaking ground was something that they didn't like at all. The entire herd was off and running at once, up the valley toward the lake and the cirque. Bortle stood and tried to line up a shot, but knew that he'd just waste an arrow. Richard emerged from the trees at a run as well, but the elk were outpacing him easily. He finally walked up to Bortle, panting, and asked "What was that? Not thunder, I don't think. Don't see any clouds anyway."

Bortle didn't have a good answer. All he knew was that he was getting damned tired of eating trout.

If it sounded like thunder, weird thunder, at a distance, from closer up it was another matter. Even from his position across the valley up on the ridge top, it was impressive, and Wilbanks had trouble controlling the horses for a few minutes. He couldn't see the entrance to the tunnel—it was just around a shoulder of the ridge—but he could see the head gate and the aqueduct, and both disappeared in, first, an impressive flash, and, second, a cloud of dust and debris.

It made him feel like he was in that famous picture of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in Oregon several years back. Even though he was at least a straight-line mile away, he could feel the strength of the blast as the shock waves hit him. He waited long enough for the dust to clear sufficiently that he could see that the head gate and the aqueduct were completely destroyed, and then he broke the horses into a trot over the ridge.

* * *

From up close, it was tremendously impressive, although Bradford wasn't going to be telling anyone about it. He had decided to explore the little side valley that his weatherproof hiking map told him was Rock Creek, and he had become fascinated with the diversion structure. He had probably been here at some point previously, but he didn't remember the place at all. And SCARAB would be very interested in this man-made structure and its obviously detrimental effect on the local ecosystem and its biodiversity.

No telling how many species of darters or some other little fish might have been lost from the stream, and before the project it looked like this valley must have once supported a solid population of nearly extinct boreal toads, he could just feel it. As he examined the mouth of the tunnel and the grate protecting it, he was pondering how effective a protest would be. This was a pretty remote place, but that made it all the more attractive to speak of it as "pristine," or potentially so, if this concrete and steel monstrosity weren't here. Strange how new the padlock looked.

If he had had time to think about it, his bad luck with Jennifer of the week before would have seemed like winning the lottery compared to this week's bad luck. He was peering in the mouth of the tunnel when he noticed a little red light wink. Immediately, there was a brilliant flash of white light that filled the tunnel, nearly blinding him.

Because it would take the shock wave a few seconds to reach him, he could have dived to one side of the portal, if only he'd known what was about to happen, and quite possibly survived. But his vision was his immediate concern, so, when the shock wave reached him, he was standing outside the grate,

rubbing his eyes. The force of the explosion blasted loose the grate, and Bradford's life ended rather like that of a bumble-bee swatted by a badminton racket.

If Wilbanks had been in a position to observe what happened next, he would have been gratified to see this accidental, and highly inefficient, projectile fly several hundred yards across the valley before crashing onto a scree slope. The eagles would once again have available for their supper the extremely rare and tasty delicacy of dead *homo sapiens*, although this one was not dismembered with the surgical precision of the previous one. Not that they were picky.

They would, however, have to work for their supper, because the human encrusted grate was only the first projectile to be launched from the mouth of the tunnel. Wilbanks' plan had worked to perfection. The two initial explosions had produced shock waves going in both directions, and the grates at the two ends of the tunnel were blown off, one with Bradford's body attached.

The explosions also collapsed the tunnel locally at both spots where the charges had been planted. When the two shock waves propagating toward the center of the tunnel met and rebounded, the debris from the collapsed sections was blown out each end of the tunnel with nearly as much force as the initial explosions. The ditch just below the northeast portal wound up covered with rocks, dirt, and concrete, and the scree slope on which Bradford's body had come to rest was covered with another layer of loose rocks and other debris. But, as with the dead human of earlier in the spring, enough of Bradford's body was visible that the ravens, at least, would have something to peck at.

With the tunnel and aqueduct destroyed, none of the Rock Creek water would be flowing over toward the Rio Grande, as it had previously. But it would be some time before any of it would make it down to the Vallecito Creek, either, because the new pond created by the explosion at the head gate would take some time to fill. Eventually, however, fill it would, and water would once again flow down the little valley without man-made controls. If you didn't count the artificial pond, of course. The Freestone River Alliance's first courageous act of returning nature to nature had to be considered a resounding success. Although, if he had been able, Whitby Bradford might have registered a dissenting opinion.

* * *

Lewis Wilbanks made it without incident over to the next valley, down to and below tree line, and once again began making careful measurements to continue his scientific cover. It took some time for his hands to stop shaking, but eventually the excitement dissipated.

What he didn't know was that both Bortle and Richard Hardin had seen him trotting away over the ridge just after the explosion, and, to make matters worse, that Richard's sharp eyes had spotted Brownie. He mentioned to Bortle that that must be the professor who rented horses from his brother Jack. They had no reason to connect Wilbanks to the weird thunder at that point, however, and they let the matter pass without further speculation.

But they were curious, and so they took Bortle's horses and rode down the valley, where they found the new pond, still filling, and the debris from the explosion. Richard was amazed that all of the structures that had been there only yesterday were now gone, and Bortle was impressed with whoever's firepower. Richard mentioned that he'd seen the professor climbing on the water bridge—Bortle knew what he meant at once—and the connection with Wilbanks was made.

As they looked around, the strategy for the explosion was more and more obvious: destroy the diversion structure as completely as possible. The ditch had already run dry, and, when the pond was filled, Rock Creek would no longer be diverted, nor would it be in the future without a prohibitive investment, economic and political, in new construction. There did not appear to be anything they could

do, so, after Richard collected several trout that were flopping around in the dry ditch, they rode back up to the camp by the lake to have trout for lunch. Bortle was so tired of fish that he was almost ready to try it raw, like Richard. Almost.

Bortle knew that it wouldn't be too long before the damage was discovered, and he did not want to be accused of it. So the best strategy would probably be to hang around until the sheriff, or whoever, arrived and to tell him about having seen Wilbanks. At least Richard could corroborate this. And that made it fortunate, except for the perspective of his stomach, that they had not got an elk.

With this strategy in mind, he decided to pack up and relocate down the valley to the site of the explosion, and pretend to be looking for victims when the sheriff arrived. His campfire ring here by the lake would provide testimony that he was indeed here last night. At least Richard was masterful when it came to catching fish. Sushi, huh. Well, maybe some vinegar and salt would help.

* * *

Twenty-Two

Annette and Hal had planned to visit the Ranch to discuss matters with Jack on Saturday, but it took them until Sunday to get organized for the trip, and then they decided to stay over Sunday night. Jack had a vacant cabin, so it was just too tempting not to. They were about half way there when there came a tweedling noise from the back of the car.

“Aw, rats. That sounds like mine.”

Annette had finally managed to persuade the department to get her a cellular phone, and she had discovered the truth of the axiom “be careful of what you wish for, because you may get it.” She unbuckled, turned around in her seat, and rummaged around for her day pack in the back.

“Trieri, investigations.”

She listened for quite a while and finally said “We're almost there anyway, so we'll meet them at the campground.”

Then she folded the phone up and stuck it back in her pack.

“That was the sheriff's office. Seems they've brought a body out of the mountains and have it up at the campground at the end of the road on Vallecito Creek. I guess they think there may be some connection with our mystery hand and so on, and I told them we would meet them there. Know where it is?”

“Sure. I park there all the time when I want to fish up in Vallecito Creek. Do they know who it is?”

“A backpacker who apparently got killed in an explosion at a irrigation structure way up at the top of the valley. They found some ID on the body, and it's a Whitby Bradford of Durango. There's some business cards for something called SCARAB in his wallet as well, with a university address.”

“SCARAB? Oh, yeah. I don't remember what it stands for, exactly, but it's some kind of environmental group on campus. Don't know this Bradford person, though.”

“They also found a nice little stash of marijuana on him, a personal smoking amount, they said.”

“What's this about an explosion?”

“Not precisely sure, but it sounded like someone, maybe Bradford, blew up a water diversion tunnel. If it was him, it would fit with his environmental group connection, I suppose.”

“Hmm. I don’t recall that SCARAB has a particularly militant reputation. Seems like they’re mostly concerned with animal rights, or something like that. On the other hand, I can just see a stoned guy screwing up with explosives and accidentally killing himself.”

Annette fumbled in her pack and pulled out several folded topographic maps. Because they had duplicate copies, Hal had volunteered his older ones to be folded and carried into the field, so they were well-equipped. She started following Vallecito Creek north from the reservoir.

After several maps, she found what she was looking for.

“Here it is. Rock Creek. Just on this side of the Continental Divide, way up there. Oh, great. The diversion is in San Juan County. Another jurisdictional problem. Well, let me call the sheriff in Silverton.”

* * *

They had turned north onto the lake road, and by the time she was finished with the San Juan County sheriff’s office, they were almost to Vallecito.

“Well, it sure is good for my self-esteem that all these folks want me to take charge of their dead bodies.”

Hal reached over and patted her leg. “My sweetie, the famous collector of stiffs.”

“Yeah, well, at least we know the identity of this one. And I guess I can’t blame either the San Juan guys or the Hinsdale guys for deferring to us, because they really don’t have a way in to these locations from where they are, except by pack horse. Or helicopter, which they don’t have. So I guess we’ll be a little late for checking in at Jack’s place.” She pulled out her phone again.

When they arrived at the campground a few minutes later, they found two La Plata County deputy sheriffs and Lester St. Clare, waiting by an ambulance, with another scruffy-looking character standing by. St. Clare had taken charge.

“Hiya, Annette. Dean Weathers. Got a strange one this time. At least we’ve got an ID.” He walked over to a gurney and peeled back a blanket covering the body. “It’s pretty much of a mess, so brace yourself.”

Hal chose to stand discreetly back.

“Oh, Lord. What happened?” Even Annette was finding it hard to take.

“Well, Bortle there found the body, and he said it was stuck to a re-bar grate, probably the one that had covered the end of the tunnel that got blown up. At least it makes the cause of death easy to figure out. Bortle says he knows who set off the explosion, too.”

Annette walked over to where Bortle was standing, trying to look inconspicuous.

“Mr. Bortle? Don’t I remember you from the Los Piños Ranch?”

“Maybe. I do some guiding for them, sometimes.”

“I’m Lieutenant Annette Trieri, Durango police investigations. All the local sheriffs have asked me in to investigate this thing. Lester tells me you found the body and know something about what happened.”

“Well, I was up at the lake above the diversion tunnel, doing some fishing, when I heard the explosion. And I saw someone ride off over the ridge across the valley. Richard said it was some professor from the university who was packing with one of Jack Hardin’s horses.”

“Richard?”

“Richard Hardin, Jack’s brother. He was with me up there. Keeps a low profile, so you might not have met him if you were at the ranch. Anyway, we went down the valley to the tunnel and looked around for a couple of days and finally found Bradford, there.”

“You know him? Or knew him?”

“Uh, well, uh, not exactly. I checked his wallet for ID, you know?” Bortle was fervently wishing two things, that he really hadn’t known Bradford, especially under the circumstances that he had known him, and that he hadn’t swiped all the cash from Bradford’s wallet. At least he had left the dope alone.

“Where can I find Richard Hardin?”

Hal had overheard much of this conversation, so he interjected himself at this point. “Annette? Um, I need to tell you about Richard. He’s not likely to be too helpful, unless you approach him the right way. He’ll probably be back at the Ranch, or else up in the woods somewhere. The best thing would be to get together with Jack to talk with him. He’s had a head injury and isn’t as responsive to strangers as most folks, especially official ones like you. It’s a long story, but basically he’s an OK guy, just shy and, well, slow.”

“I’d like to get him to corroborate what Bortle here is saying, and it might be necessary to get him to testify in court eventually.”

“I doubt that court would work, although maybe something could be worked out. But I bet I know who this university person is. I had a visit from the ATF last week.”

Annette smiled. “What? You’ve been seeing other law enforcement people behind my back? I don’t know if I should be jealous or not.”

“They were asking about one of our faculty members, whom they suspect of having received a shipment of high explosives. And his specialty is high-altitude ecosystems. And he’s currently checked out into the field for research up in the San Juans. I can ask Jack if he rented horses at the Ranch, and that would tie it up, I’d think.”

Annette got enough information from Bortle to be able to find him again, and she and Hal climbed back into the car to continue on to the Ranch. Bortle had already unsaddled his horses and put them in the trailer, so he also headed down the road.

On his way back to his place in Vallecito, Bortle found himself finally able to relax and actually think about the implications of all this. From the time that he and Richard had heard the explosion, he was quite concerned that he’d be a suspect, and then when they’d found Bradford’s body, his concern became a real worry. He had decided, rightly, that he would be less of a suspect if he packed the body out and called the sheriff’s office himself, then when the deputies had insisted that he stay around for questions by the Durango detective, his worry mounted. But the lady detective seemed to believe him, and it was pure luck that she had shown up with that guy from the university who knew Richard and who seemed to know who the guy on the horses was. So maybe he was off the hook.

But then he remembered the conversation with Bradford last fall at the Horse Gulch Saloon. He’d been drunk, but not drunk enough to forget what Bradford had been worried about. And now he was the only one left who knew about last Thanksgiving’s little adventure. Except Sal, of course. Could Sal have engineered Bradford’s death, somehow? Or was it another accident, like Mike and Freddy? And was

that an accident, after all? Bortle decided that the best way to stay healthy would be to remain on the best possible terms with Sal Kelly. At least he didn't owe Sal any money.

On their way around the lake to the Ranch, Hal and Annette were discussing Richard Hardin.

"It's kind of a sensitive area, because Jack is trying to run a hospitable place for his guests and to deal with a problem family member at the same time. Basically, he keeps Richard out of public view, just to prevent having to deal with potential problems. Richard's got more curiosity than good sense. Jack told me that the last time they had Richard tested, he came in at the intellectual level of about a seven-year old. I've been around the Ranch enough that I've come to know him, and I think he thinks of me as a kind of father figure. I gave him a four-piece pack rod a couple of years ago, and he carries it with him everywhere. He's a remarkable outdoorsman but kind of a social misfit. Not that he's dangerous, or anything, but he's just not presentable in public. So Jack tries his best but it's a strange situation."

"Do you think we'll be able to get him to talk to me about what he saw up at Rock Creek?"

"If Jack and I both introduce you to him and lead into the issue without being too demanding, he just might. I think the trick will be to appeal to his curiosity. We'll just have to see."

* * *

When they arrived at the Ranch, they checked in and immediately arranged to meet with Jack and Richard after supper. Jack mentioned that Richard was a little upset that one of his favorite horses was not back from a pack trip, but maybe they could use that as a starting point for a discussion. After dinner they all went out to the horse barn to find him.

"Richard, Hal Weathers is here to see you, with a new friend." Richard's head appeared in the door to the loft, and he turned around to climb down.

"Richard, this is my friend Annette. How's that fly rod I gave you holding up, anyway?"

Annette felt slightly uncomfortable under Richard's appraising gaze, but he didn't seem predatory, just curious, as Hal had mentioned. "I use it all the time. It keeps me fed up in the mountains, so it works, I guess. I love it. Hi Annette. I think I saw you here a couple of weeks ago."

She smiled as friendly a smile as she could manage, given that she now knew she had been under secret scrutiny during her visit. "I'm sorry I didn't meet you then, Richard. I hear that you're the horses' best friend around here. I had a great time riding Blackjack during my week here. He's a magnificent horse, isn't he?"

"He's my favorite, after Brownie. Brownie hasn't come back yet. You ride a lot better than most of the people that come here, I saw."

Annette saw Jack, who was standing slightly behind Richard, nodding encouragingly, so she decided to keep the conversation on track. "Brownie. I guess I don't remember him. Where is he, anyway?"

"That professor who comes up here to measure stuff in the high mountains took him out on a pack trip last week and hasn't come back yet. I saw them a few days ago way up at Rock Creek, when I was with Ty Bortle."

"Oh, yeah, Ty Bortle. We were just talking with him this afternoon. He had come out on his horses with an accident victim. He mentioned that you were with him. What happened, anyway?"

“We were up there elk hunting when there was this big rumbling noise, like thunder only not thunder, and it scared the elk. So we went to look and found that somebody blew up the water tunnel up there. And a couple of days later we found a body. A guy who had been killed by the explosion, it looked like.”

“Did Ty do anything when you found the body?”

“Yeah, he said ‘Hello Bradford,’ and then he took his wallet and took the money out of it. I asked him if he knew the guy and he said not really. Then he decided that we should pack the body out and call the sheriff. So we did. It was hard to get the body loose from the rocks and that metal thing it was stuck to. Messy.”

“I’ll bet. I saw it a little while ago. You and Ty did a real good thing by bringing the body down out of the mountains. But you said you saw Brownie?”

“Yeah, just after the rumbling noise, the explosion. That professor was going with him and Streak, who he was riding, Brownie was the pack horse, south, up over the ridge toward Roell Creek. At least it looked like the professor knew how to load a pack, so Brownie was doing OK.”

“Gee, you must have good eyes to see that.”

“Um, well, I was checking up on them before that, so that’s when I saw about the pack loads.”

“So Hal says you’re a first-class outdoorsman. You must know your way around up there, huh?”

“Aww, well, I just spend a lot of time up there and I’ve learned a lot. How to catch fish anywhere and how to find deer and elk when I want to. How to track. Stuff like that. It’s easy. I could show you how to do it.”

Annette grinned. “Well, I sure wish you had been around when I found those bones last week. Did you hear about that?”

“Oh, yeah, I did. A skull and everything, up by where Tuckerville used to be. I didn’t know they were there, but I don’t go up there a lot. That’s pretty strange. I find deer and elk bones all the time, but not people bones.”

“You know, I just learned to fly-fish when I was up here last week, and I’m still learning. But one thing I’m trying to figure out is what other people think about it. Maybe you can tell me something. It seems like there are two ways to do it, with dry flies on the surface or with streamers, nymphs, and other underwater flies. Which do you like?”

Richard’s face lit up beneath the beard. “Dry flies are a lot more fun, because you get to see the fish eat it. But if you’re hungry, nymphs work a lot better. They’re also easier to make. So I like both.”

Annette grinned again and decided she’d be able to talk with Richard as needed in the future. “Thanks, Richard. Maybe we can talk again some time. See you later.”

They walked back to the lodge, and Hal and Jack both expressed their admiration for her handling of a potentially touchy situation.

“Well,” she said, “I think it was good for you guys to introduce me, and you noticed, I’m sure, that there was no talk of police, or anything like that. But it’s interesting that Richard saw Bortle raid Bradford’s wallet.”

“Bortle lives kind of on the edge sometimes, with cash flow problems, so the cash was probably just too tempting. But it sounds like Bortle knew Bradford.” Jack had been listening carefully.

“Yeah,” Hal had noticed it, too. “But I heard Bortle deny knowing who Bradford was until he looked in the wallet.”

“Um-hmm. Me, too. I think there’s more to the business with Ty Bortle than he’s admitting to. But it looks like he’s not responsible for the explosion or Bradford’s death. And I don’t think that ‘attempted poaching’ is enough to get a warrant for an arrest.”

Jack had noticed that admission from Richard, too. “Um, Annette, one thing you should realize is that lots of folks who live up here year-round take the occasional critter, a deer or an elk, out of season for food. Nobody thinks of it as that big a deal, because it’s always for food, very business-like. Not the sporting approach to hunting at all. And, believe me, there are plenty of deer and elk about for this not to have an impact. Of course, if Bortle or anyone else does it routinely or with clients or anything like that, they’ll get turned in by people like me.”

“I didn’t figure on doing anything about it, Jack. There’s something that’s more interesting, though. Why do you suppose Bortle left Bradford’s stash alone? He strikes me as the type of person who would enjoy a good high...”

Jack snorted, interrupting her. “He certainly likes a good alcohol high, I can tell you that!”

“Right. So why didn’t he take Bradford’s pot? You wouldn’t suppose he’s got plenty of his own?”

“Well, you know, I’ve been wondering where my summer staff people get theirs. I always figured that they drove down to the university—no offense, Hal. Maybe we should check in to this.”

* * *

Later, Hal and Annette had a chance to review the day’s events in their cabin. The deductions about Bortle were especially interesting, because of the potential for a drug connection.

“At least those ATF guys that were looking for Wilbanks’ explosives cache will be finally satisfied. I expect that they will want him arrested on federal charges when he finally brings the horses in. And it sounds like he’s responsible for that other guy’s death, Bradford.”

“That should be easy enough, unless he decides to disappear into the wilderness forever.”

“No chance of that. It’s big and empty up there, but not that big and empty. Hell, we could send Richard after him. Richard wants his horse back. Oh. Shit. I forgot to tell you.”

“Huh?”

“Well, the day the ATF guys showed up last week, Alice wanted to know if they dealt with missing persons. Seems her son Francis hasn’t been heard from, by her at least, since about Thanksgiving, when he called home, supposedly from Mexico, um, Cozumel, I think. They filed a missing persons report in February, but nothing’s turned up.”

“You’re not suggesting a connection to our arm and bones, are you?”

“Well, Thanksgiving is the right timing, and he wouldn’t have turned up in your database search because he wasn’t reported missing then. And you were suspicious of him back last winter during the Stiller investigation.”

“But he had an alibi.”

“Yeah, he called Alice from Mexico. But it could have been from across town. Alice is a gem, but she’s also his mother and unlikely to be completely objective.”

“OK. It should be easy to find her report and do the first-layer comparison with the characteristics that Lester gave us. But what does that have to do with Wilbanks and Bortle?”

“I was just reminded of it by thinking about the ATF guys, Mutt and Jeff.” He grinned. “Besides, to a layman like me, all murders look alike, so I get confused easily.”

“Right. Well, I guess I ought to call the ATF guys tomorrow. If they were looking for explosives in connection with Wilbanks, they’re going to have to take a long ride on a horse to find traces.”

“What do you bet they get a helicopter?”

* * *

Twenty-Three

The nightmare had happened so many times that it was becoming familiar and predictable. Bortle almost knew when he would wake up, trembling and drenched in sweat.

They were holding Frank down but he was screaming and wiggling uncontrollably. Sal finally whacked Frank on the jaw just in front of the ear with the pistol and knocked him out. But Frank’s arm jerked, and Big Mike accidentally chopped right through the middle of Frank’s forearm instead of his wrist. Bortle, who was holding Frank’s left leg, always woke up when Frank’s blood squirted out and splashed everyone. Except this time, he didn’t wake up, and Mike had picked up the severed forearm by the hand and, for some reason, was banging on the hood of the snow-cat with it. At least everything else was normal. Stogle and Freddie were staring at the procedure in fascination, and Bradford was puking in the bushes.

But why didn’t the banging stop when he woke up? Oh. It was somebody pounding on the metal garage door. Bortle looked at the clock: 10:15 am. Well, at least he wasn’t too hung over. “Hang on, there! I just woke up. Who is it?”

“Tyrus Bortle? This is the La Plata county sheriff, and we have a warrant to search the premises. Open immediately or we’ll break the door in!” Bortle was too asleep to understand anything else except that somebody was using his full name, which *never* happened, and threatening the imminent destruction of his door, so he stumbled over and opened it before remembering the horrible implications of a search of the place.

It took only about 20 minutes for the search team to find where Bortle hid his merchandise. There was no way that he could reasonably claim it to be a personal stash either: a dozen half-ounce bags of marijuana buds and another dozen small clear envelopes of white powder. He knew he was a dead duck. Well, maybe he could cop a plea. He talked the sheriff into his one phone call before leaving, and made arrangements with Jack to have his horses taken care of. He’d be using a public defender, anyway, so he wouldn’t need to call a lawyer.

* * *

Annette thought of Monday as a productive day of setting things up and Tuesday as the payoff day. Actually, it had started Sunday night, with her conversation with Hal and another one between Jack and his chef, Henri. Henri, it seemed, was plugged in to just about everything that went on at the Ranch, at least in the vicinity of his kitchen, and he knew who was selling pot to the help. He even indulged occasionally himself, and appreciated the high quality. Too bad to wipe out a source of good smoke, but there it was.

Monday morning, Jack had introduced Henri to Annette, and she quickly had what she needed to get a warrant for Bortle's place. Then, after a couple of hours of tempting the trout with a variety of dry flies, she and Hal headed back to town, and she promptly had Alice Swan's missing persons report sent over to Lester for comparison with the remains.

The payoff was that Ty Bortle was now in the county jail, eagerly, she was sure, anticipating a conversation with her, and that Lester had made a first-order match between the mystery arm and bones with Francis Swan. She was now going to have to talk with Alice and see if she could get dental records. Or better yet, his military record, for a fingerprint match. She could get that without talking to Alice, so she could be sure. The talk with Alice was going to be the hard part. She decided to tackle Bortle first.

On her way over to the county jail, she marveled at how she had become involved in all this. She had heard that, before her arrival in Durango, the city police and the county sheriff's office were hardly speaking to each other, and that law enforcement in neighboring counties actually ridiculed the Durango police force. She had spent considerable time and energy mending fences with the La Plata sheriff's office, and they had come to respect her enough to turn important cases over to her at the slightest excuse, and the other counties soon followed suit. The Bradford murder, with both Bortle's and Richard's testimony, seemed pretty straightforward, so it was hard to see why they wouldn't handle that themselves to be able to take credit. But it was clear that they thought of her, as did the San Juan and Hinsdale sheriffs' offices, as the lead investigator of the region. So she was just going to have to try to live up to the reputation.

When she arrived at the jail, she found that Bortle had exercised his constitutionally guaranteed prerogatives and talked with a public defender, Mimi Olive. She had contacted, at Bortle's request, none other than Arthur Stepwood, Esq., who had agreed to take on Bortle's case pro bono. Arrgh!

To Annette, this made it obvious that Bortle was selling Sal Kelly's drugs, but proving that would be another matter altogether. Normally, she could try to persuade Bortle to cooperate and implicate Sal, but Stepwood would undoubtedly not allow this. Kelly would be paying the bills, after all. Could she get a judge to declare Stepwood ineligible for the pro bono work on the basis of a probable conflict of interest? Hmm. Meanwhile, Stepwood was not here and she ought to talk with Bortle even if the public defender was to be present.

She and Mimi made their way into the interview room, where Bortle was waiting with a deputy.

"Mr. Bortle. Sorry to see you under these circumstances. Before we begin, I'd like to thank you once again for bringing the body out of the wilderness area, and I want to let you know that we have corroborated your story about the explosion and the person you saw riding off. You're here for a completely different reason, because we have information that you were selling small amounts of contraband to certain people. We used that information to obtain a search warrant, and, well, you know what we found. Is all this clear?"

Mimi Olive spoke up. "Ty, if you don't understand something, speak up. But don't volunteer any information, OK?"

"I understand everything, but you won't be getting Richard to testify against me, I promise."

Mimi gasped, but before she could say anything, Annette jumped in "Now, Mr. Bortle, I'm sure that you know that witness tampering is a very serious thing..."

Mimi interrupted "Ty, don't say anything more, please."

But Bortle didn't seem concerned. "I'm not going to tamper with anything. I just know, and you should, too, if you talked to Richard, that he'd never be a credible witness in court."

“Oh. Well, you’re probably right, but I’m not thinking of using his testimony anyway. It corroborates your story, and we won’t be needing that in court. Now, it seems to me that you have an opportunity here to make things easy on yourself. I’m not empowered to make deals, but I’d like to tell you what I plan to do. I’m going to talk with the DA’s office about a plea bargain in return for your cooperation.”

“Ms. Trieri, I am here only to monitor this conversation. As you know, Mr. Bortle will be represented by Arthur Stepwood. Any discussions of a possible plea bargain will need to wait until he arrives.”

“I know. I just wanted to let Mr. Bortle here know what to expect. Can we talk outside for a moment?”

Annette appreciated that the public defender’s office was dedicated to providing the best possible representation to the indigent, but that they also knew when their cases were weak. And Bortle’s case was absolutely hopeless. The advantage here was that Mimi was genuinely interested in doing the best possible thing for Bortle, whereas Stepwood would not be. Mimi, Annette decided, should know this, so she filled her in on Stepwood’s possible conflict of interest.

Mimi reacted as Annette had hoped, but she still had limited options because of Bortle’s request to talk with Stepwood. Because Stepwood had agreed to take the case at no cost, the request had to be honored. Yet Mimi, having been assigned to Bortle’s case, had already seen the wisdom of a plea bargain as a way to minimize Bortle’s legal exposure. So she and Annette agreed to work together in Bortle’s interest, despite their inherently adversarial relationship.

Back in her car, Annette called Hal’s office to pass along the information from the coroner’s office and to discuss strategy. She bypassed Alice by using Hal’s direct number.

“Weathers, natural sciences.”

“I think it’s so cute that you answer your phone that way.”

“Hi, lover. I learned from an expert, you know.”

“I found out something about our remains from Lester. It matches the information that Alice provided in her missing persons report.”

“Ah, shit. Is this a firm match?”

“Not yet. I remembered that he was in the service, so I’m going to get fingerprints from his record to compare with the left hand. If they match, that’ll be firm. It’s not time to tell Alice yet, but I thought we ought to talk strategy.”

“You mean if there is a firm match? Hmm. I know. You tell her.”

“Thanks a lot. I hope you’re joking, buddy.”

“Yeah, of course. But you do have to be in on it, you know. She needs your authority if she’s going to believe it.”

“Well, that’s probably true. I have to say that my reaction was exactly the same as yours. ‘You tell her.’ Damn. So we get together and do it jointly. And of course we need her husband in on it. What’s his name?”

“Leonard. I don’t know him all that well, but it would probably be best. Where should we do this?”

“Not your office, or the station. Their home, I guess. How do we invite ourselves over there?”

“Yeah. They’ll think we want to talk about getting married, or something. Say. Maybe they go to church somewhere and we could enlist their minister, or whatever.”

“Good idea. Any idea of how to find that out?”

“Hey, you’re the detective here. But I have access to her performance evaluations, and maybe she’s got something in there about church committee work, or something. I’ll look it up, OK?”

“OK. And remember, it’s not firm yet, so don’t let anything slip. You don’t want her thinking the worst and have it not true, right?”

“You bet. Want to have lunch?”

“Too busy. I’ll bring home dinner, though. Ciao.”

* * *

She was headed back downtown toward her office, to make the calls to get Francis Swan’s fingerprints from his service records, when her phone tweedled.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“This is Agent Will McCauley, ATF. Your office put us onto the possible location of a Lewis Wilbanks. We’d been looking for him in connection with some explosive devices.”

“Oh, yes. Find him?”

“I thought you’d like to know that he’s in custody. He finally came out of the mountains and we apprehended him when he returned his rental horses.”

“Any trouble?”

“Well, it depends on what you mean by ‘trouble.’ We did have a bit of excitement. We happened to be there when he rode in, and I made the mistake of announcing myself to him before he dismounted. So he dropped the reins of his pack horse and tried to bolt. But the horse he was riding must have really, really wanted to go back in the barn, or something, so he didn’t get a very fast start. And then this young guy, somebody said his name was Richard, dashed out of nowhere and tackled Wilbanks out of his saddle, and started yelling at him about never, never whipping his horses. It was a good thing we were right there to rescue Wilbanks, or he’d have been in for a real beating, looked like. Anyway, we got him.”

“You know about our possible manslaughter charge?”

“I heard something about it. What’s the status?”

“The DA’s office is thinking murder two, because it was probably accidental that the dead guy was there. But they’re probably going to charge him. If you take him to the county jail, they’ll process him in.”

“That’s where we’re headed. And we’re going to fly up to the site of the explosion and take some samples, to see if we can get a chemical match.”

“You mean you’re not going up on horseback? Aww. That means that I lose a bet.”

“Better you lose a bet than I have to sit on a horse for two days. Talk to you later, Lieutenant.”

* * *

She was just pulling into the police department parking lot downtown when her telephone once again demanded her attention. Now I know why Hal dislikes his so much, she thought.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Lieutenant Trieri, this is Mimi Olive. I’m still down at the jail. Arthur finally got here, Arthur Stepwood. And he’s announced plans to make bail for Mr. Bortle. Kind of strange for a pro bono case, don’t you think?”

“Normally, but I’m sure it’s not his money. Remember what I told you about his other client? What was his reasoning? And when is this likely to happen?”

“He made an impassioned little speech about how he knew and trusted Mr. Bortle because of their friendship developed during hunting trips together and how he couldn’t bear to see an individual who is used to the open vistas of the outdoors locked up, blah, blah, blah. There’s a bail hearing scheduled for tomorrow, with Judge Sandose.”

“I’ll call the DA and fill him on what I can, but I’m sure that Stepwood will come up with whatever bail is set. If Kelly wants Bortle out, he’ll get him out.”

“The strange thing is, I’m not sure that Bortle wants out. He didn’t object, exactly, but he didn’t look too happy either.”

“I’ll bet he’s nervous about fatal accidents. They can happen to anyone, you know.”

“Huh?”

“Mimi, I don’t know if you’ve ever been involved in something that Sal Kelly has his fingers into, but he’s probably not the kind of client you usually have assigned. I’m certain that he would arrange for something to happen to Bortle if he thought Bortle posed a danger to himself. I know that we have vastly different points of view about human nature, but trust me on this one. So it wouldn’t surprise me if Bortle would rather stay in custody, especially if he’s already thought about cooperating with us.”

“Well, if his bail is paid, out he goes.”

“Let me know, OK? I’d like to be able to keep an eye on him.”

* * *

That evening, Annette took home Atlantic salmon steaks, available in Durango thanks to the wonders of modern delivery services. Expensive, but worth it, the way that Hal cooked them. He had pruned the several apple trees in the yard the previous spring and rented a small chipper to deal with the branches. The apple wood chips, soaked and laid on the coals in the grill, produced restaurant-quality grilled smoked salmon.

“How’s Alice?” They were sitting on the deck while the fish cooked.

“Seems normal. She’s not one to express her emotions too much, and I don’t think she has any idea that we’re on to something related to Francis. I did manage to find out that she and Leonard attend the First Presbyterian Church and that she’s active on a couple of committees. I called the pastor, Donald Terwilliger, and discussed this all with him. He’s more than willing to get together with us to talk with Alice and Leonard, if the match checks out. And he thinks the best approach would be to just show up at their house some evening, uninvited. That way, they wouldn’t worry in advance.”

“Did you ask him about how much we should be ready to tell them? We don’t know what actually happened, just the result.”

“Well, he asked what happened, assuming that the remains were Francis’, and so on, and all I could tell him was those results, and he still had questions. So I expect that the Swans will, too. So the more we know, the better. But I expect that we should tell them sooner rather than later, even if we don’t know everything. The pastor thought so, too. I’m afraid that we may have trouble dodging the issue of the dismemberment, unless we flat out lie.”

“Especially because we’re going to have to mention the relatively intact arm that we have for fingerprints. The rest of the remains are in completely different condition, so they’ll want to know how that happened, and so on. This is going to be a real bitch of a conversation, I can tell. Too bad we can’t just say that we found the remains and it looks like a hunting accident, or something easy.”

“Alice is no dummy, and Leonard probably isn’t, either, so I imagine that the truth will be the best, even if it is tough. I wonder if they’ll insist on seeing the remains.”

“Oh, no. We’ve got to try to avoid that. Maybe we can get the pastor to help dissuade them. Did you tell him about the condition of what we found up in the mountains?”

“Yes, and I imagine that he’ll be a help. You’re right. This is going to be a real bitch. Ugh. Well, anyway, what other things are happening?”

She told him about Bortle’s arrest for dope dealing and the jeopardy he could be in if his bail were paid.

“So you think there’s some connection between him and my old friend Sal? Does that imply a connection to Ralph’s murder last winter?”

“I’ve been wondering about that, and I’m not sure. I’m told that the search team found some white powder at Bortle’s place, and that could be coke or some of that other stuff, so that could be a connection. But I bet that Bortle is just one of several people that deal for Sal. We’ve known that there are several dealers in the area, just not who. At least that’s one thing about Francis that we don’t have to talk to the Swans about. We suspected him, but that’s not worth talking about. Unless Sal had him killed. Oh, geez. I never thought of that before.”

“Well, that’s just speculation, and we don’t need to repeat it to them. Maybe the sooner we talk with them, the better. If we don’t know what really happened, we won’t be able to tell them the grim details. The dismemberment will be bad enough.”

“Yep. And another thing happened today. Your Professor Wilbanks showed up back at Jack’s place to return his horses. At least Richard will be happy to have Brownie back. The ATF guys nabbed him, and we’ll probably hit him with a manslaughter charge.”

“Helluva way to implement faculty cuts. Two dead chemistry professors and a natural resources professor out on a felony charge. Wonder what else is going to happen?”

“Well, I’m sorry about your dead professors, but I’m not sorry about having met you in the bargain. How’s the salmon coming?”

* * *

It all came together late the next afternoon, if not the way that Annette would have expected. On top of everything else, Bortle's surprising and cathartic confession left her drained and ready for a stiff drink or two. Or three. Compared to all this, maybe the talk with the Swans wouldn't be so tough, after all.

Fortunately, Hal was already home and puttering around in the kitchen, cutting up stuff to cook with shrimp for a pasta topping, it looked like.

"Hi, gorgeous. You look wrung out. Tough day?"

"Wait'll you hear. I want to work out and take a hot shower, then I'll have a glass of wine and tell you all about it. At least we seem to have closure on this whole matter of Stiller, Harmon, Bradford, Bortle, and Sal and his bunch."

"Holy smoke. Sounds like a Big Wine kind of day. I'll open a cabernet for you so it can breathe. Hmm. That means I'll have to spice up this shrimp to stand up to the wine..."

Later, she launched in to the tale. "Probably the most satisfying thing all day was when I overheard Sal Kelly tell Arthur Stepwood, Esq., the little twerp, to quote go fuck yourself end quote. The look on Arthur's face was priceless. That was when Sal kicked Arthur out of the limo down on 160 by the mall. I was following them and had the window open, so I heard it all." She laughed and took a large drink of her wine.

"Um, I presume that you'll back up and fill me in on what happened before that?"

"You mean I can't just tell all this in random order? You're no fun at all. Well, let's see. Where to start? Bortle's bail hearing was first thing this morning, and Mimi Olive, the public defender assigned to Bortle, called me when she found out the time. When I got there, Stepwood had just posted the \$100,000 that Judge Sandose set, to everyone's surprise, and he and Bortle were ready to walk. They got into Sal's limo out in the parking lot, and drove off, so I followed. A mile down the road, they stopped and Stepwood exited the limo rather abruptly, and, it appeared, involuntarily. I didn't see Sal, but I did hear his voice."

"So now Bortle and Sal were alone in the limo? Except for the driver, of course. Looks like your suspicions were right on."

"Yep. But now the question was, where would they go and would there be some kind of attempted 'accident.' Sal seems to have a quick trigger. It didn't take much provocation for him to arrange to have the bomb planted in your car, remember?"

"We know that it was Sal behind that?"

"No proof, but it's pretty obvious. Anyway, after they dumped Stepwood out, they did a U-turn and headed back toward Bayfield, so I kept after them. I wasn't trying to be inconspicuous, and Sal's driver probably had me pegged from the start. But at Bayfield, they turned north, and I got on the phone to the sheriff's office to see if anyone was up that way. It seemed likely that Sal was going to take Bortle back to Vallecito. I couldn't imagine that Sal would arrange for an 'accident' that would happen when he was around. He'd want a good alibi, and all. So I got a deputy sheriff to stake out Bortle's place and backed off. Sure enough, Sal let Bortle out at his place, and I got the deputy to stall Bortle long enough for me to get there. On my way up there, Sal's limo passed me, going dangerously fast back down the hill at about the dam.

"When I got to Bortle's place, he was pretty mad, but then I told him that I was worried about bombs and related the story of your car. He got calmed down some at that. Then we figured out how to get into his place without using the obvious doors or windows, just in case something was wired. Seems Bortle has a 'secret' entrance that he uses when he forgets his keys, behind a metal cabinet around the

back. So we got in, and, lo and behold, the main door was indeed wired. Bortle would have been hamburger if I hadn't called the deputy and had him stall for time. So now I had a new friend."

"Sal has this penchant for blowing things up, doesn't he? You'd think he would be more creative."

"Oh, he is. Just wait. We decided that the phone was OK to use, and I called down to the sheriff's office to get Sal picked up, even though things were pretty circumstantial. But I was figuring that Bortle would give me some solid evidence I could use to hold Sal, and I also figured that Stepwood might be a little slow to get Sal out of jail, given his recent treatment. Turns out I was right on both counts, but I didn't know how right about the evidence. After I got off the phone, the first thing that Bortle said was 'What can I tell you about Kelly to get myself out of the jam I'm in?' So I made it clear that I only wanted the truth, and then we had a nice conversation, which I got on tape, about how Bortle, as well as Bradford and Francis Swan, whom these guys knew as Frank, had been Sal's street dealers. Bradford had the campus, Frank had the rest of the town, including the other schools, and Bortle had the summer tourist areas, like around the lake and so on. Both Bortle and Bradford bought from Frank, it seems. He also talked about Sal's dealers down in Farmington and over in Cortez. Then I made some comment about how Bradford and Frank were dead, and Bortle got the shakes, literally. I assumed that it was because of his experience with Bradford's body, but I was wrong."

"Surely Bradford's death was accidental, unless Wilbanks is mixed up with Sal somehow?"

"Yep, and Bortle also thinks so. But what he got the shakes about was Frank. Seems he was there. And he told me all about it, thank you very much. Christ." She took another long drink of her wine.

"After he told me about it, he said that maybe now his nightmares would stop, since he'd talked about it. To make a long and very gory story short, Sal decided to make an example of Frank. It seems that Frank was pulling some fast ones by stepping on Sal's coke without telling Sal before it got sold on the street and by marking up the stuff when he moved it between Sal and the other two. On the pretext of a hunting trip, Sal took his local guys, including Bortle and Bradford, up to Tuckerville in a snow cat last November, up the jeep road. When they got there, he made a little speech about loyalty and so on and how one of them, Frank, had been disloyal, and Frank was going to have to pay for his disloyalty. So Bortle got to hold a leg while Big Mike—remember Big Mike, he of the cutlery skills?—got poised to chop off Frank's left hand. Frank yelled and struggled so much that Sal finally cold-cocked him, but he did it just as Big Mike was chopping and the arm jerked, so he hit it in mid forearm instead of at the wrist. Apparently, they couldn't get the bleeding stopped and Frank bled to death while unconscious, so Mike dismembered him and they sort of scattered the pieces about. All this was up where we found the remains." She took yet another big gulp of wine.

"Anyway, Bortle's agreed to testify to all this, and we've got Sal locked up on murder one and a variety of drug charges. Even though it's going to be Bortle's word against Sal's, I think that the bomb in Bortle's place will sway a jury toward him. Especially as Bortle was selling dope only to the summer folks, not school children and so on."

"So Sal's in jail and everything's pretty sewn up?"

"Pretty much. Stepwood is going to be investigated for not reporting the conflict of interest when he volunteered to represent Bortle pro bono, so he won't be representing Sal this time."

"What about Wilbanks?"

"He's not mixed up in the drug stuff, as far as I can tell, but he's up to his ears with the federal explosives charge. And no doubt the water providers will want civil damages. And then there's the manslaughter charge. I think you may need to find someone else to teach his courses this fall."

By now, she had had enough wine that she was relaxing, especially because she was past the worst part of her narrative.

“Bortle seemed to feel a lot better after telling me all about it, and I feel better telling you. Uh, sorry.”

“No sweat. I’m a dean, remember? Internecine warfare among the faculty on campus can make this look pretty tame. You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen an angry professor verbally dismember an administrator. Anyway, I’m glad it’s over. We still have to talk with Alice and Leonard, but we can skip the details. They’ll find out about what happened at Sal’s trial, but by then they’ll be used to the idea that Frank’s dead. I think we should talk with them as soon as possible. Then we deserve a real vacation. Somewhere that they can’t find you, like they did this time. You think you would like to try fishing in Montana? I’ve still got time before the semester starts.”

She smiled. “How about skiing in New Zealand instead? If you think you can keep up with me, that is...”

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Classical Villainy

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



Classical Villainy: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

Forty years after the controversial death of the minor religious figure known as Jesus of Nazareth, turmoil ruled the dusty Roman colony on the eastern shore of the great sea now known as the Mediterranean. Rumors concerning so-called miracles and reports of strange events after his death simply would not go away, and it was enough to drive Roman officialdom to distraction. Not lions, not gladiators were enough to quell the fervor of the individuals who called themselves “Christians.” At least the lions and gladiators provided the masses some entertainment—although not nearly enough to compensate for the nuisance that these new religious fanatics were making of themselves.

But on the other side of the world, in the southwestern part of a continent unknown to the Romans, a semi-nomadic basket-making culture was comfortably unaware of all this turmoil. Even if someone had told them Jesus’ message of love and faith, they were too busy surviving to pay much attention. Yet, amid the daily tasks of gathering seeds and roots, and hunting game, there was room for ceremony, especially for revered elders whose time on Earth had ended.

When the elderly shaman of one band of Basketmakers breathed her last, a particularly elaborate ceremony was in order. So it was that, in a natural cave high on the face of a cliff above an unnamed river, great effort was expended to inter the leader’s cremated remains in a specially woven, waterproofed ceremonial basket, with a careful selection of her most prized possessions. After the appropriate incantations and blessings, the workers, suspended by woven ropes from the top of the cliff, began the laborious process of sealing the mouth of the cave. Even though it was small and nearly hidden from any viewpoint from across the river or above, the care with which they went about the task of closing the cave occupied them for several days. Finally, the cave’s opening was filled and carefully plastered over with mud, which was then stained and scored to match the natural rock as much as could be managed. The resting place was hidden.

After completing the ceremonial rituals, the band gathered their possessions and moved down river, into the wide, lush valley toward the warmer region where they would spend the winter.

They were not the only band of Basketmakers to make this seasonal trek, however, and it was not too long after the ceremonies that they were set upon and annihilated by another, more warlike, band. The secret of the revered leader’s resting place died with the last member of the group.

And nineteen centuries passed...

One

As the 75-year-old steam engine of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad chuffed ’round the blind curve at its usual sedate pace, the distance to the young woman lying on the tracks ahead dwindled at an alarming rate.

Even on this early morning run—the “San Juan Express”—the engine was pulling a full load, and it seemed grateful for the slight downgrade after the steep climb into the Rockwood Station and the need to get started after the stop there. Much to the relief of the crew and passengers who knew how uncomfortable it would be otherwise, the south wind wafted the coal smoke and steam ahead of the engine. It also obscured the track, and the combination of the smoke with the blind curve almost resulted in a messy accident, despite the train’s cautious crawl along the High Line.

Fortunately, engineer Leadfoot Johnson spotted the girl between wisps of smoke and released the emergency brakes, stopping the engine and its caravan of coaches just in time. The passengers, especially those wandering the aisles and standing in the open cars, were tossed about randomly, spilling many a drink, and the conductors had a time of it getting people calmed down.

Hal Weathers, seated in the open car’s side-facing bench, had been looking out over the Animas Gorge when the brakes grabbed. Annette Trieri, who had been standing to his right leaning on the railing beside him, wound up sprawled in his lap after losing her balance. Even though they had been living together for nearly eighteen months, he still found this experience most enjoyable, and he winked at her surprised green eyes and then kissed her. Under normal circumstances, both would have been embarrassed to do this in public, but everyone else on the train was preoccupied with their own predicaments—spilled coffee and Bloody Marys, kids with bumps—and no one noticed.

As soon as the train stopped, Leadfoot jumped down to the roadbed, followed by fireman Ernie Pulaski, and walked up to the front of the engine while Ernie ran ahead.

“Jesus Christ! Look at that! Sure is a good thing you got ’er stopped.”

Ernie knelt and began fumbling with a wrist to find a pulse, but the girl, being dressed only in the briefest of undergarments, was causing him no little distraction.

“And it looks like she’s dead, too. A shame, pretty thing.”

Leadfoot, anticipating lots and lots of questions from railroad management as well as from county law enforcement, put a stop to Ernie’s activity at once.

“You ever seen her, Ernie? And, look, if she’s dead, you’d better leave her alone until we can get some careful pictures of everything. We can borrow a camera from somebody. Then we can load her in the baggage car and get moving again. You go get Willie and find a camera, and I’ll get on the radio.”

Besides the inevitable questions, Leadfoot was also concerned that the next train would be along in only about 45 minutes, and then another after that. Summer along the D&SNGRR line was a busy time indeed.

Willie Monroe was doing his conductorly best to get folks calmed down, and he was pretty much succeeding when Ernie showed up. Hal and Annette happened to overhear the conversation, and, at the words “dead body,” Annette immediately pulled out her shield and asserted her authority over the situation. Hal tagged along with his camera, trying to stay out of the way. By the time they got forward to the engine, Leadfoot had relayed the news to the station back in Durango and started a flurry of activity there. Annette’s pronouncement of her affiliation with the Durango police department got his attention, and he relayed the information about her authority back to the station, managing to ease their concerns a bit.

They walked up to the body, lying just five feet ahead of the cowcatcher, and found Hal at work snapping off pictures from a variety of angles. Having read Arthur Conan Doyle as a boy, he paid close attention to the position of the body, and he took careful pictures of the ground surrounding the scene. He was also keenly aware of the narrow ledge they were on, with sheer cliffs above and below.

Eventually they decided they had enough information—Hal had changed film twice—and wrapped the body in a blanket, then loaded it aboard to get underway once more. Leadfoot arranged by radio for the train to be met in Silverton by the San Juan County sheriff, and the train huffed and puffed, starting down the gentle grade again.

Rather than return to the passenger car, Hal and Annette took advantage of being VIPs and rode in the engine with Ernie and Leadfoot, trying to stay out of the way in the cramped space and trying not to touch anything. Every surface, even the hand-holds, seemed coated with a layer of soot.

“Well, riding up here isn’t something that just anyone gets to do, you know. Your first train ride is going to be hard to top.”

Hal, having discovered that Annette had not managed this particular tourist experience in her several years in Durango, had insisted that they take a day off to make the trip. She wasn’t paying attention to the honor of riding in the engine, however, but was staring off into space, clearly fixated on the implications of their sad discovery. Her professional thought processes had kicked in, and she was not going to miss the opportunity to ask questions.

“Mr. Johnson, am I correct in thinking that the place back there where you stopped is not particularly easy to get to, except by these train tracks?” She had to shout over the noise of the little steam engine.

Leadfoot let fly with a long stream of tobacco juice out the side window.

“You bet. I was thinking something like that myself. This part of the gorge is almost impossible to climb in or out of. Somebody must have come by here on the tracks, all right. And it was between about eight yesterday evening and now, because that poor girl sure as shootin’ wasn’t there when I came back down from Silverton on the last run yesterday evening. Funny that one of the guys in the tenders didn’t see her, though.”

Annette had a sufficiently puzzled expression that he continued.

“We have guys on little self-propelled tenders run the tracks in the morning before this first trip with the train, to check for rocks and whatever else might have happened overnight. Something must have waylaid this morning’s run. Or she fell there after the tender went by.”

Annette resumed staring out the window, but was oblivious to the spectacular scenery.

About two minutes later she shouted “You don’t always stop the train that quickly, no?”

Johnson looked over at her, shaking his head. “No indeed. That was about as quick as it gets on this old outfit. Good thing we were goin’ slow. I might have been able to be more gentle except for the smoke. Hell, I almost didn’t see her and stop a’tall, with the smoke blowing up valley. But that blind curve is bad enough on its own.”

She looked over at Hal and raised her eyebrows.

He nodded. “Wind’s usually up-valley this time of day in the summer, from early morning heating of the mountains. The air rises and gets replaced by the up-valley flow.”

Annette went back to thinking.

“And, just to be sure, neither of you recognized her?”

She looked pointedly at Ernie, shoveling madly away. The gentle downgrade to the high-bridge crossing of the Animas Gorge had given way to another climb, and the boiler’s appetite for coal had increased.

“Oh, she was way out of my league,” Ernie said between shovelful. “Those undies she was wearing, now, I’ve never seen anything like ’em, on a real person, that is. Looked like they cost more than I make in a week. Uh, with all due respect, ma’am.”

He looked embarrassed. Annette stared at him and slowly broke into a mischievous-looking grin.

“Why, Ernie. I don’t think I would have pegged you as a connoisseur of women’s underwear.”

He turned as red as the hot coals under the boiler. “Uh, well, uh, I just meant that, well...”

She broke in to try to help him out. “Don’t worry about it. And you’re right, I noticed it too. It looked like some kind of French designer stuff to me, and I can tell you for sure that you don’t find anything like that for sale around here anywhere.”

Hal tried not to seem too interested in the implications of this statement.

* * *

That evening, back in Durango at the Narrow Gauge Saloon, on College Drive by the tracks, Leadfoot and Ernie enjoyed minor celebrity status. By tradition, they had to stand their conductor and brakemen to a round, for having jostled all the passengers so much, but they were the recipients of many more rounds than they paid for because everyone was interested in hearing the story. They both had agreed to Annette’s request to keep to the basics and to leave out many of the details of what they’d seen, and, as their rapt audience asked more and more questions, they became increasingly adept at mumbling noncommittal answers into their beers.

Despite its location just across the street from the General Palmer Hotel, the Narrow Gauge was too traditional a saloon to appeal to the tourist crowd, and the locals preferred it that way, dark and smoky, with only country music on the juke box. Its proximity to the depot made it a favorite with the railroad workers, and the usuals were a tight-knit bunch. Strangers, however, were not unheard of, this being an area of town crawling with tourists at all hours, and the locals had learned to tolerate their eccentricities and ignore them.

At the far end of the bar, sitting with his face in the shadow of the four-inch brim of a new-looking, hand-made O’Farrell Roper with an expensive concha band, one such individual had just put away a cellular phone and was ordering another iced tea. Smitty the bartender hadn’t asked questions when the previous such orders had been specified to arrive in an old-fashioned glass; he really didn’t care and it increased his margin anyway. He’d been at the other end of the bar, listening to Leadfoot and Ernie, so he hadn’t been aware of the phone conversation. Even though he was adept at deciphering telephone conversations from the single side he eavesdropped on, this one would have seemed unusually difficult. Mostly, the guy in the hat had spent his time listening. But then, there was the comment that “they’re saying that she was lying there dead on the tracks.”

* * *

The next morning, sitting on the deck with a second cup of coffee, Hal read all about it in the paper. He liked to savor summer mornings at home, both because the campus was quiet enough between terms that he didn’t feel compelled to go in early—he was 54 years old and a Dean who had earned some perks, for crying out loud—and because summer mornings in southwestern Colorado are made to be savored.

This summer, especially, the mornings had been the best part of the day, because it was hotter than normal. And drier. The July rains had not materialized, and it was now late August. There had already been several wildfires in the National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands surrounding

Durango, including a severe one that started from a campfire in Sheephead Basin, up in the Hermosa Creek drainage.

Hal was amused to see that the little conspiracy that Annette had concocted with the train crew to provide only the fuzziest of details to the reporter for the *Herald* had worked.

Unidentified Body Found on Tracks

By Randall Fredericks

Herald Staff Writer

Silverton — Tuesday morning, the crew of the north-bound D&SNGRR San Juan Express, the early morning run, discovered the partially-clothed body of a white female on the tracks on the High Line section, just south of the High Bridge over the Animas Gorge. Engineer Lawrence “Leadfoot” Johnson spotted the body on the tracks in time to get the fully-loaded train stopped using the emergency brakes. Although several passengers were shaken up by the abrupt stop, none was injured. Lieutenant Annette Trieri, who heads the Investigations Unit of the Durango Police Department, was a passenger on the train, and became involved in investigating the incident. It appears that the victim, who remains unidentified, may have been sunbathing on the rocks above the tracks and slipped, falling to her death. An autopsy will be performed later today by the La Plata County coroner’s office. (*Continued on p. A-5*)

Hal wondered just how long this fabrication would hold up. He had not objected to the conspiracy, even though he, as well as the train crew, knew that it was absurd to think that anyone would be sunbathing above the tracks at that point, especially in fancy French underwear, given the inaccessibility of the location. But Annette had told them that she was only trying to stall in the hope that more information, specifically the identity of the victim, would surface before the reporter discovered the ruse. Or, better yet, that a more juicy story would come along and distract him.

He and Annette had spent some time with the San Juan County sheriff yesterday after arriving in Silverton, and, with the help of the crew and a detailed map, they had persuaded him that the jurisdiction was La Plata County’s. He tried to hide it, but they could tell he was relieved. So they had made arrangements for the body to be transported by hearse back to Durango and, finally, had rented a car for themselves with a vow to take the train again sometime so they could really be tourists. Hey, they hadn’t even had a chance to eat the tourist food and browse the tee-shirt shops in Silverton.

* * *

Up at the campus, Hal found his administrative assistant, Alice Swan, already at work as usual. Although she was nearing retirement, she never seemed to change or to run out of energy. Her hair had whitened noticeably since last year, due partly, Hal thought, to the shock she’d had when he and Annette had been forced to tell her about the death of her son. That tragic news came at the end of an eight-month case that brought Hal and Annette together and cleaned up the main drug traffic in Durango. Alice had taken the news badly, as would be expected. But in the office she was as efficient as ever, and she relished the fact that Hal came in late during the summer, giving her a head start on the day’s business.

“Well, Dean Weathers, I see that you’ve managed to get yourself involved in yet another police matter.”

Hal had not, to his discomfiture, managed to keep his name out of the article in the *Herald*. “I certainly hope that there won’t be any of the unpleasantness of last year, bombs or anything. Provost Martin’s office called, and he would like to speak with you, probably about your involvement in this.”

She always managed to sound as if she were on the bare edge of scolding him, and it pushed his buttons so perfectly that he always felt guilty, whether it was appropriate or not. He’d recognized months ago that her references to “the unpleasantness of last year,” a phrase she trotted out at just about every opportunity, were a subtle form of retribution that he had decided to bear in silence. That “unpleasantness” had cost her a son and the sanity of her husband, while he had gained a lover and, to both his and Annette’s surprise, a new fishing buddy in the form of Don Terwilliger, the pastor at Alice’s church. Don had helped Hal and Annette break the bad news to Alice and her husband Leonard, and the topic of trout fishing had come up by accident. Don’s flexible schedule (Sundays excepted) made him the perfect fishing companion.

“Why don’t you get his office on the phone for me, Alice? Thanks.”

And he escaped into his own office and closed the door.

* * *

He was working his way through the morning’s e-mail when the phone rang, and the nasal voice of Martin’s secretary told him that the provost was waiting to take his call. This bullshit of secretarial telephone protocol was something he’d never get used to, he thought.

He paused for the appropriate three seconds and said “John? Alice tells me you called earlier.”

“Good morning, Hal. It’s difficult for me, but I’ll try to resist making any wisecracks about your latest adventure. And I promise not to become involved in this one.”

Martin had begun last year’s adventure as a murder suspect and ended up assisting in the investigation. Hal suspected that Martin had become a closet detective.

“What I really called about was the concert this Saturday. I have box-seat tickets, but Edith came up with a last minute conflict and we can’t go. I was so looking forward to the Beethoven. Anyway, I thought you might like them. They’re good seats.”

“We went to see the Takács Quartet, down here from Boulder, on Monday. And one formal concert a week is about all I can handle, much as I enjoy the music. But I can probably find a taker, if you don’t want them to go to waste. What’s the program?”

“Beethoven’s Violin Concerto is the highlight, with that young violinist from Paris, Steffanie Boudreau, soloing. And there are a couple of other things, of course, let me think...”

But Hal had tuned him out. Ever since playing amateur police photographer yesterday, he’d had a nagging sensation that he’d seen the victim somewhere, but it was too vague to talk to anyone about. As soon as he could, he escaped the phone call gracefully and hurried outside to find one of the public kiosks onto which every imaginable kind of poster was taped, including notices for the Animas Music Festival, which the university sponsored each summer.

And there she was, recognizable despite the poor reproduction on the poster. Her version of the Beethoven wasn’t going to be heard after all. He fished his phone out of his pocket and punched up Annette’s number at work.

“Hello, you have reached voice mail for...” Hal took the phone from his ear and stared at it in disgust for as long as he knew the message took.

It beeped and he recorded. “Hi, kiddo. Listen, I think I figured out who our French underwear lady is, from the posters around the campus for the AMFest. The violin soloist for this weekend, Steffanie Boudreau. Hope this is helpful. See you this evening.”

He put the phone away and tried to remember what his schedule for the rest of the morning was like. Oh, yeah. The provost’s budget committee. What fun.

* * *

It was a couple of hours before Annette got the message, and she smiled when she heard Hal’s news. She had spent the morning discussing just this angle with the sheriff, based on a hunch mentioned by a classical music lover at the morgue who had also recognized the musician from the posters around town. Annette’s stellar reputation as an investigator had been enhanced by the episode last year that had so upset Alice, and the sheriff’s office was only too happy to turn to her when homicides—and this was being treated as a homicide—got puzzling.

Although the body had been found out in the county, the music festival was in the city limits, on the campus, and so it was possible that the murder had happened on Annette’s turf and, besides, everyone knew that she had connections at the university, and on and on. The sheriff had apparently spent all night making a list of reasons why this should be Annette’s case.

After spending an hour or so surfing the internet, she wandered down the hall and stuck her head in Walter Jankowski’s office.

“Captain? Got a minute? The sheriff thinks he’s in over his head again and wants my help.”

“You mean on that ‘sunbathing accident’ you found on the train tracks yesterday?” His sarcasm was evident.

“Yeah, well, at least we’ve figured out who it is. We think. And it’s going to blow wide open, I bet. It’s not often that an international celebrity, even an obscure one, is killed in this part of the world. And get this: the British press has her tied in to their Royal Family.” This got his attention.

“Huh? I know that you conned the paper, but what’s this all about?”

She told him about the suspected identity of the victim, including the tidbit she’d run across during her internet search. It seemed that British paparazzi had pictures of Steffanie Boudreau dancing with Prince William of England, heir to the throne. Unfortunately, one of the pictures showed him with what appeared an especially devilish leer. (Actually, it was a look of amused surprise. Steffanie had just stepped on his left foot.) No matter that the dance had been a public benefit for the London Symphony Orchestra, and attended by hundreds. The picture first adorned the cover of a London tabloid and was quickly picked up by the largest selling U.S. supermarket weekly, the *National Gazette*, which trumpeted “Playboy Prince Plays Symphony Babe’s Tune” in the headline.

“So, whether we like it or not, we’ve got a body that is probably going to be identified as the Royal Girlfriend, or something like that. Untrue, of course, but truth isn’t the issue here.”

Jankowski leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on his desk, and stared at the ceiling.

“I’m thinking, first and foremost, spin control. We don’t want to look like a bunch of rubes here. This is going to get picked up on the international wires, for sure. How do you think we should handle it?”

“Well, how about this? We’ve worked pretty well with *Herald* police-beat reporter, Randy Fredericks, before. What if we get Randy back in here and tell him everything we have so far and admit that we conned him yesterday to buy time, so we could get a head start on things? He can write the story

with a copyright, for the wires, and get some national and international by-lines. I think he'll play ball with us, given that kind of exposure for himself. And, even if he's a pain like all reporters, he's pretty much a straight arrow. He's always been discreet when we needed him to be. Amy can be in on it, too, so she'll know to give him first crack at things."

Jankowski was intrigued by this strategy, as he usually was with Annette's ideas, but he was also thinking about what was going to happen to their little community. Chances were pretty good that there would be a media feeding frenzy as soon as the story hit the wires, with TV news trucks from at least four networks and a host of reporters, both electronic and print.

Of course, it would be a bonanza for the hotels and restaurants, not that they really needed any more business during the height of the tourist season. But conspiring with the local newspaper reporter for him to have first crack at local information put out through Amy Hodges, the department's media spokesperson, would make the home folks happy and provide a modicum of control of the situation. He'd have to shoulder the media focus as much as possible, so that Annette could be relatively anonymous and have the freedom to do her job.

"Annette, do you have any idea what's going to happen around here? Remember the stories about what happened up in Boulder, when that little girl got killed several Christmases ago? And we've got an international music star, one linked to the future King of England and All Those Other Places, found dead in her underwear, assuming that's what Randy meant by 'partially-clothed,' for heaven's sake."

"Yep. It'll probably get crazy. I guess this isn't a good time to go on vacation or anything like that, huh? But we can still get Randy and Amy in here for spin control on the bogus story we put out yesterday."

"Yeah, I agree with that approach. First, though, is there anything else about this I should know? I haven't read a report or talked with the sheriff's office about particulars, so I don't know anything beyond the rumors. And your bogus story in the paper."

"Well, we did get lots of pictures before moving the body. The coroner's office will be doing an autopsy today, so maybe we'll have information for Randy in time for his deadline this evening."

"So somebody carted the dead body of this sort-of-famous musician, dressed only in her underwear, several miles up, or down, I guess, the Silverton tracks and set it there to wait for a train to come along? This is crazy."

"Well, we don't know where she was killed, but it appears that the location on the tracks may have been chosen with the idea that the engineer wouldn't see the body in time to stop the train. It was on a blind curve. So maybe they were looking to have the body mangled."

"Why in the world would anyone want to do that? Jesus! Could it be like the thing with Frank Swan? Making an example out of somebody?"

"No clue, yet at least, why anyone would want to make an example of this violinist. And, even if that was the strategy, the killer picked a pretty stupid way to go about it."

"Well, maybe if we find the who, the why will emerge. And maybe the autopsy will help. There were no obvious signs of the cause of death?"

"Nope. She could have had a head wound hidden by her hair, but nothing obvious. I didn't examine her too carefully, though, because we needed to get her off the tracks and get the train moving because of the passengers and the next train coming along. I'll attend the autopsy and keep you informed. Then we can get Amy and Randy in here later this afternoon. Thanks, Captain."

* * *

“Jacques, I can see that you’re dashing off somewhere, but it’s absolutely essential that I talk with you for a minute.” The budget committee, after two hours of wrangling over how to divvy up a shrinking financial pie, was breaking for lunch, and Hal had hurried to intercept Jacques Ament, Frémont State University’s distinguished Dean of Fine Arts.

Just three years ago, they had managed to lure him away from the Paris Conservatory, with a juicy package that included funding from the local business community, to revitalize the Animas Music Festival. He had accomplished miracles, even if the repertoire tended to lean heavily toward Debussy, Ravel, and Saint-Saëns. Ament had spent several minutes of casual conversation at the beginning of the meeting waxing eloquent about the weekend soloist, who turned out to be an ex-student of his, and had mentioned that they were having lunch.

“Hal, I’m so sorry, but I’m already late and I don’t want to keep Steffanie waiting. Please, can’t this wait?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Did you read the paper this morning?”

“Yes, and I saw that you got your name in it yet again. Tell me. Does this notoriety help you with fund raising?” Ament’s Gallic sense of humor was well known on campus.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news, or at least potentially bad news. I had a good look at that unfortunate person we found on the tracks yesterday, and it looked to me a lot like the pictures of Steffanie on the posters for the festival. I’m sorry to be so blunt, but you really do need to know this. I don’t know if it’s been confirmed that it’s her, but it seems like it might be.”

Ament had stopped walking and was staring at Hal in shock. He put his hand out to lean on the wall and almost didn’t judge the distance correctly. Hal steadied him and steered him toward a chair at the conference table, and the other committee members, sensing that something was wrong, gathered around.

“But this is not possible! She arrived in town only Monday evening! How could she have managed to get way up there in the wilderness yesterday? My God! What will we do for the concerts this weekend?”

“I’ll get in touch with the scheduling people and tell them about the problem. And, remember, I don’t know if it really was her. But the pictures sure look like that body we found. I’ll call the police and see if they have an identification yet. Where were you supposed to meet her? We can go there and pray that she’s waiting.”

Hal was concerned for Ament’s health, because he had turned a deathly shade of gray and was breathing in a shallow, irregular pattern that was frightening.

But Ament shook his head, took a deep breath, and stood up, nodding.

“Yes. Let’s go. She’s staying at the General Palmer, and I was going to meet her in the lobby at noon. Five minutes ago.”

They hurried out to Ament’s car. Even though it was a short trip, Ament had ample time to demonstrate his Parisian driving skills, and Hal got on his phone as a way to distract himself. Annette answered on the first ring.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi. Did you get my message?”

“Yes, and it’s nice to have an independent agreement with hunches because it makes them more likely to be true.”

“Does this mean that you have confirmation?”

“Not yet, because we don’t have any idea of where to look for her passport or ID or anything with a picture. If it is her, that is. I’m going to the autopsy this afternoon, though, and at least we should be able to find out the cause of death.”

“I’m headed to the General Palmer with someone who’s supposed to meet her for lunch. Apparently she was staying there. And he can ID the body, if it’s necessary. Why don’t you meet us in the lobby? We’re just about there, but it’ll take a minute to park.”

“I’ll be right there.”

* * *

Because it always takes more than a minute to park in downtown Durango at noon in the summer, Annette was waiting for them in the lobby of the General Palmer Hotel even though she’d walked the five blocks down from the police station. After introductions, it took only a minute to discover that the violinist was not in her room, and Annette immediately asked to see the hotel manager, using her shield to move things along. They sat with the Teddy Bears on the Victorian wing chairs in the lobby while he was fetched, and Ament fidgeted in worry.

Presently they were approached by a tall, thin, middle-aged man with a name tag reading “Phillip Westerman, Manager,” who inquired about their needs.

“Mr., ah, Westerman, I’m Lieutenant Annette Trieri of the Durango Police Investigations Unit, and these gentlemen are academic officers at Frémont State University, Dean Harold Weathers and Dean Jacques Ament. I believe that one of the performers at this summer’s AMFest is registered here, a Ms. Steffanie Boudreau?”

“Ah, yes. Ms. Boudreau checked in Monday, I believe. We’re honored to have her as our guest. I’m personally looking forward to her concert on Sunday afternoon.” He raised his eyebrows instead of asking the obvious question.

“We have reason to believe that it was her body that was found on the Silverton tracks yesterday, perhaps you read about it in the *Herald*?”

Hotel managers are trained to be imperturbable, and Westerman did a fair job under the circumstances. His face whitened slightly and his narrow mustache twitched only a bit, so Annette continued.

“We are attempting to make a positive identification, and we are in need of Ms. Boudreau’s passport. Did she check it with your front desk? And it would help if we could see her room.”

Westerman blinked, paused, and blinked again, clearly evaluating the situation. Annette instantly understood.

“Mr. Westerman, I’m certain that you and the General Palmer want to cooperate with our investigation fully, but I also understand that you feel the need to protect the privacy of your guests. Dean Ament was Ms. Boudreau’s music teacher in Paris, and he was, I’m told, to meet her here for lunch. We’ve already discovered that she is not in her room. I’m absolutely certain that I could easily get a warrant to enter and examine her room if I need to. But we would like to avoid delay if possible. It’s especially important to us to make a positive identification so that we can have some control over the publicity that this tragedy is sure to generate. Of course, if you feel that we need to obtain the warrant,

I'll take the time to do so, but we will lose control of how you and, indeed, the General Palmer, will fare in that publicity..."

Westerman undoubtedly knew blackmail when he encountered it, but he also knew when he was out of his depth.

"Come with me," he said, as he turned to walk to the front desk.

* * *

It was nearly seven when Annette finally got home and found chicken breasts marinating in a fragrant mystery sauce in the kitchen and Hal on the deck going over a pile of bureaucratic-looking reports. There was a stack of new charcoal in the starter can on the grill ready and waiting to be lit. He looked up as she came out the patio door.

"How'd it go? Want a drink?" He got up to light the charcoal.

"Broken neck. Recent sexual activity, vaginal and anal, no signs of force. Blood tests will take a few days. And the fingerprints match the passport we got from what's-his-name, Westerman. And, yes, I would. Some kind of wine to go with that chicken, I guess. I'm going to shower. Christ, I hate my job sometimes."

He stopped fiddling with the grill to give her a therapeutic hug.

"There's no rush with dinner, if you want to work out first."

He leaned back and kissed her on the tip of her nose.

"Good idea. Thanks. I'll be down in about a half hour. What's the marinade?"

"My attempt at something French. I spent all afternoon with Jacques and got inspired. I'm going to make some couscous to go with it, and a big salad."

After he had heard the ski machine whooshing for 15 minutes or so—it sounded to him as if her pace was faster than usual—he put the chicken on to begin grilling and went into the kitchen to work on the salad and couscous. Just about the time he finished the salad, she came in drying her hair and found a glass of Chablis waiting.

"Want to talk about it more now?"

"I guess I would if I thought there were something more to talk about. But I'm pretty stumped. An internationally famous musician comes to town, immediately jumps in the sack with someone and has more than standard sexual experience, apparently consensual, then gets her neck broken and winds up dead on the railroad tracks in a very remote location. All within about twelve hours. Maybe I can get a transfer to parking enforcement."

Hal smiled and hugged her yet again. "Well, if meter maid uniforms were still in style, I might support that idea. You'd be as cute as a button. But they're not, so I guess I'll just have to tell you what I found out from Jacques."

This time it was her turn to lean back, not to kiss his nose but rather looking as if she might bite it—a look he recognized at once as her official "better tell me what you know right now, buster!" look.

"It seems that our unfortunate soloist had a dinner date Monday evening after she arrived. With Luigi Franconi, the guest conductor that Jacques brought in for the AMFest this year. And today, Franconi's nowhere to be found. But strangest of all, in light of your information from the autopsy, is something else Jacques told me: Franconi's gay."

* * *

Two

It worked as Annette had predicted. Randy Fredericks' story in Thursday morning's *Herald* was separately copyrighted, even though its content was still minimal. Luigi Franconi's absence was noted merely as his being "unavailable for comment," and some of the more gruesome details of the autopsy were omitted, having been withheld pending further investigation. Amy Hodges did an admirable song and dance around this issue at the press conference, helped partly by the fact that she hadn't seen the omitted material either. Randy was miffed at having been misled the day before, but his private briefing before the press conference had more than made up for the misdirection.

Hal and Annette's conversation at dinner the previous evening had included a discussion of her strategy for dealing with Randy's situation and how the city planned to handle the inevitable media crush once Randy's story got out. They also spent considerable time on the issue of how Hal knew that Franconi was missing.

After the meeting at the General Palmer and a visit to Steffanie Boudreau's room, he and Jacques Ament returned to campus. Ament tried for two hours to contact Franconi, who needed to hear the news at least so that he could plan for a substitute (violinist or piece of music, Ament was not sure) for the weekend. During the course of the varied attempts to find Franconi, the information about his dinner date with Boudreau emerged. Ament had arranged the date as a way for them to meet and to discuss their approach to the concerto before rehearsals began—not, he had reassured Hal, as anything romantic, given Franconi's orientation.

Eventually, Ament and Hal persuaded the manager of the campus apartment that Franconi had been given for the summer to let them examine the place and found nothing remarkable beyond the fact that Franconi wasn't there. Nor was he or his car to be found anywhere on campus. However, because there were no concerts Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, he could simply be off on a brief out-of-town jaunt. The concertmaster always led the Wednesday rehearsals anyway, and this time the only thing unusual was the absence of the coming weekend's soloist. Even this wasn't too much of a concern, because it seemed that the concertmaster was willing (and even eager) to play the Beethoven concerto, if necessary.

Annette absorbed this information with a variety of questions, including several about the extent to which Hal knew about Franconi's sexual orientation. It was important, she pointed out, because if he were bisexual, he could have been Boudreau's last partner. Otherwise, a third person (at least) was indicated. Hal had only Ament's comment about the dinner date to go by, so Annette was going to have to question Ament, and orchestra members, further about this sensitive topic.

* * *

Sitting on his deck in the morning sunshine, Hal finally realized that he was using this musical mystery as an excuse not to work on the reports he'd brought home. He had persuaded himself over time that his interest in Annette's career was mostly a case of "the grass is greener" syndrome, because he knew that he really wasn't cut out for police work. Despite the many similarities between criminal investigations and scientific research, and despite his preparation for the fuzzy nature of human events by the uncertainties inherent in the earth sciences, he knew that he wouldn't be satisfied with the outcome of

police work, which often depends more on evidentiary rules and seemingly arbitrary court decisions than on the truth. So he sighed and picked up the reports to haul up to the campus.

When he got up the hill, it took him a minute to figure out why there was so much activity for mid-August. Ah, yes. New student orientation was to start tomorrow, and some people always insist on arriving a day early. Scores of young people (they seem to get younger and younger each year, he noted yet again) were wandering around, trying to look as sophisticated and unimpressed as possible, many accompanied by parents who were trying not to look worried. He stitched a welcoming smile on his face and prepared himself for the expected barrage of questions about where's this or that building.

When he reached his office, Alice greeted him with congratulations about having been left out of the morning paper this time, along with several telephone messages. His relationship with Annette had matured to the point that most people on campus who knew him well knew about her also, and they always wanted to find out what he had heard about the latest police activity. But the messages this time were more impressive than usual: one from Provost Martin (expected), one from Gladys Pearl, chair of the music department (unexpected, but not unreasonable), one from Ament (expected), one from President Black's office (?), one from the facilities management people (must be about something else altogether), and one from the public relations office (what the hell do they want?). In a fit of rebellion, Hal decided to call the facilities people back first.

* * *

Having briefed both Amy Hodges and Randy Fredericks before the press conference the previous afternoon, Annette knew that today it would all hit the fan. Randy had been certain that he could get a story out on the wires before anyone else and had become most cooperative when Annette agreed to postpone the news conference to give him time to do just that. Amy would have to be the one in the police department to field questions, and she had received permission from Captain Jankowski to hold a daily press conference to provide updates on the case.

Nonetheless, when she got to her office, Annette found a stack of at least a dozen messages, all marked "URGENT," all from media people she'd never heard of. Well, she figured, any reporter worth his or her press card would be able to find out who was in charge of the investigative division. Although it didn't make her feel particularly good, she passed the messages to Amy with the notation that they could be considered low priority.

Annette's first job for the morning was a visit to Lester St. Clare, the coroner. Doubling as the medical examiner, he was a first-rate forensic pathologist, and she had been impressed with his professional handling of the autopsy. She found him, as usual, in his laboratory.

"Morning, Lester. Randy has his story about our musician on the wires, so are you ready for the bomb to go off?"

"I didn't see my name in the *Herald* story this morning, so maybe I'll be Mr. Invisible."

"Wishful thinking. They'll find you. And watch out. You'd better brief your staff. Some of these folks are beyond sleazy. There's no doubt that you and your staff will be offered bribes of significant amounts—the high five figures wouldn't surprise me—for the complete autopsy report. And I'm certain that our keeping parts of it under wraps will be challenged in court, not that you have to worry about that."

"I thought of the problem of the bribes, so I typed up my dictation myself, and I'm keeping the original in a secret place. Here's a copy for you, the only copy I've made."

He handed her a sheaf of paper.

“What a pain it is, transcribing. I’ll be sure to enunciate better in the future, you can bet on it. I don’t suppose you’ve made any progress since yesterday afternoon?”

“In fact, I have, a little at least.”

She relayed the information about Franconi and checked to make sure that St. Clare planned two separate DNA tests on the two semen samples. She also handed him an envelope and requested a DNA test on its contents.

She hadn’t really been annoyed with Hal the previous evening about his meter maid wisecrack, but he had made up for it anyway with a small present. It took some coaxing to get the full story, but she finally discovered that he’d already thought about the possibility of a sexual angle to the case. On an impulse, he took advantage of the afternoon visit to Franconi’s apartment to nab a hair sample from the hairbrush on the dresser. He knew it was not entirely ethical to have done this, and he also knew that it wasn’t even close to being “evidence” in the sense of admissibility. But he figured that Annette could dispose of it if she wanted to. And, hey, it might come in handy.

And indeed it would. If the DNA tests matched, Franconi would be identified as Boudreau’s partner (or at least one of them) the evening of her death, even if the information couldn’t be used in court. This would give them a place to start. Assuming he turned up.

* * *

Meanwhile, the object of all this attention was headed back to town, cruising along on Highway 160 eastbound through Mancos. He had the top down on his white Chrysler Sebring convertible and a puzzled look on his face. His *a capella* rendition of *Non piu andrai*—the aria in *Le Nozze di Figaro* in which Figaro extols to the unhappy Cherubino the virtues of a military career—had crashed to a halt while he tried to remember the second half of the libretto. As a conductor, Luigi had no problems with music, but words escaped him on occasion.

Disheveled, badly in need of a shave, and smelling rather fishy, he was about as happy as he could remember. Except for the missing phrases about the moustache.

When his old mentor Jacques Ament had called him last fall to ask him to be the guest conductor of something called the Animas Music Festival, Luigi had wished fervently for the courage to say “no,” but he just couldn’t summon it up. He owed Ament too many favors to decline. Yet, spending a summer in some godforsaken place called Durango, Colorado, USA, was not something he could imagine himself doing. And when he finally located the place in an atlas, he nearly called Jacques back to cancel, favors or no. The arrival of an information package, including a number of maps, had helped only a little. Sure the scenery looked spectacular, but so was it in Switzerland, just up the road. Unfortunately, he was committed, and he made the necessary plans to follow through.

So, back in early June, he flew to Denver and rented a car for the summer, one that he’d fallen in love with despite its inability to measure up to his Porsche Carrera. Then he followed a route to Durango suggested by Jacques. Not the most direct way, it included six mountain passes through the heart of the ski country. He stopped overnight in a pleasant little town called Buena Vista (which, strangely, the locals called “Byoona” Vista), and then headed west through Montrose and the San Juan mountains to Durango the next day. Switzerland, he’d decided, was indeed spectacular, but so was this, and it was much bigger. And so empty.

After arriving in Durango, he’d settled in and looked around for something new to do with his spare time, and someone suggested that he take up fly-fishing. This seemed logical somehow—as a conductor, he was used to waving his arms around in rhythmic motions—and so, carrying an unlimited-ceiling

American Express Platinum card, he visited a shop on Main Avenue with the clever name of Duranglers. He remembered the great American film star Humphrey Bogart once saying in one of those sentimental old war movies something about the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Such was Luigi's first visit to Duranglers.

For weeks his new friends there had been suggesting that he spend time fishing tail-waters, the sections of rivers below dams, especially the San Juan River below the Navajo Reservoir south of Durango, and the Dolores River below the McPhee Reservoir north of Cortez. He had finally made time this week to do both in a two-day trip, staying overnight at a rather seedy motel in Farmington after spending a reasonably productive day Tuesday on the San Juan, along with dozens of other fishers and their guides. The San Juan, a destination fishery, gets crowded.

Wednesday morning, he had left early and, needing every detail of the carefully drawn map he'd been given, found his way to the obscure dirt road along the lower Dolores. He spent the day there with mixed success at a variety of spots on the river, and he was packing up to leave about supper time when a pickup truck pulled into the parking area. The colorful fellow who got out (he had learned not to think automatically of all locals as "cowboys") recognized Luigi's license plate as a rental car, and he mentioned that, unless Luigi really had to, this was not the time to be leaving. Something called a "spinner fall" was about to happen, and the fishing would become truly remarkable.

The Duranglers folks had equipped him with a variety of flies, including, he remembered, something they'd called "BWO spinners," little olive-colored dry flies with splayed-out greyish wings designed to mimic the dying mayflies that fall to the water's surface. So Luigi stayed and had the most amazing experience of his short fly-fishing career, catching a large trout on almost each cast. He lost count at two dozen, and it was only because he was used to waving his arms for long periods of time that he had the strength to continue until the phenomenon stopped.

By then it was dark, and he thanked his colorful new friend by offering some Jack Daniels bourbon, another American product that he'd developed a taste for. By the time it was gone, he was beyond driving, so he spent the night asleep in his car.

And now he was on his way back to town, singing Mozart (the words had finally popped into his head) at the top of his lungs, blissfully ignorant of the firestorm awaiting him in Durango.

* * *

The facilities people wanted to know whom to contact about the technical requirements of installing a new digital video projector in one of the natural sciences classrooms, and Hal felt that he had actually accomplished something useful after returning their call.

As he had suspected, the other calls were oriented toward finding out the latest gossip about the death of Steffanie Boudreau. Even President Black, whose Texas accent was in high gear in an attempt to charm Hal into revealing confidences, really only wanted cocktail party ammunition.

Hal decided to begin an e-mail alias list so that he could simply send out a daily update to everyone who expressed interest in the case. He would conspire with Annette about what information to put out each day, making sure not to pre-empt Randy Fredericks' deal. He told Alice to inquire of all incoming callers if they were asking about the case and to simply add their names to the alias. Once Alice understood what was going on, she asked that her name be added to the list, which was about the most effective way that Hal knew to spread information around campus generally.

Feeling rather smug about this clever idea, Hal called Annette to make sure that he wasn't going to step on any official toes. He could tell from the various clicking noises that her office phone had been forwarded to her cellular phone.

"Trieri, investigations."

"Have the tabloids arrived yet? I can't wait to see how they try to outdo each other."

"I'm lying low, so I don't know what all's going on. I gave your hair sample, I mean the sample of Franconi's hair, to Lester for a DNA test, by the way. Thanks. What's up?"

"Ahhh, first, remember that these cellular phone calls can be monitored pretty easily."

"Not this new one I got. It's digital and virtually impossible to listen in on."

"Oh. You mean you're actually ahead of me in technology for once? There goes my self-esteem. But, look. Maybe yours can't be monitored, but mine still can. And therefore if I can hear you so can listeners-in. Hmm?"

He could hear a grunt of frustration on the other end.

"Anyway, I wanted to ask you about an idea I've had. I'm getting hounded by folks up here to give them juicy details on this Boudreau case, and I'm tired of saying the same thing over and over on the phone. So I thought I'd send out e-mail once a day, like Amy's press conferences only just to a select list here on campus. That way, they'll all stop bothering me. I hope. I thought I'd send only innocuous information, of course."

"Um. My immediate reaction is not so positive here. Is this really necessary?"

"Well, I'm just trying to make my life easier, that's all. And, you know me, I'm not beyond using this as a tool to be helpful to you. With mis-information, I mean. You know, actually making gossip work in your favor."

"Let me think about how it might work and we can talk about it tonight, OK? Do you need to do something before tomorrow?"

"Not really. I'll take names for the list today. Pasta tonight?"

"Yum. What with?"

"I'll see what looks good in the seafood case. Oh, I thought of another thing. Jacques told me that Franconi is scheduled to conduct a rehearsal this afternoon, starting at two. Do you want me to check to see if he shows?"

"I'll go one better and be there myself. I want to talk to him soonest. Where?"

"The concert hall, where we went Monday evening. I'm sure your badge will get you in..."

"Hal, please, call it a 'shield.' Boy Scouts are the ones with 'badges.'"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sorry. Anyway, I'll meet you there just before two if I don't have any conflicts. Keep a low profile. Those TV people are out there, just waiting for you to stick your head up."

"Don't be surprised if I show up tonight in a wig. Ciao."

Hal thought it over and decided that it wouldn't be a tragedy if his e-mail scheme didn't fly with Annette. He could just tell everyone that it wasn't being allowed and save himself the work involved. And it would be quite interesting to see if Maestro Franconi would turn up at the rehearsal.

* * *

Luigi had fly-fished only for a few weeks, and, like any enthusiastic novice, he enjoyed talking about it at every opportunity. He had had one such opportunity with Hal at a festival reception a couple of weeks back, so when he saw Hal on the front steps of the concert hall, he couldn't contain himself.

"Dean Weathers! I hope you remember me! I'm Luigi Franconi, and I recall a most informative conversation about fly-fishing we had at a party recently. I just have to tell you about what happened to me last night!"

And he launched into a rhapsodic monologue about his experience in the spinner fall on the Dolores.

Hal was completely taken aback, this being about the last thing he expected under the circumstances. Normally, he would have loved such a conversation, even if it was mostly one-sided, because other peoples' fishing experiences, particularly beginners', fascinated him. And, from the sound of it, this was an experience that few people were ever lucky enough to have in a lifetime of fly-fishing. Hal managed to smile and to nod at the appropriate intervals, all the while thinking furiously about how he should handle the situation.

Fortunately, Annette came to the rescue. She walked up behind Franconi and listened long enough to deduce who he was, from his accent, and what the conversation was about. She mouthed "Does he know?" at Hal, who shrugged and shook his head "No" gently. Franconi noticed that Hal was looking over his shoulder and turned without breaking stride.

"...and it was finally too dark to tie on another fly, so we stopped. It seemed that the spinners had stopped, too, which was most fortunate. Ah, hello, Ms. Trieri! How nice to see you again! I was just telling your husband here about a most marvelous experience I had last evening on the Dolores River. I'm happy to say that the river did not live up to its name. 'Sad' it was not! Except perhaps for the fact that my arm is so sore today that I don't know if I'll be able to conduct our rehearsal for the concerto this weekend. Which reminds me, I'm late, I'll have to run. Nice seeing you both again!"

And he started to run up the steps to the auditorium.

Annette turned on her command voice, but only up to medium.

"Mr. Franconi! Wait! I need to ask you something!"

She, and Hal, walked up the steps to where he had stopped. Annette's command voice never ceased to amaze Hal, who had experienced it turned up to high early in their relationship, quite possibly saving his life.

"Mr. Franconi, I understand that you had dinner with Steffanie Boudreau on Monday evening?"

"Yes, Jacques arranged it. I picked her up at the airport in the afternoon, took her to her hotel downtown, and waited for her to check in. We then walked up the street to Ariano's and had an early supper. Why do you ask?"

"Are you aware that she was found dead the next morning, under most unusual circumstances?"

Annette was watching him very carefully for any kind of reaction.

React he did, first with an extraordinary look of astonishment, then by very carefully sitting down on the steps. He shook his head several times, as if to clear it, and finally looked up at Annette.

"Excuse me, but I am confused. Why are you asking me about this? I had the idea that you are Dean Weathers' wife, but there must be more that I don't know."

"Dean Weathers and I are not married. I'm the head of the investigations unit of the Durango police. And as far as we know now, you were the last person to see Ms. Boudreau alive."

Annette wondered if the implications of this statement would be lost on a non-native speaker of English.

“Well, the last I saw of her was when she got her key from the desk clerk at the hotel, the General Palmer, and we said good night. So the desk clerk saw her at the same time I did. I think it was about 7:00. But how could this have happened? And what did happen?”

“That’s what we need to find out, Mr. Franconi. Perhaps we could schedule a time for an interview after your rehearsal?”

“I’m not sure that I can tell you much more than I have.”

“Even so, I’d like to go over things slowly and in detail.”

“Come with me. I’ll cancel the rehearsal and we can talk now.”

Hal spoke up for the first time, “There was an article in the paper this morning, so I’m sure that the orchestra members know about the death. And, of course, she wasn’t at rehearsal yesterday. Jacques told me that the concertmaster took the solo part in the Beethoven concerto yesterday.”

“I’m not surprised. He’s quite adequate, although not in Steffanie’s league. And ‘the show must go on,’ after all. I suppose we can dedicate the weekend performances to her memory. What am I going to say to these people?”

And he sank into thought as he opened the auditorium door.

* * *

Hal was in the middle of concocting a sauce in which to braise the bay scallops he’d found at City Market when Annette finally got home. He planned to serve them over spinach fettuccine, and getting the flavors right was always a challenge with scallops.

Under Annette’s tutelage, he had almost completely abandoned his compulsive habit of following recipes to the letter for everything and now enjoyed free-form cooking. Sometimes the results were a bit of an adventure, but he was usually quite successful.

“Well,” Annette had kissed him on the cheek and was looking over his shoulder at the stove, “either Franconi’s as good an actor as he’s supposed to be a conductor, or he’s completely innocent of anything to do with Boudreau’s death.”

“The DNA test will exonerate him, I suppose, if the hair doesn’t match anything. What do you think about tarragon, mainly, with just a hint of this Cajun spice stuff to give it some zip and counteract some of the sweetness?”

“Uh, those are scallops, right? What’s the stock?”

“That shrimp stock from boiling the shells last time, with some vermouth, remember? It’s pretty subtle, as stock goes.”

“OK, but how about a hefty squeeze of lemon?”

“Voila! Just what I was looking for but couldn’t think of! So where do you go from here?”

Annette opened the refrigerator, took out a bottle of chardonnay, and poured herself a glass.

“I yanked on Franconi’s chain by asking him, as discreetly as I could manage, about whether he and Boudreau had been involved, sexually. He took the question pretty much in stride and said, basically, that she wasn’t his type, without much further elaboration. And his story checks with what we heard

from the Monday evening desk clerk at the hotel. The clerk also told us that she didn't go out through the lobby again before midnight, when he went off shift. And the graveyard-shift clerk didn't see her at all. Franconi told me that she mentioned something about a late date—that was why they were having an early dinner—but he doesn't know who the date was with. To tell you the truth, my dear, I don't know where I go now, especially if the DNA test clears Franconi. Say, that's beginning to smell good. Is it time to boil water yet?"

"Sure. What about working backwards, from when the train stopped? Didn't the engineer, Leadfoot what's-his-name, say something about a tender run that didn't happen before our train trip? And, suppose the body was placed on the tracks just before our train came by. How long would it have taken someone to get her to that spot? I mean, how late could she have left the hotel and got there? Suppose the sex happened in her hotel room. It seems like it would still have taken some time to get from downtown to that place on the tracks, even if she was killed at the site. And if she was killed somewhere else, it would take still more time, wouldn't it? And how do you suppose they got her there? Seems like up or down the tracks would be the only way."

"Hey, I'm only the *sous-chef* around here, I don't know this stuff. We did find out that the guy who was supposed to make the tender run on Tuesday morning has disappeared. And there is one other thing I've thought of. What's the main difference between the Silverton and normal trains?"

"Uh, steam engines?"

"Wrong, Mr. Science Person. The track width, I mean gauge. It's a narrow-gauge railroad. Suppose you got a full-sized pickup truck with those off-road tires. Couldn't you just drive up the tracks, straddling the rails? I mean, it might be bumpy on the ties, but wouldn't that work?"

"And if the tires were the big, off-road kind, they could just force them up and over the rails if they wanted to turn around or if they had to deal with a switching mechanism, or anything like that. So what you have is a scenario in which she leaves the hotel for this late date by the back door sometime after 7:00; gets in a vehicle of some kind and is driven up the tracks past Rockwood, and gets dead somehow along the way; and is then placed on, or maybe just falls onto, the tracks. Say, maybe we're being too suspicious here. What if she was just out joyriding with her lover and fell? Any indications from the autopsy that could help? Bruises, or anything? And where's the nearest place to where we found the body that someone could get a vehicle onto the tracks? And, say, do you suppose that there are any places where there might be tire tracks? Like, where there's mud seeping up through the ties, or something?"

"I thought you scientists had all the answers, not all the questions. Anyway, it sounds like a ride on one of those tenders that Leadfoot mentioned could be instructive. Or maybe the railroad company has something more comfortable."

Just then, the phone rang, and Hal reached over the counter and picked it up.

"Hello...Can I ask who's calling please?...That's nice, but I'm sure you'll understand when I point out that she has many 'close, personal friends,' all of whom never hesitate to introduce themselves to me by name." He winked at Annette while listening with a bemused smile. "I see. I'll find out if she's available."

He covered the receiver with his hand, and tried to keep a straight face. "A gentleman caller for you, a close personal friend, he says, name of Lance Riggins. Should I be jealous?"

She looked disgusted. "Never heard of him. Any guesses?"

"Five to one it's a media person of some ilk."

“No takers here. Let’s have it.” And he handed her the phone and went back to cooking, losing track of the conversation as she walked into the other room.

About two minutes later, she returned, and set the phone on the counter. “Well, it’s started. My close, personal friend Lance Riggins is with the *National Gazette* and has information for me, if only I’ll answer some of his questions. Arrgh!”

“Let’s see. The *National Gazette*. I have trouble keeping all these things straight, given that I only look at the covers in the supermarket check-out line. Was that the one with the picture of Jesus’ face in a cloud last week?”

She took a large gulp of her wine. “Is there some way to turn all the phones off during dinner?”

* * *

Later, they made a point of watching the local 10:00 pm news program and were treated to stock videotape of the D&SNGRR engines and helicopter footage of the Animas Gorge, as well as satellite vans, multiple sets of TV lights and cameras, and a horde of reporters shouting questions at a nervous-looking Amy Hodges. All in all, Amy did quite well, averaging about a 50% “no comment” rate and maintaining a professional cool throughout.

“So, which of those guys is your friend Lance?”

Hal was feeling puckish. She poked him hard in the ribs.

“Probably none on camera. The TV people are usually pretty good at keeping print reporters out of the frame, seems like. But if you see someone who looks like a slimeball, that’ll be him. I guess I didn’t mention that he asked me out, for professional reasons, of course.”

“Uh, just what kind of professional does he think you are? Ouch!”

* * *

Three

Lance Riggins always managed to be near the front of the pack at press conferences, so he had, in fact, been in one of the TV shots on the News at Ten. That had all happened earlier in the afternoon, and he was now nursing a third margarita, rocks, at the Narrow Gauge Saloon, taking stock of the situation and trying to think of a way to get the proverbial scoop.

That his little ruse hadn’t worked on the police investigator bothered him not in the least. In contrast to his colleagues, he had only a single story per week to write, and his next deadline was still three days away, so he wasn’t too worried. Moreover, he had a research staff to do the background work on the dead violinist’s biography and other information. He hoped that they would come up with something juicy, so that whatever he managed to write could be cast into appropriately lurid headlines.

His single idea so far had been to call back to the *Gazette*’s office in Atlantic City to request that they send out, as soon as they could manage it, a model who resembled the victim as closely as possible (except, he’d instructed, find one who’d look way voluptuous in bra and panties), so he could stage a photograph. It could be run without a caption, and readers would automatically assume that it was real, even though there would be a subtle and indirect disclaimer buried in the text of the story. It should be

easy to get a model willing to be made up appropriately and to lie down on the tracks in underwear, dirt and splinters or no. The persuasiveness of money, and all.

But ideas based on fact were harder, because the facts were so few. That police department spokeswoman, Amy what's-her-name, hadn't responded to his leading questions, so all he had—all anybody had, really—was a dead body found on the tourist train tracks. And he'd not been able actually to take the train ride to see the location, because it was booked all summer well in advance and he'd arrived in town only a few days ago.

He noticed a familiar figure entering the bar and tried to hide under his big hat.

“Well, if it isn't the Lanster. Sitting all alone in the haze. How come you're not hard at work on the Big Story?”

The voice of Eddie Walker informed Lance that his attempt at hiding had failed, and he knew there would be no graceful escape.

“Come on over here to a table. And I'll buy you another drink. I hate sitting on bar stools. What's that in front of you, a marg?”

Walker's personal aspect ratio was about as close to 1:1 as a person could be and still walk, and he had enough bad experiences with under-designed bar stools to make him prefer a chair. Or two, if they were available. He worked for one of the networks—Lance could never remember which one—as an investigator and sometime cameraman, being too unphotogenic to appear on camera. But he was good at investigating, and Lance knew he could profit by buddying up to Walker, as unpleasant as it might be. At the very least, he knew that his chances of picking up any of the local single women would be nil with Eddie around, so he might as well pump him for information.

“So, Eddie, what have you guys found out lately? Any new news?”

Walker and several other broadcast news investigators were kept busy feeding the bottomless appetite of the television audience, and they occasionally came up with something of interest to Lance's readers. And because the *Gazette* was published only weekly, the TV people didn't consider it competition.

“Naw. Just a dead French woman. Who plays violin. Lying on the railroad tracks in her underwear. Died of a broken neck. Maybe sustained during a fall from the rocks above the tracks, maybe not. Just arrived in town the day before. Was supposed to play a concert on Saturday. How she got to the location is up for grabs. But you know all this too, huh?”

As out of shape as Walker was, it would be several days, if ever, before he would adapt to Durango's elevation and be able to speak in complete sentences. Despite deep breaths between clauses in this small speech, he was panting for air.

“What I don't know is why we're all here. Talk about the sticks. Jesus!”

“You know what we need, Eddie, is to get a train ride up to the location, somehow. Have you looked into a charter, or anything? I know you got helicopter footage, but we really need to stop and walk around. And it didn't look like anyone was going to land a chopper anywhere near there.”

“That damned train is all booked up for weeks. We tried, but we can't get them to add cars. Or extra trains or anything. Cops must have them under their thumb, or something. Say, I've been meaning to ask you. Where'd you get that hat, anyway? Makes you look like a skinny John Wayne.”

Lance grinned. “Local color, figured it'd help me blend in. There's a custom shop just around the corner. It cost a bundle, but that's the beauty of expense accounts. And it keeps the sun off.”

Lance was sensitive about getting any more freckles on his bald spot.

“Maybe we can figure out another way to get up there. I checked out the train, too, and it looks like it runs only during the daytime. So the tracks are just sitting there all night, with no traffic. I’ve seen pickups with train wheels on them—maybe we could borrow one.”

“Right. And be sitting ducks for getting arrested. When they find it missing. But maybe you’re onto something, there. Maybe we could just rent a jeep and drive up the tracks. Not on the rails but on the ties. Of course, we need to know where the body was found pretty closely if we’re to find it in the dark.” The last, longer, sentence had Eddie gasping.

“Now there’s an idea. You leave finding the body to me. See if you can rent something big and comfortable, like one of those Grand Cherokees, or something. It’ll ride better and there will be plenty of room for you and for your camera, or whatever you want to bring.”

Neither of them had reason to pay attention to the figure at the next table under the O’Farrell Roper—a black version of Lance’s new hat—with the concha band, doing a lot of listening to the cellular phone he held to his ear.

* * *

Of all the questions posed by Hal the previous evening, the one that stuck with Annette was the one about whether or not all this could really have been an accident. She had concocted the sunbather-falling-off-the-rocks story to stall for time, but she had ignored the possibility that it could really have been an accident because of the position of the body on the tracks: it looked too carefully arranged to have accidentally fallen into place, and there were none of the bruises or abrasions that would be expected from a fall onto such a rough surface, at least a fall from the cliff above. She had spent at least an hour in the middle of the night mulling the possibility over, and she finally decided it should be thoroughly examined.

Lester St. Clare was always in his lab in the coroner’s office by 7:30, so Annette had no trouble finding him the next morning. She brought with her some of the pictures taken by Hal at the scene.

“Morning, Lester. Do I smell coffee hiding behind the formaldehyde?”

“That’s not formaldehyde, that’s whatever the cleaning people use in here every night. Probably stronger. Do you take sugar or anything?”

“Black’s fine. Lester, I want to talk about the possibility that the Boudreau death may have been an accident. I brought you some of the pictures we took.”

“Oh, yeah. They weren’t ready when we did the autopsy the other day, were they? Accident? Well, I can only deal in probabilities, but I’d have to say that the probability of an accident is pretty low. The way her neck was broken, for example. And no bruises.”

“My initial assumption was homicide because of the way the body was lying on the tracks. Here, look at this.”

She plopped down an eight by ten print of the late Steffanie Boudreau in front of him.

“It just doesn’t seem like she could have fallen in this position. But I want to get your opinion.”

“Hmm. I’d say that this confirms my earlier statement. You have to ask yourself, how could her neck have been broken the way it was and how could she have ended up in this position with no bruises or abrasions and have it be an accident?”

“I understand about the bruises but not about the neck.”

“Oh. Well, her neck was broken with some kind of twisting motion. Not a forward-backward, or side-to-side, snapping motion, like whiplash from a rear-end car accident, say. More like one of those martial arts moves, like in those action movies where somebody grabs a victim from behind and twists their head one way and their shoulders the other.”

“So, with no bruising and the way the neck was broken, you’d say it was a ‘pretty low probability’, I think that’s what you said, that it was an accident. What about with this photo?”

“Extremely low. I think somebody killed her and put her body there in that position deliberately. Whether or not that somebody had the sex with her, I can’t say. It couldn’t have been too long between the sex, the time of death, and the railroad tracks, though. At least the two DNA tests on the semen samples will tell us if there was more than one person involved. Oh, by the way, you were right. The pressure’s on for us to sell the autopsy. Highest bid so far is fifty grand. One of my people got approached. I’m glad I have the original stashed away.”

“Yeah, and I got a call from a supermarket tabloid reporter last night. Wanted to take me out for a drink so we could exchange information. Hang in there, Lester.”

* * *

The number of worried-looking parents tagging after bored-looking teenagers was higher than yesterday, and New Student Orientation Weekend was officially underway. Hal had been able to avoid getting on the schedule for the upcoming Saturday and Sunday activities, but he would have to make up for this luxury with double duty today. He picked up a copy of the weekend edition of the *Frémont Free Press*, the “Welcome Back!” issue, on his way across campus. What he saw on the front page made him walk faster.

The *Free Press* had begun as an official student paper handled by the journalism school, but it had run into political trouble with the trustees back in the early seventies (when it was also known as the “Freak Press”) and they had abolished its funding. Now it was an independent, campus-oriented tri-weekly paper that tried to maintain high journalistic standards but tended toward inflammatory rhetoric.

What had increased Hal’s pace was the 72-point headline announcing “Campus Visitor Murdered” with a sub-head that asked if anyone could feel safe. Just what all these new students’ parents need to see, he thought. And just what I need to have happen on the day when I get to be the Official Campus Spokesperson and meet with all of them.

When he got to his office, he set the paper in front of Alice and asked her to get the campus public affairs office on the phone.

“The provost already called about this. He said he knows you’re occupied with the orientation weekend today, but he needs you to meet with him and the other deans over lunch. That’s between your orientation sessions, so I gave him a tentative ‘yes’. It’s to be in his office, twelve to one. Should I have some lunch sent over for you? I know your schedule will be tight.”

“Thanks, but I’ll grab brunch before my eleven-o’clock session. And I still need to talk to the public affairs office. I’m sure they’ll be busy, but it can’t wait.”

He knew that Alice would be able to break through the lines of defense that public affairs would undoubtedly have in place.

It took her only five minutes. The smooth voice on the line, which Hal recognized as that of Reginald Meeker, the director of the office, immediately began trying to put the conversation off to some other time, but Hal wasn’t having it.

“Look, Reg, I won’t take much of your time. I’ve got sessions with visiting parents here for the orientation weekend at nine, eleven, one, and three, and it’s probably a good idea if I tell them what you’re telling people, so we don’t get our signals crossed, OK? Now, what’s the position on the *Free Press* headline? And I’m in a hurry, too.”

“We’ve been saying that there is no indication that this has anything to do with the university, that it’s highly unusual for Durango, let alone the campus, and that no one needs to worry. I’ll fax you the official statement. I think it’s gone out on the campus-wide e-mail distribution, too.”

“OK. And thanks. Are you going to the noon meeting in Martin’s office?”

“Haven’t heard about it.”

“I’ll let you know what happens. Thanks again.”

Meeker was a combination of a glad-handing used-car salesman and oily lawyer, and Hal couldn’t stand him. But there was no use making extra enemies. He just had time to think about what he was going to say to the first group of new students and their parents.

* * *

If it’s not an accident, it’s a homicide, and I need to move this investigation along, Annette thought. Maestro Franconi’s a nice guy, but he’s still the last person whom we know to have seen her alive. Time for a follow-up interview.

But first, there was a gantlet to run. The parking places across from the police station had been taken over by the media, and anyone entering or exiting the building came under intense scrutiny. They also had the back door staked out. Let’s see, she thought, today’s Friday, we discovered the body Tuesday morning (time of death Monday night); I bet they’re looking for something to close out their news week with a splash. Not that I have anything to give them.

Fortunately, Captain Jankowski had been able to keep the media spotlight on himself, so his line investigators were still not widely recognized, at least by the reporters from out of town. So she strolled casually past the assembled cameras without incident.

But Randy Fredericks, being a local, knew her, and he hurried to catch her after she had reached the parking lot. At least he had the good sense not to shout her name so that the others could hear.

“Morning, Lieutenant. They’re getting pretty desperate over there. And there’s talk of getting a court order for the release of the autopsy. Words like ‘stonewalling’ are going to start showing up in stories pretty soon, like, today probably.”

“Everyone wants instant gratification, no? Well, they’ll have to use whatever words they want, because we’ve got nothing to give them, really. Tell you what, though. If they’re going after the autopsy, we may as well begin to let some of the details out, the ones that we’ve been sitting on. I’m deep background, only, though. OK?”

“Whatever you tell me, I’ll have to ask Amy at the press conference, for confirmation.”

“Then you’ll lose your exclusive, unless you wait ’til tomorrow to ask her.”

“Oh. Right. Nothing’s ever easy, is it?”

“Your deadline for tomorrow morning’s *Herald* is this evening, right? I’ll call you about dinner time. I want to talk to Amy and my Captain about this first. But you’ll hear from me, OK? This way, you won’t have anything concrete to ask Amy today, but you’ll still have the exclusive. And please don’t tell any of those vultures over there who I am.”

“How am I going to get confirmation for tomorrow’s story?”

“I’ll think of something and let you know. Got to run, I’ll call you later.”

She got in her car and immediately called Walter Jankowski to let him have time to think about her newest strategy. Maybe if they called it a “sexual assault,” they could rattle some cages and break loose more information.

* * *

Hal had decided to occupy the moral high ground in the student/parents meetings, and the tactic worked well enough in the 9:00 and 11:00 meetings that his confidence level was high for the afternoon. By introducing the *Free Press* as a useful community and campus resource, and by providing a chatty overview of its colorful history, he was able to criticize the offending headline without being defensive. Like all newspapers, he reminded the concerned parents, they need to do what they can to bolster their circulation to keep advertising rates up, and one way to do that was with headlines.

He emphasized that there was no connection of this tragedy to the campus, beyond the musician’s arrangement to appear at the concert. And he trotted out the campus crime statistics that the Feds required them to publicize—for once, they would actually be worth the effort it took to compile. The ones on campus involving students showed the expected petty theft (bicycles, mostly) and one assault that had really been in the category of fisticuffs (a disagreement, lubricated by beer, over the merits of various professional football teams). He really didn’t have to work too hard to prove that Frémont State was a safe place for people to send their kids.

His high confidence level would be helpful for the 1:00 meeting, because he needed to have it go smoothly after the meeting with the provost and the other deans. The main topic of that discussion had been the *Free Press* article, and Hal’s handling of it in the student/parents meetings had won him praise, helping his confidence further.

But Provost John Martin was one of those rare administrators who disliked meetings, so he used what ones he held to cover as much ground as possible. And, in the discussion of the substance of the *Free Press* article, he had mentioned that he had been on the airplane from Denver with Steffanie Boudreau on Monday afternoon and had been introduced to her by none other than Reginald Meeker who, it turned out, was seated with her. And Meeker was known as something of a womanizer. Martin had been returning from a meeting with National Science Foundation advisors in Washington, but he didn’t know where Meeker had been before boarding the Denver-Durango flight.

While the university could manage the little bumps in the road like the one the *Free Press* headline presented, having the university’s director of public affairs involved in the murder of an international celebrity was a little too much. Even though Meeker reported to the president’s office, Martin was concerned. And Hal would have to put this out of his mind until he saw Annette later, so he could concentrate on putting forward a happy face to the worried parents this afternoon. The best way to do that would be to call her and let her know, so he fished his cellular phone out of his jacket pocket. Several clicks later the multiple forwards found her.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi. I’m dashing about between meetings, but I had to let you in on something I heard over lunch.”

“I’m dashing about, too, trying to avoid all the media vultures in town. What’s up?”

“Have you checked out who may have been on the airplane that Steffanie Boudreau flew in on Monday afternoon? If it wasn’t Franconi who killed her, it may have been someone who met her on that

flight and arranged for a late date. Turns out that John Martin was on it, and he saw Reg Meeker sitting with her.”

“Who?”

“Reginald Meeker, our director of public affairs. It wasn’t clandestine, because Meeker introduced John to her. John said he doesn’t know if they were traveling together before Denver.”

“Hmm. Looks like I should take a little drive out to the airport. Anything else interesting?”

“I’m up to my eyeballs in worried parents. The headline writer at the *Free Press* stuck it to us good, and on orientation weekend, yet.”

She chuckled. “I saw it. And if the local papers treat us this way, what do you think the others will do? I’ll be home about six. Should I bring food?”

“Good idea. I’ve got four meetings with groups of parents, two down, two to go, so I’ll be ready to just sit and stare at the wall. See ya later.”

* * *

She brought home a container of ready-to-boil ravioli with sweet Italian sausage and ricotta filling, dumped them into a casserole dish, covered them with a thinned-down, home-made tomato sauce she had thawed for the occasion, sealed the dish with foil under the lid, and stuck it in the oven. In an hour, she’d make a salad and, presto, they’d have a minimum-effort dinner.

Hal was on the deck, not staring at the wall but watching the clouds gathering west of town, with an opened manuscript in his lap. Reviewing a journal submission, she guessed. She kissed the top of his head, took his glass in for a refill of soda water, and returned with it and a glass of wine for herself.

“So, did you get all those nervous parents calmed down?”

“Yeah, I think they’ll be OK to leave their kids with us now. The campus is really a pretty safe place, and it’s easy to persuade people of it. Find anything out at the airport?”

“Just what you told me. I didn’t have the clout to ask for a search for his complete itinerary. The airline agent in charge is new and doesn’t know me, so I have to go through channels. But I did manage to find out that Meeker changed his seat in Denver and wound up sitting next to our dead musician. You got the phone out here?” He pulled out the house phone from a pile of papers next to his briefcase and handed it to her, and she took a piece of paper from her shirt pocket.

“You might find my half of this conversation interesting,” Annette was grinning as she punched in numbers. “Hello, Randy? I hope you recognize my voice because I’d rather remain officially anonymous for this call. Are you on a reasonably secure phone? ...I guess that’ll have to do. OK, here’s some new information for you. There is evidence, which we haven’t released yet, in the autopsy report that suggests that Steffanie Boudreau was sexually assaulted on the night of her death...What? ...No, the cause of death was the broken neck, but it wasn’t an accidental break, it was definitely intentional, so it wasn’t part of some weird sexual game, it was murder. ...Yes, I figured out what to do. Right after I hang up, which I’ll do in a minute, wait exactly five minutes and then call the county coroner’s office, the number in the phone book. Look it up during the five-minute wait. Announce yourself and listen. You’ll be talking to someone who won’t identify himself—if it’s not a him it’s the wrong person—but who will verify what I’ve told you. Then it’s up to you to write it into something printable. ’Bye.”

And she switched the phone off.

Hal was watching, shaking his head. “Oh, what a tangled web we weave.”

“No kidding. It’s all planned, of course, and cleared with Jankowski. Lester’s at his office waiting for the call. Amy’s ready for the stuff to hit the fan at tomorrow’s press conference. And Randy gets another juicy scoop. All in a day’s work.”

“And I bet this makes Mouthpiece Meeker sweat bullets. You going to question him?”

“Tomorrow, after he has plenty of time to read the paper.”

* * *

As arranged, Eddie Walker picked up Lance Riggins at 11:30 that evening in a forest green Chevy Suburban, big enough to ride the tracks comfortably and to carry all of Walker and his assorted TV equipment.

“OK, Lance, I hope you know how to find where we need to go. And why don’t you drive? I may want to tape some of the scenery. I’ve got a low-light camera here, and the moon’s pretty big anyway.”

“I spent the afternoon at the library and the courthouse looking at maps, and I bought this Colorado atlas, supposedly with all the roads there are on it. The train tracks, too. From what I can gather, they found the body just this side of where the train crosses to the east side of the river, north of a place called ‘Rockwood.’ I couldn’t tell what to expect in the valley, like whether we’ll be able to turn this thing around or not. It looks like the tracks hug the cliff, though.”

“So, how far is it on the tracks, anyway?”

“If we get on the tracks at this Rockwood place, a couple of miles, I guess. I don’t know how fast we’ll be able to go, but I can’t imagine that it’ll take too much more than about fifteen minutes to get there, once we get off the main highway. And about the same to get back, assuming we don’t have to go too far to get turned around.”

Keeping carefully below the speed limit, Lance steered the huge vehicle up North Main Avenue and out of town toward Silverton. The nearly full moon lit the Animas Valley with a conspiratorial glow, and Walker was experimenting with various camera settings to be ready for the real thing later. It took about 20 minutes to get to the turnoff to Rockwood, and Lance pulled over to the shoulder to let several late-night travelers recede into the distance. He did not want the Chevy to be seen turning onto the side road.

When there was no traffic, Lance turned down the hill toward Rockwood, using only the parking lights and creeping along slowly. After descending the steep, curvy grade, they came upon several houses, a small, commercial-looking building, and assorted pieces of railroad equipment. They discovered that the road was parallel to the train tracks. At a driveway that crossed the tracks, Lance switched off the parking lights and turned right and then quickly left, straddling the rails.

Experimenting with gears and speeds showed him that he could actually make pretty good time, and he put this to good use to get clear of the built up area and away into the wilderness. Steering was a little strange, because the tracks tended to correct errors, kind of like an amusement park ride. As a test, Lance slowed to a crawl and turned the wheel sharply, to see if the vehicle might be trapped on the tracks, but its big tires easily clambered over the rails. With his confidence restored, Lance reset the trip odometer and settled in for the short drive to the bridge.

They almost missed it in the dark, because they still had the headlights off, but the D&SNGRR folks had kindly put up a sign announcing the Animas River crossing. Lance stopped and backed the Suburban several hundred yards up the tracks, using them as a guide. He parked on a nearly flat section, just before backing around a curve, where the tracks still banked slightly toward the rock wall on his

left. The rail-bed was nestled onto a rock shelf against an irregular, sheer cliff, and he had to find a niche in the wall so that he could open his door. As he squeezed his way out, he heard a yell from Walker.

“Holy shit! There’s just air here! And the sound of a waterfall or something. How the hell am I going to get out?”

Lance shut the door and shuffled sideways between the vehicle and the cliff to get around to the back, and shined his flashlight over the edge that Walker’s door was hanging above.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to get out the way I did, and there’s not much room here, either. Man, I didn’t know how close to the edge I’ve been driving this thing. Probably just as well I didn’t, especially that backing up. I’m glad I’ve got the tracks to guide me along. You stay there, and I’ll look around some. Maybe you can get some video shots from where you are.”

“You want the camera lights?”

“I don’t think so. They would only make weird shadows.” He started walking the tracks, up the slight grade back toward Rockwood, scanning back and forth with the flashlight. He really didn’t know what he expected to find, but looking carefully for something, anything, seemed like the thing to do. At least this would give him a feel for things, so that he could provide a more authentic, and lurid, description of the scene for his upcoming article. He looked back and saw Walker standing in the door, aiming a camera out over the gorge and panning upstream, slightly downhill from where he’d walked to. Well, he thought, the tracks look just like railroad tracks. The cliff is sure impressive though, both up and down.

About a quarter mile later, he got bored and turned around to walk back to the Suburban. Walker was still standing in the door, aiming the camera up toward him, so he waved. Then he started to enjoy the evening. The moonlight cast shadows in the gorge, and the stars were brighter, and far more numerous, than he remembered. Sounds were drowned out by the white water in the gorge below. A gentle up-valley breeze at his back carried the smell of pine and railroad tracks. And something else, slightly acrid, and smoky.

When he was about halfway back to the Chevy, he noticed that Walker had lowered the camera and was staring at him, or maybe past him. Suddenly, Walker waved his free arm, and Lance heard him shout over the noise of the river. Something about “...behind you.”

He glanced over his shoulder, and his peripheral vision worked just well enough to cause the hair on the back of his neck to stand up. He turned, and had barely enough time to recognize what was lumbering down the tracks toward him as an eight-foot-tall snowplow blade, its leading edge about six inches from the rock wall. Then a bank of six high-powered driving lights blazed on from the roof of the cab, nearly blinding him. Behind him, he heard that Walker had begun leaning on the horn of the Suburban. But the plow kept coming.

Lance began running instinctively, at the same time thinking that it wouldn’t help to run. Then he remembered the niche in the rock wall where he had stopped to open his door, and he began watching the cliff face on his left. The lights on the snowplow made shadows of each irregularity in the wall, and, when he spotted a large one, he stopped and flattened himself against the wall next to a vertical ledge about a foot wide. That, plus the six inches or so of clearance that he’d seen might just do the trick.

He took several deep breaths, exhaled completely, and tried to make himself one with the wall, facing it, head turned toward the Chevy, arms stretched high, butt tucked in. And he felt the ground vibrate and the slipstream buffet him as the snowplow roared by a few seconds later, its empty dump-truck bed yawning at him. It seemed to be picking up speed. Only after he was safe did it occur to him what was about to happen.

Chevy Suburbans are very large vehicles with a curb weight of close to three tons (even without an Eddie Walker inside). But a mountain snowplow is designed to move large amounts of material, and the blade on this one was angled for maximum leverage, toward the right. So, with a screeching of torn metal and a shower of sparks, it rear-ended the Suburban and had no trouble tipping it over into the Animas Gorge. Lance's eyes adjusted to the moonlight as he watched in horror while the rented Chevy with Walker inside managed two and a half slow motion mid-air rolls before bouncing off a large boulder into the river, nose first. The current quickly tipped it upside down, and it floated a few yards before becoming jammed on some rocks, creating a new, artificial patch of white water. The snowplow had disappeared up the valley around another curve, and Lance was left standing alone on the tracks, gasping for breath, cold sweat chilling him to the marrow.

He recalled from the drive up to the bridge that there would be no place for the truck to turn to come back to get him at least to that point, so he had some time to save himself if it should. He began to run up the slight grade, back toward Rockwood.

* * *

Four

His and her bedside telephones, on separate lines, had seemed like a techno-extravagance to Hal until the first time she got a middle-of-the night call. By now, whenever it happened he would wake up, listen to her answer her phone on her side of the bed, and happily roll over and go back to sleep. Unless her end of the conversation was weird, he was usually asleep within a few seconds. This one kept him wide awake.

"This is Annette Trieri...Oh, hi Jackson. Geez, it's Saturday morning. What time is it?...You've got who down there? Where have I heard that name?...Oh, yeah, one of those tabloid reporters. So why are you calling me? Don't tell me he wants another date...He was where? And what happened?...A snowplow? Who was in the truck?...A TV guy? Off the tracks into the gorge? So what am I supposed to do about it in the middle of the night?...OK, I'll get there as soon as I can."

It was about then that Hal decided that he should get up and make coffee.

* * *

The eastern sky was just beginning to glow pink behind the mountains by the time that Annette got to the police station. Hal's coffee was a godsend: her first cup had helped her get dressed and her second cup was almost empty as she walked up to the front desk.

"I'm here, Jackson, barely. Now what"

"Well, Lieutenant, we've got him sitting outside your office, drinking coffee. He's still pretty shook up. He's also exhausted."

Annette stopped at the departmental coffee pot for a refill, and she grimaced at the difference between Hal's Kona blend, freshly ground that morning, and the early-morning police station sludge. In a chair outside her office, with his head in his hands, sat a forlorn looking figure. She could see his scalp through the thinning dirty blonde hair atop his head, but otherwise he looked young and fit. A tad over six feet, under 180 pounds, probably, her trained eye told her.

“Mr. Riggins? I’m Lieutenant Annette Trieri. We spoke on the telephone the day before yesterday. I understand you’ve had an exciting night.”

When he heard his name, Lance looked up blearily, blinked his brown eyes, and worked to gather his energy for a conversation. He hadn’t realized how tired he was until he’d been seated to wait for her. The drive down from Rockwood in the stolen pickup—he was thinking of it as “borrowed”—had used up the last of his energy, and he had been able to make it to Durango only because of how scared he was.

“‘Exciting’ understates it, Lieutenant. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to stay awake, but I’d like to give you an outline of what happened.”

“I understand that you were trespassing on the Durango and Silverton’s property and got into some trouble.”

“Yeah, well, normally I’d try to lie my way out of something like this, but this one time I’ll be straight, honest.” And he proceeded to fill her in on his adventure.

“You must be in some kind of shape to have run all the way up that section of track, no?”

“I run marathons, so it wasn’t out of my ability range. And I’ve been here for several days, so I’m almost acclimated to the altitude. And I was pumped with adrenalin, that’s for sure.”

“To be clear, you had no glimpse of the driver of the snowplow?”

“Nope. Those lights came on and my eyes had been pretty well adjusted to the dark. I was blinded. I did get a look at the back end of the truck, and it seemed like a highway department one, maybe state, maybe county. It was sure big.”

“So. Are you going to write this up for publication?”

“Hmm. I hadn’t even thought of that. Yet. I guess I’m too exhausted. Yeah, I guess I’ll have to. Since Eddie and I were up there investigating the Boudreau death, I’ll probably tie them together. Say, what about Eddie? I can’t imagine he survived that crash into the river. Is anyone looking for him?”

“The desk sergeant told me that there would be a search party out with first light, which is about now. Why don’t you go back to your hotel and get some rest? And, look, I’m sorry about being nasty to you on the phone the other night. But you were being just too sleazy, OK? Here’s a tip: the best way for you to get information about this whole thing is to be real nice, and I mean that in the most positive way, to Randy Fredericks, who writes for the local paper. We’re feeding him information. This morning’s paper will say that the Boudreau death was a homicide with a sexual assault.”

Lance managed to look grateful through his weariness. “Thanks, Lieutenant. And I’ll take your advice. Let me know if you find anything about Eddie, OK? I kind of feel responsible for him.”

* * *

As Annette was watching Lance make a tired exit, thinking that she really shouldn’t feel sorry for him, she was handed a note. She glanced at her watch and fished her phone out to call home.

“Hi, I’m glad I caught you before you left for campus. And I can’t thank you enough for getting up with me to make that coffee.”

“Summer mornings are beautiful around here anyway. What news from the front line?”

“You won’t believe it. Lance Riggins—that reporter for the National Gazette who called me the other night, remember?—he got a rental car and drove up the Silverton tracks last night. Just like you

and I discussed doing. He went with a cameraman for Fox News. I don't know what they thought they were going to accomplish, but they just had to see where we found the body Tuesday. And while they were up there, up on the High Line section, a highway snowplow, for God's sake, came roaring down the tracks from Rockwood and plowed the car off into the gorge, with the camera guy in it. Riggins was walking the tracks and managed not to get hit, luckily for him. Then he ran back to Rockwood, found a pickup with the keys in it and drove back here."

"He ran the High Line section, in the middle of the night? Whew. I guess I have to have more respect for someone who can do that."

"Anyway, I just got a note that says the sheriff wants me to go with him and some railroad people on a flatcar with a crane to find the car and, presumably, the body. My front desk must have called his office. So I have no idea where I'll be when today, except I'll be up there for most of the day, probably."

"I'll make something for dinner that'll keep, so don't worry. And, hey, come home first and put on some outdoor clothes. You looked like a million on the way out this morning, even if you were half asleep. You don't want to ride up there with a work crew and get that dress all greased up."

"Oh. Right. They can wait for me to get changed, I'm sure. I'll be right home. See ya, unless you have to leave right away."

"I'll probably stay home today. And I bet you haven't eaten anything, so I'll whip up something for you to take with you. I sure do make a good wife, if I don't say so myself. Or maybe a Mom."

"Yes, Mom. I'll be right there."

Annette put the phone away, started a mental list of the calls she'd have to make to rearrange her day, and headed for the door.

* * *

Even though there were three performances scheduled for the weekend, Saturday evening and both matinee and evening concerts on Sunday, Luigi had insisted on a Saturday morning rehearsal. The concertmaster's ego and ambition notwithstanding, his ability to pull off the Beethoven concerto was just not quite up to Luigi's standard.

It wasn't that Leonard Schwab didn't know the music, or that he wasn't a top-notch violinist. Juilliard graduates aren't second rate. It was just that his interpretation didn't quite harmonize with Luigi's. Schwab was from Manhattan; Luigi was from Como. They had both grown up steeped in classical music, but New York versions of the great works are quite different from northern Italian versions. What galled Schwab was that he knew, no question about it, that that little pompous ass Franconi would have let Steffanie interpret the Beethoven her way. Except for her little accident. And it didn't help a bit that Luigi kept calling him "Lennie." After all the trouble he'd gone to, Schwab was afraid that his big chance to shine in public was going to be tarnished.

But there was nothing he could do about it, because Luigi, as conductor, was clearly in charge. So he went along with Luigi's interpretation, knowing that he could have the last laugh at the final performance on Sunday. Besides, he'd been up most of the night and was too tired to fight about it.

"Thank you! That was much more crisp. Now, let's try the final half of the last movement just once more, and this time make it sing. Then we can all rest before tonight." Luigi was quite the perfectionist.

* * *

Hal had decided to avoid the campus, having done his part for orientation yesterday, so he was at home when Annette called about mid-morning.

“Hi. I thought I’d check in and let you know what’s going on, since I’m standing around waiting anyway.”

Earlier, she had hurried home to change into hiking boots, jeans, and a windbreaker, and Hal had packed her a lunch and other amenities in a day pack.

“Hurry up and wait, that’s the way it always is.”

“Well, what you don’t know is that I’m waiting by myself. We had to drive up to Silverton, because that’s where their crane was. Then, we were chugging down the tracks a little way below Needleton, when I spotted what turned out to be a state snowplow in a thick patch of woods on the edge of a meadow. As near as I can tell from the map you packed for me—and thank you very much again for all the stuff in the pack—it’s just above the inlet of Cascade Creek, before the gorge closes in again. There’s green paint on the blade of the plow.”

“So you jumped off the train to look at this thing, or what?”

“I made them stop and let me off. I really won’t be needed down there where the car’s in the river anyway. And I put in a call to the office to send out an investigation team, to look for fingerprints and get a sample of the paint. They should be here before too long.”

“So the bad guy pulled the snowplow off the tracks, drove across a meadow to try to hide the plow in the woods. Then where’d he go? Isn’t that still pretty isolated? And, for that matter, I’m surprised that your phone works way up there, in the valley and all.”

“According to the map, this is pretty close to the ski area and you know that the skiers have to have their cell phones, so I must be hitting a tower around here somewhere. And the map says there’s a pack trail here that goes up to the highway, so the perp could have hiked out of the gorge here. It doesn’t look like more than a couple of miles up to the highway...uh, although there’s quite an elevation gain, about 1500 feet. But it’s no big deal, really. And there was a full moon last night.”

“Um, so have you got your service revolver? It makes me nervous that you’re up there all by yourself.”

“Yeah, well, you know that I’m not Ms. Outdoorswoman, and I’m not too comfortable myself. For one thing, the mosquitos are driving me nuts. There must be a pond around here somewhere. And every time I hear the wind move the bushes around, I can’t help but think of bigger critters. I’ve got my gun, but I sure as hell hope I don’t have to shoot any bears with it.”

“I’m more worried about unfriendly humans than bears. You don’t actually know that the bad guy, or guys, really walked out of there. Listen, don’t use your battery up, OK? I want you home for dinner.”

“Yes, Mom. I’ll be careful. And I’ve got the phone plugged into the cigarette lighter in the truck, so I’m using its battery. Here comes a railroad company pickup now, the kind that rides the tracks. That must be my guys coming down from Silverton. I’ll be home before you know it.”

* * *

Reginald Meeker finally dragged himself out of bed at 1:00, still feeling woozy from too much tequila the night before. If only he’d not started drinking so late. At least it was Saturday, and he didn’t have to put on his happy face for the university—the way he felt, all those parents and new students would probably just make him throw up.

He forced himself to drink a large glass of V-8, with a splash of Worcestershire sauce to make it into a sort of hybrid Virgin Mary, and then went out to the deck for some t'ai chi. He knew that the only way to get over the hangover hump was with some serious exercise, and t'ai chi was a useful warm-up for his karate routine. That, followed by a three- or four-mile run, would work miracles. Assuming he could get through it all without passing out.

Although he was able to will his body through the intricate, slow dance movements, his mind would not behave. He returned again and again to yesterday's crisis at the university. The *Free Press* story had kept his telephone ringing all day with a mix of calls from worried parents and bloodthirsty reporters. It surely didn't help matters that the international tabloid press had the town staked out.

But there was really no news beyond the discovery of the body and speculation. The fact that the autopsy report was being kept secret was not at all surprising, especially given what he knew they would have found. But even that should not surprise experienced reporters—although they would exploit it for their stories, certainly.

At least his position at the university seemed secure. Weathers, he had heard, had done an admirable job in the orientation presentations yesterday, and today's presenters would take the same approach. And the press release Meeker had written had been approved by both the provost and the president without a single change, a minor coup under the circumstances.

Clearly, the only thing to do was to sit tight and wait. And see if this hellacious hangover would go away.

* * *

On the campus, the Saturday orientation sessions were in full swing, with Provost John Martin at the podium. He was following Hal's lead of yesterday and trying to maintain his position on the high moral ground, against a tide of worry (from, naturally, parents), accusations (from the campus rabble rousing crowd), and leading questions related to the sexual angle of the murder (from the tabloid reporters, who had discovered the sessions). Martin was doing his best to keep his temper in the face of outrageous behavior by the last two of these groups, but it was tough going for someone used to being in charge and control.

"Provost Martin," a well-dressed, middle-age woman holding a notebook had jumped up, "How is the university handling this situation compared to how it usually handles sexual assaults?" Martin recognized the woman from her previous questions in the same "have you stopped beating your wife?" mode. He wondered how red his face had turned by this time.

"I hate to disappoint you, but Frémont State University has no experience in 'handling,' as you put it, sexual assaults, because we haven't had any, ever. And this one isn't a university matter, as far as we're concerned. There is simply no evidence that it occurred on our campus. As I've said repeatedly, it's in the hands of the police. And, as I have also discussed, the campus is probably the safest place around for miles."

Just as the reporter was opening her mouth to ask a follow-up question, up from the front row jumped an individual of dubious gender, wearing a tee shirt that boldly proclaimed "Dyke Power: Womyn Loving Womyn!!" Martin had to restrain himself from simply walking off the stage, for he knew what was coming.

"You lying chauvinist pig! What about that gang-rape at the fraternity house last year?" Martin forced himself to take a deep breath and count slowly to five.

“Professor Glendon, you know well that the investigation of that incident by the Durango police showed it not to be an assault at all. And you also know well that we have closed and disbanded that particular fraternity chapter despite this finding, as a way of clearly signaling that we simply do not tolerate any improper behavior by any of our student groups.” He forced a smile. “And I had thought that my attendance at your sensitivity training sessions last spring had cleansed me of the ‘chauvinist pig’ title. My mistake and apologies.”

There was a titter of amusement from the audience at this last, and Martin sensed that they were on his side. He broadened his smile.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let me take this opportunity to introduce Professor Madge Glendon, who chairs our women’s studies program. She and I have worked closely to ensure the safety of our female student population here at Frémont State University, and I consider her to be a valuable advisor. Her demeanor also points out an important aspect of the academic environment that we strive to maintain here: open, frank, and free discussion of even the most sensitive of issues. We believe that this environment is an important component of the extraordinary education that we offer to our students. Now, perhaps we could have a few questions from the parents?”

Martin hadn’t been selected to become provost by accident, and his skill at deflecting attacks such as this one was the envy of his faculty. Glendon sat down and was now looking worried, for she knew that Martin had a long and precise memory. There would be no favors for her, or her program, this academic year.

* * *

Because she was not stuck with the salvage operation, Annette was able to get back to town by mid-afternoon. Although most of her plans for the day were canceled, she was intent on questioning Reginald Meeker about his meeting with Boudreau on the airplane, so she called him as soon as she could, from her cell phone on the way home. Her timing couldn’t have been better.

Meeker was finally eating and reading the morning paper, his exercise having done wonders for his stomach, and his attention was riveted on Randy Fredericks’ copyrighted story when the phone rang.

“Yeah.”

“Mr. Meeker? This is Lieutenant Annette Trieri, Durango Police Investigations.”

Fortunately, Meeker’s mouth was empty, or he’d have choked.

“Mr. Meeker? Are you there?”

“Ahem. Excuse me, Lieutenant, I’m afraid I had a mouthful of toast. Now. What can I do for you?”

“I’m investigating the death of Steffanie Boudreau, the violinist who was found dead on the Silverton tracks. I’m sure you’ve read about it. I understand that you rode with her on the flight down from Denver, and I’d like to get together and talk with you. We’re needing to exploit every possible source of information if we’re to make headway on this case.”

“I’m afraid that there’s not much I can tell you about it. We did sit together and chat, but it was mostly light conversation, mostly about the area. She had never been to Colorado before, let alone our little corner of the state, and she was intensely curious about it. So I basically gave her a verbal tour. But I can’t imagine that you’d be interested in that.”

“I’m interested in everything, Mr. Meeker. When would be a good time for you?”

“Well, I’m afraid that my weekend is pretty full. How about Monday morning? Say, around 9:00?”

“At your office? That will be fine. I’ll see you then. Oh, by the way. Because of your position at the university, I’m sure you’re trying to keep up with this thing, especially given the *Free Press* article yesterday. You should know that we’ve decided to use Randy Fredericks, of the *Herald*, as our conduit for leaking information, so be sure to read his stuff first. Did you see today’s paper?”

“I was just reading it. I got rather a late start today. I guess that this development isn’t too surprising, but it adds to the mystery.” *I got rather a late start today!* What the hell did I say that for? He felt dizzy.

“And this is pretty tame, all things considered. More will be coming out in the next few days, you can be sure. Well, see you Monday. Have a nice weekend, Mr. Meeker.”

He felt little beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

* * *

It wasn’t two minutes later when Annette’s cellular phone tweedled—an annoying noise that never failed to startle her, but the price she had to pay for having calls forwarded to wherever she was.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hello? Ah, my name is Joe Weisicki, I work for the Durango & Silverton. I have a note from my boss to call you.”

Annette’s mind shifted gears rapidly, seeking a connection between the name and a reason for his call. Oh, yes! The missing railroad tender operator! Then she had to shift her Subaru’s gears even more rapidly, to zip around a tourist Winnebago, backing out of a side street. Summertime Durango striking again.

“Yes, thanks very much for calling me. Have you been out of town?”

“What’s this all about? Why should I answer police questions about my personal life?”

Annette winced at the thought that this character would play these little games and decided to nip his bad attitude in the bud.

“Just trying to get calibrated, Mr., um, Weisicki, was it? If you’ve been out of town, you have a solid explanation for why you’ve not called me before today, and you also may not know of recent events around here. Otherwise, I’ll have to assume that you’re hiding something from us, something that may be related to a murder. And since you called the station, where all incoming calls are traced automatically, we know where to pick you up. Do you want to do this hard or easy?”

Annette’s free and easy approach to the truth in these situations was one of the reasons that she was so successful in her job.

“What? ‘Accessory to murder?’ What murder? Look, lady, I just got back into town from a little vacation and I’m catching up on things and I got this note from my boss, who’s already mad at me for something else I don’t understand. I don’t need trouble from you, too. What’s going on here?”

“So you were out of town. Good. Now we’re getting somewhere. I have an idea of what your boss is upset about, and if you can help me out, I think I can help you out with him. How about meeting me at the police station downtown so we can have an informal chat? I’ll fill you in. I think you’ll understand why you’re on something of the hot seat, but I also think I can get it cooled down. How soon can you get downtown?”

“I’m already downtown, at the Narrow Gauge. I’ll walk up to the station right now and meet you there.”

“OK, I’ll be there in about five minutes. Just ask at the front desk for me and they’ll sit you down if I’m not there yet. It seems that traffic is a bit of an adventure just now.”

By feel she pushed the “End” button and speed dialed the front desk to warn them and to see if this fine example of citizenship had a record.

* * *

When Annette finally got home, just before 8:00 that evening, the realization that she had put in a fourteen-hour shift, on a Saturday no less, hit her as the garage door was closing behind her. She had been quite proud of the fact that, with her promotion to lieutenant, she was no longer really working “shifts,” or getting overtime, for that matter. But fourteen hours on a Saturday was absurd. Not to mention exhausting.

She eased herself out of the car, collected her gear, and let herself into an apparently empty house. No pots merrily bubbling on the stove, no Hal watching television. But there was Pat Metheny’s soaring guitar, off in the distance, upstairs, so Hal must be tying flies, she thought. As she hauled herself up the staircase, she realized how tired she was.

Hal was hunched over his fly-tying desk, working on a tiny bit of fluff rigged in what looked like a miniature torture device. He had heard the stairs creak, no doubt, so he didn’t jump when she kissed the back of his neck.

“Welcome home, all in one piece, I hope? Give me a minute and I’ll welcome you properly. If I get up right now, this thing’ll fly apart and I’ll have to start over.”

“What is all this? I thought I’d seen everything, but this is all new.” She yawned so hard her jaw cracked.

“Remember those parachute patterns, with the little white wing sticking straight up above the horizontal hackle winding? This is how you make ’em, with a parachute hanger. It’s something of a pain, but I’m running low. Someone, it seems, has found them to be quite effective, and she hasn’t learned to tie flies yet.”

Annette thought it best to change the subject.

“Um, I seem to remember something about dinner? I hope?”

“Absolutely. All set, well almost. I didn’t know when you’d get in, so I made something this afternoon. I can finish it up while you have a hot shower. What time is it? Was your long day well spent?”

“About eight. And, yeah, it really was. Although these fourteen-hour days aren’t what I like to plan for. As you know. What’s to eat? I’m ravenous. If I can stay awake.”

“A pasta salad with cold smoked salmon and various goodies. There! Now isn’t this little thing cute?” And he stood up, turned around, and enveloped her in a bear hug. She snuggled in close.

“No fair going to sleep yet. You’ve got to eat and fill me in on your adventures. Last I heard you were sitting in a snowplow in the woods. Hope that didn’t last all day.” All he got was a muffled “mrrph” in response.

* * *

It had taken only a little cajoling to get her into the shower, and it turned out that much of the exhaustion was merely low blood sugar, for she perked up with the food and provided a running commentary on her day's activities between mouthfuls. She was finishing up her third helping of the pasta (and Hal was watching tomorrow's lunch disappear) when she got to her interview with Weisicki.

"It turns out that the tender operators, as well as the company, take their jobs quite seriously. They make the first run up the tracks each day, in all kinds of weather and in bad light in the spring and fall, and it's their responsibility to make sure the tracks are clear and to spot potential rock falls as well. So my new friend Joe was appalled that no one had made the run Tuesday. He fully expected that it would be covered. Can I have a little more Chablis?" Hal poured.

"But it was his run to make, right? So wouldn't it be his responsibility to get a replacement?"

"He says that they told him it was taken care of, 'they' being someone he couldn't really identify. It seems that he got a call on Monday morning, after his run, that he'd won an employee bonus award for five nights up at Peaceful Pines Resort, but he had to take them right away, starting that evening. So that's where he was all week. It's something way out of his price range, and he's always wanted to go there, riding by it every day and so on, so he didn't want to lose the opportunity. And in the scramble to get ready and take the last train up there Monday, he just believed what 'they' told him on the phone. We'll try to check into who made the reservation and paid for his stay, and so on, but that's where things stand now. I did call and got a verification that he was indeed up there. It looks as if someone went to a lot of trouble, and expense, to get him out of the way for the Tuesday morning tender run. What's five days up there cost, anyway? Three grand?"

"Maybe two-and-a-half, double occupancy. Unless you get a lot of massages and extra stuff. It's about the most expensive resort around these parts. That's why I like to go up to Jack Hardin's place—it's less than half that. But I'm pretty sure that Peaceful Pines has only weekly accommodations, so I don't know how they could have wangled a five-day stay."

"The thing about this is, of course, all the trouble of getting reservations at Peaceful Pines and paying for them just to get old Joe out of the way for a morning suggests clearly that whoever killed Steffanie planned things way far in advance. This was not a crime of opportunity. They made it happen."

"Unless there's more going on than just the murder. But I don't know what that could be, aside from that episode last night with the plow. Did Riggins say anything about who could have overheard him making plans? I mean, it's highly unlikely that whoever did that was just out for a casual joy ride. Too coincidental, even for me. Um, I've got dessert for you, if you want some. Although I can't see how you could, after all that pasta."

She had finally wiped her plate completely clean with the last piece of French bread.

"What is it?"

"Just some of that raspberry sorbet. And cookies."

"Yum. Nice and light. What is it, a pint box? Tell you what. Just get a couple of spoons and forget the bowl. I'll share." And there goes my afternoon snack, Hal thought.

* * *

At 9:10 Monday morning, Annette was sitting in the anteroom of the public relations office at the university, sipping the coffee that Reginald Meeker's secretary had kindly offered. Quite good coffee, actually.

She had spent most of Sunday in her rest-and-relaxation mode, lying around doing nothing. Hal had tried to get her to go fishing with him, to try out some of his new creations, but she hadn't had the energy. Now, while she was waiting for the tardy Mr. Meeker, she was pondering his comments on the phone, about getting a late start on Saturday. And he'd said something about "eating toast." A mid-afternoon breakfast? What was he doing Friday evening?

The hallway door flew open, and in burst the object of her patience, full of apologetic explanations about his late arrival. Smarmy apologetic explanations, she thought. Are all PR people this way? After coffee refills and a word to the secretary that they weren't to be disturbed except for the president (of the university, Annette decided), they were finally sitting in his office. He had chosen a side table for their conversation, hoping, Annette decided, to keep matters informal and as cordial as possible.

She noticed that Meeker's office furniture was significantly newer, and far more expensive, than the furniture in Hal's office. PR flacks get better furniture than deans, eh? Our tax dollars at work. Maybe I'll make him earn his pay today.

"Well, once again, Lieutenant, I'm most sorry that I was late. I'm afraid that someone in my position, you know, just has these little things come up."

"I understand completely, Mr. Meeker. In an organization like this, there are any number of matters that need to be attended to, some of which, I'm sure, make this murder investigation pale by comparison."

She stitched a smile on her best poker face while watching him sit up straight in surprise.

"Now, Mr. Meeker, as we discussed on Saturday, I'm interested in your conversation with Ms. Boudreau on the flight from Denver. Do you mind if I tape this?"

She had placed a portable recorder on the table and now pushed the record button. He looked stricken.

"Could you please go over as much of that conversation as you remember with me? There may have been something she said, or some reaction she had to something you said, that could be very helpful in reconstructing her remaining hours of life. It appears that you were one of the last people to see her alive, after all."

She noticed that a shine of sweat had appeared on Meeker's ample forehead, despite the brisk air conditioning.

"Ah, as I mentioned, she was full of questions about Colorado, and the mountains, and cowboys, and so on, and I did my best to be a travel guide for her. It was really a most unremarkable conversation. And, really, it's a pretty short flight. We didn't have much time, what with the beverage service and looking out the window and all."

"Interesting. My information, from the airline, has Ms. Boudreau sitting in an aisle seat." She smiled, cordially, she hoped.

"Ah, yes, that's probably their information. But, you see, I insisted that she and I exchange seats, so she could see the view. Is it warm in here?"

He took a silk handkerchief from his jacket pocket and blotted his forehead. Annette, meanwhile, made a note to ask John Martin if he recalled the seating arrangements on the airplane.

“Anyway,” he was beginning to ramble nervously, to Annette’s pleasure, “we talked about the names of the mountains, I know only some, of course, and other features like the San Luis Valley. I was able to point out the ski area up at Wolf Creek Pass. And she asked about outdoor opportunities here in Durango. She was quite interested in exploring the area, by car and on foot. From what I saw in the paper last week, it looks as if the exploration took a tragic turn.”

He smiled weakly. Annette wrote deliberately in her notebook, summarizing his statement and including some lines from a Shakespearean sonnet she remembered, to kill extra time. It worked—he rambled on.

“I can’t imagine who would do such a thing, and how it could have been planned so elaborately. I mean, that’s what it looks like. And then there was that story in yesterday’s paper, about the car in the river. Do you suppose the two things are connected?”

“Did she say anything during your conversation about her plans for the evening, that would be last Monday evening? We’re trying to reconstruct the time line.”

“She did mention that she would be staying at the GP and she was having dinner with the conductor, um, Franconi, is that right? I presume you’ve questioned him. After the story on Saturday, about the sexual assault, I would think that he would be a real suspect. Seems like a womanizer, if I ever saw one.”

They obviously don’t hire PR people as judges of character, Annette thought.

“One thing that would help me, Mr. Meeker, is to understand how it was that you were on her flight from Denver. Did you arrange for this in advance, or were you there for some other reason?”

“Oh, it was entirely coincidental. I was in Denver for discussions with some of our state legislators—not really lobbying, you know, just keeping in touch. I have a log book of all my professional contacts, being a public employee, you know. And so I can show who I was meeting and where. Then I just happened to be on the same flight back here as Miss Boudreau.”

He was trying very hard to document the coincidence, she thought. She slowly picked up her coffee cup and took a sip, watching him follow her moves with his own cup.

“Since you mentioned the incident with the car in the river, Mr. Meeker, I’m curious about something. I recall that you seem to have been eating breakfast when we spoke on Saturday, about 2:30 in the afternoon, I believe. May I infer from this that you were out late Friday evening?”

He choked on a mouthful of coffee, dribbling some down the front of his designer silk tie. She waited patiently while he recomposed himself.

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry. Went down the wrong way. I’m sorry. What were you asking?” He glanced at the tape recorder.

“Was Friday night a late night for you?”

“Well, I’m afraid that I don’t really see what this has to do with my conversation with Miss Boudreau. But, since you ask, yes, I was out, in a combination of social and professional activities, rather late Friday. Public relations can be an all-day and even all-night job, sometimes.”

“Professionally? Oh, good. Then you won’t mind providing me with the names of your contacts. They must be part of that log book of your professional activities, no?”

It was fortunate that he didn’t get caught with another mouthful of coffee. Really, she thought, this is not someone who should get involved in high-stakes card games.

* * *

Luigi was still steamed, so it was just as well that he didn't have to conduct on Mondays, which were reserved as Chamber Night at the AMFest.

Last week, the world-renowned Takács String Quartet had created a sensation with the final two Bartók quartets, completing the cycle they had begun three weeks earlier. This week the AMFest Chamber Consort, a subset of the orchestra Luigi had conducted over the weekend, was returning to more classical themes by playing Haydn symphonies. Led by the concertmaster, Luigi's favorite violinist, Lennie. Who had absolutely butchered the Beethoven Concerto last night with an inexcusably heavy, overbearing interpretation.

Despite Luigi's best efforts, Lennie had managed to turn the opening *Allegro* into a sort of weird march (even the slower, lyrical section) and the following *Larghetto* movement into a dirge. And Luigi couldn't bear to even think about the *Rondo*.

At least Saturday night and Sunday afternoon had gone according to plan. Lennie could actually play pretty well when he chose to. If only poor Steffanie hadn't died, she would have been splendid with the Beethoven. And her Stradivarius was far more well suited to the *Violin Concerto in D* than that Japanese contraption that Lennie played.

It was times like this that Luigi really missed Dieter, who was always able to provide a calming influence. Having heard rumors about the intolerance levels of the cowboys in the American Southwest, they had decided that Dieter should not accompany Luigi to Durango. Luigi had since come to think of Durango as a relatively enlightened place, but it was probably better that they had not taken any chances, especially given Dieter's tendency to flout his nipple rings.

Maybe he could call. Let's see. 11:00 am in Durango, Rocky Mountain Daylight Time, would be 1700 UCT, or 7:00 pm in Rome, eight hours later. Or is it the other way around, eight hours earlier, which would make it 3:00 am? This sort of calculation never failed to remind Luigi why he was an artist, not a rocket scientist.

But what a tragedy it was, this business with Steffanie. Most everyone seemed to think Luigi an eligible bachelor, he knew, so the police were bound to suspect him. Maybe Dieter should have come along, after all. But, no, then fly-fishing would be out of the question, because Dieter would consider it barbaric. Perhaps he should explain his orientation to that policewoman, Ms. Trieri, the dean's, uh, partner, she seemed sympathetic. The less reason they had to suspect him, the better, after all.

* * *

On the campus, it was time for another kind of orientation, phase two. The parent/student phase had been completed over the weekend, and now the parents were supposed to be departing, leaving their offspring to tackle early class registration by themselves. And, for most of them, to take their first independent steps toward adulthood, much to the delight of said offspring. Hal, having done his part with the orientation lectures during phase one, had only the registration week hassles to deal with.

As he walked up to the campus, he reminded himself to enjoy the relative peace and quiet, because, starting on Wednesday, the rest of the student body would begin arriving. The dorms would be overflowing, the bookstore would have lines around the block, and traffic, already a tourist-infested nightmare made worse by the out-of-town media crowd, would probably become gridlocked all over town. And the campus would fill up with students and their dogs.

The only up side to this would be the warm weather, with the attendant fashion, or lack of it, among the young women. Thank heavens for halter tops, he thought, and other such perks of academic employment.

When he came across a copy of the *Free Press*, he braced himself for the worst and was glad he did. A 72-point headline screamed

AMFest Violinist Raped and Murdered

This was followed by a summary of Randy Frederick's *Herald* articles from over the weekend. He also noticed a tease for an editorial that dealt, apparently, with the lack of police response. Better read that when I'm feeling calm, he thought.

Alice, as usual, was already in the office, reviewing one last time the fall semester class schedules for the various natural sciences departments in Hal's college. He was only too happy to have her handle this chore, which included coordinating classrooms and laboratories as well as double-checking on the faculty course assignments made by the various department chairs. His role would be to mediate disputes, always in favor of Alice's side, of course. As he walked in, she intercepted his trajectory toward his office.

"Good morning Dean Weathers. I was glad to see that you weren't part of the newspaper stories about the newest tragedy over the weekend. The provost has scheduled a meeting at noon, over lunch, to discuss matters, particularly the latest headlines and the editorial. I haven't read it yet, but I understand that he's most upset. And Mr. Meeker, from the public relations office, just called. He seemed upset also. I hope you're feeling better than all these other people?"

"Couldn't be better, Alice, given that the summer's winding down. Were you able to schedule my class on Tuesdays and Thursdays this semester? Let's see, this time it's earth sciences for journalists, isn't it? Yes, that works just fine with two long lectures per week, so I hope it can be late morning, starting, say, at 10:00? And maybe in that classroom with the new digital projector I talked to facilities about last week? I could take my portable computer and show real-time weather and earthquake data."

He knew she already had this covered, but he had to act as if he had some modicum of control. He was, after all, The Dean, and supposedly In Charge.

"All set, Dean Weathers. Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00-11:20, NATS 205, although I'm told that the projector won't be installed for a few weeks yet."

"Great, and thanks for your efforts, Alice. Guess I should read this editorial that's got everyone so het up."

And he eased into his office, leaving the door open.

Actually, he knew he wouldn't have to read the entire editorial, only the paragraph headers. They, in the *Free Press* attempts at style, would summarize the salient points.

The first paragraph, "Musician Murdered," would no doubt re-hash what little was known about the incident. "Students Scared" would, predictably, provide a campus perspective, and "Women Worried" would spin this perspective into the feminist angle that the *Free Press* was notorious for. "Police Paralyzed" would then begin the editorial rant, and, ah, here's what's got John upset, "Administration Impotent," which would rail against the university's response (or, in the newspaper's opinion, lack thereof) to the situation.

Well, Hal chuckled to himself, John's getting to the age when a headline like this could just hit a little close to home. Especially given that battle-axe he's married to. Maybe he'll get calmed down in time for that noon meeting he called.

As Hal was getting settled in to work on the weekend's e-mail, his interoffice phone line buzzed. Even though his door was open and she was sitting just outside it, Alice was careful about protocol.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Dean Weathers, but Mr. Meeker is calling, again. I'm afraid that I mentioned that I expected you soon, when he called a little while ago. I can tell him that you're not available and that you'll call back, if you'd like."

"Thanks, but I'll take it, Alice. Don't worry about Reg. He's usually all puffed up about himself, but he's basically harmless."

And he pushed the flashing button on the phone set.

"This is Hal Weathers."

"Hal, this is Reg Meeker. I'm worried about how the campus is looking with respect to this murder investigation, and I have to say, your girlfriend isn't helping things a bit. This morning she grilled me and even taped the conversation. It was sounding like she suspects me of something."

"Well, what could that be, Reg? If I know her, her approach would be to let you decide whether the shoe fits and whether to put it on. Have you got a solid alibi for last Monday night, and for Friday? If so, surely you've got nothing to worry about."

"My whereabouts isn't the issue. The university's image is. And she's not helping a bit. Can't you get her under control?"

"Oh, come on, Reg. I'm sure the university will survive, even if you turn out to be the murderer."

Hal thought he heard something like a hiccup on the other end of the line.

"And the people who were most worried, the parents of the new students, left over the weekend, after we got 'em calmed down last week. Anyway, I'll mention to Annette that you're concerned and that you want me to get her under control. That'll be good for a laugh or two."

"I'm afraid that you're not taking this nearly seriously enough. I'll have to speak to the provost about this. Good day."

And the phone went dead. Hal burst out laughing as he stared at the receiver. If only the rest of the day could be this amusing, he thought.

* * *

Just as the dormitories were filling up, so were the apartments in the student slum, to the north of, and down the bluff from, the campus. To maximize their profits, landlords required student leases to begin at the start of orientation, even though most of the students in the apartments were juniors and seniors, disdaining the events meant for first-year students. But, because their leases started, they began arriving by the car load. An extra week of parties before classes start never hurt anyone. At least anyone that age.

In one such apartment, which had actually been occupied for most of the summer, a black O'Farrell Roper, with a concha band, hung on a peg on the back of the door. Like many of the student apartments, this one came unfurnished, but the occupant had obviously been too busy to pay much attention to decorating. There was a cheap set of dining furniture, already beginning to show wear and tear, and one overstuffed chair, clearly obtained from a second- (or maybe third-) hand store. Through the bedroom door could be seen a mattress, on the floor, with sheets unmade and in need of washing. And, in a

corner, there was a vinyl-covered particle-board desk, on which sat, incongruously, a laboratory-quality LCD video monitor and several professional-quality audio components. Next to the desk was a high-end computer workstation, cooling fans humming their content. The other electronic equipment in the room also contrasted with the stark furnishings. Strangest of all was the gadget connected to the telephone jack, a beige box with several rows of winking red lights. The computer and the telephone were plugged into it. The owner of this eclectic collection was speaking into that telephone.

“That’s right. Everything I’ve been telling you is confirmed. Those cell phone calls from the bar were even better than I thought they would be. The sensitivity of the microphone was perfect for recording all of the background conversation. And when I enhanced the tapes, it worked just like we planned.”

The voice on the other end was intelligible to only the apartment’s occupant, thanks to the scrambling capability of the beige box.

“And the police still haven’t figured out anything, is that correct? All this confusion can work for us as well as screw things up for us. It’s your job to make it work for us as much as possible, as I’m sure you know. Your little indiscretion with the girl is what got the police involved, remember.”

“You don’t have to remind me. And I’ve been taking that approach for a couple of days already. I think things will work out fine. Ah, shit. Hold on a minute, will ya?”

A high-decibel version of an old Jimi Hendrix tune—it turned out to be his cover of Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower”—had started up from the apartment across the alley, and the window needed to be closed if the conversation were to continue.

“Damn kids. I need to get this thing wrapped up as soon as possible. School’s starting up, and the place is crawling with students. Between them and the media people and the tourists, I’m going crazy.”

“Yes, well, if you can stick to the original time line, you’ll be out of there in a week or so. But I expect that things are going to slip a little, given recent events. And there’s no hint about the merchandise, hmm?”

“Nope. But I’ve got a couple of ideas to follow up. I’ll keep you posted. Same time Wednesday morning?”

“I’ll be waiting. Remember to keep a low profile.”

* * *

Lance Riggins had been only about a third awake Saturday morning at the police station, but he remembered Annette’s advice clearly. So, after several hours of badly needed sleep, he had tracked down Randy Fredericks on Saturday evening and, despite Randy’s better judgement, struck a deal to work together with him. This was fortunate for Lance, because his weekly deadline was today, and he needed to impress the folks back in Atlantic City.

Randy wouldn’t have cooperated except for the deep pockets of the *National Gazette* and its huge circulation. Lance had agreed to include both their names on the by-line, and that promised Randy a readership unheard of by Durango standards. And the \$10,000 weekly bonus helped calm Randy’s reluctance about working with Lance. Lance could pretty much recycle Randy’s weekly output, punching up the juicy stuff, of course, and add the information available only to Randy on Monday, so that the Tuesday *Herald* and the *Gazette* would share the latest details. What a deal. Now he could go back to what he was good at, sitting at the bar drinking margaritas. And trying to figure out who dumped Eddie and the rental car into the river.

Eddie was dead, of course. Lance had found that out Saturday afternoon. Not that he really cared that much, but whoever did it was also out to get Lance, so he had self-preservation as a motivating factor in trying to figure out who it was. Unless Eddie had told someone, and Lance doubted that, the only people who could have known about their plan to drive up the tracks Friday night would have had to overhear his conversation with Eddie at that bar on College Avenue. Unless someone had been watching the tracks and radioed to someone with the truck. But the eavesdropping made more sense. So maybe the thing to do would be to hang out at that bar and see if he recognized anyone from the other night. Lance, being a professional journalist, at least in his own eyes, was supposed to be a trained observer, and he should be able to spot people he saw then.

But what next? Suppose he recognized someone. Confront them? Maybe not. Lance was good at running, not confronting. Well, the *Gazette* had provided him with an expense account, so maybe he should hire a private detective to check out whoever he recognized. This is newspaper business, after all. That foxy lady detective could recommend someone. He dug in his pockets for the card Annette had given him.

* * *

What was most puzzling to Annette, and also to the other professionals concerned with the case, was why Steffanie Boudreau's killer, or killers, would have gone to all the trouble of dumping her body on the railroad tracks, especially in such a remote location. Because no one could understand it, Captain Jankowski had convened a Monday afternoon brainstorming session to tackle the issue. Annette was sitting at a conference table with the coroner, Jankowski, and Sgt. Fred Winders, Annette's second in charge, to discuss the issue. It was supposed to be Annette's case, but she recognized the need for help.

"It seems to me that we should question everything, including where we started this whole investigation. Did someone really place the body there, intentionally, I mean?"

"We talked about some of this last week, Annette. There weren't the sorts of contusions that you'd expect if it just fell." Lester St. Clare was quite confident in his findings.

"I know, and the positioning of the arms and legs wasn't natural, like from a fall, either. But we were thinking about a big fall, like off the cliff above, as in that story I made up for the newspaper. How about a little fall, like off the back of a pickup truck, or something like that?" Having evidence that trucks can indeed drive the tracks, Annette had new angles to explore.

"Is this before or after she died?" Jankowski was careful about his understanding of time lines.

"Right. Even though the injury that killed her looked intentional, maybe it could have happened, in some weird way, in a fall." Annette was determined to question every detail. "We're looking at this as a sexual assault and homicide, but maybe it was really just a romp in the hay and an accident."

St. Clare had his chair tilted back, and he was staring at the ceiling, hands folded under his chin, concentrating. He looked far more rumped than usual.

"Suppose that's right, Annette. She gets laid, double, and then goes for a joy ride in the back of a pickup, or something like that. Her boyfriend is driving and she's in the back, enjoying the wind in her hair. And all over her body, because all she's wearing is her underwear. Or maybe it's a motorcycle. A bit bumpy, but possible. She loses her grip, or balance, or whatever, and falls to the road bed. She lands somehow, on her hair, I guess, so that the blow of hitting the ties is cushioned, but it twists her neck and breaks it, killing her. And her body comes to rest in that strange position we have in these pictures here. With no other bruises, or scratches, or injuries of any kind."

He pointed to the pile of eight-by-tens made from Hal's pictures, spread out on the conference table.

“Right. And the boyfriend doesn’t know she’s fallen, so he doesn’t stop. When he can’t find her, wherever he winds up looking for her, he’s too scared to go back and look, and he’s been lying low ever since.” Annette was trying to encourage this alternative line of reasoning.

“OK, but then he comes out of hiding to steal the snowplow and dump that reporter into the drink on Friday? That seems a little strange.”

“But we’re assuming that the two are connected. Maybe they aren’t.”

Jankowski had been studying the photographs carefully.

“Look here, Annette, this roadbed where she’s lying isn’t exactly a bluegrass lawn. It’s rocky, the ties are all roughed up, and there’s no way she could have fallen, even from just standing still, and not have received some kind of scrapes and bruises. You were there. What do you remember about the surface?”

Annette looked depressed.

“You’re right, of course. I’m questioning everything, but some things are just too true to bother with. That roadbed would have caused some marks on the body, whether it was dead first or not, if there was any kind of significant fall. But, look, let’s be as methodical about this as we can. Is there some kind of accident that we can imagine that would have put her there in the condition in these pictures? I mean, what if she was up there with someone, goofing around? Maybe, just lying down, pretending to be the classical damsel in distress on the railroad tracks? If she was on a hot date, that sort of thing could happen, no? She was in that wild-and-crazy age group that we’ve got so much of at the university here.”

“Yeah, but how did she end up dead?” Jankowski had achieved the level of Captain by being ever practical.

“Oh. Well, there is that complication. I guess what we need is the results from the blood work to see if there’s alcohol or drugs involved. And the DNA tests on the semen samples.”

St. Clare had been staring at the ceiling again.

“You know, that’s worth thinking about. How she might have got dead in that goofing around scenario, I mean. Let’s hold that thought pending the blood and DNA results. I presume that you’ll still be interested in finding out who her date, or dates, were? And, of course, there’s still the snowplow murder.”

“And whether they’re connected somehow.”

* * *

Back at her desk, Annette was making notes of the meeting when the telephone on her desk buzzed, and the operator informed her that a Lance Riggins was calling.

“Mr. Riggins, what can I do for you? I hope you’re all rested up?” Hearing background noises, she wondered where he was.

“Afternoon, lieutenant. Yes, I slept most of yesterday, in addition to Saturday. Now I’m trying to figure it all out. What I don’t understand is who could have known we were going up there. Eddie and I had one conversation about it, here in the Narrow Gauge on Thursday evening.”

So that’s where he is, she thought.

“Well, someone could have listened in on that conversation. But you must have thought of that.”

“But there really wasn’t anyone sitting near us. Did you read the report on Eddie?”

“Just this morning. Why?”

“Well, you now know that he was really obese, and people tended to give him lots of room, even in a bar. So, even though the place was pretty full, we had elbow room. And it was noisy, like now only more, and it’s hard to believe that someone could have eavesdropped.”

“We just had a meeting about all this, and we’re trying to question everything, including all of our previous assumptions. Have you thought that this may have just been an accident? Maybe there were just some teenagers out for joy ride and you got in the way.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Do things like that, I mean kids swiping a snowplow, happen often around here? Or things like people driving down the tracks?”

“No idea, but I’ll check with the railroad. Or, better yet, maybe you can. If you’re in a bar this time of the afternoon, it sounds like you need something constructive to keep you occupied. Do me a favor and let me know, OK?”

Lance said goodbye and hung up, wondering how he’d managed to lose control of the conversation so quickly. He hadn’t even asked about private detectives.

* * *

Having worked a long day on Saturday, Annette was determined to leave early, and so it was about 3:00 that afternoon, when she was just getting into her car to leave, that her cell phone tweedled.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi, Annette, it’s Lester. We got the Boudreau blood work results.”

“And?”

“Our demure violinist was a serious party person. Given her age group, I guess that’s not too surprising, though. Anyway, we’ve got alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and just a trace of PCP.”

“All within 12 hours of her arrival here? Whoever she met up with was certainly well supplied. Well, hell. I thought we had this stuff under control, after we got my friend Sal off the streets last year.”

“I’ve been thinking of that discussion we had earlier this afternoon, about the possibility that this whole thing was some kind of accident, from wild-and-crazy goofing around. This combination of chemicals raises the possibility a notch or two.”

“How so?”

“Well, chances are that she did the coke fairly early on, because I didn’t find any residual in her nose, and she had no needle tracks on her. Could have been smoked, like crack, but that would probably have been early, too, because smoking crack is hard to do in a vehicle. Too much paraphernalia. So then they were out driving around, up the tracks and so on, and drinking and smoking dope. And the dope was probably laced with a little angel dust. This combination could have induced a convulsion, especially if she’d been sitting for a long time and then lay down. All the chemicals in the blood going to the brain, you know. An oxygen-starved brain, at that, since she just arrived here from sea level.”

“And the convulsion could have broken her neck?”

“Possibly. I’m going to do a follow-up on the autopsy and see whether there are any indications I missed before that could support this.”

“You? Miss something? Come on, Lester, I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Well, I’m thinking of splinters in the back of her head, hidden by hair. I did look for bruises and contusions, but I didn’t go through her scalp with a fine-toothed comb. Uh. Sorry. Accidental pun, really. And I want to have another look at her elbows. But don’t think that this will solve anything. After all, you still have to find out how she got up there, and who fed her the chemicals. And we have that snowplow thing to think about, too.”

“Of course, but this changes the entire complexion of the investigation. Let me know, OK?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

* * *

Six

Hal was asleep, in the middle of a wonderfully frustrating dream. He was standing in waist-deep water, braced against a mild current just below an elegant little waterfall, and trout bigger than his thigh were porpoising everywhere, some close enough to touch. Their prey, giant golden stoneflies, filled the air, flapping around his face and covering the surface of the stream.

But no matter what he did, he always discovered that his stonefly imitation wound up in the middle of a huge, intractable wind knot in the tippet of his fly line. Try as he might, he couldn’t get the knot untangled, and each time he tied on a new length of tippet and tried to make a cast, it instantly transformed itself into yet another knot, worse than the previous one. Then he noticed Annette standing on the bank, shouting at him through cupped hands. What was she saying? What about the violin?

As he slowly emerged from the water, he realized that Annette was wide awake, sitting up beside him in bed, looking rather fetching in the dim light filtering through the window, it occurred to him, and talking to—herself? the wall? Hal?—about a missing violin. So that part of the dream was real. He’d rather it had been the trout.

“Oh, you’re awake. What an absolute dolt I am. Steffanie Boudreau was a concert violinist, no? Well, where’s her instrument? Don’t world-class soloists usually have world-class instruments? Where’s hers?” She was clearly not going back to sleep any time soon.

“Um, what time is it? Four-thirty? Ahh, surely it’s not going anywhere between now and morning, you know?” But she had leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and was getting out of bed.

“Maybe I can find some kind of violin listing on the internet, with who plays what on the international scene. There’s no network traffic this time of day anyway, so things should be fast.”

And she was gone, before he could even shake the water out of his consciousness.

Two hours later, when he awoke to the squawks of a magpie argument, or maybe it was a courtship, out on the deck, he realized that she was still missing. He found her sipping coffee over the Tuesday *Durango Herald*.

“I seem to remember something about a violin that got you out of bed earlier. Any luck?”

“Morning, sleepyhead. Yes, some. I found a listing of musicians and their instruments, but I couldn’t really find out much about Boudreau’s violin. It was a Strad, though.”

“A Stradivarius? Really? Aren’t those astronomically expensive?”

“Depends on its pedigree, on which Stradivari brother made it and its paper trail. Some are more expensive than others, it appears, but high six or seven figures is a ballpark. So, yes, they’re not for everyone. The question is, where’s hers? I’ve decided not to call the General Palmer until later this morning, when the day shift gets there, but it’s got me chewing my nails.”

“The hotel? Is her stuff still there?”

“No, we inventoried her room early last week, and her stuff finally got packed up for storage Friday. But I sure don’t remember anything about a violin. Maybe she had the GP put it in their safe, or something like that. I wonder why no one’s said anything about it. Like Meeker. He was sitting with her on the plane, and I bet she didn’t check it with luggage. Or put it in the overhead. If I had a million dollar fiddle, I’d buy it an extra seat and make sure it had a couple of pillows. And a blanket.”

“But, last night you were talking like you’d figured it all out. The accident scenario, where she died of a convulsion from a drug overdose and all. How does this missing violin, if it’s really missing, fit in?”

She smiled knowingly.

“Remember now, I’ve been up and thinking about this for a couple of hours already. That’s one of the first things that occurred to me, too. And, of course, there are several alternatives.” She began ticking items off on the fingers of her left hand.

“First, maybe the violin’s not really missing. Second, if it is missing, maybe there’s no connection, but it just got stolen after she died. Third, maybe the drug overdose was not so accidental, and whoever’s responsible for it took the violin, either when they went out together or later. Fourth, maybe the drug overdose was accidental, but it still wound up in the hands of whoever was with her.”

“You’ve been up for a couple of hours and a couple of quarts of coffee, sounds like. But, look, something like a Stradivarius isn’t going to be all that useful to a thief. It’s not like you can take it to the local pawn shop, or something. They’re collectors’ items, and collectors usually want legitimacy, don’t they?”

“Not always, although this is a little different from things like paintings or other art work. Unless someone’s into collecting musical instruments and never playing them in public. But you’re right, this is the thing that’s been puzzling me, too. Maybe the perps don’t know what they’ve got their hands on.”

“Or maybe it’s sitting in the safe down at the General Palmer. But you’ll need to wait ’til nine or so to find that out.”

“Hmmp. And here I was going to drag you back to bed and ravish you. But if you’re going to give me grief, I’m just going to take a shower and go to work.” And she stuck her tongue out at him and headed for the shower before he could recover. Maybe he could go back to that dream and actually catch a fish this time. At least she hadn’t drunk all the coffee.

* * *

Annette waited patiently until 9:00 to call the General Palmer, hoping that the day shift would be on duty and alert. She succeeded, using her Voice of Authority, in getting Phillip Westerman to the telephone.

“Mr. Westerman, I’m sure you remember me from last week, when we had just found that Ms. Boudreau’s body had been left on the Silverton tracks. I’d like to thank you for your cooperation.”

“As I said, Lieutenant, the General Palmer tries to balance the privacy of its guests with its civic duties. And I’m still not over the shock of having such a tragedy strike one of our guests, especially her.”

“We continue to discover things that add to the confusion, I’m afraid. I’d like to ask you about something I just thought of this morning, in fact. I feel rather foolish in not having thought of it before. You have a copy of the inventory that we made of her possessions, I believe?”

“I recall it, yes. It’s filed away by now. Should I get it?”

“Not unless you want to—I have my copy here. I’m puzzled that there’s no violin on it. There’s sheet music, but no violin. I’m sure she must have had one, being a concert soloist and all. Did she check one into your safe?”

“No violin on the inventory? How strange. Let me check the records.” Annette heard the tapping of a computer keyboard. “Ah, yes. According to this, she checked several items with us. My apologies for not thinking of this when your people packed her belongings. It appears that she has a safe deposit box, probably with cash or jewelry in it, and a larger item in the safe. Presumably that’s the violin. It will take me a minute to look. Can I call you back?”

“I’ll hold, thanks.” Annette scanned down the inventory list, and found the key to the box Westerman had mentioned. At least they would be able to see what valuables Boudreau had thought important enough to check.

It actually took Westerman five minutes.

“Lieutenant? I’m back. With bad news unfortunately. The larger item I mentioned is missing. I looked in the paper records we keep and found a notation that she took it out of the safe at 8:30 last Monday evening, a week ago. All we have is ‘Item 31-G,’ though. I’ll have to ask the clerk who was on duty if he remembers what it was. I also dug out our copy of the inventory, and here’s her key to the box, at least.”

“So if it was her violin, she took it with her. You might be interested to know it’s worth a huge amount of money, at least on the legitimate market. It’s a Stradivarius.”

“Oh, dear. I’ll call the clerk right now, even if I have to wake him up. I certainly hope that everything is by the book on our end.”

“I’m sure you don’t have anything to worry about, Mr. Westerman. And I’ll be right over with her safe deposit box key. I want to see what she put in there.”

* * *

The man in the black O’Farrell Roper with the concha band was on his way south up Main Avenue when he spotted Annette crossing the street, headed toward the General Palmer. Unlike the hoard of reporters, he had been able to spend several weeks becoming familiar with the local authorities, so he recognized her easily.

Torn between his need to remain anonymous and his desire to find out what Annette was doing, he hesitated for a moment in front of the old building before curiosity finally won out. He went in just in time to see Annette disappear behind the front desk with someone who looked to be the hotel manager. The clerk at the desk look up as he walked in—so much for complete anonymity.

“May I help you, sir?”

“Ah, well, I’m wondering about your room rates. And availability. What an elegant lobby you have here.”

Improvising, he hoped the conversation would not take too long, as he wanted desperately not to be seen close up by Annette.

Back in the vault, Annette was in the middle of the ritual she had experienced at her bank. Westerman had inserted his master key into one slot, and she had inserted the key she'd retrieved from the evidence room in the other, and the little door marked "31" opened, revealing a metal box. Westerman slid this out and set it on the table behind them.

"Um, normally, Lieutenant, I'd leave the guest in private to retrieve his or her belongings, but I hope it's allowable for me to remain for this?"

He was obviously as interested in the contents as Annette.

"I insist, Mr. Westerman. You'll make a good witness. Let's see what we've got."

And, after pulling on a pair of latex gloves, she opened the lid.

Inside was a variety of objects, some more recognizable than others. Annette went for one of the more obscure ones and picked up a white cardboard tube. Westerman looked somewhat uncomfortable.

"Is that what I think it is? And why..."

"Looks like a tampon tube to me. But five will get you ten that it's got some kind of contraband in it."

Annette put the tube in a plastic bag she had pulled from her pocket.

"I'll wait and open this in the lab. You wouldn't want the floor of your nice clean safe to get all dusted with, say, cocaine, now would you?" she asked.

Westerman pointed to a little booklet.

"Is that a passport? I thought you found hers in her room."

"We found a French passport in her room, yes. But this is Canadian. Maybe she had dual citizenship. But look. Here's her picture, but the name is Sylvie Benton. Address in Montreal. And here's a bunch of Sylvie Benton credit cards, golds and platinums. SB. I guess that would be to cover monograms and so on. There's more to our dead violinist than meets the eye, I think."

"Maybe Boudreau is her stage name, or something innocent like that. And that looks like travelers' checks."

"Yep. Let's see. \$100s. Way more than a dozen, maybe two. This lady traveled in style. And the rest is jewelry. String of pearls. What looks like an emerald broach. Three diamond studs in a little box."

"Three?"

"Two ears and a nose. I bet you didn't know she had her right nostril pierced."

"She was in that age group, I guess." Westerman sniffed. "I never could understand how they put up with the annoyance. I guess I'm just an old fogey."

"Yeah. Well, I've seen worse, ones that you really don't want to hear about. That looks like all of it. How about a signature? Then we can make a copy for your records. I'll have someone come by to pick up all this stuff later."

Annette had been making notes of the contents of the box, and she had initialed them, leaving a space for Westerman to do the same. Westerman shut the box and slid it back into place, using both keys to lock it up.

"Once again, I'm sorry I didn't think of this last week, lieutenant. And, as I said a few minutes ago, the clerk on duty last Monday told me that he retrieved what looked to be a violin case for Ms. Boudreau, or Benton, I guess. I wish we could be more helpful about that, but it's gone."

“So there’s a million-dollar plus fiddle floating around Durango somewhere. Great.” She chuckled. “Maybe we should put a lost-and-found ad in the paper. Well, thanks for all your help, Mr. Westerman. And, listen. I’ve often thought that one of the disadvantages of living in Durango is that I don’t have the excuse to come and stay here. Maybe I’ll talk Hal into getting his house painted so we can make the excuse.”

“It would be our pleasure to have you stay with us, Lieutenant. Let us know when, and we’ll reserve you a suite.”

* * *

“Do you mean to tell me that Steffanie may have been killed for her instrument?” Jacques Ament was incredulous. They were sitting on the side chairs in his cluttered office in the music building.

“Not necessarily, Dean Ament. All I’m saying is that it’s missing, that she apparently took it with her wherever she went after having dinner with Luigi Franconi last Monday evening. We found her body the next morning, but the violin is still missing. She may or may not have been murdered, regardless of what you’ve read in the newspaper. And the violin may or may not be connected to all this. I’m wondering what you might know about it. If it’s readily identifiable, for example.”

“Of course, she has several instruments, and I don’t know which one she brought with her here. I remember when she got the Stradivarius, though, because she called me. She was so excited. She even played it for me over the telephone, from Paris.” He smiled with the memory. “I have to say, it lost something in the transmission.”

“This is important information, that she may not have brought the Strad with her. Is there some way we can find out?”

Ament had winced, a small gesture, but noticeable, at Annette’s use of the contraction for the famous violin maker, and she made a mental note to reform her usage.

“I can call her agent in Paris. I believe that this was a special trip for her engagement here, rather than a concert tour, so it may be that she brought one of her lesser instruments. I recall that she mentioned to me her concern about the climate here, the low humidity especially.”

“We do know that she checked her violin into the hotel safe, for a short time. But I suppose that all of her violins are rather valuable, no?”

“Actually, I don’t even know how many she has. When she was a student, she had a rather ordinary instrument, but now, well...?” He trailed off with a typically Gallic shrug. “But I would think that she would bring a reasonably good instrument for this concert, if only to impress her old teacher. Perhaps this is conceit, but I think it is probably true. Even if she did not bring the Stradivarius. I will call her agent and leave a message. Will that help?”

“Most certainly, Dean Ament. Thank you so much.”

It will serve the jerks right if they have an inferior violin after all their trouble, Annette thought.

Because she was on the campus, she went looking to see if Hal wanted to have lunch. Alice was, in her usual efficient manner, holding down the fort.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Ms. Trieri, but Dean Weathers is at yet another luncheon meeting with the provost. They’re probably discussing strategy again, to deal with the publicity about this terrible tragedy and so on.”

Annette had worked hard to get Alice to address her more informally, with mixed success. In person, in Hal's office, Alice seemed incapable of informality, though.

"Well, please tell him that he missed his second chance today. He'll know what I mean. See you soon, Alice."

* * *

From Hal's office, Annette wandered over to the chemistry building, a place familiar to her from an earlier case. She took her time, enjoying the hustle and bustle of the campus on the day before registration. And marveling at how young the students looked.

Inside the chemistry building, she found the door to the analytical laboratory open, but saw no one inside.

"Hello? Anyone home?"

She knew from experience that Gil Taylor could be anywhere in the helter-skelter of equipment.

A head appeared over the top of an equipment rack, rather as if it were a jack-in-the-box instead of a bank of computers.

"Right here. Oh, hey. Annette Trieri. Long time no see. How are things down at the station? Pretty crazy, I bet, with all the media types in town, huh?"

Gil eased himself out from between the rack and the wall behind it, looking taller and skinnier than ever. His wizardry with chemical analyses had earned him enduring respect, and a standing-order contract, from the Durango police department.

"Don't get me started. That's why I'm here, partly. The less time I spend downtown, the less chance that I'll get recognized and staked out. This, I can tell you, is a real lesson in how to hate the media. Anyway, I've got a sample for you. How are your toys?"

"Ready and willing. Any hints?"

"I don't even know what color it is. Haven't opened it yet." She pulled out the tampon tube from the hotel safe deposit box.

"Oh, cool, the old trick from the *Monkey Wrench Gang*." Gil looked tickled.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that Ed Abbey book. I remember. What's her name, Bonnie. But this is from that dead musician that's been in the papers. She's French. Or maybe Canadian. Surely this is just a common subterfuge, not something that Abbey invented."

"Sure. But it's still neat to see it in action. You haven't opened it? Here, come over here and use this."

He walked over to a fume hood, squirted a clear liquid that promptly evaporated onto a stainless steel tray, and polished the tray with a Kimwipe. Then he turned around and set the tray on a table, after pushing aside a clutter of tools. She put her latex gloves back on, held the tube over the tray, and gently pulled the telescoping halves apart.

And out plopped four little hand-rolled cigarettes, in two different colors of paper.

"Man, whoever rolled these puppies was really a pro. Ah...not that I'm an expert or anything you understand, Lieutenant." Gil's grin was shameless.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it all before. And don’t even think of smoking these. We found PCP in the owner’s blood. You might find yourself in deeper than you want to be.”

Taylor chuckled, “I gave all that stuff up years ago, I’ve told you that. Strangest thing. I just discovered that I didn’t like the feeling of the marijuana high any more. Anyway, what should I do with these? Check for PCP? If I’m allowed to empty one out, I could tell you if it’s pot or not just by the smell, I bet.”

“Maybe the different colors mean different things. How about doing a little exploratory surgery on one of each color and seeing what’s in there? A check for PCP would be good, but maybe a check for cocaine would be also. Looks like there’s enough material to do both, no?”

“Sure. Want to help in part one? Go ahead and put two of ’em away. I’ll get another tray cleaned off.”

And he rummaged around and came up with a second stainless steel tray, which got the same cleaning treatment as the first. Then he rummaged around some more and produced a scalpel, which got carefully wiped before he used it to slit open the blue joint. He spilled out the contents and scooped up a sample of the vegetable matter with the scalpel. The sample got placed in the center of a microscope slide, which he carefully transported across the room to a stereo microscope that was almost hidden by a pile of computer cable.

“Hmm. Have a look.”

He had fiddled with the microscope, looked in critically, and was now inviting Annette see for herself. As she did, he returned to the rest of the contents of the blue joint, picked up and crushed a pinch in his gloved fingers, and smelled it gingerly.

“Of course, you can’t tell by looking, but it sure smells like pot. See the crystals, though? There’s something else in this stuff, for sure.”

Through the microscope, Annette could easily see what he was talking about, translucent white grains of some kind of powder mixed in with the flat chunks of a brownish-gold material.

“Now for door number two,” Gil said as he slit open the red joint.

The same procedure produced the same result, with a twist. After looking carefully at the second sample under the microscope, Gil carefully arranged both samples on a single slide, in separate little piles.

“Have a look at this.”

H offered the instrument to Annette after studying the side-by-side sample carefully. She saw that both piles contained white grains, but there were differences. The vegetable matter was not the same color, the second sample being more brownish green, she decided, and the powder was somehow different. She mentioned this to Gil.

“Yep. That’s my observation, too.” He was taking notes, and looked up with a smile. “I love it when I get a second opinion that agrees with mine. I’d say it’s two different strains of ganja with two different spikes of whatever the powder is. One’s probably PCP, from what you said. Chances are the other’s cocaine or heroin.”

“Cocaine, most likely, but we’ll see. We also found coke in her blood. And the pot, of course. And alcohol.”

“Yeah, well, smoking makes you thirsty, dry throat and all that. Damn, I’m sure glad I’m all grown up. But this isn’t what killed her, according to what’s in the papers.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m told that the combination of all this junk could have put her into convulsion, and the official cause of death was a broken neck. So who knows? Anyway, you won’t have any problems with the analysis, huh? So I can take these other two joints back and log them in?”

“No problem. And I’ll bring in whatever’s left over, scout’s honor.”

* * *

Annette was feeling a little better. Maybe all the drugs found in Boudreau’s blood were not really local after all. Looking at her watch, she saw that it was 1:30, and she decided to see if Hal was out of his lunch meeting yet.

“Hello, Alice, I’m back. I thought Hal might be, too.”

“As a matter of fact, he just walked in. And he’s not on the phone, so he’s probably just working on e-mail. Go right in.”

Annette smiled and carefully, quietly, opened Hal’s door. He must have felt a draft, or the light changed, though, because he looked up.

“Oho! Is this my third chance? Why don’t you just close the door behind you, and I’ll clear these journals off the couch, and...”

“Not on your life, buddy boy. I’ve been here too many times when Alice just waltzes in without knocking. Besides, I’m saving it up for tonight. The longer we wait, the more special things I’ll think up. I was really thinking about lunch—but I hear from Alice that you’ve eaten. Want to go out for dinner? My treat.”

“Celebrating something?”

“A little progress, maybe. Gil Taylor and I just cut apart some joints that our dead violinist had stashed in the GP hotel safe, joints spiked with some kind of crystal substance. So maybe she brought her drugs with her, and I don’t have to be concerned about what’s floating around the streets here.”

“Or maybe she found someone to buy them from here.”

“Killjoy. Hmm. But probably not, because she wasn’t here very long. I mean, she checked in to the hotel, put some stuff in the hotel safe, including, probably, her violin, went out to dinner with the conductor, then took out the violin later in the evening, before going out again. So, unless she got the dope from Luigi, she brought it with her.” She stared off into space.

“Anyway, I found out that the missing violin may or may not be a Stradivarius, from Dean Ament. It seems she had more than one and that she was worried about the dry air here and how it might affect the Stradivarius. So at least that lowers the stakes a little. And finding the dope makes me feel better, somehow. Gil’s going to figure out what the crystal stuff is.”

“Hey, great. Our college can always use the income. Where are you going to take me for dinner?”

“Straighten up and fly right, wise guy, or it’s to the cafeteria over at the student union.”

“Ah, yes, and it’s Tuesday. Let’s see. Must be meatloaf night. Maybe we’ll get there for the beginning-of-semester food fight. Man, those were the days...”

“OK, OK, I’ll give it some thought. How about Chinese?”

* * *

The man with the black O'Farrell Roper had connected to his internet service provider and was downloading several e-mail messages. Snoops on the network would have been frustrated to try to read them, however, because the messages were complete gibberish until they passed through the beige box that acted as the scrambling device between his telephone and computer, on one side, and the outside world, on the other.

One advantage of this system was that incoming messages that were not scrambled by the sender got descrambled anyway, into a gibberish of their own, so he had an automatic method to filter out spam, the e-mail equivalent of those annoying telephone solicitations that always happen during dinner. This time, it turned out that all but one of the incoming messages fell into that category, so he deleted them immediately. The remaining message was genuine, and disturbing.

*To: LaCoste
From: RH
Ref: Timing
Cc: File*

While I recognize that the public news sources are not entirely trustworthy, I am concerned by media reports of the fallout from the operation you are managing. I require that, within 48 hours of the time of this message, you provide details of activities to date and their results. In particular, progress toward acquiring the merchandise needs to be explained clearly. RH

The 48 hours, according to the time stamp on the message, had started earlier that day, so he really had only 40 hours left. LaCoste used the "reply" feature to send a confirmation that he would provide the information demanded, because he knew that he had no choice. But that didn't mean he had to like it. As soon as the e-mail was sent, he disconnected the computer link and picked up the telephone. The beige box would do its work here, also.

"Dick? Tony. Listen, did you get a copy of the mail I just read? Uh, the one about 'timing.' What the hell's going on?"

"Easy, pal. Yeah, I got it, too, via a blind copy. He doesn't seem to want you to know that I got it. But he wants us to be talking, so I don't completely understand things, either. Anyway, it looks like you shouldn't have too much trouble with the report he wants. And all he's had to go on has been the papers, which are full of crap, as we both know."

"You're right, but it pisses me off to have that desk-bound bean counter breathing down my neck. We're still ahead of the original schedule and way under budget. Plus we got him that nifty, unexpected bonus. So what's his beef? He should know better than to believe what he reads in the papers. Idiot."

"Yeah, yeah. But he knows we're working up in the valley, and even the Santa Fe paper is probably full of stories about Steffanie. And he probably knows you met her on one of your trips to Europe for him. He seems to know just about everything that goes on, after all. And I bet he's also worried that he hasn't seen anything at all about the stuff. Which is to our advantage, of course. Listen. You probably already told him that you'd provide the report he wants. I'll send a response to the copy I got, letting him know that things are in good shape. Maybe that'll satisfy his curiosity."

"Maybe that'll help. And I'll tell him everything we've found, even though it's preliminary. Those pictures should impress him, at least."

“Yeah. I’m going to drive down with them and the case tonight. That should calm him down. And I’ll reassure him about how we’re clean with respect to Steffanie. I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know how it goes.”

“Right. And I’ll put some heat on the boys. It’s time they gave us something more tangible. Talk to you tomorrow.”

* * *

“On belay! Three, two, one, go!”

And Reginald Meeker began taking up slack as he watched Leonard Schwab’s progress up the wall of the climbing gym. He was almost holding his breath in anticipation of a mistake as Schwab came to a series of especially difficult moves about two-thirds of the way to the bell at the top, yet he was still surprised when he saw Schwab’s left foot slip and heard his yell “Falling…”

They had enough experience at this that his response was automatic: Meeker sat back onto the loop of climbing rope around his backside, caught the strain easily, and slowly eased Schwab back to the floor. The automatic response was fortunate for Schwab, because, had Meeker thought about it, he just might have let go the belay line. But he needed to cover his resentment.

“Man, you were up that lower section in no time. Without that slip, you’d have beat my time by at least five seconds.” Schwab was still getting his breath, but managed to grunt agreement.

“Whew. Well, now we need a tiebreaker. If you’re gonna win, I don’t want it to be because I slipped. Let’s try number six over there.”

“Sure, pick the one that’s mostly hands oriented. We both know your fingers are stronger than mine. Hmmp. How about number three, that looks more balanced.”

Schwab eyed Meeker’s preferred route appraisingly. “It looks like they changed it since last week. It was too easy then, maybe it’s better this time. OK, let’s try it. I sure wish they’d let us set one up to resemble that cliff face of ours, though. That would really be interesting.”

He unclipped the carabiner from his climbing harness and walked with Meeker over to the new route.

“Yeah, but there’s no need to race up that thing. Still, you’re right. The extra practice would be really helpful out there. Especially when we’ve got to start hauling the stuff out.”

Meeker clipped the carabiner from the number three route’s belay line on his harness.

“OK, I’m set.”

Schwab wrapped the tag end of the line around his backside. “On belay. Three, two, one, go!”

And Meeker began his spider-like crawl up the climbing wall.

* * *

Seven

Four Corners Archaeology, LLC, occupied the top floor of an elegantly restored double adobe just off Canyon Road in Santa Fe, above the Southwest Cultures Gallery. Although the separate entrances of the

two establishments presented to the world their separate identities, in reality they were connected by a back staircase, as well as by ownership and mission, the clandestine acquisition and sale to collectors of ancient Native American artifacts.

The gallery on the ground floor was filled with contemporary reproductions of baskets, pots, and religious icons discovered by amateurs and professionals at sites on both private and public lands spread throughout the Four Corners region. The originals resided in environmentally controlled, high-security vaults upstairs. Although the reproductions were as faithful as technology would allow, the price difference between the items for sale on the two floors was startling. A \$100 ground-floor bear fetish was priced upstairs at \$9,000. A \$500 water vessel downstairs fetched \$26,000 one floor up. Of course, the ground-floor items could be sold over and over: the basement contained boxes of inventory. And the top floor antiquities were considerably older, as in the cases of the 15th century obsidian bear and the 17th century clay pot. Nowhere did “what the market will bear” apply more precisely than at Four Corners Archaeology.

Early Wednesday afternoon, Raimer Holtzmann was staring out his second-floor window at the street below, one of those narrow, winding Santa Fe streets that fills up with the summer tourist crowd to the point of pedestrian gridlock. The worry lines on his craggy face were deeper than ever.

By contrast, galleries and restaurants on the other side of the street enjoyed a carefree, continuous stream of people in high spirits flowing in and out, shopping bags bulging. He knew that his gallery below was part of this stream. Even if only one in fifty customers bought a reproduction, the costs of running the gallery, as well as the offices upstairs, would be covered easily. The occasional sale of an original was almost all profit. But he was still worried.

Holtzmann’s office, comfortably air conditioned against the August heat of the New Mexico high desert, was furnished in the Santa Fe style, with over-priced, under-built, faux antique furniture, Navajo rugs, and several of his most prized originals displayed around the room in *nichos*, little shelves formed into the adobe walls. Incongruously, there was an expensive Italian leather couch and armchair on two sides of a massive coffee table, made from a slab of sandstone on which several 900-year-old petroglyphs were etched.

He had also spent a small fortune on unobtrusive security for the office, including both the door and the bullet-proof windows, and another, somewhat larger, fortune on electronic equipment hidden in a rustic, artificially weather-beaten armoire and behind paintings. The office was bug-proof, via full-spectrum scanners and a subtle RF/HF white noise, and search-proof, because all of the computers were programmed to wipe and over-write with random characters the sensitive information contained on their disks, should anyone tamper with them in any way. And there was nothing on paper that could possibly implicate him in anything.

Despite its name, the actual work done at Four Corners Archaeology consisted of paperwork—highly specialized paperwork, to be sure, for each original artifact required extensive counterfeit documentation in order that its subsequent sale and resale could be conducted with a veneer of legality. One of the reasons that Holtzmann was so successful as a purveyor of antiquities was his ability to concoct and produce such documentation. Nothing in his inventory conveyed even a hint that it had been unearthed after 1979, when the Archaeological Resources Protection Act put real teeth into the original 1906 Antiquities Act, making the acquisition and sale of such artifacts a prohibitively expensive Federal offense.

It was the documentation for the two sets of new items that had Holtzmann worried, for somewhat different reasons. As a general rule, the going rate for original Native American artifacts was proportional to their age (more like the square of their age, actually), and these new items were therefore going to be the most valuable he’d ever had brought to him.

But creating the documentation was a special problem, one that had to be solved before he could even think of displaying them. They weren't going to be especially marketable, but he wanted to show them off in his office, to one-up his competition. And because it was widely known that a large Basketmaker site had been discovered only last year, he had a problem. The last batch of legal Basketmaker artifacts had been discovered on private land in the 1930s, and they were all accounted for. His new items, of course, were not from last year's dig—it had been handled scientifically by archaeologists from Frémont State University. So he needed documentation before the new inventory could be displayed, to avoid potentially embarrassing questions.

His first order of business, however, was actually to recover the new inventory. He'd been told about it, and he'd even seen pictures that morning, but he had yet to get his hands on it. From the pictures, the items appeared clearly to be Basketmaker culture artifacts. This stimulated no small amount of curiosity in him, as these would be by far the oldest items to cross his desk. Would they feel different? How delicate would they be? How could he calculate the worth of objects over 1500 years old? And how enviously green would the competition turn when they saw his new display?

And then there was that damned violin.

* * *

That morning, 160 miles due northwest, Hal had been on-call for the possible emergencies that arise during fall registration, but because things usually went smoothly, he was able to use the time to catch up on his reading. The technical literature in his areas of interest had grown nearly exponentially over the past decade. It seemed that new journals were appearing almost each month, and established journals were printing more and more pages. And electronic publications were beginning to proliferate, so he necessarily had to be increasingly selective about what he read carefully. Thank heavens for abstracts.

Also that morning, Annette had finally been forced to confront the media. Actually, it was Lance Riggins' fault, and once again he was *persona non grata* for her. He'd been in the crowd of reporters and technicians camped out in front of the police station and, displaying an unusual lack of discretion even for him, had shouted her name when he'd spotted her exiting via a side door. Like a swarm of hungry house flies, the assembly had converged on her before she could escape, and she'd had to endure a very uncomfortable half hour of rude interrogation. Her repeated attempts to deflect questions by declining to comment on an ongoing investigation seemed only to make the swarm buzz louder. The assembled eyes of the TV cameras staring at her made her keenly aware that it would not do to lose her temper, but it was a struggle. She had finally been rescued by the arrival of Jankowski, who had the day's press release. She'd escaped, leaving him to the questioning.

Just down the hill, tourists were milling around the D&SNGRR station, awaiting their departure times or hoping to take advantage of someone else's last-minute cancellation. The notoriety of the events of last week had only increased demand for tickets, but, admirably, the railroad company carried on as if nothing in particular had happened—although they had become even more vigilant on the early-morning tender runs.

But this vigilance extended only to their roadbed, and they generally ignored the surrounding terrain unless it posed a potential danger to the trains. About a mile north of the Rockwood station, it was the cliff below the tracks that could have benefitted from some of that extra vigilance. Several months before, a large eye-bolt had been drilled and cemented into the rock in a spot not visible from the tracks. And now, two climbing ropes ran through the eye, the tension on them suggesting that they were in use.

About 100 feet down the face of the cliff, Reginald Meeker had clamped off his Jumar Ascender and was leaning back, feet planted squarely on the rock. Just on the other side of a fireplace-sized

opening, Leonard Schwab had assumed a similar position and was fumbling with the zippers on a large duffel bag. Meeker looked between his legs down the perfectly vertical cliff face.

“Do you suppose we’ll ever find another place like this to climb? Sometimes I think it’s a shame that we got distracted by this cave. I almost wish I hadn’t put my foot through the entrance that time I was rappelling down.”

“Yeah, well, just remember how much money Holtzmann has and how much he wants that stuff in there. If you hadn’t broken through this stack of rocks we’d never be able to get our hands on that. It’ll give us the money so we can climb wherever we want.”

“I know, I know. I keep telling myself that. But this face is just too perfect. Vertical. Not rotten rock, like so much of the rest of this canyon. Nicely spaced holds, natural holds in real rock, not those fake things they bolt on the climbing wall in the gym. Routes from 5-8 to 5-13. Plenty of cracks to stick protection in. Even pretty good access, although I’m beginning to wonder if those people at Rockwood aren’t getting suspicious. And there’s no way we can come back here after this trip.”

Schwab had finished opening the duffel bag’s various zippers and now thrust the bag into the little cave.

“We could just seal it up again, and leave things be. Yeah, right. Fat chance.”

“LaCoste wouldn’t let us. Even though he doesn’t know where it is, exactly. At least I don’t think he does, does he?”

Schwab began maneuvering to sit, facing outwards, in the mouth of the cave, with his legs dangling.

“I don’t know what he knows. For sure he knows the general area. But he certainly acts like he doesn’t know exactly where this is, but... I didn’t show him, and if you didn’t, I can’t imagine that he would have found it. He’s not exactly the type to spend enough time across the river with binoculars to have spotted it.” Having loosened the clamp on his Ascender, he began scooching backwards into the cave. He had to duck his head.

“I sure didn’t tell him, either. Be careful with that stuff, now. The less we break, the more we’ll get for it.”

“Right. And if you hear a train, holler. I know this thing has been here since ever, but I still get nervous.” Schwab’s voice began to echo a little as he worked his way back into the cave.

* * *

Annette was halfway to the airport when her cell phone tweedled.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi, Annette. It’s Lester. Listen, I just got a fax with the DNA results on those semen samples and the hair.”

“In only a week? Geez, I thought these things take months.”

“Well, I FedEx’d the samples to them last week, and then called in a favor. And they were impressed by the high visibility of the whole thing, famous victim and all—seems it made the papers even back in Virginia. So they expedited it for me.”

“So, what’s bottom line?”

“Two different guys, no match to the hair.”

“So Luigi’s in the clear. Good. I kind of like him. So now all we have to do is to get samples from everyone else in Durango and try to find matches.”

“Yeah, except, one, that’s not legal and, two, your budget couldn’t afford to go wild-goose hunting that way. You need a better plan.”

“Well, legal has never been that much of a problem, but the cost sure is. I guess I’ll just have to figure this one out the old-fashioned way. Thanks for getting this done so fast. It really helps, because Luigi was sort of my prime suspect. Now I can concentrate on something else. Don’t know what though. I’ll stop by for a copy of the report later. See ya, Lester.”

“I’ll be here. See ya.”

She thumbed the “End” button and then the speed-dial button for the station. It was answered on the second ring.

“Donovan? This is Trieri. Listen, I need you, or someone, to look up a phone number at the university faculty apartments. For Luigi Franconi, the AMFest conductor.”

“Don’t have to, Lieutenant. There’s a message for you from him, with a number. Looks like the university’s exchange. Got a pen?”

“No, I’m in the car. Tell you what. I’ll disconnect, you dial him and then transfer it to my desk. It’ll get forwarded to me here, at least if things work as advertised. If he doesn’t answer, I’ll just pick up the message when I get back. OK?”

“Uh, if you say so, Lieutenant.” Donovan, more of a traditionalist than a high-tech individual, sounded skeptical. “I’ll put the message in your mailbox anyway, OK?”

“Thanks. And don’t worry, it’ll work, at least if Franconi’s in. ’Bye.” And she disconnected.

It took about two minutes, just enough time for her to find a convenient place to pull off the road safely so she wouldn’t have to talk and drive at the same time during this conversation. Because she already had the phone in her hand, she was able to interrupt the first tweedle.

“Trieri, investigations. Is that you, Mr. Franconi?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. Thank you for returning my call. I’d like to see if we can get together for a discussion of your murder case. There’s something I need to tell you about it.”

Given the information provided by St. Clare about the DNA samples, this was not what Annette had expected to hear. But maybe he knew something, even if he wasn’t really a suspect. At least they could have an informal conversation, now.

“I’m certainly interested in anything that has to do with this case, Mr. Franconi. Perhaps we could meet for lunch, if a late lunch is OK with you. I’m on my way to the airport for a short meeting, but I should be back in town by one or so.”

“Please, call me Luigi. And a late lunch would be perfect for me. It’s such a beautiful day. What if I pick up some food and meet you, say, in that little park across from the fish hatchery, by the river?”

Well, she thought with a smile, at least he’s not going to hit on me.

“A lovely idea, Luigi. Perhaps just a little after one?”

“Excellent. I’ll see you there.”

She disconnected and pulled back onto the highway, toward the airport. The folks at the airline were going to have to cough up more information this time. Passenger privacy wasn’t a good enough excuse when murder was involved.

* * *

It was about a quarter after one when Annette pulled into a parking space at Rotary Park, by the bend in the river just north of downtown, across from the Colorado Division of Wildlife's trout rearing unit. The drive back to town from the airport had given her time to cool down a bit.

Uncooperative bureaucrats, whether in government or the private sector, always managed to raise her blood pressure. Not that this was unproductive—it also made her all the more determined to get the information she needed. In this case, it was a mistake for “Mr. Robert Townsend, Manager,” as his little airline nametag had informed her, to have balked at providing her information. A call from her cellular phone to the station asking for information on his record had made him most uncomfortable, quite effectively breaking down his reluctance. She now knew that Reginald Meeker had been somewhat less than candid about his recent travel schedule.

Luigi wasn't in any of the obvious places, such as the picnic tables, so she wandered across the pedestrian bridge over to the hatchery. There he was, leaning on a railing, peering into a concrete trough teeming with 14-inch trout, tossing them pellets of trout chow, or whatever that stuff in the vending machine was. A day pack with the end of a baguette sticking out the top was draped over his left shoulder. She walked up beside him.

“Hal tells me that these hatchery trout just don't compare with the wild ones, but I don't really understand what he's talking about.”

“Oh, hello, Lieutenant. Yes, I've heard that also, from the fellows at Duranglers. Something about strength and fighting spirit. ‘Wildness,’ whatever that means. And I'm told that these hatchery fish have one of their fins notched, so you can tell the difference, but I forget the details. Are you hungry? They sure seem to be.”

He tossed in the remaining handful of pellets he'd purchased, and the water boiled with fish, the sunlight flashing on the red and gold stripes down their sides.

“Well, watching these fish go after those hatchery food pellets isn't the most appetizing thing I can think of, but, yes, I am. And I see you've found the Swiss bakery. There are some tables across the bridge, by the river.”

“I think I've found all of the places to purchase good food in this town, few as they are. You Americans don't seem to care much about what you eat. Ah, no offense, you know, but it's very different in Europe. Anyway, I didn't want to get into a food argument. I wanted to talk to you about poor Steffanie.”

“We're making slow progress. Slower than I'd like, unfortunately.”

“Well, maybe I can help a little. The last time we talked, I didn't really know what you were looking for. The stories since then in the paper have helped me to understand what you were probing for. So maybe I can be more helpful. I really do want to see justice done.”

“And, last time we talked, I was not able to be entirely candid with you, Luigi. Perhaps we can do better this time. If it will help you, I can tell you that you're not a suspect in all this.”

“But I was before, eh? No, no, it's OK, really. It only makes sense that I would be, having taken her to dinner that night and so on. But something has changed your mind, it seems.”

“Yes, and it's in the way of physical evidence, so it's quite solid. I'm afraid that I can't be more specific. But one thing you mentioned last time is that you knew Ms. Boudreau reasonably well. Some of the new information makes me want to revisit that part of our conversation. Will that be acceptable?”

“As I said, we have been doing concerts together for some years. She was a European child prodigy and began appearing in public when she was 10, about 10 years ago. I think our first concert together was about 6 years ago.”

“She was a European prodigy? Do you know if she had any connections to Canada?”

“Oh, yes. She was born in Montreal. But I think she came over to Paris in her early years and now has, or, um, had, French citizenship.”

“Did you ever have any knowledge of her life style? Her friends, social habits, and so on?”

“Well, I do know that she sort of went wild when she finally stopped living with her parents and being managed by her father. As with most child prodigies, she had led an extremely sheltered childhood, with her entire existence focused on her music. She really didn’t have a normal childhood, or adolescence, either. So as soon as she could, about three years ago, I think, she broke loose. Lots of alcohol. Some drugs. Lots of boys and sex. She even confided in me that she had two abortions. But she always managed to continue to perform, and she even got better during this time. Her interpretations became more, oh, fluid and, what should I say, true to the composer’s intentions for the music.”

While talking, they had crossed back to Rotary Park, over the new pedestrian bridge, which, built to modern standards, made the old narrow-gauge railroad bridge next to it look flimsy. By now they had reached the picnic tables, and he was unloading an interesting combination of foods from his day pack. The baguette, a wedge of some kind of cheese, a slice of paté with little specks (truffles? Yum, she thought), grapes in both colors, and a liter of San Pellegrino sparkling water appeared on the table in turn. He poured a glassful for her, in a stemmed wine glass he plucked from a side pocket of the pack.

“My, my. You, sir, do a first-class picnic. This looks wonderful. Ah, she confided in you?”

“Yes, well, you see, I wasn’t threatening to her, in the sense of being a potential sex partner, nor am I old enough that she thought of me like she thought of her father. So I was a good confidante. You know, it’s so sad, really. She was really a remarkable violinist, and she had at least 50 more years of music to contribute, if other performers are any indication. And, for her age, she was positioned better than anyone in a long time. She even had a Stradivarius violin, for goodness’ sake.”

He wondered if Annette would follow up with questions on his comment about not being a potential sex partner.

“Yes, I’ve heard that too, from Jacques Ament. Do you know if she brought it on this trip?”

“Oh, yes. She told me how excited she was to be able to play it here in Colorado at dinner last Monday. She said she was going to run out and buy a humidifier for her hotel room so that it wouldn’t dry out.”

“You may be interested to hear that it’s missing.”

“What?! Do you mean to say that someone’s stolen it?”

“We don’t really know. She had checked it into the hotel safe when she arrived, but she retrieved it just after your dinner with her. You told me she had mentioned a late date. Did she say anything about it that could be helpful?”

“No, not really. She did seem distracted, and in a bit of a hurry, though. It must have been that she was looking ahead to it. She said it was with someone she had met in Europe, that’s all.” He looked away, into space. “You know, she did say something else that puzzled me at the time. Something about the mountain air and how sound carries so well. And the almost-full moon. As if she was looking ahead to some kind of outdoors activity that night. At the time, I thought she was just excited to be in a new place. Compared to her usual travels, Durango is pretty exotic.” He smiled. “For me, too.”

“No cowboys in Italy, eh? So Steffanie was distracted, but she didn’t mention anything about whom she might have been going out with later, beyond that it was someone she’d met in Europe?”

“Just those cryptic remarks.” He grinned. “And the only cowboys we have in Italy are in those spaghetti western movies, or in the gay bars.”

Surely she would pick up on this hint. But she seemed oblivious. Instead of giving him an easy opening to tell her why he couldn’t be a suspect, she steered the conversation to his origins in Italy and where her family had come from, generations ago. Whatever her evidence was, he thought, it must be quite solid. It felt good not to be a suspect any longer. He ate with more gusto than he’d planned.

* * *

Lance knew that he’d blown it with Annette the minute he’d shouted at her that morning. He simply hadn’t realized that she wasn’t known to his colleagues. Oh, well. She was attached, anyway, to some geezer up at the college, he’d learned.

Now, he was sitting in the Narrow Gauge Saloon, his big hat pulled down low on his forehead, nursing a Jim Beam and waiting for the arrival of Randy Fredericks. He had a check for Randy, and, he assumed, Randy would be providing him with more insider tidbits. Meanwhile, he could read the latest issue of the *National Gazette*, with his lead story splashed all over the cover. That model he’d had sent in from the agency worked out just fine. There she was, lying on the tracks, arms akimbo, the nipples of her up-thrust breasts just visible through the filmy bra, full, red lips slightly parted. Under a banner headline reading “Railroad Villain Slays French Beauty” and over smaller ones that smirked “Sex Scandal Rocks Rockies” and “Prince William Said to be Devastated.” It gave him goosebumps.

“So this is what I’m making all that money for, huh? Now I know what a whore feels like.”

Randy had arrived, overflowing, it seemed, with guilty conscience. Lance looked up from under the wide brim of his O’Farrell Roper.

“Exactamento, my friend. And don’t worry, just lie back, relax, and try to enjoy it. It won’t get you any Pulitzers, but it will keep your bank account fat. Just keep repeating over and over ‘10 G’s a week...10 Gs’ a week...10 G’s a week.’ That’ll make it all better, believe me. See, here’s the first check.” He had taken a bank draft from his shirt pocket. “What new goodies do you have for me today?”

“Well, I saw you at the briefing this morning, after you set the pack loose on Lieutenant Trieri. You screwed up big time there, my friend. She’s one enemy that you don’t want to have, believe me. Anyway, you got this morning’s press release. This afternoon, I got an off-the-record verification that they’re looking for two people. Seems that there is evidence pointing to more than one killer, or at least a killer and an accomplice. And there’s an unconfirmed rumor floating around. Something about a million-dollar robbery. I don’t quite see the connection to the murder, however, and no one’s saying what’s missing that’s worth a mil.”

Lance was busily taking notes.

And, as usual, no one paid attention to the cell phone at the ear under the brim of the other O’Farrell Roper, the black one with the concha band.

* * *

Just as Hal was getting ready to head home, after a long day of waiting for fall registration emergencies that never happened, one did. Perhaps “emergency” overstates the circumstances of a full course with a

waiting list of seniors needing it to graduate, but they certainly thought of it that way and that's what Hal was there to deal with.

One of seniors who'd been put on the waiting list apparently felt that the answer to his problem was publicity, and so he had called the *Free Press*, who had called the dean for a comment. The reporter, Jennifer Mason, was obviously fishing, because she seemed intent on linking this course overbooking—a pretty standard practice, actually—with the AMFest Murder, as they were now calling it. Quite a stretch, even for the *Free Press*, Hal thought. He was working to break the tenuous link by focusing only on the registration glitch.

“No, I hadn't heard about the waiting list, but it's not at all uncommon. It's surprising how many students sign up for senior-level courses to try to finish up and then drop them in a week or two. Either they decide that the course is too hard to take just now, or they decide that they don't really, really have to graduate this year. And, as I'm sure you can understand, we like be as efficient as possible and keep the classes full, so having the waiting list is one way to do that. I wish this student who called you had talked with me. I'm sure I could have eased his concerns. Or hers.”

“Why shouldn't people assume that an organization that lets its distinguished visitors be murdered is also incompetent in other ways, too?”

Man, oh man, Hal thought. Does our journalism department teach this stuff?

“Jenny, I'm afraid that I simply can't agree at all with the premise of your question. You're assuming things that are simply not true. And, really, whatever you think about this waiting list, it's nothing new or different compared to other fall registrations. Or spring ones, for that matter. If you'd give me the name of the student who contacted you, or even only the course in question, I'm sure I could put everyone's worries to rest.”

“We never divulge sources. You should know that it's unethical. What about the cutbacks in the women's studies program?”

Now for something completely different, he realized.

“Of course, budgets have nothing to do with the rate at which courses fill up. But women's studies isn't in my college, I'm afraid, Jenny. So I really don't know anything about this. I can tell you that at the last budget meeting, nothing of the sort was discussed, and I believe that it would have been. This must be one of those false rumors that gets spread around now and then.”

“So women are being raped and murdered on campus and now women's studies is being cut. What does this say to women in high schools all over Colorado who may be thinking of Frémont State as their next educational step?”

Unless they believe your headlines, it doesn't say anything, he thought.

“Jenny, that's not true, and you know it. As I said, I don't know anything about women's studies. And, based on my visits to high schools, I'm positive that our reputation is quite good, and improving, among all students. We're certainly one of the best buys in the inter-mountain west. Our applications and admissions are proof that women think of Frémont State as a place where they can learn and grow in safety and security. Even if they do have to be patient with the occasional waiting list. Now, Jenny, as I mentioned at first, I'm recording this conversation, just like I bet you are. So please be sure to quote me accurately, OK?”

“Is that some sort of threat? You may be a college dean, but you don't control freedom of the press!”

“Jenny, all I’m interested in is not being misrepresented as the result of some sort of misunderstanding or misread notes. I’m glad you’re taping this, because that makes it easier to get things right. Please do. Now, I’m afraid I have another commitment. It was nice talking with you.”

Happily, she did not try to prolong the conversation. How do people with teenagers keep their sanity? he wondered.

* * *

That evening, they cooked together while discussing the day’s events. A soufflé with crab meat, sharp cheddar, shallots, and a jolt of fresh nutmeg grated on the top. They took turns whipping the egg whites.

Annette’s lunch had motivated her to go by the Old Town Bake Shop and pick up a baguette for supper, and this seemed like the perfect complement. Hal had found a reasonably dry Mosel Valley Kabinett for her, and she felt guilty that she hadn’t picked up something special for him. But he was addicted to iced tea in the summer anyway.

“So, Luigi kept dropping hints, and I think he wanted to ‘out’ himself to me, but I just ignored them. With the DNA results, we don’t really need to know that women aren’t to his taste, so his orientation is irrelevant. But the comments about her being distracted during their dinner are quite relevant. Someone had made a date with her, someone she’d met in Europe, so it wasn’t just a spur-of-the-moment decision to go out later. That fits with someone making the reservation at Peaceful Pines Resort to get Weisicki out of the way. And, I have to say, the information from the airline about Meeker doesn’t make him look especially good. Hmm. Should I be telling you all this?”

“Meeker works at the university, sure, but he’s not a friend of mine, or anything. And if he’s in on it, he needs catching. I’ll help however I can. Incidentally, I tried calling him this afternoon, to let him know that I got grilled by a *Free Press* reporter, about registration. But his secretary said he’d taken the day off to go rock climbing. Something, apparently, he does as a serious hobby.”

“And something one doesn’t do alone, no? And we’re looking for two people in this, now. Wonder who he climbs with?”

The timer buzzed, and they had to scramble to dress the salad before the soufflé fell.

* * *

Eight

At 8:00 sharp the next morning, Annette called the university’s public relations office. Might as well turn up the heat on old Reg first thing, she thought. But he wasn’t in, and Margaret, his secretary, didn’t expect him until 9:00 or so, she wasn’t sure of precisely when.

“And, I’m sorry, but sometimes things come up and he doesn’t get in all day. Like when he has to dash off to Denver to meet with legislators, or something. So I’m afraid I really can’t be very helpful.”

She offered to page him, or have him call back, but Annette talked her out of the various options, playing down the importance of her call. She wanted the element of surprise.

But she wouldn’t be finding him this day, because Meeker was meeting with Leonard Schwab for breakfast, to discuss strategy. They had decided on the student union cafeteria, not for the quality of the

food, but for the cover, and Meeker was waiting outside the main entrance. Fall registration week always turned the place into a zoo, and faculty and staff generally avoided it. Later, the two of them were going to meet Tony LaCoste to discuss how to transfer the artifacts that they had so carefully packed into the duffle bag yesterday.

Meeker had been turning the situation over in his mind almost all night. The problem they had was not so much the transfer of the artifacts as it was the payment they were to receive. No price had been set, nor could it be until there was some sort of appraisal. But only Raimer Holtzmann could do that, and he steadfastly refused to meet Meeker and Schwab, at least according to LaCoste. And neither he nor Schwab trusted either LaCoste or Holtzmann. They certainly didn't want to just turn the duffle bag over to LaCoste and hope he would come back some day with an appropriate amount of cash. And what would be appropriate, anyway? His thoughts were interrupted by Schwab's arrival.

"Morning, Len. Hope you got more sleep than I did. I feel like shit."

"Hi, Reg. Me, too. Do they have anything resembling good coffee here?"

"Actually, they do. The food's not so great, but the coffee's quite acceptable. There's even an espresso cart with various concoctions. But it's the big vats of coffee that are the high-octane stuff, if you need a caffeine fix. We can get some with breakfast, if you want to eat."

"Yeah, food would be good. Thinking all night works up an appetite, somehow."

They entered the din of the dining room, now certain that their conversation would be well disguised by the hundreds of excited students.

After patiently negotiating the food and cashier's lines, they managed to find a table well in the back of the room, away from the windows. They sat down and began to examine the breakfasts the cafeteria provided. Meeker had opted for a Denver omelette, with the standard sides of hash-browns and toast. Looking at it critically, he estimated that it ran to about 1500 calories, grease included.

Schwab's breakfast burrito, a large flour tortilla wrapped around scrambled eggs, chorizo sausage, cheese, and hash-browns, smothered in some kind of green chile stuff, was even bigger, probably closer to 2000 calories. College students demand their money's worth and tend to be hungry.

Well, they had both put in a long, strenuous day yesterday, and they needed to fuel up.

Although their plan to disguise their meeting in the public, but noisy and chaotic, environment of the cafeteria was basically sound, they hadn't known that it was during registration week that the Natural Sciences Dean always met with the leadership of the various science clubs for breakfast. So, when Hal walked up behind Meeker to say hello, and to let him know about the *Free Press* grilling he'd endured the day before, the advantage was his. Meeker didn't exactly choke, but it appeared that he worked hard not to.

"Morning, Reg. I called you yesterday afternoon, but Margaret said you were out rock climbing." Seeing Meeker's face turn red and his eyes bulge out, he turned to Schwab.

"Good morning. I don't believe we've met. I'm Hal Weathers, Dean of the College of Natural Sciences."

He stuck out his right hand toward Schwab.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but I'm here for a meeting with some students and recognized Reg, here. I'm impressed with your courage to brave the environment in this place this week. And the food."

He smiled in encouragement, and there was little Schwab could do except to be polite in response.

“Ah, yes, good morning. I’m, ah, Leonard Schwab, a friend of Reg’s. He, ah, suggested we eat here because, ah, it’s so close to his office. I’m, ah, the concertmaster for the AMFest orchestra.”

“Oh, yes, I heard that you had to fill in at the last minute over the weekend, for the Beethoven Concerto. I’m sorry I missed it. How did it go?”

“Pretty well, all things considered. I’m sure that the audience was a little disappointed, given all the build-up for the guest soloist, and all. But I think my interpretation was well received.”

By now, Meeker’s demeanor had begun to return to normal, so Hal quickly filled him in on the *Free Press* interview.

“Anyway, Reg, maybe you should call Jenny and butter her up a little. I didn’t give her anything damaging, I’m sure, and I’ve got my recording of the conversation as a back-up. And give me a call if other questions come up. Listen, I’ve got to get back to the students I’m meeting with. Nice to meet you, Leonard. I hope to see you this weekend, at the final performance.”

Schwab, who had a mouthful of burrito at this point, did his best to nod and smile. Except the green chile was hot enough that the smile was somewhat surprised and pained. He waved good-bye with his fork, looking comical.

Meeker was staring at his plate, breathing deeply. Finally he looked up, fear and confusion in his eyes.

“Holy shit. I hope that it’s not as bad as I think. Of all the people to meet here. You know his lady is the cop who’s investigating Steffanie’s death? She interrogated me the other day, and I didn’t feel very good about how I handled it. And now he’s seen us together. And he knows I went climbing yesterday. At least you didn’t say anything about climbing. What if he asks me why I’m having breakfast with you?”

“Hey, slow down. It’ll be OK. You’re in PR, and the AMFest is a big deal for the university. It’s natural that you’d meet some of the musicians. His reason to talk to you, that interview thing, makes sense to me. He sees you here and wants to tell you about it. Perfectly natural. Calm down. Jesus, this stuff is burning holes in my mouth.”

“I sure hope you’re right. And if it’s too hot, go get some milk. It helps, really. Some kind of chemical thing. I’ll try to get my appetite back.”

Schwab left, heading for the dairy case in something of a hurry.

By the time he got back, working on his second carton of milk, Meeker had begun to attack his omelette.

“You’re right, the milk helps. Weird. And this chile is really pretty good, when you get past the heat. So. What are we going to do with our little stash of stuff? How do we handle this, anyway?”

“Exactly what I was chewing on all night. I wish we knew exactly what we have. At least how old it really is. It feels like we have a suitcase full of cocaine and need to sell it to the cartel without getting killed in the process, but we don’t know their rules. Or like trying to arrange a fool-proof way to get a kidnapping ransom so you don’t get caught. Or something like that.”

“If this guy Holtzmann won’t meet with us, and if he’s the one to decide on the price, what can we do? Hire someone to act for us? But then Holtzmann would have to meet him, which probably won’t fly, either.”

“Well, here’s one approach I’ve been mulling over. How about if we give LaCoste something to show Holtzmann. Not the whole inventory, just one thing. Like, maybe that stick with the notch at the end. Holtzmann can decide if it’s authentic, maybe even test its age. Wonder how he’ll do that?”

Anyway, since it is authentic and obviously very old, he'll get all excited and want more. Then we'll be in a stronger position to insist on meeting him with the rest of the stuff. The basket is clearly the centerpiece of this find, so we can hold that back. Maybe not even take it to him until we're satisfied with his offer for the package."

"What about having someone we trust hold on to the basket, with a letter explaining everything, to be opened if something happens to us. We wouldn't have to explain about the basket, or even show it to them. We could just keep it wrapped up."

"Good idea." Meeker couldn't help but laugh. "Good idea, but listen to us. What hocus-pocus. Like a cheap TV cop show. And we have no real idea of how much money were talking here. I'd like to think in terms of six, or even seven, figures. But I bet that Holtzman offers five or less. For the artifacts, I mean. That violin is something else, at least if what you said about it is true."

"Oh, that's true, all right. It's a Stradivarius. You have no idea, not the remotest conception, how difficult it was for me to give that thing up. Damn. And it's worth at least a million, at least on the legitimate market. I don't really know about the black market. But it should still be worth a lot. Six figures, easy. You know, of course, that the best way to handle the artifacts would be to get a second opinion, from one of Holtzmann's competitors. Especially because we can't be sure that he'll be honest about the age, or whatever else he finds out."

"You're right. But who would that be? We ran into the Holtzmann connection by accident, by just sort of stumbling across LaCoste up at the Pines."

"Maybe somebody at the university would have an estimate. Didn't I hear that someone in the anthropology department, or something like that, handled that other big Basketmaker dig last year? Maybe they'd know something, either about value or about other dealers."

"You're talking about Ben Hartford. Maybe that's a place to start. What we need to do is to invent a story I can tell him to get the information without raising his suspicions. Maybe I can tell him that the university is being approached about a magazine story, or maybe TV, Discovery Channel or something, about that dig. And before he gets interviewed, I'm putting together a basic information package. The writer wants a human interest angle beyond the archaeology, something about collectors, how much stuff is worth, and so on."

"Reg, this is obviously why the university pays you those big bucks. Go for it."

Schwab finally was able to flash a genuine smile. The milk had done its work.

* * *

When Hal returned to his office, after eating a bagel in the cafeteria while explaining to the science club officers why the college's subsidy of their operations would have to be cut back yet again, he immediately called Annette. To his astonishment, she was actually in her office.

"Trieri, investigations"

"This is your university snitch calling. Guess what I found out this morning."

"Ah, geez. The Ivory Tower connection strikes again. Let's see. The white mice escaped from the biology lab and havoc reigns on campus, right?"

There was a pause.

"Here I was going to give you the tip of the day, and this is what I get? Let me guess, instead. You've been hobnobbing with the reporters again and you're all bent out of shape, right?"

“Something like that. And you know I’m not really giving you grief in any serious way. What’s up?”

“Well, I had a meeting in the student union cafeteria this morning and saw Reg Meeker having breakfast there. With someone called Leonard Schwab, who said he’s the concertmaster for the AMFest. Might be innocent, because Reg is public relations and AMFest is a big deal up here. But last night you and I were talking about someone who could be Reg’s climbing buddy.”

“Hmm. Meeker’s secretary claimed he might not be in all day, she really didn’t know. So he gave her some sort of vague story about his activities today. Surely, he’d tell her if he was interviewing an AMFest musician for breakfast. Leonard Schwab, eh? Let me check into this. Anything else? I’ve got a meeting starting.”

“I’ll pick up something for dinner. Any requests?”

“Comfort food. With the DNA results in, the heat’s on to solve the Boudreau thing, and we’ve also been reminded that the snowplow incident also needs attention. Maybe I can clone myself.”

“Comfort food it is. And, listen, one of you is plenty for me to love. You’ll figure this all out, I’m sure. ’Bye.”

Because it was the last day of registration, Hal needed to be available for other matters arising, like the pseudo-emergency of yesterday, so he settled in to more reading. The technical debate concerning the sensitivity of Earth’s climate to greenhouse gases had become more and more rancorous over the past several years, and he was trying steadfastly to remain objective. But the weight of the evidence was settling more and more heavily on the side of global warming. The questions remaining had begun to focus increasingly on how much warmer it would become, and how long this would take. He was burrowing into the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change when his intercom line buzzed. Alice was summoning him.

“Yes, Alice?”

“Dean Weathers, there’s a Mr. Franconi here asking for you.”

“Luigi? Well, I’m honored. Be right out.”

Hal had never been able to adapt to the normal procedure of awaiting guests in his office. Unless, of course, they were in some kind of trouble, when that particular power play was quite useful. He opened his door and walked out to meet Luigi.

“To what do I owe this honor, Luigi? Good to see you again.”

“Ah, Dean Weathers. I’m sorry to interrupt your day, but I’m glad you are available. This won’t take long.”

“Oh, don’t worry a bit. I’ve got all day. I’m trapped here by the registration process. I’ve got to be available in case some emergency comes up. You’ve met Alice, I take it?”

“Indeed, and I am charmed.”

He turned to her, and she blushed, to Hal’s surprise.

“Thank you for your help, Mrs. Swan. I look forward to seeing you and your husband this weekend.”

What in the world is this about? Hal wondered. Luigi turned back to Hal.

“I’m dispensing tickets to our weekend *finalé*, and I thought you and Ms. Trieri might be interested. I’ve already persuaded Mrs. Swan to join us.”

“Why, how delightful. We’ll make every effort. Annette’s pretty busy, but I think I should be able to get her to take a couple of hours for a concert. What’s on the program?”

“Well, I’m not sure yet. I know, it’s Thursday and we should be rehearsing. And the publicity people are going crazy. They want to print their programs. But, well, the orchestra has been playing together so well, I’m confident of their abilities. My concertmaster seems distracted just now, but we’ll come up with something appropriate for the closing concert. Maybe I’ll have the publicity people say that it’s a special *finalé* surprise program.”

“Your concertmaster. Let’s see, that would be Leonard Schwab, right? I met him this morning, in the student union cafeteria. He was having breakfast with our director of public relations.”

“He was? Hmm, he told me he would be out of town again today. Well, anyway, we won’t be playing anything that really needs him. He had his chance for the spotlight last weekend.”

“Don’t tell me he’s taken up fly-fishing, too. You musicians are going to get all of our trout.”

“No, no. He’s a rock climber. Violinists have strong hands anyway, but I can’t understand how he can justify putting his hands at risk that way. But it’s his career. Such as it is. And you don’t have to worry about me. I catch a few, but I think most of your trout are having lots of fun down there laughing their little heads off at me. Between all the flies I’m losing and the leaders I get tied in knots, they must find it quite amusing.”

“That’s why addicts like me take up tying flies. They’re cheaper that way, at least if you count the time spent as fun. Have you been out since last week? I’ve heard that the Animas Gorge is starting to heat up, an ongoing caddis hatch.”

Hal, knowing Alice’s boredom with his hobby, steered Luigi into his office, and shut the door.

* * *

Tony LaCoste’s refusal to introduce Meeker and Schwab to Raimer Holtzmann was not his own idea. Four Corners Archaeology was designed in a careful series of layers, to insulate Holtzmann from just about everything—LaCoste seldom saw him, if the truth be known.

But LaCoste was not about to advertise this, because part of his role was to persuade the amateurs, Meeker and Schwab in this case, that he and Holtzmann were the best of pals. To this end, his afternoon meeting with the pair of rock climbers was designed to impress them using a pre-arranged telephone call.

LaCoste intentionally arrived early at their meeting place, the park benches in Bradshaw Circle, outside the D&SNGRR station at the south end of Main Avenue. Oblivious to the gaily blooming flower beds, he positioned himself to be able to see anyone approaching, and used his cellular phone to call his intermediary to Holtzmann.

“Dick? Tony here. I’m in place, and they should be here in a few minutes. I don’t really know what to expect—like I told you, they wanted a meeting in public. Maybe they’re getting nervous. Ah, I see them down the block. No big parcels, though. Give me, oh, five minutes, then call. OK?”

After letting his accomplice know what to expect, he disconnected and put the phone in his pocket, just as Meeker and Schwab walked up.

“Gentlemen. I hope this is public enough for you?”

There were tourists meandering around in droves, as LaCoste had expected.

“I notice you’re not carrying anything bigger than a breadbox. I was hoping you’d have something for me.”

“All in due time.” Meeker had lost the coin toss and was spokesman. “We want to clarify the exchange procedure first. There are some details we haven’t discussed yet.”

Schwab was looking around carefully at the tourists, as if to try to spot anyone watching their conversation.

“‘Exchange procedure?’ What details? Look, guys. Here’s where we are, in plain, simple English: You found some items of interest to my boss. He may want to buy them from you. But first, he’s got to see them. Then he’ll decide how much they’re worth to him and whether to make you an offer. This all seems pretty straight-forward to me. What’s the problem?”

LaCoste was used to dealing with amateur jitters, and he had found that the best approach was to seem disinterested.

“We’re not comfortable with just turning everything over to you. You’ve already got that violin. What about payment for that? If we pass everything along, how can we be sure that we’ll ever see you again? And how can we be sure that Holtzmann will offer us a fair price? Anyway, we’re not ready. We need to have some independent tests done, age determination and so on.”

Meeker was breathing a little too hard, a sign that he was nervous. LaCoste noticed little beads of sweat on Meeker’s broad forehead.

“Listen, guys, I don’t know why you’re getting cold feet now. I thought we had everything worked out. We only got the violin yesterday, and it has to be appraised, and so on. As for the other stuff, Raimer has seen the photographs, and he’s quite interested in your find. He’s been trying to add things like this to his collection for years. He’s not going to re-sell them—the market for stuff this old is practically non-existent anyway. And as to their exact age, well, that will take an expert. How are you planning to get the stuff dated?”

“Radiocarbon dating, probably. Expert analysis, that sort of thing.”

Meeker was becoming defensive, something that LaCoste knew was to his advantage.

“You know that radiocarbon dating is destructive? How much are you willing to sacrifice, anyway? Each piece has considerable value, you know. And if you actually show the items to anyone, you’re running a big, big risk. Any expert will know it’s an undocumented find and probably turn you in.”

Any second, now, LaCoste thought. And on cue, his phone tweedled inside his pocket.

“Excuse me, fellas.” He flipped the phone open expertly. “Yes? Oh, hello, Raimer...They’re with me now...No, they didn’t bring anything, apparently...I’m not sure, but I don’t think they trust us...I know, I know—maybe they have another buyer lined up.”

During this monologue, LaCoste was carefully gauging Meeker’s and Schwab’s reactions and body language. They were trying to look cool, but not really succeeding very well.

“No idea who...yeah, I know there’s no one else with your expertise west of the Mississippi. To make matters worse, they’re talking radiocarbon dating...Hey, I don’t know. Maybe they’ve got some extra pieces and they think they can sacrifice a few grams of wood, or something...Well, of course. If all of the original burial artifacts aren’t intact, the whole thing could be worthless...No I don’t know if they know that.”

LaCoste could tell that the pair of amateurs was becoming increasingly nervous.

“OK, I’ll let them know. One thing they’d probably like is some security, or some assurance that we won’t just disappear with their inventory. Also, they want payment for the fiddle...Well, I know they know about Four Corners, and I reminded them that we got the violin only yesterday...OK, I’ll handle it, don’t worry...Yeah, that other find we heard about is probably better anyway, at least if you compare the pictures. Maybe we should just go with that one...OK, I’ll call later.”

Meeker had taken out a handkerchief and wiped his face, and Schwab was fidgeting annoyingly by now. LaCoste knew he had them where he wanted them.

“So. Listen. Raimer is getting impatient. You’ve been promising us this extraordinary new Basketmaker find for weeks now, and all we have is pictures. How do we know you didn’t take them at some museum somewhere? It’s time to put up or shut up, guys. Raimer has another find to examine, and it actually looks more promising than yours. He’s willing to consider yours first, because you came forward first. He’s a fair and honest guy. But he’s also only just so patient. Now what do you want to do? I’ve got another appointment to get to.”

Meeker, although nervous, had somehow shifted gears, LaCoste could tell. But he couldn’t quite understand what had happened. Schwab also noticed something, because he was staring at Meeker with the hint of a smile.

“OK, Tony. I’m going to call your bluff. I don’t know who you think you’re dealing with here, but we weren’t born yesterday. The last time someone tried that approach with me was at a used car lot. It didn’t work then, and it’s not going to work now. Nothing is going to happen until the matter of the Stradivarius is completely resolved. Then we can discuss the artifacts, the exchange procedure, and all of the things we’re concerned about. You know how to reach us. Come on, Len, let’s get away from here.”

During this, Schwab’s smile had frozen, and he was now looking scared.

“OK, guys. But it’s you who don’t know who you’re dealing with. You should ask around about what happened to the guys that blundered into the site up Lightner Creek a couple of years back. They tried to double-cross Raimer. Check into it, before you call me again.”

“We won’t be calling you. You need to call us, when the payment for the violin is ready. And don’t forget that we know its value.”

After a brief stare-down, LaCoste broke into a smile.

“Oh. I almost forgot. I’ve heard something interesting from the investigation. They’re now calling it ‘murder.’ And they’re looking for a pair of suspects.”

The color drained from Schwab’s face and Meeker’s mouth actually fell open.

Amateurs.

* * *

Comfort food, to Hal, was simple but reasonably elegant. He decided on *fettucine alá Alfredo*, made the original way. The first time, months ago, that he had prepared something he called “Alfredo” sauce, and linked the term to wide, flat pasta ribbons, Annette had lectured him unmercifully about how restaurants in the U.S. had corrupted the original dish beyond recognition. Pasta swimming in parmesan-flavored white glop was simply not what the dish was supposed to be all about.

So, when Annette arrived home, looking worn out and slightly grumpy, she found a large pile of finely grated pecorino Romano next to a small dish with about a half-stick of unsalted butter softening at room temperature. The large stock pot was full of water that had, apparently, been brought to a boil and

was now waiting for its next task. A package of fresh fettuccine was sitting on the counter next to the stove.

Hal must have heard the garage door close, because he came up behind her while she was inspecting the water in the stock pot and kissed her on the neck.

“Glass of Chablis? Or do you want to work out?”

“I’m too frustrated to work out. Chablis it is. Should I make a salad?”

“All ready to go. You can figure out dressing while the pasta boils. And how about a variation? I want to try something a little different with the pasta.”

“Not the goopy white sauce again, I hope. The grated cheese has me salivating for the real thing. My favorite comfort food.”

“No goopy white sauce, I promise. But how about some garlic?”

“Garlic? Hmm. Not too non-traditional. How?”

“I can melt the butter in a measuring cup in the microwave with some pressed garlic in it, then pour the result on the pasta and toss it a little before the cheese goes on. Just like the original, only with garlic. OK?”

“Looks like you’ve got plates heating up. So, I say ‘go.’ I’m going to wash my face and see how much of work I can rinse down the drain.”

Later, as she was using the Italian bread to wipe the last molecules of cheese and garlic-flavored butter from her plate, Hal chanced to mention his encounter with the conductor earlier that morning.

“I expect that you really don’t want to re-live the day, but I ought to fill you in on another conversation I had up on campus.”

“You mean after you bumped into Meeker at the cafeteria? Schwab has no record, by the way, beyond the usual minor traffic things.”

“But he is a rock climber. Luigi came by with tickets for the final performance at AMFest this weekend, and we got to talking. I hope you can manage a Sunday matinee, by the way.”

“Absolutely. I need a break, badly. I’ll probably have to work on Saturday, but Sunday I’m resting. How does Luigi know this?”

“Good question. I didn’t ask, because I didn’t want to raise any suspicions. But he mentioned it and then wondered at the sensibility of a violinist putting his hands at risk that way, so it sounded merely conversational. He was surprised to hear that I’d run into Schwab on campus, because he thought Schwab was going to be out of town today. Apparently, Schwab was out of town yesterday as well. So was Reg.”

“Busy boys, eh? Wonder what they’ve been doing?”

* * *

Right now, they were still arguing, although, due to the effects of a large amount of margarita mix and tequila, not entirely coherently.

“What are we going to do about the investigation? They’ll catch up to us sooner or later.”

“How? Everything’s clean, no prints anywhere, at least none of ours. Nobody saw us with her. The violin’s out of state. It was LaCoste’s fault anyway, and his pal, Dick What’sHisName, if push comes to shove and the cops need a second suspect.”

“How could we have just let that jerk have Steffanie’s Stradivarius? I still don’t believe we did that. Now it’s gone forever, and we’ll probably never get anything for it.”

“Oh, come on. You could never have played it in public. That little serenade the other night was your big chance. You know that. And we talked about it over the weekend. We had to give LaCoste something to keep him interested. And we know Holtzmann really wants that Indian stuff way more than he wants the fiddle.”

“Fiddle! How can you call it that? This is a 300-year old work of art! And if it’s not treated right, it’ll fall apart. Serve Holtzmann right if it does. I just wish that I’d had more time to play it, just for myself. Exquisite.”

“But it’s too easily identified to be good for anything, right? You said that yourself. Those artifacts, though, are pretty anonymous. They’re Holtzmann’s specialty, and he’ll know just what to do with them. Hey! I know. Maybe we could get the Strad back, instead of cash. You probably have a better idea about what to do with it than Holtzmann does anyway. And then you’d get a chance to play it again. Maybe I should call LaCoste.”

“What was all that about Lightner Creek he was talking about?”

“Yeah, I heard that, too. Lightner Creek is the canyon running west from town, along the highway. I don’t remember anything about a Basketmaker site there. But, then, I got interested in this stuff only recently.” He giggled. “Bet you never thought you’d be robbing ancient burial sites when you came out here to play in the symphony.”

Schwab found Meeker’s giggles infectious.

“No way. I came out here for the rock climbing, mainly. This podunk music festival made a good excuse and pays the bills. But there’s nothing like the climbing here back in New York State.”

“So what happens when we get the money? LaCoste was trying to scare us, I know, but I don’t think he’d double-cross us. He couldn’t find anything for Holtzmann to buy if he got a reputation for that.”

“If we get as much money as we should, I’m going to retire to someplace warm and sunny. With girls who don’t wear shirts.” His giggles broke into a real laugh. “And if we get the Stradivarius back, I’ll serenade them with it. What’re you going to do?”

“Hmm. I like the ‘girls that don’t wear shirts’ part. Maybe I’ll buy a topless bar somewhere. California. California girls. With no shirts. ‘I wish they all could be California girls.’”

“I hope you don’t think that you’re carrying that tune. My musical sensibilities are incensed.”

“Nonsense!”

“Yeah, well that’s my two cents’ worth.”

“Oh, Mr. Sensitive.”

“No, I’m insensate.”

Things went downhill from there.

* * *

Nine

Friday morning, Annette was beginning an assault on the week's paperwork to free herself up for another attempt to crack Reginald Meeker's prevarications, when, just after 8:00, her desk phone rang.

"Trieri, investigations."

"Lieutenant Trieri? Ah, I don't know if you remember me, it's Larry Johnson—you know, Leadfoot? From the train last week."

"Mr. Johnson, good morning. Certainly I remember you. And thank you for your discretion the evening of that accident. We were able to let the information trickle out at our own pace, thanks to you."

"Well, uh, sure." He chuckled softly. "Have to say, though, I'd never make a good spy, or anything like that. Didn't take too many beers for me to get loosened up, and I had some trouble keeping a lid on it. Ernie, too."

"I'm glad you did. And thank Ernie for me. Now, what can I do for you today?"

"Well, I've been meaning to tell you since Tuesday, but I keep forgetting. And, besides, I had a chance to ask around since then, so I've got even more for you, now."

"Tell me what, Mr. Johnson?"

"I'm not sure we can identify them, you understand, but it all fits together."

"Uh, Mr. Johnson, what fits together? Could you start at the beginning, please?"

"Huh? Well, sure. I guess that would be Tuesday. But really it all started a week ago Tuesday when we almost ran over that poor young lady's body up there. When you were with us."

"Mr. Johnson. Please. I'm lost. What started?"

"I started watching the tracks lots more carefully, that's what. Not that I didn't pay attention before, you understand. I mean, if I hadn't been paying attention, we'd have run right over her. But since then, I've been looking even closer. See, in all the excitement when we found her body, I forgot that I saw something just before I saw the body. Turns out they were ropes."

"Ropes?"

"Climbing ropes. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this last Tuesday, I mean a week and a half ago, but I just plain forgot. Just before that blind curve, I thought I saw something strange farther up ahead, hanging down the cliff. But it was too far ahead to really see. And then there was her body and things got real busy, if you'll remember. But then Wednesday, when I was thinking about it, I remembered those things hanging down the cliff. So I started carrying field glasses with me. The small kind, for hiking, you know? But I didn't see anything until on Tuesday. Of this week. I saw something hanging down the cliff again and looked at it with the glasses. And, sure enough, it was a couple of climbing ropes, one purple and one red. Hanging down into the gorge below the roadbed on that section of the High Line where we found the body. Maybe a hundred, two hundred yards north of where we found the body. And about a quarter mile this side of where that car got dumped into the river last Friday. I looked for what the ropes were attached to when we passed the spot they were hanging from, but I couldn't tell anything. It was just because of the curves on the High Line that I happened to see the ropes hanging down."

Annette was beginning to think he'd never wind down. But now she understood what he was talking about, at least.

"Now I understand, I think. But you said you'd had time since Tuesday to 'ask around,' or something like that."

"Yep, and sure enough, there's been a couple of fellows up at Rockwood, hanging around until after the morning trains go past, about once a week all summer. All equipped with ropes and climbing gear. Helmets and everything. I asked Willie about it. He doesn't know their names, but he'd know 'em if he saw 'em. He said he's seen them up there, at Rockwood, lots of times."

"But you think you saw the ropes on the early run a week ago Tuesday? Meaning they got up there before the morning trains, no?"

"Yep, I thought about that, and I guess they must have walked in early. Our schedule is pretty solid, and people know what it is. So they could have made it with no problem. Or maybe they were up there all night. Now, three days ago, when I saw the ropes, I had the late morning run, so they must have got in there between trains somehow, or gone in real early again. Anyway, I thought you'd like to know. Sorry I didn't remember last week."

"Me, too. Well, maybe not. You've followed up nicely, with the binoculars and the questions. Saved me some work, and, believe me, I appreciate that. I'll talk to Ernie and Willie, and the conductors on the other runs, too. I'd also like to go up there and look around."

"Well, I've got the 9:45 run today, and you can ride up with me, if you want. You could get off at Peaceful Pines, just across the High Bridge. You'd have about five hours to hang out there and look around, before we come by on the way back down. I can pick you up then."

"9:45, eh? What time do you need me there?"

"Well, you can ride up front again, so how about 9:30?"

"Hmm. I'll have to hustle, but I'll see you then."

* * *

Before she had time even to begin to digest all of this new information, or plan for the day, her phone rang again.

"Trieri, investigations."

"Lieutenant Trieri? This is Sergeant Luis Montoya, Santa Fe Police Department. We got copied on this regional alert from your office, to be looking for a violin you're reporting stolen, a Stradivarius. Is it really worth millions?"

"Quite possibly, we don't really know. But we've got this music festival happening up here, and a guest soloist, a violinist, got herself killed. And she owned this expensive antique violin. Which is now missing. Can I hope that you've got something for me?"

"Maybe. Santa Fe is a big fine arts center, as you probably know, and so we try to stay on top of stolen collectibles. We've got informants placed in various galleries and so on. And one of them reported that discreet inquiries are being made about the black market value of a Stradivarius violin. He seemed to think that it involves someone local, not somebody from out of town. He's going to keep tuned in for more. But I thought you might like to know now. Seems like two stolen Stradivariuses in this part of the country is too much of a coincidence."

Annette smiled, resisting the urge to say "Stradivari."

“It sure is. Would you be offended if I came down and interviewed your informant?”

“We can do that. This isn’t someone deep undercover, or anything. See, the arts community is on our side. They don’t want lots of hot stuff floating around, either. When do you have in mind?”

“Well, this is Friday, and I have to take a train ride today. What if I come down Sunday evening and we can talk to your guy on Monday? Maybe he’ll hear more over the weekend.”

“Sounds fine. Should I find you a place to stay?”

“Um, well, I don’t know Santa Fe at all, so maybe that would help. I’m not real fond of hotels, though. Are there alternatives?”

“Sure. I’ll reserve you a condo.”

“A condo? How will that look on my expense report?”

“No problem. It’ll show up as a hotel booking. Lots of rich folks have second homes here, condos they rent out through agencies that have hotel names. So it’s just like home, for the price of a nice hotel. I’ll get you one downtown, so you can walk over and see us Monday morning. My office is at the downtown substation, near where all the galleries are. Downtown Santa Fe is about the size of downtown Durango, or at least that’s what I remember from the last time I was up there, and you really don’t need to drive. Or want to, this time of year. I’ll call back with the information later today.”

After getting his telephone number and office location, she thanked him for his trouble and hung up. It never rains but it pours, she thought. Two breaks in one morning. Better tell the Captain.

She walked down the hall to see if Jankowski was available, and found his door open. He was staring out the window, obviously deep in thought. She knocked gently, and he looked up.

“Oh. Hi, Annette. What are we going to put on the press release today? I’m running out of ways to say ‘no new information’ creatively. Have you got anything?”

“Well, I actually do, but it’s too soon to put it out to them, probably.”

She filled him in on the two new leads in the investigation.

“Climbing ropes, down into the gorge, huh? On the morning you found the body, and then again this past Tuesday? What’s that all about?”

“The fact that the engineer saw them on the day we found the body is significant because it means that the climbers were probably up there when the body got put on the tracks, or at least close. So they might know something, or even be involved.”

“So you’re going up there?”

“Yeah, and I’ve got to get cracking. I need to go home and change into outdoors clothes. I swear. This job is going to make a mountaineer out of me yet. I should be back by about dinnertime.”

“Call me at home when you get back, OK?”

“Will do. And then Sunday, I’m going down to Santa Fe. What’s the best way to get there?”

“So the violin’s in Santa Fe, huh? Um, probably fly to Albuquerque and then drive up. Rent a car. It’s about a four-hour drive from here, so flying will be faster, even with the airports. I’ll get someone to make reservations for you today. You need a place to stay?”

“Montoya’s getting me a condo. Pretty snazzy, eh? He said it won’t cost more than a hotel.”

“You priced hotels in Santa Fe lately? But that’s probably a good idea. What’s your plan for today?”

“Ride up there, look around. I’ll check in with the Peaceful Pines folks and see if I can find out who made the reservations for that tender operator. Something I needed to do anyway. I’m hoping I can find out something about why there were people climbing on that cliff. Maybe the Peaceful Pines staff will know something about them, too.”

“All right. But watch for that rope, and if it’s there, I want you to have backup available before doing anything. Clear?”

“Yes, sir. Crystal clear. I’ll call you when I get back.”

* * *

Three hours later, she was peering through binoculars at the cliff below the railroad tracks several hundred yards ahead of the train, her gaze directed by engineer Leadfoot Johnson. She felt rather like the family dog out for a ride in the car, head out the window, watching the world go by. At least her tongue wasn’t hanging out. But it felt like her ears were flapping.

“Well, this is about where the ropes were hanging down from. But they’re not there today,” Leadfoot said, over the noise of the engine. Annette felt reassured, because there would have been no chance for a timely backup if the ropes had been in place.

“Yeah, I sure didn’t see any ropes. But it looks like I can see the cliff face from down there, on the other side of the river, if I can get over there.”

“No sweat. Just walk down the other side from Peaceful Pines. I bet there’s even a trail. It’s about a mile, or maybe a mile and a quarter down the other side.”

“What about walking back across the bridge and down the tracks to see if there’s anything here? It looks like that little tree back there would make a good landmark, you think?”

Leadfoot looked sideways at her, skepticism apparent.

“Well, got a watch?”

“Sure, why?”

“If you walk back down the tracks, keep a close eye on the time. You’ll have about two hours or so before the first train comes back down from Silverton. Unless you want to jump into the river. Could be done, I suppose, but I wouldn’t recommend it. It’s about four hundred feet down.”

“It should be about a mile and a half each way, right? Say, an hour of walking, max, leaving plenty of time to look around.” She smiled encouragingly, but he still looked skeptical. “And there’s plenty of places to get off the tracks along through here—it’s not all like those cliffs back there.”

“Yeah, but you probably wouldn’t want to get caught here,” Leadfoot said sardonically, as they began the crossing of the High Bridge.

Shortly after that, Leadfoot began easing off the steam for the stop at Peaceful Pines. Because the grade was still fairly steep, as train tracks go, the brakes would not be necessary, given his experience with coasting to a stop. At the station, actually just a shelter from the elements, Annette climbed down and turned to wave at Leadfoot and Ernie, his fireman. She noticed several people retrieving backpacks and other gear from the freight car at the back of the train, day hikers, backpackers, and others using the train as their transportation to the wilderness. And there were several people with real luggage being met by resort staff. Hal, she saw, was already standing off to the side, beginning to rig his fly rod.

She had called his office to let him know her plans for the day, and he’d surprised her by asking if she wanted company. With registration over, it seemed that he was no longer required to be on hand for

emergencies, real or imagined, and he wanted to take a day to get his breath before the semester began in earnest. She had been delighted to accept this offer, and used her clout to get him on the already full train—he didn't qualify as "backup" from the department's perspective, but she was going to be feeling a lot better to have company up there in the woods. Even if Hal's intentions were mainly to stand in the river casting imitation caddis flies. He'd chosen to ride in one of the passenger cars with the other back-country aspirants, and she, with a final wave to Leadfoot and Ernie, walked back to where he was busily putting his fishing gear together.

"Can't wait, huh? Bet this train just wouldn't go fast enough." He grinned a response.

"What I have to do," she continued, "is to walk down the tracks and look carefully at the top of the cliff, back there by a tree I spotted, about a mile and a half down. I'll try to find a landmark on the other side, so I can walk down there later and look across. There must be something about the cliff that motivated those climbers to come all the way up here with their gear."

"Do you suppose it was our friends, Reg and Lennie?"

"Don't know yet. But I'm going to figure out how to get the conductors to have a look at them, to see. I presume I'll see you in the river somewhere around here, after I get back?"

"I imagine that there will be plenty to keep me occupied around here. Looks like good water."

"Good. But I better hustle. Leadfoot told me I have a little under two hours before a train comes along. I want to be back here with you by then."

"I'd like that, too. I really don't want you caught up on that shelf with a train coming along. Are you all oiled up with sunscreen, or can I get a kiss?" He pushed his hat back on his head to get it out of the way of her face.

"Yes!" she replied, with a big, greasy smooch.

Then she walked off, back in the direction of the High Bridge, as the engine took several deep breaths and made panting noises to get started up toward Silverton. After about a minute, she looked back and saw the little train receding up the river. Hal was walking briskly, even though encumbered by chest waders and his assorted gear, up the tracks to a place where the river looked accessible.

She knew she had plenty of time, as long as she walked quickly, so she headed back down the tracks. It wasn't too long before Lance Riggins's story popped into her head. Just down the tracks from here, after all, was where it happened. Broad daylight notwithstanding, the mere thought of the snowplow hurtling down the tracks caused her to look over her shoulder frequently. It didn't help when she encountered a little warning sign put up by the railroad company:

Attention!

Persons proceeding beyond this point
do so at their own risk and are liable
for prosecution as trespassers!

It was the "at their own risk" part that got her thinking.

At the pace she set for herself, it took only about a half hour for her pedometer to read 1.5 miles, and then she recognized the little tree she'd picked out as her landmark for the spot identified by Leadfoot. She stopped and looked around carefully, but there was nothing particularly unique about the area, just more railroad tracks like everywhere else along the grade. She took the few steps over to the

edge, looked down, and stepped back quickly. Four hundred feet, eh? she thought. Well, if this shelf can hold trains, it can hold me.

Then she began working her way along the cliff edge, walking very carefully and examining the ground in some detail. There was nothing especially noteworthy until a few yards past the little tree, where there were numerous footprints around the top of a vertical crack in the cliff face below. Feeling rather like Sherlock Holmes, she took out a small tape and carefully measured their dimensions, and took several pictures of them. Then she walked gingerly to the edge so she could see down the crack.

There it was, a large eye-bolt. That must have been what the climbers used for their ropes. She looked across the river for landmarks, but there was nothing she could get a good fix on. Then, inspired, she gathered several large rocks and made a little cairn, right on the edge of the cliff. Feeling much better, she struck out up the tracks for the bridge and a visit to Peaceful Pines. All in plenty of time, she noticed on her watch.

* * *

Hal, meanwhile, had followed her progress back across the High Bridge and down the tracks until she disappeared around a curve, and then set about his business for the day.

The air was filled with little moth-like bugs wearing two sets of wings and no tails, tan caddis flies, equivalent to about a size 16, or maybe 18, Hal saw. Trout were rising sporadically, in the pools behind boulders and in the riffles over gravel banks as well. He tied on an elk-hair caddis, with a dark tan dubbed body wrapped with gold wire for ribs, and started casting into one of the larger pools.

It took only three casts before a medium-sized fish snatched the fly, and then promptly spat it out. Hal wasn't expecting anything to happen this soon and felt foolish for missing the strike.

All right, he thought, now I'm ready. Let's see you get away with that again. And he continued casting to the same pool. After four more casts, another, somewhat smaller, trout slurped the imitation, and this time Hal was ready. Two minutes later, he carefully released a 14" rainbow trout, with no notch in its dorsal fin, meaning it was a wild one. With the first fish of the day taken care of, he settled into a rhythm and forgot about time.

It seemed like only a few minutes before Annette appeared in his peripheral vision.

"Doing any good?" she shouted above the noise of the white water.

All he could do was grin and nod. He reeled in his line and carefully sloshed his way over by the bank where she was standing.

"I want to walk down the river on this side and see what that cliff face looks like through these," she waved her small binoculars, "and we ought to get going. We have to get back up here to the train stop after that. It'll be time to catch Leadfoot's train on the way back to town."

"You had a chance to talk to the people at Peaceful Pines? Has it been that long already?" He was amazed to think that several hours had passed.

"Time flies when you're having fun, no?"

They set off down the river along a narrow hiking trail made, no doubt, by years of Peaceful Pines guests.

"So what did you find up there, anyway?"

“A big eye-bolt at the edge of the cliff, cemented into a crack. Probably won’t be able to see it from this side. Can’t see it from the tracks, either, unless you know where to look. I noticed a bunch of footprints, they gave it away.”

Twenty minutes later, she stopped and began scanning the cliff on the opposite side of the river through her binoculars.

“There’s the cairn I built where the eye-bolt is. And there are several little ribbon thingies over there on that wall, below the cairn. And, say, there’s an opening, like a little cave. About half-way up. Hard to see because of the angle of the face. See it?” She was pointing, and handed him the binoculars.

“Those ribbons look like climbing nuts, protection against falls. You jam them into cracks and tie pieces of nylon webbing on them—that’s what you’re seeing—to clip a rope onto. Sometimes they’re too hard to get out, so climbers just leave them. And there’s the cave. Maybe that’s what they were interested in. Wonder how they found it?”

“No idea. But if the conductors identify our friends, and if their shoe sizes match those footprints, we’ll just ask them. Ready to go?”

“With fishing like this, I’m ready to go back into the river. But it’s a long walk home, I guess. And I’m getting hungry.”

He led the way up the trail along the river, toward the Peaceful Pines train stop.

* * *

They sat together for the run back down to Durango on Leadfoot’s return trip to town, and she filled him in on her visit at the Resort.

“Peaceful Pines looks like the kind of place I’d pay big bucks to stay at, I’ll say that much. Although a lot of the cost is for the golf, I bet. Anyway, it’s quite the place. And it was so strange when I asked for the manager. Do you remember the manager at the General Palmer, Phillip Westerman?”

“Yeah, that skinny guy who was not comfortable with our looking in the room the day after we found the body. Last week.”

“Right. Anyway, I’m sitting there waiting, and, so help me, up he walks and says ‘Can I help you, ma’am?’ like he’s never seen me. And I just saw him again last Tuesday, when we went through the safe deposit box. So I said ‘Nice to see you again, but I’m surprised to see you up here, Mr. Westerman,’ and he gets this confused look. But then a sort of recognition happens and he explains that he and Phillip Westerman, who works at the General Palmer down in Durango, are twins, and his name is Richard. We had a good laugh, and then got down to business. He was most helpful. The death, followed by the incident with the snowplow, are things they want cleared up as soon as possible. He’s going to find out how the reservation for Weisicki was made and let me know. Then I got a first-class tour of the place.”

“Weisicki? Oh, yeah, the tender operator who missed his Tuesday morning run a week ago. Well, if you want to stay up there, we could save our pennies up and do it. Probably have to wait until next summer, though to get a reservation. Did he, or anybody, know anything about the climbers on the cliff face?”

“Nope. He was very interested in that, though. Funny that no one would have noticed it, but those folks are busy with the guests, and they don’t get downstream by that cliff very much. And the guests don’t seem to stray far from the golf course.”

“All the more reason for us to think about coming here. It sure costs a lot, though.”

“And I think the people, I mean the regulars, up at the Los Piños Ranch are more our kind of folks. Anyway, we don’t have to decide now. Are we there yet? I’m getting hungry, too.”

“Almost, I expect. Let’s go home, get cleaned up, and go find someone to cook and serve us food. Lots of it.”

“Good idea. Especially because there’s something I didn’t have a chance to tell you. Sunday afternoon, I’m going down to Santa Fe.”

“Santa Fe? Not fair! The semester’s just starting, so I can’t come. And talk about food... Anyway, for how long? What for?”

“The Stradivarius may have turned up down there. And I think only for one night, but you never know. Captain J. said I should fly to Albuquerque and rent a car. Does that make sense to you?”

“Well, I’d drive, but it *is* about four hours. And flying to Albuquerque and driving back up to Santa Fe is probably only about two, or two and a half, if you count airport fooling around. The airport there is only a little bigger than ours, so things are quick on both ends. Oh, wait. I remember reading something last spring about air service, Rio Grande Air, or something like that, between here and Santa Fe. That would be ideal, if you can handle one of those little bitty planes.”

“What’s ‘little bitty’ mean? And are there cars at the Santa Fe airport? For that matter, is there a Santa Fe airport?”

“An airport, sure. Lots of people with lots of money have second homes there and fly in and out in their private planes. Some jets, I bet. We can look up the cars and what kind of planes they have when we get home. Where are you staying?”

“My contact in the SF police department suggested a condo, close to his office, I guess. I don’t really need one, I mean, I won’t be cooking or anything, but it sounds fun, and I’m not real big on hotels. Maybe I can scout it out as a place for us to stay on a vacation down there some day. Hint, hint. Anyway, that’s why eating out tonight is a good idea. A celebration tonight and tomorrow we can cook at home and snuggle. Say, this our first time apart in...well, since I moved in with you, no?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure I like the idea. But I guess we’re grownups and can deal with it. Hmm. This sure tells me something about my feelings for you, you know?”

“Good or bad?”

“Good all the way. Just something I hadn’t thought of before. Something to think about.”

She giggled and punched his shoulder.

“Well, ‘you just keep thinking, Butch. That’s what you’re good at.’ Remember that?”

“Riding on this train, how could I not remember that? Besides, the way I’ve seen you handle a gun, you know, you could be Sundance. Maybe we should rob this train, like they did. Naw, not enough return on investment. Let’s hit one of the banks in town. Then you can go to Santa Fe, and buy yourself some of that expensive jewelry they have down there. Or some Big Expensive Art. A Remington. Painting, I mean.”

“Well, even if it’s only for one night, I’m going to miss you, Butch. I mean, Hal. Suppose these other people would be embarrassed if we make out?”

“Who cares?”

* * *

Although Friday afternoons usually meant extra business at the Southwest Cultures Gallery, and sometimes upstairs at Four Corners Archaeology, LLC as well, this one was slow. Raimer Holtzmann knew that this lack of customer interest would extend through the weekend, so he went home early. This involved no little fiddling with the electronic equipment, but he was sufficiently security conscious that it had become habit. Much of the fiddling could have been automated, but that would lead to security holes that he simply could not tolerate.

This weekend would be slow, just like the past week, due to a hangover from last weekend's orgy of selling at the Santa Fe Indian Market downtown, so Holtzmann knew he would be better off thinking of other things. Like unloading that stupid violin. He was well aware of its intrinsic value, but he was also skeptical of its black market salability. Who would dare invest in something of such notoriety, especially undocumented?

So he closed up early, sent his staff home—with pay, for he recognized the value of high morale in his trusted employees—and headed home, the long way, so he could avoid the downtown streets. Even without a special event, they were always hopelessly clogged this time of year. He worked his way east and north through the foothills, and finally over to Bishop's Lodge Road. From there, it was easy to get to his house on Mansion Ridge on the north side above the Governor's place, with the view of downtown and the Ortiz Mountains to the south.

He made it almost home before remembering he'd promised to pick up the dry-cleaning. Back downtown. Tiffani would be petulant, and he would sleep alone tonight. For a twenty-two year old, she could be quite the independent thinker, he grumped to himself. If it weren't for her magnificent body, and her enthusiasm in bed, well, there were lots of young women interested in men with his income, age be damned. Aach. Maybe he should just go back down to Sandoval Street and get her dresses.

As he turned left onto Bishop's Lodge instead of right, his car phone purred. It, too, was connected to one of those beige boxes, a very special one.

"Ja?"

"It's me. We've got new information, on two fronts. Can you talk?"

"Just a minute. Let me get out of traffic." He turned onto Murales, and pulled into one of the Fort Marcy ball field parking areas. "OK, what do you have for me?"

"First, the Durango police are getting closer and closer to Meeker and Schwab. Schwab is busy rehearsing for this weekend's concerts, the final ones of the festival. So he's not going to be doing anything for us until Monday. Meeker could, but he won't without Schwab's concurrence. If we don't get our hands on the new inventory this weekend, the police may get them and then it."

"A tragedy. About the inventory, I mean. What do you recommend?"

"A little incentive for Schwab, in the form of a visit with Dino. This will put pressure on Meeker, and I think he'll come through."

Holtzmann thought for a minute.

"Good. Make it so."

Using Captain Picard's famous command never failed to boost his ego.

"And the other thing?"

"The violin. Immediate disposal will come at a price. Word is that in Europe, collectors will pay almost market value, even without proper documentation. Here, there will be a huge discount. All the more reason to put pressure on Meeker to deliver the artifacts, in my opinion, rather than wait to be able to pay him for the violin. Unless you want us to try to persuade him that the black market values it way

below the legitimate price and just front that money to him. You could then make a huge profit if we sell it in Europe.”

Violins, or anything else European, were not Holtzmann’s cup of tea. But profit was, profit from Europe or anywhere else, and he could see the sense in this.

“Let’s wait and see if Schwab’s visit with Dino puts enough pressure on Meeker to make this part moot. We will still owe Meeker something for the violin, of course, but we don’t need to hurry. Remember, we’ve only had it for a couple of days.”

“Right. We’ll make the thing with Schwab happen as soon as possible, don’t worry. OK?”

“Excellent.” The prospect of additional profit—not to mention not having to sleep alone—had softened the pain of having to trek back into town for Tiffani’s dry-cleaning.

* * *

Ten

They arranged it for Saturday morning, as a hint that there was no time to waste. Walking from his apartment up to the campus for rehearsal, Leonard Schwab suddenly found himself hustled into a passing car, before he knew what was happening.

One second he was walking up the hill on Eighth Avenue, the next he was sitting in the back seat of a dark sedan—a limo-sized one, he realized—facing Tony LaCoste, who was seated with his back to the driver. That individual was a Very Large Person, with, apparently, no neck, whom Schwab had not seen before. Before Schwab could object or argue, LaCoste shushed him with a shake of his head and a wave of the gun, complete with silencer, he held pointed at Schwab. There was a short staring contest, won by LaCoste, who then used the gun to tip his black hat back on his head.

“Don’t spoil things by whining, Len. I just don’t want to hear it. What I do want, is for you to pick up that phone there,” he waved the gun toward a car phone hanging next to the seat Schwab was in, “and call your colleague Reg Meeker. Tell him what’s happening, and I’ll disconnect you when I think you’ve said enough. If you cooperate, I won’t have Dino break any of your fingers. Otherwise...well...say, Dino?”

He turned slightly to address the Very Large Person.

The driver reached up and adjusted the rear-view mirror so that Schwab could see his face, which was dominated by a single dark eyebrow, and then made a sort of grunting noise.

“Dino, how are you at breaking fingers? One by one, slowly, I mean?” LaCoste continued.

Schwab heard another grunting noise, but what bothered him most was the look in Dino’s two black eyes, under that distracting eyebrow. Not anticipation, exactly, or glee. Hunger? Passion? Whatever it was, Schwab suddenly felt his palms sweating. He reached for the phone and began punching buttons.

“Hello, Reg? Ah, listen, I need to fill you in on what’s happening to me. LaCoste picked me up on my way up to rehearsal...I’m in his car. He says if I cooperate, he won’t break my fingers...I think he’s serious, but I really don’t know what he wants yet...Sure, I’ll ask.”

But he didn’t have to, because LaCoste had taken the receiver from him.

“Hi there, Reg, how’s it hanging? What I want is the Basketmaker inventory. Now. No more stalling. OK? I think we both know that Lennie here isn’t the world’s greatest violinist, but he’s pretty good and he’s a friend of yours, isn’t he? He’d be pretty bad off with broken fingers, don’t you think?”

He smiled pleasantly at Schwab, who was trying hard to keep his breakfast down. His morning coffee had turned potentially acidic in his stomach.

“You sure you want your friend here to know that?”

He put his hand over the mouthpiece, and said to Schwab, “Sorry, Len, but he thinks I’m bluffing. Want to talk to him again? And what would you like first? Thumb? Pinkie? What? And which hand?”

Schwab grabbed the phone, his hand slippery with sweat.

“Christ, Reg, he’s serious. He’s got a guy here, a big guy, I mean, who looks like he’d enjoy breaking things. C’mon, we’ve got to tell him. If you don’t, I will.”

He realized in panic that Dino had parked the car—where, he couldn’t tell, because of the tinted windows—and was waiting patiently for something to do next. He heard the sound of cracking knuckles from the front seat. Then, hearing something reassuring on the phone, he handed it back to LaCoste.

“Good choice...You’ve got it *where?* Amateurs! You have any idea how delicate this stuff is? Let me tell you, it better be in good shape, or I’m going on a bone-breaking spree, and not just with Lennie here. We’ll pick you up, and you better have the stuff, in an hour, outside the gym. Be there.”

And he disconnected, looking disgusted. Schwab heaved a sigh of relief.

“Don’t get too complacent yet, pal. I can’t believe you idiots would stash 1500-year old artifacts in a gym locker. The humidity, for one thing. If anything’s damaged, you’re both toast, and Dino will have you for breakfast. Won’t you, Dino?”

There was yet another grunt from the front seat. Schwab decided the expression he was seeing in the mirror was hunger.

* * *

Annette’s trip to Santa Fe, plus the Sunday afternoon concert, meant that she had to tie up as many loose ends as possible as soon as possible. Neither Schwab nor Meeker was answering her calls, however, so she decided to work on the snowplow incident.

This meant telephone calls to the Colorado Department of Transportation, owner of the vehicle, and its local yards. An adventure in dealing with the bureaucracy. It took only a short time for her to realize that there was simply nothing that she could accomplish on a Saturday. No one was answering any of the CDOT’s phones. Two lines of investigation, two strikes. Rather than tempt a strikeout, she decided to go for a walk. Lance Riggins would probably be camped outside with the other reporters, and maybe she could make progress on the snowplow incident with another conversation with him.

The on-street parking on both sides of Tenth Street near police headquarters was now the exclusive domain of news crew RVs and satellite vans, many with generators growling noisily. Annette watched as a pre-teenaged boy went solemnly from parking meter to parking meter, feeding each a dose of change. Capitalism in action. At least some of the national news largesse was filtering its way into the local economy.

But there was no throng. Apparently the strategy of holding regular press conferences had trained the reporters quite effectively. Besides, it was hot, even though it was only about 10:30 in the morning, and why would they want to stand around in the sun when they could be inside their air-conditioned

cocoons, watching CNN? Finding Riggins wouldn't be as easy as Annette had assumed. Then she remembered the bar, from that phone call earlier in the week. Tuesday? No, probably Monday. Days were slipping by and she wasn't making the kind of progress on any of this that was really needed. The Narrow Gauge Saloon, on College, it was. She headed west.

The sign in the window proclaimed that the saloon opened daily at 10:00, so Annette expected it to be empty. But there was Lance Riggins, sitting at a table with a view of the street, pecking madly away at a laptop computer. He must have a deadline soon, she thought. She was relieved to see that he was drinking only coffee.

"Mr. Riggins. Good morning. Got a deadline coming up?"

"Huh? Oh, hello, Lieutenant. Want to sit down? Yeah, even weekly papers have deadlines. Mine's Monday, but I'm trying to get a head start. Don't have a lot to write about, though, unless you've got new news..."

The hint was obvious, but Annette ignored it, sitting down and waving for coffee instead.

"I thought this week you'd probably write about your little adventure up the canyon. Unless you've brought in another of those models for more pictures. How are things working out with Randy? I noticed his name on your byline last issue."

"Can I infer from this comment that you've actually read my stuff? Why, I'm honored!"

"Just the usual supermarket check-out line browsing, don't get all excited. The byline was on the front page, along with that ridiculous picture. You know she didn't look at all like that model, don't you?"

"You mean the violinist? Of course. But our readers don't, and they probably don't care. The hair color was close enough, wasn't it? And there were the other, er, distractions the picture offered, after all."

"Yeah, 'distractions' that didn't look at all like her, either. According to the autopsy, Steffanie's body didn't contain any silicone at all, and certainly not in the quantities that model must have. Can I ask you a question? How do you manage to do what you do and maintain any self-respect?"

She thought he might be at least a little embarrassed, but he just grinned.

"I had to deal with that a long time ago. But you might like to know that your local guy, Randy, is chewing on that one now. I'll bet you anything that he'll figure out how to deal with it, though, just like I did. Large amounts of money are quite useful for assisting self-rationalization. I've also got the advantage that I'm writing the Great American Novel in my spare time. I'm about half way through. Makes me feel like a real writer, not just the hack that you think of me as. So, did you come looking for me, or do you just wander in here every Saturday morning?"

"I thought I might find you here. And if you're writing about that car-in-the-river incident, that's a good place to begin, or continue, a conversation. Maybe you'll hear something new, or think of something new, if we talk about it some more. But you've got to promise to share new stuff with Randy. I don't know what all you know about it, though, so maybe this will all be old stuff."

"Is this on the record or off?"

"Hmm. Thanks for asking. How about if I'm a 'highly placed source' in the department? No names."

"Perfect. Better than a direct quote, for our readers. But I thought we'd covered all the ground of that snowplow thing last weekend."

“Maybe, maybe not. You know that we found the plow?”

“What!? Where? That’s just what I need to polish off this story. Can I get a picture of it?”

“Come on, you don’t need a picture of that one, just find another one. There’s a CDOT yard down on the south side of town. The real one was in the woods up in the canyon, a few miles above your little adventure. No prints or anything else to identify who did it. Green paint on the blade, though, that matches the Chevy. Now then, it’s your turn. You told me that the only place that you discussed your plan to drive up the tracks was in here, with Eddie, um, Eddie...Eddie Walker, was that it?”

“Yeah. Poor Eddie. He was something of a loser, but really quite competent and even sort of likeable in a way. We talked about the plan in here. Like I said, it was late, um, a week ago Thursday, at night. The place was pretty full, and noisy. So I don’t see how anyone could have been paying much attention to us.”

“If this is where you talked about it, that’s what must have happened, though, no? Let’s go over things in as much detail as you can remember. Maybe something will emerge that you’ve not really given much thought to.”

She took out a notebook and a pen.

* * *

Hal had called John Martin and set up a Saturday lunch meeting, because he was worried. It was looking more and more as if the university’s PR director could be involved in the murder, and the last thing that the university needed was the publicity that this would generate. Martin had said he’d be in his office, working on whatever provosts work on at the beginnings of semesters, Hal supposed, so he decided just to bring lunch with him. A pizza, and some non-alcoholic beer.

As he was walking across the campus at about 11:30, hands full of lunch, he was surprised to see a stretch limo, black-looking, windows tinted, in front of the student gym. And there was Reg Meeker, in a very animated conversation with someone in a black cowboy hat. What in the world? But the pizza was getting cold.

Martin was working on a spreadsheet that filled his huge computer screen, piles of paper scattered about his desk and typing table. And floor. So provosts really do real work, Hal thought. Martin looked up, apparently sniffing pizza aroma. Even on a Saturday, he was dressed in his provost’s costume, tie and all.

“Ah, Hal. Just in time. I’m disgusted with this budget stuff and hungry. Hmm. I wonder if that’ll be big enough.” He grinned and licked his lips.

They made small talk, about the budget, mostly, and demolished the pizza. Finally, Martin’s curiosity got the best of him.

“So, what’s this meeting really about? Is everything under control for this semester?”

“Academic-wise, yes. But maybe not PR-wise.”

And Hal filled Martin in about Annette’s suspicions and the various bits and pieces of information connecting Meeker to the Boudreau murder, including the curiosity of the limo just before lunch. It took about a half hour, with Martin’s questions, and by the end Martin was looking rather acidic.

“Hal, you’re a great dean, but a lousy menu planner. First a greasy pizza, now this. Got any Maalox? Better yet, got any suggestions about what to do?”

“I’d recommend confronting him, but Annette may not be ready for that. We don’t want to spoil whatever she has in mind for an arrest, if it goes that far. I wonder what he was doing with that guy in the hat. A limo like that on campus isn’t usual, that’s for sure. One thing we could do would be to find a good picture of him, one that really looks like him, to show around down at the railroad station. And maybe we could get lucky and find a picture of the AMFest concertmaster, Schwab, I think. Maybe in a concert program or something.”

“At least we should prepare some kind of statement for when he does get arrested, assuming that happens. About how we’re cooperating fully, opening our files, all that sort of thing. Do you really think he was involved in the murder and the, um, sexual activity?”

“I really don’t know him well enough to judge his character in that regard. But look, his office falls under your legal jurisdiction, doesn’t it? Do you suppose we could get in there and find something that would allow a DNA sequence? I don’t know that it would be admissible, but at least it would be legal to take one from furniture or whatever else there might be in there that we could get one from. Then we could either eliminate him or not. I’m told he works out at the gym. Maybe there’s some sweaty clothes, or something, although I don’t know if they’d work for what we need.”

“Who would know? Are any of the cellular biology faculty around today, do you suppose? Or should we get Annette over here?”

“Well, I already got her one DNA sample on the sly, of hair from the AMFest conductor. It eliminated him and Annette was most pleased. So let’s just wander over there and see what we can find. Got your super-master key?”

* * *

It had been a busy week in the La Plata County Coroner’s office, and Lester St. Clare had been up to his elbows in his work—literally, for a good part of the week, due to a multi-fatality car accident Tuesday night up the valley that had required three autopsies, and figuratively, because of the stack of paperwork.

He had re-examined Steffanie Boudreau’s body on Tuesday, but, with the accident victims occupying most of the rest of the week, he hadn’t had the chance to follow up on his new findings. Saturday morning he spent on the telephone with trusted colleagues around the country, and Saturday afternoon he called Annette.

She was sitting in her car with her cell phone in her hand, just about to call Hal, when it tweedled, making her jump.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hi Annette, it’s Lester. Sorry it’s taken me so long to get back to you. I got tied up with that car accident.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised. That’s the worst one we’ve had in a long time. Anything weird?”

“Not really. Alcohol in the driver’s blood, I found out yesterday. Passengers not wearing seat belts and bounced around to death with head and internal injuries. One ejected, as you probably saw in the paper. Looks just like the first guess, going too fast for that curve. What I can’t figure out is why it was that particular curve. The ones farther up the valley, like at Cascade Creek, are so much more dangerous. And then it would have been a San Juan County problem, not mine. But I’m calling about the violinist. I had a closer look at her scalp and her elbows, like we talked about.”

“Right. To look for evidence of a convulsion, or something like that.”

“Yep. And it’s equivocal. Maybe, maybe not. Cause of death is solid, crushed spinal cord from the broken neck, but homicide may not necessarily follow. It’s a tough call. Could be some kind of convulsive motion. A possibility, a fair one, I’d say. Reinforces our speculations from her blood work. Makes for the possibility that she died accidentally, at least in the sense that a drug-overdose-related convulsion can be called accidental.”

“But there’s still the placement of the body, what she was doing up there in the first place with no clothes on, all that stuff. She sure didn’t get there all by herself.”

“Right. So there are accomplices in the drug activity, or worse. Your initial exam was quite thorough, under the conditions, but if she was convulsing it would change some of the time line, at least potentially. You’d expect rigor sooner with all the activity in the muscles. So death was probably later than we estimated. In any case, it may not be as straight-forward a murder case as we were thinking. And I don’t know what got into me about the karate move breaking her neck. I suppose that’s still a possibility, but maybe not. I guess I’ve got to stop watching Jean-Claude Van Damme movies.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. And besides, you just said it’s equivocal.”

She told him about finding the joints in Boudreau’s hotel safe deposit box, their composition, and the missing violin.

“So, we’re looking at a strange combination of things, now. And there may be more, too complicated to fill you in about just yet.”

“A Stradivarius? Floating around the black market here? That’s a new one. I can’t imagine that any of the local music stores would touch it.”

“It may be down in Santa Fe. I’m going down tomorrow, to interview an undercover source in the arts community on Monday. What I’m really interested in is who took it down there. That should connect with her death. So I’ll keep in touch. Thanks for the extra work, Lester.”

“Hey, I feel dumb for having missed this the first time through. I’ll dig out my report and change it. At least that hasn’t leaked to the papers yet. See ya, Annette.”

She sat staring out at the trees on the other side of the parking lot, contemplating her next move in the light of St. Clare’s new information. This made it unlikely that first-degree murder was involved, probably more like murder two or some kind of accident.

But the missing violin was a wild card. Could she have been killed for it? Or did she die from the drugs, somehow, and then her companions, who could be the two climbers, just walk off with it? More than ever, Annette needed to identify the climbers, and the way to do that was to find pictures of the suspects. Surely the university would have one of Meeker. If one of the train conductors could pick him out of a group of photographs as someone who had been hanging around with climbing equipment at Rockwood, she ought to be able to get a search warrant for his home.

A DNA match would certainly be nice, she thought.

* * *

Earlier in the week, Luigi had been upset about Schwab’s performance of the Beethoven Concerto; now he was outraged about Schwab’s absence at the most important rehearsal of the season. Never again would they appear on the same stage, not under any circumstances. To devise a program, one designed as a surprise for a final set of weekend concerts, without the concertmaster was, well, just unthinkable.

Luigi had waited a polite, if impatient, hour, and then he’d promoted the second chair to concertmaster, much to her delight. They settled on a program of music inspired by the west, including

pieces by Copeland, Grofé, and, just for fun, some Elmer Bernstein movie themes. Almost a pops concert, guaranteed to be a crowd pleaser, especially because all summer they'd limited their programs to more serious pieces. Fortunately, this music was easy enough that the orchestra—after a summer of playing together—could sight-read it almost perfectly.

The object of Luigi's outrage was still sitting in the back seat of the stretch limo, next to Reg Meeker now, trying not to wet his pants. They were cruising into Chama, New Mexico, on their way south from Pagosa Springs, and still had about two hours to Santa Fe. Schwab didn't think he could hold out that long, and he kept thinking back to the pot of coffee he'd drunk before leaving his apartment that morning. Tony LaCoste was still sitting across from them, with that superior smirk on his face. The space between their feet on the floor was filled with a duffle bag, apparently full of something strangely shaped, lying next to it a peculiar looking stick.

They had turned off the highway onto a gravel side street, and the limo slowed, finally coming to a stop. They heard Dino growl something about a detour and now a traffic jam. Schwab realized his chance.

"Look, Tony, either I'm getting out right here to take a leak, or I'm gonna just do it on the carpet here. Unlock the damned door!"

LaCoste laughed, and flipped the door-lock switch.

"Hurry back, Lennie. You run off, and I'll shoot Reg and then send Dino after you. Hey, Dino! Pull over for a second." The big car eased to the right, then stopped again.

Schwab opened the door and leapt out. He was momentarily blinded by the bright sunlight—those windows were seriously tinted, he thought—and then he recognized the form of a large clump of lilac bushes just off the road. He sprinted that way.

Rosa Jaramillo was sweeping her back porch, trying to ignore the noises from around front. It was just so annoying, the crush of tourists during summer weekends. Between the arrival of the Cumbres and Toltec tourist train and the various and sundry garage and sidewalk sales, normally peaceful Chama clogged up on Saturdays. The honking horns and motorcycle motors of the traffic jam ripped the usual quiet, and the vehicle exhaust mixed with the coal smoke from the train to fog up the cool mountain air. It was only in the last few of her 85 years that it had become intolerable. Before that it was sort of charming, and it certainly had helped the local economy. But now, well, she had probably lived long enough anyway. Maybe she should take her grandson's offer, and move to that nice retirement home down in Española. The winters were warmer there, too.

She swept the grass clippings and dust off the end of the porch, and, glancing around the side of her little house, noticed a man, a *gringo* no less!, peeing on her lilac bushes. Well! This was too much by half again! And she tottered off the porch, waving her broom and exercising her astonishingly vile Spanish vocabulary, Northern New Mexico version.

Schwab had experienced that moment of bliss as he was able to let go, and was nearly finished with his business when he heard an old, old voice screaming in an unknown language. Spanish, that was it. He looked over his shoulder just in time to be whacked on the back by a dusty broom. He nearly fell over into his own puddle, but then he managed to sort himself out, adjust his clothes, and make a dash for the limo. At least the old crone wasn't going to be able to run like he could.

But when he reached the car, the door was locked, and when he pounded on it, the window opened on Tony LaCoste's Cheshire Cat grin.

"All finished, Len? Ready to roll? Come on back in. Maybe we can get through this traffic." But the time this took allowed Rosa to hobble across her front yard, and as Dino was pulling back into traffic,

she delivered the limo a number of death blows with her broom, or so she saw them. Although these were ignored by the occupants of the limo, they afforded the rest of the prisoners of the traffic jam considerable amusement.

Rosa, however, was anything but amused. She stomped back into her little house and immediately called her grand-nephew Diego at the sheriff's office, before she forgot the license plate number of that huge, dark car she'd whacked with her broom.

* * *

Annette finally reached Hal at home. It seemed he had turned off his cellular phone for the afternoon, but he answered the house phone, his number.

"Hi, found you at last."

"Huh? Oh, I had my phone off. I was off on a, ah, secret errand. What's up?"

"Secret errand? Guess I'll have to bribe it out of you later. What's up is that I need a recent photograph of Reginald Meeker. Any ideas?"

"How about the Frémont State web site? I bet that the PR office page has a picture of him. His ego wouldn't let it be otherwise. Let me call it up and see. How's your day going?"

She could hear the sound of a computer keyboard in the background.

"Fair to middling. I interviewed my good friend Lance Riggins again, about the snowplow incident. There are some curious aspects of that whole thing that I think I almost understand, but not quite. There's still a missing piece of that particular puzzle. And Lester called me about his follow-up look at Boudreau's body. He's now equivocating about whether there's really a homicide or not. Since I've got to wait for your computer, what's this 'secret errand?'"

"Aww, I was going to surprise you later. Some of Reg Meeker's hair. A rare commodity, actually. He just doesn't have that much available. John Martin and I made a visit to his office, and Reg has a private bathroom with various grooming gadgets. Including a hairbrush. It was great. I almost got John to promise me a private bathroom, and he's definitely upset that he doesn't have one for himself. It seems that our PR director's budget has been on a kind of loose leash for some time. That, I bet, will change. Now, here we go. Let's see. Yep, as I thought. A rather professional-looking picture of the great man himself. Appropriately casual and friendly, yet elegant."

"What's he wearing?"

"Preppy. Polo shirt, casual slacks, it looks like. He's outside, leaning on a tree, with what looks like the humanities building in the background. Very picturesque. Waist up shot."

"Great. I'll pick up some similar pictures at the station and take them down to the train depot first thing in the morning, to see if any of the conductors can pick him out. Can you print out a four-by-five size color version?"

"Hey, I'm Mr. Computer Wizard, remember? It'll be ready and waiting when you get home. And I've got the hair in a baggie."

"You do good work. I must be a pretty good teacher."

"Indeed you are. Any dinner requests?"

"Um, how about something homey? It looks like restaurant food for me for the next couple of nights."

“Hmm. It’s hot. How about tuna salad, or something else cool like that? I’ll work on it. We can eat on the deck after it cools off.”

“OK, but no pickles though. And I’ll stop and get some fruit for breakfast. Ciao.” She pushed the End button.

A hair sample! And, because the provost had authority to be in any office on campus, a reasonably legal one. Now, if she could get that picture identified, she’d be in business.

* * *

The Saturday night concert was a smash, just as Luigi had thought it would be. The orchestra played together with the intuitive familiarity of an experienced jazz ensemble, so much so that he began to feel superfluous.

That, of course, was just the challenge he needed to exert himself and change the tempo from what they’d rehearsed, so in the middle of the *Grand Canyon Suite* the donkeys suddenly galloped like thoroughbreds.

And Leonard Schwab wasn’t missed at all. In fact, his substitute handled first-chair leadership so well that Luigi gave her a long flowery introduction during the curtain calls at the end of the evening. He referred to the missing concertmaster only briefly, as being “indisposed.”

But that was not precisely the case.

After negotiating the rural traffic jam up in Chama, the remainder of the limo ride to Santa Fe had been unremarkable for Meeker and Schwab. If, that is, watching Tony LaCoste becoming increasingly drunk while continuing to wave the silenced automatic around randomly could be called “unremarkable.”

Because of the dark tinting of the windows, they had little choice but to watch LaCoste, despite the spectacular scenery of northern New Mexico, scenery that inspired some of Georgia O’Keeffe’s best work. It wasn’t until they stopped in the driveway of a huge stucco house with an amazing view of what turned out to be Santa Fe and mountains to the south that they were able to figure out where they were.

Dino showed them into the foyer, where they were surprised to learn that they were to be guests of Raimer Holtzmann for the night. Holtzmann was not in town this evening, but there was a Sunday afternoon meeting scheduled to examine the contents of the duffle bag. They were both overwhelmed by Holtzmann’s accommodations, which turned out to be a guest house just down the hill from the main mansion. Dinner was catered, and superb, the wines and liquor were all first-class, and the guest house itself was far more elegant, not to mention bigger, than Meeker’s home in Durango, which he thought of as something of a showcase.

It was not until Schwab decided to go outside for a stroll late in the evening that they discovered not all was as it seemed.

The doors were locked and unresponsive to their attempts to unlock them. The windows opened, but they were barred, not with the usual burglar-proof ornamental wrought iron on hinges, but with steel, set in concrete well back from the window openings. The “guest house” was really a jail, and Meeker and Schwab were the prisoners.

So “indisposed” was actually something of an understatement on Luigi’s part.

* * *

Eleven

Even though Annette was apprehensive about flying in Rio Grande Air's little single-engine Cessna, she was looking forward to the trip to Santa Fe. Hal had emphasized that the scenery would be far better from this airplane than it usually is from high-flying jets, and, besides, she needed the time to catch her breath. As she settled into her seat, it dawned on her that she had been on the go continuously since 6:00 that morning. And it was Sunday! At least she'd get to Santa Fe and check in to her room by late afternoon. Then she could relax.

As the engine started, and wound louder and louder, she remembered that Hal had handed her a pair of foam earplugs when he dropped her off at the terminal. She fumbled in her bag and dug them out, then jammed them into her ears. The engine faded from a loud growl to a quiet purr, soft enough so that she could think.

If the morning had been busy, at least it had been successfully busy, mostly. Down at the D&SNGRR station, conductor Willie Monroe had picked out Reginald Meeker's picture from a dozen others as being one of the two climbers that had been hanging around Rockwood about once a week all summer

Armed with this information, she had intercepted Judge Sandose as he was leaving 9:00 Mass at St. Columba's, to talk to him about a warrant. Considerable persuasion was needed, but she had enough circumstantial evidence involving a possible murder and multi-million dollar robbery to obtain a search warrant for multiple entries to Reginald Meeker's residence and any other personal properties that might emerge from the investigation. Meeker was to receive his first visit from a forensics search team in about—she glanced at her watch—fifteen minutes.

Then she had interrupted Lester St. Clare's brunch ritual of bagels with the *Sunday New York Times*, locally printed from a satellite feed, and delivered Hal's baggie full of what was very probably Meeker's hair. Lester had promised to ship it out FedEx for DNA analysis first thing in the morning.

Finally, after a romantic lunch with Hal, on the way to the airport she'd managed to slip in a quick visit to the Narrow Gauge Saloon, where Lance Riggins was still pecking away at his laptop. The issue of who could have overheard the conversations between Riggins and Walker in the crowded, noisy bar was bothering her more than ever. But Riggins was tapped out.

It had been disappointing, both to her and to Hal, that she was missing the matinee concert they'd planned to attend, but more to him. The review of Saturday evening's program in the *Herald* made it something of a relief to her not to have to attend, her tastes running more to Baroque music—Bach, Vivaldi—than to the ambling donkeys of the *Grand Canyon Suite*.

While she was thinking about all this, the little airplane had been jockeying around the taxiways for several minutes. After a final turn, the purring of the engine deepened, and she was pressed back into her seat. She decided to stop being so analytical and just watch the scenery. The airplane rotated and climbed, and almost immediately began a left turn during its ascent. Sitting port-side, Annette had a lovely view up the San Juan River Valley to the east. Eventually they leveled off, and her view shifted to the San Juan Mountains to the north. She knew at once that Hal was right: small airplanes were the way to watch the scenery in this part of the world.

* * *

Two hours later, she was unpacking her overnight bag and groceries. The flight had been beautiful, but bumpy from the afternoon convection and thankfully brief. She was charmed by the intimate little airport at Santa Fe, and surprised at how close it was to the city. On the way into town, along the strip development of Cerrillos Road, she had found a grocery store and stopped to pick up breakfast for tomorrow and a chilled split of wine for the evening.

Her accommodations consisted of a small, one bedroom condominium on East Alameda, a few blocks up the Santa Fe River—a fanciful name for such a small creek, she thought—from downtown. The clerk at the rental agency had mentioned that it was a second home used only one or two weekends a year by its owners, available for rent the rest of the time. He had suggested the short walk downtown to a place called the Plaza Restaurant for dinner, if she didn't want to cook.

She opened the Riesling, was delighted to find real wine glasses, and poured two fingers. Then she called her search team's leader, Sgt. Fred Winders back in Durango.

“Hi, Fred, I'm here in Santa Fe. How'd it go?”

“Still at it, Lieutenant. We've found a closet full of climbing and other sports gear, including some boots that look like a match to those footprints you found up the river. And a purple climbing rope. There's also a computer, so I put in a call to Wiz. We're going through a filing cabinet now.”

Wiz, short for The Wizard, was their polite nickname for the department's resident computer genius. She was also known as The Geek, when people were upset with her.

“Any sign of Meeker himself?”

“Nope. Garage is empty. He must be out for the day, or at least all afternoon. Oh. Thanks, Jack. Annette? Jack just handed me a sheet of paper he found in the filing cabinet. Looks like a map, or more of a drawing, of a funny shaped room with stuff in it. Very peculiar.”

“What stuff?”

“A long thing, labeled 'stick,' something labeled 'basket.' A cairn, it looks like. Notations, numbers that look like measurements, or something. Is there a way I can fax it to you?”

“Take it back to the station and scan it in, then e-mail it to me. I'll call in later. Have Jack and the guys be on the lookout for photographs. I think I know what that drawing is. There's a cave in the cliff that they were climbing, up the river just below the High Bridge. How about giving Lester St. Clare a call for me? Tell him what you've got and see if he can get his latest analysis expedited. Also, see if you can find a hairbrush, or a comb, with some hairs to give to him as a second sample. He's going to ship out a sample for DNA analysis tomorrow and it would help to get an answer yesterday.”

“Will do. Where can I call you? Wiz might find something you'd like to hear about.”

She read him the condo's telephone number. “And, listen, I'm going to call Judge Sandose and see if we can get a warrant for the other guy's place. Except I don't know where it is. But you can find out from the AMFest office. There's a concert tonight, and you should be able to call the ticket office and get information about whom to call for the address. I'm talking about the orchestra's first violin player, the concertmaster, name of Schwab, Leonard Schwab. If you have any trouble, call me and I'll fix it with the university. What we need is a hair sample from his place, too, tonight, if we can get one, so it can get sent out tomorrow also. And a search for the same kind of stuff you're finding there, climbing gear. So don't turn your phone off for a while, I may need to get back to you.”

“Uh, it's Sunday, Lieutenant. I'm not sure how much success I'm going to have.”

“Well, yes, you may be right. But give it a shot. We may just be able to bag both of them.”

* * *

Both of them, at this particular time, were miserable.

Holtzmann's "guest house" was far more posh than either was used to, but they still didn't sleep much. After a late breakfast, which neither ate, Dino had shown up to inform them that they would be meeting with Holtzmann later in the afternoon, then he'd left them to contemplate their cold French toast and bacon, with sides of scrambled eggs with chiles and chorizo. Later, he'd herded them into the back of the limo, and locked them in.

After a short drive, full of twists and turns, he opened the door and they were escorted up an exterior flight of stairs into the back of a two-story adobe building, in some unknown part of Santa Fe, apparently. Holtzmann was sitting in a large, elegantly understated office, behind a huge, intimidating desk. The duffle bag, with the stick lying beside it, was sitting in the middle of a large coffee table made out of a sandstone slab. They were ignored for a full five minutes, while Holtzmann wrote in a notebook. Finally he looked up at them.

"Gentlemen. Good afternoon. I trust you rested comfortably. I apologize if you found the accommodations restrictive, but the neighborhood has coyotes, which can be dangerous if you wander outside. Now. I'm sure you know the reason you're here is to be present when I examine the various items you have found. Mr. LaCoste, unfortunately, is under the weather today, but his presence isn't really necessary. Would either of you like coffee, or anything else? Fine. Then let me ask if you know anything about the prehistoric Native Americans?"

Meeker cleared his throat, trying to remain calm but also trying to be as offended and assertive as he thought he could be without causing trouble.

"Perhaps we should formally introduce ourselves first. I'm Reginald Meeker and this is Leonard Schwab. I guess we should assume that you're Raimer Holtzmann. And you should know that your little sham about coyotes is so transparent that you should be embarrassed. If this is Santa Fe, then we've been kidnapped and transported across a state line, which is a Federal crime. This whole thing is simply outrageous."

Meeker was himself a little embarrassed at how high his voice had risen, in both volume and pitch, by the end of this speech.

"Mr. Meeker, please. You're unhurt, rested and well fed, at least you've had the opportunity. I'm sure you understand my need for, ah, discretion and relative secrecy. I was hoping that we could complete all of our business today, not only about the contents of the bag sitting there but also about that violin. Surely that's what you want also?"

Up to this point, Schwab had been able to keep his temper largely because of his fear of the chauffeur, but Dino had left the room some time ago.

"Look, Holtzmann, if we're unhurt it's because we were smart enough not to argue with that gorilla that drives your limousine or with LaCoste and that gun he likes to wave around. And Reg is right, this was kidnapping all the way. As far as I'm concerned, we're talking a huge premium on the price for this stuff not to press charges. And I want the violin back, now."

"Ah, yes. The musician. Mr. Schwab. Perhaps you don't understand the situation. You can call it whatever you want, kidnapping or a chauffeured ride in the country, in rather high style, I believe. But who knows where you are? Surely you realize that I hold all the cards. Do you really think you can dictate terms to me, under the circumstances? Shall I call in Mr. Papandreou, whom you probably know as 'Dino?'"

He opened a drawer and pulled out a telephone.

“No, no, put the phone away. We know, or I know at least, that you hold all the cards.” Meeker had his voice back under control, and was looking daggers at Schwab.

“But that doesn’t mean that we’re expendable. By now Len here has been missed at a concert,” he looked at his watch, “two, in fact, and I’m scheduled for a number of meetings tomorrow. You don’t need the hassle of dealing with our disappearance. And all we want is a fair shake for the artifacts, and the violin back.”

“I’m afraid you don’t quite understand, Mr. Meeker. There will be no ‘hassle’ for me, I mean none whatsoever, about your disappearance, whether you reappear or not. No one knows where you are, and you’re certainly not in Colorado any more. Things are different here in New Mexico. And here in Santa Fe, as you deduced correctly, by the way, I’m a respected businessman who sells high quality reproductions of Native American artifacts to tourists. I’m quite successful, so much so that I’m up for president of the Chamber of Commerce next year. My only incentive for your safety is my reputation among amateur pot-hunters and their ilk. And that does indeed mean something to me, so I’m planning on treating you far better than you deserve to be treated.” He folded his hands on top of the big desk.

“Now, then. First, the violin. It’s to be shipped to Europe, hidden in a crate of reproductions, for sale to the highest bidder. I have seven very interested parties lined up, and they will want to see the thing before submitting a bid. You, of course, will receive a share of the proceeds, after expenses and my fee. These, I’m afraid, will run to at least 90% of the selling price.

“Second, these Basketmaker artifacts, which, as you may know, are quite dear to my heart. They won’t be for resale, because I want them for myself. As I asked before, does either of you know anything about the prehistoric Native Americans? No? Well, from your first descriptions of your find, and then from those pictures you sent down, it was clear to me that you’d found a very nice example of early Basketmaker culture. This is the name we give to the semi-nomadic tribes that predate the cliff-dwellers we call, somewhat mistakenly according to some, the Anasazi. Basketmaker culture dates from about the time of Christ to about 800 AD. If you don’t know about them, then I doubt you know what you’ve got here. This interesting piece, for example?”

He had risen and rounded the desk to pick up the stick from the table top.

“We figured it for some kind of walking stick, or staff.”

Schwab was pouting, but at least a little responsive. Meeker seemed shocked into silence, possibly by the evaporation of most of his share of the violin’s proceeds.

“As I thought, total ignorance. No, my friend, this is an *atlatl*, a throwing stick used to gain extra leverage when throwing spears. Note the notch here at the end, and the windings at about the balance point. And, I must say, this appears to be far older than others I’ve seen. It seems that you may have stumbled on a truly ancient site.”

He unzipped the duffle bag and reverently removed a large object. He set it on the sandstone slab, and it rattled softly.

“And, oh my, a burial basket. Old indeed. Note the primitive windings of the grass braid. I’m surprised that it’s survived your barbaric treatment of it. Fortunately for you, it did, with only a minor flat spot here on the side. Must be from the humidity in that gymnasium locker, I believe, that LaCoste told me of?” He shook his head in distaste.

“You fools. Your treatment of this and your lack of appreciation for what you’ve found tells me that you don’t deserve anything for it. Consider it a donation to my good taste and to my collection.

“In fact, this is so disgusting that I just want to be done with it. I’ve heard that the Stradivarius will fetch between one and a half and two million dollars in Europe. I’ll be generous and offer you \$200,000,

now, in cash, for everything. Take it or leave it. Mr. Papandreou and I will remove these items to an environmentally controlled room while you think the offer over.”

He reached for the telephone.

* * *

The final Sunday matinee concert of the AMFest was fun, Hal thought, although, truth be known, somewhat pedestrian. What a shame that the really serious 20th-century composers were always neglected in favor of the crowd pleasers. Orchestral square-dancing music, indeed. And those movie themes, well, maybe even “fun” was too kind. Hal was old enough to remember the Marlboro Man commercials and that music always reminded him of a good smoke, which he hadn’t had in 30 years.

But Alice had enjoyed it. It seemed that Luigi had been handing out sequential tickets the other day, and they wound up seated next to each other. Because each was alone, Hal had gallantly taken her out for an early supper after the concert and had been mildly astonished when she had suggested a pizza joint on the north side of town.

Now, back at home, the house seemed hugely empty. He had been on a couple of short, one-day business trips in the past few months, but Annette had always been there, ever since she had moved in with him just over a year and a half ago. He’d forgotten how big his house was for one person. Time for some fly-tying therapy.

Two hours later, he had four little piles of flies, elk-hair caddis in four different colors of tan and olive, about two dozen altogether, and was thinking of changing patterns when the telephone rang. He stretched and picked up the portable hand set, turning it on with anticipation. As he hoped, it was Annette.

“You should have warned me, my friend. This Santa Fe chile isn’t at all what I’m used to up there. The locals here must not have taste buds left. And when I asked, they told me that theirs wasn’t even that hot!”

But she wasn’t sure if he heard her through his laughter. He finally calmed down a little.

“I’m sorry, but I just forgot. It’s been a while since I was there. Where’d you go?”

“The guy at the rental office suggested the Plaza Restaurant, a few blocks from here. I probably should have had the meat loaf, but I figured I ought to try something more local. So I had some enchiladas. The waitress probably figured me for a tourist, because I hadn’t a clue when she asked ‘red or green?’ I tried some of both, but they were so hot I really couldn’t taste much difference. I should have paid attention to that warning on the menu. Something about ‘We can’t be responsible for chile that’s too hot.’ Thank goodness for beer.”

“The Plaza has a steady local clientele, but it’s also a tourist place so they’re used to the blank responses to the ‘red or green’ question. Both is called ‘Christmas,’ if you want to sound like a local. If I remember, the Plaza has about medium chile, by Santa Fe standards.”

“*Medium!!* I don’t even want to think about hot. Christmas?”

“You know, red and green together. How was your flight?”

“Bumpy, but beautiful, like you said it would be. And Santa Fe is a strange town. Bigger than home, but not really that big. And like you said, the streets are impossible. I got lost twice trying to find the rental office and then this place. I mentioned it to the rental guy and he said something about 400 years of history all on top of itself in the street names.”

“If I remember right, the 400 years of history has produced some simmering resentments as well as street-name confusion. But it’s still a pretty interesting town. So what’s your plan?”

“I’m meeting the informant tomorrow and I hope to get home tomorrow evening. I’ll call you from the Santa Fe airport before I leave.”

“And I’ll meet you at the airport here. This house is empty without you.”

“And I need you here to be a tour guide and protect me from the food. And for other things.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to think about that right now. Any progress on the searches and so on?”

“Done and done, found enough to bring our two climbers in for serious questioning and maybe arrest them. Well, Meeker, at least, and I’m betting on the other guy, too. The DNA tests will be critical. But we can’t find him, I mean Meeker. He’s not home and no one’s seen him.”

“Well, I think I mentioned that I saw Meeker yesterday, about noon. On campus, talking to some guy I didn’t recognize, standing by a huge limo. It was strange. And, say, now that you mention it, Schwab wasn’t at the concert this afternoon. I didn’t think about it at the time, but the first chair violin player was a woman. Not Schwab.”

“Hmm. Any description of the guy Meeker was talking to yesterday?”

“It was pretty far away for that. But he had a big hat on, looked like one of those O’Farrells you see around town. Black. With some kind of band that glinted in the sunlight, I remember.”

“And the limo?”

“Big. Black, or very dark blue. Maybe one of those Lincolns, you know, the big stretched version of the Lincoln Town Car. Boxy. Not real new, but shiny, well kept. Definitely too far away to see a license.”

“OK, well, I’ll call the station and see if they have anything on stretch limos in the region. Couldn’t be too many of them. And you said a black cowboy hat? What rings a bell about that? Oh, I know. My close, personal friend Lance Riggins has one of those, a grey one. But he said he’d seen another just like it, only black, on a guy in the Narrow Gauge Saloon. With a band that he described as being made out of silver coins. Sounds like conchas. They’d glint in the sunlight, I guess. Said that the guy was always on the phone, a cellular phone.”

“Well, there are lots of black cowboy hats in town, but concha bands aren’t all that common. Suppose there’s a connection?”

“Lance and I have been trying to figure out who could have overheard him and the guy who got killed in the snowplow business planning their little escapade.”

“Hmm. Here’s a little-known true fact I read somewhere: cellular phone microphones are extremely sensitive and can be used to record all sorts of things, if the transmission is taped and processed appropriately. Maybe that’s what happened.”

“Huh? Oh. Uh, let’s see if I get this: Black Hat is connected with Meeker and Schwab somehow and, via the cell phone, overhears Lance and Eddie planning the trip up the canyon. So he worries they might find something and plans the snowplow attack. He’s also connected with the limo and, somehow, Meeker and Schwab’s disappearance. Hmm. Well, nothing there classifies as evidence, but maybe things are starting to come together. Maybe I’ll make more progress tomorrow, with the informant.”

The conversation drifted into more personal subjects.

As she was getting ready for bed, the condo's phone rang. Winders had finally made it home, too late for Sunday supper with his kids, so he wasn't in the best of moods, but he knew what was expected of him. Annette treated him gently.

"Hi, Fred. Sorry it's been such a long day. Any news?"

"We worked out the location for the other search and got a warrant. We found a red rope and more boots that may be a match. And got a hair sample. And delivered it to St. Clare, at his house."

"Outstanding! You deserve tomorrow off. Go fishing or something. Uh, one more thing, though. Could you call in an APB tonight? A regional one, for information. See if there have been any sightings of a dark limousine, maybe an older model Lincoln, the stretched kind. Black or dark blue. Give them my number here. I think we're closing in."

"One more call I can manage. Then I'm off duty, OK? Uh, but how 'regional' do you mean, exactly?"

"Oh, say a 200 mile radius of Durango, or so. That'll get it here, and up to about Grand Junction. And then you're definitely off duty. And, like I said, take tomorrow off. Thanks, Fred."

She poured herself the last of the Riesling and curled up with her laptop computer to summarize the day's developments.

When Schwab and Meeker turned up, they would have to be brought in for questioning, of course. But there was really nothing they could be held for—a competent lawyer would have them free in no time. However, their presence near where Boudreau's body was found did need discussing, and the Feds would probably want to talk with them about their activities in the cave.

The connection between Lance Riggins, the black-hat guy, and the limo that Hal had seen had promise, but it was pretty tenuous to base any action on. But maybe black-hat's cellular phone explained how Riggins' and Walker's plan to drive up the railroad tracks was overheard. He clearly needed identifying.

But what was his connection to the climbers? If there was none, then she'd be nowhere. If there was one, then things would move ahead.

But even if there was a connection, what was motivating all this? Stealing that violin didn't call for leaving Boudreau's body in such a public place. Annette decided that the violin must have been a crime of opportunity: Boudreau died, somehow, and her violin was there for the taking. But, again, what was she doing on the tracks, up in the gorge? The DNA tests would tell if the climbers were her sex partners, and Annette felt sure she could get them to confess if presented with such damning evidence. But why were those guys climbing up there? What was in that cave, anyway? Fred Winders was going to e-mail a drawing that included notations about a stick and a basket. What could that be? And was one of them driving the snowplow, or was it the black-hat guy? Or somebody else?

She typed up a set of notes based on the premise that black hat and the climbers were somehow connected, and then made herself a list of questions, those that needed to be resolved to build a case and others that she classified as personal curiosity, such as why Boudreau would have gotten involved so quickly with these guys.

And why she would have taken a million-dollar fiddle into the woods in the middle of the night. Maybe she was wild and crazy, and a serious party animal, but Meeker and Schwab weren't exactly in her peer group. Annette's final question, in the "make the case" column, was "Motivation?"

* * *

If the two rock climbers had been thinking clearly, they wouldn't have been surprised that Holtzmann lied to them. For one thing, he had no intention of sending the violin to Europe in a crate of reproductions. He did indeed plan to sell it in Europe, but only detailed pictures were going there first. The potential buyers would simply have to make do. Just the hint of its availability had made the Stradivarius the object of a number of urgent inquiries, including two outright offers, so Holtzmann was confident that the pictures would be sufficient.

After leaving Schwab and Meeker to consider their options, limited though they were, Holtzmann had gone home to watch a pre-season NFL game on ESPN. Ever since immigrating years before, he had become enamored of American football and considered himself a strategist of considerable skill. European football—soccer—was so slow and effete by comparison, he thought.

Meanwhile, Dino had collected the climbers and taken them back to their gold-plated jail cell in Holtzmann's guest house, with the information that Holtzmann was expecting a decision on his offer of \$200,000 by morning. He also mentioned that no distractions were going to be allowed, and that Schwab and Meeker would have to make do with breakfast leftovers. Fortunately for them, the guest house had a kitchen, so they could heat the cold food up again.

"I vote we take it and be glad it's over," Meeker was chewing a bite of re-toasted but rather rubbery French toast. "Maybe it's not as much as we fantasized about, but it's still 100 big ones each."

"It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing, for me at least. Damn, this chile makes that stuff I had at the student union seem like pea soup." Schwab had attacked the re-heated eggs. "Even if I give up on getting the violin back, I can't help but think we're getting taken to the cleaners. Just because this guy has muscle at his beck-and-call, he thinks he can take advantage of us."

"You're right, but what can we do? If he gives us cash, we can get a cab to the airport and get back to Durango tomorrow, and be done with all this."

"Yeah, but I don't have to like it."

* * *

Dionysus Papandreou—he resented his nickname, but had long ago learned to live with it—was supremely confident in the security measures of Holtzmann's guest house, so he went home to his town house, down the hill in Valle del Sol.

His job with Holtzmann as chauffeur and Very Large Person paid well, but he knew its career potential was severely limited. Still, it gave him plenty of time to sit and wait, and he occupied his hours by feeding a voracious reading habit. This had let him finish the Great Books Program at nearby St. John's College at the top of his class, and more recently it had allowed him to absorb with ease the extensive reading list of the graduate program in philosophy at the University of New Mexico.

Now, in his dissertation research, he had progressed beyond the required list and was at a particularly obscure juncture of Heraclitus' fragmentary writings. He was curled up with his cat, Guppie, his single eyebrow scrunched in concentration, trying to figure it out. He wanted to be sure he understood the difference between serious philosophizing and Heraclitus' well-known goofing around. But if he had it right, it could be just the capstone he needed to finish his dissertation and find a real job.

This driving people around and playing the heavy was getting old.

He was hoping that the two guys from Durango wouldn't need a ride home tomorrow. He felt just too conspicuous in that big limo, driving around the little mountain town. But he had promised himself to ride up there some day on his mint-condition 1990 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy, to look around some

more. The campus had charmed him during his brief visit on Saturday, and, who knew?, when he got his Ph.D., maybe they'd need a new philosophy professor.

* * *

Twelve

Hal could hear that something was happening in his office as soon as he got to the top of the stairs. Some Mondays, he thought, behave just like Mondays. As he walked down the hall, he realized what he was hearing was both sides of a rather contentious conversation. Alice was winning, barely, and managing to keep her calm demeanor somehow. As he reached the entry to his suite, he saw through the open door a very attractive young woman being lectured by his administrative assistant.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ms. Mason, but Dean Weathers is simply not available at just any time. I would be happy to set up an appointment with him for you, but it is not acceptable for you to just barge in. Today is the first day of the fall semester and we're quite busy with any number of issues. Students who can't find their classrooms. Faculty members who can't find their classrooms. Typographical errors in schedules that refer to classrooms that do not exist. This is just a terribly bad day for us, and Dean Weathers can't be expected to be available on a moment's notice. If you'll tell me what it is you're concerned about, I can see if he has a few moments later this morning, but he needs to know the situation in order to be able to judge priorities."

The young woman was finally able to get a few words in as Alice stopped to breathe.

"So my concerns are not a high priority for him, is that what you're saying? I will have you know that I am both a student here and a reporter for the *Free Press*! And I need to talk with him about a problem in his college. Right now!"

"Everyone's concerns are a priority, but not all can be the highest. When he comes in, his first priority will be dealing with one of those non-existent classroom problems I mentioned, one that involves at least two dozen people. Surely you'll understand that that problem needs immediate attention."

Alice knew how to lie with the best and could clearly hold her own with the reporter, but Hal decided it was time for an entrance. He cleared his throat as he walked through the door.

"Alice...Oh, hello. Excuse me. Alice, I ran into Jack Wubbles coming across campus, and he told me he was on his way to find a classroom for the earth sciences intro class. So if they call, it's taken care of. I think."

He turned slightly away from the reporter and winked at Alice, who tried not to smile too broadly. Then he turned back to the young woman.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt. Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"Oh. Yes. I'm Jennifer Mason, we talked on the phone last week? I'm trying to follow up on the problem we discussed, the student who needs to graduate but can't get into a course he needs?"

"Ah, yes, Ms. Mason. Jenny. How nice to meet you in person. Would you like to come in and talk? May I get you some coffee, or tea?"

Killing them with kindness almost never failed.

“Oh, well, I’m sure you’re awfully busy and I’d hate to be a bother.”

She smiled and blinked her blue eyes slowly, directly at Hal, somehow managing to dilate them as she did so. He almost succumbed. She obviously knew the effect she could have on men, he thought.

“Oh, it’s no bother, I need a cup of coffee anyway. Here, follow me and I’ll see what kinds of tea we have.” And he led her toward the little kitchenette.

A few minutes later they were sitting in his office, she on the couch and he on a side chair across from her. He had decided that the power play of putting his desk between them would be counterproductive.

“Now, what can I do for you today, Jenny?”

“Well today is the first day of classes and I was wondering how many students will not be able to graduate because of scheduling problems?”

“Too soon to tell. After our last conversation, I did a little research and found out that, in my college, only about 10% of the courses are oversubscribed, and the longest waiting list was four people for a course limited to 24 students, about a 16% over-booking. The rest of the oversubscribed courses have shorter waiting lists. And, last year, counting both spring and fall, there was a total of three students who didn’t eventually get into the classes they needed to graduate. I need to be candid about this figure: I worked with several of my departments to develop creative solutions to these graduation problems by finding substitute courses in several cases. Does this help?”

“So you’re saying you don’t know yet if the student who contacted me, or other students in similar situations, will be able to graduate?”

“Like I said, it’s just too soon. We’ll know more in about a week, and all of these things are usually resolved within two weeks. But we always work very hard to make it possible for people who are qualified to graduate on schedule. I can provide more details of last year’s experience if you’d like. I’m not comfortable with giving names, because of privacy issues, but I can talk more about the courses we substituted and so on. And, if you can tell me more about the specific case you’re concerned about, I may be able to help with that right now.”

She sighed, and stared briefly through the window at the leaves of the maple tree outside rippling in the breeze .

“Oh, maybe I should just come clean. It’s me. I really, really want to try to graduate this year. I had a terrible experience last summer, I mean a year ago, a friend of mine got killed up in the mountains, and I’d like to move on with my life and find a new place to live. But I really need to graduate this year to do that. I’ve got 24 more credits to go, and I can make it if I get the right courses this fall and next spring. And I guess this thing about the musician who got killed has me upset on top of everything else.”

“Let’s take one thing at a time, Jenny. Who got killed in the mountains? I don’t remember anything that might have involved you.”

“A friend. We went backpacking together. He wasn’t a boyfriend, I didn’t really like him all that much, I guess, but when he got killed it really shook me. Whit Bradford. There was an explosion way up in the San Juans, up by the Continental Divide. Somebody blew up an irrigation structure and Whit was too close. And I don’t know why, but to me it somehow relates to this musician, Steffanie Boudreau. I had an appointment to interview her the day after she arrived, but then she got killed the night before. And I did a lot of research on her and sort of feel like I got to know her. I was doing a music minor, piano, and so I sort of identified with her, like a fantasy. I even got to talk with her on Monday night. And then she got killed...”

She descended into sobs while Hal was trying sort out the various implications of these connections to his experience. She talked with Boudreau on the fatal Monday night? A serious interview about this was in order. But she also knew that drug dealer who got dead up Vallecito Creek? Too strange. Was she with him when it happened?

He got up to fetch her a tissue, and then thought better of it and found her a clean linen handkerchief from the stash in his desk. He gave it to her and then went for a refill of her tea and to call Annette from Alice's phone. But she didn't answer, so he was on his own.

"Jenny, you have had a remarkable set of experiences recently, horrible ones. Sometimes it helps to talk about things like this. And I think you could find that talking with me would be very good for you, because you might find that you have something to contribute to solving these two deaths. I know a bit about both of them."

"Huh?" She looked up, her blue eyes shot with red, tears running down her cheeks. "I could help? How?"

"Can I ask some questions?" She nodded. "Well, first, were you with this Whit Bradford when the explosion happened?"

"Oh, no, we were backpacking up there, actually east of there, a week earlier. He was hitting on me, or trying to, and I wasn't, um, cooperating. It was actually kind of pathetic. I think he must have gone back up there without me to get over his disappointment, or something. Do you know anything about it?"

"Well, I live with a lady, Annette Trieri, who's a police investigator, and this was one of her cases. If I remember right, this was officially ruled to be an accident. The guy who set off the explosion was a professor, in one of the departments in my college, no less. He was prosecuted for manslaughter, accidental homicide, along with a bunch of Federal explosives charges. He's in prison now. I seem to remember that Bradford worked for an environmental organization here on campus, and his office had a big hiking map on the wall, with places he'd been up there. So there wasn't anything mysterious about it. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The explosion wasn't for him, it was for that tunnel. But what you just said explains something about why he might have been up there. I'll let Annette know about this.

"But, you know, if you talked with Steffanie Boudreau before she died, that's potentially really important, because Annette hasn't figured that one out at all. She's getting closer, but it's a real puzzler. She'll want to know everything you can remember about that conversation."

"Well, there isn't very much to say. I called her to set up a time for our interview the next day. That was the arrangement, I mean, she had agreed to the interview before coming to town and said to call her when she got in to set up a time. So I called her. Twice, actually, once about 6:00, but she was out, and then again about 7:30."

"What did you talk about?"

"What time I should meet her, and where. And I tried to make conversation, but she seemed distracted. Or maybe drunk? I couldn't really tell, with her accent, but she might have been a little tipsy."

"What time did you decide on?"

"Oh, well, I wanted to meet her for breakfast, but she laughed and said she'd probably not be up until noon. So I suggested we meet for lunch. And she laughed again and said as long as there was good, strong coffee, that's all she'd want. So I made a comment about jet lag and she laughed again—all the

laughing was another thing that made me think she was drunk—and said, no, she had a late date. To go out and play her violin in the canyon. She was excited about it.”

Hal tried to keep his voice calm.

“Did she say who she was going out with?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t recognize the name, and it sounded like some kind of nickname anyway. It was not like she really said it clearly, because of being drunk and her accent. And she said it, like, ‘I’m going out with so-and-so later to play up in the mountains.’ So I asked, ‘do you mean play your violin, or something else?’, and she said, yes, to play her violin up in the canyon, with the echo and the river. So I wished her the best and said I’d see her tomorrow, I mean Tuesday.”

Hal could tell she was becoming more and more upset as she related the conversation, so he leaned back, took a sip of his coffee, wincing at how cold it had become, and smiled at her.

“Well, Jenny, I’m sure you know how important it is to talk with Annette about this when she gets back. You might just be able to help her solve it.”

“Gets back?”

“She’s in Santa Fe now, talking with the police down there about this very case, or at least a part of it.”

He was about to go on, but then remembered that Jennifer was a reporter as well as a student. So he changed gears instead.

“When she gets back, we’ll have you over to our house and you can talk with her about all this. I’m sure it’ll help. And, I bet, the more you talk about it, the better the chance that you’ll remember that name. I’d try out a couple of possibilities, but I think it’s better for Annette to do it. I don’t want to influence you.”

“Do you think that this guy killed her?”

“Well, I don’t quite know everything that Annette knows, but I know a lot more than has been in the papers.” And he grinned and wiggled a finger at her. “And don’t you dare think about trying to write a story about what I know. There’s a deal at the police department with all those reporters who are in town to put stuff out at the daily news conference. Anyway, it’s more complicated than just this one guy. But if she knew for sure who that is, she’d be able to make great strides, I think. And I bet anything that helps Annette solve this death would make you feel a lot better about things. Maybe even enough to consider sticking around. Durango is a pretty nice place, after all.”

She sniffed, and blew her nose on the handkerchief.

“You’re probably right. One thing that’s bothered me has been feeling so helpless. When is she coming back?”

“This afternoon, as far as I know. I’ll call her this morning. Want to go out to the airport with me to pick her up? I think you’ll like her. Well, I’m biased.”

And he made his smile as friendly a smile as he knew how.

“Well, I have a class at 2:00, one that I actually got into.”

“It will be later than that. But that’s the other thing that’s bothering you, isn’t it? What class, or classes, are you having trouble getting into? Maybe I can figure out something.”

“Uh, yours, actually. Earth Science for Journalists.”

It was her turn to smile, in an embarrassed sort of way.

* * *

Monday morning had dawned bright and clear in Santa Fe, and Annette wished she had brought workout clothes. A run along the Santa Fe River, even though it didn't have any water in it, would be a good way to start a new week, she thought. She made a half-pot of coffee with the fresh-ground beans she'd bought, ate her yogurt with a granola bar, and toasted a bagel. Thirsty beyond her usual experience, she drank a full quart of fresh orange juice. The dry, desert air was having its effect on her system.

After packing up to check out, she decided it was such a nice day that she'd walk downtown. Instead of following Alameda down the river, she cut across Delgado Street to Palace Avenue, and turned left toward the Plaza.

At the downtown police substation on Washington Street, she found Sergeant Luis Montoya pecking away at a computer terminal, a pile of overnight reports accumulating in a nearby printer. They introduced themselves and he offered coffee, showing her around the station on the way to the pot. Then they wandered back to his cubicle. His first action was to shuffle through the pile of paper in the printer and hand her one of the reports. She recognized the description of the limousine she had telephoned in the previous evening.

"Chama. Chama. I know the name but don't quite place it."

Outside of Durango and its immediate vicinity, her knowledge of regional geography was incomplete.

"It's due north, almost in Colorado. Between here and Pagosa Springs. I called up there earlier this morning, because I know the deputy who filed the report, Diego Jaramillo. Met him at a regional law enforcement conference last year. He thinks the whole thing is hilarious. Seems his Aunt Rosa, or great aunt, I guess, phoned in a complaint of a guy peeing on her lilac bush, and then he got in this limo and drove off. She may be old, but she's sharp and she got the license. It's registered to a local businessman, Raimer Holtzmann. He runs a gallery up on Canyon Road."

"Did she report anything about who else was in the car?"

"Diego says she told him that the windows were too dark to see into. But one of the windows was rolled down briefly, and she saw a guy with a black cowboy hat. That's all."

"What does this guy Holtzmann sell in his gallery?"

"Interesting you should ask, because it connects to the report I called you about originally. My informant tells me that the inquiries about the violin came from a direction that makes him suspect that Holtzmann was behind it. But what his gallery sells is Indian artifacts. Fake ones, but very high quality fake ones. Reproductions. So what he'd be doing with a violin is beyond all of us down here."

Annette could almost feel the synapses clicking in her head, as things fell into place.

"I'm not sure I know either, but there may be a connection between this Stradivarius and an Indian artifact site up north of Durango. We don't have all the details yet, but it looks possible. So it's not as off the wall as it might seem."

"Holtzmann has something of a shady reputation, at least in my book. It's actually kind of fascinating. He sells these reproductions of artifacts, and they're top-notch. Some of them, like the stone carvings, fetishes and so on, are so good the only way to tell them from an original is by chemical analysis to see where the stone came from. Others, like the pottery, are a little easier to date, but the copies are still good. Thing is, he mostly copies originals that aren't catalogued. Every time he's been questioned about the originals, he's produced them along with appropriate documentation, but nobody

knows where the originals come from, or at least the right people don't know. I'm not the expert on this, but Gunther is. Our informant. He should be along any time now, except he's usually late for everything. But I don't understand how there could be a connection between this and the violin."

By the time that Annette was finishing the story of how the musician's body was found in the vicinity of the climbers' little cave in the cliff wall, a new visitor arrived, waltzing in unannounced except for a well-modulated contralto greeting.

"Darling Luis, it's been far, far too long. We've just *got* to get together more often."

"Oh. Morning, Gunther. This is Lieutenant Annette Trieri, Durango, Colorado police investigations. Like I said on the phone, she's interested in these rumors of the Stradivarius that you mentioned last week. What's new?"

Annette was well-trained and experienced, so, as Gunther was giving her the once-over, she was able to take in stride the fact that he was wearing a long, very full broomstick skirt with Indian designs in bright colors, red patent-leather cowboy boots that matched one of the colors in the skirt, a purple silk shirt that matched another of those colors, a fringed yellow leather vest with lots of Indian beading on the fringe, enough makeup to equip an opera diva, and more jewelry than she had in her entire personal inventory. She had to admit, though, she liked his hair, especially the leather thong with the big silver concho—it matched the ones on his belt—holding his pony-tail in place. Although the black dye job was a tad obvious.

"Charmed, I'm sure, my dear. Durango? Such a quaint little mountain town. When I was younger I used to ski up there quite a lot, but I expect it's changed in recent decades, like everywhere else."

"Well, I haven't lived there long enough to really remember what folks think of as the 'old days,' although I've still seen some growth. It's probably not as quaint as you remember it. The traffic has pretty much destroyed that image."

"Here also, my dear. It's sad. Now—what's your interest in this business of a Stradivarius? What a juicy story it must be. We certainly don't have much like this going on here. Our concerns are mostly related to things like fake Georgia O'Keeffes and other paintings and sculpture."

He (Annette had to force herself to think using that pronoun) listened intently as she sketched only the barest outline of the circumstances. She was impressed that he didn't ask for more details. A well-trained informant, apparently.

"That fits in with what I've heard. One of our local arts agents, a kind of slippery character who works for someone even more slippery, was asking discreet questions about potential interest in an undocumented Stradivarius. He usually confines his interest to Native American artifacts. Has something of a reputation as a pot-hunter, or at least someone who buys from pot-hunters. He acts as a middle-man between people who dig stuff up and his boss, Ramier Holtzmann, who owns a gallery and another outfit up on Canyon Road. He also travels to Europe a lot, lining up buyers. Name is Tony LaCoste. He spends a lot of time out of town, and some of the questions were by phone. But he actually talked with me about it in person. He wanted to know if there might be interest and how much the thing might be worth. But he was very careful not to admit to having a Stradivarius—everything was completely hypothetical, if you know what I mean."

"As in 'what do you suppose a Stradivarius would be worth if one were floating around and who would be interested?', only lots more subtle, right?"

"Precisely, my dear, but, yes, not nearly so directly. I told him I'd look into it. And I have and it's bad news, at least for whoever's selling. No one around here is very interested, at least without documentation."

Annette looked at Montoya and felt her eyes relax at the sight of his simple, gray suit.

“Sergeant, do you suppose we could consider setting up a sting operation of some kind? Just to get this thing back? I think I know someone who would gladly pose as a buyer.” She actually had two possibilities in mind, Franconi and Ament. Because both were musicians of some reputation, either would be a credible buyer.

“Hmm. Now there’s an idea, especially if your buyer isn’t local. A local buyer wouldn’t work, I think. What about it, Gunther?”

A long, deep red, index fingernail was tapped thoughtfully against a perfectly white front tooth while half-inch eyelashes fluttered in the direction of the ceiling.

“How exciting! But, Luis, we need to think beyond this to the future. I’d be worried about blowing my cover if I got involved and things went wrong somehow.”

“Not if you’re just a matchmaker, putting together seller and buyer. Or seller’s agent, if LaCoste is the contact. For a fee, of course. You don’t have to pretend to know anything about violins or be involved in the actual transaction. We can set up the buyer with an escort, who would be carrying the cash. As well as a shield.”

They spent the next hour discussing various aspects of the idea, and developed a plan that would begin with Gunther contacting LaCoste with the good news that two possible buyers had expressed interest and perhaps could be persuaded to bid against each other. It was a good thing that Gunther’s makeup was waterproof, because as his excitement level increased so did his perspiration rate.

* * *

About a mile north on Washington Street, several blocks after it metamorphosed into Bishop’s Lodge Road, and just west on Mansion Ridge, Meeker and Schwab were trying to contain their glee, at least until they were alone. Dino had arrived with brunch from the French Pastry Shop in the La Fonda Hotel and news that he could return in the afternoon with a suitcase full of cash, if that was their decision. They caved in.

Dino finally left, and they attacked the food to celebrate their impending wealth.

“Damn, Reg, maybe this is going to work after all! If he comes through with the cash, then all we have to do is figure out how to get home with it safely. And that should be pretty easy, I guess.”

Meeker had to talk through a mouthful of quiche.

“Right, but first things first. And we have to be sure that he and Holtzmann don’t know our plans. So maybe we can get the cash and have Dino drop us off downtown, where he won’t know our next step.”

“Do you know anything about options? Like, what’s downtown? I don’t know anything about Santa Fe. Is there an airport around here?”

“If we get downtown, we should be able to disappear into the crowd of tourists and then pick a big hotel to stage our next move. We can either rent a car or get a taxi to the airport. Or maybe get a shuttle or a rental car to the Albuquerque airport, where there are more flights and options. I want to get back to Durango as soon as we can, but maybe a detour through Denver would be a good idea. They’ll expect us to head straight home.”

Schwab poured another cup of coffee, broke open a second croissant, and reached for the raspberry preserves.

“If we rent a car, we’re in control. But if we fly back, we’ll be at airports with crowds of people, which has a safety margin, seems like. And, of course, we have to figure out what to do with all that cash after we get home. Banks have to report transactions over \$10,000, or something like that, so we can’t just put it in a checking account. Or accounts.”

“Right. But back to getting home. If we go through an airport, we’ve got to put the bag with the cash through a security x-ray machine. Or, worse, check the bag. And either of those is pretty scary. Neither of us has pockets big enough to carry all that cash, even if it’s in \$100 bills.”

“Hand me that piece of quiche, would you? How big a stack of bills are we talking about? Uh, \$200,000 in \$100 bills is 2,000 of them, I guess. How big a stack? Any idea?”

“Hmm. Well, at work, when I refill the copier, it’s from reams of paper, 500 sheets. They’re about two inches thick, or so. So I guess we’re talking an eight-inch stack of \$100 bills, if they’re compressed. Or a 40-inch stack of \$20 bills. Ouch.”

“What’s today, Monday? How about this? We could take enough off the top to get home with and put the rest in a safe deposit box in a bank here in Santa Fe. Then we could come back in a couple of weeks, by car, you know, pick a day at random, and get the money out. Then drive home a different way. I guess there are driving choices.”

“Now there’s an idea. I’m certain that there’s a bank downtown. We could get a box, put all but ten Gs or so in it and then fly back to Durango later today. If there’s a late afternoon flight. Damn, I wish there was a phone in here.”

* * *

To get her bearings, Annette left the police substation and turned toward the Plaza. There was the Plaza Restaurant across the way, where she had eaten dinner last night, burning out a significant number of taste buds on the “medium” chile. So San Francisco Street is over there, she thought.

She stopped to buy a lovely Navajo bracelet, silver with little, tasteful flecks of turquoise, from one of the licensed vendors under the *portal* of the Palace of the Governors, and crossed the little park in the middle of the Plaza to San Francisco. Then she headed east, up the street toward the Cathedral. Montoya had recommended this stroll to her, since she was headed in this general direction anyway, because of the grandeur and historical significance of the buildings. About half-way up the block, she heard the familiar tweedling noise from her bag.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Found you! I wondered if this trick would work. You’re in a different area code and everything.”

“Hal! I wish you were here. I’m playing tourist and need a guide.”

“Maybe I can help from up here. Where are you?”

“On San Francisco, looking up the block at the Cathedral. Everyone here talks about it as if it’s some kind of special shrine, or something. But it just looks like a big church, kind of squat and ugly, actually, as cathedrals go.”

“Compared to the other churches around there, it’s quite the thing, though. And the story behind it is interesting. I’ll dig out that Willa Cather book, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for you when you get back.” He proceeded to outline the story for her. “And it looks squat because they never finished the spires. Every now and then, someone comes up with a plan to finish them, but it’s never happened. Anyway, you can read it for yourself. What’s your schedule today?”

“I’m on my way back to pick up my car and head for the airport. I should make the afternoon flight easily. How’s your day?”

“First day of classes. It’s always a bit of an adventure, because students seem to call my office when they can’t find their classrooms. Oh, for the days before cellular phones.”

“But then we wouldn’t be talking just now.”

“Well, right. And I guess that’s the compensation for those student calls. Anyway, Alice handles them for me, and better than I could. Have you found anything out you can talk about?”

“Everything I need except real evidence. The limo is identified and we’re going to run a sting operation for the Stradivarius. I met the most outrageous individual, by the way. I’ll have to find out where he gets his clothes and pick up an outfit for you.”

She couldn’t help but break out in giggles.

“Huh? Oh. I bet you met some local Santa Fe color. Well, just remember that turquoise doesn’t go with my eyes. Listen, I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you late this afternoon at the airport, OK? I’ll bring a surprise, one you’ll like.”

“OK indeed. A surprise, huh? No hints? Well, I’ll savor the anticipation. And we’ve got to come here together some day. The place I stayed last night would be perfect for the two of us.”

She put away her phone and stared at the Cathedral. In fact, she had read *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, years before, in college. So this was the famous Cathedral, eh? Well, compared to all the other one- and two-story adobe buildings, it was pretty impressive, she had to admit. But as cathedrals go, it was missing something. Compared to the ones in Italy, it was, well, dumpy. It needs those spires, she thought.

She was so absorbed in the structure that, when she turned right at the end of the block onto Cathedral Place, she didn’t notice the deep blue Lincoln limousine that also turned right several car lengths behind her. It was about half way across toward Alameda, when there were no pedestrians or traffic, that she was startled by the black velvet sack that was dropped over her head. The dark, and the fact that she was spun around twice, disoriented and confused her, and she didn’t have time to react before she was bundled into what felt like the back seat of a large car.

* * *

Thirteen

The office door closed, with a solid thunk followed by a sequence of metallic clicks, and Annette exhaled gratefully and relaxed her tensed muscles. Maybe, just maybe, she would be able to get loose now, assuming that Holtzmann and his goon didn’t return too soon. She set about working the cords loose by twisting her wrists and generally squirming around.

Because all she could do was sit and wriggle, she also had her first opportunity to look around the room. Holtzmann’s office was obviously designed to impress and intimidate. By sitting behind the massive desk in front of the large window, his head would be backlit by the sun, and his face would be very hard to read. The surface of the desk, a single slab of some kind of dark hardwood at least four inches thick, was empty—no desktop gadgets, paper, or even a telephone. Nothing so convenient, she

gripped to herself, as a letter opener. But she had seen Holtzmann open a drawer and put her service revolver into it, so there was hope, if only she could get loose.

Because she had tensed her wrist and arm muscles, she now had a significant amount of play in the cords around her hands, and the wriggling was beginning to work the play she'd gained when she had exhaled out toward her arms. After about fifteen minutes of this, she could feel the cords chafing her wrists, and she knew that there would be huge, painful blisters to contend with. But she could also feel her hands beginning to come loose. Strange, how easy it seemed.

And then the sequence of metallic clicks from the door interrupted her efforts. She tried to make herself as big as possible, to take up the slack in the cords, and froze. In walked Holtzmann.

With barely a glance at her, he crossed the room to a large R.C. Gorman painting on the wall to the right of the desk, and, feeling behind the left side of the frame, made something click. The painting swung on hinges away from the wall, revealing a high-tech-looking safe.

Because Holtzmann had his back to her, Annette carefully explored the play in the cords around her hands, trying to gauge if she could get loose in time to ambush Holtzmann. Although she didn't usually go for hand-to-hand combat, she was mad enough, and sufficiently pumped up with adrenalin, that she knew the advantage would be hers, if only she could get loose in time. She felt a loop of cord fall off her fingers, then another. And Holtzmann, who had been absorbed in the combination of the safe, turned to look at her.

"You know, Lieutenant, New Mexico is quite different from Colorado. People disappear here quite regularly. So much so that the local authorities hardly require any compensation to look the other way. We were just discussing where to dispose of you. Perhaps you'd like to have some say in the matter?"

His smile was malicious as turned back to the safe.

"We thought that you might like to choose your resting place, either in the mountains or in the desert. What is your pleasure?"

He was busy removing packets of bills, tossing them onto the desk behind him. Annette felt another loop of cord slip loose, and her hands were no longer bound together. The right one, however, was still tangled in the remaining cord.

"Do you really believe that this will work the way you want it to? I mean, in this day and age, it's a little silly to believe that you can simply spirit me away into nothingness, don't you think?"

She knew that she needed to stall for time, but she didn't want to antagonize him any more than necessary. The less adrenalin in his system the better.

He looked over his shoulder and smiled—and she froze—and then went back to emptying the safe.

"Well, I think that 'silly' is probably not quite accurate, but, you're right, it is a gamble. But then, so is life. I don't mean to be too much of a philosopher, but I've learned that just about anything worth doing involves some kind of risk. Hmm, now what's this?"

He had stopped tossing bills onto the desk and was examining what looked to Annette like a legal document of some kind. She now had both her hands free. But how could she get her feet loose, with him standing there? Surely he'd see the motion required to do that. So, with her back straight and shoulders squared to take up as much of the slack as possible, she tried to relax.

Holtzmann finished with the document and, looking thoughtful, folded it carefully. Then he checked his watch and walked right behind Annette's chair, over to the desk. But he was too absorbed in thought to notice the loose cord on her wrists or on the floor. Sitting behind the desk, he opened a drawer and lifted out a telephone receiver.

“Hello? Manager, please....Dick? Ah, good, I hoped you’d be on duty. Listen: I’m going through some papers down here, I ran across that option agreement we worked out. The one with the Resort, remember? I’d almost forgotten it. It expires next month.”

He was looking out the window and listening to the telephone, so Annette brought her hands in front of her and wrapped the cord in coils about her right wrist. Now at least it wouldn’t be hanging loose if he looked. She put her hands behind her back again as Holtzmann turned to stare across the room, lost in the conversation.

“I think a renewal is the only practical thing to do. That is, if it’s worth the cost. Even if the place burned down tomorrow, I doubt that they’d sell within a month. The real question is whether we should seek an extension. What’s up there?”

Annette tried to look as bored as she could. Without looking so bored that it would be obvious to him. But pretending not to listen.

“So they cleaned it out? Then the question is whether there are other sites on the property. But I remember that we walked the area thoroughly and didn’t find any indications.”

She settled her attention on another painting, on the wall across from the Gorman hiding the safe. Could that be an O’Keeffe? Goodness, this guy was rolling in extra cash.

“Yes, that’s true. They got lucky, after all. Well, look. It’s going to expire and we might as well let it. Based on the other valleys, we might as well concentrate on areas farther south. That site above Hermosa, for example. Besides, with all the fuss associated with LaCoste’s little adventure with the musician, I’ll be glad to be done with the place.”

If not an O’Keeffe, it was surely a close imitation. The shading on the wall of the barn was very distinctive.

“Right. I’ll file this away and not worry about it. And we’re going to be cleaning up some—ah—odds and ends in the next day or so. I’ll be in touch.”

He was now looking directly at Annette. She wondered if she were the “odd” or the “end.” He replaced the receiver in the drawer and stared at her thoughtfully.

“Well, Lieutenant, have you decided? On your resting place, I mean.”

“To tell the truth, I’m partial to the mountains up in Colorado.”

“I expect we can arrange that. I’ll just finish up here and send Mr. Papandreou to fetch you shortly.”

And he returned to the safe, emptying it and placing the bundles of cash from the table into a duffle bag.

* * *

By the time the door began its clicking again, Annette was ready. She had finished untying her feet and then re-wrapping them to make it look innocent. In the interim, she had retrieved her revolver and was now sitting on it, having no better place to hide it within reach. It was lumpy.

The door opened and in walked the Very Large Person she had experienced earlier. But he looked quite different now that Holtzmann wasn’t with him. He put a finger to his lips in the universal “Shhh” gesture and walked over to the O’Keeffe painting. What in the world?

He slid the painting to one side—it was on some type of rail, she saw—revealing a tape recorder in a niche. Pressing a button that paused the transport, he turned to her.

“Listen, please,” he whispered. “I’ve got only a few seconds before I need to turn this back on. Any more than that and he’ll suspect something if he ever reviews the tape. And I’ve got to try to stay on his good side. I’m going to untie you and take you down to the car. You need to make struggling sounds and so on. When we get outside, I’ll fall down and get dirty, and you can take off. I’ll tell him that you surprised me and got away. Something credible, I don’t know. Understand?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Lady, I’m just the chauffeur around here. He uses me for intimidation because of my size, but really I’m just a graduate student. OK? That’s why I didn’t tie you up too tight. I don’t want to get involved in anything like disappearing a police officer. You know?”

“Well, neither do I. Especially if I’m the officer. So turn that thing back on and let’s do it.” She gave him her most flirtatious grin.

He turned back to the tape machine, reactivated the transport, and slid the painting into place. By the time he returned his attention to her, she was standing up, with her revolver pointed at him, smiling even wider. His look of surprise included a single eyebrow that arched all the way across his massive forehead.

“Get your hands off me, you gorilla. And if you touch me there again you’re toast!” She managed to put anxiety, rather than the laughter she was feeling, into her voice, and she pointed toward the door. He shook his head in disbelief, obviously trying not to laugh, and turned toward the door.

“Ow! You kick me again and I’ll just knock you out and carry you down, dammit!” He shuffled his feet noisily and indicated she should, too.

The charade continued until they made it down to the car, parked in the alley behind the adobe building. Dino began rubbing his right eye furiously, and then sat down in the dirt and scootched around.

“Down the hill in the alley, first left over to Canyon, then right, and it’s about three blocks to the Paseo de Peralta. Go right to the first light, then left to downtown. You know where the police station is down there, right?”

“I was there earlier today. But if we’re where I think we are, I can go back to the condo I was staying, on East Alameda, and get my car and stuff. Where’s my bag?”

“Front seat. Now get out of here! He’ll be coming up from the cellar any second.”

She opened the passenger door of the limo, grabbed her shoulder bag, and put her revolver into it.

“Mr., ah, Papandreou, was it? Thank you! I don’t forget things such as this, believe me. And if you have information that you think could help me, call the Durango Police Department, investigations division, OK? Good luck!” And she hurried down the alley.

When Holtzmann emerged from the basement door with a duffle bag a few minutes later, it was to find his chauffeur looking anything but intimidating, groaning, sitting in the dirt rubbing his left eye and holding his crotch, covered in dust. And the woman was nowhere to be seen.

“Dino! What are you doing? Where’s that cop?!”

“Unnnnh.” And he pitched over onto his side, lying in the dirt.

It took about five minutes for Dino to become coherent and to be able to relate his tale.

“I had to untie her from that chair to get her down here. And nobody has ever given me trouble before. But look, she bit me!” And he showed his patron a set of fresh teeth marks on his right forearm. “And then she poked me in the eye, hard.” His left eye was appropriately red and its tears had made tracks in the dirt on his cheek. “And she must know judo or something, because the next thing I knew, I

was on the ground. And then she kicked me in the balls!” And, still holding his crotch, he groaned again most pitifully. “Where is she, anyway?”

“How do I know, you idiot? We can’t let her escape, she knows far too much. Get in the car. She’ll probably run back downtown to the police. No! Not that car, my car. She won’t recognize it or report it.” And they piled into Holtzmann’s Mercedes and roared off down the alley.

* * *

Meanwhile, Annette was making her way downhill and right, toward where she remembered the “river” should be. Ah! Here was Delgado Street, an old friend. While walking, she used the last-call-recall function on her cell phone to call Montoya at the Santa Fe Police Department. It was answered by the front desk, and she identified herself and asked for Montoya.

Just then it dawned on her that one of the few ways that she could think of for Holtzmann and Papandreou to have known where to grab her was Montoya, or perhaps someone else at the station who could have overheard their conversation. So she realized that now they might direct her captors toward her once again.

“Lieutenant? What did you think of our Cathedral?” The familiar voice had no hint of surprise, beyond what she would normally have expected.

“Quite impressive indeed. But I need to tell you about something else that happened.” And she proceeded to relate to him her abduction and escape. “Can I come by and make a formal statement? I’m almost there, I think, walking down Canyon Road.”

“Well it’s still quite a way. Can I have a car pick you up?”

“Actually, I’d rather keep moving. I’m sure they’re after me. I heard some things that they don’t want known, I’m positive.”

“OK, well, when you get to the Paseo, turn right, then cross the river and turn left down Alameda. Then I think you’ll know where you are.”

“Oh, yes, I see it now. I’ll be by shortly.” She actually had just turned right, east, the other direction up Alameda, and saw the entrance to the complex where her car was parked. Her pace increased. If she could get in her car before anyone spotted her, she’d feel safe. Plus, with the map, she could probably find the long way ’round to the airport and wait there incognito. Montoya would just have to deal with being stood up.

The long way ’round turned out to be more convoluted than she would have imagined, but it worked. Up past St. John’s College, across to Old Pecos Trail, south on the interstate for three exits, and then back up 599 to Airport Road, she was finally there. After checking her car in, she found a Rio Grande Air agent.

“Listen.” She showed him her shield. “I need to wait for my flight without anyone seeing me. And it would help if I could be first on your plane, so I could sit in the back and hide behind a newspaper. Can I wait in the back of your office here? It’s official police business.” Even though she was two hours early and the wait would be tedious, she knew that she’d not feel safe anywhere else.

Between typing up a report of both her experience in the morning and the afternoon’s adventure, calling in to retrieve her telephone messages, and calling Captain Jankowski to report the abduction—he was not amused—the time went quickly. The airline could not have been more cooperative, and, by the time the other passengers began boarding, she was sitting in the back row, port side, scrunched down in the window seat reading a newspaper.

When she took a second to steal a glance at the other passengers, she was astonished to recognize the bald spot and wide forehead of Reginald Meeker sitting in the seat in front of her. He was turned sideways, talking with a man sitting across the aisle, someone she didn't recognize.

"Made it! I was worried there for a while, but that's the beauty of this podunk airport. It's so small you can get from the car to the plane in no time. I sure hope you tipped that cab driver a lot."

"I just gave him a \$100 bill and ran. It wouldn't have been so tight if those bozos at the bank hadn't been so long with the boxes."

"Or if Dino had showed up sooner. He sure seemed pleased with himself. But he looked like hell. Wonder what happened."

Annette used her last-call-recall button again, and seconds later, Jankowski was back on the line. She knew she had to be cryptic, and that she had to avoid Meeker's recognizing her voice. She chose breathy bimbo.

"Walt? Hi again. Listen, I just wanted to, like, confirm that you and the guys were going to meet me at the airport, like we discussed? It looks like we're leaving on time, and we should be there in about an hour. Huh? Sure, bring everybody. I just love being greeted by several cars full of big, strong hunks. Listen, I've got to go, they're telling us to turn off electrical equipment. 'Bye.'" She never called him "Walt," so she was sure he would understand something strange was happening. And he was just too smart to ignore the two references to bringing people to the airport. At least she could hope so. Now, all she could do was wait.

"Man, I'll sure be glad to get into some fresh clothes. Three days is too long." It was Meeker's friend who started on this new topic.

"Yeah, especially considering that this isn't what I'd plan to wear to travel in. That son of a bitch. Well, anyway, I guess we should just get over it and move on. When do you think we should drive back down here?"

"Let's see. It's Monday, right? I'm due to head back east in two weeks, so there's plenty of time. How about Friday? I bet that Santa Fe is busy on weekends, and the sign at the bank said it's open Saturdays. If we come down Friday afternoon, stay somewhere on the outskirts, and pick up the cash Saturday when they open, we can be back in Durango by early afternoon, probably. And we can blend in with the Saturday crowd and Holtzmann won't see us."

Once again, Annette's synapses clicked into place. So Papandreou's first name was Dino, eh? How appropriate. And Hal had been right, the limo had picked up these two guys on the campus. And brought them to Santa Fe via Chama. Wonder which was the lilac-bush culprit?

And they want to come back next weekend and get cash from a bank, from "boxes." Safe deposit boxes? Cash Holtzmann must have given them for something. The Stradivarius? Something from that little cave? Well, if Jankowski came through, there would be plenty of muscle at the Durango-La Plata County Airport to haul these two in for questions, and then she'd have the chance to ask them.

Compared to the real-life drama playing out in front of her, the newspaper was just too boring.

* * *

Hal, with Jennifer Mason in tow, was waiting inside the terminal for Annette's arrival when he recognized a familiar face.

"Captain, uh, Jankowski, I think? I don't know if you'll remember me. Hal Weathers. Your guys didn't let my car, or me, get blown up a while back."

“And, as I remember, you persuaded my star detective to settle down. All I need to know now is when you’re going to make an honest woman out of her.” Jankowski was smiling so widely that Hal couldn’t begin to be offended.

“Hey, I keep asking. But what’re you doing here? And, if I may say, there aren’t usually this many people hanging around waiting for these flights to arrive, especially not ones who have the official look these guys do.”

“I wish I knew. I got this strange call from Annette. Like she couldn’t talk, but really, really wanted me to meet her here with backup. So here we are.”

“Well, I’m here to pick her up, too. Talked to her earlier today, very late this morning, I think, and everything was fine. She was walking back from the police station to her car. Looking at the Cathedral. I wonder what’s up.” He smiled. “At least we’ll have plenty of cars for all her luggage.”

Jennifer cleared her throat, and Hal looked startled.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Jennifer, this is Captain Jankowski of the Durango PD. Captain, this is Jennifer Mason, one of my students and also a reporter for the *Free Press*. I bet she would just love to know what this is all about. But there’s more: she came along with me to talk with Annette. Seems she talked with Steffanie Boudreau on the evening of her death. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Jankowski’s eyes were big, round disks; but then there was a disturbance as the doors opened and in walked Reginald Meeker and Leonard Schwab, looking frightened, followed by Annette, who was obviously herding them toward the waiting crowd.

“Walt, old buddy, you got my message!” Her wink said it all. “Hi fellas! Good to see you all here. Why don’t you take these two fine gentlemen downtown for questioning? I’ll be down shortly.” She turned to Hal and wrapped her arms around him. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you, pal. The stories I could tell.”

He was surprised at the strength of her grasp. Geez, she’d been gone only one night. And there are all these people standing around watching...

“Um, well, I’m sure glad to see you, too. And, er, I brought a surprise.”

He kissed her, pulled back slightly, and reached for Jennifer.

“Kinda young for you, isn’t she?”

Annette’s eyes were twinkling, which only increased as Hal’s face turned red.

“She’s one of my students. And a *Free Press* reporter. With information for you about the night Boudreau was killed.”

It was Annette’s turn to look surprised.

“‘It never rains but it pours.’ Can we talk on the way back to town? Oh, wait. I need to go in with the Captain and brief him. And then I’ve got to deal with the Two Stooges, there. And damn, I’m hungry. Missed lunch. What’s on for dinner? I could eat a moose.”

If Hal was disappointed, he hid it.

“OK, first things first. You go back into town with your friend Walt there and do whatever you need to do. I’ll put dinner together and Jenny’s invited. I promise you an interesting conversation, OK?”

“OK indeed. And do me a favor. No red chile. Or green. OK?”

“Well, I usually marinate my moose in red chile, you know, that famous moose adovada recipe with cranberry salsa. But maybe I can find something that you can handle. Like salmon. Can you get a ride home?”

“You bet. I’ll try to be there by 7:00.”

* * *

“Wow. That was sure amazing. All of it. Hectic, confusing, everything. I’m seeing a very different side of you, Dean Weathers.”

They were in his supercharged Audi A4, headed back to town, and he was trying hard not to drive like a teenager. What he wouldn’t have given to be this girl’s age, driving her around in this car.

“Living with a cop has changed my life, that’s for sure. But I’m used to her scheduling. She’s very career oriented, and, besides, she has an important job. Did you know that the big case that Bradford’s death was sort of a part of resulted in putting the main drug distributors around here out of commission?”

“I read about that in the *Herald*. It was before I started working for the *Free Press*. I knew Whit smoked grass, but I didn’t know he was involved with that dealer, or that he was a dealer.”

“Are you thinking about a career in journalism? Is that why you want to get into my course?”

“I’m thinking about it. But I haven’t decided yet. So far, I’m trying to treat it as a part-time job. I used to be an aerobics instructor, but that isn’t so trendy now, and, besides, I got tired of jumping around without enough clothes on in front of a bunch of people. The guys in my classes were pretty gross, even if I worked them extra hard.”

The image in Hal’s mind of Jennifer in an aerobics outfit was most pleasing. He knew he needed to be extra careful.

“Well, it’s been my experience that college-age guys often have more hormones than tact. Hmm. I guess that can apply to guys any age, for that matter. But don’t worry. You tried your charms on me back in my office and I resisted, and I’ll continue to resist. Hey, my girlfriend carries a gun, for heaven’s sake, and she’s a crack shot.” He chuckled.

And she blushed. “Oh. You caught me doing the eye thing. I noticed it at the time. I try not to do it, but it’s an old habit. It’s hard to break old habits that work. You have no idea of how many C’s I’ve turned to B’s that way. Combined with a little pouting.”

“Let me guess. You finally decided that you wanted to earn what you get with your mind rather than with your body, right? And that’s part of taking this reporter job instead of having the other one.”

“Pretty much. How do you know all this stuff? By being a Dean?”

“No, by being around people your age all the time and by having a keen memory about myself at your age. Would you believe that I used to smoke grass, too, almost continuously, my senior year? This was back when it was hard to get, and supposedly a lot weaker, I’m told. It was the thing to do, so I did it. So. This stuff you know from your conversation with Steffanie Boudreau. I think you ought to talk with Annette about writing an undergraduate thesis on this case. You know, sort of trade your information for her help. Not to write stories for the *Free Press*, but to write it up as a case history. As a project, you could do a two-semester thesis, and I bet you could get six credit hours, maybe eight, for it. And that would help with the graduation thing, huh? Also, it would help you figure out whether you really want to have a career in journalism. And if you do, this would get you the job of your choice.”

“How could I arrange that?”

“I can talk to the journalism department chair—even though she’s in a different college, I can still be persuasive—and suggest it. You’re in a unique position with the information you have, and you’re interested in the case. And a big writing assignment like this is the best way to learn to write. I know it will sound intimidating, but I’m talking about a 25,000-word paper, or something like that. Not a whole book, but a start on one. And, like we discussed earlier, you’ll get into my class, for sure. If I don’t say so myself, my class is the perfect way to learn about crime reporting. Amy Hodges, the police department press liaison, told me so herself.”

She was looking him over. “You know? I think I can understand what Annette sees in you.”

It was his turn to blush.

* * *

The salmon was ready to grill, Jennifer’s salad was ready for the oil and vinegar, and, because it was close to 8:00, Hal had put out crackers and cheese. Annette would be ravenous, he knew, and would eat whatever she could find in the refrigerator, even raw moose *adovada*, if there was no alternative.

She walked through the door just past the hour, looking tired and hungry, saw the crackers, and grabbed a handful.

“Am I ever glad to get home. I need a quick shower while you make dinner. And I’ll eat yours if you don’t make enough, I’m so hungry.” And she headed upstairs.

At the table, she wolfed down half a salmon steak and then was ready to slow down and talk.

“So we’ve got the Two Stooges in custody, and, Jennifer, I understand that you have some interesting information for me?”

Jennifer looked at Hal, but he wasn’t helping. She was on her own. So she mentioned the telephone call that Annette would be so interested in. But instead of giving details, she took a deep breath and plunged in.

“Ms. Trieri, I don’t want to sound like I’m trying to bargain, but I would like to propose something. Dean Weathers actually suggested it.”

Hal was suddenly very busy trying to wiggle a salmon bone loose from his steak.

“I’m a journalism major, and I’d like to try to do an undergraduate thesis on the story of this case. Not for real-time publication in newspapers, but more of an archival piece. I did a lot of research on Steffanie Boudreau in preparation for the interview that never happened, and I kind of identified with her somehow. So what do you think? I mean, I’ll tell you everything I know, but I’d like to do this story, too.”

Annette popped another big bite into her mouth and looked thoughtful while she chewed.

“You know, what would be a good story would be the media coverage of this thing. I mean, sure, the case itself is interesting, but that will be reported over and over. If you’re going to do something really original, you could do a kind of investigative report on all the reporters, especially the tabloid ones, that showed up looking for juicy stories. See what I mean? That would even be the kind of scholarly thing that’s required for a thesis. I’ve got no problem with providing you with whatever information you’d need, as long as it doesn’t get to any of the other reporters in town. Besides,” she grinned, “One of the tabloid reporters thinks he’s my close personal friend, and boy would he make a

perfect case study. Hmm. As long as your defenses are up. I bet he wouldn't hesitate to hit on you before you could blink."

"What a cool idea! Dean Weathers suggested a thesis, but I wasn't thinking of a real topic beyond something to do with this murder. And it is a murder, isn't it?"

"Well, that's something we haven't really figured out yet, believe it or not. But you can see for yourself in the coroner's report. Which you'll have to read, blood and guts and all. That's part of being a journalist. So what do you have for me, anyway?"

"Dean Weathers and I talked about this telephone conversation I had with Steffanie Boudreau the night she died. I needed to set up the time for her interview the next day, Tuesday. I can go through it as closely as I remember it when you've got a tape recorder or something, but probably the most interesting to you would be when she talked about having a date Monday night, to go up into the canyon to play her violin."

Annette looked surprised and sat up straight.

"She mentioned something like a 'date with somebody' but I didn't really catch the name. She had this strong French accent and I think she was drunk. But," she looked at Hal, "I've been thinking about it and it sounded like a 'date with homm-ie.' You know, the French word for 'man,' only with an 'i-e' sound on the end. It doesn't make much sense to me."

"Not 'ami,' the French word for 'lover'?"

"Maybe, but it seemed like too much accent on the first syllable, and too broad an 'a'."

Hal was looking thoughtful.

"You know what? Along with all the other possibilities, that could be a diminutive, affectionate nickname for my colleague, Dean Jacques Ament."

* * *

Fourteen

By 9:30 the next morning, Annette was ready to begin her interviews. She had been thinking hard about which of her captive climbers to talk with first, and she finally settled on the one she didn't know, Schwab. He was essentially a tourist, or, more accurately, a summer visitor, and therefore he was more vulnerable. She could use what information she got from him in the subsequent interview with her pal Reg Meeker.

Jennifer's information could not have come at a better time, although it would have been nice to have a more positive identification of Boudreau's last date. The discussion over dinner had continued until about all the possibilities were exhausted. Annette had pointed out that Schwab could go by "Lennie" and, because he was also a musician, a date would be logical. Maybe they knew each other from other concerts. But "Lennie" was just too far from what Jennifer had heard for her to think it very possible. At the same time, it was most probably the name of someone she'd heard, rather than a generic reference. Which left two possibilities, someone completely unknown or someone highly improbable, the Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Frémont State University.

Annette was wondering what mood her two interviewees would be in today, bad or worse. They had, of course, been kept in separate accommodations. And the reason that Annette had been so late

getting home the evening before was related to these accommodations. She had scoured the local city parks for two of her favorite homeless guys, Jimbo and Lucky, so that her climbers would have roommates. Couldn't let them sleep alone, after all. And both Jimbo and Lucky were gratified to be able to sleep indoors, for the nights were getting chilly as fall approached. They also appreciated the several packs of cigarettes that Annette promised them for acting as spies on the two climbers.

Jimbo, put in the holding cell with Meeker, was a down-on-his-luck biker who had lived in his leathers for about the past three years running. Very fragrant. A large fellow, about 6'5" and 350 pounds, he was also quite the conversationalist. Annette introduced him to Meeker with the comment that she knew that they would grow close during their night together. Meeker had not been amused.

Lucky, a wiry little man, bald, stubble-faced, and missing an eye, fancied himself an evangelist of the fire-and-brimstone school. When he heard Schwab's name, he deduced, incorrectly, that Schwab was Jewish and immediately set out on a mission of conversion. Annette figured this would last all night.

Both Jimbo and Lucky had played these roles before, and they were quite good at remembering conversations. Meeker would probably be too afraid of Jimbo's potential friendship not to discuss why he was in jail, and Schwab would gladly discuss his predicament as a respite from religious browbeating. So Annette had them just where she wanted them.

Carrying her notebook, two cups of coffee and a bag containing a muffin, she walked into the interview room containing Schwab. She had heard he had not touched his breakfast.

"Good morning, Mr. Schwab. I trust you slept well. As you may guess, we need to talk. Of course, you needn't talk with me if you don't want to. You have the right to an attorney. And everything is being video recorded, behind that mirror there." She pointed over her shoulder at the wall behind her.

"You know this, but I want to make clear the fact that you're here for questioning—you have not been charged with anything. Yet. You may not be. We have, ah," she looked at her watch, "about six hours to charge you or release you. What we do will depend on how this interview goes. You may stop answering my questions at any time, or, for that matter, not start. You may request an attorney at any time, either your own or one appointed to assist you."

She took the muffin out of the bag and set it in the middle of the metal table where Schwab was seated.

"These actions, of course, will cause delays. If all goes well, we just might have you out of here in a couple of hours. Otherwise, well, we couldn't find you over the weekend when we were looking for you and we're not keen to have that happen again. And I'm certain that we can get a warrant for your arrest. But the main reason for that is to question you, which we can do right now. Am I making sense?"

Schwab had been staring at the muffin, sipping at the coffee Annette had handed him. His appetite must have returned, she thought. She sat down across the table from him, reached across for the muffin, and unwrapped it. He looked as if he might begin drooling.

"Um, yes, I believe you are. Although why you would want to question me is something I don't understand."

She broke the muffin in half and set the two pieces down, amid a cascade of crumbs. His eyes dilated as the aroma of blueberry-cinnamon reached his nose.

"I'm sure you will shortly. OK, first question: where were you two weeks ago last night?"

"Aahhmmm, let's see. Mondays are chamber concerts, and two weeks ago I wasn't involved. So I must have been out somewhere. Let me think. Probably the bar scene. As you know, I'm from out of

town and don't have family here. So on nights off I tend to socialize in the pathetic ways I can." He smiled thinly.

"What bar? Or bars?"

"Well, I'm not sure I can say. I do this about twice a week and they all start to blur together."

"You are the first chair violin, the concertmaster, for the large orchestra of the AMFest, is that correct?"

"Yes I am. Or was, I guess the Festival is over and the ensembles have disbanded."

"Of course, you knew that Ms. Steffanie Boudreau was to have been the guest violin soloist for the concerts two weekends ago?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. I had never met her and was excited to have the opportunity to play with her. Um, in the concert I mean." He blushed slightly. "It's just tragic, what happened to her. She was so young and had so much potential. I can't tell you how much I admired her talent and artistry."

His eyes had not left the muffin the entire time.

"Would you like some of this muffin?"

He grabbed a piece and ate it in one bite.

"How much money did you and Mr. Meeker deposit in Santa Fe yesterday, and what was its source?"

Half-chewed muffin globs spewed across the room, fortunately, Annette thought, not at her. Schwab broke out in a coughing fit. Annette waited patiently.

"I don't know what you mean. Reg and I were in Santa Fe to see the museums and art galleries. I've been wanting to go all summer but never had the opportunity before."

"How is it that you and Mr. Meeker have become friends?"

"He works in public relations at the university, and we ran into each other at an introductory reception for the Festival last June. Talking, we discovered..." Annette could see that he was thinking carefully about what to say next. "...We discovered that we have various interests in common. Southwest history and art, for example, which is why we finally went down to Santa Fe for the day yesterday."

"Where were you on Saturday and Sunday?"

Neither climber had been told about the search warrants that had been executed.

"Why, I was around here. Doing various things, in and out of my apartment. Then we went down to Santa Fe late Sunday afternoon."

He was beginning to sweat from his forehead, and he was rubbing his palms on his pant legs.

"Why were you absent from this weekend's concerts?"

"Oh, that. I injured my left hand last week. Had to bow out."

"Mr. Schwab, was there any professional jealousy between you and Ms. Boudreau?"

"Oh, heavens no. She was way out of my league. I was feeling honored to have the opportunity to play on the same stage with her. Until that tragic accident."

"Mr. Schwab, it's been reported in the newspapers over the weekend that it was not an accident. Big headlines all over the place. Surely if you were around town you would have seen that. This suggests to

me that you just lied about your whereabouts this weekend. Can you show me the injury that prevented you from playing, please?"

The sweat was now trickling, and his breathing was revealing the stress he felt.

"Oh, well, it's a muscle strain, here in my wrist and hand." He held out his left hand toward her. "Please don't touch it, it's tender."

"Mr. Schwab, are you a rock climber, a technical climber who uses climbing ropes and other equipment?"

He looked startled that this should come up, and blinked rapidly. Finally he managed a sickly smile.

"Well, I'm not sure that 'climber' is accurate. I'm just learning. I took it up this summer as an outdoors diversion. Something to do in my spare time, you know?"

"I see, along with the bar scene. Mr. Schwab, have you ever climbed a cliff face above the Animas River between Rockwood and the High Bridge?"

He almost fell out of his chair.

"Um, well, er, I climb with friends, of course, you never climb alone. And they've taken me all sorts of places. It could be that I've been somewhere like that. I couldn't say for sure."

Annette sat back in her chair and turned slightly sideways, toward the wall. She stared thoughtfully for nearly a minute. Schwab couldn't stand it.

"Rockwood does sound somewhat familiar. It's on the narrow-gauge line, right? Up the river a long ways. I remember a couple of trips up there, to different climbing places above the river. So maybe I was where you're talking about, once."

She let the silence drag on, and finally heaved a deep sigh.

"Leonard, Leonard, Leonard. I had hoped that you would be forthcoming and truthful, and that we could release you without further delay. But if you're going to be untruthful with me, well, I'm afraid that won't be possible. Do you know a lawyer? I think you'll be wanting one."

"Wait, no, really, I want to help. I haven't done anything. Please, I'm telling the truth. How can I make you understand?"

"You can tell me what you, Reg Meeker, and Steffanie Boudreau were doing on the railroad tracks in the Animas Gorge, between Rockwood and the High Bridge, very early in the morning two weeks ago today, that's how. Honestly and truthfully, with no prevaricating. I believe I'll give you a little while to think about it."

She left, wondering whether the rest of the muffin would still be sitting there when she returned. She sort of thought it would be.

* * *

Out in the lobby, Annette called her office to get telephone messages and put into motion the extraction of Reginald Meeker from his night-long conversation with the loquacious Jimbo. Schwab had lied almost continually, so she expected Meeker to do the same. And she knew his attitude would be quite different. More combative, less pliant. It made her tired just to think about it. Time for a restorative phone call.

"Good morning Alice, how's the day treating you? Well, I hope?"

“Good morning, Annette.”

At least Alice was able to be informal over the phone.

“Much better than yesterday, although still a bevy of lost souls to deal with. The first day of classes is always the worst. Let me put you through.” There was a short pause.

“What news from the world of bright lights and rubber hoses?” Hal could be positively primitive when he tried.

“Lies, all lies. From Lennie and probably from Reggie, too, I’ll have to see. Two Stooges, indeed. How are you doing today? Going to bring another babe home?”

“Aww, now, c’mon. She’s just a kid. Who needed a shoulder to cry on. And I didn’t even think about thinking bad thoughts.”

“Oh? None? Zero? I don’t know how much more untruth I can stand today.”

“Well, OK, just one or two little bitty ones.” He laughed. “The hardest part was in my car. First, I kept think of how driving fast makes you horny. Then, I kept thinking of how much fun it would have been to have had a car like mine when I was 22. With a girl like that in the passenger seat. Whew. Now you know why I felt so frisky last night. Well, that and the fact that you were home with me after having been gone.”

“Hmm. OK, you get points for honesty. But I’ll have to think about diplomacy points. Anyway, I’ll just assume it had to do with the tip about the phone conversation she had for me.”

“Well, truthfully, that’s why she came to the airport. I’d originally just invited her over for supper, and I was thinking of this week sometime. But it seemed like the sooner you heard about it the better. So what’s happening with those guys in Santa Fe?”

“We’re having a discussion after lunch about what to do. Problem is, there may well be a leak within the Santa Fe PD, and I need to factor that in. Holtzmann is toast, of course, but it may take a while. And that guy Dino, his chauffeur, is a good guy, in my book. I should send him some flowers, or something.”

“Aha! Now I’ve got something I can tease you about!”

“Aw, not really. First, he’s not all that attractive, just big. And second, he saved my hide, like I told you last night. He said something about being a graduate student, so he’d probably like to meet you.”

“Well, I’d like to do a long weekend with you down there, feed you some real chile and so on, but not until this Holtzmann character is put away. Daylight abductions are more than my delicate academic constitution can stand. How about spaghetti for dinner? Red sauce, garlic bread, the works?”

“I’ll eat a light lunch. Six-ish? I deserve an early evening.”

“See you then. ’Bye, lover.”

Frisky, indeed, she thought. He damn near wore me out. I thought these fifty-plus guys were supposed to be slowing down.

* * *

On her way back to the interview room, Annette stopped to check in the recording booth.

“Everything going smoothly, Bill?” On the other side of the one-way mirror, Schwab was sitting forward, with his face in his hands.

“Got it all. He’s been about like that since you left.”

“I’ll go in quietly and see if he’s going to be more cooperative. You know, these amateur liars get tiresome. Give me a career criminal any day. At least they present a challenge.”

She left and walked around to the door to the interview room. Opening it as quietly as she could, she slipped in. The remaining half muffin was still sitting on the table where she had left it.

“Well, Mr. Schwab? What will it be? I hope you understand that I do this a lot, interview suspects, I mean. It’s my job, and, if I don’t say so myself, I’m good at it. The sheriff’s departments from the counties in the area routinely call me in to help them. So this business of trying to lie your way out of an already bad situation is only making things worse, and in several ways. First, it antagonizes me. Second, it will make the rest of the investigative team even more suspicious of you than they are now. Third, it’s dumb from your legal perspective, because it gives me yet another reason, and legal excuse, to hold you. If you’re innocent of criminal activity, your best approach with me would be simply to come clean. It may put you in an embarrassing position, or something else uncomfortable like that, but those things are always better than prison, believe me. Especially on a first-degree felony conviction. Now, let me refresh your memory about my last question:

“What were you, Reg Meeker, and Steffanie Boudreau doing on the railroad tracks in the Animas Gorge, between Rockwood and the High Bridge, very early in the morning two weeks ago today?”

He finally looked up at her, and it was apparent that he’d been crying.

“We didn’t kill her, OK? In fact, the last time I saw her, she was fine. Higher than a kite, but fine.”

“She just walked off? What direction? Alone?”

“Toward the train stop. With LaCoste, Tony LaCoste. Works for Holtzmann, he’s the guy who took us down to Santa Fe.”

“So you didn’t fly down, but you flew back yesterday?”

“Right.”

“And you left Boudreau, alive but intoxicated, in the hands of one Tony LaCoste up in the canyon. On the railroad tracks?”

“Actually, it was at the Peaceful Pines stop, at that little not-quite station they’ve got there.”

“Do you know the cause of her intoxication?”

“I’m not sure, but probably marijuana and alcohol. Although she sure seemed to have a lot of energy. I do know she smoked some marijuana, I saw her. And she smelled like liquor.”

He was close enough to her to smell her breath? Annette made a mental note.

“You said ‘we didn’t kill her.’ ‘We’ who?”

Schwab hesitated, evaluating how far he should go, evidently.

“Reg and I. I don’t know what went on with LaCoste.”

“So you and Reginald Meeker were at the Peaceful Pines station, or way stop. What were you doing up there?”

“Why am I being questioned? Is this a fishing expedition, or are you interested in a specific crime of some kind?”

His spine was re-stiffening, it seemed.

“Mr. Schwab, I’m looking for cooperation and information. If you’ll answer my questions, then that cooperation will be rewarded. I mentioned that we can get an arrest warrant for you. If I execute such a warrant, you’ll know precisely what it is that you’re being arrested for. If you cooperate fully, however, I may not get one. Would you like to tell me what the two of you were doing up there? Or should I move on to other matters and keep in mind your lack of cooperation?”

“Climbing. We were rock climbing. I was telling the truth about our climbing up in the canyon. Although I’m not really just a beginner.”

“You were climbing at night?”

“No, we got a late start that day and were spending the night up there, waiting to walk out in the morning.”

“Walk out?”

“Walk the tracks back to Rockwood, where we left a car.”

“I recall from a conversation with Mr. Meeker last week that he flew in from Denver that Monday, which means he didn’t arrive here until afternoon. When did you get up there?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about that. That was one of the rules.”

“Whose rules are these?”

“Well, I’m not supposed to talk about that either.”

“But, because you’re being so cooperative, I’m sure you will, given the alternative, no?”

* * *

Grumpy. That’s how Reginald Meeker looked, grumpy, she thought. In which case, Schwab was Dopey and they were the Two Dwarfs and not the Two Stooges. Well, here comes the Wicked Witch. She carried coffee for two into the interview room containing Meeker. No muffin, this time.

“Mr. Meeker. How are we this morning? And how is our new friend, the gentle Jimbo? He was gentle with you, wasn’t he?”

“Your department will be hearing from my attorney, Lieutenant, you may be sure. This is harassment, pure and simple, and harassment that placed me in no little danger.”

“Well, that’s not what the judge thought when he gave us the warrants to search your house.”

That should steal his thunder, she thought. Meeker blinked several times, clearly re-evaluating his strategy.

“Now, Mr. Meeker. Let’s not play games. First, let me explain the situation and the ground rules.”

And, as she had with Schwab, she pointed out the video camera behind the mirror and outlined the options facing Meeker.

“My interview with Mr. Schwab earlier this morning was most revealing. I hope to corroborate some of his comments here and to gain a better understanding of your role in Ms. Boudreau’s last hours.”

She had not mentioned the DNA testing that was in progress, nor that she had recognized one of the keys he had in his pockets on being arrested yesterday as a safe deposit box key. It was a near match to the one that Schwab had been carrying.

“And, of course, to understand your interaction with Mr. Holtzmann over the weekend.”

During this exposition, she had watched Meeker becoming progressively redder, and now she was expecting an explosion. But he held himself in check.

“Well, I don’t know what Leonard may have told you, but I can assure you what I am about to say will be the entire truth of the matter. I have nothing to hide. I’ve tried to impress this upon you in our previous interviews. My life is an open book. In fact a lot of it’s written down in that log book I told you about.”

“Then you won’t mind telling me how much Holtzmann paid for your artifacts.”

He looked startled.

“The artifacts that you found up in the gorge, in that cave on the wall. I’d like to double check Schwab’s numbers.”

“Ah, well, Len is the one who handles the financial transactions, so I really don’t know exact figures. About much of anything. But I’m afraid you’re confused. We were involved in a transaction with Holtzmann, but it wasn’t artifacts.”

Don’t tell me, she thought, that he’s going to come clean about the violin.

“Of course, it’s possible that Mr. Schwab wasn’t entirely candid with me. What’s your story?”

“It’s well-known that Holtzmann deals in artifacts, as well as reproductions. He’s always looking for sources of clay that he can use in his reproductions of ancient pots. These sources, of course, are scattered about in various places, and the river gorge is a productive place for deposits. We found some clay that we thought might be of interest to him and took him samples. He liked what he saw, so we sold him the information. Not clay, because he will have to figure out how to pay the rightful owner for it. Just the information. He paid us a finder’s fee. Len took care of the financial transaction, like I said.”

Now, that’s truly creative, she thought. I wonder what else I can get him to make up?

“And, because you’re a rock climber, it’s only natural that you’d be in the canyon anyway, is that correct?”

“Exactly! I knew you’d understand. We’ve been climbing up and down the canyon all summer, and in one spot we found an especially good-looking clay deposit. So we took Holtzmann a sample.”

“Why were you in the canyon all night on Monday, two weeks ago last night?”

He looked more than a little scared at this change of direction.

“Um, let’s see, two weeks ago, let me think. I guess I don’t recall being there all night. What makes you think that?”

“This was the day you flew in from Denver with Ms. Boudreau. Perhaps you got a late start and dark just caught up with you. Anyway, I’m more interested in something else. Where Ms. Boudreau may have obtained her narcotics and what time you, and she, got up the canyon.”

“Well, I don’t know about drugs or what time she got there, but we, I mean Len and I, got there about supper time. We did a little climbing and then walked the tracks down to the Peaceful Pines stop.”

“If she didn’t go up with you, then she must have gone up with someone else. How was it that you and she met up?”

“Well, we... Wait. Who says we met up? Len and I were up there, sure, but we were camping out. Because we were climbing and dark caught up with us. That’s all.”

His broad forehead was bathed in sweat.

“Hmm. I’m not sure that I can quote you precisely, but we could always play back the tape. Something about having nothing to hide and telling me the complete truth. Was this a lie also, or did you actually intend to lie all along?”

“I...no...I...we, we were up the canyon climbing. And, if the newspapers are reporting things correctly, it was in the vicinity of where Steffanie’s body was found, up on the High Line. There was someone else up there, I mean at the Peaceful Pines stop, I heard a commotion. But I was trying to sleep. I had a long day, flying in from Denver and then going climbing, and all. So I really didn’t see anything.”

“Mr. Meeker, do you think I’m stupid? This is really quite insulting. Surely you must know that the reason that you and Mr. Schwab were kept apart last night, and the reason you’re being questioned separately, is so that we can compare your stories. Now, you and Mr. Schwab appear to be good friends. Despite this, it could be that he’s lying to implicate you. Or you could be lying. There is no potential for a simple misunderstanding here, given that the stories the two of you are telling are so different. And, I must say, that his has much more of the ring of truth to it than yours. Clay samples indeed.”

Annette began gathering her things as if to leave.

“OK, OK. We weren’t really camping, we were sleeping on the benches at the Peaceful Pines stop. We, we didn’t want to walk out in the dark, so we were waiting there. And I was, in fact, asleep, or almost, when I heard violin music, echoing in the canyon. Loud enough to be heard clearly over the noise of the white water. Beautiful. Len was blown away. And, then, here comes Steffanie, walking down the path from Peaceful Pines, playing away. She said she was meeting someone. She was stoned. Len recognized her right away. They talked for a while, she let him play her violin a little, and a guy came down from the Resort and they walked away together. Then we waited all night. That’s it, really.”

“Now, think carefully about this, Mr. Meeker. Did you recognize the guy who came up from the Resort for her?”

It was almost possible to see the gears turning in the primitive calculator in his head, evaluating how much Annette really knew and what he should say.

“No. At least not at the time. Now I know his name is Tony LaCoste. He works for Holtzmann, and he gave us a ride down to Santa Fe with the clay samples.”

The strange mixture of truth and fiction was beginning to become so confusing as to be funny. Annette wondered when he would get confused about it himself.

“Did you wait at the Peaceful Pines stop all night, until the first train came in the next morning?”

“No, we walked back to Rockwood at first light.”

Annette thought about this, trying to put everything together.

“Did you see anything strange on that walk?”

She realized that St. Clare’s new time of death for Boudreau would have been just about dawn.

“No, we walked back to our ropes, pulled them up, and went back to Rockwood. Nothing strange or unusual.”

Annette sighed and began gathering her things again.

“Mr. Meeker. Reginald. Please. I have unsolicited testimony from someone not involved in all this that those ropes were hanging there when the first Silverton train went by at about 9:00 that morning. I’m sorry, but I’m really, really tired of these lies. Do you have a lawyer?”

“Oh, wait! Maybe we forgot the ropes that morning. We went there more than once, I don’t remember exactly. But there wasn’t anything strange, really.”

“Mr. Meeker, I walked that section of track myself. How is it that you wound up at the Peaceful Pines stop, across the High Bridge from where you were climbing? Why didn’t you walk out the night before?”

“Ahhh, it was just easier to walk over to Peaceful Pines. That’s all. Really.” He was beginning to sound as he didn’t even believe himself.

“You’re lying. I’m tired of this. Good day, Mr. Meeker.”

She walked out.

* * *

Well, she thought, on her way back to her office, that was interesting. Despite the lies, there is a coherent story emerging.

Climbers walk in late in the afternoon and, for some reason, wind up sleeping at the Peaceful Pines stop. Boudreau is up at Peaceful Pines, getting there who knows how, and goes for a late-night stroll to play in the canyon. LaCoste is there, for some reason.

She either is killed or dies of a drug overdose, and her body gets left on the tracks, *sans* clothes. Of course, whoever put her body on the tracks has to haul it right by where the climbers are sleeping, and they can’t have missed it on their walk out. Unless the climbers are really sleeping at the Resort and don’t leave until after our train picks up the body. I’d sure sleep at the Resort, and sleep late.

But if Boudreau was at the Resort, then I wasn’t getting a straight story from that guy up there, Westerman, Richard Westerman. And there was that conversation yesterday between Holtzman and someone named “Dick,” who was some kind of manager, about a “resort.” Perhaps a more formal investigation would be in order.

Back at her desk, she called the La Plata County sheriff’s office to discuss a warrant for Peaceful Pines and to see if someone from their jurisdiction would like to accompany her up there. But they had taken off for lunch, so she had to leave a message. Maybe the people at the Resort would just cooperate, especially if she talked with someone besides Westerman. Like the owner. He, or she, surely wouldn’t want the potentially bad publicity that a formal search of their records could bring. She picked up the telephone again.

“Good morning, Peaceful Pines Resort.”

“Good morning. I wonder if I could speak with the manager, please?”

“This is the front desk, may I help you?”

“This is Lieutenant Trieri, investigations division of the Durango Police Department. I’d like to speak to the manager on duty, please.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Well, I’d like to help, but we’re between managers just now. Would the owner be OK?”

“Thank you, even better.”

There was a pause and finally a woman’s voice came on the line.

“Lieutenant Trieri, I believe he said? This is Anne Beldon. My husband and I own the Resort. How can I help you?”

“I’m leading the investigation of the death of the woman whose body was found on the Silverton tracks a couple of weeks ago. I’m sure you recall it.”

“Oh, most certainly. It was so close to here and all.”

“Initially, we had no reason to think that the Resort was a part of this, but we now have some evidence that the victim, her name was Steffanie Boudreau, may have been there the night before her body was found. I wonder if it might be possible for me to come up and look through your registration records to see if any of the individuals we are investigating may have been registered.”

“Oh, dear. I certainly hope not. But I suppose it makes some sense, given our location. Feel free to come up any time, and I’ll put our records at your disposal. I’ll help as much as I can, but I’m rather busy just now.”

Annette was relieved that cooperation seemed to be the order of the day and decided to lighten up a bit.

“I can see how you might be, with the size of your place. I had a tour last week, and it’s beautiful. Although, I have to say, if I were the owner, I’d hire good help and do my best to just sit and enjoy the scenery and fresh air.”

There was a chuckle from the other end of the line.

“That’s my plan, but you know Robert Burns’ comment about plans, no matter how well laid. The person that I usually have do all this work up and quit on me yesterday. Not even the usual notice. With Labor Day Weekend coming up. And to think that I trusted that letter of reference from his brother.”

“Hmm. My tour was with your manager, a Mr. Westerman. And he has a brother, I believe, who works down here at the General Palmer.”

“That’s Phillip. He wrote the letter. Richard, my guy, is the one who left. They’re twins. I should have known better. Live and learn. Anyway, come on up when you get the chance and I’ll help out as much as I can.”

* * *

Fifteen

So Richard Westerman had disappeared, and he was connected with Holtzmann and therefore this guy LaCoste, who was at the Peaceful Pines Resort the night that Boudreau died. And her violin wound up in the hands of Holtzmann, along with whatever stuff the Two Dwarfs, Grumpy and Dopey, had run across. Clay samples, or whatever. But it sounded from that telephone conversation in Holtzmann’s office yesterday as if Richard and Holtzmann work the artifact trade together, so he’s probably not left the area.

But why would the Two Dwarfs avoid telling the truth about their role in all this? Surely it would be easy for them to play the innocent amateurs who get in over their heads with this gang of professional pot-hunters.

At least Westerman’s involvement provides a lead into that snowplow incident, she thought.

She dove into the paperwork associated with arresting Meeker. Probably the best thing to do would be to start small, she thought. Obstructing a police investigation, or something like that. Then the telephone rang.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Annette? This is Wilbur, over at the sheriff’s office. You left a message for me to call.”

Wilbur Jamison, the La Plata County Sheriff, had evidently come back from lunch. After two hours, Annette noticed from her watch.

“Thanks for calling back, Wilbur. I called about the Boudreau investigation, you know, that body we found on the Silverton tracks a couple of weeks ago? I need to go up to Peaceful Pines Resort and poke around. It’s your county, and I thought I ought to let you know in case you want to come along.”

With cooperation at the Resort, a search warrant wouldn’t be necessary, so inviting him was for protocol reasons rather than jurisdiction.

“You need me to get a search warrant?”

“No, I talked with the owner this morning, and she’s most cooperative.”

“Anne? She’s a peach. And I bet she’d like this thing cleaned up as soon as possible, so she’ll surely cooperate. Is the Resort involved somehow? I guess that body was pretty close by.”

“Hard to say. The victim may have been staying there, or gone there for a nightcap, or something. What I can’t figure is, how did she get up there? We know she had an early dinner here in Durango, but that lasted until seven. How do you get up there at night?”

“Good question. All the regular guests come in on the train. But, say! They have an emergency vehicle, a station wagon fitted out to ride the rails. Few years back, I remember one of their guests had a heart attack, and the weather was too bad to get a helicopter in. So they invested in this car. After the trains are done for the day, they pretty much have the tracks to themselves, and if there’s an emergency, they just run it up to Rockwood and get on the road. Maybe somebody fetched her in that thing.”

And maybe, Annette thought, somebody used it to go get the snowplow as well.

* * *

She found Lance Riggins at his favorite watering hole, reading his latest literary masterpiece, this one including a front-page picture of an “artist’s rendition” of a menacing-looking snowplow tipping a large SUV over a cliff, with a terrified passenger’s face staring out a window. Strangely, it was a mirror image of the actual event, like a photograph printed backwards. Couldn’t they do anything right?

“Mr. Riggins, good afternoon. I see you’ve succeeded in meeting yet another deadline.”

“Ah, Lieutenant Trieri. Indeed I have. And I did it by writing in the first person, no less. None of the usual ‘this reporter blah, blah’ sort of verbiage. How wonderful to be in the middle of a story. And to have an editor who’s afraid to touch my stuff.”

“I know I keep coming in and asking questions, but questions keep coming up. So can you handle a few more?”

“So far, I don’t feel like I’ve been very helpful. Although,” he smirked, “the questions have been helpful to me in thinking about angles for stories. So ask away.”

She smiled. “This case is taking more twists and turns than I would have expected, even given its bizarre beginning. I remember that you ‘borrowed’ a vehicle, a pickup truck, I think it was, to get back down here from Rockwood the night of your little adventure, is that right?”

“Uh, well, yes. And I made sure it got back to its owner, remember? With a couple \$100 bills for the guy’s trouble. Even though he didn’t know it had been borrowed. But I got a release signed by him, so I’m clean, I think.”

“Of course, that’s not the issue. But it’s occurred to me that you must have started looking for cars, trucks, whatever, with keys in them the first thing, when you finally got up to Rockwood, right?”

“Right. And it took a while to find the one I borrowed. I sort of figured it would be easy, but even up there people don’t seem to leave keys in the ignition very much. Bet they lock their front doors, too. The end of the innocence. Say, wasn’t that a song?” He grinned, trying to flirt.

Annette ignored the ploy. “Meaning that you’d have started looking at the first vehicles you came to, in the rail yard there. It would be very helpful to me if you could try to remember each one you looked at. This could be important in finding whoever put your car, and your friend, into the river.”

“Wow. I don’t know. I wasn’t paying attention to the vehicles, I was looking for keys. And there wasn’t anything, at least that I saw, until I got into that subdivision up the hill. What am I supposed to have seen that you want me to remember?”

Annette looked thoughtful. “I’m not certain. I thought maybe you would have seen something unusual that I could use to make a connection.”

She smiled, and continued. “A long shot, but that’s about where I am, working long shots. So, now we’re two weeks into the investigation, the AMFest is over, and you’re still here. Any idea of how long you’re going to stick with it? No offense, I mean, but surely your readers will lose interest. Their attention span can’t be too long.”

“I beg your pardon!” He was grinning even more widely. “Do I understand you to be casting aspersions on the highly educated and critical readership of the *National Gazette*? Why, I’ll have you know that our surveys indicate an average educational level of at least third grade! You can’t get rid of me that easily, Lieutenant. Besides, I’m kind of getting to like it around here, and I’ve got this novel to finish. It’s not the big city, but it’s quite civilized, for the wild, wild west, and the scenery is pretty. And so are the girls. Whew!”

She ignored this even more completely than the attempts at flirting.

“Any idea of next week’s story? Maybe I can help.”

Help keep you away from places I don’t want you going, she thought.

“No, I need a rest day or two. Think I’ll go over to Mesa Verde National Park tomorrow, pick up some local history. To provide local color for my Pulitzer-prize level writing.”

“Well, watch out for rattlesnakes. Wouldn’t want one of them to get hurt biting you.”

She left him looking confused.

* * *

“So, we finally booked them on obstruction charges, for now. That’ll stick for a couple of days, until a bail hearing, and then we can re-evaluate.”

Annette was sopping up the last of the basil-and-tomato sauce with a piece of garlic toast.

“I expect another night or two in cells with Jimbo and Lucky will get them to re-think their strategy of not cooperating. There are still too many holes and inconsistencies in their stories. We’ll start using the inconsistencies against them, one against the other. They’ll cave in eventually.”

“But you didn’t have any luck with Riggins on the snowplow thing?”

“Didn’t really expect to. More salad?”

He passed his plate.

“But you had to try. Presumably, whoever was driving the plow and left it in the woods walked out, up that trail. And got picked up by someone. It’s a long walk back to town, in either direction.”

“Yeah, and that’s why Riggins didn’t see the station wagon with the railroad wheels anywhere. Anyway, I’m going up to Peaceful Pines tomorrow morning, to check out their records. I’ll be back on one of the early downhill trains.”

“I’d love another shot at the river, but I’ve got meetings. I worry about your going up there alone.”

“I would, too, except Westerman has disappeared. Based on the conversation I overheard, I think Holtzmann and company have lost interest in that area. He said something about Hermosa. So it should be OK, really. He seems to be the threat to me, but we’ll put him away, too, sooner or later.”

The telephone rang, and they looked at each other. Their policy was generally to ignore dinner-time phone calls, given the high probability that it would be a random solicitation of some kind. But they were finished, so she answered it.

“Lieutenant Trieri? This is Sergeant Jim Stevens down at headquarters. We’ve got a call for you from a Mr. Papandreou, long distance. He insists that you’ll want to speak to him, but I didn’t want to give him your home number. Want me to put him through?”

“Yes, please. Thanks, Stevens.” There was a pause, and she heard a click or two.

“Lieutenant Trieri? This is Dionysus Papandreou, Dino, from Santa Fe? You said to call you with information.”

“Indeed I did, Mr. Papandreou. I trust that you didn’t get into trouble with your boss yesterday?”

“Well, a little.” She could hear a deep rumbling, which she decided was suppressed laughter.

“I did a pretty good acting job, though, and now he thinks you’re one tough cookie. To beat me up, I mean.”

The very thought of her beating Dino up made Annette laugh as well.

“Anyway, I thought you might like to know that I’m driving Holtzmann up to Cortez tomorrow, for a meeting with two of his guys, Tony LaCoste and Dick Westerman. I’m not sure what they’re up to, but it sounds like they’re moving on, to new acquisitions.”

“Do you know where the meeting will be?”

“No, he doesn’t tell me things like that until we get there. It’s a lunch meeting, so it’ll be at some restaurant in Cortez. And I don’t think I’ll be able to call you. Can’t use the phone in the limo, that’s for sure. But we will be taking the limo. Maybe someone can spot it. He wants to leave early, about 7:30, so we should be through Durango about 11:00 or 11:30 or so.”

“Mr. Papandreou, this is most helpful. You mentioned that you’re a graduate student. What’s your schedule for finishing your degree? And what’s the degree?”

“Uh, well, I’m supposed to be finishing my Ph.D. dissertation in philosophy this fall. From UNM. Why?”

“Philosophy, hmm? Well, I happen to have connections up here at Frémont State. I’ll put in a word for you. Too bad it’s not earth sciences of some kind, though. Be sure to call me if there’s anything else. And thanks for your help.”

Hal couldn’t help overhearing.

“Connections at Frémont State? In philosophy? You seeing Davie Gersowitz on the side?”

“Davie Gersowitz?”

“The philosophy chair. An unreconstructed deconstructionist, or something like that. Also, about 95 years old, around five feet tall, no teeth. Sharp as a tack, though. I bet he’d go for you.”

“Um. No, I was just asking about his major field, in case he...95 years old? Don’t your faculty ever retire?”

“Well, maybe only 80 or so. And we can’t make ’em, anymore. Used to be, 65 was the retirement age. Now, when they get tenure, they can work as long as they want. We’re putting in place rules about new tenure decisions, and the pension program is decidedly biased in favor of retirement at 60. But Davie is one of those people who was grandfathered in. Literally, in his case. Or maybe great-grandfathered. Anyway, what’s it about?”

“Papandreou, the guy who saved my bacon down in Santa Fe. He called to tell me that Holtzmann has a meeting with his henchpersons—see, you’re teaching me political correctness—over in Cortez tomorrow. And he, I mean Papandreou, is getting his Ph.D. in philosophy this fall, so I told him I’d put in a good word with you. I don’t know how much of a philosopher he is, but I guarantee he’d be able to maintain discipline in the classroom. So I did my part. And if Davie needs a new faculty member next year, maybe you could pass along the good word, no?”

“Absolutely. Those philosophy classes are one place where chaos runs amuck. A little discipline would be a good thing. Philosophically speaking.” He winked; she giggled and pretended to pout.

“OK, OK, I’ll mention it, but everyone’s very insistent these days on open faculty searches. Lots of heartfelt words about ‘hiring only the very best...’ and so on. And, of course, for diversity reasons. So if there’s an opening, he can apply. And, I suppose, you could send in an unsolicited letter about his ethical standards and so on. That would help, actually. Ethics is a big deal in philosophy.” He munched the last of his salad.

“As opposed to natural sciences?”

“Oh, sure. Twist the knife. Just because we had two chemistry professors in trouble with the law. And a natural resources professor. Say, maybe I should hire this guy to maintain discipline in my college.”

She had forgotten that teasing about these incidents was still too close to home, so she decided to load the dishwasher herself to make up for it.

* * *

Wednesday morning was busy, and to complicate matters the weather finally decided to make an attempt at the monsoon. It looked as if there would be severe thunderstorms all over the region by afternoon.

Annette made arrangements to have the main highway intersection south of downtown watched around 11:00, so that the progress of Holtzmann toward Cortez could be monitored. She also called the Cortez police department and the southwest regional office of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation to set up a tail when Holtzmann arrived there. Then she knocked on her captain's door.

"Come in."

He had his feet up on his desk and was watching television. Yesterday's performance by Reginald Meeker, it turned out.

"Morning, Captain. Oh, look, the award winning performance, best supporting actor in a comedy role, or something like that."

"You'd think that he'd know better. Here's a guy who's pretty young, really—maybe in his early 30s?—and he's got this great job, and he gets entangled in something like this. And then he thinks he can lie his way out of it."

"Well, I think today's the day we can break this case open."

She told him about the meeting in Cortez and her preparations.

"I think that even with the lies, we have enough information to bring in LaCoste, at least, maybe Westerman for questioning. And the CBI is going to talk to the FBI about arresting Holtzmann for grabbing me, although I'm asking them to go slow on that one. There's also the possibility that they'll be interested in him for violations of the Antiquities Act, or its follow-on."

Jankowski looked thoughtful. "There are still some gaps in our story, though. Like who was really the victim's last date. And what went on at Peaceful Pines that wound up with her getting dead. And where her clothes went. And who drove the snowplow a few nights later."

He thought for a moment. "It's hard to believe that this guy Holtzmann would have the gall to drive through here, though, if he tried to grab you just the other day. He should know that we'd be after him. And if there's a leak at the Santa Fe PD, he'd know that we know about the limo. What could he be thinking?"

"He seems to believe himself above the law, at least in northern New Mexico. He mentioned 'compensation' of law enforcement personnel to look the other way at times. Maybe he has the idea that his reach extends to here."

"Maybe it does, and we don't know about it." He looked even more thoughtful. "But, look, we have to remember where this started, with the dead violinist. And then a dead TV guy in a car dumped in the river. Holtzmann may be connected to those deaths, somehow, but there's no indication that he was directly involved."

"Lester seems to think that complications of a drug overdose, a combination of things, could have killed Boudreau. You know, caused a convulsion that broke her neck. And I think that LaCoste and Westerman, working together, are responsible for the snowplow incident. Can't say who was driving it, but probably LaCoste. Westerman worked at Peaceful Pines and would have had access to that station wagon of theirs."

"Huh?"

Annette filled him in on the specially equipped vehicle.

"So." Jankowski pursed his lips in concentration. "LaCoste overhears Riggins and Walker planning their escapade, there in the Narrow Gauge Saloon, and then he and Westerman retaliate with this snowplow thing?"

“Yeah. Westerman drives them down here to town, LaCoste steals the plow, drives up to Rockwood and gets on the tracks, then wipes out the Suburban and Walker. Then he meets Westerman in the station wagon up on the road, by the ski area. Or, I suppose, Westerman could have just followed him down from Rockwood, um, except then Riggins would have seen him, unless he waited a long time. Well, whatever, it was all in a good night’s work. Except they didn’t get Riggins, too, like they planned. Wonder why they haven’t tried again.”

“Maybe they figured he’d be too scared to make more trouble.”

“Have you seen this week’s *National Gazette*? Riggins’ front-page story is about this whole episode. Asks lots of ‘whodunit’ questions. Accuses us of incompetence and stonewalling.”

“Aw, gee, my subscription must have run out. Haven’t been to the supermarket today. But maybe the story will protect Riggins. It would bring the heat down, meaning us, to have something happen to him now. Anyway that’s all plausible. Now, what about the chain of events leading up to Boudreau’s death?”

“According to the girl’s story, Jennifer Mason, the *Free Press* reporter who called Boudreau that Monday night, Boudreau said she was going up the canyon with someone named ‘Hommie,’ or something like that. And both of the Two Dwarfs said they saw her up by Peaceful Pines, with LaCoste. But there’s the gap between the phone call and then. And I can’t connect LaCoste with this ‘Hommie’ person. So there’s still something missing. And, of course, we still don’t know the circumstances of her death quite well enough, at least not well enough to satisfy me.”

“Me, either. Or the DA, I’m certain. I’m going to have to think this through. There’s got to be something in all this that we can feed to the press, through Amy. Something that will help our cause.”

“And something that will give them a juicy bone to chew on. Hmm. How about the DNA tests? Tell them that we’re doing DNA tests on ‘bodily fluids’ associated with a ‘sexual assault’ and also about the search warrants we executed. Not on who, just that we did. Then we can make sure that some papers ‘accidentally’ get in to the cells where Schwab and Meeker are. That will scare the crap out of them, and maybe they’ll cooperate. That could help fill in missing pieces. And the ‘bodily fluids’ stuff will give the media people plenty of headline material.”

A slow smile spread across Jankowski’s face.

“Annette, you’re diabolical. The other thing it will do is to scare whoever else may have had sex with Boudreau, and presumably he’s one of the missing parts of all this. The ‘Hommie’ person.”

* * *

About a quarter past 11:00, Annette’s phone rang.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Lieutenant? This is Fred Winders. I’m sitting in an unmarked watching the 160-550 intersection, the one by downtown.”

“Fred! Good morning! Hope you had a couple of good days off. How’s the weather out there?”

“Looks like rain. Listen, that limo you’re looking for just cruised by. Or at least a limo of that description. Signaled his left turn like a good boy and everything. Headed west on 160.”

“Excellent! You’re finished there, so come on back. Or go to lunch or something. Thanks for the help.”

Her next call was to the university, Hal’s direct line.

“Weathers, science.”

“Hi, glad I caught you. Got lunch plans?”

“I was just getting organized for an executive meeting with the other deans and the provost. Wish I could cancel and have lunch with you, but this is a biggie. One topic will be Meeker, no doubt.”

“Rats. Well, got a couple of minutes? I need advice.”

“For you, I’ve got plenty of time. What’s up?”

“Well, we want to get the violin, the Stradivarius, back. I talked with Montoya down in Santa Fe about setting up a sting, finding a false buyer for it and meeting with Holtzmann to get it back. Of course, there’s a leak down there, I think, and it could be Montoya, although I kind of doubt it. But if it is, it means that the sting would be blown from the start. But I kind of think it was someone else. Anyway, what I want advice on is Jacques Ament. I had thought of him as a possible buyer. But you mentioned that he could be the person that Boudreau met with that Monday night. And, because she was with LaCoste later, maybe Ament and LaCoste know each other.” She paused, expectantly.

“Uh, I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“Well, what do you think? I mean, if they know each other the sting won’t work, using Ament.”

“I’m sorry, but what I think is that I have no clue. Really. When I told Ament that Boudreau was dead, he reacted pretty strongly, but she was his student, after all. If they were out together the night before, or I guess it would have been two nights before at that point, that could explain the reaction, too. If he already knew she was dead, well, then he’s a pretty good actor, I guess. Can’t you just use someone else for the sting?”

“I thought of Luigi, too. But I wanted to use them both, to set up an ostensible bidding war. It would make Holtzmann more likely to want to get involved.”

“But first you’ve got to settle the thing with the leak in Santa Fe. And that’ll take time. By then, maybe you’ll know about Ament and LaCoste. Could be that Ament and Boudreau went out but he’s still not really a part of anything sinister. Uh, sorry I’m striking out with advice, here.”

“Do you know Ament well enough to know if he’d cooperate with us? He didn’t volunteer that they’d been out the night of her death.”

“But did you ask him?”

“Well, no. But I did talk with him about the Stradivarius, and he didn’t know about it, or pretended not to. So if he was out with her, he was lying.”

“Maybe that’s where to start. He seems like an honest guy to me. And I’d think he would want the murder solved.”

“Unless he did it.”

“But you said that the Twin Midgets, or whatever you’re calling them, saw her alive in the middle of the night, up at Peaceful Pines. With LaCoste.”

“Two Dwarfs. Dopey and Grumpy. Will Ament be at this meeting you’ve got soon?”

“Most likely. He’s one of the club. Want me to set up a meeting with him for you?”

“Could you do it without his knowing it’s for me? I mean, do you deans get together to talk about things? Like, somewhere that I could just ‘accidentally’ show up?”

“My sweetie, the sneak. Let me talk with him after this meeting that’s coming up...” There was a pause, “...and that I’m going to be late to. OK? Got to go. I’ll call you after lunch.”

“Ciao.” As she hung up the phone, she noticed her message light blinking. Maybe, she thought, I should just get a telephone implanted surgically.

The message was from Montoya, who sounded hurt. Well, she had promised to come by his office to file a complaint about the abduction. Um, almost 48 hours ago. She’d have to be extra nice. Better get some fortification first. She headed for the vending machine.

Munching on a candy bar—the machine was out of her favorite, PayDay, so she settled for a Mounds—she returned the call from Santa Fe and was put right through.

“Luis? Listen, I’m sorry and I’ll explain. But I’d rather do it on another telephone. Can you call me from a pay phone in the hotel next door? What was it, the Anasazi? I promise the explanation will be worth it.”

There was a pause, long enough to begin to become uncomfortable. The voice that finally replied was distant.

“I was just on my way out to lunch anyway, so I’ll call you back in a few minutes. You’ll be there?”

“Absolutely. And I’ll not take any other calls. Promise.”

It took ten minutes, and Annette decided he was probably using a different telephone from the one she had suggested. Good idea, actually, she thought.

“Luis? Thank you so much. And I’m sorry. But there’s a problem.” She filled him on her suspicions about his department. “Anyway, I’m afraid to talk to you on your department phone because of this.”

“But the leak could be me, have you thought of that?”

“That’s why I didn’t call you. I’ve been thinking about it. You’re the one who sent me up San Francisco Street to the Cathedral, where I was grabbed. But. You know about the limo, and Holtzmann brought the thing by here today, on the way to Cortez. If the leak’s you, surely you would have told him that his limo is on our radar screen and he wouldn’t have brought it. Also, you told me about Holtzmann; I didn’t tell you. If you were working for him, you wouldn’t have done that. So I’m thinking it must be someone else, an eavesdropper or something. Someone listening in on your phone. Hence this stuff about using a different phone.”

There was another pause, shorter, and the voice that finally came back was friendlier this time.

“You know, this could explain some other things I’ve been wondering about. I appreciate your candor. And trust. I guess we should think of another way to get after that violin, in case our conversation about the sting idea was overheard.”

“I’m worried about that, too. We could take the chance, of course, and just make sure there’s plenty of backup in case he knows in advance and tries something. I’m also worried about Gunther. I guess I have this thing about protecting outrageous weirdness.”

“They picked you up on Cathedral Place, right, that street that the east end of San Francisco tees into?”

“Right. You suggested I walk back that way.”

“Yes, and that was when I was walking you out, through the hall and lobby, if I remember. But I’ve talked to Gunther on my phone about stuff involving Holtzmann before, and Gunther’s still healthy. Well, if he can be called healthy.”

“Hmm. Sounds like maybe we could take the risk and do the sting. With lots of care. I’ve got a glitch on my end, though, and I’ll have to go with only one bidder. At least if Holtzmann wants to meet them.” She explained about the problem with Ament.

“Let me have a talk with him and then we can see where we are, OK, Luis? Maybe we can make this work after all.”

“OK by me. I’ve got to deal with this problem in my station house anyway. Stay in touch?”

“For sure. And when we get this all settled, I’ll come back and take you and your wife out to dinner.”

* * *

Annette spent the rest of the afternoon typing up notes of the conversation, the interviews, and on other sundry paperwork. At about 5:30, Jankowski stuck his head in her door.

“They got to Cortez and had lunch at a restaurant called the Warsaw Inn. CBI had a guy there with a microphone and a recorder, across the room. They’re going to send us a copy of the tape. But, from what they say, it doesn’t sound like much. All of the conversation was about acquiring something called the McGurney collection. Purchase cost, shipping precautions, insurance, resale, blah, blah, blah. CBI is wondering why they went to the trouble.”

“Sounds like they were made and Holtzmann staged the conversation for their benefit. Unless there’s something about this collection that required Holtzmann and company to have lunch in Cortez. Any sign of their return?”

“No, the limo went south from Cortez, then west on 160. Presumably past the Four Corners and then either back around toward Santa Fe or on down to Flag. Out of Colorado, so CBI gave up.”

“Maybe I’ll hear from my source, the chauffeur, and find out what happened.”

“Hope so. We’re going to have trouble getting CBI interested in Holtzmann again, without something new.”

“What happened to Westerman and LaCoste?”

“I didn’t ask, but there was only one CBI guy, and he followed the limo down to the 160 turnoff. So they’re loose, out there somewhere.”

“I thought the Montezuma sheriff, or the Cortez PD, or somebody, was involved, too.”

“Only in the spotting phase. When Holtzmann and company settled in to lunch, all the locals went off to lunch themselves, leaving things to the CBI guy and his microphone.”

“Well, hell. Any other good news?”

“Actually, yes. Amy put out the word on the DNA tests and the ‘bodily fluids’ business that we talked about. She got hit with all sorts of questions not fit for family newspapers. But all she did was to repeat the basics. I expect they’ll draw the conclusions we want them to.”

“And we make sure that our two guests see the paper tomorrow, then I’ll have another chat with them. There’s a bail hearing coming up, though, so we may lose them tomorrow afternoon. And we’ve got to do something about Holtzmann. What’s next there?”

“How are your drafting skills?”

“Huh? Oh.”

They were sufficiently familiar with each other's thought patterns that they were able to say in perfect unison, "Back to the drawing board."

* * *

Sixteen

Even before Annette got into the office Thursday morning, she was feeling overwhelmed. Then, when she checked her voice mail, she decided she'd have to cancel the visit to Peaceful Pines. Superwoman could do only so much in one day.

The voice mail was the first order of business. It was from D-NAlysis, in Arlington, Virginia.

"This is Lieutenant Annette Trieri of the Durango, Colorado police department. I'm returning a call from Sarah Bishop earlier this morning."

"Good morning Lieutenant. This is Sarah. I have results from the hair samples you wanted expedited. We started on them first thing Tuesday and they're in this morning."

"Wonderful! I appreciate your efforts. We have a murder investigation hanging in the balance. What did you find?"

"Well, let's see. You had previously sent us three samples, two semen samples and a hair sample. No matches among them. The two new hair samples are two from different people, both different from the other hair sample as well. What I have is that one of the new hair samples matches one of the semen samples." She rattled off some long identification codes. "There are no other matches. Does this make sense?"

Annette had found the file with the information she needed to interpret this and was making the necessary notes.

"Yes, it does. Thanks very much. You'll be sending a written report?"

"Of course. And a bill, naturally. Thanks for your business."

"And thanks for your help getting this done so fast."

So, she thought, a match between the vaginal sample and Reg Meeker. He was doing more than just sleeping and listening to violin music up there at the Peaceful Pines train stop. Hal would need to be informed, so he could let university officialdom know that there was trouble brewing, but she could do that when she met with him and Ament later in the morning. Jankowski would need to know as well. And she needed to call Peaceful Pines.

Through the window of her partition, she noticed one of the vice squad undercover officers with his feet up on his desk, reading the morning paper.

Out of the blue, a verse from an old Dire Straits song popped into her head, "That ain't workin', that's the way you do it..."

Well, she thought, time to go install another microwave oven.

After leaving messages at Peaceful Pines and in Jankowski's office, she headed up to the campus, ready to confront the parking problem. Hal had provided her with a magnetic card for the various parking lot gates, at least, so she wouldn't have to walk too far. Even with an umbrella, it looked as if

she was going to get wet. Ten minutes later, having parked illegally in a loading zone, she walked into his anteroom, shaking water off her umbrella.

“Good morning, Alice. How are you at fixing parking tickets?”

“Good morning, Ms. Trieri. Um, I would have thought you’d be in a better position to do that than I.”

“Not up here on campus. Anyway, maybe I’ll get lucky and they won’t notice my car until I’m finished here.”

“Don’t count on it. It’s the beginning of the semester, and there’s a whole new batch of student parking monitors out there, each one eagerly trying to write the most tickets. They seem to think of it as a contest. You’d have better luck during finals week.” She nodded toward Hal’s office. “Dean Weathers is expecting you.”

Hal was surfing the Web, looking at satellite loops of the weather. Over his shoulder, she could see the Four Corners states covered by a huge swirl of white, with streamers of cloud flowing up the screen from old Mexico. He turned as she put a hand on his back.

“Do you know how nice it is to see you in the middle of the work day like this? It really brightens things up for me.” He turned, smiling.

“I wish it were under less stressful circumstances though. I don’t know how this discussion with your colleague, Dean Ament, I mean, is going to go.” She told him about the results of the DNA test. “What this means is that we’re still missing a partner for Boudreau. It could be LaCoste, or Dick Westerman, I guess. But Ament has to be on the short list, too. And that conversation I had with him about the violin, where he may have lied, bothers me.”

“I’ve been thinking about him. His reaction to my telling him that Boudreau was probably dead was pretty strong. But it could have been interpreted in a couple of ways, including concern for himself. I’d swear that he didn’t know she was dead when I told him, though.”

“Do you suppose they could have been, uh, involved?”

“He’s a real charmer. Very French. Romantic. I don’t know of any reputation for going after students, unlike some of our faculty. But he was her mentor in France. Maybe now that she’d grown up, old, latent attractions popped up. Uh, so to speak.” His eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Oh, please. But, look, since the Two Dwarfs saw Boudreau with LaCoste later, Ament probably didn’t kill her. And it’s really none of our business if they were getting it on. She was an adult, after all. What we really need to know is whether he’s the person she went out with in the first place, and their itinerary, and so on. Oh, and there’s something else I need to find out. Is there an expert on Indian artifacts on campus. Anthropology department, maybe?”

“A and A—anthropology and archaeology. You need to talk with Professor Benjamin V. Hartford, our local reference for all things Native American. He’s particularly good at pre-European cultures. He’s not mine, though. A and A is in the humanities and social sciences college. Want me to call him for you?”

“Good idea. And I’ve got a tip for him. We might as well have that little cave up in the cliff face examined by an expert.”

* * *

Lance Riggins' day at Mesa Verde had been wet. The monsoon threat of Wednesday morning had congealed into a massive thunderstorm over the park's plateau in the afternoon, and the rain was like a wide-area waterfall. Except, that is, for the brief periods when it turned solid, into the styrofoam-like pellets that a park ranger had told him was called "graupel." Lance got soaked.

Sitting in the Narrow Gauge Saloon, at the table he'd come to think of as his own, staring out the window at today's rain, he reflected on the parts of the park he'd managed to see despite the weather. How, he wondered, could he work in some of this local color and history into his story for next week's edition?

Randy Frederick's familiar stooped posture intruded into his peripheral vision, dripping water from its hooded rain jacket.

"Hey, Randy. Have a seat. Let me buy you a coffee. Unless you'd like something stronger?"

"Not this early. But coffee would be good, warm me up. This feels like a cold, fall rain. Strange that it's raining so early in the day. Got my check?"

Lance fumbled in his briefcase and came up with an envelope.

"Spend it wisely. I don't know how many more there will be. I talked with my editor this morning, and he's getting antsy. Unless the case breaks, he may pull me off. There's some new dirt out in Malibu just begging to be dug up."

He watched Randy stash the envelope carefully in an inside jacket pocket.

"See the *Herald* this morning yet? Or are you too busy re-reading your own stuff?"

"Hey, c'mon, there's no reason for that. This is just a job. And, yeah, I saw it. 'Bodily fluids' indeed. What's that mean? Saliva? Blood?"

"Semen. And, of course, the hair samples. My source told me that what they're trying to do is to scare up some new information. I hear they've got a couple of guys in jail, on obstruction charges."

"Who?"

"Not sure, but I think I can find out today. But what's really interesting is that they told me, not for print, but they told me that there were two separate semen samples sent to that DNA lab. Uh, fore and aft, as it were."

"Huh? You mean she got it both ways?"

"That's what they said. And they also said that it isn't clear that it was rape, like that headline in the *Free Press* was calling it, the way they originally thought."

"So, this is like 'Nympho Violinist Killed During Orgy,' or something?"

"Well, something. And there's a connection to drugs, too. They found pot in her bloodstream, and some other stuff."

"Randy, I think I'll hang around for another week. Which means another paycheck for you. Let's find out who those guys in jail are."

* * *

Randy's story in the *Herald* had left out his off-the-record information—he was still too young and honest to break promises—but what was in the story had its desired effect on the taller of the Two Dwarfs. After three nights of close quarters with the fragrant and *very* friendly Jimbo, Meeker's nausea

had finally abated. Then he read the story about the DNA tests and put it together with the information given him about the search warrants, and his breakfast came right back up.

“Don’t like their oatmeal, huh?”

Jimbo was trying to be sympathetic, through a cloud of cigarette smoke, as Meeker was hugging the stainless steel commode.

“Well, I’ll tell you, it’s a helluva a lot more tasty than what you find dumpster diving. I’ll tell you what. One time I was so hungry that I found this dead rat, and...”

His soliloquy was interrupted by loud and quite pitiful retching.

A few cells down the row, Leonard Schwab and the one-eyed Lucky were immersed in Chapter 57 or so of an ongoing liturgical discussion that was now examining the theological implications of computerized music, and so Schwab hadn’t read the entire paper yet. He had learned early on that Lucky’s side of the discussion tended to consist of long, rambling monologues that were impossible to follow, so all he had to do was to listen with half of his attention to the last few sentences or so. Then he could respond with only the briefest references to what Lucky had said and spin the discussion to his own interests.

But the “DNA Testing in AMFest Murder” headline grabbed his entire attention, and Lucky faded into a background drone. Schwab didn’t even notice when Lucky finally ran down. He finally looked up to see the one bloodshot eye staring his way.

“Huh? Oh, sorry, there’s this article I had to read. Hey, listen, man, do you know how to get hold of the cops to talk to them? Just yell? Or what?”

“Yeah, man, y’know? Like in the movies, huh, with the tin cup on the bars, clanka, clanka, clanka? But we got no cup. What I’d do is wait for one of them guards to walk by and just talk to him.”

“But I need to do this right away.”

Schwab turned to the bars and began hollering “Guard! Guard!”, repeating himself every few seconds. Finally he attracted the wanted attention, sort of. The guard on duty wasn’t the one Schwab would have hoped for. But any port in a storm.

“Officer, listen. I need to talk with that detective, the lady, um, Trieri, I think, right away. OK?”

The guard, whom Schwab had come to think of as a shaved-head version of Dino the chauffeur, looked even more bored than usual. Head nodding to his internal music, he blinked several times, slowly, and finally wandered back to his station without saying anything.

“Now what in hell do you suppose that means?”

Although Schwab’s question was rhetorical, Lucky was not tuned in to such subtleties.

“Big Freddie’s always like that. He’ll probably put in a call to the cops, though. But don’t hold your breath. They’ll get here when they get here. So, listen, did you ever play that Beatles album backwards and hear the devil worship stuff?”

* * *

Jacques Ament was obviously uncomfortable, but just as obviously he knew he was in a delicate situation that wouldn’t allow him to storm out in a rage. So he was walking a fine line, keeping a firm grip on his temper while letting Annette, and Hal as well, know in no uncertain terms what he thought of Annette’s questioning.

“I must say, Lieutenant, that I resent the implications of your questions. My personal life is not something that I choose to talk about with just anyone. With all due respect, I believe your questions to be intrusive.”

“No doubt. And I apologize once again for the small subterfuge that we arranged for me to be able to talk with you. But it’s very important to our investigation to understand everything we can about Steffanie Boudreau’s activities on the evening before she died. Surely you want us to succeed in this.”

“I do indeed, but I also wish to maintain my privacy. I can assure you that I have nothing to add to what I told you previously.”

Clearing his throat gently, Hal broke into the conversation. “I believe that I need to leave the two of you to sort this out. Jacques, remember that Annette here is a professional, and she hears all sorts of things as a matter of routine. She’s the soul of discretion, and she only remembers things that are relevant to the investigation she’s in the middle of, like this one. But she does need to hear everything so that she can sort out for herself what’s relevant.”

He got up to leave, winking at Annette when he was out of Ament’s vision. She carefully maintained a straight face.

As he was walking out the door, he heard Annette beginning once again to outline exactly what questions she needed to ask. In the anteroom, on Alice’s waiting couch, he found John Martin, looking fidgety. He could hear fiddling noises in the kitchenette, probably Alice making Martin a cup of fresh coffee.

“Well, John, good morning. This is a surprise. What can I do for you?”

“Fill me in. Alice says that Jacques is in there with Annette. I’m worried enough about how Meeker’s arrest is going to play, but now one of our deans?”

“Right. I’ve thought about it, too. But I don’t think it will be a problem. Assuming he’s cooperative. That’s why I bowed out, so he could talk to her confidentially. He and the violinist, Boudreau, may have been, um, involved in things he’d rather not have me, or you, for that matter, hear about. Thing is, there’s testimony that Boudreau was alive after midnight, and what Annette’s trying to do is to figure out who was where before midnight. I don’t think Jacques is going to be implicated in the death. In fact, we may be able to spin this to our advantage, you know, how he was with her in the evening to look after her safety and all.”

“Hmm. I think we’d better go slowly on that one, because she’s dead, after all. Do you know any more about Meeker?”

“Big trouble. There’s a DNA match showing that he had sex with Boudreau. Annette found out the test results this morning. No other matches, though.”

“Well, shit. That fool does have a reputation for following his dick around.”

He was so mad that Alice’s presence just around the corner didn’t faze him in the least.

“But that doesn’t mean he killed her. And she was an adult, able to make her own choices.”

“But it’s surely going to come out, and that’s not going to be good for the campus. What do you think we should do?”

“Nothing, for now. They won’t release those test results, I’m sure, at least not until they’re needed for a trial. If it gets that far. I bet Annette will use the information to get Meeker to crack. She says he’s not been very cooperative. I assume he’s on some kind of administrative leave, at least until he makes bail, or whatever.”

“You’re probably right. I guess I should get out of here. If Jacques comes out and sees me, he’ll be even more upset than he already is. Anything else I should know about?”

“Maybe a more positive note. Annette’s talking about bringing in Ben Hartford to look into the artifacts angle on this.”

Hal explained the connection to Santa Fe and the cave they had seen in the cliff face below the High Line.

“Ben knows all about this stuff, and his help would be a positive contribution by the university. And maybe there’s another collection for the museum.”

Frémont State’s historical museum had inherited several artifacts from a previous dig of Hartford’s.

“Hmm. Good plan. I hope it works for us. I’ll be off. Thanks for the information. Keep me informed.”

The provost strode purposefully out the door. Five seconds later, in walked Alice, with a cup of coffee and a tea napkin. Seeing only Hal, she looked puzzled.

“Why, thanks, Alice. A fresh cup of coffee. Just what I needed. Now, how are the class schedules working out? Have you heard anything about add/drop rates? I need to work another student into my course.”

* * *

The Kayenta, Arizona, Holiday Inn wasn’t up to Raimer Holtzmann’s usual standards, but, he thought, it was not bad for somewhere so isolated. He had needed to bribe the desk clerk to get rooms for himself and for Dino, as the place was completely booked with end-of-summer tourists driving to and from Monument Valley. But even so, it wasn’t that expensive, and the meeting with his connection for access to Keet Seel artifacts justified the cost and inconvenience. His collection of original artifacts would be nicely enhanced by the new goodies carefully packed in the limo.

For its original career, the big car had been modified to conceal two bales of marijuana between the back seat and the trunk, and the hidden compartment now served Holtzmann well for his other purpose, one that didn’t involve strange odors.

Now, comfortably settled in the rich leather seat just in front of the compartment, Holtzman reached over and flipped a switch.

“Dino, let’s head back up toward Durango, up through Aztec. I’m going to call that B and B in Durango, where we stayed last spring, and see if I can get a room there tonight.”

“Right, boss. But don’t you think this car’s going to attract more attention? Even in all this rain?”

“No, because I’m going to rent something else in Aztec and you’re going to head back to Santa Fe. Unpack the new items this afternoon and then park this thing in town somewhere where it will be seen. It’s Labor Day weekend coming up, so take some time off. Maybe by Tuesday things will calm down.”

“How are you getting back?”

“I’ll fly from Durango. And get a cab from the Santa Fe airport. If you lie low all weekend, like you usually do, all that attention we attracted yesterday will fade.”

He reached over and picked up a telephone handset, the one connected to one of those beige scrambler boxes. The connection took a while to synchronize but finally went through.

“Dick? Find Tony and tell him I’m staying in Durango tonight. Don’t know where yet. But I won’t have the limo and I’ll have my regular phone, so we’ll have to be careful. I’ll call you later with a dinner location, so we can discuss plans without being overheard, like yesterday.”

“How did it go today?”

“Excellent. Nine new items, earliest somewhere in the tenth century, looks like. Dino’s going to take them home. I’m going to rent a car to come up there.”

“Good idea. The car, I mean. They spotted the limo yesterday, for sure.”

“Yeah, but it worked out fine. By the time they figure out that the McGurney collection isn’t what we’re after, it’ll be too late for them to do anything. I’ll call you later on the open line. As, ah...”

He looked about at the Farmington, New Mexico, strip rolling by. Liquor stores. Fast-food joints. A hamburger chain.

“...Ronald. Ronald, um...” A pizza place. “...Domino. I’m going to try to get a room at that B and B up by Trimble Hot Springs, so let’s see if we can have dinner on the north end of town somewhere. I’ll call later.”

He felt the car swinging to the left, northeast toward Aztec. Domino, Ronald Domino. He’d have to remember that somehow.

* * *

“Urgent,” it said. Well, all messages from people in jail tend toward urgency, Annette thought, so why should I feel guilty about having eaten lunch first?

She had returned from a lunch date with Hal and Provost John Martin, at Skinny’s Grill. Although not the same from a sentimental perspective as its previous incarnation, the Main Street Grill, it still offered marvelous food, eclectic servers, and amusing conversation. How wonderfully panicked bureaucrats can be when their little worlds are disturbed.

Annette liked and respected John Martin, but she also recognized his tendency toward an imperial bearing and attitude. Hal seemed aware of this also and never failed to tweak Martin’s pompous nature at every opportunity. When Martin hadn’t see the humor in their nickname for Reginald Meeker, Hal, with yet another mischievous twinkle in his eye, had suggested calling Martin “Doc” so that he could join Grumpy and Dopey in the Dwarf Club. He had then salvaged things by launching into a discussion of the Southwest Monsoon and how it was behaving rather strangely, allowing her the opportunity to escape gracefully.

And, speaking of Dopey, here was a message from him, imploring Annette to contact him as soon as she could possibly manage it. Must be, she thought, that the hapless Lucky had finally persuaded Schwab to recant his sins and confess. Or so she could hope.

* * *

“So, anyway, because it was in the paper, I thought I could establish my credibility with you by telling you in advance about the results of those DNA tests.” It was 20 minutes later and she was sitting in an interview room at the jail listening to Leonard Schwab explain his urgent message. She cocked her head to one side and raised her eyebrows in a question; Schwab rushed on.

“You’re having DNA tests done on samples from my place and from Reg’s place, and you probably have samples from the body of the violinist, Steffanie Boudreau. If you sampled what I think you

sampled, you'll find evidence that Reg had sex with her, but not me. Uh, wait. That didn't come out right. Reg and I don't have sex. I mean, I didn't have sex with Boudreau. But someone else did, I think, that guy Tony LaCoste, who took us to Santa Fe last weekend. What happened was, Reg and I were up at Peaceful Pines..."

"Excuse me. Do you mean actually at the resort or just at the train stop?"

"At the resort. We drove up to Rockwood late Monday afternoon, walked in on the tracks and did a little climbing. Then we walked across the High Bridge and went to the bar at the Resort. Later, in walked Steffanie. Alone. I didn't expect to see her there, although, of course I knew she was going to be in town. So I introduced myself, being the concertmaster and all, and I introduced Reg. He seemed to know her, though, and they picked up a conversation from earlier, I guess. And after a while they disappeared together. Then they came back to the bar, and LaCoste showed up."

"How do you know she and Meeker had sex?"

"He told me later. Bragging about it, sort of, or maybe just being honest. He said her ferocity in bed took him by surprise. And that she was sky-high from smoking a joint."

"What happened with LaCoste?"

"She must have met him somewhere before, too, because they greeted each other like old friends, close old friends, and then they took off together."

"And..."

"And that's about it. We stayed at the Resort, in a room that the manager got for us."

"You didn't camp out or sleep at the train stop?"

"No way. I'm too much of a city boy for that sort of thing."

"Do you want to tell me what was in the cave in the cliff face yet?"

"Huh?" She just stared at him, so he finally went on. "Uh, well, uh, that doesn't have anything to do with Steffanie's death."

"I'll be the judge of that. But because LaCoste took you to Santa Fe, and LaCoste disappeared with her, and LaCoste works for one Raimer Holtzmann, a black-market purveyor of Indian artifacts, and Holtzmann is rumored to have a black-market Stradivarius violin available, which is probably Boudreau's, and you and Meeker probably visited him in Santa Fe, and the two of you had on your persons safe deposit box keys from the same bank, which is probably in Santa Fe, when you were brought in on Monday," she paused and took a breath, "my judgement is that it might well have something to do with her death and that you're still in this up to your eyebrows even if you didn't have sex with her."

She took another, deeper breath.

Schwab had listened to this litany with increasing agitation and seemed to be in shock by its end. Annette got up to leave.

"Do you have a lawyer yet?"

She meant the question to be rhetorical, a parting shot, but her phone tweedled giving her the perfect excuse to let Schwab contemplate his future alone.

"Trieri, investigations," she flipped it open and was walking down the hall.

"Lieutenant? Let me patch Jim Milner through."

“Milner?”

“Deputy with the sheriff’s department, a new guy. Maybe you didn’t meet him yet. Here he is.”

“This is Annette Trieri, Durango investigations.”

“Lieutenant? Jim Milner here. I was doing radar shots of westbound traffic down the hill just east of the 550/160 intersection on the south end of town, you know where I mean? Anyway, this big, blue Lincoln limo, with a New Mexico plate, comes down the hill on 550, stops at the intersection and heads east on 160. I remembered the APB you had out and I’m following it. He’s legal and everything, but I could still stop him if you want.”

“Where are you now?”

“Coming up to the light at 172. Oh. He’s signaling a right. To the airport, maybe?”

“How about just following him, discreetly. I’m at the jail and I’ll see if I can catch up. Don’t stop him, OK? I’d like to find out where he’s going.”

* * *

Some frantic, fancy driving in the rain on her part turned out to be unnecessary. She stayed in touch with Milner and discovered that the limo had pulled up at the Hertz outlet at the airport. When she arrived, the limo was pulling away, followed at some distance by a blue Ford Explorer. Dino was driving the limo, and she gave him a small wave as they passed each other. Then she immediately pulled into a parking lot turnout so that the other driver wouldn’t see her, and, when the Explorer went by she saw in her mirror the distinctive profile of Raimer Holtzmann.

After thanking Milner for his tip and putting her phone away, she took off in pursuit. This was quite simple, actually, because both vehicles were carefully driving just below the speed limit, and she caught up in only a couple of blocks. At the intersection with US 160, Dino turned east and Holtzmann turned west, toward town.

Maintaining enough distance that her non-descript unmarked sedan would blend into traffic, she followed Holtzmann’s Explorer into and through downtown, all the way north on Main Avenue, and around the curve flanking Animas City Mountain past the northern city limits onto the highway toward Silverton. The rain was noticeably more intense the farther north she went.

About four more miles up the road, Holtzmann turned left, into the little cluster of buildings at Trimble across from the new golf course subdivision, and Annette’s phone tweedled. She pulled off the highway just past the Trimble turn-off, and flipped her phone open.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“This is Dino Papandreou, Lieutenant. I’m calling from a pay phone out in Bayfield.”

“What in the world are you guys doing up here?”

“Well, Holtzmann wants to stay up in Trimble tonight at this B&B that he likes, and I’ve got to drive back to Santa Fe and unpack some new artifacts stashed in the limo. Um, I’m telling you this so I won’t get busted for having them, OK? But I’ve got to take them back, or he’ll get wise to our agreement. We were going to rent him a car down in Aztec, but there weren’t any available. So he just had me come on up here so he could get one at the airport. Even though I told him we could be spotted. Did you wave at him, too?”

“No chance. I pulled off and I don’t think he saw me, so I followed him up here to Trimble. He pulled onto the side road and I’m sitting here by the highway wondering what to do next. Don’t worry about the artifacts, though. Just make a list of what’s there and keep it for future reference.”

Despite not liking to talk and drive at the same time, she pulled out onto the highway.

“OK. And, listen, we spotted your tail yesterday, and I think they figured out about the guy in the restaurant. So their conversation was faked. I heard Holtzmann tell Westerman today something about the McGurney collection comment being bogus.”

Annette checked her mirror carefully and slowed to make a U turn to face southbound, winding up on the muddy shoulder.

“Thanks, Dino. That’ll help us avoid getting sidetracked. Do you know why Holtzmann’s up here?”

“To have dinner with LaCoste and Westerman, and make plans. For what I don’t know. And I don’t know exactly where, either, but probably somewhere on North Main. He likes barbeque, so maybe that’ll help you figure it out.”

“We’ll keep an eye out. And, listen, if you do get popped for those artifacts, have them call me. I won’t be able to get them to let you keep the stuff, but I’ll be able to get you off the hook, OK?”

“Will do. And thanks, Lieutenant.”

She punched the End button and sat staring out at the rain. Strange, she thought, how much rain we’re getting this late in the season. Across the road and the subdivision beyond, the Animas River was muddy, and a foot higher than normal for the end of August.

* * *

Seventeen

It turned out to be Sweeney’s for dinner, and Fred Winders was delighted. He seldom went there, except for extra special occasions too few and far between, and to have his dinner paid for, and his wife’s, too, was one of those perks that didn’t come along often enough. It would make up for the long hours last weekend.

Oh, they had to scramble to find a babysitter at the last minute, and he felt nervous about using Penny for cover. But the quality of the meal would justify the hassle, and there was really no danger. All he had to do was to persuade Sweeney’s host, a young woman with a little badge reading “Bobbi,” to seat him reasonably close to the table with Holtzmann and the two other guys. He took a chair with his back to them, so the microphone under the back of his jacket collar would have maximum exposure to their conversation.

Penny, to tell the truth, was tickled at the idea of helping with the case, especially because it meant dinner at one of Durango’s nicer restaurants. The notion that they wouldn’t be able to have much of a conversation was somewhat foreign to her, but she understood that they needed to let the tape pick up as much of Holtzmann & Company’s discussion as possible. The microphone under the collar of Fred’s sport coat would do the work, if only she could manage to keep quiet. His reminder that every word of their conversation would be listened to, over and over, by any number of other people, helped. Just like so many other old married couples, she thought, we’ll just sit here quietly and eat. At least she was facing the windows. Even with the rain outside, the view over the Animas Valley was lovely.

They also had to pace themselves, to eat slowly and sparingly so that they could stay at the restaurant as long as their subjects, or at least try to. But those guys were so slow. They talked and talked—Fred even put in a new tape at one point, fumbling in the inside pocket of his jacket, hoping no one would notice—and she got fuller and fuller. Cocktail. Appetizer. Soup. Salad. Entrée. Dessert. Coffee.

They were working, slowly, on their second after-dinner drinks, another Grand Marnier for her and a Drambuie this time for him, when, finally, Holtzmann rose to leave, followed by his two associates. She felt drunk. And stuffed.

“Well, darlin’, all in the line of duty, hmm?” Fred was obviously going to be calling a cab to get home.

* * *

For weeks, the Earth’s great weather engine had been energizing the Southwest Monsoon. Although it was running late this year, due to a strong El Niño event in the Tropical Pacific Ocean the previous winter, its strength seemed geared to make up for its tardiness. Throughout July, the huge Bermuda High over the Atlantic Ocean had been building, and around it, under the clockwise surface flow sweeping across the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico, more and more water evaporated from the ocean. As the trade winds came onshore in Mexico and ran up the hot, eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre, they turned north, carrying their humidity into Texas and New Mexico.

Up the valley of the Rio Grande, and diverted to the east and west by the north-south ranges of the New Mexican mountains, the water-laden winds spread across northern New Mexico and into southern Colorado. The deep winter snowpack had finally melted and the high alpine meadows were heating up from the summer sun. Some of the moisture was wrung out of the air as it encountered the highlands of the Jemez Mountains and the Sangré de Cristo range near Santa Fe—arroyos were carved deeper, the Rio ran deep and muddy, and Cochiti Reservoir began to fill for the first time in decades.

But much of the water that had evaporated from the Atlantic and its warm, coastal seas remained with the northward flowing air until it ran up against the east-west ranging San Juan Mountains, the largest and highest massif in the Rockies. As the air lifted to cross the barrier, it cooled, and the water condensed. In condensing, it released the latent heat acquired when it evaporated, and the heat accelerated the lifting motion. Convection deepened. Small cloud droplets coalesced into larger and larger raindrops and began to fall. Normally confined to the afternoon and early evening hours, thunderstorms lasted well into the night and even early morning. After being some two months late, the Southwest Monsoon seemed to be trying to make up for lost time.

* * *

Cecilia Livesay, sitting at her workstation at the National Weather Service office up in Grand Junction, was becoming more and more sleepy, but that didn’t keep her from being worried. She’d been up most of the night, watching a display from the new weather radar that Channel 14 had put up amidst the radio towers on Smelter Mountain south of Durango.

It was fairly short-range, and it didn’t have the Doppler capability of the new Weather Service NEXRAD systems, but it filled in a radar “hole” over the San Juans. Because it was so far away and blocked by the high peaks around Telluride, her—or, more properly, the Grand Junction office’s—NEXRAD system could see only the tops of the clouds over the Animas Valley. That wasn’t very helpful for rainfall estimates. Not many people lived where the NEXRAD system couldn’t see, but the

folks with cable in Silverton and the Purgatory area were loyal Channel 14 viewers. The radar's main value was in the advertising mileage that the "Station That Cares About You" got out of the thing.

That rain cell over the headwaters of Hermosa Creek had been dumping an inch or more per hour for the better part of six hours, over an area of at least four square miles. So there was going to be something like 1300 new acre feet of water to contend with. Nearly half a billion gallons.

What had Cecilia most worried was the fire. In late July, lightning had ignited a wildfire up there—the Sheephead Fire, she remembered it was called—before the rains. The forest needed thinning, but this fire had crowned out. It had burned over about 8000 acres, much of it so hot that the ground was sterilized and nothing had sprouted since—a stand-replacement fire, in forestry jargon. In some places, the topsoil melted, and the ground was hydrophobic. The water from this rain wouldn't soak in.

What this all added up to was that Hermosa Creek was going to be running at least 100 times its normal flow—even the spring floods would pale by comparison. And now, it would run not with just water or even muddy water, but with an ash-, rock-, and tree-laden soup, with the occasional deer or elk thrown in for variety. If the debris built up in one of the narrow, winding canyon sections and then let go all at once, there would be a wall of the stuff descending on the subdivisions along the highway in the valley below. Where her parents lived.

* * *

Holtzmann slept in. He'd awakened about dawn, and, seeing it was raining again, or still, gone right back to sleep. He didn't have anything scheduled until late morning, anyway, and the feather bed wouldn't let go of him.

But then the telephone rang, yanking him out of a sound sleep. The only people who knew he was here were his Colorado collectors, plus Dino, so it must be important, he thought. He rolled over and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello? Holtz..., er, uh, Ronald Domino here."

"This is Dick. We've got trouble. The creek's rising, and the rain isn't stopping."

"So? Are you afraid of melting, or something?"

"Hey, I'm not kidding around. It's potentially serious out here. You have to remember, the site that Wilton kid showed us is only a little above the previous high water mark we identified. And the creek makes for enough of an access problem, even when it's normal. And you probably don't know about the fire last month."

"Fire?"

"Up high in the drainage, the Sheepshead Fire, or something like that. If it's raining up there anything at all like it is down here, we could be in for a mother of a flood. If the water gets high enough, it'll wash away that boulder we're using to hide the entrance to the alcove, you know?"

There was a long pause, as Holtzmann absorbed this distressing information. It would have been bad enough anyway, but to hear it so early in the morning, before a cup of coffee...

"So what's to be done?"

"I've got LaCoste on the way over here, and if you hustle, maybe we can get the stuff out before it's inaccessible. But it's going to be an adventure. Otherwise, all we can do is to wait and hope that the creek stays low enough not to be a problem."

“I’ll be there as soon as I can manage.” He’d have to skip the sumptuous breakfast offered by the hosts at the B&B, to say nothing of a nice soak in the Hot Springs. But the latest collection would be worth these minor inconveniences. If they could get it out fast enough.

* * *

Annette was at her desk pushing paper around when she got the call about 8:30, from Deputy Milner. Holtzmann was outside the city limits, and now the Sheriff’s Department was holding up its end of the investigation.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Lieutenant? This is Deputy Jim Milner again. I’ve been watching that suspect of yours, the one I spotted yesterday in the limo heading toward the airport? He stayed the night at the B&B up by the Trimble Hot Springs, and now he’s in his car getting ready to pull out.”

“Uh, hold on, and I’ll forward this to my cellular phone so we can talk while I head for my car.”

She pushed buttons and her other phone tweedled.

“Ok, let’s talk. Any idea of which way he’s headed?”

She was on her way out the door of the station, into the rain by the time he answered.

“He’s turning north on the highway. I’ll follow him and keep you posted, unless you run out of towers.” She could hear the deep rumble of the Police Interceptor V-8 in his patrol car winding through its gears, then almost immediately throttling back.

“Looks like he’s turning west up the Hermosa Creek Valley.”

By this time she had reached her car and shut the rain out. As she roared out of the parking lot, lights and siren broadcasting her hurry, she followed Milner’s narrative of Holtzmann’s westward progress up the Forest Service road toward the Hermosa Creek trailhead. Milner described how the road climbed the side of the valley, winding in and out of side stream channels, and eventually turned from blacktop to gravel. By then it was several hundred feet above the creek.

Finally, Holtzmann turned off the road into the new parking lot and, when Milner arrived, was disappearing on foot through the scrub oak down the hillside toward the creek, some 600 feet below.

“I saw where he went down, it was just a little back toward the east. Probably going to follow that last little draw down to the creek. Lieutenant, it’s raining like a sonofabitch, and I don’t mind telling you that I’d rather not go after him, at least not by myself without better clothes. And shoes, especially.”

“Why don’t you wait until I get there and we can talk about it. I don’t know the area, so I can’t visualize what to do. Try to stay dry, OK? By the way, how’s the road?”

“Fine. The paved part is in good shape, and the gravel is graded. Wet, but not muddy. Just stay on the gravel—I don’t think I’d try the shoulders or anything. They look kind of soft. And there are ditches running pretty full. I couldn’t tell how deep they are. Up here at the parking lot, there are only two other cars, so I’ll be obvious.”

His directions were precise, and, as promised, the road was in fine shape. The parking area, on the other hand, was slippery. The new gravel mixture hadn’t weathered, and the clay mixed in the sand and rocks was floating to the top and creating a slimy goo. She slithered to a stop on the left end of a row of four vehicles, next to Milner and at the opposite end from what she recognized as Holtzmann’s rented Explorer.

Milner, somewhat gallantly, she thought, got out in the rain to sit in her car, and they sat with the motor running and the defroster blowing away the fog from the windshield. They were facing down the hill, looking out over the creek far below. The view was actually quite spectacular, gambel oak thickets mixed with ponderosa pine just down the hill in front of them, with the light-green pattern of aspen groves spreading into the distance across the far side of the valley. But they were too distracted by their errand to appreciate it.

“He walked off down the hill and over that way,” Milner was pointing to the left, across her steering wheel, “and probably went through that gap in the oak thicket there.”

“Well, I’m not dressed to follow him down there either. With the rain and the water on those leaves, it would be like swimming. And I sure resonate with your comment about shoes. But I bet I know what he’s up to. Trouble is, I sure don’t want to drown in the process of proving it.”

“What’s he up to?”

“Probably looting an archaeological site. He’s a collector, a pot-hunter. The other car probably belongs to his flunkies, the ones he had dinner with last night.” She saw something in her peripheral vision and looked up into her rear-view mirror. “Now what in the world is that?”

Milner swivelled his head around and peered out the back window.

“Looks like a Hummer. Yeah, that’s it. Not your usual suburbia Hummer, either. This looks like an industrial strength one. What’s he doing pulling up behind us?”

In Annette’s mirror, she caught a brief glimpse of a black cowboy hat behind the Hummer’s steering wheel, just before the entire view was taken up with the huge front end of the wide, boxy vehicle. She felt a firm bump.

“What...? Oh, shit.” She felt her car moving forward, despite its having the front wheels locked by the transmission in “Park.” Involuntarily, she stepped on the brake, but the car kept moving. The parking lot was indeed slippery, at least to the tires on her sedan. The oversized, off-road mud tires on the all-wheel drive Hummer hardly seemed to notice.

“Lieutenant, I’d say we should get the hell out of your car. How about unlocking the doors?”

Annette realized, with a sinking sensation, that they’d been sitting long enough that the auto-locking feature had done its work. She fumbled for the master switch, placed awkwardly on the arm rest on her door.

But she didn’t find it in time. As the Hummer kept pushing, and as the hill became steeper and steeper, her sedan began to drift slightly sideways, and, with a crunch, it was pushed across a tree stump, crumpling the frame under her door. The deformed door frame jammed the auto-locking mechanism somehow, and they were trapped.

The tree stump wasn’t finished with its work, however. It was the remnants of a 200-year old ponderosa, logged years before along with the other old-growth trees on the side of the valley. But this stump was still well preserved, because of the usually dry climate, and it stubbornly held its position against the weight of the car. So, after it crumpled the door frame, it caught, and the car tipped on its side. And continued tipping.

Annette still had her seat belt on—a heavy-duty harness belt installed in all Durango police cruisers—so she was held firmly in place. But Milner hadn’t buckled up, so, first, he slid across the seat, landing on Annette, then he landed on his head as the car tipped upside down. As the car began to roll, he slammed into the right-side door and began bouncing about the interior, grabbing frantically for a hand hold.

The rolling car picked up speed, and the thought of snowplows ran across Annette's mind. Then something smacked into her head and everything went black.

* * *

The detour up to the Durango airport on Thursday had put Dino behind schedule, so he didn't get back to Santa Fe until quite late, too late for him to feel comfortable about unloading the new batch of artifacts. The Santa Fe police would naturally wonder what someone was doing, unloading packages wrapped in newspaper in an alley behind a gallery at 10:00 pm. So he put it off until morning.

And, Friday morning, he had a meeting with his dissertation committee down on the main UNM campus. So he left early, cruising on his Fat Boy down the Turquoise Trail, the back way to Albuquerque, through Madrid, Golden, Cedar Crest, and Tijeras. He wanted to have time to think and to put his head in the right place for the philosophical issues his committee would want to discuss.

By the time he returned to Santa Fe, just past lunch time, Annette's colleagues in Durango had dissected the tapes from the evening before at Sweeney's and listened with glee to several damning comments about such things as "pots in the hidden compartment of the limo," "a new batch that includes several old fetishes," and "that damned violin." Jankowski immediately called Montoya in Santa Fe.

So when Dino finally pulled the limo up to the back entrance of the Southwest Cultures Gallery, he was startled to have an official-looking Hispanic guy, holding a shield in one hand and a gun in another, walk up to him, even before he could get out of the car.

"Dionysus Papandreou? I'm told you're on our side, but please don't move until we make sure. OK? What can you tell me about someone named Annette Trieri?"

Dino heaved a sigh of relief and launched into a monologue about his connection to her.

"...so anyway, I think I persuaded Holtzmann that she actually beat me up. And, to tell the truth, I'm not sure she couldn't have. She seems like a tigress. Anyway, he was pissed, but he hasn't acted strangely toward me, or anything."

Montoya had listened to the tale of Annette's abduction and subsequent escape with, first, incredulity and then considerable amusement. It matched with what Annette had told him previously, but the details he hadn't heard made the story worth hearing again. And Dino, having spent the morning waxing eloquent with his dissertation committee, was warmed up to play story-teller to the max.

"So what's in the secret compartment, anyway?" Dino had finally run down.

"You know about that? Well, let me show you. Uh, I'll keep my hands visible, scout's honor, except for this. I've got to reach under the dash, here. I'll do it slow, OK?" He carefully reached in under the dash and fumbled around, and there was a distinct click from the back of the limo. Then he pushed a button to the left of the steering column and the trunk popped open with a pneumatic "foosh." He opened the door and got out.

The opened trunk revealed an opened panel inside the trunk, and several newspaper-wrapped bundles were visible in a compartment behind the back seat. Dino tried, with only marginal success, to look innocent.

"So, what are you supposed to be doing with this stuff, Mr. Papandreou?"

"Uh, taking it upstairs to a vault. Environmentally controlled and all that. The boss will unwrap everything when he gets back."

“We’ll see about that. I’m here because of a phone call from Durango, from your friend Annette’s boss, name of Captain Jankowski. I’m told I should ask you about a violin.”

“It’s in the vault upstairs, at least it was the last time I was up there. Um, I’m afraid to touch it, even in the case. Nothing else Holtzmann has is even close to its value. And it looks so fragile. And little. It’s only a little bigger than my hand. Why didn’t she call herself?”

“He said she’s out on a tail, after your boss. They’re somewhere up in the foothills, I guess.”

“Well, I hope she’s careful. He’s a snake. And those other two characters are, well, vipers.”

* * *

After Annette’s car began rolling on its own. LaCoste jammed on the Hummer’s brakes, and it stopped with the smallest of skids. He watched while the tumbling police car disappeared into a scrub oak thicket, and then backed carefully up the hillside to the parking lot.

There was the other car, a county sheriff’s patrol car, to do something about. And Annette’s car had left no small amount of damage, having been shoved through the underbrush and then through the oak. LaCoste set the parking brake and clambered out of the Hummer.

And then he could hear the quiet idling of the sheriff’s car. How convenient, he thought.

A quick reconnaissance of the hillside, rain or no rain, was in order, so he began to hike down the hill, to the right of the path of Annette’s car. He discovered that the farther right he angled, the steeper it got, and there were patches between the oak thickets that would accommodate the car. And, eventually, he found that the oak petered out, giving way to bare rock as the hillside became increasingly steep.

After climbing back up the hill, he considered the alternatives. Obviously, something needed to be done with the car. And, just as obviously, it would be a terrible waste to leave its contents intact. So, true to his packrat nature, he relieved the patrol car of its useful contents—a shotgun, the police-band radio, and, from the trunk, a first-aid kit. He also poured himself a cup of coffee from Milner’s thermos and sat in the Hummer and drank it. Then he got back in behind the wheel of the patrol car, put the transmission in low, and carefully began to negotiate his way down the hill via a reasonably clear path he’d found.

When he could feel the car beginning to lose its footing, as the hillside became too steep for the brakes to hold it, he angled it slightly toward the clearest path, set the parking brake, and turned off the ignition, leaving the transmission in neutral. Then he got out, planted his feet as firmly as he could, and reached back in to release the parking brake.

The car didn’t hesitate, and it almost took his arm with it as it began its final, unguided, trip into the creek valley. It trundled down the hillside, and, with a series of satisfying scrunching noises, disappeared into the scrub. Eventually there was a solid crash, and then silence.

LaCoste carefully climbed back up toward the parking lot. As he passed through the oaks, he repaired the damage from the car as much as possible, and he kicked and scraped the ground as well, to try to cover the tracks.

It took him somewhat longer to repair the damage caused by Annette’s car, for his Hummer had pushed it through some fairly large oak scrub. He pushed and pulled, straightening the broken branches as best he could. It was fortunate that he’d thought to wear a waterproof jacket, because by the time he was finished, he was dripping. Then he tried to cover with gravel the big tracks made by the Hummer. At last, after a long, critical look at the scene from various angles, he was satisfied that it didn’t look too suspicious. Finally, he retrieved a large backpack from the back of the Hummer, finished the last of

Milner's coffee, and walked into the oak thicket, toward the creek down the fledgling trail that he and his associates had been developing.

* * *

The sun was out in Durango, and the sidewalks had dried up. There was still rumbling in the distance, though, and everyone could see that it was still raining buckets up the valley. Jennifer Mason was walking around downtown, window shopping, enjoying the sunshine and its warmth, using it as an excuse to avoid her next move.

She had decided to follow Annette's advice, and the next move that she was so carefully avoiding was to the Narrow Gauge Saloon to meet with Lance Riggins. The notion of reporting on the reporters as a thesis project, although intimidating, was also fascinating. Jennifer knew it would take some doing to persuade her faculty advisor and the journalism department to let her take on a thesis project of this nature, but her confidence level was bolstered by Hal's friendship. She knew he would go to bat for her, if necessary, and not use it to take advantage of her the way that so many men did. His openness and candor was refreshing, and she trusted him.

And the project was interesting because she had been both attracted to and repelled by the story she'd read in the *National Gazette*. The personal angle of the story about the snowplow incident was quite effective, she recognized. But its continued references to the Boudreau death was worse than disgusting, given the tone. Forewarned, she knew, would make her forearmed, and forewarned she was. Annette had pulled no punches in her description of Riggins. Standing at College and Main, at last Jennifer made up her mind, and turned west down College.

And there he was, sitting in the dim light of the Narrow Gauge, pecking at a laptop computer with a half-filled beer mug beside his right hand. She recognized Annette's description of his grey hat.

But this didn't fit. Here was a mid-30s-ish guy, rather handsome, in shape. Where was Annette coming from, anyway? Could this be the same person she'd been so cynical about?

Feeling much better, she walked out of the bright sunshine into the Saloon's gloom and up to Riggins' table.

"Mr. Riggins?" She could tell she was doing that thing with her eyes.

It worked.

* * *

Annette woke up, dangling upside down from her seat belt, left cheek smooshed against her side window, with an amazing, an overwhelming, headache. "Agony," she decided, wasn't appropriate, but she couldn't think of what was. When she finally opened her eyes, she couldn't see clearly from the right one, and everything was green. The car had come to rest upside down, which really meant it was lying mostly on its left side on the steep hillside. Outside her window were oak leaves, smashed flat.

She turned her head, ever so carefully, but she couldn't find Milner. The roof below her was crumpled, the windshield was shattered, and his window was missing. Maybe he fell out, she thought. But then, as she turned her head farther, she saw a foot from the corner of her good eye. Turning her head more, still ever carefully, she watched the foot turn to a leg, to a thigh, to a torso; and then she gasped and began to retch as it turned to a bloody pulp.

What killed Milner probably saved Annette. The car had come to rest on the hillside only because of another tree stump, this one somewhat taller than the first but no less sturdy. The car had rolled on top

of it, and it had punched through the rear window, catching the car in mid-roll. But Milner, rattling around inside the car as it rolled, wound up with his head and chest in the wrong place when the stump punched through.

She passed out again.

* * *

Upon reading Riggins' first story, the one from the week before, Jennifer was even more ambivalent about him, both attracted and repelled. He had the story, complete with pictures, on his laptop, which was helpful as she had missed it in the supermarket. Somehow she just knew that neither the university nor the public library would have the *Gazette* archived. The picture of the scantily clothed body—only after prompting from her did Riggins explain it was a model—and the lurid tone made Jennifer shudder. But there was something else there, something almost titillating, that kept her reading.

As she read, she was analyzing the writing with part of her mind. She had no real experience with tabloids, beyond the usual supermarket cover-browsing for amusement, so this was a new experience. If this keeps me reading, she thought, it must be quite compelling for people with less education. Maybe that's why these things sell so much.

Yet another part of her mind noticed that Lance had positioned himself strategically behind her, looking over her left shoulder, arm resting on the table beside her. As he pointed out features in the picture and the article on the screen of the laptop, he leaned into her, his chin resting almost on her shoulder, his arm brushing hers. She glanced up, and saw their reflection in the mirror over the bar. How interesting, she thought. He's really focused on this story, at least that's what it looks like. She could feel his breath. Not unpleasant, actually. She would have expected something beery, but that was somehow missing, or not noticeable.

Maybe my flirting worked too well, she thought. On the other hand, he *is* rather attractive, and it's been a long time.

* * *

Milner's patrol car was airborne for only a short flight, near the very bottom of the valley, where the hillside turned to crumbly cliff. What launched the car was the increasing roughness, little steps, boulders, cracks in the rock face, and the last of these caught the right-side front tire long enough to impart, in flight-school terminology, both rotation and yaw on the patrol car as it left the ground. Its short flight ended when it crashed into the creek, landing on its left side, wedged against a large rock. It settled uncomfortably into place as the water began to pool behind it.

Up on the hillside, water was also pooling behind Annette's inverted car, although she wasn't aware of this. The force on the car from the pressure of the water was subtle, but it kept changing, especially as dirt and gravel washed from under the places supporting the car. As a result, it shifted little by little to accommodate the force and to try to regain its equilibrium. As it shifted, it began to pivot slightly around the stump that had crushed Milner, and it also began to slip on the slick oak leaves and branches under it.

Below, open space beckoned.

* * *

Eighteen

When Luigi Franconi returned to Durango on Thursday, he'd found the rain depressing, so Friday's sunshine was all the more welcome. He'd become accustomed to bright sun for the past several days, during his end-of-season fishing trip down to Arizona. His Duranglers friends had suggested Lee's Ferry, on the Colorado River just below the Glen Canyon Dam, as a destination, and he had spent three days in sunny, hot Marble Canyon on a boat with a guide, casting to large trout. And then, on his drive back through Tuba City and Kayenta, he had kept the top down.

So the rain was a big change for him. On Friday, he was making the rounds on campus, wishing the best for the future to the various friends he'd made over the summer, in preparation for his departure on Saturday. He had to drive back up to Denver, say goodbye to his trusty Chrysler Sebring (which, truth be told, would be the best thing his sunburn could have happen) and prepare for the flight to Zürich on Sunday.

When the sun finally came out, he was on his way to Hal's office from a farewell meeting with Jacques Ament, and the warmth brought a smile to his face. It also brought out the demonstrators, as well as the gawkers who wanted to watch them, including, in this case, not a few hecklers.

Because he was paying more attention to the sunshine and the mental list he'd made of whom to visit, Luigi wasn't paying much attention to his immediate surroundings. Consequently, when he crossed the quadrangle to the natural sciences building, he blundered through the group of women who were parading around in a circle in front of the administration building.

The student protesters were surprisingly nice. Some tried to hand him flyers—the headlines used the word “rape” a lot, he finally noticed—which he politely declined. But after a half-dozen rather genteel interactions with students, he found himself confronted by a different sort of creature. After some thought, he decided on “she” as an appropriate pronoun.

And she was not at all nice. First, she stepped directly in his path—all of the students had been polite enough to approach with flanking maneuvers—so that he had to stop in his tracks. Second, she shoved a protest sign in front of his nose, much too close for him to read, so he tried to step back so it would come into focus. Third, she interpreted this backwards step by Luigi as a sign of weakness, or at least that was his best guess, because she snarled and began to scream in his face.

“And how many women have you raped lately, huh?”

Of course, the mere notion of such a thing was so foreign to Luigi's very being that he couldn't help but look surprised and somewhat amused.

Bad response. The woman wearing the “Dyke Power” etc., etc., tee shirt (he couldn't read the whole message because it was obscured by her protest sign) thought he was laughing at her. So she whapped him with the sign.

By itself, the sign, a reasonably stout cardboard affair with strident black lettering, wouldn't have been a problem for Luigi to get whapped with. But in organizing the protest, Madge Glendon and her co-conspirators had attached their signs to four-foot sections of one-by-two furring strips, pine boards they had bought at Boker Lumber. And when she whapped him, her sign rotated so that the thing came his direction furring-strip first.

Moreover, Madge was strong.

As Luigi sank to a sitting position on the sidewalk, bleeding from a cut on his forehead, one of the student protesters screamed and the others gathered around. Suddenly, he was surrounded by a dozen or

so college girls, most of whom smelled pretty good, his mind registered, who were doting on his predicament. Madge had disappeared.

It didn't take very long before people began emerging from the administration building to check out the commotion. A demonstration was one thing, pretty much a dime a dozen in front of the admin building; but screams and a knot of people surrounding someone on the ground was another. Luigi couldn't help but enjoy the attention, but then he heard a siren in the distance. Getting closer.

So he was struggling to his feet, blotting his forehead with a handkerchief someone had handed him, when John Martin strode purposefully up. Martin didn't recognize any of the students, but he had a pretty good idea of the instigator behind the protest. His first concern, though, was the victim, or, more specifically, the potential for a lawsuit by the victim. When he recognized the poor fellow as the AMFest guest conductor, he was aghast.

"Oh, Maestro Franconi, I'm so sorry. I hope you're not badly injured."

Martin was actually risking wrinkles in his Armani suit by kneeling to help Franconi up. But his action was highly effective, because his use of "Maestro" got the students' attention, and his solicitous treatment of Luigi got them scared.

"Well, I'll probably have a headache, but I don't think I'm what you'd call 'injured'. I'm afraid that you have me at a disadvantage."

"I'm sorry. I'm John Martin, the university's provost. I think that this little demonstration was aimed at me."

"How nice to meet you, Provost Martin. I wish the circumstances were better. I expect you know a friend of mine, Dean Hal Weathers. I was just on my way to see him when I managed to interrupt these, um, demonstrators. Perhaps we could retire to his office before that ambulance, or whatever that siren is, arrives. I'm really fine and I don't want to be sidetracked by anything unnecessary. I have a rather ambitious schedule over the next day or two."

This request surprised Martin, but he had little choice except to honor it. He turned on his Official Glare, picked out one of the student demonstrators who had the courage to stick around and told her, in no uncertain terms, to send the paramedics to Hal's office when they arrived.

* * *

Alice was taking notes about what to do with Hal's mail, not something that she really needed to do, but she knew it made him feel better. Everything he was telling her was what she would have done anyway. Except sometimes, very occasionally, he surprised her.

"Now, here's an invitation to a semi-arid lands conference. Next spring. In Boulder, at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. Hmm. The fifth in an ongoing series."

"You know," he looked up pensively, "We should probably try to get them to come here for one of the future conferences, if this is really an ongoing series. So maybe I should go to this one. When's commencement next spring, Alice?"

Just as she was about to tell him, in walked John Martin and, to her surprise and delight, Luigi Franconi. Except that Luigi was holding a bloody handkerchief to his forehead. She dashed into the kitchenette for the First-Aid kit.

"Luigi! What in the world happened to you?"

Hal ushered the injured conductor to a seat on the couch and, for lack of anything better to do, helped him put his feet up. Martin, apparently feeling that Luigi was too weak to speak, butted in.

“Madge Glendon’s storm troopers got to him, poor fellow. I hope he’s not too severely injured.”

“Figures. What’s got her knickers in a twist this time?”

“What? Excuse me, but what did you say?” Luigi, surprised, was still learning about American slang.

“Huh? Oh, I mean, ‘what’s she upset about this time?’”

“Thank you, Hal. ‘Knickers in a twist.’ I’ll remember that. How would I say that in Italian...” Luigi looked off into space.

“I don’t know. She thinks I’ve cut back the women’s studies funding, probably. I didn’t, but I may now.” Martin was clearly disgusted with the whole thing.

Alice came back with the First-Aid kit and elbowed her way past Martin and Hal without hesitation. And they didn’t even think about resisting, as both knew her too well. She began fussing about over Luigi’s cut. It turned out not to be too bad, just a forehead bleeder.

She had everything under control and patched up when the two paramedics walked in. Sensibly, they had decided that if the victim had walked away, they didn’t need their gurney. But they were still carrying an array of stuff, two big valises each. Luigi tried to look healthy.

“Uh, we were directed up here. Who’s hurt?” This from the one carrying what looked like a portable defibrillator machine.

“No one here.” Luigi was also trying to sound healthy.

The telephone rang, and Alice looked annoyed. Leaving her patient, she picked it up.

“Natural sciences, Dean Weathers’ office.” She listened for a moment, perplexed.

“Dean Weathers, it’s Ms. Trieri. She sounds...strange.”

* * *

Annette had come to once again, and she immediately noticed that her headache was becoming localized. Worse, but localized behind her right eye. She was dangling from the seat belt more than ever, not at all pressed against her window, now. Somewhere in her mind, this registered as motion by the inverted car.

She turned her head, again carefully, and the foot was still there, although shifted a little. And there, next to it, resting on the roof of the car by the roof pillar on the right side, was her cellular phone.

The car moved, with a little jerk.

Well, Trieri, she thought, this is not a good situation you’re in, not at all. She tried to reach over to the phone with her right hand, but came up about four inches short. She also noticed that it hurt like crazy to move her right shoulder. Not as much as her head, but enough that she wasn’t going to be moving it again.

The car moved again, with another little jerk.

OK, she thought, I’ve got to get that phone, and to do that I’ve got to get unbuckled. And to do that, I’ve got to relieve the tension on this seat belt, which I can do by pushing on the roof with my left hand.

Then I can pop the seat belt loose with my right hand, assuming I can get up the courage to move my right arm again. Then I can land on my head. Yuck, right in that puddle of vomit. Great.

The jerk of the car moving was a little bigger this time.

Five minutes later, she was wriggling through the missing passenger side window, phone clutched firmly in her good left hand. Thinking, Trieri, why didn't you just opt for being a mother and going through twelve hours of the agony of labor instead of getting yourself into a fix like this?

She finally cleared the window, which was now only about four inches from the hillside due to the car's rotation around the stump that had mashed Milner. She hardly noticed the rain. Still holding the phone, she wrapped her left arm around the base of a two-inch scrub oak and tried to get a foothold on the bushes below her.

Relieved of her weight, the car shifted even more, rotating away from her. Then it rolled slightly, un-impaled itself from the ponderosa stump, and slid down the hill, leaving her by herself, hanging onto the oak for dear life.

Wonderful, she thought. Now what I need is for a bear to come along. She began fumbling with the phone, left-handed.

* * *

Hal took the telephone from Alice.

"Annette? Alice says you sound strange. You OK?"

"I meant to call the station, but I must have hit a wrong button. But you're even better. No. I'm not OK. But maybe I'll get lucky and things won't get worse."

"Where are you? What can I do?"

"On a hillside above Hermosa Creek, with a broken shoulder and something wrong with my head and trying not to fall off the world. Help?"

"Where above Hermosa Creek? And your signal is breaking up."

"Oh. Crap. The battery. I forgot. Below the trailhead parking lot. Follow the broken bushes."

"OK, I'll be there sooner than you think. I'll try to call if we can't find you, OK? Hang in there. I love you." And he hung up the phone.

"Annette's in trouble and needs medical help." He pointed to the two paramedics. "You and you are coming with me and you'd better persuade me not to drive. But whoever drives better not fool around. Now."

The paramedics looked at each other, shrugged, and picked up their assorted stuff. Hal was out the door already, so they followed. Luigi jumped off the couch and took off after them, and, with only the slightest hesitation, Martin followed.

On their way down the stairs, Hal was instructing the paramedics.

"Offhand, I don't know which is faster, north on this side of the river, on County Road 250, or across on 32nd Street and up the main highway. But I bet you know and that's the way we go. To Hermosa, then up the Forest Service road to the trailhead."

"But that's not our jurisdiction."

“You want to argue, pal, and I’ll just take your damned ambulance and do it myself. Now let’s move!”

Martin had caught up with them and was surprised by Hal’s tone. Hal’s always been so mild mannered, he thought.

At the ambulance, Hal got in the front, with the taller of the two paramedics, and the others climbed in the back. Off they went, holding on. Martin was trying to explain the situation to the paramedic in the back with himself and Luigi, but the ride was a distraction.

This was largely because, up front, Hal continued to use his newly found Voice of Authority with the driver. He also did a credible job of spotting at intersections, helping the driver make good time. As a result, they were on the highway north out of town—the driver had decided that would be faster—in only five minutes. Then there were no more traffic lights, and Hal had less to do with himself. So he fished out his cell phone and called 911.

“I’m calling to report an officer down. Durango Police Lieutenant Annette Trieri. I’m in an ambulance headed her way, so the best thing you can do is to connect me with the police station downtown. Captain Walter Jankowski.”

“Is this an emergency, sir?”

“I said ‘officer down’ didn’t I? Doesn’t that constitute an emergency to you?”

“Can you give me your name and address, sir?”

He held the phone away from his face. “Do you guys have any special codes or anything you use to get through to these people? She’s playing unbelievable bureaucratic games with me.”

“Who is it?”

“A 911 operator.”

“Oh. Tell her Gerry Slocomb says do it. Maybe that’ll help.”

Hal spoke the magic words into the mouthpiece and was delighted when they worked. A few seconds later Walter Jankowski was on the line.

“Walter? Hal Weathers. Annette’s hurt. I’m on my way with an ambulance crew. It’s a long story. Point is, you need to know and also you may be able to help. Sounds like she’s out in the woods, near the Hermosa Creek trailhead. Have you guys got any mountaineering search-and-rescue resources?”

“Well, the county sheriff’s a better bet, but I’ll get in touch with them and get someone up there. She blew out of here this morning without much in the way of information, but the desk sergeant told me she said something about a sheriff’s deputy and that pot-hunter she’s on the trail of. Hang on, let me make a quick call and I’ll get back to you.”

Hal waited impatiently for what seemed like an eternity.

“I’m back. The sheriff has units on the way. What’s your number? I’ll call you back when I get in my car.”

Hal told him and then had to wait some more, another eternity.

While he was waiting, the ambulance turned left off the highway, then back right onto the Forest Service road and around its first left curve, and Hal decided to risk Annette’s battery.

“Hello?” Her voice was distressingly weak.

“Hi, lover, it’s me. Just a quick call to tell you we’re coming up the Forest Service road, we should be there in just a couple.”

“Good to hear your voice. Look for ...Hummer ...push ...hillside ...Holtzmann ...” And her voice faded completely. Hal sat and stared at his phone. He pushed the “End” button, and it tweedled almost immediately.

It was Jankowski. “Hal? Your phone’s been busy.”

“Yeah, I called Annette to tell her we’re on the way up to the trailhead. But her battery died. Where are you?”

“Stuck in traffic at Park Avenue, but not for long. I should be there in, oh, fifteen minutes, max, once I clear this intersection. And the sheriff’s guys should be there sooner.”

In the back of the ambulance, the ride was challenging. Because the passengers had no idea of what to expect in the way of the next curve, each maneuver was a surprise. Liugi was reminded of a childhood pastime, riding roller-coasters with his eyes closed. And the vehicle was not designed for the S-curve meanderings of the road up the mountainside, so they couldn’t tell if they were going to tip over or not. At last, they could feel that the pavement had turned to gravel, and the ride eased as the driver began skidding around the curves.

Finally, they felt the big vehicle sliding to a stop, and stop it finally did, with a minor bump. They gathered themselves and opened the door.

They had left Durango in sunshine and warmth, and they emerged into rain and gloom. The bump, they discovered, was from the ambulance sliding into the back bumper of a large vehicle, which turned out to be a tricked-out Hummer, sitting in a muddy parking lot looking over a green valley.

Hal was nowhere in sight, but Gerry Slocomb, the ambulance driver, pointed at the bushes down the hill.

“He went that way.”

* * *

One by one, the number of vehicles in the parking lot increased, clustered around the Hummer and its companion vehicles. Searchers worked their way down the hillside, in the direction Hal had gone.

Far below in the valley, the flow around the cars in the creek had reached critical proportions. What had begun overnight high in the watershed as small rivulets, many running off the burned-over soil in Sheephead Basin, gradually merged and grew into new streams. When they merged into the existing channels, they quickly overwhelmed the channels’ capacities and began to carve their own new stream beds, picking up sediment in the process. As the myriad new and old streamlets merged into the main channel of Hermosa Creek, the flow in that watercourse spilled over its banks, drowning meadows and uprooting trees.

Then it encountered the narrows, usually a gorge of strong flow, now a virtual cataract. And about halfway down was a car.

Milner’s patrol car had acted as a new dam for several hours, but then the pressure of the water had begun to move it downstream. It rolled and spun, catching on rocks and tree roots, but always breaking loose again, until it encountered the other car, the one with Milner’s body still inside it. It had filled with water, and was solidly anchored to the stream bed. The two cars, wedged together, made quite an effective dam, some two hundred yards upstream from Holtzmann’s new site.

Tony LaCoste, having considerable outdoors experience, realized the danger of the rising water when he first arrived at the creek. In their several trips to the site, they had been careful to use different approaches, but all of the usual crossings were now under water. LaCoste walked upstream to a point opposite the alcove with the new batch of artifacts, and set his backpack on the ground. It didn't take long for Holtzmann and Westerman, on the other bank, to notice him.

LaCoste took several large nylon stuff sacks, each with a drawstring, out of his pack, and proceeded to nest them inside each other. When they were all nested, he looked about for a baseball-sized rock. When he found one, he held it up for Holtzmann and Westerman to see and then put it in the bottom of the sacks. Then he tightened the drawstring on the outer sack, whirled it about like an old-fashioned sling, and let it fly toward Westerman. At first it looked as if Westerman might try to catch it, but then he must have remembered the size of the rock. Over the noise of the creek, LaCoste shouted for Westerman and Holtzmann to load up the sacks and get up to higher ground.

LaCoste then began looking around for an appropriate tree. It had to be tall and sturdy enough, but not too big. He didn't want to have to work any harder than necessary. And it couldn't be leaning in the wrong direction. As he wandered down the bank of the creek, he stopped, removed a hatchet from his pack, and cut a one-inch oak branch that was straighter than most. This he trimmed to a length of four feet. Then, using his sheath knife, he whittled notches in the ends of the oak branch.

By then he had spotted a candidate tree, a ponderosa pine about eighteen inches in diameter and close to sixty feet tall, he estimated. It was standing on a shelf about ten feet above the creek, set back some fifteen feet from the bank. He fished around in his pack and came up with a small stuff sack, and removed a three-foot chainsaw chain.

This was different from a normal version of such a chain in two respects. It was disconnected; that is, it had ends, in this case, with one-inch steel rings on each. And it also had cutting teeth facing both directions. He leaned on the oak branch, bending it so he could slip the two rings on the ends of the chain onto the notches in the branch. Then he set to work with his makeshift saw. It would be something of a job, but he'd done such things before.

LaCoste had finished his first cuts—he was careful to keep the teeth on the saw chain quite sharp—and was about a third of the way into the final cut when he spied Holtzmann and Westerman across the creek. It was now running deeper than ever, and he wondered if he'd picked a tree high enough up the bank. The worry made him work harder, and he was sweating despite the cool air and rain.

He could tell that he was four or five strokes away from felling the tree, when he looked up and saw Holtzmann and Westerman standing just where it would fall. Why is it, he thought, that I always wind up working with losers? He waved them away and returned to the saw.

A few strokes later, he heard the telltale snapping noises, and he stood back. The ponderosa teetered slightly, and then fell majestically into the position that LaCoste had planned for it. Damn, he thought, I'm good. Then he sat down to rest and watch the show. He was wondering if one of his two colleagues would have the sense to come across to get the hatchet or the saw. It would sure be easier for them to carry the four sacks full of artifacts across the makeshift bridge if there weren't so many obstructing branches on the other end.

Neither did. Instead, they stood on the bank, arguing with each other. Westerman must have lost, because he tied the drawstrings of his two sacks together and hung them around the back of his neck. And then he struggled to mount the tree, climbing through the branches and trying not to get tangled up.

When he reached the clear part of the trunk, Westerman simply walked across, with the creek running about three feet below him. He hopped down beside LaCoste, set the sacks on the ground

carefully, rolled his eyes dramatically, and looked back at the tree, where Holtzmann was making his way through the branches on the fallen ponderosa.

It soon became clear why Holtzmann had not wanted to carry any of the sacks himself. He simply didn't have enough self-confidence crossing the tree to carry anything. Unlike Westerman, when he reached the clear part of the trunk, Holtzmann crossed sitting down, scootching his way across.

As Holtzmann was over the middle of the creek, past the branches, his feet were nearly touching the water. It's really rising fast, LaCoste thought. Eventually, Holtzmann reached the near bank and slipped to the ground. He pointed to LaCoste, and shouted and panted for breath.

"The other sacks. Go get them while there's time. Quickly!"

"Me? Let him do it. I cut down the damned tree."

"I did my trip, pal. You go." Westerman was not moving.

"Quickly! Now!" Holtzmann was practically breathing fire. So LaCoste shrugged and ran across the ponderosa, made his way through the branches, and retrieved the other set of full stuff sacks. Then he began to make his way back across.

When he was about mid-stream, with the water nearly up to the tree trunk, there was a loud crashing noise, followed by the snaps of trees and a roar of water.

Down the stream came a car, upside down, carried on a wave at about the height of LaCoste's head. Westerman grabbed the sacks he had placed on the ground, and he and Holtzmann scrambled up the side of the valley as fast as they could manage, grabbing oaks and pulling themselves up. They could hear the water rising behind them. When it seemed to stop rising, they stopped climbing, and turned to see what had happened.

LaCoste was nowhere to be seen, nor were the sacks he was carrying, nor the felled ponderosa.

There was too much noise to talk, and they were too tired anyway. Slowly and methodically they started up the hill, Westerman carrying the two sacks. Each had made the trek several times before, and they knew the difficulty involved. It was a long, steep slog.

* * *

Jennifer Mason was examining her options. Riggins had excused himself for a visit to the Men's Room, and she, having spent enough time with him to have descended to his level of journalism, felt herself on the horns of a dilemma. A horny dilemma, she giggled to herself.

They had spent the better part of the morning together, sitting in the Narrow Gauge discussing his writing assignments. He was still nursing the same mug of beer he had when she came in earlier. It must be warm and flat by now, she thought. Eventually, they had ordered lunch. Now, mid-afternoon, things were progressing in the expected order. She had set the stage by doing that thing with her eyes, and he responded appropriately. Then she had flirted in subtle ways, and he flirted back, but not by coming on strong. Just what she needed to keep her interest up. Their discussion of journalism proved to each that they had something in common, although she liked to think that her perspective was on a somewhat higher plane than his.

But then he started talking about his novel, and she gained a new level of respect for him. Lots of people she knew talked about writing a novel, but almost no one actually did it. He was, and proved it by showing her the draft on his laptop computer.

And he still smelled good, even after about five hours of sitting together. She knew that the next step would be a dinner invitation and its implications for later in the evening. It was Friday, after all.

And here he was. Show time.

“Jennifer, I’m having a great time, so I hate to do this. I’d much rather ask you out to dinner. But I made arrangements to do an interview later today. And I’ve got another deadline on Monday. If I blow off the interview, I won’t get what I need for my story.”

She was astounded. This was supposed to be her line. A line she had just about decided not to use. Damn! Now the most she could hope for was a graceful recovery.

“Oh, how disappointing. Dinner would have been lovely, but I understand. Really. I should have contacted you in advance, instead of just showing up here this morning. But I’m still trying to get a handle on the project I described, so is there some way we can continue this, like, tomorrow?”

“I’d like that a lot. But I’m still not clear on this project. You were, um, sort of cryptic about it. Maybe you didn’t quite trust me when you explained it earlier. Hell, maybe you don’t trust me now, for all I know. But I still don’t understand the project.”

“Oh. Well, you’re right. I wasn’t telling all. See, what I want to do is to write a research paper, for credit, so I can graduate. At first I had the idea of writing the story behind the story of Steffanie Boudreau’s death. Not the whodunit story, but the background and all that. I was going to interview her so I did a lot of research on her. But then, the police detective, Annette Trieri, suggested that I do a sort of investigative report on the media coverage of this whole thing. See, here in Durango, we’ve never seen anything like this, all these TV vans and people from out of town. And then I read your story about the snowplow and got interested in your involvement. Does this make sense?”

Riggins smiled, most engagingly, she thought.

“I think so. And I bet another reason you picked me is because I write for a supermarket tabloid and therefore would make a pretty good story for your project. The lurid headline angle, and all that.”

Well, at least he’s honest. Now how am I going to finesse this?

“Um, sort of. Annette suggested you, also.”

“Did she tell you that I tried to hit on her? That was before I knew she was hooked up with that guy from the university.”

“Well, actually, she warned me about you, pretty strongly.”

“Thought she would. Well, she’s right. I travel a lot and I’ve become accustomed to picking up women whenever I get the chance. Also, I’m thirty-six. I put you about twenty-one.”

She blushed.

“Um, I guess that ‘almost twenty-two’ wouldn’t make a lot of difference, would it?”

Might as well treat honesty with honesty, she decided. How strange. I’m so used to being in control of situations like this. And this is so out of control. She looked up to see him smiling his friendliest smile.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to say it was an issue, or a problem or anything like that. It’s not, for me at least. How about dinner tomorrow? If we start early, we’ll have plenty of time to talk about your project. And if that goes well, maybe we can go dancing, or something.”

She smiled back. This, she thought, is more familiar territory.

* * *

Nineteen

The paramedics were working to get Annette stabilized for the ride to the hospital, and the various police and sheriff's people were standing in a little knot talking among themselves. It still wasn't clear what had happened, because two cars were missing. At least the rain was letting up.

Milner had maintained contact with the sheriff's department, so they knew his car was supposed to be somewhere in the vicinity. And Annette's car wasn't around either. She wasn't talking yet, so speculation was rampant.

Hal was sitting, alone, in Jankowski's car, with the heater on full blast, trying to warm up and get some energy back. Ever since his first conversation with Annette, ages ago, back in his office, he'd been running on high-octane adrenalin and now it was wearing off.

The few words he'd heard from her when her battery died had been just enough to send him running straight down the hill from the Hummer, when the ambulance had arrived at the trailhead parking lot. After he'd burst through the first oak thicket, it was pretty easy to pick up the path of the car, and he had followed it down the hill, careless of the increasing slope. Finally, after taking a bad fall, he slowed down and took it easier. At just about the point where the hill was becoming too steep to walk comfortably, he'd found her, curled up in a ball, left arm around a small oak, passed out.

He used his belt to fasten her securely to the oak, then kissed her and covered her with his jacket, and headed back up the hill for help. After that, it was a matter of letting the professionals handle things. He'd extracted a solemn promise from Gerry Slocomb and his partner, whose name turned out to be Al Witherspoon, to fetch him if she woke up. In return, he promised to stay out of the way. At last he was finally getting warm. He went looking for Martin and Luigi and found them sitting in one of the sheriff's department cars. Martin rolled down his window.

"Hal! Glad you're OK. They say Annette will be fine. Did it stop raining? Good."

And he opened the door. Luigi got out the other side.

"Hal, I'm so glad Annette will be OK. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I'd hate to leave not knowing."

"Yeah. Well, thank you both. Of course, I'll feel a lot better when I can talk to her. And she sure looks banged up. I hope those guys know their stuff, when it comes to diagnosis."

Annette had a badly bruised, possibly fractured, right cheek and maybe a slight concussion. And her right shoulder was separated. Because she was unconscious, Witherspoon had popped it back into place before they had brought her up the hillside. Less potential for more damage that way, he had said.

"So," Hal continued, "Do these other guys have any ideas about what happened?"

"The last thing they told me was that they think both cars, I mean Annette's and the sheriff's deputy's, are down in the creek. There's another sort of track over there to the right."

Martin pointed vaguely. "I think what they're talking about now is who owns these three other vehicles, the Hummer especially."

"Do you suppose," said Luigi calmly, "that it could be those gentlemen?"

He was looking the down the hill and to the left, where two bedraggled individuals, one carrying nylon sacks full of something, were emerging from an oak thicket, looking soggy and exhausted.

“Oh, Captain!”

This time, Luigi was somewhat less calm, and he was elegantly waving an arm toward the thicket, as if giving the second violins their cue.

* * *

Hal was waiting in her hospital room when she woke up. The x-rays had shown no fractures, although she was going to have a shiner to beat all shiners, and only the least of concussions. The shoulder would have to be immobilized for some time, and corrective surgery might be needed down the road. Mostly, the problem was hypothermia. Annette had spent quite a while lying, injured, in the rain and cold on the side of the mountain, after all.

He was just beginning to doze off when she made a little noise, took a deeper breath than all the others, and opened her left eye. The right one was both swollen shut and bandaged over.

He jumped up, knelt by the bed, and took her left hand. Like her eye, her right hand wasn't available just now.

“Ssshhh, don't move or anything. You're fine, and I'm here.”

“Move? Are you nuts?” Her voice was sleepy, but she was lucid despite the painkillers. “Is this the hospital?”

“Yep, back in town. You said ‘help’ and you got it. Warm enough?”

“Yeah, finally. It was so cold. And my head doesn't hurt any more. Umm. Well at least not as much. Is my eye OK?”

“Swollen shut and bandaged. But no permanent damage. And your shoulder was just separated, and that's all fixed. They think it'll heal up just fine. There are other little things, what they called ‘contusions and abrasions,’ but you'll be just fine.”

“I must look like hell.”

“Yes, but you never, ever, looked better to me.”

“What a mess. Did anything good happen back there?”

“Hmm. I don't know what you mean by ‘good,’ but Richard Westerman and Raimer Holtzmann are in custody for pot-hunting. At least. On the other hand, there are two cars in the creek and a missing deputy sheriff. And LaCoste's nowhere to be found.”

“Milner. Deputy Milner. Nice guy. Very dead. He was in my car when it went into the creek. Already dead. I'm sorry for his family.” A tear trickled down her left cheek.

“LaCoste is missing, huh? The son-of-a-bitch. He was in that Hummer that pushed us down the hillside. Well, I hope he's dead somewhere.” A hint of a malicious smile appeared.

“Now, calm down. There's plenty of time for that stuff when you get out of here. You need to rest. Doctor's orders.”

“What doctor? You?”

She must be feeling reasonably well, he thought, if she's teasing again. He was immensely relieved.

“Hey? You must be feeling pretty good. So let me suggest something. Walter keeps teasing me about making an honest woman out of you. I keep teasing back about why don't you make an honest

man out of me. So what about this: why don't we make honest people out of each other and get married? After you get your arm and eye back, I mean."

This time, it was a different flavor of tear trickling down her left cheek.

* * *

The 75-year-old steam engine of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad chuffed its way up the tracks on the last leg of its 43-mile trip into Silverton. It was working harder than usual because it was pulling an extra car, the *Nomad*, a restored and refurbished private coach. The D&SNGRR had added it especially for Hal and Annette to make the trip. The railroad had promised that the trip would be uneventful, and it was. Spectacular, to be sure, but blessedly uneventful, at least compared to their first trip.

There was an amusing moment, however, just about where they had found the body on the High Line section back in August. They were on their way forward to the concession car, Annette being careful with her balance because her right arm was still in a sling. Her right eye, even after a month, was still a little purple, but at least she could see again.

Entering one of the coaches, they ran across a tourist sales pitch by one of the concessionaires. She was selling video tapes of the train and the most recent edition of the book *Cinders & Smoke*, which contained a detailed, mile-by-mile description of the trip—and this edition had been further updated with a "special story of how the mystery of the tragedy of the famous violinist Steffanie Boudreau was solved by the internationally famous writer Lance Riggins."

On hearing this, both Hal and Annette burst into uncontrollable laughter, to the mystification of the passengers and the annoyance of the concessionaire. They had to excuse themselves elaborately just to continue their walk.

Mostly, they enjoyed the scenery. They had waited patiently for the peak of the fall aspen season to make this trip, and the Animas Gorge and the remote valley into Silverton were a wonder to behold. An early snow had dusted the high peaks, and the yellows and golds of the aspen, mixed in with the deep greens of the conifers, all set against the new snow and the deep blue of the sky, made for a truly remarkable experience.

In the concession car, they ran into Conductor Willie Monroe, who was taking a break before the Silverton station. Annette was glad for this, because she had never had a chance to thank him for helping out with the identification of Schwab and Meeker.

"So what's going to happen to those guys, anyway?"

There were certain details of the case that hadn't made the papers yet, and Willie was as curious as anybody.

"Well, you know about the Antiquities Act stuff, the artifacts we caught two of them with, right?" Willie nodded knowingly.

"The guy from Santa Fe who was behind it all, Holtzmann, was one of the guys caught red-handed, along with one of his flunkies. His other flunky, LaCoste, died in that flood. They found his body lodged on the railroad bridge over Hermosa Creek, incidentally, mangled, his mouth full of mud and ash.

"As for the other two, well, they're clearly amateurs, and we plan to get them to sing. All we really have on them in the way of criminal activity is the antiquities charge, although they were involved in separating the violin from its owner in some way also. But they want to get on with their lives, so

they're going to deal. This will give the Feds another antiquities charge to lay on Holtzmann and maybe Westerman."

"But who killed the girl?"

"Westerman told us that it was LaCoste, but he was fuzzy on the details. It seems that she and LaCoste walked down the train tracks, back to the High Line from Peaceful Pines, and only he came back. Apparently they had met in Europe and were lovers there. LaCoste told Westerman that they were 'fooling around,' which probably means something sexual, and that the girl died. So either he killed her or she may have died from a combination of drugs, the thin air, maybe some jet lag, and the excitement of sex and just being out in the gorge. There's some evidence that she may have had a convulsion and broken her neck. Or LaCoste broke it. He left her there, on the tracks, and they got rid of her clothes in a dumpster at Peaceful Pines. And Westerman also told us that LaCoste was driving the snowplow. Since he's dead, LaCoste, I mean, there's really no way to prove this. But it makes sense and some of it's corroborated by the chauffeur. LaCoste was the hands-on guy who did Holtzmann's dirty work."

"Damn." Willie seemed pleased to hear it tied up so neatly. "This summer on the Silverton was pretty different, I'll say. We've had some strange things happen, like the time back in '87 when the truck loaded with potatoes crashed into Engine 473. But, with the girl on the tracks, that snowplow business, and then the flood that almost washed out the bridge back at Hermosa, where they found that body, this was really something new."

* * *

They took coffee back to their private car and snuggled together to watch the sweeping aspen vistas as the valley opened up into Silverton.

"So," she leaned into him, "I was all doped up and hurting, but I remember clearly in the hospital that you mentioned the 'M' word."

"Um, you mean 'murder,' like the one you just solved?" He tried to look innocent, and she poked him in the ribs.

"No, 'marriage,' and don't pretend you don't know what I mean. Thing is, you haven't mentioned it since."

"Well, I don't want to put any pressure on you, so I thought I'd let you bring it up before I did again."

"So now I have. I've been wondering if you mentioned it then because you were worried about me, or something like that."

"Worried? Me? Well, maybe a little. When you get the chance, you'll have to ask John Martin about my behavior after that first phone call you made, when you were hanging on to that little tree. I think I surprised him some. But I wasn't suggesting marriage just out of sympathy. I've been thinking about it for a while."

"About a family, too?"

"Mostly just you. But I've got an open mind."

"Well, the thought of getting married again doesn't tie my stomach up in knots any more. Maybe I'm ready."

"Now that's a positive sign. Although, you know, it would help if I had something better to say to people that ask than, 'She married me because I don't tie her stomach up in knots.'"

She poked him again.

“I can probably think of something even more positive. But it spoils my plans for up here in Silverton.”

“Huh?”

“If we’re getting married, it wouldn’t do to get myself one of those ‘I’m with Stupid’ tee shirts, would it?”

He poked her back, very gently.

* * * * *

Nuclear Family

Not * * * * *
^A Four Corners Mystery



Nuclear Family: [Not] A Four Corners Mystery

Part I: Hot Lead

lead (lēd) *n.* **1.** *Symbol Pb* A soft, malleable, ductile, bluish-white, dense metallic element, extracted chiefly from galena and used in ... radiation shielding ... **3.** Bullets from or for firearms; shot.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,
Fourth Edition*

One

If I were a betting man, which I'm not, most of the time at least, I'd bet my bankroll on stupidity as the first and foremost reason that bad guys get caught, or dead.

For sure that was the case with the poor dumb schmuck sitting slumped in the corner of the kitchen, his blood smeared down the wall where he'd slid to the floor. The cockroaches, I thought, will feast tonight.

Thing is, he had a chance not to get dead, if only he'd been just a little smart. "Don't move," I told him, with emphasis.

Especially, I was thinking, don't move that gun hand in my direction. He could have just dropped the thing on the floor and stood still. Then he'd probably still be alive.

But, no, he was one of the stupid ones. Maybe he thought I was so old that my reflexes weren't up to par. Or maybe he thought I was distracted by the luscious pair of tits that jiggled into the room just then, attached to the naked blonde.

Distracting as she was, in my peripheral vision I could see his gun hand rising toward me, and I twitched my left index finger, three times. The recoil of the borrowed Glock 9mm lifted my aim with the second and third shots, so the first one got him in the belly, the second in the heart, right through his sternum, and the third in the neck. He sprang leaks all over the kitchen, big leaks from front and back, making a real mess as he slid down to the floor.

His shot, which coincided almost exactly with my second one, missed wide and low, and I knew the hole in the baseboard would be helpful to me in establishing my claim of self-defense.

The blonde screamed and pranced back into the other room, jiggling at all quarters. I heard a door slam and then another, what sounded like those lightweight interior doors. Maybe, I thought, she has some clothes in there somewhere.

Just to be safe, I kicked the dead guy's gun across the room and felt for a pulse. None. So I went exploring.

The next room was a combined living and dining room, and it had a closed door in its left wall, the kind that doesn't lock. Behind that was a bedroom, and clothes and a shoulder bag lay on the bed.

Another closed door, the kind that does lock, suggested to me that the blonde had decided to hide in the bathroom.

Her shoulder bag held, among assorted female things, a box of condoms—two dozen or so, a high-quality brand—and I decided she was probably a hooker.

“Blondie? Hey, Blondie! Unless you’ve got a gun in there with you, you can come out safely and get dressed. I’m going to call the cops, and you have time to get out of here, if you want.”

No answer.

“Look, I shot him in self-defense, OK? And I’m not going to do anything bad to you, so come on out. You don’t want the cops to find you in there, do you?”

There were fumbling noises with the handle, and it turned. The door eased open a crack, and a wide blue eye peeked out, looking scared.

“Close your eyes?” The voice was timid.

“Of course.”

But that was a lie—I didn’t trust her enough to let her wander around without being watched. Besides, I fancied myself as something of a connoisseur of women’s bodies, and I wasn’t going to miss the chance to do a little ogling. Hooker or not, the glimpse I’d had before had interested me. Apparently a natural blonde, she had a most intriguing bikini wax job, for one thing.

So she jiggled out of the bathroom and over to the bed, where she wriggled into her clothes, providing me with quite a show. In the middle of the jiggling and wriggling, she noticed that my eyes were open.

This was her turf, and her confidence returned. “Hey! You said you’d close your eyes.”

But she was smiling, so I smiled back. “What? And miss all this? Look, you’re going to want to get out of here, I expect, but I need a couple of answers first, OK? Like, what’s the guy’s name? And what’s yours and where can I find you if I need to talk to you some more?”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

“Because I’m going to let you leave if you do. Otherwise, you can tell the cops, and they’ll also want to know about your job and so on.”

I think it was the “so on” part that persuaded her to talk to me. I was pretty sure she didn’t want to owe the cops anything.

“He told me his name is—was—Nassir Al-Ayas. But I didn’t ask for ID. And I’m Dolly.” She really did resemble the famous Dolly a little, at least with the hair and the melons. She rummaged in her bag. “Here’s a card. They’ll know when it’s OK to page me.”

“Hmm. All right, thanks. And what did our friend Nassir want? Full ride? Or what?”

She looked startled at first, but recovered and took it in stride. “Naw, just a blow job. But he wanted me naked, so he could tell I’m a woman, he said. He seemed paranoid about getting a blow job from a guy in drag. Musta happened to him before. Who the hell are you, anyway?”

By then she was dressed, if you want to call it that—her outfit seemed designed to elicit a different description.

“Better you shouldn’t know, but thanks for the answers. Now you ought to get out of here.” As I opened my cell phone, she scampered out, her haunches swaying in a rhythm I hadn’t seen before.

I had several calls to make, and because I had the notion that the local gendarmes might find a way to retrieve my cell phone records, I called them first, via 911—not that I had an emergency to deal with, mind you, but it seemed politic to let them know I was aware of the seriousness of the situation. The operator stopped sounding bored when I told her that I was with a dead body, dead because of me, and that I would provide the weapon to the investigating officer. She tried to make me stay on the line with her, but after giving her the address I disconnected.

As I made other calls, all to numbers that would be meaningless in the cell phone records, I searched the apartment. Mr. Al-Ayas, it seemed, was not your typical American consumer, for he had very little in the way of possessions. There was the obligatory computer and television, along with minimal furniture, but the usual glut of consumer products and cheap plastic crap and the like was missing.

It took the length of the telephone calls for me to find what I was after, a sheaf of papers hidden in a recently constructed compartment in the floor, covered by a prayer rug in the living half of the combination room. I folded the papers, took off the latex gloves I'd been wearing ever since knocking on the kitchen door, and used the papers to stuff the gloves deep into my inside jacket pocket.

Then there was a pounding on the door to the kitchen, the one I'd come in through. I pulled my credentials out of the right side pocket of my jacket and held them up for the world to see as I opened the door.

It's not that patrol cops are stupid, at least not in the way that crooks are, but I've found that they tend to lack imagination. True to form, the two uniforms on the porch stuck to the routine all the way. I suppose they were nervous, not unreasonable in light of what I'd told the 911 operator and all the blood in the kitchen, but I was a little surprised that the credentials I showed them didn't impress them more. It's not every day that guys like that would have U.S. Treasury Department Secret Service identification stuck under their noses. Even though mine wasn't genuine, it looked good enough to pass muster with them, I was sure. But ID or no, the questions started when they came in the door and kept on until the real crime scene investigators finally showed up.

And they, being investigators with very different points of view from the uniforms, had their own questions, somewhat more sophisticated ones.

I got through it all by telling the truth, mostly. The CSI guys found evidence of Dolly's presence—blonde hair in the bathroom—but I managed to persuade them that she must have left before I arrived. It helped, I'm sure, that she didn't go far into the kitchen after the shooting, so she hadn't stepped in the blood. And, as the slug in the baseboard proved, it was true that I'd fired in self-defense—that plus my bogus Secret Service shield got me off the hook.

Still, it took better than three hours before they let me go, and then they insisted on getting contact information from me. Not that it would do them any good—I hadn't been at the hotel whose key I showed them for days.

Then, finally, I was back on the street. Night-time, full moon, Coconut Grove on Saturday night in late spring. Gorgeous. Jasmine, I think, was blooming, and its sweet fragrance hung in the still air. An insect symphony was in full voice, punctuated by the occasional bark of a dog chasing squirrels in its dreams, or something. The foliage was thick enough that the few remaining lights in the houses hardly reached the street, so I felt as if I had the whole town to myself.

I'd arrived in a cab, which had dropped me off two blocks away, but it was so nice out that I decided to walk the mile or so back to my hotel. Traffic on the side streets was nonexistent, and by staying on them I managed to avoid being seen. Along the way, I took apart the components of the bogus ID by tearing up the picture and crumpling the foil shield and dropping it into a storm drain. My

fake moustache got plucked to pieces and scattered in the grass, and the drug-store glasses went into a trash bin. The temporary black hair coloring I'd washed in earlier would vanish as soon as I got back to my room at the Grand Bay Hotel. At that point the guy the cops had talked to would, in effect, cease to exist.

And the Glock that the police had taken for ballistics testing had someone else's fingerprints on it, someone who was currently in solitary confinement at Quantico. They'd find his prints in the NCIC database, but his alibi was pretty solid, all things considered. From there, the case would wither and die, destined to languish in a cold case file forever.

Except for Dolly. She'd seen me, the fake me, and, worse, she had talked with me. But the chance of her being identified, I decided, was nil, so I put her out of my mind.

Back in my room, after a shower that put my hair back to its normal brownish-gray, I unfolded the papers that I'd found in Al-Ayas' hiding place. As I'd been told, they were listings of locations and amounts of Special Nuclear Materials—plutonium, enriched uranium, and other more exotic radio-nuclides, all weapons-grade material. According to my sources, this was the only such listing that existed, for this inventory data was normally kept in separate places. Los Alamos knew what Los Alamos had, Oak Ridge knew what Oak Ridge had, and so on, but no one really knew everything—except for whoever had assembled Al-Ayas' list. And because the list appeared to have been printed on a word processor, it probably existed on a computer somewhere.

That computer somewhere was the real worry.

* * *

Just because someone, or some group, knew the details of all of the nation's Special Nuclear Materials inventories, that didn't spell disaster in and of itself. All of the locations were heavily guarded with several levels of protection, and stealing any of it would be a major undertaking even for a well-organized military team—and as far as we could tell, we were dealing with poorly organized civilians.

But SNM is nasty stuff, and it wouldn't do to have even a little of it floating around in bad-guy neverland. Maybe they wouldn't be able to assemble a real nuclear weapon—one of those "Improvised Nuclear Devices" that the government was so worried about—but some of that material in a regular bomb could contaminate a large area with radioactivity. And given the paranoia of the general population about radiation—just using the word "radiation" in connection with sunlight could cause panicked telephone calls—the social disruption caused by one of those dirty bombs would be significant.

The potential for this kind of disruption, not to mention death and destruction, was what got the government, and ultimately me, involved in the whole thing. Someone at one of the SNM locations had reported observing an unknown person making copies of classified documents. The person had the right kind of security credentials to be in that particular area, but he wasn't one of the regular staff there and his using the copier raised questions. Because he'd gone through a recording gate to get to the area, his identity was recovered, and then his activities at all such classified sites were reconstructed. It turned out that he had visited all of the nation's repositories of SNM within recent weeks, so the existence of the master list was inferred.

His name was Wetherby Stephens, and he was the unfortunate fellow in solitary confinement at Quantico awaiting his day in court, the fellow whose fingerprints the Miami police would undoubtedly find on the Glock and then track down in the NCIC database.

I got involved when his telephone records showed an unusual number of calls to Miami and his Visa credit card charges showed a payment to Federal Express. FedEx was most cooperative and looked in their files, which showed that he'd paid for an overnight shipment to the Grove.

And at the time I lived near there, sort of, at least compared to the people in Washington.

I had planned that my retirement would be complete, and I'd even given out fake forwarding addresses to the people and organizations I didn't want to hear from. But some of those people and organizations were in the business of finding folks who don't want to be found, so I expect they didn't have to work very hard to find me—probably they didn't even break into a sweat. Looking back on it, I guess I might as well just have put up a big sign on my mailbox up in Boca Raton: Hamish Angus MacQuarrie, Clandestine Operations Specialist.

At least they sent someone I knew from the old days, instead of sending a youngster or just making a phone call.

It was about noon on a Saturday in early April, with that perfect not-too-hot weather we have in Boca that time of year, and I had the Florida Marlins on the TV—they were playing an early-season game in New York and getting whumped by the Mets. I was working on yet another bookcase, about the only thing I'd mastered in my newly acquired avocation of woodworking, when a nondescript sedan eased into the driveway. Through the stand of bamboo outside the front door, I could see a guy get out and walk toward the porch, a guy I couldn't help but recognize. Partly it was his cheap suit, partly it was the memories.

It's my first time inside the headquarters building of the ultra-secret National Security Agency, and, despite my years of CIA experience both in the field and at Langley, I'm intimidated. Security is tighter than I've ever experienced, and the quiet, business-like efficiency makes me question whether my casual approach to just about everything will ever fit in.

I'm past the first security check and walking up to the second, wondering if they'll let me pass, when I'm approached by a tall, gaunt man about five years my junior. Bags under his eyes and thinning hair give him an air of an undertaker. He's wearing a cheap blue suit with an ID badge that says "Petersen" clipped to the coat pocket, a white shirt, and a tie of some nondescript dark color I can't identify.

"MacQuarrie? Uh, Hamish A. MacQuarrie?" He's reading from a note card in his left hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Petersen. Please, call me 'Mac'." I hold out my right hand to shake, but he ignores it.

"Come this way, please. You can't get through the next check without our in-house ID." He leads me to a door in the side of the foyer, a door I hadn't noticed because it's disguised as a large mirror.

"I'm Bill Petersen, and I'll be checking you in. We've got a drug test and a polygraph to get through, and I'm hung over. Let's see if we can make this as easy as possible, OK?" He almost manages a crooked smile.

Three hours later, having peed into a cup, twice, and after I answer a series of questions designed both to put me off guard and to keep the machine calibrated—we carefully concoct a couple of lies for me to tell every now and then—Petersen decides I really am who my CIA ID says I am. He finally relieves me of my CIA credentials, carrying them to the shredder as if they're last week's fish that washed up on the beach.

“Now,” he looks at me in triumph, “you work for the country’s real spooks, not those spook wannabes over at Langley.”

“Well, Mac. How are ya? You’re looking pretty fit for an old retired geezer.”

Petersen and I had always traded friendly insults after that first day at the NSA, so I guess I should have been ready for it.

“And you look like hell, Bill. You ought to retire, too, save your health while some’s left. What brings you way down here? And where are you working these days, anyway?”

I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know.

“Right to business, eh? Well, you were always a no-nonsense kind of guy. I’m with a new inter-agency task force. Ultra-secret, can’t even tell you the name, standing outside, at least. Want a consulting job? I haven’t told you the name of the task force, so you can still say ‘no’.”

His smile, crooked as ever, looked hopeful and a little evil at the same time.

“Come in and tell me about it, I guess. But I need to warn you, my clearance expired. What’s this secret name, anyway?”

I led the way toward the kitchen. Bill, I knew, would need coffee.

“Yep, it did. But it’s been miraculously renewed, and upgraded. You’ve been keeping your nose clean, so it was easy. I’m now with the Strategic Alliance Investigating Nuclear Terrorism. Top priority, unlimited budget. Do I smell coffee?” He actually made sniffing noises.

“A miracle, huh? Right. What did you say, ‘Strategic Alliance Investigating Nuclear Terrorism’? SAINT? You marching in yet?”

He shot a sour look at me.

“OK, sorry. Bad joke. Anyway, there are no recording devices here and the people next door seem deaf as stumps. Unless someone’s targeting me, and I don’t know why that would be, we’re clear. What’s the problem?”

I twisted open a Beck’s Light and took a sip, then poured him some coffee—the last of the morning’s brew, good and thick at that point.

He told me about the unauthorized copying of the SNM lists and how the guy was watched and finally arrested, then about the connection to Coconut Grove. They even had an address, from the FedEx records. Bill had scouted the place and found it to be an apartment over an old garage in the northeast end of the Grove, not quite up to SW 17th Avenue.

“So what do you need me for? This sounds like a job you could handle, or even somebody local. Go there, get the list, be done with it. Why come all the way here to find me?”

I was trying to be genuinely puzzled rather than resentful.

“Three things. First, we didn’t find anything about this at Wetherby Stephens’ office back in Washington, or at his home or anywhere. No documents or computer records or anything. We think he must have sent his only copy of the various lists to this guy down in Coconut Grove. But so far, Stephens isn’t talking.”

He took a sip of the black goop in the cup he was holding, but didn’t even grimace.

“Second, the Miami guy’s a Saudi, here on a diplomatic visa, just moved into this apartment a couple of months ago. His landlord’s Lebanese, runs a grocery nearby. We did a quick search of the place, black, but didn’t find anything. But he’s been spending time at the university, at this public computer lab they have there. He’s probably put the whole thing into a computer file, and God only knows where he’s been sending it. We did a computer search of everything at the lab and didn’t find anything, though, even on email archives, so he’s been careful. Finally, he sent a big envelope via regular mail to an address up here in Palm Beach County. We intercepted it, and it contained Stephens’ originals, it looks like. But that just means whatever the Saudi guy was doing on the computer is the more important. We now know that Stephens had a complete inventory of all of our SNM, down to room numbers and security protocols.”

“Here in Palm Beach County? What address?”

“A box at one of those package-and-mail franchises. We’re watching it.”

He tried to disguise his evasiveness by drinking the rest of the coffee in a big gulp, which did elicit a wince.

I took a swig of beer to buy time to think. “Tell me about the computer lab. Do the machines have removable media, CDs or anything?”

“DVD burners on all of ’em. And the keyboards have USB ports you can plug those little flash-drive gizmos into. There are two dozen machines, Macintoshes, on the university-wide network, which is connected to the whole-world internet. And there are email programs, but, like I said, we didn’t find anything from those. People can also use a regular web browser like Firefox to get and send mail, though, and then they can wipe the history of what they’ve done. There’s even a custom software program on the computers that asks users if they want to wipe their histories. Also, there are printers in the lab, a couple that all the computers share. And a scanner.”

He ended this litany with an exaggerated shrug.

“So your Saudi goes there, to that computer lab, scans Stephens’ lists and gets them into a single document, then saves a copy on a CD or one of those flash drives, maybe prints a copy. Maybe emails it around some. That what you’re thinking?” I still wasn’t clear on why he’d come to me.

“Right. Something like that, some or all of it. We’ve observed him hanging out with a bunch of people down in Coconut Grove, at a coffeehouse on Grand Avenue near the intersection with Commodore, a bunch of guys who all speak Arabic with each other. He may have passed something to one of them. There were too many for us to follow them all. At the time, it was just me and two other guys working this, I mean.” He looked embarrassed.

“So maybe one of them, or more than one, I guess, has this master list on a computer CD or on paper or something. And maybe your original guy has copies, too, huh? You obviously need names for that group at the coffee house.”

I was beginning to see why he’d come to me. I was born in Massachusetts, but my father got a job with the State Department when I was two—in Saudi Arabia. I grew up speaking and writing Arabic and English interchangeably, and, as my father’s assignments moved him around the various embassies in southwest Asia, I learned other languages as well. Later, various three-letter agencies in Washington put this ability to good use throughout my career with the federal government. It also helped my career that, for reasons of genes or food or vitamins or whatever, I never grew to American basketball-player size. By topping out around 5-11—and a wiry 5-11 at that—I was able to fit into crowds in the places the agencies wanted to send me with only a bit of hair color to disguise the Scottish red tinge I sported in my younger days.

Those agencies also taught me an array of other skills, too, most of which really don't have any place in civilized society. Some of those skills, though, came in pretty handy during my second career, the one with the New York Police Department, where I spent a decade undercover working drugs and other fun stuff in the city's middle-eastern community.

After considering it, I took Bill's consulting job—demanding and getting an absurdly high daily fee, plus expenses.

My first step was to become a regular at the coffee house, eavesdropping on the conversations and then discreetly following people home. Between me and Bill's team, we had them all tracked within three days.

Then, a week after Bill came to see me, I paid a visit to the apartment where I ran into Mr. Al-Ayas and Dolly. That was not the intent—I was hoping to have the place to myself so I could take my time and do a thorough search. But he was home, the poor, stupid schmuck. And now he was dead.

* * *

Two

My cover story for the visit of the bogus Secret Service agent to the apartment in Coconut Grove was that a credible threat to the President had been traced to Al-Ayas. I'd relayed that to the Miami police along with an admonition that they should keep it confidential, because other components of the same investigation were ongoing.

But when I went down to breakfast at the Grand Bay on Sunday morning, the shooting was all over the front page of the *Miami Herald*, along with a description of the Secret Service agent involved—the one no one would ever see again—and, in a sidebar, an overview of how the Secret Service investigates threats to the President. To add insult to injury, they got that part all wrong.

The story seemed guaranteed to drive the coffee-house crowd underground, and we still didn't know if we had found all of the copies of the SNM inventory. It made me glad that I was billing by the hour.

I ate breakfast and checked out, putting the charges on one of the agency credit cards that Bill Petersen had given me. The room rate was triple what the government allowed, and the breakfast used up an entire day's meal per diem, but that was going to be someone else's problem to deal with. Another identity change was in order, just as soon as I turned in the rental car I was using.

But instead of heading back to the airport, where I'd picked it up, I drove out to Key Biscayne, to a Hertz franchise at a hotel on the beach. The drop-off fee didn't bother me in the least, because Bill would be getting it. Then I walked down the beach four hotels, to one that had an Alamo franchise, and got another car using a second agency card and the driver's license that went with it.

If only it were so easy to play chameleon in real life, I thought.

I had a lunch meeting scheduled with Petersen, after which I was planning to take the Alamo car back to the airport and pick up my own wheels from the parking garage—and pay with cash. But the shooting and its story in the paper had changed things. Maybe, I thought, I'll find out the changes at lunch.

What I found out, though, was that I was back to being retired.

“Washington closed the whole investigation down, at least SAINT’s part of it. I’m out. They think that the copies of the list we recovered are all we’re ever going to find, and the best we can do is improve security at the sites where the SNM is stored.”

Petersen took another huge bite of his fried snapper sandwich. We had met at the outdoors Raw Bar at Monte Trainer’s in the Grove—I was still full from the big breakfast I’d had, but he seemed famished.

To get a word in, I took advantage of the fact that he had to chew.

“What about the conspiracy angle? This wasn’t just one person who got Wetherby Stephens to put that list together, it was a group. An organized group. Aren’t your bosses the least interested in that? I mean, the group, their funding, all that stuff? And what about the money angle?”

I knew well the limited imaginations of the Washington bureaucrats, but there was a clear national security angle to this. National security was something they usually took seriously.

Petersen swallowed and took a swig of beer, then belched under his breath.

“It’s being handed over to the FBI on the theory that it needs to be treated like a law enforcement matter now, not a nuclear issue. The CIA people are all over the foreign connections, especially the ones involving that guy Al-Ayas you shot. But that leaves SAINT on the sidelines. So I’m going home to Washington later this afternoon, and you can go back to building bookcases. Buy yourself some new tools or something when you get our check.”

“But...”

I was going to protest, but I realized that I didn’t want to. My week back in the saddle had been a return to familiar habits—stressful habits developed to minimize the risks associated with dangerous activities. The business of switching hotels and rental cars, not to mention identities, was the least of it.

What I wanted was to be retired again.

Maybe, I thought, I can teach myself to build something else, end tables or something. It suddenly occurred to me that end tables were just short, wide bookcases without backs. I could do that!

After lunch, I drove out to the airport and turned in the Alamo car, then fetched my own car from the parking garage. After paying the ransom, I caught the Dolphin Expressway back east and then headed north on I-95, toward home.

At the time, I thought that was the end of it, and my thoughts turned to other things. Bill’s wisecrack about buying new tools was rattling around in my head.

But old habits die hard. It was just in my nature to vary my speed and change lanes in random patterns while watching my rearview mirror, and about the time I got to Broward County I determined I had a tail. I tested that conclusion by taking the first exit into Fort Lauderdale and jumping a red light to get back on I-95 right away. When the green SUV I’d been watching did, too, I knew I wasn’t just being paranoid. And I felt that familiar surge of elation at having made him.

It’s my first solo field operation, and paranoia is the least of my worries. Of far greater importance is remembering my field-craft, all the little things that I need to do as a “natural” part of myself while I’m following the detailed script that is supposed to control the timing and outcome of the whole thing.

But it’s Beirut, and in Beirut things never happen as planned. Given traffic and other uncertainties, timing is impossible to control, even though I’m on foot.

I’m supposed to meet a contact on the campus of the American University, and he’s to swap briefcases with me. By doing this during the mad rush between classes, we are unlikely to be seen, but

that means it has to happen within a ten-minute window, both of us arriving from opposite directions through the crowd of students, bumping into each other, dropping and picking up the wrong briefcases, and continuing on our separate ways.

It's hot, no surprise there, but I'm sweating more from the tension—fear, even—than from the heat. This is because I've picked up a tail.

She had started following me about a block after I left the embassy, and has managed to stick with me despite some false turns, double-backs, and other tricks I'd been taught for such circumstances. I don't think she knows I know that she's following me, but, then, maybe she does and she's just rubbing my nose in it. In any case, I can't shake her and my appointment on the campus is fast approaching.

Finally, I manage to hop aboard a bus just as its doors are closing. It's headed the wrong way—away from the university—but that's fine because it will help cover my tracks. I see her out the window running, trying to flag the bus down, looking around for a taxi or something, then, just before I lose sight of her, heading into a phone booth.

I get off at the next stop, before, I hope, her phone call can put anyone else onto me, and catch a taxi, instructing the driver to hurry to the university but to take the long way around. He looks at me as if I'm an idiot, but I'm so elated about losing my first real tail that I don't really care.

I had taken my family sedan to the Miami airport—I'd never, ever want to leave my Cobra parked there—but I thought that it might be up to the task of turning the tables on my follower. To all outward appearances a five-year-old, somewhat battered Honda Accord, it had some go-fast goodies—I had replaced its stock motor with a racing-tuned V6 and drive-train from an Acura NSX and doctored the suspension to match. And whoever was in that green SUV didn't even have the smarts to avoid being spotted on a simple, straight-line tail, so he would be unlikely to know some of the tricks I knew.

It didn't take much. I took my home exit—Palmetto Park Road in Boca—and then used my car's power and quick steering to gain enough ground to double back in a mini-mall parking lot. Next thing, we were both west-bound on Palmetto Park, only I was following him. Because there are dozens of white Honda Accords on the road, I don't think he had a clue—and his behavior behind the wheel showed it. He was speeding and weaving in and out of traffic, trying to catch someone who, he thought, had sped away.

By the time we passed over the turnpike, he had slowed down and was talking into a cell phone. I could imagine the conversation: Sorry, boss, I lost him. Yeah, I know I'm an incompetent fuck-head, boss, but what can I say? I got stuck in traffic.

When we got to 441, he turned south, and I followed. After a few blocks, across from the entrance to my subdivision, he turned into the 7-Eleven and parked. I kept on south, watching in my mirror, but he just sat. Staking out my neighborhood, I guessed. Maybe that's what his boss told him to do next. Well, I thought, he can sit there and sip Slurpees until next year. I can use the back gate entrance.

I made a quick U-turn and pulled into a gas station across the street, parking where I had a view of the green SUV, and called Bill Petersen on my cell phone.

“Bill, I thought you said this whole thing was over. But I had a tail from Miami. What's that about?”

He got relevant information and told me to sit tight and watch the fun. Sure enough, about ten minutes later, the green SUV was suddenly surrounded by Palm Beach County Sheriff's patrol cars, lights blazing, officers crouched behind doors with weapons deployed. A few minutes later, my cell phone played its little tune.

“Mac? Anything happening?”

Bill always did have a knack for understatement.

* * *

Glades View Village was one of those developments just like all the other ones in that part of Palm Beach County—houses crammed together, fancy-looking but cheap houses, all built on fill dredged from the algae-filled canals that provided “scenic views” touted by the developers, water hazards for the golf courses, and homes for alligators with a taste for poodles. Unlike some other subdivisions, though, this one was limited to folks aged 55 and up, and it had various restrictive covenants about what colors you could paint your house, what sorts of pets were allowed (small poodles were OK), how long guests could stay—and how many were allowed at one time—and on and on. I picked it because I found the right house at a not-too-outrageous price, and I really didn’t care about all the restrictions.

Sadie and Jerome Wizenbaum, refugees from Manhattan’s lower east side, lived just to the south of me. They were an ancient couple who seemed to get along despite nearly continual shouting matches over various and sundry health issues. It started in the morning with the functioning of their lower intestines and what sorts of fiber they should eat that day to compensate for problems that had solidified overnight and ended in the evening with urinary-tract issues. In between they yelled about skin lesions and sunscreen, joint and muscle stiffness, and, once in a while, erectile dysfunction. It was the high-volume nature of their interactions that had persuaded me of their deafness.

I knew about all this because, unlike most Glades View residents, I tended to keep my windows open and my air conditioning off, and they did, too. I don’t know why they did, but my excuse was that I had converted my living room into a wood shop. Despite my use of the whole-house vacuum system for sawdust control, enough of the stuff remained airborne that it seemed futile to use the A/C. The filters just couldn’t handle it. So I spent my time sweating and, in between power-tool noises, listening to the Wizenbaums.

On the my north was Mitzi Greenberg, a widow who, being somewhere in her middle eighties, had quite sensibly decided that she was a little too old for me. But she was convinced that her daughter Stella, who lived with her, was just my type. Mitzi was considering moving into one of the assisted care units at the Village medical facility, and she, typically, was trying to arrange Stella’s future.

I knew that zero-lot-line subdivision living worked better when neighbors were on good terms, so, to be polite, I’d taken Stella to lunch—once.

In my mind, Stella was also too old for me, nearly sixty, but the miracles of plastic surgery and, probably, Botox made her look to be a well-upholstered sixty. And she must have had an exercise fetish, because she was athletic to boot, despite being somewhat top-heavy—on the way to the diner, she kept bumping into me with those twin torpedoes she followed around everywhere.

My jobs with the Washington spook shops and then with the NYPD had made me a good listener, which helped me get through that lunch. Stella liked to talk, mostly about herself, but also about her three failed marriages, or, more precisely, about her three ex-husband bags of shit, as she put it. I stitched a gentle smile on my face, ate slowly, and listened while she expounded.

It caught me by surprise a little when she rhapsodized about the virtues of oral sex, in a voice loud enough to cause heads to turn, but mostly I was able to keep my equilibrium. It was clear to me from the start that she and I weren’t going anywhere—although I have to admit, with no little embarrassment, that I wondered for a few minutes there about her sexual proclivities and what it would be like if she took out her dentures.

Like most such developments, Glades View Village was ruled with an iron fist by a homeowners' association, the elected board of which held powers unknown in the real world. Want to paint your house? They got to pick the color, one that would blend in with the colors of the nearby houses. Need a new roof? You got to pick from red barrel tile, rust barrel tile, or pink barrel tile, but your choice had to be ratified by the board or, more often, by the board chair, who was empowered to act for the group on such matters. Tired of your landscaping? Submit a new design to the board before pruning a twig, or get taken to court.

Naturally, the position of board chair was a coveted role, one that involved considerable politicking every year during the campaign. Retired guys with Napoleonic complexes, as well as too much money and too much time on their hands, were always challenged, unsuccessfully, by community organizers, usually women, who advocated the consensus approach to decision making.

The current board chair, Antonio "Big Tony" Fallucci, was a retired car salesman from Boston who had mastered the art of divide and conquer. He kept the transplanted New Yorkers and Washingtonians at each other's throats, diverting the attention of both groups from the fact that he was a genuine, dyed in the wool, New England asshole.

He and I had an interesting confrontation when I first moved in. One of the things that had attracted me to my house was its three-car garage, and I decided to use the third bay as storage for lumber and other wood-working supplies. Just after the truck from Home Depot unloaded its cargo, a short, wide, cigar-smoking fellow appeared on my front porch and demanded to know what was going on. When I allowed that I wasn't sure that I really needed to explain myself to him, he puffed up visibly and announced his name and title—and then proceeded to lecture me on his responsibilities in the neighborhood. It gave me time to consider how to respond.

I'm in New York City, coming out the door of a lottery office after having picked up a minor prize I've won, stuffing the check into my pocket. A wiry little guy holding a black book that turns out to be a Bible approaches. And he wants money, a donation. Apparently, he lurks outside the lottery office and pounces on unsuspecting winners, hoping to catch people who feel a little guilty about their good fortune.

But I don't feel guilty at all, and when I demur at the opportunity to donate to his church, he becomes offended and blocks my path. After being subjected to a short, whiney harangue, I let myself be manipulated into a response.

"So, you're telling me that God wants me to give money to you? Don't you think you're in, um, something of a conflict-of-interest position here? Don't you think that God would tell me this herself, if that's what she really wanted? Or maybe you have some kind of exclusive communications channel?" Even though I'm pushing his buttons intentionally, I'm also trying to be polite. But the whole thing is getting annoying.

He manages to draw himself up an inch or two and look thoroughly offended. His head is tilted back slightly, and he's literally looking down his nose at me. He raises his right hand and points his boney index finger skyward.

"For your blasphemy, I call on God Almighty to curse you, to curse you and your family for seven generations! His wrath will descend on you and you will beg His mercy!"

Somehow, he's made his voice sound deeper, more commanding. It still has some of that whiney intonation, but it carries more effectively. I tilt my head to the side and try to look puzzled.

“Really? And you believe this is the Christian way to do things? Call on God to lay her wrath on people who don’t give you what you want? This sounds like some kind of religious extortion to me, I have to say.”

“You WILL be cursed, your family WILL suffer!”

“Well, OK. Tell you what. You go ahead and call on your God. Meantime, I’ll use some of this money I just won to call on the Gemanicci brothers, to have them pay you and your family a visit some night. Late.”

I don’t know where the name “Gemanicci” comes from; it just pops into my head. But it has the effect I intend—it brings him up short.

“Geman ...Geman-who? Who are they?” His voice reverts completely, back to thin and whiney, but now it has a slight squeak.

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll introduce themselves. Their Sicilian Momma brought them up to be very polite.”

His face goes pale and he’s trembling slightly, so I decide that’s enough.

“You be sure to have a nice day, now.” I turn and walk away without looking back.

Big Tony Fallucci’s lecture had the same effect on me, but I decided not to resurrect the fictional Gemanicci brothers for the occasion. Didn’t want to offend his ethnic heritage, after all. So, when he paused for a breath, I tried another approach.

“You know, Mr. Fallucci, when I moved here, I went over the covenants with a fine-toothed comb. And I didn’t see anything about having the homeowners’ association board micromanage my hobbies. I’m pretty sure I’m on solid ground here, because I learned to read legal documents extremely carefully in one of my jobs, years ago. Kept myself out of trouble with the law that way. That was important to me, because I was doing wet work for the CIA at the time. It had certain, you know, legal exposures.”

I smiled; he blanched. And he never bothered me again.

* * *

Three

Bill Petersen looked peeved when I finally answered the door. It was Monday afternoon, and I’d been sanding, wearing my noise-canceling headphones, and I couldn’t hear the doorbell.

“Christ, Mac, I’ve been ringing that bell for at least ten minutes!”

“Yeah, sorry. I keep meaning to hook up a blinking light to the bell, but I’ve just never got around to it. Want a beer or something?”

I led him past the mess in the living room to the kitchen, through a dust-proof door—mostly dust-proof, at least—I’d installed.

“I can’t stay, got a plane to catch. But I thought you’d like the scoop on the guy who was tailing you yesterday.”

He took the beer I handed him and sat down.

“Yeah, I would. I saw him having his little run-in with the Palm Beach sheriff yesterday. What happened after that?”

“They took him up to West Palm for questioning. Turns out he’s a PI out of Miami, hired by someone he declined to name, at least as far as the sheriff’s guys were concerned. But I paid him a visit last night, after he finally got home. He was most cooperative, after a little persuading. Told me he got a retainer in cash to keep track of you. No name, just a phone number. Supposed to tail you home and call in your address. But he lost you, he said.”

“Yeah, I gave him the slip, then followed him to that 7-Eleven where he got picked up. Right across from the subdivision entrance, so at least he knew that much.”

“No, I think it was coincidence. He ... ah ... he stuck by his story under some duress, said he didn’t know anything about where you live, except that it’s probably out here west of Boca Raton somewhere.” He took a pull on his beer.

“So you must have got the phone number he was to call in my address to.”

“Oh yeah. But I checked it out, and it’s one of those use-up-the-minutes-and-throw-it-away cell phones. No real information.”

“Did you give it a call, that phone? Maybe we could locate the thing, pay its owner a little visit.”

I didn’t like the idea that someone was trying to find out where I lived.

“Well, like I said, I’ve got a plane to catch. But I did manage to find a connection down here to do the locating.” He smiled and pulled a slip of paper out of his jacket pocket. “It’s probably in Miami, so you want to be down there for the first call. And you need to figure out how to make two calls at the same time—I guess you’ll need two phones—one to call our unknown friend and one to call this number simultaneously. You make a call, get a rough fix, zero in and make the second call. With that, plus your natural charm, you should be able to find whoever it is. Be nice, OK?”

He drained his glass and stood up. “Gotta run. Thanks for the beer, Mac. Take care of yourself.”

I considered going back to sanding bookcases, but the little problem of someone who was trying to hunt me down nagged at me too much. So I cleaned up, dressed for an evening’s work, and equipped myself from my cache of handy-dandy covert ops tools.

One of the first things I did when I bought my house was to turn the center bedroom into a study, and I converted its closet into special-use storage. The double bi-fold doors got transformed into half wall, half hung door, and the space behind the wall half became my weapons and clandestine gear cache. I put a waterproof, fireproof vault for all my goodies in there. The hung-door half I lined with cedar planks to make a moth-proof closet for my clothes, and the planking did a fine job of disguising the hidden door providing access to the vault.

Before heading to Miami, I stopped for a light supper at a sushi place in downtown Boca. Some time back, sushi became so popular that you can find it almost anywhere, but it takes training and skill to choose the best quality fish and to prepare it properly. Among the early settlers of Boca Raton was a contingent of Japanese farmers, and their legacy included local landmarks such as Yamato Road, the Morikami Museum, and several truly superb sushi restaurants in the traditional Japanese mode. Like any restaurant, they welcomed tourists, but I discovered that they catered especially to the locals who appreciated raw fish the old way.

By eight Monday evening, filled full of omega-3 and -6 based proteins, I was about forty miles south, on Coral Way just east of the Gables, parked off the street in a nearly empty lot by a big department store. There was a pay phone on the corner of the building—the last of a dying breed—and I

planned to use it to call the suspect cell phone. I called the number that Bill had given me using my own cell phone.

“Hello? Mac?” The voice seemed vaguely familiar, an accent from the past, not ancient history, but from another time.

“Uh, yeah, I’m sorry, but ...”

“Mac, it’s me, Joe, Joe Fila. Howzit hangin’ these days, anyway?”

It took me a few seconds to overcome a minor bout of speechlessness. “Joe? No shit! You’re the last person I expected at this number.”

Joe had been my partner when I was a detective with the NYPD. When I took a bullet. His voice transported me back in spite of myself, swamping me with unwanted memories. They made my right shoulder twinge with indelible pain.

What surprises me most about getting shot is how little it hurts. At first. Later, shortly later, I change my mind—“hurt” doesn’t begin to describe it. Then I pass out.

When I wake up, I’m on my left side in a bed, and a cloud of people hover about, chattering away, poking and pulling at me. Then I faint again.

The next time I wake up, I’m on my back, and all is quiet except for a dissonant hum. The machines, I discover, are talking to themselves as they monitor me. With nothing better to do, I try to remember just how I wound up in the fix I’m in. I figure that sooner or later someone, probably someone sporting a shield, will be around to ask.

Sure enough, just as I’m getting my recollections of the whole thing put back together, a young guy wearing a slime green blazer that reeks of smoke shows up. With questions. I don’t recognize him—but, then, we detectives always avoid the Internal Affairs pukes if at all possible.

“Maybe it’ll help you to know that you got both of them, kill shots. And this is going to be pro-forma, because one of those weasels killed my partner a couple of years ago, when I was still on the street.” I decide his expression is a sort of grim smile.

He leans over close enough that I’m nearly choked by the cigarettes on his breath, but the comment makes me feel better about him. Or maybe it’s just the painkillers. It dawns on me that I seem to feel better about pretty much everything. My right shoulder is completely numb, and that helps, too.

“Fila told me that the two of you went there for a drug buy, is that right?” He has the obligatory little notebook in hand, pencil poised, so I nod.

“But he said he was around the corner of the building, so he only heard what went down. Shouting, then shots. One from an unfamiliar gun, two from yours, then a short full-automatic burst. That sound right to you?”

I nod again. Joe, I remember, had ducked around the corner of the building to whisper into his mike for more backup, and the perps had gone all to pieces. The seller had grabbed a handgun hidden in the pile of boxes he was standing next to and put the slug through my right shoulder. I’d managed to get off two rounds—being left-handed has its virtues—and the bodyguard with the Mach 10 had fallen with his finger pulling the trigger.

I remember standing there, trying to look at my shoulder, wondering why it didn’t hurt. Then, about the time that Joe turned up, it did—a wave of agony paralyzing my entire right side before I collapsed. Now it’s not only numb but also completely immobilized, I discover. I can’t even shrug.

“OK, well, that’s good enough for me, and I’ll make sure it’s also good enough for IA. Too bad it took your getting hurt to get those two off the street, but that’s the good news, at least. Anything I can do for you?”

I discover that my voice isn’t quite working, so I cough a couple of times. “Joe’s OK, right? He around?”

“Right behind me. I’ll send him in.” And he leaves, little tendrils of cigarette fumes trailing behind him.

And now that I remembered, Joe’s voice on the phone sounded just like it had in the hall that night, outside my hospital room.

“Well, it’s good to hear your voice again, pal. So you’re in the track ’em down business these days, huh?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know too much about what he was doing, but some small talk seemed appropriate.

He laughed. “Yeah, well, the love affair between me and the NYPD ended shortly after you went on disability. You always were good at keeping me in line, and without you around I kept getting in all sorts of trouble. Besides, it’s cold up there. I took an early retirement they were offering, went back to school, and set myself up as a high-tech computer-crime consultant down here. Gotta love those topless beaches, eh, Mac?”

“Indeed I do, although I seldom get to the beach these days. So what’s the deal with this cell phone number? Are you really able to track its location?”

“You just have to know the right people, Mac. And this character has been using the phone, so I’ve got a pretty good fix on it already—I don’t think you’ll need to make calls to him. Based on signal strength, I triangulated the place where most of his calls are going, and I bet that’s where he lives.”

He gave me an address in the south part of Coral Gables, the very high-rent district. Unlike my cheek-by-jowl subdivision, with lots barely twice the size of the houses’ footprints, that stretch of Old Cutler Highway was lined with estates, some occupying several acres of manicured grounds. Whoever was after me had plenty of money. And it’s never a good thing to have very rich people after you.

“Thanks, Joe. Listen, do me a favor, OK? If you ever figure out my address, keep it quiet. I’m trying to maintain a very low profile down here—too much bad history for my whereabouts to be public knowledge.”

“No prob, Mac. And let’s get together for a drink. Give me a call when you’re down this way with extra time.”

* * *

I didn’t know when I might have the extra time to have a drink with Joe—it would undoubtedly turn into several drinks and I’d need a cab home—but the next day I made time to check out the address he’d supplied me with.

Because most of the big estates down there by Matheson Hammock Park have gates and security systems, not to mention very large and hairy guys with suspicious dispositions acting as guards in some cases, I decided I would need a good excuse to hang around in the vicinity of the house I was interested in. I’d also need to make my activities as innocent as possible, due to the possibility of video systems scanning the area.

As much as I hated to do it, I decided I was going to have to sacrifice a tire.

I could have arranged for another sort of car trouble—a coolant leak because of a loose radiator hose, perhaps—but I had the notion that there might be inquisitive onlookers. Sitting by the side of the road with the hood up would show the world my Accord's secrets, something I wanted to avoid.

But a flat tire would immobilize the car for a short time—as long as it took for AAA to arrive, at least—and also provide compelling visual evidence of my plight. Fortunately, I had spare wheels, left over from my snow-tire days up north, that I could get a cheap used tire mounted on.

Tuesday morning, I dressed for the occasion as a passenger on a pleasure boat—Topsider boat shoes with no socks, a baggy white shirt and jeans—and put an empty ice chest in the trunk, along with an overnight bag and a rain slicker. I also removed the combination jack handle and lug-nut wrench from the little tool kit in the Accord's trunk and left it in my garage. Then I stopped by Boca Tire just as they opened and talked them out of a used tire, and had them mount it and put it on the car. They were skeptical, but I'm a persuasive fellow when I need to be. An extra \$50 bill for the technician helped, too.

After battling the Tuesday morning rush-hour traffic south into Miami, I made my first pass by the estate, southbound, at around eight-thirty. That gave me a chance to pinpoint the address and scope out the security, even if only briefly. And I was right: there was a serious gate, closed, with a bevy of cameras scanning back and forth. The entire ensemble was protecting a couple hundred yards of frontage behind a seven-foot stone wall on the east side of the road. Assuming the property ran down to one of the big canals off the bay and that it had an appropriate residence on it, I was dealing with at least \$30 million worth of real estate.

I drove on south, down to the little marina at the bridge over Snapper Creek Canal, and got out to stretch. I also took the opportunity to check out the boats—the 35-foot sport-fisherman called the *Morning After(noon)* would suit my purpose quite well, I thought. And I stuck the micro-charge I'd prepared onto my right rear tire, the used one I'd bought, on the inside under the car.

On the way back north, I slowed slightly at the estate, pushed the button on the radio controller, heard and felt the tire go, and steered the foundering car onto the little acceleration lane just past the estate's gate, a stretch of custom-built pavement to let those folks' Mercedes to come up to speed, no doubt. Then I got out to look at the damage.

“God-damned piece-of-shit frog tires! Fuck!!”

I was squatting down, poking at the Michelin logo on the dead right rear. I didn't know whether the cameras came with sound or not, but I thought the possibility worth a little acting. I did know that one of them, then two, had stopped scanning and were staring fixedly at me.

To continue the charade, I opened the trunk, found the tools, and had a second little temper tantrum when I couldn't find the jack handle. Then I opened passenger door and rummaged around in the glove compartment. When I found the card, I dug out my cell phone and called AAA to come and help. After that was arranged, I pretended to make another call, just about the time I saw the gate opening.

“... yeah, Fred, had a flat. Fucking cheap-shit tires. I knew I shoulda never gone to that discount place. Anyway, I called triple-A, and they said it'd be about a half hour ... Oh. You got beer? Well, good, that'll save me some time. I was headed up to South Miami to fill up the cooler.”

Two muscle-bound individuals in shorts and tank tops, with flip-flops on their feet, were hovering around me, hairy arms folded across their ample pectorals. I held up an index finger and nodded at them.

“... What's that? Oh, yeah, I got a license yesterday, so we should be able to leave as soon as I get there. See ya.” And I folded the cell phone and put it in a pocket.

“There’s no stopping permitted here. See the sign?”

Very Large Guy Number One actually knew how to talk—with his voice, unlike that more famous gorilla who uses only her hands.

“Sorry.” I tried to act apologetic and annoyed at the same time.

“Got a flat, see?” And I pointed to the offending tire. “I called triple-A, and they’ll be here in a little while, they said.”

“Watcher bidness ’round here anyways?”

It seemed that Very Large Guy Number Two, the one with the high-tech knee brace, was still learning.

“What’s my ...? Well, I was driving down a public highway and I had a flat tire, so I pulled off onto the shoulder, on the public right-of-way, I believe, to wait for help to get it fixed. And I think that’s really all I need to say to you two gentlemen.”

I kept a small smile on my face during this short speech.

They each took a step toward me, closing what had been a reasonably polite amount of personal space down to a threatening crowd. I made a point of looking scared and took a step back.

“Hey, now, calm down. I was on my way up to South Miami for a beer run. I’m going out fishing with a friend of mine who has a boat down at the Snapper Creek Marina, the *Morning After(noon)*, you know it?” I made little parentheses arcs with my hands. “I got there before he did, found the empty cooler on the dock, and decided to get more beer. Right?”

It’s sometimes hard for me to know when the truth is necessary. My friends don’t seem to have this problem, but, then, I’m the only person in the frat house who grew up in Saudi Arabia. It’s not that lies don’t come easily to them, but they have a better intuition about when the truth is really needed and when it’s not.

This dilemma is churning around in my head as I wait for my appointment with the UCLA Dean of Students. A bunch of us Zekes were caught staggering around the campus last night, drunk and disorderly by any definition, and we’re being accused of vandalizing a rock wall with spray-painted graffiti. Because I’m under-age, I’m in more trouble than the others. That, I’m thinking, is why my appointment with the Dean is the last one. She’ll want me to rat out my friends.

But the truth is, I wasn’t drunk. Yeah, I’d had a beer, and that put me technically in the guilty column, but I wasn’t drunk and I wasn’t the one with the spray paint, either. The one who sprayed the wall was Toby Vandenberg, one of the biggest horse’s asses in the house. Not only that, but I have proof: I saw where he tossed the spray can and I’d picked it up for safekeeping earlier this morning. No doubt his fingerprints are all over it.

But Toby’s also the quarterback of the Zeke intramural squad, and we need him for the big game next weekend with SAE. An obvious time for a lie.

But it’s not that simple, because, first, I don’t know what the other guys will have told the Dean and, second, this isn’t Toby’s only indiscretion in recent days. He also tried hard to hit on my girlfriend, to the point of being abusive. Because I’m a pledge, though, I really can’t do anything about it.

Except now’s my chance with the Dean. What, I think, would she like to hear? Would she like an excuse to throw the book at Toby? If I tell her the truth, what’s in it for me?

My thoughts are interrupted by the voice of the Dean's secretary. "The Dean will see you now, Mr. MacQuarrie."

My upbringing was decidedly limited in the female department, and I'm continually amazed and astounded by American women of all ages. Dean Susan Standerfield, a late-thirties California blonde who wears miniskirts and keeps herself fit, about knocks me over. I have trouble not staring at her legs as she walks across the office to greet me.

"Mr. MacQuarrie, I believe." The handshake is more formal than friendly. "We have something to discuss, don't we, Mr. MacQuarrie? Please sit here, in front of the desk."

She rounds the desk and sits with her back to the window, her legs, fortunately for me, hidden. The sunlight makes it hard for me to read her face.

"Now, Mr. MacQuarrie, perhaps it would interest you to know that your four fraternity brothers all have told me consistent stories about last night, about how you, as the only pledge among them, were trying to impress them with your ability to drink and with your bravado with that spray paint can. Would you like to comment?"

The truth, and my proof of it, suddenly come into clear focus for me.

A radio that Very Large Guy Number 1 had on his belt crackled, and he held it to his ear, the cauliflower one.

"Yeah, boss? OK ... yeah ... OK. C'mon, Rafe, it's cool."

And they both turned and walked back toward the gate. So there *was* sound along with the pictures, I thought.

"Uh, OK, nice meeting you guys!" I called after them.

VLG 1 turned. "Don't you go wandering off. We're watching."

He pointed at the cameras.

"OK, thanks, I'll be right here!"

I waved, and they went in through the gate, which closed behind them with motors whining and then a solid clank.

Because I really had called AAA, and because I really did need them to get my tire changed, all I could do was wait. So I sat down in the passenger seat and took out the miniature camera I'd brought to document security device placement and as much of the gate mechanism as I could see. By yawning and stretching, I managed to get several shots, and the process also allowed me to examine details I'd missed before.

How I'd missed it, I don't really know, but what jumped out at me then was the plaque mortared into the wall next to the gate.

"*Consulate of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*", it said, with Arabic lettering saying the same thing plus a "Praise Allah" admonition. That told me all I needed to know.

* * *

The guy that AAA Florida sent put on my spare quickly and efficiently. Examining the dead tire, he stuck his finger in the hole that my little explosive charge had made and pronounced it unrepairable. He thought a minute and recommended that I contact the manufacturer, though, as he thought the blow-out to be clear evidence of a defect that should be covered by their warranty. I had reason to think otherwise but decided not to bring that up.

On the drive back home I considered my situation. Someone living in the mansion of the Saudi Arabian consul had put a tail on me, shortly after I'd killed one of their citizens. I had a feeling that my self-defense excuse wasn't really something that would matter to them.

Consequently, I not only had some very rich people after me, but they were very rich people with diplomatic immunity. Bad, bad, bad.

On the other hand, the reason they were after me had to do with espionage—the theft of highly classified information and its distribution to a group of foreigners—foreigners who might well be part of the government's terrorist watch list.

While the consulate crowd could claim their diplomatic immunity, the immunity wouldn't keep them from being booted out of the country should they be connected to espionage. And if they were sent packing, my little problem would go away.

So, I thought, the way for me to deal with the whole thing would be to demonstrate a connection between Nassir Al-Ayas and people in the consulate. This would implicate the consul's staff, or maybe family, in the theft of the Special Nuclear Materials information.

Of course, the value of that information lay only in its use in an attempt to steal some of the material itself—and such an act would go far beyond mere espionage. Moreover, because the whole thing so far involved a group of people—Wetherby Stephens, Nassir Al-Ayas, and the coffee-house crowd—it involved a conspiracy by definition. Pulling my consulate nemesis into it would seal the deal—he'd be on the next plane home before he knew what was happening.

I just needed to make that connection.

I'd heard that the Kingdom was encountering unexpected turbulence since King Fahd had died some time back. He'd been infirm for years, with the one of his brothers or son or somebody doing the Acting King role, but the real king's death had let loose a power struggle behind the scenes. It occurred to me that this involvement of the consulate with the SNM espionage could be the first step toward less friendly relations between the U.S. and the Kingdom.

Or it could be merely the action of a single, unauthorized individual. If that were the case, making the connection would put that person in serious hot water—and hot water to the Saudis often involved such punishments as beheading.

That would solve my problem for sure.

Making the connection would require understanding who all the players were, and a biography of Nassir Al-Ayas would be most useful in that regard. And a list of the Saudi occupants of the consulate compound would also help. It's time, I thought, to start calling in favors from people who still work in Washington.

Although much of my federal career had involved assignments overseas, mostly in that part of the world now called Southwest Asia, I was almost always covered by posing as a State Department employee, one of the ubiquitous "cultural liaisons" that embassies seem to overflow with. Because real State Department employees tend to move around and often wind up enmeshed in the stateside

bureaucracy in some Washington office, there were plenty of people whom I could call for information. It was simply a matter of finding out who worked where at the present time.

Back at home in Boca, I started with the easiest approach—the internet. Federal agencies all had web sites, some more obscure than others, of course, but they often listed employees and their locations, or at least their mail codes. The mail codes needed translating, but I'd worked with State long enough that I knew what many of them meant.

I had two particular individuals in mind, Tom van Ostern and Caspar Spoot. Both were typical State Department career types—old, entrenched, eastern seaboard families, top prep schools, Ivy League colleges—and both seemed to suffer from the sort of inbreeding that lends such people the common sense of lichen.

On assignment in Saudi Arabia, Tom and Caspar had let themselves be bribed by one of the minor Saudi Princes into taking him to a western nightclub, where, as might be expected, the wrong people saw them and informed the religious police. The Prince had promptly disappeared—word on the street was that his voice had changed, up a register, and his new job involved the role of eunuch for his brother's harem.

The religious police were of the persuasion that setting examples was a good way to keep their charges on the straight and narrow, and sacrificing a minor prince now and then reminded the Royal Family of their own responsibility to set a good example for the peons.

Van Ostern and Spoot found themselves in a Riyadh jail awaiting a public punishment, probably to involve a protracted flogging, as diplomatic immunity goes only so far over there. Rescuing them and smuggling them out of the country, while not blowing my own cover, was one of my more challenging assignments. They were both now somewhere in Washington, with scar-free backs, unless they'd managed to do something else similarly stupid in the years since.

It turned out that van Ostern had, more or less. I couldn't find him in the State Department listings anywhere, but a Google search turned up an old newspaper article with the tidbit that he'd driven his Lexus off a bridge one night. It was suggested that the accident may have had something to do with his 0.34 blood alcohol content.

Caspar Spoot, on the other hand, had avoided such disasters, apparently, because he was listed by State as having a mail code putting him in the Southwest Asia section office in Washington. There was also a phone number, so I called it. Even though it was lunchtime on most of the East Coast, I had the idea that Spoot took his two hours later in the afternoon. He always acted like the aristocracy he derived from.

The desert sun isn't just hot, it's a searing weight pressing down from the sky. We westerners do the best we can, but we never truly adapt to it. Success is declared in terms of being able to tolerate it for short periods.

Still, there are people who manage to appear above it all. Caspar Spoot, rogue scion of a wealthy Bangor Maine family, looks as if he has been sitting comfortably in the air conditioned billiards room of the yacht club instead of standing under the sun of the Arabian Peninsula.

I, on the other hand, must look like hell. I feel wilted, like yesterday's violets.

"Caspar, if I'm going to pull this off, I'm going to need your cooperation."

“Mr. MacQuirk, or whatever your name is, I do not care in the least whether you are able to ‘pull this off,’ as you put it. I have clear orders from my section leader at the embassy not to associate with you CIA types.”

“Call me ‘Mac’, OK? And let me explain to you what I saw the other day, over there in the public square.”

I proceed to tell him, using as much graphic detail as I can conjure up, of the lashing I’d seen, the one in which the guilty party had his back shredded by the steel-tipped cat-o’-nine-tails. After that, I’m quick to point out, he also had his right hand lopped off. I think what gets to Spoot is my description of the flies swarming on the cuts on the guy’s back while he was being strapped down to have his hand removed. Or maybe it’s my description of the way he was screaming.

I’m talking with Spoot only because of the clout exerted by the US Embassy. He and his compatriot are due for their own turns at the whipping post the next day, even though their diplomatic immunity is being violated. But for some inscrutable reason, the Saudis have decided to let them discuss their situations with Embassy personnel.

Because I’m going to rescue them, I’m that personnel. And I’m frazzled while Spoot is cool as a Maine brook trout. How he manages, I don’t know.

“State Depahtment, Spoot heah.” He still wore his Bangor accent proudly.

“Caspar, it’s been a long time. This is Mac MacQuarrie calling.”

I put a gentle but slightly menacing edge onto my voice, just to let him know it was serious. He got the message—there was a long pause, and then he said exactly the right thing.

“Why, Mac. Haven’t heard from you for a long, long time. What can I do for you?”

I filled him in on the background of my little problem and explained how I needed various identities and biographies. He asked me to spell Al-Ayas’ name.

“Let me do a quick look for you right now, Mac.” There was the clicking of a computer keyboard in the background. “OK, got him. Nassir Al-Ayas, the one who came into the country on a diplomatic visa a couple of months ago. Hmm. Looks as if he’s suspected of being connected with the Saudi secret police, their version of the FBI and CIA combined. Apparently a bastard son of the old king, so there’s a connection to the Royal Family. Says here that he died. Last Saturday night, shot by a Secret Service agent who’s disappeared. What’s that about?”

“You don’t want to know, Caspar, trust me. And, tell you what. Do the research on the consulate down in Miami and put it all together in a computer file. I’ll get back to you with an email address to send it to. What you just told me has me a little nervous about doing this over an unsecured phone like this one. Understand?”

“Well, not completely, but probably well enough.” He sounded more nervous than I felt.

“And that’s probably fine. Listen. When you research the consulate, see if there are any family or professional connections between anyone there and Al-Ayas, OK? And, if it’ll make you feel any better, all this is part of an official investigation.”

I had a long history of never worrying about stretching the truth.

“Official? I’d heard you retired years ago, Mac. Went to work with the NYPD or something.”

“I did, and I got shot in the shoulder in the line of duty and was put on a disability retirement. So I’ve got a titanium right shoulder joint and a small New York pension to go with my small federal

pension. Small plus small adds up to, well, still small. So I'm doing some consulting. That's the official part. I'll give you contact information in email, so if you're ever down my way we can get together and I'll tell you all about it, OK?"

I had no intention of doing this, but I wanted him comfortable with the whole thing.

"Sounds fishy, but, then, everything you used to be involved with was fishy. I'll get right on this. Give me until tomorrow."

"I'll call late tomorrow morning. And thanks, Caspar. This will be a big help."

Big help indeed. If the Saudi secret police were part of the SNM espionage, the whole thing was going to be way over my head pretty quickly. I had to find out who in the FBI was handling it.

* * *

I also had another source of information I needed to tap into, one that might be able to provide more details of interest about the late Mr. Al-Ayas. Dolly. I'd kept her business card against just such a possibility.

I hunted around and finally found it in a shirt pocket in the dirty laundry basket. She worked for an outfit that called itself "Sun and Sand Escorts," with offices in Miami Beach and West Palm Beach. I picked the Miami Beach number.

It turned out that the name Dolly was sufficient for them to recognize who I meant—I filed away a mental note to have each girl adopt a unique first name, if I ever ran an escort service—and that they wanted a credit card number to use for a payment guarantee even though I said I'd be paying in cash. I gave them the number from one of Bill's cards, the same one that I'd maxed out for cash at an ATM before Bill told me I was back to being retired, and they said that Dolly would be calling me soon to make arrangements to meet me.

While I waited, I tried not to think about what she might be doing that was taking her so long.

She finally called back about three, and, from the yawns, I decided she must have been asleep all day. The escort world works at night, I remembered.

"Thanks for calling, Dolly. I'm the guy you met last Saturday night in that apartment in Coconut Grove, Nassir's place, remember?"

There was a long pause and then another yawn. "Oh, yeah. Moustache, black hair, glasses. Yeah. So, you liked what you saw and want some, or what?"

"Of course I liked what I saw, you know that. But I just want to talk. I'll pay for your time, but it's just talk, really. And I, uh, shaved my moustache and my hair's not so dark now. You'll see. Where can I meet you for a drink?"

"Mister, if you knew how many guys tell me they just want to talk and then they can't keep their hands off me, well, you'd know just how dumb that sounds. But, hey, I'm game. Like I tell everyone, it's \$200 an hour just to talk, anything else is more, OK? And if you've got a car, you can pick me up and we can go wherever you want."

She suggested that she meet me at an intersection in North Miami Beach, and the vision of picking up a hooker on a street corner reminded me of what she'd been wearing when I last saw her.

"Oh, Dolly? Can I ask a favor? We'll probably go to a quiet lounge I know for a drink, and I think they'd appreciate it if you, well, covered up a little, you know? It's the kind of place that grandmothers go to, and we really don't need to draw attention to ourselves because of the way you're dressed, OK?"

There was a pause and then a quiet laugh. “Whatever turns you on, honey, sure. See you soon.”

By the time I got myself organized and ready to go, it was time for the afternoon traffic, and it took me over an hour to get to the Collins Avenue intersection where I was to meet Dolly. But she was there, easy to pick out among the other girls standing around because of her socially acceptable garb—she would have fit in among the staff at just about any conservative law office, while the others wore skirts cut up to their crotches and shirts opened down to their navels. And she even had her hair toned down—I realized that the other time, she’d been wearing a wig, and her own hair, blonde as ever, was cut nearly as short as mine.

I waved as I pulled over to the curb, and she saw me easily because I was in the Cobra.

“Well, it sure took you long enough to get here, honey. The clock started a half-hour ago.” She looked slightly miffed.

“Sorry, Dolly, really, I’m sorry. It’s the traffic. And your clock is fine with me.” I tried to look guilty. “So, I didn’t introduce myself before, and I’m betting that you’re not really Dolly on your drivers license. Want to trade real names?”

With a roar from the race-tuned V-8, I pulled into traffic, and her eyes got big as the little car shot forward. “Can’t. It’s against the rules. They told us it’s for our own protection.”

She was clinging to the hand-holds I’d put on the center console and on her door, so I eased off the throttle a little. I looked over to see if she was OK, and it hit me like a run-away cement truck: she looked just like Joanie, all grown up.

Top-down under the warm California sun, the patched-up Triumph TR-6 purrs north on the coastal highway toward Big Sur, almost driving itself it handles so well. This is a good thing, because I’m completely distracted by the sweet young thing sitting beside me.

“Oh, thanks so much for stopping to pick me up, mister, thanks so much. I didn’t think I’d ever get a ride, you know? My name’s Moonglow, what’s yours? I’m headed for Monterey, up the coast, you know? There’s a concert there I don’t want to miss. Want some acid? It’s pretty pure—I tried some yesterday and it was real mellow, no bad vibes at all. Not like that other stuff that Jimmie scored, it had too much speed in it and it was a real bummer, a rough trip for sure, you know? Anyway, where are you headed?” She finally stops to take a breath.

I laugh. “No, thanks, I don’t like to drive while I’m tripping, especially not on a road like this. But thanks for asking. ‘Moonglow’? I bet that’s not what your parents call you. I’m Mac. I’m in college down at UCLA, and I’m headed for that concert up in Monterey, too. Got tickets? I’ve got extras.”

“Oh, man, far out, that’s great. How much? I was gonna have to score some somehow, but this is great!” She giggles and squirms around, tossing her long hair in the wind.

It takes me about two minutes more to decide I’m in love, but I’m too shy to say anything. Besides, she’s talking non-stop.

By the time we get to Big Sur, I’ve heard her life story—somewhere in there it slips out that her parents call her “Joanie”—and have even managed to slide some of my own background into the few pauses. We stop in Carmel for supper, and she trades me a little bag of Acapulco Gold for my extra concert tickets. Then I get a sisterly kiss on the cheek just before she jumps on the back of a Harley Davidson, behind a guy I know better than to mess with, and zooms off forever.

It took that memory a minute to fade and for the current reality to come back into focus.

“Oh. Well, fake names sound like a reasonable approach, most of the time. But this is different. Like I said, even though you don’t believe me, all I want to do is talk. And it has some legal issues behind it, so real names seems like a good idea. I’ll start. I’m Hamish MacQuarrie, but everyone calls me Mac. I used to be a New York City cop, and before that I worked for the Feds in Washington and overseas. What’s going on is, your Saturday-night john, Nassir Al-Ayas, he was involved in a terrorist operation to steal some plutonium and other nasty stuff that you can make nuclear bombs out of. I’m working with the Feds to investigate it, and I need your help. That’s why your real name is important—believe it or not, your real name will keep you *out* of trouble in this situation.”

I let her think about it as I worked my way north and west toward the interstate.

“Why should I care? And, for that matter, why should I even believe you?” A glance at her told me that she was staring at me with eyes squinted, mouth pursed—one very suspicious lady.

“Didn’t I treat you right on Saturday? Because I’m not a Fed or a cop any more, I was able to let you go when they would have kept you around for questioning, maybe even arrested you as an accomplice. Right? And I came to find you myself instead of giving that business card to the Feds, right? I’m not saying you owe me or that I expect anything, but it seems like you could cut me some slack in the trust department. Thing is, this is a huge deal to everyone. We don’t want these jerkweeds to actually steal any plutonium, after all—it could be used for a terrorist attack worse than nine-eleven. And you just might have some information that would help us get the rest of these guys, even if you think you don’t.” I turned toward her and smiled. “Besides, I have *such* an honest face.”

There was a long pause.

“Winslow, Samantha Winslow. But don’t you *dare* ask me for my birthday.” She was staring straight ahead.

I smiled more. “Gotta say, I like ‘Samantha’ better than ‘Dolly,’ by a lot. And I like your hair better this way, too. But don’t you dare ask *me* about the clothes, even though they were my idea.”

That got me a giggle, and she began to relax.

I took her to the Seaside Lounge, a beach-side bar at one of the big hotels up in Hollywood, between Miami and Fort Lauderdale, trying my best not to show off with my hot car. The hotel was one of those stupidly pretentious places that had only valet parking, but I liked it because the bar was cantilevered out over the beach almost to the water line, it was quiet enough to hear the waves, and the staff dressed like adults instead of teenie-bopper beach bunnies.

Also, I have a key-lock switch under the dash in the Cobra that puts the car into “valet mode,” which limits the rpms and the gas flow, and locks out the top two gears. So even though it’s a restored ’66 Shelby racer, in valet mode the car drives like a golf cart, a really noisy golf cart. And I’ve been to the Seaside enough that the valet guys knew this, so I trusted them.

We found a table right on the rail over the surf—the tide was in—and ordered drinks, a Myers Rum with soda for me and a Tom Collins for her. That took some doing—she started with a request for lemonade, and I had to run through the “just want to talk” routine again. Even though it was true and even though I put as much sincerity into it as I could muster up, she remained skeptical, so I decided to put my money where my mouth was. I took a fat money clip from a pocket and started counting out \$100 bills.

“Seems like we’re an hour into this, and I’m happy to talk all night. Let’s say, oh, ten hours?” I pushed the pile of bills across the table toward her.

She looked at it for a few seconds, then smiled. “That’s a lot of talking, honey. But it’s your show.”

I'd been watching her face and missed how she did it, but the bills disappeared somehow, as if by magic.

"Just remember, though, anything else is extra, OK?" Her attempt to look coy was not what you'd call successful.

* * *

Five

I didn't wind up getting my full ten hours' worth of time talking with Sam, as I started calling her after just a few minutes, but that was fine. To my way of thinking, it was quality time that we spent together, and that was what I'd had in mind all along.

I think she was surprised that I didn't come on to her—that it was really true that all I wanted to do was talk. But her acting skills were good enough that she didn't let on.

We talked about nearly everything two people could talk about—ourselves, including some things we had in common and some we didn't (who would think that a hooker would be such an avid golfer?), what we thought of South Florida compared to other places we'd been, where those places fit into the scheme of the Universe, and, finally, our shared experience of the previous Saturday night.

I expect that it was fresher in my memory than in hers—I'd been focused on the fallout from it ever since, and she'd probably had other things to deal with, guys with bulges in their pants and so on. Even so, she remembered details with surprising clarity, adding to my mental portfolio of the incident.

In return, I told her everything I knew about the background of the whole thing, more about the SNM than I'd alluded to previously and various aspects of the government's interest in it. I probably went too far, in terms of revealing classified national security information, but it seemed to me that the probability of a Miami Beach hooker's being a spy was somewhat lower than that of a South Florida politician's being honest—meaning that she qualified for a top-secret clearance.

My candor probably helped matters, too, as she let me take her home to her place in Bal Harbor, north of Miami Beach, when we finally left the lounge at about 2 am, instead of having me drop her off on the corner where I picked her up. The fact that she was beginning to trust me seemed like a positive sign.

At the time, I wasn't sure why that was important to me, but it felt good enough that I savored it all the way home.

All the way, that is, until I got close enough to see the flashing lights. The red and blue and yellow ones.

As I drove down my street, I came to realize that the lights were about where my house was, or, as I noticed as I got closer, where it was supposed to be. My house, instead of a pile of smoking rubble.

Oddly, the first thing I thought about was those bookcases I'd almost finished. All that measuring and sawing and rabbeting and fitting and sanding now turned into matchsticks.

Even more oddly, the thought of it all made me burst into laughter, and that was how the fire chief first met me, the guy whose house got blown to bits laughing about it. He must have thought I was completely nuts—and he treated me that way for the next couple of hours, asking only the simplest of questions using two-syllable words and short sentences.

I was undoubtedly in a state of shock at some level, but my brain was in overdrive. It seemed obvious that the people with whom Al-Ayas was connected had discovered my address somehow, and it was just dumb luck that I hadn't been home. My arms cache—the vault in the closet—had probably survived, though, and I was going to have to figure out how to get at it without raising official suspicions. And, after the implications of the whole thing had crystallized for me, I was keenly aware that my world now consisted of the clothes on my back, the contents of my pockets and that vault, and my Cobra.

At least, I thought, I'll still be able to get around fast.

The rest of that night and the next couple of days were a blur. I managed to eat and sleep, a little, and I accomplished two important things: I found a new place to live, for a while at least, and I got my vault out of the rubble. I also recall dealing with reams of paperwork, for the sheriff's office and for the insurance companies.

The official explanation for the explosion was a gas leak, and the arson investigator's report showed no indications of accelerants or other suspicious circumstances. They found a battered propane tank, empty, in the canal behind the house to verify the verdict. The insurance company that underwrote my homeowner's policy—and I was carrying full replacement value insurance—had an adjuster there the next morning, and my car insurance would replace the Accord, although not its go-fast extras.

Because the insurance companies had fat checks for me, one handed to me, another in the mail, I wasn't going to argue with the explanation—despite the fact that I had never had propane in the house, nor was there a tank left from previous owners. My best guess was that someone with it in for me had snaked a gas line into my attic crawl space and turned on the valve on the tank they'd brought. What set it off—the spark or whatever—was anyone's guess, but Glades View Village was prone to power surges, so it was probably something electrical.

It didn't take me long to decide not to rebuild. Given the price of land in the Village, I thought I would just sell the empty lot, lump the proceeds with the insurance checks, and move into a townhouse somewhere closer to the coast—and take up a new hobby, something less dusty.

Most of it was easy, all things considered, but retrieving the vault required a bit of grunt work and stealth. I rented a heavy-duty mover's dolly and a pickup truck with one of those lift gates, and, early Wednesday morning, nearly 24 hours after the house exploded, I ignored the police tape and dug the vault out of the rubble. The streetlight helped, and the neighbors did, too, by ignoring my activity. The next morning, I ran the entire rig through a car wash, then dropped the vault off at the place I was renting at one of those extended-stay hotels. I had picked one that had a private ground-floor entrance to my suite and easy access to the interstate.

The hardest part of recovering from losing nearly everything was rebuilding my personal inventory—that is, doing the shopping. Some of it was sort of fun, like the electronics. A new computer and printer and digital camera got me up to date, and, because like a good boy I had computer backups in my vault, that part of my life was easy.

But some of the most trivial things turned into a chore. Underwear, for example. For years, I'd been buying the same old thing, replacing what wore out. But now I was able to start from scratch, meaning I had to sort through all the choices. God help me, there was even men's thong underwear in bright colors and animal-skin prints to choose from. At least the whole episode didn't take place just after Thanksgiving, when the rest of civilization is on its annual holiday shopping spree. I don't think I would have survived.

The problem was that, unlike your average American consumer, I never was able to get into shopping as recreation. To me, shopping classified as a necessary evil, unavoidable if you want to put

your hands on what you're buying—otherwise, the internet works just fine. But in the case of underwear, I'd probably have wound up with leopard-skin thongs if I hadn't been at the store to actually look over the choices in person. Then I'd not only have started from scratch, I'd still be scratching.

I'm surprised to discover that living light has its virtues, that possessions can possess you as much as the other way around.

Not that the discovery is voluntary, mind you. I'm living light because I had to make a quick exit from my hotel in Damascus, quick, quiet, and complete. The Syrian secret police figured out my reason for being there. They seem upset that I was trying to plant electronic surveillance equipment in their headquarters. Go figure.

All I have to do is to make it to the embassy, but that could be dicey because the word is out: assist the American spy in any way and you and your family will die horribly.

But because I've done my homework, I'm in pretty fair shape. My series of safe houses hasn't been compromised, at least not that I can tell, so I'm able to move across town from house to house, on foot, at night. And, because I'm living light, I can carry what's left of my stuff easily.

But a change of underwear sure would be nice.

This last safe house is just down the street from the embassy, positioned so that I can watch the front gate from an upstairs window. The Syrians know that I'm likely to be headed for that gate, so they have it staked out, openly, blatantly, guys standing around, smoking cigarettes and looking sinister.

Although most of the embassy staff is unaware of my predicament, my agency contact knows what's going on, and we're setting up a clandestine entrance for me over night. It involves my sneaking around on rooftops, uncovering an air-gun powered zip line that's been left for me, shooting the line over the embassy wall from the roof across the street, and sliding home down the wire.

Not, I assure you, the way I like to spend my evenings. But, because all I have to carry is the briefcase with the super-secret gear in it, I should be able to bring everything sensitive inside to safety.

Living light indeed has its virtues.

By Thursday evening, I was beginning to feel a little more like normal. I'd been out to dinner at my favorite sushi place—my suite had a kitchen, but I wasn't cooking at that point—and returned to settle in by watching something mindless on TV, when the phone rang, the suite's land-line phone.

"Got your life back together yet, Mac?" Bill Petersen's voice was gravelly, as if he had a cold. "Sorry about what happened."

I decided on the spot not to worry about how he'd found me.

"You're sorry. Hell, Bill, you're the one got me into this mess, and then fired me from working on it. Christ!"

I tried not to whine, but I'm not sure I succeeded.

"Yeah, well, that wasn't my idea. But, anyway, you're not fired any more. The SAINTs are back on the case and so are you, at least if you want back in."

I didn't quite know what to say, so I thought for a minute.

"My consulting rate's gone way up."

“OK.”

“Way up, OK? What’s the deal? Why are you back in?”

I was a little surprised that he hadn’t asked how much I was raising my rate.

“You don’t know? Haven’t you been reading the papers?” He sounded surprised.

“Nope. Too busy. What’d I miss?”

“What’d I miss?” he asks. Lord Almighty. What you missed, my friend, is that five SNM storage locations were attacked. It looks like the attacks on Los Alamos, Pantex, Oak Ridge, and Hanford were diversions. The real target was the Indian River Lab. They killed a couple dozen of the lab’s security personnel and technical staff and made off with a nice little stash of enriched uranium, plutonium 239, and some other nasty isotopes. Enough to make a nuke, although we’re betting they just want to make some dirty bombs.”

“Jesus H. Christ! Who’s ‘they’?”

“No idea, although they sent all the networks videos of their success. Al-Jazeera is playing it, but no one else is. It’s predictably grainy and as anonymous as anything I’ve ever seen. They say their next step is a coordinated attack on our business centers. That made the stock market crash, and people in New York and Los Angeles and other places are panicking. Things here in Washington have gotten a little crazy. You want back in or not?”

I suddenly understood why he hadn’t asked about my consulting rate.

* * *

It didn’t surprise me that Petersen had discovered my new living arrangements, but it did surprise me that all of the information I requested arrived by courier less than an hour after the phone call. I was glad to see that the package also included three new sets of identification with more credit cards, passports, and driver’s licenses.

In the meantime, I’d fired up the new computer I’d bought and used the hotel’s free internet connection to do some catching up. As might be expected, the public information about the attacks was more than a little hysterical—even the *New York Times* was sounding panicky. The local papers—Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami—all focused on the Florida connection, but much of their information was sketchy, speculative, and just plain wrong.

Most likely this was because of the obscurity of the Indian River Isotope Laboratory. Unlike the big DOE facilities, IRIL was small and specialized, a couple of compact reactors and some laboratory buildings on a small site on the bank of an estuary on the east coast. And they did a thorough job of avoiding publicity. The only thing Google had on it was a old puff-piece from the *Miami Herald* about IRIL’s role in manufacturing certain medical isotopes. It seemed probable that most of Florida’s citizens didn’t know of its existence until the story about the successful radioisotope heist broke. Because virtually all of the work at IRIL was top secret, DOE kept the facts about the heist under wraps, and the papers had no real information to report on. So they made lots up.

But I knew that IRIL’s job was to develop more efficient techniques for producing radioisotopes for DOE nuclear weapons programs. And while their work was largely experimental, they succeeded in making isotopes in substantial quantities—which had obviously been the target of the attack.

The courier’s package included a review of what had been discovered by the first-response investigating unit from SAINT, of which Bill Petersen was the leader. To the best of their information, a team of between 6 and 10 well-armed attackers had slipped into the facility via the estuary and, during a

shift change for the security staff, gained access to the SNM by shooting as many people as they needed to. This all happened at about 3 am Wednesday, more or less at the same time my house was blowing up. I couldn't help but wonder if my house was another of the diversions, like the attacks at the other DOE facilities.

The entry by water was interesting, a possibility that I knew something about. Years before, back when I was with the NSA, I'd been part of a security audit of IRIL, and we had uncovered significant vulnerabilities associated with the lab's location on the west bank of the Indian River Lagoon, the estuary just north of Fort Pierce. They needed the water for cooling their equipment, despite its salinity, so the location wasn't something they could change. But it was hard to secure, and they also had to deal with environmental considerations—big, cute, fat, slobbery environmental considerations.

The manatees that liked to congregate at the warm-water outflow from the lab drove the IRIL security people crazy. An under-water security fence was instrumented against intruders, but the manatees liked to rub against it, probably to scratch themselves. This set off alarms, so the staff naturally kept the intrusion detection systems disabled when there were manatees around, during the several winter months when the water in the estuary cooled enough to make the big critters uncomfortable. Although the guards used visual surveillance of the area, via underwater cameras and lights, the water was murky and people in diving suits could look like a manatee on the video monitors. And because the guards on duty who might have made this mistake were all dead, it wasn't possible to question them about it.

It's a cliché, but it's true: dead men tell no tales. I've had this little homily pressed onto my psyche in preparation for my upcoming operation. And the nature of the thing is such that we surely don't need any tales told.

My Farsi isn't nearly as good as my Arabic, but it works well enough in Tehran, where the variety of accents gets me by. In the countryside, it's less easy to pass as a native, though, so I'm glad this little caper is to take place in the big city.

The problem of the American hostages has occupied the U.S. government for months. Hawks want to nuke Tehran; doves want to continue to negotiate, and by these definitions the President is a dove. But the real peacenik doves have no idea about what he's doing behind the scenes.

And except for my little part in it all, I really don't know, either; I just assume there's more than my operation.

I mean, there better be. There's no guarantee that I'll succeed, and even if I do, I'm not exactly clear on what bugging the headquarters of the national television station will buy us. All we really have to do is to watch the broadcasts to know it's Ayatollah time all the time.

Under the guise of foreign investment in Iran's religious government, I'm working on remodeling a downtown Tehran building for use as offices in a religious import-export business. It's purely coincidence that the building happens to be next to the television headquarters. And remodeling to modernize the old structure involves lots of drilling into whatever the thing's made out of—brick, maybe, or more likely some local version of adobe. In the process of doing this, one of the workmen will be offered a huge bonus to drill completely through our wall and nearly all the way through the one next door, too. That will let me put the gadgets in there so we can hear what's going on behind the scenes in Iranian TV-land.

And as much as I hate to have to do it, that particular workman is going to have to disappear. He'll come to work one day and never go home. Poor sap.

Although the total amount of missing material weighed only about 50 pounds altogether, transporting it would have been complicated. The stuff would have fit easily into a briefcase, its being so dense and all, but that would have been a very stupid thing to do with it, as it would have likely produced critical or near-critical mass, depending on the uranium isotope mix involved. So what was missing was the SNM stored in its “pigs,” as those radiation-proof lead bottles are called. According to the lab’s inventory, there were a dozen of these pigs missing, each bright orange with a red top, about the size of a basketball, each weighing more than 80 pounds. The attackers were therefore carting a half ton of heavy metal around, and they obviously didn’t leave the way they’d come. Those pigs made pretty good boat anchors, after all.

Also missing from the lab was a van specially designed and shielded to transport the awkward containers, and a search by regional law-enforcement agencies had discovered it submerged in an abandoned gravel pit at the end of a canal between Wellington and Loxahatchee, west of West Palm Beach and some 60 miles south of Fort Pierce. The van’s contents included eight empty pigs, which almost literally glowed in the dark, they were so hot. The perps had, apparently, consolidated the SNM into four of the containers—not the smartest thing in the world to do, but expedient, at least in terms of moving the stuff.

Which stuff seemed headed my way.

After the dead bodies were identified and initial contacts with the rest of the IRIL personnel were completed, the roster was still short a few people. This made the members of Petersen’s investigating team, a suspicious group to begin with, even more so. To them, it looked as if the assault had help from the inside.

Over the subsequent day and a half, the list of AWOL personnel dwindled. Willie Finckel, a janitor, had left town without telling anyone in order to visit a sick grandmother in Dixie county, up in Florida’s armpit. The grandmother, 90 years old and the matriarch of a large, extended family, complained of gout and Willie knew how to concoct her favorite folk remedy. Richard C. Withers, IRIL’s assistant vice president for personnel, and Dawn Munroe, his administrative assistant, were found in bed together at the Morning Glow motel, across the Indian River Lagoon out on Hutchinson Island. It turned out that Withers’ cell phone had GPS capabilities that he didn’t know about. Although the report was a bit vague, it appeared that Mrs. Withers was not amused.

Still missing were Hoagland L. Forth, known to all as Hoagie, Lawrence Sutton, and Ali Temekis. Forth and Sutton were mass-spectrometry technicians who worked in quality-assurance laboratories, and Temekis was a supervisor in inventory control. Considerable effort, in the form of a nation-wide manhunt, was being expended to find them.

I read through the report twice, thought about it, and decided to call Bill Petersen back.

“It’s Mac, Bill. So you’re in charge of dealing with this shit storm? Who did you piss off, anyway?”

“It’s because of the history—I had point on the SAINT investigation before, so they handed it back to me now.” He laughed his gravelly laugh. “Same reason I called you back in, basically. You got the package, right?”

“Yep. And I have to say, they did just what I would have done. I don’t know if you remember, but I was part of that security audit the agency did at IRIL. We pointed out the weakness of the waterside security—oh, what was it?—20 years ago, I guess. Except we didn’t know about turning off the sensors because of the manatees. That makes it even worse. We’d probably have closed the place down if we knew about that.”

“Yeah, but that’s the water under the dam, or over the bridge, or whatever.” He sounded tired. “There will be a follow-up investigation, of course, and probably some management heads will roll. But our problem is the stuff that’s floating around out there. DOE’s called in their NEST folks from all over, so at least we’ll have help.”

The Nuclear Emergency Support Teams that DOE employed were scientists, not law officers, so it wasn’t clear to me how much help they could be. But maybe, I thought, they could be helpful with some of the technical details. I decided not to raise any concerns about it.

“You’re right about that, Bill. If they’re going to do a dirty bomb attack, that’s the kind of thing that won’t take much prep time.”

Hell, I was thinking, all you have to do is stick some powdered SNM into a stick of dynamite. Or don’t even bother with the powder part—just use whatever lumps you’ve already got.

* * *

Six

Even though the SAINTs were supposed to be more secret than Top Secret, their existence had been reported by all of the news media outlets, at universally low accuracy levels. No doubt there would eventually be an investigation into who leaked the information, but the urgency of the isotope hunt put that on the back burner.

My role in the investigation, though, was still under the media radar, and Bill and I agreed that it would be a good thing to keep it that way. He hinted that there might be other people doing consulting as well, but he wouldn’t give me any details. Nor would he provide me with any kind of official credentials such as that fake Secret Service ID I’d had before. Too risky, he said.

But he did give me a 24/7 telephone number to call to get me out of legal trouble, in case my nosing around got me arrested or something. And he agreed with my suggestion that I snoop around the Saudi consulate as my initial assignment.

The first thing I did was to rent another car, a Chevy Malibu, white for anonymity and with a few dings and scratches for authenticity. The Cobra went into storage in a garage I found for rent. It was just too distinctive to be useful for what I had to do.

Although I had a small stash of masquerade supplies left in my vault, I needed to visit a theater supply store for more fake hair and some makeup. After that, I had to hunt around for a while before I found a sporting goods store with the right-sized kayak, and even then I had to paint it black myself, flat black with mottled flat gray and dark brown-green overspray, an attempt at nighttime camouflage colors.

And last, but hardly least, I stocked up on ammunition for my various weapons.

Bill had told me that there were shoot to kill orders out for the perps—illegal orders, probably, but ones backed with the promise of a Presidential pardon. The White House was really, really keen to avoid any dirty bomb explosions, he said.

Thus equipped, I was ready to go isotope hunting.

My previous experience in a kayak had been out west, on vacations to the mountains, so the water was cold. But the current had been fast, with rocks and rapids and even a few waterfalls.

What this meant was that the warm water with waves but no current on Biscayne Bay was something of a new experience for me. I learned quickly not to let myself get broadside to the waves, which meant I had a lot farther to paddle, and it was hot work. But I surprised myself by doing fairly well.

Mac, old pal, you've done it to yourself this time. Talk about biting off more than you can chew!

I'm half-way up the rock face and three-quarters the way to the time limit, panting, arms and legs quivering with exhaustion. Shouts of "Keep going, the rest is lots easier" and "Don't quit now, you're almost there" and "Don't look down" echo up from below. The fact that it's a free climb—no ropes—nags at me, creating a psychological barrier that makes me want to hug the rock, melt into it.

But I've got to make it to the top in the time limit if I'm to pass this wilderness survival course I signed up for. Why, I ask myself again, did I think this was a good idea?

But the little voice that's nagging me about no ropes reminds me that even if I don't make the time limit, I still have to get myself off the rock somehow. And that even if the top half weren't easier than the bottom half, going up is always easier than going down, at least going down under control.

So I reach for the next handhold and step up once more—but my climbing boot slips off the little nub of rock and I slide back to my previous hold, scraping my fingertips raw. I hear someone say "Oh shit!" in the distance.

But it turns out that the little slip is just what I need. The adrenalin that it produces gets me going, rejuvenates my tired muscles, and I start upward, slowly at first and then, gaining confidence and momentum, faster. Whoever said it has it right—the top part is easier.

And I place my right hand, fingertips bleeding, onto the top of the rock just as the bell sounds. I'm not sure who is more surprised, the instructor or me.

I'd lashed the kayak onto the top of the rented Malibu and taken it plus a duffle bag full of goodies down to the Matheson Hammock marina, where I parked in the overnight lot. Well after dark, when no one was around, I put out to sea in the kayak, across the bay, headed east into the wind. After paddling for about a half hour, I turned and stroked in the other direction, almost. By angling just to the right of the wind slightly, I managed to avoid tipping over in the waves while still making headway toward the canals I needed to find. It took three such tacks before I managed to find what I was looking for.

Despite the best efforts of well-organized environmental advocacy groups, the mainland coastline of Biscayne Bay was nearly all high-end real estate developments. Like my dredge-and-fill land in Glades View Village, land for houses had been created by destroying the natural wetlands in favor of subdivisions. But along the Bay, the dredged part was canals full of seawater, generally deep enough for pleasure craft. One of those canals, I knew from satellite pictures and nautical charts, reached inland enough to be the water access for the Saudi consulate's estate.

It was convenient that the canal entrance I was looking for off the Bay was marked with stakes—helpful for residents full of beer on their way home from a day in the sun, and helpful for night-time visitors in kayaks, too. By the time I reached the quiet waters of the sheltered canal, it was after midnight, so I had the water all to myself.

Kayaks are interesting little watercraft. You sit on the bottom, sealed in by a spray skirt, a sort of neoprene collar around your waist, so sinking is pretty much impossible. But tipping over is easy, and that possibility had made me extra cautious out in the waves. I'd had lessons on my vacations out west,

where they'd showed me the self-righting maneuver called an Eskimo roll—a quick flick of the paddle could put you upright, should you turn over. Experts used this trick for recreation, but for me it was more of a desperation maneuver.

Still, the outing improved my confidence, and by the time I was gliding through the canals toward the dock of the consulate, I was feeling quite accomplished. Tired and looking ahead to a set of sore shoulders in the morning, especially my titanium one, but accomplished.

With the mottled black kayak and black spray skirt, black clothes and hat, and my face all smudged, I was as invisible as it was possible to be. But that didn't mean I was not going to be seen, because the high-tech gizmos available to paranoid rich people were far more capable than mere eyes. Infrared motion sensors, in particular, were something I was worried about.

In the calm waters of the canal, I didn't really need the spray skirt, so I undid it and pulled out from between my legs several useful gadgets. The small night-vision headset went on my head, turning the world green to my eyes but lighting things up nicely. Now, I knew, I would be able to see any IR sensors that the consulate had deployed. I also booted up the portable decay counter I'd brought, a high-tech version of the old Geiger counter. This one was designed to be small and clandestine, so it recorded the energy of the decay particles—alpha, beta, and gamma radiation—for later analysis and indicated detection counts with only a small blinking LED. After I turned it on, I put it back in its waterproof bag and velcroed it to the top of the kayak where I could see it. Then I re-fastened the spray skirt, put the diving mask with the miniature SCUBA rebreather I'd brought onto my left arm for safe-keeping, and went to work.

My goal was as complete a sampling of the vicinity of the consulate's docks as I could manage—without, of course, being discovered. The SAINTs had sampled the stolen van with a counter like the one I had and were able to identify traces of radioactivity on it as well as in the pigs the bad guys had left behind. But the front entrance of the consulate had come up clean on several drive-by sampling runs. The docks seemed like an obvious possibility.

As I paddled gently toward the docks, I worked at translating the eerie green glow of the night scope into terms I could comprehend. It was a high-contrast, black and green world out there, and nothing looked at all familiar. Gradually, though, the form of the pilings and decking of the docks took shape, and there was a boathouse. Bright green spots, almost blinding in their brightness, on several of the pilings validated my concern about IR motion sensors. I knew, however, that their sensitivity must have been turned down, because otherwise they would pick up birds, jumping fish, even waves. So I thought I might be able to avoid detection if I took things slow and easy.

With the right end of my two-bladed paddle, I sculled my way slowly and carefully along the docks toward the consulate's boat house, watching the detector in its clear bag on the prow of the kayak. There was the occasional blink of the LED, but I'd been told to expect some background detections. Anything real, they had said, would light the thing up like a hyperactive turn signal.

It took until the boat house door for anything to happen, and even then it was not dramatic. But there was a clear indication of radioactivity all around the doorway, and when I eased under the dock to the side entrance, the detector began to get excited. I decided to park there for a while to let the counts in the detector's recording accumulate as a way to improve the analysis to come.

With nothing better to do, I took off the night scope and tried to enjoy the evening. Under the dock, it was reassuringly dark, and the night sounds were soothing in some way I couldn't fully understand—the gentle lapping of water on the pilings and the seawall, insects and the occasional bird noise. A couple of times, a fish must have jumped, because there was a slap and a splash. A car went by on Old Cutler out front of the residence once, sounding far away, and somewhere out on the bay a powerboat of some kind was thrumming up the Intracoastal Waterway.

It was so peaceful that I almost dozed off. To keep myself awake, something that seemed like a good idea at the time, I did a little housekeeping, putting the night scope back by my feet and refastening the spray skirt.

And then all hell broke loose.

I still don't know what I did—maybe it was those motion sensors, or maybe I made some unnatural noise that their microphones picked up. But whatever it was, they were on to me. Lights blazed, and almost immediately there were dogs barking and people shouting, headed my way from the residence. I could see the lights reflected off the water of the canal, and there were stripes on the water around me from overhead lights shining between the planks of the dock overhead.

By the time the thundering hoard of dogs and guards reached the boat house end of the dock, I had pulled my way, piling by piling, to the other end of the structure and had only a couple dozen yards of water to cross to the darkness and safety of the canal, but it was brightly lit water. I was hoping they would search the boat house and give up, but as soon as I saw flashlights probing under the dock, I knew I wasn't going to be so lucky. With no better alternatives, I slipped on the dive mask, put the rebreather in my mouth, and, as quietly as I could, rolled the kayak upside down.

* * *

If I had thought about it ahead of time, I suppose it would have made perfect sense to me that the canal would be deep enough for boats out there beside the dock but not necessarily under it. But since I hadn't thought about it, the face-full of mud that I encountered was something of a shock. I could feel with my hands, though, that the bottom was sloping, so I pushed myself sideways to deeper water.

Having hit bottom, I'd stirred up the murk, and visibility was nil. I could see a dim glow from the water lit by the dock lights, somewhere up ahead of me and over to my left. That was enough to get me oriented.

And I could also hear the activity overhead. The footsteps, both human and canine, were amplified and coming my way, it sounded like.

Slipping off the spray skirt and sliding out of the kayak, I felt less confined and more able to manage the situation. The dive knife I'd strapped to my left leg easily cut a gash in the bottom of the kayak, and all I could do was hope that the air escaping through the hole wouldn't make too much noise. The entire thing was submerged in less than 15 seconds. I pulled the decay counter loose from its velcro and shoved off a piling toward the channel, hugging the bottom.

Once out of the cloud of murk I'd stirred up, the water was a little better, but tidal flow and algae kept the canal from ever becoming crystal clear, probably, because visibility was still limited to a couple of feet. That, I hoped, would prevent the guys on the dock from seeing me gliding along the bottom.

If only, I was thinking, I'd thought to bring dive fins.

As it was, I had a long, lonely swim ahead of me, and it was at least two hours before I got back to the car. Only the first few hundred yards were under water, for which I was glad because that miniature rebreather wasn't designed for lengthy service.

That two hours gave me plenty of time to keep thinking about dive fins—although now and then there would be a splash somewhere that made me wonder about alligators.

I keep reminding myself to think rationally, keep thinking, do the intellectual bit. After all, I tell myself, any number of primeval things out there can stimulate old, old memories in our reptilian brain, memories that produce irrational responses. And rationality is what you need most just now. So think!

Darkness, for example. People evolved with eyes that work well during the daytime, unlike some big cats and other night creatures. So darkness is scary.

And abrupt noises, like a sudden clap of thunder. Now, I ask myself, what would make that so fundamentally frightening to us? Were our various ancestor species all threatened by things that made loud noises? Good question, I say to myself—keep thinking about it.

Just don't, I remind myself, think about that other scary thing, the one that already made you wet your pants, not that it's important, given the temperature of the tropical ocean and your immersion in it. As I crest yet another wave, I look around for any sign of anything, but see only more wave tops. And the setting sun.

Holy crap! The thought intrudes without regard for all of my best efforts at intellectualizing the situation.

CAN SHARKS SEE AT NIGHT?

Because I had managed to don a life vest before the boat sank, I'm able to float without wasted motions, and I'm careful not to kick my legs—don't want to look like bait, after all.

At each wave crest, I continue to look around, hoping to see other survivors, seeing only more waves. And the setting sun.

And I'm reminded again of how a couple of the guys got hit by the 50mm rounds that we were strafed with, how they were dead before the boat sank.

NOW THERE'S BLOOD IN THE WATER!

But, I remind myself, they're not here or you'd see them, and the blood is wherever they are, not here. So keep thinking about other things.

Like how you know just who was in that airplane, who was behind the whole thing. And how they don't expect you to survive, let alone come after them. And keep thinking good thoughts about that locator beacon you pitched over the side before the boat sank.

Just keep thinking.

Eventually, I made it back to the car, cold and tired, but with the decay counter intact. I had one of those adrenalin-rush moments when I couldn't find the car keys on the first try, but that was just because I'd put them in the other pocket.

On the drive back north, I had an hour to think about the nature of covert operations and my role in them.

That adrenalin my system had generated over the car keys was the last of the evening's several doses, and I decided I didn't like it any more. Used to be, 20 or so years earlier, I'd thrived on the stuff like some folks thrive on Starbucks' triple shots. My vacations back then involved adrenalin-generating activities ranging from rock climbing to extreme skiing, and, of course, whitewater kayaking. But having become accustomed to a retirement in which my most exciting activity was trying to get my bookcases not to wobble had changed things.

Mac, I thought, you've turned into a retirement-village couch potato.

That thought was reinforced by how tired I felt.

But I still had work to do that night. When I got back to the hotel, I went through the process of uploading the data from the decay counter to the computer site that Bill Petersen had told me about—it involved nothing more complicated than getting pictures off a digital camera, which was a good thing, because I was having trouble staying awake.

At last, I was able to hit the sack, after first turning everything off, my cell phone, the room's phone—I unplugged it—my computer, everything, and then turning the TV on to an empty channel for white noise to mask the rumble of the trains.

I slept until noon. I remember a dream at some point about a school of little fish and how I had to escape them by swimming through a culvert that got smaller and smaller until I got stuck and they started nibbling on my toes. Then the mud in the culvert smothered me and everything went fuzzy and black.

When I woke up, I was sore all over, and my right shoulder was so stiff I could hardly move it. But at least my toes were intact.

I turned all of my equipment back on while waiting for the coffee to brew, and I found voice mail on the phones and email on the computer. Bill Petersen was working hard to contact me. He had results from the decay counter, and I needed to call him right away.

“Where the hell have you been, Mac? I’ve been trying to get in touch since six this morning.”

“Bite me, Bill. I’ve been asleep. I got in about four after swimming a couple of miles in the ocean for that data I sent you. You could at least thank me first.”

With no coffee in me, I wasn't ready for criticism.

“Yeah, well, we need you at a meeting. While you were out for your swim, one of our guys turned up full of holes. Someone put a clip from an Uzi into him. Things are heating up.” He sounded grim.

“So what about that data I sent you? Do we storm the consulate, or what?”

“Data? Oh, yeah, that file you sent. Nothing. Or, rather, just the same we got out front.”

“Huh? Wait a minute! You told me you didn't find anything out front. And that counter was going nuts last night by the boat house.”

“Yeah, with iodine counts, iodine-131. I don't know what those guys at the Saudi consulate were doing with that stuff, but it isn't something we're particularly worried about. Maybe a private doctor is treating somebody for a thyroid problem, or something. We got hits from it by the front gate, too. It's not the SNM, though. They're clean as far as we're concerned.”

His dismissive tone pissed me off, but at some level I understood.

“You going to make it to this meeting or not?”

I'm not sure what I'd been hoping for, maybe that the decay counter results would show that the SNM was in the boat house and we'd sent in the Marines or something. That would take care of my little problem with whoever blew up my house. But instead there was already a shooting war going on somewhere, or at least that was what it sounded like.

“Right, yeah, I'll be there. Where? Should I expect action?”

“Not yet, this is just planning. Federal Building in Miami, at two. We've got to figure out how to take down an encampment out west of town without making too much of a ruckus.”

“Is that where your guy got shot up?”

“Yep. It’s about 40 miles west, out in the ’Glades, on one of those little islands out there. Our guy was actually just scouting, sitting by the highway with binoculars. Whoever is out there seems to value their privacy in a big way.” Petersen heaved a sigh. “Trouble is, Mac, we don’t know if this is related to our SNM case or if it’s something else. We don’t even know who’s out there.”

Maybe he didn’t, but I thought I might. It was a badly kept local secret in South Florida that what used to be hunting camps in the Everglades had become havens for the international drug cartels. And people who smuggle cocaine could also smuggle other stuff, stuff that glows in the dark.

* * *

Seven

That Saturday afternoon, I learned I hated meetings in downtown Miami. Well, actually, I knew I hated all kinds of meetings, but those where you have to fight traffic and then pay exorbitant parking rates trumped everything else. Especially on a Saturday. Especially when the other people at the meeting treat you like some kind of slime mold.

But to be fair, the slime mold part worked in my favor, because it let me sit in the back and listen without having to say anything. And I expect the reason for that treatment was that I was the only one at the meeting who didn’t get paychecks directly from Uncle Sam. Federal employees can be a clannish bunch, particularly in crisis situations. I know. I used to be one.

And the death of a Federal agent was, in their eyes, a crisis situation. It turned out that the poor fellow who had been shot full of holes out in the Everglades had been working for the DEA and was, at the time of the shooting, on loan to Bill Petersen’s SAINT operation. Bill held forth at some length about what was known about it.

“Jim Lund was one of us, people, and he drew that assignment the way you all drew yours. What I mean is, it could have been any of you out there last night. Now, I know that we’re all from different agencies and sometimes we compete with each other. But on this case, we’re all working together for the same thing, and the first thing is to find out who put Jim Lund down. Right?”

Even though I’m sure the question was rhetorical, there was a general mumble of assent from the crowd. Petersen nodded with them and continued.

“Jim’s assignment last night was to watch, from long distance, a little island out in the Everglades about 40 miles west of Chrome Avenue, the edge of the developed area. He drove out the Tamiami Trail and parked at a pull-off that fishermen use to access the canal there. This morning, his relief found him dead. He and his car were shot full of holes on the canal side of the car. A boat, or maybe airboat, drive-by shooting, like. The car was closed up, with the motor running and the A/C on—we figure he kept it like that on account of the mosquitoes and the heat. Yeah? In the back.” Petersen pointed at a raised hand.

“Air-boats are noisy as hell, and even a power-boat isn’t real quiet. How come Lund didn’t hear it coming?”

“We found a heavy-metal CD in the car’s player. Lund was out there in the middle of nowhere, with only through traffic going by, no one around. So we figure he was trying to keep himself awake with the CD. And he was watching the island using a night scope, so he wouldn’t have necessarily seen a boat on the canal. What?”

Petersen was looking at someone near the front and listened to a question I couldn't hear.

“Hammock?”

He looked up at the crowd. “OK. I'm told that those little islands out there in the Everglades are called hammocks. Whatever. And he asked if we had any aerial or satellite recon of it. Well, we tried a fly-over with a small plane and got shot at, so something's going on out there. And as you all know, the use of NRO satellite assets over the continental US is strictly prohibited by law. The President, though, was persuaded to issue an Executive Order in this case, so we've managed to get some pictures. And they show a couple of cabins—what someone described as a hunting camp—and, in one of the infrared bands, some kind of operation that's apparently under a camouflage net. Maybe drug processing, maybe something with our SNM, although the particle counters didn't see anything unusual. There are also several airboats pulled up on the side of the island—I mean, hammock—near the cabins.”

Petersen waved at a guy standing over to my left, and the lights went down. A projector on a little platform on the back wall behind me came to life, and the front wall was filled with the image Petersen had described, in full color and exquisite detail. In the upper left corner, an arrow labeled “N” pointed up, and there was a block of text including obvious latitude-longitude notations.

“Here's the visual. Cabins over here, green metal roofs, shiny enough that they're not too old. Satellite dish. Shed, probably with a generator, see the little stack? No outhouses that we can find, which implies some kind of indoor plumbing—so these aren't just old-timer shacks. Half dozen good-sized airboats here. Looks like a fish-cleaning table or something like that over here. The rest looks like trees and underbrush, but pay attention to this area down here in the next picture. It's infrared.”

Petersen waved his hand generally over the lower right quadrant of the image as it changed to a gray-shade blur with several white spots.

“Something is going on down here that you can't see on the visible image—that's what tells us that there's a net over this area. Something's generating heat. Notice the little shed is also hot.”

He pointed at the little whitish rectangle and then two large, darker ones.

“And that you can still see the cabins because the roofs are cooler than the surrounding vegetation. That might be from the fact that they're metal, or it might be from air conditioning, in which case these are not your average, low-budget hunting cabins.”

I've got satellite imagery on the brain. I thought I knew enough about it to do what I need to do, but it's changed. No more of the old ways, with huge lenses and film canisters spat out by the satellites and picked up in mid-air by the Air Force. It's all digital now, and there's lots of new stuff to learn, unless you want to go the way of the dinosaurs, Mac, old pal.

And not only is it all digital now, it's multi-spectral and hyper-spectral, and here, I'm thinking, am I, spectral-phobic. Used to be, you could capture pictures of whatever light or other kind of radiation your film was sensitive to. That meant visible and infrared, and some particle signatures, too. But now, there are photo-detectors for just about any wavelength imaginable. Some such images don't show much, but you never know, you need to look at them anyway.

The analysts call each picture a “data cube”, a three-dimensional image. Two dimensions are the usual horizontal ones, call them north-south and east-west. The other dimension is wavelength, the colors of the data at a particular place, a spot on the horizontal grid. And the numbers in the data cube are the intensities of the colors at that place (all, of course, at that particular time, for there's another data cube coming along in just another millisecond. Ready?).

But handling the data cubes, the analysts tell me, is what the computers are for. Big computers, super ones. The computers will handle the data. Your job, Mac, should you decide to accept it, is to help the computers make sense of it, turn that data into information, knowledge. You'll work with us and ask questions, we'll translate those questions so the computers can understand them, and we'll get answers that way. Got it. Ready? Go!

I decide, on the spot, that I don't want to accept it, that what I'm ready for is the NYPD position I've been offered.

“So who owns them, anyway, those cabins?” The voice came from about the middle of the crowd.

“Good question. It's on the Miccosukee Reservation, with a 99-year lease currently held by something called Western Investment and Import, which is owned by something called Liberation Twenty Group. Because it's Saturday, that's as far as we've been able to get. So far, though, there are no real names, just these shadow companies.”

Petersen picked up a little remote controller and pushed a button. The gray blur faded back to the colored details.

“Anyway, it looks as if there could be as many as a thirty or even forty people out there, with these big airboats you see here. And if they're keeping any kind of lookout, there's no way to mount a surprise attack, because, as was pointed out, airboats are noisy. We can't really just go in with an air strike, either, because we don't have enough solid evidence to justify it. Although, I have to say, I was in the small plane that got shot at, so as far as I'm concerned we do. But others higher up feel differently. So what we're going to do is put you all on attack helicopters, a dozen of them, and we'll surround the hammock, hover, and demand surrender. If we get shot at, we'll shoot back with more firepower than they ever imagined. Whatever happens, we'll get you on the ground and see what we see. That's going to involve some interesting logistics, because, as you can tell from this image, there really isn't much in the way of a landing area anywhere. But everyone who goes in this way will be a sworn law enforcement officer, that's why you all were recruited for this mission.”

Petersen stopped, looking for questions, it seemed, and I wondered how I was supposed to fit into this description. I hadn't been sworn to anything, just hired as a consultant.

“OK, everyone, you'll find big envelopes on a table in the hall with your names on them. That's your orders. Omega Team, Mac, stay in here with me, please. Let's move, people.”

And he clapped his hands a few times for emphasis.

I sat in my chair in the back of the room, by the door, watching them file out, catching the occasional sneer tossed in my direction, and wondering what the hell the “Omega Team” was.

By process of elimination, I quickly decided it was composed of the six ramrod-straight fitness freaks who weren't leaving. So I headed to the front to introduce myself.

“Hey, guys, I'm Mac MacQuarrie, and I have no idea whatsoever of what's going on here. Do any of you?”

I tried to put as much friendly into it as I could, quite a trick given the intimidating nature of the group.

“Mr. MacQuarrie! Happy to meet you. Hell, sir, I'm *honored* to meet you. I've read a lot about you.”

The oldest guy in the bunch—early thirties, probably—had stepped forward, right hand stuck out.

“I’m Commander Ross Bierkens, we’ll all get introduced after the briefing.”

As far as I knew, the only way for him to have read about me was for him to have had access to highly classified archival files at either the CIA or the NSA. Unless he was reading things in the NYPD archives, which seemed unlikely. In any case, his comment couldn’t have surprised me more if he’d told me he was my long-lost son.

* * *

“OK, Gentlemen, This is...”

But Bill Petersen was interrupted by Commander Bierkens.

“Excuse me, Mr. Petersen, but I’ve briefed my men on Mr. MacQuarrie’s background and accomplishments. And I believe you owe us an explanation of our presence here. We, and Mr. MacQuarrie, apparently, are the only people who are still in the dark.” Bierkens didn’t look at all happy.

“Easy, Commander, that’s just what I’m getting to. Part of our problem is that new information is arriving in real time, and we need to plan on the fly. But the short version is that we want your team, along with Mac, to move onto that island—or hammock or whatever the hell you call it—on an airboat, using the noise of the helicopter squadron as cover.”

Petersen did a fair job of standing up to Bierkens’ ire, but he was obviously a little intimidated.

“And be in the field of all that unimaginable firepower you mentioned, should the occupants of the island decide to take a shot at you? No, thanks. I won’t put my men in that kind of harm’s way.”

Bierkens was the picture of square-jawed resolution.

“At ease, Commander.” Petersen’s patience was wearing thin. “If you study your orders, you’ll find that I’m in charge of this operation. The same orders, and they originated at the White House—right?—those orders authorize you as military personnel to undertake a mission on US soil. By Presidential Directive. So I’m in charge, and I’m not without military experience. I’m just as concerned about your team as you are, be reassured.”

He gestured again at the satellite image on the wall.

“We’ll send you in to this area where the airboats are, so that you can secure them against their use by whoever’s there. The two helicopters in this quadrant will have ‘no fire’ orders, the ones across here will keep their fire low to avoid crossfire, and all the others will be required to avoid the airboats as targets—they’ll all be made aware of your presence there, right? And if we shoot back, it’ll be with M134 Miniguns, not rockets, so there won’t be shrapnel for you to worry about. If the occupants do surrender, you’ll be able to move in quickly and secure them as prisoners and begin a survey of the cabins and whatever’s under that net, or whatever it is.”

“Yes sir. Sorry, sir. If you’ve read my dossier, you’ve seen that I have experience with several questionable operations run by civilian agencies.”

Bierkens’ expression was not nearly as contrite as his words.

I watched this with mixed feelings, because I’ve been in the middle of such tugs-of-war on various occasions. Military people, in my experience, can suffer from a serious lack of imagination. On the other hand, civilian agency people seem particularly adept at running operations that define the military expression “cluster-fuck.”

The afternoon waning, our infiltration team needs desperately to make contact with the local operative, a CIA recruit whose day job is raising melons. We've spent 50 hours working our way from the drop zone through the marshes to this point, and the recruit is supposed to get us into Baghdad somehow—probably in his melon truck, we've decided. But he's not at the rendezvous point at the right time, or at any time for the next several hours.

Just as dusk is turning to real night, we hear a truck coming down the road toward our position on the edge of the marsh, and we fade back into the water and the cat-tails, waiting. As it comes closer, we exchange worried whispers through our encrypted headsets—this sounds like a half-track, not a truck! What's a melon farmer doing with something like that? What's our plan for escape?

But then there's the melon farmer's voice, calling "Muskie, Muskie, are you here? Where are you?"

"Muskie" is me, my code name for the operation, as far as melon-boy is concerned. We wait.

Without warning, the rendezvous spot at the edge of the marsh is lit up by spotlights from the vehicle. The farmer is at the center of the blazing circle of light, looking bewildered. We're all certain that there is no possibility that he doesn't know about the vehicle—in fact, we're sure he arrived on it.

Then there's a twinkling at the position of the truck, and the sound of automatic weapons fire rolls across the landscape as the vegetation around the rendezvous is shredded, and melon-boy is, too.

By then we're well back into the marsh, safe for the time being, but now facing a two-day reverse slog back to the drop zone, low on food and water purification chemicals. And there's no certainty that we'll be picked up at the drop zone, either—what if it's been compromised as well?

I'm the lone CIA officer on the team, and I'm the one who takes the heat all the way back, even though I have no idea what went wrong and even though I had nothing to do with recruiting the melon farmer. Taking the heat just comes with being part of the civilian agency that set the whole thing up.

"Right. Understood." Petersen stared hard at the commander.

"This time, it will work out fine. We'll go in at sunrise tomorrow. The airboats are on the east side of the, uh, hammock, and that will give you the advantage of the sun at your back." And he stalked out.

"I think he's watched *Top Gun* too many times, Commander. 'Sun at your back,' what's he thinking?"

A team member with Senior Chief rating stripes looked disgusted.

"Yeah, well, at least we'll be picturesque, you know, the airboat, the sunrise. Maybe some birds, too." Commander Bierkens grinned, and his men chuckled.

I was introduced around and found that the group knew quite a bit about me already—as Bierkens had said, he'd briefed them. So even though I was a civilian, and an old geezer civilian, by their standards, I was accepted onto the team with something like celebrity status.

My job, I learned, was to be the technical advisor, the radiation counter guy. If the SNM was on the hammock somewhere, I was supposed to find it while the team secured the airboat fleet, protected me, and took prisoners as appropriate.

I was confident of their part of the whole thing—SEAL Team Six, the Navy's ultra-secret counter-terrorism unit, always knew its job and did it well, in my experience. I was somewhat less sure of my own part.

I needed to return home to equip myself, and the Omega Team needed gear, too, so we made arrangements for them to pick me up in a helicopter at the Boca Raton Airport, by the university, well before dawn. Then we'd fly out to a rendezvous point in the 'Glades to board the airboat.

On my way out, I bumped into Bill Petersen in the hallway.

"Your Omega Team isn't real happy, Bill. You'd have done better to let them in on the planning. They know their stuff."

All-in-all, it's generally my preference to have my protectors be as happy as possible.

"Too many cooks ...', Mac. We need to go in as soon as we can, and tomorrow morning's it. And we need those airboats on that island secured, that's what they've got to do. We'll make sure no one on our side shoots at you, I promise." He looked annoyed. "Listen. There's something else I need to talk with you about. Let's go to my office."

He led me to a small, nearly empty office down the hall. It was obviously borrowed for the duration, because it contained only a desk, covered by paper and photographs, and two chairs. We sat.

"Remember when this all started, Mac? I mentioned to you, I think, that Nassir What's-His-Name, the guy you shot, he sent an envelope to a post-office box up in Palm Beach County. We intercepted the envelope and were watching the box, right?"

"Yep, you said something about that. I wondered what it was about."

"Because we got the envelope and then we got taken off the case, all this was before the attacks and the missing SNM, the watch on the mailbox got dropped and the whole thing sort of got lost in the shuffle. But now it's obviously of interest again."

He was poking through the piles of papers on his desk, looking for something.

"You said it was at one of those commercial pack-and-ship places, the kind that also has mailboxes for rent, right?"

"Right. On some street called Palmetto Park Road, ah, here it is." He pushed a sheet of paper my way. "Here's the address of the mailbox place, and that's who rents the box, that Winfrew Hanley person. His street address is real, it's in a development called "Exclusiva at Boca" just southwest of the mailbox place on the other side of I-95. One of those golf and tennis communities with a guarded gate and everything."

"And?"

I thought I knew what was coming, but I wanted him to say it.

"And because you live up there, I'd like you to check it out. We haven't had a chance to, what with the attacks and planning this assault on the island. I don't mean a B-and-E job or anything like that, just drive-by scouting trip. See what the house looks like and so on. Here's a satellite picture of it."

He showed me an overhead shot of the development, largish houses with more land than is usual in that part of Boca Raton, each with either a fairway or lake frontage, some with both. The house in question had a three-car garage, and what looked like a BMW 7-series sedan in the driveway next to another strange looking vehicle that I decided must be a golf cart. There was a pool and a hot tub out back, and a hedge on three sides with an embedded fence. The fourth side, the lake, appeared to be unprotected but probably was not.

"Well, I don't know what I can find out today, Bill. It's Saturday afternoon, getting a bit late. That hedge probably blocks the view of the house from the street, and it's undoubtedly got an alarm system of some kind. And that's the kind of development that you don't just park on the street and wait for

something to happen, because what'll happen is that the private security guards will give you the bum's rush. And there's no telling what it takes to get in through the gate in the first place."

"You're right, but I'm sure you can figure out how to get in there and take pictures of the hedge and the gate to this house. And maybe you'll get lucky and see the owner. Catch him leaving to go out to dinner, or something. I'll get as much information about him as is available and send it to your email."

Petersen seemed sanguine that I'd succeed, but I was thinking this was going to be just another civilian agency cluster-fuck.

* * *

Eight

By the time I got back to Boca, it was nearly five, and I knew I would have to hustle to find out anything about Winfrew Hanley that evening. On my way home—I was beginning to think of my hotel as home, so help me—I drove by the Exclusiva-at-Boca entrance to see what I could see.

Like so many of the high-end communities in that part of Palm Beach County, the developer had put the cost of a good-sized house into a grand entrance façade, in this case a faux castle and drawbridge setup that took advantage of the street-side canal to make the place appear to have a moat. I was sure that the drawbridge didn't really function, but there was a guard gate protected from the weather by the castle entrance. Several large signs warned about security and patrols, apparently to scare off would-be burglars.

There were three traffic lanes, all with lift gates, mini-versions of those standard railroad-crossing gates, one lane outbound and two inbound, a residents' lane and a visitors' lane next to the guard station. I spotted what I'd hoped to find next to the residents' lane—a bar-code scanner.

Because I had my new digital camera in the car—I've learned that you'll never know when you'll need a camera, so having it in the car is always a good idea—I was prepared for what I had to do. I waited for a likely-looking resident to emerge, in this case a soccer mom, harried looking, probably on the way to the grocery for some last-minute items. Probably milk, by the looks of the kiddies in the van, I thought. Following her was trivial.

Sure enough, she headed for the Publix by the big mall, parking and herding her brood toward the store entrance. As innocently as possible, I meandered over to her van and shot three pictures of the big bar-code label on the rear passenger window, using various camera settings. I also measured its size (four spread fingers square) and position on her window (the bottom of the label was a hand-width above my navel).

A while later, with still about an hour of daylight left, I was parked so that the Exclusiva gate guard couldn't see me, waiting for something good to happen. A pizza delivery car was my first bet, but party guests might also be a possibility. I wanted the guard to be occupied with checking credentials.

A bar-code label, in the right position and of the right size, was stuck to my rear passenger-side window, courtesy of the printer I had at home and some cellophane tape from the hotel's business office.

While I waited, I occupied myself by reading the email that Bill Petersen had sent me, background information about Winfrew Hanley: 65 inches tall and 225 pounds or so, late twenties, single, unemployed although he took golf seriously enough almost to qualify as a professional. A black and white head shot showed a pudgy, baby-faced young man of generic northern European heritage. He and

his twin brother Josiah were the only heirs to their father's Ohio department store fortune, and, for his part, Winfrew seemed intent on blowing his share by his thirtieth birthday. Besides golf, no organized social, religious, or political activities of any kind.

As I was pondering this information, I got lucky. Two non-resident vehicles showed up together, one a delivery of dinner from a local Italian restaurant, Cannoli Kitchen, and the other a sedan full of teenagers. I eased through the residents' lane past the bar-code scanner, gave the preoccupied guard a casual wave, and watched as the gate opened automatically for me. The whole thing was disappointingly simple, really. All their supposed security, and I got in with almost no work at all.

But it fit the pattern. I learned early in my career that security measures are more often psychological than real.

Someday, airport security might actually work. And it's certainly true that its effectiveness has continually increased since the first hit-or-miss metal detectors were installed. But carry-on weapons are trivial to sneak past the bored, minimum-wage airport employees at the passenger checks, although I don't think I'd want to try an M-16. Even the heightened awareness of risk from the Achille Lauro hijacking, where that Palestinian slimeball shot the guy in the wheelchair and dumped him overboard while his wife watched, hasn't placed true security at a higher priority level than passenger convenience, at least not in the U.S.

Rather than get too fancy, I've elected to carry on a ceramic sheath knife, invisible to the metal detectors, strapped to my left calf. In every other respect I'm cleaner than the proverbial whistle, so getting stopped for a pat-down is highly unlikely. I've heard that overseas there are passengers selected at random for pat-downs, but that hasn't happened for U.S. domestic flights, so I'm safe.

The red-eye flight from Los Angeles to New York arrives at 6 am New York time and makes a quick stop in Chicago in between. Because there's another flight two hours later, a direct flight, this one is nearly empty. How the airlines can make money this way is beyond me, but it suits my purposes perfectly.

As soon as we take off and reach cruising altitude, my target moves to an empty row, wedges himself into a window seat, and buckles his seatbelt over the blanket he's covered himself with. Soon he's asleep. I'm expecting this, and, assuming he's operating true to form, also expecting that he's taken his usual light sleeping pill.

His name is Boris Memchenkov, although he's traveling under a passport that tells the world he is Benjamin Morris, and he works for the Soviet KGB as an assassin. My job is to make sure that he is put out of commission permanently. Hence the ceramic knife that I've spirited through airport security.

After they turn out the lights, I'll move to his row, reach over, and slide the knife between his third and fourth ribs, giving it some back-and-forth wiggles as I do so. As soon as I pull out the knife, I'll put a heavy-duty adhesive plaster over the wound before I cover it back up with the blanket, and disembark in Chicago. By the time his death is discovered, the plane will be sitting at La Guardia Airport and I'll have disappeared.

So much for security on domestic flights.

As developments in Boca Raton go, Exclusiva at Boca was pretty much like the others at its price point—ostentatious houses, all bearing uncanny resemblances to each other, many of their yards hidden by tall hedges or privacy fences and gates, with no cars parked on the street. But the driveways, the ones

that could be seen, were full of luxury cars and the occasional Hummer, as if the occupants used their garages for storage of something other than cars.

Every now and then there was an elaborate cross-walk with huge warning signs about a golf-cart crossing and how carts had right-of-way. Elsewhere there were speed limit reminders and the occasional speed bump for emphasis. It all struck me as rather tacky.

Adjusting for location, which meant a 25% or so premium, the cost of houses in Exclusiva at Boca was probably twice what it was in Glades View Village, at least, but I couldn't help but think that the Village seemed nicer. Big Tony and all the other homeowners presidents made sure that nobody put up front-yard fences or hedges, so there was more of a feeling of openness along the streets. Obtrusive signage was minimal, and there were no speed bumps. It all made me feel smug.

I had no trouble finding Winfrew Hanley's house, where I stopped briefly in three places to get a series of photographs, including a close-up of the gate. If ever there was a good example of "casing the joint", this was it, but the much touted Exclusiva security was nowhere to be seen. I almost got out to check on the brand of lock on the gate, but the security cameras made me think twice.

Satisfied, I cruised around the neighborhood a little more, and I waved again to the guard on my way out the automatic exit gate. With some hesitation, he waved back. I guess he was a little uncertain of my identity, which was my plan all along.

I stopped to pick up a pizza and headed back to the hotel.

Back at home, between bites, I downloaded the new pictures and emailed them, along with the ones of the bar-code label, to Bill Petersen with commentary about Exclusiva access. I also told him that I was too old to do a clandestine breaking and entering job in a house with so much security, so he should get someone else.

Then it was time to pack for the next morning's adventure.

Because I was to be accompanied by a half-dozen heavily armed SEALs, I decided to go light, with only my Sig Sauer 9mm and three full magazines. With the camera and the decay counter, into which I put a fresh battery, I was set.

And it was only 8 pm.

Now what? I wondered. It occurred to me that what I'd been doing before in such situations was working on bookcases, or, sometimes, tackling some home-improvement project or other, like putting up more storage shelves in the garage. Puttering. That's what I needed, was a way to do some puttering. Accomplish some minor thing while passing the time.

Except to do that would require something more permanent than a hotel room to putter in.

So, even though it was less than a week since my house had blown up, I decided it was time to do some house-hunting. The internet being what is, and Realtors being what they are—marketing junkies, among other things—I knew I'd be able to get a good start right at home on a Saturday night.

I began with two-bedroom, two-car garage townhouses with access to the Intracoastal Waterway. And even though I had steeled myself, the sticker shock sent me reeling. I needed a Plan B.

Fortunately, all that had taken long enough that I could sleep on it.

* * *

Alarm clocks at 4 am are not my thing. At least I was living only about ten minutes from the Boca Raton airport, so I hadn't needed to set it earlier. As it was, I managed to brew some strong coffee while I took

a quick shower, and I pulled into the executive parking lot at 4:30. A familiar thwocking noise, inbound, greeted me, and a camouflaged SEALs transport helicopter touched down a hundred yards away, missing the parked Mercedes and Jaguars by a barely comfortable margin.

Two minutes later, we were flitting southwest through the darkness, rows of seats about half-filled with painted-up commandos, all except me armed to the teeth, ready for action. We were wearing huge, noise-cancelling headphones over our earpiece communications links, but the chatter was nil. Everyone was focused on the mission ahead.

It was about 5:15 when we landed at what turned out to be a high-school athletic field loaned to our operation by the Miccosukee Nation. It was their land that we were going to invade, but their leadership had been briefed on the problem, and they, offended at the possibility that they were being used for something so nefarious, were cooperating to the fullest. A deputy from their law enforcement agency was going to pilot our airboat.

Jimmie Nightfisher, our pilot, allowed as to how it would be about a half hour by airboat to the hammock and, depending on their alertness and hearing, the occupants there could hear us coming for at least half that time. This meant that the helicopter squadron needed to be inbound for twenty minutes or so to cover us.

Which also meant that the occupants of the hammock would have those twenty minutes to mount whatever defense they could manage.

After spending several minutes on the radio, Commander Bierkens gathered his team for a briefing.

“Here’s the story, guys. Mr. Jimmie Nightfisher here—he retired as a Army Special Forces Lieutenant, by the way, so be nice to him—he is going to pilot us in. The plan is to arrive just after the helicopters, after they’ve lit the place up and announced surrender terms. With all the lights and the noise, we should be covered, and we can slip into the airboat landing undetected. We think. And, if it works, we’ll be able to round up the people surrendering, right?” He shook head as if dubious that the plan would work. “Lieutenant Nightfisher will get us on the ground and then back off to await a withdrawal signal from me, if we need one. He’ll have a radio, too. Let’s saddle up.”

The first half of the airboat ride was in that pre-dawn grayness that lends a mysterious air to everything you see. Because we first had to navigate waterways in a cypress swamp, the effect was both beautiful and spooky. Moss hanging from the trees and the twisting channel made it impossible to see far, and the close-in silhouettes of the tall trees sliding by made it feel like a fun-house ride.

Then the surroundings opened up into a field of sawgrass, a field that stretched as far as the eye could see, and we headed toward a dark mass on the horizon. As it came closer, it resolved into more trees, a clump of forest surrounded by more sawgrass.

The road, if you can call it that, is a kidney crusher, but the view out the back of the covered military truck is unbelievable. Afghanistan’s mountains present some of the best scenery I’ve seen anywhere in the world. And even though the circumstances make it a little difficult to appreciate it, I try.

Seven Afghans and I are being transported to the nearest Soviet military base for questioning and, later, execution. We had been working our way along an old trading route via camel caravan when the Russians ambushed us. They killed at least two dozen men, women, and children and captured the eight of us survivors.

So far, I’ve not been found out. Between the deep tan I’ve developed from the high-altitude sun and the fact that I’ve neither bathed nor shaved for weeks, I look pretty much like a native, although the Afgans still think my Scottish nose looks funny. But the Russians don’t know any better.

So I'm watching the scenery and sorting out my few options. Our hands are bound behind our backs, and we're managing to hold onto straps behind us on the rough bench seats. A pair of Russian soldiers carrying AK-47s with big banana clips hold on to the back of the canvas top, framing the mountains nicely. It will be winter soon, and the snows are already coming into the high country. It reminds me of the high Rockies in Colorado, way up there.

Suddenly, the jeep with the machine gun that's been following us explodes and flips over, and the two Russian soldiers fall off the back of the truck, each shot in the back. There's another explosion from the front of the truck and it stops with a lurch. About the time we're standing up to untie each other, a turbaned figure on a horse appears at the rear of the truck, providing a romantic-looking foreground for the mountain backdrop.

My Pashto is still limited, but I can catch his meaning: "Anybody need a better ride?"

Our comm links had several channels, and, with nothing better to do, I fiddled with mine. The Omega Team defined the word "taciturn," so I quickly decided conversation with them would be unproductive. Nightfisher was focused on keeping the airboat off rock outcroppings, by some kind of instinct, I think, and I didn't want to distract him. Running aground amidst all those alligators wasn't what I wanted to happen.

So I fiddled, and eventually I found the channel on the comm link that was being used by Bill Petersen's helicopter squadron. They had borrowed attack helicopters from a local National Guard base—maybe "conscripted" would be a better term—and the SAINT pilots were somewhat less than fully experienced in these particular craft, it sounded like.

With twelve of them, they need identifying information, and they'd used colors. But twelve colors required some creativity, so the spectrum was fully parceled out, parceled out in ways that were probably not entirely satisfactory.

I'm just glad I didn't have to ride on—let alone pilot—the "Puce" bird. Mauve, maybe, but not Puce.

Both Jimmie Nightfisher and Ross Bierkens, I discovered, were on this same master channel, so I was able to anticipate our landing within a few seconds of its happening. Nightfisher gave Petersen an estimated on-ground countdown, and Petersen directed the helicopter squadron to approach on the same schedule.

With this warning, unlike the other Omega Team members, I wasn't too surprised when the hammock lit up like mid-day and we ran up on a little beach. The sun was just coming over the horizon, at our backs. And it was rather picturesque, just as Bierkens had predicted.

Even through the noise-canceling headphones, I could hear the thunder of the assembled helicopters, and then an even louder voice over the top of it all.

"Attention in the cabins! United States Federal Marshalls order you to surrender immediately. We are here with overwhelming force. Exit the cabins immediately with your hands on your heads, and lie down on the ground with your arms extended. I repeat, surrender immediately or face overwhelming, deadly force. Exit the cabins peaceably at once."

The front doors of both cabins were facing the beach with the airboat fleet and, to Petersen's credit, our landing spot was kept in the shadows, out of the spotlights on the helicopters. As a result, we had a great view.

A great view of nothing much, at that point, so the high-decibel command for surrender was repeated.

And the front door of the left-hand cabin opened a crack. A white tee-shirt poked out and flapped. It sure looked like surrender to me, and to the Voice in the Sky as well, it appeared.

“White surrender flag noted. We will hold fire. Now exit the cabins with your hands on your heads, then lie down on the ground. At once. Do it!”

The door opened farther, and out came a middle-aged man wearing shorts, boxer shorts in a comedic Mickey Mouse print. He was about 70 inches tall and heavy, maybe 250 pounds, with quite a gut. And hairy, like a small bear. He squinted against the bright lights and made his way into the yard, where he lay down.

But before anything else could happen, he jumped up, frantically brushing himself off. I heard on the comm link a chuckled comment of “fire ants” from Nightfisher, and a “hold fire” order from Petersen. Then the Voice in the Sky thundered forth again.

“OK, we appreciate the situation. You may stand, but keep your hands on your heads, and stand still. Here is a demonstration of our firepower, so you’ll know what you’re facing.”

And a two second burst from a Minigun—a couple hundred rounds—turned the fish-cleaning table 25 yards to our right into matchsticks.

Ross Bierkens’ voice on the comm link was irate.

“Goddammit, Petersen, you son of a bitch! You get any closer to us with that and we’ll take all of you out with our rockets!”

I looked around and saw that the Omega Team had their weapons deployed and sighted on the nearest helicopters. Those big lights, two per helicopter, made inviting targets. Just shoot between them—that’s the location of the pilot, I thought.

Before Petersen could say anything, I butted in. “Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but it appears that our captives have chosen discretion over valor. Cover me, Commander, and I’ll see if any of them glow in the dark.”

I was referring to the dozen or so men who had made quick exits from the cabins. All were standing quite still, hands on heads, and all of them, save one who was completely naked and looking quite scared from his shriveled-upness, were dressed in boxer shorts and some briefs. None, though, made as much of a fashion statement as the Mickey Mouse guy. On that basis, I decided to question him first.

I walked carefully out of the shadows, which were fading fast in the dawn, into the brightly lit area, and the assembled men gasped. I took that as a compliment about my carefully applied camo makeup. The Mickey Mouse guy was still smarting from the ants, I could tell, but he was gamely standing as still as he could manage, hands on head.

“Nasty critters, those ants, huh? You got a name?”

I tried to make my inflection half way between polite and rough.

“Hiram, Hiram Milliken, uh, sir. What the hell’s going on, anyway?”

He was obviously scared but also quite annoyed.

I scanned around with the decay counter and didn’t get as much as a wink from its LED.

“That, I think, is what we need to ask you, Mr. Milliken. But, first, is there anyone else in the cabins? You saw what kind of firepower we’ve got, and there are eleven other helicopters with those things.”

Milliken looked around and appeared to be making a head count. “No, we’re all out here, uh, sir. And what’s going on is that we’re having a poker party, that’s what.”

“Hiram, what about the girls?”

A tall, skinny guy in tighty whities nearby managed a stage whisper.

“Oh, yeah. All the men are out of the cabins, is what I meant. There are about a half dozen girls locked in a bedroom in the left one. I didn’t think they counted.”

Milliken didn’t look the least embarrassed.

“‘Locked in a bedroom?’ What the hell’s that about? Commander? I’m going in the left-hand cabin to do a scan and to release some women in there, I think. If you don’t hear from me within one minute, you’re free to do whatever.”

I heard on my headset the double click meaning “go for it.”

Inside, there was a big room with three round card tables holding piles of chips in front of chairs. Despite the air conditioning, the place was quite warm and smelled of beer and cigars. On one side was a small kitchen area badly in need of housekeeping, and on the other was a closed door secured by a throw-bolt. The decay counter was quiet.

I pulled the bolt back and knocked. “Ladies? Are you decent?”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say as I shoved the door open and stepped back. When nothing happened, I carefully stepped into the room.

Inside were seven women, mostly young, in various states of undress, an understandable state of affairs as the room was stifling. My appearance elicited a few squeals of surprise, but for the most part they took me in stride.

A busty brunette sitting on the bed was the first to speak.

“Who the hell are you? And are you going to get us out of here?”

I didn’t know quite what to say, so I looked around at the others. All looked scared, except for one face I couldn’t see. In the corner, there was a shock of blonde hair that looked sort of familiar, but the head was bowed.

“Well, I guess so, get you out of here, I mean. Sorry about my appearance, but I’m one of the good guys, really.”

I stepped toward the bowed head in the corner. “Are you all right over here, miss?”

As I approached, she looked up at me, eyes puffy, makeup smeared, a bruise on her left cheekbone. I was surprised, but somehow not that surprised.

“Aw, *crap!* Geez, Sam, are you sure you don’t want to find another line of work?”

* * *

“She’s what?”

Both Petersen and Bierkens had the same response at the same time, when I announced on the comm link that one of the women was a friend of mine and would be staying with me.

I gave all of the women a chance to get cleaned up and dressed as much as they could manage, and then led them out to the yard. Sam was clinging to me like a kudzu vine on a telephone pole, so I decided she needed the company and let her. Besides, it felt good.

“She’s a friend of mine, long story. Don’t worry about it. But she’ll stick with me—it’ll be OK.”

My tone let them know not to argue.

On my way through the yard, I pulled out my Sig Sauer and gently disengaged Sam.

“You just stand still for one minute, OK? I’ll be right back, I promise.”

I walked over to where Hiram Milliken was standing with his hands on his head, trying not to move despite a few remaining fire ants on his legs.

“So you had these women locked in that bedroom, huh? What the hell is that about, anyway?”

I was holding the handgun to his neck, so I had his attention.

“Hey, c’mon, take it easy, willya? They’re just whores. We’re paying them. Jesus.”

I dropped to one knee, holding the Sig Sauer low to the ground, then brought it up between his legs as fast and hard as I could. The barrel connected perfectly, and he doubled up in agony, his hands leaving his head in favor of other more painful spots. For good measure, I chopped the back of his neck with the butt of the handgun grip, and he collapsed to the ground, stunned. I turned him over with my foot as I watched the fire ants crawling over him.

“Bill?” I had the comm link open as I re-joined Sam. “I think the Commander and I can handle this situation. Maybe you can drop a couple of real Federal Marshals, or FBI agents, you know, somebody with arresting authority. And then your fleet can return to base. I don’t think there’s anything for you to worry about here.”

“What do you think you’re doing, anyway, Mac?” Petersen was not happy. “What was that about? And don’t go ordering me around, got it?”

“Bill? Remember that fiasco in Jerusalem? You sure you don’t want to take my advice and get those airships out of here?”

As secretive intelligence agencies go, the Israeli Mossad is universally acknowledged as one of the best. They’re so good, in fact, that their most stalwart ally doesn’t trust them, and as a result Uncle Sam has Israel on his list of “special” countries, along with Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, and Libya.

I should be feeling special, I think, because the Mossad has chosen me to be the liaison between their PLO infiltration efforts and U.S. intelligence. And maybe I do feel special, at least if the word’s being used in the way it’s used in, say, “Special Olympics.”

That’s certainly how I’m being treated. Even though my Arabic is better than anybody else’s, I’m left out of the information loop on most everything. And when they do pass information my way, it’s done with such condescension that I almost feel as if I should pay them for it.

But their reticence is actually helpful, because it gives me the excuse I need to keep them in the dark about some of our activities. In particular, the operation that Bill Petersen is running has certain sensitivities that the Mossad shouldn't know about.

It's especially important that they don't know about it just now, because it's quickly falling apart. Not only is there the potential for considerable embarrassment for Uncle Sam, there is some actual danger for Bill's field personnel.

So on the one hand, I'm working with the Mossad to place several sleepers into the PLO, while Bill's operation is working to uncover connections to arms dealers that the PLO is using. The thing is, one of the Mossad sleepers is easing his way into the good graces of the PLO by working with one of their arms dealers. If Bill's operation uncovers him, the Mossad will be worse than merely unhappy. And, as we have discovered the hard way, it's not a good idea to have the Mossad unhappy with you, at least while you're in Israeli territory.

It's fortunate that one of the things that the Mossad does deign to tell me is the identity of the arms-dealer sleeper. I'm able to pass this along, discreetly, to Bill Petersen, with the suggestion that he and his people lay off this particular individual. Petersen, skeptical as ever, requires some persuading, but eventually he agrees. And when three of his field people are picked up for questioning, I'm able to persuade the Mossad to return the favor, saving Bill's entire operation.

He learns to trust me after that, with the occasional reminder.

The comm link was silent, at least on the channel I was using. But something happened, because the helicopter noises changed and the bright lights switched off, leaving us in the gathering dawn. Ten of the birds peeled away and headed back east, into the sun, while two went into hover mode by the airboats and two men in jumpsuits slid down lines to the ground. Then those two helicopters left as well.

The newcomers were FBI agents assigned to the SAINT operation but, by some stroke of luck, they both had left their attitudes back in town.

"You're MacQuarrie?" The taller of the two stuck his right hand out in my direction. "I'm Special Agent Will Perry, and this is Special Agent Thomas Spellman. We're both out of the Miami office. We're supposed to arrest people, I guess, assuming there's some reason to. Got any ideas?"

I grinned. "Nice to meet you both. Please call me Mac. Now, let's see. Hmm. Well, that guy on the ground there told me that what's been going on is a poker party. But this is Miccosukee land, and they've legalized gambling, so that's probably not a good reason. Seems like they were keeping these women locked in a bedroom, which might classify as some kind of kidnapping, I guess. But I don't know if it would stand up. I have the feeling the women wouldn't want to press charges."

Sam snuggled close to me and whispered in my ear, making me grin some more.

"Say, I know. She just told me that there's a stash of Cuban cigars in there. Maybe you can bust these guys for that."

"Ah, hell, let's just smoke 'em." Thomas Spellman swatted at a mosquito. "Maybe they'd help keep these bugs away."

"Now there's an idea. I bet my guys would appreciate a good smoke."

Ross Bierkens had joined the conversation, so I introduced everyone. Then I looked around and discovered that his men had vanished.

"They went to check out the camouflaged area over there." Bierkens gestured over his shoulder.

Sam whispered in my ear again. I didn't want to discourage this, as the snuggling was most pleasing, but it didn't seem right that she was talking through me.

"Go ahead and tell 'em, Sam. Guys, this is Samantha Winslow. Not at all happy with the living arrangements here, so she's leaving with me." I couldn't help but smile even more.

She cleared her throat. "I heard that guy Hiram say there's a still back there. They're making moonshine, I guess."

Sam's voice was a little shaky, but it obviously gave her confidence to be taken seriously.

The FBI duo looked at each other and managed to say, in unison, "A still?" And they both burst into laughter. Will Perry got control of himself first.

"So this big-fucking-deal SAINT operation—such a big deal that it commandeered a dozen attack helicopters and sent in a squad of SEALs—winds up busting a bunch of guys in their underwear for having Cuban cigars and a still?" He lost it again for a minute, laughing merrily.

"I'm sorry, Mac, but my report is going to read like a Monte Python script. Except for your part. From what I heard on the radio, you get all the credit for keeping this from turning into a huge disaster all the way around. A *still*. Jesus."

We were all laughing when one of Commander Bierkens' men came running up with confirmation of the still.

"It's pretty good stuff, too, Commander. A little early in the morning for me, though, sir."

And then he was laughing, too.

* * *

It wasn't until one that afternoon that Sam and I got back to my hotel. The first thing she did was to jump in the shower.

Rather than arrest the assembled group right away for their Cuban cigars and their moonshine, the FBI agents had decided to obtain an educated opinion, and Jimmie Nightfisher was summoned. He informed us that the still was certainly illegal by Miccosukee law, whatever the Federal law was, but that an arrest would probably be more trouble than it would be worth, given various political machinations that would come into play. His advice was to break the thing up and let it go at that.

The Cuban cigars were dispersed among the SEALs, and Jimmie took a dozen to reward the crew he planned to call in to destroy the moonshine operation. The FBI agents also lit up a couple, and the evidence of the heinous crime of possessing smuggled cigars was destroyed.

Jimmie gave one of the SEALs a quick airboat lesson, and we borrowed one of the hammock's fleet to haul the girls out to where we started. On the way back, Sam tossed her Dolly wig into a gator hole, and we watched an eight-footer attack it, which spooked the other girls. Finally, once on land, Commander Bierkens called in his transport helicopter, and we all took it back into town.

I knew I'd have to be in contact with Bill Peterson at some point, but I made the decision to take the rest of Sunday off, SNM be damned. For one thing, I was tired, and, for another, I needed to have a long conversation with Sam and take her home.

Although I hadn't been using the kitchen in my rental suite for cooking, I had stocked up on food, mostly breakfast supplies. For some odd reason, it felt good to me to be using the kitchen for the first time to make a late brunch for Sam and me.

It's my first dinner date at home, my first time cooking for my new girlfriend in my first off-campus apartment. An evening, I'm hoping, of even more firsts later on.

I've decided to make the latest in-crowd dish, a vegetarian rice pilaf with Basmati rice and assorted vegetables, the more exotic the better. To that end, I've scoured the local groceries for new and different peppers, special onions, pine nuts, and even some dates. A big jug of a very drinkable white wine is chilled and ready, and the pilaf is in the oven.

She arrives right on time—I'm a sucker for women who are on time—dressed casually and smelling faintly of patchouli oil. I pour glasses of the wine and suggest an appetite stimulant in the form of a before-dinner joint. Some of the Acapulco Gold I scored in exchange for the Monterey concert tickets is left, and what better occasion for it?

We smoke and listen to a couple of album sides, the mood becomes the very definition of mellow. I even remember to turn the oven down so the pilaf doesn't dry out.

Finally, we decide we're ready to eat, and I retrieve the pilaf and pour more wine. She comments on how wonderful it smells, and I explain how it's healthy to boot, being vegetarian and all. We sit and dig in.

I watch to see how she likes it, but the expression on her face after her first bite isn't what I'd been hoping for. It looks pained, politely pained at first and then openly so when her eyes begin to water. I decide I better taste the stuff and put a big forkful in my mouth.

Then I understand her expression, empathize with it, feel it all over my own face all the way to the watering eyes. It makes the local heart-burn joint's four-alarm chili seem like Gerber's strained peas, it's so hot. Whatever buzz I have going from the joint is immediately subsumed by the endorphin rush induced by the capsaicin in the pilaf.

Because we're on a date, after all, we're both too polite to spit, so we swallow as quickly as we can and gulp wine, refill the glasses and gulp some more. When we're finally able to talk, she asks me to show her what I put in the stuff. I have more of everything, so I do.

As politely as possible, trying hard not to laugh, she suggests that next time I not use habañero chiles. It's the first time I've received cooking tips from a girlfriend. So it's a night of firsts, just not the one I was hoping for.

She came out of the bathroom wrapped up in my terrycloth robe, toweling her short hair dry. I started to say something, but she held up her hand.

“Wait, Mac. I've got to say something first. When I first heard your voice back there, asking if we were decent, I was so happy I almost burst. But I was also really embarrassed, you know? I still am, some, that you found me in that situation. I have to say, it's not at all the way my assignments usually wind up. Not at all. And when you helped me out of there and I was hanging on to you, well, I've not felt anything that good in a long, long time. So I need to thank you, offer you my thanks any way you'd like it. Know what I mean?”

And she dropped my robe at her feet.

I stared at her for a little while, taking it all in, enjoying every second. I couldn't help but wonder if that wax job had been painful.

“I think I do, and that’s very sweet of you. Too sweet for words, really. But, tell you what. How about a rain check? I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. Why don’t you put that robe back on and have some breakfast, or lunch or whatever, with me?”

It was interesting. She had been wearing an odd expression, sort of distant, I guess, but also with a come hither look about it. And she didn’t look particularly disappointed when I turned her down. As soon as I mentioned food, though, her eyes lit up.

“Breakfast sounds great. Outstanding. I thought I smelled something good.”

I made her an omelet to order, with toast and orange juice and coffee, and took the one I’d made for myself out of the oven, where I was keeping it warm.

We ate for a while in silence, both famished and both, I think, a little shy about initiating a conversation under the circumstances. But I couldn’t let the opportunity get away.

“I hope it’s OK that I introduced you to all those guys by your real name. I’ve come to think of you that way, instead of as Dolly.”

She reached over and patted my hand. “I’m Dolly only to clients, Mac. And you’re not, and neither were they.”

“Good. You know, I was sort of trying to be funny, but I was also serious when I asked you whether you might want to find another line of work.”

She squirmed around in her chair a little, and I knew I’d struck a nerve.

“Of course I would, Mac, you think I haven’t considered it? But there are two things. One is the money. I make good money doing what I’m doing. You’d be surprised at how much I’m able to save for the future. I don’t know of any other job I could have that would let me do that. And the other thing is the service, the company. I, uh, sort of have this contract, where I agreed to work only for them, doing what I do. An exclusive contract. You know?”

I took a while to answer so that she wouldn’t think I was being argumentative.

“I understand about the money, but I don’t understand about the contract. I mean, and please don’t be offended, if Sun and Sand has you under an exclusive contract to prostitute only for them, well, that’s unenforceable, it’s an illegal contract. And if it’s just an escort contract, well, all you have to do is not be an escort for anyone else, surely. I mean, you could get a job as a model or something, couldn’t you?”

“You don’t understand my world, Mac. And I don’t want you to get sucked into it, OK? But the contract doesn’t have anything to do with whether it’s legal or not. It’s about whether it’s enforced by Sun and Sand. And I’ve seen what happens when girls try to break their contracts. It isn’t pleasant.”

It was my turn to reach across the table and pat her hand. And then I held it and smiled.

“Too late, pretty much—I’m already sucked in. And I think I know exactly what you’re saying. What you don’t know is that I’ve dealt with situations like this before. It’s really quite easy to handle. All that’s needed is for me to get you out of your contract. No sweat.”

“Mac, I don’t think you know what you’re saying. You don’t know these guys. How are you going to get me out of my contract?”

“Hey, don’t worry, it’ll be easy. I mean, you saw me out there in the ’Glades, right? It’s not like I’m without connections or experience.”

I smiled some more. “Like a famous movie star said in a famous movie, ‘I’ll make them an offer they can’t refuse.’”

* * *

Part II: Hot Lead

lead (lēd) ... *n.* ... **3a.** Information pointing toward a possible solution; a clue.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,
Fourth Edition*

Ten

I almost skipped the Monday morning briefing that Bill Petersen had called down in Miami, but then I decided I needed to make a trip to South Beach anyway so I might as well go. Once again, I got to deal with traffic and exorbitant parking fees. This time, though, the SAINT crew didn't treat me like slime mold. In fact, to Petersen's consternation, they applauded as I walked into the meeting room. The two FBI agents, Perry and Spellman, had spread the word about how we handled the mop-up at the hammock, I guess.

As I found a chair, I couldn't help but notice that Commander Bierkens and his SEALs were conspicuously absent.

"OK, let's settle down. I want to make this as short as possible."

Petersen looked as if he hadn't slept much.

"I think you probably all know the fallout from yesterday's operation. Obviously, we were operating from bad intel. One thing, though, seems resolved: a detailed search of that hammock found an arms cache that included an Uzi, recently fired. We're checking ballistics against the slugs found in Jim Lund's car and body. Those guys who were out there playing poker have some questions to answer."

A voice from the middle of the crowd broke in.

"Does that mean you're *still* holding them?"

The room dissolved into laughter.

"Ha-ha. Very funny. Look, keep a lid on it, OK? We've got work to do."

Petersen's sense of humor was on holiday, it seemed.

"It all may seem like a big joke, but it turns out that the Miccosukees are grateful for what happened. They've been having trouble with moonshine getting into their communities in recent months. This ought to shut it down. So it wasn't all a complete wash-out, OK?"

He shuffled some papers he was holding.

"Now, as you all know, our number one priority is to find and recover the SNM stolen from the DOE lab up in Fort Pierce, IRIL. Our overall mission is to take charge of the operational side of this, but there is also a huge infrastructure that's been put together in a hurry to handle the intel side. So it's inevitable that we'll be getting some bogus information. That's what happens when you take tips from the public, which is what's going on. We need all the help we can get, and information, 99% of it

irrelevant or just plain stupid, is pouring in. What we have to do now is to sort through the one percent that could be real, follow up on those few tips that might pan out. Right?"

He looked around the room for nods of agreement, but about all he got were blank stares. I decided to rescue him by raising my hand.

"Bill? Do I remember hearing something about a coast-to-coast highway shipping interdiction across the Florida peninsula from, uh, I guess it was about Melbourne to Tampa?"

"Right, Mac. That got put in place immediately after the IRIL assault. There's no way that the stuff could have gone north by land. Even moving it north by air would have been a neat trick, because all air traffic was monitored closely, still is, in fact."

"So," I continued, "that means that the SNM is still in central or south Florida, or it's been moved offshore by boat somehow, right? What I'm getting at is this: The DOE NEST people have been doing all sorts of airborne scanning for radiation signatures, using ultra-sensitive equipment, and so far they haven't found anything, right? So it seems likely that the stuff may have been moved offshore. Shouldn't we concentrate on tips about boats, or something like that?"

"Good idea, Mac. Sounds like you just volunteered. I'll get you a list."

Peterson looked so smug I could have socked him.

My exit interview with the Deputy CIA Director—I'll never be allowed to say Deputy Director in charge of what—is going badly. My decision to move laterally to the NSA is based mainly on what I see ahead in the way of career opportunities rather than on anything negative at the Company, as we field guys call it, but the DD isn't buying that. He wants to know what's wrong. I guess he's a fix-it sort of guy, and to fix something you've got to know what's broken.

"Sir, I'd like to think I've given the Company fifteen good years, and I believe it's fair to say that my successes far outnumber my failures, in terms of the operations I've been involved in. What I'm doing is, essentially, looking for new territory to explore."

"I bet it was that last tour in Kuwait that soured you on us, wasn't it? Well, you're right—your successes are your trademark, and even that Kuwait business turned out to be a positive, didn't it? What about if we guarantee you stateside assignments? Would that motivate you to stay with us?"

He's looking pathetically hopeful.

"Oh, c'mon, sir, that wouldn't do at all. First, we both know that stateside isn't where my talents are. And, second, you have limited slots to fill, and wasting one on someone who isn't available for overseas operations would be, well, a waste. Really, I'm not disillusioned at all, I'm just restless and looking for new opportunities."

"You're right, Mac, as usual. Your talents aren't stateside at all. But what do you think you'll be doing over at Brand X intelligence agency, huh? You'll be stuck stateside 90% of the time, and those fine talents will go to waste."

He grins, sits back in his chair, and lets an expression of self-satisfied smugness creep over his face. Perhaps more than anything else, that validates the change, in my mind.

True to his word, Petersen kept the meeting short so that we could all go off to sort through possible leads based on tips phoned and emailed by the public. I hadn't been paying attention to television, but apparently a major public relations campaign was underway, soliciting information and offering big

rewards. The list Petersen promised me would show up in my email by noon, he told me, so I was able to head over to Miami Beach earlier than I thought.

On the way, I thought over what Sam and I had talked about. She provided me with sketchy information about some of her recent assignments, and I thought I'd make use of one in which she had been a nude cocktail waitress at a private party on Star Island, at the home of one of the wealthiest South Florida liquor distributors.

She had also filled me in on her rate schedule a little more—the \$200 per hour she'd quoted me for talking was really quite a bargain. Normally, Sun and Sand charged her clients a \$1250 minimum with an additional \$500 per hour for anything over the first two hours. The 24-hour rate, she said, was \$10,000. I had suspected that Sam's Dolly persona wasn't your garden-variety street-corner hooker, but I had no idea.

I tried to get her to tell me how much of that she was allowed to keep, but she wasn't saying. She did confide that she was taking some time off, though, so that her bruise could heal. She thought that her bosses would not object too strongly, as it would coincide with her regular monthly "down week" when she wasn't available for full services anyway.

It took me a while to figure that one out, but eventually it dawned on me.

Sun and Sand Escorts, LLC, occupied an office suite on the ninth floor of a restored Art Deco building on South Beach. The suite was conservatively decorated, and the receptionist seemed to be working hard to show people how affectedly gay he was. Dapper, with a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee, the slight young man named Lance, according to his desk sign, reminded me vaguely of someone, but I couldn't place him.

I'd seen "Nikolay Kirov, CEO" on the door, so I asked Lance if I could see him.

"Well, of course Mr. Kirov is a *very* busy man, you know. Do you have an appointment?"

Lance had mastered the art of eyelash fluttering.

"I understand completely, I'm overextended myself. But I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by on the possibility that he might have just a minute. I have a business proposition for him. Perhaps you could pass him my card?"

And I handed Lance a business card I'd printed up the night before, one that presented me as Randolph Hunt, producer of Major Motion Pictures. I wasn't sure how the boss would react, but Lance was impressed, at least.

"Oh, I will, Mr. Hunt. Motion pictures? *I've* always thought I have star quality, if the role were right. I hope you'll keep me in mind."

The eyelashes went off again as he stood up. After a brief sashay, he knocked on, then entered, a door toward the back of the reception area. It took a minute, then he returned with news that my fake card had also impressed the head honcho, Nikolay Kirov.

"Mr. Kirov has only a minute before a *huge* conference call, but he'd be glad to speak with you."

Lance had sneaked a quick look at a wall clock, so I did, too. Somehow I doubted that a *huge* conference call would be scheduled for 11:39, but who was I to ask questions?

Kirov's office was what I expected: chrome and glass furniture with leather seating, double French doors leading to a balcony with a nice view of the ocean. Little in the way of evidence that actual business was done there.

"Ah, Mr. Hunt. How good of you to visit us at Sun and Sand. What can I do for you?"

He had a trace of a Russian accent, and the proffered hand was meaty but soft.

“I’m sorry to barge in like this, Mr. Kirov, I know you must be busy. But I’m leaving town later today and I’m on South Beach for a lunch appointment, so I thought I’d drop in. It’s good of you to see me.”

I was trying to avoid too much of a used-car-salesman approach, but I did need to do a sales job.

“You see, I’m working on a new project, a major motion picture aimed at the young-adult art-film set. We’re aiming for a fairly hard ‘R’ rating, but it will be a serious film, entertainment with a message, and we’re negotiating with some major stars for the lead roles. And the reason I’m here is that I was at a party the other day over on Star Island, where I ran into one of your people, a woman who I think would fit into a supporting role we’re struggling to fill. We need a real beauty, not too young but with a spectacular body. Someone who can exude the right amount of innocence but who won’t be uncomfortable in nude scenes.”

Kirov’s nod showed his polite interest, but I could see something more in his eyes. Greed, maybe. He stayed quiet, so I continued.

“Anyway, there was a waitress at this party who caught my attention. Right age, amazing body—she wasn’t dressed, it was, um, an exuberant party—beautiful with a hint of innocence. Just what I had in mind. So I talked with her and she said she works for you and I’d need to work out something with you to free her from other obligations. She called herself Dolly.”

“Ah, yes, Dolly. My goodness, you’re interested in her? She’s pushing forty, you know. Perhaps you’d be interested in someone younger.”

My genuine surprise worked in my favor by making it unnecessary for me to put on too much of an act.

“*Forty?* That’s hard to believe, but it’s *perfect*.”

I hoped I didn’t sound too much like Lance.

“You see, this role, in most movies, would go to a younger actor, a young woman hungry enough to want to do the nude scenes in the script. It’s hard to find actors the right age—and we really do need someone in the thirty-five to forty-five range—who are willing to do that kind of thing. Well, unless it’s a porn film, but this is definitely not. It’s art. *Film*, you know? Anyway, what sort of business arrangement might be possible for me to acquire Dolly’s services for our production?”

I’m sure that it was my imagination, but it seemed like his eyes were doing that spinning thing that slot machines do, and they came up dollar signs.

* * *

Haggling has never been my forte. That’s odd, I know, for someone who grew up in Southwest Asia, but there it is. I don’t like it, and I’m not good at it.

And I think Nikolay Kirov sensed that and tried to use it to his advantage. His opening offer was her full-day rate for as long as the “production” needed her. Rather than address that directly, though, I raised another issue.

“One of the things I’ve discovered in the film production business, Mr. Kirov, is that the public is very unpredictable. And while I’m concerned about my art, the backers of my films—the studios and the private investors—they are always interested in the bottom line. In order to make that work out over the long run, and I’ve been very successful at it, if I don’t say so myself, I always keep my future options

open. In this case, that means that I'd like to have an option for additional films with Dolly in them, in case that fickle public takes a liking to her. In short, I'd like to get her under contract rather than just hire her by the day."

He sat bolt upright, and his expression hardened, so I held up my hand.

"Now, I know this may seem to be a radical proposition, but I'm certain that, as a businessman, you can see the merit of the idea if we can work out an appropriate arrangement. All this comes down to how much it would cost for me to buy out Dolly's contract with you, right?"

The dollar signs were back, I could see.

"Well, you know, Dolly is one of our company's best assets. She makes huge amounts of money for us. That's why we're able to command ten grand a day for her, yes? So I don't see how any amount of money could compensate us. In short, as you say, she's not for sale."

Right. Even though she's pushing forty, I thought.

I looked at my watch.

"Oh, damn. I'm afraid that I'm taking up too much of your time for a quick drop-in visit like this, and I have another appointment coming up. Here's what I'd like to do. You say that Dolly's not for sale, but, really Mr. Kirov, as a businessman you know that anything is for sale if the price is right. Could you think about this for a few days? And by all means, think creatively. You have my card, and I'll be back in touch later in the week. I hope we can discuss this more at that time. As I've tried to make clear, I believe that Dolly is precisely the right person for this part I'm trying to cast. I have a lot of experience with this sort of thing, and I've learned to trust my gut. Dolly's it. Really."

I managed as graceful an exit as I could, avoiding Lance's attempts to suck up to me in the process and wondering again where I had seen him before. Then I hit the road for home and what I'd begun to think of as the "boat list."

It was waiting in my email in-box when I arrived. I'd stopped at a Too Jay's deli on the way to pick up lunch and dinner, so I was set to get to work without interruptions.

The list, though, was a mess. I suppose I should have expected that, given its real-time nature, but I didn't see how I could do anything with such a rat's nest of tangled, disorganized information.

It took me some fooling around, but by mid-afternoon I had the thing imported into a database program that allowed me to sort it by the tipsters' names and other information. Because that other information included occupation, I chose that for my first sort. I was looking for people who might be most credible.

That's how I found Annette Trieri's name. She had told the phone operator that she worked in "law enforcement," and that was one of the keywords I was looking for in my sorting process. The operator had been savvy enough to ask for elaboration, and Ms. Trieri had provided the information that, as Chief of Detectives, she held the rank of Lieutenant in the Durango, Colorado, Police Department.

As credibility goes, that ranked pretty high on my list.

And that was a good thing, because Ms. Trieri's tip was a bit odd. She had called ship-to-shore from a cruise ship, the *Earth Explorer*, with the suggestion that our missing SNM might just be on board. The ship's contact number was included, so I put in a return call to her. Because such things take time, I worked on other possible credible tips while waiting for the call-back.

Various marina owners and operators had claimed knowledge of boats that the SNM had left Florida on, and a wide variety of "captains" of various pleasure and other craft had reported suspicious

sightings, but there really was nothing that looked especially enticing. We would have to follow up on the marina owners' tips, certainly, and that meant lots of legwork for someone, or some group.

I was working on a geographical sorting of the marinas, to help the field people, when my suite's phone rang.

"Mac MacQuarrie here."

"Um, my name is Annette Trieri, and I was paged to this phone."

"Right. Ms. Trieri, I've called you because you phoned in a tip to us about that Special Nuclear Material that was stolen. I'm working with the government task force on the problem, and I'd like to talk with you about it."

There was a long pause. "Well, Mr. MacQuarrie, I'm sorry to be suspicious, but how do I know you're who you say you are?"

If her job title had provided her with credibility in my eyes, this question sealed it. "Good point. You don't, of course. Let's see. Would it work for you to call the tip line back and have the call routed to me? I'm not absolutely certain I can pull that off quickly, because there's quite a bureaucracy involved. But I can sure give it a try."

"I think that would work fine. How long do you need?"

"Hell if I know, Ms. Trieri, I'm making this up as I go along. But try the tip line in fifteen minutes, OK? I hope to be talking with you soon."

By scrambling and getting Bill Petersen to scramble, too, we made it work. I don't know exactly what strings he pulled, but my phone rang again exactly sixteen minutes later.

"Mac MacQuarrie here."

"Impressive work, Mr. MacQuarrie. I guess that speaks to how seriously the government bureaucracy is taking this thing, no?"

The humor in her voice painted a beautiful picture of her in my mind.

Being on foot and in danger in the United Arab Emirates is not how I've planned my trip. But at least the UAE is a high-tech sort of place, so I'm able to call for help while I'm on the run.

"United States Embassy, how can I help you?"

"Extension 1413 please."

Several clicks later, a very pleasant female voice says "Field Services."

"MacQuarrie here. I'm sorry to have to make this call, but I was made and I've got people after me. I need a pickup as soon as possible, sooner"

"Understood, Mac."

That she knows my nickname doesn't surprise me, even though I have no idea who she is. Everyone calls me that.

"Can you stay on the line while I set this up? It will help us locate you."

"I can and I will. Whom do I have the pleasure of?"

"Sally McBride. A fellow Scot. Hold, please."

Background music comes on the line, and I take a quick left into an alley, only to find it dead-ends a half block in. I dodge behind a dumpster, hoping my pursuers will miss seeing me.

“Mac? I’ve got a car headed your way and it has active tracking. So if you keep moving, they’ll be able to follow you. What’s your immediate situation?”

Her voice, calm and collected, is soothing. I think I’m falling in love with her.

“Not good.” I’m whispering. “Can’t talk now.”

The four goons on my tail have slid to a halt at the mouth of the alley and are playing the “which way did he go” game. Even though the noise of the city would probably mask my voice, I’m not taking any chances.

“Well, if you can’t talk, it must not be too good. But, listen, Mac, just hang in there. Our guys are on their way and will be there soon. Your location isn’t too far from here, so it should be quick. Breathe easy, OK?”

Who cares what she looks like? As far as I’m concerned, this woman is beautiful. Maybe I should propose.

“It is something of a big deal, ma’am. Now, could you repeat the story you first told the operator, please?”

*“I will, but you’ve got to try not to call me ‘ma’am.’ It makes me feel like a grandma, which I’m not. Please, call me Annette. Now, let’s see. I’ll try to be as clear as possible, but be sure to interrupt me with questions. First, I think it will help if I provide background. The tip, of course, is that I think, or more specifically my husband thinks, that your Special Nuclear Material may be on board the *Earth Explorer*, the cruise ship we’re on, currently headed for the Panama Canal. But the background will be helpful.*

*“My husband, Hal Weathers, is a Dean and Professor of Earth Science at Frémont State University in Durango, Colorado. He was invited by a colleague in Florida to spend ten days aboard the *Earth Explorer* as guest scientist, giving several lectures to passengers and acting as a scientific host. Apart from airfare, his cruise is his compensation, and I got to come for free, too. This is standard operating procedure for the *EE*, as we all call it. They cruise back and forth between Miami and San Diego through the Panama Canal, and, on the way, they operate as a scientific research vessel, taking data from the ocean, temperatures and such, as well as entertaining passengers with science, as it were. There’s the usual gambling and food, too, but the *EE* does these scientific theme cruises. Am I making sense?”*

“Perfectly, but I don’t see the connection with the SNM yet.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But here it is. As the guest scientist, Hal gets the run of the ship, the public areas as well as the crew areas and the scientific laboratories. Now, he and I are always early to everything we do, it’s a sort of compulsion with us, so we boarded early, while loading was still going on. Hal was wandering around in the scientific laboratories, and he told me he saw two lead canisters being loaded—he called them ‘pigs,’ said he heard the term at Los Alamos after I had to ask what he meant. They had radioactivity symbols on them, and they were orange with red tops. A little pig, he said, would be understandable, because some of the oceanographic measurements might need isotopes for calibration, but there were two, and they were big, the size of watermelons or so, he said.”

Bingo! I thought. The IRIL pigs were orange with red tops, unique in the DOE universe.

“Um, Ms. Trieri, why did you call this in and not your husband?”

“Well, we talked about it. He thought it would be taken more seriously if it came from me. We figured that the tip line would be getting zillions of calls, and credibility would be what would get attention. My job title is, well, supposed to be impressive that way. And I guess it worked, no?”

* * *

Eleven

During the conversation, I'd been on the computer searching a screening database Petersen had provided me access to. I learned that Annette Trieri was indeed affiliated with the Durango, Colorado PD and, before that, with the PD in the City of Chicago. She had a BS in political science from Northwestern University and had taken several advanced training courses from the FBI at Quantico and other locations. All-in-all, she was on the “A” list, credibility-wise.

But it was her husband who had purportedly seen the pigs.

“Ms. Trieri, you said your husband's name is Hal Weathers?”

Different last names were common among married couples, especially professional people, so that didn't faze me. But I hadn't found a “Hal Weathers” in the database.

“Yes, that's what he likes people to call him. It's really ‘Harold’, though, if you're trying to do a computer search for him.”

Smart woman, I thought.

“You mentioned Los Alamos. Has he worked there?”

The database yielded to Harold Weathers immediately, with a long entry.

“Not as an employee, but as a summer visitor. This was before we met, though, and I'm not clear on details. Would you like to speak with him?”

It dawned on me that she was staying one step ahead of me with everything, starting with the verification of my first call to her. I didn't know quite how to feel about that.

“I would, if he's available.”

“Hello, this is Hal Weathers.”

She's still one step ahead, I thought. Let's see how he does.

“Mr. Weathers, thank you for being available, and thanks for this tip. I'm Mac MacQuarrie, and I'm with the federal task force investigating the Indian River Lab incident and trying to track down the missing SNM. I understand you may have seen a couple of the pigs?”

“Well, I think so. Not up close and personal, mind you, but I think so. They were a funny color, though, orange with red tops. The ones I've seen at Los Alamos were different.”

Not many people knew that the different DOE sites used different colors for their pigs, and his confusion was a point in his favor.

“It looks to me as if we'll need to get someone on that ship as soon as possible. May I ask a few questions?”

“Of course. I'd be surprised if you didn't” He sounded expectant.

“Your wife said you’ve worked at Los Alamos, as a summer visitor.”

“On four different occasions. They have summer programs for faculty, and Durango is just a couple of hours, well, maybe four, up the road. I worked with their environmental scientists on several problems, including that big radioactive waste sequestration project out in Nevada, Yucca Mountain, back before the project got cancelled. That’s where I ran across their isotope management procedures and learned what pigs look like.”

“Did you have a security clearance for the work at Los Alamos?”

“Still do, a DOE Q. It’s active because I serve on various committees and panels, for LANL as well as for DOE, that need it.”

His pronunciation “lanol” threw me for a minute, but then I remembered that the place is Los Alamos National Laboratory and, like all government operations, acronym happy.

“I’d like to hear your own description of exactly what you saw, the pigs, I mean. She said you saw them being loaded on board.”

“Right. Well, we boarded pretty early in the process, ahead of all the passengers, and after getting settled in our stateroom I went wandering off to see the scientific laboratories and so on. They were still loading supplies, stowing them away, and making ready for departure. I had walked through a door—er, I mean, a hatch—to a big lab and was standing at the top of a stairway platform, so I had a view of the entire room, or cabin or whatever it’s called on a ship. At the other end, maybe thirty feet away, a guy came through a big double-wide hatch with one of those powered hand-trucks, loaded up with all sorts of boxes of stuff. He sort of jumped when he saw me, but then smiled and waved, so I waved back. He opened another hatch, to what’s a storage locker, and started unloading boxes from the hand truck into it. I watched, and at the bottom of the pile were the pigs. Initially, they had been hidden by the boxes. About the time I saw them, the hatch I’d come through opened, almost squishing me, and I had to duck out of the way of one of the on-board scientists. We introduced ourselves and started a conversation, and by the time I looked again the pigs had disappeared.”

“Do you think they went into that same locker?”

“I’m not sure. The hand truck was also gone, so they could have been taken somewhere else. Also, I’ve looked in that locker, out of curiosity, and didn’t see them. Now, they could be there, behind and under some of the boxes in there, I didn’t rummage around. I wouldn’t have blinked at one pig, although I guess I would have expected a small one, not those big boys. But two of the big ones seemed quite strange, I’ll tell you. Particularly in light of the IRIL incident.”

“Any ideas about how I could get on that ship, Mr. Weathers? What kind of cruise is it? What’s your itinerary, do you know?”

“Well, this is a couples’ cruise, kind of strange, I’ll tell you. In addition to the usual scientific complement, we have psychologists on board who are giving “how to have a better relationship” talks and so on. There seems to be an emphasis on hot sex. But I’m strictly with the oceanographic component so I really don’t know much about it. Anyway, we left Miami on Friday evening, stopped at Nassau in the Bahamas on Saturday, San Juan Puerto Rico on Sunday—San Juan’s pretty dead on Sunday, by the way—and now we’re underway to the Panama Canal. We do a transit tomorrow morning and spend a bit of time at the other end, in Panama City. Then it’s off across the eastern Pacific, up the coast of Mexico to San Diego. There’s a stop in Puerto Vallarta, but I forget which day that is.”

“And you’re giving lectures or something, while the other scientists measure things?”

“Right, I have a lecture on climate change this evening. Competing with the casino, not to mention another lecture that has something to do with the *Kama Sutra*, puts me at something of a disadvantage, I

guess. Anyway, the scientific crew, ten people including three Ph.D. scientists, are measuring water properties and variability of phytoplankton distributions. I think on some of the passages they dump minerals into the ocean to see how the phytoplankton respond, then measure the same water mass on the passage back. I get to explain what they're doing to any passengers who are interested in the process. Guest scientist and tour guide, that's me." He laughed.

"Good luck with the lecture. Did you recognize the guy with the hand truck, the one with the pigs, as one of the scientific crew?"

"No, I haven't seen him since Friday. I guess he was just part of the loading crew. Are they called stevedores? All this nautical jargon gets me confused."

"I never picked it up, either. Tell you what, Mr. Weathers. I'll probably be seeing you in Panama City." I thanked him and disconnected.

Then I sat and thought. His database entry verified what he'd told me, and, because of the security clearance, it also provided him with at least as much credibility as Annette Trieri. More, if you counted the experience with the Los Alamos pigs.

My problem now was getting on board that cruise ship without attracting too much attention. A "couples' cruise", eh? Well, I thought, I guess I'll have to find me a better half.

I called Bill Petersen with the news. It wasn't 100% certain that we'd found the missing SNM, but it looked promising. The fact that it was on its way to San Diego, though, was not.

"Hell, Mac, I say we get the Navy after them, out in the Pacific somewhere."

"Slow down, Bill, willya? Weathers said he's not seen that crew member since the day the stuff was loaded, so this may be only a clever way to get the stuff transported. What we really need is to find out who picks it up, right? We can't do that if we send in the Navy. What we need is for me to get on that ship in Panama, get the credentials to go where Weathers is able to go, which is everywhere, it sounds like, and find the stuff. We can substitute empty pigs for the ones with the SNM, or, better yet, just move the material to other pigs and put tracers on the empty ones. Then we'll know where they go when someone grabs them, right?"

"Right, unless the ship itself is turned into a bomb or something. A nuclear detonation in San Diego harbor would not make the President happy."

"If that's the case, then I'll be able to find and disarm it. Did you ever read the report on my little adventure in Paris?"

In the movies, it always comes down to the last five seconds on the timer, which is displaying its countdown prominently, usually in some kind of distorted time frame—sometimes the timer is slow and sometimes it's fast, depending, I guess, on what the director is trying to accomplish. But during those five seconds, there's a tension-filled choice for the hero between the red wire and the black wire. Or maybe white.

In real life, at least this time, all the wires are green and there's no visible timer. I decide early in the process that if there's a beeping noise of any kind, I'm just grabbing a handful of wires and ripping.

What they teach you in bomb class is to trace the wires to figure out what they do, keeping in mind that there will probably be dummy ones put in to confuse the issue. The real ones, though, connect among the power source, usually a battery, the timer, and the detonator. Sometimes there's an extra one, to a capacitor of some kind, to act as the back-up power should some meddling fool disconnect the

battery first. That wire usually bypasses the timer, is what they teach, so that if you disconnect the battery first, it will go bang.

I'm thinking about all this amid the chaos of a Parisian street scene, people milling about, jabbering in French I don't understand, those wee-wah police sirens in the distance, getting closer, the non-displayed timer counting down, in my head at least. The guy with the bomb is unconscious, thanks to me, but the bomb is still thinking, as a blinking diode tells me. That, I've decided, is the timer, the little black cube with the LED.

The bomb itself is what looks like C4, plastic explosive, with detonators embedded in it and all sorts of nails embedded in it, too. It will be nasty if it goes off, especially if I'm still holding it. I can't just pull the detonators out, because the bomb-class teacher wouldn't approve and because the C4 and detonators are encased in some kind of clear acrylic. I could break off the wires, but what looks like the capacitor is encased in there, too. Nice trick, I'm thinking.

And the bomb-school teacher is right—there are at least five wires that seem to have no real function. I decide to ignore them and choose one of the three leading to the timer cube, whose light seems to have sped up. Oops. Three wires, running into three sides of the cube. Hmm. I pick the middle one, take a breath, and yank.

The LED stops blinking, and the crowd around me sighs and jabbars. It's nice to hear them, even if I can't understand what they're saying.

“Yeah, yeah, you must have told me a hundred times. And for the hundred-first, I still say you got lucky. But, you know, I guess it wouldn't matter so much if you blew yourself and the ship and all those passengers up way out in the middle of the ocean, would it? Except it would be a shame about the ship and the other passengers. OK, let's get you on that cruise ship. What do I need to do?”

I thanked him for his concern about my welfare and suggested that he use some juice to contact the cruise line, or better yet the *Earth Explorer's* captain, and find out if there would be any empty staterooms available at Panama City. A call from the President to the captain, I suggested, might just produce results.

Finding a better half was my own problem, but I had a notion of where to start.

* * *

“A cruise ship?” she asked, surprised. “You want to take me on a cruise ship? Isn't this a bit elaborate for a first date?”

“Second date. And like the first one, when we went to the Seaside Lounge, it's actually business related, so I'm not sure it really counts as a 'date.' Anyway, you said you were taking some time off, so why not do it right, a real vacation?”

I reached her that evening at the home number she'd given me. I explained the situation and warned her that the sleeping arrangements might be pretty friendly, but she wasn't saying “no” so far.

“But I don't want to be on a ship with a bomb. No offense, Mac, but, c'mon. This sounds dangerous.”

“I don't think there are any bombs involved, just that radioactive stuff I told you about last week, encased in lead. And you won't be getting anywhere near it, I promise. You can work on your tan, and I'll buy you a dress or something in Puerto Vallarta, OK?”

“Well, I don’t see how I can turn down an opportunity like this.” There was a giggle. “You going to want to collect on your rain check?”

“Oh, I think I’ll let that be a surprise. But don’t think I’ve forgotten. The sight of you still has me hot, believe me—it’s one of those things I’ve got a photographic memory for and, man, is that photograph ever sharp. Right now, though, I’ve got to save the country from whoever swiped that material. And you can help by coming along, providing me with cover.”

An image of Groucho Marx popped into my head, tapping his cigar, and saying something like “and who wouldn’t want to be covered by you?” But I kept that to myself.

“Well, how do we get there? What do we do?”

“I don’t know details yet, but I will soon. We’ll probably fly to Panama City tomorrow morning and board there. I hope your passport is current. I’ll be back in touch when I know a schedule.”

“I’ll start packing.”

I was thinking about packing myself, when the phone rang.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie, this is Norris Swendson, master of the *Earth Explorer*. The President of the United States asked me to call you at this number.”

The voice sounded a little in awe of what it had said to me.

I always like it when Bill Petersen takes my advice, and I like it even more when the advice works.

“Thank you for calling, Captain Swendson. I assume that the President filled you in on the situation, or the possible situation?”

“He did, and I must say, I’m appalled. I’ll do anything I can to help you people out. I’ll put you in one of our best staterooms—I checked, and there’s an outside one on the third deck available, a double suite. And you’ll have credentials to access the entire ship. Do you have any indication of where the material might be?”

He sounded as if he wanted to find the SNM and toss it overboard.

“Your guest scientist, Professor Weathers, was the person who thinks he saw it, and he’ll know. But let me suggest that you simply conduct normal operations until I arrive. It may be that your ship is only being used to transport the material, and we don’t want to show our hand too soon. Can I board in Panama City?”

“Absolutely. And I’ll keep this information to myself, although I think I’ll have a chat with Dr. Weathers.”

“Fine. And what we’ll do is to bring replacement containers on board, empty ones, and transfer the material into them. Then in San Diego we’ll watch the unloading carefully and see what happens to the empty originals.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie, I want that material off my ship as soon as humanly possible.”

“Understood, Captain. We’ll off-load it in Puerto Vallarta, quietly. Or maybe before, if we can manage it. I guarantee that the government wants that stuff back as badly as you want to get rid of it. I hope that the President was able to convey the urgency of this to you.”

I always figure that, whenever possible, not-so-subtle reminders help with establishing pecking order. He was the master of the ship, but I wanted him on my side instead of wrapped up in his own bureaucracy.

Of all the things that can go wrong with an overseas operation, the ones that always cause me the most trouble are those associated with petty bureaucrats. In Tehran, it's getting a building permit for new plumbing.

"To obtain the permit you need, fill out this plumbing form and return it to me." Even with my still-limited Farsi, the greasy little man's first instruction seems simple enough. But the form isn't. I have a question.

"Excuse me, but the form for the plumbing permit wants to know whether I'm replacing existing plumbing or adding to existing plumbing. This building I am remodeling has no plumbing at all, so what I need to do is to install new plumbing."

"You want to install new plumbing? Oh, yes, well then, you need a new building permit for construction. You can't build a new building without that." He smiles serenely.

"No, perhaps I wasn't clear. It's an old building, not new construction. But there's no old plumbing, I need to add new plumbing. To the old building."

"Ah, I see. You want to add to existing plumbing. You check this box here." His look tells me that I'm incredibly stupid.

"But if I do that, then I need to provide you with information about my most recent plumbing inspection. I don't have that information because there was no recent inspection, because there is no existing plumbing."

"Ah, well, that means you first need a plumbing inspection. That's a different department, on the third floor." He points to the door and waves his hand upward in dismissal.

"But there's no plumbing to inspect!"

"Then you should get some. You will never receive an occupancy permit for an office building if there is no plumbing. We are a modern city, and we require plumbing in all office buildings." He clearly thinks of me as a cretin from an uncivilized village somewhere, one with sewage running in the gutters.

"That's why I'm here, to get a permit to install plumbing."

"Oh, well, then, why didn't you say so? Here, fill out this plumbing form and return it to me. There is an empty desk right there."

"The President honored me with his phone call, Mr. MacQuarrie, and I assured him that he will have my fullest cooperation."

His icy tone sounded offended that I might be implying otherwise, which was just what I had hoped for.

"I'm sure the President appreciates that, and I'll let him know. And I certainly do, too. I'll get started on this immediately after I board in Panama City, Captain. We'll find this stuff if it's on your ship, and we'll get it off as soon as we possibly can."

I think I made him feel reassured, but sometimes it's hard to tell with people like that.

Almost as soon as I disconnected, the phone rang, the first of nearly continuous calls until it was time for me to leave, as it turned out. There were also three courier deliveries, and just about breakfast time the next morning Sam turned up, courtesy of a limousine ride from her place in Bal Harbor.

I had the limo driver wait so he could take us over to the Boca Raton airport. One of those many phone calls had informed me that the Secretary of the Navy was going to send his executive jet to take us down to Panama City.

Sam was still unclear on the concept of a high-priority operation with direct White House involvement.

“Mac? What’s going on, anyway? I mean, these Secret Service agents showed up at my place, scared the hell out of me. I barely had time to get my suitcase—and thanks for that other phone call telling me to get packed and ready, by the way—and they shoved me in this limousine. I haven’t even had breakfast yet. Not even coffee.”

I smiled, trying to offer encouragement and sympathy.

“Breakfast and coffee, really good coffee, on the plane, I think. I hope. What’s going on is that you and I are the single highest priority of the U.S. Government just now, and we’re getting the Treatment. The only trouble is, we’ve got to go along with it. Got your passport? I don’t think we’ll need it until we get to San Diego, or maybe if we want to get off the ship and sight-see in Puerto Vallarta, but in San Diego you’ll need it to get back into the country, probably.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it, but don’t I need a visa or something?”

“Nope. I’ve got everything we need. Lots of government bureaucrats had their beauty sleep interrupted for us last night. Ready?”

I hauled my luggage out to the limo and the driver put it in the back with her single case.

* * *

Twelve

“I thought cruise ships were big. I mean, way bigger than that.” Sam sounded disappointed. “All the ones I’ve seen in Miami, and Fort Lauderdale, too, are lots bigger.”

To tell the truth, I was surprised as well. The *Earth Explorer* did seem small by normal cruise ship standards. I couldn’t figure out how they could fit the usual array of amenities on board—theaters, shopping malls, casinos, bowling alleys, swimming pools with wave machines, even golf courses, not to mention the dozens of restaurants and bars most cruise ships contained.

Breakfast on the flight down from Boca was even better than I’d expected—the Secretary’s jet came with its very own executive chef, who offered to fix us whatever we wanted. Sam had French toast with Vermont maple syrup and Iowa corn-fed bacon, and I had a Denver omelet, a huge one, and a couple of slices of Virginia ham with English muffins and Montana home fries. Naturally, being dutiful citizens of the Sunshine State, we both had fresh-squeezed Florida orange juice, and, as I’d hoped, the coffee, Jamaica Blue Mountain, was outstanding. Breakfast by geography test was just wonderful.

That breakfast took us most of the flight down to Panama City, and we arrived feeling comfortably well fed, only to be stuffed into an embassy car and whisked to the port. The Treatment didn’t include time for sightseeing, it seemed. They even phoned ahead, for the ship’s officers were waiting to greet us at the dock.

Sam, at least, had the good sense to voice her opinion about the ship’s size before we stepped out of the car.

“Mr. MacQuarrie? I’m Norris Swendson. And these are my senior officers ... gentlemen? Gentlemen, please!”

But Swendson had lost control. As soon as the officers saw Sam step out of the car, she had their undivided attention—and she even had all her clothes on. But I can’t say I blamed them. I’d been so busy with remembering all my equipment that I hadn’t paid much attention back at my place, but then, after breakfast, she’d walked to the back of the plane, to the head, and it about took my breath away. She was wearing some kind of white ensemble, not exactly pajamas and not exactly a pants suit, something flowing and diaphanous yet snug in exactly the right places. It was both the perfect cruise ship outfit and the perfect guy magnet.

Once Swendson figured out what was going on, he gave up and escorted me up onto the ship.

“My apologies, Mr. MacQuarrie. There’s no excuse for that behavior, and I’ll be addressing it later. With as much bathing attire as we have on board, you’d think they would be used to seeing an attractive woman. Although, I must say, she is, shall I say, quite eye-catching. Your wife?”

“No, just a friend whom I asked to accompany me, for cover. Professor Weathers told me that this was some kind of couples cruise.”

This produced a deep sigh. “Yes, I’m afraid so. We run about three of these so-called couples cruises a year. Of all our theme cruises, I find these the most embarrassing. But speaking of Dr. Weathers, I thought I would introduce you to him right away. He and I have both avoided a detailed search for your, um, quarry, but we’re anxious to get started. One thing we did accomplish was to eliminate the locker in which Dr. Weathers thought the material may have been placed during loading in Miami. It isn’t there.”

“Although it could have been moved since it was loaded. Anyway, I have some equipment that will help us with the search.”

I couldn’t help but notice the concern on his face when I suggested the material may have been moved, suspicious ex-spook that I am.

“In fact, Captain, I think it would be a good idea if we went straight to the stateroom you have for us. As much as I’d like to meet Professor Weathers, it’s probably better if we don’t do anything that would raise anyone’s suspicions. Normal VIP passengers you meet on the dock go right to a stateroom, don’t they?”

He looked worried. “Well, yes, that’s true. Do you really think there is someone on board who’s involved in this ... this materials theft?”

“No idea. But I’d rather not take chances. We want to get these guys, after all. Say, is there a map of this ship available, or something?”

Swendson had been leading me through the ship, first on a lower deck, outside along a rail and then inside, through a series of passageways and up several sets of steps, all of which were labeled with some kind of letter-and-number code as ladders. I was thoroughly lost and becoming more and more aware of how confined everything seemed.

My various government employers, beginning with the Defense Department, have never been shy about putting me in harm’s way. This latest bunch, the people in civilian clothes with offices in Langley Virginia, are no exception.

I have to give them credit, though—they’re big on training, specifically designed training that focuses on what particular harm you might be in the way of this time. And another thing they’re big on

is psychology. They just love to give their people tests and follow-up interviews with shrinks. Some of the tests involve more than just pencil and paper.

That's how they find out I have what they diagnose as "mild claustrophobia." I suppose I could have just told them that, had they asked the right questions, those shrinks. But they must have seen something from one of the paper-and-pencil tests, because next thing I know I'm being put into little boxes, smaller and smaller ones.

I manage just fine until the box about the size of a small compact car trunk, lights out, the one with scratching and scabbling noises, like rats or something, on the ceiling or roof or top. Before it starts, they tell me what is happening, what they are doing. They want to see what I can tolerate, and I'm not really trapped, I can break out of any of the box any time I want to, they say.

And I'm gritting my teeth in this trunk-sized box, sweating, telling myself that the noises aren't real, just recordings, when there's a distinct gnawing sound from a corner of the box by my feet, and then a draft of air, as if the rats are on their way in.

That, says my subconscious, is enough of that. And they're right: the box is easy to break out of.

Well, like I said, they're big on training, so I have the dubious pleasure of attending who knows how many hours of instruction and brainwashing and practice on how to cope with small, tight spots. And it actually works. I'm pretty immune to those panic attacks now—except when rats are involved.

"There's a map in each cabin, and I have a special one for you that shows the whole ship, not just the passenger spaces. Here we are."

He came to a stop at a door labeled "Executive Suite."

He showed me in and pointed out the various amenities. It appeared that the suite was three regular cabins with connecting doors, set up with the bedrooms on the sides and a small sitting room in the middle. I picked the bedroom on the right and threw the case I was carrying on the bed, which looked queen sized. I couldn't help but think that the perks we were getting would be easy to get used to.

Among other things, the case held my computer and two decay counters, more sophisticated ones than I'd used on my midnight swim—these would read out specific isotopes from the energies they detected. About the time I got one organized to use, the rest of my luggage arrived, along with Sam and her bevy of escorts, all of them falling all over themselves to be extra nice to her.

Swendson shook his head in disgust and frustration, then turned to me.

"I'll find Professor Weathers, Mr. MacQuarrie. Excuse me."

He turned to the fawning group of officers. "Gentlemen! *Gentlemen!!* Come with me, please. Now."

They seemed to understand that his tone of voice meant something serious was up and followed him out.

"Got some new friends, do you?"

I thought Sam deserved a little teasing.

"Too bad I'm not working, Mac. I'd have a full dance card, that's for sure." She winked at me. "Two bedrooms? I guess we're really VIPs, huh? Looks like I'm on the left. For a while at least."

Normally, a comment like that would have commanded my attention for the rest of the day, but I had work to do.

With the decay counter ready to go, I still had to organize the location transponders we planned to affix to the IRIL pigs and test them for readiness. And there was the inevitable and inescapable paperwork. Fortunately, just as I was working myself up to that, there came a knock on the cabin door. It was Swendson and another man, middle-aged, professorial-looking, an inch or two taller than I.

“Mr. MacQuarrie, this is Professor Harold Weathers.”

Swendson started in on the introductions, but I interrupted.

“Please call me Mac, Professor. And I’m glad to meet you.”

I stuck out my right hand, and he shook it with a firm grip.

“Will do, if you’ll call me Hal, Mac. And it looks as if your other boxes have arrived. I was standing at the rail and saw several crates coming on board. They looked heavy.”

“The pigs we’re going to off-load the SNM in, probably. And I’m going to stick one of these doohickies to the stolen ones when they’re empty, so we can track ’em.”

I held up a transponder I had in my left hand.

Weathers was about my age, only his hair wasn’t gray yet. He appeared to be starting a beard, and it showed some salt-and-pepper.

He peered closely at the transponder. “Radio frequency?”

“No, but I can’t tell you what it is, sorry. It blips at thirty-second intervals, each has a different code so we can track them individually.”

He scratched at his not-quite beard. “Hmm. OK. I was wondering because it seems like the metal of the ship would interfere with transmissions.”

I nodded. “Right. That’s why it’s not RF.”

Sam walked out of her bedroom. “Mac, do you know ... Oh, hello, sorry to interrupt.”

“Sam, this is Professor Harold Weathers, but he’ll want you to call him Hal, I expect. Hal, Samantha Winslow, my traveling companion.”

“How nice to meet you, Samantha.”

With her, Weathers shook hands using the two-handed politician’s grip.

“I’ll have to introduce you to Annette, my wife. I’m semi-official on this cruise, and she’s just a passenger, kind of a bored one. Maybe the two of you can keep each other company while Mac and I go exploring. She’s used to a little more excitement than she’s getting—that’s what happens when you work for the Durango PD, I guess.”

He was smiling, trying to be pleasant. Sam, though, looked startled.

* * *

Swendson needed to get the ship underway, but he was insistent that we begin a search as soon as the *Earth Explorer* was at sea. So, after sending Sam off to find an officer to flirt with and to give her a tour, we beat Swendson to the punch by beginning our own exploration of the *Explorer* while he was busy being captain.

Weathers took me first to the laboratory area where he had seen the stevedore unloading the pigs and the other supplies. It was good to have him as a guide, because the crew passageways were even more confusing than the public areas I’d been in earlier. Unlike the public areas, which were designed to

impress the passengers, the behind-the-scenes areas of the ship were cramped, in need of new paint, and dirtier than I would have thought.

Several decks lower than our cabin and well aft, Weathers led me into a large laboratory full of scientific equipment of various kinds. Two people in white lab coats looked up as we came in, but, seeing Weathers, went back to fiddling with a stainless steel instrument package they had taken apart.

“The lockers where I thought the pigs might have initially been stowed are behind those doors over there.” Weathers pointed across the room and headed that way.

He opened the double doors to the storage area while I opened the decay-counter case. Inside the locker were boxes, stacked four high, all with labels describing their contents in various cryptic ways. I recognized the brands of two computer manufacturers and another scientific instrument company, but most of the labels were meaningless to me.

But the signal on the counter display wasn't. “Hal? Check this out. Either those pigs were in here or there's other radioactive material around somewhere.”

He stood behind me and looked over my shoulder. “I'm not familiar with that gizmo you've got, but it looks like it's saying that the signal is way above any reasonable background.”

And it was, well above background on several different energy levels at that, meaning there was, or had been, a complex mixture of decaying isotopes at work.

“But Captain Swendson said you didn't find the pigs in here, right?”

“Right. He and I supervised a small work party while they emptied this locker enough to do a complete inventory. No pigs.”

Weathers stepped back and leaned against one of the lab benches, looking thoughtful.

“And we didn't see anything on any of the boxes indicating any other isotopes. They're supposed to be clearly labeled, and there's no reason to think they wouldn't be.”

“So these counts are probably from contamination left behind when the pigs were stashed temporarily in here. Meaning there's material on the outsides of the containers. Great.” I shook my head. “This is what happens when amateurs handle this stuff. I wonder how badly they've contaminated themselves. And if they even know it.”

“Does that mean what I think it means? We've got a radionuclide contamination incident going here?” Weathers looked worried.

I flipped some switches on the decay counter and studied the display.

“Well, the levels aren't dangerous, and these are mostly alphas anyway. The energies are consistent with our missing SNM, though. This area will have to be decontaminated eventually, but for now all we need to do is to keep people away from it.”

“So it looks like all we have to do is to survey the ship with that gadget, and we'll find the stuff, right? Along with whatever other contamination there is, I guess.” Now he looked hopeful.

“And I have another one in my cabin, so we can split up and cover the ship twice as quickly.” I smiled. “Of course, we need to be as clandestine as we can be, so we don't give things away, right? I mean, someone moved them from here, meaning we've got a conspirator on board. And we don't need him to know we're onto this thing.”

Covert operations as a way of life leads to strange and wonderful ways of doing things. Avoiding routine becomes the routine. Misdirection is the direction. Prevarication is sincerity.

I've been operating this way for so long now I'm not sure what it was like before. Had I ever presented my honest-to-goodness Hamish A. MacQuarrie passport when checking into a hotel? Did I always walk blocks out of my way, doubling back, going in circles, before showing up somewhere for an appointment?

At least this Zürich assignment is in the summer and the weather is good, with spectacular mountains reaching up to deep blue skies and flowers everywhere all over the city. I'm wearing comfortable walking shoes and playing the extraordinarily curious tourist, exploring everywhere, asking typically dumb questions, pretending to be suitably impressed with the history and the culture.

In reality, I'm making the rounds of a series of blind drops we've set up so that our contacts in the various delegations attending the OPEC Conference on Banking in the New Millennium can keep us apprised of their secret strategies. Although the turn of the century is still a decade away, the amounts of money are so vast and the banks involved change so slowly that the conference is quite timely, all things considered.

And it's also quite fruitful for us, given the information that's being passed through my network of drops. I'm still wondering if anything will be done with the information that Iraq will invade Kuwait sometime soon. Anything we do, of course, would tell the world that we know and thereby give up our source of information, so it's possible that the people upstairs will just sit on the information.

After all, war is just war. Covert is a way of life.

“Maybe,” Weathers scratched at the stubble on his chin again, “we should involve Captain Swendson. He needs to know about this contamination, no matter how small it is, and he might just have an idea we could use as cover for our surveys. I mean, you're right—we need to do this quietly. Do you suppose the excuse of an air quality survey would fly? Maybe we could tell everyone we're making sure that there are no harmful chemicals in the air handling system, or something like that.”

I looked at him for a minute. “Hal, I like the way you think. And here's a twist that could improve on that a little. There have been several cruise ships in the news recently, they came back to port with loads of sick passengers from something called a ‘norovirus.’ I think it's associated with food handling, but maybe not, I don't remember. Quite virulent, but not truly life-threatening. Mostly just nasty with the usual digestive-system upsets. Anyway, we could survey the ship for signs of that easily enough. Thing is, the crew know all about these norovirus episodes, and an official check in their sections of the ship wouldn't faze them in the least. So our on-board conspirator wouldn't be worried by it, assuming he's crew. And the passengers will be oblivious.”

He nodded. “And we can make like your decay counter is some kind of bio-sensing device. We could even go around wiping surfaces with tissue, then holding the tissue to the counter. That could improve our chances of finding the SNM, I bet.”

I hadn't thought of that. “Right! Exactly. Let's go find Swendson.”

* * *

Over the course of the next day and a half, Hal Weathers and I discovered just how big the *Earth Explorer* really was. She may not have looked impressive to Sam and me at the dock in Panama City, but that just showed how little we knew about ships.

Weathers and I had no trouble persuading Captain Swendson to support our ruse, and the good captain even came up with some useful suggestions to improve it. He loaned us genuine ship's medical scrubs from the sick bay to wear and announced our supposed task to the entire crew, using made-up credentials for me and Weathers' real scientific credentials as a basis for our work. That we were doing it after putting to sea from Panama, Swendson asserted, had to do with a tip he received about another ship with an outbreak apparently acquired from that tropical port city.

Although we spent most of our time and energy on the survey, we made sure to take time for meals and so on as well. Weathers, I think, wanted to be seen publicly with his wife so that the ship's officers wouldn't think of her as single and available, and I wanted to spend as much time with Sam as I could for my own reasons.

Because she and I had been put into that VIP stateroom, it made sense for us to have dinner at the Captain's Table the first night. Weathers, as the guest scientist for the cruise, was a permanent fixture at that table, so dinner provided the opportunity for introductions to be completed. I was glad to meet the person who had phoned in the SNM tip, but Sam, having heard about Annette Trieri's background in law enforcement, wasn't exactly thrilled about the whole thing. Annette, though, defused the tension easily.

"Samantha, I'm so glad to meet you, because I need to thank you for this afternoon." Annette looked around the table and smiled. "I was lounging by one of the pools trying to read and get some sun, and there was a gaggle of ship's officers clustered around this elegant lady, so preoccupied by her that they left me alone, just the way I wanted it. I've spent five days now being interrupted by their attempts to 'help' me in some way or other. It's been getting tiresome. Samantha came to my rescue this afternoon."

"Both of you, please call me 'Sam,' like Mac does. And I don't quite understand it. I was all the way dressed. You'd think they would have been distracted by those bikinis in the pool." Sam laughed and shrugged. "At least I learned all about the ship—except there were so many facts and figures I can't remember half of them."

Weathers was staring off into space. "Y'know, it would have helped me this afternoon to have someone along when I was doing that survey."

I didn't know where he was going with this, but it concerned me. "Ah, maybe we shouldn't ..."

But he shook his head and winked at me. "Annette, if you and Sam are bored, maybe you could help us out, come along and take notes and so on. I kept getting slowed down by not having four hands."

As a result, I wound up spending most of Wednesday wandering around the *Earth Explorer* in the company of Annette Trieri, pretending to check the ship out for evidence of noroviruses while actually staying on the lookout for radionuclides. She and I covered the upper three decks, while Weathers and Sam took the lower three. We arranged to meet for coffee breaks and lunch as a way to report on progress.

It was one of those scavenger hunts where you make just enough headway to keep yourself interested. We turned up traces all over the place, indicating that whoever had handled the pigs was contaminated enough to spread bits of the stuff around. By late Wednesday afternoon we had a map of our findings, which pointed to a crew cabin on the second deck and traced a route from one of the loading gangways to the storage locker where Weathers had seen the pigs initially.

How the Russian thermonuclear warhead wound up in the hands of the rag-tag band of Kurdish rebels was something we'll probably never know. Maybe they managed to steal it somehow, or maybe a disaffected Russian nuclear scientist sold it to them. But however they got it, it's my job to coordinate and lead the effort to get it away from them.

I'm hoping that the big aluminum suitcase full of \$100 bills—well over 10,000 of them—will do the trick. Assuming, of course, we can find the person in charge. That's the trouble with rag-tag rebel bands, their tendency toward anarchy.

It takes two weeks of careful inquiries, serious negotiating, and more bribery than I'm comfortable with, but eventually I'm ushered into the presence of someone who appears to be in charge. My translator is a nervous wreck, and I'm getting sick and tired of toting that damned suitcase around.

"He says that he doesn't know what you are talking about, and he wants to know what's in the suitcase."

The translator's whisper is an indication of how scared he is.

I force myself to remember a favorite old joke, so that I can make my smile reasonably sincere.

"Tell him that what's in the suitcase is for someone who knows what I'm talking about. And that the contents self-destruct unless it's opened properly, and only I know how to find out how to open it properly."

That much is true: I need to make a confirming telephone call to obtain the combination to the lock on the suitcase, and if the lock is forced, the contents will be vaporized.

My host considers my response, then holds forth in an obscure dialect for a while.

"He says that he misunderstood, and that he does, in fact, know of a piece of Russian equipment that is in their possession. He also said that his people have been disassembling it to see how it is supposed to work."

There's surprise in the translator's voice this time.

"Tell him that if he shows me what I need to see, the contents of the suitcase are his."

I'm wondering just how far along the disassembly has proceeded and how many people are doomed to a horrible death as a result. And how to tell him of this nasty news.

It doesn't matter if it's Russian Special Nuclear Material or American—it'll kill you just as horribly dead either way.

We met with Captain Swendson and his First Mate to discuss our map. The First Mate took a look and consulted a list of names.

"That cabin houses Engineer Third Class Willoughby Trimble, Captain. This is his first cruise with us, he replaced that guy we fired for drinking, remember?"

Swendson nodded. "I do. And who else is in there?"

"He's alone on this leg, Captain. His bunkmate disembarked in San Juan, that broken clavicle from the Nassau passage. I still don't understand how that happened."

"Captain, you don't suppose this fool has the material in his cabin, do you?"

The map suggested just that to me, no matter how hard it was to believe.

Swendson looked at the map, at me, at the others, and shook his head.

“And I’d thought I’d seen everything stupid under the sun. Just what I need, a glow-in-the-dark engineer.”

* * *

Trimble, it turned out, had a 12-hour duty shift that began at 2000 hours that evening. While on shift, he would be supervised and unable to return to his cabin, so that gave us a window of time during which we could investigate it and take whatever steps seemed appropriate.

But although we had the pigs on board to put the SNM into, should it indeed be in Trimble’s cabin, we really didn’t have the equipment to do a transfer safely. Nor did we have personnel. I could have helped someone with the right training, but I didn’t want to involve civilians in the task, given its risk levels.

What I did have was friends in high places, deep ones, too. It took me a single call to Washington, via the encrypted satellite phone I’d brought along, to determine that the *USS Jimmy Carter*, a Seawolf-class nuclear attack submarine, was on station 1500 meters off our port side, and that Commander Bierken’s team of Navy SEALs, augmented with three nuclear tech specialists, had arrived the previous night. Those phone calls I’d been occupied with the night before we left for Panama City had covered a lot of contingencies.

At 2100 hours on Wednesday evening, Captain Swendson had his helmsman head the *Earth Explorer* into the wind dead ahead slow while all available crew used searchlights to scan upwind for the source of a rescue beacon that was identified as belonging to the *SeaFairer*, a 49-foot Morgan sloop out of Acapulco reported to be missing and foundered. At least that’s what Captain Swendson told everyone. A surprising number of passengers joined the crew at the forward rails to peer into the darkness.

Meanwhile, the SEAL team came aboard at the stern loading hatch of the *EE*, having been put off the *Jimmy Carter* with their duffels of equipment in two Zodiac rubber boats. Within an hour, while the *EE* crew was still on searchlight detail, the SNM was swapped into the replacement pigs and off-loaded into the Zodiacs, the original pigs, now with tracking devices attached, and the cabin they were in were decontaminated, and half the SEALs were headed back to the submarine with the SNM. The others, including Bierkens, were to remain aboard the *EE* to decontaminate the other places we’d noted on our decay-counter map. And to be part of whatever operation in San Diego might be needed when we arrived.

There was still the matter of the glow-in-the-dark engineer, but that meant watching and waiting, mostly.

I missed the fun, because we thought it best that the four of us who had spent the day on the “norovirus” survey continue play our roles. This meant attending the lecture on “Climate Change and You” that Professor Harold Weathers, Ph.D., presented at 9:00 pm and the following reception in the Silver Ballroom and Salon, at which Captain Swendson spent a lot of time nervously checking his watch.

I guess I should qualify it when I say that I missed the fun—what I meant was that I missed the fun with the SEALs. After the reception and a nightcap with Hal Weathers and Annette Trieri, Sam and I retired to our fancy suite, and she decided that her own bed was too big and empty. So she tiptoed into my room to share mine.

And all I'm going to say about that is that I'm glad I had been keeping myself in good physical condition. It was even more important to me that night than it was on the night of the kayak trip and midnight swim.

I was up and at 'em early the next morning, energized and feeling as good as I have in years. The twinges in my titanium shoulder from its workout the previous evening seemed trivial.

Captain Swendson, though, looked worn out—satisfied but tired. And when I heard his report, I was satisfied, too, for the time being.

“The ship is as clean as you could expect, Mr. MacQuarrie. The SEAL team decontaminated everything except Trimble himself and the clothes he's wearing, and we've had a counter in proximity to him with no dangerous readings.”

I sipped the coffee a steward had brought. “What do you suppose Trimble would do if you told him that he's getting a new bunkmate?”

“I've wondered that myself.” Swendson looked thoughtful. “His first bunkmate broke his clavicle, as I think you heard. But we couldn't figure out how it happened, and he didn't remember. We put it down to some kind of weird accident. But I'm wondering if perhaps Trimble didn't have a hand in it as a way to get that cabin to himself.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess there's no real point in yanking his chain. We don't really want to raise his suspicions. We've got the remaining SEALs on board to watch him all the way to San Diego, so I don't think he'll be causing us any trouble.”

“And what's your plan, Mr. MacQuarrie?”

“Well, with your permission, Captain, Ms. Winslow and I will remain your passengers for the duration and do what we can to enjoy ourselves. I need to be in San Diego when Trimble, or whoever, offloads those empty pigs, and this seems like a good way to get there.” I smiled.

“You're most welcome to be my guests. And after what you accomplished here, you'll be welcome for a return cruise as well.”

And, so help me, he saluted.

I managed to escape with most of my dignity intact and went looking for Sam. With all of the previous evening's exercise, I was ready for a serious breakfast.

But when I returned to our suite, all I found was a note saying “Off to yoga class—back by 8. S.” I suppose I could have joined her at yoga class, but turning myself into a human pretzel that early in the day just didn't seem appealing. So I tackled the paperwork I'd never finished from Tuesday.

It was right at eight sharp that she returned, wearing a leotard and a healthy glow. When she took my hand and led me into the bedroom, with some comment about “I've got to show you this position I just learned,” well, I decided breakfast could wait just a little longer.

How in the world I ever wound up as a lifter-catcher with the Chinese acrobat troupe is something that still puzzles me. My memory of the events leading up to our performance in Kabul is fuzzy, even as I'm on stage and small, lithe women are flying into my arms.

They make it look so easy, mid-air acrobatics, contortions that make rubber bands seem brittle, balancing on dangerously precarious stacks of chairs. The Russian soldiers stationed in Kabul eat these performances up, partly, I guess, because of the skills and thrills and partly because of the skin-tight, revealing costumes.

Even though they make it look easy, it's not. I've been with them long enough to know that their abilities come from endless practice, practice overseen by virtual slave-drivers. And underneath those costumes are bruises that would scare a football player. These people work at their art.

Of all the oddball situations I've ever found myself in, this one takes the cake. And try as I might, I just can't remember certain critical bits and pieces that get me to where I am. I've about decided the only explanation involves drugs. Afghanistan, after all, is full of them, opiates and cannabis derivatives galore, just about any level of potency you'd like. Maybe someone slipped an opium-hashish mixture into me somehow, shanghaied me into this acrobat troupe, and taught me how to catch the girls without hurting them. At least, I'm thinking, it's Kabul and maybe I can sneak off and find the embassy.

Meanwhile—ooofff—here comes another one, the really ugly one with acne scars and bad breath. But after her is the cute one, she even has tits, and she always smiles at me. She also has this interesting ability to do the upside-down splits in mid-air, arching her back and bending her legs so that she's almost inside out. That, I'm thinking, could be a most interesting talent under the right circumstances, circumstances involving an hour or two of privacy and no costume.

And she's on her way, and—ooofff—I catch her just so, just like I'm supposed to and won't get yelled at for, the way that involves my arm across her breasts. What's new is the stroke, gentle but determined, she gives my crotch. Hmm ...

Well, I hope that look of surprise doesn't make my made-up eyes look too round, too western. I sure don't want these Russian soldiers to figure out I'm not really Chinese.

As a result of all the delays, we didn't get to breakfast until about nine, and by then I would have eaten boiled shoes. But the buffet was still in action, and the good professor and his wife were there to join us. It seemed that Annette had been in the same yoga class with Sam and, for some obscure reason, they were also delayed in getting to breakfast.

We all made a trip past the buffet tables and settled in.

“Well, folks, here's to a successful mission, the first phase at least.”

I help up my Mimosa cocktail for a toast and touched the other glasses.

“Does this mean you'll be disembarking at Puerto Vallarta?” Annette had that sleepy, contented look of a woman who had finally figured out how to relax. Kind of like Sam, now that I noticed.

“Are you kidding? I think it's critical that I'm around for phase two, when we get to San Diego. And Sam needs to be there, too. Right?” And I smiled and looked into her blue eyes.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” she said, looking straight back at me.

* * *

Fourteen

As I had promised, I bought Sam a nice dress in Puerto Vallarta, and she had plenty of time to work on her tan before we arrived in San Diego. Hal Weathers resumed his original role as the cruise scientist, giving more lectures and generally making himself a resource for passengers with questions. And

Annette Trieri spent more time with Sam than I would have thought possible, given their disparate backgrounds.

I was finally able to catch up on my long-overdue paperwork. Fortunately, the new developments in my relationship with Sam provided frequent diversions, so it wasn't really all-work, no-play. In fact, it was nearly the opposite. She seemed to find sex for pleasure rather than for work to be something she enjoyed enough to keep doing over and over—and under, and beside, and every other which way.

And there were other diversions, too. On Saturday, the last leg into San Diego, Annette and Sam marched into our suite and sat down on either side of me. I was on a ship-to-shore call at the time, so they just sat and stared at me.

Now, Annette has a couple of years on Sam, and she's not so well constructed, at least not in the sense of *Playboy* standards, but she still rates extremely high on the babe scale. So I was sitting there, talking on the phone, flanked by two lovelies who were obviously waiting for something. Rather than keep them waiting, I hurried the phone call to a quick end. But even after I disconnected, they sat and stared.

It didn't take long for this to make me nervous.

"Ah, hi?"

I looked back and forth between them.

"Right. See, Mac, the thing is, Sam says you've talked about getting her out of her current arrangement, that sort of contract she's bound to that Sun and Sand outfit by, or whatever it's called. And she's worried that you'll wind up getting yourself hurt in the deal. So, how about let's go over your plan and I'll critique it for you."

Annette had her head cocked a little sideways.

"Not, you understand, in any official way from my position in law enforcement, but rather from the perspective of my experience with stupid crook tricks."

Sam reached over and put her hands on my arm. It felt good.

"I don't want you to get hurt, sweetie."

Annette smiled. "You understand that I'd be delighted for Sam to be clear of that unfortunate arrangement, of course. It's just how to get from here to there that's concerning me. Concerning both of us, actually."

"That's why I've been telling you I'm not ready to retire, sweetie."

Sam looked both worried and embarrassed at the same time, somehow.

"I really don't want you to get hurt by these guys. I've seen them in action, believe me."

I cleared my throat. "Yes, well, there's also the issue of your getting hurt. I could see them coming after you if they thought you were trying to get away from them. That's why I haven't done anything except ask a couple of questions."

"You *what*?" Sam looked scared. "Last time anyone asked questions about one of their girls, he ended up dead and she ended up with razor scars all over her body."

So, to calm her down, I had to tell about my posing as the famous Hollywood movie producer and so on. It really didn't help, though, because Sam was sure that Nikolay Kirov, or one of his goons, would check out my story. And when they found out that there was no such movie producer named Randolph Hunt, they'd come after her and me both.

“OK, look. Really, it’ll be fine. We can easily protect you, and if they come after me, well, they don’t know what they’re dealing with, do they?”

I tried to be reassuring, but both Sam and Annette were giving me the silent treatment along with that skeptical look that women are so good at.

My first interaction with Dean Susan Standerfield, the one in which my frat brothers had tried to set me up, has me confident that she’s now my friend and ally. After all, thanks to me she’s been able to find the real graffiti culprit and to shut down a source of illegal undergraduate alcohol to boot.

So, sitting outside her office awaiting my second appointment with her, I’m not the least worried. I have a good explanation for why the campus police found me outside the Tri-Delta house, hiding in the bushes. Or at least I will by the time she calls me into her office.

Since my first appointment with her, mini-skirt fashion has receded upward by another inch or so, and those movie-star legs of hers are just stunning. Plus, it’s a cool day, as Southern California goes, so she’s wearing a sweater, a V-neck. The sensibilities imbued by my puritanical upbringing in the Middle East are knocked for a loop, making my head swim. To make matters worse, she sits in a side chair this time, and crosses her legs. My blood pressure is so high I hear a buzzing noise in my head.

“Well, Mr. MacQuarrie, we meet again. I hope you realize that multiple appointments in this office are not something that most students here strive for.”

The tone is bemused, but distant.

“Ah, well, no, ma’am, I expect not. But I hope you remember the situation last time, how I was being set up and how I helped you get to the bottom of it all.”

I smile what I believe to be a rakish, movie-star smile.

“I do indeed, Mr. MacQuarrie, and that’s why you’re not already suspended. Lurking in the bushes outside sororities is not something we tolerate around here. Not at all, not for any reason. Although I expect that you have a reason?”

She tilts her head slightly to her right and arches her eyebrows.

“I know it looked bad, ma’am, to those police officers. But, honest, I wasn’t ‘lurking.’ I was looking for something, for a book. Ah, well, you see, I had been visiting one of the Tri-Deltas, a girl I had a study date with. But, well, we had this argument, see, and she threw my Middle English lit book out the window. So I was looking around for it. There. In those bushes. Honest.”

This time my smile probably classifies as “feeble.”

Her look tells me that my story doesn’t pass the giggle test, that, even though she will never be able to refute it, she’ll never believe it, either. And her expression reminds me of how my biology professor looked when she was examining the dead frog I’d carved up—mangled, really—in her lab section.

Finally, Annette broke the silence.

“So, Sam told you how they operate. But you haven’t told us your plan. Just how do you plan to get her out of this, hmm?”

“Well, you know, I didn’t have a chance to get that far. This cruise ship thing came up, and I got distracted. But it was going to involve another visit to Sun and Sand by Randolph Hunt and more discussion of a cash contract buy-out. And then, when Kirov refused to be reasonable, a little more

direct persuasion. These things have to be played by feel, though, you know? You can't script them too closely."

I realized how lame that sounded, but I didn't know what else to say.

Annette looked at Sam. "Well, you've got to give him a lot of points for trying to be the romantic hero, no? Lots of points."

Sam nodded and patted my arm. It felt good, but also condescending.

"Mac, my friend, I've had a few days with the ship's internet service to check some things out. And your background is indeed pretty impressive, so I think I can understand your self-confidence." Annette smiled and shook her head. "But there's such a thing as too much self-confidence. And it turns out that this Nikolay Kirov character is the son-in-law of the head of the North American branch of the Russian mafia. These are not people you want to take on by yourself, believe me."

All I could do was shrug.

She smiled more broadly. "If I might make a suggestion, though ..."

* * *

We met for dinner Sunday evening, for dinner and good-byes, at Anthony's, a venerable San Diego seafood standby, on the bay across the street from our hotel. That hotel was a Holiday Inn, but not your typical backwoods version. Sitting across the street from Anthony's as well as the cruise-ship port and a couple of picturesque antique clipper ships open to tourists, its upper-floor west-side rooms had balconies overlooking the entire central harbor and providing views of remarkable sunsets behind Coronado Island. We almost just stayed put and ordered room service. But Hal and Annette were headed back to Colorado in the morning and I had discovered that I was expected back in Southeast Florida post-haste, so Sam and I were not staying around, either. We all wanted a farewell dinner together.

Anthony's had a big, open dining room tending toward noisy, but that was what we needed to cover the topic of the conversation. I owed Hal and Annette a debrief on where things stood, as he quickly made clear.

"A toast to what I think we can call 'victory.'"

Hal raised his glass of iced tea as soon as our various drinks arrived.

"At least, assuming everything worked out according to plan today, right? Did you ever find out anything about this guy Trimble?"

"Oh, yeah. I had plenty of time to check him out completely. And now he has one of my tracking devices embedded in his personal belongings, along with the two on the empty pigs."

I stopped to take a long sip of my rum and tonic.

"Seems that he was born in central Mississippi, made it through elementary and high school without incident or distinction, and then he signed up for a hitch in the Navy. Stayed just long enough to qualify for college tuition benefits and didn't make it beyond the basic seaman rating, but he kept his nose clean. After an honorable discharge, he moved to South Florida, to an apartment complex in Weston, way out by the Everglades on the far west edge of the Fort Lauderdale metropolitan area, and enrolled in Florida International University down in west Miami. He racked up some 73 credit hours toward an undeclared major before dropping out. Because he has no criminal or other records, and because his background check for Naval service involved only his juvenile years, there's no real information available about hobbies or interests outside his work. We do know that he attends some oddball church down there, but

so does half the population in general, there's so many oddball churches in South Florida. His work records include construction, landscaping, which probably means yard maintenance, car sales, and most recently working as crew on the *Earth Explorer*, a position no doubt gained because of his experience in the Navy. All-in-all, a life-long dossier of a very average Joe, undistinguished in any way and unsuccessful as well."

Annette looked puzzled. "How and why he would be involved in an activity as high-level and risky as this SNM theft, then?"

I shrugged. "A complete mystery. But I expect we'll find out when he gets picked up. He seems like the type to cave in to interrogation."

"So where is he now?"

Hal had been too busy with the ship's arrival to pay attention to our quarry that afternoon.

Right about then, the server arrived with our appetizers, a big plate of deep-fried calamari with two lively sauces, and a sushi sampler. I tucked a couple of bites away before resuming my narrative.

"When the ship docked, I went up on deck and fired up the software on my tracking computer to make sure everything was working, and then we caught a lift to the hotel and settled in. Nothing much happened until after lunch, and then the computer beeped. The screen showed a detailed map with a blinking triangle—us—across from the port and three circles of different colors next to the shoreline. Little by little one of the circles, the blue one, which was Trimble, began to move away from the others, toward the shore. He was walking down the dock. I grabbed a pair of binoculars to verify his progress from our balcony, and there he was, a duffle bag slung over one shoulder and a small briefcase in his other hand. A hundred yards back, two of the FBI suits I'd noticed earlier were on his tail. It concerned me a little when I saw Trimble catch a cab at the end of the dock, but I needn't have worried. Those two FBI agents did just fine, getting a cab of their own, following Trimble to Lindberg Field, and then discovering that he was boarding a flight to Fort Lauderdale and getting last minute seats themselves. I got a phone call about all this just before we came over here to dinner."

I stuck my appetizer fork into another big piece of the calamari.

"So his part of this conspiracy, then, was simply to look after the pigs during the cruise."

Hal was working on the eel from the sushi sampler.

"Right. And as soon as he's arrested in Fort Lauderdale, or wherever, he'll be finding out that his life expectancy is now considerably truncated, thanks to the sloppiness of the materials handling by his counterparts in Florida. Poor schmuck."

I looked around for the server. My glass was empty.

"OK, well, what about those pigs? Where'd they get off to?"

Annette had finished her part of the sushi and was sitting back, blinking away tears from the wasabi.

I had to smile, not at her but at myself. Most of my afternoon had consisted of a gold-plated stake-out to keep track of those pigs.

Despite shelves full of spy novels that convey other impressions, espionage work always involves lots of waiting around, waiting and, usually, watching. Editors, I'm certain, don't want realistic spy novels, because they wouldn't fall into the "thriller" genre; rather, they would be boring, boring, boring. Stories about guys sitting around drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes just don't grab your average reader.

All that waiting around, of course, provides ample opportunities for thinking about things, and my thoughts on this occasion have turned to the thrilling life of a spy, as least if those shelves full of novels have any credibility. The reality of my situation, though, is flushing that credibility down the toilet.

I'm sitting in a cab, disguised as its driver, on a street in what passes for suburban Athens. The light on top is off, so no one will be bothering me for a ride while I wait for the deputy ambassador from Saudi Arabia to finish up his tryst two houses down the block. He arrived in a limousine, which departed after he got out, and I'm expecting its return any time now. I mean, how long could it take for this turkey to get off, anyway?

I'm on this detail because we suspect the deputy ambassador of treason against his kingdom, something that, if we can prove it to his government's satisfaction, will result in the separation of his head from his shoulders in a most primitive fashion. And this would be quite fine with us, because he's demonstrated on any number of occasions that he would just love to see the United States of America adopt fundamentalist Islamic principles as its official state religion. Worse, he's provided financial support for organizations that are actively and violently working toward that goal.

Today, though, he's not meeting with his favorite terrorists but with a lonely Greek socialite he was introduced to at an embassy reception last week. Her husband, a prominent member of the international banking community, is out of the country on a business trip, and she's taking advantage of his absence to learn about sexual techniques from the desert.

And I sure wish he'd hurry up and get it over with. I've been drinking coffee all morning and desperately have to take a leak. Talk about the tension of espionage—I'm feeling it.

“It was about five this afternoon when the pigs finally started to move, well after Trimble caught his flight to Florida. In fact, the computer map had zoomed back, showing his blinking blue circle over Texas, when it beeped again. I zoomed the map in here and watched the symbols for the pigs, from their tracking gadgets, as they eased down the dock right on top of each other, mimicking the earlier motion of Trimble's own tracking device. With the binoculars, I could see that they had to be in a van with an OceanParts logo on the side, because it was the only thing moving down there. I got on the phone and discovered that both the FBI and SEAL teams were on top of things, something was confirmed by the slow creep of the FBI sedan I'd seen earlier toward the street, and the four athletic-looking men on foot. It took only about ten minutes, and the two circles on the screen were headed north on I-5. I watched for a little while, and they kept on north, toward Los Angeles. I have to assume that by now the FBI has them located along with the west coast conspirators.”

My second drink arrived just in time.

“Sounds like it's a wrap to me.”

Hal smiled with satisfaction, and Annette was nodding. Sam, sitting beside me, patted my knee.

“Well, yes, this part of it. But that phone call I got this afternoon was a good-news, bad-news sort of call. The good news, like I said, was that the FBI guys were on the flight with Trimble.”

I paused for dramatic effect by taking a sip of my rum and tonic and poking around the plate for more calamari.

Sam gave in first.

“Well, so, what's the bad news? C'mon, don't play with us!” This time she smacked my knee.

I smiled. “Something I should have figured out, I suppose. It turns out that only about half the missing SNM was recovered from those two pigs on board the *Earth Explorer*. I should have known,

because if all of it had been stuffed into just those two containers, it would probably have gone critical. And there were four pigs still missing after they found that missing van down by West Palm Beach. Duh, silly me. Anyway, the rest is still probably back in Florida. And that, my dear, is why we're getting a red-eye home tonight."

* * *

Part III: Just Hot

hot (hŏt) adj. ... 1.a. Having or giving off heat; capable of burning. b. Being at a high temperature. ... 5a. Marked by intensity of emotion; ardent or fiery

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,
Fourth Edition*

Fifteen

The red-eye back to Miami was not quite as elegant as our flight down to Panama had been, but that was only because we had eaten and they didn't need to cook for us this time. After the dinner with Hal and Annette, Sam and I packed up our things, got a cab out to the Naval Air Station on Coronado Island, and found another executive jet awaiting us. This one was made up as a sleeper, with separate cabins for the two of us. We used one for the luggage. The opportunity to become members of the Mile-High Club was just too good to pass up.

We arrived back at the Boca Raton airport at about 6:30 Monday morning, and a Navy officer handed me a fat envelope as I deplaned. It could wait, I decided, until we got "home."

Back at my hotel, Sam unpacked, took one look at the situation, and made a decision.

"Mac, I'm going to have to get more of my things from my place. This stuff worked for the cruise, but it won't for real life."

She was standing in one of those hand-on-hip positions that I knew, instinctively I guess, wouldn't consider any discussion. On the other hand, having just started life over except for a car and some spook toys, I knew it could be done. Besides, I was willing to bet that she would actually enjoy shopping.

"You don't think those Surf 'n Suck boys are there waiting for you to show up?"

She looked disgusted. "Sun and Sand. Geez."

"Whatever. But, look, you're the one who's scared of them. You've got to know they're looking for you by now, right?"

She nodded. "I can't just abandon everything in my apartment, though. I mean, I've got my *really* important stuff locked away in storage, but there are clothes and all sorts of things I'd hate to lose."

"Well, do you remember what Annette suggested?" She nodded again. "Let's make a plan instead of just running down there, OK? Maybe we can solve the problem once and for all."

Annette's suggestion had been quite sensible, if not something I would have expected to hear from a law enforcement officer. No doubt, she said, that Sam's co-workers would be grateful for having been

rescued from the hunting camp in the Everglades, and they'd probably be even more grateful if they were relieved of their contractual responsibilities to Sun and Sand. Conversely, it seemed obvious to Annette, from what Sam had told her, that Ross Bierkens and his men were offended by the treatment of the girls at the hunting camp and that their enmity extended to Sun and Sand as well. Perhaps, she suggested, the Omega Team would be interested in some off-duty head-knocking in return for whatever creative gratitude the girls might be able to conjure up.

Sam, of course, was out of the picture, having shown her gratitude to me in all sorts of creative ways, but it seemed like the other girls just might be available. Lining them up would be Sam's job—I had to work on Commander Bierkens and his team. I was hoping that none of them was married.

But it was still too early to begin telephone calls, and besides, we were both starving. And there were numerous devilish details to be worked out. So I tackled putting together a credible breakfast—not as good or as geographically diversified as the one on the first Navy plane ride, but still pretty good—while we discussed tactics.

For sheer chutzpah, I can't think of a more outrageous assignment than my current one as a short-order cook in a greasy-spoon breakfast-and-lunch joint in Berlin. First, my German isn't all that accomplished—that's OK, the handlers said, people will just think you're a rube from Bavaria. Second, I really don't know how to cook American breakfasts, let alone German ones—but that's OK, too, they said, just fry up some bratwurst with scrambled eggs and serve it with toast.

Of course, when I show up for work, the boss doesn't like my German and he wants me to cook what's on the menu, only with small portions, to save money. On the excuse that I don't want to ruin his joint's fine reputation, I get him to show me how to cook what. Fortunately, for both me and the customers, it's all pretty easy.

I'm on this job because the deputy political liaison from the Iraqi embassy just down the street has developed a taste for German breakfasts, including the very politically incorrect, by his standards, pork sausages we serve. Mr. Aziz would lose both his job and possibly his life if this new taste were found out, so three or four times a week he comes in alone, reads the newspaper and eats breakfast, and leaves by the back door.

Mr. Aziz is not only the deputy political liaison, he's also the prime operative in the transfer of large sums of cash from Middle Eastern banks to various organizations that Uncle Sam considers to be full of terrorist nasties. So Mr. Aziz has to be decommissioned.

A couple of weeks back, he ingested the first half of a binary poison at an embassy party. We had managed to ensure that the stuffed dates he so loves were all dosed with part one. Although many of the other guests also ate those dates, they are perfectly safe. As will be Mr. Aziz, until he ingests the second part—and that's what I'm doing as a short-order cook, dosing his breakfast.

And here is his order—potato pancakes and sausage, with a side of scrambled eggs with ketchup. Five minutes later, it's all ready, with a cute swirl of ketchup on top of the eggs, ketchup with the required four drops of part two. Good night, Mr. Aziz. Have a nice heart attack.

“I still don't see how you're going to pull this off, Mac. Nikolay has lots of muscle at his beck and call.”

Sam was shoveling in large bites of an omelet.

“Exactly. And you can provide a list of that muscle, so we can get the SEALs to take care of them. The Commander and I, meantime, can play a visit to Nikolay, and he’ll get a choice of learning to fly off his balcony or leaving town permanently. Right? Then the guys and girls can have a big party. Or whatever.”

“But, sweetie, you remember what Annette said, that Nikolay has family connections to the Russian mafia, right?”

I smiled and nodded. “Right. But that part will be just fine. See, first, my years as a New York cop included plenty of interactions with the real Mafia, the guys from Sicily. And it so happens they owe me some favors. And, second, it turns out that Miami is still an open city, turf where no one is supposed to be operating. Good old Nikolay is breaking some very old and venerable gentlemen’s agreements, agreements that are taken very seriously. So all it will take is the right word to Nikolay’s connections and all will be well.”

“Does all this mean I can get my stuff from my apartment?”

She was polishing off the last piece of toast.

“In fact, I think what we can do is to make a trip down there later today, if the Omega Team is available. They can shadow us, and if any of Nikolay’s muscle shows up, the fun will begin. Meantime, if there’s something you really need, why don’t we just go shopping. I mean, hey, this is Boca Raton, after all. There must be some stores here you could find what you want in.”

She perked right up. “Say, you know, that’s right! I think there’s a Bloomingdales in a mall somewhere around here. And a Nieman Marcus. But I thought you didn’t want me to go out alone.”

“I don’t. But that’s OK, I’ll come along and exercise some of these neglected credit cards that Bill Petersen gave me. And I have lots of work to do, so I can sit and read while you pick stuff out, and then I can critique it when you try it on. OK?”

I got up and started to clear the dishes.

“No, wait. I’ll do that. You cooked. If we’re going to set up housekeeping, we need to share the chores.”

Well, she’d already won my mind and body, now she was going to win my heart.

* * *

After my house blew up—or, more accurately, was blown up—I managed to rebuild my wardrobe without going into the Town Center Mall. Shortly after moving into that house, I’d made the mistake of visiting the place to pick up some tools from Sears. It’s possible to use the Sears entrance and avoid the rest of it, but I was new to town, and curious.

I don’t know whether it was the matrons with drum-tight cheeks that yanked their mouths into perpetual smiles, the teenagers wearing iPods and pants around their knees, or the thirty-something tennis babes with their boobs hanging out, but it didn’t take long for me to decide that it was just not my sort of place.

And that didn’t even consider the stores. That curiosity I mentioned motivated me to take a walk around, and the only stores I found of interest were the Sears I’d started in, a Radio Shack right next door, and a store that sold Sony electronics a few yards away. The other two hundred or so just didn’t float my boat.

All of this is by way of saying that I didn't pretend to be able to guide Sam around when we went there. But, then, she didn't need a guide in that kind of place. Like a pre-programmed cruise missile, she targeted the best stores and hit them with nary a detour. I was just along as a companion and, as I discovered later, a pack horse.

But I took a shoulder bag with my laptop computer and that fat envelope they'd handed me at the airport, so I had plenty to keep me amused, if that's the right word.

The sportswear department at Bloomingdales had nice easy chairs for guys like me—and I mean that literally. Several of those chairs were occupied by gentlemen of my vintage and older, all of whom were attending to females of the trophy-wife variety. Some of them, the men, were reading the *Wall Street Journal*, checking their stocks, I supposed, to see if they could afford the clothes they were going to be buying shortly. Others were intermittently looking terribly bored or making polite comments about whatever their trophy had just tried on.

I settled in and opened that envelope. Inside were a single sheet of paper and other envelopes with Top Secret markings. Great, I thought, warn me why don't you? But opening those envelopes without taking them out of the plain one meant that no one would know what I was reading, so I plunged in.

The loose sheet of paper was a note to me from Bill Petersen saying that the envelopes were official copies of my reports to date that I needed to initial for validation purposes. When I finished that exciting task, I was supposed to call him.

I was halfway through checking my report about the kayak trip to the consulate's dock when I heard Sam's voice.

"Mac? Isn't this just *darling*?"

I looked up, and she was standing in front of a mirror, so I could see both her back and, in the mirror, her front. She was wearing one of those tennis-babe outfits and tugging at various spots to get the fit right. Like the other babes wandering the mall, her boobs were on display. The outfit's top, stretched to its limits, was held together by one strategically positioned button, clearly the weak link in the whole thing.

"Um, Sam? Is that supposed to be a functional tennis outfit? I mean, don't you think, maybe, it's a size too small or something? That button in the front there looks like it's under a lot of strain. Is it going to work if you're really playing tennis?"

I kept my voice low, but in my peripheral vision I noticed a couple of heads turn. Those other guys were suddenly not so bored.

"You think so?"

She hopped up and down a few times, and I enjoyed the way her backside flexed. The guys in the other chairs were enjoying the view in the mirror, I decided, because I heard the rustling of a couple of *Wall Street Journals* falling to the floor.

But Sam was oblivious—given her background, she was not at all body-conscious. She tugged at a couple of places near her shoulders, then hopped more vigorously. And that poor button just couldn't take it anymore. Off it popped, bouncing off the mirror with a distinct click, the ricochet then whizzing past my head. And, bloop, out she fell from the tennis top, both of her.

"Well, shit!"

She stared at herself in frustration.

If Sam wasn't body-conscious, the same cannot be said for the guys in the room. I was hearing gasps and coughs from the chairs around me, so I turned to look. With the exception of one poor fellow

whose red face indicated that he was having serious problems with either his heart or his breathing, all of the men were suddenly quite interested in the ceiling tiles.

“You’re right, Mac. This won’t do at all. We’re taking up tennis, you know, so this has to be functional.”

And she walked off toward the changing rooms, her short skirt swaying suggestively while I pondered the business of taking up tennis.

The fellow with the red face had begun wheezing, and he reached into a shirt pocket and extracted a bottle of pills, popped one, and suddenly looked much better. I went back to my reading.

Several reports and four outfits later, I had initialed everything and was ready to call Petersen. Any conversation with him, I knew, would have to be cryptic, but I wanted him to know I was on the job. I put on my Bluetooth earpiece and punched up his number on the encrypted cell phone he’d given me.

For the first time, I’m thinking about retirement. The notion takes me by surprise, because retiring is just something that never occurred to me before. But this latest version of a field satcom unit has provoked memories of all of the various communications arrangements I’ve used in the field. And it makes me feel old.

Originally, of course, there wasn’t much of anything. Even short-wave radio transmission required bulky equipment, and people on their own in enemy territory couldn’t manage it. Reception was possible, with the new-fangled transistor receivers, but one-way communication isn’t really communication.

Communications satellites made two-way communication possible, but the first units were also prohibitively bulky, for most field agents, at least. On three occasions, I was sent behind the Iron Curtain in a specially prepared car, so I was able to take advantage of the satellites. But sometimes you need to call home and the car is somewhere else.

Then satellite phones, first generation, and cell phones came along, and matters improved. But encryption on the early units was nonexistent, meaning anyone, particularly the bad guys, could listen in. Digital technology helped with that, of course, and eventually true encryption made private communication possible. Yet cell phone coverage isn’t always available, especially in places of interest to my agency.

And now I’m sitting on the balcony of my hotel room in Bahrain, talking into the microphone of my wireless headset that’s linked to the card-deck-sized unit on the cocktail table. Its satellite link makes the voice in my ear sound as clear as if Bill were sitting next to me, except that there is this annoying delay to deal with.

And when I think about how many times technology such as this could have made my job so much easier, how many colleagues’ lives could have been saved, I just feel old.

That offer from the NYPD is looking better all the time.

“Mac, thanks for calling in. You get those reports?” Petersen sounded tired.

“Yeah, and they’re all fine. I’ll pass the initialed ones along next time I see you. But, look, this is all stuff I already know. Are there any new developments? Oh. And, listen. You can talk away, but be aware that my answers may be a little vague. I’m in public.”

“‘In public?’ You shouldn’t even be calling this number, then. Christ, Mac. You always were a loose cannon.”

“You gave me this phone, so you know its capabilities, Bill. Quit worrying. I’ll not be talking much. What’s new on your end?”

I didn’t say it, but I was thinking “and you always were a shithead.”

“OK, well, there’s nothing new on the Saudi Consulate business. Our listeners didn’t pick up any hints that your little expedition was compromised or anything like that. They must have written things off to a false alarm or something like that. And, of course, there were no radionuclides of concern, as you remember.” He paused, and I heard papers shuffling.

“There’s nothing more from the Everglades business either, and, hey, no jokes, OK? Those rednecks out there were just making moonshine and getting laid. And killing the odd Federal agent, of course. We got one to spill, used that to persuade others, and now there’s solid testimony about who shot Jim Lund, so that one’s a wrap.” There was more shuffling. “Any questions so far?”

“Well, you know, originally we had a pretty solid Middle Eastern connection, that group in Coconut Grove, right? I guess that’s still hanging out there, but we can probably eliminate a connection to the consulate.”

I wondered if that would be too specific for public consumption in his view.

“Hmm. Let’s not go farther with that just now, OK? We can talk it over in person. There’s still some connection, just not what we thought.” More shuffling. “Now, the last thing you looked into was that mansion in Boca Raton, the place belonging to Winfrew Hanley, right? The guy whose rental mailbox the original SNM list was sent to. That bears more investigation. We cruised the neighborhood like you did and made some flyovers with detectors and picked up a little extra in the way of decays. Not definitive, but for sure more than background. That’s where we’re going to focus some energy next, and I’m hoping you can help with that.”

“Any sign of Mr. Hanley?”

I remembered that the last I’d heard he had become invisible.

“None. But I’m getting to that. First, though, your friend Willoughby Trimble. He arrived at Fort Lauderdale last night, and we tailed him to his place out in Weston. The only thing that’s happened is that he made a telephone call and left a message at a number we have. It’s a land line, with the handset and answering machine located in a cheap storefront on Commercial Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. Obviously just the equivalent of a blind mail drop. That line is now tapped, and early this morning it got a call to retrieve messages, from one of those throw-away cell phones. The connection time was too short to get a precise fix on its position, but it’s somewhere in south Boca Raton.” I heard him take a breath.

“Which brings me to Mr. Hanley. We’ve been watching his house. In fact, we rented a house in the neighborhood just across the lake from his, and we’ve got our guys on the gate guard shifts. And we’ve got NRO on the job. The President has approved lifting some of the usual restrictions about domestic surveillance. Nobody’s seen Winfrew Hanley, but his brother has been around some.” More shuffling papers.

“I thought they were twins. How can you tell?” I remembered the dossier Bill had given me.

“They are, but Josiah is skinny and Winfrew is fat. Anyway, that’s it. What we’re going to need next is another covert visit with a decay counter. By water.” He laughed. “Maybe you can find out for us if those ‘Beware of Alligators’ signs around the lake mean anything.”

At least, I thought, I've still got that bar code for the Exclusiva at Boca gate on my car. But I wasn't at all interested in alligators.

"Up yours, Bill."

Sometimes my eloquence just flows.

* * *

Sixteen

By the time we finished shopping, it was too late to pay a visit to Sam's apartment with the Omega Team as backup. But I did manage to get in touch with Ross Bierkens. He was amused by the whole idea of bringing down Sun and Sand, and he said he'd ask for volunteers from his team.

"But I don't know about the 'gratitude' business, Mac. That sounds a little like pandering to me."

I could hear the disapproval in his voice.

"We weren't thinking of anything formal, maybe just an informal get-together at a nightclub or something, so that the girls could say thank you. If it's at a public location, well, whatever happens later on in private is their own business, right? I mean, everyone is a consenting adult."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he rang off to make some calls.

Sam, for her part, had been chatting merrily on her cell phone all day. I don't know quite how she managed to try on so many clothes and use a cell phone at the same time, but by mid-afternoon she told me she had several of her co-workers lined up for a celebration party with the Omega Team. The girls, she said, would be delighted to be meet the guys and express their gratitude for having been rescued both from the rednecks and from Kirov. This reminded me of something I needed to ask Sam, but it would have to wait. Victoria's Secret was pretty busy at the time, and that conversation needed to be private.

We detoured through Exclusiva at Boca on our way home from mall. I wanted to verify that the bar code still worked and to check out the house that Petersen had rented.

I recognized the guard in the Exclusiva gate house as one of the people from Petersen's pre-Everglades meeting and gave him a wave as the gate rose for me. As I remembered from my previous visit, the place was a rat-maze of streets, so it took us a while to find the house in question. But that gave us a chance to look the neighborhood over. In the process, Sam's curiosity finally got the better of her.

"Mac, what are we doing here, anyway? Yeah, you said you wanted to check something out, but it looks like you're checking out the whole development. You looking to buy a house or something?"

She had been staring with wide eyes at what opulence was visible. It occurred to me that I could have a little fun with that line of thought.

"Well, you said something about setting up housekeeping earlier, and the hotel isn't really appropriate for that. See anything you like here?"

"I can't see crap, what with all these fences and hedges, and neither can you. Besides, there aren't any for sale signs." She sniffed. "Anyway, this kind of plastic paradise isn't for me. If I've gotta live in the city, I want it to be *city*, an apartment in a high-rise with a bus stop, stuff like that."

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I’m trying to find a house that the Feds rented for this ongoing investigation of the SNM. Remember I said that some is still missing?”

“Yeah. You guys think it could be *here*?”

“Who knows? But we need to check out everything.”

I remembered the deferred conversation.

“Say, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. It concerns your old job, so please don’t get upset, OK? But it’s possibly important. Remember I said I talked with Nikolay? Well, he told me what your daily rate was. And it seems like Sun and Sand is generally a high-class operation, in terms of pricing, at least. So what in the world were you and the rest of the girls doing out at that hunting camp in the ‘Glades? Those rednecks couldn’t afford you, surely.”

I was hoping she wouldn’t get mad, and, to my relief, she didn’t.

“No way. That was a bunch of low-life white trash if I ever saw it. In fact, when they locked us all in that little bedroom, we were talking about just that, trying to figure it out. I mean, that was fifty large a day worth of talent locked in there. But one of the girls, Tawney, she said she’d been on a date with that Hiram guy before, and that Nikolay had comped it. A freebie. So something’s going on between that bunch of moonshiners and Nikolay, I guess.”

I thought for a minute. “Ah. Well, in a way, that’s even better. It means that the real mob will be even more pissed off at Nikolay and will be willing to put even more pressure on Nikolay’s connections to cut him loose. And I think that Ross and I can use this information to help the cause.”

One of my first lessons in spookdom is that the criminal underworld is your friend, or can be, at least. You have to be careful, because some organized crime outfits are surprisingly patriotic, and if they think you’re a “bad” spy, well, watch out. But almost all organized crime has it in for certain aspects of the active government, and it’s pretty easy to play that one to good effect. You just have to be careful that they don’t play you and, ultimately, turn you in. It helps if you can team up with them against rival gangs.

And there’s some level of organized crime almost everywhere, even in totalitarian countries—indeed, sometimes those are the most organized of criminals.

That’s certainly the case in Libya for this assignment. The Kadhafi regime classifies as totalitarian, and the criminals are even more organized than the ones in New Jersey.

My instructions are to contact a basket-seller named Abdul, who has a stall on the southern fringe of the main bazaar in Tripoli. It’s easy to play tourist, strolling randomly about and examining the merchandise, introducing myself and asking for Abdul. But there are lots of basket-sellers, and when the first one is Abdul, I’m surprised. And when the second, third, and fourth ones are also Abduls, I get suspicious, and the picture finally comes into focus. Tell the dumb tourist what he wants to hear and sell him something. So I’ve got to have a strategy.

Which of the basket-sellers, I ask myself, looks different? It stands to reason that the one I’m looking for isn’t just your run-of-the-mill merchant. I wander, smile and nod, occasionally pick up a basket. And everywhere, I’m immediately accosted by the merchant, jabbering at me in the oddly accented Arabic they use, telling me how his baskets are the best and least expensive and what would I offer for that one?

But at one stall, the merchant ignores me. I pick up a half dozen different baskets, look them over, thump them, even, and he still ignores me. He couldn't care less if he sells anything. And I notice that, unlike the other stalls, this one has no second, silent partner who seems to be watching for shoplifters.

Bingo. No one shoplifts from this guy, because they know that if they do, they're toast.

"Excuse me, Abdul, I wonder if I might have a word." He looks up and smiles.

I noticed a name sign on a lamp post.

"Hey, does that say 'Nichols'? Yeah. This is the house."

There was a gate across the driveway, with one of those keypad-speaker boxes, so I pulled in beside it and pushed a button.

"Si?"

The voice was tinny, and I wasn't expecting Spanish.

"Mac MacQuarrie. Bill Petersen sent me."

That seemed to work, because the gate began to open.

Past the gate, a driveway—pavers, laid in an interesting pattern—led to a faux Italian villa, a surprisingly common, if ridiculous, architecture in this part of Florida. The ten-foot high, double front door was open, and two large men with that distinctive Federal Agent look stood on the porch, their right hands reaching across their chests inside their jackets. I suspected they wanted to be sure that I really was who I had said I was. But I was, and I recognized them from Petersen's briefing, as I had the gate guard, so all was well.

I leaned over toward Sam. "Do us a favor and sit tight until I open your door, OK? Those guys look nervous." She patted my hand.

I parked in front of the house with the porch on the right of the car and got out. The two Feds hadn't moved a muscle.

"Mac MacQuarrie, guys. At ease. I'm here to check out the situation, and I've got a friend."

They still didn't move.

I walked around the car, opened Sam's door, and smiled at her.

"They're still nervous, so don't pull a gun or anything."

She smiled back and winked. Uh-oh, I thought.

For reasons unclear, but quite possibly because she's a big flirt, Sam had decided to wear home one of her Victoria's Secret purchases, a resort outfit consisting of a teeny-tiny bikini and an almost socially acceptable, matching silk cover-up of the sarong family with blue and pink orchids all over it. How we made it out of the mall to the car without being arrested is something I'm still pondering. Maybe it was because of how comical I looked, carrying all those boxes and bags.

She turned slightly in the car seat and thrust her right leg out, and the sarong fell away. The agents were left looking at a sandal-clad foot attached to a bare leg that went well beyond all the way up. Out came the other leg, this one covered with silken orchids, and she stood up, adjusted the sarong, and looked around innocently.

"Is this our new home, sweetie?"

And she lowered her dark glasses and winked again.

I smiled at her. “Maybe. Let’s go in and check it out.”

* * *

After that performance, the agents could hardly detain us, although I bet they were hoping for an excuse to frisk Sam. Trouble was, there was no place she could be hiding a weapon that they couldn’t already see. So they let us into the house.

As I passed them on the porch, one said, “All the way down the hall, in the rear sun room. And thanks for the show, ma’am.”

Smartass, I thought.

Inside, the air conditioning was doing a credible job of keeping the temperature in the low seventies—meaning it felt cold compared to outside—and the lights were low. We took our time, admiring the various rooms we passed. It wasn’t exactly clear what their purposes were, but they were very nice rooms, assuming your tastes tended toward chrome and mirrors and commanding accent colors as decorating staples.

The last room on the left was the kitchen, and that I could relate to—a wonderful, professionally appointed kitchen. But the sliding doors to the sun room were right there, and the half dozen guys in white shirts and ties suggested to me that visiting hour was over and business called.

Sam and I stepped down into the sun room, and six heads turned our way.

One of them announced, “MacQuarrie? Glad you’re here. But, hey, who’s this? Christ, you can’t bring just anyone back here, what the hell do you think this is, anyway?”

I guessed he was talking about Sam.

“Oh, sorry. My mistake.”

And I took Sam’s elbow and turned both of us back toward the hallway we’d just come down.

“Time to go, kiddo.”

The various shouts and imprecations I heard as we walked back toward the front door suggested that our departure was not quite what they had intended, but that really didn’t matter. I’d retired from spook stuff to get away from all that foolishness, and I just wasn’t motivated to put up with it again.

As I wheeled the car around toward the gate across the driveway, I saw in the mirror the two agents on the porch raising their left hands and talking into their sleeves, and then they started out after us. But the gate had an automatic exit switch of some kind, because it opened as I approached it. We were back on the street before they caught us.

Our drive around the neighborhood earlier had oriented me, so I knew the way out. As I suspected, at the gate house the exit lane was blocked by one of the guards, who was waving at us to stop. Instead, I veered over to the guest entrance lane, used the sidewalk to dodge around the tip of the little arm that was supposed to constitute a gate, and stopped to wait for traffic so I could turn south on Military Trail. At the stop sign, I tossed the encrypted cell phone that Petersen had given me into the canal, a nice left-handed hook shot over the top of the car.

“I don’t think they really wanted you to leave, sweetie.”

Sam was looking back to see if they were following us.

“Maybe not, but they need to learn some manners before I’m going to have anything to do with them. Besides, we saw what we needed to see. Or least I did. What did you think of the place, present occupants excepted?”

I signaled to make another right, this one onto 18th Street.

“Well, you know, like the neighborhood, it’s really not my style. I mean, with all due respect, it’s nicer than where we are now. But I bet we could do lots better, easily. I guess your interest is really about the location, though. Something about that SNM, I bet, huh?”

“Yep. Don’t know if you noticed the house just across the lake, but it has some suspicious circumstances associated with it. That’s why those agents are there, watching it. I think Petersen wants me to swim across the lake and take a look around over there.” I shrugged.

“Why you? Can’t those guys swim?”

I looked over at her for long enough that I could feel the car starting to drift, and there was an irate honking noise from the left lane.

Out of the mouths of babes and innocents... Well, in this case, a babe.

“That, my dear, is the million-dollar question, and it’s one I want an answer to. Let’s go home.”

Back at the hotel, I had the dubious pleasure of playing pack horse again, between the car and our suite, but then the real pleasure of watching a fashion show as Sam tried on all her new clothes, including the functional tennis outfit. Not even the real Dolly would be popping loose from that sucker. Then she put that resort ensemble on again, and I got to help her take it off. That, and its inevitable follow-on, lasted until dinnertime.

By then the land-line phone had rung a half-dozen times, probably, I thought, Bill Petersen. Instead of calling him, though, I used the phone to order a couple of pizzas and salads from Sal’s, a local family-style Italian place.

Sometimes, I’ve learned, letting your handler stew a little is better than an immediate response to his concerns. He doesn’t really need blow-by-blow updates of every little thing, he just thinks he does. I guess that being a worrier is one of the qualifications for the job.

The increasingly tenuous Soviet economy has resulted in a new spirit of entrepreneurship among Russian scientists with skills to market. This spirit matches up well with the needs of the rich states of the Middle East, whose leaders would dearly love to claim membership in the international nuclear weapons club. Because those scientists and engineers can often smuggle materials and parts along with their own knowledge, it is a match made in heaven, or maybe paradise, depending on your philosophy about such places.

I’ve been set up as a middle-man, ostensibly to play match-maker between enterprising Russian scientists and Iraqi military personnel in charge of their floundering nuclear program. Of course, what I’m really supposed to do is to persuade the scientists that Uncle Sam will make them a better offer than Saddam’s guys ever will. But I have to be patient about playing that card, because I need the good will of the Iraqis for it all to work.

And while it’s easy for me to be patient, my agency contact is having trouble. He wants reports hourly, almost, every time I’m in discussions with a new scientist or when I meet with one of the generals.

At last, I’m talking with a Russian whose talents we don’t really care about—the Iraqis can have him. The match-maker is actually going to make a match!

The negotiations are delicate and require all of my skills as a translator and diplomat, and they stretch over several days. I'm simply too busy to call home. When it's all over and I finally do call in, I get chewed out royally. But the success trumps everything. And he's much more polite, and patient, the next time.

After dinner the phone rang yet again, and this time I decided I'd answer it.

"Christ, Mac! I've been trying to get hold of you for hours. What happened? Did you turn off that cell phone?"

Bill Petersen's voice was exasperated and a little worried.

"Cell phone? Oh, yeah. Sorry, but I seem to have misplaced it. Its battery died this afternoon, so I can't find it by calling it, either. Sorry." I really wasn't, of course, not at all. "Say, Bill, I've been thinking about something we need to get to the bottom of. And it's probably connected to the SNM thing, too. Who do you suppose blew up my house, anyway?"

That was probably the last thing he wanted to talk about it, and bringing it up put him off stride.

"Your house? Well, I just assumed that it was the same guys who were on your case about shooting that Al-Ayed guy, you know, the ones that had that PI follow you. But, look, that's going to have to wait. We need to get into the Hanley house, across the lake from here, have a look around. And, say, what happened, anyway? When I got here the guys told me that you just took off."

Now he sounded just a little mad.

"I saw all I needed to see, including eight very capable-looking guys who no doubt could get you whatever you need from across the lake. And you're right. It was probably connected with the Al-Ayed shooting. That means there's some connection to the Saudi consulate, even though I didn't find the SNM there. And, remember, Al-Ayed was the guy who mailed the SNM list to Hanley's mail box. So it's all connected. I think we should concentrate on that angle." I paused, but he didn't respond. "And, say, isn't it about time I saw a check or something? I've been on this job for a good two weeks now, and we had a financial arrangement. Doesn't Uncle Sam pay his bills?"

Now he was so off stride that he was practically tripping himself.

"Uh, I'll have that looked into. And maybe there's a connection between your house and the SNM, but you're the only one who's seeing it. What I want is for you to get in Hanley's house with a decay counter and see what's over there. We've got to move this thing along. The pressure from Washington is getting unbearable.

Unbearable for you, maybe, I thought. I'm doing just fine.

"Don't tell me that none of those eight brawny guys can swim. What's the younger generation coming to, anyway? Can't you folks do better with recruiting than that?" This time I didn't wait for a response. "But, look, Bill. If you're in such a hurry, you'd better get one of them some swimmy floats or something, because I can't possibly do it tomorrow. I'm booked up. People who pay their bills on time are the ones who get my attention first, and I'm afraid you're a tad behind on your payments. Tell you what. I'll call you when I'm free. Same number as always?"

"Holy crap, Mac! What are you trying to pull here?"

"Listen, you stupid son-of-a-bitch. *I'm* the one who took the tip about the SNM on that cruise ship, and I'm the one who found it, made arrangements to get it back to the Navy, and set things up to catch that Trimble guy. I've done half your job for you, and now you want me to do the other half, without being paid, yet. Meanwhile, my house got blown to smithereens and I lost everything, you've just

admitted it's connected to this case, and you don't seem to give a shit. I'm not lifting a finger for you until you get the bill paid. And, say, the price just doubled. I don't seem to be able to trust you, so if you want anything else from me, make sure that double what you owe me shows up in that Swiss account you seem to know about. Got it?"

I managed not to get too worked up during this little speech, even though it released a lot of pent-up frustration.

There was a pause, and his voice came back silky smooth, oily, even.

"Well, Mac, I think the situation now is that you need me more than I need you. I mean, for one thing, you're right—the guys at the house are quite capable. And for sure they can swim, all of them. So I'll just move ahead without you. When you get hungry, you'll come crawling back, I'm sure."

"Fine with me, Bill. Don't forget, though, that I know various people in Washington, and that stiffing me won't bode well for your ability in the future to enlist help from outside your own very small circle. Your credit rating, so to speak, will tank. Think about it. And I'll give you a call Wednesday, after I take care of some other business tomorrow."

And I hung up before he could say anything else.

Sam was staring at me with wide eyes. "Gee, sweetie, I don't recall hearing you get so worked up before. Didn't know you had it in you."

I smiled and gave her a big hug. "Some people bring out the worst in me. If you're around, you may see more tomorrow, when Ross and I meet with Nikolay."

* * *

Seventeen

Tuesday morning, about ten, Sam and I drove down to Miami Beach to pay a visit to her apartment. After our shopping trip, she needed less of her stuff than she had before, clothes at least, but she still need to pick up some things. And we thought we just might pick up some of Kirov's goons as well.

On that chance, Ross Bierkens and six members of the Omega Team met us a block from the apartment, arriving in an anonymous, windowless van of the sort you see all over the Miami area. We decided that Sam and I would go up to her apartment—I would probably be reprising my role as pack horse, I thought—and that Ross and company would provide backup in case we were accosted.

The team, dressed in baggy paramedic scrubs with lots of pockets, had brought all sorts of useful equipment, so when Sam and I went up the elevator, I was wearing a miniature transceiver that provided an automated communications link to everyone else—so if we got jumped, help was only a holler away. Ross and two of the guys came up with us, while the other four covered the building's entrances.

That building was a glass and stucco affair on the Intracoastal Waterway. Sam had a tenth floor, west side unit with, no doubt, spectacular sunsets, six doors away from the elevator lobby.

As she took out her key, I stopped her.

"Just a sec. Let me have a look."

I squatted and examined the lock plate. A new-looking scratch in the brass had caught my eye.

“Do you remember this scratch?”

“No. Geez. Who did that? That sucks.”

She inserted the key and turned it, unlocking the door with a solid click.

As the door opened, a cloud of stale cigarette smoke mixed with rancid sweat puffed out into the hall.

I said quietly, “Company, Ross.”

Sam walked into the apartment, into her kitchen, and I followed. The door closed behind me, and I heard a footstep.

“So, she finally returns. With a john, even.”

The voice was deep and had a trace of a Russian accent.

“Don’t turn around, just keep walking. Don’t even think about doing anything heroic. Go sit on the couch, both of you.”

In the living room, the shades were drawn, so I didn’t have a chance to enjoy the view I knew was out there. A burly individual sat in an easy chair across from the couch, and as we turned and sat, I saw that the guy from the kitchen was equally well put together. He stayed on his feet, standing near the kitchen door.

“At least two, unlocked,” I said quietly and as casually as I could.

“Quiet, you. We’ll get to you in a minute. First, I have to welcome Dolly home from wherever she was. Which is an interesting question. Where were you, anyway, Dolly? We’ve all been worried. Nikolay especially.”

The goon in the easy chair also spoke with a slight Russian accent.

Sam was doing a good job of keeping her cool, under the circumstances.

“Serge, you asshole. Break into my place, stink it up with your smoke and BO. But I guess it’s about what I should expect from you.”

Serge’s eyebrows lifted almost to his hairline.

“My, my. I think we’ll need a training session. Has this, er, gentleman been having a bad influence on you? Georgi, take Mr. WhatHisName into the bedroom and teach him some lessons in courtesy, will you?”

“Call me Mac, gentlemen. And I should point out that Ms. Winslow’s assessment of your character seems quite accurate. I didn’t have to teach her anything, she came up with that all on her own. And I should also say that I’m afraid you’re quite out of your depth with all this. It seems unfair not to let you know that, even if you’re not likely to believe me.”

As I wound down, through the kitchen I saw the door to the hall open with no sound. Ross Bierkens and two of his men slipped through.

Serge and Georgi found my comments quite amusing, and Georgi was laughing and shaking his head as he walked over to where I was sitting.

As he reached out to grab my collar, I simultaneously kicked upward as hard as I could, connecting between his legs, and grabbed his index finger and bent it backwards until it snapped. But he was a tougher fellow than I would have ever thought—these actions produced only a grunting noise, and, fire

in his eyes, he reached for me with his other hand. I grabbed the thumb of that hand and rolled sideways, away from Sam, dragging him with me. To my relief, as I hit the floor the cavalry arrived.

There was a solid *thwock*, and Georgi went limp, bounced off the couch, and landed on the floor. Bierkens was standing there holding a leather blackjack. I'd noticed that Serge had started to stand up, but then he sat back down abruptly and now had his hands raised.

"You people have no idea of the trouble you have made for yourselves. For the sake of your families, I hope you all have last wills and testaments in good order," he said.

"Two under control, all clear," Bierkens said quietly, and then louder, "OK, Mac, this looks good. Now what?"

"Well, Ross, I think we should find out a little more about these gentlemen by searching them and wherever they live. And Sam can gather whatever things she wants."

She stood. "First, though, I'm opening all the windows so this place can air out. Mac, I think these guys share an apartment with the other two, down on South Beach. And they'll be there, asleep, probably, until noon at least. They trade shifts in pairs."

"Interesting. Perhaps we can find out the address. Maybe someone has a driver's license. And those two, with Serge and Georgi here, are the four lieutenants you mentioned?" I looked at her.

"Right. These four, along with Nikolay, are really the only ones we need to worry about. Everyone else is a flunky who only takes orders. And you probably won't find any licenses. As far as I know, these guys are here on tourist visas, probably expired by now."

She walked through a door to a bedroom, and I heard a sliding door open.

I looked at Bierkens. "Gee, Ross. Maybe we could get the INS interested in these guys. Expired visas, working illegally in a very questionable industry. Sounds like they're ripe for deportation."

"That would solve one problem, wouldn't it?" He smiled.

Birken's two men had Serge lying face-down on the carpet, arms and legs spread wide, and Georgi was trussed securely with industrial sized zip-ties and unconscious besides. A little pile of personal possessions from the two goons was growing on the coffee table.

"Add carrying concealed weapons to the list."

I remarked as a Saturday night special of unknown vintage was added to the pile. I noticed that one of the men was examining a wallet.

"Any sign of an address?"

"No, sir. And she was right."

He had unfolded a tattered sheet of paper.

"This is an B-2 tourist visa, expired two years ago."

"Mac, if you'll excuse us for a minute, I think we may be able to persuade Serge here to provide us with an address for the apartment." Bierkens' expression was grim.

I walked into the bedroom and closed the door. With the slider to the balcony and another window open, the breeze had cleared the air nicely. Sam was making a pile of clothes on the bed, and a small valise was half filled with bathroom gear.

She looked up. "What's going on?"

"I don't think we really want to know."

Field agents live and die by information, information that sometimes resides only in the head of one individual. If that individual chooses to keep that information to himself, it's sometimes necessary to persuade him otherwise. Your life can depend on it.

That persuasion can range from a simple, polite question to medieval-style torture, and every situation has its own requirements, time being an important one. How quickly is the information needed?

Of course, there are rules and regulations about this. Further, people who enjoy inflicting pain, either physical or psychological, are unlikely to last long in the covert operations business.

And there is also a large body of information about the effectiveness of the various forms of persuasion—in particular, it's common knowledge that actual torture is often counter-productive, producing answers that are what the victim believes the questioners want to hear, rather than the truth.

All of these considerations are running through my head as I try to decide how to approach my current problem. All I need to know is, in essence, "which way did he go?" That information resides in the head of the unfortunate individual who is staring, cross-eyed, at the handgun pressed to the tip of his nose. The thing is, I need to know this information, very, very quickly.

So, first, I use his belt to tie his hands around a convenient tree. Then I ask, reasonably politely, "which way did he go?" But I add words to the effect that, "if I don't find evidence that your answer is truthful, I'll come right back and shoot you in the kneecap."

The wide-eyed answer, "that way, that way" is accompanied by an appropriate shake of the head, so I head off in that direction. Sure enough, I find footprints within about fifty meters.

I don't know if my bosses would approve of my technique, whether they would call that "torture." But sometimes it's just a matter of whatever works.

A short time later, there was a soft knock on the door, and Bierkens stuck his head in.

"Got it. We're ready for phase two."

I still didn't want to know.

"OK. What are we going to do with Serge and Georgi?"

"Heart attack rescue. Two of 'em. Georgi's on the way down to the van now. We found the back elevator, so it will be done quietly." Bierkens smiled. "I gave this whole thing some thought, you see."

"I'm glad we're on the same side, Ross."

* * *

Bierkens' "phase two" was the apprehension of the other two goons who shared the apartment on South Beach with Serge and Georgi. Given the address, it was a no-brainer, and Bierkens sent off four of his team in the van to do the honors. The other two, Bierkens, and I took my car to pay a visit to Nikolay Kirov at the Sun and Sand offices. We left Sam at her place—she was wanting to get the mess cleaned up and the whole apartment aired out fully.

I persuaded Bierkens and his men to let me go into the Sun and Sand suite first, alone. For one thing, I wanted to get Lance out of the way—as a harmless innocent, he didn't deserve to be in the

middle of what was going down. For another, it would help everyone for me to reconnoiter the situation, and, with the headset, I could relay whatever I found, as I had at Sam's. At least that was the plan.

Lance recognized me instantly. I guess that's part of a front-desk job, to remember faces.

"Oh, Mr. Hunt! How wonderful to see you again! I hope everything is going well for you?"

His simpering—including an annoying amount of eyelash fluttering—was almost too much for me to take.

"Lance, something's going to happen here that you don't want to be part of, believe me. Don't you have an appointment about now to get your beard trimmed, or something?"

I tried to keep my voice low and calm, but I think my nerves were showing a bit.

"But Mr. Hunt, I can't just leave my desk. We get important phone calls here."

In his confusion, Lance forgot to simper or flutter, and a tinge of suspicion crept into his voice.

I pressed the comm link into my ear. "Ross, our boy needs some motivation."

Then, to Lance, I said, "You really don't want to be here for what's going to happen, Lance. Trust me on this."

Bierkens and his two men opened the door and walked in, and Lance got the message instantly.

"Oh, why Mr. Hunt, you're right! I completely forgot. I need a trim. Bye y'all."

And he was out the door in an instant.

"Any idea about who else is here?"

Bierkens was eyeing the closed door to Nikolay's office. I shook my head.

"Hmm. Well, let's see if we can find out."

Bierkens reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a wire with a suction cup on the end. He stuck the cup on Kirov's door and made a rubbing motion, upwards, on the comm link in his right ear.

"Did you see what I just did, Mac, with the link? That'll switch you to channel 2."

I tried the same motion, and suddenly I was in the middle of a conversation, listening to a voice I didn't recognize.

"...and it was my brother, Allah save him, who obtained the list of materials sites and passed it directly to the family. So we have been instrumental in providing them with both information and financial resources through your operation. Your involvement has therefore been crucial, not only for the financial arrangements but also through those nuclear engineers you recommended for the project. But then it all started to fall apart. Nassir had his weaknesses, and your woman was there when he was murdered. Then she turned up on that cruise ship the family was using. You should know that we expect you to control your people."

The voice had a trace of an accent, partly British and partly something else. And it sounded angry. Not loud and shouting angry, but worse, calm and quiet angry.

"Now, look, Mr. Al-Ayas, I know very little about this. Our schedulers got a call from a gentleman who was looking for some social companionship for an evening. We always contract such activities to independent escorts who have maintained our high standards of conduct and service. The woman we call 'Dolly' is one of our best, and she handled that request. After that job, she took some well-earned time off. Nothing out of the ordinary for us. I'm very sorry about your brother, but there's nothing at all that I know about it. And the financial arrangements for the family, as you know, were always handled with

extreme discretion, using us only as a pass-through. Every cent was accounted for, and our commission was quite small, as these things go.”

This voice belonged to Nikolay Kirov, and the smoothness he showed me had an overlay of nerves. But he got control of that as he continued.

“Now, there’s nothing I can do about the tragedy—a tragedy that I’m very, very sorry about—that befell your brother. But I’ll tell you what. I have some other contacts who can look into what happened on the cruise ship. I can’t believe that Dolly had anything to do with spoiling the family’s plans, but we can find out. OK? As for the financing, there’s no money trail for anyone to follow, we made sure of that. And I think those engineers I found for you prove my dedication to the project.”

As creative uses for radionuclides go, the Russians seem to have a corner on the market. Oh, U.S. scientists know all of the tricks and continually invent new ones, but they are far more reserved, civilized, even, in what they propose.

In making better offers on behalf of Uncle Sam, with the goal of keeping out-of-work Russian engineers gainfully employed, I am running into all sorts of weird ideas, ideas that go far beyond the black world of nuclear weapons.

And some of the scientists are even knowledgeable about the sensitivities of the U.S. public to radioactivity. Thus it is that the design for the nuclear space heater includes careful shielding, and it is the lead shielding that heats up, keeping your toes warm. There are some details to be worked out, however, including the fool-proof, easy-to-use control system. Personally, I wonder about the consumer product safety labels, but I keep that concern to myself.

The designer of the nuclear motorcycle, however, has no such sensitivities, and he has put the power source under the seat. In this way, the decay particles from the small plutonium fuel package will provide a heat source for the miniature steam turbine—and for keeping your nether regions warm. Also for helping with family planning, assuming you want a very small family, or children with more than the usual complement of fingers and toes.

And the biomedical uses are legion. The well-known application of iodine-131 to irradiate tumors of the thyroid seems to have stimulated their imaginations, all with the best of intentions, of course, but... As I interview them for possible jobs in the U.S., I hear about how all sorts of radioactive substances could be built into all sorts of exotic, injectable agents to attack all sorts of tumors. Trouble is, there seems to be no way to test many of these ideas except on humans. Any volunteers?

And even as I am astonished, and worried, by these applications, it is the military ones that are the most frightening. Miniature nuclear bombs, miniature thermonuclear bombs, dirty bombs of various levels of strength and contamination, aerosol spray weapons, radioactive projectiles; all of these ideas and worse spin out of the heads of the Russian engineers I am interviewing.

And what is truly terrifying is that if Uncle Sam can’t find jobs for them, they’ll go to work in Baghdad or Tehran or Damascus or Tripoli.

Bierkens and I looked at each other in astonishment. I mouthed “family?” and looked as puzzled as I could, and he shrugged and shook his head.

The strange accent returned in our ears. “Your help with finding the expertise needed for the project is most appreciated, and I don’t need to remind you that you have been handsomely compensated. It is this other business, the apparent coincidences involving your Dolly, that is my concern just now. I have

word that there is trouble on the west coast end of the project, that it may not be possible to complete it. She was on the ship. It appears that she is an agent of some kind.”

There was a faint rustling noise, and Kirov’s voice sounded panicked. “Mr. Al-Ayas, there’s certainly no need for that. I assure you that Dolly had nothing to do with anything except providing social services for our clients. Now, there was that other fellow, the one whose house you had destroyed. He’s the one who killed your brother, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but it’s obvious that your Dolly tipped him off. And then you must have tipped him off, too, because he somehow escaped the trap we planned when we destroyed his house. And even the engineers you found for us don’t make up for that.”

There were three *thwup* noises.

Bierkens jerked alert and made hand signals, and his two men positioned themselves on either side of Kirov’s office door, weapons at the ready. He motioned to me to follow away from the line of the door, so that we would not be the first people that Al-Ayas saw as he came out of Kirov’s office.

Shortly, the handle turned and the door opened. Out walked a trim, well-dressed man with a goatee and mustache, holding a semi-automatic pistol with his left hand as he unscrewed a suppressor from it with his right. Bierkens’ men had no trouble subduing him, not that he was happy about it.

“You must release me at once! As an official of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in this country as part of its delegation, I have diplomatic immunity!”

“Diplomatic immunity, hmm? Good thing we’re not from the government.”

I thought for a couple of seconds. “But I guess it won’t matter if this Beretta with your prints on it stays in the office with Kirov, then, will it? In fact, maybe you have a business card we can leave. You can’t provide too many clues for the city cops, after all. I know, I was one.”

Al-Ayas only glared at me.

Biekens understood my strategy instantly. “Bravo, Charlie, let’s run the gurney plan, like at the other place. We’ll have to wait for the van.”

His two men emptied Al-Ayas’ pockets and, with a hypodermic, sedated him into unconsciousness, then trussed him up like a turkey on Thanksgiving. I worked hard to resist the urge to kick his ribs in as retribution for my house.

To distract myself, I walked into Kirov’s office, holding the Beretta via a pencil through its trigger guard, to survey the damage. The only sign of anything out of the ordinary was Kirov himself, slumped forward with his head on his desk. The three exit wounds in his dark blazer just on the left side of his spine were hard to spot, so the bleeding must have been onto his lap. It appeared that the slugs were lodged in the padding of the back of his executive desk chair.

I left the Beretta on the chair where Al-Ayas had probably been sitting.

Fifteen minutes later, the van arrived. We used the time to find that, indeed, Al-Ayas did have a business card that we could leave with the Beretta and the body and, for good measure, to put some of his fingerprints on a water glass we found in Kirov’s office.

While we waited, Bierkens’ man Bravo kept busy cracking a safe that he found in the inside wall of Kirov’s office, and Charlie tackled Kirov’s computer, one of those miniature desktop units. By the time the gurney showed up, the safe, which had held considerable cash and several computer CDs, was empty and re-locked, and the computer was unplugged, with Al-Ayas’ using it for an uncomfortable pillow on the gurney. Charlie made sure there were no traces of it left in the office.

Then Bierkens and his men, who were tending the gurney with Al-Ayas on it, headed for the elevator.

The last thing I did before following them was to use Lance's desk phone to call 911. They were quite insistent on getting my name and so on, but I just talked about the body and the gun and hung up.

On the way down, I wondered how the van was going to hold everyone. But it turned out that five of the occupants—four Russians and a Saudi—didn't need seats. They were more like sacks of potatoes instead, all piled in the back. The van with the pile and Bierkens' men headed off in one direction, and Ross and I took my car in another, to pick up Sam.

Bierkens was staring out the passenger window at the buildings flowing by.

"So, Mac, originally we planned to lean on these guys, the Russians, I mean, maybe knock them around a little, then let them go somewhere way out west in the 'Glades. But I'm thinking that Kirov's death may change things."

I had been thinking about what to do with Al-Ayas, but this comment made me realize that we had more than that to be concerned with.

"Yeah, maybe it does. I wonder if there's any way we could get the INS interested in them. Leave them on a boat out in the Gulf Stream for the Coast Guard to find, maybe, without any documentation at all. Or, better yet, all their documentation and so on except those expired visas. And their passports."

He looked over at me. "Good idea. And easy to manage. Now, what about that Arab?"

"Well, you heard what I heard, but it's just the two of us. And he'll be able to pull some diplomatic clout out of his ass, I bet." I shrugged.

"Except channel two is always recorded, so anyone can hear that conversation. It implicates him directly in the SNM hijacking." His smile was serene.

I was surprised, but pleased.

"As much as I hate to say it, I expect we ought to bring Bill Petersen in on this. Maybe he can find out who this 'family' is, that Al-Ayas was talking about. It sounds like they're running the operation."

"I've got to admire your restraint, Mac. If that joker really was responsible for blowing up your house, well, I'm sort of surprised you didn't offer him a little payback." He laughed.

I laughed, too. "Your guys are too efficient, Ross. He was out before I could get to him. Otherwise, he'd be sporting several broken bones."

* * *

Eighteen

As it turned out, both Bierkens and I wound up playing pack horse to get the stuff that Sam wanted from her apartment. The car was crammed full, both the trunk and most of the back seat, leaving only a little spot for her to sit.

After we got settled in and headed for Boca Raton, she wanted to hear all about it. I let Bierkens tell it and watched her reactions in the rear-view mirror. It was a story she liked to hear.

“So you got all four of the lieutenants? Where are they? I want to kick each of them in the balls before you put them in that boat. How about Nikolay? That scum.”

She was practically bouncing with excitement.

“Interesting you should ask. It seems he was in a meeting when we got to his office.”

Bierkens was having too much fun with the story-telling.

“We managed to eavesdrop on some of it, but we missed a lot, I guess. One thing that confused me. Did you ever have a client named Nassir Al-Ayas?”

I heard a gasp from the back seat and looked up to see Sam staring back at me, wide-eyed. I nodded but kept my mouth shut.

“Well, sort of. I mean, he wanted a date, and so one got set up. But, uh, we were interrupted, sort of.” She shook her head. “I mean, well...”

“Don’t worry, Sam, I’m just trying to put pieces together. See, the guy meeting with Kirov was named Al-Ayas, too, Nassir’s brother.”

Bierkens turned in the passenger seat to try to see Sam.

“And he, I mean the brother, he seems to think that you set Nassir up to be killed and, further, that Kirov was in on it. So, to make a long story short, he shot Kirov dead. He, the brother, also thinks that you were on that cruise ship as some kind of secret agent. Fun, huh?”

“Well, not really, not if he’s coming after me. I could always handle Nikolay. I don’t know about this Al-Ayas brother.” She sounded worried.

“Not to worry.” Bierkens’ smile widened. “We’ve got him, too, all signed, sealed, and delivered with the others.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Good question. We’re not sure. He claims to be an employee of the Saudi Arabian consulate here in Miami, which gives him diplomatic immunity. Not that he can go around shooting people, that’ll get him kicked out of the country pretty quickly. But if we turn him over to the cops, well, they won’t be able to hold him for long.” Bierkens shrugged. “What do *you* think we should do with him? Oh, and we also heard him say that he was responsible for getting Mac’s house blown up.”

There was a long pause, and I could practically see the gears turning behind Sam’s blue eyes.

“So, if this brother thinks I was on the cruise ship as some kind of secret agent, that implies that he’s mixed up in the nuclear material thing, right?” She watched Bierkens’ head nod. “It seems like you guys might want to know just how he’s mixed up in it, what he’s doing. So I’d say that you ought to find out what he knows.”

“You think he’ll tell us?”

“Well, you found out Serge’s address from *him*, didn’t you?”

The ensuing strategy discussion occupied them all the way to our hotel in Boca, with Bierkens’ playing the bemused innocent and Sam’s proposing increasingly vicious interrogation methods. By the time we got there, I was doubly glad that they were both on my side.

Although I've been trained to adapt to the unsophisticated—even barbaric—cultural practices in the countries I spend time in, I still get surprised. And many times it's the women who surprise me the most.

I've managed to make my escape from the Chinese acrobat troupe just after our final Kabul performance, at a small Russian outpost in the outskirts of the city. In the hustle and bustle of packing to leave, I slip away into the night, dodging through alleys and unlit streets back toward the center of town, where the embassy lies.

Even though the Red Army's presence is spread throughout the city and its environs, in places it's spread quite thinly. In an older part of the edge of the city—and "older" means centuries in this case—I find myself closing in on that distinctive ululating that people in this part of the world make when they're having fun or grieving or expressing any number of other emotions. I turn a corner into yet another dark alley, and there they are.

It's a small mob of Afghan women, and they have cornered a young Russian soldier. He's obviously drunk, bewildered, and more than a little scared. And weaponless.

The women, all covered from the tops of their heads to the bottoms of their feet by chadris, keep their distance as he strikes out with his fists, ineffectively. They have long sticks, poles, really, to poke at him as if he were a wandering goat. And when he grabs one stick as it jabs at him, another causes him to lose his grip.

The sticks, I see, are pointed, more like spears.

The ululating increases in volume and pitch as the women close in. Soon, the pokes are more like stabs, and, after an especially vicious one in his right thigh, the soldier goes down. I hear him pleading as the women close in for the kill, and then there's a scream of agony.

I'm glad to use the commotion to slip back into the shadows and make my way toward the Embassy.

After playing pack horse once again, during which we did a fair job of filling up the little living room of my executive suite, Bierkens got on the phone. His end of the conversation was cryptic, sometimes nearly in code, but I got the gist of it.

When he finished, he looked at Sam and me. "OK, we're all set. The thing with the boat is going to take some arranging, but my guys will take care of it. They'll find a tub of some kind down in the Keys, and one of them will head out east in it, with passengers. The others will meet him there in one of our boats, pick him up, and leave the four Russians to bake in the sun a while until they wake up. We'll make sure there's almost no fuel and disable the radio and so on, so the thing will drift until the Coast Guard spots them on radar."

"Won't they see the rendezvous on radar, too?"

Sam was staying on top of this one, I could tell.

"Probably, and they'll think it's some kind of drug thing, so they'll go investigate. That helps our plan. Our guys, meanwhile, will be in uniform on a training exercise, with all the appropriate paperwork and no contraband. So they'll be covered." Bierkens smiled.

"And it sounded like they're bringing Al-Ayas here, right?"

I'd been thinking about next steps.

"Yeah." Bierkens looked at his watch. "ETA in forty-five minutes or so."

“OK. Hmm. No disrespect here, Ross, quite the opposite, really. But I think you should leave with your guys, the ones who are delivering Al-Ayas to us. Today started with your doing me a favor, helping me lean on a bunch of pimps, but it’s changed. In real life, you’re official military, and I don’t think you need the headache of dealing with any fallout from our kidnapping this diplomat. Or what’s going to happen to him next. It could be that the SAINT operation will need you and your guys again, in which case you’ll be back in an official capacity. I’d certainly welcome that, and I’ll recommend it if it’s OK with you. But I think you ought to disappear from this phase of things.” I took a breath and held it.

He’d begun nodding about half-way through my little speech.

“Makes sense. And, yeah, we’d be happy to be part of whatever goes down with that SNM. Well, except actually handling it.” He smiled. “For that, you need *real* experts.”

While we awaited the arrival of the august Special Assistant Deputy Political Liaison to the Consul of Saudi Arabia, which is what Assim Al-Ayas’ business card had printed on it, Bierkens and I set up a call to Bill Petersen. Sam got busy with unpacking.

“Bill? It’s Mac, and before you say a word, listen to this.”

I nodded, and Bierkens pushed a button on the little gizmo he’d hooked to the phone. The conversation between Al-Ayas and Kirov played all the way through.

“I’ll have a copy of that for you the next time I see you. Comments?”

I wondered how Petersen would react. He was in full analytic mode.

“Interesting. I guess that was Nassir Al-Ayas’ brother, who works at the Saudi consulate and got your house blown up. And is obviously connected to our missing SNM somehow. Who’s the other guy? And it sounded like he got whacked, right?”

“Right. He ran Sun and Sand Escorts, which is now out of business. The good news is that I’ve got this Al-Ayas brother, name of Assim. The bad news is that he’s hollering that he has diplomatic immunity. That doesn’t matter to me, because I’m not official. But you are. Got any idea of how to proceed?”

There was a long pause, and I heard some background conversation.

“Play that tape again, will you? I’ll record it, and we’ll see what the White House has to say about Mr. Al-Ayas.”

* * *

Wednesday morning, Sam and I awoke in the California-king bed in the master suite of the Exclusiva at Boca mansion that Petersen and his boys had taken over. She and I were back in their good graces, to the point that everyone was calling her “ma’am” and me “sir.” That kind of treatment just made me feel old, but I think that she rather liked the respect it implied.

The previous evening had been a whirlwind of activity, not the least of which was getting Sam re-packed to move from our hotel to the Exclusiva house. The pack horse thing was beginning to feel familiar to me.

That the SAINT’s SNM operation still commanded considerable attention in Washington became evident to me about ten minutes after Al-Ayas had arrived—and Bierkens had left—when the phone in the hotel suite rang.

The voice was smooth, pleasantly modulated, and consummately professional.

“Mr. MacQuarrie? This is the White House. Will you please hold for the President of the United States?”

If I hadn't already been standing, I'm not sure but what this would have made me stand up. I could only imagine Norris Swendson's reaction when this call had come through to him on the *Earth Explorer*.

It took five seconds or so, and the familiar politician's voice came on the line.

“Mr. MacQuarrie?”

“Mr. President.”

“Mac—I hope it's OK for me to call you ‘Mac’ because everyone around here does and that's who I think of you as—Mac, the first thing I want to do is to express, on behalf of the American people, our sincere gratitude. I've got your service file here in front of me, and I have to say that's impressive enough. But what you've been able to do for us with respect to this current special materials business is truly exceptional. I'm sure you know that we won't be having any public expressions of our gratitude, it's just not appropriate in cases such as this, but I want you to know that you have our highest commendation.”

He paused for a breath, and I jumped in with what I knew to be the correct response. “I am honored to be able to be of service, Mr. President.”

“Now, Mac, as you know, the west coast part of this incident is under control, thanks largely to your efforts, and we've managed to recover about half of the stolen material. This leaves, of course, the other half along with the ringleaders and so on. No doubt they're tipped off about the west coast business by now, so it's going to be dicey. But I understand that you've made a major breakthrough in that regard as well. And there are some issues with respect to that breakthrough that I have to make decisions about. What sort of exceptions to authorize and so on. I'm sure you're aware that the national discussion of how to obtain information from adversaries has been heated in the past few years, and that policy has changed—changed for the better, to my way of thinking—as a result. Still, in an emergency such as this there is room for some, um, flexibility. Now, as I understand matters, you are holding the key to this, or at least as much of a key as we have available. And this situation is sufficiently dire that I think we need to make use of this key to unlock as many doors as possible. Therefore, and this is the other reason I've called you, therefore I have authorized a Special Presidential Directive, a classified one, for the SAINT team operation to use this flexibility to obtain the information they need to bring this situation under control. Further, I have directed the SAINT operation to integrate you into its highest levels of planning and implementation—by which I mean that you have leadership authority. Not as the SAINT's director, but as a consultant at the highest level. Parenthetically, let me note that this highest level is above Mr. Petersen. You will be getting another phone call about this shortly.”

He paused again, so I jumped right in. “Mr. President, I understand fully, and I'll be honored to provide whatever service I can. And I also understand your directive, I believe. I'll leave that to the experts.”

“Thank you, Mac. Godspeed. Let's get these guys. And have a good day today.”

He disconnected, and I sat down.

Sam was looking at me with big, round eyes.

“That was the President? Of the U.S.? Wow. You must rate, Mac. Except, I have to say, I've figured out that he's just another politician underneath all that smooth charisma and everything.”

“You’re right, darlin’. He’s just another politician, for sure. But, hey, he’s *our* politician. And he sure beats the last one, don’t you think?”

My interactions with foreign governments are teaching me just how comfortable it is to be a U.S. citizen. Sure, there’s a huge, cumbersome bureaucracy in Washington. Sure, it’s inevitable that the head of our government takes on some trappings of royalty on top of the role of chief executive officer. Sure, there is lots of secretive activity, not all of which is something to be proud of.

But there is still a sense of egalitarianism, of citizens in service of their country, all the way to the top that’s just absent in most other countries. Elsewhere, the guy at the top acts like King for Life, and often is, at least in the countries I’m most familiar with, the sandy ones in Southwest Asia.

There, unless you’re a member of the King’s Court, you don’t want to be in a conversation with Him, because the only reason that would happen is if you’ve come to His attention. And you won’t have come to His attention unless it’s in a bad sort of way.

This lesson is hammered home for me as I play fly on the wall—with the help of a strategically placed electronic bug—in the main office of the would-be king of a small, oil-rich country. It appears that an accountant in the government’s treasury department has come to the despot’s attention, not for the usual sort of malfeasance or embezzling that accountants are prone to, but simply for being too competent.

“My sincere apologies, Majesty, but the numbers just do not add up,” says a frightened voice.

“I did not command your presence here for you to tell me this. What I want to know is what I asked before. Can we afford ten new F-18s, or must we really limit ourselves to only five?”

This voice is imperious and impatient.

“Majesty, please understand. Purchasing such a thing as an F-18 is only the beginning of the cost. There is also maintenance and upkeep, very specialized and very expensive, and training, and parts. And, of course, weapons systems, unless you wish these airplanes to be used only for passengers, one passenger at a time, assuming that we are buying the two-seat version.”

The voice is still frightened, but a little more sure of itself this time.

A deadly calm pervades the other voice.

“I am afraid that I have neither the time nor the patience for such insolence. Colonel, I believe you know the appropriate procedure.”

“Majesty,” the voice is clearly terrified, “Please, Majesty, I ...”

It is cut off abruptly, and the ensuing discussion concerns a replacement accountant.

My report on the matter includes a suggestion to the effect that we should not sell these people so much as a can opener, not to mention F/A-18D Super Hornets.

As a result of the phone call from the President, I received another phone call, from “Henry,” Bill Petersen’s boss, whose real identity I can’t talk about, asking me to serve as his chief advisor on the SNM matter and to work in the field with Petersen and the other SAINTs. Shortly thereafter we had a visit from Petersen himself and two of his boys. They got Assim Al-Ayas out of the suite’s extra bathroom, where he’d been locked in and tied to the commode, bundled him up, and took him away.

And, when we woke up Wednesday morning in that huge bed, I remember thinking that I probably had a much better night than Al-Ayas did.

I got up, showered and shaved, kissed Sam and suggested that she play with the massage jets in the bathtub, and went looking for breakfast. Petersen was back, he and the boys were still set up in the sun room, and there was a new chef in the kitchen.

“May I make you some breakfast, sir? Coffee?” This was my first “sir” of the day, and it took me by surprise. I’d had several the previous evening, and it was getting old fast.

He poured me coffee and took my request for a ham-and-cheese omelet, with toast and hash-browns—I think he was disappointed that I didn’t want something truly fancy—and I took my mug into the sun room.

“Morning, Mac.”

Bill Petersen acted as if we were, always had been, and always would be the best of buddies.

“I think we may get a handle on this thing, thanks to your Mr. Al-Ayas. He’s been most cooperative, at least once he figured out that we were not going to let him hide behind that immunity thing. He had a tough night, so he’s resting up in the other room.”

“I don’t think I want to know details, Bill, but I bet that whatever’s been going on has been tame compared to what he could expect at home. What have you got?”

I took a sip of the coffee and was surprised by how good it was.

“He confirmed what he said in the conversation with Kirov, for one thing. He’s been channeling money to the group that’s actually running the operation from a bank account in Grand Cayman. He says he doesn’t know who set it up, and we’re starting to believe him. And he says that none of what he’s been doing is part of official Saudi politics. In fact, he’s begging us not to tell them about this or to send him back. I think he wants to keep his head attached to his shoulders.” Petersen smiled. “So now we’re back to the surveillance mode. Nate? Let Mac have a look, will you?”

A tall, thin African-American man arose from a chair that was set behind a tripod supporting a huge set of binoculars, which were aimed at the house across the lake.

“They zoom, sir. And these arms on the tripod let you pan around,” he said.

My second “sir” of the day. Time to put a stop, I thought.

“Thanks,” I raised my voice, “and, say, everyone? Could you please call me ‘Mac’? This ‘sir’ stuff just confuses the hell out of me. OK? Thanks.”

I sat down behind the binoculars and started fiddling. I zoomed the view back to take in the entire scene—the edge of the lake, really a big pond, a small dock, an immaculate lawn running up to a rock wall behind which was a fenced-off pool area, and finally the house. Unlike the our fake Italian villa, the house across the pond was modern South Florida tacky, with interlinked boxes of stucco, glass, and steel. Very rectilinear, but at least it wasn’t pink. There wasn’t a sign of life, and all of the windows were completely covered.

“Nate, it looks as if you have a fascinating job, watching this thing. It’s way too much excitement for me. I don’t know how you keep your heart-rate under control.” I yawned and stood up.

Nate looked embarrassed. “Yeah, well, we take turns. You know, share the wealth and all.”

“I’ve got an idea. Maybe I can talk Sam to sitting by the pool in that outfit she had on a couple of days ago when we were here. That ought to get a rise out of them, you’d think. Maybe they’d open one

of the window shades, or something.” I grinned. “Except I don’t know if you guys could stand the distraction.”

He grinned back. “C’mon, Mac, we’re professionals here. We can handle it, I think. We’d certainly like the opportunity to try.”

There was a murmur of laughter from the rest of the room. I decided to change the subject before I got myself in trouble by committing Sam to something she really didn’t want to do.

“So, you’re watching the place. Got any sound?” I looked around.

“We do, Mac.” Bill Petersen responded. “Shelby, over there in the corner, is recording from lasers on all the windows. And we want to get someone over there tonight with a decay counter and more surveillance. I wasn’t kidding, before.”

“I could tell.”

I gestured at the “Beware of Alligators” sign on the lawn down by the lake.

“And I wasn’t kidding either. I really don’t want to do any more swimming. But, say. That house has a dock. So does this one. I see lots of docks, all around the lake. Where’s the boats?”

“We wondered that, too. So we got a copy of the homeowners’ rules. Big, long, legalistic document that says something to the effect of ‘no boats on our lake’ and ‘you must have a well-maintained dock’ and ‘no fishing.’ It’s the biggest load of crap I’ve ever seen. Makes me glad to just be renting.” He laughed at his own joke.

“So, is Shelby hearing anything?”

He shook his head. “Nothing of interest. Doors opening and closing. Activity that sounds like work in the kitchen. We’ve seen people coming and going through the front gate—a couple of cars, golf carts, pedestrians—but nothing really out of the ordinary. So something’s going on in there. Maybe it’s in the basement.”

“Basement?” I laughed. “Bill, this is South Florida, man. The water table is about three feet down, somewhere about the surface of the lake. Nobody has basements.”

“Yeah, I know.” He looked smug. “But take a close look at that house. See how high it’s sitting up? We got its plans from the county, they keep such things for tax purposes and inspections and so on. Damned if that house doesn’t have a full basement. What we’ve gotta do is to find out what’s down *in* that basement.”

We were interrupted by a collective gasp from the other guys in the room, accompanied by Sam’s voice from behind me.

“Mac? The chef says your breakfast is ready. And I’m going to swim a few laps before I order mine. I need some exercise.”

And she strode purposefully through the sun room to the door to the pool, wearing a sensible, almost modest two-piece swim suit and a large towel over her shoulder. Still, all eyes in the room, as well as the chef’s, peeking around the corner, followed her every step with red-blooded interest.

So much, I thought, for professionalism.

* * *

Nineteen

“Say, Bill?”

Having eaten, I was thinking about the basement business and all of its implications—I get philosophical on a full stomach.

“Out there we’ve got a lake with no boats but with alligators, right? How do you suppose those ’gators get in there, anyway? Do they walk over from the next subdivision?”

“They probably swim. Isn’t this lake connected to that big canal out front, the one with the fake drawbridge over it?” He looked puzzled.

“Yeah, OK, well, how do they get there? What’s that canal connected to?”

I didn’t really know the answer, but I had my suspicions.

“I think I see what you’re getting at, Mac. All the lakes and canals are connected, at least the major ones. Ultimately they’re designed to connect the Everglades to the ocean, right? And the ’gators live in the ’Glades, so they can pretty much get anywhere.” He shrugged. “But what does this have to do with anything?”

I kept my expression blank. “I’m just curious. Got a map, or a good-quality satellite picture? I want to see where that canal out by the street goes.”

There was hustle and bustle, and presently a pool-table-sized satellite image of Exclusiva at Boca and its surroundings in exquisite detail was projected on the wall of what seemed to be the living room, or one of them. I poked around the gadgetry in the sun room and came up with a laser sight attached to a Ruger .45 automatic.

“OK, this is about where we are.”

I steadied the pistol with both hands so that I could shine the laser on our lake, while being careful not to touch the trigger.

“And, like you said, it’s linked to the canal here.”

“And the canal,” I swept the laser southward, then eastward, “joins this bigger canal, which empties in the ocean, which is over there. Looks like this satellite shot captured some boats on these bigger canals.”

“What’s your point, Mac?” Bill was getting impatient.

“Well, except maybe for a couple of dinky water-control structures, maybe between the lake and the canal, or between the canal along Military here and this bigger canal where the boats are, houses around this lake have water access to the ocean. If the water’s deep enough, they have underwater access, right?”

I looked at him, hoping he’d draw the obvious conclusion. But he’d walked right up to the wall and was peering at the projection closely.

“It looks to me like there’s a dam here, where the Military canal joins this bigger one.”

“With the boat traffic there, they could just meet somebody and hoist stuff over that dam, seems like.”

I was still wanting him to see the obvious.

“So, you’re telling me that the people in that house over there have some kind of mini-sub that they roll across the lawn into the lake and then ferry things like our SNM to someone in a boat on the big canal? Wouldn’t just be easier for them to use a car or a truck?” He wasn’t getting it.

“Think about it, Bill. Cars and trucks in and out have to pass through that gate, which would be a deterrent to anything of the nature we think these yahoos are doing. Surely they would want a more clandestine way to move stuff around. Right?”

Sometimes, I thought, you just have to spoon-feed these agency guys.

Espionage, covert operations, surveillance, whatever you call it, there’s always an element of detective work involved. An analytical, even mathematical, mind is indispensable. But the ability to make intuitive connections among seemingly disparate facts and inferences—to be a good detective—is even more important. That ability is what separates successful field agents from the failures—and the live ones from the dead, sometimes.

But for reasons I’ll never understand, it’s the analytical minds, especially the organized analytical minds, who wind up in the supervisory offices in Washington. And because intuition is often linked to imagination—and the lack of the two go together as well—those offices are just chock full of unimaginative number-crunchers.

All of which is no help to me as I, on the verge of wrapping up a complex and dangerous operation, am requesting extra time and flexibility to do the kind of job that needs doing. To make matters even more difficult, the telecom link I’m forced to use is flakey—there is both the inevitable satellite delay and some weird kind of drop-out thing. I can only hope that my arguments sound persuasive on the other end. But based on the response I’m hearing, it’s hard to be optimistic.

“...ciate your conc... ..ort your eff... ..ever, we must foll... ..tain respect for ... To repeat, foll... Out.”

Well, I think, that sure clarifies the situation for me. It must be that they want me to follow the original plan, the carefully crafted, detailed and time-sensitive plan that has gone all to hell due to unexpected issues that have arisen. Issues that are best handled with intuition and imagination.

In the end, I do it my way, everything works out fine, and I even get a commendation for “field innovation” while my unimaginative, number-crunching supervisor smiles in approval. Go figure.

“You mean to tell me that you really *do* think they have some kind of mini-sub that they’re using to move the SNM around? What have you been smoking lately, Mac?”

Petersen was laughing at the absurdity of it all.

“Yeah, it does sound nuts, doesn’t it? Still, it would be pretty easy to put a hydrophone in the lake and monitor it along with those windows, wouldn’t it? I mean, I’m just the advisor here, but that’s my advice.” I tried to remain polite.

“What we really need to do is to get into that basement,” Petersen grouched.

“Right. And hydrophone data just might be the ticket to a search warrant. With no boats or other activity on the lake, anything you pick up would provide evidence of underwater activity. And with the information we already have about that house, it might be persuasive to a judge. Hell, Bill, put two hydrophones in, spaced along the bank. Then you could use the time differences in the signals to triangulate the source. If it’s over by that house, you’ve got them.”

I had no idea whether he had a clue about what I was proposing, but it would work, I knew. I'd done it in the field on a couple of occasions.

"This could take weeks, and we don't have that kind of time."

He had progressed from grousing to grumping.

"OK, well, you keep Nate watching the grass grow through those big glasses and Shelby listening for kitchen noises with those lasers. I'm going to call some people I know at the Naval Research Lab." I remembered I'd "lost" my cell phone. "Is there a secure line around somewhere?"

"OK, OK, we'll put in a couple of hydrophones. But we better hear more than frogs mating. Oh, and I got you another encrypted cell phone. Don't lose this one, OK? It's in the sun room, Shelby has it."

The grousing and grumping had been replaced by petulance. He was having a fine morning, so far.

"Mac? There you are."

Sam, her hair dripping wet, was wrapped in her towel, but I bet she still turned the heads of all those professionals out there in the sun room.

"Nice pool out there, you ought to try it. Listen. I'm going to get some breakfast, the chef offered crepes, yum, and then I need to go back to the hotel for a couple of things. How about I just take the car?"

She was scrubbing at her hair with a corner of the towel.

I thought about it. "Seems fine with me. Say, I didn't even think to ask if you have a car of your own. Did we leave your car behind down in Miami Beach? Geez, I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "Not a problem, really. We can go back and pick it up one of these days. It's in the garage down there, so it's out of the sun and not getting bird poop on it."

Petersen was obviously not attuned to such domesticity.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Why don't you take her to get it now, Mac? That'll get you both out of my hair. And we can get some phones in the water in the meantime."

He stalked off, and Sam and I looked at each other and laughed.

After she polished off a big order of crepes, a sort of purple mix of blueberry and strawberry ones, we organized ourselves to take Petersen's advice. I got my new phone, she got dressed, and we did a quick critical assessment of our personal inventories at the house. Her inventory took longer than mine.

It turned out that we both needed to fine-tune what we had brought, so after some repacking and more pack-horsing by me, we finally set out to retrieve her car. It had occurred to me that using her car would let me turn in the rental car I'd been driving, and it would also provide us with a change of cars, something any good covert operative does every now and then.

It was a lovely early-May Wednesday, and rush hour was winding down by the time we left, so we decided to take it easy and cruise down US-1, Federal Highway. It's one long strip between about Jupiter, north of West Palm Beach, and Homestead, almost to the Keys, that's easy, mindless, and offers the occasional tidbit of Floridania. But it's also slow, so that what would normally have taken us just under an hour on the interstate, the dreaded I-95, took us over two.

On the way, I mentioned to Sam my thought of turning in the Malibu I'd rented. There didn't seem to be any reason we really needed two cars just now, and when the SNM thing was all over with, I could get my Cobra out of storage anyway. She thought it was a fine idea.

But then, in her parking garage, when she pointed and said “over there,” I wondered what I’d gotten myself into. For reasons beyond my understanding, Sam drove one of those new VW Beetles, a convertible, and at least it was the turbo-charged model. But it was—and I almost reneged on my notion of turning in the Malibu over this—a reasonable facsimile of Mary Kay pink. I guess I could have lived with pink on the outside. Maybe. But the pink leather of the interior was almost too much. We nearly had our first big fight.

Sam, though, is no dummy. Rather than rise to the challenge of a fight, she was calm, collected, and even understanding.

“Lighten up, Mac. I didn’t pick the color, because I got the thing for free. A client, an older gentleman, gave it to me, he told me it was his wife’s. She sold cosmetics and won it as a sort of prize or something, but then she died of cancer. So it wasn’t my idea. And it’s just a color, Mac. It isn’t a statement, or at least you don’t have to take it to be one. I mean, it *certainly* doesn’t diminish you in my eyes.”

She said that in just the right tone of voice, and accompanied it with an anatomically strategic squeeze.

“Besides, the seats fold back into very nice little beds,” she continued.

That did the trick, although I’m still embarrassed to be seen in the thing.

So we transferred our gear into her pink-mobile and set out to find the nearest Avis franchise. Once there, I turned in the Malibu, after an argument about a drop-off fee I didn’t feel like paying, and then turned north for home. I have to admit, on a day as beautiful as that, the convertible was a nice touch, pink or not.

But the pinkness was on my mind. She was driving, so I was completely absorbed in what sort of explanation I was going to conjure up for Petersen and the boys, when my new cell phone rang—and “rang” is the right term, because I had not had time to reprogram it with my preferences.

“MacQuarrie here.”

“Mac, it’s Henry.”

I recognized the voice of Bill Petersen’s boss, the guy I had been appointed chief advisor to, and he sounded worried.

“I’m relieved to hear your voice. We got an alert that the house the SAINTs are using has gone up in smoke. Boca Fire and Rescue responded with four trucks. I haven’t been able to contact anybody there, except Von Rogers, who’s on gate guard duty just now. Where in the world are you?”

I filled him in on the errand we were running.

“Hmm. Well, let me suggest that you head back to your hotel and let things calm down a little. We’ve got the FBI on the scene by now, and they will handle the investigation. All of the data Bill and the guys collected is already archived up here.”

Henry meant “up here in Washington,” the center of the universe as far as he was concerned.

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do there. Lie low until you hear from me, OK?”

He didn’t have to suggest it twice.

* * *

We made it back to the hotel just before one, and I turned on the TV to catch the tail-end of a local noon-news program, just in time to hear the “Breaking News!” rehash. It concerned a catastrophic house fire in a ritzy Boca Raton subdivision that could involve fatalities.

This was followed by the closing “Top Story of the Day!” report about a small boat full of Russian drug smugglers that the Coast Guard had apprehended about five miles off Fort Lauderdale. The smugglers were badly dehydrated and sunburned, apparently.

And, finally, they provided us with the end-of-show “News Update!” about progress—actually a serious lack thereof, with aspersions cast in the direction of the tight-lipped police detectives—in the investigation of the murder of respected Miami Beach businessman Nikolay Kirov. No connection between Kirov and the purported drug smugglers was implied or inferred.

It was sort of a news trifecta for us. Maybe, I thought, we should head for the track this afternoon.

Sam was aghast that the house-fire report was about the house we’d just spent the night in.

“You mean that nice place, well, sort of nice, not really my style, you know, you mean it burned down? My God! And what about Bill and Nate and all of the other guys?”

“All I know is what I heard on that phone call I got in the car. The guy who called me couldn’t get hold of any of them except the one who was in the guard house, by the canal. And he didn’t know anything, I guess.” I shrugged. “I don’t know if you noticed, but that house was really well equipped with a big-time security system and even a sprinkler system, in some of the rooms, at least. So the fire seems pretty suspicious.”

“So you think somebody set the fire intentionally?” Her blue eyes were huge.

“Henry, he’s the guy I talked to on the phone, Henry said the FBI is investigating it, so we’ll know eventually. But if somebody did, well, they’re good. The front of that house was sealed off from the street, with the gate and that big wall and hedge, and cameras watching everywhere.”

“Geez, I didn’t notice.” Her nose wrinkled and her chin quivered a little. “All dead? That’s terrible.”

I pulled her into a gentle hug. “Well, we don’t know for sure, but, yeah, maybe.”

A picture of the property had formed in my mind.

“And there are privacy fences and hedges along the sides of the lot, too, separating the house from those next door, on both sides. All the way down to the lake.”

“Huh?” She was on a different wavelength.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking out loud. If someone torched that house, they were a serious bunch, not just your garden-variety arsonists.”

Suddenly those hydrophones seemed more important than ever to me.

“Do you think they’ll come after us?” Now she sounded scared.

“Well, I suppose they might if they could. But I doubt they could find us—we have a different car now. It’s distinctive, though, so we have to keep it away from that subdivision. I guess I’ll have to rent something else, another white jelly-bean car.”

Anonymous. Nondescript. Invisible. My entire existence in dangerous neighborhoods depends on maintaining these characteristics. It comes naturally to me on the streets of New York, because I learned the lesson over and over on the streets of various foreign capitals. In New York, on drug unit duty,

though, it's even more important, because I can't claim the defense of being an ignorant foreigner if I'm found out accidentally.

That makes it particularly vexing that the NYPD powers that be—meaning anyone from the Commissioner of Police to the guy who runs the motor pool—have provided my partner and me with an deep-orange, tricked-out (and very loud) Camero Z-28. It's not as if we're trying to be like the guys in Miami Vice. No, we want to blend in. But wherever we park the thing, it draws crowds of kids and teenagers, as well as snickers from the players we're out to bring down. They hear us coming from so far away that by the time we pull up, their main activity seems to be selling votive candles for the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Finally, we decide to try a different strategy in a different neighborhood. We make ourselves over as über-pimps, with clothes, hair, and what's now called bling to match the car. Our schtick is that we have a stable of girls that we can sell to the local street pimps for an appropriate piece of the action and for information about where to find the really good stuff. In a way, it is like the guys in Miami Vice, only with about one percent of their class. They drove Ferraris, we drive a Z-28 with crappy mufflers.

And somewhat to my surprise, it actually works. The girls we deliver turn out to be undercover vice-squad detectives, and our schtick puts them in the heat of the action. And we get all sorts of tips about where to buy quantities of coke and heroin, uncut.

Nothing in New York is forever, but we milk the reverse-invisibility strategy for as long as we can. There's nothing like having fun in your line of work.

I scratched my head. "I wonder how long it will take the people in Washington to assemble a new operations team."

She pulled back from our hug. "Christ, Mac. You sure a different sort of person. I mean, here all those guys, friends of yours, almost, here they're all dead, and maybe we have people after us, and you're analyzing and speculating and not even worried."

I looked in her eyes for a few seconds and then led her over to the couch. We sat, and I patted her hand.

"See, there's a lot you don't know about me, about my background. I have years of experience with strange and dangerous and fluid situations. Lots of experience. One thing I learned to do a long time ago is to think about the present, the immediate future, and the longer term future, in that order. The more fluid and unknown a situation is, and dangerous, maybe, the more important that order is."

I stopped to make sure she was following this.

"So, our present situation is secure, no real worries. The immediate future, like, later today, that also seems fine. We can't be sure about either of these conclusions, of course, because the bad guys could burst through that door any second. But probably not. That leaves the longer future, tomorrow and beyond. And the way you handle that is to analyze it. So I'm analyzing. Thinking about Bill and the guys won't help them, and they'd want me to help us instead, believe me. Worrying won't help us, though, so I'm doing other things, like analyzing." I shrugged. "That's just me."

She leaned her head on my shoulder.

"Well, I just hope that if I get killed, you'll feel at least a little bad about it. You don't seem to care about Bill and the guys at all."

"I do care, just not in a sentimental kind of way. They were colleagues, not really friends. You, however, are in a different class altogether. Sentimental for sure. But the thing is, the only way you'll

get killed by these yo-yos is if they kill me first.” I squeezed her hand. “Another thing about me is that I don’t like to sit around waiting for things to happen. I like to be doing something. And what I need to do right now is find some way to get some juice with certain offices in the Palm Beach County government.”

She went into the bedroom to take inventory again, with the goal of figuring out what she’d lost in the fire, and I called Henry.

“Hey, Mac. Are you safe and sound? You’re the only person left with any real knowledge of the whole SNM business. We got verification from the FBI team that except for Von all of the SAINTs perished in the fire, along with another unidentified person.”

Henry sounded tired, and it was still early afternoon.

“There was a chef there this morning.”

“No, he’s been identified. He was on the team.”

“Oh. I know who it was, probably.”

I told him about Assim Al-Ayas.

He sounded relieved. “Of course. I forgot all about him. And that actually solves a little problem we created for ourselves, or maybe you created it—the kidnapping of a diplomat. I’m glad you did it, you understand. We just hadn’t figured out what to do with him.”

“Well, I just hope that whatever information Bill managed to get out of him was recorded and archived. We don’t need to reinvent wheels at this stage.” I paused to change the subject. “Henry, the reason I called is that I need a little technical help from within the government offices of Palm Beach County, and I don’t even know where to start. See, the thing is, I’ve been thinking about that house that burned, and the only way I can see for anyone to have gained access to it to torch it would have been from out of that lake. The rest is fenced off and has solid security.”

“OK, that sounds like a possibility.”

His response was measured, thoughtful.

“And the county here will have all sorts of information about that place squirreled away in their records. Now, in principle, those are all public records, because of Florida’s Sunshine Law. But they’re not easy to find, and the county isn’t likely to be very helpful. I guess that’s a good thing, because I wouldn’t want just any Tom, Dick, or Harry having access to all the details of my house. What I need, I guess, is for someone who is sufficiently persuasive to get the county administrator to enlist one of their know-it-all computer weenies to help me find everything there is to find about that house across the lake that Bill and his guys had under surveillance.”

“I thought Bill had those records.”

His interest was clearly piqued.

“Some. But there are the original plans, permits for modifications, permits for landscaping and all sorts of stuff he didn’t have. That’s what I need. Everything. And it’s just not possible to find it unless you know the ins and outs of their computers.”

I felt a little dumb, saying it that way. But I also knew I could spend weeks wandering the labyrinth of the county’s computers without finding everything I might need, if I found anything at all.

“I think we should be able to arrange something of that nature.” He laughed. “One of my biggest headaches in this operation has been finding things for the President to do. He desperately wants this

whole thing to be cleared up, and he's clamoring to help. And the one thing he can do is call people and ask favors—in a situation like this, political parties don't matter a bit.”

“Did Bill talk to you about hydrophones?”

“Hydrophones? No, not that I remember. What's that about?”

Henry was typing and talking at the same time, as I could hear clicking in the background.

“Well, I'm thinking that there may be something going on underwater in that lake. That's about the only thing that Bill and his guys weren't monitoring, and what they were monitoring was coming up with nothing. What we really need is justification for a search warrant for that house, right? It must be that Al-Ayas' information wasn't quite good enough to get us one. But suspicious underwater activity, combined with the other information, just might. Like Bill said, just this morning, I guess, we need to get into the basement of that house.”

I wondered how much of this he had heard before.

“Maybe you're right. Everything we have is incomplete. Al-Ayas mentioned several things, all of which reinforced our previous suspicions of that place. The hint of enhanced radioactivity is suggestive, but not compelling. The activity in and out is also curious, but that happens lots of places. Frankly, right now it's our best lead, God help us, but nothing's good enough for us to break the door in. This is America, after all. I'm guessing that the fact we disrupted their west coast plans, thanks to your involvement, has put them off stride, and they're sitting tight for now. But if we don't clear this up, sooner or later there's going to be a really nasty bang somewhere.” He paused. “Well, crap, I'm just rambling here, Mac. Sorry. I guess I'm pretty upset and worried.”

“I'm worried, too, Henry. Maybe I can find something in the county's files that will tell us more about that house. And maybe the FBI guys can toss some hydrophones in that lake for us.”

I didn't want him to lose sight of those things.

“Message received, Mac.” He chuckled. “Somebody in Palm Beach County government is going to be getting an exciting telephone call pretty soon.”

* * *

Twenty

I heard a wail from the bedroom. “My orchids! Ohhhhhh! My silk orchids got burned up!”

I ran to the rescue.

“You mean that bikini and cover-up combination thing? Aww, that *is* too bad. It was beautiful on you. Off you, too, for that matter.” I leered, but she just pouted. “Look, we can easily get another one, right? It's just over at the mall.”

“I just hate it when that happens!” More pouting.

“C'mon, don't worry about it. Make a list, starting with that. We'll go back and get replacements. Anyway, even if you looked great in it, it really didn't look that comfortable.

Ever the practical one, I also didn't want her to get arrested for wearing it.

“Hmmp!”

My phone buzzed—I'd reset the ringer options—rescuing me.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie? This is Laurel Washington, I'm the Palm Beach County administrator. I just received a most interesting telephone call from Washington DC. Took me by complete surprise. Anyway, I want to be sure I understand what you need before I assign someone to help you.”

She sounded official, to be sure, but potentially helpful as well.

“I got one of those calls earlier today. Surprised the hell out of me, too. But it's just an indication of how important what I'm working on is. I'm interested in every possible bit of information available about a house in the Exclusiva at Boca subdivision.”

Intuition flashed, and on impulse I rattled off the street addresses of the house across the lake and the two on either side of it, then repeated the numbers when she asked.

“I'm pretty sure I could find some of the information you folks have stashed away in your computer files, but I need everything you've got. And time is of the essence here.”

“Does this have anything to do with that terrible house fire?” Now her official side was taking over.

“These are different houses, on a different street. And I don't know if they're connected to the fire or not. I've heard that the FBI is coordinating the fire investigation, though. It seems the federal government is taking a keen interest in Exclusiva at Boca just now.”

I was trying to walk the thin line between too much and too little information.

“Mr. MacQuarrie, I'd appreciate it if you didn't jive me.”

She sounded annoyed, and I knew that I'd slipped over to the “too little” side of the line.

“I am responsible for the running of this county, and that includes law enforcement and protecting the public. The Department of Homeland Security has done a background check on me and has provided me with a security clearance. You can tell me anything.”

In my world, DHS security clearances rated at about the level of graduate degrees based on “life experience” from on-line “universities.” And that assessment was verified by the mere fact that she would be discussing her clearance over an open phone—mine was encrypted, but hers wasn't. I'd not heard the confirming beeps.

But I needed her cooperation. I decided on a bad-guy / good-guy approach. She needed a slap on the wrist.

“I certainly can't tell you just anything over this phone. And you should know that. Even the DHS briefing, which is pretty crappy by my standards, covers that.” I paused for effect. “I *can* say that there's a strong possibility that the two are linked somehow, and that somehow is what I'm trying to find out. I can't really say much more, but I expect that there's a single word that will help you understand a lot. That word is IRIL. That's why you got the phone call from the person you did.”

There was a gasp and a squeaking noise. I decided she had sat down on a chair that needed lubricating.

“You mean to tell me that stuff is in that neighborhood?”

She was breathing hard, and I had visions of her calling out HazMat teams and who knows who else.

“No, I do not mean that, Ms. Washington. Please take a deep breath and calm down. If it were, we would know it, because it can be easily detected if it’s not stored properly. And that neighborhood has no such storage capability.”

“How do you know? Isn’t that why you want all those plans and so on about those houses?”

Now she was back on the attack. And she had me. That’s not why I wanted the plans, but it was an even better reason for wanting them than the reason I’d been using. I decided on more good-guy.

“Actually, that’s not why I wanted them, but now that you mention it, that’s worth checking out as well. Meaning that it’s even more important that I get the plans. Oh, and, Ms. Washington, there’s something that you may not know. Half of the stuff we’re talking about has been recovered without incident. But the other half is still dangerous, and I can’t imagine that anyone would want to keep it in their house, even if it’s been suitably modified to provide shielded storage space. But the plans will tell us what we need to know. And if we do find the stuff there, you can bet that there will be a recovery team sent in from that lab, a team that knows exactly what it’s doing and how to do it safely.”

I held my breath, hoping that my comments, and the information, would mollify her.

I decided that she had been the subject of those all-too-typical “we’re from the federal government, and we’re here to help” experiences.

It surprises me how often people just don’t want help, not from their neighbors, not from their local government, and certainly not from Uncle Sam. They want to do it themselves, even if they have no resources, skills, or manpower.

Now, giveaways of technology are another thing. Whether it’s western consumer goods or military gadgetry, it’ll get snapped up at a speed inversely proportional to the wealth of the people doing the snapping.

But not good, old-fashioned, person-to-person help.

What I’m supposed to be doing, here in the refugee camps of southern Lebanon, is developing the sort of rapport with the refugees that will let me help them develop democracy on small scales. The idea is that the small scale democracies—clans, groups of tents, city blocks, whatever—will gel into the sort of large-scale democracy that Uncle Sam so values.

But whenever I suggest to someone a discussion with his fellow refugees about some issue—where the latrines might best be positioned, for example, or how to construct a more secure pen for the goats—as a prelude to developing a consensus, I am rebuffed. One response is “my way or the highway,” and if his compatriots don’t like it, they can go do anatomically impossible things to themselves; in other cases, the individual has been told by someone in authority, some nebulous person I’m never able to identify, what to do, and he dares not argue.

By the end of my six-month assignment, I’ve managed to organize a single meeting that involves voting on something. In an overwhelming landslide, they elect me to be their representative to the larger group whose duty it is to collect camel dung for the cooking fires.

It turns out to be harder work than you might think.

“OK, Mr. MacQuarrie, I’ll tell you what. I’m going to assign this to my most knowledgeable computer guy. A real nerd, although I’d appreciate it if you don’t tell him I said so. He knows our systems inside and out, and he knows how to run searches that find anything. I’ll give him these addresses I wrote down, and he’ll get back to you today sometime, or maybe first thing tomorrow.”

She paused, and her voice was different when she started up again, back to the no-arguing-with-me-now mode.

“But I want you to know, I expect to be kept informed of any threats to the health and safety of the citizens of Palm Beach County. Is that clear?”

“The good health and safety of the people of Palm Beach County, as well as the rest of the United States, is exactly what we’re trying our best to ensure, Ms. Washington. And thank you for your cooperation. I’ll make sure that word of your helpfulness gets back to that certain individual in Washington.” I let out my breath and disconnected.

No sooner had I regained my equilibrium—I had a high-school teacher, eons ago, whose voice Laurel Washington’s reminded me of, and I was a bit discombobbled—than my phone buzzed again.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

I heard a series of beeps and boops indicating a secure call.

“Mac, it’s Will Perry, FBI. I’m the lucky guy who got the SAINT’s fire investigation dumped in his lap.”

He seemed resigned to his fate. Still, the sensibility he’d shown me out at that camp in the Everglades made me glad it was him and not some prima donna.

“Sorry to hear it, Will, although I’m glad it’s someone I can trust. What’s up?”

“Well, I got a call from Washington, from my Director, no less. He told me that this entire operation is now being managed directly from the Oval Office, believe it or not. And he also told me that you’re the lead person for the entire deal here in South Florida.”

He said this in the sort of matter-of-fact way that you’d talk about getting your car’s oil changed, but it knocked me for a loop. First high-school flashbacks from Laurel Washington, now this. What *had* I been smoking?

“I knew that the highest levels were involved, but I’m surprised to hear that the Oval Office is managing things. They seem more like visionaries than managers.” I didn’t say anything about Henry. “And I expect that my role is temporary, until some other group, some group with a new leader, gets assigned down here. Is it true that the entire SAINT unit was wiped out? Do you have any indications of what caused the fire?”

“Everyone except Von Rogers died, and he’s gone into some sort of psychological shock. There’s also someone we can’t really identify. I’m told you provided information about him, and we’re going with that for now.” He paused to take a breath. “Now. The fire. I don’t know that I’ve seen such a professionally thorough job before. They used some kind of incendiary devices that just overwhelmed everything, including the sprinkler systems. We’ll figure out just what they were when the residue gets analyzed. But there must have been a dozen, tossed through windows and so on.”

“That sounds like a fair-size team of attackers.” I thought about the lake again.

“Yep, that’s what we think, too. And we agree with your comments about the lake. There’s a set of three hydrophones on the way, with analysis equipment.”

His remark impressed me with the efficiency of the communications links that Henry had enabled.

“Do yourselves a favor and see if you can get ’em in the water clandestinely. The people in the house across the lake are probably watching.”

The last thing we need, I thought, is yet another attack.

“And there’s something else that might be useful, not for the arson investigation, but for the bigger picture. I’m sure you’re going to interview all the neighbors. How about working into those interviews a general question about unusual construction activity? Either recently or in the past. Anything they can remember, anywhere in the neighborhood. We don’t need to raise suspicion, but what I really want to know about is activity at that house across the lake.”

I heard laughter. “Gee, Mac, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you have some concerns about that house across the lake. But don’t worry. We’re on it. Whoever pulled this stunt has to expect there to be an arson investigation. So we’re investigating the crap out of the place, and in the process we’re getting all sorts of other things accomplished. I guess you haven’t been here since the fire, huh?”

“I got a call about it earlier and stayed away. Why?”

Will Perry hesitated. “Well, from what I saw of the news reports and so on, it sounded as if I was going to find a pile of ashes when I got here. But that’s not the case. The place is burned out, for sure, a total write-off, but there’s structure still standing, and some rooms are nearly untouched. It’s pretty clear that the attackers knew exactly which rooms to focus their efforts on. Those rooms got the incendiaries, and the sprinklers must have saved the rest of the house. It’s as if they’d been watching the SAINTs for days and knew just which rooms they needed to hit.”

* * *

Will Perry disconnected, and my phone started making weird noises. I poked at it for a minute, and, just about the time I figured out that the noises meant I had voice mail, there was a knock on the outside door.

Distracted by the phone’s complexity and still poking at it—how to get the noise to shut up and get at voice mail was the next puzzle—I wandered over to the door, unlocked it, and pushed it open. Only then did it occur to me what a stupid move that was, how vulnerable Sam and I were if one of the bad guys had found out our location.

But we got lucky—it was Ross Bierkens, and there was that nondescript white van sitting nearby in a parking space, engine idling. I put the phone in my pocket, which meant that every few seconds a sound like Tinker Bell with a sock in her mouth emerged from the front of my pants. I tried to ignore it.

“Hey, Mac. My CO sent me over, said he got a call from the White House. It seems there’s some concern for your welfare. What’s going on, anyway?”

He couldn’t help but look in the direction of the muffled tinkling, so I pulled out the phone and started poking at it again.

While I fumbled with the phone, I began to fill him in on the Exclusiva fire and its victims. Suddenly the little gadget let loose with a high-volume rendition of the famous finale from Rossini’s *William Tell Overture*, and, startled, I dropped it on the tile—at which point the back popped off and the battery skittered across the floor.

That shut it up. I decided to let it lie there for a while, to teach it a lesson.

“Feel free to step on it if you want to, Ross.” I shook my head in frustration. “Anyway, we’ve obviously made someone nervous enough to fight back. And I expect that means we’re getting close.”

“Maybe,” he looked thoughtful, “just maybe we could have a look around while the FBI team is sifting through the rubble, if they still are. That way, we’d blend in and not raise the suspicions of any watchers, at least not higher than they already are. I need civvies, though.”

I looked him up and down, estimating. “Well, Ross…”

But the land-line phone, the hotel's room extension, had started ringing. I picked it up and found myself listening to my White House contact, Henry. He was not happy.

"Mac? Did you get that voice mail yet? When are you going to download that file? You need to see it soonest."

Oops. I pointed and gestured at my cell phone's parts, and Ross finally understood. He assembled it and handed it my way.

"Sorry, Henry, I've been talking strategy with Commander Bierkens. What's in the file? How do I get it?"

"Mac, the cell phone's encrypted, right? For, you know, a reason?"

Henry sounded resigned to my stupidity.

"Be sure and check out time mark oh-nine-thirty and the following twenty minutes or so."

"Oh, right, sorry. Once more. I'll get right on it."

I hung up the house phone and started fiddling with the other one again.

It took all of about fifteen minutes for me to figure out how to retrieve the voice mail and then to use its message to find the web site I needed and to log into it. The high-speed internet at the hotel made reasonably short work of the large, encrypted file, and I used the password in the last part of the voice mail message to un-encrypt it.

It was a computer movie, streaming video recorded from one of the surveillance cameras that had been installed at the Exclusiva house, the only camera looking over the back yard to have survived the fire.

Surveillance, whether by camera or by eyeball, can be invaluable, or it can be a big waste of time, energy, and money. Agency analysts, those legions of highly trained and specialized civil servants who often spend an entire career poring over satellite images without seeing anything of significance, think of the whole affair as a big game. But to those of us in the field, it can be a life-or-death proposition.

The miniature video camera I've left watching the back exit of the bookstore, the one that fronts on the street across from the government house in Lahore, is programmed to take a picture every five seconds, so the tape, when viewed as a movie, is jerky and, because its lighting is terrible, full of shadows.

But it has two frames at just the right time, the first showing someone leaving the store and taking care to close the door carefully. In the second frame, I'm facing the camera.

"Right time" in this case means two minutes after a sniper's bullet hits General Bassam Zirafi, the leader of the Muslim-extremist military faction that is about to overthrow the Pakistani government. He is standing on the steps of the government house, reprimanding an aide, when his head explodes. Because his day job is commanding the new military detachments that will oversee the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, he is something of a concern to Uncle Sam and his various friends both in the region and around the world. The folks next door in India are beside themselves with worry.

The question is, can the shooter be identified by the videotape? Or, more importantly, can he be mis-identified? It really wouldn't do at all for the his true identity to become known because, thanks to the recently renewed Executive Order prohibiting employees of the U.S. government from involvement in political assassinations, no matter how dangerous a potential target may be, it would cause something of a stir, were his identity to be publicized.

I'm using the best video equipment I can rustle up in this godforsaken place, including a brand-new computer enhancement system. The first frame isn't a problem, as there is nothing to identify the individual's nationality based on the back of his head. But the second ... does it not look like an American enough for a disclaimer to that effect to be credible? Does it look enough like someone of another nationality—pick one, I don't care which—for a statement of blame to fly?

It's time, I'm thinking, to call in the real analysts.

I managed to skip forward in the video file to 0930, and then clicked the “Play” button. It showed a nicely framed shot of the back yard and the lake, the occasional bird flitting around making cheeping noises, and, I suppose, the grass growing, for about five minutes. Then there were small ripples, different ripples from those the wind was causing, along the edge of the lake right about where the lot-line hedges ended at the waterline. Nothing much followed, although it seemed as if there was a rustling in the hedges themselves—I couldn't tell whether it was the breeze or what.

Nine minutes later, at the 0944 mark, all hell broke loose. Several rocket propelled grenades came whooshing out of the hedges from different spots, the microphones saturated and shut off, and the picture jerked and wobbled. It took only a few seconds for dust and smoke to obscure the picture completely, and it finally went black. The power to the system must have failed.

Bierkens, who had watched the show over my shoulder, let out his breath.

“They came in from the lake and worked their way through the hedges. I bet when we check it out, we'll find the centers of the hedges have been cut to make pathways, like tunnels or something. This tells me that the whole thing was carefully planned and executed, and that means we're dealing with professionals.”

“That fits with what Will Perry told me—remember him? One of the FBI guys at that bust out in the 'Glades? It looks like they had the SAINT house under thorough surveillance for some time. Apparently, they knew just which rooms to fire those RPGs into.” I was staring at the blank screen.

“I don't want to speak badly of those guys who got killed, but I don't think they were taking the whole thing seriously enough. Or else they were just too removed from military discipline.” He shook his head sadly. “You seemed to know that guy Petersen pretty well, huh?”

“We went back a long way, lots of years.”

I had never really liked Bill Petersen, but losing a long-term colleague that way is still jarring

“You're right, though—what I saw at the house was a pretty casual bunch. I don't think they believed there was a threat from across that lake. And I saw what you saw—that attack came by water.”

“Right.” Bierkens was thinking. “But...well, I'm not a lawyer, but I'm thinking there isn't much in the way of real evidence implicating that house across the lake—meaning that I don't know if it's going to be possible to do a legal search yet. That Presidential Directive lets us work with law enforcement, not outside the law.”

“Yeah, you're probably right.”

Time, I thought, for a little creative covertness.

“Y'know, I think I'm beginning to develop a personal animosity toward that greasy little lake.”

* * *

Twenty-One

Well, I can't verify my comment about that lake's being greasy, but it was sure warm and wet, especially the warm part. Almost like bathwater. And, greasy or not, I still didn't like it.

Two of Bierkens' men and I had waited until dark to ease our way through the tunnels that someone had cut down the center of the west-side ficus hedge and slip into the lake. We made certain that Will Perry's FBI team had plenty of lights shining in all directions in the back yard, so that any night-vision equipment watching us would be overwhelmed.

It was dark, and based on its taste I'm positive that the water was muddy, but we found our way around under the surface quite nicely, thank you, with some nifty equipment that the SEAL team brought along. They wouldn't tell me much about it, beyond how the "ON" switch worked, and even if they had I probably wouldn't be able to write about it without getting hauled off to Leavenworth. Suffice it to say that my swim that night was a lot easier than the one behind the Saudi consulate had been.

Also, the fins they loaned me helped, a lot. I wished I'd had them in Biscayne Bay that other night.

We managed to get three hydrophones installed, bracketing the suspect house across the lake so that sound sources could be pinpointed. Our main purpose, though, was an up-close examination of the shoreline and lake bottom behind that house. I don't know what I was expecting—maybe some kind of underwater door to a tunnel to its basement, or something.

But we didn't find squat, except mud and more mud, with lots of algae and some kind of seaweed that kept grabbing at our feet. It reminded me of that dream with the nibbling fish. At least there were no alligators, despite all those warning signs.

It was after midnight when I finally got back to the suite, feeling desperately in need of a shower and some clean, crisp, dry sheets. I'd left Sam to go shopping to rebuild her burned up wardrobe, so it didn't surprise me to find the living room strewn with bags and boxes.

I was a little taken aback, though, to find her dressed only in some wonderfully filmy underwear, leaning over a ten-foot putt on the living room rug.

"Uh..." How, I thought, should I put this? "New hobby, sweetie? Clothes-optional golf? I thought you said we were taking up tennis."

Her stroke was smooth and sure, and the ball rattled into the water glass. She stood up with a smile of triumph.

"I did. But we need variety in our lives, so I'm going to make you take up golf, too. I went for a walk that day we stayed at the Exclusiva house, and their golf course got me all inspired. Nice contoured greens surrounded by lots of sand traps." Her smile turned seductive. "The clothes-optional thing is just for you, though. You like my new undies? Oooh, goodness. I see you do. Well, maybe I can help with that. But you obviously need a shower first. Maybe I can help with that, too. Where in the world have you been?"

What followed made me forget all about golf until the next morning. I was barefoot, on the way to the kitchen to make coffee, when I stepped on her golf ball in the middle of the rug. As I was massaging the ache in the arch of my right foot, I remembered her words from the night before.

"...their golf course got me all inspired. Nice contoured greens surrounded by lots of sand traps."

Sometimes the answer is hovering about like an annoying mosquito, whining, mocking you, and you just can't grasp it. Other times, it's more subtle, and you don't even know it's out there hiding in the shadows until you blunder into it by accident.

Joe Fila and I need to find out who is whacking our snitches, and we need to find out quickly before we run out of them. Developing that group of informants had taken us a long time, and we can't afford to have to start over. Tooling around the city in our rumbling orange Camaro gives us plenty of time to discuss the problem.

"I just can't feel too bad about Jamal. I mean, yeah, we've been getting lots of information from him, but he was such a dirtbag."

Joe emphasizes his point by spitting out the open window.

His opinion of most of our snitches is similar, but in Jamal's case it's spot on.

"He was playing both sides, right? Not like the others."

I'm referring to the four other late informants.

"Yeah, and he was also the one I trusted least. Thing is, we can't tell who might have done him. I'm thinking it was probably the street guys, though. But I'm not sure which crowd."

The fingers of his left hand make drumming noises on the glass of the T-top.

The "street guys" are the local dealers' network, three separate networks, actually, consisting of gang members associated with the different neighborhoods in the turf we're working. The other side that Jamal was probably playing as well is the importers, a mixed bunch of Arabs, Afghans, and Syrians who are able to get along only because they make so much money together smuggling heroin from southwest Asia.

We're trying to bring down both sides at once, more or less. If we break up the smuggling ring, the dealers will just find other importers; if we bring down the dealers, the importers will find new ones. Get 'em all, that's our plan.

The dead informants had been providing us with information about the various components of the overall operation, so it's just not obvious who would be after them as a group. They were each pretty isolated from one another, and there was no reason for the smugglers to have gone after the south-side snitch, who knew only about the dealers down there. Even Jamal hadn't been involved in anything on the east end.

I grab the passenger-side window frame as Joe takes a corner faster than he needs to.

"The MOs on those hits all look alike, right? Same killer. It has to be someone who knows the big picture, then. But who's that? Even the Loot doesn't know very much."

We aren't filing full-disclosure reports with our Lieutenant's office and haven't been for months. The PD is full of leaks from top to bottom.

"Hell, I don't know. Probably somebody in the department, though. Wanna get some lunch?"

Joe is perpetually hungry and likes to eat at least three lunches while on shift.

"Where's that menu we got from the new Chinese place, anyway?"

I begin pawing through the pile of paper on the dashboard, rooting around for the list of offerings at Szechwan Heaven, making a pile of paper in my lap. Most of what's there consists of unpaid parking tickets. We get them by the boatload and just ignore them.

“Yeah, must be someone in the department has figured out where we spend our time. The pattern would have made it easy to find Jamal and the others.”

I find the menu and square up the pile of paper to jam it into the glove box, along with all the other paper in there, also mostly parking tickets—and a light bulb in my head turns on.

“Uh, say, Joe? You don’t think... Ah, what I mean is, look at all these tickets. They all have locations and the license plate number, and times and so on. You think maybe someone in parking enforcement is tracking us?”

“Holy crap!”

Joe can say a lot in very few words when he wants to.

And with that little epiphany, the rest is easy.

Sand traps, I thought, and golf carts in practically every driveway.

Having been a homeowner with a cantankerous lawn sprinkler system, I had done my share of digging. I knew that below about six inches of turf and soil there was pure sand in this part of southeastern Florida. It would stand to reason, then, that those sand traps would be virtually bottomless, I thought.

Commander Ross Bierkens answered on the second ring, and I waited for the secure beep.

“Ross? Hey, sorry to call so early, It’s Mac.”

“Not a problem, Mac. I’m out on my morning five-mile run. What’s up?”

I couldn’t help but hate the fact that he wasn’t even breathing hard.

“Do four of the guys on your team play golf? We need to have a foursome play a round at that Exclusiva course. They should make a point of hitting every sand trap, and we can have them carry rad detectors. I want to know if there are any signals in any of those bunkers.”

There was a long pause, during which I pretended that Ross was trying to catch his breath.

“Sounds like you think the missing SNM might be buried out there somewhere.”

Nope. His voice was relaxed and smooth. No panting or huffing or anything. Geez.

“It’s occurred to me. And a good way to find out, and keep it quiet, is to have somebody play some golf, seems like.”

“I think I can get a foursome together. What’s the plan if we find something?”

He must have turned onto an arterial street, because suddenly there was traffic noise in the background.

“Keep it under surveillance and then pull the same switcheroo that we did on the ship, I guess. That’ll get the material off the street and give the FBI a way to get the perps, right?”

“Right. And, listen. While you guys were swimming last night, I had a long talk with Will Perry. They’ve got the forensics on the arson and murders under control. There are some test results they have to wait for, and they’ve got surveillance re-established using the undamaged part of the house. And they were all set to begin recording the hydrophone signals. So, they’re looking for what’s next. Maybe Perry could run checks on the golf course employees.”

And he could even talk paragraphs without breathing hard! Damn.

“Sounds like we’ve got a plan for the day, Ross. Let me know if you guys need any of this equipment I have.”

I finally heard him take a deep breath.

“You bet. And a plan it is. But after talking with Will last night about what went down at that house, what I’d really like to do is shoot somebody. We just need to find out who.”

My self-service foot massage had managed to erase the golf-ball ache, and I must have been inspired by Ross, for I had an urge to work out. The hotel, I remembered, had boasted about their exercise equipment, so I decided to check it out. After dressing quietly and managing not to wake Sam, I went looking for the Chamber of Pain, as I started to think of it. I left her a note with the excuse that I wanted to keep myself healthy so we could spend more years together.

An hour later, tired all over, I limped back into our suite to find Sam making us breakfast. As I came in through the door, she grabbed me in a big hug.

“I don’t think that anyone has ever left me such a sweet note! You sure know how to make a girl feel wanted.”

Her kiss made my exercise-induced lethargy fade.

“But your phone has been buzzing and buzzing, and then making chirping noises. I think someone must really want to talk with you.”

“I’ll call ’em as soon as I shower. And eat whatever smells so good.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “And it’s true, ya know. Even we old-geezer ex-spies know the value of good relationships. And I seem to have found a great one.”

I was tickled that it made her blush. God help me, this mushy stuff was feeling *real* good.

* * *

The phone had voice mail from Henry directing me to my computer, and my email had a long message time-stamped a few minutes after the voice mail. The message was about the execution of a search warrant on Winfrew Hanley’s house in Exclusiva at Boca, that house I was obsessing about. The search was going to happen at 0830 with or without me. Third-class engineer Willoughby Trimble, after some persuasion, had cooperated with the FBI’s questioning about his role in the SNM caper, and he’d told all about that house.

That’ll teach me to go for a little workout, I thought.

By then, it was nearly nine, and I was missing all the fun. But there was still the SEAL golfers’ sand-trap scavenger hunt to keep me amused, so I was reassured that the day might still have possibilities.

I decided it would be politic to call Henry back.

“Looks like I missed the fun, Henry. Sorry. I went off to the exercise room without my phone.”

But I didn’t even try to sound contrite.

“Not a problem, Mac. You would have just been in the way anyway. Perry and company know the drill. I’ll let you know what they find.”

“This may turn out to be a good day all around, Henry.”

And I proceeded to sketch my idea about the sand traps. When I finished, there was one of those pregnant pauses you read about.

“Now, why didn’t we think of that sooner? Shit. It’s pretty obvious when you describe it that way.”

“Yeah, well, we haven’t found the stuff yet. So don’t go betting your mortgage.”

I had my fingers crossed, but it was still only a hunch.

“So, anyway, your email didn’t really say much. What did you learn from Trimble?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Well, it seems that Winfrew Hanley’s twin brother Josiah is the head of some kind of spooky religious-political cult, Trimble called it a ‘family.’ Josiah holds worship services, or something like that, and strategy sessions in the basement of Winfrew’s house. Trimble has never seen Winfrew, though. The religious angle wasn’t a priority for our people, so they didn’t get into details about it, but what Trimble said about the strategy session business was enough to get a warrant. Uh, wait one.”

There was a muffled side conversation on his end.

“OK. Sorry. So Trimble told us enough to get us a warrant, but he said he didn’t know where the rest of the SNM got off to. In fact, he was surprised that there was more than he had on the ship. I’ve got no idea of what Will Perry and his team are finding, but at least it’s progress. If the SNM is really in those sand traps, we’re miles ahead today.”

“Well, like I said, be patient. We’ll see. Anyway, what about the commandos who staged that raid on Bill Petersen’s operation? Did Trimble have anything to say about that?”

“He’s ex-Navy, of course, and he said he met several others in the cult with military backgrounds. Seems they have some sort of enforcement system for slackers, or something. So that could explain the commandos. Listen. I just got a note here with a progress report. Apparently that house is empty, at least as far as people are concerned.” There was disappointment in his voice. “They’ve found a weapons cache, though, in the basement. And a coffin, some kind of weird setup involving gas canisters and a freezer. But no hint of radioactivity.”

“A coffin?”

What, I thought is *that* about?

“That’s what it says. Nothing about what, or who, is in it.” Henry paused again. “I guess it could be lead-lined and have the pigs in it, though. I’ll let them know.”

“OK, well, thanks, Henry. Let’s keep each other informed about what’s going on today. Things are getting interesting.”

“Right. Finally. The President will be happy, at least.” He sounded relieved.

Even I, with my rogue field-agent’s history and unrepentant bad attitude about authority, knew the value of keeping the boss happy. Especially a boss with such a nice house.

Stateside, between assignments, I find it a useful skill to be able to sleep with my eyes open, because it makes it so much easier for me to get through the various training seminars I’m required to attend. It seems that the latest set of guidelines from the Carter White House has sparked sensitivity to ethics and honorable behavior among the bureaucrats of the intelligence community, and they are bound and determined to pass this sensitivity along to those of us who do their dirty work out in the field.

So, even though we have always operated in the mode of justifying the means based on the ends, we now have the task of balancing the two, at least in these seminars.

The chirpy woman for this round is lecturing on the importance of our showing respect for other cultures. Every culture deserves respect, she asserts, and no culture is inherently better than another. Never mind, I'm thinking, that we're in the process of trying our best to subvert some of those other cultures for Uncle Sam's benefit. That's our job.

Because she has introduced herself as "Miz Sandra Jackson," I've pigeon-holed her with the Gloria Steinem crowd—and what Ms. Jackson lacks of Steinem's sense of style, she makes up for in stridency. Whenever she tries to emphasize a point, her voice rises to a level beyond shrill, a level that keeps waking me up. Very annoying.

So annoying, in fact, that I finally raise my hand when she pauses for a breath.

"Ms. Jackson? I'm afraid that I'm a little confused about all this. I've been assigned in countries where things are very different from here in the States. For example, in some of the places I've been assigned, women are treated like property, like farm animals. In fact, farm animals are treated better, mostly. In one place I know of, they routinely do surgery on little girls—rather primitive surgery at that, without anesthetic or much in the way of sterile instruments, just big knives—surgery in which they cut out the little girl's clitoris. Is this one of the cultural practices I'm supposed to respect and honor?"

The audience, my fellow field agents and a large number of office workers from the Company, lets out a collective sigh, and then the silence is broken only by a nervous throat-clearing from a very pale Ms. Jackson.

Shortly afterward, after the seminar ends prematurely and while we're all filing out, I get my share of smiles and nods of gratitude. But I find the Deputy Director waiting for me out in the hall. He pulls me aside.

"Mac, I just don't know what we're going to do with you."

He can't quite hide the grin lurking behind his stern expression.

"Yes sir."

I try to look contrite.

"Thing is, Mac, our official position has to be that we buy into these philosophies. It's White House policy. Of course, the real world is a bit messier than mere philosophy, isn't it?"

His wink gets the real message across: he's a happy boss.

On my phone there was more voice mail that must have come in when I was talking with Henry. Perhaps, I thought, that was the new and different tweeping noise I had heard, some kind of call notification alert. That stupid phone had more features than I knew what to do with. At least I had figured out how to get the message, though.

"Mr. MacQuarrie? My boss, Palm Beach County Administrator Laurel Washington? She asked me to dig up some info from our real estate databases for you ASAP. I've got it. Please call me back and let me know how to get it to you, OK?"

The squeaky voice left a call-back number and said it belonged to Alvin White.

The files he had for me were huge, some having been scanned in from the original paper architects drawings, but eventually I got them downloaded. They were organized so nicely that it was easy to

eliminate the house on the east end of the three—no permits had ever been pulled for any additional work beyond the original construction.

But the other two, Winfrew Hanley's house in the middle and the one on its west side, had undergone layers of additions, remodeling, and reconstruction since being built. And the west-side house turned out to be the property of Josiah Hanley, with a purchase date shortly after Winfrew's purchase next door.

It made sense, in a way. Twin brothers, each made rich by the efforts of their father, retiring to Florida and buying houses next door to each other. Keeping family connections close, and all that.

But the more I pored through the various plans and permits for the two houses, the more curiosities emerged. I finally called Will Perry.

"Will? Mac here. Listen, I got the details of plans and permits from the county, for the Hanley house, right? And, on a hunch, I also got them for the house next door, to its left as you look across the lake. That greenish one, I think it is. And isn't it sitting up pretty high, too, like our favorite one there?"

"Yeah, greenish. I'm looking at it right now. And it is kind of high up. Find anything interesting?"

"How fast can you get over here?"

It didn't take him long at all—unsurprising, really, as it was only about four miles north and then a bit east for him, but he managed it faster than I had ever been able to. Sam started a new pot of coffee as we huddled around my computer screen.

"OK, Will, here's the original plan for Winfrew's house," I switched to a second open file, "and here's the one for the green house, which turns out to belong to his brother Josiah."

"Really? I wonder why Josiah was holding his meetings in Winfrew's house, then." He shook his head. "I don't understand this at all."

"Well, now look at this. It's a permit that Winfrew pulled to install a whole-house generating system, along with an underground propane tank for fuel. People have generators here in South Florida for power in case of a hurricane, right? And rich people sometimes put in these whole-house deals. They're automatic, and they let you run the air conditioning and everything."

We were looking at plans that included a significant excavation in Winfrew's side yard between the two houses.

"Turns out that Josiah did the same thing a couple of months later, same company, even, and his system is also between the two houses. In fact, if you compare them, the excavations are only a few feet apart."

"Um, OK, but ..." He sounded even more perplexed.

"But, wait, as they say: there's more." I switched to yet another drawing. "Here's another permit Winfrew pulled to put in a wine cellar in his basement, against the wall that the propane tank is buried outside of. And there's the exact same thing in Josiah's house. Yeah, they're twins, but this is something more, I'm thinking."

Will scratched his head. "Looks like that wine cellar in Winfrew's basement is where we found the freezer with the coffin in it. Oh, and maybe you haven't heard. The coffin contains the frozen body of Winfrew Hanley. It turns out the tanks were nitrogen, and they were used to flush the oxygen out of the coffin. We found pressure fittings that match up. So Hanley is nicely preserved for posterity. We're going to do an autopsy."

“How carefully did you guys look at the outside wall of that freezer?” For me, this was the payoff question.

“Hmm. Well, as I recall, it was shelves. Mostly empty, but ... now that I think of it, empty in the middle but full on the two sides. Looked like frozen food. We didn’t pay much attention, though, because of that coffin.” He looked surprised. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Seems like another visit to that house might be in order, huh?”

* * *

Twenty-Two

It was getting on toward lunch time, so we decided to chow down in preparation for what looked like an afternoon of discovery. Sam wanted to go shopping—surprise, surprise—and I didn’t want to bother Will for rides around town, so the three of us made a little caravan to the Too Jay’s by the mall, where we tucked into those giant deli sandwiches they serve. Just as I was starting on the second half of mine, my phone buzzed.

“Mac MacQuarry.”

“Mac, it’s Ross. Eureka, as they say. Or maybe it’s ‘Bingo’ down here in Florida. The left bunker by the thirteenth green is full of hot sand. Hot with the right radiation signatures, even. And it’s just across the street from Hanley’s house, hidden from it by another of those big hedges they have everywhere.” Ross sounded triumphant.

“But all you’ve got is hot sand? No pigs?”

“They got the radiation signatures first, of course, and they’ve been using probes to look for anything buried. No luck so far, though.”

“Well, maybe they’ll find something. But, Ross, make sure that your activity is also screened from the green house to the ... ah, I guess it would be to the right of Hanley’s. Turns out it belongs to his brother the cult leader, the one who Trimble was working with. They could be watching from there, too.”

I heard some muffled instructions being relayed.

“We’re going to do some more searching in Winfrew Hanley’s house in a little while, so I’ll be over that way. See you soon.”

I decided not to call Henry with the news until it was confirmed, but my two lunch companions deserved to know.

“Looks like the SEALs found where the rest of the SNM is hidden, or was, at least. They’ve got the right readings. We’ll know more soon.” I smiled at Sam across the table.

Will Perry had a mouthful of corned beef, but not for long.

“I hope they’ve found it, all of it. Getting that stuff off the street is our very top priority in this thing. Now we can focus on finding whoever’s responsible.”

“It’s looking like Josiah Hanley, isn’t it?”

I don't usually like to state the obvious, but I wanted to make sure that I was on the same page that Will was.

He grinned. "He's certainly what we like to call a 'person of interest,' I'll say that. I'd very much like to talk with him. Also, there's this 'family' business we've all heard about by now."

"Does this mean we don't have to worry about that nuclear stuff getting spread around anymore?" Sam looked hopeful.

I reached over and patted her hand. "That's what we're hoping, darlin'. Why don't you find something elegant to go out to dinner in?"

"Well, that's a relief. And I think I will, if you two gentlemen will excuse me."

She slid out of the booth and headed for the door.

That served as a cue for Will and me, so we wolfed down the rest of our sandwiches and got the bill.

The driveway of the half-burned house in Exclusiva had become something of an RV parking lot. There were three FBI crime scene vans, plus another from Homeland Security, hogging so much space that cars were parked all over the lawn.

Based on having found Winfrew Hanley's body at his house, Will and colleagues had declared the place a potential crime scene and secured it, so our access was easy. We drove around the lake to the Hanley driveway, where an agent in jacket with "FBI" in big letters on the back let us in through the gate.

Although the house was very different on the outside from the one that had burned, the similarity of the interiors surprised me. While they differed in details—specific colors and so on—they both projected the same mood of sterile wealth. That really had not surprised me in the other house, as it was a rental. But someone had been living here in the Hanley house. As we walked through the upstairs rooms, I kept flashing back to the house that had burned, wondering why anyone would want to live in such a generic environment. Nice, yes, but no personality.

Down in the basement, it was much the same, if you overlooked the eccentricities. Not many residential basements, after all, consist of one large finished room with fifty or so chairs set up in rows facing a little speaker's platform. And the odd symbol on the banner behind the podium—an upside-down horseshoe with a vertical spike through it—didn't do anything to warm the place up.

Our interest, though, was in the middle room next to the stairs we'd just come down, the one flanked by a lavatory under the stairs on one side and a laundry room on the other. What was supposed to be a wine cellar, according to the permit for its construction, was obviously a large, walk-in freezer.

"We found a whole range of weapons there in the laundry, assault rifles, machine pistols, handguns, and even a couple of small RPG launchers. Plus ammo."

Will Perry was playing tour guide.

"No hint of the sort of incendiaries that were used on the other house, though. Surprised us."

"That must be the freezer." I gestured to the middle door.

"Yeah. Open it up, would you, Roger?"

He addressed the request to one of the two agents who had accompanied us.

Inside, of course, it was cold. There was an empty stainless steel table in the middle of the little room, and the far wall was lined with shelves, the middle third of which were empty.

“Thought you might like these, Will, Mr. MacQuarrie.”

Roger held out insulated gloves for us. I put them on and studied the shelves for a minute.

“Will, let’s move some of this stuff onto the table, OK?”

Glad for the gloves, I began transferring various packages from the middle ends of the full shelves to the table, and Will and Roger pitched in. After a little while, we had a pile of cartons of rock-hard steaks, lobsters, assorted potatoes and vegetables, and a surprising number of Popsicles on the table, and the empty space on the shelves was a couple of feet wider.

The back of the shelf unit was made of the smooth, white plastic that you would expect in the walls of a freezer unit, but the surface was scored by a series of vertical slots, which, on close examination, were obviously designed for the shelves to hook into and hang from. The shelves themselves consisted of several sets of three-foot units, spaced apart at various heights to accommodate different-sized packages.

The shelves of the originally empty three-foot section in the middle of the wall were all offset by an inch or two from the shelves immediately to their right. Some, though, lined up with the shelves on their left. There was a good three feet of empty floor between the shelves and the table.

Curious, I gave the left-hand corner of one of the empty shelves a little tug, then a harder one, and felt a magnetic seal let go. The middle section of the wall began to swing outward, toward me.

The palace, recently renovated, is really a thousand years old behind the new spit and polish. Doorways between rooms are more like short tunnels through the four-foot thick interior walls, and the high, arched ceilings everywhere are lined with ventilation gratings. It’s a building that the word “Moorish” was invented for.

We’ve all been carefully briefed that our stay with the Sheikh is a high honor indeed, but one that we need to be extremely wary of. We can have no expectation of privacy anywhere, anytime, even in the wonderfully modern bathrooms. We need to remember to lock our briefcases before going to sleep. Conversations, even in code or obscure languages, are risky.

My role is to be a glorified bodyguard for the State Department’s Special Envoy, and to keep my ears and eyes open for the Company. Sensitivity levels are high because of the nature of the mission, negotiations about military aircraft purchases, and because the Special Envoy is Rita Vincent, recently divorced and not all the sort of submissive, female personality that the Sheikh is used to. At least, in deference to local custom, Ms. Vincent makes sure that her wardrobe, while stylish, is puritanical.

After lunch on the first day, our communications officer hands me a decoded message from home. It seems that an ultra-conservative faction has planned an attempt on the Special Envoy’s life. I’m instructed to stay with her all day and all night, not to let her out of my sight.

Because our relationship is at the “ma’am” and “Mr. MacQuarrie” stage, I view this as something of a challenge. When there is as much of a private moment as is possible in that palace, I show her the decoded message and ask her for an opinion.

“Well, Mr. MacQuarrie, regardless of this, you will not be accompanying me to the lavatory. That’s just not open for discussion. But there is a rather comfortable chair in my room, as I recall, and you’re welcome to spend the night in that.” Her tone is severe, her demeanor is prim, and I’m looking forward to a long, boring night. It occurs to me to wonder if she snores.

She maintains her tone and demeanor, overlain by a reserved friendliness for the Sheikh, throughout the afternoon discussion sessions and the sumptuous banquet. Finally, it’s time to retire, and

she becomes prim and severe become positively strait-laced. Fortunately, I have a briefcase full of reading material, and that chair really is quite comfortable.

Although I'm worried, my thorough inspection of her bathroom persuades me that she will be safe in there alone, and she informs me that her bath may take quite a while. I hear her locking the door and then testing it.

A half hour or so later, I'm in the middle of an analysis of new Soviet missile capabilities, when I hear the door unlocking. I don't look up.

The next thing I know, there is a lightly perfumed and quite naked Special Envoy sitting on my lap. In her mid-40s, she has a few years on me but is in her prime. The only word that fits the warm, soft body snuggled up against me is "lush."

"Mr. MacQuarrie, I understand that it's your job to take care of me. How do you propose to start?"

"Uh, well, ma'am, look. There are probably watchers everywhere. I spotted several hidden doorways, and these thick walls are probably riddled with hidden passageways. I expect that there are several people assigned to us even now." I can feel my body beneath her lap beginning to betray my professionalism.

"Well, then, Mr. MacQuarrie, don't you think they deserve a good show?"

"No shit." Roger was amazed. "Do we know what's back there?"

He drew his handgun.

"What we really need is a flashlight."

Will opened the main freezer door and stuck his head out.

"Neil, we need a flashlight. Why don't you get that tool bag out of the back of my car?"

"Yessir, be right back."

As the junior agent on the detail, Neil seemed to be getting the short straw in the form of guarding our rear and doing errands. I shut the hidden door, Roger holstered his weapon, and we moved back out into the main room, where it was warmer.

"So, what in the world is that on the wall?"

Roger was pointing at the odd, pierced horseshoe symbol.

"We've been overhearing conversations about some kind of 'family.' Trimble mentioned it, too. I suppose it's like a gang sign, or something like that." Will shrugged. "I guess it could represent a dagger of some kind, or maybe a perverted cross. If we get lucky, we'll find someone to ask."

Neil returned lugging a canvas bag, and Will rummaged around and came up with a large flashlight and a smaller electronic gadget.

"Rad counter," he said.

Back in the freezer, just as I was about to pull open the hidden door again, I had a thought. "Will, how about hitting that light switch there, so it'll be dark when I pull this open. If there's anyone in there, we gave ourselves away before, when I cracked the door with the light on, but at least this will cover us this time. And stand off to the side, just in case."

But it wasn't needed. The door opened easily, pivoting smoothly on well-oiled hinges, and the flashlight showed a long, narrow room with two large propane tanks off to one side and a solid wall at

the far end. We found a light switch, which allowed a closer examination. And that examination revealed two dark orange bars of something stuck to the tops of the tanks, with wires leading off to what looked like a cell phone sitting on the far tank. I checked my phone for a signal and was surprised to find one, then swiped my finger on the closest orange bar and sniffed it. I recognized the explosive concoction that was favored by terrorist groups world-wide.

“Semtex, smells like. Well, all we can do is hope they don’t get itchy just this instant.”

I pulled the wire, which was attached to a detonator, out of the bar, walked down the room, and did the same to the other one. For good measure, I opened the back of the phone and took out its battery.

“There. This would have made one big hole in the ground, I bet. Any readings, Will? I don’t know why anyone would set off a dirty bomb in a residential neighborhood, but I doubt that these people are fully rational.”

“No, we’re clean here. I guess this was just designed to cover their tracks, or maybe for a diversion like the ones at the other labs just before the IRIL attack.”

Will turned and tossed the radiation counter to a surprised Roger, who just managed to catch it.

“If there’s another door down there, I think I’d like to go through it with some real firepower. Let’s bring in some backup. What with the Semtex, I don’t think I need to wait for another warrant to get into that house next door.”

We retreated to the Winfrew Hanley house, switching off lights and closing doors behind us. Will got on the phone to call in the cavalry. And my phone let loose with yet another new sound, something like a duet between an angry blue jay and a frightened prairie dog.

“What the hell?” I pulled it out and looked at the display.

It told me to press its special features button to access push-to-talk mode—without, of course, telling me what the special features button might be. Between the touch screen and the physical buttons, I had a dozen or so choices. I picked one at random, one I’d never used before.

The phone squawked again, surprising me so much that I almost dropped it, and displayed the same message. Three rounds of this later, I finally picked the right button, because the display said “Hold down to talk.”

I did so. “Hello?”

Instinctively, I guess, I let off the button.

“Mac?”

Sam’s voice was nervous, even more so than when I’d first met her, in that Coconut Grove apartment.

“Mac? I’m ...”

A different voice came on.

“What she’s trying to say, Randolph Hunt or whoever you are, is that she’s with me, and if you want to see her again we need to talk.”

Even without the simper, it was easy to recognize the voice.

* * *

“Be glad to talk, Lance.”

All of my old high-alert mechanisms instantly kicked into overdrive, and I suddenly felt like I was buzzing all over.

“Are you on Sam’s phone? Can I call it instead of using this dumb walkie-talkie feature?”

“Suits me. Don’t be long, though.” And he disconnected.

“Will, I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I’ve got a little crisis to deal with, here. Is there a way you could trace the other end of the call I’m about to make?”

“Sure, it’s easy. What are the numbers involved?”

He had opened his phone and was paging through its call list.

I gave him my number and Sam’s, and speed-dialed hers. Lance answered on the first ring.

“She called you ‘Mac.’ I knew you weren’t who you said you were, of course. I guess that puts us on a level playing field.”

His meaning, I assumed, was that he wasn’t really “Lance,” either.

“Dolly here is just too easy to spot, what with that pink VW convertible of hers. And she’s going to be my ticket out of this situation.”

“Um, OK. You’re welcome to call me ‘Mac.’ Should I keep calling you ‘Lance?’”

I knew it was important to keep the conversation going for as long as possible.

He laughed. “Sure, Mac, whatever you’d like, pending formal introductions.”

This was not, I thought, the Lance I’d talked with before.

“Fine. Now. What’s this ‘situation’ that you need to get out of? I’m afraid that I’m completely clueless.”

More laughter. “You’re fun to talk to, Mac. And clueless for sure. What I need to do is to get on a chartered airplane headed for Venezuela. A plane big enough for me and a dozen other people. And luggage. Heavy luggage.”

“Well, that’s a nice outcome, I guess, but it’s not a situation. I mean, you could just do that, couldn’t you? Charter a plane yourself, whatever size you need? Unless it’s the money. Are you angling for cash or something?”

I listened for background noises while watching Will Perry setting up a laptop computer on the breakfast bar between the kitchen and dining room.

The general background on Lance’s end of the phone was that of a busy public place. An airport? It didn’t seem as if there had been time for him to grab Sam and get to either of the two big airports nearby, Fort Lauderdale or Palm Beach. Maybe it was the Boca Raton Airport, I thought. They have charters over there.

Yet more laughter, but subdued this time.

“No, no, what I need is protection from dudes like the ones you were hanging out with last time I saw you. The day that Nikolay got whacked. You hang out with people like that, you must have pull. So use some of that pull to get me and my friends on a CharterSouth plane to Venezuela. We’ll all head over to the Boca airport shortly. With Dolly. And you can have her back when I get on the plane.”

Either this guy is pretty stupid, I thought, or there’s something he’s not telling me. That sequence of events would hardly be foolproof, from his perspective.

I noticed Will giving me a thumbs-up sign and waving me to come his way. The laptop on the breakfast bar was showing a map with two blinking symbols and a crawl of text that I quickly recognized as the transcription of the conversation I was having. One of the blinking symbols, I saw, was in the Exclusiva subdivision just off Military Trail. Me, no doubt.

The other was in the middle of Sam's shopping destination, the Town Center Mall, a couple of miles north of us and a little west, and about a mile southwest of the Boca Raton Airport. Will scribbled a note that said "team on way."

"Well, Lance, I still don't quite understand all this, but I should be able to arrange something. They may have to fuel a plane, though, so it probably won't happen instantly."

I nodded at Will, who was making the "stretch-it-out" signal that TV directors use.

"Listen, if you're going to release Sss ... Dolly at the airport, why not just leave her wherever you are and take her car? Then she won't be in your way, and we can get you onto that plane faster. Right?"

He was back in the full laughter mode.

"What, you think I'm totally stupid? Dolly's going to be wearing a suicide vest, and I'm going to be holding a dead-man's switch, radio controlled. Its range will get me out of US airspace. I'm disconnecting for now, so you can call CharterSouth. Here's their number."

I repeated it, and Will wrote it down for me. The phone went dead.

"What's that all about?"

I took a couple of deep breaths to try to calm down.

"Well, Sam's been grabbed, by a guy I know as 'Lance.' He was Nikolay Kirov's receptionist, but he must really be someone else. That phone number you wrote down is for a charter airplane company he wants me to call, so he can get a flight to Venezuela. Him and a dozen of his closest friends, apparently. He's going to wire Sam with a bomb and hold a dead-man's switch until the plane is off and out of range."

Will's phone played a little tune, and he opened it, listened, and handed it to me.

"Mac? Good. Your phone was busy." Ross Bierkens sounded down. "All we've found out here is hot sand. No pigs, no material. Sorry."

"Well, crap. At least we know where they stashed it for a while, though. Thanks, Ross. And listen, I'm over at the Hanley house just now, and we've got a thing going that you and your guys might be able to help with."

Ross said he'd be right over, and I shut Will's phone and handed it back to him.

Will pointed at the text on his computer screen.

"Sounds like Ross hasn't found the SNM, huh? What do you suppose that Lance meant by 'heavy luggage'?"

* * *

To this day, I'm still surprised at the amount of arranging that Will and Ross, who arrived a few minutes later, accomplished in the next half hour. With a fix on Sam's phone, we were able to track it even when it was disconnected, and we watched it sitting at the mall while we made a variety of other calls and finally got in Will's car. I updated Lance on things after fifteen minutes or so, giving him a carefully

edited version of the situation, and agreed to meet him at the CharterSouth access gate shortly thereafter. Then we watched Sam's phone making its way from the mall to the airport.

And, before I knew it, there we all were.

To Lance, "we" meant, I hoped with my heart of hearts, me, him, and Sam.

To me, it was more complicated. "We" meant the three of us, me standing a few steps opposite Lance and Sam, as well as a cadre of FBI people hidden in various locations around the half-empty parking lot, with several of Ross's SEALs positioned as snipers on nearby rooftops. I had an earbud radio that was picking up the mission's progress, and four of the cars in the lot had already been identified as being occupied, with, most likely, Lance's accomplices.

It took me only a minute to understand everything.

"Why Lance, you shaved!"

I couldn't contain my big grin, and it obviously confused him.

"Yeah, well, I figured that whoever killed Nikolay might come looking for me, so I thought it might help me be a little more anonymous." He seemed nervous.

Without his facial hair, Lance was the spitting image, minus a hundred pounds or so, of the picture of Winfrew Hanley I'd seen in the file Bill Petersen had given me so long ago, it seemed. The missing Josiah Hanley in the flesh.

He was holding, up high so I could see it well, some kind of push-button gadget in his right hand, and he had control of Sam with his left. She was wearing a fishing vest, its pockets bulging with things I didn't really want to think about, and around her right wrist was a locked handcuff—the other half of which, unlocked, Hanley was holding.

"Dolly tells me you're called Mac MacQuarrie. Not Randolph Hunt. Tsk, tsk." He shook his head. "But I guess it's OK in the end, because your conversation with Nikolay told me everything I needed to know to get where we are now. Is my airplane about ready?"

I looked around. "I thought you said you were traveling with company. And luggage. Should I get CharterSouth to send over a cart?"

I flipped open my cell phone and, per our plan, pressed and held the push-to-talk button.

"My friends will be here any minute, and they'll handle the luggage, thanks. It's pretty special."

It was his turn to grin.

"You can put your phone away."

Over his right shoulder, I noticed some motion among the parked cars, so I eased around to his left a few steps.

"I suppose that listening to Nikolay's conversations was just part of the scam you were pulling on him, eh, Hanley?"

I felt a tiny victory when I saw how that startled him.

"I imagine that you also did errands, such as runs to make bank deposits and so on. Pretty convenient. It explains some of what we heard him talking about with Assim Al-Ayas, the day Al-Alyas shot him. Like how your little group of terrorists was getting funded. Is the rest of the SNM in this luggage your friends are bringing?"

The question startled him even more, and I wondered if I'd pushed too far.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. And I asked if my plane was ready.”

His pleasant demeanor had changed to one of viciousness, and his voice hissed. He pulled Sam over to the pickup truck he was standing near, then locked her to its driver-side mirror bracket with the handcuff.

He waved the push-button gadget in his right hand with menace. “Remember, I’ve got this, and she’s got that vest. There’s enough Semtex there to destroy everything within a hundred yards, and as soon as I get out of range, you can bet I won’t hesitate to detonate it. We can continue this conversation by telephone.”

And he walked off, around the truck and toward the CharterSouth building.

Sam was struggling to slide her right hand out of the cuff, but getting nowhere.

“Squat down, sweetie, so he won’t be able to see you, and get your left arm out of that vest.” I kept my voice low.

Her big blue eyes were pleading with me, so I smiled and winked at her. It took me all of five seconds to reach her, keeping as low as I could, then I sliced down the right side of the vest with my handy Swiss Army Knife, got it off her, and tossed it under the truck. After that, I ripped the mirror bracket free—whether it was just cheap and easily broken or I was pumped up with some kind of superhuman strength wasn’t quite clear at the time. Maybe both.

We were scurrying away, stooped down, when my phone buzzed.

“So what’s the deal with the plane, MacQuarrie?”

Hanley’s voice carried a new sense of urgency.

“I talked with the charter people a few minutes ago, and they said that it’ll be another few minutes.”

I tried to be as conversational as I could under the circumstances.

“Since we’ve got time, maybe you could satisfy my curiosity?”

“Can’t promise, but ask away.” He sounded suspicious. “Hey! Where’d you go?”

“We’re still here, behind that truck. Just don’t let go of that button, OK? Anyway, we found your brother, of course, and they’re doing an autopsy. But I’m wondering what happened to him. And when. I’m having trouble imagining you killed him. Twins are supposed to be close, and all.”

“Heart attack. Two months ago. He found out about my little adventures, had a fit, and keeled over. I was keeping him on ice until I had time to take him back to Ohio to the family plot. With our father and mother.”

He actually managed to sound saddened.

I heard a jet engine begin winding up just behind the CharterSouth building.

“Hey, maybe that’s your plane.”

“It better be. Hold on, I’ve got another call.”

He put me on hold for about ten seconds before coming back on, madder than ever.

“You stupid son-of-a-bitch! Do you really think that I don’t have a backup plan? Let’s see just how far away you managed to get.”

Even with the vest under the pickup truck and now behind the several cars we’d dodged around, the explosion knocked Sam and me flat. We were lucky not to have been crushed by one of the cars that were tossed about the parking lot.

As the last of the debris rained down and the smoke began to clear, I made sure that Sam wasn't injured and concentrated on getting my equilibrium re-established. And I wondered about Hanley's backup plan.

But I didn't have to wonder for long.

"Ah, here you are. And you survived, I see. Well, Brother Josiah will want to talk with you both, I expect. Come on! Stand up! Now! Do it!"

It was a new voice, and it belonged to a muscle-bound goon in a tee-shirt with that spiked horseshoe symbol on it. He was pointing a suppressed H&K automatic at us.

I began to help Sam up, when the goon grunted and slumped to the pavement, with a neat entry wound in the right side of his head, just above the ear. The SEALs, I realized, had also survived the explosion.

Using a voice that sounded a lot like Ross's, my earbud said, "Stay put, Mac, and stay low. We'll cover you."

My phone, I was surprised to find, was still in my hand, and it was still on. I cancelled the previous call and speed-dialed Ross. Then I picked up the H&K.

"We'll stay put, Ross, and I've got some real firepower now. How about you all concentrate on getting Hanley and whoever among his friends has that SNM?"

"Done and done, Mac. While you were talking with Hanley, we found the car with the material. It might as well have been glowing in the dark. And Will says that Hanley's in custody. They grabbed him without much trouble."

* * *

Will Perry found Sam and me sitting on the ground, leaning against a Mercedes sedan with shattered windows. Sam had a skinned knee from our tumble onto the tarmac and a truck mirror dangling from her right wrist, and I had landed on my titanium shoulder, which made it ache, a sharp, throbbing ache unlike the other times when I'd over-exercised it. I was hoping that none of those parts in there had got bent.

"Mac, it looks like we've got everything under control. Best of all, the SNM is secure now."

He was all smiles as he kneeled down to unlock Sam's handcuff.

"You guys OK?"

"I'm getting too old for this kind of stuff, I'll tell you that. And Sam here doesn't need any of it. I think I'll go off the clock on this one."

Will nodded. "Not a bad idea. We've got some things to finish up here, though. Can we find you back at that suites place, up there on Yamato where you've been?"

"For now, I guess. We can get a cab, I expect. And if this really is a wrap, maybe we'll find someplace with a little more peace and quiet. Someplace with personality."

I thought for a minute.

"Sam, what do you think about Big Pine Key? You know, almost down to Key West. Ever been there? Seems like it would be nice to just go fishing."

She didn't have to say anything. The soft kiss on the cheek I got was all the answer I needed.

* * * * *

Excess Homicide

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A Four Corners Mystery



Excess Homicide: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

When Joe Loughlin arrived at work on the Friday morning before the long Fourth of July weekend, it was definitely not written in his day planner that, at 10:10, he'd take a bullet for the President of the United States.

Hell, Joe hadn't even voted for the guy, and he had tried to plan his day to avoid all the hoopla and security weirdness that would accompany the Presidential visit. With the crowds of summertime tourists, the weekend of the Fourth in Boulder was going to be bad enough, but with the President there as well, Joe just wished he could be on vacation for the whole thing, somewhere up in the mountains.

Later, Joe would tell anyone who asked, including reporter after reporter after reporter, that it really wasn't that big a deal, he'd have done it for anyone. Well, just about anyone, maybe not that junior U.S. Senator of theirs, though, some politicians being better off out of their misery.

Joe was getting to that age when two mugs of coffee in the morning, followed by sitting for an hour in a meeting, caused far too much pressure in his bladder to be ignored. Crossing the lobby on his way to the Men's Room, he was surprised when the Secret Service detail swept in, pushing him gently to the side of the room, over by the couch, so that the President and his retinue could have the right of way.

Then Joe noticed something strange, something that shouldn't happen. A little door popped open on the solar telescope display, and he could see what looked like the business end of a rifle barrel peeking out. Just above the door was a lens of some sort, and that wasn't supposed to be there either. Later, the Secret Service people would explain that they were too unfamiliar with all the gadgetry in the displays to have been able to distinguish the lens from all the other stuff, and during their sweep they simply hadn't had the chance to disassemble any of the scientific equipment on the mezzanine to see what was inside.

But Joe's sharp eyes, honed by years of deer and elk hunting in the Rockies and quite familiar with the displays up there on the mezzanine, recognized the fore-sight of the rifle, probably a bolt-action .30-06, he thought. So he did what any red-blooded American citizen would do if they saw a gun pointed at the President. First, he froze in amazement as he felt his adrenalin level skyrocket, and, because he hadn't made it to the Men's Room, he tried hard not to wet his pants. Then he panicked, grabbing the Secret Service agent standing in front of him.

"Uh, hey! Look up there! That looks like a rifle pointed this way, hidden inside that box up there," he managed to stage whisper and point simultaneously.

Because the agent had grabbed Joe back, they had hold of each other, and when the agent screamed "GUN!!" and lunged for the President, Joe was just sort of dragged along. In the ensuing tangle of bodies, Joe was in the line of fire when the rifle went off. Or, more precisely, Joe's right buttock was in the line of fire.

"So, Mr. Loughlin, how does it feel to be shot in the butt for the President?" was the first question the first reporter asked him, and it was repeated, in various forms, until Joe became thoroughly sick of it. To tell the truth, it hurt like hell, but Joe managed to keep both his sense of humor and his dignity, mostly. After all, it was really only a flesh wound, passing through a considerable layer of fat and some

muscle, and then out again. His friends would never let him forget that the gunman had quite logically hit what was the biggest target in the room.

But the more immediate result of the rifle shot was a fusillade of semi-automatic weapons fire from the several Secret Service agents, leading to the complete destruction of the solar telescope display. The lobby of the National Center for Atmospheric Research would require a substantial amount of spackle, to patch all the holes in the plaster walls and ceiling, and a complete new coat of paint.

After the hubbub subsided, it was discovered that the rifle had been mounted inside the display with a miniature video camera sighted along the barrel. This, in turn, was connected to a gray box with a small antenna on the top, and there was a curious, home-made-looking triggering device on the rifle also hooked to the box. At least that was the reconstruction. The barrage of lead had pretty much destroyed the original set-up, and it appeared that the contents of the box had been wired to self-destruct if disturbed. Except, that is, for the bottom of the box and the message laminated to its outside:

Dear Mr. President:
You've been SCREW'd!
Hope you enjoyed it as much as we did!

But none of this information would be released by the Secret Service for some months, long after Joe's wound had healed, leaving small, Presidential, entrance and exit scars.

* * *

Part I: The Year Before

One

September Sunrise, southwestern Colorado – and New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah: the Four Corners.

A light dusting of early fall snow covered the chamisa and sage, still grayish-green from the warmth of summer, and it made the juniper bushes on the hillside across the way sparkle in the glow of the young sun. But the body that lay sprawled across the engraved brass monument marking the only spot in the U.S. where four states touch was still warm enough that the snow falling on it had melted.

It was the dark form against the white background that got Billie Sweetwater's attention. She had unlocked and opened the gate across the entrance road and was headed toward the visitor center's service entrance when she noticed it. As soon as she came close enough to recognize what it was—a young man, with long dark hair, lying face down in what looked like a pool of something dark—memories of the works of her favorite author, Tony Hillerman, put her on guard. Rather than track everything up, she headed for the phone.

She knew—once again, from Hillerman—that the FBI would eventually become involved in this, but she called 911 anyway, instead of looking up the number for the feds. The local call would bring in the Navajo Tribal Police first, and it would also spread the word throughout the close-knit, albeit scattered, Four Corners community that another tragedy had struck in *Diné'tah*, the land of her people.

Considering the travel distances involved, as well as the bureaucratic communications needed, it was surprising how quickly the investigation proceeded. By 2:30 that afternoon, a telephone was ringing in the Durango police department.

“Durango investigations. This is Winders.”

“This is Todd Sweeney, FBI. The CBI told me to talk with, um, an Annette Trieri. Is she in?”

“She’s out today. This is Sergeant Fred Winders, her second in charge.”

“Well, I got called in to investigate a murder down on the Navajo Reservation this morning, and, according to a driver’s license, the victim was a Durango resident, a Luke Begay. I thought I’d see if the name rings a bell with you folks.”

“Hmm. Not immediately with me. But let me have a look on our database. Let’s see.”

Fred was typing furiously at the keyboard of his new office computer.

“Luke Begay. Right. Nothing big. Arrested for civil disturbance, once. Apparently had to do with a demonstration for Native American rights. It says here that he was the chairman of American Indian Restoration. I’ve heard of that for some reason. Oh, I know. It’s a local advocacy group. Wants to ship all of us European types back to the coasts, or something like that, and let the tribes have all of their land back. Return nature to its true stewards. Stuff like that. Does this help?”

“Maybe it does. His body was found this morning, lying on top of the Four Corners Monument down here southwest of Cortez. Shot once in the back of the head, execution style. Looks like someone planned this carefully.”

* * *

Sitting in front of a window in her suite in the Lodge looking out over the valley, Carla Fraser was wishing that she had already succeeded. The trouble with trying to become a travel writer, she thought, is having such lovely things to write about and no readers. She lowered her eyes to the screen of her laptop and reread her latest effort.

It’s early October, and through the window we’re watching the morning sun creep down the northeast face of McIntyre Peak. A mere bump by Rocky Mountain standards, the peak is distinguished by cliffs that expose a dozen or so strata of different colored rock near its summit. The colors of the rock are muted, however, because aspen dressed in all shades of green, gold, and even orange command the view. They spread in sweeping stripes, random patches, and single, startling trees over the mountain and in both directions along the side of the valley. As the sunlight hits them, they explode into brilliance against the deep green of the spruce and fir, under the crystal-blue of the sky. A patch of red—kinnikinnick?—on a high scree slope and the white of yesterday’s snow on the peak punctuate the scene.

Because our room is up on the hillside, we’re also looking out over the treetops in the valley. Perched nearby at eye level on the top of a ponderosa pine, a magpie watches to see if we might offer breakfast. A few yellow leaves still cling to the elm, willow, and ash along the river, but most have fallen, leaving behind gray and tan skeletons brightly lit by the sun, in stark contrast to the shadowed valley wall. They provide a hint of the winter to come, a hint reinforced by smoke curling lazily down the valley from the wood stove in a cabin across the way, and by the frost on the corners of our windows.

As the morning matures, the little settlement that calls itself Horca begins to come to life. Guys in insulated overalls are standing around in the parking lot of the restaurant, little puffs of breath evidence of their discussion. The occasional semi whizzes by on the highway. Pickup trucks towing horse trailers appear, converging at the restaurant for morning coffee and conversation.

These are the San Juan Mountains of extreme south-central Colorado, a few miles from the New Mexico border, where State Highway 17 from Antonito crosses the Conejos River before its winding climb up La Manga Pass to the south. From our window, we can see the road curving gently up the grade into the distance, disappearing into an aspen grove. We're about halfway between Antonito, to the east, and Chama, south over the pass. There is history here, and, because our Spanish-English dictionary tells us that one definition of "horca" is "gallows," it may be dramatic history.

From here, the Conejos Valley continues upward to the northwest. After about 25 miles, the gravel road along the river passes the settlement of Platoro before ascending the aptly named Stunner Pass on its way over to the Alamosa River Valley...

As she read, trying to decide if this was too much or not, Carla kept checking the scene outside to gauge her accuracy. When she looked to see if there was anyone left in the parking lot of the restaurant, out from under a Volvo station wagon crawled one of those men dressed in overalls. How curious, she thought.

Just then, she heard a huge yawn behind her, and turned to see Kevin finally emerging from the bedroom, mouth wide open, scratching his hairy belly. How romantic, she thought. Now he'll probably want to Do It again. Maybe I can divert his attention.

"I made some coffee, sweetie. Good morning!" She turned back to her laptop and the scenery. A couple had emerged from the restaurant and were climbing into the Volvo. They headed off south, in the direction of Chama.

As she was working on her last paragraphs, trying to make them sound somewhat less clinically directional, she noticed a flash over the top of her reading glasses, out the window. She looked up just in time to see a large puff of smoke, with pieces of flying debris, where the Volvo should have been. Three seconds later, the noise of the explosion rattled the windows.

* * *

In the Four Corners states, hunting season, especially big-game hunting season, is a good time to stay out of the woods. And the mountains, and the desert—and anywhere else there might be, could even remotely possibly be, big-game in season. It's much better to stay indoors, behind eighteen inches of adobe, if possible.

It's not that the local citizens are irresponsible; quite the contrary. The danger is from the thousands of men—this is a guy thing, mostly—from neighboring states who have too much disposable income. With it, they purchase equipment by the ton, including large trucks and trailers to haul it, fancy firearms, and gallons and gallons of whiskey. Nothing like slugging down a pint or so of 86-proof spirits to improve one's ability to aim a high-powered rifle. Fortunately for the Four Corners states, many of these purchases are made locally, and the cash flow keeps many a small town in the back-country solvent. Locals who used to make a living from mining and logging are now able to survive as big-game guides. Some like it more than others.

Jake Colvin was one of the others, but he needed the money. His six weeks of guiding, run out of Cedaredge, Colorado, north of Delta on the road up the Grand Mesa, paid most of the bills for the year. He managed to defer the rest. But dealing with the people who hired him was almost not worth it.

Take that bunch from Oklahoma who came in for the second rifle season in November. Six guys in three extended-cab, dualie pickups, each crammed full and pulling a twenty-foot flatbed trailer loaded with two of those stupid little four-wheel-drive all-terrain travesties, a freezer, and several additional crates of junk. Including a Hell's Angels' convention worth of Wild Turkey, which they consumed while sitting around telling each other lies about their successes over the summer catching women and large-mouth bass. Jake wondered idly what activities coincided with which catch.

And why they needed all that stuff was a complete mystery. Hell, Jake supplied tents and cooking equipment, and he would have supplied horses if they hadn't brought those ridiculous ATV pollution machines.

He'd much rather have been able to make a living by teaching silviculture down at Mesa College in Grand Junction, but the curriculum had changed, as had the requirements. You had to have one of those fancy doctorates to get on the faculty there now. The generations of experience he'd absorbed from his father and grandfather as a kid, on those trips up to the Grand Mesa with the six-mule team to take out bridge-truss-sized trees, that didn't count for squat. And logging, what there was left of it, was all done with machines now. None of the old-fashioned, gentler techniques were economically competitive.

But the rifle seasons were behind him, and they'd been good. His new, higher rates hadn't raised any eyebrows, all the sports had filled their licenses, and the tips had been astonishing. Must have been a good year in the oil and gas industry. At long last, all those giant pickups had left town, along with the usual contingent of Lexus SUVs with California plates, and it was back to the locals and their battered mini-pickups and ancient Subaru. He and his family would be having a good Thanksgiving later in the month.

He was on his way down the hill toward Delta for groceries and a trip to the hardware store, enjoying the view of the Gunnison River valley, as always. The snow line, he noticed, had come almost all the way down to Orchard City last night. So absorbed was he in the scene that he wasn't paying attention to the blue pickup truck with the oversized tires and reinforced front bumper that was following him, much too close for comfort, if he'd noticed.

When he finally did notice it in his rearview mirror, it was too late. Only the barest of nudges from the big vehicle behind him was enough to send his compact Nissan pickup out of control, and it spun twice before crashing sideways into a telephone pole, driver's door first. Unfortunately for Jake, he'd never gotten around to fixing the broken seat belt. Now he never would.

* * *

Arthur Powell, who had felt more like a traffic cop than a National Park Service ranger in his previous assignment at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, was still fascinated with his new world. It was smaller, and for sure drier, but it was his, or at least he was in charge. He made a point of arriving early every day, despite living some 35 miles away in Blanding, so he could have it all to himself for a little while.

Natural Bridges National Monument in southern Utah is to Rocky Mountain National Park as the little town of Blanding, Utah is to Denver, and Arthur was still adjusting. He'd even stopped wearing his sidearm, although the possibility of rattlesnakes, even this time of year, motivated his employees to wear theirs.

The drive over from Blanding was a pleasure every morning, and the return trip in the evening was just as lovely. With the sun behind him each way gently lighting the piñon and juniper scrub, making the solitary little trees cast long, long shadows across the desert and giving the red rocks a stark relief that vanished during mid-day, he felt as if he were driving through a travelogue. Ever since daylight savings time had ended, just over a month ago, the mornings were the better drive, with everything looking so fresh.

Another adjustment was in the political differences, and he was still getting used to this as well. The switch from touchy-feely, warm-and-fuzzy, north-central Colorado to stolidly down-to-earth Republican southeastern Utah was startling, to say the least. But these people had great respect for the land, too, and it was ingrained. He often felt that the Colorado Front-Range outdoors crowd had learned their environmentalism at summer camp or from reading about it in those slick advocacy magazines.

Also, since just about everyone hereabouts hunted for food and almost always carried a rifle in their pickup truck, there was a certain amount of self-policing that was not present up in Colorado. He was especially glad that he wouldn't have to deal with those groups of right-wing extremists who seemed to think that poaching elk in the Park was a God-given right.

For one thing, the elk around here stayed up in the mountains, in the Abajos, or over in the Henrys on the other side of Lake Powell. For another, everyone around here was pretty right-wing already, so the definition of "extremist" was quite different. And they all went to church and kept each other pretty honest. He was looking forward to a true community Christmas this year. Even though his coffee-colored skin set him apart from the others (man, these Mormons are *white*, he couldn't help but think), he had been welcomed into the Blanding community and had more dinner invitations than he could handle. He'd already gained ten pounds as a result. They all seemed to think that his foods of choice were deep-fried everything.

Arthur finally pulled in to the short section of pavement leading from State Road 95 to the Monument and stopped to open the gate to the day-use area. The air was cool, a pleasant wintertime cool, and it smelled of juniper. There was a hint of piñon smoke from a campfire somewhere. He took a deep breath, and stretched grandly. Looking around his little domain, he couldn't help but feel lucky.

Because the muzzle velocity of a Remington .30-06 is much faster than the speed of sound, he didn't hear the rifle's report, and the hollow-point slug caught him squarely in the side of the head, just above the tip of his left ear. He dropped like a rock.

* * *

Except for the ski area, Santa Fe in January would be nearly devoid of tourists, and that would have made Roger Colgate just about as happy as anything else in the whole world. Well, maybe not quite as happy as complete closure of the National Forests to all humans—assuming, of course, that he and his band of eco-preservationists could continue to have access. But close. The tourists just clogged up the narrow Santa Fe streets and made it necessary to make reservations for dinner. And even lunch.

This tourist problem was one of the reasons, not a public reason but a real motivating one, that he and his cohorts steadfastly opposed plans to expand the Santa Fe Ski Basin across its little valley to the next hillside. Roger and friends were all well-off enough, from trust funds and other annuities, that they could afford to take on the Forest Service in court, using the legal system to effectively strangle anybody's plans for anything. Rather than work at this themselves, Roger and friends hired lawyers, particularly young, hungry ones, from the huge contingent that needed such gratuitous work to pay off their mortgages in Santa Fe's up-scale foothills neighborhoods. They also donated large sums of tax-

deductible dollars to various fringe organizations to do the actual protesting when it was needed. That way, Roger's group was able to spend its time on more relaxing activities.

The main vehicle for the legal action was the Endangered Species Act. It was pretty easy, especially in this undeveloped part of the country, to find some critter, or, if need be, some plant, that would be "threatened" by whatever the Forest Service, or anyone else, wanted to do. And even if they couldn't find a threatened species, there were possibilities. One time when they couldn't find a suitable candidate, they had been successful at stopping a forest-fuels thinning project over in the Jemez Mountains by inventing a new species of mouse, the "Jemez Springs white-tailed deer mouse." A picture of the cute little guy, created on a computer as a composite of three actual species, was one of Roger's favorites. He kept a copy, framed, on his desk. And it was a good thing that it was just a computer mouse, because any real ones would have been exterminated by the catastrophic wildfire they'd had over in the Jemez last summer.

Roger was thinking about tourists, especially the problem with their taking up valuable restaurant space, because he was waiting for a table for lunch at Santacafé, on Washington across from the old Federal Courthouse. Even though it was January, the mid-day sun was warm, and he was enjoying it while leaning against a massive elm tree on the courthouse lawn. The south light, crisp and clean, for which Santa Fe is famous, filtered brightly through the bare branches over his head. Twenty minutes, the maitre d' had told him, so he'd decided to wait outside in the sunshine and read the latest issue of the *High Country News*.

When, he thought, were they going to admit to being pawns of the logging and mining industries and quit pretending to be environmentalists?

He heard a polite tap on a car horn, and looked up to see who it was. Stella! Lovely Stella. She was waving to him from her Mercedes SUV as it rounded the curve from Washington to Federal Place. He waved back and smiled. Just seeing her drive by was enough to warm him up, especially in the vicinity of his lap. He went back to reading.

Lies! That "experiment" up in Oregon, where they fenced off the riparian area next to the stream bed, was just a sham. His friends on the west coast had told him all about it. Just getting the cattle away from the streams wasn't enough. Eliminating grazing altogether was the only solution. Let the land be the land, without all these four-legged bulldozers ranging around!

Thinking about cattle got him thinking about lunch again, and a vision of the Santacafé's green-chile smothered New York luncheon steak, medium rare, east-coast medium rare, lingered in his mind. His mouth watered.

A second polite tap on a car horn made him look up again. Could Stella be back? Despite the sunshine, his lap could use all the warming it could get. But, no, he thought, this horn didn't sound quite like the first one.

It wasn't.

This time, the car, actually a windowless black van with a sliding side door that had opened, stopped. Roger squinted, trying to see into the dark interior. There was someone kneeling inside, but he couldn't quite see what was happening.

Then there was a little twanging noise. He felt a horrible, blinding pain in his neck, and his knees buckled. But he couldn't fall. Nor could he scream. As he tried to reach up to investigate what had happened, everything went black. Unseen, the *High Country News* fluttered to the ground.

It didn't take long for the police to arrive, and they found him, quite dead, impaled through the neck onto the elm with a crossbow bolt, rather like a spindly-legged beetle pinned to an entomologist's collection case.

* * *

On the high plains of Northern New Mexico, west of Taos across the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge on U.S. Highway 64, it was easy to imagine that one had arrived on another planet. The houses there were built in quite a fanciful manner, supposedly self-contained and Earth-friendly, with curves, turrets, and angles that might be expected of a Star Wars movie set. Some were reminiscent of those sand dribble castles kids made at the beach; some looked like they were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright on LSD. And those were just the ones that could be seen from the highway. To come upon these dream-shapes rising out of the desert, especially after leaning over the railing of the Bridge watching the natural scenery of the Gorge, was quite disorienting.

Hidden in an arroyo out of view from the casual passerby was the house of Trenton Garcia, or SunMaster, as he insisted his acolytes call him. (He didn't have any real friends, so no one called him Trent.) SunMaster specialized in separating wealthy, insecure Taoseños and their friends from the coasts from their excess funds. He'd built his *ashram* in a location strategically chosen to enhance his ability to do this, due west of Wheeler Peak, the highest point—13,161 feet—in New Mexico. From SunMaster's place, sunrise on the equinoxes was just over the peak. And, on the solstices, it rose in almost equally impressive places, over another of the high Sangre de Cristo peaks to the north in June, signifying the "height" of summer, and over a dramatic saddle between two peaks to the south in December, signifying the "depth" of winter. As a result of these spiritual convergences, his clientele were *very* impressed with his powers.

Year 'round, his daily routine included rising before first light and running down to the very middle of the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge and back, some ten miles that he managed to do in about 50 minutes. Then, as the sun rose over the Sangres, he led a yoga class for whoever showed up with the requested "donation" of \$75. Naturally, when the sun rose over some special landmark, there was a special ceremony and the checkbooks came out yet again. It was surprising how many of those special landmarks he'd identified up there in the Sangres.

The daily ten-mile run and the yoga kept him in fine condition, and he led the yoga class wearing only a bikini brief and his famous suntan. This combination was useful in maintaining his credibility in the private afternoon sessions he held for his female clients. The attractive, well-endowed ones, that is. Tantric yoga is a specialty that needs to be taught in private.

On Saturdays, the morning yoga class was generally over-booked, and his sun room was crowded. When he didn't show up on time one day in February, a completely unprecedented occurrence, confusion reigned. Finally, one of the more experienced women—experienced in both the morning yoga classes and the afternoon Tantric sessions—took charge and tried to conduct the class. But her attempts just didn't measure up.

Later that morning, Helma Lundegaard, visiting New Mexico with her husband as a respite from February in Minnesota, was standing on the Gorge Bridge, gazing down at the river some 650 feet below, when she spotted an unusual flash of color. Borrowing the binoculars from Herman, she was able to see that the color was a flame-orange pair of running shorts. Worn by a someone sprawled on the rocks.

It took the rescue team four hours to haul up Trent's badly mangled body.

* * *

Spring snow! Jodie Pacheco knew the skiing lasted only briefly after each March storm this far south, but she also knew how to make the most of it. The trick was to catch it several times within a few days of its falling, before it had time to go through too many of the day-night melt-freeze cycles. The first day would be worth paying the lift ticket prices up at the Arizona Snow Bowl in the San Francisco Peaks. But after that, it was much better in the ponderosa forest south of town, where a first tracks descent of the Mogollón Rim always pushed her abilities to the limit.

Mostly, the ponderosa forest was too dense to ski, at least at the speeds she liked. In order to float on the new snow, speed was necessary, and to keep up speed, only the most gentle telemark turns were possible. It helped a lot not to have to dodge too many trees.

But she knew her way around the forest, in large part because she had been involved in thinning it. Her work with the faculty at Northern Arizona University had put her in a position to take a lead in the volunteer brigade that had been assembled for the task. Although it was an experimental program, they had managed to take out the undergrowth and small trees over quite a large area, and it now made for wonderful back-country skiing—towering ponderosas about 50 feet apart, with no lower limbs sticking out as obstacles. Like a park.

The thinning program was controversial, to be sure, because removing the slash, the downed trees and brush, had been denounced as “logging” by several noisy groups. Even Jodie had second thoughts. But leaving the slash in place wouldn’t have reduced the fire danger significantly, and that was the whole point, after all. And it had also occurred to her that the piles of branches would probably not be covered with enough snow to be safe for skiing, either. So she pitched in with enthusiasm.

She and her three friends had arranged a complicated car shuttle to accomplish their run through the woods, leaving their cars in four places—at the top, at the bottom, and at two intermediate parking areas where they could ferry across flats. Why walk, even on touring skis, when you can ride? Besides, the chance to rest was worth taking advantage of.

They were on the last leg, a familiar chute that didn’t take long to get skied out after new snowfalls. Because back-country skiing is a popular thing to do among the young and fit in Flagstaff, tracks appeared almost as fast as snow fell. Jodie felt lucky that hers were the first tracks this time. She was able to stay well ahead of her companions because of the workouts she forced on herself—running, wall-sitting, weights, the Stairmaster. It was paying off.

She made the last of the series of turns that had started higher up with long, sweeping telemarks, which tested the stamina of her quads, and ended in the chute with short, choppy jump turns. Then she checked to a stop above the final, straight shot at the bottom of the chute. Looking back, she was tickled to see her smooth, convergent S-shaped tracks proclaiming her expertise. Pleased with herself, she set her skis straight downhill and flew out of the bottom of the chute. But she didn’t notice the piano wire stretched tightly across the opening, about shoulder-height off the snow surface, between two large ponderosa pines.

That’s where her companions found her head. The rest of her was another thirty yards down the slope, but it was easy to find because of the bright red stripe on the snow leading to it.

* * *

North of Golden, Colorado State Road 93 winds over grass-covered hills and valleys at the base of the Front Range Foothills, and Stuart Pendleton was enjoying the handling and power of his new Porsche Boxster. He’d waited six months to get the color and options he wanted, and now he realized how well

worth the wait this car was. Even thoughts of his date in court, in which he was to defend a client against a defamation charge, couldn't distract him from the road.

Cruising over the crest of Davidson Mesa and down the two-mile grade to the South Boulder Creek crossing, he drank in the green of the springtime pastures. Ahead, the prominent Boulder landmarks were still limited to the National Center for Atmospheric Research, nestled on Table Mesa under the Flatirons, the university dormitories at Williams Village, and the stacks of the power plant out east. The downtown area and the red tile roofs of the university campus were hidden by the pastels of April in the Boulder Valley.

Stuart was sufficiently mesmerized by the view that he almost didn't notice the traffic overtaking him—it was the erratic patterns in the mirror picked up by his peripheral vision that finally got his attention.

A gray, customized van of indiscriminate vintage was gaining on him rapidly, weaving across the yellow line into the oncoming passing lane and back onto the right shoulder. Farther behind, just beginning the descent, a blue pickup truck with those oversized, off-road tires was also closing quickly. A passenger was leaning out the side window with what looked to be a pipe on his shoulder, trying to point it at the weaving van.

Hemmed in by an embankment on his right and the guard rail protecting the drop-off across the road, Stuart's choices were limited. He shifted down two gears to fourth and stomped the accelerator, and with a roar from the engine compartment behind him, his new car leapt forward down the grade. He was glad there was no traffic in front of him.

As he rounded the curve at the grade's half-way point, he saw dueling 18-wheel gravel trucks occupying both of the southbound lanes coming up the hill, a pack of frustrated Boulderites in Swedish sedans and SUVs queued up behind them. At least the uphill traffic was staying politely on its assigned side of the double yellow lines. Stuart wondered vaguely about the weaving van and whether it would negotiate passage of the two trucks.

He jumped the red light at the Eldorado Springs Drive intersection at just over 100. But despite the tension of the speed and whatever that thing was that was aimed generally in his direction from the blue pickup, he appreciated the irony of the "Welcome to Boulder – Please Drive Safely" sign as it zipped past.

It was not until the road straightened, metamorphosing into South Broadway, that he noticed the van was no longer in his mirror. It had not made it up the little curved hill from the bottom-land of the creek drainage. Stuart slowed to the speed limit, turned onto a side street at the first opportunity, parked, and tried, with deep breaths, to stop shaking. He picked up the car phone and punched 911.

"Hello? I'd like to report a very strange event on South Foothills Highway, south of Boulder, and there may well be some kind of medical emergency."

He related matters as well as he could, given his adrenaline level, and got put on hold while the operator called in the troops.

The 911 operator finally got back to him with silly follow-up questions, which Stuart tried politely to deflect. No, at 100 miles per hour, he wasn't able to read a backwards license plate in his mirror, being preoccupied with other matters. He couldn't tell if there had been gunshots. All he knew was that the van didn't come over the rise up South Broadway by Chambers Road. Yes, he'd be happy to await arrival of a police officer to answer more questions. He provided his car description and location, and settled back for a wait. Time to call the office, he decided.

By the time several sirens zoomed past, southbound on Broadway, and a police cruiser finally pulled up behind him on the side street, he had rearranged his schedule to accommodate the delays. In his mirror he saw the officer approaching, so he lowered his window, and readied his license, registration, and proof-of-insurance. He took a breath and put on his lawyer face.

“Mr. Pendleton? I understand you called in this incident?”

“Indeed I did. What happened back there?”

“Would you mind stepping out and sitting in my car? I’ll need to take notes.” Stuart gathered himself and got out, listening for the chirp of the alarm as he locked his car behind him, and followed the officer back to the cruiser.

“I’d like to get a statement first, so your information isn’t influenced by things you didn’t see.” Despite his mostly civil-court case load, Stuart knew enough about police procedure not to argue, and related the incident yet again.

“You said ‘over 100,’ did I hear that correctly?”

“Um, yes, well, I don’t like to incriminate myself, but I expect that it’s relevant for you to know my state of mind. Like running the light. Not my usual approach to driving, I assure you.”

“It’s fortunate that there wasn’t very much traffic. And I won’t be writing you up—you’re right, though, everything’s relevant. Now. What happened back there is that the gray van you described appears to have been hit with some kind of explosive device. It’s completely destroyed, off the road, on fire, with two dead people inside, a man and a woman. There’s no blue pickup truck anywhere around.”

“So it sounds like that thing I saw on the guy’s shoulder was some kind of rocket launcher, or bazooka, or something like that.”

“That’s my guess. It suggests that your decision to speed away was probably a good choice.”

“Well, considering that it was the only thing I could figure out to do, it sure was. Is there anything else I can help with?”

“Where can we reach you if more questions come up?”

Stuart gave him a business card, and they went their respective ways.

Neither was aware of the blue pickup truck off in the distance, at the pullout at the crest of Davidson Mesa, or of the two men dressed in camouflage fatigues using high-powered spotting scopes to inspect the scene far below.

* * *

Two

As the mid-May sun settled down behind Sugarloaf Mountain, Hal Weathers unpacked and mentally organized his schedule for the next two weeks.

Because Annette would be joining him tomorrow and staying for the duration of his conference, he had decided to splurge on a top-floor suite in the old part of the Hotel Boulderado, downtown. Not the official conference hotel, and definitely not on the approved travel list for Frémont State business trips, it was still worth the extra cost. He could either walk or take the shuttle bus up to the campus, and

Annette could have the car to drive up into the mountains to contemplate her navel while trying to figure out her future. She needed the time to think about whether to leave her position with the City of Durango Police Department and accept an offer to take over the satellite office that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation maintained in Durango.

As he was unpacking, he caught a glimpse of himself in the big mirror. How, he wondered, did I manage to get into this fancy hotel looking this scruffy? A week of fly-fishing solo with an empty tube of sunscreen and without shaving had given him the appearance of one of those guys who slept on the benches over in Central Park. Scratching the stubble, he examined it closely in the mirror to assess the gray and came up with a conservative estimate of 35% on his face. Fortunately, it was still only about 1% on top, a few flecks of salt amidst the full head of brown pepper, if you didn't count the temples. Those, he remembered, were supposed to make him look distinguished.

"I think," he said to the guy looking back at him through humorous brown eyes flecked with gold, "I'd better shave."

He got cleaned up and decided to call Annette. On his checking in, luck was smiling on him and he was given a west-side suite, so he was watching the evening sun over the foothills when her phone rang, twice.

"Trieri, investigations."

"Hey, darlin', I got here..."

"Hal! I want to talk, but I'm on the other line. Can you hold on for a couple of minutes?"

He didn't have time to answer before she switched back. He used the wait to continue organizing his schedule and to review his reasons for being in Boulder.

As Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University and a faculty member of the Earth Sciences Department, Hal was always getting all sorts of invitations to this meeting or that conference, and he had learned that he could not possibly attend even a small fraction of them. So he was very selective, not only about the topic of the invitation but also about the location. Living in Durango meant that most of the standard vacation spots held little attraction for him.

Not that all was sweetness and light in the little southwestern Colorado mountain college town. Frémont State continued to struggle with its perennial budget woes, and Durango's continued growth was becoming more and more depressing. At least, for long-time residents like Hal, the growth meant his home's value continued to appreciate, but the university's budget problems didn't seem to have any such silver lining. If only, he thought, the Board of Trustees hadn't been swayed by the pie-in-the-sky ambition of that long-gone university president back in the '80s. Then the school wouldn't have morphed itself into a second-rate research university, and it would still be able to take pride in its identity as the premier undergraduate college in the State of Colorado system. As things stood, Hal was forever working hard to increase Frémont State's visibility in the scientific community, with a frustratingly low success rate. And that was one of the reasons he was in Boulder, to try yet again.

The invitation to the two-week-long symposium and workshop on the increasing sensitivity of arid- and semi-arid-land ecosystems to climate variations, to be sponsored by the National Center for Atmospheric Research and held at the University of Colorado, had intrigued him for two reasons. For one thing, he had in mind a plan to bring the next such symposium in the series to Frémont State, so he needed to attend this one. Holding high-visibility meetings would be one way to increase the reputation of the foundering school, and, as a dean, that was one of Hal's responsibilities.

For another thing, between semesters at the university, Boulder was actually quite a pleasant little city, and it was only a short drive from world-class trout streams along the Rocky Mountain Front

Range. The Cache la Poudre, the St. Vrain, and the South Platte were all calling out to him. Hal was sure that the conference, being two weeks long, could manage to stumble along without him for a day or two. If he got lucky, the freestone streams might not yet be flooded with runoff—spring seemed to be running a little late in these parts. But even if they were, the South Platte in Cheeseman Canyon and below would always be there, protected from runoff by the dam.

“Hal? Are you still there?”

“I’m here and you’re there, and I wish you were here or I was there.”

“Me too. How was the drive?”

“Nothing unusual. Pretty. Spectacular. You know. But on this end, yecch. The development down by Golden is way out of hand. Makes me glad we don’t live here. I did have a great time yesterday and the day before, though. The caddis hatch on the upper Arkansas was in full swing, just on schedule. And there was still a little snow on the banks of the Blue River, but the blue-winged olives were awake, and so were the trout trying to eat them.”

“And now you’ve got to go to work at that conference. Well, good luck getting your head into it. By the way, that phone call was the CBI again. They’re really turning up the heat. They sent me a package this afternoon and wanted to know if I got it.”

“A package? Candy? Flowers?”

“No such luck. A case file, or a set of case files. They have this idea that a bunch of homicides are somehow linked, and they think I’d be the perfect person to head up the investigation as my first CBI assignment.”

“A *bunch*? To me, that implies, oh, more than five. Wouldn’t you already know about something like that?”

“One of them, I do. And I recall hearing about a couple of the others. The Colorado ones. There are others in this package, too, a couple in New Mexico, one in Flagstaff, and one over in Utah. A bunch.”

“What do those have to do with the CBI?”

“They don’t, at least directly, but if they’re linked to the four Colorado ones, they do.”

“Four? When?”

“Over the past eight months. One down south of Cortez, at the Four Corners Monument. One up in Cedaredge. One west of Antonito, and one up in Boulder, last month, and both of those were doubles so it’s really six homicides.”

“So somebody’s been busy. Or several somebodies.”

“Quite. But there’s no indication of who. None. Completely clean crime scenes. So they’re appealing to my considerable ego and suggesting that I could solve the whole package, if only I signed up.”

“But you didn’t, at least yet, because you’re coming up here to think about it.”

“Yeah. That’s what I told them and that’s when they sent this package. Anyway, I’m on the early flight tomorrow, gets in about seven.”

“And I’ll be there to meet you. At the gate, if they’ll let me out to it—they seem to keep changing the rules. Otherwise, at the top of the stairs after you get off the train, OK?”

“If I remember right, that place is bigger than all creation, so I hope you can get to the gate. Then you can buy me breakfast. I don’t want to eat before getting on the plane, in case it’s bumpy.”

“I’ll find an ATM before I meet you.”

* * *

In a glass office tower on the north end of Colorado Springs, in the midst of several other such glass towers that contained mostly religious non-profit groups, Charles Shure sat in a conference room with an unbelievable view. The Pikes Peak massif and the setting sun behind the Rampart Range dominated the scene, but the city of Colorado Springs, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and Cheyenne Mountain all provided variety, spread across the landscape in front of him. Lights were beginning to twinkle in the city.

UNELECO headquarters occupied the top three floors of the Christian Families Association, Inc. building—UNELECO owned it, truth be known—and the top floor consisted of the executive conference room and the offices of Shure and his senior staff.

Shure had the conference room, on the building’s southwest corner with two walls of glass to look through, to himself. He had chosen to use it to open and examine a curious package that had been delivered earlier in the afternoon. Lying on the massive conference table was a leather-covered book, apparently hand bound, and, printed on 40-pound parchment paper, a letter.

7 May

Dearest Charles,

My colleagues and I have followed your extraordinary career with the greatest interest, and we all agree that it is now time for you to be made aware of your proud heritage.

When your grandparents immigrated to the U.S. at the end of the Second World War, they, like so many other people displaced by the War, had to begin a new life with only the clothes on their backs. Through hard work and the perseverance that one would expect from solid Aryan stock, they built a business from scratch, a business that your father would use as a springboard for his career and that you have brought into the 21st Century as one of the powerhouse organizations of the new economy.

UNELECO has matured from its origins supplying electrical equipment for the post-war housing boom in Colorado Springs to a multi-national conglomerate that stands at the center of the digital communications world. It is now poised, through its various subsidiaries, to surpass all expectations for profitability. We are aware of this because we have been stockholders since the IPO fifteen years ago. You, my good Charles, have made us rich.

It is now time that we return the favor.

Of course, given your personal fortune, it is unnecessary for us to return the favor in financial terms. But we believe we can return it in another way, one that fits with your Aryan heritage, and one that will make your professional life far easier than it is now. We can help UNELECO.

First, we should explain about your heritage. Enclosed with this letter is the final volume of your Great-Uncle Heinrich von Scheuer’s laboratory notes. You may not know that your grandparents changed their name from von Scheuer to Shure upon emigrating from Germany. This was because the family name had become contaminated by the

slandorous lies told by the Jew traitors in Germany and Europe at the end of the War. Your Grand-Uncle Heinrich was one of the premier Aryan scientists working on the problem of how to eliminate the inferior gene pool that had been spreading like a plague across Europe for centuries. As we all know, this is a problem that haunts us even today, and, with the continuing flood of inferiors sneaking illegally into our country, it will continue to be a problem, given their insistence on breeding like cockroaches.

You may be interested to know that the first twenty-four volumes of these lab notes are now a part of the propaganda on display at the so-called Holocaust Museum, where the Jew power structure continues to spread its malicious lies. How this volume came into our hands is a long, convoluted story, one that we hope to have the opportunity to relate to you personally someday soon.

Now, to return your favor. We believe that we are now in a position to assist UNELECO in two ways.

The first is related to your Grand-Uncle Heinrich's work. We have made arrangements to liberate a copy of the rest of his laboratory notes from the so-called Holocaust Museum, and we believe, with this final volume, UNELECO's biotechnology division will be in a far more competitive position to develop new pharmaceuticals than it is now. Of course, it will also be in a perfect position to work toward cleansing the gene pool.

Second, we have already begun to assist UNELECO's natural resources divisions by paving the way toward simpler approaches to new acquisitions in both the minerals and forest products groups. It is too soon to be specific about this, but, as you will soon see, many of the legal obstacles that UNELECO has been encountering will no longer be troublesome.

We regret that, for now, we must remain incognito, but we look forward to the day when we can meet with you, toast your successes, and discuss our common heritage in more detail. In the meantime, you have our

Sincere regards,

The Aryan Rights Foundation

Charles Shure was aware that his grandparents had changed the family name, but the rest of the letter's information, and the book itself, were news to him. By the time he finished reading the letter, his hands were shaking badly, and he walked to the sideboard to make himself a stiff drink, a good six ounces of Glenlivet over ice. Then he sat in one of the leather chairs facing Pikes Peak to try to calm down.

With friends like these... He took a large gulp of the Glenlivet.

Who, he thought, could these people be? The last thing UNELECO needed was a bunch of racist crazies doing things to "help." The timber and mining divisions were facing the same legal problems as the rest of the industry, and negotiations for new resource acquisitions were in a very delicate stage right now. UNELECO's public image simply couldn't stand any more tarnish. What in the world was the "Aryan Rights Foundation?"

He cleared his throat and raised his voice slightly above a normal conversational level.

"Comm-access!"

“How can we help?” came a disembodied, metallic voice from the general direction of the ceiling.

“Susan Mackovich, voice, please.” He enunciated carefully and almost immediately heard a ringing.

“UNELECO, Susan Mackovich.” This voice also came from the ceiling, but it was natural, a real human.

“Susan, Chuck Shure. Glad you’re here late. I need help. I’m in the conference room upstairs. Could you come up, please? And please bring your CryptoCard.”

He was confident that Susan, computer wizard extraordinaire and head of UNELECO’s executive research group, would be able to find the answers he needed. With her CryptoCard and the conference room’s workstation, she would have access to just about any database she needed, anywhere, even from the Defense Department’s secure servers.

* * *

The early flight from Durango was right on time, and, at 7:20 the next morning, Annette walked off the escalator from the underground train at the Denver International Airport and into Hal’s arms. He had been standing back from the little crowd gathered around, and, watching her come off the moving stairway and look around for him, he marveled yet again at how fortunate he was to have attracted someone as spectacular as she.

Even though he was some 15 years older and couldn’t, even on his best day, honestly consider himself a “catch,” she had found something appealing in him. She had come along at just the right time for him, when he had finally put behind him the pain and heartbreak of losing his first wife to cancer. Whatever it was that Annette found in him, he sure wasn’t going to argue.

After a long hug she handed him her briefcase and they headed up to the restaurant level, to Pour la France for breakfast.

“Well, Mrs. Weathers, what’s your fancy for breakfast?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Trieri, maybe Eggs Benedict?”

They had kept their separate last names after marrying in March, and there was no end to other people’s confusion. So they enjoyed the private joke now and then.

“This briefcase must imply that you checked a bag.”

“Um, two. I’m going to be here for a couple of weeks, you know.”

“I thought I brought all the stuff you’ll be needing up here when I packed the car.”

“But I’ve had time to think about it some more.”

“So just how big do you think my car is, anyway?”

“You didn’t have the back seats folded down before, so there’s plenty of room.”

She was right. Hal had used the ski sack to store his fly-rod tubes, but everything else had fit into the trunk, nice and neat. With Annette’s two new bags, he wasn’t sure that this strategy would work, however.

After a relaxed breakfast, they headed over to baggage claim and found Annette’s two bags patiently waiting to be picked up. Sometimes, Hal thought, things actually work the way they’re supposed to.

They carted her luggage out to Hal's new car and put her two bags on the back seat, on either side of the fly-rod tubes sticking through the back seat on top of the arm rest. Hal headed out of the airport and turned north on the new bypass, toward Boulder.

"So, if I know you, you stayed up half the night reading those files they sent you yesterday."

"Guilty as charged. I even brought them with me. It's fascinating stuff. The CBI is doing exactly the right thing in trying to recruit me. Giving me these files, getting my curiosity piqued."

"At least you've got that figured out. I mean, if you know what they're trying to do, at least you won't get suckered in."

"Yep. I'm paying close attention to that, believe me. The strange thing is, most of the cases aren't CBI's. One of the Colorado murders is actually the FBI's. CBI is helping with the two double homicides and the one in Cedaredge, which may be only a traffic accident."

"And there's nothing that is logically in the Durango jurisdiction?"

"Not really. The victim in the FBI case, the body found on the Navajo Reservation at the Four Corners Monument last September, was a Durango resident, one Luke Begay. No obvious reason anyone would want to kill him, at least not execution style."

"Does that give you an excuse to get involved without changing jobs?"

"I thought of that already. Walter says no. But he and I talked about a temporary leave, to go work with the CBI on this case. To see if I liked it enough to make the change and all. He doesn't want to lose me, but he doesn't want to stand in the way of a career move."

"And, by treating it this way, dealing with you honestly, he's going to treat you well enough that you'll have second thoughts about another job. Bosses that considerate are hard to find, and I bet he knows that."

"Right again. And he and I've had this conversation, so at least there aren't any hidden agendas at work on his part. I think I'm going to see if I can get the CBI to let me talk with the locals here in Boulder about their double last month. That'll give me a little better taste of what working with them would be like."

"Do they have any theories about how these things fit together? I mean, they must think they fit together somehow, if they've got 'em all in the same package."

"The only thing remotely similar about them is that the victims all have one kind of connection or another to some relatively extreme faction of the environmental movement. Either they were active in some organization, or they provided funding, or they had some official position. Like, the guy over in Utah was a National Park Service employee, at Natural Bridges."

"And the two double homicides as well?"

"Both were married couples with both partners active. The Boulder couple, um..." she rummaged in her briefcase, "the Mayers, they were the people behind the Boulder chapter of SCARAB."

"SCARAB. Ahh, Students and Citizens for Animal Rights and Biodiversity, right? The same organization as the one at the U? The one run by that guy that got killed up in the Weminuche a couple of years ago, right?"

"Yeah, that guy Jennifer went camping with. One of Sal Kelly's dealers. The Mayers were killed in their van, on the way into Boulder last month, by someone who chased them and, apparently, got them with a rocket launcher, or something like that. The other couple was killed by a car bomb, near where the road west of Antonito crosses the river."

“West of Antonito... Oh, at Horca? I’ve been fishing there a couple of times. What a beautiful place. How could a car bomb get them there?”

“A witness said that she saw some guy crawl out from under their car when they were in a restaurant. It blew up about a mile down the road from there. This was the Levines, Holly and Jack, from Denver. They were on their way to Santa Fe for a vacation, from what the CBI’s figured out.”

“An environmental connection?”

“Funders of various small, radical fringe groups, big bucks funders. Like the Old Stand Guardians people in Boulder, the Forest Rescuers in Santa Fe, groups like that. In addition to the Sierra Club and so on.”

“What about the Cedaredge guy?”

“Interesting. He was a big-game guide. Came from a logging family, people who did things the old way, before machines. Took big trees off Grand Mesa, not for lumber mills but for single beams. Mules, sledges, all that. Had a reputation as a tree-hugger. But he ran off the road in his truck. There were some indications that he may have had help, a push from behind. But nothing conclusive.”

“So someone’s going around knocking off Colorado environmentalists?”

“And their pals in New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona, or at least some of them.”

“Well, at least it sounds like there isn’t a Frémont State connection this time, like there usually seems to be. That’s a relief.”

* * *

If you plop a rectangle the size of Wyoming squarely on top of the Four Corners, you cover a landscape that is the property, for the most part, of various governmental entities. The largest landowner is Uncle Sam, through his agents in the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service. Second on the list is the Navajo Nation, which controls almost all of the Arizona part of this landscape plus a significant amount of it in Utah and New Mexico. Other Native American Nations—two Ute tribes in Colorado and the various New Mexico Pueblos—follow in turn.

Individual landownership, at least in terms of large parcels, is far down the list. Yet there are some ranches, assembled by hook and crook over the last century or so, that include significant acreage. The profitability of these ranches benefits significantly from additional grazing leases on nearby federal lands.

One such ranch, located in southern San Miguel County about 30 miles due west of Telluride, was the centerpiece of Jarvis Schoenfield’s empire. His great-grandfather, Johann, had assembled the initial parcels during the late 1800s, using the Homestead Act and the less-than-perfect record keeping at the county seat, which at that time was way over in Silverton. When Grandfather Xavier linked the parcels into the X-S Ranch in the 1920s, the core of the Schoenfield empire took shape. Jarvis’ father and uncles had expanded the X-S holdings and diversified into mining in the Paradox Valley after World War II, when uranium became the object of federal attention. Because Jarvis had stuck with the ranch, he was able to watch from a distance as his uncles and cousins died from cancer, and eventually he became the sole proprietor of some 50,000 acres of hay fields, pasture, and timber, too many mining claims on federal land to count, and grazing rights all over the region.

Because much of the pasture was scattered in parcels of various sizes throughout the Paradox Valley and the surrounding plateaus, the sight of cattle with the X-S brand seared onto their flanks was familiar to residents of the communities of Nucla, Naturita, and Norwood. This familiarity worked to

Schoenfield's advantage at election time, and he was able to keep his seat in the Colorado State Senate as a result. His seniority there paid dividends for both his constituents and his fellow ranchers throughout the state, as well as for his variety of personal interests. His seniority also allowed him his choice of committee assignments, and he'd been Chairman of the Committee on Law Enforcement for years.

And the best thing of all was that everyone called him "Senator" all the time.

An operation the size of the X-S, which involved not only ranching but also timber and minerals extraction, required no small number of accountants and lawyers as well as ranch hands, lumberjacks, and miners. The corporate office, in a small building next to the First National Bank up in Norwood, was the employer of choice for the town. But the real seat of power for the X-S was at Raven's Roost, the ranch headquarters. Sprawled across the flattish top of North Mountain, about 15 miles south-southwest of Norwood, Raven's Roost consisted of a cluster of buildings—a small village, really—dominated by a huge, rambling log cabin, where Schoenfield lived with his domestic staff and personal assistants. But no wife.

For after trying three times without a hint of success to maintain a marital relationship, Schoenfield was finally and permanently single. His only regret was his failure to produce an heir. For a time, he blamed this on his wives, and he divorced the first two largely because of it. Wife number three, however, had the sort of personality that wouldn't put up with such badgering, and she had insisted on medical tests for both of them. She passed hers, and he failed his. He thought about adoption as an alternative, but he finally decided to work toward making the X-S a self-perpetuating, autonomous corporation, held closely by a select group of directors on behalf of a carefully crafted trust.

Wife number three, meanwhile, had died mysteriously on a hunting trip. It was only because of Schoenfield's considerable political clout, and financial resources, that the coroner had ruled the death an accident.

Sitting at his huge mahogany desk with his back to the bay window that looked out to the southeast toward Lone Cone Peak, Schoenfield contemplated the sheaf of paper with the laser-printed Colorado Bureau of Investigation logo lying on the leather writing pad in front of him.

He scanned the first page quickly, recognizing it to be a cover letter to the Governor signed with "best regards" by Roderick Andersen, the CBI Director. The remainder of the report took him two hours to read and digest. He was sufficiently engrossed that he paid no attention to the setting sun, which, due to the high cloud cover, lit Lone Cone with a deep red hue. When he was finished, he took a key from the ring on his belt, unlocked a drawer, and put the folder in, locking the drawer again afterwards. Then he picked up the telephone.

"Send Pickle and Mad Dog up here, willya?"

Whoever answered knew his voice, because that was all he said before hanging up. Then he set to examining a thick account book.

Ten minutes later, there was a knock on the heavy door to the office.

"Yeah? Come in."

The door opened, and in walked a curious pair, who were waved to two leather chairs facing the desk. The right chair was taken by a small, wiry man with a puckered expression permanently fixed on his face. The left chair, appropriately larger, was taken by a very big man, someone who, before he put on middle-age weight, had the build and size to play power forward in professional basketball. His calm expression was marked only by a wandering left eye, which appeared to be trying to track the random

flight of a housefly, or possibly a hummingbird. They waited patiently for a full five minutes before Schoenfield looked up.

“You asked us to come up, Senator?”

The smaller man was the spokesman.

“I just finished reading about your handiwork. Quite an interesting compilation, actually, what there is in the report. It leaves out several of the early operations, and it misses a couple of the more recent ones that looked like natural causes. Last time I met with Andersen, he didn’t refer to any of these, so I don’t think they’re onto them.”

“Ah, I hope there’s no suggestion of who was involved.”

“Nope, only the victims. You guys are good. Real good.”

Pickle beamed, and Mad Dog’s wandering eye almost focused on Schoenfield.

“And there’s no hints about the others?”

“Nope. They’re probably being treated as routine homicides, or accidents, and so Denver isn’t involved. And this seems to be confirmed by the work Timmy’s doing on their computers.”

Although almost everyone on his staff knew that Schoenfield was considered to be the CBI’s staunchest political patron, he always referred to them indirectly rather than by name, at least in this company. He continued.

“In fact, I’ve got a little bonus here for you both.”

He opened the top drawer and took out two envelopes. He pushed one toward each man across the desk.

“Make sure that this stays quiet, and there will be more of these envelopes. Now, then. Let’s talk about that little affair we’ve planned for July up in Boulder. How are things progressing?”

“We’ve got the equipment all ready. We’ve been extra careful, Senator. All the stuff has been brought in from out of state. The electronics were bought as individual parts from about a dozen suppliers. The rifle was smuggled in from Canada last year, and it’s only been used once, except for being sighted in. And we’ve figured out how to get access to the display. It’s being taken out to be fixed up, polished and all that, later this month. We’ll get at it then.”

“You said that the controller box will be rigged to melt itself?”

“Yep, that’s the way it will be set up. We figured it will get blasted, so it will have an internal flash heat source hooked to a motion-sensitive trigger. And even if it doesn’t get blasted, the recoil from the rifle will probably trigger it.”

The smaller man fidgeted in his chair, and his forehead wrinkled, accentuating his puckered expression.

“And we’ve been practicing with the video system. I have to tell you, Senator, I’m really doubtful that we’re going to have any chance at accuracy. With the thing fixed, we can’t really aim, so we just have to take a shot at whatever walks through the sights.”

“That’s OK, I keep telling you. The idea here is to make a big impression on this administration we’re stuck with. Taking advantage of the President’s visit to that research center in Boulder will embarrass them as well, maybe put them out of business and stop wasting our tax money on all that stupid global heating research. And it will register our dismay with this fool President’s choices for his cabinet. Diversity, hell. He’s picked so many token blacks and browns and other inferior types, not to

mention women, that we'd be better off without him. I mean, look at that Secretary of Interior. That's what she should be doing, being somebody's secretary. So we don't really have to hit him, just the event will have its effect. But if we do hit him, and especially if we get lucky and kill him, it'll play right into our hands, because this Vice-President is really a better choice."

"If you say so. Senator. We'll certainly do our best."

"And I know that really to be the best. Now. One more thing. How are you two at kidnapping?"

* * *

Three

The previous evening, while he was waiting for Susan Mackovich to come up to the conference room, Charles Shure had decided to examine the leather-bound volume that had arrived with the letter. He picked it up, turned it around, and felt a knot form in his stomach as a glimmer of recognition of the blue numbers on the book's spine settled into his consciousness.

Carefully, he opened the book, to a page that seemed stiffer than the rest. It turned out this was because the page had four photographs glued to it. Although old and black-and-white, they had obviously been taken by a professional, because the lighting and detail were exquisite. The six heads, sitting on the stumps of their necks severed neatly at about the Adam's apple, were lined up carefully on a table, and the four photographs showed them from the front, the back, and the two sides.

When Susan had arrived, she found him retching into the bar sink, the sour smell of used scotch permeating the air. It was the frontal angle that got him, the one with the staring eyes.

Looking back on it later, he decided that his reaction was appropriate, and that it was perfectly acceptable for her to see him this way. He had eventually shown her the volume, but not the letter, and her reaction was similar even though she knew what to expect. So if any gossip about the meeting got started, he'd be something of a hero.

After the two of them had recuperated from the shock of the contents of the book, Susan became all business, motivated to find out who was behind the whole thing, and her research instincts kicked in. Before too long, a dossier on the Aryan Rights Foundation was sitting beside the workstation's printer.

He was now back in the conference room, reviewing the dossier in preparation for a meeting with Susan and Jerry Perkins, head of UNELECO security. Although there was more information than he could absorb in one sitting, he could tell that it was shallow stuff, and quite anonymous. The Aryan Rights Foundation wasn't revealing any secrets, or even any names, on its web site. And it wasn't listed on any of the hate-group watchdog sites, strangely enough.

He'd been trying to figure out an appropriate strategy all day. Fortunately, he'd not shown Susan the letter, just the book. She had been so disturbed by it that she hadn't thought to ask why he connected something called the "Aryan Rights Foundation" with it. Good enough. But Perkins wouldn't be so easily distracted.

Shure strode back into his office, on the northwest corner of the top floor, and sat down at his computer. After thinking for a minute, he opened WordPerfect and typed into a new document the words "Courtesy of the Aryan Rights Foundation." Then he thought for another minute, reached down, opened the lid of his laser printer, and removed the toner cartridge. He turned it over and over in his hands, and then replaced it. Then he printed the brief document, and repeated the trick with the toner cartridge.

Back in the conference room, he folded the paper in half, unfolded it and made sure to get his fingerprints all over it, and refolded it several times and put it into the book. Now he was ready for Perkins, as well as for any after-the-fact questions that Susan might come up with.

The information that Susan had found on the Aryan Rights Foundation site, although shallow, painted a picture of a well-financed, clandestine hate group, one that was able to use clever arguments to make its points. Any way he looked at them, however, Shure found those arguments disturbing. The notion that some ethnicities were inherently superior to others grated on his sensibilities. As the CEO of a large, international conglomerate, he dealt with bright, motivated individuals from all over the world. To suggest, as did ARF, that northern Europeans were somehow inherently better than people from Asia was just silly. Yet he recognized the appeal of the arguments as well, particularly to those who felt threatened by people who look different or who maintain different cultural traditions.

And it was hard to disagree with the premise that humanity could only benefit from improvements in the gene pool. Of course, the definition of “improvements,” he thought, was the rub. And especially who was going to be doing the defining.

There was a soft knock on the conference room door, then Susan Mackovich and Jerry Perkins slipped into the room.

“Susan. Jerry. Thanks for coming. Jerry, did Susan tell you what this is about?”

“Just briefly, Mr. Shure. It sounds pretty strange, something I’d think of as the work of a crank, except for the picture Susan described.”

“My thinking exactly. The book’s over there on the table. If it’s genuine, this thing is pretty scary to me. There’s also the issue of its historical value. There’s a notation on the first page that suggests it’s part of a set. If the rest of the set’s somewhere, this could be an important part of it.” Shure had thought carefully about how to avoid any references to the ARF letter.

Perkins had begun looking at the book, and, on seeing the pictures that it fell open to, he reacted just as Shure and Susan Mackovich had the day before. Fortunately for the conference room’s carpet, he made it to the same bar sink the other two had. Susan picked up the page of paper that had fallen to the table.

“I didn’t see this yesterday. ‘Courtesy of the Aryan Rights Foundation.’ Why do you suppose these guys would send this to you, Mr. Shure?”

“I was so rattled I stuck it in my pocket yesterday. That question kept me awake most of the night. The only thing I can think of is that my grandparents immigrated here from Germany at the end of World War II. They never talked much about their life there, but maybe there’s a connection to this von Scheuer guy. Somehow this Aryan rights bunch got hold of it and decided I should have it. It makes my skin crawl just to think about it.”

Perkins re-entered the conversation, wiping his face on a towel.

“Mr. Shure, please accept my apology. I feel completely unprofessional. But that, that picture took me by complete surprise. Now I understand what Susan was telling me. And now I do have to take this more seriously than just a crank thing. If I may borrow this book, I’ll dust it for prints and have it analyzed for its paper and so on. We need to authenticate it. Um, is this cover made of what I think it is?”

“Probably. Check out the little blue numbers on the spine. You can have that tested, too, I expect. Susan, why don’t we have this whole thing scanned in and then, after it’s analyzed, we can just put the original away in a vault, an environmentally controlled one. Eventually, we should get an expert in these

things to look at it and advise us on what we should do with it. Meanwhile, let's keep this as quiet as we can. Jerry, do you think there's any special precautions I should take?"

"Can I persuade you not to drive yourself around? I'd like to ask you to use the armored car, with a driver and an extra person with him, if I could."

"And maybe you could set someone to watching my house for a while."

"Right. Do you have any overseas trips coming up? Or any others? Maybe it would be a good idea to stay close to home until we get a better handle on all this."

"Agreed." Shure grinned. "I was supposed to go to Moscow next week, but this is the perfect excuse to cancel. I'll set up teleconferences for whatever else I need to do."

* * *

Never, ever, ever ever again will I complain about the traffic in Durango, Annette said to herself. She was sitting in Hal's new Audi S4, waiting, according to Hal's careful instructions, instructions she suspected were totally unnecessary, for the two turbines to wind down and cool before shutting it off. She had finally found the parking lot next to the CBI offices in downtown Denver and pulled in, despite the \$8 per half hour sign at the entrance. Even Durango, she thought, is getting so you have to pay for parking, but this is absurd.

It had been easy for her to make an appointment to see the CBI Director, but his schedule required an 8:30 meeting, so she had spent the previous 90 minutes negotiating the 35 miles from Boulder. The average speed of just over 20 miles per hour was misleading: most of the time had been spent sitting still, with the remainder spent at about 70, bumper to bumper—with lots of people weaving between lanes, attempting to "win" the daily "race."

Annette kept current with her various training courses, including defensive driving, and she was well experienced with various modes of traffic, including big-city traffic. Growing up and learning to drive in Chicago had seen to that. But the morning commute into Denver from Boulder was something she hadn't expected, couldn't even have imagined. It didn't help that she was driving Hal's new pride and joy. Although comfortable and powerful and a dream to drive, it still had no scratches, and she was certainly not interested in contributing the first one.

At least she'd been warned about the drive and had left Boulder with plenty of time. Her watch told her that she had fifteen minutes to get an elevator up to the nineteenth floor, to the CBI Director's office. She felt a mixed sense of elation and nerves. They, after all, were recruiting her, so this wasn't a job interview. But she still wanted to make the best possible impression.

Ten minutes later, Annette entered the door to the CBI suite. A receptionist, whose desk label said "Sandy McStain," looked up at her with just the right mixture of professionalism and warmth.

"Good morning. I'm Annette Trieri. I have an appointment with Director Andersen at 8:30. Ahh," she looked at her watch, "I guess I'm a couple of minutes early."

"He's expecting you. Would you like a cup of coffee? Help yourself, there's a fresh pot just over there. Take one of the clean mugs." Sandy pointed to an alcove at Annette's left.

"I'll let him know you're here." She pushed buttons on a telephone.

Annette found, to her relief, that there was a choice of regular or decaf—she picked the decaf, because she was still jangled by the traffic. As she was pouring, she heard footsteps behind her.

"Lieutenant Annette Trieri, I believe? I'm Roderick Andersen. I'm so glad you could come down."

Annette managed not to spill anything while she turned to shake his hand.

“I’m glad to be here. And, given the traffic, lucky. You don’t commute from Boulder, by any chance, do you?”

He tilted his head back and laughed.

“Don’t tell me you came down from the Peoples’ Republic at this time of day! My sympathies. No, I live just across town a ways, on South Ogden, by Washington Park. I take a bus, about 20 minutes including lots of stops.”

“I thought I was ready for big city traffic, but that was just ridiculous. If you really want me to come to work at CBI, your best approach will be to let me stay down in Durango. I guess I’m spoiled.”

“That you are. Summer music festivals right in town and winter skiing only 25 miles up the road. No, our intentions are strictly, shall I say, honorable. We want you for our office down there because of your relationships with the southwestern counties and with Durango. And, of course, because Bob Weldon is retiring. Let me get a cup of coffee here, and we can go into my office and talk about it.”

Two minutes later they were seated on the casual furniture in his office, looking west over downtown Denver, the western suburbs, and toward Mount Evans on the Front Range.

“As I said, I’m glad you could come down. And thanks for braving the traffic. I hope you’re here with good news for me.”

“Depends on what constitutes ‘good.’” She smiled. “I’m sure that you know how flattering it is to be sought after, and, to tell the truth, I’m at the point in my career where this would be a good move. I really don’t want to move up in the Durango PD, because the next thing will be too desk-oriented. What I think I’m good at is investigating, leading investigations. Field work, coordinating the people, putting the puzzle together, and all that. It’s certainly what I like to do.”

“And that’s exactly what we’re after. Someone who’s a leader. I’m sure you know that CBI isn’t a huge operation. We mostly function as intra-state coordinators of difficult investigations, providing assistance in investigating and in forensics to small law enforcement units, and we try hard to keep our bureaucracy to a minimum. Um, I don’t want to say anything bad about Bob, he’s a good friend of mine. But he’s run the field office in Durango in his own way for years now, and he’s retiring. I think that office may be in something of a rut, and I think that your hands-on approach is just what’s needed to get us out of that rut. If you decide to join us, what I’ll suggest is that you appoint Bob’s second-in-command as your chief-of-staff, to run the office side of things and to keep you available for investigations.”

“This second-in-command, is he, or she, also a candidate for the directorship? What’s it called, ‘Field Office Director’?”

“Right. And the second-in-command now is Derek Petersen. In the normal course of things, we’d advertise the position, and I’m sure that he’d apply and be a strong candidate. But there are two mitigating factors. First, he’s been the primary field investigator down there. Bob ran the office and Derek did the leg work. Derek needs administrative experience before he’ll be ready for the top job. I figure, with you in the top job, he could get the administrative experience as your chief-of-staff and then move to another division directorship when one opens up. And they do, reasonably often.

“Second, well, I want to be candid with you but I don’t want to offend you. So please don’t take this the wrong way. But we, that is, the CBI, are under pressure from the Governor’s office to diversify our staff. Especially at the top, we’re dominated by older, Anglo guys. So what I’m trying to do in recruiting you is to get myself some points with the Governor while adding the best investigator in the Four Corners to our staff. I got permission to go after you without the usual open search. My excuse to do this

is gender diversity, but I hope you believe me when I tell you that my real reason is your talents and capabilities and potential. Your work in Durango, and with the sheriffs of several of the counties down there, makes you perfect for our office. I've done a lot of homework on you, so I'm confident about this."

Annette was shaking her head.

"Well, I guess I'm not offended. It would be nice to be past all this stuff, but we're not, so I might as well take advantage of opportunities when they come along for whatever reason. I have to say, I'm suspicious that I got to be lieutenant for similar reasons, and I've been working hard to prove that I'm worthy of the position because of that."

She shifted in her chair and took a sip of coffee.

"My captain is being straight with me on this. He doesn't want me to leave, but he's not going to stand in my way. He's offered me a leave of absence to try this out. I think he's got a hidden agenda of improving the PD's relationship with the CBI, so this is a sort of perfect opportunity for him."

She smiled. "I like the idea of an experienced chief-of-staff, even if he's not an administrative expert. But I'll need to meet him and check out the chemistry before I can commit. I'm sure you understand that."

"Absolutely. And, if you're going to be up here for a few days, we may be able to arrange something. He'll be up this way later this week for meetings. We're working on what may be a serial killer."

"I bet that's the folder I got. Those environmentalists?"

"The same. Derek's dead-ended. He'll be up here to talk to the Boulder Sheriff and PD about what happened, so he could meet with you in Boulder. Then you wouldn't have to drive down here again." He grinned.

"I'll be in Boulder through next week. My husband's at a climate conference up in Boulder, and we're going to drive back together when it's over."

"I'll make sure that Derek sees you when he's up there." He looked at his watch. "I'm sorry my schedule's so tight, but I have a meeting with the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Law Enforcement. He and the Chief of the State Patrol are coming in for something or other about budgets."

"I'm glad to have had the chance to meet you. And, while I'm in town, I thought I'd go to the Denver Art Museum and do some shopping. Do you suppose that Ms. McStain would know how to direct me to the Cherry Creek Mall?"

"Would she! I think that's her second home. And I'll get you a pass to the museum. We do have various perks."

Just as Annette was about to leave, the main door to the office suite burst open and in walked a large, imposing figure with an air of authority; tall, immaculately dressed, gray hair coiffed like an anchor-man. Sandy McStain scrambled to her feet.

"Senator Schoenfield! How nice to see you again. Director Andersen is expecting you, sir."

"No doubt. Is Chief Wilkerson here yet?"

"No, sir, he called and said he's running a few minutes late. Something about traffic."

"Well, then we'll just have to start without him. Where's Rod?"

Andersen emerged from his office right about then, and Annette was startled by the change in him. With her, he had been confidently in charge, in a quiet sort of way. Now, he was the obsequious servant. Standing off to the side of all the commotion, she tried to be invisible, but she knew somehow that it wouldn't work.

“Senator! Thanks again so much for coming by. I'm certain that Chief Wilkerson will be here shortly.”

“Hope so. I don't have all day. I need to get back this afternoon.”

“Since we have a minute, I'd like to introduce you to someone, someone from your part of the state, actually.”

Andersen steered Schoenfield in Annette's direction.

“Senator, this is Lieutenant Annette Trieri, of the Durango Police Department. I'm hoping I can persuade her to replace Bob Weldon. Annette, Senator Jarvis Schoenfield.”

“Weldon? What's happening with him?”

Schoenfield obviously did not like being uninformed.

“He's retiring. I'm sure it was in last month's report. Lieutenant Trieri has been in charge of the Durango investigations unit for several years, and she has a solid history of working with law enforcement in the counties down your way.”

Schoenfield turned his gaze on Annette, giving her a leisurely once-over. At 5'9", she was used to being able to look most people in the eye, but Schoenfield was a good head taller. It made her uncomfortable to tilt her head back—she felt like a rabbit being watched by a mountain lion.

“Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant. Bob Weldon's an old friend on mine. You'll have big shoes to fill. Hmm. Trieri. Interesting name. Where's it from?”

At times like this, Annette was able to participate in the situation while simultaneously observing herself as if she were acting in a play. It happened all the time, and she had learned to be both actor and director. This time, her directorial instincts told her not to be intimidated.

“How nice to meet you as well, Senator. I've had various interactions with the southwest CBI office over the years, and I've developed great respect for Bob Weldon and his people. Ah, my family is back in Chicago, if that's what you're asking. Generations ago, it was in Europe, like yours, I imagine, maybe a little farther south.”

She met Schoenfield's intense stare without flinching, her green eyes focused like lasers on his. He was obviously not used to such behavior, for he turned away from her and changed the subject.

“Rod, I need to move along, so perhaps we should start.”

She was dismissed, just like that. He, she thought, is someone I'll have to be careful of.

* * *

Anarchists are not the sort of people that I should be trying to organize. Why the hell did I ever talk myself into this?

Sitting in his north Durango apartment, Steve Rutherford was bemoaning his situation, trying to find a graceful, or even clumsy, way out. He had gathered together a group—no, that sounded too formal and organized; it was a bunch, a pile, a heap—of acquaintances from the area to discuss the formation of a new organization. Naturally, he'd picked the people he knew to be disenchanting with

other groups, even the underground fringe represented by the Mother Earth Defense League. And if they couldn't get along in the MEDL, they were definitely loners by nature. Talk about herding cats.

They had shown up largely because he had promised beer—and wine for Lolly. About the only thing they had accomplished in their three hours of wrangling and arguing and, finally, laughing was to come up with a name they could agree on. And even then, there was controversy. Steve thought that it had just the combination of whimsy and topical relevance that was needed, along with the potential for name recognition and a really cool logo, should they ever need one: Southwestern Colorado Radical Environmental Warriors. To be known, obviously, by the acronym.

David Wellington, who always took everything, including himself, far too seriously, thought the humor would distract people from the purpose of the organization. Aaron Felterson objected to the use of “warriors” in the title, arguing that it would give away their strategy. “Radical” was also a cause for concern, for similar reasons. Lolly Markham argued against “environmental,” reasoning that it was too restrictive. She thought “social” would be more appropriate. Even the “Southwestern Colorado” regional twist raised questions, but Steve pointed out that they needed to keep this group small and focused.

In the end it was the killer weed that Flip Chester always seemed to have some of that forged an agreement, or, more precisely stated, a reluctant truce. That and the distraction of Lolly's not wearing anything under her tee shirt. When she got agitated and waved her arms around, it looked like she had a couple of puppies squirming around in there, little dark noses poking against the fabric. Man, Steve thought, I'd sure like to get my hands on those puppies.

Lolly's point about the limitations of restricting SCREW to an environmental mission was well taken, but they did need some kind of focus. And the catalyst for getting together in the first place had an environmental basis, for sure. Too many of their friends and colleagues in the environmental movement, especially in the MEDL, were dying off, getting killed in suspicious circumstances.

Steve had wondered about it idly for several months, but it was the thing up in Boulder last month, where Bill and Jane Mayer got blown up in their van, that finally got his attention. He'd started a list, and he was surprised to see how long it was when he was finished. And he knew that at least half of the people on the list had been MEDL supporters. So he'd called around to friends and acquaintances within a couple of hours' driving time who weren't dead (yet? he wondered) to talk things over, and then to get together and try to get organized. A couple of them had been thinking along similar lines, so it was easy to arrange the meeting. The timing was a hassle, but it finally got put together.

They met in Steve's apartment, because his office at Frémont State was too cramped, and because he kind of suspected they'd end up smoking a joint, or two or three. Lolly, since she lived in town, arrived first, and he was proud of himself for not coming on to her, at least not too strongly, puppies or no puppies. Wellington had stopped in Pagosa Springs on his way over from Alamosa to pick up Felterson, and they wound up late. Reid Tompkins, who came in from Cortez, was always late for everything, as was Flip Chester, who had the excuse of being perpetually stoned.

“So, I talked with each of you a little about this meeting on the phone,” Steve started out when they had all assembled. “If I'm right, the cops aren't doing anything about these killings, and we're on our own. I think, with a little organization, we can accomplish a lot. Find out who's behind this and deal with them ourselves. In the process, we'll eliminate an enemy of Mother Earth. We need to wear a different hat to do this so that we don't bring any attention to MEDL.”

“You mean, violence?”

Lolly was either aghast or delighted, Steve couldn't tell.

“Isn’t it about time that someone stepped up and fought on the side of the Earth? She’s been raped and ripped open for generations. I think we owe her. MEDL doesn’t condone violence, but I think that may be what’s called for, in this case at least.”

“What’s this have to do with your list of dead people?”

Wellington was always practical.

“They were all, in one way or another, fighting within the system on Mother Earth’s behalf. And they got killed. Even Jake, who was a logger, was really a tree-hugger. And he got killed.”

“Didn’t he just crash his truck?”

“The police report had some suspicious stuff in it. It looks like someone gave him a shove and then he crashed. Meaning he was killed. Now it’s time someone avenged him and the others, too.”

Thus was the concept of the Warriors born, and eventually SCREW.

“Far out,” said Flip, through his personal fog.

* * *

They used the tried-and-true road construction ploy, and it worked to perfection.

First, they invented an opportunity, irresistible to the target, to lure him onto a secondary road in a relatively remote area. In Shure’s case, the opportunity was to obtain a combined timber and mineral lease on private property, allowing extraction without most of the usual federal paperwork. They set up a phony meeting in Norwood for this purpose. Because the obvious itinerary for a high-roller like Shure was to the Telluride airport and then by car down the San Miguel River Valley toward Norwood, there were ample opportunities for the subsequent steps of the process. The “meeting” was supposedly a discussion between Shure and the “owner” of the property, and Shure rose to the bait like a hatchery trout to a stonefly.

Second, they isolated the target’s vehicle from other traffic. They managed this with the expedient of two semis, one in front to block Shure’s car and one behind to slow trailing traffic.

Third, they used a phony construction crew to route the target vehicle onto an isolated tertiary road. This was easy, given the lack of traffic between Placerville and Norwood, and, because the lead semi was routed as well, step four was expedited.

Fourth, they merely blockaded the target vehicle, front and rear, and extracted the individual of interest from it. To this end, the lead semi rolled to a stop, the back door rolled up, and the occupants of Shure’s rented car found themselves staring at a rocket launcher held by someone wearing a black hood, sitting casually on a stool. There must have been a black curtain behind him, because there was nothing to be seen in the interior of the semi-trailer. Shure’s driver immediately tried to reverse directions, but he discovered that a large farm implement—a combination hay rake and bailer, as it happened—was blocking the road behind them.

After that, it was simply a matter of negotiation.

Before Shure thought to telephone for help, someone was calling him. Surprised, because he thought his cell phone number was confidential, he pushed the Talk button.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Shure, my abject apologies for the inconvenience. First, let me reassure you and your driver that no one will be threatened in the least by this little delay. The, ah, device in the truck in front of you

is merely to get your attention. We know your driver is armed, and we simply want you to understand that we hold the upper hand. All we want is to talk with you for a few moments.”

“What is it you want?”

“If you’d walk past the truck in front of you, you’ll find a most comfortable van in which we can conduct business. I’m sure you know that these cellular telephones don’t offer much in the way of privacy. Your driver can remain seated. You can reassure him that you’ll return, completely healthy and even well-fed, if you’d like, in a short while. We will maneuver the van so he can see it, and it won’t be going anywhere.”

“How do I know that I’ll be safe?”

“You’ll have to trust me, I’m afraid. Given the situation, surely you can see there’s little choice.”

At this, the hooded person holding the rocket launcher waggled the tube. Shure realized that he must be listening to the conversation. Or maybe he was even conducting it, from under the hood.

“I’ll expect you in the van shortly.”

The phone went dead.

“I’m told I should get out and get in a van that’s ahead of this truck, Walt. What do you think?”

The driver, Walter Herrington, looked skeptical.

“I think I can’t go anywhere, Mr. Shure, what with the truck in front, that equipment behind us, and these ditches on either side. Besides, that thing on that guy’s shoulder is not something I feel like arguing with. But I don’t like you getting out. What’s the deal? What do they want?”

“He said, to conduct business. He also said I’d be safe.”

“They just moved a van into view up ahead. See it?”

Shure leaned to the left, and there was a black, windowless van, sitting on the road ahead of the semi.

“What if we call for help?”

Walt was clearly not comfortable with Shure’s leaving the car.

“He mentioned that cell phone calls are easily monitored, and I think that was a sort of warning. I guess I’ll just have to do this.”

“Well, be careful. I’ll sit tight, with my hands visible.”

Shure opened the left rear door, and got out onto the road. He felt an overwhelming urge to run for it, but the hooded person in the semi loomed. So he simply walked ahead to the van. As he passed the tractor of the semi, he noticed that the driver was also wearing a black hood, as was the person sitting behind the steering wheel of the black van. The side door slid open as Shure approached.

“Mr. Shure, please, come in.”

Shure saw a young man, curiously familiar, sitting in an easy chair in the van’s interior. A second chair, on the other side of a small side table, sat empty. Shure climbed aboard and sat.

“Mr. Shure, my name is William Campbell. I’m an attorney representing the interests of a group that I believe you’ve heard of, the Aryan Rights Foundation.”

“Have we met?”

“Yes sir, we have. Until recently I was employed in the legal office of UNELECO. I recall meeting you several years back when your company hired me right out of law school.”

“And you quit working for us and went to work for this Aryan Rights bunch? What could have possibly motivated you to do this?”

“Um, er, well, they made me an extremely attractive offer,” Campbell was writing on his legal pad while talking, “and it seemed to have, ah, career potential on a faster track than what a large office like UNELECO’s did.”

He tore off the paper and slid it across the table to Shure.

Shure read “They are listening. They blackmailed me.”

“I see. Well, I certainly wish you the best. Now, I was given to understand that I would be meeting with the owner of certain timber and mineral rights that I was planning to lease. Normally, this would be handled by the heads of the appropriate UNELECO divisions, but the owner’s representative was insistent on me. I now see why. But I don’t see why the need for this cloak and dagger stuff. Surely, we could be having this conversation at that address in, um, Norwood that we were given?”

Campbell reached for his piece of notepad paper and began writing.

“Well, um, the Sen... Ah, that is, my understanding is that the Aryan Rights Foundation wants complete secrecy in its dealings with you at this stage.”

He handed the paper back, and Shure read “Show of force—Intimidation.”

Campbell continued, “The purpose of this meeting is to follow up on the letter and the book that they sent you a few days ago. I was told to give you this computer CD.”

He handed Shure a standard CD jewel box.

“The CD contains images of the other volumes of your great-uncle’s laboratory notes. The other volumes were ‘borrowed’ and scanned electronically. My clients are certain that you’ll be able to read them.”

“I’m afraid that I simply don’t understand what this is all about. Why these people believe that I would be interested in all this is beyond me.”

“I’m told to tell you that this will be made clear soon. For now, it’s suggested that you return to your car and review the material on the CD at your earliest opportunity. That’s all there is for this meeting.”

Campbell looked both nervous and apologetic.

“I think not. Someone owes me an explanation, and you, having taken the position of the Aryan Rights Foundation, or whatever these people call themselves, the position of their lawyer, you are the one to start explaining. First of all, who are these people?”

“I’m truly sorry, Mr. Shure, but I’m simply not at liberty to tell you that.” Campbell was sweating heavily. “My clients aren’t ready for you to know more. They will insist on doing things their way, I’m afraid.”

He took the paper back from the table, folded it several times, and reached across and slid it into Shure’s jacket pocket.

“Now, Mr. Shure, as I said, I’m afraid this meeting is over. It would be best for both you and your driver if you were to return to your car.”

Defeated, but with some understanding that the notes Campbell had passed meant more than he yet understood, Shure exited the van and walked back to his car. Inside, he reassured his driver that he was perfectly fine, and they both watched as the semi-trailer door rolled down. The van ahead of it backed down the road to a pull-out, reversed its direction, and sped away.

Then the door of the semi-trailer rolled up a couple of feet, and a body was pushed out. It flopped onto the roadway, right in front of Shure's car. The truck began rolling, and roared off in a cloud of dust.

Shure and Walt Herrington leapt out of the car and approached the body, which was lying face down in the gravel, a pool of blood seeping out from under the left cheek. They turned it over, and Shure gasped as he recognized William Campbell, now with a small red hole between his eyebrows. A note, pinned to Campbell's tie, scribbled on the same paper as was in Shure's jacket pocket, read:

*We tolerate neither traitors nor incompetence.
Consider this an example of our ongoing efforts to clean up the gene pool.*

* * *

Four

Some charter members of SCREW were more action-oriented than others. One, who was completely inaction-oriented as well as not entirely trustworthy, was tolerated mainly for the controlled substances he could provide to enliven meetings. Another was too argumentative to include in tactical planning, so he was left out. A third had to work.

So SCREW's first operation was up to Steve Rutherford, Reid Tompkins, and Lolly Markham. They were the most appropriate conspirators for this one anyway, because they were the ones who had known Luke Begay best. A planning session, at Tompkins' house in Cortez, was in progress.

"So, the deal is, last September, Luke was found at the Four Corners Monument, shot in the back of the head, close range, with a soft-nosed .22 long-rifle slug. An execution. The only thing that anyone could have wanted him dead for was his politics. He didn't do dope, he didn't gamble, he didn't owe money. But he was into AIR in a big way. And he was working to get the forests back into Indian ownership."

Steve had done quite a bit of homework to piece this all together. Lolly had a far-away look in her eyes.

"We went out a few times. He was a good guy. Not militaristic or anything. Kind of shy. But really committed to ending commercial exploitation of the lands of his people. That's why he was so involved in the Mother Earth Defense League, and in American Indian Restoration."

"Yeah, and it went beyond the tribal thing with him. He was Navajo, but he was working hardest on a project that would have benefitted the Utes. The latest thing was to keep some big logging company out of the San Juan National Forest over east of Dove Creek, north of the McPhee Reservoir. They were getting a lease from the Forest Service, I think it's called the Glade Mountain lease, and Luke was claiming it was invalid because those were really Ute lands, that the feds had illegally stolen them. He used to come into my office to talk about the legal aspects."

Reid's day job in Cortez was with an environmental law firm.

“So,” Steve drew the obvious conclusion, “Someone from the logging company doesn’t like his advocacy and whacks him. Should we try to find out who, or should we go after the company?”

“There’s one more relevant thing. Jake Colvin was working the same issue, from a little different perspective. He didn’t care so much about the Utes, but he cared about the trees the logging company was going to destroy. So I think that he and Luke were actually working together. I remember seeing Jake at a MEDL meeting or two.”

“I didn’t know Jake, but I heard he was a big-game guide.”

“Yeah, I went out with him a few times, too. Before he got married. What a hunk.”

Lolly had that far-away look again.

“He guided because he couldn’t do logging any more, and he needed the money. He was an old-school guy, it was in his family. None of this mechanized clear-cutting stuff. One tree at a time, carefully. The big companies really pissed him off.”

“So maybe this company wanted to off both of them. How do we find out the name of the company? These killings were last fall.”

“Forest Fiber Products, Inc. I remember from the conversations with Luke. Let me look ’em up.”

Reid walked over to the desk and sat down. He was by far the most well-equipped of the three of them to deal with the modern world and his computer system was even turned on already.

A few minutes later, he found what he was looking for. FFPI was a wood products company whose local installation was a lumber mill and a wafer-board plant, both over in Monticello, Utah, about 25 miles northwest of Dove Creek. According to their web site, FFPI was a subsidiary of something called UNELECO.

The UNELECO web site, they discovered, was huge. And intimidating. To think that they were going to take on something of this magnitude was scary, especially to Reid. As a lawyer, he knew the power of a large corporation, with its regiment of highly paid legal counsel.

“This is a multi-billion-dollar international conglomerate. Jesus! How can we deal with something like that?”

“Hey, we’re environmental warriors, remember? We start with the real culprit, the logging company. We hit and run. We don’t get caught. They get SCREWEd, pun intended. We can destroy their capability to carry out their destruction pretty easily, I’d think. And if we can find out where the executives live, we can get them personally. Really avenge Luke. And Jake.”

“Poor Jake. He was such a great guy. I really liked him. Let’s give ’em hell.” Lolly looked to be on the verge of tears. “But what do we do? Kill somebody?”

“Let’s drive over there and scope out the operation. If it’s a lumber mill like that one that was up in Olathe, I bet we could burn it down without too much trouble. Reid, why don’t you see if you can identify the plant’s managers? We can go after them individually.”

“How do we know they’re responsible?”

“Who else could it be? But, look, you’re right. I’ll do some more digging around. If it was this Forest Fiber bunch that’s responsible for both Luke and Jake, there will be a way to find out. I’ll ask around up at Cedaredge.”

“I miss Jake. He was so, so kind. And considerate. And, and strong.” Lolly was awash.

* * *

The two vice presidents had been waiting for Shure's arrival at the Durango – La Plata County airport so long that they were becoming restless. Shure was late because his helicopter had detoured well to the south to get around turbulence over Wolf Creek Pass. UNELECO's Chief Executive Officer had a weak stomach, which was why he normally preferred his Gulfstream executive jet, but the hop from the roof of the UNELECO headquarters building to Durango was not worth the trouble of dealing with the Colorado Springs airport.

Even with the detour, Shure looked dyspeptic when Henry Abraham and Bill Morton boarded the Bell. It was being refueled for the next leg of their tour.

"Hank, Bill, glad to see you. Hope this wasn't too short notice. I want to talk where there's no chance of being overheard, and you know about the itinerary, right?"

"Tina said that you wanted a tour of our current operations, Mr. Shure. So I assume that you want to head northwest to that lease of ours north of McPhee Reservoir."

Henry Abraham was the UNELECO vice president in charge of Forest Fiber Products, Inc., the lumber and wafer-board division.

"And Gretchen told me the same thing, so I guess that means farther north to Bedrock."

Bill Morton was the UNELECO vice president for Mile-High Mining, Inc., UNELECO's division for all things underground.

"Right on both counts, plus another possible lease. We'll make a loop and come back down past Norwood, or just west of there."

The intercom crackled, and then said, "Whenever you're ready, Mr. Shure."

Shure pushed a button by his seat.

"All set back here." He released the button. "Better belt up, guys. It's bouncy up there today."

Morton and Abraham fumbled for their seat belts as they heard the rotor winding up. Even with the extra soundproofing in this executive model, the ride was going to be noisy. Shure settled in and looked closely at his underlings.

"I had a strange and frightening experience the other day I want to tell you about. Remember our conference call about that possible lease on Hamilton Mesa? The owner wanted to meet with me personally, remember? And we talked about the potential of the property and you did some background research, right?"

"Well, as I recall, the board feet were on Hamilton Mesa, but the tailings were farther northwest, on private mining claims." Abraham's interest in those trees was palpable.

"Yep. The story was that this guy had heard about our new reclamation process and wanted to get us involved in some of his old tailings. But we're not doing a flyover because I signed anything. I just want you guys to point out to me where the timber stands and these tailings are supposed to be." Shure paused and took a deep breath.

"See, what happened was that the so-called conference about the lease was really a setup."

And Shure related to them the conversation with William Campbell and his murder, carefully leaving out references to the Aryan Rights Foundation.

"So after we discovered that Campbell was dead, Walt and I got the hell out of there. I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop, and all I've seen was a story in the Grand Junction paper, 'Lawyer

found shot on country road' sort of thing. It looks like there's no ties to me or Walt or the car. But someone pulled a fast one on both of you to get to me."

"Jesus, Mr. Shure. I'm sorry." Morton was aghast. "I verified that the tailings are really there and that they're from an old uranium operation, so it seemed legit. It was kind of weird that they wanted to talk to you, yeah, but we have weird experiences with landowners all the time."

"Right. And there's lots of board feet up there, as we'll see when we fly by it. Someone went to a load of trouble to set this whole thing up. Why would anyone want to do this?"

"One of the notes that Campbell passed me, notes that got him killed, it seems, said it was a power play, to intimidate me. For what purpose, I'm not sure, but it worked. I've been wondering if either of you might have some ideas. Do we have competition that would do this sort of thing?"

Shure looked back and forth at his two vice presidents.

They speculated on this and other possible motives as the helicopter made a wide circle, west and then north over a new federal timber lease north of McPhee Reservoir, then north some more and farther west past the large uranium tailings piles at the Department of Energy complex near Bedrock, then finally east again to the private land-holdings. Shure restarted the lagged conversation.

"My understanding is that the private timber lease is somewhere down there, on the west and south sides of the mesa below us."

"Yes, it's supposed to be about below us now. North of that road."

Abraham had scouted the region by air when first informed of the opportunity and was now scanning the landscape below with binoculars.

"Lots of board feet down there, for sure, but the access will be a real challenge. It's rough terrain."

Several buildings, including a huge log cabin, came into view as the helicopter drifted farther south. Abraham continued playing travel guide.

"Mr. Shure, those buildings are the X-S Ranch, and as far as we can tell, their holdings include most of Hamilton Mesa."

"So this X-S Ranch is the owner of the rights, including the mining claims?"

It was Morton's turn.

"We haven't been able to verify that for certain, but it looks like it, Mr. Shure. The problem is that the X-S is a privately held corporation, owned by a trust with layers of lawyers shielding the people in control, and what they control. About all we've been able to find out is that the person who lives down there is a Colorado State Senator, Jarvis Schoenfield. The X-S used to belong to him and his father before him. Then this corporation was set up with the provision that he can live there. He probably controls it, but we haven't been able to prove that. Yet."

Shure pushed the microphone button by his seat.

"Henry, let's head back up toward Norwood, to the north and a little east. Follow the main highway east from town a ways."

He then turned to his two vice-presidents.

"I remember that we got stuck behind this semi on the hill that climbs out of the river valley up to the plateau here. Then there was this construction detour that had us turn left onto a gravel road. Let's see if we can spot where my little adventure went down."

He looked pensive, and, after a pause, continued.

“Jarvis Schoenfield. That’s a familiar name in Colorado political circles. I’ve met him a couple of times. He’s one of the most senior members of the Colorado Senate, a real operator. And it looks like he might be behind my little adventure the other day, huh?”

His vice-presidents were carefully non-committal as the helicopter began to skim along over a two-lane paved highway.

“Yeah, it was probably one of those county roads that head off south from the highway here. Not sure which one. Let’s find out who owns these pastures and hay fields to the south of the highway. If it’s the X-S crowd, I’ll be pretty satisfied that they’re behind this. Then we have to decide where to go with the information about the murder.”

Shure turned from looking out the window to his two vice presidents.

“Gentlemen, this has been a very interesting tour. I think for now we’re going to proceed with this leasing business as if nothing happened, if possible. And I’ll make arrangements to deal with Schoenfield as soon as you can confirm his control over these resources. I assume that you will be able to confirm this, one way or another?”

“Yes, Mr. Shure.”

They were almost in unison.

* * *

After Hal’s conference in Boulder ended, they headed home the long way. The second night, they stayed in a bed and breakfast in the forest just north of the little town of Divide. Their plan was to spend three nights there, with two full days of fishing the South Platte in Cheeseman and Eleven Mile Canyons.

Hal had managed to play hooky from the arid lands conference for only one day, to fish the Cache la Poudre north of Fort Collins, and it had been something of a challenge as the runoff had finally started. So he planned the trip home to include stops on rivers protected by dams. After the South Platte, they were going to head north and west, through South Park, up the Arkansas Valley, and over Independence Pass to the Frying Pan above Basalt. After that, a short day’s drive would take them home through Delta and Ouray.

It was a second honeymoon of sorts. After their marriage in March, they had taken a cruise through the Panama Canal; the Boulder conference provided an excuse for another well-deserved break. Hal felt lucky that Annette liked fly-fishing well enough that he could plan an itinerary such as this, and Annette felt lucky to be traveling with someone who knew the back roads and the off-the-track places to stay in the Colorado high country.

Not that obscure inns and B&Bs were their only choices. The first night, they had stayed in the Honeymoon Cottage at the Grand Lake Lodge, after a drive over Trail Ridge Road. The late spring had delayed the snow melt, and the highest through road in the country had just opened by the Memorial Day Weekend target date. Snow banks twenty feet high on the sides of the road caused flatland tourists to stop and gawk, and Annette, who hadn’t been into Rocky Mountain National Park before, was awed by the scenery.

And she finally had a chance to see a yellow-bellied marmot, the foot-and-a-half long, high-altitude cousin of the woodchuck that had been adopted as the sports mascot at Frémont State. A particularly robust individual was sunning itself on some rocks near the Forest Canyon Overlook parking lot off Trail Ridge Road.

“That’s your mascot? No wonder you guys don’t win a lot of games.”

“Hey, we won the NCAA Division II national championship in football a couple of years ago! Don’t you remember our friends the defensive linemen? Besides, that guy’s probably a victim of tourists with Cheetos. He probably weighs twice what he should.”

“But it’s just a big rodent!”

“Um, well, yeah. See, what happened was that when the teaching college became Frémont State University years ago, they had a contest for the students, to select a new sports mascot. And this was back when students had a collective sense of humor, unlike today’s politically correct student body. And all of the real sports-like names were taken. Like, Adams State over in Alamosa is the Grizzlies, and so on. I don’t think the athletic department has ever been able to get used to the Golden Marmots. They tried ‘Mountain Marmots’ at first, but that provoked too much satire. The word play against ‘mounting marmots’ and the resulting mental image of marmot sex, along with not a few black-market tee shirts, were just impossible to deal with. So we’re the Golden Marmots, and proud of it.”

He struck an especially heroic pose, but the marmot on the rocks just belched and went to sleep.

On the west end of Trail Ridge Road, Annette was charmed by the Grand Lake Lodge, with its rustic accommodations and elegant dining room. They had after-dinner coffee on the front porch and watched the shadows lengthen on Grand Lake and Byers Peak.

After the relative hustle and bustle of Grand Lake Lodge, the small B&B in Divide was something of a relief. They drove into Woodland Park for supper, and settled in for an evening of reading and relaxing.

“I feel like I’ve been a paradigm of patience.” Hal finally broke a comfortable silence. “Hmm. ‘Paradigm of patience.’ I’ll have to remember that. Has a nice ring.”

Annette was giving him her cynical look.

“Anyway, I haven’t been bugging you about your future. But I am intensely curious, you know.”

“Me, too, actually. This is one of those hard choices between two good things. I’ve pretty much decided to take Walter up on his offer of a leave of absence to try out the CBI. I’m really curious about these serial murders, and I can probably work with Derek Petersen well enough to make progress on the case. But I really don’t know what I’ll want to do in the long run. Thing is, joining up with a state government organization is opening a door to getting entangled in bureaucracy. I’ve learned to work whatever bureaucracy there is in Durango pretty well. But I bet the state one is a lot tougher. And the Durango office is attached to the western district office up in Montrose, and I don’t know what autonomy I’ll have. So the bureaucracy thing is a little intimidating.”

“No doubt. That’s certainly been my experience, whenever I have to deal with the educational bureaucracy in Denver. The bigger it is and the more layers there are, the worse it is to navigate. So what have you found out about all these killings? Anything interesting?”

“I made the rounds with Derek, like I told you last week, and we interviewed all sorts of people. A lawyer from Lakewood who was on his way to Boulder when the van got blown up, all of the police and other official people involved. Everyone’s been cooperative. But there’s just not much to go on. Even the local SCARAB supporters don’t know anything. Of course, everyone who’s in that camp has some kind of conspiracy theory or other, but that’s no surprise. SCARAB is one of those groups that makes a lot of people mad, for sure. But not generally mad enough to do something like this.”

Hal looked thoughtful. “I seem to remember that the Frémont State chapter was hell-bent on protecting prairie dogs, or something like that.”

“Me, too, and I think they probably got that idea from the people in Boulder. Prairie dogs are almost a religious icon for them. But that sort of activism is more of a nuisance than a real threat. It shouldn’t motivate murder. At least I don’t see how.”

“What about all the other killings? Are they linked together?”

“Derek told me that the more he looks into it, the more they appear to be. Everyone on the list had some connection to everyone else via a fringe environmental group called the Mother Earth Defense League, MEDL. They were all involved in other things, too, but that was a common thread. Thing is, we can’t find out anything about this group. They’re not officially chartered in Colorado, or anywhere else, apparently. It seems to be more organized than the thing called ELF, the Earth Liberation Front—you know, the ones who claimed responsibility for burning down that restaurant at Vail and some other such things. But MEDL’s not organized enough to appear on very many radar screens. Anyway, it looks like some of the victims were bank-rolling these MEDL folks and some were actively involved with them. Um, you mentioned the other day that you were relieved that there wasn’t a connection with the U this time. Well, brace yourself. Derek thinks that the Durango victim, Luke Begay, was the League’s president and that he had an active chapter going, underground, at Frémont State.”

“Lovely.” Hal looked disgusted. “I’ll have to get together with John as soon as we get back, to fill him in. Here we go again.”

* * *

Even though Durango is not very big, it must be big enough that I’m used to the city lights. Damn, Steve Rutherford thought, it’s *dark*.

They had waited for the new moon to carry out their raid. A couple of casual reconnaissance trips to the FFPI plant over in Monticello had persuaded them that it wouldn’t be too difficult, really—a few cans of gasoline strategically placed and cigarette “fuses” would create enough of a fire to set FFPI, or at least this particular plant, back on its heels for a long while.

He and Reid Tompkins, dressed all in black, with soot smeared on their faces in artistic patterns by Lolly, had spent the better part of an hour shuttling between the rented Chevy Blazer and various parts of the FFPI facility, carrying two-gallon cans of gasoline. After they placed the cans, they’d gone back to light the fuses, and sucking on ten cigarettes to get them burning had been more than Steve had bargained for—he was now feeling light-headed from the nicotine. He almost jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“I think I may puke.”

Reid was having a similar reaction to his cigarettes, apparently.

“Let’s get out of here.”

They kept close to the buildings and stacks of lumber and made their way back to the car. Rounding the last corner, they stopped in horror, and shrank back out of sight. Lolly had moved the car when they had finished unloading the cans of gasoline, to the far side of the parking lot, near the lone street light.

And in the light they could read “San Juan County Sheriff” on the side of the white sedan parked just behind Lolly.

“Holy shit!”

At least Tompkins managed to keep his commentary to a stage whisper.

“We’re dead meat! We’ve got to get out of here before those cigarettes burn down.”

“Shhhh. Calm down. Lolly will handle this, she’s an expert at dealing with men. What do you bet that guy is so busy looking down the front of her blouse that he’s forgotten all about the rest of the universe. But why she parked under that light is a mystery.”

The individual leaning on Lolly’s car, bending over to talk into her window, did indeed seem focused on the conversation.

“We’ve got plenty of time. And he doesn’t have his emergency lights on, so he probably hasn’t called this in or anything.”

“But cops always call in license plates. Always.”

“That’s why I borrowed the plates from that other green Blazer back in town. Wait here.”

Three minutes later, Tompkins watched as the sheriff’s deputy stepped back from Lolly’s car and, from what Tompkins could tell, began talking into his shirt. Then the deputy tipped his hat to Lolly and walked back to his car, started the engine, turned all the lights on, including the emergency lights on the roof, and sped away into the night. Rutherford appeared at Tompkins’ elbow.

“He left? Perfect. Let’s get out of here.”

They sprinted for the car. On reaching it, Rutherford detoured to the power pole with the street light on it, for a last errand.

Two minutes later Rutherford was behind the wheel, carefully negotiating the back streets of Monticello via a different route from their initial approach to the mill. Except for the occasional street light at intersections with stop signs, it was as dark as before.

“What was that about, Lolly? The cop, I mean.” Tompkins was in the back seat, cleaning soot off his face with a baby wipe. Lolly was working on Rutherford’s face while he drove.

“He just wondered what I was doing there. Said he was on a routine patrol and asked if I was having car trouble. I told him I had a fight with my husband and needed to get away, to think. That we were on vacation and so on and got to arguing. I think it worked.”

“What did you do to make him leave, Steve?” Tompkins spoke up from the back.

“I used the cell phone to call in a traffic accident on the highway south of town. I said I was a passer-by and that there was someone hurt.”

“You know, of course, that all cell phone calls are logged and can be located to the nearest tower.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I lifted this cell phone to use. This afternoon. I’m glad the owner didn’t find it missing yet and deactivate it. I’m going to ditch it at the first opportunity. Which reminds me, we need to swap the plates back to the ones that came with this thing. So they match the registration in case we get stopped. Then we can get the borrowed ones back where they belong before morning.”

“You should take the battery out of that phone, now, just in case they try to query its location.” Tompkins heard a grunt of assent, fumbling noises, and a sharp “click.” “And you got the note posted, like we talked about, right?”

“Yep, on the power pole with the street light, where Lolly was parked. Speaking of which, why in the world did you park there, Lolly? Christ, we were trying not to get noticed.”

“Hey, ease up, Steve. I parked there because I thought it would be more suspicious in the dark. There sure weren’t any other cars parked around there. And I wanted to read.”

Rutherford looked in the mirror just in time to see Tompkins rolling his eyes.

They turned onto the highway back to Cortez, and Rutherford noticed something in the rear-view mirror. He watched for a few seconds and grinned.

“Houston, we have ignition, and liftoff.”

Tompkins swiveled around to stare out the back. Several bursts of flickering light illuminated a patch of night sky on the near horizon behind them. As he watched, they grew and merged, as the inferno gathered strength.

Back where Lolly had been parked, in the flickering light of the flames, now bright enough to outshine the streetlight, a notice was tacked to the power pole. It had a picture of a large lag bolt on it, and it read:

*Dear Forest Rapists:
Guess what: you've been SCREW'd!
We hope it was as good for you as it was for us!*

* * *

Five

Two mornings later, the story appeared in both the *Durango Herald* and the *Frémont Free Press*, and it was the talk of the campus. Hal was reading the *Free Press* version in his office when his boss, Provost John Martin, strode purposefully in.

“Morning Hal. I see you’re catching up on the sensationalized version of this little affair. We need to talk.”

Hal looked up, surprised. He had heard all about it from Annette the night before and read the *Herald’s* version earlier, at home. He was not surprised that the *Free Press* played up the environmental angle and sympathized with whoever was responsible for the fire at the FFPI mill in Monticello. But the *Free Press* was independent of the university, so Martin’s concern seemed odd.

“Uh, about what? This fire? What’s it have to do with us?”

“I just got off the telephone with George Jepperson.”

This made Hal’s expression even more surprised, as Jepperson was Frémont State’s head legal counsel.

“It seems that he received a call this morning from the legal office at Forest Fiber Products, Inc. They are asking for our cooperation in their internal investigation of the fire. Of course, the Utah State Police are on the case, but FFPI is doing some work on its own. They have the resources of their parent organization behind them.”

“Who’s that? I really don’t know anything about any of this stuff.”

“A multi-national conglomerate called UNELECO. Headquarters in Colorado Springs. Profits last year of about half a billion. A significant contributor to us, incidentally.”

“So we cooperate. That’s easy. But what’s the connection to us?”

Hal was partly playing dumb, hoping not to hear what he was afraid he was going to hear.

“They’ve concluded that there’s a new environmental sabotage group responsible for this. It has to do with a note that was left at the scene. And because we’re a hotbed for environmental groups, well, they think there may be a connection here. And, of course, the faculty with environmental leanings are in your college.”

“Well, now, I’m not so sure about that. We have the environmental science disciplines, yes. But most of the environmental radicals on campus are in other departments, in other colleges. The most technical person I know who classifies as an environmental ‘radical’ is in the math department, for example. The environmental science faculty know too much about the scientific side of all this stuff to be radicals. They’re all middle-of-the-roaders, as far as I know.”

“What about that SCARAB outfit?”

As provost, Martin was suspicious of student groups.

“Perfect example. They’re a bunch of animal rights people. The local coordinator is a research assistant in sociology. And there’s a more wild-and-crazy group I heard about from the grapevine, the Mother Earth Defense League, I think it’s called. The leaders of that group are students, mostly in the fine arts, as far as I could find out. I try to keep up with this stuff, and I’m confident that my faculty aren’t going around torching lumber mills.”

“OK, I’ll keep an open mind about faculty involvement. But I think we do need to cooperate with the FFPI investigation.”

Hal stared at a corner of the ceiling, thinking about the implications of working with a private company in their investigation of a criminal offense.

“‘Cooperate,’ I guess I can go along with, as long as we don’t violate anyone’s rights here. ‘Assist,’ though, isn’t something that I’m automatically comfortable with. Thing is, this is a criminal investigation at some level, and a private investigation could hamper the official one. Also, there’s always the possibility that FFPI could mount a sham investigation to cover something up. Maybe they burned the place down themselves for insurance, or something like that, for example.”

“That seems unlikely, given the company’s profitability. But I suppose that this branch could be in trouble. Surely, you’re not going to argue with the assertion that Frémont State is a hotbed of environmental activity?”

“No indeed. I will stipulate that this place is getting crazier and crazier in that regard. Want to hear the latest? I’ve got a TA who’s plugged into SCARAB. She tells me that they’re going to try to get the city council to outlaw the concept of pet ownership. So you won’t own your dog, or cat, or goldfish, you’ll just be their ‘companion,’ a companion with various responsibilities for their care and feeding. They even want to outlaw using the word ‘pet.’ It’s too demeaning, they say.”

“I heard about this happening up in Boulder, so I’m not surprised. Edith will be delighted. She’s big on the animal rights thing. I’m continually amazed at how you can be married to someone for decades and not really know them. But doesn’t this strengthen the argument that someone associated with Frémont State could be behind the fire-bombing?”

“In principle, but I know some things that you don’t. Let me make a phone call.”

Hal picked up the handset of his desk phone and poked a speed dial button.

“Trieri, investigations.”

“Hey, you’ve got to change that now.”

“Oh, hell. I keep forgetting. Let me start over: Trieri, CBI.”

“Much better. How’s your day?”

“So far, so good. The FFPI firebombing is leaking more and more onto our turf, though.”

“That’s what I’m calling about. John Martin is here. Let me turn on the speaker phone, OK?”

“I hate those things because my voice sounds funny, but OK.”

Hal pushed more buttons. “Annette? OK, like I said, John’s here. He’s under some pressure to cooperate with an internal investigation that FFPI’s running. They think, apparently, that Frémont State might somehow be connected to the fire-bombing. And, of course, there is a strong environmental advocacy community up here. I don’t know how closely you’re likely to be involved in this, but maybe we could all share information. I mean, is it OK for me to tell John the stuff we talked about yesterday? And maybe he’ll have information relevant to your involvement.”

“Hi, John. Normally, I’d have to be careful about this, because there’s always the possibility that the victim isn’t really a victim. But FFPI has been eliminated as a suspect. They’re very profitable, and they just signed onto a new timber lease that will feed several million new board feet into the Monticello mill, or would have. And that mill had no problems, union-wise, or safety-wise, or anything-wise. So their investigation will be considered a friendly one by the people in Utah and, to the extent we’re involved, by us. So whatever I tell you, you can tell them. But beyond that, this isn’t going to be for public consumption, OK?”

Annette was right: she sounded funny on the little speaker.

Martin cleared his throat. “Good to talk with you again Annette, and congratulations on your new assignment. I’ll be extremely discreet, you can be sure.”

“So, John—and, Annette, jump in here if I screw this up—the thing about the fire-bombing is, there’s a suspect, with a description, and unknown accomplices. A San Juan County Deputy Sheriff on routine patrol just before the fire questioned a woman, early thirties, long blond hair, buxom, in a green Chevrolet Blazer with Colorado plates, near the FFPI mill. She gave him a story about a domestic argument, getting away to think, and so on. He was interrupted to respond to a 911 call about a traffic accident, which turned out to be bogus. But he got the license plates, which, it turns out, were stolen from a green Blazer in Cortez. Or at least that’s the best guess. The Blazer they belong on hadn’t been moved for weeks, it even had a flat tire, and there are indications that its plates had been tampered with. Its owner has an ironclad alibi. And the phone that called in the fictitious accident was a cell phone, stolen at the public library in Cortez. It hasn’t been recovered. I guess the point is, all this suggests a more professional level of involvement than either students from here or even the pseudo-professionals in our environmental groups would be able to pull off.”

“And, John,” Annette spoke up, “we’ve heard that the reconstruction by the arson experts points to gas cans with relatively primitive fuses, but ones that can’t easily be traced. Cigarettes folded into packs of matches, which lit a plain black-powder fuse into the gas can. This is a well-known guerilla warfare tactic. But the trick is the fuses. They can only be acquired by people with the right connections. And your run-of-the-mill environmental radical group is unlikely to have those connections.”

“So we shouldn’t worry, I take it. But I believe it would be irresponsible of me not to remind our officially recognized groups, such as SCARAB, that any illegal activities on their part will place their status in jeopardy.” Martin was keenly aware of the university’s legal exposure.

“By all means, John, do that. Worded as strongly as you’d like, with reference to the Monticello thing. But so far, there’s no indication of a solid connection with anything at the U.”

Hal piped up, “Of course, the suspect could work here, and there are any number of other possibilities. But nothing with an official connection.”

“Guys? I’m going to have to go, got another meeting. We can talk more later if you need to, OK?” Annette disconnected.

“John, there’s one more thing you should know about. Probably not related to this fire-bombing, but you never know. Annette’s working a possible serial murder case that might possibly have a connection to us.”

And Hal related the tale of the dead environmental activists, their connection to MEDL, and the possibility of a campus chapter.

“But the only connection you know of to a campus chapter is the guy who got killed last September? If we haven’t heard anything about it since then, maybe it dried up and blew away.”

Martin had enough to worry about that he wasn’t going looking for trouble.

“We can always hope. And, of course, we can also keep our ears to the ground. I’ll let you know if I find anything out.”

* * *

Steve Rutherford, enjoying a late lunch at home, was also engrossed in the papers, delighted at the coverage. Then the telephone rang.

“Yeah?”

“Steve? Reid. We’ve got big trouble, on two scores. First, they’ve got a solid description of Lolly. You know that rose tattoo she has on her right tit? Well, it was just like you thought. That deputy was looking down her blouse, and she was playing him for all she could get. So he saw it.”

Steve didn’t, in fact, know about the tattoo. He felt a flash of heat just thinking about it, and then another of jealousy when it occurred to him to wonder just how Tompkins did.

“So, we’ll just tell her she needs to keep her shirt buttoned up. What’s the other thing? And how did you find this stuff out? It’s not in the papers.”

“I had an early lunch with the courthouse crowd today, and they’re gossiping about all they’ve heard. The second thing is not good either. Sort of bad news and bad news. FFPI has announced that they’ll be able to ship the logs from the Glade Mountain lease up to Moab until they can get the Monticello plant rebuilt. Which they plan to do. They’re saying they can modernize it and improve their capabilities. So we may have actually helped them.”

“Well, crap. We certainly didn’t plan for that. But we can’t change what happened. It seems to me that we need to do some damage control. To protect Lolly. And to fill the others in on what’s happened, so that they aren’t surprised by this. If the papers print the contents of the note, Dave and Aaron, and probably even Flip, will recognize what’s happened. We ought to tell them first.”

“Good thinking. I’ll call Aaron and Dave if you’ll get hold of Lolly and Flip. And get Lolly to dye her hair.”

“But she had a wig on the other night. The cop saw blonde.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t have it on when we got together at my place. A third color will further confuse things. Maybe she can do some of that henna stuff, add some red highlights.”

Steve was less concerned and had begun to think of the future.

“So what are we going to do next? I mean, we’ve got to lie low for a while, but there’s a chance to gather momentum. What about a raid on the equipment they have up at the Glade Mountain lease?”

“What is it with you, man? Addicted to the rush of danger or something? Sheesh, we’ve got to do better than just to lie low. We’ve got to be invisible.”

“All right, all right. But when things quiet down, let’s talk about that equipment. OK?”

“Right. And, listen. Tell Lolly to keep her tits out of view, for Christ’s sake. That rose will bring her down in a flash.”

The mere reminder of Lolly’s chest made Rutherford’s face hot again.

* * *

When Annette finally got home from her last day at the Durango PD, it was close to 10:30. She had spent most of the time since returning from her three weeks away catching up, and then she had a mountain of things to do to make a smooth transition to her CBI assignment. Her last day was exhausting.

By that time of night, she expected the house to be dark, or at least mostly dark, but it was lit up like a Christmas tree. The first thing she noticed was a smell of fireplace soot. The second thing was Hal.

He surprised her by coming down the stairs, carrying a long-handled landing net and wearing only thick gloves and what she was able to identify as his old fencing mask. She had run across it while cleaning up the attic a year ago, and he’d not been able to part with it, even after its 30-plus years of dust-gathering. Rather than let her get rid of it, he had put it on the mantle over the fireplace. A “conversation piece,” he called it.

The odd combination, not to mention the brevity, of this attire took her a multiple double-take to get over being speechless. By then he’d slipped past her toward the kitchen, muttering something like “bat.” She followed his naked backside through the dining room.

“Ummm, I’m sure there’s quite a logical explanation for this, but I couldn’t possibly think of what it is.”

He stopped and tilted his head back, apparently peering around the ceiling of the room through the screening of the mask.

“Bat, or bats. At least one, maybe more. I lost track of it, or them.”

And he was off into the kitchen. She followed.

“You mean the little flying mammals, not the ones in your belfry, I guess. I sure am glad I didn’t bring the folks home to meet the new hubby.”

By then he’d been confronted by himself in the full-length hall mirror. He struck a gallant pose, net held like a sword before him.

“I’d have to explain about our sex life, I guess. You know, how we dress up like this to spice things up.”

“Uh, I’m definitely not going there. Where’d they come from? The bats.”

“The chimney, I think. I heard noises in the fireplace and rattled the damper handle. Some soot fell out, so I opened the flue to let it out now, rather than be surprised by it next winter. And at least one bat zipped out into the living room.

“That was just about at dark. I couldn’t find it, so I finally went to bed. And ten minutes later, there was a bat flying around the bedroom. I could see him in the glow of the streetlights, making circles over

the bed. Remember those old Dracula movies? It was just like that. It's probably just trying to find a way out, so I thought I'd help."

"Somebody told me once, probably you, that bats navigate almost perfectly by their sonar, so what's with the mask?"

By now Hal had begun prowling the house, watching the ceilings carefully.

"It's psychological. If I can find the thing, I'll try to get it with the net, but I could scare it. I thought about my eyes."

"Um, it seems to me that you have other, ah, sensitive parts exposed. Did you think of that?"

"Yeah, but it's flying around the ceilings. Look, it's perched up there."

He was pointing to a dark corner of the hall ceiling. He handed her the net.

"Hold this. I'll go get a stool to stand on and see if I can grab it. If it takes off, see if you can get it in the net. Gently. I really don't want to hurt the little guy. They eat their weight in bugs every night, or something like that."

Two minutes later, Annette was trying to ignore her eye-level view of Hal's rear end and thinking about the benefits of tanning salons. He was standing on a kitchen stool closing in on the bat with his gloves. It must have been worn out, for it only chattered at him as he carefully trapped it with both hands.

"Got it!"

"Now what?"

"Open the front door, and I'll let him go."

"You're going outside like that?"

"Well, make it the back door."

Hal stuck both hands out the door and launched the bat into the night, and it flew off, presumably in search of big juicy bugs, they figured. Then they retired to cups of tea in the kitchen, after Hal substituted a robe for his gloves and fencing mask.

"So why would we have bats in the chimney? Is this something that happens?"

"Probably the time of year. I heard enough noise that there must have been a colony of mothers and babies in there. Nursery colonies like that get established in the late spring, and the house was quiet while we were gone. So they took a liking to the chimney. It's got that cap, so the rain stays out. I'll read up on how long it takes before the babies can fly and then do something to discourage them, like smoke or noise."

"I've heard something about rabies."

"Yeah, it happens, but it's pretty uncommon. Skunks are worse. I'm all in favor of bats over bugs, but a colony would wind up producing quite a stink. Especially if we don't get rid of them and all their poop accumulates in the chimney. The first fire next fall could be..."

"Ecch."

"Right. So, you had a long day. Did you eat dinner?"

"Got a pizza delivered. Yeah, trying to catch up after three weeks and getting ready to go on leave is a lot of stuff all at once."

"Anything happen while we were out of town?"

“Not really, at least not anything that Fred can’t handle. He seems like he’ll do OK acting for me while I’m at the CBI office. The only thing we have pending is one of those CBI killings, the Durango guy who got killed over at Four Corners.”

“When do you officially start?”

“Monday. Although I’ve sort of started already, given the amount of attention I’m giving to their list of dead people.”

“Did I see that CBI’s involved with that killing up by Norwood last month?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s another one they’ve been handed. The locals up there don’t have the resources, because it’s obviously some kind of execution. A soft-point .22 slug between the eyes; body left out in the country on a dirt road. There’s a witness who’s talking about a small convoy of vehicles headed in that direction early the same day—a van, a couple of semis, a passenger car of some kind. It’s not clear that it’s connected with my list, though, yet, at least. We’ll get the FBI to compare the ballistics with the slug from last fall, Luke Begay’s killing. They’re handling that case.”

“From what you’ve told me, his killing and some of the other ones on your list look like executions, too.”

“That bothers me, but it’s also an opening. But, listen, I’ve been at this stuff since eight this morning. How was your day?”

“This is the time of year I get to do faculty performance evaluations.”

“That says it all, I guess.”

“Pretty much. Let’s go to bed. I promise to protect you from bats, if there’s another one in the house.”

“Should I wear a garlic necklace?”

“Ooo. Sounds kinky. Can I wear my fencing mask?”

“I didn’t know I married such a romantic—he wants to keep a metal screen between us in bed.”

“Well, maybe just the gloves.”

* * *

The meeting hall outside Montrose had seen better days, first as a Grange chapter and later as a supper club that tried to be too fancy for the local folks. After the new highway bypassed it and the tourists couldn’t find it any more, the place sat idle for years, slowly acquiring the sagging demeanor of abandoned buildings that eventually renders them picturesque and attractive to amateur photographers.

Still, its original construction had been solid enough that it was yet weather proof, and the power company was only too glad to have someone pay them to turn the electricity back on. And electricity was important, because the sophisticated public address system brought in for the occasion needed plenty of power.

Out in the long-unused parking lot, the several dozen muddy, battered pickups ticked peacefully as they cooled. The weeds, those not smashed flat under parked tires, were gradually recovering in the cool twilight.

But inside, things were heating up.

It was dark in there, except for two spotlights centered on one end of the spacious, open room. They illuminated a large banner on the wall that read “Resources For Humanity.” Behind a long folding table, also lit by the two spots, stood an imposing figure, tall, heavy-set, just beginning to work up a sweat. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up a couple of cuffs’ worth, and his tie was loose. He held a black book in his left hand, and was gesturing dramatically with his right. Wet stains were growing under his arms. His voice boomed from the huge PA speakers.

“Now, whatever you folks think about the Bible, you’ll have to agree that it’s one of the oldest and most widely-read books in history. Far as I know, it’s still on the perennial best-seller lists. And its philosophy provides the foundation for the beginnings of western civilization. You don’t have to be religious, or take it as the revealed word, to understand that. Of course, for those of us who do believe that it’s God’s revealed word, it’s all the more powerful.

“This isn’t a revival meeting, so don’t get the wrong idea. But I do want to take a minute to read you a little of it, *from its very first page*, from the Book of Genesis.”

He held up the book, and grinned.

“For those of you who pay attention to such things, what I’ve got here is the King James Version.”

Then he settled his reading glasses down on his nose, cleared his throat, and opened the book.

“Here’s what it says.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

And God said, “Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed, to you it shall be for meat.

“And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat,” and it was so.

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

He closed the book and looked across the crowd. Although he couldn’t see them, out there in the dark on those rows of folding chairs he’d help set up, he knew the room was full.

“Now, like I said, this isn’t a revival meeting. But I think that these words bear some thought. And their meaning is pretty unmistakable, really. I mean, phrases like ‘subdue it,’ ‘have dominion,’ and ‘I have given’—this is God speaking, remember—these are pretty unambiguous. Their meaning is clear.

“And this is the real message of Resources For Humanity. The earth is ours, for us to use and prosper with. With all due respect for our Native American brothers who believe otherwise, it’s our heritage that the earth is here for our use and prosperity.

“Of course, there are lots of folks who seem to have some kind of inferiority complex, that they’re not good enough to take advantage of all the earth’s resources. Hell, there are some folks who think that

prairie dogs are more important than people, that coyotes, for crying out loud, should be protected. Coyotes! Is that what you folks think?"

There was a sort of derisive growl from the darkness.

"I didn't think so. This same bunch of insecure tree-huggers is not only rich enough that they don't have to do honest work, but to make matters worse, they're trying to eliminate honest work for people who do. Like you folks. Y'all heard about that fire they had over in Monticello, I bet. The one that destroyed the Forest Fiber plant?"

The growl was louder, and decidedly affirmative this time.

"Well, guess who? That was sabotage, pure and simple, by some new bunch of environmental crazies. Hey, maybe they're well-meaning, but they sure are misguided. Turns out they put at least a hundred folks out of work. Maybe more, if they have to shut down harvesting the timber because there's no place to send it."

He could hear the growling continue, but he wasn't ready for the big finish, just yet.

"I know, I know this is upsetting. I know it isn't fair. But that's what Resources For Humanity is all about. We're here to work to make it fair again.

"And I'll just bet y'all could use some good news, for once. Here's some now: we're not here to ask for your money! All we're here for is to ask for your support. Do we have that?"

Applause broke out, with a couple of cheers.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I should tell you that I feel a little foolish standing up here with this microphone and these big speakers. Hope it's not too loud. But they're not here for me, really, they're here for a special guest, who's on the phone with a special message. I don't think he needs an introduction around these parts."

He chuckled, and fiddled with a box of switches on the table.

"I sure hope this works. It usually does, but once we somehow picked up one of those weird rap music radio stations. So-called 'music' by folks who have lots of rhythm but nothing else, no brains, no talent, nothing. Just a bunch of criminal bums, really. Yeesh." The audience joined his mirth. "Senator, you there?"

"I am, sir, I am indeed. And I'm honored to be able to talk with you folks a bit. I'm sorry I couldn't be with you tonight, but, as you know, I have responsibilities in Denver that I just can't get out of sometimes. If I'd been home, I'd be with you myself.

"Most of you folks know me, because you're in my district. There are probably some folks there from other districts, but, well, maybe you know me, too. I mention this because, like many of you, I'm a southwest Colorado native, third-generation native. Like so many of you, my great-grandparents came over from Europe over a hundred years ago and helped tame this wild land.

"And what's been happening lately is sad, truly sad. It makes me angry that it's happening to native Coloradans like you folks. What we have is outsiders moving here from far away, from New York, California, all sorts of places. Places where nobody appreciates our heritage. Places full of people who are concerned with 'lifestyles' rather than with good, honest work. People who are concerned with 'self-realization' and 'self-esteem' rather than with family and community. People who think that all cultures are equal, rather than people like us who know the value of our cultural heritage. And the worst of it is that these people are trying to take our world away from us. Eliminating our jobs. Preventing our use of our land. Imposing their foreign ways on us.

“Oh, I guess that ‘foreign’ isn’t completely accurate. These are Americans, mostly. But their ways sure seem foreign. And there are even some that *are* foreign. People who come to this country and think they can take over. Immigrants. Some legal, some illegal.

“Now, my great-grandparents were immigrants. But that was back when there was room for new folks. I don’t know about y’all, but I’m beginning to think that we’re full. No more room for new people, whether they’re foreigners from the coasts or from other countries.

“So that’s why I’m calling you now. To support Resources For Humanity and to urge you to do the same. I think that you’ve been told that you’re not going to be asked for money. At least you should have been told this. That’s because Resources For Humanity is being supported by a private foundation. What you can do, however, is to provide support for the ideas and agenda of Resources For Humanity.

“One more thing. I bet you’re concerned about that fire over in Monticello. Well, I am, too. And I’m going to use whatever powers I have to look into it. And to do something about it. Don’t know what, yet, but those who know me will tell you that when I say I’m going to do something, well, I do.

“So that’s the message. Support Resources For Humanity and their agenda to help hard-working, native Coloradans and to get rid of the environmental radical outside agitators. RFH is here to look out for you, and you can help by joining in.

“And, y’know?, I think there’s something more. Y’all can stand up to those agitators. In meetings, like city council meetings and county commissioner meetings, stuff like that. You don’t need to take their crap. You’re Real Americans. Stand up for your heritage! Thanks for listening.”

The speaker fiddled with more switches, and the room lights came up. As people in the audience were able to look around and see each other, they began to break out in handshakes and applause. Applause that went on for some time.

* * *

Six

About the time the meeting near Montrose was breaking up, Steve Rutherford’s phone rang. He almost didn’t answer it, being distracted.

He’d set his computer up to spend the better part of the afternoon and evening automatically downloading images from one of his favorite porn sites, triple-d-cup.com, and was now browsing through the various pictures, trying to find one that closely approximated his fantasy of Lolly with no clothes on. The models, however, all seemed lots younger than Lolly and, well, levitated somehow. As if they’d been photographed in a zero-gravity environment. Must be silicone, he thought.

But the phone, right next to the computer, kept annoying him with its distracting rings, and he finally gave in to it.

“Yeah.”

He noticed his breathing was not quite even.

“Steve? Dave Wellington. Listen, you need to know about something I ran across the night before last. A meeting, in an old barn at a ranch west of here, between Del Norte and South Fork. Heard about it from some contacts in the logging world in South Fork. Managed to sneak in without being

recognized. You there? All I hear is heavy breathing. Are you practicing to call little girls, or something?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure, I'm here."

And I wish she were here with me, Rutherford thought. Damn, look at those!

"OK, well, anyway, it was a meeting held by some wise-use group that I hadn't heard of before. Calls itself 'Resources For Humanity.' Most of the pitch was the same old same old. But this one had some subtle overtones of racism."

"Yeah? So? Most of these bozos are closet racists."

Oho! Definitely not a natural blonde, this one.

"Maybe, but not as much as I bet you think. At least over here in the Valley. But the speaker at this meeting last night was treading very close to racism. These wise-use people always talk about 'family heritage' and so on, how ranchers and loggers have been here since ever and all that stuff. But this included references to 'Native Coloradans' and other such code words for white folks. And also there was a religious angle, subtle but unmistakable."

"So it was worse than usual."

Holy hooters! Can those be natural? No way.

"Yep, but that's not why I called. The most disturbing thing was a phone call, or maybe it was just a taped message, from a Colorado state senator from out your way, Jarvis Schoenfield. He mentioned the little escapade over in Monticello and allowed as how he was going to use his powers to get whoever did it. And I looked him up and found that he's chairman of the Senate's Law Enforcement Committee. It oversees the State Patrol and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Hey! What the hell's going on over there? What's with the heavy breathing?"

"Uh, isometrics. I'm trying to get an early start on the ski season by doing isometrics for my quads. Sorry."

Rutherford realized that he was going to have to concentrate on the conversation.

"I've heard of this guy. Been in the state senate forever, almost never opposed for reelection. I think he lives up around Norwood somewhere."

"Something like that. Wasn't he behind the head-bashing at the last Nucla protest a couple of years ago?"

"Oh, yeah. Before my time in SCARAB, but I remember hearing about that. Got the state cops to beat up some of our protestors at the prairie dog shoot. But it backfired on him. The publicity was so bad that they quit having them, at least they quit publicizing them."

"Right. And now he's talking about how native Coloradans should assert their rights, stand up to what he calls the environmental radicals, and so on. And how he's going to get whoever did the Monticello raid. I sure wish you guys hadn't gone off half-cocked. I worry about Schoenfield's reach."

"Hmm. Well, we're going to lie low for a while. And I don't think that there's any way that any of us are going to be implicated. I mean, this is a Utah investigation, southeastern Utah, and they're not exactly rocket scientists over there. Buncha dumb Mormons."

"Yeah, well, just remember those dumb Mormons are as tenacious as bulldogs, and not real tolerant of the likes of you and SCARAB. Not to mention our new little enterprise. Gotta go. Later." He hung up.

Great, Rutherford thought. Something else to worry about. Well, whatever. Now, then. Let's go back and find the redhead with the feather boa. She looked a lot like Lolly. And she even had a tattoo.

He felt his face getting hot again.

* * *

Even in summer there were meetings—administrative meetings, academic planning meetings, faculty development meetings, facilities improvement meetings, meetings to schedule yet more meetings. Try as he might, Hal simply couldn't avoid them, at least not all of them.

He managed to delegate many of them to junior faculty—always providing memos of appreciation for them to show their department chairs the proof of their service to the college—but some meetings just needed The Dean in attendance. Too many, if you asked Hal.

Alice Swan, Hal's administrative assistant, knew Hal's aversion to meetings well, and she was particularly adept at keeping his calendar under control. As she edged ever closer to retirement, Hal's sense of the impending loss grew ever keener. Now, with only a couple of years to go, he was beginning to feel panic over how he was going to survive without her. He was reminded of this problem by the annual taste of it that he had to confront when Alice took her vacation, a benefit she seemed to resent.

This year, she had decided to take two weeks in June to visit her grandchildren in Virginia, so Hal was suffering through a temporary replacement, a young woman who not only could not deal with calendar scheduling at Alice's level but who didn't really care. And she chewed gum. With her mouth open.

Crystal's inability to schedule meetings to Alice's standard was why Hal was now sitting in his third of the day, with another to follow. All the way across campus from where he now sat listening to a discussion of new grading standards for student athletes, meeting number four was going to be the really important one. And, somehow, he had to work in an informal get-together with Provost Martin, to bring him up to date on the implications for the campus of Annette's investigations. He would probably wind up being late, unless someone stepped in to negotiate a deal between the athletic department's representative, who was demanding a 2.1 minimum grade point average, and the chair of the department of English, who would settle on nothing lower than 2.25. As the senior academic officer present, Hal knew he would have to mediate this impasse.

"Time out, time out. Folks, let's calm down here. First, we're talking about a small difference, between just above a flat 'C' and just below a 'C+'. It seems to me that what we're doing is putting a lot of energy into arguing over pretty low standards. Like arguing over the difference between Walmart and K-Mart. How about raising our sights a little? What's wrong with a 'B' average, a 3.0?"

It looked as if Milt Grabowski, the athletic department's academic advisor, might explode, while Sadie Mickelstein, the chair of English, suddenly took on an uncanny resemblance to the Cheshire Cat.

"I know I haven't been at the earlier meetings," Hal continued, "and I'm sorry if this is ground you've covered. But why are we aiming so low here? Sadie?"

"Thank you, Dean Weathers. I've been advocating all along for something respectable, and a 'B' average would be more than respectable, I think. I've been unable to persuade my colleagues that this is appropriate."

She paused to take a breath and Grabowski jumped in.

"One reason is because we'd lose our ability to compete, in just about all of the varsity sports. Jesus, Hal, a 'B' average would eliminate almost two-thirds of our scholarship athletes. Even a 2.25 would

eliminate a significant number. I mean, you've got to remember that the NCAA rules for us mandate only a 2.0 for fourth-year students, and even lower before that."

Hal feigned surprise.

"Well, we certainly want to maintain our standards well above the NCAA minimum, don't we? And do you mean to tell me that you offer scholarships, university scholarships, to individuals with GPAs under 2.25? *Scholarships* for students who can't even maintain a 'C+'? My goodness. I seem to remember that we approved what I considered to be a questionable curriculum, the one we call 'university studies,' for people who are, ah, challenged by our more traditional curricula. And you're telling me that this isn't good enough? That we're offering scholarships to people who can't even maintain a 'C+' in university studies? We do have accreditation to worry about, you know."

Grabowski's red face had become more and more crimson, and he opened his mouth to respond. Then he took a breath in preparation for a speech. Then he stopped short, apparently thinking better of it. That was all Sadie Mickelstein needed.

"Thank you, Dean Weathers, for supporting my position. In the English department, we have developed special courses for the university studies program, and, I have to say, calling them 'remedial' is to use polite terminology. I believe that similar comments apply to such courses in other departments."

Hal knew that this was indeed the case in the earth sciences, but he also knew that he would be unable to maintain a hard line on this. The athletic department had substantial clout in the university president's office.

"Look, Milt. This is an advisory committee, and its job is to recommend, not implement. We have a responsibility to the university to uphold high academic standards, and, more than that, we have a responsibility to our student athletes to make sure that they are not shortchanged in their education. To let their grades slide too far is to cheat them—those NCAA rules, for example, are just pathetic. These kids bust their butts in practice, and they make the university lots of money in return by playing their hearts out. And they don't get paid for it, they just get NCAA rules stuffed down their throats. It's not as if a lot of Frémont State students go into professional sports, after all. Also, we need to let this committee save face. You may not realize how uncomfortable it makes faculty to think of a 'C' average as acceptable. But because the decision will be made in the president's office, we can recommend high with a clear conscience, and let them change it."

Grabowski, less red this time, went through the same process of starting to talk and stopping. Then he started up again.

"Probation at 2.5, but they keep playing above 2.0."

"2.5 in academic curricula, 2.75 in university studies."

Sadie Mickelstein is definitely not someone with whom I want to negotiate, Hal thought.

"I'll have to check with the AD."

Grabowski seemed beaten down. It's time, Hal thought, to be conciliatory.

"Milt, one thing that we can probably do is to help you with the tutoring program. I have a dynamite teaching assistant who can help with earth science courses. And I know a guy in chemistry who could help with that. If we start tutoring early, when it looks like someone might be dropping below a 2.5, or 2.75, maybe we can catch them before they go much lower. Then they can continue to play and also get off probation."

"I'll check with Charlie."

“Thanks. And I’ve got to run. Again, I’m sorry to have missed the previous meetings.” Right, Hal thought. “But I’m glad we’ve resolved this.”

And he stood, closing his notebook.

Now I get to sprint over to the student center, he remembered. Then I need to brief John Martin, if I can get in to see him. What fun.

* * *

Maybe, Annette thought, just maybe I’ll get lucky twice in one day. Seems like I deserve it, at long last.

Her first bit of luck had been a phone call earlier. The FBI ballistics lab had called with the news that the slugs that had killed Luke Begay and William Campbell had come from the same gun. This physical evidence, combined with the similarity of the executions, provided the first real break in the portfolio of environmentalist killings. How Campbell fit into the whole thing was still not clear, but at least it appeared that the killings were related.

Lucky break number two would depend on a couple of things. First, Deedee would have to want to cooperate. And, of course, she’d have to be the creator of Lolly’s rose.

“We’re BAD!” hand-lettered in bright orange paint on the front window of Body Art by Deedee, a seedy store-front on North Main Avenue, announced Deedee’s attitude to the world. Annette was glad to have had her several years of experience investigating all sorts of unsavory matters for the Durango police department, because she had developed an underground network of people who owed her favors. Deedee was about to have her favor called in, bad attitude or no.

Inside, the walls were covered with flash, patterns for all sorts of skin-based self-expression, and the music was almost too loud for comfort. Some sort of heavy metal, distorted guitars accompanied by a screeching noise that Annette decided was supposed to be singing, was blasting from speakers on the ceiling, and it got louder deeper into the shop. Annette wandered toward the back and began to hear behind the “music” the buzzing noise that meant Deedee was at work on a client, who Annette soon saw was wearing headphones.

And what a client he was. Huge. Hairy, except for the shaved spot. And apparently scared out of his wits. Deedee, hunched over, working on something to do with the guy’s right shoulder, didn’t see her, so Annette watched in fascination. His eyes were clamped shut, his teeth were clenched, and he was sweating. She could see his massive hands clinging to the arms of the old barber chair. Looking over Deedee’s shoulder, Annette could make out a snake emerging from the pattern of blood as Deedee blotted it off.

Finally Deedee noticed Annette and held up one hand, fingers splayed. She mouthed “five” in a question, and Annette nodded and went back out to the front room to study the art work. It was a sort of gallery, she decided, of the comic-book school.

A few minutes later, the music moderated and Deedee appeared, stripping off her latex gloves. She promptly lit a cigarette.

“Find one you like yet?”

“Ha. I’m too chicken. I hope I’m not interrupting too much?” Annette wanted to start off as politely as possible.

“No, not hardly. Snake back there needed a break. The guy I mean. You’d think someone that big and mean-looking with a nickname like ‘Snake’ wouldn’t be bothered by a little prickling sensation. But

he's really wimped out, probably more chicken than you. Wanted drugs... ah... but of course we've got none here. So he's got those headphones cranked up so loud that he can't possibly hear what I'm doing. But he's still freaked. Glad I'm almost done."

"I've seen the finished product, but not the process. It's bloody."

"Yeah, but it's just capillaries. You want these things to take, you've got to go deep enough to hit them. It heals fast. Now, what can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

Annette decided not to bring Deedee up to date on her employment status.

"I'm hoping you can do me a favor, Deedee. We need to find a witness to something I'm looking into. We got a partial description of her, and she has a tattoo of a rose on her chest, just above her right breast."

"And?"

"And I was hoping you might have done it and be able to point me toward her. We really need her help."

"You know how many roses on tits I do? It seems to be a favorite these days."

Annette had been anticipating this response, so she had driven over to Monticello to interview the deputy sheriff personally. That had been strange indeed, because, as a law enforcement officer, he was trying to cooperate and, as a devout church-goer, he was trying to maintain his sense of modesty. Talking about body art on a woman's breast, and especially how he had been staring at it, was not easy for him.

"Yeah, I was afraid of that. I do have a somewhat better description. This is a blonde, in her 30s, busty. The rose is red, just a rosebud, on a long green stem. It's upside down and runs across and down, like this." Annette made a S-shaped stripe with her finger from near her right armpit down and across to her sternum. "And it didn't look like a new tattoo. It was faded and a little stretched-looking. Does that help?"

"Even if it did help, what makes you think I'd give out information about a client? People pay cash here, mostly, with good reason. They like anonymity."

"Deedee, we both know you're not exactly Chamber of Commerce material. But we also both know that you're a member of the local business community, and you need us. So when we need you, you ought to be there. Remember that little episode with the biker gang last year? And do you really need us to check into whether your supply of Xylocaine is legal?"

Deedee stared, first at Annette and then at a garish depiction of a bloody dagger with the inscription "Mother," while she smoked.

"So how many favors like this do I owe you?"

"I don't think of it as 'owing' so much as I think of it as a business relationship. You're the first person I refer people to when they ask me where they can find a good body-art shop. And I always put in a good word for you with the folks in vice."

Deedee stared some more.

"Well, like I said, I do lots of roses, but mostly recently. If you're looking for an older one with a long stem like you described there's only one I can think of. I did it about five years back, and gave a discount in return for getting her to agree to show it to girls who might be interested in one. Name's Billingsley, Louella Billingsley. But she's not a blonde."

Annette tried not to gloat. “Well, you said that was five years ago, and you know how things change. Thanks, Deedee. I won’t bother you again about this. And I won’t say anything about you to Ms. Billingsley.”

This, she thought as she walked back to her car, is what we need to get this thing moving along. Wonder where we’ll find Louella Billingsley?

* * *

It had taken over a month to get the text translated and analyzed, one of the most distasteful months in Wendell Ellison’s career. Today, finally, was his big presentation up in the executive suite, and he could put this whole sorry episode behind him.

The Biotechnology Division was still on the second tier among UNELECO’s various ventures, so he knew he’d be going into the meeting with a slight handicap. But he also knew that Biotechnology had been selected by the CEO as one of the growth areas for the conglomerate’s future, and this would give him an edge.

And he needed all the edges he could get, because he was not going into the meeting with good news. There was nothing of scientific value, not a shred, in Heinrich von Scheuer’s volumes of laboratory notes.

He’d driven down from the UNELECO Biotechnology Laboratories in Boulder the evening before so he’d be fresh. Then he made a point of arriving at the corporate headquarters building early, so he could double-check the computer setup. He should have known, he told himself, that in the executive conference room it would be fine. More than fine, really, for they had only the newest and best up there.

So he was sitting near the front of the room in a side chair, trying to be inconspicuous while he enjoyed the view of Pikes Peak, as the assorted vice presidents and their minions began arriving for the 9:30 meeting. They studiously ignored him, an outsider in their *sanctum sanctorum*, a mere research scientist in their high-powered world of corporate executives.

He sat and watched the preening and the conversational cliques with interest. Even though he’d worn his best—and only, truth be known—suit for the occasion, with a new white shirt and conservative tie, he felt underdressed. The others also wore suits, of course, but they seemed to fit better, to look more elegant somehow. The difference between a tailored Armani and an off-the-rack from Foley’s, he figured.

Then there was a commotion at the double doors, and in swept Charles Shure, followed by several attendants. Wendell recognized him from corporate literature, and he looked as impressive in person as he did there. The various vice-presidents sort of gravitated his way, and, even though no voices were raised, Wendell could tell that there were urgent attempts at communications being made. What a world to operate in, he thought.

He was surprised, astounded to see Shure headed his way, shaking off the clinging vice-presidents, walking around the big table, right up to where he sat, right hand extended.

“Dr. Ellison? I’m Chuck Shure, we spoke on the phone last week. I want to thank you again for that confidential report you sent me and all the help you provided me over the phone so I could understand its nuances.”

Wendell had stumbled to his feet and noticed how well Shure shook hands. Not the dead fish approach, not the usual western knuckle crusher; just right.

“Ahh, well, of course I’m glad to help, Mr. Shure, and very glad to meet you in person.”

“And thank you for coming down from Boulder for this briefing. As I told you, there have been so many rumors about this whole thing that I want to get it out in public and behind us. Especially since there’s nothing of use to us. One thing I didn’t mention: I hope your presentation is a dumbed-down version of that report, dumbed *way* down. Some of these guys are not even up to my feeble level of being able to understand this stuff.”

“I planned to keep it simple. And pretty short, really. There’s really nothing much of interest. Um, have you considered my suggestion about donating the final volume to the museum?”

“Yes, and I’m going to announce it when I introduce you. And then there’s going to be a press conference this afternoon. I hope you can stay around for it?”

“Anything you’d like, Mr. Shure. I’ll think about what to say if someone asks me something.”

“Good idea. But right now, we need to get this show on the road. This assembly of suits is costing me over fifteen thousand an hour.” Shure’s pleasant, business-like expression morphed into an impish grin. “Watch this.”

He turned from Wendell and walked to the end of the conference table, stood for a short five seconds, and then snapped his fingers. The room immediately hushed, and, within another five seconds, everyone had taken a chair. Shure looked at Wendell and winked, and then turned to the assembled suits.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice. We’re here to gain closure on a strange episode that started in May, when I received a bizarre package. I know that there has been a considerable amount of rumor and speculation about this, and the purpose of this meeting is to present what we know, the facts, to you publicly. There will be a press conference about this later today, and you can feel free to pass the information along to the folks in your divisions as you feel appropriate.

“Now, I’m really not sure why I received this package, although I have a theory that I’ll explain in a minute. But what I do know is that, after it had passed our security tests, I unwrapped it to find a book. It turns out that this book is an historical artifact, and nothing more, and we will be donating it to the appropriate museum this afternoon. It was hand-written in German, so we had it translated, and we also had the book itself, the cover and the binding and so on, analyzed.

“What I received turns out to be Volume 25 of a set of laboratory notes of a Nazi prison camp doctor. One of our researchers, Dr. Wendell Ellison,” he gestured in Wendell’s general direction, “will present a brief review of its contents shortly. The book, which we have stored in an environmentally controlled vault, is bound in tanned human skin, apparently taken from prison camp inmates.”

There was a collective gasp from the others in the room, and a murmur of comment.

“As I said, this is an historical artifact, and we’ll be donating it to the Holocaust Museum in Washington at the press conference this afternoon. This is appropriate because they already have the first 24 volumes of the set of notes, not on display but in their archive.”

Shure paused and took a deep breath. He looked around the room slowly.

“As you can imagine, I’ve given a lot of thought to why this might have been sent to me. The only thing that I can think of is that my grandparents immigrated here from Germany after the war, and it appears that the Nazi prison camp doctor may have been my great-uncle, the brother of my grandfather Peter, who, as you know, was the founder of what’s become UNELECO. I didn’t know of this great-uncle until our research into this book. For obvious reasons, he wasn’t someone my grandparents were proud of. I certainly feel no connection to him. However, donating this volume to the Holocaust Museum, along with a small endowment to assist their educational efforts, will help to ensure that that reprehensible chapter of our society’s history is neither forgotten nor whitewashed over. Now, let’s hear from Dr. Ellison.”

Wendell, having heard most of this previously, was not nearly as shocked as the other occupants of the room, so he was ready.

“Can we have the lights, please? I think the most effective way to present this material to you is with pictures, some of which I’m certain you’ll find disturbing.”

And he turned on the computer projector as the room lights dimmed.

* * *

Seven

First things first, Annette decided, so she started with the phone book. She had enough experience at this sort of thing that she wasn’t too disappointed when she didn’t find a Louella Billingsley. But there was a Richard Billingsley Realty, with an address in Pagosa Springs. She crossed her fingers and picked up the phone. There was a clicking noise that she recognized as the call’s being forwarded.

“Hello? Rich Billingsley here.”

The signal was less than clear and she suspected a cell phone. Also, there was background noise, perhaps wind. She decided that someone in the business community would likely be cooperative and that she could be straight.

“Mr. Billingsley, my name is Annette Trieri. I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I’m calling you with the hope that you may know a Louella Billingsley. I need to reach her.”

There was a long pause.

“Is she in some kind of trouble?”

“Not that I know of. We just need to talk with her.”

“Oh. Too bad. And unusual, really. That’s she’s not in trouble, I mean. Listen, I’m with a client, and it sounds like I’m almost out of cell range. Can we talk when I get back to town?”

“You do know her, then?”

“Oh, yes. But I’d rather talk about it when I’m back in my office, with a stiff drink and my feet up.”

They set a time later in the afternoon for a follow-up. A stiff drink? Why, she thought, would he need a stiff drink to talk about this?

There was a knock on her office door—a real door to a real office now, one of the perks of her new position. Derek Petersen stuck his head in.

“Ms. Trieri? You said you wanted to go over the budget estimates?”

“Come in, Derek. And look, man, you’ve *got* to call me Annette, around here at least. Really.”

He was still getting used to his new role as her combined second-in-command, chief-of-staff, and head expert on all things bureaucratic in the CBI. Somewhere in his middle forties, he was just beginning to acquire that mature look—thinning hair, a spare tire, and the slight squint that suggested he should have his eyes checked.

“Derek, I’m pretty much of a straight-forward person, and I’m not very good at maintaining hidden agendas. I want to accomplish two things around here in addition to all the stuff I mentioned in that little speech I gave last week.”

On her first day, she had held an all-hands meeting and outlined her vision for the organization.

“First, I want to parlay my good relationships with the counties around here into a coherent regional law enforcement system. That’s really what I meant when I was talking about a strengthened southwest CBI office. And, second, Director Andersen and I conspired to put you into a position that would provide you with the experience you need to take over one of the division offices someday soon. He said what you need is more administrative experience. I hope that putting you behind a desk hasn’t got you too upset with me.”

“Uh, no. I was surprised and a little disappointed at not getting promoted, but Rod, that is, Director Andersen, called me and gave me a pep talk. And your reputation preceded you. To tell the truth, I’m going to be happy not to be on the road so much. Laura, that’s my wife, could use me at home more. The kids are teenagers now, and she needs help. But I’m not sure I’m cut out for this administrative stuff. These budget estimates, for example, are, um, foreign territory for me. And no matter how hard I try, it’s hard to get interested in them.”

She smiled.

“Rule One: Delegate. You’re used to working in the field and being pretty much on your own. Rod told me that Bob Weldon had become entrenched as a micro-manager, so the entire staff here, including you, are probably used to that style. I don’t want to micro-manage you, and I think that you shouldn’t micro-manage the others. So let the accountant, what’s her name... ah, Cheryl, do her thing and get her in here when we talk about the estimates. These folks may take a while to adapt to bosses with a new approach, but most people like a loose leash.”

“Don’t forget that we’re all state employees, used to dealing with lots of rigid procedures and silly rules.”

“Yeah, but I bet everyone’s got ideas about how to make those rules work in our favor, or how to avoid them. And I see that as part of your job—assimilating all those tricks. And teaching them to me. Now, since Cheryl isn’t here, let’s talk about something more interesting. We have the ballistics connection between the killing up by Norwood in May and the other one, same execution style, same gun, down at the Four Corners monument last year. You’re the one with the field experience. What do you make of this?”

“Well, for one thing, the FBI is probably going to be a pain in the you-know-where. My experience with the local guys is that they need lessons in how to share information. They’re sort of a black hole—stuff goes in but nothing comes out.”

“That’s what happened, all right. Last year, the day it happened, they called the Durango PD to get an ID on the victim down at the monument, Luke Begay, his name was. We told them what we knew and then didn’t hear a word about it. My next smidgeon of information was in that assembled file I got from Rod’s office, the one with all the dead environmentalists in it. What about the other one? That’s the San Miguel sheriff, right?”

“Yeah, and he’s also a little problematic. See, one of his constituents, a big player, is a state senator who lives southwest of Norwood. Senator Jarvis Schoenfield. Chairman of the Committee on Law Enforcement. Controls our budget. And controls Jim Nettleman, the sheriff over there.”

“I met him, Schoenfield, I mean. Rod took me to see him last month, just after I signed on. First thing he asked was when we were going to make an arrest for that murder. He said he wanted to be kept informed about our progress. And that he expected progress.”

“This sounds in character. You were talking about micro-managing. He seems to think that because he holds sway over our budget he’s our real boss. And Rod has to go along with it, pretty much. Same thing is true for the State Patrol.”

“So, is it a problem?”

“Well, let’s just say that we ought to be cautious. He’s in something like his seventh term, really entrenched. Although, I have to say, with all the new folks moving into the vicinity of Telluride, his margins of victory have been less the last couple of times. But his power base includes some, how shall I say it, seriously right-wing groups. And he owns, or used to own, about half the county. Now I guess he’s set up his ranch as some kind of non-profit trust. Gets him out of property and other taxes. Anyway, you can bet that anything that Jim Nettleman knows, Schoenfield knows.”

“Yeah, but that’s not much, right?”

“Right. Victim’s ID, cause of death, and so on. That’s about it. The funny thing is that no one in the area knows the victim, or will admit to it. He was from Colorado Springs. What he was doing out Norwood way, dressed in a business suit, is a mystery to everybody. The indications are that he was killed pretty close to where his body was found, given the amount of blood at the scene. And there’s that witness report of the several vehicles. But that’s it so far.”

“What are the biggest unknowns?”

“I’d say just that, I mean what was a Colorado Springs lawyer doing in Norwood, and what’s the connection with Begay? If we can answer those questions, we’ll have a good start on the portfolio, I’d think.”

Annette nodded. “That’s my thinking. Y’know, Rod and I sort of set you up to get administrative experience so you can take over a division some day soon. But I hope you’ll be stay interested in case work, because I’ll need the advice, and someone to bounce ideas off of.”

“I’m hoping to. Stay involved, I mean. This administrative stuff may be necessary, but I don’t think it’s my cup of tea.”

“I know what you mean. Just remember Rule One. It’s what kept me sane at the PD.”

* * *

The Right Reverend Dr. Michael Oswald was letting Schoenfield vent. His fancy titles and even his last name were not quite accurate, but being accurate was less important to him than making an impression. Jarvis Schoenfield, however, was not impressed.

“That ungrateful, Jew-loving son-of-a-bitch! Does he have any idea of how much trouble we went to to get him that book? Plus the copies of the other ones? And now he’s giving it to the Jew museum? And he has the gall to pull out some so-called ‘scientist’ to tell everyone that there’s nothing of value in the set. I think that scientist, what was his name? Ellison? I think he’s going down for this.”

“Now, Jarvis, calm down. You’ll burst an artery or something. C’mon, you knew this business of enlisting Shure was a gamble. And I still think it might have worked, if your guys hadn’t popped that lawyer, Campbell. I bet that’s what scared Shure off, and this is how he’s distancing himself from us.”

He let Schoenfield stomp around the porch for a while.

They were sitting on the veranda of the log cabin, looking out toward the southeast, watching the afternoon shadows lengthen on Lone Cone Peak, and Oswald couldn't help but think that Schoenfield had it too good. He was like a spoiled child, always wanting, and mostly getting, his own way. When he didn't get it, he had a tantrum. Like now.

"Look, Jarvis, let's just let go of this thing with UNELECO and move on. We don't really need them. And those meetings I've been holding around the region are going pretty well. We're going to wind up with a good-sized group of people interested in moving up to stage two. And the people who drop out aren't going to hurt us. I mean, I think the meeting over by South Fork last week was infiltrated, but even that's not a big deal. The message I'm laying on them is so bland that it doesn't matter who hears it. It's stage two where we have to be more careful. And the same thing's true with Shure. He really didn't hear enough to be a danger to us, right? Besides, Timmy's going to provide us with insider information about what Shure knows."

"The South Fork meeting was infiltrated? By who? I know that those meetings are for public consumption, but we need to make an example of this guy. If we're gonna get spied on, we're gonna send a message."

"I don't know who, but I'll find out and let you know. But, listen, Jarvis, we can't go around killing everyone. That report you got, along with Timmy's information, shows that the CBI is aware of what's going on, at some level at least, and we know the FBI's responsible for investigating that killing down on the Rez. We've got to be careful."

"I'll worry about the CBI, and the FBI's going nowhere. You worry about getting people enlisted. And Shure needs reminding to keep quiet about what he's heard. Another news conference, and he gets put on the hit list."

"Just as long as he's one of the 'natural causes' hits. He's too high-profile to have anything suspicious happen to him. And, Jarvis, I'd be careful about the others, too. People besides the CBI are going to start putting two and two together."

"Yeah, yeah. Where's that damned phone?"

He was fumbling in the pockets of his jacket and eventually fished out the handset of a cordless unit. He punched buttons.

"Pickle? Can you come over to the back porch? The Reverend and I have some stuff we need to talk over."

He put the phone away, in a different pocket.

"It doesn't really matter who puts what together, because I've got control of everything that counts. The CBI—hell, even if Weldon is leaving, there's this new girl Andersen's putting in his place. She'll be easy to keep under control. And I've got the State Patrol running scared over their budget. Jim Nettleman and his crew at the sheriff's office owe me too much to give us trouble. And, besides, Pickle's good, real good."

* * *

Annette called right on time.

"Billingsley Realty, Rich speaking. How can I be helpful?"

"Well, if you've got your stiff drink and your feet up, you can tell me about Louella."

"Oh, yeah. Ms. ahh... Treery?"

“Trieri. Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation.”

“Right. Sorry. I was out in the woods showing a parcel to this guy from Texas who’s looking for a place for a summer house, and I didn’t have a way to write it down. So you want to talk with Lou? Is she in some kind of trouble?”

“As I told you, I don’t know. We need to talk with her about an investigation we’re doing. But we don’t know how to contact her.”

“Well, if you have her name as Louella Billingsley, that’s probably why. That was a long time ago. When we were married. I’m still paying for that mistake. If it weren’t for these rich folks from Texas wanting to buy land up here, I don’t know how I’d manage to pay her off.”

“So you were married to her and now aren’t?”

“Not by a long shot, thank God. Divorced four years ago.”

“Do you know how we might contact her?”

“Well, I have the dubious pleasure of sending her checks every quarter, and she cashes them. So they must be getting to the name and address I’m sending them to.”

“Which are?”

“Please tell me that she’s going to be in hot water.”

“Mr. Billingsley. I’m afraid we can’t promise to act as your personal avenger. All we want to do is to talk with her. If it will make you feel any better, I imagine that it will make her nervous to have us contact her. Most folks react that way, no matter what.”

Annette had always been good at manufacturing little stories when they helped her cause. She certainly wasn’t going to stop just because she changed jobs.

“Well, try to make her real nervous, OK? She’s not Louella Billingsley anymore, she’s Lolly Markham. Markham’s her family name and Lolly is because she never really liked Lou. I think I made her actually hate it. So that’s what I call her whenever I get the chance. Here’s a phone number.”

He rattled off a string of digits, which Annette wrote down.

“I assume this is a home number, Mr. Billingsley. Would you know if she’s employed?”

“Yeah, and that’s the best thing of all for me. She has to do something with her time besides sit around on her fat ass and spend my money. She’s got a job at Carman’s Western Art on Main Avenue.”

Annette thanked him and escaped. With relief. She turned to her computer.

What, she thought, is the name of the shortcut I made to the program that looks up drivers’ licenses? Oh, yeah.

And within a couple of minutes she was looking at a screen-sized image of the Colorado driver’s license of one Louella Markham, resident of Durango, required to wear corrective lenses to drive. Shoulder-length chestnut hair, if the picture could be trusted. Semi-attractive in a mid-thirties, used-hard sort of way. Not, from her face at least, thin.

Now, she thought, how do I do this? Copy the picture from that program to this other one, then send it as a fax over to the San Juan County, Utah, sheriff’s office. She used the mouse and a graphics utility program, and finally the computer confirmed that the fax was sent. After they had Deputy Clean-Cut look at it, she should have a positive ID of the person he chatted up, and ogled, just before the FFPI fire. They’d owe her one, and maybe she could get a look at the file on the Natural Bridges Monument killing.

She looked at the clock. 4:45. When do you suppose these state employees go home?

She wandered out of her office and down the hall toward the receptionist, Sally Brigman. On the way she noticed that Derek Petersen was still in his office, working on a formidable stack of paper. Cheryl Trudeau, the head of the business-office side of things, was also still in, peering at her computer screen at what looked like a small-print spreadsheet. Damn, Annette thought, I've got to find out where that woman gets her clothes. She has the best sense of style I've run across in a long time.

Sally, behind her receptionist's counter, was staring at a calendar on the wall and talking through pursed lips into her headset.

"I appreciate your sense of urgency, Ms. Williams, but I'm afraid that public calls are always routed through me and assigned accordingly. And none of them go directly to our Director. I'm afraid that your high opinion of your Mr. Shure is not enough to make an exception. May I route you, and him, to one of our investigators?"

She noticed Annette and rolled her eyes. Annette winked.

"Ms. Williams, I understand, but what I'm telling you is that I don't care who Mr. Shure is. We need to begin at the beginning and that's not with our Director... Well, if that's how you feel. Have a nice day."

She ground her teeth and shook her head.

"That's not the way I like to finish up the afternoon. And if she has the clout that she says, you may be getting a call from Director Andersen in Denver. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, Sally. If it's that important, Rod will understand, and so will I. You did admirably. Keep up the good work. And, look, it's just about five. Take off. Have a nice evening."

Sally beamed. The idea of having a boss who wasn't a clock-watcher was a new experience. One she liked.

Annette strolled back to her office and was writing up the conversation with Billingsley when the phone rang.

"Annette? This is Rod Andersen. Sorry to bother you."

Annette noticed it was 5:10. Whoever this Williams person is, she does indeed have clout, she thought.

"What can I do for you, Director Andersen?"

"Ugh. Please, call me Rod, at least when we're not in front of the Governor. Or the press. Um, I just got a call that started with my Public Affairs person and then came to me. It's convoluted, but the bottom line is that Charles Shure wants to talk with you, about a case, it seems."

"Should I know this person?"

Annette was far more familiar with the criminal world than the business world.

"You don't? Oh. Well, I wouldn't have expected your front office people to, and they did a good job of protecting you, I guess. Charles Shure is the CEO of UNELECO, a big conglomerate based in Colorado Springs. One of the top three business people in Colorado, and in the top twenty between the Mississippi and the West Coast. What you would definitely call a Big Cheese, at least in the business world. I take his calls so that the Governor won't call me and tell me to."

"Oh. Never heard of him. But I did hear that the company, um, FFPI, whose plant got torched over in Utah last month is a UNELECO division. Suppose he wants to talk about that?"

Things were clicking into place in Annette's head.

"No idea. Could you call him? I've got a direct number. He's a workaholic, so he'll no doubt be in for a while."

"Be glad to. And, um, is there a list of people like this whose calls I should take? My receptionist would sure appreciate it. How should I handle this sort of thing?"

"I started my own list a long time ago and keep adding to it. Some are obvious, like the Gov, but others aren't. So just wing it. I don't think Shure is mad, or anything, I think he just wants to talk with you."

"I'll call him right back. Thanks, Dir... ah, Rod. Be talking with you."

I'll call him, she thought, but not this second. I don't care who he is, he's not jerking me around this much.

* * *

It was just getting dark as David Wellington eased his old Mazda pickup along the road behind the mill on the edge of Creede. He was, he noticed, barely on time. The 65 miles from Alamosa included the main streets of several small towns—Monte Vista, Del Norte, South Fork—and the propensity of the local constabulary to seek community income from people who played fast and loose with speed limits was well known to the residents of the San Luis Valley. He felt clever that he'd made it in an hour. And relieved not to have been caught by one of the various radar traps between the towns.

But he was also still a little pissed. Why in the world he needed to hustle over here on such short notice was a complete mystery. But the message on his answering machine had been insistent that he get himself up to the lumber mill at Creede by dark. He'd recognized the voice, sort of, if you filtered out the sneezes and the allergy-induced nasal tone.

The voice had said to park on this road behind the mill, right by the third pile of logs. He was supposed to pull off the road next to the pile, which was set back off the road a little more than the others. He idled slowly up to the spot and stopped next to a fifteen-foot wall of huge logs. Damn, these were big trees, he thought. Some of those suckers must be five feet in diameter. Old growth timber. Just the sort of rape and pillage activity that he and his friends in SCREW were trying to put a stop to.

Except for the fact that his fellow SCREWers were so impulsive, they might be able to accomplish something good. But that raid on the Monticello plant was too much, too soon. The risk of getting caught was way out of line with the payoff. So what if they burned down a lumber mill? It would just get rebuilt, newer and better.

That bunch seemed to think it was all a big game. Rutherford wouldn't take anything seriously, and, besides, he was obviously infatuated with Lolly. At least he spent a lot of time staring at her chest. And she was just too scatterbrained to be trusted, or useful for much of anything, either. The other two, Felterson and Tompkins, had potential, but they were old-school anarchists, hard to control. And Flip Chester was a danger to all of them, with his ever-present stash of joints.

Well, he thought, better a SCREWer than a SCREWee.

But Rutherford was right about one thing. When you assembled that list of their dead friends, it looked pretty clear: someone was systematically eliminating people involved in MEDL. Wellington felt his heart rate increase slightly as he remembered the circumstances over in Horca. He hadn't talked to anyone about it, but he'd been there, having breakfast with Holly and Jack Levine. They were on their way to Santa Fe to talk strategy with Roger Colgate and his buddies—Roger was dead, too, Wellington

remembered—and he'd driven down early to meet them at Horca. They had discussed Wellington's idea to develop a new MEDL chapter at Adams State College in Alamosa. The students there tended to be more conservative than over in Durango, but there was still a strong environmental consciousness. And water issues in the San Luis Valley were one thing that got them involved in a flash. Whenever one of the big Front Range cities hatched another plan to grab San Luis Valley groundwater, the students at Adams State got hopping mad, some of them mad enough to take direct action.

He and the Levines had eaten a pleasant breakfast at that little restaurant at Horca—Rosalita's? Rosella's? Rosa's? He couldn't remember—and he'd left them lingering over a last cup of coffee. It wasn't for another day that he heard about the car bomb and their deaths.

Let's see, he thought. Holly and Jack. Roger. That arrogant bastard down by Taos, the one with all the money. The Mayers up in Boulder. And, of course, Luke Begay over in Durango and Jake Colvin up in Cedaredge. That Park Ranger over in Utah. And Jodie P. down in Flag. Damn.

He tried to shake off his gloomy mood, but the gathering darkness didn't help matters. Where, he wondered, is that jerk who left me the message? And, goddammit, I've got to take a leak. Well, there isn't anybody around, at least that I can see through these dirty windows.

He opened his door and got out, standing in the middle of the gravel road to look around in the gloom. Seeing no one, he walked around the car, to stand between it and the log pile for some privacy. At least he could get more comfortable. The smell of freshly-cut conifer reminded him of the back woods. He took a deep breath.

He unzipped and let fly at the logs on the base of the pile. Looking up, he noticed the stars coming out. Creede, he thought, doesn't have the light pollution of Alamosa. How beautiful. But that's strange. That top log looked like it moved.

He looked down and flexed his neck around in a circle to loosen it up and to clear his head. Then he looked up again just in time to see the top-most log on the pile, a four-footer, rolling off the top and falling down toward him. It did its job so well that he didn't see the next dozen or how effectively they flattened his truck.

* * *

Eight

“He's coming down here this week to give us a formal statement. I guess I should be impressed, although I'm cynical enough to think of it more as ass-covering.”

“Charles Shure himself, eh? Well, he *is* one of those hyper-busy corporate executives who values his time. Think this will help you move ahead on the portfolio?”

Annette and Hal were having a relaxed breakfast on the summer solstice, sharing bagels and the newspaper. Her new job had been playing havoc with their joint schedule, and they took every opportunity to spend time together.

“Well, we can't place this guy Campbell with the others in the environmental movement, but he was killed by the same gun as one of them. So, we'll see. On the other hand, that lead to the woman at the Monticello FFPI mill the night of the fire is getting interesting. I got a call-back last evening that the deputy sheriff over there places her at the scene just before the fire, based on her driver's license picture. A Durango citizen named Lolly Markham.”

“So now what?”

“We’ll pick her up for questioning and get one of the Utah investigators over here to be in on it. She was sitting behind the wheel of a car with stolen, or at least ‘borrowed’ Colorado license plates, and that’s enough of an excuse to ask her some pointed questions. And the cell phone someone used to get the deputy away from her was stolen, hasn’t been recovered. Stolen from the library in Cortez. So these are both Colorado crimes and belong to me. Meaning I can pick her up and question her, and we don’t have to fool around with extradition just yet. If it turns out she was connected with the firebombing somehow, well, we’ll share.”

“But Shure’s coming down to talk about the murder, not this?”

“That’s what he said on the phone. He has information about it, including something in writing and, he said, a videotape of a press conference that’s related somehow. So I don’t really know details. He did say that he can’t identify any of the players beyond the victim.”

“Interesting. When the FFPI thing went down, John and I called you the next day, remember? He was wanting us to cooperate with their internal investigation because they’re such big contributors to the U. But now there’s a second connection, not to the university, exactly, but to Shure and UNELECO.”

“From what I understand, their internal investigation focused mostly on whether it may have been worker sabotage, and they concluded that it was not. They’re assuming that there’s some new environmental radical group that’s responsible, probably called SCREW, based on that note.”

“Yeah, I remember you told me something about a clever note. I wonder if they’re connected with that other shadowy organization you mentioned. The Mother Earth Defense League. I’ve been poking around, carefully, and whatever connection there is at the U is so clandestine as to be invisible. The closest thing is the SCARAB chapter—Students and Citizens for Animal Rights and Biodiversity, remember?—and they’re mostly animal rights oriented. But their publicity talks about ‘opportunities’ for involvement at all levels, without being specific. I suppose they could be a front, or entry-way, or something, for a more radical group. Or groups.”

“Any way to find out?”

“Well, I probably can’t. Being a Dean means lots of people who might know don’t trust me for anything. But let me ask a couple of folks who do trust me. Maybe they can find something out. You remember Gil Taylor, right?”

“You bet. My friend with the chemistry lab that’s got all the fancy analytical equipment. Does analyses for the PD.”

“And just about everyone else on campus. Including, sometimes, students with concerns about purity of certain substances they manage to obtain. He’s worried about safety and does some screening for poisonous impurities.”

“So he’s plugged into the dope-smoking, enviro-hippie, tree-hugger crowd?”

“Uh, well, ‘plugged-in’ is probably overstating things. I think he just doesn’t want any of the kids to get their brains permanently fried by toxic stuff. After he analyzed those bogus designer drugs for you, and those joints that had PCP in them, he started to worry about what the kids are getting into. So he talked to me about quietly putting the word out that he’ll do discreet analyses. He’s being careful. For example, he’s not screening for purity, just toxic impurities.”

“Meaning he’s not telling folks if the coke they just bought is cut, unless it’s cut with bad stuff?”

“Right, and even then he’s not telling cut how much. Just if it’s dangerous. That is, dangerous in unsuspected ways, given that most of that stuff is dangerous in some sense even if it’s pure. Uh, he

talked all this over with me and I gave him a thumbs up. I figured the chemistry department owes the community a favor.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“Um, well, you remember that business of whose jurisdiction is where and how the campus is really outside the city’s purview? Well, I used that to rationalize that it’s none of the Durango PD’s business.” He was wearing a sickly grin.

“Right. But now I’m CBI and the campus, being state property, is my jurisdiction, no?”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. Yet. But now you know, so it’s OK, eh? Please?”

“I think I’ll have to go have a chat with Gil.”

“Oh, crap. Now I’ve got him in trouble.”

“Gil? How could he be in trouble with me? He’s a friend of mine, and he’s been more than helpful on several occasions. I think I should just talk with him about this, that’s all. Because I know about it, he needs to know that I know, and all that.”

“Yeah, but he’ll be pissed that I told you.”

“I won’t tell him that, so don’t worry. I’ll let him think that I found out some other way. And, look, I view this as a sort of public service, kind of like handing out disposable syringes to help prevent the spread of AIDS. And I bet he’s got some kind of anonymous drop-off system set up, so he doesn’t know who’s giving him samples. So don’t worry.”

“I see a Machiavellian gleam lurking in your eyes. What sneaky thing are you planning?”

“Innocent li’l me? Well, I did have a thought. Perhaps I can talk Gil into helping with the serial murders, assuming that’s what they are.”

“By spying on the environmental community, you mean?”

“Well, maybe just by asking a few questions in the right places around campus. You know, places you can’t really go and get straight answers, Mr. Fancy-Dan Dean.”

“That’s why I love you so much. It’s that sass.”

* * *

Gil Taylor will just have to wait until tomorrow to hear from me, Annette thought. With the Shure interview and tracking down Ms. Markham, I’m going to have a full day. Especially since that late start. And what a worthwhile late start it was—one of these days, I guess the honeymoon will be over, but I’m quite happy that it isn’t yet. Mmm-mmm. Thank you Dean Fancy-Dan.

She pulled into the parking lot at the downtown station of the Durango PD, and smiled to see Fred Winders’ car in her old spot. There was no real reason to expect trouble with Lolly Markham, but backup wouldn’t be a bad idea. And, Annette thought, I can get my pals from the PD involved. That would be both politic and fun.

Twenty minutes later, she strolled into Carman’s Western Art, which turned out to be a tourist-oriented gallery and high-end souvenir shop near the train depot downtown. She’d planned this earlier and dressed for the occasion, in jeans, her western riding boots, Indian jewelry, and a cheap straw cowboy hat, pushed back on her head. Although a bit pumped up for the occasion, as she always was on a bust, she made a point of playing the role of the bored shopper, looking for the perfect treasure to take back home to Toledo, for that special place on her knick-knack shelf.

“May I help you? All items are twenty per-cent off today.”

After another critical look at the statuette, Annette turned and, at a glance, took in the name tag reading “Sondra” and the disparity between this person and the driver’s license picture she’d seen.

“No, thank you.” Smile. “I’m waiting on my husband to finish up at the fishing store down the block. I thought maybe I’d browse around and see if I could find something for my mother back in Ohio. Thanks.” Back to the shelves.

She worked her way around the shop and finally came to the check-out counter. The person behind the cash register wasn’t Lolly either. Time for plan B.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for someone. A friend of mine said I should look up Lolly Markham here, to say hi. Is she here?”

The person with the name tag reading “Denise” looked surprised.

“Lolly? Sure. I think she’s in the back. I can get her.”

Annette smiled. “No rush. I’m looking for just the right thing for my mother back in Ohio, and I have plenty of time. Once my husband gets talking about fishing, there’s no stopping him.”

She went back to the displays and pulled out her cell phone.

“Fred? Listen, I’m here at the Western Art Gallery, and I’m just about finished. Are you going to be much longer?”

“Hey, Annette. All set?”

“Just about.”

“We’ll move in.”

In short order, Fred Winders wandered into the shop and worked his way toward the back, near the “Employees Only” door. He’d worked for Annette for years, and now he was acting in her old position at the PD, so he knew the drill: he studiously ignored her. Annette noticed another official-looking person standing outside the front door.

When Lolly came out from the back looking for Annette, the rest was easy.

With Lolly safely, although perhaps not comfortably and certainly not happily, in the detention center awaiting the arrival of the Utah investigators, Annette turned her attention to the day’s other appointment, the meeting with Charles Shure, CEO of UNELECO. And, according to the message that awaited her in her office, his attorney, his driver, one Walter Herrington, and *his* attorney. The southwest office of the CBI was about to experience a sort of corporate takeover, she supposed. She went looking for her chief-of-staff.

“Derek, can I tear you away from all that paperwork?”

They both recognized her question as rhetorical.

“Have you read the file on that killing up by Norwood last month?”

“For sure. I don’t have time to get out and investigate things, but I make time to read up on them. If I’m going to do the budget and all this other stuff, I need to know what’s going on.”

“Good thinking. I have two people, apparently, coming in to provide statements related to it. We should question them separately. Want to take one?”

“You bet. Got to keep the hinges oiled somehow. But I’m swamped. Which one will be quicker?”

“The driver, probably. We’ll start out together to see what they’re going to ask for. They called us to volunteer to come in and make a statement, so I doubt that they’re going to confess to murder. They probably know something that they think is relevant. Maybe they were part of that convoy of vehicles that’s in the report. But if they’re bringing lawyers, they’ll probably have a set of conditions they’ll want to discuss.”

“Like immunity, no doubt.”

“No doubt. But I expect that their only real vulnerability is waiting until now to talk with us. Leaving the body there instead of calling in the local sheriff immediately. So immunity could be a good deal from our perspective.”

“Assuming they have anything to contribute.”

“Right. We’ll see. And we can use all the help we can get with this one, especially because of its possible connection to the others I’m supposed to be clearing up. I’ll call you when they get here. We can all meet in the conference room, and then we can use a couple of the rooms across the street.”

The county detention center had video cameras ready to roll. Annette had called her old friends over there and arranged to use the facility. Never underestimate the value, she thought, of having a personal contact network.

* * *

“So, after we compared notes,” Annette was talking around a mouthful of the lasagna that Hal had concocted for dinner, “we found that their stories are completely consistent. Aside from not reporting the killing right away, we have no reason to think of Shure or his driver as suspects. But the really interesting part is the rest of Shure’s story, the part that the driver, Herrington, didn’t know about. Or at least didn’t talk about.”

“Why they were there and so on?”

“Right. The connection with this racist group, the Aryan Rights Fund, or Foundation, I guess. Apparently, this was the second contact, the first being the package with the book that I mentioned.”

“But Shure was supposedly there to talk resource leases.”

“Yep, on private land associated with the X-S Ranch. Of course, most of the private land around Norwood is part of the X-S. But it’s hard to believe that there’s not a connection between this Aryan group and the X-S. I mean, why drag Shure all the way over to Norwood? They could have concocted potential leases closer to the Springs, like in the Wet Mountains or somewhere.”

“After we talked this morning, I did some internet sleuthing. That’s the nice thing about the campus this time of year. It’s quiet and there’s time for this sort of fooling around. I found out that one thing that Shure’s company has done is to develop a new method of reprocessing mine tailings waste, doing it profitably and, from an environmental perspective, safely, at least so they say. So maybe whoever set this up thought that all the tailings up by Uravan and Bedrock would be an extra added attraction to Shure.”

“Shure mentioned something like that. But they were originally supposed to have the meeting in Norwood, in an office at the X-S headquarters building, or the business office or whatever it is. I guess that they could have just picked that out of the phone book, but it looks like there’s a potential, one that’s too big to ignore, for a connection between the ranch and this Aryan group. Oops. I smell garlic bread burning.”

She jumped up to rescue it from the oven. Her voice continued from the kitchen.

“I looked up the ownership of the X-S and found out that it belongs to some non-profit trust called Resources For Humanity. Then I ran out of time.”

She returned, with a basket full of well-toasted and quite fragrant pieces of bread.

“I seem to recall something about the X-S, vaguely. There’s a reservoir south of Norwood that I fished one time, can’t remember the name. And there were no-trespassing signs all over the countryside, saying X-S Ranch and displaying a logo, or maybe a brand. A stylized ‘x’ with one leg curved to make a sort of ‘s.’ That was years ago.”

“Anyway, Resources For Humanity could be anything. Sounds like maybe one of those ‘feed the world’ foundations, but maybe not. It’s probably going to be hard to show a connection between them and the Aryan group, though. Shure said that the Aryans were very secretive, lots of hocus-pocus.”

“And this book he talked about was really from a Nazi prison camp?”

“Apparently. Shure’s people examined it thoroughly, and we have their report, quite solid-looking with all sorts of high-tech analyses. Get this: The book was bound with tanned human skin. Shure donated it to the Holocaust Museum in Washington. It turns out to be part of a set of lab notes on medical experiments on prisoners.”

“Why would they have sent it to Shure?”

“The letter they wrote talked about how the guy, the prison-camp doctor, who wrote the notes was Shure’s great-uncle. And it appears that they, the Aryan group, were trying to recruit Shure. He showed me this letter they wrote him. Pretty weird stuff.”

“And you said that the meeting in Norwood turned out to be more of the same. The lawyer who got killed gave him copies of the other volumes of lab notes?”

“Right. The discussion of leases didn’t come up. The lawyer, Campbell, passed notes to Shure talking about how the whole thing was supposed to be a show of force, to further intimidate Shure. Strange way to do recruiting, but this group seems strange all around.”

“Where to from here?”

“Shure’s going to contact us if this ARF group contacts him again, and we’ll figure something out. He doesn’t know how to contact them, though, so all we can do is wait. Meanwhile, tomorrow we’re going to try again on that woman who was at the Monticello fire. Lolly Markham.”

“Try again?”

“Today all she did was weep and demand her attorney. Who is in Cortez and couldn’t get here today. So tomorrow, it’ll be the Utah guys and me versus Ms. Markham and her lawyer. If the lawyer’s got any sense, he’ll work some kind of deal. The Utah deputy sheriff has her in the car with the stolen plates when the fire was actually being set, so she’s not one of the principals. Just a driver.”

“Why would she have a lawyer from Cortez? This town’s crawling with them. And she lives here, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, and I don’t know why. Asked myself the same question. But, hey, we’re not going to screw this up on a technicality, and letting her choose her own representation is easy for us.”

She bit into another slice of the garlic toast.

* * *

Across town, Steve Rutherford was once again becoming emotionally involved with his two-dimensional facsimile of Lolly, the one on the computer screen, when the phone rang with news of the real one. Bad news.

“Picked up? In custody? CBI? Jesus!”

“And she wants me there when they question her. I’m really worried about this one, Steve.”

Reid Tompkins seemed to be blaming Rutherford, for some reason.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? That way, you can keep her from giving the wrong answers.”

“Ha! What if she slips up and talks about ‘we this’ or ‘you that’? That’ll implicate me. She’s such a ditz. I don’t trust her not to slip up.”

“Can’t you talk with her first, alone, and sort of rehearse what she should and shouldn’t say?”

“Of course. And I will. But I’m worried that if she gets rattled she’ll blow it. And, look, I’m an officer of the court. I can’t afford to be implicated in this. I’d be disbarred!” Tomkins’ worry was palpable.

“Calm down. For one thing, you’re not really a criminal lawyer, right? Can’t you pass this one to someone who is? Then the potential for slip-ups would be less, wouldn’t it?”

“But she asked for me and I sure don’t want to piss her off. She’d have to tell another attorney what this whole thing is about, and he’d want to cut a deal. She’s not who they’re really looking for. That’s us. And if she’s pissed at me, or you, then she could just give us up.”

“So you go with her and get her to stick to the story she gave that cop originally. The fight with her husband and so on.”

“Right. And they’ll ask where this ‘husband’ was, what motel or whatever, and then we’re screwed.”

“Well, you can’t have it both ways. Either go represent her or don’t. I think it would be better for you to work with her than to try to avoid all this.”

“Yeah, really, so do I, I guess. But I also think we’re awfully close to completely busted. You need to lie low, really, really low. And the others, too. Why don’t you call them and warn them?”

“OK. But I can’t seem to get hold of Dave. I was trying last night and today, to talk about something else. You heard from him lately?”

“No, but he goes off camping a lot.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll leave him a message to call me right away. And I’ll call Flip and Aaron tonight. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help with Lolly.”

“Bail money, for one thing. Find some.” And Tompkins hung up.

Bail money, eh? Rutherford thought. Then Lolly would owe me a favor. A big favor. The least she can do is to let me see that tattoo.

Aaron Felterson wasn’t home, so Rutherford left an urgent, albeit cryptic, message. Flip Chester was home, sort of.

“Who? Oh, yeah, far out, man. ’S-happenin’? Want some more weed? I got a new stash, better than ever.”

“Flip, listen up. This is important. You remember the conversation we had about that fire over in Monticello?”

“Right on, man. You dudes really did a number on those lumber guys. Good deal.”

“Yeah, well, Lolly’s got herself picked up by the cops. CBI no less.”

“Bummer, man, major bummer. CBI? What’s that?”

“Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Not just the Durango fuzz or the sheriff. These are the heavies. Lolly’s got herself a real problem, and, hey: She’s gonna need bail money. Can you help out?”

“Whoa, man. Bread? Like, how much, man?”

“Don’t know yet. But you’ve always got a lot of cash, and this is a friend in trouble. It’ll only be a loan, until we get her out of this mess she’s in.”

“Yeah? How are you gonna do that, man?”

“Reid’s a lawyer, remember? It’ll be cool. So can you help with bail money? We’d help you.”

“Depends on how much. But I can help, some. Let me know.”

“I will. And, listen. We’ve all got to be careful just now, right?”

“Hey, man, I’m always careful. Gotta be, right? But you’re the one who’s gonna be in trouble for this one, not me.” He giggled. “But I’ll be careful. Extra careful.”

Maybe it was because he’d been talking with Flip, the perennial outlaw. Maybe it was because he couldn’t get Dave Wellington on the phone. Maybe it was because he didn’t entirely trust Reid Tompkins. Whatever it was, paranoia took over Rutherford’s thought processes.

The first thing he did was to turn off all the lights, room by room. The computer screen, grandly displaying a busty young woman wearing only a pink feather boa and a smile, lit the apartment with an eerie glow. Then he carefully, slowly, eased the living room curtain back to peek out at the street below.

Just the usual cars were sitting out there... except for that one. Across the street, facing his way. Jelly-bean shaped American sedan of some sort, generic features, some dark color or other. Was that a glow, a cigarette, from the front seat? Somebody in there watching? Oh, shit.

He stepped back from the window, glad he’d at least turned out the lights behind him. What now? Ignore it? Wait and see if the car goes away?

He settled on going for a walk to see if the car would follow him. At least he didn’t have the worries that Flip would, a stash of contraband. Oh, double-shit. There was that stuff in the kitchen, in a jar with the other jars of spices.

He walked, as calmly as he could under the circumstances, into the kitchen and, with the lights still off, fumbled in the spice cabinet. Trips back and forth to the light of the computer monitor to see labels made the process drag on and on. Finally he found the one labeled Roma Oregano. Then, staying near the wall, he crept into the bathroom, and emptied the jar into the toilet. From the glow of the computer screen in the living room, he could just make out that... it was floating! One flush, wait. Two flushes, wait. Three flushes... there, that should do it. He let out his breath. Then he crept back to the living room curtain, and gently drew it aside.

The car was still there... but here came a young girl, high-school age, it looked like. Bouncing out of the house that the sedan was sitting in front of. Leaning into the driver’s side window. Getting in the other side. Driving off.

Triple-shit! That was nearly a whole ounce, of that \$500 North Coast Hybrid from Flip, no less. Shit, shit, shit.

On the computer screen, the Lolly-look-alike, proud of her silicone adornments, just kept smiling.

* * *

Conflicting schedules meant that the next day Hal couldn't get in to see Provost John Martin until 4:30, and by then Hal was meeting'd out. Earlier, he had acted as the facilitator—the latest fancy word for referee—in a meeting on a reorganization plan for the social sciences and humanities college.

The hang-up was sponsored research. As in the natural sciences in Hal's college, there was a variety of potential funding sources for research in psychology, anthropology and archaeology, and sociology. Not so in the humanities departments. The cultures of the two sides of the college were drifting apart, and they had a mandate from the provost to stop the drift by reorganizing. Reduce 'tribalism,' a term the anthropologists derided as racist. Increase a sense of 'community,' a term that the comparative theology faculty felt smug about. And it was Hal's job, as a favor to John Martin, to chair their meetings, keep order, and maintain whatever little momentum they were able to generate. It was an exhausting task.

"The sun's over the yardarm, Hal, in the Midwest, at least, and I'm going to celebrate."

Martin opened a panel in his bookcase, revealing a highly illegal cache of expensive liquor bottles. He reached for the Laphroaig.

"As I remember, you have soda and ice over here in the 'fridge. Want some to go with that?"

Hal was familiar with the provost's liberal interpretation of state laws about liquor on campus.

"Tonight, it's neat. Now, what brings you here at this hour? I thought you tried to go fishing on these long summer evenings."

"What's got me here instead of in the river is our patron in the state senate, Jarvis Schoenfield. We may have a problem. And I know you like plenty of warning about possible problems, especially ones of this magnitude."

Martin was staring through the amber liquid in his glass at the maple trees outside.

"And now for the bad news?"

"I'll have to tell Annette about this, of course, because I thought of it today. Last night, she told me that there's a connection between a murder in San Miguel County and the X-S Ranch. Charles Shure, the UNELECO CEO came down to provide a statement about his knowledge of it. He seems clean, but it appears that the X-S may be involved. And today, I finally remembered where I'd heard about it. From our connection to Schoenfield. The X-S is his place, isn't it?"

"Used to be. He still lives up there. What's the story?"

As Hal told him, Martin sank deeper into his chair, and finally got up for a refill on his Laphroaig.

"Actually, this isn't the end of the world. He's the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Education, but he's not the committee chair. There's some rule about being chair of only one committee at a time and he's chair of something else, law enforcement, I think. But you're right about his being our patron. We're his baby. Especially since we've been doing so well in football."

"So if this business with the X-S involves him, somehow, we may lose an important political ally."

Martin took another sip of the scotch.

"Yes, but I don't think it'll be the end of the world. I have a kind of bad feeling about him. Ever since we won the national championship three years ago, I've wondered about him. I remember he was congratulating me at some meeting or other, and then he launched into a monologue about how it was too bad we had to use all that imported talent and couldn't win with students from around here. The big,

strong ranch boys, he said. He also implied that we were somehow forced by political correctness, the diversity issue, to import all the non-local talent. So he was treading very, very close to issues of race, and it seemed like he was on the wrong side. It's bothered me ever since."

"I imagine you didn't come to the defense of our diversity program."

"Not hardly. You know that I don't like to go looking for trouble. But, anyway, if he takes a fall of some kind, I'm not going to panic. Hmm. I think I will make a point of finding out who's the second-ranking person on the education committee, however."

"So, if he doesn't own the X-S any longer, who does?"

"I'm not sure. He told me, kind of bragging, about how he set up a trust, gave the ranch over to it as a tax deduction, and has a deal to live there. He was talking like he ran the thing but that no one could really prove it. There's some kind of foundation that gets the income from the ranch. He didn't go into detail, and I probably wouldn't remember it anyway. But, look, like I said, I think he's chair of the law enforcement committee. Which would oversee the CBI. Seems like that would have some implications, to say the least. Does Annette know about this?"

"The foundation part. It's called Resources For Humanity. She didn't seem to know about Schoenfield last night, though. I'll fill her in."

Hal poured himself a touch more soda water.

"So she told you that Shure talked about some white power group, or something like that?"

"Aryan Rights Foundation, I think it was. It's been in contact with Shure, apparently trying to recruit him. And they seem to be behind the murder of that lawyer that Shure met up by Norwood."

"Which means that if the X-S is involved, Schoenfield is probably involved in this Aryan thing and maybe the murder. I think I'll have a chat with President Black and see if we can start to distance ourselves from him. Having a right-wing patron is one thing, but having a racist one, who's involved in a murder to boot, is another."

Martin was looking off into space, thinking, evaluating.

"Right. If that bunch I was just meeting with were to find out, there'd be hell to pay."

"Bunch?" Martin's eyebrows went up.

"The SS&H faculty. You asked me to facilitate their reorg, remember? These folks are the stewards of political correctness, even more than the arts faculty. They'd rather see the U go belly-up than to have a white power group's support."

"Well, for once I may just agree with them. But my job is to make sure that we can stay solvent without that support. Since you mentioned it, though, is that SS&H reorg making progress?"

"Oh, about what you'd expect. I think I have them convinced that combining their talents and leveraging resources is more likely to be productive than back-stabbing. But don't expect any major changes in the college's structure, like new departments or anything like that. They'll probably agree to form some kind of joint planning committee, though. Maybe that'll make things work."

"I'm grateful for your doing this, Hal. The acting dean has his hands full, and we need to get our house in order before we do a search for a new dean. My job will be to find the right candidate to put the final touches on what you're starting."

"And, right now, my job is to get home and put together dinner. Annette likes her new assignment, but she sure has a weird schedule."

“Which won’t get better if Schoenfield really is involved in all this stuff. Good luck, Hal.”

* * *

Southeastern Utah, being big and mostly empty, breeds people who think nothing of a 200-mile drive for lunch. It was therefore not surprising that the investigators from the Utah State Patrol had decided to commute rather than to stay over in Durango. What was surprising was that Reid Tompkins, Esq., agreed to postpone until afternoon the joint interview involving Lolly Markham, himself, the CBI, and the Utah crew.

Normally, Lolly would not have stayed in custody for so long without being charged with something. Annette was prepared to do that, but her best shot at the moment was pilfering license plates. She was therefore pleased that Tompkins had asked for the afternoon session.

What she didn’t know was that Tompkins needed the extra time to prepare his client. And what *he* didn’t know was that his client wasn’t her usual pliable self.

“Lolly, we don’t have a lot of time, so we really need to put it to good use.”

She had been pacing about the private interview room and now stopped, leaned over the table toward him, and looked daggers his way.

“Up yours, Tompkins. I’m the one who’s been stuck in this rat hole. Get me out of here!”

“I can do that, and will. After they question you. And we need to be ready.”

“Ready for what? I think I’ll just tell them what happened!”

Tompkins took a minute to suppress the fear surging through his nervous system. Lolly, he saw, was staring at him defiantly. Definitely looking her age, and then some. Bedraggled and, well, puffy. He’d brought lunch, but she was apparently on a hunger strike. Not that losing a few pounds would hurt her.

“Lolly, there’s no reason to do that. You’re just as committed to what we’re all trying to accomplish as I am. And we have to stick with our story, or our whole effort will be ruined.”

He paused and summoned up a sincere expression.

“And you know that I’m still in love with you. I won’t let them hurt you.”

She had been staring out the window, arms crossed against her ample chest. Then the magic words had their effect, and her icy defiance began to melt.

He stood up, walked around the little table, and wrapped her in hug.

“It’ll be OK, I promise. Look, why don’t you eat something. I got all this stuff from the deli. And let’s talk about how to handle these people.”

“Reid, it was so lonely and cold here last night.” Sniff. “You feel so warm. Mmm. Oh, what’s happening here, you naughty boy? Do you want to warm me up? Hmm?”

She sank to her knees in front of him and began fumbling with his belt buckle.

“Here? Lolly, we don’t have any time for this right now.”

“Oh, c’mon, Reid, it never takes you much time.”

Maybe she was on the slippery slope toward middle age, but she still knew that playing the coquette would push his buttons. He stepped back, embarrassed by his reaction to her.

“Lolly, we’ve got to be ready when those CBI people come in. Look, I’ll take you to the Strater tonight, after we get you out of here, OK? Then we can take as long as we want. With champagne and oysters.”

He sat back down on the other side of the table.

“Getting older, baby? Need oysters these days?”

She licked her lips, showing more tongue than was really needed.

“Lolly! Get with it, OK? Now. Tell me again what they told you when they picked you up yesterday.”

Now she was pouting.

“Well, just that she was with the CBI and needed to question me. I asked what about and she wouldn’t say. We got down here, and I was scared, so I started asking for you. They told me they would provide a lawyer if I needed one, but I kept asking for you. And I asked what are we waiting for and they told me that you couldn’t get here right away. That’s all I know.”

“OK, well, here’s what I know. Remember when you were in the car over in Monticello, and that sheriff’s deputy was talking to you? He saw your tattoo, because I heard that there was a description of it being circulated. And I’m certain that before he got out to talk to you he called in the license plate number. That’s standard procedure. So they know about the stolen plates and probably found you through the tattoo somehow. I think that the thing to do is to stick with the story you told the deputy. About getting away to think after a fight with your husband.”

“Except I don’t have a husband.”

“Right. OK, so he becomes a boyfriend. You told the deputy that it was your husband because it’s Utah and you wanted to sound respectable, OK?”

“OK. And his name is ordinary, like, like, Robert Jones, OK? Uh, Bob. Right?”

She was beginning to get interested in creating the story.

“Sure. Now, they’re going to ask where you were staying, I mean, what motel. You had a fight and had to get away from him. So you left him somewhere. A motel. Has to be a motel because it was, what, three in the morning?”

“OK. What motel?”

“I checked, and there’s a Super 8. They’ll find out, probably, that there wasn’t a ‘Robert Jones’ registered, though. So tell them that you think that maybe he registered with a fake name. Because you’re not married and it’s Utah. That’s consistent with the boyfriend thing. And consistency is what we need.”

“What about the stolen license plates?”

“It was Bob’s car and you didn’t know they were stolen. Just that he lives in Cortez, you met him at a bar, pick your favorite one here in Durango, and you went away for a few days together. To Moab. To go camping. Got it?”

“Uh, I think so. New boyfriend, met him in a bar. Robert Jones, from Cortez. Went camping in Moab, in his car, that green Blazer. Stayed in the Super 8 in Monticello because it was too late and we were tired. He told me he was using a fake name, because it’s Utah, but didn’t tell me the name. Had an argument, about sex, why not?” She winked at him, and his body tingled. “Went for a drive to think, and the deputy stopped to talk to me. That’s all I know.”

“Great! Lolly, you sure do a good job of hiding your smarts sometimes. And, listen, if they ask you anything you have a concern about answering, don’t answer. Look at me. I’ll be right beside you, and I can guide you. This is what they expect anyway. I’ll whisper in your ear.”

“Blow in my ear and I’ll follow you anywhere, lover.”

The tingle returned, and he began wondering how much time they really had.

But then there were noises in the hallway, several people, with keys.

* * *

Nine

Although the Reverend was part of Schoenfield’s inner circle, he wasn’t privy to everything. The final planning meeting for the ambush in Boulder involved only the Senator and his operatives Pickle and Mad Dog.

“We’re all set, Senator. Equipment’s ready and in place, all tested and everything. But I have to keep telling you, I don’t think there’s much of a chance for accuracy with this set-up.”

“And like I keep telling you, Pickle, don’t sweat it. Just the event will send our message. Go over this one more time for me, willya? I need to hear the details again.”

“Well, Senator, like I’ve told you, this all started with an opportunity we heard about. There was this article in the paper about how the White House announced a visit by the President to NCAR, in Boulder. And how NCAR was going to get all fancied up for the visit, including refurbishing some of its educational displays. They have a bunch of old scientific instruments, and some newer displays, in their lobby, and school kids and the public just love it.”

Pickle squirmed in his leather chair, trying to get more comfortable.

“So,” he continued, “it seems that one of the displays is this old telescope, originally invented by one of the NCAR scientists to look at the Sun and to record something about it I don’t understand. Sunspots or something. This guy, the inventor, he’s retired now. But NCAR asks him to polish up this old telescope for the President’s visit. There was another newspaper story about this, in the *Denver Post*, one of those human interest things. So they pack it up and the guy works on it in his garage. When you expressed interest in making your statement, well, I figured this was an opportunity not to pass up. So we, ah, worked with this old guy to help him polish up his telescope. That’s how we got the equipment installed. The rifle is inside the telescope tube, mounted so that it can fire down into the main part of the lobby from the balcony it’s sitting on. It’s completely hidden, so no one will find it unless they completely disassemble the whole thing. The camera is also inside the tube, but the lens is on the outside. It looks just like it’s supposed to be part of the instrument.”

Schoenfield was staring at the ceiling, trying to find flaws.

“And so it’s in place and all you have to do is use the remote controller to turn it on and watch for the target. What’s the plan for your cover? The remote doesn’t have lots of range, I expect.”

“Pest control. We’ve got signs and uniforms to make the van look just like a pest control truck. It’ll need paint, too, but that’s easy. That way, we can park in the subdivision down the hill from the laboratory and be inconspicuous. That’s within the range of the transmitter. Then we wait, trigger the rifle when we see a chance, and drive away while there’s still confusion at the laboratory. Then we’ll

take the signs off the truck, probably down in the parking lot of that big shopping center at the base of the hill, change clothes, and head back here.”

“Right. And this old guy. The retired scientist who first invented this, this telescope instrument you got access to?”

“Well, he’s decided to take a long, long trip to a remote place. Left in a big hurry. No one knows his itinerary.”

Pickle didn’t succeed in looking innocent.

“Sounds solid. And you got that special message on the bottom of the controller box, right? It’ll be amusing, and it’ll confuse things further.”

“All set.”

“Great. Now. How are you coming with plans to deal with Mr. High-and-Mighty Charles Shure?”

Pickle looked uncomfortable, and Mad Dog’s eye wandered more randomly than ever.

“That’s going to be a tough one, Senator. See, he’s got this driver, the same one who was up this way last month, who’s really more of a body guard. And he’s using an armored car these days. You said you wanted an accident, and so we’ve been trying to fix some kind of traffic deal. But I don’t know.”

“Hmm. Let me think some more about it. I don’t guess there’s any real hurry. In fact, if we wait, he’ll become less and less concerned and maybe ease up on the security a bit. Stop using that armored car, drive himself, and so on. Or maybe we can think of another kind of accident. He must fly places. How about some kind of airplane accident?”

“He has a corporate jet and a helicopter. And he flies commercial a lot. I’m not sure I could get a commercial plane down, though. And, anyway, remember that all aircraft accidents are investigated by the feds, right? And, of course, airport security is a tough nut these days. Isn’t there some other way we could get back at this guy?”

Schoenfield, although autocratic, also knew when to listen to advice, especially from an expert such as this.

“Got something in mind, Pickle?”

“Well, do we really need a hit? I mean, couldn’t we get him through his company, or something like that? From what you’ve told me, his company is his life.”

“Yeah, well, I own stock in that company, and I sure don’t want to shoot myself in the foot.”

“So sell it. Divest. Then we could call Timmy and see if he has any ideas.”

A smile materialized on Schoenfield’s grim face, little by little becoming an intense, evil grin. His left eye twitched a little.

“Timmy. Sure. I hadn’t thought of him. He does good work, doesn’t he?”

* * *

Mostly, Hal’s habit of coming in around mid-morning in the summer worked fine. He could get some work done in the peace and quiet of home, and nothing much was happening up on campus anyway.

On the other hand, sometimes there was.

He arrived at about 10:00 the next day, looking forward, for once, to the budget meeting he had scheduled with the provost at 11:00. He was going to be able to present John Martin with some good

news: his college was going to finish the fiscal year with a slight surplus. And there was nothing else on his schedule.

But then he walked into his office, into the ante-room, Alice's little domain. And there on the couch, nodding, presumably, to whatever was emanating from his headphones, was a young man, a student by his age. Coffee-colored skin, fairly well muscled, far too tall to fit comfortably on the couch—his knees were practically touching his chin—probably a student athlete. At least he should be, Hal thought. The basketball team could use all the help it could get.

“Morning Alice.”

“Good morning, Dean Weathers. This is Jamal Washington. Here to see you.” She raised her voice a few decibels. “Mr. Washington? MR. WASHINGTON?”

His eyes opened, and he smiled and began to unfold himself from the couch. The process went on for some time, and included his pushing a button on the gadget the earphones were plugged into and removing them from his head. Finally, he was standing, towering over Hal by about a foot.

“Mr. Washington, this is Dean Weathers. Dean Weathers, Mr. Washington tells me he was sent over here by the Athletic Director to discuss tutoring.”

Hal's synapses clicked into place. Feeling short, he extended a hand, in an upward direction, to the student.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Washington. Come in to my office. I think I have a chair that will fit you better than this couch.”

They settled themselves—Hal's side chair was still far too small—and Hal guessed that the young man would be shy.

“So Charlie, I mean, the Athletic Director, sent you over to talk to me about tutoring, hmm?”

“Yes, sir. He wants my grades up so I'll be eligible to play this fall.”

“Play...”

“Play ball. Basketball. I've got a scholarship, but my grades are, um, too low.”

“What about you? Do you want your grades up? I mean, sure you do, so you can play. But what about besides that?”

“Well, my Momma would sure like that. And I guess I would, too. But the science course I signed up for looks pretty tough for me. And I don't know about the computer course.”

Hal smiled, a friendly smile, he hoped, and looked out the window.

“Jamal Washington. Now why does that name ring a bell? Do I remember your name from the all-state team?”

“Well, I was on the all-state team. On the Parade All-American Team, first team, too.”

“Right! That's right. And you took a scholarship to come here, huh? How come? I mean, you must have been recruited by the big-time schools, Duke and Arizona and so on.”

“My Momma, she wanted me to come here. My brother went here, and she was real impressed with the school.”

“Your brother...”

“Radford. He played football. He graduated a couple of years ago.”

“Radford Washington? Oh, yeah. Defensive lineman when we won the national championship. I met him a couple of times. A good guy. Big, but not as tall as you. Fast. And smart. He always seemed to know if a play was going to be a run or a pass. Sacked a lot of quarterbacks that way. Let’s see. He went to the Bears in the second round, right?”

Jamal was clearly impressed with Hal’s knowledge of Frémont State sports. “Yeah, but he busted up his knee in training camp. But, see, what impressed my Momma so much was that he got a job in the Bears’ front office, on account of his education here. So here I am. Also, it’s a lot closer to Denver than Duke and some of those other schools that offered me scholarships. And my Momma, she wasn’t going to let me go up to Boulder, no way.”

“I don’t remember you from last year’s team, so this is going to be your first year?”

“Well, I was here, red-shirted so I could get my grades up. Also so I could put on some weight. Coach, he says that I’ll get knocked around out there and I need to be stronger. So I’ve been trying to bulk up and get my balance improved, stuff like that. Anyway, I thought I was doing OK with my grades. But then some committee changed the rules.”

“Oh. Right. Well, it’s appropriate that you’re here, because that’s my fault. I was on that committee. We raised the requirements earlier this month. Sorry.”

“It’s OK. I just have to get ‘A’s—in that Intro to Natural Science course I’m going to take this summer and that computer course, and I should be OK to play. Before, ‘B’s would have been good enough.”

“Are you worried about the courses?”

“Well, they look hard, but no. Um, mostly, no. But I don’t know about an ‘A,’ especially in that science course. That’s, like, something different for me.”

Well, normally a ‘B’ in that course would be something to be proud of. We designed the course to be challenging.”

“What’s covered?”

“Just what it says, ‘Introduction to Natural Sciences.’ A little geography, geology, weather and climate and some oceanography, some ecology, and so on. It’s the first third of the elective sequence for the general majors, like that university studies program. Are you in that?”

“No, I’m in theater and dance. I figured the dance part would help my moves on the court. And I kind of like acting. What are the other electives?”

“Two other courses in the departments. You pick based on what you’re interested in, like a geology course and an ecology course.”

“You said weather, huh? Maybe I’ll take that one. People are always asking me ‘How’s the weather up there?’ and I need a snappy answer.”

“Hey, get interested in it, combine it with theater training, and become the world’s tallest TV weather guy. In the meantime tell them that it’s OK but that the contrails make you sneeze.”

“Say what? Uh, sir?”

“Contrails. You know, those stripes of clouds that are made by jets, condensation trails. Someone asks you how the weather is up there and you hit them with that one. A snappy answer that will shut them up. When it gets worn out, we can think up another one. The more absurd the better. Unless you like being asked that kind of thing.”

“Well, no, I really don’t. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“I don’t blame you. Hit ’em with something like that contrail answer, though, and I bet they stop asking.”

“Uh, I’ll think about it. But what about the weather guy thing?”

“Sure. You’re good looking, you speak well, especially for your age, and you said you like acting. Learn some weather stuff and get a job with a TV station. After your basketball career, I mean. But first we’ve got to get you to an ‘A’ this summer. Let me make a couple of phone calls and we’ll set you up with a tutor. And you can always come and see me if you need a second opinion, like another explanation for confusing things. Like the Coriolis force.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s what makes weather systems spin, you know, like you see on satellite loops on TV.”

“Coriolis? That some foreign word?”

“A guy’s name, who first figured it out. I think. Anyway, a famous weather guy from a hundred years ago, or more, I guess. Point is, the Coriolis force gets everyone confused the first time through. If you can’t understand it well enough to explain it to your teammates, come see me and I’ll help you with it.”

“Well, thanks. I don’t think the AD was expecting a dean to tutor me, though.”

“Probably not. But it’s summer and I have the time. Besides, it’ll make the basketball season that much more interesting for me. And we can also help you find a computer tutor, if you need one.”

“Cool. I appreciate it. I’m good with computer games but, uh, I kind of think that the course will cover other things. I’m sure I’ll need help.”

“That’s why we’re here. We’ll help and try to make this as interesting for you as we can.”

* * *

“So, that’s her story and she’s sticking with it, huh?”

Derek Petersen was amused, in contrast to Annette’s disgust.

“Yep. It’s always remarkable to me that people believe they can conjure truth from fiction. And consider the contrast between Charles Shure and his driver the other day and this Markham person. The story they told left us satisfied, like dinner at a four-star restaurant. The story told by Markham and her lawyer was more like scrounging appetizers from a dumpster. And they expect us to believe it.”

“Has she identified this boyfriend?”

“That’s our next step. She’s shielding him, for now. The lawyer, this guy from Cortez, Tompkins, I think, was whispering in her ear the whole time. Actually, it was surprising. He seemed more nervous than she. I checked on him, and he’s not really a criminal attorney, just an environmental lawyer. Sues the Forest Service a lot, on behalf of advocacy groups. So why he’s representing her is another interesting question. She insisted on him.”

They were sitting in Derek’s cluttered office catching up on each other’s work load. As much as she was bored with it, Annette knew she needed to stay informed about her budget and other administrative matters, and she had quickly learned that Derek appreciated being kept up to date on the progress of investigations. As Annette was staring out the window trying to talk herself into a better mood, Sally Brigman walked in.

“Oh, here you are. I was just going to ask Mr. Petersen if he knew where you went. This fax just came in for you.”

She handed Annette a sheaf of papers.

“Thanks, Sally. Hmm. Five pages from the Mineral County Sheriff. You know him, Derek?”

“Sure. Ralph Wertlinger. Under-funded, under-paid, over-worked. Mineral County is one of the poor ones. Good guy, but stuck in a lousy situation.”

“Says here his guys found a corpse. No, some lumber mill guys found it and called Ralph’s guys. Let’s see. Looks like an accident, sort of. White male carrying the Colorado Driver’s License of one David Wellington, of Alamosa, crushed beneath a collapsed log pile. Along with his car. The body looks like the CDL picture, as much as they can tell through the damage and decomposition.”

“A lumber-mill accident? Not unusual, although they don’t happen nearly as often as they did in the old days.”

“Except that they have questions.”

Annette began ticking items off on her fingers.

“Like, what was the victim doing there? Why did the pile collapse? Why was he out of his car? Uh, he was found between the crushed car and the center of the pile. It says his pants were unzipped so they’re speculating he was taking a leak. And when did this happen? Looks like it was several days ago, but they don’t know exactly, yet.”

“They asking for help?”

“Not here.”

She had shuffled rapidly through the paper.

“They’re just letting us know what they have. A note here says that we’ll see it in the paper, but they wanted to inform us officially.”

“Protocol. You’ll find that some of the counties are better than others. Like I said, Ralph’s a good guy.”

“You’ve met him, then?”

“A couple of times. Talked on the phone a few times, too.”

“Maybe we could call him and you could introduce me. On the speaker.”

“I hate those things. But, yeah, that’s a good idea. Is there a number on that fax?”

She shuffled through the paper some more, and he dug around on his desktop, looking for the speaker phone. She found a number, and he found the phone.

“Sheriff’s office, Darla speakin’.”

“Darla, this is Derek Petersen, CBI over in Durango. We just got a fax from you folks. Is Ralph around?”

“Did you get all five pages? I never trust this thing.”

“All five, nice and clear.”

“Great. Here’s Ralph.”

“Derek! How are ya? I hear you got stuck behind a desk.”

“I did indeed. Think I’m already gaining weight. Ralph, I want to introduce you to Bob Weldon’s replacement, Annette Trieri. She’s here on a speaker phone.”

“Sheriff Wertlinger, nice to talk with you. I’m planning to get over your way as soon as I get the chance, so I can meet you personally. I’m sorry that I’ve been too busy getting my feet under me to make it over there yet.”

“I understand completely. Don’t think of it. Nice to talk with you as well, Ms. Trieri. We’ve heard a lot about you. Good things. I bet you’re calling about that fax we sent your way.”

“Indeed we are. I’m impressed with how complete it is, given that you just found the body this morning.”

“Well, superficially, it’s transparent. Guy’s hanging around a pile of logs that collapses and squishes him. And his car. Naturally, we’re looking beyond the superficial. And that’s not quite so transparent.”

“My thoughts also.”

“We found out a little more about him since this morning, assuming he was carrying his own driver’s license. He was an environmental activist from Alamosa. Worked at Adams State College, in the admissions office. I’m told he was trying to get a student group started, probably modeled on one of the groups over your way, at Frémont State.”

“Are there specific indications that this wasn’t an accident?”

“Well, that’s one of the things we’re looking into. Ya see, this happened some days ago, maybe a week. The guys at the mill finally figured out something was wrong by the smell. Nobody noticed it before because the log pile looked just like all the others.”

Annette looked at Derek Petersen, puzzled. “Huh?”

“Well, see, this pile of logs collapsed and squished this guy, but it collapsed into the same size and, uh, configuration as all the other ones, their usual stack of big logs. So that means it was different before it collapsed. So maybe someone set this up, by re-piling the logs in that pile in a way so that they’d collapse back into the original configuration. And then they pushed them over on this guy Wellington.”

Annette looked startled and sat down, carefully, in Derek Petersen’s side chair.

“Sheriff? One reason I was hired here was to tackle a case, or set of cases, that haven’t received much publicity. Over the past year or so there have been nine or ten suspicious deaths, some definitely murder, of people active in environmental issues. All here in the Four Corners region. A couple in New Mexico, one in Arizona, one in Utah. All with very clean crime scenes, and a couple possibly accidental. Your crushed guy sounds like he could be part of this pattern.”

“Well that sure puts a different light on things.”

“The other Colorado cases are all over the place. A double murder, a car bomb, west of Antonito; an execution—bullet in the back of the head—at the Four Corners Monument; a car accident over by Cedaredge; another double homicide up in Boulder. And, just last month, another execution over by Norwood, with the same gun as the Four Corners Monument one. One of the two in New Mexico could have been an accident, guy fell off the Taos bridge into the Rio Grande Gorge. The other one, and the ones in Arizona and Utah, were definitely homicides.”

“Ma’am, could I put you on hold for just a second? I want to call my guys over at the scene and tell them we’ve got a homicide on our hands, probably.”

They heard the clunk of the receiver's being set down and then a jumble of background noise, including mumbling sounds that could only have been instructions.

"Hello? You folks still there? Thanks for holding on."

"Would you like us to send a forensics team over? Uh, I don't mean to suggest you folks can't handle things, you understand. It just seems like we should offer."

Annette was treading carefully. Her relationships with the sheriffs of the counties around Durango were solid, but she hadn't dealt with Mineral County before. Getting off on the right foot seemed wise.

"Well, I don't know that it'd be worth the effort. I mean, thanks for the offer and all, but I don't think there's much here. We'll take the car to our garage and go over it carefully, and it'll be there if you want to have a look at it. So there's no hurry there. And the scene was pretty well disturbed by the time all the logs got moved off the body and the car. The guys from the mill are saying that it looks as if the logs were moved about a week ago, they were looking at cuts on the bark and so on. Which would fit with someone fixing that pile so it would collapse easily. That, I mean moving the logs, would require machines, but all of the mill's big machinery has been in use ever since. So there's not going to be anything there to find. We'll do an autopsy, of course, but I don't think anything remarkable will come from that. This guy Wellington was squished by the logs, pure and simple. And we're already working with the folks in Alamosa, looking for anything at his residence. Maybe there will be something in his files or in his mail, or something like that."

"Well, if there's anything we can do, please do call us in. I'm told it's our job to help and not to grab headlines or credit from you folks. And it seems like that's the way things have been done, according to the sheriffs I know from around here. It'll sure be the way I'm going to run things."

"Tell you what, Ms. Trieri. You take the headlines and I'll take the credit. If I get in the papers too much, nobody around here is going to vote for me no matter what. Anyway, we'll keep you up to date on what we find out. And we'll yell for help if we need it, you can be sure."

"Don't hesitate. Nice talking with you. I'll get over your way as soon as I can."

* * *

Timothy Langer was frustrated, stage four in the evolution of his emotions. He was finding the process of trying to hack his way into the UNELECO servers to be an emotional roller-coaster.

At first he'd been surprised and amused that he couldn't work his way in via the usual back-door security holes. But they were all patched, some by means of algorithms he'd never heard of, never even dreamed of. Then he was outraged that the sophisticated tricks he knew of to gain access via the UNELECO web site didn't work—they always did, *always*. But UNELECO's web site, the interesting part, had some kind of triply circular firewall system, and getting through that required use of two separate one-time-only passwords. After that, when his personal bag of e-mail tricks failed him, he was simply in awe. Now, while waiting for a brute-force attack to have its inevitable success, he was getting frustrated. Bored from waiting and frustrated from failure.

Normally, he'd simply find something else to do while waiting, but he was under no little pressure. This particular client, unlike others, was not interested in excuses, no matter how valid they might be. He wanted results, yesterday. Because the brute-force attack simply could not be rushed, however, Timothy was forced to wait. And wait. And hope that his client wouldn't call to check on progress.

It made him feel better that it was only this first time through the firewalls that would require patience. Once inside, he would set up a hidden login account, probably piggy-backed onto an existing

administrative one, and in the future it would be trivial. But for now, patience was more than a virtue, it was mandatory. There was simply no choice.

With the waiting, he had time to think. It occurred to him that he really didn't have a plan once his attack succeeded. Of course, there would be the usual housekeeping to be done, associated with creating his hidden login and so on. But his instructions were simply to snoop around and see what kind of system UNELECO had and what its vulnerabilities might be. This, he realized, reflected merely the computational naïveté of his client, because he knew that he wouldn't be finding one system but rather a network of all sorts of systems, each with its own peculiarities and vulnerabilities. Once inside the UNELECO firewall, these vulnerabilities would be unprotected, Timothy figured, at least if his experience with other corporate and governmental local area networks was any indication.

Remembering his experience made him smile. The worst was that server at the state police headquarters. Of course, they were cops, not computer jocks, but, really, there was no excuse for that sloppy level of security. He'd had no trouble at all tapping into their files. This had made his client very happy indeed. On the other hand, the best security so far was at Microsoft. Maybe because they developed their own operating system, they knew how to keep it secure. Or maybe they were all just afraid of Uncle Bill. Others that should be solid really weren't, like at the CIA and some of the other three-letter agencies in Washington. But they were pretty good, he thought, and that would keep everyone out but experts like himself.

He wondered if the UNELECO network would include its classified servers as well as all of the other ones. He'd seen from their public web site that they did a lot of work for the military, and their job postings talked a lot about ability to get and maintain security clearances. Classified systems were always a little more challenging than open systems, so he was hoping he'd be able to find some to try to get into. He liked challenges.

He was startled from his reverie by the ringing telephone, his cell phone making tweedling noises.

"Hello? This is Tim."

"Timmy, my boy. How are things going? Making any progress?"

"Oh, hello, sir. So far, it's not the kind of progress I'd like, but it is progress. I found out what won't work. Now I'm trying what will, but it's a slow process."

Tim hoped his nervousness didn't come through in his voice.

"I thought you told me it would be finished by now."

"Ah, well, sir, I told you that I hoped it would be. But it turns out that these folks have quite solid computer security. And now all I can do is work my way in by brute force."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, I found the names of various accounts on their systems by looking carefully at the UNELECO web site. Now what I'm doing is trying to access one of those accounts by using passwords in sequence, the computer does it from passwords from in a dictionary, sort of. So it just takes time."

"What if they notice all the failed attempts?"

"This is always an issue, but what I'm doing is rotating among login names rather than using the same one all the time. And I set it up so that it will look to their computer as if these attempts are coming from different places, so they shouldn't notice anything strange. See, this kind of thing happens to big systems all the time."

"How long?"

“I really can’t say precisely. It’s never taken longer than three days with other systems, though. Uh, sir? One thing I thought of is that I really don’t know what to look for when I’m in there snooping around. Could you give me some guidance?”

“What I want you to do is to get established on the UNELECO network without arousing suspicion. Then we wait a few days to let dust settle and let you figure out what their network is like, what kinds of computers and all that. I remember when you set up your access on the state patrol and CBI system that it took you some time to figure out its layout. UNELECO’s is probably lots bigger and more complicated. So when you get in there, check out the layout, and then I’ll get back to you in a few days. But first you’ve got to get in. Is there some way to speed up the process?”

“Well, I could use a more powerful system than this one I have here at home.”

“Why aren’t you doing that already? You know I’m in a hurry. And you know how I dislike waiting.”

Langer shuddered at the implied threat.

“I could use one of the systems at the university, but that would increase the risk, some. And I know that you want this to be done carefully.”

“But you know I’m in a hurry. Why would it increase the risk? And how would it speed things up?”

“A more powerful computer, like a real workstation, could run lots of my scripts in parallel, try lots of logins simultaneously, sort of. But sometimes the systems people watch processes and someone could notice what I’m doing. That’s never happened to me, but it could.”

“Timmy, you know I’m in a hurry. Let’s pick up the pace, OK? After all, I’m paying you quite handsomely for this, aren’t I? And I’m also keeping quiet about our little secret, aren’t I?”

“Yes, sir, Senator, you are, on both counts. And I appreciate it, I really do. I’ll speed things up as much as I can, I promise.”

“You do that, Timmy. I’ll give you a call tomorrow to see how things are going.”

“Yes sir. I’ll give it everything I’ve got, to get into that system.”

There was the sound of a telephone receiver being clunked down on the other end, but Timothy was shaking too much to hear it.

* * *

Ten

The story finally appeared in the next morning’s papers. “Alamosa Resident Crushed at Creede Lumber Mill” led into the *Durango Herald’s* subdued treatment, in which the facts were reported along with remaining questions, and a brief biography of David Wellington served as an obituary. The *Frémont Free Press*, true to form, played up the industrial accident angle and declared Wellington to be a hero with its headline “Environmentalist Martyred at Mill.” The story talked of conspiracies spun by the logging industry, of Wellington’s valiant fight to preserve old-growth forests, and of the day in the future when trees would be accorded the same rights as people.

Steve Rutherford’s heart was with the *Free Press*, but his head was with the *Herald*. It was clear to him that there were unanswered questions, but surely, he thought, they would be the object of an

investigation, if not by the sheriff over in Creede then by the timber company. He knew some of the people who ran the mill there, including the owners of the mom-and-pop outfit calling itself Upper Rio Industries, and there was no way that they were part of a conspiracy. The *Free Press* was full of it. But, still, there were some strange inconsistencies.

If this weren't bad news enough, it appeared that his friends in SCREW had taken the name of their organization a little too literally. Tompkins had called, from Lolly's place, according to Rutherford's caller ID, at 7:00 this morning. He wanted them all to get together to discuss how to deal with Lolly's legal predicament. It seemed that the CBI was insisting that Lolly produce this boyfriend with whom she'd been staying in Monticello. Plan A, Tompkins said, was for Rutherford to play the part. On his drive over to Lolly's, Rutherford was working hard on formulating a Plan B. For one thing, he wasn't going to just play at being Lolly's boyfriend while Tompkins was actually enjoying being her boyfriend. For another, he had already thought through the down side: how would he explain to the CBI and the Utah cops about those license plates?

He pulled up in front of Lolly's small bungalow on the west bluff. The neighborhood had undergone a renaissance over the past couple of decades, with most of the small houses, originally built by the coal company for its workers, having been remodeled and upgraded to modern standards. Lolly had mentioned wanting to remodel her house but, obviously, this hadn't happened yet. It needed new siding and a roof, and window upgrades seemed in order. The yard was also neglected compared to the neighbors.

Rutherford gathered his thoughts as well as the newspapers. Tompkins hadn't mentioned anything about Wellington during the earlier phone call, and they all needed to discuss that one as well as how to play Lolly's story, so he'd brought reference material.

As he was getting out of the car, he heard a noise from the house and looked up to see Lolly hurrying down the walk toward him. Wearing, well, not much. A lightweight summer bathrobe over a nightie. Both pretty transparent. Damn, he thought, they *are* big.

"Bobby, baby, I thought you'd never get here! I'm so glad to see you!"

She waltzed around the car to where he was standing, threw her arms around him, and planted her mouth squarely on his. He felt her tongue insinuating itself between his teeth.

After a long time, at least what felt like a long time, during which she ground her body into his, she stepped back and batted her eyes at him.

"C'mon into the house, honey. Have I got a surprise for you."

She wagged her backside, which made the rest of her waggle in syncopation. Why, he wondered, was she talking so damned loud? Then she practically hauled him up the walk to the front door.

Once inside, it all changed.

"Whew!" She was out of breath, and blushing. "Steve, I'm sorry for that, but we thought we should put on a show for those cops out there. Maybe they got some good pictures. Excuse me, I've got to go put some clothes on."

And she dashed down the hall, her bottom in sublime motion beneath the filmy fabric, and closed a door behind her. Rutherford stood, dumbfounded, staring down the hall.

"I don't think it'll win any Academy Awards, but maybe it'll help."

Tompkins' voice from the living room behind him made Rutherford spin around, his anger rising as his erection fell.

“What the hell was that all about? I thought we were going to discuss this whole thing, but now you’ve got me up to my eyeballs in it. Goddammit! There’s no need to keep getting in deeper with this. All we have to do is stand on the story that we have. Putting me in jeopardy isn’t going to make things better!”

“Steve, Steve, calm down. The CBI wants this boyfriend for questioning. Lolly’s dead meat unless we produce him. It’s got to be you.”

“No it doesn’t. She can claim she doesn’t know him well enough. You gave them a name, right? A name she was supposed to say she thought was fake, right? Just stick with the damned story, man! Except now it’s too late.”

Tompkins tilted his head to the side and stared.

“Hmm. Maybe not. I think maybe we just increased our options. Thing is, they released Lolly on recognizance while they check out her story. Said they would probably want to talk with her again and that they wanted to find this boyfriend. We didn’t promise to produce him, though. Maybe we could stick with the story. It would make her out to be something of a slut, though. Going off for a weekend with a guy whose real name she doesn’t know. I mean, the story so far is that her boyfriend is ‘Bob Jones,’ who probably registered at the Super 8 with a fake name. But ‘Bob Jones’ could also be a fake name. We, I mean, Lolly, already told them that she’d met this guy only recently.”

“She called me ‘Bobby’ out there, man. If the cops were listening... hey, what cops? I didn’t see any cars out there with people in them. Who was that show for?”

“I was watching. Across the street and three cars down. They ducked when you drove by. But they were watching the performance. And it sounded to me like ‘Baby, baby,’ so our options are still open.”

“Well, let’s exercise those options. Better she should come across to the cops as a slut than have me questioned about the license plates and everything else. The more people we have trying to tell the same lie, the more likely we’re going to screw up.”

“Who’s a slut?”

Lolly emerged, wearing jeans and a tee shirt, both opaque, to Rutherford’s simultaneous disappointment and, because he really didn’t need the distraction, relief.

“Nobody, at least not here. What we were saying is that maybe we can avoid producing your boyfriend, this Bob Jones character, by just letting them think you are. What if ‘Bob Jones’ turns out to be a fake name, too? You don’t know where he lives, or his phone number. You just met him in a bar and then went off for a weekend in Moab with him.”

“I guess that would make me kind of a slut, wouldn’t it?”

“But who cares what they think, as long as this all fades away? It’s like this: They let you go, you stay around and act cooperative, and this Bob Jones character never calls or anything so you don’t know how to find him. He’s a jerk, love ’em and leave ’em, wham-bam thank you ma’am, all that. You’re pissed at him for not calling. But since he hasn’t, you can’t put the cops onto him. Does this make sense?”

Tompkins had bought into the story completely, to Rutherford’s relief.

“It sure makes sense to me. Lolly can kiss me any time she takes a notion to, but we’ve got to quit embellishing this story, or we’re dead.”

Rutherford was watching Lolly as he said this, and he was gratified to see her blush again. It made him tingle.

“Well, I guess so. I guess I really don’t care what the cops think of me. I mean, who are they to judge? So, I just sit tight and wait for them to call me?”

“Sure. Life goes on, things are normal, all that.”

“Right. And I’m not the boyfriend of the story no matter the little charade out there. Now. Did you guys hear about Dave?”

Rutherford plopped the newspapers on Lolly’s coffee table.

The plopping noise, transmitted cleanly through the single-pane picture window in Lolly’s living room and picked up by the ultra-sensitive directional microphone aimed at it, made the two undercover officers, one from Utah and one local, wince. In unison, they removed their headphones and griped, the Colorado officer with the more colorful language. Consequently, they missed the part of the conversation inside the house about Wellington’s connection to SCREW and whether the Creede sheriff would bring the others into his investigation.

But the tape machine didn’t miss anything.

* * *

Even though it was something of an emergency meeting, it needed to be formal, very formal. Hal had therefore asked Alice to have Jamie McFarland wait for ten minutes and then to call him on the intercom. He disliked using such intimidating tactics, but sometimes they were for the best. He needed Jamie to be off balance for this one, even if the wait did make her a bit angry. When Alice finally buzzed him, he asked her to send Jamie in.

“Come in, Jamie, please sit down. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Hal was sitting behind his desk, in the Power Seat, and the chair he indicated for Jamie was across from him. Annette sat off to one side of Hal, also in a position of superiority.

“No problem, Dean Weathers. What did you need to see me about?”

She didn’t appear to be overly nervous, Hal noted.

“A telephone call that found its way to me this morning. We have a problem with our systems.”

Jamie, the computer systems administrator for the natural sciences college, instantly went on alert.

“Why would someone call you about a systems problem?”

“The nature of the problem. The fact that the call got routed to me via Provost Martin’s office is a clue to its severity. Another clue is sitting here. Let me introduce Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. She’s the director of the CBI’s southwest office here. The reason I asked you to come in is that we need your help. It seems that someone has been using our systems to try to hack into the computers of UNELECO, some of which are military classified systems. UNELECO has a whiz-bang computer security shop and they traced the attempts to our systems.”

Hal was holding back the bombshell for now.

“Uh, what’s UNELECO?”

“A conglomerate based in Colorado Springs. They got their start in electronics and they still do a lot of R&D work for the military. But they’re also involved in a lot of other things. For example, the outfit that ran that mill over in Utah that got burned down last month—remember?—that’s a UNELECO division, Forest Fiber Products. But this computer attack was on their corporate server network, which includes the military R&D. Their computer security people have been watching this hacker trying to

weasel his way in for some time. Initially, it was happening slowly, the attempts, I mean. Then last night, it picked up and that's when they were able to trace things back to our systems. Before, the attempts were routed through faked-up accounts on a variety of those freebie e-mail hosts floating around out there."

"Our systems, hmm? Well, I can do a process check and see what's been happening for the past couple of days. But I haven't noticed any unusual activity, not that I've been really watching for any."

Time for the bombshell, Hal thought.

"Well, Jamie, one thing that you should know is that this hacker has been using your login account for his attacks."

"What?! How can that be? I have a truly random password, and I change it all the time. And the system root password changes every time. And only I and Bill Brooks have the list. It's not Bill, I'm certain. And of course it's not me. I've got far better things to do. Maybe I have a hidden account on our systems, one that I don't know about."

"Hidden account? What's that?"

"Well, it's possible, if you get system access and know the right tricks, to set up an invisible user account that sort of piggy-backs on a real user. Everything that this piggy-backer does looks as if it's being done by the real user. So someone must be piggy-backing on me and trying to get into these UNELECO computers that way."

Annette cleared her throat gently.

"Ms. McFarland, because I don't know you at all, I'm a neutral observer in this. Dean Weathers, of course, knows you and is therefore biased. I'm sure that you can see that, from a neutral perspective, you'd be under some suspicion here?"

"Naturally. And the best way for me to deal with it, I assume, is to help you, and UNELECO, figure out just what's going on. I infer from what's been said that the hacking attempts have not been successful so far, is that right?"

"That's our inference, too, although I'm not sure that the UNELECO computer people would tell us if they were successful. Whatever the case, it would be nice to catch whoever's doing this. Using state property, that is, your computers, for this is potentially a felony."

"Especially if there's an attack on a military system. That could be a federal felony, I suppose. Normally, what I'd do in a case like this would be to rebuild my login, or the login of whoever's being piggy-backed on. That would wipe out the hidden account. But I guess we need to stick with this and figure out who it is and how they're getting access to our systems."

"Say, I bet it's via an incoming phone line. UNELECO told us that the attack was slow until last night. There could be a phone connection to those floating e-mail hosts. But a phone connection to our systems would allow lots of attempts to be created and run in parallel, right, Jamie?"

Hal was confident that Jamie wasn't behind the attack on UNELECO, and he wanted to enlist her help immediately.

"Could be. We've upgraded our modem pool to have caller ID automated and logged, so if that's the case, we should be able to find who's doing this pretty easily. But then what?"

Annette was ready for that one.

"You ID this person and we'll take it from there. I'll call Charles Shure, he's CEO of UNELECO, I know him from something else, and find out if they want to press charges or what. If you can provide

documentation from your system's logs of this person's activities, we have him, or her, for misuse of state property, at least. And if UNELECO wants their pound of flesh, well, we can get it for them as well. And if UNELECO's secure computers, the classified ones, are involved, well, the FBI may want a piece of this fool."

Jamie's indignance finally spilled over.

"Hey, *I* want a piece of this fool! I say we stick his head on a pike for all to see. If we make a big enough example of him, maybe others will take their hacking skills elsewhere."

"If it's a student, I have a better idea."

Hal knew an opportunity for free tutoring help when he saw one.

* * *

Stage two was by invitation only. Because there would be fewer people attending, stage two meetings were to be held in central locations, and the first, the kick-off meeting, was held in a church basement in Cortez. Invitations had gone out to people in all four states, and a good turnout was expected despite the dominance of Indian Nations in the immediate vicinity. The church—the Temple of Jesus Our Savior—didn't really know the purpose of the "prayer meeting" that the Right Reverend Dr. Michael Oswald had organized, they just appreciated the color of his money.

Oswald checked off names from his invitation list as the men—and all were men—came in through the side door. Farmington and Aztec, New Mexico; Bluff, Blanding, and Monticello, Utah; and a variety of small towns near Cortez in Colorado was represented. Notable for its absence was Arizona, but the northeast corner of Arizona is the land of the *Diné*, and this meeting was not for Native Americans, nor anyone else of non-Aryan background.

After all of the names were checked off, Oswald closed the doors and strolled to the front of the big meeting room. He faced the crowd, a big smile on his face, and waited for the various conversations to subside.

"Evening, everyone. Glad to see y'all here, glad you were able to come. I expect that you've had a chance to look around the room, to check out the others here. I see that some of you know others—I hope that you have a chance to get to know the people you don't. And I hope you appreciate that you're among people you can trust. Every one of you got an invitation to be here, because we know you are with us. We're all starting out on the same page here, and the purpose of our little gathering is to turn some pages together and wind up at the end of the same story. This make sense?"

There was reluctant nodding, a murmuring of agreement in the audience.

"Great!

Oswald was familiar with how long it takes to get a group, especially a new group, worked up.

"Now," he continued, his voice warming to the oration, "Y'all were at one or the other of our first set of meetings, what we refer to as our 'stage-one' meetings. This is stage two. By invitation only. That's because we're going to discuss some things that require trust. If we don't trust each other, well, there's potential for trouble. So we've got to have agreement that what's said in here stays in this room, OK?"

Again, the murmuring, but this time a hand shot up, from near the back.

"Got a question? In the back, there? How about introducing yourself, OK?"

“Uh, yeah, I’m George Sm... Uh, George, from uh, Utah. What about people I trust, people who aren’t here that I’d like to bring in to this?”

“Right. Great question, actually, because we need more recruits. Let me make a suggestion and see what you think of it. Eventually, we want to bring as many people into this as we can. We’ll figure out how to do that as we go along. But now, at first, we need to develop trust among ourselves, and we need to keep this whole thing pretty close, so that it develops a strong foundation. I worry that if we start bringing in too many people too soon, we run the risk of weakening that foundation. So, is it OK to keep things within this group here for now? What do you think, George?”

Oswald was staring directly at the nervous individual standing in the second row from the back.

“Uh, sure, OK, sounds good.”

And he sat down abruptly, obviously relieved. To be under Oswald’s close scrutiny gave him the willies.

“Good. Thanks for the question. Now. You’ll recall that we have behind us the resources of an outfit called Resources For Humanity. This organization is privately funded, so there aren’t any of those stupid restrictions on it that the government has. And it, I mean Resources for Humanity, wants to return the use of the land to the people who live on it. Us. For us to use and prosper. For us to be able to raise our families the way we know is right. Right? Remember this?”

He knew they did, so he plunged ahead.

“So what we’re here for now is to decide how to make this happen. How to reach these goals. It’s pretty clear that what we need to do is to figure out how to get the roadblocks out of our way, the roadblocks that are preventing us from using the land to help us prosper. So. What does that mean? Well, we have to ask what those roadblocks are. Anybody got any ideas?”

Oswald was wondering just how long he’d have to wait to get someone from the audience to volunteer an answer. Not long, it turned out.

“The damned feds!”

The audience mumbled agreement with that sentiment.

“Yeah, the Forest Service.”

“And the EPA!”

“The tree-huggers!”

“Colorado Department of Wildlife!”

The noise level had increased enough for Oswald, so he held up his hands to calm things down.

“This is wonderful. You guys obviously know what I’m talking about. And how to get rid of roadblocks like those is a good question. Even the tree-huggers are pretty damned tenacious. Some of you probably remember the old days, when we used to just beat the snot out of them. Right, I think it was pretty funny, too. But that’s not so effective any more. First, the media gets hold of the story and blows it way out of proportion. Second, they get lawyers. And, of course, the feds and the state guys are even worse—some of them *are* lawyers, and the others are almost cops.

“I don’t know how many of you guys remember your high-school English classes, but I bet the name William Shakespeare rings a bell. If you do remember him, it’s probably because of Macbeth or Hamlet. But he wrote lots of other plays as well. And in one of them, there’s this line where one guy says to another guy ‘First, let’s kill all the lawyers.’ You’ve probably heard that used. What’s not so

well known is that he said this in the context of destabilizing an existing government so they could take it over. By getting rid of the lawyers, the government would be destabilized and ripe for the plucking.”

Oswald looked around the room to make sure everyone was following his logic.

“So what if we apply this strategy to our situation? Well, think of this. What’s driving a lot of the efforts of the feds and the state guys is the tree-huggers. They lobby, they hire lawyers, they elect soft-headed liberal politicians. So how do you suppose we could fix this?”

The voice from the third row was unequivocal.

“Kill all the tree-huggers!”

“You got it. And you know what? I’ve heard that there have been several of these tree-hugger types biting the dust lately. Not that I know anything much about it, mind you, heh, heh. But there sure have been a lot of them dying mysteriously lately. Like that guy over in Creede, got squashed at the lumber mill.”

The murmuring was both astonished and confirmatory.

“So, what’s the next step? Well, maybe we’re ready to take the feds on. Let’s talk a little about where things could go from here…”

* * *

Part II: The Days After

Eleven

The media, print and broadcast, but especially broadcast of course, had a field day. News stories on the Fourth of July weekend were normally about kids, fireworks, and picnics, but the adventure at NCAR provided fodder for real reporting. The only thing that could have been better would have been a *successful* assassination attempt, not that anyone at the networks would have admitted, at least publicly, to wanting *that*.

As it was, the interviews with Joe Loughlin and his wounded *gluteus maximus* played well enough to sell lots of advertising time, and the background footage of the picturesque NCAR laboratory and its herds of tame deer gave photographers plenty of opportunities to exercise their artistic talents.

Despite advice to the contrary, the President discussed the matter willingly, praising the response of his Secret Service detail and referring to his perceptions of the whole thing as its having reminded him of some kind of bad fraternity prank.

“I heard somebody shout ‘GUN’ and the next thing I knew I was at the bottom of a football scrum. Thank God that no one was killed. And Mr. Loughlin has my everlasting gratitude for his vigilance, and for being between me and that rifle. I’m glad he wasn’t hurt worse.”

The networks’ best footage was of the President shaking Joe Loughlin’s hand, smiles all around. It was a grand hospital photo-op that drove the medical staff crazy.

Naturally, NCAR management was mortified. How could such a thing happen on their turf? They announced that the laboratory would be closed for a week and sent everyone home with the admonition

that they be on-call for interviews with the Secret Service investigative team. The interviews started immediately with the security staff, even while the forensics team was going over the lobby centimeter by centimeter.

There were two important results from this initial investigation. First, they were able to dredge up video tapes from the security system of the two individuals who had delivered the solar telescope several weeks back, after its refurbishment. Unfortunately, the retired scientist whose job it had been to polish it up had disappeared. Second, they found the .30-06 slug that had sliced through Joe Loughlin's right hind cheek.

The FBI had also investigated the shooting of Arthur Powell at Natural Bridges Monument back in December. A junior G-man was assigned to hunt around the parking lot until he found the slug that had cut Arthur down, which slug then went into their database. So they found a ballistics match to Joe's slug within a few hours.

The forensics team also quickly deduced that the transmitter for the video camera could have had only a very limited range, and a canvassing of the Table Mesa neighborhood below the laboratory quickly uncovered the fact that a yellow and tan van with pest control company markings—Bug-Be-Dead—had been parked on Vassar Drive during the time frame of the assassination attempt.

Further questioning of residents uncovered a morning jogger who had seen the van—it was described as looking like some kind of box-elder beetle—and was able to place one of the individuals shown on the security tapes in it. Another resident, who had been shopping down the hill at the Table Mesa Shopping Center, had seen two guys removing some peel-off signs from a yellow and tan van. Unfortunately, no one had noticed a license plate number.

All this, of course, caused quite a lot of excitement, both in Washington and in Boulder. The investigative team decided to keep their findings as quiet as possible, and so the media weren't informed of the ballistics test results nor of the descriptions of the suspects. They were told merely that the assailant had escaped. All of the Boulder residents interviewed had been admonished to keep quiet about this, in order to avoid sabotage of the investigation, so all there was to report was a "massive manhunt" being conducted by the FBI and the Secret Service.

But what was really happening was nothing. After the initial flurry of success, the investigation stalled. The van and its well-described occupants had vanished. There was still more work, of course—the company that had made the magnetic signs would be found; the parts, and fragments of parts, from the rifle setup would be traced; Bug-Be-Dead, Inc., would come under serious scrutiny. But there was going to be no instant gratification here.

* * *

In the law enforcement community, bad news travels fast, and Annette heard about the assassination attempt by noon on Friday. She called Rod Andersen in Denver, but all he could tell her was to be available if the feds asked for help. So, with question on question rattling around in her head, she rearranged her Friday schedule so she would be in her office if a call came in.

The rearrangement meant that she would not be serving the arrest warrant they had obtained for one Timothy Langer, 19, student at Frémont State University, full-time Durango resident and native of Placerville, a hamlet just down-river from Telluride.

UNELECO had been most willing to lodge a formal complaint against whomever was trying to hack into its systems, and Jamie McFarland's ire had motivated her to find that "whomever" within a

few hours of her embarrassing conversation with Dean Harold Weathers. As nice a guy as Hal thought himself to be, his being dean caused folks to think otherwise.

So early Friday afternoon, Annette was sitting in her office. Fidgeting. Tapping pencils, shuffling papers, staring out the window in annoyance at the fine day out there, and generally being impatient. When her telephone rang, she jumped about a foot in the air and landed with her hand on the receiver.

“Treiri, CBI.”

“Hey, did you hear about the doings up in Boulder? Damn, it sounds like a close one.”

“Hi, Hal.” She paused and drew a deep breath. “You know, I’m glad you called. I’ve been going nuts waiting for the other shoe to drop. I’m supposed to be on call if the feds need any help, but they’re not calling. And I’ve got a team out picking up our UNELECO hacker, a guy named Timothy Langer, and waiting for them is also tough. Maybe talking with you will calm me down. And, yeah, it did sound close. Apparently the President is fine, though, and the NCAR guy just got a flesh wound.”

“So Jamie came through, huh? Was it a student of ours?”

“Bingo.”

“Great.” Hal sounded disgusted. “Just what we need. Well, catching him on such a fast time scale will help us look better, I guess, given that we helped. Actually, I’m sort of glad it was a student, because I’d rather have students hacking into our computers than outsiders. Strange as it may sound. Keeps it all in the family, sort of. What’s going to happen?”

“We have an arrest warrant, kind of a vague one based on misuse of State of Colorado property, and my team is bringing him in for us to question. If he was just doing this, I mean trying to get into the UNELECO computers, on a lark, like lots of these computer hackers, then we’ll probably just put the Fear of God into him and let him know he’s on a probationary status with us. I presume you’ll want to discipline him as well?”

“Hmm. Well, I think I’ll follow your lead. We should probably send him up before our computer ethics committee, and they’ll give him a really hard time. It’s a peer-pressure sort of thing. Depending on how things go, I’ve also got another idea, sort of in the mode of community service. Want me to come down for your interrogation? I can be a real Mean Dean when I put my mind to it. And if I talk with Jamie first, she could probably put me in just the mood. She’s pretty pissed about this whole thing. Especially because this guy used her login.”

“You mean the old, never fail, ‘Good Cop, Bad Dean’ interrogation strategy? I suppose that might be effective, depending on this guy’s personality. They should be back in an hour or so if you want to come down.”

“Let me talk with Alice about my schedule. Actually, I need to talk with her about that thing in Boulder. Tell her that I’ve talked with you and found out that there’s no new information. Yet. For some reason, she thinks the world of this President. Maybe it has to do with his father, or something like that. Anyway, she’s been in a real tizzy.”

“Well, you can tell her that the manhunt is on, but there are no results yet.”

“OK, so after that I’ll head over your way. Since I’m going to be down on your side of town, maybe we can go out to dinner somewhere down there. Have you got anything else happening?”

“What I should be doing is going over a transcript of a meeting between Lolly Markham, her lawyer, and another guy who seems to be a friend of theirs. Guy named Steven Rutherford. Works in the sociology department at the U as a research assistant of some kind. Know of him?”

“Well, crap. Steve Rutherford is the coordinator, or something like that, for the local chapter of SCARAB. Remember Whitney Bradford, the guy who got killed in the Rock Creek Tunnel explosion? Rutherford took over for Bradford. So I have yet another FSU connection to weird things going on in your world.”

“Well, it gets weirder, a little at least. Remember that news item about the guy who got killed over in Creede at the timber mill there? Well, he was from Alamosa. And, as part of the post-mortem, the Alamosa County folks checked out his apartment, and found messages, three, they said, on his answering machine, from Rutherford. Rather urgent messages. ‘Call me as soon as you can, it’s really important’ sort of messages. So squished guy, David Wellington, was connected with Rutherford, and therefore Lolly Markham, somehow.”

“Squished guy? Is that some kind of medical terminology?”

Hal was laughing almost too hard to talk.

“Ah, well, I picked that up from the Mineral County Sheriff, Ralph Wertlinger. He said that’s what happened, that Wellington got squished, and who am I to dispute a first-hand account?”

Now she also was laughing. Must be the tension, she thought.

“Hmm. So Markham, Rutherford, and the squished guy could have been involved together in the FFPI mill arson in Monticello, is that what you’re thinking?”

“And I’m betting the lawyer is in on it, too. He’s not a defense lawyer. He seems like a friend of Lolly’s. But I’ve got this transcript I should read. We taped them talking the other day, and the surveillance team told me that there’s stuff there that bears on Markham’s story. So, uh, where did you want to take me to dinner? There’s not much in the way of quality food down this way, you know.”

“Not in town, unless you want to go back to Fanny’s Saloon for old times’ sake.”

“Right. For old time’s sake, or so you can ogle all those girls with no shirts?”

“OK, OK. How about a nice drive up to the lake? It’s Friday and we deserve a date.”

“I need to be available for this assassination thing, if someone needs me. But I can take a phone and be available that way. So it sounds fine, as long as you know a place to eat up there.”

“I’ll ask around. And I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Maybe between us we can get some information out of Mr. Langer.”

“I sure hope so. Just once, it would be nice to have someone in here who actually wants to tell me the truth.”

“Good cop, bad dean. Just remember that. See ya.”

* * *

Pickle and Mad Dog had been listening to the radio, the all-news stations especially. The news, or, rather, the lack of it, was frustrating.

“What’s with these guys? Why isn’t there more news?” Pickle was the worrier of the two.

“Ya know, it’s strange that there’s not more information.” Mad Dog, wandering eye or no, was a keen observer. “It must be that the feds are keeping a tight lid on this.”

“Yeah. Good thing we did all that planning. Let me know when you want me to drive.”

After peeling the magnetic Bug-Be-Dead logos from the van, and discarding the stolen license plates that no one had seen, they had headed east to an automatic drive-through car wash at an Amoco station, where the day before they'd purchased a deluxe wash, wax, and dry. The van entered the wash bay sporting the insect-like, two-tone, yellow and tan color scheme of other Bug-Be-Dead vans. After a few minutes it emerged—out the back, where no one who saw it go in would be likely to see it again, they'd checked—black. While the wash was cycling, they'd changed clothes in the back of the van and stuffed the fake Bug-Be-Dead uniforms, along with sunglasses they'd had on and the radio controller, in a garbage bag for later disposal.

Then they headed farther east and then south toward Denver International Airport, Pickle driving and Mad Dog fussing with a battery-powered shaver, removing the moustache and goatee he'd been working on for the past six months. Both were wearing latex gloves, and had been since the beginning of the operation.

At DIA they drove into the far back reaches of the east parking garage, where they swapped vehicles. The now-black van was parked in the spot formerly occupied by a Jeep Grand Cherokee, bought used, for cash, which had been waiting for them for the past two days. It had twenty extra gallons of gasoline in cans in the back. This time, Mad Dog drove, and Pickle worked loose the shaggy moustache that was glued to his upper lip. His next step was to eliminate his sideburns with the shaver.

They headed west and then south, and, on reaching the end of Peña Boulevard, southwest on I-225. When they reached I-25, they turned north, back toward downtown, and then west on Hampden. This took them through the western suburbs toward the foothills, and, along the way, they found a dumpster behind a supermarket, into which went the fake uniforms, radio controller, sunglasses, latex gloves, and the shaver. By 12:30, they were on their way up US 285, in Turkey Creek Canyon, homeward bound. Through the foothills, South Park, and down the Arkansas Valley; over Monarch Pass and down the Gunnison Valley to Montrose; over Dallas Divide and up to Norwood, they'd be home to Raven's Roost for a late dinner, if all went well.

“So, what do you think? How's the Senator going to take it? I mean, the fact that we missed.”

Pickle always had something to worry about.

“Well, he said several times that he really didn't care if we hit the guy, that he just wanted to put a scare into him.”

“Right. ‘Send a message’ was what he cared about. Well, I guess we did that. What's the message? Any ideas?”

“Naw, hell, I can't figure out what the Senator's trying to accomplish with this. I understand that he's pissed about all those blacks and browns and women in cabinet positions. But, Jesus, how this little episode is going to send a message about that is beyond me.”

“Yeah, and what's this got to do with all those other jobs we've been doing? Things are getting too complicated. Simple jobs are so much better, ya know? Like that hit on the park ranger. Or the car accident we helped that guy up in Cedaredge have. All these complicated plans are just trouble waiting to happen. Sooner or later, someone's going to see something we don't want them to, and we're dead meat.”

“You got that right. Like the last time we were up in Boulder. Or that job down in Flag. I didn't think that one would even work at all.”

“Right. We got lucky on that one, estimating the height of the wire right and all. The others, though, and even that one, all worked because of good intelligence, good advance information. I'm sure glad we

had that relaxed schedule, so we didn't have to rush things. Like that guy down in Taos who we had to watch for a week before we figured out the thing with the bridge."

Pickle's pucker twisted into something resembling a grin.

"He sure hollered when you dumped him over the railing, didn't he?"

"I liked the one in Santa Fe. Man, you hit that guy perfectly. Stuck him to that tree like pin the tail on the donkey."

"I'm glad this is the end of it for a while. The Senator says we're supposed to head up to Idaho after we check in with him."

"Yeah, and we probably do need to lie low. But what's up there?"

"Well, I'm going fishing. But he said something about meeting up with a group up there, somewhere north of Coeur d'Alene. Start linking together, I guess. But I want to take some time off, go fishing."

"Time off sounds good. I'm behind on my poetry. Maybe northern Idaho will be inspirational. I want to start on an epic, maybe a series of sonnets. But first we've got to get home. Damn, this thing handles good. I'm going to have to watch the speed."

Pickle knew better than to say anything about poetry. With at least seven hours of driving left, he surely didn't want to get Mad Dog started.

* * *

Timothy Langer turned out to be an innocent, terrified of what was happening to him and not hiding his terror, guileless in his responses to even the most leading questions. The "Good Cop, Bad Dean" strategy wasn't necessary, because he opened right up. It quickly became clear that he had no particular reason to pick UNELECO for his hacking attempts, so Annette asked the obvious question.

"Who put you up to this, Mr. Langer?"

His response was their first hint that someone had scared Langer more than the CBI or the Dean of the College of Natural Sciences could ever hope to. He shivered, sat up straighter, thought for a minute, and drew a deep breath.

"I have to take full responsibility for this. It doesn't matter who put me up to it, I'm the one responsible. There's no point discussing anyone else. I can't go there, period. I did the hacking, and I have to take whatever punishment is coming."

"Hmm. You sound like this is not negotiable. Is he paying you?"

"I just can't talk about this."

"Is he blackmailing you? You know, blackmail is in itself illegal. More illegal than what you did. We can help you with that. The best thing to do with blackmailers is to call their bluff."

"No comment."

"You know, when we got the arrest warrant, we also got all records for you, public ones and others, too. The sheriff over in San Miguel County, where you're from, was very helpful. Did something happen when you were working on the ranch one of those summers?"

This question disturbed Langer so much that Annette knew she was on to something.

"Ah, n-n-no, what ranch, anyway? I didn't work on any ranch. I grew up in town, in Placerville."

A major slip, Annette thought. Maybe I should gamble a little.

“You know, Mr. Langer, the reason we’re interested in who put you up to this thing is so that we can believe your story. There’s no reason for you to have attacked UNELECO on your own. Telling us will provide credibility, rather than implicating this other person. You’re right, it’s your fall to take; you did the hacking, and this isn’t going to get this other person into much trouble, really. It’s not really that big of a deal, hiring someone to do a job like this. Especially in this case, because the Senator’s already in a lot more trouble than this could ever cause.”

Bingo! Langer was shaking with terror, unable to speak.

“One thing you can tell us, Mr. Langer, is why the Senator would want to attack UNELECO. What’s he got against UNELECO, anyway?”

But he was incoherent. They decided that an extended break was in order, and Langer was taken back to a holding cell.

“What happened there? Where’d that question about ‘the senator’ come from? What senator?”

Hal didn’t get to observe Annette’s interviewing technique very often, and he was amazed.

“Senator Jarvis Schoenfield. Sort of intuition and sort of a gamble. I called Jim Nettleman, he’s the San Miguel Sheriff, about Langer, and he talked about a teen-age trouble-maker who had worked on ‘the ranch’ during summers in high school. You saw Langer’s response to that. And also my blackmail question got a rise out of him. I remembered that Shure had commented on something that Campbell, the dead lawyer, had almost said. A couple of times he almost said ‘The Senator’ but then caught himself. And Nettleman said ‘the ranch’ not ‘a ranch.’ Up that way, ‘*the* ranch’ is probably the X-S spread, which used to belong to Senator Jarvis Schoenfield. All this sort of came together in my head and I decided to gamble with a question. Obviously scared the hell out of the kid.”

“That’s for sure. I remember about Campbell and Shure’s sort-of kidnapping, but I didn’t know about the slip. But this is a connection that I don’t understand. It must be that Schoenfield was trying to get Shure to do something that he refused, so now Schoenfield is trying to make trouble for Shure’s company.”

“Shure talked about an organization called the Aryan Rights Foundation. Said he was getting mail from them, including that Nazi prison-camp diary. He went public with the book a few weeks back, and if Schoenfield was behind the recruitment, I can see that Shure could have made an enemy real fast with that stunt.”

Annette stared off into space, thinking.

“Right. And if that’s what’s going on, this hacking business is more than an illegal use of state property. It’s harassment at the least.”

Annette was nodding. “And if it’s connected to Campbell’s murder, well, it’s murder and possibly attempted murder. And remember that Campbell was killed with the same gun as Luke Begay, last September. Trouble is, this guy Langer is obviously more scared of Schoenfield than any scare either of us can put into him.”

“I think you’re right about that. I’ve never seen anyone so terrified. Do we need him for anything else?”

“Well, explicit confirmation of Schoenfield’s involvement would be nice. Hmm. I wonder if Langer has hacked into any other systems for Schoenfield. Maybe I should talk to my boss about this.”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt. Say, you said something earlier about a transcript about the FFPI firebombing. Read it yet?”

“Yeah, while I was waiting for Langer. Very curious. It proves that Lolly Markham is lying about her presence in Monticello, and it shows that her lawyer and this other guy, Rutherford, are in on the lie. We can’t use it officially, because it’ll fall under attorney-client privilege. But it’s information that we can use to guide us. And it also had some other stuff, about something called ‘SCREW,’ which would mesh with that cutesy note found at the scene of the fire. It’s not clear what it’s about, but it seems to involve those three and the dead guy over in Creede. And someone called Aaron Felterson over in Pagosa Springs, and a local pot-head whom I’ve known for years, Flip Chester. SCREW must be the name of some new organization. No idea what it could stand for.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Continue to watch them, see what happens next. Of course, things are a little distracted right now, at least potentially, if the feds want help with the Boulder thing. And there’s the Schoenfield matter to clear up as well. No rest for the wicked. Speaking of which, I seem to recall something about dinner up by the lake. Anything wicked up there to eat? Like, a big steak maybe?”

“Oh, yeah. Big and rare, with a lake view. Ready to go?”

* * *

The problem, Annette thought, with driving up to the foothills for dinner is that Hal remembers he needs to go fishing. And here I am, stuck in the middle of two investigations and a potential emergency.

Their dinner, at Virginia’s Steakhouse, with great steaks as well as the promised view of Lake Vallecito and the San Juan high country beyond, had been lovely. But Hal spent the drive up watching the Los Piños River, and Annette knew he’d be off trying out a new batch of trout flies today. So the next morning she worked off some of those beef calories on the ski machine and then headed in to the office. But the only thing to be done on a Saturday was paperwork, unless something happened.

Two hours later, something did, in the form of a telephone call.

“Trieri, CBI”

“Ms. Trieri? This is Todd Sweeney, from the Durango Field Office of the FBI. I bet you can’t guess what I’m doing today.”

Annette laughed. “Oh, let’s see. Mail fraud, I bet that’s it.”

He laughed back. “I’m calling about ballistics. You folks sent us a report on a .22 slug that killed a lawyer up in Norwood, remember? We found that it matched one found in the head of a Luke Begay, who was killed, execution-style, at the Four Corners Monument last September. I remember calling your office at the Durango PD about that case.”

“Right. Fred Winders told me. I was out of town that day. But that case has never been cleared, no?”

“No, indeed. Crime scene was completely clean, we couldn’t find any reason for someone to want to kill the guy. There was no indication of involvement with any of the usual stuff that gets you executed. Drugs, stuff like that. We found out that he was involved in some flaky organization at Frémont State, some kind of Indian rights group, but that wouldn’t get you shot in the head. At least I don’t think so. So the case just flat stalled out. Anyway, I’ve got an even stranger ballistics match for you. The .30-06 slug that hit that guy in the butt up in Boulder yesterday is a match with one that killed a National Park ranger over in Utah last December. I figured you’d be interested because of the other match in your area. And I thought maybe you’d made some progress on the other one, that lawyer.”

“Nothing firm. But the .30-06 match is really interesting. Let me think, that Parks guy was Arthur Powell, right? A black guy, I mean, an African-American guy, that the NPS had assigned to Natural Bridges. Talk about a fish out of water, a guy with his background in rural southeastern Utah. But what’s interesting is that he’s one of a portfolio of about eleven people in the region who have died in suspicious circumstances in the last year, all of them connected with some facet of the environmental movement. Begay’s organization, the flaky one, was called American Indian Rights, known as AIR. But he was also involved in an environmental group, the Mother Earth Defense League, appropriately known as MEDL. And Powell, of course, was a Park Service ranger. I have six other of these cases, and there are three in Arizona and New Mexico. All environmentalists. Campbell, the guy up by Norwood, is a little outside this box, but the ballistics on that .22 slug tie him in. And now this whole package is tied in with a Presidential assassination attempt? Wow. This is really too weird.”

“How are the others tied together?”

“Well we really don’t know they are, for sure. It’s a hunch. They’re all environmentalists. But other than that, it’s thin. For that matter, some might be accidental. For example, there was a guy up in Cedaredge who died in a car crash, but there’s an indication that he could have been pushed a little. And another guy, just a couple of weeks ago, who was crushed by a pile of logs at a timber mill. It was definitely supposed to look like an accident, but there are some strange things that haven’t been explained yet. Others were obviously murder, like a car bomb, a guy with a crossbow bolt in his throat in downtown Santa Fe, stuff like that. But the thing is, these folks all seem to have been tied in with this Mother Earth Defense League organization. It’s as if someone’s going around killing them off. And to have the incident yesterday tied in with this is, well, like I said, too weird.”

“Especially since the President isn’t exactly known as an environmentalist. Although he might like people to think that, they don’t. But you said the Norwood lawyer wasn’t either.”

“Actually, he was a Colorado Springs lawyer who just happened to get whacked up in Norwood. That’s one of the puzzles. To make things stranger, this lawyer, Campbell, was working for something called the Aryan Rights Foundation, some kind of white supremacy group, apparently. He used to work for a big company in the Springs, but this other group made him an offer too good to ignore. This ARF outfit is another shadow organization, espousing how white folks are naturally superior and all the usual crap, but not really existing in a formal sense that you can grab on to. It’s doubtful that they have anything to do with the environment, though. If they do, it’s probably like those wacko outfits up in Montana and Idaho, white supremacists and tax evaders and mountain men who don’t bathe.”

“Real solid citizens, those folks. I’m glad we haven’t had any confrontations around here like the ones up in Montana. I’ll work the Rez any day.”

“I’m kind of surprised you haven’t been under a lot of pressure from the Navajo government to make progress on Begay’s killing.”

“Well, we have, some. But he seems to have alienated a lot of his own people. He was working on stuff that would have benefitted the Utes, and those two groups are not exactly best of friends. And a lot of his people thought he’d sort of ‘turned white.’ He lived here in Durango, he worked on those Anglo-type environmental causes, all that stuff. Same thing for Powell, in a way. If he’d been a civil-rights activist, we’d be under incredible pressure to do something. But he was a park ranger, not something that African-Americans feel particularly close to, it seems.”

“Well, maybe we’ll eventually get somewhere. Thanks for the information about the ballistics from yesterday.”

“And there’s more that I didn’t get to. It’s not for public consumption, but we have solid descriptions of two suspects, from the security people at that lab in Boulder. And a description of a

vehicle. I'll fax you sketches. And one more thing, quite strange. It rings a bell with me, but I don't know where. Like I read a report about it but can't remember details. Anyway, the assassination attempt failed because they were using a remote control on the rifle, which was fixed on a tripod and couldn't really be aimed. They had a little TV camera sighted along the rifle and a transmitter with a radio controlled triggering device, and they could only shoot at what walked through the sights. All the electronics for this was in a box, a box that was rigged to melt down. But there was a message on the bottom of the box. And this isn't for public consumption either. It said 'Dear Mr. President: You've been screwed,' spelled capital S-C-R-E-W-apostrophe-little-d. Like SCREW is the name of something."

Annette was certain that he heard her gasp.

"Todd? What are you doing for lunch? We need to talk in person."

* * *

Twelve

Enthroned behind his huge desk, Jarvis Schoenfield, back to the room, feet up on the window sill, was staring out at the incredible view but not really seeing it. Instead, he was reviewing the debriefing with Pickle and Mad Dog, searching for vulnerabilities. He was thinking hard, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair and jiggling the pointed tip of the cowboy boot on his right foot.

They had arrived, exhausted, about 9:00 the previous evening, and he had postponed their discussion until this morning, so that they would be fresh. Then, over a breakfast that ended up lasting all morning, they had discussed every detail of Friday's events, going over some of the details three and four times. Schoenfield repeatedly assured them that they should consider their mission accomplished, even though they had shot the wrong person. To tell the truth, he was just a little disappointed that they hadn't been successful, but, well, he'd said all along that the message was the more important thing.

Pickle, flushed with success, had the audacity to ask "What *was* the message, Senator," but even that act of insubordination had not been enough to dampen the high spirits of the meeting. He'd even passed them envelopes stuffed with bills, despite the indiscretion.

"Well, Pickle," the Senator had been feeling generous, and forgiving, "You've heard me gripe about how this new President of ours has loaded up his cabinet with people I don't exactly approve of. He seems to be trying to please everyone, all the special interest groups, instead of doing what's right, what he was elected to do. And then he goes and visits this think-tank where they spend our tax money on this global heating horseshit. So I wanted to let him know that not everyone approves of him, including people with spine, not just those limp-wristed Democrat liberals. And that we can express our disapproval even when he's in a federal research facility. That he's not safe anywhere. Think he got the message?"

"The last part for sure, but the Secret Service probably tells him that all the time. I don't know about the rest. We fired the rifle as soon as we saw all hell break loose. Some guy, maybe the guy we shot in the ass, because he sure wasn't a Secret Service guy, saw the rifle and pointed it out to an agent, who dove for the President. We fired, they fired, and the TV camera went out. Then we got the hell out of there."

"That was the right thing to do. I saw the son-of-a-bitch on TV last night, shaking that guy's hand, in the hospital. All smiles for the TV cameras and the public. But I bet he's pissing in his pants about

this whole thing. I think we've succeeded. We'll be able to get what we want—what we deserve—from him in the future.”

Schoenfield was confident that last night's conversation had dealt with Pickle's curiosity. Now, the question that was keeping Schoenfield from enjoying the view was whether the job had gone smoothly enough that he could keep his two operatives around for a little longer before sending them off to northern Idaho. That other job Timmy was supposed to be doing had unraveled completely—word was that Timmy had been picked up and was now in custody. Schoenfield needed advice, so he reached for the phone.

“Find the Reverend and send him up here, willya?”

It took about ten minutes, during which Schoenfield continued to stare at the scenery without seeing it. Even after the knock on the door, the command to enter, and the seating of the new guest in a chair with a view equal to his, Schoenfield continued to stare.

“God's country out there, sure is beautiful, isn't it Senator? Makes me feel blessed to live out here.”

Oswald was gazing with rapture at the scenery Schoenfield wasn't seeing.

“Come on, Mike, you know that crap doesn't work on me. What are we going to do about Timmy? He's in custody down in Durango. CBI's got him.”

“For what?”

“I don't know for sure, but the university caught him using its computers for that job on UNELECO I mentioned to you.

“The one that was Pickle's idea, yeah. But we both know that Timmy won't talk.”

“Not directly. But they'll question him over and over, and he's likely to slip up at some point. We've got to do something.”

“I don't think I want to hear where you're going with this.”

“You've got to. He's your responsibility, too.”

“He's my nephew, yeah, but you're the one controlling him.”

Oswald was looking increasingly nervous.

“Right. And my concern is that he's out of my control just now. If he is in custody, they'll need to charge him formally, then he gets the phone call, and so on. I presume he'll call you. If he does, I need to hear about it. And we need to find him the right lawyer. Obviously not you, you're too close to him.”

He stared at Oswald, and his left eye twitched.

“Seems like that fella Bill Campbell would have been perfect.”

“Don't razz me, Mike! And besides, Campbell was a corporate lawyer who didn't know criminal law. Anyway, we'll find someone, and we'll get Timmy out on bail. Then I need to get him back under control. I was thinking of keeping Pickle and Mad Dog around for a few days, before they make that run up to Idaho we discussed.”

“Oh, no, you're not going to send them after him, are you? Jarvis, Timmy's *family!*”

“Yeah, well, even family needs reminding of the state of things once in a while. I'm not going to have Timmy hit, just reminded, OK? So calm down. In fact, why don't you stay here and talk with Pickle and Mad Dog about this with me? Then you'll see we're not going to hurt the kid.”

He reached for the telephone.

“Send Pickle and Mad Dog up again, willya?” He turned back to Oswald. “So, how are the stage two meetings going?”

Oswald was now the one staring out the window, trying to compose himself. He shook his head and took a deep breath.

“Well. Every time we have a meeting, I get a couple of questions about letting other people into the circle, but so far I’ve been able to deflect them, to keep the circle unbroken. I’ve received lists from the first two meetings, in Cortez and in Alamosa. Got a total of two dozen names, of feds, of State of Colorado people, of tree-huggers, that we could do without. The next step will be to set up teams of new people to handle the hits, in a cell structure where no one knows about everything. Most of the hits, of course, will be set up as accidents. Like we’ve talked about, this needs to be done carefully, without anyone except us knowing everything. Pickle and Mad Dog just can’t handle all these new hits, and the new people are going to make mistakes, unlike our two pros. But we’ll set this whole thing up to look like a grass-roots revolt, so whoever gets caught won’t be linked to anyone else. The tactic of using someone from one cell to direct an operation in another cell will also keep the level of secrecy high.”

“I like it. You’re doing a great job. Can I have a look at those lists? Maybe I can help prioritize them. We’ve gotta be sure to avoid making such big splashes with the first ones that we scare off the others.”

“I’m planning to sit down with you and do just that, when we get the lists from the other three meetings. Sometime next week, probably.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Yeah, come in.”

Pickle and Mad Dog entered and sat in their usual two chairs.

“Wanted to see us, Senator?”

“Yep. I need you two to hang around for a few days. Not go up north right away. Got another job, an easy one.”

Schoenfield opened a drawer in his desk and took out a bottle of Jim Beam. He poured a generous three fingers into an old-fashioned glass and took a large gulp.

“Well, OK, Senator. But don’t you think we should make ourselves scarce, just in case they’ve got descriptions ready to circulate?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that. But you guys were wearing shades, you’ve both shaved. And now that you’ve had a chance to clean up completely, your hair is a different color from yesterday. I can’t see how you’re likely to be identified. Maybe if you were hanging around Boulder, but not out here. I think it’s pretty safe, as long as you don’t get busted or something like that.”

“If you say so, Senator. What’s the job?”

“Timmy Langer needs the Fear of God put into him. The Reverend and I are going to chat with you about just what this means.”

He smiled an evil smile and took another gulp.

* * *

A workaholic like Charles Shure, Annette thought, would surely be in the office on Saturday. Let’s see if that number he gave me is really his own private line. She punched buttons on her desk phone.

“Shure here.”

“Mr. Shure? This is Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation.”

“Ms. Trieri. How nice to hear from you. What motivates you to call me on a Saturday?”

“The possibility of progress, not much, but a little. Have your computer security people briefed you on the hacking attempts that were directed your way?”

“Well, we get lots of those all the time. That’s why I have such good computer security people. What’s especially amusing are all the foreign operatives, what I mean by that is basically spies, who think they can find stuff on our web site and then get into our systems and find more. I usually don’t hear details, though.”

“This little episode has been going on over the past week or two, and your people traced it to Frémont State.”

“Oh, right. I did hear about that one.”

“We got the guy, dead to rights. He’s a student there, and he’s admitted to trying to break into your systems, although he won’t tell us why. Yet. We’re thinking the most appropriate thing is to twist his arm into telling us and then working a community-service deal. Lots of times these hackers can be turned away from the Dark Side, to use a hackneyed metaphor. But I thought I should talk it over with you.”

“My computer security people are almost all ex-hackers. Maybe I should offer him a job.”

“That’s part of what I want to talk with you about, indirectly. First, though, I wonder if you’d mind if I go over some of that statement about the incident up in Norwood. I want to verify my memory and the transcript.”

“Ahh, should I get my lawyer in on this?”

“You can, but there’s no need to. You’re not under any suspicion of anything. In fact, you’re about our most valuable witness to something that just seems to keep growing. I can’t tell you details, especially over the phone. I promise to someday, though. Anyway, I just want to check a couple of things.”

“Sounds OK with me. I still remember most of that weird affair.”

“Good. So it all started with that package containing the letter and the book. Then there was this so-called appointment to negotiate some resource leases, right?”

“Right. And they insisted on having the meeting over in Norwood, at a bank, the First National, as I remember.”

“And you flew to Telluride and drove to Norwood and were hijacked on the way. And met with this lawyer, who passed you notes and then, after the meeting, got dumped out of the truck in front of you with a bullet between his eyes.”

“Scared the hell out of both me and my driver. We got out of there as fast as we could.”

“I don’t blame you. Now, here’s what I’m interested in. You reported that this lawyer, Bill Campbell, said he was representing this Aryan Rights Foundation outfit. But you also reported that he slipped up in referring to who he was working for and started to say something else. But he caught himself.”

“Right. He said ‘The Sen...’ and then reverted to this Aryan Rights bunch. And, like I told you, we had done some background work related to these leases. It turns out that the board feet are on property

that's part of the X-S Ranch, and the tailings we were going to process are from mining claims owned by the X-S also. And, until fairly recently at least, the X-S Ranch was owned by Senator Jarvis Schoenfield, whom you know. It had been in his family for generations, until he turned it over to a private foundation. Since the incident, we've found out that the foundation is something called Resources For Humanity. This RFH is a non-profit that seems to fit in with the other so-called 'wise-use' organizations, but it's hard to be sure."

"Do you think what Campbell almost said was 'The Senator'?"

"Well it would sure all fit together, wouldn't it? Although there's a missing link, between Schoenfield and the Aryan Rights bunch."

"Say, something just occurred to me... but it's probably stupid. We have the Aryan Rights Foundation. A-R-F. And we have Resources For Humanity. R-H-F. A-R-F and R-F-H. If you say them, you know, like acronyms you can pronounce, you know, 'arf' and 'rfh,' they are pretty similar. At least they're both like noises dogs make. I wonder if they're linked and someone made the linguistic equivalent of a Freudian slip somewhere? Hmm, well, like I said, it's probably stupid."

"Hmm, indeed. You know, though, that it isn't trivial to come up with names for organizations. Most of the obvious ones are taken. A Freudian-like slip could be possible. But I guess I'd have to say that this probably wouldn't fly in court."

"You don't think so?" She was giggling. "Yes, Your Honor, we, the people, assert that these two organizations are really one and same because they both sound like doggie noises. Wow. I think I need a vacation."

"If you do get to that point, I mean, in court, please invite me for the day. I'd like to see that one. But, seriously, I'd think of it as more of a hint than a coincidence. Really. If you get enough hints like this one, something will come together eventually."

"As I said, there are some things that I can't talk about just yet. But here's one thing that I can. This student that was trying to hack into your computers. I suggested to him that he was put up to this by someone, and he got all high-and-mighty about how this was his doing and how he'd have to take whatever punishment there was. I pushed things a bit and eventually dropped the phrase 'The Senator' into the conversation. At that, he almost had a heart attack. It definitely pushed buttons with him. Point is, I sort of think that Senator Schoenfield may be behind the attack on your systems."

"I guess that wouldn't surprise me. If he is behind the ARF, then I probably made him quite angry by going public with that prison camp book. I'm pretty convinced, not in a way I could prove it in court, mind you, but convinced, that he's behind that hijacking episode. Which means he's behind the ARF. And, presumably, the RFH. Say, you know? The more those two things get used together, the more they do seem linked. You've got good intuition, madame."

"Well, thank you sir. And I promise that I'll invite you when we present that evidence in court. Anyway, thanks for verifying the solid information and for all the hints. They'll be quite helpful."

"If there's anything else I can do, let me know. I'd like to see this bastard's hide nailed to the barn. He's the person to go after, not this student."

"Oh, if this all comes together, nailing his hide to the barn will be the least of it. Thanks for your help."

* * *

Shure isn't after him, and prosecuting him for illegal use of state property is a waste of time. Community service, Annette thought, is sounding more and more appropriate. And last night Hal was talking about how he needed to find a computer science tutor for some athlete whose grades are on the edge. Subtle, the man is not. But that could work. After all, it was the university's computers that were the property being misused.

Maybe I should pay Mr. Langer a conciliatory visit.

After polishing off the last of the week's paperwork, she headed over to the county detention facility, where the state contracted to have its needs for short-term incarcerations met. It took her longer to get through the socializing than anything else. She knew these folks well, from cases in years past. Eventually she was in an interview room, sitting across from Timothy Langer. She'd brought a bag full of Burger King lunch, having called ahead and ascertained that he'd not been eating. It was clear that the smells wafting from the bag were having their effect on Langer.

"Mr. Langer, this is not a social call, but neither is it meant to be as adversarial as our discussion yesterday. I heard you haven't been eating, so I brought this in case you get hungry. Hope you like burgers and fries."

"So, are you going to charge me formally, or what? Don't I get a phone call and all that?"

He was eyeing the bag carefully.

"I'd rather not do that, because it puts in motion a lot of paperwork that's hard to stop. What I'd like to do is to accomplish two things. Yesterday, you admitted that you've been trying to access the UNELECO computers without authorization, and you stated that it's your responsibility to take whatever punishment is appropriate. So, the first thing I'd like to do is to get that resolved. If we can reach an agreement about this, and that's part two, I think the appropriate payback is for you to tutor in computer sciences at FSU. And if you do that well, you know, take it seriously, be conscientious, and so on, it may just be that the UNELECO computer people would like to interview you about a job. I hear their compensation package is extraordinary."

"Why would they want to hire me?"

"The UNELECO CEO, a guy named Charles Shure, told me that a lot of his computer security people are ex-hackers. It was he who suggested that they might hire you." Stretching the truth was something Annette did often in these circumstances.

"OK, well, what's part two? This agreement you want."

"Yesterday, it was obvious that you don't want to talk about who put you up to this. The agreement is this: I'll stop asking about that, give up on it completely, if you'll provide me with information about other computer systems you've hacked into for this person. And for anyone else, as far as that goes. The idea here is that you go straight before you get in real trouble. And that we see if there's any hacking damage you might have done that can be reversed."

"You don't want to know who I'm working for?"

"What I want to know is what systems you've hacked into, besides the ones at the U and the attempts at the UNELECO ones. That's it. Well, I also want to know that you're committed to going straight, that you'll do as good a job as you can with the tutoring, and stuff like that. But we'll leave your employer, or benefactor, or blackmailer, or whatever out of it completely. And, of course, you won't be charged with anything."

"When can I go home?"

“Well, I think I’d like the list first, and some way to verify it. Give me that and it’ll start the process of my trusting you. Then we can take it from there. How’s that sound?”

“What’s in the bag?”

“Like I said, a burger—a double Whopper—and fries. And a Coke.”

He reached for the bag and dug in.

“So, how do I know I can trust you?”

She was surprised he could talk with his mouth so full.

“I won’t be charging you, like I said. Give me the list and you’re out of here. And I won’t ask about who put you up to this. I’ll also call off others who might. If someone does, then you can go back to hacking. Of course, we’ll catch you again, eventually. See, by giving me something tangible, this list, then I can start believing that you’ll keep your promise to go straight. On your side, I’m not making promises for the future, I’m doing things now. Like getting you out of here. I figured the food would be a nice gesture.”

“Got some paper, and a pencil or something?”

* * *

The lengthening shadows on Lone Cone Peak held Schoenfield’s attention, not because they were different from other days, but because his mind was now at ease, at least relative to its earlier level of heightened concern. The half-bottle of Jim Beam he’d consumed since mid-afternoon also helped. Oswald was captivated by the scene, too, and this time he wasn’t even going to try pseudo-religious platitudes. But now it was his turn to be concerned, unlike before.

“Senator, I know you don’t like to be second-guessed. I hope you realize that the concerns I express here, in this room, are meant to help you in your decision-making.”

“Aw, hell, Mike, everyone’s got to have people to bounce ideas off of. And you help a lot.”

“Well, the stuff I talk about with you here stays here. In public, I back you one hundred per cent, all the time.”

“That’s the word I get.”

No harm in letting him know he’s being watched, Schoenfield thought.

“I appreciate that you told Pickle to go easy on Timmy. I agree, he does need reminding. But that’s the thing with computer hacking. It’s hard to stay ahead of everyone. I’m not surprised he got caught. After all, he’s only a kid.”

“He hasn’t called you yet, right? That’s my main concern now. If he was arrested, he should be making a phone call for help.”

“Well, he knows the drill. If he’s caught, he’s just a college student snooping around on the internet. Maybe they’re questioning him and that’s it. He didn’t tell you that he got into the UNELECO systems, right? He got caught in the process. He’s a student, so probably the university will have some process to deal with the transgression.”

“I sure hope that’s all.”

His left eye twitched, twice.

“Me, too. Senator, there’s something else I’d like to ask about. I don’t mean to offend you with this, but I’m just too curious to stay quiet. Did you have anything to do with that little affair up in Boulder yesterday? I noticed that Pickle and Mad Dog were gone all day and got back late.”

A wide grin spread itself across Schoenfield’s face, and he leaned back in his executive chair and put his feet up on his desk. Staring at the ceiling, he chuckled to himself.

“Well, now, Mike, what makes you think that I’d have something to do with an assassination attempt? I mean, it’s just flat unpatriotic. And you know me to be a true patriot.”

“I do. And I’ve also heard you rant and rave about this particular President. And I’ve heard you say good things about the Vice-President. With your two hit men gone, things just started to add up. Besides, that shit-eating grin you’re wearing tells it all.”

“Can’t fool you, Mike. That’s why I put you in charge of RFH, you’re good. Yeah, well, we didn’t expect to succeed, we just wanted to send a little message.”

He proceeded to fill Oswald in on the details of his antipathy toward Presidential politics.

“Forgive me, Senator, but that seems a little thin.”

“Yeah, well, it was good enough for Pickle.”

“And Mad Dog, too, no doubt. But you don’t really expect it to be good enough for me, do you?”

“No, I don’t, and never did. We kept you out of the loop, though, for two reasons. First, I figured you’d try, and try hard, to talk me out of it. Hell, even Pickle did. I just didn’t want to argue with you about it. Second, the fewer people who knew about it, the better. Especially you, because you’ve been doing those stage two meetings and knowing about this could have influenced your presentation, maybe even made you slip up. But now that it’s over with, and it looks like we did it cleanly, that’s not an issue.”

Schoenfield got up from behind his desk and began pacing about the room.

“And it’ll fit in with what we’re trying to accomplish. When these stage two guys find out—and we need to work out a plan for how they find out—when they find out that their leadership pulled something like this off, that’ll solidify our power base, don’t you think? And that’s only part of it. After Pickle and Mad Dog have their little conversation with Timmy, I’m sending them up to Idaho. Partly to get them away from here and whatever investigation is going on, but mostly to get them in touch with some groups I know up there, groups with the same agenda as ours, more or less. Groups that want to do the same thing, successfully, I mean take out the national politicians, and haven’t been able to.”

He stopped pacing and stared directly at Oswald, something that made the Reverend shiver.

“When they hear that it was us that did this Boulder thing, well, that’ll put us in a leadership position, won’t it? None of those other groups have pulled something like this off. They talk about it a lot, but that’s all it is, talk. But we’ve actually done something, so we’re going to come out of this as the leaders of the movement. And then we can exert some leadership and begin to consolidate all of the groups that think alike on these matters. You can start having RFH meetings up there, and getting to stage two will be easy. This will put us lots of steps closer to getting a critical mass together.”

“So far, we’ve been small and invisible. Don’t you think that consolidating all these groups will make us big, and potentially visible to the feds? Then we’d be in for trouble, for sure. Don’t you think so, Senator?” Oswald looked uncomfortable.

“I’m using the word ‘consolidate’ loosely. We’ve done a lot with very few people. If other groups take the same approach, just think of the impact. Hell, the tree-huggers do it. You’ve read about these people who call themselves the Earth Liberation Front, ELF. They claim there’s no central organization,

no one knows what the other people are doing. If those damned hippies can do this, so can we. We adopt their tactics and wipe them out in the process. Along with other such groups and certain people in the government who are in our way. Then we can get the land back to the landowner. Use it to prosper and all that other stuff you talk about.”

“You mean you actually listen to my message? Senator, I’m flattered.”

“Far as I’m concerned, you don’t go nearly far enough. But, I know, I know, you’ve got to go easy on the masses. I’m being patient, don’t worry. But eventually we’ve got to start getting the message across that we Aryans are the folks that run the show. The others can hang around to work for us, or go back to the cities on the coasts, to their ghettos. But the inter-mountain west is our turf.”

* * *

The attempts by the feds to keep a lid on the investigation had worked for the Saturday papers, largely because of timing. Given the 36 hours between the Big News Event and the Sunday deadline, they had no such luck with the Sunday papers.

Of course, the networks had been providing as much coverage as they could justify to their advertising departments, but both Hal and Annette craved analysis, such as would be available. So Hal went out early and came back with bagels and accoutrements and an armload of Sunday papers, including the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times*. The *Durango Herald* had plenty of wire coverage, but Hal knew Annette would be starving, for news as well as for breakfast. Even if the stories were just repeats, this was a day for more pages than the *Herald* offered.

They settled themselves on the deck with the papers, the food, a toaster oven, plenty of coffee, and telephones, just in case someone called. It was like moving, a little.

“Did you plan to feed an army? Two bagels I can manage, but there are at least a dozen here.”

“Didn’t know what flavor you wanted,”

Hal was stringing an extension cord to a plug on the house, so that they could keep the coffee warm and toast the bagels.

“So I got lots of choices. Also, we might be having company.”

“Company?”

“Well, you told me yesterday that you were going to release Tim Langer after he gave you a list of the places he’d hacked into. And I want him as a tutor. So I may call him in a while and ask him over, and maybe the student I want him to help, too. Get them acquainted in a sort of social setting rather than the formality of my office. So pick your favorite flavor, and we can offer what’s left to them.”

“Poppy seed, two of ’em. Toasted, with butter and some of those raspberry preserves. That’ll do me. What are you going to have?”

“Sesame seed, with cream cheese and lox.”

“Oh, *very* Durango. I’m sure that will impress Tim. Probably the only thing they eat up in Placerville. Along with knishes and pirogues.”

“I’ll be done by then. Sure you don’t want some?”

“No, thanks. The preserves will do nicely.”

Annette rather liked raw fish, especially fixed the Japanese way, but not for breakfast.

“So, uh, was there anything interesting on the list Tim gave you? Can you tell me?”

“Well, it’s not for public consumption, but there were some familiar organizations. Most familiar is us, the CBI and the State Patrol. I promised Tim I wouldn’t push him to tell me who he’s been doing this for, but I’m really tempted on this one. And another organization, familiar because it’s in the news just now, NCAR, up in Boulder.”

“You think it’s Schoenfield?”

He fiddled with getting hot bagels out of the toaster oven.

“Probably. See, I don’t think that Tim was free-lancing, doing these hacking jobs for lots of people. I think he has one client and it’s Schoenfield. Tim’s reaction to the mere mention of Schoenfield, not even by name, just by title, suggests that Schoenfield has some hold on him. So I’m going to ease off. I already told my boss that we need to re-program the computer system, though. I don’t know if Tim was supplying Schoenfield with information, or if Schoenfield is computer literate enough to have his own secret login.”

“Would it be fair to ask Tim? Not who, just how?”

“Hmm. I’d have to be careful how I asked, but maybe I could.”

“Thing is, if Tim’s supplying the information and it suddenly stops, Schoenfield is going to be suspicious. The other way is to use this whole setup against him, pass him information that he could only find out via a clandestine link to the CBI system and then use it against him.”

“Boy, for a stodgy academic, you can be quite diabolical. Machiavellian, even.”

“Is there anything on your system that would be damaging if Schoenfield had it?”

“Well, there are reports on the Campbell investigation. And, say, the entire file of the environmentalist portfolio is there, too. Of course, all that would tell him, the Campbell file, too, is that we’re not making progress.”

“I assume you informed Andersen of this. I’d sure want to know.”

“I told him about the hacking but I’m holding back on my suspicions on Schoenfield. That’s a real bombshell, politically. It’s real touchy.”

She took a bite of raspberry-covered bagel.

“Well, if you trust him, you ought to tell him your suspicions. At least I think so. Like I said, I’d want to know. In a way, it’s a damage control thing.”

“Let’s talk with Tim first to see how the information was getting passed.”

“Sure. It’s your call, anyway. Are you finding anything new in those articles?”

“The *Times* got to the NCAR guards. Hmm. Says here that they remember the guys who delivered that telescope. Reporter must have suggested they blew it. But the security tape is in the hands of the feds, and the guards were told to keep quiet, they say. Well, actually, they’re saying that the feds want all communications to go through them. So the NCAR guys aren’t talking much to the *Times*, or anyone, it seems. There’s a comment in the story that the guards were unresponsive to questions about people’s right to know and ability to help find the suspects.”

She looked up and grinned.

“Here’s one you’ll like, from the *Post*. I guess they put a whole team of local reporters, people who know Boulder, on this. They went door-to-door in the neighborhood below the NCAR lab. Found a guy the feds missed, apparently, who seems to like to talk. He saw a yellow and tan van from a local pest

control company—he remembers a logo in the form of some kind of bug but can't remember the company name—this van was parked out in front of his house Friday morning between about 9:30 and 10:15. He remembers it because the guys in it never got out. He figured they were on a coffee break and he didn't want them in his yard, so he was watching them. And the *Post* people found out that NCAR contracts with a pest control company that has yellow and tan vans, outfit called 'Bug-Be-Dead.' Calls to them weren't returned."

"Interesting. I bet the *Post* reporters don't know how close they are. If the feds had let it be known that the rifle was radio controlled, people would be camped outside Bug-Be-Dead. But, you know, this could open the flood gates. Todd Sweeney, the local FBI guy, told me that his colleagues were trying to get all of the folks they interviewed to be absolutely silent about this, like the way the NCAR guards were behaving in this *Times* story. But now one guy has talked, and that'll probably get everybody talking, probably anonymously. I bet tomorrow's stories are even more interesting."

* * *

Thirteen

After an hour or so of torturous persuasion at one of their meetings, Steve Rutherford had finally convinced his fellow members of SCREW that they needed an outing, something to break the tension, get them outside, accomplish something goal-oriented.

He knew of a land-clearing operation, a new subdivision going in on the edge of the National Forest north of Pagosa Springs. The contractor had all sorts of heavy equipment sitting out there in the woods, there were survey stakes galore, and surely no one would be working on Sunday of the Fourth of July weekend. Time for some monkey-wrenching.

Reid Tompkins begged off with the excuse that he had real cases to catch up on—all the time he'd been spending on Lolly's legal situation had put him behind. The consummate diplomat, he didn't mention the amount of time he'd been spending on Lolly herself. But Flip Chester and Aaron Felterson were willing and ready, Flip giggling at the prospect of the fun they were about to have and Felterson righteously indignant at the thought of yet another subdivision of forty-acre ranchettes ripping up the landscape, disrupting elk migration routes, destroying habitat.

Preparations were pretty simple, really. Lolly made a picnic lunch for all of them and was proud to drive her new car. She had saved enough from her ex-husband's alimony checks for a down-payment on a Dodge Neon, the sporty edition, in purple. Felterson provided local information—maps, in particular, because this new subdivision was definitely off the beaten track. Flip provided his usual contribution, and Rutherford had made up another clever message, complete with pun, for the contractor to find. The three Durango residents drove to Pagosa Springs, getting higher and higher as Flip kept rolling joints. Down in town, they picked up Felterson and headed back west up the hill to the turnoff onto Piedra Road, the county road that provided access to a variety of subdivisions, including the new one, and to the eastern reaches of the Weminuche Wilderness.

It took a few miles, about to the end of the pavement, to persuade Felterson to lighten up and get high with the rest of them, but he finally caved in. Yes, everyone agreed that their work was important and that these subdivisions were the blight of southwestern Colorado. But, come on, they could still have fun, couldn't they? Geez.

A few more miles down the gravel road, about half-way through their second joint since Pagosa Springs (Rutherford had lost count of the ones since Durango), they came around a curve and over a little rise, into a huge meadow, pasture for about 500 head of cattle. And about halfway across the meadow, they found most of those cattle walking down the road. There were three fellows on horses—cowboys!—keeping track of strays and generally moving the cattle along.

“Steve,” Lolly was appalled, “You told me that the road was slippery because of mud, because it must have rained. I don’t think so. Look at that.” She was pointing toward one of the steers just ahead of the car, who was making his personal contribution to the road’s slick surface.

“Steve, this is my *new car*. And it’s going to be all covered in cow shit!” She was in tears, but she had the presence of mind to tap lightly on the horn. The cattle parted to let her pass.

Normally, Rutherford would have been appropriately solicitous about Lolly’s feelings, maybe even offered to wash her new car for her. He, however, was not normal, nor were the car’s other two occupants. As a result of their particular abnormality, their response to Lolly’s tears, and especially to the coating on her new car, was hysterical giggling. Uncontrolled, can’t-get-your-breath giggling, which soon evolved into rolling-around, pounding-on-the-seats belly laughter. And because Lolly was not normal either, it didn’t take too long for her to switch moods and join in. All the while, the two-tone purple and brown sports-edition Neon was easing its way toward the front of the herd and the open road beyond.

Meanwhile, Red Collins was having a great day. He had won the coin flip and was riding point, ahead of the herd as its guide and, most importantly, on the gravel road in its pre-slippery state. Much less fragrant up front. The weather was dandy, the cattle knew what was happening—this early July change of pasture meant new, sweet grass—so they were cooperating, and what better way to spend a Sunday than to be atop his bay mare Sweetheart riding in the high country? Besides, he had a date for the annual fireworks display later. His boss, Archuleta County Sheriff Ron Grange, had given him the evening off so he could go out with his fiancée. Maybe, he thought, Sweetheart here is only the first filly I’ll be atop today.

He wasn’t really paying attention, because the noise of the cattle, the warmth of the day, and his thoughts of the coming night had lulled him into reverie. But then there was this strange noise, a sort of toot-toot-tooting. He swiveled around in his saddle to see a little purple car, the sides streaked with brown, inching its way through the herd, almost on top on him. He edged Sweetheart over to the right side of the road.

As the car passed him, he automatically waved, and the occupants waved back. Then he caught the familiar whiff of burning contraband. At the same time, he saw that the people in the car were laughing hysterically. He pulled a cellular telephone out of his shirt pocket and hit a speed dial button.

“Hey there, Zelda. This here’s Red. Hey, I’m doing this cattle drive up Piedra Road, right now we’re right about at Ant Hill. And, listen, a car, a new Dodge Neon, purple underneath the cow shit, Colorado plates, just went by northbound, full of dope-smoking hippies. They’re so whacked out I don’t see how they can drive. Y’all got anybody up this way today? Ron’s up here? Aw, hey, that’s perfect. Let him know, will ya?”

* * *

They decided to invite Tim Langer over first, ahead of Jamal, to have a chance to talk with him alone. He was initially reluctant, but Annette reminded him of their deal and promised food. Nothing like food to entice college students, except maybe beer, but Langer was only 19 and it was Sunday morning. Hal

and Annette were still absorbed in the papers when the doorbell rang. Annette stood up to get it, and shortly she returned with the reformed computer hacker in tow.

“Good morning, Tim. Want some breakfast?”

Hal wanted to start things out on the right foot.

“Uh, good morning, Dean Weathers. I am kind of hungry. Um, this sure looks, ah, domestic. Do you both live here?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? I guess we didn’t say anything the other day. We’re married. Domestic, huh? Yeah, you’re right. This is our Sunday-morning-after-the-assassination look, newspapers everywhere. What kind of bagel do you want? And should I toast it? And what on it? Welcome to the Eighth Street Deli.”

“I’ll try this one,” he was pointing to an “everything” bagel, covered with all sorts of different things. “And, uh, what’s that pink stuff on the plate there?”

“Lox. Smoked salmon.”

“Looks raw.”

“Almost. Not as raw as sushi. And not as smoked as the smoked salmon in those packages at the store, the Alaska kind. Want to try it?”

“Raw fish for breakfast? Um, can I just have it with butter, or cream cheese, is that what that is?”

“Fine with me. I’ll try the raw fish out on Jamal. He’s from Denver, maybe he’s had it before.”

“Tim, while he’s playing chef, burning your bagel,” there was a good-natured “Hey!” from Hal in the background, “I want to ask you something about the hacking you’ve been doing for the people on that list you made up yesterday.”

Langer was instantly on alert, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Don’t get upset, I’m not going to ask you who you were hacking for. I promised not to go there, and I’m not going to. But there’s something I didn’t think of yesterday, and it relates to how—not for whom, but how—you were doing this hacking. Did you go into these systems you compromised and find information and pass it to whoever it was, or did you get them access so they could find their information themselves? The reason that this is important is this: if you go straight, like we discussed, you won’t be passing information any more, and that could get you in hot water with whoever you were working for, right? And we’d like to avoid that.”

“Oh. You’re right. I didn’t think of that either, but that’s because I haven’t been passing the information. I’ve been setting up logins, the secret kind like I had on the FSU system. I don’t know what kind of information is of interest to, well, you know. And I don’t want to know, actually.”

“OK, thanks. Now, Jamie, the systems person who caught you once we knew someone was using the FSU systems without authorization, Jamie said that the secret login you were using was sort of piggy-backed onto something she called ‘root.’ Are the others like this?”

“Yeah, they’re all the same. See, I get in, there are different ways to do that, and run a script that sets this secret login up, then I turn it over to, uh, the others, and don’t go to that system again. Except I didn’t do that with the FSU system because I needed it for myself, as a fast host.”

“OK. I’m not a computer guru like you are, but I don’t need to know details. One thing I’m curious about, though, is how you get into these systems in the first place. You said there are different ways.”

“Several. And there’s a book that describes a couple, and other ways are discussed on hacker internet sites. Once you know the IP address of a computer, that’s like an internet phone number, then you try a couple of things that tell you what kind of computer it is. There’s a utility called ‘ping’ that works on most systems. Once you know that, you can see if the systems people there have plugged up known security holes for that kind of system. If not, you’re in. If so, well, then my next step is to find the web site of the organization and see if it has any security holes that are vulnerable. Most web sites of organizations have e-mail links to people there, and these links give you addresses. There are e-mail security holes on some systems that are worth trying. Finally, there’s the ‘brute force’ method, where you take e-mail names, assume that they’re login names—they usually are—and just try to guess passwords using a dictionary, a special dictionary. That takes a while, and it’s risky. The systems people for the system you’re working on see all these attempts from the same user and wonder. I imagine that’s how I got caught.”

“Excellent. Thank you. No more such questions. So you’ll know, the UNELECO people told us that they were watching your brute force attack, but they had discovered you before you started that and had been watching for a couple of days. They wouldn’t go into details. And it looks like our deli chef has got your bagel ready. Coffee?”

“That’d be great. Black. Hmm. Sounds like those UNELECO people are good. So, I have a question, Dean Weathers. Who’s this athlete you need me to tutor? And what’s his situation, grade-wise?”

“Basketball player named Jamal Washington, a real super-star, at least by Frémont State standards. Seems sharp. He’ll be a second-year student this fall, his first year they had him on ‘red-shirt’ status, meaning he was here but didn’t lose a year of eligibility. He’s taking two courses during the second summer term that starts in a couple of weeks, a survey course in natural sciences and an intro to computers course. He says he’s got to get ‘A’s in both, to maintain the GPA he needs to play. That’s my fault, partly, because I’m on this faculty committee that’s recommending raising the minimum standards. Hence my involvement.”

“What’s his major?”

“Theater and dance, interestingly enough. He said he likes the acting and wants to improve his coordination on the basketball court with the dance. I can just imagine him doing ballet lifts. His partner would get nose bleeds from the altitude. And, listen, both of you, don’t make any ‘tall’ jokes. He’s sensitive. And, as you’ll see, tall.”

“I didn’t take the intro course, so I’ll have to find out what’s covered. But it shouldn’t be too hard. Where’s he from—oh, you said Denver, didn’t you? What high school?”

“East High. Pretty good school, as inner-city big schools go. His brother, Radford, was here a couple of years back, and he graduated in four years with honors. So either it’s a smart family or a good high school, or both.”

The doorbell rang again, and this time Hal got up to do the honors.

* * *

Lolly, the one person in the SCREW crew with first-hand experience, was able to say with authority that the Archuleta County lock-up was not up to the standards of the La Plata County lock-up, although the view out the little barred window was better. Neither Rutherford nor Felterson had any reason to be experienced with the legal system. And, despite his potential for such experience, by some miracle Flip Chester had managed to avoid it, even with his reputation in Durango’s police department.

It was not pleasant, for any of them, experience or not. How quickly a fun Sunday outing had degenerated.

The Neon had a reasonably good HEPA filter on its air conditioning system, and the stronger odors of the cattle herd began to seep into the car's interior about half-way through the teeming mass of bovines. The car's stoned occupants had quickly opened the windows, only to find the outdoor air to be even more fragrant. As they made it past the herd, waving gleefully to the cowboy leading it, they all stuck their heads out of the car, like dogs on a ride, for fresh air.

It took several miles for the car to begin to smell fresh—there was a lingering scent from the brown streaks—and just about the time they were breathing freely, their world ended.

“Oh shit, oh Jesus.”

Lolly, driving carefully in the fuzz of her cannabis-impaired senses, was the first to see the sheriff's SUV parked across the road ahead, lights flashing, uniformed officer standing impassively with his hand in the “STOP” gesture.

Rutherford, in the front seat with her, had less charitable thoughts. At least the car was aired out pretty well, he thought, and the cow shit should hide whatever other aromas there might be, especially incriminating ones. That, however, turned out not to be the case, because Sheriff Ron Grange, having been raised on a ranch, had no difficulty distinguishing between cattle fragrances—the sweet smell of money—and the odor of dope smoke.

At least he was nice about it, the sheriff. He had them sit on the ground, on a soft patch of grass, with red Indian paintbrush and columbines, plastic cuffs on but with their hands in front, while he searched the car. Flip, on seeing the SUV, had divested himself of his stash, so Lolly would be held responsible for the baggie of vegetable matter that Grange found wedged behind the rear-seat arm rest. Felterson had brought several rolled-up maps in a day-pack, and one of these had a circle drawn around an area in which Grange knew a new ranchette subdivision was being developed. There were several containers of strange substances in the trunk, including bottles of Karo syrup and cans of lapidary grit, and some long-handled bolt-cutters.

And in Rutherford's shirt pocket, he found a folded-up note that piqued his interest.

Sheriff Ron Grange, being a modern sort of sheriff, read everything he could from his neighboring sheriffs' offices and from the CBI, so he was well up to date on various ongoing investigations in the region. And, with what he was finding, he knew just what phone calls to make when he got back to town.

So, as the SCREW crew were adapting to their new accommodations, Grange was on the phone. Annette and Hal were cleaning up after their breakfast/brunch/lunch marathon when a telephone rang from under a pile of newspapers. Annette recognized it as hers and went digging for it.

“Trieri, CBI”

“Ms. Trieri, this is Ron Grange, over in Pagosa Springs. How's your Sunday, nice, I hope?”

“So far so good, Ron. How are things over your way?”

“Well, interesting, I guess you'd say. I'm calling because of that, actually. Got some folks in my detention facility who might just be connected with that fire over in Monticello at that lumber mill I heard you're investigating along with the Utah State Patrol folks.”

“No kidding? Well, that would certainly brighten my day. Who?”

“Four people, caught them with various strange substances, including marijuana, in suspicious circumstances. Let's see. Car owned by and driven by one Louella Markham, Durango address, said

she's 32 but her license suggests she's 38. Passenger number one is Steven Rutherford, 27, Durango. Passenger number two is Aaron Felterson, 29, Pagosa Springs. I know this guy. He's a local activist and general pain in the ass. Passenger number three is Phillip Chester, 39, Durango."

"I know passenger number three, he's a local pot-head. If you found some grass, it's his, 99% probability. He's pretty harmless, small-potatoes sort of guy. And I know Ms. Markham, too. She's out on a personal recognizance bond during pre-trial maneuvering. She was spotted near the mill in Monticello, but all we have her for is driving a car with stolen Colorado plates. And this guy Rutherford is connected with her somehow, maybe with the Monticello thing also. What strange substances, besides the pot?"

"Couple gallons of corn syrup. Some really fine sand, like lapidary grit. Maps, and Felterson had these, showing the location of a new subdivision—and they were on the road toward it. I figure they were going to mess up some construction equipment."

"You going to charge them?"

"Well, I'm not sure it's worth the hassle. The dope wasn't much, way under an ounce, and it was stuffed in her car behind the rear-seat arm-rest. I figure that one of the guys in the back seat, probably Chester, according to what you just said, put it there when I stopped them. Can't imagine Markham carrying it around in a new car, especially if she's out on recognizance just now."

"Unless it was left over from before her adventures with us. She's kind of an air-head."

"Maybe, but they were all higher than kites. One of my deputies smelled dope smoke when they drove by him up the road a piece. He called them in and I collared them. Anyway, I can book her for DUI and probably conjure up some kind of disturbing the peace thing for the others, if you want me to hold on to them."

"Did they make their calls?"

"Markham did, to a lawyer in Cortez, ah, some guy named Reid Tompkins, according to our version of caller ID. She got his answering machine, and boy, was she pissed."

"Did you do the roadside test on Markham?"

"Yeah, and she fell flat. I mean literally, during the one-foot part. Good thing the turf underfoot was soft. With that and the stash, I could cause her lots of headaches, but you know how these cases are."

"Yeah, not worth the hassle. But because she's out on recognizance just now, this is an excuse for me to see if I can get it revoked. I'll work that end, and we can figure out how to get her out of your hair. And I'll leave the others to you. I guess it would be pretty hard to get them on 'intent to sabotage' or something just for having that other stuff, though."

"Yeah, but there's one more thing. It's what made me think of the possible Monticello connection. Rutherford had this piece of paper in his pocket, folded up. Printed on it was 'Dear Developers: SCREW [and it's SCREW in capitals] you! Stay out of our forests!'"

"Oh. Well. That's interesting indeed. More interesting than I'm supposed to tell you, unless Todd Sweeney has talked with you."

"Sweeney? The FBI guy over your way?"

"Yeah. Well, hell, I'll just tell you anyway, but keep it secret, OK? You called me because you read about the SCREW note in Monticello, right?"

"Right. And because of the connection with sabotage."

“Well, the secret is that there was a SCREW note at the scene of that assassination attempt up in Boulder on Friday.”

“What? No shit? Uh, excuse the French. But, really? I mean, from what I’ve been reading, that was carefully done, the perps got clean away. I can tell you, there’s no way that this bunch could have pulled that one off. These people remind me of the Three Stooges and their girlfriend.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. The Boulder note is probably a misdirection. The feds know about the Monticello note, I talked with Sweeney about it. He agrees that they’re probably not connected, but they’re looking into it. I’ll mention this one to them as well. So, anyway, I’ll get Markham’s bond revoked and come pick her up. Anything else I can do?”

“Yeah. Figure out what to do with her car. It’s stinking up our holding lot. But that’s a long story.”

* * *

Annette was right—after the interview on Sunday, the flood gates opened. Monday’s papers were full of “un-named source” interviews, sound bites, and hearsay about the mysterious Bug-Be-Dead van and its two occupants. Although less precise than the descriptions from the NCAR security tape, the public perception of the van’s occupants was taking form. The *Denver Post* reporter who summarized the variety of eye-witness reports described that form for his friends as “Those Las Vegas comics, Penn and the short guy Teller with a corn cob up his ass.” And the radius of their sighting was increasing—someone had seen the van drive into a car wash on the far east side of Boulder, over a mile from the shopping center where its occupants had been seen taking the signs off.

The car wash information was new to the Secret Service and FBI teams, and they were not amused to be scooped by the news media. The news media, of course, rubbed this in with gleeful abandon.

Pickle and Mad Dog, however, were too busy to read the Monday papers, for they had chosen Monday as the day to lean on Timothy Langer. They drove down from Norwood quite early and staked out an apartment building where he was supposed to be living.

About 9:30, Langer left the apartment building in the company of two other people, and they all climbed into a beat-up, older model Ford Bronco and headed off toward the campus. Langer was let off in front of a building with a sign that said “Streak Willoughby Athletic Dormitory,” and, before Pickle and Mad Dog could do anything, he disappeared inside. They debated what to do next, and finally settled on following him into the dorm. Langer would recognize them on sight, of course, but they would be careful.

After spending a half hour trying to find a parking place that wouldn’t get them towed—even on the Monday holiday, the public spots were mostly full—they walked back to the athletes’ dorm and strolled in through the open front door. They found themselves in a large lounge area, full of couches and easy chairs, study tables and bookcases. There was a television in a far back corner, tuned to the Cartoon Channel, from the looks of it. After their eyes adjusted to the relatively dim lighting, they recognized the back of Langer’s head, over in a corner in front of two open windows, sitting with a group of very dark-skinned young men. One had his leg in a cast, propped up, crutches leaning against his chair. Another, quite tall, was leaning over a table, paying close attention to Langer. The third, a tall, bulky fellow, was sitting in an easy chair, reading a newspaper, nodding off.

Following a brief consultation, Pickle walked toward the corner where the group was sitting, and Mad Dog held back, leaning casually against a column in the middle of the room.

For his part, Tim Langer was surprised at how fast everything was going. The Sunday meeting with Jamal—and man, this dude was *tall*—went better than he’d expected. For one thing, there was no

communications gap. Tim had sort of expected to have to get used to hearing ghetto slang, but that wasn't the case. In fact, Tim was finding himself speaking with more care than he usually did, so as not to sound like a dullard to Jamal. For another, Jamal seemed both interested in learning about the technical background behind the tool that he had learned to use in high school and adept at picking technical issues up quickly. So they had agreed to start on the tutoring first thing Monday, which turned out to be at 9:30, in the dorm where Jamal lived and generally hung out with his fellow athletes.

Tim was a little late, but no one really cared. Jamal was waiting for him in the main lounge, with two of his pals, Freeman Williams, the football team's star right tackle, and Abdul Moustafa, a running back who was recovering from getting his knee 'scoped. The poor guy had blown his medial collateral ligament during a springtime pickup game—a flag football game, to his embarrassment. Having read about these football stars in the paper, Tim was learning the pleasure of consorting with celebrity. Basketball season, he thought, will be a lot more interesting this year.

Just as he was finishing going over the outline for the Intro to Computers course—Tim had spent the evening before surfing the Web—he felt a tap on his shoulder and saw Jamal looking up at someone. Tim turned to find his nemesis Pickle standing behind him.

“Hey, Timmy, listen, I need to talk with you. Could you step outside? C'mon now.”

Pickle had taken hold of Tim's left shoulder.

“Excuse me.” Jamal's voice was silky smooth. “We're in the middle of something here, something that is really important to me. Something that we have an appointment for. We won't be much longer. Please take your hand off *my friend*.”

The very notion of a middle-aged guy, especially such an *ugly* one, grabbing Tim offended Jamal to the core.

“Hey, pal, I suggest you stay out of this, if you know what's good for you. Timmy and I have a little business to discuss.”

During this exchange, Tim had begun to tremble; this, combined with his pallor—white as snow, a remarkable contrast to the athletes he was sitting with—made it clear to Jamal that something was amiss. So he stood up. By the time he was finished, he was hovering a good 18” above the top of Pickle's head.

“Excuse me again, sir, but I'm not your pal, and I would appreciate it if you would take your hands off my friend.”

Then Pickle, whose head was tilted way back to see who was talking to him, heard a deep, sonorous rumbling from behind him.

“Don't think you're anybody's pal around here, buddy. You heard the man. Let the little dude go.”

Pickle turned, only to see another very tall individual standing staring down at him. This one, however, was much, much wider than the first one.

As if by magic, a knife appeared in Pickle's right hand.

“OK, fellas, back off. I can take care of the kid here and slice you both to ribbons before you can say jigaboo.”

He looked surprised, apparently realizing what he'd said just a fraction of a second too late to stop saying it.

“Before we can say *what?!?*”

Jamal and Freeman were almost in unison.

But Pickle didn't have a chance to answer. There was a sharp cracking noise, and Pickle squealed in agony as his right wrist broke from the blow by one of Abdul's aluminum crutches.

"Aw, it bent!" was Abdul's only comment, referring to his crutch, as Pickle's knife went skittering into the corner.

"Time for you to fly, friend."

The rumbling resumed briefly as Freeman grabbed Pickle by the shirt collar and the belt, picked him off his feet, swung him back and forward and let him sail out the open window.

In itself, this wouldn't have been catastrophic for Pickle, for this was the first floor and they had come up only a few steps from the ground at the entrance to the dorm. His wrist, of course, was broken, but he could have landed on the grass with little additional damage. However, outside the window was a robust hedge, green and healthy, thick and hearty, of carefully pruned hawthorne. The pruning administered by the grounds keepers over the decades seemed to have enraged the otherwise placid bush, because it had grown its thorns much longer than one would usually expect.

Pickle's first ever solo flying lesson ended with a landing in the hedge. He sank in a foot or so, felt himself being stuck as if he'd become a pin cushion, and wriggled so much that he became completely entangled. The pain of his wrist was a secondary problem now, and the wailing sounds he was making were easy to hear inside the dorm.

Back inside, Mad Dog had sprung into action, but he was just a tad late to save his friend from flying. He took out Freeman with a blind-side rabbit punch, and kicked the cast-encumbered Abdul off his chair. Then he was facing Jamal, who had come out from behind the table and was standing between Mad Dog and Tim, who had backed into the corner.

"Stand on the knife, Tim, but don't pick it up. Fingerprints. There's going to be police involved here, sometime."

Although calm, Jamal seemed ready for trouble. He was also fascinated by Mad Dog's wandering eye, which was doing double time in its random walk around the room.

"You, boy, are in bigger trouble than you know."

"Jigaboo? Boy? Man, what planet are you two guys from, anyway? Listen, whoever you are, you can sucker punch and kick people in leg casts, but you've got more than you can handle with me. The folks over there are calling the cops. We've got witnesses. Your friend isn't going anywhere without hedge clippers. You might as well just sit down and be quiet and await your destiny. It's inevitable. Unless you want to get hurt, white boy."

Jamal had taken just enough theater training in his first year at Frémont State to have access-on-demand eloquence.

With a growling noise, Mad Dog rushed the taller, lighter basketball player, but Jamal simply stepped aside and gave Mad Dog a kick in the pants, which helped accentuate his crash into the bookcase on the wall. Mad Dog turned, truly worthy of his name now, and began a slow, careful stalk.

But Jamal stood his ground, balanced on the balls of both feet. When Mad Dog was just under two meters away, it happened, almost too fast to see. Jamal jumped, executing a double pirouette with remarkable speed and even grace, and, on the second revolution, he thrust out his left leg a long, long way, landing a back heel kick with his Doc Martin boot squarely on the point of Mad Dog's jaw. There was a sort of crunch, and teeth flew from Mad Dog's mouth. He toppled into a heap on the floor, sliding under the study table.

“Holy Moroni!” Tim was the first to speak. “Jamal, what in the world was that move? I’ve never seen anything like it, even in the movies!”

“Well, I took karate at home, in high school. Now I’m taking ballet. I sort of improvised.”

The rumbling noise was back.

“Abdul, you OK? Good. Hey, guys, I was reading in the paper about how the President was almost assassinated by two men, a big one and a little one, and the little one had a funny, puckered mouth. What the hell, let’s call the FBI.”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Tim was smiling so wide his nose was stretched. “I know this lady who runs the CBI, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, down here. She’ll know what to do.”

* * *

Fourteen

“He said what?”

“He said that he was going to send me two season passes for basketball. He claims that it’s because I started things in motion, I guess he means the tutoring, things that wound up with all the great publicity. He figures that all the home games will sell out, and probably away games, too, because we have this ballet-jumping, karate-kicking center playing for us. Of course, I think it’s all a way to get me to make sure Jamal’s grades are good enough. And we already have season tickets, even though we haven’t used them, so I’ll give the new ones away. Hmm. Unless they’re better than ours.”

Annette and Hal were once again in the middle of a long breakfast on the deck, home-made muffins this time, discussing Hal’s conversation with the Frémont State Athletic Director. His call was the most recent fallout from the “Rumble at the Streak,” as the *Frémont Free Press* called it.

From Hal’s perspective, the fallout was good news. The students had reacted appropriately, if exuberantly, to a clear threat, and the threat had been mitigated in the least damaging way possible. The university fared well in the press reports.

The fallout was also good news from Annette’s perspective. For one thing, the feds now owed her, big time, *biggest* time. She had turned over to them, with no fanfare or expectation of credit, their two main suspects in the assassination attempt. And she’d done it in relative secrecy. More importantly for Annette, having Pickle and Mad Dog off the streets had opened Timothy Langer up, and she now had a much clearer picture of Schoenfield’s activities than before. Tim was still afraid of Schoenfield, so he wasn’t going to be testifying. But Annette knew enough to develop strategy.

Although still afraid of Schoenfield, Tim considered the fallout to be good news, too. He had a new set of friends, his first ever, practically—friends with celebrity status on campus, no less. He had season tickets to both football and basketball. He wasn’t afraid of getting caught hacking any more. And girls were noticing him.

About the only people for whom the fallout was bad news were Anthony J. Mercer, also known as Pickle, and Morgan L. David, aka Mad Dog. Mercer’s wrist was in a cast, and some two hundred small puncture wounds, many as deep as two inches, had been tended to. David’s jaw was wired together, *sans* three molars, two uppers and a lower. From a medical perspective, the only good news for these two was

that David's eye had stopped wandering. He was delighted and would have talked Mercer's ear off, the one with the four little holes in it, if he could have talked more than just to say "Mrrph."

From a legal perspective, there was no good news at all for these two. Because the NCAR security guards had positively identified them as the two Bug-Be-Dead workers who had made a service call to the laboratory the morning of the assassination attempt, the feds were holding them without bail. And the ballistics match that showed their involvement in the assassination attempt implied their involvement in the murder of Arthur Powell at Natural Bridges Monument. Annette had her suspicions about other murders as well, and their incarceration on federal charges would give her time to sort all of those out.

And, to add insult to injury, Bug-Be-Dead, Inc. had announced that it was going to sue them for defamation.

"Does this mean that we're going to the basketball games this year? And can you pass the peanut butter?"

A basketball fan ever since playing on her college team, Annette had been wanting to go, but something always came up.

"Well, it makes a difference, knowing one of the players. You remember how we enjoyed football more after we met the Twin Towers, no matter the circumstances. And, hey, this basketball player could be a gas to watch, if he's on your team. I mean, anybody messes with him is asking for trouble, and the opposing players know it. This could be fun."

"I'm glad it all worked out so well. If I'm right, these two thugs are responsible for killing a lot of people, very well, I might add. The clean crime scenes, for example. They must have had brain lock to get themselves in the situation in the dorm."

"I bet they weren't thinking it would be an issue. I mean, it's a college dorm. They go in, find Tim, use their adult ways to intimidate the students, and spirit him out of there. They didn't figure in running into Jamal and his friends. The flying lesson was especially good. Who'd think those hawthorne hedges would be so useful? They were planted years ago, you know, when the old college needed a way to keep the boys out of the girls dorm."

"I didn't know. But I do remember college, so it isn't surprising. Anyway, that chapter seems to be closed. The issue now is nailing Schoenfield and there still isn't solid proof of much of anything. Even if Tim agreed to testify, he would get torn to shreds by a good defense lawyer. He's got some real animosity toward Schoenfield that he isn't talking about, but it would come out in court. His testimony wouldn't hold up."

"Is there evidence that Mercer and David work for Schoenfield?"

"Formally, they work for the X-S Ranch, Incorporated. The X-S is owned by the non-profit corporation Resources For Humanity. Its board, the public board, is a bunch of community leaders from around the region, but everyone recognizes that it's run by Schoenfield. But that's hearsay. So, if asked, Schoenfield will say that these two renegade X-S employees, whom he hardly knows, went off and did these Bad Things without his knowledge, oh dear, oh dear."

"But if Mercer and David testify against Schoenfield, and Tim does too..."

"There are possibilities there, but I don't think Mercer will. David's not talking just now. And getting Tim to testify is more than I'm willing to push for. What I really want to do is to get Schoenfield red-handed. Somehow. But I'm optimistic. Events, she said ominously, are in motion," she said, ominously, despite her grin.

“You were talking the other day about a computer sting. That’s probably the best part about getting Tim to stop worrying about whatever he was worried about.”

“Yep. I think he was worried about Mercer, as controlled by Schoenfield. He’ll talk about it eventually.”

“Well, I’m thinking that the U will come out of this in pretty good shape, unless our guy Steven Rutherford turns out to have killed somebody.”

“Probably not. I expect he was part of the Monticello arson, but that’s it. He’s not talking about that, but he’s talking about other stuff, being pretty cooperative. I think he’s pissed off that Mercer and David used that SCREW note up in Boulder. But he’s also worried, I think. The guy who got killed over in Creede, the squished guy—remember?—was a friend of his. Rutherford thinks he may be next on some hit list. There was talk between them of a sort of revival meeting for Resources For Humanity. Wellington, the squished guy, thought it was just a wise-use group thing, but he talked to Rutherford about racist overtones. So that’s another possible connection between RFH and Schoenfield’s outfit, at least I think it’s Schoenfield’s, the Aryan Rights Foundation.

“Anyway, we’ve managed to scare the bejesus out of those environmental people, and they’re actually starting to cooperate. I had a little chat with the lawyer, Tompkins, about the lay of the land, and he’s been pretty reasonable. I’m not sure about him, though. There’s more there than I’ve figured out.”

he popped a piece of muffin smothered in peanut butter and honey into her mouth.

“Anybody ever figure out what SCREW means?”

“I think Tompkins knows, and I’d bet the mortgage that Rutherford knows, but they’re not talking. Probably worried about incriminating themselves.”

“At least, if you’re right, with Mercer and David off the streets, Rutherford doesn’t have to worry about being next.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to let him know that. I like keeping him off balance.”

* * *

Both Hal and Tim Langer had ulterior motives in seeing that Jamal’s grades were up to par—good basketball games—so they were meeting often to keep on top of the situation. When Annette heard about this, she designated Hal as a sort of de facto probation officer for Langer. This merely gave Hal an excuse to discuss computer hacking issues with Langer, in particular, those related to Langer’s former client, as they had come to refer to Schoenfield. Annette’s ominous reference to events in motion had piqued Hal’s curiosity, so that afternoon he broached the subject with Langer during one of their meetings.

“It’s pretty clear to everyone that Mercer, I mean, Pickle, is just a fall guy, an operative, for whoever’s in charge of all that was going on.”

“Oh, yeah. He was an enforcer, and if his enforcement didn’t work, Mad Dog would take over. I can’t tell you what a relief it is not to have to worry about them.”

“They were looking for you, but why?”

“Probably because I wasn’t getting the job done, the job on UNELECO. Because I got caught by you guys.”

“Your name was kept out of the papers, I think. At least I didn’t see it. Do you suppose that you could still succeed at getting into UNELECO? I mean, tell your client that you’ve done what he wanted?”

“But I haven’t. And he knows I got caught, I think. At least he knew it if it was on the CBI computer, and it probably was.”

“Oh. You mean that he wouldn’t buy a story about how you were questioned and released and are being disciplined by the university. But then you went ahead and hacked into UNELECO anyway, just because you wanted to do a good job?”

“Uh, I don’t think he’d buy that, no.”

“Hmm. Well, I was thinking of helping Annette set up her sting.”

“What kind of sting?”

“As I understand it, the idea is to plant information somewhere that he can get to only if he has unauthorized access to where it’s planted. The information would be about something that the CBI thinks he’s done, something shady. It’s false information, of course, but designed to make him act on it, but only if he’s really involved in the shady stuff. Then they have him stung.”

“So what do you need UNELECO for?”

“With all due respect to the CBI people, I think UNELECO’s computer systems jocks are better, they could do a better job on the sting. Also, your client doesn’t know his way around on those systems so well. If the CBI makes changes to catch him, he might notice something fishy.”

“Right, he might. He’s not real sophisticated, though. If they want to make changes, a good way to do it would be to make it public, like it’s a normal part of systems upgrades, or something. Put out a flashy MOTD for all to see. Then, the changes to catch him wouldn’t be so suspicious to him.”

“Uh, MOTD?”

“Message of the day. It tells people, when they log in, what new stuff has happened on that system, that sort of thing.”

“Hmm. I know Annette got her boss to stop big changes on the CBI system, like—what did Jamie call it?—rebuilding the root login, I guess it was. That would apparently wipe out your secret login, right?”

“Yep. And, of course, he’d wonder why he couldn’t get in and probably try a lot and be real frustrated and mad, but that would be the end of it. Keeping that login alive is the first step toward getting him.”

“So what’s your position on this. Want to get him?”

“You bet. With him as well as Mad Dog and Pickle out of circulation, I’d be breathing a lot easier. I mean, as things are now, he could hire a couple of new thugs and I’d be back to where I was a week ago.”

“You have a unique combination here, you’re knowledgeable about this, and you’re motivated. And, since this is summer, you have time. Jamie knows what to do, I think, but she’s mostly upset with you, not your client. And I guess the UNELECO people are out of the picture. Annette is working the sting from her own angle. But the more angles we get going, the better.”

“So, if you don’t mind my asking, Dean Weathers, what’s your motivation in all this?”

“Oh, a couple of things. I want Annette to succeed, of course, but she’ll do that with or without me, I’m sure. But I also want to get who’s really behind all this, at least if he’s responsible for the portfolio.”

“Portfolio? Of what?”

“That’s right, you may not know. Well, over the past year or so, someone has been killing off people associated with the environmental preservation movement. Mostly, it’s been pretty radical environmentalists that have been killed, all with some connection or other to some shadowy group called the Mother Earth Defense League, MEDL. But not always. I forget how many, but it’s around a dozen. As much as I’m a centrist on these issues, it offends me that someone’s going around killing people. And everything we know, which is admittedly not much, points to Senator Schoenfield.”

“I heard my uncle give a speech once, where he talked about how the tree-huggers were preventing people from using their land, the resources God gave us, for their families. He’s a sort of bogus preacher, and he brings God into everything when he can.”

“Your uncle? Would I have heard of him?”

“Michael Oswald. He calls himself ‘reverend,’ but that’s just his ego. He’s really a lawyer. I heard he got disbarred for something or other. Now, he spends his time drumming up support for Resources For Humanity, the outfit that the Senator set up as the front for his ranch and for his other thing, the Aryan Rights Foundation. What a crock that one is.”

“Does Annette know about these connections?”

“Um, I think so. I don’t remember if I talked about them with her. But I think so.”

“Is it OK for me to tell her what you just said, in case she hasn’t heard it?”

“Uh, sure, but I’m still scared of going to court or anything.”

“She isn’t going in that direction at all. But better yet, why don’t you just give her a call? Volunteer to set the sting up for her. That would really rehabilitate you in her eyes.”

* * *

Even though they all knew each other, they were supposed to pretend they didn’t. Instead, they were assigned numbers, and the operation began to sound like a parody of a bad spy novel, “Number One” this, “Number Two” that. But those were the rules.

To make matters even more ridiculous, they had to wear hoods, black ones that were intolerably hot during the day, when they were practicing. During the real thing, at night, the black hoods would help disguise their lily-white skin. But no one thought to suggest white hoods for daytime practice. Even tan and green camouflage ones would have been better than black.

Number Three, known to the rest of the world as Gerald McTeague, was sweating so much that he couldn’t see. He’d been using the hood to sop the sweat from his eyes, but it was saturated by now and so were his sleeves. But he needed to see, for his role in the operation was to be the signal relay. A flashlight was going to send him the “go” signal, and he would use a flashlight of his own to relay the “go” to Number Two, who in actuality was Gerald’s best friend Bob Roy, down the way. Bob Roy, er, Number Two, would cut a climbing rope with his razor sharp axe, which would let the rock go, pulling out the support under the main timber of the little bridge over Lime Creek above the Spar City site, which would collapse the bridge just in time for the Forest Service truck, on its rounds bedding the camp grounds down, to fall into the creek and be swept over the falls just below, killing the meddlesome rangerette with the big hooters in a way that would look like an accident. The flashlight that Gerald’s

sweaty eyes were supposed to see was to be triggered by the pickup's passing a certain tree just up the road from the bridge.

Of course, during this practice run, the pickup wasn't the rangerette, it was Number Five, the only one of them that no one knew, the ringleader. He was from Cortez. And, naturally, Number Two wasn't going to cut the rope, he was going to whack a log instead. In theory, it was easy, but with the sweat and the daylight, Gerald had his doubts about whether he was going to see the flashlight. At night, of course, it would be a snap. But Number Five insisted on practice, and he was a real taskmaster. Plus a real asshole.

The latter personality trait had come out during planning meetings. The distances involved, a few hundred yards, would allow the use of those cheap walkie-talkies, or even whistles, so why not use them?, Gerald had asked. We thought of that already, came the condescending answer: Because they use open radio bands and anyone can hear, and because we need to keep quiet. But if someone just said "Go," well, so what if it's overheard? Smarter people than you thought this up and this is the way it's going to be done, with flashlights, was the answer. If you don't want to do it the right way, then we'll find someone else and you can get yourself off the "A" list.

Was that it? Or was that a glint from a car window on the road? Shit, this is impossible. Just to cover his ass, Gerald turned and blinked his flashlight in the direction of Bob Roy, who must have seen it because there was the whacking noise, right on time. OK, great, exercise over, I'm getting out of this goddamned hood. Gerald stripped the dripping black cloth off.

"Number Three, you're out of uniform." The booming voice seemed uncannily close. "That'll be ten demerits. You also screwed up the operation with a false signal. That's about it for you, soldier. We don't tolerate mistakes or incompetence. You want to play with the real men, you've got to do it the right way, our way. Otherwise you might just as well head for Boulder and hang out with those limp-wristed faggots up there. Ten demerits for being out of uniform is a hundred push-ups. In uniform. Now! And screwing up the exercise means you clean out the latrine tonight! On the ground. Now!"

It didn't help that Number Five, whom Gerald had turned to stare at, was only about 5'1" tall, a little bantam rooster puffed up with self-importance. Well, he needed to play the game, and that meant getting past this test.

"My apologies, Number Five. I saw a blinking and thought it was the signal. It must have been sunlight off the window of a car. And I signaled Number Two, he responded, and I thought the exercise was over. These hoods are hot in this sun." He put his hood back on and started on his push-ups.

While he was busy humping the ground, Numbers Two and Four arrived from their appointed positions, seeking approval from the leader. Number One was on station near the bridge and had pretended not to hear the whacking noise. His job in the operation was to untie and retrieve the rope from the keystone rock, eliminating evidence that this all wasn't an accident. During the practice, however, he was sitting in the shade with his feet in the river, listening to the gurgling water and thinking about cold beer. His hood was wet, too, but with cool river water instead of sweat.

"Whoa. What's Ger... um, Number Three up to, Number Five? I saw his light and did my thing. We done now?" Bob Roy's drawl from under his sopping hood was unmistakable, no matter what Number he was pretending to be.

"He's being disciplined for being out of uniform. And he gave a false signal anyway. We've got to do this all again."

"Aw, hell, Number Five, it's too damned hot for this fooling around. We can pull this off just fine without any more practice. The main thing is to get that Rube Goldberg contraption set up right, so the

whole thing actually works when I cut the stupid rope. I don't see why we don't just blow the damned bridge anyway. I've got some TNT up at my mining claim."

"I've had just about enough of your questioning my authority, Number Two. That'll be ten demerits for you, too. On the ground. One hundred push-ups. Now!"

Because he didn't have Gerald's motivation, with a muttered "To hell with that. I'm out of here!" Bob Roy stripped off his hood and stalked off in the direction of the pickup, *his* pickup. He roared off in an indignant cloud of dust.

Gerald was up to fifty-two when he heard the truck go. Great, he thought, it'll be as long a walk for asshole Number Five as for the rest of us assholes.

* * *

"Well, Tim," Annette was gazing out her window at the top of Smelter Mountain, "I appreciate your wanting to help. Really. In fact, you may be the best chance we have of pulling off a successful sting operation using computers. But, look, I promised not to require you to testify, and I want to keep that promise. You've been as helpful as you could have been, even telling me about Senator Schoenfield, but the more you get involved with this the greater the likelihood that we'll need you to testify."

Tim Langer squirmed in his chair, evaluating his next move. He knew she was right.

"What I'm afraid of is that I'll testify and he'll get off anyway and come after me."

"You've told me that he's behind all this stuff, at least as far as you can see, but you haven't told me what his hold on you is. Is it through your uncle somehow?"

"My uncle doesn't know, I don't think. He's kind of the Senator's front man, but he's always treated me like family." Tim squirmed some more. "See, when I was in high school, my uncle got me a job up at the Ranch, wrangling horses. I used to help out with the pack horses when the Senator went on hunting trips. And on this one trip his wife died. The county coroner ruled it an accident, but what happened is that she fell off her horse because the saddle wasn't tight enough, and she broke her neck. And I'm the one who saddled that horse. And the Senator knows all about it, so if he tells the coroner the case will get re-opened and I'll get accused of being responsible for her death, maybe even charged with manslaughter. At least that's what the Senator says. I know I saddled that horse perfectly well, so I really don't know how it could have happened. But it did and she's dead and the Senator's got me under his thumb."

"So if you don't do what he wants, he'll get you for her death? Surely it's just your word against his?"

"But who would believe me? On the other hand, people would believe him. He's a senior member of the Colorado State Senate, for God's sake."

"Hmm. Well, you're probably right, there's no point in poking at that particular hornet's nest. But, look, you told me you set up computer access for him to various sites, including the CBI one. And you were going to set one up for him on the UNELECO system, right? But you also said he was pretty unsophisticated when it comes to computers, right?"

"Right, on both counts."

"Hal said he talked a little with you about the sting idea. It seems to me we ought to be able to work something out, since you've done this work for the Senator already."

“I was thinking about a practical way to get to him. But what we could do to get started is just turn the tables on him. Hack into his system.”

“What? Oh. Of course. Well, Mr. Langer, you get a Gold Star. But how?”

“Well, he’s probably heard that Pickle and Mad Dog have been arrested, or he will. So he’ll be accessing the CBI system to try to find out why and what you people know about them, right? I could set up a script to detect when he’s logged into your system and then to access his system, do things like download his directory structure. The next time, we could start downloading his filesystems, the data files, to see what’s on there and what he knows. We could even write to his system, plant things to make him look bad.”

“Planting things isn’t what I want to do, because it could backfire. But, look, doesn’t hacking into a system take time? And he’s not permanently connected to the internet, right?”

“No, he uses dial-up access. But it won’t take time at all, so that’s not an issue. I guess I understand about not planting things on his system. But we could plant things on your system and wait until he finds them and downloads them, right? And then he’d be caught.”

“Right. And if those things motivated him to act in some way, to do something else illegal, well, then we’d really have him. But, look. I don’t understand why it won’t take a lot of time to hack into his system.”

“Well, because it won’t really be hacking. I’m his system administrator. I know the logins and passwords.”

* * *

Even without the hoods, it was still hot, but at least they were bare-headed. It helped to be able to see.

After Bob Roy had set them afoot, the remaining Numbers had grumbled and argued and grumbled some more about what to do next. Number Four’s cell phone wasn’t getting a signal, so they couldn’t call his wife to come and get them. There was little hope that hitch-hiking, this far up in the watershed, would be productive. Bob Roy was probably sitting in a bar, sipping a cold one, and he sure wasn’t going to reappear.

To make matters worse, at first Number Five had insisted that they continue to wear their hoods. The first priority was to keep their identities secret, he said. Finally, some not-so-gentle and persistent persuasion had succeeded in changing his mind. After all, if someone should see four people walking down the road in black hoods, well, wouldn’t that be just a tad suspicious?

The breeze was pleasant, and the babbling noises of Lime Creek, over to their right in the trees, was soothing as they walked along. If they got too thirsty, they could drink stream water, giardia or no, but at least they wouldn’t get dehydrated. Number One was complaining about being hungry, but he needed to lose some weight anyway.

Gerald figured it was at least ten, maybe twelve, miles back to Creede, and it would be well past dark by the time they arrived. They would all be hungry by then. But the time involved would also mean that things would be cooling off. He and his fellow Numbers could have used one of those summertime thunderstorms today.

Gerald was thinking that this Number business was about the dumbest thing he’d ever been involved in. Number One, real name Billy Henderson, rather liked the hocus-pocus involved, but that was no surprise. A rocket scientist Billy was not. Playing at being soldiers of fortune in the woods was a

welcome break from his real job, mucking the stable at the Three Rivers Dude Ranch. Even wearing a black hood in the hot sun would be an improvement over that.

And Number Four, Jonas Alberts, was unemployed, so anything to do was good news to him. The alternative, hanging out in what passed for downtown Creede hitting up the tourists for spare change, had a tendency to attract the sheriff's attention. Jonas had done that once too many times to want it to happen again.

So Gerald and Bob Roy were really the only reliable members of the team, aside from Number Five, whom none of them knew well enough to trust. They had all speculated on how this "exchange program," as the Reverend had called it, would work out. Now, Gerald thought, they were all probably wishing that Will Johnston had not been exchanged for whoever this jerk Number Five really was.

All the while, Number Five was continuing his authoritarian ways, enforcing a fast pace in single file, and silence. At least it was downhill. And, after Gerald straggled once too often, Number Five stopped leading and began following so that he could berate them from the rear. Gerald took pleasure in scuffing up as much dust as he could for Number Five to eat. Number Five responded to this by acting even more like a drill sergeant, so Gerald got to watch Number One's large behind marching in double time just ahead of him.

Then Number One stumbled, and Gerald hopped aside to avoid him. But Number Five didn't, resulting in a rear-end collision of the sort when a motorcycle runs into a dump truck. Number Five bounced into the ditch, and Number One lurched into Number Four, who toppled with him in a tangle. Gerald had to work hard not to laugh out loud. What a bunch of pathetic losers!

About that time, around a curve ahead, coming up the road their way was one of those powder-puff green Forest Service pickup trucks, driven by none other than Rangerette Adams, she of the hooters. It rolled to a stop next to the chaotic little parade.

"Hey there, fellas. Out for a hike, eh?"

She was obviously trying just to be pleasant, and they all had little choice except to be nice in return. But no one seemed inclined to respond, and Number Five was even trying to hide his face. Finally, to avoid letting Number Five make too much a fool of himself, Gerald decided to speak for the group.

"Ah, no, ma'am, we're on our way back into town. Car broke down up a ways. We'll get a tow truck and come back for it tomorrow."

"Hiking into town? Geez, it must be ten miles. Want a ride? I've got time to take you in."

Gerald didn't care what Number Five might think of this. He just didn't want to walk.

"You bet. I'll hop in, these guys can get in the back. C'mon fellas."

It appeared that steam was coming from Number Five's ears, but what could he do but climb in?

"Good work, Ginny, and just keep pretending you don't know me."

Gerald was buckling himself in as he muttered this under his breath.

Then, more loudly, "We all sure appreciate this, ma'am. My name's Gerry."

"And I'm Ranger Virginia Adams. Nice to meet you." She stuck her head out the window. "You guys all set? Hang on back there."

And she jockeyed the pickup around to head back down the hill.

As they rattled down the dusty road, Gerald kept up a running monologue, interspersed with appropriate comments of encouragement from the ranger. He rattled on and on, in a louder voice than he needed to, about how he and his friends had been fishing—catch and release only—and their car broke down, about the weather and how nice it was with no storms to worry about, about what beautiful country the upper Rio Grande Basin was, about what a tough job Forest Service rangers must have.

All the while, he was writing notes on the back of the top piece of paper on the clipboard he'd found on the seat between them.

* * *

Fifteen

The only good thing about it was that, with Lolly stuck in jail because her bail had been revoked, Reid wouldn't be getting any. Everything else was bad; no, everything else was horrible. Steve Rutherford, released on a recognizance basis, could only go about his life as best he could and wait for the other shoe to drop.

It finally did when he received a summons from Dean Harold Weathers of the College of Natural Sciences—routed, for reasons of protocol, through the Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities and then through Rutherford's boss, the Chair of Sociology—to appear in Weathers' office at 10:00 am on Tuesday to discuss the status of SCARAB as a student organization. It seemed that Weathers had responsibility for oversight of student groups with ties to programs in his college, and biodiversity was one such tie.

On Tuesday morning, Rutherford found his way to the natural sciences building—an unfamiliar location to him—and sat himself on the couch in Dean Weathers' waiting room. The little old white-haired receptionist was polite, if distantly cold, and she persisted in giving him what he could only interpret as the Evil Eye. Little did he know that Alice held SCARAB at least partly responsible for the death of her son. So his five-minute wait for Dean Weathers to finish a phone call was not at all comfortable.

Inside Hal's office, he and Annette were finishing a cup of coffee and discussing strategy, the five-minute wait for Rutherford having been calculated in advance.

“So you don't think we should even bring up the SCARAB business I concocted? Just hit him right off with MEDL and the portfolio?”

Hal had thought to sneak up on the real reason for the meeting by putting Rutherford off guard.

“Well, like we discussed, we can use the threat of scrutiny of SCARAB as a trade-off for him. If he doesn't want to cooperate on MEDL and so on, SCARAB gets audited, or whatever you folks do here at the U. If he cooperates, we don't even have to talk about it. Surely he'll be a little relieved if we don't even bring SCARAB up.”

“Probably. And I have this idea he should be pretty willing to cooperate. I mean, we have him tied to a Presidential assassination attempt, for heaven's sake. Wouldn't he want to get as far away from that as he can?”

Hal picked up his phone and buzzed Alice. “Hi, Alice, go ahead and send him in. Did you offer him coffee? ...No? ...Good. Neither will we. Thanks.”

There was a tap on the door, and it opened to admit a sheepish looking Steve Rutherford, dressed in his usual summertime sociology research assistant uniform of polo shirt and jeans. Hal and Annette were seated in their Power Seats, and Rutherford had little choice but to aim for the chair across the desk from Hal.

“Good morning, Dean Weathers. You wanted to see me?”

Despite not wanting to act it, Rutherford was intimidated, and it showed. Upon recognizing Annette, his intimidation level ratcheted upward several notches.

“Mr. Rutherford. I believe we met briefly at the student-group orientation meeting last fall. Do you know Ms. Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation?”

“Yes, I do. Ah, may I ask why she’s here?”

“Of course. As you know, Frémont State University is a State of Colorado entity, and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation has ultimate jurisdiction over legal matters on state university campuses. So her presence is entirely appropriate when legal matters related to university organizations are being investigated. However, she has an additional reason for being present at this meeting as well.” Hal turned to Annette.

“Glad to see you’ve been keeping your nose clean lately, Steve. I want to talk about the Mother Earth Defense League.”

They watched as he looked surprised and sat up straighter.

“And I particularly want to talk about this list of people. How many of them did you know?”

She handed him a sheet of paper, which he took only after hesitating. He read it, blinked several times, and read it again.

“Ah, ahem, ah, I thought you wanted to talk with me about SCARAB, Dean Weathers.”

“He did, and does, maybe, but I’m first. Here’s the deal, Steve. So far the feds don’t know about the note you had in your pocket when Sheriff Grange picked you and Lolly and the others up over by Pagosa Springs.”

Annette had no problem lying to suspects when it suited her.

“They do know, of course, about a similar note found up in Boulder, in the debris of that assassination attempt on the President. What do you suppose they’d want to do with you if we told them about your note?”

She paused for rhetorical effect, and Rutherford shifted in his chair, trying to get comfortable. It didn’t appear to work.

“Now, I think that whoever was involved in the thing up in Boulder was just copy-cattin your Monticello note, as a misdirection, or maybe as a joke. But the feds won’t think that, at least not for a while. So what we’re here for is for you to persuade me not to talk to the feds about your note and for you to persuade Dean Weathers that we have more important things to talk about than the irregularities in the SCARAB bank account. And you can do that by talking to us about MEDL and that list of dead people.”

This time her pause was long enough that Rutherford felt he need to respond.

“They *are* all dead, aren’t they? I made a list a while back, too, and I was surprised at how many there are.”

“Friends of yours?”

“Mostly. Not all. Are you investigating their deaths?”

“That’s the general idea, and that’s why we want to talk with you about MEDL and them. Not because you’re a suspect, mind you. In fact, if you knew they’re dead and some were friends of yours, I think I now have a motive for your arson at the FFPI mill. So now you really do need to talk with us.”

“Why? Are you arresting me? And what do you mean, ‘my arson’?”

“The FFPI arson was over in Utah, so I can’t arrest you, not for that. Of course, I could tell the guys over in Utah about the motive and the note we found on you, couldn’t I? But what I really want is information from you about MEDL and those dead friends of yours. We know they all have some connection to MEDL, but the more details we have, the better the chance we’ll be able to find who killed them. And that’s what you want, too, no?”

“I sure do. A couple were close friends. So, what do you want to know?”

Hal had been listening passively, but now he leaned forward.

“Well, the first thing I’d like to know is what SCREW stands for. I’m mostly just curious.”

Rutherford looked smug. “Southern Colorado Radical Environmental Warriors. My idea, actually. Kind of clever, don’t you think? And there’s, I mean there was, only six of us, now there’s only five. Dave Wellington is the last name on this list.”

Annette nodded. “And the others in SCREW are you, Lolly, Aaron Felterson, Reid Tompkins, and my old friend Flip Chester. Which one of them was with you and Lolly at the mill?”

“Tompkins.” Rutherford had no reason to protect him. “Are you granting me immunity, or what?”

“Probably ‘what.’ We’ll see how cooperative you are. But I think you may be able to help us get a ways down the road of clearing all these cases, Steve. Maybe you can help me find a solid connection among all these victims.”

* * *

Back in her office, Annette was assembling the information from Rutherford in context of what she already knew, when her phone rang. That meant that Sally, the receptionist, was putting a call through directly, per instructions. Not that Annette didn’t want to talk with Sally; rather, Annette was trying hard to change some of the culture of bureaucracy she’d run into at the office.

“Trieri, CBI.”

Her new greeting was coming more naturally, after about six weeks.

“Afternoon, Annette, this is Ralph Wertlinger over in Creede. Got some information for you.”

“Good to hear from you, Ralph. How are things up your way?”

Annette was glad she’d taken the day last month to drive over to Creede, to meet the Mineral County Sheriff, even though his county was in a different CBI district. For one thing, the personal connection would pay for the investment in time. For another, she hadn’t ever been to the spectacular valley of the upper Rio Grande, and she hadn’t realized what amazing country was on the north side of the San Juans.

“More interesting all the time, actually. You remember that guy that got killed here at our lumber mill back at the end of May?”

“You bet. One of what we’re calling our environmentalist portfolio.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. We talked about that when you came over for the visit last month. Well, like I told you then, we have a couple lines of inquiry going, in cooperation with the folks in Alamosa. One of them is following up on some information we found at Wellington’s—he’s the dead guy—at Wellington’s place”.

“I remember your telling me something about notes concerning some meetings that Resources For Humanity was holding.”

“Right. Well, I called in a favor and got an informant to go to their next meeting, and he’s managed to get himself on the inside of what they’re doing. Seems that they have this tiered system, where the first set of meetings, like the one Wellington went to, is pretty open, but then they have a second tier, where only a select group is invited.”

“And that’s where things get interesting, I bet.”

“You got it. What’s happening in this second tier is that they’re talking about killing people in the Forest Service, the state Division of Wildlife, and other such organizations.”

“You mean talking about as in conspiracy to murder?”

“Pretty much. They don’t plan specific hits at these meetings, but they talk about it in general. Then they form small teams, local people led by someone from another part of the region, someone the team doesn’t know, to do a specific hit. My latest information is about a plan to kill a Forest Service ranger here. We’re going to prevent it, of course, but without showing our hand.”

“Good strategy. Maybe you can follow the information up the chain of command.”

“We hope so. And it should be pretty easy. My guy says that their plan probably won’t work anyway, because the team is sixty per cent losers. The leader, a guy from Cortez, is a little Napoleon, more strut than skill. But one reason I called is to alert you. They have some kind of exchange program. They brought in this guy from Cortez to lead the operation here, and they sent a local guy over to Cortez, or at least over your way, to lead another over there.”

“Any particulars?”

“Just that his name is Will Johnston, nothing about what the job is. I know Johnston, so I can send you a description and so on. But their system keeps the information about the different jobs compartmentalized, so my guy doesn’t know anything else.”

“You said they were going to hit a Forest Service ranger?”

“Yep, Virginia Adams. Nice girl. They’re going to try to rig a sort of accident, put her pickup into a creek so she’d drown, I guess.”

“Interesting. What started as hits on people in a pretty radical environmental group, hits by pros who were very careful, is expanding to hits on regular folks. Hits by amateurs, sounds like.”

“Good way to put it. And that means they can expand the operation by getting more people involved.”

“Right. Just what we need to deal with. What’s your next move?”

“Well, like I said, we’re not going to let anyone get hurt. But we want to watch these bozos and see what they try next. I think we have enough to get them on a conspiracy charge now, but I’d like to catch more than just the little fish.”

“Me, too. Let’s keep in touch. And if you send me information about this Will Johnston guy, we’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“Will do, Annette. Nice talking with you again.”

* * *

The next item on Annette’s agenda was the weekly CBI status-report conference call. She called in at the appointed time and listened to everyone else saying hello and how’s it going and so on, then introduced herself one more time. Not everyone had become used to her new appointment yet.

After hearing several district reports, she had just finished a report on activities in the Durango office when Sally walked in and slid a note across her desk. “Todd Sweeney, FBI, my line, says it’s urgent.” With glee, Annette excused herself and punched buttons.

“Todd? You rescued me from a conference call. Good work!”

“If you think that’s good, wait ’til you hear this. We’ve got the Bug-Be-Dead van from the Boulder assassination attempt! It was parked at DIA, in the far reaches of one of the garages. It’s black now. And guess who owns it?”

Sweeney sounded triumphant.

“How in the world did you guys find it at DIA?”

“Well, it’s about time we got a break in this thing. I mean, the reporters beat us to several important tidbits of information, like that car wash, and the two primary suspects were apprehended, for crying out loud, by a bunch of college students, jocks, no less, the ones who called you.”

He took a deep breath and continued.

“But we really didn’t find the van either. It was the DIA parking security guards, rent-a-cops, who did. They noticed a black van parked in a normally empty section of the east parking garage, because one of its back tires was flat. It had picked up a nail and had a slow leak. It sat long enough, accumulating \$12 per day charges, that it finally got tagged and then eventually towed. The guards remembered the news reports about the wanted Bug-Be-Dead van that was seen entering a car wash in east Boulder. And they’re bored out of their minds, way underemployed, so they decided to play amateur detective and dust the steering wheel and gear shifter and door handles for prints. It puzzled them at first when they didn’t find any. Then they called us. We got a make and model ID from one of the Boulder witnesses and then went to work on the thing. It seems the car wash it went through wasn’t completely thorough. And neither was whoever wiped the thing clean. So we found some yellow paint that matches the Bug-Be-Dead color and some latents. And you didn’t answer my question. Who do you think owns the van?”

“It had plates?”

“Stolen ones, it turns out. But we traced ownership through the VIN.”

“OK, you got me. Whose prints did you find?”

“Not the owner’s but someone who probably works for him. Anthony J. Mercer and Senator Jarvis Schoenfield, respectively. Actually, the title is held by the X-S Ranch, Inc., J. Schoenfield, Proprietor. Must be dated before he divested himself of the place, and they forgot to transfer the title formally.” He laughed.

“Interesting. We knew about a connection between Mercer and Schoenfield, of course, but this cements it. But, look, Todd, a good lawyer will tie you up in knots. The paint is helpful but not enough. There’s no crime in parking in a parking garage, even for a long time with a flat tire. And maybe Mercer’s just an anal compulsive who likes a clean vehicle.”

“Yeah, we know. This is just another link in the chain, not the smoking gun or anything. But it does confirm what you’ve been telling me about Schoenfield’s possible involvement.”

“He’s still got deniability, though.”

“Sure does. But less than before. Anyway, since you got Mercer and David for us, I thought you’d like to know.”

“I appreciate it. We’ve got two possible tie-ins with a black van, one to a murder up in Norwood and one to another in Santa Fe, for which the only lead at all is an eyewitness report of a black van with New Mexico plates. And I think I told you the Norwood murder was connected to your murder on the Rez last September. So things seem interconnected. Anyway, look, we’re hatching a plan to get Schoenfield as well.”

Annette filled him in on the connection to Tim Langer’s skills with computers.

“What we need is information that we can put on a system that Schoenfield has clandestine access to, maybe the central CBI one, that will make him act. Got any suggestions?”

“Hmm. How about something related to the van? Doesn’t have to be true, of course. Something that connects him more tightly to it. And it to the NCAR thing.”

“Right. Of course, if he’s the owner, he’s tied to the van pretty well. But he can always claim that it was stolen, but he just didn’t report it. His prints and stuff like that won’t work, because he’ll know better. Hmm. Say, how are you holding Mercer and David? Can they communicate with Schoenfield?”

An idea was beginning to take shape in Annette’s mind.

“Indirectly, through their lawyers. But their lawyers are avoiding Schoenfield.”

“Didn’t you tell me that the rifle that took the shot at the President was radio controlled? What if we put an inventory of the van on the CBI computer and say that we found the radio controller, or least parts of such a thing? That would be a link to the assassination attempt that would scare Schoenfield.”

“I assume it got ditched somewhere, of course. Probably along with the stuff they were wearing and so on. But, look, he can still say the van was stolen, and so anything in it isn’t his responsibility.”

Sweeney was skeptical of her plan, Annette could tell.

“What if we say there are prints on the controller parts that we can’t match to the others in the van, but we’re trying to get a match through the NCIC?”

“I’ll see if he’s in there. If so, that could put a scare into him. But I think you need additional bait on the CBI computer.”

“I’ve got another idea as well. But for this one, could you write up a summary about this and e-mail it to me? I want to use as much of the truth as possible.”

“Glad to. What’s your other idea?” His curiosity was obvious.

“It’s not completely figured out yet, but it involves something completely different, a couple of things, actually. I’ll tell you about it when I get the i’s dotted and so on.”

“OK. I’m interested. See ya later.”

She hung up the phone and considered her next move. Should I get back on the conference call? I sure don’t want to. Let me think of one good reason I should... oh, yeah, I need to learn all I can about the CBI. Well, how about two good reasons? Nope, there’s not another one I can think of. Whew.

* * *

She called Charles Shure's private line instead of returning to the tele-conference. It rang about six times and then she heard it transfer somewhere, so she stuck with it.

"UNELECO, Mr. Shure's office," came a professional-sounding voice.

"This is Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Shure gave me this number as a way to reach him."

"Yes, it's his direct line. Unfortunately, he's out of the country and we can't forward things automatically."

"Is there a way I can reach him for a short conversation?"

Annette was wondering if the voice would ask her whether the call was important.

"I have your number here, and I'll let him know to call you as soon as he can, that it's urgent. I'll send e-mail and leave a message where he's staying. I hope this helps? Excuse me a moment please?"

The line went into telephone limbo. Annette was impressed nonetheless—it had been a while since she had encountered this sort of efficiency.

"Ms. Trieri? You're in luck. Mr. Shure just called in with an answer to a question I sent him a while ago. I'll transfer you."

Before Annette could offer thanks, she heard clicking.

"Annette? Glad I happened to call in. What can I do for you?"

Shure sounded a long way away, unlike most long-distance calls in Annette's experience.

"I guess I'm lucky today, Mr. Shure. Can I ask where you are?"

"Indonesia. The phone system is, ah, less than completely modern. And, listen, this is our fourth or fifth conversation. Please, call me Chuck."

"Chuck?" Annette thought. He seems more like a "Charles."

"Thank you, I will. Indonesia? Geez, it must be the middle of the night there. Ah, Chuck, I'd like to ask if you'd mind a little subterfuge on my part. Involving information related to you. It's to try to catch whoever it was that killed Bill Campbell, the lawyer you saw murdered."

"You mean, catch Schoenfield?"

"Well, right, if it's indeed him. We've found out that he has a surreptitious computer login on the main CBI system. Those hacking attempts on your system were to have provided him with a similar login on your computers. What we want to do is to plant some false information where he'll find it, information that will make him do something, force him into action. Then we can nail him."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Two things. See, I'm going to set up a bogus file and have several false leads in it. One will have to do with an FBI case. And I'd like to use something related to Campbell's death, I don't know exactly what. But what I really want to ask you about is that Nazi prison camp journal you got. I know you've said in public, in that press conference, that there's nothing of use in there. But what if we pretend you were just lying for public consumption, that there's something in there that you're going to pursue actively, through your biomedical people, or something? That's what he wanted to happen, wasn't it?"

“That’s what he thought, yes. He gave me a bootlegged copy of the other volumes of notes for that purpose. But it’s all just garbage, of no scientific value at all. I see what your strategy is, though. What kind of results are you going to make up?”

“Well, I was sort of hoping you’d be able to suggest something. You’ve heard the pitch for this Aryan Rights thing, and I haven’t. What would push his buttons, make him act?”

“There was talk of cleaning up the gene pool. I guess that connects with the Nazi agenda of eliminating what they saw as inferiors. And, well, the latest biomedical research has to do with gene splicing, related therapies, and so on. Of course, a lot of this was simply not part of the body of scientific knowledge in World War II. But I guess that Schoenfield won’t realize that. Anyway, this Aryan Rights bunch, the doggie-noise outfit ARF,” he actually giggled, “seems to assume that they’re the ones with perfect genetic structure, or at least preferred structures. What if we pretended that the Nazi journals had information to the effect that the Aryans were actually inferior to the others, at least in some ways?”

“You mean, pretend something like the journal has information showing Jews to be, oh, I don’t know, say, the intellectual superiors of Aryans?”

“Yeah, or maybe that gays are genetically more artistic, or that Asians are harder workers. Genetically, I mean. Or that Africans are genetically more athletic.” She heard him giggle again. “Or, better yet, that Africans have more sexual prowess. You know, stuff that provides genetic confirmation of Schoenfield’s Aryan stereotypes. Think Schoenfield would buy it?”

“Maybe. Most of these racist types are basically hung up on various inferiority complexes. But what can we say that would make him act? So we can catch him, I mean.”

“How about something like this: UNELECO is seeking ways to introduce these qualities into dietary supplements, so that everyone can benefit from them. Of course, we would really never do this, but we could put that out there on our computers for Schoenfield to find.”

“Ah, well, I can’t guarantee that he won’t go public with this information. And it could put UNELECO in a bad light, you know, with horrible publicity.”

There was a long pause, almost long enough that Annette thought the connection had been dropped. It was Indonesia on the other end, after all.

“You’re right. But, look, it’s my company. And I have all these highly paid PR people who thrive on challenges. And I really, I mean *really*, want to get this guy.”

“So you’re OK with it?”

“Absolutely. Give me your e-mail address and I’ll send you something in writing, along with some specific ideas about wording. At least I will as soon as I can. The technology here is, um, strange. And, tell you what, I’ll also get in touch with Wendell Ellison, one of my senior scientists in the Biotechnology Division. I’ll tell him to help you with absolutely anything you need.”

“That would help a lot. Meantime, I’ll work on getting something going. And, thanks, Chuck. I’ll keep you informed. Especially when it gets fun.”

* * *

Tim Langer was feeling liberated, more than he would have thought. Also, horny. He was feeling liberated because he was finally doing hacking with full authorization—is it still “hacking” if it’s authorized? he wondered. It was not as much of an adrenaline rush as his earlier, clandestine work, but it was a good feeling. And feeling horny was a puzzle he’d have to work on. A lot.

Jamie McFarland had been gracious in accepting his apology for piggy-backing on her login, but it didn't surprise him that she was still a bit distant. For one thing, she had a good five years on him. He usually didn't go for "older" women, but she was too much to ignore. Smart. A better systems person than he, although probably not a better hacker. Athletic, even, unlike most of the female computer jocks he knew. Sophisticated, too—she played classical music while she worked on code.

And then there were those cantaloupes she had hidden in her shirt.

Jamie had agreed to Hal's request to set Tim up with the necessary equipment, and access, to help Annette with her little scam, but Jamie had extracted some concessions. The main one, having Tim help with plugging all of Jamie's systems' security holes, was Tim's favorite. It required that they work together. So he'd apologized as abjectly and profusely as he could, and now he was trying to decrease the distance between them. But that was tricky, because he was sure she'd see through him and just laugh. And if she laughed at him, poof, no more horny.

For her part, Jamie was amused that Tim was acting like such a love-struck schoolboy. The fact that he was trying not to let her notice that he was staring at her chest was hilarious. She thought about wearing something that would show cleavage just to see if his eyes would actually pop out. As much fun as that would be, however, it would probably also lead to complications. For one thing, they'd have trouble working together as well as they had been.

But he was kind of cute, in a boyish sort of way. And so polite, and eager to please. Very different from the guys her age who tried to hit on her.

Plugging the security holes had actually been pretty easy, so Tim was now working on an automated program—what his computer world called a "daemon"—to put on the CBI computer. When Schoenfeld logged in, it would go to work and do two things. First, it would monitor and record all of Schoenfeld's activities, down to the last keystroke. Second, and simultaneously, it would download information—the entire directory tree, during its first activation, plus as many files from certain key directories as time allowed—from Schoenfeld's computer. Then it would transfer the information to Jamie's computer, clean up after itself on the CBI system, notify Tim, and the second part would modify itself to wait for Tim to decide what it should do next.

He also needed to figure out how to ensure that Schoenfeld would find the information that Annette wanted put on the CBI system. Schoenfeld, he knew, was pretty computer illiterate, at least by Tim's standards. Tim fully expected to find, probably on his second raid on Schoenfeld's computer, a file with all of Schoenfeld's logins and passwords, listed by what computer they worked on. This would be most helpful in discovering if Schoenfeld had anyone besides Tim setting up clandestine accounts. It would also be useful to Annette as evidence, he figured.

But with Schoenfeld being such a computer dolt, Tim was going to have to get cute. He wandered off to find Jamie.

She was in the middle of reviewing usage on the college's number-crunching computer when Tim knocked on her door. Here he is again, she thought, coming to practice his x-ray vision on me.

"Jamie? Got a couple of minutes?"

"Come in, Tim. What's up?"

He was staring at the screen of her new LCD monitor, not her. How different.

"Well, I want to see if you'll let me try out a new alias in the user list. A sort of simplified grep. Like, grep for dummies."

"Isn't there something called 'whereis' for that purpose?"

Oh, right. Her new screen saver, the three-dimensional hyper-cube drawing, had kicked in. And it did indeed look way cool on this new monitor. Hmm. Was that just a tiny twinge of jealousy that she felt because he was looking at it and not her? Get a grip, McFarland.

“Yeah, but this is for a different system, and I want a new alias so I can announce it and everyone will see it. I’ve got to get someone pointed at some information but have him think he found it himself.”

“So you just want to create a synonym, basically, for ‘whereis?’”

“Yeah, although I’ll simplify the syntax. I’ll call it ‘findme’ or something like that and have it search for filenames and directory names as well as file contents. And it will make a global search automatic, or at least a global search within the user’s permission space. And I won’t require logical syntax for the search string. I’ll announce it on the MOTD, with a pointer to a new man page.”

He was referring to putting a new page in the online user manual that described system commands.

“Why are you asking me?”

She shrugged and wiggled her shoulders. That did it. He was practicing his x-ray vision on her again. She felt an unexpected surge of pleasure. What is happening to you, McFarland? she thought. Leave the poor kid alone.

“Well, I’d like to try it out on the physics department server. It’s the same version of Unix that’s on the machine I need to use it on.”

“Use the physicists as experimental subjects? Experiment on the experimenters? Sounds like poetic justice to me. Mail me the code and a new man page, and I’ll put it up.”

She smiled and, just to have a little more fun, licked her lips. Almost! His eyes almost popped right out.

* * *

Will Johnston, who had introduced himself as “Bill” to this little group, was on the very edge of losing it. They just didn’t want to follow the Plan.

“Now, look, Bill. We’re all from around here and you ain’t. We know most of the folks in these parts and you don’t. Let’s just go do it our way, and we can stop this stupid arguing.”

“I keep telling you, Jim,” Will suspected that “Jim” had another name on his driver’s license, “All I’m doing is following the plan we discussed at the meeting with the Reverend. He insisted that we do things his way, because it’s part of something bigger.”

“Well then, tell us about this bigger something so we can understand what this is all about and where we fit in and why we should do things your way.”

“It’s not my way, it’s the Reverend’s way. We agreed to this at our stage two meeting, didn’t you guys?”

“Sure, but we were talking about operations that were supposed to take out people. You’re talking about a little-bitty firebombing job. I think we should just shoot ’em all.”

This was from “Roy,” no doubt another stage name, Will thought.

“Guys, guys. I’m here on this exchange program, and some guy from here is over my way leading an operation over there. I have no idea what that is, but I hope he’s having an easier time than I am. What I understand about this is that we’re just supposed to put a serious scare into these folks. The deal is that they’re little more than hired guns. What the Reverend told me is that we’re saving elimination

for people who truly believe in what they do. He said that people like these lawyers just aren't worth the risk of a real hit. So we're just supposed to scare the shit out of them. Understand?"

"We understand, Bill, but, hell, there are other points of view in this thing. And since we live here, we know these people better and we know what it's going to take to be effective."

"Well, now, look here, uh, what'd you call yourself, 'Jim?'"

The fourth person there, a large, quiet fellow, had finally stepped forward.

"I agree with Bill here. And you know me well enough to know I know the people here at least as good as you do. And one of 'em is a pretty good guy, underneath it all. So I think we should just do things according to the Reverend's Plan. OK?"

Will let his face relax into a smile.

"Thanks, uh, well, thanks. I appreciate your support in this. I want to do things according to the Plan, that's all."

"You're welcome. And my name's Rudy. My real name."

He looked daggers at the other two.

"And, believe it or not, my real name's William." Will smiled even bigger. "So, look, Jim, Roy, this isn't supposed to be a democracy, the Reverend was real clear on that. But even if it was, we'd be tied. Doesn't that suggest we should go with the Plan?"

Jim and Roy were grumbling, looking at their shoes. But they were also nodding, reluctantly.

"So what is the Plan, anyway? I mean, the schedule and everything."

Jim was apparently going to make the best of it.

"Well, like I said, a firebomb in their offices. And that, of course, is where you guys are indispensable. Like you've been saying, you're from here and you know the turf and the people. I don't know squat, even where the offices are. Or much at all about them, for that matter."

Roy piped up, "They have offices, what they call a professional corporation, over on Fourth Street, a half block north of Main. In an old converted house. Kind of Victorian looking."

"Landscaping?"

"Lots of bushes, lilacs and so on. Big trees in the yard. Got some Mexicans who come and tend to it."

"They keep regular office hours? You know, nine-to-five sort of thing?"

"Seems like, except every now and then someone's there in the evening. Sometimes until late. Uh, see, I know about this because I drive by there a lot. And I notice things like this, especially about assholes like those folks."

"If it looks Victorian, it's probably wood siding, a frame house, right?"

Roy was nodding at Will's question.

"So that means we can torch it easily. I wonder if it's been upgraded with fire sprinklers inside and all that kind of stuff."

"Probably not."

Jim seemed eager to show off his knowledge now.

“The city code requires them for new commercial structures, but old buildings like this can be grandfathered in, so they don’t need sprinklers. Probably has alarms and all that, though.”

“So we want a fire that’s hot and fast, to burn as much as possible before the fire department can respond. I don’t suppose any of you have been in there?”

“I have.”

Rudy stepped forward again.

“Just offices, with office furniture. Wood, as far as I could see. Even the file cabinets. All very impressive, but wood. Probably burn like hell, if we get the thing started right.”

Will smiled again. “Well, I happen to have just the ticket. Any of you guys remember napalm? What we do is to set off several ignitions outside the house, around the base of where the wood siding is. And we get additional ignitions in through the windows, as many of the windows as we can. We set up the outside ones to ignite about fifteen seconds after the ones through the windows go off. The place will go up like a torch.”

“With four of us, how do we do more than four windows at once?”

“Got it covered, as long as you guys can throw a softball accurately. I mean, the house has only four sides, right?” Will’s smile was grim, now. “So tell me. What’s in this place that the Reverend’s so eager to burn up, anyway?”

“You don’t know? These people are an environmental law firm. They file lawsuits to stop logging operations and stuff like that. They’re funded by rich tree-huggers, so they’re like the hired guns the Reverend said they are.”

* * *

Sixteen

Jarvis Schoenfield couldn’t stand it any longer, so he finally opened up the armoire and turned on his computer system. Because the armoire was a family heirloom, he found a coaster for his glass of Jim Beam on the rocks.

“Timmy, you little son-of-a-bitch,”

Schoenfield had begun talking to himself in the days since Pickle and Mad Dog had been incarcerated,

“I sure I wish I knew where you are. And this thing better still work, or I’ll cut off your balls and fry ’em.”

The entire system was controlled through a surge-protecting power strip, so it all turned on and the boot-up process proceeded. Eventually, Schoenfield was looking at the familiar screen, a single instance of the X-S brand as wallpaper with several desktop icons superimposed. He found the one labeled “CBI” and clicked it, and then found the one labeled “Logins” and clicked it. While the computer accessed the CBI computer, the text file with his logins opened, and he reminded himself of the one for the CBI computer.

Eventually, a large window opened itself, and large block letters, formed by clever groupings of standard text, spelled out “CBI,” followed by “Colorado Bureau of Investigation, for official use only.”

This was familiar territory, so Schoenfield grinned with pleasure and took a long sip of his Jim Beam. Then there was the usual warning that was more explicit than the “official use only” declaration, how unauthorized users would be prosecuted and so on. Finally, and Schoenfield actually clapped his hands, there was the single word “Username:” followed by a pause. He typed in his name and then responded to the password prompt, holding his breath. He finally let it out when the system began printing lines of text on his monitor:

Notice: New filesystem protocols in effect. Evidentiary files to be cataloged in subdirectories via suspect last name and files with case. Restricted to qualified users.

Notice: New search utility in effect. Do “man findme” to learn about simple global searches.

After that was the thing Timmy called the “prompt,” a simple “CBIMain:” statement and a pause. Well, he thought, your wish is my command. He typed “man findme” as requested.

How convenient, he thought. It even gave clear examples, unlike some of the other man pages he’d tried, including an example on how to send the results of the findme command to a file for later printing.

He took a deep breath and typed “findme schoenfield”, and then set about finding Timmy’s instructions on how to move files from the CBI system to his own. Soon, the prompt was back, and, just to preview the results, he typed “more findme.out”, which would show the first several lines of the output file from the search on his name.

The files that began with labels like /etc/cases/evidence/schoenfield/bouldercase/... got his attention. And then the first of the login notices popped back into his head.

“Shit! This better not mean what I think it means. Now how the hell do I find that file? Oh, yeah, the change directory thing, ahh, ‘cd’.”

He tended to talk to himself more when under stress, and he drank more, too.

He changed to the bouldercase directory and found several files, including one called “van” and one called “radio”. “What in the world is all this? Jesus H. Christ, I hope Pickle didn’t get careless.”

The command “more van” produced a distressing result:

Boulder: cross reference Mercer files on same case.

Unsuccessful assassination attempt on the President (an FBI case) still open. However, vehicle used has been recovered and is linked to J. Schoenfield via hard evidence (ownership, among other things). Cross reference: .../schoenfield/bouldercase/radio.
More to follow.

He was almost too afraid to look at the “radio” file, but finally did.

Boulder: cross reference Mercer files on same case.

Cross reference: .../schoenfield/bouldercase/van

Contents of van owned by J. Schoenfield suspected as used in assassination attempt included parts identified as radio-link components (rifle in attempt was radio controlled).

Several latent fingerprints suggest that individuals apprehended (cross reference: Mercer, David files) are not matched. NCIC search in progress. More to follow.

“Christ! Didn’t that idiot wipe the radio off? Did I even touch it? Oh, yeah, back in March or sometime, when he was putting it together.”

He could feel the sweat on his forehead.

“NCIC? What’s that? Oh, yeah, the national database for prints. Geez, am I in there? My Army record, maybe?”

If someone had asked him later, he would not have been able to recall his actions, but they were quite calm and calculated, under the circumstances. First, he returned to his home directory to download the findme.out results. Then he printed them on his home system and erased them from the CBI system. After that, he spent several hours systematically downloading each file that had his name in it, even the ones that referred to him only because of his role as Chair of the Senate Committee on Law Enforcement.

It was about 3 am when he was finished with this task, and then he faced a dilemma. Timmy had told him that he could erase anything he found on the computer. However, most things could be recovered from backup tapes, and erasing something would tell the CBI people that someone was hacked into their system. Files he created himself, of course, should be erased, like the findme.out one. But how could he just leave all of that damaging information there? But if he erased it, it would be recovered and they’d know.

Besides, this wasn’t evidence, it was information about evidence. What he really needed to do was to acquire and destroy the actual evidence. Maybe not the van, but surely those radio parts. But the FBI had the evidence. How could he get it from them?

The computer kept itself busy during his hours of work. Even if he had known to pay attention, though, he probably wouldn’t have noticed all the extra activity on his hard disk, or how slow his downloads were. He was just too distracted and worried. And drunk, toward the end.

* * *

It was about 3:30 am when Steve Rutherford finally ran out of energy. He had driven over to Cortez, to Reid Tompkins’ office, and they had been discussing strategy, alternately arguing and agreeing, since about ten the previous evening.

About midnight, in need of strong coffee, they’d retired to the kitchen of the converted Victorian, now an interior break room used for coffee and snacks. Tompkins had lapsed into semi-consciousness an hour earlier and now was snoring peacefully, and Steve had retrieved a laptop computer from Tompkin’s desk so he could type up his version of the agreement they had hammered out.

Just as he finished up his notes and felt himself slipping into a nap, he heard a crashing noise from upstairs, like a window breaking. Then, in quick succession, there were a dozen more crashes. The commotion even woke up Tompkins.

“Huh? What’s that noise? What time is it?”

“Welcome back to the living. Sounds like someone, or several someones, don’t like the look of your windows.”

Steve walked to the nearest door and looked out.

“Holy shit! That office is on fire!”

He ran across the little kitchen to the other door and opened it a crack.

“The waiting room is, too! Move it, Reid, we’ve got to get out of here.”

He looked around the kitchen, frantic to find another exit. Tompkins remained seated, still too groggy to comprehend the problem.

“Reid! Get with it! The building is on fire and we’re in the middle of it.”

Steve spotted a fire extinguisher and grabbed it.

“Come on! I’ll see if I can put the fire down with this so we can get out of here. Come on, move!”

He took the extinguisher back to the first door and peeked out. The office, on one of the building’s corners, had two broken windows, and it was an inferno. He knew at once that escape through there would be hopeless. By the time he made it back to the waiting-room door, Tompkins was standing, but still clearly half asleep. He was looking helpless and confused. Steve had the distinct feeling that the temperature was rising.

Steve opened the waiting room door a crack and saw that the fire there was confined to an interior corner. Something had set the Victorian couch ablaze, and flames were creeping up the wall behind it. An end table, covered with magazines, was in flames, and the fire had spilled onto the floor as well. Steve readied the extinguisher and motioned to Tompkins to follow. He dashed into the room.

It was only when he reached the front door that he noticed its window was smashed. A thought flickered through his mind that this must have been where the fire in this room came from. He also noticed that the large covered wood porch was burning, flames licking up the columns to its roof.

He tried the door. The knob turned, but it wouldn’t open. Must be a deadbolt, he thought. Looking down, he saw that the locking mechanism required a key. He turned to Tompkins.

“What the hell kind of place is this? We’re locked in!”

Tompkins looked sick.

“We worried that someone would break the glass, reach in, and just unlock the door.”

He patted his pockets and looked ever sicker.

“Shit! My keys are on my desk. I remember leaving them when I came in earlier.”

He ran to a door in the wall to his right.

“Wait! Feel the door!”

Tompkins laid both hands flat on the door and jumped back as if shocked.

“It’s too hot to touch.”

“Then we’re not opening it.”

There were windows on either side of the door, and Steve could see the burning porch through each. But the one on the left appeared to have more fire showing, so he looked more carefully out the one to the right. Maybe, just maybe they could make it that way.

“Help me!”

He was struggling with a large easy chair. Tompkins hustled around to the other side of it and stooped to pick it up.

“We’re throwing it through the right-hand window, right?”

Steve was sweating not only from the exertion and stress—it was becoming downright hot in the little room.

“On three!”

They picked up the chair and swung it back and forth toward the window, letting it go with an extra heave. It broke the lower pane of the double-hung window, but it was far too big to fit through the opening and so it bounced back into the room, blocking access. Unbelieving, they both just stared at it for a few seconds. The fire had spread into about half the room, and their return to the kitchen was now impossible.

“Move that damned thing!”

Steve rushed to a straight-backed side chair and picked it up.

Tompkins, with more strength than he knew he had, heaved the easy chair aside, and Steve smashed the side chair into the window, shattering the remains of the bottom pane as well as the top pane and the wooden frame. Then he ran the legs of the chair around the frame, clearing out hanging shards of glass. The window was clear, but flames from the porch came licking inside the room.

Steve looked around for the fire extinguisher, found it by the door, and began blasting the flames on the porch outside the open window with its white fog. They responded grudgingly, backing away from the powder when it hit them, then recovering and regaining ground almost immediately. The noise from the porch included the whooshing of the fire and a considerable cracking and groaning of the structure itself.

“We’re going have to run for it. Follow me as close as you can!”

Steve blasted the flames just outside the window and stepped out onto the porch. As quickly as he could, he sprayed a path toward the side of the porch, where the flames were less intense. Just as he reached the railing, he heard a scream behind him.

Turning, he saw that Tompkins had broken through the burning and weakened floorboards. One foot had punched through, and he was up to his knee in the porch, fire licking at his crotch. He tried to pull free, but the weight on the other leg put it through, and he was suddenly up to his waist.

There must have been fire under the porch as well, because the draft created by the hole Tompkins made caused a chimney effect, and Steve was suddenly looking at a human torch. Even though Tompkins’ mouth was open, there was no more screaming. But Steve probably wouldn’t have heard it anyway, as he was mesmerized by the terror in Tompkins eyes.

He was staring in shock at his rival for Lolly’s affections, thinking that no one deserved this, when one of the roof beams gave way with a loud snap. His world went black.

* * *

Tim Langer’s first task each morning was to check for messages from the daemon he’d installed on the CBI computer, and he was finally rewarded. Even though the message was coming from himself, and its contents were therefore no surprise, he felt a thrill when he read “bait taken, trap sprung.” He changed to the directory he had set up to receive the files from the Senator’s computer and was astonished to see how many there were. The Senator, it seemed, was using his computer far more than Tim would ever have thought.

Then it dawned on him. As an unsophisticated computer user, the Senator didn’t do computer housekeeping. Files were stored where the computer wanted to store them, and, because these were all simple text and word processor files, the computer wanted them all in the same place. So, instead of

differentiating among files by directories and subdirectories, the Senator was forced to use increasingly complex names. But that meant that it should be possible to find the interesting ones, or at least for Annette to. He decided he should call her, even if it was still early.

But Annette was in her office, having been roused out of bed about 5 am by a courtesy phone call from the Chief of Police in Cortez. A fast-moving fire, probably arson, had completely consumed some legal offices, and there were two casualties. Although they were both burned beyond recognition, the positions of the bodies suggested that they were killed trying to escape the burning building. And if the fire was found to be arson, the deaths would become murder. Identification of the victims would require dental records.

So when her telephone rang, she thought it would be more information from Cortez. Tim Langer's voice surprised her, especially because of the excitement it conveyed.

"Annette! You're in. I thought I'd be leaving a message this early. Guess what? Last night we scored! Uh, I mean, the Senator took the bait and now I have copies of lots of files from his computer."

"Good morning, Tim. Great work. Does this mean that he's found the information we wanted him to?"

"Um, I don't know yet. The first thing I looked at was what got downloaded to me, from his system. Ah, let me look—where is it?—at the activity log from his session. Here. Ah, yes, it looks like he took it hook, line, and sinker. He used the search alias I set up to find files involving his name, and then he grabbed all of them. I can replicate his actions exactly to see what he got besides the stuff we put there."

"And you say that you now have many of his files? I mean, files from his system? How did you know where to look? And what to look for?"

"A hunch. There are a couple of default directories where computers like his store things automatically. I figured he wouldn't be smart enough to save files in special places. So I just had your system get everything in these default directories while he was logged in and looking at the stuff we put there. There are lots of files, some with pretty weird names. Like this one, I'll have to spell it out: r-f-h-underscore-o-p-s-2, numeral two. Or this one: a-r-f-underscore-i-d. Others are easier to figure out, though."

"Is it easy to open these files and read them? I mean, easy enough to do one now?"

"Sure. They're mostly plain text files. He didn't like fancy word processors. But a couple are Word documents."

"How about that r-f-h whatever one?"

"Sure... um, it's a list. It starts out with a bunch of stuff under the heading 'priority,' then has another heading called 'chronology.'"

"What's on the 'chronology' list?"

"It says 'Cortez, law firm,' then 'Creede, ranger,' then 'Montrose, DOW office.' And more stuff like that."

"DOW office as in d-o-w?"

"Right."

"Tim, this is incredibly important. What information about these files did you get from Schoenfield's computer?"

"Well, the file contents and directory information, the usual stuff."

“One of my programs tells me when files were last modified, probably because I set it up that way. Do you have this information about Schoenfield’s files?”

“What I did was to capture a long listing of the complete contents of his hard drive. It’s listed one line per file, so it goes on and on and on, lots of pages. But it’s all there, including all the system files and the executables and so on for the programs he has.”

“But you downloaded only some of his text files, his data files.”

“Right. Why’s this so important?”

“First, can you tell me when the file you read from was changed last?”

“Ah... it looks like a couple of days ago.”

“Thank you. That particular file may just be evidence of Schoenfield’s being part of a murder conspiracy. That’s why it’s important.”

“What murder?”

“It’ll be in the papers tomorrow. Last night, it looks like someone torched a law firm’s offices in Cortez, and two people were killed in the fire. Don’t know who yet. But if it’s arson, the deaths are murders. And Schoenfield has it on what appears to be a planning list. And he had it there two days ago.”

“Wow. So we’ve got him?”

“We will have got him when he’s behind bars without bail. But this is another step in that direction. Can you bring all that stuff over? Or would it be easier to e-mail it to me?”

“If you’re using a CBI system, I’d rather not e-mail it. If he finds his own stuff somehow on a CBI system, it’s all over, and I bet I can find more next time if we don’t get him suspicious.”

“You’re right. Well, I’ve got one of those new, high capacity Zip drives on a system that’s not on the network. Will that work?”

“I’ll be over to see you later this morning.”

* * *

Annette hadn’t told Tim the name of the law firm that had been burned, because it wouldn’t have meant anything to him. And, really, it didn’t mean anything to her, except that it connoted environmental law. EarthLegal Associates just didn’t sound like the usual small-town divorce and probate group. She knew that Reid Tompkins worked for an environmental law firm, but the connection was tenuous.

She’d just have to await the results of the identification process. Maybe the victims were the arsonists, after all. Sheriff Wertlinger had described the Creede operation as being composed of losers. Maybe the Cortez one was also. She made a note to call Wertlinger to let him know that his ranger was next on the list.

What did Tim call that file? She thought hard. Was it “rfhops”? “rfh” then “ops”. As in operations, no doubt. But the “2”? Did that imply a “1” on another such file? What would that have in it?

She was snatched from her musing by a knock and the appearance of Derek Petersen in her doorway.

“Annette? You wanted to spend some time on the budget today, right? Is now a good time?”

And it occurred to her that it was a better time than most, actually.

Two hours later, she was feeling much better about her understanding of the workings of the CBI budget process and how her office received its allocation. But, after two hours of budget minutiae, she was also ready for something else.

Tim showed up just in time. He waltzed into her office and, with a big grin and a flourish, pulled a Zip disk from his shirt pocket.

“Did you know that, way back when, twenty megabyte hard drive packs, the removable ones, were about the size of a sofa cushion? And that the gizmos you put them into, the drives, were about the size of an easy chair? Now we have more than ten times the storage on this little thing, and the drive itself is smaller than a portable CD player. Ta da.”

He laid the disk on her desk in front of her.

“Amazing. I mean, that miniaturization, plus it’s amazing how easy it was to get this information from Schoenfield. Um, where else is it? His computer and yours, I know. Any place else?”

“Well, I had the CBI computer erase all this from itself after it transferred the information to the computer that I’m using at the university. It’s not really my computer. And I found a file where the Senator keeps his logins and passwords, organized by what computer they’re for, and there aren’t any FSU computers on it. So, yeah, the only places where this information is are this disk and the two systems, his and the university’s.”

“How much have you looked at it?”

“Not much. That file with the logins. The file I read you. The directory with the file names.”

“I’d feel better if you didn’t look at it any more. In fact, it would be better to erase it from the university system.”

“Well, are you sure? Then there would be only the Senator’s computer and that disk. I know that people with systems experience like me are pretty paranoid about backups, but it’s for good reason. Computers die and stuff gets lost.”

“I’ll copy this disk onto my non-networked computer and then make a copy of it onto another Zip disk. Is that good enough?”

“OK. Just keep the two Zip disks in separate places.”

“OK. And you’ll erase everything from the university computer? Is this one of Jamie’s systems?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Look, Tim, I know you’re probably curious about all this stuff from Schoenfield’s computer. But as someone with systems experience, you should know that curiosity isn’t a good enough reason to go snooping into someone else’s stuff, even though you’re able to do it. And this particular stuff is like dynamite, it could blow up on you. Even though it’s just information, Schoenfield seems to have quite a network of operatives. You got lucky with those two a couple of weeks ago. The people in Cortez last night didn’t get so lucky. The less you know about all this, the better off you’ll be. So I want you to go back to the university and erase all of this, or at least all of it that isn’t needed to get more information next time. I guess you’ll need to keep some in order to look at the directories, huh?”

“There’s so much stuff and I’m so busy now that I really don’t have time anyway. But, you’re right, I do need some of it. I’ll erase the rest, promise.”

“And I’ll get right on examining this. You’ve done us a great service with this, Tim. I think Hal, that is, Dean Weathers, will consider you to be rehabilitated. Well, this along with the tutoring. How’s that going, by the way?”

“Great. Jamal’s a natural. Which reminds me, I’ve got an appointment with him. Got to run.”

Smooth kid, Annette thought. I think I’ll call Jamie McFarland and make sure that stuff really does get erased.

* * *

It was not until mid-afternoon that Jarvis Schoenfield finally woke up. It had taken him another hour and an additional half-bottle of bourbon to get to sleep, but then his body’s defenses kicked in and kept him asleep for a good ten hours. He woke up groggy but, to his relief, not hung over. He also woke up worried. It took him only a few minutes to return to his computer and the problem of the information in the CBI files. He started making notes.

Four hours later he called downstairs for a meal to be brought up, and he also asked for the Reverend. Michael Oswald was down in Norwood, but he would be summoned and available within the hour, he was told.

Schoenfield was just finishing the food when there was a knock.

“Yeah?”

“You asked me to come up, Senator?”

Oswald looked peeved, but Schoenfield ignored it.

“Have a seat, Mike. Pour yourself a drink, and get me one, too. We’ve got trouble, real trouble. We need to talk.”

“Now what? And, say, I heard that the Cortez job went off great.”

“Yeah? That’s right, it was supposed to happen last night, wasn’t it? I was up most of the night and slept all day, so I haven’t heard anything. What happened?”

“Burned to the ground. I’ve heard they found a couple of bodies, not identifiable, but all our guys are accounted for. Cortez cops are clueless so far. Keep your fingers crossed.”

“Wonder who it was. Well, no matter. Anyway, we’ve got to talk about the information I got last night. Remember how Timmy set me up with a way to get into the CBI computer? Well, I’ve been staying away from it since Timmy got away from us. But last night I finally called it up. They have a new set of files with evidence information that I found. About me. It concerns that Bill Campbell hit and the thing in Boulder. For that one, it looks like the FBI has evidence implicating me.”

“How’s that possible?”

“They found the van and traced ownership. Some idiot forgot to transfer the title to the foundation. And there’s something about prints on parts for a radio controller.”

“Hmm. Well, the ownership isn’t any more of a problem than Pickle and Mad Dog are—you know, rogue employees and all that. They took the van and you didn’t know. But prints on controller parts are different. Did you ever handle any of Pickle’s stuff?”

“Hell, I don’t remember. I mean, sure, some of it. But I don’t remember about radio parts.”

“Well, look, we can take the same approach with this as with the van. It’s part of the ranch, you live here, you use it occasionally. One time there was this stuff in it and you had to move it to put, well, whatever you were putting, say furniture, in it. So you must have touched it without knowing what it was. Then these rogue employees went off and did all this stuff that you know nothing about. This isn’t really any worse than having Pickle and Mad Dog picked up.”

“Yeah, I thought of this angle, too. But the FBI worries me. Anyway, we’ll figure out how to get through this. But there’s other stuff I want to talk about, stuff I found on the CBI computer. For one thing, it looks like that bastard Charles Shure was scamming the public, and us, when he had that press conference about his great-uncle’s journals. According to what’s in the files, there’s valuable information in there after all. Information he’s going to use to make tons of money, the little weasel.”

“Like what?”

“Like, Heinrich von Scheuer discovered that there are certain genetic traits in different populations he was working on. The CBI information is sketchy, but apparently von Scheuer provides hints about isolating these traits. With modern technology, you know, gene cloning and all that stuff, it should be possible to develop pills to let people change themselves. Or for parents to custom-make their kids. Or for bureaucrats to put stuff in the water supply to control the population.”

“What was all this doing in the CBI computer? And what’s the connection to you?”

“Well, the connection to me is just that my name was there, because I gave, or they think I gave, Shure the journal. So I found the computer file by doing a computer search on my name. And why it’s in there seems to be that the CBI is concerned about misuse of these genetic supplements, or whatever they’re called, about unauthorized experiments and so on. It’s really an FDA problem, but CBI’s worried because it’s in Colorado.”

“So, what kind of genetic traits are we talking about here?”

“There’s not a lot of detail in the files. But, look, von Scheuer was at a prison camp and so he had lots of Jews to work with. One of the things mentioned is mathematical abilities. Everybody knows that Yids can do interest rate calculations in their heads. And look at all those physicists that invented the atomic bomb. And even Einstein was a Jew, right?”

“Well, I have to say, Jarvis, that it wouldn’t hurt the American people to have better math skills. I mean, I get the wrong change all the time in stores because people don’t know how to add and subtract, even.”

“And you want the government to go putting Jew genetic supplements in our water supply? I may have to shoot you right here, Mike.”

Schoenfield picked up his glass of bourbon and swirled it thoughtfully.

“I didn’t say that, Jarvis. Geez, you’re uptight these days. Look, all this sounds pretty speculative. It’s not clear that there’s anything to be done about it right now. We should probably just keep our eyes open. You’ve got access to the CBI computer, right? Well, if they’re worried about this, they will update their information regularly. So just keep up with their latest stuff, OK? Or did you have something more in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking about a stage two operation of some kind.”

“Against UNELECO? Whoa. They have security, good security, remember? And all we have are little groups of civilians who are playing out their ninja-wannabe fantasies.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, how about kidnapping Charles Shure again?”

“What would that accomplish? All we could do is get a ransom, and we don’t really need money.”

“What if the ransom was to make them go public with this gene supplement stuff?”

“Hmm. Now that has possibilities. Let’s think about this more.”

* * *

Seventeen

“Thank you for these breakfasts.” Annette was trying to be as sincere as she could, but she was sure it sounded corny, or silly, or just plain stupid. They were again sitting on the deck, basking in the glow of the late July morning sun and of *huevos rancheros*, among other things, finishing the papers, and waking up with the summer morning.

Hal looked up and smiled in his mischievous way.

“You mean, as opposed to that lovely pre-breakfast interlude, or to dinner, or what?” She wadded up her paper napkin and tossed it at him.

“No, I mean thank you because otherwise I’d be at the office already slaving away. And we both know I put in enough hours as it is, without going in early. Besides, I probably do better work this way.”

“Well, you sure did better work about an hour ago...”

She was looking around for something else to throw, so he continued in order to distract her from throwing her fork.

“I know what you mean. I figured it out for myself a long time ago. Aside from going to work more relaxed, starting mornings slowly gives me time to think about the day ahead, so when I get there I’m ready for action. I hate it when John or somebody else calls an early-morning meeting.”

“Sometimes, I guess like today, I also use it as an excuse to put off what I really don’t want to do. Today I get to talk with Lolly Markham.”

“Lollipop? She of the now-decimated SCREW? How is she, anyway?”

“I’m told she’s not so good. Her lawyer hasn’t called for some days, of course. I guess she doesn’t know that his was one of the bodies found in that arson fire last week.”

“So you get to tell her?”

“That’s the plan. And I also get to tell her about the other one, that FSU assistant Steve Rutherford we talked with a while back. Remember?”

“Rutherford? He was there, too? I guess I didn’t know that, or if you told me I forgot.” Hal looked shocked.

“I just found out yesterday. It took some time to ID the bodies. We’re talking very well done, here. Really crispy. But we know who’s responsible, except for some of the small fry. When we bring in the leaders, we’ll get them, too.”

“Steve Rutherford, damn. Well, I guess he just got himself in too deep. I wonder how they’ll take this in the sociology department. Maybe I should call someone.”

He shook his head and took a deep breath.

“So, yeah, you talked about that operations list you found on our esteemed Senator’s computer. I guess that’ll help you get them. What about that next job, the one over in Creede?”

A wide smile emerged on Annette’s face.

“It fell on its face, largely because we knew it was coming. They, I mean, another of these little bands of losers, were going to try to kill a Forest Service ranger by sabotaging a bridge. She was

supposed to drive over this weakened bridge, fall into the creek, and drown. Unlike the arson in Cortez, this was supposed to look like an accident.”

“A Forest Service ranger? Why?”

“Well, apparently she’s been pretty active in her spare time on behalf of preservation groups. So this bunch of crazies decided to make an example of her. Although if it had succeeded in looking like an accident, I don’t know how that would have worked. Anyway, that was the plan. The sheriff over in Creede, Ralph Wertlinger, had an informant planted, though, so he knew about it. And on the appointed evening, the ranger, her name is Virginia Adams, I think, just stopped her truck at the bridge and waited while the band of crazies was rounded up by the sheriff’s guys. I’m told that they were all wearing black hoods, and one of them, a short guy, started yelling ‘Shut up number one’ when one of the others started trying to explain. It seems they were calling each other ‘number one’ and ‘number two’ and so on. Talk about losers.” She shook her head.

“Sounds like what we used to call going to the bathroom when I was a kid.”

Annette burst into a fit of giggles, so he went with it.

“You know, stuff like ‘Excuse me number one, but I need a bathroom break.’ ‘You do? Number one or number two?’ ‘I’m number two but I need to do number one.’ ‘But I’m number one.’ Like that old Abbott and Costello ‘Who’s on First’ routine. Wish I could have been there.”

She finally got control of herself. “That’s why I love you so much. You make me laugh.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a good thing you’re a pushover. But I’m glad. So, you’ve got everything under control except for the Big Fish. What’s your strategy with them?”

“We’re letting some seeds we planted grow. Tim Langer’s been getting great information for us, and Schoenfield seems to be snapping up everything we put there for him to find. This means that he’s aware of the FBI’s interest in him, and our interest in him, too. Which means that he’ll be keeping his nose pretty clean, I expect. What we want to happen is for him to get interested in the UNELECO information we planted. It’s supposed to push his Aryan Rights buttons. We’ll see.” Annette shrugged.

“John and I have been talking about how to live without the guy, and we’ve decided it’ll work fine. He’s the ranking member of the Senate’s Education Committee, but the guy behind him is even more sympathetic to our needs. He’s from Greeley, and he thinks that the big schools, CU in Boulder and CSU, get too much state funding, that the small schools like UNC in Greeley, and us of course, should get more.”

“Should they?”

“Well, I’m not unbiased, of course.” Hal, in fact, positively oozed bias, and he grinned. “But I can tell you that we, and UNC and the other smaller universities, spend a lot bigger percentage of our state tax support on teaching, instead of subsidizing research so much. So if the taxpayers want instructional bang for their tax bucks, we’re a good choice for them. But do you think you can get both Schoenfield and the other guy, Tim’s uncle?”

“Oswald. Michael Oswald. Pretend preacher who’s really a lawyer, a defrocked lawyer it turns out.”

“You defrock preachers. Lawyers get disbarred.”

“Yeah. Whatever. But he’s been leading these Resources For Humanity meetings and planning sessions, according to an informant. And so far the plans coincide with the stuff on Schoenfield’s computer. And that is now murder one caliber stuff, as well as a lot of conspiracy stuff. Not to mention a link to the Presidential assassination attempt. Oh, and I bet I didn’t tell you. I finally figured something out from the information we got from Schoenfield’s computer. Tim told me about a file with a weird

name, RFHOPS2. It has that Cortez fire and the Creede thing with the ranger in it, along with lots of other things. But I figured that there should be an RFHOPS1 file as well, but there wasn't. So I kept looking at these files, there are hundreds of them, and finally ran across what I was looking for. It was called PHASE1OPS, and it hadn't been changed since late last April. It has a list of all the deaths in our environmentalist portfolio, plus a couple we didn't know about. It looks like those two guys, Mercer and David, who the FBI has on the assassination charge, were responsible for all of them, and that Schoenfield was the mastermind."

"Was there a file about the assassination attempt?"

"Oh, right. Called PREZOP. Plus a big long essay about why the President deserves to die. Plus other essays on how Aryans are superior; well, no, actually they're about how non-Aryans are inferior. He really slanders Latinos. This guy's way over the edge."

"So why don't you just arrest him? It sounds like you have enough information to charge him with all sorts of stuff."

"There's concern about the admissibility of the information. Even though Tim was the system administrator for Schoenfield's computer, it wasn't really formal, so it may not have been kosher for him to download all of Schoenfield's files. Also, because we got them over the internet, it's not clear that we can actually prove they're Schoenfield's. So we're going to try to catch him actually doing something. Hence the business with UNELECO."

"What's going to happen?"

"Good question. Right now, I've got to get off to work, finally."

* * *

Along with the usual paperwork, Annette's main task for the day was the visit to Lolly Markham. Lolly, according to Annette's information, had been demanding to see her lawyer, but Reid Tompkins was, of course, nowhere to be found. Lolly had been offered the services of other attorneys, but she was set on Tompkins.

In order to make her visit with Lolly as productive as possible, Annette decided to have someone from the Durango Public Defender's office accompany her. She called Mimi Olive, whom she knew from an earlier case. Mimi was a good advocate for her clients, but she also had a pragmatic outlook. She briefed Mimi on the phone and they agreed to meet at the county lockup after lunch.

Mimi and Annette were waiting when the guards brought Lolly into the interview room. She looked, Annette thought, at least ten years older than she had just a month ago, when Annette first arrested her. But she also looked defiant. Kid gloves time.

"Lolly, you know the drill here. Everything is recorded and video-taped. I want to introduce you to Mimi Olive, from the Durango Public Defender's office."

"I don't want a new lawyer, I want my lawyer, where the hell is he?"

"I know you want to be represented by Mr. Tompkins. You don't have to be represented by Ms. Olive. I asked her to observe this interview to ensure that your rights are protected."

"Great. Fine. Really. But where's my lawyer?"

"As you know, I've talked with Steven Rutherford about the organization you folks formed, the thing called SCREW. It started with six of you. You know that David Wellington was killed back in the middle of June, right?"

Lolly, still looking defiant, was nodding, so Annette forged ahead.

“Well, now fully half of the original members of SCREW are dead. Both Steven Rutherford and Reid Tompkins perished last week in an arson fire at Reid’s legal offices. It appears that they were attempting to escape the fire but didn’t make it. Whether their deaths were intentional or accidental, in terms of the arsonists intentions, isn’t clear. This is why Reid hasn’t been to see you. Understand?”

Lolly’s defiance had evaporated, and she looked completely deflated, sagging, pale, slack. And even older. Then she collapsed in tears.

“Reid! Dead? N-noooooo...”

Annette and Mimi let her grieve, and someone on the other side of the one-way mirror had the empathy to bring in a box of tissues. Finally Lolly looked up, pleading.

“We were going to be married. I’m going to have his b-baby.”

Annette turned to Mimi. “I didn’t know this, FYI.”

Then she turned back to Lolly.

“Lolly, now that you know where things stand, I want to urge you to cooperate with us. Perhaps we can use information you have, even if it’s information that you don’t think may be important, to convict Reid’s killer or killers. Mimi, of course, will advise you to look to your own situation and your own defense first, and that’s appropriate advice. And you certainly don’t have to tell me anything. Also, Mimi doesn’t have to represent you. But she’s here if you’d like to talk with her. We can move you both to a private room—no cameras or windows or microphones—if you’d like to talk with her.”

“They were burned to death? Oh, dear God. Do you know who did it? Have you caught them?”

“We have an idea of some of the people involved, and we know where to find them. We’d like to get all of them at once. That’s where you might be helpful.”

“What do you want to know?”

Mimi jumped in instantly. “Now, Lolly, you don’t have to say anything at all, now or ever. Maybe it would be in your best interest for you and me to talk privately about this. Ms. Trieri has told me that you were originally charged in connection with a fire in Utah, and now that you’re here because of a minor marijuana charge while you were out on a recognizance bond. And for some driving-related charges. This is all small-potatoes stuff, and if she wants information from you, we should be able to get you immunity. At least it’s worth a try.”

She looked at Annette, eyebrows raised, questioning. Annette kept her poker face intact. Lolly’s face brightened perceptibly.

“Is this true? Could I get out of here if I cooperate?”

“I’m not empowered to make deals. All I can do is to put in a word with the right people, and they can try to influence the District Attorney.”

Annette was, of course, understating her ability to influence matters. Mimi knew this and just looked at the ceiling, shaking her head gently. But Lolly was not at all aware of how things really worked, so she took the bait.

“Please. I’ll do anything, I’ll cooperate fully. I need to be out of here. All I’ve got now is Reid’s baby, and I need to take care of myself, to get healthy, for him. Or her.”

She smiled and patted her tummy. Mimi, however, wasn’t finished.

“Ms. Markham. Your attention, please. There’s a right way and a wrong way for you to do this. If we do it the right way, your ability to be a good mother will be enormously enhanced. OK? First, you need to ask me to represent you.” She paused, waiting.

“Oh. Well, will you please represent me?”

“Yes, I will. Now then,” she turned to Annette, “Ms. Trieri, my client, Ms. Markham, will cooperate fully with you in return for full immunity for everything for which she is now charged, and for other matters in connection with these charges, and in return for her immediate release. She will agree not to leave the region and to be available to you for information and testimony if required. We need to reserve the right to protect her in the case of testimony that might lead to a dangerous situation for her. Also, if you find that she is not cooperating fully, you may consider this agreement to be abrogated. Further, this agreement does not apply to her future behavior. Because this is all on tape, I consider it as binding as a written agreement.”

Again, she raised her eyebrows in question.

Annette smiled. “You work fast. Lolly, do you understand all that?”

“I think so. Um, Ms. Olive, what do you mean by this agreement being abrogated?”

“I mean if you don’t hold up your end, by cooperating fully, the deal’s off and she can put you back here. It’s the price you pay for getting out of here and having charges and so on dropped.”

“Oh. Well, it sounds OK with me.”

“OK. Done.”

Annette looked up at the mirror and gave a thumbs up to the camera she knew was there.

“Let me ask one quick question now, and then we’ll get you out of here. You were driving a car in Monticello, Utah, the night of the lumber mill fire. Did Rutherford and Tompkins start that fire?”

“Yes, but it was Steve’s idea. Reid wasn’t in favor of doing something so drastic so soon.”

“Thank you. I’ll pass along to the Utah State Patrol and the San Juan County Sheriff’s office that we have eye-witness testimony that the fire was started by two individuals who are now deceased. That will let them close the investigation. We will, of course, have questions for you. One more question. Was that Flip Chester’s pot that was found in your car?”

“Absolutely, the scumbag. He must have ditched it when the sheriff stopped us. I’m never having anything to do with him ever again.”

“I thought so. We’ll deal with him appropriately. And, Lolly?”

“Yes?”

“Good choice going with Mimi. She’s top-rate, and she’s free. Anyone else would have charged you \$500, minimum, to make this deal.”

Amazing, Annette thought, how Lolly didn’t look quite so old any more.

* * *

For completely different reasons, Tim Langer was also amazed. Astounded even, for Jamie McFarland had actually asked him out! They were going to walk downtown for dinner tomorrow.

But this meant he’d need a wardrobe upgrade. Baggy pants and over-sized tee shirts, with beat up tennis shoes, were OK for hanging out, even for his tutoring job. But this was different, it demanded

something more sophisticated. So he'd borrowed a car to drive down to the mall to go see what they had at Mervyn's.

The parking lot, as usual, seemed to be full, so he had to park on the wrong end of the mall and walk. But his mood was so ebullient that it didn't matter. He kept thinking to himself about how he should act—be very cool, was his mantra—and where a dinner date might lead. He was so absorbed that he didn't notice the car that had pulled up beside him as he walked through the parking lot.

"Hey, Timmy! Long time, no see. Where ya been lately?" said a sadly familiar voice.

He turned in surprise and fear.

"Un-uncle Mike! Ah, I've been around. Haven't seen you lately, either. What's happening?"

"We need to talk. Get in."

"Get in? Oh, well, I'm on my way to something important, so how about some other time?"

"Timmy, don't make me stop the car and get out. Just walk around here and get in. Right now!"

Even though his instincts were shouting at him to run, Tim went on autopilot and got in the car next to Michael Oswald.

"Good job. I could tell you were thinking of running on me, but this was the right thing to do. You understand why, don't you?"

"I wasn't going to run, Uncle Mike. Honest. I was just surprised to see you, that's all. I haven't seen you for a long time."

"Not since before you got caught trying to do that job for the Senator, I think. How did that work out? Did you get in trouble?"

"Well, um, yeah, of course, some. But it's OK. I told them that I was just curious about that company. UNELECO, that's it. Because they do so much stuff with computers and military stuff. They caught me because I was using a university computer. I had to, Uncle Mike, because my computer network connection at home was just too slow. The UNELECO computer security is really, really solid, and I needed a fast connection. So they caught me."

"What'd they do to you?"

"Aw, just a slap on the wrist. They made me promise not to do it any more and they're making me tutor this guy who needs help with a computer science course. An athlete who needs his grades up."

"Well, the Senator needs your help more than ever. Did you learn enough about the UNELECO system before that you can pick up where you left off? Without the university computer? This is really important to the Senator, Timmy. And to me. And you owe him, and me. Pickle and Mad Dog are in jail because of you."

"Hey, that's not fair, Uncle Mike. It wasn't me, it was the guys at the dorm. They didn't like the way Pickle was treating me, and they stood up for me. And Pickle and Mad Dog just got in over their heads. These guys are athletes, and they don't take shit from anybody. Say, where are we going? I have to go shopping and then do some other stuff."

"We're going to drive around until I decide to take you back to your car. Don't worry, I'll get you back there. But I need to get you to agree to help the Senator get in to the UNELECO computers. It's lots more important than it was before."

Tim knew he shouldn't agree too easily, but he didn't want to spend any more time than absolutely necessary with Oswald.

“But I’m out of ideas, Uncle Mike. That’s why I needed the university computer, for its fast network, so I could get into the UNELECO systems by brute force. That takes a lot of bandwidth.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can find some new ideas, Timmy. You’re a bright kid. That’s why the Senator’s been paying you so well. And keeping your little secret.”

“Uncle Mike, I wish you’d believe me. I didn’t have anything to do with that. Someone tampered with her saddle.”

“Timmy, Timmy. Who should I believe? My nephew, who I remember as a little kid always telling lies? Or Senator Jarvis Schoenfield, pillar of the Colorado Senate, owner of the biggest ranch in the Four Corners? Hmm?”

“I know, I’ve heard this before. So it’s do what the Senator wants or I’m blamed for her death, right? I don’t know if I can do it, but I guess I have to try.”

“Good thinking, Timmy. I’m sure the Senator will be most pleased.”

To Tim’s relief, he noticed that the car was headed back in the general direction of the mall.

“Well, all I can say is that I’ll try. Does the Senator have a timetable I need to know about?”

“This one is urgent, Timmy. As soon as possible.”

“OK, but you’ve got to buy me time. I’ll start the brute force attack and work some other angles also. But it’ll just be slower because I can’t possibly use a university computer again. OK?”

“Results, Timmy, that’s what the Senator wants. And you want to please him, don’t you?”

He slowed the car, in more or less the same place that he’d picked Tim up.

“I sure do, Uncle Mike. Can I get out now?”

“You bet, Timmy. Stay in touch. OK?”

The smile reminded Tim of a shark’s.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the car drove slowly away.

Then he headed for the nearest telephone.

* * *

Bingo! was all Annette could think of when she and Tim were finished with their phone conversation. She immediately dialed Charles Shure’s direct line and was surprised to hear his voice after only two rings.

“Chuck? Annette Trieri. I think we got him. Schoenfield, I mean. He’s asking our guy, our computer hacker, to go back to trying to get into your computers. It must mean he’s fallen for that strange information we posted about the Nazi journal.”

“Ha! Wonderful, just wonderful. We’ll cooperate in every way we can. Hang on a second.”

Annette heard various computer-generated telephone noises, and then a new voice came on the line.

“Peters, computer security.”

“Phil, this is Chuck Shure. I’ve got Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation, on the line with me. Annette, Phil is head of our computer security group. Phil, remember that hacker we caught using the Frémont State computer systems trying to brute-force his way in a while back?”

“Sure do, Mr. Shure. As I recall, you told us not to worry about it because it would stop, and it did.”

“Yep. Annette was involved at the time, and she’s why it stopped. What’s happening now is that it’s going to start again. But this time, Phil, I want you to work with Annette, or whoever she has talk to you, her computer person, and let the hacker succeed this time. Maybe we can even help him out. OK?”

“Uh, Mr. Shure? This is pretty irregular for us, and raises lots and lots of questions, particularly with respect to our classified systems. Can we talk about this?”

“Mr. Peters? You and I should talk about this first, because I think there’s far less here than you may imagine. And I bet there’s nothing for you to worry about. Then you can take up Chuck’s time if you really think it’s really necessary.”

Annette wondered if her use of Shure’s first name would have any effect on his employee. But she didn’t have the chance to see.

“She’s right, Phil. I’ll give her your number and you can expect to hear from her. Thanks.”

“Yes, Mr. Shure. Uh, nice talking with you, Ms. Trieri.”

And he went away. At least, she thought, he got my name right the first time.

“Annette? I’m sure that Phil will cooperate. His job is to be paranoid, though, and he’s good at it. Being paranoid, that is. Well, his job, too.”

“He’s also right, especially because of your classified systems. But I think all we need to do is to set up a way for Schoenfield to snoop around in a little area we set up for him. He doesn’t need access to the whole system, like he has on our CBI computer.”

“He has access to your entire system? Geez.”

“Well, it got set up in the real hacker mode, with a login with root privileges. That’s jargon I’ve learned, and I’m rather proud of it, thank you. It means that the login has system administrator powers. They’re turning me into a computer nerd. Anyway, we don’t need that for your system. All we need is a login that gets Schoenfield where we want him to get. And Phil can set that up quite easily. In fact, I bet that Phil has an old, stand-alone workstation or something that he could set up to look like the main UNELECO system and fool Schoenfield completely. Then he wouldn’t be getting into your real systems, just a dummy one. A dummy system for a dummy.”

“Damn, you’re devious. And good. How much are they paying you, anyway? Want a job? Oh, let’s talk about that some other time. We’ve got to get Schoenfield first.”

Annette was surprised at this offer of employment and almost tempted to talk about it now. But he was right—nailing Schoenfield was the first priority.

“We will. We know he downloaded those genetics clues we gave him, so he’s motivated to get into your systems. And because he’s never been into your systems before, he doesn’t know what to expect, so it should be pretty easy to set something up to fool him.”

“Then what?”

“Well, he gets in, looks around, and finds things that yank his chain. Your guy Wendell Ellison gave me some great ideas, so we should get him in on this. He seemed amused by the whole thing, quite ready and willing to help.”

“Wendell’s a good guy. I think he was pretty disgusted by that journal. Which probably motivated him to be helpful. And so we’ve got Schoenfield’s chain rattling. Then what?”

Annette could see why his company was so successful. The guy at the top liked to think things through.

“At some point we have to start playing it by ear, and this is probably that point. If we put the right stuff on your systems for him to find, then we should be able to motivate him to act, and to act in a way we can predict. I mean, suppose we put information there that talks about specific ingredients needed to produce the dietary supplements we talked about. Then he might try to hijack shipments or corner the market or something. Uh, that sounds pretty lame, but do you see what I mean?”

“You’re right and I do. But his real weapon against this supposed dietary thing would be publicity, wouldn’t it? So we should make it clear in the bogus information that UNELECO considers this a top-secret project. Seems like that would really push his buttons. Maybe he’d try blackmail or something.”

“And you said I’m devious. Welcome to the club. He’s already blackmailing at least one person, our hacker, actually, so it’s in his genes. Or something. Anyway, it sounds like a plan to me. And if you think of anything more devious, be sure to let me know. I’ll call Phil as soon as I can.”

“You know, this is all great fun, more fun than I usually have at work, I can tell you. Is this what you do all the time?”

“This is what I do for fun. All the time is paperwork. I’ll be in touch.”

* * *

Late the next afternoon, just as he was getting primed for his date with Jamie, Tim Langer’s phone rang. Oh, no, he thought, she’s calling to cancel.

“Tim Langer? This is Phillip Peters. I’m the head of computer security at UNELECO.”

Tim suddenly knew the physiological meaning of the “fight or flight” syndrome, and his immediate reaction was to do the latter. Even the guy’s deep voice was intimidating.

“Uh, yes, Mr. Peters? What can I do for you?”

His voice just barely worked, and he noticed he was trembling.

“I’ve been talking with Ms. Annette Trieri.”

That helped Tim relax a little.

“She tells me that you’re under instructions to resume trying to hack into our systems again.”

That didn’t.

“Uh, well, it’s been requested of me, yes. I talked with her and she put me on hold. Told me to wait a day.”

“That’s what I’m calling about, to get you off hold. She and I have a better idea than having you try to hack in again. I have to say that it probably wouldn’t work anyway, and if it did, we’d find out and come and get you.”

Tim’s trembling made it hard to hold the phone, and his voice failed completely. But it didn’t matter, because Peters was continuing.

“I’ve got a login and one-use password on a special system for you. Got a pencil?” He rattled off codes and a telephone number. “Now, this system is stand-alone, and I’ve set it up specifically for you to be able to access. Its start-up screens look exactly like our main UNELECO systems do, so, if I wasn’t telling you this, you’d think you were into our central system. Also, I’ve cloned parts of our web

site onto it, and it has a network address.” He rattled off more numbers. “It’s set up so that you can create special web pages available only via that dial-up number, pages that will look just like our regular web site, our insider web site. And the login I gave you has admin privileges, so you can set things up to do whatever you need done.”

“I think I understand. And it sounds like it’s just what I need. So I won’t be trying to get into your real systems again. OK?”

“OK indeed. I must say, before you tried the brute force attack the other time, your attempts were most sophisticated. We were all impressed. I understand you’re in your second year of college. Let me know when you get your degree.”

“Uh, thanks, and I will. Um, can I ask a couple of questions?”

“Ask away.”

“Well, I don’t know how much Annette talked to you about. What I’ve been asked to do is to set up a login on your systems so someone can poke around for information he’s interested in. This stand-alone system is perfect, because I was real worried about your classified partitions. Anyway, he’ll probably expect to see a UNELECO network, with at least different systems for different divisions. I think he’ll be most interested in your biotechnology division. What I need to know is whether it’s OK for me to set up this stand-alone system to look like a network, and if I can grab stuff from your other systems to make it look authentic.”

“No sweat. This stand-alone system is all yours. And I’ve heard about the biotechnology angle, too. We have one of the scientists in our division, Wendell Ellison, working on some material for you. He’s going to e-mail it to this login, so don’t be surprised when you get something from him.”

“That will help a lot, because I really don’t know enough to invent that sort of material. And, uh, it would help if I had another login to your real network. I mean, to get first pages and so on that the public doesn’t see. To make it authentic. If I have to make it up, it won’t be, I don’t think.”

There was a long pause, and Tim began to tremble again.

“I understand. But I don’t think that would be a good idea. However, I can tell you that all of our first pages, the login startups and so on, are identical with one exception. When you access the system, you’ll see a screen with text symbols and so on, and one line says ‘UNELECO Gateway.’ All of our other systems are identical, except they say stuff like ‘UNELECO Biotechnology Division.’ See what I mean? Oh, and the classified systems have a line in big letters that says ‘Classified Use Only’ and ‘Need to Know Codes Required for Access.’ So you could create some dummy systems on your dummy network to make it look to this guy as if he’s found us for real. I can’t imagine that he’d expect you to hack into our real classified partitions.”

“Well I can probably persuade him that I can’t go there, and he wouldn’t want to himself because it could bring the CIA down on him, or something.”

“No comment. Do you need any help setting this dummy network and so on up?”

“No, I think I can manage. I like this sort of challenge.”

“I thought as much. As I said, we were quite impressed with your creativity.”

“So, were you serious about calling you when I graduate?”

“Absolutely. In fact, if you were in school here at Colorado Springs, I’d be talking with you right now about an internship. But Durango’s a little far away for one of those, I’m afraid.”

“I understand. But what if I transferred to the University of Colorado there in the Springs next year?”

“Then we can talk about this again. Let me know.”

“Thanks again. I will. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Just keep your nose clean. You need a Top Secret clearance, at least, to work for us.”

“How do I get one of those?”

“Oh, we’ll get it for you, but you’ve got to have a clean nose.”

After hanging up the phone, and unconsciously rubbing the dirt off the tip of his nose, it took Tim quite some time to regain his equilibrium. An almost job offer, no less. And a way to deal with the Senator. He looked down at himself. And I didn’t even wet my pants. Man what a scare that guy was.

He heard a thup-thup-thumping on the wall of his cubicle.

“Tim? About ready? I’m starved.”

Her voice came from right behind him, and he nearly jumped out of his chair.

Damn, he thought. Almost a job offer, a way to deal with the Senator, and a date with a real woman, not just one of those college girls. All in the same evening. Tim, old buddy, don’t make a fool of yourself. He turned to her with a big smile.

But when he saw that Jamie was wearing a tank top, he knew he was in big trouble.

* * *

Eighteen

It was finally time to brief Rod Andersen about the whole thing, so the next morning Annette took the early flight to Denver. She promised Hal she’d be back in time for dinner.

The short ride was actually smooth, because the daytime convection hadn’t become established yet. After negotiating the DIA terminal—it helped not to have to wait for baggage—she found a taxi willing to take her downtown. By 10 am she was in the CBI office, waiting for Andersen to finish up a telephone call. Finally, Sandy McStain’s telephone buzzed. She listened to it and told Annette that the Director would see her now.

“Annette! Good to see you, sorry I took so long. Sometimes I can’t get away from the telephone. That was Senator Jarvis Schoenfield, wanting to talk about some new, exotic security systems he thinks the state needs. Strange call. He doesn’t usually get involved in such things.”

The mention of Schoenfield’s name naturally put Annette on alert, all warning lights flashing.

“Um, Rod, I wonder if I can ask for more information about that call? You’ll understand in a while, I promise.”

“Huh? Well, sure. You know he’s the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Law Enforcement, that he controls, or at least has strong control of, our budget. So I’m always nice to him when he calls. Like I said, this was strange. He said he heard that this company in the Springs has developed some new, high-tech security system components that he thinks we should look into. I didn’t want to say that we really don’t have a need for high-tech security, well, not much. So I encouraged him. I even volunteered one of

our experts to look into details, but he said he'd do it for himself. He just wanted to run it by me, to sound me out. Something about having a way to verify that he's serious if he needs to make an appointment with the CEO of the company."

"What company, may I ask?"

"I think I remember talking with you about it. UNELECO. Oh, yeah, Charles Shure, the CEO wanted to talk with you a while back. I never heard how that went. Anyway, Senator Schoenfield is going to look into these security gadgets. What's your interest in all this?"

"Well, that's actually what I came up to talk with you about. I need to brief you on an extremely sensitive issue that involves Senator Schoenfield. And, interestingly, Charles Shure. You said that the Senator may be trying for an appointment with him? I'd like to call Mr. Shure, if I may."

"Annette, that's fine, but what's this all about?"

"That's what I'm here to talk to you about, but there's a timing issue. Let me make a call first, please."

He nodded, and she headed for his desk.

"Is the outside line nine?"

He nodded again and she poked buttons.

"Chuck?"

She was amused when Andersen's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Annette. Listen, this is quick. I just found out that Schoenfield may be calling you for an appointment, on the excuse of talking about security equipment for the state government. He may suggest you call my boss, Rod Andersen, for confirmation... Right. Why don't you tell him that you'll be in Durango and offer to meet him there, at some public place. Maybe a restaurant? ...OK. Let me know... Yeah, I think this may be it. Talk to you later, bye."

She smiled at Andersen. "Now I bet you're really curious."

"No kidding. 'Chuck?' Nobody else I know calls him 'Chuck.' And you just dialed and got him? Even the Governor can't do that."

"Uh, right, well, we're working together on this thing. It involves, like I said, Senator Schoenfield. Um, is this room secure? From eavesdropping, I mean?"

"Tighter than the Oval Office. Pray proceed."

"Well, it also involves that environmentalist portfolio that we talked about when you were recruiting me, remember?"

He was nodding yet again.

"And, believe it or not, the assassination attempt up in Boulder the Friday before the Fourth."

If he looked surprised at her relationship with Shure, now he looked flabbergasted.

"And, um, it also involves the arson fire in Cortez last week. Did you hear about that?"

She thought his head might come loose from the nodding. Time to let him say something, she thought.

"Ahh, that's all? No plans to nuke Denver? Are you telling me that Schoenfield's involved in all this stuff? I sure hope you've got all your ducks lined up straight."

“I’ve been waiting to brief you until we do. Now, we aren’t ready for a collar yet, which is why Schoenfield was able to call you. But his appointment with Shure is probably just a way to trick Shure into meeting with him. For a different purpose. But let me start at the beginning.”

“Please do. I’ll take notes and try to save as many questions as I can for the end. And, um, let *me* make a call.”

He walked over to his desk.

“Sandy? Listen. Cancel the rest of my morning and that lunch appointment... Yeah, I know, there will be hell to pay. But I’ve got to do this other thing. And please get the deli downstairs to bring us some sandwiches around noon.”

He looked a question at Annette.

“Ham and cheddar on rye, mustard, no mayo, no onions. Chips. Diet cola.”

He repeated it to Sandy McStain and continued, “And I’ll have a tuna salad on wheat toast, Coke, chips. Take it out of petty cash, this is definitely a working lunch. And, Sandy? Absolutely no interruptions unless the building’s on fire. Thanks.”

He looked up at Annette, took a breath, and walked over to the conference table where she was sitting.

“So, you were going to begin at the beginning.”

“I will. You know about the environmentalist portfolio. The next thing, chronologically, is where Shure came in...”

It took until 2 pm for her to tell it all and for him to get his questions answered. Somewhere in there, lunch happened, then coffee. He personally drove her back to the airport, and she even made it home in time for supper.

Aside from questions, all pointed and pertinent, his only comment was, “I’ve always wondered if that son-of-a-bitch wasn’t crazy as a loon. Of all the stupid reasons for wanting to kill the President of the United States, this one’s the stupidest I’ve ever heard.”

* * *

The trouble with politicians, Annette thought, is that they’re by nature gregarious. They meet people and remember them for the next time. The fallout from this was affecting her now, for she had been forced to come up with people who had never met Schoenfield or been present at small gatherings with him.

She needed the help, because Shure had taken her recommendation literally. Too literally, now that she thought about it. He’d suggested, when Schoenfield called for the meeting supposedly on security devices, that they have lunch at Oliver’s, in the Hotel Strater, on Main Avenue in downtown Durango. Fortunately, there was a three-day lead time, so Annette was able to find people whom Schoenfield would not recognize, mostly from the police force in Durango. She was also able to work with the restaurant staff and reserve about half the restaurant for her help. The other half was already reserved by the public, and she couldn’t risk so many cancellations. The resulting scene would tip off Schoenfield. But she would be able to treat much of the Durango Police Department to an elegant luncheon, at least by PD standards.

She decided to wait in the kitchen, with a view out the door to the dining room, because of the probability that Schoenfield would remember her from their brief meeting. Besides, the radio headset

she was wearing would look suspicious. Charles Shure was wired for sound, playing his role with glee. With a room full of cops backing him up, what could go wrong?

They had ordered lunch and were making small talk over drinks—an iced tea for Shure and a large, probably a triple, Manhattan for Schoenfield. Then Annette spotted trouble. There were Tim Langer and a young woman she recognized—Jamie, Jamie McFarland—trying for a table. Annette grabbed a waiter, pressed a five dollar bill into his hand, pointed out Tim, and had the waiter tell him to meet her in the back of the lobby. She worked her way through the bustle of the kitchen to the other door, all the while listening to the insipid conversation on the headset.

“Annette! What are you doing here?”

“Getting you and Jamie the hell out of here. Schoenfield’s in there, having lunch. It’s all going to go down shortly, and you two don’t want to be here, I promise.”

“The Senator’s in there? Well, they told me they were booked. I was trying to pay Jamie back for dinner the other night with a fancy lunch.”

“Well, there are other choices. Get out of here and pick one. I’ll call you later.”

She worked her way back through the kitchen to the dining room door. It sounded as if lunch was arriving at the table she was eavesdropping on. She peeked out, and saw Shure and Schoenfield in quiet conversation, arranging food, responding to the waiter’s questions.

Then, out the street window, she noticed Tim and Jamie in conversation with someone she didn’t recognize. It appeared forced, out of kilter somehow. Then the three walked off together. She returned her attention to the dining room. The meeting was about to begin.

“Now, Senator, I believe you wanted to talk about some of our new security gadgets?”

“Well, Chuckie, I can call you Chuckie, can’t I?”

He was smiling, and his voice seemed lower than Annette would have expected. He continued in the same menacing tone.

“Just keep smiling, Chuckie, because if you don’t, I’ll blow a big hole through you, just below the table here, with this beautiful antique derringer I’m holding. It’s not much for accuracy, but you’re close enough. And it’s a .60 caliber soft lead ball, which would punch quite a hole in your guts. Maybe even get that poor bastard sitting behind you. So keep calm and keep smiling.”

Shure’s voice was surprisingly steady, under the circumstances.

“Smiling I can do. Calm I can only try for. I guess I should have brought some of our new gadgets with me, hmm?”

“No smart remarks, you Jew-loving son-of-a-bitch. What’s going to happen is that we’re going to walk out of here best of friends. I’m going to leave a fifty dollar bill on the table, and we’re going to just walk out quietly and calmly, OK? And this lovely little derringer is going to be on you the whole time.”

“Um, we walk out of here, OK, then what?”

“We keep being best friends, of course, and we get in a car together. Got it?”

Annette could see the smile was strained, but intact. The two diners arose, and Schoenfield laid a bill on the table. She could just make out the snout of the derringer concealed in his large right hand.

She keyed her microphone. “All personnel. Schoenfield’s got a gun. No one move.”

The conversation in her headset resumed as they walked out, with Annette following as discreetly as she could.

“So tell me, Senator. What in the world does my affinity in your mind for people of the Jewish faith have to do with anything?”

“You know damned well what. You want to pollute the pure genes of good, red-blooded Americans with your filth.”

“Huh? Excuse me? You think I’m trying to pollute people’s jeans? You mean, like Wranglers?”

“Don’t goad me, Jew-lover. And keep smiling. Here. Get in.”

Suddenly Annette’s reception waned markedly. Must be in a car, she thought. But Shure’s voice still came through.

“Lovely vehicle, Senator. And it even comes with a driver.”

“Let’s go, Mike. Oh, well, hello Timmy. And a little chickie, too. Well, maybe we can have a party. Move it, Mike.”

She reached the sidewalk just in time to see a large SUV turn the corner and disappear down the side street. But the voices in her ear didn’t disappear.

“Annette? I sure hope you’re still getting all this. We just turned north. White Ford Expedition. Uhh.” There had been a slapping noise.

“You wired? You bastard. You BASTARD. I’ll probably have to kill you for this. Where is it? Ah, got it.” There was a crunch and the sound stopped.

It occurred to Annette that a chase wouldn’t happen. The single car outside watching the restaurant was facing the wrong way in traffic, and her contingent of officers was still in the restaurant. Well, she thought, I guess they won’t get lunch after all.

* * *

“Too many civilians.” Annette was explaining once again her decision not to prevent the kidnapping, this time in a conference room at her CBI office the next morning. Rod Andersen was hearing it again, this time in person. Todd Sweeney from the FBI was there, as were Fred Winders, her replacement, and Walt Jankowski, her previous boss at the Durango PD. Representatives of various sheriffs’ offices from neighboring counties were also present, with Jim Nettleman, from San Miguel County, conspicuously absent. Even Hal was there. His computer systems person and one of his students had been kidnapped, after all.

“Too many civilians, and he had a cannon. A short-range one, to be sure, but it was too dangerous to move in at the restaurant.”

“And you didn’t have the street covered.” Sweeney wasn’t trying to be nasty, but it came out that way.

“We did, actually, but we weren’t expecting that vehicle. Schoenfield arrived in a cab. I expect that the driver of the SUV escape vehicle was Michael Oswald, Schoenfield’s second-in-command, or something like that. But he wasn’t familiar to any of us. And our observer was not able to deal with the traffic and follow them. Of course, most of the PD was in the restaurant. I called the State Patrol, and they set up roadblocks to no effect. We have a report from local air traffic control of a helicopter taking off from a field on the north side of town and heading north, so that was probably them. There’s a white Ford Expedition parked at a car parts store close by, a rental.”

“Where’d they go?” Walt Jankowski was ever practical.

“I’m certain they went to the X-S Ranch headquarters, a cluster of buildings and cabins southwest of Norwood called Raven’s Roost. It’s where Schoenfield lives and the only place he’d feel comfortable and safe.”

“Well, then, hell, let’s just go get ’em.”

Ralph Wertlinger, Mineral County sheriff, was still put out that Schoenfield and company had tried an operation on his turf.

Rod Andersen stepped forward.

“We will, sheriff, but we’ve got to be careful. The hostages are our main concern at this point. Schoenfield isn’t going anywhere, and this other guy, Oswald, is not as much of a concern. We’ll get him sometime. As far as I’m concerned, Ms. Trieri handled this thing entirely appropriately. We’re just dealing with a very clever individual who was willing to expose himself rather than maintain his previous façade of innocence. I never would have predicted that Senator Schoenfield would have behaved this way. So this is still Annette’s case, as far as the CBI is concerned.”

“The FBI has a call in this too, Director Andersen. We want to question him about the assassination attempt.”

“I understand, and you’ll get your chance. But that was an attempt, and we want to question him about something like a dozen actual murders. I suggest that this will work best if we all work together. And, like Ralph said, let’s just go up there and get him.”

Wertlinger, no wallflower, spoke up again, “Say, where’s Jim Nettleman? It’s his turf up there. Shouldn’t this be his show?”

“Ralph, there is information that Jim isn’t entirely objective when it comes to dealing with Jarvis Schoenfield. On orders of the Governor, the State Patrol is relieving him of duty, temporarily, for the duration of this operation, as we speak.”

Rod Andersen was trying to be diplomatic about Wertlinger’s friend and colleague, but it was a thin attempt.

“Annette?”

She stepped forward again.

“This may be my show, but I need all the help I can get. And it’s clearly in all our best interests to work together. Furthermore, the last time I tried a collar out in the woods, I almost ended up dead.”

She looked at Hal and smiled.

“Fortunately for me, Superman there came along and saved me.”

Everyone turned to look at Hal, and he blushed scarlet.

She continued, “But it seems to me that all we can do is to marshal forces and truck up there with the appropriate warrants. If they decide on a stand-off, well, then we use standard hostage-situation procedures. Now, let me show you some pictures. Can someone hit the lights?”

She stepped back, turned, and pulled down on the cord of a screen, yanking at it several times in the eternal hassle of getting the thing to stay down without rolling up with a snap.

“This slide is an aerial photo of Raven’s Roost. We took it yesterday afternoon, late, as you can see by the shadows. We used a search-and-rescue helicopter and got shot at for our trouble. This large building is a two-story log cabin, Schoenfield’s house. These out-buildings are the usual sort of thing for a ranch, garages, barns, equipment sheds and so on. Over here is what we think is a bunkhouse, and out

here by the gate is another house, probably for a gatekeeper sort of person. The property, of course, is much larger than the area in this photo, but it should be possible to drive up to this gate without incident.”

“A ranch this big has staff. Where are the hands?”

It was too dark for Annette to see who was asking, but it sounded like Sweeney to her.

“On furlough just now, at least the ones we know of. This morning, we got records from the business office, down in Norwood, and contacted everyone we could. It turns out that relatively few employees live here at Raven’s Roost. There are at least two housekeeper/cooks and a sort of major domo type person. Two other people who used to live there are, fortunately, being held in the sumptuous accommodations of the FBI. They’d be dangerous to encounter, so I’m glad you guys have got ’em, Todd.

“What we’re planning to do is to move in with a contingent of State Patrol SWAT officers and set up for a siege. We have phone numbers for the place, so we’ll be in contact with whoever wants to talk with us. I think, because there are only a few hostiles in there, that we can move some people under the cover of darkness, if need be.”

“Where are the hostages?”

This sounded like Walt Jankowski to Annette, and she asked for the lights to be turned on.

“We’re not sure. Most likely in the main house, where Schoenfield and Oswald can keep an eye on them and where the staff can feed them. But maybe somewhere else, like the bunkhouse.” She paused. “Any other questions? ...No? Fred?”

“You said someone took a shot at the helicopter. Any idea where it came from?”

“We think it was the main house. It was some kind of large rifle, probably. We got lucky, because it hit only one of the landing struts. Blew a big hole in it, too. This wasn’t your average high-powered hunting rifle. Any more questions? ...Well, thanks for coming, especially you folks from around the region. I know you’re all interested in getting these guys behind bars, and we’re going to do it. And we’re going to do it without hurting any of these hostages. I know all of them, they’re friends of mine. We’re going to get them out safely.”

* * *

Hal tried not to pout, but he was certainly disappointed.

Annette finally persuaded him that he had no business being part of the assault team. He argued that he’d been there to save her once, a year ago, and maybe he should be there to help again. But he had to agree that she made a valid point that this time there would be a couple dozen State Patrol officers with her and reinforcements could be called in as needed.

What really worried him was that there would be no cell phone availability up there. Raven’s Roost was out of range of any cell towers. This meant that Annette would have to use a radio patch through the State Patrol office in Norwood in order to talk with Schoenfield. And, if she got in trouble, she would have no way to call home.

So, after Annette’s morning briefing, Hal went to work and tried to accomplish something besides fiddling nervously. He knew he had failed, when, on about his sixth trip out to Alice’s front office, she looked up at him, over the top of her reading glasses, with that quizzical expression that meant she was wondering what was going on.

“Is something wrong, Dean Weathers? You seem, may I say, not your usual calm self this morning.”

He sat down and explained what was going on and was surprised by how much better it made him feel.

Annette, meanwhile, had assembled her team and was approaching Raven’s Roost. She had six State Patrol officers with her for visibility, all looking sort of bulky due to the Kevlar vests under their uniforms. Another twenty had been deployed earlier, SWAT team members dressed in camouflage, around the perimeter of the Raven’s Roost compound. There were warrants galore, so, technically, no one was trespassing.

Annette, riding with the lieutenant in charge of the Norwood office, was leading the column of six patrol cars, all with lights flashing, up the gravel road to the compound. As they came around the last curve, they saw the gateway, a huge, imposing structure made from logs at least two feet in diameter bridging the road. The gate under it was closed.

Someone was standing behind the gate, dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved white shirt, and a western hat.

“I believe that’s Jim Nettleman. What do you suppose he’s got himself into?” Tom Ayala, the lieutenant, knew the local law enforcement community well. In fact, he had the sad task yesterday of relieving Nettleman of duty.

The little caravan of patrol cars rolled to a stop spanning the road in front of the gate three abreast, two deep. Annette and Ayala got out while everyone else remained seated. She and he had agreed to let her do the talking.

“Mr. Nettleman, I believe? I’m Annette Trieri, CBI. I’m in possession of warrants for the arrest of Senator Jarvis Schoenfield and Mr. Michael Oswald, and for complete searches of all buildings on this property.”

He ignored her completely, not even looking at her. His gaze, full of disdain, was on Ayala.

“Hey there, Tom. Thought I might see you today. Sure y’all know what you’re doing out here?”

“Talk to him.”

Annette was surprised at how calm she was.

“Morning, Jim. Sorry about yesterday, but you know it was just orders. I do what the Governor says. And, like I said, it’s only temporary. That is, unless you got yourself into something here that will make it permanent. We’ve got lawful warrants, Jim. You know you can’t interfere and come out of this clean.”

Nettleman shifted the chew in his mouth, turned his head aside, and shot a long stream of brown spittle onto the dust. At least it was on his side of the gate.

“Yeah, I know that. And you’ll notice I’m not armed, or anything. Unlike the people in the houses, I might add. The Senator asked me to come up as a mediator. I’m going to be as neutral as I can. First thing is, I want to see the warrants. In fact, we’ve got a lawyer here, at least he used to be, who wants to look ’em over. That’s got to be step one, they say. By the way, is this all the help you brought?”

Ayala looked at Annette—good man, she thought—and she shook her head.

“Mr. Nettleman, you are impeding our lawful performance of our duties, I’m sure you know that. Because of your status, we can be flexible. But please don’t jeopardize your future by aiding and abetting.”

“Lady, I don’t really know who you are or why you’re here. But I do know Tom here, been playing cards with him for years. So if I’m talking to anyone, it’s him. Got it?”

To Annette’s amazement, her sense of calm only deepened.

“Now, Jim, she’s my boss in this operation. It’s her show. No point in antagonizing her.”

“Lieutenant Ayala, I want to settle this as peacefully as possible. I’ll defer to Mr. Nettleman’s wishes. Feel free to consult with me as needed. Here are copies of the warrants for him. Let’s give them an hour to look them over.” She rummaged in her briefcase, handed the copies to Ayala, and returned her steady gaze to the man behind the gate. This fellow, she thought, is on very thin ice if he wants a future in law enforcement. But maybe he can be helpful in this situation. She watched Nettleman walk back up to the main house.

An hour later, she used the radio patch to call the house. After four rings, the telephone was answered by a woman with a heavy Spanish accent.

“This is Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Who am I speaking with, please?”

“I am Consuela. I work here, I cook.”

Consuela, Annette could tell, was quite nervous.

“Consuela, I’m sure you can tell that things are a little strange just now. But I don’t think that you have anything to worry about. I need to speak with Senator Schoenfield. Is he there, please?”

“He said that he is not going to talk with anyone.”

Annette heard a voice in the background, and Consuela resumed.

“Oh, he is not talking with anyone yet. I guess maybe later.”

“I see. Consuela, I need to know something else. Are there three people there, two men and a woman, one of them is Tim Langer, Michael Oswald’s nephew, and are they all right?”

“Si, they are fine. In the basement.”

Annette heard a roar of outrage in the background.

“Oh, I cannot talk any more.”

The phone went dead.

Annette looked at Ayala.

“Well, it sounds like our hostages are doing OK. At least we know that much. Let’s deploy, and then we can go to work on that chain on the gate. It looks sturdy.”

There was backing and filling of the cars to create a semi-circle around the gate, and everyone put on radio headsets. Annette and the officers positioned themselves behind the cars, and one officer, probably the most junior, Annette thought, crept forward with large bolt-cutters.

When he got halfway to the gate, a hefty chunk of wood was blasted loose from the right post on the gateway almost simultaneously with a booming report of a large-caliber rifle. The junior officer duck-walked, apparently without really touching the ground, back to a position behind the cars. If the situation had been different, it would have been quite amusing.

“Well, that sets a tone, doesn’t it?”

Annette was wondering just what she should do next.

“Lieutenant, that was quite some weapon. Kind of sounded to me like one of those antique Sharps buffalo rifles. .50 caliber maybe. Probably from the Senator’s collection.”

One of the older officers seemed to know his firearms.

“I bet you’re right, Larry. And that means it was a warning shot. If there’s someone with a Sharps in the gate house there, they’re ready for a fight. Damn.” Ayala looked worried.

Annette switched on her radio and said into the headset, “Trieri. I need two snipers at the gate, quietly.”

“Already here, ma’am,” came the quiet reply. “One on either side in the trees. If you can see us, we screwed up. I was watching the gate house and saw the shooter. George, it’s the upper left window. See how it’s open just a crack?”

“Got it,” came a second voice.

Neither had screwed up, for Annette had no idea where they were.

“Look, up the road.” Ayala was pointing toward the main house. Jim Nettleman was walking toward them, hands aloft.

“I’m coming out, OK? I’ll climb the gate.” He still had his hands up when he reached the gate. Over he came, and then he scurried around to the back of the cars with the others.

“I heard the shot. Oswald’s in the gate house, with an closed-circuit phone link to the Senator. They’ve been discussing the warrants. Oswald saw your guy, and the Senator ordered him to hit the gatepost as a warning to you. He said to Oswald that the next one should be for real, and to aim for the head. Oswald’s a crack shot.”

He was breathing hard, not from exertion, Annette thought, but from nerves.

He looked at her. “Listen, ma’am, like I said, I was just being a mediator. As a favor to the Senator. But if they’re shooting, I’m done with that. Also, he, I mean the Senator, he’s been drinking a lot, and I’m a little worried about his judgment. Hope it’s OK with you if I just sit this out.”

He stared at the ground, rather like a four-year old caught with a mess in his pants. Annette was thinking that he had undergone a remarkable attitude adjustment.

She switched on her radio again.

“Snipers, we’re going to try the gate again. If you see that rifle poke out that window, or anywhere, lay down steady fire at it.”

She took a pair of small binoculars out of her briefcase and trained them on the window.

“OK, let’s see if we can get that gate open. You’ll be covered.”

As the officer duck-walked, zig-zagging, back toward the gate, Annette peered at the window, periodically scanning the others. When he was about half way to the gate, she noticed movement behind the upper-right window, and it opened a crack. She switched her radio.

“Upper-right window opening. Protect the officer. Fire at will.”

She couldn’t quite tell what was happening behind the window, but she knew that the snipers’ telescopic sights had better optics than her binoculars.

A shot rang out, from the woods to her right.

“Shooter down, head shot,” came a voice in her ear.

“You sure you got him?”

Annette was looking at the junior officer lying flat in the dust of the road, trying to burrow beneath the gravel.

“Absolutely, ma’am. We’re using hollow points. I saw his head explode.”

* * *

Nineteen

It took about five minutes for Ayala’s car radio to crackle, “Telephone call patch for Trieri.” She switched her radio to the other channel.

“Trieri, CBI”

“I seem to recall meeting you briefly, maybe back in May or June, Ms. Trieri. In Denver.”

The voice, slightly slurred, was smooth and pleasant.

“Yes, Senator, you did. Just before I joined the CBI.”

“And, let’s see, you were with the police department in Durango before that?”

“Correct. Senator, surely you realize that your situation is hopeless and is not going to improve. We came here to serve the warrants that you have seen, and we’re doing things legally and properly. You’re not. Shooting at us will not make this any easier.”

“Speaking of shooting, that last shot wasn’t the Sharps that Mike’s using. What was it? And where’s Mike? He’s not answering the phone.”

Annette’s mind raced. No point in telling him things that could make him mad.

“Well, Senator, he fired a warning shot at us, and we fired one back at him. At least he’s got some sense. He came out with his hands up. He’s lying on the ground in front of the gate house, waiting for us to come get him. We will, as soon as we get the gate open.”

She heard a slow chuckling noise.

“Well, I’d sure hate for Mike to lie around on the ground too long and get all mussed up. He’s really fussy about his clothes. You go ahead and open the gate and get him. But if I see anyone come closer than the gate house, you’re going to have a dead hostage. I think I’ll start with our industrialist here. I’d hate to disappoint Mike by killing his nephew, and I have some ideas for the chickie.”

“Senator, I’m sure you know that our first priority is to ensure the safety of the hostages. So we won’t be doing anything to endanger them. But we also need a plan to resolve this. Do you have any suggestions?”

She realized that if this were to continue, they would need to call in an experienced negotiator.

“Well, I reckon I’m just fine here. Got food, water, booze, and women. That should last me for as long as I need.”

His recurring references to the women began to bother Annette.

“Senator, if you’ll excuse me a minute, I’ll tell my people to go and get Mr. Oswald. You said you didn’t want him lying on the ground too long.”

You didn’t say anything about him lying in it, though, she thought.

She switched the radio channel and it occurred to her that Schoenfield could have a police-band scanner. She hoped he hadn't heard the news about Oswald.

"Trieri. Move to gate house, but no farther. Hostages well so far. Radio silence. Out."

She motioned to Ayala and turned her radio off.

"Lieutenant, let's wait until dark to remove the body. I don't want Schoenfield to know that Oswald is dead, OK? Thanks. Oh. And see how quickly we can get a real negotiator up here. I'm not really well trained for this."

She switched back to the channel with the telephone patch.

"Senator? Thanks. My people will go no farther than the gate house."

"That's a good idea, because I've got another Sharps, an even better one, up here with me. Longer range, with a tripod. Much longer range than anything you folks have. And, of course, I've got the three hostages. Plus others on my staff, who really have no role except as additional hostages."

"Senator, are you interested in negotiation, or what?"

"Well, I suppose that depends on the definition of 'what.' But I'll talk, if you'd like."

"Thank you. Now, the longer this goes on, the more attention it will draw. And even if you have some agenda that needs attention, that kind of attention isn't what you need. For one thing, the FBI is going to want to get involved. If they put pressure on the Governor, I'll lose control of things and it will be downhill from there. One thing that could help me retain control, and to do things the way you'd like them done, is for me to establish that you and I have a credible negotiation going. Understand?"

"Sure. And you're probably right. It's far more pleasant talking with you that it would be with some federal storm-trooper. Why don't you come on up here for a drink with me?"

"I'm afraid not, but I'm glad you're comfortable talking with me. So, something that would help establish the credibility of our negotiation would be a gesture on your part."

"A gesture? Like what, not shooting that cop I've got in my sights just now?"

"Well, any shots by either side will prove to anyone who's interested that we have no negotiation and then the feds will take over, probably. So not shooting is fundamental. But a gesture of trust would be an additional step. The best thing you could do would be to let some of the hostages go. Send them walking down the road, just like Jim Nettleman did."

"I'll think about it. Got to keep my cook, though. Man gets hungry during a negotiation. But which of the others would you suggest?"

"Ms. McFarland is the least involved in all this. She was just along for lunch with Tim. Completely removed from the whole thing. Why don't you send her out?"

"Well now, I just don't know. Letting a pair of tits like that get away is just something I'm not sure I want to do. Like I said, let me think about it."

Focus, Trieri, she thought. Don't let him get to you.

"Senator? Please reassure me that they are safe and unhurt. That's also fundamental to our negotiation."

"Oh, they're fine. Consuela was right. They're in the basement. There's an apartment down there, with a bathroom and everything. They're locked in, of course, but Consuela's feeding them and they're fine. Hell, I don't even have the key—I gave it to Consuela. Look, I'm getting bored with this. I'll call you back later this afternoon. Got some thinking to do. Don't you folks try anything now. This Sharps

has quite a range, and I've practiced with it. Got an elk in the head, aiming for the head, at 500 yards once. Nearly a third of a mile. And you folks are only about half that far. So don't try anything foolish. And don't call me, I'll call you."

* * *

It was a long afternoon. They set up a base of operations in the gate house, and Oswald's body was zipped into a body bag. Annette called Hal on the radio patch, just to let him know she was fine. Word came that an experienced negotiator was on the way. Food and drink arrived. Annette had messages sent, by runners and hand signals, to the SWAT officers in the woods to ease their way in toward the house on all sides except the front, but to remain concealed.

And they waited.

Annette had brought a laptop computer with the most revealing of Schoenfield's files on it, so she spent time re-reading them. She also noticed that Lieutenant Ayala was keeping very busy, busier than he needed to be. Time for a chat, she thought.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant. Can we talk? And I'd like to be informal, so please call me Annette."

"Uh, OK, that's fine. Call me Tom by all means. What's on your mind?"

"Well, you don't know me very well, but people who do think of me as a straightforward person. It's all just out there. So here's some of it now. It seems to me that you're uncomfortable about something. Of course, I don't know you at all, either. But it seems like you're fidgeting. Are you OK?"

"Uh, well, Annette, this is your operation, and that's fine with me. You know the background and so on. But, well, it seems like you ordered that guy shot awfully quickly. I mean, with hostages and all, we usually go very, very carefully. At least that's what we're trained for. And he wasn't shooting, he was just opening a window, right?"

"Oh, he was going to shoot, I have no doubt. I saw the rifle barrel come out the window. And I had to assume that your guy Larry was right about the rifle's being a Sharps. And Schoenfield confirmed it after the fact. But given that, and given the history of these guys, I wasn't going to take any chances. Also, I'd heard that the hostages are up at the main house, and I figured that some action here wouldn't necessarily endanger them. It was a little risky, for sure. And I think that you're right, in general. I moved quickly, more quickly than you learn in training, that's for sure. What do you bet that the negotiator will be upset, when he gets here?"

"Well, it turned out all right, so far at least. But you sure surprised me, there."

"You may not know these guys the way I do. Remember that lawyer, Bill Campbell, the guy that got murdered back in June down by Norwood?"

"Sure do. Still open."

"These people were behind that. They probably weren't the shooters, but they were the masterminds. And Schoenfield planned the assassination attempt up in Boulder earlier this month. And they're behind that fire down in Cortez that killed those two guys a little more than a week back. Have you heard about what CBI's calling the 'environmentalist portfolio'?"

"I did hear something, but no details. Bunch of people have been killed here in Colorado, some down in New Mexico. No leads."

“These same people are behind all of them. A dozen murders. And they have plans for lots more. Kind of a militia movement thing. And, here, read this.” She had opened one of Schoenfield’s files that she remembered. It would be especially interesting to someone named “Ayala,” she thought.

He began reading from the screen of her laptop, and she decided to take a little walk. Evening was approaching, and at home she’d be eating dinner. What do you suppose Hal would fix tonight? she thought.

More to the point, where is that negotiator? And even more to the point, why hasn’t Schoenfield called? It’s been almost four hours. What’s going on up there?

He said don’t call me, but I think I’d better, she thought. She returned to the gate house.

As she was figuring out how to use the closed-circuit phone system, so she wouldn’t have to go through the radio patch again, Tom Ayala walked into the room, a look of serenity on his face.

“Thanks for showing me that, Annette. And thanks for handling this the way you are. If you ever need me, especially if there’s anything like a board of review hearing about this, just call me. OK?”

“I will, although I hope it doesn’t come to that. But, look, you live here, right in the Senator’s home town.”

“But I had no idea. Now I do. What can I say? He had a secret agenda that none of us knew about. If we had, he wouldn’t be dog-catcher, let alone a senator. Anyway, where do things stand? Any word on the negotiator?”

“Haven’t heard a thing. So I think I’ll call up there, if I can figure this out. It says ‘house phone’ on it, so let’s just try old reliable, zero.”

It rang twice and then was answered. Annette recognized Consuela’s voice.

“Consuela? This is Annette Trieri, calling from the gate house. Are you OK?”

“Si, I’m fine. And your friends downstairs are fine, too.”

“Can I speak with the Senator?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“He won’t speak with me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably. But not now.”

“Maybe later?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. If he comes back.”

“Comes back? Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. He went through the—how do you say?—tunnel.”

“When?”

“Oh, about an hour ago, I guess.”

“Can we come up to the house?”

“I don’t think he would like that.”

“But is there any danger if we do?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Thank you, Consuela. I’ll be seeing you shortly.”

She looked at Ayala in exasperation.

“Schoenfield slipped out through a tunnel or something about an hour ago.”

She switched her radio on.

“This is Trieri. Move in, move in. There should be no resistance. There isn’t really any rush, I guess. And be nice. Schoenfield has escaped.”

She and Ayala started up the road toward the main house at a brisk walk, and the others followed. Around her, she saw shadowy figures emerging from the landscape, the SWAT. She had no idea that they were so close.

They entered through a side door, into what turned out to be the kitchen, a large, elaborate kitchen at that. A short, round woman was singing to herself and peeling potatoes. She looked up when Annette and her retinue crowded through the door.

“Yes? Oh, you must be Señora Trieri. I am Consuela. Have you had supper?”

Annette looked at Tom Ayala, puzzled.

“This is unworldly. Do you speak Spanish?”

A rapid-fire conversation in Spanish ensued, and Annette had the remainder of the officers spread out through the house, carefully. At last they were going to be able to execute their search warrant. Apparently, the arrest warrant would have to wait.

Finally the Spanish waned, and Ayala turned toward Annette.

“All she knows is that the three hostages, she calls them your friends, are downstairs and the Senator’s gone. The other cook and the housekeeper, who’s the boss, are off today, it turns out.”

“Where’s downstairs?”

More Spanish led to Consuela’s pointing at a door at the back of the kitchen. Annette led Ayala through and down a flight of narrow, steep stairs. More of a cellar than a basement, Annette thought. At the bottom, there was a locked door, with a key in the lock. Annette unlocked it and opened the door slowly, carefully.

There was a light on in the room, and the first thing she saw was carpet, Berber carpet in an off-white with darker tan flecks. As she continued to push the door open, she began to see furniture, a couch against the wall, a lamp, and finally the legs of a dining room chair. Then there was someone’s back, someone with no shoes on, hunched over a table. As she opened the door farther, two other chairs, with other people hunched over the table, became visible. And she began hearing a strange conversation.

“So we take the high-voltage capacitors and their power supply from the TV tube and rig them to the reading lamps, right? Like this circuit here.”

Annette recognized Tim Langer’s voice. So, she thought, that must be his back. So that means the one on my right is probably Shure and the other one is Jamie McFarland.

“Right.” It was Shure’s voice this time. “It’ll be tough to get solid connections without tools, but at least you’ve got your fingernail clippers, so we can strip the insulation from the wires. And I bet there are some wire nuts inside the lamps or the TV or somewhere that we can borrow. Anyway, the connections only have to last for a couple of milliseconds, long enough to energize and blow out the light bulbs in the lamps. The flash and pop, and the glass shrapnel, should be enough.”

“Do you guys really think that will be enough of a distraction for you to jump Schoenfield?”

To Annette, Jamie sounded highly skeptical.

“All we can do is try, Jamie. We can’t rig the door, because we don’t want to hurt Consuela. So we’ve got to see who comes through it before we can do anything. And this will blind him and disorient him long enough for us to jump him. C’mon, there’s three of us. I’ll conk him on the head with the lamp base, and then we’re outta here.”

Shure, Annette could tell, was looking forward to the conking part.

She cleared her throat, in a way that she hoped would be authoritative.

“So, I hate to break this up, but does anyone want to be rescued?”

The three prisoners practically hit the ceiling coming out of their chairs before they recognized Annette. Wow, Annette thought. Talk about kids with their hands in the cookie jar. Shure was, predictably, the first to recover.

“Annette! Whew—I sure am glad it’s you and not Senator Shithead. Although I would have liked to try out our little plan on him. Did you hear?”

“Senator Who?”

“Ah, well, we made up a new name for him. But did you hear the plan?”

Shure was looking pleased with himself.

“Just enough to know it’s a good thing I got here when I did.”

“So have you got him?”

“No, he seems to have vanished. We still have some searching to do. But we can get you three out of here and home. That’s the first thing I’ve been worried about. Get your shoes on and come on upstairs.”

She left the door open, and she and Tom Ayala returned up to the kitchen.

* * *

By the time the former prisoners made it upstairs, Annette and Tom Ayala had related their find to the others, and a series of jokes was in progress, none very flattering to Senator Jarvis Schoenfield. The “conking” part, and his new name, received extra attention. Annette finally decided it was time to get back to business.

“OK, look, this is all healthy. Really. We had the shoot-out earlier and then we waited and tension built. And now we can all breathe a big sigh of relief. We actually needed something like this. But we still have a bad guy to catch. And he’s got more than an hour’s head start and he knows the territory. Anybody have any suggestions?”

Annette wanted get things back on track soonest.

“Well, we’re really not set up for a search in these mountains. Let’s have our guys here search the house and the buildings, and maybe Consuela can tell us where the tunnel is. The SWAT guys outside have some wilderness experience, so maybe they can help with strategy. But I don’t think we ought to run off into the woods chasing this guy tonight.”

Tom Ayala was still grinning, but he was serious now, too.

“I agree. Gentlemen, the search of the house is on. Go for it. Consuela, would you be so kind as to make a big pot of coffee? Oh, and do you know where this tunnel is?”

“Si. Under the basement stairs. I do not know where it goes, just outside somewhere, I think.”

“Well, Tom, are you game for a little expedition? Maybe we should get a couple of the SWAT guys in here.”

She switched on her radio.

“Trieri. We are going to check out this tunnel, Tom Ayala and I. Please send in two SWAT members. Out. Oh. No, not out. Can someone in communications please call whoever is sending the negotiator? We won’t be needing him. Out. Oh, wait, one more thing. If anybody has a set of those night vision goggles, they’d be useful in this tunnel, I bet. Out, for real.”

It took only about 30 seconds for two of the camouflage-covered SWAT members to arrive, one carrying a bulky set of goggles. Conseula began to look very nervous, so Annette figured they should just go look at the tunnel without any more delays. They followed her down the stairs.

With the door to the suite left open by its former occupants, there was enough light on the base of the stairs that Annette could see a small passage to the side of the staircase and a door underneath it.

“Want to draw straws, or what?”

She was being flip, but she also really didn’t want to go first.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

The smaller of the two SWAT guys eased past her toward the hidden door, goggles on his face. He motioned Annette and the others aside and, protecting himself as much as he could, he jerked the door open.

The darkness of the empty tunnel stared at them, and then it seemed to exhale with a cool, earthy breath. The SWAT officer took the goggles off, and then he reached into a cargo pocket and came up with a flashlight, which he pointed down the tunnel and turned on. It showed more tunnel, a passageway about five feet tall and three wide. It seemed maintained, because the roots that hung from the ceiling were trimmed. There were post and beam supports about every five feet, and they receded past the reach of the light. It appeared that the floor began to climb on a gentle slope after about fifty feet.

The SWAT guy reached into another pocket and produced a compass.

“Ma’am, please have someone upstairs sight along a heading of 098 degrees. If there are no turns, and if that slope down there is steady, this thing should surface a couple hundred yards out. Is there a building out about there, or something?”

Annette heard the other SWAT guy taking the stairs two at a time. I really need to get their names, she thought.

He was back in a surprisingly short time, hollering into the tunnel,

“Looks like the hay barn, Al.”

“Thanks, Rafe,” came the response.

Well, she thought, that takes care of that.

“Ma’am, Tom, with all due respect, you folks aren’t really dressed for this. It’s not only dirty in there, we really don’t know what we’re going to find. He may be holed up. Excuse me.”

And Rafe eased his way into the tunnel after Al.

“He’s right, Tom. Let’s go have a look at that hay barn.”

She switched her radio on as they started up the stairs.

“Trieri. SWAT please converge on the hay barn east of the main house. We think it’s where the tunnel surfaces. Out.”

“Hay barn, eh?”

Alaya was thinking out loud as they walked toward the barn.

“Annette, did you grow up on a farm, or ever visit one much?”

“We used to visit my uncle in downstate Illinois in the summer, for Labor Day. Big family reunion. He raised corn and soy beans, some hogs.”

“I grew up on a ranch, cattle and a hay operation. Sometimes, we used to make tunnels in the hay loft, using bales like bricks, you know? All sorts of passage ways, little rooms. We used to play hide-and-seek.”

“Yeah, we did that, too. I think that’s where I got hay fever, from breathing all that dust.”

Just thinking about it made her sneeze.

“Bless you. So, what do you suppose we’ll find out here, in this barn?”

“Are you thinking that the tunnel surfaces in some kind of cave in the hay?”

“No idea. It just occurred to me, about my childhood and hay lofts.”

“Trouble is, it’s getting dark.”

“Yep. If we have a real search, it’s for tomorrow. But maybe we’ll find something here that will help tomorrow.”

When they reached the barn, there was a cluster of camouflage-clad people standing around, talking with one another. They came to a sort of casual order in Annette’s presence. She supposed that her handling of the Oswald situation was getting around. Alaya took charge.

“Guys, what Annette said over the radio is about all we know, until we hear from Al and Rafe. They should be under us somewhere, I guess.”

“Not quite, Tom, we’re here.”

It was Al, walking around the corner of the barn.

“Come look at what we found. The group followed him.

On the east side of the barn, a car-sized sliding door had been rolled back, revealing a little room made out of hay bales. In its center was an open trap door. The room, about the size of a small garden shed, was empty.

“Look at this.” Al was pointing at tracks in the dust, from the knobby tires of an all-terrain vehicle, leading down the hill toward the forest.

* * *

Back in town, Annette showered and washed her hair before calling home.

“He must have waited us out and rolled the ATV down the hill after the SWAT guys had closed in past the barn. They searched it, of course, but not well enough to find this hide-away. The sliding door was locked, from the inside, when they tried it earlier.”

“So the Senator gave you the slip. But Jamie and Tim are OK and on their way home?”

“And Chuck Shure, too. They should be there by now. Tomorrow, they’re supposed to see you and tell you all about it. Please try not to laugh too hard. They need the Stern Dean look on this one.”

“Stern Dean look?”

“You know, when someone needs an authority figure to clamp down on them. Discipline. That sort of thing.”

“They need discipline?”

“Oh, not really, but it would be better if you acted like it. They were concocting a hair-brained escape scheme, not something we like hostages to do. They’re supposed to sit quietly and await their fate. At least that’s what the book says.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll see. And nothing, really. I’m just tired. The yo-yo day I described has me exhausted and babbling. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“You be careful out there.”

“I will. Superman isn’t around to save me.”

“Right. But those SWAT guys can, right?”

“You bet. Good night, sweetie. I miss you.”

“Me, too. The house is too empty. Hurry home, OK?”

She felt lucky to have found room at a bed and breakfast down in Norwood. Tom Ayala was across town at a motel with some of his officers, and most of the SWAT officers were still at Raven’s Roost, having taken over the bunk house as well as the gate house. Someone had pointed out that one tunnel with hidden entrances could mean more, so they had all-night guards posted.

The next morning, a Saturday, dawned gray and gloomy. It appeared that the southwest monsoon might pay the Four Corners a visit, just in time to wash away whatever tracks Schoenfield had left. Annette and the entire team gathered at the gate house for a morning briefing and strategy session.

As they were assembling, Jim Nettleman, forgotten in yesterday’s action with Oswald, walked in. Yesterday, he had borrowed a ranch pickup he found by the gate house and driven home at the first opportunity.

“Here’s the keys, Tom, Ms. Trieri. Uh, my car’s up by the main house. I’d get it but it doesn’t look like you got much further with this thing than yesterday.”

“You can go on up there. We got the house searched, but Schoenfield got away through a tunnel to the hay barn. We found some ATV tracks leading down the hill over to the southeast there.”

Tom Ayala was pointing in the general direction of Lone Cone Peak.

“Got any idea of where he might have gone, Jim?”

“Well, now, I reckon that the more I work with you folks as a civilian, the more temporary that civilian status is likely to be, hmm?”

Nettleman looked Annette in the eye for the first time.

“I’m just in charge of this operation, Mr. Nettleman, not your future. But the more you help us, the more I can help you. And I’m perfectly willing to overlook our bad start yesterday, to begin all over with you. You didn’t do anything that had any real effect on yesterday’s events. It didn’t all turn out the

way we would have liked, but I don't know how we would have got anywhere at all without your presence at the start. And you climbed that gate at exactly the right time."

She smiled, trying to be as disarming as possible. He actually smiled back, a sort of half smile that twisted his moustache around, and nodded.

"Well, thanks for that. Now, as to the Senator... Say, I guess I'll have to learn to stop calling him that, won't I?"

"Oh, I imagine that his new friends at the state pen will continue to call him that, and have a lot of fun in the process." Ayala was grinning.

"You're probably right about that. Anyway, if he headed off toward Lone Cone, he's probably making for his hunting cabin. He usually goes in there on horseback, but in the past he's had people take supplies in with four-wheelers, and groups sometimes go in using off-road pickups. It's about three, three-and-a-half miles southeast, on a saddle between a couple of little draws, near a spring. Hidden away pretty well, but not too hard to find because there's an old logging road. It's part of a network of old roads in there. Got a map?"

They unrolled a USFS quadrangle and Nettleman pointed out the location and approaches. Annette noticed the dashed-dotted line first.

"Well, isn't this ironic. Mr. Nettleman, you're off the hook anyway. If he's gone to this cabin, he's out of your jurisdiction. This is Dolores County, isn't it?"

"Just barely, yeah. I've been down there several times on hunting trips with the Sen... with Schoenfield. Uh, y'see, ma'am, he's a community leader here and being invited to hunt with him, or to come to his parties, or anything like that is a real honor, or has been in the past. So I've been there. And I always figured that because it was in the next county, I could take off my badge and kick back, if you know what I mean."

"What's the cover like?"

"Ponderosa forest, mixed with aspen and some spruce. Lots of rocks. We grow rocks good in these parts, as they say."

"You know, Annette, it won't do to have civilians along on this operation, and Jim's a civilian. Maybe he would benefit from reading some of the stuff you showed me yesterday."

Ayala wanted to give his friend the perspective he'd seen.

"Wait 'til you see this, Jim. Some of Schoenfield's thoughts written down. Surprised the hell out of me, I'll tell you."

"Good idea, Tom. I'll leave you with my laptop computer, Mr. Nettleman, and you can get educated about Senator Jarvis Schoenfield's political philosophies, his private ones. Meantime, we'll see if the ranch vehicles sitting around here can negotiate these old logging roads."

* * *

It was bumpy, and several times even the high clearance of the pickup Annette was in scraped something, but they worked their way down the roads. There were three pickup trucks, with the beds full of the SWAT officers, wedged in and hanging on. Tom Ayala, driving the lead truck, seemed to have a global positioning system in his head, for he made turns onto connecting roads at seemingly random intervals, all the while managing to maintain more or less the same heading.

Eventually, he stopped the truck in a clearing, and the other two pickups pulled up beside.

“I think we’re close enough that we need to do the rest on foot. Let’s see that map, Annette.”

“If we’re not lost, you’re in the wrong line of work. You should be a navigator.”

Ayala looked embarrassed.

“Well, to tell the truth, I’ve been here, once. I couldn’t have put it on the map like Jim did, but I did remember the trick to getting here. There are marks on trees where you turn.”

She handed him the rolled up quadrangle, thinking that it had been a wise idea to wear sensible outdoor shoes today. He opened the door and stepped down, amid the SWAT members, who were stretching and rubbing spots that had gone to sleep. He unrolled the map on the hood of the pickup next to his, and everyone gathered around.

“I think we’re about here.”

He was pointing to a spot on a dashed line to the west of where the cabin had been marked.

“It’s about a half mile away from the cabin here. By road, it’s half again that much, probably, because you can see how there are these sort of switchbacks. If we fan out, we should be able to cover any additional escape attempts, at least on the road and uphill toward us.”

“You think he’s still got that Sharps?”

George, one of the snipers, was well aware of the potential of that weapon.

“We didn’t find one in the main house, so we have to assume he does. Also, there was an arms cabinet left open, and there appeared to be handguns missing. Can’t say what they are, although the only ammo left was large-bore. So I think we’ve got a heavily armed crazy person on our hands.”

“What’s the drill?”

Everyone, even Ayala, looked at Annette. She tried to think fast.

“We’d like to take him in, of course. But he may not let us. So, first and foremost, protect yourselves and each other. I’m hoping we can get close enough to the cabin to hail him, give him a chance to surrender. We certainly can’t just go in blasting.”

She paused to gather her thoughts, and before she could continue, Ayala held up a hand.

“Listen. Is that a horse?”

The familiar sound of a horse at full gallop caused the SWAT officers to melt into the landscape, and Annette and Ayala, along with the uniformed officers, took up positions on the opposite side of their pickup. Presently, the horse appeared, running flat out down the road, carrying Jim Nettleman. He pulled the horse up short at the trucks and swung easily down.

“Tom, ma’am. I know you don’t want me here, but I need to say something to both of you. I mean, I had no idea. Schoenfield helped get me elected and re-elected, and I owe him for that. That’s probably why the Governor suspended me during this operation. But, honest, I had no idea. Tom, after reading that garbage, I have to tell you I’m ashamed. Ashamed to be associated with the man, and, well, just ashamed. And Ms. Trieri, well, I had the wrong idea about you altogether. I guess I figured there was some kind of political vendetta at work, but I can see how wrong I was. If there’s anything I can do, just say the word.”

He was breathing hard from the ride and this speech, so he stopped to recover.

“Well, tell you what. You can show us where we are on the map and give us more details about the cabin and the layout. And, hell, I guess you could help by guiding us down there. I thought to cut off the next big curve by bushwhacking through the woods. Does that make sense?”

Ayala, who knew Nettleman well, was convinced, and Annette decided to follow his lead.

So they gathered around the map, and the SWAT members re-emerged from their concealment.

Twenty minutes later, they were in position. Annette could see the front of the cabin from her position amid a cluster of large granite boulders. The boulders were high enough above the cabin to provide a clear view, and they were large and numerous enough to provide cover for her, Ayala, Nettleman, and two uniformed officers.

In front of the cabin was an eighteen-inch ponderosa pine, standing like a sentinel with long, jagged stubs of two broken-off limbs about street-sign height pointing both right and left along the logging road. She knew that, to her left, downhill slightly from the cabin, the road was blocked by one of the pickup trucks. It had been moved into position quietly by letting it roll with its engine off for the last two hundred yards to the road's low spot.

She could just make out the remnants of a long-unused road heading straight away from her on the left side of the cabin. It wasn't likely to be Schoenfield's choice for a quick exit, as it was blocked by deadfalls. To the right, the logging road swept upward and away from them around a curve. There was a group of SWAT officers at about the apex of the curve, where they had cover. Because that direction led away from the ranch buildings, everyone thought it would be Schoenfield's first choice for flight. But even this would be difficult, as the old road, while serviceable, was eroded badly. Near the stately ponderosa in front of the cabin, there were several deep ruts completely across the road, and she could see erosion channels running down the hill as well.

On the porch of the cabin sat an ATV, and the view through binoculars suggested its tires were candidates to have made the tracks leading away from the hay barn.

Annette was not looking forward to what had to happen next. Megaphones were not her favorite method of communication. For one thing, she thought they were just flat obnoxious. For another, she didn't like the way her voice sounded through one. But there was really no alternative, and she was in charge. She took it from the officer who had carried it down from their truck, and turned it on.

"Senator Jarvis Schoenfield! You are surrounded by officers of the Colorado State Patrol and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation! We have lawful warrants for your arrest on felony charges. We order you to surrender to us. Exit the cabin through the front door, keep your hands on top of your head, and lie face down on the porch. Do it now!"

She paused to take a breath. Why, she thought, couldn't her voice sound like, say, Melissa Etheridge, instead of like Britney Spears with a bad sinus infection?

"Senator, we know you are armed. You should know that I lied to you about Michael Oswald. He's dead. The shot you heard was not a warning shot, it was a kill. He pointed that rifle our way, and we used deadly force. We're prepared to do the same with you. And despite the power of your rifle and your skill, you are outnumbered and outgunned. So please don't do anything foolish. Surrender peacefully and you will be treated well. So come out with your hands on top of your head. Now!"

And, after a tense minute of waiting, he did.

The front door of the cabin opened part way, and Annette could see a cowboy boot kick it fully open. Then Schoenfield was standing in the doorway, hands on top of his head as ordered. He began walking out onto the porch, slowly, looking around, up and down the road, at the boulders up the hill toward Annette and company. He walked to the ATV, and then he began the process of lying down. He lifted his hands off his head, fingers splayed, and extended them in front of him while beginning to bow from the waist.

Annette realized that she had been holding her breath, and she exhaled in relief. So did everyone else.

But when Schoenfield's hands were about waist high, he moved. Instead of lying down, he leapt sideways, onto the ATV. He grabbed the handlebars, pushed a button, and it roared to life. It lurched off the porch, and then it turned left up the road, in the direction everyone had expected Schoenfield to flee. Annette switched on her radio.

"Trieri. Subject bolting, on an ATV up the road toward the SWAT. No weapons seen, and as long as he's got hold of the handlebars, he won't have any. Hold fire. Guys, get out your ropes."

But they must have shown their hands too soon. When he was up the road 100 yards or so, Schoenfield twisted the handlebars and spun the ATV completely around, and then he accelerated back down the hill toward the cabin, standing on the foot pegs and leaning forward on the handlebars to absorb the rough road. As he approached the first of the ruts across the road by the cabin, he squatted and then suddenly jerked the handlebars upward, gunning the engine. The ATV hopped across the rut.

But the second rut got him when the ATV's front wheels landed squarely in it. Because they were turned slightly to the left, the handlebars were wrenched from his grasp. And because the suspension had compressed on landing, the ATV bounced, and Schoenfield was thrown clear while the ATV did a somersault.

It is said that victims of accidents such as this always see things happening in slow motion. Certainly, Schoenfield had time to scream while flying through the air. But he didn't have time to twist away from the ponderosa. It caught him head-on, and his body looked like a rag doll as it smacked squarely into the trunk. His arms and legs wound up wrapped completely around it in the sort of embrace small boys use to shinny up trees.

But he didn't fall. This puzzled Annette and her team, until Jim Nettleman pointed out that the sentinel's right-pointing branch was nowhere to be seen.

Except, suggested Tom Ayala, for the bump under the back of Schoenfield's jacket.

"That," someone said, "has gotta hurt."

It took only a couple of minutes for Schoenfield's arms and legs to go slack, and for his head to sag back.

But he still didn't fall.

* * *

Sunday morning was much better for Annette than Saturday had been. For Hal, too, but most certainly for her. She'd managed to get home late Saturday night, and sleeping in her own bed, curled up with her favorite Dean, was an antidote to the previous 48 hours.

Breakfast, a quiche Lorraine, on the deck in the late July morning sun, was the finishing touch to her recovery. It also helped that she could tell the story to someone who really listened rather than merely to a computer file. She'd have to do that later, for her official report, but for now talking helped.

"So you're telling me that Jarvis Schoenfield, who was so set against the environmental community that he plotted to kill them off, with considerable success for a time there, actually died hugging a tree? Talk about irony. What's going to happen to his empire?"

Hal was working on his second piece of quiche.

“Well, of course it’s too soon to tell, really. But it was interesting. When we got back to Norwood yesterday afternoon, there was this committee wanting to talk with me, most of the directors of the foundation that now owns the X-S Ranch. They had already voted, unanimously, to change their name to something besides Resources For Humanity. It seems that Jim Nettleman is an enterprising sort of guy. After he read Schoenfield’s stuff on my computer, he figured out how to use the ranch phone to e-mail a bunch of it to the directors of this foundation. So they were falling all over themselves to point out how the X-S had no real connection to any of Schoenfield’s other activities and on and on. I guess that the foundation will now figure out what to do with itself, presumably something constructive.”

“And what about those two hit men? The ones that the FBI thinks tried to kill the President?”

“We’ve got ’em dead to rights. The material we found in Schoenfield’s house, found with valid warrants, means they’re going to be tried and convicted for several murders and for attempting to assassinate the President. And the same goes for several other unsavory individuals as well. The guys who burned the law offices in Cortez, for example. And a bunch of people who were in line for other operations like that. The whole Resources For Humanity thing is simply over with. Especially since its so-called spiritual leader, Michael Oswald, is dead. Say, that reminds me. He was Tim Langer’s uncle. And Tim and Jamie were supposed to come and see you yesterday. When I told them to, I forgot it would be Saturday. Did they?”

“Indeed they did. Along with Charles Shure, industrialist nonpareil and all-around pretty good guy. And not a bad schemer, from what they told me.”

“So they told you?”

“Yeah, all about how they were fed up and were trying to concoct an escape plan when you showed up. Shure took responsibility. He also offered Tim a job, which Tim said he knew about from Shure’s computer security guy, and almost offered Jamie a job, too. But I changed the subject before he could, because I want to keep her at the U. And now the real question here is your experience with the CBI. You were doing this as a try-out, last I heard.”

He arched his eyebrows and looked the question right at her.

“Well, I think I’m hooked. Hmm. It feels like anything I say will imply bad things about the Durango PD. And I really like those guys, all of them. And the connection to the people in town, serving the citizens and all that, is really rewarding. But I guess I’m ready for a change, new challenges.”

“Well, this first case, I mean all the cases in that portfolio and the other stuff, up to and including a Presidential assassination attempt, that’s indeed a change. But how can the CBI, or anyone, top that?”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily what I’m looking for, I mean big, high-visibility cases. But variety is good.”

She paused to chew, and to think.

“Even though I was working with the counties in the region when I was with the PD, the CBI offers more, on a broader scale. And the connection to the feds is tighter. The FBI takes a lot of flack, but they never get much credit for all their good work. And that’s interesting to be involved in. But one thing worries me a little. CBI is a state government operation, and they like to move people around. What happens if they want me somewhere else?”

“Well, as long as it’s west of I-25, I don’t think there’s anything to be concerned about. Say the word and we’ll move there.”

“West of I-25?”

“You know, in the mountains. I mean, I’d hope that they would offer you some choice. You’re going to get a lot of points for solving this case. Er, rather, clearing it. Surely they won’t insist on sending you to, oh, some place like Julesburg.”

“I’d hope so too, the choice, I mean. And, hey, I do my best work in the mountains. But what about your job?”

“Alice is going to retire before too long, and I’m ready for a sabbatical. I’m about burned out on this Dean stuff. Like I said, say the word.”

* * * * *

Head for Murder

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



Head for Murder: A Four Corners Mystery

One

I heard it was the *Alamosa Valley Courier* that first used the term “Burma Shave Murder” to describe what that poor guy found down by Capulin, west of La Jara. Then the Associated Press picked it up, and the name stuck. Later, of course, it became plural.

I’ve wondered whether the *Valley Courier* reporter who coined the name realized that she had dated herself back to the middle of the last century. Her reference to those sets of little roadside signs with doggerel advertising shaving soap must have been lost on anyone under about 50. I had to ask Hal what it meant before I understood it.

Poor Ron Hufnagel was so rattled by what he found that he forgot he was actually in Conejos County, and he called the Alamosa County Sheriff’s Department by mistake. But it didn’t take long for them to call the State Patrol, who relayed the information to the correct sheriff’s department down in the hamlet of Conejos. Eventually, the Patrol also filed a report with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and I heard about it through the routine of the weekly conference call. By then there were additional details.

It seems that Hufnagel was on his way home from a Friday fishing trip up in the southeastern San Juans, and he decided to take a short-cut by way of a back road. He was driving along and noticed a little sign on a metal fence-post in the ditch. It read:

To Help Protect

Then, in what he estimated to be about tenth-mile intervals, he passed three more signs that read in succession:

*The Shy And Meek,
Eliminate
A Jerk A Week.*

Hufnagel, who admitted to having been an English literature major in college, was considering the iambic meter of this little couplet, when he came upon a fifth fence post with a human head impaled on it and a sign reading “*One Less Jerk.*”

What rattled Hufnagel so—to the point of hysteria, in fact—was that he recognized whose head it was, that of the wrestling and football coach at Monte Vista High School, Frank Scharmatz. Or, as Hufnagel corrected himself, ex-coach.

Hufnagel can be excused for his hysteria, because primates, humans included, seem to have an instinctive fear of severed heads. The Hollywood crowd that makes those slasher films knows this and exploits it at every opportunity. I've heard the tape of the call that Hufnagel made from his cell phone, sitting in his car staring at the head, and the poor guy could hardly talk.

At least the fear made him sit tight and not get out and track up the scene. The Conejos County sheriff's deputy who arrived first found Hufnagel in his car, whimpering.

The second Burma Shave Murder, or at least the first evidence of it found a week later, was on a county road east of Gunnison, and the person who called it in was nearly as hysterical as Hufnagel had been, despite not knowing whose head it was. The second victim was identified by the sheriff's deputy first on the scene, who recognized the head from having seen it, attached to its shoulders, around the Gunnison County courthouse. The poem for this one was a little different, more personal:

*If You're a Jerk
Like This Poor Sod,
We'll Send You Off
To Meet Your God.*

But in all other respects the *modus* was identical. In both cases, the decapitations were extraordinarily clean, so much so that they'd be described as "professional" if there were still such a profession. And the killer had drained the blood from each head prior to its immersion in a 15% formalin solution, that formaldehyde-based preservative used in museums and mortuaries.

In the second case, the victim was a lawyer from Crested Butte, and the only thing the two victims had in common was the cause of death and the assertion via the poems that they were less than upstanding citizens. This assertion was verified during the follow-up interviews with family and acquaintances—it turned out that neither victim had much in the way of friends. The interviews with the two wives, in particular, were highly instructive regarding the victims' characters.

It probably affected the subsequent conduct of the investigation that the State Patrol officer who interviewed Bonnie Scharmatz the morning after her husband's head was found had recently completed a training course for law officers involved with domestic violence investigations.

Officer Candice Garcia immediately became suspicious about Bonnie's black eye and the brace on her left arm. At first, Bonnie tried to protect her husband with the standard explanations of running into a door, falling, and spraining her wrist. But Candice reminded Bonnie that Frank was dead and didn't need protecting, and, moreover, the truth would help in the investigation. So the story of years of abuse poured out—he'd caused the recent injuries when he twisted her arm into a hammer lock and shoved her into a wall, as punishment for a less than stellar meatloaf. This had happened five days before the interview, and Frank had disappeared shortly after that, walking off, leaving his car at home. Bonnie had assumed that he was staying a few blocks away with his mistress, Crystal Stafford, a third-grade teacher in Monte Vista.

Under ordinary circumstances, the fact that Bonnie had been battered and knew of her husband's infidelity would have made her a suspect in his death. In fact, a spirited discussion of just this topic was in progress during a Friday conference call between the courthouse down in Conejos and the State Patrol office in Alamosa when the evidence of murder number two was reported.

Based on the conversation with Bonnie, the Gunnison County authorities had Sarah Robinson, wife of headless Crested Butte lawyer Martin Robinson, interviewed by a deputy with credentials like

Candice Garcia's, and a similar story emerged. Sarah had no recent injuries, though, because she had learned how to protect herself enough to avoid them. Marty, she said, had left home after a shouting match about four days before. His car was eventually found twenty miles away in Gunnison, parked on a side street.

It therefore appeared that, if the definition of "jerk" included "wife beater," the poems were accurate.

Forensic evidence was somewhere in that gray zone between thin and none. Nothing obvious, such as fingerprints or tire tracks, was found. The fence posts were third- or fourth-hand, old and rusty, of slightly different designs and ages, which suggested that they had been scavenged from various sites around the region. Although the soil in the ditches where the signs stood was fairly soft, whoever had put in the fence posts had been careful not to leave footprints. The signs themselves were quite professionally done, but anonymously done as well, printed with some kind of laser printer and enlarged to 11x17 size on a copier somewhere. The paper had been laminated onto plastic sign-board, the weatherproof kind that political campaigns use. We found the manufacturer easily, but in the process we discovered that this particular sign-board could be purchased at literally hundreds of retail outlets, including many copy shops.

It was as if someone had a routine: they went out to these remote country roads; put in nine fence posts, the steel ones with the T cross-section, spread out evenly over a mile or so; attached signs so that drivers traveling in both directions could read them; and then pulled a severed head out of a bucket of formalin and thumped the thing onto the top of the middle post—always facing the road.

One curiosity was the expressions on the faces of the two heads—both appeared utterly terrified, as if they knew what was about to happen to them. My first look at these expressions was in photographs that were sent around to the various CBI field offices with other documentation, but the pictures really didn't do them justice. When I finally saw one of the heads in person, the terror visible in its expression made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

And there were no signs of either body. Just the heads.

It was the third one—discovered exactly a week after the second—that dragged me into the whole thing. A rancher from north of Pagosa Springs lost his head, which was found way south, down on Coyote Park Road close to the New Mexico state line. Three murders with the same MO, in three different counties, the last one fairly close to my office in Durango—I got the call from CBI headquarters in Denver that the whole business was now my case, on the Governor's orders. And with all the publicity it was getting, well, it wasn't going to be a back-burner case, either.

* * *

At first, it just didn't seem fair. I'd recently finished clearing the first case of my relatively new Colorado Bureau of Investigation appointment, a high-profile series of murders of over a dozen environmental activists in the Four Corners region. The mastermind, a Colorado State Senator who moonlighted secretly as an ultra-right-wing rabble-rouser, had been killed in an accident while trying to escape capture, and his hired killers were in custody awaiting trial—for which we had evidence enough to consider conviction a foregone conclusion.

So even though I'd been on the job for only a couple of months, they had been stressful months. I wanted a week of breathing room, some personal time with Hal before classes at Frémont State began so that we could go off fly-fishing somewhere. But I'd no sooner finished the paperwork on the environmentalist murders than this new file got dumped in my lap.

At least I couldn't complain that it was going to be routine. Even the name made it sound lurid—the *Frémont Free Press* immediately picked up on “Burma Shave Murders” and had way too much fun proclaiming that the third victim had received a “really close shave.”

Well, what else can you expect from a bunch of college students running an independent campus paper?

Hal, that is, Harold Weathers, Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University here in Durango, and also my husband, called me with that particular tidbit. Being married to a dean means that I have to go to lots of campus cocktail parties and sports events, and he makes it up to me with information. He called from home just after I finished the Saturday morning phone call with Rod Andersen, my boss in Denver, when I got assigned to the cases, so I wasn't in the best of moods. But that ridiculous quote from the *Free Press* cheered me right up.

“‘Really close shave’? They actually said that?” I was trying not to laugh.

“I don't think they're at all sympathetic to these guys, the dead ones. I mean, you know, the *Free Press* is quite radical, politically. And this business about domestic abuse has got their editorial juices flowing.” I could hear Hal turning pages of the paper. “Did you hear the latest poem?”

“All I know is that I got assigned to do the investigation. But if the poem's in the paper, I'm already way behind. How's it go?” Sometimes I'm more curious than is good for me.

“Ahem. Let me use my recitation voice:

*The Jerks Who Shove
Weak Folks Around
Are Bound To Wind Up
Under Ground.*

Not, I would say, literature-quality poetry.” It sounded as if Hal's rubbing shoulders with his colleagues in the English department was influencing his literary tastes. “Same meter as the others, though—same basic message, too.”

“Yeah, and Rod told me that the reports he got from the sheriff and the State Patrol suggest it's the same MO. So we've got another serial murderer to find. The Governor's office told Rod to make sure the CBI doesn't let all these sheriffs flounder around on their own. I'm kind of ticked off, though, because I wanted to get away with you for a week, before classes start and you get busy.”

“Well, now there's a good idea. Hmm. Say, wasn't one of these things up by Gunnison? Maybe you'll have to go up there and do some investigating. Seems like we could drive up there tomorrow so you could get started Monday morning. Then we could drive home the long way, through Alamosa and Pagosa Springs. Even if you have to work, we'd be together.”

“Yeah! That's why I love you so much—you're a great creative thinker. Listen, I've got to go, but I should be home in time for dinner, OK?”

“And I thought you loved me for my body. Oh, well. I'll take out my disappointment on something interesting to eat. See you later.”

“Well, that, too. Later, 'bye.”

Truth be told, I do love him for his body, along with everything else. He has this middle-aged insecurity complex that guys in their fifties are prone to getting, but it's a breeze for me to boost his ego

whenever he seems to need it. He returns the favor by showing me off at those campus cocktail parties—they're one of my few opportunities to get dressed up and strut a little. It's out of character for me, but I can't help but have fun with it.

People are always mistaking me for a trophy wife, because I'm a lot younger than Hal, and I love the looks on their faces when I mention my job. I used to surprise them with my title of Lieutenant in the Durango Police Department, and now that I'm the Director of the Durango Office of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, it's even better, with all those extra capital letters.

Sometimes those campus parties, especially the ones involving graduate students, get a little loose, and the Lieutenant comment actually motivated someone to eat a joint—a lit joint—one time. It was hilarious. I offered the poor kid my drink to help wash it down.

Hal and I met a few years ago, back when I still worked for the PD, after one of his chemistry professors had been killed on the campus. When the students who found the body reported it, Hal, as the university official closest to the victim, got involved right away, and I got involved because that was my job at the time. He told me later that he was smitten with me immediately, and it didn't take me long to fall for him as well. I wound up moving in with him, and we got married last spring, just before the environmentalist murders broke.

In addition to being a wonderful husband, he's interested in my work. He's an earth scientist at heart—being a dean is just a temporary distraction, he says—and he seems fascinated about how solving the puzzles associated with crimes is similar to solving scientific problems. But in this case, I couldn't help but think that his scientific problems wouldn't have much in common with the beheadings.

I spent the rest of that Saturday on the phone, coming up to speed on the three decapitations and making plans for visits to the three locations. As I talked with various people, Hal's idea became more and more intriguing—we could make a tour around this part of the state so I could check out the places where the heads had turned up and put in some face time with all the people in the three investigations. Each of the county sheriff's offices was baffled, even though they retained responsibility for the investigations, and the State Patrol people were looking to us in the CBI to coordinate things and to make the big breakthrough. That's our job, of course, so we do what we can. But it's not like we're miracle workers.

The longest conversation I had was with Ron Grange, the Archuleta County Sheriff, the lucky guy whose department had responsibility for the newest Burma Shave Murder. He didn't feel at all lucky, though.

"Y'know, if you made me choose between a poke in the eye with a sharp stick and dealing with this beheading, well, I'd have to think about it for a while. I mean, that thing I worked on with you last month, where we picked up those tree-huggers who were smoking dope, that's more my style. We just don't get very many murders over here, let alone bizarre ones like this. We can probably handle it, but it'll be a stretch."

"By now, you've seen the reports from Conejos and Gunnison, right?" I wanted to be sure he knew he wasn't alone.

"Yeah, and I talked to a couple of the guys in the Alamosa State Patrol Office, too. They know lots more than the people down in Conejos. Seems like we've got the same thing, not just a copy-cat. So you're going to coordinate our investigations, huh?" The tone suggested he was grateful for the help.

"That's what Denver told me. But what I really want to do is stay in the background. I mean, if whoever's doing this is going to continue, he'll feel better, more bold, maybe, if he thinks that you various county sheriffs are all working separately."

“Yeah, we’re just hick backwoods cops with our bellies hanging out over our belts. Don’t know crap about how to do real investigations and all that. At least that’s what we want him to think. Maybe I can come up with some dumb quotes for the newspaper, enhance that image.” I was glad to hear him laughing while he said all this.

“Do you have any insights about your victim? Does he fit into the same mold as the other two?”

“You mean, as in, was he as big a jerk as they were?”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it.”

“Well, now, Hollis was one of those guys who wanted things his own way, I’ll say that. And he didn’t have a very high opinion of women, except as sex objects, no offense intended, Annette. People around here say he worked his wife to death, and since then he hasn’t been able to keep a housekeeper around for more than about a month. The last one got a lawyer and filed a civil suit for sexual harassment. It was settled out of court with big bucks for her, I hear.”

“Is there any family?”

“A daughter, lives here in Pagosa. She told me yesterday that she hadn’t spoken with him in months, actually used the word ‘jerk’ in our conversation to describe him.”

So, I thought, Hollis Henry fits into the same category. Someone is indeed freeing the world, or at least our little corner of it, from jerks.

* * *

We left the next day, a beautiful mid-August Sunday, for Gunnison, where I had my first appointment on Monday morning. Our route started to the north through the San Juan Mountains, beginning a big clockwise circle that would take us up through Ouray, Montrose, Gunnison with a side trip to Crested Butte, Saguache, Alamosa, Pagosa Springs, and finally back home to Durango. I didn’t have Sunday appointments, so we left early to give ourselves time to fish the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River before heading to the B&B in Crested Butte that Hal had booked us into.

We have this great division of labor for our road trips—he makes the travel arrangements, loads the car, and drives. And, at least when the road is straight enough, I sleep.

I knew that the twists and turns of the Million Dollar Highway up to Ouray wouldn’t allow sleeping, though—Hal’s mild-mannered college dean persona goes into hibernation whenever he gets behind the wheel of his Audi S4. This is one of those first-generation S4s, the ones with the twin turbochargers, so it’s nearly as happy at 10,000 feet as it is at sea level. Even climbing a grade in the thin air up in the high country, the car can make your head snap back when you ask it to accelerate.

And on a Sunday in the height of the summer tourist season, this ability is useful, at least if you want to travel faster than the twenty miles per hour or so that the flat-land RVs manage up there.

Hal knows the road north well enough that he’s patient, waiting for the next straight stretch to pass. He peeks around the offending aluminum box, and I get a warning if he downshifts or a reprieve if he grumps about oncoming traffic. It’s actually quite fun, because he doesn’t tailgate and people behind him do, thinking he’s just some old geezer out for a Sunday drive in his Audi sedan. But then, when he launches into passing mode, the tailgaters recede in the mirrors, and we never see them again. Hal seems to take genuine glee in this when the tailgater is driving another German car, especially a BMW. I suppose that it’s some sort of guy thing at work—he’s middle-aged, but there’s a teenager still lurking in there somewhere.

That Sunday, we managed to get over to Ouray, down in the Uncompahgre River Valley, in about an hour and a half, and then I promptly went to sleep. The next thing I knew, we were bumping along a dirt road beside a beautiful stretch of water.

“So, are you going to fish or just sleep?” He patted my leg.

“If it’s like this, I’ll fish.”

I’m not what’s known in fly-fishing circles as a power wader, preferring shallow streams with gentle currents instead of big water. Years ago, before I met Hal and learned to fly-fish, I would have been reduced to a fit of giggles by the mere notion of putting on Gore-Tex pants and felt-soled boots to splash around in a stream so I could wave an eight-foot stick trying to catch trout.

But I’ve found that it’s something that brings me a special kind of peace—the sounds of the stream and the wind in the trees, the smells of the pine woods, the scenery. Catching a fish disrupts all this with a few minutes of pandemonium, but that part’s OK, too. I use hooks with the barbs flattened down and release all the fish I catch, trying to handle them as little and as carefully as possible. I’d like to think that I’m helping educate them in the finer points of what not to eat, but on more than one occasion I’ve caught a fish with a second fly in its lip—a fly that I had broken off only minutes before. As graceful and as elegant as they are in the water, I’m afraid that trout just aren’t very bright.

We spent a couple of hours trying to figure out which flies the trout might be interested in, but it must have been their day off—I had a few half-hearted strikes and Hal actually brought an 8-inch brown trout in, but fishing was slow. I think we were both glad to pack it in and head to Crested Butte for dinner and our B&B.

Crested Butte is one of those little Colorado mountain towns that has made the transition from mining and logging to high-end recreation—skiing in winter and a variety of things, notably mountain biking, in summer. It’s remote enough that it hasn’t completely succumbed to the problem of “Aspenization” that its neighbor across the Elk Mountains to the north gave its name to. But Crested Butte has “succeeded” enough that it’s begun to lose some of its identity and funky charm. For example, they no longer have their semi-official “ski naked” day every spring—not that it really concerns me. When I ski, I hardly ever fall down, but just the thought of taking a spill in bare skin makes me cringe—never mind the cold air and, um, exposure.

An advantage of these gentrified mountain towns is that they have figured out how to separate tourists like Hal and me from our money, and to do it with class. This means elegant places to stay and truly fine dining, and we’re happy to take advantage of the chance to enjoy ourselves.

Monday morning, I was due at the sheriff’s office down in Gunnison and after that at Sarah Robinson’s back up by Crested Butte. Hal was discouraged enough from Sunday’s slow fishing that he decided to accompany me, so I appointed him the informal expedition photographer. At least this would let him play with his new digital camera, giving him something to do so he wouldn’t get too bored.

I hadn’t met Sheriff Scott Lister before, as his county was part of the area under the responsibility of the CBI Montrose office. They had notified him of my assignment, though, so I was expected. This is important to me—maybe it’s because I’m still new to the CBI, but I worry about being seen by county law enforcement as some kind of outside interloper. Consequently, I always try to operate the way I’d have liked someone in the CBI to when I was still with the Durango PD—and this means that I don’t want to just show up unannounced.

But even though I was expected, it quickly became clear to me that I wasn’t really welcome. I left Hal at a diner on Gunnison’s Main Street, engrossed in a local fly-fishing guidebook, and walked a block to the sheriff’s department. That part was fine. When I flashed my shield and told the clerk at the front desk my name, though, I could feel the chill begin. And it continued while I waited and deepened

when I finally was shown into the sheriff's office. He just nodded at a chair and stared at me. Something, I could tell, wasn't right. So I took the offensive.

"Sheriff, I don't know what you've heard about me that's making people act the way they are, but perhaps you could make a phone call. Do you know Ralph Wertlinger, down in Mineral County? Or Ron Grange, in Archuleta?" Given the close-knit nature of law enforcement on Colorado's Western Slope, I figured he must know one of them.

He cocked his head sideways a little and stared at me even harder than before.

"Ralph's an old friend. Why would you want to bring him into this?"

I stared back, not blinking, and waited a full ten seconds before answering.

"Perhaps you could call him and ask him about me. I don't know what's going on around here, but maybe that would help move matters along. If you'll excuse me, I'll find a restroom while you call him."

And I walked out into the hall, hoping he wouldn't notice the steam coming out of my ears. On my way out, I told the front desk clerk that the sheriff could find me at the W Café over on Main Street when he was ready. Ralph Wertlinger, I knew, would give me a great introduction, because we had worked together on those serial murders earlier in the summer. We had shared information, I stayed out of his way, and he got the credit he deserved.

In the diner, Hal was seated in a back-corner booth with his nose in the guidebook. He was surprised to see me so soon, but when I told him what was happening, he just waved to the waitress for more coffee.

It took about twenty minutes for Sheriff Lister to find us. He clomped into the café in his western boots, cowboy hat in his hands. Tall and rail thin, his uniform sharply creased, he looked like the perfect stereotype of a modern western sheriff. Except, I noticed, he wasn't wearing a sidearm on his belt—it must have been under his jacket.

"Ms. Trieri?" He was clearly uncomfortable, but Hal came to the rescue by standing and pulling out a chair.

"Sheriff Lister? I'm Hal Weathers, Annette's husband and official amateur photographer for our little expedition. Have a seat. Coffee?" He looked around and waved at the waitress again. "So, I'm the photographer, but I'm really going to sneak off and do some fishing. Would you know anything about the Taylor River? How's fishing below the dam this summer?"

Lister had to shift gears to deal with this, but he looked relieved to be able to make light conversation. He and Hal talked trout until the coffee came. But then it was time to talk business.

* * *

"So, I just wish I'd called Ralph before you came. But I didn't know you knew him." Lister was working up to an apology.

"Y'see, we got this fax from the Montrose office telling us you'd be here today. Thing is, they said you were in charge of the investigation, that we need to cooperate, blah blah blah. And they have a history of acting this way, like they're in charge of my office." Huge sigh.

"So, anyway, Ralph says you're not like them at all." He looked at me with a kind of sick grin.

I looked around the café and decided that we were isolated enough to talk privately, but, even so, I lowered my voice. "Sheriff, what I'm doing is touching base with all the jurisdictions who have these

beheadings to deal with. From the reports I've seen, they're all virtually identical. What I'd like to do is to talk with your investigator and with the victim's wife, gather information, and be on my way down to Monte Vista. And finally Pagosa. I plan to make sure everybody gets copies of everything. Information sharing is a way to figure this out, make breaks for ourselves, right?"

"Well, it's not like we're not talking with each other, you know." He wasn't going to give up too easily.

"Of course you're talking with each other. But look at it this way. There are three county sheriffs, plus the State Patrol Office in Alamosa, plus medical examiners. That's where we are now. And given what's been happening, I wouldn't be too surprised if there are more of these murders. That'll be even more people to keep in touch with. What I want to do is to be the central information archive, the way for everyone to share what they know. That way, you won't have to spend so much time at it—it'll give you more time to get real work done, no?"

Lister scratched the back of his neck and finally nodded. "Yeah, you're right, I guess. So what can I tell you?"

"Do you know anything about this lawyer who got killed?"

"Marty? Can't say I knew him personally. But he was a familiar figure around the courthouse. He liked to file what I'd call nuisance lawsuits, and he didn't make a lot of friends that way. See, people around here try to be tolerant of each other, mind their own business, that kind of thing. But Marty wanted them to behave his way, and he used lawsuits to try to make that happen. Basically, I guess most people thought of him as a real pain in the ass."

"Did he win any of these cases?"

"Not the ones that went to trial. Juries around here hated him. Mostly, he intimidated people into some kind of settlement." He took a sip of coffee, becoming more comfortable with this whole thing.

"So he wasn't making money doing this."

"No, I don't think so. I've heard he made a lot of money in a big east coast law firm—New York and Washington, I think—and in the stock market. Moved out here a few years back and didn't need to work. So he took up this hobby of hassling people by using the law, or at least his idea of it."

"What sorts of cases?"

"Stuff that usually gets ignored here, like building code cases or zoning violations, dogs on the loose, petty stuff. We all kind of thought he was just bored and looking for something to do. It would have been funny if it hadn't been such a pain."

"And he made a lot of enemies doing it?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't seem like anybody would have killed him this way over this stuff. Shot him maybe, or at him, that's more the style around here. But decapitation? Not hardly." He shook his head.

"The signs, though, I mean the poem, it was right on the money, huh?"

"About sending him off to meet his God because he was a jerk? Yeah, well, that's what happened, all right. Although most folks around here probably would like him to go to the other place, if you know what I mean." He was smiling as he took another sip of his coffee.

"I'm told you followed the lead of the State Patrol down in Alamosa and had his wife questioned by a deputy with domestic violence training."

"Yeah, although I'm not sure it was really relevant in this case. Are you going up to talk with Sarah?" He looked at me and I nodded. "So you'll understand. I expect that at one time she was a real

looker, maybe a fashion model, tall and thin and beautiful. And you can still see some of that in her face. But she's not thin any more, probably outweighed Marty by fifty pounds, and Marty wasn't a little guy. If he'd tried anything physical with her, she'd probably have snapped him in two."

"But domestic violence can be non-physical, too."

"True. And if he treated her like he treated everyone else, well, that would probably have qualified. But she didn't suggest there was anything of that nature going on, and it wouldn't surprise me if she could hold her own in that department, too. I think they probably didn't have much in the way of a relationship at all. But you can ask her."

"Any indications if she's going to stay in the area? Or move back east?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure she'll stay here. She's raises llamas, got quite a business. Can't hardly do that in New York City." He chuckled.

Hal had been idly fiddling with the camera, trying to stay out of the conversation, but this was too much for him to ignore.

"Llamas! Really? I've always wanted to go on one of those llama treks, you know? Where you walk and the llama carries your stuff. And its own food, too."

"I think Sarah has some she rents out, as well as some breeders and show animals. Maybe you can talk her into letting you take one of 'em for a walk. I've heard people do that. Seems kinda strange to me, though, when you could just ride a horse." Exotic pack animals seemed to offend Sheriff Lister's sense of western dignity. At least he was still smiling.

I decided that too many questions the first time would run the risk of alienating him again, that we could always stop back with more on our way out of town the next day.

"Sheriff, thanks for your time. I hope it's all right if I come by tomorrow morning if I have more questions. We should probably get back to Crested Butte and see Sarah Robinson now. Oh, and I'd like to talk with your medical examiner, too. Do you suppose this afternoon would work for that?"

"Possibly, but you ought to give her a call. She'll either be in her office or her lab at the morgue. Here's my card, and my office can connect you to her number." He passed a business card across the table. "You know how to find Sarah's place?"

We must have looked blank, because he went on to provide directions, with Hal taking notes.

"So, again, Ms. Trieri, I'm sorry about getting off on the wrong foot. I hope you can find out what you need while you're here."

I knew it was time to be gracious. "Whatever I do find out, you'll know about. Not only what I find out here, but down south also. Maybe we can put this all together quickly."

"I sure hope so. This thing isn't something we want to leave hanging out there. So have a good trip. And a word of advice? At Sarah's, pull up to the house, but stay in your car until she comes out, she'll either be in the house or the barn, probably, at least if her pickup's there. You'll want her to get Lion under control before you're out of your car."

Hal looked surprised. "Uh, 'Lion'?"

"You'll see. Just stay in the car." Lister's enigmatic smile left both of us wondering.

* * *

Two

We took a turn around Gunnison before heading back north. Hal wanted to see the campus of Western State College, and I always like to get some idea of the locale of crimes I'm trying to untangle. I had him drive past the spot where Marty Robinson's car was found—about a diagonal block off the intersection of Highway 50 and Main Street. It wasn't a spot you'd pick to park for any obvious reason, yet it was close enough to various stores and bars that, parked there, it would be unobtrusive—just another car on the street.

We took the opportunity to circle the Western State campus, and Hal got nostalgic.

“This reminds me of how our campus used to look, back before we got our heads all swole up. A small, liberal arts college atmosphere. A constructive relationship with the legislature. Students we actually taught. Ah, for the good old days.”

He's never quite bought into the change that created Frémont State back in the '80s, when an ambitious, ladder-climbing president persuaded the trustees to grow Durango's regional liberal arts college into a research university—and to change its name as well. Then the federal research funding boom went bust and the ambitious president left for greener pastures, leaving Frémont State to struggle with its second-tier status and chronic budget shortfalls. Worse, the guy for whom they renamed the place has since become somewhat politically incorrect, having mapped the west during the 1840s and helped open it to the Anglo settlement that followed.

Eventually, Hal got us back to North Main Street and on our way to Crested Butte. State Road 135 heads generally north, up the pastures of the Gunnison River Valley, and various county roads branch up the side streams and tributaries. After a few miles we passed the road up the Taylor River, Hal peering wistfully in that direction. A little farther along, the old settlements of Roaring Judy, now a fish hatchery, and Jack's Cabin sparked a brief conversation about whether Jack and Judy were a mining-era item and how she got her name.

Sarah Robinson's place was outside of Crested Butte (the town) past the airport on the county road that wound around the east side of Crested Butte (the mountain). A long driveway led us toward a cluster of buildings nestled at the base of the mountain, just where the trees begin their climb up the slope.

It was apparent that Marty Robinson had arrived in the area with plenty of money—instead of the usual decades-old weathered ranch buildings you expect to find, the Robinson spread was new with one of those trophy homes presenting walls of glass to the south and east.

Hal pulled up in front of the house and parked on the circular drive.

“What do you suppose the sheriff meant about ‘Lion’?” He was swiveling his head around like an owl.

I saw a flash from the side of the house and pointed. “Maybe that. What do you suppose it is?”

“Oh! Got me. But, tell you what, I think maybe we should just sit here. You know, watch for a while. Maybe we'll figure it out.”

The creature bounded across the yard and skidded to a stop about ten feet from Hal's door. It sat down and proceeded to bark, suggesting to us that it was some kind of dog, a really, really big dog. But what kind of dog was something of a mystery, because neither of us had seen anything quite resembling it before. The best we could do was to guess it to be a combination of Golden Retriever and some kind of Mastiff. It had the Golden's tawny, flowing coat and the stocky build and jowly face of the huge

slobbery dog in that old Tom Hanks movie. And it was loud. Plus, every time it barked it snapped its head back, and a spray of spittle flew toward the car.

“Yuck, my car!” Hal flinched as his window got slimed.

“Well, look at it this way. At least it’s trained well enough to be sitting over there and barking instead of jumping up and scratching your car. Better you should have to get a car wash than to get it repainted, no?”

It didn’t take too long for a door in the barn across the parking area to open, at which point the dog began running laps around the car. It continued barking sporadically, and eventually a big blob of spit went splat on my window and oozed slowly downward. Equal opportunity slobber.

The person emerging from the barn must have said something, because the dog broke off doing laps and ran over toward her—we assumed it was Sarah Robinson—and fell into heel. What looked like a kid, of the baby goat variety, had followed Sarah out of the barn, and it proceeded to bounce playfully around the dog, occasionally butting it. That the dog ignored this persuaded us that it was very well trained. But we still didn’t make any moves to get out of the car.

With the engine running and the air conditioning on, we didn’t hear what commands the woman was giving the dog, but they sure worked. When she was about fifty feet from the car, the dog sat down and watched us. Given a stationary target, the kid proceeded to bonk into the dog repeatedly, but it was still ignored.

As the woman approached the car, I saw Hal pointing in my direction, so I lowered my window, stopping at the spit mark. She headed toward my side.

“Can I help you folks?” Her voice had raspy edge of a heavy smoker. “And it’s all right to get out now. Lion will stay put. He’s really a big sweetie, although I’m sure you don’t believe me.” She reached out with a towel she had draped over her shoulder and wiped the spit off my window, leaving a big smear. I opened the door and got out.

“Ms. Robinson?” She nodded. “I’m Annette Trieri, I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I know you’ve been interviewed a lot about what happened to your husband, but I’ve recently been assigned to coordinate the county investigations of these cases. Have you heard that there’s been a third one? Over by Pagosa Springs?”

She nodded again, licked a finger and stuck it in the air, and moved downwind of me to light a cigarette from the pack she pulled out of a shirt pocket.

“Yeah, it was in the paper. Another ‘Burma Shave Murder,’ they’re calling them.”

“So, because I just got started on all this, what I’m trying to do is talk with everyone I can. I’ll probably be going over all the same ground again, but it could help me to coordinate things, get to the bottom of all this, you know?”

“I’ve gotta tell you that I’m not real motivated. My opinion is that you folks should find whoever’s doing this and give them some kind of award. A plaque signed by the Governor, or a medal or something.” She took a long drag and exhaled a huge cloud of smoke downwind.

I had to smile. “I hope you told the sheriff that only after he’d eliminated you as a possible suspect.”

She laughed, a deep rumbling laugh that degenerated into coughing. “Yeah, I expect I ought to keep stuff like that to myself, huh? So, would you folks like to come in for a cup of coffee? About the only good thing I got out of this awful marriage was a lot of great toys. I’ve got an espresso machine that makes a mean latté.”

I waved at Hal, and we both watched as he got out of the car, keeping an eye on Lion the whole time. But by then the dog was lying on the drive, asleep with the kid curled up next to its belly.

“Ms. Robinson, this is Hal Weathers. He’s my husband, but on this trip he’s the CBI photographer. And he’s expressed an interest in llamas, too.”

She wiped her right hand on her shirt and stuck it out in Hal’s direction. “Llamas, huh? Well, the vet’s out in the barn right now, midwifing. Not that she’s likely to be needed. Sophia’s an expert at dropping babies by now.”

Hal was floored. “Now? A llama birth. Can I watch? I’ve never even seen a baby llama before.”

“Sure, in through that door I came out of. And baby llamas are called ‘crias.’ You can impress Maureen—she’s the vet—if you work the word into the conversation.”

“Will Lion be OK with me wandering around?” Hal was still looking a little nervous.

She whistled and almost immediately Lion was at her feet, sitting expectantly. He watched as she shook hands with both of us again, and followed Sarah and me into the house. Hal headed for the barn, the kid prancing along behind him.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Sarah Robinson and I were sitting in a breakfast nook off the kitchen, watching the clouds forming over the mountains across the valley. As million-dollar views go, this was one of the best I’d ever seen. Between the view and the espresso—made with freshly ground beans she took out of her freezer—I was having trouble focusing on the business at hand.

“I guess that after you live here a while, the distraction of this view fades.”

“Yes and no. One thing I’ve learned to do is to stop and enjoy it frequently. And its changes throughout the year make that easy. I guess this place is another thing I should thank Marty for, but I learned a long time ago that material stuff isn’t what makes for a good relationship, or life, for that matter.”

“One thing I’ve heard is that victim number one beat his wife up a lot. And victim number three seems to have had similar tendencies.”

“Yeah, well, if victim number two had tried to beat his wife up any time recently, I’d have broken his scrawny neck. Saved the Burma Shave murderer from having to do the job for me.” And she looked as if she could have done it. At nearly six feet and weighing close to 250 pounds, she was not someone to antagonize.

“It wasn’t always this way, though. When we got married, I wasn’t as big as I am now, not by about 125 pounds or so. And Marty, for all that he treated me like a queen at first, he also pushed me around some. We moved out here and I decided to get my life under my own control, so I ate a lot and worked outside a lot and also took some self-defense courses over in town. We developed an uneasy truce by going our separate ways, as much as we could, at least. I’ve actually been able to immerse myself in my llamas. And I just got some Angora goats, too. There’s a fairly strong demand for high-quality fleece, from the goats and even from the llamas. I just ignored Marty, mostly.”

“So this has been going on since you moved here?”

“It developed over time into what it is now, or, rather, where it was up to the point he got killed. Now, of course, I’ve got the whole place to myself. The only thing I have to worry about is getting the

property taxes paid each year. And the investments will take care of that, even with the stock market in the tank.”

“I guess the big question is whether you’d know of anyone who could have killed him this way. From what Sheriff Lister told me, there were plenty of people with motivation, but beheading and the display of his head on the fence post, well, that seems a bit much for most folks.”

“True, but I also think of it as quite inspired. Word gets around, these guys will start being nicer to people, including their wives.”

“I’m getting the impression that you don’t feel any grief about Marty’s death.”

“Like I told the deputy sheriff, just relief. He’s out of my life. Good riddance.”

“So, I don’t want to seem like I’m prying, but it’s relevant for me to ask if you had a real marriage, in terms of marital relations.”

She laughed that deep smoker’s laugh again, and once again it set her to coughing. “Sorry, but that’s just funny. We were so far from having sex that even the distant memories have faded. Different bedroom suites and everything. He stopped finding me attractive years ago, and that was my intention. From what I’ve heard, he was getting his on the side, had a girl down in Gunnison.”

“Do you…” I started, but stopped when I saw she was already shaking her head.

“Don’t know, don’t want to know, don’t really care. Y’see, if I knew, she’d probably know I knew, and things would be awkward. But this way, I guess it’s blissful ignorance. If I run into her, there won’t be any of that awkwardness, at least not on my account.”

“Any idea how I could find out? I really should speak with her, too.”

“You might try the Stockman’s Saloon, on South Main. I think Marty was something of a regular there, and maybe the bartenders would have seen him with someone they could identify.”

Although I didn’t really know where the Stockman’s Saloon was, it occurred to me that it could be within walking distance of where his car was found.

“Thank you, Sarah, that will help. And only one more question, not a question really. Just a verification of a hunch—no children?”

She laughed again. “No, thank God. He wanted them, right away, but I still had some career goals, so I managed to avoid getting pregnant. By the time I would have been ready for children, I’d figured out his true character. And he was adamant that we weren’t going to divorce—that was his religious background talking. So I’ve substituted my llamas and now the goats for children, I guess. Which reminds me, I may have a new cria out there by now. Want to come see? If you’re done, that is.”

I stood up. “Sure. And I hope baby llamas are ugly or something. I’d sure hate for Hal to insist on taking one home.” Then I saw Lion, who had been lying asleep in front of the door, open an eye and look at me. I froze.

“Oh. Lion? Here, boy.” She made a kissing noise, and he jumped up and stood at her feet, looking up. “Annette? Hold out your hand and let him smell the back of it. And say his name and tell him he’s a good dog.”

I did as instructed, and he looked up at me, stuck out his tongue and panted. I took that as friendship, and reached out and scratched the top of his head and behind his ears. This produced a sigh of contentment and one of those low groans that dogs make, so I knew our relationship was cemented.

“Good job. He likes you. Now, when we get outside, the first thing he’ll do is shake his head and irrigate the porch. So let him go out first and give it a second.”

“You’ve trained him not to shake in the house?”

She reached down and patted his flank. “As weird-looking as this guy is, he’s smart as any dog I’ve ever known about. Eager to please, understands a lot of different commands. Let’s go, boy.” She opened the door, and he went out and, as I was warned, shook his head. Spray flew, and I was glad to still be out of range.

About half-way across to the barn, Sarah stopped, looking surprised.

“Say. I just thought of something. As glad as I am to have Marty out of my life, I understand that it just won’t do to have someone going around beheading people. So maybe there *is* something that will help you.”

“Sarah, at this point, any leads at all will be helpful.” I took out my notepad.

“Well, a couple of years or so ago, Marty got it into his fool head that he wanted a pair of crossed swords and a plaque with his family’s coat-of-arms to mount on the rock chimney of that fireplace in the main room. So he checked around and found a collector in Pagosa Springs who deals in antique weaponry. Swords and stuff like that. Authentic stuff, with documentation, supposedly. And he also engaged the services of a genealogist to create a family tree, to see what kind of swords would be appropriate, you know, French, English, Scandinavian, or what. So, to make a long story short, there was a dispute about the swords the collector supplied. Marty took delivery, got them independently appraised, and decided he’d been taken. So he sued the guy. It got real messy, and finally the judge made Marty return the swords and the guy give Marty his money back. But the collector claimed he was out a lot of money for his efforts and made comments about how this wasn’t over yet.”

“Do you remember the guy’s name?”

“Hard to forget. It’s Kristof von Stier. Claims to be a Prussian count, or some such ridiculous thing. It’s probably a front he maintains to help his antique business.”

“Sounds as if I shouldn’t call him ‘Kris,’ then. Maybe I’ll take him a little box for his monocle.”

“Hey, don’t joke. He really has one, along with a huge handle-bar moustache. I’ve never seen him wear one of those red sashes, though.”

* * *

The barn door opened into a tack and feed room, and Sarah led me through it into a series of small stalls. Hal was perched on the top rail of one of them, about five feet in the air, staring down intently. He must have seen us in his peripheral vision, because he turned our way, talking.

“Sarah, if I knew you better, I’d congratulate you on being a new grandmother. You’ve got a bouncing baby girl here. Well, maybe not bouncing yet, but pretty soon.”

“That’s great news!” Sarah had a huge grin.

And her voice got the attention of the stall’s occupants, because the tops of two more heads appeared. The human one had dark red hair peeking from under a Colorado Rockies ball cap and wide-set, green eyes; and the camelid one had perky gray ears, one sticking straight up and one folded forward, and huge brown eyes with the lashes of a mascara advertisement. The llama blinked, twitched the folded ear, made a humming noise, and then disappeared, obviously preoccupied with something down there.

The human was less distracted. “He’s right, Sarah. Sophia’s given you a beautiful little female. Everything seems fine.”

“And she’s OK? Sophia, I mean?”

“Sophia’s a trooper. And she’s learned to bond quickly. I’m impressed.” She had the trace of a lovely accent, not quite Irish, not quite English—in between. I wondered if it might be from a childhood in Northern Ireland.

Sarah led me around to the door to the stall, which was open, and I peeked in to see a full-sized llama standing next to a wobbly miniature. The woman with the red hair was rubbing the baby down with a towel, and mama was sniffing at it with interest.

I couldn’t stop myself from turning into an idiot. “Awww...that’s just the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. Look at her. Truly precious.” I looked up to see Hal beaming at me.

“Sure is. But, no, I’m sorry, we can’t take her home. City zoning won’t allow llamas in the back yard. Besides, she’d be lonely, with the two of us at work all the time. And just think how crazy she’d make the neighbor’s dog.”

At least I wasn’t going to have to worry about him. He smiled and nodded toward the redheaded woman.

“Annette, let me introduce you to Maureen Downey, llama midwife and large-animal veterinarian. She just taught me more about llamas than I ever thought I’d know. Maureen, this is my wife, Annette Trieri.”

The red-headed woman looked up from rubbing the baby llama and smiled from under her cap. “Call me Maureen, please. None of that ‘Doctor’ stuff, OK?”

“And I’m Annette to everyone except criminals.” I meant it nicely, but it produced a startled reaction, quickly suppressed. Lots of people, I’ve learned, have these little guilt demons in their conscience that even innocent comments on my part can tickle.

Hal must have noticed it, too. “Annette’s with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation,” he said to Maureen, grinning. “She keeps me in line.”

Maureen went back to rubbing the cria with great concentration. “I suppose that means you came here to talk with Sarah about her husband. Or what’s left of him.”

“Yes, and I think we made some progress. She gave the name of someone down south to talk to. And we have more people to meet with tomorrow, in Gunnison. I’m just getting started on this thing, so it’s still pretty opaque to me.” I shrugged.

“From what I hear, the killer’s doing us all a favor.”

“That’s what he wants us to think, at least.” But this really wasn’t the conversation I wanted to be having. “So, anyway, I thought mothers always licked their babies clean, or something like that. But it looks like you’re doing the job with that towel.”

“Some animals do, but llamas don’t. Their tongue isn’t made for licking, and they’re rather independent critters anyway. Friendly, but not particularly affectionate. Sophia’s done enough nuzzling that I know they’ve bonded, though. Sarah? Want to weigh her?”

“I’m already on it.” Sarah’s voice came from the tack room, and she emerged holding a balance-beam scale. Maureen quickly wrapped the confused baby in the towel, picked her up, put her in the basket of the scale, and Sarah got a reading. They’d obviously done this before.

Maureen unwrapped the cria and set her on her feet, in the general vicinity of lunch. Sophia bent her long neck around and gave her baby a gentle nudge in the right direction, and just like that, the little one was suckling away.

“You two make quite a team. I don’t think she even knew what happened there. Or if she did, she’s forgotten it already.” I could feel a huge smile stretching my cheeks—the whole thing was just too cool.

And Sarah looked like she felt that way, too. “Maureen has had lots more practice than I have, and with lots of different animals. But the two of us have helped about a dozen of these little critters into the world.”

“So what are you going to name her?”

Sarah looked me up and down, and her smile gradually took on a mischievous glint. “Hmm...maybe I’ll call her ‘Annette.’ Haven’t had an ‘Annette’ in my flock, so I think it’ll work just fine.”

This time I could feel myself blushing scarlet. But Hal came to my rescue.

“I think that’s wonderful! Just think, Annette, we could have been here for, oh, I don’t know, say, the birth of pigs. But you got lucky and got this sweet young thing named after you instead!”

“I do feel honored.” A little flustered, too, but I didn’t want that to show. “So, she grows up and then what? You breed her, sell her, what?”

Sarah considered this for a minute. “It depends. If she takes after her mama, I’ll get fleece from her for sure. Maybe I’ll be able to show her, if she matures well and has the right disposition. And eventually, I’ll breed her, yeah.” She grinned. “Got a pasture full of horny males back there, just waiting.”

“I’ve heard that they can be used as pack animals.” Hal likes to sneak up on things a little.

Sarah looked up at him. “They can’t carry as much as a horse, of course, but, yeah, they’re great on pack trips. Low maintenance, good companions. And they don’t bust up the trails as much as horses, because their feet are softer.”

“We probably won’t have time to go for a walk this trip, but that sounds like something I’d like to do, someday.” I could tell he was hinting at something.

“Come back in a month or so, and I’ll send you off for a day with Sophia here and Annette.” Sarah looked at me and grinned again. “Both Annettes, I suppose. There’s a great day-hike, a long day, for sure, but only a single one, up Crested Butte behind the ranch here. Takes you up and around a little, for a great view of town and the Elk Mountains to the northwest.”

Maureen had been packing her things. “Sarah, I’m going to have to dash off. Got a four-o’clock appointment back home.” She looked at her watch and at me. “Long drive. Nice to meet you, Annette, Hal. Sarah, be sure to call me if anything doesn’t seem right with little Annette here.”

But it looked as if little Annette was about as perfect as she could be, and, with her first meal filling her up, happy, too.

* * *

I discovered that the medical examiner in Gunnison wouldn’t be able to see me until the next morning, so I decided to relax a little. It was beginning to look as if the next few weeks might be hectic.

We spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening trying to persuade the trout in the Taylor River that our imitation bugs were worth tasting. Like so many of the famous trout streams in Colorado, however, the Taylor’s fishery receives enough attention from guides and their clients that the trout are hard to fool. Although they were interested in what we were presenting to them—in the clear water, we could see good-sized fish swimming up to look over our imitations, occasionally even nudging at them

with their noses—we just couldn't entice any strikes. Two days without significant action would make Hal grumpy, I knew, but I don't mind such lack of success at all. Just being out in the air is enough of a pay-off for me.

The next morning we got an early start so that we could be at the medical examiner's office in Gunnison when it opened. Once again, I left Hal in the W Café—I knew there was no way he'd want to be part of my visit to the ME. He's rock-solid for me when I need him—one time, he rescued me when I was injured and alone in the wilderness—but like most civilians, he's squeamish enough that morgues just aren't comfortable places for him.

For me either, as far as it goes.

The Gunnison County Medical Examiner's office was in the basement of the county building, the place I'd walked out of in a huff the day before, and, as I thought, the ME was there when I arrived. Belinda Edwards wasn't exactly what I was expecting—late twenties, perfectly made up and elegantly dressed, she came across as a young corporate executive in the fashion industry rather than the coroner of a Western Slope county. But I soon found that she knew her stuff—and she also knew about me. It seemed the sheriff had briefed her.

“You'll have to excuse Scott. He's been burned a couple of times by your colleagues in Montrose, so he just jumped to conclusions.” We were sitting in her office drinking coffee. Excellent coffee. The Gunnison County ME and coroner was a clothes horse and coffee connoisseur.

“I can't blame him too much. I've been a little put off by the behavior of some of the CBI people on conference calls. Like most state bureaucracies, I guess, we have our bad apples. But I've been working hard to develop good relationships with the counties in my area, and it's succeeding. He called Ralph Wertlinger down in Creede, who must have given me a good reference or something.”

“Something, indeed. Scott said that Ralph dressed him down for mistrusting you. He's embarrassed, Scott, I mean.” She was smiling and shaking her head.

I smiled, too. “He was a little embarrassed when he finally found me. But that's OK, I think we're all on the same page now.”

“And you're here to learn what you can about these Burma Shave killings, huh?”

“Yeah, I'm trying to pull together all the information from here and Monte Vista, and now Pagosa Springs, too. If I could, I'd like to see the victim. Guess I'm going to have to check all of them out. But maybe you can fill me in on what you learned from your post-mortem. Your report was thorough, but maybe you have additional impressions.”

“We don't have many homicides out here, and I suppose that's true in Monte Vista and Pagosa, too. Most of my work involves accident victims, unattended heart attacks, stuff like that. This one is strange, I can tell you.” While she was talking, she pulled a file folder out of a cabinet beside her desk. “White male, 41, decapitated, only the head recovered. I don't have to tell you the circumstances of that. Victim identified as Martin Robinson, lived on a ranch up near Crested Butte. He had plenty of people who would be considered ‘enemies,’ but I don't think any of them would do this.”

“That's what the sheriff said. He figured that maybe someone would have been motivated to take a shot at him, but not this.”

“Right. Especially as there's really more to it than just a beheading. Very high quality work, for example. And also quality post-mortem work.”

“The formalin?”

“Right. But not only the formalin, also the fact that they drained his head, the blood, I mean. And it’s as if the formalin was pumped into the circulatory system—some kind of pump was hooked to the carotid arteries and formalin was forced in until it saturated the tissues. And meanwhile the blood would be draining out the jugulars.” She was pointing at places on her neck.

“Is that significant somehow?”

“I don’t know for sure. But it’s puzzling. Maybe it was done this way just to preserve the head, so it wouldn’t decompose on that fence post too quickly. But it has the side effect of preventing us from doing any blood toxicology tests.” She shrugged.

“Couldn’t you do tests on brain tissues and so on?”

“Maybe, but the formalin would probably mask anything else, at least in the equipment we have.”

I saw an opening. “Maybe that’s something we can help with. I have connections to a very sophisticated analysis system at the university in Durango. And if I get samples from all three victims, at least we’ll be able to tell if the formalin is all the same. And possibly identify the source.”

“That could help. Especially if you can detect traces of other things in there. I mean, I’ve been thinking about how this could have happened. It’s like, someone with an extremely sharp sword comes up to these guys, or my guy, at least, and he sees it coming. This scares the crap out of him—have you seen the pictures?” I nodded. “So that produces the death mask on the victim. But why doesn’t the victim duck, or dodge, or something? Maybe he was drugged.”

“I saw that in your report and didn’t quite understand it. What makes you say that Robinson was attacked this way?”

“Huh? Oh, I guess I didn’t describe it very well. It’s subtle—has to do with the entrance and exit wounds from the blade that was used. You can see from skin indentations, and, at the exit, a little flaring, that the blade must have entered first right about here…” She was pointing at a spot just under the point of her left jaw. “…and exited about here.” She pointed to a spot behind and below her right ear.

“Did this happen to the other victims?”

“Don’t know yet. I called the other MEs, told them what I’d found. But I haven’t heard back.”

“I can ask them. I guess that means I should have a look at what’s left of Mr. Robinson. But maybe there’s one more thing you can tell me. Sheriff Lister talked about how Robinson made a lot of enemies, and you mentioned it, too. And I’ve talked with his wife, Sarah, and it’s clear that they didn’t have much of a relationship. She said he was having an affair, but she intentionally didn’t try to learn anything about it. Do you know anything else about all this that might be relevant?”

“It wasn’t me he was having an affair with, that’s for sure. Not that he didn’t try. I think he hit on every woman he ran into. And he spent enough time at the courthouse that he ran into me on several occasions. What a jerk.” She smiled. “As the signs said. But I really don’t know anything else. Wouldn’t surprise me if he slept around, based on his interactions with me. And I’ve never met his wife.”

“I’ve got a lead on how I might find this girlfriend, so maybe that’ll work out. But it’s interesting to hear you verify what everyone else has said about his character.”

“And the character of the other victims, too, from what I hear. As if the murderer knows what he’s doing. So, do you really want to go over to the lab and see this head?” She rose and turned to a rack of lab coats.

“Well, I guess I need to. But you’re wearing such an elegant suit. You go into the lab with it?”

“When I’m getting down and dirty, I change. There’s a shower here and everything. But for what we need to do, these coats and rubber gloves will do. No cutting today, you know?” She smiled, and I felt a little better.

I don’t know what I was concerned about. I had been in the La Plata County morgue on countless occasions—the ME there, Lester St. Clare, is an old friend and colleague from my days in the Durango PD. But even though the temperature in the morgue wasn’t all that low, I felt a chill as I went in through the air-seal doors. It was a relief that it didn’t have any of the usual smells, but something was bothering me. Belinda Edwards, though, was completely at ease.

“So you want me to send you tissue samples, eh? Better I should send them than you should take them with you, I guess. Hmm. A little muscle, some fat, maybe from under the chin, and some brain tissue, I guess. But I’m sure they’re all going to be heavily soaked in that formalin solution.”

She had made her way over to a wall of what looked like very large file drawers. “Let’s see. I’ve got Marty stashed in number 13 here. I’ll tell ya, if everyone came here in his condition, we wouldn’t need so much storage space.” She pulled open the drawer and took out a box, like a large hat box.

“Let me take him over to the table.” She set the box on a stainless steel table and hit a switch. Ceiling lights over the table illuminated everything without creating shadows, and an exhaust fan started up.

“Now, brace yourself. It’s not pretty.” And she lifted the cover off the box.

Even with the warning, and even having seen the pictures, it was still a shock for me. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, prickly, and I felt my knees giving way. I steadied myself by leaning on the table a little and took a deep breath. The familiar morgue-smell of formaldehyde, strangely, settled me down a bit.

“Good Lord! Those pictures don’t do him justice. What in the world could have scared him so? Something evil caused this.”

* * *

Three

I retrieved Hal from the W Café, where he was working on a second breakfast and what appeared to be every newspaper available in Gunnison—the local ones as well as both Denver dailies. After the interesting, and even educational, interlude at the morgue, I wasn’t in the mood for food. Mostly, I just wanted to hit the road, but we had one more stop to make first.

“Well? Learn anything?” He had gladly stayed behind rather than accompany me, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t interested.

“The real thing is way worse than the pictures I showed you, remember them?”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s what I figured. I’m glad I didn’t go with you.”

“But I learned something important. It looks like whoever did in Marty Robinson did it by walking up to him with a sword or something. It has to do with the cut marks on the skin.” I explained the entrance and exit signs that Belinda Edwards had discovered and shown me in detail. And she was right—the signs were clear, once you looked carefully. But her theory of the crime didn’t impress Hal.

“Oh, come on. That’s hard to believe. Some guy with a sword walks up to the victim, who sees him and freaks out, explaining the expression on these faces, and then just stands there and gets his head cut off? C’mon. That just doesn’t work.”

We were walking south on Main Street, headed for the Stockman’s Saloon, the place where Sarah Robinson had told me Marty used to hang out. It was only a little after ten in the morning, but I was hoping they’d be open already.

“You’re right, of course. This is a working hypothesis until a better one comes along. Thing is, they do have these terrified expressions, and the cut marks on Robinson’s neck are pretty clear about the angle of the slice. Also, it had to be something quick and clean, done with an extremely sharp blade, because there wasn’t any splintering of the vertebra. His head was sliced off cleanly.”

“Something that requires not only the right equipment but also strength. Like hitting a home run in baseball, or something, except with a quality sword. I guess you’ve got to have a hypothesis, and that’s as good as any. But I’ll be surprised if that turns out to be the answer.”

“Me, too. Oh, here’s the place I’m looking for.”

We’d come to a prosperous looking storefront, brick that had been cleaned recently, with a massive oak door. An understated, Victorian sign reading “Stockman’s Saloon” spanned the lintel, and there was a bronze plaque by the doorknob that read “Members & Guests Only.”

“Hmm. Got your membership card? I forgot mine.” Hal grinned.

Being a dean, you’d think he would have this tendency to want to follow rules, but I’ve discovered that’s not necessarily the case. But this time I was able to help out—I fished out my shield.

“Right here. You can be my guest.” And I pushed open the door.

I don’t know what I was expecting—leather, wood, and the smell of cigars, maybe—but I was surprised by the well-lit foyer inside. There was wood, but it was light oak, and there wasn’t a hint of any kind of smoke. A maitre d’ looked up from behind a podium and turned on his greater smile.

“Good morning, folks. I’m sorry, but this is a private club. I’m afraid I don’t recognize you.”

“You’re right. You don’t. I’m Field Office Director Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation.” I showed him my shield and ID. “And this is Hal Weathers. I came in to talk with your staff. I’m coordinating the investigation of the death of Mr. Martin Robinson. I understand he was a frequent customer here.”

“We don’t comment on our membership.”

“Mr. Robinson was the victim of murder. If he spent time here, perhaps one of your people could tell me who he spent that time with. There’s no reason to think anyone who’s a member here would be a suspect, but it could be helpful to the investigation to talk with them. You do understand that it’s in everyone’s best interest to capture this individual who’s going around beheading people, don’t you?”

He blinked several times, obviously torn between civic duty and club rules. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t help you.”

“Mr., ah, Peter Ryan.” I had noticed he was wearing a little name badge. “If I have to come back here with a warrant and with subpoenas for your staff, I’ll do it with reporters and members of the state liquor board and the county health department in tow. I’ll make your life, your own life, a living hell. I’ll close this joint down. You don’t seem to understand that the Governor assigned me personally to this case and told me that I have the full weight of his office behind me and that I shouldn’t waste any time. He doesn’t think we should have someone going around beheading people, either, apparently. Believe me, you don’t want me to walk out of here without the information I came for.”

I'd watched his eyes get bigger and bigger while I was making this little speech, and when I was finished, he swallowed several times.

Then he took a deep breath. "Ms., uh, Treery, you have to understand, I just work here, and I follow the rules, that's all. Can I call the manager? Please?"

I made a show of looking at my watch. "I understand your position, Mr. Ryan. But let's do get on with it. My time is limited." I turned to Hal and winked. "Hal, could you please call Denver and tell them we may be running late? Tell the Governor I'll explain when we finally get there."

I could see he was having trouble keeping his smile suppressed, but he managed. He couldn't keep the twinkle out of his eyes, though.

"Surely." He pulled a cell phone out of his jacket pocket. "I'll be just outside."

When I turned back to Ryan, he was on the phone, talking in a stage whisper. "OK. I'll tell her."

He looked up at me and beckoned toward a door to the right. "Mr. Salem will be right down. He told me to ask you to please wait in the lounge."

The lounge was more along the lines of what I expected a place called "Stockman's Saloon" to look like—darker woods and leather. Dim lights, even in mid-morning. But, thank you very much, there was still no lingering smoke odor. It occurred to me that they must have a very good air handling system, because being a member of a club like this must involve a lot of cigar smoking.

I waited about two minutes, trying to decide whether to pump the bartender—even though it was barely 10:30, there was a guy behind the bar polishing things—but I remembered Ryan's comment about only working there. Finally a door at the other end of the room opened, and a well-dressed, middle-aged man strode in.

Just about the time he was finished introducing himself as Gregory Salem, the Saloon's manager, the door I'd come through burst open, and Hal bustled in, followed by a worried-looking Peter Ryan, wringing his hands. Hal walked up to Salem and me.

"Excuse me." Hal turned to me just enough so that the others couldn't see the big wink. "The Governor needs to talk with you." He handed me his cell phone and excused himself to Salem again.

This time it was my turn to suppress a smile.

"Yes sir?" I had no idea what to expect, but a possible charade began running through my mind.

"Annette?" I recognized the voice of my second-in-command in the Durango CBI office, Derek Petersen. "Hal called and said I should pretend to be the Governor. Is this OK?"

"Yes, sir, it is. I'm afraid we'll be delayed a little in getting back to see you. I know you're eager for our report, but we've run into a snag. One of the victims belonged to a private club, apparently, and it's probable that the staff have information pertinent to the investigation. But they're not cooperating. So, I'm sorry, sir, but we're going to be running late."

"Ah...I see. Well, you probably don't want me to talk with whoever you're playing to. That would be pushing this too far. Besides, you can never tell, he might recognize that my voice isn't the Governor's." Derek is sharp, and I'm glad to have him working for me.

"No, sir, we don't. Warrants and subpoenas are the next step. But I'm hoping that I can persuade them to cooperate. I think they're mostly concerned about the privacy of their members."

"Tell you what. I'll gradually raise my voice, and when it gets loud enough, hold the phone away from your ear. Whoever's there will hear a rant, and maybe it will help motivate him." And he gradually started to talk louder and louder.

When it got uncomfortable, I held the phone away a little and heard Derek hollering about cooperation, catching the killer, public safety, and various other gubernatorial-sounding things. And I noticed that the effect wasn't lost on Salem and Ryan. Once again, it was Hal's turn to work hard on his poker face.

Finally, Derek ran down.

"Yes, sir, I understand. And thank you for emphasizing this. I'll pass your message along."

"Hope it works, Annette."

"Thank you, sir. And we'll report to you as soon as we return." And I pushed the 'End' button.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, Mr. Salem." I looked up at him. "I'm sure that you can tell we need to talk."

* * *

Hal and I laughed about it all the way to North Pass.

After the phone call, the interview with Salem had been much easier. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot to be learned from either him or Ryan, or the bartender for that matter. None of them knew anything about a girlfriend that Marty Robinson may have had. He did spend a lot of time in the Saloon, for lunches and afternoon drinks, but, true to character, he alienated most everyone he came into contact with. There were even complaints about him to the board, which was considering suspending his membership. I asked various questions and, somewhat to my surprise, Hal chimed in with a few, but we really didn't make much progress.

So we kept it as short as we could, stopped at a grocery store to pick up a picnic lunch, and hit the road.

North Pass, on State Highway 114 south of Gunnison, marked our crossing of the Continental Divide, over to the east side, to the Rio Grande drainage. Hal found a likely-looking side road, and we had lunch in the Rio Grande National Forest, sitting in a meadow ringed by aspens shimmering in the breeze, surrounded by late-season wildflowers. A herd of suspicious range cattle watched our every move, just in case we might conjure up horses to chase them around with, I guess.

After lunch, the road south took us through the little town of Saguache and straight down the bottom of the San Luis Valley toward Monte Vista and, eventually, Alamosa. The Valley is a broad alluvial plain about the size of Connecticut, a basin full of gravel washed down from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east and the La Garita Range of the San Juans to the west.

Cruising down US Highway 285, we passed truck after truck after truck full of potatoes. Hal kept me awake with a lecture about the history of the Valley, its evolution into an agricultural powerhouse, and its vulnerability to the water-grabbing schemes of various cities over the mountains to the east, cities in the growing Colorado Front Range region.

We came to the town of Monte Vista at about two that afternoon, and Hal, who seems to have a digital navigation system in his head, had no trouble finding Crystal Stafford's house. Derek, I knew, would have called to set up an appointment for us. He's good.

Crystal Stafford lived in a little bungalow, obviously old but well-preserved, about three blocks off Main Street, the highway through the center of town. We found her on her front porch awaiting us with a pitcher of iced tea.

In her late twenties, Crystal would be politely described as “zaftig,” someone at whom the diet-plan and exercise-machine ads on TV are aimed. Yet there was an attractiveness and innocence about her that explained why Frank Scharmatz would have wanted her as a mistress. She was grieving his loss only marginally.

“I was sorry that he got killed, of course, especially that way. I guess I wasn’t too surprised, though. He had lots of people that didn’t like him. And, well, I’d been trying to figure out how to end our relationship. But I was afraid of him, a little, and I didn’t want to just dump him.”

“And you’d been seeing him for some time?”

“Ever since my fiancé and I broke off our engagement, about four months.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to need to pry a little. What caused the end of your engagement?” I hate these interviews. They’re necessary, but they make me feel like one of those slimy tabloid reporters, or an ambulance-chasing lawyer.

“Oh, well, it had to do with money. See, one of my aunts died, one of my mother’s sisters. I was her favorite niece, and she left me a small inheritance. Billy wanted to use it to invest in his business, but I wanted to put it into savings. We had a big fight and he started saying things that hurt too much. So I gave him back his ring.” She looked glum. “Between him and Frank, I guess I’m not picking my men very well.”

“What’s his business? Billy’s, I mean.”

“He’s a martial arts instructor, has a dojo over in Alamosa. He teaches a bunch of things that I can never keep straight, karate, kung fu, aikido, kendo, all that stuff. What he wanted to do with my inheritance was to buy the little building he’s renting for his dojo and remodel it. But he’s been struggling for clients, and I just didn’t think that the investment would pay off. He took it personally, though, said he didn’t think I believed in him. And I guess I’m not sure if I did, really. I loved him, maybe I still do, but, well...”

“Do you suppose he could have blamed Frank Scharmatz at all for your break-up?”

She turned white. “Oh. I never even thought of that. I met Frank while Billy and I were still engaged—I was on the steering committee that Frank was also on, for the teachers’ union. And there were meetings in the evening. And that’s when Frank started, you know, showing an interest in me.”

“I think I know what aikido, karate, and kung fu are. What’s kendo?”

“I get those three confused, but kendo’s the one I remember, it’s ‘the way of the’...Ohmygod...‘the way of the sword.’ No, it’s not possible, not at all. Billy and I had a fight and broke up, but it wasn’t that kind of fight. He’s the kindest and most gentle guy I’ve ever met, really. Not at all like Frank.”

So here was another connection between a victim and a guy who knew about blades. I made a point of getting information about how to contact Billy and tried to reassure her that he didn’t really qualify as a suspect or anything, but that I simply had to check out every possible lead.

I don’t think she believed me.

* * *

Our next stop was down the road in Alamosa, where we were spending the night as well as interviewing people. Like Gunnison, Alamosa is the home of a small state university, what used to be called a “teachers’ college,” Adams State, and Hal would again have a chance to look around on a small, intimate campus and get all nostalgic about the good old pre-Frémont-State days.

I planned to drop him off to talk with people there the next morning, while I looked up Billy Abernathy, the kendo master, and drove back to Monte Vista to see Bonnie Scharmatz. Our plan for the remainder of the afternoon was to check in with the State Patrol office and talk with their investigators.

The State Patrol and the CBI are both part of the Colorado Department of Public Safety, so I knew I wouldn't have to deal with the turf-related issues I'd encountered up in Gunnison. True to form, they were cordial and helpful, and it surprised me that they were even a little relieved to have my office involved. But everything they had to offer was included in the reports I'd seen, so all I was able to do was to put faces together with the names on the reports and to reassure everyone that we were working hard on the murders.

There's no fly-fishing around Alamosa, at least none that meets Hal's high standards, so we spent the evening driving up to the dunes after dinner, the Great Sand Dunes National Park just northeast of Alamosa. For some reason, and Hal tried to explain this in meteorological terms that I didn't quite understand, the winds in the San Luis Valley dump their loads of wind-blown dust and sand in a specific place just on the west side of a little gap in the Sangres, and there are several square miles of fantastic dunes. Someday, I want to go back there with a car that will negotiate the back road. You need high clearance, and Hal's S4, while good for most things, just doesn't qualify for that.

My main task for Wednesday morning, one that arose because of the interview with Crystal Stafford, was to find Billy Abernathy and see if I could get a feeling for him without warning him that he was as much of a suspect as anyone.

To do that, of course, I had to meet with him, identify myself, explain that I was investigating the notorious beheadings, and ask him about his expertise with swords. Without tipping him off.

It didn't surprise me at all that I failed.

Billy's martial arts studio—the place that Crystal had called his dojo—was in a shabby little building that reminded me of a rundown garage. No wonder, I thought, that he wants to fix it up, and no wonder that Crystal didn't want to invest in it.

I arrived at about 9:30 and found Billy in the middle of teaching a class full of what looked to me like eight-year-olds, assembled in rows, kicking straight out and hollering all together. When I saw this, I went back to the car to make phone calls.

Eventually a gaggle of tired-looking, but still excited, children emerged from the little building, and I took that as my cue. I wandered in the front door and began looking over the various props and decorations on the walls, including a crossed pair of those two-handed Japanese swords with the curved blades and black handles. It was clear that Billy was taking his business seriously, and it was also clear that he needed an infusion of capital.

“Can I help you with something?” Billy emerged from wherever he had disappeared to after his class.

I introduced myself and tried to work gracefully into the subject of beheadings and swords.

“...so it seemed to me that I should ask you, as a local expert, about other people in the area who might know something about handling swords.”

He smiled and shook his head, but, to my relief, he didn't seem to be agitated.

“Of course, if you're assembling a list of possible suspects, I'm certainly at the top, right? And that only makes sense. What do criminal investigators and crime writers talk about—motive, means, opportunity? Well, I guess I've got 'em.”

“You’re right, of course. But you’re also obvious, too obvious, really. So I thought you might have some other ideas. Since you mentioned it, though, why do you say you had the opportunity? Motive and means I know about.”

He sighed. “I’m not sure I should explain this, because it could incriminate me, I guess. Or maybe I should explain it, because you haven’t Mirandized me so anything I say won’t be admissible.”

He smiled again, bigger this time.

“Oh, if you want to confess, that’s OK. I’ll file it along with all the other bogus confessions we’re getting. I’ll never understand why these high-profile cases bring the weirdos out of the woodwork, people who are looking for publicity with their false confessions. What I want are leads to solid forensic evidence.” I smiled back. “That’s why I was wondering if you know anyone else with real proficiency with things like those.” I waved in the direction of the swords.

He laughed. “There’s a guy over in Pagosa Springs who I fence with, you know, the Olympic thing. Masks, padded gloves, practice sabers. Whacking away at each other.”

“But you don’t have advanced kendo students.”

“No, that’s too much for Alamosa. I manage to have pretty full kids’ karate classes, during the summer at least, and some adult things. Kung fu once in a while. But kendo is way too advanced for the folks around here. I’m afraid it’s just me and Kristof, if you’re looking for swordsmen.”

“Kristof? You must mean Kristof von Stier?”

He looked startled. “You know him?”

“Never met him, but I’m going to look him up. I heard his name in a somewhat different context.”

“Ms. Trieri, have you ever seen depictions of those medieval executioners, the guys with the black hoods and the big axe? Or pictures of a guillotine? There’s a reason the axe is so big, that the guillotine blade is this big slab of sharp steel with an angled edge. It’s actually fairly hard to decapitate someone, not at all like, say, slicing through a potato with a kitchen knife. Not that I’ve decapitated anyone, you understand, but I’ve learned a lot in my studies. Anyway, whoever did this was really, really skilled, at least if the newspaper accounts have been accurate. They can call them the ‘Burma Shave Murders’ all they want, but those of us who know our business are amazed at the guy’s skill. I participate in a computer chat room, so I’ve seen a lot of opinions on this.”

“Aside from professional amazement, what’s your impression of Frank Scharmatz’ death?”

“A while back, couple months, say, I’d have been ecstatic. I had a dark time of it there, for a while, and I would have gladly done it myself. I was sure he stole Crystal away from me. But I’ve come to realize that it was all my fault—I got dollar signs in my eyes when she got that little bit of money. When she wouldn’t give it to me, I turned into a real jerk.” He laughed. “At least I was a jerk who didn’t lose his head. Anyway, I guess that now my feeling is more along the lines of relief, that he won’t have any hold over her any more. I don’t think that was a good relationship she was involved in. I’ve been trying to decide whether to give her a call.”

“Send her lots of flowers first. And just to close the book on this, you never explained the opportunity you mentioned.”

“Opportunity to kill Frank? Oh, there were plenty, but it would have been back two or three months ago, back when I was really pissed with him. He used to walk over to Crystal’s house, stay a while, and walk home drunk. I don’t want to know what happened in between. But I could have picked him up on his way home and done anything I wanted.”

“It sounds like you were watching him, or them.”

He sighed again. “Yeah, I was. And I think I’d better just shut up. I can tell this is beginning to sound too strange.”

* * *

Back in the car, I was trying to decide whether to stop for coffee and organize my notes or to head to Monte Vista to see Bonnie Scharmatz, when my cell phone played Hal’s tune. Of all the stupid gimmicks built into my new phone, the ability to program particular rings for particular numbers is actually quite handy. This rendition of Eric Clapton’s opening riff to “Layla” is tinny and dumb, really, but it’s identifiable and it tells me it’s him.

“So how’s the campus? Serene?”

“Oh, very nice. Serene, quiet, and green. Are you on your way to Monte Vista yet?”

“Just about to leave.”

“Good. I mean, good that you haven’t left yet. You may not want to. There’s a panel discussion here at a conference you might want to come to instead. Bonnie Scharmatz is supposed to be there, although I don’t understand exactly. You said you have an appointment with her.”

“I do. What’s the panel discussion about?”

“Domestic violence, battered women, how to fight back. Um, it’s being moderated by Madge.”

“Madge?”

“Maybe you don’t know her. Professor Madge Glendon, head of the Women’s Studies Program at the U. She must be over here for the conference, or something. In some circles, she’d be called a ‘femi-nazi,’ just to give you one perspective on her politics.”

“And Bonnie’s going to be there?”

“That’s what the flyer says. But maybe they’re just using her name to draw an audience. That kind of tactic would be right up Madge’s alley.”

“I’ll try calling Bonnie, but if she’s not at home, where can I meet you?”

“Where you let me off. There should be parking around there somewhere. The panel discussion isn’t until one, so we can wander around and find a place for lunch. You already made progress today, right?”

“Oh, yeah, and I’ve got a ton of voice mail to catch up on.”

I called Bonnie and got her answering machine. This could have meant that she was only at the grocery, or something, but it didn’t seem worth the trip all the way back to Monte Vista if she might be coming to the conference. So I left her a message that I’d not be able to make it to our appointment and drove over to the campus to find Hal waiting where I’d left him earlier. He got in the car and guided me to a place to park, and, after I turned the engine off, he handed me a fluorescent purple sheet of paper.

Womyn’s Defense League presents

“Burma Shave” Murders: Homicide or Grass-Roots Justice?

Professor Madge Glendon

Womyn’s Studies Program

Frémont State University

leads a Panel Discussion
with
* * * **Bonnie Scharmatz** * * *

The typeface was huge, as big as could be fit onto the page, and the font was boldface in big block lettering.

“Womyn’s Defense League? Haven’t heard of that one. I called Bonnie and got an answering machine.” I handed the paper back and opened my door; he opened his and got out.

“Yeah, Madge formed it after that little adventure with the Silverton. She used the publicity over Stephanie Boudreau’s death to sensitize the university community to women as victims. And she hasn’t stopped blaming the administration for it. Waddle is one of those thorns in the paw that John Martin gets to limp around with.”

“Uh, ‘waddle’?”

“WDL. Gotta say it somehow—I’m sure Madge always spells it out, but John and I and just about everyone else call it Waddle.” I knew John Martin, the Frémont State Provost, to be the consummate campus politician with a wicked private sense of humor.

“I’m a little surprised that she’s able to blame the university. Stephanie’s death didn’t have anything to do with you folks.” Stephanie Boudreau, a concert violinist in town for a summer music festival, had died from excessive partying, as best we could tell. “So what do you suppose that this Waddle group wants Bonnie for, anyway?”

“Not to be too cynical, or anything,” Hal smiled, “but I expect it’s just to use her to draw a crowd. If Madge sticks to her usual approach, she’ll have a couple of local faculty members that she’s got on her side on the so-called panel, and they and Bonnie will get to listen while Madge harangues the audience. Why don’t we see if we can find some lunch first?”

Finding lunch proved more challenging than we had thought, and we wound up running behind. The WDL panel discussion was in an old auditorium in the heart of the campus, one of those ornate, high-ceilinged rooms with semi-circular rows of folding wood theater seats. The entrance doors were on either side of the stage, and, because we were a few minutes late, we had to enter the theater facing the audience. Fortunately, the side-lights were down, allowing us and several other late-comers to sneak in and not be noticed.

But this entrance arrangement also allowed us to see the audience. The theater, designed for perhaps a hundred people, was about a third full, mostly young women. They were sitting in groups of two and three, scattered about the room in random patterns. The exception was a line of seven women, dressed in what looked to me like military camouflage fatigues, sitting side-by-side front row center.

We walked up the side aisle to the last row, and sat in the shadows on the end. Even though we were a few minutes after one, nothing had happened. Hal has mentioned on several occasions the academic tendency to run everything except regular classes on a relaxed schedule, so this wasn’t too surprising.

On the stage, five women were sitting behind a long table, facing the audience. Just about the time we got seated, one of them, a short, stocky person dressed in loose jeans and sweat shirt, stood and walked over to a podium. She cleared her throat into the microphone and began speaking.

“Good afternoon, women of Adams State! I’m Professor Madge Glendon, head of the women’s studies program over in Durango, at Frémont State. Thank you for coming to the Womyn’s Defense

League's panel discussion on grass-roots justice as an answer to domestic violence. With us today are three members of the faculty here at Adams State, Professors Alicia Finney," a woman behind the table nodded and waved briefly, "Rhonda McWilliams, and Beatrice Toon." The other two also waved.

"And with us as well is Bonnie Scharmatz. I'm sure that many of you know about Bonnie's horrible experience at the hands of her misogynistic spouse, and she has kindly agreed to speak to us today about her experience. My Adams State colleagues," she turned and nodded toward the table, "will be providing their perspectives about recent events that freed Bonnie from her oppression and also freed the region from the clutches of other misogynists. These so-called Burma Shave Murders may be cause for concern in the good-old-boy law enforcement establishment, but to the WDL and oppressed women everywhere, they are cause for celebration."

At this, Prof. Finney looked up, clearly surprised, and Bonnie Scharmatz looked down at her hands.

"In fact, the WDL believes that more of this type of justice is sorely needed. The good-old-boy establishment won't protect women, so we have to do it ourselves. Protecting oppressed women is the business of our WDL action squad, here in the front row. The justice meted out to the three Burma Shave dirtbags in recent weeks is just the beginning of our plan to end the oppression of women everywhere!"

Now the other two professors were beginning to squirm in their chairs. Madge Glendon, apparently, hadn't briefed them fully. But Glendon was too wrapped up in her rhetoric to notice their discomfort.

"But before I introduce our action squad and outline our plans, let me introduce a true hero, a woman we can all be proud of, Bonnie Scharmatz!"

One time, when Hal and I were out fishing, I watched a coyote catch a rabbit. He did it by cornering the poor thing in a niche in a rock wall, cutting off its frantic attempts to escape, moving in for the kill inch by inch. Finally, the rabbit was too tired to keep trying, and it just gave up. It just sat there quivering, awaiting its fate.

The way Bonnie looked reminded me of that rabbit.

* * *

Four

I think we were both glad to hit the road again, the more so for having sat through the WDL embarrassment.

After the "discussion" ran down—meaning that Madge Glendon had finally recognized that she was losing the attention of her audience—and the panel dispersed, Hal stopped at the stage on our way out.

"Madge! How nice to see you here! Great presentation! I'm sure Provost Martin will be delighted to hear that you're reaching out to colleagues over here at Adams State."

At that point, it was Glendon's turn to look uncomfortable. Women's Studies isn't part of Hal's College of Natural Sciences, but a dean is a dean is a dean, I guess.

We were headed west, on US Highway 160, about half-way between Monte Vista and Del Norte, when my cell phone made its chirping noise—the generic ring for a number it didn't recognize.

"Trieri, CBI."

“Annette? This is Ralph Wertlinger.”

“Ralph! Say, let me thank you for putting in a good word for me with Scott Lister the other day. It helped, a lot.”

“Oh, yeah, my pleasure. He needed setting straight. Listen, though, you shouldn’t blame him too much. He got really burned by your Montrose office on a couple cases last year.”

“Whatever you said fixed it, for me at least. What’s up?”

“I called to let you know about something that I just heard. Like everyone else around these parts, I’ve been following those Burma Shave Murders and wondering who would be next. You know, three of ’em in three weeks. It’s been making me nervous.”

“You and me and everyone else. Especially, I bet, guys who haven’t been real nice lately.”

I heard a bitter laugh. “You got that right. Anyway, I called because we’ve got a missing person. Someone who just might fit the category of ‘jerk.’ Doc Whiler. No evidence he’s a victim, or anything, but he’s been reported missing.”

“Who reported it?”

“His office staff, the receptionist called it in. I talked with his nurse practitioner, and she said she was the one who told the receptionist to call us. He hasn’t been in the office for two days, neither yesterday or today, and that’s just too unusual for them to ignore, she said.”

“What’s the jerk connection?”

“About like the others. Treats his women badly, throws his weight around in the community. He’s the long-time town doctor up here in Creede, so everyone has been cutting him a lot of slack. But I’ve heard more than I care to about his bad behavior.”

“If there’s nothing more than he’s missing, there’s not a lot to do, is there?”

“Naw, I just thought I’d let you know. Scott told me you’re coordinating the investigation. If it is another Burma Shave thing, well, I guess we’ll find some evidence somewhere on Friday, if the pattern holds.”

“Right. Meaning that whoever is doing it will be out Thursday night, probably, putting up little signs and so on. What’s your intuition of where? Could we catch the perp in action?”

“Maybe up here in the upper valley, but they’re kind of spread around, aren’t they? I mean, the Monte Vista guy was found down in Conejos County somewhere, the Pagosa guy way down south, or something. We’ve got only a few back roads up here, but east of South Fork there’s miles and miles of ’em.”

“Too bad we can’t have somebody in Washington DC turn on a spy satellite tomorrow night to watch things for us.”

“Yeah, well, maybe, maybe not. I guess that could help us catch this Burma Shave guy, but I know lots of people here who would hit the ceiling.”

“Right, in Durango, too. Remind me to tell you my black helicopter story sometime. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. But thanks for letting me know.” I disconnected.

Hall looked over at me. “Another one?”

“Not yet. Just a missing person. But if his head turns up somewhere, this will be useful, because he was missing yesterday. And getting a lead time established for however these things are being done could be very helpful.”

“Where is it this time?”

“That was Ralph Wertlinger, up in Creede.”

“So it’s Gunnison, Monte Vista, Pagosa Springs, and now Creede. Hmm. Western San Luis Valley and places next door to the west.”

“Assuming that this Doc Whiler person doesn’t just turn up.”

“Doc? I heard you ask about the jerk connection.”

“Town doctor, but not a nice guy, according to the sheriff. But there’s nothing much to do until he turns up, or at least his head.”

“So, that was Del Norte we went through while you were on the phone. We can head up to Creede, when we get to South Fork, if you want.” Another thing I love about Hal is his flexibility. I thought for a minute.

“No, let’s just head on over to Pagosa. If this is another one like the three others, there won’t be anything more happening until Friday. At least not that we’ll know about. I wouldn’t want to be in Doc Whiler’s shoes right now.”

So when we reached South Fork, we stayed on Highway 160, which runs along the South Fork of the Rio Grande until the climb up to Wolf Creek Pass, our other Continental Divide crossing on this trip. I’m not sure why, but I always feel better when we’re back on the west side—I guess it’s what I think of as “home.” And Wolf Creek Pass is easier than it used to be, because the highway department has finally added uphill passing lanes on the east side. Once again Hal had fun playing with his turbocharged car, zipping around RVs and big trucks that were laboring up the grade.

Just before the pass is Wolf Creek ski area, and Hal slowed down to scout the new lift. Although Wolf Creek almost always receives the most snow of any resort in Colorado, it’s a small place, attracting mostly locals. Of course, it aspires to be a destination, like Vail and Aspen, and so every now and then they invest in new equipment. The new high-speed chair would make the drive over from Durango worth it, at least after new snowfalls.

The long grade down the west side of Wolf Creek Pass provides spectacular views of the upper San Juan River valley, which the highway follows for the few miles into the little town of Pagosa Springs. The town grew in the valley, centered around the hot springs by the river, but new development on the plateau to the west is turning it into just another example of Colorado sprawl.

But sprawl or no, it still has trout streams nearby. We checked in to our B&B, and Hal took us west and then north on a county road to a place he knows about on the Piedra River, a good-sized tributary of the San Juan. Unlike our other two attempts on this trip, we succeeded in fooling the trout in the Piedra into thinking that our little fur-and-feather-covered hooks were edible.

In fact, at one point mayflies began coming off the water in waves—what fly-fishers call a “hatch,” although it’s really a mass metamorphosis of the larval stages into the adults—and the fish were literally boiling around our legs in their frenzy to eat. I even got bumped into a number of times. Because it started slowly, there was enough warning that we were able to figure out what kind of mayflies they were and which imitation would best mimic them. The term “catch-and-release” takes on new meaning when your fly is on the water for only seconds before a fish takes it.

After handling dozens of fish throughout the late afternoon, we decided on an Italian restaurant for dinner.

* * *

Ron Grange, the Archuleta County Sheriff, told us where to find Toni Henry, the daughter of headless Hollis Henry, on Thursday morning. Ron also warned us that Toni might not be as cooperative as we'd like—he told us of reports that she was spending all her evenings celebrating her father's demise. I dropped Hal off at a likely-looking spot for trout on the San Juan just above town and went looking for Toni Henry.

Ms. Henry worked as a clerk in an alternative music store, one of those places where you wish you'd brought earplugs and you know instinctively that it just won't do to ask about what Frank Sinatra recordings they have in stock—or even Bruce Springsteen, probably, unless you want one of those sneers of death from the help.

I walked into Tongue Whip Tapes & CDs, a little storefront just off the main drag in Pagosa Springs, and felt physically assaulted by the wave of sound. The band, whatever they were called, seemed to be playing the usual three-chord song by using all three chords simultaneously while braying unintelligible lyrics in another key. This was accompanied by a random thumping noise that I finally decided was the drummer. It was an outstanding example of White Guys With No Rhythm—I saw a CD sitting on a little rack on the stereo amplifier, with the prominent title “Snot.” I decided it was appropriate: it did seem to make my nose run.

I don't keep up with these things, but I believe that Antoinette Henry would be appropriately described as a “Goth.” Her short, spiky hair was dyed flat black, she was wearing all-black clothes with high-contrast black and white makeup, and she had enough bits and pieces of pointed jewelry stuck through various body parts to set off metal detectors without even going to the airport.

I decided that conversation would be impossible, so I walked up to Toni, stuck my shield in her face, sidestepped around the counter to the stereo amplifier, and poked the on/off switch.

“Hey, bitch, you can't do that!” She tried to shove me aside and reach for the power button, but I intercepted her in route by grabbing her right thumb in an interesting immobilizing hold I learned in an FBI course.

“Toni, you'd be surprised what I can do. For example, I can get the sheriff in here to take this place apart, looking for pirated CDs and tapes, and whatever other contraband you may have sitting around. I can arrest you right now for assaulting a police officer and for selling drug paraphernalia, based on that stuff in the window. I can break your arm if you don't hold still. Or, of far more interest to me and much less stress to you, I can get some questions answered. What'll it be?” And I gave her thumb an extra little twist for emphasis.

I knew that it hurt because of her breathing, so I kept up the pressure. Finally, she relented. “OK, OK, cop lady. Jesus! You're killing me, here.”

“You have one chance to get me to trust you, so when I let go, you need to be very, very polite, right? Otherwise, we'll have our conversation down at the sheriff's office, while his guys take this place apart. Understand?” I got a reluctant nod in response, so I let go and stepped back, ready for her to attack.

But she didn't. Instead, she massaged her right hand and sulked. It was then that I was able to get a better look at her and to classify her face. Beneath the makeup and sullen expression, I saw someone I recognized, someone I had seen only recently. It took a minute, and the face of one of Madge Glendon's WDL action squad members, the girl second from the left in the front row the day before, clicked in my head.

“Ah. I almost didn't recognize you without your camouflage fatigues. Maybe it's the makeup.” This produced even more of a pout.

“So what? What do you care?”

“Well, now, that’s actually a good question. I’m not sure, to tell the truth. I’ll have to think about it. Look. Your father got murdered, right? In a bizarre way, right? And a couple of other guys also got killed the same way. I’m doing the investigation, coordinating things among all these county sheriffs that are involved. I understand that you and your father weren’t getting along, but I can’t believe that you think that it’s OK for someone to be going around beheading people. I mean, c’mon.”

“Why not? From what I hear, they all deserved it. My old man sure did, asshole that he was.” Her defiance was unyielding.

“Are you telling me that you think it’s OK for this phantom beheader to be on the loose? Seriously?”

“Oppressed women need someone like this, to look after us.”

“Really? Maybe you’ll get lucky—maybe whoever’s doing this will do it only to people you don’t like. So, what was the problem with you and your father, anyway? What made you hate him this much? And don’t tell me it isn’t any of my business, because it is.”

“So maybe it’s your business, but why should I tell you? I don’t even know you.”

“Look. I’m trying to understand this jerk thing better. I mean, I was over in Alamosa yesterday and heard Madge Glendon, just like you. And that was all just bullshit political rhetoric, you know it as well as I do. Just because Madge doesn’t like somebody, that’s no reason to decapitate them. And I haven’t heard what was so bad about your father to justify this.”

“How about getting into my pants since I was fourteen? That enough?”

“Ah...I see.” I paused and took a breath. “Thanks for telling me, and I’m sorry to be so pushy about it. And as a cop, I still have to try to catch the killer. But as a woman, well, I’m inclined to agree that he deserved it. I did hear that he had to settle a lawsuit with a cleaning lady, or someone like that.”

“Right, but even more than that, I think his hitting on me killed my mother, essentially. She found out, I think, and she just couldn’t take it.”

“Hmm. What’s done is done, and I suppose you can make a good argument that what happened to him is for the best. But I still need to catch whoever’s doing this. And regardless of what Madge was saying about your action team yesterday, I can’t imagine that you or your friends are doing this. So who is?”

“Wish I knew, so I could give him a medal.” Her defiance was back.

“Other people have said the same thing. Do you know a guy around here named Kristof von Stier?”

“That clown? Naw, it couldn’t be him. He plays with swords a lot, but I think it’s because his dick is tiny, or limp, or something. I don’t think he could ever actually kill someone.”

“Anyone else you know of that could?”

“If I think of anyone, I’ll let you know.” I didn’t really believe her. She was finally smiling, but the sarcasm was obvious.

* * *

Kristof von Stier had an antique shop up on the hillside above town, and the sign on the door said “Open.” I went in, but he wasn’t anywhere I could see. His inventory was on display, though, and I’d come to see it almost as much as I’d come to see him.

It was quite remarkable. Lots of pointy, sharp metal things, swords of various designs, lengths, degrees of deadliness. Suits of armor. Shields. Battle axes. All sorts of other strange weapons. I tried to pick up a mace, a spiky iron ball on a chain attached to a handle, but I could barely lift it. As I worked my way back through the shop, I became aware of a strange sound from the back, from outside, it sounded like. An occasional grunt, and a soft noise, like *swok*.

When I got to the back door, I looked out to see a tall, nearly emaciated man, shirtless, with a huge handle-bar moustache, wielding a long two-handed battle sword, the kind with the big cross-shaped hand guard like the one Mel Gibson used in that movie about the Scots. Around the patio, there were several pedestals, more than a dozen, apparently made from 4x4 posts, each with a melon on the top. Based on what Sarah Robinson had told me about the moustache, I decided that this had to be von Stier.

He swung the sword around in a circle over his head and brought it around at about chest level, swinging through one of the melons with the *swok* I'd heard before. The melon didn't move. It was all so strange that I couldn't help myself.

"I've always found it easier to cut my cantaloupes on a cutting board on the kitchen counter." I said softly, as he leaned on his sword between melons.

He looked up, startled. Then he lifted the sword with an effort and touched the tip of it to one of the melons. The top half fell to the ground with a thud.

"Yes, and it doesn't involve so much setting up, does it, then?" Despite the name, the accent was strongly British, overlain with a hint of what sounded like acting-lesson German. "May I help you?"

I found my shield and showed it to him. "I'm Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I'm helping the county sheriffs around the region with what's being called the 'Burma Shave Murders.' I expect you've heard of them."

He leaned the sword against one of the posts and picked up a towel. "Oh, yes, they've become quite the talk of the town, what with a local victim. Nobody liked Hollis very much, but they sure are having fun talking about him now."

He put on a shirt, pulled a monocle out of the pocket, and screwed it into his right eye.

"No doubt. I've heard similar things about the other victims as well. I'm wondering what you can tell me about your sales in the last couple of years or so."

"You think maybe I sold someone a murder weapon? Goodness. I guess I should be flattered. Based on what I've read, it would take a very high-quality blade to have done this, the best."

"Like this one, perhaps?" I waved toward the sword he'd been swinging around, and he picked it back up.

"You know, heads, or, rather, necks, are considerably tougher to cut through than these cantaloupes. I suppose a very skilled swordsman could use this for beheadings, although it could be a bit messy, probably not as clean as the papers have reported our local ones to be. He'd have to catch the victim at just the right place," he pointed to a spot on his neck about half-way up, "about here. And he'd have to catch it with the sweet spot of the blade, about here." He pinged his index finger on a section of the sword about two-thirds of the way to the tip, and it rang like a chime.

"Most of my sales are to people, other collectors, who don't live around here, not even in Colorado. The internet has made it possible to reach collectors world-wide, and I do my buying and selling by Federal Express, for the most part."

"Why the shop, then?"

“I have to store my inventory somewhere. And I do get the occasional walk-in visitor, like you. But as far as I can recall, the only sale I’ve had to someone face-to-face recently was to a fellow from over in Alamosa. A beautiful antique katana. He said it matched one he already had, and he wanted to make them a set. I think buying it was a big stretch for his budget.”

“‘Katana’?”

“A two-handed Japanese sword with a slightly curved blade. Beautiful ebony handle. About a meter long altogether. Light and fast, in contrast to this monster I’ve got here. These were made to hack through armor with brute force. The katanas are more finesse oriented.” He had walked into the shop and set the battle sword on a rack on the back wall.

“Why would someone stretch his budget for a sword?”

“I have two sorts of customers, generally. There are the serious collectors, and there are the other guys who are massaging their egos somehow. They want something to hang on a wall to prove to the world that they’re real men, I guess. I’ve had people order special swords to hang with their coat of arms. Hmm.” He looked around. “You said your name is Trieri? Sounds northern Italian, at least at some time in the past. So you’d get a set of rapiers, what people generally think of as ‘Three Musketeers Swords,’ only the Italian design, like this one.”

He had walked to the front wall where there was an ornate, four-foot sword with an elaborate, full basket protecting the handle.

“I seem to recall something like this in the big-budget movie version of *Romeo and Juliet*. They were dueling with those in one hand and a long dagger in the other.”

“Precisely. You have a good eye, and memory. After years, centuries, even, of hacking at each other with those big broadswords like I was slicing the cantaloupes with, someone figured out that with a little skill you could slip a blade between the cracks of your opponent’s armor with a well-placed thrust. Changed everything. The battle sword is too heavy and unwieldy to use in a true sword-fight, at least as we think of swordfights now.”

“So your local and regional sales are limited. Had any break-ins, stuff stolen, anything like that?” As interesting as the history was, I wanted to try to stay on topic.

“Never. That’s one reason I’m here. Low crime rate.”

“It doesn’t sound as if you think these murders are being done with any of your equipment.”

“It doesn’t seem likely, although I guess you never know.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about any of the victims?” I usually give people a couple of chances to tell me what I already know.

“Hmm. What I know about Hollis Henry is probably common knowledge. He was a cattle rancher, had a big spread up Piedra Road north of town. His family has been in the area for several generations, but his daughter will probably sell the place. She doesn’t seem like the type to run a ranch. But she’ll make a ton of money from selling it, so I guess she has a motive for wanting him dead.” He shot me a meaningful look, although what he meant and what I took from it were probably quite different.

I didn’t say anything, so he continued.

“Other than that, I guess I’ve heard that Hollis wasn’t very popular around town. Had a reputation of being hard to get along with. I suppose that’s the basis for this jerk business, in his case. And if the other two victims fit the same mold, that’s something you can look into.”

“Did you know either of the other victims?” Third time, I thought, is the charm.

“Don’t think so. I don’t get up to Gunnison much, and the news was pretty sparse about that one. The one over in the Valley, though, got some space in the paper. That guy was a high-school teacher, right?”

I decided to raise the stakes. “One thing about these high-profile cases, the politicians want results. Like I said, I’m involved to coordinate the investigation in the different counties. The Governor’s office put it in my lap, and they’re impatient. So, what happens is, my boss, the CBI Director in Denver, gets pressured by the Governor and he pressures me. And it turns into a little game of find the killer before he kills again, and if a few citizens’ lives get disrupted in the process, well, that’s the breaks. It gets easier and easier to get obstruction of justice warrants, because the Governor also puts pressure on district attorneys and judges.”

He cocked his head sideways a little and looked puzzled. “Nice speech. But what’s it got to do with me?”

I had to laugh. “Very perceptive question, Mr. von Stier. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. Do you have travel plans in the near future? I may need to talk with you again.”

“It sounds like you suspect me of something.”

“That’s my job. I suspect almost everybody of something. I’ll be in touch if I need to talk with you.”

* * *

I found Hal sitting on a rock by the river, near the spot where I’d left him. He was staring off into space with a truly goofy expression—even the crunching of the tires on the gravel didn’t snap him out of his reverie. So I got out and sat down beside him.

“Hey there, tiger. Where are ya?” This got a response—he leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

“Playing the tape over again. See that big rock out there?” He pointed toward the middle of the river, at a boulder in the midst of the main current.

“You mean the one with the eddies this side of it?”

“Right. And the nice little current seam on the far side. Well, it turns out that just where that seam peels off the rock, there’s a dead spot just to this side. I was casting around the near side of the rock, over here, and I thought I was seeing things—a big nose kept poking up into the edge of the seam. So I watched for a while, and, sure enough, there was a fish sipping whatever was floating around the far side of the rock. I got out my little bug net and figured out that he was eating caddis emergers. Then I had to figure out how to cast to that spot—with the currents on this side, it was going to be hard. Anyway, to make a long story short, I got lucky and made a perfect cast and found out that what was eating those caddis emergers was a two-foot brown trout. Biggest trout I’ve caught in a long, long time.”

“Two feet! But you’ve got your light outfit.”

“Yep. Three-weight, with a 7x tippet. I had no idea what I was getting into. But he cooperated, mostly. Didn’t swim up around the far side of the rock. Just kind of pulled and made a couple of runs. My, my.” His grin was as goofy as ever.

“You don’t have your net. How’d you manage?”

“Oh, I got him in to about arm’s length and intentionally broke him off. He was getting tired and I didn’t really want to handle him. He’s probably down there sulking somewhere. Hurt feelings,

embarrassed, whatever big fish feel.” He shook himself, kind of like a dog would. “So, anyway, how did things go with you? Ready to head home?”

I was. It was our fifth day on the road, and I’d been working most of the time, either running around interviewing people or thinking about it, trying to sort through the discrepancies.

He hadn’t bothered to take off his waders, so I drove. It gave me a chance to play with the car’s power. On the long uphill grade west out of Pagosa Springs, I downshifted and pulled in to the center lane to get around an 18-wheel gravel truck. He asked again about my progress as the acceleration pushed us back into the leather seats.

“More puzzles. It would be nice if one of these guys who likes to play with swords knew all of the victims, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. It would also be nice if everyone was obviously telling the truth, but that’s not the case, either.”

“You’ve always told me that everyone’s got something to hide. Except me, of course.” His goofy grin was gone, replaced by a triumphant smirk.

“Oh, I’ve got a whole dossier on you, buddy.” And I reached over and patted his Gore-Tex covered leg. “But, yeah, it does seem that everybody’s got something they’re afraid to have made public. And it just gets in the way. I mean, I don’t really care what web-sites people visit in private, you know? Or what they do with their tax forms.”

“But even if they’re not trying to hide stuff like that, I think most people are just too private to open up to you right away. I mean, people don’t like to answer a stranger’s questions. Especially a stranger with a badge.”

“When am I ever going to get you to call it a *shield*, anyway? Can’t take you out in public, or the company of my colleagues, if you don’t know the jargon.” I looked over at him and winked.

“Oh, right. Shield. It’s a *shield*. I keep forgetting. But if you’re concerned about jargon, just be glad that I don’t insist you learn mine. Quasi-geostrophy. Biogeochemical cycling. Catalytic ozone destruction.”

“Hmm. ‘Quasi-geostrophy.’ Sounds like a useful relaxation mantra.” I repeated it several times, and finally tripped over it. “Well, maybe not. Too much like sneezing.”

He laughed. “In graduate school, it was the stuff of nightmares. We all knew we’d have to explain it on our oral exam. And with math, it’s easy. But in words it’s a nightmare.”

We had crossed the Piedra River, just past the restaurant at Chimney Rock, and were headed across the flats along Yellowjacket Creek, when Hal saw the signs. I was about to zoom around a vacation trailer meandering along well under the speed limit, but Hal put his hand on top of mine on the gearshift.

“Whoa, there. Let’s stay in this lane for a couple of minutes. There’s a grade with a passing lane about a mile ahead, and I see some little signs coming up.”

“Huh?”

“‘Womyn must not,’ and it’s ‘womyn’ with a ‘y’, uh, ‘tolerate,’ stay with me here, uh, ‘men whose psyches,’ ... ‘only hate.’”

I slowed the car as fast as I could without skidding on the gravel on the shoulder.

“Where’s my phone? Think we can get a signal here?” I looked around the ridge tops for a tower as I fumbled in my purse.

“Don’t get too excited, now. I didn’t see a head, just the four signs. And they were hand-lettered, it looked like. The ‘y’ in ‘womyn’ is a dead give-away, no pun intended. This is Madge’s handiwork, I’m certain of it.”

I was nodding at him while listening to Derek’s office phone ringing. He finally picked it up.

“Derek? Annette. Listen, Hal and I are on our way west toward town, and we just passed a little Burma Shave type poem on four signs. On the flats just west of the Piedra crossing by the Chimney Rock Restaurant. We’re going to walk back and check them out, but how about getting someone over here to dust them and so on? Just signs, no heads, so there’s no evidence of a crime, beyond littering, I suppose.”

As usual, he was on the ball. “You’re still in Archuleta County, if you haven’t gone over Yellowjacket Pass, so I’ll call Ron Grange. Maybe he can send out the same people who investigated his crime scene last week.”

“Good idea, thanks.” I put on the emergency blinkers and began backing slowly and carefully down the shoulder, toward the last sign. About the time I got close enough for comfort, about 50 yards, my phone chirped.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Annette? Ron Grange here. Your guy tells me that you found another poem.”

“Yep. But Hal, that’s my husband, he works at FSU in Durango, says it looks like the work of a radical women’s advocacy group there, outfit called the Womyn’s Defense League, WDL.”

“You looked at the signs closely yet?”

“I was just about to.”

“We found another set east of town, positioned for east-bound traffic to see, this morning. Haven’t been out west yet. The ones we found have got a ‘WDL’ stamp on them, so I bet it’s the same people.”

“Another set? My goodness. Bad poetry all over the place. What’s your poem?”

“I’ve got it here in my pocket. Uh, let’s see, well, here goes:

*Women Must
Not Tolerate
Men Whose Psyches
Only Hate.”*

“Aw, how disappointing. That sounds like ours here. I’ll double check, but I think that’s what Hal read out as we went by.”

“So, your Mr. Petersen said you’re on the flats by Yellowjacket Creek. I’ll send someone right out, see if there are prints. We got loads from the other set of signs this morning.”

“I expect that this Waddle outfit will put more of ’em out. I saw a speech yesterday, lots of political rhetoric. They’re on a roll.”

“Waddle? What’s that?” When I told him, he laughed until he got hiccups.

* * *

Five

Friday morning, I went into my office early. I had four days' worth of mail— electronic and paper—to deal with, a staff meeting to lead, and an unknown number of phone calls to return. I also suspected that it just might be a busy day with new poems, the WDL kind and otherwise.

After getting off the phone with Ron Grange Thursday afternoon, I'd asked Hal to dig out the digital camera and document the signs. Like the ones that Grange had found east of Pagosa Springs, these also had a "WDL" stamp on them. And, though they were on the same type of sign-board as the murderer's signs, these were hand-lettered, rather neatly, and posted on 1x2 pine furring strips, pounded into the soft dirt of the ditch. It didn't take too long for one of Grange's deputies to arrive, and he confirmed that "our" signs matched those found east of town, almost exactly.

The rest of our trip home was uneventful, at least in terms of my investigation. Hal took me out to dinner at a steakhouse up by Vallecito Lake, and he even invited me to drive on the way there. I put the S4 through its paces on the hills and twisties of Florida Road and felt myself falling even more in love with its handling and fun-factor. But I let Hal drive home—with my rib steak I had a half-bottle of a lovely Napa Valley cabernet from Oakville, just enough to make me feel a little dreamy. Being married to a full-time designated driver has its advantages.

The next morning I caught up on my email and looked over the paper mail before my staff arrived, and then I convened the staff meeting. I caught them up on my week and how the investigation was proceeding, or not, and then they filled me in on what had been going on. Fortunately, there wasn't much.

When the phone finally rang for me, I discovered that I'd been holding my breath, figuratively speaking. And when Sally told me it was Ralph Wertlinger over in Creede, I was actually relieved.

"Ralph! I guess I was sort of expecting to hear from you. Any news?"

"Well, it's Friday. And Doc Whiler turned up, at least the top part of him."

"Aw, hell. Another one, huh? I guess you'd better tell me about it."

"In a way, I'm off the hook, although I don't know what we're going to do without an experienced doctor around here. The new guy still seems a little green. Anyway, they found Doc up toward Lake City, in Hinsdale County. One of Steve Phillips' guys found him on the South Clear Creek Road, up past Browns Lake State Wildlife Area. Saw the signs, braced himself for what he figured he'd see, but it still scared the crap out of him."

I'd grabbed a topographic atlas from my bookshelf and found the side road he was talking about. Past the wildlife area, there wasn't much of anything along it. It stayed in a little valley while the highway climbed up to Spring Creek Pass.

"So it's across the county line from you, huh, but still on your side of the Continental Divide? Are the remains going up to Lake City?" Hinsdale County has very little in the way of towns or people, and Lake City is the only community of any size at all.

"Yeah, Steve almost tried to talk me into taking this one on, I guess he figured that it's my doctor, after all. But he came to his senses." He chuckled.

"Steve Phillips. I guess I don't remember ever meeting him. Ralph? Do you suppose you could pass along a suggestion? It might be good for the overall investigation if he called Belinda Edwards, up in Gunnison. Not to do the Hinsdale investigation, just to be there for the post-mortem. She could tell if the

MO is identical and so on. Belinda's the ME up there in Gunnison, and she explained some details of the second murder to me." I hate to meddle in other people's investigations, but this was too important an opportunity to pass up.

"That's a great idea. I'm sure Steve will think so, too, and he can probably persuade his coroner to go along with it."

"Ron Grange has had some copy-cat signs put up, and I want to be sure that we don't wind up with copy-cat murders. Are all of the other things the same, you know, the signs and so on?"

"I went over to check it out, and, yeah, as far as I can tell they are. Same type of signs, same steel posts, same spacing. Except this time, there was only one set of signs, not the usual two sets. Steve and I talked about it, and we figure maybe it's because there's not likely to be any traffic coming down the road that didn't go up first. Past the wildlife area, there's a fishing camp, but not much else."

"Hmm. Suggesting that the perp knows the territory, eh?"

"Yeah, or else he was pressed for time. I had more guys out on patrol last night, and maybe the perp saw some of them and got spooked. In fact, Steve and I were speculating that maybe the guy went across the county line because of seeing my patrols. Uh, you said that Ron's had some copy-cat signs?"

"Right. Put up by a feminist group from the university here in Durango. One set of signs on each side of Pagosa, but they were hand-lettered and stuck on pine boards instead of on fence posts. Hal and I found the set on the west side of Pagosa on the way home yesterday."

"I'll tell you mine if you'll tell me yours."

"Huh? Oh, the poems." I had to laugh, and then I recited the WDL doggerel.

"'Psyche'? Sounds rather high-toned for our murderer. That how you ID'd the poets?"

"They also spelled 'women' with a 'y' instead of an 'e,' which is almost a trademark for them. And close-up, you can see a stamp of their logo." I could almost see him rolling his eyes. "So, I'm waiting."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm working myself up to it. You know, it's weird. I still remember, back in high school, back in the last century and all that, one of my worst experiences ever was in English class, I had to recite a poem. *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, that classic by, uh, Coleridge, I think. You know, 'water, water everywhere' and all that. Didn't have to memorize it, thank God, just read it. Scared the living bejesus out of me, almost made me wet my pants, standing there up in front of the class. I've never liked poetry since."

"Ralph, this is only a short little couplet. Not an epic, or anything. And it's just me, not a class." I was trying not to laugh at the poor guy.

"I know, I know. OK." I could hear him take a breath. "Here goes:

*It's Really Quite
A Simple Task,
A Jerk A Week,
That's All We Ask."*

I was writing as quickly as I could, so I didn't respond immediately.

"Annette? You there? Was it that bad?"

“No, no Ralph, it was fine. I was writing it down. And thinking, a little. It seems, I don’t know, different from the other three. But the ‘jerk a week’ thing was in one of the others, so it’s the same basic message.”

“Right, I saw that, too.”

“So, you said that Doc Whiler fit the jerk profile. Any specifics? People I should talk to? I need to come back your way and finish up some interviews in the Valley, so I might as well come up to Creede, too.”

“I expect there’s lots of folks who’d be able to talk about Doc. You’ll be wanting to find out about enemies and so on, I’d guess.”

“Right, and if there’s anything I can put together about him and the other victims.”

“Let me know when you’re going to be here, and I’ll get something arranged. I reckon you can start with me.”

“Well, sure, but why?”

“Oh, I’ve got some amazing stories for you. A couple of years ago, my sister JoAnne finally wised up enough to divorce the jerk. But before that Doc was my brother-in-law.”

* * *

About the time I finished the conversation with Ralph Wertlinger, Sally Brigman, my receptionist and all-around person Friday, whom I’ve learned I couldn’t function without, brought in more telephone messages. One was from Hal and said “called about lunch.” The other was from someone called “Naomi,” and it had a strange prefix. Since it was only about 9:30, I decided to make Hal wait. If things kept up at this pace all morning, I’d be ready for another big steak for lunch.

“Valley Women’s Center. Can I help you?” So the prefix, I thought, was back over Wolf Creek Pass, on the east side of the continental divide somewhere. Around here, when people say “Valley,” they usually mean the San Luis one.

“This is Annette Trieri in Durango—I’m returning a call from Naomi.” I had to wait only for a few seconds, and I found myself listening to a valley girl—of the California variety.

“Ms. Trieri? Thanks so much for calling back? I’m Naomi Winters, I’m the director of the Valley Women’s Center? We offer different services for women, including safe-houses for victims of domestic violence, shelters for homeless women so they can have a place while they get back on their feet, health services, things like that?”

“It sounds familiar. I think there’s probably something like it over this way. Part of the county’s social services department, or something. What can I do for you?” I was hoping that this wasn’t some kind of solicitation, and she didn’t disappoint me.

“I heard from the sheriff’s office that you’re coordinating the investigation of these murders, you know, the ones where the guys are getting their heads cut off? And, well, Bonnie Scharmatz has been to see us a bunch of times? So I feel kind of connected to the whole thing?”

How does she not drive her staff crazy? I thought.

“Anyway, I thought you might be interested in something? See, we also have a phone bank, with telephone counseling for domestic abuse, crisis intervention, that kind of thing? And for the last week, or week and a half or so, our phone calls are way down, you know?”

“Ah, when you say ‘way down,’ how much way down do you mean?”

“Like 90% way down, I mean, we’re only getting about a tenth the calls we usually do? It varies from month to month, of course, holidays are the worst? But this is also a bad time of year because school will be starting soon and for some reason people are under a lot of stress? But for the past, say, ten days, the calls are way down?”

Does she practice that inflection? I wondered.

“It sounds to me as if you think this is somehow connected to the murders I’m investigating.” I promised myself not to ask questions, not directly, at least.

“Well, I thought you might be interested? I mean, maybe it’s working? These guys, these jerks who are getting killed and the poems and all the publicity, maybe other guys are paying attention and being nice?”

“Of course, in the past ten days, we’ve had two more of these murders.”

“Two?” This was a gasp in addition to a question.

“Right. Last week south of Pagosa Springs and a new one last night, which hasn’t hit the papers yet. So maybe your calls will stop altogether.” My intuition in situations like this—where a civilian seems to be getting involved in an investigation without invitation—is to downplay their role, to get them to ease off. But a plan began to take shape in my head.

“Say. Maybe you can do something for me. These cases have generated a lot of publicity, all around Colorado and even in other states. Both the Denver papers have been on a feeding frenzy, and the publicity in Colorado is just huge. If you’re right, I mean, if the publicity is really suppressing domestic violence, then I bet that phone banks or whatever in other parts of the state would also be having fewer calls. See what I mean?” Nuts, I thought. I blew it. I asked a question.

“Sure I do, you know? Maybe I could call around?”

“Exactly. See what you can find out. I’ll be interested to hear. And I bet that you’ll find that other places are having fewer calls, just like you. If that’s the case, there might be a newspaper story in it, or a TV story. I know a guy at the *Durango Herald*, Randy Fredericks, and I can have him call you. Randy’s reported on other cases I’ve had, and he’s a straight shooter.”

“You think publicity is a good idea?”

“If you get interviewed, it will certainly give your Valley Women’s Center great visibility.” I resisted the compulsion to add “Right?”

“And from my perspective, it has certain advantages as well.” I rambled on before she could ask another question. “We’re going to catch whoever’s doing this, but I can’t say when. And in the meantime, publicity about this might persuade the killer that he’s converted all the jerks out there to nice guys, and he’ll ease off. We really don’t need more dead people.”

This would have to do for now—I didn’t want to tell her my real plan.

“Oh, so I get free publicity and you get the killings to stop, right? Great idea!”

Finally! I thought. She actually ended a sentence without that question mark inflection, short sentence though it may have been.

“Right. I’ll let Randy know about this and give him your number.” And I was able to escape.

I called Hal back and discovered that he wanted to have lunch, not a romantic lunch for the two of us, but rather a working lunch involving Provost John Martin. I’d known Martin for a couple of years

because he was peripherally involved in a couple of my cases when I was with the Durango PD. To me, he was a stuffed-shirt academic—not the easy-going kind of university administrator that Hal managed to be, but good example of a bureaucrat. Smart and effective, yes, good sense of humor, but also a stuffed-shirt bureaucrat. Going to lunch with him wasn't my idea of a social occasion.

“Does this have anything to do with that Waddle rally we saw in Alamosa?”

“Yep. That, plus those WDL signs we found along the highway yesterday. John's political sensitivities are finely tuned, and he worries about a lot of things, like the U's exposure on things like this.”

“I don't think that's anything to worry about. Waddle didn't obstruct anybody. I mean, it was obvious that their signs aren't the same as the perp's. And I'm not going to worry about littering or anything like that. There's free expression, after all.”

“Yeah, I know. But I also think he's interested in getting something on Madge, something he can use against her. She's got tenure, so she's untouchable unless there are legal issues of some kind that would show her to be unfit as a professor. So how about meeting us downtown? My treat.”

There isn't any place to eat in the office park where the CBI building is anyway, so being taken out somewhere nice was an opportunity not to be missed. I knew it would be nice because Hal wouldn't take his boss anywhere else.

“Tell you what. I'll come up to campus and meet you guys at your office. I need to talk with Gil Taylor anyway, and I'll go find him after lunch.”

“Gil? I think he's probably around, but you should call him, to make sure. What's that about?”

“Sample analysis. I want to see if he can tweak up his equipment enough to pick anything out of the formalin background in the victims' tissue samples. This business of these guys all getting walked up to bothers me. Maybe they were drunk or something.”

“Or drugged, huh?”

“Right. The fact that they all had their blood drained also has me puzzled. Maybe the perp is trying to hide something. But Gil might find it in the brain tissue.”

“Ugh. And here we started off talking about lunch. Let's not go into this with John, OK?”

* * *

Because we all were on campus, we decided to walk over to the faculty club rather than navigate the traffic and parking downtown. That was just fine with me, because I don't get up to the campus very often, and, especially in the summer, it's a beautiful place. Compared to my dreary office park, it's positively uplifting, what with the landscaping and the views.

We had lunch, and I was mulling over the provost's comments on my way to the chemistry building, where Gil Taylor runs the department's analytical laboratory. Hal had it right—Martin was looking for information about Madge Glendon that he could use to question her continued tenure. And it was more than simply the responsible interest of a provost—I sensed there was something personal in it, so I pushed back on him a little.

“But John, surely there's such a thing as academic freedom on top of the usual constitutional freedom of expression, no?”

“Of course, of course. But here at FSU, first and foremost we strive to be a community of scholars. Our women's studies program is a scholarly program. Faculty members are free to engage in political

activism, but that should be secondary to their scholarship. Professor Glendon seems to have made political activism her main focus, and that's just not appropriate. Of course, it's for her department chair and dean to decide whether it's in the way of her duties. But it's for me to be concerned with legal matters." And he actually looked down his nose at me when he said this.

"But weren't a lot of university faculty involved in the civil rights movements—didn't some of them get arrested in those demonstrations? And what about Vietnam? As far as I've seen, Professor Glendon isn't even coming close to that level of civil disobedience."

"That's what I'm trying to verify. If she's just in the protest mode, that's fine, assuming she's fulfilling her normal responsibilities. But if she's connected to these murders, well, that's something else altogether."

It took some doing, but I had finally persuaded him that we had no reason to think that Glendon was connected to the murders. Now, I was having trouble not resenting his attitude.

But that was interrupted when I came around the corner of the student union building and ran smack into a demonstration of some sort. It didn't me take very long to figure out that it was connected to my cases—in groups of four, young women were parading around with protest signs displaying the WDL stamp and the three poems that had been in the papers as well as the new one, the one that Ralph had read to me over the phone only a few hours earlier. The whole thing was rather nicely choreographed, actually—the girls were chanting their poems, each reciting the line on her sign, taking turns with the poems. They were even reciting them in the right chronological order.

Someone, I thought, had put some effort into this—someone with the connections to have found out about that fourth poem quickly. It wasn't too surprising that the fourth poem was public—with the internet and continual AP updates, news has become truly current—but there was the inevitable time lag with getting the signs made, getting the fourth group of girls integrated with the choreography of the other three and so on. It almost seemed as if the whole thing was planned in advance, as if the WDL had advanced knowledge of the fourth killing. I began to wonder if maybe Provost John Martin had a point.

Other than the sixteen college girls parading around in their little groups, the only people at the demonstration appeared to me to fall into the category of curious on-lookers—a few college students, the boys trying not to ogle openly and some groups of young women whispering among themselves; various adults standing under trees in the shade, including a couple of men in suits and four women in professional office attire; various groupings of three, which I figured must be new students and their parents. And then I noticed another person, standing in deeper shade almost behind some bushes, watching the whole thing as if it were a freak show. I walked over his way, coming up to him just out of his line of sight.

"Dino! Dino Papandrea! Haven't seen you in—what?—nearly a year? What in the world are you doing here?" When I said his name, Dino had jumped about a foot, and I swear that when he landed I could feel the ground shake.

Dino—his real name is Dionysus but everyone calls him Dino—is an extremely large fellow. He put himself through graduate school by acting as the chauffeur, bodyguard, and all-around muscle for an art dealer in Santa Fe. The dealer was a crook, and Dino helped me make the case on him when he was in Colorado stealing antiquities, so we're friends.

"Oh! You startled me. Annette! Annette Trieri, it's great to see you." The rumbling of his voice had barely faded when he swept me up in a hug that squeezed my breath out. When he set me back down, he was positively beaming. "I wondered if I'd run into you sometime, and I meant to call, but I've just been swamped."

I finally got my breath back. “What are you doing here, anyway. I mean, watching this little circus, sure, but why are you on campus?”

“Well, I finished my Ph.D. last winter, and then I went to Europe for a few months. Saw the family home in Thessalonika, bummed around a while. I came back and managed to get a position here as a philosophy instructor. Not a tenure-track faculty job, but it’s a start. I taught two summer courses. What have you been doing with yourself lately?”

I’d come to know Dino well enough that he wasn’t as scary to me as he usually is to others. I mean, he’s nearly seven feet tall, weighs a good 350 pounds, has a single black eyebrow, generally sports a three-day growth of beard, and rides a Harley and dresses the part. Some people are just intimidated by the guy. What took me a while was getting used to the idea that he reads philosophy books for amusement, the way most people read, say, mystery novels.

So I told him about getting married last spring and my new job at the CBI.

“CBI? As in Colorado Bureau of Investigation? So, the papers say that the cases with these poems are yours.” His single eyebrow had a complicated double arch in it.

“Technically, each case belongs to the sheriff of the county where the body—er, the head, we haven’t found bodies—where the head was found. But I got handed the job of coordinating all the investigations. And the sheriffs seem to like the idea, I think.”

“So that’s why you’re here? Checking up on these demonstrators?”

“No, I just blundered into them. I was on my way over to the chemistry building.” I shrugged.

He was nodding. “Me, too. I got the final syllabus for my fall courses finished, and I was going to grab a late lunch in the student union here. It’s been a long time since I saw an actual campus demonstration. Takes me back. But what’s the deal with these women? How come they’re chanting these poems?”

I explained about Professor Madge Glendon and her Womyn’s Defense League, and how they seem to have latched onto the Burma Shave Murders as a *cause célèbre* to get publicity for domestic violence issues.

“Madge Glendon? Oh, I remember her. She was on the committee that was interviewing for new instructors in the humanities. She asked me how I felt about women, women’s rights and so on, and all the other people on the interview committee rolled their eyes and shook their heads.”

“How’d you answer?”

“I asked her for a context, tried to be philosophical, and tried to be very, very politically correct. I could tell it was a loaded question. So this WDL business explains a lot. But surely you don’t think she’s behind those murders, do you?”

“No, I don’t see how she could be. But I do need to ask her a couple of hard questions.” That fourth poem was still on my mind.

* * *

I’d expected to find Gil Taylor in his laboratory, because I had called ahead as Hal suggested. But when I got there, the door was closed and a note was taped to it. I read “Abducted by Aliens—Check Chem. Dept. Office.”

The tone fit perfectly with Gil’s sense of humor. He and I have worked together on several cases, beginning with the one that introduced me to Hal. The City of Durango and La Plata County cooperate

on various law enforcement matters, and they have a joint facility for analyzing drugs and other strange substances. But Gil runs a state-of-the-art research laboratory for the university's faculty and students, and his equipment is far more sophisticated than what local law enforcement has. So I had managed to get him on contract for the city, and his equipment has provided crucial information on more than one occasion.

The office of the chemistry department—down the hall and one floor up from Gil's lab—was completely remodeled since the last time I'd been there. That time I was there to do a search for evidence of the department chair's involvement in a murder case. She wound up dead herself, in an avalanche on Red Mountain Pass, and so it shouldn't have surprised me that a new department chair would have changed the look of the place.

Gil was sitting in the office, at the desk facing the door where you'd normally expect to find someone like a receptionist. Gil's a tall, skinny guy, and it looked as if he was sitting at a kindergarten desk. The strange picture was completed by the telephone headset Gil was wearing. He blushed when he saw me come through the door.

"Hey, Annette, glad you found...oop, 'scuse me...FSU chemistry, may I help you?...No, he's not in just now, can I...Oh, hi, Alice, this is Gil Taylor...Naw, they talked me in to filling in here in the office while Bucky took everyone to the Waddle demonstration over at the student union...He needs to talk to Bucky now? All I can do is deliver the message. And, Alice? Tell him that his wife just walked in and I need to talk to her. 'Bye."

He tore off the headset and threw it on the desk. "This damned thing is going to make me crazy. I don't see how she puts up with it."

"Who's Bucky?" That was about the only part of the conversation that I hadn't figured out. "Alice" was undoubtedly Alice Swan, Hal's administrative assistant, and, of course, I knew about the demonstration.

He pointed over his shoulder with his right thumb, and I saw the little plaque by the inner door that said "Buckman V. Thorndyke IV, Chair of Chemistry." Vague recollections of Hal's mentioning a recruitment last spring flitted through my head.

"So the new chemistry chair and his office staff are at that Waddle demonstration I ran across? What's up with that?"

"Well," Gil was shaking his head. "Don't get me wrong. Bucky's a great guy, and he's already earned his stripes in the department. We were lucky to get him, after that scandal with the previous chair and Ralph's murder and all the disarray. He came to us from DuPont with a stellar research record and exceptional management experience. And he's loaded, family money, we think, so salary wasn't an issue like we were worried that it might be. But there's this one thing. See, he has this overwhelming crush on Madge Glendon. So he wanted to go to the demonstration to see if she'd be there, but he didn't want to go alone. So he got the staff to go with him, and they talked me into doing this."

The phone rang. "Oh, crap, 'scuse me again...Hal? Um, it's like I told Alice...Oh. She's right here." And he handed me the receiver.

"Hal? Don't pester my friend Gil."

"Hi, darlin'. I'm not, really. I'm sure the message will get to Bucky. But since you're there, I thought I'd ask if you have any insights from lunch. We didn't have a chance to talk without John."

"I do, I think, but they can wait 'til dinner, OK? Did you know that Madge Glendon's people are having a demonstration?"

“Alice told me. She’s the fount of all knowledge, at least as far as the campus grapevine is concerned.”

“There are some interesting things about that, too, things that you can tell John tomorrow. See you later.”

I turned back to Gil. “Y’know, it seems to me that Madge Glendon might not be—how do I say this?—Bucky’s type? I heard a speech by her on Wednesday, and some of her remarks suggested to me that her tastes might not run to men, exactly.”

He sighed. “Yeah, we’ve told Bucky this, it’s almost a running joke. ‘Thorndyke chases the other...’ anyway, I’m sure you can figure it out. And if you’ve seen her, you’ll know that she’s not exactly what we guys call a ‘looker,’ right? That doesn’t bother him, either. He keeps mumbling about pheromones and how they’re irresistible and there’s no point fighting it. And he’s going to win her over, he says. I suppose that if anyone can do it, he can. But this little soap opera isn’t why you came up to campus to see me.”

I had to stop laughing to talk. “No, but I seem to have walked into something almost as interesting. No, what I wanted to talk about is more analysis work. Have you followed the news stories about the Burma Shave Murders?” He nodded. “What we have are tissue samples from the victims, but they’ve been soaked in formalin. I’m wondering if there’s some way to analyze those samples in spite of the formalin, to see if there are traces of anything else there.”

He looked thoughtful. “The papers said the blood was drained.” This time I was nodding. “So the tissue samples are from the heads? Well, brain tissue will have whatever the blood had in it. I can probably use some computer processing to filter out the formalin results, and as long as that doesn’t filter out the other stuff, it’ll show up. So it’ll depend on what you’re looking for and what’s there.”

“One of the medical examiners is convinced that the actual decapitation was somehow done while the victim watched—it has to do with the cut marks. How do you get four guys to stand still, or sit still, while you walk up to them with a sword? Only thing I can think of is drugs, maybe a strong tranquilizer. Even if they were tied up, tied to a chair or something, you’d think at least one of the four would have moved his head and the stroke would have hit him funny.”

“Did you say four?” So I told him about the morning’s news. He looked surprised but took it in stride while he thought about the problem of the drugs.

He scratched his head. “I guess it will depend on the tranquilizer, or sedative or whatever. I’m sure I’ll be able to see everything in samples you bring me, and it’ll just be a matter of figuring out the molecules.”

“But that’s what you do, right?”

“Yes and no. Complicated molecules are hard to figure out, and it’s easiest if we have samples of what we’re looking for, to calibrate the equipment. I do have samples of a lot of things, from all the testing of street drugs I’ve been doing, so maybe we’ll get lucky. And of course if the same results show up in all three—I mean four—tissue samples, we’ll have something, won’t we? Even if we don’t know exactly what it is, that’ll be significant, right?”

I nodded. “And maybe we can get some idea of whether it’s possible to trace the formalin, too?”

“Hmm. More research, I expect. But I wouldn’t count on it. Formalin is just formaldehyde dissolved in water, and formaldehyde is CH_2O , essentially water with a carbon stuck to it. So formalin is fairly innocuous stuff, identification-wise. But I suppose there could be impurities in different brands. I’ll look into it, do some research. You’re with the CBI now, right? Say, I bet you have lots more money to spend than the Durango PD does! I may just have to put in some overtime on this one.”

He grinned, but I knew that his results would be worth every cent.

* * *

Six

Having talked with Gil, I was ready for a conversation with the CBI Director, Rod Andersen. I had left him a message before lunch, warning him about murder number four—I sure didn't want *him* to see it first on the internet. He was probably going to lean on me a little, because I was almost sure that the Governor would be leaning on him a lot. I mean, if these once-a-week beheadings went on much longer, just think of the jokes our poor Governor would have to put up with at meetings of the Western Governors' Association and such—Colorado tourism: Come lose your head in the mountains!

But Rod was really quite low key about the whole thing. I'd been sending him email reports day by day, and the only new information I had was about murder number four and about the comparative analyses that Gil had planned. I promised him an update on Saturday, either from Creede or wherever I wound up in the late afternoon. I could tell I was going to have a busy weekend.

While I was making phone calls and setting up appointments, I kept feeling distracted by something running through my head. Every time I noticed it enough to try to concentrate on it, it faded away, but when I tried to concentrate on something else, it reappeared.

It was when I was organizing my notes from the morning and I ran across the poem that Ralph Wertlinger had recited for me that it hit me. I had been having this ta-TA ta-TA ta-TA ta-TA thing going through my head ever since after lunch, since I'd run across the WDL demonstration on the campus. Something about those poems was bothering me, and it had to do with having heard them recited over and over.

So I dug them out of my notes, including the WDL one, made a computer file of them, and stared at them for a while. Eventually, I got up and shut my office door and began reading them out loud, reciting them. I thought I was reciting softly, but apparently the walls in our offices are thinner than I thought. It was when I was starting on my fourth time through the set that the interoffice phone line rang.

"Yes?"

It was Derek Petersen. "When you get tired of that, let me know and I'll spell you."

I felt a blush creeping up my neck, but the embarrassment was stifled by the idea.

"I hadn't thought of that, but that's what I need. Come in here and read these damned things to me, will you please?"

"Aw, gee, boss, I was just teasing you. No offense intended, or anything."

"No, no, it's fine, really. I didn't mean for anyone to hear me, but I think what I need is to have them read to me." I explained the problem, and he finally agreed.

Good sport that he is, he ran through the four murder poems six times, and I finally had the heart to let him stop.

"I don't know. Something's bothering me about this, but the only thing I can come up with is that the second one is written in second person while the rest are in third. The second one is a warning, an

admonition, while the rest are sort of declarations of war. But I don't know why that should bother me so much."

"Sorry, Annette, but at this point I don't think I can tell you much. I must be overexposed, or something." Derek was indeed looking a little bleary-eyed.

"Don't worry, and thanks. I actually figured out the second person thing while you were reciting. And maybe no one else heard this—your office is the only one next to mine, after all." I grinned. "Of course, Sally could probably use someone to read Mother Goose to her kids in the evening, you know?"

Derek looked surprised, and then composed himself with quiet dignity. His voice was calm as he said, "Excuse me while I go outside and scream."

Steve Phillips, the Hinsdale County Sheriff, called me shortly after that, and I was relieved to find that the poems were no longer bothering me so much. I could at least concentrate on talking with him instead of the ta-TAing.

"Ms. Trieri? Ralph Wertlinger down in Creede suggested I call you. He says you're coordinating the investigations of all these decapitations." Sheriff Phillips managed to sound both agitated and hopeful.

"The Governor dumped it in my lap. And, please, call me Annette. What I'm trying to do is gather as much information as possible about these things and make it available to everyone. I've been to visit Scott Lister up in Gunnison, and I think he trusts me now. I haven't been down to Conejos, but they don't have anything that the State Patrol in Alamosa doesn't have. And I know Ron Grange and Ralph from a previous case. I'm glad you called."

"Ralph told me that the ME in Gunnison ought to see my victim."

"Belinda Edwards, right. I suggested that because she noticed some interesting indications on the head of her victim, things that suggest—let's see, I don't want to prejudice you in advance—things that suggest something about the mechanism of the decapitation. If she sees the same things on your victim, it will verify that we don't have a copy-cat murder, and it may help us get at the bottom of this whole thing."

"I see your point. I'll have to sweet-talk my coroner into agreeing to this, but just having her in to consult shouldn't be too big of a deal, I guess. Are you planning to get up this way?"

"I'm going over to the Valley tomorrow, and I thought I'd get up to Creede and talk with Ralph and with some civilians about this Doc Whiler. I hate to make other people work on weekends, though."

"Well, y'know, I was going to go fishing tomorrow, but if I do that, I bet I'd never hear the end of it. And I have an election coming up. I bet the paper here would just love to run a headline like 'Sheriff fishes while heads roll'."

I had to laugh. "Tell you what. I'll come straight to see you after I'm done in Monte Vista, and catch Ralph and the other folks on the way back. Say, about lunch time. Got any good diners over your way? I've got an expense account from the Governor."

"Can't pass that one up. Let's meet in my office, and we can walk to lunch."

"And since I'll be driving by, maybe I'll stop off and have a look at the crime scene, on South Clear Creek Road, was it?"

"Right. You take the road, it's graded gravel with a lot of potholes this time of year, past the two lakes of the Browns Lake wildlife area about another half mile. There's a straight stretch, and the signs are in the left-hand ditch. We've still got a crew working the site."

“Will you be through with things there by tomorrow? I mean, will it mess anything up if I walk around some?”

“My guys have been on it all day, with fine-toothed combs and everything else you can think of. Including video galore. They’ll remove the evidence, but they’ll have the site marked with crime-scene tape. So go ahead and walk around. Remind me and we can get a footprint impression when you’re here, just to document it.”

“Right. Anyway, see you tomorrow for lunch, then. Thanks for calling.”

“Left-hand ditch” he had said. Ralph hadn’t mentioned that. Of course, the other three crime scenes had involved two sets of signs, for traffic in both directions. And therefore one set would have been in the left-hand ditch for one direction of traffic. But it seemed strange to me that with one set of signs for one direction of traffic, the left ditch would have been used. Another puzzle to file away, I thought, along with the fact that only one set of signs was used this time.

* * *

Hal made one of my childhood favorites for dinner, spaghetti with sweet Italian sausages, which he grilled first and then simmered in the sauce. The red sauce was something he calls his secret recipe, which he is steadfast about refusing to divulge. I think it’s just one of those boutique-label jars with some extra herbs added to jazz it up, but I can’t be sure. I’ve never looked in the trash for an empty jar to check—I decided a long time ago that the way to stay happily married is to play these little games and learn to enjoy them.

With garlic bread and a tossed salad, I was in comfort-food heaven. It helped, because I knew that Saturday was going to be long and full of miles—miles in the CBI vehicle I’d been given, an underpowered SUV. I would have tried to talk Hal out of his car for the day, except I didn’t know the condition of the road to the Browns Lake crime scene.

I was glad that he let me work my way through about half of my pasta before restarting the conversation we’d begun on the phone earlier.

“So, if you’re going off investigating tomorrow, I’ll go up to the campus. And up there I’ll run into John, probably. What am I supposed to tell him about Madge’s demonstration?”

I talked around a mouthful. “I’m puzzled by the time line. Ralph called me a little after nine this morning, and I think he called me pretty soon after he saw the crime scene west of Creede. A little after one that afternoon, I stumbled into this demonstration, where Madge’s people were parading around with the poems on signs, chanting them. All four poems, including the one found that morning. Seamlessly, I mean, with the new one worked into the routine perfectly. Like they had time to practice. How could all that have happened so fast? I mean, it looked like the demonstration had been going on for a little while, because there were lots of people watching. So the Waddle girls did all this in well under four hours, finding out about the new murder, finding out the new poem, making signs of it, and working it into their routine.”

“I didn’t know that they were reciting all four poems—Alice said something about chanting, but I just assumed it was that poem of their own, the one we found on those signs along the highway.”

“That one wasn’t part of it, in fact, at least not when I saw them.” I reached for another piece of garlic bread.

“You’re making it sound as if you think Madge has some kind of in with the murderer. Like she got the poem beforehand, or something.”

“It sounds like that, doesn’t it? But that’s what’s puzzling me. I think I’ve figured out Madge’s politics, but I just can’t see her as the murderer, or even in cahoots with the murderer. Say, did you know that your new chair of chemistry has a crush on Madge?”

He groaned. “I don’t want to hear about it. Yeah, Alice told me. I guess I figure that everyone is allowed a foible or two, and this one is Bucky’s. But, geez, why me, Lord?”

“Hey, look at it this way. If he can persuade Madge to get interested in him, maybe she’ll mellow. I don’t think he’s on one of these ‘conversion’ missions or anything—from what Gil said, it sounds as if he’s really taken with her. There’s no accounting for taste, I guess.”

“Hmm. Maybe I can devise a way to get them on some committees together. The fall semester has lots of committee work to do. If this was high school, I could put them on the prom committee. That’d do the trick.” He grinned.

I was wiping the last of the secret sauce up with the last piece of bread. “So, the other thing that happened to me today was that I got obsessed with these stupid poems.”

“Obsessed?”

I told him about my and Derek’s recitations and my realization that the second one was a little different from the others.

“Are you asking me if I’ve noticed anything weird with any of them? I guess I haven’t really studied them.” He shrugged. “Not that I’d be likely to see anything subtle if I did study them. I’m not very good with literature, let alone poetry.”

“The second-person thing with number two jumped out at me when Derek was reciting them, but that hasn’t made my nagging sensation go away completely.”

“So there’s something else? Do you think they’re written by different people?”

The idea was a bit startling. “Maybe. I hadn’t thought of that. I guess I need to look at them again. Will that ruin your evening?”

“Tell you what. Get the poems and come upstairs to the study. I’ll tie flies and you can read ’em to me. That way, I’ll focus on them indirectly, and maybe some flash of intuition will happen. Who knows?”

I went through the four poems twice before he stopped me.

“Know what? It’s interesting. All the rhymes are different. Let’s see if I remember them. ‘Meek’ and ‘week’; ‘sod’ and ‘god’; ‘around’ and ‘ground’; and ‘task’ and ‘ask.’ To me, ‘sod’ is rolled up grass ready to unroll and make a lawn. But this is some kind of slang usage that I’ve also heard. Wonder what the origin is?” He was winding thread around the shank of a little hook, so it was obviously up to me to find a dictionary. I went looking.

“Says here, ‘vulgar English slang’ from ‘sodomite’; ‘bugger’; more generally ‘guy’ or ‘poor fellow.’ Hmm. Maybe that’s it! All of the rest of the poems are completely American English, but here’s this ‘sod’ reference. It sticks out.” I could feel a surge of excitement.

“And it’s in the second poem, the one you noticed for being in second person. Suppose a different person wrote it?”

“Or else the same person, but his background is showing. I mean, if you’re writing these little couplets, you look for words that rhyme, that fit the meter, and that send your message. It could be tough to get all three, so you’d cast about to find things that work. And words would come to you intuitively,

even from, say, your childhood. And if that childhood was in a different country with different slang, well...”

“So you need to look for someone with an English accent, from childhood?”

“I might have found one, I think. Somebody who also knows swords.”

* * *

Saturday morning, I needed to get an early start, because I had told Bonnie Scharmatz that I’d come by her place in Monte Vista at 9:00—and it’s well over two hours getting there from Durango, unless the traffic cooperates fully. And that almost never happens around here anymore.

Even though I knew Saturday was going to be a long day, I stayed up late Friday night working various computer databases I have access to, including the NCIC one, trying to find out what I could about Kristof von Stier. But there really wasn’t much to be found. He existed, but not in a way that made it look as he’d existed for as long as he seemed old. It was as if he’d been invented about a decade ago. So I left email for Derek to start a thorough search for everything that could be found about him, including via Interpol.

Hal, bless his dear heart, got up early with me, fixed me a thermos of strong coffee, and also badgered me into eating a good breakfast. With his help, I managed to get on the road by a little after six, and that got me to Monte Vista on schedule.

Bonnie Scharmatz had told me that her house was on the southwest corner of town, and she gave me detailed directions. For some reason, I just assumed that she lived on a normal city street, so I was a little surprised when I found her house to be truly on the edge of town, the outside of the edge. She lived on a farm of some kind—or perhaps a ranch. The sign out front advertised Shetland ponies.

Later, during the two-plus hours it took me to get to Lake City, I had plenty of time to go over our conversation, except that there just wasn’t that much to go over. Yes, Frank had been abusive. No, they never had children, because he wouldn’t allow it—in fact, he’d bullied a reluctant town doctor into a vasectomy just after they were married. So the ponies were her substitute, and now, she thought if she succeeded with her diet and found someone soon, she just might be able to beat the biological clock and realize her dream of a real family, with ponies as a bonus for the kids. She held no particular grudge against Crystal—in fact, she appreciated the fact that Crystal had diverted Frank’s attention from herself. Just like Sarah Robinson, she was relieved to be through with the guy she’d married.

And, no, she had never heard anything about Frank’s ever getting interested in family coats of arms or swords and shields or anything like that.

I managed to stretch my thoughts about this conversation to Creede, and then I let the scenery take over. Ralph had told me it was about 15 miles to the South Clear Creek turnoff, so I just soaked it in. I’d been as far as Creede before, but the Rio Grande Valley above that little mining town was new to me. No wonder, I thought, that Hal speaks about it with such reverence. A broad, flat river valley between snow-capped mountains, even in August, with perfect trout water meandering in wide oxbows—that’s his idea of heaven. Even the vacation-home subdivisions almost everywhere on the flats couldn’t ruin it.

On the road in to the Browns Lake State Wildlife Area, I finally came to appreciate the SUV I was driving. Climbing up Wolf Creek Pass on the long grade eastbound had been pure torture, and even in the little ups and downs of the highway between Durango and Pagosa Springs, the transmission repeatedly shifted up and down, searching for some elusive optimum. But the South Clear Creek Road, although nominally a graded gravel county road, had a full summer’s ration of wear and tear from people driving too fast in pickups and SUVs, and from people in oversized, overweight motor homes.

Combined with the July and August rains, from which I was spared on that particular Saturday, this had made a real mess of the road. Hal's S4, despite the all-wheel-drive, would have been scraping bottom almost continually.

The crime scene was easy to find, a half-mile section of ditch with rectangles of yellow plastic tape every 200 yards. As Steve Phillips had mentioned, it was on the left-hand side of the road, reckoned heading west, going away from the highway, and this was also the downhill side. It was easy for me to discover that the soil there was much softer than it was on the uphill side. If the perp was in a hurry, I thought, this would be the position of choice—the fence posts would go in much easier. I used Hal's digital camera, borrowed for the day, to create my own documentation of the scene, and, for Steve Phillips' benefit, I even took a picture of one of my own footprints with a ruler beside it.

Because there wasn't really that much to see, it was easy for me to make it to Lake City by lunch time. I pulled into a gas station for a fill and got directions to the sheriff's office.

Steve Phillips—how do I say this delicately?—was a knock-'em-dead, eleven-on-a-scale-of-ten, absolutely beautiful, western-sheriff hunk of a guy. If I'd been ten years younger and single, I hate to think what a fool I'd have made of myself, especially because of his naked ring finger. He was sitting at the front desk of the department, and at first I took him to be the duty officer. But he introduced himself and flashed a smile that would make Robert Redford jealous, and I could tell he knew exactly what effect it would have. So I just gave myself over to it, thinking what fun it would be to have lunch in public with him.

But he mentioned that Belinda Edwards had come down from Gunnison earlier and should be finished with the coroner in time to join us for lunch. As I remembered, she was about ten years younger than I, and apparently single. Maybe, I thought, I would get to watch her make a fool of herself.

To give credit where it's due, she did a respectable job of hiding her foolishness—in fact, she did a better job, because he was just about as taken with her as she with him. After a while, I began to feel like I should charge them for match-making services—it had been my idea, after all, for her to come down to Lake City.

Somewhere during lunch we actually got Steve's case discussed.

"It's the same, exactly the same. I even reviewed my notes this morning and took another look at Marty Robinson's head before I came down. This one—Whiler, you said?—is identical. And the post-mortem work is also the same, as far as I can tell, blood completely drained and all." Belinda didn't seem to have any problems talking about decapitations while eating a chicken sandwich, and I was used to the idea by then—besides, it had been a long time since breakfast.

But Steve Phillips turned a little green and carefully set his BBQ pork aside.

She was oblivious to his discomfort. "I'm still surprised by how clean the slice is, even through the vertebra. And it's nearly at the same point on the two necks. It's as if a machine is doing this."

A vision of von Stier's cantaloupes popped into my head.

"Is the facial mask similar, too?" I needed to verify that detail.

"Oh, yes, it's horrible, just like Robinson's. Pure terror, as if he was screaming."

Steve Phillips groaned and dashed for the men's room.

Belinda stared after him. "Oh, dear, I hope I didn't offend him."

"I think he's not used to the notion of decapitations—he's just the sheriff, after all. Belinda, I'm beginning to put together a solid picture of these murders, except for one thing, the issue you brought up, in fact. I'm still having trouble, and other people agree, with the idea that someone is killing these

victims while they are able to see him, and they sit still while he swings this sword, or whatever it is. I'm sure you're right about the cut marks and the skin and all, but I just don't get it." But I'd lost her attention.

"I wonder if he's all right? Maybe we should call 911."

"I'm sure he's fine, or will be shortly. Just to be clear, you're certain that the entrance and exit angles are the same on this one as the other?"

"Mmm. Huh? Oh. Well, yes, absolutely. Did you have those lab tests done that you were going to arrange for? The sensitive ones? I still think there may have been drugs involved. Let's see. I sent samples by UPS on, let's see, last Wednesday."

"It's all arranged, but we haven't got the samples yet. When they come in, I'll have them taken right to the lab. The technician is pretty confident, though. I guess we'll just have to wait."

Steve Phillips emerged from the men's room, looking a little better. He was embarrassed, though.

"Guess I shouldn't have suggested we have lunch for this discussion, Annette." He grinned at Belinda. "I deal with car accidents all the time, but this one's different for me. I saw Doc's head earlier—he was a fishing buddy of mine, and, well..."

She started apologizing, they started making eyes at each other, and I felt like a third wheel on a bicycle. It was easy to excuse myself and hit the road for Creede.

* * *

Ralph Wertlinger had arranged for me to meet with several people, and he was going to chauffeur me around to do it. That would give us time to talk about the interviews as well as for me to hear Ralph's own perspective on his ex-brother-in-law. His sister was second-to-last, after various people around town.

Elise Wertlinger—she had dropped her married name after the divorce—ran a small gift shop on Creede's main street, just down the block from the courthouse. The place was crammed with every type of tourist doo-dad you can imagine, and on the last weekend before Labor Day, the place was busy. But she was able to turn things over to her help, and we went out back, to a pleasant patio by the stream through town, to talk.

"You know, Doc didn't have friends, but he was a doctor, so he really didn't have what you'd call 'enemies,' either. People were a little afraid of him, but they needed him. Now, everybody's worried that the new guy, he came here about a year ago, that he won't be able to handle the patient load."

"Your divorce was final a couple of years ago, Ralph told me. What's your reaction to Doc's death?"

"Y'know, it's interesting. I surprised myself. I don't really feel much of anything. Maybe a little relief, maybe a little sadness. Thing is, with Ralph being the sheriff, I never had any problems with Doc after the divorce. His checks were always on time, and he never bothered me. And now the life insurance policy that was part of the settlement will get paid off, and I'll be completely on my own, finally. At some level Doc was a good person, but that level was hard to find. Mostly, he was a grade-A son of a bitch."

"Do you suppose he could have made enemies in the past couple of years?"

"You'll have to talk with Amelia about that. That's Amelia Dent, Doc's girlfriend. She lives out at his ranch. Haven't seen her in town since Thursday."

Ralph spoke up. “She’s next on the list. We’re due out there shortly.”

“She used to be his office nurse, but I imagine there’s been hanky-panky going on for years. I didn’t really know about anything until the divorce, and they started being seen together. She moved in with him about a year ago. I don’t know what she’s going to do, now.”

It turned out that her plans were to stay on.

Amelia Dent was about ten years younger than Elise, making her about my age, and she was clearly in control of her own life. As Ralph and I drove up to the ranch house, at a beautiful spread in the valley above town, she was standing by a corral near the barn, feeding carrots to several horses vying for her attention.

She took us in the house and offered coffee. Inside, it was what you’d probably picture a man’s western ranch house to look like: leather, decorations running to old horseshoes, dark mission-style furniture, a huge rock fireplace. I wondered how long it would continue to look this way, with Doc gone.

“Ralph, I don’t know if I ever told you this, but I always felt sorry for your sister. I think she’ll be all right now, though, with that life insurance policy. At least I think it’ll pay off. This sure wasn’t suicide. Thing is, she couldn’t handle Doc. I figured out how to do that years ago, shortly after he hired me. But she just never did.”

Ralph opened his mouth and then thought better of it, taking a sip of coffee instead. He’d told me that these interviews were my show.

“Anyway, one thing I did before I agreed to move in here was to make him re-write his will, so I’d be taken care of. And I’ve come to love the horses, they’re registered quarter horses, so I think I’ll see if I can make a go of ranching. If not, I’ve already had two offers on the place, and I could always go back to nursing.”

“Ms. Dent, one thing I’d like to find out is whether you know of any enemies Doc may have made in the past couple of years. New enemies, I guess you’d say.”

“You probably know he didn’t have much in the way of friends, and lots of people didn’t like him. But he was the family doctor in town, so people needed him and they just put up with him. So...oh! There was one thing. Happened last summer.” She blew on her coffee to cool it, gathering her thoughts.

“See, Doc always took a week in early September and went camping, backpacking, up in the Weminuche Wilderness somewhere. It’s a big place, and over the years he’s been all over it. So, last year, he came back a day early. This was just a month or so after I moved in here, and I was actually glad he came back early, because I wasn’t used to the work load yet. But I’ve never seen him in such a foul mood, and I’ve seen a lot of his moods. He finally told me he’d run across another hiker up there and they’d got into an argument about a camping spot— something about how the other guy was too close to a lake or something. He said the other guy had finally pulled a big knife out, a really big knife, like a small sword, according to what Doc said.

“Well, Doc, he always carried a .45 automatic with him, because of bears, so he pulled his gun and disarmed the other guy and chased him off. But he was still really, really mad about the whole thing when he got back. Said it spoiled the whole trip.”

“Any description of this other guy?”

“Not too much. Let’s see. I recall Doc said something about breaking his, I mean this other guy’s, his scrawny neck, like he was really skinny, and Doc was also griping about how the other guy talked funny, like a Brit, Doc said.”

I'd noticed on my way back from Lake City that my cell phone wasn't getting a signal, so I asked Amelia if I could use her house phone. She directed me to the kitchen, to where a phone was hanging on the wall in the middle of a bulletin board covered with notes and cards. It was obviously the center of household's social and business activity.

Despite its being Saturday afternoon, Derek was in the office.

"Hi, Derek. Listen, I'm up in Creede, and I just heard a little story that suggests animosity between our newest victim and von Stier. How's your trace going?"

"Just fine, actually. I found out who he used to be—it's interesting. I'll have a full report by Monday morning."

"Great. Take tomorrow off. That's an order, OK?"

"I like your orders, boss."

I was glancing over the business cards while I talked, and learned that Creede offered various services, including an emergency clinic, several car repair specialists, a tavern that delivers pizza, and just about every home and ranch fix-it repair person you can imagine. Maureen Downey's large-animal vet clinic was represented, too. And there were cards for other things from as far away as Walsenberg and Gunnison, almost none of which I recognized. But there was Billy Abernathy's card for his martial arts instruction. What's up with that? I wondered.

* * *

Seven

There was plenty for me to think about as I drove home, but it was Ralph's parting comment that grabbed my attention.

"Y'know, Annette, what I don't understand is, why Doc Whiler. I mean, I could make a list of a dozen guys, easy, who are much bigger jerks than Doc was. Not that I want to defend him, you understand, but it seems like he was picked for more reasons than that. I wonder if this applies to the other victims as well?"

Why *were* these four guys picked, anyway? I thought about what I knew of them. Because he had raped his teen-aged daughter, I decided that Hollis Henry was probably the worst of the lot—assuming that none of the others had such things in their sordid pasts. Frank Scharmatz had abused his wife, and so had Marty Robinson at one time. Doc Whiler had fooled around on his, and, from what a couple of the other people I'd talked with hinted, possibly done so with patients. All had been disliked and barely tolerated in their communities.

But something was missing, something to tie them together and put them into the category of people worthy of being made examples of.

Unless there was another motive for the killings, I thought, and the public nature of the heads-on-posts and poems was just a smoke-screen.

Which brought me back to Kristof von Stier. Amelia Dent's story about the argument in the wilderness showed that von Stier had probably met Doc Whiler, and he also had connections to two of the other victims—Robinson directly and Scharmatz indirectly, through Billy Abernathy—and he lived

in the same community as Hollis Henry. That stuff Derek had said he'd found on von Stier would make for an interesting Monday.

But ever since I was a rookie detective in Chicago, before I moved west years ago, I've tried hard to avoid drawing premature conclusions. I learned the hard way that it limits your perspective and colors your judgment. Kristof von Stier was becoming more and more of a fully fledged suspect, but in some ways he was just too convenient.

And that line of thinking brought me full circle: why were these four guys picked for murder? Maybe, I thought, I'll have Derek see what he can dig up on them. He seemed pleased with what he found about von Stier. I made a mental note. That's the thing about driving out here in the southwest—it's big country, and you have lots of time to think and rethink everything.

I finally arrived home in Durango about 6:30 that evening, after putting in more than twelve hours on a Saturday. I vowed that on Sunday I'd follow the order I'd given to Derek Petersen—to take the day off.

Hal was busy puttering around in the kitchen, working on a batch of chile. He taught me early on that what I grew up eating, what we called "chili" back in Chicago, is really just hamburger soup with tomatoes and beans and some spices.

He makes it from scratch, using a bag of dried New Mexico red chile pods. By soaking the dried chiles and stripping out the seeds, then running them through the blender with some water until they're emulsified, he winds up with a rich, red base that gets simmered with beef stock, and, depending on his mood, onions, garlic and/or cumin. It can become either a sauce or a meal, made by adding some browned beef and pork and some beans. No tomatoes at all.

The first time he made it for me, he used medium-hot chiles, and it nearly took my head off. I've lived here for long enough to get used to some amount of zing in my Mexican food, but that was way too much. Since then, he's used mild ones, and I'm much happier.

In addition to the usual mouth-watering aromas that this process creates, there was something a little different this time.

"What's that I smell? I'm starving and this smells extra good."

"Lamb, ground lamb in about a one-to-four ratio with cubed sirloin. With extra garlic. How was your day?"

I gave him a quick summary and promised details at dinner, then jumped in the shower.

Dinner was a bowl of the lamb chile—and even though it was mostly beef, the lamb was evident, as a little goes a long way—with warmed tortillas and a diced tomato and cucumber salad. As usual, Hal was patient. It wasn't until I was about half-way through my second bowl that he finally asked me to keep my promise.

"I found out more connections to von Stier. Apparently he and Doc Whiler had a fight once. So he's connected, more or less, with three of the victims. And he knew the fourth by virtue of living in the same community."

"But it doesn't sound as if you've settled on him as the prime suspect."

"There's still too much that doesn't make sense." I reached for another tortilla. "Why would he be making examples of his victims, for instance? And the elaborate preparation with the formalin, that doesn't fit von Stier at all. But maybe I'll find out something Monday to change my mind. Derek said he found some information on von Stier's background."

"Did you learn about any other connections among the victims?"

“I thought about that all the way home. They all lived on ranches, or almost, and they were all prominent in their communities. A doctor, a high-school sports coach, a lawyer, and a well-known rancher.”

“That would fit with the business of their being made examples of.”

“Right. And it also fits with the fact that there seems to be a decrease regionally in domestic violence.” I told him about the call from the Valley Women’s Center the day before.

“You mean it’s working? Assuming that the killer really has the intention of stopping domestic violence and all that. Hard to believe.” Hal had his spoon suspended half-way to his mouth.

“Don’t drip on your shirt. That stuff stains something fierce.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” And he set it down. “But this is interesting because it has an impact on what happened today, up on campus.”

“Let me guess. Something involving the WDL, right?” I was mopping up chile molecules with the last bite of tortilla.

He sighed and looked at the ceiling. “Remember last August, in the middle of the Boudreau case? When Madge was acting up during new student orientation? Or did you miss all that?”

“I guess I knew that there was lots of noise made about whether women would be safe on campus, but I didn’t know Madge was part of it.”

“Oh, yeah. John told me that she even disrupted one of the sessions for parents that he led. I think that’s why he has it in for her. Anyway, the WDL got started shortly after that, and naturally they’re using your new case to make all the political hay they can.”

“So what happened yesterday?”

“We’re in the middle of orientation again, with first-year students and their parents all over the place, trying to get used to things, figure out the lay of the land up there. The parents are worried about their eighteen-year-olds’ leaving home, and the kids are eager to do just that, most of them. So they’re already kind of stressed and really don’t need the kind of stuff that Waddle is doing. There was the demonstration you mentioned Friday, and then yesterday there was a protest march, right through the orientation picnic we organized. They had that bunch of girls in camo fatigues—what did she call them, the ‘Action Squad’?—marching in formation with other girls carrying signs with the poems and chanting them.”

“You mean ‘womyn with a “y”’ carrying signs, don’t you?” I was teasing and he knew it.

“Oh, absolutely. No girls on our campus, no sir, ma’am. Anyway, I was sitting at this table full of parents, and, man, did the questions fly. And I could see the same thing was happening at the other tables, too—including John’s, so he’ll add this to his list of things to hate Madge for.”

“But these murders have no connection to the U at all!” I wasn’t exactly a member of the Madge Glendon fan club, but my sense of fair play was offended.

“Nope, except for what Madge and her crowd are making out of them. Like I said, political hay.”

“And domestic abuse isn’t mainly a college women’s issue, is it? I mean, most of the women at the U aren’t married, right?”

“I’m sure that Madge would say that raising their consciousness is one way to help prevent it when they finally do get married. As much as she’d hate to admit it, I’m certain she knows that most of them will marry, after all.” Now he was mopping up the last of his chile.

“So what happened yesterday? How do you handle a disruption like that?”

“We try to take it in stride. I explained to all the parents at my table that their kids would have new opportunities to think about things they’d not experienced before, and this political demonstration was one example. That we value free expression and even encourage it, so demonstrations and parades are almost expected. That the campus is the perfect environment for it, because it’s sheltered from the real world. Most of the parents these days were in college during some stage of the Vietnam war, so they understand demonstrations—and the ones we have these days are lots less dangerous than what many of them went through. So it works out.” He shrugged.

“I just want Madge and her bunch to keep things on your campus. There’s enough going on out in the real world to keep me busy.”

* * *

Monday morning, I was actually looking forward to going down to my office—I wanted to see what information Derek had found on von Stier. Plus, my Sunday was just the type of R&R I needed to be ready to go back to work. I’m sure that Hal had enjoyed our trip around this part of Colorado the week before, but I spent most of the time either working or thinking about working. Sitting around loafing for a day was just the thing.

So Monday I got in early and found Derek’s report sitting on my desk, a folder about a half-inch thick. I started a pot of coffee, worked on email until it was ready, and settled in to see just what Derek had found.

It took me a minute to realize that Derek had arranged the folder in reverse chronological order—it started with the present day and worked backward. Although what I was really interested in was information about ten years old, I skimmed the current biography anyway. It confirmed what I already knew and added one interesting tidbit—someone knowledgeable had looked over the inventory that von Stier had in his shop and estimated its worth at well over a million dollars. But the source of this information wasn’t clear—the markings on the document showed that Derek had obtained it from the FBI as a faxed copy of an original with source markings blacked out.

Why, I wondered, would the original source be considered so sensitive?

The apparent censorship continued as I worked my way back in time, and eventually I began to suspect I knew why. My earlier, quick search of the usual databases had turned up Kristof von Stier beginning about a decade ago, and before that he simply didn’t seem to exist. Derek’s documentation showed that it was because he really didn’t—before that he was Christopher St. James.

And what a background Derek had found for Mr. St. James. Most recently, just before the name change, he had been a mercenary, a soldier for hire with experience in eastern Europe, southern Africa, South America, and Indonesia. That activity extended back to the early ’80s, before which it appeared that he had a shady role in Vietnam, working for a foreign intelligence service. The paperwork speculated it was the British, as that was his country of birth. And his current attempts to pass himself off as Prussian nobility—at least that was what Sarah Robinson had said, and what his fake German accent hinted—were rooted in his family’s close connections to the British royal family. Apparently he had a brother in the House of Lords.

And now he was living in Pagosa Springs, selling antique weapons and, it seemed quite likely, hiding out. Why else would he have changed his name?

I spent an hour and a half or so combing the file for information that might provide connections to the four victims but didn’t have much luck. By the time I was finished, the staff had begun to arrive, and

a new week was officially underway. The first real indication of this happened just as I was finishing my email, when Sally buzzed me.

“Director Trieri? There’s a gentleman here to see you. A Mr. von Stier.” It took some doing, but I’d finally persuaded Sally to use my formal title only when there were civilians present. And, with this particular civilian, I was glad she did.

I went out to the foyer and fetched him, got both of us coffee, and shortly had him seated in my office across my desk from me. I wanted the formality of the furniture between us.

“Do you mind if I close the door, Ms. Trieri?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I’m afraid I need our conversation to be highly confidential.”

I noticed that his German accent had vanished, but the British one lingered.

“Mr. von Stier, you should understand that everything in this office is considered confidential, but I’m certainly willing to accede to your wishes. What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to talk to you about the information you gathered about me over the weekend. Now, before you worry, let me assure you that your office is secure—the fact that I know about this didn’t come from here. It came from the other end.”

“That’s reassuring, I suppose. But I didn’t do the computer search. My Deputy Director did.”

“Oh. Well, would it be possible to include him, or her, in this conversation? It would save repeating it.”

I considered this briefly and asked Derek Petersen to step in. After introductions and a brief explanation for Derek, von Stier continued.

“So you both now know my background, and I thought it might be helpful to you if I explained some things. The fact that you called in whatever favors you did to get that information means that your interest in me is more than casual. And the only possible reason for that I can imagine is that I’m a suspect in the Burma Shave Murders.”

I glanced at Derek and saw that his expression was as blank as I hoped mine was. After a brief pause, von Stier decided we weren’t going to say anything, so he went on.

“I have some experience with solving puzzles such as this, as you now know, so I have to say that if I didn’t know better, I’d suspect myself.” He smiled.

“For one thing, as I told you, Ms. Trieri, beheading people cleanly is not a trivial thing. And I do have both the skill and equipment. For another, as you’ve probably discovered by now, I’ve had contact, and not always the most friendly contact, with the victims. So…” He shrugged. We continued to keep quiet.

Finally he sighed. “You’re not really helping, here, are you? Anyway, what you’ve discovered about my history is information that was supposed to have stayed buried. It’s not as if I’m in a witness protection program, or anything such as that, but the information wasn’t supposed to have been released under any but the most dire circumstances. This is both for my protection and for the protection of my neighbors, wherever I am, but right now in Pagosa Springs. There are people in the world who would pay handsomely to have me eliminated, and they wouldn’t care how many others went with me.”

I cleared my throat gently. “It appears that you’ve retired from your earlier activities. Was this because of these people?”

“Quite the opposite. Because I retired, they want to eliminate me. It’s one of those cases of knowing too much. You see, some of my more recent commissions were from organizations that did not have

access to, um, governmentally sanctioned resources, if I may put it delicately. I'm afraid that I have one attribute that disqualifies me from certain activities of this nature—a conscience—and I finally decided that I needed a change. Also, my health began to deteriorate. My indiscretions in Africa have come back to haunt me. So I put some effort into inventing my current persona and did my best to disappear.”

He looked at Derek and smiled again. “I must say, Mr. Petersen, it's to your credit that you've been able to discover so much about me. One thing you both should know, in a general sense, is that I built some protections for myself. If something bad happens to me, there will be information released implicating my detractors. Not you, of course; rather, the people I'm avoiding.”

After a pause that began to become uncomfortable, I decided it was my turn.

“So...I guess what I'm hearing is that you're here to tell us that you know that we know about you, and that you'd prefer we not spread this information around?”

“Yes, that certainly. But also that you're barking up the wrong tree, if I may borrow a Yankee expression.” He was obviously amused at his own cleverness. “I recognize that I do indeed fit the profile of a suspect in these murders, but I hope I can persuade you that I'm not the murderer—nor do I know anything about the murders beyond what's been in the papers. If you concentrate on me, you're going to waste time. And even though it's Monday, well, Friday is only a few days away, isn't it?”

* * *

His point was well taken. And what's worse, it had been the previous Wednesday that Sheriff Ralph Wertlinger had called me, concerned about Doc Whiler's disappearance. If the same time line were to hold this week, it meant that someone was going to turn up missing soon, possibly on Tuesday. Tomorrow. Unless I cleared the case before then.

Not that there was any pressure on me, or anything.

Derek and I resolved the situation with Kristof von Stier, née Christopher St. James, by making arrangements with him to be accounted for throughout the coming days. Then, if another headless—or, more properly, body-less—jerk turned up Friday, von Stier would have an alibi and be off the hook, presuming the new victim fit the existing pattern. If the murderer was kidnapping the victims in the middle of the week, then killing them and making the rather elaborate preparations—the formalin and all—necessary for the heads to turn up the way they were, it would be fairly easy for von Stier to prove that he wasn't the perp.

All this isn't to say that Derek and I were persuaded of von Stier's innocence—I'm a suspicious person by nature, and I've come to learn that Derek can be positively paranoid.

“Maybe we should just put a tail on him, Annette.”

“You don't think someone with his background would spot a tail in a flash?”

“So?”

I've said that Derek is sharp. Before I took over the Durango CBI office, he had been their chief field investigator. At the suggestion of the CBI Director in Denver, I put Derek to work running the administrative side of the Durango office, to give him the experience. But every now and then his street-smart field history shines through and provides me with just the perspective I need.

“Right, you're right. What resources do we have? Can we put two people on it?”

“I’ll set it up. Got just the people, a retired couple on call. Used to work for the FBI in New York City, tailing UN delegates who were behaving strangely. I bet you didn’t know such things went on.” He grinned.

“Know what? That UN delegates behave strangely, or that the FBI tails them? Anyway, maybe it would be a good idea to tell them that getting made by von Stier wouldn’t be the end of the world. I guess I kind of like the idea of putting some pressure on von Stier, of letting him know we haven’t forgotten him.” I was still new enough to the CBI that the occasional surprise popped up, and the existence of on-call surveillance teams was a new one for me.

Derek left to set things up, and about two minutes later the intercom buzzed.

“Yes, Sally?”

“Annette? I’ve got the Denver office on the line for you.”

I had been expecting to hear from my boss in Denver—in fact, I was planning a preemptive call to him, but he just beat me to it. I poked the button.

“This is Annette Trieri.”

“Please hold for Director Andersen?” I recognized Sandy McStain’s voice. She ran the Denver office like the boss of a Formula-One pit crew.

“Annette? I’m afraid we’re going to need to keep in very close touch from now on out. Did you see the Denver papers over the weekend? The Governor called me.”

Hal and I had spent our Sunday morning in our usual summer mode of a leisurely breakfast on the deck with the combined Denver newspaper, what Hal calls the *Rocky Mountain Post*. Rod was referring to a special investigative report that began on the front page and was spread out on about four pages of the A-section, as well as the lead editorial. The story included unflattering biographies of the victims with praise for the heroic suffering of the women in their lives, interviews with three of the four sheriffs involved in the cases, and an anonymous interview with a “CBI source.” Also, there was speculation, no doubt fueled by comments from Naomi Winters at the Valley Women’s Center, about the effectiveness of the murders as a tool to discourage domestic violence. The editorial condemned both domestic violence and vigilante justice, and, with no little sarcasm, it urged law enforcement—meaning me—into action.

“I’m not surprised he called you. Too bad we didn’t talk first. And, yeah, I read the papers. At least they weren’t directly on our case, although I didn’t much like the comments from the CBI person they talked with.”

“That’s one reason we need to stay in close touch. I have the suspicion that someone’s trying to set you up. You’re still new to CBI politics and I think some people feel threatened. Especially after you brought the Senator down.”

“That’s weird. I mean, the only CBI job I could reasonably aspire to is yours, and I don’t.”

“But others do, and to the extent you’re successful, they’ll see you as competition. But if you keep me up-to-date on everything, I’ll be in a position to prevent this back-stabbing, or help to, at least.”

“I appreciate that, really. And information sharing isn’t an issue for me, either, although sometimes things happen in ways that make perfect communication hard. For example, this morning.” I told Rod about the unexpected visit from von Stier and our plan for keeping tabs on him.

“So, you didn’t exactly call this guy a ‘suspect,’ but you’re putting a tail on him.”

“It’s hard for me to think of him as a suspect. He seems to have a good reason to keep a low profile, and he’s too well-connected. Derek was astounded that he had found out about our computer search. It means either that he has sources at very high levels in Washington, or that he set up some kind of automatic notification system on secret computers that he shouldn’t have access to. Also, he’s a little too obvious.” I had already reported on von Stier’s weapons collection, so Rod knew about this.

“If it’s not him, who is it? I’ve got to tell you, Annette, the Governor is wanting some results, like, yesterday.”

“And I can understand that. But remember, I didn’t get brought in to this thing until after the third victim turned up, and it was only four days later that the fourth victim disappeared. And you know everything I’ve found so far. I don’t want to make excuses, but unless we get a big break, I’m afraid this is going to be the usual slow, plodding investigation.”

“I understand. And I think at some level the Governor does, too. I mean, he’s no dummy. But he’s also a politician, and he’s feeling the heat. So he likes to share it.”

“I appreciate your shielding me from it, Rod.”

“Yeah, well, let’s just hope we don’t wind up with another victim this week. Or if we do, let’s hope he’s a Democrat. Maybe then the Governor won’t be quite so upset. Apparently this Doc Whiler character was a big contributor to the state Republican party and to the Governor’s election campaign.”

“And he was killed for being a jerk. Hmm. I guess I’d better just shut up and get back to work.” I heard laughter as I hung up the phone.

* * *

Sally must have been watching the lights on her phone, because it was less than a minute later that she appeared in my doorway, arms full of packages.

“UPS came while you were on the phone, Annette. Four packages, from all over.”

“All over Colorado? Maybe it’s my samples.”

A look at the labels verified that the boxes were from Gunnison, Lake City, Pagosa Springs, and Conejos. The phone calls I’d made the previous week had worked. My next task was to get them up to Gil Taylor’s analytical laboratory on the campus. I called Gil to let him know I was coming and asked Derek to hold down the fort, then I gathered up the packages and dashed out the door.

And dashed straight into the middle of one of those summer-in-Durango traffic jams from hell.

Looking back on it later, I understood perfectly. It was the first day of fall semester registration at the U, so there were both the new students and their parents from last week in town as well as the returning students. And there was also the first day of the final summertime festival that the Chamber of Commerce organizes—and this last one, during the week before the big Labor Day weekend, seemed to have drawn a greater than usual number of people.

But in the middle of it, I didn’t have a clue, and, being in a hurry, I was doubly frustrated. I really didn’t get enmeshed in the traffic jam until I was past the last alternate route to the campus, so I was trapped. Traffic crept along at about a car length per minute, in the late August mid-day heat. And, of course, I was in my CBI Explorer, the one without emergency lights or siren. The one with the anemic air conditioning.

After about an hour, I finally discovered what was going on. Someone driving one of those huge, probably-not-legal vacation rigs—this one was a very large motor home towing an SUV, which in turn

was towing a good-sized boat—had managed to jack-knife the thing at the main intersection just south of downtown. Five of the six north-south lanes were blocked. There were two tow trucks working on righting the boat, which had turned on its side. A third was trying to hook itself to the SUV, the front left fender of which, in an act of automotive miscegenation, was getting intimate with the motor home's left rear fender. A Durango PD officer was standing in the shade of the motor home, writing on a clipboard and talking to an extremely harried looking man in shorts and a tank top.

I couldn't help but notice the license plate on the motor home—it was from out of state. For a crossword puzzle, you'd try to think of states that are five-letter words starting with "T."

At least I had my cell phone, so while I was sitting in the traffic jam, I called Gil to let him know what was going on, and I returned several other calls that I hadn't had a chance to get to.

By the time I got through all that and found a place to park on the campus, it was after noon. And then—I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was—I blundered into another WDL demonstration, one that had attracted a large enough crowd that I had to figure out a detour to get to Gil's lab. Carrying those packages didn't help.

But finally I got there, into the air conditioning that Gil had cranked up high to protect all his delicate equipment. When he saw the packages, he was like a kid at Christmas.

"Presents! Four of 'em! And the best-looking Santa ever!" He took the packages and set them on a lab table. "And I bet you missed lunch, sitting in that traffic."

"Now that you mention it, yeah, I did. But it's too hot to go out there again—I want to sit here and cool off for a while."

"I figured you might. How does ham and swiss on rye sound? With some Dijon mustard." He walked over to a small refrigerator with "Food Only!" labels all over it and opened the door.

"Don't worry, it'll all go on your bill." He grinned at me.

"Sounds great, but I'm not sure I want to be eating when you unwrap this stuff. It's going to smell weird, isn't it?"

"I'll do it in the hood, so don't worry. Go sit over there, that's where I eat lunch. No chemicals or anything." He waved at a far table. "I want to give you the rundown on what I've got so far. What to drink? I've got Pepsi, Perrier, ginger ale...oh, here's some orange soda."

"Huh? Perrier, thanks. But what do you mean, what you've got so far?"

"I spent the weekend doing some background studies. I analyzed all the brands of formalin I could find on campus and some archived tissue samples I borrowed from one of the biology labs. Tissue with and without formalin contamination. I've got it all worked up for baselines, which we can measure these new samples against. The mass spec shows some differences between formalin-soaked and natural tissue, but there's no distinguishing brands of the formalin."

"Already? I'm impressed, Gil. You've outdone yourself. Find anything interesting?"

"Well I found more brands of formalin on the web than I found on campus, so I can't be sure that I've analyzed what your tissue samples here are in." He had begun unwrapping my packages, in the fume hood across the lab from where I was sitting. "But I'm not sure that will matter too much, because from the formalin I've analyzed, it looks like formalin is formalin is formalin. What differences I'm seeing are almost down in the noise level and can probably be put down to the type of container it's been stored in. Even supposedly inert laboratory containers can leave traces, at least at my detection sensitivities."

“What about the tissue samples you ‘borrowed’? Don’t tell me that people here on campus keep body parts around preserved in formalin. Uh, *please* don’t tell me that.”

He turned around, grinning. “OK, I won’t. What I got are tissues from pigs and mice. Some fat samples, brain tissue, muscle. Turns out that they’re almost identical, and it’s easy to separate the tissue from the formalin, with computer analysis. By centrifuging the samples, the solids get separated out and there’s just the liquids, formalin, which is mostly water, and whatever’s dissolved in it. Just for kicks, I ‘contaminated’ one of the formalin-soaked pig samples I got with just a tiny, trace amount of valium, what I calculated, roughly, would be in the sample from a normal dose. And it sticks out like a sore thumb in subsequent analysis, because compared to the other liquids in the sample, valium is a big molecule. Also, it has a chlorine and so some of the fragments that get created in the mass spec jump right out. So if there’s anything like that in your samples, I should find it. And I looked up some other drugs, tranquilizers and sedatives, and they, at least some of them, they have big molecules, too.”

“You lost me with the ‘fragments’ business.”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, see, I separate the liquids from the solids in the centrifuge, and I run the liquids through the equipment. They get vaporized and bombarded with electrons, and this breaks some of the big molecules up into fragments, molecular pieces. Finally, everything gets sorted by its mass, by its molecular weight. Although different big molecules can have the same molecular weights, the fragments generally don’t so they help in identifying the original molecules.”

Visions of Hal’s chile recipe were swimming around in my head, and I had to yank myself back to the laboratory.

“I guess I see, and if I don’t it’s probably OK. Um, I don’t mean to sound ungrateful for all the work you’ve already done, but do you have a time estimate?”

He looked up at the clock. “Not before midnight. There’s only so much I can do in parallel. And the first two packages here each have three samples, so it looks like there’s twelve altogether. And an hour apiece is pushing things. I guess you really need these results, huh?”

* * *

Eight

Gil and I agreed that he would call in results as he got them, in groups of four—all the brain tissue samples first and so on. He thought he’d have the first group by the end of the work day.

I went back out into the heat, over to the natural sciences building to see if I could find Hal. But getting there from the chemistry building meant I had to go by the student union again, where the demonstration had been drawing the crowd earlier. On the way, I allowed myself the little fantasy of thinking about how gratifying it would be to arrest a demonstrator or two—that would teach them to clog up the campus and make me walk farther than I needed to!

While I really had no intention of doing this, I could have. As a State of Colorado official, the ranking one in the area, in fact, I had ultimate authority over law enforcement matters on campus—more authority than the FSU provost or the Durango police or the La Plata County sheriff. As a state university, it occupies a special niche in law enforcement jurisdiction, and that niche is ultimately the CBI’s turf. Mine wasn’t authority that I had ever exerted, nor did I want to. But I could have.

Stupid, loud-mouthed, inconsiderate femi-nazis—grump, grump. Just thinking about the possibility of arresting them made me feel better. So when I got to the student union and found the demonstration still in full swing—the late-lunch crowd seemed entranced—I couldn't help but burst out laughing, louder than I intended.

This made some of the onlookers turn toward me in surprise, and, because my laughter happened to coincide with a pause in the verbal action, some of the demonstrators turned as well.

Next thing I knew, Madge Glendon had marched up to me and was in my face. I hadn't seen her in the demonstration, but she must have been in the crowd.

“You got a problem with this?”

Her tone was somewhere between a snarl and a growl, and she needed a friend to offer her a breath mint. I decided that the best defense would be a good offense.

“Madge Glendon?” I pulled out my shield. “I'm with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and I'd like to talk with you about the serial decapitations that people are calling the Burma Shave Murders.”

I said this loudly enough that the nearby onlookers gasped, and one of the demonstrators dropped her sign.

But Madge reacted more calmly. I suppose that she felt in charge because she was on the campus, on her turf. I've learned that most university people think of the campus as a protected enclave in which normal rules of behavior don't apply.

She took a step back, narrowed her eyes, and so quietly that I think I was the only one who could hear her, she said, “You've got to be kidding.”

So I lowered my voice, too. “Not at all. I know an office near here that we can use.”

I waved my arm in the direction of the natural sciences building. “Shall we?”

By now the entire crowd was quiet, so it was easy for her to turn to her demonstrators and say in a normal voice, “Carry on. I'll be back as soon as I can.”

And we walked over to Hal's office.

His administrative assistant, Alice Swan, was at her desk in his ante-room, and she looked up at me with a smile when I walked through the door. Then she saw Madge and switched to her anonymous bureaucrat expression.

“Ms. Trieri, how nice to see you. Professor Glendon. What can I do for both of you?”

“Alice, I need to borrow the dean's office for a half hour or so. I hope he's not in the middle of something?”

“As a matter of fact, he just stepped out. Please go in. I'll let him know that you're in there when he returns.” I could tell she was dying to know what was going on, but she did a good job of keeping it to herself.

Madge and I went in, and I closed the door. Without being invited to, she sat in one of Hal's side chairs, and I took the other one. I really didn't see the need for putting his desk between us.

“Professor Glendon, I had planned to call you for an appointment this week, but since you approached me out there, this seemed like a good time to have our talk.”

“I hope you understand the gravity of your actions. To have a faculty member, a full professor, arrested while she is involved in exercising her freedom of expression, surely you realize that this is going to have serious repercussions.” Her voice was level, even pleasant, but her eyes were steely.

“Professor, I’m not going to be confrontational. You’re the one who started down that path, and I took advantage of the situation to talk with you. But you know as well as I do that you haven’t been arrested. You also know or should know that, first, as the Director of the Durango CBI office, I have law enforcement jurisdiction here on the campus—it’s a state university, after all. And, second, you, as a State of Colorado employee, have as a condition of your employment that you cooperate with official state investigations. I can assure you that this particular investigation is the single highest priority of the state government just now. The Governor is watching it more closely than he watches the Broncos’ football games. My only purpose here is to talk with you, to see if there’s anything that you know that could help us apprehend this killer.” I paused and held up my hand so she wouldn’t interrupt.

“And there are a couple of things you may not know. First, the university’s administration isn’t especially happy with you just now. And your not cooperating with a state investigation will give them ammunition you don’t need them to have. And, second, you may know this, one of the women in your action squad, Toni Henry, is the daughter of one of the Burma Shave victims.”

I don’t know what kind of reaction I was expecting—at the least I thought I’d get a little rise out of her. But she just shook her head.

“What do you think, that I’m stupid? Of course I know all this stuff. That’s why I didn’t make trouble out there—I don’t want Martin to have anything he can use against me. And Toni’s been confiding in me for a couple of years, ever since she was a student here. I defy you to tell me that her father didn’t deserve what he got.” Her eyes were as steely as ever.

“I suppose I need to maintain an official stance, here, so I’ll just say that it would have been more appropriate to handle that situation through the justice system.” I held up my hand again. “And I say that recognizing that the justice system might not have worked. But that has to be my official position.” I took a deep breath.

“What I’m more interested in, however, is last week. I was the one who found the WDL signs, the ones with your poem about hateful psyches, on the west side of Pagosa Springs; Sheriff Ron Grange’s people found the other ones. They’ve both been traced to your people, and they’re not being confused with the real ones. You’re not under suspicion. But there’s one thing I really do need to know. At your demonstration here last Friday, the students were chanting all four of the real poems, the poems found with the victims’ heads. The students were doing a good job, like they’d rehearsed. But at the time that I saw the demonstration, the fourth poem was only about four hours old, in terms of its having been discovered with the victim’s head. And it, I mean the poem, it wasn’t public until a couple of hours after it was discovered, in terms of its being in news reports or on the internet. I need to find out how you and your people found out about that fourth poem so soon. The one that starts, ‘It’s really quite a simple task...’ That’s the one thing I really need to know from you.”

“And if I choose not to tell you?” She looked defiant.

“You asked before if I think you’re stupid, and I didn’t get to an answer. So, for the record, no, I don’t. But even the smartest people can occasionally do stupid things. If you choose not to cooperate here, this will be one of those times for you.”

* * *

When we walked out of Hal’s office, he was sitting in his waiting area, across from Alice’s desk, reading a sheaf of papers. He looked up at me with a puzzled expression.

“Ah, Dean Weathers. I’m glad you returned, I need to talk with you next.” Madge had her back to me, so I winked at him. His jaw dropped. I turned slightly and winked at Alice Swan, and she almost giggled.

“Professor Glendon, thank you for your time and your cooperation. I’ll be sure and keep you informed of developments as appropriate.” Madge turned back to nod at me and walked out.

I turned to Hal. “Is now a good time?” And I gestured toward his office. This time, Alice giggled out loud.

When we were inside with the door closed, I walked up to him, grabbed his face, pressed myself against him all the way down to our toes, and kissed him so hard it felt like it might suck my fillings out. A slight pelvic grind provided an interesting finish.

When I pulled away, he was standing there with one of those goofy looks of his—not the trout one, though.

“That’s for being so nice about my using your office. Sorry I just took it over like that.”

“Oh, any time, any time at all. Want to use the computer or anything? The phone? Hell, use ’em all, then we can do something really interesting.”

“Sure, and really give Alice something to gossip about.”

“Either that or give me a heart attack. Whew. OK, so, you and Madge borrowed my office. No problem at all. Anything I should know?” His goofy look had mellowed to a dreamy smile.

“What I wanted to talk with her about was how she and her girls—I mean, her womyn-with-a-‘y’—how they knew about poem number four so soon last Friday.”

“What did she say?”

“I have some checking to do, so for now let me just say that she cooperated more fully than I would have expected. OK?” I was watching him closely for a reaction.

“All right. Can I tell John that she cooperated?” He had his head cocked to the side a little, a sign that he didn’t understand what was going on.

“Absolutely. She knows she had to cooperate, and she did. Oh, and Gil’s working on the tissue samples for me. They came this morning, and I took them over to him. That’s how I ran into Madge. I was on my way over here from the chemistry building, and they were having yet another demonstration at the student union.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I heard about it. I’ll be glad when classes start up and these students have something else to keep themselves occupied with. Maybe I’ll suggest that everyone assign extra homework.”

“How’s registration going?”

“Fine. Better than last year, actually. That problem with getting into courses needed for graduation—the problem Jennifer Mason had last year, remember?—it got fixed with some new rules we implemented. So things are smoother. And I don’t think we’re going to be so overbooked this year, so there won’t be quite such a housing crunch.”

“I…” But I was interrupted by the intercom.

“Dean Weathers? Provost Martin is here.” Alice had stopped giggling and was her usual formal self.

I grabbed a tissue and wiped a smear of lipstick off Hal’s mouth, and straightened his tie. When he looked professional again, we went out to fetch the provost.

After five busy minutes of pouring cups of coffee and finding napkins and so on, we were seated back in Hal's office.

"So, Annette, I saw you and Madge Glendon walk off together, from her demonstration. After you flashed your badge. What was that about?" Martin sipped his coffee and leaned back in his chair.

"I needed to have a chat with her anyway, and it seemed like as good a time as any. She just left here a little while ago, in fact. Very cooperative, after a little persuasion." I smiled, hoping it was mysterious.

It must have been, because he reacted by squinting a little and sitting forward.

"Hmm. Well, I guess that's good. Maybe between you and Bucky Thorndyke, we'll make a solid citizen out of her yet. Anyway, I've got bigger problems today."

Hal looked surprised. "Don't tell me that Bucky's succeeding."

Martin looked up at him. "I don't know about 'succeeding,' but they were out together, in public, Saturday night." He smiled at me. "Like you, Annette, I have my sources."

"I have to say, she was reasonable today. But, listen, you two probably have some university business to conduct, so I'll be on my way." I stood up and edged toward the door.

"If you have a minute, Annette, perhaps you should hear some of this. I expect you will sooner or later anyway. Might as well be now."

So I sat back down.

Martin took another sip of coffee and sighed. "If it's not one thing it's another. This time, it's a threat of a job action, a strike."

That surprised me. "A strike? Here? I didn't know you had any unions up here."

"We don't, but we're close. The adjunct faculty and the graduate teaching assistants have been discussing the possibility of organizing, and, of course, there's no shortage of groups, real unions, who are just drooling over the possibility of getting a foothold on the campus."

"I thought there was some rule, a state statute or something, about state employees' not being allowed to go on strike." Hal looked confused.

"There is, but so what? In fact, their not being unionized makes it easier for them to strike, because there's no organization that we could take legal action against. Just a disorganized bunch of people. And the worst we could do is to fire them. But we really can't do that, because we need them. Adjuncts and TAs teach over half our courses. Also, we emphatically don't need all the bad publicity that would generate."

"What? Over half your courses? I thought that's what the professors were for." It offended me a little that the university I thought of as "my" state university, where I imagined my state income taxes to be going, would not have its premier faculty members teaching its students.

"Oh, they do, Annette. Our faculty have higher teaching loads than at Colorado State or CU in Boulder. But enrollments have been rising, due to demographics, costs always go up, of course, and the legislature has been decreasing its support of all the state universities and not letting us increase tuition. So, unless we want to let class sizes get out of hand, the only way we can meet the student demand is to hire cheaper labor. That's adjuncts and TAs." Martin looked glum.

"Except that because you're treating them as cheap labor, they're threatening to strike." Once I get offended, rational arguments don't always work.

“Actually, Annette, the issue isn’t money, it’s working conditions, at least as I understand it. They want better benefits, job security, and, believe it or not, office space.” Hal shrugged. “But, of course, all those ultimately translate to money in the end, from John’s perspective, at least.”

“Hmm. I guess I’m not clear on why you think this is relevant for me.”

Martin sighed again, clearly depressed. “I hope it’s not. But if there is some kind of job action that gets disruptive, at some point the State Patrol would be called in, and your office is linked to that part of the state government, isn’t it? I mean, wouldn’t you handle any investigations that might arise?”

I thought for a minute. “I suppose that’s right. And if it’s a real possibility, I guess it would make sense to have as much information going in as possible. But right now, I have the bigger problem of these serial murders to deal with. You should feel glad that they’re all way east of here, not your problem.”

Martin finally smiled, in a grim sort of way. “I guess that’s true, Annette. Sometimes my little academic problems just don’t measure up to your real-world ones, do they?”

* * *

Hal and his boss needed to discuss their academic problem more, and I was finally able to escape. In some ways, thinking about dealing with a faculty strike was a relief, even amusing, but I really did need to get back to the main issue at hand.

As soon as I was outside, I checked for voice mail and learned that I needed to call Derek.

“Annette? Oh, good, glad you called in. Two things. Where are you?”

“I’m up on the campus, headed for my car.”

“Oh. Well, you might want to go by that chemistry lab first. I got a call from your guy Gil Taylor. Said he has a result. Just one sample, he said, but it’s interesting.”

“Good, I’ll go see him. What else?”

“And we got a first report from our intrepid couple, the Berensons. The people we put on von Stier, remember?”

“Already?”

“Already. Although it’s not much. They live over that way, so it was easy for them to get going. They actually had his shop staked out before he got back from here and went to it. And what happened is that he went to his shop and almost immediately closed it and went down the hill, to a record store, a place called Whip Tongue Tapes, or something like that. I may have written it down wrong, though.”

“Tongue Whip Tapes and CDs. That’s where I met Toni Henry, the daughter of the Pagosa Springs victim, Hollis Henry. She works there.”

“So there’s some kind of connection between them, her and von Stier?”

“Either that, or von Stier has a really bizarre taste in music, given his age group and all. Let me think about this while I go find Gil Taylor. Anything else?”

“Rod Andersen called again. He wants to have two conference calls a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. He apologized about it, but it sounds like he’s under lots of pressure from the Gov.” Derek sounded as if he was apologizing, too.

“He is. And we can call him later to give him an update. I can tell him a couple of things and you can tell him about the Berensons’ report. I think the thing to do is to tell him every last detail, and that way he’ll feel more confident that we’re doing something. And I’ll let you know if I find out anything at the lab. Thanks, Derek.”

When I reached Gil Taylor’s lab, I saw a bright red light on the door and, under it, a little sign, which I hadn’t really noticed before, that said “Do Not Enter When Red Light Is On!!” Under that was a smaller sign that said “Please push buzzer→” and pointed toward a doorbell button on the door frame. So, feeling a little like Dorothy when she and her friends were trying to get into the Emerald City, I pushed it.

There was a scratchy squawk, and Gil’s voice, more or less, came from a little speaker. “Gil Taylor here. What can I do for you?”

I leaned in the direction of the speaker and responded. “Gil, it’s Annette Trieri. I’m told you already have some interesting results.”

“Annette! Just a minute. Be right there.”

And after a few seconds, a hand reached out the door holding what looked like ski goggles, and Gil’s voice, for real this time, said, “Here, put these on. Eye protection. Then you can come in, but please don’t leave the door open long.”

So I put them on and found myself looking through almost clear glass, or plastic perhaps. I scooted in through the door and closed it behind me.

Inside, Gil’s equipment was humming merrily, and an electrical device near the fume hood was flashing and making a snapping noise.

“Glad you came over, Annette.” He was sitting at a computer console with his back to me. “The goggles are because of that laser over there. It isn’t eye-safe, and the goggles filter the light from it. Old laser operators like me have this saying, ‘Never look at a laser with your good eye.’ That’s a sort of an in joke.”

A joke that I didn’t get, so I plunged ahead. “Derek told me you’d called my office about some results. I was still here on campus, so I decided to stop by. Hope I’m not interrupting.” The place was a buzz of activity, even though Gil was the only person in there.

“I’ll take a minute to show you. Things aren’t quite automated, but this is something you should see.” He walked over to a desk that was covered with sheets of paper and picked one up and handed it to me.

“This is an example of the results I’m getting. It shows the compounds in a sample that I’ve analyzed. Each of these spikes corresponds to a compound or one of its fragments, and I’ve hand-labeled what are probably the main molecules.”

A graph on the paper was a horizontal line with several large, vertical spikes in it, and there were little notations by some of the spikes, handwritten numbers.

“Now, all these are computer processed, so they’re scaled the same. This means that if you take two and hold them up to a light on top of each other, identical samples will have the results right on top of each other. Differences will be obvious.” He handed me another graph, and I did as he suggested. The spikes were in the same places, but some of them were taller on the second graph.

“I can also have the computer do this, do it mathematically. Subtract one result from the other, in a way. So if I take a pure formalin sample and subtract it from a formalin-soaked tissue sample, I get

something like the original tissue, or at least the liquids from it. Like this.” He handed me two more pieces of paper, and the spikes on them were nearly identical. I nodded that I understood.

“So, here are three spectra on the same page, just offset a little. Pig blood, mouse blood, and Gil Taylor blood.” Again, the spikes matched about as closely as my eyes could tell.

He explained. “The purpose of this is to show that the mouse and pig tissue are close to human tissue. I didn’t want to cut a piece off of myself, so I used blood. But the research I’ve done says it should work with fat cells or brain cells, too.”

“OK, I think I’m following you.”

“Be sure to stop me and ask questions if you don’t. Now, what I’ve done is this. I have spectra from the pig and mouse brain cells, both natural and pickled in formalin. What I showed you a minute ago is the result of a pickled pig brain spectrum minus the formalin spectrum. And it compares almost exactly with the natural pig brain. Therefore, if I take the spectrum of one of your pickled human brain samples and subtract the formalin spectrum, I’ll have the natural human brain spectrum, including whatever drugs might be in it. And, except for the drugs, that should look like the natural pig brain, or mouse brain, because, first, the blood samples look alike, and, second, the research says the brains should, too. You with me?”

“I got sidetracked on the ‘pickled pig brain’ part, but that’s OK, that’s just me. I think I see where you’re going. How do the victim’s brains compare with the pig’s—the spectra, I mean?”

He picked up two pieces of paper and handed them to me. “Here is the Pagosa Springs victim, and here is the pig. See where the peaks are missing in the pig sample?”

There were indeed a few additional spikes in Henry Hollis’ brain spectrum. He handed me another piece of paper. The same differences were there, although they were slightly taller.

“This is the Gunnison victim. Same result. I should have the Lake City victim in a few minutes.”

“What is this? I mean, what substance makes these extra peaks? And how come they’re taller in this Gunnison sample?”

“Different amounts of these particular molecules, meaning that there were slightly different amounts in the tissues of these two victims, that explains the different heights of the peaks. From different dosages, or time since ingestion. But what the drugs are is something I haven’t got to yet.” He pointed to a pair of large spikes. “But whatever they are, there seem to be two fairly big molecules with weights of about 237 and 249, these spikes here. But I’ll have to do some more research to figure out what they are.”

One of the computers made a chiming noise, and a piece of paper slid out of a laser printer.

“Here’s Lake City.” He walked over to the printer. “Looks like the same result.” And he passed the paper to me.

“What you seem to have here, Annette, are victims that are being given the same substance, or substances, before they’re decapitated. That’s how the stuff would get into their brain tissue, through the bloodstream. They get an injection, the stuff circulates, they get their heads chopped off. Whoever’s doing this probably thought that by letting the blood drain, it wouldn’t be possible to get this information.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that the murderer is well-educated but not recently enough to be up on the latest analytical techniques. And meaning that this person is very, very clever nonetheless.”

* * *

I finally returned to my office about 3:00. It was tempting to hang around Gil's lab and see the results as they came out, but it was a slow process—and the first three, being identical, provided enough information to confirm my suspicions about the victims' having been drugged. Given only molecular weights, however, I could tell it was going to be a challenge to identify the drugs. But at the least, I thought, this should make Rod Andersen feel good about our progress.

Derek told me that another report from the Berensons had come in. Von Stier and a young woman dressed all in black had emerged from the music store in Pagosa Springs and headed off together in a black BMW sedan. They drove west up the grade out of town and then turned north on Piedra Road, and the Berensons tailed them to the entrance of a ranch about 15 miles up the road.

Why von Stier and Toni Henry would be visiting her father's ranch—now her ranch—was something I was going to have to remember to ask von Stier.

The Berensons also reported something that might or might not be important—it looked for all the world that they weren't the only ones tailing the black BMW. They had driven up Piedra Road two cars behind it until the pavement stopped, and then they had fallen back because they knew they could track it using its dust plume. As they came down from the woods on a ridge into a large meadow, they saw the BMW turning into the ranch entrance and the car between them and the BMW crossing the meadow below them.

When the second car reached the ranch entrance, it slowed, drove past, and turned around. The Berensons stopped to watch as the other car, what looked like one of those jelly-bean shaped, anonymous white rental sedans that every airport has, stopped and parked. Its driver emerged, carrying what looked like a camera bag, climbed the fence, and began to walk through the pasture on a course parallel to the ranch driveway. Because it was a long driveway, it took him about 15 minutes to disappear over a rise.

The Berensons had driven down into the meadow and written down the white rental car's license number, noting its little "Hertz" label and the fact that it was a Ford Escort. Finally, they turned around and were now, they said, parked well off the road at the edge of the trees on the ridge, watching to see what would happen next. They were driving a black Jeep Grand Cherokee, one of probably two or three hundred in Pagosa Springs area, so they were confident that their car would be taken for that of someone local out for a walk in the woods.

Derek was in the process of finding out who had rented the white car.

While I was speculating on the meaning of all this, my intercom buzzed.

"Annette? It's that Mr. von Stier on the phone. He sounds grumpy." So I poked the blinking button.

"Ms. Trieri? Kristof von Stier here. I must say, I'm terribly, terribly disappointed in you. I wondered if you might put a tail on me, but I thought surely it would be someone more professional than this. I mean, really. You know my background now. Don't I deserve someone more professional?" He did indeed sound grumpy.

"I'm afraid I'm not entirely clear on what you're talking about."

"I've run out on an errand, out to a rather obscure destination, and I was followed, followed rather clumsily at that, by someone driving a white Ford Escort. Looks like one of those cars that the airport rental agencies have by the dozen. Impossible to miss. Really. I'm just plain disappointed in you."

“How strange. I have to tell you, Mr. von Stier, I have to tell you *emphatically* that it is not one of my people who is following you in that white Ford Escort.”

There was a pause. Then he said, in a voice that was not quite as grumpy as before, “Why should I believe you?”

“Because we agreed not to lie to each other when we talked about your accounting for your time for the next few days, remember? And I’m keeping my end of the bargain. But, listen, there are a couple of things we need to talk about. Eventually, I want to discuss this errand of yours, why you’re out at some ‘obscure destination,’ as I believe you put it. That sounds as if it might break our agreement. But there’s something more pressing first.”

“What’s that?” Now he just sounded curious.

“You pointed out to me this morning that Friday is approaching fast. But perhaps you’re not aware that all four of the victims to date disappeared earlier in the week, on Tuesday or Wednesday. And Tuesday is even closer than Friday. I don’t know whether you really fit the profile of the other victims, because I don’t know the killer’s frame of mind. But, well...”

“Surely you can’t be serious!”

“Another thing we’ve discovered is that each of the victims appears to have been drugged at some point in the abduction and decapitation process. So all I can say is that you should watch out for people with tranquilizer dart guns.”

This time, the pause went on for quite a while.

* * *

Nine

A little later, it occurred to me that I may have just placed the white Escort’s occupant in mortal danger, given von Stier’s background. That wouldn’t do at all, I thought. I walked down the hall to Derek’s office.

“Derek? Can you get hold of the Berensons? I mean, do they have a cell phone or something?”

“That’s what they’ve been reporting in with. So, sure, I can call them.”

“Good, please do, and find out what’s happening right now. I’ll be right back.”

I went back to my office and fetched my cell phone. When I returned to Derek’s office he was talking on his phone.

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and said, “Yep, all’s quiet. No change. What should I say?”

“Tell them I’m going to have the sheriff arrest the guy in the Escort for trespassing, which will get him out of their hair. So when they see the sheriff show up, they shouldn’t worry. I’ll also let the sheriff know about them, so they shouldn’t worry about that, either.” By then I heard Sheriff Ron Grange’s phone ringing in my ear.

“Archuleta County Sheriff. This is Zelda. How can I direct your call?”

“This is Annette Trieri, CBI over in Durango. I thought this was Ron’s direct number.”

“Oh, it is, Ms. Trieri, but he’s on the other line. I can let him know you’re holding.”

“Please do, Zelda, and, before you do that, what I’m going to need is for someone to go about 15 miles up Piedra Road, to the Henry ranch, and arrest someone for trespassing. It’s for his own protection, but I’ll want to come over your way and question him about what he’s doing there, before you release him. It may be connected with the Burma Shave Murders. If you have an idea of how Ron would handle this, you can get things in motion while he’s still on the phone. There may be a time issue.”

“I can find out if we have anyone up that way. Send him in that direction. That’s probably what Sheriff Grange will do.” She sounded both hesitant and matter of fact.

“Great! And he can wait for Ron’s go-ahead before he makes the arrest. So now I can hold for Ron without worrying.”

Derek was still on his phone, and when he noticed that I’d stopped talking, he gave me a thumb’s up. He put his hand over the mouthpiece again and asked, “What’s going on, anyway?”

“I may have over-played things a little. Von Stier called me and complained about the white Escort. He thought it was our tail. I suggested it could be the Burma Shave murderer stalking him, and now I’m afraid of what he, that is, von Stier, might do. Don’t want our white Escort guy dead before we can talk to him, do we?”

“It’s always easier to talk to guys while they’re still alive.” I recognized the voice in my ear as belonging to Ron Grange.

“Absolutely, Ron. That’s why I wonder if you can have one of your guys arrest him for me?” I filled him on where and for what reason and how I was going to handle it.

“How should we do this? Find where he went in that pasture? Follow him? Or what?”

“I imagine that he’s watching the house. Von Stier was with Toni Henry, so that’s probably where they went. If your guy hangs around the rental car, maybe like he’s writing it a parking ticket or something, this other person will show up sooner or later. Then he can be arrested and taken in, and I’ll come by and talk to him. If it happens soon, I’ll be over this afternoon.”

“Sounds like a plan. Zelda told me something about getting things rolling already, so this won’t take but a minute. Hang on.” He put me on hold.

I’d noticed that Derek was waving at me, trying to get my attention.

“The Berensons tell me that they’ve heard a couple of shots. Booming, like a rifle...there’s two more, different. Not quite so loud.”

“Damn. I sure hope that’s not von Stier shooting at the Escort guy.” My nightmare is starting to happen, I thought.

“With him shooting back, maybe? They said it sounded like two different guns.”

“I’ll have to warn Ron’s deputy about this, that’s for sure. I don’t want to send a single officer into that situation.”

“There’s two more shots, with a third gun. Louder, sharper. Sounds like a war’s going on, Annette.”

“There are three people out there, von Stier, Toni Henry, and the Escort guy. Be sure to tell the Berensons to lie low.”

“Don’t think that’s necessary, Annette. They asked me not to have them go in there.”

“Reassure them we won’t...Ron?” What we really needed, I thought, was a conference call. “Glad you’re back.”

“Got a deputy on the way, he was up the road a piece and will be there shortly.”

“Better warn him that our other observers are hearing shots. They’re ex-FBI, and they’ve reported six shots, two each from three different weapons. All rifles, they say.”

“Oh, hell. Be right back.” And I was on hold again.

I got Derek’s attention. “They said that the Escort guy was carrying what looked like a camera bag?”

“Right. I asked them about it just now, and they say it’s a small camera-type bag. They can’t see how it could contain a rifle, even a really sophisticated one that breaks down into small pieces. The bag was just too small. But they said all three weapons had the characteristic boom of a rifle that not even a big-bore handgun would make.”

“And two shots each. Hmm. This is very, very weird. Oh, hi, Ron.”

“OK, we’re set. Red, that’s Red Collins, my deputy who’s up that way, Red isn’t going into this thing until we have a better idea of what’s going on. He’ll wait by the road, by where that Escort is parked. I’m going out there myself to provide backup. I’ll call you from the road in a few. OK?”

“Right. I’ll be here. No, wait. Call me on my cell phone.” I got him to write down the number and disconnected just as Derek’s intercom buzzed.

“Is Annette in there, Derek?” Sally’s voice had a tinge of panic. “Rod Andersen is on the phone and I can’t find her.”

Executive decision time. What was more important, keeping the boss informed or keeping in continuing touch with people on the scene of the Piedra Road melodrama?

I looked at Derek. “Tell the Berensons to call if anything happens and that we’ll get back to them soon. And push that blinking button there and turn on your speaker.”

“Rod? This is Annette, I’m in Derek Petersen’s office in the middle of some excitement—you’re on his speaker phone.”

“Excitement? Damn. The Governor called me again, and I don’t know how much more excitement I can handle today. What’s up?” Rod’s voice was tinny through the speaker, but I could tell he was tired.

I warned him that I might have to take another call and filled him in. In doing so, I realized just how complicated the situation was—he kept asking questions that I thought I had explained already.

“So, you’re telling me that you have some people, people with experience, tailing this von Stier character, and they’ve discovered that they’re not the only ones tailing him? And the other guy seems to be in shooting war with von Stier and the daughter of one of the victims? What the hell is going on out there?”

“We don’t know about the shooting war part, Rod, just that our people have heard shots. And the Archuleta County sheriff and one of his deputies are on it.”

“But you told me this morning that this von Stier guy isn’t really a suspect.”

“Right. Still isn’t, although I have some new questions for him, like what he’s doing out at Toni Henry’s ranch, the one that used to belong to her father, victim number three.”

His questions went on long enough that I completely forgot to tell him about Gil Taylor’s results.

* * *

Ron Grange finally called back, from the entrance to the Henry ranch up on Piedra Road. He and his deputy, Red Collins, were going to wait and see if our Escort driver walked out on his own. No more shots, rifle or other, had been heard since the first six.

He reached me in my car, just about the time I passed the US 550/160 intersection on the way south out of town. Having cell phone towers almost everywhere in southwestern Colorado has cluttered up the landscape some, but it has sure made my job easier.

Another thing that's made my job easier is having a permanently packed overnight bag in my car. Hal doesn't meddle in my work, but he did nag me into taking care of myself, thinking of myself first in high-pressure situations. That way, his argument went, I would be in better shape to do a top-notch job and come out of it healthy, both physically and mentally. Because I have to dash off to strange places in a hurry, with no idea of when I'll be able to return, the overnight bag is a mental-health insurance policy. And because it was Hal's idea, more or less, he can't really put up much of a fuss when I call and tell him I won't be home for dinner, or breakfast either.

After the briefing with Rod Andersen, I dashed out the door to get to Pagosa Springs as soon as I could. Maybe it wasn't necessary, but the more we talked about it, and we talked about it a lot with all of Rod's questions, the more it seemed like a good idea for me to be there. If those folks really were shooting at each other, there was no telling what would come of it. In the end, I was persuaded by Rod to go find Ron and Red and see what was going on first hand. Rod and Ron and Red. Thinking about it made me nostalgic for those old-fashioned, distinctive names like "Aloysius."

After I was finished talking with Ron Grange, I called my office to have them get a radio message out to the state patrol cars on Highway 160 between Durango and Pagosa Springs to please ignore a white Ford Explorer with State of Colorado plates if it seemed to be playing fast and loose with the speed limit. To emphasize the official nature of the trip, I borrowed a magnetic emergency light and stuck it on the top of the car. At least it would be almost official.

This let me cut about 15 minutes off the hour's drive to Pagosa Springs, and when Ron Grange called again, I was just turning north onto Piedra Road.

"Annette? We've got a guy walking back toward us across the pasture. He saw us when he came over the rise, stopped and looked for a minute, but now he's walking toward us again. He's carrying what looks like a camera bag. No guns that I can see, though."

"Looks like I should be there in fifteen minutes or so. Maybe we can get things all straight without your having to take him in. But be careful with him, OK?"

"You bet. And if he was watching things at the ranch, they might be about to leave, too. Should we stop von Stier and Toni?"

I thought for a minute. "No, why not just smile and wave? I'm sure von Stier is just as curious about this guy as we are. And if you just smile and wave, that'll drive him nuts. He might even stop to ask what's going on."

"Yeah, it will drive him nuts. And if he stops, I'll just tell him it's police business. That'll really set him off. I know this guy well enough to know that. But I don't know if we're allowed to have this much fun, Annette."

"Tell you what, I'll authorize it. Just this once. See you in a few minutes."

On the way up Piedra Road, I stopped to say hello to the Berensons to let them know what was going on. Although they were in almost continual touch with Derek, they were pleased to meet me and find out the latest. And I was glad to meet them, too. I like to know the people who work for me, even if only occasionally.

They were an interesting couple, late sixties, fit. They looked as if they were out on a bird-watching expedition, with binoculars, day packs, and a camera with a very long lens.

When I got to the ranch entrance, Red and Ron were talking with a chubby, middle-aged man who was sweating rivers. It looked as if the walk through the pasture at 9,000 feet or so had given him quite a workout. Either that or it was all the arm-waving and stomping around he was doing. Apparently, Ron Grange's "police business" wasn't making him very happy.

I turned around in the ranch's driveway and parked in the little caravan that was forming up—two Archuleta Sheriff's Department SUVs sandwiching the white Escort, and now with me at the front.

I was barely introduced to the chubby guy—Ron told me he was Charlie Stevens, a private investigator out of Los Angeles—when he started in on me, waving his arms around and stomping about. And sweating.

"Lady, I don't know what the hell's going on here, but I've got half a mind to sue the crap out of you people."

I looked him up and down and turned to Ron, while Stevens continued his rant.

"Ron, I recall you said that he was walking through the pasture, inside the fence, when you and Red saw him. Is that correct?"

"Sure is, Annette. On the south side of the ranch road, there." He pointed to the left side of the driveway.

I turned back to Stevens. "Mr. Stevens. Attention."

I used about level two-and-a-half of my Voice of Authority, as Hal calls it, and it worked as I hoped it would. He looked surprised and stopped talking—and he even stood up a bit straighter.

"Mr. Stevens. Can you read me that sign over there, please?" I pointed to a sign on the fence a few feet from where he must have crossed it.

"Uh, well, it says 'No Trespassing. No Hunting. No Fishing. Violators Will Be Prosecuted.' Yeah, OK, look, I was just walking..."

"Mr. Stevens. Please. Stop." I eased back to level two, and that still worked. "You were introduced to me as a licensed private investigator. Licensed in another state, of course, but still, I would think that California PIs would know what 'no trespassing' means."

"Sure I do, but..." I held up my hand, and he stopped.

"Perhaps what you don't know is that we here in Colorado take trespassing quite seriously, particularly around here. You see, there have been a number of incidents of sabotage of various kinds of equipment, as well as fences getting cut and so on. In fact, one thing we'll need to do is to search your car, to see whether you're carrying any equipment that could be used for such purposes. Ron, Red—would you take Mr. Stevens' keys and see what's in his car?"

Ron and Red, standing behind Stevens, had been elbowing each other and working hard not to laugh out loud. Red Collins took the keys to the Escort, and they began rifling through Stevens' car.

"Mr. Stevens, the sheriff reported hearing gunshots. Would you know anything about that?"

He squinted at me, obviously suspicious, obviously trying to detect any traps that I was laying for him.

"Target practice, as far as I could see. Up by the house."

"And you haven't fired any weapons recently? We'll be testing your hands."

“No way, lady. Like I said, I was just out for a walk.”

“Observing target practice, yes. Now, Mr. Stevens, I see that you have a camera. May ask if it has film in it? I could open it to find out, of course, but that seems impolite.”

“Of course it’s got film in it. You think I’d lug around an empty camera?”

“Good. We can get it developed and see what you’ve been taking pictures of. If it’s scenery and so on, well, good for you. If it’s infrastructure, dams, bridges, equipment, of course that will be another matter. The magistrate will be most interested in which of these two it is.”

“Magistrate? Look, lady, uh, Ms. Treery or whatever your name is...” I only had to raise my hand half-way this time—it was nice to know that he was getting trained.

I looked at my watch. “Yes, magistrate. And I’m afraid it’s probably too late to catch him this afternoon. Isn’t that right, Ron?”

Sheriff Grange pulled his head out of the Escort’s trunk. “Huh? Sorry, I missed that, Annette.”

“I was just saying that it’s probably too late to catch the magistrate this afternoon, don’t you think? It’s after five.”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah, sure. Right. He never hears new cases after five.”

A barely audible snicker escaped Red, who was in the front seat looking at the rental car’s paperwork.

“But I expect we should be able to get in to see him first thing in the morning, right Ron?” I looked at him and he nodded vigorously. “So if the pictures on this film back up the story you’re going to tell me when we get back to town, I’m pretty sure you’ll be on your way by mid-morning. Find anything, guys?” Ron and Red had emerged from Escort, empty handed.

“Not me. Rental paperwork looks legit.” Red shrugged.

“And all I found is luggage, a couple of days of clothes. Nothing out of line.” Ron was dusting off his hands after closing the trunk.

“All right. Good. Why don’t you guys take Mr. Stevens into town, and I’ll see you at the county building. He and I need to have a leisurely chat.”

“Now, just hold on a minute...” Stevens had finally realized what was really going to happen. But I raised my hand again, and, dutifully, he stopped.

“Mr. Stevens. You’re being placed under arrest for suspicion of trespassing. You’ll be read your rights on the way into town. And, as I’ve said, if your story checks out, that is, the story you’re going to tell me, then it’s quite likely that you’ll be on your way in the morning. Meanwhile, a part of your rights, of course, is to keep quiet, because anything you say can be used against you. So I’d suggest you and the sheriff here talk about baseball or something on your way into town. I’ll see you there.”

* * *

I waved to the Berensons on the way back into town and called Derek.

“Hi, Derek. You talking with the Berensons? I just passed them and I thought I saw him on the phone.”

“Good to hear from you, Annette. He’s on hold. What’s happening over there?”

“We’re taking the guy in the white Escort into town. He’ll be spending the night in the luxurious accommodations of Archuleta County. I’m betting he’s out of here by mid-morning.”

“What about our friends?”

“Still at the ranch, we think. Tell the Berensons to keep their eyes peeled.”

“Will do. When should we expect you?”

“I’m going to talk with this guy Stevens, the Escort guy, tonight, and tomorrow I want to talk to von Stier and Toni Henry. So if nothing else comes up, mid-afternoon, maybe.”

“Hope you called home.”

“Yeah, but it was just a message. I’ll call again later this evening, though, so don’t worry. Besides, I’ve got Hal trained better than you.” I heard laughter.

On the way into town, I stopped at a likely looking motel and got lucky. Sometimes finding rooms without advance reservations this time of year is tricky, but it probably helped that it was Monday. Even though it was getting on toward six, I decided to postpone dinner until after my conversation with Charlie Stevens. That way, I could get dinner recommendations from the people at the Sheriff’s Department and have something to look forward to later in the evening. Besides, I wanted to hear Stevens’ story.

I found him waiting for me in an interview room at the Sheriff’s Department. The desk sergeant told me that Sheriff Grange had decided on the interview room as a holding cell for Stevens because the normal holding cell was full of drunks, something associated with a bowling league rumble. When I got the door unlocked for me and went in, Stevens was polishing off the last piece of a take-out pizza.

“Ms. Treery, ya found me. I have to say, these hicks are treating me better than I thought they would. But I’m still gonna sue their asses off, and yours, too.” He wiped his mouth on a sleeve.

“Really? For what? False arrest? I thought I explained how seriously we take trespassing here, and the sheriff and his deputy both saw you in that pasture. Was there some mistreatment? You just said they were treating you well, and I’m sure you know that everything in here is recorded. I think I can assure you that no lawyer in this county would take on your lawsuit. And the out-of-pocket cost of a big-time Los Angeles lawyer who’s admitted to the Colorado Bar would be steep, I’d think.”

He lapsed into a sulk, so I decided to plunge onward. “I don’t know if they mentioned it to you, but they put you in here so that you wouldn’t be in the middle of some kind of fracas that’s got the drunk tank full. So you’re being treated reasonably well, I’d say.” I paused, realizing how hungry I was. That pizza smelled good.

“Now, it’s looking like there’s no way for you to avoid a night in jail here. Bail won’t get set tonight, but tomorrow I think the local magistrate will just dismiss everything, if I ask him to. Which I intend to do, provided you work with me.”

“Work with you how?”

“They told me out front that they took your film to the one-hour developing service at the supermarket, so it should be ready soon. In the meantime, I’d like to hear just what those pictures are of, and what you were doing at that ranch, and why you’re in town in the first place. Because you’re a PI, I bet you’re going to tell me that you’re working for a client, and that’s confidential, and so on. But that’s not going to cut it. I need to know everything. Furthermore, I’ll be checking your story any and every way I can before tomorrow morning. OK?”

“OK? Are you nuts? No, it’s not OK. But I do understand that you’re holding all the cards here. And as long as *you* understand that I’m not in the habit of talking about my clients, I think I can give you enough information to get me out of here tomorrow.”

“We’ll see. But please don’t try to con me. It just makes me mad.”

“Right.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “The first thing is, what you’ll find on the film are pictures I took this afternoon of Toni Henry and some skinny, bald guy she went out to her old man’s ranch with.”

I interrupted him. “You don’t know this other person? And it was my understanding that it’s now Toni’s ranch.”

“Never saw him before. And I know her only from pictures. But, see, it really isn’t her ranch, yet. And what I’m here for is to represent my client’s interests in seeing that it doesn’t become her ranch, at least not automatically.” His smirk told me there was more.

“Oh. Let’s back up a minute. It sounds like you know that Toni’s father is dead. What do you know about that?”

“Just what’s been in the papers. He was murdered, decapitated. Say!” He sat up straight. “Are you investigating that? The report I read just said that there was more than one of these murders and that some state agency was doing the investigation.”

“Now perhaps you understand more clearly why I’m so interested in people trespassing on the Henry ranch. And, I hope, you understand why it’s so important for you to cooperate.”

“The heat’s on, huh?” He grinned. “So, anyway, Toni’s old man gets offed and it’s not suicide. So there’s life insurance, investments, and this ranch. I’m told the real estate around here has become incredibly inflated and this ranch has development potential. Worth millions.”

“I guess I would understand where you’re coming from if you told me about your client. I’ll keep it to myself, believe me.”

“What about all the recording equipment and so on?” His skepticism was evident.

“I’ll get the recordings, don’t worry.”

I could almost see the wheels turning as he thought over his options.

“The only reason for secrecy has to do with timing. See, my client is Toni Henry’s older half-sister. I don’t think Toni knows about her. Deborah Henry, Deb, to her friends. Daughter of Hollis and his first wife, Winona, who’s now in a nursing home with early-onset Alzheimer’s.”

“So this has to do with the estate and the will and probate.” I was beginning to understand.

“Sure does. See, when he and Winona divorced, it was back when the courts were sympathetic to the wife, and the facts in this case made the court doubly sympathetic. He was fooling around, he had beat her up, and all sorts of other bad stuff. But at that time, he was land-rich and money-poor. So the decree included language about including Winona and her heirs in his estate, an irrevocable bequest. It’s expressed as a percentage of the estate. Winona was pregnant with Deb before the divorce, although it’s not clear that Hollis knew it, but she’s part of it anyway. Together, Winona and Deb get half of everything.” He rubbed his right thumb against his middle and index fingers in the universal sign for money.

“And this is a Colorado decree?”

“You got it. I don’t know what his current will says, but it’s not supposed to supersede the decree.”

“But that’s an issue for the courts. What’s your role?”

“Watching out that Toni doesn’t do things to deplete the value of the estate before it’s all settled.”

“Such as?”

“Such as making off with and selling assets. Hollis was a collector. Coins. Stamps. And guns. He had a huge gun collection.”

A light-bulb went on over my head. “Would that be related to the shots we heard today?”

He looked puzzled. “Shots? Oh, yeah, the rifles, the target practice I mentioned before. Say, don’t tell me that’s why there were two cops waiting for me at my car! What did you think, I’m some kind of sniper?” He burst out laughing.

* * *

“What it sounds like is that von Stier was testing some of the rifles in Hollis Henry’s gun collection.” I took another bite of pizza.

“That would explain why there were two shots per rifle and why they were in that particular sequence. What you described, two shots from A, two from B, two from C, doesn’t sound like people shooting at each other.”

Hal sounded relieved. He didn’t like the fact that I’d rushed to Pagosa Springs, possibly into a shooting situation. That I was away from home like this on short notice was bad enough for him, but the rifles were over the top.

The aroma from Charlie Stevens’ pizza had stayed with me, so, rather than hunt out a restaurant, I found the place that had delivered to the jail and had them make a take-out one for me. I took it back to the motel and called home, to make sure that the message I’d left earlier got through and to talk over the day. My evening conversations with Hal, whether I’m at home or on the road, often clarify confusing situations for me.

But the events of the afternoon seemed straightforward. The pictures taken by Charlie Stevens showed von Stier pointing rifles at a tree behind the ranch house, as well as the house itself and its layout with the out-buildings. And it would make sense that von Stier would know something about collectible guns, even though his specialty was antique armor. In a small town like Pagosa Springs, he could be the only person with enough knowledge to do appraisals.

“Yeah, that’s one of the things that was bothering me while I was driving over here. I concocted all sorts of scenarios, like, person A shoots twice and misses. Person B shoots twice at person A and kills him. Then person C shoots twice at person B and kills him. Leaving person C alive. Testing the guns from the collection makes much more sense.” I don’t know why I was surprised, but the pizza was actually quite good.

“So, does this business of Toni Henry’s having a half-sister mean anything? I mean, to your investigation?” Hal was also in the middle of a late supper, and I could hear him chewing. Meals together over the phone, however, just aren’t the same as being there.

“I’ve wondered a little about that myself. At some level, we’ve almost eliminated the women closely connected with the victims from being suspects. But it could be that one of them is doing it, with the idea of using all of the killings except the one—her own, I guess you’d call it—as smoke screen. And Toni Henry would be the prime candidate there, as she’s the one who will benefit most from the death, in terms of an estate and so on. The others all are getting something, and some of them are getting a bundle. Sarah Robinson, for example. But Hollis Henry was the richest of the bunch, it seems. If Toni

didn't know about her sister, she would have assumed that whole estate would be hers. That, plus the abuse in the past, sounds like motive to me."

"Hmm. Well, she probably had any number of opportunities. That leaves means. And if she hired von Stier to appraise the gun collection, do you suppose she could have hired him for something else, too?" Hal may not be the most suspicious natural sciences dean in the world, but sometimes I think he comes close. Dealing with students proffering excuse after excuse is probably not that different from dealing with suspects.

"When Derek and I talked with him this morning, he was persuasive. It just doesn't make a lot of sense for him to be involved in these murders. But, of course, that could be what he wants us to think." I have a suspicious nature of my own, of course.

"What? You mean he might have been trying to mislead you? Gracious! But, look, from what I've read and from what you've told me, these murders aren't just your run-of-the-mill hits. They're carefully planned and executed, and then advertised afterwards. Seems like an elaborate smoke screen."

"But there are millions involved, potentially, at least. And the more money there is, the more planning would go into it, seems like."

"And there's also the issue of the skills necessary to pull these killings off. Who is this guy von Stier, anyway?"

"Long story that's supposed to stay secret. But suffice it to say that his real name isn't von Stier and he definitely has the skill set necessary to have done this. A very colorful individual, who's trying to hide out from his sordid past. But, see, that's one reason why this doesn't make sense. If he's hiding out, and it seems like he really is, why would he do something high-profile like this?"

"You answered that yourself. Millions. But there's also the fact that it isn't high-profile as far as he's concerned unless you arrest and convict him. Then he's got bigger problems than his past, I'd bet."

"Even if I just arrest him, though, he's going to get tons of publicity. And that's something I'm sure he doesn't want. Even if his appearance is different, I get the impression that there are people out there who would figure it out and come after him."

"Oh. One of those kinds of sordid pasts. Still, there's the skill set and the millions."

"I'm going to have a nice, long chat with him tomorrow. He agreed with a proposition Derek and I put forward this morning—that he would make sure he has a solid alibi all this week. If someone else disappears and gets dead, that'll exonerate Mr. von Stier. But I'm not sure spending time with Toni Henry constitutes an alibi."

"You mean conspirators can't provide alibis for each other? Guess I'll have to make a note of that."

"Right, smart guy. So, anyway, how did the rest of your day go?"

"Oh, *my* day was mostly fine. I don't know if I can say the same thing for John, though. The talk of a strike got louder as the afternoon wore on. In fact, he sent out one of his 'official provost' memos to us deans, warning that we might have to figure out how to start classes without the adjuncts and TAs."

"Is that a big deal for you?"

"Not as much for me as for the social sciences and humanities dean, Bill O'Leary. I don't have any adjuncts, and our TAs are pretty independent, being physics and chemistry graduate students. They'll probably continue teaching. It's those radical leftists over in SS&H who want the union." He chuckled.

"Commie pinkos, huh?" I was starting to laugh as well.

“Absolutely. And I hear that the EPA is going to declare them an endangered species, so we have to take care of them. Maybe this strike business is really just a government plot to give them something to do.”

* * *

Ten

Tuesday morning, the first order of business was getting Charlie Stevens on his way.

He had cooperated fully, even going so far as to let me keep his photographs—he got the negatives, however—and providing a signed, written statement about his activities while in Archuleta County. In return, we had a deputy take him to his motel, where he was able to shower and change in anticipation of his appearance in court.

This turned out to be to his advantage, because the magistrate that usually handled arraignments and so on was on vacation, and his cases were being handled by the judge—the same judge that would likely be presiding over the probate of Hollis Henry’s estate. Charlie needed to make a good impression.

I helped out by meeting privately with the judge before court convened to explain things. Charlie had as much as admitted to trespassing in his written statement, so that couldn’t be ignored. But the judge understood the situation and was as interested as I in justice for the Burma Shave murderer, so he used his discretionary powers to get Charlie off the hook.

In court, he had Charlie rise and listen to his ruling.

“Mr. Stevens, we have here a trespassing charge, to which you have admitted. However, I understand that it was a call of nature that caused you to walk out of view of Piedra Road, across that pasture on the Henry Ranch. Now, I’m getting to the age when I’ve learned that such calls of nature can take on a level of urgency that demands immediate action, and there have been times when I have been grateful for the hospitality of strangers in an urgent situation. And I surely don’t want anyone to think that we here in Archuleta County are inhospitable. Therefore, I’m inclined to be lenient in this case. So I’ll only suggest that next time, you find some trees that don’t have a fence around them. Case dismissed. Next?”

Charlie almost screwed things up by standing there like an idiot with his mouth hanging open, until I grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the courtroom. Just to be nice, I personally drove him out to get his car and promised to keep him up-to-date on the progress of the murder investigation. If it turned out that Toni Henry was somehow involved, it would be likely that her sister would receive even more of the estate than the divorce decree required. Charlie liked that idea.

After my morning phone call with Rod Andersen in Denver, I had planned to find Kristof von Stier. But when I got back into town, there was a note on the door of his shop that said he was in Alamosa for the day, at Billy Abernathy’s. It also listed a phone number, which matched the one on Billy’s card.

Perhaps, I thought, this was how von Stier was providing himself an alibi today—at least for the time he wasn’t on the road between Pagosa Springs and Alamosa, close to two hours each way.

So I was more or less forced to find Toni Henry. I’d hoped to talk with von Stier first, because his perspective on yesterday’s outing to the ranch would be useful in interpreting what she had to say. I wasn’t sure I could trust her version of things.

When she saw me walk through the door of her shop, the first thing she did was to turn down the volume on the stereo. My previous visit, apparently, had made an impression. But her attitude was still in need of improvement.

“Well, if it isn’t the cop lady. Heard another one happened since you were here, some other jerk lost his head. How many more before you figure it out?”

Her expression was either a true sneer or false bluster trying to hide a bad case of nerves. I couldn’t quite tell which, so I stared at her for a few seconds while I considered the matter. It didn’t take long for the bluster to fade, exposing the nerves.

“OK, OK, that was rude. Sorry. What can I do for you? Need help finding a CD or something?” She was fiddling with some of the metal stuck through her right ear.

“I’m trying to think of a good way to describe it to you. You see, when you’re investigating a complicated case like these Burma Shave serial murders, you automatically catalog anyone who has any possible motive for any of the killings in a special way. Not as a real suspect, just as someone with a special interest. Then, when one of those people does something else that’s out of the ordinary, they get put into another special category, sort of one step closer to being a real suspect. These little steps can eventually add up to somebody who actually becomes a real suspect and perhaps even gets arrested and tried. I guess what I’m trying to describe is a way that perpetrators get caught without the cops getting the ‘big break’ in the case that so many movies and novels depend on. Rather, it’s lots of little things that add up, you know?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever given it much thought, really. Does this have something to do with me?” Now she was fiddling with the little silver ring through her left eyebrow.

“Each of the victims so far has had one or more women in his life who had a clear motive to see him dead. Each of the victims was an abuser, of a spouse or daughter or girlfriend, a serious misogynist. In your case, there’s the additional matter of the several million dollars that your father’s estate is worth.” I tried to maintain as low-key an approach as I could, but this startled her.

“You think I chopped all these guys’ heads off for my father’s money?”

“I didn’t say that—if I did think that, you’d be under arrest on suspicion of four murders. I said that all of these things add up to more and more special categorization. You’re getting pretty special. For example, there are these.” I placed two of Charlie Stevens’ photographs on the counter, turned around so she could see them easily. Her eyes fairly bugged out.

“What the hell’s this? Where’d you get these? What right have you got to sneak around taking pictures of me, anyway?” The bravado was building again.

“I was actually kind of surprised to see you with Mr. von Stier, after the way you talked about him the last time I was here. But I think I’ve decided that he’s the only person you know whom you could ask to provide a value estimate on your father’s gun collection. To provide an appraisal of some kind. Care to comment?”

“So what if I did ask him? I mean, yeah, my father got killed and now I’ve got this stupid ranch to deal with. I sure don’t want the damned thing, let alone all the crap in the house. But I’ve got to do something with it—I can’t just let it sit there and rot. For one thing there are estate taxes to be paid. If it matters to you, I’ve also had his other collections appraised, the coins and the stamps, even some old baseball cards. What else am I supposed to do? Take up collecting all that crapola myself? No thank you!” Now she was building up to righteous indignation.

“As I was saying, it’s a series of little steps that raises investigators’ suspicions under some circumstances. This, for example, seems rather hasty, insofar as your father’s will hasn’t gone through probate yet.”

“Yeah, but I understand that estate taxes are part of that process—they become due right away. And there’s no other family, so I’m getting everything, and I’ll have to figure out how to pay the taxes. I talked to a real estate guy, and he says that selling ranches the size of my father’s takes time. So I’m going to need cash. What’s suspicious about that?”

“If this were the only thing, it wouldn’t be. But you do have the other motive, the rapes, for killing him. And there’s something else. I had an interesting conversation with Professor Madge Glendon about poetry.”

I had thought that she was slathered in pure white makeup, so it surprised me when her face went even whiter.

* * *

I needed to talk with Kristof von Stier, in person, and about the only thing I could do was to drive over to Alamosa. The trip gave me another couple of hours to think things over. During our phone conversation earlier, Rod Andersen had pointed out that it was Tuesday and asked if he should begin preparing the Governor for another abduction and, later in the week, another head on a fence post.

This got me to thinking about the abductions. Last week, Mineral County Sheriff Ralph Wertlinger had called on Wednesday to tell me that Doc Whiler’s office staff was reporting him missing. Three weeks before that, Bonnie Scharmatz had been aware that her husband wasn’t at home for several days before his head turned up. She told the police that she assumed he was with his mistress, Crystal Stafford, so she hadn’t reported anything. The next week, Sarah Robinson hadn’t reported anything about the absence of her husband, either, being used to his extended absences. And Hollis Henry was living alone at the time, so no one knew that he wasn’t on the ranch.

Why hadn’t Doc Whiler’s live-in girlfriend, Amelia Dent, been the one to report his absence?

Was there some pattern that I was missing, something I should be seeing that would lead me to the next victim while his head was still attached to his shoulders?

How was it that the poem that Toni Henry had originally written for the WDL, the one used with Doc Whiler’s head, could have wound up in the hands of the murderer?

The obvious answer, that Toni or someone in the WDL was the murderer, just didn’t fly for me. And for serial murders such as these, a conspiracy within the WDL didn’t seem possible, either—for one thing, Madge Glendon would have told me a different story and Toni would never have admitted to being the poem’s author. For another, it wasn’t the WDL style.

Toni, when confronted with her poem, had caved in completely, losing all resistance to my presence and my questions. But she really didn’t have any helpful ideas. At one point, she said, the poem had been on the WDL web site, so anyone could have seen it. And she had written it some time ago, in a completely different context. The WDL was on a crusade to convert male chauvinists into more politically correct beings, and Toni’s “jerk a week is all we ask” line was meant to set a goal for the campaign.

* * *

She told me this without prompting, and it was also what Madge Glendon had reported. Both were appalled that the poem had been adopted by the Burma Shave murderer. That the WDL demonstrators were using it on the Friday that Doc Whiler's head was discovered was a coincidence—they knew the other three poems already from the newspapers and this one, which they thought was still theirs, seemed like a fitting coda.

As much as I tend to be skeptical of coincidences, I have to admit that they do happen sometimes. So all that meant was that the murderer had access to the WDL web site—along with the millions of other internet users.

It occurred to me that this line of reasoning implicitly assumed that Toni Henry, and, by extension, Kristof von Stier, were innocent, and I almost turned around toward home. But verification is one of those things an investigator thrives on, so the conversation with von Stier would still be worth the drive.

I got to Alamosa in time for a late lunch and then drove to Billy Abernathy's dojo. Inside, in the main room with the crossed katanas on the wall, I found two people, wearing padded clothes and protective headgear, pounding on each other with bamboo sticks. I watched from the doorway for a minute and soon found that their movements and strokes were clearly choreographed and highly ritualized. It even began to look graceful—for two guys pounding on each other with bamboo sticks, at least.

Eventually, they stopped pounding and bowed to each other, and they took off their headgear. I resisted the urge to applaud.

Billy Abernathy noticed me first.

"Kristof, look here. A visit from the CBI. We're honored." His expression wasn't as sarcastic as his words.

"She's come to check up on me, I bet." Von Stier was smiling in my direction.

"I just need to be able to tell the Governor I'm doing something besides sitting in my office waiting for another head to roll. I found the note on your door, Mr. von Stier, and thought I'd come by to fill you in on what was going on yesterday. That white Escort you noticed."

"It seemed abandoned later in the afternoon. Was its occupant hiding in the ditch somewhere?"

"No, he was in the company of Sheriff Grange. There was this matter of trespassing. I'll give you the whole story if you'll tell me your side of things." I smiled back.

"Trespassing? Well, it's good to hear that our fine sheriff earns his keep now and then." He laughed. "My story? Let's see. I'm not particularly gregarious by nature, so keeping my end of our bargain is something I haven't quite figured out completely. Which is why I'm here today. Right, Billy?"

"Kristof called me last night and asked if he could come over to watch my classes and get in a workout." Abernathy was nodding.

"Anyway, it happened that yesterday afternoon, after I got back to Pagosa, I did have something that would let me keep my end of the agreement—an appointment to do an appraisal. It seems that Toni Henry is trying to figure out the value of her inheritance, and it includes some esoteric items. Her father collected antique firearms, for example. Although my specialty is armor, I also know something about guns. So we went out to her father's ranch together, looked over the collection, and I made lots of notes. We even took a couple of the rifles outside and fired them, because for the older ones, working order is critical to their value. I nearly dislocated my shoulder with one of the buffalo guns."

"And you spotted the Escort on the way up Piedra Road to the ranch?"

“Right.” Now von Stier was nodding. “I got suspicious in town, but it was hard to miss him way out there. The guy must be a city fellow, he didn’t have a clue about tailing people in the country. So who was this clown?”

I dismissed the question with a small wave. “Nothing for you to worry about. But do you know if Toni Henry is an only child?”

“I don’t really know. But yesterday it appeared that she’s under the impression that all she has to do is figure out how to pay the estate taxes and everything left is hers. So she seems to think so. What’s all this about, anyway?”

“What other contact have you had with Ms. Henry?”

“None to speak of. We both live and run small businesses in the same small town, so we run into each other at Chamber meetings and so on. I have to say that before she asked me to do this appraisal, she’d always been unfailingly rude. But that seems to be the way she treats most everyone. She certainly cultivates the image, with the black clothes and so on.” Von Stier shrugged.

“Wait. Don’t tell me. Is this the woman who runs that music shop, where they sell CDs and so on? Uh, Tongue something. I stopped in this little store in Pagosa once to get some music for the drive home, after I was over there to see your place, Kristof. Almost had my eardrums imploded and got cursed at when I asked if she had any Stevie Ray Vaughan.” Billy Abernathy was shaking his head in disgust.

I was having trouble not laughing. “Sounds like Toni Henry to me. But, really, she’s a sensitive, gentle soul under that veneer of toughness. She even writes poetry.”

They looked at each other and at me, dumbfounded. Then I started laughing, and it broke the spell.

* * *

As I said, verification is good. If Kristof von Stier, Toni Henry, and Madge Glendon and the rest of the WDL were conspiring to be the Burma Shave murderers, I thought, I’d have to find a hat to eat.

Which conclusion put me almost back at square one. And it was Tuesday afternoon and, somewhere around this part of Colorado, there was a good chance that some poor jerk was being abducted, in preparation for his fifteen minutes of posthumous fame when his head would be found on Friday.

Once on the road, I called my office.

“Derek? I’m headed west from Alamosa. Von Stier is over here today, working on his martial arts skills, if that’s what you call whacking people with sticks. I talked to him, and his description of yesterday fits with both Toni Henry’s and the PI’s, Charlie Stevens.” Derek had been part of my earlier conversation with Rod Andersen.

“So the shooting yesterday wasn’t in anger?” He sounded relieved.

“Just testing some antique rifles. Von Stier was doing an appraisal for Toni.”

“So you talked with her as well?”

“Right. And she and Glendon are saying the same thing about the fourth poem. Scared the hell out of her, in fact, when I brought it up. So this consistency among Glendon, Toni Henry, and von Stier seems to rule out a conspiracy involving them, from where I sit at least.”

“I think I have to agree. It’s a big stretch to think that Glendon’s organization, that Waddle thing, would be involved in the first place. Toni Henry and von Stier could be in on it together, to get at her father’s money, but it’s hard to believe they’d go after the other three victims as well.”

“I keep thinking there’s something I’m missing. For example, the abductions bother me some.” I told him about my thoughts on how they hadn’t been reported by the most closely involved people.

“You’re not suggesting some kind of conspiracy involving the wives of the first two victims, are you?”

“I don’t know what I’m suggesting. It just seems strange. I’m going to stop off in Creede and talk to Doc Whiler’s girlfriend. She didn’t say anything about this the other day. So, what’s happening over your way?” Every now and then I remember that I’m the boss, and I need to keep up with everything.

“Got a call for you from the lab guy, Gil Taylor. He says he has more results. And a *Denver Post* reporter, says she’s researching for the guy who wrote the big article in last Sunday’s paper, she called Jennifer Mason.” He rattled off a number, and I scribbled on a note pad. Thank heavens for hands-free phone sets in cars.

“Jennifer? I know her, from when she was a student at FSU. Maybe I’ll make an exception and talk with her.”

“And there’s a weird story coming out of Saguache, from the sheriff over there. Something about stoned cattle.”

“Stoned? Cattle? You mean as in high?” We have our share of dope-smoking hippies out here in the mountains, but they’re usually people.

“Apparently a rancher in the San Luis Valley southwest of Saguache reported that some of his steers were acting strangely, staggering around, doing lots of rubbing up against trees. Even humping each other—and I’m talking *steers*, here.”

“Ordering pizzas? Giggling a lot? Stuff like that?” I heard him laughing.

“I don’t know. Maybe the herd wandered into someone’s marijuana patch. There’s some of that scattered around. Anyway, I’m just filling you in. Have you got a schedule?”

“I’m heading for Creede, and I’m hoping to be back in time for dinner. I’ll keep in touch. And I’ll figure out how to call Rod later this afternoon. There isn’t cell service up there.”

I wanted to touch base with Gil Taylor before the phone gave out, so I called him right away. I commented that he sounded tired.

“Yeah, been up most of the night doing these samples, the comparative analysis, I mean. Not sure I’ve got anything much that I didn’t have yesterday. But all the results are consistent.”

“Same chemicals, ah, I mean, same molecules in all the samples?”

“Not exactly, but they’re all consistent. See, different things will concentrate in different kinds of tissue. But all the fat samples are similar, all the muscle tissue is similar, and so on.” I heard a yawn.

“Any idea of what this stuff is?”

“That’s what I’m working on now. It may be a combination of things. I haven’t found one single drug that explains all the stuff in these spectra. And the drugs I have calibrated spectra of don’t match what’s in these samples. So it looks like some combination of things I haven’t seen. That just makes it harder to puzzle out.” He yawned again.

“Gil, you sound exhausted. Why don’t you let this rest for a day, catch up on your sleep? Getting away from it for a while could give you a new perspective.”

“Good idea. I’ve probably racked up enough overtime anyway. Don’t want to send you guys a bill that’s too big.”

By this time, I was coming into Del Norte, the last little town before the turnoff to Creede at South Fork. Because there was still cellular coverage, I called Jennifer Mason.

“*Denver Post*. This is Jen.”

“Jennifer, this is Annette Trieri returning your call.”

“Oh! Ms. Trieri! Thanks so much for calling back. I don’t know if you remember me, I was a student at Frémont State when you helped me with a story I did on the death of Steffanie Boudreau, the violinist?” It was the same, almost breathless Jennifer that I remembered.

“Of course. And it must have helped you graduate because now you’re at the *Post*.”

“Sure did, although I’m constantly reminded that I’m at the entry level. But every now and then I see a paragraph I’ve written in the paper, which is exciting.”

“I hear that you’re doing research on the Burma Shave Murders.”

“That’s what they have people like me do. Background interviews, verifications, things like that. I sit here wearing a telephone headset all day and talk to people I’ll never meet. It’s nice to talk to someone I can picture in my head. So thanks for calling back!” She still had that first-job enthusiasm.

“I thought I’d say hi. But I’m afraid I can’t really give you much, mostly because there’s not much to give. The article on Sunday covered the ground. Have you talked with Naomi Winters, at the Valley Women’s Center?” I thought I might steer her toward the human interest side of this whole thing, away from my investigation.

“That was one of my parts of the story. And it’s happening all over the state, even the neighboring states. Domestic violence reports are way, way down everywhere. Do you have a comment on that for me?”

“For the record, I’ll say that domestic violence is a shameful part of our culture. Any time that it’s on the wane, we can all celebrate. But in this case, um...” I paused to consider what I should say. I think of Jennifer as a friend, someone whom I mentored as a student. But now she was a newspaper reporter, and I knew whatever I said could appear in print to come back to haunt me.

“In this case, we’re dealing with something completely different—a cold-blooded murderer, who abducts his victims and slaughters them. Just as justice will prevail in this case, it should also in cases of domestic violence. This Burma Shave sicko will be caught and brought to justice.”

“When?”

“It’s not appropriate for me to comment on details on an ongoing investigation. And, Jen, off the record, I’m sure you know that anything about the investigation that gets in the papers could impede it, right? I know that you and the other people on the story want to get on the front page and get picked up by the wire services, but I can’t jeopardize our investigation for that.”

“Do you think it’s a lone vigilante or group of people that is doing this?”

I felt a surge of disappointment and sadness. Yes, Jennifer had a job to do. But she was trading on our friendship to do it, risking permanent damage to our relationship.

“I’m afraid I can’t comment. I guess I need to refer you to the CBI office in Denver for any future questions, Jen. Sorry.”

“You said ‘his victims.’ Does this mean you think the murderer is a man?”

“Sorry, Jen, I’ve got to go now.” And I disconnected.

Even the scenery on the way to Creede didn’t cheer me up.

* * *

I knocked several times but didn’t get any answer. This was confusing, because there were two vehicles, a sedan and a pickup truck, parked by the house. Then I heard a gunshot over behind the barn.

I hustled back to my car and got my Glock, and I made sure the magazine was full and there was a round in the chamber. After checking as much of the area as I could see, I worked my way around the side of the barn that didn’t have the corral.

In movies and in cop shows on TV, you see characters with drawn handguns sneaking around in these highly choreographed moves, both hands holding the weapon, which gets snappily pointed skyward when a buddy walks across its field of fire. Somehow the good guys always have the more graceful moves, while the bad guys look at least a little clumsy. Most of the individual moves seem designed to let someone show off his, or even her, muscles and balance. It’s all so mapped out that you expect to see “Choreography by Alvin Ailey” in the closing credits.

Even though I’ve been exposed to the real version of that stuff in various training courses, it hardly ever works out that way. This time, for example, I had about 75 feet of barnyard to traverse. It wasn’t the corral, so I wasn’t worried about stepping in something fresh, but there were thistles. And I was wearing a skirt and walking flats.

So instead of gliding around semi-sideways in that sort of half crouch you see a lot, with my Glock held in front of me scanning for bad guys in all directions, I minced my way past the side of the barn, trying not to get stuck too many times. Even then, it didn’t work completely, and my lower legs itched like hell when I finally came to the corner of the barn.

Then, instead of poking my nose out in quick, jerky glances around the corner like you often see, I crouched down, getting stabbed in the bottom for my efforts, and slowly eased an eye around the corner. Quick movements are easily detected by peripheral vision, and I really didn’t want to attract attention.

But I saw that I didn’t need to worry. Someone, probably Amelia Dent, I figured, was standing with her back to me, hands over her face, sobbing. There was a brown and white horse flopped on the ground in front of her, and I could see a red hole in the white, diamond-shaped patch between its eyes.

I flipped the safety on my Glock, stuck it in the back of my belt and stood up without making any noise. I thought I’d give her a few minutes before announcing my presence.

Eventually, she took a deep breath and wiped her eyes on one sleeve and her nose on the other. Then she stooped to pick something up. It occurred to me it might be the gun she’d used.

“Wait, please. Stop!” Command-voice level two froze her in mid-stoop. “I’m sorry to intrude this way, but I heard the gunshot. And I’ll feel better if you don’t pick that up just now.” By then she had turned, and I recognized Doc Whiler’s girlfriend and former office nurse, Amelia Dent. I could see the glimmer of recognition in her eyes.

She took another deep breath and stood up. “It’s all right, I only put one round in it. Goddammit, I sure hope I never have to do that again.” Yet another deep breath.

“I’m a little surprised. I guess I thought horses got put down with drugs these days.”

“Sometimes. But this is so much quicker. And hunting horses, like Patches was, they’re used to guns, so they’re calm right to the end, especially if you talk to them. The drugs usually freak them out, and they die freaked out.” She looked down at the horse, and I could see her eyes fill up with tears. “Aw, shit, Patches, why’d you have to step in that god-damned prairie-dog hole?”

I walked over and picked up her gun, an old Army-style .45 semi-automatic, and saw that the magazine wasn’t in it. She must have put the single round in the chamber.

“Why don’t we go into the house and have some tea, or something?” I didn’t know quite what to do to help her, but getting her away from the dead horse seemed like a good start.

“Tea, hell. You can have some tea or coffee or whatever, but I’m for some brandy. A Courvoisier toast for Patches, I think. C’mon.” And she led me back around the barn toward the house. This time we went wide, avoiding the thistle patch.

In the house, she put on a kettle of water to boil, so she could make me a cup of coffee, and found a snifter and poured herself a generous tot of brandy. Finally she turned my way.

“So, what brings you back to see me, Ms. Trieri? Any progress on your case?”

“I do want to talk about that, but I’m curious about something. Obviously, you don’t just leave him out there. What happens next?”

“Huh? Oh, with Patches. Well Doc might get the tractor with the loader on it and dig a big hole, and move the carcass into it. But even that’s got its drawbacks. You’ve got to dig a really deep hole or it’ll get dug up. Coyotes. So I called Maureen earlier, when I knew this was going to have to happen. She’s on her way with her hoist and a trailer with sides but no top. We’ll lift him into the trailer, and she’ll take him back to Del Norte, where her office is. She’s got a crematory for just this purpose.”

“Maureen? Oh, I bet you mean Maureen Downey—I met her up in Gunnison. She seems to have clients all over this part of the state. And I guess that’s right, cremation has got to beat burial, for creatures this big, at least. I love horses, but I never had to deal with anything like this. Don’t think I could handle it. I admire your fortitude.”

“Well, you do what you have to do.” She shook her head and sighed, and she took another hefty draught of the brandy. “But this isn’t why you came to see me.”

“No, I came to ask you something about Doc. Last Wednesday, the sheriff called me to tell me that Doc’s office staff had reported him missing, for Tuesday and Wednesday morning. He didn’t come in and he didn’t call, which they said was unprecedented. But you must have known he wasn’t keeping his usual routine, and I’m wondering why his staff called this in and you didn’t.”

“I didn’t know he was missing. I just knew he wasn’t here. See, Monday night the son of a bitch got drunk and abusive, so I kicked him out. Told him to walk the five miles into town, sleep it off, and not to come back until he sobered up and was ready to apologize. Again. That’s the standard way I’ve learned to handle him. And it always worked, until this time. This time, he never came home.”

She didn’t seem nearly as choked up about Doc as she was about Patches.

* * *

My coffee was nearly gone, and Amelia was well into her second snifter of brandy when we heard the noise of a heavy-duty diesel engine and a tap on a horn.

“Um, that’s probably Maureen. Damn, I’m afraid I’m getting too drunk to help much.”

Amelia stood up, a little unsteady on her feet, and walked carefully to the door. I saw her waving at someone, making a “come in to the house” gesture. Maureen Downey arrived at the door a few seconds later. She looked surprised to see me.

“Maureen, glad you got here. Patches is out back of the barn. I’m afraid that I’m not going to be much help. Uh, have you met Annette Trieri? She’s investigating these Burma Shave Murders that have been happening. Oop. ’Scuse me.” And she tottered off down a hallway.

“Good to see you again, Maureen. Sorry it’s not as happy an occasion as the other one, though.”

“Well, for me it’s pretty much one or the other, birth or death. In between, there are drugs to deal with most everything else. I do an occasional surgery for a cancer or something, and I set bones that will heal, but mostly it’s births and deaths.” She smiled weakly.

“This death is really sad. She put Patches down just as I got here, I heard the shot. She’s been quite upset.”

“Yeah, I could tell when she called. Patches was her favorite, and she’s blaming herself some. She said she was running him in the pasture when he hit the hole.”

“But he’s out by the barn. How’d he get back here?”

“Oh, she probably babied him in, leading him carefully. But she knows horses enough to tell that it wasn’t going to be possible to fix it. And I offered to put him down, but she said she wanted to do it herself, get it over with. He was hurting, apparently.” She looked at me with just a hint of defiance. “I have to admire that, taking responsibility for something and doing what’s right, no matter how hard it is.”

“Do you need help? I think she’s unlikely to do much good out there.”

“No, I’m set up to handle it by myself. If she wanted to help, she could, but I really don’t need anything. Part of dealing with large carcasses is using machinery to assist, and I’ve become fairly good at it. Glad to have you watch, though. You can tell me a couple of things that are hard for me to see alone.”

So we went outside, Maureen got in her pickup, which was towing a large trailer, and I guided her around the barn to where Patches was lying in the sun.

The trailer had a thick electrical cable running from the truck, far more robust than the usual brake-light hook-up. I soon saw why.

Maureen left the diesel running and opened a panel on the side of the trailer. Inside were switches and a joystick. She flipped a switch, and the top of a box running the entire length of the trailer’s left side opened. She flipped another switch, and a metal contraption began to unfold itself from the box. It reminded me of an adult-sized version of an erector-set crane that my brother built when we were kids. After about two minutes of whirring and a couple of firm clicks, everything stopped. Then Maureen manipulated the joystick and a cable lowered itself from the top end of the contraption. The whole thing was shaped like an upside-down L, and the cable, with a hook on the end, was lowering itself toward Patches.

Maureen saw me gawking and said, over the whirring, “Two-ton hoist. I designed it and had it built especially for this purpose. Could you let me know when there’s about two feet of cable on the ground?”

I walked around to the other side of the trailer, where Patches was lying, and, when the cable had settled a couple of feet onto the ground, I raised my hand and clenched my fist—something I’d seen construction workers do. The cable stopped, and I saw Maureen digging into another box of some kind. She came up with long leather gloves and a small roll of wire, the kind you use to splice fences, and cutters. She also had some kind of wide strap draped over a shoulder.

With this gear, she went to work on Patches. First, she gathered his feet and wired them together—it reminded me of a slow, laborious version of what rodeo cowboys do to the calf’s feet after they rope it. After that she worked the strap under Patches’ neck, near his head, and used another piece of the wire to hook the ends of the strap together and to the wire binding the feet. Finally, she hooked the end of the cable to the wire wrapping the feet.

Now I was able to see that she had parked the trailer quite deliberately, with Patches on the side opposite the hoist and with his feet pointing away from the trailer. As the cable lifted him, it would raise his feet and roll him onto his back next to the trailer. From there it would be easy to lift him up and into the trailer itself.

Obviously, she had done this before—and, I realized, with the owner watching. The neck strap would prevent the horse’s head from flopping back and dragging his nose on the ground as he was lifted, something that could be upsetting to an owner.

She was back working switches and the joystick, and I walked over to talk.

“I’m curious about something.” As I talked, I was watching Patches being lowered into the trailer. “Amelia told me you have a crematory for these carcasses. That must have been a chore to get environmental permissions for. My husband tells me that every time the university wants to burn anything, it’s a nightmare of paperwork.”

There was a flash of the nervousness I’d seen before, but it was quickly suppressed with a laugh. “I thought all I’d be doing was having the equivalent of a heavy-duty barbeque. But, no, the county and the town considered it to be something else altogether. I don’t know about ‘nightmare,’ but it was really, really tedious getting the paperwork through. Fortunately, my clinic is on the east, or more like southeast, side of town, so I stipulated that I’d use the thing only when the winds are from the west or northwest, which they are a lot of the time. Also, I got the state on my side, because I made a deal with the highway department to help them dispose of big roadkill, like elk and deer.”

“And it’s not as if you’re incinerating toxic substances.”

“Right. There’s even very little smell, as hot as the furnace is. But...”

Maureen was interrupted by Amelia, who burst out of a door of the barn, carrying a horse blanket. It was fortunate that Patches was already inside the walls of the trailer. I don’t think she would have liked seeing him dangling there.

“Maureen! I’ve got a blanket here that I always used on Patches, and I’d like it to go with him, OK?”

“Of course. Is it all right for me to cover him with it in the trailer?”

“Please. It will make me feel lots better. Sorry I wasn’t up to helping. If it had been any of the horses but him...” And she started to sniffle again. “Sorry. I’m going back in the house.”

When she was gone, Maureen turned to me. “I’ll cover him up with the blanket, but I can’t burn it. It’s wool, but the dyes in it might violate my permit. That’s what I was going to say, that there’s not much rationality in the rules for the incineration business.”

I saw Maureen off toward the east and went back in the house. Amelia was on the phone.

“Oh, she just walked in the door. They must be finished out there. Annette? Phone call.” And she handed me the receiver.

“Trieri.”

“Annette, it’s Derek, and Rod Andersen’s on the line, too.”

“Hi, Derek. Rod, can you hear me? I don’t know how good the phone service is here, even if it is a land line.”

“I’m here, Annette. You’re in Creede?”

“Yes, accidentally learning how dead horses are dealt with. And talking with someone close to last week’s victim. Did you talk with the Governor?”

“Yes, and he understands like before, but that doesn’t lessen the political pressure on him or us.”

“At least he understands. I have no reason to think there won’t be another missing person soon, although we may not hear about it.” I wasn’t going to give anyone, let alone my boss, false hopes.

There was a big sigh, from Andersen, I knew. Derek wouldn’t do that in a conference call.

“Yeah, I figured that. And there’s no hint of who it might be?”

“Someone in southwest central Colorado, most likely someone relatively prominent in his community. Someone who beats his wife, probably, or something like that. But that’s about all I know.”

* * *

“There’s something about a dead horse that’s just pathetic. Heartbreaking. Amelia was the one who was really hurting, so I sort of internalized my own feelings at the time. And I had the conference call with Denver to deal with. But it hit me on the way home. I cried from South Fork to Pagosa Springs.”

Hal looked up, concerned. “Crying over Wolf Creek Pass? Gee, I’m glad you made it home in one piece. Here, have another couple of raviolis.”

My mother used food as a tool for dispensing comfort, too. The fact that Hal does it is therefore doubly comforting to me—and he’s actually better at it, because he doesn’t try to make me feel guilty if I decline third or fourth helpings.

He had dinner waiting for me when I finally got home, and, after a shower and a glass of wine, I was beginning to feel whole again.

I had to smile at the memory, it was so out of character for me. “I took it slow. On the way up the east side, I stayed in the right-hand lane. I’m sure that there were plenty of those people who passed me wondering what the hell this woman in a CBI vehicle was bawling about. Probably figured I broke a nail or something.”

“It sounds like your day consisted of eliminating possibilities, instead of getting the goods on someone, though. This negative progress is helpful, but are you getting anywhere positive?” He was mopping up sauce with his garlic bread.

I stuck my tongue out at him. “No. Thanks for reminding me. But it’s funny. The more I eliminate the obvious things, the more something is nagging at me, at my subconscious, I guess. I just feel like there’s something I’m not noticing.”

“Well, the *Free Press* had an article today about bringing in a psychic, somebody named Sybil Starflower, I think it was. If anybody notices things, I bet she will.” He flashed an impish grin.

“Really? Cool! We need all the help we can get! And maybe she can tell me where I put those Kokopelli earrings you gave me. I can’t find ’em anywhere. Except she’ll probably charge extra for that. Might be cheaper just to buy a new pair.”

He snorted. “Cheaper and a lot more likely to produce results, I bet.”

“No doubt. So, what happened in your little corner of academia today?”

He looked thoughtful. “Things seem moving inevitably toward a strike of some kind, and the other deans are in a dither. Hmm. ‘Deans in a Dither.’ Sounds like a good title for a novel.”

“Right. Or a geezer rock band.”

“Yeah! They could play covers of old favorites. An acoustic version of ‘Stairway to Heaven,’ stuff like that.” He popped the last of the bread into his mouth. “Anyway, classes start tomorrow, and Bill O’Leary in SS&H and Jacques Ament in Fine Arts just don’t know what they’re going to do. But the rest of us who aren’t particularly worried about that are having fun with gossip. Alice is in her element, and I get the benefit of her connections. Bucky Thorndyke and Madge Glendon have quickly become an item.”

“Already? John mentioned yesterday that they’d been out over the weekend. I guess Bucky works fast.”

“Or she does. She’s not exactly a guy magnet, and he’s smart and rich. And, apparently, sensitive enough that she feels comfortable with him. They’ve spent most of the past couple of days together, it seems. I guess they cooked up some ad-hoc committee thing to try to resolve the issues surrounding the strike.”

“Er, not that I’ve given it too much thought, or anything, or that it’s really any of my business, but I guess I had this idea that Madge wasn’t attracted to men.”

“Indeed. So did just about everybody. That’s what’s been making the gossip so juicy. Are they ‘just friends’? Has Bucky successfully ‘converted’ her? Stay tuned. But, speaking of Madge, whatever happened about that conversation you had with her?”

“Oh, yeah. I didn’t tell you. It had to do with that fourth poem I was wondering about.” I filled him in on the poem’s author and how she and Madge were terrified because it had been used by the murderer.

“So the murderer got it off the WDL web site?”

“That’s what it looks like. And, of course, that means it could be just about anybody.”

“Well, now, not so fast there, pilgrim. Think about it. The internet is so huge, with so many zillions of web sites, that people seldom blunder into anything anymore. I mean, there’s that ‘I feel lucky’ option on Google, which, supposedly, takes you to sort-of-random places, but I bet even that is programmed somehow. Advertising fees, or something. People who see the Waddle web site probably have some connection to it, somehow. I’m not trying to implicate Madge, mind you. But it can’t be just anybody.” Hal is valuable for lots of things, and his computer expertise is something I consider to be a bonus.

“So, you mean it’s a Waddle member, or something?”

“I don’t know if they have official ‘members,’ beyond the action team people. But maybe they do. If it’s an official organization, I mean, a registered charity or something, maybe they take donations. Do you suppose that Madge would have a list?”

“If she did, do you suppose she would give it to me?”

He frowned. “Hmm. Not a couple of weeks ago, but maybe we’re dealing with a ‘new Madge’ now. And if it bothers her enough that the murderer got one of the poems from the Waddle web site, maybe she would. Would it hurt to ask?”

I considered that one for a minute. “Only if she says ‘no,’ and she warns everyone via the Waddle web site that I asked. That could tip off the murderer about what we know, and that would be another setback.”

“On top of all the innocent almost-suspects, you mean?”

“Innocent, I’m not sure. But certainly not-so-suspicious almost-suspects. Kristof von Stier was looking pretty circumstantial there, for a little while at least. But if he keeps himself in alibis for the next couple of days, I guess I’ll have to write him off. Thing is, I have to wait for something to happen, rather than make it happen. That’s tough.” I shrugged.

“Interesting. That’s almost exactly what John Martin said today about this strike business. He’s used to being in control, and having to wait for someone else to decide what to do is hard for him to stomach.” He laughed. “I suggested giving the adjuncts and TAs what they’re asking for, and he got all huffy. Talked about ‘principle’ and so on. He doesn’t seem to understand that the other side has more than mere principle motivating it.”

“Sounds like the opposite of my situation. I’m motivated by very real issues— I mean, it’s just not civilized for someone to be going around beheading folks. And the other side seems motivated by principle—that certain guys who abuse women need to be made examples of. If I could give the murderer what he wants, I would.”

“You said ‘him.’ You sure it’s a ‘he’?”

“Oh! I didn’t tell you. Jennifer Mason called me—remember her?—and I finally called her back. She works at the *Denver Post* now. A cub reporter, I guess you’d say. And she asked me exactly the same question. I disconnected instead of answering.”

“So?”

“So I’ve been assuming it’s a ‘he,’ because of what a couple of people have told me about how hard it is to decapitate someone. It takes quite a bit of strength, apparently, on top of the right equipment and the skill.”

“Hmm. Maybe. At least before the guillotine was invented, it did.”

There it was again, that nagging sensation in my subconscious.

* * *

Wednesday morning, I was prepared for the usual avalanche of voice-and email that accumulates when I’m out of the office for any period of time. I went in early, hoping to have some time to myself to catch up before the rest of the staff arrived. Although Derek had passed along the more important voice messages when we had talked on Tuesday afternoon, there were some that he underestimated as well as several new ones. The one from Belinda Edwards, Gunnison County Medical Examiner and, as far as

I'd last seen, looker of moon eyes at Hinsdale County Sheriff Steven Phillips, appeared to be especially interesting. I knew she arrived at work early, so I called her first.

"Belinda? Annette Trieri in Durango, returning your call. How are things up your way?"

"Annette! Thanks for calling back. Things are as fine as you'd expect, I guess. Especially because I'm not the one the public seems to expect to clear this Burma Shave case. How's that going?"

"It's not, basically. I think we're all waiting for another shoe to drop, another abduction to happen." I was resigned to the probability at that point.

"The reason I called was to make sure that the tissue samples I sent you got there."

"Monday, yours and all the others, and I took them to the lab around noon. And my lab guy had done his homework. It didn't take much time at all for him to find stuff other than formalin and tissue. But he hasn't quite figured out what the other stuff is. Yet, or at least as of yesterday afternoon. But there's something there, and it's consistent across all four samples."

"What's he using? I mean, the analysis, what equipment is he using?"

"I don't know the details, but it's a whole bunch of things. He keeps talking about 'mass spec' when he refers to his most sensitive equipment. I think that's what his main gadget is." I hoped she would know what that meant so that she wouldn't ask too many technical questions.

"That'd be a mass spectrometer. Tell him to be sure to check out street drugs as well as standard anesthetics. Some street drugs were originally developed as tranquilizers or sedatives."

"I'm sure he'll check those, because he's been providing an anonymous screening service for students, to help keep bad stuff off the streets. So I expect he's got samples of just about every street drug under the sun. But what about the anesthetics? Are there lots of those?"

"Quite a few. But they're listed in the PDR, so he'll be able to recognize molecular weights and so on from that."

"Uh, 'PDR'?"

"Physicians' Desk Reference. Big book, or computer CD. It has lists of prescription and over-the-counter drugs, indications, counter-indications, formulas, everything about them. He's probably got one or can get one easily."

"Thanks, I'll give him a call. Anything else?"

"No, not really. Just good luck. Let me know if I can help somehow."

Whew, I thought to myself, we didn't talk about Sheriff Phillips. Good luck to her with that, but I really don't want to know.

Based on her suggestion, I called Gil Taylor, thinking I'd leave him a message. But he answered.

"Gil? Annette Trieri here. I thought you'd be asleep at home."

"Hi, Annette. I was. But I wasn't sleeping, so I came in early. And I think I've figured out at least one of these mystery drugs. PCP, phencyclidine. Also known as Angel Dust. Very minute quantities, though. That's why it took me so long."

"You said one of the drugs. So there are others? What next?"

"I'm going to get some PCP and make a calibration sample, then subtract it from the spectra like I did the formalin. And dose a pig sample like I did with valium, just to see if the results look like the

tissue samples. After that I'll tackle what's left. And I think I'll send you an intermediate bill. A big one." He yawned. "So, why did you call?"

"I called with a hot tip for you to check out anesthetics, hospital ones."

"Hey, that's an idea. I've almost eliminated street drugs. Who thought of it?"

"Medical examiner up in Gunnison. She sent us one of the sets of samples. She said they're all in the PDR."

"I'll get one and see what I can find. Thanks."

About that time, I heard my staff arriving, and I knew the day would really get started. It wouldn't be long before the morning call with Denver, a task that was already starting to get old. But first, all hell broke loose.

The receptionist, Sally Brigman, had no sooner stuck her head in my office to say "good morning" and "welcome back," when her phone set went nuts. I could see three blinking lights on my phone.

"I'll take number two," I hollered at her as she raced back down the hall.

"Trieri, Durango CBI."

"Annette Trieri? Gee, I'm impressed that you answer your own phone. This is Hank Allen, I'm the sheriff over in Saguache."

"Good morning, sheriff. We seem to be having a phone call overload just this minute, and I happened to grab you. Um, I sure hope you're calling me about stoned cattle."

"Stoned cattle? Huh? Oh, yeah." I heard a laugh. "Yeah, yesterday, we got a call from a rancher down towards Del Norte, said his steers are staggering around, like they're drunk. But they're also doing other things, rubbing against trees and fence posts and each other. There were even a couple on the ground, out cold. But I called him this morning already, and he says they're all fine. So, no, I'm afraid it's something else. Probably not something you want to hear."

"Let me guess. Missing person?"

"Yep. Mayor of Kharma, Sam Milstead. I just got off the phone with his wife, she was getting hysterical."

Sally was in the door to my office gesturing for my attention, so I asked Sheriff Allen to hang on a minute and covered the mouthpiece with my hand.

"Sorry, Annette, but I may have an emergency. There's a Gwen Milstead on the phone, she's pretty hysterical. Line three. And, just so you'll know, Director Andersen is on one." She looked exasperated, and at 8:00 in the morning, yet.

"Tell Rod I'll call him back shortly—tell him we have another missing persons report. And I'll take Ms. Milstead in just a second." I went back to the sheriff. "Uh, Hank—I hope I can call you Hank—Gwen Milstead is calling here, and I'm about to talk to her. What did you tell her? We should have our stories straight."

"I told her that we'd send someone out to talk with her and that I'd notify you."

"Could you send someone with domestic violence training?"

"Yeah, good plan. And is there anything else I should watch out for or do?"

"I'm afraid I don't know Saguache County very well. I think it's in the Valley, right? And up to the northwest? You got lots of back roads?"

“I think I can tell where you’re going. We should be alert for suspicious activity involving fence posts on Thursday night, right?”

“Yeah, and Friday morning be ready for the fun to begin. The press will descend on you like you’ve never seen.”

* * *

“Ms. Milstead? This is Annette Trieri, I’m the director of the Durango CBI field office.”

“Oh, yes, my God I thought I’d never get through to you. My husband’s missing. You’ve got to find him!”

“When you called I was talking with Sheriff Hank Allen. He told me you called him.”

“Yes and he said to call you, that you’re handling missing persons. But you’re way over in Durango. How are you going to help me?” The pitch of her voice was rising as she spoke.

“Ms. Milstead. I need you to be as calm as you can be if I’m going to be able to help you at all. And Sheriff Allen will be sending someone over to talk with you in person. Because you’re upset, you may find it strange that we both, the deputy and I, will want to ask you similar questions. But this is how we get our information and make progress on investigations. OK? Now please try to calm down so we can talk.”

“Yes, yes, I understand. What can I tell you?”

“If your husband is ‘missing,’ that means to me that he’s not where you expect him to be and that you first discovered this at some particular time. Where was he supposed to be and when?” Sometimes, dealing with hysterical people works best by posing complicated questions to make them think. I had my fingers crossed in this case.

“I guess I see what you mean. I haven’t seen him since last night, yesterday evening about, oh, eight. But I expected him back by now, by this morning. So I guess he’s been missing for about twelve hours, in one sense.” She seemed a little more calm.

“It’s only eight in the morning. What makes you expect him back by now?”

“That’s the way it’s always worked in the past. We have a fight, he takes off, and he’s back around dawn.”

Even though Kharma is on the west side of the Sangre de Cristos, I took this to mean before seven, this time of year. They probably don’t see the sun itself until mid-morning or later, but it would get light early.

“So this is a pattern that’s changed in this case. Do you know where he goes for these nights when he takes off?”

“Yes and no. He’s got a hunting cabin up higher in the mountains—sometimes I think he goes up there. Sometimes he first hits a bar here in Kharma, the West Wind. Sometimes I have this feeling that he just sleeps in his pickup truck.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He leaves, I hear the door slam, and nothing else happens. I mean, the truck doesn’t start up or anything. Last night, it started up and left, though.”

“I see. Well, that makes sense. Don’t be offended please, but I need to know if he was drinking last night before he left.”

“Of course. I mean, he always does in the evening. It would be unusual if he didn’t.”

“You said you were fighting last night. Does this mean shouting and so on, or does it mean actual physical combat?” I was taking notes as fast as I could and making up questions as well. It was draining.

“I guess I don’t know quite what I should say. I don’t want to get him into trouble. Or me, either.”

“Ms. Milstead. You called your sheriff, and he said you were hysterical, but your husband is only an hour or so overdue. Why the fuss?”

“Well, you should know. Sheriff Allen said you’re the one doing the Burma Shave investigation.”

“Does this mean you think that your husband may be the next Burma Shave victim? Think about the trouble that implies versus the trouble you’re worried about with my question.”

“Oh. Good point. Well, see, our fights usually start out with his drinking and my asking him to stop. He pushes me around a little and I slap him sometimes. Stuff gets broken—I mean household stuff, not me or him. Used to be that these fights would end up with us, um, going to bed together to make up. But lately he’s been taking off.”

“OK. I need to ask a personal question. How old is he? Has he been having, uh, trouble performing in bed?”

“Only when he’s drinking too much, and, of course, that makes him drink more. That’s what happened last night.”

“Did you call the West Wind last night? I guess it’s a little early this morning, isn’t it?”

“I just went to bed last night. I mean, I assumed he’d be back by now, and we’d kiss and make up, like we usually do. He’s never been this late before.”

“And his truck is gone, you said.”

“That’s right. That’s why I thought maybe he’d gone up to his cabin. He’d never drive on the public roads when he’s drunk. But the road up to the cabin is one of those jeep roads where he couldn’t hurt anybody. You know?”

“Perhaps he got himself stuck, or had a flat or something. I’ll have the sheriff send someone up that way to look. And, like I said, there will be someone coming by to talk with you, maybe with the same questions. Please cooperate, because that’s the only way we’ll have a chance to help you.”

“I sure will. Do you think I’ll ever see Sam again? Alive, I mean?” The pitch of her voice was rising again.

“I hope so, Ms. Milstead. Just don’t *you* give up hope.”

* * *

Twelve

It looked like I ought to get to Kharma, and that, I knew, was a good hour past Alamosa, at the speed limit, at least. After I made my obligatory phone call to Rod Andersen in Denver, a three-hour drive wouldn’t get me there much before noon.

But that’s why Rod’s the boss, to make the hard decisions. I warned Derek to be ready to pick up the line and called Denver. It took only a few seconds to be put through.

“Rod? Sorry I had to put you off before. We had the Saguache County Sheriff on one line and a missing person’s wife on the other.”

“Who’s missing this time?”

“The Mayor of Kharma, Sam Milstead. And it sounds as if he fits the pattern, although his wife seems more interested in him than any of the others were about their husbands.”

“Kharma? Where’s that? Can’t place it.”

“Oh, I guess about five, ten miles north of the Great Sand Dunes, up in the foothills on the west side of the Sangres. Northeast of Alamosa. Has a reputation of being something of a New-Age hangout.”

“Saguache County, you said?”

“Right. We’ve added the fifth sheriff to the case, or at least we will be if this guy Milstead doesn’t turn up.”

“Damn. Well, maybe he’s a Democrat, and the Governor won’t mind so much.”

That was the last wisecrack I heard during the entire conversation.

* * *

We talked about whether I should get over to Kharma sooner or later and decided the political sensitivities of the case dictated the sooner the better. I reminded Rod of the big spaces we have here in the southwest and the three-hour drive. He thought for a minute and suggested chartering a plane or a helicopter, and Derek finally had a chance to speak up.

“Director Andersen, I’m afraid we just don’t have the budget for something like that. We managed the extra expenses associated with the Schoenfield case, because most of them came in at the beginning of the year in July, and we’re expecting more this month. But chartering a helicopter, I don’t know how we can do it.”

“I’ll authorize it, and there will be some additional funds sent your way. Somehow. I’m certain that the Governor will provide what’s needed for this case.”

We looked into the matter and discovered we wouldn’t need a charter, because the State Patrol’s souped-up Bell Ranger was in Cortez on some kind of public relations tour. Sally and Derek made the necessary contacts, going over the heads of the State Patrol PR people, and I found that I needed to hustle to get ready for the trip to Kharma. Fortunately, I’d repacked my overnight bag—with enough for three days—from my trip to Pagosa Springs. Some time back I discovered the hard way that repacking is a priority task.

I’ve seen parts of Colorado from a small plane, and the views you get while flying a few thousand feet over the ground are truly remarkable. But you’re still looking out a little window. If you really want to see things, sitting in the cockpit of a helicopter is the way to go. It’s noisy, and turbulence can make the ride interesting, even exciting, but you just can’t beat the ability to see the scenery.

Like most helicopter pilots, State Patrol Sergeant Mike Wiegand learned to fly in the military—his service in the Marines was reflected in his haircut, the set of his jaw, and his square shoulders. When he took off his sunglasses and smiled at me with those deep blue eyes, I decided there are advantages to maturity—that little flutter behind my rib cage, I knew, wasn’t some kind of transcendental message.

On Derek’s suggestion, Sergeant Wiegand had arranged to pick me up in the parking lot of the mall across the highway from the CBI offices. It was still early enough that the lot was almost empty, and it

saved me the drive to the airport. It also set a tone that Rod wanted us to project, that we were pulling out all the stops for a high-priority case.

Sergeant Wiegand took the same route I'd used the day before, only several hundred feet higher. The valleys of the upper San Juan and the Rio Grande's south fork, divided by Wolf Creek Pass, are some of the most beautiful landscape in Colorado. I kept wishing I'd brought a camera.

Then, when we got past South Fork, we made a beeline for Kharma, straight across the San Luis Valley's pastures and fields, cutting diagonally across the grid-work of roads. I began to understand the reason for all of the potato trucks we'd seen on Highway 285 the week before, between Saguache and Monte Vista—there were irrigated, cultivated fields everywhere. As the east side of the valley approached, the wall of the Sangre de Cristo range loomed closer and ever higher, with the jagged ridges and mountain tops of the crest looking menacing above our flight level.

Sergeant Wiegand had given me a headset in Durango, so I'd been listening to all of the radio exchanges. It took a bit of negotiating to arrange a place to land in Kharma, and when he had one, he relayed the information to State Patrol Officer Candice Garcia. She was assigned to be my driver and State Patrol liaison for my time in Kharma. Because she had been the first person to interview Bonnie Scharmatz, about a month ago when the whole Burma Shave thing started, I thought she was an outstanding choice for the assignment. And it wouldn't hurt to have at my disposal a State Patrol car with emergency lights, siren, and driver trained in high-speed pursuit, I thought.

As we approached the landing area, a school yard, empty because school started after Labor Day, we didn't see Officer Garcia's car. Sergeant Wiegand took the opportunity to show me a little extra scenery, the crest of the Sangres. One of the most challenging high climbs in Colorado, the Crestone Needle, is just above the town, and we flew around it. I could tell that Wiegand was enjoying the opportunity to show off his toy—the high-altitude version of the Ranger was able to handle the thin air above 14,000 feet better than I was.

When we descended to the school yard, we saw Officer Garcia's car waiting, the dust from its arrival still settling. She had the good sense to remain inside, windows up, until the helicopter let me out and its little dust storm abated. With the rotor idling, I was able to dash to the car and shut myself in while staying almost clean. Wiegand revved the thing up and took off, and I was glad to have made it to the car—the dust was almost opaque, it was so thick.

Officer Candice Garcia surprised me—she was tiny, barely five feet tall, it appeared, with very small hands. But her handshake was like iron. I was glad that the car was one of those hot-rod State Patrol Ford Mustangs, with separately adjustable front bucket seats.

“Director Trieri, glad to meet you, and I'm double-glad to be involved with this case again. We've got to catch this guy.”

“And I'm glad you've been assigned to this, because I want to talk some more with Gwen Milstead. You're just the person to take the lead on that. Oh, and please call me Annette, at least when it's comfortable for you.”

“Will do, and I'm Candice. Where to first?”

“I don't know anything about Kharma, but I'd like to find a place called the West Wind Bar, or something like that. Maybe Lounge or Tavern, I don't know for sure. I expect it's in the phone book, though.”

“I think I drove by on my way into town, but I'm not sure it's open yet.”

“Even if it is, the people I want to talk to may not be there until a later shift, but let's check it out.” I looked at my watch and saw that it was not quite 11:00. “But, tell you what, it's possible that they don't

open until eleven, so why don't we take a turn around town first? I've never been here and I'd like to see how things are laid out."

She started the car, the big-block V-8 emitting a satisfying rumble, and rummaged in a folder beneath her feet before putting the car into gear.

"Here's a local map, with the Milstead residence marked." She handed me a folded piece of paper. "We're at the school on the right edge, about half-way down."

The map was a photocopied page from a detailed atlas of the region, and it showed the town streets as well as various jeep roads leading up into the Sangres.

"This is perfect. Gwen Milstead told me that her husband sometimes goes up to a hunting cabin of his, on one of these jeep roads. Maybe we can go up there and see if we can find him."

"Good plan, although we'll have to find another vehicle. This thing doesn't like being off pavement very much. Graded gravel works, but barely." She grinned. "But on pavement, it's quite the machine." She put the Mustang into drive and we eased out of the school yard.

* * *

We took a turn around town before driving down the hill to the West Wind. Kharma is one of those intentionally funky places that doesn't have much in the way of zoning. As a result there are nicely kept homes with flower boxes and crystals hanging in the windows side-by-side with falling-down shacks, and yards that are someone's pride and joy next to old rusty cars on cement blocks. You have to really want to live in Kharma to put up with living in Kharma. I think they keep things the way they are to discourage developers.

It was a little after eleven when Candice pulled into the parking lot of the West Wind Tavern and Grill, as the sign said.

"These weren't here when I came by earlier." She was referring to a row of motorcycles, all parked with their front wheels cocked at the same angle. Most of them were Harley-Davidsons that had been modified in various ways, but there were a couple of Indians mixed in as well.

"I bet it's a bunch of retirees here for brunch. You know, the quiche crowd. I probably won't be long." I was getting out of the car as I said this.

"If you're not out in five, I'll be in." She was looking the place over with a suspicious eye. "At least come to the door and give me a wave, OK?" I nodded.

Inside, it was dark and smoky, and it smelled like tobacco and stale beer with more than a hint of Lysol. As I walked into the main room, the motorcycle crowd looked me over as if I were a cut of prime rib, and the bartender turned his back on me to polish some glasses. I didn't turn and wave to Candice.

"Excuse me." At the bar, being polite didn't seem to be the way to get the bartender's attention, so I walked around behind it and up to the guy polishing the glasses.

"Excuse me again. I need to ask you a couple of questions about a report of the mayor's disappearance."

He looked up, surprised to see me at such close quarters. "Hey, what the hell are you doing back here, lady? You can't come back here!"

"You were deliberately ignoring me, and that just won't do. Were you on shift yesterday evening?"

“What’s it to ya, lady. And get out from behind my bar!” He began to reach for a sawed-off baseball bat that was sitting under the counter.

I flashed my shield below the level of the bar, where only he could see it. “You really don’t want to do anything to make trouble, I promise. I’m only looking into this report about the mayor. I’m told he’s sort of a regular here, and you can help him by talking with me.”

“What’s the matter, Curley? Having trouble with the little lady?” A sneering fellow wearing a bandanna on his head and badly in need of a shave and a bath had taken a seat on a bar stool behind the bartender.

Curley, whose head was shaved, looked startled. “No problems, Mouse. What can I get ya?”

“I think maybe a little piece of pretty-girl tail would be nice. Only reason I can think of she’d come in here would be for a little action.” He ran his tongue, an amazingly long, gray-ish thing, around his lips in a most obscene fashion.

“You know, I believe in starting out with the polite approach. And I think it was going to work with Curley here. You, Mr. Mouse, weren’t invited into the conversation, and I suggest you take your previous seat with your friends.” I could feel my Glock nestled comfortably in the small of my back, and it was a most reassuring feeling.

“You know, for a middle-aged broad, you’re feisty. Me and my buddies like ’em feisty. Wonder how many of us you can take on? Last girl, she serviced all of us. Little sloppy, there, toward the end, but she managed. How do you like it, baby? Two at once? Three?” By this time, several of Mouse’s friends had drifted to sit beside him at the bar.

I looked at the bartender. “Curley, I’m sorry to have to do this. I’ll try to minimize the damage, I promise. Sit, now!”

I reached under the back of my jacket, grabbed my Glock, and put a round through the ceiling. I’d noticed that the building had only a single story with no windows on the ends of the attic, so it seemed safe enough.

“Now, there are fourteen more rounds in this thing, and I’m very, very good with it. If any of you gentlemen so much as twitches, you’ll find out just how good. You, Mr. Mouse, and your friends here at the bar need to be especially careful. I’d like to see your hands on the bar, now!”

I’d started with Voice of Authority level one and finished with level two. But only a couple of the guys at the bar had their hands showing.

Then from the doorway, there was the unmistakable sound of a 12-gauge Remington being pumped. “She said *now*, gentlemen!”

Candice used her version of Voice level three, and it worked to perfection. Seven pairs of hands were sitting palms-down on the bar, fingers spread, and no one else was moving.

“You can probably stand up now, Curley. And if you know of some way to make these guys behave, now would be a good time to roll it out. Otherwise, well, I think maybe Officer Garcia over there by the door is just itching to improve the decor in here. Were you here last night? Were any of these guys?”

Curley scanned the crowd nervously. “Yes, ma’am, and some of them, ma’am.”

“You work long shifts, Curley. I hope you get overtime. Do you suppose there’s a way to have the guys who were in here last night move over to one side of the room? I’d like to ask them some questions. Non-threatening questions so I can try to help Sam, whatever’s happened to him, although I’m not sure they’ll believe me.”

“Lady, I sure hope you and your cop friend like it rough. Me and my pals are gonna have to show you just what kind of good times a babe can have with real men.” Mouse was positively leering.

There was an icepick next to the bin with the cubes, so I shifted my Glock to my left hand, grabbed the icepick with my right, and stuck it into the top of the bar, just half-way between Mouse’s right index and middle fingers. He was watching the barrel of the Glock, pointed at his nose as it was, and didn’t see the icepick until it was stuck there, about a half-inch deep into the surface of the bar. Then he flinched and his right hand began to shake a little.

“Mr. Mouse, please. I just can’t believe that even slime like you thinks that this type of language works as a pick-up line. That means you’re deliberately being insulting. And, really, it’s most rude, and I’m getting tired of it. Next comment like that and I’ll just pin your hand to the bar while I figure out exactly which charges to file. Now, Curley, got any answers for me?”

Curley, whose bald head was white all over, had his eyes on the icepick.

“Uh, well, ma’am, uh, I suppose I could ask the fellas who were in here last night to move over to the right side of the room here.” He was waving his hand in a general way, but no one moved.

Candice stomped her left foot, shod in a cowboy boot, and it made a surprisingly loud thunk for a woman of her size. “You heard the man, anyone who was in here last night move over by the juke box!”

They must have been afraid to move until her command, because about half of the crowd moved off in that direction and sat back down, hands on the table tops. I noticed that Mouse was looking at the icepick and chewing his lip.

“Mr. Mouse, were you in here last night? If so, please join your friends.” I tried to be inviting, rather than commanding, and he complied, along with three others who had been seated at the bar. I yanked the icepick loose and put it away.

“Now, gentlemen, listen up! All I want to know is whether Mayor Sam Milstead was in here last night. Anyone who saw him please raise a hand.” Curley and five others raised hands.

“Thank you! Maybe this will be easier than any of you expect. Curley, was he with anyone?” Curley shook his head. “Did he leave alone?” Curley nodded. “When?”

“Well, ma’am, I think it was around eleven last night, just after he got a phone call. On his cell phone.”

* * *

“Annette, I hope it was OK that I butted in like that. I heard the shot and thought you needed backup.” Candice, behind the wheel of the Mustang, was working her way toward the Milstead home.

“It was perfect, Candice. I really didn’t want to have to shoot any of those bozos, and you and your Remington helped a lot. Really. And we got the information we were looking for, although there’s some cell phone company records that will need to be subpoenaed. This is the first really useful information we’ve had, in any of these cases. And we should check to see if any of the other victims had cell phones as well.” I made yet another mental note to myself.

“I really didn’t want to have to fire that damned thing. It hurts my shoulder. But I figured it might get some attention, just pumping it like that.” She was smiling.

The Milstead house was one of the ones you wouldn’t want to live next to. It was run down, with a wheel-less pickup truck in the yard, and there were several goats wandering around on the bare dirt.

Their odor was almost overpowering. A Saguache County car was sitting in front of the house, so I called Sheriff Hank Allen.

“Hank? Annette Trieri. I flew over to Kharma and I’m sitting outside the Milstead residence. One of your cars is here.”

“You flew over? What are you, Superwoman? Damn! Let’s see, that car will be Linda Forbes, the deputy I sent to talk to Gwen Milstead. Linda’s our resident domestic violence expert.”

“Hmm. I don’t really want to interrupt her. I mean, it wouldn’t be polite, horning in on her show. And it might also upset her flow, bias some of the answers she’s getting.”

“Since when does the CBI worry about stuff like that?”

“Hank, I’m finding out that I do things differently from some of my colleagues. I hope you haven’t had the same experience with us that Scott Lister up in Gunnison has.”

“Scott’s more thin-skinned than me. He takes stuff too personally.” His answer also told me that he had been burned by my organization.

“Oh. Well, listen. I was assigned to this Burma Shave thing by the Governor to coordinate the efforts of the various counties involved at the time, two weeks ago when it was only three counties. Now that it’s five, five counties with victims but two more if you count where the victims resided, I figure that coordination is needed more than ever. But I want you and your fellow sheriffs to call the shots as you see fit, and you also need to get the credit for whatever turns up. Right?”

“That’s what Scott told me you’re doing. So I’m happy. And I don’t think it’ll be a problem if you interrupt Linda.”

“Actually, there’s something else that needs doing. We need to get up to this hunting cabin where Milstead’s wife said he goes sometimes, to see if he’s there. But the car I’ve got isn’t equipped for that. Oh. And we got a tip about a phone call that Milstead got last night, when he was in the West Wind Tavern up here. He left right after the call.”

“The West Wind? I’ve been trying to close that place down for years. It’s not the kind of dive I want in my county. If the call was to the bar, I guess I don’t know if there are records of it, though.”

“It was to Sam’s cell phone, I was told. Would you like me to put the CBI onto finding the records?” I thought he might welcome the help, and he did.

“And as to a car, if you flew to Kharma somehow and now have your own car, I’m confused. But you can borrow Linda’s SUV if you want. I’ll call her and ask her to meet you outside. That won’t be too much of an interruption, I expect.”

“We also need to know which jeep road to start up. Gwen Milstead may know that.”

But we really didn’t need the SUV. After meeting outside the Milstead house with Linda Forbes, and then going in to be introduced to Gwen Milstead at Linda’s suggestion—she thought it would be comforting to Gwen to know that interest in the case was high—Candice and I drove in it to the beginning of the jeep road that Gwen had indicated on the map. About ten yards up the road was a battered, red Chevy pickup truck with the vanity plate “MLSTD,” and just beyond that was a tree across the road. It appeared that the tree was a blow-down, as the base was snapped off rather than sawed.

Candice and I, it seemed, were going for a hike.

First, we went back to the Milsteads to get the Mustang back and to get an estimate of just how far up the road the cabin was. When Gwen told us it took about an hour in the truck, Candice and I looked at each other and at our shoes and decided not to walk. Even though I was wearing slacks, my penny

loafers were only a slight advantage over her cowboy boots for walking, and neither would handle the kind of hike we knew was waiting for us.

Gwen was delighted to hear that her husband's pickup truck was sitting at the bottom of the jeep road, but I tried to quell what could be false hopes. The truck was empty, so it might be that Milstead had started walking, but there was still the phone call to be reckoned with. I didn't tell Gwen about that.

"Gwen, if he's the mayor, there must be a town public-works department, or something. Could we get them to remove the tree so someone can drive up there and see if Sam's at his cabin?"

"Public works? Oh, I see. Well, we call Sam the 'mayor' around here, but, see, it's sort of a joke. There really isn't a mayor or real town government here. We get the full-time residents together every now and then to decide things, but it's government by consensus, more or less. I'm sure you've noticed that the streets are in bad shape. Trash pickup is done by subscription—a couple of guys with trucks go around and do it for folks who pay for it. I guess Slim, one of the trash guys, probably could remove the tree, although he'll charge for it."

"Why is Sam called the mayor?"

"At those town meetings, he sometimes takes charge. He has this loud voice that carries, so when someone gets out of line, as he sees it, at least, he shouts them down. So people started calling him the mayor behind his back. Of course he found out about it eventually, and now he likes it. It gives him an excuse to swagger around town and order people around. Mostly they ignore him. But his reputation has gotten around, and all over this part of the Valley, down in Hooper and Moffat and even in Alamosa, they think of Sam as the Mayor of Kharma."

"So, how is Sam employed?"

"He works for the school district. Used to drive a school bus, but his drinking got in the way of that. So now he drives the snow plow. Usually he's sober in the morning when the roads need plowing. The school district gets some of the streets plowed so they can pick up the kids. Otherwise, it probably wouldn't get done. And he's also the janitor at the elementary school here in town. I manage to help out with a little income from my goats. Except for the vet bills, they're nearly self-sufficient, and I sell the milk to a guy who makes cheese and yogurt."

She was painting a picture for me that was consistent with the Burma Shave murderer's choice of victims—someone relatively prominent in the community who was, to put it kindly, difficult. Fights at home, chronic drinking, shouting down people at town meetings, hanging out at a biker bar—these all fit with what the murderer seemed to judge to be the qualities of a jerk.

"I guess just one more question from me, Ms. Milstead. You called the Saguache County Sheriff's Office this morning, right? Is this because there isn't a town marshal?" That seemed to fit with the local anarchy, but I wanted to be sure.

"Right. The issue of incorporating into a real town has come up several times, but it always gets defeated in meetings. Ever since the local new-agers forced the vote on changing the name years ago, from the old mining town name of Dry Shaft to Kharma, ever since then Sam's been going to the meetings to keep things from changing any more. He's a big guy, and so he shouts people down and intimidates them into backing off their ideas. But the idea of incorporating is gaining momentum, and one of these days it'll probably move ahead. And maybe we can get the streets fixed and hire a town marshal." She shrugged.

Maybe, I thought, the next town meeting will be the one where it actually passes. It's looking as if Sam won't be there.

* * *

Slim the trash guy allowed as to how making the two saw cuts necessary to re-open the jeep road, plus hauling out the ten-foot section of tree, would cost \$150 if he could keep the log—an obvious case of highway robbery, but I didn't want to take the time to get bids. The CBI financial officer wouldn't approve, I knew, but I agreed to pay it anyway. I'd figure out how to get petty cash to reimburse me later. Candice and I saw him get to work, and we went off in search of lunch.

Fortunately for us, the West Wind Tavern and Grill wasn't the only place in town offering food. If the West Wind represented one aspect of the town's culture—bikers and other guys who liked to spit instead of bathe—the Dream-catcher Diner represented the other, vegetarian offerings and faux-spiritual decor. I expected to see salads made with free-range lettuce on the menu, but all they offered in that vein was goat cheese topping made from the milk of free-range goats. The goats I'd seen ranging about in the Milstead yard hadn't looked so free to me, though.

I called Sheriff Hank Allen again to update him and see if he wanted his people to go search the cabin, and he jumped on the chance. He had suspected for some time that there was something strange going on up there, possibly a meth lab, and this gave him the excuse he needed to check it out.

With all that settled, Candice and I had a chance to eat and talk in relative peace. I wanted to find out from her more about her domestic violence sensitivity training and what she had learned from interviewing Bonnie Scharmatz.

“The basic thing is that we emphasize, carefully, the idea that there's nothing to be ashamed of and that it's not the victim's fault. If your husband knocks you around, it's his problem, his fault, his mistake, and he needs to be the one to change. But the problem in the Valley is that there's so much poverty, people living on the margin, that most women in situations like that are totally dependent on their men. Welfare is their only alternative. And people are proud, too proud to want to go that route.” She was trying various toppings on individual bites of her grilled veggie-burger (made locally from organic vegetables who were spared unnecessary suffering, the menu had said), and so far catsup, mustard, and, strange as it was that they had it, A-1 Steak Sauce had failed her standards.

“Frank Scharmatz, of course, was a high-school teacher, so he had both a paycheck and benefits. Was Bonnie in this dependency mode?”

“Y'know? It was funny. She didn't seem worried about her future. Maybe Frank had life insurance through the teachers' union, or something. And she has those ponies. But when I talked with her, she didn't seem to be grieving or even surprised. She seemed relieved, or...or maybe *complete*, somehow. As if something she was expecting had finally happened.”

“Strange. That's the impression I got from Sarah Robinson, too—she's victim number two's wife. Not surprised or in shock or anything, and definitely not grieving. But not trying to hide anything, either. Just matter of fact about the whole thing.” My salad was actually quite good, and, based on the crumbles of cheese, Gwen Milstead's goats seemed to produce fine milk despite their confinement.

“‘Matter of fact.’ Right. I guess I can understand it—if you're trapped in a relationship without love, one that's even dangerous on occasion, and you don't feel too dependent, any way out would be a relief. You'd probably not celebrate, but you'd not be sad, either. Except that's not what they taught us to deal with in the training. So I kind of winged it with Bonnie.”

“It seems a little different with Gwen Milstead. She was frantic on the phone early this morning, expressing the kind of worry that you might expect. Although I have to say that it was a little strange that she was nearly hysterical when her husband was only a couple of hours later than his usual pattern.”

“With these abductions and murders happening each week, people are a little on edge.” She had finally settled on the side of dressing I’d offered her. I don’t really like bleu cheese that much, so I just put lemon juice on my salad. Besides, I recalled from the menu that it had touted “bleu goat cheese dressing,” and I didn’t remember any bleu goats in the Milstead yard. But Candice liked it.

“I wonder if that applies extra to people who might, subconsciously at least, kind of wish victimhood on someone? If Gwen falls into that category, she fits with the other wives. Hmm. Although I guess that my husband would say that our sample is rather small.”

“Huh?”

“Hal Weathers, my husband. Hal’s on the faculty at Frémont State in Durango, he’s Dean of Natural Sciences, in fact. And he’s always telling me that trying to use statistics on small samples, meaning small groups of numbers or whatever, is always risky. It’s like flipping coins. They don’t always alternate, heads-tails-heads-tails. Sometimes there’s a run of one or another. It takes a big sample, he told me but I forget, something like a hundred flips, before the half-and-half distribution stabilizes. So with only three wives, one of whom is a girlfriend, we’re dealing with a small sample. But they’ve all behaved nearly the same. And the other victim’s closest woman relative, I mean victim number three, Hollis Henry and his daughter Toni, well, she had a better reason than the others to wish her father dead.”

“I’ve been reading your summaries. I’m sure glad that didn’t happen to me when I was a teenager. I had the boys in the neighborhood after me, but not my Dad.”

“Me, too. That would have been truly a nightmare. But this business with the wives and significant others, girlfriends, daughters, and so on, this is interesting. Gwen Milstead is the only one who called in the missing persons report herself. The others were either reported by someone else entirely or not reported at all.” I summarized the puzzle of this for her.

“Interesting. Have you talked with many people about it? It’s almost as if Gwen got instructions to break the pattern, or something.”

“Candice, I never thought of that. I wonder... Well, it’s still the small sample problem. Maybe it’s just a coincidence.” I smiled. “But, of course, we cops are...”

“...not supposed to believe in coincidences.” We said it together and wound up laughing.

But then the next logical thought popped into my head. “That implies some kind of almost-conspiracy, where these wives and so on knew what was happening to the victims. In advance, or at least in real time.”

“Conspiracies are hard to believe in, because the secrecy needed is almost never possible. But these people all have their motivations. And what we’ve been talking about fits, their matter-of-fact reactions, for example.” Candice cocked her head sideways. “Could it be?”

“Hard to believe, as you said. But, look, we’ve got heads impaled on fence posts. Lots of things in this case are hard to believe.”

* * *

Thirteen

Having a driver is wonderful, especially one as skilled and smart as Candice. It lets you get around while accomplishing other things. On the way to lunch, I'd called Derek Petersen and started the process of checking cell phone records to see who called Sam Milstead Tuesday evening. And after lunch, I called Hal to let him know where I was and that I might not be home for dinner. He was, as always, concerned about my welfare.

"You're where? Kharma? Got a place to stay?"

"I don't know if I'll need to be here overnight. If the sheriff's guys don't find our missing person up at his hunting cabin, I expect that I'll need to go over to Saguache, to the sheriff's office. He'll want some ideas about what to watch for on Thursday night."

"But you'll be home before then?"

"That's the plan, but you never know. I think we'll get some points for flying over here and using a State Patrol helicopter to do it. And for commandeering a State Patrol car with driver to get me around." I winked at Candice. "I mean, we'll get points for effort and all that. And we've got an interesting lead, the first one we've had, really, that may give us some information. But I would like to get home this evening, or tomorrow, if possible."

"I'll leave a light on for you."

"How's the first day of classes going?"

"Pretty smoothly. The strike didn't come off, partly because of that effort Bucky and Madge put together. They persuaded the adjunct and TA leadership that negotiations with the administration are making progress. And somehow they persuaded them as well that there's no faculty-administration conspiracy to hornswoggle them. So things are working today."

"Say. Speaking of conspiracies, Candice, that is, Officer Candice Garcia, she's my driver, we were talking about this case and how all the wives of the victims, and the girlfriends, they all seem kind of matter-of-fact about the whole thing. Not upset like you'd think. Almost like a conspiracy."

"But that means they'd have to have been communicating with each other before some of the killings, right?"

"That's what a conspiracy is, I guess, communications." Where, I wondered, was he going with this?

"And they live some distance apart, spread all over this part of the state. So most likely they would have been communicating by phone. Hmm. Unless there's also some kind of internet chat room. I mean, by US Mail doesn't seem likely in this day and age. And you'd think there would be at least some phone calls."

"Sounds as if you're suggesting that I check the phone records of all of the people close to the killings." Why, I wondered to myself, weren't we doing this already? Trieri, sometimes you're a dolt.

"The long distance records, and cellular calls. But most of the calls between places would be long distance, I guess. Anyway, that would provide a way to verify, or disprove, your conspiracy theory."

So I called Derek Petersen again and had him start the process of checking phone records on every person I could think of who was connected with the victims. Some of the records would be hard to get, but some would be easy. We had the Governor on our side, and his political clout, I knew, could be useful if judges needed leaning on.

"Candice, I guess we're going to check on the possible conspiracy. At least maybe that'll put to rest one of the things that's been nagging me." I was going to continue, but my phone chirped for attention.

“Trieri, CBI”

“Hi, Annette, Hank Allen. My guys made it up to Sam Milstead’s hunting cabin, and there’s no sign he’s been here recently.”

“Anything at all of interest?”

“Not at Sam’s cabin. We used the missing persons excuse to check out a couple of other places in the area, though, up that same road, and one of them sure looks like a meth lab. We’ll be going in there when we get a warrant. So it wasn’t a complete wild goose chase.”

“That’s something, at least. Are you going to keep Gwen Milstead up to date on what you didn’t find?”

“Yeah, I’ll have Linda do it, she’s still there with her. What’s your next move?”

“I thought I’d head over your way. Maybe one of the leads we’re pursuing will turn something up, but there’s nothing I can do about that, others are working on it. Seems like a good thing for me to do would be to look at some of your detailed maps of the county and see if any obvious places leap out at me. Places where a head might turn up Friday morning.”

“So, if you’re still in Kharma, I’ll see you in about an hour or so.”

“Maybe less. We’ll see what Officer Garcia can make this car do.”

“Oh. One of those State Patrol speed runs, eh? I’ll warn my guys on enforcement to cut you some slack.” He laughed. “But be sure to drive carefully in Saguache County.”

Candice had overheard my half of the conversation, so she guessed that our destination was changing.

“Sounds like we don’t need to head up to that jeep road, huh?”

“No, they didn’t find anyone up there. They do have some suspicions about another cabin though, something about a meth lab. But they’re going to get a warrant for that, and it’s not really our problem. You probably heard me talking about going over to Saguache.”

“That’s what you meant. And it sounded like you don’t want to waste time.”

“Oh, I can’t justify it as an emergency. But it seems like the roads can be empty around here. And they’re sure straight.”

She eased out of town and down to the flats of the Valley, and then she turned on her lights and put on some speed. After we reached State Road 17, a short-cut for folks north-bound from Alamosa, she let the car run, and when there wasn’t traffic we doubled the speed limit. At Moffat, she turned west, onto the county road toward Saguache, and we had to take it easier. The road followed section lines, and it seemed as if almost every mile there was a right-angle curve. Candace got into a rhythm of braking, turning, and accelerating; braking, turning, and accelerating, while I held on.

Then, coming out of a left-hand turn, she accelerated as usual but braked early and hard, coming to a stop next to a pair of men working at setting fence posts along-side the road. One guy was operating a small auger mounted on the back of a tractor, and the other was pounding on a post about 50 feet away, using one of those cylindrical fence-post setters.

“I don’t think this means anything, Annette, but what do you think?”

“They’re the right kind of posts, but everyone uses those. Thing is, these are set like they’re really putting in a fence. Closer together than the 200 yards or so that our perp uses. Also, it looks like they’re back at the fence line, not in the ditch.”

It must have been that the State Patrol Mustang in the middle of the road with its emergency lights ablaze was distracting, because the two had stopped what they were doing to watch us. I couldn't imagine why.

It didn't take long for the guy on the tractor to climb down and walk toward the car, in the direction of my window.

"Want me to just go?" Candice looked ready to punch the pedal.

"Oh, hell, I guess I should talk to him. Wouldn't be polite to just zoom off. Don't know quite what to say, though. Hope I can keep a straight face." I rolled down my window.

"Help you, officers?" He was around sixty, or long years working out in the sun made him look it, at least.

"Well, yes, Mr...?"

"Gilchrist, Lendon Gilchrist. Got a ranch over yonder." He twitched his head to the northeast.

"Mr. Gilchrist, if you've been following the news, you'll know that we in law enforcement are taking special interest in new fence post placements these days."

"Huh?" He looked confused for a few seconds, and finally enlightenment dawned. "Oh, yeah, geez..."

"And even though it's only Wednesday, we're just paying attention to these things, you know?"

"You don't think..."

"No, I guess I don't. Looks like you're making a real fence instead of sign-posts. But maybe you can tell me something. I notice you're drilling holes for these posts, then he's pounding them in. That must make it easier for him. But how hard would it be for him if you weren't drilling the holes?"

"Harder, some. Ground here isn't too bad, so he could do it. Mainly, I'm just laying the line, so he'll put 'em in a straight row the right distance apart."

"Ah. I see. Well, thanks and have a good day, Mr. Gilchrist." Candice took the hint, and we roared off.

* * *

We were still laughing about it when we arrived at the Saguache County Sheriff's Department. Candice pulled into a visitor's parking space, and, just as I opened my door, my cell phone started chirping.

"Trieri, CBI."

"Annette? Derek. Listen, got a minute? I've got some results for you on the backgrounds of our victims. Also, another little tidbit. The Berensons lost von Stier last night."

"Last night? Is he still missing?"

"Hasn't returned to his shop, which they have staked out."

"That's interesting. I wonder when he'll turn up. If he does turn up alive, I wonder if he'll have an alibi for last night. So, anyway, what about the victims?"

"Results came back just as I got all those phone traces started. Interesting. All sorts of stuff about prior jobs, schools, and so on. And it seems that three of our victims to date were part of a Colorado National Guard outfit that was deployed to Kuwait during the Gulf War in 1991, some transportation

detachment out of Camp George West over in Golden. And while they were there, they got in some trouble, our victims and two other guys, an altercation involving some of the locals, local women.”

“Let me guess. Even though, as I understand it, women in Kuwait are not sheltered quite as much as in Saudi Arabia, they’re still treated the same way, for the most part, at least they were back then. So this altercation was a big deal, probably, huh?”

“Especially because one of the women was the daughter of a local big shot, a deputy minister in the government, which means he’s related to the royal family. Our guys appeared in a military court and got off, though.”

“You said three of the victims?”

“Right. Scharmatz, Henry, and Whiler. Along with two others, one who still lives here in Colorado and another guy who seems to have disappeared completely.”

“The other Colorado guy wouldn’t be Sam Milstead, would it?”

“No, as a matter of fact, it’s not. It’s some guy named Roland Endsley. He has a Fort Garland address.” Fort Garland, a hamlet about 25 miles east of Alamosa, was in yet another county, to the best of my recollection.

“Hmm. Well, first, we need to see if he needs protection.”

“Unless we want to use him as bait.”

“Oh. Hadn’t thought of that. Tell me about the altercation.” I wanted to stall for time to think.

“They were accused of kidnapping and raping three Kuwaiti women, girls, really, they were in their teens, and leaving them in the desert. I guess they underestimated how tough the girls were, though, because they walked home. But our guys got off on a kind of technicality, because the victims didn’t appear in court to identify them. Or their families wouldn’t let them, or something. And here’s the best part. Guess who their military lawyer was?”

“Oh, shit, don’t tell me.”

“Yep. Captain Martin Robinson, Army Judge Advocate General’s office, in Kuwait with a National Guard unit from Washington DC.”

“That tears it—this Roland Endsley guy really needs our help. Get the State Patrol to his place right away, will you? I know, I know, we’ll miss the opportunity to use him to catch our perp, but protecting him is more important.”

“You’re the boss, Annette.”

“How do you suppose Sam Milstead fits into this?” I wondered if Candice and I had trucked all the way to Saguache for nothing.

“Maybe he doesn’t. Or maybe there’s some other connection, I don’t know. What about von Stier?”

“All I can say is that he better have proof he wasn’t anywhere near either Kharma or Fort Garland last night. I mean, if one of the Kuwaiti victims was the daughter of some important guy over there, he might have put out a contract on her rapists or something, offered a bounty. Given his background, our friend von Stier would seem to me to be a capable contractor, no?”

“I was thinking the same thing, Annette. I mean, you’ve talked about how von Stier was looking less and less like a suspect, but this changes things.”

“Sure does. Combined with the fact that he had direct or indirect connections to all four victims to date, it *really* changes things. So. You’re going to send the Patrol to check out and protect this Endsley guy. How long do you think our phone traces will take?”

“End of the day, early tomorrow. Are they still relevant?”

“Absolutely. If von Stier is our guy, it would make it much easier for him if all the wives and girlfriends and so on were helpfully conspiring. It’d make it easier for anyone, for that matter. Maybe he’s even sharing some of the bounty with them. I’m a little puzzled why Bonnie Scharmatz isn’t a little more worried about money, for example. And all of these women, all of them except Gwen Milstead, they’ve all been so, unsurprised. So matter of fact.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I have something.”

“Right. And, listen, is there a phone number for this Endsley guy?”

He gave it to me and I punched it up immediately.

“Hello?”

“I need to speak with Mr. Roland Endsley, please.” I had my fingers crossed.

“Sorry, I’m afraid Rollie’s not here. Can I tell him who called?”

“This is Annette Trieri, I’m the Director of the CBI Field office in southern Colorado.” I decided on the fly that Durango was too far from Fort Garland to make sense to Ms. Endsley. “Who am I speaking with, please?”

“CBI? What’s that?”

“Colorado Bureau of Investigation, ma’am. We’re the investigating arm of the State Police.” Sometimes simplification is best, even if it’s a little inaccurate.

“Oh! Well, I’m Nedra Endsley, Rollie’s wife. Can I help you?”

“I need to speak with Mr. Endsley as soon as possible. Do you know where I can reach him?”

“Well, he left yesterday morning on a three-day business trip. I don’t expect him back until tomorrow night. Um, I think today he’ll be in the middle Arkansas Valley, Salida and Buena Vista. Tomorrow he comes back down through the Valley, hits all the towns here.”

“Do you know where he’s staying? And, if I can ask, what is his business?”

“He’s a feed company rep. Takes orders from feed stores and sets up big deliveries. He never knows in advance where he’s staying, so he always calls me when he finds a place. What’s all this about, anyway?”

“Mrs. Endsley, I don’t want to alarm you, but I’m afraid I have to. If you’ve been reading the papers, you’ve heard about these Burma Shave Murders. And we have reason to suspect that your husband may be the next target.” I didn’t know quite what reaction to expect, but my conversation with Derek about a possible conspiracy had put me on the alert. Still, she surprised me, by laughing.

“What!? Oh, that’s just nuts. Why would anyone want to hurt Rollie?”

I decided to ignore that. “Mrs. Endsley, I’m going to come to visit you, and we can talk about that when I get there. Will you be home today?”

“Oh, sure. I don’t go anywhere when Rollie is out of town. I have to stay here and do the chores, feed the stock and so on.”

“I’ll be seeing you later this afternoon, then.” And I went looking for Candice, who had disappeared.

* * *

I finally found Candice by using the undignified expedient of looking at feet under the stall doors in the ladies’ room—her black snakeskin boots gave her away.

While looking for her, I called Derek, filled him in on the itinerary of Roland Endsley, and had him call off the State Patrol protection in Fort Garland. Instead, I had him run Endsley’s car registration and put out a quiet notification to the Chaffee County Sheriff. I also had him run von Stier’s registration and put out a not-so-quiet notification on him.

After a brief meeting with Hank Allen, where I disappointed him by telling him that we weren’t going to be focusing on Sam Milstead and cheered him up by telling him why, Candice and I hit the road for Fort Garland, retracing some of our earlier route.

Along the way, we discovered that Lendon Gilchrist and his helper had called it a day without putting in any many more posts. After negotiating the county road zig-zags, we got back on State Highway 17, southbound, and Candice let the car run. There wasn’t any real emergency, but the distance involved and the fact that it was already mid-afternoon motivated us to hurry. I think we both wanted to get home that evening.

Although the San Luis Valley is big and empty, it’s also flat and open, so cell phone reception is reasonably good. As we approached Alamosa, I decided it was solid enough to try the afternoon conference call with Denver, so I called Derek again. I figured he would be able to patch together a conference call easier than I could.

By the time Candice and I passed the hot springs pool on the north side of Alamosa, Derek and I were bringing Rod Andersen up to speed on the latest information.

“So, you’re telling me, I guess, that you think this week’s victim will be this Roland Endsley guy?” Rod instantly understood the implications of the other victims’ association during the Gulf War.

“Unless we find him first, although it may already be too late. As I said, he’s been out of touch for a while. I’m on my way to see his wife now, and we should be there in a half hour or so. Maybe he’s called her this afternoon, but I’m not holding my breath.”

“But it sounds like that means Endsley will be the last victim.” Rod’s hopeful tone, I thought, was nearly desperate.

Derek jumped in. “That’s our hope, Director Andersen. You see, our current theory is that these serial murders represent a vendetta of some kind, possibly financed by someone in Kuwait, a member of one of the victims’ families. I’m leaning toward the idea that all the showmanship with the heads is just a deliberate attempt to mislead us.”

“And you’re back to suspecting this von Stier character.”

“Right, Rod.” Derek and I were taking turns, and it was mine. “Not only does he have the skills and background to be a hit man, but he’s broken an agreement we made by disappearing. I’ve got the Chaffee County authorities on the lookout for him and Endsley both.”

“So what am I supposed to tell the Governor?”

“I’m afraid that we may not be able to stop one more of these hideous killings—it may have already happened, in fact. But what we’re hoping is that that will be the last one.” Derek sounded resigned to the inevitable, yet hopeful, somehow.

“And you said there was another guy involved in the incident in Kuwait who’s disappeared?”

Derek had to take this one, even though it was my turn. “Right. No sign of him for about a decade, Director Andersen. And he just disappeared. Information about him just stopped. I guess for us, this means that we don’t need to worry that he’ll be the victim next week.”

“He didn’t go into the witness protection program and turn into this Sam Milstead character by any chance?”

“No sir. I ran a quick check on Milstead today and found complete records back two decades. I don’t think Milstead’s involved in this at all.” Derek’s comment produced a sigh of relief from the Denver connection.

“Great! This is progress, even if there’s one more to deal with. I’ll fill the Governor in and have him keep things quiet until Friday, at least. But at that point I think we’ll have to go public with the Kuwait story. See if you can find this von Stier by then, OK?”

Candice had turned east in Alamosa, and we were now on our way toward Fort Garland. During my telephone call, she’d been talking quietly on her radio, and now she told me she’d been briefed on the location of the Endsley’s ranch. Apparently the stock that Nedra Endsley referred to was a herd of registered Black Angus cattle.

“So, now that I know how to get there, what do I need to know about our plan?” Candice was still making good time, but the heavier traffic on US 160 was slowing her down to an average of about 80.

“I’m glad we’re together, because your domestic violence training will be critical. I’m more and more suspicious of a conspiracy of some kind among these women, and Nedra Endsley is likely to be part of it. She just laughed when I suggested her husband could be the next victim.”

“Does that mean I should push her?” She punched the throttle, and we flew around a semi that was going only a little over the speed limit.

“Maybe you should be the good cop. I’ll push her, and you can push back on me, win her sympathy a little. I’d like to find out how her relationship with her husband is. Maybe she’ll open up to you.”

“OK, but just remember later that if I’m pushing back on you, it’s because you’ve told me to. I don’t want you to think that I’m insubordinate or anything. Right?” She looked nervous when she glanced at me.

“Right. The good-cop, bad-cop routine works only if we remember we’re play-acting. Besides, I owe you one for bailing me out up in that tavern in Kharma. That was good work. So, you said you found out where the Endsley’s place is. How much farther? Are we there yet?” The slight whine I put into my voice made her laugh.

“About another ten miles to Fort Garland, then we go south and back west for another five miles or so.”

“Good. Just enough time for me to call home.” I found Hal’s private office number on my phone’s directory and called it.

“Weathers, natural sciences.”

“Hate to say this, lover, but I’m headed the wrong way. East.”

“Oh, man! And it’s getting close to four-thirty. Where are you?”

“Almost to Fort Garland. We’ve got another interview just south of there. It should be finished by five-thirty, six, latest, but after that I don’t know.” And it was true: I didn’t have a clue about what to do after we were finished with Ms. Endsley. Without a car of my own, I wasn’t my usual independent self.

“Hmm. If I remember correctly, there’s less than nothing in Fort Garland, in terms of either food or lodging. So figure out how to get back to Alamosa somehow. Then I won’t worry so much, OK?”

“Maybe I can hitch a ride home to Durango. There seem to be lots of west-bound trucks.” I winked at Candice’s look of surprise, and she laughed.

“Yeah, well, if you’ve got your Glock, I’m not going to worry. Just tell ’em that our street is really narrow before they turn up it, OK? I don’t know if one of those highway trucks would fit.”

“I’ll call you from wherever I’m staying, I promise. Don’t work too late.”

Candice was shaking her head when the phone call was over.

“You must have an incredible relationship. I’m encouraged to see that such things exist in real life.”

“He’s a dean at Frémont State, so his life is hectic in a different way from mine. He worries some, but he doesn’t cling. Or expect me to cling. In fact, if I did, if either of us did, I don’t think we’d be together.”

“That’s so different from the guys I grew up with. They expect women to be completely dependent on them and to have no interests besides having lots of babies. One reason I took the domestic abuse training was to try to understand that better. And it helped. But understanding it doesn’t make me like it.” She looked disgusted.

* * *

The Endsley ranch was one of those places where you open a section of fence, a barb-wire gate, to get in and then close it behind you so the cattle don’t wander off. A half-mile of bumpy not-quite-gravel driveway, which the Mustang’s suspension didn’t do very well with, brought us to a run-down, double-wide trailer next to a modern, well-kept barn. There was no one in sight, not even the cattle. Candice and I walked up the steps of a rickety combination porch and deck that fronted the trailer.

Repeated knocks on the door of the trailer eventually got a response. It was opened by a worn-out looking woman smoking a cigarette and holding a jelly-jar glass half-full of a golden liquid with ice cubes. Even with the cigarette smoke, the smell of bourbon was unmistakable.

“Help you?” She was leaning unsteadily on the door frame.

“Mrs. Nedra Endsley?” I tried to be both friendly and official at the same time. She nodded. “I’m Annette Trieri, with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. We spoke on the phone earlier.” I showed her my shield, and Candice, in uniform, was unmistakably official.

“Oh, yeah. You were asking about Rollie. He’s not here.”

“Yes, I recall you said he’d be in Salida or Buena Vista tonight. Has he called?”

She looked surprised and confused. “Called? No, now that you mention it, he hasn’t. Wonder what that’s about. He usually calls by now. Strange. Anyway, what can I do for ya?”

“We’d like to talk with you, Mrs. Endsley. This is Officer Candice Garcia, Colorado State Patrol. She and I are working together on a case. As I mentioned on the phone, we’re worried that your husband might be in some danger.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember you said that. But that’s just nuts. Who’d want to hurt Rollie? He’s just a cattle feed salesman.”

It was awkward standing at the door, but I really didn’t want to sit inside with her smoking up such a storm. There was a crude bench built onto the railing of the deck, however, and it looked as if it might serve the purpose. There was a background scent of barnyard in the air, but that would be better than smoke, I figured.

“Mrs. Endsley, that’s just what we’d like to talk about with you. Why don’t we sit out here on the deck and talk this over? If Mr. Endsley is really not in any danger, it would be a great relief. Perhaps you can explain things to us.”

It was a beautiful late-August afternoon, with just enough high clouds to keep the sun from being too scorching. Nedra Endsley peered out, looked up at the sky, and considered my suggestion.

“Kay. Let me get my sunglasses. Be right out.”

Candice and I went to sit in a corner of the deck, where the right-angle of the bench would make conversation easier.

“Candice, I think we’ve found ourselves a real challenge here.”

“Yep. She’s half in the bag already. What do you bet she comes out with a full glass? Still want to do the good-cop, bad-cop thing?”

“Yeah, but I’ll go easy, at least until I see if she’s a belligerent drunk. Maybe she’ll open up easier this way. We can hope.”

It took about five minutes, but Nedra Endsley finally appeared, with sunglasses, a pack of cigarettes in addition to a new one in her mouth, and, as Candice had suggested, a full glass. She sat down across the corner from the two of us and settled herself in. We had thought to sit upwind, so the smoke wasn’t much of an issue.

I decided to plunge right in without small talk.

“Mrs. Endsley, may I ask how long you’ve been married to Mr. Endsley?”

“Why, sure, uh, lessee, I guess a little over seven years. Why?”

“I was wondering if you knew that Mr. Endsley used to be in the National Guard. He was in Kuwait, during that first Gulf War in 1991. Did you know that?”

She nodded. “Oh, sure, he’s talked about it. He quit the Guard shortly after he got back, he told me, but he sometimes talks about being over there in the desert. Says that one reason he doesn’t mind living here is that he’s seen a real desert, and this is paradise by comparison. ‘Specially the view. Says there’s nothing over there like old Blanca Peak here.” She waved at the mountain that dominated the view to the north. It was indeed quite spectacular, particularly in comparison to the pool-table flat, greasewood-and-sage-covered sand everywhere else.

“Mrs. Endsley, you mentioned earlier that you wouldn’t be going anywhere because you had to feed the cattle. What cattle?”

“Huh? Oh, they’re in the barn over there. We’ve only got a few right now, Rollie sold a couple dozen head just a week or so ago. Got our bull and breeder cows out in the barn.” She smiled at some private thought.

“I also noticed that there’s not a car here.”

“Oh, yeah, well, that’s the other thing that keeps me here. We’ve only got one car, Rollie’s pickup, and he’s got it now. So here I am.”

Candice saw this as her cue and spoke up. “It must get lonely out here when he’s away. And I’d think it would be difficult, not being able to go into town for groceries and so on.”

“Oh, we stock up on stuff every Saturday, we go into Alamosa. But, yeah, it’s kinda isolated. But I don’t mind too much. And there are visitors. I talk with the mailman out by the road almost every day. And our vet comes by to check on the cattle every now and then.” She grinned. “And ever since we got the computer, I’ve made lots of new friends in those chat rooms. I don’t think Rollie knows much about that, though. Not sure he’d approve.” There was mischief in her voice.

“Approve?” Candice had just the right inflection of curiosity and surprise. “Why not? And does it matter? I mean, what does he care if you discuss things with friends on the internet?”

“Oh, I think he’d get really pissed if he knew I was spending so much time talking with folks out there on the internet. He doesn’t like me talking on the phone—whenever the long-distance bill comes, I catch hell. But the computer calls the internet with a local phone call, so it doesn’t show up.” She looked smug and took a long drink of her bourbon.

“Sounds to me like he wants to keep you all to himself.” I decided to try a little nudge, just to see how she’d respond. “Doesn’t seem exactly fair.”

“Maybe not, but he takes care of me, y’know? And I’m not exactly country-club material, if you know what I mean. So I’m fine here. It gets a little lonely sometimes, but I manage.” She shrugged. “What’s this all about, anyway?”

“Mrs. Endsley, it’s like I said. We’re worried about your husband. You see, we’re investigating these Burma Shave Murders. And every Friday for the last month, we’ve found a victim. It’s Wednesday afternoon, and we’re wondering what’s going to happen this Friday. And we’d like to be able to find your husband, just in case he’s next on the list.” I decided I was going to drop the bomb on her.

“Yeah, you keep saying that. But I don’t understand. Why him? Who’d want to chop off his head? This is nuts.”

“I know it must seem like that. But, you see, we learned something today about the other victims. They were all friends during the Gulf War in Kuwait, and your husband was one of the gang. And now he’s the only one who is still alive. All the others have got their heads chopped off. We think maybe your husband could be next.”

It seemed to take several seconds for this information to filter into her alcohol-soaked brain, and when it finally did, she looked surprised and dropped her glass on the deck.

Fortunately, the deck was wood, and the jelly-jar was sturdy, so we didn’t have to worry about her bare feet getting cut up.

* * *

Fourteen

“Conned. I think we were conned.”

Candice and I were back in the Mustang, headed west toward Alamosa for dinner. She had a decidedly jaundiced view of Nedra Endsley's attitude and wasn't hesitant about expressing it.

I was more thoughtful. "I've been wondering. At first I thought her reaction to the bombshell was slow because she was drunk. But maybe it was just bad acting. At least she did give us the names of the motels where Endsley's stayed in the past. We can have the people in Salida and Buena Vista check them out, see if he's there."

"What do you bet he's really shacked up with some other woman? Nedra said he makes this trip weekly. Hell, maybe he doesn't even go on this Walsenburg-Salida-Monte Vista loop she thinks he does. Maybe he just heads up the road a bit to his other piece of tail. Could even be married to her, too. The way he keeps Nedra isolated, he could be doing that to someone else and no one would be the wiser." She snorted her disgust.

I couldn't help but smile. "If he's doing that, he fits the 'jerk' description perfectly. I wonder what his poem is going to say."

Her laugh had a tinge of bitterness.

Hal's advice that I get back to Alamosa for dinner and lodging was better than he knew. He was right about there not being much of anything in Fort Garland. But what he didn't know was that Candice was based in Alamosa and knew that town quite well, both the restaurants and, by local reputation, the motels. She offered to put me up in her apartment, but I insisted on staying at the nicest place she knew of. I figured that the Governor could pay for all the extra time away from home I was having to put up with.

She insisted on having dinner at Trujillo's Steak House, partly out of local pride, to show off one of Alamosa's better restaurants, and partly because of the new-age lunch we'd had in Kharma. Her green-chile-smothered rib-eye was so big I didn't see how such a small person could manage the whole thing, and my traditional filet mignon with black peppercorn sauce was done to perfection. She was right—a hefty dose of high-cholesterol protein made up for the rabbit-food lunch.

Over dinner we talked about the case, mostly, and its complexity. The inter-tangled relationships among the probable contract hits on the Gulf War rapists and their defender, the possible conspiracy of the women close to the murder victims, and the role of the WDL and its sympathizers were becoming confusing. The fact that the likely hit man was missing also complicated the issue, and the whereabouts of Roland Endsley in this context was a matter of some concern. And there was also the missing "mayor" of Kharma, Sam Milstead. Under normal circumstances, his disappearance would probably not even have been reported yet—he'd been gone for less than a day, after all—but the circumstances were anything but normal.

After dinner, Candice dropped me at the hotel, a grand old affair on Main Street that had seen better days, where I'd checked in earlier. Our plan was for her to pick me up in the morning and take me to the State Patrol District Headquarters, where I could make the morning conference call with Denver and then decide what to do next. I had a vague notion of renting a car to drive home, unless there was something compelling to keep me in the Valley for another day.

I decided I was homesick.

Even though I'd slept at home Tuesday night, I'd been on the road in recent days more than I care to be, and the circumstances weren't exactly relaxing. I needed a good shoulder rub—something I found out after I fell for him that Hal has an extraordinary talent for. A bonus, relationship-wise.

So I called home. It's not the same as being there, but it sure helps.

Hal was in the middle of fine-tuning budget estimates for the fall semester, a task he would prefer to delegate but simply cannot. When enrollment figures finally come in, as they had now that registration was complete, the juggling required to make all of his departments stay in the black was something only he could do. He told me that he had delegated it to one of the financial office people one time—it seemed like a good idea, because accountants, after all, are trained for just this purpose. But the ensuing food fight at the department chairs' meeting, where the accountant discussed the budget adjustments that she had made under Hal's instructions, was enough to persuade Hal to do the adjusting himself in the future.

He solved the problem by, in essence, communizing his college. Revenues from all went into one big pot of money, and the departments drew from that pot according to what they needed. Rich departments subsidized poor ones—with the proviso that no department was allowed to be "poor" for more than a couple of years.

No one, including Hal, liked the system, but it worked. The other colleges at FSU had different systems, none of which worked as well, and the provost tried every year to get them to adopt Hal's approach, with no success.

The only real down-side was that Hal had to do the budget adjustments himself, in order to keep his department chairs happy. Bean-counting isn't Hal's favorite pastime, especially on late summer evenings when he could be out fishing.

So he was grumpy when I called.

With his grumpiness and my homesickness, the phone call could have turned out to be a disaster, but it actually worked just the other way. I think that one reason we have such a good relationship is that we're tuned into each other's feelings, and we always try to turn bad ones around. So I cheered him up and he made me feel less lonely. After I filled him on the interesting discoveries of my day, he brought me up to date on the situation on campus.

"One thing that's got me annoyed with this budget stuff is that John Martin is telling me that my surplus may have to be used to help out social sciences and humanities. They're always on a tight budget, but with this adjunct strike settlement things are really going to be tough for them. It's one thing for me to borrow from chemistry to pay biology, but sending money from my college elsewhere is going to cause a riot by my faculty."

"So they settled this threatened strike business?"

"Yeah, they got it worked out. Madge and Bucky enlisted a new instructor— instructors are full-time employees, unlike TAs and adjuncts, but they have credibility with that crowd because they're not tenured professors—and this new guy actually made things work. I think you know him, Dino Papandrea?"

"Dino saved the day?" I couldn't help but laugh. "Did it have anything to do with his intimidating appearance?"

Now he was laughing, too. "I don't think so. He just reasoned things out with everyone. But his appearance has caused some comment, even in our eccentric academic world. What's funny is that he got the highest ever student evaluations for his summer courses. Nobody, not the philosophy chair, who considers himself a friend of students, or any of the other faculty or instructors has ever received such high marks. I think they're going to assign the new assistant professors to audit his courses as a way to improve their teaching skills."

"So he's succeeding. That's wonderful! Maybe he'll get turned into a professor—I think he's hoping for something like that. I've always thought that he'd never have problems with discipline in his

classes, but that's not what wins teaching awards. Maybe they're so intimidated by him that they actually pay attention. And he's really a very engaging guy."

"Maybe you're right. And it's possible that a real faculty position could open up, if he continues to get great evaluations."

"I think that's what the U needs more of. The biker crowd on its faculty. That'd draw the students, don't you think?"

* * *

Thursday morning, I was feeling chipper, all things considered. The late evening chat with Hal had improved my outlook immensely, and I slept better as a result. And the hotel was surprisingly quiet, its shower worked and didn't chintz on water, and their breakfast was excellent.

I was determined to sleep at home that evening, as preparation for what might be a tough weekend, but I still wasn't sure how I was going to get home from Alamosa. Maybe, I thought, Candice will have a suggestion.

She picked me up at 7:30, and we went straight to the local State Patrol office. Because the staff there had first reported Burma Shave Number One, as they were calling it, they were taking a keen interest in the entire series of cases. There was a heightened level of excitement, because Fort Garland is in their district, and there was the possibility that they would be getting involved again. I was almost sure that their interest was such that they really didn't want to find Roland Endsley's head around somewhere, but from some of the comments I overheard I couldn't be positive.

At the morning briefing, I was embarrassed to be the focus of everyone's attention. As the first priority of law enforcement state-wide, the cases were at the top of everyone's to-do list, and as the person assigned by the Governor to handle things, I was the superstar.

Candice, I discovered, had been assigned more-or-less permanently to me, and she had even packed a week's worth of clothes and stuff to carry around in her car with us. Barring other distractions, her plan was to run me over to Durango for fresh clothes and so on and to be at my disposal for whatever came up. She and I and the Mustang, it appeared, were going to be spending some time together.

Although the morning briefing was the district captain's show, I got called on to say a few words and took the opportunity to give everyone a little pep talk and to offer my opinion that Burma Shave Number Five, should it happen, would be the last. When I explained why I thought this, they all nodded in understanding and looked relieved. And when I explained who I thought was behind the whole thing, I could tell that Kristof von Stier was going to have to hide himself very carefully or surely be caught.

Given my comments, the rest of the briefing concerned, first, strategy and, second, tactics. The latter were really not my concern, so I borrowed the captain's office to use the telephone.

Derek, as I expected, was in his office and, as I hoped, full of new information.

"Annette, the phone records came in. We have calls between some of the women involved with the victims of the case. Not a lot, but a couple. And there's no reason to expect even one, unless they're conspiring somehow."

"We have to be careful with this, Derek. There could be various reasons these people would talk to each other. Even though they're spread around the region, they may have common interests. Besides the beheadings, I mean."

"Right. Maybe needlepoint? Let's see what you think when you hear this: Bonnie Scharmatz called Sarah Robinson three days after Frank Scharmatz' head was found, on Monday. Sarah called Toni

Henry on the Monday after Marty's head was found, and she also called Amelia Dent the Monday after Hollis Henry's head turned up. Hmm. I guess Toni Henry wasn't seen as reliable to make the call, or something. Anyway, Amelia called Nedra Endsley last Monday."

It occurred to me that Sarah Robinson's call to Amelia Dent would have been the same day that Hal and I were at Sarah's ranch, when Annette the llama was born.

"That does sound, let's see, what's a good cop word...how about 'suspicious'? As if a warning is being relayed, like 'I'm done, you're next.' Are there any numbers that all of them called, like, maybe von Stier's?" I can hope, I thought.

"Not all of them. Toni Henry called him, late last week, though."

"That was probably to ask about the appraisal of her father's gun collection. None of the others?"

"Nope. Bonnie Scharmatz received a number of calls the week before Frank disappeared, but none of them seems out of the ordinary, except for a couple from a pay phone in Del Norte. No telling about that."

"Pay phones are getting more and more rare these days. Maybe I can put someone from the office here onto it, have someone question people who might have noticed something." I thought for a few seconds. "Also, maybe we can match up the pay phone call dates with times that von Stier went over to visit Billy Abernathy. They seem to get together to bop each other with sticks every now and then."

"Huh? Oh, right, the martial arts thing. Thing is, the pay phone calls were over a month ago. But, you're right. Hardly anyone uses them anymore, so maybe it would have been noticed, and if it was von Stier, he's hard to forget. Anyway, like I said, this seems like evidence of some kind of conspiracy. I mean, none of these women mentioned anything to you, did they?"

"No, and they probably would have if there were innocent connections, like a needlepoint club or something. So at least we have something we can tell Rod this morning. But, look, one phone call from each-to-each, or so, is thin. I mean, wouldn't you think there'd be more communications?" That was a question that I knew Rod would ask me.

"Yeah, I've wondered about that, too. What about a computer chat room or something? They could do most of their discussions there, group discussions, even. The really important calls would be the ones I've found, the 'it's gonna happen' calls."

I felt the excitement of real insight, of a possible breakthrough. "That could well be it. Yesterday, Nedra Endsley mentioned that she spends a lot of time on-line. She said she's made lots of new friends in chat rooms, she seemed kind of proud of it. How do you suppose we can find out where these virtual discussions take place?"

"Could be anywhere out there in computer-land. From what I've heard, none of these women classifies as a computer weenie, though, so it's probably a third-party chat room. Something already in place where they met more or less by accident. I guess that would be a place where each of them would surf to individually."

"Meaning someplace that's concerned with something they'd have in common. How about an abused spouse site, or something to do with domestic violence?"

"I'll look into it. Uh, Annette? Sally just handed me a note that Rod Andersen's on the other line. Should I patch him in?"

He did, and, given the information about communication among the women who were the victims' various next-of-kin, we managed a reasonably successful morning conference call. Derek had done more homework and was able to report no new news concerning the whereabouts of Roland Endsley, Kristof

von Stier, or even Sam Milstead. We'd almost stopped being concerned about Milstead, but he was still missing as far as anyone knew. In the end, Rod was satisfied that he could keep the Governor under control. There was the issue of yet another Friday morning head-on-a-post to worry about, but that was still a day away. Anything could happen.

* * *

The Mustang was beginning to feel like home. Of course, it couldn't begin to match up with Hal's Audi, at least in terms of interior comfort, given that the State Patrol buys its chase cars to chase cars rather than to give its officers cushy rides. But Candice and I managed to fit into its confined interior quite comfortably, and the thrum of the big V-8 cruising at 95 had begun to feel familiar, homey.

We idled out of the parking lot at about 8:45, and by 9:05 we were in Del Norte. Derek had told me the location of the suspect pay phone, so I had Candice cruise by it slowly. It was at the main intersection in town, next to a filling station where people coming and going would be commonplace. I began to think that Derek was right—no one around would remember who used it a month ago.

After that it was US 160 westbound for all of the places that I was beginning to find familiar—South Fork, Wolf Creek Pass, Pagosa Springs, and finally home. About the only thing I remember about the trip was the car. It did just fine except near the top of the pass, where it seemed to lose its eagerness to go. Unlike Hal's turbocharged S4, the big-block Mustang had normal fuel injection, and in the thin air it just plain slowed down. I didn't mention any of this to Candice, though. I think she would have made me walk if I'd maligned her pride and joy.

We pulled into a parking place by my CBI office in Durango at about 10:30, certainly a record for me—under two hours from Alamosa, about 150 miles including several towns. I decided I wouldn't tell Hal. It wouldn't do to have him trying to beat that time.

On the drive into town, at about the airport road intersection, it had occurred to me that I needed to have something for Candice to do. Sure, she was driving for me, but she couldn't just sit around and wait for me to want to go somewhere fast. I had errands to run and laundry to do, but it would clearly be inappropriate for her to do them for me.

But I need not have been concerned. When we walked into the CBI office, Derek pounced on me with news about various possibilities for the conspiracy chat rooms, and we put Candice to work reading the public parts of those sites.

We thought that her domestic violence training might give her some insight about who would be users; perhaps she would even recognize one of our conspirators.

With the two of them occupied, I decided to sneak home for fresh clothes. Hal was up on the campus, of course, but on the kitchen counter I found a rose with a cute note from him saying that all the laundry was done and he hoped I'd be able to be home tonight but he wouldn't be surprised if I couldn't and that he missed me. It almost made me cry.

Candice had told me she had clothes for a week, but I decided to be more optimistic and put together just enough clothes for the long Labor Day weekend. If I wasn't home by next Tuesday, I thought, I may as well not bother.

I called Derek, but he said nothing much was happening, so I decided on a side-trip up to the campus. I hadn't talked with Gil Taylor since I'd passed on Belinda Edwards' suggestion that he look for anesthetics in his tissue samples. Maybe, I thought, he'd have something new for me. Besides, Hal's office was up there.

Being a regional CBI Director provides me with a certain amount of miscellaneous clout, which I mostly try not to use. But one thing that's been quite useful is the gate-card for the parking lots at the U and the "park anywhere" dashboard parking pass. I got them by visiting the campus security people one day, pointing out that, technically speaking, I was their boss, and suggesting that it would be helpful to everyone if I could have easy parking access. Bureaucrats that they are, it took some patient persuading before they decided it was in their best interest to provide me with the gate card and an omnibus pass. I had to promise not to let it out of my sight, especially not to let Hal use it, and not to abuse it.

And it's been a godsend. Parking on the FSU campus is probably not any worse than any other university campus, but that doesn't matter—if it's relatively normal compared to other universities, it's absolutely horrific. I fully understand why Hal walks to work, even in bad weather.

So, despite the fact that it was just after 11:30, about the busiest time of day in all of the parking lots, I was able to breeze in and find a place to park. The fact that the spot said "Reserved for Provost Martin" on it didn't faze me in the least. My pass said "Police Business Parking" on it—to me, it was like the trump-suit ace in your hand. Besides, I figured Martin was probably out at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon or something that would take until 2:00.

I made my way over to the natural sciences building, glad to see no demonstrations of any kind this time, and up to Hal's office. To my surprise, Alice wasn't at her desk, but Hal's door was open about half way. I tapped lightly and stuck my head around it.

"Yeah?" He was focused on what looked like a spreadsheet of numbers on his computer monitor.

"Are you still fooling around with that budget stuff?"

"Huh?" He looked up, startled to hear my voice. "Oh, hi! Not anymore!"

And he jumped up, ran around his desk, and grabbed me in a bear hug, which went on for a while. Finally he pulled back just a little and looked at me.

"So what brings you here, anyway? I'm glad to see you made it back to town, at least."

"I'm thinking today may be the calm before the storm. I think we may find another victim tomorrow."

"That guy you flew off to find yesterday? The Kharma guy?"

"No, this would be the Fort Garland guy, like we talked about last night."

"I'm glad you called last night, by the way. I was driving myself crazy with that budget stuff, and talking with you made it all better."

"And talking with you made me feel less homesick. And now that I've been home and found your note, that's even better. Why I'm up here is to see you and to see if Gil has any new results for me. There's nothing special going on at the moment, so I thought I'd touch base."

"He called me yesterday afternoon, late, to find out where you were, but I didn't know. It sounds as if he's got all the analyses done, and now he's just trying to interpret the results. Um, I say 'just trying', but really that's the hardest part, I guess."

"I called him yesterday morning with a hint someone had passed along to me, so maybe he's made some progress. But what it looks like to me is like finding a fingerprint on a murder weapon for which you have no matches in your fingerprint data base. You know you've got something, but you just don't know what it is."

"I suspect so. What time is it? Have you had lunch?"

“It’s just before noon. Where’s Alice? I don’t think I’ve ever been here when she’s not sitting out there.”

“She’s off at some kind of President’s Staff Appreciation Luncheon. She’s been here so long that she gets an automatic invitation to all sorts of such things. She apologized and said she wouldn’t be back before one.”

“Hmm.” I reached in my purse and turned off my cell phone while walking over to the door.

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“Locking your door.”

“Oh.”

My darling husband, the one with the Ph.D. and dozens of scholarly research papers who’s also a dean at an almost-major research university, can get looks on his face that are positively stupid. Not the goofy ones he gets for me and, sometimes, for trout, but outright stupid.

“Uh, now what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“Well, it looks like you’re unbuttoning your blouse.”

“Very good. You get an ‘A’.”

“Oh...uh, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Alice won’t be back until one, you said.”

“Oh.”

“And she and John Martin are the only two people I know of who would dare come in here past a locked door.”

“Oh.”

“And I know for sure that John won’t be around—I parked in the very last space in the parking lot, the one with his name on it.”

“Oh.”

“And Gil can surely wait.”

“Oh.”

But he finally got the idea and, as I was hoping, picked me up and carried me over to the couch.

* * *

Sometime later, after an inordinate amount of fumbling and giggling for two mature professionals, we finally managed to get our clothes on and adjusted and our hair reasonably well untouled.

Almost as soon as I turned my cell phone back on, it chirped and blinked its message light. Derek needed me to call him as soon as possible. I kissed Hal goodbye and headed for my car.

“Derek, it’s Annette. Your message sounded excited. What’s up?”

“Annette! Good! The Berensons called in and reported that von Stier’s back at home.”

“In Pagosa? At his shop, or what?”

“They’re watching his shop, but they called it home. Maybe it’s both.”

“Good. Tell you what. Call Ron Grange and have him stake the place out. If von Stier tries to leave, they need to arrest him for some reason they can make up. I’ll get down there as fast as I can, so have Candice get the Mustang warmed up. No, wait. Give her directions to my house and have her meet me there. I’m on the campus, and we’ll probably get there about the same time.”

“Will do. I presume you’re headed to Pagosa Springs?”

“As fast as we can get there.”

And that was very fast. Candice worked some magic with her radio and somehow got several of the usual bottlenecks on the highway cleared for us, and we made the 62 or so miles to Pagosa Springs in just over a half hour. It was 1:35 when we pulled to a stop down the block from von Stier’s antique shop. Ron Grange was leaning against his Sheriff’s Department Blazer, microphone in hand.

“Hey there, Annette. Say, I got this strange report of someone exceeding the speed limit, eastbound from Durango. Goin’ so fast it was a blur—no one could make out what kind of car or the license plate. You wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?”

I watched as Candice blushed scarlet and decided to play along with him. “Gosh, no, Ron. Didn’t see a thing. Maybe you guys need to put out some radar enforcement. Catch those scofflaws.”

“I dunno, Annette. Soon as we do that, sure as shootin’, some state bureaucrat would come along and let ’em go on a technicality. Hardly worth the effort.” His face turned serious. “So, anyway, your guy’s supposed to still be in there. No sign of him, though. Your people went home for lunch and new clothes. They said they’ve been on watch for two days. What’s your plan?”

“I’m going over there to talk to him. He broke an agreement we had, and I want to know why. I don’t think this is a dangerous situation, or anything. I just wanted to make sure that he didn’t disappear again, Ron. That’s why I called you.”

“What is it you’re not telling me?” He didn’t look angry or suspicious, just curious.

I thought for a few seconds. “I’m not sure. Where we are is that von Stier is back to being a suspect, although there’s no probable cause for an arrest yet. He was going to keep his nose clean by having a continual alibi until tomorrow morning, at least, but he disappeared Tuesday night. Meanwhile, another potential victim is missing. So I want to talk to him.”

“Oh. Well, how about we wait around in case you need backup?”

“That sounds fine to me. And, Candice? Ron, this is Candice Garcia, she’s been assigned to assist me in this Burma Shave investigation. She also knows something about driving. She’ll fill you in on anything you ask, if we know the answer. Got your cell phone? Good. I’ll call you on the way over there and leave the connection open so you can listen for trouble.” And I walked down the block toward von Stier’s shop.

The front door was opened slightly despite the prominent “Closed” sign in the window. I rapped hard on the door, pushed it open some more, and went in.

“Mr. von Stier? The door was open. This is Annette Trieri, CBI. We need to talk.” I used Voice level one-and-a-half or so, just enough to get his attention.

A door on one end of the room was part way open, a door that I hadn’t noticed on my earlier visit, and through it I heard cursing and coughing. He finally got things under control.

“Right, right. Ahem. Have a seat, Ms. Trieri. I’ll be right there.” And he trailed off into more coughing.

I sat in a comfortable chair with a view of that door and waited.

It took about five minutes, during which time I assured the folks listening on the cell phone connection that all was well. Finally, the door opened fully, and von Stier wobbled into the room. He was pushing and leaning on an IV stand on wheels, one of those things you see sick people pushing down hospital corridors, and he had a tube stuck into his left arm. He looked like death, not quite warmed over.

“My apologies, Ms. Trieri, for not offering you refreshment. But I’ve only recently returned home from a rather difficult couple of days.” He adjusted the IV stand and sat down heavily in a chair across from me.

“That’s why I’m here, Mr. von Stier. We need to talk about those couple of days. You broke our agreement.”

“Ahem. I beg your pardon. I did no such thing. I evaded those two old geezers you hired to watch me, yes, but my time is well accounted for, I assure you. Too well, as far as I’m concerned.” He waved at the apparatus he was hooked to. “What’s your concern? Has Endsley disappeared?”

I’m sure I looked as astounded as I felt, despite a well-developed ability to maintain a poker face.

“You know about him, then. Good. I think I can tell you what’s going on and you’ll believe me. First, I’ve been at the hospital in Durango. Their records will be, I’m sure, a sufficient alibi. As I said, I just got back, and I feel somewhat lucky to have made it. The drive took more energy than I anticipated. I was there for more chemotherapy, and this gadget is its last course. I was feeling fine a couple of days ago, remember in Monte Vista? But this chemo was scheduled ahead of time and now I feel like shit.”

His coughing fit took a minute to get under control. “You see, Ms. Trieri, I’m dying. It started with AIDS, which I got in Africa some years ago, long before it became so common an ailment. Then, possibly because my immune system was so depleted, I developed testicular cancer. They operated, both sides, hence my pseudonym, but it had metastasized. It’s now in my lymph system and it comes and goes. This latest round of chemo is supposed to make it go, but I’m not terribly optimistic.” He stopped to breathe and cough.

I took a deep breath. “I’m very sorry to hear this, Mr. von Stier, very sorry. I guess it explains some things, though. But how do you know about Endsley?”

“He’s one of six people with prices on their heads. Yes, six. The missing one, a fellow named Jeffers, was killed ten years ago overseas. He’s the one your Mr. Peterson couldn’t find. I had my computer with me in the hospital and watched Mr. Peterson’s work, just as I watched it before when he was uncovering my background. He’s quite talented, by the way. Anyway, because I’m dying, and because it was overseas, I think I’m comfortable with telling you that I killed him—Jeffers I mean. The other five, of course, were here in southwestern Colorado, and someone has killed four of them. I said it before, and I’ll say it again, that someone is not I. And I don’t know who it is, but I must say I’m filled with admiration. Whoever it is, is very good. If Endsley’s disappeared, I’d guess that you’ll find his head on a fencepost somewhere, along about tomorrow morning.”

“Because you know so much about all this, you must be in a position to help us find the killer.”

“Maybe. Possibly. But why would I be motivated to do so? As far as I’m concerned, the killer is doing the world a favor. If you know the story behind this whole thing, and if you’ve discovered anything about the character of these individuals, some part of you must believe this also.”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe, Mr. von Stier. As an officer of the law, it’s my duty to apprehend this killer. And if you believe in a civilization of laws, if you benefit from living within such a civilization, it’s your ethical duty to assist, if you have relevant knowledge.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Trieri, I suggest you refrain from entering into a philosophical debate on the nature of ethics with me. You’re outgunned.” He managed a weak smile. “I’m afraid I’m fading. I need rest. But I’ll give some thought to how I might help your investigation a little. You know where to find me.”

* * *

Fifteen

“No suspect, I guess, is better than the wrong one. But it’s frustrating when you have to start over.” I was feeling, well, frustrated.

Candice and I were on our way back to Durango, at a somewhat more responsible speed.

“True, but we’re not quite starting over. This business of a conspiracy among the women might lead to something.”

“Maybe. But they’ve become martyrs in the eyes of the public. The papers are treating them as if they’re the victims, more so than they’re treating the dead guys. We’re not going to be able to question them, let alone arrest them, without risking extremely bad publicity. Hell, even with compelling evidence, the publicity will be unbelievable.” I was staring at the scenery zipping by, trying not to be too glum.

“That’s for sure. And we’re not going to find evidence that the women are doing the murders, I’m certain, because they’re not. At worst, they’re passive conspirators, I bet, staying out of the way and keeping quiet about what they know.” At normal speeds, she drove one-handed, I noticed.

“And if they’d just tell us what they know, that’s all we need for them to do. But I expect that’s not in the cards. But we really need help on this one, now that von Stier’s out of the picture.”

“Maybe we can get him to help. He must know something. Sheriff Grange had his phone plugged into a hands-free speaker, so I listened to your conversation with von Stier.” She looked as if she had been caught eavesdropping.

“So you must have heard him scoff at the notion of ethical duty. But maybe if he thinks about it, he’ll come around.”

“Actually, I heard him tell you that you weren’t a worthy debating opponent, in terms of discussing ethics. And that he is going to think about it.”

“You’re right, that’s what he said. Didn’t really hurt my feelings, because he’s right. I’m a lousy debater, and I really don’t know much about ethics, in a formal sense at least, anyway.” I felt a light bulb go on in my head. “But I know someone who does, and maybe he can debate, too.”

“Huh?”

“A guy at the university. I’ll call him as soon as we get back into cell-phone range.” We were still east of Bayfield, in a coverage shadow.

“Want me to speed up?” She looked eager.

We had been motoring along at just above the speed of the traffic, passing people whenever there was an opportunity, without our lights. The trouble with using a marked State Patrol car is that everyone

slows way down when you come up behind them, as if driving ten miles per hour under the speed limit makes up for exceeding it when the cops aren't around. Go figure.

"Don't worry too much about it. We'll get there. Tell me about what you and Derek have learned about these chat rooms."

"We found a zillion of them, nation-wide, and several in the region. So we had to decide how to narrow the search. Derek mentioned that one of the Burma Shave poems, I think the fourth one, was originally published on a web site run by some women's group at Frémont State. So that suggests that the killer has been reading that site. How else would he know about that poem?" She punched the Mustang around an RV-boat combination doing fifteen under the speed limit, and we sped away from it.

"I know the one. It's the 'womyn-with-a-y' site, the Womyn's Defense League, WDL, right? You know what they call it up on the campus? Waddle." I watched her puzzle it out and break into laughter.

"'Waddle,' eh? That's great. I'll remember it. But, yeah, that's the one, and they have several chat rooms, including a members' only one. I signed up for it, but there's a waiting period between signing up and joining in. Something about how the webmaster has to approve the login."

"There ought to be a way to get around that in our case, but it would mean some kind of official thing, a search warrant, maybe. And the person who runs Waddle is just a tad belligerent. I'm sure she'll insist on protecting her clientele. Did you sign up under your own name?"

"I thought about a pseudonym, but I decided to be myself and join as a domestic violence expert. They have a 'why are you interested' question on the form. Say, that reminds me. What did von Stier mean about his pseudonym, anyway? When he was talking about his cancer?"

"Huh? Oh, I know what you mean. Von Stier isn't his real name. He's really Christopher St. James, and he's hiding from a dangerous past using a pseudonym, pretending to be descended from German nobility while he deals in antique armor. And I think that the word 'steer' is the same in English and German, except for the spelling." I watched as she puzzled this out and enlightenment dawned.

"Ohhh, I guess I see. Ouch. Geez. I'm sorry I asked."

"Yeah, he said it so fast that it went right by me, and I figured it out a little later. Made me wince. Must be that the guy has a dark sense of humor."

"With AIDS and spreading cancer, I guess he'd have to just to get along. He said he killed someone?"

"Apparently, there were six people involved in this incident in Kuwait, and five of them are, or were, here in southwestern Colorado. Von Stier said he killed the sixth, a guy named Jeffers, a decade ago, overseas. Which makes me wonder if he moved here to go after the other five, given that all of them have had prices on their heads."

"But someone beat him to it, looks like. How does that work, anyway? Some guy in Kuwait puts up 'wanted: dead or alive' posters, or what?" She was shaking her head.

"Must be some kind of word-of-mouth, maybe in the mercenary community, such as it is. Von Stier is plugged in with that bunch. Hmm. I suppose that means the perp might be, too."

My phone beeped, telling me that it was awake. We were coming into Bayfield.

It was time to call Dino.

* * *

Having a personal driver was a new experience for me, and I was a little unclear on the concept. Even though I'd done just fine in the hotel in Alamosa the night before, I had this overwhelming urge to have Candice stay at our house. It just didn't seem right for her to have to stay in a motel. But it occurred to me that she'd probably be more comfortable in commercial lodging than at my house, with both her boss and a strange man wandering around at all hours. I realized that I sure would.

So I compromised by asking her to come to dinner—I'd been on the road so much that I wanted to put on an apron and actually cook something, make a real meal myself, from scratch. And I pulled strings and got her a room at the General Palmer Hotel downtown. That expense would give the CBI accountants fits, but I didn't care.

Earlier, my call to Dino Papandrea had lasted about as long as it took for us to roll into town. Fortunately, he had arranged his fall teaching schedule so that all of his courses were Monday-Wednesday and Tuesday-Thursday extended classes, and his Fridays were free. He was more than happy to do a little errand for me, and he was also coming to dinner so we could discuss the details.

At my CBI office, Derek was working hard to come up to speed on everything he could get to on the WDL web site, and he had even enlisted Sally Brigman for the task. He had tentatively identified two of the women we were interested in from their use of the public chat rooms, available for the world to see. "Angus-Girl" and "LlamaLady" participated in all sorts of discussions, and they were both designated as "senior members" because of the large numbers of contributions they had made. But the topics discussed in the public chat rooms were decidedly generic. Derek was delighted when Candice arrived, because it was possible that her membership login would have been approved. When I sent her off to check in at the hotel and change into civvies for dinner, he positively sulked.

"She'll be right back, Derek, don't worry. She has to take me home later, and she deserves a shower, after the way she drove me over to Pagosa Springs. Besides, I need to brief you and Rod Andersen on what happened over there. Von Stier isn't on our suspect list any more, with or without alibis. I take it that no one in Chaffee County has seen anything of Roland Endsley?"

"Not a thing, not even his vehicle. And he drives a very distinctive pickup truck, all tricked out with lights and big mirrors and stuff, one of those 'dualies,' the kind with big rear fender flares and dual wheels on the back. We found that out from one of the feed stores on his route."

"So he actually does have a sales route that includes the Arkansas Valley?"

"Right. And the guy I talked to in Buena Vista seemed to suggest that Endsley also has a honey there. But he didn't know who it might be." He shrugged.

"That would fit the profile. Maybe his pickup is in her garage, or something."

"Or else off on some obscure back road somewhere, parked."

It was time for the afternoon conference call. I felt fortunate to be able to report some progress twice a day, even if it was only in the form of eliminating suspects. Naturally, Rod wanted more.

"This von Stier guy must know something. Can't we put some heat on him?"

"I've got that all worked out, Rod. It'll happen tomorrow. I'm betting he cooperates with us. And you're right, he probably does know something."

That seemed to satisfy him. But the idea that there would most likely be another head on a post in the morning didn't make him happy at all, even though I think he was expecting it, too.

After letting Rod rake Derek and me over the coals for a while, we were finally able to escape. I think that Rod needed the outlet more than anything, so we just took the abuse.

As soon as we disconnected, Sally rushed into my office with a note. "He said it's triple urgent."

It was from the Chaffee County Sheriff, so it was urgent indeed. I called right back.

“Chaffee County Sheriff, Danielle speaking.”

“Danielle, this is Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. The sheriff called me a few minutes ago with something urgent.”

“I’ll see if he’s available.” And she put me on hold, the kind that plays really, really annoying music. I think I heard “Lawrence Welk plays Barry Manilow,” or some such thing, for about three minutes.

“This is Herm Schneider. Ms. Trieri? Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m trying to deal with a hysterical young woman here.”

“Sheriff, it must be that you’re calling me with some information about Roland Endsley. I can’t imagine any other reason.”

“That’s exactly right. See, here’s the deal. This young woman, her name is Babette Thurl, everybody calls her Babs, she came to us with a missing persons report. It seems that Roland Endsley is missing. Of course, we knew that. But, see, it’s complicated. Endsley and Babs have a sort of standing arrangement. Whenever he comes into town, he pulls his pickup into her garage, and then he goes next door to the bar, the College Peaks Saloon, to wait for her to get off work at the prison. She works in the office there. When she gets off work, they, well, I reckon they have dinner or something.”

“Probably ‘something.’” I couldn’t resist.

“Yeah, well, I reckon so. Anyway, see, last night he did his usual thing, put the pickup in her garage. But when she looked for him in the bar, he wasn’t there. And he hasn’t turned up. The bartender says he left at about five with a blonde, a real looker he’d never seen before. They were being real chummy, he said.”

“And this Babs person is hysterical because her two-timing boyfriend three-timed her? Endsley’s got a wife in Fort Garland, you know.”

“Really? No, I didn’t know. Wonder if Babs does. Anyway, Babs is hysterical because the pickup’s in her garage and she doesn’t have the key to it, the truck, I mean. Y’see, her husband is due back later this evening, around nine, she says. Seems that every week he goes out of town to Denver, and that’s when Endsley comes to see her. ’Course, if her husband finds that pickup in the garage, I reckon there’ll be some issues.”

“Hmm. I wonder whose garage he parks in when he’s in Denver. Oh, never mind. Sheriff, do you have a good fingerprint tech?”

“Sure do. Used to work in Philadelphia. Moved here for the outdoors and so on, but he’s the best.”

“Tell you what. Have him dust the crap out of that pickup in Babs’ garage, then you can get it towed out of there in time for her husband to get home. We wouldn’t want to upset her little world any more than necessary, would we?”

“Not sure I really care that much about her little world, but that’s a good plan. Maybe it’ll shut her up. That’s my main concern just now.”

“And, just to be clear, you don’t have any additional information about Roland Endsley beyond his voluntarily leaving the bar, you said it was the College Peaks Saloon, with a good-looking blonde at about five yesterday.”

“Right.”

“Is there some way to get more of a description from the bartender? An artist’s sketch, maybe? Soon, before the bartender’s memory gets fuzzier? This could be the key to the Burma Shave Murders, and if your department provides that key, you’ll be getting lots of very good press, I promise.”

“I can do better than a sketch. We got some federal grant money, and one of the things we bought is one of those new computer gizmos that constructs faces from parts on disk. Uh, or something like that.”

“Outstanding. Sheriff, thank you. I’d come up there and shake your hand tonight, but it’d just be too late by the time I got there. Don’t want to keep you up. I’ll be looking for the fingerprint report and the computer mockup of the blonde.”

“Anything I can do to help, I will. This business of heads on fence posts is just not something we can put up with.”

“You’ve got that right. Thanks again, sheriff. I’ll be seeing you some day, I’m sure.”

Derek was looking at me, so I looked back and said “Bingo.”

* * *

It looked for all the world as if Roland Endsley was going to be Burma Shave victim number five, and there didn’t seem to be anything we could do to prevent it. But it was looking more and more as if we *would* be able to do something to catch the killer.

The fingerprints and the computer mockup would take some hours to get to us, and it turned out that Candice’s chat room membership on the WDL site wasn’t activated when she returned to pick me up. There didn’t seem to be anything else we could do, so I sent Derek and Sally home, and Candice and I headed for the grocery store.

I decided I would make an old Trieri family favorite, a variation on the dinner Hal had cooked for me the week before, sausages and peppers, with a side of pasta and *my* special red sauce, which for certain didn’t come from a jar. Unlike the sausages in red sauce that Hal had made me, this version of essentially the same ingredients keeps the flavors separated, more distinct.

I remembered seeing Candice put away the big steak the night before, and I also how Dino likes to eat. So at the store I got two packages of sweet Italian sausages; bell peppers in red, green, and yellow, three each; a dozen Roma tomatoes; a package of fresh linguini; and a loaf of Italian bread. The sausages would get grilled to medium rare, cut into bite-sized pieces, and sautéed with the chopped-up peppers until everything browned. The Roma tomatoes would get a magic wand waved over them to turn them into my sauce. Or at least that’s what I tell Hal.

I sent Candice off to the bakery with instructions to find us some dessert.

Candice and I got home shortly before I’d asked Dino to come by—this was an accident related to our staying later at the office than I’d intended. But it worked out well, because I put him to work grilling the sausages. Of course, he first had to figure out how to work Hal’s grill, but with the help of Candice and a bottle of Beck’s, this turned out to be a snap.

And something else happened that I hadn’t intended. By the time that Dino brought in the medium-rare sausages—I told him to rescue them before they stopped spitting—he and Candice were stealing little glances at one another.

Actually, I suppose I should have seen it coming. Candice had changed from her uniform into jeans, wonderfully tight jeans that I knew Hal was going to stare at, let alone Dino, and one of those western blouses with lace around a scoop neck. When I said she was tiny, all I was referring to was her stature, and that neckline was going to be a real distraction, I could tell.

And I'd seen Dino in his biker clothes and his chauffeur's uniform, but never dressed like a normal person. He's a big guy, but there's no fat on him, and he carries clothes like a fashion model. Plus, he'd shaved and had his hair cut. The big lug actually looked delicious.

First it was Steve Phillips and Belinda Edwards, now it was beginning to look like Candice and Dino. Just call me Annette the Matchmaker. Maybe I'll get cards printed up.

Hal got home about the time that everything was coming together. I'd called him earlier to warn him about a real dinner with company, so he knew what to expect when he walked in the door. After introductions, all I had to do was to put the pasta in the boiling water and dress the salad. I had Hal open the Zinfandel I'd chosen, and a few minutes later we sat down to eat.

Our guests were nervous. Candice, I think, was in awe of the guy I was married to, because of our conversations in the car, and, of course, I was her boss's boss, in some sense. And Dino, a mere first-year instructor, was having dinner with an honest-to-god *dean*.

"Dino, I've heard reports that you got the highest-ever student evaluations for your teaching this summer. Congratulations, and what's your secret, anyway?" I couldn't tell if Hal asked this as a way to get Dino loosened up or for Candice's benefit. He, too, had noticed their attraction to one another right away.

"Uh, well, uh, sir, I'm thinking it might have been a sort of fluke, because of the novelty. See, I doubt that many of the students in my classes have ever been taught philosophy by an outlaw biker. Or, for that matter, anything else." Dino had a weak smile stuck on his face.

Hal, I could tell, was going to play a little.

"Hmm. I see. So, what you're saying is that we administrators should buy everyone on the faculty a Harley and require them not to shave?" He finished this with a grin and wink at Candice, but Dino didn't see it.

"Uh, well, of course, then it wouldn't be a novelty, would it, sir?"

"Oh, man, Dino. If you're going to call me 'sir,' I'm going to feel guilty for goofing you. Please, call me 'Hal'. But you're right. I'm betting that your evaluations weren't all based on novelty, but it probably didn't hurt, either. And if everyone did it, it wouldn't be novelty. Meaning that everyone needs to invent their own novelty to succeed like you have. And if you use the words 'new and fresh approach' instead of 'novelty,' this begins to make real sense."

"Well, s...uh, Hal, I expect part of it is also appropriate preparation. In fact, I think I was probably over-prepared for those summer classes. They were my first ones, and I was scared I wouldn't be able to answer some question or other. I'm thinking that the ability to say 'Gee, I don't know, but I'll look it up' with confidence is something you learn with experience. And saying that gives the students confidence to ask questions. A kind of 'stump the teacher' thing, which is good. I think."

"So your plan is to get even better." Hal looked at me. "Why didn't I hire this guy? Oh, that's right, I don't have a philosophy department. Oh, well."

Candice watched this exchange with something resembling awe, and I could tell she was falling for Dino in a big way.

Dino turned to me. "Annette, what's this errand you want me to run tomorrow? I'm glad to do it, but you didn't describe it very well."

"Nothing much. Just run over to Pagosa Springs and engage in a debate on ethics with a guy I know." I smiled. "I'm goofing a little, too, but that's really what it comes down to."

"You mean, like, a formal debate in front of an audience?"

“No, no, just a conversation. See, there’s a guy there who probably has information we need about a big case, this Burma Shave thing. And I tried to appeal to him by saying that because he lives in a civilized society, he’s bound ethically to help me by providing information. But he told me that I was out-gunned in an ethics debate with him, and I think he’s probably right. On the other hand, I bet you wouldn’t be. The thing is, I think you’d probably be interested to meet him, especially to see his collection. He’s an antique armor dealer, swords and all sorts of stuff like that.”

“You must mean Kristof von Stier. We’ve known each other for a couple of years, I guess. You’re right, he’s an interesting guy.”

My jaw almost dropped into the spaghetti on my plate. “How in the world do you know him?”

“He’s an antiques dealer. I used to work for an antiques dealer, remember?” He grinned. “One thing I can say is that von Stier’s merchandise is legitimate, unlike my former employer’s. So, I can probably persuade von Stier to tell you what he knows without much of a debate. But if he wants to duke it out over ethics, I’m your man!” He thumped a fist on the table, gently.

“Um, Annette, if he’s going over to Pagosa Springs on police business, well, perhaps I should drive him over and observe the discussion. It might be a good idea to have someone official taking notes, you know?” Candice, I was certain, had other motives besides the police business, but the idea did have merit.

“Dino, would a uniformed officer get in your way with von Stier?”

“Hmm. Maybe. But a plain-clothes one wouldn’t. And she’s right, an observer would be helpful, because I could concentrate on the discussion instead of remembering important things he might say. And I probably wouldn’t know what’s important anyway.”

Dino’s motives probably go beyond that, too, I thought.

“Hmm.” I felt as if I had to render a Solomon-like decision. “If you’re driving the Mustang, Candice, you need to be in uniform. But if you take another vehicle, you’ve got some flexibility, and you can go plain-clothes. On the other hand, if you go over on Dino’s bike, you’d better *not* be in uniform. I mean, what would John Q. Public say if he saw a uniformed State Patrol officer on the back of a Harley? Anyway, you guys figure it out. But I think an observer is a good idea.”

I was pretty sure I knew how they’d be traveling to Pagosa Springs together.

* * *

“So, did we make sparks like that when we first met?”

Hal and I were finishing up the kitchen. Candice and Dino had mysteriously become tired at just the same time and pointed out they had a big day tomorrow, etc., etc. Strangely, the Mustang and the Harley roared off in the same direction.

“Sure. Don’t you remember that pizza we ate together in your office, that first day, when I came up to the campus to start the investigation of the Stiller murder?”

“Absolutely. Barbequed chicken. The time you were so confused by Alice and how she was able to anticipate our every need.”

“Right. If I’m not mistaken, we’re still quite good at making sparks in your office.” I batted my eyelashes as innocently as I could manage.

“Sparks? I’d call that a bonfire. Whew! But I sure had a good afternoon. Anyway, what was this ‘errand’ business? The thing with Candice going is clearly bogus, but you really do want Dino to do something, right?”

“Right. And the thing with Candice is probably about ninety percent bogus, the other ten being real. What’s happening is that von Stier’s playing coy. He was my number-one suspect until today. Now he’s out of the picture. But he knows things that I need to hear, and maybe Dino will be able to weasel those things out of him. I didn’t know that they were acquainted—maybe that’ll help.”

“So, tomorrow’s Friday.”

“Yep. And we’re anticipating another head on a post somewhere, probably farther east than the others. This guy was last seen in Buena Vista. And we got a description of who he disappeared with. A first. Maybe a major break.”

“How did the telephone records searches go?”

“Pretty well. There’s been some contact among the women.” I told him about the chain of post-killing calls and our current focus on the WDL chat rooms.

“You know, it’s interesting. The smart money on campus is on Madge’s giving up on Waddle and moving in with Bucky. At least that’s what Alice told me this afternoon. But about the chat room thing. I can probably see what’s there, if you need me to. I mean, after our other little computer-related adventures, John’s delegated me authority for monitoring suspicious activities. I farm most of it out, but I have broad computer authorities for all, and I mean all, campus machines.”

“So you can log in to the chat rooms and see what’s been talked about?”

“In a back-door sort of way. See, everything they have is in files, and I can see the files. Not by using their usual user interface, where there are lists of topics, which chat rooms call ‘threads,’ with responses nicely laid out and so on. But if they’ve archived it, I can see it. Do you remember the Waddle computer’s address?”

“I think it was just w-d-l-dot-fremontstate-dot-edu. And the chat room was a link on that page.” I was having trouble grasping the implications of this conversation.

“Thanks to the after-dinner sleepiness of our guests, or horniness or whatever, it’s still early. Want to see what we can find?”

It didn’t take me long to grasp those elusive implications. Hal logged into a server on the campus through his machine in the study using some kind of special secure linking program. Then he started jumping around on the other campus servers until he found a list he was looking for. That told him the real computer name of the WDL server. The next thing I knew, we were looking at a directory listing of the members-only chat-room archive.

“Hal, are you sure this is legal to be doing? This is a members-only directory.”

“We’ve been over this before. You’re the ultimate law-enforcement authority for the campus, right? At least when Rod Andersen isn’t in town. The campus policy, and it’s clearly stated and people sign paperwork agreeing to it, is that campus systems are for official university use only and that they’re subject to inspection at any time by appropriate authorities. I’ve got a letter in my desk at work from John naming me as one of those authorities. You’ve got authority over him. This particular use by Waddle of a campus system is indeed university business, so they’re generally clean. But they’re still subject to inspection. We have reason to believe that there is information on this system pertinent to your investigation of the Burma Shave Murders. That’s certainly reason enough to do some inspecting.”

“OK, OK. But it feels a little unethical.”

“I guess we need Dino to be here to tell us whether it is or not. But I expect he’s busy just now, gazing into the large, dark brown eyes of a little cop we know. From my perspective, whatever we see that isn’t pertinent to your investigation goes in one eye and out the other, so to speak. We just forget we’ve seen the irrelevant stuff. Right?”

“Right. I guess. Oh, just go, let’s do it.”

So we spent the better part of three hours working our way through the WDL chat room archives, just what Derek wanted to be doing all day but couldn’t.

There we found LlamaLady and Angus-Girl, and their discussions with Indigo, Shetland, Equus, and someone we couldn’t readily identify, Redeemer. A lot of it was innocent support-group talk. Some of it seemed to be in a kind of code, in which certain words appeared to be substituted for what was really being talked about, but there was reference to “we’re all in this together” and discussions of meetings. And some of it was damning. LlamaLady, for example, on the day that Martin Robinson’s head was found, put up an announcement that read simply “I’m free!!!” That could be considered innocent enough, but in the ensuing discussion, she also mentioned to the others that they would “see how freedom feels soon.”

Prior knowledge of a crime among a group of people is generally considered by the courts to be *prima facie* evidence of conspiracy, a crime in itself. And conspiracy with respect to a capital crime is a capital crime in itself.

I didn’t sleep very well Thursday night.

* * *

Sixteen

On Friday morning, Hal reassured me over and over that I looked fine, beautiful, even. But I had the unshakeable notion that I looked as bad as I felt, which was terrible.

It was partly that I’d slept badly and partly, I’m sure, the anticipation of what was going to hit the fan and get sprayed all over me.

Friday morning, head-on-a-post morning.

I went in to the office on my usual schedule, beating everyone else by a half hour or so. Even though I knew it was just postponing the inevitable, I was relieved that there were no urgent phone messages or faxes. What email there was looked like the kind of thing I could ignore for a while.

Thinking he would probably be in early, I called Rod Andersen in Denver. At least I could tell him about our computer search and the conspiracy we uncovered.

“Andersen, CBI.” He had given me his direct number for calls at odd hours.

“Morning, Rod. I don’t know how it looks from where you’re sitting, but it isn’t looking particularly good from here.”

“That seems like a perceptive assessment, Annette. Even my view of the Front Range is gloomy today. Any news of interest?”

“Nothing exciting this morning. Yet. I fully expect the top part of Roland Endsley to turn up somewhere today, though. And there are some developments you should hear, things that happened after

we talked yesterday afternoon. I'm sure the Governor will be calling you, and he may need to hear this." I filled him in about the call from Sheriff Schneider in Buena Vista and our expectation of a picture of the woman Endsley was last seen with. After that I talked with him at length about the chat-room files.

"So, you're telling me we have solid evidence of conspiracy to murder?" He sounded as if his next directive would be to arrest them all.

"Yes, in the sense that they seem to have known in advance that these things were going to happen. Not in the sense that they were doing it, however. And I think we need to be very, very careful here, Rod. We still don't know who the killer is. It may be this 'Redeemer' person in the chat room, but maybe not. Even if it is, we don't know that person's identity. And if we arrest all of these women without arresting the killer, we're really going to get shredded by the media, torn to pieces. The women have become celebrity victims. We simply have to arrest the killer first."

"I understand. Furthermore, to amplify what you just said, arresting the women now would tip off the killer that we're getting close, and that could mean we'd never catch him. So if they don't know how close we are, we should just let things be. But. And I want to emphasize this. But we need to get them eventually. Maybe the first one, the Scharmatz woman, maybe she didn't really know what was going to happen. But all of the others had to know that their husbands, or father or boyfriend or whatever, that he was going to be decapitated and have his head displayed on a post. And they went along with it. That's simply unacceptable in a civilized society. We've got to prosecute them."

"I think so, too, Rod. But prosecuting them is ultimately going to have to be the decision of the State Attorney General. And if he decides not to prosecute, for political or whatever reason, I think we should think twice about arresting them. In fact, I think we should get the Governor and the AG to sign on to prosecution before any arrests. Otherwise, we take the fall. You've been reading the papers, I'm sure. These women are heroes. There's a good chance that the AG will duck the whole conspiracy thing, even if it's handed to him on a silver platter."

There was a long pause.

"Annette, when I hired you last spring, I knew I was getting someone good. And you proved it with the Schoenfield case. And you're proving it now. And, I've got to say, it pisses me off that you're right. Don't get me wrong—I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at politics and the media." He paused and took a deep breath. "OK. What we do is to get the whole silver platter thing together and hand it to them. Then it's their decision whether to proceed."

"I think that's the wise approach, Rod. But, look, I don't want to confuse this with apprehending the killer. We find out who that is, we make an arrest. Right?"

"Absolutely. And I hope the son-of-a-bitch fries."

"With the murder-for-hire angle, there's a very good chance of that."

"Good. So, now what?"

"So, I still feel like shit, boss, and I think all we can do is to wait for the other shoe to drop. When I hear something, I'll call right away."

Derek must have been watching the lights on the phone, because the minute I disconnected he walked into my office.

"Sorry, Annette, but I overheard you say that you don't feel so hot, so to speak. Me, too. I didn't sleep very well last night. I think it's going to be a long day. Was that Rod Andersen? I mean, is the conference call over? Did I miss anything?"

I pushed a large pile of paper across my desk at him.

“Here. A present. Hal and I generated it last night. It’s the WDL chat room archive files. There’s some interesting stuff highlighted. It seems that Hal has authority to look on any and all university computers whenever he’s got a good excuse to. The telephone calls you found were just such an excuse. And I didn’t sleep either. The other shoe hasn’t dropped. Yet.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to concentrate on reading this, Annette. I’m not really awake, and there’s this thing hanging out there. That other shoe. What’s in this stuff?”

“Evidence of conspiracy to murder. They knew in advance what was going to happen, they went along with it. There’s some stuff that looks as if it could be coded, and if we decode it, it’ll probably show more, maybe even how they helped somehow. It’s depressing, I’ll say that.”

“Any indications of who the killer is?”

“Probably one of the people highlighted, ‘Redeemer’ is the login. But who it is, we don’t know. Now, here’s the deal. Rod and I discussed this. We’re going to put together as much of a case as we can make in a nice, neat package. When it’s ready, we’re going to give it to the AG to decide what to do. It’s a political hot potato, because these women are media darlings, heroes. We make the case, we let the politicians decide what to do. Uh, this is just the women. The killer, we go after all out.”

“Ah, yes. Don’tcha just love this job, Annette?”

I had to smile. “The city politics was sometimes worse, actually. The PD would get some big-shot in its sights and the mayor or someone on the council would call us off. I remember that vice once had this SOB nailed for soliciting a minor for prostitution, aggressive soliciting of a thirteen-year-old girl, Derek! And the city fathers decided that this asshole was too important in the scheme of things to go down. So it’s all in a day’s work, I guess.”

“Say, I know. While we wait for the other shoe to drop, how about some really good coffee. Starbucks, say?”

“I’ve got to stay here. But if you want to make a Starbucks run, I hereby authorize you to use an official vehicle. Bring back a couple gallons.” I found my purse and handed him a twenty.

“Sorry, Annette. This’ll only buy a pint of Starbucks.” He laughed, and then I did, too. The first of the day.

* * *

For some reason, my entire staff wasn’t in much better shape than either Derek or I. No one had slept well. Everyone was on edge. I had no idea that everyone else was as tuned into the other shoe dropping as I was.

When there was a tapping on my door, I thought Derek was back with the coffee, so I got up and opened it in case he had his hands full.

But it was Candice. Her usually assertive posture and demeanor had regressed to about tenth-grade level—she looked like a shy, scared teenager.

“Annette? Can I come in and talk?”

Oh, no, I thought. Not trouble with Dino already.

“Absolutely, Candice. And I’ll shut the door. But I’m going to tell Sally to have Derek interrupt us when he comes back. He’s on a major Starbucks run, and I need some, OK?”

“Oh, sure, Annette. And, if this is a bad time…”

“Not at all. We’re all sort of waiting to hear the Friday morning news, if you know what I mean. And any diversion from waiting is welcome. What’s up?”

“I’m supposed to go with Dino to Pagosa Springs this morning, remember? Uh, we decided to go on his bike. The plain-clothes approach.”

My suspicions of the night before were borne out—although her definition of “plain clothes” was a little different from mine. It made her outfit of the evening before look demure. Dino, I was sure, was going to delight in having this little honey snuggled up to his back, arms around him all the way to Pagosa.

“Sure I remember. And if he wears his usual biker outfit, you’ll fit right in with him. You go, girl!” I really didn’t know what else to do than encourage her.

“Annette, I don’t know what to do. I mean, last night, after we left your place, Dino and I went for a drink and talked about how to make today work. And he was the perfect gentleman, mostly business, but also nice as you can imagine. A delightful conversationalist. Didn’t come anywhere near to hitting on me or anything. But, really, uh, this is embarrassing...” She stopped and took a deep breath. “Really, all I wanted to do was to rip all his clothes off and ravish him. I came this close to asking him up to my room. I mean, I never felt this way before. What’s wrong with me?”

Ah, yes, I thought, the perils of twenty-something hormones. How very nice to have all that way behind me. Of course, yesterday in Hal’s office was something completely different, wasn’t it?

“Candice, we very have different backgrounds, you and I, and I don’t want to offend you. So I apologize in advance if I do. But as much as I hate to say it this way, there’s nothing wrong with you that a good roll in the hay won’t cure. Sorry, but it’s true.”

She looked stunned. “Oh. Thanks. I guess. Um, I’ve got to go...” And she left in a daze.

A few minutes later my phone rang.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“This is Weathers, of natural sciences, also of the lonely hearts advice club. Babe, have you seen your driver this morning?”

“She just left.”

“Hmm. Well, her driver for today, the big philosophical guy, was just here. He’s got it bad for her.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Said he felt dumb as dirt asking my advice, but he didn’t know who else to turn to. Wanted to know whether it was appropriate to ask her out, for Christ’s sake.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I wanted to tell him just to jump her bones, gently, and see what happens, but that didn’t seem appropriate, coming from a dean and all. So I told him that they’d probably be having lunch together anyway and why not make that into a nice date. I suggested that maybe it could lead to dinner and a movie.”

“Oh. That sounds like good advice to me. But that’s not what I told her.”

“She was asking about the same thing? Oh, man. Young love in action. So, what did you tell her.”

“That she should jump his bones.”

He started laughing. “What!?”

“Hey, she said she had this overwhelming urge last night to rip his clothes off and ravish him, so I said, in essence, that that’s what she should do.”

He was laughing harder, which got me started, the second time that day. It felt good.

* * *

Derek’s idea for a coffee run was brilliant. The stuff we usually have around the office is grim, industrial strength high-test, and the Starbucks was a treat. It gave us all a reason to get together and laugh about our collective lack of sleep and our unease, which made us all feel better. I gave everyone a little pep talk about our progress and how, even though we expected another victim to turn up, we also expected to be able to catch the killer based on new information that continued to emerge.

By the time we all had our mugs topped off and dispersed to our separate offices, there was a pile of paper in the fax machine. Sally handed it to me, and I carried it into Derek’s office. Despite his earlier reservations, he was plowing through the pile of computer printout that Hal and I had generated the night before.

“Find anything in there yet?”

He looked up at me. “About what you were saying. Here’s something that you didn’t highlight—a discussion of investment strategies for financial independence. It’s dated a little over four weeks ago, just after the Scharmatz murder. ‘Shetland,’ which I guess must be Bonnie Scharmatz, asked about tax shelters for her insurance money and all the others joined in. As if they were each expecting a financial windfall. Do you suppose the killer is sharing the bounties with them?”

I nodded. “Good question. But even if he’s not, an expectation of a windfall adds to the case for prior knowledge and conspiracy. When I next talk to von Stier, I’ll ask him what the bounties are. I bet he knows. And maybe the killer isn’t greedy, who knows? One thing we can do is put together a case for getting at bank records. If the killer is part of von Stier’s international mercenary community, he’s probably using a bank in the Caymans or something. But these women are probably not that sophisticated. And if we find big deposits in their accounts, that would be heavy-duty. At some point, even the politicians won’t be able to sweep it under the rug.”

“Better yet, if there’s enough of this, especially money, the papers will feel betrayed. They’ll realize that the people they’ve made into heroes and martyrs are part of this murder-for-hire business, and they’ll turn on them. At that point, the politicians will cave, and we’ll have a case.” He grinned.

“Speaking of cases, we got the stuff from Chaffee County. Just came in on the fax. I haven’t looked at it yet.” I set the new pile of paper on his desk and pulled up a side chair. “Hmm. Fingerprint reports from the pickup truck in Babs’ garage.”

“Who?” Derek looked confused, so I had to explain the cast of characters in the Buena Vista soap opera for him. I’d provided only a brief sketch yesterday.

“Wait a minute. Let’s see if I understand this. We’ve got someone named Babs Thurl, whose old man travels to Denver every week, and when he’s gone our guy Endsley puts his pickup in her garage, both literally and figuratively, if you know what I mean, nudge, nudge, wink, wink. But Endsley disappears, leaving his pickup, I mean his truck, in the garage and now Mr. Thurl is coming home to Babs. So Babs, seeing a train wreck about to happen, goes to the cops, who dust the pickup for prints and question the bartender who last saw Endsley. And this is how we break this case? Because of a small-town soap opera? Christ. I think I need a drink.” He was shaking his head.

“Don’tcha just love this job, Derek?”

The fingerprint reports were not very useful. Endsley, it appeared, took enough pride in his truck that he kept it sparkling clean, and most of the prints were from one person, presumably him. This was borne out when Derek rummaged around on his computer and came up with an image of Endsley's prints from his military records, and they matched those from the truck. There were also two other discernable individuals' prints, a whole hand on the dashboard and on the passenger window, and some partials from the driver's side outside door handle. Both of these were smaller, and the notation "female?" was hand-written on the images.

"Probably his wife on the dash and the window, and probably our friend Babs on the handle. I bet she opened the door to look for a key, before she went to the sheriff." Derek looked up at me. "I'll call up there and verify Endsley's prints for them. And I'll see if they've submitted these others to the NCIC. What's that?"

I was looking at a picture, taken with a digital camera and electronically turned into fax material, of a little box. There was a ruler in the picture, which showed the box to be about an inch square, too small to be one of those hidden-key boxes people use. Typewritten on the page was "Magnetized, stuck to frame inside front bumper. No prints. Homing device?" I handed it to Derek.

"Hmm. Could this be from the killer? He'd have to know Endsley's movements to know where to find him, after all. And Endsley moves around a lot, unlike the other victims. When I call them about the prints, I'll ask if they've taken this apart yet. Now what?"

I was mesmerized by the picture I had in my hand, the final image of the bunch. It was the computer mockup of the person with whom Endsley had left the College Peaks Saloon. It showed the face of a woman in her early 40s, perhaps, maybe late 30s, with shoulder-length blonde hair, parted in the middle, and wide-set, large eyes. Dark eyebrows, but that didn't really mean anything because of makeup. Full lips and a wide mouth. Round face with fairly high cheek-bones, but not the southwestern Hispanic/Indian look. I tried to imagine the face with darker hair, but it still looked European.

The picture held my attention because I recognized it. But the recognition was somewhere down in my subconscious, and I couldn't put a name to the face.

I handed it over to Derek. "I know who this is, but I can't come up with a name."

"Let's make a copy, and you can carry it around and look at it every now and then. Maybe it'll come to you. I don't have a clue." He cocked his head sideways. "Could that be a wig?"

"That wouldn't surprise me at all. The killer gets this babe to flirt with Endsley and invite him somewhere, then abducts him. The babe would be wearing some kind of disguise, that's for sure. Dark glasses in a bar don't work, but a wig is easy."

"It wouldn't surprise me if we have the same mockup software that Chaffee County does, so I'll get them to email me this file. We can play with it ourselves, change the hair. Maybe that'll help you remember who it is. The notation here says the bartender estimates her to be five-five or so, one-fifteen pounds. She was wearing heels, but the five-five takes that into account. Blue eyes, but he said they sparkled." He looked up at me. "What the hell does that mean?"

I shook my head, to clear it as much as anything. That picture was haunting me. "Contacts to disguise eye-color? Good question."

We discussed the matter for a while, and he summarized the things he was going to talk with Chaffee County about—the computer file of the mockup, the fingerprint information, the possible homing device. I made a copy of the mockup to carry around with me.

When we were finished, it was close to eleven, the Starbucks was all gone, and the other shoe still hadn't dropped.

We began to wonder if it was going to.

* * *

We were all getting more jumpy by the hour, so when Sally's phone rang at about 11:15, everyone came to attention. She buzzed my intercom.

"Annette? It's that Mr. von Stier for you."

"Thanks, Sally. Tell everyone else to let their breath out, OK?" I pushed the blinking button. "Mr. von Stier. Good morning."

"Ms. Trieri, good morning to you. It's Friday morning. How are things going, may I ask?"

"We've had no news of additional victims, I'm sure that's what you're asking about. But it's got all of us on edge. What can I do for you this morning? You sound much better, by the way."

"Thank you, and indeed I am. I got that damned thing out of my arm last night, and I managed to keep breakfast down. I feel almost human. And this morning helped even more. I'd like to thank you for sending Dino Papandreau my way. I haven't seen him for, oh, over a year. He used to visit regularly, whenever Raimer Holtzmann came up this way. And I have to say, I always enjoyed Dino's visits more than Raimer's. You deserve congratulations for putting that charlatan away."

"Well, thank you. And it had the side benefit of getting Dino away from him. Maybe he'll realize his potential now."

"Absolutely! I'm just delighted that he's teaching. And delighted that you sent him over to talk with me. And you win. Maybe you'd be outgunned in an ethics debate with me, but I know my limits."

I chuckled. "Does this mean you're going to tell me what you know about all this?"

"I'll tell you what I can, and that's what I know. I've been thinking about it, and there's quite a list."

"May I call in my assistant and turn on the speaker phone? That would be very helpful to me."

"Certainly. Mr. Peterson deserves to be in on this."

Rather than push more buttons and possibly disconnect von Stier, I put my hand over the receiver and hollered. Derek appeared in my doorway almost instantly. I looked carefully, found the speaker button, and poked it.

"Thank you, Mr. von Stier. Derek Peterson is now with us."

"Fine. Now. Where to start?" His voice had taken on that tinny sound of a speaker, but we could hear him easily. Derek was poised to take notes.

"I suppose that the best place is with facts, and then I'll move to speculation. Informed speculation, but speculation nonetheless." He cleared his throat.

"We've talked a little about my background, the information that Mr. Peterson there discovered about me. That was good work, by the way. Information travels by various ways and means, and it was through my connections that I heard about the events in Kuwait involving the six individuals with whom we're concerned."

I leaned forward toward the phone. "You mean our victims plus this guy Jeffers you mentioned?"

"Right. Mr. Jeffers met an untimely demise overseas—he decided, unwisely, to take a little vacation in eastern Asia before returning from active duty. His head and hands were shipped via express delivery,

packed in dry ice, to a certain address in Kuwait City. In return, a rather large sum of money was deposited in an account of mine in Geneva.”

“That’s something I have a question about, Mr. von Stier. Would you know what the bounties on our victims might be?” I looked at Derek and raised my eyebrows. He nodded.

“I understand that it’s increased since my original claim on it ten years ago. The last I heard, it was two million a head.” We heard a chuckle. “Literally. And this brings me to my first point. The client naturally wishes positive identification before payout. Hence my shipment to him. And hence, also, the method of elimination in the cases here in Colorado. You see, with the public display and identification of the victims, with all the attendant publicity, the positive identification is made easily, and the payout is therefore guaranteed.”

“So you’re saying that all this hocus pocus about jerks and so on is just a diversion?”

“Correct. Apparently, whoever is doing this, and, as I mentioned, I’m amazed at the skill involved, whoever is doing this has decided that a believable smoke screen would be to play on the domestic violence angle. The poems are part of it. It’s true that all five victims fit the description, by the way.”

“Should I assume that you moved here to try to claim the bounties for yourself?”

“Hmm. That’s perceptive, but I’ll not comment on it. Suffice it to say that I’ve done nothing, nothing, whatsoever, outside of your laws, Ms. Trieri.” He stopped to cough, and it sounded as if he took a drink of something.

“Now. I’ll move a little in the direction of speculation. I have contacts in the sheriff’s department here, and I managed to see the file on Hollis Henry. The picture of his head was intriguing. Here’s something that you might be interested in. The commission that was advertised included not only the deaths of the individuals, but it also included a bonus for their suffering. It appears that Hollis, and, by extension, the others here in Colorado, suffered somewhat more than Jeffers did. Whoever is doing this is playing it for all it’s worth. And, thinking about this, it suggests to me that these people were abducted and drugged somehow. I just can’t see any other way for it to play out.”

“We’ve been thinking about drugs, also. We’ve been analyzing some tissue samples, and there’s something there. But we haven’t figured out what it is, yet.” I made a note to myself to call Gil Taylor. I’d not talked with him since Wednesday.

“In my previous lives, I’ve been involved in some, shall I say, coercive travel plans, and one thing we used when we weren’t particularly concerned about the subject’s future health was one or another kind of animal tranquilizer. Many have antidotes, should you need the subject to become alert expeditiously. None of them is particularly good for the subject, but sometimes that’s not a concern. Perhaps that would explain your analysis results.”

“Thank you! I’ll pass that along.” I added a comment to my note about Gil.

“Finally, I’ve been giving some thought to the matter of the bodies. Perhaps you can enlighten me, if there’s information that isn’t public. But it appears that all you’ve been finding are heads. No bodies.”

“That’s correct, Mr. von Stier.”

“What about these bodies? If it was only one, I’d not think much of it. One body can be hidden reasonably securely. But four, and, if today pans out, five? Burial is risky, because of animals in this part of the country, coyotes and so on. There are abandoned mines, but most are barricaded and sooner or later there would be odors. It’s been over a month since the first killing. Five male bodies of average size, minus their heads, adds up to, oh, say, more than eight hundred pounds of protoplasm, Ms. Trieri.

Where could all this meat and bones be? It's almost as much as a small horse. Surely an operative of the skill we're seeing would have a plan for that."

"We've been wondering about that, too, Mr. von Stier. Any ideas?"

"I'm afraid I'm stumped. Perhaps someone has a large meat-locker, a freezer they're using. But, anyway, it's something to continue to think about. I'll certainly do so, because puzzles such as this are hard for me to let go of."

"Anything else?" I looked at Derek and shrugged a question; he shook his head no.

"That's it for now, Ms. Trieri. And thanks again for sending Dino over here. It made my day."

"And thank you, Mr. von Stier. By the way, do you know if Dino was heading back in this direction?"

"Well, he was with a young woman, and I got the impression that the big question on their minds was 'my place or yours.' I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

* * *

Seventeen

First on my agenda was Gil Taylor. I needed to talk with him anyway, but the idea of looking for animal tranquilizers was something he needed to hear. Maybe, I thought, he'll be in his lab over the lunch hour. I got lucky.

"Gil! I'm glad to catch you. Sorry I've been so busy."

"I guess we've both been busy. I hope you've been more effective than I've been. These results I got from your tissue samples just have me completely perplexed. Uh, this is by way of saying that the anesthetic idea from Wednesday didn't go anywhere."

"Think of it as a long process of elimination, and you've been eliminating a lot of possibilities. But I got another suggestion this morning that you need to hear. Have you looked at animal tranquilizers yet?"

"Animal tranquilizers? You mean like they use to dart bears that wander out of the mountains into town?"

"I guess. And there are probably others. I understand that some have antidotes that you can use to awaken the animal. Maybe a tranquilizer and its antidote would explain some of the results with multiple chemicals you've been getting."

"Got any trade names, or chemicals or anything? I'm afraid I don't know where to start."

"No..." I was thinking about how I'd start such a search. "...but don't you have a computer there? What was that chemical you told me about, a pair of them, actually. Molecular weight two-something."

"Yeah, I had a 236.7 and a 249."

"What happens if you ask Google to find, say, molecular weight 236.7?"

I heard typing noises.

“Annette, I think I need to get more sleep. I should have thought of this days ago. Geez. Well, let’s see. Hmm. Here’s something, medetomidine attached to a hydrochloride. Says you use it to tranquilize dogs. And it has an antidote, something called atipamezole.” He paused, and I heard more typing. “With molecular weight 249.”

“Bingo, sounds like.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Man, this makes me feel positively moronic. Here I’ve been struggling with this for days, and all it takes is a simple computer search. Duh.”

“Don’t worry. I needed this other guy to suggest animal tranquilizers, I didn’t think of it myself. So, is this stuff in all the samples?”

“Maybe. I need to look at these molecules carefully and see if they break down into the fragments that I’m seeing. Thing is, it’s possible to have more than one molecule with weight 236.7, so I need to check some things. Also, there are some other large molecules in the results, too, but I should be able to find them, now. I’ve been obsessing over these two and ignoring the others, because these two are there in the largest quantities.”

“That means it was probably the main stuff used, I suppose.”

“Yeah, no doubt. Hmm. But look, it says here that it’s only for use on dogs, and that it’s dangerous for humans.”

“Um-hmm. Gil, if you needed to immobilize someone so you could decapitate them, would you worry about side effects?” I tried not to sound too much like an elementary school teacher.

“Oh. No, probably not. But why the antidote?”

“Not sure, but I think it may be that whoever did this wanted the victim to be awake to see what was happening. Maybe some of the other things you see there, the ones you haven’t identified yet, are nerve-blocks or something, to keep the victim still after he woke up. The tranquilizer is to effect an abduction, the antidote is so they can watch what’s happening, and they’re somehow immobilized while they watch. If that fits the drugs you’re finding, it also fits with what we know about the deaths themselves.”

“So, this also says it’s intra-muscular. Did you find needle marks on the victims?”

“Gil, we didn’t find very much of the victims to look at. No bodies, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, I forgot. So, what should I do now? You seem to have the answer you wanted.”

“Verify the medetomidine, figure out the other stuff, write up a report, and send us a bill. This will be very helpful when we put the whole thing together.”

“OK. But I feel like I should give you a freebie on this, given that I didn’t really figure it out myself.”

“Your equipment found those molecules, right?”

“Oh, yeah. It did. You’ll get a bill.”

Gil’s right, I thought. Either he needs to catch up on his sleep or he’s been smoking what he’s supposed to be testing.

I didn’t bother with the formality of the intercom.

“Derek! You around?” It wasn’t shouting, exactly, but it was louder than my usual office behavior.

“Right, here, Annette.” He has his mouth full of something—probably a bite of the sandwich he was carrying.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt your lunch. I should have come to find you. Anyway, I just talked with Gil Taylor, and it looks like maybe the tissue samples have some type of dog tranquilizer and its antidote in them. Maybe not, but that’s the initial estimate. As soon as I passed on von Stier’s suggestion of animal drugs, Gil found a match with his results. Or at least a preliminary match.”

He looked thoughtful. “I guess it’s progress. Chalk one up for von Stier. So, have you looked at that mockup lately?”

In fact, I hadn’t, so I did. Yep, there she was. Nope, I still couldn’t place her.

“Hell if I know. But, look, Derek, keep reminding me, OK? Really. Maybe the name will pop into my head.”

“Will do, boss.”

“Any additional items of interest from the chat room transcripts?”

“More of the same, mostly. Little things that would be innocent by themselves, but that look suspicious when you know what we know. Also, I’m working the stuff that looks coded. Substituting bad words for innocuous ones. No results of substance, but I think I may have invented a new party game. You take a page of text from somewhere and replace every instance of some word with some other word. It could make for general hilarity, especially if it involved, you know, adult content.”

“You have my permission to call Milton Bradley, if you think it’ll work.”

“Nah, they’ve probably already thought of it. I take it there’s been no word from out there in the world about our latest victim?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll be one of the first to know.”

“OK. I just don’t want to be left out of the fun. Well, back to the conspirators.”

With nothing better to do, I tackled a pile of neglected administrative paperwork that was sitting on my desk. There were various personnel forms about my staff to be dealt with, travel receipts to put down on other forms so I could get reimbursed, things to read with checkboxes to show that I’d read them so that the bureaucrats in Denver would have their backsides covered, other things to read and check from the FBI in Washington, and a huge amount of crap from the Department of Homeland Security about How To Be Safe. At least that didn’t have to be checked off.

I was speed reading a pamphlet about how to identify possible terrorists without falling into the bad, bad, bad trap of profiling people based on their looks (the method: do it but deny that it’s profiling), when Sally buzzed me on the intercom.

“Annette? It’s Sheriff Hank Allen from Saguache.”

“Thanks, Sally.” Maybe Sam Milstead came home, I thought. I poked the blinking button.

“Hank? How are things over your way? Did Sam Milstead turn up yet?”

“Hi, Annette. No, nobody has seen him. I talked to Gwen, though, and got her calmed down based on what you told me. So that part’s under control. But someone else turned up, maybe that guy Endsley you told me about. Or at least his head did.”

* * *

That’s the trouble with waiting on edge for something to happen. You finally let your guard down, and, bang!, it takes you by surprise.

“Oh. Well damn. Uh, Hank, let me get my assistant on the line.” I put him on hold and successfully got to Derek on the intercom without disconnecting the sheriff. “OK, Hank we’re here. We’ve been expecting something like this since dawn, and I think we were beginning to hope that it wouldn’t really happen.”

“Yeah, well, the perp picked an obscure back road that doesn’t get much traffic. Heads east from 285 just south of Villa Grove, way up in the northeast part of the valley. We still might not know about it, except a guy went down there chasing some cattle that got through a fence.”

“Same MO as all the others?”

“Yep, eight signs, although there’s about no chance anyone would see the northbound ones without seeing the southbound ones first. Now, you understand that we don’t really have a positive ID on the victim yet.”

“Derek, did your research turn up dental records?”

“Got ’em right here, Annette. Sheriff, where can I fax them?” Allen recited a phone number, and I heard Derek put his receiver down.

“Hank, are you calling from the scene?”

“No, I’m back in my office. It’s actually not too far from here, at least in relation to how big the county is. The techs are doing their thing out there, and they’ll bring stuff in after it’s all filmed and so on.”

“I’ve got an atlas here. Are you talking about GG Road?”

“That’s the one that heads east from the highway. The scene is actually on 65 Road, what GG turns into at the curve, about a mile south of that curve near the foothills.”

“I see. And you’re right. ‘Obscure’ is a good word. I’d say this is somewhat more isolated than any of the others, at least in terms of how far it is from highways. I guess the perp is getting nervous.”

“Could be. So, are you coming over to see it?”

“Unless you think there’s a compelling reason for me to, I think I’ll be more valuable here. We’re getting close, Hank. Also, there’s reason to believe that this will be the last one. I don’t want to waste any time, in case the perp is done and thinking of leaving Dodge.”

“I asked because I figured we’d leave the scene intact for you. But, no, I really don’t see any reason for you to spend the time getting here, although I hear you get around pretty well in that Mustang with the lights.” He chuckled.

“Hank, when will your medical examiner look at the head?”

“Oh, probably tomorrow. He works according to his own schedule, unless there’s a real time crunch.”

“Let me make a suggestion. Belinda Edwards, the ME up in Gunnison, made a positive ID that heads number two and four were removed the same way. If she were able to observe your ME’s exam, it could help put things in the right context.”

“We’ll see if we can get her down here tomorrow.”

“Great. And I expect she’ll pass on the message that we’re collecting and analyzing tissue samples.”

“I thought as much. You going to tell me what’s going on now?”

“Hank, you’re now an official member of the club, and you’ll be getting everything that the others have and all the new stuff, too. Lots of reading material. We’ll send a courier out as soon as we get a package put together, and the newest stuff will come by email or by fax. And I’ll say again that we’re getting close. Not close enough to have saved your victim, which is probably Endsley, but close.”

“I just got handed a picture of a bunch of teeth. We’ll see about a positive ID.”

“Good. I’ll need to call Denver. What’s the situation with the media?”

“Nothing yet. I’m going to try to keep it that way, too. But that’ll only last so long.”

“If we can get the ID and tell the Governor ourselves before he hears it on CNN, that’ll be a victory. Anything else for now?”

“I figured you’d be asking about the little ditty.”

“Huh? Oh! The poem! Sure. Geez, I forgot about it. So, right, what’s it say?”

“Ahem. Here goes:

*‘This Takes Care
Of One More Jerk,
Beheading Them
Is Our Life’s Work.’”*

I was scribbling away, but I managed to talk at the same time.

“It fits the pattern.”

“Sounds to me like they’re not done. ‘Our life’s work,’ I mean. But you’re thinking this is the last?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that ‘life’s work’ thing is a smoke-screen, designed to keep us guessing. We’ve got information that all of these murders are part of a vendetta against the victims, and Endsley is the last. There’s a two million dollar bounty on these guys, we’re told.”

“Two mil? Damn! This is that business in Kuwait you told me about, huh?”

“Right. That’s why I don’t think there will be more.”

“You know, a guy in a middle-eastern country who’s financing murder for hire in this country fits the government’s definition of a terrorist, seems like.”

“I never thought of that. Although this is personal and not political. Still...what I want to do is to catch the perp and get the whole thing wrapped up. After that we can tell Washington what we know. I’m going to let them deal with a possible terrorist angle.”

“I think that’s what I’d do, too. So, when should I expect this package of stuff?”

“I’ll see who’s available from the State Patrol to run it over to you. I hope you’ll see it this afternoon. And please let me know when you get the head identified.” I gave him my cell phone number, just to be sure.

“Will do, Annette. And, hey. Sorry to ruin your day.”

* * *

Sally’s eyes were big and round and wondering, and I thought everyone else probably felt the same way.

“Sally, buzz everyone and get them in here, OK? And did Candice Garcia get back from Pagosa yet?”

“She came in a few minutes ago. And I’ll get people in here.”

Five minutes later I had everyone filled on the how the other shoe had dropped, and, even though it was bad news, I think everyone felt better that the waiting was over.

When the meeting broke up, I signaled to Candice, who was back in uniform, to come to my office.

“Candice, good job in Pagosa Springs. Von Stier told me he was delighted to see Dino, and we learned several things of interest. How is Dino, by the way?”

“Oh, he’s fine. Um, I’m sorry it took me so long to get back here, we stopped for lunch and, uh, time got away from us a little. Uh...” But I was holding up my hand.

“It’s fine, really. I’ve got something I need you to do, unless you’re occupied some other way.”

“No, I’m available for anything you need.”

“Sally’s putting together a package of stuff I need couriered up to Saguache, to the sheriff there. It’s the case files. He needs them now that he’s a member of the club. You’re the fastest way I can think of to get them there. Even if I called up the helicopter, it’d have to get here first.”

“Now?” Her face had taken a nosedive.

“Yep, now. And if you’re going to have to break a date with Dino, I’m sorry. Tell you what. Take him. Let him ride shotgun. He can help keep you awake. See, I need you to get back here as soon as you can, because I may need you with me tonight or tomorrow. A six-hour car trip with him won’t be the most romantic thing in the universe, but it’ll give you a chance to talk a lot and get to know each other better. Right?”

When I’d suggested taking Dino, her face had lit up, and she was nodding in eager agreement.

“But, Candice, listen. Dino’s probably not like a lot of the guys you know. I think his ego is on an even keel. On the other hand, the last thing you want to do is scare him with your driving. He used to be a chauffeur, so he’s used to smooth cruising in limousines. Be nice, OK?”

She giggled. “Thanks, Annette. And I’ll be careful.” She looked at her watch. “I guess I ought to be back here by about eight.”

“Sounds about right. And call me on my cell phone when you get back, OK? Drive safely.” She was beaming as she walked out.

Almost immediately, I was punching Rod Andersen’s number into my phone.

“CBI, this is Sandy McStain.”

“Hi, Sandy, this is Annette in Durango. Rod must be on another line.”

“He is, Annette. Should I interrupt him?”

“I’d say he’d want you to, even if it’s the Governor. Tell whoever it is to wait, or something. We’ve got our fifth victim.” I heard the empty space of on-hold for only a few seconds.

“Annette? What have you got?”

“Fifth victim, same MO, no positive ID yet but they’ve got Endsley’s dental records to compare with. They’ll call me soonest. ‘They’ is the Saguache County Sheriff, Hank Allen. Found the head on an obscure back road, more remote than any of the others, up in the northeast corner of the San Luis Valley, southeast of a little town called Villa Grove. That’s why it wasn’t found earlier. There’s no hint via the

poem that it's the last, but if it's Endsley, I bet it is. Oh, and Sheriff Allen told me that so far there was no media involvement."

"So far. Well, that'll change. If it's Endsley, we'll need to go public with the Kuwait story, so that we can reassure people that it's over."

"Doing that will jeopardize catching the perp. It'll let him know that we know what's really going on. He'll run for it before we know who's running."

"I'll try to persuade the Governor, but it'll be his call, like we talked about with the women. Anything else new?"

I told him about the conversation with von Stier and how his new information had been helpful.

"Animal tranquilizers, huh? This guy's creative, you've got to give him that."

"Von Stier says he admires the guy's work. A professional compliment, as it were."

"And what about this mockup?"

"We're doing the usual things with it, and I'm carrying around my own copy. I recognize it but can't put a name to it."

"But you think it'll lead to the killer."

"Maybe. Could be that it's just someone hired to lure Endsley out of the bar and into a situation where he could be knocked out with the tranquilizer. And maybe I really don't recognize the picture beyond some generic memory. But right now the mockup is a priority."

"I looked at the copy you sent here, and I sure don't recognize her. Any information from the prints?"

"Only that Endsley kept his truck clean and didn't wear gloves when he was in it. There are some partials, they look like a couple of different females, that we're working on."

"OK. I'd better call the Governor."

"Rod? Can I assume we've had our afternoon conference? I'll call when they get an ID, and if there's anything new, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Just tell me when they get an ID. The Governor will want to know that."

Talking about an ID reminded me, so I took out the computer mockup from Buena Vista. There was the same picture staring at me, taunting me to remember who it could be. But I couldn't.

So I put it away in my portfolio case to take home, to stare at after dinner.

Then I put together an email for everyone on the case list—the members of the club as well as people in the State Patrol—about what Hank Allen had reported and attached a scanned version of the mockup that Derek had passed me. His request to Buena Vista for the computer file was still pending, apparently.

And I was finally out of things to do.

Oh, there were a million things to do, of course, but there was nothing for me to do right then.

Derek was working on the conspiracy angle, trying to assemble a sufficient case to obtain warrants for the women's bank records. Gil Taylor was confirming his analysis results. We wouldn't have an ID on the latest victim until we had it, and the tissue samples would take even longer.

I'd been waiting all day, on the edge of my chair, to hear about the latest victim. I guess I'd been assuming that when the news came in, I'd charge into action somehow.

But now that we knew, there was just more waiting to be done.

I decided to wait at home.

* * *

After the stressful day, the first thing I wanted to do was to work out, to get all the tension out of my body and relax a little afterward. So at home I picked up the mail, threw it and all my stuff onto the hall table, and changed. Then it was 45 minutes on the ski machine and a shower.

When I was finished, it was about 5:00, so I turned on the local news to see if there was anything about our latest victim. I flipped around the channels—our satellite system has both the Denver channels and what passes as “local” in Durango, a version of the Albuquerque stations. There were various rehash stories about the Burma Shave Fridays of previous weeks, but nothing on the new one. That felt good.

Unlike the night before, I had no inclination to cook, nor did I want to go out. All I felt like doing was sitting around in my robe with my hair up in a towel and being a zombie. Maybe, I thought, Hal won’t mind ordering a pizza.

I remember reading things way back when I was an impressionable teenager about how to be a good wife, how you should appear and act when your husband comes home from his hard day at work being the family breadwinner. There were lots of books full of advice in the high-school library. Most seemed to agree that having dinner on the table, being well-dressed—even provocatively dressed—and cheerful, loving, and full of energy was mandatory. One book, probably not in the high-school library, but I don’t know where I saw it, went so far as to suggest wrapping yourself in Saran Wrap (and nothing else) for “those special occasions.” Even when I was a teenager, that seemed to me to be just sticky.

These and other deep thoughts were interrupted at about 5:45 by the chirping of my cell phone. I ran out to the hall and rummaged around in my stuff, grabbing it just in time to prevent its switching over to voice mail.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Annette? This is Hank Allen. We’ve got a positive ID from the dental records. Mr. Roland Endsley is officially deceased.”

“Good...No, wait. I mean, thanks for telling me and it’s good to have a positive ID. Sorry, I’m a bit worn thin.”

“I don’t blame you in the least. Oh, and thank *you*. Your courier got here with the package. Both of ’em, both couriers, I mean. I guess I didn’t know it was sensitive enough to need that much of a bodyguard. I mean, that guy’s something you wouldn’t want to mess with.”

“Yeah, but he’s a peach, really. Believe it or not, he doesn’t work for me, he’s a philosophy instructor here at the U.”

“Oh. Now I’m all confused. Anyway, it got here, so thanks. Looks like I have some reading to do. And that email you sent got to me, too, so I’m on your list now.”

“When did they get there? I’m wondering when to expect them back.”

“Oh, about 4:30 or so. He said something about two and a half hours. Say! I didn’t think of it at the time, but is that from Durango? Damn. He’s some driver.”

“She’s the driver, Hank. He’s the philosopher.”

“Huh? Oh. Like I said, I’m confused. But thanks anyway. Gotta go.”

I hate to take pleasure in other people's discomfort, but Hank's confusion let me laugh, really laugh, for the third time that day. It helped.

But I was suddenly back on duty, because Rod Andersen needed to hear about the positive ID. So I called his private number, a cell phone, I think, but there wasn't an answer until it switched to voice mail. I left him a message that the victim was definitely Roland Endsley and tried to decide my next move.

The Governor needed the information, and I had no idea when Rod would get it to him. If I just waited, the media might get it first...

It took some creative number searching and no little amount of coercion of reluctant bureaucrats, but ten minutes later I had him on the phone. I resisted the urge to stand while I talked with him.

"Governor, I'm very sorry to bother you, but I believe you need to hear this right away. We made a positive identification of the fifth murder victim. Did Rod Andersen brief you on what he knew earlier?"

"Yes, he did, and he said he'd provide the ID when he had it."

"I'm doing that for him, because I just found out myself, and I was unable to reach him. He has a message waiting for him about it. I'm not sure what he told you, but what I know is that the victim was a Roland Endsley, a cattle rancher from Fort Garland. It appears that he was abducted in the middle of his weekly business trip. He sells cattle feed, and his route takes him east from Fort Garland, up the Arkansas Valley, and back south through the San Luis Valley. He was abducted in Buena Vista. His body, or, rather, his head, was found in the upper San Luis Valley on a county road, Saguache County, southeast of Villa Grove. There's a poem, as usual, and we're still analyzing it. The rest of the MO is the same as the others. As far as I know, there's been no media involvement yet."

"Ms. Trieri, I've been talking with Rod about this every day. He's been saying good things about you, about your work. He says that you're making progress toward catching the killer, even if you haven't been able to prevent the murders. And I'm aware that you were brought in only two weeks ago, after three of the murders had taken place. In fact, I take responsibility for that, whether it's fault or credit, it's mine. Rod's been taking the heat from me, and that's appropriate. I don't want to muck about in your investigation. Now, having said that, you need to know that I sure would like to know what in the hell is going on." He wasn't yelling, but I could understand how he had developed a reputation for intimidation.

"Governor, so would I, so would we all. And we're getting very close. I believe that there will be no more of these hideous beheadings, but until we catch the killer, I can't be sure. I hope you'll forgive me for keeping confidential certain aspects of the investigation so that we can optimize our chances of catching this murderer. You see, I'm certain that if some things we've discovered became public, the killer would immediately leave the state, probably the country, before we can identify him. So, I'm being careful about some of the things I know." Ugh, I thought. Weak ending, Trieri.

"Ms. Trieri, as you know, I have a background in law enforcement, so I understand completely. I presume that you're briefing Rod fully, and that he's keeping things from me. That's fine. But I'm sure you can see my situation. What advice do you have for me?"

My brain went into hyperdrive.

"Well, sir, I hate to say much of anything without having discussed it with Rod. But I'll assume you're twisting my arm. I think I'd recommend that you call an immediate news conference, announce this fifth murder, tell them what you know, and say that you won't tell them more because you want to catch this asshole and you don't want to jeopardize the investigation. I don't know what you know, but I'm hoping you don't know things that will jeopardize it. This means you can pretend to know more

than you do—that makes you look good—but you don't have to worry about letting something slip. And, let's see. I guess I'd suggest you talk with Sheriff Hank Allen in Saguache first, to give him a heads up and, well, I'd recommend giving him credit. I'm betting you can get on the ten-o'clock news with a news conference by eight." There was a long pause. I found I was holding my breath, so I let it out.

"Done. And I'll cover your tail with Rod. And, say, one more piece of advice, please. In prime-time television programs these days, they seem to use the word 'asshole' a lot. Should I really say that I 'want to catch this asshole'? In the press conference, on TV, I mean?"

"Uh, well, sir, that's surely your call." I felt myself blushing. "I just said it because I'm a little worked up over the whole business. And, hey, from a political perspective, maybe it would be good for people in Colorado to see that you're worked up about it, too. Maybe if you can sort of let it slip out because you're righteously indignant, maybe it would be a plus. You know?"

"Yeah, I do. And I'll give it more thought. And, listen. When I get elected President, expect a call from me." He disconnected, and I had to let out my breath yet again.

That, I decided, warranted a glass of wine, so I hauled myself off the couch and into the kitchen, the frumpy housewife in her bathrobe who'd just told the Governor to use potty language on television.

I was pouring myself a glass of a lovely Chardonnay when I heard Hal come in the front door. It was a little after six.

"Hey!" His voice came filtering in from the front hall. "You're home! That's great! Oops...Annette?"

"I'm in the kitchen. Welcome home." I tried to sound as cheery as those old high-school library books said I should.

He came into the kitchen holding a piece of paper.

"Hi, lover! How wonderful that you're here! Uh, I was shuffling around in the mail, which had your stuff on it, and this picture of Maureen Downey fell out of your portfolio. What's with her hair?"

Fortunately, I was standing over the sink, so it didn't make too much of a mess when I dropped my wine glass.

* * *

Eighteen

I don't know which is worse, the type of abrupt shock that made me drop my wine glass, or the slow, lingering kind that Hal got as I explained things.

When he said Maureen's name, I instantly knew that he was right—that's who that picture was, no doubt about it—and the wine glass shattered, of course, making the whole thing more exciting. But I must have looked faint, or something, because he made me sit down. He poured me more wine and proceeded to clean up the glass in the sink.

Then, as he asked questions and, as all the pieces fell into place for me like dominos, he got answers that he couldn't possibly have anticipated, he's the one who began to look queasy. Eventually he sat down across from me at the kitchen table and just stared at me.

“I don’t know if I can bring myself to believe all this.”

He was sitting up straight, with his hands flat on the tabletop. He looked stunned.

I reached over and patted his right hand. “I think I’d be surprised if you did, sweetie. After all, you met Maureen once, right? At Sarah Robinson’s, when that baby llama was born. You saw her in action as the veterinarian, bringing life into the world. This other stuff must seem like very foreign territory.”

“That’s for sure.” He shook himself briefly.

“Tell you what. You just heard all that stuff for the first time, and it was mostly new to you. Let me run over it again quickly, and it will be more familiar to you this time. And if you hear anything questionable, say so. I’d be just as happy as you if this isn’t what it looks like to me. OK?”

He nodded.

“So let’s start with this picture. It was created by a computer program that they have in Buena Vista, one of those programs designed to let witnesses reconstruct faces they’ve seen. We have one, too, and I’m pretty sure it’s this one. Standard stuff. And what happens is a witness to something comes in and, with the help of a computer tech, builds the face he’s seen. They don’t show faces and say, ‘is it this person or that?’ They show chins and ears and so on and build a face. Right?”

He was nodding. “Used to be sketch artists, now it’s computers.”

“Exactly. So. On Wednesday, today’s Burma Shave victim, Roland Endsley, was seen by the bartender leaving the College Peaks Saloon in Buena Vista at about five in the afternoon in the friendly company of a woman with blonde hair. The bartender came in to the Chaffee County Sheriff’s offices and worked with the tech to create this picture, from scratch. I’ve had it all day, and I knew I recognized it, but I just couldn’t come up with a name. You saw it and immediately identified it as Maureen Downey, with different hair, right?”

“Right. But that doesn’t mean she’s the Burma Shave murderer!”

“Nope, it doesn’t. Could have been her, in a wig, but they just went out on a date and everything is innocent, from the murder perspective, at least. Or, it could just be someone who looks a lot like her. But I have to assume it’s her until something compelling changes my mind, and as far as we know, she’s the last person he was seen alive with. Now, from here, things are circumstantial, but they’re still damning. First, Maureen is a large animal vet. All of the first four victims have traces of animal tranquilizers in their tissues, and traces of antidotes. She knows these drugs, it’s her profession, and she has access to them. Second, we’ve found no bodies. Maureen has a licensed crematory to deal with carcasses of large animals. I saw her haul off a horse one day, and she told me that she contracts with the Highway Department to deal with large road-kill. Third, all five of the victims have some kind of large domestic animal at their homes, llamas, ponies, horses, cattle. I saw Maureen at two of these homes. Moreover, she’s well-known in the San Luis Valley, and people are used to seeing her driving around in her pickup truck, sometimes towing a trailer, at all times of the day. Fourth, and I’ll admit I’m starting to stretch a bit, Maureen has some sort of Irish or English accent. I don’t know where she’s from, but I bet it’s the UK. One of the poems used slang that only someone from the British Isles would use.” I decided not to mention the funny looks I’d had from Maureen. “Finally, and I’m still stretching, let me go get my map.”

I went out to the hall and found another of the papers I’d brought home to ponder.

“This is, of course, our little corner of Colorado. These asterisks are the locations where the heads have been found. See this?” I pointed to the newest one that I’d penciled in today. “That’s where they found Roland Endsley’s head today. Let me connect the dots.”

They made, more or less, an ellipse with Del Norte approximately in the center.

“But what’s this mean? These places aren’t where the victims lived.”

“No, but my theory of the crime, the crimes, is that she picked these guys up somewhere, drugged them, took them to her clinic in Del Norte, decapitated them, and then drove out with their heads to put up the signs and so on. She always went out in different directions because it might be that earlier spots would be watched. And she always took the heads more or less in the direction of the victim’s home so that identification would be faster. Someone would recognize him. The farthest one from his home was today, and we had to use dental records. Sometime in there, she cremated the bodies.”

“OK, but how in the world could she have done all this beheading? You’ve been saying it’s professional, almost surgical.”

“That we’ll find out at her place, I’m thinking. We also need to explain the expressions on the faces.” I stared at him with what I hoped was a gently sympathetic expression.

After a minute, he picked his hands up in a shrug. “You’ve said that everything except the picture is circumstantial. But you’re right, there are a lot of fits. So, what’s your next move?”

“I need to go back to the office tonight, get Derek in there with me, and see what we can find on her out there in computer-land. Derek’s a whiz at finding people’s histories.”

“You’re not going anywhere without some food on top of that wine, and some coffee. Why don’t you go get dressed and I’ll make us both some food—breakfast at six-thirty in the evening. That’s the fastest thing I can think of.”

I realized I’d skipped lunch, and I was starving.

“That sounds delicious. Make lots, please.”

Twenty minutes later, we were both eating huge breakfast burritos. Hal’s a wizard at fast, hearty breakfasts, probably because when he gets up early to go fishing somewhere he doesn’t like to waste time. These burritos were made with extra-large flour tortillas wrapped around three scrambled eggs each, hash-brown potatoes from the freezer, diced Black Forest ham, and grated sharp cheddar cheese. Hal poured mild green chile over them, mild, he told me, because he didn’t want to upset his stomach any more than it already was. There was also fresh coffee.

“Suppose you find things on Maureen that bear out your suspicions? Then what?”

“We put together enough information to get a search warrant, and we go over there and see what’s in her clinic. I want her computer, for one thing, to see if she’s that ‘Redeemer’ person in the chat rooms. And we arrest her for something small, something to do with the business with Endsley on Wednesday. Accessory, maybe.” I stuffed another big bite in my mouth.

“What about the other women in the chat room?”

“We’ll see. It’ll be a political hot potato. If we can find evidence that they’ve profited from the murders, that should let us prosecute them. But, otherwise, maybe they just walk.”

“I’m going to have to talk with John Martin about this chat room stuff, because it’s on one of our computers. He’ll ask me if the U is exposed, legally or to bad publicity.”

“Probably not legally; the publicity is something I can’t control. Listen, this was wonderful. I have to run. And could you watch the ten-o’clock news for me? I want to know if the Governor’s press conference is covered.”

“Any particular station?”

“Hey, they’re all about the same, aren’t they? Pick one. Let me know if he uses any questionable language. See ya.” He was scratching his head as I left.

* * *

Derek Peterson was already back at the office. I’d managed to call him while I was getting dressed, and he had already eaten an early dinner, he said.

“Hey, Annette. I got a head start on you.” He jerked his head in the direction of the computer printer, which had a pile of paper in the output tray.

“Thanks for coming in this evening, Derek. And I’d have been here sooner, but my husband wouldn’t let me leave the house without eating something. He looks after me that way.”

“And he recognized the picture right away, huh?”

“More than that. It fell on the floor, he picked it up and said he’d dropped a picture of Maureen Downey. Then he asked about her hair.”

“So it’s a wig?”

“Probably. She has short, red hair, a little longer than mine. And, as I recall, she also has green eyes, so the sparkling blue eye thing must be contacts.”

“And you’re sure it’s her?”

“As sure as I can be. Hal’s reaction to seeing the picture is really the best indicator. But when he said her name, I knew he was right. And all the other stuff started clicking into place. So, what’s in that pile of paper over there?”

“The easy stuff. Hmm, let’s see. Been in the Valley about six years, bought her clinic and the practice from an old guy who wanted to retire to Key West. Before that, she apprenticed as an assistant horse doc, up in Weld County. That was right after she got out of school, the Colorado State large-animal vet program. Good program, by the way, and she was at the top of her class. She started in that program just after the end of the Gulf War.”

“I don’t know how old she is, but doing the math backwards and making a guess, I’d say she didn’t start that program right after her undergraduate degree.”

“Right. She’s forty-two, according to her driver’s license. Before CSU is where it gets difficult, and, presumably, more interesting. That’s where I am now.”

“If it’ll help, there’s a possibility that she may originally be from the British Isles, maybe Northern Ireland, because…Oop. Excuse me.” My cell phone was chirping.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Annette? Candice. I’m baaack, as they say. Piece of cake.”

“Good work. You impressed Hank Allen with your driving, by the way, except he thought it was Dino. How is Dino, by the way? Was he able to ride with you without getting all freaked out?” I heard a giggle.

“Oh, sure. I started out slow, to get him used to the idea of my being in control. And he liked that fine. Then as I began to speed things up, he got more and more into it, even to the point of helping me.”

“Candice, are we talking about your driving, here, or what?”

“Huh? Ohhhh. Oh my God!”

“Freudian slip, eh? Well, just remember what I said. Listen, we’ve had a big break in the Burma Shave case. But you’ve been on the road, either riding with Dino or driving, since early this morning. Why don’t you get some rest so you’ll be fresh in the morning? We may have an exciting day ahead.”

“Um, it’s Friday evening, and, I’m usually off duty. So Dino and I were going to go out…”

“That’s fine with me. I just need you to be ready to rock in the morning, OK? This will probably be a big overtime weekend.” And we said our goodbyes. I refrained from telling her to go ahead and ravish Dino.

“Overtime? Did I hear overtime? Boss, I need a new roof. That’s great!”

“Derek, you’re exempt, just like me.” His face fell, a great example of bad acting.

“Oh, yeah. Well, maybe this computer stuff will get me a big raise?”

“Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. My official bureaucratic answer is ‘we’ll see.’”

“Just like I say to my four-year-old. So, anyway, I’m making some progress. And looking for a UK connection was a good idea. Thing is, her stuff is buried like von Stier’s was. Much harder to find than all the military records and stuff on our victims. But when I dig into it like I dug into von Stier’s stuff, I’m not finding anything interesting like I did with von Stier. I don’t quite understand. Why would innocuous stuff be buried so deeply?”

“Got me. What’s the innocuous stuff?”

“Well it does seem to have some relevance. She did indeed grow up in Northern Ireland, for a while. But when she got to be school age, her father began to get diplomatic appointments. So she moved around the world a lot when she was a kid. But the connection to us is that she spent her high-school years in Kuwait. Her father was in the British embassy there.”

“Where’d she go to college?”

“Oxford. Took a first in history, says here, and she also took a lot of political science and pre-med-looking things.”

“Then what?” So far, there was nothing incriminating, nothing at all. Getting a comprehensive search warrant, I thought, could be a challenge.

“Yes, well. Then nothing. There’s a complete blank between her graduation from Oxford and when she entered the vet program at CSU. Way too many years to be sitting on a beach somewhere.”

“That’s for sure. We’ll have to keep working that. Let’s see. She’s got a license for prescription drugs, at least animal ones. Maybe there are fingerprints on file for that somewhere. If so, we can run them through the NCIC and, because she’s foreign, Interpol. Say, is she a citizen?”

“I think it’s in the pile on the printer. Naturalized two years ago.”

“Do they fingerprint people for that? Maybe since all the emphasis on terrorism, since nine-eleven and all that, maybe there’s more information.”

“I’ll check.”

“And what about this Kuwait thing? You said she was there in her high-school years? Hmm. Call it twenty-six years ago. And the girls who our victims raped were teenagers during the Gulf War? So…they would have been toddlers when Maureen was in Kuwait. Do you suppose there’s any chance that she babysat for them, or something like that? Knew the family?”

“I think you’re reaching, Annette.”

“Yeah, I am. Free associating. Let’s work the fingerprint angle. If we get lucky, something on her missing years will pop out of Interpol or somewhere.”

* * *

The Saturday morning papers were full of news about victim number five, of course. I’m always amazed by how they can take two or three little facts and make them sound like investigative reporting. On television, of course, they do even more—make it sound like the sky’s falling—with only *one* fact, if that. Which reminded me.

“Say, did you see anything of the Gov last night?” I’d finally returned home about eleven and missed the news.

“More than I planned.” Hal looked up from digging around in half a cantaloupe. “I turned on Channel Nine when you left, to remind myself to watch the news. I was absorbed in some reading, and at about eight, presto! there he was, in a news conference. I guess they carried it live. And I saw him again on Channel Seven at ten.”

“So, anything interesting?”

“In the press conference, he worked himself into a righteous snit, that’s for sure. Got red in the face, raised his voice until the microphones got fuzzy, and talked about how this son-of-a-bitch was going down as sure as he’s the Governor.”

“Uh, so you didn’t hear him say ‘asshole’?” I felt a measure of relief.

“Well, no. Why?”

“Because when I talked with him I suggested he might.” I was blushing again. “I guess he substituted SOB.”

Hal started laughing, almost out of control. “You mean I’m married to the Governor of Colorado’s profanity advisor? Is this a cabinet-level position, or what?”

I wadded up my paper napkin and threw it at him, and it bounced off his nose and into his cantaloupe. But he was still laughing.

“Anyway, maybe you’ll feel better if I tell you that on the ten-o’clock news on Channel Seven, they bleeped it out. But you could still lip-read it.”

“Hmmp.”

“Actually, SOB works, in the context he used it. ‘Asshole’ implies a sort of ‘super-jerk,’ like you’d use to describe the victims, maybe, except you wouldn’t want to do that because they’re victims. What he really needed was the MF word, but he’d never use that in public, I bet.”

“Oh, thanks. An academic analysis of the Governor’s profanity for breakfast. I need another napkin.” But I was laughing, too, at that point.

“So, do you have a plan for the day? I was going to suggest that we walk into the upper Los Piños and see what’s hatching, but it looks as if you might be a tad busy.”

“That’s the understatement of the month, at least. You go. I don’t know when I’ll be home. We may wind up staying over in Del Norte tonight, depending on how things develop.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure there’s much of any place to stay in Del Norte, but you can always go down the road to Monte Vista. I think there are more motels there.”

“We may do that anyway, just to keep a low profile. I have the feeling that Denver is going to assemble quite a task force for this thing. And I don’t even know what kind of thing it’s going to be.” I shrugged.

“I…”

But the house phone was ringing, my line.

“Annette? Sorry to call you at home.”

“Morning, Rod. Not a problem. We were just finishing breakfast.”

“Listen, I’m sorry about last night. Like a dope, I walked off and left my cell phone in my office. When I got home, I had no idea where it was. So I found it just now and got your message. The Governor called me last night, before the press conference, though, so everything’s square. Thanks for calling him.”

“I thought he should hear the victim’s ID soonest. And he asked me for advice, and, well, you know me, I just shoot my mouth off, sometimes.”

“Yeah, he said you suggested the press conference, and I think it was a good idea. Gave him a chance to play the statesman a little, act like he’s really in charge. And he came across well, I thought.”

“Right. Uh, Rod? We’ve got more. We’ve got a solid ID on that picture I sent you, the blonde.” I explained how Hal had recognized it as Maureen, which tripped my memory, and I described the circumstantial evidence as well.

“It sounds as if you think she’s the killer. In addition, I mean, to having enticed that guy out of the bar, so she’s more than an accessory.”

“Don’t know yet, I’m not one-hundred-percent sure. But she sure seems deeply involved, even if she didn’t swing the axe, so to speak.”

“What’s your plan?”

What is this with everyone asking me about my plans? I wondered. I’m hardly awake yet.

“With a high-profile case like this one, I’ve been thinking that someone at a higher level than me would get involved. But based on what we have, most of it circumstantial, I’d like to get an arrest warrant for Maureen Downey and a search warrant for her place. We pick her up and see if we can get a flesh-and-blood ID from that bartender—this will take some time—and meanwhile see what we find at her place. Also, we’re waiting on some requests for information from overseas.” I told him about Derek’s computer searching and our requests to the FBI and Interpol.

“This is your case, Annette, and no one is going to horn in. We can do some things to help, though, like get the warrants. And I’d like to be there, on the team.”

“I’m honored. But, with all due respect, Rod, have you qualified recently?”

“Qualified?”

“With whatever you’ll be carrying.”

“Oh! Right. Yes, in fact, last month. Did well, better than I thought I would, in fact. I make it a point to get to the range at least twice a month.”

“Good to hear. Like I said, with all due respect, but I like to have people who know what they’re about on these little expeditions. It’s just safer.”

“Don’t want desk-bound bureaucrats prancing about with their safeties off, eh?” He chuckled. “But what about other resources? You want the State Patrol SWAT folks?”

“Since you offered, they might just be helpful. We need to keep in mind that all we’re planning to do at this stage is arrest a veterinarian on an accessory charge. But you never know. I don’t have a schedule yet, and if SWAT shows up in Del Norte, it’ll get people talking. Can you alert them without a real mobilization?”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of. I expect you’ll be calling the Governor, and he could probably use reminding of our conversation, his and mine, about confidentiality so as not to tip off suspects.”

“I’ve been ragging on him for that every day. And I’ll get to Durango just as soon as I can. Probably see you around noon.”

“I’ll be in my office.”

* * *

Derek and Candice were both hard at work when I arrived, Derek on his computer and Candice on the paper it was spitting out. She had a dreamy expression that suggested she was having trouble concentrating.

I decided not to ask.

“Annette! Top o’ the mornin’ to ye, m’ lass. Uh, sorry. I’ve been doing things Irish today.”

“Find anything interesting?”

“Maybe. Probably. Actually, Candice found the Irish one. Mine’s well to the south and east.”

Candice looked up from her reading, or maybe it was her daydreaming.

“Hmm? Oh, you tell her, Derek. You know the background better.”

“All right. See, Annette, Candice ran across an interesting little factoid. Maureen’s father is a Brit, Northern Ireland Protestant, in with the government and so on. That’s how he got his diplomatic appointments. But her mother is Irish Catholic. Now, mixed marriages like this aren’t unheard of over there, and, I suppose, the only way that conflict is going to ever get resolved is if there are more of them. But what’s interesting about this one is that Maureen seems to have become interested in the Irish side of herself when she was in college. I think I mentioned last night that she had a first in history at Oxford. Partly that was due to an undergraduate thesis, which had to do with some of the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland and how the natives, meaning the Irish Catholics, were treated badly just as other natives all over the world were treated badly by the forces of the British Empire. And if you look carefully at the history and political sciences courses she took, they reinforce this radicalization, I guess you’d call it.”

“Uh, sorry to say this, but, so what?”

“Don’t know exactly, except it may be related to her missing years. See, the IRA has a history of recruiting people and spiriting them away for training. Training in all sorts of nasty things, such as assassinations and so on.”

“Oh. Well, maybe that will give you some new ideas for places to look for her.”

“I’m ahead of you. But we need to hear about the inquiries we sent out last night, first. Meanwhile, I’ve been thinking about your idea last night, the business of Maureen in Kuwait.”

“Oh, that was just wild-eyed speculation, completely off-the-wall.”

“Maybe. But maybe not. Consider this. Maureen’s father was in the British embassy there, he had some kind of deputy appointment having to do with oil and other energy issues. One of the girls that our five victims raped was the daughter of a Kuwaiti assistant foreign minister. What with Kuwait’s being a relatively small place, and what with embassy parties and so on, it wouldn’t be at all surprising if Maureen knew the girl, even with the age difference. Baby-sitting, maybe not. But I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d met and so on.”

“So there’s the possibility of a personal connection in addition to the murder-for-hire business?”

“Right, especially in light of this: I found a report that those girls who were victims of the rape by our murder victims were all stoned to death a short time later. This seems to be something that’s done over there, or it was back then, at least in the more radically fundamentalist families. Maybe not in Kuwait generally, they’re reasonably progressive. But among the Islamic fundamentalists, it seems that they assume that the girls do something to entice the sexual assault, and in any case they had sex out of wedlock, therefore they have to die. Stoning is meant as a deterrent.”

Candice had come alert, and I felt my blood pressure take a jump.

“Stoned to death? For being a rape victim? Gee, let’s see if I can keep my temper, here.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t blame you for exploding. But, see, it’s relevant, because if there was a personal connection, that would make it much more personal for Maureen. Maybe the bounty would just be a bonus, even.”

“Maybe. And maybe she wouldn’t even be concerned about the money and give it, or most of it, to someone else. Like our chat-room women. We need to keep on that one, too, Derek. Stoned to death, huh? I know it’s not politically correct to make generalizations about cultural differences, but that’s just barbaric, plain and simple. Next time something happens over there, maybe we should just nuke ’em all. And these guys vote in the United Nations like civilized countries? Christ!” I was stomping about the hallway in the vicinity of Derek’s office.

“Um, yes, I guess it would be interesting to hear the private conversations in the White House on this topic. But, really, that’s not something we can do anything about. What we can do is to figure out how to get Maureen Downey into custody.”

“You’re right. And Rod Andersen said he’d take care of warrants. He’s coming by for a little visit—he wants to be part of the action, I think. Maybe he’ll have the warrants with him. Also, he volunteered the State Patrol SWAT, if we think we need it. Candice? Do you know if the Alamosa office has a SWAT unit?”

“It sure does, Annette. I tried out for it but I’m too short. They don’t know what they’re missing.” She had her chin tilted up. “But even without me, they’re pretty good. If you need them, they could be ready in a couple of hours, I think. It’s a weekend, and some of them would need to be called in.”

“Annette? What do we do about the sheriff? Del Norte is in Rio Grande County.”

“Isn’t he already in the club? Our first victim was from Monte Vista.”

“He’s on the distribution list, for sure. But he’s not really been involved, because nothing’s happened there. Yet.”

“Yet, indeed. I guess it’s appropriate to have the whole thing end where it started, in some sense. I guess we’ll need to brief him about what’s going on. Maybe I’ll give him a call.”

“Annette?” Candice looked concerned. “Del Norte is a tight little place, and I bet Maureen Downey is something of a community pillar. The sheriff is going to have trouble believing that she’s our murderer, even an accessory. I’d suggest bringing him in only at the last minute.”

“Good point. But is there someone over there we can trust? We’ll need to get some logistical information. Hell, I don’t even know where her place is, except she told me it’s on the southeast side of town.”

“You know, I think I know where it is. There’s a county road that heads south from the east side of town, goes up into the mountains. I’ve been up it, uh, once, I think, and there’s a bunch of buildings on a little side road on the edge of town, right after a curve. Didn’t look like a ranch, though. Maybe that’s her clinic.”

“Oh, that’s right. You work over there, don’t you, Candice? Well, that helps. I’d still feel better if I called the sheriff, though. Maybe I can do it without showing our hand.”

“Just talk to him about the case, Annette. He’ll feel good about a briefing on where things stand, I’m sure.” Derek’s advice, as usual, was sound.

I went back to my office and found the number for the Rio Grande County Sheriff’s Department in Monte Vista.

“Rio Grande County Sheriff.”

“This is Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation in Durango. I need to speak with the sheriff, please.”

“Oh! Yes, ma’am. But, I’m sorry but he’s not here.”

“Is there some way I can get in touch with him?”

“Well, ma’am, he was up most of the night and he’s sleeping in. See, we had a big fire over in Del Norte. He was out there with the fire department. They managed to keep it from spreading, but it destroyed the clinic.”

“Clinic?”

“Yes ma’am, the large-animal clinic, where Maureen Downey treats horses and so on. Burned down the entire thing, they said.”

* * *

Nineteen

The under-sheriff who was in charge while the sheriff slept in agreed to treat the burned clinic as a crime scene only after I suggested that arson may have been involved. He also informed me that Doc Downey, as he called her, seemed to be out of town, as she hadn’t been around at the scene of the fire, according to the reports he’d heard.

I took the news into Derek’s office, where the two of them were still working on Downey’s missing years. Candice, it seemed, didn’t like office work all that much.

“Sounds as if I should run you over there, Annette. You’ll want to see that the crime scene protection is complete.” She pulled a pair of driving gloves out of a back pocket.

“I kind of feel that way, too, but Rod Andersen told me he’d be here by noon, and he may have warrants. Which we’ll need, crime scene or no. The thing is, they said that the ‘clinic’ burned down, but I don’t know if that means a residence, too.”

“I remember several buildings, probably old, remodeled farm buildings. They were all clustered, but separate so that one might burn and leave the others.”

“That’s what I mean. They said ‘clinic,’ not ‘place’ or something more comprehensive. So the warrants become more important. Maybe I should hit the road and get over there as soon as I can and then, Candice, you can bring Rod over when he gets here.” I watched her brown eyes get even bigger than usual. “And you’re allowed to impress him with your driving, because I’ll need you there as soon as possible.”

I had visions of my boss showing up with white knuckles and the shakes.

“Derek, I hope it’s all right with you to stay here and keep at it. Also hold down the fort.”

“And miss all the fun *plus* the opportunity to maybe spend a night in Del Norte? Aww. Well, OK.”

“I thought you might react that way. I’ll call in now and then to see if you’ve found anything interesting.”

“I’m hoping the FBI report and the others will provide something. I’ve hit a dead end, I’m afraid.”

“Keep at it. I think I’m going to hit the road.”

I pushed my underpowered CBI Explorer to its limits getting there, and it still took longer than I thought it should. But Candice would have been proud of me, I think—I managed to get to Del Norte much faster than on my other trips. In town, I stopped at the gas station with the pay phone to fill the tank and to get directions.

Maureen’s clinic, or what was left of it, was easy to find, given that I knew the side of town it was on and had local directions. I pulled into the drive and was stopped by a uniformed sheriff’s deputy, which made me feel better about the integrity of the scene. My shield got me past him without questions.

The scene was as I had imagined—several buildings remained intact, but one rather large one was burned to rubble. While there would be plenty of charred debris left to keep the fire investigators occupied for some time, it was clear that there would be no flammable material left for them to find—documents, for example, from someone in Kuwait thanking Maureen for her efforts and mentioning a funds transfer to her Swiss bank account.

There were two vehicles in the large circle of gravel that the buildings were clustered around, one fire-engine red and the other white. A Mutt-and-Jeff duo were talking with each other near the burned building, and they looked up at me as I drove in.

As I was getting out of my car, my phone chirped.

“Annette? Officer Garcia and I are just leaving.” Rod Andersen sounded excited, as well he would be if he were sitting in Candice’s passenger seat.

“Good to hear, Rod. I’ll see you in an hour and a half or so.”

“What? Isn’t this at least a two-hour drive?”

“For normal people, yes. But I told Candice to hurry, so hold on. Oh, by the way, did you get warrants?”

“Right. One for her arrest and one for a comprehensive search. Had to do a little arm-twisting for the arrest warrant, though. I hope we find something to justify it better. Um, Officer Garcia said something about a fire?”

“One building. There’s plenty left to search, including the residence. I’m hoping for a computer. See you soon.”

“OK, I’ll be...oh, Lord...” And I heard a blip from Candice’s siren and squealing tires, the kind of squeal that hard acceleration makes, accompanied by her big-block V-8 winding out.

“Have fun, Rod.” And I disconnected.

I had been walking toward the two men by the building, and they were watching me with obvious curiosity.

“Sorry, lady, this is a crime scene, and...Oh. Sorry.” The taller of the two interrupted himself when I held up my shield.

“I’m Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation out of Durango. I asked an under-sheriff to protect this as a crime scene, and I’m glad to see it’s been done. This could be extremely important.”

“Oh. Right. I’m Sheriff Zachary Higgenbottom, and this is Chief Wilfred Lind. He and his guys worked this fire last night.”

I shook hands with both of them. “I heard you were out here, too, Sheriff. Looks as if there wasn’t much you could do.”

The short, stocky fire chief spoke up. “Not really. This building was part hay barn, part clinic, I guess. By the time we got here, it was ‘fully engulfed,’ as we say, and all we could do was to stand around and watch, keep it from spreading, try to keep the heat down a bit. We hosed down the other buildings to keep them intact.”

“I think I can see what looks like outlines of stalls. Any livestock in there?”

“Not that we could tell. And so far, we don’t have a cause, although I’m betting something electrical and the hay.”

“Any strange smells? I don’t mean flesh, but anything chemical?”

“Some. It was her clinic, after all, so we weren’t too surprised.”

“And I was told that Dr. Downey was nowhere to be seen.”

The sheriff spoke up. “That’s right, Ms. Trieri. It’s well known that she travels all over the region for emergencies and so on, so it wasn’t really a surprise. We called her pager, but we haven’t heard anything. Sometimes she’s just plain out of touch, I’m afraid.”

“Sheriff, Chief, there’s a lot more to this than you know about, and it’s all going to hit the fan soon. So I guess I’ll fill you in while we wait. First, I guess I’d like to say that we need to make this entire complex of buildings a potential crime scene. With us here, it won’t be a problem, but I want you to know why.”

They both looked surprised, and, as I told them why we needed to treat everything with care, their surprise grew and grew. Eventually we all went to sit on some lawn chairs in the shade, after Sheriff Higgenbottom called for more deputies.

* * *

It was inevitable that the number of people and cars on the site would grow, and by early afternoon there must have been a dozen vehicles parked on the gravel circle. Chief Lind had called a retired friend of his who had extensive arson investigating experience; the sheriff had called in three deputies to make sure everything stayed intact; Candice had radioed her superiors at the Alamosa State Patrol office, who had sent four officers in; and there were others in plain clothes whom I was never introduced to.

Candice showed up with Rod, lights ablaze, executing a perfect four-wheel drift on the last curve of the paved county road before the driveway, followed by a sliding, left-hand power turn into the drive and a one-eighty on the gravel into a parking spot. The noise of the four-wheel drift—tires and engine—had turned everyone’s heads, and when she finally stopped, a few people actually applauded. She got out and took off her gloves, all business. I waved at her and walked over in their direction.

After a minute, the passenger door opened, and Rod got out, holding carefully to the door frame. He stood, blinking in the sunlight, and I could see his knees trembling. Candice dove in the driver’s side door, rummaged around, and came up with something in her hand.

“Here are your sunglasses, Director Andersen.” She walked around the car and held them out for him, but he just looked confused.

By then I was there as well, so I took his sunglasses from her, pulled mine down my nose an inch, and winked at her.

“Glad to see you’re here, Rod. You look stiff, like you’ve had a long car ride. Let me suggest a little stretching.” If the poor guy hadn’t looked so shaken, I would have had a little fun with him. But that would have been just plain nasty, given his condition.

“I’ve been talking with the sheriff and the fire chief, and they’re up to speed on what’s going on. Once they heard the situation, they called in the help you see here. One guy, in particular, seems to have extensive fire experience—that’s him over there poking around in the rubble. The others are here to secure the scene, and I think some of them are ours, to help with the searches.”

I talked for a little longer to let Rod regain his equilibrium. Eventually he reached out and took his sunglasses from me, and I could see he was recovering.

“Thanks, Annette. Whew. I’m riding back with you, if it’s all right. So. How about some introductions? Then we can get on with a search.” He patted his jacket pocket.

During the introductions, the guy poking around in the rubble offered a preliminary opinion.

“Looks like it started with a short in the wiring in the hay loft.” He pointed generally in the direction of a somewhat taller pile of debris. “But the wiring’s up to code and fairly new, from what I can tell. That suggests to me that it may have been set up to do this somehow, meaning it’s arson. There’s the remains of some kind of electrical box over there, mostly plastic so it melted, but some parts are intact. We get that analyzed, it may turn out to be some kind of timer to actually cause a short and start the fire.”

After that, we worked the search, starting with the other out-buildings. One was full of animal feed and various pieces of handling equipment—ropes and halters, even a couple of cattle prods. A second was the crematory, as much a huge furnace as a building. Another was a garage, and there was Maureen’s big pickup truck sitting next to an empty space.

“Well, now, mostly we see her in this pickup. It’s what she tows the horse trailer out there with, and that other contraption, too.” Chief Lind was referring to the trailer with the hoist that I’d seen in action up in Creede. “Seems like I remember her other vehicle being one of those yuppie sport-utes, some kind of Mercedes, maybe.”

We put one of the State Patrol officers to work on the radio, to get car registration records.

Eventually, we were ready for the house. One of the plain clothes guys announced himself as having lock-picking skills, so he set to work on the back door. Another said he knew computers, so I had him standing by, ready to take on whatever equipment might be in the house.

One thing I've discovered about being a CBI Director is that I just don't meet everyone, and they don't expect me to. They work as anonymous officers, carry out my slightest wish happily, and disappear at the end of the day. I've become used to it, but I don't really like it. I'd rather know something about the people working for me, at least their names. Even if I do tend to forget them from time to time.

The computer guy got my hopes up by allowing as to how he expected to find a system in the house, because there was a two-way satellite dish on the roof. He explained how people in remote areas can subscribe to broad-band computer service linked to their television satellite reception, but a somewhat larger antenna is required, which Maureen had. He also suggested that whatever computer there might have been in the clinic wasn't linked to the one in the house, because there was no indication of the necessary wiring, and it was too far away for a wireless network to be reliable.

As soon as we got in the door, he went snooping, and it took only a minute for him to find the computer. He called me in to watch as he dealt with it. First, he disconnected the power to the satellite receiver and powered down the computer itself by pulling its plug out of the battery-backup power supply—that way, he said, it wouldn't be doing any last-minute disk erasures. There might be some operating system confusion when the system was re-started but that wasn't a concern. Our strategy was going to be to remove the hard disk and look it over separately from the system itself.

The room in which he found the computer was clearly Maureen's business office, and there were filing cabinets and a safe along with all of the other things offices contain. It was obviously going to take some time to pack up what we would be taking and to sort out the rest, so Rod and I left them to it.

When we got outside, Sheriff Higgenbotton was talking with Candice, what would be called "flirting" except for the age difference. She looked slightly uncomfortable, so I decided to rescue her. Rod walked over to talk with one of the State Patrol officers.

"Officer Garcia, I'm glad you were able to get Director Andersen here so quickly. He's been our liaison with the Governor, and he needs to be involved in this stage of the investigation." As I expected, this impressed the sheriff enough that he quit being so friendly with Candice, changing into a more businesslike mode instead.

"Glad to do it, Director Trieri." She smiled. "I hope he's no worse for the wear. I don't think he's used to speed runs. Director Andersen, I hope you're finding what you need to see?"

Rod had walked up behind me.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, Officer, I think we are. Annette? Her other car is indeed a Mercedes SUV, something called an M320. Here's the info." He handed me a piece of paper.

"Sir? You mean like that one?" Candice pointed briefly toward the road.

A boxy vehicle was sitting just past the driveway entrance, and as we looked up, it sped off down the road. I noticed just a flash of auburn through the driver's window.

* * *

"Sheriff! What's down that road? That way, south, I guess?" I was the first to react.

“Nothing much. Mountains. It dead ends, except for some connections to the network of jeep roads to the east, as I recall.”

I turned to the officer with whom Rod had been talking, and used Voice level two. “Officer! Quick! Get out and block the road so that vehicle can’t turn around and get out to the highway.”

Pointing at the receding SUV helped him understand what I was hollering about, and once he understood, he acted, enlisting help.

Sheriff Higgenbottom had yelled for the fire chief, who was a local and knew the roads better than any of us, and the portly little fellow trotted up, gasping for air.

“Wilfred, what’s up that road?”

“Uh...well...nothing much, except a couple of ranch houses...’scuse me while I get my breath...it just dead-ends about ten miles in.”

“Are there any side roads, other connections.” I noticed that Candice had her gloves out.

“Just a jeep road, about six miles up, maybe a little less, on the left. It connects to a whole network of jeep roads between here and Monte Vista, up in those hills. There’s a bunch of other turn-offs, too, but they don’t go anywhere.” The chief waved vaguely toward the mountains to the southeast.

I considered the situation. “OK, you guys make sure she doesn’t get out this way, if she should get around us. And, Sheriff, how about setting up road blocks in the places where she’d be likely to come out to the east? Candice, let’s go get her.”

I was tickled that no one said anything, not even Rod. They just nodded and got to work. But Candice was headed the wrong way.

“Candice? Let’s take my Explorer. That Mustang isn’t going anywhere on jeep roads. How are you at four-wheeling?”

She turned back toward me, and we walked off toward my car. “That’s how I first learned to drive. Used to race my brothers in the back woods. My Dad had this old, old Jeep, a World-War-Two Willys, and I’d follow my brothers around in their four-wheeling hot-rods. Hope you hang on good, Annette.”

The first thing I did after snugging my seat belt was to get on the radio and establish contact with the sheriff and his deputies. We decided that Candice and I would head south up the county road and turn east onto the jeep-road network, while the deputies, all of whom had SUVs, would continue all the way to the end of the road and cover the other dead-end spurs. If they didn’t find the Mercedes anywhere, they would return and help us cover the network of jeep roads to the east. Radios, I decided, are wonderful things.

At first, it was easy. The road became graded gravel just south of Maureen’s driveway, and there was a pall of dust hovering over it. There were pastures on either side of the road, and we could see it wending its way across the open terrain toward mountains. We knew we were on track.

But after a little more than five miles of steady climbing, during which we passed several turnoffs to both sides and the landscape sprouted bushes and stands of trees, our route became less obvious. Eventually, there was a turnoff with a sign. Candice passed it and then, about fifty yards farther, slid to a stop.

“No dust, Annette.”

So she backed up and took the left. She pointed to a little road sign.

“A Forest Service road, this one’s suitable for passenger cars. See? The numbers are horizontal. When they’re vertical, it means it’s a jeep road. Or, just so we don’t do any copyright infringement, a four-wheel-drive road. High-clearance vehicles only.”

Shortly, we crossed the stream we’d been following up the little valley and came to an intersection. The side road had a “No Outlet” sign, so we didn’t turn. But then the road we were on came to a “T” with no indication of which way we should go.

“This,” Candice pronounced, “is gonna be tough. How are you at reading tire tracks?”

“Definitely not in my gene pool. Now, if you need to know how to make an authentic tomato sauce for pasta, well, I can help.”

Candice was poking at the dashboard. “What’s this gizmo? How do you work it?”

The Explorer that the CBI had provided me was under-powered, but it was full of all sorts of electronic equipment. CBI Denver had decided I need such a vehicle—high-clearance, four-wheel drive—after my previous case, so it was a new model. I hadn’t even tried all its bells and whistles yet.

It turned out the thing that Candice was poking at was the navigation system linked to the global positioning system satellites. Eventually she found the right button, and a screen lit up and said “Please Insert Navigation CD or DVD.” So I looked in the glove box and there was a little package. One of the disks said “southwestern Colorado,” so in it went.

And a few seconds later, there was a little blinking dot sitting at a “T” intersection.

Candice and I celebrated with a high-five.

The choice to the left went back to the main road we had come up. If Maureen had gone that way, she was caught. We turned right, and I got on the radio to let them know our progress. We climbed deeper into the hills and the forest.

About a mile later, the road split in two, another intersection, shaped like a “Y” this time. Both choices had little signs with vertical numbers. But the nav system showed that the road to the right—it was actually more straight-ahead, along the little stream—dead-ended after a couple of miles. Again, if Maureen went there, she was caught. We turned left, up the side of the valley.

And now I began to understand what Candice had meant about the differences between the horizontal and vertical signs. It got rough—not just bounce-around rough, but shake-your-insides-into-mush rough. The “road” dodged around trees of all sizes, occasionally squeezing between two, nicking my mirrors. She had long before shifted the Explorer into four-wheel drive and dropped the transmission into low range. Now she was using low-low, and I was holding on for dear life.

We bumped around while the Explorer ground up the hillside, and eventually we came to the top, a little saddle in a ridge. We started down, Candice sped up, and it got bumpier. I’d adjusted my seat forward so I could push on the floor in front of me, and Candice was gripping the wheel while working the brake pedal.

“Candice, if she’s...oof...getting farther ahead of us...ouch...I’m not sure but what she deserves to get away. Geez!”

She had her teeth clenched, so she couldn’t talk.

We were following a small, dry watercourse down a little valley, winding in and out of clumps of aspen, and suddenly there was a road—or perhaps “path” would be more accurate—to the left. But it had a large mud hole in it, with no new tracks. So we kept on straight—or at least we didn’t turn left.

The jeep road continued down the little valley, and we continued to have our livers rattled around, for another couple of miles, at least. The dot on the nav system moved dutifully—and slowly—down the little dashed road on the map.

We came to another intersection, a road to the right. No mud holes this time. Candice slid the Explorer to a stop.

“What do you think?” She was looking up one route, down the other.

“See anything that looks like tire tracks, fresh ones?” I was peering at the dirt surfaces.

“How about dust?” She squinted into the air over the two choices.

“Let’s see what the map says.” But all it showed was us, the blinking dot, and three roads going off to the edges of the screen. One was easy to eliminate, but the other two just sat there, laughing at us.

* * *

“Does this thing have a zoom feature?” Candice was back to poking at buttons.

All of a sudden, the dot—us—got bigger and fewer of the roads showed.

“I’d say yes.”

“OK, OK, how about an unzoom feature?” Almost immediately, we were back to our original size. And then, after one more poke, we got smaller and lots more roads appeared.

“Now,” she traced her finger on the screen, “This right hand road goes over here, this other part of the network, with better roads, looks like.”

I looked out my window. “And it looks like it goes up. It would help if these navigation maps had topography.”

“And straight-ahead goes on down the valley. The road gets better, and then it must emerge onto the flats. Looks like the roads get straight and go along section lines.”

“If she’s taking random turns, we might as well flip a coin.” I was hoping the coin flip wouldn’t send us to the right. It looked even rougher yet, and the stands of trees were thicker.

“But if she’s taking random turns, she’s sure been lucky not to have dead-ended.” Candice looked at me, eyebrows up.

“We know she’s a planner. All the elaborate preparations for the heads on the fence posts, all those signs. Maybe she had an escape route all figured out in advance.” I looked a question at her.

“And if that’s the case, surely she’d want to get out of these mountains as quickly as possible.” She pointed straight down the road, and I nodded. Away we went.

The bouncing and jouncing went on for another mile or so, and finally we came upon an elaborate, four-way intersection with three other choices. But down the valley was obvious, so we barely slowed down.

In fact, we sped up. The road had become a road again—I even noticed a sign-post with horizontal numbers—and, because of clean living or something, we had a recently graded gravel surface in front of us. Candice shifted out of low range and we fairly flew.

“Gosh, Candice. It’s smooth again. How pleasant.”

“And it’s sure easier to handle this thing.” She was actually steering with one hand.

But soon the valley closed in, becoming an almost-canyon, and the curves tightened. I started hanging on again, and Candice started doing the gravel version of that four-wheel drift she'd done with Rod in her Mustang.

The difference was, on every other curve, there was this big drop-off into the creek next to my window. I didn't mind the right turns so much—she had the other half of the road and a wall of rock to play with. But those left turns, well, I began to understand how Rod must have been feeling.

It sort of helped, but it sort of didn't, when I looked over and saw that she had a huge grin on her face. She was concentrating, but she was loving it. This woman, I thought, is in the wrong line of work. Maybe she needs to race cars for a living.

“Annette, I know this is making you nervous. But I don't want to crash any more than you, and I'm being lots more careful than you think. See, there's a trick to getting a vehicle like this around curves like this on gravel. You brake in advance, as little as possible, of course, and, just as you go into the curve, you slide a little the wrong way, uh...like that,” the car twitched briefly, “to throw the back end around to the inside a little, so that when you stomp it at about the apex of the turn, the rear end oversteers a little and gets the car pointed the way you want it to go. Pay attention all the way through next time, and you'll see what I mean. There's a rhythm to it, and it depends on the vehicle, its size and weight and so on. I got enough feel for this thing on the way up the first valley, and it's responding quite well, really. Oop. Looks like things get tighter.”

There was one of those yellow road signs with a wiggly arrow, the first we'd seen.

But she didn't slow down, much.

Strangely, her explanation of technique helped me. I paid attention and began to understand the rhythm of her applications of the brakes and the throttle, as well as her jerks of the steering wheel, and it calmed me down. Every now and then, she'd come extra close to an outside edge, which made me grab on, but mostly it was easier.

I'm sure glad we didn't meet anyone coming up that road, though.

As I got calmed down, I also found that I could take my eyes off the edge of the drop-off, so I stole a glance at the navigation system screen.

“Intersection on the right coming up, can't really tell how soon.”

“What are the choices?”

“Straight becomes a hard left curve, and right splits again. Right looks like the shorter route out to the highway.” I felt the Explorer begin to slow.

“There it is.” She pointed ahead and even put on her turn signal. Habit, I suppose.

Although she slowed, she didn't slow as much as I would have, and the right-hand turn provided me with a good example of the twitch-and-skid turning technique, as I'd come to think of it. Someday I'll try it in my Subaru, somewhere flat, wide, and empty.

Because I was now really navigating, immediately after we turned I gave her the next maneuver.

“Left almost immediately at an intersection, a right curve, and after that we'll have a tough choice after a ways. Maybe we'll see some dust.”

But we didn't need to worry about seeing dust.

She did another of those twitch-and-skid turns, only to the left this time, and then there was that little curve to the right, a tighter one than it looked on the map. On the outside of the curve, perched on a

boulder, was a dark green Mercedes M320. We slid to a stop, and the clicking of the hot metal in the cars sounded as if they were talking with each other.

The M320 had spun a little, one way and then the other, apparently, because we were looking in the open driver's door. Maureen Downey was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Twenty

Just to be certain, we got out and looked the M320 over carefully. It wasn't going anywhere without a flatbed truck, though, and Maureen sure wasn't in it.

The surrounding countryside was almost flat, at least compared with where we'd been, but there was cover in the form of rocks, bushes, and stands of trees. We were lower, approaching the meadows and pastures where we'd begun, but there were still aspen and pine here and there. A month from now, I thought, this will be a striking setting, when the aspen turn.

But right then, it was threatening, because we were in the open and Maureen wasn't.

"Now what, boss?" Candice was doing little yoga-like stretching exercises.

"Let's do a quick check around the immediate area. She could be injured and hiding somewhere close by. And I guess we need to assume she's armed." I pulled out my Glock.

We worked our way around carefully, covering a circular area about three hundred yards in diameter around the cars, looking behind rocks and bushes, checking low spots and logs, trying to cover the ground efficiently but still not miss anything. I scared up a few birds, startling myself in the process. In a small clump of trees, Candice got yelled at by a squirrel who just wouldn't shut up. It must have taken twenty minutes for us to assure ourselves that Maureen wasn't in the immediate area.

I was the first back to the Explorer, so I sat down inside to think. Candice got back a few minutes later, and she proceeded to pull burrs out of her socks and gripe about how they itched.

"Any other ideas?" She didn't quite make it sound sarcastic.

"Got me. Hmm. Look. I think we should assume that she's still going to try to get away from us, not just sit around here and wait for us to leave. If she were injured, she would, but she wouldn't have gone far and we would have found her already. So she's probably OK and on foot. Thing is, she probably doesn't know we're here. I mean, she'll assume she lost us back up in the jeep roads, if she thinks we followed her at all. So she'd be heading for the highway, right?"

"So we should just cruise down the road 'til we see her? Hey, maybe she'll be hitch-hiking and we can just offer her a ride!...Uh, sorry, Annette. I'm still a little pumped from that driving."

"Well, look at this." I was pointing at the nav display, and she got in to watch. "Just about all of these roads head out to the highway. The one we're on offers some choices, and they're the shortest. But that other way, back a bit, where we just turned, gets there, too. More to the point, this other way leads more directly into Monte Vista. She probably knows it could take her quite a while to walk out, and she'd be concerned that someone would come along and find the Benz. If it were me, I'd go back to that last intersection and take the other way straight toward town. There are probably more chances to get another car there, and somewhat less chance of being followed that way. See what I mean?"

“I do. And that’s just what I’d do, whether or not I thought I was being followed.”

She fired up the Explorer and took off, picking up just enough speed to do a one-eighty on the road, just like she’d done before in Maureen’s driveway. And I felt just like Rod must have felt. That’s a maneuver I don’t think I’ll ever try in my Subaru.

We went back to the intersection and turned left, and I got on the radio to update the sheriff and everyone. I told them we were taking the most direct route into Monte Vista and that the others should try to cover other routes in that same direction. It would be easy for all of us, I thought, because the trees were becoming more and more sparse, and the landscape was turning into pasture and, ahead, even some irrigated fields.

At least, with Maureen presumably on foot, there was no need for the break-neck pace we’d used before. In fact, as I pointed out to Candice, that rooster-plume of dust that high-speed travel would cause could well be a tip-off, giving Maureen time to take cover while we approached. So Candice took it slowly, under thirty. It gave her time to think.

“Annette, have you got your cell phone?”

“Right here.” I pulled it out.

“Is it getting a signal? Yes? How about this? She probably has a cell phone, too. I doubt that she’d call the triple-A or anything, but it seems like she might just call for help, don’t you think?”

“Meaning that she’d call to get someone, a friend, to come out and pick her up, I guess.” I wasn’t completely clear on where she was going with this, but it looked hopeful.

“Right. And they’d be in a hurry, and they’d leave dust.”

“You probably mean, dust like that way up ahead there?”

“That’s what I was thinking, that dust that’s getting farther and farther away.”

“It is, isn’t it? But if we speed up and she’s still on foot, well...”

“Right. I’m not lobbying to speed up. I’m thinking of whom she might call.”

“She lives in Del Norte, and I bet she knows lots of people in Monte Vista.” I shrugged.

“But she wrecked her car in a strange place going in a strange direction. Wouldn’t she need to be able to trust the friend she calls? Trust them not to ask questions, or trust them to already know the answer?”

“Oh.” The light-bulb went on for me. “I think I know what you’re getting at. Bonnie Scharmatz.”

“Right. Do you know where she lives?”

“I do, and, as I recall, we’re headed straight for her place. It’s on the southwest corner of town, where the town actually turns into country. I *think* this is the road, at least.”

“Let’s watch that dust plume and see where it goes.”

* * *

I knew that this next part would be hard for me to write, but, in some sense, writing about it is the whole point.

Hal was the one who suggested that I put this entire episode down on paper, partly for a record of it, and partly as a catharsis for myself. He thought maybe my telling the story in writing would make the bad dreams stop.

We'll see.

What happened was, we followed the dust plume for several miles, while the nav system obediently tracked our progress on its map. Except for marching stands of cottonwoods along irrigation canals, the trees had disappeared. The countryside was flat and green—San Luis Valley agriculture in action.

After a while, our county road began to parallel the highway, US 160, as it ran straight into Monte Vista from the west. According to the map, our road, about a half-mile south of 160, came into town at about its southwest corner. The map even showed what looked like Bonnie's driveway there, a little dead-end spur running south off our road, right at the edge of town.

Candice was right, we continued to fall behind. Whoever was ahead of us, with or without Maureen, wasn't dawdling the way we were. But the flat terrain gave us a good view of the dust from the car ahead of us.

And about the time we saw the dust plume reaching the edge of town, it stopped moving. We were a couple of miles back at that point, so we couldn't tell why, but one possibility was that they had turned into Bonnie's driveway.

While we were still at least a mile from where I thought Bonnie's place was, Candice pulled over to the side of the road and stopped.

"Annette, have you got binoculars in this car? Seems like you should, somewhere."

"Yeah, I think so, in that box in the back that came loose a while ago." It had been annoying me by rattling around on the jeep roads, but, of course, whenever we stopped, so did it and I forgot about it. "At least this will give me the chance to secure it."

I got out, opened the rear hatch, put the box, a plastic milk carton affair with "CBI" stamped on it, back in its little nook, and refastened the straps that had come loose. Then I took stuff out of it until I found the standard-issue binoculars.

"Got 'em. Now I can safely ask: why?"

"I'm going to cruise by that ranch up there and into town at about the speed I've been holding. How about you take a look through those at what's there. That way, we won't stop and raise anyone's suspicions. If they're watching us with glasses, of course, they'll see everything. But we can only do so much."

"I'll sit low and hold these just over the window-sill."

So we cruised by slowly and I took in everything I could. Candice proceeded on into town and turned around once we were behind some trees from the ranch in question.

And it was indeed Bonnie's place—I recognized it from my earlier visit. There were several vehicles up the drive by the house, including a couple of pickup trucks that looked familiar to me. I didn't have time to get license plates, though, and a second pass seemed risky.

"Also, there's one older car that looks dustier than the others. Fresh dust, you know? On the vertical surfaces of the rear end, like it sticks there before it has a chance to blow off in the breeze while the car is just sitting. And the road there in front of the driveway is oiled all the way into town here. I think that car recently spent some time on dusty roads."

"It would be helpful to get licenses. Look." She was pointing at the navigation system's display. "We could make a big loop—what, about four miles?—and come by from the same direction. That would be way less suspicious, if anyone's watching, than if we cruised by going the other direction. You can scribble down plate numbers and read them out loud so I can scribble, too. We'll figure out the scribbles and call them in."

“It worries me, but I don’t see any alternative.”

Candice didn’t waste any time on the city street north to the highway, on US 160 west to the first county road south, and on that road back to where we’d already been. Once there, she slowed down to a speed even lower than she’d used before.

“I think the trick here is to maintain a steady speed, not to slow down in front of the ranch up there. That way, they won’t think we’re going slow just to look at them.”

“If anyone’s watching.”

“Right.”

That time, we managed to get all four license numbers, and we sat in the shade of the trees in town, with a view of Bonnie’s driveway entrance, while we called them in. We also called in backup, in the form of Sheriff Zach Higgenbottom and his guys plus Rod Andersen and several of our guys.

I recognized two of the pickup trucks because I’d seen them in the driveways of Sarah Robinson, up by Crested Butte, and Amelia Dent, out at Doc Whiler’s place near Creede. The dusty old car belonged to Bonnie Scharmatz, and the newer BMW sedan to Toni Henry. While we waited for reinforcements, we speculated that someone may have picked up Nedra Endsley from Fort Garland, because her only vehicle, the tricked-out dualie pickup that once was her husband’s, was still impounded.

Zach and Rod and all the guys didn’t take as long to arrive as we had thought they might—it seemed they had been following our general direction all along, from monitoring our previous transmissions. And they had already sent a trooper and a flatbed truck out to retrieve the Mercedes, in fact.

Then it was time for strategy. And I found myself in charge of a situation that I didn’t have a clue about.

“I don’t know that we have cause to all go charging in there, guns drawn. So I’m open to ideas, guys.”

It was Sheriff Higgenbottom’s turf, so he wasn’t shy. “Seems like you told me earlier that these women conspired with the Burma Shave killer. And now they’re all together, or at least most of ’em, looks like. You don’t think that’s enough?”

“I would if we had arrest warrants for the conspiracy charge, but that’s still in progress. Rod, we’ve talked about the sensitivity of this, how those women have been turned into victims and heroes. What do you think?”

“We have an arrest warrant for Maureen Downey. If she’s there, that’s plenty of cause.”

“But we’re not sure she’s there. We think maybe she is, but we really don’t know.”

“How about we go in there, guns *not* drawn. We all just drive up in a little caravan, surround the place, and call ’em on the phone. If it’s just an innocent tea party, they’ll be wondering what the hell’s up, and that should be obvious from the phone call. If it’s not so innocent, well, we can play it by ear. For one thing, we can say we have a warrant for Maureen and order everyone out of the house because we have reason to believe she’s in there.” The sheriff was a no-nonsense kind of guy, I could tell.

“OK. Sounds like a plan. We drive up, park around the perimeter, stay covered, and make a phone call. No weapons until it’s clear we need them. Sheriff, would you like to make the call? Or should I?” I was ready to do it myself, but it was his county, after all.

“No, Ms. Trieri, this one’s yours. I’m not sure what I’d say, anyway. Bonnie sold me a pony last Christmas, for my daughter Wendy.” He looked depressed—one of the dangers of small-town law enforcement is having your friends disappoint you.

So, we formed up our little caravan, with Candice and me in the lead, and drove sedately up Bonnie’s driveway. It reminded me of a funeral procession, a premonition that I won’t ever forget. When we reached the house, Candice parked across the front walk, and the other cars circled the house at approximately even intervals. Candice and I positioned ourselves on the far side of the SUV from the house, and then I called Bonnie’s number.

The phone rang for a long time, and I took the opportunity to look the house over. It was a small, single-story farm house with a newer green metal roof. But it needed paint, and the foundation around the basement windows looked like it was crumbling. The porch had flowers in boxes, petunias and something white that looked like sweet alyssum. There were huge, healthy lilac bushes on either side of the porch; they needed pruning, they were so big.

After about twenty rings, I gave up and started over. The phone started ringing again, and it went on and on. There were calico curtains in the windows, I remember, and a brass door-knocker. In front of the large window, in what was probably the living room, there was a little row of hollyhocks. The chimney had a rooster weather vane on it.

Candice tapped me on the shoulder and shrugged a question, and I shrugged an answer. She shifted weight and stood up to change position.

And the house exploded.

Later, it was determined that a large propane tank in the basement had exploded because someone had strapped several pounds of C4 to it and set it off. Why there was a propane tank in the basement was never explained, but the gas line to the kitchen stove started at a bare spot in the side yard.

At the time, of course, we had no idea what it was, just that the house exploded into a zillion fragments. Wood and bricks and glass and metal shards went everywhere, and we all got knocked flat. The force of the explosion nudged my Explorer sideways about seven inches and completely crinkled its safety glass. It was fortunate that we were all, per procedure, hunkered down behind our cars.

All of us except Candice. She had stood up, just briefly, to stretch out kinked muscles. All the intense driving and then the squatting behind the SUV had got to her.

So, when my eyeballs stopped rattling around and my vision stabilized, the first thing I saw was Candice lying face down in a pool of blood, with a golf-club-sized splinter of house sticking out of her back.

* * *

Instinctively, I was desperate to help her, even though a rational voice in my mind was telling me that her injuries were far beyond my first-aid training.

You couldn’t help her, the voice said, even *if* she’s alive.

Trouble was, I didn’t seem to be able to move. I was lying on my left side, sort of sprawled in a very un-lady-like tangle where I’d landed, with my left arm stuck out on the grass in front of me. As far as I could tell, I wasn’t hurt—at least not like Candice was—although every cell seemed to ache, some more than others. I lay there, trying to get my nervous system to make my muscles respond—because I could see my left hand, I concentrated on its fingers. It seemed like an awfully long time before I could make my index finger twitch.

We learned later that the explosion had shattered every window in the southwest quadrant of Monte Vista and some downtown besides. This had the side benefit, from our perspective, of getting everyone's attention, and the emergency responders showed up about the time I was wiggling my whole hand. I was delighted to see them, because the first victim they focused on was Candice.

A few minutes later one came over to me, within my field of view. I tried to wave, but it really didn't work very well. I saw his mouth move, but didn't hear anything. I think I managed to smile and blink a lot, though, because he patted my shoulder, covered me with a blanket (but, to my everlasting thanks, not my head), and went somewhere else.

It turned out that I just had some kind of temporary concussive shock, and it wore off pretty quickly. Twenty minutes later, I was sitting up, and my hearing was beginning to return. I wasn't the only one affected this way—as I was sitting there I saw several others from our law-enforcement cavalcade in similar straits. After about an hour, we were all fine—except for a few abrasions and contusions, lingering body aches, and major cases of tinnitus. The only law-enforcement casualty was Candice. She was taken off in an ambulance while I was lying under the blanket working on my nervous system.

And there were the other casualties, of course. The women in the house died together in a suicide pact—the presence of the C4 residue made it obvious that this was no accident, and we later found confirmation, in Sarah Robinson's diary, of their plan to go out together in a blaze of glory should their conspiracy be discovered. Ultimately, we were able to obtain positive identification of three of them from prints taken from assorted fingers and hands in the debris—one of those was Maureen Downey—and we were able to use DNA analysis to determine that there had been six women killed altogether. Because none of the five women associated with the Burma Shave victims ever turned up, the assumption has been that they all died that Saturday.

We were able to identify Maureen because Derek dredged up a set of her fingerprints, from a connection he made with Scotland Yard. During her years at Oxford, she had been involved in a demonstration for an independent Northern Ireland. Things got violent; she got arrested.

We never did find out where she was between college and graduate school. Also, we never were able to make a real connection between her and the Kuwaiti girl who had been stoned to death for the crime of being a rape victim.

But we did discover that Maureen had received several large funds transfers from a bank in Switzerland, because Derek worked some magic with financial records. Quite sensibly, he started with a bank that had branches in all of the towns close to the homes of the victims—the Western Slope Bank & Trust, based in Grand Junction. Rather than work through the courts, he simply called up their senior vice president and explained the situation. By working with us, the bank was able to avoid the horrible publicity that would have been involved with a more official investigation.

The six women who died in the explosion all had accounts with Western, and there had been a number of remarkable transactions in those accounts in the six weeks prior to their deaths, notably transfers from Maureen Downey into the five others.

The fact that Derek uncovered this information on that Saturday, and did so before they died, is testament to his skills.

Nothing remarkable was discovered in the investigation of the explosion, beyond the amount of propane that must have been involved, but the arson investigation at Maureen's clinic was another matter. They were able to piece together the charred remnants of a strange apparatus of some kind, what one investigator seemed to think was a sort of horizontal guillotine. While we'll never know all the

details of how those five men died, it appears that it was at the clinic and that their bodies were cremated there.

And, eventually, the hard disk we removed from Maureen's computer provided enough information for us to clear the case. It was encrypted, and we had to enlist some expert help—a student Hal knew at FSU who was probably going to work at the CIA after graduation—with a chaos-theory based decoding program. Please don't ask me to explain it.

Sam Milstead, ersatz mayor of Kharma, eventually turned up and was welcomed home, according to Sheriff Hank Allen, with mixed feelings by his wife Gwen. Somewhat reluctantly, he informed the Saguache County Sheriff's Office that he'd received a call from an old high-school buddy and taken off on a week-long drinking spree. They planned to meet up at Sam's cabin, but when they found the road blocked, they drove off in the buddy's car.

After we had all these loose ends tied up—as well, at least, as we were ever going to be able to do so—I called Kristof von Stier to thank him for his assistance. His cancer was back in remission, and it was actually a most pleasant conversation. I think he was still a bit jealous of Maureen's skills at fulfilling the Kuwaiti contract, as he called it—even though our evidence was all circumstantial, he was convinced that the Gulf War rape incident involving five Colorado Army National Guard Reservists defended by a lawyer from Washington DC was behind it all. He seemed satisfied that he had been able to get his share of the bounty for taking care of one of the five Reservists years ago.

Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of the entire thing was that Officer Candice Garcia survived, although it was touch and go there for a while. Emergency surgery removed the piece of two-by-four, which had pierced her all the way through, breaking two ribs, puncturing and deflating her right lung, and slicing her liver. A second surgery repaired some of the damage, and then, after she was flown by flight-for-life helicopter to Durango, a third surgery finished putting her back together.

I went by the hospital several times to see her. A week and a day after the explosion, the following Sunday afternoon, I found Dino there, holding her hand, patiently waiting. She hadn't awakened all week, but her signs were improving continuously, and everyone was optimistic. Dino was talking philosophy to her, rehearsing his lectures for his classes, I guess, just to have something to say.

While I was there, she opened one big, brown eye and smiled at him, a smile that actually worked because they'd removed the breathing tube a day before.

Did you know that really big guys cry really big tears? I actually heard one plop onto the sheet, it was so big.

* * *

And hearing that tear go plop was something of a breakthrough for me. It meant that I was finally whole again, back to where I started.

Although my hearing took a week to recover completely, the rest of me was better much sooner. That fatal Saturday afternoon, as soon as I could hear a little I called Hal, and I told him I was sore, but fine. I knew the explosion would be all over the news, and I wanted him to hear directly from me first.

Even though I told him it wasn't necessary, he got into his Superman mode and drove over in the S4 to pick me up and take me home—I think he beat Candice's time when she'd brought Rod Andersen over earlier. And he did it without the benefit of emergency lights.

For me, the rest of that Labor Day weekend was rather like being in a spa. I got pampered with massages, hot baths, meals in bed, and—best of all—an enforced no-telephone rule. Somehow, I've got to figure out how to get that kind of treatment without getting so banged up first.

Monday afternoon, Labor Day, was glorious. The very first hint of fall had blown in on Sunday, while I was loafing around in bed, but it was still warm enough to do summer things. It was making me feel guilty that Hal was using a university holiday to play nurse-maid to me, and I tried to send him off fishing somewhere.

"I'd rather stay here with you, really. I went fishing on Saturday, way up the Los Piños like we talked about, and I slayed 'em. I'm sure if I went back out, it would just be a disappointment."

I think he was talking extra loud, because my hearing still wasn't quite up to snuff at that point.

"But it's Labor Day. You can't just sit around here and baby-sit me."

"But that's not what I'm doing. I'm watching baseball games on TV. Now why don't you go take another nap? We're going out later."

Rather than argue, I took a nap, falling to sleep wondering what he was talking about, going out.

It turned out that he assembled a delightful Labor Day picnic for us, an early supper—and not just your run-of-the-mill ham-sandwich, potato-salad kind of picnic, either.

I woke up about four, took a shower to really wake up, and got dressed to go out to dinner. Hal was puttering around in the kitchen, and when he saw me come in, he sent me packing.

"You look beautiful, but, I'm sorry, it's all wrong. You need jeans, a light-weight flannel shirt, hiking boots. Go!" He waved in dismissal.

So I went, changed as instructed, and came back. By then he was finished puttering, and he led me out to my car and put me in the passenger seat. The back was full of something covered by a blanket.

We took the shortcut north around the base of the mesa where FSU perches and headed northeast on Florida Road.

"We're going on a picnic, up around Vallecito Lake to the Los Piños Ranch. I've got a spot picked out just above the river."

The Los Piños Ranch, a dude ranch run by a friend of ours, was the site of one of our first vacations together, the place where I'd first learned to fly-fish. Rather than ask a lot of questions, I decided to keep quiet and see what he was up to.

When we got there, I understood why we were in my car. Compared to the Saturday jeep-road chase, it was quite civilized, but the bumpy track to the picnic spot was more suited for my Subaru than for Hal's S4.

He parked, ran around to open the door for me, and proceeded to unload the back. The blanket went on the ground at spot just above the river, next to a little riffle that was gurgling and splashing even through my lousy hearing. Under the blanket in the car was an ice chest, full of decidedly non-picnic-like things. A fresh baguette. A smoked-salmon pâté. Snow-crab legs on ice. Radishes, carrots, and cherry tomatoes carved into little flowers. Chocolate truffles. A dry German Riesling for me and Perrier for him, which he proceeded to pour into stemmed wine glasses.

"So, Hal, this is beautiful, wonderful. But we're married. You don't have to propose to me, you know."

"I know. I just want to celebrate being with you. That was a close call Saturday. Here's to you. Cheers." And he held up his wine glass to clink mine.

I took a long sip and decided I just had to ask.

“So, is it OK for you, what I do?”

“You mean, save the world from bad guys? Of course. I’m proud of it, in fact. It gets a little scary sometimes, though. But then, I’m a college dean, and my little world is dull, stodgy, and really boring for the most part. I can probably use a little excitement in my life. But I feel better when it’s over.”

“And you brought me all the way up here to tell me this?”

“I brought you all the way up here to spend time with you.” He smiled. “But I do have an ulterior motive.”

“Aha! Here it comes.”

“Well, I think I need a change. One of two things, or maybe both. We’ve talked about how Alice Swan is going to retire, probably this winter, and how I’m going to use that to stop being dean, right?”

“Right.” But I really didn’t know where it was going.

“I’m thinking I’d like some kind of sabbatical. And that means making some kind of opportunity for it. It also means figuring out how to make it work with your career, too.”

“Any ideas?”

“I’m working on it. But a sabbatical is temporary, it implies a return to where we are now. And, you know what? I’d like a house in a place like this. That little house on Eighth Street is wonderful, better than ever since you’re there with me. It’s cozy, just right for the two of us, and I can walk up to campus to work. But it’s in town, and town is getting busier and busier and ever more crowded. So, how would you like to live somewhere like this? Trees, a stream, wildlife.”

“Hey, I’m a city girl, remember? To me, wildlife is squirrels.”

“I don’t want a pet bear, or anything like that. But wouldn’t some elbow room be nice? Nobody’s house next door?”

“Where is this place?”

“I need to think about that, too.”

I remembered something I’d said early in our relationship, a line from an old, favorite movie of ours, and I leaned my head on his shoulder as I said it.

“You just keep thinking, Butch. That’s what you’re good at.”

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Murder Under Glass

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A Four Corners Mystery



Murder Under Glass: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

If ants had names, or serial numbers or some other form of personal identification instead of being interchangeable biological robots, the one that bumbled across the body would have become a national hero, its identity preserved forever as a legend in the history of the colony. And a large colony it was, with thousands of individual nests scattered throughout the several linked structures—that lucky ant would have been famous, if only it had possessed a personal identity.

As it was, the discovery of such an inconceivably huge source of protein sent the ant back toward its nest in a frenzy, its excitement causing it to leave trail of pheromones stronger than usual to mark its way. Soon, its compatriots would turn the original path into an ant superhighway.

It was only because there was blood and small shreds of skin under a fingernail that the ant's attention had been attracted. The finger was poking out from under a moldy leaf, and the ant had been investigating the mold to see if it would make useful food. It wandered across the finger and found the blood, which was dried and turning brown. Then it explored for quite a while, at least in ant time, both under and on top of the porous soil before heading home to gather reinforcements. The blood under the nails would provide food immediately, and when the rest of the body became sufficiently decomposed, the whole thing would be edible—enough for the nest, indeed for the entire colony, for a long, long time.

Of course, in the world of the Arizona desert outside the structures, there would be other scavengers for the ants to compete with, and those other scavengers—coyotes, vultures, a variety of other insects—would quickly claim almost all of the available nutrients in such a rich protein source. But here, inside EcoARC's greenhouses, the ants would have the body all to themselves.

Despite the designers' and builders' best efforts, the ants had managed to sneak in. After spending several years gradually out-competing the other animal species that had also been clever enough to get inside, the ants were almost the only critters left in the place. A few cockroaches managed to eke out a living within the giant greenhouses, but they struggled to survive against the tide of ants. Only by laying eggs in lucky places where the ants didn't run across them were the roaches able to endure. Even so, most of the roach eggs were discovered no matter where they were hidden—ant work-brigades would gleefully carry them home to feed their nest.

But what led to the ants' good fortune also led to their disappointment. The finger that was poking out attracted other attention—that of a graduate student involved in a plant inventory, who thought at first that it was some kind of strange root. It wasn't long at all before humans were scurrying all over the place—rather like the ants, actually, only bigger and on two legs instead of six. But they waved their arms about much like the ants waved their antennae, trying to communicate and figure out what had happened.

On the face of it, things were really quite simple. What had happened was that Dr. Melody Witherspoon had got herself quite dead somehow. It was that somehow that was the cause of all the human arm-waving—not that the ants paid much attention, being preoccupied with scurrying around and trying not to get stepped on.

* * *

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The way it all started, I didn't think I'd be involved, at least not professionally. It looked like a local affair, and it was way down in southern Arizona—none of my business, really. But, then, I've learned not to be surprised when things turn out not to match my expectations.

Ever since I've lived in Durango, homecoming week at the U—that is, at Frémont State University—has always been a low-key affair. By the standards of the NCAA Division I-A football factories, our little home-town Division II school is pretty much a backwater.

And this year, I could tell in advance that the homecoming festivities were shaping up to be even lower-key than usual—being married to one of the campus deans puts me in touch with the mood up there. For one thing, the football team had returned to its mediocre ways after several years of unprecedented success, including a Division II national championship, so the big game would probably be a disappointment. For another, the colors of the aspen up in the Animas Valley this year were anti-climactic, because the trees got whacked by an early freeze and a week of wind. And ski season was still at least a month off, despite the frenzy of pre-season marketing hype and equipment sales.

So FSU alumni had no real reason to come to town. In fact, but for the excitement generated by the news from Arizona, Homecoming Week would have been downright sleepy. That certainly would have been my preference, all things considered.

Tuesday afternoon, Hal—Dean Harold Weathers, my husband—brought home a copy of the campus paper, the *Frémont Free Press*, to show me the campus perspective. The story was in the *Durango Herald* as well, and we had talked about it a little over breakfast. But the *Free Press* really played it up.

Hal told me one time that his dual role as Dean of the College of Natural Sciences and as the husband of the Director of the Durango office of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation had made him virtually numb to all sorts of news coming into his office. But I could tell that this really upset him—not too surprising, really, as he had a personal connection to it.

Melody Witherspoon, one of the U's recent graduates, a young woman from the first cohort of Ph.D.s in Hal's new biogeochemistry program, had been found buried inside a greenhouse at the Ecological Archive Research Center in southern Arizona. The local publicity was all the greater because she was a Durango native, high-school prom queen and student body president, the pride of the community throughout her years in college at Frémont State. And now she was dead, under suspicious—even bizarre—circumstances.

According to the Associated Press wire reports in the papers, she had been found buried in a shallow grave in the East Asian tropical rainforest greenhouse, one of several ecological communities maintained at the facility. "Unnamed sources" were speculating that this location had been chosen so that decomposition of the body would be expedited, because most of the other greenhouses were dry enough to preserve tissue almost as effectively as the desert outside. Cause of death was also a matter for speculation at this stage, according to the AP.

In custody was one Jorgé Alvarez, 22, citizen of the Republic of Mexico, working in the U.S. without appropriate documentation—a fact that the *Free Press* downplayed, given its editorial stand in

favor of relaxing immigration restrictions. Alvarez had several deep scratch marks on his left cheek, and testing of skin and blood found under the fingernails of the victim's right hand was underway.

These facts were reported in both papers. But the *Free Press* went farther, including its own reporting on the home-town angle, with intrusive interviews of grieving family members, nostalgic comments from high-school teachers, and a 15-year-old photograph of Melody, age 11, playing with her dog Scupper. In the picture, Scupper, long since deceased, was tugging with great concentration on a Frisbee that Melody was holding.

Hal told me that he had managed to avoid the *Free Press* reporter seeking to interview him about Melody's years at Frémont State. He just didn't want to do it, he said. But it turns out that he would have been a good interview, not only because he knew Melody, but also because he knows about EcoARC, as it's called. That evening, while we were working on the dishes—he washes, I dry—I asked him how.

"I was at a meeting down there a while back. It's a fascinating place." He was up to his elbows in soapy water, working on the pots. He'd fixed a braised chicken breast dish, with new potatoes, sautéed carrots, and a separate sauce involving rosemary and juniper berries, so the kitchen was a mess.

"EcoARC's a private research facility down in Arizona operated by a consortium of drug companies. Its real name is the 'Ecological Archive Research Center, Inc.' They focus on plants that might have biomedical applications. To do the job effectively, they have to maintain the plants in their natural habitats as closely as possible, which explains the name of the place and why they have ecosystems like the East Asian rainforest. EcoARC was built specifically for research, so it's set up with a bunch of greenhouses all linked together by underground tunnels that also serve as air ducts, labs, and so on. From what I can tell, EcoARC has quickly become accepted in the scientific community as a tool for doing ecosystems and other research as well as for its biomedical potential." He scrubbed furiously at something in the braising pan. "Oh, man, this stuff really got welded on. Yuck."

"So this place is down by Tucson somewhere?"

"Yeah. The greenhouses are in the middle of a several-hundred acre preserve in Arizona, in the high desert between Tucson and Phoenix, northwest of the little town of Oracle. The research facility, this greenhouse enclosure where they found Melody's body, is closely controlled in terms of its internal climate and so on. Collectively, it's also big, something like twenty acres under glass altogether, I think. It's not open to the public, except for special educational tours, and much of the research there is proprietary. But they have connections to various research universities, so there are students and other visitors working on research projects, and they work hard to maintain an academic atmosphere, rather than a corporate one." He glared at the pot, rinsed it, and handed it to me to dry off.

"What was this student of yours doing there?"

"She wasn't really my student; she was just in my college. First Ph.D. in our new biogeochemistry program. Her advisor was Jin-Rae Kim, a professor in the Natural Resources Department. Jin-Rae's got connections to one of the drug companies in the consortium, one that's part of an energy conglomerate, I guess, and he got a grant to look into carbon sequestration in arid ecosystems. Carbon's a hot topic just now because of the potential for carbon-credit trading. So Jin-Rae works down there on occasion. Melody was there on a post-doc that she got in a competitive program sponsored by the Department of Energy as part of its global change program. She was working on an extension of her dissertation project under Jin-Rae. Carbon fixation by dryland grasses, as I recall. I think she went down there last summer—or maybe it was last spring."

"This is so awful." Even though I frequently hear about death and destruction as part of my job, it's always hard to manage when it hits close to home.

“Sure is. You told me this morning that the evidence looked fairly solid against that guy they have in custody, the scratches on his face.”

“That’ll depend on the testing, and that could take some days. But there’s probably more that hasn’t been reported. I don’t really know much beyond what’s in the papers, and they didn’t even talk about the cause of death. So, is there anything we can do?”

“I was hoping that there would be a memorial service or something. I want to send flowers on behalf of her friends and colleagues at the U. I put Alice on to that one, partly as a way to get her cheered up. She’s been threatening more and more to retire, and this just might push her over the edge.” Hal’s administrative assistant, Alice Swan, made it possible for him to do his job effectively, I knew.

“How’d you do that? And what’s she going to do?”

“Oh, I walked out to talk to her this morning and found her in tears over the whole thing. She mentioned that she thought she had experienced all the grief she ever would, back when her son got killed and her husband died. But this got to her, revived those old feelings, she said. So I tried to think of something constructive to have her do, and it occurred to me that she could call Melody’s mother and see about arranging a campus memorial service, or something like that. I think it got her out of her funk, to have something to do, to be involved and help.”

“Let me know when it is, the service, I mean. I want to come.”

“Of course, I want us to go together. Oh. Something else—I forgot to call you about it. I agreed to go down to Tucson and retrieve Melody’s body.”

“What?!” I almost dropped the sauce pan he’d handed me.

“Well, before Alice could call her, Mrs. Witherspoon, Mildred, called me. See, she’s single. Melody’s father died when Melody was quite young. And Mildred told me she’s just not up to the trip down there to bring Melody’s body back here for burial. She gave me power of attorney to do it, and told me it’s all arranged with a local outfit, um, Schullmann’s Mortuary. Seems that there’s a family plot in the cemetery down in Bayfield.”

“So you got talked into it.”

“Yeah, I tried to think of a way to get out of it, but I just couldn’t figure out how to say ‘no.’ Anyway, how’s your current case load? Can you get away for a couple of days?” He had that apologetic tone in his voice that he gets sometimes.

“When?”

“Tomorrow. I figure we could take a couple of days and make the most of it. Maybe go up to EcoARC, where they found her body, and see if we can learn anything. I don’t think there’s really much else for us to do except sign papers and ride back with the casket.”

“It’s sort of last-minute, but I think I can do that. Nothing much is happening right now at work. And it would be helpful for me to get closure, I expect. I remember meeting Melody, a couple of times. Personable, bright, a great future ahead of her. This whole thing is sad.” An image of Melody’s face had popped into my mind.

“Sure is. Maybe, like Alice, we can do something constructive and make ourselves feel better. Find out something more about it when we get down there.”

So I got emotionally involved right away. My professional involvement took a little longer to develop.

* * *

It took us two airplane rides—Melody’s body was coming home via Tucson—with a stop at Flagstaff on the first one and a two-hour layover at Phoenix before the second one. After that there was a mix-up at the rental car counter at the Tucson airport, which made me proud of Hal for keeping his temper.

But eventually we were back in control of our lives, for a day or so at least. We headed north from the airport to the interstate, west and north around the downtown Tucson area, and then north on Oracle Highway. Hal was driving, so I got a wonderful view of the spectacular rocks on Putsch Ridge, on the west side of the Santa Catalinas, as the highway took us toward the open high desert.

Because it was nearly supertime, we stopped at a Mexican restaurant in Catalina, a village on the northern fringe of the Tucson metropolitan area, at least for now. Sprawl was gobbling up the fringe and pushing it ever farther into the desert toward the southward-creeping sprawl on the fringe of Phoenix.

The place was full of older couples from the nearby retirement community of Saddlebrooke, and Hal bet me that the food wouldn’t have the heat he likes in his chile. But the guacamole was acceptable, and my margarita, though a tad weak, was at least eight on a scale of ten.

“So tell me again about our schedule. In the rush of getting paperwork done this morning, I’ve forgotten.” I was munching a tortilla chip with a mound of green goop on it.

“After I talked to Mildred yesterday, I called the mortuary and found out the plan. They do this routinely, although not with murder victims. The Pinal County medical examiner has custody, but the autopsy is complete, they have no more questions, and so they’re ready to release the body. It’ll be put in a casket, the kind suitable for traveling, and shipped by air to Durango, where someone from Shullman’s will meet our flight. We’re just along for the ride.”

“So, do we take it to the airport? Like, on the top of the car, or what?” I licked some stray avocado from a finger.

“Yeah, right.” He turned on his mischievous grin. “And, darn it, I forgot to get a car with a ski rack... no, no, of course not. They, I mean Shullmann’s, made arrangements with someone local to take the casket to the airport in a hearse. It should be there when we check in at the airport tomorrow afternoon, unless there’s a hang-up, and for sure by Friday. We sign some paperwork and ride home with it in the hold.”

“And so we’re on our own until then?”

“More or less. One thing we need to do, we need to see if we can get some of Melody’s personal effects to take back to her mother. I promised I’d look into it, but I’m not going to play moving company for her. And I called Bill Longwell, he’s the new EcoARC Director, an old friend of mine. I called him this morning and told him we were coming down to do this. He insisted we stay up there at the Center, it’s about thirty more miles up the road from here, and do a tour tomorrow. I met him when he was working at the National Science Foundation in Washington. Great guy. He’s devastated by this whole thing. It’s on par with that episode at the U a few years ago, when we met— remember? Really, really bad PR on top of the personal tragedy. Also, in this case, the premature end of a potentially brilliant career.”

“And we’re going to stay in this greenhouse place?”

“We could ask, but the ants would probably carry us off if we slept in there. No, in addition to the greenhouses and the labs, it’s a corporate retreat center for the drug companies that run the place, and they have hotel rooms. Really nice ones with fabulous views, incidentally. You’ll see. And a restaurant, tennis courts, all sorts of amenities. Bill is comping our rooms. When I told him you were coming, and

who you are, he even offered to put you on retainer as a consultant to follow the investigation. I told him you were too curious to want to be paid for this, you'd just do it anyway."

"Hmmp. Well, I've read the fine print related to my CBI job, and it's an exclusive contract, so I couldn't take money if I wanted to. Of course, *you* could, I think. Doesn't your faculty appointment allow you to do consulting?"

"Hey, I like that. You do the work, and I get the consulting fee. Great idea!"

"Double hmmp. Here comes dinner." I was glad to be able to change the subject. "Let's see if they know their Mexican food."

The server, a top-heavy young woman sporting big hair and wearing authentic suburban cowgirl duds and rather too much makeup, set plates in front of us with the familiar warning about their being "real hot." As usual, Hal touched his, just to test, and gave me the "Yeah, right" look. I could tell he was disappointed that his chicken enchiladas were covered in salsa and sour cream, rather than green chile.

While Hal used his fork to poke at his sides of beans and rice, I dove in to my carnitas plate, little cubes of marinated and braised pork surrounded by beans, rice, and posole, with a mound of lettuce and tomato quickly wilting on the hot plate. It was excellent.

"So," I have this bad habit of talking with my mouth full, at least with Hal, "What did you mean about getting carried away by ants?"

"Ants? Oh, yeah. In the greenhouses, about the only critters are ants. I don't know the species, but everyone calls them 'crazy ants' because they run around like crazy all the time. They're little black ants, about two millimeters long. They don't sting and they're too little to bite much, but they're so numerous that they've just flat out-competed every other critter that's ever managed to get in there, and they have the run of the place. And because the plants provide them with plenty of food, there are lots, I mean lots, of them. If we stayed in there, even in a really good tent, by morning we'd be covered in the little buggers. Say, this is really quite good, if you don't insist on hot chile. Wonderful salsa."

"Take a look around. The clientele doesn't look like real chile lovers to me."

Because I was sitting against the wall, I could see that the room was two-thirds full of people in their sixties and up, people who had the tanned and weathered skin of folks of northern European descent who had been out in the desert sun too much, playing golf, most likely. At least that's what their plaid pants suggested.

I decided that the margarita, although good, was weak enough that I should have a second, and by the time we were finished with dinner, the sun was setting over the western desert. As we drove north and then east toward Oracle, I watched the sun's last light climb the Santa Catalinas. Just as it reached the peak of Mt. Lemmon, Hal turned left, onto an asphalt road north across the desert. Various warning signs threatened prosecution of trespassers and proclaimed the privacy of the road and its destination.

"You know, if this turns to gravel, I'm going to wonder where you're taking me." I was thinking things like "end of the Earth."

"Don't worry, it's fine. As long as it's not raining. The road crosses a couple of arroyos that can get scary if there's been rain. See, this facility has these great big greenhouses. You'll be surprised by their size. And some of the folks that live around here have this proclivity for target practice. Road signs, just about anything stationary attracts bullets. So they built the greenhouses, with all their glass, well away from the highway, kind of hidden in a little valley. As I remember, it's a dozen miles to the north here, up by that mountain. Black Mountain, I think it's called."

After a while we came to a little guard-house, where Hal assured the skeptical individual peering at us through the gloom that we were checking in at the hotel, and the gate levitated. Hal parked in front of a reception building, went in to the desk visible through the picture window, and returned with keys to our room. This turned out to be a short drive down a hillside, and, just as he said, it did indeed have a fabulous view, even though it was nearly dark by that time.

While I was staring at the darkening desert and the silhouette of Black Mountain from the patio, Hal was on the phone. He finished his conversation and came outside and hugged me from behind.

“Bill wanted me to call him when we got checked in, and he’s coming over with a bottle of chilled wine, and some Perrier for me, so we can talk about all this. Hope that’s OK?”

“Mmm. Sure. I’ll go easy on the wine, though. That second margarita was half too much for me to be really sharp, investigator-wise. Can we sit out here? It sure is beautiful. And still warm.”

“That’ll change pretty quick, but, yes. Let me find a towel and wipe these chairs down.”

* * *

Bill Longwell must have been waiting close by, because there came a knock on the door even as Hal was wiping the desert grit from the last of the patio chairs. I went to the door, introduced myself and welcomed Bill in, and I took him outside, where he and Hal shook hands like old friends.

“Bill! Good to see you again, except for the circumstances. I heard Annette introducing herself. I thought we could sit out here until it gets too cold. Um, unless there’s stuff you’d rather not have anyone hear.”

“I checked, and you’re the only guests in this block of rooms tonight, so there’s no one around. And there’s a south breeze, so maybe it’ll stay warm for a while.”

He began removing items from the various pockets in his sport jacket, and in rapid succession a bottle of Frog’s Leap chardonnay, a liter bottle of Perrier, three stemmed wine glasses, and a waiter’s corkscrew appeared on the little table. Then he patted himself down and found some napkins.

“How elegant! Makes that Mexican place in Catalina where we had dinner seem rustic.” As a child of civilization, I appreciate the little things, especially from a man. That’s one of the reasons I married Hal.

“You had dinner at Maria’s? Once is OK. But if you’re still here for dinner tomorrow, let me know and I’ll take you someplace much better.” He twisted the cap off the Perrier, uncorked the wine, and sat himself within reach of everything. Hal and I followed suit.

“So you’re here to accompany Melody’s body back to Durango, huh? Nice gesture. I talked with her mother, and she was, you know, quite naturally upset. But she was also concerned about getting the body home, so this is a big help to her. Maybe, just maybe, your time here will be something of a help to me, too.” He smiled in my direction.

“Of course, this is way out of my territory, but I’m curious about it. Maybe tomorrow I can pull some professional strings with the medical examiner and get his report. And the same with the sheriff.” With at least a day to kill, I’d been making plans.

“That’d make me feel a lot better, to know what they know. They’re not communicating much. This is Pinal County, not Pima County, where Tucson is. We’re two counties and several light years away from 21st-century civilization up here. Things get done in the old-time good-old-boy mode in these parts. Hell, I don’t even know what killed her, I mean, how she died. The sheriff’s also sealed off Melody’s

office here at the Center, which is a real pain for me. Probably has her apartment in town quarantined as well. He seems to think he has an air-tight case against that fellow Alvarez he's got in custody."

"Like I told Hal yesterday, all I know is what's in the papers. And all that's there is the scratches. If that's the sheriff's case, he's on thin ice, because if the DNA test doesn't match, his case is shot."

"I guess he's got some other stuff he's not talking about. But it's frustrating to be out of the information loop. I feel so responsible, yet so helpless."

Hal chimed in. "I've been in situations like this, and I know what you mean. It made all the difference to me when Annette and I were able to discuss things. Even if I didn't really help, talking about things made it seem like I was helping. One thing I've been wondering is whether the reports in the papers are accurate, as far as they go. Any feeling about that?"

"Yeah, from what I've seen. Kelly Rumsford, the graduate student who found her, noticed a finger poking out of the soil in the tropical rain forest, tugged on it and pulled up an arm. Boy, was he surprised!"

That made me sit up straight. "Excuse me, Bill. You said 'he.' The papers in Durango referred to Kelly as 'she.' So there are some errors. Maybe we should hear the whole story from you."

"Oh. Well, sure. Anyway, Kelly was in there doing a plant survey—you know, counting individual plants and classifying them. We track each plant in a big computer database, and he was looking for new shoots, checking health, that kind of thing. This was in the East Asian greenhouse. So he found the finger and the arm and got on the radio—we all carry radios when we're working in there—and summoned help. Art Finnegan, my second-in-command, he arrived first. He happened to be working next door on an ocean experiment, so he took charge."

"Ocean? Hal told me this was a greenhouse."

Longwell grinned. "That's what we call our big tank of saltwater. It's there in its own greenhouse to help humidify the air for the tropical plants, and we also grow corals and other tropical sea-creatures, like anemones. There's research on them as well. See, the greenhouses are all linked together with a zoned climate-control system, so the humid air from the ocean greenhouse gets pumped around everywhere in amounts needed to keep the various biomes at the right humidity. Anyway, Art saw the arm, gave it a little pull and, when it didn't come up by itself, he figured he had a whole body. So he called on his radio to get the sheriff. Then he made everyone stay clear of the area, kind of closed access off so it wouldn't be disturbed any further. The sheriff took about an hour to get here, and he called in help, which took another hour. They photographed everything, carefully dug Melody up, photographed things some more, and carted her off to the medical examiner's office for the autopsy."

"Art Finnegan. Hmm. Why does that name sound familiar?" Hal was staring at the sky. "Oh, I know. Didn't he spend last fall up with us, on a sabbatical or something? Or was it spring?"

"I think you're right. He's been here almost since the beginning, and I offered him the deputy position. He negotiated a semester's sabbatical before starting, last spring. He's a sharp fellow."

"Interesting." I was making mental notes. "The graduate student, Rumsford, is he enrolled somewhere around here? U of A down in Tucson?"

"Actually, he's visiting us, last summer and this semester. He's in the landscape ecology program up at the University of Colorado in Boulder."

"Ah. Anyway, what about this Alvarez fellow?"

"That's going to cause me even more headaches. He and his wife both work here, on the staff. She's a housekeeper, cleans these rooms, in fact. He was on the custodial staff for the administrative buildings

and the labs. The sheriff saw the scratches on his face, concluded that they were made by Melody because she had the blood under her fingernails, and arrested him. Turns out his green card is forged, so he's working for us illegally. Not truly our problem, because the INS admits it's an expert forgery. But still a big headache."

"What about his wife?"

"She's legal. Valid work permit, been here for a couple of years. They've got a kid who was born here, so he's a citizen. Good workers, both of them."

"Was Alvarez a custodian in the greenhouses also?" Hal likes to try to keep up with my questioning, and sometimes he even scores points.

"No, we have special custodial workers in there. People trained on how to clean up without disturbing any of the experimental work. Alvarez wasn't on the access list."

"Last time I was here, we did that inside tour, and getting in was no easy thing. There's the air lock with that key-pad code system. And people in there, usually."

"Yeah, and it's still that way. Also, there are cameras recording activity at all of the entrances. None shows anything out of the ordinary, like Alvarez dragging Melody's dead body into the air lock, for example." Longwell shrugged.

"But it does show her going in at some point?" That, I thought, would be most helpful.

Longwell looked embarrassed. "The video tape cycles every 24 hours. It's a money-saver. And neither Melody nor Alvarez is on any of the tapes. So whoever took her in there did it at least 24 hours before Kelly found her. I'm assuming that the medical examiner's report will bear this out."

I knew enough about this to be careful, "These recording systems can be fooled around with. Depending on the sophistication of who's doing the fooling, the tapes might not be evidence quality. If it did show something, like Alvarez dragging her body in there, that would be something. But no information from those tapes isn't necessarily meaningful, one way or the other."

"But if Alvarez didn't have access, it's hard to see how he could have put her body in there. And, say, I recall that the main entrance goes into the basement. If Alvarez didn't get in there routinely, I don't see how he could have found the rain forest to bury her there, even if he did get her in. It's a rat maze down there. That tour we did got me completely lost." Hal, I know, has a nearly infallible sense of direction, so this was no small admission.

"My thoughts, too. But the sheriff is stuck on Alvarez as the murderer, at least for now. I worry that time's a-wasting and we should be looking for someone else with scratches. But he's definitely in charge of this thing. Annette, maybe you can get something out of him tomorrow. I'd sure appreciate it. And now I have to be off. One last thing to do tonight." Longwell drained his wine glass and we all stood up. "Enjoy the rest of the wine. I'll find you tomorrow."

We walked to the door together and said our good nights.

"Well madam detective," Hal was looking tired, but interested in the whole thing, "Any thoughts on this little puzzle?"

"If Alvarez is in custody, he'll have a lawyer. At least I assume so. And if the lawyer's any good, he'll let Alvarez decide whether to fight the DNA testing. If Alvarez agrees to a match, that's a point in his favor, because it means he believes he's innocent. Assuming he's informed correctly about the test's implications. And, of course, if there's no match, the sheriff's got nothing on him, at least that we know of. The INS does, but that's different altogether."

"What about this thing with the access?"

“Not having seen the entrance or the system, I don’t know. But if it’s as tight as you guys seem to think, that’s another point in Alvarez’s favor. What we really need to find out, in addition to the DNA, is the cause of death. And whatever else the sheriff knows but isn’t talking about, of course. But that’s all for tomorrow.”

“You’re right. And I’m tired. How about a little stroll around before bed?”

“Outside? Um, what’s out there? This isn’t Durango.” I don’t like unfamiliar outdoors environments, and this one seemed really strange.

“Oh, lizards, spiders, the occasional coyote, maybe a mountain lion, snakes. The usual desert stuff. But I’ll protect you.”

“Yeah? With what? Your calculator?”

“No, by guiding you carefully along the roadway, where none of these critters hangs out. Hell, get off the roadway in the dark and the most scary thing is the cacti. Lots of different kinds, all pointy. But, look, there’s a moon. It’ll be beautiful.”

“Too bad I didn’t bring my Glock. Then I could take care of myself out there.”

“Unless you mistook a saguaro cactus for a threatening person and shot it. That would get us both in trouble. Saguaros are protected.”

* * *

Friday morning, the trip back to Durango was uneventful, for all three of us. On the Phoenix–Durango leg, the plane was nearly empty, so Hal and I moved to seats away from everyone else to talk things over. Thursday had been a busy day, too busy for us to leave, and the paperwork on Melody, more complicated than Hal had originally thought, hadn’t been ready anyway. So we stayed until Friday.

With some privacy on the plane, I was making lists to summarize.

“The tour was great, better than I would have thought. Especially inside. And the access security is reasonably tight, although it could be defeated by someone with the right skills. I doubt that Jorgé Alvarez has those skills. That’s the first thing.” I stuck my index finger out, pointing at the seat in front of me.

“Second, there was that encounter with Mrs. Alvarez, when we were packing up to check out this morning. Her English isn’t quite up to where it needs to be for me to understand things completely, but it seems she claims she’s the one who scratched Jorgé. Under what circumstances isn’t clear, but that could be clarified with an interpreter. Of course, her testimony won’t do her husband any good, but it’s another piece of information.” My middle finger joined my index finger.

“Then there’s a tidbit that the sheriff dropped, that Mr. Alvarez claims to have an alibi for the time frame of the death, an alibi that can be verified by his friends. Whether they’ll be willing to testify is a good question, at least in the sheriff’s opinion, because they may be undocumented and afraid to appear in court. However, this alibi is significant, because the time of death isn’t public information. Of course, if Alvarez arranged for his friends to lie for him, as the sheriff thinks, he’d arrange for the right time. But if the alibi’s valid and can be verified another way, Alvarez is scoring points right and left.

“Third, no, fourth, there’s the medical examiner’s report. Rudy Gelinski. Nice guy, competent. Unlike the sheriff. What a piece of work *he* is. But the ME seems to know his stuff. He mentioned that he’s supposed to be retired from his job as ME back in Newark. Pinal County hasn’t a lot of need for a medical examiner, so he’s on call. Anyway, he places the estimated time of death at T-minus-two days or so, plus or minus twelve hours. There are some curiosities about this that your stomach probably

doesn't want to hear about. But, based on other equally gross indications, he places the time of interment at T-minus-eight hours or so, maybe as many as twelve or as few as four. Where she was during the intervening day-and-a-half is a compelling question. And why there's no hint of her on that twenty-four-hour security tape is also curious."

"So, let's see, they found her body early Monday morning, meaning she was buried in there sometime over the previous night, and she was killed sometime over last weekend." Hal was trying to keep things straight, which is often as helpful to me as it is to him.

"Right. Anyway, the ME says that the DNA test will take a few days, but getting Alvarez tested will depend on whether he agrees to it, of course. Meantime, he's looked at Alvarez and says it's possible that Melody made those scratches." I continued on.

"Finally, and we're still on number four here," by now I was holding the four fingers of my right hand out, with my thumb still curled over my palm, "the cause of death. Asphyxiation, but with no signs of violence. She just ran out of oxygen and died. Suffocated. As if somehow she got her air supply cut off when she was asleep and she didn't struggle. Unusual. Points to the possibility of drugs in her system, but toxicology tests are still in progress." I had to stop to take a breath.

"Fifth, and last." I stuck my thumb out, "The defense lawyer. Public defender, just a kid fresh out of law school. Never had a capital case before, or even a homicide. Nervous about doing the wrong thing. Nervous about letting Alvarez agree to the DNA test without a fight, even though it's OK with Alvarez, which, as I've said, is a point in his favor. Nervous about my talking with him. Nervous about just about everything, probably including his own shadow. Given that the sheriff is out to get Alvarez, better representation would be a big help to the defense. I advised the kid to go along with the DNA test, because Alvarez knows whether he's innocent or not. As long as there's a competent translator, Alvarez can make an informed decision. If the DNA test clears Alvarez, the sheriff is back to square one, and he's wasted a week or so focusing exclusively on Alvarez."

"Is the sheriff going to release the ME's report, the cause of death or anything?" Hal was still trying to keep up with me.

"He said he will when he's good and ready. The Tucson paper is talking about a court order, but the sheriff is a feisty old cuss and he'll probably fight it. So it could be a while."

"Which means that we get to be the ones to tell Mrs. Witherspoon how her daughter died. On top of the fact that you weren't able to get any of Melody's stuff released to bring back. That's going to be really upsetting to her."

My heart sank. "Oh. You're right. Damn! How come it's always us? I thought that time with Alice and her husband paid our dues." I like the challenge of case work far more than the social work that is sometimes attached.

"We did that one by enlisting their pastor. Maybe we can find out who's counseling Mrs. Witherspoon, and enlist him. Or her."

"Maybe. This could be tough, though, because we don't know who killed her, and she'll ask, for sure. And we really don't know much about the actual death."

"From what you just said, it doesn't look as if Melody suffered, though. That's something. Say, how about Alice? She's already involved with setting up a memorial service, she's talked with Mrs. Witherspoon, and she's been through something like this." Hal was obviously thinking that Alice could even benefit from the involvement in this affair.

"Have Alice tell her?"

“Get Alice to help us tell her.”

“Hmm. Could work. Let’s think about it. And, of course, talk with Alice about it. At least talking with Melody’s mother will be the end of this for us.” I felt relieved. “This is clearly an Arizona problem, not mine. Or yours, for once.”

If only.

* * *

Two

We were gone only forty-eight hours, but Alice worked fast. By the time we returned to Durango, she had arranged a memorial service to be held in the Theater in the Sky up on the campus on Monday morning, a week after Melody’s body had been discovered.

An elegant Mediterranean structure used mainly by the theater and dance department, the Theater sat on the highest part of the mesa and would have had a commanding view if there had been windows. It was one of the few remaining landmarks of the “Campus in the Sky,” the old college that had been transformed into Frémont State by an ambitious university president back in the ’80s. Hal never tired of griping about the budget mess that had been left behind when that president moved on to greener pastures.

Melody’s memorial was quite well attended, nearly filling the auditorium, and many of the people there must have been “townies,” because Hal didn’t recognize them. I recognized a few faces because my time in the Durango Police Department had put me in touch with lots of people. The names were all gone, though.

Third on the program, Hal read a short eulogy he’d prepared over the weekend, using what he’d described to me as his “clergyman persona.” But it was clear that he was distracted by Mildred Witherspoon, sitting in the first row squarely in front of the speaker’s podium, with Alice on one side of her holding her hand and a 30-ish man on her other side. It was actually rather humorous. Mildred was dabbing at her nose with a large linen handkerchief and making drippy sniffing noises, which were somehow, we all couldn’t help but notice, timed with Hal’s pauses between sentences.

“Melody’s legacy will be an inspiration to creative students at FSU for generations.”

SNIFF.

And so on.

Melody’s graduate advisor, Professor Jin-Rae Kim, followed Hal with a more elaborate eulogy, and the sniffing continued all through his talk—still timed carefully—and those that followed as well. Finally, blessedly, it was over, and we all retired to the lawn for an informal receiving line.

Waiting to pay personal respects to Mildred, who was standing with Alice and that guy—Hal told me he looked familiar, but he couldn’t quite place him—we found ourselves at the end of the slow-moving line, just behind Professor Kim. Hal introduced me.

“How nice to meet you, Professor. I knew Melody only a little, but she seemed so charming and bright. This is such a terrible waste.” I was feeling more involved in this than I had anticipated.

“Yes, it is, it is. And there’s so much mystery about it. Not like she was in a car accident, or had been sick. I fear that her mother won’t be getting closure on this for some time.” Kim, it was clear, was also having trouble with closure.

“Perhaps their last visit together will provide helpful memories.”

“I hope so. And it was recent, so that should help, too.”

“Recent?”

“Oh, yes, I think last weekend, or, rather, the weekend before yesterday’s. I saw Melody on campus late Saturday, and she told me she was going to be seeing her mother on Sunday. So maybe Mrs. Witherspoon can hold onto that last memory.”

My antennae perked up. “Late Saturday? I thought she was working down at that place in Arizona.”

“Yes, but she had come up here to visit her mother, so she stopped by to hand-deliver some reprints of a journal article that just got published. It was her dissertation work, and I’m a co-author.”

“So she brought them to your office on campus on Saturday?”

His smile was shy, and a little embarrassed. “She knows me. I have this habit of working in my lab on Saturdays, when there are no distractions.”

“Do you remember what time it was, by any chance?”

“Oh, probably about four that afternoon. Maybe four-thirty. Ah, if I may say, you seem quite interested in this.”

I felt myself blushing, just slightly. “Oh dear, I’m sorry. It’s habit. I work for the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and asking questions is a big part of my job. So I listen for details. Ask Hal. I think it drives him crazy.”

As the line crept closer to Mildred and her companions, Hal pointed out to me that, because we were last, we would be trapped, with no easy way to end the conversation.

“Well,” he said, innocently, “I’ll talk to this guy and figure out how I know him and you talk with Alice and Mildred.”

And before I could say anything, we were there. I resolved to extract appropriate retribution from him as the earliest opportunity. Dinner that evening, somewhere fancy, had a nice ring to it, I thought.

I listened to Mildred introduce her son, Al Witherspoon, Melody’s older brother. Hal knew him because Al had been one of the paramedics in the ambulance a year ago when they had dashed up to that trailhead above Hermosa Creek to rescue me. Al was the one who had popped my dislocated shoulder back into place, although I didn’t know it at the time, being unconscious. He and Hal launched into a conversation about the affair and its aftermath, and I was stuck with the other two. Some place *really* fancy, I told myself.

“Mrs. Witherspoon, I’m Hal Weathers’ wife, Annette Trieri. I’m so sorry about Melody. And, Alice, I think this was a wonderful memorial you organized.”

“I’m gratified by how many people are here.” Sniff. “I had no idea that Melody was so well known at the university.”

“She was here for so many years, for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees,” Alice piped up, “I expect she got to know almost everyone. And she was involved in so many different activities. Her sorority is one of the ones that emphasizes community work and she was in several clubs, too. And she

told me, I had a chance to talk with her frequently when she was in our graduate program, she told me that she was tutoring undergraduates in chemistry. A busy young woman.”

“At least you had a chance to visit with her recently. I hope that will be a memory that sustains you, Mrs. Witherspoon.”

“Oh, dear, yes. But I wish I could have seen her one more time. It was two months ago when she was here last.” Sniff.

“But I thought...” The alarm bells in my head were making such a clamor that I stopped.

“...but I thought she was close enough, just down in Tucson, that it would be more frequent. Even so,” I was hoping for a graceful recovery, “that memory will help you, I’m sure. I hope your visit was warm.”

Sniff. “I think she and I were becoming closer. You see, when she went to school here, we grew apart. Perhaps I was too controlling when she was younger and she had to break loose. But I think we were becoming close again. And yes, her last visit was the best in a long time. She was here for a week to finish up a project with one of her community service groups, she said. So she even stayed with me. It will have to sustain me, now.”

“Community service? That’s what Alice just said, that she was involved in a variety of activities. It’s part of the tragedy of this.”

“Oh yes, she was involved in so many different things. Like one that she was here for last time, an organization that helps under-privileged children. I think it’s called ‘Intermountain Social Services.’ I guess they will all just have to get along somehow, now.” Sniff.

The ringing of my personal alarm bells had waned since my recovery from the earlier near-miss with disaster, but now this set them off louder than ever. It was fortunate that Hal came to my rescue.

“Annette, I’m sure that this has been tiring for Mrs. Witherspoon and perhaps we should allow others their turn.” He nodded in the direction of the few stragglers who had lined up behind us, and we were able to escape.

“I hope you have time after this is over to talk. Things are getting stranger and stranger.” I was worried and not a little confused.

“Sure. We can head over to my office right now, if you...”

“Hal! Annette! Haven’t seen either of you lately.” The lanky form of Gil Taylor emerged from the crowd. How we could have missed him was a puzzle, for, at 6-6 or so, his head was well above most of the others. He looked me up and down. “So, you seem to be all recovered, Annette. Glad to hear you didn’t get injured in that explosion.”

He was referring to the horrible end of my previous big investigation, in which he and his chemical analysis equipment had played a crucial role. I just smiled.

“Hey, Gil. How are ya? I didn’t know you knew Melody.” Hal and Gil were old friends, having worked on scientific projects together before Hal’s “promotion” out of active research into the dean’s office.

“Sure. But I wouldn’t have thought you knew her, Annette.”

“Just a little. But I thought she was doing ecosystems studies, not chemistry.” I was puzzled. Gil’s analytical laboratory was used by the Durango police for drug and other analyses, thanks to my work with him on a case back when I was in the PD. I’d also added the CBI to his list of extra-university clients.

“It was during her Ph.D. work. She needed some analyses of trace metals in soils and grasses. So she came to me. This thing is all too sad.”

“Sure is. The people down in Arizona are upset about it, too. I thought maybe some of them would make it up here for this memorial service.” Hal had called Bill Longwell with an invitation on Friday, as soon as we found out about the arrangements from Alice.

“Right, especially Art, since he was up here while she was still a student last spring. He’s the one who talked her into the post-doc down at EcoARC. Although, come to think of it, he was just up here last week, so maybe he didn’t want to make another trip so soon.”

“Art Finnegan?” I was on alert again. “The deputy director? What was he doing up here?”

“Finishing up some stuff from his sabbatical, I think. He stopped by to see me, a week ago Friday, I guess it was, Friday morning. He needed copies of some analyses I’d done for him. Said he lost his originals in the move back south.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah, when he came to my lab he was. But, let’s see, I think he said something about meeting someone later for dinner or something. Said he was glad he wouldn’t have to be driving back to Tucson alone. Is anything wrong?”

“Wish I knew, Gil. What we know is that Melody’s dead, and because her body was found in Arizona, that it’s not my problem. At least I don’t think so.” Although I was beginning to wonder.

* * *

“So, we have Art Finnegan here on Friday morning, T-minus-three days or so, and Melody here on Saturday afternoon, T-minus-a-day-and-a-half, more-or-less. She said she was going to visit her mother on Sunday, but didn’t. But she did work for Intermountain.”

We had retired to Hal’s office to escape the crowd and were sitting on the couch sipping iced tea. Alice was still missing, but Hal said he expected her to return before lunch time.

“Intermountain? Oh, yeah, I overheard something about ‘Intermountain Social Services.’ What’s that?”

“That’s where Melody told her mother she worked, or maybe volunteered. Mildred thinks it’s a community service organization that helps under-privileged children. But I know it as an escort service and private sex club.”

“Say what? Melody was a hooker? The all-American, hometown girl who made good? Don’t tell me!”

“I didn’t. I mean, I didn’t tell you she was a hooker. But Intermountain is widely known in the law enforcement community in Colorado. It’s run out of Denver, but there are branches or franchises or something like that in almost all of the tourist towns of any size. And Durango’s one of those.”

“But escort services are almost always prostitution fronts.”

“Not always. It varies with the company and, of course, with the girls. Intermountain is, or they used to be, affiliated with strip joints, I think. The Intermountain group here used to run Sizzles. Maybe it still does. There was a complaint about them once when I was in the PD. The corporation did damage control, though, and it was the Sizzles manager here that took the fall. And I seem to remember that Intermountain has a web site where you can buy dirty pictures, and they have phone banks for sexy conversations. After you give them a credit card number, of course. And I think they offer private

lingerie showings in the privacy of your home. Or hotel room, or whatever. You know, for guys who are too shy to go to a store to buy underwear for their wives? Yeah, right. Listen. Just give me a gift certificate, OK?"

He ignored the jab. "So Melody was involved in more than just biogeochemistry research, huh? Who'd have thought?"

"Of course, we really don't know what she was involved in. It's just that Mildred mentioned Intermountain."

"Gil said Art was talking about driving back to Tucson with somebody. Suppose that was Melody?"

"Seems like a real coincidence for both of them to be in town the same weekend and to be at the U to tie up loose ends and all. You know what I think of coincidences."

"Of course, you know what the sixty-four-bazillion-dollar question is, right?"

"I've been thinking about one, but I don't know what yours is."

"Could Melody have been killed here in Durango and then hauled back to Arizona for burial at EcoARC?"

"Hmmp. That was my question, too. And I sure hope not. I'd rather not have to work with that sheriff down there." My memories of him weren't going away soon.

"One thing that would be easy to find out would be how she got up here. Or at least you could eliminate some possibilities. I mean, if she flew up, the airline would have her name in a recent record. Or if she drove her own car up, it's probably sitting around town somewhere and your pals at the PD will run across it eventually."

"I see where you're going. If we eliminate those two possibilities, she probably rode up here in someone else's car, and that makes the Finnegan coincidence one notch less likely to be a coincidence." I have to admit—sometimes Hal's instincts are right on.

"Right. Of course, if that DNA testing matches what's-his-name—Alvarez?—to the tissue from under the fingernails, that takes care of that. Maybe all this is too speculative to really worry about."

"Maybe. But these latest bits of information don't fit at all with whatever picture was beginning to emerge from our visit down there. So it's troubling."

"Anomalous data points on the phase diagram. Makes us scientists crazy."

"Huh? Oh. Another Mr. Science Person lecture coming up, I bet." I giggled, which made Hal break into laughter.

"Hey, I'm a professor under this veneer of dean-ness, right? So, settle in."

I rolled my eyes theatrically in response.

"Now, first, you've got to understand what I mean by 'phase diagram.' One easy example is climate. Make a graph with temperature on the horizontal axis and, oh, humidity on the vertical axis. Data points for the tropics would be hot and humid—right?—somewhere in the upper right corner. Remember how it was in Tucson on Thursday? Hot and dry, so that data point would be toward the lower right corner. Antarctica is cold and dry, it turns out, so that would be the lower left corner. So if you were studying the tropics, you'd have a cluster of points in the upper right corner, high temperature and high humidity. If a few data points showed up somewhere else, they would be anomalies. You'd wonder if the measurements were right, or what. With me so far?"

“Sure. But I’m not measuring temperature and humidity. I’m trying to avoid getting involved in a murder investigation.”

“Of course. Just bear with me. Suppose you had lots of temperature and humidity measurements and you wanted to know where they were from. You make a graph like I described and see where they cluster. Based on this clustering, you make a hypothesis. So if the measurements are in the upper right corner of this temperature-humidity phase diagram, you hypothesize that it’s the tropics. But there are a few other measurements, anomalies, outside the cluster. What’s up with that? Do you need to modify your hypothesis? Or are these anomalies just bogus measurements, because of, maybe, a bad thermometer?” Hal took a sip of iced tea, coughed a little, and continued.

“Or, maybe they fit into the hypothesis in a way that you don’t think of at first. So, an upper-left data point, or little mini-cluster of data points, cold and wet, maybe they’re tropical, too, but they’re just measurements up on a mountain. See?”

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. “So pretty soon you’re going to tell me that I should be making graphs of the facts?”

“I don’t know how to do that with your kind of facts, because I’m not sure what they’re measurements of, at least not in a simple way. But conceptually, the facts, the data points, for a hypothesis about a particular crime, they ought to cluster together, if they’re graphed in the right way. New facts that don’t fit that cluster can mean lots of various things, but one possibility is that you need to modify the hypothesis. Another is that it’s not really a fact. And another is that it really fits in, with the right interpretation.”

“So what you’re saying is that these new fact we just heard about aren’t in the same cluster, on this conceptual graph, as the ones we heard in Tucson.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they would be with a different graph, that is, a different interpretation. I mean, it’s not like there was much of a hypothesis before beyond the possibility that Alvarez did it. I guess the point for me is thinking about it this way leads to new interpretations, which translate into new hypotheses.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to think about it, this way or any other. I want this to be an Arizona problem.” But I couldn’t help but think that Melody’s presence in Durango was going to make that less likely.

“I understand. But I know you well enough to know that you’re not going to ignore this. I mean, Melody was here during the period of time when she was supposed to be dead.”

“Which means she was killed sometime after Saturday afternoon. Or died, or whichever.”

“And after that she had to get down to Oracle. That’s an all-day drive, maybe nine, ten hours. Even longer for a corpse.” He grinned, pleased with his own joke.

I’ve learned it’s best to ignore Hal’s little attempts at comedy. “There’s one good thing. Whoever is investigating this, assuming that Alvarez is exonerated, will be able to narrow down the timing from what the ME reported.”

There was a knock on the door, and it opened to reveal FSU’s Provost, John Martin. He looked about with some confusion, clearly used to having people available in ante-rooms to guide him into offices.

“John! Come in and sit. I didn’t see you at the memorial service.” I wondered just what was going on that Hal was being honored with a visit from his boss.

“Sorry to just barge in, but Alice is nowhere to be found.” Martin pulled a side chair around to face us on the couch and sat down.

“She’s probably still occupied with Mildred Witherspoon, Melody’s mother. Alice organized that service and has been doing lots of hand-holding lately. I expect her back about lunch time. What brings you this way?”

“Oh, I guess I just need a little company. How’s everything over at the CBI, Annette?”

“Haven’t been there for a few days, but I expect it’s OK. I’ve got the office running just fine without me barring some kind of emergency. Were you at the service, John?”

“Yes, and I suppose that’s why I need company. It was depressing. Oh, not depressing in itself, I mean. Hal, your eulogy was most touching and Jin-Rae Kim did a wonderful job. But just the idea that we needed to have a memorial service for someone like Melody is depressing.” He sighed.

“Anyway, I heard that you two went down to Tucson to bring her body back last week. Did you learn anything about what really happened? There hasn’t even been much discussion on how she died, at least not in the papers. Everyone here is in the dark.”

Hal and I looked at each other, trying to see who wanted to tell the story.

“You’re the reluctant criminal investigator here.”

“Yeah, but you’re the one with the phase diagrams and anomalous data clusters.”

Martin looked back and forth at Hal and me, completely puzzled.

It took only a minute for me to give in. “I guess I should be the one. Wouldn’t want Hal to turn it into another Mr. Science Person lecture,” at which Hal broke into laughter and Martin looked the more perplexed.

I related as much of the story as I knew, in a reasonably ordered fashion, and watched Martin become increasingly depressed.

“So what you’re telling me is that Melody’s visit to Jin-Rae a week ago Saturday narrowed down the time of death but implicates us? This is not good news.”

“‘Implicates’ is the wrong word, John. It means that she was alive and on campus, that’s all. It does raise the possibility that she was killed here in Durango, though.”

“And the fact that Art Finnegan was on campus the day before worries me. We selected him to be a visiting professor during a sabbatical, as I recall. If he’s involved in this, and I agree with you, Annette, that coincidences such as this are always suspicious, if it turns out he was involved in this, we’re going to be sucked into it.”

“Before FSU gets sucked in, John, I’ll get sucked in, and that’s something I’m trying to avoid. I really want this to be an Arizona problem. If we do get sucked in, it’ll become a bureaucratic and jurisdictional nightmare.” Not to mention a personal pain in the derriere, I thought.

* * *

Back in my office that afternoon, I tried to focus on the paperwork that had accumulated during my absence. After our return to Durango on Friday, Hal and I had avoided our respective offices in favor of extending our holiday through the weekend. It was now time to play catch-up.

I was half-way through the weekly CBI summary, distributed electronically each Saturday, when my phone rang.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Ms. Trieri? This is Donald Parks. I’m the public defender for Jorgé Alvarez, remember me?”

“Indeed I do, Mr. Parks. What can I do for you?”

“I thought you might like to know that we have decided not to fight the DNA testing. Friday afternoon, I sat down with Mr. Alvarez and a translator, and we went over what the test is all about and so on in detail. He agreed readily. He says his scratches were made by his wife, although I couldn’t get him to say why.”

“That’s the story his wife told us. You might want to interview her with the same translator. I’m not sure that why she did it makes any real difference, although it would come up if there were any official questioning, probably. Did Alvarez ever meet Melody Witherspoon?”

“He says he recognizes her picture from seeing her around the EcoARC campus, but he didn’t know her name or anything. They were never introduced. There was no contact.”

“So the DNA test will show that what was under Melody’s fingernails wasn’t Mr. Alvarez’s face, and that should get him off the hook with the sheriff. I understand Alvarez will be having some problems with the INS, though.”

“Yes, but his wife is documented and their son is a citizen, so we should be able to get him residency easily.”

“Are you going to be involved with that, too?”

“Right. I can do it *pro bono* and get points for community service, so it seems worthwhile. Mr. Alvarez is a solid citizen, potentially, at least.”

“Well the sheriff’s got a new problem, but Mr. Alvarez seems to be set. Good work. Thanks for letting me know.”

“No problem. And it was nice meeting you last week.”

I went back to the paperwork and was well into the weekly FBI regional report when my phone rang again.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Uh, Ms. Trieri?” I recognized Donald Parks’ voice, but he sounded badly shaken this time.

“Mr. Parks? Are you OK?”

“Not entirely. When I was talking with you before, I got another call, which I just returned. It was a reporter for one of the Tucson TV stations wanting a comment from me on a story they’re doing for the news this evening. It seems that Jorgé Alvarez was found hanged in his cell this morning.”

I was too shocked to speak, but finally found my voice. “Really? And you heard about it from a TV reporter rather than from the sheriff or from the DA?”

“That fits with the sheriff’s approach to things. The reporter told me the sheriff was crowing about how this proved that Alvarez did it and now the case is solved. And he also, I guess, was making noises about how this was an example of the dangers of having Mexican ‘illegals’ in the country.”

“He must have an election coming up next month. Did the reporter tell you how Alvarez managed to hang himself? Or does this sheriff leave belts and shoelaces in the possession of his prisoners?”

“Apparently Alvarez tore up his tee shirt into strips and tied them together.”

“And let’s see, it was discovered by one of the deputies probably, who was bringing him breakfast, right?”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“I’m older than I look, at least in terms of having been in the business a while. What’s your plan?”

“I haven’t thought that far, I guess. I just heard all this and I’m still upset.”

“No doubt. Soon you’ll be mad, bet on it. If you want to keep your options open, make sure that the sheriff doesn’t get the body cremated and be sure to protect your notes from the interview with the translator on Friday. I’d put them in a safe deposit box or somewhere secure like that. Oh, and is the translator at all connected with the sheriff?”

“No, in fact she’s from down in Oro Valley, by Tucson, in Pima County. I don’t think the sheriff knows her.”

“Best keep it that way. One thing you can do is to proceed with the DNA test, and make the results public. Then the sheriff will have to re-open the case file. It won’t really help Alvarez except to clear his name, of course. But it’ll make the sheriff look bad if he doesn’t pursue the case more. And if there is an election coming up, he’ll have to do something.”

“Why would Alvarez hang himself? On Friday we had discussed how the DNA test would prove his innocence. And isn’t suicide considered the worst sin among Catholics?”

“Chances are that he didn’t kill himself, but there will be no way to prove that, at least not with forensic evidence, unless someone screwed up. That’s why I was suggesting you protect the information you have, to preserve it in case there’s a use for it. It’s circumstantial, but it could be useful.”

“You mean that someone killed him in jail? He was being held in solitary, so it couldn’t have been one of the other prisoners. That means it was one of the sheriff’s...”

“Mr. Parks. You told me that you’re new to all this, and that you have a lot to learn. Think of this as an on-the-job lesson in the way things can work. The most important thing is for you to stay in control of yourself and not dash off and do something foolish. Even though you may want to, there’s not a lot you can do. But other people might, if you handle yourself properly. For example, I bet there’s some kind of Hispanic civil rights group around there somewhere, at least down in Tucson. You might talk with them about your suspicions, and even provide them with a transcript of your notes, or the tape of the meeting or whatever you have. But if you take this on by yourself, you’ll lose, big time. Understand?”

“What I understand is that I’m going to have to think this through. But you’re probably right, my best approach would be through a civil rights group, and publicity. Thanks for the advice, ma’am. I appreciate it. And I’ll do what I can to make sure the case gets re-opened. We need to find whoever killed this unfortunate young lady.”

“You’re right on that. If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

Ma’am? I thought. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him that I’m older than I look. Sheesh.

Just as I was getting back to the FBI report, there was a tap on my door, and Derek Petersen stuck his head in. Derek, a long-time CBI field investigator, had been assigned to be my administrative deputy as a way for him to gain the experience he needed to take over a CBI office someday. So far, he was handling the changed assignment gracefully, helped in the transition, I believe, by the fact that I included him in cases whenever I could. He was especially helpful when there was computer work needed, on identity searches and so on. But it was his administrative contributions that really made my life easy.

“Annette? Got a minute?”

“Absolutely, Derek. Come in, have a seat. What’s up?”

“I’ve got the budget figures for you to review.”

“Are we in the black?”

“Plenty. I think we can even afford those new computers you’ve been wanting.”

“Great. That’s all I need to know. Go for it.”

“You sure you don’t want to see the details?”

“I probably should, but I figure that one of us looking at them is enough of a taxpayer investment in that sort of thing. I’ve got something more puzzling on my mind anyway.”

Derek sat back in his chair looking relieved and interested, so I continued.

“What do you know about Arizona law enforcement? My only experience is with stuff here in the Four Corners region—and that’s the Rez—which is handled by the Navajo Tribal Police or by the FBI.”

“So you mean the rest of the state?”

“Yeah. Is there something like the CBI down there? And how’s our working relationship with them?”

“As I recall, they have a Department of Public Safety that includes the Highway Patrol and several other divisions including an investigative division. I don’t remember any cases recently where we’ve had a lot of interactions. New Mexico, yes, but not Arizona.”

“And I’d bet that the investigative division is responsible for looking into misconduct by law enforcement officers statewide.”

“Probably, except maybe for the big departments in Phoenix and Tucson. I bet they have internal affairs people and so on. But Public Safety probably handles it everywhere else, unless there’s some other group that I’m not familiar with. Not that I’m that familiar with the DPS. Does this relate to your trip to Tucson last week?”

It took me about twenty minutes to tell him the details, and then, because he was a field investigator at heart, he had ten minutes worth of questions.

“So, there are really two issues I see here, Annette. First, there’s the questionable suicide. And I agree with your comments to the lawyer, there’s probably not going to be forensic evidence to show that it’s anything but a suicide. But maybe the circumstances will make trouble for that sheriff. And, second, there’s the question of what really happened to Melody Witherspoon. Reading between the lines, I infer that you think she may have been killed up here, and someone, most likely the killer, transported her body to this EcoARC place, took her inside, and buried her in there.”

“And, if so, I expect that we’ll have to get involved, right?”

“And this is why our relationship with Arizona law enforcement is relevant.” He was nodding in understanding.

“Right. Any suggestions about where to go next?”

He sat back in his chair and scratched his head. “I’d call that medical examiner down there. You said he was a competent guy. Ask him if it’s reasonable that Melody was killed up here and so on, especially in light of the changed window for the time of death.”

I thought about it for a minute. “Not a bad idea, especially since the ME didn’t seem to have any love lost for the sheriff. OK, I’ll do it. Anything else, suggestion-wise?”

“Assuming that this fellow Alvarez didn’t do it, someone else did who has access to those greenhouses, right? You know at least one person who does, or at least I assume he does, that deputy director, Finnegan. You also know that he was here a week ago, the weekend that Melody was killed. Maybe you could find out from the director, Hal’s friend, if anyone else on their staff with access to the greenhouses was out of town that weekend. He might even know if they were up here.”

I had to nod in agreement. “Right. And if he doesn’t know, maybe he could find out from vacation records in personnel, or travel records, or something. One thing we have going for us is that Bill, that’s the director, Bill Longwell is as determined to find out what really happened as anyone. Although I suppose he could be in a conflict of interest position, trying to protect his institution’s reputation from bad publicity.”

“Yeah, but he’s probably smart enough to know that the worst publicity would be if the killer is someone on his staff and he tries to shield them.”

“Hal knows him better than I do, so I’ll ask him to check with Bill. But I expect you’re right.”

“Another thing, simple, would be to run an NCIC check on this deputy guy, the one who was up here a week ago. See if there’s anything in his background that raises red flags. I can do that if you want.”

“I’d doubt that you’d find anything. He’s in a position of trust down there, and they probably did the check.”

He wasn’t at all discouraged, though. “Maybe. But you told me that his boss said he’d been there for a long time. Maybe they didn’t run checks a long time ago when he came on board and they haven’t done one since either. And there’s also the basic legwork to be done. If Alvarez didn’t kill her, who did? Has someone gone over her apartment and so on? I mean, besides the sheriff you don’t trust?”

“Good question. OK, sounds like a plan. You run a check on this guy Finnegan, and I’ll see if Bill Longwell can give us any information about his employees who could have been out of town. Then I’ll call the ME to fill him in, ask about her apartment and so on. After that I’ll wait and see what happens, I guess.”

Somehow I knew that my involvement was only going to escalate.

* * *

That evening, over a dinner of home-made pizza and salad, I filled Hal in about the demise of the unfortunate Jorge Alvarez, and we discussed how to approach Bill Longwell’s employees.

“Sounds like a variant of the old ‘shot while trying to escape’ dodge to me. I bet Bill is going to be livid, because he seemed to feel responsible for Alvarez. Even though he’s new down there, Bill has this extended family attitude about his employees. He’ll take it personally at some level.” Folding two pieces together, Hal had made a pizza sandwich and was talking around a large mouthful.

“You probably don’t want to say anything to him, because I don’t know how it will work, but I’m going to try to pull some strings, gently, with contacts in the Arizona Department of Public Safety. I talked with my boss in Denver about it and he gave me some names.”

“Bill will have seen it on TV tonight probably, or will for sure in tomorrow’s papers. I’ll call him and see how mad he is. Thing is, this business of asking about what he knows about the whereabouts of his people on that weekend may just get him madder.”

“But surely he’ll realize that people with access to the greenhouses are going to be the ones under suspicion. And what we do with people under suspicion is find out where they were at critical times.” I knew that my logic was unassailable, but a little voice in my head also was reminding me that my people skills are often buried by it.

“I know. But it will amount to asking him how many of his people have alibis.”

“Or, more precisely, how many don’t. Look, I can call him, but you know him better and I wanted to ask about it first. I’m not trying to get you to do this.”

“Oh. I thought you wanted me to.” He looked puzzled.

“Only if you want to. Maybe I should call him and then you can, after I find out how mad he is. I’ll talk to the DPS down there and see if they have an investigation planned and then call Bill to tell him what I found out, with a suggestion that someone will be asking about alibis. After I talk with him, I’ll let you know and you can call to tell him about the possible connections here, especially Finnegan’s visit to campus. That’s more your territory.”

“You’re going to be involved in this investigation, aren’t you?”

“I was trying to avoid it, but it looks inevitable. With both Melody and Finnegan having been up here just before she was killed, I’m afraid it’s going to fall squarely in my lap.”

“Fraid so. And with Melody and Finnegan having been at the U during their visit, somehow I think we’re both going to be involved.”

* * *

Three

On Tuesday, as if recovering from a bad hangover, Durango finally came back to life. The Homecoming Weekend festivities, rather less than festive to begin with, had culminated on Saturday with a 44-10 drubbing of the FSU Golden Marmots by the University of Northern Colorado Bears.

It would have been worse, but the UNC coach, a merciful fellow, had played his third-string defense in the fourth quarter, allowing the Marmots to avoid the humiliation of a homecoming shut-out. However, the humiliation could not be avoided completely, what with the *Free Press* headline “Bears Munch Marmots” displayed in newspaper boxes all over town.

This, combined with sermons in all the churches about the local girl’s death, had made Sunday positively dreary, and Monday, with the memorial service, had been groggily subdued. But, I thought, maybe there’s hope for Tuesday.

By mid-morning, I’d completed my part of the bargain and put in a call to Hal on his private line.

“Weathers, natural sciences.”

“Annette Trieri, CBI here. How’s your morning so far?”

“Fair to middlin’, all things considered. How are things over your way?”

“Confusing, and likely to get more so. But I called to let you know that I’ve talked with Bill Longwell and now it’s your turn.”

“How’d it go?”

“He was nice enough to me, but I hope he cools down before he meets that sheriff in a locked room somewhere. And he reiterated how strongly he wants to see this thing figured out for real instead of the sheriff’s way. So maybe he’ll be helpful.”

“Did you mention Finnegan?”

“No, you’re going to, right?”

“I think maybe not. There’s a rumor going around campus that Finnegan and Melody were traveling together when they were here and that they were having an affair.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Alice. She’s plugged into the campus grapevine and this is the current topic of speculation.”

“Do you know if Finnegan’s married?”

“I do and he is. I met his wife at a reception we had for him when he was here on the sabbatical. Strange woman—all she wanted to talk about was her health problems. Also, she needed to take better care of herself. Finnegan’s at the age that guys have their mid-life crises and go trophy hunting. Not that I really know anything about such a thing personally, you understand.”

I chose not to rise to that bait. “So you think they were involved?”

“Not necessarily. But it’s possible, I guess. I won’t talk about this to Bill unless he brings it up. We want him to be cooperative about the alibis, right?”

“Oh yes. We sure do. So don’t scare him off.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. But you said things are confusing. What’s up?”

“Well, as near as I can tell, the blue-haired mafia has been at work.

“Huh?”

“Little old ladies with political clout. I got a call from my boss in Denver, Rod Andersen. He said he had a call from the Governor, who apparently had a call from someone he owes a favor to—someone who is a friend of Mildred Witherspoon. Turns out that this someone and their friends have serious behind-the-scenes pull, both here and in the state government in Tucson. So Rod’s call was a heads-up for me to expect another call. Which came, from the Governor of Arizona—the Gov himself, not just someone on his staff. He’s asked me—and Rod instructed me to agree—to be part of a special investigative team to look into the Pinal County sheriff’s behavior and to investigate Melody’s death properly.”

The pause went on long enough to be puzzling.

“Hal? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, but I’m trying to figure this out. I got sidetracked by the ‘blue-haired mafia’ comment. Mildred’s, as I remember, is brunette with reddish highlights. Anyway, you said it was confusing, and now I believe you. Did you just say you were appointed to some kind of job in Arizona?”

“A consulting position with the DPS investigative division down there. I think they’re going to deputize me temporarily. I’m being given credentials to work with the team assigned to the sheriff’s situation and to Melody’s death.”

“So you’re a consulting detective? All right! Just like Sherlock Holmes. This is too cool!”

“Down, boy. Give me a break. ‘Just like Sherlock Holmes.’ Hardly. For one thing, I’m not getting any consulting fees. For another, you’re the wrong kind of doctor to be my Watson.”

“Does this mean you have to spend time down there, doing whatever you investigators do?”

“I need to get down there as soon as I can to help this team get started.”

“Maybe I can get Bill to put you up at the EcoARC hotel, where we stayed.”

“I’d like that. And, Hal, do you suppose I could take the S4? I want to drive down. That airport stuff we went through is too much of a hassle. And I want to stop off in Winslow on the way back to see an old friend from college.”

This time the pause was longer, but I knew he was still there.

“I guess I would have thought that you’d take your CBI car, that Explorer you’ve been using. You said they got it fixed up.”

“Would you want to drive that clunky thing all the way down to Tucson? Don’t you think your car will get me there faster? And more safely?”

I finally heard a big sigh. “Oh, sure, of course. That’s what we got it for, to be a road car. And I don’t really need it around town. Except, how am I going to pick up chicks in your Subaru?”

“Since I’m certain that you’re referring to juvenile poultry, you can fit lots more of them in my car than yours. Mine’s a wagon, after all.” I never fail to win these little exchanges, and I love every one of them.

“Yes, well, I obviously need to change the subject. What’s your schedule? And who’s this friend in Winslow?”

“Faith Weber. She’s one of the people I used to hang out with at Northwestern. I think she has some kind of teaching position at a college there. We exchange letters now and then, but I haven’t seen her in years.”

“A college in Winslow? Huh. I’ll have to look it up.”

“Anyway, I thought I’d drive straight down, which looks like an all-day drive, eight or nine hours. But if I leave this morning I can be ready to get started on the investigation tomorrow. Seems like the Arizona DPS guys are on a fast track for this thing, so I don’t think I’ll be gone too long. I’ll spend a night in Winslow on the way back.”

“We’re in mid-semester and Thanksgiving’s a long way off—I’m sure not going anywhere. But this is kind of short notice.”

“You’ll survive?”

“Somehow, I guess. I’ll call Bill and tell him you’re coming and get you a room. And talk to him about this alibi stuff.”

“And I’ll call you when I get there.”

“Please do. And drive safely. Watch out for the crazies out there.”

“I will. And, say, please tell Alice how much I appreciated the memorial service she put together. Is she doing better?”

“Much. And she said it helped Mildred, too.”

“Good. I’ll see what I can do about bringing back something from Melody’s place for her. Twist the sheriff’s arm, or something.”

“OK, but don’t get him mad at you. You’ll be alone down there. I’ll worry.”

* * *

Two hours later, a very busy two hours later, I was on the road in Hal's silver Audi S4, trying not to be distracted by the blinking of the portable red bubble light I'd stuck to the dashboard with double-stick tape. I'd not said so to Hal, but I thought that my eight- or nine-hour estimate could be a little conservative—this car would be getting me there faster than that, I could tell.

Before departing, I hustled about, getting my personal life in order, packing and dressing for the trip, and getting my professional self organized as well. In addition to delegating my complete schedule to Derek Petersen, I contacted the Arizona DPS and persuaded them to arrange for an escort to meet me just across the state line, at the Teec Nos Pos filling station on US Highway 160. There, I would top off the gas tank and follow the Arizona State Patrol officer west across Red Mesa and south on US-191 through the Rez, across the interstate to St. Johns, and southwest toward Globe. My CBI credentials would make the short stretch of Colorado roads pass quickly, but they wouldn't pass muster in other states. I didn't want to be stopped in Arizona.

I made good time between Durango and Cortez despite the traffic, and then south of Cortez toward the Four Corners, I was able to let the car show its stuff—nearly 40 miles to the state line took me under 20 minutes. I had to ease back to near the speed limit, which seemed interminably slow, for the brief stretch through New Mexico and the several miles of Arizona before Teec Nos Pos. Pulling in to the gas station, I was pleased to see that my Arizona State Patrol car escort was to be the police interceptor version of the Chevrolet Camaro.

As I was fumbling with the gas cap, I heard a voice behind me.

"Ms. Trieri? I'm Officer Winston Tsosie, your, ah, escort."

I turned to find a barrel-chested young man of medium height, dressed in a State Patrol uniform, standing with his hat in his hand. He had removed his mirrored sunglasses—they were hanging on the outside of his shirt pocket—and the crow's feet by his eyes and his darkly bronzed skin spoke of a life in the desert sun. I shook the proffered hand, and appreciated the dry, gentle grip.

"Good to meet you, officer. I hope that this isn't too much of an inconvenience. Your governor asked me to be on an investigative team down in Oracle, and I need to get there fast and safely. I figured that I didn't know the roads well enough to go it alone, at least not if I want to make good time."

The round face broke into a wide grin, showing straight, bright white teeth and twinkling brown eyes.

"Maybe that's why my captain called me. I've got that car and a reputation. Well, of course, I was up this way and available. And I know the roads, especially the one down through the Rez. But I'll pretend it's my reputation. Say, this sure is a beautiful car. And I've heard they're fast, this S4 version."

"It's my husband's. And, yes, I'm surprised by how fast it is. He has a thing about cars, he can't leave them stock. So he has this mechanic at home who messes around with them. He put a supercharger in his last car, but this one already has two turbos. So he told me he had it 'chipped,' whatever that means. I think it's some sort of computer thing. But it's got even more power, and the speed limiter was turned off. I, ah, hit about 140 for a while on that straight stretch between Cortez and here. The car was fine, even eager for more. The oil temperature went up a bit, but that was all I noticed."

"140? With room for more? Whoa! That *is* fast. I hope you won't be too disappointed if we don't do quite that well. I've done that in my car, but I don't like to. I'd hate to hit a coyote at that speed. And the road isn't quite good enough for that, either, except for short stretches. Between cattle guards and bad pavement, I don't think that I'd feel safe. Especially south of the interstate, on the way to St. Johns. There are some places that could wipe out your suspension." He made a wavy gesture with his left hand

and smiled. “Besides, I’m trying to take special care of that car of mine. They don’t make ’em any more, Chevrolet, I mean, and I want this one to last.”

“I don’t know the road, and that’s precisely why I asked for an escort. Also, I really don’t want to make people too mad.”

“Understood. I know most of the folks in the Navajo Tribal Police—got some cousins on their force, in fact—and they can be sensitive if people don’t respect their laws. So we’re going to tread carefully in the towns down along 191. But they’re OK with some speed in between, if I have my lights going and it’s official. I’ll talk with them on the radio. Oh, right. You’ve got a civilian car. Got a radio?” He bent down and looked into the Audi.

“All I’ve got is a cell phone. I found a bubble to plug into the cigarette lighter and stuck it to the dash. I’d rather have it on top, but I don’t think it would hold in the wind. Actually, I’d rather just put it in the trunk, but it seemed like a good idea to use it.”

“I’ll loan you my portable radio, so you can talk with me, at least. And I hope you’re all right with some advice? Please don’t follow me too closely. We’ll be moving right along, and I’d rather not have to worry about you if I have to brake hard. I’ll try to tap the brake lights whenever I need to slow down, but emergencies won’t allow for that. What I’m hoping is that most people will respect my lights and pull off out of the way. But you can never tell.” He shrugged.

“Officer Tsosie, you’re the expert on this, and I’m going to do whatever you think is best. But if you have a reputation for driving fast, you’re just the person I need for this little trip.”

It was exhilarating at first, zipping past the traffic on US-160 westbound. Tsosie’s lights cleared the way, for the most part, and the visibility of the straight road allowed us easily to pass the occasional oblivious tourist in an oversized motor home.

Just as my exhilaration was waning, I saw Tsosie tap his brakes and turn on his left turn signal. The US-191 intersection, offering points south to Chinle and Ganado, was coming up.

Then the exhilaration renewed itself, for there was no traffic in either direction, nor towns, mostly, and Tsosie opened it up. I gave myself a quarter mile of space behind him and hit the cruise control button when the speedometer read 120. The miles flew by. Occasionally I would see the blinking of brakes as Tsosie slowed for a cattle guard or for a hilltop or curve with limited visibility. He was fast, but he was also careful, I decided.

A few times, he called me on the portable radio with a heads up about an upcoming town, and it took only one conversation for us to evolve to a first-name basis. The camaraderie of our shared on-the-edge experience made it inevitable.

And I got to hear the latest gossip about Rock Point, Round Rock, and Many Farms. At Chinle, I heard about Tsosie’s brother Neville, a guide at Canyon de Chelly National Monument and how their mother had been so fascinated with British history that she named her boys after people she had read about. And at Ganado, I got a recommendation to return to the Hubbell Trading Post to purchase Navajo rugs and to make sure and offer them 25% less than the marked price.

Just as I was being lulled to sleep by the desert, we came to the interstate, I-40, the main east-west artery of the southwest. Eastward for six miles—in three minutes—took us to Sanders, where we turned south again on US-191, toward St. Johns. And Tsosie had been right: this was going to be a little slower, as the roadway was not in the best of shape. He kept it at about 100 except for the really rough stretches. A half-hour later, we stopped for gas in St. Johns, and I was surprised when the car drank 15 gallons for the 230 or so miles since Teec Nos Pos. At these speeds I shouldn’t expect very good mileage, I decided.

At St. Johns, we turned west, and then southwest, eventually picking up US-60 to Globe, down the Mogollón Rim, where the traffic increased and the road became more challenging. Even though most folks pulled over for Tsosie's lights, there were real curves now, and we had to pay more attention, actually to drive instead of just letting the cars run. And Tsosie was using both hands, so our radio conversations ended. This was just as well because as the curves tightened during the descent into and back out of the Salt River Canyon, I had to rein in the S4 so as not to overtake Tsosie's Camaro. It was hard for me not to gloat.

At Globe, we turned south on Arizona Highway 77, which would become Oracle Highway on the fringe of Tuscon. But first, we needed to negotiate the mining districts of the Mescal Mountains. More curves and traffic, and more real driving. I was beginning to tire, but the continued exhilaration kept me awake.

Finally, as we were slowing for the town of Winkelman, Tsosie came back on the radio.

"Annette, when we cross the river just through town, we're going to cross into Pinal County. I got just enough of a briefing about why you're coming down here to know that we need to go a little more carefully from here. You with me?"

"Five by five, as they say. But you don't think we'd be harassed, or anything, do you?"

"Don't know, but I did arrange for a second escort, to take up the rear. So don't be surprised when another car falls in behind you, OK?"

"Got it."

"And we'll be taking it a little slower, maybe around seventy-five, from here."

"Um, I've got a radar detector. Any percentage in turning it on?"

"A radar detector? Why, shame on you!"

I felt myself blush. "Uh, well, remember it's my husband's car. He gave me a big song and dance about how it would remind him to drive safely, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, should I turn it on?"

"Good idea. I don't think the sheriff here has any lasers, so it will give us a heads up if they're looking for us."

"Sounds like you expect trouble."

"I hope not. But, as you'll see when we get there, others do."

"There? You do know where I'm going?"

"Sure. But I've been hearing things you can't because you've got only that portable radio. Mine's got better range. Lots of things have been happening since we've been on the road. Bad medicine, as my grandfather used to say."

We had eased through Winkelman and crossed the Gila River when I noticed a second State Patrol vehicle, one of those Ford Crown Victorias equipped for the police, behind me, lights flashing. It took an effort of will for me not to pull over automatically. My radio crackled.

"Winston—please switch to channel two."

I picked up my portable radio set and saw a little 1-2-3 switch for the first time. Must be it, I thought, and switched.

"...a roadblock just below the east Oracle intersection at the top of the grade. You know where I mean?" This was the same voice that had asked for the channel switch.

“Those bozos. Do they really think they’re going to accomplish anything constructive with this?” I recognized Winston Tsoie’s voice despite the anger.

“It’s all Elwood’s doing. He seems to think he’s God. But I think that they’ve got all their available resources concentrated on that roadblock. So maybe we could take her up the back way.”

“It’s your territory, Sandra. I don’t know all the roads down here.”

“All right. Let me take point.” In the mirror, I saw the trailing car begin gaining on me, and it quickly passed me in the outside lane. Officer Sandra, as I only knew her at that point, waved. I noticed that Tsoie had slowed down and I needed to also. He was talking into his microphone, but I wasn’t hearing anything. So I switched back to channel 1.

“...are you there? Annette?”

“You got me, Winston. I switched over to two.”

“Oh. Of course. Let’s do that again.” So I did.

“Annette? Go ahead and pass me, and I’ll take up the rear. There’s a roadblock on the highway, so Sandra’s going to take us in the back way, whatever that is.”

“I heard. And I think I understand that the sheriff’s office is trying to detain us? Are they serious?”

“Like I said, lots has happened since we’ve been on the road. Strange weirdness.”

During this conversation and the re-ordering of the cars, we had passed through Dudleyville and were headed along a valley bottom. Shortly, we turned toward the right, west, up onto a bench above the valley and came to an intersection with a signpost pointing toward something called “San Manuel” on the left. Sandra turned that way.

* * *

“I still can’t believe you’re here!”

I was sitting on the patio of my room—our room, actually—at the EcoARC conference center enjoying, in no particular order, a cup of tea, the sunset on Black Mountain, and Hal’s presence.

“And I still can’t really tell if it’s OK that I came down.” He knows I have a love-hate relationship with surprises, so he always tries to make them good surprises.

“Yes, of course it’s OK. I’m delighted to see you. It’s just so unexpected. I mean, I spend all day driving and here you are, like magic.”

“Magic indeed, the wonders of air travel. Especially not having to go all the way down to Tucson. But I’m impressed that you got here so fast. Five hundred miles in just under six hours, including stops?”

“Um, well, it *is* a fast car. And I had a State Patrol escort, so we weren’t hampered by such mundane things as speed limits. We made good time.”

I decided not to go into the details of the last few miles, the part in Pinal County. No point in worrying him, I thought. He would have enjoyed hearing about how his car had handled the gravel back road up the hill to Oracle, I realized. But the circumstances might upset him.

My two escorts and I had made for San Manuel, but Officer Sandra turned right just before the town, onto a gravel road that climbed the side of the valley. It was poorly maintained, and through the dust I could see her Crown Vic fishtailing across the road and back. On the badly washboarded surface,

its rear-wheel-drive was struggling for traction. By contrast, I just pointed the S4 up the hill, and its all-wheel-drive made the climb inconsequential. I even had to back off the gas so as not to overtake her.

And then there was the little excitement with the deputy sheriff outside of Oracle, when we had turned back onto the highway. I *certainly* didn't want to tell Hal about that. The deputy must have been on a coffee-and-donuts run for the roadblock crowd, because he was headed into Oracle as we were heading out. We turned left onto the highway toward the EcoARC road and couldn't help but see in our mirrors the sheriff's patrol car make a U-turn and take off after us, lights ablaze and siren wailing. Over our secure radio channel, the two State Patrol officers and I had decided that I should make a run for the EcoARC, where a large contingent of state officers was waiting, while Tsosie and Sandra Kinney, as I had found her name to be, ran interference with the deputy. So I had put the S4 through its paces again, and watched in my mirror as my friends, blocking both lanes, receded into the distance.

Hal was looking relieved. "'Good time' is understating it by a lot. But I'm glad you're OK with my coming down. We didn't have a proper good-bye today, you just left. And if you're going to be here a while, that didn't seem right. So I cancelled my afternoon and got lucky with the airline—the flight to Phoenix wasn't full. And it's really as fast by car from there as it was coming up from the Tucson airport, so I got here easily. I'll head back first thing in the morning."

"Have you had a chance to talk with anyone, to find out what's been going on?"

"No, I got in only a little before you got here. But there did seem to be a lot of State Patrol cars out by the entrance. I had to do some fast talking to get past them."

"I wonder how we can find out. My State Patrol escort referred to some stuff he was hearing on the radio. I think perhaps the local sheriff has been acting out, or something like that."

There was a knock on the door to our room, and Hal got up.

"I'll get it. Bill told me that he'd be coming over with some people, for some kind of paperwork, or something. Maybe we can find out what's been happening."

I was easing myself out of my chair slowly—I was stiffer than I had expected—while Hal got the door, and I heard Bill's greeting and other voices. I turned to see two new people, a man in a business suit and a woman in a State Patrol uniform. It took me a minute to recognize Officer Sandra Kinney, because she had her hat off.

Bill Longwell had the duties of master of ceremonies.

"Annette! Wonderful to see you again, although once again the circumstances leave something to be desired. Let me introduce you to Officer Sandra Kinney, who tells me you've met, sort of, and to Ross Townsend, Deputy Commissioner of the Arizona Department of Public Safety. Sandra, Ross, this is Annette Trieri and her husband Hal Weathers. You've heard of Annette, of course; Hal's just here for a day. He's got to go back to his real job tomorrow—he's Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University up in Durango. You folks say 'hi' to each other while I make a quick phone call. Annette, I expect you're hungry, and I don't want the restaurant to close before we can get over there."

"Officer Kinney, good to meet you for real. Nice driving." I was smiling at the memory of our three-car parade.

Sandra Kinney grinned back. "Winston tells me that it's you who's the serious driver. He said he thought he'd lose you for sure, down in those curves in the Salt River Canyon, but that he just couldn't pull away from you. Surprised him, because he fancies himself something of a hot-shot behind the wheel."

I laughed. “It’s the car. What a blast that thing is to drive! If you could get your department to buy those cars for highway work, no one would out-run you folks. Anyway, Mr. Townsend, I expect you’re here with some paperwork for me?”

“Am indeed, Ms. Trieri. But, first, what car? One of my jobs is to be on the acquisitions committee.”

“It’s Hal’s, really. I borrowed it to get down here fast. Audi S4, dual turbochargers, about 250 horsepower, which Hal got boosted to 300 or so.”

Townsend’s eager smile faded. “Oh. Audi. That’s German, right? Too bad. One thing we’ve discovered is that it’s mandatory for us to use tax money to purchase only American cars, for political reasons. If we don’t, it really hits the fan. Anyway, I’m here to deputize you. Officer Kinney is here to witness for the state, and Bill and Hal can also sign as witnesses.”

He produced a Bible and a sheaf of legal-sized papers and got everyone organized. I officially agreed to uphold the constitution of the Great State of Arizona and various other rigmarole. Everyone signed the documents and we shook hands all around.

Finally, Townsend produced a shield. “Now, you understand, Annette, that this is temporary. I’ll need this back when the investigation is over because your appointment ends at that time. This is all part of the arrangement going in, so there’s no opprobrium attached to turning in the shield.”

“Of course. In fact, it’ll be something of a relief. The responsibility of carrying one of these things is plenty for me, and having this second one isn’t something I want to agree to permanently.”

Townsend smiled. “Especially since there are legal inconsistencies between the two states, I bet. Anyway, I’ve assigned Officer Kinney to you as a combination assistant and bodyguard. I hope that’s satisfactory.”

“That will be quite helpful, I’m sure. And it will be a pleasure working with you, Sandra. Bill, you said something about dinner. I just realized I’m starving. Sandra, Ross, would you like to join us?”

They had eaten, but Hal and Bill were both hungry.

“I have to check in with the front office to make sure the arrangements for tomorrow’s meeting are set, so I’ll meet you two over at the restaurant. Hal, you remember how to get over there, don’t you?” Bill Longwell was on his way out the door.

“I do, and we’ll see you over there. Mr. Townsend, Officer Kinney, I probably won’t see you in the morning, so I’ll say goodbye now. I hope all this gets sorted out. I know Bill’s especially concerned about it. And Officer Kinney, you’ll take good care of Annette, I’m sure.”

After more leave-taking, Hal and I were alone to make the short walk together across the campus to the EcoARC restaurant.

“You need a bodyguard? What in the world is going on down here?”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s anything to worry about, really. The local sheriff’s bent out of shape, probably, with a suicide investigation aimed at his department. And I’m the out-of-state celebrity, so they’re wanting to be extra careful. My perspective is that Sandra can be helpful in keeping me on track with respect to Arizona law. Like Ross said, it’s probably different from ours up in Colorado.”

“I just don’t want you in any danger.”

“With all these state cops around? I don’t think so. Listen, I don’t mean to change the subject, but there is something else I should mention.”

“Such as?”

“I said I was starving, and I am. That was hard work, driving down here and having to concentrate and so on. I worked up an appetite.”

“Yeah, and you embarrassed your State Patrol escort with your hot-rod driving.”

“Couldn’t help it with that car. But after dinner, well, you know what fast driving does to me.”

“Oh. OH. Now I see where you’re going. And you spent all day driving fast. Hmm. So, does driving fast make you hornier than just riding along while someone else drives fast?”

“I never had the chance to find out before, but it turns out that it does. And, like I’ve been saying, your car is one *fast* car.”

“Gee. Something tells me that my trip down here to say goodbye to you is going to pay unexpected dividends.”

“Hey, I *said* I was delighted to see you, didn’t I?” I gave his hand an extra squeeze.

* * *

Wednesday morning, our meeting convened promptly at 9:00 AM in the conference room of the EcoARC hotel. Hal and I had awakened early so he could get off to the airport in his rental car, and I was feeling very relaxed. It occurred to me that I might have trouble concentrating—Hal does that to me.

I realized that I would never be able to remember all the names I heard as everyone went ’round the table and introduced themselves, so I took notes. Sandra Kinney was sitting across the table from me, a tactic we had planned in advance so that we could exchange eye signals about things that seemed important. Ross Townsend was seated at the head of the table—as the ranking official present, he was going to chair the meeting. Several people from his office lined the sides of the table.

At the other end of the table was the Pinal County Medical Examiner, Rudy Gelinski, the only county official there. Conspicuously absent was representation from the office of the Pinal County District Attorney, and the Sheriff’s Department, being the subject of the investigation, wasn’t represented either. Bill Longwell was the only EcoARC employee present—he was seated in the row of chairs against the wall.

Ross Townsend cleared his throat loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Now that we’ve introduced ourselves, I’d like to relate to you my instructions, which came directly from the Governor by way of my boss, the Commissioner of Public Safety.

“The Governor, I’m told, wants this handled carefully and thoroughly. We have two purposes here. One is to discuss the circumstances of the death of a prisoner at the Pinal County jail, one Jorgé Alvarez. He was found hanged in his cell a little over forty-eight hours ago.

“He was in that cell in association with the other purpose of our meeting, the death of Melody Witherspoon. Her body was found a little over a week ago buried in a greenhouse here at the EcoARC Center. Alvarez was a suspect in Ms. Witherspoon’s death. The Pinal County Medical Examiner is with us to provide technical details. Dr. Gelinski, would you care to begin with Mr. Alvarez?”

“Be glad to, Deputy Commissioner.” Gelinski looked down at his notes. “Let’s see. Alvarez was found hanged by a sheriff’s deputy, Deputy Lyle Shaughnessy, who was bringing him breakfast on Monday morning two days ago. A tee shirt, apparently Alvarez’s, had been torn into strips and made into enough rope, about four feet, to do the job. It was tied to the upper part of the bars on the door around the upper frame. Alvarez apparently had been standing on the bed when the noose was put

around his neck. Then he stepped, or jumped, or was pushed off the bed, which strangled him. Didn't break his neck, like a real hanging is supposed to. Other than scratches on his face, which were why he was a suspect in the Witherspoon murder, his only injury was associated with the hanging."

"You're using words that have implications. You said that the noose 'was put around his neck.' And that he may have been pushed. Why? The sheriff's office is calling this a suicide." Townsend looked puzzled.

"Because I haven't formally ruled that it is a suicide yet. That's why we're here. And there are some curiosities."

"Such as?" Townsend was making careful notes as he asked his questions.

"First, this tee-shirt material is stretchy, more so in one direction than the other. So to make this work, either as a suicide or as a homicide, the shirt had to be torn in the less stretchy direction. Otherwise, the foot or so between the bed and the floor wouldn't be enough distance. The home-made rope would just stretch and Alvarez would wind up standing on the floor. So this was carefully planned, either by Alvarez or by someone else."

Gelinski rummaged in a box he had brought. "This got me to thinking, and I had a good look at this home-made rope. Got it here, in fact. Ms. Trieri, I recall you asked me some perceptive questions last week. How about taking a look at it?" He tossed a pair of plastic gloves at me, waited for me to put them on, and tossed a length of white material my way.

I found myself holding a torn-up tee shirt, strips about six inches wide tied together with square knots. It stretched, but not a lot. Examining the knots carefully, I noticed something peculiar about the ends of the strips.

"I don't have a lens or anything like that, but it looks to me as if some of the ends of these strips are a little different from the middles. Does this have to do with how they were torn?"

"I thought you might see that. If you look at the ends with magnification, you'll see that they're cut with scissors, or a knife, as if to get a start on tearing the rest. You can tell because at the edges of the strips the cuts are across the weave in lots of places, while the tears are along the weave. And the ends of the individual fibers aren't quite as frayed where they're cut."

"So whoever tore up this shirt got each strip started with scissors?" I could tell what was coming next.

"That would be my opinion, and I'll testify to it if necessary. It goes without saying that Alvarez didn't have scissors with him in his cell."

Townsend stared intently at Gelinski, and the room was silent for quite a while.

"So you're saying that someone made this so-called 'rope' for Alvarez, he didn't make it himself?" Townsend wanted our thoughts to be stated explicitly, I guess.

"No, sir. I'm saying that scissors, or maybe a sharp knife, were used on this tee shirt before it was torn into strips. That's all. However, I will note that it is not certain that this was really Alvarez's tee shirt. We can check on that by sending it with his tissue sample for DNA analysis."

"What's this about a tissue sample?" Townsend, who had gone back to taking notes, looked up, startled.

"Alvarez's lawyer has told us that he, I mean Alvarez, had agreed to a DNA test to see if the tissue and blood found under Melody Witherspoon's fingernails matched his. I'm getting ahead of myself here, but that was an agreement reached by Alvarez with his lawyer, and it's in writing. His lawyer is insisting

that this test proceed, to clear Alvarez's name. Or, I guess to implicate him further. But Alvarez probably wouldn't have agreed to the test if he knew it would implicate him."

"And you want to see if there is any of Alvarez's DNA in that tee-shirt rope?"

"Yes, sir. If this was Alvarez's tee-shirt, he had been wearing it for some time before Monday morning, because he'd been in jail for almost a week. So it should have enough sweat and maybe skin cells to test. Of course, the part that was around his neck will, but it's the rest I'm interested in. That's why I asked Ms. Trieri to put on the gloves."

"And if it's not his tee-shirt?"

"That would make this business with the scissors is even more important. Especially because of another thing that's occurred to me."

"Which is?"

"Annette, give that thing a stretch to show these folks." I did, and he continued. "Now, as I said before, the tee-shirt was torn up to minimize the stretch in the strips. But it still stretches some, and I bet that if you put some pull into it you could get nearly a foot of stretch out of that four feet or so of tee-shirt rope. So if Alvarez is standing on his bed in his cell tying this thing around his neck and the top of the bars there, he needs to tie it fairly tight to begin with, or else he'll just end up standing on the floor feeling choked, and dumb, probably. In other words, he had to be choking himself while tying the thing up in the first place if it was actually going to strangle him. We could do a couple of experiments with some weights to test this, but I think I'm right. Point is, it makes the suicide scenario even stranger. You put this all together, and it begins to smell funny."

I had noticed that during this speech a note was handed to Bill Longwell, who passed it to Ross Townsend, at the head of the table, who read it and looked around the room.

"Dr. Gelinski, it appears that you're not the only one who thinks there's something wrong with the suicide theory. There is a small caravan of automobiles at the EcoARC entrance out by the main highway. They want in. They seem to think that we're involved in some kind of whitewash of this incident and they want to be heard, it appears. I suppose that we should take a recess and explain what this is all about to them. Any volunteers?"

* * *

Four

I had a good idea of what the caravan was all about—probably, I thought, a result of rabble-rousing by Alvarez's lawyer, Donald Parks. I decided that it should be handled by someone local, so, when Townsend asked for volunteers, I was very busy working on polishing my notes. But as the group broke up, I was coincidentally finished with this simple task, and I managed to catch Bill Longwell before he ran off to whatever other thing he needed to be doing.

"Bill? Maybe we should chat about the next part of this meeting, where EcoARC becomes a player. Um, I hope that the phone conversations that Hal and I had with you laid the groundwork."

He looked at his watch and grinned at me. "I suppose I don't really have to go over those budget figures this morning, do I? I've been dreading the next part, actually, because I expect that the little matter of alibis, which you and Hal so delicately discussed with me, is going to come up. And these

folks probably aren't going to be as delicate as you two were. One good thing, like I told you, is that I don't really have one. I mean, it's good in the sense that it'll make my people feel better about getting questioned. As in, we're all in this together, me included. Of course, it won't be so good if everyone else has one, I suppose." His grin faded.

"Even though Rudy asked me to check out that tee-shirt rope, I don't think I'm going to be closely involved with the investigation of Alvarez's death. Because that's a problem internal to Arizona law enforcement, I think they'll want me on the sidelines. But that means that I'll have the chance to take more of a lead role in the investigation of Melody's death. Given that there's a chance she was actually killed up in Colorado, I bet they'll involve me closely."

"I hope that's good news for EcoARC, and for me. Like I said, I really don't have an alibi."

"I don't know how much Hal told you, but we'll be asking just about everyone to account for their time before Melody's body was found. If it makes you feel any better, you're not high on the suspect list, with or without an alibi. The time you spent in the military, and particularly those security clearances you had, are solid references. I'm sure you know how deep the background check went for your SCI clearance. And you're not in the NCIC database in any way that would raise suspicion."

He was looking surprised, so I decided to try to smooth things over. "I checked, not only the NCIC but some other resources I have. Had to, just to get a reference point. I know it's probably a little different for you, but it's routine. Speaking of which, we're going to need to do this carefully and by the book. So, squeaky clean or not, I'm not sure it'll be appropriate for you to be part of the rest of this meeting."

Longwell seemed to have recovered his equilibrium. "I've been wondering about that. Is it even appropriate to be having the meeting here?"

"I'm certain that we'll want to go into the greenhouses and look around. Some of these people haven't been in there. So, yeah, we might as well have the meeting here."

"Who's going to conduct the tour under the glass?"

"Under...? Oh, I understand. Inside. Well, my opinion would be that you're the best person to do that. But who knows what Townsend will want to do?" I looked at my watch. "I wonder when this thing will start up again. I'd like to call my office."

"If Townsend went all the way out to the highway to meet these people, I expect he won't be back for the better part of an hour. Before you get tied up on the phone, there's something I need to ask you. When we talked the other day—was it just yesterday?— anyway, when we talked, you weren't very specific about possible suspects among my employees. But Hal alluded to the possibility that someone high up could be involved. Can you tell me more about that?"

I thought quickly about the best way to handle this. I didn't suspect Longwell, but I also knew that my judgment was not completely objective. And "by the book" meant that objectivity had to be paramount.

"Perhaps the best thing to do would be to ask you a couple of questions. I mentioned to you just now that Melody could have been killed in Colorado. I've been talking about this to various people, and I'm beginning to forget what I've said to whom. What else have you been told so far?"

"I guess Hal mentioned that she had been seen on the Frémont State campus on the Saturday, Saturday afternoon, I think, two days before she was found here. Which got me to thinking, of course, about who was with her, assuming that she was killed up there. We don't keep track of people on weekends, but everyone, even graduate students, is supposed to provide information about vacation time and business-related travel during the work week. So I checked our records for the week before that

Saturday to see if anyone was on vacation, or sick, or on travel to Colorado. Of course, this isn't conclusive, because someone could have driven up after work Friday, or on Saturday morning, early. And our record-keeping is done mostly by the honor system. People are supposed to do it, but they sometimes forget."

"And?"

"At a place with this many employees you expect vacations and illness at odd intervals. So there was about the usual number of people out for one of those two reasons. And there were three people on business travel, one to Colorado and two to the East Coast."

"Did you make up a list, or anything like that?"

"Yes, and I thought you might be interested in it, so I brought it with me." He reached into an inner jacket pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Now, I need to emphasize that this isn't conclusive."

"I understand." I unfolded the paper and quickly scanned it. Kelly Rumsford, the graduate student who had first found Melody's body, was the person on travel to Colorado, I saw. "Do you know where Kelly Rumsford was in Colorado?"

"Probably Boulder, doing something at the University. He's almost ready to defend his dissertation, and he probably had a committee meeting, or something. I imagine he flew up, so there would be airline confirmation of his Tucson-to-Denver itinerary. And that's a long way from Durango."

"Right. Not impossible, but a long drive, as I've discovered the hard way. Do you happen to know if any of these people who reported taking vacation have connections with southern Colorado, if they may have gone there?"

"No, but we can ask, of course."

"And this list is exhaustive, in the sense you checked all personnel records, or whatever. I mean, you didn't leave any of your employees out?"

"I checked all the records, but, as I've been saying, there is no way to tell if someone took vacation and didn't report it, or something like that. This is standard operating procedure in academic circles, the honor system. Everyone works 60- or 80-hour weeks anyway, and we almost have to force people to take vacation. So if someone just goes and does it, even without reporting it, it's sort of an employee relations victory."

I wanted to be sure that he had checked every record, because I was puzzled. Art Finnegan's name wasn't on the list.

* * *

As I was trying to decide how to ask about Finnegan without alerting Longwell to my suspicions, my thoughts were interrupted by a disturbance at the door to the conference room. The conferees had dispersed, pending Townsend's return, and Longwell and I had the room to ourselves, until now.

The door flew open, and through it, walking backwards, came a young woman wearing jeans and a polo shirt with the EcoARC logo on the back. It was immediately clear that she was not walking backwards out of habit. Rather, she was being driven, steered, like a champion cutting horse handles a heifer, by a small, rat-faced man in a dark gray, three-piece suit. He had thick-lensed horn-rimmed glasses on his face and was wielding a briefcase as almost like a bulldozer blade, and the young woman was losing ground quickly. When she finally backed into the conference table, she turned to Bill Longwell and me and began explanations.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Longwell, he’s not on the list, I don’t even know how he got onto the grounds, but you can see that he’s determined to get in here. Should I call the State Patrol? They gave me a cell-phone number.”

“You call whoever you want, you pretty little twit, but I’m in charge of criminal matters in this county and no one, I mean no one, is going to keep me away from this meeting.” The little rat-faced man had a surprisingly commanding voice. From this, combined with his nasty demeanor and his three-piece suit, I decided that he had to be a lawyer.

“Not even the Governor and his Commissioner of Public Safety?” I ventured in a mild voice. “I believe that it was the Governor’s list that she just mentioned.”

“Don’t worry about it, Barbara. And he didn’t hurt you with that weapon he’s waving about, did he?” Longwell, I knew, had been a Navy SEAL before graduate school, and he was still in the reserves. Lawyer Rat-Face was perilously close to having some large bones broken.

“No sir, but I don’t think it’s for lack of trying.” By now, Barbara had put the conference table between herself and her pursuer, and she was clearly feeling better. I put a restraining hand on Longwell’s arm and cleared my throat.

“Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I’m Annette Trieri, on a temporary appointment by the Governor to the Arizona Department of Public Safety, as Assistant Deputy Commissioner.” I hoped that I remembered correctly the title that Townsend had tossed at me the previous evening. “And this is Dr. William Longwell, Director of the Ecological Archive Research Center, into whose conference room you have just intruded and whose employee you are abusing. So he may be a little upset. Now. You are?” I had begun gently and in an conciliatory tone, but by the end, I had turned it up to Voice of Authority Level Two. Level Three would have shattered the lenses of Rat-Face’s glasses.

But it worked only partly, not nearly as well as I’m used to or expected it to in this case.

“I’m Sibley Jensen, District Attorney for Pinal County. And I’ll thank you not to make specious accusations about my behavior. I know myself to be fully within my rights in my actions here.”

“Actually, Jensen, I believe your proper title is ‘Assistant District Attorney’ and that you’re only acting in the lead job temporarily. So you’re misrepresenting yourself to an official of the Department of Public Safety as well as intruding and abusing.” Longwell wasn’t backing down, so I decided not to, either.

“I will not be so hypocritical as to suggest that it’s nice to meet you, not under these circumstances, Mr. Jensen. You will place that briefcase on the table and you will sit down. Now.”

My Voice Level Two-Point-Five did the trick: he sat, peering myopically about the room. Hal has told me on various occasions how amazed he is at my Voice of Authority, and, truth be known, I’m surprised by it as well. It’s not the volume; rather, it’s something else that makes it work. Rock-steady resolve, with just an undercurrent of menace, or something. I can’t quite figure it out.

“Mr. Jensen. First things first. Perhaps you’d care to tell us how it is that you are here. The State Patrol officers at the entrance are under orders to admit only people on the Governor’s list. EcoARC is closed to visitors today.” I eased up on the Voice, but I kept it there, lurking in the background.

“I came up from below, if you must know. There’s a jeep road up the valley. And, as I said, I have every right to be here.”

“We can let Deputy Commissioner Townsend decide that, when he returns. It may be that he’ll decide to have you arrested for trespassing, unless, of course, you have a warrant. We’ll see. And, of course, we can let Barbara...Bill? Barbara?”

“Lancaster.”

“We can let Barbara Lancaster decide whether to press assault charges. I, for one, would be delighted to testify on her behalf and I expect that Dr. Longwell would also.”

“I am not vulnerable to idle threats, Ms. Tree-ring, or whatever your name is. And I demand to know the exact purpose of this meeting.”

I finally smiled. “Well now, that’s an interesting demand, because it just may be that the purpose of this meeting will evolve due to your presence. So I’m not sure I can say with any real accuracy what it is. So far, we’ve been discussing certain physical evidence related to the death of a prisoner in the Pinal County lockup, a Mr. Jorgé Alvarez. There appear to be, um, some questions about it. And our next item of business was to have been reviving the investigation of the death of Ms. Melody Witherspoon, whose body was found on the premises here about ten days ago. Of course, our agenda may be modified to discuss your situation. I can tell you with some confidence that the others at the meeting will tolerate neither the type of actions nor the attitude you’ve exhibited thus far, Mr. Jensen.” I toned the Voice down yet another notch. “If you’re concerned that Pinal County is being railroaded, be reassured that it is represented here in an official capacity by the medical examiner. He’s been most careful to discuss only facts, not speculation, and the rest of us are following his lead. I expect that the most to come from this meeting will be recommendations to the Governor about convening a grand jury.”

Barbara Lancaster had sat through this discussion with saucer-sized eyes, and now she took advantage of the lull to seek an immediate exit. “Dr. Longwell, do you need me for anything?”

“Actually, Barbara,” I spoke first, “You could see if Officer Kinney has returned. She mentioned something about checking for messages.” Lancaster scuttled out.

Jensen had been thinking while I lectured him and apparently had reached some kind of conclusion.

“Well,” he was trying to maintain a semblance of dignity, “If all you’re doing here is providing recommendations to the Governor, I’m not really needed, am I? And I do have other pressing matters to attend to.”

As he was rising from the table, the door opened to reveal Officer Sandra Kinney. “Annette? Do you need something?”

“Just stand right there for a minute, would you please? Mr. Jensen here bullied Ms. Lancaster before and I’d like to see how he treats you.”

Jensen took a long look at Kinney, a good 4 inches taller, standing in the doorway with a handgun on one hip and a nightstick on the other, filling the space. She stared at him impassively. He sat back down.

“Bill, let’s you and I go for a little walk and continue our conversation. I’m sure that Mr. Jensen can amuse himself for a while with what’s in his briefcase.” I winked at Sandra Kinney, who winked back.

* * *

About a half hour later, the meeting reconvened. Sibley Jensen was still at the conference table with papers spread out around him, pretending to ignore Sandra Kinney. As the other conferees took their seats, Jensen’s use of about four places worth of tabletop became more and more awkward. Finally, Rudy Gelinski arrived, sized up the situation, and promptly pushed Jensen’s paperwork back into a neat little pile in front of him. The smoke coming out of Jensen’s ears was almost visible, and I had trouble keeping a straight face.

“Sib, you’ve got to learn to share, man.” And Gelinski took his place at the end of the table.

Ross Townsend once again brought the meeting to order. “That was quite useful. I had a nice conversation with the folks at the entrance, and we agreed that they should have a representative here. I’d like to introduce Ms. Yolanda Pequin, who is chair of the Tucson chapter of the League for Immigration Reform. LIR,”—he pronounced it “leer”—“as I’m sure you know, is concerned with fair treatment of all immigrants regardless of their legal status. Ms. Pequin understands that her role here is primarily as an observer.” He smiled at her, and she nodded.

“And Annette has informed me that we have another new person at the table, Mr. Sibley Jensen, Assistant District Attorney for Pinal County, currently acting as DA because of a retirement, I believe. Whether he has this position permanently will depend on election results, of course.” His smile in Jensen’s direction was not nearly so warm. “Mr. Jensen is also here as an observer, because my instructions from the Governor did not include him as an active participant. However, I’m sure that Mr. Jensen will be able to add useful information to our deliberations.” Townsend shuffled paperwork.

“Now, Ms. Pequin and I had a chance to talk on our ride in from the entrance and I brought her up to speed on our earlier discussions. As you know, we’re here to provide advice to my boss for next steps, and based on what I heard this morning, I believe that I would entertain a motion to recommend that a grand jury be convened to investigate Mr. Alvarez’s death.” He looked up, eyebrows arched.

“So move.” Rudy Gelinski was the first to speak up. I heard a second from across the table, from someone I had to look up in my notes to identify. Oh, yes, the head of the DPS investigative division. Well, I thought, the local ME and the DPS are behind an investigation of Sheriff Elwood Johnson’s office and that’s some clout.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Is there any discussion of this motion? No? Excuse me, Mr. Jensen, but you’re out of order. All in favor?” There was a chorus of “aye”s. “Opposed?” There was silence, although it was obvious that Jensen would have liked to speak up. “Motion carries unanimously, so noted here. Thank you all.”

“Now, Ms. Pequin, that’s really the end of our discussion of Mr. Alvarez’s situation, so I expect that’s all you’ll be interested in. The other item we have to discuss is the death of someone else.” Townsend looked at her, waiting.

“Thank you for inviting me in. I’m sorry I missed the first part of your meeting, but, as I told you, we only found out about it last night. And you can be sure that we’ll be following the grand jury investigation closely.” She nodded to the room generally and took her leave.

“And now to the matter of the death of Ms. Melody Witherspoon.” Townsend was consulting his agenda. “Although it is still possible that Sheriff Johnson was correct in his suspicions of the late Mr. Alvarez, we need to explore alternatives, especially in light of the information we have already discussed, as well as information that has emerged recently. Annette? Perhaps you would be so kind?”

I related the updated time-line, including the fact that Melody had been seen only 36 hours or so before her body was found. Because Bill Longwell was still present, and because I had not had a chance to talk with him about it, I withheld the information about Finnegan’s coincident visit to Durango.

“Of course,” I concluded, “Sheriff Johnson didn’t know about this. Nor was he aware, when he arrested Mr. Alvarez, of additional testimony providing Mr. Alvarez with an alibi for the time-frame of the killing. I don’t know what the sheriff would have done with this information, but it could well have altered his thinking. He did express skepticism about the alibi, however. In any case, it seems to me that we should seek additional information about how this could have happened the way it did. Especially important is the possibility that Melody may have been killed in Colorado, after which her body was transported here.”

“Thank you, Annette. Rudy? Do you have any comment on this?” Once again, Townsend was busy taking notes.

“Annette talked with me about this new information, and it constrains my time estimates more closely than I was able to in the postmortem. But there’s nothing that she’s said that’s inconsistent with any of my findings. I will say that if she, I mean Melody Witherspoon, was killed elsewhere then transported here, it was done fairly carefully. She wasn’t just stuffed into a car trunk, or something like that. For example, lividity patterns were consistent with her burial position, meaning that she was transported here in about the same position she was buried in.”

Gelinski shuffled his notes. “Also, I have some new information to add. The lab work has come in. The only thing of interest in Ms. Witherspoon’s blood chemistry is a small amount of Valium, at prescription-level dosages. She wasn’t abusing it or using it recreationally, is the conclusion I’d draw. But she was taking it. There was also a very small amount of alcohol present, about what you’d expect from drinking a glass or two of wine with a meal like dinner. Not enough to interact with the Valium, although I suppose she shouldn’t have been operating a vehicle with these two things in her bloodstream together.”

“Rudy?” I was intrigued by this new wrinkle. “When you say ‘with dinner,’ do you mean a specific dinner, like Saturday?”

He blinked several times, thinking. “Probably. I continue to believe that she had been dead for something like 36 hours when she was found. The alternative, Sunday, just doesn’t provide enough time for the deterioration I saw.”

“So, people, where does this leave us? Where do we go from here?” Townsend was obviously one of those rare public officials who prefers meetings to be short and productive.

“Mr. Townsend?” Bill Longwell spoke up. “I’d like to provide some information as well, and after that I need to leave. You see, the fact that Melody’s body was found inside our greenhouse means that there are relatively few people who could be responsible for its getting there, and I’m one of those. So you folks need to consider me a suspect along with others here who have access to the greenhouses. I’ve done some checking, and there are several people who were on record as having been not at work here, that is, they were on vacation, or travel, or sick leave, two Fridays ago, the day before Melody was seen in Durango. Annette has the list. And there are other people who don’t have any real way to document their whereabouts during the time-frame when Melody was put into the greenhouse. I’m one of those. So if you’ll all excuse me…” And he rose to leave.

“Bill? One second.” I had a point to make. “Bill and I have been talking about this, and there are some things that he will be pursuing for us. First, he gave me the list of people unaccounted for two Fridays ago, as he just said. Second, he’s going to assemble a list of employees who were let go over the past couple of years. It’s possible that one of them still has greenhouse access, plus a grudge. Finally, I think that there are many on this committee who haven’t been inside the greenhouses, who haven’t seen where the body was found. Bill has agreed to lead a tour. How does after lunch sound, Ross?” He was calling me by my first name, so, I thought, I’ll return the favor.

“Works for me.” Townsend looked at his watch. “If I recall, lunch will be arriving here in about 20 minutes. Dr. Longwell, where should we meet you?”

“I’ll come by here about 1:00, and we can walk down there together. An after lunch stroll. How’s that?” And Longwell headed for the door.

“Perfect. Now, Mr. Jensen. You’ve been trying to get my attention for some time. What is it you need? I hope it’s not lunch, as there probably won’t be one for you. You’re not on the list.” Townsend’s grin was barely suppressed.

“Do I understand that the investigation of the death of this Melody Witherspoon person is now being handled by this, this woman?” Jensen gestured vaguely in my direction. “Or this committee? Or what?”

“Of course, there will need to be a lead investigator...”

“Who should by rights be Sheriff Elwood Johnson! You know that as well as I!” Jensen’s face was beet-red.

“I know no such thing. In fact, insofar as Elwood’s office is going to be the subject of a grand jury investigation of a related matter, it’s appropriate for his office to be removed from this case. I’d even entertain an motion to that effect.” He looked up, once again with arched eyebrows.

“So move!” It was Rudy Gelinski again. I jumped in this time with the second, and once again, it was unanimous.

“This is outrageous!” Jensen was, apparently, outraged. “You can’t do criminal investigations by Robert’s Rules of Order!”

“Sib, Sib, shut up, will you? You’re making Pinal County look bad here, for Christ’s sake.” Rudy Gelinski was fed up. “We’re not doing an investigation, we’re making recommendations to the Governor and the Commissioner of the DPS. And by making these kinds of objections, you sound like you don’t want this murder to be solved. You’re making us look bad. So just shut up.” Gelinski folded his arms and stared at the wall in disgust.

“Mr. Jensen,” Townsend was still having trouble keeping a straight face, “Dr. Gelinski is correct about our only making recommendations. And I have a different suggestion. There’s really no need for you to take Dr. Gelinski’s advice to, um, quit talking, because you’re excused. We’ll be sure and call you if we need you.”

Jensen’s departure was accomplished with remarkable grace, all things considered.

* * *

“So, after lunch we all took the tour. Same as before, except it really helped me because that place is so complicated.” It was late in the evening and I was calling home. “Also, I learned something new, something important. Turns out that the key-pad code locks they have at the entrances to the greenhouses are recording locks. Bill was surprised, and embarrassed. He didn’t know, at least he says—I need to remember to be suspicious of him along with everyone else. Anyway, his security chief was with us and happened to mention it. Naturally, we requested a list of every code used for the days before Melody was found. And what we found is that Melody let herself in the main entrance at 3:10 AM on Monday morning. Then about five hours later, her body was found buried in the East Asian greenhouse nearby.”

“But I remember something about her having been dead for some thirty-six or forty-eight hours. So a dead person let herself in?”

“Yes, Rudy pointed that out as well. A small problem. It means, of course, that whoever took her body in there knew her personal access code. Our best guess is that she had it written down in her personal effects, on an ID card or something, so the killer found it. Her purse and other things were never recovered.”

“Did anyone ask about the cameras?”

“Did they ever. Ross Townsend—remember him?—he was all over that one. And the security chief hemmed and hawed about it. They recycle the tapes every twenty-four hours, like we were told. But it

seems that the tape for that entrance for that night was just flat missing. Someone pulled it and put another one in. What they looked at before was a tape recycled from another night. They finally figured this out when the people on the lock record didn't match the people on the camera. So whoever did this knew enough to use Melody's code to get in, to find the place to bury her, no easy trick in that rat-maze, and then to find the security center, get in, and swipe that night's tape. And get out by a different door, one without a camera. It turns out that the main entrance doors have cameras, but several other exit-only doors don't."

"Definitely sounds like an inside job."

"Except, as Bill pointed out, one that could have been done by just about anyone with experience at EcoARC. Everyone gets a briefing on just about everything."

"But it still points to someone on the staff. And, wait. Surely the lock records would have been one of the first things looked at that Monday, when they found her body. What's with the delay?"

"That was the question that Ross asked." I sighed. "I'm afraid that Bill and his staff are looking just a little bad on all this. I guess the problem is that they're just not living in the world that I live in, or the other DPS types."

"It is an academic atmosphere. Remember when we had that killing on campus? We weren't prepared for that kind of thing." Hal always seems to recall that episode with ambivalence. The university lost a top chemistry professor, but he gained me. I think he likes the trade-off, but he probably feels guilty about it. "I don't think you can ascribe any bad intent. But what happened with the lock records?"

"The security chief, Stan McGriff, a one-man security department, was on vacation, accounted for with a solid alibi. He's on the list Bill gave me. And since he wasn't there on that Monday, no one thought to get the lock records. Like I said, Bill says he didn't even know the locks recorded. They did look at the tape, but it was the wrong one, and the right one's missing. Anyway, now that's all straightened out, at least the lock records are, and what we found out is that Melody, dead or not, let herself in, at least as far as the official record shows. At about three in the morning."

"Were there any other irregularities?"

"Not obvious ones. Kelly Rumsford, for example, was on there. He went in at, um, 7:30, I think. Found Melody fifty minutes later."

"Are there records of people going out?"

"Why, Hal! I'll turn you into an investigator yet! Good question. And, no, there aren't. Nor are there records of groups going in. One person uses his or her code, and a whole bunch walks in unrecorded, piggy-backing in. After our tour this afternoon and all the questions we asked, that policy may change. Bill and the security guy, McGriff, were talking about initiating what they called 'positive ingress and egress control.' Got to use your code to get in and get out, no groups, no exceptions."

"Oh, that'll go over big in that free-and-easy research environment." Hal knows just how obstreperous academicians can be.

"There's definitely going to be a long discussion. Anyway that was the upshot of our tour. The others were interested to see the place, and they asked a bunch of questions. It was a repeat for me. But at least I don't feel like such an alien in there, having been in a second time." Also, I thought, I wasn't so lost this time.

"Something's been bothering me about this, from a scientific perspective. Got enough energy to hear it? You must have had a long day."

“Hey, I’d rather talk with you than do my notes or watch TV.”

“OK. So you recall that lecture we got about how the whole place is sealed up, except for when they let in air, which they measure, right?”

“Right. I remember terms like ‘mass budget’ and so on.”

“And they compute these budgets to keep track of all the cycling of elements, like carbon, phosphorous, sulfur, and so on, in the ecosystems in there, remember? So they can keep track of plant nutrients and recycling, right? And they’ve got all these complicated measurements that even allow them to keep track of stuff in the individual greenhouses?” He knew an explanation was needed, but I could tell that he was trying to avoid his “Mr. Science Person” persona.

“Yeah. What did they keep calling it? Biogeological cycles?”

“Biogeochemical cycles. There are errors in the budgets, missing amounts of these elements, but they have a good handle on how big the errors are. And they’re lots smaller than similar errors you have to deal with in natural, open systems. That’s the advantage of this big closed system, and that’s why it’s a valuable research facility.”

“So what’s bothering you?”

“OK, bear with me, here.”

“Do I detect Mr. Science Person coming out of his closet?”

“Hey, I’m trying not to lecture. Really.”

“And I’m only teasing. What’s bothering you?”

“Melody’s elements. I mean, whoever did this, whoever buried Melody in there had to have some insider knowledge. We’ve agreed on that. But suppose she isn’t found. Her body breaks down into the soil, the nutrients get cycled and so on, and it would show up in the budget calculations people do routinely in there. So even if no one found her body, someone would find evidence of her. Understand?”

“Um, let’s see. What you mean is that the amount of new material her body would introduce into the system in there is bigger than the uncertainties in their budget calculations?” I waited, but there was no immediate response. “Hal?”

“Sorry, I’m busy being impressed. That’s exactly the right way to say it, and, said that way, I’m not sure of the answer. Maybe the place is big enough that Melody’s elements are in the noise level of the calculations. Hmm.”

Something occurred to me. “Of course, she had lots of elements. Maybe her carbon, for example, wouldn’t show up because there’s already so much in there, but something else, a trace element would.”

“Hey! I’m supposed to be the science guy here. You’ve been hanging around me too long, or something.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Not at all. Well, you’re there and I’m here, but I always complain about that. Anyway, what I was wondering was if the perp here was actually trying to screw up the science in the greenhouse by putting Melody in there.”

“Oh. I see. A motive to put her in there beyond disposing of a corpse. Hmm. Maybe I can get Bill to do some of the budget estimates to see about the noise level thing.” I made a note.

“Good plan. So what’s your schedule?”

“I’m not going to be here too much longer. I have about another day of interviews, then I’ll be headed back.”

“So I’ll see you for the weekend?”

“That’s the idea. After I stop in Winslow to see Faith.”

“And you promise to drive fast, real fast, on the way home? I’ve been, um, lonely.”

“Oh, yeah. Real fast.”

* * *

Five

Thursday morning, I planned to finish my interviews of employees at EcoARC. I had dealt with the various marginal cases on Wednesday afternoon, after the tour, saving the more high-profile ones for last. I wasn’t surprised that this task should fall to me, given that the Colorado connection in Melody’s death was becoming more and more an issue.

Ross Townsend, on the walk from the conference center at the EcoARC hotel down to the greenhouses, had made a point of talking with me to ask if I would take the lead on this investigation. His people, of course, were my people because I was his assistant, if only temporarily; but I would also have access to resources in Colorado so it made sense for me to be the leader, and so on and so on. His reasoning was impeccable, and I couldn’t decline.

I considered carefully where to conduct my interviews, and I finally settled on the conference room. It was available, private, and had the appropriate furniture. I would have preferred some place less formal, but one of the empty hotel rooms seemed a little too casual, with the bed and the TV sitting there.

Kelly Rumsford was first. I planned to save Bill Longwell for last, probably over dinner, more to provide him with a debriefing than to interview him. I also had on my schedule Art Finnegan, the deputy director.

Rumsford arrived in the usual warm-weather graduate student garb—tee-shirt, baggy shorts, sandals. He was trying to grow a goatee with only marginal success.

“Please sit somewhere comfortable, Mr. Rumsford. I think you’ve probably heard by now what’s going on.”

“Yeah, it sounds like you’re questioning lots of people about the thing with Melody W.”

“Some information has turned up that we need to follow up on. In your case, it doesn’t have to do with Monday, when you found her, but the Friday before.”

“The Friday before? Let’s see... I don’t think I can help you much. I was in Boulder all that week. My committee insisted that I come up for a pre-defense meeting.”

“You say you were there ‘all that week.’ What does that mean, exactly?”

“I went up on Monday, spent the week there, and came back on Saturday.”

“It’s important for me to have corroboration of this. Do you have, say, an airline ticket receipt?”

“Huh? Oh, no, of course not. I drove.”

“Oh. Hmm. I drove down from Durango, and that’s only about half way. All the way to Boulder is a long haul.”

“That’s for sure. It’s a long, long day.”

“What route do you use?”

“Depends. Sometimes I actually go up, or come back, through Durango because of the scenery. But the interstates are faster. I-25 and I-10.”

“And last week?”

“What’s this all about, anyway.”

“I’m asking about the route you used last week. And I’m going to ask if you have any gas receipts that will prove it.”

“And then what?”

“We’ll see. And I’m trying to be as carefully respectful about this as I can, but you do understand that I’m investigating a murder, don’t you?”

“And I’m, like, a suspect?”

“You’re, like, someone who might have important information that I need to hear. And the way I get at this information is to ask questions. To the extent that you provide clear answers, with documentation when I need it, you get classified as being cooperative and that’s that. Unless more questions come up, of course. To the extent that you don’t provide clear answers, and documentation, you’re in another category. At the least that category is ‘uncooperative.’ It may also fall more into the ‘suspect’ range. That all depends on what I learn, or don’t learn, from you, as well as from others.” I paused and tapped my fingers on the table briefly.

“Mr. Rumsford, you’re a student, have been for years and years. You’re used to listening to professional lecturers giving pedantic explanations of complex issues. I’m probably not up to their standards, so I hope I’m being clear. Whatever the case, just like in those classroom lectures, there’s a point to this, but there’s also a limit to my patience. One big difference is that the end result for you in this case has dramatically greater consequences than merely getting an ‘F.’ Are you with me here?”

During this, he had taken on more and more of a sullen expression. “You have no reason whatsoever to treat me this way.”

“Mr. Rumsford. Listen carefully. We law enforcement people are a suspicious bunch. And we’re also keenly aware of historical precedent. One obvious question that pops into my head, and it will pop into the head of any professional who looks into this case, is how it is that you ran across Melody’s body. Could it be, for example, that you found her because you put her there?”

“What!? No, of course not? I found her, I mean, it, her body, because I was doing that plant survey. That was scheduled a long time ago and everyone knows it.”

“Yes, including you, so you would have known the perfect time to put her body there, after killing her, of course. Now, the reason I was asking you about your itinerary on your recent Boulder trip was so that I could eliminate you as a suspect. Then you started being uncooperative, asking me questions instead of answering mine. What do you suppose that does to a naturally suspicious person like me, hmm? How much more difficult do you want to make this for yourself?”

“OK, OK, I went up to Boulder on the interstates, and I came back the long way, across Colorado and down through New Mexico and Arizona. Through Durango. OK?”

“Thank you. I already telegraphed my next question, so it shouldn’t surprise you. Do you have any gas receipts to corroborate this? Or any other kind of dated receipt from a credit card, or anything?”

“Yeah, I did, but I mailed them to Boulder to get expenses reimbursed. The university has them somewhere in its accounting system.”

“Excellent. I’m sure I can find them. Now. Just so I’m clear. You went through Durango on Saturday, almost two weeks ago? What time of day? And did you buy gas there? A receipt will have both time and date.”

“I guess it was mid-afternoon, maybe four. I was partying with old friends in Boulder on Friday and didn’t get much in the way of an early start. And I bought gas out in Bayfield. And again in, uh, St. Johns, I think, in the evening.”

“So you didn’t get back here until pretty late?”

“Way late. Got home about one in the morning. I thought I was going to have to sleep on the side of the road a couple times.”

“You live where?”

“Over in Oracle. In an apartment, a converted garage that this old lady rents to me.”

“Did you know Melody well?”

“Hardly at all. Would have liked to, I’ll say that. But she was post-doc and I’m a grad student, and, well, you know...”

“No, but I can imagine. I’ll be contacting the University of Colorado about your receipts, Mr. Rumsford, and I may have more questions. But for now that’s all. Thanks for your cooperation.”

“I can go?”

“Yep. I’m glad you decided to tell me what I needed to know. Really.”

He left, puzzled, while I finished my notes. Obviously, I thought, he was in the right place at the right time. But I bet he would have tried lots harder to avoid telling me about Durango if he was involved in this. And he certainly wouldn’t have told me about the receipts. On the other hand, maybe that’s exactly what he wants me to think. Also, if he got a late start, why go through Durango instead of the faster way, on the interstates? And I mentally filed away these thoughts for later analysis.

* * *

Art Finnegan was to be next, but first I needed a cup of coffee. Maybe, I thought, they have some up in the hotel lobby. I had a half hour before Finnegan was due to show up, so I decided to take a walk.

Outside, it was a beautiful autumn day in the desert, sunny and warm with just a hint of a breeze. I had a fleeting thought of conducting my remaining interviews *al fresco*. With winter coming at home, I felt drawn to the sunshine and fresh air. But I needed privacy, and outside it would be just too easy to be overheard.

It took only a little persuasion to talk the people in the lobby out of a cup of coffee, and then I was able to pick my way between the spiny plants away from the buildings and into the desert. Walking slowly and carefully, so as not to spill the coffee or get stabbed, I began to appreciate the variety of the landscape. Some of the cacti were familiar from home, such as the prickly pears. Others, like the tall saguaro, were sufficiently famous that I knew about them. Names such as barrel cactus popped into my head from who knows where, when I came across an obvious specimen. But there were many that I had

never seen and couldn't begin to place. Cactus in the form of weird-looking little bushes with a fuzzy covering of what turned out to be spines. Golf-ball-sized miniatures with spikes all over. Hand-like clumps of green thorns growing from the ground. They were everywhere, sprinkled about among the sparsely foliated bushes I remembered were called creosote bush, or greasewood.

Hal and I had taken a walk in the moonlight, but we had stayed on the paved roads. This was different from anything in my experience, and it made me nervous. I noticed I was listening carefully, for what I didn't know. Rattlesnakes? But the only creature I saw was a rabbit watching me warily as it munched on some grass.

Because sitting didn't seem likely—even the rocks were sharp—I finished my coffee standing up and eventually headed back the way I came, back to the conference room. On the stairs down from the lobby, I ran across another admirer of the scenery, a man who was staring across the desert at Black Mountain. As good at describing people as I am, he eluded me despite the fact that he looked vaguely familiar. A perfect person to blend in with the crowd, I thought. Average height, nondescript brown hair, unremarkable glasses, Dockers and a tan EcoARC sport shirt, long-sleeved despite the warm day. Why, I wondered, does he seem familiar?

He must have heard my footsteps, because he turned around as I was coming down the stairs.

“Can I help you?” Even his smile was average. It occurred to me that his question implied a sense of belonging—that fit with the shirt—and that he didn't recognize me. I smiled back but didn't respond.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I don't have my name tag. I'm Art Finnegan, the deputy director of the EcoARC Center. The reason I asked is that there's nothing down here but our conference center, and I'm afraid it's off limits to visitors today.” He cocked his head to the side, clearly expecting some kind of response from me.

“Ah, yes, Mr. Finnegan. It's off limits because I'm about to use it to chat with you. Would you care to come inside? I'm Annette Trieri, Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety. The Governor has asked me to investigate the death of Melody Witherspoon.”

It wasn't clear to me whether he was surprised at my ability to take control of the situation or he was nervous about the interview to come. But his expression told me that my tactic had worked: his equilibrium was off-kilter.

“Now, Mr. Finnegan,” we had descended the stairs and taken places on opposite sides of the conference room table, “I'd like to find out about two things. Let's start with what you know about Melody Witherspoon.”

“Melody was a post-doctoral fellow here. She was working on the ecology of dryland grasses, both the ones we have growing naturally—it's not really natural in there, but we don't cultivate them so they're growing on their own—and the ones in the experimental part of the greenhouse. I expect you've heard that I was one of the first people on the scene after Kelly found the body.”

“Perhaps you could describe what you found.”

“I was with some students down at the deep end of the ocean—that's what we call that big tank full of saltwater in there—working on the wave-generator mechanism. They needed an extra pair of hands and I was available. We all try to pitch in to help on just about everything around here. Anyway, I got a call on the radio that Kelly needed me to come find him in the rain forest greenhouse. That's just next to where I was, so I got right over there. He had found what turned out to be one of Melody's fingers, and I discovered it was attached to the rest of her. We called the sheriff right away. Took him long enough, but he finally showed up.”

“How is it that she could have been buried in there?”

“That’s what we’ve all been asking. I mean, whoever did it knew what he was doing. She was buried carefully, with some small plants re-planted on top of her. And the leaves and other debris had been scattered over the grave most cleverly. If Kelly hadn’t run across the finger, we probably wouldn’t have found her for a long time, maybe never.”

“I’ve taken only two tours of the greenhouses, so I’m still not very familiar with them. But it’s obviously confusing in there. My impression is that whoever did this must have known his way around, no?”

“Oh, for sure. That’s another thing we’ve all been wondering about. This looks like a job done by someone who has spent a lot of time in there. We’re all spooked.”

“Of course, that suggests that anyone who has experience in the greenhouses is automatically on the long list of possible suspects, as I’m sure you understand.”

“You bet. That’s been the number one topic of conversation around here for the last week and a half.”

“Which leads me to my second question—where were you that weekend, including Sunday night?” His expression didn’t change as I had thought it might. He just looked as average as ever. This suggested to me that he was expecting the question.

The silence stretched out for some time. Finally he gave in.

“Should I have a lawyer?”

“If you’d like. At this point, I’m gathering information about everyone who is knowledgeable about the greenhouses. This is a question I’m asking everyone I’m interviewing. But it’s your right to have an attorney, if you’d like. Do you need one?” That question did elicit a change of expression, to a sour one.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have an alibi for all weekend, just Sunday night. My wife will tell you I was at home then. But the rest of the weekend, I wasn’t. I was here, working alone. I’ve found that this business of being deputy director leaves me time for research only on nights and weekends.” I stared at him long and hard before writing down his answer, but he didn’t flinch.

“How well did you know Melody?”

“About as well as I know any of our post-docs. We try to develop social relationships on top of our professional ones, not deep social relationships, but friendly ones. Especially for new students and post-docs from out of town, it’s helpful. They don’t feel so isolated that way. So I knew her from that perspective. We have Friday evening social hours here, that sort of thing. I’m a marine biologist, though, so I didn’t know her as well as I do some of my own students.”

“Marine biologist? OK. Let’s see. Did Melody have a large circle of friends?”

“I’m not really certain. She was still new, having arrived just a few months ago. I think she was living down in Oracle. She had an apartment there or something, with other students and post-docs in the neighborhood. So maybe she had developed friendships.”

“Why would anyone want to kill her?”

“That’s the tough one. The speculation around here has been that this was some kind of accident, like she blundered into something she wasn’t supposed to see and got killed because of it. Like a drug deal, or something.”

“Are there lots of drug deals around here, Mr. Finnegan? I mean, we’ve already decided this had to be someone with knowledge of the greenhouses and, obviously, access.”

“Maybe not drugs. I thought they caught the guy anyway, that fellow Alvarez that worked here. Maybe it had to do with smuggling illegal aliens from Mexico.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to look into that.” I smiled as disarmingly as I could, given my disgust with his lies. “And, let’s see, you say you were here working that weekend. Did you see Melody while you were here? I seem to recall my husband telling me that postdoctoral types work evenings and weekends also.”

“Your husband?”

“Yes, Hal Weathers. He’s a dean up at Frémont State in Durango.” I tried to look innocent. He looked startled.

“Oh. I see. Well, no I didn’t see Melody here that weekend.”

“Or anywhere else? Like, in town or anything? We need to trace her movements in the days before she was killed.”

“Ah, no, I don’t believe so. Is there anything else?” He was looking at his watch.

“Hmm. Let me look at my notes. You didn’t see Melody at all two weekends ago, and you spent that weekend here, except for Sunday night. No, I guess not, not for now, Mr. Finnegan. And, you see? You really didn’t need a lawyer to tell you what to say, did you?”

“No, I guess not. Be sure to let me know if I can be of further assistance, will you? We all want to get this mystery cleared up. But I bet that fellow Alvarez had something to do with it.”

“Oh, I’ll be in touch, you can count on it.”

* * *

I left for Winslow early the next day, a bright sunny Friday morning. Officer Sandra Kinney escorted me as far as Winkleman, out of Pinal County, just in case the sheriff or his people might do something strange, but there were no incidents. Winston Tsosie had departed the previous day on another assignment up by Flagstaff, so I was on my own for most of the way. I wouldn’t be traveling as fast this time—the trip would take longer, with the overnight visiting Faith in Winslow, but the more leisurely pace would give me the opportunity to think about the meetings and interviews of the past few days.

And the leisurely pace paid off early, before Winkleman. In the San Pedro River valley north of San Manuel, I was treated to the view of a multiple hot-air balloon launch, three brightly colored mushrooms lifting elegantly into the blue sky. It made me think of a story my grandfather used to tell.

He was a first-generation American, son of immigrants who never really learned English, born and raised on the south side of Chicago. The way he told the story, as a teenager he had won a balloon ride in a church raffle. They took off from Grant Park by where the aquarium is now with the expectation that the on-shore breeze would carry them inland. But a wind shift aloft had carried them out over the lake, and all they could do was ride it out. Fortunately for them, the wind was from the southwest—if it had been more from the south, they would probably have crashed into Lake Michigan, there’s so much water in that direction. But instead they were carried across the lake, and that evening they landed on the beach just north of South Haven, Michigan, cold, hungry, and scared. He always said that he had knelt and kissed the sand, just like his parents had kissed the ground on Ellis Island. And years later he returned to that beach and bought property there. My brother still owns the lake-side cottage that’s been in the family for three generations now.

I was lifted from my reverie by the crackle of the radio loaned to me by Tsosie on the drive down.

“Annette? We’re coming up on Winkleman, and I’m going to let you go. I don’t think Elwood or his guys would be so stupid as to try anything out of their county.”

“Thanks, Sandra, thanks for all your help. And I expect you’re right. Even if they knew I was taking this route, I don’t think they’d try anything.”

“And in that car, you can outrun them anyway.” I heard laughter.

“Now that I’ve got Arizona credentials, I guess I won’t be so worried as I was on the way down. You take care, Sandra. I’ll see you next time I’m down here. And I’ll be in touch if I need anything.” I heard the microphone switch clicking that I had learned means “ten-four,” and I waved as Officer Kinney turned off onto a side street.

Keeping to the speed limit seemed interminably slow, so I decided to take advantage of being part of Arizona law enforcement. Feeling guilty, I also turned on Hal’s radar_detector. With the twisty part of the drive coming up, I knew I would be able to have a little fun with the car before the long straight stretches ahead, up on the Colorado Plateau.

Driving soon became automatic, even at 30 mph over the speed limit, and I began reviewing yesterday’s interviews in my head. Kelly Rumsford had been predictable, rebellious but probably truthful. Art Finnegan, on the other hand, what a piece of work that guy was. Did he really think his lies would stand up to scrutiny? The big question was whether he and Melody had been together in Durango. Unfortunately, hard evidence was lacking.

The interview with Stan McGriff, the one-man security department, had been unremarkable. He had been on vacation the weekend Melody was killed, and, given the normally boring circumstances of his job, it was not unusual that he had made no arrangements for someone to be acting for him. He was sure that he had briefed Bill Longwell and just about everyone else about the workings of the entrance lock systems and the video tapes, but he also wasn’t surprised that they hadn’t remembered. They, he said, had more important things to think about and probably had forgotten his briefing. He was a little embarrassed that all the excitement had occurred in his absence, but he was also philosophical. Murphy’s Law in action, he’d said. But he was emphatic that now there would be much better security arrangements, because the administration would finally have to listen to his suggestions. They had been ignoring him, it seemed.

But the biggest puzzle was Bill Longwell. He and I had met for dinner at the EcoARC restaurant, and it had been strange. He was as polite as ever, but a bit distant, considering our earlier interactions. And for some reason he spent the whole time talking about the Jorgé Alvarez theory of the murder—despite the skepticism he had expressed before, he was back to the far-fetched story being touted by the sheriff and Art Finnegan.

I heard a sudden chattering noise, like an angry electronic squirrel, that abruptly shut up after about five seconds. It took me several blinks to realize that it must be the radar detector, and, indeed, it was lit up full strength. Yielding to discretion, I let off the accelerator pedal, and the car obediently slowed. Sure enough, as I rounded a curve, there was an Arizona State Patrol car sitting on the shoulder. I waved as I cruised by at the speed limit.

Handy little gadget, I thought. No wonder people like ’em. Probably saved me a long, drawn-out explanation of how my DPS credentials make it OK for me to flout the speed limit.

The patrol car faded in the mirror, and I returned to my previous line of thought as well as my faster pace. Must be that someone got to Bill Longwell. There’s just no other explanation. And the most likely people to have got to him work for Pinal County, either at the DA’s office or at the sheriff’s office. I immediately thought of Sibley Jensen. But I realized that it could also be Art Finnegan, given his point of view. What hold could Finnegan have on Bill?

Of course, it really didn't matter if there were some people who still believed that Jorgé Alvarez was guilty, because the DNA testing would take care of that one way or the other. The problem, I reminded myself, was that the more time that was spent on false leads meant a colder trail in pursuit of the real killer.

I should turn this around, look at it from Finnegan's point of view, I thought. If he really did it, what would he gain by extra time? Surely he would know that Alvarez could be proven innocent with DNA testing. And he knows he talked with Gil Taylor two weekends ago. And I told him I'm married to Hal, so all the possible connections must be obvious to him. Of course, if he's innocent of the murder and just trying to hide some hanky-panky from his wife, he might still act the same way. Or would he?

I eventually gave up on these behavioral problems and turned my attention to forensic matters. The previous afternoon, Sandra Kinney and I had driven down to Oracle, to have a look at Melody Witherspoon's place. It turned out that Melody had been renting a little guest house, locally called a *casita*, from a retired couple. Because Melody's purse was never found, there was no key, but the Pinal County Sheriff's Department had broken into the casita and locked it up with a hasp and padlock of their own when they were finished. It took some persuading, but a direct order from the Governor had finally extracted the key from them.

There was surprisingly little of interest to see, though. Being mistrustful of the sheriff and his relatives, I wasn't sure that the place was intact, but at least it wasn't ransacked. I did find several keepsakes, now safely tucked into the S4's trunk, to take back to Melody's mother. And in a bookcase, mixed in with a variety of novels and non-fiction esteem-boosting self-help books (it occurred to me that perhaps they classify as fiction, too) was a diary that would provide, I hoped, useful reading when I had the time.

Melody's office at EcoARC was even more disappointing. The Sheriff's Department had secured it as well, but there seemed to be no need. It was virtually bare, with only a few textbooks and a file cabinet full of photocopied journal reprints. Conspicuously absent was a computer, despite an obvious computer desk complete with slide-out keyboard tray. Because EcoARC was a private facility, Deputy Director Art Finnegan and Director of Security Stan McGriff had insisted on observing Sandra Kinney and me in our visit to Melody's office, but neither would comment on the lack of a computer or notebooks or anything else personal. Sandra and I had both maintained our expressionless demeanors upon hearing this, but now I was trying to understand the implications of the obvious fabrication.

All this time, I was headed north, through the small towns below and then up on the Mogollón Rim—Globe, Carrizo, and finally Show Low, where I turned northwest toward Holbrook and the interstate to Winslow. Faith and I were going out for drinks and dinner.

The next morning, after a late breakfast and an extended exchange of best wishes and promises to get together more often with Faith, I set out east on I-40 to pick up the northern stretch of US-191 through the Rez. North of Ganado, out in the middle of nowhere, I was cruising comfortably along at about 95 when my radio crackled.

"Annette? That's got to be you doing over 90 down there. You want me to sic my cousins on you, or what?"

I keyed the microphone on the portable radio.

"Winston? Where in the world are you? I thought you had to be over by Flagstaff."

"I did and I was. Now I'm up ahead of you on that mesa you're about to come up, watching for white folks in a hurry like you. And I bet you're wondering why your fancy high-tech radar detector didn't give me away, huh?"

“Hmmp. Yeah, now that you mention it, I am. Must be one of those mystical Diné tricks, no?”

“Right. Involving landmarks, a stopwatch, and a calculator. I do it all the time. Got to earn my keep somehow. How did it go down at Oracle?”

“Weird. I thought everything was starting to come together, and last night it fell apart. So, are you going to escort me north to Colorado?”

“You’re doing pretty good on your own, looks like. But I’m due up at Teec Nos Pos, so why not? I’ll wait until I see you come up over the hilltop and then we’re off. Same as before, OK?”

* * *

I made it home by mid-afternoon Saturday, finding Durango in full fall gloom, a cloud deck threatening to drizzle at any time. It was early enough that I decided to stop by the mechanics who work on Hal’s cars to see if they could do an impromptu oil change. The car had behaved so well that it deserved a treat, I thought. Besides, the gesture would earn me major points with Hal, perhaps making up for the high-speed miles I’d put on the car. Maybe, I thought, I can figure out how to get this car for myself. Driving my Subaru will never be the same.

Following Officer Tsosie in his souped-up Camaro was more fun than before, because he knew I could drive up to his standards. We still slowed for the little towns and villages, but the open country sailed by at over two miles a minute. And once again, the short stretch through the northwest corner of New Mexico seemed interminably slow, even though my sense of speed had been moderated during a stop for coffee at Teec Nos Pos, where I returned Officer Tsosie’s radio and thanked him for his helpfulness.

The mechanics were cooperative, and I filled the car with gas and got it washed. I finally arrived at home about 5:00 PM feeling accomplished and responsible, ready for an evening romp with my favorite Dean.

Who was nowhere to be found.

I picked up the telephone and heard it booping, so I went through the process of retrieving the messages. It turned out that there was only one, from Hal, apologizing for being late. He had walked up to the campus to a yet another budget meeting that was going on longer than planned, and I shouldn’t expect him until mid-evening, after dinner. A Saturday evening meeting? Sometimes, I thought, his job is almost as bad as mine.

With nothing better to do, I decided to treat myself to a pizza for dinner and called a pick-up place for a take-and-bake. They, I knew, would prepare it and keep it in a refrigerator for me, so I had time to shower and change.

About 90 minutes later I pulled into the driveway in my Subaru—and, no, it just wasn’t the same—with a ready-to-bake pizza sitting on the floor beside me. I had left the oven on at home to pre-heat.

But I *hadn’t* left the light on in the study, I was certain. Nor had I left the side door open. Nor had that pane of glass been broken.

Nothing, I thought, like catching perps red-handed. On the theory that whoever was in the house would leave by the door he had entered, I backed my car to the end of the driveway by the street, where I could still see the side door clearly. I set my Glock on the dashboard in easy reach and used my cell phone to dial the front desk of the Durango police department’s main station downtown.

“Durango police. Can I help you?” It had been long enough since I left the PD for my position at the CBI office that I didn’t recognize the voice. The entry-level positions turn over fairly quickly.

“Good evening. This is Annette Trieri. I used to be the head of investigations with you folks, but I don’t recognize your voice, I’m sorry to say. Anyway, now I’m with the CBI, and I’ve got a little situation up at my house on Eighth Street that you can help me with.” I related the circumstances and my address. “And the fellow who took over for me was Fred Winders. I don’t suppose he’d be in? I’m sure he’d be interested in this little caper. If you send a patrol car or two this way quietly, Fred can come by and say hi. We’re old friends. Also, if Walt Jankowski is still in, I’m certain he would like to be informed of this. Unless you’d rather I call him myself. I have his office number.” And, to prove it, I rattled it off from memory.

The rookie—front-desk people are almost always rookies—took this in stride, but the Captain’s phone number clearly impressed her, because she gasped and said “Yes, ma’am” rather than asking questions. The phone clicked and I heard a new voice.

“Jankowski.”

“Walt, hi. It’s Annette.” I used to call him “Walt” even when I worked for him, except in public, but we’re friends and colleagues now, so it comes easier. “Want some entertainment?”

“Annette! I heard you’re getting involved in that local girl’s murder, ah, Melody Something. But what entertainment?”

I filled him in and he promised to get there as soon as he could. Meanwhile, I had been watching the house, and, sure enough, there was someone in the study. Once in a while he would step in front of the desk lamp he’d turned on. And it didn’t look like Hal at all. This person was short and fat.

Finally the light went off. Showtime, I thought.

I opened the car door and knelt behind it, and turned the key one click in the ignition. With my Glock resting on the window frame and my left hand reaching across to the headlight switch on the turn signal stalk, I was ready.

Because the electrical power to the car was on, I could see by its clock that it was 6:42, deep dusk even with daylight savings time still in effect. Kind of early for home burglaries, I thought. But maybe they try to catch people when they’re out for dinner.

Shortly, a head poked itself out the door and looked around, and a foot appeared on the porch step. Now!, I thought, to catch him off balance. So I twisted the light switch and pushed the turn signal stem at the same time. High-beams lit up the driveway and the side of the house with the blaze of the noon sun.

“Freeze or die, slimeball!!” Between the lights and my Voice of Authority Level 3, the poor fellow emerging from the house looked like a mouse in the gaze of a bull snake. Damn, I thought, he’s *fat*. Hope he doesn’t have a heart attack.

I had him lie face-down on the driveway, arms out, and I walked over to him to have a little chat before the PD arrived.

“You, my chubby friend, are under arrest. And this Glock of mine is loaded with soft-points that will punch a grapefruit-sized hole in you, so don’t think you can try anything. I don’t know what you’re after, but you sure picked the wrong house to rob. Breaking and entering the home of a Colorado Bureau of Investigation official isn’t going to win you points with the Durango PD, I can tell you. May I ask what you were looking for? You think I have diamonds, or something?”

A muffled voice rose from the driveway pavement. “If you were a real cop, you’d be reading me my rights.”

“No, the police will do that. It’s their jurisdiction. They’ll be here shortly. I’m just going to hold you for them, so I can ask you anything I want. Oops, careful! Please don’t move at all. I’m kind of twitchy with this thing. Now, what were you looking for?”

“Whaddya think, lady? Stuff I can fence, of course. Geez.”

“And why did you pick this house?”

“I saw you come home in that fancy car and leave in the other one. I figured no one would be home for a while.”

“Nice try. But I already know enough to know that doesn’t make any sense. So start over and tell me the truth. That way, I can help you with the PD.”

“What are you talking about? Why else would I risk a B&E? I need money. Geez.”

“OK, have it your way. I think I’ll tell my PD friends that you tried to assault me. That’ll get them happy with you. You see, I used to work for the Durango PD, and they’re still quite protective of me.”

“What?! Christ, you can’t do that. I didn’t do any such thing. And I even waited until you left. C’mon. Christ! You can’t do that!”

“Want to bet? Oh, here they are. Hi, fellas. Look what I’ve got here. Hi, Walt. Fred, good to see you again. How’re Penny and the kids?”

The muffled voice from the pavement sounded urgent. “Don’t believe anything she says! I didn’t touch her! I just broke in to find money! Honest!”

“Man, what’s with him?” Fred Winders was looking surprised, and Walt Jankowski was trying not to laugh.

“Guilty conscience, probably. Better recite the mantra, Fred. Can’t have him not knowing his rights. Say, why don’t you have the guys here take him downtown and book him, B&E, I’d say, and come in. I’ll bake this pizza I’ve got and we can catch up on old times. Hal’s at some dumb meeting until late.”

“Hey! Who says my meetings are dumb? And look at this. I go away to work and come home tired and hungry to find a circus in my driveway. What’s a guy got to do to have a little peace and quiet, anyway?” Hal was walking up the driveway, trying to hide the big grin. No one was going to take him seriously, I could tell. Maybe, I thought, I can get a second pizza delivered.

* * *

Six

Hal had been amused to find our driveway full of cops, but he wasn’t amused to find that our house had been broken into. Like most homeowners, he considered it a sanctuary, and he felt violated and not a little protective of me. And I felt violated, too despite my experience with police work. When it happens to you, it’s different.

At least the house hadn’t been trashed. In fact, it was puzzling to us that there was little in the way of an indication that anyone had been inside. The broken window pane was a sign, of course, but not even the study was mused.

And so the Saturday evening pizza party was only about half party, because I needed to provide a statement to Winders and because the forensics team needed to go over the house. But we old friends did manage to catch up.

Sunday morning, I was scheduled to visit the PD, to provide follow-up to my statement and to watch the interrogation of the fellow whom I had caught coming out of the house. But as I was about to leave, the telephone reeled me back in.

“Annette? Fred Winders here. Listen, I’m glad I caught you. I don’t know if you really want to come down. Our perp has a lawyer, and you won’t believe who it is. Your old pal Arthur Stepwood.”

“Stepwood? I thought he was disbarred.” Stepwood’s lack of ethics in an earlier case of mine had put him on the Colorado Bar Association’s blacklist.

“Me, too. But I guess he’s been reinstated, or something. Anyway, he’s here representing the guy you caught, whose name turns out to be James Lovett. Goes by Jimmie, apparently. He’s got a Colorado driver’s license with a Durango address, but the NCIC database lists him as having several small-fry arrests down in southern Arizona, south of Phoenix.”

“Any idea of how long he’s been here?”

“A couple of years at least, from his license. And, listen, I’m sorry to tell you this, but Stepwood’s talking about filing a complaint against you. Says you abused his client. Falsely accused him of assault, and hurt his feelings by calling him fat, and made him lie down on the cold, dirty old driveway. Shame on you, you bad, bad person.”

“I did call him ‘chubby,’ but only when no one was around. And I certainly didn’t accuse him of assault. I hinted that I might, but you didn’t hear any such accusation, did you?”

“No, and I’d call ‘chubby’ an accurate description, restrained and polite, even. But Stepwood’s probably bluffing anyway, so don’t worry about it.”

“I sure won’t. But what I’ll think about is why this small-fry crook would get Stepwood. He’s a high-roller guy, at least he was before.” I remembered my case involving him all too well—he’d been representing a local drug kingpin.

“And that’s the word on the street now, too. I was wondering the same thing.”

“But it fits. Look, this guy Lovett is trying to make himself out to be a B&E guy, but he didn’t break into our house for money or stuff he could fence. He looked around the study carefully. I saw him up there, and he was quite methodical. And you know we didn’t find anything tossed. So he was looking for something specific. He didn’t have anything on him, did he?”

“No, he was clean. And he’s not a pro for sure, he had his wallet with him, ID and all.”

“So he didn’t find whatever it was. Now, if he was a true pro, he would have tossed the place to make it look like a standard B&E job. But he didn’t. So he’s small fry, like his record, but he’s working for someone who can afford Stepwood. Someone who wants whatever Lovett didn’t find.”

“Damn, Annette, you’re as sharp as ever. Where should we go with this?”

“You booked him on the B&E, right? And that’s solid. I mean, your guys found his prints in the study, and I caught him coming out the door, for crying out loud. But maybe a plea bargain would be an easy way out, get him back on the street where we can watch him. I want to know what’s going on.”

“You got any big cases in progress, any that this might be related to?”

“Only the thing with the DPS in Arizona, Melody Witherspoon’s murder. Besides, I don’t keep casework at home. You don’t suppose they’d try to break into the CBI office?”

“This guy Lovett might, he’s not too bright. But look, would Hal have anything of interest to anyone?”

“University politics can be rough, but they don’t play this way. And the scientific community doesn’t, either. The best I can do is the Arizona link. If Lovett’s from down there, maybe he’s connected with the stuff I’m involved in. Could be any number of ways he’s connected, but that’s all I can think of generally. Did you find anything else about him?”

“Not really. His wallet has the usual contents, credit cards, some cash, several business cards. They might interest you, they’re from Intermountain Social Services. Remember them?”

“Do I! They still run Sizzles?”

“Yep. But they’ve been low-profile lately. Lingerie parties, mostly, from what I hear. Lap dancing, that kind of thing.”

“Hmm. What do you think the chances are of getting a warrant for his place, the address on his license? If we caught him in a B&E, I’m a credible witness, I think, maybe we could claim he’s got a stash of stolen goods there. Maybe we could find out who he’s working for.”

“He was clean when we brought him in last night.”

“Right. But maybe he was just casing the place and left to get a truck to haul all our valuable stuff away in, before I came home. Which would imply he has a house full of stolen goods for us to find. Think that’ll fly? We ought to do this before he gets out on bail.”

“Hmm. Stepwood’s agitating, but we’re not doing a bail hearing until Monday. So maybe we can look over his place today. Judge Sandose is as helpful as ever. But you won’t be looking for stolen property, it sounds like.”

“No, you will. I’ll be looking for information leading up the ladder. The Arizona connection and these cards for Intermountain got my attention.”

“You’re CBI now and outrank me, I guess. So if you want to come along on this, it’s your call.”

“It’s your case, and because I’m a victim, I have to avoid looking like I’m in it for personal reasons. But the CBI is here to serve local law enforcement, and if you folks invite me in, well, gosh, I guess I’ll have to oblige.” I heard laughter on the other end.

“Annette, you know us dumb small-town cops. Hell, you used to be one. We can use all the help we can find. Let me call you back when I get the warrant. And I’ll keep this quiet from Stepwood.” Now I was laughing, too.

Hal, finishing his coffee while reading the *Sunday Durango Herald*, looked up when I put the phone down.

“Sounds to me as if you’re having altogether too much fun for work. What was that I heard about Sizzles?”

“Remember when we talked about Intermountain Social Services the other day? Melody told her mother she volunteers for them, or some such story. They run Sizzles. That tells you what kind of outfit it is.”

“Yeah, you mentioned the connection then. Do I remember the name from a couple of years back?”

“Sure. Remember when we had our first sort-of date? At Fannie’s Saloon, the lunch?”

“Now, how could I forget that?”

“Right. What did you have to eat? I bet you don’t remember that. You were too busy checking out the scenery.”

“Aw, c’mon. With you across the table from me, how could I be interested in anything else?”

“Easy. You’re a guy. But remember I’ve talked about how Fannie’s is the tame one, and Sizzles is where the real action is?”

“Yeah, in connection with John Martin’s little indiscretion, as I recall. You know? He’s seemed a lot more human ever since he talked to me about that. We’re friends, now. And I don’t think that’s true of anyone else on campus, I mean, everyone else is afraid of him.”

“Confessions will do that to a relationship. But Intermountain runs Sizzles, and Melody worked at Intermountain. The other part of that phone call was that the perp from last night had some Intermountain cards in his wallet.”

“Alongside the condom, no doubt. What a loser.”

“Don’t know about that. But we’re going to try to get a search warrant for his place. Who knows what we’ll find there?”

* * *

On my best day, I couldn’t have predicted what we found there.

After Winders called back with the news that Judge Sandose had cooperated with a nearly wide-open warrant—Lovett had been caught in the act, after all, so there was no room for doubt of his guilt—I stopped by my office to pick up what I think of as my “spy kit.” It consists of a digital camera with an extra lens, a special one for photographing documents, and a high-capacity memory card. There’s also a laptop computer with a huge hard disk and a built-in high-capacity Zip drive. Given time and patience, I could copy the entire FSU library. Batteries aren’t even a problem—both the camera and the computer have A/C adaptors.

Our team assembled at a pre-arranged location a block from Lovett’s address, and Winders went ahead to see if there might be anyone at home. He came back with the news that no one had answered his knock, and so we could proceed with Plan A, as he called it.

Our strategy was to be clandestine, at least as far as James Lovett was concerned. As usual, one of our search team was quite adept at picking locks, so getting in wasn’t a problem. We all wore plastic gloves, and we were careful not to disturb anything unnecessarily. Our first order of business was to dispose of the ostensible reason for the search, a cache of stolen goods. With nothing obvious present, such as a room full of boxed electronic equipment, we began to look more carefully.

Lovett’s place, a large condominium in an exclusive complex on the west bluff, contained the expected household goods, most of which could have been stolen. But because there was only one of everything of potential value—television, VCR, stereo, computer, and so on—we had no reason to suspect that it was. One possibility was the camera equipment, of which there was a wide variety, but that was consistent with the darkroom in a large closet.

Given the Intermountain cards Lovett was carrying, we became curious about the purpose of this equipment. This was finally resolved by the contents of a filing cabinet.

Lovett was a pornographer, there was no other reasonable way to put it. The filing cabinet contained negatives and prints of naked women, mostly young, mostly alone posing in various ways. But there also were several files of couples and other multi-person arrangements. In some of them, furniture in the condo’s bedrooms and living room was identifiable. And there was even one series of pictures taken in

the kitchen, involving two women and several vegetables. If those cucumbers came out of the refrigerator, I couldn't help but think, that would be *cold*.

However, it didn't appear that any of this was illegal. There were copies of release forms with each set of pictures, and the pictures included copies of driver's licenses with birth dates legible. All the models were over 18. There was no violence depicted, nor implied. No signs of drugs could be detected.

When I noticed that the files were alphabetized by the models' last names, I zeroed in on the W's. And there was Melody's release form, with a date several years ago, and driver's license. And, emphatically, Melody herself. But these pictures were less explicit and, mostly, she was wearing underwear. It looked like a lingerie party with pictures. And only one, because her hair and makeup were the same in all the pictures. It appeared that she had modeled several sets of bras and panties, and eventually had been talked into changing in front of the camera.

Feeling like an intruder, not into Lovett's dirty little world but into Melody's life, I used my camera to copy the release form and driver's license pictures and a sampling of the posed photographs. After the sixth, I noticed how Melody's expression was the same in every picture—smiling, vivacious, but obviously pasted on, not natural. A vacant look in her eyes. No wonder, I thought. That's the only way I could manage this, by not really being present.

But the filing cabinet was only the tip of the iceberg. It was Lovett's computer that was the real find. When we looked carefully, we noticed that most of the camera equipment and the darkroom were dusty. But not the two digital cameras. One of these was even hard-wired, via a long cable, to the computer box. This explained the huge library of CD-ROM disks we found in a cabinet, labeled carefully and, again, alphabetized by last name.

Melody was here, also, on disk; on three, in fact. And one of them was dated three Saturdays ago, when Melody was last in Durango. So, I thought, Melody stopped by at the university and was also here, getting her picture taken some more. Did she need money?

I sent one of the search team members out to Office Depot for blank Zip disks—as many, I told him, as they had in stock. The hard disk in my laptop held the equivalent of about 100 of the CD-ROMs, and, with the blank disks coming from the store, I felt confident that we could capture as much of the information as we wanted.

Then it was time to tackle the computer. It was powered up, humming patiently, awaiting instructions. A screen saver had blanked the monitor, so it had turned itself to standby mode.

“Well, Fred, now what? Does that warrant cover computer hacking?” I raised my voice a notch. “And, by the way, everybody—you guys are to be congratulated for your professionalism. I've yet to hear any off-color remarks.”

“Yeah, I think we're all shell-shocked. I mean, a few of these pictures in the right setting, and the remarks would be flying, believe me. But this is overwhelming. I hope you're not offended.” Fred Winders and I are old colleagues, but he's still a gentleman.

“No, and I hope you all aren't embarrassed by my presence. You don't need to be, I've seen it all before. But, anyway, we need to decide on an approach to all this. We know that one of the models in this collection is dead, apparently murdered. And one of these disks has a date on it when she was last known to be alive. Could it be that others have been killed as well? We ought to get a list of all the names and addresses here, by getting copies of all the driver's license pictures. We can run them against missing persons records. But the real question is whether we can get into this computer under your warrant.”

“It says ‘all information, electronic, print, or other, related to possible criminal activity.’ I’d say that about covers everything.”

“Hmm. So far none of this porn is illegal under Colorado law, or Federal law that I know of. Except maybe the Mann Act, if there are out-of-state driver’s licenses, but I haven’t seen any. And that’s hard to prosecute these days anyway. I guess the thing to do is to copy as much of this hard disk as we can, then take it somewhere and examine it at our leisure. Maybe there are business records that would lead to a tax evasion charge. Say, I wonder if he lists ‘pornographer’ on his tax returns?” This brought chuckles from the search team.

Using my camera, we set about making a record of all of the models’ identification from the filing cabinet, with one or two sample pictures per file. And one of the search team members, Officer Peter Ivy, admitted to having computer experience and sat down in front of the keyboard.

Much to his surprise, and mine as well, there wasn’t even a screen-saver password. He bumped the mouse and, after a brief pause, the monitor came back on. It showed, full screen and with exquisite detail, a particularly explicit background picture involving a male model with anatomy so large as to be deformed, two women, and a truly amazing, not to mention unusual, application of a feather duster. Superimposed on this bizarre scene was a variety of program icons, many apparently related to manipulation of photographs and videos.

Ivy couldn’t help himself. “Damn. Uh, with all due respect, ma’am, how could anyone get any work done staring at that? I mean, Jesus.” This comment had the effect of a magnet—everyone gathered around to see what was happening.

“Well,” I was trying to keep a straight face, “What I want to know is, wouldn’t that tickle to distraction? I mean, yeesh, how does he keep it up?” And everyone in the room dissolved into laughter.

After that, it was easier to get the job finished.

* * *

“So, the guy is a pornographer. The question I want an answer to is why did he break into our house?” Hal was folding a pancake around a second helping of mu-shu pork.

“That, my perceptive friend, is what I’ve been wondering. Want to hear my theory now?”

“Theorize away, my dear. You want another pancake yet?”

“Not yet. I’ve got talking to do, between bites. So this will last. OK, here goes.” And I bit off a mouthful of mu-shu pork and wound up with juice dribbling down my chin. I wiped it away with a finger.

“The only thing that makes any sense to me,” I was talking around the bite, “is a connection to Arizona. I mean, I go down there, participate in a meeting involving the investigation of Melody’s death, and when I come back our house is immediately invaded by a guy who’s got dirty pictures of Melody on file, apparently for sale rather than for blackmail, because he’s got a release. So whoever’s behind all this, and I don’t mean Lovett, he’s small fry, whoever’s behind this is threatened by my involvement somehow. And they thought I had something here at home that’s of some danger to them.”

“Well, do you?”

“The only thing I brought back from Arizona is my interview notes, which I dropped off at the office Saturday afternoon, and some stuff from Melody’s apartment. Personal things, keepsakes I’m going to give to Mildred, and a diary. Could someone be so threatened by those notes that they need to steal them? Or the diary?”

“You know better than I. But one of the people you interviewed could have decided he said something so incriminating that he had to get the notes away from you before you figured out the incrimination. Or, another angle, someone you didn’t interview could be worried that someone else, whom you did interview, incriminated him. Or some variant of these two possibilities. Or there is indeed something in that diary. So, I’d make a copy of the notes and archive them carefully, and I’d go over the interviews with a fine-toothed comb to see what might be incriminating. But you’ve figured this out already, I’m sure.”

“Sort of. I was planning on having someone transcribe my notes onto the CBI computer file system. Tomorrow. Maybe I should have made copies today and hidden one set.”

“You said that the offices were intact this afternoon. Did you notice if your notes were where you left them Saturday?”

I closed my eyes and chewed thoughtfully. It took long enough that I bit off another chunk of mu-shu.

“I think so. I put them on my desk, and I seem to recall them today. Yeah, I remember, they were there this afternoon, when I dropped off my computer stuff, I’m sure. So was everything else.”

“So, run over after dinner and make sure they’re still there, and make a copy to hide somewhere. Uh, not here, if you please. Although I suppose that this would be a good place, now that it’s been picked over already.”

“Actually that reminded me—there’s a stack of Zip disks from that search today that need to be protected as well. I can’t bring them here, though...what? What are you staring at?”

“I’m trying to decide if I should come over there and lick that sauce off your chin.”

“Aw. How sweet. But no need.” I wiped it off. “Anyway, I can lock all the stuff in the safe at work. I’ll go do that after we finish dinner.”

“You don’t want to bring it here?”

“You want to have a porn library in your house? Maybe have President Black over for a showing? He could bring Provost Martin. I’m sure that would be fun.”

“Hmm. Guess not. And, hey, be nice. John’s one indiscretion shouldn’t follow him around forever.”

“Yeah, I know. Sometimes I just like to be catty. Now what?” I was wondering why Hal was staring at the ceiling.

“John told me he went to Sizzles that one time, when it wound up being his alibi for the Stiller case, and he talked to you about it, right?”

“A little. All I was interested in was the alibi part. And I let him know that, as a taxpayer, I wasn’t happy with his choice of nightspots. But we didn’t talk about it very much.”

“We didn’t go into detail, either. But maybe it would be a good idea to. See, if Melody was mixed up with this porn creep, from your perspective it’s relevant because she was killed. And it sounds like she may have been killed shortly after her last photo-shoot with him. But from my perspective, and even more from John’s, there’s the bigger issue of the safety of the women students. And maybe the men students as well, if this guy also provides material for the gay porn scene.”

“All we saw was girls, girls, girls, with the occasional male model acting as, um, an orifice plug.”

“And I bet that this creep Lovett set up shop here specifically because of the presence of FSU. I remember we talked at Fannie’s about how college girls like the occasional adventure, and the money would be enticing. And we at the U aren’t going to go moralizing about things like working as a topless

waitress at a place like Fannie's. But this is different. For one thing, Melody's dead. For another, there's HIV and other real dangers to consider. And for yet another, I wouldn't be surprised if there's an extortion angle to this. I mean, if Mom and Dad hear that their little girl's working at Fannie's with her shirt off while she's away at college, well, that would be pretty bad. But if they were to hear that she's become involved with the porn industry, that'd be a catastrophe. The girls would probably go to great lengths to prevent that."

"So what do you think John could contribute?"

"Don't know. But he was in Sizzles and may have seen things that you need to know about. Things that you'd have trouble finding out." Hal grinned impishly. "Of course, you could always send me there as a spy."

I rose to that bait only indirectly. "Or we could find out from John if there were couples and go together, so I could keep my eye on you. But I'm fairly well-known in this town, and so are you, so we probably wouldn't be anonymous. Want to develop a new reputation as the swinging dean and his detective?"

"Oh yeah. Right. Maybe we could even make the front page of the *Free Press*, with one of those tabloid-type surprise pictures. *That* would make parents feel good about sending their kids to Frémont State."

"And wouldn't the Colorado taxpayers, and especially their elected representatives in Denver, feel good about a CBI executive in the same picture?"

He smiled. "Well, if we ever get tired of Colorado, we know one way to get ourselves invited to leave."

* * *

I wasn't a fan of working on Sundays, but whenever I did, it made Monday morning far more palatable. This time was a good example, because I had been out of town almost all of the previous week. My hours spent catching up on Sunday after the search meant that I could start fresh on Monday morning. And a good thing, too, because at 8:30, Rudy Gelinski called.

"Annette? Glad to catch you. Hope you've recovered from our little meeting last week?"

"That was the easy part. It's catching up with all the stuff here that's the hard part."

"That's the way it is for me, too. Amazing how the day-to-day crap piles up when you're out of the office, isn't it? Listen, I called to talk a little more about my report on Melody Witherspoon. Got a minute?"

"Sure do. Maybe we can trade information. I know you're the medical examiner, not the sheriff. But you're my closest link to local law enforcement down there and I need someone to talk to."

"I'm honored. Want to go first?"

"You called, so you must have something in mind."

"OK. I do. Y'see, the information that Melody was seen in Durango on the Saturday before her body was found inside that greenhouse got me to thinking. When I did the autopsy on Monday evening, two weeks ago, I put her time of death at Saturday morning, with some margin for error, of course. According to what I saw, she could have died as late as Saturday evening. And then she was buried sometime between about 10:00 PM Sunday and, approximately, a few hours after the time she's supposed to have let herself in through that recording lock at 3:00 AM or whatever it was. With me?"

“I am. And I also remember your comment about the lividity patterns, how they were consistent with her burial position. So she wasn’t just tossed into a car trunk, say, and driven from Durango to Oracle.”

“Right. She was buried lying on her back, and the blood was pooled along the backs of her legs, her buttocks, and so on. Now. Here’s what I’ve been thinking about. My findings were based on local conditions. I mean, say someone gets dead and lies around outside, outside here in the local area somewhere at this time of year. In that case, what I found in the autopsy is consistent with about a two-day-dead person. You read the report?”

“I did.” I shifted the phone to her other ear.

“Good. That means I don’t have to go into detail. Anyway, what I’ve been wondering about is this: What if she was lying on her back somewhere in that greenhouse before she was buried? I feel reasonably comfortable with the interment estimate, four to eight hours or so, especially with those fudge factors I gave myself. I took into account the climate and the soil in there. But if she was killed in there, or killed just outside and hauled in there and put somewhere, pre-burial, her deterioration would have been accelerated. It’s a lot more humid in there than it is outside, and hotter, this time of year.”

“Hmm. So the 3:00 AM entry could have been whoever going in to bury her, but she was already in there? And therefore she might have been killed after Saturday evening? When?”

“I guess I’d shift things up by at least twelve hours. So as a central estimate, start with Saturday evening and stretch it to at least Sunday morning. Maybe late Sunday morning.”

“I’ve got to tell you, Rudy, I like this new time-line, just for selfish, personal reasons. It means that maybe she wasn’t killed up here in Colorado.” I heard quiet laughter in response.

“But remember, you accepted that temporary appointment to Ross Townsend’s staff, so you’re part of the Arizona DPS now. So you don’t get off completely. You’ve got to see this through.” He laughed again. “For one thing, you’re miles ahead of anyone in Pinal County, investigator-wise. Hell, we need you, Annette.”

“Aw, c’mon. You don’t think Sibley Jensen could handle this?”

“Ugh. Don’t get me started. But you wanted to talk about something, too.”

“Yeah, we had an interesting weekend.” I related catching the would-be burglar and the results of our search of his condominium. “And I was wondering if you did an HIV test on Melody’s blood?”

“No, no reason to. There were no signs of sexual assault, or even recent activity, either. I don’t want to sound prurient, here, but did you look at that last disk you found? Or the other ones?”

“Yesterday, when I came in to catch up. She had graduated from coy underwear modeling with the occasional nudie shot to explicit poses. Alone. You know, masturbation pictures, stuff like that. I suppose that her involvement with this Lovett guy would explain the Valium prescription.”

“Could be. Let’s see. She had just finished her Ph.D., right? And she had a postdoctoral research appointment at EcoARC? Yeah, trying to start up a respectable career in scientific research while being a porn model on the side could lead to some serious stress, I bet.”

“Yes, and possibly serious depression, I’d suppose. Rudy? Is there any possibility that her death was suicide? That she suffocated herself somehow, and then, say, someone found her and decided to bury her in the greenhouse?”

“I can imagine that possibility, I guess. Put it this way: there’s nothing inconsistent with that. Oh, wait. The fingernails. Who’s skin and blood is that? How’d it get there?”

“Right, of course. That would hardly be consistent with suicide. Down your way just about everyone except you, I think, believes that it’s Jorgé Alvarez’s skin and blood.” I told him about my dinner with Bill Longwell and his change of attitude.

“That’s completely bizarre. I mean, he sat through the first part of our meeting, right? When we discussed the inconsistencies of Alvarez’s death? How the sheriff’s story is full of questions? Why would he fall back on the Alvarez theory?”

“Only thing I can think of is that someone got to him somehow.”

“Got to him? As in, blackmail?”

“Something. And it’s hard to figure. The guy’s squeaky clean. Navy SEAL. Really deep security clearance that carried over to his career in research. He started out with some company that was doing top secret stuff for the Navy, it looks like. After that he got involved with some biochemical research that led him to EcoARC. Did a stint at the National Science Foundation in there for a while. Nothing suspicious at all.”

“Must be a family connection.”

“Maybe. But, look, Rudy. Something similar must be going on in the Pinal County Sheriff’s Office. I mean, why would all those guys stick to such a thin story? Has somebody got to them, too?”

“Oh, I doubt it. Y’see, Elwood’s just a good old boy trying to keep the modern world at bay. He hires his in-laws as deputies and tries to run the county according to his rules. That guy Lyle Shaughnessy, for example, the one who found Alvarez’s body, is a brother-in-law, I think. The place is rife with nepotism. So they all stick together. And the reason for picking on Alvarez was simple—it started with the scratches on his face and Elwood saw it as a political opportunity. Y’see, there’s an election coming up, and he’s going to have some real opposition, for the first time in a long while. He needs to divert attention from the accusations about how he runs his office. So this Alvarez thing was just what he needed. Not that it’s going to do him any good.” I heard laughter again.

“Why’s that?” I felt I was missing something important.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you. The other reason I called. The DNA test came in first thing this morning. There’s no match between who was under Melody’s fingernails and Alvarez’s face. Elwood, and everyone else down here, is going to have to find a new theory.”

Although I wasn’t really surprised by this information, I was startled to hear it and paused to think.

“Rudy? Let’s keep this between us for a while, OK?”

* * *

Seven

Now, I thought, Sheriff Elwood Johnson has more problems than just dealing with accusations of nepotism in his office. An innocent man died in his jail, under highly suspicious circumstances. But that’s not my problem. My problem is who killed Melody, and where.

I spent the better part of two hours doing the Monday-morning social ritual with my office staff and briefing my assistant, Derek Petersen, on where things stood. It occurred to me that another benefit of

my hours at the office on Sunday was that I needed less of a briefing from him, as I was already caught up on most of the local business.

Rudy Gelinski's revised time-line complicated matters. If Melody was killed in Arizona, I really had no business being part of the case at all. Melody's involvement with Jimmie Lovett and Intermountain Social Services might be connected with some type of criminal activity—although this was not at all obvious—but that would be an entirely different matter from her murder in Arizona. Unless, that is, Lovett drove her down there and killed her, but even then it would be an Arizona crime.

On the other hand, I did have that Arizona DPS appointment, which Rod Andersen and his boss, our Governor, had urged on me, all legal and documented. And if there was a chance that Melody was killed in Colorado, it made sense to stay involved, even to continue to be the lead investigator.

So, I thought, I'd better get busy investigating. I poked the speed-dial button on my desk phone for Hal's personal office number.

"Weathers, natural sciences"

"Trieri, CBI, here. Doing a survey. Got any new crimes to report today?"

"Nope. It's still early, though. You might get lucky. What's up? I've only got a second."

"Oh, sorry. I wanted to get your opinion on whether I should call John Martin to talk more about Sizzles, like we discussed yesterday."

"Sure. Do it. But not over the phone. Take him to lunch. In fact, ask him now. Here."

I was trying to sort out what was going on, when Martin's voice came on the line.

"Annette? Good morning. Glad you're back. How's the investigation of Melody Witherspoon going?"

"John? I guess I interrupted a meeting, or something. Sorry."

"I just came over to chat with Hal about a couple of things. No big deal. What can I do for you?"

"I want to pick at an old scab a bit, I'm afraid. But it's all in a good cause. Hal's right, though, we should go somewhere off campus, private. I'd like to ask you for as many details about Sizzles as you can remember. It's in connection with Melody."

There was a pause, and I wondered if Martin would be offended.

"I guess we never did talk about the place much, did we?" He didn't sound mad, just thoughtful. "And one of the things that Hal and I were just talking about was your little adventure Friday evening, and what you discovered over the weekend. It looks like I'm going to be holding my breath until *Playboy* publishes its 'Girls of Frémont State' special issue. You think there's a connection between this porn photographer and Sizzles?"

"He had several Intermountain Social Services cards in his wallet, and they run Sizzles."

"Several cards meaning he's connected rather than just carrying a card for reference purposes, no doubt. I think I understand."

"Right. And we know Melody was connected with Intermountain somehow, maybe through this photographer. Also, we know a couple of other things. The suspect in Arizona is—or was, he's dead now—exonerated, by DNA test. Please keep that to yourself, by the way. And the chance that Melody was killed in Arizona went up over the weekend, with a revised time-of-death estimate from the medical examiner down there."

“But she was still mixed up in this porn ring while she was a student here, and she was here two weeks ago, just before she was killed. So, yes, I’d be happy to give you as many details as I can. And off-campus is a good idea.”

“I know you have a hectic schedule...”

“...which I can never manage to carry around in my head more than a half day in advance. But I do recall that I’m free, or at least I can get free, for lunch today.”

I had to laugh. “I’m not the best person to pick lunch spots. Did Hal ever tell you where our first date was? We needed to have lunch to talk about the Stiller case and the best place for me was Fannie’s Saloon. So that was our first time out together.”

I heard laughter on the other end and could only imagine the look that Hal was getting from his boss.

“Fannie’s, eh? I recall that you recommended it to me as a safer alternative to Sizzles. And, given our upcoming conversation, it would be appropriate. But, tell you what, let’s go someplace more socially acceptable for people of our stature in the community.”

“Yeah, Hal and I talked about a reconnoitering visit to Sizzles and came to the same conclusion. How about the Palace? I haven’t been there for ages.”

“Sounds good. But they tend to fill up at noon, so how about 11:45?”

“I’ll meet you there. Thanks for being helpful with this, John.”

“My pleasure. Hal wants the phone back, hold on.” I heard noises of the receiver transfer, and a click.

“Annette? I put you on my speaker phone. Listen, John and I have been talking about whether this is a threat to our women students, at least a threat we should be concerned about. You’ve got all those names and IDs, and we don’t want to invade anyone’s privacy. But it would help us to know how many other women in Lovett’s portfolio are FSU students. It’s something of a dilemma.”

I’ll say, I thought to myself. This is why so many people are not in favor of a national identification-card system.

“We didn’t find any information to suggest that the models were minors; quite the opposite, in fact. There was documentation that they were all over 18. So, legally, they’re adults and can do whatever they want in the way of taking their clothes off. I don’t think the U has anything to say about it. And it follows that providing you with information to match the models with your student database would be an invasion of their privacy.”

“Yeah, that’s what we were thinking. But you see our position, don’t you?”

“Yes, and I’ll tell you what I can do. We’re going to run a cross-check of the models with the NCIC computer and other sources of information, missing persons and so on. If we come up with any matches from those searches, I’ll pass along the appropriate ones. If it turns out there are any other FSU students who were also models and who are now missing or dead, others besides Melody, we’ll have to look into the pattern.”

“At least that’s something, even if it is something after the fact. Shutting the barn door after the horses have run out, and all that. We were trying to figure out how to warn people, the women students, I mean.”

“As in ‘one of our ex-students was a porn model and now she’s dead, so watch out if you get approached by a sleazeball?’ You sure that’s necessary? Or even a good idea?”

I heard a throat clearing, and John Martin's voice, from what sounded like a distance, came on the line.

"Annette, you know how I think. We don't want any of our students mixed up in this kind of thing for their own safety, of course, but we also don't want the U to look bad. Either by allowing, and I mean this despite their being adults, by allowing them to be involved in activities like this or failing to warn them of the danger. I suppose the lawyers might even decide we have a responsibility to warn them."

"By going public with Melody's second job? Oh, that would make her mother very happy with the U indeed. And I can tell you, she has serious political clout. She got me the appointment in Arizona somehow. Look, isn't there a better way to keep the lawyers happy? How about putting out a broadcast warning to the students that you've heard that there's a pornography ring operating in the area and that they're preying on FSU students? And don't limit it to women. What will happen is that the papers will get interested, and you can work with them to flesh out the story, oops, no pun intended, without being specific about Melody."

"Uh, Annette?" It was Hal, using his "did you think of this angle?" voice. "What about the fallout on your friends at the police department? If we warn people of a porn ring and the papers pick it up, won't Walt Jankowski and his people look bad?"

"Hmm. Good point. But, look, they could be the ones to put out the warning, and you folks at the U could amplify on it. When the papers chime in, it'll get wide publicity and it'll be coming from a variety of sources. With all that, it might even work."

"Good thinking, Annette." It was John Martin again. I really detest speaker phones and telephone conferences, but they seem to be inevitable. Whenever I get invited to join a "telecon," I make an effort to be too busy. But this one caught me by surprise.

"Thanks, John. This sounds like a plan. We can talk more about it at lunch, in, ah, about 45 minutes. See you at the Palace."

* * *

As usual, lunch at the Palace was wonderfully elegant and far more food than I'm used to in the middle of the day. It would make me sleepy. And I knew I would feel compelled to work off the calories somehow.

But the discussion with John Martin had made it all worthwhile. It gave me a much better idea of how Sizzles operated—or at least how it had operated a couple of years ago. He was still a little embarrassed at having been found out, and he still couldn't explain what had motivated him to go there. Middle-aged men, he said, sometimes do strange things when their wives are away.

At least he had participated in the full Sizzles experience, or a lot of it. Apparently, there were several levels at which "guests," as they were called, could enjoy themselves. By far most of the guests made it only to the first level—paying the standard \$10 cover to get past the bouncers into the room with the large bar, where they could watch women taking their clothes off, writhing around and climbing on brass poles, and generally trying to be as lewd as possible without touching anyone. If all you wanted was a cold beer on a hot day, at Sizzles the drinks were expensive, the music was loud, and the scenery was distracting. It was also, according to Martin, smoky enough that it was hard to see sometimes and rather raucous, as most of the first-level guests were college guys who were drinking too much.

After an hour at the bar, during which time Martin had spent some \$50 by stuffing bills into G-strings that bumped and ground in his direction, he had asked the bartender if there wasn't someplace more quiet, less crowded. That, plus another cover charge that involved an additional zero, led to level

two. Although he didn't know its name at the time, level two included what Martin had since learned is called "lap-dancing."

Ironically, he had learned this terminology from prime-time television.

His introduction to lap-dancing had been courtesy of a young woman who introduced herself to him as "Chastity," a name, he pointed out, which proved that at least someone at Sizzles had a sense of humor.

She had waltzed into the little room into which he had been ushered, introduced herself, and proceeded to disrobe in a most provocative manner, even going so far as to ask him to help with a couple of zippers. Her outfit was reminiscent of a high-school cheerleader's costume, and, initially at least, she had her hair up in two of those sideways ponytails. The ponytails went the way of the rest of her outfit, and it wasn't too long before she was dancing before him buck naked, blonde hair loose and flying as she swung her head to the music. Try as he might, Martin could not conjure up an accurate memory of such a cheerleader from his high-school days. Of course, that was before silicone.

And silicone was something upon which Sizzles depended heavily, especially in Chastity's case. Martin thought that her enhancements had to involve about a quart of the stuff. Apiece.

At lunch, I found it curious that Martin was able to discuss his Sizzles experience as if it were nothing unusual. He became flustered only a couple of times, and his describing Chastity's lap dance was one.

Watching, and even helping, her disrobe, he said, was one thing. But then she began to circle his chair, rubbing against him, at one point clasping his head between those huge silicone "adornments," as he called them. Eventually she sat on his lap and began wriggling around, finally turning to face him, pulling his face into her incredible chest. This, he said, had been just too much too soon—probably never would have been too soon—and he had, as politely as possible, paid her to stop. This was a new wrinkle for her, apparently, and she didn't quite know how to show her gratitude. So they had just talked for the remaining time, another five minutes.

It turned out that she was from Los Angeles originally, had finished high school and then, needing an income, had turned to flouting her body. She was in Durango as a result of a cross-country road trip with a boyfriend. Their relationship had soured on the way across Arizona, and she had simply left him when they got to Colorado. And now she was one of Sizzles' star attractions, saving money to head back to California someday soon. When the five minutes were up, she picked up her clothes and went on, he supposed, to get dressed and start over for the next guest.

A short time after she left, the door through which he had entered opened, and he took the hint. In the hallway was the usher, an anonymous young woman wearing only a bikini. Following the "in for a dime, in for a dollar" approach, Martin had asked her about other entertainment opportunities. His discomfort with Chastity's repertoire fresh in his mind, he had specified that he preferred to watch rather than participate.

This was the second point at which he had been flustered at lunch.

"You understand, Annette, that I'm not a voyeur, at least not more than the average man. I mean, studies have shown that men tend to be responsive to visual stimuli. To some extent we all like to watch. And I'm probably average in that way. But I just didn't want anyone climbing on me again."

I was careful to keep a straight face. My experience playing poker with my family in Chicago comes in handy in the strangest ways.

In response to his query about additional entertainment, the usher had suggested that Martin wait in the bar for a few minutes until the next show was to begin. A show of what, Martin wasn't told, but a show that would be, apparently, level three of the Sizzles entertainment hierarchy.

It was nearing midnight, and the bar scene was in full stride. Women were undressing and presenting themselves for the inspection of the guests, the music was blaring, the air was dense with tobacco smoke, and alcohol was flowing, all at inflated prices, of course. The college crowd was more rowdy than before, and Martin waited impatiently to be summoned for whatever the show was to be.

At about 12:15—Martin remembered the time because he had been checking his watch frequently—he noticed a number of bikini-clad young women working their ways through the crowd, fetching, it appeared, selected individuals. And there was his very own, blonde with dark roots, at his elbow. He tipped her a \$20 bill. Time, apparently, for the show.

After being relieved of another \$350—this time he used a credit card—he was led down a different hallway to a little theater in the round—literally, as it turned out, because the stage was a giant turntable that rotated slowly throughout the performance.

The house lighting was quite low, and the seats were large and comfortable, well-spaced so that you weren't really aware of not being alone. Each seat had cup-holders in the armrests, a set of opera glasses, and a little box of tissues. I didn't ask what *they* were for.

Martin didn't go into detail because he really didn't need to. The performance was a live sex show, in three acts—each with a premise so transparent as to be humorous. Act one was a businessman and his secretary having sex on a desk—she started out on her knees and ended up on her back; act two was two nurses having sex in a hospital room, bouncing about on an articulated bed with each other; act three was two football players having sex with a cheerleader in a locker room, all together, now, one, two, three—appropriately, Martin pointed out, the cheerleader's performance was quite athletic. If the sets were fake, the sex was real, as could be seen without use of the opera glasses. Each act lasted about half an hour, and the whole thing was over about 2:00 AM. None of the actors or actresses appeared in more than one scene.

“That sounds like work, performing every day like that on cue.” I wasn't surprised at the range of entertainment at Sizzles, but I had never really thought through the details.

“I thought of that, too. They weren't very good actors in the traditional sense, but they managed the sexual performances quite well. Not that I'm an expert critic, you understand, Annette.” He smiled. “If you'll allow me a little joke, perhaps the performances can be credited to Viagra?”

I smiled back, just to be polite. “Could you tell how many people were in the theater, the audience? And was the audience only single men, like yourself?”

“It was hard to tell, with the house lights so low, even when it was over. I recall seeing three couples leaving. I didn't see any single women, which, I suppose isn't surprising. Altogether, at least two dozen people, maybe thirty.”

I thought for a few seconds. “So they take in close to ten thousand dollars for a performance. Hmm. They probably pay the actors less than a third of that, but still it's not going to be truly lucrative, when you consider the other overhead. But when you add it to the bar receipts and the lap-dancing, I suppose it adds up. Did you get any feeling about whether there were other levels?”

“They hinted at different things on different nights. But there wasn't anything specific.”

* * *

I remember when Sizzles was busted for having live sex on their main stage, I thought, and I assumed that they stopped after that. I guess they just took it into the back room. And if all this was happening two years ago, I wonder what they're up to now? Maybe Walt knows, and I need to talk with him anyway. I reached for the phone.

And the interoffice line buzzed, as if the phone resented my reaching for it. It made me jump. I pushed the speaker button.

“Yes, Sally?”

“Director Trieri? There is a gentleman here to see you, an attorney, a Mr. Arthur Stepwood? Oh, excuse me.” And I heard her voice continuing, although muffled.

“Mr. Stepwood? I'm afraid ... Mr. Stepwood!” Her voice came back to normal. “Oh, dear, Director Trieri, he just headed down the hall toward your office. I'm so sorry.”

“Sally, don't you worry about it. But do me a favor. Send Derek and Stan in here, would you, please, soonest? Thanks.”

And by that time the offending party, Arthur Stepwood, Esq., was standing in my doorway, a smirk on his face.

“My goodness. Annette Trieri. Haven't you come up in the world? You're one of the people I have to thank for my temporary disbarment. And now you're harassing another client of mine. I'm beginning to think that you have some kind of personal vendetta against me.” During this speech, he had strolled into my office and taken a seat in the easy chair across from my desk.

I thought I would give Derek Petersen and Stan Hauser a few seconds before engaging in conversation with Stepwood. So I just stared, alternating between my desk top and a point on the wall about a foot over Stepwood's head. Even had he been standing, this would still have left a couple of feet to the ceiling. As it was, I was able to enjoy a poster of Rocky Mountain National Park, a print of a John Ward photograph of an aspen grove on Hallett Peak in autumn, that I had had framed for my wall. I picked it up at the visitor center when Hal and I drove over Trail Ridge Road on our honeymoon. It always brings back good memories.

And then Derek Petersen appeared in my doorway, with Stan Hauser towering behind him.

“Ah, yes, Derek. Thanks for dropping by. Mr. Stepwood here has invited himself into my office at a most inopportune time. Perhaps you and Stan could persuade him to wait outside, out in the waiting area, until I finish up a couple of important things?” While I said this, I shifted my stare to Stepwood. But he wasn't intimidated.

“Do I understand that you are threatening me?”

“Not at all, Artie,” Derek Petersen, along with just about every other law enforcement official in southwestern Colorado, knew Stepwood by reputation. And he also knew that “Artie” isn't Stepwood's preferred form of address. “Not at all. We're going to show you the way to our waiting room. Apparently you got lost.”

Petersen stepped into the room, and Stepwood jumped to his feet, shifting into a defensive karate stance and raising his hands in front of his chest.

“I'll have you know that I have spent quite some time lately learning how to defend myself. You approach me at your own risk.” This so surprised Derek that he stopped short, and I burst out laughing.

Then Stan Hauser stepped into the room, making it considerably more crowded all of a sudden.

After college, Stan played defensive end for the Raiders for a couple of seasons. Then he blew out a knee, and he decided that law enforcement offered better long-range career opportunities than Sunday-afternoon quarterback squishing. His current assignment was a rotation among the various CBI division offices, and he had arrived in Durango in September. At 6'10", he was nearly two feet taller than Stepwood, and he outweighed him by over a factor of two.

“Uh, Director Trieri? Does he come with a handle? I could just carry him out for you.” This caused my laughter to intensify, and Derek Petersen also began to chuckle.

Stepwood looked as if he would get a crick in his neck from staring up at Stan Houser, and his karate stance quickly dissolved as his knees started to shake.

“I believe that I’ll wait outside, Annette.” Stepwood’s voice was also shaking. “Please let me know when you’re available.”

“Thanks, guys,” I got control of myself. “Please show Mr. Stepwood our waiting area. And see if he needs coffee. Or the Men’s Room. Or both. Be generous.”

Now, I thought, I need to remember what those “important things” I’m doing are. Oh, yes, calling the PD. Maybe I’ll call Fred. I reached for my phone.

“Fred? Good afternoon. Annette here. Thought I’d fill you in on a couple of things related to our weekend search.”

“Afternoon, Annette. How’s your day?”

“Too much food so far. Went to lunch at the Palace to have a private place to chat about Sizzles with someone who’s been there. Unfortunately, it’s been a couple of years. But he told me stuff I didn’t know about two years ago.” I sketched an outline of the Sizzles operation for Winders, and got a low whistle in response.

“Wow. Maybe someone knows about all this stuff, but I sure didn’t—at least not that, what did you call it?—level three. We all know about the strippers, and we had a good idea about the lap dancing. That’s standard operating procedure for these places. But not the live sex. I’ll talk with the Captain.”

“Good idea. And here’s a heads up: People at the U want to go public with our discovery that Lovett’s a porn photographer, to warn the women. You folks might want to be out front on that, or at least do it jointly. I mean, a joint FSU-PD statement for the community would carry weight, I’d think.”

“We have a statement coming out today, but I’ll call the U about it first. Who’s office?”

“Call the Provost, John Martin. He’s one of those political types that’s concerned about the welfare of the students, of course, but also worries about FSU’s image. A lot. Finally, guess who showed up here a few minutes ago? Our mutual friend, Artie S., the little twerp. Any idea of what he might want?”

“Stepwood? There? Hmm. Well, there was a bail hearing for Lovett this morning. Despite Stepwood’s bluster and pleading, Judge Sandose decided that Lovett might be a flight risk, and when Stepwood saw this coming he asked to continue the hearing. He’s a twerp, all right, but he’s a smart one. But now that we have copies of all those disks from Saturday, we can talk to the Judge about them and show him some of it. Ultimately, I think he’ll have to set bail at some level, because this is only a B&E complaint. But I expect it’ll be high, not astronomical, but high. And if Lovett takes off, at least we get the guy out of town. And if he skips, we make some money in the process.”

“Yeah, but I need to talk with him first. Privately. Say. He broke into my house, but he didn’t steal anything, right? How about if I work Stepwood a little? He’s probably here to see if I’ll drop the complaint, and I could do some horse-trading to get the information I want plus an agreement for Lovett to leave town forever.”

“Now there’s an idea. I’m sure the DA’s office will plea-bargain this, because there was no violence and he didn’t steal anything. And getting him out of town would be a true community service. I’d say, go for it.”

* * *

“Mr. Stepwood? My apologies for the delay.” After promising myself to be as polite as possible, I had walked out to the waiting area to retrieve the lawyer. “Would you care to come in?” I stepped aside and offered him the way with a sweep of my arm.

“Now.” We were seated in my office. “What can I do for you today?”

His bluster had switched to petulance. Clearly, the bum’s rush out of my office had offended his delicate sensibilities.

“As I was saying before being so rudely interrupted, I’m wondering if you have some sort of vendetta against me.”

“Arthur. Surely you know better. I had no idea that the fellow I caught breaking into my home was your client.” I smiled. “I assure you, if I had known he was your client, I would have considered just letting him off with a warning, even though I did catch him red-handed. Now, I’m certain that you have something more substantive to talk with me about. Really, how can I help you?”

I had a good idea of how I could help him—by dropping the complaint against his client, for starters—but I knew it would be to my advantage to make him ask.

“I understand that you’re involved with some people down in Arizona in an investigation. How’s that going?”

“Surprisingly well, actually. Does it have something to do with the client you mentioned?”

“I’m thinking that you might be interested in information about just that.”

“I might be indeed. However, you should know that the Arizona investigation involves one, and possibly two, murders. It’s my understanding that your newest client is only being held on a simple B&E charge ...”

“It’s your complaint, so you should be aware of it.”

“It was my house. But since the police were there, it’s in their hands. As I was saying, he’s being held on a minor charge, really. But if he has information related to the Arizona murder investigations, he needs to be aware that withholding that information could become a serious matter. So far, those investigations involve the Arizona Department of Public Safety and me. We’ve managed to avoid bringing the FBI in. But because of the interstate angle, they could well become involved. And withholding information from a federal investigation is, of course, a federal offense. So if you or your client has information about the Arizona cases, I’d suggest that you come forward with it. As soon as possible.” I smiled, but it was not a friendly smile.

“Damn, Annette, why is it always so hard with you? I mean, I come here trying to be cooperative, and you have your goons shove me around and then you threaten me and my client with the FBI.”

“Come on, Stepwood, give me a break here. I asked how I could help you, and you didn’t respond, you started asking me about the Arizona cases. You be straight with me and I’ll be straight with you. What is it you want from me? And what are you offering for it?”

“Cut to the chase, hmm? Well, my client, James Lovett, has certain information about Melody Witherspoon that you might be interested in. And, of course, he would like not only to be out of jail but also to have the B&E charge dropped.”

“Of course, for the information to be of use to me, it has to be new to me. For me to decide the information’s value, I have to know what it is. For example, already I know your client is connected to Intermountain Social Services, and I know that Melody worked for them. And I know what business they’re in. So if Lovett thinks he’s going to tell me that Melody worked for Intermountain and I’m going to cut him loose, he’s deluded.”

Stepwood’s expression had become more and more crestfallen, but I could tell he wasn’t going to give up.

“But you don’t know what she did for Intermountain.”

“Don’t need to. I know quite a lot about the Intermountain operation here in Durango, and elsewhere, for that matter, and just knowing she worked for them is enough. However, there may be other information your client could use to bargain with me.”

“Such as?”

“I’d much prefer to discuss this with him in person. There’s really no need for a middle man. With all due respect, Arthur.”

“That can probably be arranged. I’ll need to be present, of course.”

“I suppose that’s inevitable. So here’s an offer. I’ll get the PD to drop the B&E charge in return for two things. First, Lovett is out of here, Durango, southwestern Colorado, the Four Corners Region, pronto. Gone, never to return. Second, he answers a couple of questions to my satisfaction. And my satisfaction will be the sole determining factor in whether I get the PD to drop the charge.” I stared right through him.

“What questions?”

“Who he’s working for in Arizona and what he was looking for in my house.”

“How do we know you’ll be satisfied with his answers? I mean, the truth might not be very satisfying to you.”

“The truth will be quite satisfying to me. But you and Lovett need to understand that I already know a lot more than you think. So I’ll be able to see right through any games the two of you might decide to cook up. For example, if just he repeats his previous story, that he was just looking for valuables, we’ll not only throw the book at him but we’ll make his life in Durango a living hell. Am I being clear?”

“But what if that’s the truth?”

“If that’s what he’s telling you, Mr. Stepwood, you need to have a candid conversation with your client about the importance of his being truthful with you.”

* * *

Eight

At last, I thought, I can settle in to see if there's anything to learn from Melody's diary. It was late in the afternoon, and, between Sunday and Monday, I was finally caught up with everything I could think of.

One of my catch-up tasks had been a methodical search of the material collected from Lovett's computer, and I had made a list of all of the dates of Melody's photo shoots. It will be interesting, I thought, to see what the diary entries for those days read like.

Except that there weren't any. There were entries on the first five pages of an otherwise blank book, the last entry dated a few days before Melody's death. Either Melody had just begun keeping a diary, or volume whatever-it-was in my hand had just been started when Melody stopped writing in it forever. In the second case, I thought, the other volumes need finding.

I examined the book carefully. It was about an inch thick, one of those 8x10-format, leatherette-covered journals that you could buy at just about any large bookstore and lots of other places besides. Nothing was imprinted on the spine, and, in Melody's bookshelf, it had been mixed in with her other hardbacks and trade-sized paperbacks quite anonymously. And aside from Melody's handwriting—the big loopy kind that leads you to expect the i's and j's to be dotted with smiley faces—there was no identifying information, no name, volume number, or anything. If, I thought, that really is Melody's handwriting.

With only five pages, it made sense to make photocopies, so that the book itself could be given to Mildred Witherspoon along with the other keepsakes that I had brought back from Melody's apartment in Arizona. The keepsakes themselves were as unremarkable as the diary, several personal items that I had chosen for their obvious sentimental value—a picture of a young Mildred Witherspoon with a man whom I assumed was the departed Mr. Witherspoon; a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh; a charm bracelet; Melody's Ph.D. diploma, matted and framed.

I made the photocopies and called Mildred Witherspoon. She answered the telephone after four rings.

"Mrs. Witherspoon? This is Annette Trieri, I don't know if you remember, but we met at the memorial service last week? I hope you found it as comforting as I did."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Trieri. You're married to Dean Weathers as I recall. Oh. So it's not Mrs. Trieri, is it?" There was a muffled hiccuping noise.

"No—please call me Annette. Mrs. Witherspoon, I'm calling to see if you'll be home this evening. I have a few things from Melody's apartment that I thought you might like to have. I can drop by if you'll be home."

"Oh, my, you mean some of Melody's things? How wonderful! I thought they were being held for evidence, or something, and I'd never see them again. Yes, I'll be here all evening, and I'd be delighted to have you stop by. How did you happen to get them?"

"I may have not mentioned it before, but I'm with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I'm the director of the office here in Durango. Because of Melody's connection to the university, I got involved in this case. I've been appointed to a temporary position with the Arizona Department of Public Safety to assist them with the investigation. So I was down there late last week, and I had the opportunity to see her apartment. And I brought some things back that didn't seem to have any value to the investigation, things that I thought might have some sentimental value to you. They're not much, but I hope it's better than nothing."

"How kind of you. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you and Dean Weathers for your kindness."

“You don’t have to worry about it. We’re both happy to be of help. Hmm. But, you know, there is something perhaps you would know something about. Was Melody in the habit of keeping a diary?”

“Why, yes she was, ever since junior high school. Private ones, of course, ones that I never read.” I heard a demure chuckle. “I wanted to many times, I still do, actually, but I never have. It just seemed like an invasion of her privacy.”

“If she’s been keeping a diary since junior high school, there must be a set of them somewhere. They weren’t in her apartment.”

“Oh, yes a huge set. They’re here at my house. Even the recent ones. She would either bring them home or mail them to me for safekeeping. I have one here still sealed in its mailing envelope, in fact. It came just a few weeks ago.”

“Really? Mrs. Witherspoon, I think you’ve just repaid me for the things I’m going to bring by. How does a half hour from now sound?”

It sounded good to her, and I got directions to the Witherspoon residence.

I put the phone down and stared at my Rocky Mountain National Park poster. It never ceases to amaze me how getting it framed makes that \$7 poster look like art work from a gallery. Staring at it and imagining myself sitting there on that mountainside always has a calming effect on me, which I needed badly just then.

Those diaries could well be the key to the whole problem, I thought. They’ll probably have insight into what made Melody get into the porn business in the first place and maybe even provide contact information for the people she was dealing with at Intermountain. And maybe there will be something about EcoARC and why things got strange there, especially if she was close to Finnegan.

This, I thought, should break things wide open.

But my excitement was tempered with the realization that Mildred Witherspoon was undoubtedly going to read Melody’s diaries. There would be no way to prevent her—in fact, it was something of a surprise that she hadn’t already.

Which would mean she would learn about the true nature of Intermountain Social Services, most likely. Which would mean that Mildred’s view of her daughter would be forever changed, and not for the better.

But, I thought, my asking about them isn’t what’s going to make her read them— she’ll read them someday, anyway. So I don’t really have to feel guilty.

But I did.

* * *

The Witherspoon place was actually close to our house, down the hill a few blocks and a little north, in an old part of town consisting mostly of remodeled Victorians. I stopped by on my way home, parked on the street, and walked up to the house carrying a paper grocery bag with Melody’s keepsakes. I set the bag on a porch swing and rang the Witherspoon doorbell.

Mildred Witherspoon answered the door with a half-empty highball glass in her left hand and a cigarette in her right—a very different person, I couldn’t help but notice, from the reserved society matron I had met at the memorial service. And although Mildred had seemed lucid on the telephone only a half-hour earlier, now she seemed half-sloshed.

“Oh, yes, Annette. Glad you came over. C’mon in.” She turned unsteadily and walked off down a hallway toward the back of the house. “Hope you don’t mind the smoke too much. I quit years ago, but then I started again. Wanna drink?”

“No, but thanks for asking.” As I followed the wobbly form down the hall, I realized that I had been mistaken about Mildred Witherspoon. At the memorial service, she had been dressed in mourning clothes and was appropriately subdued. But now, it was obvious that Mildred was only a few years older than I, ten at the most. And Hal was right, her hair was brunette with reddish highlights.

At the end of the hall, Mildred turned left, and I followed her into a combination family room and library with one wall entirely covered with bookshelves. A couch and two easy chairs filled the middle of the room, grouped to view a large-screen television.

One of the chairs was occupied by a middle-aged man watching the network news. A talking head was on-screen, talking about something to do with the White House.

“Lee? Hey, Lee, we got company.”

The man in the chair put down his glass, turned slightly, just enough to see me standing in the doorway, and rose. He was tall, with a build on the light side of medium. It looked to me as if he had gone to hair-doctor college to get his plugs done—they were all in rows, like a corn field. I tried not to stare.

“Annette, I’d like to introduce Lee, Leland, actually, but he goes by Lee, Lee Spaulding. Lee, this is Annette Treery, she’s with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.” Mildred took another pull at her highball glass and stuck the cigarette into her mouth and sucked on it.

“Actually, Mr. Spaulding, it’s Trieri, kind of unusual, hard for people to get sometimes.” I was trying to decipher Spaulding’s odd reaction to me. “I’m glad to meet you.”

Mildred managed to half-suppress a hiccup. “We’re going to be married, Lee and I.” Sniff. “I was going to tell Melody two weeks ago when she said she’d come for a visit, but I didn’t have a chance to. She didn’t come after all.” Sniff. She slumped into the other easy chair and proceeded to sob.

Spaulding was immediately at her side. “Millie, honey, please don’t let yourself get trapped in crying again. You know the doctor said to avoid this.” He looked up at me. “She has a prescription anti-depressant, but she can’t take it with alcohol. She’s been pretty down since...since, well for the past couple of weeks. Took up smoking again, drinking more than before.”

“I can’t say as I blame her. Melody was a wonderful young woman with a great future ahead of her. This whole thing was so sad. I’m sorry to have missed you at the memorial service last week, Mr. Spaulding.” There’s that reaction again, I thought. What is it? Fright?

“Well, you see, we’re engaged, Millie and I, but it’s not public yet. We thought that if we went together, that would be the center of attention rather than the memorial for Melody. Isn’t that right, Millie?” He had been rubbing her back, and her sobs had gradually subsided.

She heaved a deep sigh. “Yes, I would have liked us to go together, Annette, but we discussed it and decided it just wouldn’t be right. Me appearing with a new beau at a memorial service for my murdered daughter. I mean, really!”

“I guess I understand, Mrs. Witherspoon. Um, do you feel up to seeing these keepsakes I brought? Or would that just be depressing?”

“Oh, yes, the things you got from her apartment. Depressing, yes, but uplifting, too, I think. Do you have them?”

“They’re on the porch swing. Mr. Spaulding, would you be so kind as to get the paper bag that’s out there?” He could hardly refuse, so he walked back down the hall toward the front of the house. I knew I wouldn’t have much time.

“Mrs. Witherspoon, there’s something I need to ask you. I’m trying to find out who murdered your daughter, and I think that it would help me to read her dairies. Could you bring yourself to lend them to me? I think they could be a huge help.”

“Melody’s dairies? Oh, yes, you asked about them on the phone. Why, I don’t see why not. I think that in the back of my mind I know I’m going to read them myself someday.”

“Right now, I think they might only depress you more. Ah, that’s not an opinion you asked for, I know, but I hate to see you like this, Mrs. Witherspoon.”

“Oh, please call me Mildred.”

“I will, Mildred. And I’ll take extremely good care of the dairies, believe me.”

I heard Spaulding’s footsteps coming back down the hall. “I think I hear Lee. Now, Mildred, are you sure that these things won’t be too upsetting for you?”

“I’m sure it will reduce me to a puddle.” She thrust out her chin in defiance. “But that’s the way it will have to be.”

She was right—each item that I had brought caused a new round of tears, but tears somewhat different from before. I wanted desperately to leave, to avoid the outpouring of grief and the reminiscences; besides, I was hungry for dinner. But I had spotted a row of identical, or nearly identical, books on the top shelf of library wall. They were about 10” tall and an inch or so thick. There were so many that they extended to the second shelf down, and on the top of those was sitting a large, unopened mailing envelope.

My chance came when Lee Spaulding said he was taking Mildred upstairs to lie down, to rest. And it sure appeared that she needed it. Clutching the Winnie-the-Pooh, she let herself be guided out of the room.

I took the now-empty paper bag and filled it with the last dozen volumes of Melody’s diary, checking first to make sure the ones on the second shelf were the newest. A quick glance at the dates of the entries proved that the earliest one I had was about a little over six years old, which would correspond to just about the time that Melody started modeling for Lovett. I also put in the bag the newest volume, in its unopened mailer.

Then I let myself out and put the bag on the floor of the back seat of my car.

I thought about leaving, but decided it would be less suspicious to wait and say a more formal goodbye to Spaulding and, if possible, Mildred Witherspoon. So I went back into the house, to the library. Spaulding was still upstairs with Mildred, apparently, so I took the opportunity to straighten the bookshelves as much as I could. After some judicious rearranging, the evidence of the missing volumes was far less obtrusive than it been at first.

Then, on impulse, I took a strip of clear tape from a roll I found on the bookshelves, applied it to a thumb-print I found on Spaulding’s glass, and put the tape in my pocket.

It took about five more minutes for Spaulding to return.

“Lee, I’m so sorry that those things upset Mildred. But I promised them to her, and I expect that not returning them would have been even more upsetting.”

“Oh, don’t worry, she’ll be fine. In fact, the way she has that stuffed animal in her grasp, I think this will help her. Really.”

“I’m glad. And now I’m going to have to be leaving. Here’s my card.” Again I noticed the strange reaction to my professional position. “Please feel free to call on me if I can be of any help.”

As I left him in the library, he was staring at my CBI card, wariness etched into his features.

* * *

Back at home, I smelled the distinctive aromas of fennel and garlic, and my mouth watered. Hal was in the kitchen, puttering with salad ingredients. There was a skinny-looking football-shaped thing wrapped in foil on the counter, and a large pot of water was simmering on the stove.

“Oh, hi! Glad you’re home. Hungry? The water’s hot and I can get it to a boil in a flash. And the oven’s hot, too.”

He wiped his hands on his apron and came over to kiss me. I had finally been able to persuade him to wear aprons after he ruined one of his favorite silk shirts by splashing salad oil on it. That was my second major kitchen victory—the first had been getting him to cook without using detailed recipes and turning the process into a chemistry experiment.

“Starved. Let me go change and you can put the pasta in.”

Fifteen minutes later, in front of me sat a plate of green, red, and yellow bell peppers sautéed in a little olive oil with chunks of sweet Italian sausage, accompanied by a side of *al dente* linguini with a touch of marinara sauce—an old family recipe of mine that I’d taught to Hal as an alternative to his forever using stuff out of a jar. The skinny football had been opened to reveal a loaf of garlic bread. He served me a big bowl of salad.

“What would I do without you, anyway?” I was spearing a forkful of peppers and sausage.

“Probably eat pizza all the time. And not the good kind, either.”

“Hey! That was good pizza I got the other night, wasn’t it?”

“The pepperoni one? At least it was the take-and-bake kind. That helped. So, how was your day? Better than mine, I hope.”

“I’ve got a bag full of Melody Witherspoon’s diaries out in the car. And, guess what? Melody’s mother, Mildred, remember her? Mildred’s got a boyfriend.”

“Mildred of Runny-Nose, as I recall. A boyfriend? I don’t remember him from the service.”

“Wasn’t there.” I popped another bite into my mouth. “Guy named Lee Spaulding, Leland. Older by a few years. Dotes on her. They’re planning to get married. Melody didn’t know, apparently. Anyway, I’m hoping that those diaries will provide some insights into who might have killed Melody.”

“Mildred gave you a bunch of Melody’s diaries? I would have thought she would keep such things to herself.”

“She didn’t exactly give them to me. But she did agree that I should look at them to see what could be in there of relevance to Melody’s death.” I related the circumstances of how I actually obtained the books.

“You walked off with them? Isn’t that called ‘stealing’?”

“She did say that it would make sense for me to read them. And I promised to take good care of them. And I’m not going to keep them very long, just a day or so.” I folded a slice of garlic bread in half and bit into it.

“Made you feel guilty, huh?” He shot me a huge grin.

“OK, OK, I am feeling a little guilty about it. But I really need to see those diaries, and I got the ones that Mildred just isn’t in any kind of shape to be reading just yet. The ones starting when Melody began her modeling career.”

“But you also got the more recent ones, right? The ones that may have some information about EcoARC? Those might shed some light on that switcheroo that Bill Longwell pulled on you. Unless you figured it out since talking to me about it the other night.”

“No, I haven’t. It’s still got me puzzled, although we did make a little progress. I guess I didn’t tell you—the DNA test has cleared Jorge Alvarez. So Bill is wrong along with the sheriff and everyone. And you’re right, maybe there will be some clues in these diaries. Guess I better get reading.”

“How romantic. We can read together. I brought home a stack of budget reports about next semester’s projections.”

About an hour later, my phone rang, jangling away from the other room. After supper, we had each plunged into our respective readings, and I had made it as far as Melody’s initial modeling job in the first diary volume that I had swiped.

“Ross! Glad you called. Did you get my updates?”

“Sure did, Annette, and I’m wondering where all this will lead us. I talked with Rudy and heard about the DNA results, too. Elwood Johnson is going to have some issues to deal with, I’ll say that. But I called to talk about this business with Bill Longwell. In your report you said he flip-flopped and was trying to get you to believe that Alvarez killed the Witherspoon woman.”

“Right. And I’ve been wondering what’s going on with him. That’s a very strange position for him to take, especially as he was at the first part of our meeting last week, when we discussed Alvarez’s death.”

“And because we now know that Alvarez didn’t do it, it looks worse.”

“I think something is going on at EcoARC. Longwell must have got leaned on for some reason. He’s too much of a straight arrow to have been involved in this from the beginning.”

“Yeah, I read your comments about his background, and I agree. But what’s going on, do you think?”

“So far, I’m stumped, but I’m going to continue to work on it. Oh. Did you have any luck with the guy I caught in my house? James Lovett?”

I heard Townsend’s trademark chuckle. “Did we ever. I’ll fax you his rap sheet. But, I’ve got to say, he seems like a bit player to me. Probably not worth any more effort than just getting information out of him and sending him on his way.”

“I made a deal with his lawyer—he tells me who he’s working for and what he was looking for, and he gets to leave town. Want me to make sure he doesn’t head back down your way?”

“Oh, he’s probably OK to come back down here. It’ll give us something to amuse ourselves with on slow days.”

* * *

The discussion with James Lovett, which I suspected would be in the presence of the impossible-to-avoid Arthur Stepwood, Esq., was arranged for 8:30 on Tuesday morning, at the county lockup facility near the CBI offices. I took a wild guess that the rotund Mr. Lovett would appreciate something more tasty than the lockup's morning coffee, so I brought him a double mocha from the coffee bar down the block, two shots of espresso mixed into hot chocolate. It smelled so good I almost drank it myself—I could have used it because I had stayed up late reading Melody's diaries.

I also decided I could conveniently forget that Stepwood would likely be there, so I didn't have to get him anything.

Lovett was dressed in a too-tight, bright orange, county-lockup jumpsuit, and he looked like he hadn't been sleeping. He perked up when he smelled the coffee, so I knew I had guessed correctly. And as I had suspected, the lawyer was sitting in the interview room with his client.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Mr. Lovett, I've brought you a cup of coffee, probably better coffee than they've been giving you in here." I set the large cup on the table in front of him, and his nostrils flexed.

Stepwood was clearly annoyed. "I presume that there is no assumption of a *quid pro quo* for this gift?"

"Artie, please. Then it wouldn't be a gift, would it? And you know I don't bribe criminals, I arrest them and provide the DA with what he needs to convict them. But, as we've discussed, that isn't in the cards for Mr. Lovett here, assuming that he's agreed to cooperate. How's the coffee, Mr. Lovett? And, by the way, did you take the picture on that screensaver of yours yourself? Who came up with the feather duster idea, anyway?" I had decided to let Lovett know that his place had been searched.

Lovett, in the middle of a large slurp of coffee, nearly choked, and Stepwood began pounding on his back to stop the coughing fit.

"Whatever are you referring to Ms. Trieri? You seem to have upset my client."

"Like I said yesterday, Artie, you need to make sure your clients are candid with you."

"How do you know about that?" Lovett had regained his voice. "And, anyway, it's all legal."

"Mr. Lovett, please. Surely you know I wouldn't be making this deal with you if I had more charges to bring? And naturally we were able to obtain a search warrant to look for stolen property. I mean, remember, I caught you in the act of burglarizing my house, no?"

"Right, right, now what do I have to do to get out of here?"

"Just tell me what you were really looking for in my house and who you're working for. The truth, this time. You only get one more chance."

"Or what?"

"Or, first, we formalize the charge of breaking and entering my place. Then, while we wait for your bail hearing, we find you a very interesting roommate, name of Bubba, probably, a friendly sort of fellow, *very* friendly, and we tell him what your profession is, what you do with your cameras. After that we let nature take its course. Ever been someone's girlfriend, Mr. Lovett?"

"Now just hold on there!" Stepwood was incensed. "This is outrageous. You're totally out of line, threatening my client like this!"

“I’m just predicting the future, Mr. Stepwood. And, as you know, this is all being recorded, so I’m not saying anything I’m afraid to have made public. What will it be, Mr. Lovett? Answers? Or a new and, ah, stimulating social life?”

“Stepwood told me that part of the deal is that I have to leave town. When?”

“As soon as you can pack up your possessions, with no dawdling and absolutely no more shoots. We’re not going to be unreasonable, but you’re not working in this town any more, or even in the region. Clear?”

“What’s ‘region’ mean?”

“I’m told that they won’t mind if you go back to Phoenix, if that’s what you’re asking, and neither will I. But if you set up shop any closer than that, I’ll be in your face before you can catch a breath. So. Who got you to break into my house?”

“Who’s going to know what I tell you?”

“Besides me, Mr. Stepwood here, and the camera guys, and whoever looks at the tape. I’ll have control of the tape, though, so if you keep your word, no one will see it.”

“OK, I talk to you and nobody else.” Lovett polished off his coffee with gusto.

I looked at the large mirror on the wall. “OK, guys, leave the tape running, please, and go take a break. And, Artie, I think he means you, too.”

“I’m not going anywhere. My client needs representation.”

“Beat it Stepwood. Thanks for your help and all, but I don’t need you for this. Beat it. You know where to send your bill.” Lovett waved his hand in dismissal, and I made sure not to laugh.

“So tell me, Mr. Lovett, where will he send his bill?”

“Intermountain. I figured you’d know that already.”

“So I suspected. And just to be clear, you’re right—we didn’t find anything illegal at your place. But we did find that you had a shoot a couple of weeks ago with a young woman who turned up dead within a few hours. So what that means is that wherever you go, you can be sure that you’ll be under the microscope. Now. Tell me who put you up to breaking into my place.”

He heaved a deep sigh. “Right. It was my cousin Elwood down in Arizona. Elwood Johnson.”

“Elwood Johnson the sheriff of Pinal County? I see. What were you looking for?”

“Anything about that meeting you were at. He called me and told me about that meeting and said he had to know what was going on. Said he figured you might have notes or tapes or something.”

“So Johnson’s your cousin? What about this deputy, ah, Lyle Shaughnessy? Is he any relation?”

“Lyle? Nah, I know him, but he’s married to Elwood’s sister. My mother is Elwood’s wife’s mother’s sister, so we’re cousins, me and Elwood, or cousin-in-laws, or something. I’m not related to Lyle. But what’s up with all this, anyway? I mean, Elwood just wanted me to look for anything that might have to do with the meeting, he didn’t tell me what it was about.”

“Let’s just say that Elwood’s got himself in a pickle, one he doesn’t need going into an election. And he dragged you into it as well. But now you’re not, assuming you hightail it out of the area. I ought to be able to get you out of here by noon. And, listen, thanks for not ransacking our house, you know?”

* * *

Nine

After making the necessary telephone calls and filling out the paperwork to get Lovett released, I returned to my office. Fred Winders had promised to keep an eye on Lovett to make sure he left town in a reasonable time frame, Arthur Stepwood, Esq., was nowhere to be seen, which was a good thing, and it was time for lunch. A productive morning, I thought.

I noticed that I had telephone messages—one from Rod Andersen, my boss in Denver, one from Hal, and two from Bill Longwell down at EcoARC. Well, I thought, the boss comes first, so I returned the call from Andersen, only to find that he had gone to a lunch meeting already. Hal's message also concerned lunch, specifically was I available? And Bill Longwell's office didn't answer my return call, so I assumed they were at lunch, too. Is there a message for me in all this? I wondered. It sure is making me hungry.

I left voice mail for Hal that I was sorry I'd missed him for lunch, but that I'd see him for dinner. Then I drove down past the south end of town to Fannie's Saloon. Despite its less than high-class reputation, Fannie's does have good food, and, besides, I wanted to talk with the owner.

Hal and I ate lunch there on our first "date." It was actually more of a business lunch, because I needed to talk with him about a murdered professor, and I was already at Fannie's to investigate a harassment complaint, back when I worked for the Durango Police Department. Hal made something of a fool of himself, but in an endearing kind of way. That was one of the things that led me to fall for him. And despite the distractions of all the topless young women walking around the place, Hal had actually managed a credible conversation and focused his attention on me. Most of the time, at least.

The harassment investigation had required that I interview both the waitresses and dancers as well as the management, so I had been introduced to the owner, Fannie Sullivan. In another time and another place, Fannie would have made the perfect madam, perhaps running the house of ill repute in some dusty cowboy town. But at this time, in Durango, she was just the proprietor of a topless restaurant and bar, trying to make a living in a college town by providing titillation for the guys and employment for the more adventuresome young women.

I showed the bouncer attending the door my CBI shield and quickly reassured him that I just wanted lunch.

Inside, I looked around for a minute, ignoring the dancers, and finally spotted Fannie sitting at a table by one of the few windows that wasn't completely blacked out. She was working on a set of what looked to me like accounting books, a coffee cup near her left hand. I headed over in that direction, and Fannie eventually looked up.

"Why, Annette Trieri, as I live and breathe! And I hear you're moving up in the world, working for the CBI now. Don't tell me, *please* don't tell me that I've somehow attracted the CBI's attention."

I laughed at Fannie's worried expression. "No, Fannie, not at all. I came in for lunch and a conversation with you, if you've got the time."

"For you, I sure do. I'll never forget how well you treated us before. I was worried about that complaint you were investigating. You want a lunch menu?" She leaned to look around me and raised her voice. "Bitsy! Bitsy, bring me a lunch menu, willya?"

I knew from my previous experience at Fannie's that the girls always used pseudonyms while on the floor or on stage, descriptive ones. So I wasn't surprised when Bitsy turned out to be on the flat-

ched side, her credentials for working at Fannie's being most optimistically described as "perky." Quite the opposite of "Busty," the server whom Hal had embarrassed that other time while making a fool of himself.

I ordered a grilled chicken sandwich with iced tea, and "Bitsy" scampered off in the direction of the kitchen. I watched the men's eyes following her and couldn't help but laugh.

"Fannie, I've got to say that I just love this place. Not for the naked girls, of course, but for how much I always learn about men every time I come here. It just kills me that they're so fascinated with breasts. It's like they missed out at the body parts store, so now they've got to envy ours."

"Ain't it the truth. That's one reason why I'm so glad you did that investigation a couple of years back. The usual PD guys would have been too distracted to function. You saw right through that line of bull, though. So what's on your mind today?"

"Your competition across town."

"You mean the Sizzles bunch? Oh, they're not really my competition, I'm so far from being in their league. I mean, this is just a tittie place, like Hooters without shirts. Sizzles is full-out raunch, from what I hear."

"That's what I hear, too. I interviewed someone who spent a long evening there, along with the better part of a kilo-buck, it sounded like. His evening culminated with a viewing of the live version of what you see in porn videos, apparently. And he said that somewhere during the evening he had his face rubbed by a pair of humongous siliconized boobs. To his credit, he didn't like it much."

"Sounds about right. All-the-way strippers, lap dancers, and treats for the voyeur. It wouldn't surprise me if they can make 'private' arrangements for call girls as well. That stuff's not for me, I can tell you that."

"To your credit. I'm curious, though. Do any of your girls go from here to there?"

"Hmmp. Not if I can help it. The ones that do tend to be the ones that I have to let go, for coming on to the customers too strong, or for drugs and stuff like that. I don't have any real way of keeping track, beyond what I hear from my girls. They gossip a lot."

"The reason I'm interested in all this is that a girl who used to be a student at the U turned up dead in Arizona, a day after she had been up here. I got involved because of that local angle, and during the investigation we found out that she had done some modeling for a porn photographer who works for Intermountain Social Services. They're Sizzles' parent company."

"Yeah, Intermountain is a regular porn conglomerate. Just like WalMart is forcing the Mom and Pop hardware and clothing stores out of business, Intermountain is putting the pressure on places like mine. So what's this girl's name?"

"Melody Witherspoon. You must have read about it in the paper, last week there was a service."

"Oh, right. Her? Wow, who'da thought? I mean, some of my girls are local, and we keep it quiet so their folks don't know about it. But, geez, this Melody Witherspoon was the real deal, huh? Prom queen, class president, all that stuff. Amazing. If you're going to ask, she didn't ever work here, at least not that I remember. We get some girls who use fake names, even after we explain that we'll protect their identities and that we need their real names for the health benefits and social security and so on. But I didn't recognize her from her picture. How'd you find this out, can I ask?"

"We got a warrant for a guy who tried to burglarize my house, the idiot, he turned out to be the photographer. He had pictures of her. And, of course, lots of other girls. And some couples, including

some very peculiar stuff. But Melody was always solo. Graphic, though, toward the end. She did a shoot the day before she was killed.”

“So do you think the photographer killed her?”

“No, we didn’t find any evidence of that. He’s actually just a harmless little sleazeball. But I do wonder about the rest of the Intermountain crowd. And this got me to wondering if maybe some other girls who worked for them might also have died suspiciously. You wouldn’t have heard about any such thing, would you? Through the grapevine?”

Fannie thought for a minute, and “Bitsy” came back with my lunch.

“You know, I do remember hearing something, back about the time of that complaint you investigated. I was so distracted that I didn’t pay much attention, though.”

“Would any of the girls who are still here remember?”

“You know, Wanda might. She’s been here for almost as long as I have.” Fannie grinned. “Just like me, she put her shirt on a while back, and she uses her real name, now. She’s over there tending bar.” Rather than shout, Fannie picked up a cell phone, pushed a button, and I heard a ring from the bar.

Shortly, Wanda was sitting with Fannie and me, sipping the iced tea she had brought with her, being introduced. Like Fannie, she remembered my fair treatment of the place during the harassment investigation, so the conversation wasn’t burdened by unreasonable levels of mistrust.

“I remember what you’re taking about.” Wanda had one of those almost southern accents that, I thought, would drive men wild, especially if she was half undressed.

“It was the girl we called Big Willie. Tall, kind of stocky. Blonde, the bottle kind. She worked here for about six months and left, I never knew why.”

“I canned her.” Fannie looked disgusted. “She was propositioning the customers. And, I think, doing dope.”

“Oh!” Wanda’s surprise was evident. “Well, anyway, her friend Ima said she went to work over at Sizzles for a while, and she got a job in Denver at another Sizzles there. Ima lost track of her after that, said that Willie just disappeared. Later we found out she had died, but we never knew why.”

“Do you remember her real name?” I had a notebook out.

“We called her Big Willie, but her name was Agnes. Agnes something. Jefferson. That’s it, Agnes Jefferson.”

I wrote it down, but I really didn’t need to. I remembered seeing the name in James Lovett’s files—“Agnes” had sort of jumped out at me, not being the kind of name one associates with girlie pictures.

* * *

So, I thought, as I drove back to my office, more or less two years ago, another of Lovett’s models winds up dead. Different circumstances, because Agnes had, apparently, moved to Denver. But she was still associated with Intermountain there. I’d better call the Denver PD and see what they know about this. Or, better yet, I’ll just mention it to Rod when I call him back. I wonder what he wants.

As I was approaching the US-550 intersection south of town, the radio in my Explorer crackled. Ever since my first CBI case, which had involved tracking a suspect through the back country, the CBI had equipped me with a Ford Explorer with four-wheel-drive and plenty of ground clearance. Not as

much fun or as comfortable as Hal's S4, and woefully underpowered by any standard, but far more expendable. Plus it had a police radio.

And now I was hearing on that radio an exchange between two Durango officers, who, it seemed, were pursuing a suspect. With the new rules, they were not supposed to engage in high-speed pursuit unless there was one of a short list of compelling reasons. In this case, it sounded to me as if they didn't have a reason on the list, so the pursuit was as much by radio as by ground. I grabbed the mike.

"Break, break. This is Annette Trieri, CBI. I'm northbound at the south 550-160 intersection. Can I assist?"

"Officer Peter Ivy here, ma'am, remember me? Yes, maybe you can. We're trying to tail a suspect who's headed your way, southbound. He's driving like a madman, and we're not authorized to pursue at full speed. I've got help at the mall exit, but she's stuck in traffic and can't use her lights. She needs to lay low."

"What am I looking for?"

"Black BMW, seven series, Colorado vanity plate B-I-G-T-O-O-T."

"A guy with vanity plates is trying to run? I gather this isn't a rocket scientist we're dealing with."

"Probably not. The car may be stolen."

I was maneuvering for a U-turn, to be ready for the BMW, when a second voice came on the radio.

"Peter? Shirley. He just passed the mall entrance. Still southbound. I'll get after him as soon as I can get clear of this traffic. Can the CBI pick him up?"

"I'll sure try. Should I apprehend him, or just tail him?"

"It's your call. We'd like to get him, but don't get hurt, hear?"

"Don't worry. I have a strong streak of self-preservation. Ask Fred Winders about me some day. Oops, there he is, coming up fast. Damn, you're right. Driving like a madman, like you said. Weaving all over the place. Doesn't look drunk, though." I pulled back onto the highway, southbound now, accelerating as hard as the underpowered SUV would let me. The BMW shot by before I came up to speed.

"OK, team, he's got way more car than I do, so I'll follow as best I can. Call the La Plata Sheriff's Department and tell them what's going on. We're coming up on the 550 turn off, and he's headed that way, up the hill, southbound toward New Mexico. Whoa, he spun out, nearly wiped out a pickup. But now he's headed up the hill."

I had to slow to a crawl to negotiate the 180-degree turn to the right onto US-550, and then I felt as if I should get out and push to help the Explorer get going up the hill. Behind and below me, still coming the other way before the turn, I saw two Durango police cruisers, now with their lights flashing.

Up onto Florida Mesa, our little caravan raced south along the bluff above the Animas River, through the Southern Ute Reservation. I saw the two Durango cars gaining on me, so I grabbed my mike.

"Peter? Trieri here. You guys seem to have more car than I do, too, plus you've got lights. Why don't you pass me and see if you can get closer to our friend up there?" There was a double-click in response, and shortly the two cars glided by my Explorer. We all waved at each other, briefly.

As the two cars pulled farther and farther ahead, I began wondering just what I was contributing to this situation, beyond another car going too fast on a rural highway. But the speaker crackled.

“Ms. Trieri? Ivy here. Suspect just tossed something out the passenger side window, it landed in the ditch. Just where I’m passing...now.” I visually marked the spot and began braking as I keyed my mike.

“Got it. I’ll retrieve it for you and let you go. I can’t seem to keep up. Good luck.”

“Thanks. We’re getting a road block set up at the bottom of Bondad Hill, way up ahead where the highway crosses the river. Tire spikes, I think. Out.”

I stopped my SUV about 50 yards before my best estimate of the spot that Ivy had noted and hunted around in the back to find the magnetic bubble I knew was in there somewhere. Eventually, I had it on top, plugged in, and giving traffic at least a little warning that something was going on. I found some plastic gloves, put them on, and began walking up the ditch ahead of my parked car.

It took me two passes to find it, because the weeds were high enough to make things difficult. But there it was, a heavy-duty ZipLock bag, the gallon size, stuffed so full that I was surprised it hadn’t burst open. Inside were other, smaller, bags, one containing currency, another with a white powder. And another with what looked to be compact disks.

I walked back to the car, found a roll of crime-scene tape and tore off a six-inch piece. Somewhere in the back, I knew, there was a satchel full of other stuff useful for investigations, and, after rooting through a variety of equipment, I found a good-sized nail. Poking it through the tape, which was tougher than I’d thought, I walked back to the bag on the ground, stuck the nail in the ground next to it, and finally picked it up, by its corners. After I put it in the back of the car, I walked the ditch again, for at least a quarter mile, to make sure there was nothing I’d missed.

* * *

Back in my car, headed south toward the road block, I listened to the radio traffic. I had used my cell phone to call into my office, to let Sally know where I was, and I had also called the local State Patrol district office to make sure they were in the loop.

The radio traffic was less than informative, partial conversations, brief acknowledgements, seemingly random clicks. But as I came around the curve about halfway down Bondad Hill, the long grade from the top of Florida Mesa down to the Animas River, I could see a considerable amount of activity down below. There were five police cars, lights blinking madly away, scattered about the highway in the vicinity of the bridge. A black sedan, which I suspected was the rogue BMW, was sitting perpendicular to the highway with its rear tires in the left-hand ditch. On the far side of the bridge was a long line of cars sitting in the hot October sun, blocked by one of the blinking police cars.

I pulled off the road near the cluster of police cars, and walked over toward a little group of officers in various flavors of uniforms. Catching Ivy’s eye, I gave him a covert thumbs up, with a “Shhh” gesture and a wink for good measure. He was in the midst of an animated conversation with an officer wearing what I recognized to be a La Plata County Sheriff’s Department uniform. Meanwhile, down the hill were coming two State Patrol cars, new arrivals who would probably further confuse matters.

The only person present who didn’t look confused was a Southern Ute police officer, who remained off to one side, leaning against his battered Blazer. At well over six feet tall with a football lineman’s build, and with jurisdiction, he could have been running the show, but instead he chose to stay on the sidelines, arms crossed, looking bemused at the confusion. I gave him a “why me?” gesture, and he laughed quietly and nodded.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Attention, please!” I used my Level 2 Voice, and it worked as I had hoped. “For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Annette Trieri, Director of the CBI office in Durango. I want to congratulate all of you on a successful cooperative effort here. I assume that the driver of this BMW

is securely handcuffed in the back of someone's car? I'll be sure to pass along my praise for your efforts to your superiors."

This had the effect of pre-empting whatever arguments were going on, and things calmed down considerably. By then the two State Patrol officers had arrived, parked, and were approaching the group. Before they could do anything, I showed them my shield.

"Fellas, we have some sorting out to do here, but you know what really needs to be done? Let's see if we can get traffic moving again."

This wasn't the job the troopers had in mind when they'd arrived, but I outranked them in the scheme of things.

"Officer Ivy, where is the suspect? And who is he?"

"In the back of *his* car, ma'am. And I need to take him in." Ivy was pointing at one of the county officers.

"Maybe, maybe not. First things first." I looked at the Southern Ute officer and took note of his stripes. "Sergeant, this is your jurisdiction. But this collar involves hot pursuit, and it started back in Durango. Do you want responsibility, or can we take the suspect back to town?"

The response involved a wide grin, the "safe" gesture that baseball umpires use, and the comment, "He's all yours. I'll be on my way."

"Thank you. I think." I turned to the others. "Officer Ivy, do you have ID on the suspect?"

"Yes, ma'am. Michael Shaughnessy, age 22, Arizona license, nothing outstanding. Made a lot of noise about his father being a deputy sheriff down by Tucson somewhere."

I tried carefully to mask my surprise. "OK. What I think is that this is La Plata County, the Southern Utes have just declined jurisdiction, and so the suspect goes to the county lockup for whatever charges the sheriff may decide to file. Peter, Shirley, you two must also have charges to file, and I'll be sure and put in a good word to Walt Jankowski about your work." The mention of their captain's name calmed the two Durango officers, and things quieted down even more.

The Southern Ute officer drove off, eastward down a gravel road, and one of the county officers drove off north, with the suspect in the back. The other county officer was busy retrieving the spike belt that had stopped the BMW. And the two State Patrol officers were directing traffic. I turned to the two Durango officers.

"Thanks for not objecting, Shirley, Peter. And this approach is in your best interest. For one thing, neither of you has to wait around for the tow truck to take that BMW back to the yard, that county guy will have to do it. For another, think about what the county guys have to file in the way of charges. Running over a spike belt, and speeding, if they got him with a radar? I don't think that's going to get them much. And for yet another thing, I've got the bag of stuff our suspect there," I gestured at the county car making its way back up the hill, "tossed out of his car back up top. I handled it carefully and you should be able to get prints off it to prove it's his. Unless he was wearing driving gloves. Was he?" I looked from one to the other.

"Not that I saw." Ivy responded first. "Although he could have left some in the car."

"What's in the bag?" Officer Shirley Rice finally spoke.

"Cash, a mysterious white powder. Some CDs." I grinned. "You know, the kind of stuff that you run across in farmers' ditches all the time."

Rice got the joke instantly. “Yeah, that’s what his lawyer will tell the judge, I bet. Good thing about the prints.”

“If you get any, but you should. Tell you what. Let me retain custody until we get back to town, so the deputy over there doesn’t get too suspicious. You guys head back and work on your reports, and I’ll come by the station and have a chat with Walt and log in the evidence with you.”

“How come you’re doing this?” Ivy didn’t seem used to cooperative police work.

“You’re new, so you don’t know, but I used to work at the PD, I was the head of investigations. Walt’s an old friend of mine. And, besides, this really is your collar, I mean you started chasing him. Why, by the way?”

“Really it was about a blowing a red light, at first. We had this low-key stake-out going at a place up town, we were supposed to watch for this car leaving. Lieutenant Winders put us onto it. And when he left, he left in a big hurry, with complete disregard for our local ideas of propriety. So we started chasing him.” Rice shrugged as if to dismiss the importance of the whole thing.

“*Lieutenant Winders?* Why, I didn’t know Fred got bumped up. I just talked to him the other day, and he didn’t say anything, the turkey. I’ll have to get him a bottle of something. He used to work for me, when I was the lieutenant.” I shook my head in disbelief. “So, anyway, the guy takes off, commits some minor traffic violations, well, maybe not so minor, and now we’ll get him for something a tad more serious, assuming that powder turns out to be something other than powdered sugar. What was the place you were watching?”

Ivy tacked a sheepish grin on his face. “That strip joint, Sizzles.”

“Yeah, and he kept wanting to go inside to do the stakeout. In uniform, yet. Guys!” Rice stuck her elbow in his ribs, but Ivy was too busy turning red to say anything. It occurred to me that someone at the Durango Police Department should be careful not to assign these two young people together too much.

“Sizzles, huh? No kidding. I’ll tell you what. I want to know what’s on those computer CDs I’ve got in the car. I’ll see you guys back at the PD, OK? I want to say thanks again to the deputy there.”

But what I really wanted was to get a few minutes alone with my computer and the CDs in that ZipLock bag.

* * *

It went quickly. I wore gloves and handled the three CDs by their edges, and they weren’t encoded or anything to make the copying process difficult. Afterwards, I arranged things in the big ZipLock bag the way they had been to begin with. I didn’t really pay attention to what was on the CDs, because I was trying to return my phone messages while swapping the things in and out of my computer. There was one more since I’d left for lunch, from Ross Townsend down in Arizona. But my boss still came first.

“Rod? Glad I caught you this time. You called this morning?”

“Oh, yes, thanks for calling back. Listen, there’s something strange going on with that Arizona investigation you’re involved in.”

“Tell me about it. It keeps getting stranger every day.”

“I got a call from the Governor, and he had been talking with the Governor of Arizona. It seems that the legal department of the biggest company in the consortium that runs that Ecowhatever place is making noise. They don’t like all the attention, it seems.”

“Yeah, no one does. But when a dead body turns up in your greenhouse, there’s going to be some attention, no?”

“You know that and so do I, but these legal eagles have other ideas. They’re talking about private property, they’ve cooperated with the investigation, now it’s time for the cops to go away. The fact that they were able to lean on the Governor down there is significant.”

“How come it came to you through our Gov?”

“Their Public Safety Department got a call and they said that you, as a temporary law enforcement official down there, are running the investigation. So their Gov called ours, and he called me.”

“So, what’s the bottom line?”

“I think that they won’t make any real changes, you know, terminate your appointment or anything like that, it would look too bad. But I get the impression that your job could get harder. You need cooperation down there to make this dual appointment work, and that could stop. Also, I doubt that the access to Eco...what’s it really called again?”

“EcoARC. Short for Ecological Archive Research Center.”

“Right. I don’t think they’ll be letting you in so casually.”

“Interesting. First, their director, a friend of Hal’s, does a one-eighty and starts claiming that the guy they arrested is the murderer, even though he should know better. Now, the legal department weighs in. Someone’s got some real clout and is using it.”

“Are you sure that the guy they arrested didn’t do it?”

“DNA tests cleared him. But so far, that’s a secret. I want to use it if I can. Thing is, there are other inconsistencies that Bill Longwell, the director, is aware of. So he should know better.”

“So, OK, now you know what I know. You be careful down there.”

“I sure will. Thanks for the heads up, Rod. Oh, by the way. Could you have someone look into the death, in Denver, I think, of an Agnes Jefferson about two years ago? I think it could have a bearing on this case.”

“Sure, I’ll do it myself. Got to keep my hand in somehow.”

I rang off and considered whom to call first, Bill Longwell or Ross Townsend. It seemed to me as if neither call would be pleasant. But Longwell had called first, twice, so I owed him.

This time everyone was back from lunch.

“EcoARC, director’s office. Can I help you?”

“This is Annette Trieri. Bill called me a couple of times this morning, and I’m returning the calls.”

“I’ll see if Director Longwell is available.” The tone of voice seemed calculated to be holier-than-thou, and I was appropriately annoyed.

“Annette? Listen, can I call you right back? Are you in your office? Ten seconds.” And he hung up. But, as promised, my phone rang again almost at once.

“Annette. Sorry, I wanted to use my cell phone for this call. And I’m going for a walk outside, so if you hear me breathing hard, or other odd noises in the background, that’s why.”

“Bill, if you’re concerned about being listened to on the office phone, you should know that cell phones aren’t all that secure, either.”

“Yeah, but it’s my personal one, and I don’t think it’s that much of an issue. But I don’t trust my office phone. So, why I called is to apologize. I got my arm twisted into trying to persuade you that Alvarez was the killer. I know he really couldn’t be, though, after hearing all the stuff at the meeting last week. I thought about it all weekend and decided that if I get leaned on, what I have to do is to lean back. So I called to get this off my conscience.”

“Apology accepted. And, you know, it could help my investigation for me to know who was leaning on you.” I wondered how he would respond to the hint.

“Yeah, I thought you’d ask. And I know that I’m in no position to ask for favors, but it would help me if I could duck that question for a day or two. So I can do my own leaning back first, you know?”

“OK, but I really didn’t ask anyway, I just suggested that it would be helpful. If I ask, it’ll be important, and official, OK? And since I’ve got you on the phone, there’s something else that’s come up. Through a chain of phone calls, I’ve heard that some of the lawyers on the EcoARC Board, or something like that, are wanting this whole thing to be over, so they’re going to have EcoARC quit cooperating with the investigation. Do you know anything about that?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it, and it certainly isn’t something I can endorse. I guess that I have to do what the Board orders me to do, if it comes to that, unless I want to resign. But I think it’s our responsibility to cooperate in every way possible.” Longwell sounded offended that someone would be making decisions for him.

“That’s something I’m truly glad to hear, Bill. I expect I’ll be getting back down your way soon, so I’ll be seeing you.”

I decided to call Ross Townsend from my cell phone, so that I wouldn’t be too late getting to the Durango Police Department main station downtown. I put the re-packed ZipLock bag into my shoulder bag and headed out to my car. I had pre-dialed Townsend’s number, so I had only to hit the “send” button when traffic eased up.

“Ross? This is Annette Trieri calling back.”

“Oh, thanks, Annette. Listen, I have to run off to a meeting, but I wanted to let you know that there’s something strange happening to your investigation. I’m getting pressure, political pressure, to get you to ease off.”

“I heard about this, but it’s indeed strange because I haven’t really done anything to ease off from. Where’d your pressure come from?”

“The Governor’s office, via my boss. I reminded him that we’re dealing with a murder here, not something that the Governor would like to be accused of covering up. I mean, I put it gently, but there it is.”

“There it is indeed. I heard that EcoARC is going to stop cooperating, too. But I just talked with Bill Longwell, who, by the way, apologized for trying to get me to believe in the Alvarez theory of the murder, he said he’d been leaned on, too. Lots of leaning going on. But anyway, he said he’d cooperate and hinted he’d resign if the EcoARC Board told him not to cooperate.”

“That’s good to hear, not the resigning, but the cooperation. We’ll need it.”

“Ross? There’s one more thing. I think that Lyle Shaughnessy’s kid just got picked up by the La Plata Sheriff’s Department on some traffic charges here. And there could be drugs involved. I don’t know what connections there could be to our investigations.”

There was a long pause. “That’s odd, but I don’t know either. Listen, I gotta go, I’ll call you tomorrow, OK?”

By then, I had negotiated the traffic and pulled in to the parking lot of the police station downtown. I carried my shoulder bag with the evidence in the front door. Yet another officer whom I didn't know sat at the desk.

"Good afternoon. I'm Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I guess I should see Fred Winders first."

"Oh, yes, Ms. Trieri, they're all expecting you. In the captain's office, down the hall."

Oh, crap, I thought. I took too long copying those CDs and now they're going to give me trouble. My conscience has a way of coming out of hiding at the most inopportune times.

* * *

Ten

"Phone calls, guys, I had to return phone calls." I had the excuse ready when I walked through Captain Walt Jankowski's door.

Jankowski, Fred Winders, and another person, whom I remembered was a fingerprint technician, looked up, surprised and dumbfounded.

"I mean, I meant to get here sooner, but I got...uh, so, anyway, I'm sorry to keep you waiting." This didn't seem to have any effect, either.

"Fred, you didn't tell me you got a promotion." Finally, something broke the spell.

He looked surprised. "Oh. No, I guess I didn't. I just never thought to, I guess, because it was a couple of months ago, and we haven't talked for a while. I forgot. Sorry."

"Well, congratulations, late ones but sincere. Couldn't have happened to a more deserving officer. So, I've brought you a little something I picked up in the countryside earlier." I set down my shoulder bag, put a plastic glove on, gingerly lifted the ZipLock bag out, and put it on Jankowski's desk.

"We're still waiting for the reports from Rice and Ivy, but they briefed me." Jankowski was standing now, looking at the plastic bag from all angles.

The technician closed in. "May I?" He didn't wait for an answer before he began dusting the bag.

"So, Fred, what's this all about? Ivy told me that you had him and Rice watching Sizzles so they could tail this car if it took off, or something like that." I was watching the technician carefully.

"That's about it. After our conversations and the business with that guy Lovett, I thought it might be a good idea to keep an eye on that place. Especially today, with Lovett being released and all. I can't say we expected this to happen." Winders shrugged.

"And the county guys have the driver in custody, right?"

Jankowski spoke up. "Yeah, they were actually quite nice about it. They faxed over his prints and ID information. That's why we're so interested in this bag."

The technician had used tape to lift several fingerprints from the large bag and progressed into the inside bags, which he was now dusting carefully.

"The car's registered to the Sizzles manager, one Tory Dowd. We're running a check on him, and the county forensics guys are going over the car now, so we'll see what they find. But he wasn't driving,

the driver was a guy named Michael Shaughnessy, out of Arizona. He claims that Dowd loaned him the car, and if Dowd doesn't complain, the county won't be pushing auto theft charges, or anything like that. They do have some violations on him, though. So do we." Winders picked up the bag with the white powder, which the technician had finished with, and opened it. He stuck in a finger, which came out with a dab of white on it, and touched it to his tongue. "Hmm. Tastes like sugar to me, but we need to have it tested to be sure. Do you suppose the cash is fake, too? Oh, wait. It's sweet like sugar, but there's something else in there."

"Walt, Fred, I've got to put in a good word for your two officers, Rice and Ivy. They handled this whole thing about as well as anyone could have. And it's my doing that the county got the collar. Your people were going to push hard to get it, but it seemed to me, at the time, that it just wasn't worth the hassle. Especially as the bag there is in your hands now." I was hoping that the two senior officers would understand.

"Stands to reason that county would bring the guy in, they really did catch him, and it wasn't inside the city. So Rice and Ivy handled the chase well?" Jankowski seemed interested in how his junior officers were progressing.

"Looked like it to me. They didn't do anything foolish, and they didn't have justification to go all out. That's why he got as far as he did, outside the city and all. I'm happy that I was able to help. But your people were great. Let me suggest that you keep an eye on them, though. There seemed to be sparks, friendly ones, between them." I turned to Winders. "Now, Fred. Ivy told me the driver was from somewhere in Arizona down by Tucson. Do you know any more?"

"Casa Grande address on his license. He's 22, told the county guys he works at Sizzles, was out doing an errand for his boss, and he doesn't understand what this whole thing is about. He's making out like his biggest worry is the damage to his boss's car. He's also talking about his father, a deputy sheriff."

"Yeah, that's what Ivy said. There's a Shaughnessy, a deputy sheriff, involved in the Arizona end of the Melody Witherspoon case, indirectly. This all gets curiouser and curiouser." I filed this new fact away for future reference and moved on to the next thing on my mental list.

"Fred, are you having Lovett watched?" I wanted to know what the pornographer's next move would be after getting out of the lockup.

"Yeah, and last we heard he was at his place loading stuff into his car. We expect him to be gone by evening."

"Good. Do you suppose you could tail him for a ways, see where he heads? Or, better yet, I'll get the State Patrol to do it, so they can see which state line he crosses. We may be getting a little closer to figuring out what happened to Melody. But, say, one more thing has come up. What do you guys know about her mother, Mildred Witherspoon?"

Jankowski picked up on that one. "Not a lot to know, in the sense that she's nearly an open book. Lived here all her life, married young, and widowed young, left with two kids and a pile of money. See, Alfred Witherspoon was the scion of one of the old mining and railroad families here, and he was, oh, maybe 50 when he married Mildred, who was about 21. I was just starting in the department back then, but I remember it was something of a scandal in the better social circles here. A few years later, he keeled over from a heart attack, just after Melody was born."

"So Mildred has money? I was at her house last night, and it's something, that's for sure. Beautifully restored Victorian, big, well-furnished."

“She may be the richest woman in the county. I don’t know the numbers, but she’s probably worth high eight or low nine figures.”

“Which, on her death, would be split by Melody and her brother Al.” I could almost feel the gears turning in my head.

“Actually, they probably both have trust funds already. Al’s part of the fire department’s rescue squad, as I guess you know, and he does it for the community service, and probably the thrills. But he doesn’t need to.”

“And Melody sure didn’t need the money from Intermountain, then, did she? Maybe that was for the thrills, too. But, you know, she sure didn’t look thrilled in some of those pictures. If there’s money involved with the Witherspoons, though, maybe this will be relevant. Did you guys know that Mildred’s got a boyfriend?”

This had the effect that I had hoped for.

“What? Really? After, what, a quarter century of being a professional widow, she’s got a boyfriend?” Jankowski was astonished.

“Interesting timing, isn’t it? Maybe,” I mused, “we should look into the details of the trusts. If they revert to Mildred on the untimely deaths of the children, perhaps Al should be on guard. And then, of course, Mildred, too. You said ‘high eight figures’? Or nine? I had no idea so much money was involved. I think I’d better run a check on Mr. Leland Spaulding.”

* * *

“So the driver turns out to be named Shaughnessy, like one of Elwood Johnson’s deputies, with an Arizona license.” I was neatly slicing my way around the T-bone of a large steak that Hal had grilled outside, taking advantage of the beautiful fall evening.

“All this is getting just a little too cozy for me. Elwood’s cousin-in-law is our burglar, James Lovett, who works for Intermountain. Elwood’s brother-in-law, I think, could be the brother, or father, I guess, of this other guy who works for Intermountain. Melody worked for Intermountain, and Elwood seems to be trying to cover up her murder with a false suspect, who died in his custody.”

“Does Intermountain have offices, or a branch or something, down in Arizona?” Hal dug into his baked potato.

“Probably. I’ll check when I’m down there. I’m going to fly down to Phoenix tomorrow.”

“Not driving again?”

“I want a car that’s a little less of an attention grabber. Some kind of anonymous rental car. And flying to Phoenix and driving to Oracle, like you did, will save me a little time and, better yet, energy. That drive tired me out, even in that great car of yours.” I grinned. “I guess you know what I want for Christmas this year.”

Hal was very quick to change the subject.

“Sorry I missed you for lunch, especially if you’re off to Arizona tomorrow. I had a free couple of hours for once.”

“Me, too. I mean sorry for missing lunch with you. But then I wouldn’t have been on my way back from Fannie’s, which is why I got sucked into the car chase I just told you about.”

“You went to Fannie’s for lunch? Now I’m really sorry I missed you. But you went there alone? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“I wanted to interview Fannie herself. Find out what she knows about Sizzles and Intermountain. Turns out that there’s another girl who worked for Intermountain and turned up dead, Fannie’s bartender told me about it. So it was helpful.”

“I suppose it makes sense that she would keep an eye on the competition.”

“She said she really doesn’t think of them as competition. She thinks of them as a level or two up from her operation. She called Fannie’s a ‘tittie place,’ and she thinks of Sizzles as way more hard-core. She sounded offended by the notion.”

“Maybe she doesn’t think of them as formal competition, but she knows they are in some sense. I mean, if Sizzles didn’t exist, Fannie’s would have far more business. And, I bet, pressure to be more than a topless joint. So Sizzles actually keeps Fannie’s in its niche. I wonder if she’s thought of that.”

“Probably. She’s well-tuned into the nuances of running her little business. Anyway, the other girl who turned up dead was in Denver at the time, and Rod Andersen is going to look into that for me.” I popped the last bite of steak into my mouth.

“Got your boss working for you, huh? I knew you’d succeed in the CBI. When are you leaving for Phoenix?”

“Late morning. I need to go into the office early and finish up a couple of things.”

“Look, if you’re going to go off and leave me all alone again, why don’t we go out for dessert? Maybe if I treat you well you’ll be motivated to come home.”

Hal has a way of teasing that does a fair job of putting me off balance. I’m never completely sure that there isn’t some element of truth behind his little jibes, no matter how good-natured they sound. So I don’t like to tease back. But I can’t take it too seriously, either—I don’t want to encourage him.

“I’ll be back, you can count on it, probably by Friday. But if you want to bribe me with dessert, I won’t turn an offer like that down. Should I get dressed up?”

“You look fine to me. Let’s go see if they have a table at Mahogany Grill. Don’t they have a dynamite chocolate thing there? Chocolate Avalanche, or something? Maybe we can split one.”

“Mahogany Grill? Chocolate Avalanche? Gee, maybe I’ll come home Thursday.”

* * *

Wednesday morning, I went into my CBI office early, as I had threatened the evening before. The memory of being wooed with dessert and flowers lingered—how did he arrange the flowers? I wondered—and it would have been nice to linger in bed as well. But there was much to be done, and, besides, Hal also had to go in for an early meeting. It was a good thing, I thought, that we had our little *tête-à-tête* last night.

Although my flight to Phoenix was reserved via one of those electronic tickets, I still had paperwork to do. I was planning to take my Glock, checked in my suitcase, and there were forms that needed filling. I also wanted to have a look at the CD-ROMs that I had copied from Michael Shaughnessy’s plastic bag.

The first thing I noticed on opening my office door was that my phone message light was on. Voice mail that had arrived sometime since the office staff left yesterday was seeking attention. I punched the appropriate buttons.

“Ms. Trieri, this is Al Witherspoon. I’d like to talk with you at your earliest opportunity, if I could. And thanks for coming to the service last week. It was nice.” And he left numbers where he could be reached. I decided to call him back on my way to the airport, later in the morning, and I tackled the firearms transport paperwork.

Just as I was finishing up, my phone rang. Because it was still too early for the receptionist, I answered it myself.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Annette? Morning. It’s Fred Winders. I thought you might be in early.”

“Why, Fred, good morning. And, hey, congratulations again on your promotion. I owe you a bottle of something. What kind of wine do you drink?”

He laughed. “We drink the kind that comes in boxes, mostly. So whatever you get will be better than what I’m used to. And thanks. I’ll try to live up to your standards. So, anyway, I called about that evidence you brought in yesterday.”

“The bag of stuff?”

“Right. You saw me taste a little of the powder, right?”

“Right. You said it tasted like sugar, only with something else.”

“Yeah, well, ahem. It’s embarrassing. But I think that something else is some kind of powdered Viagra or something just like it. Er, high-strength.”

It took a minute for me to comprehend just what he was saying, and I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Oh, Fred, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh. But I think I may understand what makes you think that. Are you, um, OK?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. A little tired. I’m not too sure about Penny, though. She insisted on sleeping late this morning. And when I kissed her goodbye to leave for work, she mumbled something about bringing more home.”

“Do I understand you to be saying that it works as advertised?”

“I don’t know what’s in the advertising. But, uh, I don’t know quite how to say this…”

“Fred, it’s me. Just say it.”

“It’s embarrassing. But I had an erection that just wouldn’t go away. I mean, nothing we could do would make it go away, and, ah, we really tried. It was very peculiar. Not bad, exactly. But a little scary. I guess if it had been intentional, it could have been, well, fun. But since I wasn’t expecting it…”

“Fred, I’m sorry to be laughing, but if Penny wants you to get more, well, hell, get more. But, seriously, even though I’m laughing, this is good to know because it says something about Sizzles, you know, how they run their operation. I was told by an eye witness that they were staging live sex scenes for audiences, a couple of years ago at least. All the way, bodily fluids, you name it. At least that’s what I was told.”

“Hmm. So this stuff suggests they may still be doing it? Uh, so to speak? Sorry. Accidental pun, honest.”

“Indeed. This isn’t my concern, really, because they’re in the city limits. But maybe you guys could get someone in there undercover. It’ll cost, but I can provide some tips about how they work. Or at least how they did a couple of years ago.”

“We may take you up on that offer. I’ll talk with the Captain.”

“Fred, I’m leaving for Arizona today and I need to get some stuff off my desk. But thanks for calling. This is useful information. I hope you’re all back to normal.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. But it was a weird experience. Have a good trip.”

“I will, thanks, Fred.” And I turned to the copies of the CDs with new motivation.

But before I could do anything with them, my intercom buzzed. The receptionist had arrived.

“Morning, Sally. What’s up?”

“Director Trieri, there’s a young man here who insists on seeing you right away. He says it has something to do with the Melody Witherspoon case.” I had finally persuaded Sally that first names were appropriate, but when outsiders were present, Sally reverted to the formalism of titles.

“I’ve got to leave for the airport by nine, but I have a few minutes before then. Why don’t you bring him back?”

Two minutes later, having declined a cup of coffee, Ernesto Ang, as he introduced himself, was sitting across my desk. He was, I decided, best described as “Latin casual,” dressed in a designer polo shirt and chinos. He sat relaxed, sure of himself, with his legs crossed at the knees, an alligator tassel loafer suspended in mid-air for me to see. He wasn’t wearing socks, despite the brisk fall morning.

“Thank you for seeing me without an appointment, Director Trieri. I’ve only recently learned that you are investigating Melody Witherspoon’s death.” He had a trace of an accent—not Spanish, I decided. Maybe it was Portuguese.

“And I’m told that you have information about it?” I could tell that this person was used to charming his way through interactions, and being in charge as well.

“I may. I’m here in Durango visiting the university for a couple of years on an exchange program. I’m a professor at the University of Sao Paolo, you see, and we have a new program in biogeochemistry. So I’m a visiting faculty member here.”

“I seem to recall that Melody was in the Ph.D. program in biogeochemistry at the university here.”

“Yes, she graduated shortly after I arrived. And that’s what brings me to see you.”

I waited, and the pause stretched on. Eventually, he gave in.

“Yes, well, you see, I am not married, and she is, ah, was, a very attractive young woman. So, I asked her out to dinner. We had a very pleasant evening, but it became clear to me that our relationship wouldn’t be going anywhere. So I was determined to maintain a friendship, as, you know, professional colleagues. And we continued to interact on that level, the scientific studies we had in common. Anyway, about three weeks ago, she came to me with a package and asked me if I would do her a favor. She asked me to keep it and, if something strange should happen to her, to give it to someone in authority. I didn’t know what she meant then, but it’s become clear to me since.”

I had been listening politely, but the mention of a package made me pay close attention.

“So you have a package for me from Melody, even though she didn’t know it would be me. Did she actually say ‘something strange’ or was she more specific?”

“She really did say those words, ‘something strange.’ I asked her what she meant, but that’s all she could say.” He reached down and picked up the briefcase he had set on the floor. It seemed to match his shoes, I noticed.

He removed a book-sized package wrapped in brown paper from the briefcase and set it on my desk. It was too small to be another volume of Melody's diary, so I was at a loss to think what it could be. But I had already recognized the implications of all this, that Melody had suspected that something might happen to her. And now Melody's brother Al was trying to get in touch with me.

It me took another five minutes or so to get Ernesto Ang out of my office. I owed him, and I wanted to be polite. Eventually, though, I was alone with the package.

But as I was about to open it, my intercom buzzed.

"Annette? You said you needed to leave for the airport about now."

There are simply not enough minutes in the day, I thought.

* * *

As I settled into my seat, I was once again glad to be living in a small market for air travelers. I know that having an entire row to myself is a luxury, and I appreciate it when it happens.

Despite having to dash out the door for the airport, I had taken the extra minute to rip the brown paper off Melody's package, knowing I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. But I couldn't leave without some idea of what was in there.

It turned out to be a standard VCR tape, unlabeled. So I wrote "MW" with a felt pen on it and locked it in my desk. I thought of taking it with me, on the possibility that I could watch it in Arizona, but I decided that it was potentially too valuable to risk.

And I had left behind the CD-ROMs from the Shaughnessy kid's ZipLock bag as well, for the same reason.

Given the attitude of the EcoARC lawyers and the Pinal County sheriff, I wasn't quite sure of what I was walking in to. But at least my paperwork had passed muster at the airline check-in desk, and my 9-millimeter Glock 26 semi-automatic was packed away in the belly of the airplane in my suitcase, along with three full magazines.

My browsing the airline magazine lasted only about fifteen minutes before the matter at hand intruded. It was my conversation with Al Witherspoon, on my cell phone while I was on my way to the airport, that was at the top of my consciousness, because he had wanted to talk about that matter, his sister's death.

"Thanks for calling back, Ms. Trieri. I heard through the grapevine that you're investigating Melody's death."

"Call me Annette, please. I don't think I'd be here if it weren't for your having rescued me, so I feel like we're friends. And, say, you folks must have a good grapevine. I got a temporary appointment in Arizona with the DPS down there."

"I have some information that may be relevant. See, Melody and I were always close, because, you know, our father died when she was just an baby. I was four. So I've always been protective of her, and we've kept in touch since growing up."

"This whole thing must be especially tough on you, then. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, I'm used to fatalities because of my job. But this one *is* tough, because on top of it's being Melody I don't know what happened."

“And that’s what I’m trying to find out, what happened. I’m on my way to the airport, in fact, to fly down there and see if I can pull the pieces together. There’s been some progress, but I’m not finished yet.”

“I certainly want to do anything I can to help, and that’s why I called. I’ve got some letters that Melody wrote me that might be interesting to you.”

“Letters? Hmm. Can you give me a preview now?”

“What I thought might be most relevant are some passages that she wrote about a guy down where she was working, that eco place, EcoARC I guess it’s called. There was a graduate student there that was mooning over her, as she put it, and he wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, it sounds like. She expresses what I’d call affection at first, but that turns to annoyance when he persists. She was lonely down there, but not lonely enough to get involved in a bad relationship, and I think she was feeling stalked. Thing is, I saw in the paper that her body had been found by a woman named ‘Kelly,’ and this guy was Kelly, too.”

“The paper had it wrong, her body was found by a guy named ‘Kelly,’ Kelly Rumsford, a graduate student. Undoubtedly the same person. Listen, Al, can you make copies of those letters and drop them off at the CBI office? It’s kitty-corner across the street from the Sheriff’s Department.”

“Will do.”

“And when I get back, probably Friday, I’ll have a look at them first thing. Maybe we can get together and chat?”

“Be glad to. I want to get this cleared up, probably more than you do. Also, there’s another thing I’d like some advice about.”

“Let me guess. Your mother has a new boyfriend, and you’re not quite sure about him.”

“Hey, how did you know?”

“Met him the other night, when I went by her house to drop off a few of Melody’s personal effects. I’ll be glad to talk with you about him. I need to, in fact. If it will make you feel any better in the meantime, we’re having him checked out.”

“Hey, that’s great! So, good luck in Arizona and call me when you’re back. We can do lunch, as they say.” He had seemed cheered up by my interest in Leland Spaulding.

The whine of the jet engines changed pitch as the airplane began its descent into Flagstaff, yanking me out of my reverie. Out the window on my left, the rocks of the Painted Desert twenty-thousand feet below blurred into an Impressionist swirl of color, and I could see ahead the high country of the San Francisco Peaks and the dark forests surrounding Flagstaff.

So, I thought, Kelly Rumsford became an annoyance to Melody, even stalking her. Which means he was being less than completely candid with me in that interview. Maybe his return from Boulder via Durango had more to do with her than the scenery. I made a mental note to have another conversation with him.

During the time on the ground in Flagstaff, I made written notes of the conversation and organized my schedule for the afternoon and Thursday. Bill Longwell, whom I’d probably have to meet somewhere other than EcoARC, was a priority, and so, now, was Kelly Rumsford. I would also probably have to take the time to drive into Tucson to see Ross Townsend at the DPS headquarters. And maybe he could advise me about whether to interview Sheriff Elwood Johnson. I had been avoiding that little chore, but it was looking more and more inevitable. Now that there were two connections in

Durango to his office, James Lovett and the Shaughnessy kid, I knew I was not going to be able to avoid much longer.

As the new set of Phoenix-bound passengers began boarding, I realized that I might have to share my row, so I tidied up. I also began taking bets with myself about my fate regarding a seat-mate—would it be an obese person who would slop over into my personal space on top of me, or a mother with a squalling infant who would spit up on me? How lucky do you feel today, Trieri? I asked myself.

It turned out to be a special day indeed. Down the aisle and into the seat beside me came a wannabe cowboy, a scrawny individual dressed in denim and leather, silver and turquoise, with high-heeled, pointy-toed boots made from the skin of some kind of exotic reptile and a hat with a brim as wide as his shoulders. Before sitting down, he put up the arm-rest between the seats, and, after sitting down, he leaned over to look out the window, nestling his left arm snugly into my right breast.

“Beautiful day out there, ain’t it darlin’?” His left arm made a rubbing motion.

I calmly reached around with my left hand and grabbed his neck, with my thumb jammed into the pressure point in the vicinity of his carotid artery. Because his head was more-or-less in front of me, I was able to whisper in his ear.

“OK, scumsucker, you’re going to sit up, right now, and the arm-rest is coming back down. And if you touch me again, both of those boots are going up your ass, side-by-side, heels first. Understand?”

He was far more polite after that, even going so far as to find another seat so that I could have the row to myself again. Must have been that he really wanted a window seat.

* * *

Eleven

After picking up my rental car at Sky Harbor Airport, I headed toward the interstate for Tucson. Previously, I had planned to cut east and south on the back road to Oracle, where my motel was, but now I needed to be sure that my cell phone would work. I had plans to execute.

A call to Ross Townsend at the Department of Public Safety confirmed that he would be able to meet me that afternoon, in Casa Grande, and it also got me his fax number. Then I called my office in Durango to see if Al Witherspoon had dropped off the copies of Melody’s letters. He had, over lunch, and I asked Sally to fax the letters to Townsend. His task was to use them to obtain a search warrant of Kelly Rumsford’s apartment in Oracle. Between these various successful calls, I also tried, unsuccessfully, to reach Bill Longwell, but all I managed to do was to leave voice mail messages at his several numbers.

About the time I had completed all of this combined telephoning and driving through the heavy traffic of the Phoenix urban interstates, I hit the edge of town, and the traffic thinned out. Some variant of Murphy’s Law, I thought. I decided to test it by making one more call, to my motel in Oracle to verify my late arrival, and it worked—I immediately became absorbed into a surge of cars and trucks playing some weird kind of leapfrog.

About half way between Phoenix and Tucson, Casa Grande, the seat of Pinal County, was the headquarters for Sheriff Elwood Johnson’s department. But I wasn’t ready to meet with him just yet, so Ross Townsend had agreed to meet me at a restaurant on the interstate, at one of the Casa Grande exits

on the far north side of town. That made it easy for Townsend to find me, and it would make it easy for me to head east, later, on a side road to catch the Pinal Pioneer Parkway and head over toward Oracle.

I knew I would be there first, as Townsend had grumped about being tied up in a meeting, so I decided to have a late lunch. The restaurant, a local clone of Denny's, was almost empty, so I took a booth by the window and watched the traffic as I waited for my broccoli-cheese soup and chicken-salad sandwich.

About the time my food arrived, so did a patrol car with "Pinal County Sheriff" emblazoned on the side. This, I thought, might be interesting.

A tall, lean gentleman—I couldn't think of him any other way—with hair going gray on the sideburns sticking out from under his big western hat unfolded himself from the front seat and strolled into the restaurant.

"Howdy, Sheriff Johnson. The usual?" The waitress behind the counter was clearly familiar with the afternoon routine.

"Got any blueberry today? Fresh, I mean?"

"You're in luck. We got some from Annie's this morning. Want it *a la mode*?" By then she had set a steaming mug, which I assumed was coffee, in front of him.

"Naw." He patted his stomach. "Got to stay trim-looking for TV. Those cameras make you look fat, I'm told." She smiled knowingly and disappeared into the kitchen.

While he was waiting, I ate and pretended to watch the traffic outside while studying his reflection in the window. He sipped his coffee and casually glanced around the restaurant, stopping to stare briefly in my direction. I was glad that my previous meetings in his county had not involved him—even the time I went to the departmental office, I'd missed him. Finally, his pie arrived, and he began putting it away by the forkful.

Because I had to wait for Ross Townsend, I was in no hurry, so I ate slowly. Johnson, I assumed, would take me for a business person stopping for lunch between Tucson and Phoenix, so I wasn't concerned that there were only a few other customers in the restaurant. At the same time I didn't want to draw attention to myself, because I just wasn't ready to confront Johnson, and certainly not alone and on his turf.

He had wolfed down the blueberry pie, but now he was working on his second cup of coffee as if it were a five-star brandy. So I ate more slowly, chewing each bite twenty times, like the diet books suggest. My waitress came, and I ordered some pie for myself, blueberry, just to be perverse. Johnson accepted a refill on his coffee, and, even though it didn't seem possible, slowed down more. This, I thought, is ridiculous. I need to do something to distract myself.

So I called Hal, on his direct line.

"Weathers, natural sciences." I was delighted to catch him in his office.

"Hi, lover. Thought I'd check in and let you know I got here OK."

"Already? I thought it would take you another half hour or so to get over to Oracle."

"I'm not all the way there yet. I stopped for lunch on the way. A late lunch, except it's an hour earlier because they don't have daylight time, remember?" Oops, I thought. I really don't need to let on that I'm from out of state. Damn. But Johnson didn't flinch, I noticed, so maybe he didn't hear that. Old guy, might be a little deaf anyway—wasn't that waitress talking loudly to him before?

"...dinner in that little burg." Hal's voice sounded a bit concerned.

“Huh? I’m sorry, I missed that. My cell phone’s a little flaky here. Sorry.”

“I said that I hope you can find a reasonable dinner in that little burg, you know, Oracle?”

“Oh, right. Me, too. I remember a little cafe, but I don’t know if they’re open in the evening.”

“Right. Oracle Grill or something, was it?”

“I don’t remember the name, but I know just where it is.” I wasn’t going to let any more information about myself or my destination slip out. “Anyway, if it isn’t, I can stop and pick up some yogurt, or something. I’m having a good lunch, as lunches go. Maybe I’ll just call it ‘dinner’ and have a snack later. So, anyway, how’s your day?”

“Oh, the usual. Except Alice is talking more and more about retirement. How am I going to deal with that?”

“It keeps coming up, and she keeps putting it off. But sooner or later, it’s going to happen.” As I said this, I noticed Ross Townsend getting out of a car in the parking lot. “Oops, listen, I need to run. I’ll call you this evening, OK?”

“Is everything all right?”

“Oh, yes. It’ll be interesting. I’ll let you know.” Interesting indeed, I thought. I wonder—do Johnson and Townsend know each other?

Sitting by the window, I was also facing the door, and Townsend noticed me the minute he walked through it. But Elwood Johnson was sitting at the counter all by himself, in his uniform, and Townsend also noticed him. So he stopped to consider what to do next, and I knew at once that Townsend recognized Johnson. Which means they do know each other, I thought. Well. Now what?

It took Townsend only a few seconds to decide.

“Well, I’ll be a three-footed mule, it’s Sheriff Elwood Johnson. Haven’t seen you for ages, Elwood. How’s it going?” Townsend had walked over to the counter, approaching Johnson from the side opposite to where I was sitting, and clapped the sheriff on the shoulder.

“Why, Ross! How ya doing? Son of a gun! Long time no see. What brings you up this way?” I was surprised that there seemed to be no animosity between them. Townsend, after all, was in charge of the investigation of Johnson’s department.

“Just stopping for coffee. Got a meeting up north. Oh, hi, miss. A cup of coffee to go? Large and black?” Johnson’s waitress disappeared to fix up the coffee to go.

As Townsend moved to sit down next to Johnson at the counter, he glanced at me. I pointed at the ladies’ room and raised a hand with all five fingers spread out. He nodded just enough for me to see, and I gathered up my things, dropped a ten on the table—more than enough for lunch plus a hefty tip—and walked toward the rest rooms.

* * *

I used my five minutes to make another phone call, and then I walked back out into the dining area. Townsend was sitting at the counter, alone, and I could see that Sheriff Johnson’s patrol car was gone. I walked up behind Townsend.

“Ross, I don’t know how you did it, but congratulations. I thought he’d never leave.” He turned to look at me, an impish grin spread across his face, and he stood and directed me toward a booth well away from the waitress behind the counter.

“I got him interested in something I heard over the grapevine, something about that nose-Colorado investigator broad being down here again, over Oracle way. Say,” he suddenly looked concerned, “you’re not really staying over there by any chance, are you?”

“No, I made other arrangements.” In the ladies’ room, I had called Sally, back in my office, to find me a place to stay down in Oro Valley, outside Pinal County. “But there is the issue of serving the warrant on Rumsford, assuming you were able to get one.”

“Right, got it here.” He tapped his jacket pocket. “Normally it would be served by Johnson’s department, and they’d do the search. But that doesn’t seem like the right approach, somehow. I’ll get my people to do it. Want to be in on the fun?”

“If it can be arranged, yeah. I’d like to see what Mr. Rumsford might have for us. And say, maybe we can do something with the wild goose chase you sent Johnson on, too. I have a reservation in Oracle, not to stay there but in case I need it. I was going to cancel. But we could use it as bait for Johnson. If you told him I’d be over there, he’ll likely call around to see where I might be staying. We could have some of your people waiting for him. Maybe get someone, Sandra Kinney comes to mind, to pretend to be me, check in, see what happens. Of course, she’d need backup.”

“Sounds a little like entrapment to me.” Townsend looked skeptical.

“Hmm. Maybe. But maybe not. Look. You told him something that led him to believe that I was over that way, right? But that’s all. Not where I’d be staying, not when I’d be there, nothing else, right?”

“Right. But I knew you weren’t over there.”

“Not when you said it, of course not, you saw me sitting right over by the window there. But you knew I’d come down here to go to Oracle for the investigation. So you didn’t really tell him anything that wasn’t going to be true. I do have that reservation there, after all. And if he goes off chasing after me, that’s not your fault. And if he goes to the trouble of finding out where I’m staying and shows up at the motel and causes problems, you certainly didn’t entice him to do that, right?”

“Hmm. How about if we have you get a double room, with the intent to share it with Sandra? Then, she can check in under your name—that’s what the reservation is for—and wait for you to arrive. When you call and say you’ll be unable to get there, she can stay on, in uniform, and see what might happen. That way, if Elwood or his boys show up to make trouble, they’ll have a lot more of a problem claiming entrapment. Sort of turn the entrapment into a sting.” Townsend had a far-away look in his eyes, and he was nodding.

“Creative thinking, Ross. I like that. Do you think Johnson will try something?”

“Good question. But there are too many connections to him and his department to ignore. Alvarez’s death. That guy Lovett, Johnson’s brother-in-law, breaking into your house. And now the Shaughnessy kid.”

I laughed. “You’ll never guess what he was carrying, what he tossed out of the car during the chase. There was cash, and some computer disks that I still need to look at. What was most suspicious was some white powder. We naturally thought it was cocaine or maybe heroin, but it turned out to be high-strength Viagra, or something similar. He works at a porn place that we suspect does live sex shows, though, so maybe that’s part of the business.”

“But Viagra is a prescription drug, and if he had a bag full, he ought to be able to prove it’s legit. Does he have a prescription?” Townsend was smiling again.

“Not for that many doses, for sure. What I don’t know is whether there’s a real connection to Melody Witherspoon. We do know she was working for the same company as the Shaughnessy kid, though.”

“Live sex shows?”

“Girlie pictures. Lovett was photographing her. But that’s the connection back to Johnson’s office.”

“This is getting confusing. We’ve got this student, Rumsford, and we’re going to search his apartment.”

“Right. On the strength of the letters in which Melody claims he was stalking her. I haven’t really seen the letters, by the way. Do they say that?”

“Enough for the judge to give us the warrant. That along with his statement about having been out of town and through Durango on the weekend she turned up dead, and, of course, finding her body.”

“Right. So he’s one suspect.”

“And we’ve got this weird thing with Johnson’s office, the dead suspect who was exonerated by DNA test...”

“Which I’m keeping quiet, by the way.”

“Oh.” He scratched his chin. “Yeah, good idea. But that puts more heat on Johnson’s department, an innocent suspect getting dead in their custody. And apparently Johnson sic’d his brother-in-law on you, to swipe your notes from the meeting—you have that testimony on tape, right?”

“Right. Something’s fishy in Johnson’s office, for sure. And there may be a connection to Melody’s death, but who exactly would be a suspect isn’t clear.”

“And there’s the other connection to Johnson’s office, the Shaughnessy kid, who works for the porn company that Melody worked for.”

“A company that has had at least one other model turn up dead.”

“Right. And finally there’s the situation at EcoARC, where their lawyers are putting political pressure on us to back off.”

“And where I haven’t been able to get in touch with Bill Longwell today. He’s got voice mail at three different numbers to call me on this.” I waved my cell phone, “I’m not going to worry about him, though, until tomorrow. Also, Longwell’s deputy, Art Finnegan, has suspect written all over him, although it’s circumstantial so far.”

“Oh, right, I forgot about Finnegan. So it’s not as if you don’t have possibilities.”

“Nope, and now there’s one more.” I told him about Mildred Witherspoon’s boyfriend and her fortune.

“OK, you’re in charge of the murder investigation, and I’m handling the investigation of Elwood and his crew. To the extent that the two are linked, we need to keep exchanging information. Otherwise, we can go our separate ways.”

“Except I need your resources.”

“Right. They’re your resources, too, of course. And I think I’ll move ahead with that sting using your reservation in Oracle for bait. See if Elwood or any of his people take the bait.” Townsend’s smile turned nasty.

“If anything peculiar happens, it should be later tonight, so we ought to be able to execute the search warrant first.” I drummed my fingers on the table. “Um, I’m not one to delve too far into hypothetical situations, but I do like to examine contingencies. Suppose we turn up something at Rumsford’s that clearly implicates him in Melody’s death. That takes care of the murder investigation, but it leaves the weird stuff with the sheriff’s department hanging, and it also leaves lots of questions open about EcoARC’s behavior, at least their lawyers’ behavior.”

“If Rumsford turns out to be the murderer, I’m not going to be concerned about EcoARC unless there’s evidence of some crime. And I think it would mean that Elwood’s office is just trying to cover up incompetence. That’s the kind of election-year behavior that you almost expect, actually.” Townsend shook his head, annoyed.

“But if there’s nothing truly damaging at Rumsford’s that doesn’t necessarily exonerate him, of course. It’s just that we’ll have to keep the other possibilities in mind.”

“Right. Now, you said that the Alvarez guy was exonerated by the DNA test. But that means that somewhere around here, someone else has scratch marks, the guy whose skin was under Melody Witherspoon’s fingernails, right?”

“Yep. And I haven’t seen anyone else with facial scratches. But there are other places where she could have got someone. An arm, or back.” I cocked my head sideways, curious about this new topic.

“There’s the answer. We just line up everyone who’s evenly remotely under suspicion and have them all take their shirts off.” Townsend laughed.

“Or just get DNA samples from all of ’em. Or both.”

“If only it were that easy. OK, tell you what. Let’s head over to Oracle, and I’ll line up people for the search on the way over. Follow me, and you shouldn’t have trouble with Elwood or his people.”

* * *

Kelly Rumsford lived on the west side of Oracle, down a confusing succession of gravel side streets from the main road, in a converted garage. Ross Townsend and I were met on the outskirts of town by Sandra Kinney and two other State Patrol officers, and Sandra, more familiar with Oracle than anyone else, guided us to Rumsford’s place.

The five of us were piled into my rental car—the less attention we attracted, the better, Townsend remarked. Once there, Sandra explained that garage conversions were all the rage in Oracle, because the combination of students and post-doctoral researchers from EcoARC made for a sellers’ market in the rental business.

Rumsford was not in his garage apartment when my DPS team and I arrived, so, rather than break anything, we rang the doorbell of the house. It was answered by an elderly woman who was not at all happy to see us. Mrs. Hazel Boyd, as she introduced herself, was Rumsford’s landlady, and she was obviously going to be giving her tenant a hard time about a visit by the police. But, on being shown the search warrant, she provided a key to the garage apartment rather than have her door bashed in.

After donning gloves I led the way. Once inside, I immediately understood why Melody Witherspoon’s complaint about being stalked needed to be taken seriously.

Pictures covered the walls—some poster-sized, some only 8x10—all of Melody. A few reminded me of Melody’s early modeling jobs, the underwear shots, but most appeared to be candid photographs taken somewhere locally, perhaps on the EcoARC campus, I decided. Some were actually quite good photographs, composed, well-lit, and precisely focused.

“Looks as if our friend Kelly will have some explaining to do.” I remarked to Ross Townsend, who, with the three uniformed officers, was staring agog at the display.

“He does seem, um, preoccupied with this one subject, doesn’t he? I assume this is Melody Witherspoon?” Townsend, apparently, had never seen a picture of her. Without waiting for an answer he continued. “OK, team, let’s see if there’s anything here that might classify as more than a harmless obsession.”

Townsend and the officers began a methodical search of the apartment, while I gravitated to the computer that was sitting on a table in the corner. I bumped the mouse, and, after a brief interval, the monitor turned itself on and displayed a picture, of Melody leaning against a fence, staring off at a mountain in the background. A number of program and other icons were superimposed on the edges of the picture. A sense of *déjà vu* sent a shiver up my spine. Oh, God, I thought. More porn?

“Ross, does the warrant cover this?” Despite the foreboding, I knew I had to explore what Rumsford might have on his computer.

“Sure does. And if it’s password protected, just unplug it and we’ll take it. And leave him a nice receipt, of course.”

But there didn’t seem to be a password, as the icons were there for the clicking, so I sat down and clicked the filesystem manager. The top-level directories had the usual names, and there was an extra one labeled “Mel.” Under it were sub-directories labeled with dates, and I supposed that there would be pictures and perhaps text files associated with the times. So I clicked the most recent one, labeled with a date in late August. Inside were dozens of picture files, so I picked one at random and clicked it.

It took a couple of seconds for the program that was going to display the picture to load, and then the picture appeared so suddenly, and explicitly, that I gasped. That got the attention of the others, and they clustered around. Except for one “Oh my God,” uttered by a male voice, there was silence. I knew I’d been through this before.

There was Melody, lying on a couch, manipulating a huge black dildo in such a way that there was no mistaking her intentions for it. The pose was one that would normally be associated with a gynecological exam, except that Melody’s body was contorted so that she could look directly into the camera lens. She wore heavy makeup, but nothing else, and she was licking her upper lip. As with the pictures I had seen on Lovett’s computer, Melody had a distant, not-quite-there look in her eyes.

Despite the attention-grabbing pose, however, my thoughts were focused on the little label in the lower right-hand corner of the picture. Below a banner reading “www.real-hot-babes.com” it said “Copyright © IMSS” and in smaller letters “JL Studios.” “Intermountain Social Services” and “James Lovett” immediately popped into my head, and I now understood why Lovett used a digital camera.

“At least this guy doesn’t have *these* things plastered all over his walls.” Townsend’s disgusted tone of voice said it all.

Sandra Kinney spoke up. “Imagine if he did, what his landlady would think. He’d be out of here in a minute.”

One of the uniforms, the guy named Wesley, I thought, cleared his throat and said, “Y’know, as much as I’m a raging heterosexual bachelor, I’ve gotta say, I prefer the pictures on the walls. I’m going back to work.” The gathering broke up after that as everyone else followed suit.

I saw no particular need to explore the other pictures on the computer, but I made spot checks in a few of the directories at random to verify that the other pictures were of Melody. And I made notes of the dates of the directories. Perhaps, I thought, I can correlate them to some of that stuff I read about in Melody’s diaries.

Although they were terribly depressing to me, the computer pictures had the effect of reinforcing everyone else's resolve to do a thorough search, and they all redoubled their efforts. Nothing any of us found, however, could be construed as evidence of a murder. Although it was clear from the pictures, the photographs and the computer pictures both, that Rumsford was obsessed with Melody Witherspoon, we knew that more would be required to persuade a jury of his guilt. Finally, Ross Townsend called things to a halt.

"Annette, this is your show. Where do you want to go with this?"

"We ought to make this search complete by going over his car carefully. And I'm going to have to talk with Mr. Rumsford again, that's for sure. The sooner the better. And, I think, the more formal the setting the better. Where's the closest State Patrol office?"

Sandra Kinney spoke up. "Down the hill in San Manuel. But that's here in Pinal County. The next closest is in Oro Valley, on the northern edge of town."

"OK. Sandra, you need to be up here for the sting, right?" Kinney nodded—she'd been briefed earlier by Townsend.

"So," I continued, "Ross, maybe we can have someone stay here to pick up Rumsford and bring him down to Oro Valley for questioning tonight. And someone else will need to stay here and go over his car. I don't know about who's on what schedule, but maybe you do. And I guess someone needs to go with Sandra and be her backup, in case she needs it at the motel. Right?"

Raging heterosexual bachelor Wesley volunteered to stand by and pick up Rumsford, and the other uniformed officer, Thomas Moody, would go with Sandra to act as backup.

Ross Townsend had to return to his office in Tucson to catch up on the day, but first he called down to the San Manuel State Patrol office to have a forensics expert come up to go over the car when Rumsford arrived.

I just wanted to find wherever Sally had reserved me a room in Oro Valley and take a shower. I felt dirty, partly from the air and car travel but mostly from my use of Rumsford's computer, from what I had been seeing and from just using it. I decided I didn't want to know what he was doing when *he* used the thing.

I left my cell phone number with everyone and hit the road. Sally, I knew, would have found me a room in a nice motel and have directions to get there as well. Once again, I thanked my lucky stars to have good staff in the CBI office.

* * *

It was a Marriott. Sally apologized over and over, because the rates were way above my official per diem, but it was the only thing available. I hushed her up and reassured her that this was really the best thing that could have happened, because up-scale was just what the doctor ordered for my psyche. To make matters even better, on the way into town I passed the State Patrol office, so I knew exactly where I would need to go later.

I checked in and stood in a hot shower for a long time, and then I ordered a snack from room service. I turned on the Weather Channel, just to have someone talking at me, to keep my mind off what I had seen on Rumsford's computer.

It was about 8:00 when the call finally came. Rumsford was on his way down to the State Patrol office and would be there in about twenty minutes. Paperwork for him, the search warrant and so on, was waiting for me at the desk.

I took my time, and, after thinking about it, dressed in the outdoors clothes I'd brought—jeans, hiking boots, a flannel shirt. This, I thought, is no time to stress my femininity. I had a fleece jacket for the chill of the October desert.

At the State Patrol office, I picked up the file and, curious about Rumsford's state of mind, asked to be shown to the observation booth for the interview room. The technicians were filming, and I shook hands with both of them. In the interview room, on the other side of the one-way mirror, Rumsford was pacing, wringing his hands, looking grim. I suspected he was not only worried, but mad as hell. So I decided on the silent approach— let him blurt out whatever he wanted.

I found a vending machine and got myself a Diet Pepsi, but nothing for Rumsford, and walked into the interview room and sat down. Rumsford was obviously surprised to see me, for he stared at me in shock for at least a minute. Finally, he got his voice back.

“You! What the hell are you doing here? Are you why I got dragged all the way down here at this time of night? Who the hell do you think you are, anyway? This is Arizona, not Colorado! I'll have you know that I've got a big deadline tomorrow, some results I need to get written up are due along with another chapter of my dissertation. I don't need this crap!”

I didn't say anything; instead, I took a sip of my soda. Then I unfolded a copy of the search warrant and pushed it across the table in his direction.

“What's that?” He looked at for a few seconds, and finally picked it up and began to read it. When he recognized its contents, he gasped. The color drained from his face, and he sat down heavily in the chair opposite me.

“Jesus. A search warrant, for my place? Does this mean you were out there? Look, I know exactly what you're thinking. But, ah, but...look, everything I told you before was true, OK? And I know enough not to volunteer information to people questioning me, and you didn't ask about any of the stuff at my place. Right? So now you've been there, but that doesn't change the fact that everything I told you before is the truth. OK?”

I leaned forward just far enough to rest my chin on my hand, elbow propped on the table. I stared at him.

“So, like, I fancy myself a photographer, and Melody was a great model, OK? Nothing wrong with that, is there? And it's not like I was selling her pictures, or anything. I was just using her for practice. I wanted to get a release from her, but, ah, but I never got around to it, OK? And those candid shots are standard fare for photographers. OK?” I could see that he was really getting worked up.

“And I know for sure you didn't find anything incriminating at my place, because there isn't anything there that is. I've got a bunch of pictures of Melody hanging on my walls, that's all. OK? So what the hell's going on here, what's this Gestapo bullshit, anyway? I get grabbed and hauled down here and I've got lots of stuff I should be doing!”

Just then, my cell phone chirped for attention, and Rumsford nearly jumped out of his chair. I held up one finger and cleared my throat.

“Excuse me for just a minute.” Then, into the phone, I said, “Trieri, DPS.”

“Annette? Hope I'm not interrupting anything.” Sandra Kinney sounded exhilarated, so I didn't say anything. “They did it. Johnson's people, I mean. Thomas watched from the parking lot as two deputies pulled up to the motel office and shook down the clerk for your, that is, my, room number. Thomas called me to warn me, and I didn't answer their knock. So they kicked the door in. I was in the bathroom by then, and they forced their way in there, too. No warrants or anything. Thomas came storming in, and

between the two of us, we've got them dead to rights. We'll be down there, to the Oro Valley office, with them in a half hour or so."

It was all I could do not to smile. "Good work, officer. I'll see you then." And I pushed the "End" button.

I looked up and said to Rumsford, "I looked on your computer."

He blinked once and again as his color changed from indignant pink to deathly white. He opened his mouth, and closed it. He took a deep breath, and said, "Oh."

After a pause, he continued, his brain obviously trying desperately to come up with something sensible. "OK. Ah, so, um, I found some other pictures of her on the internet. But I didn't take them or put them there or profit from them, that's for sure. And there's nothing illegal about downloading pictures from the internet, right? I mean, she was over eighteen, way over eighteen. An adult. What kind of pictures she let get taken of her was her business as an adult. Right? So what's the problem here? Why am I here?"

He had dropped the search warrant onto the table, so I pushed it his way and pointed to the third paragraph, tapping on it. He picked it up and read.

"...based on decedent's complaint about subject's stalking behavior...' What? Does this say Melody thought I was stalking her? But that's crazy! She hardly knew I existed. I mean, I asked her out once, only once. She said 'no.' And 'stalking' means, well, doesn't it mean repeated contact, annoying someone, stuff like that? I didn't do any of that. I mean, I'm infatuated with her, sure. But I never bothered her, honest. Geez, a few pictures and you get accused of stalking. What's the world coming to, anyway?"

I let him babble on for a while, and after a while I decided it was time to bring this monologue to an end. I cleared my throat again, and he put his hands down on the table and looked at me.

"Mr. Rumsford. Let me review the facts. One. You were in Durango the weekend that Melody was probably murdered in Durango. Two. Her postmortem was consistent with having been transported long distance after being killed. Three. You 'discovered' her body. Four. You have an extensive collection of pictures of her, stealth pictures that you took as well as pornographic pictures you claim to have found in the internet. Five. You were unsuccessful in courting her, giving you motivation for jealousy, and you were sufficiently persistent in your behavior that she thought she was being stalked. Six. You know that your behavior is suspicious because you were less than candid with me in our previous interview. To me, and I do have quite a bit of experience with this kind of thing, this all adds up to your being a potential suspect in her murder. You're a graduate student in—what?—biology? You're used making observations and deducing things from those observations, adding facts together into a coherent whole, right? Surely you can see how this all appears to an investigator such as myself?"

He took two deep breaths, put his head down on his hands, and began to sob.

* * *

Twelve

Officer Sandra Kinney was still pumped when I ran into her in the hallway, and she announced with glee that she had also called Ross Townsend. He had come to the office, in order to be part of the questioning

of Johnson's deputies, and I decided to wait around and see how things went. Maybe, I thought, I'll watch them from the observation booth.

I had just finished supervising Kelly Rumsford's release. In the interview room, I had patiently waited for him to regain his composure. He finally did, by lifting his head off his arms and asking me how he could persuade me of his innocence.

"What can I do to prove to you that I didn't kill her? I mean, I know that you can't prove that I did, because I didn't. But maybe there's some way to convince you to go looking somewhere else for Melody's killer. Surely it makes sense that if I'm obsessed with her, I'd want her killer to be found, and tried and convicted. Right?"

So I had been able to get Rumsford to sign a consent form to submit to a DNA test and to have a physical. Both were in progress while I waited—the State Patrol office had a physician on call for emergencies, and he was drawing Rumsford's blood and examining him for unusual scratch marks.

I had finished my paperwork and was on my way to the front door when I ran into Officer Sandra Kinney.

"Ms. Trieri, um Annette, are you upset with me? Did I call at a bad time?"

"You called at an awkward time, because I was interviewing Rumsford. But it wasn't a bad time, and I'm not at all upset. Sorry I was short with you, but I didn't want him to know what was up."

"Oh. That makes sense. So are you going to be here for the interviews with the Pinal County deputies?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Who are they?"

"I'm going to question Lyle Shaughnessy, and Thomas is going to question the other one, Henry Reeves. This will be a little different from the usual interrogation, you understand, because of professional courtesy. And they've already asked for legal representation. Ross will be here, too, and both Thomas and I are going to wear ear pieces so he can shoot us questions to ask and provide information. He'll be in the observation booth between the two rooms, trying to watch both interviews."

"And I think I'll be in there with him. Do you know if Elwood Johnson is coming down?"

"No, but I wouldn't be surprised to see him. I'm sure that he's aware of this, either from the lawyers the deputies called or from the grapevine up there."

"So what do you think they're going to say?"

"It'll be interesting to see. We're going to tell them about the statement we got from the motel clerk. He told us how Shaughnessy specifically demanded your room number, asking for you by name and title. So they aren't going to be able to claim it was some kind of mistake, like they were trying to take down a drug dealer or something and accidentally broke into your room. I wouldn't be surprised if their lawyers recommended to them that they put the blame on Elwood."

"I'm surprised that Lyle Shaughnessy was one of them. Seems like he should be on some kind of leave, after that episode with the dead prisoner."

"They're a little behind the times up there." Kinney opened the door to the interview room and went in, leaving me standing around the corner from the observation booth. As I was starting around the corner, my cell phone chirped at me.

"Trieri, C...DPS."

"Annette? Oh, good, I found you. This is Bill Longwell." His voice didn't sound quite right, I thought. "Where are you? We need to talk, in person."

“I’m at the State Patrol branch office in Oro Valley. Bill, are you all right? You sound, I don’t know, stressed, or something.”

“Oro Valley? Let’s see...oh, I know where that branch is, on the highway. I’m on my way past there, so I’ll stop by.”

“I’ll tell the person at the front desk where to find me. But you didn’t answer my question. Are you all right?”

“That depends. I guess so. I need a job, though. Do you suppose that Hal would know of any openings for someone with my background at Frémont State?”

“Uh ...”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m fine. Really. I’ll be down there soon and tell you all about it. Give me, say, half an hour. OK?”

“Sure. But there’s no rush. I’ll be involved in an interrogation, so take your time.”

“Oh. In that case, I’ll go home first and clean up. Take me about an hour. See you later. I’ll wait for you somewhere, they must have a waiting room.”

That, I thought, was very bizarre. But it sure sounds like he got fired, or resigned. What in the world is going on up at EcoARC?

I finally made it into the observation booth, just as Shaughnessy was providing his personal information for the camera, in the room on the left. Reeves was sitting with his arms crossed, a stubborn expression on his face. His lawyer was talking earnestly in his direction, but the sound was off, so I couldn’t hear what was being said. Ross Townsend sat on a stool in the middle of the booth, two headsets in hand, listening to one, presumably the one from Shaughnessy’s room, I decided. He nodded to me in greeting.

Sandra Kinney was questioning Shaughnessy, and occasionally Townsend would make a comment into the headset mike. A minute or two later, I noticed the other lawyer, in Reeves’ room, get up and push a button. The door opened and Officer Thomas Moody walked in, everyone shook hands and sat down. After that things got very confusing, because there were two sets of activity to watch. Eventually, I decided to focus on watching Shaughnessy’s body language. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ross Townsend trying to orchestrate the whole thing.

Townsend acted as if he were watching a tennis match, swiveling back and forth on his stool, trying to follow both sets of questions and answers, and occasionally commenting into one or the other microphones on the headsets he had. As things progressed, it became clear that most of his attention was on the Shaughnessy questioning, however. Either Sandra Kinney needed more help than did Thomas Moody, or the conversation in there was the more compelling of the two.

It took only about fifteen minutes before Thomas Moody stood up, followed by Henry Reeves and his attorney, and they all shook hands again. Moody opened the door and everyone walked out. Townsend winked at me, and nodded his head in the direction of the now empty room.

“Told all. Said Elwood put ’em up to going after you. Blamed Shaughnessy for their behavior at the motel, said he was in charge and he, I mean Reeves, is a junior officer that was just going along on an assignment. Over here, though, it’s a very different story.”

He nodded at Shaughnessy’s room. “His lawyer has been advising him in whispers, which I can’t hear, and he’s claiming it was all a big mistake. But his lawyer’s not happy about that.”

I had an idea.

“Ross, do you know if Shaughnessy ever worked at EcoARC?”

“Good question. Let’s ask.” He pulled the headset mike in front of his face. “Sandra? When you get a chance, ask Shaughnessy how long he’s been with the Pinal County Sheriff’s Department, and what he did before that. What we really want to know is whether he ever worked at EcoARC, and when.” I saw Sandra Kinney nod slightly.

Ross moved the mike away and said softly, to me, “She’s doing a great job so far. She’ll work in this question when she gets a chance, so as not to alert them to our interest. It may take a while, though. How did it go with Rumsford?”

I provided a summary and mentioned that he had agreed to the DNA test and the exam.

“So if the DNA test exonerated the first suspect, Alvarez, it should also exonerate Rumsford, huh? And the fact that he agreed to it has to be a point in his favor, right?” Townsend was nodding his approval.

“That right. Assuming there’s not a match, of course. Although I still think he knows more than he’s letting on.”

* * *

I finally realized that more than an hour had passed, and I went looking to see if Bill Longwell had arrived. I found him sitting in the lobby, drinking coffee. The first thing I noticed was a scrape on his forehead, and the second was a bandage on the back of his right hand, over his knuckles.

He noticed me staring at his hand, and he shook his head and looked at the ceiling.

“I’d say ‘don’t ask,’ but you will anyway.” His grin was sheepish, somewhat embarrassed.

“I guess you must be all right, with that kind of attitude. You want to talk about it? I guess I’d assume it was just an accident at home or something, except there aren’t many ways to injure your knuckles but for the one that I know about. Who’d you hit?”

“We weren’t properly introduced, I’m afraid. But it seemed like they didn’t think I’d hit back.”

“They?” I thought I had a strange day today, but it sounds like yours was truly bizarre.” I shook my head. “And what’s this about your needing a job, anyway?”

He sighed. “Oh, yeah. That. Well, the day started badly and only got worse. There was a phone message—voice mail—waiting for me when I got in this morning. You remember I asked for some time to look into that business about who was leaning on me to pretend that Alvarez was the killer? Yesterday? Gee, was that only yesterday?”

“Yesterday afternoon. Yeah, I remember.”

“So, let’s see, how do I explain this? First, you have to understand about the EcoARC Consortium. All spelled out, that’s the official name for the outfit that runs the Center. The Consortium is a bunch of drug companies, mostly little ones that started in the high-tech boom. Guys from universities and other places started little companies because they had figured out something or other about gene splicing or the genome or something, and they were trying to cash in on their ideas. But they were small companies and didn’t have the resources for a large research facility like the big companies, they couldn’t afford it. So a bunch of them got together and formed the Consortium. With me so far?”

I nodded and asked, “I assume this was just the little companies that were dealing with drugs derived from plants, right? I mean, EcoARC is greenhouses, not cages of mice.”

“Mostly, that’s right. See, EcoARC does two things, really. We try to replicate complex ecosystems, ones that include species of possible importance, and we also test engineered species in otherwise natural ecosystems, at least as natural as we can make them inside the greenhouses. This second job, testing new species, doesn’t get a lot of publicity, and that’s by intent.”

“Because the public might go nuts if it found out.”

“Basically, yeah. It’s complicated and we’re extremely careful, but we’ve seen other examples where misinformation by groups of neo-Luddites makes for lots of trouble.” He shook his head.

“Anyway, what happened this morning is that the voice mail message was from one of my board members, a new one, Detlef Schultz, he’s Swiss. He’s the chief legal counsel for a big conglomerate based in Geneva that recently bought up two of the little companies in our consortium, so he thinks he holds two EcoARC board seats. That’s the trouble with these little companies—if they get a little successful, they’re ripe for plucking by the big boys.”

“But a big conglomerate shouldn’t need EcoARC, right? They’d have the resources for their own facilities.” I had begun taking notes, but I was also trying to pick up on the subtleties of the discussion.

“Right, and they’ve been making noises about pulling out. But they’re afraid of losing out on some research that’s in progress, so they haven’t. Also, I think they feel like being part of the consortium gives them insider information about the other companies that they can take advantage of, if they want to buy another of them.” He stopped briefly to think.

“So I called Schultz back and he got all over me about the bad publicity that your investigation could cause. Said he’d heard about it from people out here, but he didn’t say who. To make a long story short, I ended up telling him where he could stuff his objections, and he told me that I would be fired by the board. So I told him what he and the board could do to themselves—anatomically impossible, but colorful—and I quit. I guess I lost my temper there. So I need a job.”

“Except you resigned verbally to a single board member over the phone, and if he’s Swiss, I’m betting that English isn’t his first language. So if you change your mind, you could claim it was all a misunderstanding.”

“Hmm. You’re probably right, if I want to. But I’m not sure I do. I’d have to grovel. Besides, with Detlef on the board, things are different, not the way they were when I was hired. Worse.” He looked defiant.

“So, what about your face? Did you bash yourself with your telephone, or just bang your head on the wall in frustration, or what?”

He touched his forehead and winced.

“I got my head banged on the wall for me. Since I quit, I decided I should get the personal things I really want to keep out of my office. So, late this afternoon, I had just put a box of my stuff in the back of my car, and this guy grabbed me from behind. Before I could react, he had me in an arm lock, and he marched me over to the side of the building and shoved me into it. Stucco, like rough sandpaper. Then he punched me in the right kidney. Pissed me off, I’ll tell you.”

“By your office? At EcoARC?”

“Yep.”

“I thought the place was closed to the public and visitors now. Does this mean it was someone who works there?”

“Our security isn’t all that great. You remember Sibley Jensen, right?—how he just drove up the jeep road and crashed the meeting last week? And it wasn’t anyone who works there, because I’d have recognized them, even though it was almost dark.”

“What did they want?”

“Not really sure. See, while I was being marched over to the wall, I remembered I used to be a SEAL. And when I got my face sanded and he hit me, I went berserk. Broke one guy’s knee and the other one’s jaw—it made a very satisfying crunching noise. But that’s how I hurt my hand. I forgot how hard a face can be.”

“So then what?”

“I was just so mad at everything to do with that place, I left them there and took off. Called you from my car. Since you said you were busy, I went home and got a little cleaned up. Had dinner?”

* * *

We found a restaurant not too far from the State Patrol building, one of those so-called “neighborhood” eateries that gets advertised on national television every half-hour or so. I always wonder how the same restaurant, with virtually the same interior decorations and menu, can be the “neighborhood” restaurant in places as diverse as Durango’s tourist downtown, the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles, and my native north side of Chicago. As well as Oro Valley, Arizona. The miracle of marketing, apparently. And the homogenization of America.

After enduring the chirpy, scripted speeches from the hostess, welcoming us to “our” neighborhood place, and from the server, touting the specials and pushing hard to sell appetizers, we finally were left alone to talk for a while.

“I need to pick your brains a little, Bill.” I had decided to enlist Longwell’s assistance, and to do this I needed to fill him on matters I had been keeping to myself.

“Let’s see. Where to begin?” I took a sip of the coffee that had been set in front of me. “First, I need to say that I’ve not been completely candid with you about a couple of things. Your position as director of EcoARC made for a conflict of interest. Naturally, you want to get this homicide cleared up, but, at some level at least, you also feel protective of your people. And because some of them could be suspects, there’s a conflict. So I haven’t told you everything I know, or suspect.”

“And I’ve said for a while now that I really don’t have an alibi, so I’m a potential suspect as well.”

“Technically, you’re right, but I think I’ve decided not to worry about that. However, someone who is high on the list is Art Finnegan.” I watched him carefully for a reaction.

He looked surprised. “Art? Really? Can you tell me why?”

“He did a sabbatical up in Durango last spring. Remember?”

“Sure. He negotiated it with me as part of a deal for him to stay on as my deputy.”

“And he met Melody there. He was in Durango the weekend she was killed, and he lied to me about it, that’s what has me suspicious about him.”

“Ah. There have been rumors about his sleeping around. I guess his marriage isn’t all that healthy.”

“And he could have lied to me for that reason, sure. But there’s another thing. I’ve read Melody’s diaries. She was meticulous about her diaries, had volumes and volumes of them stashed away at her

mother's house. Art's in them. It appears that he started hitting on her when he was up at FSU and continued when she came down here to EcoARC."

"Ouch. Bad deal, there. It would be OK except for his position. I wish I'd known, I'd have put a stop to it. That's one of those power-differential situations where she automatically would have a sexual harassment claim, if she wanted to use it."

"From her diaries, it's clear that she knew that, but she was holding it as her ace-up-the-sleeve. But, really, what was more intriguing to me was not their relationship, but comments she made about his work. And that's what I want to pick your brains about. For starters, Art's a marine biologist. What's a marine biologist doing out in the middle of the desert?"

Longwell laughed. "It is weird, isn't it? Well, we needed someone with a good working knowledge of seawater to keep that big tank of the stuff we have in there happy. See, we're trying to grow plants from all over, including rainforests, and they need humidity. The people who built EcoARC's greenhouses put a lot of thought into this problem and finally decided to go with an approach that's been used before—an 'ocean,' meaning a big tank of salt water. It's salt water because fresh water is too hard to keep fresh. It eventually gets salty anyway. One difference between us and other places that have done this is that we have a bunch of long, high-tech greenhouses side-by-side-by-side, all connected with underground tunnels and air ducts, with the ocean next to one of the end greenhouses. That way, the rainforest greenhouses can sit on either side of the ocean greenhouse. Then, going down the row, the greenhouses get drier and drier. That way, we can accommodate just about any kind of ecosystem we want to."

"You must filter the air as it circulates between the different greenhouses, then."

Longwell looked impressed. "Right. HEPA filters, for pollen and everything, and the air flow is monitored and its constituents are measured. And we also keep track of what the filters catch. So, we've got this big tank of salt water, and Art uses it for his own research as well as keeping it happy to act as a whole-system humidifier."

I stared at my coffee cup and thought for a minute.

"Melody also talked about Art's research, but it was cryptic."

"I'm not surprised. The two of them were working on a similar problem, carbon sequestration. Art had been working on obtaining raw materials for new pharmaceuticals from sea critters, anemones, sea cucumbers, urchins, critters like that, but he had trouble keeping them alive. So he moved in the direction of carbon sequestration."

"Hal talks about that as if it's common knowledge, but I'm a little in the dark. Also, I'm not clear on why EcoARC is doing it. Melody, I know, was working on grasses, or something."

"Remember I mentioned that our little drug companies, when they succeed, are ripe for plucking by the big companies? That happened with one of them a few years ago, it got grabbed up by a big conglomerate—a different one from the Swiss one that Detlef works for—a big conglomerate that also does petrochemicals. And companies that do petrochemicals are interested in carbon sequestration. Burning fossil fuels—oil, gas, coal—puts carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, causing the climate to warm up. To mitigate this, it's likely that some kind of market-driven trading system will develop. In fact, there's already a small market for what's called 'carbon credits.' If you're, say, Texaco and you can show that you're pulling carbon *out* of the atmosphere, you're not so likely to get dinged by the government for marketing a product that's putting carbon *in* to the atmosphere. So these companies are looking for ways to take credit for pulling carbon out of the atmosphere."

"And Melody was working on how dry-land grasses do that?"

“Right. Mostly, though, it isn’t the grass. It’s the soil the grass is growing in. If you take lousy soil, you know, clay or sand, and get grass to grow in it, after a few years the soil is far more organic, and that organic component is carbon, mostly. So you’ve sequestered carbon and, if you’re Texaco, you get points. And you can sell those points on the carbon credit market. So, if you’re, say, Conoco and need points, you can buy ’em.”

“But how does Art’s work fit in?”

“Oceanic sequestration. It’s a natural process that’s actually a critical part of the natural carbon cycle. The idea is to use it to combat global warming by speeding it up. It works in two stages. First, oceanic phytoplankton, microscopic plants, algae and so on, they turn carbon dioxide into plant material by photosynthesis, just like grasses and trees do. Then, little bitty critters, called zooplankton, eat the phytoplankton, and they turn the carbon from the phytoplankton into little shells made out of calcium carbonate. When the zooplankton die, or when they get eaten and the predator excretes them, the shells fall to the sea floor, and, presto, all the carbon is turned into mud and eventually rock. Limestone is made this way.”

“I see—Art was trying to make this more efficient. Now some of Melody’s comments begin to make sense. She was talking about how different strains, I think that’s what she called them, do different things to each other.”

“Right. In the real ocean, phytoplankton growth is limited by trace chemicals, nutrients, minerals. An important one is iron. Some experiments out in the real ocean have shown that you can put iron onto the surface of the ocean, I forget the actual chemical they used, but it had a lot of iron in it, you put it onto the surface of the ocean and, bang!, the phytoplankton grow like crazy, it’s called a ‘phytoplankton bloom.’ Then, because there’s a big food supply, the zooplankton multiply like crazy. But when the iron is used up, it all stops, so it’s not a very useful way to extract a lot of carbon from the atmosphere. To get any real effect you’d have to keep dumping the iron chemicals in, continuously and all over the place. Art’s been working on engineered phytoplankton that don’t need so much iron. But putting engineered organisms into the real ocean is not something we really want to do without a complete understanding of what could happen, so he’s going to use our tank of saltwater. Actually, I think most of his work is still in the small aquarium stage at this point.”

“I remember a comment Melody made—something like ‘all the forams died.’ It had to do with a particular strain Art was working on.”

“What? I didn’t know about that. Uh, ‘forams’ is ‘foraminifera,’ the zooplankton order. Meaning, ‘order’ as in ‘species, genus, family, order, class.’ So, taking Melody’s comment literally, if Art has a phytoplankton that killed all the forams, he’s got something that kills a lot of critters. Little critters, but really important ones.”

Just then, our server showed up, followed by a second person laden with a tray of food.

* * *

Three chirpy minutes later—after assuring the server that, yes, everything we ordered was there and looked just fine; and, no, we didn’t need anything else, not catsup, not mustard, not the restaurant’s special steak sauce (the thought of that on my chicken Caesar salad made me slightly nauseated); and, yes, golly, we were sure hungry and looking forward to eating this wonderful meal!—Bill and I were able to continue in private.

He took a big chomp out of his bacon cheeseburger and chewed for a minute.

“Of course, maybe Art didn’t do anything new or different. There’s a number of algal species that are naturally toxic. You’ve probably heard of ‘Red Tides,’ right?”

I looked up from poking at my salad and nodded. “Yeah, something to do with lots of fish dying.”

“The preferred term is ‘Harmful Algal Bloom,’ and it’s become more and more of a problem over the past several years. No one really knows why, though. Anyway, maybe Art stumbled across a way to select in favor of harmful algae that can get along without much iron. But if it kills all the zooplankton, that’s a problem because usually there are some that are able to survive.” He laughed. “And the irony of this, of course, is that you need the zooplankton to sequester carbon, so Art’s used his carbon sequestration funding to find a way to prevent carbon sequestration. Wonder what the sponsor thinks. If he’s told them.” He took another big bite.

“Melody seemed to think she had found out something she wasn’t supposed to. Is this something Art would keep secret?” I was hungry, but I was having trouble getting started eating. Something was worrying me.

“Don’t see why.” Chomp. “Unless Art thought he had something he could sell to the highest bidder. Except we have strict protocols, both about using engineered organisms with the utmost care and about keeping discoveries linked to funding sources. It’s the only way we can make this consortium work.”

I finally summoned up the appetite to take a bite of my salad and discovered it tasted quite good, actually.

“So,” I talked around the mouthful, “Art discovers some kind of super—what did you call it—super harmful algal bloom in one of his aquaria. And these aquaria are in a room in there, presumably, contained within your greenhouses. So at least it isn’t out there in the world. I wonder what had Melody so worried. Because she was. Do these things do anything else except kill zooplankton and fish?”

“I was in Florida once when a bloom happened. Stunk up the place big-time. It wasn’t only the rotting fish everywhere, there was some kind of smelly gas released by the algae.”

For some reason, this made me even more hungry, and I really dove into the salad. I noticed the Caesar dressing was authentic, with the strong hint of anchovies I like. We ate for a while, and finally Bill polished off his cheeseburger.

“The smell was kind of the rotten-egg sulfur smell, along with the fish, so the gas must have been some reactive sulfur compound.” Longwell looked thoughtful. “I don’t have a clue about what Art’s algae would do, though.”

“Does he monitor his experiments for gases released?” I popped the last piece of chicken into my mouth. “I’m still hungry. Wonder what they have for dessert?”

“He would be the one to know about it. He’s the only one with access to his tank room, except for me and Stan, in case of emergencies. But it’s sealed, the door has an air lock, I mean, so maybe he does.”

“You don’t suppose that...Oh. I just remembered something. Melody might have had Art in a position to blackmail him. But she didn’t need money. Maybe she would have blackmailed him as a way to get him to stop hitting on her.” I was looking around for the server, now nowhere to be seen.

“She didn’t need money? She was a post-doc. They’re chronically poor.”

“Not Melody. She was a trust-funder. I don’t know how much, but I don’t think money was an issue for her. That, by the way, is something I’m keeping under the table as a possible motive, the money. Maybe not Melody’s, but her family’s. But this thing with Art would seem to be about something else.”

“So what should we do?”

“You said his room, the lab where his tanks are, might be monitored for its air. Is that recorded? Could we find out its history? That could be useful information, no? Oh. And remind me to tell you about Rumsford, too.” I stood up and waved at our server, who was lurking across the room behind Bill.

“Yes it would be useful, and please tell me about Kelly.”

“OK, after I order dessert. I don’t want to lose the opportunity.”

After hearing the choices from the server, whose attention I had finally attracted, I ordered a chocolate brownie with ice cream. Bill just ordered more coffee.

“Melody wrote to her brother that she thought Kelly was stalking her. That was enough to get us a warrant, so we searched Kelly’s apartment today and found the place covered with pictures of Melody. And his computer...his computer had some, also. So it’s clear from his apartment that he was obsessed with her, and we could probably persuade a jury of stalking.” I wasn’t ready to publicize Melody’s private life more than absolutely necessary.

“I guess it wasn’t a huge secret that he had a crush on her. But this sounds, um, unhealthy. So you suppose he’s connected with her death?”

“He volunteered a DNA sample, so it probably wasn’t his skin under her fingernails.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. She had scratched somebody. You don’t suppose Art has scratch marks somewhere?”

“Could be. But, remember, we’re only concocting theories, here. Art may not have anything to do with this whole thing, beyond fooling around on his wife. There are a couple of other lines of investigation as well.” I summarized the capture of Lyle Shaughnessy earlier that evening.

“Elwood’s guys, coming after you? Whoa. That’s just nuts. Although I guess it fits with what happened to me earlier. I wonder if that was Lyle?”

“Not if you beat them up the way you described. I saw Lyle and another deputy this evening, and neither had any bones broken recently. But Lyle seems to be the leader of, um, the questionable activities. His partner this evening caved right in, blamed the whole episode on Lyle and Elwood.”

“Figures. I heard that Lyle is Elwood’s brother-in-law, or something like that. So, anyway, do we have a plan? Want to go look at Art’s setup?”

“Who knows you’ve quit?”

“Just Detlef, and he’ll probably go through channels to let everyone else on the board know. So I’ve got time to go back up to EcoARC, if need be.”

“Maybe we should check out the data on the air in Art’s tank room.”

“I can do that. What are you going to be doing tomorrow?”

“Interviewing Elwood, it looks like.” My smile was grim. “I think I’ll take back-up.”

* * *

Thirteen

Because I had called Hal after getting back to my hotel after dinner Wednesday evening, I wasn’t surprised by the weather on Thursday morning. Hal had warned me that the first cold front of the fall

would be making it down past Phoenix, maybe all the way through Tucson. Being married to a weather weenie, I thought, has its occasional uses.

He had actually hinted that this might happen when I was packing Wednesday morning, so I'd come prepared for a ten- to fifteen-degree drop in temperatures. Jeans, a sweater and heavy jacket, and my hiking boots were once again the appropriate clothes, for warmth this time, rather than for effect. In fact, I wondered if the sheriff would take me seriously dressed this way. If he didn't, of course, that would just give me even more of an advantage.

I hadn't been kidding around about taking backup with me, and it seemed like a good idea to take both Sandra Kinney and Thomas Moody. They had a piece of this case, after all, having arrested Elwood Johnson's two deputies the night before. I wondered if Johnson had any idea about the statements from the motel clerk and Deputy Henry Reeves. Combined with the previous issues surrounding Melody Witherspoon's death, this new complaint put Sheriff Elwood Johnson in a peck of trouble.

The protocol issue—where to have the meeting—was resolved by Ross Townsend. He had persuaded Johnson to meet, first thing, with state Public Safety personnel at the State Patrol offices in Casa Grande, and he went so far as to talk the district captain into offering his personal office for the occasion.

But even with this arrangement, there wasn't a lot of trust in play. Officers Moody and Kinney and I drove up from Oro Valley in an unmarked state car, hoping to avoid attracting the attention of Johnson's deputies, should any be on the lookout for us.

Johnson arrived fifteen minutes late, and he was accompanied by Assistant District Attorney Sibley Jensen. Sandra Kinney and I exchanged looks of amusement.

"Sorry I'm late, ladies, officer," Johnson's half-hearted apology to Sandra and me, and to Thomas Moody, set the tone. "I hope it's appropriate that Sib here came along. I understand that I'm under some cloud of some sort, and Sib is here to represent the county."

"Thank you so much for coming, sheriff." I had decided in advance to take an extremely slow-fuse approach to any and all baiting. "Mr. Jensen, how nice to see you again. Perhaps we can clear a number of issues up and make progress together on the main event." I introduced everyone around.

"Now. Sheriff, Mr. Jensen, what I'd like to do is work backwards in time, beginning with last night. And, to be clear, we're going to be recording all of this. OK?" I barely paused. "I'm going to quickly run through a number of matters, without making judgments or drawing conclusions, just so you'll know where the Arizona Department of Public Safety stands. To the extent that you may not agree with what I'm about to say, we can take note of your disagreement for future discussion. But what I really want to focus on is what brought me down here originally, the death of Melody Witherspoon and the discovery of her body in the EcoARC greenhouse. I would think that clearing that case would be a priority for you as well. Moreover, if we can clear that one, much of the other stuff will become moot. Does this make sense?"

Jensen had adopted a sullen expression, staring at the wall over Sandra Kinney's head, and Johnson was examining his left thumb-nail throughout my little speech. Rather than respond right away, he let a silence lengthen while he picked at a hang-nail. Finally he cleared his throat.

"Well, now, little lady, I'm not so sure it does. I'll stipulate that I do indeed want to clear the Witherspoon case, and I maintain that I have done so. It's too bad that the perp went and hung himself, but that's the way it goes sometimes. As for other 'matters,' as you put it, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree. This here's my county and my jurisdiction, and you're out of yours, by several hundred miles. I dispute the legality of your joint appointment, and I have half a mind to arrest you for impersonating a police officer. I reckon I could force a show-down with the State Patrol

here, but that doesn't seem politic, so I'm thinking what I'll do is just let you off with a warning, a written one."

I mentally lengthened my personal fuse by a factor of three and took a deep breath.

"OK. Let's talk about the Witherspoon case for just a minute. It's my understanding, and I've seen this documented, that your strongest evidence against the late Mr. Alvarez is the scratches on his face. Because Ms. Witherspoon's body was discovered with blood and skin under her fingernails, you made the connection to Mr. Alvarez, an EcoARC employee. Isn't that correct?"

Sheriff Johnson merely smiled like the Cheshire Cat, but Sibley Jensen sat up straight and looked alert.

"For your case to fly, then, that skin under Melody's fingernails must be from Mr. Alvarez's face. But it's not. That's been shown using a DNA test."

Johnson's smile twitched just a hair. He was clearly used to playing cut-throat poker.

But Jensen wasn't. His eyes bulged, and he couldn't contain himself. "What? Those scratches on Alvarez's face aren't from the victim? My God, an innocent man killed himself. In our jail, yet." He looked surprised, as if remembering something. "If he really did kill himself. Elwood, what's been going on over at your jail, anyway?"

Somehow, Sheriff Johnson managed to maintain his Cheshire Cat poker face. "Excuse me and Mr. Jensen a minute, would you little ladies, officer?" His voice was pleasant, but his gray eyes were steely.

"Sheriff Johnson." Knowing I had the upper hand, I was going to try to keep to the point. "The recording of this meeting will be given to the grand jury that will be investigating your office. Mr. Jensen is aware of this grand jury, as he was present when the recommendation to the Governor was formulated. You do understand that you and your office are in some legal difficulty, right? I don't think your leaning on Mr. Jensen will help matters. But this isn't why we're here. We're here to try to make headway on the Witherspoon case. If it will make you more cooperative, perhaps it would interest you to know that neither Mr. Lovett nor Mr. Shaughnessy, either Mr. Shaughnessy, actually, Lyle or his son, are primary suspects at this stage. That could change should evidence emerge, of course. But right now we are looking in other directions. And it seems to me that your cooperation on clearing this case would help your situation with that grand jury."

I could almost see the gears turning inside Johnson's head. After a brief staring contest—it came out a draw—he finally made a decision.

"Well, now, I reckon if she didn't scratch Alvarez's face, it does weaken our case against him some. And that makes his suicide all the more unfortunate. And, of course, it also means that we've still got a killer out there. You picked up that kid who found the body yet?"

"He's agreed to a DNA test, knowing the situation, and he's been examined by a physician, who found no scratches. We do have some issues with him, however. But we don't think he's the killer. In a similar way, we also have issues with Mr. Lovett and the two Shaughnessys. It seems to me that those 'other matters' I mentioned, the ones involving you and your office, could be related to all this. There's no indication, however, that they're directly related to Ms. Witherspoon's murder. So even though there are some things you're going to be dealing with, matters the grand jury will be considering, it isn't Ms. Witherspoon. And by helping with that case, really helping instead of just grabbing the first suspect at hand, you can help yourself in the other matters, too." I had decided that repetition just might help things along.

"You got a primary suspect? Or are you just fishing?"

I couldn't help but to smile. "If we're fishing, it's casting to rising trout, not just trolling blind. What can you tell me about EcoARC and its security situation?"

Johnson snorted. "I wouldn't grace it with that word. 'Security' is too strong. Used to be, they offered off-duty hours to some of my people, but that all changed with that new, high-falutin' director they hired. Got himself some kind of full-time guy, but it's only one guy and he doesn't know crap. I heard he was out of town when the murder and burial went down. I don't call that 'security,' not by a long shot. Used to be, my guys would do off-duty patrols out there and they put the word out: nobody messes with this place. And no one did."

"Did you, or any of the fire departments you know about, ever have to respond to any emergencies out there? I mean, any kind of emergency, crime, medical, anything?"

Johnson actually looked interested, for the first time. "Now that you mention it, there have been a couple. A few years ago, some fella had a heart attack. I think the Oracle emergency folks responded. I think there was a fire one time. And I remember a recent chemical spill situation several months ago, maybe...last June? July? I'd have to look it up. We got called in by one of the employees, but by the time the county HazMat people got there, it was all cleared up, they said. I went to that one myself. We all got shoo'd off by the assistant, what's his name? Ah...Finnegan. Somebody Finnegan."

* * *

I wondered if Art was covering something up. If so, what else has he covered up? And does Bill Longwell know about this? I thought for a minute, and changed course a little.

"How widely known is it that they're doing genetic engineering out there?"

"I suppose we all figure some stuff like that's going on. That's what these research places do these days. It hasn't been in the papers, though, so I don't know what the general public thinks." Johnson was tapping his fingers on the desk, thinking.

"Do you mean to say there are questionable activities out there?" Jensen had been quiet, but the genetic engineering comment had grabbed his attention.

"I don't know about 'questionable,' at least from your perspective. If there are county zoning regulations about that, though, I'd say it was on your plate, Mr. Jensen. But here's where I'm going with this. Mr. Jensen, do you remember the discussion at the meeting last week, Rudy Gelinski's comments about the time line leading up to the discovery of Ms. Witherspoon's body? Rudy was convinced that someone had murdered her some time earlier and took her in there and buried her. Remember?" I was looking at Jensen, who nodded.

"Rudy and I have talked about it, and I asked him how his time line would change if Melody had been killed inside the greenhouse, her body kept in there prior to burial. He said that would change things a lot, because the deterioration he observed would have been sped up. Especially in the tropical greenhouses, the high humidity ones."

Jensen seemed intrigued. "So this means that even though she was seen up in Colorado on Saturday, she may have been killed here on, say Sunday morning, or something? In which case, your involvement would seem unnecessary, at the least."

"Exactly correct, except that I'm officially appointed and involved up to my eyebrows, with all due respect, Sheriff, and there are additional ties to Colorado anyway. We haven't eliminated all the Colorado possibilities, is what I mean. But in terms of actual suspects, this altered time line narrows the possibilities."

“It’s always been apparent that someone from EcoARC was involved, though.” Despite his Neanderthal attitude, Johnson was no dummy, I decided.

“At least as an accomplice, yes, because of the security locks and getting into the greenhouses and so on. That probably eliminates a bunch of people whom you may be concerned about protecting, Sheriff.”

He looked me straight in the eyes and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, little lady.”

“You said that Finnegan ‘shoo’d you away’ from EcoARC when you and the HazMat team arrived to deal with the chemical spill. Was there any information about what kind of chemical it was, what they did to contain it, anything?”

“Nothing. I was kind of perturbed, you know? And so was the HazMat team leader. He asked all sorts of questions, but all Finnegan would say was that there was a small ‘lab accident,’ and that they had got it cleaned up already. But they’re way the hell out there in the desert, surrounded by lots of private land. They have some kind of extremely high temperature incinerator for hazardous stuff, and they didn’t have injuries, or anything. We really didn’t have any reason to pursue it.”

“Do you know that Lyle’s son Michael works in the sex industry, pornography, prostitution, all that? Michael’s your nephew, isn’t that correct?”

Johnson looked sharply at me and the two officers, and he took his time answering. “What does this have to do with anything? You already said that neither Lyle or Mikey were suspects.”

“And they’re not. But there are pieces of the Witherspoon puzzle that involve the sex industry, at least that’s what it looks like. Did you know that Michael works for that crowd? And that James Lovett does, too?”

“Well, now, I knew that Jimmie got Mikey a job of some kind up in Colorado. And Jimmie, of course, is a photographer, told me he’s a fashion photographer, models, fancy clothes, all that.”

“Models, yes, clothes, no. Michael Shaugnessy has some kind of gopher job with the company that markets the pornography that Lovett creates. And they have affiliates down here, Phoenix for sure, maybe Tucson. They like to use college girls as their models. They seem to start slowly, clothes, underwear, then, as the girls get comfortable with it, progressing to no clothes and active sex on camera, some of it solo, some of it with companionship of various kinds. We haven’t found anything illegal, you understand, the girls are all over eighteen. But I was wondering if you knew about their involvement. I don’t think this is the sort of thing you’d want going on in your county.”

“God-damned right it’s not! We got enough problems without perverts like that sneaking around.”

“No offense, Sheriff, but a couple of these ‘perverts’ seem to be your wife’s family. And it appears that your difficulties, the ones that have the grand jury’s attention, relate to things you’ve been doing to protect these people.”

Once again, I could see wheels turning, and I noticed that the poker face was gone. In fact, as the wheels turned behind the face, the face itself was getting progressively redder. Must be working up a head of steam, I thought. But when he spoke, he seemed surprisingly calm.

“One thing I sure hate, and that’s being played for a fool. It must be the case that Melody Witherspoon was one of Jimmie’s ‘models,’ because otherwise you wouldn’t be bringing it up. If Mikey works for that crowd, he probably knew her, and maybe Lyle did, too. Lyle was the one made the collar of Alvarez, and he worked hard to persuade me that Alvarez killed her. And, at least before the DNA test, there was enough evidence to sway a jury, ain’t that right, Sib?” The question was rhetorical, so Jensen only nodded while the Sheriff plunged onward. “I suspect that Lyle figured that getting the case

cleared quickly would prevent any of this stuff from becoming public. Reckon I'll have to have me a little talk with Lyle. So, Ms. Trieri, what is it you want from me?"

Well, glory be. He actually does know my name, I thought. "So far, so good, Sheriff. This information is most helpful. What you can do now is cooperate. Let me do what the DPS wants me to do, and see if you can get people in your county to help. One thing, for example, is to find the date of that chemical spill incident. I have contacts at EcoARC that I can use to find out more if we get the date. And maybe find out if there are other such incidents that didn't get called in. See, to me all this stuff about your wife's family doesn't really matter except for how it helps put the Witherspoon puzzle together. That's still a jumble, pretty much. I expect that some of it will matter to the grand jury, but cooperating with my investigation will help you there. And, hell, as far as I'm concerned, you can take whatever credit for this thing that you can get away with, once we get it all sorted out. I'm certainly not going to try to grab any headlines."

Johnson stared at a corner of the ceiling for a minute. "I guess I can live with that. No hard feelings about those, um, 'other matters,' then?" He smiled, stood up, and extended his right hand.

I looked at it for a few seconds, and finally took it. With just a hint of a smile, I said, "No hard feelings, Sheriff. But I think I'll still be careful about speed limits in Pinal County."

* * *

On the mid-morning ride back to Oro Valley, the tension level among the two State Patrol officers and me was much lower than it had been on the way north to Casa Grande earlier. For one thing, the sight of a sheriff's office patrol car didn't set us on edge. For another, we had Elwood Johnson's performance to critique.

"The guy is a real piece of work, isn't he? It's a good thing the DA was there, Jensen, because I don't think the Sheriff would have caved in without him." Thomas Moody, who was driving, had been silent all morning, watching and evaluating, apparently.

"That was a different Sibley Jensen from the one we saw last week, huh, Annette?" Sandra Kinney was turned sideways in the passenger seat so she could talk to me in the back.

I looked up from my notes. "I was glad that he showed some remorse about Alvarez's death. Makes me feel better about the DA's office."

Moody laughed. "I'm impressed with how you worked him, Annette. Especially because he wasn't exactly polite, uh, 'little lady.'" I looked up to see his big grin in the mirror and laughed myself.

"I couldn't tell if he was doing that intentionally, to antagonize me, or if that's just the way he is. But I figured the way to get him to cooperate was to show him how it's in his best interest to. And I got lucky. He didn't seem to know about his in-laws' connections to the porno crowd. I think that pissed him off some. Oh. Speaking of Elwood's in-laws. Sandra? I had to leave last night. Did you find out if Lyle ever worked at EcoARC?"

"He said he had done some overtime and off-duty security work there, but he was never an employee. And, Annette, you handled that whole thing with Elwood very well. I think I would have bopped him at about the second 'little lady.'" Sandra Kinney looked grim, but then her face morphed into laughter. "Actually, it's quite amusing. I'm in uniform and you're in, I don't know, hunting clothes, or something like that. It's not like we're in dresses and heels. Doesn't seem like we look like 'little ladies' at all. So where is this all going, Annette?"

“You two have your own charges to pursue, or not. Even if Lyle was looking for me at Elwood’s instigation, he found you and whatever attempted assault charges are appropriate are all yours. And, let’s see, the other stuff—that roadblock incident last week, I’d say let’s just forget about that. Alvarez’s death, of course, is going to be looked at by the grand jury, and it sounded as if Elwood’s faith in Lyle’s handling of it has been shaken. I’m not going to worry about how Elwood put James Lovett up to breaking and entering my house, because we’ve settled that one. I’m still not sure how all this fits together, but I feel way less concerned about Elwood’s involvement. It seems like it’s his in-laws’ doing things he didn’t really know about that was the problem.”

“You seemed focused on that chemical spill at EcoARC that Elwood mentioned.”

“Yeah, there’s something fishy going on out there. The director, the new ‘highfalutin’ one that Elwood mentioned, Bill Longwell, got roughed up last night as he was getting in his car. Art Finnegan, Bill’s deputy, has been less than candid with me. And I think there’s still more to be learned from Kelly Rumsford, if we can get him to cooperate fully. Excuse me, who could that be?” My cell phone had started chirping, and I dug it out.

“Oh, hi, Bill, we were just talking about you... There are? Is it a huge computer file or something?... This is certainly good news. Listen, could you email the whole thing to Hal? I’ll call him and let him know it’s coming and why. And I’m glad you called. I had a conversation with Sheriff Elwood Johnson this morning. It went quite well, actually, to my surprise, and he mentioned that there was some kind of chemical spill out at EcoARC, sometime last June or so. Apparently the county Hazardous Materials team got called. Do you know anything about that?... No? Hmm. Well, let me find out the date and we can talk about it again. Please don’t mention it to anyone, OK?... No, I’m going home for the weekend. After last night and this morning, I need some R&R, better food than that chicken thing I had last night, Hal’s home cooking. And I can look over his shoulder at that computer file you’re going to send him.... OK, you take care. ’Bye.”

As I pushed buttons for Hal’s office, I said to the people in the front seat, “Bill Longwell, EcoARC Director. He’s my inside information source. Oops, excuse me again. Hal? It’s me... No, I’m fine. And I’m going to come home this evening, don’t know exactly when yet. I called to warn you that Bill Longwell is going to be emailing you a big computer file, data of some kind. If you can’t read it, don’t worry, we’ll get Bill to tell us how... OK, I’ll see you this afternoon or evening. Love you too. ’Bye.”

“What,” I continued to the two officers, “did we do before these nifty little gadgets?”

“They do have their drawbacks, like in theaters and restaurants. And church, of all places.” Thomas Moody, I decided, spent his Sunday mornings in a traditional mode. I punched up more numbers on my phone.

“Ross? Good morning. You did a great job setting up the meeting with Elwood... Right. Went fine. We’re headed back south to Oro Valley, got just what we need... Yes, Elwood decided to cooperate. He didn’t know that his wife’s relatives were in the porn industry, and I’m sure he’s not happy about it... Yeah, and he’s distancing himself from Lyle’s handling of the Alvarez so-called suicide... No, I’m going to head home, catch up on my other job’s paperwork tomorrow, do some serious R&R this weekend. The Witherspoon investigation is at a cusp, and things need to go on hold for a few days. You know, like letting grape juice ferment into wine. Also, I need to deal with some details up in Durango... OK, I’ll call tomorrow. Thanks for all your help.”

I checked the battery and discovered it was still hanging on, so I called my hotel to warn them I’d be checking out by noon and the airline to arrange for a return to Durango. They put me on a mid-afternoon flight that would get me home for a late supper.

“OK. All done being rude in the back seat.” My battery was dying anyway. “Sorry about all that, but it got all my business done for the day. Now I need to get out of the hotel and up to the airport in Phoenix for a flight at three. I don’t suppose Winston Tsosie is anywhere around these parts?” I saw Thomas Moody’s puzzled look in the mirror, and Sandra Kinney laughed.

“C’mon, Annette, all you have is a rental car, you couldn’t keep up with him in that!”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot. Maybe you could escort me up there. I bet I could keep up with you. Oh, sorry, sorry. That’s mean. And after all you’ve done for me.”

But Sandra only laughed harder. “Hey, that’s what friends are for, to give each other a hard time!”

Thomas Moody looked all the more puzzled.

“Sandra, it really would help if I got up to Phoenix quickly. Um…”

“I’ll make a couple of phone calls while you pack and check out. And I promise to drive so that you can keep up.”

* * *

Everything worked. Surprised and pleased, I found myself pulling into my driveway in Durango at 7:00 that evening. Considering that was 6:00 Arizona time, I felt lucky to be home so early.

Sandra Kinney had escorted me from Oro Valley up to the Phoenix airport, getting me there in plenty of time to make it through security and so on and catch my flight with ease. It wasn’t at all like the drive with Winston Tsosie, because the interstate was full of traffic, and we had to keep our speed reasonable. Not that the rental car could have managed much more anyway.

The airplane was comfortably empty, so I had a row to myself without having any unpleasant encounters. And I was even able to stop at my CBI office and pick up mail and the videotape from Melody that Ernesto Ang had given me Wednesday morning.

Best of all, Hal had promised to have dinner for me when I got home. As I walked through the door, I recognized the distinctive aroma of green chile chicken enchilada casserole, and I realized that I was actually hungry for it.

Some time ago, I traveled down to Santa Fe for an investigation, and my reaction to the chile labeled “medium” at a local restaurant had prompted Hal to put me on a training regimen. If I couldn’t handle the heat in medium chile, albeit Santa Fe medium, I really didn’t deserve to live in the Southwest, he reasoned. So he had been training me with increasingly spicy chile dishes ever since. Now that I had finally caught up with his tastes, I actually enjoyed his creations, and the casserole was one of the best. I had come to appreciate the little buzz the chile gives me—some kind of endorphin rush, I read somewhere—as well as the taste of the green chiles and cumin together with the roast chicken. And Hal always served it to me with a Cuervo Gold margarita—since I was finally home, I thought maybe I’d get him to make two for me.

He wasn’t in the kitchen, so I went to the bedroom, unpacked, undressed, showered, and got refreshed for dinner. Then, following the noise, I found him in the study, peering at a computer screen full of wiggly lines in various colors. He seemed oblivious to my arrival because of the noise I’d followed—a CD he’d made with various 35-year-old rock and roll bands, bands of the loud and raucous variety, was cranked up. As I walked into the study, The Who were reminding Hal, and now me, to be sure and not get fooled again.

But before I could get over to his chair to surprise him, he jumped up and grabbed me in a bear hug.

“Welcome home, darlin’. Let me turn this down.” I heard him because he was talking right into my ear. He reached over and turned a knob, just as Roger Daltry was inviting everyone to meet the new boss (who, apparently, bore an uncanny resemblance to the previous boss), and the closing chords faded away.

“How’d you know I was here? You got eyes in the back of your head?”

“Yeah, all of us professors do, so we can watch the students while we’re writing on the board. No, seriously, I smelled you. And you smell good.” He dove for my neck, but I giggled and pulled away.

“Food! You promised me food! And that smells too good not to eat.”

“Yum, just like you. But, OK, we’ll have dinner. First. Want to see what I’ve been doing?” He waved in the direction of the computer screen.

“Can you print it out? We could look at it at the table. I’m starved.”

“Will do. And I’ll be right down. Table’s all set, all that’s needed is to get the chicken out of the oven and the salad out of the ’fridge.”

Hal must have been hungry, too, because we ate without talking until little beads of sweat began to pop out on his forehead. That, Hal had told me, was the appropriate level of heat in chile—one comfortable serving makes you start to sweat a little. I could feel the roots of my hair getting damp. Then we slowed down.

“So, now we can talk about these graphs you’ve got. What is it?”

“What Bill Longwell sent me. I really don’t know what it is though, beyond the obvious. Variations of something with time, over the past couple of years, according to the dates. It looks like gas samples, at least some of it.”

I remembered that I hadn’t described the data that Longwell would be sending. “I can understand how you could tell about the dates, but what’s this about gas samples?”

“This green line here is probably carbon dioxide. See, the numbers on it tend to hold steady for weeks at a time, and they’re at different levels between 300 and 700 parts per million. That’s what the data values in the file are. And that’s what you would do if you were running a carbon dioxide experiment in a greenhouse—control the CO₂ level at amounts like this.”

“Why these amounts?”

“Back before the industrial revolution, the atmosphere had about 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Now it’s closing in on 400, and it’s projected to get much higher over the next several decades. And I know that they do CO₂ experiments down at EcoARC.”

“So what are the other lines?”

“I can’t be sure without documentation, but it looks like other trace gases. Which ones depend on the kind of experiment they’re doing. If it involves plants, this one, which is in parts per trillion, really tiny amounts, could be a gas called isoprene.”

“Does all this mean anything?”

“Got me. There are several places where things change a lot, sometimes quickly, in a matter of days, like here,” he pointed to a step in a red line, “and sometimes more slowly and steadily, like this purple line. But without knowing what the gases are, if they are really gases, there’s no way to know if either of these is significant.”

“I’ll call Bill tomorrow and see if he knows anything more. I think this is air sample data from an experiment that Art Finnegan has been doing. He has a sealed room full of aquaria containing some kind of genetically engineered plankton. Bill told me a bunch of stuff about carbon sequestration. And Melody’s diaries have comments about what Finnegan’s doing. She didn’t seem happy.”

“Oh. Probably Art is trying to develop phytoplankton that are more efficient at sucking carbon dioxide out of the air, or ones that can grow without being so sensitive to trace nutrients like iron, or something like that. You need to do this stuff in an aquarium, because you surely don’t want some kind of weirdly engineered critter loose in the real ocean, at least not until you’re absolutely sure it won’t have unforeseen consequences.”

I guess I should have expected that Hal would know about this stuff, but it surprised me that he was almost able to summarize the conversation I’d had with Bill Longwell in a few sentences.

“One of Melody’s diaries has a comment that all the forams died. Bill says those are—what did he call them?—oh, zooplankton, and they eat the phytoplankton.”

“Right. You wouldn’t want those little guys loose in the ocean, because we need the forams. Bigger critters eat them, and we probably eat some of those bigger critters. Offhand, I don’t know which. But if Art’s engineered some phytoplankton that kill forams, he’s got a problem algae on his hands. Sounds like you had an exciting time of it down there. Anything else happen?”

“Huh. This plankton stuff was the least of it, although I’m beginning to think it may wind up being the most important.” I filled Hal in about Kelly Rumsford’s obsession, Sheriff Johnson’s foibles and apparent conversion to sanity, and Bill Longwell’s possible change of employment status.

“He quit, on principle, eh? Good for him. You think he’d be interested in being Dean of Natural Sciences at a small, financially teetering state research university here in the Southwest? Maybe I’ll give him a call tomorrow.”

“You could ask him about the graphs, too.”

“Right. Talk science even. Give both of us a change from administrative foolishness. So you were down there—what?—one night? And all this stuff happened? Too bad you weren’t busy or anything.”

“Actually, there’s one more thing that didn’t happen, yet. Wednesday morning some guy named Ernesto Ang came by my office, before I left town.”

“Ernesto? Why would he come by your office? Oh, I know—he was hitting on you.”

“No, he wasn’t, but why do you say that?”

“Oh, he thinks he’s God’s gift to women. Ever since he got here, he’s been chasing anything female and under about 45. But what *did* he want then?”

“He delivered a videotape that Melody had left in his keeping, to be given to, ‘someone in authority,’ I think he said, if something should happen to Melody.”

“A videotape? Made when?”

“It sounded like around the first of this month. Something like a week, maybe two, before she was killed. Want some after-dinner TV?”

* * *

We cleaned up the kitchen first, and Hal had to remember how to use the VCR. He had graduated to a DVD player some time ago, and getting all the equipment switched so that the VCR would play on the TV and through the sound system—the sound wouldn't play through the TV speakers, the way it was hooked up—was something he hadn't done in months. It's a complete mystery to me.

But eventually he got it to work, and Melody Witherspoon appeared on the screen. Hal backed the tape up, cued it to the beginning, and waited while I went to fetch the coffee I had started brewing.

When I walked in with the coffee, I really looked at the TV, and I saw one of the first frames of the tape, a picture of Melody sitting on a rock wall with her arm half raised, a little gizmo of some kind in her hand. In the background was a nicely composed view of the side of a hill covered with scrub oak trees and cactus amid a jumble of boulders. She was wearing sneakers, jeans, and a sweatshirt with the Frémont State logo on the front. I decided that she was also wearing just a touch of makeup, quite professionally done, and her hair looked wind-blown.

"What's she doing with her hand?" That was the only thing that looked unusual to me.

"I watched the first few seconds before, to make sure it was working, and she lowers her arm from this point. I think it may be a remote control for the camera." Hal helped me settle in to the couch. "Ready?"

I nodded, and he pushed a button on his remote control. Melody came to life, lowered her arm, and cleared her throat.

"I don't know who is seeing this first, or what the circumstances are. But I expect that my family will see it at some point, so let me start out by saying that I'm sorry, Mom, and Al, truly sorry for what you're about to hear. I know that you're both proud of me, for what I've done in school and all that. Well, hold on to that, OK? Because I'm going to be talking about some things that I'm ashamed of, and I expect you'll be ashamed, too. But just remember that I love you both more than anything else. And, again, I'm sorry. Just remember, what you're going to hear doesn't change the person that you've known all these years. It's just that there's also another person, another Melody Witherspoon, someone you haven't known." Melody paused and took a deep breath.

"The reason I'm making this tape, and I'm making it in the hope that nobody will ever see it," she held up the gadget in her hand, "by using this remote control, so I'm the only one here, uh, I'm making it because I'm concerned that something bad is going to happen to me. Actually, something bad has *already* happened to me, but what I'm worried about is that something worse may happen, like, I may die somehow." Melody's image swiveled around, looking at the view, and turned back to face the camera again.

"It's strange, sitting in this beautiful, secluded place and thinking about all this. If I could just stay here, it seems like everything would be all right. But I know that can't happen. They would find me eventually. OK, so here goes. It's complicated, so bear with me. And, one more time, I'm really sorry, Mom, Al.

"About six years ago, when I was still an undergraduate, I saw an ad in the *Frémont Free Press* for a photo-shoot, for women who want to be fashion models. I guess I've always been someone who likes to try new things, so I wanted to try this. It sounded, you know, glamorous. And this was before I had decided on graduate school, so I had an idea that maybe it could turn into a job. So I went and stood in line.

"To my surprise, they really liked me. I tried on lots of different outfits, and the photographer, a guy that I've come to know is named James Lovett, he must have run through eight or ten rolls of film. He

told me that it was really only the audition, but that he used more film on me than on anyone else and I should expect a call-back. He also asked a lot of questions, whether I'd be able to travel to location shoots, if I had any other contractual obligations, and so on." She paused, cleared her throat again, and took another deep breath.

"So the call-back came, and I went and signed up. There was a consent form with a picture of my driver's license and a bunch of other stuff. And that same day, after I signed up, they did another shoot of me, this time for real, or so they told me. It was party dresses, about a dozen, all by the same designer. I changed clothes so often that I began to lose my feelings of modesty, and toward the end of the shoot, I was standing around in my underwear while Jimmie and his assistant, some gay guy whose name I've forgotten, they discussed which dresses they needed to re-shoot." She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Now, I realize that this was all planned out. First, they got me to stand around in front of them in my underwear without being uncomfortable. Then, in later shoots, they suggested that I might make a good underwear and swim-suit model, like for the Victoria's Secret catalog, or something. After that, it was easy for them to suggest that I just pose nude. And, when I got used to that, they started suggesting that I pose in more and more sexually explicit ways." She tossed her head and blinked at the camera several times.

"So here's the hard part: I guess that, as of now, I'm what you'd call a porn star, at least if you can be a porn star without being in movies and pictures of people having sex. Um, if I'm not a porn star, I'm the closest thing to it you *can* be, at least.

"So, Mom, Al, that's what I'm ashamed of and I'm so sorry." She blinked again, several times, clearly fighting back tears.

"That's all the background for why I'm making this tape. See, it turns out that these people, the people who were paying me to have pictures taken of me, so that they could sell the pictures on the internet and elsewhere, these people are kind of like drug dealers. They start you out easy, on the soft stuff, and bit-by-bit they move you into harder and harder territory. Soon, they've got their hooks into you so deep that you just can't escape. With me, it isn't the money, it's the potential for bad publicity. This is because, while I was doing all this modeling, and it didn't really take much time, I graduated, stayed at FSU for grad school, got a doctorate, and now I have a prestigious post-doctoral appointment here in Arizona. I feel like I'm on my way to a rewarding and stimulating career. But if the people at Intermountain, Intermountain Social Services, that's the company I model for, if they tell the world about my, my other life, any future science career will be shot." She shrugged and raised both hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I'm someone who has always tried to take charge of my future. So I decided I had to do something about these real and implied threats the Intermountain people were making when I told them I didn't want to model any more. I decided that what I needed was something I could threaten them with if they threatened me. Create a stand-off, I guess. I think I have that figured out, and, if it gets to the police, there's information in a safe deposit box, information that should make them very nervous. The key to the box, and the name of the bank, is sewn in the spine of the volume of my diary that I just mailed to you, Mom. Please let the police have it, and provide permission for the bank to let them open the box. What the information is about is, their models have a habit of disappearing— that's what I'm worried about for myself—and I've assembled some lists.

"I guess I should say that I don't blame Jimmie for all this. He's actually been pretty much of a friend. He takes the pictures, but he hasn't hassled me at all. He was the first one to warn me about Intermountain when I told him I wanted to quit, and he's also warned me not to try to threaten them with the lists. I guess he may know about some of the girls that disappeared, or something. Anyway, he's harmless, really, even kind of sweet. Also, he never really coerced me into anything I was

uncomfortable with at the time, and he even warned me about how to protect myself against going places I don't want to go.

"And because I don't want innocent people to be hurt by this, let me say that I don't blame anyone who has found my pictures on the internet for anything. It's my fault for getting myself into this, not the guys who like to look at the pictures." She shook her head and sighed again.

"And even though some of my worst fears have been realized, some guys I know through work found the pictures, I know I can't blame or hold anything against them. One thing is for sure. If I had it to do all over again, I'd sure not answer that first modeling ad. But since I did, maybe this tape and the lists will wind up having some positive effects.

"Um, so that's about it, I guess. Mom, Al, just remember that I love you very much. And I'm sorry." There was a hint of a smile on Melody's face as she raised her arm and twitched a finger. The tape switched to snow.

Hal reached over and wiped a tear from my cheek.

"That's the Melody I remember—the self-assurance and the attitude, not the subject matter. Um, I was going to find out how much fast driving you did today and see if a rambunctious homecoming would be in order. Hope it's OK if I don't go there tonight."

I sniffled, shook my head to clear the cobwebs, and patted his hand.

"It's fine, perceptive, even. I'm going to be up for a while, though, working on this. I just got re-motivated."

"You know that I'm here if you need a sounding board."

"I always do. What do you think about that monologue?"

"I think you need to find that diary and see if it has the safe deposit box key in it. And then see what's in that box."

"Tomorrow morning, first thing."

"And it seems to me that leaning on James Lovett might be in order, if you can find him. It sounded as he may know something about who was leaning on Melody."

"Um-hmm. I think I know just how to do that. Elwood will be quite helpful, I bet. He wasn't at all happy when I told him that his cousin-in-law is a pornographer. But what about Melody herself? Any feelings about that?" I leaned over and put my head on his shoulder.

"It's sad, that's for sure. And I imagine it was hard for her, going public like that. It really came out when she was addressing herself to her family. And that talk about two Melodys, for example, it sounds as if she was essentially leading a double life. Stress city. So what do you suppose really happened?"

"I thought I was figuring it out, but this puts a new spin on things. I was watching that tape and thinking that all we have to do is find the Intermountain enforcers. But now it occurs to me that we also have to figure out how those people could have put her body into the greenhouse."

"So there must be a connection between Intermountain and EcoARC?"

"If they're involved, yeah." I yawned and stretched. "I guess the thing to do is to look in the spine of that last diary tomorrow, and see what's there."

"Oh, yeah, you've got her diaries, don't you? Did you ever hear anything about having swiped them?"

“Mildred should remember that I asked to take them, unless she was too drunk. And I’m hoping that Spaulding won’t notice that they’re missing. Which reminds me, I need to see if there’s a report on him in that mail I brought home.” I stretched again, stood up, and took the coffee cups into the kitchen. A minute later, I returned to the TV room, a sheaf of paper in hand, reading the contents of the large envelope.

“Well, well, well. I’m glad I lifted that thumb print. A search on Leland Spaulding didn’t turn anything up, but the print did. Whew! Look at this list! The guy must have a monogrammed wardrobe. Louis Simpson. Lee Stuckey. Lawrence Smith. And on and on. Hmm. Standard MO—finds a rich widow, woos her, tries to get her money. Seems like there aren’t any convictions, though ... nope. I guess no one has prosecuted him, even for using false names for misleading purposes. Must be he gets them—the women, I mean—to buy him off. Avoid embarrassing publicity and all that.”

“So he’s some kind of con man?” Hal had extracted the VCR cassette, and he added it to the pile of mail that I had put on the couch.

“I guess that’s what I’d call him. Probably, though, he’d just say he’s a lonely guy in search of true love.”

“And the fact that he seems fixated on rich widows is just coincidental?”

“Single women in their 50s tend to be either divorced or widowed. I’d think that Mildred Witherspoon should know this, though. Just to protect herself. I think maybe I’ll give Al a call.” I wandered off, and found my cell phone in the bedroom.

“You going to tell him about the tape?” Hal’s voice was filtering down the hall from the front of the house.

“Not yet. First things first.”

My first try failed—Al had left a message on his home phone that he was at work. So I tried to find the emergency medical response group in the phone book, but it wasn’t there. Must be that everyone calls them via 911, I thought. Finally, I called the Durango Police Department and talked the front desk officer out of the number. I tried it, and a woman answered. She promised to fetch Al Witherspoon.

“Hello? Hope this is good, I had a really top-notch poker hand going.”

“Al? Annette Trieri. And I’m sorry to interrupt your poker game.”

“Oh. Hi, Annette. For you, I guess folding with three kings is OK. What’s up?”

“Remember I told you I was going to run a check on Lee Spaulding?”

“Oh, yeah. Find anything?”

“His real name is Lindon Saunders, for a start.”

“‘Real name’? This doesn’t sound too good.”

“Let me change the subject for a minute, if I could. I’d like to ask you about your trust fund. I don’t mean to pry, but I’m curious to know what happens to it if you should have a fatal accident.”

“If Mom’s still alive, it reverts to her. Like Melody’s did, I guess. If she’s not, it’s just part of my estate.”

“And what about your mother’s trust?”

“Same thing. Now that Melody’s dead, the whole thing goes to me, I think. Unless I’m dead first, then it’s part of her estate. Um, is this going where I think it’s going?”

“Where do you think it’s going?” I believe it’s always better for people to figure out bad news for themselves.

“The guy whom my mom calls ‘Lee Spaulding’ is really named ‘Lindon Saunders.’ My sister’s dead, so her trust has reverted to my mom. Should I assume I’m next?”

“I honestly don’t know. Saunders doesn’t have anything in his record to indicate that he goes around killing people. But he does have a history of relationships with rich widows, all settled out of court, quietly, it appears.”

“Any indication of marriages in which his new wife dies?” An edge of concern had crept into his voice.

“Nope. Could be that he just never got that far; could be that he’s using the same MO on your mother, and that he’ll break it off before a wedding happens, if he can get her to write him a big check.”

“Not if I can help it. What are you going to do?”

“I called you to get advice, actually. Seems like your mother might like to have a look at Mr. Saunders’s NCIC file, which I just happen to have a copy of. But I don’t know her well enough to know if she’d believe it. Sometimes people in love tend to be blind to reality. She might even resent my intrusion.”

“You really think she loves him?” He sounded disgusted.

“It’s hard to tell. The only time I saw them together, he was absolutely doting on her, and she was eating it up. But I really don’t know any more than that.”

“That’s my experience, too. They’re like lovebirds. Christ.”

“You know her better than I do. Would you like to spring the NCIC file on her?”

“I don’t know. I already had one big argument with her, and I don’t know if she would believe it, coming from me. Uh, what if you spring it on her?”

“I worry that she’d be suspicious of my motives for having it. She knows I’m investigating Melody’s death, so she’ll assume that I think Saunders is a suspect.”

“Which is true, or you wouldn’t have checked him out. But aren’t you checking out everyone remotely associated with this? So it’s part of the overall investigation, right?” He was obviously working hard to get me to break the news.

“I’d sure feel better if we did it together. And early in the day might be a good idea, if she’s still drinking in the evening. We need her sharp. What are you doing tomorrow morning?” I heard a huge sigh from the other end.

“Looks like I’m going to visit my mother with you. What time?”

* * *

Arrangements were challenging. Al Witherspoon and I agreed that it would not do to call Mildred that evening, because the chance that she’d be incoherent was too great. So we had to call her in the morning, talk with her, not “Spaulding,” persuade her not to start drinking early, and get her to come to brunch without him. This last part was turned out to be the easiest, because she wasn’t ready to go public with her relationship yet. It was the one before that presented the most difficulty, and it worked only by agreeing to take her to the Edgewater Grill in the Doubletree Hotel down by the river, which Mildred maintained served the best Bloody Marys in town.

I had time to go in to my office Friday morning, and the first thing I did was to find the second-to-last volume of Melody's diary. Feeling along the spine, I discovered a small key-shaped hard spot. When Sally stuck her head in to say welcome back, I was poking at it with a letter opener.

"Morning, Sally, and thanks—I'm glad to be back. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Just the usual. We helped the PD and the Sheriff's Office on that guy that got picked up Tuesday, but that's about it. Derek played peacemaker, I think. What are you doing? Can I help?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to get a key out of the spine of this book."

"Did you try opening it to a middle page, opening both covers past flat? Normally, you don't want to do that, of course, because it could break the spine of the book."

I looked up and shook my head, surprised that Sally would know to make such a useful suggestion. Setting the letter opener on the desk, I carefully opened the diary as instructed, and held it vertically. A little key plopped onto my desk. I peered into the tunnel between the spine of the cover and binding and saw a slip of paper near the top, which I was able to ease out with the letter opener.

"Thank you, Sally! Just the trick I needed."

"I used to work in the library at the high school. You'd be amazed what the kids used to pass around to each other that way."

"Stealth notes, eh?"

"Oh, that's not the half of it." Sally giggled. "I even found a condom one time, in the spine of *Dr. Zhivago*."

"A condom in *Dr. Zhivago*'s spine?"

"Um-hmm. It said on the package that it had 'pleasure nubs,' whatever that means. Uh, not *Dr. Zhivago*, the condom."

I shook my head, mentally changing the subject. "I don't even want to think about it. So what's on the schedule for today? I have a meeting downtown at ten."

"There's the directors' conference call at two."

"Oh, right. I'll be back in time for that, which is probably good, since I missed it last week. Could you tell Derek I'd like to see him, when he comes in? Thanks."

I saw that I still had an hour or so before I needed to leave for downtown, so I turned to my computer. I had created a new directory for the contents of the three CDs from Michael Shaughnessy's plastic bag, and now I finally had time to see what I had copied.

An hour later, feeling somewhat soiled from early-morning porn viewing, I made my way into the Edgewater Grill. I spotted Mildred Witherspoon and her son Al by the windows looking over the Animas River.

"Mildred—thanks so much for coming. Morning, Al." Because there was only water in the glasses—unless Mildred was drinking pure vodka at ten in the morning—I decided they hadn't been waiting long. "Mildred, I hope you're beginning to recover from your shock?"

"Oh, I'm making progress." There was bitterness in her laugh. "I promised to have only one Bloody Mary this morning. Compared to last week, that's progress."

"Maybe it will help if I tell you that I'm also making progress, progress toward learning about what happened to Melody. You remember we talked about my borrowing her diaries?"

“Oh, yes, I do, vaguely. Lee tells me some have disappeared, so I assumed that you have them.” Mildred’s news was unsettling to me, but there was nothing to be done about it.

“Yes, I do, and they’re quite safe. I’ll bring them back to you when all this is cleared up. They’re very helpful. For one thing, I found a key to a safe deposit box in one, with a note about the bank and account number. I think it would help my investigation to see what’s in that box.”

“What bank? And if we’re going to talk about Melody, I’d better get that one Bloody Mary into me. Where’s our waiter?”

“It’s a bank down in Arizona—it looks like a branch of the Tucson Bank and Trust in the northern suburbs. In order for me to get into the box, I’ll need a consent form from you. I took the liberty of bringing one, I hope that’s OK?”

“Sure, sure, here, let me sign it. Where’s...oh, there.” Mildred Witherspoon half rose out of her chair and waved at the other side of the room. A college student wearing an apron approached. Mildred took command.

“We’re ready to start ordering. I’ll have a Bloody Mary, a double.”

“Mom! That’s not one, that’s two.” Al put his hand on her sleeve.

She shook him off. “Oh, hush. You want some coffee or something?”

“Ma’am, I’m not sure I can get you a Bloody Mary. We do that on weekends, but I don’t think the bartender is here yet. Not until eleven.” The student had moved around to stand between Al and me, putting the table between himself and Mildred. She looked daggers at the young man, who seemed to shrink under her glare.

“Oh? Send the manager over, immediately, please.” And she waved a hand in dismissal. “Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Let me sign this thing.”

“Thank you, Mildred, this will be most helpful to my investigation. Now. There’s something else I’d like to talk with you about. As you can imagine, my investigation of Melody’s death involves looking at all possible angles. Because it’s so mysterious, we need to be sure to examine anything and everything. As a result, all sorts of curious information comes to light.”

“Yes? Oh, excuse me.” Mildred had been watching the approach of a middle-aged man from across the room. “Mr...ah,” she squinted at his little badge, “Mr. Spencer, your server tells me that there’s a problem with my ordering a Bloody Mary. I can understand how these students can be confused. Could you please see to it that I get one, a double? Thank you, very much.”

If Spencer was also confused, he disguised it well. After considering the situation for a few seconds, he made a decision.

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll make it myself. Right away.”

“Anyway,” I plunged onward, “one of the things I’ve done is to look into the backgrounds of everyone remotely connected with Melody and her friends and family. You and Al, of course, are not part of this, being her immediate family. But others, including for example, the director of the center in Arizona where Melody worked, and other people there, are. And there are some people here in Durango as well. Um, including Mr. Spaulding.”

“You’ve done a background check on Lee? How amusing. May I ask why?”

“It’s really just part of the routine of this type of thing. When we don’t have specific indications of where to look, we look everywhere. Al probably knows about this from his connections to law enforcement.” I looked his way for help.

“Right, Mom. And, well, I don’t really know, but I expect that Lee seems mysterious to the police because you and he haven’t really gone public, you know? They must be wondering who this person is who has moved in with Durango’s wealthiest widow.”

Great, Al. Some help, I thought.

“Usually we wouldn’t care. But because there’s been a murder, or so it appears, we’re interested in everything out of the ordinary. I hope you’re not offended, or anything.” I could see that Mildred was again watching something on the other side of the room. Must be the manager with her drink, I thought.

“Oh, thank you *so* much, Mr. Spencer.” Mildred took the tall glass with the stalk of celery in the red liquid, and immediately drained about half of it. “Ahh. Much better. Now. Um, no I’m not offended, just puzzled. You must be leading up to something.”

“I am. You see, there’s really no such person, officially, as ‘Leland Spaulding.’ There is someone, however, named ‘Lindon Saunders’ who has Lee’s fingerprints and looks exactly like him, someone who has used a number of aliases, all with initials ‘L-S.’ This Saunders person has a long history of relationships with wealthy single women, all of which relationships have ended abruptly. ”

“Oh, now I see. You’re worried about me. You, too, Al?” Mildred looked kindly at her son, and she reached over and patted his hand. “Well, that’s sweet of both of you.” She took her glass and drained it.

“But you don’t have to worry. You see, I’ve been rich and single long enough to know how to protect myself. In the safe in my study, there’s a dossier on Mr. Saunders at least two inches thick. I know all about him. But he treats me like a queen, he’s there when I need him, and he hasn’t asked me for anything, so far at least. And he smells good. When it all wears thin, I’ll be most happy to send him on his way with a fat check for his time.” Her self-assured smile seemed impossible to argue with.

* * *

Back in my office, I was finally able to regain my equilibrium. I knew I shouldn’t be surprised that Mildred Witherspoon was in control of her own life, but Mildred’s degree of confidence in her ability to do so had been unexpected. And it raised another question: could Mildred know what Intermountain Social Services was really all about? She was involved in a variety of community groups already, and, especially in light of her Saunders dossier, it would make sense that she would have the group her daughter mentioned checked out.

I had slipped Al Witherspoon a copy of Melody’s videotape when we were saying our good-byes in the parking lot and asked him to call me before watching it. So I wasn’t surprised when Sally buzzed my intercom to tell me that Al was on line one.

“Al? I guess we shouldn’t have been concerned about your mother, huh?”

“Hi, Annette. No, I guess not. She sure surprises me sometimes. So, um, I thought I’d watch this thing now.”

“Ah....you won’t want to do this with a group.”

“No, I’m at home. Oh, I know what you mean. I’m on the late shift this week, that’s why you caught me at the station last night. But I’m at home now. I’m off until six.”

“Oh. Good. The tape was made by Melody. In fact, it’s how I found out about the safe deposit box I got your Mother to sign the consent for, remember?”

“Oh, geez...”

“And I thought you ought to see it yourself before deciding when, and how, to show it to your Mother. But she’ll need to see it, too, because eventually she’ll be reading Melody’s diaries. I think this would be a good introduction.”

“What’s on it?”

“You’ll see. It’s Melody, talking. It appears to have been made a couple of weeks or so before her death. Um, watch the thing, watch it a couple of times if you want to, it’s short, and call me back, OK?”

I made a copy of the safe-deposit-box permission form that Mildred had signed, taped the key onto the original and put it into an overnight delivery envelope to Ross Townsend, and I also made a quick phone call to him to warn him about what was coming his way. The paperwork on my desk had piled up, so I dug in, concentrating on CBI matters that would likely be discussed in the afternoon conference call. After about a half hour, my intercom buzzed again. Al had called back.

“Al? I hope you’re OK to talk about this a little.”

“Oh, yeah. In fact, maybe that would help get me calmed down. I’m ready to go after that creep Lovett, wring his neck. Is he in the phone book?”

“Maybe, but we already ran him out of town.” I related the story behind Lovett’s departure. “But after hearing Melody’s comments, it’s clear to me that he knows something about the Intermountain enforcers, so I’m going have to look him up again.”

“Punch his lights out for me, willya?”

“Well...tell you what. Like it or not, I expect that all this is going to get around, sooner or later. All your friends, including the police and fire department people, are going to be on your side. What I’ll do with Lovett is tell him about this. It will keep him far away from Durango forever, I’d think. But what about Intermountain Social Services? You ever heard of them?”

“Sure. It’s common knowledge that they run Sizzles, at least among the people I know. I think there’s even a little footnote on the Sizzles sign on the door. You know, ‘Sizzles, a service of IMSS’ or something, which everybody knows is Intermountain. But I had no idea that Melody was hooked up with that bunch. Lord.”

“Do you suppose ‘common knowledge’ about Intermountain would extend to your Mother? Do you think she’d know about them?”

“Hmm. I guess it’s hard for me to imagine that she wouldn’t. She knows just about everything else about this little town. And she’s thorough, as we discovered this morning. So I bet she does.”

“Then she won’t be destroyed by what’s on that tape.”

“Huh? When she hears that Melody worked for Intermountain...”

“She already knows. Remember at the memorial service, Hal was talking with you in the receiving line? I was talking with your mother. And she mentioned that Melody worked with them. She talked about as if it were a community service group, or something like that, said they help under-privileged children.”

“I suppose it’s possible that they do, somehow. Maybe they have a public face that people like my mother would see. The people I know, and you too, are linked to law enforcement or the fire department communities. And we hear things that most people don’t.”

“Al, I’ve got an idea. Have you got time to hang with me a minute?” I glanced at the clock and saw that I still had an hour before my conference call.

“Let me try something. What if I type in ‘Intermountain Social Services’ into a Google search?” My fingers almost kept up with my words. “There we go... First hit, hmm, let me link to it...yes! A nice conservative home page about needy children and how people can help by sending money. Tax-deductible, even. Does your mother have a computer?”

“For sure. She’s probably the most computer literate person in town, for her age group, at least. In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if that’s how she assembled the file she has on Lee, I mean...what’s-his-name, Saunders. There are people-finding services out there that are highly effective, I’m told.”

“Maybe that explains it. She thinks Intermountain is a service group and that Melody was helping needy children. I guess maybe Intermountain has that web site to protect its real identity. Hmm. I saw one of their pictures with ‘copyright IMSS’ on it, just like that sign you mentioned. Let me try a search on that...Aha! IMSS doesn’t have a site of its own, at least not the one we’re looking for. There’s the International Mass Spectrometry Society, and the International Museum of Surgical Science, and some museum in Italy...and a medical imaging company. But Intermountain is missing. Oh, it seems to be mentioned on the real-hot-babes.com site, though, not Intermountain but IMSS. I also saw that URL on a picture. OK, so the tape is going to be something of a shock to her.”

“That’s for sure. Maybe I can catch her tomorrow morning when she’s still lucid. Give her another double Bloody Mary and turn it on.”

* * *

Fifteen

The conference call went on and on and on. And on. I asked Derek Petersen to sit in, and because he had been acting for me so much of the time in the past couple of weeks, I really didn’t have much to say. He spoke up every now and then from his office down the hall. I needed to listen, however, to keep up with what was going on state-wide in the CBI. But it was tough, because most of what was going on had to do with the budget, which was Derek’s territory. Crime-wise, things were quiet.

Just as I was nodding off for the umpteenth time, I heard my name mentioned, which jolted me awake.

“...found out about the person you asked about, Agnes Jefferson. And I think it’s worthwhile mentioning to everyone.” Rod Andersen was holding forth. “A Denver PD report had an Agnes Jefferson, black female, late twenties, found deceased in an alley near Five Points—that’s one of the tougher parts of Denver, for those of you who don’t know—dead of a heroin overdose, syringe hanging out of her, ah...” there was the sound of papers shuffling, “...left ankle. Several priors for prostitution. No one claimed the body. That sound about right, Annette?”

“I didn’t know she was African-American, but the drugs and prostitution fit. Is there a picture you can fax me? I’d like to see if anyone here can ID her.” I was thinking of the pictures in the James Lovett files as well as the women at Fanny’s.

“Will do. And, for everyone else, here’s the context.” Andersen cleared his throat. “Let’s see—there’s a company that’s close to one of Annette’s cases, an outfit called Intermountain Social Services. Agnes used to work for them in Durango and then in Denver. Intermountain runs the strip joints called ‘Sizzles.’” I heard various exclamations of recognition from the other listeners.

Anderson continued. “And we’re wondering if some of the girls they employ have been disappearing. Annette’s case involves such a thing, and here’s this Agnes Jefferson one.”

“Rod?” Being the relative newcomer, I still didn’t recognize all the voices, but I thought this voice was the guy from the Grand Junction office, Rory Furman. “Sounds like this Agnes Jefferson doesn’t really qualify as a ‘disappeared’ one, though. Just a dead junkie.”

“Except there were no needle marks on her, just the one that killed her. The Denver PD has a note about this in her file, but they just didn’t have the manpower to do anything more. Could have been a convenient way for this outfit to dispose of someone they didn’t need any more. Anyway, consider this a heads-up.”

“Rod?” I thought my new information would be relevant. “It might interest people to know that Intermountain operates like a stealth corporation. I did a web search on ‘Intermountain Social Services’ and found only a web site that solicits donations for under-privileged children.” I sketched the rest of the story for them. “We know that Sizzles is pretty open and public—they have to be to draw customers. But their parent company is almost invisible.”

“Did it look fraudulent?” It sounded like Furman again, offended.

“No, it looked legit. I didn’t follow up, haven’t had time to yet. But it’s actually smart. Think about it. Here’s a company that’s hiring young women, college girls, to pose for dirty pictures. What do the girls tell their parents they’re doing to earn money? There’s the Intermountain web site to refer the parents to. My victim told her mother it was volunteer work. Probably, others just say they’ve got a day-care type job, or something.”

“Annette?” Furman sounded more offended than ever. “Would you mind if I go after this? My wife runs a day-care center, and she does lots of volunteer work for kids. This sleazy outfit needs shutting down.”

There was a nasty laugh from someone, and a voice said, “Rory, you sure she’s not working for Intermountain, are you?” But no one else laughed.

“Bite me, Harmon. Geez.”

“Calm down, guys, calm down.” Rod Andersen used his Director-is-not-happy tone of voice. “Rory, I think that’s a good idea, especially because it’s not confined to Denver, or Durango or Grand Junction. That OK with you Annette?”

“Sure is.” I was relieved to have someone else take on that new task. “And I’ll have some more information shortly from Arizona. I’m hoping it will be a list of their enforcers. That should help you, Rory.”

“Damned straight. I’ll enforce them, is what I’ll do. Buncha damned perverts.”

“OK, good. Now let’s see.” Again, Rod Andersen shuffled papers audibly. “OK, that’s about it except for one last thing—something I’m sure you’ve all been waiting for—succession planning. Ever since we made the moves in the Durango office and instituted their plan, I’ve heard nothing but good things from the Governor’s office. So I want to start a discussion of succession plans. Someone I talked to called this the hit-by-a-truck theory of management. No one is indispensable and every organization should have a plan for succession in case something happens to people in critical positions—if they get hit by a truck, for example. Let’s start with you, Harmon.”

My plan was in place and being used as an example for the others, so I tuned the whole thing out. At least, I thought, I avoided having my “To Do” list get any longer. Rory Furman has a good idea, but I

sure don't want to follow up on it. And he seems awfully bent out of shape about Intermountain. Maybe he has teen-aged girls.

I was snapped out of my reverie by the blinking light, my other line. The rest of the conference was droning on without me, so I put them on hold and pushed the blinking button, just as Sally stuck her head into the office and held up a hand-lettered note, in big letters, that said "Ross Townsend on 2."

I nodded and, into the phone said, "Ross?"

"Hope it's not a bad time, Annette."

"It's the weekly telephone conference with my fellow CBI division directors. But I'm fine to escape for a while. Hang on a sec, can you?"

I put my hand over the receiver and said to Sally, "Tell Derek I'm on another call, could you? He can cover for me." Sally nodded, and I went back to the phone.

"Sorry, I'm juggling various things here. What can I do for you, Ross?"

"I just wanted to follow up on your interview with Elwood. The transcript makes it look like he's going to let Lyle take the fall."

"Fall? Oh, you mean for Alvarez?"

"That, and the attempted assault on Officer Kinney."

"Hmm. Assuming that she decides to press charges. I think we might have some ability to persuade her either way, depending on what seems like a good strategy. Also, in the Alvarez case, Lyle will take the fall assuming there's sufficient evidence to rule the death a homicide, right? And that's in the hands of a grand jury, right? So it's going to come down to what Elwood says to them."

"With the transcript of your interview as evidence, of course, so he'll need to be consistent." Townsend's chuckle made it sound as if he didn't think that Elwood would have much luck with consistency.

"Right, and there's also the testimony of his deputy, the one with Lyle when they raided the motel, um, Henry what's-his-name, the guy who wasn't very happy with the whole thing."

"Reeves. Henry Reeves. Anyway, it'll be amusing. And, by the way, we're all set for tomorrow, when the key arrives. We'll get a court order, and I'll send Sandra Kinney to the bank to retrieve whatever's in that box."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. Is this going to work?"

"We checked with the bank and it's open until one. I've got a judge all lined up for the order, so I'm sure we'll be able to get what's in that box. Want me to send it to you?"

"If it's not too many pages, could you fax it back here?"

"Will do. Otherwise, I'll FedEx it to get there Monday."

"Perfect. I'll be sure and look for it."

"Whoops, now I've got another call. I'm expecting one from my boss, so I'll be in touch, OK?"

"OK, talk with you later, Ross." There went my excuse for skipping out on the rest of the conference call.

* * *

The conference call finally ended at about 4:30—after 2 ½ hours of mostly bureaucratic blather, I was free. Even though I had been wearing one of those lightweight, hands-free telephone headsets, I had a sore ear. I decided to head home a little early because I would be coming in the next morning to look for the fax from Arizona. I started to pack up, but just as I was about to walk out the door, my phone rang again. Aarrgh!

“Annette? Fred Winders. Listen, we’re going to have to release Michael Shaughnessy soon. You want to question him or anything?”

“What happened? Did he make bail?”

“Your favorite shyster is involved, and he forced the issue of bail and paid it.”

“Stepwood? Hmm. I guess that makes sense—he seems to be on retainer to Intermountain. What’s the schedule?”

“We have until about seven this evening to finish up paperwork.”

“You got him downtown?” I heard a grunt of assent. “I’ll be right up.”

So I wasn’t going home after all, but at least I was headed in the right direction. The main police station, where Fred had Mikey Shaughnessy entangled in paperwork, was about half-way home.

On the way across the river and up the hill to the station, I thought about strategy. Stepwood would have to be present, of course, and I needed a briefing from Fred before doing anything. No point in covering the same ground all over again. But my interview with Elwood was still fresh in my mind. He wasn’t at all happy with Michael’s choice of employer, and that might be useful information. And the quantity of that powdery stuff that Fred had sampled was sufficient to be an issue, if it really was a prescription drug. People who cart large amounts of prescription drugs around need to do it the right way. Furthermore, Michael was clearly on his way to New Mexico with the stuff. Maybe, I thought, I could make an issue out of that. Threaten to bring in the FBI to look into interstate prescription drug-running, or something. That wouldn’t scare Stepwood but it might scare Michael, especially combined with implied threats from his Uncle Elwood.

But that strategy would depend on what that stuff was. At the stoplight near downtown, where US-160 peels off to the west, I punched up Gil Taylor’s number on my cell phone.

“Hello? Gil Taylor here.”

“Gil, Annette Trieri. How’s the mystery substance business?”

“Booming. Nobody seems to know what they’ve got, and they all want me to tell them. What’s up?”

“I’m calling to find out if you did an analysis on some white powder for Fred Winders at the PD. He probably would have brought it by on Wednesday morning.”

“Are you in on this one, too?”

“I’m going to interview the guy who was carrying it right now. Fred’s already worked him over, so I need a new angle. But that depends on what that stuff is.”

“I figured out what it isn’t. Any of the usual suspects, I mean. Nothing on the controlled list. So I had to ask Fred for a hint, for what he suspected it is.”

“So he told you his ‘experience’?”

“Ah, well, what do you know about it?”

“He told me the whole thing. I had a lot of trouble not laughing my head off. Fred and I go way back, and I’m glad for it. Otherwise, I think my giggles would have offended him.”

“Oh, OK. I didn’t want to give away any secrets. It seems like he could be sensitive about it.”

“I’m sure he is. And I’m sure he appreciates your discretion.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, his hint put me on the right track. I looked up the formula for tadalafil and figured out how to identify it. And there it was.”

“Formula for what?”

“Tadalafil. That’s the short name of a very complicated chemical formula that’s the active ingredient in Cialis. What’s interesting is that the powder was almost pure tadalafil itself, with none of the fillers that Cialis pills have. Potent stuff.”

“That’s what Fred thought.” And, God help me, I started giggling again. Fortunately, Gil laughed, too.

Between chuckles, he went on. “Fred told me they had several ounces of the stuff. Considering that Cialis comes in doses of a ten milligrams or so, they could have something like ten thousand doses there.”

“This is a prescription drug, so it seems like the guy they caught with it was probably playing fast and loose with the law, huh?”

“You’re the law. But, you know, if it was me, I’d just claim that I had a prescription for it, but I didn’t have the documentation on me.”

“A prescription for ten thousand doses of Cialis?” My giggles evolved into real laughter at the thought. “Isn’t that the stuff that’s supposed to work for three days? So that’s what, something just shy of a hundred years’ worth? A lifetime’s supply?”

“Oh. Right. Well, that does seem unrealistic. But can you bust him for having it?”

“I’m thinking maybe I can put a scare into him. But I’m afraid his lawyer will call my bluff. Anyway, you told me what I needed to know. Thanks, Gil. And, if it makes you feel better, this just might help me find Melody’s killer.”

“You know, I’ve been wondering. There wasn’t any information about how she died, in the papers or anywhere. So she was murdered?”

“It sure looks like it. And it wouldn’t surprise me at all if there’s some connection to that tadalafil—is that what you called it?—that tadalafil powder you analyzed. Thanks Gil.”

By the end of this conversation, I’d made my way through traffic to the Durango police headquarters downtown and managed to find a parking place. Friday afternoon on Main Avenue was in full swing, and the town was hopping despite the cool fall weather. Just thinking about so many people having so much fun put me in a good mood, and I actually began relishing the possibility of running into Arthur Stepwood again. The old Randy Newman song “Short People” popped into my head, making me smile. Artie, I thought, was surely one of those with no real reason to live.

But my smile faded and my mood darkened when I walked in to the police station. Maybe I should have used the back door instead of entering through the main lobby, because the lobby was where I ran into Stepwood. I was ready for him, having that song in my head, but not the guy he was with. He had a predatory look about him, and he smelled of some kind of leathery cologne, that old horse blanket aroma without the rancid sweat.

“Well, well, Annette Trieri.” Stepwood was wearing a condescending smirk. “I kind of thought you might be down this way. Figured you’d come down to talk with my client before they let him out. I need to introduce you to Tory Dowd, another client of mine. Tory, this is the director of the local Colorado Bureau of Investigation office, Annette Trieri.”

I was certain that Dowd knew my name, but he did a fair job of pretending he didn’t and acting impressed. I couldn’t resist a little dig.

“Oh, a client of Artie’s? Are you just getting out of jail, too?” But it hardly fazed him—he just tilted his head back and laughed.

“No, no, not this time.” And he looked straight at me with a boyish grin. It took me a second to realize that he was used to charming people and that he had me in his sights. But because I knew his occupation, I was vaccinated against his contagion. I decided to ignore him.

“Mr. Stepwood, you’ve guessed right—I’m told that there will be a few minutes before all the paperwork on your client is in order, so there’s time for me to chat with him briefly. Should I assume that you’d like to be present?”

“Why would you want to talk to him?”

“A couple of reasons. One thing we in the CBI do is follow up on local arrests with respect to how law enforcement agencies treat suspects, you know, Miranda rights, no brutality, all that. I’d like to ask Mr. Shaughnessy some questions about how the sheriff’s people treated him. And I also need to talk with him a bit about his uncle.” The blank look on Stepwood’s face was well worth my trip downtown, never mind the results of the upcoming interview.

* * *

And that was a good thing. Except for the opportunity to yank Arthur Stepwood’s chain, the interview turned out to be a waste of time—about all I got of Michael Shaughnessy was the civilian equivalent of “name, rank, and serial number.” Stepwood just wouldn’t let him answer questions about anything relevant. I mentioned that I’d been in contact with Michael’s uncle, and that did get something of a rise, but Stepwood managed to smooth that over as well.

The one thing that got *my* attention was a remark by Michael Shaughnessy that his job with Intermountain was a combination of errand runner and computer programmer for their web site. That got me to thinking about the possibility of finding information about Intermountain on the real-hot-babes web site that would relate to Melody’s list and her experience with IMSS.

So Hal and I spent our Friday evening exploring the sleazy world of on-line porn, at least Intermountain’s little corner of it. I got him involved because he’s much better with computers, and besides, I just didn’t want to do it by myself.

I sure am glad that he’s an even-keeled guy, otherwise it could have been a disaster.

I was coming down the hall with cups of coffee I’d gone downstairs to fetch when I heard a soft “Uh oh.” Hal’s dismay was almost tangible.

“What happened?” I set his cup on the desk and looked over his shoulder at the computer screen.

He shook his head and sighed. “Did you ever read those old, classic fairy tales when you were a kid? The Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen? I vaguely remember one about a woodcutter who had this problem with his axe, or his trees, or something. Every time he chopped a chip out, two more instantly grew in its place. Most frustrating. And he had to get the tree cut down to rescue the princess, or some such thing. Well, watch this.”

His screen was covered with little windows showing women in various stages of undress, and I watch as he moved the mouse to the little “X” that would close the topmost one. He clicked it and it vanished, but two more instantly popped up in its place. He closed one of them, and two more appeared just after it disappeared.

No wonder the screen was getting so cluttered, I thought.

“So, what’s happening, anyway? That never happens on my computer.” And I was glad that it hadn’t—I think I would have unplugged the thing and thrown it in the trash, or maybe the river.

“They’ve structured their windows to do this. While you were downstairs, I had to agree to an ‘I am over 18 years of age and I agree to blah blah blah’ button. It was blocking the part of the site you want to see. So I agreed. And then this started happening. Let’s see if I can fix it.” He reached around to the back of the computer box and extracted a wire. “If the network is disconnected, it can’t possibly do this. I hope.”

His next mouse click succeeded in closing a window without opening any new ones, and he cleared the screen by closing all the windows. Pictures of naked women, several of well-muscled, hugely endowed naked men, and a variety with couples doing lascivious things to each other disappeared in succession.

“So that’s that? You just unplug the network?” Maybe, I thought, I wouldn’t have to trash my computer after all, should this happen to me.

“Let’s see.” He fumbled with the cable, feeling behind the system box for the right connector, and I heard it click into place. Then he opened his internet browser program.

“Oops. That’s not my home page. It got changed.” It didn’t seem as if he was angry, just surprised.

More little windows started appearing every few seconds, a few with naked people but many others as well, advertising all sorts of things, even some that looked legitimate. It took only a minute before his screen was completely filled again with overlapping ads.

“Wow. This is remarkable. I must have agreed to have some software installed or something. It’s reaching out to some kind of advertising server. I need to stop this.” And he reached behind the computer and extracted the wire again. The ads stopped popping up.

“Now what?”

“We didn’t accomplish what we set out to, that’s for sure. We got ambushed instead. Um, I guess what I’d like to do is to use a different computer for this search of yours and fix this one later. I’d rather not use this one any more for this, because it’s the good one. I’ve got an old computer up in the attic that I’ve been meaning to give to the thrift store. It’s set up with only a browser, and it won’t matter if all this weird software gets installed on it. When we’re done, I can just wipe its disk and rebuild its operating system from scratch.” He was shaking his head in disbelief.

It took only a few minutes for him to dig out the older computer and set it up. He hooked it to the network and the monitor and the other gadgets, and we were back in business. Before too long, the screen was covered with pornography again.

Hal, however, was reading a page he had printed, the page with the “...I agree to blah blah blah...” on it.

“How odd. The only thing here that could refer to this software that got installed is the privacy statement. The reference to it is in a slightly different shade of blue, see?” He held it up for me and pointed. “It must be a link to another place that discusses it, a link that isn’t obvious and that you get only one chance to read. Man. These guys are insidious.” He was shaking his head again.

We went back to the screen and spent an hour or so exploring around on the IMSS-related web sites, including the one called real-hot-babes.com and a variety of other ones that specialized in various peculiar sexual tastes.

And then we hit pay-dirt—emphasis on “dirt.”

The part of the site that advertised videos teased viewers with still shots, and I recognized Melody in one of them, dressed as she had been in the last photo-shoot before she was killed. Hal didn’t recognize her for the makeup and the clothes, which from his perspective were quite unusual, but I knew what to expect. The page advertised previews, so we picked one.

And there was Melody, taking those clothes off, swaying to some un-heard music— Hal hadn’t hooked speakers to this particular computer. At one point she looked at the camera, and her expression was even more distant than in the photographs I’d seen. Vacant.

Hal noticed it, too. “She looks drugged. Totally spaced out. And that makeup sure makes her look different. I wonder…”

He stopped because, now completely naked, Melody was sashaying across the room, and as the camera panned another person had appeared, male, seen in profile with his head turned away from the camera. She dropped to her knees in front of him and began unbuckling his belt.

“Aw, Melody, geez…” Hal sounded sick.

But we were spared the details, because just as the scene was becoming explicit it also became censored, via that trick of blurring the parts of the picture with big squares the way they do on TV when they don’t want to show someone’s face.

Except the face wasn’t the part of the anatomy being obscured in this case.

The blurring was followed by an ad that told us we could obtain the uncensored, complete episode if we merely provided a valid credit card number via the IMSS secure site.

That, however, was less interesting to me than what I noticed just before the blurring started. The man in the scene had placed his right hand on the back of Melody’s head, and I noticed a pinky ring, an unusual one with what looked like the head of a snake on it, with green gemstones for eyes. It wasn’t visible for more than about two seconds, but that was long enough for me to recognize it.

I’d seen it earlier at the police station on the little finger of Tory Dowd’s right hand.

* * *

I woke up a little when Hal finally came to bed, but it wasn’t until Saturday morning breakfast that he told me about it. He got up first and was toasting a bagel when I came into the kitchen.

“So, did you get your good computer fixed?” I yawned and reached for the coffee pot.

“I’m not sure. We’ll see. And I don’t know whether to be mad or impressed. That software that installed itself was some piece of work, taken altogether. I guess if I ever meet the guys who planned it all out, and I happen to have a gun, well… I expect the next thing would be that you’d have to arrest me for manslaughter or something.” The bagel popped out of the toaster, and he began to slather it with cream cheese.

“So what happened? How did all that work?”

“A whole suite of software got installed, some of it legitimate, in the sense that you could probably buy it and put it to good use. There was a nifty clock synchronizer, a program that goes to the National

Institute of Standards and Technology website and uses its atomic clock to set your computer's clock. And there was another program that supposedly scans for viruses or something like that. But they were all strung together in a way to reach out and grab ads almost continually, and they were installed in places where you wouldn't normally look. Also, they were archived in such a way that if you uninstalled them, they switched on some kind of master program, one with a really innocuous name, something like 'winweb.' To all the world, it looks like a part of the operating system, but what it really does is to check all of this bogus software and tell it to reinstall itself if some of it's missing. Damn." And he was shaking his head yet again. "Also, you'll be glad to know, a huge, long list of porn sites got added to my list of favorite web places, and the site that the home page got reset to was really a front for more porn sites."

"How did you find all this stuff to fix it?"

"I've got a couple of utilities that track weird software down. For example, one utility looks for what's called 'spyware,' programs that report to their owner what your computer is being used for. A lot of that stuff got installed with names similar to lots of other names. There was a number of new program directories that I knew shouldn't be there. The hard part was finding that master program, webwin or whatever it was called. I kept killing things off and they kept reappearing. Very frustrating, especially at two in the morning, I can tell you. And that wasn't even the end of it. There were some other things that kept changing their names every time they re-installed themselves." This time he just shrugged.

"I'm sure sorry that I got you involved in this."

He walked over and kissed me. "Oh, don't worry about that. I guess I consider it an educational experience. I mean, I've got all these firewalls and virus filters on my computer, but this still happened. It just goes to show how delicate the balance is; I mean, how easy it is to bypass all that stuff if you agree to one little thing."

He smiled. "Besides, just think how much of a problem this would have been if you'd used your computer at work. For all I know, this software can copy itself across a local network, like the one inside your office. So your staff comes to work on Monday and guess what's all over their computer screens?"

"Oh, yeah. That would make the Governor happy, wouldn't it? But, well, I'm sorry. You don't bring your work home like I do." I was feeling guilty as hell for involving him and causing so much trouble.

"Hey, it's fine, really. And we found what you were looking for, didn't we? But it sure was a shock, seeing Melody like that. In her video tape, I mean, the one she narrated for her family, she said she wasn't doing real sex videos. So I wasn't quite prepared for that. At least it stopped before things got too far. I mean, I can imagine what happened next, but I really didn't want to see it."

"She must have crossed the line just recently, after she made that tape for her family. Maybe it was the drugs, or maybe the threats she talked about. Extortion or something. I'm really sorry to have dragged you into this." I apologized again.

He smiled again and hugged me. "C'mon, it's OK. Honest. Besides, I've got a plan for a little revenge. I'm going to give that old computer to Tim Langer. I didn't uninstall any of the software, and so it's got the complete record of what happened when the software installed itself. I bet he can reverse engineer it. The IMSS web site is going to get itself hacked." His grin, somehow, was both self-satisfied and mischievous.

That comment caught me in mid-yawn, so it took me a minute to understand its implications. Tim Langer, I knew, was a computer hacker extraordinaire, a student at the University whom we had caught and rehabilitated. The last I had heard a few months back was that after graduation he was in line for a

computer security job at the electronics conglomerate where we'd caught him hacking in. He was so good his victims wanted him to work for them.

"You're not going to do anything, um, illegal, I hope?"

"*Moi?*" Hal looked as innocent as a cat with yellow feathers in its whiskers. "Last night, one thing I did was to go back and start over, and I read the privacy statement that I noticed the first time through, or I guess it was the second time, all that garbage. And it doesn't say anything about software getting installed on the user's system, no warnings, no nothing. So what IMSS is doing is hacking into the computers of people who browse their web site, and they're doing it in a dishonest way, by using that 'I agree...blah, blah' button to get access. And surely they're not doing anything illegal. So neither will we." Now he just looked smug.

"So what are you going to do, or have Tim do?"

"I'm not sure exactly what's possible. I'll leave that up to Tim. One thing I thought of is to change some of their little information windows that pop up, like the one that told us how to get a copy of Melody's video. Make it say something like 'How would you feel if you recognized this woman as your sister or your daughter?' If we could do it in a way that the IMSS programmers couldn't un-do it, at least not easily, well, that would be fun. Another possibility would be to create a big pop-up window that warns people that they are likely to get their systems hacked into if they go any farther. Generally speaking, I thought of warnings, stuff like that."

"I guess the best thing for me to do is to pretend I didn't hear any of that—although off the record, more power to you, of course. So, did you manage to capture any of those video frames with the ring?" I'd gone to bed while Hal was working on that.

"Yep. Several, from three different previews. One is very clear—the hand with the ring along with a recognizable view of Melody's face. Is that what you wanted?"

It was exactly what I wanted, and I felt triumphant when I drove down to the office after breakfast with color prints of the ring frames in my briefcase. And I felt all the more triumphant because Hal had also managed to capture and print some frames of Melody still dressed in the same clothes she was taking off in dated pictures from James Lovett's files—dated the weekend she died.

Although the pictures were something of a triumph, I still had a long morning ahead of me. Waiting for the fax from Ross Townsend, I knew, would require my trying to be patient and not fidgeting too much. Although I really didn't expect anything until noon, I decided to type up my notes from the interview with young Mr. Shaughnessy.

The fax finally arrived about eleven, and I was reminded again that almost everything in criminal investigations is a matter of timing. At that point I knew Michael Shaughnessy would be out on bail hanging around town somewhere unless he was violating its conditions. It didn't matter that the fax came after he was released, because Melody didn't mention him.

But Tory Dowd didn't have any such conditions restricting his travel, so he could be anywhere. And he was the one that Melody talked about the most in those papers that Sandra Kinney had retrieved from the safe deposit box. That tidbit, combined with his role as the stud in Melody's porn videos, made me really, really want to talk to him—and not for social purposes.

* * *

The rest of Saturday, I decided, would need to be spent trying to track down Tory Dowd. I had the notion that he would probably be making himself invisible, but this isn't as easy here as it is in real cities—Durango just isn't that big a place. Besides, I thought, a guy who drives a high-end BMW isn't set up to blend in.

I was tempted to call Derek Petersen, to put his computer-search wizardry to work on the problem, but I decided that could wait until Monday. I've learned that having willing and ready employees, not to mention smart and motivated ones, is a privilege not to be abused. They're too hard to replace.

I didn't find Dowd in any of the obvious places to look—the telephone book and so on—and I was thinking about what to do for lunch, when Sandra Kinney called from Oracle. It made me feel better, somehow, to know that Arizona law enforcement also worked weekends.

“We made an image of the hard disk in Kelly Rumsford's computer, Annette. He was demanding the computer back so he could complete his research work, or his thesis or something, and we really didn't have any reason to keep the whole thing. But what this means is that we're able to have it available for you to look at without coming down here. I thought you might be interested.” Her voice had that enthusiasm that I remembered from my early days as a cop.

“Have you looked at it, I mean, looked at what's there, on the disk?” I was wondering whether Rumsford might have purchased those porn videos with Melody and Tory Dowd.

“Just briefly. And I can see why he wants it back, there seems to be a lot of some kind of data, along with several chapters of what looks like a long technical paper, probably his thesis. But there's also a huge amount of stuff relating to our victim. His own pictures, like the ones we saw in his apartment, candid shots, and lots of porn he undoubtedly downloaded.”

“Did you run across any videos? I'm asking because we discovered that she made some, you know, with sex scenes, just before she was killed.” I explained what Hal and I had found the night before.

“There's a directory called 'videos' with movie files, yeah. But I haven't looked at them at all. There's just so much that I haven't had time. But, look, you can see it. We've got it on a server and I had the computer guys create a login for you. It's got a password and everything.” She carefully spelled out two complicated strings of characters and told me the name of their computer. “The computer guys don't want you to change these, because they don't want anyone else to have access to this stuff. Beyond the evidence thing, there's the problem that we don't want the media to find out that we have porn on a state computer.”

I had to laugh. “I understand. ‘Arizona State Patrol Porn Site’ is not a headline that you or Ross needs to have the governor see, right?”

“Or that we need to have anyone else in the department see, for that matter. The computer guys are way paranoid about this. They're sweating bullets that someone will find out. But it's evidence, for crying out loud, and we've got to keep it somewhere.” Her indignation was beginning to show.

“And, in terms of its being against policy to have porn on your computers, it's flat illegal to have cocaine and so on, but I'm sure there's some in an evidence room somewhere. So I'd take that approach with this whole thing and not worry about it. I mean, if it's got passwords like this one, no one's getting in there by accident.” I was hoping that a matter-of-fact approach would calm her down. “Besides, I have the feeling that you won't need to keep those files around very long. Rumsford isn't a suspect, or at least not more than a weak accomplice-type suspect. I'll spend some time today looking through the files for anything that might be useful. Maybe they can be taken off the system and burned onto a disc or something. You folks must have a DVD burner there.”

“That’s a great idea, Annette. Let me know when you’re finished, and we’ll get them off-line. That’ll keep the evidence intact and keep the computer gurus happy, too. Oh, and before I forget, the results from the examination of Rumsford’s car came in.”

I had completely forgotten about that. “Did they find anything?”

“No, and that’s the strange thing. It’s a 1987 Honda Accord, with almost two hundred thousand miles. Various minor scratches and dings on the outside and, for that aged car, the appropriate amount of wear and tear on the inside. But except for the driver’s seat, there was no hint that anyone had sat in the car. The seats are worn and all, but there was nothing there, you know, threads, hairs, the usual stuff that we’d find. The investigator, and this was someone I know, a good guy, he suggested that maybe the car had been detailed in the last couple of weeks, or at least very thoroughly cleaned—vacuumed, dusted, scrubbed, polished.”

Because of my preoccupation with Melody’s porn videos, on which I thought I might find a better picture of Tory Dowd, this didn’t really sink in. I made a mental note and filed it away for future reference.

I resumed my search for Dowd, but, because I didn’t know how to find the real thing, I spent some time looking for a virtual version of him on the Arizona server that Sandra had told me about. The most logical place for that was in the video in which I’d recognized his pinky ring, but finding that particular video was something of a crap shoot. Kelly Rumsfield had at least two dozen of the short movies in his ‘videos’ directory, named in various ways. Most appeared to relate to clothes— “BlueDress.mpg” caught my eye because that was what Melody had taken off at the start of the video in question. But that was simply a strip-tease, apparently made earlier than the one with Dowd, because Melody didn’t look so spaced out, so vacant. Also, her makeup wasn’t so shoveled on. Quick looks at several others with clothes-related names proved that they were also just strip-tease clips.

That turned my attention to the other names, and I finally found the one I was looking for in a file with the prosaic title “BlowJob.mpg.” There was Dowd’s ring on the hand on Melody’s head, and then, past the point at which the censoring on the preview had occurred and after several shots of Melody’s face stuffed uncomfortably full of Dowd’s anatomy, there was his head—his face wearing an expression of over-acted ecstasy. Just what I wanted. I didn’t bother to watch the video to its inevitable, messy end.

The shot of his face was the perfect thing to tie him to her. Her list was part of the puzzle, but the two of them together in that video was really the keystone. I was almost certain that now I’d be able to obtain an arrest warrant for him—for precisely what charge I wasn’t sure, but I was confident that something would occur to me.

My earlier thoughts about the importance of timing in investigations welled up in my mind—something about the timing of Melody’s death began teasing me.

A week or two before she died, she became concerned for her own safety, concerned enough that she made a videotape confessing her other life and providing information about a safe deposit box with a list of her blackmailers. In the confession, she implied that her other life did not include full-out, hard-core pornography.

A day or two before she was killed, she returned to Durango for what turned out to be her last photo-shoot with James Lovett, which involved her wearing and taking off a blue dress. To all appearances, she also made her first real sex videos in that time frame. They were undoubtedly her last.

Then she was killed and her body was buried in the East Asian tropical rainforest at EcoARC.

Shortly after that, apparently, IMSS decided to go ahead and market her sex videos. Whether she was alive or dead was not their concern, it seemed, just profits.

The treatment of people like meat was a hallmark of the sex-for-profit industry, I knew. But this seemed like a new low, and it happened in my town, on my turf.

There was no doubt in my mind that I'd figure out something to charge Tory Dowd with.

* * *

After a few minutes of teeth-gnashing over this IMSS sleaziness—exploiting a dead person for profit, someone I knew personally, no less—it dawned on me that the reason I was able to link Tory Dowd so closely to Melody was Kelly Rumsford's obsession. He had downloaded Melody's sex video to his computer.

Although my computer skills are nowhere near Hal's or Derek's, I do know a few tricks. It took me only three tries to figure out how to view the dates on which the files on Rumsford's computer were created—the dates had clearly been preserved when the Arizona DPS people made the hard-disk image, because they were not all the same. Most of them seemed to be the dates I'd seen when I'd examined Rumsford's computer during the search of his apartment. And the date on the video was the day before Rumsford had found Melody's body. Which meant that IMSS had wasted no time at all getting that video up and for sale. Forget post-production work—just get the raw footage out there to generate profit.

It also meant that Rumsford wasn't quite slimy enough to have downloaded a sex video of the person whose dead body he had already found. That made me feel just a tad better about him—not much, but a little. I mean, if he'd downloaded that video, say, on that Monday, well ...

Rumsford had passed the physical we'd subjected him to on Thursday night—no scratches anywhere—so he wasn't my prime suspect for Melody's murder. But it was clear to me that he was involved more than he was letting on. Call it my intuition or something like that, but there was something more than he had told me. Two interviews and incomplete candor: something or someone had a powerful hold on him. During the first interview, he would have been motivated to hide his obsession with Melody, of course. But that couldn't have been holding him back during the second interview, two days ago, I thought. What could it have been?

As I was pondering this question, I heard the front door to the office suite close and realized I'd forgotten to lock it. Our office hours normally don't include weekends, and there's no receptionist out front, so when any of us comes in, we keep the door locked.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" A male voice I almost recognized sounded lost, and I walked out to the waiting room to see whom it belonged to.

"Why, Tim Langer! How nice to see you again, Tim. Whatever ... oh, wait. I bet I know why you're here."

"Oh, hi, Ms. Trieri, um, no one was here when I came in ..."

"Right, it's my fault. We're not really open for business on Saturdays, normally, at least. I just forgot to lock the door behind me when I came in to get a few things done. But you're welcome to come in. Come on back to my office and have a seat." I jerked a thumb over my shoulder and led the way.

He hesitated, but with a little urging I managed to get him seated in my office. I decided I would save him the trouble of broaching the subject.

"So, I bet you came to see me because my husband called you and you're worried about getting into trouble."

He looked startled. "Well, yeah, that's about it. Are you in on it, too?"

“Oh, no, in fact I told him I didn’t want to hear about it. But this morning I discovered some things that will guarantee I look the other way. What did he tell you? Or ask you to do?”

“Dean Weathers said he and you were looking on a web site for information related to one of your cases, and his computer got a virus from it—except it sounded to me more like what we call a ‘Trojan Horse’ than a regular virus. He said it installed lots of nuisance software on his computer and wondered if I could reverse engineer it to get back at them somehow.”

I just waited patiently, wearing my best poker face, looking at him. He squirmed in his chair and finally continued.

“Um, see, all the technical stuff is easy. We, I mean, he and I would have to figure out a strategy for getting back at them and all, you know, *what* to do. But *how* to it would probably be a snap. Except because I promised you I’d go straight I’m not sure I should. See, I’ve got a job lined up next spring, after I graduate, with that big company I tried to hack into before, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.”

“Hmm. I guess I need to steer this conversation carefully. First, everything we’re saying here is off the record, OK?” I stared at him while he looked surprised and finally nodded slowly.

“And there’s no way I can give you permission to do this. All I can do is to pretend I don’t know anything about it. That’s why I told Hal I didn’t want to hear about it. But I’m glad you came by, because even though I don’t want to hear about it officially, it’s a good thing for me to know about, unofficially. That’s so I can head off trouble if any should arise.”

“So, it’s OK?”

“I told you I can’t give you permission. But I will say, way, way off the record, that nothing would delight me more than to have the company that runs that web site look like a bunch of idiots. And if it costs them money, well, gee, that would be a shame.” I hoped my smile would provide him with the unofficial encouragement I wanted to convey.

“I’m still a little concerned about my job next spring.”

“You spent time with Chuck Shure, right? That day or two in the basement apartment, when you and he and Jamie were kidnapped? Do you think he would object to Hal’s little plan?” When I rescued the three of them, they had been working on a weapon with which to electrocute their captor, so I knew Shure to be a fan of guerilla warfare tactics.

“Mr. Shure would probably help us, if he knew about it. But I’m worried about their computer security people, the ones who are going to hire me.”

“How about if I call Chuck, put in a good word? Of course, I’m assuming in all this that you won’t get caught by the IMSS computer security people.”

“IMSS? That must be the target, huh? No, I’m certainly not going to get caught.”

“Intermountain Social Services. If you look that up, you’ll find it’s a charity. But the real organization behind the charity is a porn outfit. They run the strip bar here called Sizzles, and they also market porn on their web site ... you’ll be hacking into a porn site, so if that’s going to bother you, I mean having to view lots of pornography, you’d better call Hal and bow out.”

“Oh, a porn site, huh? Dean Weathers didn’t tell me that. So, you and he were surfing a porn site? For a case?”

I felt a blush sneaking up my neck, and an overwhelming urge to explain took over. “It turns out that a woman who went to school here at FSU got killed in Arizona, and we found out she was modeling for IMSS. So, we were looking for information about her on the web site. And, uh ...”

I realized how lame this must sound, just like the perps that I'd picked up throughout my career, all of whom seem to think that they have to explain themselves, all of whom sounded utterly insincere. Hey! I really don't need to justify myself to a college senior, I told myself.

"Anyway, we eventually found the information I need for the case, but Hal's computer got all this Trojan Horse software installed on it in the process. Ticked him off. So he thought that you might be able to extract some revenge."

"He told me what he has in mind, changing the warning and so on, putting in pop-ups to make users feel guilty. But I've got some ideas, too. You probably don't want to hear about them, though." Langer smiled in a way I knew was supposed to make me ask, but I didn't.

"Just be aware that IMSS seems to play rough if things don't go their way. I don't want to see you get hurt over this, OK?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm an expert at covering my tracks. Thanks for listening—I've got to run. Dean Weathers is going to bring me a computer, the one with the software on it." I saw him to the door and locked it behind him.

As promised, I called Charles Shure, president and CEO of UNELECO, and someone I knew well enough from that previous case that I had his personal number. Surprised to hear from me, he could only laugh about the purpose of the call. He hadn't heard that Tim Langer had been hired by his computer security department—a multi-billion-dollar corporation is just too large for the CEO to know everything—but he let me know there wouldn't be any problems for Tim, no matter what happened with the forthcoming IMSS caper.

And he also mentioned he was looking forward to seeing me later in the evening, at a cocktail party and reception at the university—something about the FSU Foundation and corporate donors that Hal would be attending with, Shure hoped, me. I managed to cover up the fact that this event was news to me and promptly called Hal.

Hal and I have a relationship that allows each of us whatever flexibility we need for our careers, and we're able to schedule plenty of time together as well. About the only thing I do that might be considered to be part of a traditional wife's role is to let Hal show me off at university events such as this reception that Shure mentioned. Because I work in law enforcement, a culture that doesn't provide much in the way of dress-up opportunities, I've come to enjoy these activities. But Hal usually lets me know about them well ahead of time.

What, I wondered, do I have that I can wear this evening?

* * *

Hal was contrite, embarrassed, even. "Tonight? Oh, *man*, I completely forgot about it! I mean, it's on my calendar at the office, but I just forgot to tell you. I think you were out of town when it got scheduled for me, and I just spaced it. And it's tonight, or, rather, this evening, at six at the faculty club. Can you manage?"

I considered just how much blood I should try to extract for this little goof.

"As far as I know, but, gee, I'm not sure I have a thing to wear..."

"I guess I owe you one. Surely there's something across the street, over at the mall, that I can get for you?"

“You mean at Sears? Yeah, right. Listen—don’t worry. I’ll stop downtown on my way home in a little while and see what I can find there. What kind of reception is this, anyway? What are you wearing?”

“Suit and tie. It’s not truly formal, but it’s dress-up. I’ll probably wear that dark gray pin-stripe suit, the one I call my funeral suit, remember it? With a white shirt and a tie suitable for the evening. The reception’s one of those affairs that President Black arranges for potential corporate donors, and if he got Chuck Shure to come, it must be a big deal. I’m supposed to go and schmooze the guests, impress them with all the nifty high-tech research that the college is doing, the usual stuff like that. But you know how much I enjoy having you with me at these things.”

And I like them, too. Hal is adept at maneuvering me onto center stage, and I have fun showing off. There’s nothing like wearing a knock-out dress of some kind, and standing in the middle of a group of rich industrialists and mentioning what I do for a living. It’s amazing how quickly their eyes shift from my décolletage up to my face.

“Tell you what. I’ll find something to wear to the reception and you can take me out to dinner afterwards for not telling me sooner. I think maybe a little shopping would be therapeutic anyway, get my mind off all this filth I’ve been dealing with lately.”

“Speaking of which, any progress?”

So I told him about Melody’s list, finding a clear picture of Tory Dowd in the video, and the visit from Tim Langer.

“I’m just about to leave to take Tim the computer. And we’ll be careful, don’t worry. You said that this guy Kelly had all of Melody’s videos and so on filed on his computer? Sounds like he’s got a problem.”

“Yeah, he admitted to an obsession. He also took his own pictures, candid shots of her wherever he could get them, probably on the EcoARC campus. Those aren’t porn, of course, but they fall into the same obsessive behavior pattern.”

“But he’s not on Melody’s safe-deposit-box list, huh? So she saw him as more of a nuisance than a threat.”

“She used the word ‘stalking’ in a letter to her brother, Al, but that list is what she was really worried about. Oh! That reminds me ...” I scribbled a note to myself. “I need to check on one more thing, and then I’ll go see what kind of slinky new outfit I can find for tonight.”

“Well, good luck. I hope you find something, although I think you look great in just about anything. Or nothing, not that I’d suggest that for tonight. It’s supposed to be cold. And I’ll make reservations at downtown for a late supper. And, listen, I’m sorry I forgot about this reception, darlin’.”

I tried to reassure him that it really wasn’t a problem and then turned my attention to the note I’d scribbled—“KR’s clean car?”

Although all five of us in the search on Thursday had been preoccupied with the pictures of Melody on the walls of Kelly Rumsford’s apartment, it hadn’t escaped my attention that he couldn’t be described as a meticulous housekeeper. Put simply, the place was a mess—what you’d expect from a single, male graduate student. Horizontal surfaces covered with layers of dust or empty pizza boxes, overflowing trash cans, and a bathroom that needed a high-pressure steam cleaning.

How was it that his car was so clean that the DPS investigator found nothing except traces of Rumsford himself on the steering wheel and driver’s seat? Some guys, I know, are compulsive about

their cars, keeping them clean and shiny and scratch-free. But this was just an old Honda with more miles than it deserved, not a candidate for a show car.

The only reasonable answer was that he recently cleaned it carefully, or had it cleaned, and all traces of its other occupants had been eliminated. Despite my suspicious nature, I've come to realize that there are such things as genuine coincidences in life, and they even happen in relation to cases I'm investigating. Sometimes.

But not this time, I thought.

* * *

I have this ambivalence about shopping. Early in our relationship, Hal cured me of the compulsion of driving all over town to find the best price on potatoes and other groceries—and in return, I cured him of compulsive use of cookbooks—but I still like bargains. I'm definitely not a recreational shopper, one of those people who goes to malls to pass the time. I shop for specific things I need (or want), and I don't like wasting time at it. But I do enjoy finding what I'm after, especially if it's on sale.

This time, I struck gold, black gold. Not oil, but a barely decent, little black Donna Karan, probably left over from summer because its price was down to where I could afford it—definitely not a cold-weather garment. Cut low and high—I don't mean in the Puritanical sense—I just fit into it. It would work, I decided, only if I didn't have to sit down or bend over—and from experience I knew that these receptions consisted entirely of standing around talking to people. Also, later at the restaurant, I'd be sitting with my legs under a table, so that would keep me from getting arrested.

On the theory of not going half way, I also found a pair of black stiletto pumps with three-inch heels. These would make me about an inch taller than Hal, and the men at the reception would line up like dominoes waiting to be knocked over.

One of the virtues of a short haircut is that it doesn't have to be "done" for special occasions such as this. As a result, I was able to get home, change, and be ready to go out by a quarter to six. Hal was waiting to go, watching some college football game or other, and when he heard me say "I'm ready," he turned off the TV and stood up. Then he took one look at me and sat back down, eyes a-goggle.

Success! I thought.

"Holy...uh, you know, most of these rich guys that I'm supposed to schmooze at this reception are old, way older than Chuck Shure or me. And the purpose of this thing is to weasel donations out of them, not to give them heart attacks. At least not until they change their wills in favor of the U. You're gonna kill half the guys there."

I walked over to him and pulled him to his feet, and then I stooped the inch necessary to kiss him.

"Oh, they'll survive. And just think how much fun you'll have when I leave with you, with all of them watching and wishing."

"Hmm. Well, promise me one thing?"

I just stared the question at him, and he smiled.

"Promise me that I get to help you out of this little number later, OK?"

That was an easy promise for me to make.

He stepped back and looked at my shoes. "Oh. That's why you're so tall. I'm betting you don't want to walk up the hill in those."

Our house—and it's been almost a year now since I began to think of it as “our” house instead of Hal's—is on Eighth Street, below the mesa that the U sits on. It's a short hike up to get there. I thought about doing it in the shoes I'd bought.

“No, not really. On the other hand, I don't know if I can get in and out of your car decently, either. Maybe if I stood real still, you could take me up there on one of those mover's hand trucks, so I wouldn't have to bend over or sit.” Suddenly self-conscious, I pulled at the hem of the dress, which turned out to be at about my knuckles.

“Hmm. How about taking your car? It's not so low-slung as mine, and maybe you can get in and out of it more easily. And I won't park where there's a crowd. Besides, you'll want a coat. It's chilly, at least for that dress, or, or whatever it's called.”

The coat was a good idea, and not only because of the temperature. It gave me something to take off when we got to the reception. Provost John Martin ran into us going up the steps into the faculty club, and he started on a harangue about some administrative matter or other with Hal. Martin continued the harangue while we approached the coat-check, run by a student group—and I took off my coat.

The student, a bulky one, probably one of the football players, who was taking coats stopped and stared, his mouth open. There was the briefest pause in the background conversation among the dozen or so other people in the ante-room, which told me that I'd been noticed. Even John Martin reacted.

“...and I think what we need to do, Hal, is to ensure that there is a more uniform approach to the development of course syllabi next semes...” Like the student, his mouth was hanging open.

I reached out and poked his arm. “‘Semester,’ John, the word is ‘semester.’ Now, John, I need a glass of wine, and then whom should Hal and I talk to first?”

Martin tried to talk but succeeded in producing only a small gurgling noise. He was spared further embarrassment by a familiar voice behind me.

“Annette Trieri! My, my—you look stunning, especially because, if I recall correctly, the last time I saw you, you were wearing a CBI jump suit of some kind and a kevlar vest.”

We all turned, and there was Charles Shure, looking me up and down.

“This,” he said, “is probably not as functional for police work, but it's certainly my preference. How are you, Annette? Hal, good to see you again.” He stuck out his right hand to shake.

We walked off toward the bar, leaving John Martin and the student coat-checker staring after us.

Charles Shure, one of the twenty or so most powerful industrialists between the Mississippi and the West Coast, had built UNELECO from a family electronics business that his grandfather had started after World War II. The company had since branched out to include just about everything from mining to timber to agriculture and all the associated manufacturing. Most recently, they were moving into the world of biotechnology.

Shure, however, was still a computer and electronics nerd at heart. The previous summer he had become closely involved in my case concerning serial murders of more than a dozen environmental activists. He, along with Tim Langer and a woman from the university had been kidnapped by the man behind it all, in large part because of a mistake of mine. That I was the one who led their rescue evened things up in my mind, but Shure still seemed to feel in debt to me. Mostly, that just meant that he was friendlier to Hal and me than was his usual style.

As he guided us through the crowd, Shure lowered his voice a notch. “So, Hal, what's this I hear about you and Tim Langer scheming against some porn outfit? So you'll know why I know, Annette

called me to get reassurance that Tim won't lose his job opportunity with us if your little plan goes bad somehow."

Hal looked startled, but he tried to make the best of it. "Annette and I were surfing this web site, looking for information related to a new case of hers, and I got a bad virus from it. Tim says it's probably what's called a 'Trojan Horse.' Whatever it's called, it installed lots of nuisance software on my computer, software that was a bitch to uninstall. It took me several hours to get the whole mess cleaned up, and I bet most people would never get all of it uninstalled—they'd just be stuck with it forever. I decided to see if Tim and I could figure out how to, um, extract a little revenge."

By then we'd reached the bar, and Shure, used to being in charge, ordered me a glass of Chardonnay, Hal a Perrier on ice, and himself a Crown Royal, neat.

"And Tim, I take it, is going to do the actual hacking for you. Well, good. I want him to keep his hand in. That'll make him more valuable to us next spring. Annette told me that our computer security division is going to hire him."

I took a sip of my wine and glanced around the room. Surreptitious glances slid my way and quickly elsewhere. The men were licking their chops, and the women were sharpening their claws. We're having fun in the old town tonight, I thought. Time to get to work.

"Chuck, I don't mean to be rude, but Hal's supposed to schmooze you and the others here for donations. As I recall, you're already one of the U's biggest supporters, so we'd be ungracious to hit you up for more. But we should probably go after some of the others. I think that President Black over there is watching Hal's technique, sizing him up for a promotion or something." I nodded toward the end of the room to my right.

Shure broke into laughter. "Are you nuts? Annette, he's staring at you and trying not to step on his tongue. I bet he doesn't even notice Hal standing here, or me, either."

I worked at suppressing the blush I felt starting. If one got going, people would see it long before it got up to my neck.

"Besides, Annette, Hal, you don't want to schmooze those other guys, you want to talk with me. I remember your telling me, Hal, that you're ready for a sabbatical. Well, I've got an offer for you. Want an interesting job?"

* * *

Seventeen

Hal and I, being two highly trained, experienced professionals holding responsible leadership positions in our respective organizations, stared at Shure like a couple of morons.

But maybe he didn't notice—at least he didn't immediately withdraw the offer.

"C'mon, let's get away from the center of the crowd." He started leading us over toward the side of the room, to an empty spot where we'd have more privacy.

"I came to this little soirée because President Black asked me to. He told me, just like you did, Annette, that he wasn't expecting me to pony up more donations. He said he just wanted me here to draw the others. I guess he was able to tell these guys that I'd be here so they ought to come, too. Anyway, here I am and I have two things I want to accomplish. I need to talk with Jin-Rae Kim about

his grassland sequestration work, and I want to talk with you two about this sabbatical business. I don't see Professor Kim yet, but Josh Black assured me he'll be here." He was looking around the room.

"Chuck? Professor Kim was one of the last people to see the victim in my current case alive, so I definitely want to come back to this." Bells were ringing in my head.

"Huh? Sure. How strange." Shure was obviously surprised.

Hal chimed in. "Moreover, this victim was Kim's student before she got her post-doc, and she was the one doing the grassland sequestration work."

"'Curiouser and curiouser, said Alice.' Well, fine, when he gets here, that'll remind us. But since you're here, let's talk about this sabbatical business. You up for it?" Shure's mild smile belied, I knew, shark-like business acumen.

"Up for a sabbatical? You bet. My administrative assistant is going to retire in December, and I don't have the energy to train a new one. I want to go back to teaching. And a sabbatical first is my reward for being a dean all these years." Hal and I had talked about this many times, and by now it wasn't a question of whether, just when and how.

"So, how would you like to organize and, for a while at least, direct a new climate institute I want to set up?"

Hal almost managed to hide his surprise. "Fascinating. Tell me more. I have to say that I didn't think climate was part of UNELECO's portfolio, though."

"Our interest is from the perspective of computing. See, Hal, UNELECO has developed some new computer chip technology that increases processing speed significantly. We've also used this technology to improve networking. We want to find out if this new technology will have commercial potential. Proving the chips and the advanced networking out at a high-visibility research institute like I have in mind will provide us with a leg up on marketing. And, as a computer weenie myself, I'm personally embarrassed at how far behind the rest of the world both our supercomputer technology and our climate modeling efforts have become, and I want to do something."

He took a small sip of his whisky. "All this came up when I was on a committee convened by the Secretary of Commerce. We were supposed to look into competitiveness of the U.S. computer industry, and it turns out that the Europeans and the Japanese are way ahead of us in climate modeling. It has to do with what kinds of computer chips we make here. Climate modelers like big mainframes that require specialized, expensive processor chips. U.S. industry tends to make chips for small, personal-computer-type systems. You can link these small systems together in clusters, but clusters have limitations that hinder climate modeling. And some other kinds of modeling, too, but I suppose climate came up because the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is part of the Department of Commerce. The Secretary had climate on her mind, I guess."

"So what's your interest, specifically?"

"Like I said, we, I mean my company, UNELECO, we have this new, really fast processor chip, and we also have a new networking technique that involves some innovative memory management techniques that take advantage of our new chip technology. I thought we could put the two together in a configuration that would be optimal for climate modeling. Between the tax write-offs for a non-profit institute, the marketing potential, and the real-world test-bed for our products, I figure it's a winner for us. But I need someone I can trust to set it up and make it go."

"I'm flattered, Chuck. And intrigued. But you must have an idea of what kind of budget would be involved, and facilities and so on. Also, a time line for the institute as a whole. Do you envision something that will, you know, last forever? Or is this a short-term thing?"

“We’re going to be developing new computing technologies for the foreseeable future, so I’d say ‘forever,’ at least in the sense that it’s to be ongoing, not just, say, five years. I suppose that it’s possible that the climate problem could be solved someday, so we’d need to have other candidate problems to work on, problems requiring big computer horsepower. So maybe we shouldn’t call it a climate institute. And as for facilities, I thought we’d find a chunk of land somewhere and build one. A campus of some kind. I’ve got somewhere in mind, actually.”

“And budget?”

Shure’s serious expression evolved into an mischievous smile, and he gave me a nudge with his elbow. “Budget? Well, now, this sounds like a negotiation. Should I assume you’re accepting an offer to do this?”

Hal laughed. “Consider me a consultant at this stage. Budget for the institute is important, though, because if it’s under-funded, even with the best computer in the world it will fail. And doing climate is an expensive proposition, as several federal agencies have discovered. We’re talking millions per year, tens of millions, in fact, plus facilities.”

“How about a billion-dollar endowment?” Shure’s poker face was inscrutable, and I could see Hal trying not to let his jaw hit the floor. He took a few seconds to find his voice.

“Ahem, well, yes, that would be very helpful. Perhaps even adequate. Especially if it’s invested aggressively. Um, and if the computer hardware is donated, or something like that, at least the big iron.”

“‘Big iron’? Oh, you mean the heavy-duty processing capability. You’ll have to put up with the new experimental chips we’re making, but you can have plenty of those. What I’d like to do is to put together a system that benchmarks at least in the top five in the world, hopefully at the top. It would be nice to beat IBM to the peta-flops benchmark, for example. Production runs of whatever climate models you adopt should be pretty fast, I’d think.”

Hal looked surprised, and I could tell he was impressed. But I had no idea what that meant, so I asked.

“Hmm? Oh, that would be a computer system capable of a billion billion floating point operations per second, a peta-flops it’s called. A system like that would revolutionize climate simulation in this country, if it could be utilized to its full capability.” Hal thought for a minute and then continued. “But it would depend on the system architecture and how well we can match models to it. Those benchmarks are really nothing more than stunts to produce big numbers, and production runs are usually way slower. But, still, that level of compute-power is what climate modeling in this country needs to get revitalized. And related to that is the need to build on what’s been accomplished so far, to work with the federally supported climate research community and so on. There’s no point in reinventing wheels for this.”

Shure nodded. “Absolutely. That’s one of the reasons I’ve been looking for property up in the Fraser Valley, in eastern Grand County. It’s just across the Front Range from Boulder, where the National Center for Atmospheric Research and NOAA are. And it’s close enough to the Denver airport—a couple of hours, except in rush hour, I think—to make it fairly easy for people from all over to visit. I’ve already made arrangements with the railroad, I’m on the Board of Directors, to put a fiber bundle through the Moffatt Tunnel to get a hundred or so gigabytes per second networked over to Boulder. I figure we can work with the folks there, provide computer resources for them, stuff like that. Also, I’ve got some leverage with respect to land. Turns out that the church group that rents space in my headquarters building has a youth camp there, if you want a campus out in the woods. I can make them an offer they can’t refuse.” Shure’s smile wasn’t quite chilling, but I could see how it could be.

I’d been listening to this conversation with only half my attention—the business about peta-flops piqued my interest a little, but mostly I was thinking about how I could arrange my CBI job to

accommodate a move away from Durango. I was also watching the room, having positioned myself against the wall we were near. Because I could see the door, I spotted Professor Kim before either Hal or Chuck Shure did.

“Excuse me. You guys keep talking, but, Hal, don’t agree to anything yet, OK? We’re going to have to talk about all this. Anyway, I just spotted Professor Kim, and I’ll go get him.”

* * *

Frémont State University takes pride in its diversity program, and both its faculty and student body sport a fair number of Latinos and American Indians. African Americans and Asians, however, are in short supply, at least in comparison to the California schools. And among the Asians at FSU, people of Korean extraction are far and few between. So I didn’t have any trouble recognizing Professor Jin-Rae Kim, despite having met him only briefly at Melody’s memorial service a couple of weeks back.

I wriggled my way through the crowd toward the entrance where I’d seen Kim, grateful for my additional height because of the improved visibility. The crowd, to my relief, parted for me, as if the men were afraid to touch me and the women just didn’t want to.

When I got close enough, I re-introduced myself. “Professor Kim, I don’t know if you remember, but I’m Annette Trieri, Hal Weathers’ wife—we met at Melody Witherspoon’s memorial service. Hal is talking with Charles Shure over by the wall over there, and I’ve come to take you to them. Mr. Shure would like to speak with you.”

“Ms. Trieri, how nice to see you again, and may I say you look truly beautiful. Do you suppose we could detour by the bar so I could get a drink?”

“A good idea, I need a refill.” I held up my empty wine glass. And it was also a good idea from my perspective because I wanted a minute or two with Kim for my own purposes.

“Professor, Charles Shure mentioned that he wanted to talk with you about carbon sequestration. I understand that’s what Melody was working on.”

“Quite right, and she should be the one to have this conversation. But, well ...”

“It turns out that I’ve become involved in the investigation of her death. I think I mentioned to you before that I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I recall you said that you had seen her on the Saturday afternoon before her body was found down in Arizona. I wonder if I could ask you more about that?”

“Of course, although I’m not sure there’s much more for me to tell you.” We’d reached the bar by that time, so he turned to the bartender. “Ah, a gin and tonic for me and, what’s that, Ms. Trieri, white wine?”

“Chardonnay, please. And no one thinks they have anything to tell me, but it’s remarkable how little details are often critical to investigations such as this. Do you know why Mr. Shure would be interested in carbon sequestration? UNELECO isn’t an oil company, is it?”

“No, no, but they do own vast areas on the Colorado eastern plains. Ranches they’ve bought up over the years. Mr. Shure’s people contacted me a while back about how they might improve the quality of the soils with different strains of grasses, apparently for the future. They seem to believe that someday there will be a sufficient supply of water to allow agriculture out there, not just cattle grazing but actual farming. First, though, they need the soil to be in better shape. More recently, there’s an interest in this carbon sequestration issue, because they think they can make money on it. But, as I said, they really need to be talking to Melody.”

“So they wouldn’t want to stop Melody’s research, or anything like that?”

“Oh, my goodness no. On the contrary, I think they would have funded her research after her post-doc, if she’d only lived to get a faculty position somewhere.”

“You told me before that Melody came to see you on that Saturday, I guess it would be three weeks ago, at your laboratory, in the afternoon. She brought you some reprints of an article, right?”

“That’s right. And she still had her keys because she let herself into the building and into my lab. It was about four when she came to see me, and we talked for, oh, for about an hour, I guess.”

“You were probably talking about how her post-doctoral appointment down in Arizona was going, stuff like that?”

“Yes, mostly. She asked about some of the students she knew, students who were a year or two behind her. But mostly we talked about how her research was going.”

“And how *was* it going?”

“Quite well, by all accounts. She had good things to say about the Eco place, about their facilities and so on, and she was talking about several more research papers.”

“Did she say anything about specific people at EcoARC?”

“Let’s see. She mentioned that her dryland grass sequestration work wasn’t the only carbon-related research there. The deputy director, Art Finnegan, I remember meeting him when he was here last spring, he was working on oceanic carbon sequestration, so the two of them had talked about doing a joint paper. She said they drove up from Arizona together, but she was going back with someone else. Something about some kind of conflict, or something. I assumed she meant a scheduling conflict.”

“There were rumors about an affair.”

“Really? How odd. I never knew Melody to have much of a social life. She told me once that when she was an undergraduate, here at FSU, she had such a busy time of it with her sorority and all that she just got fed up. So she decided, when she was finishing her graduate work, to focus only on her research. She would hang out with the other students in my group sometimes, but they’re mostly workaholics.”

“Hmm. Maybe as a post-doc, she decided to resume her social life, at least a little. You said she was planning to return to Arizona with someone else. Did she say with whom?”

“I didn’t get a name, but she said something about a guy who had a crush on her. I think he’s a graduate student at EcoARC. He was picking her up at five, so I walked her outside. She got into a Honda of some kind, a sedan. Not a new one.”

“Would you recognize the driver if you saw him?”

“Maybe. She got in and lowered her window to say goodbye a final time and I leaned down to shake her hand. I didn’t know how final it would really be, or I wouldn’t have let her go. But I got a look at him. Do you think he’s who killed her?”

“That’s the same question I’m asking myself. First, I need to show you a picture of someone to see if we’re thinking of the same person, though. Tomorrow’s Sunday— could I stop by your home with a photograph? It would take only a minute, literally.”

“I’ll be home all morning, please do stop by. I’d feel much better if this whole thing were cleared up, and I’d be delighted to help.”

“I think you already have, Professor. Let’s go find Chuck Shure and my husband. I’ve got to get out of here—there’s work for me to do.”

* * *

Late the following afternoon, I was on the last Sunday flight to Phoenix. It was beginning to feel as if I was commuting to Arizona for my job, and it was getting old.

This made the discussion that Hal and I had over breakfast the more pertinent, because the prospect of working somewhere besides Durango and Oracle seemed intriguing.

“You know that I’ve been thinking about this sabbatical business for a long time, and now that Alice is finally going to retire in a couple of months, it’s time for me to do it.”

“And it certainly sounded like Chuck Shure had an attractive offer for you.”

“Right, although it isn’t my only alternative. I’ve been working on something else, something to keep me working for the State of Colorado. But I thought about it most of the night—didn’t get much sleep, actually—and I might just be able to do both. But I’m worried about you. You just started for the CBI—when?—last April, or May? I’m sure not leaving town without you, and I don’t want my plans to screw up your career, either.”

“I’ve been wondering about that, about how to make it all work. I slept like a baby, though, after what you did to me last night, so I’ve still got to figure it out.” I’d winked at him at that point.

“You told me I could get you out of that little dress, and, you know me. One thing leads to another.” He’d winked back.

It was a good thing I was alone in the row of seats on the airplane, or someone surely would have asked me about the silly grin on my face. And there was no way I wanted to explain it.

In some ways, that breakfast conversation was the highlight of my day. Of course, I made progress on the case, even though it was Sunday, but my heart wasn’t in it. For one thing, the news that Kelly Rumsford had continued to lie to me in our second interview was flat-out depressing. When Jin-Rae Kim positively identified him from among the stack of mug-shots I showed him, I couldn’t even get mad. Just more depressed. Now I was going to have to arrest him for obstruction, something that I really didn’t want to have to do.

Then there was Art Finnegan. He’d lied to me about some things—that he didn’t admit to being in Durango was especially troubling—but most of those things could have been construed as being unrelated to Melody. But if they drove to Durango together, he lied about something directly related to her—another case of obstruction.

Unfortunately, all I had on that was hearsay, Jin-Rae Kim’s account of a conversation with Melody. It probably wouldn’t be enough to support an arrest warrant, although it might be worth a shot. Arresting Art Finnegan was a priority for me. I wanted him to have a physical exam as soon as possible, one that would find any scratch marks he might have before they could completely heal.

About the only thing I remember about that flight was that, at Flagstaff, the same wannabe cowboy who had groped me the previous week came walking down the aisle toward me. Even though the flight was only about a third full, he obviously had me in his sights, because he was headed straight for my row. But he must have recognized me from the last time, and I was spared another encounter when he kept going right on down the aisle, toward the back of the plane.

And he didn’t even say hello. Rude, rude, rude, I thought.

I finally arrived at the Marriott in Oro Valley at about ten-thirty. Even though it was too expensive, it was close to the State Patrol office, and I needed pampering. I ordered a snack from room service—just before their closing time—and settled in.

That Sunday was the first day of standard time in Durango—Halloween was later in the week—so it was the same time there and in Arizona. I called Hal to talk more about our future, something I'd been thinking about on the plane and during the drive down from Phoenix.

"Hey there, I got here. And I even managed to get a room service order in before they closed. A nice crock of French onion soup."

"Was your flight OK?"

"Just fine, a row to myself and everything. Couldn't ask for more. It gave me time to think."

"You figure anything out?"

"Not specifically, but I sure am tired of commuting to this job in Arizona. What I did decide is that there's got to be a way somehow for you to do this sabbatical thing and for me to make my job work. I just don't have all the details filled in yet."

"I haven't agreed to do it. I'm just considering it. And Chuck didn't give me a deadline or anything." I could visualize his shrug.

"But that's why it's such a good offer. No pressure, a situation that seems as ideal as you could invent it yourself. A great location, seems like."

"You remember we went skiing there, right? At Winter Park – Mary Jane, when we drove over Berthoud Pass and those thugs who were chasing us crashed?"

"Sure. You said you were also working on alternatives for your sabbatical, though. What's that about?"

"Nothing firm. But remember our picnic on Labor Day? When I talked about moving out of town to somewhere less crowded?"

"When you were shouting at me because my ears weren't back to full strength yet, after that explosion, right. It sounded like a wonderful dream. You mean you want to make it come true?"

"Here's what I was thinking. I've been talking with people in Denver, at the Colorado Commission for Higher Education. It's the group that coordinates all the state colleges and universities, and they have opportunities for people to do internships, help them out with planning for future educational needs, stuff like that. I thought I could do a stay-at-home sabbatical, travel around working on issues for them and oversee building our new house in the process. I don't have a site for the house yet, though. We'll have to find some land somewhere."

"But you could still do this consulting for the Denver people from Fraser, right?"

"Maybe, on a reduced basis, certainly not full-time. I expect that organizing that institute for Chuck would take most of my energy."

There was a knock on the door, and I walked over to let the room-service guy in. He set up my food, I signed the tab and gave him a cash tip, and Hal and I were alone again.

"Well, whatever you do, I'm coming with you, so that's that."

"Was that your food I heard? Don't let your soup get cold."

"It's got one of those cheese crusts. It's not getting cold any time soon."

"So what's your day like tomorrow? You going to be able to get home?"

"I hope so, but I doubt it. Probably Tuesday evening. But I think I may wrap this thing up on this trip, so it'll be the last."

“You be careful. I worry.”

* * *

He *sounded* worried, and that stuck with me until the next morning. Then, I got so busy I didn’t have time to worry about Hal’s worrying about me anymore.

The first thing to happen was a call from Ross Townsend so early it woke me up. I’d left him a phone message telling him I would be at the Marriott, so his call wasn’t unexpected. But his news was.

“You’ve probably got a schedule all planned out, Annette. I’m sorry to do this—but the grand jury investigating Elwood’s operation is convening today, and the first thing they want is to talk to you. I’m thinking you ought to be done by noon. If it’s any consolation, I’m after you.”

“You? Why?”

“Probably one of the things they want to talk about is your appointment. Elwood’s been bitching about it, and they probably want to understand your status better. But they’ll also be asking you about your investigation and about that cut-up tee-shirt that Rudy showed you at the meeting. They’ll ask me about your appointment and so on, and about our investigation of Elwood’s department.”

“So we’re friendly witnesses, then?”

“Most definitely. The guy who’s running the show works for me. So it’s not a threat, it’s just a time sink.”

“Now I understand, Ross. But, listen, there are some things I need to get done. Will this grand jury meet up in Casa Grande? Because if so, I need to hit the road. Can you set some things in motion for me?”

“What do you need?”

“Another arrest warrant for Kelly Rumsford, and for him to be picked up and detained for questioning, my questioning, at the Oro Valley State Patrol offices. This time we charge him with obstructing and destroying evidence. He’s lied about when he last saw our victim, Melody Witherspoon, and I have a witness who made a positive ID of him from the pictures we took last time we brought him in.”

“So it’s just obstructing, not murder?”

“We don’t have any real evidence of murder, but the destruction of evidence is getting close. See, Melody got into his car in Durango, and my witness thinks they were headed back here. So if that’s true, she rode from Durango to Oracle in his car, alive, at first, at least. But the car’s too clean to show any signs of her, meaning he cleaned it to eliminate them. Destruction of evidence. Obstruction compounded. Because of the grand jury, I won’t be able to meet with the judge, but maybe we could talk on the phone. I’d think that whoever gave us the previous warrant would spring for another one with this new information.”

“Not a problem. We’ll have Rumsford at Oro Valley by noon, assuming he’s not left the state.”

“OK, good. Thanks. I’ll be making phone calls from my car on the way up to Casa Grande, and I’ll probably see you there. Ross, I think I’m getting close to clearing this Witherspoon murder.”

“Good to hear, Annette. I’ll see you in Casa Grande, no doubt.”

I didn’t know where I’d be that evening, so I packed up my things and checked out of the Marriott. I also spent a few minutes loading up my cell phone’s memory with several numbers I’d need on the road.

The first call was to Bill Longwell. I tried his cell phone not knowing where he'd be, but it turned out he was in his office.

"Yeah, I just came into work like you suggested last week. No one seems to know about my little tiff with Detlef, so I'm still in charge, it seems."

"Bill, there are a couple of things I need to talk with you about. I'm on my way to a grand jury hearing, though, and this afternoon I have to question a suspect down in Oro Valley. Can we talk a minute now?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"First, I'm going to see if I can get an arrest warrant for Art Finnegan, on a charge of obstructing the course of an investigation. I don't know if I can pull it off, because part of the background is hearsay. But there's no reason to think it's not true. It seems that Art and Melody drove up to Durango together the Thursday, or maybe Wednesday, I guess, before she was killed. And he lied to me about that. You understand that this has to remain between us."

"Of course. I've been wondering about him lately. Somehow this doesn't surprise me."

"OK. The other thing I want to talk about is that data you sent to Hal. He and I looked at it last week, and he wasn't sure of what some of the numbers meant. Did he ever call you about it?"

"No, he didn't. He sent email thanking me, but he didn't ask any questions."

"Hmm. He must have forgotten. We got kind of busy over the weekend. Anyway, do you know what those numbers are? What I mean is, Hal made graphs of them—there were several different things that he plotted as a function of time. He identified one of them as carbon dioxide, from its values, and he thought another one might be isoprene because its numbers were so small—he called it a trace gas. But there were others he couldn't identify. Can you?"

"Not off the top of my head, but I can look into it. You say he made graphs? Do you know how?"

"I think it was some kind of spreadsheet program. They weren't very sophisticated, but they did show lots of cycles of these gases, or whatever they are, up and down and up and down over time, with some of them going all the way to zero every now and then. If this is the record of the gases in Art's experiments, it would be useful to know what they are. Maybe some of his behavior could be explained if we knew what was going on."

"Hmm. Maybe it's more than just gases, maybe there are critter counts in there. The zeros could be what Melody mentioned about all the forams dying."

"Maybe. That's what I need to understand, though."

"OK, I'll look into it. Are you staying down in Oro Valley again?"

"I did last night, but I've checked out. I don't know yet where I'll be tonight. Can I call you this afternoon?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh, and did you ever find out anything more about those goons who attacked you and ended up the worse for it?"

"Nothing. But it coincided with Art's acting more strangely than ever, so I'm wondering what's going on."

"Hmm. I'm beginning to think they were enforcers for a bunch that Melody was involved with, people that Art may just be involved with, too. I'll let you know more when I do."

“Enforcers? What is this, some kind of mob thing?”

“Something like that. I’ll be in touch.”

* * *

Eighteen

During the rest of the drive up to Casa Grande, I kept thinking about that statement to Bill Longwell while dodging morning traffic. I’d taken a shortcut from Oro Valley over to the interstate, and once headed north at 85 miles per hour—I was merely trying to keep up—I discovered just how eager people in Tucson are to get to their jobs in Phoenix.

Why, I wondered, had I suggested that Art Finnegan is involved with the IMSS crowd? Not that I’d explicitly named IMSS to Bill, but that’s what I must have been thinking when I said to him that Art might be involved with the same bunch that Melody was.

I’ve learned to trust my instincts, and a subliminal Freudian slip such as that must, I thought, mean something.

Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Art was part of Melody’s safe-deposit-box list, not at the top of the list like Tory Dowd, but on it nonetheless. Melody hadn’t trusted Finnegan, but I’d been assuming that was because of the difference in power in their relationship. Yet, as Bill had mentioned at one point, that power differential actually worked to Melody’s advantage, because she was sitting on an automatic and pre-decided sexual harassment claim, if she had chosen to pursue it.

On her confessional videotape, Melody had said that “some guys” at EcoARC had found her pictures on the internet. That sounded like more than one. Who besides Kelly Rumsford might have found them? Could Art Finnegan also have found Melody’s pictures and used them to blackmail *her*, to create a stalemate of sorts?

And what about the connection to Lyle Shaughnessy? He’d worked off-duty hours at EcoARC as a security guard, before Bill Longwell hired a full-time professional. Finnegan had been at EcoARC forever. Lyle’s son worked for IMSS.

Maybe, I thought, that Freudian slip of mine had some basis in reality. Maybe Art really is connected to the IMSS crowd somehow.

Could he have driven Melody up to Durango knowing she was finally going to cross over the hardcore porn threshold?

What could have happened to motivate Melody to ask Kelly Rumsford for a ride home instead of just going back with Finnegan?

Suddenly a mini-van swerved in front of me, and I snapped back to reality—doing 85 in morning rush-hour traffic with distracting questions bouncing around in my head. I realized I needed Hal just then. He’s always a calming influence when I get all wound up—there’s something about his academic outlook that keeps him steady, and that helps calm me. Even that time when we were being chased by the thugs over Berthoud Pass down into Winter Park, when we barely knew each other, I was the one who was losing it while he drove and formulated escape plans—and it was a good thing that Plan C, or D, I forget, worked, too. I smiled at the memory, and vowed to myself to follow him to the end of the earth, if necessary.

As an alternative to that, though, the Fraser Valley seemed quite attractive.

In Casa Grande, I stopped at a gas station just off the interstate to ask directions to the court house, and, after one false start, I found it and dashed in through the front door just at 8:30. The woman at the information desk directed me down a hallway toward the back of the building, where I found the place to check in, sit down, and wait. I was told the grand jury had convened at 8:00, but that they were still hearing background and instruction. I was next, however.

I finally had a chance to catch my breath, and I looked around the waiting room. Elwood Johnson was slumped in a chair in one corner, his big western hat so low over his eyes I thought he might be asleep under it. But he must have seen me, because he raised a hand to his hat and tapped an index finger on the brim.

Sitting two chairs away from Elwood was Henry Reeves, the deputy who had been with Lyle Shaughnessy during the raid on the motel. He was alone, sitting quietly, reading a magazine.

Across the room from the two of them, Lyle was huddled with his attorney, engrossed in a low conversation. They looked at me curiously, and I realized that although I knew them on sight from having been in the observation booth during Lyle's questioning, they didn't know me.

About that time, the door to the hall opened, and Rudy Gelinski strode in, carrying a cardboard box the size of a case of wine—I noticed, in fact, that it said "Woodbridge" on the side. He saw me and smiled, and headed over to sit with me, setting the box on the other chair next to him.

"Good to see you again, Annette! And maybe, just maybe, we'll make some progress today."

That remark got the attention of Lyle Shaughnessy and his lawyer, and they both stared bullets at Rudy. But they had the good sense not to say anything.

"I sure hope so, Rudy. And I hope this goes quickly, because I've got a ton of other stuff to do. Regardless of how this grand jury business plays out, I think I'm making progress on my other case." I tapped my ear and tilted my head toward Lyle, and Rudy nodded imperceptibly in understanding.

"Good to hear. We'd all like to get that one cleared." He looked around the room. "Do you suppose this is all? Seems like we're missing someone."

"Ross Townsend will be here. He said he's after me, so he ought to be here soon. And I bet Sandra Kinney will be here eventually, maybe this afternoon. Also, I expect that there will be at least a second day, so they'll be able to call in people who come up today."

"Of course. I didn't think of that. Say, there's a rumor making the rounds about big changes at that EcoARC place. I heard they're going to phase out the academic research and concentrate on stuff that has commercial potential." He was only making conversation, I could tell, but this was a topic I thought was important.

"Meaning, I expect, no more graduate students or post-docs. Crash goes the rental housing market in Oracle. But if you're right, it's important because EcoARC could lose its non-profit status. That would change everything. I don't think Bill Longwell would want to continue to run the place under those circumstances."

"And the county probably wouldn't be so lenient with them, either. There's been rumors for a long time about genetic engineering out there, and everyone's spooked by that possibility." He shrugged. "I learned enough about it that I'm not concerned the way that most folks are, but we do live in a democracy, of sorts. Most folks would rather not see that stuff happening in their back yards, and so neither will the county commission."

“Well whatever they do, I’m sure they’re quite careful. For one thing, that’s why, or at least one reason why, they have those closed greenhouses, to keep their stuff contained. For another...” But the door to the jury room opened, and a woman called my name.

* * *

It went the way Ross Townsend had suggested it might, and I was finished and out of there in two hours. When I left the jury room, Ross was waiting outside for his turn, and, in passing, he told me that the warrant for Kelly Rumsford had been obtained and was being executed. He thought that Rumsford would be in custody as soon as I could make it back to Oro Valley.

On the interstate, the traffic was much easier to deal with, because there was less and it was slower, only about 75. I used the drive back south to try to relax, clear my mind, and switch gears for the upcoming interview with Rumsford.

After a pleasant lunch with Sandra Kinney, who had brought Rumsford to the State Patrol office and was waiting for the next thing to do, I got down to business. Rumsford was brought from one of the holding cells to an interview room, where he found me waiting for him. Unlike his previous visit to the State Patrol, this time they had dressed him in an orange jumpsuit, and his hands and feet were shackled. He was not a happy camper. But, then, neither was I. However, I realized I would have to tread carefully.

Into the interview room with Rumsford had come a young man with an emaciated look, wearing a cheap blue suit and carrying a briefcase; his glasses had white tape on the nose-bridge, and his shoes needed a shine—Donald Parks, Pinal County public defender, just as I remembered him from when he was representing the late Mr. Alvarez.

“Ms. Trieri, how nice to see you again. I’m representing Mr. Rumsford. Even though my client has been brought here to Oro Valley, his case will undoubtedly be adjudicated in Casa Grande, once the business with the sheriff gets settled. I understand the grand jury convened this morning.”

“Nice to see you, too, Mr. Parks. Yes, they got started, and I was their first witness. I think it will be cleared up fairly quickly. I’m not sure what role you’ve played in that little drama, but I think that the sheriff and his cronies are going to find that justice applies to them as well as to the people they arrest.” Even though I smiled, I was disappointed to be across the table from Parks this time. We seemed a better match when we were on the same side.

“I appreciate your advice, Ms. Trieri, about not losing my head over that incident. I think I was much more effective in taking the route I took, rather than confronting Sheriff Johnson and crowd.” He smiled slightly. “Now. Mr. Rumsford tells me that this is the third time you’ve detained him for questioning. Why are you harassing my client?”

Ah, me, I thought. A new lawyer, still full of piss and vinegar, and still wet behind the ears. But surely, in law school, they teach these bozos to learn as much about both sides of the story as possible before latching onto one. Maybe he forgot.

“Mr. Rumsford has been arrested for obstruction of a murder investigation and destruction of evidence pertinent to that investigation. You see, I have a credible eyewitness who saw the murder victim sitting in Mr. Rumsford’s car, even shook hands with her there, about thirty-six hours before Mr. Rumsford found her body in the EcoARC facility, where he works. Yet there was no trace of the victim in Mr. Rumsford’s car, and he has lied consistently to me about his contacts with her. So ...” I shrugged. “So, I’m afraid your best strategy will be to negotiate a plea of some kind. Otherwise, Mr. Rumsford will be going to the state prison for a while, and, well, given his age and his, um, fine features, I’d say

he's likely to have some interesting social interactions in there." During the last part of this, I was staring at Kelly Rumsford, watching his eyes get bigger and bigger.

"Ms. Trieri, please! That was completely uncalled for." Parks had been confused by my side of the story, and his covering up his confusion with indignation about the facts of life was a lawyer tactic with which I'm all too familiar.

"Sorry, Mr. Parks, but there's no judge here to sustain your objection. Besides, you'd probably be overruled anyway. Facts are facts, no matter how unpleasant they are. I don't know what your client has told you, but I know what he's told me, and lots of that is on tape. My witness is a professor who knew the victim quite well, and he's made a positive ID of Mr. Rumsford as the driver of the car in which the victim was sitting. I've got about as air-tight a case as I've known of. Like I said, I think your best strategy will be to negotiate a plea of some kind. Mr. Rumsford is afraid of telling me the truth for reasons I don't fully understand, but if I can be persuaded that he will do so—and if he does to my satisfaction—I'm certainly open to alternatives to his inevitable status as someone's sex toy in the state pen." I gathered up my things. "I'll leave you two to chat about this, with the equipment off. I'll be somewhere in the building." I made the "cut" sign of a finger across my throat to the mirror on the wall, and walked out.

Sandra Kinney was waiting for me in the hall.

"Sandra! You're still here?"

"I hope it's OK, I was watching from the booth. I thought I might learn something about tactics. Annette, you're good." I could see a hint of hero worship in her eyes.

"If Rumsford had been alone, I would have done about the same thing, maybe not so strongly. But this nitwit of a lawyer accused me of harassing his client, so he was going only on what Rumsford had told him. He wasn't prepared for the reality of the situation at all. I don't know what will come of their conversation, but if it's not a request for some kind of plea bargain, Parks isn't really doing his job."

"Do you really think that Rumsford could wind up in the state penitentiary?"

"I don't know, really. I'm not that familiar with Arizona law. But it makes a good threat, no?" I smiled. "Sometimes hyperbole is a good tactic in these situations, Sandra. If you use it and get called on it, you can just ignore whatever they call you on and move ahead. But almost every time, the suspect, or defendant, or whatever, will remember the threat and act so as to avoid it. It's a way to steer matters in the direction you want to go. So, are you still assigned to me?"

"Absolutely, that's why I'm hanging around. When you're not here, I go on patrol or work on background for your case."

"Hmm." I fumbled in my bag and pulled out my cell phone. "Let me make a call." I pushed a speed-dial button, and got an instant "hello?"

"Bill? It's Annette. I'm back down in Oro Valley, and I should be done here by, oh, by about three or three-thirty, I guess. Can I come up to see you?"

"Sure, Annette. I'll give them your name at the gate. Do you have a plan?"

"That depends on your protocols. You're the director, right? Does that give you any kind of jurisdiction over people's offices? If you think there's something out of line, can you do an unannounced search?"

"Yes and no. Technically, yes. I'd probably want to take Stan McGriff along, because security is his turf. Although he's down in Tucson today. But the thing is, there are some people here who I really

don't want to piss off, because they might leave if I just barged in and searched their office, or lab, for that matter.”

“But there's no requirement for a warrant or anything, right? You're the boss, it's a private facility, people really don't have an expectation of privacy. Right?”

“Technically, yes. But ...”

“Don't worry about pissing anyone off, Bill. That won't be an issue, I'm sure. So my plan needs some fine-tuning, and I'll be thinking about it. One thing I'd like to do is talk more about that data from Art's lab. And, say, I guess seeing the lab would be a good idea as well. How's that?”

“Not a problem. Annette? I have to ask. Do you really think that Art's involved with the mob?”

“This morning I said ‘something like that,’ and what I meant was that maybe he's involved with a company that markets pornography, creates it, too, for that matter. You see, Melody was involved with them, although I'd like that to remain as private as possible.” There was a long pause. “Bill? You there? Did this thing disconnect?”

“Sorry. I was finding a chair to sit in before I fell down. Uh, right, private it will be. I'm having trouble absorbing this, though.”

“I'm not surprised. She led a double life, and there's the possibility that Art found out about the other half.”

“So I guess what you want to do is to search Art's office and lab to see if you can find anything relating to this.”

“And I figure you won't mind pissing Art off, right?”

“I might even enjoy it. See you later.”

* * *

Sandra Kinney and I were in the hallway, discussing my plan for the EcoARC visit, when Donald Parks came to find me. I wanted Sandra to come with me to EcoARC, both to be another set of eyes as well as to do her job of body-guarding me as might be needed. But I didn't think it would be a good idea for her to be in uniform, so we had to decide what type of undercover “look” she should adopt. We settled on an academic preppy, post-doc-wannabe approach just as Parks walked up, and I sent her home to change.

“Ms. Trieri, I think we may be able to reach an agreement. It's certainly the case that my client will do whatever's necessary to avoid a trial. What can you offer us?”

“Mr. Parks. The first thing, the very first thing, is for you to stop screwing with me. I already made you an offer, at least the part of it that I expect. Without some response on that, we're going nowhere.” In point of fact, I was not quite sure what my authority was in this situation.

For one thing I wasn't on my own turf—Arizona law was a bit of an unknown for me. For another, jurisdiction was all messed up. By rights, a plea-bargain negotiation should have been conducted by the Pinal County District Attorney—currently the inimitable Sibley Jensen, Acting. But the murder wasn't a Pinal County case, because of the problems at the sheriff's office. The most likely answer that I could think of would be that a negotiation should be handled by the Arizona Attorney General's's office or someone else at that level.

But if I was going to move things forward, I needed an answer now. Well, I thought, if I screw up, the worst they can do is fire me. Then I can go home.

Parks finally stopped sulking. “Mr. Rumsford and I have discussed the situation, and I can tell you one thing—he’ll have to tell you the rest.”

Meaning you know one thing to tell me, I thought.

“Mr. Rumsford has been less than candid with you because he is afraid that his quest to obtain his doctorate will be side-tracked. Not by you or by the legal system for his involvement with Ms. Witherspoon, mind you; sidetracked by someone who has threatened him with such a thing if he does not keep quiet about what he knows.”

“Who?”

“An Art Finnegan, I understand him to be deputy director of the EcoARC.”

“Hmm. So Art Finnegan is blackmailing Rumsford by threatening to squelch his Ph.D. somehow. OK, now we’re getting somewhere. I take this as a sign of faith on the part of your client, Mr. Parks. Now, let’s go see him and get my other questions answered. After that, maybe he can go home.”

“Just like that? All charges dropped?”

“No, just like that on a recognizance release. After you hear the story, I’ll want to talk to you, alone, one more time about how much of a slap on the wrist you think he deserves. And the state’s attorney will need to be consulted. You’re representing him, Mr. Parks, but you’re also representing justice. Before you object, wait until you hear the story. Oh, and if Kelly’s not completely candid with me, well, I’m getting more than a little impatient with him. It’s now or never, if he wants to deal.”

In the interview room, Kelly Rumsford was sitting with his elbows on the table, his head in his shackled hands. He looked pathetic—I had him just where I wanted him.

“Mr. Rumsford, your lawyer here tells me you’re ready to cooperate. No more lies, no more omissions, nothing but the whole truth and nothing but the truth, right?”

“What’s in it for me?” He looked scared, but he still had a little backbone.

“For one thing, I’ll send you home on a recognizance release, which means you have to agree to appear in court when summoned. That will get those things off your arms and legs and your own clothes back. And Mr. Parks tells me that Finnegan has been blackmailing you with threats about your Ph.D. being screwed up, or something. I can promise that will not happen, absolutely. In fact, that won’t happen even if you’re busy being Bubba’s girlfriend in prison. Finnegan will be a non-factor in your degree, I’ll make sure of it. I have enough connections to make that happen. As for the obstruction charge, that depends on what you have to say and how the State of Arizona feels about it. I represent the State just now, so if you impress me I think Arizona might just be lenient.”

“How can you be sure Finnegan won’t screw up my degree?”

“Because I’m married to a guy with higher education connections in Colorado. He’s a dean at the state university in Durango, and he knows people all over. All he has to do is call your committee chair. Finnegan’s credibility will be zero after that.”

“OK, where should I start?”

“Start with when you were in Boulder, three and a half weeks ago. No, wait. First, when did you first find Melody’s pictures on the internet?”

“About, um...” He stared at the ceiling, apparently counting. “...I guess about two months ago. Toward the end of August.”

“You downloaded some videos the day before you found her body, right?”

“Oh god. Yes, you’re right, I did. I’m sorry I found them, now. I’ve stopped going to that web site since.”

“Were those the first explicit sex videos of her? I’m not asking to embarrass you, Kelly, I’m asking you as a sort of ‘Melody expert.’ This is the one time that your obsession with her might actually be of use.”

“They were, and I was shocked. Um, turned on, I guess, but shocked. Up to that point, all there was of her was, you know, nudie pictures, some more risqué than others, and a few strip-tease videos. Those last ones I ran across on that Sunday were something completely new for her.”

“Did she mention them at all during your trip back from Durango?”

“Uh...” He looked at Donald Parks in desperation, but Parks was engrossed in an examination of a hangnail.

“Kelly! You heard me say that I have a witness putting her in your car on Saturday afternoon, thirty-six hours before you found her body. She told the witness she was riding with you back to Oracle. I’m not going to ask you if you got her here alive, because he wouldn’t let you answer anyway. But she was in your car, alive, for a while at least. I need to know what you talked about.”

“OK, OK. No. She didn’t mention them at all. I didn’t want her to know that I’d found the pictures of her, so we didn’t talk about anything like that. She did say, though, that she was glad I was able to give her a ride, because she and Dr. Finnegan had some kind of fight...say! I never thought of this. But she said something about how he forced her to compromise her principles. I thought it had to do with publishing, the old argument about who should be first author or something like that, because we were talking about research and so on. That’s mostly what we talked about, research. And it was great! We actually had something in common, even though I’m tropical and she was high-plains.”

What a relief it was to see something real. Maybe he had a crush, an obsessive crush, on her, but he also had more, something in common with her as a person.

“And, I have to tell you. I got her here alive, I mean to Oracle. It was about three in the morning, Sunday morning. I dropped her off at her place. She was asleep for the last couple of hours, but she was alive at three when I watched her unlock and walk in her front door. Those ten hours with her were about the best of my life. Even when she was asleep. She looked so peaceful. And then Monday morning was the worst.”

I don’t know what it was, but something made me turn to the mirror and gesture to the guys behind it to come in and take off his shackles.

* * *

Sandra Kinney wasn’t back from changing into street clothes when I was finished with Rumsford and his lawyer, so I pattered around by assembling the paperwork for an arrest warrant for Art Finnegan on obstruction charges. I was going to try to get Rumsford’s charges dropped, or at least reduced to being an idiot, and I needed to arrest someone for obstructing justice, because it sure was being obstructed. It might as well be Finnegan, I thought.

Sandra finally showed up at about 3:30, dressed in cuffed slacks and an Oxford button-down shirt with a blazer, carrying a small day-pack slung over one shoulder. Very preppy. It also made her look way younger than she looked in uniform—the post-doc-wannabe cover suited her just fine.

We borrowed an unmarked car from the State Patrol office and headed up the road toward Oracle, turning off to the north toward EcoARC before getting to town. At the gate, the guard seemed more

suspicious than ever, but he checked his list and let us in. I had to explain about bringing Sandra, and invoking Bill's name worked wonders. We got there a little after four.

Bill was in his office, working on a spreadsheet on his computer. There were graphs, and I recognized the data that Hal had shown me.

"Bill, do you remember Officer Sandra Kinney? She was at our meeting here a couple of weeks back, in uniform. We thought it would be better if she blended in here at EcoARC this time."

"Glad to see you again, Sandra. And blend in you will, at least for someone new here. You look like a post-doc candidate on a job interview. You'll find, though, that the people who work here, ah, dress down from your level somewhat." Bill's unconscious compliment about our subterfuge made Sandra beam.

"So it looks like you've got Art's data there." I pointed toward his monitor.

"Yeah, and I took your hint about the spreadsheet approach, so it's not very sophisticated. But the graphs sure do what you said. And I've found out that what goes to zero there, and there and there," he was gesturing at the screen, "is the oxygen content of the ambient air in Art's lab. It's a sealed room, so that cycling is some kind of natural thing with the tanks and so on."

"Here," he pointed at another place where the line dropped to zero, but this time it rose quite abruptly afterward, "here is a place where something else happened, probably someone opened the door. See, the oxygen jumps back, but the other gases respond, too. This is most likely dilution by the air outside the lab."

"So what's happening in there, anyway?"

"There are cycles associated with the plankton in the tanks. I expect that there are lights on some kind of timer to simulate the daily solar cycle, and when the lights are on, the plankton photosynthesize, making oxygen. When the lights go off, other things take over. Something oxidizes, which gobbles up the oxygen. Also, the plankton respire, using oxygen in the water and releasing carbon dioxide, just like we do in the air. You can see here that the CO₂ in the air rises somewhat when the oxygen is depleted. I haven't figured out what all of these other numbers are, though. Probably some of them are measurements in the water, dissolved trace gases and other nutrients."

"It looks as if this period of zero oxygen is several hours, at least if the total cycle is a day. I mean, there's a quarter of the cycle or so with no oxygen. That could be six hours, no?"

"Yep, and that's probably a good interpretation. If you look at the data," he clicked the mouse on the spreadsheet itself and moved everything to the right, "you can see the first column has numbers that look like times. And this period of zero oxygen, which is really just a very, very low value, maybe in the noise of the instruments, covers what looks like six hours."

"So, if someone were in there for that time, they'd suffocate, right? Six hours of no oxygen. Are there any toxic gases in there?"

"What are you saying, Annette? No, there aren't any toxic gases that I can tell. I'd know because my permission is required when we do anything remotely toxic around here. But what are you saying?"

"It's looking like Melody Witherspoon arrived in Oracle perfectly healthy at three in the morning on the Sunday before Kelly Rumsford found her body. Twenty-four hours later, her code was used to activate one of the greenhouse entrance locks. In the meantime, she died, and the autopsy results indicate non-traumatic suffocation. She wasn't strangled, she wasn't bonked on the head, she wasn't poisoned with carbon monoxide or anything. She suffocated, died from lack of oxygen. Furthermore,

according to the medical examiner, for her to have died on Sunday, her body needed to have been in a warm, damp environment the whole time.”

“You think she died in this lab? How could that have happened? Is that why you were asking about Art before?” He began to look a little frantic.

“I’m working on things circumstantial just now, Bill, so don’t get too excited. There’s no hard evidence, just circumstance. This oxygen thing is another circumstance in a long list. And even if Melody did suffocate in Art’s lab, it could have been an accident. But having a close look at that lab seems in order, and Art’s office might be worth looking at, too, because of that connection I mentioned on the phone.”

Although the office was closer, we decided to start with the lab. The walk over there took us out of the administration building across the carefully landscaped campus, and into an airlock protecting the greenhouses from the outside air—or maybe the outside world from what was inside the greenhouses, if you believed some people.

This was my third time under the glass, and even so, it was amazing to me. Sandra had been on the tour conducted at the meeting about the Alvarez death, but she was also filled with wonder. Bill, however, was all business, taking shortcuts that got Sandra and me completely lost. Eventually, in what must have been the second basement, we came to a hallway with several large doors, doors of the type used on submarines, with large wheels on the outside to seal the things shut. On the wall outside of the one Bill walked up to was a computer monitor, showing graphs not unlike the one he had made using his spreadsheet program.

“This doesn’t show anything unusual, see? It’s very much like those cycles you saw over in my office. Maybe we can get the data for the dates around when Melody died. That would tell us if the hatch was opened at critical times.”

He began to crank the wheel counter-clockwise, and, from movies, I could picture large bolts sliding out of the inside of the door frame. “Sorry, Art, wherever you are, but your experiment’s toast, for now at least.”

The wheel stopped turning, and Bill flipped a latch. The big door eased open with a little sigh, and we got hit with a puff of damp, musty air.

“All the labs are under slightly positive pressure, to ensure that leaks are outward rather than inward. That way, it’s easier to monitor and isolate the experiments in these relatively small rooms. But with this thing open, there will be a complete exchange of air between the basement here and the lab.” He pulled the door open on its well-oiled hinges and stepped over the sill into the windowless room. Sandra and I followed.

It was strangely lit, with banks of fluorescent lights suspended over glass tanks. The colors made us all look deathly ill, and the air exchange was still in progress, because the musty smell was nearly overwhelming.

“These lights are what Art uses to simulate sunlight for the plankton. It must still be the daytime cycle. And you can see how everything is instrumented.”

Indeed, there were gadgets hooked by wires everywhere. In fact, it seemed as if wire management, routing them without tangling them, eliminating trip hazards, keeping them labeled, was as big a job as keeping the aquaria themselves in good shape. The wire routing problem was compounded by what looked like miles of plastic tubing. Each aquarium had its little bubbler, with the multitude of tubes running to a big pump on a platform up by the ceiling in the middle of the room.

“Now, Annette, if Melody was in here when she died, someone had to lock her in here, either purposefully or accidentally. Or, I guess, she could have locked herself in. But there are all sorts of safety systems.” He pointed at the big door. “See? There’s a wheel in here, it was turning in here when I was turning it out there, and identical latches. There’s an intercom, there on the wall over there. There’s a panic button.” He pointed at a big red doorbell button on the far wall by the intercom.

“I just don’t see how she, or anyone, could suffocate in here.” He stepped over the sill into the hall and gave the inside wheel a little twist, in the direction of the big red “open” arrow, which was clockwise on this side. The wheel spun freely.

“Huh? That’s odd. It should be all the way open already.” He stepped back into the room, walked over to the far wall, and took the cover off the intercom box. “Hello. Come look. This thing is completely disconnected. Something very strange is going on here.”

Then he hit the panic button, but nothing happened.

“There ought to be lots of noise outside.” He shrugged and looked worried. “It sure looks as if someone’s sabotaged all the safety systems. We’d better go look into this.”

But that was easier said than done, for behind us we heard a whoosh and a heavy thunk, and the door shut with an ominous click, making us all jump about a foot. We could only watch as the big bolts eased back into the door frame, sealing us inside. And then the lights went out.

* * *

Nineteen

“Well, that’s a helluva note.” Bill Longwell managed to keep the panic out of his voice.

I’d shut my eyes when the lights went out and expected complete darkness when I opened them. We were in a hermetically sealed, windowless room.

But instead I was greeted by an eerie, greenish glow. It appeared to come from the aquaria, and, given how many of them there were, the glow suffused the room with a hint of light, enough to see two silhouettes in the gloom.

Sandra noticed it, too. “It’s not dark. I thought it would be dark.” She wasn’t as successful as Bill at keeping her panic suppressed.

“Bioluminescence. Critters in tanks are glowing. It’s something you see in the real ocean, in boat wakes at night sometimes.” Bill’s mind was clearly elsewhere, however.

“Annette? Did I hear you two talking about no oxygen after the lights go off? Are we going to suffocate?” Sandra’s panic was closer to the surface than before.

“Not for a while, Sandra, so don’t get too freaked out yet, OK? On those graphs, it took two or three hours for the oxygen to go away, so we’ve got time to do something.” I surprised myself by how calm I felt. “Bill? It seems like there would be normal room_lights in here. Not everyone who uses these laboratories would have grow-lights and aquaria, no?”

“Right. There’s a switch over by the door, I expect. If I can find it in this gloom. Without tripping over anything.” I heard Bill’s feet shuffling, and his silhouette moved toward the door.

“No worries, mate.” I used my best Australian accent, probably lousy under the circumstances. “Besides, you’re the Navy SEAL, right? Hell, this should be a snap for you.”

“Absolutely. I’ll just whip out my rocket launcher and blow a hole in the wall. Oh, wait. I left it in my office.” His shuffling was making progress, but slowly.

Fumbling in my bag, I pulled out my keychain, which had one of those little diode lights on it. Very helpful for finding where to put the car key in the dark without scratching the car door, and, I hoped, very helpful in finding things when locked in hermetically sealed laboratories two stories underground.

I pointed it toward the door and pressed the button, and the room lit up enough to make us squint.

“This probably won’t last very long, but it sure helps now, doesn’t it? Got any sunglasses?” I could see Bill making a beeline for a light switch, and the fluorescent lights on the ceiling blinked on.

He turned around and smiled at us. “That improves things. Now. Annette, you’re right about our having some time, but if you remember the graphs, the oxygen declines to zero smoothly over the next two or three hours. If it’s two hours, then after an hour it’ll be half gone, after a half hour it’ll be a quarter gone. A quarter gone relative to where we’re starting here, about thirty-five hundred feet, is like being on an eleven-thousand foot mountain, or something like that. Air’s thin, but it’s the lack of oxygen that makes you breathe hard. So we’ll be a lot better off if we fix this little problem as soon as we can.”

“I was thinking the same thing. So, what zaps the oxygen, anyway?”

“I’ve got to assume it’s something in the tanks. They’re continually aerated with the bubblers, so the room air gets depleted of oxygen as it cycles through the tanks.” Bill scratched his head.

“Sounds like we should turn off the pump, then. No bubblers, no aeration, no chance for what’s in there to gobble up our precious oxygen, right?” I’m not a scientist, but I bet I could play one on TV, I thought.

Sandra had wandered off behind the racks of tanks, and her voice now filtered over the noise of the pump in question. “Annette? There’s a ladder over here. And a toolbox.”

I looked at Bill Longwell and shook my head. “Man. I’ll tell ya. Used to be you could count on killers to do a good job. But ya just can’t find good help anywhere.”

Sandra appeared from behind a rack of tanks carrying a step ladder, and she stared at me in surprise. Bill Longwell was also looking question marks my way.

“Hey, if it’s a toolbox with tools in it, the worst case is that we can take this door apart. Even better, maybe we can fix it. Don’t you think?” I shrugged. “First thing, though, is to get this pump unplugged. No, no let’s wait a minute and think about this.”

“Are you crazy?” Bill clearly thought I was.

“Let’s take just a minute, we can afford it. Whoever locked us in here must intend to come back and get us, right? And he’ll see the monitor in the hall, right? If we unplug the pump, the normal cycle of the gases in here will change, and he’ll know we did something, and when he opens the door, he’ll be on the alert. On the other hand, if we find the timer and turn the grow lights back on, the oxygen levels will stay up so we can breathe while we fix the door, or whatever, and then we can turn off the lights and get out of here. The monitor will look normal, the culprit will come back to fetch our bodies, and we can grab him. Right?”

“Uh, I guess...” Bill looked uncertain, and Sandra didn’t say anything.

“The timing of everything will be a little off, on the monitor, but we opened the door already, and we have to open it again to get out. He’ll know about the first time and just assume that’s what’s got

things off a little. Where do you suppose the light timer is?" I began wandering the room, looking for outlets with a timer, and I noticed that Sandra was, too. Bill, with nothing else to do, set about examining the door.

After about a minute, Sandra found the timer, which turned out to be a heavy-duty version of those things that people use to turn their Christmas lights on automatically. We moved its clock setting back an hour, which turned the grow lights back on and would keep them on for another fifty minutes or so.

Bill, meanwhile, had the toolbox open and was fumbling with the big wheel on the inside of the door. He asked to use my little diode light to see better, and Sandra and I left him to it. A light went on in my head, and I thought of something else we could be doing in the meantime.

"Sandra, let's assume that Melody Witherspoon was locked in here, like we are. Maybe the lights went out and spooked her like it did us, or maybe she was shoved in here when the lights were out and oxygen was already depleted. In either case, she must have grabbed her captor and scratched his arm, or something."

"OK, so she was locked in here and suffocated?"

"Right. But it wouldn't be instant, she would have had some time. What would she do? Wouldn't she try to leave a message, or try to escape or something like that?"

"You're saying there should be some evidence of her somewhere. We need to get a forensic examiner in here, then."

"And maybe, just maybe, we can find something now."

So while Bill fumbled with the door, making encouraging noises all the while, Sandra and I examined the walls and the tanks carefully for any signs of Melody's presence.

"Annette? If Melody were locked in here in the dark, she'd have the green glow, that biolum- whatever from the tanks, right? Or maybe she would have even found the switch."

"Hmm. Right. And any message would likely depend on whether she found the light switch. With just the green glow, it would be a lot harder to do anything, even if her eyes adapted completely. I don't think ours quite did."

"And even if the oxygen were depleted, when the door got opened for her to be put in here, there would be some additional oxygen let in. So she'd have at least a little time."

"But she wouldn't know how much time, and in the dark, she'd want to do something fast." I was taking cues from Sandra's reasoning, and she from mine. It was a wonderful example of being on the same wavelength.

"So." Sandra had walked to the door, where Bill was mumbling under his breath. "She could most likely either try to scratch something here on the wall, maybe in this soft plaster, where there's nothing to be seen, or she'd walk toward the nearest glow, the nearest tanks."

Sandra walked over to the rack of tanks nearest the door and began misting them with her breath by blowing on them gently from an inch or two away. On the third one, she found what she was looking for.

"Look! A hand print, and 'MW'." She misted the tank again, a little lower. "Amazing! Here's something that says 'AF did it'." She looked up in triumph.

There was a click and a sigh of air from the direction of the door.

"Ladies, shall we?" Bill Longwell also looked triumphant as he shoved the door open with his foot.

* * *

“You’re right, Annette. It’s a sad day when murderers are so incompetent that we could escape so easily.” Bill was shaking his head in mock despair.

“It’s weird. Whoever did this—and I think we all have a suspect in mind—whoever did this went to the trouble of disabling the intercom and the panic button, and he disconnected the wheel inside the door. But he must have assumed the person, or people, he would be locking in there would be disabled as well. To leave the tools in there—that’s just plain stupid. Not that I’m complaining, you understand.” I was trying to size up the situation for next steps while I ranted. “By the way, how did you fix the door?”

“Thanks to our suspect’s stupidity, mostly. He’d removed three set screws, big machine screws that go through a collar on the wheel. They screw into threaded holes in the shaft that goes through the door to the other wheel which turns the gears that drive the bolts. The three set screws were in the tool box, so I put ’em back in, after I figured the whole thing out. So, now what?” Bill looked ready for anything.

“I’ve been thinking about that. When AF, whoever that may be, wink, wink, locked Melody in there, he came back using her ID card at about three in the morning to move her body. I’m not sure that he’ll wait that long this time, but he’ll probably wait for a couple of hours. I’d like to be waiting and catch him red-handed trying to find our bodies.” I looked at my watch. “It’s getting close to six now, so I sure hope he comes back before three. That’s nine hours away.”

“Annette? What are we going to do about food?” Sandra, young and healthy, was apparently used to regular meals.

I turned and looked the question at Bill Longwell.

“There are vending machines, and of course our restaurant is open for another couple of hours. But you probably don’t want us to be seen.”

“Right. Not by anybody. But if we can’t go get food, maybe it can come to us.” I pulled out my cell phone, but it didn’t have a signal.

“Won’t work, Annette. We’re too far underground with too much steel around us. We could go upstairs, I guess ... but there are land-line phones around. I think there’s one down the hall on the left.” He pointed over his right shoulder.

“OK. What kind of pizza do you guys like?” I took orders and walked off to find the phone.

An hour and a half later, we were in an empty laboratory just down the hall from Finnegan’s lab, eating pizza and telling a wide-eyed Kelly Rumsford about our little adventure. I’d called him on the theory that he would be willing to do just about anything to get in my good graces and keep quiet about it, and also that he deserved to hear firsthand what had happened to Melody. He brought four large pizzas with various toppings, a variety of drinks, and what seemed to be a huge amount of other junk food. The pizza would get cold, if we had a long wait ahead of us, but Kelly said he knew about a bootleg microwave oven up in the first basement. Officially, food and associated equipment wasn’t allowed inside the greenhouses, but it was an open secret that almost everyone had their ways around the rule. People spent so much time working under the glass that food was a necessity.

We ate two of the pizzas while we set up for a stakeout. I tried to send Kelly home, but he said he was staying, no matter what, so I gave in. He and Sandra went down the hall with the remaining pizzas, to another empty lab, and Bill and I stayed put, leaving our door open just slightly. The lights from the

hall gave us just enough light to feel comfortable. Between Sandra and me, we had Finnegan's lab flanked on both sides with law officers, and all there was to do was wait.

Bill and I talked in whispers about Hal's sabbatical opportunity, and it turned out to be a big help to me. After I explained my dilemma of wanting to go to Fraser with Hal but also wanting to continue my career, Bill immediately cut to the chase.

"Why don't you just ask your boss, that guy Andersen you mentioned, ask him how you can be of service up in Fraser? Tell him what's going on, what you want to do, and ask him what's available there. I mean, it never hurts to ask."

We also talked about his future, and I mentioned that someone would need to replace Hal at FSU. That got him interested enough to ask questions about the school and Durango, and I wound up playing informal recruiter for a while there.

And I finally came to understand what Hal had meant about the ants in the greenhouses. At first, there didn't seem to be any, but after a couple of hours I noticed that the nearly-empty pizza boxes appeared to have changed color. My little diode flashlight showed me that they were now the color of ants, a sort of off-black. An orderly brigade of the creatures were marching in lines to and from the boxes, carrying off crumbs. I started paying more attention to my arms and legs, brushing them off every few minutes.

About ten, we heard footsteps in the hallway, two people not trying to be quiet, carrying on a conversation. Bill and I crept over to the cracked-open door to peek into the hall, and before too long I watched Art Finnegan and another guy walk by in the direction of Finnegan's lab. After they passed, Bill whispered in my ear that the other guy was one of the two goons who had attacked him, the one whose jaw got crunched by Bill's fist.

That explained why half of the overheard conversation consisted mostly of grunts and mumbles. His jaw must have been wired shut.

They passed our door, and we heard noises from the hall suggesting they were opening another of the lab doors, probably Finnegan's. I risked opening our door a little wider and was able to see them at work—soon they had pulled the other door open and entered Finnegan's lab.

As I started down the hall, I felt Bill grab me by the arm. He had a finger to his lips as he slipped past me and quickly closed the door to Finnegan's lab, locking him and his accomplice inside—just as Finnegan had locked us in.

Sandra and Kelly were nowhere to be seen. I walked down the hall to where they'd hidden themselves. There was no noise at all, so I peeked in. They were asleep, Sandra with her head on Kelly's shoulder, sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. An alarming number of ants was investigating them.

Rather than embarrass them, I found another open door and slammed it as hard as I could. Seconds later, they emerged from their hiding place, looking confused and still half asleep, but hopping around, frantically brushing insects off themselves.

But they woke up when Bill told them what he'd done.

"I figure we can leave them in there for a few minutes, until the oxygen level gets down to, say, half of normal. Like being at twenty thousand feet or so."

He gestured to the monitor, which showed an oxygen spike associated with the door's having been opened. The spike was beginning to drop as the minutes passed.

“That’ll give them a taste of what they were dishing out. We can always go in and get them before they’re in any real danger. Or not.” His smile was icy.

“But, Bill, you fixed the door. Why aren’t they opening it?” Sandra had waked up enough to figure this one out.

He reached into his pants pocket and he held out his hand, with three rugged little machine screws in it.

“I un-fixed it, too.”

* * *

“They were unconscious when we opened that lab back up, but by then we had an oxygen bottle on hand to revive them. Sandra had come well-equipped, with her sidearm and three sets of handcuffs in her day-pack. Some post-doc! We cuffed them, revived them, and Sandra read ’em their rights. And, just by happen-chance, so to speak, in the process of reviving them, we discovered four parallel, almost-healed scratch marks on Art Finnegan’s left arm. DNA testing is under way.”

It was Tuesday evening, and Hal and I were cooking dinner while I told him the story. I’d be returning to Arizona at least once more to testify, but mostly I was finished down there. One of the many things I’d accomplished earlier in the day was to return my Arizona credentials, the shield and paperwork. It felt liberating.

“Uh,” Hal was working on a braising sauce for chicken breasts. “If I understood you, you just said that you’re alive because of Art Finnegan’s incompetence. If he was better at killing people, you’d be dead. And you wonder why I worry about you. Geez!”

“I know. I’m sorry. But just because Finnegan killed Melody that way didn’t mean he could get me, especially because I was there with Bill Longwell, and Sandra Kinney, too. At worst, if we hadn’t been able to open that door, we would have been stuck there for a while. We figured out how to prevent the oxygen depletion right away. In fact, I’m surprised that Melody didn’t.”

“Did you figure out who the other guys is, the one with the wired jaw?”

“It took all morning, but, yeah, we identified him. He’s employed by IMSS, as I suspected, and he seems to be their muscle, along with the guy whose knee Bill broke last week. This cements the connection between Art and Tory Dowd, as far as I’m concerned. Which reminds me, did you and Tim Langer make any progress on your, ah, your little project?”

His worried look morphed into a little smirk. “I thought you didn’t want to hear about it. I mean, gee, you might have to arrest me for something.”

“Right, right. But I’m off duty now, and, frankly, I have to say that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation has many, many other cases that are way more important than what inconveniences the IMSS web site may experience. Why, just today, when I picked up my car at the airport, I saw several cars parked on top of the yellow lines in the parking lot. I’ve got to get out there with my ticket book before I can possibly do anything about poor, beset-upon IMSS. Assuming that they’re really beset upon.”

“Go check it out. I got that old computer from Tim and set it up in the den, with the little monitor. See what you find at real-hot-babes.com. This has to simmer for at least a half hour.”

Upstairs, I typed www.real-hot-babes.com into the old computer’s web browser and was quickly rewarded, if that’s the word, with the by-now familiar front page of the IMSS porn site. At least it was familiar at first glance, but then I noticed something different. A little box that had previously said

something like “All the hottest girls! All the newest pictures!” now said “Haven’t you got anything better to do? More naked women. Big deal.”

I slid the mouse across the screen, aiming for the link that would take me to where Melody’s videos were. But before I reached the link, a pop-up window appeared. It contained an animated cartoon picture of a carnival barker—somehow it reminded me of Tory Dowd—whose pants kept falling down, revealing his miniscule private parts. Just as his pants hit the floor, a dialog balloon appeared that said “Uncle Wiggly says: If this is how you get your girls, you are sure one pathetic loser!”

I moved the mouse to close that pop-up window, and as soon as I closed it, another one appeared, with the same animation but a different dialog. This one said: “Uncle Wiggly says: Don’t get your mouse sticky! Whatever you’re holding in your hand, drop it right now and go wash! ”

These pop-up windows appeared whenever I closed the previous one or whenever I clicked back on the main page and slid the mouse toward one of its links. I was stuck, at least as far as I was concerned. I could see how anyone who was cruising the web for porn, free or not, would get frustrated and go somewhere else.

And I was also getting an encyclopedia worth of quotes from Uncle Wiggly, some amusing, some clever, some just stupid. All-in-all he was becoming quite tiresome.

But even so, I was laughing my head off.

The novelty wore off after about five minutes, and I went back downstairs to see how dinner was coming.

“So it looks as if you set IMSS up so that no one can get past its main page.”

“More or less. It can be done, but if you manage to get past the main page, you get more of the same. Each page is set up to act like a video game—Tim told me he actually used video game software techniques—that dares you to get to the next level. And those pop-up quote are randomized, as is the software that controls them. What I mean is, the files that generate the pop-ups and so on have names generated randomly, names that change each time the program is accessed. And they’re stashed away in a very obscure sub-directory somewhere on the IMSS server, so they’re very hard to find. *And* their dates, the ‘last modified’ thing, are also randomized, to dates and times over the past year.”

“Turn-about is fair play, huh?” I was munching on a carrot that I’d swiped from the salad he was preparing.

“Yep, only what Tim did to them is far, far more sophisticated and entrenched than what their software did to me. For one thing, the IMSS server is a Linux system, the kind of system that Tim specializes in. When he found out he’d be hacking a Linux system, he actually got the giggles, like a mad scientist.”

“I guess I read somewhere that only Windows computers can get viruses.” This time it was a stalk of celery.

“Most viruses attack Windows systems because that’s what most of the computers out there to be attacked are. But Tim didn’t really do a virus. He hacked himself an administrative login on the IMSS computer and just programmed it. He says that they’re not going to be able to do anything except start over. And there’s something else that you probably *really* don’t want to hear.”

“Well, thanks for teasing me about it. Now you’ve got to tell me.”

“OK, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. One thing that Tim installed on their computer is a seek and destroy program that finds all pictures and videos on their system and corrupts them, writes random bits so that they can’t be read. So even if someone did manage to get to the part of the IMSS site that has the

dirty pictures, they couldn't see them, they wouldn't load properly. And he also disabled the software that takes credit card numbers, so everything on the site is free—free, unreadable pictures.”

“And you and Tim did this? Oh, you bad, bad person. Momma spank.”

“Gee, that sounds like it could be fun. Maybe later? But, see, the thing is, when an IMSS systems person tries to track this all down, he'll discover that all the damage was done by a user named ‘dowd-underscore-t’. So Tim and I can't really take credit.”

* * *

After dinner, I remembered it was Halloween; or, rather, I was reminded of it by the big bowl of bite-sized candy bars in the front hall. Hal's weird leather Mardi Gras mask, the one he got in New Orleans when he was there at a conference, was sitting there, too. He puts it on when the doorbell rings and makes a fool of himself for the kids extorting candy from us.

It had turned chilly, a mid-autumn cold snap with the feel of winter about it, so Hal lit a fire in the living room fireplace, and we sat and watched it while we waited for trick-or-treaters. And, because we knew we'd have way too much candy for those who show up—we always seem to—we had mini-Mounds bars for dessert.

“Bill Longwell called me today.” Hal was unwrapping candy bar number two. “He said that the EcoARC board has decided to phase out the student and post-doc programs, and they're going to move away from the basic research they've supported.”

“I heard a rumor about that. Yesterday morning. Wow. A lot's happened since then.” I was trying to nibble, a technique that keeps me from eating too many of those little things.

“Anyway, he's looking for a job. And he says he's fallen in love with the southwest. Said you mentioned FSU as a possibility.” He was maintaining a completely neutral expression, so I couldn't tell if my conversation with Bill was a good thing or not.

“We had a couple of hours of conversation to make while we waited for Art Finnegan to show up. So we talked about a lot of things. And I remembered you'd mentioned him as a replacement for you, so ...”

“Oh, I'm not upset, don't worry. I don't know how much leverage I'll have in naming my replacement, though. But I think he'd be a great choice, a great addition to the faculty at the U.”

“Surely you could recommend him.”

“Oh, sure. I can serve as a reference, a really strong one, if he applies for the position, or I could recommend him out of the gate when I tell John Martin I'm stepping down.” He frowned, so I snuggled.

“I guess the thing is, I've been thinking about this and talking about it for a long time. I've known that Alice would retire, and that always seemed like the time for me to make a change. But now she is, and if I'm going to do something, it's time to fish or cut bait. If I'm going on sabbatical next semester, in January, I need to tell John tomorrow. Gulp.”

“Did you talk with Chuck Shure again?”

“I've spent most of the past two days on the phone talking with all sorts of people. Chuck, people at NCAR and at the university in Boulder, people at the CCHE. Yesterday, Chuck and I even talked money and term of appointment as director of this new institute and everything. I would have told you all about it, but I didn't hear from you last night because you were too busy chasing bad guys.” He poked me gently in the ribs.

Before I could say anything, the doorbell rang, and Hal got up to put his mask on and play boogey man and give away candy. From his greeting, I decided it must have been a group of grade-school kids, old enough to be by themselves, but young enough that he didn't come on too strong and send them screaming down the sidewalk. That mask is something, I'll tell you.

"Anyway," He came back into the living room with the mask still on, and I burst into laughter. "Huh? Oh, yeah." And he took it off and sat down beside me again.

"Anyway, what needs to happen is that we need to decide what to do. Both of us, not just me."

"If you're asking my opinion, what I think is that we should start looking for a place to live in the Fraser Valley, the sooner the better. And I'm going to get some new skis." I tried not to look defiant and went for serene instead.

He smiled. "Um-hmm. That's all well and good, but without a second income our lifestyle is going to take a hit. Even with the big raise Chuck's giving me. I mean, what kind of allowance are you going to want?"

"Ha, Mr. Smarty-pants. What you don't know is that one of the things I did today, on the way to the airport, was to have a long talk with my boss. I may just surprise you and not need an allowance. So there!" Now it was my turn to poke him in the ribs.

"You mean to say you've got a job? Up there? Well, hell. What am I going to do for a receptionist now? An institute like this one is going to need a real babe for a receptionist. I figured you could wear that little black number...Ouch!" And he burst into laughter despite the hard poke. "OK, OK, seriously, what did you talk with Rod about?"

"One of the things that Bill and I talked about was how I should handle this. And he suggested I call Rod and just lay it out, as in 'I'm moving there and what do you have for me?' That's not exactly how I put it, but that was the gist. I guess I played a little on my status as the only female CBI district director and as something of a rising star. And I let Rod know that Derek Peterson is completely ready to take over the Durango office. Also, I hinted that my experience with the CBI so far has been beyond the call. I mean, in my three big cases, I've been shot at, blown up, and locked in an airless room, to use just a little hyperbole. That's more than anyone expects. Also, I told him that I have an offer from the Arizona Department of Public Safety."

"Truth?"

"Yep. An informal offer, but I think it would stick. Ross Townsend offered my temporary position on a permanent basis, if I should want to move to a warmer climate. He emphasized the warmer part, and tonight is making me understand what he meant." I snuggled again.

"So what did Rod say?"

"It turns out that that part of Grand County is growing like crazy, and the infrastructure there is really, really stressed. Law enforcement, in particular, is struggling to keep up with the growth and the increasing sophistication of the crime—they're just overwhelmed. He's been trying to figure out how to help out by getting them some consulting help."

"A match made in heaven, then. And it's interesting. I got the same story from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. They need someone to scope out the situation and work with the people there to make recommendations. In the future, there will be some kind of higher education up there, it's just a matter of what kind of institution and who runs it."

"So you're going to consult for them, or what?"

"I'll work for them part-time and, officially, consult for Chuck, at first, at least."

“All right! It sounds like we have a decision. We’re moving to Fraser! Uh, when?”

“January, I guess. Packed yet?”

“Almost. But you’ve got to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Make sure your new institute has occasions when I can wear that black dress. I like the way you look at me in it.”

And this time, the poke was more of a caress.

* * * * *

Frozen Stiff

Different * * * * *
A^Four Corners Mystery



Frozen Stiff: A [Different] Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

When the pain of the biting cold faded and sleepiness began to wash over her, she realized, somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind, that she was in serious trouble. But it was such a relief not to hurt any more that she ignored the alarm bells in her head.

Ever since she had regained consciousness with a headache that could have dropped a polar bear, the cold had been overwhelming, seeping into her very soul. She had spent an eternity shivering, but it didn't have its intended effect—rather than warming her up, it only sapped her strength faster. And even though she was walking as briskly as the conditions would allow, she just got colder and colder.

If only she had listened to that nice guy she'd met down in Santa Fe yesterday. He had warned her that the weather up here in the mountains could change with surprising speed, and did it ever. Last night had been barely tolerable for her, curled up in a ball under the low boughs of a fir tree. She had long since grown tired of the granola bars, but they had enough calories to keep her going, while they lasted. Then this morning, what had started as a nice fall day—chilly, but sunny and warming up—had suddenly turned vicious, with wind, a cold rain changing to snow, and finally these blizzard conditions.

She knew she was too far from anywhere and too deep in the canyon to get a cell phone signal, probably, even if her battery wasn't dead, even if she hadn't dropped the thing somewhere, maybe when she had stopped by that big rock to rest.

And then ... what had happened? She was walking up the little side valley, thinking about her dilemma again, resolving to put a stop to the madness somehow, to prevent the slaughter, and ... then what?

All she could remember was waking up cold, and with the unbelievable headache. It made her usual migraines seem tame, even benign.

It didn't help at all that these mountains were so confusing. Steep valleys winding here and there, with little side canyons going nowhere. Rocks and cliffs, and cliffs and rocks—that all looked alike. She knew she had to go down before going back up, but how much and when to turn off the trail down the stream was just a mystery.

This side canyon she was in just now certainly wasn't the right one. The cliffs up there behind her weren't something she had encountered before, and there was no way she was going up them anyhow. If only she could find the right trail and get back to the car, she could get warmed up.

Ah, here. The big rock, where she rested before. The one like a toadstool, with a little shelter under its side, the downwind side. Just a little rest, maybe that would help restore enough strength to find a way out of this awful place. As she settled into a hunched-up sitting position in the lee of the big rock, she pulled her windbreaker over her head and stuck her hands into her armpits.

So tired, sleepy.

What would her father do? He was always talking about his hunting trips when he was younger, trips into the Sacramento Mountains in the fall. If you get lost, he said, stay put. Someone will find

you—assuming someone knows that you're missing. But no one knew that she had come up here, except that guy downtown yesterday. Of course, he wouldn't know she hadn't returned last night.

And her father had always talked about what you should carry, even on the shortest hikes. Matches. A space blanket. Rain gear. All that other stuff that she'd neglected to bring as well.

I'm sorry, Daddy, I'm so sorry. I screwed up, I should have listened to you.

He would be frantic, of course. She was supposed to call him tonight, she remembered.

And she also needed to make that other call, as difficult as it would be, she must—the madness *had* to stop. No matter the history of injustice, the collusion with the Zionists, the seductive infidel decadence that was corrupting the faithful. There was simply no way she could let all those people die like that. No way. She had to stop it. Had to.

Just a little rest, she thought, maybe then I can go on, find the car. So sleepy ...

* * *

One

After it was over, on the road down the mountain in Terry's big Ford Excursion with the heater blasting, the four of them talked about it, finally agreeing that the only reason we were able to find her body that day was the dogs.

Maybe in the spring someone else would have eventually run across her remains, after she had been through the repeated freeze-and-thaw of March and April and served as a snack for a variety of critters and started to smell. But then and there, hidden away by the snow in early December, it was because of the dogs, they figured.

I think we were all jealous of them, Ketchum and Filly, curled up snug against each other, sound asleep in the back—Filly was snoring, and the rest of us would have liked to doze off, too. But we had to keep Terry awake and on the road, hard as it was for him to see with the wind blowing the snow around out there in the gloom. None of us trusted the guard rails, and we all knew how far down it would be if Terry went off the road on one of those deceptively sharp curves.

Also, staying awake was good because they needed to talk about it—so did I, to tell the truth, but I just couldn't, not at that point.

The dogs deserved to sleep, though, having covered at least twice as much ground as the rest of us, and they had done it without the benefit of snowshoes. On the other hand, when they found her, their work was done. It was the rest of us who had to haul her body out.

Ketchum had finally found her, with Filly close behind. She was sitting under the shelter of a mushroom-shaped rock the size of a garden shed, behind a three-foot snow drift. Even though she was nearly frozen stiff, there must have been enough scent floating through the cold, still air for Ketchum to pick her up. We were about five hours into our search of the upper Rio Nambe drainage and slogging up the bed of a side creek, thankful for the lull between surges of wind and snow. Ketchum and Filly were following in our snowshoe tracks, when all of a sudden he let out a small yelp and poked his nose up in the air, snuffing and puffing like a little black steam engine.

“What'cha got, boy, what'cha got?” You could tell Terry was proud that Ketchum had picked up the scent first.

He and Chug competed in just about every way imaginable, even with silly things like whose dog had the better nose, as if they somehow had control over that. But they were best of friends despite it all, and they had even talked about breeding Ketchum and Filly. I can't say for sure about Filly, but Ketchum would have obliged, given his affinity for humping Terry's right leg. And, besides rooting for Ketchum as a guy thing, I think we all had a voyeuristic curiosity about the geometry of the actual consummation. But the size of the pups might have given Filly problems, and there was also the issue of what a cross between a black Lab and a Jack Russell terrier would look like.

With Terry's encouragement, Ketchum bounded off up the creek bed, the untracked snow splashing out from under his belly, and Filly, yapping away, floundered after him. They disappeared around a rock up ahead at a bend in the stream, but we could still hear Filly's excitement so we picked up our pace to see what they had found. Soon it sounded to us like they weren't getting any farther away, and after a while a black face peeked back around the rock to see what was taking us so long. When we finally caught up, they were sitting patiently next to the mushroom-shaped boulder, making snow angels with their tails, a big one for Ketchum beside the tiny one for Filly, waiting for the praise they knew was coming. It was all a game to them, even if they didn't feel the competitive urge that Terry and Chug did.

She was alone in the lee of the big rock, leaning sideways up against it, huddled up with her face on her bare knees, arms folded across her chest, her green windbreaker pulled up over her head, one of the most heartbreaking things I've seen in a long, long time. It looked as if she was asleep, but we all knew that was too much to hope for. She'd been out there for at least 24 hours in blizzard conditions without proper clothing, far too long to have survived.

An old friend once told me that "... there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes." When we saw her sitting there, I thought of that, and it occurred to me that her gravestone should read "Died of Bad Clothes." But I guess people would just confuse that with a fashion statement.

This kind of thing happens around here now and then, and that's one of the reasons for the existence of our Back-country Emergency Rescue Team. Thing is, the weather will surprise you. The locals, both the natives and those of us who have lived here a while, have figured this out, and we're prepared when we go up there. But the tourists, well, they get fooled by the nice weather in town, drive up the ski-hill road in shorts and a light jacket for a day hike, and get blind-sided by a snowstorm. And this year it was especially deceiving, with temperatures in the 70s the first weekend of December.

On Saturday, that is. Sunday, it all changed. The first big storm of the season plunged in from the northwest, dumping two feet of snow above Los Alamos in the Jemez Mountains and about the same amount in the Sangre de Cristos. The folks at the ski areas were ecstatic, of course, and the four inches in town charmed the tourists. The piñon trees, what's left of them, and the juniper on the hillsides, as well as the adobe walls we have around town, they all look just wonderful with a frosting of snow—it's the stuff of calendars and postcards. But up in the Sangres it can be deadly.

So it seemed clear that the woman in the green windbreaker had gone up there Sunday morning for a hike and got caught in the storm. When we found her Monday afternoon, it was too late. She must have taken the side creek when the main trail got snow-covered and the visibility went to hell in the blizzard. To the uninitiated, it might look like the right way, and it *was* in the right direction, at least. But it was really just a little creek bed that eventually petered out at the base of some impassable cliffs. Whether she made it to the cliffs and turned back before stopping at the mushroom rock was something we'd never know.

Anyway, I was listening to Terry and Chug and Steven and Ronny talking about finding her and how clever the dogs were and our long return hike, towing her body on the toboggan. Her body was semi-frozen, kind of like grocery-store chicken, where you can still bend the joints, so we straightened her out, wrapped her in a blanket, and lashed the package onto the toboggan for the hike out. The whole

affair was now on top of Terry's Excursion, and we were headed back into town, to the emergency room at St. Vincent Hospital. They were talking, but I wasn't, because when we uncovered her head while wrapping her up, I recognized her.

* * *

Living in Santa Fe means living with tourists, and this is fine, really, even fun once you get used to it. Part of getting used to it is being a good citizen and helping out when they get lost. And get lost they do, because it's a confusing little town, with streets that arbitrarily change their names, streets that loop around and almost tie themselves in knots, and street numbers that have no particular relationship to what people in the rest of the country think of as "blocks." It's easy to recognize—you see someone wearing a puzzled expression standing on a corner and holding a map, and ten-to-one it's a lost tourist. If the map's upside-down, twenty-to-one.

Saturday morning, I was down on San Francisco Street, the narrow, dark part west of the Plaza, and here was this gorgeous lady—and I mean she was *stunning*—standing across from the corner at Galisteo with an upside-down map, swiveling her head around like an owl. I couldn't really see her expression because of her big dark glasses and floppy hat, but I could still tell she was gorgeous. And, because of the map, lost.

I've had some experience with this kind of situation, and a couple of times I think I made matters worse. For some reason, the lost tourist—each was a single woman—must have thought I was trying to hit on her, and she hurried off in a direction that probably made her even more lost. So I'm careful and use an approach that's polite, to the point, and not at all aggressive.

"Excuse me? I live here, and you look like you might be lost. Maybe I can point you in the right direction?" It helps to put a gentle inflection into the questions, to sound helpful. With her, it worked, or at least it didn't frighten her off down Galisteo, probably not where she needed to go.

"Oh, well ... um, yes ... that is, I hope so. I was supposed to meet some friends for brunch at Café Pasqual's, but I'm having trouble finding it. Thank you for asking. You're so kind."

So Galisteo would have worked after all, a block of it over to Water Street and then east for a block up to Don Gaspar. While these directions popped into my head immediately, it took me a minute to get them downloaded to my mouth. She had taken off her dark glasses, and I was entranced by her sky-blue eyes—and when I say "sky-blue," I mean the Santa Fe sky-blue, which is truly entrancing. I managed to cover my confusion with a coughing fit.

"Excuse me, uh, again. This dry fall air even gets to us locals. Ahem. Your friends picked a dynamite place for brunch, but I hope they got there to stand in line and get a table. Otherwise, you'll be standing with them." And I proceeded with the directions and waved my arms around to illustrate the route. She glanced at her watch and looked down Galisteo.

"May I ask you a personal question? Not too personal, just how long you've lived here?"

I actually hadn't counted for a while, so I did the math in my head. "Twelve years, plus a little. Interesting. I haven't thought of that recently. Seems like a long time, at least compared to some folks. Santa Fe has been growing like crazy for the past few years."

"Maybe you can give me some more advice, then. I was thinking of getting out of town for a few hours, and I've heard there's a ski area somewhere around here."

"Sure is. Santa Fe has its own little ski area just up there." I waved in a generally northeast direction. "North on Washington and right, east, on Artist Road, which becomes Hyde Park Road and

takes you up there. It's about fifteen miles from here. But it's not open for skiing yet. We've had such a warm fall that there's just no snow up there. Same with the other areas, like Taos. Taos is a couple of hours north. They're not open either. Not enough snow. It's been too warm."

Good going, motormouth, I thought to myself. Suave. Maybe I should explain that they're not open. Because there's no snow. Duh.

"I guess they wouldn't be open, if it's been like this. No, I wasn't going to ski, I just wanted to get away, maybe go for a little walk, do some thinking. I thought that at least there would be a good road, you know?"

All this time, her eyes had continued to mesmerize me, and I was thinking how easy it would be to fall head over heels for her.

"Well, there's weather moving in tomorrow, what they're calling the first big storm. So be sure to be careful. The weather can change quickly, and it gets dangerous real fast up there. And the road is good, but it gets challenging when there's snow on it. So my advice would be to go up there today, before the storm."

She smiled, and I felt my heart jump.

"Careful is what I do, so I'll go up today. Maybe after this brunch thing I'm headed to. Thanks for your help." And off she went, down Galisteo toward Water Street.

But she must have changed her mind, because now she was on the top of the Excursion, wrapped in a blanket and, as the air warmed up as we descended the mountain, probably thawing out.

* * *

By the time we arrived at St. Vincent, Steven had a report of our search and day-late rescue typed up on his laptop. He was by far the most experienced in our little group, and he would plug the thing into a printer at the nurses' station when we got to the hospital, print out a hard-copy of it, have us sign it, and we'd be out of there in less than a half hour. He'd been spending most of the drive down the mountain, since about the Nordic ski trail parking area, quizzing us, reviewing facts, and typing madly away.

Everything was reasonably straightforward, except for the original phone call. The issue of who had phoned in the missing person report wasn't our problem, but it was puzzling anyway. We had been rousted out early that morning, rescued from having to go to work, with a report of a missing hiker on the Winsor Trail. Monday morning is a strange time for calls like this—usually they'll come in Saturday or Sunday evening and we wind up spending all night wandering around in the woods, calling out names, scaring the wildlife. Scaring us, too, sometimes. You've got to experience personally the sudden awakening of a randy bull elk in the middle of a moonless fall night to get the full effect.

At the hospital, the dogs woke up, looked around, and yawned. We got out and started fiddling with the toboggan on the top, and they went back to sleep. They didn't have as much experience as Steven, but more than I, and they knew the drill.

We had called ahead, of course. Even here in Northern New Mexico, there are cell towers almost everywhere, so the hospital folks were expecting us. Ronny is a paramedic, but we always make sure that dead folks are declared dead by an MD. Unless, that is, we were just bringing in parts. That happens sometimes, too, when we run across the remains of someone who has been out there for a while, and the critters get to them.

But this time it was a whole body, pretty fresh, actually, so a genuine doc was going to have to do the honors. The other guys all walked into the emergency room behind the orderlies pushing the

gurney—we had transferred the body from the toboggan to it. I stayed behind, using the excuse that I was going to walk the dogs. I just didn't want to look at that poor woman's dead body any more. It seemed like a much better idea to remember her from the Saturday morning encounter.

St. Vincent is on a ridge south of downtown, and it affords an expansive view to the south and west. Lights were beginning to come on down toward the airport, over by the community college, and in the neighborhoods between there and the hospital. Even though it was getting dark, cooling down from the warmth of the early December sun, it was still quite comfortable compared to where we'd been all day. At our highest point, the saddle on Raven's Ridge above the ski area, we had been three-quarters of a mile higher than in town. It was full winter up there. But down in town, the sun had been out all day, apparently, and much of the snow had melted.

As we strolled around, the dogs were having lots of fun sniffing among all the bushes and winter-dressed flower beds surrounding the hospital. Now that they were off duty, they could use their amazing noses to explore, and they were tugging me all over the grounds. And it gave me time to think.

I've done about a half-dozen of these search-and-rescues where we're too late to do a real rescue, and we wind up toting out a body instead of a grateful hiker. It's always depressing, although sometimes our gloom is tempered with anger or black humor. The stupid things that people do, or don't do, that wind up getting them dead is sometimes just too much, and on the way out with the body the jokes fly.

I let the dogs wander to their hearts' content for about twenty minutes and then started working them back toward the parking lot. If the half-hour ritual of printing and signing the report held to schedule, it would be just about time to leave when I got the dogs back in the Excursion. But as I started back, I noticed a Santa Fe Police Department patrol car heading up the drive toward the emergency entrance, fast. He didn't have his lights or siren going, but he was certainly not dawdling. About a minute later, there went another one, followed closely by a New Mexico State Police cruiser. Then there were a couple of unmarked cars, dark-colored, full-sized sedans, official looking. Each one parked in the fire lane, and the driver—in one case there were two passengers as well—got out and quickly went into the hospital. I had a sinking sensation that we might not be getting home for a while.

Back at the Excursion, I was bedding the dogs down when Steven strolled up. He turned his back to the evening breeze and lit a cigarette while I locked up with the key that Terry had given me earlier. Ketchum immediately sprawled on the doggie bed stuffed in there with all our gear behind the back seat and looked to be asleep instantly. It was, after all, his car. Filly, on the other hand, was pacing nervously back and forth across the top of the back seat, displaying remarkable balance. I knew she was high strung, but I think maybe she was also prescient and sensed that something was wrong.

"Just our luck." The cigarette smoke combined with the fog from Steven's breath to make him look like a dragon. "I hope you don't have a big date tonight. I think we may be here a while."

"What, they don't like your report?"

"Oh, my report's fine. It's just that who it's about isn't."

"Huh? Should we know who it is?"

"I didn't, until they told me. And we're not in any kind of trouble—it's just that they want us around to answer questions for a while."

"So, who is it?"

"Elizabeth Davidson." The blank look on my face must have been blanker than usual, because he laughed. "Yeah, that was my reaction, too. How about Elizabeth Prince? Or Elizabeth O'Malley? Either of those names ring a bell?"

“Oh. So she got remarried to some guy named Davidson, huh? Either of the Senators here yet?”

“I hear Saint Mike’s going to fly up from Albuquerque. Bill Prince is probably not going to show, though. Anyway, they want us to hang around in case there are questions, ‘they’ being the Nimbies. The police got here first and claimed jurisdiction, but the Nimbies showed up and took over.”

They would, I thought. The New Mexico Bureau of Investigation—whose agents we all call “Nimbies”—just loves to assert itself over local officials.

“What questions? All we got is a babe-sicle, dead for quite a while before we found her.” We never use such terms as babe-sicle in public, preferring to keep our black humor to ourselves. But with each other, it’s standard operating procedure.

“Yeah, well, the doc in there unwrapped her and recognized her immediately, so he called the cops. And he noticed something we didn’t, a contusion at the base of her skull. He thinks someone may have knocked her unconscious and left her up there to freeze. So we’re looking at something quite different from the usual lost-and-frozen tourist.” He took another deep drag on his cigarette.

“Damn. That sounds like murder. Of the Senator’s daughter, and the other Senator’s ex-wife. Who’s this guy Davidson?”

“Got me. Just be glad we found her and treated her with respect and all that. Saint Mike will look on that favorably. And that sure couldn’t hurt.” Trailing cigarette smoke, he turned and headed back toward the emergency entrance, and I followed.

He was right. Saint Mike’s favorable view of us would be a Good Thing. Michael T. O’Malley, Senior Senator from New Mexico, in his fifth term, over 27 years in the U.S. Senate, was responsible for ensuring, literally, billions of dollars of federal spending in the Land of Enchantment each year. Between the military bases, the national laboratories, and the federal support for research at the universities, his influence in the Senate provided something like half of our impoverished state’s income. That’s why just about everyone called him Saint Mike.

And it was his only daughter that we had unceremoniously carted down the mountain on the top of Terry’s Excursion.

Furthermore, she was the ex-wife of our other Senator, like his colleague a Republican, and, like his colleague, of considerable stature in the Senate. William R. Prince was in his third term, recently re-elected despite the messy divorce. Overcoming this handicap in the heavily Catholic Hispanic voting community had been a major success for Prince, and it was to Saint Mike’s credit that he had endorsed Prince’s reelection despite it all. So the babe-sicle whom I had met in a much warmer state of being on Saturday morning downtown was something of a celebrity in most of our state, if not in the movie-star vacation land of Santa Fe.

And apparently she had been murdered.

Great. Just great. At least I didn’t have a hot date that night. But, damn, I was hoping to see the Broncos and the Raiders on Monday Night Football.

* * *

Two

Inside the lobby, the police officers were sulking, probably because the Nimbies had taken charge and were strutting around, puffed up with self-importance. My BERT pals were sitting along the far wall, half asleep, so I went over and joined them. It took about fifteen seconds for a Nimbie to march up to me, a look of official curiosity, stern and authoritative, on his face.

“You are?”

I stood up and found myself looking down at the top of his head. “I’m Sandy Livingston, I’m with these guys. I’ve been outside walking our search-and-rescue dogs. Didn’t want them to mess up Terry’s SUV. Did I hear Steven right about this being a homicide?”

“I can’t comment on that. But it looks like something different from the usual search-and-rescue you guys do. We are going to need statements from each of you, on top of that report. So don’t plan on going anywhere for a while, OK?”

“No, it’s not OK, not even close. We, all of us, have been up in the mountains all day. We put in about ten miles with maybe four thousand vertical feet of elevation gain, a lot of it in blizzard conditions. We found Ms. Davidson, quite dead, and brought her out. We’re the heroes in this thing. And we’re exhausted and starved. You keep us here with this officious horseshit and you’re going to lose the cooperation of the Back-country Emergency Rescue Team. Next time you’ve got a missing person up there, you can goddamn well go up and get her yourself. You need statements, we can come in tomorrow and give them. Got it?” I maintained a completely calm, even sleepy demeanor through this little speech and stared down into his eyes.

Those eyes, a sort of cow-flop brown, I decided, narrowed, and his face got all pinched up. I guess it was because he was thinking, and it caused him pain. But at least he was smart enough to know that he couldn’t alienate us, that the NMBI needed BERT far more than we needed them. I don’t know whether he knew I was the Governor’s nephew, and I didn’t care—that wasn’t a card I wanted to play anyway. But I did know that these NMBI guys were more bark than bite. He finally seemed to make a decision.

“Sorry, I didn’t know the circumstances. Let me give you guys a number to call in the morning, OK? And you can give your statements then.”

“Thank you. And I’m afraid I’m being a little short-tempered. Like I said, we’re exhausted. And starved. Tell you what. We’ll be over at Tiny’s for the next couple of hours, if something important comes up. St. Francis and Cerrillos, OK? Oh, and if you really need to be doing something tonight, you can check out a car we saw up at the bottom of the parking lot at the ski basin. Looked like one of those standard rental cars— maybe it was hers.”

It’s easy to be generous when you win.

He almost smiled. “Got it. Thanks for the tip.”

We all trooped out to the Excursion and headed out to St. Michael’s Drive, which got its name before we got our generous Senator, and turned west toward the big intersection with St. Francis Drive. Santa Fe—the City of Holy Faith—has a surprising number of these religious-sounding streets.

A couple of miles north, at the Cerrillos intersection, Terry pulled into the parking lot. Tiny’s is one of those places that we locals consider our secret—it’s hidden away behind a shopping center and so doesn’t attract much tourist traffic. Most of the out-of-town crowd sticks with the trendy places that sound like they’re named after someone’s Mexican aunt. And Tiny’s has a wider selection of menu items than just the usual chile-covered burritos and enchiladas of the low-end tourist places, but it doesn’t have the froufrou creations, or snooty atmosphere, of the high-end places. It’s just right for a bunch of hungry guys. They knew us, so they weren’t surprised when we asked for a couple of bowls of water, which Terry and Chug took outside for the dogs.

By the time they got back, the two pitchers of beer we ordered had arrived, and I was starting to pour it into glasses. Terry, whose owning the biggest vehicle made him the designated driver, just looked sadly at his iced tea.

“We’ve got some hungry dogs out there, guys. Those snacks we brought for them disappeared faster than this beer’s going to.”

Chug picked up a three-quarters-full pitcher, tilted his head back, and poured it in his mouth, demonstrating how he got his nickname. He had this trick of opening his throat, or something like that, so he didn’t have to slow down to swallow normally. He left just enough in the pitcher to propose a toast.

“Gentlemen! Now that I’ve taken the edge off my thirst, I believe that we should all raise our glasses to our good friend and colleague Sanford Gentworthy Livingston the Third, Esquire, gentleman and all-around good guy, for getting us away from the clutches of that hospital and those evil Nimbies. Without his efforts, we would probably still be sitting in that waiting room.”

Glasses were raised and, because it was all true, even if it sounded corny with all the flourishes, there were comments of “Bravo,” and “Hear Hear.”

I raised my glass. “Thank you, Charles, and I should tell you that I gave them your address and phone number instead of mine, so when they come in the night with their arrest warrant for being a meanie to a Nimbie, a serious crime as you know, don’t be surprised.”

That got a few laughs. Then we got busy destroying the chips and salsa the waiter had brought.

It’s true that my full name is Sanford Gentworthy Livingston III, but Chug just threw in the Esquire for the hell of it. I’m definitely not a lawyer. And even though the full name makes me sound like I’m some kind of British nobility, it’s really just a bunch of old family names thrown together by my paternal great-great grandparents. They did this, I guess, to honor ancestors from generations before them, when people used last names for everything. Honoring ancestors was the type of thing people did in the Midwest in the late nineteenth century. Because my great-grandfather, the first Sanford, was quite the patriarch—he was the founder of a wildly successful law firm in Indianapolis—my grandfather and my father were bribed with promises of being remembered in his will to continue his name. He died when I was about 3, secure in the legacy he had established, I’m told. If I ever have a son, though, I think I’ll spare him the embarrassment, so there won’t be a Sanford Gentworthy Livingston IV. I’ll go with one of those trendy California-sounding names, maybe Derek.

The food arrived, combination plates containing mixtures of four different entrees for each of us except Ronny, who got two orders of green chile cheeseburgers with fries. And there were more chips and salsa with two bowls of guacamole this time, and another pitcher of beer, which we kept on the opposite side of the table from Chug. It got quiet for a while. But I live alone and eat in silence a lot, and having a group to socialize with was too good to pass up.

“So, did you guys give statements while I was outside, or what?”

Ronny maneuvered a big lump of cheeseburger into his left cheek.

“Naw, we just told the Nimbies we had all contributed to the statement Steven wrote and agree to it. One of ’em, that stuck-up one, told us we’d be questioned separately about it, like we’re some kind of suspects, or something.”

“They don’t really think we’re somehow involved, do they?”

“I don’t think they think.” Steven made no attempt to keep his low opinion of the Nimbies under wraps. “But to be fair, this will be a high-profile investigation and they’ve got to move carefully.”

“So what’s your story going to be? Just what’s in the report?”

Steven looked puzzled at this question, and Ronny stopped eating and just looked at me. The other two shrugged and grunted behind their burritos.

“Of course. What else?”

“I was asking because I know something more, and I need to decide if I should just answer questions or volunteer information. I suppose they’ll have a general ‘do you know anything else that might be relevant?’ question anyway.”

Terry swallowed a mouthful of beef and beans.

“You know more than we do? How?”

“I met her Saturday morning, downtown. I mean, I bumped into her. She didn’t introduce herself, she was just a lost tourist, as far as I could tell.” And I proceeded to fill them in on my encounter.

“So you actually warned her about the storm? And told her it was coming in yesterday?” Steven looked surprised.

“Yeah, and she seemed to hear it, I mean she thanked me and all, and told me she’s careful about things like that. So it’s strange that she’d go up there Sunday afternoon.”

“How do we know she went up there Sunday?” Chug more or less burped out the question, and I looked at him, startled more by the question than the belch. I hadn’t thought of that.

“I guess we don’t. Although it must have been cold up there Saturday night as well, and wouldn’t she have been completely frozen stiff if she’d been up there for two days? And wouldn’t it be compounded by rigor?” We all know just enough medical stuff to be dangerous, and I’m probably the most guilty.

“Maybe. But it’s been a warm fall, and the ground was probably above freezing, including that rock, Saturday and Sunday morning, at least. So maybe by being under it, or somewhere like that, she could have spent the night before the storm up there as well. And it was sunny yesterday morning, wasn’t it? Before the storm?” Ronnie looked around the group for confirmation.

I’m the resident weather weenie in the BERT, but I tend to pay attention only when unusual things happen. I knew the storm was coming, and, knowing that, I just had tuned everything else out. There were a couple of NFL games on Sunday that had grabbed my attention.

“Yeah, it was.” Terry is such an avid skier that he tracks the day-to-day weather in anticipation of when he can get on the mountain with skis under him. “And it was windy Saturday night, which probably kept it warmer in the valleys, isn’t that what you’ve told me, Sandy?”

“Right. So maybe she could have gone up there Saturday. Which means I was one of the last people to see her alive. Damn.”

* * *

My status as resident BERT weather weenie was the result of my professional background. I was always good in math and physics—it just seemed to come naturally, a lot more easily for me than for my classmates—so I pursued it all the way to a Ph.D. About the time I went to graduate school, the fashionable thing in mathematical physics was the new specialty called nonlinear dynamics. What you do in the study of nonlinear dynamics is basically computer programming, and that appealed to me a lot more than working on particle physics experiments in some underground accelerator facility—to do that you have to be a plumber, or at least have the knack.

I don't think anyone really knows what nonlinear dynamics is, but all of us who do it are good at pretending to. What it's about is trying to understand the "big picture" of complex systems—physical systems, economic systems, biological systems, social systems, systems of systems that are mixtures of all these—without having to understand all of the underlying details of all of the processes within these systems. Did I mention it's about systems?

Anyway, one such complex system is the weather, so I've managed to learn a lot about it and that makes me a weather weenie—a title of distinction to my way of thinking.

Another complex system is the economy, and that's what I worked on during my graduate studies. I got my Ph.D. for developing a method that explains certain behaviors in the stock market, and, putting my money where my mouth was, I also got comfortably well-off at it. In fact, my method worked so well that I kept using it until just a few years ago. It predicted the October 1987 crash back when I was still in graduate school, and, more recently, the collapse of the dot-com economy, and I got out of the market both times before it wiped out so many other people. I got back in after the '87 crash at just the right time to make a killing. But just as I was about to get back in the second time, after the dot-com collapse (hey, any successful method uses the "buy low and sell high" trick; it's just a matter of timing), those scumbag al-Qaeda terrorists took out the World Trade Center, and the market dove some more. I knew then and there that I had been lucky—my method could never have predicted such an event. So, rather than push my luck, I converted everything to some conservative annuities and quit speculating altogether. Now I'm a self-made trust-funder.

Because I'm not paying attention to the market anymore, I have time for other things, and the weather as a complex nonlinear system has become more and more fascinating to me. I've got a research position at the Santa Fe Institute working on certain aspects of predicting seasonal weather patterns—SFI made its bones on nonlinear dynamics, and they like to have people with experience in a range of specialties on staff. And so I'm the resident weather weenie there as well as in BERT.

Actually, the math and physics thing works quite well in combination with my volunteer work in BERT. We spend a lot of time hiking in the mountains, year 'round, and I derive equations in my head while hiking, the times when it's boring, at least. It's really easier than most people think. I mean, if you're literate and you know the Pledge of Allegiance, you could spell it out in your head with no problem, right? And if you worked at it a little, you could spell it out backwards, even. But if you were illiterate and didn't know the Pledge, it would seem like magic for someone to do that. It's exactly the same with what I do. I know the equations I start from, and I'm mathematically literate. No magic involved at all.

In fact, on that Monday when we were slogging up the Winsor Trail to see if we could find the missing hiker who turned out to be Elizabeth Davidson, I was working on a new transformation of the Navier-Stokes equations based on an idea I heard from a guy up at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. The Navier-Stokes equations are basically Newton's Laws written for fluids, and they describe how the atmosphere works. This idea had promise, I thought.

But the trouble with doing this stuff in your head is that something comes along as a distraction and you lose your place. It was Ketchum's yelp, when he first got a whiff of Elizabeth's body, that brought me out of my mathematical trance on Monday.

So I went into the Institute on Tuesday morning to see if I could re-create on paper all the stuff I'd done in my head on Monday. But there are distractions in the office as well as in the woods, and just as I was getting rolling, I was interrupted by a phone call. I should have been expecting it, I guess.

"Mr. Livingston? This is Detective Orlando Aguilar of the NMBI." He didn't call it "nimbie" like everyone else did—they seem to be sensitive about that. "We need to get a statement from you concerning your search yesterday."

“I was expecting your call, detective,” I lied. “When would be a good time? And where? Are you guys over in the state government complex somewhere?”

“We’re down on South Cerrillos in the Public Safety Building, across from the auto park. And we’d like you here as soon as you can get here.”

“You mean way down past the mall? OK. But it’ll be a while, I’m afraid. I’ve got to walk home and get my car, and it’s probably a good half-hour drive down there, or more if there’s a traffic holdup. I’m up on Hyde Park Road.” I looked at the clock on my computer screen. 9:33, to the microsecond, because it was automatically linked to the atomic clock up in Boulder. “How about eleven? I’ll have a phone with me and I can call you if I get held up.”

“We’ll expect to see you then.”

* * *

Having been a Santa Fe resident for more than a decade had allowed me to find just the right place to live. The real-estate market here is bizarre, what with the movie stars, the rich folks from the coasts and Texas, and the celebrity wannabes all trying to out-do each other’s second homes. Normal folks, if there are such things here, can take advantage of all this with patience and strategic offers on properties that come on the market.

It amazes me that people will plunk down the cost of a flashy house—often a megabuck or more—on impulse. They come to Santa Fe on a short visit, stay a while longer, get infatuated with the place, and, next thing you know, they’ve bought a second home here. But after a while they find that they’re not using it enough to justify its upkeep, or they get divorced and need the cash or something, so they put it up for sale. As a result, the turnover is significant, and, for people like me who just want a nice house to live in, opportunities abound.

I spent my first several years here in a condo, all the while watching the market carefully. When a house on the hillside just below the Institute became available, I jumped on it, and then I spent six months or so remodeling it before moving in. It’s a simple one-story in the Santa Fe stucco style, with a big garage and a little guest house, and it suits me perfectly. I also built a landscaped trail up the hill through my back yard to the Institute’s grounds, so I have a private path to and from work. It climbs the hillside in a series of switchbacks among those piñons and junipers that I mentioned before, the ones that look so picturesque with snow on them.

It’s funny. Those little trees are seldom more than about fifteen feet tall, around here at least, almost like big bushes. But when you’re walking among them, you feel like you’re in a forest. And they support a robust ecosystem, because both species provide cover and food for a variety of birds. I’ve also done a fair job of restoring the ground cover with native grasses—it had been over-grazed severely before the land was subdivided in the ’60s—so there are cover and seeds for ground squirrels and rabbits as well, and their presence attracts coyotes. As a result, I have a back-yard nature preserve that I get to walk though on my way to and from work.

I’ve been lucky with this property, because my trees are still in good shape. The vast areas of dead piñon trees that we’ve had to deal with here in the southwest in recent years bypassed me—there must be some local wet spot or something that’s keeping my trees alive. It wouldn’t surprise me if runoff down my hill from the Institute’s parking lot actually helped.

On that Tuesday, when I was walking down the hill to get my car so I could drive down to the Nimbie headquarters to give my statement, my cell phone let loose with its custom ring-tone, the first loud power chords from the Van Halen tune *Jump*. I had been having a conversation with a scrub jay—

they remind me of giant, bad-tempered bluebirds—trying to reason with it but not succeeding. It must have been one of the pair that thought of my bird feeder as their personal lunch counter, and I expect it was scolding me for having forgotten to put out more of those oily black sunflower seeds over the weekend. It swooped from tree to tree, following me down the switchbacks of my path, squawking. When the cell phone rang, it stopped and cocked its head sideways, listening. If I couldn't reason with it, maybe my cell phone could, I thought.

“Hey there, Sandy, guess where I am?”

I recognized the sultry voice with mixed feelings for what would likely be about to happen.

Alex was one of those professional Santa Feans who worked, more or less, at about five jobs. If I recall correctly, at that time she was writing an astrology column for a local weekly, working part-time in an aroma-therapy shop downtown, peddling healing crystals at Tupperware parties, and doing a couple of other ridiculous metaphysical things that I could never keep straight. Definitely not a nine-to-five type, where she was just then was probably in my house somewhere. She had a key.

We had been involved in an on-again off-again affair for a couple of years, recently off-again so I was a little surprised, and pleased, to hear from her. I thought of her as a sweet, dear person and would have asked her to marry me, except she was just such a flake. I mean, I'm a mathematical physicist, for crying out loud. Even though I'm supposed to be an expert on complex systems, this lady was just too complex for me to begin to understand, big-picture-wise or any other wise. Also, her temper bothered me, from the perspective of a long-term commitment.

But, damn, she had this porn-star enthusiasm for sex, anywhere and everywhere, any way and every way. I'm usually not one to follow my dick around, but when someone as striking as she is grabs it and tugs, what can I say? She told me once that she liked our sex together so much because her orgasms cleaned out her chakras. Mathematical physicist and weather weenie I may be, but I'm street-smart enough to have smiled and agreed with her on that one. I don't know about the chakras, though; what it did for me was to clean out my sinuses, better than anything except the green chile stew they have down at the Horseman's Haven Cafe.

I read somewhere that men reach the peak of their sexual potency in their late teens and early twenties, while women reach theirs in their thirties—which explained her enthusiasm, I guess, and made me feel like a teenager again.

So my mixed feelings involved a sinking sensation that I'd probably get in trouble with the Nimbies for being late for my meeting, on the one hand, and, boing!, an instant erection, on the other. Chances were good that she was down at my house, waiting for me either in bed or in the hot tub.

The reason I thought this was that it had happened before—she'd call me at work and invite me home for a mid-day romp. I'd go back to work and people would ask me why I looked so tired and dreamy-eyed. I had a long list of publicly acceptable excuses ready to go.

I knew that I'd have to play her game, though, even if I didn't have time for a romp. She expected it and had proven before that she could be unbelievably bitchy if I didn't go along.

“Hi, darlin'. Um, let's see. In the kitchen, doing the breakfast dishes?”

“No, silly. Guess again.”

She could play this game for just about as long as it took me to get down the hill. But it occurred to me that she probably didn't know that I had a head start this time, as I was about half way there when she had called. So I could play her game and sneak up on her before she expected me.

“Oh. Hmm. I recall a big pile of laundry. Maybe you're in the utility room?”

She giggled. “No, but you’re getting warmer ... guess again.”

I had picked up my pace, frustrating the scrub jay’s scolding, and I hemmed and hawed on the phone while I tip-toed around to the southwest side of the house, where the hot tub sat on the porch. But she wasn’t there. That was good, actually, because sex in the hot tub, as titillating as it is to fantasize about, is actually just sloshy, and its, um, aftermath tends to muck up the filter. So I tip-toed into the house, feeling sneaky.

“Are you going to guess again, you bad boy? My chakras are just sooo clogged up.”

By now, I could hear her over the phone and in person. The in-person voice was coming from the direction of the bedroom, so I headed that way. But she wasn’t there, either.

“Sandy ... are you trying to sneak up on me?”

The in-person voice was from the open bathroom door, and there she was, quite naked, quite spectacular, sitting on the edge of the tub shaving her legs. All the way up. She must have sensed my presence, and she looked up with a grin.

“Here.” She was holding out her pink plastic shaver for me. “There are some spots I can’t reach very well.” She blinked several times.

It occurred to me that the Nimbies were going to be furious.

* * *

Three

What with an early lunch and an encore, it was nearly 1:00 by the time I got to the Public Safety Building. Even though I had called them twice, once about car trouble and again about a massive traffic slow-down, both fictitious, I could tell that Detective Aguilar was not at all pleased with my timing.

“Let me explain something to you, Mr. Livingston. We’re trying to run a homicide investigation here, and, because I believe you know the identity of the victim, you can probably guess at the pressure we’re under. Senator O’Malley has been calling us about every fifteen minutes, and as soon as his helicopter lands over at the airport, any time now, he’s going to head right over here. And we need to have our story straight so we can make sense to him. Whatever it is that you’ve been doing, it’s not a good enough excuse. I don’t care about car trouble, I don’t care about traffic, I don’t care about excuses of any kind. Now that you’re finally here, let’s get on with this. I’ve got half a mind to keep you in custody for a while afterwards, just to let you know how serious we are. It might not stick, but an obstruction charge would be enough for me to make your life miserable.”

I’ve learned that it’s best to just let these rants go and to focus instead on pertinent information.

“I couldn’t get a straight answer last night, so this is the first I’ve heard of a homicide investigation. But that means that you’ll be even more interested in my statement. It’ll be quite a bit longer than the others, my BERT pals’ statements, I imagine.”

He had walked away from me in the direction of some glass-walled offices, and this stopped him short.

“You don’t say. That makes your timing even worse. Get in here and let’s get going.” He was holding open a door to one of the offices, and the tape recorder on the desk in there looked ready to roll.

It turned out that he didn't care very much about the part of my statement that dealt with the search-and-rescue, because the other guys had all said the same thing, what was in Steven's written report. He did quiz me about the car in the parking lot that I'd told the Nimbie at the hospital about, though. I reiterated my previous statement and said I didn't have anything to add to it.

But he ate up the stuff about my Saturday morning encounter with Elizabeth. We went over it three times, and each time he stimulated some additional memory that enhanced my description. Still, it wasn't much for him to go on. But he hadn't known about the brunch, so now he had additional people to interrogate, if he could find out who they were. I sure didn't know.

Just as he was about to start in on his fourth run through my story, the door opened and a uniformed officer stuck his head in.

"Lando, the Senator's here. Wants to see you, like, yesterday."

"Send him in. We've actually got something he'll want to hear." He looked at me. "This, my friend, will be your punishment for being late. Senator O'Malley is about to question you. I can't wait to hear this."

I can't say this scared me, but it was a little intimidating. Fortunately, I still had really, really clean sinuses. You never want to be interrogated by a Senator when your sinuses are clogged up.

About ten seconds later a short, bullish man, full of bluster, clearly used to being in charge, marched into the little office. It was amusing to see him in person. You see these politicians on TV all the time, and they come across bigger than life. And Senator O'Malley was certainly charismatic, handsome in a rugged way, graying around the temples, piercing blue eyes. But the bigger than life part vanished in person, because he was short, down around five feet or so.

"You Aguilar? I want to hear everything you know. Who the hell's this?" He twitched his head in my direction.

I stood up before Aguilar had time to respond. "Senator, I'm terribly, terribly sorry about your daughter. I'm Sandy Livingston, I'm a member of the search-and-rescue team that found her yesterday."

And he changed. His posture sagged, he suddenly looked ten or fifteen years older, bluster gone. I pushed a chair around behind him and actually guided him into it. Aguilar was just standing there, sort of at attention. I think he was scared.

Senator O'Malley took a deep breath and let it out.

"Sit down, son, sit and tell me all about it, all the details. Please. Tell me whatever you can about my Betsy."

I'm barely on the near side of forty, and it's been a long time since anyone called me "son," even my Dad, but it worked somehow, coming from him. I pulled a chair around to face him and sat, with our knees almost touching. He had his head in his hands, looking at my shoes.

"Sir, I don't know if it will help any, but I don't think any of us had the impression that she suffered. When we first found her, we thought she was just asleep."

He looked up at me. "I was at the hospital last night, talked with the doctor who did the exam of her body, and with the medical examiner. They both told me that she had a bruise on the back of her neck, that she had probably been unconscious. Something about the bruising was consistent with her having been alive for some time after she was knocked out."

"Senator, I heard about the contusion last night, but I didn't know those details. If she was knocked out, that would have been instantaneous, and if she froze without waking up, there wouldn't have been pain. So maybe she didn't suffer. That's the best I can tell you."

“What about other details?”

So I filled him on the place we found her and everything else I could think of, and I talked about Saturday morning. He had me repeat the story twice and asked penetrating questions each time, even raising points that Aguilar had missed. Eventually he seemed satisfied with what I was able to tell him, as far as it went.

“Mr. Livingston, thank you for being so patient with me on this, but I’m sure you understand how much interest I have in it. I’ll have my people follow up on this brunch you said Betsy was going to. We’ve also got to get this business with the missing-persons call straightened out. Congress is in recess just now, so I’m in Albuquerque for the next few weeks. I’ve got people there and people in Washington I can put on this.”

“Senator, don’t you think that your involvement will, you know, get jumped on by the media? I mean, the NMBI is working on this, and they have a solid reputation. And that won’t put the spotlight on you. Right, Detective?” I looked over at Aguilar, who was nodding—probably for my not having said “nimbie,” but the Senator thought he was agreeing with me.

“That right, Detective? You guys on top of this?”

“Y-yes sir, Senator, we’re all over it like ... like ...”

“Like a cabrito on a chile bush, or something, I know. Or a duck on a June bug, as my esteemed colleague the Senator from Indiana would say.” He looked at me and arched an eyebrow. How did he know to do that? I hadn’t told him where I was from.

“At ease, detective, I’m the only old fart here allowed to say folksy stuff like that.” He was grinning, and Aguilar seemed to relax a little. “Detective? Could you please ask your Chief to step in here for a minute? I’d sure appreciate it.”

“Yes sir, Senator. Right away.” Aguilar scurried out, and O’Malley turned to me.

“What I really want is to talk to you alone for a minute, son. Now ...” He stopped when I held up my hand.

“Excuse, me Senator, but I imagine that everything in here is recorded, sound and video. Should we perhaps go for a walk?” I’m not paranoid, but I am a pretty quick thinker. If he wanted Aguilar out of the way, he probably didn’t want to be overheard.

His response surprised me with how astute he was—he nodded almost imperceptibly and continued talking as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“No, I just wanted to thank you personally for your efforts on this thing. It’s so close to my heart that I want to make sure you understand I’m not just saying this for political purposes. It’s personal with me, and I owe you one.”

I grinned and winked, playing along. “Gee, Senator, I’m not real political, but I can probably think of a way for you to get out of my debt with a vote or two in the Senate.”

He looked startled and laughed. “Now, don’t push it, son.”

The door opened and Aguilar walked in with a guy in a crisply pressed uniform. O’Malley turned on his million-watt smile and became a politician again. I tuned them out.

* * *

“You’re a quick study, son, I like that. I appreciate your reminding me about the recording equipment in there.”

We were strolling around the meager grounds of the Public Safety Building, being watched closely by the several suspicious suits standing by the Senator’s car.

“Now, you understand that I have nothing but the highest respect for the Nimbies.” His use of the popular diminutive startled me. “I helped get legislation passed through the Round House to found the NMBI, and I’ve managed to help get them federal law-enforcement funding on a couple of occasions. But I’d feel a lot better about this thing with my Betsy if I had a closer connection to it. Even though I’ll be in-state for a while, I really can’t get too involved, like you were saying in there. But I have a couple of questions that I don’t think the Nimbies are prepared to look into, now or ever. I think you could, though.”

“Well, Senator, I’m a volunteer member of the Back-country Emergency Rescue Team here in Santa Fe, but, gee, I’m not a detective or anything like that. My day job is being a mathematical physicist at the Santa Fe Institute.”

“I know. You got your Ph.D. at Berkeley and spent a couple of years at MIT. You’re something of the family black sheep, having chosen science over law—you were supposed to get your J.D. from Harvard and join the family firm in Indianapolis. And just to tie up the loose ends, you have a girlfriend, no pets, no police record or military record, two cars, and lots of money. Oh, and, of course, your mother is the Governor’s wife’s sister.” He grinned somewhat sheepishly. “You sure you don’t want my people to look into that brunch? They’re good.”

Of course, this was all public information, but I felt naked. I suppose that if you’re experienced with the armed forces or security clearances, having other people know all about you is standard operating procedure. But it was weird for me, coming out of the blue like that.

“If you know all about me, Senator, you’ll know that I’m not likely to be of much help.”

“Not in the usual way, I agree, not like a private investigator or anything like that. But one thing I have questions about is something you can help with—the place where you found her. I heard last night about that bruise, and I haven’t been able to think about anything else. How could it have happened? I mean, not how she was attacked, but how she ended up there. If someone assaulted her, he must have been there. I’m thinking of footprints. And you said she wasn’t sitting in the snow, she was sitting under this rock you described. Of course, now there are lots of footprints—yours and the other guys’. But, still ... I can’t help but think it might be possible to find some other indications of what actually happened. Did she walk there herself? Or was she carried? For example.”

“You know, Senator, when we were up there, we thought we were looking for a lost hiker. And when we found her, we didn’t think for a minute about foul play. Let me see ... what we did was to walk up to the edge of the snow on our snowshoes, take them off, and we tromped all around on the bare ground under the rock where she was sitting. So there won’t be any useful footprints under the rock, but there might be under the snow. If all this went down before the storm, I mean. And if there was someone else there, it probably happened before the storm, because we didn’t meet anyone on the trail, and it would have taken an expert not to get lost up there.”

“So if someone went up there and, say, swept away the snow, there might be more footprints?”

“Right. And if there are two sets, hers and someone else’s, we’d know more about what happened. I mean, it could be that the bruise happened accidentally, or it’s a couple of days old, or something.”

“There you go. See? This is exactly what I was thinking, that you could help me out on this.”

“Sure, but, if the Nimbies are treating this like a homicide, that’s a crime scene, and I shouldn’t go messing about with it.”

“No, you’re right. And I wouldn’t ask you to, even if I’m not being recorded.” I could see him smiling. “But the fact that you had that idea is what I need. Ideas. We can pass that one along to the Nimbies and let them deal with it. Hell, you’ll probably be just as glad not to have to go all the way up there again, right? Anyway, I was also thinking of something else. The brunch business. I don’t know for sure who it might have been with, but I think I can find out. And if you talk with these folks, they just might be a little more forthcoming than if the Nimbies do. Betsy’s circle of friends has this anti-establishment attitude. If you just say that you met her Saturday morning and feel bad about it and want to talk, I bet they’d tell you stuff they’d never tell the Nimbies.”

“You know, when I talked with her Saturday, I thought she was a lost tourist. But she grew up in New Mexico. How come she was lost?”

“We never spent much time in Santa Fe, and Bill Prince lives in Las Cruces. So I expect she just doesn’t,” he suddenly looked crestfallen again, “... that she *didn’t* know the town. And, you have to admit, it’s a confusing little place.”

“Oh, yeah. And it’s a good thing that it’s small, or we residents would never get it figured out. So, if you want me to look into this stuff, Senator, maybe you have an idea of who’s behind it.”

“I do. I wasn’t going to tell you if you didn’t ask, because I thought you might be better off with a fresh perspective, untainted by my prejudices. But since you asked, I’ll tell you. You know she divorced Bill, of course.”

“Hard to live here and not know that.”

“Right. And she married this guy Davidson.”

“Who’s a mystery to me and everyone I’ve asked.”

“That’s because you don’t watch enough B movies, and C and D and E ones. Derek Davidson.” Great, I thought. There goes the name of my first-born son. “Hollywood stunt man, as he never tires of calling himself. I guess he’s what girls would call a ‘hunk.’ I never understood what Betsy saw in him—and I guess now I never will.”

“Seems like a strange pairing. How did they meet?”

“On a cruise ship, of all places. Right after her divorce, she busted loose and took a singles cruise. There he was, tall, blonde, tanned, and available. I guess she was lonely.”

“And you think he may have been behind this?”

“Maybe it’s just that I want it to be him.”

“You don’t think it could have been, for example, Senator Prince? No offense—but I have to ask.”

“I don’t think so. Bill’s a straight-up guy. He was hurt by the divorce, which was Betsy’s idea, but he treated her fairly and isn’t one to hold a grudge. That’s why I supported him for re-election.”

“And your help is why he got re-elected. So do you know if this guy Davidson had a motive for wanting Bets ... your daughter out of the way?”

“Money. He’s chronically broke. He has lifestyle aspirations that exceed his income, considerably. For example, he spends the winter in Telluride, at a trophy home he bought, so he can be seen by the right crowd. And it’s not like he’s a movie star—he’s just the stand-in that gets banged around in the stunts. And Betsy had lots of money, from me and from Bill, in the form of a trust and in some life-

insurance policies. And, who knows, maybe Davidson took out more life insurance on her. I'll have this checked on."

"By those staffers who are so good about finding out about people, no doubt. But, look, Senator, I'm still not clear on what I can really do for you. I can talk with the brunch crowd, when you find out who they are. But I don't see myself being very helpful with Davidson, especially if he's up in Telluride. I mean, even if the Nimbies were on our side, we couldn't just waltz up there and grab him. Could we?"

"If we get real evidence, we can get him extradited, if need be. And I know some people in Colorado who could be helpful, if it comes to that. But what I was looking for now was just an indication that you would help me out. What the specifics are can wait. I won't insult you by offering to pay you, but I do want to emphasize that I am serious about this and can provide whatever is appropriate for compensation." And he looked serious, almost pleading. So I grinned again.

"Hmm. Back to the votes in the Senate, eh?"

He grinned back. "All depends on what the issue is and how I was going to vote anyway."

* * *

When I finally got home, it was close to 5:00, and the missed-call light on my house phone's ID box was blinking. Five new calls, it said, with two "unavailables"—slimeball telemarketers too slimy to want to be identified, no doubt—and calls from Steven, Terry, and Joyce Ortiz, the secretary for my part of the SFI. Her message was a relay of several urgent calls from the Nimbies that I'd missed while being preoccupied earlier with Alex.

I half expected to find Alex asleep in the bedroom where I'd left her. Clean chakras do that to her, and once she slept for two days straight after our romp. I have no idea how she managed her part-time jobs when she did this, but in Santa Fe lots of strange things are possible.

Both Steven and Terry had essentially the same news, that the Nimbies wanted some of us to trek up the Rio Nambre with them so they could examine the place where we found Elizabeth Davidson. I'm the BERT member with the most flexible schedule—the other guys have real jobs and families, except for Chug, who's working hard to avoid both. Therefore, it seemed that I was being nominated for another long snowshoe outing. And another storm was coming in on Wednesday. Great.

On the other hand, if I went up myself, I could be part of the investigation that Senator O'Malley wanted without getting on the wrong side of the Nimbies. He and I had agreed to what corporate America calls "deferred compensation" for my work on the mystery of his daughter's death without specifying what form that compensation would take. I figured that doing a big favor for someone as powerful as he could only lead to good things down the road.

Maybe, I thought, I could persuade him not to back my uncle for another term as Governor. What a disaster that whole thing was. Just because a guy is successful at running a grocery-store chain doesn't mean he can run a state government.

When the phone rang, I had the TV tuned to the news and weather on one of the Albuquerque stations, which was presenting a new talking head trying to make sense of a convergent pair of jet streams over Arizona. Albuquerque is a small TV market as such things go, so it attracts two sorts of on-air talent for the news and weather—people who are personally committed to the area for some reason, and ladder-climbing youngsters. The weather here is tough to forecast, even tomorrow's weather. And despite official forecasts from the National Weather Service and customized ones from private forecasters to lean on, it's a real challenge to go on camera and put your reputation out there for people to judge day in and day out. The weather folks with experience take this in stride and with humor; the

youngsters get flustered and move on to easier, and, if possible, bigger, markets as soon as they can. I figured this new one wouldn't last long, even if she was a classic beauty and had a Hispanic surname. But I still needed to watch her segment to see the satellite pictures and animations of computer simulations so I would know what to expect when I took the Nimbies up there.

It didn't look good.

The phone had a female voice talking at me. "Please hold for Senator Bill Prince."

Normally, I would have said "no" and hung up, but compassion seemed appropriate here—the guy's ex-wife had been murdered. And I did want to talk with him, just to see if he could add any useful information to what I'd learned from Senator O'Malley.

"M-m-m-m-mister Livingston? I hope this isn't a b-b-b-bad t-t-t-t-time?"

My God, I couldn't help but think. We've got one Senator who's short as a stump and another who stutters. How in the world did he manage to give speeches? Drugs?

"Senator, I appreciate your call. I expect this whole thing is upsetting to you. Let me reassure you that I've agreed to work with Senator O'Malley to do everything possible, and some things that aren't, to discover what happened to Elizabeth and to bring whoever did it to justice."

This seemed to calm him down, and his stutter faded significantly.

"T-that's what Mike told me. He suggested I call you to see if you have any questions. I don't know what I m-might be able to tell you, but I'll sure try to do everything I can to help."

"I hope Senator O'Malley told you that I'm just a search-and-rescue team member, not a detective or investigator. I'm still a little mystified why he asked me to do this, but I'm glad to help. Now, please don't be offended, but I expect that you understand that you could be a suspect in this thing. Your divorce wasn't your idea, I believe, and therefore you have a potential motive. And because you're in a position of power, you have both means and opportunity, by hiring others." I read mystery novels now and then, and some of the jargon had soaked in. "Senator O'Malley has vouched for you, and that's good enough for me. But I don't know about the official investigation."

"Yes, I'm aware of this issue, and I'll do whatever I can to c-cooperate with the NMBI. That's all I can d-do. I'm glad that you don't suspect me."

"Besides what Senator O'Malley told me, it just doesn't make sense that you'd be behind this. From what I know of you, you're far too smart to do something like this for revenge. So I'm going to focus on other things. Tomorrow, I'm going to trek up to the place where we found her, in a storm it looks like, and then I'll talk to some folks here in Santa Fe. Did Senator O'Malley tell you about the brunch?"

"The Saturday morning one, yes."

"If he finds out who the brunch crowd was, I'll see if I can talk with them. Maybe they'll know when she went up there and if she went with someone."

"It seems like s-she must have gone up there with *someone*."

"Probably. But I'm a scientist and I always think of questions to ask. Like, was that bruise old, not related to her death in any way? Or maybe she fell and banged her head, got disoriented and sat down to rest. Maybe she just went up there and got lost and froze. Or maybe she mentioned to someone that she and so-and-so were going hiking. Who knows? So I'm going to ask around. I'll see if I can get a copy of the autopsy."

"If you need any strings pulled, just c-call."

“Will do. And there’s something you might have an opinion on. I don’t mean to reopen old wounds, but it’s pertinent, honest. Do you have an opinion about Elizabeth’s new husband?”

I heard laughter being smothered.

“Do I have an op-pinion? Let’s see. How long do you have to listen? Except that my opinion isn’t suitable for family listening, so c-cover the kids’ ears.”

“Do you know if she had assets that he would now have access to?”

“She sure did. I mean, have assets, at least. A trust from Mike, something like a million invested in stocks, and life insurance from him and from me, about three million altogether. Don’t know if Davidson increased the insurance or not.”

“With him the beneficiary, no doubt. May I ask why you had so much life insurance for her?”

“In case of children or as a long-term investment, if it wasn’t needed as insurance. I talked about it with Mike, and that was his reasoning, too. There’s a \$10 million policy on me, for the same reason. I bet that’s not Davidson’s reasoning, though.”

“Sounds like you and Senator O’Malley share opinions about this guy. I’ll keep that in mind.”

* * *

Four

I spent the rest of the evening preparing for the next day’s outing, so it was just as well that Alex had disappeared. She could be a real distraction. Instead of thinking about her, I turned on the mindless nattering of the announcers of an NBA game on cable to provide company. Early in the season, the games are mostly glorified practice sessions, but sometimes exciting things happen. Through the magic of instant replay, I could putter about getting ready without missing anything worth seeing.

Growing up in Indianapolis in the late ’60s and ’70s meant that the Home Team was the Pacers, at first in the ABA with those stupid multi-color basketballs and finally in the NBA. Here in Santa Fe, there’s no real “home team” for any sport, unless you’re interested in the second-tier college competitions or minor-league pro sports down in Albuquerque. So I’ve adopted the Denver Nuggets to follow—I figure they can use all the help, fan-wise, they can get. That Tuesday night, the Nuggets were getting stomped, their usual fate, by the Pacers, and my loyalties were being tested.

About 6:30 the phone rang, and I recognized Alex’s voice, not sultry this time, but sobbing. There’s something about being called up by a woman in tears, especially a girlfriend in tears, that makes me feel guilty. What, I was thinking, did I do this time?

It took some careful soothing, but I finally discovered that Alex had seen a story about Elizabeth Davidson’s death on the TV news and was upset because they had been in college together, down at New Mexico State in Las Cruces. Alex had dropped out after three years, and Elizabeth had graduated, *summa cum laude*, but they had been sorority sisters for Alex’s three years.

And I had to sit down when Alex mentioned that she’d last seen Elizabeth on Saturday morning, at brunch. This so startled me that I missed her next few sentences, but it didn’t matter because I knew I’d have to get together with her and discuss the whole thing in detail. The sooner the better.

That's how I wound up spending the night with Alex over at her place in the forest between the villages of Pecos and Glorieta. You head east on the interstate for about fifteen miles to the exit by the Baptist Conference Center, and then take a turn to the north on a dirt road by the Glorieta Battlefield, the site of a locally famous Civil War altercation between some guys in blue uniforms and some in gray ones. She found this place by accident, but its proximity to the conference center persuaded her that it was meant for her, because she could direct her meditation energies toward counteracting the evangelistic misogyny, as she put it, of the Baptists.

She was certain that misogyny was what kept getting her chakras all clogged up. I kept thinking I should write the head of the church a thank-you letter, but they're so loosely organized that I couldn't figure out where to send it.

Alex had left out her "come in, I'm meditating" signal for me—a misplaced flower pot on her porch—so I walked in, trying not to let any of the cats out. At that point, she had five cats, I think, but it was hard to keep track because she also had a soft spot for strays that came and went as they pleased. I'm allergic to cats, so we tended to spend our time together at my place. Not even Horseman Haven's green chile stew could fix the things her cats did to my sinuses. It looked like I was going to be snowshoeing in a snowstorm with the Nimbies and a head full of snot on Wednesday. Great. Just great.

But cats or no cats I had to talk with Alex, both to calm her down and to find out what she knew about Elizabeth. Also, to tell the truth, to let her know that I'd been in the day-late rescue party and that I was going to work on Saint Mike's behalf. Otherwise, I'd have a real reason to feel guilty the next time she called me in tears.

She was meditating in the solarium, bathed in the soft glow of several dozen candles from her aroma-therapy shop. The resulting olfactory stew, combined with the cat dander, started me off in a sneezing fit, which brought her out of her trance. She jumped up, grabbed me in a full-body hug, and burst into tears all over again. Between the raw sexuality of her body, her tears, and my memories of earlier in the day, I felt myself progressing toward the boing! stage, and she must have, too. She pulled back and kissed me gently.

"Oh, Sandy, not right now, OK? I'm just too upset." This produced an instant un-boing reaction, which was just as well for both of us.

"And that's why I came over. You and I need to talk about this. I had no idea you knew Elizabeth Davidson. You never mentioned it."

"Well, no, silly, there wasn't any reason to. I mean, there are lots of people I haven't mentioned to you, y'know? Did you know her, too?"

That's when I had to tell her about our BERT search party on Monday and its sad result. And that got me into trouble, because, she thought, I should have told her all about it that morning. If I had known she and Elizabeth were friends, I would have, at least that was the story that I stuck to.

It took some doing, but eventually I got her calmed down. If she didn't completely believe me, at least she wasn't mad.

"Look, I just didn't know, OK? But lots more has happened since then anyway, so it's a good thing we're talking now. For one thing, I've got to hike back up there tomorrow with the Nimbies, to look for clues. For another, Senator O'Malley, Elizabeth's father, has asked me to look into what happened. All that came about this afternoon, so I couldn't have told you this morning."

"You're going to investigate her death?"

"'Investigate' may be a little strong. But I'm going to look into a couple of things. Did they say anything on TV about what happened to her?"

“Just that she died of exposure. But they also said that they haven’t ruled out foul play, whatever that means.” At that point it dawned on me that Alex must use waterproof makeup, because her face was tear-stained but her mascara was intact. Strange how you notice little things at inappropriate times like that.

“That’s what I’m looking into. And, look, I have to ask you about Saturday morning. You said you saw her then.”

“We had brunch at Café Pasqual’s, with some other friends from college.”

“I knew she was there, because I gave her directions on how to get there. She was lost over on San Francisco Street. We talked a little bit and she mentioned going up to the ski area, so I warned her about the storm on Sunday. But I didn’t know who she was at that point.”

“You talked to her Saturday? This is getting stranger and stranger. Like there’s some mystical force at work.” She looked around nervously.

“I don’t know about that,” I had learned long ago not to argue with her strange beliefs, “but I do know that whatever you guys talked about at brunch is something I need to hear about. Who was there?”

“Eight of us. Three couples and Betsy and me. The three guys mostly ignored us and talked about football.”

“OK, listen. The ‘foul play’ stuff might be murder.” She looked truly spooked. “The people at the hospital found indications that Elizabeth may have been assaulted and left up there to die. So the Nimbies are going to be talking with everyone who might know something, including you and the other people at that brunch.”

Her eyes were saucer-sized, so I hurried on. “I don’t think any of you is under suspicion, but you might have information that’s important. And there are two things I need to talk about. Did Elizabeth make any comments about going up to the mountains, after your brunch or any other time?”

“No, she didn’t talk at all about what she was going to be doing. I think we all assumed she’d be heading back to Colorado.”

“To Telluride?”

“Yeah, I guess. She talked a little about being there with her new husband.”

“That’s the other thing I need to know about. Did she talk at all about him?”

“It was kind of sad. She mentioned that she probably made a mistake, getting married again so soon. I think she was unhappy with that guy Davidson.”

“Did he come down from Colorado with her?”

“I don’t think so. He would have come to brunch, probably. Um ... Oh. I remember. She said something about how he was meeting with a producer of a new movie, so he was still up in Telluride.”

“She didn’t say anything about their relationship?”

“Not much beyond what I said, that she was thinking she got re-married too soon. But she didn’t seem happy when she talked about him. Um, Sandy? Do you really think the Nimbies will want to talk with me?”

I definitely did not want to know why she would be concerned about that. “Why don’t you call them in the morning? Ask for Detective Orlando Aguilar, I’ll write it down. You can go down to their offices and talk to them, and get it over with. OK?”

“I guess. It’s better for me to go there than for them to come here, that’s for sure.”

“If you call Aguilar and tell him you’ve talked with me, that should smooth the way for you to go see them. I expect that they’ll want names and phone numbers of your friends at the brunch, so take your address book. But what they’re looking for is information. None of you is under suspicion. OK?”

“It feels awkward, but I expect that’s the best thing to do.”

“It is, because they’ll find out that you all were having brunch with Elizabeth anyway, and come find you if you don’t find them.” She looked spooked once again. “So Elizabeth seemed unhappy in her new marriage. Anything else you can tell me?”

“Not really, we just gossiped and caught up on stuff. Sandy? I know you don’t like my cats, but can you stay with me tonight anyway?”

“Baby, it’s not that I don’t like them, I *love* your cats, really. It’s just that I’m allergic to them.” Coincidentally, I sneezed, for about the twenty-fifth time. “And I have to leave really early anyway to meet the Nimbies up at the ski area. If I’m here, I’ll have to get up about five. Listen. If you don’t want to be alone, why don’t you follow me home?”

“Oh, I need to be here in my, my spiritual place. But I understand.” Her eyes filled up with tears, which spilled down without dissolving that miracle mascara. “I guess I thought you loved me more than that. That you’d stay to help me through this.”

Oh, *man*.

* * *

Wednesday morning, as promised, I managed to get up at about five, get home, finish assembling my gear and put it in the car, and make it up to the ski area parking lot at first light, in time to meet the Nimbies I was guiding. My sinuses were completely stopped up and I was sneezing about every ten minutes, despite the antihistamine I had found in Alex’s medicine cabinet. With the misery of it all, not the least of which was Alex’s mood swings, I had managed to get something like three hours of sleep.

And, as promised, the weather went all to hell. I tried to be philosophical about it, thinking about how I would be tickled to death if I were on my way up the hill to go skiing. And even though I wasn’t, we needed the snow badly, if we were going to establish the base we needed for a good ski season and to have an adequate water supply next summer.

When I got to the bottom of the parking lot, by the Winsor Trail access, it was snowing hard, probably an inch an hour or more, and there was more wind than I wanted to deal with. The car’s thermometer said 5 degrees, and because it was set for the U.S. rather than Canada, I knew it was cold out there. I was about provide my opinion of the situation in a series of colorful adjectives when I was hit by another sneezing fit. This, I could tell, was just going to be too much fun.

Another car was sitting there, motor running, windows all fogged up, so I deduced that it was occupied, probably by the Nimbies I was supposed to meet. If I was going to become an investigator for Senator O’Malley, I figured I should start deducing whatever presented itself.

I maneuvered my car around to be as close to the other one as possible, window to window, and tapped my horn. The foggy window next door lowered itself a few inches, so I lowered mine also.

“Hiya! I’m Sandy Livingston. You guys going up the hill this morning?” I had to shout over the noise of the wind. The window came down a little more, and I could see a face surrounded by the fluff of the fur around the hood of a goose-down parka.

“God help us, I guess we are. Hope you know that trail really well.”

“Oh, yeah, don’t worry. And it’ll be less windy in the woods. Listen. Follow me around to a better parking place. We’re likely to get plowed in if we park here.”

One advantage of working with the BERT was being a member of the in-crowd at the top of the mountain. I got a free season ski pass every year, access to the close-in employee parking, and other perks like first rides up the lifts on days I got there in time. And because I spent a lot of time up there, I knew the drill for the snowplow routes. Although the ski area wasn’t open yet, the plows would be by later on, and I knew if we stayed where we were, we’d have to shovel our way out that afternoon.

It took fifteen minutes or so to get organized and on the trail, and another thirty to get up the switchbacks to the saddle at the lower end of Raven’s Ridge, to the Wilderness Area Boundary. We didn’t stop to sign in on the ledger that was kept there, because the wind was howling. Back down in the trees, though, it was more bearable.

High winds, blizzard conditions, and 5 degrees is intimidating weather, but, like I said before, there’s no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes. I was dressed for it and so, fortunately, were Jake Williams and Ricardo Montoya, the two Nimbies who were assigned to this little expedition. I asked and found out that they weren’t being punished or anything; in fact they had volunteered. Volunteered, they hastened to point out, before they knew what the weather was going to do.

Another hour of steady walking got us to the mushroom rock, where the BERT guys and I had found Elizabeth two days before. Contrary to popular opinion, walking on snowshoes is not really very different from just walking. You tend to keep your feet slightly farther apart with a wider stance, but that’s mostly psychological. Modern, high-tech snowshoes are lightweight, and they have crampons—metal teeth—on the bottoms so you don’t slip even if you try to. After your first day, you’ll notice a new set of sore muscles, on the outside of your hips from the wider stance, but that’s about it.

The two Nimbie guys were used to snowshoeing, so we made good time. It was getting close to nine as we approached the rock, and we decided to take a break and discuss strategy. Their plan was to quickly go over the ground under the overhang of the rock and then to explore the ground under the edge of the snow more carefully with whisk brooms they had in their packs. The first order of business was to photograph everything. I decided to stay out of the way as best I could and to get under the shelter of rock, out of the wind, when they were finished there.

I waited around trying to be patient, hopping and stomping my feet to keep the blood flowing, and finally they signaled that I could get under the rock. The wind for this storm was from a slightly different direction from the last storm, so to get out of it, I settled into a spot a little way around the rock counter-clockwise from where we had found Elizabeth. Just as we suspected, the ground was completely tramped up. The five of us on the BERT rescue weren’t concerned with a crime scene, so we had not tried to be careful. But I was sitting toward the edge of the area where we’d all been, and I could see farther around that there were no footprints at all. None of us had walked all the way around the rock and, apparently, neither had Elizabeth. Or whoever was with her.

So, I asked myself, how could all this have gone down?

Thinking about this got me to looking around carefully, and I finally noticed a curious bump in the snow out by the edge of the rock’s overhang. Maybe it was there on Monday, and maybe not. The change in the wind direction had blown the old snow around, and the new snow was accumulating in different spots. So it was hard to tell. And there were rocks of all sizes all over the place anyway. But this bump in the snow got my attention for some reason.

So I brushed away some snow, grabbed at it, and came up with a cell phone, the little flip-open kind, a Motorola. I dusted off the snow from it, opened it up, and pushed the power button, but the battery was dead. It probably had been left on, and two days in temperatures around zero would be hard

on a battery, I thought. So I put it in a pocket in my parka. It occurred to me that I ought to give it to the Nimbie guys, but I was feeling connected to Senator O'Malley just then. He'd want to see it, I was certain, because it might have information he would be interested in. The Nimbies could wait.

Out of curiosity, I fumbled around taking off gloves and unzipping things until I found my own cell phone, in a pocket in my shirt. I flipped it open and watched its screen. Yep, there was a signal, kind of weak, but a signal. Probably a cell tower on Tesuque Peak, the top of the ski area. My phone remembers the last several numbers I've called, so I thought maybe the other one would have a record of whom Elizabeth had tried to call. Or, if she was indeed unconscious, the other person.

The Nimbie guys, Williams and Montoya, were around the other side of the rock from me, so they couldn't have seen anything. But I was feeling guilty anyway, so I decided to do something nice for them. I unzipped my backpack and unloaded my gas stove and a one-quart pot. It didn't take too long to melt a pot-full of snow and get the water boiling, and I poured in about half a box of chocolate-flavored instant coffee. Even though I was downwind, a gust or eddy must have carried the aroma back to them because before I could yell at them they appeared.

"How's it going over there? Want a break?" The look of surprise and gratitude on their faces said it all. And when I pulled out a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps and poured in a hefty slug, I thought they might cry.

* * *

Even though I'll still call them "Nimbies," my respect for the NMBI took a giant step forward that day. In the space of about an hour, Williams and Montoya found new footprints under the snow and even managed to get plaster casts, with a quick-setting concoction that smelled like it involved rubbing alcohol. They took several dozen photographs, using a digital camera so fancy I wanted one, and they even tried to dust the mushroom rock for latent fingerprints near where Elizabeth had been sitting. I resolved to get the cell phone I found to them as soon as I could.

The hike out was tougher and slower because it involved a thousand feet more of climbing, so we didn't get back to the cars until about 2:00. On the last leg, the 500 feet down from the saddle, all I could think about was about the heated seat in my car and how good it was going to feel cranked up to high. Even though I was dressed for the weather, my butt was cold. For some reason there's never enough insulation in the layers I put on to keep my backside warm, even with all the exercise.

When we finally got down, the road had been plowed, and it looked as if the snow was beginning to let up a little. Jake and Ricardo were impressed with my choice of parking places: where they originally had been sitting was now covered in a huge drift of that packed stuff that snowplows leave in their wake. As it was, we had just over a foot of new snow to push through to the plowed road surface. They had come up the hill that morning in a Nimbie SUV, and my Audi allroad—the souped-up station wagon with the small "a" and the big engine—will handle anything, so we were on our way in no time.

Before I started down the mountain, the first thing I did was to turn on my seat heater, all the way up. Then I rigged my cell phone to its car cradle and the no-hands setup and called Senator O'Malley's office in Albuquerque. He had said, with Congress in recess, he would be spending most of his time there and had given me the number of his direct line, which was now programmed into my phone.

"Senator O'Malley's office. May I help you?" A professional voice with just a slight Spanglish accent answered.

"The Senator gave me this number as his direct line. I'm calling with some information about his daughter. This is Sandy Livingston calling from Santa Fe."

“This is his direct line, but he’s in a meeting just now. He mentioned that you might be calling and said he would call you back as soon as he can. Where can he reach you?”

I left my cell phone number and concentrated on willing the seat heater to hurry up. I also concentrated on my driving. The road up to the ski area, State Road 475, is paved, but it’s narrow and winding. Even in the summer, it’s hard to average more than about 30 mph, in a normal car, at least. During that snowstorm, it was covered with the packed, slick aftermath of the snowplow runs. They had sprinkled gravel—crushed volcanic rock, actually—but it was snowing hard enough that it was already covered up again. With all-wheel-drive and serious snow tires, my car is a unbeatable going uphill, but going down can still be a challenge. The tires helped, but I was still slipping around like a puppy on ice for the first time.

The heat from the seat finally soaked through my layers of clothes at about the Aspen Vista trailhead, and a warm glow began to work its way into my buttocks and up my spine. That helped. And then, about half-way down to Hyde State Park, the phone rang. Senator O’Malley must have a pager, I thought, when I recognized his voice.

“Erma told me you have news about Betsy?” He was all business.

“Yes, sir, I do. Lots, actually. First, you can call off your people, because I have a list of everyone who was at the brunch on Saturday. Entirely coincidental that I got it, just an example of Santa Fe’s small-town nature. And right now, I’m on my way down the hill to town. A couple of investigators from the NMBI and I just finished our hike up to where we found her the other day.”

“Anything I should hear?”

“Oh, yeah. They got plaster casts of some footprints that weren’t mucked up by us on Monday, and I found a cell phone. Battery’s dead, so I don’t know what it will tell us, but I’ll fix that when I get home. What I’ll do is to copy down all the information I can find on it, give that to you, and pass the phone to the Nimbies.”

“They should probably have it already.”

“Right. I thought of that, but I figured you’d want whatever information it has. Like, who she, or its owner, called recently. Also, if there are voice mail messages or caller IDs or anything like that.”

“Do you know whose it is?”

“Not until I get a live battery in it. It’s a Motorola, but that’s it.”

“Betsy had one of those.”

“So do I and a gazillion other people. But I’ll find out and let you know.”

“Son, you’re doing an old man right.” An old, very powerful man, I thought. “I have a good feeling for people, and I knew when I asked you to get involved in this that you were the right person. But be sure to get the phone to the Nimbies so you don’t get hit with a tampering charge. If you need a little clout, I’ll be there for you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I know I’m imposing, but what would you think about a trip to Telluride?” His question took me aback, but just for a second or two.

“I hear they have snow, Senator, lots of it. And, you know, I haven’t been able to ski here yet ...” I let the idea dangle there, and I heard the rumble of his chuckling on the other end.

“I’ll make some arrangements with law enforcement up there and get your expenses handled somehow. You’re doing great, son. Just keep me informed. Gotta go, this damned meeting is starting up again. Thanks for everything.” And the line went dead.

That’s the thing about People In Charge. When they want something, they know how to stroke you just enough to keep you happy, to make you want to help them more.

* * *

Five

When I finally got around to my voice-mail messages that evening, I listened to an aide to Senator O’Malley telling me to expect an express delivery on Thursday morning. Of what, it wasn’t clear, but I was going to have to sign for it, so would I please be at home between 9:30 and 10:00? By the time I got the message, I had tidied everything up and had a report ready to email to the Senator, although I didn’t quite know what address to send it to.

Upon getting home early that afternoon, I had plugged in the mystery cell phone to get it charged up—the charger for my phone fit the plug, so I just used it. Then I stood under a hot shower until the water began to cool off—a long time, because I have a 50 gallon water heater that I keep turned up high. I made myself a huge, greasy lunch—breakfast actually, in the sense that it was lots of bacon and eggs, with green chiles and a couple of tortillas smeared with refried beans—and a big pot of coffee. It was about 4:00 when I finally sat down at my desk to tackle the mystery phone. Outside, the snow drifting down onto the piñons and junipers looked to be almost over, picturesque as ever. At my house, there was about a foot of new snow, which meant that there would be eight inches or so down in town.

Best not to go anywhere this afternoon, I thought. The good citizens of Santa Fe, not to mention the tourists, would have the streets snarled up for hours. It takes about three good snowfalls each winter before people learn how to drive in winter conditions all over again, and this was only the second.

The phone was a treasure-trove of information. Elizabeth had obviously figured out all its bells and whistles and made use of them. When I got its battery charged and turned it on, it told me that it had a 310 area-code number and that it belonged to Betsy. I had to turn it off and on again to get its entire number written down, and then I did an area-code and prefix lookup on the internet and discovered that it was a Los Angeles phone, the northwest part of Los Angeles including Malibu. So Derek Davidson lived in Malibu and Telluride—no wonder he was chronically broke.

There was a single caller ID from a number I didn’t recognize, but since it was from 970—western Colorado—I immediately thought of Telluride. There was also voice mail waiting, but I couldn’t do anything about that because I didn’t know Elizabeth’s security code. The list of speed-dial numbers was too long to analyze, but I copied them down. One was the direct-line number Senator O’Malley had given me.

The recently-called-number list was also instructive. There were three calls to two different 310 numbers, maybe to Davidson’s house and/or his cell phone, I supposed. The 970 number ID’d as having called this phone was on the recent list as well. And there were several calls to local numbers, presumably associated with setting up the brunch. But it was troubling that she had called Alex twice—once Friday and again on Saturday afternoon, after the brunch. Alex hadn’t told me about that.

I began to worry about the trust angle of our relationship. Alex was a bit flaky, but that was mostly a veneer, a misdirection to make people underestimate her. If she was using that trick on me, I had to worry.

I ended up spending nearly an hour with Elizabeth's phone and even went so far as to look up its user manual on-line to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything. I assembled all the information I had into an email for Senator O'Malley and realized that I didn't know how to send it to him.

So I picked up the house phone to call him and that's when I found out I had the voice mail telling me that I had delivery coming from O'Malley's Washington office in the morning. There was also a message from Orlando Aguilar, thanking me for my help earlier in the day. He also said that the plaster casts that Jake and Ricardo had obtained were of two different footprints. One matched the shoes that Elizabeth had on when we brought her in, and they wanted all of us BERT guys to bring in the boots we had been wearing on Monday to see if they matched the other one. We were all supposed to come by the Nimbie offices in the morning. Well, I thought, that will give me the opportunity to turn in the phone.

I called Senator O'Malley. It was about 5:00 and I thought that maybe his daily schedule in Albuquerque would be winding down and he'd be available.

"Mr. Livingston, how good to hear from you again." Long-distance caller ID, I guessed.

"Afternoon, Senator. I got a call from one of your aides about a delivery from your office in the morning."

"Right, and I'll tell you all about it in a minute. What do you have for me?"

"A report that I'll email to you, if you'll tell me an appropriate address. I didn't want to send it to your public senate office address. For one thing, I figured it would get buried in with the usual crush, and for another, it may be sensitive, I don't know."

"Hmm. Good thinking." He rattled off an alternative. "Can you give me a quick summary?"

"Here's something I just heard that's not in the report: the Nimbie guys I took up to the site today found a footprint under the snow that's not Elizabeth's. Because it was under the snow, it's probably not mine or one of the BERT's either, but we're going to check that out tomorrow." I also gave him an overview of what I'd discovered from Elizabeth's phone.

"Excellent. I'll have one of my people do a reverse look-up of all the numbers you found. And I'll have her email the names and addresses back to you, so you'll have them, too. I'll also need to see what I can do about getting the cellular company to give me Betsy's voice mail security code. Let's see. I can get her voice mail from here, can't I?"

"Yes, but only if you get it before the Nimbies do. I'm going to turn in the phone tomorrow morning."

"Oh, yeah, you need to do that, don't you? Tell you what: I'll get someone started on that tonight. Got just the person. Now. Let me bring you up to date. The package coming your way has a credit card in it, in your name but with my office here as the billing address. You'll never see a bill. I think you have to make a phone call to get it activated and set up one of those PIN numbers, and you can use it to get cash and everything. It's an unlimited ceiling card in one of those rare metal colors. That'll take care of your expenses for this whole thing. There's also some information about an appointment I got for you with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation tomorrow afternoon, up in Durango. I figured you could get there by late afternoon, stay overnight, and head on to Telluride on Friday, maybe get there in time for some skiing. There's information about reservations in the package you'll be getting, I think at the Strater in Durango and at some condo or something in Telluride."

“Sounds like you’re running a travel agency, Senator.” I was learning to recognize the rumbling noise as mirth. Crusty old fart that he was, he had a good sense of humor. “So I talk with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation tomorrow and head to Telluride. OK. Any agenda for the meeting tomorrow?”

“They’ve been briefed. And I don’t have any specific things to suggest about Telluride. It would be nice to know where Davidson was last weekend, of course.”

“For sure. I thought I’d just check some things out—his behavior, for one thing. I mean, he ought to be in some kind of mourning, you’d think. And his whereabouts last weekend is something I want to find out about. Oh, one more thing, Senator. Maybe your people could do a discreet background check on one of the people whom Elizabeth called on Saturday. I’d look into it, but I have a conflict of interest, because she’s my girlfriend. Alexis Hall. Elizabeth called her Saturday afternoon, but Alex didn’t tell me about it, and I’m wondering what’s up.”

“You suspect your own girlfriend? Son, I’ll turn you into a detective yet.”

* * *

By hustling, I managed to be on the road at 10:15 Thursday morning, shortly after Senator O’Malley’s package arrived. As promised, it included a Platinum MasterCard and information about reservations and my appointment at the Colorado Bureau of Investigation office in Durango.

I know I should have been flattered to get a platinum card, but secretly I had been hoping for something better. I mean, with all the credit-card inflation that’s been going on, platinum cards have become passé. I figured that O’Malley’s office would at least get me whatever the next thing up is. Titanium? Molybdenum? Beryllium?

Here in Santa Fe, the local joke is that the banks up in Los Alamos—up there in the “Atomic City”—should issue plutonium cards. They could even make them glow in the dark. But that’s the trouble with banks—no sense of humor.

Down at Nimble headquarters, Detective Aguilar had appreciated my showing up bright and early at 8:00, for the shoe test, but he had been less than gracious about Elizabeth’s cell phone. I tried to act innocent—I’d picked it up, put in a pocket, and forgotten about it, was my excuse—but he hauled out his threat to hold me for obstruction again, just like on Tuesday when I was late. It was amusing to see the look on his face when I mentioned that I would have brought it in yesterday except that I was on the phone with Senator O’Malley.

And it was interesting to find out that none of the shoes from the BERT members matched the cast they had taken. So it looked as if Elizabeth had been up there with someone else, because one of those mystery prints had been on top of one of hers.

Wednesday’s storm had blown through leaving enough snow to make the winter-sports crowd happy and to keep the highway crews busy all night. By Thursday morning, the roads were mostly cleared off, with gravel patches where the snow was still packed, and the sky was that crystalline blue we have here. Like Elizabeth’s eyes, I remembered. At the time, as I recall, it didn’t seem at all odd that I was thinking more of Elizabeth than I was about Alex.

The drive from Santa Fe to Durango is about four hours of delicious scenery, and, once you get north of Española, almost no traffic all the way to Pagosa Springs. You wind up the Chama River Valley for a while, then climb up to a plateau where the fantastic rock spires in Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings form the edge of the next higher plateau. With the bright sunshine on all the new snow, the reds and pinks and purples of the rocks didn’t need artistic hyperbole to be spectacular.

The long stretch past Ghost Ranch and the Amphitheater picnic area was warming enough that the snow on the roadside was already beginning to melt, but it cooled off noticeably up the grade to Cebolla, up on the high plateau. The change from the sage-covered flats, with piñon and juniper on the hillsides, to the piñon and ponderosa of the higher plateau always makes me feel better somehow. As much as I like piñons, ponderosas are real trees instead of just overgrown bushes.

This far northern part of New Mexico always reminds me of Colorado, a foreshadowing of the sub-alpine forests to the north. Chama, the little town snug against the mountains between Colorado and New Mexico, serves as a southern gateway to the San Juans, as well as the western terminus of the Cumbres and Toltec Narrow Gauge Railroad, which comes in from Antonito, Colorado, to the east and north. My route took me the other way, northwest from Chama, over the Continental Divide, and into Colorado at Pagosa Springs.

The Continental Divide is one of those geographic landmarks that usually brings to people's minds visions of snow-capped mountains, rugged peaks, and very thin air. And in Colorado, that's a reasonably accurate vision, all the way north to Wyoming. Just northwest of Chama, however, the Continental Divide runs across a pasture, barely discernible as a slight ridge in the rolling, high-plains prairie. It's quite the anti-climax. But even so, crossing it to the Colorado River drainage, what everyone calls the "Western Slope," always gives me a little charge for some reason. And with a couple of feet of new snow glinting in the sun under a blue sky, on that particular trip it was more than just a little charge. But it wasn't just the snow and the sky—something about leaving Santa Fe and all my personal baggage behind for a few days was uplifting.

Past the turnoff west toward Farmington, the highway to Pagosa Springs climbs into the southern San Juans, and soon it not only looks like Colorado but is. The rest of the drive to Durango is the mountain-and-valley country that teases you with peeks at views every now and then and frequently takes your breath away with an open vista of mountains on a grand scale.

The problem is that it's filling up with subdivisions and traffic, in the form of trophy homes that are absurdly ostentatious and SUVs driven by people who think four-wheel-drive makes them invincible. Between Pagosa Springs and Durango, US 160 is nearly saturated, and there's no point in trying to make good time.

On that trip, the drive was especially depressing for me, because I hadn't done it for several years. As Pagosa Springs was reaching farther and farther west with developers busy turning historic ranches into vacation-home subdivisions, Durango was reaching farther and farther east. The two won't meet for some time yet, but it's in the cards. It makes me feel like an old-timer, but I remember when the road to the Durango airport east of town was considered way out in the country, and the Animas River Valley south of town was the industrial strip. Now, according to the directions that O'Malley's office had sent, the offices of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation were south of the old part of town in the business park across from the main mall, but that I shouldn't be distracted by the other mall, the new one. Two malls? A business park? What, I wondered, had the Chamber of Commerce wrought?

The business park was a mixture of warehousey-looking concrete buildings and prefab offices, all one story and rather glum in the winter whites and grays. Predictably, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation was in one of the pre-fabs, a sterile, government-issue double-wide. But at least it was easy to find, with its big CBI logo over a smaller sign that said "Annette Trieri, Field Office Director."

* * *

I guess I'm either a lonely guy in denial or maybe just a pushover. I mean, I nearly fell for Elizabeth Davidson during a chance street-corner encounter. And I was in love with Annette Trieri, Colorado

Bureau of Investigation, from the moment I laid eyes on her. I noticed the gold band on the ring finger of her left hand right away, but it didn't matter—I knew I was a goner.

I had been musing about what to call the employees of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. After all, I thought, if I call the home folks “Nimbies,” it would only be fair to call these folks “Seebies.” That thought spawned others, about the investigators in the other nearby states—logically, they would become “Arbies” in Arizona, despite the fact that it would make them sound like a sandwich, and “Ubies” over in Utah. Or, better yet, “Hubies” to make them sound cute. But then I met Annette Trieri and the Colorado organization snapped into place as the “CBI” for me.

A receptionist led me down a government-drab hallway, into an office decorated with framed posters of national parks and monuments in Colorado. It was a nice touch—they brightened up the place and made the little room seem bigger somehow. She was sitting with her back to the door, tapping at a computer keyboard, but she heard us, I guess, and jumped up to introduce herself. And I was instantly smitten.

She must have been used to this reaction from guys, because she took it in stride. I mumbled out my name somehow, let myself be seated in a chair next to her desk, and listened in a daze as she talked about how she had received a phone call from the senior U.S. Senator from Colorado the day before.

“... called me yesterday. He made it as clear as could be that he'd really appreciate it if I help you out. I think he owes Senator O'Malley a favor or something.” She smiled, and I hoped my mouth wasn't drooped open. “And I owe him, because he's been helpful in getting federal funding for some of our pet projects. He told me about Senator O'Malley's concerns, how tragic the whole thing is. And how you've volunteered to help out. Or maybe you were drafted. But he didn't tell me anything about you or your background. Do you have any experience with law enforcement or investigations?”

I was hearing her words, but I guess the communications among my ears, my brain, and my mouth were having bandwidth problems, like when you try to browse the internet using a really, really slow telephone modem. There was a long pause, during which she cocked her head to the side and raised her eyebrows with a quizzical smile.

“Uh, well, ah, no, not really. I'm a volunteer on the Back-country Emergency Rescue Team we have in Santa Fe, so I work with local law enforcement down there sometimes. But I don't really have any real experience with real investigations or anything. Um, Senator O'Malley seems to think that I can contribute to this whole thing by virtue of my outsider perspective, I guess. And so far, I've been lucky. For one thing, maybe you heard this, I was with the group that found her body. It was something of a shock, because I had accidentally bumped into her in downtown Santa Fe on Saturday. And my gir ... ah, a friend of mine knew Elizabeth and had brunch with her on Saturday. So there's a vague connection. And I found Elizabeth's cell phone up where we found her body. So, I guess Senator O'Malley thinks I can help somehow.”

About that point it occurred to me that I had to figure out how to get the motormouth thing under control, and quickly. “Anyway, I came up here at his suggestion to go to Telluride to check out Elizabeth's husband. He seems to be under some, ahh, suspicion. For some reason. I guess.”

A little voice in my head was shouting “LAME!!!”, but I was happy to have finally run down. Either she didn't notice, or she was too gracious to show it.

“I did some checking this morning. This guy you're asking about, this Derek Davidson, is also someone we're aware of. I'd call our interest 'more than casual,' but there's nothing formal in progress. The deal is that we got asked by the Telluride town marshal to look into his background. CBI does this kind of thing for local law enforcement all the time. It seems that Mr. Davidson has been living a highly

visible existence up there. Flamboyant behavior. Women. Parties. Like that. They were wondering about drugs.”

“Both Senator O’Malley and Senator Prince—he was married to Elizabeth for a while—they don’t seem to think much of Davidson, that’s for sure.”

“They’re both sensible fellows. It turns out that Davidson has other names and a long career history. Before he got into the movie stand-in business, he had a little legal adventure under the name of David Stevenson. He got caught in a major drug sting operation, coke, it was, but got off on a technicality. Before that a girlfriend charged him with battery, and he got put on probation, as Steven Jorgenson.” She laughed. “The guy needs a dictionary of names, I guess, or a better imagination.”

“Both Senators seem to think he’s been living beyond his means and is after Elizabeth’s money. She had trusts and life insurance. So . . . Davidson?” It was my turn to laugh. “Now I’m confused—yeah, that’s right, Davidson, he’s got motive. One thing I’m going to try to find out is where he was last weekend. Also how he’s behaving. I mean, his wife just died. He ought to be, you know, upset, or something.”

“I kind of thought so, too. So I called the marshal up there to see if he has any information. Seems that Davidson’s been partying almost continuously since Monday night. Bar-hopping with various sweet young things in tow.”

“Drowning his sorrows, no doubt?”

“If you ask him, sure. All perfectly innocent, I bet. And he seems to have been AWOL over the weekend.”

“I’m told that Elizabeth expressed regrets about their marriage on Saturday, to her friends in Santa Fe. Sounds like she knew something.” I realized that the conversation was actually working, that I’d begun to treat her as a real person rather than Aphrodite.

“So Mr. Davidson-Stevenson-Jorgenson begins to look suspicious. I’ve got a folder of information here—it includes how to contact me and the marshal in Telluride. He’ll be expecting you. I’ve asked him to cooperate, because you can do all of us some good by finding out what’s going on with this guy. And I’ve also asked him to spread the word.”

I left feeling good about the investigation, about her, and even about myself. And I decided that I was glad she was married—if not for that wedding band, I’d have made a seriously big doofus of myself. As it was, I hoped that I’d covered my foolishness well enough.

* * *

Six

I started for Telluride early Friday morning, because I’d seen on the TV weather the night before, from the same pretty face in Albuquerque via the station’s Durango translator, that yet another storm was moving in.

The Strater lived up to its reputation for elegance, and I had a great dinner Thursday evening just down the street, by the train station. Thursday Night Football was on, and I managed to keep occupied by watching it and studying Annette Trieri’s file of information about Derek Davidson, or whatever his real name was, at the same time. She had included pictures, a list of the movies he had been in, and his

rap sheet. And I hauled out my computer, called up my internet service for email, and sent a progress report to Senator O'Malley. I thought he would want to hear what I'd learned about the background and behavior of his daughter's bereaved widower.

Getting to Telluride from Durango offered two possibilities on paved roads, but with weather going to happen, I forsook the better scenery of Silverton, Red Mountain Pass, and Ouray in favor of the slightly shorter, and lower, trip over Lizard Head Pass. That way also involved less traffic. You head west and then northwest over to the Dolores River Valley, northeast back up the valley to the pass, and down to the San Miguel Valley and Telluride.

That got me there by 10:00, and it was just starting to snow. I drove around and scouted out where I would be staying, finally finding it to be up the hill from town in something called Mountain Village. But there was parking and a ticket sales kiosk at the foot of a nearby lift, so I had a ski-in, ski-out condo. Thank you, Senator O'Malley! I began scheming in my head to come up with a good reason to stay a week or two, instead of just for the weekend.

The trouble with being in BERT is the free ski pass we get. I never pay for lift rides, so I'm spoiled rotten. They wanted nearly \$80 for a one-day lift ticket at Telluride, and that was a serious case of sticker shock for me. Even though I had Senator O'Malley's credit card, it just offended my sensibilities to pay that much for a day of riding up the mountain, even the mountain at Telluride.

But at that point it was snowing hard, in fluffy, light, December flakes, and my offended sensibilities were quickly mellowed by thoughts of new powder.

One thing about Telluride that I hadn't expected—I didn't feel as much like an alien as I usually do on my telemark ski equipment. From the lift, I could see lots of folks on the hill were cruising around with freed heels. I guess I'm used to all the tourists from Texas visiting Santa Fe who act like telemark skiing is some kind of weird fertility rite, pointing and gawking. Of course, that only reinforces my notions of superiority.

Feeling superior isn't why I took it up, though. I got started because of BERT—there are times when we need skis to get to our search and rescue location, and backcountry skiing is done on cross-country equipment, so you can walk up hills and skate and glide across flats when you need to. Telemarking is just the style of turns you use when your heels aren't clamped to the skis the way they are in alpine equipment, when they're free to lift clear of the binding as you push forward onto your toes. Otherwise, the equipment is much the same, because modern telemark boots have plastic shells, modern telemark bindings can release like alpine bindings, and modern telemark skis aren't much different from alpine skis. And, of course, I'm completely modernized.

For me, there are two significant advantages besides the backcountry necessity of telemark equipment. First, the boots are way easier to walk in, like stiff hiking boots instead of lightweight cement overshoes, because they flex forward nicely. And second, the style is just so graceful and relaxed, at least once you get used to it. It feels kind of like walking down the mountain with big gliding strides instead of swerving back and forth and bouncing in those parallel turns. Moreover, you can always revert to alpine-style turns on telemark equipment, but it doesn't work the other way.

It's also a great way to meet women, because it provides a far better conversation starter than, say, "Hey, doll, wanna see my tattoo?"

And that's exactly what happened to me that Friday at Telluride. On my very first lift ride, I got on the chair with two women, somewhere in their mid-twenties, eye-catching in their tight-fitting ski outfits, and I remarked about how many tele skiers I was seeing. They came back with, yes, you see it a lot at Telluride, but they couldn't fathom how anyone could manage to do that. So I launched into my discussion about how easy it really is, and how relaxed and graceful it feels, kind of like dancing, how

you don't even feel like smashing through bumps like you see alpine skiers doing, how they could learn it with a single lesson. They got fascinated, we talked, and I bet I could have wound up at least at lunch—if not in a hot tub—with them if I'd tried.

But it was the first ride of the day, and I wanted to ski the powder and explore the mountain. They didn't look like the type that could keep up.

Ah, the sacrifices we sometimes have to make for our sport.

So I spent about two hours riding up and skiing down, taking advantage of the new snow and enjoying every minute, managing to cover most of the mountain. Its size finally persuaded me that the lift ticket price wasn't all that unreasonable. Compared to my little home area in Santa Fe, Telluride is just enormous, with about three times the vertical.

By 1:00 I was getting tired and hungry, so I stopped at an Italian restaurant on the top of a ridge to grab some lunch and rest a little. I planned to ski a few more runs and take the Plunge—nearly 3000 vertical feet of double-black-diamond bumps—all the way down to town in time to visit the local constabulary that afternoon. Then, later, I would ride the gondola back to my condo in Mountain Village. Telluride may be doing what so many ski-resort towns have done—grow explosively, gentrify, and crowd the old-timers out—but at least it's doing it with a little forethought. That gondola, for example, is designed to make getting around easy, which helps the traffic and parking problem, and keeps down the air pollution.

Sitting in the restaurant enjoying the view, such as it was with the snow falling so hard, I wondered where the crowds were. Apparently, most everyone had been intimidated off the mountain by the weather. There were only a few people in the place, including a small, rowdy bunch at the bar. A couple of especially obnoxious squeals finally got my attention, and I turned to shoot them a dirty look.

There were three babes standing around a guy on a barstool, alternately pressing up against him and stroking his shoulders and hair. One was massaging his back with her ample chest—even though she was wearing a ski suit, it occurred to me that could be rather pleasant. His left hand, with no ring on it, was patting a nicely rounded rump, and the other, sporting a pinky ring, was curled around a beer glass. He'd say something, they'd giggle and squeal and move in close. One whispered something in his ear and, I couldn't help but notice, flicked it with her tongue. He turned sideways to respond, and I was surprised—or maybe not—to see that it was bereaved widower Derek Davidson.

* * *

In real life, he looked even more like a god than he did in the file pictures I got from Annette Trieri. Of course, the mug shots were lousy, but the file had several publicity photos as well, stills from movies he'd been in and candid shots on sets. He looked like a blonde Arnold What's-His-Name, only without the cheekbones and pumped up muscles—and that explained some of the movies I recalled from Annette's list.

No wonder Elizabeth had fallen for him, and no wonder that bevy of babes was climbing all over him. Well, I thought, bereaved widowers need solace in whatever form they can find it. And it occurred to me that maybe I could help.

They didn't seem to be going anywhere in a hurry, so I finished my lunch and had a second beer while I watched the scenery and tried to recall the plots of a couple of the movies that were on the list in Davidson's file. Finally I paid my bill and walked back to the grope-fest at the bar.

"Excuse me? Mr. Davidson?" He looked up with a photo-ready smile on his face, but his eyes told another story.

“Mr. Derek Davidson? I’m awfully sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say how much I enjoy your work. Without you, there would be some really boring movies out there.” My smile was as genuine as I could manage.

In return, his smile broadened in appreciation, but the eyes just got harder.

“Why, thank you very much. Which is your favorite?”

“And I also wanted to say that I’m terribly sorry about your wife’s death last weekend. My sincere condolences. It must be hard on you.” His eyes widened, and his smile dimmed.

“Wife!! You didn’t say anything about a wife!” Ms. Round-Rump seemed truly surprised.

“She died last weekend? While you were with us? You didn’t tell me that, you scumball.” Ms. Ear-Licker had a certain sense of decency, apparently. And Ms. Chest-Masseuse took a step back, a look of indignation on her face.

“Thanks, a lot, pal.” There was real menace in Davidson’s voice. “And I asked you which of my movies you were referring to.”

“I just came up from Santa Fe to do some skiing, we don’t have enough snow down there yet? But it was in the papers on Tuesday and Wednesday. It sounds like they don’t think that it was just an accident. Boy, I sure am sorry, and I hope for your sake, for your peace of mind, they find whoever killed her.”

Ms. Chest-Masseuse gasped. “Your wife was killed? Last weekend? And you’re here with us? You’re right, Tiff, ‘scumball’ for sure. Let’s get out of here.” And the three of them gathered their stuff and stalked off, leaving Davidson and me staring at each other. I was still smiling, but he sure wasn’t.

“All right, you son-of-a-bitch, you’ve ruined my plans for the afternoon, and you’re not answering my question. Which I asked for a specific reason.” And he stood up, grabbed me by the collar of my ski jacket, and yanked me close. “The reason is that I think you haven’t seen my movies. That you’re just bullshitting me. I think you’re working for the heat.”

I reached up to my collar and, before he could react, slipped my thumb under the little finger of his left hand, grabbed it, and twisted. With his finger bent backward past 90 degrees, his attitude adjusted—he released his grip, and he began to sink to the floor. I increased the pressure until he was on his knees.

“If you think I work for the police, surely it isn’t a good idea to assault me. I could arrest you. But I won’t because I don’t. I’m just an adoring fan. Or I was until I discovered what an asshole you are.” I held the finger firmly and watched his jaw muscles twitch for a few seconds before continuing.

“I’m leaving now. I suggest you sit here and contemplate your sore hand for a while. You touch me again, you’ll have some broken bones. And if you think this hurts,” I gave the finger a little twitch, and he winced, “you should see what I can do to knees.”

All this happened fast, and neither the bartender nor anyone else in the place noticed anything before I turned and walked away. And I didn’t hear any ruckus behind me. Score: Livingston-1; Davidson-0.

One problem with telemark equipment is that getting into the bindings is a little more complicated than those alpine step-in bindings, where you just line up your boot, stomp your foot down, and away you go. I have cable bindings that require squatting down on one knee, fumbling around, and snapping the heel-lock into place. It’s a vulnerable position to be in if someone is mad at you. And I had a feeling that might be the case.

So I picked up my skis and poles and walked away from the restaurant, up a little rise to where I could see both entrances, and turned and put my skis on, watching all the while.

As I was fumbling with my bindings and watching the doors, I was also thinking about skiing. If you've seen World Cup skiing or the Winter Olympics on television, what you've seen are ski racers using alpine equipment. They do this not because it's easier or more popular; they do this because it's a faster way to get down the hill. Of course, a good telemark skier can ski faster than a mediocre alpine skier, especially on real-world ski runs as opposed to those ice-covered race courses. But I had the notion that Davidson would be better than mediocre. Of course, I'm better than merely "good," but how much of a skill advantage I would have was a good question. As was whether that advantage would make up for my disadvantage of slower equipment.

On the other hand, it was still snowing hard, and, while I was in at lunch, another two inches or so had accumulated. There was at least a foot of new powder on the ground, chopped up where people had skied it and creamy smooth where they hadn't. My telemark skis are great powder skis—they float like corks. Maybe Davidson would be at something of a disadvantage there.

On yet the other hand, he knew the mountain. I didn't.

And at that point, I figured there were too many hands to count, so I should just ski down to town and not worry. Maybe watch my back, but not worry.

Except I wouldn't have to, because there he was, coming out the same door I had. I felt an adrenalin surge putting my body on high alert, but he just went straight to the ski racks, found and stepped into his equipment, and skied off down the mountain without looking my way. Away from town, I noticed, over toward an intermediate run in the other direction, down to the Prospect Bowl, not down the Plunge.

Maybe, I thought, that adrenalin will be helpful to get me down what I'd heard called the toughest run in Colorado.

* * *

I called him Saturday morning at about 10:00, at what I thought would be a reasonably decent time, not too early. But my idea of a decent time and his were clearly not synchronized—he seemed barely awake.

I'd puzzled over how to reach him all the way down the Plunge, finally remembering about the phone numbers stored in Elizabeth's cell phone. I had them in my notes, and there were three possibilities, two with California area codes and one with the code for western Colorado. Naturally, I made the local call first, and he answered after six rings.

"Yeah? This better be good."

"I think my favorite was that scene in 'Accidental Spies,' where you do the stand-in for Arnold hanging from the landing gear of the crop-duster to rescue the girl. The timing on that was exceptional. The audience in the theater I was in was going nuts. It was just great work. How's your finger?"

I could hear labored breathing during the long pause.

"OK, so you *have* seen my movies, at least that one. How'd you get this number? Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

"Long story, Mr. Davidson. And I'll trade you everything I know for one little piece of information. How do I get hold of that girl called 'Tiff,' the one who called you a scumball yesterday? If I can talk with her, I may be able to do you a very big, a huge favor. Which I'll explain after I talk with her."

The pause went on longer this time, but the breathing was somewhat easier.

"Look, pal. I don't know who you are or what you want, but I do know that I got no reason at all to trust you. What the hell's going on, anyway?"

“What’s going on is that you’re the prime suspect in the murder of your wife. And there are two U.S. Senators, at least, who have the same opinion of you that Tiff does, and they want to hang you up by your balls. Also, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation is interested in you, for a variety of reasons including the murder. Based on what I saw yesterday, I don’t have a very high opinion of you, either, but my main concern is finding out who really killed Elizabeth. And I heard something yesterday that’s led me to believe that maybe it wasn’t you, or at least you didn’t do it personally. So if I can talk with that babe who was licking your ear yesterday in the bar, I just may be in the position to do you the favor of getting those Senators off your case, not to mention conventional law enforcement. At least as far as Elizabeth’s death is concerned. Understand?”

“Who are you working for?”

“Like I said, I’ll trade you everything I know for information about how to talk to Tiff. OK?”

“So her old man thinks I killed her, huh? He didn’t like me from the start, the old windbag. And I gotta tell you, I don’t like him, either. And to make things worse, it turns out that his daughter took after him, personality and controlling nature and everything. A real ball-buster. Too bad for me I didn’t find that out until after we got married. So I’m glad to be separated from her, but I sure as hell didn’t kill her. And here’s Tiffie’s number, unless she and her friends blew town already.” And he finally rattled off a phone number. “Ha! My little joke. They were blowing just about everything else in sight. You talk to her and call me, OK? That’s the deal, right?”

“You got it. And let me suggest that you lie low for today, at least. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

As much as I thought Derek Davidson was a Grade-A asshole, what I had told him was true: all I really wanted to do was to find out who was responsible for Elizabeth’s death. Maybe it’s the scientist in me, trained to set personal feelings aside and go wherever the research leads. Or maybe I felt that I owed it to the Senator, for placing so much trust in me. Davidson, I thought, would end up getting whatever he deserved without my setting him up. What I needed was to find Elizabeth’s killer.

Friday afternoon, after wearing out my legs negotiating the moguls of the Plunge, I’d spent a couple of hours in town in the offices of the Telluride Marshal’s Department, where, with persistence and patience, I had finally worked my way into the office of the Chief Deputy. After explaining why I was in town and dropping Annette Trieri’s name into the conversation, I found he became most cooperative, and he offered to help however he could. He told me that Annette had called, and that he had also talked with the police department up in Mountain Village about me. They were all on my side. Davidson, it seemed, was someone the entire department was ready to send packing.

After talking with Davidson on Saturday morning, I called the Chief Deputy with the number Davidson gave me for Tiff, to see if it could be attached to an address. Ten minutes later, he called me back with the information. It was a condo in Mountain Village, a couple of blocks down the hill from mine. Small town coincidences, just like in Santa Fe, were inevitable, I decided. He also gave me a name at the Mountain Village Police Department and suggested I contact him if I needed assistance up on the hill.

So, at 10:45 on Saturday morning, exactly a week after I’d run into Elizabeth Davidson on San Francisco Street in Santa Fe, I found myself ringing the doorbell of a nondescript residence in Mountain Village, one of those places where you desperately need to remember the number because there are no other distinguishing characteristics to remind you where you’re staying. I wasn’t expecting much, because the snow had continued overnight, and that morning the sky was blue and the sun was cutting sharp-edged shadows everywhere. Surely, I thought, anyone who was here for a ski vacation would be on the mountain. And the locals were undoubtedly lined up waiting for the lifts to open two hours ago.

But, no, the door opened a crack, and an emerald-green eye peeked out. I manufactured my most charming smile, or at least what I thought was.

“Hi! I’m Sandy, and I’d like to talk with Tiff if I could. Is she here?”

“Do I know you?”

“Well ... not very. We all bumped into each other yesterday at that Italian restaurant up on the mountain. I’m afraid I’m the one who broke up your little party. And Tiff is the only one of you whose name I know. But I really do need to talk with her. There’s no trouble, or anything. Just conversation.”

“My name’s Adrienne, call me Addie.” And the door opened to reveal Ms. Round-Rump standing there wrapped in a towel. “We’re just getting ready to go ski. Want to come?” And she smiled almost wickedly.

* * *

Seven

It turned out that Tiffany, Adrienne, and Shelley were staff assistants in a large stock brokerage in Los Angeles, visiting Telluride for ten days of skiing and general vacation. They were due to leave the next day, so I was fortunate to have caught them. Adrienne chatted me up while she watched me hang up my coat. She apologized for not hanging it up for me, but she thought she’d better hang on to the towel instead. I wasn’t going to touch that one, no matter what.

She led me into the dining room, where Tiffany, already dressed and ready to ski, was sipping coffee, staring out at the view of the mountain. Adrienne scampered back down a hall toward, I assumed, her clothes.

“Good morning—I’m sorry to barge in like this, but I’d like to talk with you for a minute? I’m Sandy Livingston. We met yesterday, very briefly. At the restaurant up on the mountain?”

“Yeah, I won’t forget that. And I guess I owe you for getting the truth out, as disappointing as it is.”

“I can tell you’re almost set to ski, so I won’t keep you. And, I don’t mean to defend him or anything, but he really is single, now, and he told me that he wasn’t getting along with his wife, uh, before.”

She giggled. “We saw your little confrontation, just before we left. He’s not used to being on his knees, that’s for sure. But you talked to him more?”

“Yeah, I called him this morning and apologized, sort of. Got him to open up a little. See, his ex-father-in-law suspects him in his wife’s death. He says he didn’t even know about it, although I’m not sure I quite believe that. But it’s very possible that he’s not to blame.”

“So, what happened?”

I gave her the edited version of Elizabeth’s story, leaving the foul play angle as vague as I could and avoiding specifics of the time line.

“So, the reason I need to talk with you is that you said something yesterday that got my attention, something about being with Davidson last weekend. Can you be more specific about when?”

“Why should I? None of us owes him anything. The jerk.”

“Yeah, I thought about that. And it would be easy to let Davidson take the fall for this thing. But it’s possible that he wasn’t involved, or that he was involved but not directly. What I’m looking to do is to find out what really happened. I feel connected, you know? I met her last Saturday, and she seemed like such a nice person. And I was on the rescue team that found her body. I’ve talked with her father, the Senator, and I saw past his politician mask to the real person, the concerned and upset and heartbroken father in there. So, I want to find out what really happened. And if you were with Davidson, here, last weekend, he couldn’t have been in Santa Fe. Right?”

“Right. He wasn’t—he was here. See, Shelley and Addie and I got here a week ago yesterday, and we met him last Saturday, Saturday morning, on a lift ride up the mountain. We came back here that afternoon, and we’ve all been sharing him all week, here and at his house. And downtown, some. The three of us are such good friends that we can do that and make it work. Although I’m especially upset, because I was really beginning to like him a lot. Beneath all that macho stuff there’s a nice guy in there, believe it or not. And he lives in Malibu and I have a place in Westwood, so I was beginning to think beyond this week of vacation. And then you came along and started talking about his wife. It pissed me off, you know? Not you, but him being married and not telling.”

“So, just to be clear, you met him a week ago today, and you or one of your friends were here with him ever since, at least for the most part?”

“We met him last Saturday morning, yeah. And,” she blushed, “I’m surprised we’re not starting to grow gills, we’ve all spent so much of the time since in his Jacuzzi together. I don’t know how he could have been in Santa Fe between when we met him and now. So he didn’t kill her. I guess he could have arranged for someone else to do it, but that doesn’t seem like him. Like I said, he’s really a nice guy, once you get past his bravado.”

A third person entered the room, preceded by a well-endowed chest, which was stuffed into a ski outfit. Shelley, I assumed.

“Tiff, are you ... Oh. Hi there! Where were you last night when we needed you? I’m Shelley.”

“And I’m Sandy. Sorry about the scene in the bar yesterday. It wasn’t worthy of me.”

“Bar? Oh, yeah, you’re the guy that Derek went to his knees for.” She giggled. “Bet he’ll never live that down.”

“I won’t tell on him if you guys won’t. And, look, I shouldn’t have been so catty yesterday. But I was a little ticked off that he just lost a wife and he was fooling around already. I didn’t know that they were separated.”

“They were? Officially?” Tiffany seemed to sense a ray of hope.

“I guess I don’t know about ‘official,’ but they weren’t together, were they? So, anyway, I’m sorry I broke up your party. But it looks like you guys are about to hit the slopes. Need company? I remember there’s a quad chair around here somewhere.”

Which is how it all got started, by skiing. Perfectly innocent.

But one thing led to another. Predictably, it started with a conversation about my telemark ski equipment and their fascination with the style. Because Saturday was their last night in Telluride, and I was new to town and needed to be shown all the hot night spots, they were happy to have me escort them around later. And let’s just say that these girls were *very* good friends. At some point during the evening, when I surprised myself by how much I was feeling like a teenager again, I thought of Alex. It made me realize that all the fun I was having with these three lovelies was going to make me feel very guilty someday.

Guilty, guilty, guilty. But in the meantime, talk about clean sinuses ...

* * *

Sunday morning I took them across the valley to the airport, where we said our goodbyes in a very sexy group hug with me in the middle. I promised to look them up when I got to Los Angeles; they promised to find me if they got to Santa Fe; the hypocrisy flowed like the drinks had the night before. But it was friendly, and—who knows?—maybe we would see each other again. Just in case, I made a mental note to see them separately. Even feeling like a teenager again wasn't really enough to deal with the three of them together.

After that it was time to let Davidson know that his alibi was secure, as least as far as his presence in Telluride was concerned. He wasn't answering his phone, though, even after I let it ring an obnoxious number of times, so I looked up his address in the CBI file, found it on a map, and drove by.

It was on the bluff overlooking the Telluride valley, clearly a trophy home, but it was dark, with a For Sale sign out front. I called the agent, and discovered that it had been listed only the day before, the owner was "motivated"—Realtor-speak for "in a hurry and willing to negotiate"—and would I like a showing?

It occurred to me that I might be able to learn more about Davidson and his relationship with Elizabeth if I were able to look through the house, so I acted interested by talking about how I'd been driving around and was struck by the beauty of the place and its view. I went on a little, with the expected comments about how I wasn't sure that the house would be in my price range and so on, but that it was one of the best properties I'd run across. Telluride, I said, has everything I ever wanted as a vacation destination, and it's close enough to my home in Santa Fe—I made certain to drop *that* name into the conversation—that it seemed like a real possibility. Blah, blah, blah. I probably sounded just like all the people who buy second homes in Santa Fe.

The agent ate it up, and we made an appointment for 2:00.

Between seeing the girls off and the appointment, I managed to work in a couple of hours of skiing—that platinum card was really coming in handy—so at 2:00 I was feeling comfortably accomplished as I pulled up to Davidson's house. And there was the agent, right behind me in a Jeep Grand Cherokee. Doris Weatherby was a middle-aged, matronly woman, somewhat overweight—quite the contrast to the young ladies I'd spent the night with.

She introduced herself and immediately began apologizing. The house, being listed only yesterday, wasn't really prepped for showing, it might be a mess (it certainly was yesterday), she couldn't get in touch with the owner today, and so on. I thought of it as a sales technique. I had told her of my genuine interest on the phone, and she had said the right things to raise my expectations. Now she was intentionally lowering them, so when I actually saw the house, I'd be all the more impressed. Which meant that it was time for me to lower her expectations a notch or two in return.

"Hmm. Only a two-car garage. Do you know if it's heated?" She looked deflated.

"Oh. No, I don't. Let's check when we get inside. Do you need a bigger garage? Do you have, um, family?" She was fumbling with the lock-box on the front door, trying to get the house key out.

"I might be able to make do. See, sometimes I'll be driving up here, like this time, and sometimes I'll be flying. I'll need two cars here—a summer one and a winter one. So the third one would be here the times I drive up. And nothing beats keeping a car in a heated garage for comfort and convenience. But it's not a deal-breaker." This cheered her up a little.

She finally got the door open and we walked into the entrance foyer, or vestibule, or whatever such things are called. It was designed to impress and even intimidate, with a cathedral ceiling probably 30 feet high at the peak, graced by a large, ornate chandelier and a grand staircase up to the second floor balcony, which encircled the room we were in. A large portrait in oil of Davidson, in full fox-hunting regalia sitting on a horse, stared down from the opposite wall. The pack of foxhounds was tearing apart something under the horse.

“Gee,” I said, “Do you suppose the painting comes with the house? I could have someone paint my face on it. It would fit my style perfectly.” The sarcasm went right over Doris’s head, however.

“Um, probably not, but I can ask. Let’s see. Before I forget, why don’t we check the garage to see if it’s heated? I think it’s through that door over there.” She was moving off to the left, past the base of the stairs through what looked to be a mud room, so I followed.

It turned out that the garage was heated, and, of more importance, full. A shiny red BMW M5 sat next to a dirty green Dodge Durango. Either Davidson was home or he’d ridden the bus to go skiing. But that was lost on Doris, as she was too deeply focused on her sales pitch to think of such things.

“Now.” she was leading me back into the house, “Just to the left here is the kitchen, a large one as you can see. Hmm. It’s going to be lots more attractive when it’s cleaned up, as I’m sure you can tell. But note the professional appliances, Sub-Zero ’fridge, Garland range. And this kind of quality is seen all throughout the house in every way. The windows and doors are by Pella, and ... um, Mr. Livingston?”

I was listening with only one ear, but that was enough to catch my name. I’d been staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the dining room, across a large deck toward the spectacular view to the north. The snow on the deck was pristine, undisturbed except for a curious pattern of dark spots. It appeared that the spots had rained down after the snow stopped early the previous day.

“I’m sorry, Doris, but I have my own way of looking houses over. Do you know what’s just upstairs from where I’m standing?”

“Yes, I believe it’s the master suite, with more windows and its own deck, more like a balcony, really. You can see outside stairs just off of the left there. Of course, the main staircase in the foyer also goes up to the second ... Mr. Livingston? I, uh, I need to be with you, because the owner still has ...”

I could hear her trotting after me as I bounded up the main stairs. I picked a door that looked as if it might be over the dining room, but it was locked. The next door was obviously a guest room of some kind, and the others were too far around the balcony to lead to rooms over the dining room. So I kicked the first one in and was smacked in the face with a blast of cold air.

Well, I thought, at least he opened the window.

I found him lying crumpled on the floor in front of the open door to the upper deck’s catwalk, the back of his head missing—that, I thought, is probably what’s sprinkled down there on the snow on the main deck—and a snub-nosed Smith & Wesson .38 Special in his right hand.

Doris finally caught up with me, and then I had two bodies on the floor. She took one look at Davidson and fainted in a heap.

Fortunately, she landed on the carpet.

* * *

“I can’t honestly say I’m sorry about this.” Assistant Chief Randolph Winters of the Mountain Village Police Department was shaking his head. “Davidson was a significant trouble-maker in this town. The

marshal and his guys down in the valley say the same thing. They also told me I should help you out because you were going to be investigating him. Do me a favor and don't investigate me, OK?"

Doris had responded to smelling salts, but fainted again when she woke up in the same room as the body. Two burly officers carried her to the next room for re-revival. I was quite happy that Doris had been with me, though, as there would be no question about my own involvement. The subterfuge I'd used to get into Davidson's house was enough to raise suspicion, despite my CBI letter of introduction.

"Chief, I'm not an investigator, but a couple of things here seem strange. Like, if you were going to do this, wouldn't you do it facing the view? I mean, why stand in front of the window looking back into the room. That's what he must have been doing, right?"

"Yeah, you're right. But he also opened the window, like he didn't want to mess things up or anything. So maybe he stared at the view for a while and turned around and did it."

"And there's no snow on this catwalk up here, but there's snow on the deck."

"There's brains up here, though, and blood, that's for sure."

"Could you have your guys check for footprints on top of the brains and blood? That would make me feel better."

"What're you driving at here, Livingston? You think someone shot him and set things up to make it look like suicide?"

"Maybe. Thing is, he was left-handed. One of those publicity pictures in his file shows him signing autographs. And there's a poster on the wall behind him, with the lettering correct, so the picture wasn't printed backwards. He's got the pen in his left hand."

"And the .38's in his right hand, isn't it? Damn. You bet we'll check for footprints. We also need to see if it's possible to lock this bedroom door from the outside. It looks like one of those doors you can *unlock* from the outside, like bathroom doors, but locking them is a different matter." He stared at me in disgust. "Why do things always have to be so complicated?"

"You're right, Chief. I mean, the guy should have just taken a drug overdose, instead of using a gun. People are just so darned inconsiderate." I was smiling so he wouldn't take all that guff the wrong way, but I think it was a close thing anyway.

He finally smiled. "Or, better yet, he could have just had a heart attack, in bed or someplace convenient. Then we could all go skiing. But, noooo, he has to go and get himself whacked, the inconsiderate jerk. Got any thoughts on who?"

"Got me. I came here thinking he whacked his wife. Apparently he did have some redeeming qualities, but I didn't see them. However, it's becoming clear that he didn't kill his wife, at least not personally. So at least I got that part figured out. But now he gets it. I suppose the logical thing to think is that he and his wife were done by the same person. But who that is? ... well, I've got no clue."

About then, a plainclothes officer came into the room from the hall.

"Chief? We've got footprints coming off the deck into the side yard and out to the street. Looks as if they came down from up here."

"Any indication of age?"

"Probably yesterday afternoon, maybe mid-day. The sun hit some and missed some."

"Hmm. Pick a likely pair of shoes from the closet up here and see if there might be a match."

"Right. And I'll send O'Leary up to have a look at this part of the deck."

“Thanks. And, listen, call the Sheriff’s Office, and the marshal downtown. And notify the CBI down in Durango, OK? I think this may blow up on us. Livingston here thinks it’s tied to a murder in Santa Fe.”

“Another state? Geez. Does this mean the FBI’s gonna want in?”

“Not if I can help it, or if the CBI can help it, either.”

“Nor,” I jumped in, “if the NMBI can help it. They don’t trust the Feds either.”

“So, talk to me, Livingston. I could tell you were holding back a bit earlier. And, first, tell me where you were all day yesterday, just to clear that much up.”

“Skiing, during the day, with Tiffany from Westwood and her friends Adrienne and Shelley. Don’t worry, Chief, this isn’t my handiwork. I’ll admit, though, that I gave Doris a load of crap so I could get in here and look around. I wanted to see if I could learn anything about Davidson’s relationship to his wife. I found out he wasn’t in Santa Fe last weekend, but he could have set her up, or something.”

“He was a real suspect?”

“Only because of motivation, I think. He had a reputation of being broke, and she had money that he would come into, maybe. We need to check her insurance policies and her will to find out for sure. Also, his father-in-law, Senator Mike O’Malley, didn’t like him very much.”

“Bad guy to have not like you.”

“Really. But it’s compounded by the fact that our other Senator didn’t like him either. So he was on more than one powerful shit list. The motivation to kill her got magnified by these Senators and the investigation got launched.”

“And you called Doris Weatherby just to look around in here?”

“Right. I talked with Davidson yesterday morning, about 10:00, to get Tiffany’s, the one from Westwood, Tiffany’s phone number. I talked to her yesterday. And I called him this morning to tell him that she cleared him, but he didn’t answer. I drove by the house and saw the sign with Doris’ name on it. So I called her.”

“Did someone mention my name?” Doris walked into the room, on wobbly legs, and immediately looked at the body. Fortunately, for her and for the two burly cops, someone had thrown the bedspread over it. “Oh, Mr. Livingston. I’m so sorry I fainted. I was going to explain the passive solar heating to you, I think. But maybe we should do it another time?”

“Good idea, Doris. Thanks for taking the trouble to show me the house, and I’m sorry this all happened today. How about if I call you this week, when things have settled down?” She gave me her card and, gratefully, escaped.

“Why’d you kick the door in?” The Assistant Chief, it seemed, wasn’t finished with me.

“A couple of things. First, the garage is full—it has two cars in it, and the driveway had virgin snow on it before I pulled in. It stopped snowing Friday night, and I don’t think that Davidson is—was—the type to take the bus. And, of course, he wasn’t answering the phone, but I talked with him Saturday morning. I saw the spots on the snow down on the main deck, when I was standing in the dining room. It looked like a spray of something from an upstairs window, right above where I was. I asked and Doris told me the master suite was up here. So I put things together and decided kicking in the door was justified. It was locked, after all.”

“Locked from the inside. And you figured out it wasn’t suicide? When?”

“Pretty much while I was waiting for you guys to get here, which you did in good time, I have to say. That phone over there should be the only place where my prints are ... um ... I think in the whole house. Certainly on this floor. Anyway, it was the facing away from the window thing that got me started thinking about it. And I think I can see footprints on the catwalk here, on top of the blood and so on. But an expert needs to verify that.”

“Makes sense to me, and I think it will to the DA, too. So I’d say you’re clear, Livingston. But maybe you should stick around for a day or two.”

“Really? Can you, you know, make that official? I don’t want folks to think I’m just hanging around here to ski.”

* * *

Eight

I’d been remiss in my reports to the Senator, but now I had plenty to tell him. After I got back to my condo, I called him before dinner. What, I wondered as I punched numbers into my cell phone, do U.S. Senators do on their Sunday evenings? But just as I got to the last digit, the condo’s phone rang.

“Livingston? Winters here. Listen, I thought you’d want to know that we’re back to suicide.”

“Huh? How’s that?”

“The shoes. We’ve positively identified the shoes that Davidson was wearing as the ones that made the footprints outside. They fit the tracks in the snow perfectly, even to the tread pattern. And there aren’t any tracks on the blood and stuff on that upper part of the deck, the part without the snow. I don’t know what you saw, but they weren’t tracks.”

“So, let’s see. Your theory is that he intentionally went to the bedroom, made a trip outside, down the deck stairs and around the side of the house, back in the front door and up to the bedroom, where he locked himself in, opened the window, turned his back on the scenery and ate a bullet. While holding the gun in his off hand? Really?”

“Got any better ideas?”

“Not off the top of my head. Although since you’re betting everything on his shoes, wouldn’t it be possible for the perp to have taken another pair, same kind and size, from Davidson’s closet and used them to get away? Seems like that would make as much sense as the wrong-handed suicide theory.”

“Assuming Davidson was in the habit of keeping identical pairs of shoes. Why are you working so hard to avoid the suicide theory, anyway? And what about the no tracks on top of the blood?”

“Surely you noticed that he was in front of the right-hand sliding door, and there was another one to the left, away from where the blood was. I bet it’s unlocked. What kind of shoes were those that matched the tracks? I didn’t notice. Running shoes?”

“Yeah, running shoes.”

“Two pairs of identical running shoes isn’t uncommon. You find a pair you like, you buy a second pair before the company stops making them. Or you run every day and you want two pairs to alternate, so they can dry out completely between uses.”

“Aw, crap, Livingston, how come you’re just making my life so complicated?”

“Sorry, Chief. But if you go with the suicide as the official verdict, the perp will have succeeded. You know, ‘the terrorists will have won’ and all that bullshit. Hey, look, maybe I’m full of it. But that wrong-handed thing bothers me. You’re taking residue samples from his gun hand, right?”

“Of course. Standard procedure. And the field test showed he’d fired a gun.”

“How about his teeth?”

“Teeth? Huh?”

“I read a story once about how eating a bullet often produces chipped teeth, from the fore-sight on the gun barrel and the recoil. If he really did this, using his off hand, you’d think that might happen. And maybe not symmetrically, you know, kind of off kilter to one side? On the other hand, if someone put the gun in his hand and forced it into his mouth, it might have been held more steady. See?”

“Geez, Livingston, what is this? Amateur detective night? Look, we’ll check on all this stuff, but we’ve got to go with suicide as our preliminary finding. OK?”

“Checking is the important part, Chief. And a preliminary finding of suicide is fine, because it will get in the paper and make the perp think he’s succeeded. That will put him off guard.”

“OK. Suppose I go along with all this nonsense. What’s your theory?”

“I’m trying to keep an open mind, Chief. I mean, it could be that whoever killed Elizabeth Davidson also killed Derek, that there’s some reason that both had to be got out of the way. We initially thought that Davidson was after his wife’s money, that’s why I came up here in the first place. Maybe somebody else still is, and they had to knock off Derek to get it. Or maybe there’s another reason. We know that Davidson has been involved in shady stuff in the past, like cocaine. Maybe both of them knew something, or owed somebody something, or, uh, something.”

I give seminars and other presentations where I have to think on my feet to answer questions, so this kind of free-lancing with ideas wasn’t new to me. But in this case, I knew that I was out of my depth. And, I think, the Assistant Chief knew it, too.

“As opposed to he was despondent over his wife’s death, especially because he didn’t know about it until you caught him in a bar with three babes, and he just offed himself? What’s that principle scientists use to judge competing theories? Somebody’s razor?”

“Yeah, yeah, ‘Occam’s Razor.’ The simplest theory is the best, to paraphrase it. But if he was so despondent as to kill himself, why the subterfuge, the trip outside, the wrong hand holding the gun?”

“Oh, hell, I don’t know. Maybe the guy was ambidextrous, he wrote with his left and shot himself with his right. Look, we could debate this forever. I’m sensitive to your connections in Washington and with the CBI, but I’ve got to move ahead with this thing. We’ll go with suicide as our preliminary finding for now. And the thing for you to do is to think up some piece of evidence that we can use to be sure it wasn’t suicide. I know that’s too much like proving a negative, but, given the evidence we’ve got, I’d say the burden of proof is on you. OK?”

“Not OK, exactly, but I understand your position. I’ll come by tomorrow morning. Is that all right?”

“See you then.”

* * *

My cell phone was patiently awaiting the last digit of the Senator’s phone number, so, after gathering my thoughts about what to say to him, I supplied it and hit the “Talk” button. There were several clicks, forwarded calls bouncing around, I guessed, and finally a deep, pleasant “Yes?”

“Senator? Sandy Livingston here. Sorry to bother you.” The background noise on the other end sounded like a rather boisterous cocktail party was in progress. A mumbling of different voices was almost drowned out by a mariachi band.

“Howdy, son. No bother at all.”

“Sorry I didn’t call yesterday, Senator. I got tied up all day following a lead.” This was only a small lie—the three girls hadn’t exactly tied me up. But they had made me lie spread-eagled on the bed for quite a while, and they threatened to tie me up if I moved too much.

“No problem at all. Anything new?”

“More than you probably want to hear now. It sounds as if you’re at a party. How about if I give you the summary and send details in email?”

“Sounds fine. And you’re right. I can’t really talk much here.”

“And I know you’re going to have questions. So here goes: You’ll remember when I talked with you Friday evening about how I’d run across Davidson at a bar with three honeys hanging all over him, and that one had said something about being with him last weekend. Right?”

“Yup, and you were going to check that out.”

“Right. I did, and she’s quite clear that Davidson was here in Telluride Saturday a week ago, all day, and ever since then. So he couldn’t have been in Santa Fe when Elizabeth was killed. But that’s only the tip of the iceberg.” And I proceeded to sketch out Davidson’s death and the questions attached to it.

“No shit? Dammit! That sure complicates matters. You think it’s not suicide?”

“I’ve got to respect the local police, they’re the professionals. But I do have some questions. And maybe you can help, or your connections can. I’ll send details in the email, but it seems like some investigation of Davidson’s will and so on would be in order. If he wasn’t after Elizabeth’s money, maybe someone else was but he got in the way. There’s also the possibility that he was involved in something shady that got him in trouble, and maybe Elizabeth, too. Anyway, I’ll send details of what I know, OK?”

“Sounds fine. I’ll check my email late tonight. How’s the skiing?”

“Outstanding. I feel guilty about it, it’s so good. Not guilty enough to make me stop, but, well, you know. And I think skiing is how I managed to get the information from that girl about Davidson, by the way. We connected because of it. She was mad at Davidson for not telling her he was married, and she really didn’t want to supply an alibi for him at first. So maybe it’s all in the line of work.” A gentle shading of the truth now and then seemed to me like a good way to stay on his good side.

“You want my people to check out those three babes for you? Make sure you’re not going to get taken?”

Ouch, I thought. So he’s got someone watching the watcher. That meant I’d have to be very careful about how I did that truth-shading.

“I doubt if I’ll ever see them again, so it’s probably not worth the bother. But thanks. And I’ll send out this information soonest. Thanks, Senator. Oh, and the local police want me to stick around for a couple of days, until Davidson’s autopsy is completed, I guess.”

“Try to keep out of trouble, then. And I’ll look for the email. Now. Back to the battle. Good to hear from ya, son.” And he disconnected.

I put together everything I knew into a long email message and was just getting ready to upload it to the Senator's private address when my cell phone let loose with *Jump*.

"Hello? This is Sandy."

"Mr. Livingston? This is Annette Trieri down in Durango. I just read a curious report that the Mountain Village PD put out. I assume you know about it?"

"I guess it depends. Is it about Derek Davidson's death?" I was surprised. She reads police reports on Sunday evening? Some dedication.

"That's the one. Suicide, it says here, at least that's the preliminary finding."

"Yeah, I'm the one who found the body, me and a real-estate agent. She fainted; I called the cops. But I'm not so sure about the suicide thing."

"Oh?" I could tell she was instantly on alert.

"There are some, well, issues, questions about it." I filled her in on my concerns.

"Hmm. I'd have to think about it, but the only thing that grabs me is the gun in the wrong hand. Even if he was trying to be cryptic about his suicide, with the tracks in the snow and everything, for someone to use their off hand to eat a bullet is unlikely. I'm thinking maybe I should come up for the autopsy."

My heart did a flip-flop, but as much as the thought of seeing her again was most pleasant, I didn't want to annoy the locals.

"Oh, well ... the Assistant Chief of Police, the guy I've been dealing with, would really be pissed if he thought I brought you in. He's already unhappy with me for asking all these questions. Not that I wouldn't welcome your expertise, but I think he'll be even more unhappy."

"You mean Randy Winters? Oh, don't worry about him. He's a friend of mine. Besides, I think my husband could stand to get away for a day or two to do some skiing. He's been kind of unsettled lately. His staff assistant is retiring, and it's got him all strung out. The thing is, I have some information about this Davidson guy that may have a bearing on the circumstances. It seems he was in debt up to his chin. He ran through all the legitimate sources of cash—you know, loans from banks and so on—and he was borrowing from some folks in Las Vegas. Folks who charge very high interest and make their collections emphatically." I heard a gentle laugh. "They're quite good at using uncooperative folks like Davidson to send messages to other, um, clients."

"This seems subtle for the mob, though. Making it look like a suicide and all."

"Not if they have video of it. But maybe I'm wrong. What I want to see in the autopsy is if there are specific marks on the body that will give it away. So I think I'll come up. Any recommendations on where to stay? And how's the snow?"

"Snow's great, and I got put in a condo up in Mountain Village. There's a central reservations number in the information booklet they have here." I recited it for her. "Maybe we can talk about all this tomorrow, but I'm wondering how Elizabeth's death might tie into this Las Vegas thing."

"Good question. But that's why you're there, right? To figure that out yourself? I'm going to worry about the Colorado death before I take on a New Mexico one. See you tomorrow."

"OK, I'll keep my cell phone turned on. And maybe we can all go skiing together."

Wow, I thought. Now all I have to do is keep from acting like a total doofus in front of her husband. The lucky bastard.

* * *

By that point in the evening, Sunday Night Football was just starting the second half. Riding the gondola into town for dinner seemed like a real pain in the ass, and a cold one at that, so I ordered a pizza to be delivered and settled in to see how badly the Packers were going to beat the Texans.

Besides, I owed the Senator his email, and it was time to check my email at the Institute and see what I'd been missing at work. One thing for sure—I knew I needed to keep busy to avoid acting like a doofus in front of myself over the prospect of seeing Annette Trieri again.

So, after I sent off the Senator's email message and downloaded my email, instead of reading it I stared at the TV while trying to figure out what in the world was happening to me. I had a comfortable relationship with Alex—apart from her cats, at least—that was fulfilling enough that I'd actually considered marriage. But for her metaphysical flakiness along with her volatile temper, I probably would have proposed. I was still a little disturbed by Elizabeth's phone call Saturday afternoon, the one that Alex hadn't told me about, but that was probably just more of her flakiness.

And I'd just spent almost 24 hours in the company of three of the most delightful, and uninhibited, women I'd ever met. Surely, I thought, that should satiate me for the time being. Hell, as close to 40 as I was, I should have been completely worn out, acting like a grownup, not thinking about sex at all. My BERT pals with families sure acted that way, and they were younger than I.

But, thinking about it, I realized that I wasn't feeling the guilt that I'd anticipated. It wouldn't do for Alex to find out about my 24 hours of bliss, of course, because that would be a major hassle, but I just couldn't summon up guilt about being unfaithful to her.

Instead, my immediate concern was embarrassment at the prospect of Annette's finding out about the 24 hours. What in the world was that about? Reaching for the unattainable ideal? High-school infatuation? A case of terminal doofusitis?

Eventually, I did what any red-blooded American guy does when he's overcome by a fit of introspection—I turned up the volume on the TV and let myself get absorbed into the football game. That, after all, is what's *really* important—who beats the crap out of whom.

Which is why I almost didn't hear my cell phone ringing.

Fortunately for me, it happened just as the ex-jock color commentator said something so ridiculous that the other guy was dumbstruck, and I heard the phone during the pause, just before they both burst into laughter. I found the remote and turned the sound down with one hand and flipped the phone open with the other.

"Sandy?" Alex's voice was small, and it was wavering.

"Alex! Darlin'! What's wrong? You sound, um, scared, I guess." I felt the hair on my neck standing up.

"Are you home yet?"

"No, I'm stuck in Telluride for another day or two. What's wrong?"

"The cops came, the state ones."

"To your house? The Nimbies?"

"Yeah. They came with a s-search w-warrant." She had started sobbing, and I thought I knew why.

"Did they take your place apart? Where are you now?"

“At home. They didn’t arrest me or anything. But they did make a mess. Um, I forgot to go down there and do the statement thing like you suggested. So they came here.”

“What was the warrant for? They should have told you.”

“Telephone stuff. My cell phone and its memory, my answering machine tape, things like that. Documents, papers, letters and so on. And computer stuff. Email. All kinds of things.” Email? Alex? That was news to me.

“Alex, I didn’t even know you had email. So they took your cell phone and your computer? But they didn’t find anything that made them arrest you on the spot?” I’d been assuming that she had a personal stash of drugs around somewhere and that was the issue.

“No, I mean yes they took the phone and the computer and the answering machine tapes, and no they didn’t arrest me. Th-they scared off my k-kitties.” This sent her into a full-out bawl.

“Oh, now, I’m sure the cats will come back. Put some food out. They’ll come back and you’ll feel better. Look, was there anything on the phone or the computer that you’re worried about their finding? Do you want me to have my lawyer call you?”

“N-no, I want you to hold me.”

Oh, *man*. But I couldn’t help but notice that I still didn’t really feel guilty about anything.

“Well, I’m here and you’re there, and I’m sorry that I’m not there to hold you. Listen, did you get the mess cleaned up? If you do, it will make you feel better. Maybe you’ll feel mad, but that will be better because you won’t feel so helpless. You know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Sniff. “But I think I’ll just go to sleep tonight. I mean ... oh, this is just so upsetting.” Sniff. “And you’re not here for me ...” And she lapsed into wailing.

Looking back on all this later, I realized it was somewhere during this conversation that it dawned on me that our relationship wasn’t going anywhere, now or ever. It wasn’t a thunderbolt from the blue, or anything, and I certainly didn’t feel the need to dump her. Nor did I want to abandon her in this time of need. But I just lost interest, somehow.

“You’re right, I’m not. But you know why I’m here, to find out what I can about the death of your friend Elizabeth, right? And, say, that reminds me. She called you from her cell phone a week ago yesterday, in the afternoon. I think you told me she called you in the morning, before that brunch, but you didn’t say anything about the afternoon call. What was that about?”

“Huh? What do you mean? Wait! You’re asking me about a phone call I got? Where do you get off with questions about who I talk to on the phone?” She always amazed me with her ability to switch moods in an instant.

At least, I thought, it stopped her crying.

“I’m trying to find out everything I can about Elizabeth’s last hours, that’s all. It’s like putting together a puzzle and each piece is important. I’m not prying, and you know I don’t usually ask you about stuff like this. But the lady’s dead, Alex, and I’m trying to find out everything I can. According to her cell phone record, she called you Saturday afternoon, and I was wondering what you talked about. Maybe there’s something there that will fit together with something else I’ve found out and this will all begin to make sense.”

“You’ve got a lot of damned gall, buddy. Here I call you up because the cops tore apart my house and I need some TLC, and you start grilling me about a phone call that happened a week ago. This just sucks. Tell you what. You take those cell phone records, or whatever they are, and shove them, hard. And I hope they’re sharp.” And she slammed her handset down.

As an example of how she could be bitchy, this was top-notch. But, even for Alex, the abrupt change of mood didn't really make much sense to me—I just got more suspicious.

I also made a mental note to call a locksmith in Santa Fe in the morning, to have all the locks on my house changed. With any luck on my part, Alex wouldn't go over there before then.

* * *

Nine

Monday morning looked like snow again. First thing, I called a Santa Fe locksmith and persuaded him to go up to my house and change the exterior locks. It took some doing, but telling him about my secret key under the rock by the back porch did the trick. It would be amusing, I thought, to see how Alex reacted to this change in her world. Probably another snit. And try as I might, I just couldn't bring myself to care.

Then I called Joyce, my secretary at the Institute, to let her know I'd be out of the office for a few more days.

About 9:00, as I was getting ready to head out the door to take advantage of the new snow on the slopes, my cell phone let loose with its distinctive chord progression.

"Sandy? This is Annette Trieri. Listen, I need a favor. Hal and I are just coming over Lizard Head Pass, and we'll be down to Mountain Village shortly. I'm supposed to meet with the medical examiner for the autopsy at ten. So could you and Hal go off skiing? You've been there all weekend, I guess, so you must know where the good snow is. I'm hoping to be done by lunch time."

On hearing her voice, my heart leapt; on hearing her request, it sank. Great, I thought, I get to babysit her old man all day. Just what I want to be doing. But I couldn't very well say no, so I told her where they could meet me.

While I was waiting for them to come by and drop him off, I tried to work myself into the right frame of mind. Maybe, I was thinking, I could get him lost in the trees and buried in an avalanche. Then she and I could run off together.

I know, I know. Really, really dumb. But that's how we guys think sometimes.

Trouble was, it turned out that Hal Weathers, Dean of Natural Sciences down at Frémont State University in Durango, was a great guy, and there was no way I could even dislike him, let alone contrive to get him buried in an avalanche. And we had a lot in common. Cars, for example—he and Annette showed up in his Audi S4, the smaller, performance-sedan version of my station wagon, equipped for winter with four studded snow tires and a truly elegant ski rack. And his scientific background was weather and climate. And he was a really good skier, at least for someone fifteen years older than I. And obviously we shared the same sophisticated taste in women.

The fact that I secretly envied him his wife was somehow cancelled out for me by his open envy for my Audi allroad and my ability to ski expert bump runs on telemark equipment. Of course, he could buy an allroad and learn to telemark but I didn't know quite what I could do about Annette, so the cancellation wasn't entirely complete.

Anyway, we spent the morning skiing our legs off and, on the lift rides, talking shop and cars. After hearing me talk up my allroad, he allowed that he was going to consider giving Annette his S4 and

trading her Subaru in for one, if he could find one with low miles and in good shape. And after he explained to me how he was going to host a scientific conference on climate in the southwest at Frémont State in a couple of years, I asked to be included on the mailing list and told him I'd give a paper. And I invited him down to the Santa Fe Institute to give a technical talk on climate modeling uncertainties.

It was a regular guy-style love-fest. So much so, in fact, that I almost resented it when Annette finally joined us for lunch and we had to quit talking shop.

But only almost.

She showed up for lunch about 1:15, at that Italian place at the top of the Plunge where we had agreed to meet, where I'd interrupted Davidson and the girls on Friday. Annette was wearing a form-fitting ski suit that made my eyeballs bulge out. I hoped no one noticed.

"How's the snow? Did you leave any for me?" She sounded hungry for powder. It had been snowing most of the morning, not heavily, but there was enough new accumulation to make those of us who appreciate powder happy.

"Plenty. The snow's been keeping the crowds down, and the conditions are just the way you like 'em." Hal was looking around for a waiter. "At least they were when we came in a while ago. Now that the sun's out, though, we won't have much time to eat and get out there before the new snow's all chopped up."

He was right. The weather had cleared, the sun was out, and the fair-weather skiers were going to be on the mountain in no time, flocks of them. So we hurried through lunch and managed to get back outside before there were too many other people out there.

Skiing itself is inherently a solitary activity, although staying on the same runs and stopping for little rests provides chances for conversation. It's the lift rides that allow companionship. We managed to stick to the triple chairs and therefore didn't have to share with strangers. This let us talk about our case, and Annette described her morning, leaving out the really gory details.

"The cause of death, of course, was obvious, but I didn't say anything about our speculations on the manner, murder or suicide. I wanted the ME to go at it objectively. But she did have the report from the scene, so she knew about the gun in Davidson's right hand. And she also figured out he was a southpaw—something about tennis muscles that I couldn't quite see when she showed me. That made her suspicious about the gun, of course, and she got to thinking about murder instead of suicide."

"If he played tennis left-handed, it would stand to reason that he'd shoot left-handed, too, seems like. So much for the ambidextrous theory." I felt proud to be able to contribute and added my information about the poster I'd seen Davidson in, the one where he was signing autographs left-handed.

"That's something I hadn't really paid attention to, but it's good to know about. And there's more." Annette was on a roll. "The ME is ready to testify if necessary that the ballistics are all wrong for Davidson to have shot himself holding the gun in his right hand. She decided the angle of the entry wound isn't right for it to have happened that way. Of course, there are traces of powder on his right hand, so her theory is that someone helped him shoot himself, held the gun in his hand at an unnatural angle in his mouth. Because Davidson was a big guy, this must have been an even bigger guy helping him, or maybe more than one guy. Or else they had him intimidated another way, I guess. And there was another thing. She was surprised by the damage to Davidson's head. She asked me what kind of bullets were in that S&W, because the one that he ate did far more damage than she said would be usual with normal loads. And I checked, the rest of the bullets in that S&W are just your standard revolver load. Her theory is that the one that Davidson ate was a hollow point, probably dum-dummed. It seems unlikely that he'd do that himself."

“Does this support your theory that the Las Vegas crowd is using him as an example of what happens to people who get behind on their loan payments?” I had been thinking about possible connections between Elizabeth’s death and what happened to Davidson, and the mob angle seemed like good possibility.

The upper lift house came into view, and we all began getting organized to stand up and ski away. Hal put up the foot rest.

“It doesn’t contradict it, at least. Which way?” Annette kicked her legs a couple of times and looked around at the trail signs.

“How about ‘down’? And let’s try something easier, maybe left?” Hal stood up and slid off, and Annette and I followed, toward a blue sign. A cruiser. I reminded myself not to show off too much in front of Annette.

* * *

Reminder or no, I couldn’t help making long, sweeping, high-speed turns ahead of Annette, kneeling into the telemark position far more deeply than was necessary for the blue, intermediate run’s relatively gentle slope. That deep crouch, at least, gave me the control I needed to keep from breaking a leg when I hit the patch of ice.

When I was growing up, I always thought that show-off prima donnas deserved to go face down in the mud, or snow or water or whatever surface they were showing off on. So I guess I got what I deserved. But damn, it hurt, especially my pride. The bruise on my hip was going to be bad enough, but I wasn’t sure how long it would take my psyche to heal.

At least she didn’t laugh.

With my tail between my legs, I managed to limp my way down the rest of the hill and back to my condo, carrying the pieces of my shattered ego for later reassembly. I promised to meet the two of them for dinner that evening. Although still stiff, and walking rather off-kilter as a result, I was able to make a credible entrance for dinner by virtue of having spent the afternoon soaking in the condo’s hot tub—alone, which was just as well. I was wrinkled, prune-like, but I felt much better.

Between the hot tub and dinner, I walked around in circles, little circles, in the condo’s living room to try to keep my leg from tightening up, and I made various phone calls to get some work done, such as it was. I caught the Senator between meetings and brought him up to speed about what now looked more clearly to be Davidson’s homicide. He reassured me that he would start some inquiries about the possible Las Vegas connection, something I didn’t want to go anywhere near. There was voice mail to listen to—it turned out to be nothing important—and I decided to do the politic thing and call Alex. She wasn’t in, so I left as soothing an apology as I could manage, even warning her about having changed my locks. I used the excuse of burglars in the neighborhood, always a credible excuse in Santa Fe. I didn’t tell her that she wouldn’t be getting a new key.

And I put in a call to Deputy Chief Randy Winters, not to gloat or say “I told you so,” but to ask him if there was anything else I could do to help. I was hoping he’d say “no” so I could hit the road for home Tuesday morning. I could tell that my hip was going to be too sore for a few days to be able to ski.

“Well,” he sounded resigned to dealing with the homicide, “I don’t think there’s anything more, really, because we’ve got your statement. All the speculation, even though it seems like you were right, that isn’t going to be part of the official record. Which is probably a good thing for you, because if we ever arrest anyone, the record will be available to their lawyer. If it really is someone from Las Vegas, you don’t want to be featured in that record.”

“That’s for sure. I don’t mind being there at the level of a possible house-buyer who found things, but that’s it. Dealing with those guys is not my thing at all.”

He got contact information from me, and I promised to stay in touch. I also called the Telluride Marshal, just to let him know what was going on and that I would be leaving. He seemed glad to get closure on Davidson’s situation, and, though he didn’t say so specifically, to have me out of his town.

I met Hal and Annette at a little steak house close to my condo—they insisted that it be close so I wouldn’t have to limp too far. They seemed genuinely concerned about my accident, not really amused at all, which spoke volumes to me about the type of people they were. My BERT friends and I always had a lot of fun with each other’s ski goof-ups, and, if I had taken that spill in front of them, I’d never hear the end of it.

Annette looked great, dressed in a cable-knit sweater over jeans, and hiking boots. And Hal, escorting her in a way that unconsciously showed her off, was what’s called “distinguished,” I guess, appropriate for a dean. It occurred to me that my boyish infatuation with Annette seemed to be evolving into a more mature friendship, with just a hint of lust lurking around the edges. Maybe it had to do with having met Hal, and liking him. Or maybe it had to do with the spill. Guy psychology is something that’s as much a mystery to me as it is to the experts.

“How’s the leg?” Hal was the first to ask.

“I’m glad to see you walking.” Maturing friendship be damned, Annette’s smile still made my legs wobble, even the good one.

“Oh, I’m fine.” The prototypical guy response. “Stiff, and I think I’ll stay off the skis for a few days. But I’m fine—and hungry. I’m glad you suggested this place. I think I need some serious protein.”

Annette laughed, and it was her first jibe. “We thought you could get a raw steak to put on the bruise—you know, like putting one on a black eye—in addition to getting a grilled one.” The thought of slapping a raw steak on my hip made me laugh, too.

I don’t know when a slab of beef ever tasted so good. Annette and I shared a bottle of Raymond Napa Cabernet—it turned out that Hal stuck with Perrier, without making a big deal of it—and the simple dinner of steak, baked potato, and salad was just perfect. We had a wonderful conversation that included a history of their relationship, how they had met on one of Annette’s cases involving a dead professor, the attempted hit on the two of them by professional killers and how Hal had out-driven them in his Audi, and fly-fishing. So Hal and I had yet another thing in common besides cars, skiing, and taste in women—and I had another thing to be jealous about. Durango’s proximity to first-class trout water made the little streams around Santa Fe, and even the Rio, seem like barren trickles.

I thought about all this in an extended fit of introspection—introspection without football announcers to distract me—while driving home Tuesday morning. It started with the grass-is-greener issue of better trout water up in Colorado. But that led to some kind of mental dam burst, and other issues came flooding out.

I had surprised myself in the brief conversation with Elizabeth Davidson the previous weekend with the realization that I’d spent over twelve years in Santa Fe. And even though the ski area was less than half an hour up the hill from my house, as ski areas go it was small—of course, just about anything would seem small after skiing Telluride. My only real emotional tie to Santa Fe, the relationship with Alex, had come unraveled. The friendships I had with the guys in the BERT were pretty much focused on BERT activities, and I could join an emergency rescue team anywhere. I liked my position at the Institute, but sometimes I felt as if they just barely tolerated my presence—it wouldn’t do for them to piss off someone who donated a post-doc’s worth of funding each year. And wouldn’t it be nice to *earn* professional respect from them, or anyone, rather than buying it?

Sure, I told myself, Santa Fe is a OK place to live—great climate (except for the water problem), great people (except for the crime problem and the nepotism that pervades just about everything), outstanding restaurants and cultural activities (but pricey). On the other hand, there are other places that are nice as well, maybe nicer. Had I become too comfortable in my little Santa Fe rut?

And there was the larger issue of New Mexico as a third world country, something that had always bothered me, but something that living in Santa Fe disguised reasonably well. It was brought home to me once again as I drove south from Chama. In most parts of the country, little rural towns are friendly, safe places. But north of Santa Fe, all of the houses and stores in the little villages sported bars on the windows and doors and an unseemly number of razor-wire-topped fences. And the sense of uncivil civilization got worse as I finally reached the villages on the north end of Española, the little valley town just north of Santa Fe. Poverty in the desert in the winter was just flat-out pathetic.

Maybe, I thought, it was time for a change.

* * *

But real life confronted me when I got home around noon. My garage-door opener let me in the house, and I found new keys on the kitchen counter, left there by the locksmith. The mailbox was full, as I had forgotten to stop delivery, and my bird feeder was empty. I could feel the accusing stares of the jays and juncos watching me as I trudged around in the snow to fill it.

And snow there was. Apparently, it had been falling off and on since I'd left last Thursday. Once again, my choice of a house with a south-facing driveway paid off—even a little daily sunlight melted it clean.

After avoiding it for as long as I could, in mid-afternoon I finally put in a call to the Nimbies. Detective Orlando Aguilar seemed almost happy to hear from me.

“I understand from the Senator’s people that you’ve been out of town for a few days, Mr. Livingston. Up in Colorado?”

“Yeah, the Senator asked me to look into some things for him. I hope you haven’t been trying to get hold of me?” I was just being polite, because I knew he hadn’t left any messages.

“Do I understand that you are now employed by the Senator?” A certain edge crept into his voice.

“Me? Not hardly. Just doing a favor for someone whom I respect a lot. Have you folks made any progress on the death of his daughter? Last time I talked with him he was, naturally, still concerned about it.” I’m a firm believer in the concept of the best defense being a good offense.

There was a long pause. “Mr. Livingston, you can be sure, and so can the Senator, that we’re doing all we can. It would help if you were more cooperative, I must say. Such things as keeping that cell phone you found from us don’t help.” It appeared that he believed in the same concept.

“We’re both after the same thing, I think, although maybe for different reasons. The truth about what happened to Elizabeth, I mean. I’m sure it will help both our causes if we share information. I’d be curious to know, for example, why you got a warrant to search Ms. Hall’s house and if you found anything relevant.” I was trying to be polite but not to back down.

“And we would be quite interested in what you found in Colorado.” And so was he.

“Perhaps we should get together and discuss our respective progress. I’m back in Santa Fe, so I’m at your disposal.”

“How about if we meet somewhere to talk? I’ll bring my chief investigator. I’ve got a team full-time on this now.”

Which is how I was introduced to Angie, as I came to call her later. Like I said before, I don’t know if I’m a lonely guy in denial; or maybe I just have a thing for female cops. But meeting Angie washed Annette completely out of my hair, to paraphrase an old Broadway song. And, best of all, Angie wasn’t wearing any rings.

I suggested we meet at a restaurant I knew about, a place that would be fairly empty at that time of day. Mucho Gusto is a little hole-in-the-wall place, opened by the chef of the Old Mexico Grill when that Santa Fe stand-by closed, and I was glad that Aguilar knew where to find it and agreed to it. Rather than the standard Northern New Mexico cuisine served all around town, they had dishes that are more traditional south of the border. I liked Horseman’s Haven for getting my sinuses cleaned out, at least via food, and Mucho Gusto for such things as paella and grilled salmon with unique salsas. And they had truly remarkable barbecued ribs.

But that afternoon, I was busy being entranced by Aguilar’s chief investigator, Detective Angela Espinosa. I talked, but I don’t remember if I made a fool of myself or not.

I do remember that I told them that Derek Davidson couldn’t have murdered Elizabeth, because he was in Telluride at the time, and that he had probably been murdered while I was in Telluride, even though it was set up to look like suicide. And that it was possible that Elizabeth was killed either by someone Davidson hired or by whoever killed Davidson, although that theory needed to take into account the very different methods the killers used.

And Aguilar told me about the car I had seen and told his people about, the one in the ski area parking lot the day we hauled Elizabeth’s body out. Numerous phone calls had eventually identified it as her rental car, out of a franchise at the Albuquerque airport. And that they’d obtained the search warrant for Alex’s place because she wasn’t responding to their requests for an interview. Beyond that, however, there wasn’t any useful information, or at least he wasn’t telling me if there was.

They asked a lot of questions, playing “good-cop, bad-cop,” with Angela, bless her heart, as the good one. It seemed a natural fit, mostly because I couldn’t imagine Aguilar in any other role than the bad one.

After being whip-sawed for a while, I realized that they were just asking the same old questions again, the ones I’d already addressed in my original statements to Aguilar. So I had a great idea.

“Detective Aguilar, it’s occurred to me that these questions are covering a lot of old ground, stuff that you and I have discussed before. Maybe it would be better if I just started at the beginning and told Detective Espinosa the whole story. Then she’ll have the complete picture, at least as far as I know it, and she can ask questions as they come up.” I looked pointedly at my watch and at Angela. “And besides, it’s getting on toward dinner time. I haven’t eaten since breakfast, and that was in Telluride. Why don’t we order some real food instead of just these chips?”

It was so reasonable, I guess, that Aguilar had to go along with the idea, and Angela clearly wanted to hear the whole story. Aguilar finally decided he didn’t need to hear it again, so he left us to it. And there I was, having dinner with another entrancing young lady.

I found out later that Angela’s family had been in Santa Fe for over 300 years. Her appearance reflected her family’s inevitable mixture of bloodlines—her aquiline Spanish nose tucked between high Native American cheek-bones accented her deep brown eyes, and her rich black hair, pulled back into one of those severe, no-nonsense buns, framed everything beautifully. I couldn’t help but wonder how that hair would look when it was let down.

I ordered the barbequed lamb tacos, served on soft wheat tortillas, another of the chef's unique specialties. She decided on the daily special, a paella, which they served as a rice and seafood soup, quite spicy. And we talked.

I told her the whole thing, including my encounter with Elizabeth before we found her body and my work for Senator O'Malley. She asked lots of questions about Telluride—the good-cop, bad-cop routine hadn't gone beyond my brief summary—and I didn't hold anything back, except for the 24 hours with the brokerage secretaries.

“The thing is,” I was trying to summarize while working on dessert, a flan, “the farther I've gotten into this, the more motivated I am to get it figured out. At first it was just feeling sorry for Elizabeth, and for her father. Davidson was a convenient villain there, for a little while, but now he just seems like another victim. But his death may not be related to Elizabeth's. It may even be that hers was purely an accident.”

“Unfortunately, it's got to the point that we're going to have to prove that it was an accident, if that really is the case. Or, putting it differently, we'll have to prove that it wasn't murder.” Even her voice was entrancing.

I smiled as friendly a smile as I could. “Ah, yes, the old prove-a-negative conundrum. How do you prove all crows are black? By proving there are no non-black crows? I'd say we have quite a challenge here.”

She laughed and tossed her head. “Well, with you working for the Senator and me for the Governor, how can we fail?”

“I'm not sure, but I know we'd better not. And we can probably make sure we don't by working together.”

That, I thought, would make staying in Santa Fe worthwhile indeed.

* * *

Ten

Wednesday morning, I went up to my office at the Institute for the first time in over a week, tromping a trench in the snow up the hillside. I'd kept up with the email, so that wasn't vying for my attention, and there wasn't any snail mail to speak of.

With nothing else demanding my attention, my introspection of the day before, particularly my realization that my position at the Institute might well be due entirely to my donations to the organization, came back to haunt me some more. Despite my best efforts to ignore it, I began wondering whether I was just taking up space, whether they were just keeping me around to humor me.

But I was diverted from that impending fit of self-doubt by a telephone call.

“This is New Mexico Republican Headquarters. Please hold for State Director John Kurkle.” The secretary's voice had that grating, nasal tone, and she sounded bored.

“No thank you.” And I hung up. It seemed unlikely that the Director of the New Mexico Republican Party would be wanting me to volunteer to run for office, but I had no reason to talk to him in any case. And waiting for him to come on the line just wasn't something I wanted to do. Let him call me himself, I thought.

It took about three minutes before the phone rang again.

“Mr. Livingston? This is New Mexico ...” It was the same nasal, bored voice, and this time I didn’t wait so long to hang up.

The thing that bothered me was that my opinion of State Director John Kurkle was about the same as my opinion of used-car salesmen, lawyers, and other con men. Why in the world the Republicans of New Mexico would keep electing him as their leader was something that I couldn’t understand, not that I really cared that much. But my uncle was a Republican, and, because he was the Governor, I had a connection to state politics whether I liked it or not.

The problem I had with Kurkle was that he was pit-bull mean. Sure, his job was to advance the Republican cause, and that usually meant doing so at the expense of the Democrats. But he was just plain mean, as nasty an individual as I’d ever come across.

I’ve read enough history to know that there has always been plenty of mud-slinging and other questionable tactics in American politics. But Kurkle took back-stabbing, personal attacks, and general unpleasantness to a new low, as far as I could tell. So I really had no reason to talk with him.

But after another five minutes, the phone rang yet again—this time it was the great man himself.

“Livingston? Why do you keep hanging up on Donatella? I need to talk with you. And don’t you dare hang up on me!”

“Excuse me? Do you have a wrong number? Is there some reason I should be intimidated by that sort of crap?”

He obviously wasn’t used to having his bluff called. “I’m calling Sanford Livingston, and if I have a wrong number, my apologies. It’s important that I talk with him, however, and I believe this is his number.”

“Why in the world would it be important for you to talk with me, Kurkle? Are the Republicans running short of funds, or something?”

“It *is* you. Good. Now you listen ...” Once again, I hung up. I figured that if he really did need to speak with me, he’d eventually be motivated to modify his behavior.

But he didn’t call back, so I went about my day. There was a seminar just before lunch that sounded stimulating, and one of my colleagues had left me a manuscript to review, something about fractal patterns in road networks. The heyday of papers dealing with fractals had passed several years before, but every now and then someone resurrected the idea as applied to yet another phenomenon. What I always asked the authors of these papers, and what I still wanted to know, was, so what? Sure, they’re a nice mathematical description of this and that and the other thing, but what does that tell us?

After the seminar, which I don’t remember at all, I was on my way home for lunch, slip-sliding down the trench I’d made earlier in the snow, trying not to fall on my bad hip, when my cell phone let loose. This time, I knew it wouldn’t be Alex waiting for me at home. Without a key, she wouldn’t bother to come by.

“Livingston here.”

“Son, glad I caught ya.” The Senator’s voice was becoming familiar and comfortable to me, like old slippers.

“Senator! Nice to hear from you. And you’ll be glad to know that the Nimbies have a crackerjack investigator on your daughter’s case. Not that guy Aguilar you met, but an Angela Espinosa.”

“Well, now, son, you be sure and remember that girls from old Santa Fe families take romance more seriously than secretaries from Los Angeles on vacation. Far more seriously.” That rumbling chuckle told me he was ribbing me a little.

But the words told me he was keeping close tabs on me, and once again I wondered what I’d gotten myself into, working for him. Before I could think of an appropriate rejoinder, though, he continued.

“But that’s not why I called. Son, I need a big favor.” He sighed. “I need you to call John Kurkle. And I need it so much I’ll even say please.”

I was taken completely aback. “With all due respect, sir, what’s he got on you? I mean, haven’t I read that you aren’t one of his big supporters?”

“Son, just between you and me, that’s true, more true than has been reported. Hmm. Let’s see, I guess I’ve been trusting you so far, so I might as well keep on. But don’t let this slip to anyone, hear? See, I’m being nice to him just now, even though I think he’s last summer’s pond scum. Next spring, at the party meetings, I’m going to see to it that he’s not re-elected to be state chairman, but I don’t want him to get wind of this now. So I’m being nice. And he called me just now and asked me—well, no, he actually demanded, more or less—that I make you call him. He seems to think you’ve been a tad rude to him.”

“‘Last summer’s pond scum,’ eh? Yeah, Senator, I think that’s a good description, actually. But I wasn’t really any ruder than he deserved. Um, did he suggest why he wants me to call him? I’ll feel better calling him if I know what it’s about.” Not arguing was a no-brainer, really. I didn’t want to say no to Saint Mike, at least not for something this trivial.

“That’s the funny thing. I wondered, too, so I asked him. And he didn’t want to say, didn’t even want to admit to not wanting to say. Ducked the question, even when I asked it again.” He sounded as puzzled as I.

“And I’m not even a registered Republican. I’ve been out of town and not really paying attention—has my uncle been acting up or anything like that?”

“Not that I’ve heard, son. Politically, things are real quiet just now, even in Washington, pretty much. We’re in recess, the White House seems preoccupied with Christmas decorations. Your uncle is behaving, for once. You don’t suppose it could have anything to do with Betsy, do you?”

“I suspect you’d know that better than I, Senator. Did he know Elizabeth? I mean, he must have run into her at party events, I suppose, but did he know her more than just casually? Uh, I’m not trying to suggest anything improper, you understand.”

“I do understand, son. But what you may not know is that he’s been chasing Betsy’s skirt ever since he met her, before she married Bill. And now that I think of it, he was pretty sour on that whole thing. And even worse when she ran off and married that jerk Davidson.”

“You don’t suppose ...”

“I don’t know what to suppose, son. But that’s why you’re on the job, right?”

“I guess so, sir. Me and the Nimbies, or at least Detective Espinosa.”

“Just you remember, son, what I said about girls from Santa Fe, especially ones whose families have been there for a long time. They’ve got strong tradition.”

What all, I wondered, did he know about me, anyway?

* * *

During the call from the Senator, I'd managed to slip and slide all the way home, and the prospect of having to call John Kurkle after lunch—I was glad that his number was on my office phone rather than at home—motivated me to indulge in a margarita, then two. Not the best thing to accompany a can of vegetable beef soup and crackers, but better than you might think. Especially the second one.

Sometime in the morning, the sun had come out, and by the time I was heading back up the hill after lunch, it was warming up and beginning to drip. The sunshine, the blue sky, and the white of the snow on the dark trees reminded me of one of the benefits of living in Santa Fe—its beauty. And my appreciation wasn't dampened at all even when a gallon or so of snow slipped off a tree branch onto my head—I just laughed. It's wonderful, what a couple of margaritas at lunch can do for a bad attitude. I resolved to try to carry that light-hearted feeling into the upcoming phone call.

But my resolve was strained to its very limits. Kurkle, apparently, felt that he had won some sort of victory and didn't hesitate to rub my nose in it. Knowing the Senator's strategy helped me, because I was able to keep telling myself that Kurkle was in for a big surprise come spring. But Kurkle had fun at my expense, too much fun.

I won't give him the satisfaction of repeating all of his oily gloating here; besides, I tuned most of it out. What refocused my attention on his commentary was the reason he wanted to talk with me.

“So, since you finally decided to call me, I assume that you're going to tell me what I want to know, right?”

“Well, I told Mike I'd call you, yeah. But I didn't commit to anything else.” He was consistent in referring to “Senator O'Malley,” and I thought maybe I could push his buttons with the informality. Not that I'd call the Senator by his first name in any other circumstance.

“Are you telling me that I have to call Senator O'Malley again, waste more of his valuable time getting you to behave? You need to learn to respect your betters, pal.”

“You know, Kurkle, it's interesting. Before I met him, I thought Mike was like any other powerful politician. But since I've come to know him, my respect for him has increased by several orders of magnitude.” I thought maybe that using technical jargon might also push his buttons a little. “So what is it you want me to tell you about, anyway?”

“I need you to tell me everything you know about the investigation of his daughter's death. Both what you've been doing and where the NMBI is. It's official business.”

“Whose official business?”

“I'm not at liberty to say.”

“Oh. Well, if it's official business, then you should make the request official, do it through the proper channels, don't you think? Call the NMBI, ask them for their records under the freedom of information act, or something like that. Conducting official business with a phone call to an unofficial person like me just doesn't seem to be the right way to go about it, you know?” I was trying to maintain as casual a tone as I could, but his request had set off all sorts of alarm bells in my head.

I was expecting an explosion of sarcasm and threats, but instead there was an uncomfortably long pause. Maybe, I thought, he's slowly counting to ten.

But when he spoke again, it was in a completely different tone, gentle, persuasive, and even polite. “And we have put in those official requests, Mr. Livingston, we have. But, you see, such official requests take time, and time is something we can't waste just now. I need to find out about the investigation immediately. It's really very important—it could have an enormous impact on Senator O'Malley's future, and the Governor's, too.”

“And you don’t see anything improper about demanding information about an active murder investigation? You don’t think that keeping the investigation uncompromised is a more appropriate course of action? That would seem to me to be the law-and-order approach to this. But, then, I’m not a lawyer.” It had occurred to me that I might be able to find out his real motivation if I could argue without seeming to.

“Mr. Livingston, Sandy—may I call you Sandy?—you can be sure that in any other situation I’d agree with you. If you know anything about me at all, and if you know anything about our party platform, you’ll know that we believe the first priority of government at all levels is protecting its citizens—and that means a strong defense abroad and an uncompromising stance against crime at home. And you can be sure that I’ll treat the information about this investigation with extraordinary care and discretion.”

“I’m sure you will, Mr. Kurkle. You have a reputation as a fierce political competitor, but you’re also known for your integrity.” As hard as that was for me to say, I knew that strokes, even hypocritical ones, would help me get information. “But I’m afraid that I just don’t see how what I know could be important to you, or the party, for that matter. And I feel bound by the agreement I made with the Senator.”

“I understand completely, Sandy. But if the Senator knew what I’m about to tell you, I’m sure he would agree that it’s appropriate for you to confide in me.” His oiliness was almost making my telephone feel slippery. “You see, there are people who are trying to use the Senator’s daughter’s death against him, and against the Governor, too. They want to exploit the situation to attack the Senator personally, and that would spill over onto the Governor, your uncle. It would make both of them suffer politically, which is the real agenda. But if I know the status of the investigation, I just may be able to stop it, I know I can. You see?”

What I saw was that he was feeding me a load of crap. We were engaged in a game of who could be more coy—and I realized I was playing against a master.

“I have to say, Kurkle, that I don’t see at all. You’re clearly not telling me the whole story. But, regardless of that, I don’t really know what to tell you about the investigation. Do you have specific questions for me? Maybe that would help me get started on the information you want.” I thought maybe I could get him off balance with a combination of directness and apparent motion toward his goal of pumping me.

“I understand you were part of the rescue team who found Elizabeth, or found her body, I guess. And then you disappeared for a few days. Where did you get off to?” His voice had changed from oily persuasiveness to eager anticipation, and I decided he probably really didn’t know I’d been up in Telluride.

So I decided that the whole truth wasn’t necessary. “Well, the Senator asked me to follow up on a rumor he had heard, something about Elizabeth’s new husband—what’s his name?—Derek Davidson, that’s it. So I drove up to Durango to talk with some people up there. The Senator wanted it done informally, and he thought having me do it would be a good informal approach.”

“And?”

“And I talked with them and found out that the rumor wasn’t true. See, the Senator had heard that maybe Davidson was in town the weekend Elizabeth died. But he wasn’t, he was up in Colorado.”

“That’s it? You were gone for almost a week.” He didn’t seem to realize he was telling me that he had been paying attention to my whereabouts.

“Well, yeah. It’s been snowing here, right? Up there, it snowed even more. I figured as long as I was up there, I might as well get some skiing in. Haven’t been able to do that here this year, and the opportunity was too good to pass up. Say, I haven’t been back long enough to check—did they open Ski Santa Fe yet?” I thought it might help my cause to keep him off balance with little changes of subject like this.

“Uh, I’m not sure. Anyway, when you got back, you went straight to the NMBI.” He was having me *closely* watched, I realized.

“They called me, actually.” My compunctions about altering the truth for his benefit were zero. “Demanded to see me, something about an inconsistency in the report I gave after the rescue operation. It turned out to be a misunderstanding on their part. And then they asked me about where I’d been because they couldn’t find me for those days I was in Durango. You know how they are, compulsive about details. But, look, I don’t understand. How does where I was this past week relate to anything that could affect the Senator’s political future?”

“One more thing—you went up to the ski basin last Wednesday, was that with the NMBI?”

“Right. They needed someone to show them where we found the body, so I took them up there. They noted the spot on a map and took a couple of pictures, probably bad pictures, because the weather was just awful. See, all of the other guys in BERT have jobs they can’t ditch easily, and I was the only one available. But, like I said, what does this have to do with the Senator’s future? It sounds to me like you’re just following me around. Hope it’s keeping you amused.”

“Very perceptive, Sandy, and you’re right, I have been, or my people have been. You see, the Senator’s enemies think he is running a separate investigation using you. They plan to go public with a story of how that separate investigation will be a cover-up of what really happened. This will damage the Senator’s credibility and hurt the party. See why I’m concerned with all this?”

I didn’t, but I did see that he concocted that story on the fly. “Oh. I guess. Well, I hope what I’ve told you will help head off trouble.”

“It will if you’re cooperating fully with the NMBI, because then the Senator is working with them. This other story will fall on its face.”

“You can tell everyone the Senator’s cooperating.”

* * *

If I managed to hide most of the truth from Kurkle, he managed to hide his true motivations, so I called it a draw. But it seemed probable that his interest could bear on the investigation, so I called the NMBI. It was a good excuse, at least, to talk with Angela.

“Detective Espinosa here.”

“This is Sandy Livingston, detective. I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

“Not at all, Mr. Livingston. What can I do for you? Oh. I also have another question, don’t let me forget, please.” Her voice made me think of her hair, how it would look unbunned.

“Maybe we should take your question first.”

“Good idea, then there’s no chance I’ll forget. I need to ask about your relationship with Alexis Hall, the woman whose house we searched.”

Alex was one topic I’d been hoping to avoid. We had talked about the search briefly the day before at Mucho Gusto, but I really didn’t want it to come up again. No luck, though.

“Well, we’ve been seeing each other off and on for a while. I think maybe we’ve decided it’s best to go our separate ways. At least I feel that way, and that’s the impression I’ve been getting from her. She told me she was at brunch with Elizabeth the Saturday I met her, I mean met Elizabeth.”

“Right. Do you know why Ms. Hall may have been at that brunch?” Her voice had an edge that worried me.

“She told me that she and Elizabeth went to college together, they were in the same sorority. Old friends. Apparently that also applies to the other people at the brunch, um, three other couples I think it was. The thing about Alex is, she’s what I’d call flighty, has five part-time jobs or so, isn’t reliable, doesn’t seem like the type to ever settle down. And she wants her own way all the time, instead of having the ebb-and-flow that a real relationship functions with. So we’ve gone our separate ways.” I hoped I didn’t sound as desperate as I was beginning to feel.

“I see. So what did you call me about, Mr. Livingston.” The edge was still there, and my desperation grew.

“About a very strange telephone conversation I just had, with John Kurkle, the Republican Party Director here in New Mexico.” I summarized the little contest over who could tell whom less real information.

“He wanted information on our investigation, eh? That’s very curious.” Her voice had softened, and I imagined that during the pause she was writing notes furiously.

“Mostly my investigation, if you can call it that. All I told him was that I went to Durango to verify that Davidson wasn’t here in Santa Fe the weekend before last and that I showed your people where we found the body. No details and nothing about Davidson’s death.”

“And he claims he’s trying to protect Senator O’Malley from some kind of political attack? And the Governor, too?” She sounded as skeptical as I felt.

“I think the business about the Governor was just to suck me in—the Governor’s my uncle. And the story about the Senator seems too thin to be believable. I’m afraid I don’t have a clue about Kurkle’s real agenda, though. Oh, but there’s one thing. The Senator told me that Kurkle was after Elizabeth, had been since before her first marriage—he used the phrase ‘chasing her skirt.’ So I suppose Kurkle could have the same kind of personal interest in the whole thing that the Senator does.”

“Mr. Livingston, you’re being too kind to the man.”

“Yeah, probably. Say, could you call me Sandy? Every time you call me Mr. Livingston, it takes me a second to remember that you’re talking to me. Everyone calls me Sandy, except maybe your boss, Detective Aguilar.”

“I’ll try, if you’ll call me Angela.” Progress! I thought.

“Thank you, Angela. Anyway, I try not to be too suspicious about people I dislike—and I can tell you that I think of Kurkle as last summer’s pond scum.” The Senator’s description seemed to me to be too good not to adopt, and it made her giggle. “But it could be that he has a more sinister motive in wanting to know about the investigation, I suppose.”

“You probably don’t have any idea of where he might have been on the Saturday that Elizabeth went up the mountain.”

“Sure don’t. And you’ve decided she went up on Saturday, not Sunday?”

“That’s our best estimate. The hotel where she was staying, the Eldorado, reported that her room wasn’t used Saturday night. Her belongings were left there, but the room wasn’t slept in.”

“Hotel room? Of course! You know, I told the Senator going in that I’m not an investigator, and he still wanted me to, um, to be his link to all this and to ask around on my own a little. Which is why I went up to Telluride. But this proves me right. I didn’t think of that. You’re the one who knows how to do this sort of thing, not me.”

“A lot of what we do in an investigation is detail work, stuff that you might not think of. Like the hotel. We called around until we found where she was registered. Never did find a key, though. Or her purse, either, which is a little strange.” Her voice was back to the friendly tone that had mesmerized me over dinner the day before. “And this business about Kurkle is something I’ll have to look into.”

There was a pause with the tapping of her fingers on a computer keyboard in the background, so I remembered a question of my own. “Angela? Yesterday, Detective Aguilar was pretty vague about the rental car, Elizabeth’s car. And you said you didn’t find her purse in it?”

“Oh, right. No purse or much of anything beyond the paperwork. But we did find suggestions that it had been broken into, by an expert or by someone with the key. Her fingerprints were all over it, like you’d expect, but a number of them were smeared or partly obliterated, like someone wearing gloves had been inside it, going over everything.”

“And there was no identification on her, either. The only thing was her phone, which I found on the ground. Strange.” Someone, I thought, had tried hard to cover this whole thing up.

Her typing had been continuing, in fits and starts, and when she spoke again she sounded excited.

“Hmm. Now this is something. Kurkle’s the state director, eh? It turns out he lives on the southeast side of Albuquerque, southeast of the University, and the state party office is on the northeast side, on Osuna. So he probably commutes to work across I-40 and north on I-25.”

“I guess. But ...”

“The call that got your guys, your BERT team, out of bed Monday morning and out looking for Elizabeth—it came from a pay phone, in the lobby of the Marriott on Louisiana. Which is right on Kurkle’s way to work, just off I-40.”

“I didn’t know there were pay phones anymore.”

“There aren’t, except for places like hotel lobbies. He could have stopped there and then continued on to work by any number of routes.” She was indeed excited now, even breathing fast.

I was astonished. “So you think Kurkle made the call? Wow. Well, I guess that would explain his call to me about the investigation. Is there a recording of it, the search-and-rescue call? Maybe I could recognize his voice or something.”

My mind was racing off in two separate directions. Kurkle’s making that call the previous Monday morning would certainly explain his interest in the case and, in my mind at least, make him a suspect. But it also seemed far-fetched to think that someone like him would be that deeply involved like this.

“We’ve got the recording here. I’d play it over the phone, except it’s not very good anyway and you should hear it over headphones. When can you come down here?”

I looked at my watch and did some arithmetic. The time that Aguilar had called me, I’d allowed ninety minutes, but Alex had shanghaied me so it took far longer.

“Give me forty-five minutes. Say, 3:30. I’ve got to go home and get my car.” The prospect of seeing Angela again got me moving—I knew I’d be there with time to spare.

* * *

Eleven

The ski area had opened, it turned out, and I decided to spend Thursday morning testing my sore hip. With the machine-made snow they had been working on plus the three recent storms, there was even a decent base with a top layer of new powder, all chopped up. Except for the fact that I'd spent several days skiing at Telluride, it would have been a good first day. As it was, Ski Santa Fe seemed tiny compared to what I'd quickly become used to. And short—I felt as if I spent as much time riding the short lifts up as I did skiing down the short runs.

Still, it was fun to be at my local area again. It felt like home, and my hip cooperated by complaining only a little. And the drive up and then back down gave me time to think about the previous evening.

I had made it home from the Institute to get my car and then all the way across town to Nimbie headquarters in record time, only to be shown to a waiting area, where I cooled my jets for the next hour. Angela told me later, amid profuse apologies, that she was called into a safety stand-down meeting at 3:30, just as I was arriving. It seemed that there had been several minor accidents that were all attributed to carelessness, and having a stand-down meeting was the stock answer for such things—she described it as the “Johnny threw a spit-wad and we all get detention” approach to management. Such meetings were mandatory, no exceptions, and I just had to wait.

But my having to wait had the silver lining that our meeting started later and ran into the dinner hour. So we went out again, this time to the Outback Steakhouse in the business park next to the Nimbie offices. Why in the world anyone would think a chain steakhouse was needed in Santa Fe, with all of its top-rated local places, is a mystery to me. But I was grateful it was there, because it made an easy and non-threatening choice for my second dinner with Angela.

We talked and ate, re-hashed the Kurkle phone call, and made plans to investigate it further. At the Nimbie office, I had listened to the recording of the search-and-rescue call that put BERT into action looking for Elizabeth, but I couldn't swear that it was Kurkle. The voice sounded muffled, and there were traces of some strange accent, but there were also inflections that reminded me of him. We decided to see if we could obtain another recording of him—he was always appearing on television talk shows to denigrate the Democrats—and do a computer analysis of the two to compare them.

I spent most of the time gazing into her beautiful eyes—a soft light brown, and lashes out to here—and trying to keep my end of the conversation professional. But eventually it drifted toward somewhat more personal areas, such as my day job. I talked about my fascination with the complexities of the weather. We agreed that the water shortage in Santa Fe wasn't going away soon, at least not unless the climate miraculously turned tropical or, of somewhat lower probability, the city council developed the good sense God gave a gopher and put a stop to the willy-nilly development of new subdivisions. We also agreed that gophers are rather stupid, as critters go.

And, best of all, we made plans to get together on a regular basis to keep the information related to the investigation flowing.

Thinking about this pleasant evening on my way down from skiing put me in the best mood I've been in a long time. Maybe, I started to think, Santa Fe isn't such a bad place after all.

Back down in the foothills, I pulled into the parking lot at the Institute, got out, and started the process of climbing out of my ski suit. It's one of those one-piece overall suits, a powder suit, as they're called, and I had it on over my work clothes, jeans and a button-down shirt. There was a jacket in the

back of the car—despite the warm sun, the December air was chilly. Just as I was wriggling out of the powder suit’s sleeves, I heard a voice behind me.

“You Livingston?”

I turned, the sleeves off but the two legs still on so that the suit was now dangling awkwardly behind me, to see a burly fellow in his early twenties, with a shaved head and tattoos on his neck, standing about ten feet away. His two companions had taken up flanking positions a few feet just behind and on either side of him. They were standing in what photographers call the “fig-leaf” position, a sort of parade-rest but with their hands clasped together in front. The posture doesn’t look at all relaxed, and it accentuates shoulder bulk. Even though they were wearing winter jackets, there was plenty of that bulk visible—all three of them looked like wrestlers.

I’ve seen enough movies to believe that this arrangement of three people means trouble. The rear hatch of my car was open, so before answering I sat down on the back of the car to get all the way out of my powder suit.

“I’m Sandy Livingston, yes. What can I do for you guys?”

“My name’s Jaime Espinosa.” He just let that hang there for a few seconds, and it gave me time to recall that Angela had mentioned that she had a brother who was overly protective of her. “And these are my friends. I want to talk to you about my sister.”

“Angela? She mentioned she has a brother. Good to meet you, Jaime.”

“I want to know what your intentions are.” As archaic as it sounded, it fit with what Angela had told me.

“And you probably want an honest answer, no bullshit, right?” He shot a suspicious look at me, but nodded. “Well, I just broke up with my girlfriend, and I’m available. And Angela’s a terrific young lady, in all respects, as I’m sure you’re aware, and I didn’t notice any extra jewelry on her ring finger. But, see, just now, we’re working on a case together. Did you hear about that woman who died up in the Sangres a week and a half ago? It was Senator Mike O’Malley’s daughter, and he asked me to look into certain aspects of it for him. Angela is the NMBI lead investigator. So we’ve teamed up. And, terrific young lady or no, I don’t believe in mixing business with, ah, other things. Right?”

By that time, I had my powder suit off and my shoes on. In the back of the car, there were two ski poles—ski poles with ice tips, sharp points designed to dig in—within easy reach. And I had been on the fencing team in college. So I just sat and stayed as relaxed as I could, under the circumstances, and smiled at him.

He squinted, and I could see his arms flexing under his jacket.

“I don’t want her hurt—me and my friends here don’t want her hurt. Understand?”

“Sure. But, look, with the training she’s been through she probably knows enough judo and karate to break my back, or whatever else she wants to break, if she needs to. I’m certain she can take care of herself. Not that she’ll need to with me, though, you know?” I kept smiling.

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Her last boyfriend dumped her and left the state, and I didn’t think she’d ever get over it. Also, it got my folks upset, and I don’t want that to happen again, either.”

“Oh. Well, we’d have to develop a personal relationship before anything like that would happen, and we’re nowhere close to that. I had dinner with her yesterday and Tuesday, and we talked business. Jaime, how do you think she’d feel if she knew you were here?” The question startled him, and his demeanor changed slightly to something a little less menacing.

But then the bluster returned. “She’d probably try to beat the shit out of me. But if you tell her, I’ll know it was you and come back and find you.”

“Jaime, come on. I already said that she’s a terrific young lady. I certainly want the best for her, just like you. I’m not some coyote on the prowl. And she’s probably a lot more resilient than you think. She’s also smart—I bet she learned a lot from that experience with the boyfriend that dumped her. Tell you what.” I fumbled in a portfolio that was in the back of the car. “Here’s my business card—I work here at the Institute. Phone numbers, email, everything. You can find me any time you want to talk about this. But you don’t need the extra muscle, and you don’t need to threaten me. All you have to do is tell me she’s upset, if that should somehow happen. And I’ll fix it, promise. I’m certainly not going to skip town, because I live and work here. It’s my home. Right?”

He began nodding slightly while he was looking over the card. “Yeah. And I just stopped by to let you know I’m concerned about her. I don’t want her in risky situations, emotional or otherwise.”

“Message received. But she’s a detective with the NMBI, for heaven’s sake. Seems like that puts her in situations a lot more risky than anything to do with me. And, say, that reminds me.” I paused and stared sharply at him and his two companions for a second. “This particular case has some possible risks. I don’t think they would involve Angela, because the sort of people we may be dealing with don’t like to go after law officers. But I may be. At risk, I mean. You guys need a job, by any chance?”

* * *

It turned out that they all had jobs, quite good ones in fact, as master carpenters in home construction. No doubt they were helping to fill up all those willy-nilly new subdivisions that Angela and I had discussed.

My question surprised them, though, and their curiosity got the better of them. What had made me ask was the possibility that either John Kurkle or someone associated with Derek Davidson’s murder could be trouble for me. It seemed as if it might be useful to have on call three bulky guys who knew how to stand around and look menacing.

I couldn’t really tell if they were flattered or scared to be offered jobs as hired muscle, but, whichever it was, they had fun talking about it. In the end, I wrote down Jaime’s cell phone number, and we agreed that I’d call him if something appropriate came up, meaning that all they’d have to do is put in an appearance and look tough. They weren’t sure at all about any greater level of involvement than that. Tito, the toughest looking of the three, with scars on his face and a missing front tooth, allowed that his wife might have something to say about it, if she were to find out.

Between that encounter and the morning of skiing, I felt as if I’d had a full day, and it was only about noon. But when I got into my office, I found voice mail waiting, from Angela and from the Senator—so the afternoon looked as if it was going to keep me busy, too. It seemed likely that Angela had additional information about Kurkle and that the Senator wanted to hear from me because I didn’t call him the night before. That dinner with Angela had lasted a long time, not that I’m complaining.

I called Angela first and got her voice mail, so I told her I’d call back later. Then I called Senator O’Malley. He had not heard any of the information about Kurkle, and I thought he would find that amusing, at the least.

“Well, son, were you able to bring yourself to do me that favor, to call Kurkle?”

“Yes, Senator, I did. And I think he’s now a suspect.” I explained what Angela and I had learned and what we were working on.

“Son, it’s hard for me to believe, but it’s also not hard for me to believe in some ways. You know?”

“I do, Senator. We’ll know more when we do the voice analysis. But there’s still one thing that’s puzzling me. The questions that Kurkle asked me seem to suggest that he’s been following me, or having me followed. I guess that makes him somewhat more of a suspect in my mind. But I can’t figure out how he got started on this with me, unless he started out by following you, or his guy did, and then I got picked up. Anyway, I’m confused.”

“It does sound confusing ... but, say, you know maybe I can find out a couple of things. I’ll need to make some calls and get back to you. Shouldn’t take too long, so don’t go anywhere.”

Because he used my cell phone number for his calls, it really didn’t matter if I went anywhere as long as I carried it around. So I walked down the hall to talk with the author of the fractal paper I’d been given to review. At the Institute, we try hard to follow the protocol of having papers reviewed locally before they are sent out to journals for the usual anonymous pre-publication review, because it means that we have better manuscripts out there in public. But it also means that we need to be careful about our reviews, because they’re not anonymous and often the authors are friends. Because I wasn’t very impressed with the fractal paper—to me, road networks just didn’t behave that way at all—I needed to draw on my reserves of diplomacy so I wouldn’t hurt his feelings.

I managed to get my concerns about the paper across and was saved from what appeared to be turning into an argument by my cell phone, which had been part of my strategy all along. The Senator and I conversed as I was walking back to my office.

“I think I’ve got it figured out, son, and I have to apologize. It’s partly my fault.”

“Senator, we were talking about whether John Kurkle is having me followed, or maybe doing it himself. How could that be your fault?”

“Well, son,” I heard a big sigh, “Now be patient with me on this, OK? When I asked you to help me understand what happened to Elizabeth, I did it without knowing very much about you or very much about what you’d get involved with. I wanted to make sure you didn’t get into any trouble on my account and, well, frankly I didn’t know how much I could trust you. So I pulled some strings and had some of your activities surveilled. Not all the time and not close up, just where you were and who you met with. That’s how I knew about the secretaries in Telluride.”

“I kind of figured, Senator. But Kurkle didn’t seem to know about that.”

“No, he wouldn’t. See, in having all this done, and it’s not that uncommon, really, I didn’t get into the details, never do. I just passed the word, back to Washington, in fact, and I knew it would happen. Well, it turns out that one of the ways it happens, in New Mexico at least, is through the party, through Kurkle’s office. He has operatives he can call on to watch people as needed. I don’t know whether he was watching you himself or who it might have been. But that’s why he’s asking those questions. He put two and two together and figured out that you’re looking into Elizabeth’s death. And, inadvertently, I put him onto it. Sorry.”

It felt strange, being apologized to by this most powerful of New Mexicans. “Interesting. And there’s really no need to apologize, Senator, although I expect you’d rather not do things inadvertently. But I view it as a good thing. After all, in a sense this has flushed him out of his cover. Maybe he’s not involved beyond your little errand of watching me, but, then, maybe he’s into things at some deeper level. That call to BERT about your daughter could have been him. And if it was, he’s got some serious explaining to do.”

“You’re right on that one, son. Tell you what. Since I’m here in Albuquerque, I can ask around personally and find out who’s been doing the watching. That’ll give us more information about his level of interest in all this.”

“Good idea, Senator. And in the meantime, I’ve started making my own plans in case push comes to shove.” I explained the arrangement I’d made with Jaime Espinosa and his two friends. And I was wrong—O’Malley hadn’t been amused by the situation with Kurkle at all, but this made him laugh out loud.

“See? What did I tell you about her family? But it sounds like you handled it perfectly, son. Good work. And, listen, don’t go getting those guys in any trouble, hear? Wouldn’t be fair to them.”

“Actually, Senator, I don’t plan to use them very much. If I employ them, then I have to pay them, and if I do that, then there’s the issue of taxes and so on. Even if I use that platinum card you got me to get cash to pay them, I’m not sure I’m comfortable with having records of all that in your office, both for your sake and for mine.”

“Hmm. Thanks for thinking of that, son. Beyond saying that, I guess I should have no comment, though. But, listen. As I recall, that card still has a ways to run before it expires. Why don’t you keep it on hand in case more expenses come up? No telling whether you might have to get up to Colorado again, or somewhere else, you know?”

“All right. But I won’t use it except for business related to this investigation.”

“Fine, son. And keep me informed.”

I’d made it all the way back to my office during the conversation with the Senator, and just as I was putting my cell phone away, my office phone rang.

“Sandy Livingston.”

“Sandy! Glad I caught you. It looks like it’s him.” Angela’s voice was more excited than I’d yet heard it.

“Him who?”

“Kurkle. At least it’s an eighty per-cent chance, according to the sound tech. I got a videotape of him from a TV station and did a computerized voice comparison with the phone call.”

“Interesting, especially in light of what I just heard.” I told her about the Senator’s comments.

“So this means he found out about your involvement in the investigation accidentally? No wonder he was pumping you for information. Was he the one following you?”

“We’re not sure. The Senator’s going to look into it. Listen, Angela. An eighty percent chance of a match is pretty good, but it’s not conclusive, right? I mean, you’re not going to be able to get a warrant with that, are you?” In weather forecasts, that kind of accuracy is something to celebrate, but I had the idea that in court, a good defense attorney would make it look like random chance at best.

“We really don’t have any basis for a warrant. Making a call to your search-and-rescue team isn’t against the law, after all. But it tells us where to focus our energy, right?” Her excitement hadn’t been dampened in the least by my caution.

“I guess that’s true enough. We know he has motive, and the phone call implies he knew she was up there, which suggests opportunity. Have you got a plan?”

“I’ve been thinking about one. How about we get together for dinner again and talk about it?”

She didn’t need to ask twice.

* * *

“Did my brother come and see you today?”

Of all the questions she could have asked me while we were waiting in the bar for our table, I can't imagine one that would have caused me more consternation. I hadn't promised Jaime not to say anything, but the rapport we had developed in our discussion earlier made me want not to. And I certainly didn't want to lie to Angela. So I waffled.

“Huh? Why?”

“He's not hanging around out there.” She gestured over her shoulder toward the parking lot across the street.

We'd met downtown at Pranzo, by Santa Fe standards a fancy Italian place in the Sanbusco Center. Despite the little plaque on the building, few tourists knew that the center's upscale-sounding name was constructed as a pseudo-acronym from its previous incarnation, the Santa Fe Building Supply Company, a lumberyard.

“Uh, you mean ...”

“I mean that the turkey's been watching my every move. At first I think he was worried that Lando was after me, but then you came along.” She had a fierce look in her eyes, and I could see why Jaime might be a little concerned for his health, especially because he probably wouldn't fight back.

So I waffled some more.

“You know, of course, that it's a well-known fact that Anglo guys like me have a thing for sexy Latina girls, that we just can't keep our hands to ourselves.” I winked at her and hoped my smile was just rakish enough to put her off balance a little.

No luck, though. “Hmmp. You've been doing pretty good so far, mister. And you're changing the subject—did Jaime come see you today? I swear I'll kill him.”

“Well if you're going to kill him anyway, then it doesn't matter if he came to see me, does it? Um, want a drink? You're out of uniform, so it should be OK, right?”

And out of uniform she was indeed, wearing high-heeled cowboy boots, tight jeans, and a wonderfully form-fitting v-necked cashmere sweater. With her hair down. Maybe I'd been doing a good job keeping my hands under control so far, but with her dressed the way she was, I was in for a real challenge.

She heaved a huge sigh. “Yes. Margarita, rocks, no salt, premium since you're buying, and a double. That turkey.”

“Oh, he's just being a brother, worrying. And I'll tell you about it if you promise not to do anything to him. He's afraid you'll beat him up.”

“When is he going to realize that I can take care of myself, anyway?”

“He did say something about being more worried about your emotional well-being than anything else.”

“Ha! If he and my Dad had their way, I'd be in some kind of weird arranged marriage. Or a convent. What do you think that would do for my emotional health, huh?”

“If it'll make you feel any better, I think Jaime and I are friends now, pretty much.”

“You mean he didn’t threaten to break you in two? Did he have Tito and Willy with him?”

“Yeah, and they’re going to work for me, if I need some hired muscle. Actually, Jaime didn’t threaten me, he just asked what my intentions are.”

“About me, I presume. I’ll kill him.”

“You want to know what I told him?” I was having trouble not laughing my head off, but I knew that would just turn the whole thing into a disaster.

“Well, if he didn’t break you in two, you must have told him something that’ll be a big disappointment to me, that’s for sure.”

If her initial question had been a source of consternation for me, this statement was a complete show-stopper. I think I probably sat and stared at her with my mouth hanging open for a good thirty seconds. Sometime in there, the waitress set a margarita in front of Angela and a Corona in front of me. Finally I found my voice.

“Angela, I have to tell you that the implications of that statement have me completely dumbfounded.” I shook my head to clear it and took a deep breath. “Anyway, what I told Jaime was that you and I are working this investigation together and I don’t believe in mixing business with other things. Of course, it’s business only for you; for me it’s more of a hobby. And you might also like to know that when I say I believe something, it doesn’t mean that the matter is closed or that my beliefs are set in stone.”

She looked at me, squinting, maybe trying to figure out what I’d said. Then she took a big gulp of her margarita.

“I guess if I can say off-the-wall things, you can, too. But you’re right about being careful about personal relationships in a business setting. And I’d say, let’s get this damned case cleared, then.” She smiled, and I could swear that her right eye actually twinkled when she winked at me. It must have been the lighting.

I managed to steer the conversation to less risky topics—Jaime would have approved, I think, even if Angela didn’t. We were finally shown to a table in the dining room and a server took our orders, the *osso buco*, a lamb version, for me and a linguine with grilled salmon in a light cream sauce for her.

Just as our salads arrived, my cell phone started up in my pocket, not something I wanted to happen in a nice restaurant like Pranzo. I excused myself and dashed for the door.

“Son, you there?” I had flipped it open to get the thing to shut up but not actually talked into it.

“Sorry, Senator. I needed to get clear of the dining room.” I’d stepped outside and was reminded of how cold it was by the goose-bumps that popped up on my arm.

“Yet another dinner with your favorite detective? Well, son, I’ve warned you all I can. Now, why I called was to tell you what I found out about our mutual friend John Kurkle. And I’m afraid that I was right—he wound up getting asked by my people in Washington to keep an eye on you. He did some of the surveillance himself and farmed some out to a bunch of college guys he pays as part-timers. I almost had him called off, but then I remembered what you said about its being a blessing in disguise.”

“Maybe I can think up something to amuse him. Set off on snowshoes up the Winsor Trail again, something like that.”

“Good idea—give it some thought. I’d better let you get back to dinner. G’night, son.”

I was grateful that the conversation was short, because of the temperature outside. And there was also the company inside I’d abandoned so abruptly.

As I walked back to our table, I saw Angela alternately poking at her salad and staring off into space. She smiled as I walked up.

I smiled back. “Sorry I dashed off like that. This damned phone always pushes my buttons somehow, like Pavlov’s dogs, and I know how I don’t like it when other people use theirs in restaurants and other quiet places. It turned out to be Senator O’Malley, though, so I’m glad I talked with him. He found out that Kurkle has been tailing me himself, at least some of the time.”

“I’ve been thinking.” Her smile grew. “Slowing down is a good idea. For one thing, it’ll give us both time to get blood tests.”

I’m sure she had fun watching my reaction—it probably progressed from a blank stare to surprise and a bit of shock, which I no doubt tried, but failed, to cover up with my natural savoir-faire and sophistication. Somewhere in there I sort of fell into my chair, knocking over my beer glass in the process. Fortunately, it was empty.

“Blood tests.” Hey, talk about a witty response! George Clooney, move over.

“Well, in this day and age, it just seems like a good idea. You know, HIV?”

I managed to stall for time by pouring the rest of my Corona into the empty glass. I had no doubts about its being a good idea—my last blood test had been back in graduate school before the stock market paid off for me, when I sold pints to the blood bank. I have trouble counting all the girlfriends since then—I can never remember if there were two Debbies or three. And, she was right, in this day and age...

“I guess I don’t even know where to get one.” I thought maybe that if I treated the topic as if I were, say, getting an oil change for my car, I would project maturity and wisdom—except I knew perfectly well where to get my car’s oil changed.

“That’s probably because you were in college in the mid-eighties. Ten years later, we all learned the drill, at least those of us smart enough to cast off our cultural shackles. I’ll get you a phone number tomorrow. And most medical labs do them, too, but not anonymously.”

“I had no idea things changed that much. But you’re right, it just wasn’t something we worried about. So, what’s the protocol? We compare each other’s results? Like ... I don’t know ... like exchanging report cards?”

“You can make fun if you want, but it’s deadly serious, literally.” She looked slightly peeved.

“I’m not making fun, honest. It’s just a new thing for me. Really. And you’re absolutely right—it’s serious and it’s a good idea. Um, it’s just that I keep thinking about the motivation.” I couldn’t help but grin, and it made her grin back.

“Oh, you mean having SEX?” Her emphasis on the last word was enough to make people at nearby tables turn and look. And this, combined my discomfort, made her burst into laughter.

I was deeply grateful that the arrival of our entrées rescued me.

* * *

Twelve

She stuck to her guns, about slowing down, I mean.

Even after a second double margarita and an after-dinner *grappa*, at which point she was becoming dreamy-eyed and talking with a little slur, she didn't relent. Not that I pushed on her, mind you, because the slow-down strategy suited me, too. I think that Senator O'Malley's warnings must have sunk in.

She was certainly in no condition to drive, but she told me she'd expected to wind up that way and had come in a cab. So I drove her home, to a casita that was the guest house of a good-sized adobe on East Palace, just before it ends at Alameda. She told me she'd found it by accident one day when she was doing interviews for an investigation in the neighborhood. There was a small "For Rent" sign in a window, and when she found out she could afford it, she couldn't pass it up. Her family was upset that her finding the casita meant she'd have to move out of the family compound in Agua Fria, and that's when her brother had started watching her like a hawk. But even so, having her own place with its greater degree of independence was well worthwhile.

Her comment about her brother made me invent an excuse to turn down her invitation to come inside for a cup of coffee. I'm not sure, but I think she was relieved.

After watching in through her door, I kept going east onto Alameda and then turned north on Gonzales to head up to my part of town. The hill up the first block or two is steep, straight up the Cerro Gordo ridge, and I used my allroad's turbos to good effect, accelerating hard all the way up. Then, just over the crest, I killed my lights, turned on to a little side street, and made a quick U-turn. All the talk about Angela's brother and, earlier in the evening, about John Kurkle and his college-student watchers had made me paranoid, I guess.

There's nothing like positive feedback. It works for behavior modification and is a wonderful technique for training pets and children—reinforce the behavior you're seeking, and they learn fast. It's also effective in other ways, such as reinforcing paranoia. When the bad things you're so worried out turn out to be true, well...it reminds me of the old Henry Kissinger quote "even a paranoid can have enemies."

The bottom of Gonzales Road, under the trees, had ice and compacted snow on it from the recent storms, and I had felt my allroad's all-wheel-drive scrambling its way up the hill, using all four snow tires to get a grip. Almost any other vehicle, I thought, would require more care and time to get going, and then the steep part of the hill would slow them down, too. So I waited patiently, parked in the dark on the side street, to see if anyone else was coming.

It probably took less than a minute, but eventually someone did—without lights. It looked like a customized version of one of the small Japanese sedans, the type of car you see a lot around Santa Fe and Albuquerque. It roared by where I was parked, making that sort of high-pitched putt-putt noise caused by an overstressed four-cylinder engine exhaling through a fat after-market tailpipe. I pulled out a block behind him, leaving my lights off.

That section of Gonzales, although paved, has a 25-mph speed limit because of its residential character and a couple of deceptive curves. Mr. Putt-Putt was flouting the speed limit and without his lights he seemed nervous about the curves. Between the moonlight and the brake lights that kept flashing on and off, following the noisy little car was easy.

He blew the stop sign at Hyde Park Road, making the quick right-left zig-zag that put him on the north part of Gonzales, where it turns into a narrow, gravel lane. That's the dusty way to get to my house, and my suspicions grew. I also wondered if he could maintain control on the hill down off the main ridge, given the speed he was carrying.

Feeling clever, I used my transmission to slow down at the stop sign and do what we New Mexicans think is good enough—a low-speed rolling not-stop. That also kept my brake lights off, a ploy I thought would be useful if the people ahead were looking back.

I'd been trying to guess who it could be. One possibility, Jaime Espinosa, with or without his friends, seemed unlikely. For one thing, Jaime, Tito, and Willie had met me in the Institute's parking lot in a pickup truck—it had been parked behind the three of them when they were standing in the triangle looking tough. It was customized, but it wasn't a little sedan. For another, I thought Jaime would stop following me after Angela's place. Surely, as soon as he saw her get out of my car and go inside alone, he would have quit worrying, at least for this night.

Another possibility, John Kurkle, didn't make much sense, either, as he wouldn't be driving a car like that. I was betting that he drove one of those super-sized SUVs, maybe even a Hummer. He seemed like the type to need such a symbol of enhanced manhood.

That left either Kurkle's minions, the college students that the Senator told me about, or someone associated with Derek Davidson's murder. I couldn't decide which would be the lesser of evils. Mob hit men would be harder to deal with than college students, even football players—although I wasn't entirely sure about Young Republicans. At least, I thought, you could probably reason with mob hit men.

I let my car coast in second gear down the hill on the narrow part of Gonzales and watched the sedan's brake lights signal its route. When it passed my driveway without slowing significantly, I felt my heart-rate moderate a bit.

Instead of following them—they seemed to have gone straight onto Paseo del Sur instead of turning left to continue on Gonzales (another bit of Santa Fe street trickery)—I turned into my driveway and pushed the garage-door button on the visor. The house was greeting me with its lights on, because I have timers set to make it look occupied when I travel, and I relaxed a bit more when the garage door opened. I even used the brakes. Once inside the garage, when I shut the garage door, the feeling of relief was joined by one of stupidity—to think someone was tailing me like that, really! At least, I thought, I was alone, and no one else would ever have to know about this little fiasco.

But the relieved and stupid feelings both vanished when I walked into the kitchen from the garage.

“Ah, Mr. Livingston. You're finally home. And how nice of you to have left the lights on for us.”

The speaker was seated on a stool at the breakfast counter. I couldn't help but notice the automatic handgun—with a very long barrel, which looked like a silencer to me—on the counter near his right hand. And his companion, seated on one of my dining-room chairs in the corner across the room, was also hard to miss. The chair was turned facing the corner, but he was facing the room, with a full view of everything.

They were both dressed in black, jeans, sweaters, gloves, and watch caps, and the guy in the corner had dark glasses on. And both wore full sets of facial hair, neatly trimmed. They looked vaguely Middle Eastern to me, small and wiry, olive skin, but missing the high cheekbones of the local Northern New Mexico natives. There was a trace of an accent, neither the local melodic Spanglish inflection nor anything Semitic, but rather faintly British.

If it hadn't been for the handgun—and it immediately occurred to me that they both probably had them, although I saw only one—I might have dashed back into the garage for a weapon. The machete that I use for trimming the chamisa bushes was hanging on the wall just over by the ski rack. But instead, I just stood very still and tried to sound as calm as I could.

“You gentlemen have the advantage of me, obviously.”

“Yes, that's true, isn't it? Well, you can call me Mr. Smith and my colleague over there is Mr. Jones. We're here to talk with you.” His little smile was ingratiating, not unlike the expression many of the local shopkeepers use sometimes.

“No offense, but usually when people want to talk with me they don’t have suppressed automatics at hand. And I don’t know quite what you’d want to talk with me about that requires the timing and your breaking into my house. I mean, you could have just called me.”

“You have information we need, Mr. Livingston. And the timing is unfortunate, I agree. I assure you, however, that our skills are such that your home hasn’t suffered any damage from our presence. And neither shall you, if you choose to cooperate.” The smile widened slightly.

“I don’t see any reason not to. But, look, I just got home from a long evening in a restaurant. How about if I take off my coat and then use the bathroom? Uh, I had tiramisu for dessert, and it seems to have gone right through me. I’ll be in much better shape to answer whatever questions you have if I can get comfortable. And much less accident prone.”

A friend of mine once told about this little problem with tiramisu—the sweet rich cream combined with the coffee and rum had an instant laxative effect on him, on a first date with the woman of his dreams, no less—and it seemed like a good way for me to buy some time to think.

Mr. Smith’s smile remained, but his eyes hardened in suspicion. “I suppose that’s not an unreasonable request, now, is it? But I’m afraid that we’ll have to be a little careful. Why don’t you tell Mr. Jones where you want to go, and he can precede you? And I’ll follow.”

Tossing my coat on a chair in the living room as we passed through, I pointed the way to the master bath, which Mr. Jones checked carefully, as if I would have a stash of rifles in the shower, or something.

Eventually they left me alone in there. I’d warned them to be a little patient and turned the exhaust fan on before I closed the door, so I’d earned myself a few minutes of privacy with enough noise to mask any sounds I might make.

What I’d been thinking about ever since I concocted the tiramisu story was the stash of Alex’s sleeping pills, high-strength Seconal and something called Mebaral, that was still in my medicine cabinet. One of the Seconal pills, I remembered, knocked Alex out for the night, and she was among the more drug-tolerant people I knew.

* * *

While making preparations, I flushed the commode three times for effect and made a lot of splashing noises while I washed up. In the meantime, I’d crushed up four of Alex’s Mebaral tablets and emptied the powder from a half dozen of her Seconal capsules into a little portable pill box I normally use for taking vitamins on short trips. It’s small and flat, like one of those old, metal aspirin boxes that you can never get opened without spilling the pills all over the place. Slipping the little box in my waistband behind my belt buckle, I went out to deal with my two visitors.

Mr. Jones, dark glasses and all, was waiting for me in the bedroom, and he patted me down briefly before following me out into the living room, where Mr. Smith was looking over my bookcase. The pat-down missed the pillbox, to my great relief.

“Feel better, Mr. Livingston? Good. Now, I suggest we all make ourselves comfortable while you tell us everything you know about Elizabeth O’Malley Prince Davidson.” He still had that ingratiating smile, but his eyes weren’t quite as hard as before.

“Everything? Well, that could take a while. Is there something in particular you’d like to know?”

“We’d like to know the truth, Mr. Livingston. You see, we already know some things, and if you tell us everything, we’ll be able to compare what you tell us against what we know—a useful check on whether you’re being truthful. So, yes, everything.”

“OK. But as I said, it’ll take a while. If we’re going to get comfortable, how about if I make some coffee? I’ve got an espresso maker in the kitchen. You can watch, of course. And, um, I won’t need a knife or anything, so I don’t think there’s any reason for you to worry.” I was succeeding reasonably well in maintaining a casual detachment, I think.

“My goodness, Mr. Livingston. What a thoughtful host you are.” Mr. Smith looked a question at Mr. Jones, who nodded slightly. Apparently, his search of me hadn’t raised any suspicious. Also, I think the dark glasses were putting him to sleep, and a dose of caffeine probably sounded appealing to him.

In the kitchen, they watched my every move. First, it was the coffee beans. They wanted an explanation of why I keep two jars, dark-roast and light-roast. I told them that the light-roast was for regular coffee, like what I make for breakfast, while the dark-roast was for espresso—completely true, as far it goes. But what I didn’t tell them was that the dark-roast beans were decaf.

Then they had to inspect the cabinet where the espresso maker resides. Mr. Jones even took it out and put it on the counter for me. After that, they wanted to know what was in the sugar bowl, so I ate a spoonful to prove to them it wasn’t rat poison, or whatever they were worried about. And all the time I was keeping my belly pressed firmly against my belt buckle to hold the pillbox in place. It made talking normally a little difficult.

Eventually, though, they seemed satisfied and took up their original places in the kitchen, Mr. Jones in the corner facing the room with a chair-back protecting him—he was now fiddling with his handgun—and Mr. Smith on a stool at the counter with his automatic close at hand.

When I was a kid, I was fascinated by magic. At first it was because I really thought there was such a thing, and then, even after I learned it was only sleight-of-hand and diversion of the audience’s attention, it stuck with me. As an adult, if that’s an accurate description of a forty-ish bachelor who has never really grown up, I’ve found that the old tricks are still great fun at parties. And my nephews and nieces think they’re extremely cool—I am definitely their favorite uncle. Pulling a dollar coin out of a kid’s ear and then giving it to him or her is a guaranteed way to make a friend.

But this little episode of making Mickey-Finn espresso was the first time that the old sleight-of-hand tricks were of any real, practical use. I managed to turn my back on Messrs. Smith and Jones to fumble with the espresso maker and, in the process, I slipped about a third of the Mebaral/Seconal powder into each of the three cups. Then I set them—regular teacups, with double-shots of doped-up espresso in each—onto the counter by the sugar bowl, on the opposite side of Mr. Smith from his automatic. They each took a taste and made a face. Smith commented on the bitterness and started adding sugar, stirring the concoction well. I made excuses about the dark-roast beans and how the espresso maker puts out strong stuff while Jones and I followed suit. I kept stirring and then pretending to sip, but mostly I was talking.

While making the espresso, I’d begun an introductory patter on everything I knew about Elizabeth. In the time-line of what I knew about her, it was just about when I got to the start of the BERT expedition where we found her body that they started drinking the espresso.

And it was just about the time that I talked with Senator O’Malley about working the case for him that they began yawning. I’d been careful to turn my little lecture into as much of a drone as I could manage in the meantime, using a soft, soothing voice, answering questions slowly, carefully, and pedantically. I don’t think I’ve ever been so boring, even in my most technical seminars.

I was a little concerned that when they felt themselves becoming sleepy they might get suspicious and do something untoward, like shoot me. But it worked out just fine— somewhere on my way to Telluride, Mr. Smith started snoring and Mr. Jones leaned his head back onto the wall and dropped his automatic on the floor.

One advantage of being a do-it-yourself homeowner is having all sorts of gadgetry around—my garage includes a workshop with a ridiculous array of tools and parts. After donning a pair of disposable latex painter’s gloves and relieving the dozing duo of their armaments, which I stashed in a cupboard, I scrounged up several of those large, plastic zip-ties that the police now use as disposable handcuffs. My stock on hand was for bundling landscaping materials, but they were strong enough to use on people, too.

So it wasn’t too long before I had a pair of sound-asleep mystery goons tied up on the floor of my kitchen. I’d bound their wrists and ankles and taken the additional step of strapping Mr. Smith’s left leg to Mr. Jones’ right wrist and vice-versa. They looked quite cozy.

Then I examined the meager contents of their pockets. Mr. Smith had a small role of currency, but nothing else. Mr. Jones also carried cash, and he had a plastic motel-room key and a driver’s license, along with car keys labeled “Avis,” as well—and, according to the license, his name really was Jones, William Jones, of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. But even with his dark glasses off, he looked like a William Jones about as much as my grandfather, Sanford Gentry Livingston, Jr., looked like an Abdullah Mohammad.

Car keys implied a car, so I put on my coat and went looking. It took some time, but eventually I found that they’d parked a couple of blocks away, down at the curve where Gonzales Road magically morphs into Vallecita Drive, a spot where teenagers park and drink beer, if the tossed-about empties are any indication. Still with the gloves on, I drove the rental back to my house and parked it in my driveway.

At that point, I wondered what next steps I should take. It was about one in the morning, but I was far too pumped up to sleep, despite my snoozing guests. I really didn’t want to have to interrogate them myself. Maybe, I thought, Angela would be sobered up.

Her phone rang through to her answering machine, so I started over. It took four tries, but I finally woke her up.

“What? Jesus, what time is it? Who is this, anyway?”

“Angela, it’s Sandy. I’m sorry to wake you up, really. But I’ve got a situation here. How are you feeling?”

“Not as good as I was earlier, that’s for sure. Ugh. What situation?” She was struggling to be sober and alert, but I could tell it was a close thing.

As I explained my little adventure, though, she fought her way through her impending hangover and, by the time I had the rental car in my driveway, she was ready to rock.

“You shouldn’t have moved the car, Sandy. And I’m glad you weren’t hurt. You say they’re out?”

“Sleeping like babies, should be for several more hours. And they’re well secured anyway. I hope I didn’t cut their circulation off with the zip-ties.”

“Give me ten minutes ... no, make it fifteen. You’ve got a computer, right? Does it have a scanner?”

“One of those all-in-one scanner, printer, fax machine things, yeah.”

“OK, good. And you’re probably hooked to the internet. Listen, here’s what’s going to happen. I’ll get there shortly, but I might not be first. I don’t know who’s available, but I’m calling for help, so don’t be surprised if someone else shows up first. In uniform, I’ll make sure.”

“So you’re coming over? You know where I live?”

“I am, and you bet I do. I always know where guys live before I suggest mutual blood tests. See you soon.” At that point, she’d sounded almost chipper.

It’s amazing how a little adrenalin in the system can fight off a hangover.

* * *

In preparation for my middle-of-the-night visitors, I made a pot of real coffee, extra strong and without additives, and turned on the outside lights. Most of my neighbors are part-timers, people whose houses in Santa Fe are used maybe three weeks a year. I wasn’t worried about disturbing anyone.

True to her estimate, Angela arrived about fifteen minutes later, hair in her severe bun, wearing a crisply pressed tan uniform and carrying a large briefcase that turned out to be full of investigator’s toys.

Before she opened it and got to work, though, she walked up to me, threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me in the most thorough fashion I think I’ve ever experienced.

“There!” She smiled and panted a little along with me. “I wanted to do that before, but I was a little too sloshed to remember to.”

“Oh. Well, um, feel free, anytime. Yum. You taste good.”

“Yeah, well, I feel pretty lousy, although that perked me up some. So these are your two friends, eh?”

But I wasn’t ready to move on to them just yet. “You sure you don’t need more perking up? You look like you just might.”

The second kiss was more tender, gentle and exploring, clinging, turning eager toward the end. Eventually she pulled back and rested her head on my chest.

“Sandy? You took a big chance with these guys. They could have killed you.”

“The only time I worried, really, was when they were getting sleepy. I thought one of them might react badly. But they just dozed off. And I had to do something. I think they were going to find out what they wanted me to tell them and then kill me anyway.”

“I suppose. I’m sure glad you’re OK, though. So, maybe we should get on with it?”

“Uh ... you mean with us? Or with them?” But she was saved from having to answer me by the doorbell.

“That’ll be Lando. Do me a favor and wipe the lipstick off, OK?” She walked off toward the living room to get the door.

The rest of that long night was busy. Even though Orlando Aguilar was Angela’s boss, he pronounced the situation to be her case and put himself at her disposal. She immediately sent him off with the motel key to the Santa Fe Inn to find out what he could about our two captives. Perhaps, she thought, there would be identification in their room.

And then she opened her briefcase. The first order of business was fingerprints, which she scanned into my computer and transferred to a server at the NMBI office. Then she worked some magic and got into the NCIC database and some other places.

Fifteen minutes later she found them, and it was strange.

“Look at this, Sandy. You’ve got two Saudi Arabian computer salesmen tied up on your floor. Says here they once had tourist visas and were part of some kind of exchange thing set up by the State Department. But that was four years ago.”

“Why in the world would the Saudi Arabian computer salesmen want to know about Elizabeth?” I was even more mystified than I’d been before, when they were just two anonymous goons.

“I’d like to know that, too. Did they ask about anything in particular?”

“They just wanted me to tell them everything I know. So they could check on whether I was telling them the truth, they said.”

“That means that something you know, or know about, is important to them. Must be that they’re not really computer salesmen. This is pretty weird, Sandy.”

“Very weird. And it means that there’s more to Elizabeth’s death than we’ve been thinking, right? And maybe to Davidson’s, too.”

“Could be. Let me see what else I can find. Do I smell coffee?” She went back to the computer, and I played waiter.

It took her another half hour, but then she found some files buried deeply in the computers of the Department of Homeland Security. By then, my adrenalin was wearing off, and I was wanting sleep.

“Sandy? Look at this. Here’s a terrorist bulletin. It identifies these two by name, a bunch of names, actually, and here are their fingerprints and some passport numbers.” She clicked on a link to another site. “They’re on a watch list. It says to call this counterintelligence office at the FBI if they’re identified in the U.S. And they’re not from Saudi Arabia, they’re from Syria and they’re connected to the Hezbollah terrorist group.”

“Hmm? In the country? So should we call the FBI? You’d lose control of things at that point, right?” I yawned, and she got a great view of all my dental work.

“Now you’re the one who needs perking up.” She smiled and came over to sit by me on the couch.

“You seem to be pretty good at that. Hope I did as well.” I yawned once more, but then she kissed me again and the sleepiness went away.

“You did great. But Lando will be back any time, I bet. And you’re right. We call in the Feds and we lose control. But we’ll have to see what Lando finds. If it’s their real passports, any of those I saw listed, well, we’re stuck. But if all we know is that they’re Smith and Jones, I think we’ve got some wiggle room.”

“Mmm. Speaking of wiggle room ...” I wiggled my way down into the couch, and leaned my head on her shoulder. “What we need to do is to have some time alone with these guys after they’re awake. Maybe get Senator O’Malley involved. What do you suppose they think I know?”

“Got me. Sandy? Is there anything about this business with Elizabeth you haven’t told me? Because nothing you’ve told me seems like this big of a deal, that two guys from Syria who once pretended to be Saudi Arabian computer salesmen would want to question you, I mean.” She leaned her head on mine while I considered what to say.

“The only thing I haven’t talked about is what I did in Telluride last Saturday, the day before I found Davidson’s body. But that couldn’t have anything to do with tonight, these two goons, I mean.”

“So tell me, and maybe I’ll see it from a different angle.”

I paused to think about what to say.

“When were we introduced, you and I?” My sense of foreboding was growing by leaps and bounds.

“Tuesday. Lando and I got together with you at Mucho Gusto, late afternoon. He finally left, and you and I had dinner there.”

“All right, hold onto that thought. I didn’t know you existed until Tuesday.” And I sketched my day with the secretaries from Los Angeles, leaving out the salacious details but emphasizing how all our sex was fully protected. In a way, it was liberating, to get that out in the open. The longer it remained my secret, the worse it would be whenever it finally came out.

“See? Those two bozos on the kitchen floor wouldn’t care about that, right?”

“Right. And I’ve been reminding myself that we didn’t meet until Tuesday. But I’ve got to tell you, this business of blood tests is suddenly more important than ever to me, at least if that’s how you’ve behaved in the past.”

“And I think it’s a fine idea, even though I’ve been only with Alex, Alexis Hall, I mean, for the past, oh, year at least. Two years, now that I think about it. I’m sorry if you’re offended, or upset or anything. I think I was pulling away from Alex, pulling away emotionally, and I just sort of busted loose. But this doesn’t get us closer to why these guys are interested in what I know about Elizabeth.”

She pulled away from me and stood up; I toppled over sideways on the couch.

“Sandy, I need to get used to the idea that you were in an orgy last weekend. I’ll be OK, but give me a little time, all right? Now. No it doesn’t. Get us closer to understanding what these guys want, I mean. What else could there be?”

“The only two things I really know about are where we found her body and her phone. Her phone! Say, maybe that’s it. Maybe they think I know something from having found her phone.”

I sat up straight, then got up to pour myself some coffee. All things considered, Angela had taken the news about my time in Telluride with remarkable grace, and I was determined to put it behind us.

“Angela? Did your people figure out how to get those messages that Elizabeth had on her phone? Or do you know if the Senator did?”

“What is it with guys, anyway? You go off on a little vacation, some girl twitches her tail at you, and you fall all over yourself? Don’t you have any sense of dignity? Or self-control? Christ!”

She was typing madly away at my computer, so I couldn’t very well accuse her of not paying attention to the case at hand. Maybe, I thought, she’ll get this out of her system tonight.

“Well?”

“Oh, sorry. I thought those were meant as rhetorical questions. Um. I guess I don’t know what it is with us guys, and we do tend to fall all over ourselves sometimes, and I think that guys have very different senses of dignity and self-control from women. Sometimes, we don’t have much self-control at all.” I could tell this would get tiresome very quickly.

“It sounds like you think sex is no different from ... from skiing or tennis or something. It’s just a game, a sport.” One night of this, I thought, is about all I want to put up with.

“You know, there’s truth in that, at some level. I mean, it *is* fun. And if everyone involved is grown up and ready and willing and wants to have fun, well, why not?” I could tell that this was going to lead to an explosion, but I slogged ahead anyway. “But at another level, it’s more than fun, so don’t think that’s all I see in it, OK? At another level, the level I think everyone strives for, it’s special, not just fun, but really meaningful. I guess I don’t know what to call it exactly, but at that level just calling it ‘fun’ is serious understatement. And I think everyone, not just men versus women but different men and

different women, everyone has his or her own level of selectivity along the way to finding this special, meaningful level that I think we're all looking for. Uh, sorry if I sound like I'm lecturing. I don't mean to."

"Was it that special with your Ms. Alexis Hall? Or was it just fun?" Her typing was going to break the keyboard, I thought.

I never really liked Detective Orlando Aguilar, not from our first interaction the day I met the Senator nor any time since. Still don't, for that matter. But I sure was glad when he returned that night from the errand she'd sent him on.

* * *

Thirteen

I slept until noon. We had worked until about 5:00 am, and then we agreed to meet at one at Nimbie headquarters for a debrief. Senator O'Malley would be invited. By then, we thought that our two guests might be awake, although the dose, and combination, of barbiturates I'd given them made that anybody's guess.

Aguilar had no trouble finding their room, because although they didn't know it, Smith and Jones were under arrest. The night clerk at the motel didn't bat an eyelash when Aguilar asked for their room number. It turned out they were registered under Smith's name.

And it also turned out that their passports, Canadian passports, were in their room, one for William Jones and one for Richard Smith, along with three other credit cards, some cash, and another car key, a key with the Volkswagen logo on it.

When he saw the terrorist watch list that Angela had found, Aguilar had wanted to call the FBI immediately, but she and I persuaded him that there was no particular hurry. For one thing, the suspects were asleep. For another, we couldn't be absolutely, 100% sure that it was the same people. And for yet another, it would be an irreversible move, something that couldn't be undone.

Even though there was a distinct chill in the air between Angela and me for the rest of the night, we had an unspoken agreement to conspire to keep Smith and Jones away from the Feds as long as we could. Nor did we tell Aguilar about the computer-salesman cover they had used in the past.

After I roused myself out of bed just after noon on Friday, I hustled around to get to the Nimbie office on time, and, part way there, got a call from Senator O'Malley. Santa Fe has a law about not using cell phones in cars, unless you have it hooked to a hands-free setup of some kind, and I had to decide whether to hang up on the Senator or be the only person in the entire city who paid attention to that law. The Senator won out.

"Son, I got a funny call this morning about a meeting I should come to at the Nimbie headquarters this afternoon, at one. Don't think I can make it, though. You know about this?"

"Yes sir, I do." And I described the events of the previous night. "The best idea that Angela and I had was that these guys think there was information on Elizabeth's cell phone that I know about. So one thing that the Nimbies will want to know is whether you or your people got to Elizabeth's voice mail. Angela tells me that there weren't any messages when they finally got the phone from me and the password from the phone company."

“And you, of course, know that there were messages. Right, son?”

“I recall telling you about them, yes. But I’ll leave it to you to decide whether to tell the NMBI. I don’t know what the messages were, but maybe they were too personal for you to want to go public with.” I was hoping he’d tell me, though, because I wanted to know why those two bozos were so interested in me.

“I surely don’t want to be withholding evidence, of course. But I have to say, son, some of what my people found is puzzling to me, and a little disturbing.”

“Senator, I’m all ears if you want to tell me.”

“Well, there were four messages, three of them prior to that brunch that you directed Elizabeth to and one after, that evening. That last one was from your ex-girlfriend, Alexis Hall. The others were from people confirming the brunch, although one of them was a little strange. It said ‘Butchie says he’ll bring the document.’ And we checked, this ‘Butchie’ is one Bertram Cale, husband of Amanda Cale, who’s one of Elizabeth’s circle of friends. Thing is, Bertram Cale works at Kirtland Air Force Base here in Albuquerque. Sandia National Laboratories are at Kirtland, and Cale is an engineer employed by a small, private subcontractor on several projects that are joint between the Air Force and Sandia. He’s a biochemical engineer and he’s working on something to do with anthrax. Anti-terrorist research. Top secret.” He sighed, a deep wheezing heave of air. “I’m afraid of what all this could mean. I’m just afraid.”

“What about the message from Alex?”

“It sort of fit with the others.” I heard shuffling papers. “Here it is. Hmm. Says ‘Betsy, please call me. We said we’d supply the document this week, remember? And you said we shouldn’t double-cross them. Betsy, we’ve got to give it to them. Please, please call me.’ Son, I just don’t like the looks of this.”

“Actually, Senator, it may be that Betsy’s the hero in this, especially because the two guys at my house seem to still want this information. Maybe she prevented them from getting it.” I explained the dual personalities of Messrs. Smith and Jones.

“You say they’re on the terrorist watch list? And they’re not supposed to be in the country? Well, I reckon you’ve got reason enough to hold them. But it sounds like the FBI will be interested in them, too.”

“Senator, we’re also not rushing to call in the FBI. Call it, um, a carefully considered procrastination.”

“Well, that just might be a good idea, son. As much as I respect the FBI in Washington, I’m afraid I have to say that the people they post to these big square states out here in the southwest tend not to be their best. What’s the plan, if I may ask?”

“We want these two guys to wake up so we can ask them some questions. I’m curious to hear their stories. All they have is their Canadian passports, so our response will be to call the local Canadian consulate. Turns out I know the consul, and he’ll be very interested in the connection of Canadian passport holders to the terrorist watch list.”

“You know him? You get around, son.”

“Through my uncle. He, I mean the consul, he’s a party animal and always shows at parties at the governor’s mansion. Which I go to also. We usually get drinks, go out onto the patio, and talk soccer. I got a ball from my car one time, and we kicked it around until Uncle Jake’s security guys made us stop. Senator, what about this business of a document and so on? That definitely sounds like something the FBI needs to get involved with.”

“Eventually, yes. But I’d like to find it first, see if Betsy had it or what. You know?”

“Senator? Can I ask a tough question? Did you have any inkling of this business with Elizabeth before you asked me to get involved?” It bothered me that he might have involved me without telling me all the relevant background.

“I guess I could ask you a hard question, too, son—did you have any inkling that your girlfriend, Ms. Hall, had any involvement with stuff like this?” There was just a slight edge to his voice, but I couldn’t tell if he was angry.

“Well, Senator, my answer is ‘no,’ definitively. Of course, I’ve always known that Alex is something of a flake, and her politics are way, way to the left of yours, mine, and most other people’s, even most other people in Santa Fe. But I wouldn’t have suspected espionage. How about you?”

I heard another huge sigh. “To be honest, son, I’ve got to be more equivocal. The thing is, Betsy got involved in some strange stuff after college. Spent several years overseas, working in refugee camps and all sorts of other places. In the Middle East as well as in Africa. She never talked about it when she came back, though. And when she was in college, she used to argue politics with me all the time, and then she didn’t when she came back. I never could understand what changed her, except that I figured maybe she had enough of it when she was involved in those relief organizations. She came back about five years ago, turned into a socialite, and ended up marrying Bill Prince. The rest you know, I think.”

“Senator, this is all very, very strange. And I’m still on your side in this, OK? But it helps me to know ... ah, shit. Oh, sorry, Senator, but I’ve got a Santa Fe cop on my ass, lights going, wanting me to pull over, I think.”

I had taken the round-about way to the Nimbie building in order to avoid the mid-day crush of traffic on Cerrillos Road. From my house, that means heading south down St. Francis after crossing downtown, and then taking the interstate to the south end of Cerrillos to come back north to headquarters. At the city limits, there was the “No Cell Phones” sign, but I’d ignored it. That, I thought, must have been the issue, because otherwise my driving was exemplary—I wasn’t even speeding by a mile per hour. Of course, maybe that was it. Going the speed limit in Santa Fe is really going too slow to be safe.

“Well, don’t hang up, son, maybe I can talk to him for you.”

“OK—thanks, Senator.”

By then, I’d pulled over, off the highway into the parking lot of a furniture store, and the officer was approaching my window. I lowered it and had my registration and proof of insurance at the ready.

“Sir, didn’t you see the sign back at the city limits, the one about the cell phone ordinance? May I see your ... Oh, thank you.”

I’d handed the cards to her. “Officer, don’t tell me you’re going to do me the honor of making me the only person ever cited for violating the cell phone ordinance? Why, I’m proud, I guess.”

“Sir, sarcasm isn’t likely to be helpful.”

“You’re absolutely right, officer, my apologies. But, listen, the reason I was on the phone was that Senator Mike O’Malley called me. I would have stopped to talk with him but I’m running late to a meeting over there at the NMBI headquarters.”

“Blatant falsehoods are also unlikely to be helpful, sir.”

“You don’t believe me, officer? Here, talk to the man.” I handed her my phone.

It occurred to me that successful politicians almost always have distinctive voices. That's partly, I suppose, because we hear them talking so much and come to recognize their inflections, pitch, and so on. But their voices are seldom normal, whatever that means, seldom the anonymous voice of Joe Public.

Senator O'Malley's voice was perhaps the most distinctive in the entire state, even if you count my uncle. With O'Malley it was actually his voice, with my uncle it was his Texas accent—but O'Malley still won the most distinctive title, hands down.

The officer sure recognized it. She took the phone from me looking skeptical, then she straightened to attention and turned beet red. Finally she let loose with a string of "Yes sir, Senator, yes sir"s and eventually handed the phone back to me. I put it in my shirt pocket, still on.

"Sir, the Senator asked me only to give you a warning, because he told me that he did, in fact call you. And that you are, in fact, due at a meeting over there. Would you like an escort?" She was scribbling furiously on her ticket pad. "Sign here, please?"

"No, thank you officer, it's a meeting but it's not an emergency. I'll drive real carefully to get there. It's just a couple of blocks. Oh, and I'll finish the phone call sitting right here, if that's OK?"

"Certainly, sir. Have a nice day." She marched back to her patrol car and pulled away, glad, it appeared, to escape unscathed.

"Senator, thanks. I think you gave her something to tell her friends. Now ... oh, right. It's very helpful to me to hear what you said about Elizabeth. And, as I said, it may be that she's a hero in this, because it sounds as if maybe those documents didn't get where they were intended to."

"But where could they be? That worries me, a lot, son."

"Me, too, Senator. But I think I may be able to get more information about them. And you can help—give me about fifteen minutes and then call Nimbie headquarters and ask for Detective Orlando Aguilar. He'll be in this meeting with Angela and me, the one you can't come to, and if you demand to talk with him, it'll give the two of us time to talk privately. I need to tell her about this conversation. Uh, but don't say anything about the FBI, OK? We don't want to encourage him."

"Be glad to, son. And can I ask how it's going with Detective Espinosa?"

I had to laugh. "Senator, I'm just not sure. I was making good progress there, but then I had a little setback when I had to tell her about those Los Angeles secretaries in Telluride. Your advice has been right on the money, I'll say that."

His familiar, rumbling laugh told me that he sympathized.

* * *

We met in Angela's office, a glass-walled space in a sea of desks. At least we would be able to talk privately. She was pleasant, if a bit distant, and Aguilar was all business. It didn't take long for the call to come through, and he scurried out to talk with Senator O'Malley.

"Angela, Senator O'Malley called me while I was on my way down here, and that call to Aguilar was my way of getting a chance to talk with you privately."

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, then?"

"Yeah, one thing I'd like to do is to take you in my arms and hold you and tell you that I'm sorry you're so upset about last weekend and that I hope you can get past it. But that doesn't seem quite

appropriate here.” I gestured to the sea of desks visible through her walls, took a breath, and kept talking.

“So let me stick to business. Elizabeth, maybe, and more likely Alex Hall could be involved in espionage for our two Syrians.” I related the voice messages from Elizabeth’s phone and the Senator’s confusion about his daughter.

“So maybe we *should* bring in the FBI. It sounds like there might be a classified document floating around somewhere.” She had listened with an increasing sense of alarm, I could tell. “Oh, and, you know, if you did take me in your arms and all, it just might work. But you’re right. Later.”

Her smile just about melted me. But business was business, and Aguilar would be back soon.

“Angela ...” But she was holding up her hand for me to stop.

“When it’s just the two of us, I’d like it a lot if you’d call me ‘Angie.’ But just when we’re alone.” That did melt me, my knees at least. I had to sit down.

“OK, Angie. Gosh, that sounds sweet.” I shook my head to clear it. “Right. Before Detective Aguilar comes back—do you know what the search of Alex’s place found? She told me that the warrant included all sorts of telephone message equipment and computer stuff, along with documents on paper. Have you, or has anyone, gone over all that? See, that voice mail from Alex to Elizabeth sounded as if maybe Alex had the document from the Kirtland guy, this Butchie character, and Elizabeth was supposed to get it to the Syrians. But she, Elizabeth, I mean, she was having second thoughts.”

“So you think Elizabeth made contacts in the Middle East when she was there years ago? Hmm. That makes sense, I guess. Tell you what. After Lando comes back and we finish up with him, we’ll go over what we took from Ms. Hall.”

“What about the two Syrians?”

“Still out, last time I checked at least, about a half hour ago. You really did it to them.” This time, it wasn’t a romantic smile, but rather a devilish one. Still cute, though.

“Here comes Aguilar. Let’s see. What are we going to talk about with him?” I wanted to be on the same page she was on.

“He’ll want to talk about two things, bringing in the FBI and my role as lead on the case. I think he thinks it’s over my head, or will be if the FBI’s involved.” Now she looked disgusted, not quite so cute.

“Like you said, though, with classified stuff floating around, they do become more relevant. But maybe we can have a look at Alex’s document first.”

Aguilar strode into the office, full of purpose and, it appeared, himself.

“That was Senator O’Malley. He needed to talk with me. He wants progress reports about his daughter. What can we tell him?”

I turned slightly sideways and winked at Angie with the eye he couldn’t see.

“I think you should tell him that we have our first credible suspects, Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones. And they may be suspects in her husband’s murder as well.”

“Oh, them, yes. But they’re on the FBI watch list. We need to call in the Feds.”

This time it was Angie’s turn. “Lando, we talked about this last night. Murder takes precedence over a terrorism watch list, and the Feds could still mess things up for us. What’s to lose if we keep them until we can question them, a few more hours at the most?”

“Hmm. Good point. If they’re suspects in the Colorado murder, should we call someone up there? Is the CBI involved in that?”

The mention of the CBI put Annette Trieri into my head, and I was rather proud of myself that it didn’t make me feel like a doofus. That feeling seemed to be exclusively associated with thoughts of Angie at that point.

“Detective, I know just whom to call. I met her when I was up there last week, and then she and her husband,” I put that in specifically for Angie’s benefit, “met me in Telluride after Derek Davidson was murdered. I’m sure she’ll want to know about your two, um, guests.”

Just then another officer stuck his head in Angie’s door. “Lando, the two suspects you brought in last night are finally waking up.”

Aguilar looked at Angie. “Well? Shall we go see what we can find out?”

“Lando, they’ll be groggy for a while, and dehydrated and in need of the bathroom. And food, I’d guess. Why don’t you go make sure they’re healthy and so on and we’ll catch up on reports?” Angie, I thought, didn’t miss a trick.

He left, once again full of purpose, if not of himself this time, and Angie and I hurried down the hall to the evidence room. After some paperwork, we were handed two large plastic tubs full of stuff from Alex’s house. I could tell it was from Alex’s house because it took me all of fifteen seconds to start sneezing from the accumulation of cat dander.

When Angie found out what the sneezing was all about, she couldn’t stop laughing.

“You’re allergic to your girlfriend’s house? Must have been a great relationship.”

“I’m allergic to my EX-girlfriend’s cats, and I spent as little time as I could at her house. Do you have cats?”

“Nope, I have fish, tropical fish.”

“Angie, to borrow a line from an old movie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Now. What are we looking for? Some kind of multi-page document with big labels, I guess. Wonder what it looks like?” And I sneezed again.

We sorted through telephone records, credit card bills, personal and business correspondence, and all sorts of other paperwork that I would never have thought that Alex would keep around. It went quickly, because we decided that a classified document would be several pages at least, probably stapled with some kind of special cover. But there just wasn’t anything like that. It was all miscellaneous correspondence and old bills.

When we finally reached the bottom of the second tub, all that was left was a disorganized pile of computer CDs and diskettes. A light bulb went on in my head.

“Angie, we’ve been thinking of a document as something on paper. But it could as well be a computer file, don’t you think? In fact, if you were going to smuggle information, would you do it on paper or on a computer CD?” I was feeling rather stupid, and I could tell she did, too.

She looked at me cross-eyed. “Duh. Well, at least we’ve eliminated all the paper. Let’s see what these CDs tell us.”

Mostly, they didn’t tell us much. There were various software distribution disks, some recognizable and some quite obscure. Did you know, for example, that you can get a computerized catalog of aromatic candles on CD?

We sorted and stacked, and things were looking bleak. But then as we were finishing up I noticed that Angie had put a CD with the Numerical Recipes in FORTRAN on the top of one of her piles. This is familiar software to me—it consists of a huge library of mathematical computer programs put together by a Harvard professor and his colleagues to solve all sorts of problems in science and engineering. Recipes, just like the title, and the language the programs are written in is FORTRAN, the formula translating language that, until a few years ago, was the standard for scientists and engineers. What Alex would be doing with it was a complete mystery.

“Angie ...”

“I like it when you call me that. Makes me tingle.” This time I was already sitting down, which was just as well.

“Tingle good, I hope. Hand me that top disk there, the numerical one, would you please? Thanks.”

“What is it? Looks strange.”

“Very strange, for Alex. Not for me or my colleagues, but strange for Alex.” I looked more carefully at the label, and there was a little Sandia National Laboratories thunderbird logo, with a small-print “unauthorized distribution prohibited” warning.

“We need to look at this on a computer, Angie. Maybe not here, though. I think I should take it home.”

“You sure? Really? I can check it out from the evidence room.”

“You don’t want it on the NMBI computers, just in case.”

My knowledge of matters classified is miniscule, but I do know that classified information can “contaminate” computer systems. Once it becomes public, it’s less of an issue—whoever classified it in the first place just ignores the whole thing, everyone issues “no comment” statements and acts as if nothing happened. But on controlled computer systems, like NMBI’s, it can be a real problem. The Feds can come in and confiscate anything they want to, if they think a system has unauthorized classified information on it.

I wasn’t concerned about my computer at home, but I didn’t want the Nimbie computer systems to become contaminated with classified information—there was no telling how their network worked. For all I knew, their system had automatic backups that copied any new information to an archive, or even to multiple archives. Anything designated classified by the defense establishment could have been a real disaster.

So we packed up the tubs and checked them back in, and Angie checked the single disk out of the evidence room without commenting on why. The less fanfare, we figured, the better.

* * *

Back in Angie’s office, Detective Aguilar was pacing, obviously impatient for our return.

“Where’ve you two been? They’re awake and demanding lawyers, so let’s get in there. Not you, Livingston, you’re a civilian.” He stalked out.

Angie shrugged. “Maybe it’s really better if you wait this one out. They could recognize you, and that’s something we can save for later. OK?”

She smiled and trotted out, chasing Aguilar.

Angie's office, while glassed-walled, was designed to give her a little privacy while she was at her desk, and I couldn't help but notice the laptop computer sitting there. Right next to it was the numerical recipes disk, where she'd left it. Maybe, I thought, I won't have to take this CD home after all. I went over to examine her computer.

It had one of those abstract-in-motion screensavers going, and, when I swiped the touchpad, a password box appeared. Password cracking isn't something I know much about, but I wasn't even sure I wanted to try. It didn't seem ethical. On the other hand, there was a CD drive right there on the front of the machine, calling out to me. I finally resolved to myself to try only a few possibilities, the more obvious ones that people tend to use.

I ran through all of the names I knew in her family, trying them with and without capitals. Then, just out of curiosity, I tried mine. To my embarrassment, "Sanford," with the capital "S," lit up the screen.

I unplugged the network cable from the back of the laptop and opened the CD reader. It took what seemed to be a terribly long time to read the disk, but, I reminded myself, these laptops always do. Eventually the additional icon appeared, and I clicked it, revealing the directory of files and folders on the CD. And there was the familiar file structure, with a folder with all the program modules—the recipes themselves—and the other one with examples. Plus an additional folder I didn't remember, one called "man." Normally, such a thing would contain documentation—the manuals—of the contents of the disk, and, when I clicked it, that appeared to be the case. But in there was also a large file in standard portable document format called "SNLsys.pdf".

I took a deep breath and clicked it open. The pdf reader took a few seconds to load, and then I was greeted with an ominous-looking page with red borders and the words "Top Secret National Security Information" printed over a warning box informing me of the dire things that could happen to me if I was looking at it without authorization. Despite myself, I felt a little adrenalin rush.

I wasn't authorized, of course, and I probably should have stopped there. But the Senator had said something about anthrax, and I thought it would be a good idea to verify that what I had was what the Senator was talking about. So I scrolled down a few lines and discovered that the document had originated at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, which surprised me. Apparently classified documents are like the technical papers that I read at work—reprints get around. I scrolled a little farther, to the title, and read

Nano-polymeric cryo-encapsulation (C)
of B. anthracis spores against UV degradation. (C)
Part II: Chemical reactivation sequence (C)

As I said, I don't know squat about classification, but it didn't take me long to decide that those parenthetical "C"s meant that even the title was classified. So I tried to forget it while I closed the file viewer and the file index and found the "recently used" list and purged it.

But when you try to forget something, you can't. Besides, a corner of my brain was working on what those words meant. About the time I ejected the CD from the computer, the whole thing came together. Someone had figured out how to use ultra-cold temperatures to encase anthrax spores—maybe spore-by-spore, if that's what the "nano" meant—in a polymer so they would survive exposure to ultraviolet light, and this particular document provided a chemical recipe to break down the polymer so the spores would be reactivated. I felt prickles on the back of my neck and realized my hair was standing on end. There was no doubt in my mind at that point that I should have stopped before reading that title.

With the CD back in its paper envelope and Angela's computer plugged into the network and back to its previous state, I looked around for something innocent to be doing. She's a cop, I thought.

Shouldn't there be a copy of the *Police Gazette* somewhere, or maybe *True Crime*? But all I found was a stack of FBI bulletins on a credenza and, under the in-box on her desk, the current copy of *Bride*.

That scared me as much as the top-secret title had.

Blood tests and *Bride* magazine. Using my name as her computer password. Wanting me to call her "Angie."

After three dinners? And a couple of kisses? The Senator, I thought, really knew what he was talking about.

Looking back on it, I can see that I was suffering a bachelor panic attack—my precious freedom was suddenly being threatened, and I was having mixed and contradictory feelings about the whole thing.

At the time, though, I broke into a cold sweat. If it hadn't been for that CD, I think I would have bolted for the door and not stopped until I got to Mexico. As it was, I had to do something responsible with that top-secret report.

My cell phone wasn't getting much of a signal, so I used the phone on Angie's desk to call Senator O'Malley.

"I found it, Senator. I'm talking on a land line, so I'm not going to be too specific, you understand, but it was in the stuff that the NMBI took under their warrant, remember?"

"And maybe you had it right, son. Maybe Betsy's the hero. I think I'll hold onto that thought. What are you going to do with it?"

"Senator, I wish I knew. Do you know anything about what to do with ... ah, with this sort of thing?"

"What I've seen, is people use special shredders, they use 'em on everything, documents, diskettes, CDs, you name it. Saw a guy accidentally use one on his tie once, almost pulled him into the shredder with it. Everything gets turned into confetti."

"I wonder if there's one around here somewhere. The Nimbies have sensitive stuff, I'm sure."

"Don't, son. We'll need that for evidence. There's a spy at Kirtland, and your Ms. Hall has some questions to answer as well. I think we really ought to call in the FBI."

"You're right, sir. But the trouble with that is that we'll lose control of the two Syrian guys. Did you hear about Elizabeth's rental car, sir?" I plunged ahead without waiting for an answer. "See, it was in the parking lot by the ski area, where you'd expect it to be, but it was empty. None of Elizabeth's belongings. Her purse was never found. And many of her fingerprints in the car were obliterated, as if by someone wearing gloves. But the car didn't have any broken windows, or anything. Also, she wasn't carrying any ID or anything."

"I'm hoping you'll tell me what you think this means, son."

"Well, the two Syrian guys got into my house somehow without actually breaking in. I mean, nothing was broken. I checked last night. And they bragged about it. They could have broken in and rifled her car, too. Or maybe they were up in the forest with her and stole her keys."

"I said before you're a quick thinker, son, and I was right. Still, I think you should call the FBI. But if they give you trouble about that item you have, make sure they call me. And, say, how do you know it's the real deal? Don't tell me you read it."

"Only the title, Senator. That was enough. I don't even want to know more."

His rumbling laugh was back. “Smart move, son. And that’s how I feel when I get intelligence briefings. They tell me stuff I just flat don’t want to know about. I try to forget it as soon as I can.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do with that title, Senator. I’ll stay in touch.”

The CD was sitting on Angie’s desk, crying out to me that it was top secret and hide me, Hide Me, HIDE ME. But, of course, to the world it just looked like a volume of software for science and computer nerds. When that thought finally soaked in, I began to reason the situation out—why would Angie have a CD of FORTRAN computer programs? If someone saw it, what would be her explanation? Where would she stash such a thing, if she had it, say, to give someone as a gift?

I guess I decided that if she had it as a gift for someone, then she’d put with her personal possessions. And for lack of any better thing to do, I slipped it into the *Bride* magazine under her in-box.

* * *

Fourteen

The FBI bulletins were both scary and boring. To think that there were such evil people wandering around out there made me want to crawl in a hole and hide.

But I also couldn’t help but think that they should have hired an ex-reporter from the *National Enquirer* or one of the other tabloids to write their stuff. The prose needed spicing up, and it would have been easy, given the raw material. I managed to get nearly all the way through the stack on Angie’s credenza before she and Aguilar returned.

When I saw her look at her desk, not see the CD, and then look at me in panic, I winked at her, trying to be reassuring. I would have said something, but Aguilar was holding forth.

“Jesus! We’ve got two guys with Canadian passports who are also on the terrorist watch list, under different names. And they’re in our lockup. This is nuts! What’s with you people?”

Angie looked a little scared and intimidated, so I took him on. “Calm down, detective. First of all, they have Canadian passports. If they’re really Syrians, like the watch list says, that means they might be traveling under falsified credentials, and I’d say you’re justified in holding them for the FBI. Second, I don’t know what they told you, but I bet it was a different story from what we know. So why don’t we just call in the FBI and let them handle it? And third, I caught them red-handed having broken into my home, and they held me captive at gunpoint. That’s sufficiently criminal, isn’t it, to justify your holding them here?”

He calmed down a little after that, especially, I think, because I had suggested calling the Feds.

“I guess you’re right. We shouldn’t be in any real trouble. And there were a couple of agents around here earlier today—I’ll go see if I can find them. You people stay right here.” And he dashed off.

I looked at Angie. “Boy, he certainly is excitable, isn’t he?”

“What did you do with it? Where did it go?” She was practically hissing, trying to keep her voice down yet communicating a definite urgency.

“You mean the CD? I looked at it on your computer, and it’s got the ...” I looked around for eavesdroppers “... document. Bingo, as they say.”

“You looked at it here? What about that business of contaminating our systems?”

“I unplugged your laptop there from the network. And I cleaned up after myself. So everything’s fine. I’m the only one contaminated—I read the title. Pretty spooky.”

She looked around again. “So where is it? And what do we do now?”

“It’s hidden in plain sight, so to speak. Don’t worry about it, at least as long as we’re in here. And what we do is wait and give it to the FBI with a little explanation, and then we have them call the Senator. Calm down. Everything’s fine, really.” We were still in her glass-walled office, so I still couldn’t take her into my arms to reassure her like I wanted to.

“But you didn’t want the FBI called in. What gives?” She was calmer, but puzzled.

“I still don’t, but the longer we wait the worse we’ll look. We’ve got to tell them about that document, after all”

“Let’s think about that. We know, at least we think we know, that she was involved in espionage somehow with these Syrians. A go-between who was putting together the source with the recipient. Maybe she was supposed to make the delivery.” She sat down at her desk, leaned her elbows on it, and nibbled on the end of her right thumbnail. Even deep in thought she was beautiful.

“But it appears she may have been having second thoughts. When I ran into her downtown the day she died, she said something about getting away to do some thinking. And that phone message from Alex suggested that somehow the pipeline had been interrupted.” I couldn’t let go of my notion of Elizabeth as hero.

“Could you do me a favor and try to call her ‘Alexis’ or, better yet, ‘Ms. Hall’?”

This took me completely by surprise. It was silly, but I could also understand it—a little. And it seemed to fit with some of the other little things that were popping up, the things that had precipitated that panic attack of mine.

“OK, right. Anyway, Alexis called her that Saturday afternoon while she was up there on the Winsor Trail and left the message about how ‘we’ had to give ‘them’ the document ‘this week.’ As if whoever ‘them’ is was waiting for it, in town, maybe.”

“Sandy, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that, about calling her ‘Alexis.’ I’m just sort of confused, I guess.” She gave me a little apologetic shrug.

Enough, I thought, time to have it out. “Me too, Angie. You know, there are several little things that don’t quite add up, or maybe they do but I forgot my math. Like, well, we seem to be on a fast track to intimacy, in some ways more emotionally than physically. And your computer password—I guessed it by accident when I wanted to read the CD. And where I put the CD, in your magazine under the in-box there. And the blood test thing. I’m trying to see how all this fits together.”

When I mentioned the magazine, she practically dove for it, leafing through it to find the CD.

“Oh, God, I’m so relieved. I got to worrying about this thing while we were in with the Syrians. It’s evidence checked out in my name, and the chain of custody is important. I really shouldn’t have left it lying around. All you did was look at it on the computer, right?”

“Right”

“Right. OK. So, the computer, the password, yeah. And you’re wondering about, what? The blood tests and ... and this?” She held up the magazine, looked back and forth at it and me a few times, and then burst into laughter, a delighted, fun laughter.

And then it changed as she started to tease me. “Got you worried, lover? They have some really beautiful gowns in here. And articles on which stores to register at, what all the most fashionable silver

patterns are, what to have the groom wear, how to have the best reception, how long to wait to get pregnant, all that stuff.”

I could feel the panic attack lurking around the fringes of my consciousness, seeking an entry. But she was shaking her head no, as if to tell me not to let it in.

“C’mon, Sandy. We’ve had—what?—three dinners? Two, maybe three kisses? I mean no offense, but do you think I’m crazy? You haven’t met my family, except for Jaime and he hardly counts. I haven’t met yours. I don’t know very much about you, certainly not the important stuff. Hell, I haven’t even tried you out in bed!” She stood up and walked over to me. “Screw the glass walls. You need a hug.”

It really did help, even if there were quite a few of her NMBI colleagues out there watching with mounting curiosity. Them, I could handle. But I also saw Aguilar coming down the hall with two suits.

“Angie? Here comes Aguilar with the FBI, I think.”

She pulled back and winked at me. “Hang in there. You never can tell what’ll happen after the fourth dinner.”

The two FBI agents, Chet Hornby and Lou Collingswood, seemed fixated on the watch-list status of the two Syrians, and they began to grill me about how I’d captured them.

I put up with it for a while but finally decided enough was enough.

“Gentlemen, with all due respect, you’re going about this all wrong. Let’s start over from a different angle. What if I told you that we have circumstantial evidence that these two individuals you’re so worried about are involved in espionage—espionage for which we not only have direct evidence but also know who the traitor is?” To their credit, my question’s circumlocution didn’t faze them.

“What direct evidence?” It was Hornby’s turn to ask the question.

I picked up the CD that Angie had taken out of the magazine. “There’s a top secret document on here, associated with what looks like biological warfare research. Senator Mike O’Malley has telephone-message evidence of where it came from and where it was going.”

I handed it to Collingswood, who was nearer. He peered closely at the CD through the clear plastic front of the envelope, then wrinkled his nose.

“What the hell?” He took a big sniff. “What *is* that? Shalimar?”

* * *

The FBI guys were methodical, and they took the rest of the afternoon and went on well past dark. Angie and I eventually ended up at the Outback next door again for dinner. The actual questions they asked were straightforward; it was the complexity of dealing with the classified issues that took most of the time. They were absolutely paranoid about the possibility that classified material had somehow been compromised— and, of course, it had, in the sense that I’d seen that top-secret title.

They weren’t at all amused when I suggested that all someone had to do was to change the title of the report to make the title I’d seen a non-issue.

But my attitude was, so what? What harm could possibly come from the fact that I knew about the existence of a way to protect anthrax spores against ultraviolet degradation and then to reactivate them? It’s not like I knew any details that I could accidentally tell someone. Maybe the fact that such a thing could even exist, or was even being thought about, was considered sensitive, but all it took was a little imagination to think such a thing up. Even those two Syrians would have been capable of that.

What I thought was that Hornby and Collingswood were more concerned about paperwork than compromised secrets.

Anyway, after we figured out why a classified report on anthrax smelled like Shalimar—credit *Bride* magazine for having a blow-in scratch-'n-sniff where I'd stashed the thing—and then related the CD's recent history, they wanted to look at it. It took some persuading, but finally we got them to agree that the NMBI was a good enough location for a quick peek, and they had me show them exactly what I'd done before. This allowed them to verify that Angie's computer wasn't contaminated and to see the title for themselves. Before that, though, they had to make Aguilar, Angie, and me recite an oath about not divulging any of the information, blah, blah, blah. It was a good thing all three of us were U.S. citizens.

And afterward, they had to deal with the NMBI evidence-transfer paperwork, far more than I would have thought. I think Angie took delight in a little pay-back for all the classified rigmarole. Somewhere in there, I called Senator O'Malley on his private line—the FBI duo were suitably impressed—and they made arrangements for his statement to be taken formally in Albuquerque.

Hornby and Collingswood finally ran out of things to make us do, and they left with the CD, a hint of Shalimar wafting down the hallway after them. Just to be polite, Angie and I invited Detective Aguilar to join us for dinner. We weren't *too* disappointed when he told us that he had a wife and children to get home to.

"I guess we have a lot to talk about, huh?" I'd ordered us one of those giant onion-flower appetizers that Outback offers. We were both sticking to iced tea and had to settle for gratuitous deep-fried calories to indulge in. "But here, in public, we can't talk about that document we saw, that's for sure."

"Did you really think I'm husband-hunting?" She picked the one topic that I was hoping to postpone indefinitely.

"I don't know what I was thinking. Really, I guess I was just confused. But what's that magazine doing in your office?"

"One of my old friends is getting married, which reminds me, I need an escort to her wedding, if you're not doing anything Sunday. Got a tux? Or a nice suit?" She smiled, then shook her head. "No, no, don't worry, I'm teasing. I got the magazine to see what people wear to weddings these days, and tomorrow my job is to find a dress. I know it's out of line to ask you to come at this point—I was planning on going by myself anyway. So don't worry about it. And, believe me, that magazine isn't my idea of recreational reading. It's really quite appalling. And, let's see. My password. Right, well, see, the damned computer system forces us to change our passwords once a week, and it also keeps a list so we can't just switch back and forth. So I ran through my family's names and some friends and then you came along. So I just used you. Hope it's OK?"

I decided to return to a better subject to see if I could redeem myself for having been such an idiot. "It's fine, really. But, look, going to a wedding alone seems, I don't know, lonely, I guess. And it's not like I have other plans, except for the usual NFL games."

She tilted her head a little and looked bemused. "All right. Let's give it more thought. But I guess I shouldn't be on your case too much, about thinking I'm man-hungry, I mean. I'm about the only single girl I know. All my friends from high school have three or four kids and weigh about fifty pounds too much. And my friends from college up in Colorado are turning into soccer moms at an alarming rate. My family thinks I need to get married and start popping out babies, that's for sure."

"I guess that goes along with your brother's being so protective. But you're on a different track, it seems like. A law-enforcement career, huh?" I had to move the iced-tea glasses and some of the tableware to make room for a giant plate the waitress brought us.

“I don’t know about a career, but so far, so good. At some point I’ll probably get bored and figure out the next thing. And that might just be settling down, I don’t know. But you’re—what?—ten years older than me? I bet you’re not following the traditional pattern in your family, either.” She ripped off a chunk of battered and fried onion, dipped in the spicy mayonnaise sauce, and took a bite.

“I’m sort of the family black sheep. I was supposed to go to law school and join my father’s law firm, which was his father’s and his father’s before him, back several generations. But instead I went into science at Berkeley and MIT, and then moved to Santa Fe. I think they all suspect I’m gay, but they’re too mid-western to broach the topic.” I was trying to nibble, because with the sauce those damned onions probably have 500 calories per slice.

“If you’re gay, pal, my intuition is severely out of joint. Or at least you sure do kiss a girl convincingly for a gay guy.” At the rate she was gobbling the onion, I couldn’t help but wonder how she didn’t look like her high-school friends, the overweight ones.

“No, I’m too attracted to women.”

“Glad to hear it. But with that mid-west upbringing, how come you’re not married?”

“I just never got around to it, I guess. But I do seem to be moving in that direction—I don’t want to upset you or anything, but I actually thought about it a little when Alexis and I were still seeing each other. I came to my senses last week, though. Good thing, too, or I’d be talking about ‘my honey, the spy.’” I was hoping that mentioning Alex wouldn’t set her off again.

But she passed right over it. “I have a feeling that Ms. Hall is in for a change in living arrangements. But speaking of spies, we don’t want to get sidetracked and forget about our real investigation, do we? We really don’t have anything more than speculation connecting those Syrians to Elizabeth Davidson’s death.”

“Yeah, if she was murdered at all. Although you said it before—at this point we’ll have to prove that she *wasn’t* murdered, if that’s the case. I guess I don’t know where to go from here.”

Our salads had arrived, and she began munching on lettuce. “We make a list. Either she wasn’t murdered, she just died by accident. Or she was killed in connection with this espionage business. Or she was killed for another reason, maybe something in connection with her husband, or something else, like the John Kurkle angle.”

“When I got those two Syrians knocked out and tied up, I thought everything was solved, that we’d figure out how to prove they killed both Elizabeth and Derek Davidson.”

“They told Lando and me that they’d been in town only for a couple of days, that they could prove they were on the east coast before Tuesday. We didn’t push too hard, because they demanded lawyers. But if what they said is true, someone else killed Davidson, and Elizabeth, too, if she was murdered.” She seemed to like the combination of the salad dressing and the onion flower. “But we’ll have to see that proof, I mean the east coast documentation.”

“If they didn’t kill Davidson, then I sure hope that whoever did isn’t after me. I think I used up my bag of tricks on those two Syrian guys. Say! Can I hire you to be my bodyguard when you’re off duty?” I tried to look innocent. “You know, nights and weekends?”

“I thought you were going to hire Jaime and Tito and Willy for that.”

“No, they’re just for when I need hired muscle to back me up, when I need someone to help me look intimidating. Besides, you’d be a much more interesting bodyguard.”

“Especially the night part, I guarantee it.” Now she was the one who was trying to look innocent.

Despite her hints and teasing, we returned home separately after dinner. I was actually glad for that, having been up almost the entire night before. Even though I'd slept until noon, I was practically dozing off over dessert. I guess that all-nighters are easier when you're college age than twenty years later.

Saturday morning, my main task was to make sure I had something appropriate to wear to the wedding. We'd reopened our discussion of going together and decided it would be appropriate—if nothing else, it would give Angie's friends something to gossip about.

Angie's old high school friend Carmen Martinez had a Sunday afternoon ceremony scheduled in the Cathedral—the St. Francis Cathedral, built in the late 1800s by the Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, whose efforts were chronicled by Willa Cather in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. It simply wouldn't do for me to show up at the Cathedral wearing a turtleneck and sports jacket. Fortunately, my one suit was waiting for some appropriate occasion in its plastic cleaner bag, all pressed and ready. Better the occasion should be a wedding than a funeral, I thought. And even better yet, I still fit into it.

I was thinking about whether I should go find an up-to-date tie when the phone rang.

“Sandy? This is Annette Trieri”

Despite myself, my heart did a little flip. “Annette! Good morning! How's everything in Durango?”

“About the usual, I guess. How's your leg?”

“Almost back to normal. A little stiff. What's up?” I shook my leg and it actually felt almost whole again.

“We've made some progress on background for the Davidson murder. I jumped to a wrong conclusion—it probably wasn't the Las Vegas loan sharks. We've discovered that Mr. Davidson had a serious gambling jones, but it wasn't in Nevada, it was in New Mexico. Both of the houses, the Telluride one and the Malibu one, are mortgaged to their full appraised value, and he had personal loans on top of that. Apparently, one of those loans, a very high-interest one, is in connection with the casino down your way. Hal and I are going to drive down to Santa Fe today, and I've got an appointment at three this afternoon at the NMBI to begin looking into this angle.”

“The casino?”

“Right. There's an Indian casino somewhere by Santa Fe, no?” All of a sudden she sounded like my fifth-grade teacher.

“To say the least. Let's see if I can remember them north-to-south. There's Taos, then there's the one the Picuris folks have up in the foothills. In the valley, there's the Ohkay Casino the San Juan Pueblo runs and the Big Rock Casino of the Santa Claras—they're both in Española. Then there's the Cities of Gold in Pojoaque, and Camel Rock, the Tesuques' place just north of Santa Fe. Between Santa Fe and Albuquerque there's the San Felipe Casino Hollywood just off the highway and the Santa Ana Star Casino in Bernalillo, and on the north and south edges of Albuquerque there are the Sandia and Isleta Casinos. Finally, there's the Route 66 Casino that the Lagunas run and another one, Sky something, run by the Acomas, both of those are west of Albuquerque on Interstate 40. And those are just the Pueblos' casinos—the Apaches also have several, one just south of the Colorado border somewhere, Dulce, I think, and others down south by Ruidoso. I imagine there are others, too, down by El Paso, probably.” I wondered if I'd forgotten any. “Oh, yeah, there's another one farther west on the interstate, Interstate 40, way out by Grants. I can't remember its name, either.”

There was a long pause. “Oh.”

“Right, well, see, with all of these small Pueblos, each of which is a sovereign nation, it’s sort of Balkanized. Everyone wants his share of the pie.”

“And you wouldn’t have any idea which one of these Davidson might have gone to? He didn’t say anything?” Now she sounded like one of the students I’d tutored when I was a graduate teaching assistant.

“I didn’t know he was ever here in New Mexico, although I suppose it makes sense. Say, you know, lots of movies stage location shoots here, especially westerns. Maybe he did stunts in some of them. You could find out where the locations were and zero in on what casinos may have been closest.”

“Not to mention that his father-in-law lives in New Mexico.”

“Right, in Albuquerque.”

“So should Hal and I go stay in Albuquerque instead?”

“Not unless you have a good reason to punish yourselves. Stay in Santa Fe, and I’ll show you the good local restaurants. It’s only about an hour to Albuquerque from here, if you really need to go down there.” I had the notion of showing Angie off to them as a way to make up for some of my doofusitis in Telluride.

“I stayed in Santa Fe for one of my cases a couple of years ago. It was at a condo on a street by a creek, a little uphill of downtown, I think. Residential neighborhood.”

“Sounds like East Alameda, and if it’s where I think it is, it’s by what we call a river down here. Tell you what. I’ve got a little guest house, one bedroom and bath, kitchen and sitting room, you can stay there if you’d like. It mostly gets used when my family comes to visit now and then. It’s at least as nice as the condo you stayed in, I’m sure. And before you say anything, believe me when I tell you it’s no trouble, really. I have a housecleaner with not enough to keep her busy. She loves it when the guest house gets used.”

“Well, thank you. I won’t argue, but I’ll insist that we take you out to dinner a couple of times. You show us where and it’s our treat—that is, just as long as I can control how my chile is served. I about got my head knocked off when I was there by so-called ‘medium’ chile at a place downtown, the Plaza Restaurant, I think. Hal’s been upgrading my taste buds, as he calls it, but I still don’t like things really hot.”

“He’s been upgrading your taste buds? Does that mean he’s trying to train you to like hot chile?” I wondered briefly if this might constitute some type of domestic abuse.

“Right. And I’ve actually learned to like it much hotter than I ever thought I would. Way, way hotter than anything I grew up with in Chicago.”

“One place we could go is where local folks go for chile—people with asbestos mouths. If he likes hot chile, that’s the place, but it’s only open for breakfast and lunch.” Teach *him* a lesson, I was thinking.

“As long as they have alternatives for me, it would be fun to see what he thinks of the really hot stuff.” I heard a soft chuckle.

“If you’re here until Monday, we can drop you off at the NMBI building after breakfast there—it’s close by. Meanwhile, is there anything I can do to help your investigation? You sure helped mine, such as it’s been.”

“I’ve obviously got some work to do to track this casino business down. How *is* your investigation, by the way?”

I told her about having teamed up with the NMBI and my adventure with the Syrians.

“You mean to say that Elizabeth Davidson was involved in some kind of terrorist spy ring?” She sounded as if she couldn’t believe it.

“It seems quite possible. But it also could be that she had second thoughts at the last minute and was killed for it. And I’ve been wondering if her husband’s murder could be related to this somehow. We don’t have any real evidence connecting these Syrians to the deaths, though.”

“Right. That’s another wrinkle, isn’t it? If these guys were going to pay Elizabeth for that top-secret document, I’d guess it’s possible that there was a connection—maybe this was how Davidson planned to pay back those high-interest loans, but she changed her mind.”

“Say, I hadn’t thought of that. Right. Suppose Davidson had told whoever he owed the money to that Elizabeth was going to get it. So they watched her, and when she had second thoughts, they killed her and then Davidson because he couldn’t make his payments. Annette, this is the first real hypothesis I’ve heard for this thing, and I’m glad to hear it.”

“You sound like Hal. He just loves hypotheses. Then it’s fitting the available data to a phase diagram and looking for outliers. I guess you scientists all think alike.” I was glad to hear her laughing.

“Well, that’s what you get for having amateur detectives like us around. But we keep you amused, don’t we?” I couldn’t help but think of Angie in this context.

“Just as long as you don’t go off and get yourselves in trouble, yeah. Sandy, I’ve got to run, but we’ll give you a call from the road later, OK? I’ve got your cell phone number.”

Get ourselves in trouble? Ha!, I thought, What does she know? I’ll just use magic on ’em, like I did with those first two morons.

* * *

Fifteen

Although I had told Annette the truth about my housekeeper, I also wanted to be a good host, so I walked over to check the guest house, only to discover that the locksmith hadn’t changed its key. So I had to rummage around in my kitchen junk drawer to find one of the old ones that he’d made obsolete, mostly. Fortunately, there was still an extra one floating around in the drawer.

The casita was just musty enough to want airing out, and the thermostat was set too low for comfort. What few staples there were in the kitchen needed beefing up with fresh coffee, at least, and a variety of other things if I were to feel good about my hospitality. I made a list and took fresh linens out of the closet, then debated with myself about making up the bed, finally deciding to let them do it. That way, they’d know the sheets were fresh and not feel as if I had to work for them.

I’d never given much thought to the Pueblo casinos as anything other than tourist attractions and hangouts for local gamblers, but the notion that there would be loan sharking and other shady activities associated with them made sense. I thought that maybe Angie would have more information, so I used it as an excuse to call her. It turned out she already knew about Annette’s upcoming visit.

“I don’t know how I’m going to manage to do everything I need to! Aguilar is having me come in to this meeting with her this afternoon, but I’ve got to find a dress. And the good places don’t open until ten or eleven.”

“But Annette told me the meeting’s at three. That’s lots of time.”

“Time? Sandy, you’re a really great guy and I like you a lot. A lot. But I’ve got to tell you that you obviously don’t know beans about shopping for dresses suitable for occasions like this wedding.”

“OK, well, I’m sure you’re right. If there’s any way I can help, just let me know. Oh, by the way, do you know what color you’re going to get? I thought I’d buy a new tie, and I wouldn’t want the color to clash with your dress.” I really was trying to be helpful, but all I heard on the phone was semi-hysterical laughter.

“You crazy man! Just get yourself something understated, not flashy. Conservative suit, white shirt, club tie or something similar, it’s so easy for you.”

I thought it best to change the subject. “Angie? Do you know anything about the casino business here in New Mexico? Is there an underworld associated with it? Loan sharks, you know, all the stuff you hear about Las Vegas?”

“Sandy, that’s the last thing I want to think about just now. I’ve got to find a dress, don’t you understand? And shoes. Shoes! Do you know how long it takes to find shoes?”

I knew it usually took me a half hour or less to find shoes, but I didn’t think that was what she wanted to hear.

“OK, tell you what. Who at the NMBI should I ask about casinos? Tell me that and I’ll let you go find your new dress and shoes. Please?”

“Oh, just call Jaime. He’s probably up at Camel Rock right now. He’s into gaming in a huge way, and I bet he knows this stuff. ’Bye, I’ve got to go.” And she disconnected.

And he did know, far more than I would have thought. I called him on the cell phone number he’d given me, and we had a conversation in which his half was punctuated by booping and beeping and ringing and dinging and the other sounds of a casino’s main floor at nine-thirty in the morning. When he understood what I wanted to know, he asked me to hold on while he rigged up his hands-free headset so he could talk while he played.

Then he proceeded to give me an education in the finer points of New Mexico gaming. Eventually, he got to the interesting part.

“The only place I know that extends credit is the Land of Enchantment Casino and Hotel in downtown Albuquerque. It’s not on pueblo land, but one of the tribes leases the land from the city, I forget which one. They have some deal with the city that makes it legal Indian land and lets them have gambling there. And it’s not really run by the tribe, it’s run by a contractor, a company that specializes in running casinos. They have connections in Vegas and other places like that.”

“You ever play there?”

“Just once. Me and Tito and Willy went there once. Tito went bust after a while and got offered credit. Except, of course, that wasn’t how it was presented to him. That would be illegal. It was much more subtle, Tito said something about the guy offered to stake him to play. But Tito’s smart enough to ask questions, and he asked enough to find out what the interest rate would be. The guy wanted his money back plus ten percent by closing.”

“Call it ten percent per day, huh? Pretty steep, especially since it probably compounds.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure. Tito knew me and Willie’d be good for it, so he borrowed a grand from the guy and then got lucky. Turned it into about twelve hundred, paid the guy back, and walked out with his left-over hundred, scared shitless. We’ve never gone back.”

“Jaime, remember our little conversation about how you three might be able to help me out once in a while? I just may have an idea for you. Would you be game to go back there and sort of make out to be my muscle?” I explained that I wanted to see if I could buy outstanding loans owed to the casino and it would help if I looked the type. To do that you don’t want to be alone.

“You sure about this?”

“Nope, not until I discuss it with your sister and with a Colorado Bureau of Investigation detective. But I thought I’d mention it to you first, since you told me about this place.” Such implicit flattery couldn’t hurt, I thought.

And I was right. “Let me talk to Tito and Willy. This could actually be fun, huh?”

“That’s what I’d hope for, Jaime. And we could wear wires so that the police could listen to make sure we don’t get in over our heads.” I heard an extra loud booping just then—Jaime apologized and disconnected. He must have hit a jackpot.

The idea wasn’t as far-fetched as Jaime probably thought it was. One way we could find the casino where Derek Davidson had accumulated his debt would be to pay likely places a visit and offer to purchase Davidson’s loans. This would take a certain amount of inside knowledge, knowledge that Jaime and friends had, and it would take negotiating skill. An offer to pay the full price, for example, would be completely inappropriate, because Davidson’s death was undoubtedly known to everyone in the casino business, given the publicity. The only rationale for even a discounted offer would be that the purchaser, a role I was prepared to play, had inside access to Davidson’s estate and could recoup the investment that way. So it would take negotiating skill and not inconsiderable chutzpah.

I worked on various tactical plans as I did the shopping, and I also tried out various possible sales pitches that I might use to Annette and Angie. I knew that they would not want any of us amateurs doing this.

But there were good arguments in favor of our doing it. Tito knew the guy at the Land of Enchantment Casino that we needed to approach, and I could easily play the role of a rich playboy looking to make a little extra money. New Mexico is a small state, in terms of population, and I thought that the underworld probably had a good idea of who worked for what police agency. Undercover cops would be smelled out in a flash.

Besides, it was my idea.

While Angie had an assortment of fine dress shops from which to choose, my choices for men’s apparel, especially finer shops, were limited. That’s one of the problems with Santa Fe—if you want men’s clothes in more traditional styles, it’s tough. Bolo ties, those silver-tipped leather braids with clasps in any style you can imagine, are everywhere, but regular neckties aren’t. Down at the mall, all of the anchor stores had ties, I knew, but I didn’t want Angie to look at the label on my new tie and see it was from Mervyn’s, or Penney’s either.

I finally remembered seeing an assortment of ties in a shop off the lobby of the Inn at Loretto downtown. They’d be overpriced by a factor of two, I knew, but at least they’d be reasonably current in terms of fashion. And maybe the sales person would know what color would be appropriately conservative.

My first stop was at one of the medical labs down by the hospital, where I got some blood drawn for the HIV test Angie wanted me to have. It confused them when I didn’t have a lab order from my doc and when I didn’t insist on anonymity like most people do, but offering to pay cash for it smoothed the way. That, it turned out, was the easiest errand of all.

The other errands took me most of the morning. It was getting close enough to the holidays that weekend parking downtown was a nightmare, so I had to resort to the valet at the Loretto, something I resent—trusting strangers with my car isn't something I do very well. Besides, I have this unfortunate tendency to lose the little identification tickets they hand me.

But I finally found everything I needed, and I headed home with a new tie, silk in a rich, dark maroon with little deep-blue snowflakes. I also had a bag of staples for the guest house, including not only coffee but wine, bottled water, and assorted snacks, and another with Sunday brunch for me and, I hoped, Angie. I didn't really expect her to spend the night, but the possibilities for a pre-wedding brunch seemed worth a shot.

Maybe all the talk of casinos had put me in a mood to gamble.

* * *

At home, there were two messages waiting on my phone. Senator O'Malley wanted to know if there was any progress and to talk to me about the FBI, and Detective Aguilar wanted me to call him for a reason he didn't specify. He sounded even grumpier than usual, however, so I didn't think it could be good. Just to get it out of the way, I called him first.

It turned out that Annette had called him earlier and insisted I be invited to the meeting at three, so he was even more out of sorts than usual. I guess he was within his rights, having been forced to include an amateur in his investigation, first by a U.S. Senator and then by an out-of-state investigator. And it probably didn't help that I had been managing to stay a step ahead of him—and I was also seeing one of his employees, possibly one he had his eyes on for himself. How a guy with a family could be jealous of such a thing was something I just couldn't understand, but I was prepared not to be surprised.

Thinking about it, it occurred to me that I should probably go out of my way to be nice to the guy. I learned a long time ago how futile and stupid it is to antagonize people in positions of power—even if you're right, you'll lose. My first experience with this in any significant way was back in fifth grade in Indianapolis, when Mrs. Zales was trying to teach us North American geography. She was talking about rivers, pointing to all of the big ones on this huge map she had hanging on the wall, and, of course, they all flowed north-to-south, generally speaking, *down*, from high up on the map toward the floor. The Colorado, the Mississippi and its tributaries, the Hudson, the Tennessee River, all flowed *down*. Water, after all, flows *downhill*. I still remember her emphasis.

By the time she got to the St. Lawrence, the poor lady must have completely confused herself, because, after she pointed out how all the Great Lakes are interconnected, she began talking about Niagara Falls and how the water flows *down* from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie—north-to-south, more or less, just like all the other rivers.

Well, I'd been swimming in Lake Michigan, unlike most of my classmates, and I knew for sure it wasn't salty. And because she had stressed how the lakes are all connected, I knew that she had it wrong—that Niagara Falls must flow northward, toward Lake Ontario and eventually to the Atlantic. Up, on the map at least.

My mistake was in telling her so, in no uncertain terms, in front of the class. The principal and I had a nice long chat about that, and I had the privilege of staying after school and doing clean-up chores. I did get an "A" in geography that term, though.

But Detective Aguilar wouldn't be giving out grades, so I realized that my best approach would be to ingratiate myself with him somehow. Maybe, I thought, Senator O'Malley would have something I could pass along later.

“Howdy, son, glad you caught me. I was just going out for lunch, and then I’ll be on my way up to Santa Fe. Got a meeting at three with the Nimbies and that Colorado investigator, what’s her name, Treery?”

“Trieri, Senator, I think it’s an old Italian family from Chicago. And I’m coming to the meeting, too. I hear she insisted, and Detective Aguilar didn’t seem too happy about it when I talked to him just now.”

“Got his nose all bent out of shape, huh? Well, we’ll straighten it right out. I’ve got some interesting information for him. Turns out those two fellas you caught in your house were carrying bogus Canadian passports. They’re in something of a pickle.”

“Who are they, Senator?”

“Near as we can figure, and by ‘we’ I mean the FBI and some other organizations I won’t name over the phone, they’re mercenaries who work for various Middle Eastern terrorist groups. Their real names are Amir Hassan and Halim Mohammad. They probably want that ... ah ... information you know about because they’re planning some kind of attack, or something like that, or maybe they want to sell the information to someone else. Either way, it’s a good thing you caught them.”

“They talked, it sounds like. And it didn’t take long, did it?”

“Yep, and I don’t want to know under what circumstances. The other thing I found out is that my Betsy was part of a spy network they’d set up here, but she didn’t come through with this information for them. So I’ve got kind of mixed feelings about it. At least she did the right thing at the end.” He sounded old and defeated.

“I’m sorry, Senator, not that she did the right thing, of course, but that she was mixed up in this at all. But did they say anything about how she died? Did they have her killed?”

“The questioning didn’t go into that, I’m afraid. That’s not the concern of these agencies, although they may change their tune when we have budget hearings.”

“Senator, Annette Trieri suggested a possible link between Elizabeth’s murder and Derek Davidson’s.” I related the gambling-debt hypothesis that Annette and I had discussed.

“You say she figured out that Davidson owed people here in New Mexico somewhere? Interesting. I don’t remember that the two of them, I mean him and Betsy, that they spent much time down here. But, then, it probably wouldn’t take very long for him to have run up a big tab at one of the casinos. Any idea which casino it could be? I’ve got some pull around these parts.”

“Not really, Senator. I have this idea of asking around to see if there’s a gambling debt or two of Davidson’s I could buy up at a discount, on the excuse that I’ve got an in with the estate that no one else will be able to take advantage of. That way, I might be able to find out what organization had its hooks into Davidson and proceed from there. You know, try to find out if they have enforcers and see if they might be suspects. Based on what Angie’s brother told me, we were going to start at the one downtown, the Land of Enchantment place.”

There was a long pause. “Son, I’m not sure I like that idea. I asked you to do some investigating for me, I know, but this seems like a recipe for disaster. I don’t think you want to get on the bad side of the casino finance crowd. Trust me on this one, OK?”

“I kind of thought that Annette and Angie would try to talk me out of it, too, and maybe I’d just as soon they did. But, look, it doesn’t have to be me, and it doesn’t have to be this approach I thought of. It just seems like we should check this possible connection out.” I wasn’t sure if it was the thought of

going down to Albuquerque or dealing with the casino crowd that bothered me more, but I was a little surprised to find myself relieved to hear the Senator's opinion.

"'Angie,' huh? Getting in deeper and deeper are ya? Anyway, that does seem like a good idea, if we can find the right person to do it. But let's talk it over at this meeting. Son, I've got people waiting to take me to lunch. I think maybe they might want me to vote for something or other." His rumbling chuckle told me he got that a lot.

I spent a while putting things away and straightening my place for the company that was coming. Then my suit got a quick going-over with a lint brush, and I polished up my dress shoes. The idea of getting all dressed up and going to the wedding with Angie began to seem fun. As I was fumbling with my new tie, trying to remember how to make a perfect Windsor knot, my cell phone rang.

"Sandy? Hi. Hal and I are just coming up the hill past the opera."

"You made good time, Annette. Got that map I emailed you?"

"Right here. Looks like we should see you in a few minutes. Did you get invited to the meeting?"

"I talked with Detective Aguilar, but he didn't sound real happy about it. I'm coming, though. And Senator O'Malley will be there, too. I talked to him about our casino hypothesis, so he'll want to push ahead, I'm sure."

"OK, good. Encouragement from the likes of him can only help. Here, Hal wants to talk to you."

"No! Wait..."

"Huh?" She was still there.

"I got busted yesterday for talking on my cell phone while driving. And you're in the city limits by now, or almost. There's a city ordinance." I wasn't too worried, but there was no reason I could think of I really needed to talk to him.

"Oh. Well, he wants to know if it makes sense for him to go skiing while we're at that meeting."

"Sure. The lifts run until four, and it shouldn't take him more than twenty minutes to get there from my house. Getting back will take him longer, though, because of the traffic. But that's OK, it's still not far."

"I'll let him know. See you soon."

* * *

They arrived shortly after Annette's phone call, and, after unpacking the car and getting a key from me, Hal left to head up to the ski area. I showed Annette the guest house and explained its eccentricities—just about everything in Santa Fe has eccentricities that need explaining—and then we made a little tour around town on our way to the Nimbie offices.

I found where she'd stayed during her other trip to Santa Fe, at least where I thought it was, and she recognized it. And she explained how she'd been abducted briefly, then escaped and, thinking that even the Santa Fe Police were after her, had taken the long way around the east side of town to get back to the airport. I managed to duplicate her route, and, since it took us past Museum Hill, we killed an hour at the Wheelwright looking over an exhibit of Navajo rugs. I couldn't help myself: downstairs in the Case Trading Post I bought two more to add to my small collection, a beautiful gray/tan/off-white Two Gray Hills and a Ganado in a startling color combination, red with orange highlights. And I helped Annette pick out an Eye-Dazzler—she told me she had wanted to start a collection for some time but didn't know where to begin.

I couldn't help but think that if I'd been escorting her around a week before, I'd have been in doofus city, but Angie's presence in my life had quickly changed things. Annette had turned into a friend instead of some kind of prey.

The meeting at the Nimbie offices was predictable. Aguilar tried to take it over, but Senator O'Malley made sure he didn't. Annette was provided with enough background to understand where our investigation had led, and the NMBI and the CBI agreed formally to coordinate efforts in case there was a connection between the deaths of Elizabeth and her husband. The Senator's news about the Syrian guys produced both amusement and concern about spies in our midst, and Annette's theory that Davidson's gambling debts could be connected to both murders got a thorough airing. I didn't say anything, but the implications of the title of the top-secret document had me worried as well.

And I found out about Alex.

Kirtland Air Force Base employee Bertram Cale—he actually worked for an Air Force subcontractor there—had been arrested by the FBI on a charge of espionage. Under questioning, he had shown himself to be a spy of the amateur variety, for very little persuasion was needed before he broke down completely and told all. “All” included the tidbit that Alex had been the main arranger of the whole thing. She and Elizabeth Davidson had been volunteers together at refugee camps in the Middle East—something else that Alex hadn't bothered to tell me—and she knew that Elizabeth still had connections there. Alex also knew that Cale had access to information that certain people over there would be interested in. Cale had made an unauthorized copy of the electronic document and burned it onto the CD, with the FORTRAN library to disguise it, and passed the CD to Alex. That the information didn't reach its intended destination was something that Cale didn't know anything about—in fact, when told of its intended destination, he promptly vomited. Apparently, Alex had persuaded him that she was going to give it to a public-health group so they could assess its possible use for vaccines in case of an outbreak of anthrax. Cale, a Green Party supporter, thought that would be a noble use for the classified technology and so compromised his security oath.

Alex had a variety of federal officers trying to find her to take her into custody, and it was unlikely that I would be seeing her again, unless it was at her trial.

As Aguilar and the Senator were filling us in on these details, my head was spinning so much that I felt like the little girl in that movie about the exorcist. For one thing, I was wondering if there was anything of mine at Alex's place. Surely the Feds would have done a more thorough search than did the Nimbies, and if they found something pointing to me, well, I'd be next on their list. But mainly, I was simply having trouble assimilating the fact that my sweet, flakey, erstwhile girlfriend could have masterminded this whole caper. I mean, she had trouble remembering to put gas in her car.

I must have been off in the ozone somewhere, thinking about this, because the next thing I knew was that Angie, seated next to me, poked me in the arm.

“Sandy? You there?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, I guess I got sidetracked on Alex, uh, Alexis. How she could have managed to do all this is just not computing for me. Did I miss something?”

“Son, we've been speculating that the Feds may eventually get interested in Betsy's death, but for now it's still an NMBI case. And it seems to be stalled. Any ideas?”

“Oh. Well, there's the gambling angle, how Derek Davidson may have planned to use the money from the Syrians to pay off his debts. But wait, I hadn't thought of this before, that would assume he knew about Elizabeth's involvement in the spy business, and I'm not sure that makes sense. Anyway there's still the John Kurkle angle.”

“Who?” Annette, being from Colorado, couldn’t be expected to understand New Mexico politics, so I let Senator O’Malley explain it.

“Thank you, Senator. I think I understand. But he wouldn’t have been complicit in Davidson’s death, surely?” Annette was clearly skeptical.

“That depends whether he was the one who was watching me when I was up in Telluride.” I had come to like and respect the Senator, but this little dig just popped out. He took it in stride, though.

“No, wasn’t him, son. I relied on Colorado connections for that.”

Everyone else was looking mystified, so, rather than explain, I plunged ahead.

“Kurkle was having me watched here, and I expect he could have been tailing Elizabeth, too. The real question is, where was he on the Saturday she went up the Winsor Trail, after that brunch she went to? Annette, I know this may not have anything to do with Davidson, but if we can show that to be the case, it’ll help you avoid a needless diversion, right?”

“Absolutely. And there’s every possibility that their two deaths are unrelated. We need to figure that out.” She smiled at the group. “I’m wanting to be as helpful to your case as I can, but I don’t want to get in the way or send you off chasing wild geese. That gambling hypothesis of mine may be completely bogus. Sandy’s right. There’s no reason to think that Davidson would have been privy to Elizabeth’s espionage connections.”

“I think I have to agree, Ms. Trieri. My Betsy was a master at keeping things to herself. Especially after she came back from her time in the Middle East, it was hard to get her to open up about anything.” The Senator was shaking his head. “I’m trying to hold on to the fact that she seems to have squelched this spy deal, but the whole thing is still disturbing. On top of her death, I mean.”

Annette reached over and patted his hand. “Senator, I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you, one thing on top of the other. I hope it helps that there is progress toward unraveling Betsy’s death. We know now that Davidson didn’t do it, for example. That, I think, was where you were coming from initially. And there’s a solid team at work here, from what I can see. I hope they’ll be able to help me figure out what happened to Davidson. And I’m sure they’ll get Betsy’s death explained.”

I suddenly understood why she was a CBI executive. Leadership.

* * *

Sixteen

That evening, the four of us went to dinner at the Plaza Restaurant. Hal seemed to want chile three times a day, so I thought we’d start him out with a taste of what Annette had mentioned having on her previous visit. After the Nimbie meeting, I took Annette home and we waited for Hal to return from the ski area and for Angie to come by so we could all go together. Riding down there in the back seat of my allroad, Hal was like a kid in a candy store, commenting on how much more room it had than his car, being impressed with the handling for a car of its size full of people, digging the notion of a hot-rod station wagon.

We parked a couple of blocks north on Lincoln and walked to the Plaza, Angie and I leading Hal and Annette. I used the opportunity to mention, quietly and as casually as I could, that my blood test results would be ready on Tuesday morning.

She bumped me gently with her elbow. “Good boy. Mine are in. Next things next.”

I spent the rest of the short walk trying to get my heart rate under control.

Even though it was Saturday night, it was too early for the real holiday crowds, and it was cold—the locals were staying home. We were seated almost immediately in a booth.

Hal was amused by the warning on the menu about how the restaurant couldn’t be responsible for too-hot chile, and he proclaimed that it must apply tourists rather than chile lovers like himself. After that, his reaction to their “medium” chile was quite gratifying, and it made Annette laugh. As she ate her meatloaf—the Plaza has a somewhat eclectic menu—she explained that his face was turning the shade of red that she associated with his trying to hide the discomfort he was really feeling.

“But don’t worry, he’ll be OK. He loves this sort of thing. And, listen, I don’t want to talk shop any more, but I’m thinking that my presence here in New Mexico isn’t going to lead to progress. I wasn’t aware that there are so many casinos, so I’m going to have to think of a plan B. But part of that means I’m free tomorrow. Do you ski, Angela? I know Sandy does.” She was looking back and forth at Angie and me.

It occurred to me that I didn’t know if Angie skied or not. How convenient that I don’t have to ask her myself, I thought.

“Oh, I do, I’d love to go, but I’m sorry we can’t tomorrow. I shanghaied Sandy into going to a wedding with me. One of my friends from high school is getting married at the Cathedral.” Angie shrugged, and I mentally put a check mark by skiing on my compatibility list.

“That reminds me. Did you find your dress and shoes?” I couldn’t help but to wink at Annette.

“Oh, don’t get me started. I thought I was going to go crazy. There wasn’t time to get the dress altered, so I had to find one that fit perfectly. Nobody had both dresses and shoes, I had to run all over the place to find a match. And I didn’t have makeup in the right shade. Aiee!”

I just had to say it. “Well, you’ll be glad to know that I found a nice maroon tie.”

If we’d been alone, I think she would have hit me. But Annette was laughing, and even Hal was smiling through his chile-induced tears, so Angie just shot me The Look.

“Angela, I know just what you mean. A couple of months ago, Hal, absent-minded Dean Weathers here,” Annette stuck her thumb in Hal’s direction, “remembered to tell me with about two hours to spare that we had to go to a cocktail party at the university, one of those big deal fund-raising events. I got lucky, though, and found a dress just in time. I hope you did as well—of course, you wouldn’t want to wear something like that little black number I found for the party to a cathedral wedding, I expect. You wouldn’t want to outshine the bride, for one.”

Hal coughed to get his voice working. “Hey, if you wore that dress in any kind of church, you’d be excommunicated in a second.”

“I worried about that, both those things, actually. Gotta be decent and gotta not be too much. One thing about being a bridesmaid is that you wear what you’re told to, but I don’t have that excuse. Anyway, I found something that will be OK at the wedding but will also knock Mr. Maroon Tie’s socks off.” Angie looked smugly in my direction.

I decided to change the subject back to safer ground.

“Annette, if you’re skiing tomorrow, you ought to consider Taos. Hal’s done Ski Santa Fe, right?” I looked at him.

“Right. Again would be fine, because I was there only for a couple of hours. But Taos sounds interesting. I’ve certainly heard lots about it. What is it, an hour or so north?”

“Ninety minutes, if the weather and traffic cooperate. It’s way past Taos the town, and you have to go right through the town, a slow process, to boot.” I made a snap decision not to try to explain the locals’ shortcut. “But I’ve heard they have great snow. I’d come if I could, but you heard the lady.”

“Sandy, we’d planned to stay for several days, but I think I’d better get back to Durango. I need to get cracking on my plan B to figure out who killed Davidson. Can we ski Taos and get home tomorrow?” Annette, I could tell, was apologizing for accepting my hospitality and then leaving so soon.

“Hmm. Well, I’d guess Taos to Durango is about four hours as a worst case. I don’t know if US 64 is open west of Tres Piedres just now, that would be shortest—it takes you to Chama and then Pagosa Springs. But you can always get up to US 160 at Fort Garland and then head west, or go over to Tres Piedres and then north to Alamosa. And, of course, you’re welcome to stay, but I understand. Tell you what: get this thing cleared and come back for a week or so of skiing and more food. You can do the museums and so on, add to your new rug collection.”

“New rug collection? What new rug collection?” Hal’s antenna perked up instantly.

Annette patted him on the shoulder. “Nothing, dear. Now finish your green chile.”

“No, really. The only kind of rug collection you’d start in Santa Fe is Navajos, I’d imagine. And I like that idea, because we’ve got a wonderful gallery in Durango to go to, Toh-Atin, on Tenth Street, I think, maybe Eleventh. I’ve always wanted to buy stuff there. What did you get?” And he dutifully popped the last bite of chicken burrito, sopping with medium green chile, into his mouth, as the sweat ran down his forehead.

So Annette told him about her new Eye-Dazzler and made me explain the two I’d purchased. That surprised Angie, because she didn’t know I had a Navajo rug collection.

“That’s because when you were at my place the other night, you were preoccupied with those two Syrians I had tied up. You didn’t get the tour.”

“What!?” Hal and Annette managed this in perfect harmony, and I had to explain my trick with the sleeping pills.

“... so that’s really how the whole espionage connection got tangled up in this. Without those two, we would have had some cryptic telephone messages, but I bet that classified document would still be sitting in the evidence room. Right, Angela?”

“Yeah. Yeah! I forgot about all that, those connections. Without those two Syrian guys, we’d still be thinking that Kurkle, or maybe some goon hired by Davidson, was responsible for Elizabeth’s death. And we still need to keep thinking about that, I guess. The Syrians are spies, but we don’t have any evidence that they’re murderers.” Angie looked thoughtful.

“Say, that’s something worth considering. Davidson was in Telluride, so he didn’t kill his wife. But maybe he hired someone to do so, as a way to get at her money, insurance and everything—and the insurance money was going to be used to pay the killer. But something goes wrong with the money, so the hired killer goes back to Telluride and kills Davidson.” Annette was sitting up straight, staring off into space.

“Gee, I’m sure glad you don’t want to talk shop, dear.” The chile-induced red in Hal’s face was slowly returning to normal behind his big smile.

“Three-to-one, you’re outnumbered. Get some dessert.” She leaned sideways and kissed him on the cheek, and he smiled.

This little glimpse at domestic bliss made me wonder whether I'd ever have such a solid relationship—would Angie and I end up that well-adjusted to each other?

“I was going to anyway. Nothing like chocolate after chile.” Hal waved for the waiter and then looked around at us all. “But, look, if you're thinking about hired killers and that insurance money, shouldn't you have an idea of the beneficiaries? I mean, this guy Davidson was probably a beneficiary, sure, so he'd be on the list. But there are often secondary beneficiaries, in line after the primary ones die, or, in this case, get killed. They ought to be on your list, too.”

“Right, we have people at NMBI working on that one. It's complicated because of the multiple residences, though. There are probably some policies in California that we haven't found out about, yet. And maybe in Colorado, too, although I bet CBI could get on to those.” Angie watched Annette nodding. “Here in New Mexico, we found some information about policies she had via her father and her first husband. But I haven't had a report on them yet. I should hear something on Monday.”

The waiter came, and we all ordered dessert and coffee, flan all around except for Hal's chocolate decadence. He looked pleased with himself.

“What's a 'Kurkle'?” Hal was the only one who had missed the afternoon explanation.

“From what I heard earlier, that's a good way to put it.” Annette explained what she had learned. “I can't think of anyone in Colorado who compares. Maybe some of those gadflies up at the Independence Institute in Golden.”

“Sounds like his only motive would be love scorned. Don't you law enforcement people consider that weaker than money?” Although he probably didn't realize it, Hal was giving me a lesson on how to be an amateur detective. You ask pertinent questions when you get a chance and go skiing while there are boring meetings among the professionals.

“Where'd you find this guy, Annette?” Angie was smiling. “I want one. Mine's still in the cowboy mode, capturing bad guys and tying them up and all.” She bumped me with her elbow.

“Yeah, but he's going to this wedding with you, no? He ought to get big points for that, I think. Try getting my guy here into a church and you'll see what I mean.”

Hal was rescued by the arrival of the coffee and then the desserts.

* * *

I walked up to the Institute on Monday morning, but I just couldn't manage to concentrate on my research. Angie was expecting to hear about the beneficiaries listed in Elizabeth Davidson's various insurance policies and other investments, one of the few real lines of inquiry into her death we had going. My little science project seemed mundane by comparison.

After the Saturday night dinner, we all went back to my place. I was glad that Hal and Annette's impending arrival had motivated me to do housecleaning that morning, especially the part about getting all of Alex's bottles of pills and so on out of the bathroom. I definitely didn't want Angie running across the “so on” things. But it wound up not mattering. Hal and Annette planned to get up early to drive up to Taos, and Angie was exhausted from her stressed-out shopping trip, so no one stayed for long.

The wedding on Sunday was pretty much what I expected—lots of people all dressed up and lots of religious mumbo-jumbo. The bride was “beautiful” in the sense that brides always are, and her maids of honor were all dressed in those coordinated outfits—uncomfortable-looking, never-wear-them-again outfits—that a bride's retinue wears. But in the sense of truly beautiful women, the only one I could really put into that category was Angie. She was a knock-out. It was chilly, so she was wearing a

camel's hair overcoat, and when she took it off at the coat rack, she took my breath away. The dress she'd found was somehow both conservative enough for the cathedral and sexy enough to make heads turn.

While I was trying to figure out what to say, she complimented my tie.

Big cathedral weddings, apparently, demand big, lavish receptions, and this one, across the street at the La Fonda Hotel, went on and on. We finally escaped at about eight that evening, both so tired out that I dropped her off at her place and went home alone. Monday was a work day, after all, and my blood test results wouldn't be in until Tuesday anyway.

I kept thinking back to my comment to Jaime, about not mixing business and pleasure. It sure would be nice, I thought, to get this Elizabeth Davidson murder all figured out by Tuesday evening. Maybe it would help if I pushed things a little, take a gamble. I picked up my office phone and called Senator O'Malley.

"Morning, son. How was the wedding?"

"Not my style, Senator. I'm more for a small, private affair somewhere like my living room. Senator, I called for some advice about our investigation. We have a professional opinion that there's about an eighty per-cent probability that the phone call to BERT about Elizabeth two weeks ago this morning was made by John Kurkle. I mentioned the possibility to you, I think, but we got a real sound technician to do a computer analysis. Angie and I have been sitting on this information, because we got distracted by those Syrian guys and some other things. But since we don't have any evidence on those two goons, I think we should follow up on the Kurkle angle. What do you think about our questioning him?"

"Like I said the other time, it's hard to believe but at the same time there's some sense to it. And if it's your only lead, I'd go after it." There was a slightly menacing tone in his voice.

"Senator, you're the senior Republican in the state, and Kurkle is the party chairman. Would you like to be present at his questioning? The reason I ask is, I think you may know him well enough that you could function as a sort of lie-detector for the NMBI."

"Son, I like that idea. Seeing that pond scum sweat is something that would amuse me a lot. When? And where?"

"As soon as I can persuade Angie that it's a good idea. And where is a good question. I guess I was thinking that the NMBI could just pick him up for questioning. But maybe there's another way. What if you and Angie and I just descend on his office and demand to see him? Would your presence make that work?"

"Damned well better. I do have some clout with the party, you know. I think that's a good idea, son. Let me know when."

"I'll get back to you. Thanks, Senator."

Getting Angie on the phone was becoming as natural as brushing my teeth. "Did I tell you how beautiful you looked yesterday?"

I could almost feel her blush.

"Only about a dozen times. And like I said, don't get threatened but I think we made a handsome couple." I hoped she didn't feel my blush.

She continued before I could say anything. "I was just about to call you. We got beneficiary information on Elizabeth's policies. Almost all of her money was set up to go to various environmental organizations and a couple of children's charities. Davidson wasn't in line for a dime, at least from the

policies we know about, so there weren't secondary beneficiaries after he died. This means that none of his creditors has access to her money. I called Annette, and she has similar information from her sources in Colorado. The money angle seems like a dead end."

"Well, in a way that's a relief. I've been thinking about some of the ideas that I've had, and I don't like 'em. Investigating casino loan sharks, for example, just isn't something I really want to get involved in. But it sure makes things bleak." On the other hand, I thought, it would strengthen my case to bring in Kurkle. "Angie? Do you think that it's worth following up on that eighty per-cent chance that Kurkle made the phone call to get BERT mobilized?"

"We probably should. But how?"

"Why don't we just ask him about it? Maybe if we had the Senator sit in with us, Kurkle would be less antagonistic. He doesn't want to make the Senator mad, after all. And the Senator knows him pretty well. Maybe he could tell if Kurkle is lying."

"You think he would do that? The Senator, I mean?"

Then and there, I made a decision that, in retrospect, shaped my future with Angie. Instead of continuing to pretend to work out a plan with her, I 'fessed up.

"I'm sure he would. I already talked with him about the idea. We talked about the three of us walking into the Republican Party offices and demanding to see Kurkle. Question him on the spot. See what happens."

There was a long pause. "You know, for a civilian, you've got good instincts. Let's do it. I guess it means a drive down to Albuquerque. Are you available today?"

"Absolutely. But I need to set up a time with the Senator. I'll head down your way and call him while I'm on the interstate, just to be legal. Hey, you know, I'm looking forward to seeing you again. Even if you are in uniform."

"Aw. You're sweet. See you soon." The happiness in her voice made my day.

On the way back down the hill on my trail through the trees, I couldn't help but notice what a beautiful day it was. What the hell, I thought, I'll take the summer car. The Senator can meet us at the party offices.

My Audi allroad, basically a mid-sized station wagon with off-road capabilities, is my all-purpose vehicle, and, in winter, I use it almost exclusively. But in the summer, at least when the monsoon isn't threatening, I drive my restored '88 Porsche 959—the racing version. Actually, "restored" isn't quite accurate, because much of the restoration has involved subtle updates—the use of various modern parts and technologies, as well as creature comforts, that would horrify purists, including, probably, the ghost of Ferdinand Porsche himself. But I want to drive the thing on the street, not race it or just look at it sitting in the garage, without feeling *too* guilty about emissions and safety and so on.

I took its cover off, and fired it up, pleased that it sounded healthy. Then I headed out to pick up Angie for the run to Albuquerque. Maybe, I thought, we'd have time to go down the Turquoise Trail, the two-lane state road that winds through the foothills of the Galisteos and the Sandias. It's prettier, less busy, and, in that car, way more fun than the interstate.

Good citizen that I am—or was turning into, what with having a Nimbie girlfriend—I waited until I was outside the city limits before calling Senator O'Malley.

"Damn, son. What's that noise?"

"Oh, that's my car, Senator. This one's not quite as civilized as my new one. Can you hear me all right?"

“I suppose so. What’s the plan?”

“When can you meet us at Republican Headquarters? Oh, and where is it, anyway? Uh, we can probably get there within an hour or so.” I was banking on using Angie’s credentials to allow me to push the speed limit.

“An hour? You still in Santa Fe? Well, I guess I don’t want to know. Let’s see. I suppose I can get there by about eleven. How’s that? Then you won’t have to break any of the traffic laws of our fine state, son. And, let’s see. They moved. It’s on Osuna, just west of the interstate. Get off at the San Mateo exit.”

“We’ll see you there at eleven, Senator.”

I felt smug, in my new-found good-citizen behavior, to finish the phone call just as I passed the city limits sign on South Cerrillos, and I didn’t call Angie until I parked in front of her building. Not wanting to be too much of a Pollyanna, I parked in a no-parking zone, but, then, I was waiting in the car for her to meet me.

When she came out the front door, she looked around in confusion, and I tapped the horn to get her attention. But even that didn’t work, so I got out and stood beside the car.

“Sandy! What in the world is that thing?”

“It was under the car cover in my garage. It’s my fair-weather car. I thought you might enjoy a ride down the Turquoise Trail.”

She walked down the steps with a look of amazement on her face, and then walked a circle around the car. Finally she open the passenger door and looked in.

“Since I’m trying to persuade you that I’m not husband-hunting, I guess it wouldn’t do to ask where the child seats go, huh?”

* * *

I turned south on Cerrillos, which is the north end of the Turquoise Trail, and tried not to accelerate too hard. She was in uniform, and I figured she just might write me a ticket if I didn’t behave. Because it was only 9:30, we had plenty of time to get there for our appointment with Senator O’Malley and his pond scum, so I really didn’t need to hurry anyway.

On the phone, the Senator had noticed the cabin noise of the 959, but it really wasn’t bad. My unconventional restoration had put quite a bit of effort into civilizing the vintage race car, and the extra weight of all the sound-deadening material I put in was well worth it, to me, because it made conversation possible. Even with all the stuff I put in it, though, the total weight was just under 3300 pounds, and, putting out about 450 horsepower, it did fine. I’ve always thought that anyone who’s really interested in cars should have the opportunity to own something in the ten pounds per horsepower class, and, at just over seven pounds per horsepower even with me in it, that 959 was something.

I could tell that Angie thought so, too, but she was studiously avoiding saying anything about it, beyond the wisecrack about child seats. She made conversation about the wedding until we got south of the penitentiary, but then I came up behind a slower moving, customized pickup truck.

“Oh, Sandy! That’s Jaime, and it looks like Tito and Willy are in there.”

Indeed, there were three shaved heads visible through the back window of the cab.

“Sandy? Pass ’em, OK? Fast. And hit the horn when we’re beside him, so he’ll look and I can wave.”

“What? Are you nuts? What are they doing down here, anyway?”

“On their way to a job, probably. There are lots of new houses being built down this way, and they’re finish carpenters. C’mon, pass ’em. Please?”

“Geez, Angie, I was just getting Jaime to trust me, I think.” But I downshifted three gears, checked for oncoming traffic, and stomped it.

Not having experienced that sort of acceleration before, except maybe on an amusement park ride, she let out a squeal of surprise. But when I tapped the horn, she pulled herself forward to wave. I tried not to look, but there seemed to be something more than surprise on Jaime’s face. So I ran through the gears and kept my foot down until the speedometer said 140.

“OK, OK, I believe. Holy shit, Sandy. At least we were past that school zone back there.” I slowed to something less outrageous, a good idea anyway with houses coming up.

“You think he recognized you?”

“For sure.” Her smile was ear to ear. “I’ll probably never hear the end of it, but it’s worth all the coming grief. Is he trying to catch up? Don’t let him.” The seats in that car, not-quite racing seats, don’t lend themselves to turning and looking back, so she was scrunched down, trying to see with the right-hand outside mirror.

With the sets of S-curves into Madrid coming up in a few miles, I knew they would never catch us, unless I let them. That 959 does more than go fast in a straight line. But then in the mirror I saw Jaime’s signal go on, and he turned onto a side road.

I slowed to just above the speed limit, and we returned to being law-abiding citizens. The Porsche took those S-curves like it was on a slot-car track, and we eased through the village of Madrid.

On the grade up the hill south of town, in the middle of small talk about my shopping experience on Saturday and all the traffic and crowds downtown, she suddenly sat up straight.

“Oh! I just remembered. After we talked on the phone this morning, I had a little time, so I was catching up on things. I was looking over the stuff that Lando found in the motel, the one where the Syrians were staying. Remember?”

“Yeah, he found a car key and a some credit cards, didn’t he?”

“Right. And a changes of clothes, some cash, and some other assorted stuff. Including what looks like a valet car check receipt. It doesn’t have a name on it, though. Just ‘valet’ and a number.”

“Well, that’s probably where that other car is. Was it a VW key? I think that’s what Lando said.” I was trying to remember foggy, middle-of-the-night details, and couldn’t.

“I think so. Anyway, your comment about buying your tie at the Loretto reminded me.”

“I got one of those receipts on Saturday, a little blue slip of heavy paper with a ‘valet parking’ and a number on it. They took it when I got my car back. Cost me five bucks, for about fifteen minutes.”

“Sandy, the one I found in the stuff Lando got from the motel is blue. You don’t suppose ...”

“Hey, who knows. Santa Fe’s a pretty small place. We can check the lot for Volkswagens when we get back.”

“Good plan. And I also put a trace on recent activity on those credit cards. The one that Jones, or Smith, I forget which, had on him and the others from the room.”

“Any idea of when that information will come back? That could tell us where they’ve been, what they’ve been doing. Maybe verify their claim that they were on the east coast when Elizabeth turned up dead.” If we couldn’t find the killer, I thought, maybe we could make progress by eliminating suspects.

“It’ll probably be in when we get back to Santa Fe. This electronic stuff is fast. But I think the main thing is to find this Volkswagen.” She had her cell phone out. “Well, crap. No signal.”

We were behind some of the Cerrillos Hills, but I knew the road opened up about a mile ahead. I put on more speed and she watched her phone for a signal.

“Oh, good.” And she started poking buttons. “Lando? Angela. Listen. We’ve got a new lead in this investigation, and I’ll need to get back to Santa Fe as fast as I can ... No, I need to keep this appointment with Senator O’Malley. That’ll probably take an hour or so. Then we’ll get right back there. I’ll have Sandy hurry, and you have no idea of what that implies.” She looked at me and winked.

“I’ll need an escort, a patrol car with lights, at the Republican Headquarters, uh ...” She looked at me and I said “on Osuna” quietly. “Republican Headquarters on Osuna, at about noon. OK? Thanks. See you about one.”

“So are you going to ride in the patrol car or with me?” I tried to look innocent.

She reached over and patted my arm. “Oh, with you for sure. I just want an escort so we don’t get stopped. I could get you out of a ticket, but it would take time. And we need to get back to Santa Fe as soon as we can. Besides, the escort won’t go much over ninety, I bet, and he’ll slow down for traffic. We’ll be safer. No offense, Sandy.”

I had to smile. My conversion to upstanding citizenship was going to happen even if it wasn’t my idea.

We cruised through the hamlet of Golden and were approaching the north edge of San Antonito, on the east side of the Sandias, when she raised the topic of the top-secret document.

“Sandy, I know we’re not supposed to talk about it, but I’ve been wondering about that title we read on my computer on Friday. You know, that document on the CD.”

“We’re not supposed to talk about it when someone else might be eavesdropping, but I doubt that’s possible now. What are you wondering about?” I downshifted a couple of times to get the car to slow to the suburban speed limit that we had encountered.

“What it meant. I never really figured out what it was about. I know I don’t really need to know details, but I ought to have some idea of it if it’s related to our two Syrian guys.” She looked perplexed when I glanced her way.

“That makes sense. Let’s see if I can remember it. The first part was something to do with ‘nano-polymeric’ encapsulation, right? That’s just a technical way of saying coating little bitty things with a polymer shell. And it was ‘cryo-encapsulation’, meaning it’s done at extremely cold temperatures. Then it was the ‘B. anthracis spores’ reference, that’s just the spores of the bacteria that cause the disease anthrax. So they’re using ultra-low temperatures to coat anthrax spores against ultraviolet light degradation. See, anthrax is really pretty common, but its spores—those are the sort of seeds that carry the bacteria through lean times—they don’t survive exposure to UV light. And even the amount of UV that the Sun puts out is enough to kill them. But encasing them in this polymer, I guess, allows them to survive.”

“Why would anyone want to do that? Aren’t they better off dead? We don’t need extra anthrax spores around, do we?”

“I sure don’t think so. But who knows? Your government and mine has all sorts of strange reasons to research all sorts of bizarre things. Anyway, the last line of that title was about part two, so there’s a part one of that document somewhere. Our part two was about how to chemically remove the polymer, I guess, and to reactivate the spores, to make them dangerous as well as to make them vulnerable to UV light. It must be that part one has to do with how they’re encapsulated in the first place.” I glanced over again and saw her staring out the side window.

“So, if these guys you caught, or anybody, really, had some encapsulated spores, our document would tell them how to un-encapsulate them and reactivate them? Sandy, I’m beginning to get a very bad feeling about this.” I could feel her eyes on me.

“I had a bad feeling about it when I read it, I’ll say that.”

“What would they look like, these spores, I mean?”

“Can’t say for sure, but probably the polymer coating reflects light, and the ‘nano’ reference suggests a powder. Maybe it would be white, or silver-colored. But I don’t really know. I imagine the chemical sequence the title referred to is pretty complicated, though, and probably involves liquid chemicals. So the powder would get liquefied in the process of getting the polymer off. And then, I guess you’d have a pretty dangerous liquid on your hands.”

“Not on *my* hands, thank you. I don’t want anything to do with this stuff.”

* * *

Seventeen

We stopped for coffee and tried to reverse the mutual depression brought on by the anthrax discussion, and then we found the Republican Party offices by 10:50. After about five minutes of conversation about the possibilities for that valet ticket, we watched a Lincoln Town Car drive up and deliver Senator Mike O’Malley.

Inside, he received an emperor’s welcome. The front-office staff made so much fuss that a private-office door with a name plate reading “John Kurkle” opened, and a short, portly man, just an inch or two taller than the Senator, walked out to find out what was happening. This, Senator O’Malley told us later, was just his plan.

Kurkle was surprised, to say the least. “Why, Senator! Well, I’ll be damned. How good to see you! To what do we owe the honor today?”

“Howdy, John. I came down to talk with you, got a few minutes for me?”

Kurkle suddenly looked wary, but he could hardly say no. “Of course, sir, come in to my office. Can we get you coffee or anything?”

“No, thanks. John, have you met Sandy Livingston and Angela Espinosa? They came down to talk with you, too. Let’s all go into your office.”

If Kurkle had been wary before, now he looked positively suspicious. He made a big show of arranging chairs for us, and it began to seem as if he was stalling for time, to think. That, I decided, is just fine. My presence will probably make him think we want to talk about his phone call to me. Then, when we ask him about his search-and-rescue phone call, he’ll be off balance.

When we were all seated, Kurkle went on the offensive. “What’s this all about, Senator? I feel ambushed.”

“Well, John, Ms. Espinosa here, as you can probably tell, is with the NMBI. She’s the lead investigator in the death of my daughter. And Mr. Livingston, whom I believe you’ve talked with on the phone about the same topic, is doing some behind the scenes research for me. Ms. Espinosa?” Senator O’Malley looked her way.

“Mr. Kurkle, I need to ask you about something associated with this investigation I’m leading. It has no direct criminal connections, but it could provide us with information we need to move the investigation forward.”

Kurkle had a sour look. “Should I call my lawyer?”

“As I hinted, Mr. Kurkle, there is no suggestion that you’re under any suspicion. What I need to ask you about is this. Two weeks ago this morning, at 7:30, someone called the Santa Fe Back-country Emergency Rescue Team’s search-and-rescue hotline. We have evidence that you made that call. What I need to know is the basis on which you made that call. How did you know that Elizabeth Davidson was up in the Sangres and in need of rescue?”

Kurkle hemmed and hawed, squirming in his chair. But he didn’t deny Angie’s assertion. “Well, I was worried about her. And I’m not the mountain-man type.”

“That’s your motivation for the call, Mr. Kurkle. I need to know how you knew she was up there.” Angie had begun to play a role I hadn’t seen before—patient, cordial, yet persistent.

Kurkle paused, apparently considering his options, and we waited. Eventually Angie decided to continue.

“Mr. Kurkle, while the BERT hotline has much the same status as 911 lines, meaning it has official status and the calls are recorded, making calls to it carries no legal implications. What I mean is, it’s not illegal to call the BERT. Oh, I guess if you made lots of nuisance calls, false ones, there would be some implications. But that’s not the case here. Part of the system, though, is that the calls are recorded, and their origin is recorded. The call about Elizabeth was placed from the lobby of the Marriott on Louisiana, and a computer has matched it to your voice. We also have verification of your presence there from a hotel desk clerk. All I need to know is how you knew she needed BERT’s help.”

Kurkle heaved a big sigh and looked at the Senator. “Senator O’Malley, I’m terribly sorry about Elizabeth. You know, I think, that I’ve been attracted to her since before she married Bill. After the divorce, I was hoping that I’d have the chance to get to know her better, but then she went and married this guy Davidson. I heard, though, that it wasn’t going well, so I was hoping to be able to talk with her. So, uh, so I sort of followed her around waiting for an opportunity when she was up in Santa Fe.”

He paused in what was obviously a confession for the Senator’s benefit to look at me. “I saw you talking with her downtown, Livingston.”

Then he turned to Angie. “And I followed her, discreetly, when she went up to the ski basin on Saturday afternoon. There were lots of other people, Saturday, because the weather was nice. She parked and walked off up the Winsor Trail.”

Because he stopped, Angie decided to prompt him. “She walked up the Winsor Trail on Saturday afternoon, but you called BERT Monday morning. You must have more information, Mr. Kurkle.”

“Yeah, well, see, I didn’t quite know what to do at that point. I wasn’t dressed for hiking and, besides, it seemed too contrived for me to just ‘accidentally’ run into her in the forest. So I sat there in my car and tried to figure out what to do for a while. Then I drove back down to town. I knew she was

staying at the Eldorado, so I thought I'd try to bump into her in the lobby or something." He paused and heaved another big sigh. "I know, I know, I still haven't answered your question. I'm just providing background. Anyway, I called her via the hotel's front desk, late Saturday evening, but she wasn't in. Then she wasn't in Sunday morning either, so I drove back up to the ski area and found her car, and I began to get worried. But maybe, I thought, she ran into friends on Saturday and went home with them. So I waited up there most of the day to see if she would come for her car. But she didn't, and the weather went to hell. So I finally came back to town. Then, when she wasn't at the hotel Sunday evening, I got really worried, and after checking Monday morning one more time, I finally called BERT."

"Thank you! That explains a lot, Mr. Kurkle. And as I said, your calling the search-and-rescue hot line isn't something I worry about. I just needed to know why." Angie gathered her thoughts. "Now, I need to ask another question, and this one is the payoff for us. You said there were lots of people up at the ski area parking lot on Saturday, right? How about Sunday, before the weather changed? In particular, were there any cars besides Elizabeth's up there when you arrived, especially any that may have been there Saturday, too?"

"I think I see what you're getting at. I hadn't thought of that before. Let me think." Kurkle closed his eyes, apparently trying to picture the scene. "When I left on Saturday, there must have been at least two dozen cars up there. Elizabeth's was down at the lower end of the parking lot, by the Winsor Trail, by that restroom building they have down there, and there were several other cars there, too. I was higher up, in a clump of cars closer to the base of the ski area. On Sunday, Elizabeth's car hadn't moved, and it had frost on its windows. I saw that because I drove right by it. There were also some other cars there with hers, but they hadn't been there overnight, or at least they weren't all frosted up. And there was also one car up by where I'd parked, so I parked there again, near the other one. It had frost, too. And this is probably what you're really interested in. While I was waiting up there on Sunday, before the weather got really nasty, two guys came out of the woods. They went to one of the cars parked lower down and disappeared for a few minutes, then they came up to that car I was parked near. They were pretty well bundled up, but I got a good look at them when they took off their parkas. They also had small backpacks. They put everything in their car and drove off. I waited about another hour, and then decided the weather was just getting too bad to stay up there."

"Which car down lower did they go to?" Angie had leaned forward and was sitting on the edge of her chair.

"I couldn't tell, because there were several cars down there all in a clump."

She looked disappointed. "Do you remember what kind of car you were parked by, what car they got into there?"

"I think it was one of those Volkswagen Touaregs." He pronounced it "tregs." "You know, the SUV. Sort of dark silver, but it was pretty dirty."

She looked pleased. "Ah. Good! Let's see. Was there anything unusual about those backpacks?"

"One of them had what I assumed was a small shovel in it. There was a handle sticking out of the top."

"Do you think you would recognize these two men if you saw them again?"

"Probably. They took off their parkas before they got in their car, and I was pretty close. I was pretending to ignore them, but I got a good look."

Angie stood up. "Mr. Kurkle, I want to thank you. We'll have someone get in touch with you about an identification of some people, and then there may be testimony at some point down the road, I don't

know. But this has been invaluable. If you had an attraction to Elizabeth, then you must have been worried about her and now you must be upset about her death. I think you can take pride in having helped us identify her killers. Now. I have to get back to Santa Fe. Excuse me.”

She opened her cell phone and walked out into the front office.

“Is that it, Senator?” Kurkle looked relieved.

“Reckon so, John. Gotta say, I’ve not been too happy about your obsession with Betsy over the years. But it sure paid off in the end. Thanks, John. That’s from the heart.” The Senator’s emotions were very close to the surface.

Angie had walked all the way outside and was waiting for me in the warm December sun. The Senator followed me out.

“Well, son, I guess even last summer’s pond scum can have redeeming qualities. I sure wish he’d come forward with this information before, though. Next spring, he’s toast.”

He turned to Angie, now off the phone. “Detective Espinosa, I want to thank you for your efforts in this case. I’ll be writing a thank-you letter to the NMBI chief, and I’m sure he’ll have something good to say to you. And, son, you keep that platinum card, I’ll make sure it doesn’t expire. I want you on retainer, so to speak. OK?” He smiled his million-dollar politician smile. “Never can tell when we might need some other terrorists put to sleep, right?”

His driver was holding the door, and he got into the Town Car and left us standing in the parking lot.

I looked at Angie. “That didn’t take very long, did it? I guess your escort’s not here yet.”

“I called, and he’s on his way, just coming through Bernalillo now. But I don’t want to wait. Let’s go.”

“You know how to drive a stick?” Holding out my keys, I tried to make the question innocent, but she still looked surprised.

“My Forester has a five-speed. You mean you’d let me drive this thing?”

“You’re in a hurry, right? And I’m a civilian. I’m afraid I don’t have the right lights to make it official, but I bet you can pretend this is an unmarked car, or something.”

I almost laughed at her expression, like a kid on Christmas morning.

* * *

The trip back up to Santa Fe was, well, interesting. She had me make some phone calls while she drove, and I managed to get patched through to her escort. Northbound, we passed him going southbound between the north end of Albuquerque and Bernalillo—a long stretch with no exits—and I pointed out my car to him when we passed by. I managed to turn around a little in that form-fitting seat and saw him make a dusty U-turn across the median, but he was never able to catch us.

He wasn’t able to catch us, because Angie drove the 959 the way it was designed to be driven—and she had a huge smile on her face the whole time. Including the stretches of city streets on each end, we made the fifty miles or so back Nimble headquarters in just under a half hour. I’d like to think the car appreciated the exercise.

Once there, she shut the car off and sat for a minute, savoring the experience. We got out, the car making its cool-down ticking noises between us.

“Sandy, I’m going inside to get the Volkswagen key and that valet slip. Then we can check out the Loretto’s parking lot, OK? Be right back.” She tossed me my car keys.

If I had that much fun each time I went to a valet parking lot, I wouldn’t resent them so much. I drove her across town to the Inn at Loretto, and she had me cruise right by the waiting valet and pull directly into a space in his lot. He chased after us, waving his arms, and she got out to greet him.

“Official police business. Go away.” Her uniform made it work, almost. He took a few steps back toward his kiosk, but then hung around enough to watch us.

We didn’t find any Volkswagen Touaregs in their lot, though. When we asked, the valet told us that the receipt we had wasn’t one of theirs, it was too much of a dark blue. Theirs were lighter, he said.

So, for us, it was back to wondering. At least we knew what model of Volkswagen we were looking for. I took Angie back to NMBI headquarters.

“Sandy, I’ve got lots and lots of work to do this afternoon. I was going to suggest that I make you dinner, but I’m afraid I’ll be here until late.”

“Can I help?”

“I think this is going to be official paperwork, mostly, so, no, I’m afraid not. Call me in the morning?”

So I drove home and walked back up to the Institute for the rest of the afternoon. I had about as much luck concentrating as I had earlier that morning, but somehow the day passed.

On Tuesday morning, I walked up to the Institute first thing to try to accomplish something constructive. But as soon as business hours started, I called the medical lab, for my blood test results. I really hadn’t been thinking about it, but I felt relief wash over me when they told me that everything was fine. Some other feeling washed over me, too—probably anticipation.

Then I called Angie.

“Oh, Sandy, I’m so glad to hear from you! I worked until about eleven last night, and I’ve been on the phone all morning. Those credit card activity traces came in. Our friends have been busy guys—they used the credit cards for cash, starting in Canada, up in Toronto. After that, they came into the country via Detroit, it looks like. Then there’s a gap of a month until they arrived here. Recently, they made a cash withdrawal at an ATM here in town, on Cordova, the Friday before you found Elizabeth’s body. So they were lying about being on the east coast.” She stopped to take a breath.

“So they could have killed her, then.” Spies these guys may be, I thought, but they’re obviously not up on their tradecraft.

“They were here, at least, and Kurkle’s statement puts them up on the Winsor Trail. And, Sandy? They were in Telluride when you were. There’s a cash withdrawal there, on the Friday before you found Davidson’s body. I called Annette Trieri, and she put me in touch with the police in a place called Mountain Village. It seems there was some trouble when they tried to rent a condo using cash. They had the money, and even had enough for a damage deposit, but then there was trouble when they wanted the deposit back in cash. So the police up there remembered them. I faxed pictures up and got a positive ID. Best of all, John Kurkle ID’d them late yesterday afternoon, in person.”

They *really* needed to brush up on their tradecraft, I thought. “So we’ve put them in the right places at the right times to have killed both Elizabeth and Derek Davidson. But it’s still pretty circumstantial, isn’t it? We obviously need to find that Touareg.”

“And I think I’ve got that one figured out. Where are you? Can I pick you up somewhere? Turns out that the Hilton uses dark blue valet receipts.”

I told her I'd meet her there and ran down the hill to get my car. It was something of a miracle that I didn't break my neck on the slippery trail.

I drove downtown in my allroad—no way do parking valets *ever* touch the Porsche. The guy at the Hilton gave me a dark blue ticket and drove off in my car to park it somewhere around the back, and I waited out front, listening for squealing tires, ready to rip his head off. But he must have been careful.

Presently, an official Nimbie vehicle, one with lights and everything, turned in, and I watched as Angie pulled the same stunt at the Hilton as she had made me pull at the Loretto—the valet had to jump out of her way this time. I followed her on foot as she cruised around the parking lot, looking for Touaregs. Eventually she pulled to a stop behind a gray one with Ontario plates and lowered her window.

“What do you think, Sandy?” She flipped a switch, and her emergency lights started flashing, which told me what she thought.

“I think we should see if that key works.”

And it did.

Unlike Angie's brother Jaime, I don't have experience in casinos, and my stock-market successes came slowly and incrementally—moreover, I usually found out about them a day or two after they happened. I think, though, I now know what hitting the jackpot feels like. Opening and searching that Touareg was positively exhilarating.

And scary, when we fully appreciated what we'd found.

First, there was the obvious—luggage with clothes and the other personal items you'd expect cross-country travelers to have, including a portfolio holding a variety of passports and, strangely, an envelope with tickets to the upcoming Rose Bowl game in a couple of weeks. Also, there was a stack of credit cards, which Angie thought might explain the gap between Detroit and Santa Fe in the records she'd obtained. And there were two trench coats, peculiar ones that had a dozen inside pockets each, maybe to hold all those passports, we speculated.

Then there was confirmation of what John Kurkle had told us, two goose-down parkas, winter hiking boots, and two backpacks, one with something sticking out the top.

“Grenade launcher? Is that what that thing is? No grenades?” I was mystified, but Angie recognized what she'd found.

“No,” she was rifling through the pack's pockets, “but here are a couple of CO₂ cartridges and some other stuff. Very weird.”

“Wait a minute.” I had to think. “Don't riot-control police use gas-powered grenade launchers to shoot those beanbag things, for crowd control? I remember reading about that somewhere, something about someone getting killed even though the beanbags are not supposed to be lethal.”

“Oh, right. I know what you're talking about. I think we even have some around NMBI somewhere. I didn't make that connection.” Her eyes were thoughtful, staring straight ahead.

“So what would our Syrian spies be doing with a grenade launcher? Do you suppose it's standard equipment for people on the terrorist watch list? Oh. Wait. Elizabeth had a bruise on the back of her neck. You don't think ...” I almost had it, but there was something missing.

“Maybe I do think that, Sandy. Maybe they followed her up into the mountains, ambushed her from behind by knocking her out with a beanbag, and searched her for the disk that Alexis Hall had. Then they left her to freeze. And they took her car key and searched her car while Kurkle watched.”

“Well, I’m no law officer, but that sure sounds like murder to me. Or, maybe, assault and battery and then negligent homicide, if the DA is feeling magnanimous.”

But the scary stuff was still waiting, underneath the parkas and the clothes, in two aluminum suitcases, one about the size of a briefcase and one a little larger. Angie had to pop open the locks using one of those multi-tools she carried in a holster on her belt.

The larger one only confused us, as it contained twenty compressed air horns, like the ones that people use at sporting events to make noise. Except these had their tops off, and there were several attachments of various sorts in the box as well. It looked as if the whole affair was designed to allow filling of the cans using whatever compressed air sources might be available—including, maybe, the compressor included with the Touareg to inflate its space-saver spare tire, I thought, at least if Touaregs are like my allroad.

“Damn, Angie. I sure wouldn’t want to be sitting in front of these guys at the Rose Bowl game. They must be huge Michigan fans, or something.”

But my feeble attempt at a joke was lost on her. She was looking puzzled as she opened the other aluminum suitcase, then her expression turned to horror and she gasped. “Oh, God, maybe not, Sandy. Look at this.”

The international biohazard symbol is a circle with three other broken circles in the shape of a three-leafed clover superimposed on it. Snuggled into the foam packing inside the smaller aluminum suitcase sat twenty little bottles full of a silvery liquid, or perhaps an ultra-fine powder, with seals on the caps that had bright red symbols on them.

Angie’s voice was shaking. “Now we know why they wanted that top-secret document, I guess. How many people does the Rose Bowl hold?”

“Over a hundred thousand, if I remember right.”

“That’s what I remember, too.”

* * *

Because the bottles were sealed, we decided to do things as quietly as we could manage, but we didn’t succeed very well. Angie called Orlando Aguilar, and he called the HazMat team from the city, just to be safe. They brought with them a contingent of Santa Fe city police, and pretty soon the Hilton’s parking lot was full to overflowing, but not with hotel guests—they were all looking out the windows at us. Before we were finally able to get away, the two FBI agents who had taken the computer disk, Hornby and Collingswood, arrived and proclaimed the whole thing a federal case—probably true, I thought, if the Touareg had come into the country via Detroit. Lots of state lines between Michigan and New Mexico, after all.

After about the fifth time I was ordered by someone in uniform to get the hell out of the parking lot, each time to be rescued by Angie, she took me aside.

“Here, Sandy, take my shield. This is a horrible breach of protocol, and if you lose it, I’ll lose my job. Also, don’t let Lando see that you have it. But I can’t do my job if I have to keep these idiots off your back all the time. Just show it and tell them you’re with me.”

But as the situation matured, Angie’s job began to evaporate. Other people took over after talking with her, and pretty soon she didn’t have anything to do but stand around. It felt good when she decided to stand by me.

“Sandy? You know we’re all here right now because of you, because you caught those two Syrian guys, right? And you probably saved tens of thousands of lives at the Rose Bowl, too.” She gave my right hand a little squeeze, and I squeezed back.

“Well, I just caught those two guys by accident, to save my own skin. I had no idea about all this.”

“Remember how they killed Derek Davidson? I guess they thought that Elizabeth had told him about the document thing. But remember how they killed him? I’ve been getting chills thinking about how they would probably have killed you that way, if you hadn’t pulled that stunt you did.”

“Tell me about it. That’s why I’ve been practicing my card tricks. Don’t want to lose those old skills, because you never know when they’ll come in handy. Oh. By the way. I called the lab about my blood test. I’m fine.” I’d been wondering how she’d react to that.

“Well, good! I am, too.” She smiled at me. “So, listen. I didn’t have a chance to make you dinner last night because I was too busy to. Instead, I put in lots of overtime yesterday, so I thought I’d take the afternoon off today. This thing looks like a wrap, for me, for today, at least. And it’s time for lunch. How about I make you something to eat? My place.”

“Sure! Sounds great. Can I bring anything?” It suddenly occurred to me that my heart rate might not be compatible with my age.

“Well, I’ve got all the food I didn’t make yesterday, lots of food. And there’s champagne in the ’fridge. Hmm. Oh, I know. You’re going to need to shave in the morning, right? On your way over, why don’t you go home and pack an overnight bag?”

* * *

Eighteen

Maybe it’s a variant of Murphy’s Law that, when you’re in a hurry, every little thing that could possibly slow you down does so. At first, it was getting out of the parking lot. I would have gladly paid the Hilton’s ridiculous parking fee, but first I had to get the car unblocked. Between the HazMat folks, the police, the fire-and-rescue crowd, and the FBI, the lot was completely grid-locked. I finally managed to get out of there by setting the allroad’s suspension all the way up to high and driving, gently, over a couple of those concrete parking-lot barriers and a curb or two.

Then there was the downtown traffic to negotiate. All the ruckus in the parking lot had drawn a crowd of on-lookers, including passers-by in their vehicles, and cars and trucks in the streets around the Hilton were moving at glacial speed.

When I managed to get clear of that mess, I found myself in the middle of an unannounced construction project. Apparently a water main had failed, causing a minor street flood on Grant by the civic center, and a city crew was busy standing around, leaning on their shovels, discussing what to do. We motorists were on our own, and that meant people jockeying back-and-forth, making U-turns in the middle of the street.

At that point, it would have been smooth sailing but for the fender-bender at the Paseo-Washington intersection. A tourist in a bulky motor home had misjudged the northward left turn off Paseo and clipped the front end of a Jaguar whose nose was sticking out too far. Because most of the police were down at the Hilton and the two drivers were involved in a shouting match, the intersection was considerably less than functional.

There are side streets, though, and in my high-clearance mode I managed to bump over curbs and even use a few sidewalks to make my way around to Hyde Park Road. But there I wound up behind a huge pack of bicyclists laboring up the hill at about two miles per hour, occupying the entire right lane and then some. For reasons unknown, there was an unusual amount of downhill traffic, and I couldn't pass.

And why they picked that day to grade the upper part of Gonzales Road, the part I needed to use to get home, was a question I had plenty of time to ponder. The gravel had become a teeth-shaking washboard and it really needed work, I knew, but why today?

After all that, the fact that the UPS guy had parked his truck across my driveway to make a drop-off across the street seemed trivial.

Finally, over two hours after Angie's suggestion that I go home—normally a ten-minute trip—and pack an overnight bag, I pulled into my garage. I'd called her a couple of times and discovered that she also had a problem with the Hilton's parking lot and the downtown traffic. But the second time, while I was behind that pack of cyclists, she was at her place and wondering where I was.

At home, I dashed into the house and began trying to get organized. I took a quick shower to rinse away the fear and shock of finding all that anthrax and the frustration and anger over the traffic delays, and then I considered what to pack. Clothes, bath gadgetry, and a cold bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé from the refrigerator formed a little pile, just right for the shoulder bag that was included in a luggage set I'd bought a few years earlier—and stored away somewhere.

Like most Santa Fe houses, mine was built on a concrete slab and had a flat roof with, in most of the rooms, exposed ceiling beams. Very picturesque, but very lean on storage space. I was fortunate to have lots of closets and an oversized garage to make up for a lack of an attic and a basement. But that was still not enough, and I'd been using my guest house as well, so when I couldn't find the bag anywhere I went out there to look around.

I'd checked on Sunday morning and found that Hal and Annette had left things tidy, just as they had found them, even to the point of running the linens through the washer and drier. So it was something of a surprise to discover a lived-in mess in the casita. I felt a little like Papa Bear after Goldilocks' visit. But that explained itself quickly.

"Well, well. If it isn't the two-timing son-of-a-bitch who hasn't called me for almost a week." Alex's voice was slurred a little. It seemed she'd found the wine I'd left for my weekend guests.

She was sitting in the corner of the living room where she could see out the window and be hidden by the way the door opened into the room. She startled me, but because I recognized her voice, it wasn't a real fright.

But the gun was. I turned to look at her and found myself staring at the business end of a small semi-automatic she was holding. Alex with a gun seemed to me like a tree-hugger with a chain saw—a contradiction in terms if there ever was one. Her various new-age Santa Fe connections were just incompatible with firearms.

I knew I had to be extremely careful, and I stood perfectly still.

"Alex!" I didn't have to feign surprise. "What in the world are you doing here? Do you know there's an arrest warrant out for you? A Federal one?"

"That's why I'm here, idiot. Well, that and because you had the locks changed on the house. That little trick ought to cost you, I think. Maybe I'll shoot one of your ears off." She raised her aim a little, holding the pistol rock-steady.

“Geez, Alex, c’mon. I told you about the locks. And I did try to call you. You haven’t been home.” I decided that a lie couldn’t make matters worse and maybe it would help. “Do you know what you’re doing with that thing? You never told me you had a gun.”

“What I didn’t tell you would surprise you, buddy. And, yes, I know what I’m doing. See that clock? Pick a number.” She waved the pistol toward the kitchen door, through which a clock was visible on the far wall.

“OK, OK, I believe you. It just seems so ... I don’t know ... so out of character.” I didn’t really know what to do, but stalling for time seemed like a good idea.

“‘Out of character’? You mean, an aroma-therapy flake like me, a Santa Fe new-age crystal-gazer shouldn’t have a gun? Hmm. Well, you’re probably right. But I’ve got the gun, so what should that tell you about me? Huh? It probably never occurred to you that I’m not really the helpless bimbo that you took me for. Pig.” With her free hand, she picked up a glass from the table by her chair and took a swig. “So, since you’re here, maybe you can tell me something I’ve been wondering about. You screwing that little *mojado* bitch yet?”

Maybe she wasn’t the Santa Fe flake she’d pretended to be, but she’d been around the southwest long enough to know how to insult people. Referring to New Mexico natives as wetbacks was at least as bad as referring to people of African descent using N-word.

While pondering how she knew about Angie, I waited long enough to realize that she wasn’t asking rhetorically. “Alex, I never talked to you about any of my other relationships, and I never asked about yours. I’m not a kiss-and-tell kind of person. Turns out, though, that Angela and I aren’t romantically involved. We’ve been working Elizabeth Davidson’s murder.”

“Ah, yes, Elizabeth. Poor Betsy. From what I can figure out, her eastern Mediterranean friends weren’t as patient as she thought they would be. And it’s too bad. We could have made a lot of money *and* helped advance the cause.”

“Uh, ‘cause’? What cause?” Although I had to ask, the answer was already dawning on me.

She smiled, a sort of dreamy smile with evil overtones. “Why, bringing the Great Satan to his knees, of course. Hadn’t you heard? Oh, of course you wouldn’t have, being a trust-fund parasite instead of a productive contributor to society. You scum. I should just shoot you right now and put you out of your misery. But, no, that would be too kind. I think you need to suffer.”

“Alex? What are you talking about? I mean, we’ve been together for a couple of years now. Where is all this coming from? What happened to that sweet person I’ve been in love with? Do you know I’ve been thinking about asking you to get married? What’s going on here, anyway?” Keep her talking, I thought. Stall, stall, stall.

She looked surprised at first, but then her eyes narrowed in suspicion and she actually hissed. “You what? Liar! You just dumped me, and now you’re telling me you were thinking about marriage? I hate liars!”

She raised the pistol toward me, and I saw her index finger begin to move inside the trigger guard.

* * *

In addition to flat ceilings with exposed beams and other southwestern touches, houses in my neighborhood have fancy exterior doors. Some people hang true works of art on their front entrances; others, like me, have solid doors made from thick oak planks with carved filigrees on the outside. I think it was the casita’s solid door that saved me.

As soon as I saw Alex's finger begin to move, I dove out the door and landed on the porch. The pop from that little pistol, surprisingly loud, told me I'd made it just in time—and, later, I dug a lead slug out of the oak, a souvenir of the adventure.

Even though my hip was still stiff from the previous week's spill, I jumped up like a gymnast and sprinted back toward the house. Alex had been sitting in a low-slung chair that I always struggle to get out of, and I was hoping against hope that, between the chair and the wine, she'd be slow to get after me.

In the main house, I grabbed my cell phone and, from the top shelf of one of the kitchen cupboards, the two suppressed semi-automatics that the Syrians had "accidentally" left behind. Then I slipped out the side door—the door on the side of the house away from the casita, the side next to the hill up to the Institute.

I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with the automatics. Defending myself—meaning, getting into a shoot-out with Alex—didn't really seem like a good strategy, even though I had firepower on my side. I think I grabbed them instinctively, afraid that Alex might find them. Looking back on it now, I doubt she would have, but at the time I wasn't thinking too clearly.

I was sure about the phone, however. As I scurried up the trail to the Institute as fast as I could manage, I pushed the speed-dial button with Angie's number in it. She answered on the first ring.

"Sandy! What's taking you so long, anyway? I'm all hot and bothered here, and I need your body!" Normally, she would have taken my breath away with a comment like that, but at the time I didn't have any for her to take.

"Angie! Listen, I'm sorry, but I've got a real problem. It's Alex. She was hiding out in my casita, and now she's trying to shoot me." I had to stop talking to pant. "I think I'm getting away from her, but I can't be sure. I'm headed up the path to the Institute."

"What?! Holy sh... OK, OK, listen. You keep running. If there's a way to do it safely, I mean without getting into problems with the snow, get off the path and into those trees of yours, see if you can hide. I'll get my tail over there as fast as I can, and I'll get help on the way, too. What's she thinking, anyway? Jesus!" I could hear background noises that suggested she was already on the move.

"I'm armed, but I don't really like the idea of shooting her." My sentences were getting shorter because of my increasing need to breathe harder.

"You're armed! What? Where'd you ... Oh, never mind, I don't want to know. Just keep going, OK? You're in good shape, maybe you can outrun her. Please don't get into a shoot-out, OK? Or shoot the ground, maybe the report will scare her off." I heard a motor start in the background. "Listen, I need to call 911, but I'll call you right back."

And my phone went dead, surprising me so much that I stopped and stared at it for a few seconds. That was enough time, though, to give me an idea.

My hillside is mostly covered with piñon and juniper, but there are several places where limestone rock outcroppings intrude, making small cliffs. Above them are slabs of bare, exposed rock, one of which bordered the trail where I was standing for a few dozen feet. I carefully knocked the snow off my right shoe and stepped onto the slab and then cleaned my left shoe off before stepping over there with it. Then, staying on solid rock as best I could, I walked off the path across the hillside until I put at least a hundred yards of trees between me and the path. I sat down behind a tree with especially thick foliage near the ground and tried to make myself small.

Angie's suggestion was still ringing in my ears. If I had an unsuppressed pistol, I thought, perhaps I could make enough noise with it to scare Alex off. If she thought I was shooting back, maybe she'd give up on me. I put the phone in a pocket and set one of the pistols down. The silencer on the other one

unscrewed with surprising ease, and it went into another pocket. Then, with a handgun in each hand, one still suppressed and another ready to make noise, I turned to toward the trail to keep watch.

I'm surprised I didn't shoot my foot or something when my phone played its chords, I was wound so tight.

"Yeah?" I was whispering.

"OK, Sandy, the cavalry is on its way. I'm just coming up to the Hyde Park Road intersection now, and I think I'll pull in to the Santa Fe Institute lot and come down your trail. Where is it? Are you OK?"

"Northwest corner. And, to tell the truth, I'm scared out of my mind."

"Good. It'll keep you alert. Have you seen her?"

"No, but I'm too far from the trail to see much of anything. You be careful coming down, OK?" About then, I heard a distant thwok, thwok of a helicopter, getting closer. "Is that helicopter with you?"

"Yep, our guys. They'll hover and use a loudspeaker to let her know she's outnumbered and outgunned. Listen. I'll see you soon. Right now, I've gotta coordinate this thing on the radio. 'Bye.'" And my phone went dead again.

With the helicopter getting louder and louder, I realized that there was no chance that I was going to hear Alexis' footsteps, so I redoubled my watch of the area between me and the trail.

"ALEXIS HALL, THIS IS THE NMBI. DROP YOUR WEAPON AND STAND IN THE DRIVEWAY WITH YOUR ARMS SPREAD!" To call the helicopter's public address system a mere loudspeaker would be to understate things a bit.

I was up the hillside far enough that the helicopter was just about at eye level for me, hovering over my house, or maybe over the road out in front of my house. I could see an officer sitting in a side entry hatch, M-16 at his shoulder, scanning the ground below. Over to my left, I saw three State Patrol cars coming down the hill toward my driveway, and to the west there were more coming up Gonzales from the other direction.

"ALEXIS HALL! COME OUT UNARMED AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED. WE HAVE YOU SURROUNDED." The helicopter began a slow circle around my house, the hatch with the sharpshooter sitting in it tilted slightly toward the ground.

I suddenly felt a cold spot on the back of my neck, like a half-inch ice cube.

"Those damned things sure are noisy, aren't they, Sandy?" I could feel Alex's breath on my left ear. "Why don't you set those guns down, slowly and carefully? If I'm going to have to shoot you, I'd like it to be sporting."

* * *

I was in no position to haggle, so I laid the two semi-automatics in the dirt under the tree in front of me.

"Oh, dear. Bad Sandy. I want them. Take the one with the silencer and carefully put it back here beside you. Do it!" She was talking quietly, but forcefully, and she sort of screwed the barrel of her pistol into the back of my neck for emphasis.

"Good boy! Now the other one. And be careful. I'm a little nervous." Her breathing was fast enough to verify this for me. "Thank you. Now put your hands on top of your head, fingers laced together, and lean forward. And hold still."

I did so, and a few seconds later, when the helicopter came closer to us, I heard a heavy thup thup thup right behind me. The helicopter noise changed as it veered off.

“There, that should give us a little privacy, for a few minutes, at least.” She sighed. “Poor Sandy. I bet you didn’t think I’d find you up here, did you? You probably thought I didn’t know about your little trail, even. What you didn’t know is that all those times you left me in bed asleep, well, I wasn’t. I was doing sprints up and down your hillside here. Girl’s gotta keep her figure somehow. So, what’s their plan, Sandy? Are they coming down from the top?”

“Alex, what in the world is going on here? This is all crazy!” I tried to talk normally, conversationally, but it probably came out strangled.

“Please don’t talk so loudly, Sandy. Like I said, I don’t want to have to shoot you just yet. And answer the question.” She prodded me in the back of the neck with a gun barrel—it felt like a bigger one, and it was warm.

“Alex, I don’t know what’s going on. I saw some patrol cars coming down Gonzales, but I don’t know their plan.”

“But you did call them, didn’t you? Tsk tsk. Bad, *bad* Sandy. You made a pretty good boy-toy for a while, but you’re a lousy co-conspirator. Well, I think you’re going to be my passport out of here. Stand up—use your hands if you have to, but put ’em back on your head when you’re standing—and let’s work our way over to the trail. Then go up. And, remember, I’m right behind you with this thing.” Another prod reminded me of what thing she meant.

While I walked, carefully and slowly, trying to balance on the uneven rocks with my hands on my head, Alex talked. She told me of how she and Elizabeth had been in the Middle East together, and how they had been recruited into Hezbollah to be sleepers for future work in the U.S., for something in the nature of this anthrax attack in particular. Perversely, she seemed proud of the fact that their plan was to kill as many as a hundred thousand innocent people.

Because the organization operated as independent cells, she didn’t know who was going to be the contact for the classified document, and that’s why Elizabeth was involved: she knew. But Elizabeth had second thoughts, and everything got screwed up.

It wasn’t clear to me, but it seemed as if Alex didn’t know about the fate of the Syrians or the document. And there was little chance that she knew about our discovery of the Touareg earlier in the day. With the gun in my back, I didn’t feel like it was the right time to tell her, either.

When we reached the trail, I turned right to go up it, but she stopped me.

“Let’s just stand here for a minute, Sandy. Not that I don’t trust you, but I’d like to be sure that there isn’t an army coming down. Please be very quiet.” She poked me with the silencer again.

The helicopter had been gone for a few minutes, and things were returning to normal in my little nature preserve. I heard jays squawking down by my feeders, and there was a hint of a breeze sighing through the trees. And there were voices, sounding confused, down by the house.

“OK. Let’s go, quietly.” And I started up the trail.

Two switchbacks later, I saw a flash of tan through the trees, tan the color of Angie’s uniform. It was up the hill, at the apex of the next switchback, and very brief. I hoped that Alex hadn’t noticed.

“Alex? Do you really think you’re going to get away with all this?” I didn’t shout, but I wasn’t trying to be particularly quiet, either. My question got me an especially hard poke in the back.

“Sandy!” She was hissing again. “What did I say about being quiet? And to tell the truth, I don’t care if I get away with it. Dying for the cause is something that I’d be proud to do.”

About half-way up to where I saw Angie—or what I thought was Angie—my phone let loose, the opening chords of *Jump* shattering the winter silence.

“What’s that?” She hissed.

“My phone. Want me to get it? It’ll ring for a long time before it goes to voice mail. I’ve got it set that way, at least 30 seconds.”

“Get it! Fast!”

“Hi, this is Sandy.”

“Got her attention, didn’t I?” Angie sounded gleeful. “Act like it’s a wrong number.”

“Who?” I said, with as much confusion as I could muster.

“Watch ahead, and when you see me step into the trail, fall to the ground instantly, no hesitation, no questions. Got it?”

“Oh, well, sorry, I don’t think you’ve got the right number.”

“Good going. Remember, no hesitation.” And she disconnected.

“I sure hope you’re not scamming me.” The voice behind me was not happy, and I got another poke in the back.

We were struggling up a slippery place on a straight stretch, and I was having trouble keeping my balance with my hands on my head. I wanted to watch the trail up the hill, for Angie, but I also needed to look down to keep my footing. I heard Alex having trouble behind me, too.

Then, as if by magic, Angie appeared in the middle of the trail about fifteen yards ahead, in a two-handed shooter’s stance, weapon pointed straight at me. I flopped to the snow as fast as I could, banging a knee on a rock in the process.

And nothing happened, or at least not right away. I could hear Alex breathing hard, and the jays were still squawking down by the feeders.

Angie spoke first. “Drop the weapons, Ms. Hall. Do not move, and drop the weapons. Do it. NOW!”

I realized that with her arms at her sides, Alex could still have me in her sights, so I rolled away down the hill. I wound up on my back, with a view of Alex through the branches of a juniper.

“Well.” Alex sounded amused. “If it isn’t the Nimbie *puta*. How does it feel to betray your people, huh? Fall in with the Anglo establishment, sleep with the white guys, turn your back on your origins?”

“Drop the weapons, Ms. Hall. NOW!”

“I don’t think ...” Alex began to raise her arms, and in quick succession there were four loud booms that echoed off the hillsides while she crumpled to the ground in a heap.

“Angie!?”

“I’m fine, Sandy. You OK? Good move, by the way, rolling like that.” I could hear her coming closer and watched as she knelt to check Alex for a pulse.

“She’s dead, Sandy. Come on up.” Angie began talking on her radio, all business.

I lay on my back and watched the world for a while, trying to sort out what had just happened. My heart was still pounding, and I discovered that my breathing was perilously close to panting, so I concentrated on getting things under control. Eventually, the adrenalin in my bloodstream began to fade little by little, and I tried to focus on something peaceful.

The sky seemed like a good candidate. Its deep blue was mottled with small clouds clipping by, from a direction that I decided must be the west. It made me feel better to be getting my bearings.

Finally I struggled to my feet and brushed snow off myself, and started up the hill. My knees were shaking—the left one hurt from where I banged it—and I felt light-headed, so I stopped to take some deep breaths. Even though it had begun to fade, I could tell the adrenalin was not going to wear off completely for quite a while.

Angie was on the radio, talking matter-of-factly with the others. When I reached her, she winked at me.

“I don’t know what the ruling will be, but from my perspective this comes down to a case of ‘suicide by cop.’ She deliberately raised her weapons, both of them, in my direction, well after I directed her to drop them, after she thought it over for a while. And I’ve got a witness. Wait one, over.” And she grabbed me in a bear hug.

“Oh, man, I’m so glad you’re OK. You really had me worried, Sandy. Let me finish this, OK?”

And she went back to the conversation on the radio, giving me more time to absorb the events, something that I needed to do, it seemed. She signed off the conversation about the time I was beginning to hear real voices coming up the hill through the trees.

I hugged her this time. “Well, I had me worried, too, I guess. It was spooky having a gun pointed at me that way, and she even took a shot at me down in the guest house. That was something else. And that was an Alex I never knew about, I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah, but it’s over now, all except the paperwork. We can put it all behind us and get on with our lives.” She gave me a squeeze and then leaned back and smiled at me. “I mean, we talked about how it’s not a good idea to mix business with pleasure, right?”

“I remember that conversation, and I’ve been having second thoughts ever since.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore, right? I mean, the business part is over, right?” She had that impish smile going.

“Riiiiight”

“So, do I remember that you have a hot tub? And a big bed?”

The bed part got my attention. “Yeah, of course, just down there.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I fed my fish then. I don’t think they’ll be seeing me for a while.”

* * * * *

Developing Murder

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



Developing Murder: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

Riding up the mountain, Lannie Young couldn't decide whether she just had a cold bottom or whether she was literally going to freeze her ass off—leaving patches from her cheeks behind, sticking to the seat when she got off at the top, maybe. It was one of those philosophical questions that she pondered now and then as a way to help distract herself from her misery while sitting on ski lifts.

And she was truly miserable—at 9:07 on a Friday morning in late January, still trying to wake up, Lannie was sitting alone on the Zephyr quad-chair at Winter Park enduring weather so bad that it had closed Berthoud Pass and scared the tourists into huddling in front of the fake fireplaces in their rented condos. The thermometer at the base read minus twelve, and it looked to be snowing at a rate of more than six inches an hour. At least, she thought, it isn't blowing, which means it should be eight or ten degrees warmer at the top.

No wind was good news, but better news was that it had been snowing like this off and on most of the night. She and the handful of other hard-core powder hounds riding the lifts at the opening bell would have between two and three feet of new, light snow to play in for most of the morning.

Because this was her first ride up, she was freezing, especially her backside. A run or two would get her warmed up, she knew from experience, but, damn, it was *cold* this time, even inside her new, insulated powder suit. She wriggled around and kicked her legs to keep the blood flowing—because she intended to check out the new snow on Outhouse for her first run, she needed her legs to be ready.

Yet again, she was glad that the Zephyr was a high-speed lift—at least she wouldn't have to sit too long. On the last, flat stretch before the upper lift house, she kicked her legs more and took deep breaths, getting psyched.

At the top, there were two little groups of unidentifiable people standing around, hopping up and down to keep warm while they argued about which run to do first. Lannie ignored them and turned left toward Outhouse. Through the gate with all the signs—signs with black diamonds, signs declaring there to be no escape to an easy run once through the gate, signs with every type of dire warning except skulls and crossbones—she saw no tracks.

Yes! she thought, and whooped her delight aloud. A first-tracks run down Outhouse in 3 feet of champagne powder! This is why I put up with the grind of selling real estate up here, dealing with all those people who have too much money to know how to spend it wisely. And the scumbag developers and their builders—ten-thousand square-foot log cabins, indeed. Which reminded her of the appointment with the assistant district attorney that afternoon. Well, she thought, the powder will be all chopped up by then so I won't be missing anything here.

As soon as she was through the gate, the slope increased, and she began to pick up speed. Her fat, flexy powder skis began to float, and she immediately started a gentle hopping motion, like being on a trampoline, to get them bouncing so she could turn. Between the falling snow and the spray she was making, she could barely see, but the trees along the edge of the run were visible as a wall of darkness. There, she knew, would be where the snow was absolutely the best, so she angled left, toward the steep side of Outhouse, near the trees.

At the top, she had been so focused on getting into the powder that she hadn't noticed one of the groups there breaking up, heading off in various directions. Or that one of the men was following her. Now, on the run itself, she was so concentrating on making perfect *wedeln* turns, linked S's, over to the edge of the trees, back toward the center of the run, over to the edge of the trees, that she didn't notice how fast he was overtaking her.

But she did notice the shove from behind, a ski-pole tip in the small of her back, just as she was going to launch into a right turn away from the trees. She couldn't help but notice—for one thing, it *hurt*; for another, the shove sent her out of control, and she had to fight not to lose her balance. Of course, this completely disrupted her turn, and she continued to pick up speed as she flew downhill into the forest.

She managed to dodge the first two trees, mostly, brushing by several smaller branches, snapping them off. But the third, a 12-inch lodgepole pine, got her, one of its large, lower branches catching her chin-high. In a fraction of a second, it crushed her mandible and then caught under her upper teeth, snapping her head back with a twisting motion. The force pulverized her three lowest cervical vertebrae and severed her spinal cord in an instant. Like a flying crash-test dummy, she tumbled deeper into the trees, finally coming to rest in a heap some fifty yards from the edge of the steep mountainside clearing that was Outhouse.

And the snow continued to fall, creating a new hump, another rock-like mound of white amid the spruce and fir.

* * *

One

The Saturday we drove from Durango to Fraser was spectacular, the perfect transition to our new home. And, in retrospect, we needed a good transition. If we had known what was awaiting us in Fraser, we might have just stayed put.

It was just after a big snowstorm had blanketed the mountainous half of Colorado, more of a blizzard, really, and the sky was that deep blue that makes the new snow on the ground so startlingly white—or maybe it's the other way around.

Actually, we were late. We had intended to make the move in early January, but we discovered that pulling up roots to relocate, even for only a year or so, involved way more than just packing to go on a long vacation. It was so complicated and there were so many details to finish off that we ended up living out of a Durango hotel room—it was really a suite, downtown on Main Avenue—for ten days, because we'd rented our house to people who arrived in the second week of January.

But the spectacular drive across Colorado's high country made us forget all that.

By the time we got as far north as Silverthorne, it had been nearly twenty-four hours since the snow stopped, plenty of time for the road crews to get things plowed out. But much of that day had involved wind, so Hal decided to take the low road to the Fraser Valley in order to avoid two additional crossings of the Continental Divide. The highway over Fremont Pass had been more challenging than he would have liked, and he said he didn't want to deal with road conditions like that again. He rationalized the extra thirty or so miles from Silverthorne to Fraser via Kremmling and Granby as bypassing both the

potential traffic mess at the Eisenhower Tunnel on I-70 and the likely avalanche closures on Berthoud Pass.

Besides, he said, we had been over Berthoud Pass the other times, first when we were being chased by those goons in the rental car and then when we were on our second honeymoon the previous spring. Hal explained that I needed to see the broad meadows and rolling hillsides of the Colorado River Valley, and the cliffs and spires of Byers Canyon. If we were going to live up here for the next year, he said, I needed to get to know the territory.

Just like the first time, a ski trip to Winter Park while we were dating, we had left Durango before first light and made it to Silverthorne for lunch. Unlike the first time, though, it didn't seem to Hal that anyone was following us, so he was much more relaxed. He likes fast driving, and it has the side benefit of making me feel sexy. But he doesn't like being chased by bad guys with guns. His years of experience as Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University just haven't prepared him for such things. Academic politics is bad news, to be sure, but it involves words, not bullets.

Anyway, we were in my Subaru Outback on this trip, and, with its little four-cylinder engine, it didn't qualify for driving fast, at least not in Hal's book.

"Let's see. The other time we came up this way, we kept going up the interstate, east, right? And now we're headed, what, north? On State Highway 9?" I was looking at an atlas of Colorado, trying to trace our route.

"Right. Around the Williams Fork Mountains instead of over them, or, I guess, instead of under them via the tunnel. North, then east, then back south a little. Less traffic, trust me. Also, this is a beautiful valley, down the Blue River. We'll be coming back over here to do some fishing this summer."

"OK. Then what? We get to Fraser, we have to find this subdivision that your friend Win built his new house in?"

"With the help of that hand-drawn map that's in there somewhere, yeah. Hope we didn't lose it. He told me the directions over the phone, but they were so strange that I got him to fax me that map." He looked over at the atlas in my lap. "Find it?"

"Um-hmm, here it is. I guess we can worry about it when we get there. But you said we were staying in his guest house, right?"

"For a while, at least. I called him to see if we could stay in his condo, like we did last time. I thought we could stay there for a few weeks until we find something more long-term. But he launched into this story about how he sold the condo and bought land in this subdivision, and then he built a house and a barn and a guest house, which he offered us for the whole year—the guest house, not the barn. I had to do a little song and dance to commit to only a month. I mean, what if we don't like it? But I didn't ask him that."

"This subdivision—it says here on his map that it's called 'Middle Earth Estates.' And comparing his map to the atlas, it looks like it's up on the side of a mountain. Uh, Sheep Mountain, it says in the atlas. 'Middle Earth Estates?' Where'd they get a name like that?" I wrinkled my nose, knowing that Hal would understand just the level of distaste I was feeling.

"Well, this part of Colorado is called 'Middle Park.' But mostly it's developer talk. Marketing hype. Knowing Win, it'll be a top-of-the-line development. Large tracts of land. Probably a gate with a guard, all that kind of stuff. That's why I didn't want to commit to a year without checking it out in person, without both of us checking it out."

“Good plan. Especially because the streets in this place seem to be named rather strangely. ‘Hobbiton Hollow,’ for example. And Win’s address, 151 Lothlórien Lane. What a thing to have to put on your stationery, for crying out loud.”

“More hype. Win told me that the guy who developed the place has a kid who’s just at the age for the Tolkien books, you know, *The Lord of the Rings*. And when they were about to plat the subdivision, the first movie came out. So that’s where the names of the roads came from. Probably made the kid happy, but ... I don’t know. Maybe all the more appropriate names like ‘Pine Tree Way’ and ‘Aspen Drive’ were taken.” He was shaking his head.

“So, anyway, we get to Fraser and turn right, coming from this direction, and then use Win’s map. But I’ve been looking at Grand County in this atlas, and it’s a big place. Fraser is actually kind of tucked into one corner.”

“The fastest growing corner, because of the ski areas and the scenery. And the easy access from Denver. So that’s where we both start. Criminal investigation and educational resource needs are where the people are—and that’s where Chuck wants me to put together this new institute as well.”

“It looks like we get to Grand County on this road, just north of this big reservoir, Green Mountain Reservoir.” I had the atlas turned sideways. “And then we’re in Grand County the rest of the way.”

“And the little town of Kremmling is one of the places we’re going have to be concerned about, because it’s an important community center. Did you ever read that Grand County History I found?”

“I looked at the first chapter and almost dozed off reading the title. ‘The County Grand: Physical Geography.’ Or something like that. Yawn.” And then I actually did yawn. Long car trips always put me to sleep, and staying awake for most of this one meant that I had a sleep deficit building up.

“I never said I read the thing. I just found it. I think it’s on the back seat at the top of the box of books.”

“Does this mean you want me to get it?”

“When you get bored with that atlas, why not? Read us a little about where we’re going.”

I unbuckled and knelt on my seat to rummage around in the back. “Ah, yes, here it is. *The County Grand: A History*, by Carla Fraser. Carla Fraser. Now why would that name ring a bell?”

I turned back around and re-buckled my seat belt. “Well, I can’t remember. Good thing for you I don’t get car sick, if you want me to read. Let’s see, how about the physical geography stuff first? I guess if I’m reading aloud I won’t go to sleep.”

“Or if you do, I’ll know it’s truly boring. I’m all ears.”

I opened the book and cleared my throat. “Ahem. OK, here we go...”

Chapter 1

The County Grand: Physical Geography

In terms of size, Grand County, Colorado, is only a couple of townships shy of the entire state of Delaware. Big as this sounds, you can count its municipalities on two hands and still have a couple of fingers left over to count its ski areas. With fewer than nine people per square mile, there’s plenty of elbow room—but that’s up more than 50% since the 1990 census, so some folks are beginning to feel crowded. Even so, it’s still

mostly empty, especially compared with the sprawl of the counties of the Colorado Front Range, just a short hop over the Continental Divide to the east.

Of course, if you count tourists, the elbow room shrinks, especially where they tend to congregate: the towns of Grand Lake and Winter Park; Rocky Mountain National Park and the Winter Park / Mary Jane ski area. And, if you're backpacking, the Indian Peaks and James Peak Wilderness Areas seem almost full, because backpackers have a different notion of "elbow room" from the rest of us.

Grand County is home to the headwaters of what is now called the Colorado River. Originally, the small stream that arises just below La Poudre Pass and then flows through a spectacular canyon known as Little Yellowstone was called the Grand River. Only when it finally joined with the Green River in the Utah Canyon Country below Moab was the interior West's major waterway called the "Colorado." Now it's the Colorado River from the start, first wending its way south through the oxbows of the Kawuneechee Valley toward Grand Lake, then joining with the Fraser River near Granby to become more than just a small mountain stream before it heads west.

"It goes on. More river stuff and..." I flipped pages, "...looks like geology, lots of stuff about mountains and rocks, and yet more river stuff. Do you really want me to continue? I mean, I can, but I'm putting myself to sleep."

"Well, the last thing I need to do is to go to sleep. Maybe we should just enjoy the scenery. Or you can take a nap. We can save that history for when we have insomnia."

"Good. I'd rather watch the scenery anyway, if I can stay awake. I gather that big lake we went around was Green Mountain Reservoir?"

"Right. And here's the county line, so you can watch the real thing go by instead of just reading about it. I think, maybe, that last ridge up ahead, way up there, is where we drop into the Colorado River Valley. Kremmling is just down there. Then it's up the river past Parshall and Hot Sulphur Springs to Granby and then our new home. For a while at least."

"I know we've talked about this over and over, but I'm still worried that you're not happy with this change." I yawned again.

"It's hard to see how it could have worked out any better. I mean, it's just too cool that you were able to cut that deal with the CBI, becoming a Deputy Director at Large to come up here to work with the sheriff's office on its future. And I'm certainly ready for a sabbatical, so scoping out the educational needs of the growth areas up here is a good justification to be here. The U and the State will realize their investment in me. On top of that, the opportunity to set up this institute was just too good to pass up."

The opportunity was indeed remarkable. Hal's tenure as a dean at Frémont State had been stimulating—a refreshing break from the usual faculty grind of teaching, research, and assorted service activities. It had also been highly successful, according to the Provost, but Hal was ready for a change. For one thing, his cynicism had been growing more and more dominant in his thinking about university administration—not a good attitude for a dean to have. For another, the person who really ran the dean's office, Alice Swan, Hal's administrative assistant, had retired. Hal simply didn't have the energy to break in a new assistant. He had explained all of this over dinner on numerous occasions, each explanation sounding progressively more desperate.

So he was open to the idea of new opportunities.

The cocktail party had been the kickoff for one of President Black's fundraisers, and movers and shakers from industry in Colorado were there. Among them was Charles Shure, President and CEO of UNELECO and one of the twenty or so most powerful industrialists between the Mississippi and the West Coast.

Hal's presence at the cocktail party was one of those duties associated with his appointment as dean, one of the more pleasant ones, actually. He and the other deans, plus some department heads, were supposed to schmooze the potential donors into becoming actual ones. And he took me, as he always does, to show me off and to surprise people who've never met me. As he put it one time, privately, introducing people to a knock-out babe in a little black dress, a babe who turns out to be a Colorado Bureau of Investigation director, creates wonderfully amusing double-takes.

But then Shure asked, casually, if Hal would be interested in heading up a new research institute, underwritten with a billion-dollar endowment, that would use advanced computing hardware to simulate regional climate, and Hal forgot all about schmoozing for donations.

* * *

"So I'm looking forward to all this." He looked at me and reached over to pat my leg.

In Kremmling, we turned east on US Highway 40, up the Colorado Valley. Here, the valley was wide and the surrounding hills were rolling, sometimes tree-covered, everywhere glistening in the sun. Bare cottonwoods lined the river banks, and the parking lots for the public-access fishing leases were empty.

The grade up Byers Canyon was still snow-covered and icy, and even though the road was sanded, I felt more secure for the all-wheel-drive and the new snow tires Hal had bought for the trip. Still, it was clear that the car needed more power. The business of the transmission's continually shifting up and down was a real pain, with all the surging. But even though I was still sleepy, the scenery made staying awake worthwhile—red and orange spires of rock topped with the white of the new snow.

At the top of the grade, we caught up to a state highway department gravel truck, and Hal had to slow to the speed limit through Hot Sulphur Springs, something unusual for him. With me in the car, I think he feels as if he can speed with immunity. One day, I'd like him to get pulled over so I can just watch while he tries to talk himself out of a ticket. And if he tries to bring me into the discussion, I'll just bat my eyelashes and play dumb.

Slowing down for the town, though, was helpful, because it allowed me to catch a glimpse of the Grand County Court House and the sheriff's department office building, where I would likely be spending much of my time—and where I was hoping I'd fit in.

Then he was able to pass the creeping truck on the flats east of town, and we had the road to ourselves through Windy Gap, where the Granby section of Middle Park opened up in front of us, the backside of the Front Range towering white and serene over everything. I finally dozed off for a while, until I felt the car stop.

"Are we there yet?"

"Sort of, a grocery stop. Want to come in, or wait here and sleep?"

"Oh, I'll come in and get waked up. Where is this?"

"Fraser. You might as well begin learning this store, where things are and so on, because we'll be in here a lot. It's the only real supermarket in this part of the valley."

We loaded up on staples and a couple of dinners and breakfasts, and then set out for the subdivision, with me navigating from the hand-drawn map. We turned off the highway onto a county road, and soon we were driving through a forest, a forest of dead trees.

“Hal? What’s all this about, all these dead trees?”

“The drought, and some kind of beetle, I think it’s called the Ips beetle. Sucks the life out of the trees and they die. There are thousands of dead acres up here. It’s pretty depressing.”

And it was. After four miles or so, all plowed but increasingly narrow and wooded, with much of the lodgepole forest dead, we came to an imposing gate post made of bundled tree-trunks on either side of the road, with a spanning sign reading, in a very elaborate script,

Middle Earth Estates

Private

More smaller, but quite obvious, “private” signs decorated the posts. A hundred yards farther there was an official-looking sign informing everyone that the road was private and there was no access to public lands. The message was loud and clear: if you don’t belong here, go away.

“Good.” Hal was taking it easy, because the road was snowy and slippery despite being plowed, “At least there isn’t a gate, or a guard-house. We can come and go as we choose without being watched. I guess.”

“That’s a good omen. Let’s see, take the next left. That should be Lothlórien Lane. There was a fancy street sign back by the gate-post, so maybe there will be more. And then Win’s place is the first driveway on the right. Number 151. Not a lot of traffic, huh?”

“Looks like we’re probably the second or third car on it since it was plowed, must have been this morning. So, no, I guess not a lot. Win told me there are something like two dozen parcels of land in this subdivision, about half of them have houses so far. They’re each about 35 acres, so there should be lots of elbow room. Moreover, Win said he bought four of the lots, so he’s got almost a quarter section.”

“So, how much does property up here go for, anyway? I mean, from what you just said it sounds like there should be—what?—ten or eleven lots for sale.”

“Something like twenty thousand an acre, I think. For that, you get underground utilities including natural gas and TV cable. And lots of dead trees. But not water or sewer. So you get a million dollar lot and have to put a septic tank in it. And uphill, I guess, a well. Ah. Here we go.”

We’d come to an intersection with another of those fancy street signs sporting more of the elaborate script. Hal turned left, and the road wound up a little valley, disappearing around a curve into the spruce and fir. Every now and then there was a clump of bare aspen trees for variety.

Just around the curve, we came upon a driveway on the right, with a slab of sandstone standing like a monument next to it, “151” chiseled prominently into its face. Ahead, the road appeared to wind around the shoulder of a ridge while the driveway looked as if it was headed up to the top. Fortunately, it was plowed as well, somewhat more thoroughly than the road, in fact, as there were gravel spots showing through here and there. Because there were no berms of snow on the sides of the driveway, Hal pointed out that his friend Win, or at least Win’s caretaker, must have an industrial-grade snow blower.

A half-mile farther, after two switchbacks to make the grade manageable, the driveway reached the top of the ridge, and the valley opened up before us. Confronted by more than 180 degrees of view including rolling hills of snow-covered conifers with the Indian Peaks of the Front Range centered a few miles across the valley, all we could do was stare in amazement. Shoshoni, Apache, Navajo, Arikaree,

and North Arapahoe Peaks—as I’ve since learned their names to be—watched us impassively from their 12- to 13-thousand foot vantage points.

After five minutes of pure gawking, Hal continued up the driveway, around the last switchback, and came to the guest house—not that we would have known without the map, as it looked to be at least twice as large as our house in Durango, a three-story wall of windows bisected by a rock chimney, with wings on either side. But the map said clearly that the first thing we’d come to on the driveway was the guest house.

“So this is a ‘room with a view’ kind of place, huh?” I was trying to hide my astonishment, but I know I failed.

“Looks like. Let’s see if this is the right place. Where’s that garage-door opener Win sent?”

The main driveway led past the right side of the house, and the right-hand wing turned out to be a large, two-car garage with its driveway apron cleared off. The door began opening when I pushed the button of the gadget I retrieved from the glove compartment.

“Before we go in, let’s see where the driveway goes.” Hal kept the car pointed up the main driveway.

The ridge kept rising, but the driveway stayed almost level, traversing the hillside. After another quarter mile or so, through a large aspen grove, we came around a curve and discovered the main house. It was now clear that we were, indeed, staying in the guest house, as it was a mere scale model for this larger structure, more properly described as a hotel than a house, at least by the look of the façade.

Hal kept driving around the circular drive past the front doors—an appropriately grand entrance—and then back down the driveway. Neither of us said a word until he pulled into the guest-house garage and killed the engine. I pushed the button on the remote, and the door closed behind us.

Hal sat behind the steering wheel, staring ahead at the garage wall. “You know, Win’s condo was quite nice, penthouse, four bedrooms, all that, but I always thought it was, well, small. Looks as if he felt that way, too. And, besides, with this guest house he won’t have to worry about riff-raff like us staying in his own digs any more. Not that I’d want to. I mean, he always asked me to make certain the toilets flushed, remember? In that place, it would take a couple of days to make the rounds of all the bathrooms, looks like.”

When he finally stopped babbling, I sighed. “I thought we were doing OK, I mean, financially. We both have respectable salaries, there’s our portfolio of retirement investments and so on. Two nice cars. A lovely house. What are we doing wrong?”

I was also staring at the bare garage wall talking in a monotone.

“We’re working stiffs, that’s what. Win was always the entrepreneur, even in college. He invested, took risks, put together deals. It worked. And look at Chuck Shure. Built a business empire from the ground up, with a start from his grandparents, I guess. Unless we win one of those monster lottery jackpots, we’re just in a different world from those guys.”

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got to move into inside this place. Look at it this way. We get the fun of moving ourselves into a new home. I bet Win and Chuck never get to have that experience.”

* * *

Although my car was full of our things, it was still not a lot of stuff—mostly just clothes and on top, of course, skis. There would be a small truck arriving Monday, with more, and Hal’s Audi S4 was packed full of other things that we were afraid might get broken by the movers. It was waiting for someone to

fly back to Durango to fetch it. Our furniture was staying behind, though, for the visiting professor from Switzerland and his wife who were renting our house on Eighth Street.

And it was a good thing we left most everything back in Durango, because the guest house was completely furnished, including linens and kitchenware. Our own furniture wouldn't have fit into the place. But we immediately decided to pack the various knick-knacks away so that we could substitute our own—making the place more familiar in that small way, at least.

It took us only about two hours to get settled, and somewhere in there the sunset happened. And the full moon rose over the Front Range.

“Did you plan this?” I was standing in front of the wall of east-facing windows, once again astonished at the view. Hal walked up and put an arm around me.

“Coincidence all the way. Romantic fellow that I am, I wish I could have planned it, though. Think we'll ever get used to this?”

“Maybe it won't be quite so mesmerizing, but I bet it'll always be spectacular.” I leaned into him.

“We need to stare at it a lot, because we might decide that we're too isolated up here. The commute, after all, could be an adventure after snowstorms. And there's no newspaper delivery and other in-town amenities like we're used to.”

I was skeptical. “For this, some isolation is worth it. And the commute as well—what was it altogether, five, six miles? That seems manageable. Maybe we can carpool, go into town for breakfast and the newspaper every morning.”

“You don't sound eager to go somewhere else.”

“You kidding? Abandon this view? And what about the hot tub, the heated garage, did you notice that? What about that kitchen, with the automatic boiling water spigot thing and all that other stuff? Think we're going to find a rental with all this? For this price?”

“Yeah, well, free is hard to beat, that's for sure. So, how about I turn on the fire and put together that casserole we talked about? It can cook while we watch the alpenglow over there fade.”

“Uh, ‘turn on the fire?’ I didn't see any firewood.”

“Gas log. Watch.” He walked over to the mantle, picked up a funny-shaped remote control, pushed a button, and a fire burst to life in the fireplace between the windows.

“So what's this huge chimney for, if it's just a gas log?”

“It was probably designed as a regular wood-burning fireplace, and then Win decided to do the environmentally correct thing and avoid the wood smoke. Besides, I bet the whole chimney eventually warms up and heats the entire house. Kind of inefficient, but probably a lot better than a real fireplace would be.” He pushed another button, and there was a beeping noise as two ceiling fans 25 feet above our heads began to spin.

After supper, we settled on the couch to watch the fire and the moon over the valley. Hal had made what the cookbooks call cassoulet, three kinds of white beans with various leftover bits and pieces of meat in it, simmered all day. He and I had long ago begun calling it franks and beans, because his fast version involved canned white beans and smoked pork sausage with a liberal dose of *herbes de Provence*.

We were working on after-dinner cups of tea when lights came up the driveway, first headlights on the trees and then taillights, and finally, when the car turned the last switchback, headlights in our faces. Shortly, the doorbell rang.

“Expecting anyone?” Hal could tell, though, that I was as surprised as he. And then I heard his surprise level ratchet up a notch when he opened the door.

“Good evening, I’m sorry to intrude. But I’m told that Annette Trieri is staying here?”

“She is. Please come in out of the cold, officer.” Hearing my name, I walked up behind Hal.

“I’m Annette Trieri. What can I do for you ...” I looked quickly at the insignia on the shield the officer was wearing on his bomber jacket, “... sheriff?”

“Ms. Trieri, I’m Sheriff Francis Schmidt. But please call me Fran. We talked on the phone a couple of times. I’m sorry to bother you at this time of night, but I heard you’d made it up here today. And I’d like to talk with you for a minute.”

“Come in. Coffee? Hal makes a mean cup of decaf this time of the evening. Oh, yes. Sheriff, this is Hal Weathers, my husband. While I’m up here working with you folks, he’s going to be doing some consulting with the school system about their future. Seems they have some of the same problems with growth that your office does.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Weathers. And, yes, a cup of decaf would be just the thing.” They shook hands and Hal headed off toward the kitchen.

“So, sheriff, what’s on your mind this evening?”

“It seems that you came at a good time. It looks like we’ve had our first homicide in a long while. Yesterday, we think. Found the body today. And there are complications.”

* * *

Two

“Complications?” Hal’s voice echoed slightly from the direction of the kitchen. “That’s what she likes, sheriff, complications. Cream and sugar, sheriff?”

“Black, please.” Fran Schmidt lowered his voice, unnecessarily, because Hal had the coffee grinder going. “Ms. Trieri, this is pretty sensitive stuff, what I need to talk to you about.”

“Don’t worry about it, sheriff. If Hal doesn’t hear it from you, he’ll hear it from me. I talk about all my difficult cases with him. It helps me think them through. Let’s go sit in the living room.” I led him toward the couch in front of the fireplace.

“Well,” he still looked doubtful, “OK, then. See, the reason it’s sensitive, and the reason for the complications, is the victim. Pillar of the community, active in church, all the right things for a close-knit county like ours. And the circumstances are compromising.”

“Compromising complications?” Hal walked into the living room with a steaming mug of coffee, thanks to the instant hot-water spigot. “She’ll really like this, sheriff. And don’t worry, I’m the soul of discretion. I guarantee that some of the things I’ve heard in my role as dean make this criminal stuff look tame. And if it will make you feel better, I’m a State of Colorado Official Person, just like she is. That’s what working for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education gets me.”

“Oh, that’s right. I remember that when we talked on the phone, Ms. Trieri...”

“Please, Fran, call me Annette. We’re going to be working together for the next six months, at least. And go ahead and call him Hal. He doesn’t answer to official-sounding greetings very well.”

“...uh, Annette told me that you were going to be working with CCHE and the school system here on growth issues, and—what was it?—post-secondary education. And some kind of new institute? Then this will interest you, for sure.” He took a sip of the coffee and then a larger one, and nodded appreciatively.

“Say, this is good! I keep thinking I’ve got to quit using that instant coffee, and this is the clincher. Anyway, what happened is that we got a call this afternoon from our new school superintendent, Emily Griggs. She moved here last fall, and, being new to the community, she bought a condominium near the ski area, one of those places that had reduced its prices because the units weren’t selling well. She’s single, and she’s a skier, so it made sense. Anyway, today she called my office and said that someone needed to get over to her place as soon as possible. The office called me at home and I went.”

“Now, to be clear, you mean the Winter Park Ski Area, not the other one?” I had shifted into my analytical mode.

“No, the other one, SolVista. It’s closer to Granby, where the school district offices are. Her place is in one of the smaller condo buildings right near the base, over the first ridge from the highway. So, anyway, I go over there and what do I find but, sprawled on her couch, the body of Tobias Summers.”

“Your pillar of the community and so on. Any obvious signs of a struggle or cause of death?”

“Nothing obvious, aside from some empty liquor bottles, so we’re going to have to wait for the autopsy. But he was only partly dressed, and he looked like hell. Now, I know that sounds strange, I guess you’d expect a dead guy to look like hell, so let me explain. See, Tobias Summers is—was—maybe the richest man in the upper valley here. He’s a lawyer and a developer, and he’s what you’d call a clothes horse. Armani suits and so on. Impeccably groomed. But it was clear that he hadn’t shaved for a couple of days, and he was wearing worn out jeans and a tank-top shirt. No shoes—in fact we didn’t find any shoes that would be his anywhere in the condo.”

“So what’s Emily Griggs’ story?” I was sitting on the edge of the couch, trying to memorize every detail.

“Says she was out of town, went down to Denver on Thursday and spent the last two nights down there. Came back this afternoon after the roads opened. But she doesn’t have anyone who can verify that she was in Denver, she says.”

“Unless she slept in her car, she has a motel receipt.”

“I thought of that, but she says she paid cash and tossed the receipt. She went down to go shopping. That’s not unusual, by the way. People do it all the time, although they don’t always stay overnight. She got stuck down there by the weather.”

“If she went shopping, she should have some dated store receipts.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t. She says she couldn’t find what she went down there for, so she didn’t buy anything.”

“Not even gas receipts? I bet gas is cheaper down there and you’d expect her to buy some. Hmm.” I stared at the ceiling, way up there. “So you’ve got a pillar of the community dead on the couch of the superintendent of schools, whose story is thin. Let me guess. This guy Summers was married, family, all that stuff?”

“Right. That’s part of the complications. His wife is a teacher at the middle school in Granby. Works for Griggs, with a couple of layers of management in between, of course.”

“The richest guy in the valley is—was—married to a middle school teacher? Interesting.”

“She obviously doesn’t need the income, in fact I think I remember some newspaper story about how she donates it to the teachers’ retirement fund or something like that. She likes kids, I guess. She and Tobias have five kids of their own, in college and older. If I recall, there are a couple of grandchildren.”

“So, I guess I’m getting the picture here. But there’s one thing that isn’t clear. Why do you call this homicide? Maybe he just had a heart attack or something.”

“You’re right, maybe ‘homicide’ is a tad premature. But, see, Summers was healthy as a horse, participated in the Grand Triathlon this year in the over-forty category and came in second or third. And he was a straight arrow, LDS Church deacon, didn’t drink or anything, no reason to think he’d be fooling around. And here are the liquor bottles and Griggs’s story that doesn’t stand up. I mean, if he was fooling around with her, say they were having sex and he had a heart attack, why would she make up a story that she can’t defend? This lady is no dummy—she’s got a doctorate from the University of Denver. So I smelled something fishy and decided to go with the assumption of homicide until I hear different.”

“Did you arrest Emily Griggs?”

“No, but I made her agree not to leave the valley. If she runs, well, that will tell us something, won’t it?”

* * *

Sunday morning, we went into town, as we had discussed, for breakfast—more like brunch, by the time we got there—and the newspaper. Sharky’s Eatery, recommended by the sheriff as the locals’ favorite for breakfast and lunch, was still full of people in brightly colored ski outfits putting away high-calorie meals in preparation for a day of exercise. The current dictates of ski-suit fashion seemed to be oriented toward various exotic shades of reds and blues, and those of nutrition leaned toward large, well-stuffed omelettes with huge mounds of hash browns.

I mentioned to the harried waitress with the nametag reading “Mindy” that Sheriff Schmidt would probably be joining us, and our status immediately jumped several levels. After a short wait, we were shown to a corner table set for four.

“He said he might stop by, but what I really wanted was space to spread out the paper.” My ability to manipulate circumstances this way always makes Hal glad to be on my side.

The combined Denver paper, the Sunday *Denver Rocky Mountain Post*, as Hal likes to call it, was soon spread across the table amidst cups of coffee and plates of the house favorite. Because we hadn’t planned to ski, we made a pact with each other to figure out some form of exercise later in the day, to make up for the calories.

The front sections of the paper were full of national headline news and various matters of interest to the folks in the Denver metropolitan area, so it took some hunting for me to find the short story about the untimely death of a prominent real-estate developer in the Fraser Valley.

Meanwhile, in the business section Hal ran across his own name in a story obviously adapted from a press release put out by the UNELECO public relations machine. It named him as the founding director of a new non-profit institute to be established by the Charles and Rebecca Shure Foundation for the purpose of putting the “United States back on the world map of global environmental research.” To

Hal's relief, details about when, where, and how much were lacking, as most of the story was puffery about the Foundation and its benefactors.

"Hey, this is interesting!" I was working on my hash browns and talking at the same time. "This short story about Summers' death doesn't have anything in the way of details, but there is a comment here about how he was planning a new development called 'Tabernash Meadows' that has generated lots of controversy. Are there real estate ads in this paper?"

"Are there real estate ads in this paper?" Does a bear...well never mind. Here." And Hal shoved a huge pile of newsprint my way. "Your real estate sections, ma'am, all twelve of them. Most of the ads will be for developments down in the metro area, but I bet there's a 'mountain' or 'high country' section also." He went back to his omelette and the puff piece about Charles Shure.

After considerable shuffling and reshuffling, I found it.

"Here we go. 'Tabernash Meadows, the Best of the Fraser Valley,' according to the ad agency. Looks like they're planning a subdivision, hmm, just south of Tabernash or something. I guess that would be just north of here. It talks about affordability. Says that the first phase should be available next summer."

"There's a huge empty pasture along the railroad tracks there, maybe that's where. The other side of that sports complex by our county road. Remember?"

"Sort of. Below, I mean, east of, that first little bluff, huh? By the tracks. Gee, that'll be peaceful, trains going by all the time. Plus the traffic on the highway. Says here that they're planning eight hundred new homes. Or seven hundred and ninety, actually."

"Times, say, three and a half people per home is something like twenty-eight hundred new residents. More than twenty per cent of the entire county. Wonder what it'll do to infrastructure, water, sewer, all that?"

"Here comes Sheriff Schmidt, with company. Let's ask him. Hi, Fran! Have a seat, I'll clear up this paper." I pushed piles of newsprint around, clearing the two empty places.

"Annette. Hal. Good morning. Let me introduce you both to Officer Janelle Kennedy, one of my under-sheriffs. Joined us last summer, fresh from the Marines, Shore Patrol. Janelle, this is Annette Trieri and her husband Hal Weathers." We both stood and shook hands with the tall, strikingly beautiful woman in uniform.

"I've been telling Janelle about your assignment here, Annette, and how it's starting out with a bang, so to speak." Schmidt surveyed the table as he and Kennedy sat. "Haven't seen the paper yet, anything in it?"

"A short story about the death of Mr. Summers, they're not saying what happened."

"Yeah, that's not surprising. We didn't tell them anything. Um, I should tell you that we're planning to release Ms. Griggs's condo back to her. Janelle and my forensics guys spent all the time there they need, they say. But maybe you'd like to look it over or something?"

"Not me. I'm all thumbs when it comes to forensics. But I'll be interested to see their report. And I'd say that if they're done, giving the condo back to Emily Griggs is a good idea, it'll give her less excuse to rabbit."

"That's what I thought, too." Janelle Kennedy's voice was as beautiful as the rest of her, with a southern accent to boot.

"Janelle," Hal chimed in, with a big grin, "Something tells me you're not originally from around here. That accent, for one thing."

She smiled and held up her left hand, reaching it out toward the window and appraising its back carefully.

“I guess I don’t exactly blend in with the snow, do I?” The milk chocolate skin was indeed something of a contrast with the scenery outside. “No, I’m originally from Savannah. And you know what? It’s damned cold here. But my husband got a job with that outfit that’s running the ski area, so here we are.”

“Cold indeed, even for us. Durango doesn’t get anywhere near this frigid.” Hal polished off his cup of coffee and looked around. “So, we were just talking about something in that story about Summers, this new subdivision he was developing just north of town. The story says it’s controversial. Is it likely to move ahead without him?”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing.” Schmidt was also looking around for a waitress, and finally waved for a cup of coffee. “Especially because my folks owned the land next to this piece he was going to put the subdivision on. They used to lease the meadow for summer pasture, in fact.”

“Seems like that many houses would have a huge impact on the community, hell, all the communities here. No wonder it was controversial.” Hal got a refill on his coffee as a bonus when Schmidt’s new cup came.

“Yep, even some folks in the Chamber of Commerce had reservations about it. But Summers, well, he was a force around here, one that wouldn’t be denied sometimes. And from what I’ve heard, he’s been calling in all sorts of favors to try to get this approved. There’s been lots of opposition, from local environmental groups and others, too, but it was looking as if he’d carry the day. Now I’m hoping that the whole thing will just go away, so then I won’t have my budget stretched so thin. Our plan was for Annette to help me figure out how to deal with this growth, but maybe it won’t be so critical now.”

“There’s still growth up here, though. There’s something for me to do, I bet.” I wasn’t ready to re-locate back to Durango yet.

Hal was staring off into space, like he does when he’s doing math in his head. “I’ve been looking at land prices up here, on the internet over the past few months. Even if these lots were small, I’d be surprised if they went for less than, oh, 80 grand apiece. So that many lots would gross something close to 64 million. Less infrastructure costs and so on, it’s still a lot of green, and it just counts the land.”

“Especially,” Fran Schmidt was unhappy, “because I recall something about how Tobias wound up getting the property for a song. Never heard the details, but there was some kind of complicated three-way land and water-rights swap involved. He paid somebody something like four million or so and wound up with that parcel. So he would be looking at least a ten-fold profit margin, if you factor in the development costs, in only a few years. Not bad, huh?”

Janelle Kennedy looked startled. “Sounds like this might provide someone with a motive to want Summers dead.”

“You got that right, Janelle.” The sheriff shook his head. “Y’know, it used to be quiet up here, rural. That’s all changing, though, with these wheelers and dealers moving in. Tobias had been here for a long time, but there’s lots of newcomers just like him, or trying to be.”

It was my turn to look around for a waitress. “Well, you saw that place we’re staying—and it’s only the guest house. This kind of wheeling and dealing is how you get to be able to afford such things. Unlike us working stiffs.”

“Yeah,” Hal saw Mindy, and waved at her, “but look who’s the real stiff. You deal with that kind of money and controversy, you run risks that folks like us just don’t have to worry about.”

* * *

It was Sunday, so everyone had the day off except merchants and ski area workers, and we had enforced vacation. But we didn't want to ski, because word of all the new snow had spread around Denver. We knew Winter Park would be unpleasantly crowded. So, after brunch and a stop at the grocery store, we went home—we were determined to think of this small mansion as “home,” at least until we found something more appropriate.

Despite the fact that most of our belongings were not due to arrive until Monday, there was plenty of puttering around to be done, to get moved in. Hal went exploring while I rearranged our hasty unpacking of the evening before.

I was in the middle of figuring out the underwear drawers in the dresser when I heard a shout from somewhere downstairs, seemingly far away. It didn't echo, but almost.

Rather than shout back, I went hunting. I knew he wasn't upstairs, so I started with the rooms on the main floor, and then headed down to the basement. Eventually I found him in a little mud room by the walk-out basement door, examining a pair of snowshoes.

“Look what I found!” He was wearing the grin of a ten-year-old. “Toys!”

“Right.” I'm a skier, but my other winter sport is sipping cocoa in front of the fireplace. I'm especially good at it if there's a shot of peppermint schnapps in the cocoa. “Now all we need is a sled and some dogs. You can play Sergeant Preston of the RCMP.”

“Not at all. This is great! We can go wandering around the woods here, get a little exercise, avoid the crowds. And it's free.”

“Aren't those things heavy? And they must make you walk like a duck.”

“No, no. Maybe the old kind, those huge wooden ones with moose-hide decks. But these new hi-tech ones are lightweight and shaped so you just walk. Here, feel this.”

I took the snowshoe from him and had to agree that it was lightweight, and the spikes on the bottom looked as if they'd be useful for slick spots. So, after a half hour of fooling around, finding the right clothes, digging out our new insulated boots, figuring out the bindings, we were standing at the edge of the driveway, next to a three-foot cliff of snow, ready to go.

“So, how do we do this again? Just walk? Where?” I was not at all confident that the big things on my feet would work as advertised.

“Well, this is all new snow, so we've got to make a trail. I'll go first and stomp the snow down; you follow and step in the spots I miss. Then we'll have a trail to come back on, and for next time.”

“Next time?” My expression elicited an unsympathetic laugh.

But it worked, after a fashion. Hal was obviously getting a lot of exercise, lifting his snowshoes clear of the unpacked snow and stomping down until the snowshoe supported his weight. He wound up standing about half-way between the level of the plowed driveway and the top of the untracked snow. He floundered off around the corner of the garage, in the direction of the aspen grove across the front of the house and down the hill a bit. Gingerly, I stepped up the eighteen inches onto Hal's tracks and set off after him, using the ski poles that he had given me for balance.

It took me only about a dozen steps before it stopped feeling weird, and I fell right into the rhythm. I tried to step on the spots where Hal's snowshoes hadn't completely compacted the snow, but even

there I sank only a few inches. And it wasn't too long before I was using the poles in rhythm with my steps and not leaning on them, much.

"Don't forget to check out the scenery." Hal's voice startled me, and I looked up to find him standing in the aspen grove, watching my progress. I realized I had been watching my feet, a common beginner's mistake for skiers that I had adopted for my snowshoes.

So I made it a point to look up every other step and soon found that I could actually manage to look down only every third step—the scenery was sufficiently compelling that I was motivated. And it was so quiet—the soft scrunching of the snowshoes and Hal's heavy breathing were the only sounds to be heard.

Hal's track weaved its way through the aspen grove on a slight uphill traverse, making a loop around the house and generally following the ridge line. As the aspen gave way to spruce and fir and his weaving changed to accommodate the wider spans of the lower branches, it occurred to me that this was like walking in a well-groomed park. Because the snow covered all the undergrowth, there was none of the usual stepping over deadfalls and bushes involved in summertime walking in the woods. And, unlike the lodgepole woods lower down on the mountainside, here most of the trees were still alive.

Hal took us up over the ridge and down through the trees, which changed back to aspen, around to the main driveway, breaking maybe three-quarters of a mile of new trail altogether. He stopped on the plowed driveway and leaned on his ski poles.

"Whew. Well, that's my exercise for the day. How are your legs?"

I had noticed twinges on the outsides of my legs just below my hip joints and decided that it had to do with walking with my feet slightly farther apart than normal. Not at all like a duck, but definitely not like I usually do, either.

"OK, mostly. This is easier than I thought it would be. I think I'll do some stretching when we get back, though."

"Speaking of which, we can either take these things off and walk back on the drive here or go back the way we came. It'll be easier this time, especially for me. But it depends on whether you've had enough of these snowshoes for one day."

I thought for a minute and opted to go back the way we'd come. There was something quite appealing about those quiet, park-like woods that drew me that way, sore legs or not. And because Hal let me go first, I felt as if I had the place to myself—even the scrunching was softened because Hal wasn't breaking trail this time, and he wasn't breathing nearly so hard. The only sound was a freight train laboring its way up the valley far below.

And the view was different this time. At the edge of the aspen, just before the dark forest of spruce and fir took over, there was a little clearing with an opening toward the south. The runs of the ski area at Winter Park were dotted with tiny figures. Hal proceeded to tromp out a small circle, a platform of packed snow amidst the three feet of untracked powder.

"Maybe tomorrow we can bring a ground cloth and sit here and have a picnic. If there's sun, at least."

* * *

Three

Monday morning, I felt creaky. When we had finally made it back to the house the previous afternoon, my legs were protesting enough to get my attention. Snowshoes, I decided, require different muscles from either walking or skiing. And despite half an hour of yoga to stretch things out, the next morning it hurt all over again.

But even with the aches, I managed to do more yoga, which helped. Then, after some breakfast, I drove over to Hot Sulphur Springs for an appointment with Fran Schmidt. We planned to begin a discussion of staffing levels relative to growth projections.

Just about the time we were finishing up, his computer bonged and a sultry female voice announced that he had new mail. Like so many other people, he couldn't ignore it—I think of it as Pavlovian—and he turned to his keyboard. It took him only five seconds of reading to react.

“Whoa! What the hell? Annette, come look at this.” I got up, carefully, aware of a twinge in my hip, to read over his shoulder. After all of the usual header material I found a carefully composed letter:

Dear Sheriff Schmidt:

You'll find my body in the garage. The keypad code for the garage door, the right-hand one, is 1-9-1-6, the year I was born – my memory has been fading, and this is how I've managed to avoid locking myself outside for the past several months. I turned off the garage heater and cracked the window, and I'm going to leave the door open until I get sleepy. So, what with the cold nights and sub-freezing days we're having, I should be quite solid when you get here.

You'll find a notarized document that has instructions about my cremation on the hood of the car. It will be in a file of papers with a will and so on. Therefore, unless you think there will need to be an autopsy, you might have your folks bring a pine box. (I'm 6'1" tall, by the way, and reasonably thin, about 170.)

You'll also find an empty bottle of sleeping pills in the downstairs bathroom and an empty bottle of Glenlivet by the cot in the garage, with the remote door opener – at least that's my plan. That should give you a clear hint of the cause of my death. And the time (assuming that I got this delayed email business to work right) would be about three and a half days before the time on this message. I'm fastidious enough that I'm going to make sure that things are tidy for you – I'd hate to think that people would have to clean up after me.

I'm thinking that there will be some discussion of all this, and people will be asking why. So to clear that up, in the folder with the will and so on there's an essay. But the sound-bite version is that I'm old, in lousy health, and I'm terribly lonely. And I don't want to be a burden to anyone. So I think this is for the best.

I hope it's not too much bother.

Best regards, Mike McMurphy

“Wow. Like a message from the grave or something. You know this person, Fran?”

“I know of him, more like. Met him in passing a few times, had a couple of conversations with him. He's a minor celebrity in these parts, reclusive, somewhat mysterious, but famous. An author. Lives, or lived, I guess I need to use past tense here, way up Crooked Creek Road above Fraser. He bought out an

old mining claim a few years back and had a nice house built, beautiful view, surrounded by National Forest. I remember some controversy about it.”

“Any reason to think this isn’t straight up?”

“No, not really. I ran into him in the grocery store over in Fraser a couple of weeks ago, and he was looking old, I mean, older than his age, if you can believe it. Frail. Kind of confused, actually, so I chatted with him for a while and asked him if there was anything I could do for him. But he turned me down. Said he was getting his driveway plowed out whenever it snows so he can get into town. Must have been costing him a bundle, because he’s way up there.”

“Even if he planned this out carefully, it seems strange. Age, poor health, and loneliness don’t just switch on. They develop over time, it seems like. Do you know of any recent events that may have precipitated this?”

“His wife died about six months ago. Long battle with cancer. He’s definitely gone downhill since that. And he *is*—uh, was—old, ninety or something like that. But I guess I better see who’s over that way and send him up there to see if this is on the up and up.” Schmidt pecked at a few keys, and a patrol schedule appeared on the screen.

“Mind if I tag along? This note seems kind of pat, you know? Too neat. Besides, I haven’t been up Crooked Creek Road. I need to get to know the county.”

“Don’t see why not. Hmm. Looks like Janelle is on patrol over that way.” He looked up at the clock. “Probably about to have some lunch. Let me find out where she’s going to eat and you can meet her there. You can take her a copy of this email, too.” He clicked a screen button and a printer hummed.

“Janelle? Oh, yeah, Janelle Kennedy, yesterday at brunch. So, how should we handle this?”

“Well, let’s see. McMurphy, or this email from him, has that code for his garage, 1916, so I suggest you use it and see if his body is really in there. If so, you’ve got cause to enter the house. If not, there’s some kind of hoax going on, and you should see if he’s around somewhere. I think our radios will work up there, and, if not, he’s got a phone. If there’s any hint of anything strange, go carefully. Two unattended deaths over the same weekend is probably some kind of record around here.”

“OK. I usually treat anything involving a body as a potential crime scene until shown otherwise. We’ll see what there is in the way of tracks in the snow, too.”

* * *

Officer Janelle Kennedy was having lunch in Sharky’s, at a table with three other women in civvies. Kennedy was facing the door, and she waved me over to the table, where an extra chair was waiting.

“Ms. Trieri, please join us, and I’ll introduce you around. This is Millie Sabelhousen, Tina Granger, and Fiona Simpson. Girls, Annette Trieri, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation here in Grand County.”

“Everyone should call me Annette, including you, Janelle.” I looked at Janelle’s brown eyes and nodded for emphasis. “Do you suppose I have time for a bite before we take off?”

“Fran called me, and from what he said it sounds like another few minutes isn’t an issue. Nobody up there is going anywhere, it sounds like. Besides, you might like to hear the rest of this little discussion we’re having. We’re being subversives—trying to revolutionize the school district.” Kennedy’s grin was more humorous than subversive, but I noticed that the other three women shot nervous glances at each other.

It seemed a little strange to me that we wouldn't dash off to see about the McMurphy situation, but I was determined to fit in with the local culture. And if that meant a relaxed attitude about chasing after leads, well, so be it, I thought.

I decided to be reassuring. "Well, if you're not in a hurry, I'll get a sandwich. And I know for a fact that the CBI is interested in subversive activity, so you'll have to tell me all about it. Except mostly our interest has to do with the middle-eastern-terrorist variety of subversives, and you don't look the type. So if it's about the schools, I don't think we'll be too concerned. Besides, the school district is democracy at its most fundamental level. I bet what you're doing isn't subversive, it's just good-old-fashioned democracy in action. Anyway, I'm here only to assist the sheriff's office with some planning. And he griped about the school district all morning." I stopped feeling guilty about little white lies years ago.

I looked around the table and smiled broadly at all of them. "I remember a Mark Twain quote, something like 'God created idiots for practice, and then he created school boards.' Or maybe I've got it backwards." They all laughed, and their concern dissolved.

Just as Janelle started to explain about the school board, a waitress appeared. I decided I was hungry, so I ordered a cheeseburger and fries. After all, I thought, we're going up into the mountains, and who knows when I'll be able to eat again?

"So, Annette, what we were talking about was how the school board has decided that their main goal is higher test scores. So they're requiring the principals to require the teachers to make sure that the students get higher scores on those awful standardized tests the State of Colorado sends out. 'Teaching to the test,' it's called."

"Why would the state send out standardized tests? Are they supposed to be experts, or something?"

Fiona Simpson, a thin woman with sharp features onto which she had smeared too much makeup, spoke up. "They're not experts, really, but the policy, which the legislature mandated, is that financial aid to school districts depends on test scores. It's not exactly that the rich get richer, but districts with consistently poor scores that don't improve get penalized."

"In law enforcement, we call that kind of behavior 'bribery.' But I guess if government does it, it's different, no?" The coffee I'd also ordered was set in front of me, and I warmed my hands with it for a minute.

Millie Sabelhousen, one of those short, round, bubbly women whom you'd suspect was a high school cheerleader before her calorie intake caught up with her, snorted her disgust. "What it does is allow the school board to enforce a standardized, rote curriculum. They don't have to deal with real issues in education today, all they have to do is get our kids to learn to answer multiple-choice questions correctly. And none of these tests has anything the least bit controversial on it. Evolution? Hah! My Donnie wants to go to medical school. How's he going to get into a good pre-med program without a strong biology course or two in high school?"

"For that matter," Tina Granger, athletic, dressed for skiing, had her two cents to contribute as well, "any of our high-school-aged children who want a quality university experience need more than just the ability to get good test scores. They need a real education. My Beatrice is in the middle of her junior year, and she's starting to think about where she should apply. She's been getting straight As, but all that will do is to get her into Colorado State, or maybe, if she's lucky, CU-Boulder. I'd like to see her go to an Ivy League school, or maybe Cal Berkeley. Hmmph. Fat chance, with this test requirement crap."

"Well, my Nathan is still in middle school," Janelle Kennedy sipped her coffee, "so we have some time yet before college is an issue. But I'm still upset about this. Learning is something you've got to learn to do, and these standardized tests are just not the kind of thing that is conducive to learning. But,

look. There's another side to this. Before we moved here, we lived in Los Angeles for a several years while my husband worked at Disneyland. And if you think the schools here are bad, you ought to check out the schools in LA. Even in Orange County, in Irvine where we lived, they were mostly just baby-sitting services designed to keep the kids off the streets. At least here they're trying, even if they're misguided."

"I wonder how this will affect my husband's job." It seemed to be my turn so I jumped in. "One of the things he's going to be doing here is working with local officials to assess higher education needs in the local area. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education is trying to plan for the future, and eastern Grand County is a place they're watching."

"Watching for what? A place to put another Colorado Mountain College campus, or something? They have good programs, but, c'mon, they're only a two-year institution, a community college." Tina Granger made no attempt to hide her ambitions for her daughter.

"Good question. I've heard Hal talk about how difficult it is to commute to anywhere from here, west Denver or the CMC campuses in Dillon and Steamboat. Or Vail. On the other hand, since Grand County is part of the CMC District, that's what a two-year college would be here, wouldn't it? But, look, maybe they'll get more ambitious and decide that a branch of CU or CSU would be appropriate. The closest four-year colleges are in the Denver area, right?" I thought for a second and began ticking numbers off on my fingers.

"I mean, if Pueblo, Alamosa, Gunnison, Durango, and Grand Junction can have four-year colleges, why shouldn't there be one up here somewhere? Maybe some place like Kremmling, I don't know." From conversations with Hal, I had been learning about Colorado higher education lately, and this seemed like a good time to show off some of my new-found knowledge.

Millie Sabelhousen looked interested. "You think that's possible?"

"Another good question. If your child is in high school now, though, I doubt that there will be anything in time for him. But who knows what they'll decide for the future? First thing, though, is to get the local house in order. I hear your school district's new superintendent is in a bit of a pickle." I wanted to find out what the local grapevine knew about Emily Griggs' situation.

"I'll say." Fiona Simpson didn't hesitate. "Of course, you probably know more than I do, Janelle, but I heard she was having an affair with Tobias Summers and he dropped dead while they were having sex!"

"And him with a wife and children. A wife who's a teacher in the district, yet. That's terrible." Millie Sabelhousen was shaking her head at the shame of it.

My cheeseburger arrived, so I was able to eat instead of talk, which gave me the excuse I needed to avoid correcting their inaccuracies. As the gossip progressed farther and farther from the truth, I winked at Janelle, and she winked back.

After a few minutes of speculation that impinged on a world of complete fantasy, Tina Granger summed things up. "Anyway, the tragedy of it all is that there was some hope that Dr. Griggs would be able to stand up to the school board and their new philosophy of teaching to tests. And now it looks like she'll be fired."

The tragedy of Tobias Summers' death seemed to be secondary to this group.

* * *

Janelle and I had the excuse of checking out the McMurphy cabin, so, to our mutual relief, we were able to escape from the gossip-fest as soon as I finished my burger. While Janelle worked the sheriff's department Dodge Durango carefully up the snow-packed surface of Crooked Creek Road, I called home.

"Hal? Did the movers come yet?" They were due in mid-morning, but we were skeptical, given the obscure location of where we were staying.

"About eleven, and they're about half done or so. The garage is filling up, but I'm going to leave room for your car. Right side."

"The garage is filling up? Aren't they taking things in?"

"Oh, sure, but there are boxes and boxes that don't have an obvious destination. I guess we should have collected everything in one place at home instead of having them pick it up from all the different rooms. I had no idea there was so much stuff. And there's not even any furniture. It's astounding." He sounded overwhelmed.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry to leave it to you like this," I lied.

"Don't you worry. I'm going down to Denver and then to Durango tomorrow, so you'll have some time alone with it all." He chuckled. "I'll clear a path between the bedroom, the bathroom, and the kitchen, though."

"I don't understand how it could be like this. I mean, yeah, there were boxes in just about every room of the house in Durango, but this new house is as big, maybe bigger"

"But the rooms don't all match up. The bedroom and the kitchen are obvious, but we didn't decide where to have the study, and our living room at home doesn't seem to be the same as the main room here. So there are lots of boxes that I don't know where they go." He probably shrugged when he said this—I could just picture it.

"Oh. Well don't worry about it. I'll take a stab at it while you're gone." It would give me something to do in this new house while he was away, I thought.

"Works for me. But I've got to warn you about the miscellaneous problem."

"Huh? We've got miscellaneous problems? What miscellaneous problems?"

"No, a problem with miscellaneous boxes. Seems like there must have been two or three from each room. So now there are a couple dozen or so, all in the garage, all labeled as 'miscellaneous-one' or 'miscellaneous-two'. I guess we're not exactly experienced with this process, are we?" At least he was laughing.

"Oh, no. You're right—I remember now. I guess it'll be an adventure."

"Speaking of which, how's your day?"

"I'll fill you in tonight. Do we need anything for dinner?"

"Maybe you could find something prepared at the store. Or bring a pizza or something—the kitchen may not be in very good shape. I don't know if I'll have time to get to it. I want to get the computers and the stereo hooked up. First things first. See ya later, sweetie." Hal's priorities were strange, I thought, but at least the equipment would be ready to use when he was away.

I would have liked to talk more, but my phone was losing its signal in the little valleys leading into the foothills of Byers Peak—a sign that it was time to go to work, I thought.

During my conversation with Hal, Janelle had driven us farther and farther up a winding, steep mountain road that had been recently plowed—when Hal disconnected we were past any other car tracks. Finally we came to a dead end, a parking lot, it appeared, with the road ahead closed by a gate.

“Oh, hell, I must have missed the driveway.” Janelle turned the Durango around to head back down the hill and parked. She fumbled with a stack of paperwork and came up with a spiral-bound book that turned out to be a detailed set of county maps.

“These show every address in the county, supposedly. There are probably some new ones missing, but McMurphy’s place is on it, I’m certain.” She turned pages.

“Oh. Here. See? We’re here, just at this gate...” she pointed to a spot on one of the roads, “...and this is McMurphy’s driveway, a couple of curves down. It’ll be on the right.”

She handed me the book of maps, and I studied it while she eased the SUV back down the hill. Two curves later, she slid to a stop by a mailbox that was nearly buried by the drift from the snowplow. The driveway itself hadn’t been plowed, which was why we’d missed it on the way up—its entrance was blocked by a four-foot drift. She leaned over and looked at the map I was holding the book open to.

“Oh, great. This driveway has to be a half-mile long, at least. And uphill, too.” She shook her head.

“And it looks as if there’s at least a foot of new snow in there. That’s going to be quite a hike.” I could feel my leg muscles complaining in anticipation.

“Let’s think about this for a minute, Annette. Fran got this email suicide note today, right? Email that was set up to arrive today but was actually sent, or posted for sending or whatever, several days ago? Did you see it?”

“I’ve got a copy of it, in fact.” I extracted the email’s printout from my shirt pocket. “We expanded the header information, which is all that stuff at the start.”

“Hmm. Says here, assuming his plan worked, that his time of death would have been three and a half days before the date on the mail. Do you suppose that means before today? Or before this other date here,” she was pointing at the middle part of the header information, “when it looks like it was posted for sending?”

“Before today, that is, before this morning when the mail arrived, would be—what?—last Thursday evening, right? Wasn’t that when the storm was starting?” I remembered that Hal and I had watched the weather carefully on the days before our Saturday drive. “But that other date is Saturday, right? That must be some intermediate posting time, between when he originally put it out there on the delayed mail send and when it was due to arrive. Anyway, that date would imply a time of death on Tuesday, I guess. Assuming all this is on the up-and-up.”

“Let me remember. Last Tuesday, I think, was before that storm when we were having some nice weather. Well, I mean nice in the local context. Sunny and calm, but cold. I went skiing, as I recall.” She had her head cocked to the side, thinking.

“Is your point that the weather could have played a role in this?”

“Not sure. I’m just trying to set the context. The thing is, we need to check out the email story, see if there’s a body up there and all, but we need to be ready to treat this as a crime scene. But we also need to be ready to bring a body out, and that means getting a vehicle up there. But if we get it plowed, we’ll wipe out any tracks just under the new snow. See the dilemma? Too many ‘buts,’ and they contradict.”

“Quite right. Hmm. I’m not sure I can be completely objective about what’s the best thing to do, because my legs don’t want to hike up there much. We went snowshoeing yesterday and they’re hurting. And, actually, that’s the answer, as much as I hate to say it. Snowshoe in through the woods beside the

driveway, see what's up there, then, if need be, look for tracks under the new snow before getting it plowed. Lord. Did I see snowshoes in the back of this vehicle?" The complaints from my legs had become hard to ignore.

Which is how I wound up on snowshoes for the second time in two days. My legs, at least, gave up on complaining after only a few minutes of slogging. I guess they saw the futility of it.

Fortunately, I'd dressed for the occasion. That morning, the thermometer at the house had read zero, and I'd been scared into dressing in several layers. It almost never gets that cold in Durango, and when Hal told me it would probably be colder in the valley, I went overboard, even to wearing the insulated boots I'd used on the snowshoes on Sunday.

Janelle and I took our time preparing for the hike up to McMurphy's house. We didn't want to forget anything, the snowshoes needed adjusting, and we needed psyching up anyway. But eventually we were ready and set off, taking turns at breaking a trail through the trees beside the driveway. I quickly understood why Hal had been breathing so hard during our outing on Sunday.

It was nearly an hour later, an hour of some of the toughest exercise I've ever experienced, because the snow in the woods beside the driveway was at least five feet deep, that the house came into view. We each took another turn leading the way, and I was the one to actually reach the garage doors first. Between gasps for breath, I outlined my idea of a plan.

"OK. So, we've got a code for this door, and, assuming the power's still on, we should be able to get in. Supposedly, the garage will be the same temperature as out here, more or less. But I think we should be careful about what we do in there, unless it's obviously not a potential crime scene. Right? And if we find a body, in my book that's automatically a crime scene, at first, at least."

"Right." She was breathing hard, too. "If we open the door, we should be able to spot a place right inside where we can take off these damned snowshoes and leave them without messing up anything else. Then we can look around carefully and decide what to do next."

I took off my right glove and punched 1-9-1-6 into the keypad by the right garage door, and, with creaks of protest, it began to rise.

* * *

Four

"I'd say, it looks like his plan worked."

Indeed, it was almost as I had pictured it. A car, a battered, fifteen-year-old Subaru wagon in the left-hand stall, had a file of paperwork sitting on its hood. In front of us, toward the far end of the right-hand stall under an open side window, was a cot with an old man lying on it, looking peacefully asleep, dressed in sweat pants, a sweater and a jacket, and gloves. A nearly empty bottle of Glenlivet single-malt sat on the floor next to his right hand, which was dangling over the edge of the cot. A garage-door opener was next to the bottle. And it was cold in there.

Janelle and I stood just inside the snow line made by the garage door and managed to take off our snowshoes within the space of about a square yard. We left the garage door open and carefully walked past the cot, checking briefly to make sure the man was indeed dead, into the house. He must have turned down the main thermostat, because it was only about 60° inside—but compared to the garage, it felt tropical. Janelle and I made a little pile of coats and sweaters in a chair in a corner, and I went

looking for a telephone. Janelle began a search for the master bathroom, at my suggestion, to look for pill bottles.

I was put through to Fran Schmidt immediately.

“Fran? It’s just as he described it in that email, at least on first glance.”

“How’s the road?”

“The road’s fine, but the driveway isn’t—it hasn’t been plowed since last week’s storm, so we snowshoed in, through the woods next to the driveway. We’re trying to observe as much crime-scene protocol as we reasonably can. I’ll tell you, I’ve had my exercise for the day, and I think Janelle has, too.”

“We’ll need to plow the driveway, I guess, to get his body out.”

“Right, but I thought we might do a search under the new snow for tire tracks, or people tracks or whatever. Janelle and I talked about the timing of this and decided he died either last Tuesday, before the storm, or last Thursday during it. If there’s foul play involved in this, there may be tracks under the new snow.”

“I’ve got a guy who’s an expert at that sort of thing. I’ll send him up right away.”

“And meanwhile, Janelle and I will start working this house over. We’ll leave the garage for last—it’s not going anywhere and the cold has preserved everything. Maybe we could have a plow standing by, along with a forensics team for prints and so on. When your guy is finished with the driveway, they can go to work and maybe we can get this closed off before dark.” Although there was a lot to be done, I had my hopes.

And Fran Schmidt’s people turned out to be remarkably efficient. Maybe it was because they hadn’t had many chances to swing into a full-out investigative mode and everyone was motivated. Or maybe they, too, just wanted to finish up before dark. Whatever it was, it was impressive.

The snow-track expert arrived on snowshoes at the house a little over an hour later, having already taken care of the lower end of the driveway. He thanked Janelle and me for making such a nicely packed path up the hillside and immediately went to work with a broom and a shovel on the upper part of the driveway, near the garage entrance and then a little lower down. Although I was busy searching the house for anything unexpected, I noticed that he took a large number of photographs and several plaster casts.

About the time he finished, a snowplow came grinding its way up the driveway and cleared off the area in front of the garage. As it was turning around to leave, a car full of technicians arrived, and they set to work dusting everything in sight, starting with the garage. Janelle joined in their efforts.

I felt superfluous, but then that was entirely appropriate, I decided. I was, after all, the CBI advisor, not a real part of the team. So I got permission from the fingerprint crew and made coffee and hot water for tea. Norman Dzung, the track expert, was especially grateful, having spent quite some time outside.

It was about 4:30 and the activities were winding down when Fran Schmidt arrived followed by a large, black SUV that turned out to be the medical examiner’s car. Out of it came a pine box, and shortly Michael McMurphy was on his way to the county offices for his post-mortem. Janelle rode down the hill in the ME’s vehicle to fetch her SUV.

I poured Fran and myself the last of the coffee, and we sat down in front of the windows in the living room to talk over the afternoon. The sun was behind Byers Peak by then, but there was still light on the backside of the Front Range across the valley.

“Fran, I’m amazed and impressed. I didn’t think this thing could get wrapped up by dark, but your people have been wonderful. Efficient, on-the-ball, even having fun, from what I’ve seen. You’ve got a great crew.”

“Well, it’s not quite wrapped up, but I think we can call it a day and go home. There’s still the autopsy and some other matters. I want to compare the pictures and impressions from the driveway with cars we know had business here. And there are the fingerprint results and so on to go over, as well as those papers that Mike left on the car. My people are good, though, aren’t they?” He smiled like a proud father.

“So good that I’m unclear on the concept of why I’m here, why you requested CBI advice. I mean, my big contribution to this afternoon was making this coffee. Well, that and helping Janelle tramp down the snowshoe path that got us up here. I’ve been wondering if I’ll be able to walk tomorrow.” I flexed my legs, and they whined at me.

Schmidt laughed, but his laugh was tinged by cynicism. “What you don’t know, Annette, is that just about all of my people east of Hot Sulphur were here today. If anything else had happened, there wouldn’t have been anyone to deal with it. And west of Hot Sulphur, I think there are only two people on duty now. So even something like this stretches us thin. And as the population in the east county grows, we’ll be stretched even thinner. You’re here to bail us out, to tell us how to manage.”

“Ah. Not that there’s any pressure on me, or anything, huh? I guess the issue is that your budget probably won’t grow as fast as the county, so you can’t just plan to scale up what you’re doing now to meet future needs, right?” I sipped my coffee.

“That, plus the fact that demands on the department will probably grow faster than the county grows. There will be new types of crimes, not just more of what we’re used to, and that means we’ll need training and new types of expertise. And our budget is going to be constrained by all those stupid constitutional amendments that the voters agreed to in the past couple of decades. So we’re looking to the future and needing help. Here’s to you.” And he raised his coffee mug in a toast to me, his help for the future.

“Like I said, my first day on the job involved making coffee, for the most part. Maybe I can do better tomorrow.” And we both laughed.

Janelle arrived, back with her car, and she decided to warm up with a cup of tea before we all left. Fran Schmidt took advantage of the opportunity to get debriefed on the forensics searches.

“As far as I know, there really isn’t much of interest, Sheriff. I found an empty pill bottle in the bathroom, a prescription for Seconal, dated about two weeks ago. A month’s worth of doses, bottle empty.”

Schmidt looked surprised. “Was it from the Safeway? I saw Mike in there a couple of weeks ago. Maybe that was the day he bought them. Whew.”

“If he ate a bottle of those, plus most of that bottle of Glenlivet, well, that’s going to be pretty lethal, I’d think.” Janelle shrugged. “But that reminds me. The one thing we ran across that’s puzzling. See, we dusted everything in the garage that we could think of as well as various things in the house. And we took McMurphy’s prints from his body. Everything was consistent—the guy obviously lived here. But there was one thing.”

We waited while she sipped her tea.

“The thing is, there were no prints on that Glenlivet bottle. None at all.”

* * *

With Yo-Yo Ma's recording of the Bach Cello Suites serenading us, our dinner pizza seemed elegant and the piles of boxes melted into the background. Hal's high priority on getting the electronic equipment hooked up suddenly made sense to me.

Janelle had recommended a hole-in-the-wall take-out place in Fraser as having the best pizza around, so I'd tried it, negotiating with the manager to get a half-baked pie to finish off in our oven at home. Fortunately, Hal had cleared the cardboard away from the stove, so we were able to cook.

The piles of boxes all over the house weren't quite as bad as I had envisioned, but they were still intimidating. Half of the garage was occupied by boxes labeled "miscellaneous," most of which I didn't recognize, and the main-floor rooms each had their own cardboard groupings sitting around taking up floor space. In setting up the electronic equipment, Hal had picked the southeast bedroom to be the study, so it had both full boxes and empty ones flattened in a pile, and, leftover from the stereo equipment, there was another stack of flattened boxes taking up space in the main room.

But there were just enough of our own belongings scattered around to make the place begin to look like home, and the Bach, one of our favorites, sealed the deal for me.

Besides, the pizza and the company were just right.

"You mean to tell me that you've been here—what?—two full days, and you've got two suspicious deaths? Goodness. Do you think they're going to want you to stay around?"

"Today's wasn't so suspicious as the other one, though—it looks more like a suicide. Although, I don't know, something's bothering me about it. Anyway, we'll know more after the autopsy. But, I have to say, I'm glad you took me out snowshoeing yesterday. Today would have been impossible without that first lesson you gave me. Except I don't know if I'm going to be able to walk in the morning." I poured myself another glass of wine. "So tell me about where you're going tomorrow."

"To pick up the other car, mostly. But first I've got an appointment in Denver, at the CCHE to talk about...oh, I guess you'd say to talk about parameters for my work for them here. What the future possibilities are and so on. And after that I'll get a cab to the airport and catch the last flight to Durango. I've got a spot on the 7:30 shuttle to Denver in the morning, it leaves from that hotel by the Safeway down in Fraser." He reached across the table for another piece of the pizza.

"So you'll be back here on Wednesday?"

"Late, probably. I've got a meeting in Colorado Springs with Chuck Shure for lunch on Wednesday. I thought I'd try to get over to Alamosa tomorrow evening, stay there to get a head start on the drive to the Springs."

"Hmm. Back Wednesday night. I don't know how much of this mess I'll have under control by then, but I'll give it a try. Depends on how much new information about these two new cases develops over the next day or two, probably, how busy I get with them." I was hoping to get rid of most of the cardboard, but it looked daunting.

"How involved are you going to be?"

"If it's anything like today, probably not much. They've got a highly competent team of folks here, and my job, after all, is to advise them on planning for the future. But if they ask for help, I'll certainly pitch in. I want to make a good impression, after all. Today, though, my job was mostly to make coffee and tea."

“But before you said you weren’t sure about the suicide theory of today’s death, or the dead body you found today, or however you put it. That must mean you’re involved at some level.” He bit into yet another piece of the pizza.

“To the extent that I’m hearing about what’s being discovered and can’t help but think about it, sure. But they really didn’t need me to be there to help. On the other hand, I’m glad I was there, because I was able to see Sheriff Schmidt’s people in action. I guess I had the idea that what they need here is better people, but I learned today that what really they need is *more* people, at least if the growth continues.”

“I wonder if that same conclusion applies to the schools.”

That made me remember the conversation at lunch about the shortcomings of the school board, so I related it to Hal.

“Teaching to these tests is a big problem.” Hal, I could tell, was about to launch into one of his academic lectures. “And as far as higher education here is concerned, it’s compounded by the fact that Grand County is part of the tax district that supports the Colorado Mountain College. One obvious way to provide opportunities here would be to open a CMC branch in the east county, and the type of secondary education they’re offering here would fit well with that. But the problem is, that’s setting their sights too low. If the area is to be anything more than a destination resort and haven for second homes for people across the mountains there, it needs a real economy. This institute I’m supposed to put together, for example, will need to hire a whole range of people. It’s inevitable that the top scientists will be imported, but if the educational opportunities around here were right, I could hire technicians and computer programmers and all kinds of other support staff from the local talent pool. But as it is, it looks as if I’ll have to import them, too.”

“So you’re saying that the ladies at lunch have the right idea, it sounds like.” I found this amusing, given that they were as interested in gossip as they were in the school board’s deficiencies.

“Maybe. Not every kid can reasonably expect to get into Harvard, no matter how good the high schools are. But I guess I think the high schools should be good enough that the best kids, smartest or whatever, should have a fighting chance. And if the school district here is focused on these standardized tests, they’re not aiming high enough. The kids will be ready for CMC, sure. But that’s just not good enough. Sorry, I guess I’m an academic elitist.” He grinned in that abashed way of his.

“I speculated at lunch that maybe there could be a branch campus of one of the big universities up here, or maybe over in Kremmling or somewhere. Would that, or something like that, help?”

“That’s exactly what’s needed, because it would give the local school board something to shoot for. See, if the local high-school graduates didn’t have the education necessary to get into that local branch, the school board would clearly be failing. So a local four-year campus would be a real boost for everything educational. I’m convinced that’s one of the reasons that the schools in Durango are as good as they are, that Frémont State has raised the bar for the school board. So, listen, I could talk about this all night, but we’ve got a house full of boxes. Want to do some organizing?” He stood up and gathered an armload of dinner dishes to take into the kitchen.

I went looking for the CDs that Hal had unpacked in the hope of finding some music that would be a little more conducive to moving boxes—the Bach makes me want to just sit and dream. I had rock ’n roll in mind, but all I found was classical, so I settled on Mozart, a disk of the early symphonies. With the volume way up.

Hal and I spent three hours organizing, unpacking boxes, and creating an ever larger stack of flattened cardboard in the garage that eventually eclipsed the miscellaneous box pile. We found where we’d packed the various items needed to live in a civilized fashion, including the laundry soap, the

kitchen gadgets we just couldn't live without, and the winter clothes—including the long underwear—that we hadn't been able to fit into the suitcases in the car.

After that, I figured I could get along without him for a day or two. But no more.

* * *

When we got up on Tuesday morning, it was still dark, but because Hal's shuttle to Denver left at 7:30, we had little choice. And the thermometer said zero again. I couldn't help but wonder if this was going to be a daily occurrence—and if so, whether I'd ever get used to it.

But the house was warm and the shower was hot, so getting going was possible. Hal had packed a small overnight bag for himself the night before, and by seven we were in the car headed down the hill into town. We got him to the shuttle in plenty of time.

At that point, it wasn't dark any more, but it was still too early to accomplish anything, so I found the Tuesday Denver papers at the grocery store and stopped in at Sharky's for breakfast. The option of driving all the way back up to the house, only to be confronted by the rest of the unpacked boxes, just did not seem very attractive.

It was too early for the ski crowd, but Sharky's was busy serving coffee and various breakfast options to people on their way to work. I was shown to a small booth, where I sequestered myself behind the newspapers. Coffee arrived, and then breakfast—I was feeling proud of myself for having ordered oatmeal—and I began to feel content.

But I had the booth to myself for only about fifteen minutes. Just as I was finishing Ed Quillen's column on the editorial page of the *Post*, an informed rant about water problems in the Colorado mountain communities, a voice broke into my little world.

"Excuse me? Are you Annette Trieri, from the CBI?"

Vowing to be polite, even though I really didn't want to be disturbed, I lowered the paper to find a woman in her early thirties or so, trim and attractive, dressed in a blue cashmere sweater over gray wool slacks, peering at me through thick-lensed glasses. I decided she must have left her coat on the rack by the door, which suggested to me she was a regular at Sharky's.

"I am. Can I help you?"

"Ms. Trieri, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Emily Griggs, the school superintendent. At least for today I am; that may change soon. I've heard you're part of the investigation that involves me."

I masked my surprise and decided a formal response was appropriate. "That's correct, although I'm not part of the investigation in a truly official capacity. Yet, at least. I, ah, need to ask why you're here. I'm new to the valley, but I understand you live and work in Granby, or close enough. Did you come up to Fraser to find me?"

"Oh, well, no, not specifically. I had a breakfast meeting here that just finished up. But your appointment is common knowledge, and one of the people at my meeting saw you in here with Janelle Kennedy and Fran Schmidt on Sunday. So I took a chance. I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"Please, sit down. Coffee or anything?" I waved to my waitress and tried to adjust to the notion that my appointment was common knowledge. "Ms. Griggs, it's not entirely appropriate for us to be meeting. Your lawyer would probably have a heart attack, and I'm not sure that the district attorney would like it either. At least we're in a public place, and you should know that I'll be reporting our conversation to the sheriff when I see him later this morning. Clear?"

“I don’t understand. Why is this a problem?”

“Unless something has happened that I don’t know about, you’re one step removed from being a murder suspect, and you may be placed under arrest by the sheriff at any time. I believe the sheriff has made it clear to you that you’re not to leave the county. Correct?”

“Well, yes, but...” She stopped when I raised my hand.

“Therefore, let me do what the sheriff may not have been done, just so we can be absolutely clean about this. I need to remind you that if you are arrested, anything you say to me can and will be used against you in a court of law, if the district attorney so chooses, and that you have the right, at the county’s expense if necessary, to legal representation in any conversations we may have. You’ve not been arrested, but you need to keep this in mind. Understand?”

“I do, I know all that.” She took a deep breath. “But I still need to talk with you. You’re new to the valley, like I am, and I think you may have a somewhat more cosmopolitan outlook than most of the folks here. At least I hope so. I need some advice.”

“I don’t see how I’m in a position to advise you on anything, Ms. Griggs.”

“I understand your perspective, believe me. But let me explain. Please?”

I couldn’t very well just get up and walk out—besides being rude, it would mean I’d stiff the waitress. So I reminded her of her Miranda rights again and waited.

“I expect you’ve heard most of the first part of this, but I need to tell the full story. You see, I came home from a trip to Denver on Saturday and found Tobias Summers’ body in my apartment, my condo. I called the sheriff, and the fact that I don’t have any real documentation of my trip to Denver has put me in the position of being the sheriff’s prime suspect, or ‘person of interest,’ as he called me. Even though I haven’t been arrested, I don’t think he has any other people in mind.” She fidgeted with her teaspoon.

“Now for the new information, at least information that I didn’t tell the sheriff.” She lowered her voice noticeably. “I was in Denver to visit my partner. She’s a vice-president at a bank there, and until she can find something appropriate here, we have a commuting relationship. Frankly, it sucks. But what’s worse is that I still haven’t decided if this community is ready for me to be its school superintendent if I’m out of my little closet. So that’s why I haven’t told the sheriff about this. But, obviously, Susan could provide me with an iron-clad alibi, if I asked her to come forward. Further, we were at a party Friday night, and the other people there would back up her story.”

She paused for a drink of the tea the waitress had brought. “I’m not at all concerned about my legal exposure, beyond its effect on my career. But I am concerned that the sheriff, by being distracted by me, will miss an opportunity to find the real people behind Summers’ death.”

It was her last comment that resonated most strongly with me, although I suspected her strategy of keeping her personal life private was wise, at least until she understood the local culture better.

“I’ll need to talk to your partner—Susan?—but then maybe I can persuade the sheriff to broaden his investigation. I’ve developed a good relationship with him already. I think I may have to tell him the circumstances of your alibi, but I also think he’ll be discreet about it. And I’m fairly certain that he won’t have a problem with it, or if he does that I can persuade him not to. But if there’s the possibility that you’ll lose your job, as you suggested before, I don’t know that I can do anything about that.”

“I’ll take that chance. If they’re going to fire me for being an almost-suspect, they’ll probably fire me if I trot Susan out. But if the sheriff makes it clear that I’m a sort of victim, too, and that I’m cooperating, which I have and will, that should take care of the situation. I think.”

“Ms. Griggs, what do you know of Tobias Summers? Why would he have wound up at your place?”

“Well, that’s the question that I’ve been obsessed by ever since I got home Saturday. I met him on various occasions, public occasions, receptions and the like, and his wife is a school system employee, but those are the only connections. I’m baffled.” And she did indeed look baffled.

“From what the sheriff told me, it appears that this was arranged in such a way as to compromise his reputation, Tobias Summers’, I mean, and yours, too. To me, I guess that implies a common enemy. Can you think of anything you and Summers might share? Political leanings? Religion? Anything?”

“He and I are about as far apart as you can imagine. If you know anything about him, you can probably believe this easily. He is, or he was, a Mormon, a family man, a lawyer possessed of right-wing politics, an educational Neanderthal, and a rape-and-pillage, take-no-prisoners developer. I’m none of those and an environmentalist to boot, although I don’t go advertising it. I thought of this also, this business of common enemies, but it’s part of why I’m baffled. I mean, that old saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ could hardly apply more. You know?” She was shaking her head and had a blank look on her face.

She gave me contact information for her partner, Susan Maloney, and I assured her that both my sense of fair play and my desire to see justice done would motivate me to persuade the sheriff of her innocence. We also discussed how to meet with the sheriff in a way that would be suitable to both of them and agreed to keep in touch.

Afterward, I paid my bill and left for Hot Sulphur Springs more puzzled than ever. Unraveling the circumstances of Tobias Summers’ death was going to be a corker.

* * *

Five

At the sheriff’s office, the day was just getting started. The aroma of brewing coffee permeated the building, and the day shift was settling into their start-up tasks. Because Fran had introduced me to everyone Monday morning, I was able to wander around saying “good morning” to people without being treated like too much of an outsider, but it was clear to me that not everyone was comfortable with my presence. I promised myself that I’d work hard to change that, to become part of the team.

Fran wasn’t in when I got there, so I scrounged myself a cup of coffee and went looking for Norman Dzung to see if he had anything to say about the tracks he’d found under the new snow on the driveway at the McMurphy place.

Dzung’s office was larger than I expected, but then I saw why. Its walls were lined with locked cabinets, and the tables and desks in the room were piled high with stacks of paper and inch-thick white bricks. The bricks turned out to be plaster casts of various things, tracks mostly, of tires, animals, and people. I knocked on the door frame, and he looked up from his computer screen.

“Annette! Good morning—good to see you again. Did you ever get home last night?”

“We managed to close things down up there about dark, so it wasn’t too bad. I thought I’d stop by for a chat about what you found yesterday.”

“Actually, it’s what I didn’t find that I’m wondering about. Remember that there was a car in the garage, an old Subaru? It had very distinctive snow tires on it, a Swedish brand called Gislavad, studded tires. For the life of me, I couldn’t find any tracks from them in the driveway, not even right behind where it was parked in the garage. Apparently it hadn’t been moved since the previous time the

driveway was plowed. And, assuming that McMurphy was calling to get his driveway plowed after each storm, that would be a couple of weeks ago.”

“Sheriff Schmidt told me he ran into McMurphy at the Safeway a couple of weeks ago. I’ll have to ask him if that was before or after that storm, see if he remembers. So what *was* there?”

“Delivery truck tracks, probably the local FedEx guy, I’ve seen his tires at various places. The snowplow, of course. A couple of other vehicles, which look to me like SUV all-season tires—I suppose they could have made it up the driveway in four-wheel-drive if it was plowed. And down at the bottom, a couple of vehicles that went up and backed down, probably scared off by the first switchback. At the house, three people got out of one of the SUVs and it looked to me as if they walked over toward the front walk, toward the front door. They were all wearing Sorels, those insulated leather boots that everyone around here has. Two of them were close in size, the other was much smaller. They returned to the SUV via the garage door.”

“Any indication of what was last?”

“The SUV with the three people. Their tracks were on top of everything else.”

“Hmm. I need to talk with Fran. Is it possible to get a tire brand for that SUV, and then to match that with a list of possible models of vehicle?”

“That’s what I was just getting to work on.” He gestured toward his computer screen, which was displaying side-by-side photographs of a tire-track photograph and a tire tread. “I should have it figured out later this morning.”

“When you do, let Fran know. That’ll help move things ahead, I’m certain.” And I went off to see if the sheriff had arrived yet.

It turned out that he was looking for me, and we bumped into each other in the main hallway. After warming up our cups of coffee—I went with decaf because I could feel the beginnings of a caffeine buzz—we settled into his office.

“Fran, my husband suggested that you folks may start to think of me as some kind of jinx, what with these bodies turning up since I’ve arrived.” I tried to make light of it, but I’m not sure I succeeded.

He looked surprised, then burst into laughter. “Perfect! I hadn’t thought of that, but it’s the perfect explanation. I’ve been wondering what would have brought this on all of a sudden—two bodies in three days, that’s some kind of record around here.”

“I had an interesting conversation with Emily Griggs this morning, not of my doing, I assure you.” I related my discomfort with that situation and how I’d Mirandized her, and then I explained her situation as best I could. He took it in stride.

“Oh. Now I understand. Well, I sure wish she had been more candid on Saturday, because I feel like we’ve wasted a couple of days. Although I guess we were distracted yesterday anyway. But, still...so, let’s see. We’ll need a statement from this Susan person, maybe I can get someone in Denver to take it for me.”

“I talked with her on the phone this morning, while I was driving over from Fraser. She’s ready to give as formal a statement as you need, and she’ll also provide names and contacts for the Friday evening party as well, if you want them. I can get someone from the CBI office to depose her, if that will help.”

“We’ll need to do that, and some people from the party, too. There’s an additional wrinkle, though. We interviewed Mrs. Summers, Mandy, on Sunday. She told us that her husband went down to Denver for business on Wednesday, and she hadn’t heard from him since. Because of the storm, he must have

come back up here, dead or alive, on Saturday in the same time frame as Emily Griggs.” He looked at me with one arched eyebrow over the rim of his coffee mug.

“Have you established a time of death yet?”

“The ME did an autopsy yesterday morning. The best estimate is early Saturday morning, meaning as soon as he could have got up here. Which is strange, because of his condition, a couple days of beard, I mean. As if he was partying in Denver for several days straight and then was transported up here first thing Saturday just after the roads opened and then keeled over. Massive stroke, it turns out.”

“Emily said she didn’t get here until early afternoon.”

“Right. She called us about 1:30.”

I thought for a minute. “I suppose it’s possible that Emily and he were together in Denver, that she brought him up here and he died with her in her apartment, or was killed. But it seems implausible. Susan Maloney told me that Emily left Denver on Saturday at about eleven.”

“Hmm. Two and a half hours, with the ski traffic, yeah, that would be reasonable. Especially if she stopped for lunch. I think we’d be better served to turn our attention elsewhere. Of course, that raises the question of where.”

“Right. But at least it eliminates that false lead. Oh, I need to ask you about Michael McMurphy. You said you ran into him at the grocery store in Fraser a couple of weeks ago. Do you remember if that was before or after the previous storm? Apparently there was one around that time.”

He looked at the ceiling in thought. “During it, as I recall, just as it was starting. It was late afternoon and weather was moving in, it had started to dump snow. He was hurrying home, as much as he could in his condition. He seemed frail.”

“Norman told me that there were none of his car’s tracks in the driveway under the newer snow.”

“Meaning that Mike hadn’t been out in his car since the driveway was plowed after that previous storm, huh? Did Norman find anything else?”

“He’s working on a report, I think.” I didn’t want to steal Norman Dzenge’s thunder, especially after I’d encouraged him so.

“Interesting. I’ll have to find out who plows his driveway and when it was last done, before yesterday, I mean. I guess it’s possible that the actual time of death could be any time between when I saw him and when that email got sent, or posted or whatever.”

“Assuming he did the actual posting, right.” I know enough about computers, having lived with Hal for a three years, that I know they can be used to send false clues.

“Huh? You think someone else could be involved in this?”

“Just keeping an open mind, Fran. Until the ME officially declares it a suicide, it’s just an unattended death, right?” I smiled as innocently as I could.

“Yeah, I guess...excuse me.” His phone had rung. “Yes, Ellie?...*What?*”

Schmidt looked at me sharply. “Well, who’s over there, anyone? It’ll take me at least a half hour to get there, and more to get up the hill...OK, I’ll saddle up. But see if you can page Janelle. Today’s her day to ski, I think. Maybe she’s there somewhere.”

He shook his head. “Could be there’s something to that jinx stuff after all, Annette. A snowboarder just found a body in the woods by one of the runs at Winter Park. We’d better get over there.”

* * *

Fran Schmidt's departmental vehicle, outfitted for winter with studded snow tires as well as with a new instant-on radar unit, made me jealous. It was a Ford Explorer, just like the CBI car I had been driving in Durango, but this one had far more engine than mine—a team of Clydesdales under the hood instead of a miniature pony. He turned east on the highway and then almost immediately veered off to the right, onto a side street.

He must have seen the question on my face. “Short cut, the county road over Cottonwood Pass. I checked yesterday, and they plowed it Sunday afternoon—we finally persuaded them to keep it open to allow shorter response times for calls in the southeast county. It comes out just at the bottom of that big grade north of Tabernash, the one down from Red Dirt Hill, remember?”

I thought I understood what he meant, but I decided to wait and see where he was taking me. And it didn't seem like I'd have to wait long—Fran had his emergency lights on and wasn't holding anything back.

About ten minutes later, after climbing over a little saddle, which I decided must be Cottonwood Pass, and then down into a valley and across a stretch of pasture, we slid to a stop at the intersection with the highway, and I recognized where we'd been. Fifteen more minutes later, after several judicious chirps from the siren to move people out of the way, we pulled into the drop-off circle at the Mary Jane base of Winter Park Resort. Fran was on the phone most of the way, so I had to figure out for myself where we were.

“I think I remember this, from the time Hal and I spent a week skiing here. There's a restaurant, right?” It seemed only vaguely familiar to me, as our condo—Win's condo, actually—had been over at the other base area, the Winter Park side.

“Right. And Janelle told me this is where they'll be bringing the body out. It's hard to get to where they found it from here, though—I mean, if we need to see the place. Maybe we won't.”

I'd been trying to ignore the snowshoes in the back of the Explorer, and this news was welcome. My legs were working, but not without protest. I really didn't want to spend any more time on snowshoes so soon.

We left the Explorer parked under a prominent sign that said “Don't Even Think Of Parking Here” and walked through the base building and up a flight of stairs to the loading area for an old lift, which wasn't running. I remembered it as being slow with hard seats, but that it accessed a part of Mary Jane that you couldn't get to any other way.

Gliding down the lower part of the ski run was a parade of people, including several wearing ski patrol parkas, two of them guiding a toboggan. I recognized Janelle Kennedy, despite her ski clothes and goggles, bringing up the rear. Her dark chin gave her away.

Because the lift wasn't running, we had the loading area to ourselves, which was just as well. It's not uncommon at ski areas for people to be brought down the hill on these toboggans, but it's very seldom that they're dead. And in this case, the package wasn't wrapped up like a mummy as they usually are—apparently the victim had frozen into an awkward position, because there was a red-and-blue striped arm of a ski suit with a gloved hand sticking straight out at a funny angle.

Janelle skied over to Fran and me, executing a perfect check stop right next to us, and took off her goggles.

“Good timing, sheriff. And the emergency rescue ambulance should be here in just a minute. I'd hate to have to wait around too long—I think we may draw a crowd if the word gets around.” She was breathing only slightly harder than she would in normal conversation.

“What’s it look like up there, Janelle?” Fran was squinting against the glare, staring up the hill.

“She was about a third of the way down Outhouse, in the woods off to the left side—left as seen coming down the hill. Uphill from the body, there were several broken branches, including a two-inch one. That looks like what killed her. She’s got a season pass with a picture. It’s a Lannie Young. I’ve got the folks back at the office working on more information.”

“Lannie? Oh God, Lannie? That’s horrible.” Fran had a shocked, unbelieving look on his face. “Lannie? She’s a truly expert skier. How in the world could this have happened to her?”

“Don’t think we’ll ever know, sheriff. The ’boarder who found the body said it was completely covered with snow—he thought it was a rock, but it shifted a little from his weight when he went over it. Then he looked back and saw the color of the ski suit. But we can get an idea of when it happened by checking the scan records, when they last scanned her pass, and where.” Janelle took off her gloves and hooked them to her belt.

“Anything out of the ordinary, for a thing like this, I mean?” Fran sounded deeply depressed.

“The big branch crushed her lower jaw, and she probably got her neck broken. But there’s a tear in the back of her suit, right in the middle of the back, so she probably spun around from that impact and got poked by yet another branch. The woods aren’t too thick up there, but there are lots of dead branches sticking out from some of the trees.” She leaned a pole on the binding on her right heel, it clicked open, and she stepped out of the ski. “Sheriff, you look awful. Somebody else can take statements, why don’t you go home?”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. This one’s tough. Mike McMurphy was old and in bad health, and I was prepared by his note. And, truth to tell, I really didn’t like Tobias Summers much anyway. But Lannie, gez. Lannie. I used to date her. She’s my wife’s best friend. Damn. Mary’s going to be devastated.” He stared at the ground and shook his head.

That Fran had dated his wife’s best friend was confusing, but I let it pass as a quirk of the small community. “She’s right, Fran, you go on home. I’ll help Janelle and we’ll see you tomorrow, OK?”

He trudged down the steps toward his car, and I turned back to the assembled group. “Janelle? It sounded like you’ve called in some help or something?”

“I expect we’ll see a couple of other people from the office as well as the emergency rescue people soon. Cell phones are such a blessing—you ever talk on one and ski at the same time?” Despite the situation, she couldn’t help but grin, her white teeth flashing.

“Seems like it would cramp your style though. So, you said the body was covered with snow. Does that mean she’s been there since—what?—Friday?” I counted days backwards in my head.

“Probably. Her skis, we lashed them to the toboggan, they’re powder skis, and that would fit with her being up here since Friday. The scan records will tell us for sure. But for now, the fact that she’s frozen completely solid, like McMurphy was yesterday, backs that up. So the ME has another autopsy that will have to be thawed out first.”

“Speaking of McMurphy, I talked with Norman Dzung this morning, and he says that McMurphy’s car wasn’t out of the garage since before the previous storm. So we really don’t know for sure when he died. It could have been as long as two weeks ago.”

She looked surprised. “And because he was frozen the whole time, it’ll be impossible for the ME to figure that one out, won’t it? And that complicates things. I mean, if it wasn’t really a suicide. That computerized note could have been sent incorrectly, or something, so that’s not really part of the timing issue, is it?”

“I was thinking that, too. McMurphy could have screwed that up. Or, I suppose, someone else could have done it intentionally, to mislead us.”

About that time, the ambulance showed up, along with two deputies, and things got busy. They eased the toboggan around the building to the drop-off area on the drive and loaded the body, and the deputies began taking statements from the ski patrol. At least, I thought, the crowd today is sparse and they’re mostly ignoring all this. Gawkers we don’t need.

* * *

“You don’t know how prescient your question last night was, about whether they would let me stay around. We found yet another body today. I’m wondering when they’re going to pull the welcome mat.” It was late, and Hal had called me from Alamosa. He was bedded down in a motel for the night, and I was having a cup of tea before turning in. An afternoon and evening of unpacking boxes had me exhausted, but it had the reward that I’d found the little two-cup teapot packed in with the miscellaneous kitchen ceramics. One miscellaneous box down, another couple dozen to go.

“Another one? Didn’t the sheriff say the other day that the Summers thing was their first homicide in a long time?”

“Right, he did, and it seems like they’re making up for lost time, or something. This one today was frozen, too, like the one yesterday. A skier who died last Friday, most likely. Hit a tree.”

“Oh. Sounds like maybe an accident? So there’s a ski accident, a suicide, and one real homicide. Maybe that’s not so bad.”

“From the perspective of the sheriff’s office, though, it’s three unattended deaths in almost as many days. More than they’re used to. And questions keep popping up. We’re going to have to wait for the autopsies to be sure that the ski accident and the suicide really are. And it’s complicated by the fact that the ski victim was a close friend of Fran and his wife.”

“That doesn’t help things, not at all. But, look, this is just why you’re up there with them, to see how they handle this kind of overload situation and to help them plan for how to do better with it in the future. And you can help out while you’re at it. Seems like maybe you have more experience with strange cases than they do.” Hal has this scientifically objective perspective that can be cold and calculating at times.

I took a sip of tea and thought about this. “At least it looks like the school superintendent isn’t a suspect, like Fran seemed to think on Saturday.” I told him about my conversation with Emily Griggs.

“So she does have an alibi, but she just doesn’t want it to be public. I guess that makes sense—without knowing the sense of the community about such things, discretion is probably the smart approach. But that means the circumstances of Summers’ death are more complicated. You said he was supposed to be in Denver on business? How come he didn’t shave for several days, then came back to Granby after the storm, got into her apartment, and drank himself into a stroke on Saturday morning? And why her apartment? This is all too strange. I guess I’m glad it’s not my problem.” He sounded as confused about the whole thing as I felt.

“And for once in recent months, it’s not really my problem, either.” As relieved as I was to be able to say this, I had a nagging sensation that I might not be off the hook completely. “But how was your day? If you’re in Alamosa, it must have gone according to plan, more or less.”

“I’m not sure I want to take that shuttle over Berthoud Pass again, but other than that it was fine. With only four of us in that van, and not that much luggage, it had power to spare, and the driver made

full use of it. I think he beat our time when I was skidding around during the car chase with those thugs, and he wasn't even being chased by guys with guns."

"You're saying he was pushing the speed limits? Well, I guess that's inevitable. He probably drives it every day and knows every curve, just how fast he can take it under what kind of road conditions."

"And half the time he has a van full of eager skiers, wanting to get to the resort as fast as possible, yeah. Anyway, he got me downtown by nine despite some rush-hour traffic, and I grabbed some breakfast and made my meeting with time to spare."

I poured myself the second cup of tea from the little pot. "Did the people at the CCHE give you your marching orders?"

"I think they were expecting me to have an agenda, or something like that. Or else they're used to people like me doing these internships and trying to take the place over. Whatever it was, they seemed a little afraid of me, or maybe in awe. It was pretty strange. But we talked for most of the morning, and I took a little group out to lunch and they loosened up. And what marching orders I have involve assessing the situation up there and writing reports. I'm glad I have the real job creating the institute, because this advisory stuff alone would leave me underemployed, I think."

I had to laugh. "You're used to working harder than you realize. Besides, with what I've been hearing, assessing the education situation up here could turn into the advisory equivalent of sticking your whole arm into a hornets' nest. I don't suppose you discussed any of the possible alternatives with them, like what we talked about last night?"

"In fact, we did, after lunch. I wanted to get a feeling for what kind of planning is in place, what the university systems are thinking, stuff like that. And it turns out that both CU and CSU, at the systems levels, have been considering the possibility of a northern mountain campus, most likely in Grand County, probably in the vicinity of Kremmling. So you hit it right on the nose. CSU has more elaborate plans in place, probably because they're still smarting from when we pulled out of their system, back when we became FSU."

Hal had told me the story of how Frémont State's original role had been as an undergraduate liberal arts campus in the CSU system. When the name changed to Frémont State, they had also severed ties with the parent system, and now they had perpetual budget problems as a result.

"No doubt it's way too soon to suggest this possibility again, but there are people up here who will be delighted to hear that. Although I expect it will be a good-news/bad-news thing for them. The ones I talked with would much rather have it be the University of Colorado, for the prestige factor." Or, I thought, Harvard.

"Definitely too soon to say anything more to them than you already have. Although, you know, if they really want this kind of thing to happen, what they need to do is to organize. Form a committee, lobby their state legislators, talk with the CSU people. It won't happen just because I think it's a good idea. Not even though I'm apparently God's gift to higher education in the eyes of the CCHE. And now that I think about it, it won't be too long before you might want to mention it again, to those women you were talking about. See, I won't be able to suggest such things, because I'm supposed to be the objective advisor. But if you dropped the right hints, it might get things rolling in a way that would support my recommendations. That could conceivably make things actually happen years ahead of when I could make them happen alone. See what I mean?"

"Sounds as if you've made up your mind already."

"Only in connection with my other job, what I see as my real job. Like I was saying last night, I'm going to need to hire lots of skilled people, and I'd much rather hire those people from the local area.

And Chuck Shure told me before that he views this institute as an ongoing concern, so these recruiting issues will be a continuing thing. A real university up there would help a lot, in the long run.”

“Speaking of Chuck, you’re going to see him tomorrow?”

“Yep. He’s going to present me with the endowment he’s set up to underwrite this institute. And, I guess, we’re going to talk more about his vision for it.”

“What? He’s going to give you the endowment?”

“Right. He’s going to me a check for a billion dollars and I’ll bring it up to the valley and deposit it at that little bank in Fraser. It’ll be fun to watch the beads of sweat pop out on the manager’s forehead...no, no, of course not. There will be some paperwork or something, I don’t know. I need to have spending credentials of some kind so I can draw on the funds needed to get the institute rolling.”

“Oh. Well, OK. I had this vision of your bringing home a suitcase full of cash or something.”

“Right. Plus a fork lift to move it around with.”

* * *

Six

The first thing I did Wednesday morning was to check the outside thermometer. I’d managed to stay warm overnight without Hal in bed beside me by wearing flannel pajamas and wool socks—even though the house thermostat was set on 65° for the night, it seemed cold without him there.

The outside thermometer said 10°, a full ten more degrees than Monday and Tuesday, and I felt a glimmer of hope. But then I noticed the tops of the fir trees were swaying in a considerable breeze.

C’mon, Trieri, I thought. You’ve got layers and layers of warm clothes, a thoroughly winterized, all-wheel drive car that starts the day in a heated garage with a remote-control door opener, and a hot tub set to 106° for when you get home.

But none of that seemed to make up for the chill I got watching the snow blowing off the tree-tops.

I remembered another, far more civilized, version of swaying trees—coconut palms, swaying in the trade winds blowing onshore at Key Biscayne. I’d gone there while on an administrative leave—one of those leaves that police officers get put on after they shoot a civilian—and Hal showed up. I barely knew him at the time, but he took me under his wing and played tour guide, putting to use his knowledge of the Miami area gained from having been in graduate school there. And even though he’d tracked me down without an invitation, I wasn’t the least bit threatened because he was a perfect gentleman—for as long as I let him be, at least. We wound up spending several days in Miami and the upper Florida Keys, and then, back in Durango, we began playing that old “whose place are we staying at tonight?” game. A few weeks later I moved in with him.

It occurred to me that Hal would probably be having a greasy-spoon-diner breakfast somewhere in Alamosa before hitting the road for Colorado Springs. Knowing him, I figured he’d order something running to at least a thousand calories chock full of cholesterol. OK for you, buddy, I thought—let’s see what we have in the refrigerator.

Fifteen minutes later, I was working my way through a large plate full of bacon and eggs, hash-browns and toast, and a huge mug of steaming coffee. I didn't even bother to clean up the kitchen before heading out the door to the sheriff's office in Hot Sulphur Springs.

I arrived just in time for the morning briefing, and I couldn't help but notice a number of suspicious glances directed my way. It was my third morning at the departmental office, so people were beginning to recognize me, but it appeared that they were also beginning to associate me with bad luck. I had the feeling that if another body turned up, I was probably going to run out of town. What, I wondered, could I do to fit in better?

Fran's briefing was low-key and sad, his friendship with the latest victim clearly influencing his presentation. He managed to avoid any references to me during the briefing, for which I was grateful, and, in response to a question, he mentioned that the medical examiner would be doing the McMurphy autopsy that morning. After he was finished, he walked over to the side of the room where I was standing.

"Morning, Annette. I'm about to head down to the morgue, want to come along?"

"I do, Fran. You look like you're taking Lannie Young's death hard."

"Me and Mary both. I can't figure it out. Lannie was probably the best powder skier I know. I guess accidents like this just happen, though." He held a door for me, and we started down the hallway toward the stairs to the basement.

Morgues aren't my favorite places, although I've learned to handle their smells and chill. But how people can work in them every day for hours at a time is just beyond me. The Grand County morgue was similar to all of the others I've been in, but I quickly discovered that the medical examiner was something else again.

"Sheriff, hey, what's happening, dude? And who's this? New deputy? Cool!" The greeting was ebullient, and the greeter was best described as an aging hippy. Even dressed in scrubs, he looked as if he belonged at a psychedelic rock concert—tinted granny glasses, beard, ponytail and all. The music echoing in the stark room completed the image. I didn't recognize it, but later I spotted a CD case with something called Quicksilver Messenger Service on the label.

"Annette, George Neering, our ME. George, this is Annette Trieri. She's with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, remember I talked about this? She's here consulting with us for a few months." Fran had raised his voice and made a point of talking slowly and enunciating.

"Oh, yeah, far out. I do remember. Right. Ms. Treery, glad to meetcha." He was nodding his head to the music.

"Tri-er-i, George. Can we back off the music a little? We need to talk." While Neering was walking over to his boom-box, Fran turned to me. "He's a little deaf, Annette. Probably too many rock concerts when he was younger." The music faded into a background drone.

"So, Sheriff, are you and Ms. Tri-er-i here to watch me work on the McMurphy dude? I think he's thawed enough."

"That's right, George. We want to verify the suicide, be certain there isn't anything questionable. What's your schedule today?" Schmidt wasn't talking so loudly now, but he was still speaking more slowly than usual.

"Well, man, I don't know. I've still got some paperwork on that Summers dude to finish up. You said that was a priority, man."

“It is, but that was before we found McMurphy and Lannie. You told me the whole story yesterday, right?”

“Right, man, the whole thing, every detail, except for, you know, I always write it up more formally.” Now Neering was nodding to his own inner metronome.

“So we’ll need the paperwork eventually, but now we have these two new bodies for you. I’d like to be sure about McMurphy. If you can’t find any evidence contradicting the suicide then we can move on. When do you think you’ll be able to get to Lannie Young?”

“Oh, man, that’s so sad. I really liked that lady. She was one of my favorite people. She helped me find my house, we skied together. And, man, could she party. We’ve gotta find who killed her, man. But she’s still too frozen to work on today, sorry, man.”

My instincts came to attention, and Fran’s head snapped up. He was the first of us to speak.

“Say what? I thought she just skied into the trees and caught a branch.”

“Well, yeah, man. Caught a branch on the chin, looks like it broke her neck. You don’t want to see that. But let me show you something else.” Neering walked over to a wall covered by what looked by giant file drawers and pulled a lower one open.

We followed, and there was the red-and-blue striped ski suit arm we’d seen yesterday. Lannie Young was lying on her side, facing away from us with her head covered, and Neering was pointing at the small of her back.

“See this?” He pointed at a tear in the fabric of the insulated suit.

“Right, George. Janelle mentioned it yesterday, like Lannie got poked by a branch when she was spinning around after hitting the tree.” Fran’s voice was husky, and he was breathing through his teeth with his jaws clamped.

“Yeah, well, I wondered about it, you know? So I cut her suit open a little.” Neering pulled back a flap of several layers of fabric to reveal slightly bluish skin. There was a dark, reddish dot just to the left of Lannie Young’s spine, about between her kidneys.

“Take a close look at that, Sheriff, while I go get something.”

Fran and I bent over to have a close look at the wound, not touching it. Apparently, after ripping through her ski suit, whatever had stabbed her had come straight in, for there was no asymmetry, no scratching, just a circular red dot about the size of a fat pencil. It had several radial lines that were somewhat darker than the rest. The skin didn’t appear to be punctured, although it must have been close.

“Ever seen a perfectly round broken branch, Sheriff? I mean, doesn’t that look just a little too *round*, man?” Neering had returned and was holding a ski pole. “But take a look at this.”

He held the tip of the pole next to the wound, and the resemblance was remarkable, even to the way the radial lines matched the little teeth on the tip.

“Ice tip, sheriff. Dime a dozen. Looks to me like she was pushed, man.”

* * *

“Sorry I lost it there, Annette. Doesn’t happen very often. I guess I’m stressed out.”

We were sitting in the office working on cups of coffee and strategy. Sheriff Fran Schmidt was apologizing, unnecessarily as far as I was concerned, for the string of expletives he’d let loose with on

hearing George Neering's assessment that Lannie Young had been murdered. For his part, George had taken it in stride, even agreeing with the sentiment.

"I thought you were pretty restrained, actually, Fran. And it didn't seem to faze George at all, or if it did he hid it well. And he seems to be on top of the McMurphy issues."

"George is quite the character, isn't he?" The smile that accompanied this was his first in quite a while. "I've known him for at least twenty years, and I still can't quite figure out if it's all a front or if that's really him, the way he presents himself."

"I've known several MEs, and he's definitely unique. At first he seemed like a brain-dead ex-hippy. But there's an analytical mind in there somewhere. What did he decide about Tobias Summers?"

Schmidt stood and stretched. "Stroke victim. But it doesn't look accidental or the result of normal activity. George found a needle mark in a strange place, up inside his nose. We're waiting on blood toxicology."

"If somebody pushed Lannie Young into the trees to kill her, it means they were trying to make it look accidental. And the setup in Emily Grigg's condo was obviously designed to make it look like some kind of tryst between the two of them, Summers and her. You suppose there's a connection?"

"Good question. Lannie was active in the community, but not in school district issues, as far as I know. She spent her time helping with the disabled ski program, at least in the winter. Got herself a lifetime ski pass, in fact. And she was also a force in the land trust we've got here. It's a group that gets ranchers to take tax breaks for setting up their land in conservation easements instead of selling it to developers."

"We've got a group like that in Durango, as I recall. What did Lannie do for a job?"

"Real estate agent. It's kind of an oxymoron, I guess, environmentalist and real estate agent. But there are lots of folks around here who need to sell a house or some land and who are tree huggers. Lannie was doing pretty well, from what I've heard. And she also did it in a green sort of fashion—she encouraged people to remodel rather than build new houses, put a lot of emphasis on solar heating, stuff like that."

"She sounds like a polar opposite of Tobias Summers. And, it's funny, but Emily Griggs thinks of herself as his opposite, too. Still, two homicides in the same time frame when you don't usually have any just seems too coincidental."

"I was thinking the same thing."

I thought for a minute. "Let's see. You said Summers had a needle mark in his nose, in the inside, right? I suppose the right stuff in there could induce an immediate stroke. But how do you suppose he got so disheveled?"

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the door frame, and a large woman, large in width rather than height, announced her presence with a commanding voice.

"What's this I hear about Lannie Young, Fran? And who's this?" She looked at me with obvious suspicion.

"Annette, this is Donna Little, assistant district attorney; Donna, Annette Trieri of the CBI. Annette's here at my request to help us do some strategic planning. And I don't know what you've heard about Lannie." The tension between them was obvious, and curious to me.

"I heard she got killed skiing, that's what."

"Last Friday, most likely. Janelle's checking the scan records at Winter Park."

“Well, that would explain why she didn’t show up for our meeting, I guess. I’ve been wondering.” The big woman shrugged and leaned against the door frame.

“You had a meeting scheduled with her Friday? What about?” I could see that Schmidt was on the alert.

“Don’t know that it’s any of your business, sheriff.”

“Strange. I thought part of my job was homicide investigation. And usually, in such things, the DA’s office pitches in and helps.”

“Homicide? You sure? I heard she just caught a tree. Don’t make things up to weasel information out of me, Schmidt.” Her tone was insulting, no mistake about it.

“Ms. Little, as of about a half hour ago, the investigation of Lannie Young’s death classifies in my department as a homicide investigation. This means two things. All information about it, including that it’s a homicide investigation, is to be considered confidential, for official use within Grand County law enforcement only. And anyone who isn’t forthcoming with information relevant to the investigation is obstructing it. Clear? Now, if you had a meeting scheduled with her Friday afternoon, it’s pertinent to the investigation until I think it isn’t. Do you want to assist or obstruct?” He was calm enough, but his tone was icy.

“You threatening me, Schmidt?”

“I’m telling you the lay of the land, Ms. Little. Right now, I’ve got an understaffed department to run, a department that’s suddenly been handed two homicides and a questionable suicide to investigate. Seems to me the DA’s office would want to help.”

“I’ll give it some thought.” And she turned and stalked off, her huge backside wobbling with each step.

Schmidt looked at me and rolled his eyes. “Sorry you had to see that, Annette. Her boss the DA is a Republican and I’m a Democrat, and she seems to think of me as the enemy.”

“It seemed almost personal.”

“Yeah, well, that too. Long, long ago, just after high school, she and I were an item. I broke it off poorly and she’s never forgiven me, so she rubs my nose in whatever’s available to rub it in. Anyway, I’ll call the DA and this will get straightened out.” He shook his head. “I wonder what that meeting was about. Maybe it wasn’t anything, but...”

The telephone interrupted him, and he picked it up.

“Schmidt here...What?...You don’t say. Thanks, George. Let’s get the blood tests expedited, OK?”

He looked up at me. “Well, well. Seems that Mike McMurphy has a needle mark in his nose, too. Same spot as Tobias Summers. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve got us three homicides, Annette, two of them connected for sure and the third, too, probably. Welcome to Grand County.”

* * *

Janelle Kennedy was on the phone, in the middle of a conversation in which Lannie Young’s name kept coming up, when I found her in her office. She winked at me and pointed toward her computer, then, when I must have looked confused to her, shooed me at it. So I sat down and started reading.

On the computer screen several windows were open, but on top was the title page of a document by Michael McMurphy, *Water Wars: Front Range Associated Water Board’s Attack on the Human Rights*

of *Colorado Citizens*. If ever there was a political polemic, I thought, this would be it. I began reading the introductory section, and my initial impression was immediately confirmed. After two paragraphs, I was relieved to hear Janelle hang up her phone.

“How far did you get?” Her voice was tinged with amusement.

“Not far past the title. Where’d this come from?”

“Off a floppy disk that I found at McMurphy’s place, sort of hidden away. His computer was completely blank, in terms of his personal writing—someone reformatted the hard-drive recently and re-installed the operating system, looks like. But old Mike must have made this as a back-up or something. Looks like he was on the warpath against frob.”

“Uh, ‘frob’?” I blinked a couple of times, feeling stupid.

She smiled. “Front Range Associated Water Board. FRAWB. The Colorado mountains’ worst nightmare come true. They control water rights all over the upper Colorado, South Platte, and Arkansas watersheds, and they’re rich enough and intimidating enough, in terms of their legal department, to make people offers they can’t refuse.”

She was shaking her head. “I haven’t been here long, just about a year and a half, but I’ve heard enough people bitching about them that it’s clear they’re a problem. From the perspective of the people here, at least. I guess from the perspective of Denver and the suburbs over there, FRAWB is just doing what it’s supposed to be doing.”

“You think McMurphy might have been killed in connection with this document? What is it, an essay?” I squinted at the computer screen. “Or a book?”

“I’d guess either is possible. Look down at the bottom of that page.” She pointed to a little box below the text. “See? The document has 350 pages, so it sounds like a book. And he was a writer with a good reputation, even famous, so people would probably listen to him.”

“So what do you think is going on here, Janelle?”

“Good question. But George called me and said that McMurphy’s got to be considered a homicide. That means that whoever did it planned and executed it carefully, including setting up that phony email suicide note and its timing.”

“And the other two homicides were also set up to look like something else. Somebody’s trying to be clever.” My experience has been that murderers who try to be clever are every bit as likely to be caught as ones who just whack people outright. Maybe it takes a little longer to catch the clever ones, but we usually get them.

“If we get lucky, they’ll be too clever for their own good.” She smiled, clearly thinking the same thing as I.

I walked around the desk and sat down. “Are you finding out anything useful about Lannie Young?”

“We’ve got a team searching her place now. That was a guy at the land trust she used to work with, volunteer work.” She shrugged. “But I’m having trouble asking the right questions without giving away the homicide, so I didn’t get very far with him. He did say that she was concerned about water issues here in the Fraser Valley. Two people concerned about water issues, two people dead.”

“I heard Fran say something the other day about Tobias Summers’ wheeling and dealing in water, too.” I closed my eyes to try to visualize when he had talked about it.

“Right, Sunday morning at brunch, when we were talking about that new subdivision.”

“That’s right. So we have three people killed in ways meant to look self-inflicted or accidental, all three of whom had connections to local water issues. But Tobias Summers doesn’t fit with the enviro orientation of the other two, right?”

Janelle thought about it. “No, although he must have needed water for that new subdivision, so he could have got on the bad side of FRAWB. On the other hand, it’s hard to believe that FRAWB is going around killing people. For one thing, they’ve got enough money and political clout to do what they want anyway. For another, it’s bad for PR.”

“How do they operate, anyway?” My knowledge of water resources was limited to turning on the faucet, mostly.

“They own water rights and buy up more. Partly, they do it by investing in land, ranches for sale and that sort of thing, land that has rights associated with it. And they go after senior rights, the ones that get water even in drought years. As I understand it, they own lots of land as a result, and because they’re a public entity or a non-profit or something like that, they don’t have to pay the usual property taxes. Here in the Fraser Valley, I’ve heard that they’re the second biggest landowner after the federal government with its national forests.”

“And the water they have rights to, they export it across the mountains to the cities and suburbs of the Front Range, right? Plus they don’t pay property taxes. No wonder people here feel like they’re getting stiffed.” I was a newcomer and I felt offended, so I could imagine that the long-timers didn’t like it at all.

“Right, they send their water over to the Front Range through all these tunnels, and they sell it to local water companies in the cities and so on. This gives them the money to lobby the legislature and to buy more water rights. Did you ever see that old Jack Nicholson movie *Chinatown*, where he gets his nostril sliced open by that little hood played by the director, Roman Polanski? That story had to do with the Los Angeles water grab, where they dried up the Owens Valley east of the Sierras.”

“You mean that could happen here?” I couldn’t believe that any place with as much snow as I’d been floundering around in for the past few days could dry up.

“Oh, probably not exactly like that. But if there’s no water here for local use, the developers and chamber-of-commerce types don’t have the resources they need for growth. And, as I’m sure you know, growth is the way you create jobs and prosperity, at least according to the politicians.” Her expression was as sarcastic as her words.

“I wonder how Emily Griggs fits into all this. It looks as if Summers was abducted, or some such thing, down in Denver, held captive for a couple of days, and then brought back here and killed. Why would they involve the school superintendent in this?”

She stood up and looked out the window. “I’ve been thinking about that, too, Annette. Fran talked with me about what Emily told you, and I suppose that could have something to do with it. They needed a way to stage Summers’ death, and maybe whoever did the actual killing knows about her relationship and decided to set her up for a fall. I’m absolutely certain that there are people up here who would have a fit if her relationship were public knowledge. Just like there are people here who don’t approve of me and my husband. Bigotry can cover a lot of ground.”

“Have you run into problems since you’ve been here?”

“Not really, at least not the in-your-face kind. Here in the east part of the county, tourism is king, and public bigotry and tourism don’t mix. I think there may be some resentment behind my back, though, even here in the department. Also, I’ve heard some second-hand comments about the ‘keep to your own kind’ thing.”

“Huh? As in, stay on the other side of the tracks?”

She smiled. “You haven’t met my husband Daniel, have you? We met in the service, the Shore Patrol, he’s a white guy from New York City. Can’t jump, no rhythm at all, but he’s a through and through sweetheart. Did security for Disney and then got a job with the ski area here. They wanted to hire me, too, but Danny and I decided that one of us working there would be enough. Meanwhile, Fran was looking for a new under-sheriff, so I jumped at the chance. And now the homecoming queen from the wrong side of the tracks in Savannah is living on the right side of the tracks in the coldest place on Earth, freezing her chocolate backside off.”

“You may be from Savannah, Janelle, but you looked at home on those skis yesterday. Which reminds me, I’ve been here the better part of a week and I haven’t been skiing yet. These dead bodies keep turning up. How inconsiderate!” I couldn’t help but laugh, and she joined in.

“No, but you’ve learned all about snowshoes, it seems like. I’m betting that we’re going to be too busy for recreational skiing, but I think you ought to see the spot where we found Lannie Young’s body. And I want to have another look at it with this new information in mind, that she was pushed. Tell you what, my ski day yesterday was interrupted, so I can take tomorrow morning to go skiing—maybe we could retrace Lannie’s movements. The scan records came in, and we know she got on the Zephyr lift at the Winter Park main base at 9:01 Friday morning. That was the last time her pass was scanned. And you can meet Danny, he’ll be around the base offices somewhere looking for any excuse to get in a run or two.”

“Great idea. Hal will be back this afternoon, and I expect he’ll be ready to ski tomorrow. I’ll ask him tonight.”

* * *

Seven

I debated with myself whether to go home by way of the short-cut that Fran Schmidt had used, but then I remembered seeing a City Market in Granby—by going the long way, I could stop and pick up some groceries. My unpacking of the day before had put the kitchen in workable shape, and I had the idea of making Hal a special homecoming dinner.

But when I got back to the house and opened the garage door, Hal’s Audi S4 was sitting there. It took only a second before he emerged from the garage to greet me.

“I almost made it, got the garage empty, I mean. Sorry.” His hug was what I was interested in, so I didn’t pay much attention to the apology.

Then we walked inside with arms full of grocery bags, and I saw what he meant. Almost all of the boxes were gone, the flattened ones taped together leaning against a wall and the full ones down to a last half dozen. After setting the groceries in the kitchen, we returned to the garage and pushed the remaining boxes against the wall next to the flattened ones. Hal pulled a second remote door opener from a pocket and handed it to me.

“Now we can both have warm cars in the morning. It’s beginning to feel like we’re moved in at last.”

We caught each other up while we made dinner.

“I found out something interesting today.” Hal was pounding on slices of pork tenderloin with a meat mallet, thinning them down to a quick-sauté thickness. “Chuck Shure is something of a control freak. I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised to find this out, but it just hadn’t occurred to me. He’s been doing behind the scenes work for me without asking. My new institute now has a building, or will when it’s finished.”

“Is that a good thing? Or not?” I was dicing a shallot and peeling garlic cloves.

“I had the drive all the way here to think about it without knowing much, but I guess it will be OK. He bought out a failed condo development in downtown Winter Park. A steel framework of a building that has been sitting there for a couple of years, looking ugly, and the town government keeps threatening to condemn it but never has. Meanwhile, the people who bought into the development when it was still on paper want their money back, or a condo to live in. It’s a legal mess. But Chuck pulled strings and bought various people out, so we now own it, we the institute, I mean. Not you and me, thank heavens.”

“I think I saw what you’re talking about when the sheriff and I went through town yesterday. A real eyesore with some snooty sounding name that I don’t remember. So, what’s going to happen? The thing gets turned into offices?” Shallots don’t make my eyes tear up as much as onions, but I was still starting to sniffle.

“Right, and big rooms for computer equipment. I’ve got the condo plans with me, and one thing I get to do is figure out how to modify them to work for us.”

“Sounds like he was taking advantage of an opportunity. It doesn’t sound overly controlling.”

There was an extra loud whap from the Hal’s mallet. “No, but that’s not all. He also invented a name. All by himself.” Whap.

“So, you going to make me guess?”

“Well, I’ve mentioned how this part of Colorado in general is sometimes called ‘Middle Park.’ There’s South Park, where Fairplay is—you know?—that huge open expanse of high grassland. And there’s North Park, north of here, where Walden is, another open region. So this is in the middle, not as big and open, but it has enough flat terrain to be called ‘Middle Park.’ So, as Chuck told me, he was thinking about something built on that. He didn’t want it named after himself or his company or something about the environment, so he settled on the locale.”

“This ‘park’ business confuses me. ‘Winter Park’ is the name of the ski area. That’s not flat, I remember clearly.”

“Right, well, that’s the other kind of ‘park,’ I guess, the kind you play in instead of the big flattish area. Anyway, Chuck came up with ‘Middle Park Advanced Research Center’ for the name.”

I stared at him, looking right through him, turning it over in my mind.

“Ohhh, I get it. M-P-A-R-C, a play on words, eh?”

“Well, yeah. The National Center for Atmospheric Research down in Boulder goes by its acronym, pronounced ‘en-car,’ so this place could become ‘em-park’ for short. Clever, huh?”

“Hmm. Maybe too clever. But he’s the money behind the thing, so what are you going to do?”

He looked up and smiled. “Change the subject. How were your two days?”

“Ha! Well, let’s see. Last night I mentioned that a third person had turned up dead, right? The ski accident?”

“Right.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like an accident after all. And the suicide from Monday doesn’t look like a suicide. And the developer whose body was found in the school superintendent’s condo, that wasn’t an accidental death, or natural causes, either. All three are now considered homicides. And two seem closely linked.” Now I was making the whapping noises as I smashed garlic cloves with a flat of a knife blade.

“I’m very confused.”

“You and me both, lover.” I smiled at him to emphasize that my tone of voice wasn’t aimed his way. “Here’s the run-down, as near as I can tell. First to die was the apparent suicide, the one we got the note from and found the body on Monday. But it may have all been staged with the death as long as nearly two weeks ago. He was a writer, working on a new book exposing water-rights hanky-panky. But his computer was wiped. Fortunately, we found a back-up copy on a diskette he’d squirreled away. It would look like a suicide except for some unexplained tire tracks and a needle mark inside his nose. Also, there are some irregularities with fingerprints.”

“Second to die, we think, was the skier.” I had begun dicing the flattened garlic cloves, and I was being careful not to dice my fingers. “Looks as if she was pushed into the trees with a ski pole. Everyone agrees that she was a highly accomplished powder skier and that a fatal accident like that seems too unlikely. Turns out that she was also interested in water-rights issues.”

The shallots had been simmering long enough, so I added the diced garlic. “And finally, Tobias Summers died of an apparent stroke on Saturday. Except he also has a needle mark inside his nose. And to get so disheveled and unshaven, he must have been abducted down in Denver on Wednesday. Plus, his new subdivision needed water, so there’s this water-rights link to all three deaths. That’s what we know now.”

Hal had started tossing the shallot and garlic in the pan. “The cliché in Colorado is that water flows uphill toward money. What’s the money behind the local water issues?”

“An outfit that people here call FRAWB, the Front Range Associated Water Board. But I’m having trouble thinking of them as an organization that underwrites murder for hire.”

“FRAWB, huh? Sounds evil, called that. But it’s strange. Chuck Shure told me today that Front Range Water might be our first paying customer, MPARC’s, I mean. They want to fund studies of climate change and how it will affect water resources—snowpack, runoff, stuff like that—in the Central Rockies. And you’re right. It’s hard to think of them as murderers, even indirectly. Especially at this level. Even Summers, as big a wheeler-dealer as he was, in Front Range Water’s world he was small potatoes.”

* * *

It snowed again on Wednesday night—there were hints of weather moving in earlier in the day, and then about dinnertime it let loose. Hal and I got up early on Thursday and found a foot of new powder awaiting us. The driveway hadn’t been plowed, so we took my Subaru down the hill to town, pushing a little wave of snow ahead of us out to the county road.

Janelle and I had agreed to meet in the Winter Park cafeteria when it opened at 7:30, so Hal and I skipped breakfast at home and went straight there. The food wasn’t nearly as good as we’d had at Sharky’s, and it was about twice as expensive. But it was filling and provided the fuel we’d be needing to ski.

About the time we sat down with our trays of breakfast, Janelle showed up, accompanied by a distinguished looking man in a Winter Park ski suit—not a uniform, exactly, but distinctive and official-

looking. Slightly taller than Janelle, putting him at about 6'2" or so, he had an athletic build and walked easily in his ski boots.

"Hal, Annette, this is my husband Daniel Kennedy. Everyone calls him Danny. He's got passes for you and is going to escort us around this morning." We all shook hands, and Janelle went off to find two cups of coffee.

"I know Annette needs to look over the site where you found the body on Tuesday, but didn't I hear that's on Outhouse? I'd like to do a couple of blue cruisers first, to get my legs warmed up." Hal had suggested this strategy on the drive over as a way to get into the new powder.

"The lifts don't open to the public until nine, but I have some pull around here." Daniel Kennedy's strong New York accent was modulated by the smooth, deep voice of an opera baritone. "How about if you finish breakfast, no hurry, and then we help the ski patrol check out the conditions before we tackle Outhouse? On days like this, I figure they need lots of help. And I need to warm up, too. I'm trying to make these old knees last as many years as I can."

I tucked a bite of breakfast burrito with chile, truly wimpy chile even by my standards, into my cheek. "Janelle tells me that you're head of security here, Danny. I guess I don't know what security problems a ski area has. Um, I'm interested on a professional level, because I'm with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation."

"Yeah, Jan said you're here to help the department with growth issues. And I have to say, they need the help." He sat down at the table with us. "Mostly, our security concerns relate to three areas: petty theft, things like skis and poles and snowboards people leave sitting around; bad behavior, including people going too fast and recklessly, trying to cut into lift lines, drunks being jerks, stuff like that; and a few bigger issues that come up from time to time, like what we're doing officially today. And I don't want to talk about it here in public, but we have the usual amount of employee-related security issues."

"Janelle said you were with the Disney people before this. Is it about the same kind of problems here?"

"More or less. Disneyland and Winter Park are both big recreational facilities. Relatively little truly violent crime in both cases. Mostly, I see my job as preserving the good experience for as much of the clientele as possible. And this involves working with the safety people, too, of course. Also, there's some PR. I've got a date with the county commission tonight for some of that." He smiled as Janelle returned with coffee for the two of them.

Hal looked up sharply from his breakfast tray. "Oh! That reminds me. Sorry to interrupt, but I don't want to forget again. Annette, I'm going to the county commission meeting tonight, too. I set it up Monday and forgot to tell you. Five-thirty until who knows. Don't make me dinner."

"PR stuff, too?" Daniel looked amused at the thought.

"I guess that's a good description of it. I'm going to announce this new computing center I'm setting up here. If it goes well, it's PR; if it falls on its face, well, we'll see." Hal grinned. "If you get tired of working here in the next few months, let's talk. I need to hire a whole bunch of different kinds of people for this thing."

We polished off our breakfasts and coffee and went outside to buckle up. By a little after eight we were riding up the Zephyr lift, braced against the crisp, single-digit air temperatures under the blue sky that the storm had left in its wake. And the foot of new snow at our house translated to 18 inches at the top of Winter Park—too much new snow to make it possible to ski easy runs.

We spent almost an hour checking out the snow conditions on the steeper runs back to the base—Daniel dutifully reported each time via his radio that the conditions seemed pretty good but that we

needed to check again to be sure—and caught a last ride up just before the lifts opened to the public. In the maze leading to the lift, there was a fair-sized crowd of early-morning powder hounds waiting impatiently, stomping their skis and puffing clouds of steam in the cold air.

With the new snow, Outhouse wasn't nearly as intimidating as usual. There were no exposed rocks, and it was easy to keep to a reasonable speed. Because there had been little wind, the hills and valleys of the mogul field were still visible, making it possible to follow the contours of the surface without surprises. We worked our way down the steep slope toward the area of the fatality—it was easy to spot because of the yellow tape that the ski patrol had used to cordon off the spot.

When we stopped at the edge of the run to discuss how to approach what we now considered a crime scene, Hal spoke first.

“I don't want you folks to rush through your investigation on my account, so, tell you what. I'll just ski on down and take the cat road back over to the same lift and meet you here. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes or so. I can keep doing that until you're done, OK?” He tried to look innocent, but I knew better.

“You just want first tracks in this powder, don't try to con us, buddy. But that's probably a good idea. We don't need you standing around griping about how slow we are.” I blew him a kiss. “Be careful down there, OK?”

He took off down the steep hill in a cloud of snowflakes, and I turned back to the other two. They were both watching with a mixture of envy and relief—I think their two winters of skiing hadn't quite prepared them for the challenge of new powder on Outhouse.

“So, Janelle, what did you find the other day? Can you point it out before we go in there?” I knew there was no way we could walk around on foot, so we would be side-stepping on our skis. A general overview first would make that much easier.

“Well, you remember we found out, through the good auspices of my friend here,” Janelle twitched a ski pole in the direction of her husband, “that Lannie Young scanned in at the Zephyr lift at 9:01 last Friday. Same place we just were. And she didn't scan in anywhere else. Chances are, she took this run first to catch the new snow before it got chopped up. According to Fran and various other people, she was a hard-core powder skier.”

Daniel was nodding agreement. “And there was more new snow Friday morning than today. Plus, it kept snowing for most of the day Friday, snowing hard.”

“So whatever happened would have been covered up?”

“Right, Annette.” Now Janelle pointed into the woods, toward the big rectangle of yellow ribbon. “Her body was down toward the far left end of the lower ribbon there. From the broken branches, it looks as if she entered the trees about here at a fairly shallow angle.”

“It's as if she was about to make a turn back toward the center of the run when she was pushed. That sent her out of control. She missed the first two trees and hit that branch about head high on the third one. See where it's broken off?” Janelle had her ski pole pointed down the hill into the trees.

I scanned the trees to the left and just above where we were standing. “Seems like, if she was skiing fast down the hill and someone overtook her to push her hard enough to tear her suit and make that wound I saw, well, wouldn't that be likely to put that person out of control, too? What's that?”

I'd seen a flash of color two trees into the woods from where I was standing, well uphill from the taped-off area.

* * *

Hal got more runs in than he bargained for, and eventually he tired himself out and stood around with us to watch Norman Dzeng at work.

Janelle and I decided to call Dzeng after a brief discussion of the new swatch of fabric I'd seen on the branch above the crime scene. Our thinking was that it may have been torn from the perp's ski suit after he pushed Lannie, and we could reinforce this theory if his tracks from the tree that he scraped led down toward where the body was found. Presumably, he would want to check the results of his handiwork.

While waiting for Dzeng, we all took turns guarding the scene and skiing, using the need to keep warm as an excuse. When Dzeng finally arrived, a little after ten on backcountry skis, we were ready for a break.

He skied down Outhouse to where we were waiting for him, executing perfect telemark powder turns with a huge smile. I could tell he would rather have kept going, but he checked to a stop just above us. He was wearing a bulging backpack with snowshoes strapped on its outside, and soon he had the pack off and was on those snowshoes, carrying a shovel and working his way above and around the tree with the fabric swatch. He carefully reached out from above the tree and retrieved the fabric from the short, jagged stump of a branch and put it in a zip-lock bag. Then he looked down the hill at the taped-off area.

"Janelle? You said the body was down at the lower left corner down there?" He was pointing with a ski pole.

"Yep, just to the right of that tree the tape's wound around." She was nodding.

Dzeng studied the terrain and the trees, detoured on his snowshoes well into the trees and down and back about twenty feet below the tree that had snatched the fabric from someone's ski suit. Then he started digging, snow flying over his head and downhill.

After about fifteen minutes, he stopped for a breather. "Janelle? Can you get the camera out of my pack? How about getting a picture of this with the tree up there in the frame? Thanks." Then he went back to playing badger.

Fifteen more minutes of digging plus considerable snowshoe tromping created a platform just downhill of a six-foot wall of snow. He got the camera from Janelle and took at least a dozen pictures of the wall from various angles and distances. Then he waved us over.

I didn't know quite what to expect, beyond snow, but with Dzeng's help there was plenty.

"OK, here's what I was looking for." He used a ski pole like a pointer, starting at the top of the wall, the surface of the new snow.

"This top foot or so is new snow from last night. There's less here than on the run out there because of the trees. Then there's a couple feet of snow from last Friday, this layer here. There was more before it settled. These," he leaned forward and brushed a spot on the wall gently with his glove, "are ski tracks. See how the snow is compressed under them? And how they make slots filled with somewhat different snow?"

He looked wistfully at his skis stuck in the snow at the edge of the run, about twenty feet uphill. "If I had my skis here, I'd be able to prove this next assertion. I brought my powder skis today, the wide ones. And these tracks are wider. That means that the skier here was at an angle to my cross-section—see how the track on our left is a little deeper?—he had his weight more on his right ski and was turning into the woods."

He turned to look downhill, and we all swiveled our shoulders around to follow—standing on skis in a clump, we couldn't move our feet very much without getting tangled up.

"I'm betting he made a right turn around that tree there," he pointed with his pole, "to get over to the body. I'm going to make another smaller cross-section there to see."

While we waited and watched Dzeng dig another trench and platform, Daniel gamely side-stepped up the hill and fetched Dzeng's skis. It dawned on me that I should have done that, as it would have warmed me up. Standing around in the cold was testing my ski clothes to their limit.

Shortly, Dzeng had another cross-section of the snowpack ready for our inspection. There were the two tracks again, this time with the one on our right a little deeper. And there was another track, much wider.

"Janelle, do I remember that you said the body was first found by a snowboarder? Did he say which way he came down the hill?" Dzeng looked up at her.

"Right, that's probably it. He said he came out of the woods about here, I think. But that was on Monday."

"Yeah, that's consistent. He didn't compress the snow so much, but I'd say there was more snow under him than our guy with the torn suit." He looked over the cross-section one last time and nodded. "OK. My assessment is that whoever left that swatch of fabric I've got here in the bag skied down here by the body, and that it was most likely on Friday morning."

He pointed at the two tracks. "See how the snow that's on top of the tracks reflects the light a little differently from the snow right beside it? That's because the character of the daytime snow on Friday was different from that overnight. It was just a little warmer, I'd guess. So, I've got pictures and I see you've been making a sketch, Janelle, and I think we're all set. Hey! Thanks for fetching my skis, Dan."

"No problem, as all my twenty-something employees say. Norm, when do you think we could take down all this yellow tape?"

Dzeng shrugged and looked at Janelle. "Your call, Under-Sheriff Kennedy. We completely finished here?"

She thought about it. "Well, tell you what. I hate to do this, Norm, but one more trench would be a good idea, then we can take the tape down. I want to verify that the guy who left these tracks came into the woods up there where he would have pushed Lannie instead of from up higher in the trees like that 'boarder. Does that make sense?"

Dzeng was crestfallen. "It does, I'm sorry to say. But you folks have to come up and look, ha ha, so you get your exercise, too." He set off on his snowshoes up the hill toward a spot mid-way between the ski run and the tree that had grabbed someone's ski suit.

I felt a poke in the back. "Annette? I'm freezing. I'm going down to get some hot coffee, where we ate breakfast. Meet you there?" Hal had that please? please? expression.

"And I need to get back, too. I heard my code on the radio a couple of minutes ago." Daniel had an earpiece to listen to the ski area's goings on.

"Dan? Before you go, just a second, OK?" Dzeng tromped back down the hill to our position, and then he fumbled in a pocket. "I want to have a close look at your ski suit, the back."

"Look at this, folks." Dzeng was holding the bag with the swatch of fabric he'd taken off the tree next to the yoke of Daniel's ski suit on his left shoulder. From the texture and weave as well as the color, an unusual purplish mauve, it looked like a match to me.

It must have looked like it to Hal also. “Hmm. Dan? I’d say you may have one of those employee-related security issues you mentioned earlier.”

* * *

Eight

The five of us convened in Daniel’s office at the Winter Park base.

“Hal? Did you say something about needing a security guru for your new organization? You promise there won’t be anything like this to deal with?” Daniel was smiling at his own rhetorical question.

But Janelle’s sense of humor was in hibernation. “Annette? I think I need to back away from this investigation. If a ski area employee is a suspect, I’m too close to Danny and he’s too close to the company for me to be seen as truly objective. I can take on the other two, but this one seems like it might have conflict-of-interest perceptions.”

“I understand. But if all three are linked, then what? Can Fran afford to have you sidelined for all three? Let’s hold that thought for now, though. Danny, I’m going to assume that you’re as interested in finding out whose ski suit that fabric got torn off as I am. Right?” I looked Daniel’s way.

“Absolutely.” He was nodding. “One positive aspect of this big, impersonal corporation that runs the show here now is that nobody gets special treatment. If this were a Mom-and-Pop outfit, I might get pressured to protect somebody. But the company will want this thing sorted out as soon as possible. And I can help, because there’s only one source for these ski suits. Either someone is wandering around with a badly torn suit or someone ordered a new one very recently. But I think Janelle’s right about the possibility of perceptions of conflict of interest, at least until we get more information about whose suit that fabric’s from.”

“You don’t think that the company would try to cover this up?” I was determined to probe a little to gauge his reaction.

Daniel shook his head and frowned. “I strongly doubt it. We have some bean-counters in the front office whose first reaction to something like this would be cover-up, but there are also cooler heads that will prevail, I’m sure. One thing that concerns the company is what I’ll call substantive PR. The implications of having a killer on the staff are substantive. Lots of other things, particularly the local folks who are upset with corporate policy that’s changing their comfortable little world, that stuff the company doesn’t worry much about. I kind of wish they did, but I don’t make that policy.”

“What do you know about the company’s involvement in local water-rights issues? You folks make snow early in the season, right? How does that relate to who owns the water rights?”

“I’m not familiar with all the details, but I believe that an organization called Front Range Water owns the rights to what flows out of the creeks here into the valley. But they don’t worry about us, because what we pump out of the creeks gets stored as snow and they get all of it back. Or at least nearly all of it.” Daniel shrugged. “And even if there were some kind of corporate connection, I don’t see how that could possibly relate to someone’s killing Lannie Young.”

Hal cleared his throat. “Sorry to butt in, but I’m curious. Does Winter Park try to make it snow, you know, by cloud seeding with those ground-based iodide burners like they use farther west?”

Daniel thought for a minute. “Not that I’m aware of. I know what you’re talking about, though. What I’ve heard discussed here is that nobody thinks they work well enough to justify the investment. Plus, we generally get lots of snow. Maybe the burners they use at Vail and Aspen help us somehow, we’re downstream, after all.” He grinned.

I couldn’t think of any other questions. “So, I guess the plan is for you to find out whose ski suit got torn up, right, Danny?”

“I should be able to find out pretty soon. First thing I’ll do is see who has ordered new ones recently, then I’ll figure out how to do an inspection of the troops to see if anyone has a suit that’s been mended on the shoulder.”

Norman Dzeng broke in. “Dan, it looks like the fabric matches your suit, but maybe it matches other retail ones, also.”

“Maybe, but probably not. Each year, we try to get unique suits designed for the ski area employees to wear, sort of like having uniforms. Sometimes next year’s retail products look like ours, but then they’re a year behind. And this color isn’t something I’ve seen on anyone else. I’ve got to say, I think it’s hideous.”

Dzeng nodded understanding. “That leaves only one other possibility—our perp may have ordered more than one suit at the beginning of the year, so neither recent orders nor a torn suit will give him away. But something else will. If you can figure out how to have people take a medical exam, I bet you’ll find that our perp has a gash on one shoulder. From that third cross-section I dug, it looked as if he was seriously out of control when he banged that tree. I’m thinking that fabric didn’t get torn off without collateral damage.”

* * *

“Ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about a new organization that will soon be founded here in eastern Grand County, over in the upper Fraser Valley. My name is Harold Weathers—I’ll invite everyone to call me Hal—and I’m here to coordinate the founding of this organization while I’m on sabbatical leave from my regular position as Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University down in Durango.”

I was listening from a back corner as Hal, standing at a podium diagonally across the room from me, addressed the Grand County Board of Commissioners at the court house in Hot Sulphur Springs. It was the part of their weekly meeting set aside for public participation and comments, and he had three minutes of celebrity to enjoy, if that’s the right word.

“I’ve been asked to organize a center that will, we hope, assemble and operate the world’s fastest computer. Of course, given the pace at which technology develops, what constitutes the world’s fastest computer is a moving target, but it’s one that we think we can hit.” Hal looked up from his notes and smiled at the commissioners.

“Now, I’m keenly aware that my time here is limited, so rather than to go into detail, I thought I’d simply announce our intention to form this organization and then see if you have questions. As you can imagine, there will be reams of information becoming available in the next few months.”

A woman with a name plaque that read “Commissioner Frieda Swank” spoke up. “Mr. Weathers, you said you are a dean at Frémont State? I don’t quite understand why you wouldn’t be creating this new computer center in Durango. Why here?”

Hal grinned his little devil grin. “Commissioner Swank, you made me lose a bet with myself. I thought that might be the second or third question. I figured the first one would be about where the money is coming from.”

The commissioner looked surprised. “Oh. Well, that, too.”

“The Middle Park Advanced Research Center, which we’ll be calling by its acronym, M-P-A-R-C, pronounced ‘em-park’, will be underwritten by a consortium of high-tech companies, mostly by UNELECO in Colorado Springs. The details are complicated and involve a private foundation, but UNELECO figures in big. They want to use MPARC as a test-bed for their new computer chip technology. Because they want these chips to do useful work, along with being fast, they think that a test-bed that involves real-world computing would be the best thing for their purposes. So we’re going to focus, at first at least, on computer modeling of Earth’s climate, which has been and continues to be one of the most significant computational challenges out there. I’m taking this project on because I’m an earth scientist by training, and I have to tell you it’s tremendously exciting to me. And, to answer your question directly, Commissioner Swank, we’re founding MPARC over in the Fraser Valley because of its proximity, relative to a number of attractive locations, to Boulder, which is a sort of Mecca for this kind of science, and to the Denver metro area. We’re trying to achieve a balance between isolation and availability of big-city amenities and an airport hub. We will be having lots of visitors and plan to host workshops and conferences with people from all over the world. And as much as I would have liked to see the Center founded in Durango, we’re just a little too remote way down there.”

Commissioner Ned Grassel waved a pencil in the air. “This seems pretty ambitious. How big an organization are we talking about, anyway?”

“Probably somewhere around two hundred full-time professional employees, eventually, with facilities and other such operational services contracted out. About half of the MPARC employees would be high-level scientists and engineers, people who probably don’t already live here. Maybe, but probably not. The rest can probably be hired from the local talent pool, we’ll see.” Hal shrugged.

Grassel looked surprised. “So you’re telling us that you’re creating two hundred new jobs?”

“Professional positions, yes. And more, if you count contractor jobs. Plus, we’ll be doing as much of our procurement locally as we can, and I’m certain that there will be a few new businesses created as a result of that.”

Commissioner Alva Hathaway, whose little name plaque also said “Chair,” leaned forward and peered left and right at her colleagues behind the long table. She looked suspicious.

“Mr. Weathers, to me this sounds too good to be true. We’ve had any number of people come before us with plans and promises, but they always want some kind of subsidy, a tax break of some kind, maybe, or something else. Before we get too excited, what is it you want from us?”

Hal was nodding. “I understand your suspicion. But I’m here merely to announce our intentions, not to ask for anything. We’ll be working with local government because we need offices and there will be building inspections and so on. I think probably we’ll have to approach the Town of Winter Park, but I’m not certain. This is going to be a non-profit organization, so it will qualify for property tax exemptions, but we’ve already discussed how to make sure that we pay our fair share of the costs of local services.”

Ned Grassel had been scribbling on a note pad. “Say, I just did a little estimate here. Sounds as if you’ll be putting five million a year or so into the economy here.”

“Well, Commissioner Grassel, we believe that we’re going to have to pay competitive salaries and benefits to our professional staff, competitive with positions over on the Front Range, and if you add

that to the contractor wages and the workshop lodging and catering and so on and do the math, well, I think we're looking at more like five times that much."

Grassel dropped his pencil in surprise. "Holy sh...uh, well, goodness me. But I'm curious about something. Big computers like this need to be connected to the world, right? Not just with the sort of narrow version of broadband we have up here, either. How are you going to get the kind of connections you need?"

"Well, without going into too much in the way of technical details, we're going to use a new, proprietary network connection to the fast internet node that's over in Boulder. We'll get there through the Moffatt Tunnel, we've already made arrangements with the railroad. And, since you brought it up, we'll have enough bandwidth to lease some to local internet providers, so there will be improved broadband available up here for everyone. We've talked about providing it to the school district for free, and some others, too. One of these days I'm going to talk with the county information management people, for example."

Alva Hathaway was still shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weathers, but this is just all too good to be true for me to quite trust it. There's got to be a hitch somewhere, some kind of fly in the ointment."

Hal shrugged. "Well, ma'am, I'm not asking for your trust or anything. I'm just announcing our intentions."

A fourth person behind the table, quite likely a commissioner but his sign was missing so it wasn't entirely clear, cleared his throat and spoke up in a gravelly mumble.

"Ya got good sense, Alva. All these so-called climate studies done by computer are a complete load of horse pucky. Buncha environmentalists trying to generate global heating propaganda so they can ruin our economy, kill off jobs, make us all drive those crappy little Jap electric cars. Fella, I tell you we got no use for this stuff here in Grand County, and you can take your new organization somewhere else, as far as I'm concerned." He looked around as if he needed a spittoon.

The room was silent, apparently awaiting a response from Hal, and he took advantage of the silence to let a little tension build by shuffling his notes again.

"I'm afraid you have me at an advantage, sir, because your name plate seems to be missing." Hal gave the crusty old fellow a little smile and stared at him expectantly.

"Doesn't matter who I am, because I represent the views of lots of folks here. I could be anybody. Just call me Joe Citizen."

"Well, Mr. Citizen," Hal seemed unfazed, "Your view of our future activities may be representative of many people in Grand County, but that just means we have some public education to do. You see, climate simulation using computers isn't about proving anything in particular, it's about understanding how Earth's climate works. The big issue just now is how regional climate works, that is, how the global climate influences the climate in particular regions. And I'd say that Grand County, with its ski areas and other weather-dependent tourism, not to mention agriculture, is a place that folks might just be interested in that sort of thing, or they should be. I mean, even if the odds of significant global warming are quite small, wouldn't it be nice to have some idea of what could happen here anyway? Just in case? And if we're creating a couple hundred or so well-paying jobs in the process and not costing the county or its municipalities anything, what's the problem? It seems to me that professional career positions like we'll be filling are preferable in the local economy to entry-level, minimum wage, service jobs."

Alva Hathaway responded for Mr. Citizen, who was looking sullen. "He's right, Simon, it's no skin off our nose as long as they don't ask for any tax breaks or anything. And the jobs will help. Mr. Weathers, this is Commissioner Simon Murcheson, by the way."

Hal smiled his best college-dean smile. “It turns out that another task of mine while I’m here is to assess educational needs on behalf of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. I must say, they do seem to exist, those educational needs.”

As Hal turned to sit down, the stare from Simon Murcheson could have burned a hole in his back.

* * *

“No wonder that development went under. Whoever would want to buy into a place with a name like ‘Mount Epworth Arms’?” Hal was studying architectural drawings that he had unrolled on the dining table.

“That your new building?” I was munching on toast, looking over his shoulder. “And what’s wrong with ‘Mount Epworth Arms’? Sounds distinguished. Mt. Epworth must be one of the peaks over there on the Front Range, no?”

“To me, ‘Mount Epworth Arms’ sounds like the name of a falling-apart, pre-art-deco apartment building on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach, full of geezers trying to remember to take their memory pills and heart meds. Not an upscale vacation condo in Winter Park. Anyway, yes, it’s my new building. Except I don’t need so many two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartments with kitchens. These plans are going to be changed a lot.”

“But at least all these bedrooms are on the outside, with views and balconies. Make each one an office, and you’ll have lots of happy employees. Much better than cubicles. And I’ve never been in an office building that had enough bathrooms, especially women’s bathrooms. Be generous, OK?”

“Absolutely. At least I think I see how this can work. I’ll have to get a recommendation from Chuck on an architect. He bought the thing, so maybe he’ll have some ideas.” He took a sip of his coffee.

After the long day on Thursday that culminated in Hal’s appearance before the county commission, we slept in Friday morning and had breakfast together at home for the first time since Monday. And it was truly beginning to feel like home—both of our cars were in their customary places in the garage, our computers and other electronic gadgets were hooked up and humming away, and our knick-knacks were scattered about, lending an air of familiarity to the place.

With Hal’s new offices still in the form of steel superstructure, he was working from home, spreading out his stuff onto whatever surfaces seemed appropriate for the task. The dining table was the only thing large enough for the plans.

I was due at the sheriff’s office at eleven, but first I planned a call to Denver, to my boss, Rod Andersen, the CBI Director. We had agreed that weekly phone updates, plus monthly written reports along with whatever other updates seemed appropriate, would suffice to document my work with Grand County law enforcement, and I wanted to make this first call in privacy, from home. I had nothing but good things to say about Sheriff Fran Schmidt and his department, but it seemed better to make the call from somewhere other than the sheriff’s own telephone system.

I got through to Rod’s administrative assistant, Sandy McStain, at exactly 9:30, right on time.

“Morning Sandy. It’s Annette. I’m calling for my weekly chat with Rod.”

“And he’s waiting to talk to you. We saw a report yesterday about the three homicides up there.” I heard clicks that told me she was pushing buttons.

“Annette? Good morning! How are things on the other side of those beautiful mountains I’m staring at?”

“You sound ready and raring to go this morning, Rod. And things here are all in a tizzy. Grand County has three homicides all at once, and the sheriff is understaffed. But, listen, you should know that all three happened before I got here. They were discovered after we arrived, but all three deaths happened before.” He laughed, and I knew my message got through—Don’t blame me, boss!

“That’s understood at this end, but I expect there are some people up there who don’t quite understand it. The CBI jinx strikes, and all that. Oh, well. Listen, I saw in the update you sent that there are indications that the three are related somehow.”

“Two seem to be. We should have blood results today from two bodies that have needle marks. The other one may also be related, but that’s circumstantial just now. The third victim, the woman who was killed on the ski run, she was deeply involved in the water-rights issues that one of the others was writing about.” When I said it that way, the connection sounded tenuous even to me.

“Right. And the other victim was a local developer who had connections to water issues as well. Seems he was a mixed success, though. One of his projects fell through in a big way, and lots of small investors got stiffed. So there are people with a motive for wanting him dead. One of my staff here told me about it—he lost his deposit on a condo up there.” Rod was more informed than I had thought.

“Rod? Do you happen to know the name of the project? I’ve only heard of the Tobias Summers projects that succeeded.”

“He didn’t say, but hold on, I’ll get Sandy to ask him.” And he put me on hold for a minute. “OK, she’s got to track him down, but we’ll find out shortly. Anyway, how’s the department there doing? You said it’s in a tizzy.”

“Yeah, they’re understaffed for this. For example, the day we found the second victim, the one made to look like a suicide, Sheriff Schmidt told me that he had all of his available people on the scene except for two, who were on patrol in the western part of the county.”

“‘Western’ meaning…”

“Oh, well, they seem to think of themselves here as two large units, with the county seat, Hot Sulphur Springs, in the middle. The east county is where the action and money are just now, because it includes the ski areas and,” I counted in my head, “let’s see, five of the eight municipalities, or something like that, including Grand Lake. The west county is lower geographically and in terms of population, but it’s still a big area. So, anyway, he had almost all of his people at the scene where one of the under-sheriffs and I found the victim. If any other emergencies had come up, they would have been in trouble.”

“And they can’t just hire more people because of budget issues, I bet.”

“Right. So I’m working on efficiency improvement. On top of that there are some strange things that keep popping up because this is a pretty small community up here. For example, the sheriff used to date the female victim, and she, the victim, was also close friends with the sheriff’s wife. And the sheriff and one of the deputy DAs have trouble getting along, because of an ancient relationship gone bad. I’ve seen a little of this sort of thing in Durango, which isn’t the world’s biggest population center, after all. But here, it seems more prevalent.”

“Is it getting in the way of their work?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but it’s weird to run into it. All-in-all, with these three homicides I’ve been spending most of my time at the sheriff’s department and haven’t touched base with the municipalities yet. Oh, but I did meet the medical examiner.”

“During one of the autopsies?”

“Right. A real character. Comes across like a drugged-out ex-hippy, but underneath I think he’s sharp. We’ll see how he interprets the blood-test results today.”

“According to the reports, one of the men died from a stroke and the other from sleeping pills and alcohol, a suicide.”

“That’s what we’re saying publicly, and that’s certainly what they were both set up to look like. But the needle marks inside their noses are too suspicious to ignore. And there are other factors, too. That’s why the blood tests are so important. Even if McMurphy—he’s the apparent suicide—even if he did die from Seconal like we’re supposed to think, it could have been intravenous. And I suspect any number of substances injected into the brain could induce a stroke.”

“Interesting. Well, you’re right, Annette, the blood tests will be critical...oh, thanks Sandy. Hmm. Annette? Sandy just handed me a note. Says here that the name of the development that my guy lost his shirt on was something called the Mount Epworth Arms. Yeesh. Who’d want to live in a place with a name like that?”

* * *

Nine

“That is extremely bizarre.” I was looking at Hal, who responded with one of those quizzical expressions he adopts when things don’t make sense.

“Uh, what should I say? ‘Yes, dear?’” He cocked his head sideways with the question.

“The failed condo development that Chuck Shure bought for your institute, for MPARC, was one of Tobias Summers’ projects. Possibly the only failed one, although I’ll want to verify that.”

There was a long pause before he reacted. “Really? You’re right, that *is* bizarre. What Chuck told me was that the sale finalized last week, but he didn’t say who the seller was. Those plans I was looking at earlier are dated five years ago, though. It would be astonishing if the thing hadn’t passed through several hands—these failures almost always do.”

“I’ll call Chuck and find out who. I’m not going to obsess over this, but it’s a little too coincidental for me to be comfortable with.” Coincidences and I are not the best of friends.

“You want his private number?” Hal reached for his cell phone. “I’ve got it programmed in here.”

“It’s in mine, too, ever since that case of mine he got involved in.”

I walked into the other room to make the call. Hal was working on something on his computer with accompaniment by a Grateful Dead concert CD. Turned up.

“Yes?”

“Chuck? It’s Annette Trieri. How are things in the corporate world?”

“Annette! Hey, it’s good to hear from you. I was asking Hal about you on...on Wednesday, I guess it was. I assume he got home all right?”

“Oh, sure. And last evening, he made a short presentation on MPARC to the county commission. He’s going to call you about an architect to redesign that building you bought, or that frame of a building, actually.”

I heard laughter. “Right, I think he was a little unnerved by that. But, hey, I need some fun, too. Thanks for the heads up—I’ll put him onto my personal architect. He’ll know what to do with that thing.”

“Chuck, that building is what I called about, actually. Would you happen to know who the seller was? Maybe you could refer me to whoever closed the deal for you.”

“Don’t need to, because it was me. Enough money was involved that it got kicked upstairs to my office. So I went up to Denver last week to do the closing. The official seller was an outfit called TMS Holdings, Inc. The paperwork was as complicated as anything I’ve seen, because it included the notes owed to various investors, people who bought into the thing before it went belly up.”

I thought for a minute. “Does this mean that those people are going to get paid off? I know of somebody who lost his shirt, or so I’m told.”

“I’m going to have to deal with them one-by-one, and there are a couple dozen. But, yes, generally that’s my plan. They will get an offer of their money back plus reasonable interest. If they don’t agree with my idea of ‘reasonable,’ then I’ll have to play hardball.” He laughed quietly in a way that almost seemed menacing.

“Can I ask what the price was?”

“My total outlay was just under five million, and I figure I’ll have to come up with another two hundred thousand or so in interest. Naturally, this money comes from the earnings of the endowment for MPARC, so it really wasn’t my outlay. But you see what I mean.”

“So the seller walked out with a check, or a deposit receipt or something, for, what, four, four and a half million?”

“Three point two. The principal owed the investors is in escrow, and there was the broker’s commission. The broker, that son-of-a-bitch, made a bundle for very little work, I’ll tell you.”

“Chuck, I’m asking all these questions because the person who started the Mount Epworth Arms development is a homicide victim up here. To have that building resurface this way has got me curious.”

“Tobias Summers a homicide victim? Was it in the paper? I haven’t seen anything. When?”

“You know Tobias Summers?”

“Well, yeah. He was the seller. TMS Holdings is Tobias and Mandy Summers or something like that. He has this group of companies to wheel and deal with, to move properties among. Or he had them. He was at the closing on Wednesday. I shook hands with him. Damn. Now he’s dead?”

“Right. Killed, although it was set up to look accidental. You say he walked out of your closing with over three million dollars? In what form? Not cash, surely.”

“No, no, it was a special cashier’s check that was only for deposit. It would have to be deposited and verified. That’s what he and the closer specified, so that’s what I brought. Hmm. And I remember that it was made out to him personally, not to TMS Holdings. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but now it seems a little strange.”

“And this was Wednesday a week ago, right? What time of day?”

“Right, nine days ago, and it was about one-thirty that afternoon when we were finished. It took place at an outfit called Western States Title, and I was with one of my lawyers and an accountant. Summers was alone. He left, the rest of us, including the Western States closer, talked for a few minutes, and then my guys and I came back here to the Springs. That’s how I got the plans I gave to Hal two days ago, at the closing.”

“His wife, Mandy, saw him that Wednesday morning, so you’re the last person we know who saw him alive. We think he was abducted while he was in Denver and then brought up here and killed in this setup to make it look accidental.”

“Let me guess. There’s no sign of that three point two million dollar check, right?”

“This conversation is the first I’ve heard of it. And it adds a whole new dimension to this investigation. We need to find out if it’s been deposited and, if so, where and by whom. Chuck, I’d like to have one of our sheriff’s people drive down to interview you, if that’s OK. It’ll be about what you’ve told me with additional questions about how Summers looked and acted. Will that work for you?”

“How about if I come up there? I’ve got this new building, such as it is, to look at and my institute director to talk to. Know any good places to stay?”

I thought quickly. I knew Charles Shure well enough to invite him to stay in our guest room, the guest room of the guest house. But if he was driven up by a chauffeur, then what? And I really didn’t know the local hotels very well—besides which, it was ski season and they might be sold out for the weekend.

“I don’t know the local places at all. We’ve got a guest room, but it may not be up to your usual standards. We’re staying in the guest house of one of Hal’s friends, Winston Fredrickson.”

“Win? Well, small world. Ten to one says he’s not there, am I right?”

I tried to mask my surprise. “We’ve been here not quite a week, but we haven’t seen him.”

“Tell you what. I’ll call him and tell him I need to stay at his house. Then I’ll be just up the road and I won’t bother you. And I can zip over to see the sheriff and get interviewed. What’s today, Friday? Maybe I can get up there tomorrow and stay over Saturday night, then ski on Sunday. I’ll keep in touch. Oh, and I’ll have my accounting group follow up on that check.”

“OK, sure, Chuck, keep in touch.”

I felt as if my head was spinning around when I went back to find Hal in his study.

* * *

“Hi, sweetie. You look dazed and confused. Can I help? Coffee, tea, something stronger?” Hal knows me well enough to diagnose head-spinning, even if it’s only the virtual kind. I sat down in a chair across from his desk.

“I think I need to think for a minute. Chuck Shure bought the Mount Epworth Arms directly from Tobias Summers, shook his hand in the process, last week, a week ago Wednesday, the day Summers’ wife last saw him. Chuck is going to try to come up here tomorrow to talk with the sheriff about it, and, because he seems to know Win, he’s going to stay up at the main house. Or so he said. Oh, and there’s a three point two million dollar check missing, drawn from an MPARC account, I think.”

Hal’s expression started out surprised, then morphed to thoughtful and matter-of-fact.

“Hmm. Lots of information to process there, no wonder you look dazed and confused. I guess it’s not surprising that rich guys know each other, Chuck and Win, I mean. And I truly am astonished that Summers still owned the building, but if he did, it makes sense that he’d be at the closing. The missing check changes the complexion of your investigation, doesn’t it?”

Putting the new information in those simple categories helped me considerably.

“It does indeed, but Chuck is going to have his accounting people trace it. Maybe we can find out who deposited it and where. I’m due for a meeting at eleven, got to run. What should I get for supper?”

“When will you be home?”

“Five, five-thirty, I guess.”

“How about we try out the Mexican restaurant in Winter Park. Carlos and Maria’s—I’ve heard good things about it. I need a chile fix.”

“You sure? This is pretty far north for your kind of chile. That stuff I had at the ski area would have disappointed you badly.”

“That’s why I didn’t have it. Ski area food is meant for the masses. But this place has been around for a long time, by local standards, and it has a great reputation. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

I left for Hot Sulphur Springs amused by my husband’s never-ending quest for chile nirvana—and that he thought he might find it in Winter Park, Colorado, of all places.

Because I was running a little late, I decided to brave the back road that Fran Schmidt had used on Tuesday and found it neatly plowed and trivial to negotiate. I even managed a little controlled four-wheel drift on the sweeping curves down the west side into town—something that once had scared the daylights out of me was actually fun.

The 11:00 meeting was just convening when I arrived. Fran Schmidt had pulled his employees together to hear the blood-test report and to communicate as much information as possible about the three homicides his department was confronted with. As I sat down, it occurred to me that I might just need to announce what I’d learned about the Tobias Summers homicide that morning. But that would have to wait.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. I wanted to get you all together to let you know where things stand with our three homicides—and they’re homicides for sure now. Today is the right time to do this because the blood tests on a couple of the victims came in this morning. George?” Fran Schmidt was strangely nervous, I thought, considering he was, first, the boss and, second, basically a politician who gave speeches all the time while running for office.

“Yeah, thanks, man, far out. Well, folks, I’ll tell ya, we got some seriously weird sh... uh, stuff here, weirder than anything I’ve ever seen, that’s for sure, man.” George Neering was in fine form, playing to the crowd. He had his beard braided—possibly for the formality of the occasion, because it looked a little like a necktie. When he talked it bobbed up and down, kind of like neckties do on Adam’s apples sometimes.

“Anyway, see, I did autopsies on the three victims. The lady, Lannie Young, a lot of us knew her and it’s just a damned shame, really, well, she died from a broken neck, basically, caused by when she caught a tree limb on the chin. But it wasn’t an accident, man, because somebody pushed her, see? Norman found some forensic evidence yesterday, and Fran’s got some folks following that up, right, Fran?”

He looked toward the sheriff, who nodded.

“OK, so the other two victims, Tobias Summers, who’s someone a lot of us also know and I guess it’s not such a damned shame, although don’t quote me, right? And the other guy, the writer Mike McMurphy who no one knew very well because he kept to himself. Anyway, they both died in circumstances that sort of looked normal—a stroke in Summers’s case and suicide by sleeping pills and booze in McMurphy’s case. Except, man, that’s just what they were *made* to look like. But, see, I found needle marks inside their noses, in the same place, left nostril, way back up in there where whatever got

injected would go right to the brain, man. I'll tell ya, do not, *do not* try that at home, man. So the blood tests are to try and find out what they got injected with, see?" George looked around at the crowd, nodding his head to that internal rhythm he carried around.

"So, anyway, Summers' body was found with lots of empty booze bottles, right, Fran?" George got another nod. "But there was no booze in his system, blood alcohol content zero, or at least below detection limits. And there wasn't anything else unusual in his system, either. So I'm pretty stumped, man. But there was some cell damage up in there, up in his nose, so something got put in there. Maybe just a few milliliters of alcohol—that would induce a stroke and probably not be detected. Something, I don't know, man. Also, Summers had traces of some tranquilizers in his blood, suggesting that someone had him under their control for some time before they injected the coagulant. All this is consistent with what little we know, that he went to Denver on Wednesday before last and didn't resurface until he was dead. So that's what we know about Tobias Summers, man."

He looked around as if expecting questions, but the room was silent except for a few coughs.

"OK, well, that's Summers, man, now McMurphy. Remember, I said I found an almost identical needle mark, right? So the deal with McMurphy is that he supposedly sent Fran an email suicide note on Monday. It was a delayed email, and supposedly he took a load of reds—I mean, you know, downers—and booze a couple of days before Fran got the email, right? And Janelle and the CBI lady, Annette Tri-er-i went up and found his body along with an empty pill bottle and an almost empty bottle of Glenlivet. However. *How-ev-er*. No alcohol in old Mike's blood either, none, nada, zero. Also, no evidence of pills in his stomach. I mean, if he gobbled a whole bottle of pills, some would get absorbed, dissolved and digested, but some would take longer. Usually, you find pill residue in cases like that, man. But his blood test shows lethal amounts of Seconal. I think that's what they injected him with. So that's what we got, man, two dead guys who got injected with things that killed them except in both cases it was set up to look different. Like I said, real weird, man."

He looked around for questions again, and, when none materialized, he sat down. I think everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"OK, thanks, George. Since there aren't any questions, Norm? How about an overview of what you've found?" Fran Schmidt still seemed strangely nervous.

"Right, Fran. I've been involved in two of these homicides. On Monday afternoon, I went up to Michael McMurphy's place on Crooked Creek Road to look for tire tracks under the snow before the plow came. There was nothing remarkable down by the road, but up by the house there were two interesting things. First, McMurphy's car hadn't been out of the garage since before the previous storm, which was a couple of weeks back. Second, the last vehicle up there was what I've identified, from the track width and the tires, as a Cadillac Escalade. Three people got out and went over to the front door of the house, then came back, out through the garage door, and left. This was after the plowing from that previous storm." He looked around, but the crowd had learned to sit on its hands.

"OK, well, the second of the cases was Lannie's, and yesterday I went up to Outhouse—for those of you who don't ski, that's an expert run that connects the top of Winter Park to the Mary Jane base—and dug some trenches in the snow. This was after Ms. Trieri found a swatch of fabric on a tree in the woods above where Lannie's body was found. It looks as if someone, probably the person who pushed her, skied out of control and got his shoulder scraped by the tree where the fabric was, and then he skied down to examine Lannie's body. We're following up on the fabric now. Questions?"

Someone in the middle of the crowd stood up. "When are we going public with the homicides? So far, public thinks they're what they were supposed to look like."

“I’ll take that, Norm.” Fran Schmidt stepped to the front of the room. “Today. That’s one of the reasons for this meeting, so none of you is blindsided. I’ll be having a news conference after lunch, and the DA’s office will be there, too. I’m going to avoid mentioning certain aspects of what we know, however, so don’t be surprised if you don’t read about some of the things you just heard. And everything you don’t read about, or hear publicly, has to be considered confidential information, which we need to remain confidential, clear?”

He looked around the room, but no one else stood. “OK, folks, I know you’ve all been working your tails off lately, and there still more to be done. But we’re going to find out who’s behind these homicides and put them away. You can all be proud of the work so far, and I’ll tell you straight out that I’m proud of you. Also, I’ll say that our CBI liaison has had good things to say about everyone, which makes me even more proud of you. I can’t think of a better bunch of people I’d want behind me in a situation like we’re facing. Let’s get out there and catch these guys.”

* * *

Norman Dzeng and George Neering were sitting together in the front row, and Fran was just finishing thanking them when I approached.

“Fran? Good job all around. You seem nervous, though.”

“Aw, it’s the press conference. I hate press conferences. Plus, the DA himself is in Denver today, so guess who is representing his office?” He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Oh. I see. I’d be nervous, too, with a loose cannon like her on deck. Want me to be there? I could repeat in public what I’ve said to you about your people.”

He thought about it. “You know, that’s a great idea. And if you put in a plug for increased staffing, it wouldn’t bother me in the least.”

“I’ll be diplomatic about it, for sure.” I recalled something from the earlier briefing. “Say, I couldn’t help but notice that Norman didn’t mention all we know about that fabric.”

He nodded. “Right. We talked about it beforehand and decided to keep that quiet for now. Thing is, we have people on staff with agendas about the ski area. Some love it because they have relatives working there. Some hate it because they have relatives that weren’t retained by the new company that’s operating it. The more invisible the company stays in this thing, the better, at least until we have something solid.”

“I guess this is another facet of this small-town thing I keep seeing. Like with you and Donna Little. There are all these connections in unexpected places.”

“You should have been up here twenty, thirty years ago. Back then, it was ridiculous. But we’ve had enough new people move into the county to help with that some.” He grinned. “I guess you’re finding out about all the girls I used to date, though.”

I grinned back. “Only two, three counting your wife, so far. You mean there’s more? And, not to change the subject or anything, I found out something interesting this morning, some of it possibly relevant.” I told him about the conversations with Rod Anderson and Charles Shure.

“So this guy Shure is coming up here this weekend so we can interview him? I’m impressed. And the money is a new angle altogether. Puts Summers’ murder in a different category from the other two.” He looked thoughtful, measuring implications.

“Chuck’s people are going to trace it, or keep watch on its progress through banks.”

“That should help us. How do you know this guy, anyway? Doesn’t sound like you’d travel in the same circles.”

“Old case. We had a state senator down by Telluride with delusions of grandeur, who tried to recruit Chuck for his vigilante gang. It didn’t work because Chuck came to us instead. He wound up getting kidnapped for his trouble, and I rescued him.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember reading about that, uh, some time back. And now he’s bankrolling this institute that Hal is setting up? Interesting. You know, it’s great that he bought out that development to use. Winter Park was getting close to condemning it and tearing it down. And please tell me they’re going to change the name.”

He had led us back to his office, where a stack of phone messages was waiting, along with Donna Little, who was sitting on a side chair, overflowing it by a large margin.

“Ms. Little. What can I do for you this morning?” His tone was polite but not quite friendly.

“You could have invited me to that meeting you just had, for one thing.” Her tone was impolite but not quite hostile.

“I don’t think so. I’ve discussed it with your boss on a couple of occasions, and we both agree that it’s better to keep some distance between the investigators and the prosecutors, at least in the early stages of investigations. Then, when we make an arrest, we work together and you come to our meetings. Finally, when the actual prosecution starts, we fade away unless called on. He and I talked about writing up a formal agreement to that effect, but then we decided to keep it informal. I guess word didn’t get to you.” His tone was still polite.

“What are you, joined at the hip to this person?” She jerked her head in my direction, an amazing feat considering she didn’t seem to have a neck. “I need to have a private conversation with you.”

Despite her now-rude tone, I kept quiet.

“Ms. Little, the only conversations that are appropriate for this office concern official county business. Ms. Trieri, in her role as our consultant from the CBI, is privy to all official county business. It’s therefore appropriate for her to be part of conversations in this office.” His continued ability to remain polite was remarkable.

I thought about excusing myself but sensed that Fran wanted me to stay, so I remained as impassive as I could while watching her little piggy eyes dart back and forth between the two of us.

“I thought you wanted to hear about the meeting that Lannie Young had scheduled with me. It doesn’t concern *her* at all.” She jerked her head in my direction again, and her several chins flapped with the motion.

“Actually, it does, Ms. Little, now more than ever. Because Janelle Kennedy has recused herself from the Lannie Young investigation due to a perceptual conflict of interest, I’ve asked Ms. Trieri to take more of a lead role. Anything involving Lannie is relevant for Ms. Trieri to hear.” Fran had not discussed this with me, but I wasn’t going to say anything under the circumstances.

“Really? Your cute little token-ette has given up? I always thought she didn’t have the right stuff. And I’m not sure it’s appropriate, or even legal, for you to involve this person,” again the jerk of the head, again the flapping jowls, “whatever her credentials, in an official capacity. I’ll have to look into it. And until I do, you’re just going to have to wait to hear about my meeting with Lannie Young.”

She struggled to her feet and wobbled off down the hall.

“Oh, *man*. Maybe I should just cancel that press conference.” Fran had begun nibbling on a thumb-nail.

“Have you and she discussed an agenda for the press conference? Who goes first and says what? And don’t cancel. It’ll just get the reporters even more stirred up.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ve only done this once before, when there was a big car-bus crash involving alcohol. The DA and I had a press conference to talk about it. He went first, he’s a take-charge guy, did a short introduction and turned it over to me. Then he summarized by talking about drinking and driving in general and how Grand County has zero tolerance, blah, blah. Very political, but, then, it was only a couple of months before the election.”

I thought about it. “Well, it sounds to me as if that’s a precedent. Go to the conference on time. Sit down and wait for her to do something, assuming she’s there on time. Then wing it. And do not, under any circumstances, let them see you sweat.”

He smiled through his nerves. “I’ll go spray my face with Right Guard.”

* * *

Ten

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. I’m Grand County Sheriff Fran Schmidt. We also planned to have representation from the District Attorney’s Office today, but I know that they have people out of town and are short-staffed. Some kind of pressing matter must have come up.”

It was ten after one, and Fran had waited as patiently as he could, even to the point of pretending to get a cell-phone call to let extra time pass. He’d called Donna Little at five after, but her secretary didn’t know where she was.

“We called this press conference to discuss with you suspicious circumstances of three unattended deaths we’ve had in Grand County recently. Although we thought, at first, that these deaths were either natural, accidental, or self-inflicted, they now classify as homicides, all three of them. Let me explain what I can tell you about them, and then I’ll take questions. There’s also a press release ready for you that’s being passed around.”

Fran proceeded to talk for a good half hour, explaining each death in as much detail as he could without giving away information we had agreed to hold confidential. Then the questions started.

“Sheriff, with regard to Tobias Summers. His body was found in the apartment of the school superintendent, Emily Griggs. Were they having an affair?”

“There’s no indication of that whatsoever. Dr. Griggs was out of town, stuck in Denver due to the big snowstorm we had a week ago. When she returned Saturday afternoon, she found Mr. Summers’ body and called us immediately. Why and how he was in her home is something we do not yet understand, and neither does Ms. Griggs. Yes?”

“Sheriff, is it true that Mr. Summers was in Denver as well? Couldn’t she have killed him and set this up?”

“Let me be clear. Ms. Griggs is under no suspicion. She is cooperating fully and wants this cleared up as much as we do. We believe that Mr. Summers was in Denver during the same time frame as Ms. Griggs, but that he was brought back here sooner than she returned. We have testimony from several people in Denver as to Ms. Griggs’ activities, and there’s also the issue of size differences. Ms. Griggs is

a petite woman; Mr. Summers was bigger than I. She simply could not have manhandled his body to set this up. Yes?”

“Sheriff, is it true that you and Ms. Young were having an affair?”

“No. Lannie and I had a relationship years ago, before I met my wife, and we ended it as friends and still were friends. And Lannie and my wife were very close. Lannie’s death has been a personal tragedy for my wife and me both. Yes?”

“Sheriff, why did you relieve Under-Sheriff Kennedy of her duties on these cases?”

“I did not relieve Under-Sheriff Kennedy of her duties; in fact, she remains the lead on the Summers and McMurphy cases. She recused herself from the Young case because the body was found at the ski area and Ms. Kennedy’s husband works there. She is trying to avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest. Yes?”

“Sheriff, there’s a rumor going around to the effect that Emily Griggs is a lesbian. Do you think it’s appropriate for the school superintendent to be a lesbian?”

“In general, I think the appropriate criteria for selecting a school superintendent relate solely to educational qualifications and experience—how much the individual can provide leadership in the education of our kids. And it’s clearly not appropriate for me to make any comments or to speculate about Ms. Griggs’ personal life. I will say that she seems like a fine person to me, though. And she seems like just the sort of superintendent we need here. Yes?”

“Sheriff, Lannie Young was a real-estate agent and Tobias Summers was a developer. Do you think they were involved together in something that got them both killed?”

“There’s no information that would suggest such a thing. Yes?”

It was amusing to watch Fran bob and weave among the questions, trying to be forthcoming with straight answers without venturing into the territory he wanted to avoid. The only question that took him aback was also the only question about Michael McMurphy.

“Sheriff, there’s been a persistent rumor going around for years that Michael McMurphy had a huge stash of gold nuggets from that mining claim that he built his house on. Did your people find anything of that nature when you searched his place?”

Fran paused, stared at the reporter for a full ten seconds, and burst into laughter.

“Excuse me, excuse me, I’m sorry. The answer, of course, is ‘no.’ And no one on my staff has run off to the Bahamas, either. I had a conversation with Mr. McMurphy some time back about this rumor, and I’ll tell you that we both had a good laugh about it. It turns out that he used the mine site for his home because the tailings made good fill for the foundation and the entrance to the old mine itself made a great wine cellar. But there never was any gold in that hole, or anything else of value, for that matter.”

At last, after a half hour of such give and take, he thanked everyone again for coming and the gathering broke up. Donna Little never put in an appearance, and I didn’t get asked to speak, either.

“Sorry I didn’t introduce you, Annette, but I think these people have short attention spans. That hour was about their limit, I think.”

“It’s OK by me. I wonder what happened to your colleague from the DA’s office.”

“God knows. I hate to wish bad things on people, but that’s one person who tests my restraint. I mean, it’s been twenty-five years. You’d think she’d be over it.”

“It’s on her by this point. Has she ever had other relationships?”

“Oh, for sure. She went to college and then law school, in Fort Collins and then in Boulder. Got married and worked in Pueblo for a while. When her marriage broke up, she came here, home, and landed the job with the DA’s office. That’s when she let herself go to hell, must have gained two hundred pounds. That was about five years ago.”

We had left the small auditorium where the press conference had convened and were walking down the hallway toward Fran’s office. A young woman in uniform saw us from the other end of the hall and rushed toward us.

“Sheriff, sheriff, did you hear? About Assistant District Attorney Little?” She was slightly out of breath, flushed, clearly distraught.

“Calm down, Anna, calm down. Take a deep breath. What happened? I haven’t heard anything.”

“Donna Little, she, she...well, she’s dead. It looks like she was trying to run across the highway, coming back from lunch just now, and she slipped on some ice. Only, she was running to get across the traffic and after she slipped she got run over by a highway department sand truck. Killed her instantly, they say.”

* * *

Considerable sorting out ensued. Because the accident—and it appeared from every perspective to have been an accident—had happened right in front of the sheriff’s department’s offices, there was no lack of official people on hand. Because the highway was still closed, with a side street bearing the brunt of re-routed traffic, and there were uniforms standing around doing official things, the reporters who had left the press conference had no shortage of people to quiz.

For his own protection from the reporters as much as anything, the driver of the sand truck, Shorty Thistlebaum, was hustled into the sheriff’s office, given a cup of coffee and paper and pencil, and told to write out his description of what had happened in as much detail as he could remember. The main purpose of this exercise, I discovered on talking with Fran, was to buy time and keep Shorty out of more trouble.

George Neering was fetched from his morgue and asked for an opinion about the cause of death, to which he immediately responded “squashed like a bug, man. I mean, a really *BIG* mother of a bug, you know?”

When this opinion was greeted with somewhat less than official approval, George decided, apparently, to play only by the rules and required the body to be transported to his examination table. The three deputies who were tapped for the task each suffered back strain and were sent home to rest.

It appeared that Donna Little had finished a late lunch at the diner across the highway and was hustling to the press conference, which she mistakenly had thought to be scheduled for 2:00. This was confirmed by a notation discovered later on her office calendar. Fran and his secretary were certain they had told Donna’s office that the press conference was at 1:00, so the mix-up remained mixed up.

The District Attorney was tracked down at his meeting in Denver and called to the phone, at which point Fran had the unpleasant experience of delivering the bad news.

“Strange.” Fran said afterward. “He wasn’t particularly concerned about Donna or her family. All he could talk about was how he would be able to afford a replacement. It sounds like Donna was underpaid by a significant amount.”

Then we finally were able to talk with Mr. Thistlebaum, who, we discovered, was in sore need of a bath. The task of writing out the incident seemed to have set him under considerable stress, and he had

stunk up Fran's office something fierce. We left the door to the hall open and cracked a window despite the cold air outside.

Fran handed me Shorty's essay to read while he asked questions.

"Now, Shorty, your initial statement was that you were driving west on US 40 at about the speed limit when the victim started running across the highway, right?"

"Yessir, sheriff, that's right. And she probably woulda made it if she hadn't slipped and fell. I hit the brakes anyway, before she slipped, just to slow down more. But then she fell in front of me and I just couldn't stop, not with that load of sand and that little downhill grade there."

"OK, fine. Now, two things. First, it happens that we had radar enforcement watching that stretch of the highway—people tend to speed through town here all the time—and your story is backed up in full by the officer on duty. He saw the whole thing and clocked you at 33 in the 35 there. And you already passed the breathalyzer test. So you're clean." Fran looked at his notes while Shorty looked relieved. "But you've said that the victim slipped on the ice. Shorty, I need you to think about it carefully and picture it in your mind and tell me exactly what you saw."

"Well, I think that's what musta happened, because one minute she was running across the highway and the next she was flat on her back in front of me. And, you know, when I say she was running, well, it's not like she was an athlete or anything like that. What I saw was this really big woman start across the highway at a fast walk or slow run, moving pretty quickly for someone that large, actually. I hit the brakes to slow down for her and looked in my mirrors to see if anyone was following me too close, and then when I looked back at her she was down, lying right in front of my right wheels. I woulda swerved to miss her but there was this school bus coming the other way, and besides with a full load that old truck don't handle too good. Anyway, I stood on the brakes but I couldn't stop and then there was this ka-bump ka-bump and I ran over her. Geez, it makes me feel terrible."

"My officer on duty also saw the school bus, so your story is solid, Shorty. This was an accident, pure and simple, and I'll make sure the highway department hears that from me personally, in writing."

At this, Shorty looked even more relieved and began to thank Fran profusely, almost in tears.

But there was a knock on the door and George Neering stuck his head in. "Sheriff? Got revised opinion for ya, man."

He looked over Shorty's highway department uniform and rendered an accurate assessment. "Say, man, you the truck driver? Bummer, man, bummer. But, listen, it's not your fault, man. I mean, yeah, you squashed her like a bug, man, but that's not what killed her. She had a massive heart attack, man, must have keeled over in a flash, dead as a doornail before she hit the ground. You just made her fit into a different sized coffin, man. Pancake shaped instead of like a fat bowling pin. Unless they make her un-flat again. Say, man, do you suppose they can *do* something like that?"

Shorty promptly fainted and George became distraught, thinking he had caused Shorty to have a heart attack. Fran groaned and put his head down on his desk.

It was all I could do not to laugh. "George, with all due respect, I think you need to work on your people skills, man."

Fifteen minutes later, Fran and I had his office aired out and to ourselves.

"That's enough excitement in one day for me, Annette. And we didn't even make progress on our cases."

"I wonder if Donna had any calendar notations about that meeting with Lannie Young a week ago, the meeting that didn't happen. She had the press conference on her calendar."

“Let’s go see.” He stood and stretched. “Maybe I can get one positive thing accomplished today.”

“You think we’ll be able to look at her calendar? Really?”

“Now that she’s dead, her secretary will let me, I’m sure. We’re old friends.”

“Another ex-girlfriend, eh?”

He actually blushed. “Well, yeah, but in this case she’s the one who dumped me. And I don’t blame her, I was being a jerk at the time. So I’ve since apologized and we’re friends”

We walked down a different hallway to the opposite side of the building and came to an office suite that was furnished extravagantly, at least by comparison with the sheriff’s department. A set of glass doors, hand-painted with gold letters, said

District Attorney
A.D. Sonos, D.A.

“Axel is quite proud of the fact that he’s probably the only district attorney in the whole country whose name and title make a palindrome. Go figure.” Fran pulled one of the doors open for me, and we walked across thick Berber carpet to the secretary.

“Honey, this is Annette Trieri, visiting my office from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Annette, Honey Blaise, the person who keeps the DA’s office functional. What we need, Honey, is to see Donna Little’s computer calendar. She had a meeting scheduled with Lannie Young last Friday, the day Lannie got killed.”

“She was killed? Ohmygod.” Honey Blaise’s blue eyes were as big as her huge glasses. “I didn’t know. Ohmygod. And now Donna.” She burst into tears.

Fran plucked a tissue from a box on the desk and handed it to her. “Honey, Donna died from a heart attack. George examined her. You know she was ripe for one. Look, I don’t mean to be cold about this, but we really do need to see her calendar. Can I go look?”

“OK, sure.” Sniff. “I’m sorry, Fran, but it’s been a tough day.” Honk. “Donna gets killed, or dies from a heart attack or whatever. Axel calls and chews me out for no reason. And now you tell me that Lannie was killed, that it wasn’t just a bad accident. Um, there’s a password. Donna’s last name backwards, with capital ‘L’ at the end.”

We walked into Donna’s office, and Fran bumped the mouse on her computer table. The screensaver changed to a password box, and Fran carefully typed in “e-l-t-t-i-L” and the screen came on, opened to her calendar program. There was the press conference, mistakenly scheduled for her at 2:00. He clicked on a notation for noon on the previous Friday.

The calendar program opened a new little window, which said “Lannie Young, water shortage, Summers land grab, McMurphy protection.”

* * *

By the time we got everyone gathered for dinner, it turned into a party of six. There was a big basketball game at the gym in Granby, so Fran and his wife and Janelle and her husband dropped off their youngsters to cheer on the team and then got themselves up to Winter Park to join Hal and me for dinner at Carlos and Maria’s. The three spouses made Fran, Janelle, and me promise not to talk shop, which put the spotlight on Hal.

The first thing he did was to order, along with the usual pre-dinner chips and salsa and guacamole, sides of regular and of vegetarian green chile. They came about the same time as all the drinks, a mix of margaritas and beer, with iced tea for Hal, and he set about a tasting.

“Hmm. Not quite as good as Santa Fe—too much cumin—but far, far better than anything in Durango. Quite a nice kick, actually. Annette, we’re staying!” And he toasted everyone including the chef.

“So, Hal.” Mary Schmidt, a tiny woman in her late thirties wearing granny glasses and her hair long, had told me earlier that she was fascinated by the idea of MPARC. “Tell us about this MPARC thing you’re starting up. As long as I can remember, there’s been nothing like it here. Ever.”

“And I don’t quite understand that, but there it is. Maybe it has to do with the highway. It’s in great shape now, but only a few years ago it was something of an adventure, getting over that pass in the winter. And it still can be, I suppose.” Hal popped a chip covered in two kinds of green topping—one of the chiles and some guacamole—in his mouth. “But aside from that, this valley has everything you’d want for high-tech companies. It’s close enough to Denver and the airport to be convenient; it’s isolated enough to keep people focused on the work at hand; it’s got the kinds of recreational activities that high-tech company employees want. I’ve heard that the schools leave something to be desired, but that can be fixed. Medical services are also not really up to par, but that would change if there were more people with real jobs here, instead of all the minimum-wage service-industry jobs.”

“But why MPARC?” Mary wasn’t going to let Hal off with generalized philosophizing.

“I’m not completely certain about that, either, except for what the force behind it has told me. Charles Shure—oh, he’s supposed to come talk with you, Fran; he called me to verify his arrival this afternoon and almost immediately several cars full of people showed up at that main house up the road from us to prep it, I guess. Anyway, Charles Shure runs this conglomerate that includes a big electronics company that’s a competitor of Intel. They think they’re onto a new computer chip technology that will revolutionize things and they need a real-world test-bed. Turns out that Shure was on a federal advisory committee chaired by the Secretary of Commerce, who oversees the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. To make a long story short, the Secretary was griping about how US climate modeling is lagging because we don’t have the computer power needed to do the job. Shure decided that would make a good test-bed for his chips and talked to me about it at a Frémont State fundraiser we both attended. Made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“And you’re starting this thing from scratch? That sounds like a real challenge.” Daniel knew something about big organizations.

“Except Chuck bought me lots of time by going over my head and buying that not-quite building down the street. It’s going to take at least a year, maybe two, to whip that thing into offices ready for occupancy, and I really can’t do much hiring, or installing of fancy computers, until then. Meanwhile, I’ll set things in motion and probably do some traveling to check out how other institutes work.”

Fran Schmidt set down his bottle of Corona. “Hey, even if this whole thing falls through for some unforeseen reason, getting that building completed will be doing the community a huge service. It’s just a dangerous eyesore now. What are your plans for it?”

“I think I want to make it shorter. As planned, it has at least twice as many square feet as I can ever imagine needing, and it looks—I don’t really know what I’m talking about here, because I’m not an architect—it looks frail. Maybe condos don’t need as much structure as I think office buildings need. So one thing I’m going to suggest is disassembling the fourth story and using the steel to reinforce the floors below. That’ll leave more room than I’ll need but make the thing more manageable, and more aesthetic, I think.”

“Oh, Hal,” Mary had stars in her eyes, “The height of that damned Epworth thing has had people upset ever since it was approved, and when the roof went on there was talk of blowing it up. If you do that plus bring all these new jobs to the valley, you’ll be a god around here. You’ll have the town council eating out of your hand. And I know at least a half dozen women in the East Grand Environment League who will give themselves to you as sex slaves.”

“Hey, wait a minute...” My protest was drowned out by their laughter.

Dinner arrived, and everyone quieted down for a while. Finally, Daniel addressed a different issue related to MPARC.

“With no building, like you said your style is cramped. But is there a hiring plan?”

Hal washed a mouthful down with his iced tea so he could talk. “I’ve been thinking about that since Wednesday, when I found out about my not-quite building and also got spending authority. Some of what we’ll need will be taken care of, at first, by the UNELECO people, that’s Charles Shure’s company. Accounting, setting up human resources policies, that kind of thing. Legal. But I’m going to need both advice and help on some things pretty soon. Public relations, for one thing. As much as I hate to say it, I’ll need a PR flack. And, Mary, seriously, I don’t care so much about the sex slaves—you owe me one now, Annette—but your comment about the building is important. We want to score PR points all we can, and that tip will be helpful, I’m certain. Let’s see, I’m going to need a couple of computer people, maybe consultants, maybe employees, I’m not sure. Our networking will be ready to rock pretty soon, and I want to get the school district and some other partners connected as soon as possible. Sometime soon, I’ll have to find a chief scientist. And, Dan, I wasn’t kidding about needing security help. Does your job let you do consulting on the side?”

He snorted his disgust. “My job lets me have the honor of working for the company, full time, no outside interests, no consulting, nothing. I need to learn to read fine print better. Besides, you’re married to someone with pretty good security skills, I bet.”

Hal winked at me. “Yeah, but she’s got a job, and I want to stay clean, in terms of nepotism issues. I got picked for this position—I don’t know—maybe because of my good looks, and I don’t want people to think of MPARC as a place that plays favorites. Besides, I could be a lousy boss, by her standards. I’d hate to have to fire my own wife. Who knows what I’d find in my dinner?”

Since everyone was looking at me, I jumped in. “Dinner, schminner. Mary, if that happened, he’d come crawling for the names of those sex slaves, count on it.”

After the laughter died out, Janelle changed the subject. “Hal, didn’t I hear from Annette that you’re also scoping out the county for the higher education commission?”

“You may have, because I am. With the growth here, including what appears to be an increasing number of retirees, the demand for both community-college resources, including continuing education, and a four-year college is only going to grow as well. Personally, and professionally, too, I guess, my own perspective is that a good four-year institution here would be a real winner. I can say that it will scare the crap out of my colleagues in the administration at Frémont State. I mean, think about it: if you were college age and thinking of smaller universities in the Colorado mountains, which would you pick, Durango, Gunnison, or, say, Tabernash, all other things being equal? At least, it would be a close call, right?” Hal popped the last bite of his chicken enchilada into his mouth.

“You know, I didn’t think of that.” Mary was once again overly impressed with my rather ordinary husband, I thought. “I heard about the CCHE study, but I was only thinking in terms of a place for our kids to go to school locally, instead of having to leave home for college. But a university here would mean that kids from other parts of Colorado, other states, even, would come here, wouldn’t it?”

Hal looked at her. “Like Durango. But just remember the old Chinese curse about being careful what you wish for.”

* * *

Eleven

The others were constrained by the timing of the basketball game, so our dinner party broke up by eight-thirty. Hal and I stayed for coffee and a chat with the manager, who got a promise of future catering jobs for MPARC.

It was about 9:30 when we finally made it up our series of back roads and the long driveway home. We had left lights on, but the car in our driveway was a surprise.

“Expecting company? I’m not.” Hal is almost always more calm than I when things get strange.

“Nope. Normally, I’d assume it was OK, though, because home burglars don’t tend to park in the drive. But there’s really no place else to park around here without getting stuck. I’m not liking what I’m thinking.” I rummaged in my purse for my Glock 26, which, as it always does, contained a full magazine.

“Hmm. Can’t read the plates, they’re covered with dirt. Car’s kind of old and beat up, but so are at least half the cars up here. Any ideas?” His casual tone of voice suggested he might be discussing tomorrow’s weather.

“If they’re in the house, I wonder why they didn’t open the garage and pull the car in. And it’s not backed into the driveway, like you’d do if you were planning a quick exit.”

“You’re right. Sounds like we’ve got real amateurs here. How insulting. I mean, c’mon—we don’t rate professional burglars? Geez!” Now he sounded as if he was complaining about sub-standard service at the dry cleaners.

“Well, tell you what. Going by the book means I don’t charge in there without backup. And, no offense, but you don’t qualify. I’m going to call the sheriff’s office and see if they can send someone out. We can just wait here in our warm car until help comes.”

“We could drive up to the main house and see if any of those people I saw go by are still there. You know, reinforcements.” Hal, I could tell, wanted some action.

“They’re probably housekeeping service people and caterers. They don’t count as backup either.”

“OK, have it your way. How about I park behind this car to block it and take a little nap?” He pulled our car up to block the one in the drive and leaned his seat back.

I called the sheriff’s office and was assured that someone would be up from Fraser within fifteen minutes—name recognition on my behalf was beginning to spread through the department, and they were treating me like family.

Fifteen minutes later, a very long and slow fifteen minutes, a sheriff’s department Blazer pulled up beside us, and a uniformed officer whom I didn’t recognize got out. I lowered my window.

“Sergeant Rolf Hendricks, ma’am. I understand you’re concerned that someone may be inside your house.”

“Correct, Sergeant. We don’t recognize this car, and we aren’t expecting anyone. I didn’t want to go in there without backup. I do have my weapon, however.”

“Tell you what, ma’am. I realize that you’re the superior officer, here, but it’s really my jurisdiction, you know? How about if you be my backup?” He was right, no doubt about it.

“Fine idea. We don’t have keys, though. We’ll have to go in through the garage door, using the opener. Unless they left the front door unlocked.”

“If this garage door is like mine, it’s noisy. Let’s check the front first. I’m on point.” And he began walking carefully up the sidewalk to the door. I told Hal in no uncertain terms to stay put, quietly got out of the car, and followed Sergeant Hendricks by the book.

On the front porch, he opened the storm door slowly, listening for squeaks, and then tried the main door. It opened easily. He waved at me and disappeared inside. A minute later he was back at the door, motioning me to come in.

“This end of the first floor is clear. Come on in. I’ll check the other end of this floor and then go upstairs. You can watch my back and the basement stairs, OK?” He was whispering.

I waited by the stairwell while he checked the other end of the first floor, and then moved to a better vantage point in the shadows of the dining room to watch the basement while he tiptoed upstairs. Two minutes later, there was a feminine squeal and a short paragraph of frantically spoken Spanish. Very shortly after that, a small man carrying a broom emerged from the basement, just as a woman came down the stairs with her hands raised. Hendricks was following her, his weapon in his holster.

“Sonya?”

The small man dropped his broom when he saw Hendricks and raised his hands, too. I stayed in the shadows.

There was more Spanish spoken, which Hendricks tried to keep up with, succeeding only by asking the couple to repeat themselves. Finally he seemed to have things in hand.

“Ms. Trieri? It’s your housekeeping, ma’am.”

I emerged from the shadows of the dining room and stood in the doorway, making no effort to conceal my weapon. “I don’t have housekeeping, Sergeant. Can you ask them if they have a business card, or any identification of whom they’re working for?”

He gave me a look as if to say “yeah, like I know how to say ‘business card’ in Spanish,” but plunged in anyway. The small man, hand quivering, reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a card. Hendricks took it and read it on both sides.

“Says that these people are Miguel and Sonya Rendón, US citizens from Mora, New Mexico, and the other side is the card for a company called Mountain Home Care, which it says here is licensed and bonded. Oh, yeah. I’ve heard of them, maybe from an ad in the paper or something like that.”

“Annette? I need to come in.” I recognized Hal’s voice from the direction of the front door. “I’ve got an explanation with me. OK? Is it safe?”

I sat down on a dining room chair. “Right, Hal. Come in.”

“I know you said I should stay put, but, uh, there are mitigating circumstances.”

He was accompanied by a woman in her late twenties wearing a jump suit. Her blonde hair and blue eyes were a marked contrast to the appearance of the Rendóns, despite the similarity of clothes. They obviously recognized her but didn’t speak. Instead, they were pleading with their eyes.

“Who are you? And why are you harassing my employees?” Her indignation suggested that she felt herself to be in the right.

“I’m Annette Trieri, with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. You’ve apparently met my husband—he and I live here just now. This is Sergeant Rolf Hendricks of the Grand County Sheriff’s Department. I called him to help me investigate the unauthorized entry of unknown persons into my home, unauthorized by me, at least. I will tell you this one time: you and your organization are on very thin ice here, so I suggest that you not speak unless you want your words to be potentially used against you in a court of law. Understood?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it, nodding instead. Perhaps she noticed the Glock I was still holding.

Having commanded her undivided attention, I softened my tone. “Now. First, your two employees, the Rendóns, are just fine, aside from having had a little excitement. Sergeant Hendricks’ uniform, I’m sure, was reassuring to them that they were in no real danger. Should I assume that your company has a contract with Win Frederickson to clean his house and this guest house, too? And that you got a rush call today to have it ready for guests to arrive tomorrow?”

The blonde woman nodded again.

“I see. Then this is all a misunderstanding, although I’d suggest that your company be more careful about entering houses that are obviously being lived in, as this one is. Please accept my apology, and please apologize to the Rendóns for me. I’m sorry that I don’t speak Spanish, or I’d do it myself.” I tucked my Glock into my belt in the small of my back.

A rapid fire conversation followed, and eventually everyone was smiling.

“Ma’am? Ms., um, Tree...”

“Trieri.”

“Ms. Trieri?” The blonde woman was still smiling, so I knew things were still fine. “Miguel and Sonya want to know if you’d like them to finish up. They’re almost done.”

* * *

“Sure am glad you had cash last night, lover. If anyone ever deserved a big tip, those two are first in line.” I bit into a toasted bagel.

“Right you are. But I had an ulterior motive. What say we call Mountain Home Care and arrange for the Rendóns to come once a week, not Friday night, though, and do the whole house? You’re too busy to houseclean, and I know I don’t want to. Laundry, I can handle, but housecleaning is something else.”

“From what I’ve seen, they did a bang-up job. They even oiled the dining table. Yeah, let’s do that.”

Saturday morning was bright and sunny, the house flooded with light from the reflections off all the snow. Only a few puffy clouds were scattered about the deep blue sky, and the icicles on the eaves had already started to drip.

“I’m not certain that we’ll be able to specify the Rendóns, but I’ll try. Did you get the name of that other woman?”

“No. I think she was too preoccupied with ogling Rolf to introduce herself.” Under different circumstances, I would have been ogling Rolf Hendricks, too.

“And he was looking her over as well, it seemed like. Anyway, I’ll try for the Rendóns. So, what’s your schedule for today?”

“Chuck Shure is supposed to arrive sometime, and I expect we’ll go over to Hot Sulphur together for his statement. I thought I’d pick up reports when I’m there and bring them home to read. Got any ideas?”

“It’s too nice a day to go skiing—weekends can be tough over there. And Chuck talked about skiing on Sunday anyway. One day of putting up with those crowds is enough for me. How about a stroll around the grounds on snowshoes? I’ll probably need to spend some time with Chuck, too, but we should have an hour or two when we can get away together.”

“Did he say when he would be getting here?”

“By noon. He’s driving up from the Springs. It took me a little over two hours, but that wasn’t on a Saturday morning. We’ll see.”

It was about eleven when my phone rang.

“Annette? Chuck Shure. Listen, I’m sorry to say I’m stuck in traffic on the interstate. I’d heard about this but I had no idea. At the rate we’re going, I won’t be there until about one, I’d guess.”

“Where are you now?” I knew there were no shortcuts I could tell him about, but I was curious.

“We just passed something called the ‘Chief Hosa’ exit, up on the top of the foothills, I guess. My memory of this road is a bit vague, but I think we go back down a big hill to a valley, then up the valley to the Winter Park exit.”

“That’s right, and all you can do is be patient. If it’s any consolation, a crew of people showed up last night and blitzed the main house, so it’s ready for you.”

“I’d rather have it dirty and get there sooner, but what the hell. See you this afternoon.”

Hal and I took advantage of the delay to spend two hours tromping around the grounds. During the week, he had made several new trails to seek out different views, so we had various options. Two hours, I discovered, was just the right amount of time for my hip muscles to start complaining again.

We were eating lunch when the doorbell rang. I found magnate of industry Charles Shure standing humbly on our front porch.

“Made it, finally. We just pulled in, haven’t been up to the house yet.”

“Glad to see you. I’d ask you in, but I bet you want to get up to the house. Come on back down when you’re ready to go over to Hot Sulphur Springs, and you and I can ride together.”

It wasn’t clear to me what he had meant by “we,” but I resolved to be patient.

At about 2:00, the doorbell rang again, and once again our porch was graced by a VIP. He had pulled his vehicle in behind my car, so we took the easy approach and climbed back in to his big SUV.

Inside, I couldn’t help but notice it was a Cadillac Escalade, given the insignia staring at me from the dashboard.

“Chuck, you weren’t up here two-three weeks ago, by any chance?”

“Say, two-and-a-half weeks ago? Hmm. No, I think I was in Europe. Why?”

“We’re working on these three homicides, of which Tobias Summers is one. At the house of another of them, the last vehicle to be there has been identified, by its tires, as a Cadillac Escalade. Just thought I’d check, you know?”

He laughed. “Nope, not mine. Besides, this doesn’t have the factory tires, so you’d never have identified it that way. This is my winter car, studded snow tires all around.”

“In that case, we can take the short-cut to Hot Sulphur.”

I showed him where to turn onto County Road 55, and shortly we were at the county building in Hot Sulphur Springs. I’d called ahead to give Fran a heads up, and he was waiting for us at his department’s front desk. After introductions, we made ourselves comfortable in Fran’s office.

“Now, Mr. Shure, I’m going to be a little formal about this, including recording it, but I want to be clear that there is no reason for you to think of this as adversarial—you’re in no way considered a suspect.” Fran pushed a button on a pocket cassette recorder. “You’re here, Mr. Shure, to provide us with information about a homicide victim, Tobias Summers. As far as we now know, you’re one of the last people to have seen him alive. To get this started and help the stenographer, we need to introduce ourselves. I’m Fran Schmidt, Grand County Sheriff.”

Fran looked at me, and I introduced myself, and then Shure followed suit. Fran’s questions allowed Shure to expand on the narrative he’d provided to me on the phone, and I heard that Summers had been dressed for a business meeting in his stylish fashion, upbeat and alert, ebullient, even. The purchase and its closing had been accomplished more quickly than is usual for such things, given the amount of money involved and the complexity of the title, but Charles Shure gets things done quickly when he’s motivated. Finally, Shure had covered in detail the ground he’d skimmed over with me on the phone.

Fran Schmidt was looking thoughtful. “This business of Summers’ walking off with that big check changes things considerably.”

“And I’ve found out more about that. No mystery, it turns out, but I just hadn’t paid attention. That’s what I pay my legions of accountants to do.” Shure smiled. “It seems that Tobias Summers walked out of our closing meeting and down the block to the downtown Denver branch of the Western Slope Bank & Trust, where he kept a personal account. He deposited the check at 1:45 and waited until it verified, which it did because that’s where I got it. Then he withdrew almost all of it, 3.1 million, in cash and cashier’s checks in his name, \$50,000 in \$100 bills and the rest in \$50,000 checks. Sixty-one checks and five hundred \$100 bills. We found this out because the bank has to report such things and I have an in with them. He had a nearly empty briefcase when he left the closing meeting, and he filled it up at the bank.”

* * *

I was the first to recover—Fran was in shock, I think.

“So you aren’t the last person to have seen him alive, because people at the bank did. Well, that’s something at least. But now we have our victim wandering around with three million in what amounts to cash.”

Shure nodded. “Right. Except, unlike real cash, those cashier’s checks can be traced, up to a point. Whoever accepts them and deposits them can be traced by the bank, and, in my experience at least, they can’t be second-partied.”

“Meaning?” I wasn’t sure I understood.

“Meaning, say, I couldn’t sign them over to you and then you sign them over the sheriff. If I had the original checks I could sign them to you but then you’d have to deposit them. You could go ahead and sign them over to the sheriff and he could accept them, of course, but he’d be in for a nasty surprise when he tried to deposit them because they wouldn’t be accepted. Sheriff? You here?”

Fran's far-away look dissolved. "Yeah, I'm here. Three million dollars is a lot of money to be floating around. I was thinking about what I know about Tobias. From what I've been hearing, he was in some financial trouble. The Epworth thing has been hanging over his head like a dark cloud for years, racking up legal expenses and so on, a bunch of other projects barely broke even, and he extended himself to the limit with the new subdivision. That three million must have been a godsend to him. Except to liquify it that way, well, it doesn't make much sense to me." Fran shook his head as if to clear cobwebs.

"I don't have real experience with this, sheriff, but it seems to me there aren't many possible explanations for it. Maybe he had some off-the-books loans to pay back, where he needed cash. He could make stops at various banks and turn the checks into cash, one-by-one. Each transaction would get reported, but by the time they all came in and someone noticed the pattern, he'd be finished before he could be stopped." Shure's explanation made sense to me, but that kind of high finance wasn't something I was familiar with.

Fran nodded understanding. "And that kind of loan is usually associated with people who are very persuasive about getting paid back. So much so that Tobias would have been more worried about them than the fallout from cashing all those checks, probably. I guess what we'll have to do is to get the bank to put traces on all those cashier's checks, watch for them and see who deposits them. If it's lots of other banks, well, that's a start. But we can't get much in the way of that done on a Saturday afternoon."

"Not officially, sheriff, but as I said, I have an in with them. I'll see what I can do to get things started today. Do you need me for anything else?"

"No, Mr. Shure, we're finished here, I think. Let me thank you, though, for coming in. And also for endowing the new computing center that Annette's husband is setting up. I think that's going to do wonders for our county." Fran stood and extended his right hand, and Shure stood and shook it.

"Here's a little-known secret, sheriff. I'm going to find a house here and use the center as an excuse to get up here to ski. I'm fed up with this all-work and no-play business."

I stopped by the office that Fran had found for me and gathered up an armload of reports to take home, and we went outside to Shure's car.

"Becky asked me to stop off and pick up some special coffee creamer she's taken to. Is there a grocery store on the way back?"

"In Granby and in Fraser, each a little out of the way. Might as well start with the Granby one to see if they have it." I was amused by the notion that a multi-billionaire would be doing such errands. "Who's Becky?"

"Huh? Oh, my wife, Rebecca. I guess you've never met her. She's between assignments just now, so she came up with me. She's a fashion photographer, used to be a model but got tired of starving herself. So she switched ends of the camera a few years ago. I have to say, I think she's even more beautiful now. I guess I just don't appreciate skin and bones on a woman."

"Are the two of you rattling around in that huge house by yourselves? Want to come down the road for dinner with us?" If we were going to the grocery store, I thought, I could come up with something.

"You beat me to it. I was going to invite you and Hal out somewhere with us. But, you know, having a quiet dinner close to home would be even better. Thanks. But, ah, I've got to warn you that Becky's a vegetarian. Not super strict, but she doesn't eat red meat at all."

"If chicken is OK, then I'll get Hal to make a civilized version of his green-chile chicken enchilada casserole, meaning not as hot as he likes it. He can have hot stuff on the side. If we're going to the store, I'll just pick up what I need. Oh, and turn left when you get to the highway."

“Sounds perfect. Ah, good, a cell signal. I need to call my accounting group about that bank thing, get a trace started on those cashier’s checks.”

“And I’d better call Hal and let him know we’ll be having company for dinner.”

We finished our respective phone calls at about the same time that we arrived at the grocery store on the east side of Granby, which we reached by virtue of some pantomimed hand signaling on my part.

“So, Chuck, I don’t completely understand. Banks tend to be open for business on Saturdays now, but only the public face. The behind the scenes work is still Monday through Friday, at least if that business about accounts being credited on Monday for Saturday deposits means anything. How can you get traces started today?”

“Well, I didn’t want to say anything to the sheriff, but that in I have with the bank is a big one. I own about a quarter of its stock, so I’m on the board. The president is a friend of mine, and my accounting group interacts with theirs all the time. If those checks were negotiated, we’ll know by this evening, I expect.”

* * *

Twelve

Rebecca Shure, Becky to friends, turned out to be a farm girl from North Dakota who was not at all spoiled by her years of association with the fashion industry. I’m sure that she was glad to have a career in photography rather than in farm chores, but she seemed like the kind of person that could still slop the pigs if need be.

And she was one of the few women I’ve met whom I’ve felt plain around. You don’t graduate from the farm in North Dakota to the runways of New York, Paris, and Rome without striking beauty, and she had it to spare. And it wasn’t her makeup, or her hair color, or any of those things you see supermodels touting in advertisements, it was just her.

They arrived for dinner on snowshoes, having followed one of Hal’s trails to our house. She was carrying a camera bag and proceeded to snap off a dozen shots of the alpenglow on the mountains across the valley. Our view, she declared, was better than any of the rooms of the main house had.

Hal and Chuck launched immediately into a discussion of Hal’s ideas for the not-quite building that Chuck had bought, so Becky followed me into the kitchen and offered to help. I put her to work slicing vegetables for the salad. The casserole was already in the oven, so I pattered about with appetizers and dessert.

It made me feel just a little better that, as beautiful and successful as Becky was, she didn’t know the first thing about how to prepare vegetables for a salad. Ha! Some vegetarian.

After making our guests and myself margaritas and putting out the appetizers, and watching them dive in just like normal folks, proclaiming their satisfaction with both the drinks and the salsa, I was able to relax a little. No doubt the tequila helped.

As we were putting dinner on the table, Chuck Shure pulled me aside for a moment.

“I don’t want to talk shop at dinner, Annette, at least not your cases, not without you starting it. But I’ve heard about the cashier’s checks. They were deposited with brokerage firms in New York City. Five

firms, the money was spread around evenly, six hundred grand per firm. There's one check and the cash unaccounted for."

This was a surprise to me, to say the least. I asked the first question that came into my head. "When?"

"Started Thursday morning, the day after my closing. The last one was deposited late Thursday afternoon." He handed me a piece of paper, a list of companies and names of individuals. "These are the firms and the brokers with his accounts."

"Thank you. I need to think about this, and maybe we'll have a chance to talk about it later. And I'll talk with these brokers on Monday. But tonight I want to know what you guys are going to do about that building you bought for Hal. A full report over dinner." And I led him into the dining room.

The enchilada casserole that Hal and I make has evolved over time, but it's still the same basic ingredients—roast chicken, green chile sauce, and tortillas. It's the spices in the sauce that have evolved, and I think we have it fine-tuned to the point that it would stand up to anything served in Santa Fe. For Chuck and Becky Shure, we made certain to keep the heat in the sauce under control, though.

Becky raved over it, remarking that she was so tired of chicken that new and different recipes were something she always looked for. Like her chunky vegetables in the salad, this made me feel better. Petty, I know, but there it is. Because she seemed to be in a talkative mood, I used her to open the subject of the not-quite building.

"Becky, what did you think of that building site your husband bought? He must have pointed it out to you on the way through town."

"Not only did he point it out, we stopped to look. It's certainly depressing, isn't it? And from where we stopped, just on the shoulder, it blocks the view of the mountains behind it. Which means it blocks them from the sidewalk, too." She shot her husband a dirty look.

I rescued him. "It's been controversial in the community, I'm told, for that and because of its size, its footprint. I'm hoping these guys have ideas about how to fix its problems and make it into a building we can all be proud of." And I shot my husband the "you're on, don't blow it" look.

"Yeah, well, Chuck and I were looking at the plans before dinner. Thing is, the plans say "Mount Epworth Arms" in big letters on each page, and that's a big distraction. We kept getting sidetracked on new names for the thing."

Shure laughed. "Right. And I'm opposed to having my name on it, so that eliminates one possibility. Calling it the 'MPARC' building is too ordinary, unimaginative. So we're thinking of famous dead guys to name it after. Scientists, maybe. But we also made some progress with the problem you mentioned, Bec. Hal suggested taking off the top floor, making it shorter by one story, and that's a great idea. And we're going to have the area from the front of the building to the street be landscaped, park-like, with some aspens planted to screen it. There's already an enclosed garage in the plans, and we'll take advantage of that as much as we can to eliminate a lot full of cars. Also, I think changing the exterior treatment is a good idea, we need to make it blend in with the other architecture in town more. Whoever designed that thing should go back to designing for southern California."

Hal looked thoughtful. "One thing I want to do is to see what's available in town in the way of meeting facilities. We're going to have several meeting rooms in different sizes, and it's occurred to me that we could get some points if we had a big auditorium that we offered to the community for meetings they don't have a room for. I don't know what that means, exactly, but it's one way we could make people feel better about the building."

Becky had cheered up. “Well, if you’re going to make it a story shorter, that’ll help a lot with the view. And you could have public tours, too. You know, design it so that groups of people walking around getting lectures wouldn’t disturb the staff and so on. If you’re going to have the world’s fastest computer, it seems like people will want to see it, even if it is something of a bore.”

“Actually, I’m thinking that it’ll mostly be nearly two stories shorter. Right now, it’s got a peaked roof over the whole thing. I’d like to limit that to the eastern half, the back half, and have the front half with a flat roof that’s a patio for the staff. Make it into a running track, or something like that. We could use it even in the winter, by keeping the snow off with radiant heat, waste heat from the computers. But you’re right, Becky. Even though big computers are pretty boring, public tours will still be a thing to do. We’ll want to use them for educational purposes, that’s for sure. I ran into the need for that already.” Hal described his encounter with County Commissioner Simon Murcheson.

Shure shook his head. “You find that sort of know-nothing attitude everywhere, I guess. One reason that I didn’t even consider the Colorado Springs area for this center is that it’s even more pervasive there. Between the right-wing Christian organizations and the retired military people, there’s an overwhelming distrust of science. I was hoping it would be a little more progressive here.”

“Oh, it probably is.” Hal put yet another spoonful of the special hot green chile I’d put out for him onto his serving. “Besides, these jobs we’re creating will overcome resistance. Truly professional positions are hard to find in this valley, and we’re going to be introducing a big change in the local culture. Real professional people with real money who actually live here. It’ll be interesting to see how it all evolves.”

“What do people here do now?” Becky was on her second helping, way ahead of the rest of us. Making up for years of starving herself, I thought.

“Looks to me like they mostly sell real estate.” Chuck Shure’s cynical streak was emerging. “For sale signs everywhere, new developments. That and work at the ski area, I’d say.”

“Construction is a big employer, pays well, too. Lots of the people who used to be in extractive jobs, mining, timber, do that now. But a high proportion are low-paying service industry jobs, associated with separating tourists from as much of their money as possible.” Hal also had a cynical streak, I reminded myself.

“But what’s interesting about this is our housecleaners.” I told the story of our encounter the previous evening, getting a good laugh in the process. “The thing is, though, the two folks cleaning our house are from New Mexico. Nice, hardworking people who can’t find work there. It must be that this company that contracts with people who own second homes has to import the labor they need to do the actual work. So even the service jobs don’t always return their cash flow to the local economy, at least not all of it.”

“Well,” Hal summed things up. “Let’s see if MPARC can start a trend in a better direction.”

* * *

Sunday morning, Hal and I declined the opportunity to ski with Chuck and Becky, opting instead for an extended breakfast at home over the Sunday paper that Hal drove down to fetch.

While he was making the trip, I called Fran Schmidt at home.

“New York, huh? Brokerage firms, like stock brokers? You think he was playing the market? What happened to the Dow on that Friday?”

“I’m going to do some checking tomorrow. I didn’t know him, of course, how he operated or anything. All I do know is that the cashier’s checks were deposited with five different brokerages on Thursday, a little over a week ago. And then Summers turned up dead on Saturday afternoon.”

“Must be that he thought he could turn that three million into more. But the way he looked, especially the beard, well, something must have gone wrong.” His voice faded out as he thought about it. “I can’t quite put this together. I mean, he hadn’t shaved for a couple of days, at least. Shure said he looked quite professional on Wednesday, so that morning must have been the last time. So he closed the deal with Shure, flew to New York, and spent Thursday at brokerages, with a day-old beard. That’s just not the Tobias Summers I knew.”

“Fran, I think this is just one more fact that we need to catalog. It’s not a case-breaker or anything. I wanted you to know about it today, though. I’ll work it some more tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and thanks for calling, Annette. Oh, say, I’ve got information, too. You probably didn’t hear it. Dan Kennedy did his job in fine fashion and found out the owner of the torn ski suit, at least we think.”

“Good for him. How’d he do it, line everyone up and look for patches?”

“No, he went to the clinic they have up there for ski injuries. Based on what he heard from us, he figured that whoever lost that swatch of fabric would have enough of a shoulder injury to want to get medical help. So he asked them about employees with shoulder injuries, on the pretext of checking out workman’s comp fraud. Turns out they had someone come in last Friday afternoon, said he’d hit a tree. He must have changed, though, because the report didn’t note any tears in his ski suit. But Dan cross-checked and found out that this guy ordered two suits last fall. It’s Junior Murcheson, I mean, Simon Murcheson, Jr.”

“The son of the county commissioner? My, my.” I remembered the senior Murcheson from the commission meeting.

“My, my, indeed. This one is going to be touchy. Simon, Sr. is someone that I have to be friends with, whether I like it or not. He’s chair of the commission’s law enforcement committee. Also, I asked around and found out that Junior and Lannie were an item up until a couple of months ago. I guess Lannie must have been desperate.”

“And right now, everything you have is circumstantial. Junior has a shoulder injury and we have a swatch of fabric. He could have disposed of his other suit by now, meaning there’s no way for us to connect the two.”

“Right on the button. But wait, as they say, there’s more. See, Junior has worked for Tobias Summers’ construction company as a foreman for several years. Their work was down just now, so he hired on with the ski area—I guess he’s a great skier and has been on the ski patrol in the past.”

“A connection between Junior and Summers? Interesting. Does this suggest to you that they may have conspired in Lannie’s death?”

“Hey, it’s just like the thing with New York. One more fact for the file. However, when you add this next thing to it, suggestions like that become easier to believe. We ran a check of all the Cadillac Escalades in the county. All four of them. Guess who turned up?”

“Not Chuck Shure, probably, although he’s got one. But it doesn’t have the original tires. Four? That’s all?”

“Chuck Shure’s got one? Huh. Uh, yeah, four. Now, if it was a Ford Explorer or a Chevy Trailblazer or any number of other everyman SUVs, we’d have too many to think about. Escalades are

another matter. Anyway, what we found is that Mandy Summers drives one, and it does have the original tires. We waited until she went shopping and checked them.” He sounded proud of himself and his troops.

“Mandy Summers drives an Escalade? What did Tobias drive?”

“Last I saw, he was tooling around in one of those Hummer H2s. Bright yellow.”

“Y’know Fran, if those two had driven more sensible cars, the money they would have saved on gas would have probably kept them out of financial trouble.”

His laughter was genuine, I could tell. “But you’ve got to impress those clients somehow. Anyway, the facts are piling on, one after another. I still don’t know what they mean, though.”

“Take the day off, Fran, go skiing. It’ll clear your head and help you think it through.”

“Ski? Today? Not me, not on a Sunday. Besides, my list of chores needs catching up on. See you tomorrow, Annette.”

Hal had returned during the conversation and was puttering around in the kitchen.

“Did I hear you suggest that Fran go skiing?”

“Yeah, he needs some R&R.”

“I hope he doesn’t. There’s a traffic jam on the highway, southbound toward Winter Park. It took me fifteen minutes to get to the store, usually only about a two minute ride.”

“Oh, really? That must be why he said he doesn’t ski on Sundays. And I’m glad we’re not, either.”

“And Chuck and Becky Shure are going to be stuck in that traffic. I feel sorry for them. All the money in the world won’t help, either.”

* * *

I think I have a built-in lawyer detector that works something like the radar detector Hal has in his S4. Lawyers walk around giving off evil rays, when they’re on the job at least, and my lawyer detector picks the rays up and sets off an alarm in my head.

But because I try to have as little contact with them as I possibly can—a neat trick for someone with a job like mine, but I work at it—it doesn’t go off very often and I forget I have it. Then when I finally do run into a lawyer, the alarm always confuses me for a minute. My brief encounters with Donna Little set it off that way—the first time I had to remember what it was, and then the second time I remembered and recognized it right away.

I was therefore on the alert when the young man appeared in my office doorway late Monday morning.

I had been working through the reports that I hadn’t had time for over the weekend, and re-reading others in light of the information that Fran had passed my way Sunday morning. My next task was to call the New York stock brokers visited by Tobias Summers. But first I was ready for a break—maybe a cup of coffee and a chat with whomever was hanging around the front desk—when my alarm started its “bottom-feeder bottom-feeder bottom-feeder” clamor in my head.

Even for a young one, he already looked the part, I’ll give him that. Three-piece suit under a trench coat, slicked-back hair with no part, tortoise-shell glasses frames with large round lenses, oversized briefcase—there was no mistaking it.

“Ms. Trieri? Ms. Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation?”

“What can I do for you?” I always try to be polite, even to bottom-feeders, until they give me a good excuse not to be. His pleasant tone didn’t quite qualify as a good excuse.

“May I come in?” He did so without waiting for an answer, and he closed the door behind him. I made a careful note of his actions.

“May I sit down?” This time he didn’t move, apparently waiting for an answer. I kept writing much longer than necessary as a tactic to see what he might do.

I finally looked up. “Oh, excuse me. You came into my office and closed the door without an invitation and without introducing yourself, so I just assumed you’d sit down, too. Are you going to present credentials or do I need to yell for help? Although I suppose I may be able to handle things myself.”

My Glock made a solid thud as I set it on the desktop. He turned around, opened the door, and fled. I began thinking about the cup of coffee again.

Shortly, Fran Schmidt appeared in my doorway with the young man in tow.

“Annette? What’s going on?”

I handed him the paper that I’d taken notes on, and his eyebrows arched almost to his receding hairline as he read. He finally looked up at me.

“I see. Thanks for the clarity. Please excuse us.” He turned to the young man. “You. Come with me. Now.”

It was a half-hour later, after I’d had that cup of coffee and a nice conversation with Rolf Hendricks, whom I’d run into at the coffee machine, about trails for snowshoeing in Rocky Mountain National Park, that Fran and the young man reappeared in my doorway.

“Annette? Let’s see if we can start this all over. I’m not sure it will really help, but at least there may be a little more progress.” He turned to the young man, whose face was beet red. “Go.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Trieri, and please accept my apologies for my earlier behavior. I’m Gerard P. Yount, an attorney for Front Range Water. I assure you I meant no disrespect nor do I represent any sort of threat to you. I do, however, need to speak with you about an important matter.” Despite his embarrassment or anger, whatever was making his face red, he managed the same pleasant tone he’d used earlier.

“Thanks, Fran. I think it’ll be OK. Come in, Mr. Yount. Please be seated.”

“May I shut the door?”

“No.”

“Ms. Trieri, I have confidential information to discuss. It really would be appropriate for the door to be closed.” His tone shifted to the school-girl lecture mode.

“FRAN!” His return was remarkably quick. “Fran, is there an interview room that’s free? I need this conversation to be witnessed and taped.”

Yount looked as if someone had told him his fly was unzipped in front of the Supreme Court. But he came to see me, I reasoned, and I was therefore in the position to call the shots. Besides, overtones of water rights resonated throughout the three homicides, and it made sense to have the conversation on tape for future reference.

It took only a few minutes for us to get tape rolling and introduce ourselves to it. Yount was quite adaptable, all in all.

“Now, Ms. Trieri, as I said, there is something of a confidential nature that I need to discuss with you. I’m not entirely comfortable with these recording arrangements, but I will have to assume that they, the recordings, I mean, will be kept secure.”

“But first, Mr. Yount, there’s something we need to clarify. You have twice introduced yourself as an attorney for something you’ve called ‘Front Range Water.’ I know of no such organization. Does it have a real name?”

He looked confused but then recovered quickly. “I thought everyone knows what Front Range Water is. Of course, the full title is Front Range Associated Water Board, Inc., a public, not-for-profit corporation in which water users from Fort Collins to Pueblo, more or less, are shareholders and vote for the board, mostly by proxy through their local water providers. But we generally go by Front Range Water.”

“Thank you. I believe that it’s also called by its acronym, FRAWB. Now, what is this confidential matter you wish to discuss?” My FRAWB comment startled him, but once again he recovered quickly. He’s good, I thought.

“I, in representing Front Range Water, am given to understand that you believe us to be complicit in criminal activity here in Grand County. Specifically, in one or more of the three homicides currently under investigation here.”

“‘Given to understand’ is a fine-sounding phrase without real meaning, Mr. Yount. But please continue.” His assertion was surprising to me, but my well-practiced poker face combined with the little semantic tactical diversion seemed to be a sufficient response.

“To put it plainly, Ms. Trieri, what I’ve heard is that we’re on your suspect list.”

“And?”

“And, Ms. Trieri, *and* that’s completely inappropriate and from our perspective legally actionable. Any public hint of this and we will see you in court. Front Range Water will not stand idly by and be libeled.”

“Oh. Well, let me be certain that I understand. You’re threatening to sue me, meaning the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and, presumably, the Grand County Sheriff as well, if FRAWB’s role, should there be any, in criminal activity is investigated? So, in effect, either we give you blanket immunity for past, present, and future activities or you sue us? Hmm. Well, OK. Thank you for coming to see me, Mr. Yount. It’s been instructive.” I rose.

He didn’t.

“Is there something else, Mr. Yount?”

He took a deep breath. “Ms. Trieri, we are obviously not asking for blanket immunity of any kind. Front Range Water will take responsibility for its actions and for the actions of its employees. Our concern is about slanderous information being published.”

I remained standing. “Surely, Mr. Yount, that’s a matter between FRAWB and publishers. Neither the CBI nor the Grand County Sheriff publishes anything.”

“But you could leak information that could damage us. We won’t stand for that!” His veneer showed a slight crack—he was good, I thought, but not that good.

“Mr. Yount, be serious. We clearly have no control over what is published or broadcast. And for you to expect us to prove that we did *not* provide information that might be published or broadcast in the future is patently absurd. You’ve threatened me twice today, Mr. Yount, once in my office, implicitly, on a personal level, for which I have real-time notes and corroboration via a credible witness of your subsequent behavior, and once here, on a professional level, on tape. I’m through with you, Mr. Yount. Good day.” And I walked out.

Fran, having been in the control room behind the one-way mirror, caught up with me as I was walking down the hall.

“Annette? Um, listen. We’re friends, and that’s the way I want it to stay, OK? I don’t ever want us to be on opposite sides of anything, you know?”

* * *

Thirteen

Fran Schmidt must have played the tape for his senior staff—that’s the only possible explanation for the standing ovation I got when I walked into the staff meeting after lunch. My hunch was confirmed by the first item on the agenda.

“You’ve all seen Annette’s interview with the Front Range Water lawyer this morning, and I wanted you to see it because it has disturbing implications. Somehow they’ve heard that they’re part of the investigation and are worried about it.”

“But Fran,” Janelle looked puzzled. “They’re not. We’ve talked about connections to water issues, sure, but no one I know of has suggested FRAWB as a suspect.”

“And that simply means that they’re getting their information third- or fourth-hand and it’s garbled as a result. The good news is that no one here or in the rest of the department is leaking information to them, because it wouldn’t be garbled. But it points out two things. We’ve got to be extremely careful, not only about whom we talk to but also about how we ask questions when we’re investigating. People draw inferences, and that’s probably how they got their garbled information. We can’t prevent it, but we can be aware of it. The other thing it points out is how concerned about all this they are. What’s that line from Shakespeare? *Macbeth*, maybe—‘the lady doth protest too much, methinks’? Something like that...”

“*Hamlet*.” Someone in the middle of the group knew Shakespeare, it appeared.

Fran looked surprised. “*Hamlet*? OK, you’re probably right. Anyway, if Front Range Water is so worried that they sent a lawyer after us, via Annette, based on garbled information, well, they’re worried about *something*. I’m curious about what that something is.”

The remainder of the meeting was the usual weekly outlook, including traffic control assignments and so on. After Fran provided the updates on the homicides that he and I had discussed Sunday, without naming the owner of the torn ski suit, there was a question from the back.

“Sheriff, should we quit worrying about the other Escalades now?”

“No, to be complete, we should get tire information from the other two. We know that one fits the profile that Norm developed and one doesn’t. I got a call this morning from the patrol over in Kremmling. That rancher’s Escalade has the wrong tires on it. And we can’t assume that the vehicle we

think was at the McMurphy place is one of the four registered in the county. But let's continue to keep our eyes peeled and see if we can get tire info from the other two. Anything else? No? OK, let's go to work."

Fran and I were headed down the hall toward his office when I spotted an unfamiliar person coming our way and my lawyer alarm went off. He wasn't wearing a topcoat or carrying a briefcase, but the signature three-piece suit was tailored just so, and the breast-pocket handkerchief was coordinated with his tie.

"Annette, let me introduce you to Axel Sonos, District Attorney for Grand and Jackson Counties. Axel, this is Annette Trieri, our CBI liaison, whom I've mentioned. And, say, I'm sorry about Donna. She and I didn't get along, as I'm sure you know, but I'm still sorry about it."

"Yeah, that's a real tragedy." The tone belied the words. "Ms. Treery, glad to meet you at last. Please call me A-D. AD the DA. I understand you're doing more than just planning, that you're actually helping Fran's department with these homicide investigations."

"So far, I'm observing and commenting, a consultant, sort of. As far as I can tell, they're doing just fine. But I'm glad to help. The cases have some interesting twists."

"Well, I'm ready to prosecute, when you make a case on someone. I had planned to take the cases myself, we don't get many homicides up here. But now I'll have to. And I have no idea whatsoever when and if I'll be able to replace Donna. I've got some creative budgeting to do."

"I'd think, AD, that an assistant district attorney position here would be quite attractive. Having a real job and living here is a combination that's hard to beat." I wanted to probe the county's employment policies a little.

"True, but we don't pay as much as most other jurisdictions. Oh, we're higher than the smallest counties—Moffat County, Rio Blanco County, up in the northwest corner, they pay slave wages. But people would rather work down in JeffCo, make real money, and drive up here to ski than live up here and take the pay hit." AD the DA shrugged.

"I guess that also allows the people who work for you their eccentricities." I was thinking of George Neering, the medical examiner, who was part of the DA's staff.

He knew exactly what I meant. "Sure does, and we've got one whom you've probably met. But don't be deceived—he's sharp under that layer of weirdness, believe me. Well, I've got to run. With no assistant, I'm doing two jobs. Talk to you later, Fran. Nice to meet you, Ms. Treery." And he marched out, full of purpose.

"Ah, yes. The Alpha Male. Do you get along with him, Fran?"

"About as well as you could expect. What I told Donna the other day was true, we have an agreement to stay out of each other's way during the different phases of an investigation and prosecution. That helps us get along, I think. And we both do a fair job of treating the political party difference as a joke. In some ways, given the small population here, it makes sense to have one of us be a Republican and one be a Democrat. Keeps the balance of power from getting tilted." He began leading the way to his office.

"I notice you call him 'Axel.'"

"There are a few of us who've known him for a long time who do, and that *is* his name. He adopted the 'AD' thing when he first ran for office. I've just never switched. It probably bugs him, but, hey, do I care?" He grinned.

“In my opinion, anything you can do to keep a lawyer off balance is a good thing to do. As you may have noticed this morning.” I grinned back. “And, by the way, your comments about FRAWB, or Front Range Water or whatever we should call them, were right on the money. I’m wondering if we shouldn’t see if we can get our hands on all of Tobias Summers’ financial records and Lannie Young’s real estate transactions, just to see if they might relate to Front Range in some way.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too. Lannie’s files shouldn’t be too hard, because her sales will be public documents. And I’d think that her agency wouldn’t object to our knowing what other properties she’s been representing. But Summers’ files might require subpoenas. And that could get sticky. If Mandy objects, she could easily cast herself as the bereaved widow who’s being harassed by the nosey cops.” He shut his office door behind him, and we both sat down.

“But, Fran, our side of that argument is stronger—that we need his files to catch his killer *and* to find out who looted his company, meaning to find out what really happened to that three mil. Mandy couldn’t possibly object to either of those things, and if she did, she’d look disingenuous. That would keep you on the high moral ground, at least.”

“Hmm. Good point. And maybe we can use those arguments to persuade her without a subpoena. I don’t know what the real situation with Tobias Summers’ financial empire is, but that missing three million has got to be an issue. If she balks at our tracking it down, she’ll begin to look complicit somehow. And if we can avoid a subpoena, that’s the way to go. I know that Tobias was a big contributor to the Republican Party and to Axel’s election campaign. The DA will want a very compelling reason to go the subpoena route.”

“What are you going to do about Junior? I noticed you didn’t mention his name at the meeting.”

“That’s another problem. On top of what I told you yesterday, that Simon, Sr. has some clout when it comes to my budget, he’s also a Republican. He and Axel will stick together. We need an air-tight case against Junior before we can do anything. At the least, we need the torn ski suit. What we have now is just too circumstantial.”

I thought for a minute. “How about a ploy? Janelle has recused herself, which is fine. But I’m certain that Danny wants this sorted out as soon as possible. Suppose we figure out a way to get Junior to wear that torn ski suit out, assuming he hasn’t destroyed it. Maybe, someone, could be Danny, ‘accidentally’ spills coffee on Junior’s good ski suit. While it’s being cleaned, he’d need the other one, and Danny or one of us could get a look at it.”

“Definitely sounds like a ploy. But I guess it might just work.” He stared at me. “Annette, like I said before, I want to always be on your side.”

* * *

It was about 2:30 when I got back to my office—just the right time to begin working the New York brokers. The market was closed, and they wouldn’t be distracted by what was going on there. Or at least that was my hope.

At the first two firms identified by Chuck Shure as having received Tobias Summers’ cashier’s checks, the individuals on the list had left for the day. But the guy at the third was still in, not that it helped much.

“I’m not sure what I can tell you, Ms. Trieri. It’s our policy to treat these transactions confidentially.”

“I’m investigating the murder of your client. His body was found two days after he deposited six hundred thousand dollars with your brokerage, with you. If I need to come to New York and do this formally, I won’t be in a very good mood. You can save yourself and your firm a lot of grief by cooperating here. What I need to know is what he instructed you to do with those funds. That seems simple enough.” I tried to keep my tone polite, but because I’m a native of Chicago, dealing with New Yorkers has always been a challenge for me.

“Ms. Trieri, you need to look at this from my perspective. You call me and ask me questions, but I don’t really know who you are. I don’t really know if my client is really dead. Why should I believe you?”

I wanted to say that one good reason would be to keep the Securities and Exchange Commission off his back, but that didn’t seem politic. Instead, I simply thanked him for his time and said I’d be in touch.

I felt better when I hit pay dirt at the fourth brokerage.

“I saw the story in the newspaper that he had died. But murder? Geez.” The voice on the phone sounded scared.

“You read the Denver papers? Don’t tell me this made the papers in New York.”

“No, neither. But I subscribe to a search service to keep track of stories about all my clients, especially new ones I don’t know anything about. His name popped up last week. But it didn’t say anything about murder.”

“That wasn’t in the initial stories, but it should be out by now. Anyway, we found out that Mr. Summers had deposited something like six hundred thousand dollars with you two days before his body was discovered. I’d like to find out what he had you do with those funds.”

“It was strange, I’ll tell you that. He had this tip, he called it, about an IPO that he wanted to buy into. A small company that was going public based on a new technology that it had developed to desalinate brackish water. He said I could ride along if I wanted to, but he wanted all of his six hundred K to buy into it on Friday. Even mentioned that he had some other brokerages doing the same buy.”

“Why is that strange?”

“Well, we try to keep on top of IPOs, and this one didn’t look like a very good investment to us. We, and I mean our firm, here, we had decided to pass on it, both on behalf of all our clients and the firm itself.”

“And you told him this?” I don’t really know anything about the stock market, but this did sound strange.

“Absolutely. I tried hard to talk him out of it. But he insisted—he even wanted us to place an expedited order to buy at the opening bell. I made him put it in writing.”

“Had Mr. Summers dealt with you before?”

“No, he was a brand new client to us. Basically walked in off the street. He told me that he picked us because we have a reputation of being able to get into IPOs effectively, though, which we do pride ourselves on. So he must have done some research.” The voice held a hint of pride.

“So, what happened?”

“Well, we did what we do best—we got our order in early, and we bought him the six hundred thousand worth of PureAgua, that’s the company’s name, right off the top on Friday morning. Had no trouble getting in at the initial price, because the IPO was for twenty million.”

“You said that Mr. Summers mentioned that he was having other firms make purchases of this nature, too. We think he was trying to make a fast buck with this IPO, because he was in some financial trouble and he had just received a considerable sum—not enough to get himself out of trouble, but enough to speculate this way. Do you have any idea of how the stock did?”

“Well, naturally, I watched it. It went up a little early in the day, about a percent or two. But then it stopped selling, after about five million worth of shares got grabbed up. And then it started to sink. By noon, it was down about fifteen percent—the company had let it float all morning. And then, early in the afternoon, there was an announcement of a lawsuit against PureAgua for patent infringements. The stock tanked and they had to stop trading it. When they finally froze it, it had lost about eighty-five percent of its initial value. It dropped so fast they couldn’t rescue it sooner. Mr. Summers’ six hundred thousand dollars with us was down to less than ninety, after our fees.” He sounded embarrassed.

“Did Mr. Summers have anything to say about this?”

“I didn’t hear from him—our last conversation was on Thursday afternoon, when he left me the written instructions to buy at the opening bell. I kept expecting to hear something, but then my service found the story about his death. I guess his account will be part of his estate. Maybe they can write the loss off against other assets and minimize the estate taxes, or something.” His closing comment sounded to me like a verbal shrug. After all, what did he care? His brokerage got its fee.

Just as I was about to call the fifth brokerage to see if I could get this story corroborated, Fran Schmidt stuck his head in my door.

“We got him, Annette. Junior, I mean.”

“You arrested him?”

Fran came in and sat down. “No, not yet. I want to discuss the arrest with you and with Axel first, because Simon, Sr. will make a stink. But we verified that Junior has the torn suit. I called Daniel about your idea, and he decided to try something else first. They do random drug checks on the employees, and that includes searching their lockers. So he did a random locker search, with Junior’s locker having been ‘randomly’ selected. The torn ski suit was hanging in it.”

“Sounds as if Junior isn’t the brightest star in the galaxy.”

“That’s putting it kindly, Annette. I think it’s more like he’s five beers short of a six-pack. Anyway, what I want to do is review the evidence with you and see how it looks. Then we can vet it with Axel to see if he thinks it’s solid enough to justify a politically sensitive arrest. If so, we can try to find Junior and bring him in.”

“Um, ‘try to find Junior’?”

“Right. Daniel told me he hasn’t clocked in at the ski area in a couple of days, and he was signed up to work the weekend. No one seems to know where he is.”

* * *

“We’re going to meet with the District Attorney tomorrow, discuss the evidence, and see if he thinks we have a case.”

“And if he agrees that you have a case, then you get an arrest warrant?” Hal looked up from the report he was reading.

“Right. And then all we have to do is find the guy. He disappeared and left his truck parked at his cabin up in Grand Lake. It’s as if he just walked off. Danny Kennedy told us that Junior hasn’t been at work for a couple of days, so we checked this afternoon.”

I was putting together dinner for two at home, one of my invent-it-on-the-spot tomato sauces for spaghetti—this one was going to have rosemary overtones. I won’t claim that this ability is genetic, but it feels like it. Growing up, I learned enough from watching my grandmothers that it comes easily.

“So you’ve got a torn ski suit in the locker of a guy with a sore shoulder. Does the piece of fabric you found in the woods match the tear? And even if it does, it seems like a barely competent lawyer would be able to make it all look coincidental. From what you’ve said, you haven’t established much of a motive.”

“I know. That’s why we’re going to talk to the DA about it. That and the political issues. Your good friend, County Commissioner Simon Murcheson, Sr., has Fran running scared.”

Hal’s laugh was bitter. “Right. A Luddite know-nothing in control of the budget for the sheriff’s office. Reminds me of some of the people I’ve had to deal with in the rural school districts, the ones who insist that the Grand Canyon was really created in a day or two, isotopic and geologic evidence notwithstanding. People like Murcheson are why I think higher education is so important for this valley.”

“Just be glad we’re not doing this year away from home over in Utah.”

He groaned. “Don’t get me started.”

“Speaking of getting started, have you made any progress on what positions you’re going to fill first for MPARC?”

“I’m going around in circles. I talked with Chuck Shure’s architect and he told me the idea of taking off the top story is workable but that I need to decide on what’s needed in the way of office space, computer space, and meeting space. To figure that out, I really need people to help plan it, especially a chief scientist and what I’ll call a chief engineer, a computer person. But I can’t really hire anyone until I have a place for them to sit. I think I’m going to have to rent some office space somewhere for a while. I mean, I can work from home, but I really can’t expect every MPARC employee to.”

“You also said something about a public relations person.”

“Yeah, and I need that right away. By rights, I should find a chief operating officer and let that person hire a PR type, but I need a PR person now.” He sounded helpless.

“Contract someone to work with you temporarily, try for someone local. That’s what you need right away, local PR connections and help. Then find a COO and let him set up a real PR department, or whatever, maybe PR and educational outreach.”

“Too bad you’ve already got a job.” He smiled at me, and winked. “Except, of course, I do want to avoid playing favorites. And you’re definitely my favorite. But, you’re right, a short-term local PR person would help. I’m afraid, though, I may have to play favorites with the chief scientist and chief engineer, just offer it to people I know and trust. A real search would take months and months.”

“Surely there are people all over at universities who would like to do the chief scientist job for a year while they’re on sabbatical. Maybe the chief engineer, too, if it’s really to set up this fast new computer you keep talking about. Say, didn’t Sandy Livingston talk about needing a break from Santa Fe when we were down there just before Christmas?” Livingston had been helpful in a case that involved related murders in New Mexico and Colorado.

“Sandy? Yeah, he did. But, gee,” he tried to look innocent. “I’m not sure I want him sniffing around you.”

“Oh, he got over it, I think. You should have seen him when he first met me, an appointment at my office. I thought he’d step on his tongue.” I had to laugh at the memory. “But he seemed pretty taken with Angela by the time we left.”

“And she with him.” He looked thoughtful. “Hmm. I wonder. You know, you’ve been talking about how Fran needs more staff. Angela’s got credentials as good as Janelle’s, I bet, maybe better because her experience is in civilian law enforcement. And our experience the other night suggests that Fran needs people who can speak Spanish. Maybe there’s some way we could get both of them up here. I guess I should see what I can find out about Sandy, his scientific credentials, I mean. I’ll Google him after dinner.”

“OK, good. That’s the chief scientist. Now what about this computer person, your chief engineer?” Not that I’m a control freak or anything, but sometimes Hal needs a little kick in the pants to set things in motion.

“I think maybe I’m going to consult with Chuck Shure on that one. We’re supposed to build the world’s fastest supercomputer using his new processors, so maybe he has someone he could recommend. The COO is the bigger problem. Also a security person, both for computer security and other stuff. For all I know, Chuck will want us to have a classified capability.” He scratched his head. “Hmm. I wonder if Mac MacQuarrie is tired of Florida yet. He’d probably know about all that stuff. But first I really do need a COO.”

MacQuarrie, ex-CIA and other spooky agencies, had been investigating theft of nuclear material and its transport on a cruise ship we’d been vacationing on. He seemed like overkill for Hal’s institute, but I decided not to go there.

“A chief operating officer implies someone who can make the organization run, and that implies knowing something about the local culture, to me at least. Does that suggest it ought to be someone local? You could do a search to gauge the local talent pool in about a week, I’d think. Plant a story in the local paper here, that one with different versions in each little town, along with an ad in the classifieds, and see who responds.”

Hal nodded. “I’d be willing to bet that Mary Schmidt would. Didn’t she say something the other night about wanting to find a way to put her bank manager experience to work?”

“Hmm.” Now it was my turn to try to look innocent. “I’m not sure I want her to have the opportunity to sniff around you. She was in the hero-worship mode the other night.”

“The sheriff’s wife? Right. Let’s see, what other ways could I think of to endear myself to the community? I know! I’ll do what I can to have our non-profit center avoid paying taxes, stiffing the fire departments, the school board, and everyone else. They’d love me then, especially because I told the county commission I wouldn’t.”

I was just about to put water on for the pasta when the phone rang, so I turned the sauce down to a simmer and answered it.

“Annette? Fran. I’m going to cancel our meeting with Axel tomorrow.”

“Uh, OK. Why? Are we giving up on Junior?”

“In a way. I just got a call from Simon, Sr. It seems that Junior usually has dinner with his folks over in Kremmling on Mondays. Sort of a family tradition that started with Monday Night Football and turned into a year ’round thing, or something like that. Anyway, Simon, Sr. and Marge, that’s his wife,

didn't hear anything from Junior and he didn't show up at the usual time. He didn't answer their calls. So they drove up to Grand Lake, to Junior's place, to see what they could. They have a key, so they let themselves in, and found Junior. I'm up here now, and he looks a lot like Tobias did. Peaceful, even a sort of smile on his face, dead as a doornail. Lying in, or on, his bed. No obvious signs, although George is sure as shooting going to look for needle marks in his nose. At least he's not frozen solid."

* * *

Fourteen

Tuesday morning, I decided to try the other brokers before the market opened, so I made phone calls from home after breakfast. Numbers one, two, and five told me much the same story as number four had on Monday, and number three, the recalcitrant one, finally gave in and corroborated the story as well. Given information to verify, he allowed that he could help me. He just didn't want to volunteer information outright, he said.

It probably helped persuade him to cooperate when I dropped the FBI into the conversation. They, after all, would become involved if a Colorado murder and a New York securities fraud case became intertwined, I suggested.

The net result of all these calls was that I knew far more about Tobias Summers' finances than I had before. Of the three million dollars he had invested with the New York brokerages, he had well less than half a million left—after one day's trading.

Perhaps he had been a wheeler-dealer in the Fraser Valley real estate market, but his record on Wall Street was not very impressive.

But Charles Shure had said that the transaction on Wednesday had involved \$3.2 million, that Summers had withdrawn almost all of it. He had deposited Shure's check and withdrawn 61 cashier's checks at \$50,000 each and 500 \$100 bills. Somewhere, there was still one of those checks and a considerable amount of cash floating around. I got busy.

Airline records revealed that Summers had taken a red-eye from Denver International to JFK in New York on Wednesday night, and that he'd returned to DIA Thursday night. Some of that missing cash probably bought tickets, I thought. On a hunch, I checked records for the companies that sell traveler's insurance at those two airports—computer databases and connections to the FBI have made such things much, much easier than they used to be. It turned out that Summers had plunked down \$500 in cash for airline passenger policies for his trip to and from New York. That cashier's check was still a mystery, though. I drove to Hot Sulphur Springs with its fate on my mind.

When I got to the sheriff's office, I realized I needed a distraction. I had copied Michael McMurphy's water-rights book from Janelle's computer, and it seemed like it could serve the purpose.

Besides, I thought, it might help me understand something. If FRAWB was so sensitive to all this that it was trying to lean on the CBI and the Sheriff's Department based on rumors, something had to be up, as Fran had suggested. Maybe McMurphy could provide enlightenment.

Halfway into the first chapter, past where I'd stopped the other time in Janelle's office, I discovered that the polemic faded and that the guy could really write. It turned out that this was a good thing, because his topic wasn't exactly a page-turner.

But it was instructive. In my years in the Southwest, I'd picked up bits and pieces of water lore, some of it apocryphal and some of it informed, but I'd never seen it formalized before. And McMurphy started at the beginning and provided a step-by-step development of just how things got to where they are now.

It all began, I learned, with the "first in time, first in right" doctrine of beneficial use. Whoever had arrived in a particular region first and laid claim to its water resources had senior rights to those resources, and as long as he used them for beneficial purposes he retained them.

One sticking point was the definition of "beneficial," an issue made all the more problematic by society's changing values. Keeping fish alive, for example, didn't used to count; in recent years, it's begun to. But for more than a century, "beneficial use" has meant agricultural and domestic consumption, fish and wildlife and natural stream-flows be damned.

Another sticking point raised in recent years concerned who was really first. Early European settlers always thought of themselves as first, and senior water rights reflected that tradition for decades. But Native Americans have rightly pointed out that they were here long before the Europeans, and their water rights were increasingly becoming recognized, throwing water-law precedent into chaos in some river basins.

In north-central Colorado, the first European claims were agricultural, among them farming communes in the Greeley area. Water on the plains was scarce, so farmers dug ditches into the foothills to divert the Cache la Poudre and other streams. Because natural stream-flow is so dominated by the springtime snowmelt, they built reservoirs to store the water for use later in the summer.

And when all of the Poudre's water was claimed, they looked to the west side of the Continental Divide.

One of the first, and, for the time, most ambitious, of the diversion projects was the construction of the Grand Ditch, a canal still in use today that runs along the flank of the Never Summer Mountains on the west side of the baby Colorado River. It catches snowmelt that would otherwise feed the Colorado in the Kawuneechee Valley in Rocky Mountain National Park and guides it northward *around* the Colorado's headwaters across the Continental Divide at La Poudre Pass and into the Cache la Poudre drainage. It's not merely moving water from the other side of the mountains to the plains, it's moving it from the next range of mountains.

In more recent decades, this engineering approach has resulted in lakes' being created, including Granby and Dillon and dozens of smaller impoundments, and tunnels' being bored, so that nearly all of the water that melts off the snowpack in the central Rockies is pumped back east one way or another.

McMurphy's tone switched back from historical explanation to polemic when he got to the creation of the Front Range Associated Water Board. It amalgamated a host of smaller water districts and boards several years back, centralizing the Front Range resources into a single entity with more clout than ever. This allowed it to expand its acquisition program, offering farmers and ranchers hugely attractive buy-outs for the senior rights that had been attached to their land for decades.

Of course, buying and selling commodities is the American way. Despite some shady dealings and a history of protecting the status quo with political donations and lobbying, the water industry wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. But slaking the thirst of the cities and suburbs of the Front Range was causing increasing hardship in the mountains. The hardship was particularly difficult in growing communities, where local development meant the need for additional water, water that was being pumped back east.

It was puzzling to me that McMurphy didn't seem to appreciate the irony involved. It was the developers of the Front Range, after all, who were responsible for the pressure to grab ever more water

from the Western Slope—water that the Western Slope developers wanted for their new subdivisions. Warring developers—even better, I thought, than warring lawyers.

It was looking as if the developers from the east side of the Continental Divide were winning the war, not a surprising turn of events given their strength in numbers, constituent population, and money. And with the consolidation of the Front Range water interests into FRAWB, several new, even more ambitious attempts to acquire water rights had surfaced. Both the Arkansas River and the Rio Grande were at risk, with attempts to fill the middle Arkansas Valley with a huge lake and to pump the subsurface aquifer in the San Luis Valley dry.

And the granddaddy of all water projects, what had been dubbed the “Big Straw,” a giant pipeline/canal project designed to pump water all the way back uphill from the Colorado River at the Utah border to the Continental Divide was being discussed. Even though such a thing sounded like a bad joke, high-ranking politicians from both the Front Range and the Western Slope were serious about it.

I was just starting on a chapter entitled “Drying up the Back Range” when my phone rang.

“Annette? Chuck Shure. Listen, I just found out where the last cashier’s check went.” He sounded triumphant.

“I’ve been wondering. Turns out that his investments on Wall Street tanked, and he lost more than just his shirt. He was pretty much down to his jockey shorts.”

“What happened?”

I told him about the PureAgua IPO and its disastrous day and got a low whistle in response.

“Maybe that explains the check. He cashed it at a Western Slope Bank & Trust branch in Black Hawk. That’s why it didn’t show up before, because the transaction was purely internal to the bank. He bought the check from Western Slope and cashed it there. I had my people looking outside.”

“Black Hawk, huh? Where all the casinos are?”

“Right. On Friday. I expect he may have been feeling desperate.”

* * *

I went searching for a Colorado atlas. I thought I knew about where Black Hawk was in relation to the Fraser Valley, but I wanted to check. Some lucky person, maybe me, was going to get to drive over there and question casino operators. But instead of an atlas, I ran into George Neering.

“Yo, Ms. Tri-er-i, nice mornin’, huh?” Despite his strangeness, you couldn’t fault George for bad moods. “Say, you know, I’m on my way to see Fran with autopsy results on Junior. Wanna tag along?”

“I will, George, thanks.” I decided a little friendly confrontation might prove interesting. “Y’know, George, no offense, but I think I’ve got you figured out. You have this persona you present to the world—reminds me of the old George Carlin stand-up routine he called the ‘Hippy-Dippy Weatherman’, as a matter of fact—but behind the façade there’s an analytical mind that’s sharp as a tack. You just like to keep it hidden, and you present yourself this way to make people think you’re spaced out. Does it give you a significant advantage, or something?”

He had been walking down the hall toward Fran’s office about a step ahead of me, boogieing along to his internal music, and he now stopped and turned toward me. His look of surprise quickly changed to full-out laughter.

“George Carlin, huh? Well, I guess I should take that as a compliment, I’ve always liked him. Actually, I don’t know about advantages, man—I’m just the way I am. But I think I know what you’re talking about. Guess I’m just an unreconstructed hippy, man.”

“I bet you tone it down in court testimony, though.”

“Only when I have to go down to Denver. Around here, the judges all know me, and it’s really a pretty effective way to get on a jury’s good side, you know, man?” His big smile was infectious, and I began laughing.

Fran Schmidt’s door was open, so we walked in to find him staring at a spreadsheet on his computer screen. He turned and looked at us with a sour expression.

“You two look like you’re having way too much fun. Here, help me with these budget numbers. That’ll fix you right up. George, I expect you’ve got autopsy results for me.”

“You guessed it, man. Junior’s got a needle mark up there in his nose, just like the other two. Only difference is the shit-eating grin he was wearing. But I think I know what caused that—looks like he’d just had sex, and there was some cocaine caught in his nose hairs.”

“Any idea of what he got injected with?”

“Too soon for blood test results, man, and they may not help anyway. Remember how we didn’t find anything in Summers’ blood? It doesn’t take much when it’s injected right into the brain, man.” George looked philosophical. “But I bet it’s a pretty good rush. Whew!”

Schmidt leaned back in his chair and put his cowboy boots on top of a pile of spreadsheets on his desk. His feeling about budget numbers was apparent.

“So…” But George interrupted.

“Sheriff, man, you know, if I was from Southeast Asia, I’d think you were trying to offend me, man. You don’t show people the soles of your feet there, man, it’s an insult.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, man, I read that somewhere. I mean, you’re a politician, man, you’ve got to be careful about offending people, right?”

“Give me a break, George. You’re not from Southeast Asia. And if I recall, you went to great lengths to avoid visiting Southeast Asia at Uncle Sam’s expense some years ago.” He didn’t move his feet.

Fran shot George a nasty look. “So, where was I. As I was going to say, it looks like we have a secondary murder now. What I mean is, there were three first-level targets, Summers, McMurphy, and Lannie, and now one of the killers is doing clean-up. Getting rid of the original gang, assuming Junior killed Lannie.” Schmidt stared at the ceiling. “I wonder if this means Junior was at McMurphy’s?”

“If that’s the case, Fran, then we can expect another. There were three people at McMurphy’s house, right?” His theory clicked for me. “And, assuming Junior was heterosexual, one of them was a woman. That would fit with the single set of smaller footprints.”

“Junior was definitely not gay, man. In fact, he was one of the biggest gay-bashers here in the valley. God-damned bigot was what he was, man.” George’s normally serene expression had turned fierce. “Besides, man, the evidence of the sex includes some spermicidal foam on his dick, man. That’s pretty conclusive, I’d say.”

I had to laugh. “George, it’s a good thing the judges around here know you. Man.”

For the first time I'd seen, George looked embarrassed.

"Fran, I have some other information about this whole mess as well. We've almost accounted for Summers' whereabouts up to the time of his death. And the money, too." I explained the stock-market fiasco and Summers' apparent trip to Black Hawk.

"Black Hawk? That's strange. Tobias was a real straight arrow. Somehow, I can't imagine him gambling." Schmidt looked genuinely puzzled. "Besides, that's small-stakes gambling. You can't make real money at that."

"Well, I dunno, man. You sure can *lose* real money there. I gotta a friend, man, inherited a bundle, bought himself a Porsche, went over there for some fun. Drove home in a beater Nissan, broke. And as for Summers, man, well, that stock market deal sounds like gambling to me." George, apparently, wasn't going to let a little embarrassment keep him out of the conversation.

"Speaking of cars, Fran, I think you told me that Summers drove a Hummer. Did that ever turn up?" That detail had escaped me up to that point.

"I've been wondering about that, too. Nobody's seen it, at least not that I've heard. You don't suppose it could be over at Black Hawk in a used car lot?"

"No used car lots there, man. Land's too valuable. My friend told me his Porsche ended up at a used car place down in Lakewood."

Schmidt nodded his understanding. "Well, if Tobias drove that Hummer back here on his fatal Saturday morning, we'd probably have seen it around the county somewhere. That means he either drove back in another vehicle or someone went and picked him up.

"I was looking for an atlas when I ran into George here, because I don't remember exactly where Black Hawk is. Over in the Front Range foothills, isn't it? Somewhere over there?"

"Right. It's up the north fork of Clear Creek Canyon, the turnoff is a couple of miles below where I-70 and US 6 meet up just below Idaho Springs." Fran looked a question at me. "Why?"

"So it's sort of on the way back here from Denver? Yeah, well, I'm sorry to be so suspicious, but I think that we need to elevate Emily Griggs back up a level on our suspect list."

"What? Annette, c'mon, I thought we had eliminated her." Fran was looking perplexed, and George just stared at me in astonishment.

"I know. But now we know there's a woman involved in this thing, and Emily's a woman, regardless of her orientation. If she had help, she could have overcome the size difference we were wondering about and moved Summers around. She came back here on that Saturday morning, and her alibi pretty much evaporates west of Denver. There's no real reason to think she didn't pick up Summers somewhere on her way back up here." I held up my hand to stop their protests. "Look. I'm not naming her as our prime suspect or anything like that. And the only real connection involving her is to Summers—there's no reason I know of to think she'd be connected to Lannie Young's murder or to McMurphy's. But until we know how Summers got back here and into her condo, we have to keep her in mind, OK?"

* * *

Fran's office had a better view than mine—he could see out the front of the building to the street, while I was able to see only two big dumpsters in the alley. Because I was across Fran's desk from where he sat with his back to the window, I was able to see a large SUV pull into a parking place out there. As it

maneuvered into position, its logo and nameplate told me it was a Cadillac Escalade. And when its door opened, my lawyer alarm went off. It took only a minute or so for Fran's phone to ring.

"Yes?" I guessed it was his intercom line. "OK...Oh, well, she's in here. Please bring her over." He set the phone down.

"Annette, you've got another visitor from FRAWB, another lawyer. Be nice, OK?" He was laughing.

George looked startled. "A lawyer from FRAWB? I'm outta here, man." And he disappeared with amazing speed.

"George lives on a little ranch next to one of the feeder ditches FRAWB owns. I suspect that he's rather free and easy with their water when he needs it." Fran's explanation helped me understand George's departure just in time for the arrival of our new visitor.

She turned out to be the female version of Gerard P. Yount, the previous FRAWB lawyer—young, aggressive, sure of herself, clearly in need of a spanking of some kind. I was going to try to be nice, but I knew it would be a chore. Rita Chesley-Hayes was in her early thirties, about three inches over five feet tall plus a couple of inches because of her heels, and dressed in an expensive tailored suit that looked like camel's hair. Fran's front desk officer made introductions and quickly excused herself.

I decided to take the offensive. "Where's Mr. Yount? I was beginning to like him. I think we hit it off."

She looked surprised and unused to being off balance. "He was, uh, assigned elsewhere, I understand. I was asked to continue his discussions here."

Fran assumed as innocent an expression as he could muster up. "What discussions were those, miss?"

"My understanding, sheriff, is that Mr. Yount came up here yesterday and discussed with Ms. Trieri certain concerns that Front Range Water has, concerns about being libeled."

"Well, my goodness, I don't blame Front Range Water at all for being concerned about libel. What's the issue exactly, and who specifically is Front Range concerned about?" Fran had changed from innocence to indignation in a heartbeat. I wondered if he had taken acting courses in college.

"I thought you understood the issues here, sheriff. We are concerned about your office, of course."

Now he was back to innocence. "My office? I don't understand. How could my office libel Front Range Water? That just doesn't make sense to me at all."

"If media reports mention Front Range Water in connection with these murders you've had here in Grand County, sheriff, we will consider that libel."

"I'm sorry, miss, but I still don't understand." Fran's first reference to her as "miss" had produced a sour expression, and I think he had decided to push that button intentionally. "If you're libeled by the media, you'll have to go after them. I don't see how my office would be involved. I suppose we could forestall this issue by putting out a press release saying that the Grand County Sheriff is not considering Front Range Water as a suspect in these murders. But from what you just said, maybe you'd consider even reports of that nature to be libel."

Before she could say anything, I jumped in. "If it would help, we could put out a joint statement from the sheriff's office and the Colorado Bureau of Investigation saying that the ongoing investigation of FRAWB has not yet made any connection to the murders. Oh. Fran, before I forget, she pulled up in a Cadillac Escalade. It's parked behind you."

He looked at me, then swiveled his chair around. “Really? That car’s hers?”

He reached for his phone and pushed a couple of buttons. “Norm? Say, could you take a minute and check out the tires on an Escalade that’s parked outside my window? The sooner the better, because I don’t know how long it’ll be there, OK?”

Now Ms. Chesley-Hayes was the indignant one. “What, may I ask, is this about?”

I decided to keep my mouth shut—it was Fran’s investigation, after all. And he was thinking about what to say.

Finally he decided. “Well, miss, you see, one of our recent murders involved a writer who was working on a book that exposes, shall I say, some of the more assertive tactics used by Front Range Water in effecting its goals. Someone who was driving a vehicle with tires that come standard on Escalades was at his residence shortly before the time of his death. And his computer files, including the working copy of his book, were destroyed. So we’re checking the tires on every Escalade we run across.”

With Fran’s lead, I knew it would be appropriate for me to chime in. “And it would help us to know your shoe size. There were footprints, also.”

Ms. Chelsey-Hayes’ look of indignation had been frozen in place until my comment. Then it turned to anger—even through her lawyer mask, it was obvious that she was mad as hell.

“This is outrageous! You do not have my permission to examine my automobile, sheriff. And my shoe size is none of your business.”

“Well, miss, I’m afraid that when the media reports facts, it’s not libel. So when they report that a Front Range attorney refused to cooperate with our murder investigation despite, as Annette suggested, its ongoing nature and despite an apparent connection to forensic evidence, well...” Fran shrugged.

“Perhaps you’d care to tell us about the two people you were with that day, Ms. Chesley-Hayes.” I made a point of making my voice completely flat, devoid of any emotion or inflection, despite the fact that her demeanor was making me want to burst out in laughter.

“What? What day? Are you accusing me of being at McMurph...at wherever it was that you were talking about?”

“Ms. Chesley-Hayes, it seems clear that you know where it was that we were talking about. You almost said it. Fran, I remember you told me that all conversations with civilians in this office are recorded.” I turned toward him and winked. “Can I assume that the equipment would have recorded Ms. Chesley-Hayes’ little Freudian slip, there?”

“Absolutely, Annette.”

“Good. Oh, look, there’s Norm. I wonder if the tires will be a match. Say, Fran? Do I remember correctly? Isn’t that a handicapped parking spot there? I think I recall it from my first day here, I almost parked in it, then I saw the sign.”

Fran shoved some papers on his desk aside and picked up a walkie-talkie. “Norm? Norm, can you hear me? Over.”

I saw Dzeng turn his head and reach toward a lapel. “What’s up, Fran? Over.”

“Norm, is that Escalade there in the handicapped spot? It sort of looks like it from here. If so, impound it for towing, would you? Over.” I saw Dzeng looking toward a sign on the curb and nodding.

“It is, and will do, sheriff. We’ll have to call for the flatbed from Granby, though. Can’t really tow these all-wheel-drive vehicles. And we’ll have to break in to get it on the flatbed, break a window, I guess. Gonna get expensive. Over.”

Fran turned to look at Ms. Chesley-Hayes but looked surprised instead. I turned, and saw that she had vanished.

“Norm? Any minute now, you’re going to have a very angry lawyer on your hands. It’s possible that she’s the owner of the Escalade, but we don’t know that unless she has her registration on her person, not in the car. Think you’ll need backup? Over.”

“Angry lawyer? C’mon, Fran, I’m just the tracker. You bet I’ll need backup. Out.”

* * *

Fifteen

“Fran and I went outside to act as Norman’s backup, out a door Fran has in his office, so we got there before she did—it surprised the fight out of her to find us standing there. She turned into putty in Fran’s hands.” I chuckled at the memory.

Hal and I were on our way to a school-board meeting, where he was going to wear both of his new hats. I’d spent the entire afternoon dealing with Ms. Chesley-Hayes and got home just as he was leaving, so on the spur of the moment I had jumped in his car to go with him.

“Fran probably exceeded his authority, but it was only a parking violation and it was also linked to the investigation. But he essentially plea-bargained with her, getting her to authorize a search of her vehicle in return for not towing it. He even tore up the ticket that Norman Dzung had written. The interesting thing is, we found a pair of Sorels in the Escalade, hers, and they match the size of the small prints that Norm found at McMurphy’s place. And the Escalade had its original tires, so they’re a match, too. And then there was her McMurphy slip. She knew she was looking bad.”

“Does Fran really record conversations in his office? I thought that was illegal or something.” It was snowing again, and Hal was taking the curves on the northward stretch of County Road 5 with extra care.

“No, he doesn’t. But he could so she couldn’t be sure. I spent most of the afternoon talking with her in an interview room, where things *are* recorded, talking about her remark in Fran’s office. Part of the plea bargain, the part where he tore up the ticket, was that she would explain herself fully.”

“Tire tracks and footprints aren’t conclusive, surely. I mean, there are other Escalades driven by small-footed people wearing Sorels, right?”

“Right. And, I have to say, to think that a FRAWB lawyer would have murdered Mike McMurphy is a real stretch for me. But we now think there’s a woman involved, because of Junior Murcheson’s death.” It took me until the outskirts of Granby to explain that wrinkle.

“So how did this FRAWB lawyer explain herself?”

“According to her, Front Range has known about McMurphy’s book for some time. And his death was in the papers. So when Fran talked about a dead writer who was working on an exposé of FRAWB, she says she put it together easily. Then she let the name slip out without thinking about it. Where are

we going, anyway?” Hal had turned off the highway—the main street through Granby—and it looked as if we were headed away from civilization.

“The high school—it’s supposed to be up here somewhere. The board’s meeting in their auditorium. I bet that’s it over there.” Through the snow, we could see lights on an institutional-looking building.

Hal’s two roles at the school board meeting were to explain his Colorado Commission on Higher Education assessment of future higher-education needs in eastern Grand County and to provide the board with an overview of MPARC and its staffing needs in the coming years. Because he was listed on the agenda in two time slots for these roles, the board members had questions. The chair, Asa Scanlon, acted as their spokesman when Hal’s first turn came up.

“Mr. Weathers, it says here that you’re supposed to talk about higher education needs now, and then later you’re back to talk about this new institute. Surely the institute will have higher education needs. This feels like a conflict of interest. How can you represent the people of Colorado, via the CCHE, and this private institute as well?”

“Well, sir, I guess the quick answer is time scales. MPARC, which I’m going to talk about later, is on a two-to-three-year time scale to get rolling. I’m about to hire its first personnel soon. And, as I’ll explain in more detail later, our needs are going to be rather specialized, in terms of the types of higher education degrees we’ll be looking for and so on.

“On the other hand, my study for the CCHE deals with the longer-term higher education needs here, ‘longer-term’ meaning ten years and more. Part of the basis for the study is a set of planning assumptions, assumptions that include, implicitly, organizations such as MPARC and others. On the time scale of a decade and more, MPARC will be a drop in the bucket, so to speak.

“If you hear me advocating that CCHE recommend a graduate school of computer science or earth science that would start next year, well, you can feel free to label that a conflict of interest. Those sorts of things would benefit MPARC. But that’s not where this study will go at all. What it’s primarily concerned with is undergraduate opportunities for the population here, four-year opportunities leading to a baccalaureate degree.”

Scanlon was still the one with the questions. “We’re part of the Colorado Mountain College special taxation district. What about that?”

“CMC is a two-year college, for the most part, and it awards two-year degrees, associates degrees. Growth projections here suggest the need for a four-year college, at least, in the future. Other communities have both, so there’s really no issue. The four-year college would be part of one of the state systems, CSU or CU most likely, and there would be no special district. Now, to be sure, the legislature could do all sorts of things in the meantime. For example, it could mandate somehow that CMC become a baccalaureate institution and start awarding bachelor’s degrees. If that happens, well, that would be on the table and it would represent one possible solution.” He paused to take a deep breath.

“I have to say, the main purpose of this new campus would be to provide baccalaureate opportunities for the population here, which is projected to be much larger in the future than it is now. But a spin-off of this would be additional business opportunities. A campus here would draw students from all over—I mean, who wouldn’t want to go to college in Grand County, Colorado? With all due respect to the folks out east, it would beat the pants off going to Greeley. This would mean visits by out-of-area parents, motel room sales, restaurant meals, and on and on. Eventually, athletic events would draw people here, too—I expect, for example, that home games during football season would fill a slow time just before ski season starts. It represents an environmentally friendly industry, in some sense, on top of the existing tourism base.”

“So what does this have to do with the East Grand School District?”

I’d been listening carefully, but then two things happened. Hal launched into a discussion I’d heard before, about how the presence of a college locally would raise the bar for the primary and secondary schools, and I was passed a copy of the meeting’s agenda. Naturally, the first thing I checked for was Hal, and there he was, in two places.

But in between, mixed in with a budget discussion, a proposal for grade-point requirements for athletes, and a review of the high-school biology curriculum, it said “Future of Superintendent.” I looked around, but Emily Griggs was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

“You sure you want to create this new institute up here? I bet Chuck Shure could figure out some other way to make money on that building he bought.”

We were on our way home, Hal plowing his S4 through eight inches of new snow on the county roads. It was light snow, and the studded snow tires and all-wheel drive kept the car moving easily.

I had skipped dinner to go to the meeting with Hal, so at one point during the meeting I went foraging in the high-school hallways, to find only vending machines full of candy bars. The sugar and chocolate had me a little wired.

But what had us both upset was the last half of the school board meeting. Their treatment of Emily Griggs and their discussion of the biology curriculum had showed us a side of the local culture that we hadn’t seen before, a side that made us very uncomfortable. When Hal’s second turn at the podium came up, his comments about MPARC were attacked with the same know-nothing attitude the board had shown us in their remarks about the curriculum, including “magnificent design,” or whatever they called it, in the biology courses.

“Well, we have to remember that we were hearing just the school board, not the people. School board members have to get themselves elected, and that takes motivation. Motivated people have, well, motives—what I mean is, they have agendas. They invest in getting elected to advance those agendas.” Hal’s ability to detach himself and look at things objectively is something I envy.

“I was proud of you when you were talking about MPARC. They were worse than that time at the county commission, and you stayed cool.” I patted his right leg.

He looked grim. “I’m going to have to re-think our community investments, though. Because we won’t have to pay taxes, I’d intended to make up for it with donations. Plus, we were going to provide the schools with real broadband internet access and computers and so on. I don’t know if I’m comfortable with giving that bunch of bigots a lot of freebies, now.”

“But you don’t want to hurt the kids, and especially the kids’ future, just to spite the bigots, huh?”

“No, and that’s the dilemma. One factor in our recruitment will be the schools here. It’ll be hard to get the scientists and engineers I need if the schools are lousy. Of course, with a cadre of highly educated people here in the valley, the level of the schools will rise simply because these new parents will demand it. Maybe that’s the way to look at it. We’ll get the last laugh when this current flock of turkeys is voted off the school board.”

“Now I have a better idea about what that group of women I had breakfast with last week was talking about. I was thinking of them as subversives then, but now I’m thinking of them as saviors. It’s a good thing we don’t have kids in school, lover, because I’d be lobbying hard to move back to Durango tomorrow.”

“Well, if we had kids in school in Durango, they’d be in a private school. You haven’t been paying much attention to the school board down there, have you? I guess school boards everywhere can be pretty pathetic.” It was his turn, so he patted my leg. “So, do you suppose we’ll have any late-night visitors tonight, like the last time we were out in the evening?”

“Good question, but I don’t see any tire tracks.” We were on our way up the driveway, and I felt my stomach growling. “But if there are, I’ll roast ’em and eat ’em. I’m famished.”

“I’ll make you an omelette. By the way, I was proud of you for maintaining your cool during that discussion of Emily Griggs, for not jumping up and screaming at those idiots. I don’t know if I think it was a good thing she wasn’t there or not. Maybe she should hear what those folks think of her.” He pulled into the garage.

“I bet they wouldn’t have said those things if she’d been there, so maybe she stayed away on purpose, to let them vent. That comment about how much it would cost them to break her contract now injected some reality into the discussion, at least.” I could tell my blood pressure had risen a little—even though I had Emily Griggs back on our suspect list, I was not prepared to abandon her to the homophobes on the school board.

Hal made me a three-egg omelette with pepper-jack cheese and smoked ham, and I practically inhaled it.

“Now, remember to chew, dear. It’s healthier.” He smiled, and I slowed down just a little. “You know, I thought of something about the schools—I guess I reminded myself with that comment about private schools in Durango. One way to improve our recruiting abilities would be to help set up a private school for our employees’ kids. A Montessori school or something like that. Maybe provide tuition as a part of the benefits package, or at least part of the tuition.”

“Wouldn’t that discriminate against the singles and the childless couples?”

“In the same way that we’re discriminated against for having to pay school-district taxes. We don’t have kids, so we don’t get anything directly for paying the assessment. It’s one of those societal greater-good things.” He nodded. “But you’re right, this would be one more such hit. I’ve also been trying to figure out how to have ‘ski days’ built into the benefits package without discriminating against non-skiers.”

“What, no ‘fly-fishing days’?”

“Oh, that’s not a fringe benefit, that’s a fundamental human right. After work, at least. But ski days, or maybe we should call them ‘powder days,’ are something that actually makes sense. Not that we’d close the institute or anything, but a way for people to take a morning off after a big snowfall and not feel like they’re missing something would be an attractive perk.” He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

“Well, that’s easy—just cancel organized meetings and so forth, and make the skiers take a half-day of vacation. Non-skiers can come to work and save the vacation for something else. Or not. But the private school tuition is something else. It’s real money.” I popped the last bite of omelette into my mouth. “Yum. Thanks for making that. I was starving.”

“Any time, for you.” He shrugged. “Yeah, I’ll have to think about it, the tuition thing. I expect there are precedents elsewhere. This is what a human resources person does, I guess, figure stuff like this out and make it legal.”

“Which is why you need to hire that chief operating officer, so he can hire an HR person.” Nag, nag, I thought. How does he put up with me?

“Well, you’ll be glad to hear that I talked with Chuck today about this very issue. And the chief engineer, too. But for the COO he pointed out, from his experience at least, you need different sorts of people when you’re starting an organization from when you’re running an established one. Builders are different from maintainers, is what he said. So I’m thinking I’ll hire someone local for now, with the idea of turning them into the community liaison, or something like that, when we get to the point of needing a maintainer-type COO with experience in bigger organizations.”

“So, are you going to advertise?”

“Yeah, I’m running an ad in that local paper, so it’ll appear everywhere up here over the next week or so. A quarter-page display in the main section, not the classifieds. I’ll show you the copy upstairs on the computer.” He rolled his eyes. “I learned I’m not as good at copywriting as I thought I was. But maybe it’ll work.”

“If it’s a good job with benefits, I bet you’re buried in applications. Do you suppose our mailbox will be big enough?” We had rented a normal, residential sized mailbox at one of those pack-it, mail-it stores down in Fraser.

“I’m using the spanking new, official MPARC address, a box at the post office in Winter Park. A big box. Another detail I got taken care of. This setting up MPARC business is overwhelming me with details. I guess that’s the point of a builder-type COO.”

“You’re used to details, surely. Being Dean of Natural Sciences must involve a load of them.”

“Yeah, but that’s what Alice used to do for me, be the detail person. I had no idea, I guess. Anyway, enough! I want to sit in the hot tub and relax before bed. Want to join me?”

“You mean I don’t have to wait an hour after eating? Well, then, sure...”

* * *

On Wednesday morning, eleven days after her husband’s body was discovered and a week after his funeral, Mandy Summers was scheduled for another interview by the Grand County Sheriff’s Department. Two previous interviews, conducted immediately after the body was found and again a few days later, had been unproductive, and this third one, we hoped, would get our questions answered. Janelle Kennedy, as lead investigator of Tobias Summers’ murder, was slated to conduct the interview, and she had invited me to be part of it as well.

Mandy showed up on time with her lawyer in tow. My lawyer alarm was in perfect working condition, having been exercised by the FRAWB duo, so I had the benefit of a warning. Janelle was blindsided, however. It changed her attitude immediately, and the tone of the entire interview was affected. Without the lawyer, I think it would have been informal and maybe even friendly. With him present, it started out on the wrong foot and went downhill from there.

Steven Sheffield, portly, salt-and-pepper beard, was wearing a what looked to me like a custom tailored three-piece suit, and his briefcase matched his alligator cowboy boots. His business card listed a Denver address.

After introductions all around, he went on the attack. “Mrs. Summers has endured an overwhelming emotional upheaval, as I’m sure you know. Why you would choose to add to her distress by insisting on yet another grilling is unfathomable. You should be ashamed.”

Mandy took the opportunity to dab at her eyes with a handkerchief. She was one of those “five-foot-two, eyes-of-blue” girls who had not let herself go as she approached middle age—something all the

more remarkable because of her five children. In fact, it occurred to me that Tobias Summers, unlike many men his age, didn't need to find himself a trophy wife—he already had one.

“Mrs. Summers, please understand that all of us at the Grand County Sheriff's Department would like to express our heartfelt condolences about your husband's death. We've waited for the week to pass since the services so that you could begin to regain your equilibrium. I realize that it will always be too soon to do this interview, in some sense, but it needs to be done. It's part of completing our investigation, and it may be that you have knowledge that will help us find whoever is responsible for this, knowledge that you may not be aware of. You see, putting together information that we already have with what you know could provide us with the final piece of the puzzle we're trying to assemble.”

Janelle was talking directly to Mandy Summers, quietly, calmly, and looking as relaxed as she could manage. She was not even acknowledging the lawyer's presence.

But he wasn't going to let himself be ignored. “How DARE you suggest that she knows anything about this heinous crime! She's as much a victim as poor Tobias was. What kind of heartless soul are you anyway?”

“In addition, Mrs. Summers, we have learned some things that you probably need to know, because they relate to Mr. Summers' estate. It's new information that you may not have heard about.”

“What's this!? You've been withholding information from my client, information pertinent to her future? This is actionable, and you can expect action!” Sheffield was doing a fine job of getting himself worked up. It occurred to me that Mandy might be suitably impressed, enough so to pay his bill without arguing.

Janelle finally looked over at him, her brown eyes maintaining their sleepy gaze. “Mr. Sheffield, are you aware of how ridiculous you're going to look on the videotape?”

She turned back to Mandy. “Now, Mrs. Summers, I understand that the last time you saw Mr. Summers was Wednesday morning, the Wednesday before he died. You've said he was on his way to Denver, is that correct?”

Mandy sniffed behind her handkerchief and looked at Sheffield. He nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Yes, that's true. Tobias said he had an appointment in downtown Denver Wednesday afternoon.”

“Do you know the nature of that appointment, whom it was with?”

Again the look at Sheffield for permission, again the assent.

“No, he didn't tell me. He had this way of...Oh. Excuse me. Um, no, I didn't know anything about the meeting in Denver.” It happened so quickly I almost missed it—she had been watching Sheffield, and when she began to volunteer information, he shook his head no—just a twitch—and she stopped.

““He had this way' of what, Mrs. Summers. It will help our investigation immensely if we can understand Mr. Summers as much as possible.”

But Sheffield twitched his head again, something I didn't think that Janelle could see.

“Ahem, excuse me. The record needs to show that Mrs. Summers' attorney is advising her not to cooperate.” I made my stare at Sheffield as steely as I could manage.

“Why, that's a damned lie! I demand an apology!”

“I point this out to suggest a careful, frame-by-frame examination of the videotape, should there be any question about it in the future. Sorry, Detective Kennedy, for interrupting.”

“Thank you, it’s not a problem. Now, Mrs. Summers, I hope you understand that you’re under no obligation to answer our questions let alone volunteer information for us. Our purpose here is to see if there is any way that you can help us with the investigation of your husband’s murder. I must say, though, why you would balk at helping us, even with advice from an attorney, is something I just don’t understand at all. In fact, it seems unusual, even somewhat suspicious, that you wouldn’t be eager to help. But, as I said, you’re under no obligation to answer my questions. I do have more. Is it worth our time, yours and mine, for me to continue?” Janelle’s patience was impressing the daylight out of me.

“I’d like to confer with my client privately.” Sheffield’s tone was decidedly dismissive.

“Fine. The next room is free, I believe, and not on tape just now. We’ll be here.” Janelle heaved a huge sigh of relief when they’d left.

“Janelle, I can’t tell you how impressed I am with how you’re handling this. I hope my comment about his prompting wasn’t too much of a distraction.”

“On the contrary, I didn’t know about it. Glad you mentioned it for the record. What in the world do you suppose all this is about? Why would she want a lawyer anyway?”

“Especially an expensive Denver lawyer like this. Maybe he’s been handling the family stuff, I don’t know. You’re right, though, this is very strange.”

“Annette? What do you think about this? I won’t tell her what we know about Summers’ stock-market fiasco unless she cooperates. Does that seem unfair?”

“Well, I don’t think we’re under any obligation to reveal to her what our investigation has uncovered.”

“No, we’re not. It would be nice to let her know, I guess—for one thing there is the half million or so left, unless that stock’s gone down more. But I’ve got to say, this lawyer is getting my back up.” Her eyes flashed, sleepy no more.

“He’s going to want us to tell her the information you mentioned earlier, of course.”

“Right. I’ll have to think of something innocuous. Hmm.” But her thought was interrupted by the return of Mandy Summers and her expensive Denver lawyer.

Once again, he went on the attack.

“Is the tape running? Good. I want the record to show that Ms. Summers has answered your questions about her knowledge of her husband’s last days. Now, I believe that you have some information for us.” He crossed his arms over his chest, stood behind his client, and looked stern.

Janelle had switched back to her sleepy mode. “Actually, the record of this discussion will show that Mrs. Summers answered two questions, one of which was in the nature of a confirmation of what she’d said previously. There are many, many more questions that I have, questions which you seem to want to avoid, Mr. Sheffield. For example, Mrs. Summers, was there any contact of any kind—telephone, email, anything at all—between you and your husband after he left for Denver on Wednesday?”

Because Sheffield was standing behind her, Mandy couldn’t see him, and she began to panic. The silence quickly made her uncomfortable enough that she started talking to fill it.

“Just a phone call, Thursday evening. I don’t know where it was from. He said that his meeting went great and that we’d be out of the woods by the weekend. At the time, I had no idea what he meant. And, uh, it’s still a complete mystery to me, I have no idea what it was about.”

Her demeanor had changed significantly between the last two sentences, but I wasn't clear on why. Then I noticed Sheffield's hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you, Mrs. Summers. I can see that this is very stressful for you, so let me suggest that we continue this another time. And, with respect to the information we uncovered, I don't know what your husband meant by 'out of the woods,' either, but if it had to do with financial matters, it appears that he was mistaken."

Why Mandy didn't react to this leading comment was yet another puzzle.

* * *

Sixteen

"I'd say it's pretty obvious she knows lots more than she's letting on."

Fran Schmidt and I were headed up to Grand Lake to have a look at Junior Murcheson's cabin, and he was reacting to having watched the tape of the Mandy Summers interview.

"That's what Janelle and I think, too." She and I had discussed every possible angle and couldn't conclude anything else. "The prompting by the lawyer and then when Mandy ignored that comment Janelle made about the finances, well, something's fishy, that's for sure. Anyway, what's this business with Junior's cabin?"

"We sealed it up after we found Junior's body—of course, we don't really know how much Simon and Madge might have compromised the scene before they called us, but at least it should be intact from the time we got there on. A forensics team went up today to go over everything carefully, and they called me a while ago, said they've got something I need to see."

We had crested the hill that takes the highway from the plains of the Colorado River Valley up to the plateau on which Lake Granby sits, and I was astonished at what a difference a couple hundred feet of elevation made. Down on the flats all the way from Hot Sulphur Springs through Granby, it had been sunny and warmish—the highway had melted off and there was even dry pavement most of the way. But up on top, the wind off the frozen lake was creating ground blizzards, and the highway was glazed over, a sheet of packed snow with ice on top. As we rounded the first curve by the little overlook parking lot, Fran hit his brakes, and the studded snow tires on his Explorer skittered and scratched the heavy vehicle to a stop.

The studs on his tires stopped us in plenty of time—we weren't anywhere near crashing into the jack-knifed semi that was blocking both lanes of the highway. Other cars, though, the ones without studs, I guess, weren't so lucky. Two were wedged under the trailer, like piglets suckling on mama, and a third looked as if it had bounced off the truck's front bumper before landing in the left-hand ditch.

"Well, crap. Looks pretty new, or I'd have heard something on the radio." Fran reached for the microphone. "Annette? I'm going to call this in. How long has it been since you played traffic cop?"

"Longer than I want to admit. If I remember, though, you just wave your arms around as if you know what you're doing and try to look authoritative. I'll give it a shot, but first I'll see if we have injuries." I opened the door and then quickly shut it.

"Damn! It wasn't this cold in Hot Sulphur. Geez." I zipped up my parka and put my gloves on before opening the door again.

I was wearing the insulated boots that I use for snowshoeing, running-shoe technology transformed into warm, winter footwear. The bottoms had big rubber cleats, but they were no match for the road surface. As soon as I put weight on my feet, I felt them slipping. The Explorer was sitting, held by its steel studs, on the slight banking of a curve to the left, so I had the car to lean on—which was fortunate, as the wind off the lake was pushing me into it. But as soon as I made my way past its front end, I was on my own, and I had to use all of my combined skiing and ice-skating skills to make it to the left shoulder of the pavement without doing so on my backside.

On the shoulder, it was somewhat easier going, but I still had to shuffle my way forward to stay balanced against the wind. After the fifty yards or so to the tangle of vehicles, I finally had the hang of it. I climbed up to look in the cab of the semi, nosed into the left-hand ditch, and found it empty, so I worked my way back to the car in the ditch. The cabin was so full of smoke that I couldn't see the driver, so I opened the door. The smoke puffed out, and it smelled like some kind of acrid chemical. Powder from the air bag, or something, I guessed.

“Hello? Can you hear me? I'm a police officer.”

The driver's left arm waved at me, accompanied by coughing.

“Are you hurt? Uh, if you feel OK, give me a thumbs up, how about?”

The left thumb pointed skyward, with more coughing.

“OK, listen, if you can get your seat belt off and get out, you'll be able to breathe. Although it's cold out here, as you can probably tell. Otherwise, this dust will clear out soon. I'll open a back door.” This elicited another thumbs up, and I opened the rear door. The dust began to swirl around and puff out into the open air.

As I began to work my way toward the cars wedged under the trailer, up toward the middle of the roadway on the glare ice, a guy in a hooded parka came around the front of the tractor cab. I saw him take a look at Fran's vehicle, now with its emergency lights ablaze, and heave a sigh of relief.

“Man, am I glad to see you folks! I called 911, but they said it would be a while.”

“We were just on our way up to Grand Lake. What happened?”

“The car in the ditch there came around the curve in the wrong lane, almost sideways. I went into a slide and wound up like this after he ran into me. Then that other SUV there couldn't stop in time. The little smashed-up car there must have happened while I was putting some flares out up the road in that direction. At least maybe there won't be more people sliding into this mess from there. The road's bad all along this side of the lake, so people coming from that way will be taking it real easy.” His adrenalin was really doing its job, I could tell—he hadn't taken a breath, it seemed like.

“Well, the road's just fine until about a hundred yards back south,” I gestured over my shoulder toward Granby, “which probably explains why these people wound up like they did. I'm glad that the sheriff has studded tires. Let's see if there are injuries.”

And there were. We shuffled our way to the closer of the two cars wedged under the trailer, where we found a woman alone flailing about with her hands in the dust of her SUV's air bag. The vehicle itself was big and sturdy enough that its front end had smashed into some of the understructure on the trailer, so, aside from a wrecked car and some smeared makeup, she was fine.

But the other car was a small Kia sedan, and it held a family of four, or what was left of them. The front-seat air bags had deployed and prevented the front-seat passengers—Dad and Mom—from crashing through the windshield. But the car had slid under the trailer far enough that the front half of the roof was sheared off, and those air bags meant that Mom and Dad couldn't duck. And one of the kids

in the back seat must not have been wearing a seat belt, because she was scrunched head-first into the place where the gear shift normally sits.

It was tragic, and ugly.

I waved frantically at Fran and made the slice-across-the-throat gesture, and he nodded and began talking into his microphone with more urgency.

* * *

It took several hours to get things squared away. The only survivor in the Kia was a young girl, age about eleven, who had been wearing her seat belt in the back seat and didn't have a scratch. But she was traumatized into incoherence—we couldn't even get a name from her.

Emergency vehicles showed up little by little, their drivers taking extreme care on the icy roadway, and two Colorado State Patrol cruisers arrived to handle the increasingly complex traffic problem. Their solution was to make formal the de-facto road closure, turning people back to where they'd been coming from.

Finally, a heavy-duty tow truck arrived, chains on all its tires, and, after hauling the cars out from under the semi-trailer and moving them to the roadside, it got the semi itself straightened out and off the road. Department of Transportation sand trucks arrived and began their salt-and-gravel treatment of the icy road, and life began to return to normal for all but the occupants of the Kia.

By then, lunchtime had come and gone—my stomach was reminding me of that in no uncertain terms—and Fran and I still had considerable paperwork to do. We had been first on the scene, and there were the three deaths. Fran told his forensics team to seal up Junior's cabin, that he and I would have to get there another day. Then we headed back to Granby for food and forms.

Fran was grim-faced, and I could tell it wasn't from concentrating on driving.

"Damn. That poor kid. Her whole family got wiped out." He smacked the steering wheel with his hand.

"I guess they took her to the emergency clinic? But she didn't seem injured. So what's next for her?" I had found out only a few days before that the nearest real hospital was a couple of hours away, down by Denver. Kremmling was developing one, but it was still understaffed.

"Social services, I suppose. She's a minor, and she's obviously in need of some psychological help. I hope she's got grandparents, or maybe aunts or uncles. Lord." He shook his head. "I just don't know how we can prevent that sort of thing. If people won't slow down when conditions are bad, it really doesn't matter what speed limits we post."

"I don't know if you noticed, Fran, but that car didn't even have all-season tires. They were clearly not prepared to be driving up here. And I heard one of the state officers say that he thought they must have been going 65 or so, based on the damage to the car."

"Yeah, I know. But I still feel responsible when folks get themselves killed in my county. Maybe I'm just not cut out for law enforcement—I care too much. On top of Lannie's getting murdered, this kind of thing is something I really didn't need. Not, mind you, that I'm blaming those poor folks. But it sure is depressing."

"If they keep the little girl up here, maybe we can look in on her. I think that would help me some." Fran's depression, I was discovering, was infectious.

We stopped at a little diner on the west end of Granby and had them make us some box lunches to go, and then we turned west toward Hot Sulphur and the paperwork that was awaiting us.

I managed to fill out one set of accident forms and eat my sandwich at the same time, feeling rather proud of myself for not getting mustard on Form 111-14-B, or whatever it was called. About the time I finished, my cell phone let out with Hal's personal ring, Eric Clapton's opening riff from "Layla."

"Hiya, lover, you're just who I need to talk to. Cheer me up."

"Are you having a bad day?" Just hearing his voice helped.

"I'm having a horrible day." I summarized the accident.

"God, that does sound horrible. Let's talk about it tonight, though, while I make you dinner—I don't think it's the sort of thing we should talk about on the phone. And I don't know if this will cheer you up, but it'll change the subject. I called to tell you about a very strange lunch I just had." He paused, probably to organize his thoughts, I figured.

"I got a call this morning, on that line I had installed in MPARC's name, from a Rita Chesley-Hayes, she introduced herself as an attorney for Front Range Water. She wanted to have lunch to talk about what sorts of studies Front Range might have MPARC do. So I met her at Randi's, over in Winter Park. She showed up wearing a dress kind of like that little black Donna Karan number you got last fall, only red and cut lower. And she proceeded to pretend to talk about hydrological studies while coming on to me."

"I've met her, although in a quite different context. She's worried that Front Range is going to be libeled by our murder investigations."

"Oh. Well that explains a lot. I'm betting she didn't get what she wanted from you, so she tried me. Anyway, what she really wanted to talk about was how Front Range could help MPARC in a political sense. She hinted that most of the local politicians are in their pocket and that Front Range could smooth the way for us, or, by implication, that they could make things difficult for us. Uh, and she also hinted that the payoff for me would go way beyond that, if you get my drift. I really didn't understand their interest, but if she's leaning on you, that probably explains it."

"She came to see me, or Fran, or both of us, late yesterday morning. She's actually the second FRAWB lawyer they've sic'd on us—I sent the first one packing with his tail between his legs. And we did a number on her, too. Did you get to the part of the conversation where she told you what she wants you to do in return for these favors, personal or otherwise?" I tried to keep my voice level—I trust Hal completely and didn't really feel threatened, but it pissed me off.

"That was the interesting part. She talked and talked, had a couple of martinis, ate a salad, and schmoozed me every which way. Every time I tried to steer the conversation around to the 'what can I do for you' perspective, she steered it back away. Finally I got to feeling manipulated, so I just asked her—I told her it was nice to hear that FRAWB was so interested in helping MPARC, but it must be that FRAWB wants something in return. She looked at her watch and said she was late for an important meeting and had to run—that we could continue the conversation later, over a late dinner if I wanted. She left me her phone number and dashed off."

"Late dinner, huh? Where? At her place? Hmmph." I could feel my claws emerging.

"Probably. But I'm making dinner for you, remember?"

"Yes you are, and you're going to help me with this horrible accident today. But, look, maybe you shouldn't just blow her off. Front Range could probably make trouble for you, something you don't really need, and I'm interested in them, too. FRAWB is just too nervous about our investigations for

them to be completely innocent. Fran pointed out that it's like that line from *Hamlet*—only he thought it was *Macbeth*—where someone says ‘the lady doth protest too much’.”

“Hamlet’s mother, the Queen, says that, she’s talking about a character in a play whose role is the Queen. Yeah. Front Range is acting as if they’re involved in this stuff somehow, aren’t they? If they send a cute little twenty-something after a geezer like me, they’re desperate, seems like. I wonder what they’re up to.”

“Me, too. And I think I’ll do a little digging.”

* * *

I blasted through the rest of the accident forms and spent the remainder of my afternoon with that digging, which turned out to be remarkably productive. Fran assigned Anna Hermanson, who had front-desk duty and some time on her hands, to help me, and she went to work on the internet ferreting out information about Front Range Water. I wandered over to the county clerk’s office and poked around in the files of disclosure forms for political donations. By the end of the day, we had quite a portfolio assembled.

FRAWB, being a public, non-profit corporation, was required to publicize its board membership and senior employees, so Anna had no trouble making a list. Most interesting were the cross-connections she made between FRAWB big-wigs and executives in the large companies that provided many of the jobs in the communities in the central Rockies. The big resort corporation that was now operating Winter Park, being relatively new to the area, wasn’t represented, but the others were, as was the railroad and just about every big construction company.

There were also quite a few local politicians listed. I recognized the names of Grand County Commissioner Simon Murcheson, Sr. and Asa Scanlon, the chair of the local school board. If, I thought, the others are as much in the Luddite camp as those two, it appears that FRAWB’s strategy is to support people who are intent on keeping their communities behind the times. Like the “keep ’em barefoot and pregnant” oppression of women, this strategy would delay any modern thinking on the part of the mountain communities and thus help assure FRAWB’s future ability to exploit them.

What was more interesting was the comparison of the list of FRAWB board members and executives with the list of people who had donated to political campaigns in Grand County. Both Scanlon and Murcheson were the beneficiaries of support from other FRAWB insiders, in fact those sources combined made up the bulk of their campaign war chests, and the list of recipients went on and on—it even included Fran Schmidt. It was all very cozy.

I found it strange that in all of the documentation, Tobias Summers’ name appeared only on the list of donors to political campaigns. It was as if he was completely disconnected from FRAWB, an outsider. But he was still working to build his own base of people who owed him favors. His biggest donation was to the campaign of the District Attorney, A.D. Sonos. To the extent that he was not part of the FRAWB crowd, I reasoned, he could have been working an agenda at cross-purposes with theirs. A possible motive in Summers’ murder began to emerge in my mind.

But just as I was thinking that the information was all neatly packaged, I ran across a wild card. Steven Sheffield, the Denver lawyer who had accompanied Mandy Summers to her interview, was on the FRAWB directors list and also showed up as a donor to the Murcheson and Scanlon campaigns. Mandy Summers, wife of the FRAWB outsider was represented by a FRAWB insider. What, I wondered, could that mean?

As I was pondering this puzzle, Fran Schmidt wandered into my office.

“Annette, I got a list of the properties that Lannie Young was representing. You’ll never guess who’s on it.” Fran, I remembered, was working the Young case because Janelle Kennedy had a perceived conflict of interest, with her husband working at the ski area.

“No, I probably won’t. This is all too complicated. Fran, do you remember getting political campaign donations from FRAWB directors?”

“Huh? Well, not specifically. I only accepted donations of a hundred dollars or less, and there were lots. I figured that anyone who thinks he can buy the sheriff for that amount of money is too stupid to worry about.” He scratched his scalp. “There were FRAWB directors? Interesting. But I guess it’s not surprising. They’ve got a stake in what goes on up here. We’re the collection point for a significant amount of their acre-feet.”

I didn’t want to push Fran on this point but just to let him know that I knew about the donations. “They seem to have donated to just about everyone, down to the county surveyor. The heavy hitters are Murcheson, Sr. and Asa Scanlon. They raked in the dough. Anyway, whose property was Lannie trying to sell?”

“Mike McMurphy’s place. He listed with her only about a month ago, and it appears it was to be one of those ‘by appointment only’ things that don’t get advertised much.”

“““Curiouser and curiouser,” said Alice.’ We’ve about decided that Junior killed Lannie, right? Do you suppose this means that Junior was involved with McMurphy’s death, too? That would suggest that he was just a flunky, and now the master-mind is going around killing off the flunkies.” I tapped my chin, thinking.

“Well, there’s more. Mike’s place was an old mining claim, three, actually, that he bought years ago and combined into a single property. The water rights came with the claims, and they include an extremely productive cirque up on Byers Peak, several hundred acre-feet a year. So Mike’s place is water-rich. He had a complicated arrangement set up that leases the rights to the town of Fraser for a nominal fee. But the kicker is that he worked a conservation easement deal such that the water rights forever remain with the property and any leases have to be relatively short term and made with local, Fraser Valley entities. Not anything like FRAWB.”

“And this is inviolate? It stays with the property, no matter the owner? But what happens if FRAWB buys it?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Fran was shaking his head and smiling. “Mike must have paid a very smart lawyer lots of money to set up the restrictions on the sale, restrictions that apply regardless of his living or dying. And subsequent sales. His water stays in the Fraser Valley for primary use and for subsequent re-use. And it’s set up that whatever amount that makes it to the Fraser River has to flow to the ocean—meaning the Gulf of California down in Mexico. It’s a remarkable piece of work.”

“This means that someone local, a developer like Tobias Summers, would have access to this resource, if he could pay for it, right?”

Now Fran was nodding and smiling. “Right, assuming he could persuade the owner, whether it’s Mike or his estate’s executor, to deal. I can tell you for sure that Mike was not a big fan of Tobias’s plan to fill that meadow up with houses.”

“So, do we know who the executor is? Will he deal, or she?”

“Can’t. It was supposed to be Lannie Young. She was representing his property, but apparently their relationship went beyond that. Now there will have to be a court-appointed executor. I guess it’s worth noting that Lannie wasn’t a fan of Tobias’s big subdivision, either.” He shrugged. “If Tobias was still alive, he’d be the one with motives for Mike’s and Lannie’s deaths.”

“But if the water rights are locked away from FRAWB, they don’t have a motive in those cases, either.” Now I was truly confused.

“Which is just as well, because it’s simply too much to believe that FRAWB is behind these murders. As we’ve discussed before.”

“Yep. Although their behavior is pushing me toward being a believer.” I told him about Hal’s experience with Rita the FRAWB lawyer.

“She what? How strange. I really didn’t think she was attractive enough to pull something like that off. But maybe that’s just me.” He made a sour face.

“From what Hal said, she wasn’t wearing that business suit we saw her in yesterday. But his reaction was similar to yours anyway. What do you suppose Front Range is worried about, anyway? Could they be concerned about losing their hold on the communities up here? Bad publicity wouldn’t help them, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe that’s right, Annette. As more people move up here, retirees and people who work on the internet and so on, Front Range Water has a new set of folks to deal with, many of whom don’t know the history up here well enough to understand why the water rights are all in the hands of the folks over the mountains. Hal’s institute is going to bring even more of those folks up here. From FRAWB’s perspective, the peasants are getting restless.” He shrugged. “Legally, FRAWB holds all the cards, but in the long run, those laws can evolve. They’ve always taken the long view.”

“The long view would be to get their hands on Mike McMurphy’s water rights. Do you suppose they’re going to challenge the conservation easement stuff in court? Get it all thrown out so they can buy up the rights?”

“That would put us back to FRAWB’s having a motive in the murders, wouldn’t it? I sure hope we don’t have to go there.”

* * *

Seventeen

“I wonder how that little girl is doing. I can’t imagine how she must have felt—the crash and then looking around and seeing her whole family mangled and dead.” I was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a glass of chardonnay and trying to unwind.

“I guess there’s no information yet about whether she has other family, huh?” Hal was working on comfort food for me, fettuccini alá Alfredo. He had a mound of grated pecorino Romano cheese waiting to be put on top of a pile of buttered pasta, and he was tearing up romaine for salad.

“Not yet. And I’m not sure how much information we’ll be able to get, either. Social services has the kid now, and they’re in their own little world. They sort of own her, for the time being.” That thought didn’t help cheer me up much.

“But Fran’s the sheriff, and people that work there live here in Grand County. He could make their lives miserable if they’re jerks about the whole thing.”

“And I wouldn’t be surprised if he leaned on them some. He was at least as upset as I am, probably more so because he seems to take stuff like this personally. But enough of that.” I took another gulp of wine. “I found out something interesting today. Lannie Young, the victim of that so-called ski

‘accident,’ was acting as the Realtor for Michael McMurphy, the old guy whose death was supposed to look like suicide. His place was for sale, quietly, and only to certain types of buyers. He’s got several hundred acre-feet of water rights, senior rights hooked to the old mining claims, and they’re all locked up so that FRAWB or other such predators can’t get at them.”

“You were up there, right? Is it a nice place? Good views?” He looked up from his salad preparation.

“I guess you’d call it ‘rustic elegance,’ and the view is better than here—it’s higher up.” I looked a question at him.

“Did Lannie work for an agency? I mean, do you suppose someone has taken over her accounts?” He deftly ignored my question.

“Where’s this going, anyway?” There. Ignore that, sport.

“I’d be curious to know what they’re asking for the place. Land is always a good investment, after all. And we’re freeloading here. Could be it’s way out of our price range, but if that’s the case, well, Chuck Shure said he’s going to buy a place up here, and *nothing’s* out of his price range, nothing.” He looked up and smiled.

“Fran said that there will have to be a court-appointed executor for McMurphy’s estate, and I guess that would include the sale of his real estate. Hmm. If it was contracted to be on the market before he died, it would be hard for a public trustee—that’s what a court-appointed executor would be, I guess—it would be hard for a public trustee to take it off the market for anything but very solid legal reasons. Owner’s intent, and all that. I’ll look into it tomorrow, I mean whether Lannie worked for an agency. But I doubt that Chuck Shure would be satisfied with McMurphy’s house. It’d work for us, but I imagine he’s got bigger needs, for entertaining and so on. Also, I’m not sure if he’d be into that rustic a level of elegance.”

“If it’s got senior water rights, I bet it’s expensive. Maybe we could do a partnership with Chuck, buy the house but let him buy the land with the idea of putting up another house for himself. We could probably wrangle something legal, like calling the existing house a ‘guest house’.” My sweetie, Hal the ex-dean, is a conniver when he puts his mind to it.

Between the comfort-food dinner, really just a fancy version of macaroni and cheese, and the intriguing notion of buying McMurphy’s place, my depression lifted considerably. I suppose the wine helped, too. Or maybe it was when I sat at the kitchen table after dinner and continued the conversation with Hal while he cleaned up.

Anyway, I felt a lot better. And my imagination went into overtime, thinking about owing a place like that in the mountains. One of the first things I thought of was snowshoes, especially that long trek I’d made up through the woods next to Mike’s driveway.

“So, if we live up there, how do we get in and out in the winter? Are you going to buy a snowplow, or what?”

Hal looked up from the dishes in the sink. “Somebody’s contracted to keep the driveway here plowed, and the entrance roads, too. I’m betting that he and his equipment wouldn’t mind additional customers. And the same guy would probably run a blade over the driveway in the summer whenever we paid him to, if it needed smoothing.”

“Well, there’s electricity up there, and maybe gas, I don’t remember. Internet service could be iffy, unless there’s TV cable with it, like here.” I was trying to think of what civilized infrastructure we couldn’t live without. “Oh, and there’s some kind of drinking water, probably a well.”

“Like here. Based on the real estate prices I’ve seen, it’ll depend both on the quantity of the water rights as well as their seniority of the rights, on top of the total acreage. I’m betting it’s beyond our abilities, though, even if we cashed out our retirement investments and so on. So it’ll need Chuck Shure’s involvement for it to work for us. The deal-killer will have to do with whether Chuck likes the location enough to want to buy it. It’ll depend on whether there’s another building site that catches his fancy.”

“You know, if we’re going to spend very much time here in the Fraser Valley, it *would* be nice to have a place of our own. I mean, this house is great, but you’re right, we’re freeloading. It feels, well, uncomfortable somehow.” I hadn’t really thought of it until Hal had mentioned it, but he had hit it on the nose.

“To me, it feels impermanent. And even if we’re here for only a year, or even less, it’d be nice to feel really moved in. Here, it’s like living in a fancy rental condo, even with our stuff around us. Do you know where this place is? Think we can find it on one of our maps?” He had finished the dishes, dried his hands, and was looking for the next thing.

“Maybe. Probably. Let’s see.”

So ten minutes later, I had my chin on Hal’s shoulder, looking at a computer map of the area. The roads in Middle Earth Estates were too new to be on the map, but the general area was easy to spot. And I found the county road that Janelle and I had navigated on our way to the McMurphy place, and then identified what I thought was the spot where the driveway climbed up the side of the mountain to the house.

“What are those different colors?”

Hal pulled down a menu. “Land ownership, looks like. That color where you pointed looks like, well, *voilà*, mining claims. Let’s blow things up a little...and it looks like three separate ones, see the boundaries? So this must be McMurphy’s land now. A lot. Um...close to a half section, I bet. If it could be subdivided, it would go for several million, I expect.”

“But I don’t think it can be. Fran talked about how the water rights were restricted through some kind of conservation easement. Anyone who would take the trouble to do that would also restrict development.”

“Meaning it won’t be worth as much on the market. Say. Look at this.” He made an imaginary line on the computer screen with the mouse pointer. “I think we should be able to see that mountainside if we work our way over this ridge here. And unless I’m mistaken, that’s the ridge behind the Win’s main house up there, the first ridge, not the big one.”

“It’s too bad that the local roads aren’t on there. I guess it’s too much to expect the driveway to be there, though.”

“Not at all. We can use the version of this mapping program I have on the laptop with that little GPS gizmo—put everything in the car, drive all the roads, and they’ll map onto this program. Then we can go over to McMurphy’s driveway and map it, too. I can’t think of any better way to get Chuck interested than to show him where this is in relation to that big house he and Becky stayed in. Just like casting to a rising trout.” His smile reminded me of the Cheshire Cat’s.

* * *

The little girl’s name was Natalie Stokes, she had just turned twelve, and she had grandparents, whom she’d never met, in Florida. They sent Christmas and birthday presents in the form of savings bonds,

along with cards. Social Services had contacted them, and they were helpless, they said, as they lived in an adults-only retirement community and were on a very tight budget.

George Neering's field test revealed that Mr. Stokes, the car's driver, had a blood-alcohol level of 0.221, nearly three times the legal limit. According to Natalie, she and her sister had been pulled out of school in Aurora for the day in order to go snowmobiling with their parents up at Grand Lake, a birthday present that seemed more appropriate for her father than for her. They had stopped for an early lunch at a bar in Granby.

Fran Schmidt told me all this on Thursday morning, obviously still haunted by the tragedy. He also mentioned, almost in passing, that we were set to try again to examine what his forensics people had found in Junior Murcheson's cabin. But clearly his heart wasn't in it.

About halfway through the morning, I checked my email and found a note from Hal, with an attachment. After navigating all the warnings on the computer about how attachments might contain viruses and did I really, really want to open it, I found myself looking at a picture just like the one that had been on Hal's computer the evening before, except this one had more roads.

The text of the email said simply "Bingo! I also got photographs.", and it didn't take me long to recognize the roads in Middle Earth Estates and then our driveway. And there was Mike McMurphy's driveway, too. A driveway, it dawned on me, that had crime scene tape across its entrance.

Hal answered the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hi, lover. Sorry, I was on the other line with Chuck Shure."

"You work fast. But how did you get McMurphy's driveway on that map? It's supposed to be sealed off." I tried to put an unspoken question in my tone.

"It is, with yellow crime scene tape. Tape that's tied to itself, not very tightly, after wrapping around a couple of bushes on either side of the driveway. I guess the sheriff's office trusts the folks around here more than you CBI people do."

"Don't tell me..."

"I won't tell you anything. But I had the GPS on when I found the driveway entrance, and it was easy to see up there a ways. So I could have just drawn in that driveway by hand, based on an educated guess, right?"

"Um-hmm. What do you suppose would happen if I had Norm Dzeng go out there and take tire-track casts, say, half-way up the driveway?"

"Gee, dear, I don't know. There were plenty of tire tracks on top of the snow, new-looking ones. I don't know who made all of them."

"Right. You just know who made the newest set. Someone with four fairly new, studded snow tires."

"Ah, well, if you say so. I bet there are dozens of cars up here with tires like that. Studded snows seem popular in these parts."

Hal, I knew, could play innocent with the best of them, and in a way it was endearing. He knew that if I didn't have confirmed knowledge of something, I wouldn't be put in the position of having to act on it, at least if it was something fairly trivial like this.

"I don't suppose that any of those photographs you got were of Mike's house?"

"Well, now, how could that be? I couldn't see the house from down there on the road. Although I did get a long shot earlier, right after breakfast. I snowshoed up to that ridge behind Win's house on up

our driveway. I also found out something interesting. Lannie worked for the Upper Fraser Associates real-estate agency, and they still have the place listed. For two point five million. That's why I called Chuck. He's coming up from Colorado Springs tomorrow afternoon."

"Hal, it's a crime scene. Nobody's supposed to go up there."

"Yeah, that's what I told him. He told me not to worry. And he invited you to come along, if you could arrange to be off duty. He didn't want you in a conflict of interest situation."

"How could it not be a conflict of interest for me?"

"If we go in with an official police escort that's not you, that's how. I think he's going to, um, persuade Fran to take us in. Chuck can be very persuasive, you know. He persuaded me of how good an idea it would be to form a partnership for the property, after I suggested it. The guy's a marketing genius."

I found out just how much of a genius Chuck Shure was on the ride with Fran up to Grand Lake that afternoon. Fran spent most of the drive talking about Natalie Stokes and her uncertain future. When we crested the hill and came to the spot where the accident happened, he slowed way down, despite the layer of gravel on the road's surface.

Because he was in his official car, with the lights on top, the traffic behind him slowed, too, not daring to pass.

As we drove through the built-up area around the Soda Springs Ranch, he suddenly changed the subject.

"Oh! Say, I almost forgot. I got a call from Charles Shure earlier today. He asked me how he could get in to have a look at McMurphy's property, I guess he's interested in it. So I offered to escort him in, although I told him we can't go into the house yet. He said he'd meet me at the driveway tomorrow morning at ten and that you and Hal might come. Are you guys in on this somehow?"

I tried not to seem conspiratorial "Well, you know, we feel like we're freeloading in that guest house we're staying in. You must have heard that Chuck is the money behind this institute that Hal's setting up, and Chuck wants to have a place here, closer to where it's going to be than where he lives, Colorado Springs. Mike's house isn't likely to suit Chuck, but it would suit me and Hal. So Hal's talked to him about a partnership. It's all pretty spur of the moment—we just dreamed it up last night. Uh, Hal works fast when he wants to."

"I guess. And so does Mr. Shure. He said he would have a helicopter photographic survey done this afternoon, and he may show up with a snow cat tomorrow, so he can scope out home sites above where the existing house is."

I felt the need to confess. "Fran, I think that Hal may have untied the crime scene tape and driven up the driveway this morning, to get a GPS track on the location. And he probably took some pictures. Want me to throw the book at him?"

"You *think* he may have?"

"Well, he sent me a computer map with Mike's driveway on it, and also with our subdivision's roads. He mapped those with his GPS and the computer in his car, I know. And I wouldn't be surprised if he mapped Mike's driveway that way, too. Although he told me he could have drawn it in by hand."

"Well, we should be able to tell if he went up there. It's been snowing since we were up there last week, so his tracks ought to be obvious."

"He said there were lots of tracks. He was being cagey, like he does sometimes when he doesn't want me to know the whole story about something."

“Lots of tracks? Well, I’ll check, but I don’t think we’ve had anyone up there since last week. If there are lots of tracks, I need to know what the hell is going on.”

“I’ll make sure he tells me the whole story tonight, count on it. When he knows the significance of the other tracks, assuming there are some, he’ll be forthcoming. And then, of course, we’ll see for ourselves tomorrow. Um, where in the world are we going?”

We had turned off the highway onto a series of ever-worse side roads up and over the ridge to the west. Almost all of the pines were dead, and it was depressing. Eventually we began bumping our way down the hill toward a small cabin visible in a little meadow next to a stand of bare aspen. There was another sheriff’s department SUV sitting beside it.

“Junior’s place. Bachelor paradise, you’ll see. Brace yourself.” Fran wasn’t smiling.

* * *

Gayle Weston and Roger Traubman, deputies in Fran’s department, were waiting for us. They said they had gone over the cabin with a fine-toothed comb on Tuesday, and their seals on the doors were intact.

Inside, I had to take a minute to get my equilibrium. I found myself standing in a large room that, as Fran had suggested, was some kind of bachelor boudoir. There were movie posters on the walls—not guy-type action movies, either, but art movies—and indirect lighting. A king-sized bed was centered on one exterior wall, with mirrors over the headboard and on the ceiling. Just about every horizontal surface was covered with candles, and there was a fireplace on the wall across from the bed.

“What’d I tell you, Annette?” Now Fran was smiling.

“I take it that Junior fancied himself a ladies man, huh? George said he was found dead, on his back, in the bed, right?”

“That’s right, Ms. Trieri. Right in the middle. Naked. He had been involved in a sex act.” Gayle Weston spoke these words clinically, with obvious distaste. “We found a little stash of cocaine, George tested it out for us, and some marijuana as well. And watch this.”

She walked over to the bed and pushed a button on a pad on one of the nightstands. A motor whirred, and a section of cabinetry in the little kitchenette rolled forward, a bottle of champagne and glasses visible.

“And how about this?” She pushed another of the buttons, and the bed began to vibrate visibly. “Magic Fingers, remember when they had this in motels?”

“Or this?” She poked another button and sections of paneling on the wall next to the bed drew back, revealing a wide-screen plasma television, with four rows of DVDs in bookshelves below it. “But that’s not all. If you check out those movies, they include the ones he has posters of and lots of other ‘sensitive films.’ But look!”

She poked the button again and the shelves opened like little doors, revealing more DVDs behind them.

“Here are his real movies, action stuff and porn.” She was shaking her head.

Fran was shaking his head, too, barely containing laughter. “So, what was it you wanted to show us, guys? Surely you didn’t drag us up here just to see all these toys.”

“Sir, we found something quite interesting behind this mirror.” Roger Traubman gestured toward the head of the bed.

He felt along the right edge, and I heard a click. The mirror swung on hinges on its left side, opening like a door. And behind it, there was an array of electronic equipment, with one fat wire extending out to the center of the mirror itself.

“Two mini-cameras, one here,” Traubman pointed to the end of the wire on the mirror, “and one on the back of that mirror on the ceiling up there. Two DVD burners, linked to the cameras through this computer system. The guy was making movies of his, uh, activities, probably without his partners’ knowledge.”

“The dirtbag! I couldn’t believe it when we first found it.” If Gayle Weston had been clinical before, now she was seething.

“Gayle? Do I detect something more than professional indignation here?” Fran was not disciplining his employee, but he was moving in that direction.

She turned beet red. “Uh, no sir, well, almost. That is, I’m certain I wasn’t victimized in this way, although it wasn’t for his lack of trying. I’m glad I didn’t go out with him, that’s for sure.”

Fran pointed at a row of little cases, those CD jewel boxes. “I take that his archive is in those?”

“Probably, sir, they’re labeled by hand with first names and dates. Uh, I’ve been careful not to take note of any names. We’re talking about innocent victims here.” Roger was more than a little embarrassed. “Except for one ‘victim,’ the last one. You see, when we discovered this equipment, it was on. He was recording his last encounter.”

“You mean we’ve got his murder on tape, or DVD or whatever?” Fran’s astonishment overwhelmed his interest in the archive.

“Well, sir, we thought we’d let you watch it and decide for yourself. Uh, but, sheriff, and Ms. Trieri, I’ve got to warn you that this is real-live porn—not what I’d call super-hard-core—no close-ups, after all—but the real thing anyway. So just be aware of what you’re about to see, OK?” Now Roger was turning red.

“No sweat, officer. I had a case last fall that involved a segment of the porn industry. I think I’ve been immunized against its shock value.” Being the newcomer to the sheriff’s office, I thought I should be the one to reassure the others. “One thing I figured out during that investigation was that humor is helpful in these situations. We kept running across unexpected dirty pictures, computer screen savers, for example, and humor helped us stay grounded. So I got into the habit of it. Uh, that’s a sort of warning.”

“OK, well, sure. Anyway, I’ll play the DVD we found in the machine, the one from the camera behind the wall mirror. It’s curious. It starts when they come in the front door. It’s as if he had the recording equipment hooked up to the light switch, or the door lock or something. So, anyway, I’ll play it until you understand what’s going on, and then I’ll fast forward it—and tell me if you want me to stop or play parts at real speed—to where we get involved. Meaning where there’s something that’s relevant for us in the sheriff’s office. OK?”

“Go.” Fran was all business, but his demeanor changed the instant the woman in the recording was recognizable. “My God...that’s Mandy Summers! Holy shit! Why didn’t you tell me?”

The frame froze.

“Got that Gayle? Sir, Gayle is going to take notes of your comments. That one was important, and it’s why we didn’t tell you anything about this. We wanted your initial reactions to this thing. You recognized that person, named her, without any prompting. We recognized her, too, of course, but your

reaction verifies our identification. So, now I'm going to fast forward past most of the, uh, action." Roger's coloring was turning toward red again.

The recording took on that jerky, high-speed character that digital fast-forward creates, but it was still obvious what was going on. Clothes came off, and Mandy vanished into the bathroom—while she was out of the room, there was considerable cocaine sniffing by the male. She returned and groping commenced, and before too long the two people—I recognized Mandy Summers, too, and I had to assume the other one was Junior Murcheson—were hard at it on the bed. This went on for some time in various positions, finally winding up with Junior on his back and Mandy on top, riding him like a rodeo star. I almost made a wise-crack about how she must have had some plastic surgery, because, for a mother of five in her forties, she was far less bouncy than she should have been. Then the recording slowed to regular speed.

"OK, I think this where we want to pay attention." Roger was already doing so, apparently quite absorbed in that surgically damped bouncing.

I was startled when the sound came on—but of course that made perfect sense, that Junior would record both video and audio, I thought.

"Now, close your eyes, honey, I've got something extra special for you." Mandy's voice was as recognizable as her face.

She looked downward, probably at Junior's face, which was out of the frame. Satisfied, she reached over to the nightstand and picked up her purse. She opened it and took out a syringe, held it up and tapped the air bubbles out of it, and then positioned it in her right hand to give an injection, thumb on the plunger. Finally, her hand and the syringe disappeared below the bottom of the frame.

* * *

Eighteen

"I don't believe it." Fran Schmidt's reaction summed things up nicely, I thought.

Just after Mandy's hand holding the syringe disappeared, Junior made a sort of squeak and then an ecstatic moan. Mandy sat there, perfectly still, for about half a minute, then dismounted, grabbed her clothes, and disappeared into the bathroom. Shortly, she emerged, fully dressed, found her coat and put it on, and left. At that point, Roger stopped the DVD player.

"Her lawyer's probably going to call this 'circumstantial evidence,' because we don't see her stick the needle in him. But, then, there's the camera on the ceiling. Maybe it'll show something. I'll tell ya, Fran, it's good enough for me. I say we get an arrest warrant, murder one." I was having trouble believing it too, but I was mad enough to hunt Mandy down and throw away the key.

As soon as I saw her with the syringe, all the pieces fell into place for me. There were three people at Mike McMurphy's house—most likely Mandy, her husband Tobias, and Junior. Then Junior killed Lannie Young, for the same reason that they killed Mike—to position themselves to buy the McMurphy property without any awkward questions and to secure the water rights for that new subdivision that Tobias was putting together. But Tobias screwed up with the cash from the Epworth Arms sale, cash that would have bought the McMurphy place, so Mandy went down to Black Hawk, brought him back to Winter Park, and, with Junior's help, got him into Emily Griggs' place and killed him. And, finally, Junior had to go as well—he knew too much.

“Roger, do you know how to work this equipment? I mean, to make recordings?” Fran was moving to the next step, I thought.

Roger nodded. “I think so, sir. Do you mean make recordings from the cameras?”

“No, I mean to make duplicates of that disk, also the one from the ceiling mirror, that one should show her sticking the syringe in the poor sap’s nose. I’d like...ah...three copies of each, made with Gayle watching you and noting your actions. That’ll give us the originals and three other sets. One set of the copies goes to her lawyer. We keep the others, in three different secure locations. Can you do that, Roger?”

Roger nodded again. “I think you just treat the DVD like a computer disk, copy all its files to the other burner and burn away.”

“Good. Now, Annette and I are going to take off, but first, I want to gather up all of the DVDs that Junior made, except for the two of Mandy, of course. I’m going to take all of these damned things and lock them away for now, and I’ll eventually destroy them personally, after this case is completely adjudicated. I don’t want to know who’s on them, and I certainly don’t want to watch them. In fact, maybe I’ll give them to Annette to secure, so I won’t even have to look at those first names on the labels. Right?” Fran looked at me, eyebrows arched.

“I think I see what you want to do, Fran. And I’m far less likely to recognize the names than you are. I’ll put them, sealed, in the CBI archive down in Denver until we can destroy them. OK?” I started pulling the home-made DVDs off the shelf behind the mirror.

“Good plan, Annette. Let’s just leave everything else as is, all of these secret compartments and so on open, and seal the door when you leave, Gayle. Annette and I are going to see if we can get an arrest warrant based on our knowledge. If not, we’ll use one of the copies of the Mandy discs to persuade the judge. Roger, making these duplicates will just take as long as the burner’s speed, right?” Fran seemed pleased that Roger was agreeing. “Good. Make the duplicates, Gayle you watch him so you can testify if need be, and then get back to Hot Sulphur in case we need them for the warrant. OK?”

We found a sack to put the DVD collection in, and Fran and I left. The first thing he did, after we got over the ridge and on smoother roads, and back in the cellular coverage, was to call his office.

“Anna? Listen, could you please find out who is on patrol closest to Legacy Park? I want someone to block Mandy Summers’ driveway, detain her if she tries to go somewhere, or if she comes back from somewhere, OK? Stay in contact with them and let me know who you find. I’m on my way back to the office right now and I need to see a judge. Could you also find out who’s available?...Right. I’m surprised, too. I’ll fill you and everyone else in when I get back. I’m just getting to the highway now, it’ll be, oh, give me fifteen minutes.” He reached down and flicked the switch for the emergency lights.

About the time we reached the stop sign at Granby—which Fran blew through—and turned west toward Hot Sulphur Springs, my cell phone let loose with “Layla.” Fran almost started singing along before he realized he didn’t know where it could be coming from. When I pushed the “talk” button on my phone and the music stopped, his jaw dropped.

“Hi, lover, Chuck Shure just called to tell me he’s arranged a tour tomorrow morning at ten. Can you get away?” Hal’s voice was excited.

“Fran told me, and you bet I’m coming along. For one thing, we’ve got to get something figured out. You told me there were lots of tracks up that driveway, right?”

“Uh, well, yeah, I guess I said that.” Now his voice was wary, careful.

“OK, well, listen. I don’t much care if you went up there or not, but I really, really need to know if there were tracks up that driveway that you didn’t make. And how many. It’s important.”

“Ah...it’s not as if I counted them or anything. But I’d say, you know, enough to represent at least a half-dozen round trips, up and down. What’s the problem?” His wariness had switched to curiosity.

“Fran says he hasn’t had anyone up there since it snowed. There shouldn’t be any tracks, yours or anyone’s. Did you get a photograph of the driveway, by any chance?”

“Let me think. Yeah, I think so. I tried to shoot up the driveway and keep the crime scene tape out of the picture. I see what you’re getting at—it should show some of the tracks. I’ve got the pictures out of the camera—I sent ’em to Chuck—so do you want me to email the driveway one to you?”

“Excellent idea. Same address you sent the map to. I’m not sure if we’ll be able to do anything about it today, because we’re going to be a little busy. I’ll tell you all about it this evening. But Fran and I both want to see it.”

“All right, it’ll be right there. And, listen, I just found out this afternoon that I need to go talk to the Winter Park Chamber of Commerce this evening, they have a dinner meeting. It’s at Carlos and Maria’s, starting at five-thirty. Can you make it?”

I checked my watch and was surprised to find that it was 3:30 already. “Maybe, but I have to hustle to get home. See you in about an hour?”

“Wonderful. Then we can drive down together.”

Fran, pushing the speed limit, had reached the flats into Hot Sulphur Springs by then, and soon we were inside his office, in the middle of a whirlwind of activity. It took only a few minutes for A.D. Sonos, D.A. to show up.

“What the hell is going on, Schmidt? You can’t get a warrant for Mandy Summers, you idiot!”

“Afternoon, Axel. And maybe you’re right, at least for the time being. But when the video gets here, it’ll be a snap, believe me.” Fran was serene.

“Video?” Sonos’ bluster evaporated.

“Video, Axel. Showing her screwing Junior Murcheson, two very consenting adults, and then jamming a syringe up his nose. Seems old Junior liked to tape his sex conquests, or whatever you call it when you record it onto DVD.” Fran was gambling on what the ceiling camera showed, I realized.

“So where is this video? I need to see it.” Sonos was either just doing his job or wanting to have a look at Mandy having sex, I couldn’t tell which.

“It’ll be here soon, along with some copies. Mandy’s lawyer will want a copy, I bet. Meantime, you probably don’t want to make a big scene in opposition to the warrant, Axel. It’ll look bad, believe me.”

“But it’s Mandy Summers, the famous grieving widow. This better not backfire on us, Fran.” Sonos was trying to be menacing, but it just wasn’t working.

* * *

“Certainly is nice that the Chamber of Commerce is more progressive than those other groups you talked to.”

“Well,” Hal smiled, “I didn’t know how they’d take the news about the salaries we’ll be paying. But I guess the prospect of our new professionals in the valley, professionals with lots and lots of money to

spend, by local standards at least, made them forget about how we may steal some of their employees. And, yeah, it's nice to have an influential group on our side for once."

We were in my Ourback, heading down from our perch near the top of Middle Earth Estates toward the other side of the Crooked Creek Valley, to the meeting with Chuck Shure and his various minions, including, for the morning, Fran Schmidt. I knew from experience that Chuck would make everyone feel good about being a minion, though. That Fran was keeping the appointment in the face of his unsuccessful search for Mandy Summers was testimony to Chuck Shure's importance in the scheme of things.

On the other hand, there wasn't much that Fran could do anyway. After verifying that Mandy Summers was indeed the murderer—it showed clearly on the recording from the ceiling camera—he had obtained an arrest warrant for her late Thursday afternoon. Late into the night and all morning, he and his people had scoured the county for Mandy, with no luck. She wasn't at home or at the company office; nor was she anywhere else that anyone could think to look. With an all-points bulletin out for her Cadillac and the State Patrol on the alert, along with the TSA people at the Denver airport and security folks at the Amtrak stations, Fran had all the bases covered.

So, as we had discussed earlier Friday morning on the phone, he might as well play tour guide for Chuck Shure as sit in his office and stew. Cell phone coverage on the mountainsides around the Fraser Valley was surprisingly good, so he'd be able to stay in touch with his office.

Down by the soccer fields on County Road 5, Hal turned south onto the connector to Crooked Creek Road, and after a few miles of climbing the other side of the little valley, we arrived at Mike McMurphy's driveway. It would have been easy to find because of the crime-scene tape, anyway, but Chuck Shure's presence made it unmistakable. He'd arrived in his own SUV, and he was accompanied by a crew-cab pickup truck with dual rear wheels towing a trailer with a snow-cat on it. A sign on the door said "Forest Fiber Products, Inc., A Division of UNELECO," and the driver inside was asleep. Fran was there, too, sitting in his Explorer talking on a telephone. All of these vehicles were parked on the far side of the road from the driveway entrance.

When Fran saw us drive up, he put the phone down and got out, directing us to park on the same side of the road as the others.

"Thanks, Hal. I want to have a look at all those tire tracks before we go up there and create more. Norm Dzenge is on his way. Is this the car you were over here with the other day, what was it, only yesterday?" Fran was all business.

"Yesterday morning, right. But I had my Audi. Different tires, I guess that's what you're interested in. Let me show you." Hal led Fran over to the driveway entrance and began to point at the ground, and I tagged along. "See? These tracks with the big chunky lug patterns and the zig-zag stripe down the middle are mine. Nokian Hakkapelitta 4s, studded.

"Nokey-whats?" Fran looked confused.

"Nokians. They're from Finland." Hal kept pointing at the ground. "I nosed in, just under the tape here, to turn around. Then I backed up the road a ways, here, and rolled back down, parked, and got out to take a picture up the driveway. I think these are probably my footprints."

So he *hadn't* crossed the crime-scene boundary, at least not substantively. Somehow, I was proud of him.

"Annette? Do you remember those tracks that Norm got the casts of up at the top of the driveway? Do these look similar?" Fran was gesturing at the various sets of tracks uphill from the yellow tape. I walked over to take a look.

“Could be, Fran. Afraid I don’t remember for sure, though. But all of these tracks on the driveway look identical to me. Is that Norm coming up the road? He’ll know.” I pointed toward a sheriff’s department car on its way toward us.

It was, and he did. Why there would be several sets of Cadillac Escalade tracks up and down Mike McMurphy’s driveway was a puzzle, but, as Norm pointed out, one that we would probably figure out shortly. There was a set of tracks, headed uphill, on top of all the others.

“You don’t suppose this is where Mandy Summers is hiding out?” I meant my question to be rhetorical, and humorous, but Fran took it seriously and got back on the radio.

After instructing people in his office, Fran walked over to Chuck’s SUV. The driver’s window opened.

“Mr. Shure, I hate to do this, but we may have a situation here. We’ve got the possibility that our murderer is up there, you know, the murders I talked with you about last weekend?”

“No kidding! Annette?” Chuck Shure looked my way. “I don’t know what it is about you, but we seem to see each other in the strangest situations. How can I help, sheriff?”

“Well, I’ve got lots of backup on the way, and when they get here, we’ll head up the driveway and see who’s up at the house.”

Chuck got out of his SUV and leaned on the door, thinking.

“You know, I didn’t come to look at the house. I was going to take that puppy,” he twitched his head in the direction of the snow-cat, “and explore the valley above the house, look for another, bigger home site. The aerial survey my people did yesterday shows another old road, probably an old mining access road, just up the way. It bypasses the house by a half mile or so. I could go up that in the snow-cat, with some of your people, if you’d like, while you go in the front way. It holds four plus the driver, I think. That way, we’d have that particular escape route covered, if your suspect is really up there.”

Now it was Fran’s turn to think. I’m positive that the prospect of sending a civilian, especially such an important one, into what could turn dangerous concerned him. But if I were in charge, I thought, I would give the suggestion serious consideration, because it would get Chuck out of the way.

“Fran, how about this? Chuck, Hal, and I can go with the snow-cat driver up that old road. Then we’ll be out of your hair. And I’m carrying, if things should get strange.”

“Not a bad idea, Annette. But if you see Mandy, don’t get within arm’s reach. She’s pretty damned quick with that syringe. Oh. I didn’t tell you. We did some background checks and found out she’s trained as a nurse. Never worked at it, apparently, because she married Tobias and started popping out babies. But she’s got the training.” He paused, thinking some more. “OK. Let’s do it. We can get that snow-cat unloaded and things ready to start when my other people arrive. And, Annette, let me give you a two-way radio, so you can keep track of what’s going on.”

The driver of the pickup towing the snow-cat was also the snow-cat driver, so we woke him up from his nap and put him to work. With the maneuvering of the various vehicles, it took us about fifteen minutes to have everything ready. At that point, several more cars from Fran’s department showed up, creating something of a miniature traffic jam on the narrow county road.

As Fran’s contingent headed up the driveway, Chuck, Hal, and I climbed into the snow-cat cab, a cozy fit with the driver. Willie McGee was probably a small, wiry sort, but it was hard to tell with the insulated jump suit he was wearing. All I could really tell was that he needed a shave.

“All set, Mr. Shure? Folks, it’ll be a good idea to buckle up.” He handed a sheaf of paper to Chuck. “I reckon you want to navigate, right, Mr. Shure?”

“Right, Willie, but I won’t need those. Hang on a second while this thing gets a fix.” He opened his door and reached out, and, with a metallic click, something attached itself to the roof. Then he opened a laptop computer, which was already on. It took about 10 seconds, and I saw a blinking triangle appear on the screen, superimposed on a map that was superimposed on an aerial photograph.

“That looks like Hal’s gizmo, the one he used to map the roads in Middle Earth Estates.” My comment got Hal’s attention, and he leaned forward to look.

Chuck glanced back our way. “It’s the military version, though. Lots more accurate, and faster. OK, Willie, let’s roll. Or creep or whatever this thing does.”

We started up the main road, the three-foot wide treads of the snow-cat making clacking noises on the packed snow, and I watched the blinking triangle moving along with us, leaving a trail of shadow triangles in its wake. After about a quarter mile, Willie slowed down, and he and Chuck began a conversation about where the old mining road’s entrance might be. I couldn’t see anything that looked likely, but suddenly Willie turned left, lowering the snow blade on the front of the machine enough to cut himself a path through the drift on the shoulder.

“We could have just gone up and over this, folks, but I figured you don’t need to be rocked around that much. I don’t know what it’s going to be like up here in the woods, though, so please hold on.”

Hal and I, in the back seat, held on to each other and to hand-holds on the roof, while Willie worked the snow-cat into the forest. Although it didn’t appear so at first, presently it was clear that we were on some kind of roadway, for there was the unmistakable slot through the trees ahead. Around a curve, it opened up a little, and Willie revved the diesel engine, putting on more speed, such as it was. Snow-cats just aren’t very fast.

* * *

“Looks like a half-mile or so before the valley opens up.” Chuck Shure, riding shotgun, was studying his computer screen. “Any idea what’s going on with the sheriff?”

“Oh. I suppose it’d help if I turned this radio on.” I fumbled to find the pocket I’d slipped it into.

“Clear in the garage.” The voice was tinny but undistorted. I recognized it but couldn’t put a name to it.

“Clear on the left side.” It took me a few seconds to recognize this voice as Janelle Kennedy’s.

“And it’s clear here on the right.” That was Fran. “I’m going to work my way toward the back. And Roger, ease into the house.”

Ah, I thought, that must have been Roger Traubman in the garage.

“Roger, Janelle? I’ve got a snowmobile track, looks pretty new, leading into the woods, up the hill and away from the house.” Fran’s voice sounded excited. “Annette? Annette? Are you there?”

“Right here, Fran. Sorry, but I missed most of the first part of what you’ve been doing. Uh, over.”

“We got up here and found Mandy’s car. I used the code to open the garage door, and we’re looking for her. But now I found this snowmobile track. It looks as if it’s following a path up into the forest. Hard to tell. It might be angling off toward your road, though.”

“Well, OK. We’ll keep our eyes peeled. What are you going to do, Fran?”

“We’ll make sure she isn’t here, and then we’ll try to follow the track. It’s going to be slow, though. The snow’s pretty deep. Maybe we can find some snowshoes. Or back-country skis. Stay in touch, Annette.”

“Will do, Fran. Out, but I’ll listen.” I released the “talk” button. “Chuck? Do you see any evidence of a road uphill from the house that intersects this one? Maybe...wait one.”

“Sheriff?” The voice on the radio was Roger’s. “I’ve found something, sir. In what looks like a study. A television with a picture of all our cars at the bottom of the driveway. And there’s Anna walking around, trying to keep warm, looks like. Mandy must have seen us coming.”

“Aw, hell. Well, that explains why we didn’t hear the snowmobile. She probably took off while we were all hanging around down there with our motors running.” Fran was clearly disgusted. “Must be some kind of hook-up that Junior put together for her. He was big on cameras. Any hint of why she would have been in that room?”

Roger’s voice was excited. “I think so, sir. There’s a wall safe here, and some tools. It looks as if she was trying to drill it.”

“OK, well, that answers that. Annette? You still there?”

“Roger, Fran. I don’t remember any closed-circuit TV stuff when we looked through the house a week and a half ago. And we didn’t run across the safe.” But, then, I thought, we didn’t look very hard.

“Annette, Mandy’s car had open ski racks on the top, suggesting she may have skis with her. So if you find an abandoned snow machine, there should be ski tracks leading away from it. I’ll see if I can find some snowshoes.” Fran now sounded resigned to a long slog in the woods.

Chuck Shure was gesturing at me and pointing to his laptop’s screen. “Annette? Look at this. There’s a track on here showing the driveway up to where the house is, that’s this little black square, and then this other track. It intersects our road way up here, about two miles in. Could that be her route?”

“Hey!” Hal’s indignation was just for show, I could tell. “I want a map like that! Mine doesn’t show any of that stuff.”

Hal, sitting directly behind Chuck, couldn’t see the smirk that I could.

“Fran? You ought to call in another snowmobile. Or two. It’s a long way up the valley, and you really don’t want to be stuck on snowshoes.”

“I’m on it, Annette. If she comes down your way, be careful. She could be armed with more than that syringe.”

“Mr. Shure?” Willie, who had been concentrating on moving the snow-cat ahead as fast as it would go, broke in. “What the hell is going on? Who’s she talking to?”

I answered before Chuck could open his mouth. “Sorry, Willie. I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and I’ve been working with the sheriff on some murders we’ve had up here. We think we’re talking about the murderer. We’ve got a warrant for her, and she’s on the run. So if you see someone coming down the road toward us, it would be helpful if we could stop her, somehow. But my first priority is to keep you guys safe.”

“Oh. Well, if she’s on a snowmobile, I can run her into the woods or into the stream with the blade.” Willie twitched a control lever, and the snow blade on the front of the cat lifted a foot and angled itself to the left a little more. “This thing actually handles pretty well, and the road isn’t much wider than it is.”

“Well, let’s all watch out for her. She could come barreling around a curve at us, like this one just ahead.” But my comment was unnecessary, because when we rounded the next curve, the valley opened up, with the road running straight ahead of us for at least a mile.

“How much did you say they want for this property, Hal?” Chuck was looking around at the scenery, a mix of gray aspen patches and dark green conifers on the sides of the valley, with Byers Peak dominating the skyline at its end off to the west.

“Two point five mil. Think there might be a place to put a house here, Chuck?” Hal, I could tell, was wishing we could afford it ourselves.

“How about on that little shoulder over there?” Chuck gestured over to the right slope. “South facing, so it would get winter sun, might be high enough to see out to the Fraser Valley behind us, great view of the peak there. And a whole hillside of aspen across the way. I’m making a phone call.”

He fumbled in a pocket and came up with a portable phone the size of a beer bottle. “Satellite phone. I didn’t know about cell coverage up here.”

We listened as he instructed someone in his Colorado Springs office to make an offer on the McMurphy property, full price, no haggling. Finished, he disconnected and turned in the seat. “I had my lawyers look over the paperwork on this place, and the conservation easement is both strict and flexible. Definitely no subdividing, but another house or two is fine. Not having seen the existing house, Hal, I don’t know what an appropriate level of investment for you folks is, but I’m certain we can work it out.”

He turned back to look at his new home site. “This is exactly what I had in mind. Private, great views, and I bet I can make this into a first-class trout stream. Very, very cool.”

Then he pointed up and left toward about ten-thirty. “Say, who’s that skiing down my hillside over there?”

* * *

I got back on the radio. “Fran! We’ve got a skier headed down the hillside our way, from your general direction. She must have abandoned the snowmobile. Fran, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Annette. You don’t have to shout. And we’ve got snow machines on the way, but it’ll be twenty minutes or so. Where are you?”

Chuck Shure was the one with the map, so I handed him the radio. “Sheriff? This is Chuck Shure. I’ve got a pretty good computer map here, it even shows the road she took away from the house. We just got to the bottom of the valley where it opens up, and I’d say she made it halfway to where her road intersects ours higher up. She’s headed down through aspen toward the valley bottom and our road. No idea if she’s seen us, but maybe not. We’re sort of behind a huge boulder, and she’s probably paying attention to her skiing, dodging trees. Uh, over.”

“Any way you can stop her?”

Chuck handed me the radio. “Fran, the snow’s too deep for us to get out of this thing, but maybe we can get back down the road to where the valley is too narrow for her to pass us. But, Fran? I’d have people waiting for her down at the main road, just in case. Out.”

Willie had already started backing down our road, slowly enough to keep the skier in view. “Mr. Shure? I’m not an expert backcountry skier, or anything, but I’m thinking she’ll have to start walking when she gets out of the aspen. The snow’s pretty soft and deep, and the slope flattens out. I’m betting I can catch her.”

Chuck turned toward me. “What do you think, Annette?”

“Great idea, Willie. Let’s wait until she slows down, though, just to be positive.”

Willie was right. Once out of the aspen onto the flatter slope, her momentum couldn’t keep her going against the increased friction of the deep powder, and soon she started into the cross-country skier’s long, swinging stride. Her technique was impressive, and she was making good time. But it looked as if we could catch her in the snow cat.

“Let’s go get her, Willie!” And he revved up the diesel and away we went.

But because she didn’t have to concentrate on dodging trees, she could look around. The roar of the engine got her attention, and she looked our way immediately. Then she changed course, heading for the creek instead of angling down toward us on the road.

Willie was the first to notice her change of direction. “Uh oh. If she gets to the creek, she’ll be able to get around us. And back down there it’s steeper, she’ll be able to speed up. We can’t chase her down the creek in this thing.”

I felt my hopes of catching her myself being dashed. “Well, hey. It’s crowded in here anyway. If she gets around us, we can follow her by staying on the road, and I can keep the folks down below apprised of the situation. No way will she get clean away on skis.”

Willie wound up the diesel to its red line and tried to cut her off, but she made it to the creek easily. Then she gained some ground down the hill on us while we got the snow-cat turned around. But Willie pulled back onto his first set of tracks, and we picked up speed, slowly gaining on her.

It was strange—a slow-motion chase, her striding along in rhythm, our roaring after her, rocking a little with the motion of the cat.

She knew we were gaining on her, so she tried to speed up, but we still were a little faster. It looked as if the narrower part of the valley, below where it had opened up, might afford her protection from us, because our road had not always followed along the side of the streambed. But down in there, I remembered seeing deadfalls across the creek, which would surely slow her down more.

I picked up the radio. “Fran, Fran are you there?”

“Here, Annette. What’s happening.”

“I’m afraid she got around us, and she’s headed down the stream bed. We’ll stay behind her, pushing her along, sort of herding her, I guess. If your people are waiting down by the road, particularly where it crosses the stream, maybe you can get her. Probably take fifteen minutes, at least.”

“Ten-four Annette. We’ll get her, count on it.”

But it didn’t work that way. On the way up, when we rounded the last curve, we were all so taken by the view of the upper valley that we didn’t notice the waterfall in the stream just next to the road. It wasn’t a big waterfall, maybe a two-foot drop, but the flow wasn’t completely iced over.

Mandy, striding along, took the drop easily, but ice on the pool below wasn’t strong enough to hold her when she landed. When we pulled up beside the pool, she was in it up to her waist, floundering and thrashing about in the cold water.

I opened my door and saw that there was a good five feet of roadway between the snow-cat and the stream, so I jumped out, just as I heard Willie yell “Wait! Don’t jump! No!”

In all the excitement, I’d forgotten that the snow-cat, with its pair of three-foot wide treads, was made to ride on top of the snowpack. And backcountry skis do that, too.

Consequently, when I yelled “Mandy Summers, you are under arrest for the murder of Junior Murcheson! You have the right to remain silent...” and so on, I was standing up to my armpits in fresh powder.

* * *

Epilogue

I have to credit the three guys in the cab of the snow-cat for not laughing *too* hard—just hard enough for me to hear them.

Fortunately for me, I’d jumped down, not out, so Hal was able to reach me and haul me back up. And fortunately for Mandy, there was a coil of climbing rope in the snow-cat, so we were able to haul her out of the pool. It took some doing, but I got her frisked and cuffed, just in case she was armed, and then she rode down the hill toward the sheriff’s assemblage sitting between Hal and me. I think the heater in the snow-cat saved her from a nasty bout of hypothermia.

When we got down to the county road, Fran Schmidt took her into custody, and everything else was cut-and-dried. Eventually, when the whole thing worked its way through the legal system and went to trial in late summer, A.D. Sonos was masterful at getting into the record the two other murders that had involved the same means of death as Junior’s. So, even though the evidence for Mandy’s involvement in Mike McMurphy’s and Tobias Summers’ deaths was only circumstantial, the jury got to hear about it. Her conviction took them all of six hours, and the foreman told me later that it would have been quicker except that they wanted to make it look good, and also to have some pizza on the court’s nickel.

In the library of candid-camera porn DVDs that I had taken from Junior Murcheson’s place, I found another one, older, with Mandy’s name on it and a date weeks before Tobias Summers’ death. I eventually destroyed all of the other ones without watching them, but that particular home movie proved interesting. In addition to a very similar version of their tryst—except that Mandy didn’t end up on top on that occasion—there was a post-coital conversation about how Junior needed to eliminate Lannie Young, and how he should do it. He resisted, but Mandy threatened to discontinue her sexual favors and he finally gave in.

By the time Mandy was convicted, Hal’s new Middle Park Advanced Research Center was up and running with a staff of about thirty and a brand-new computer courtesy of UNELECO, although they were still in rented office space, awaiting completion of the re-designed Mount Epworth Arms. He hired Emily Griggs, who had been terminated by the school board, as his chief operating officer, and she was put in a position to extract her revenge by providing liaison to the schools on her terms.

The FRAWB lawyers continued—still do—to plague the folks of the Fraser Valley, and everyone in the Central Rockies, generally, but we feel good that we control a fair bit of water that they can’t get at. Ever.

Chuck Shure, bless his soul, built a tasteful house of reasonable size in his valley, a house not at all like Win Fredrickson’s ridiculous mansion, and now he lives there about half time. And Hal and I went into partnership with him for that wonderful piece of land and moved into Mike McMurphy’s old house in May, after we had done some remodeling.

At that point, Fran Schmidt and his wife Mary were up to their eyeballs in paperwork, trying to adopt Natalie Stokes. After the accident in which her family had been killed, she was placed in a foster home, and Fran and Mary decided to provide something more permanent for her.

Best of all, Fran and all the folks in his department decided to keep me. Despite the fact that my arrival had coincided with four murders and four traffic deaths, more loss-of-life than Grand County had been confronted with in as long as anyone could remember, their vote was overwhelming in my favor.

I don't know when I've ever felt so wanted by such a good bunch of folks. We're staying.

* * * * *

Power Play

Displaced * * * * *
A^Four Corners Mystery



Power Play: A [Displaced] Four Corners Mystery

1.0

The red blinking LED and its accompanying *tweep* told the man in the lightweight black wet suit that the idling outboard motors over there were putting out enough heat for the missile to lock on. A kilometer across the sparkling waters of the Florida Current, the *Stream-Tracker*, at first glance just another thirty-seven-foot Boston Whaler, sat rocking gently in what passed for swell.

A closer look, though, would reveal hints that it was more than just the usual recreational fishing boat. The three 350-horsepower Yamaha outboards, which over-powered the hull rating by a substantial margin, were one clue. They were throttled back at that point, nearly at idle, working just hard enough to keep the boat stationary in the 4-knot current and to run the electronics. And those electronics were another clue to the *Stream-Tracker*'s true identity, a clue so obvious as to be hard to miss. Eight antennas of various designs decorated the T-top, and the radar dome was twice as big as most others. Less obvious was the sophistication of all that gadgetry. What was holding the boat stationary was an autopilot system linked to a military-grade GPS computer, the whole customized arrangement created specifically for precise station-keeping.

Standing in the cockpit, Skip Nicholls wiped the sweat from his face with a soggy bandana. The near calm was helpful for their work—calm conditions are a real blessing for doing oceanography—but a little more breeze sure would have made life a lot more comfortable. He watched the large flat-screen display on the console, studying the flashing numbers with concentration and trying not to drip on it.

“Jorge, be ready to bring her up in two minutes, OK?”

Skip glanced at the figure crouched in the aft workspace.

“And, c’mon, willya? Put that PFD back on. I know it’s hot, but when you’re recovering equipment, you really do need it.” He shook his head in frustration.

It bothered Skip not at all that he had taken his own personal flotation device off, despite unequivocal rules and regulations, an hour before.

“Hear that, Amelia? Two minutes.”

He turned his attention to the young woman sunning herself in the bow. She was lying face down, and he saw that, in the interest of a uniform suntan, her bikini top was unhooked.

“But, you know what? You don’t have to put your PFD on if you don’t want to. Or anything else, for that matter.” He couldn’t help but grin at his joke.

“In your dreams, pal.”

Her rejoinder was appropriate for the circumstances. A seagoing electronics technician, her dealings with the male-dominated oceanography community had helped her grow a skin as thick as an M-1 tank’s.

She stood up with her back to both men, adjusted some straps and other things, slipped into her PFD, and turned to face him.

“Did you get any error messages this time?”

They were working with an acoustic velocimeter, a notoriously finicky piece of equipment. Its data stream, fed back to the *Stream-Tracker*'s computers by an optical fiber cable, was frequently a mixture of meaningful numbers and complaints in the form of various error messages. But her latest ministrations had worked, apparently.

“Not so many this time. None at all that I've seen, even. Whatever you did, it did wonders, looks like.” He smiled his appreciation. “OK, Jorge, let's start the winch.”

A mechanical whining noise emerged from the stern.

“*What the hell...*” Amelia's voice tailed off, and Skip looked up to see her staring over his shoulder toward the aft horizon. His mind barely had time to register her dive over the side before the explosion.

* * *

From the tuna tower of the fifty-foot sport-fisherman a kilometer north, the man in the wet suit watched the exhaust trail tracing the missile's path toward the *Stream-Tracker* just long enough to be sure it was seeking accurately. Then he slid down the ladder toward the waiting *Zodiac*, reaching it as the *ka-rump* of the explosion rolled across the water.

“Let's get over there, now!” He was clearly used to being in command.

The *Zodiac*, with its three passengers, set off on full plane, and the sport-fisherman followed at dead slow.

It took the *Zodiac* only a minute in transit, by which time most of the smoke had begun to drift away on what little breeze there was. The ocean surface was littered with fiber glass and the closed-cell foam that made Boston Whalers famously unsinkable—indeed, this one was still floating, albeit in hundreds of very small pieces. They recognized two tattered PFDs, empty.

“Over there.”

The leader had stood to survey the scene and spotted something just to the west, something obscured by the glare of the mid-afternoon sun. He sat down as the rubber boat accelerated toward what was thrashing about in the water.

It took only a minute to haul the dazed young woman aboard. Before she could recover her equilibrium, she was relieved of her flotation vest, and almost immediately she grew uncomfortable, despite her thick skin, with the three wet-suit-clad men undressing her with their eyes. Her discomfort turned to anger when the man behind her slipped a commando knife from a sheath strapped to his right leg and sliced through the straps of her bikini top. She struggled to cover herself as the top fell away into the sea.

“Forget whatever you're thinking and let's get on with it. Time is short.” The leader's growl spurred the other two into action.

The half-naked young woman was unceremoniously pulled to her feet by one of them, and the other fastened a dive belt around her waist, stealing a grope or two in the process. The belt held an unusually large number of lead weights.

“Hey, what are you doing...get your hands off me, you scum...*what's going on, anyway?*”

Her voice rose in panic as her hands were yanked behind her and fastened to the dive belt with plastic zip-ties. They used doubled-up zip ties to bind her elbows together, pulling her shoulders back and up in the process.

Her struggles produced a most fascinating syncopation, and the leader's stare at her chest was long and intimate. He licked his lips, twice, then shook his head in disappointment.

"How sad. Such a waste." His voice was flat as his shove toppled her over the side.

* * *

1.1

It took only a couple of days of trying to be on vacation on South Florida's Gold Coast for me to figure out that I'm not a beach person.

Beaches, I decided, are great for kids who want to dig and build sand castles or for teenagers who want to chase each other around and squeal a lot, but lying in the heat and getting windblown sand stuck to my suntan lotion just isn't my thing. Besides, the entire business of tanning is just decidedly unhealthful.

Hal, I discovered, isn't a beach person either, but he had more trouble admitting it to himself. He thought his years as a graduate student in Miami had left an indelible impression, but time, it seems, can change a person. We settled on morning walks down by the water while it was still cool and mostly deserted.

This explains why we were reading the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel* while sitting in the morning shade of the west-side balcony of our condo instead of lying on the beach, that Wednesday morning on which the story of the *Stream-Tracker* tragedy broke.

Normally, a story like that wouldn't have grabbed our attention. South Florida is rife with boats, many owned and operated by untrained, incompetent drunks, and accidents happen all the time. But in this case Hal knew the victims—and Professor Solomon "Skip" Nicholls was highly trained and fully competent on the water, with years of experience in all sorts of vessels. He did have a habit of imbibing to a state of considerable silliness at parties, but at sea he was all business.

I was reading the local news—Hal always starts with the editorials, followed by the comics—and when I saw "Pompano State" in the article I tossed the folded-up section his way.

"You're not going to like this at all. Lower right corner." I took a deep breath and tried to think what to say to him.

"Aw, geez. What could have happened?" I watched his face turning gray as he read on. "Gas fumes? Explosion? That doesn't ring true—it was a brand new boat. And out on the water they keep the engines running to power the equipment. No way can fumes build up."

The story repeated Coast Guard speculation about an explosion associated with the fuel system—lacking any solid evidence, it looked like they were trying to buy time with obvious guesses.

"I've got to call Shorty Ringwold." He went looking for his cell phone.

Randall Ringwold, chair of Oceanography at Pompano State University, always introduced himself as "Shorty" because, at 6-feet-4, he had been the least tall of the members of his college basketball team,

and that's what they had called him—or so he told it. He was also the host of Hal's visit to the Gold Coast.

As Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University in Durango, and more recently on extended sabbatical as a special advisor to the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, one of the roles Hal had taken on concerned the coordination of renewable energy research at Colorado's universities, a job not unlike herding cats, but one that needed doing in the face of state budget cuts. To him, this coordination began with canvassing universities around the country to see how they conducted collaborative research on related topics. Pompano State had embarked on an innovative project in collaboration with other Florida universities that involved the underwater equivalent of wind power—they had been funded to test the concept of placing turbines in the Gulf Stream between Florida and the Bahamas. Pompano State had both the lead role in the project and the responsibility for observational studies—additional measurements of the current's speed, structure, and variations were needed.

It was just a coincidence that the most convenient time for everyone to have Hal visit Pompano State was March and April. Or so he told it.

He had been basking in the sunshine for a week, but I'd arrived only a few days earlier. My job as investigator-at-large for the Colorado Bureau of Investigation had kept me busy in Colorado's icebox—the Fraser Valley—for most of February and early March, and I was finding that spending the Spring Equinox on the beach was just fine indeed.

Except for the beach part. Aside from the sand problem, the college kids on spring break were pretty obnoxious, both their behavior and, well, their skin. My generation had vastly different idea about propriety from the younger ones, I discovered. Hal seemed to enjoy it, though, or at least the distaff half.

“Annette?” Hal's voice echoed slightly from the interior of the condo. “They're having a briefing over at the OceanLab in an hour. Want to come?”

“I'll get dressed.” The rest of the paper was going to have to wait, I decided.

* * *

Hal had been fortunate to find a 15th-floor condo on the beach side of South Ocean Boulevard in Boca Raton, just south of the Boca Raton Inlet. The condo belonged to a Pompano State professor who was in Australia for the spring semester, and we were taking a turn at house-sitting. It was a rather ritzy neighborhood by our standards, but a nice place to visit. Compared to the winter conditions I'd left behind, the luxury of opening windows on both sides of the building and letting the trade winds waft through all night was positively decadent.

Pompano State's OceanLab sat on Hillsboro Inlet, about five miles to the south along fabled State Highway 1A, known by a variety of names depending on the town of the moment—five miles that could take a half hour at some times of the day. Hal managed it in about six minutes that morning.

As a result, I was still on the phone when we arrived, so, to avoid losing him, I had to trot along and talk at the same time. I had called in a favor and found, through an FBI contact, whom to call at the Coast Guard.

“We actually have surveillance photos that may be of interest in the investigation. I can't say more on this phone call, but they will be made available to the folks on the case.” He was undoubtedly referring to assets the Coast Guard used to monitor smugglers, classified assets of the eye-in-the-sky variety.

“I appreciate your help. And you think the local office here will be handling the investigation?”

“Yes, ma’am, at least the search. Probably out of Station Fort Lauderdale. If they did an air search, it would have originated at Air Station Miami.”

“Thanks very much. I’ll contact them.” I was glad to disconnect, as Hal was waiting impatiently. Besides, I was starting to breathe hard, talking and trotting at the same time. I made a mental note to hit the gym.

Hal was looking at me with a question on his face.

“Coast Guard. They have satellite pictures, sounds like, which the local office will get. They’re on the case, I guess.”

“Good to hear.” His expression turned grim. “They need clear proof for me to believe it was a fuel explosion.”

We walked through the OceanLab building—a converted, upscale shopping mall that had been foreclosed, acquired by the county, and donated to Pompano State—to a patio overlooking the inlet, a wide part known locally as Hillsboro Bay. Seating had been arranged and a podium set up, but the only one present was a very tall, middle-aged man wearing tan slacks and a blue blazer. His tie sported a nautical theme.

“Hey, Shorty. This is horrible. What happened?” Hal’s tone revealed his feelings, a mixture of grief and incipient anger.

“Well, the Coasties are saying it was a fuel explosion. That’s all I’ve heard. Hi, Annette. Good to see you again, but I’m sorry about the circumstances.” We shook hands.

“Me, too. It sounds like a real tragedy, regardless of what caused it.”

Just as he was about to respond, I noticed that his attention had shifted to something over my shoulder. I turned and saw a military officer in dress whites walking onto the patio toward us.

“Lieutenant Duncan Jones, Coast Guard Station Fort Lauderdale. I take it you’re Professor Ringwold?” He stuck out a hand.

Ringwold shook it. “Correct. And this is Dr. Hal Weathers and his wife, Annette Trieri. Thanks for coming, Lieutenant. I’m glad that you were on the invitation list.”

“I came early to brief you, Professor. Um, I’m afraid that some of what I have to tell you is classified, though. I understand that you’re cleared, but...” He let the sentence hang to see if we would get the hint.

Hal did. “Lieutenant, Shorty, that is, Professor Ringwold here, is cleared through the Navy because of his research with the Naval Research Lab. It turns out that I have a very high-level Department of Energy clearance, through Los Alamos. And Annette is cleared to Top Secret through the FBI and Homeland Security. I think we’re probably all good, although this location may not be.”

“Hal’s right, Lieutenant. And I was just on the phone to your headquarters—did you get the satellite pictures they have?” I wondered if that would establish some credibility. It may have helped that Ringwold was nodding agreement.

Jones looked surprised. “Satellite pictures? No, I don’t know about satellite pictures. I’ve been in the car for the last 45 minutes. We do have some aircraft surveillance imagery, though. Is there somewhere we can be secure?”

Ringwold led us back into the building, to a laboratory with various warnings about security and a complicated lock on the insulated door. We sat down at a conference table.

“OK, here’s the story.” Jones jumped right in. “Late yesterday afternoon, at 1650 hours, we received an emergency call from the skipper of a yacht, a sport-fisherman called *Reel-Thing* based in Fort Lauderdale, from out on the Gulf Stream. They provided us with GPS coordinates about 15 clicks east of here. We scrambled a helicopter out of Miami. The *Reel-Thing* skipper said that they had seen an explosion on the horizon and motored over to investigate, but all they found was debris scattered on the surface. No victims or bodies or even remains, he said. Our helo reached the site and found the *Reel-Thing* still there, with a crew motoring around in a Zodiac looking for survivors. We took pictures.”

He opened a portfolio he was carrying and passed around a stack of 8x10 color images, which verified what he had described.

“We also scrambled one of our new high-speed response boats out of Fort Lauderdale, and it arrived on the scene within less than an hour, with some daylight left. The helicopter crew had not spotted survivors, nor bodies for that matter, and neither did the boat’s crew. They did recover quite a bit of debris, however, and we put people at work analyzing it overnight.” He paused for a breath.

“Most of the debris is fiberglass fragments, from the hull and buoyancy compartments of what was probably the *Stream-Tracker*. It’s clear that the explosion was in the stern of the boat, because the bow debris is in bigger pieces. And there was also some personal gear such as a flotation vest, the top of a woman’s swimming suit, meaning a bikini bra, an ice chest that stayed latched shut and was floating, stuff like that. We think we found some of the fiberglass from the transom—it appears to have paint on it, like lettering or something—and that’s being analyzed for chemical signatures as we speak. Uh, I guess I should say that the story in the paper was just our way of buying time.” He looked around to see if we understood.

Ringwold nodded. “You said ‘probably the *Stream-Tracker*.’ Are you sure? I mean, yeah, the *Stream-Tracker* is missing, but there may be other explanations. Could that debris be from another boat?”

There was a long pause, and Jones cocked his head sideways. “Ah, well, let’s see. The skipper of the *Reel-Thing* told us he’d seen the *Stream-Tracker* in that area earlier, and later in the evening your place here reported that it had been in the area and was missing. Some of the larger pieces, from the bow, look like Boston Whaler construction. So we inferred it’s debris from the *Stream-Tracker*. Is there any reason to doubt this?”

I jumped in. “With all due respect, Lieutenant, it seems like a positive identification would be a good thing to have. I’m an investigator for the Colorado Bureau of Investigation with a lot of FBI training under my belt, and this seems pretty basic. Is there some way someone could use the debris to make a positive ID?”

“Actually, we’re hoping to do just that. One of the reasons I came up here today was to see what help might be available.” Jones appeared both relieved and a little abashed at the same time. “One thing that would help us would be a good-quality photograph of the boat’s stern, so we can compare the paint color and lettering with that piece we found. And anyone closely familiar with the boat ought to look at the debris as well.”

Ringwold was nodding. “I’d be one of those people, and I have a photograph on the wall of my office. I’ll come down later this morning.”

* * *

At that point, it was time for the briefing that Ringwold had scheduled. An audience including several reporters, many people from the university administration, and nearly the entire Pompano State

Oceanography contingent had gathered on the patio. Shorty had a fine line to walk, and he focused on repeating the official Coast Guard story that Jones had told the public. He added some elaboration based on what Jones had said to us, emphasized that official confirmation that the wreckage was the *Stream-Tracker* was still lacking, and eulogized the three lost oceanographers just enough to be respectable. It was definitely a mixed message, but that's about as good as he could do under the circumstances, given incomplete information.

Questions from the reporters were, to me, surprisingly subdued and dealt with Nicholls' credentials and on-water experience, and the roles of the two technicians. The entire event lasted only about half an hour, but Shorty had to stay around and converse with various concerned individuals for another hour and a half.

Afterward, Hal and I rode down to the Fort Lauderdale Coast Guard station with him. He was silent on the surface streets over to I-95 and all the way to just past the airport, Fort Lauderdale – Hollywood International, and then he started talking.

"I just don't know what to think about this whole thing. There's a small part of me that wants to cling to the hope that it was some other boat—which is still a tragedy, of course, but for someone else—but the evidence is such that I just can't make that small part grow." Shorty heaved a huge sigh. "So I guess we have to face it. But I'm like you, Hal, I didn't buy the gas fumes business either, and Jones confirmed that it was just made up. Which, of course, raises the question of what did happen. And I can't think of any other accidental cause for such complete destruction. I mean, an electrical explosion, a big short or something, could disable everything on that boat, and it would float away. But even a breach of the hull wouldn't sink the thing, those Boston Whalers are truly unsinkable. So it sure looks to me like this was some kind of deliberate sabotage, or maybe an attack, using explosives."

"If that's the case, Shorty, there will be some chemical residue on that debris that the Coasties brought in. I presume they're analyzing for that. And I'm interested in those satellite pictures I heard about before." I had been thinking along the same lines. "Suppose you're right. Who'd do such a thing?"

"Yeah, right. I've been speculating about that, too. Thing is, people who might want to do bad things to Skip wouldn't go this far, or even have the ability."

Hal cleared his throat. "Just to be sure, can we eliminate your two technicians as the targets?"

"Probably, at 99% or so. They were great folks and valuable employees, but I don't think they had public visibility. And you'd think that any private grudges would be settled more privately. If there was a target, it would be Skip. His own opinion of himself was quite different from what many other people thought of him." Shorty, I could tell, was working hard at not speaking ill of the deceased.

"Could be that the boat itself was the target, I suppose. Or your research project." Hal said.

Hal was in the front passenger seat, staring out his side window at the mangroves zipping by as we worked our way out a beautiful boulevard toward the ocean. This was a new part of the metropolitan area for me, south and east of the airport, and I'm still not completely sure where we were. Shortly, we came to a drawbridge, which was just starting up, so we got in line with the rest of the traffic to wait.

"If Skip's enemies aren't suspects because they lack means, that's about all that's left, strange as it might sound." That joint observation by Hal and me wasn't earthshaking, but it changed the conversation.

Shorty thought about it. "Y'know, you both may be right. It just doesn't make sense to me that Skip would have been the target, at least not intentionally. I guess it could be that the *Stream-Tracker* was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Barring that, though, it must have been the research project."

“But you’ve talked about how the project has captured the public’s imagination.” Hal looked puzzled. “That outreach stuff you’re doing with the schools has those kids practically giddy with excitement about all this. And even the people in our condo have commented on how cool the whole idea is—when you can get stodgy old folks like that engaged, you’ve really got something.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s everyone, though, Hal. There’s been some push-back, even in the oceanography community. You’ve heard of NIMBY, I’m sure, ‘not in my back yard’.” He smiled. “Well, there’s a new one for what we’re doing: NIMO—‘not in my ocean’.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You’re saying that there are people in the scientific community who would sabotage your current measurements and kill the participants? That’s hard to believe, Shorty.”

“No, no, not people in the scientific community. Some of our colleagues, especially some of the regulatory office folks at NOAA fisheries, they’re worried about setting precedents, but even they understand that our one little installation won’t do any damage to anything.” He was talking, I figured out, about the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s responsibilities for fish-stock monitoring. “Their worry is about large, commercial installations in the future, with arrays of lots of devices. On the other hand, there are some radical environmental groups that don’t have such a balanced view of things, and we’ve heard suggestions that some of the conventional power producers are unhappy with the possible competition.”

Hal spoke up again. “You said something before, Shorty, that I hadn’t thought of, and maybe it’s the Occam’s Razor solution in all this. Maybe the *Stream-Tracker* really was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. They saw something someone didn’t want them to, and they paid the price. Isn’t there still quite a bit of smuggling in these waters?”

“Some, for sure, but I don’t know how much. Drugs and people both. And the drug smugglers have pretty bad reputations, so maybe you’re right—that’s the obvious answer.” Shorty shook his head. “Well, here we are, and maybe the Coasties will be able to enlighten us a bit more.”

* * *

1.2

The Coast Guard Station was on the barrier island, across that drawbridge over the Intracoastal Waterway, then north through the entrance to a state park. Like all U.S. government facilities these days, it was surrounded by a no-nonsense fence, and, given its military connection, this one had razor wire on the top. The guard at the gate, equipped with a sidearm, had our names on a list, fortunately. He handed us visitors’ badges and directed us toward a nondescript building next to a serious antenna mast. The station was on the Intracoastal side of the island, just across from Port Everglades, and there sat a gigantic cruise ship that dwarfed everything else in the vicinity.

Inside was a small waiting area with an enlisted Coast Guardsman who seemed to be Lieutenant Jones’ staff assistant—military protocol and duties always get me confused, though, so I could be wrong. Anyway, he asked who we were and said that the Lieutenant was waiting for us but tied up on a phone call, so would we please have seats? They were hard plastic seats designed for rugged military bottoms, it turned out, with shapes very different from mine, but I managed to keep my wriggling to a minimum.

We would have continued our speculations, I think, but for the presence of the Seaman in the room, so, instead, we all studied our phones, looking for new email. Mine was brand new, and I was still figuring it out, but Hal and Shorty were pros. They actually *answered* their email instead of just reading it. We were all engrossed in our own little screens when the Seaman's desk buzzed, and he ushered us into the Lieutenant's office, or at least that's what the door said.

But it was really a small conference room, and Lieutenant Jones was there with three other Coast Guard officers, two of whom had fancier insignia than his and all of whom were wearing blue uniforms, formal ones. They stood as we entered, and Jones began introductions.

"Captain, let me introduce Drs. Randall Ringwold and Hal Weathers and Ms. Annette Trieri. Dr. Ringwold is head of oceanography at Pompano State and Dr. Weathers and Ms. Trieri are visiting him. Ma'am, gentlemen, this is my commanding officer, Miami Sector Captain Hector Galliari, and these officers are Commander Paul Snedaker of Miami Sector's investigative division and Chief Warrant Officer Garrett Kraus, an agent of the Coast Guard Investigative Service. I've explained to them about your clearance levels. Um, it seems that we have some developments since I last spoke with you." He gestured us into seats around the conference table. "Captain?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Folks, let me first pass along condolences from the very top, the Coast Guard Commandant in Washington and from my Rear Admiral here in Miami, who commands the Seventh District. They are in the loop on this and my presence here is an indication of just how seriously the United States Coast Guard is taking this incident of piracy."

He paused, and the three of us civilians were too stunned to say anything, I think, until I blurted out, "Piracy? As in walking the plank and so on? Really? Arrr!"

Captain Galliari sat stone faced while just hints of smiles flicked across the faces of his men. "For us, piracy is simply the term for felonies on the high seas, Ms. Trieri. And the new information that Lieutenant Jones mentioned suggests that we have three murders to contend with here."

I could feel my face getting red. "My apologies, Captain. Forgive my ignorance—I guess it comes from serving in a state with no oceans except those very old ones we see evidence of in the rocks."

"Not necessary, Ms. Trieri, it happens all the time." He let out a little sigh and shrugged almost imperceptibly. "Just like the outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid have come to be folklore heroes out west, there's something about seventeenth-century pirates that has captured the public's fancy. Certainly those Hollywood movies haven't helped. But I'm sure you know they're no joke in reality."

He continued, "In any case, we believe that we now do have a positive identification of the wreckage as the *Stream-Tracker*, I'm sorry to have to tell you, and, what's more, we found indications of chemical residue on a piece of the transom. High-explosive residue, HDX, the chemical used in many shoulder-fired, heat-seeking missiles. That's why Chief Warrant Officer Kraus is here. He's been assigned the investigation, and he'll be keeping my office in the loop via Commander Snedaker. Before you ask, you should understand that it's our practice for CGIS investigators to be Chief Warrant Officers. Chief Kraus is one of our best—he has to be, given all the wild and crazy things that happen in our district. Chief?"

"Thank you, Captain. Think of CGIS as the Coast Guard equivalent of Navy's NCIS. You've probably seen the TV show about them—we even have our share of wise-ass investigators like that show does. Like them, we're independent from just about every aspect of the normal chain of command. In this case, though, we'll be working closely with people here at Station Fort Lauderdale and in the Miami Sector generally. I'm quite confident that this is not an internal Coast Guard issue." He smiled.

“Now, one thing we’d like to do is to have a close liaison with your lab at Pompano State, Dr. Ringwold. Because of her investigative background,” Kraus tapped a file on the table in front him, “which I have to say is extraordinary, the CGIS proposes to make Ms. Trieri a full member of our team both to provide that liaison and to assist with the investigation. Again, to anticipate your question, Ms. Trieri, it’s very common for us to employ civilian investigators.”

This time I really was speechless. That he’d assembled such a fat file on me so quickly and was offering me a job was hard to believe. But Hal rescued me, if you can call it that.

“Well, I can vouch for the wise-ass part.”

It annoyed me that he was too far away for me to kick him under the table.

* * *

The Captain and the Commander departed after once again expressing their condolences, leaving the rest of us to get down to business.

“So you’re sure it was the *Stream-Tracker*, huh?” Shorty sounded ready to give up hope.

“Let’s show the pictures, Lieutenant.” Kraus got up to dim the lights while Jones fiddled with his laptop. “This first one, Dr. Ringwold, is a side-by-side look at a piece from the transom that was recovered yesterday, cropped to leave off the ragged edges of the broken fiberglass, and a cropped section of that photograph you gave to Lieutenant Jones earlier this morning. Can you tell which is which?”

I sure couldn’t, but, being a crackerjack investigator and all, I was suspicious. “No Photoshop on either one, or anything like that?”

Kraus smiled. “I’m going to like working with you, Ms. Treri. Nope, no Photoshop or anything. Just cropping to show the same areas. And the photograph one is blown up, of course.”

Shorty had slumped down in his chair far enough to justify his nickname. “Ah, crap. My worst fears. Damn, damn, damn.”

“I’ll add my sincere condolences to the others’, Dr. Ringwold. And be assured that the CGIS is going to spare no effort to clear this. Lieutenant? Let’s see the next one.”

Jones poked the keyboard, and a picture of a yellow bikini top appeared, arranged clinically on a black background. I couldn’t help but think that it was not much fabric to cover an obviously well-endowed woman, one who didn’t need a whole lot of support, and it harked back to the twenty-somethings on the beach for me. Modest, it wasn’t. Then something caught my eye.

“Is the real thing available? I’d like to have a close look at it.”

Jones went over to a footlocker sitting on the credenza, opened it, and lifted out the yellow top with a pair of large forceps that were in there too. He handed the forceps to me.

“I assume you noticed that someone cut these straps with something sharp, Chief?”

Kraus looked startled.

“Huh? I haven’t really examined any of this yet, beyond doing an overlay of the two transom pictures to be sure about the identification.” He leaned across the table and squinted at the bikini top. “Damn. You’re right. We’ll have my lab tech figure out if it was scissors or a knife.”

“A knife, I think, but it’ll take a microscope to be sure. This puts a new wrinkle on matters, doesn’t it?” I knew I’d have to give this some thought. “Are there more? Pictures, I mean?”

“Not of the bikini, but lots of other things. What I thought what we should do now, Ms. Trieri, gentlemen, is to look at a couple more important ones and make a plan for tomorrow. I mean, there’s no way we can clear this case today. Can I assume you’ll accept my suggestion about joining us, Ms. Trieri?”

I pointed at Jones, and he advanced to the next picture, an aerial view of the ocean, with boats. “I need to talk with my boss in Denver, although I think it’ll be a formality. I just finished a case, and this is a slow time where I’m assigned. What’s this?”

“A satellite image from one of the classified birds we use to watch for smugglers. This is the first of a sequence, and they can be zoomed in to see all sorts of interesting things. It’s good that Lieutenant Jones explained your security clearances to me earlier, as it gave us a chance to verify them.” Kraus walked over to the projection screen and began pointing to the image. “Now, this is the *Reel-Thing*, and this is the *Stream-Tracker*. In fact, if you zoom in, you can see the yellow bikini in action on the *Stream-Tracker*.”

“That would be Amelia Albright.” Shorty had shaken his earlier depression and become engaged. “Our best electronics tech. Except you shouldn’t be able to see the bikini top because she’s supposed to be wearing a personal flotation device. And our PFD’s are pretty much a torso cover-up.”

“Well, in this shot, she’s not really wearing the top, just lying on it, sunbathing on the bow. What’s obvious is the bottom, its and hers.” How Kraus said this with a straight face is beyond me, but he did.

“Now, the important thing here is that the time of this image is 1512 local time. Remember that the call from the *Reel-Thing* was logged at 1650?” He looked at us until we all nodded. “Well, have a look at this next image. Duncan?”

The screen switched to another picture of the ocean, this time with only one boat plus a little raft or something. And there seemed to be quite a bit of clutter on the ocean surface around them.

“This is a half hour later, and everything is displaced a couple of nautical miles north because of the current. The *Reel-Thing* is there in the middle, and the small blotch to its right side is a Zodiac rubber boat. They’re both motoring in the patch of debris that used to be the *Stream-Tracker*. The time is 1545 local.” Kraus’s expression was somewhere between a snarl and a triumphant grin.

Hal cleared his throat. “So it took them another hour to call this in, hmm? Are there any images between these two?”

Kraus shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. We can pull these back, though, and look at a bigger area. That would show, in that first shot, two additional boats, one north-bound somewhat to the east of this image and another south-bound, somewhat to the west. Both are high-speed recreational boats, what people generically call ‘cigarette boats’, and both transited the area here during the time between these two pictures, just after the first one. So we’ve got three candidates for the missile, and an hour’s worth of time discrepancy on the *Reel-Thing*.”

“No doubt you’ve started the search for the other two boats?” I wanted to deal with the easy stuff first.

“Yep, and the north-bound one disappeared sometime between 1715 and 1745, the southbound disappeared between 1745 and 1815. We have these images every half hour, so where they disappeared to can be narrowed down by quite a bit. The rest, we’re working on.”

Hal spoke up again. “If there’s an hour of time discrepancy, there must be an hour’s space discrepancy, too, four miles or so? Shorty, do you have your research people file float plans or something? We can tell where they wound up. Do you know where they started?”

Shorty looked surprised. “We do require float plans, but I don’t recall theirs. I’ll have to check. You’re suggesting that the explosion wasn’t where the *Reel-Thing* people want us to think it was, I guess?”

“Where and when, yeah. Maybe there’s something important about the where.”

One point for Hal, I thought, and then I asked my pay-off question. “What have you found out about the *Reel-Thing*?”

“It’s a sport-fisherman out of Fort Lauderdale, available for day charters. We’ve got people following that up.”

* * *

Somehow, it had become one in the afternoon, and Chief Kraus had the good graces to return to his earlier comment about making a plan for tomorrow instead of trying to solve all the world’s problems today.

And my stomach was starting to complain about its emptiness.

Fortunately, our two hosts were also ready for lunch and, besides, they had various other afternoon commitments, they said.

We asked about local opportunities for food and were directed to a place on the Intracoastal called Jimbos, just south of the drawbridge. Lieutenant Jones put it in the category of serviceable and authentic Florida, an outside deck under a tiki hut roof on the water. Try the seared ahi tuna salad, he suggested.

Ten minutes, conference table to dining table, including navigating the gate through that razor-wire-topped fence, turned out to be about what I was hoping for. It wasn’t long after that that Hal and I had those ahi salads in front of us, looking delicious. Shorty, in a fit of comfort-food mania, had gone for a grilled mahi sandwich with fries.

“So, Annette,” Shorty did a pretty good job of talking with his mouth full, “are you going to take this liaison position and become a CGSI agent?”

“Well, like I said, I have to talk with my boss. And Hal and I need to figure out whether it will work.” I looked at him only to find that he was poking at his salad with little interest.

This time we were close enough, so I gave him a little kick under the table. “And if there’s some problem with it, well, we’ll work it out together, right, Hal?”

“Hmm?” He looked up, trying to pretend innocence. “Right. Sure.”

As I mentioned, my smart phone was brand new at that time, so I wasn’t familiar with all of its capabilities. One of them, I knew then, was texting, but that’s still something I try to avoid. It’s just too, well, quick-and-dirty to be helpful as communication. Still, I’d already learned some of the texting jargon. And my response to Hal if I had voiced it—or texted it—would have been *WTF??*

It was fortunate that Shorty’s mahi sandwich seemed to be cheering him up, because he came to the rescue of an awkward silence.

“Sorry I’ve been so quiet today, but I’ve been thinking a lot. One thing I’ve been wrestling with already is what to do about this big project that Skip was principal investigator of. Believe it or not, I was approached this morning by two other faculty members who were so kind as to volunteer to take the thing over as PI.” Shorty rolled his eyes. “Not that they have designs on the eleven million or so that’s still available in the project budget. No, they were willing to make the *sacrifice* to take this on.”

Hal came alive. He looked up at me, winked and patted my hand, then turned to Shorty. “Shorty. Do you mean to suggest that some of your professors may not be entirely candid with you about their motives? Really? Why, who ever heard of such a thing in academia?”

Shorty’s dour expression morphed into mirth. “Hal! What an insight! I never thought of that!”

And they both broke into such gleeful laughter that I couldn’t help but join in.

When Shorty got himself under control, and swallowed the fistful of French fries that he had stuffed in his mouth, he continued.

“Anyway, what’s occurred to me is that we do indeed need a new PI for that project. And maybe the best way to do that is to have an interim PI who can get it over this bump in the road—not that I’m trying to minimize Skip’s death, or Amelia’s or Jorge’s, either, but I do have to think of the future. And moving into the future is what this project needs to do. In the long run, of course, we’ll need to find someone permanent. But maybe we should defer that in favor of an interim PI.”

Hal was now actually eating his salad instead of just poking at it. “I had to deal with things like this, sort of, not this tragic and sudden, but a bit like this, when I was Dean. And you’re right, Shorty, buying time with an interim person can be helpful. Especially if the entity in question is in need of organization, or fixing, or some other kind of help. Is this project in disarray? I mean, of course, aside from losing its PI?”

“We haven’t really talked about that, have we? Well, I think that ‘disarray’ would be a bit of understatement. Thing is, between my office and its actual execution, the project has a layer of insulation, Pete Chu in the OceanLab Director’s office. Skip and Pete were buddy-buddy and liked to do things their own way, even though both report to me. I was letting them handle the project until I got a report from my external advisory committee that scared the crap out of me. Then I looked into it and found that the whole thing is headed for a train wreck. And it wouldn’t do for that to happen. We got a total of about sixteen million for this project, which is an astronomical amount of money for Pompano State, and there’s a consortium of universities involved, some with their own pots of money. Our reputation is on the line here, and the deans, the provost, and the president are all on my side.”

A thought popped into my head. “Let me guess. Dr. Chu is one of those who would make the purely altruistic sacrifice to take over the project, if you asked him nicely.”

Hal grinned, but Shorty laughed out loud. “Absolutely! He’s extremely busy, but he would reluctantly be willing to step in to do the additional work to manage the project if the university really needs him to. You nailed it, Annette.”

“She’s heard a lot of war stories from me about how academics operate.” Hal reached over and patted my hand again. “You said there’s about eleven million left? What’s the five been spent on?”

Shorty rolled his eyes again. “Well, some of it isn’t really spent, just promised, ‘obligated’ as our budget people call it, and ‘encumbered’ on their spreadsheets. About two million is in that sort of limbo, promised on contracts to other universities to work with us on the project. Um, there’s some computer modeling up at Florida State, for example, on how the Gulf Stream might respond to having some of its energy turned into electricity. And the people up the road at Florida Atlantic have a contract to do research on sea turtle populations. We’re worried about sea turtles.”

He looked up at the underside of the thatched roof and pondered. “The other three million got frittered away on toys, mostly. The *Stream-Tracker*, for example. They bought a brand new, top-of-the-line Boston Whaler, turned it into a hot rod with those three big outboards, and set to work on modifying it and buying gadgets for it. While it was still in one piece, it was probably the most well equipped and expensive Boston Whaler in existence—including the trailer and big pickup they bought to haul it

around, they put nearly a million into that damned thing. Then there was the OceanLab computer network, which needed upgrading, and their computer labs, too. And all the professors with offices there needed computer upgrades, and do they ever have the taste for high-end systems. Finally, there's our experimental energy conversion device, the turbine. It's not very big, just a small-scale prototype, but it's proving to be a money pit. And it looks like Skip didn't really go through a formal design process, so we may have to start over on it."

"I hate to ask this, because I think I know the answer—was the *Stream-Tracker* insured?" Hal winced in anticipation of the answer.

"As a state university, we're officially self-insured, and purchasing commercial insurance is not allowed." Shorty shook his head. "Of course, in practice that means that it's not going to be replaced any time soon, unless we pop for another million from our remaining funds. But they need to last at least another five years."

Shorty drummed his fingers on the table as the server came by with our check. "It's occurred to me that I've not been doing the sales job I'd intended."

He sighed. "Well, I guess that's why I'm a professor and not a stock broker. But Annette's possible assignment to the CGIS team got me thinking. Hal, do you suppose I could twist your arm into becoming a Visiting Professor and the acting PI for a while, long enough for us to find a more permanent replacement?"

* * *

1.3

I was fascinated by the idea of working with the CGIS people, as much to learn about how they operate as for the specific case. Hal, I knew, would find a short-term appointment to the Pompano State faculty rewarding, even if it did involve preventing the impending train wreck, and even if it would put a crimp in his ongoing work to organize his new institute back at home

But we really needed to sit together and have a long chat about the whole thing before we made commitments, not to mention having conversations with our respective bosses in Colorado.

I thought about this as I visited the ladies' room after lunch and tried to figure out a strategy. But when I returned to the table, Shorty was signing the credit card slip, and Hal was putting his phone away.

He smiled at me. "I just made us a dinner reservation at a nice quiet place where we can talk about all this. It's not every day that we *both* get new job offers."

Shorty nodded. "And I promise not to talk about it anymore today, except to say that we'll really hustle on finding someone more permanent if Hal accepts."

And he was true to his word. He drove us back to OceanLab so we could pick up our car, and talked instead about all sorts of other things. Now that I think about it, though, those other things were the sales job that he hadn't done before. I'd be surprised if the section of the Gold Coast around the Broward / Palm Beach county line has ever been painted in such rosy colors as Shorty used that afternoon. And I also recall that he dropped in a little weather tidbit about how Denver was in the throes of one of those big spring snowstorms at the time. Maybe he *should* have been a stock broker.

We got back to the condo just after three, and I noticed that the newspaper had fallen off the table on the balcony and blown around a bit in the breeze. It was startling to think that it was just over six hours ago that we'd been peacefully sitting there reading it, so much had happened in the meantime.

My conversation with Rod Andersen, CBI Director, went swimmingly—he agreed that experience working with CGIS would be invaluable and made me promise to provide training for CBI people when I returned. What I heard of Hal's conversation sounded encouraging as well. He wasn't asking permission so much as informing whoever it was on the phone of his intentions, but apparently there wasn't any push-back.

So it began to look as if we'd be staying around even though we hadn't had a chance to discuss it all. And then it occurred to me that I'd come for a week's vacation instead of an assignment. My wardrobe just wasn't up to police work, I knew, which meant only one thing, a thing that I rather dread, shopping. I mentioned the problem, and Hal sent me off in the car to a mall he knew about in Boca Raton.

Fortunately, the place was big enough that it had sensible stores in addition to the glitzy ones—Bloomingdale's and Neiman Marcus I just didn't have any use for. By 5:30, I was back with appropriate clothes for the CGIS work, including a couple of pairs of khaki slacks, several polo shirts in muted colors, some Topsider boat shoes, and a summer-weight blue blazer cut full enough to give me room for a side-arm in a holster in the small of my back. Rod and the CBI safety people, I knew, wouldn't like that choice, but, then, who was going to tell them? And I could always get the blazer tailored when I got home.

To complete my outfit, I was hoping to score one of those cool Coast Guard ball caps from the Fort Lauderdale station.

That evening, we finally did have a chance to talk it over, and even though it was pretty much after the fact, it was a good conversation to have. Hal's reservations were at a place in downtown Boca Raton called Truluck's, an elegant seafood restaurant with, Hal assured me, all the Florida stone crabs I would want as well as a great wine list.

The mention of stone crabs reminded me of our courtship, which had been of the whirlwind variety. I first met him on the campus of Frémont State in Durango when I was doing investigations for the Durango PD and one of his professors got killed by a drug dealer's goons—not that the professor was innocent in the whole thing, mind you. I noticed electricity between us right away. Then, after I shot one of said goons and got put on routine administrative leave, I jumped on a plane for Miami to meet up with an old girlfriend.

She, though, had obtained a personality transplant from somewhere, and we just didn't connect. So I was trying to figure out what to do all by myself on Key Biscayne, sitting on the beach-side deck of my motel's bar, when who should turn up but Hal. I guess we'd call it "stalking" now, but he was so sweet and careful about not coming on strong that it was irresistible. We wound up spending a long weekend together exploring far south Florida and the upper Keys, and he introduced me to Florida stone crabs, a culinary experience I've never forgotten.

Because they're not available in Colorado, at least not in Durango or Winter Park, I hadn't had them for a couple of years, but the memory made my mouth water when he mentioned them.

The only bad thing I can say about Truluck's is that the black ceramic tile in the entry and bar made me feel like those kittens you see on a glass table, scared of not being able to see the floor that they can feel with their feet. But the feeling vanished when our waiter, a very helpful fellow named Ron, brought the bottle of Puligny-Montrachet that Hal, with his advice, ordered for me.

“Oh!” I said when I tasted it. “This will work. Yum. Tell me, Ron. Is it gauche to have a stone crab appetizer before a stone crab dinner?”

He looked surprised in a reserved sort of way and then smiled. “Well, ma’am, not in my book. You could make it a tasting that way, by trying a couple of large ones for your appetizer and a big plate of mediums for dinner. See how they compare. Or...hmmm...maybe I’d do it the other way around. Mediums first.”

I decided on that other way around, and asked for the green salad between the two. Hal ordered the stone crab dinner as well, but chose the barbeque shrimp for his appetizer and a Caesar salad.

“So,” he said, as I was digging in to a knuckle on my first medium crab claw, “it seems as if we’ve decided to stick around and help these poor folks out. Either that or you’ve got a lot of new polo shirts to cart home.”

“It’s OK with my boss, and it sounded to me as if no one is going to give you trouble about it. And I checked. Shorty wasn’t jiving us. There’s a snowstorm back home.” I popped a big bite into my mouth. “Mmm. Yes! This is just right. How’s the shrimp?”

“Tasty, good sauce.” Hal swallowed. “I guess I worry about how long I might be stuck in the acting PI role. Shorty said he’d get right to finding someone more permanent, but it could still take months.”

I eased the meat off a claw with the little fork and dipped it in the mustard sauce. “I thought of that, too. I mean, there’s no way to know how long this investigation will take.”

He nodded. “Yeah, we could both be here for a while. Of course, that’s not so bad until about June, though, weather-wise. But hurricane season starts then. And at least your job as liaison will be easier with me at Pompano State.”

“Yup. And I bet you can help with the investigation, too, by telling me all of the gossip you hear. All that stuff with the satellite pictures this morning was pretty telling, but we still don’t know of a solid motive. For all we know, Skip Nicholls was sleeping with the wrong person’s wife, or something like that.” I shrugged.

“Now there’s a possibility. I was at a party last Friday, before you arrived, and he was hitting on anything in a skirt.”

“Gee, I’m sorry I missed that,” I said, just as our salads arrived.

* * *

We were back at home, as I resolved to force myself to think of it, sitting on the sea-side balcony listening to what surf there was splashing on the beach, when I remembered my phone. As new as it was, I kept forgetting it because it didn’t have the little belt holster that I was used to from my previous one, one of those oh-so-passé, and dumb, flip phones. So I set the last of the Puligny on the table—Ron had been a gem and helped me to smuggle the remainder of the bottle out of the restaurant—and went to find it. And, surprise, it had voice mail waiting for me. That meant I had to fumble around and find the instruction manual that I’d carefully packed somewhere just for something like this, and then figure out how to get to the message.

It actually turned out to be fairly easy, and I discovered that the message was from an area code 305 number. Hal told me that was Miami.

“Ms. Trieri, this is Garrett Kraus calling, CGIS. I don’t know if you’ve made a decision about joining our investigation, but I really hope you do. By the way, your observation that the bikini top was cut with a knife has been verified. Anyway, if you do want to work with us, and I hope you do—oh

sorry, I said that already—please call me first thing Thursday morning. I think your cell phone will have the number, but here it is anyway.” And he rattled off a phone number, then continued. “We try to keep our bureaucracy to a minimum, but there still is some, so you’ll need to come down to the Miami Sector headquarters to get signed on and so forth. I’ll have the paperwork all ready, but we really do need you here in person. Hopefully, that’ll be your only trip down here. And if we can get this done in the morning, I’d like to go find that boat we saw, the *Reel-Thing*, and have a little chat with its owner. I’m up and going by six in the morning, and I’d sure like to hear from you. Take care.”

That’s why, after an early breakfast together, Hal and I came to be headed south on I-95 Thursday morning a bit after seven. I was going to drop him off at the airport so he could pick up the rental car he’d reserved—I got to keep the Mustang GT convertible he’d originally rented—and then continue on down to Miami. One of my law-enforcement resource sites on the internet told us that the Coast Guard station there was on a little island just off MacArthur Causeway, and that the main gate opened to qualified visitors at eight. I’d called Garrett and he assured me that I would be expected.

“So, I really appreciate having the use of this car, Hal. This GPS gizmo is going to help immensely. What did you reserve for yourself, anyway?”

“Well, I did give it some careful thought. I found a luxury rental outfit, and, you know, I’ve always wanted to drive a Porsche. But I doubt that Shorty is going to be paying me enough to justify that. Another thing that seems like a good idea is a pickup truck, so you could use it when you need it for all the dead bodies that you’ll probably turn up.” He grinned, and I reached over and slapped his thigh. “But, well, the parking in that building of ours is pretty limited, and the spaces are too small. So I opted for a little zippy car. I’ve got to negotiate when I get there, you know, find out just what they have available and all. It’s early in the day, so maybe I’ll have choices. And I’m going to extend the rental window on this car as well. We’re covered. But don’t leave the top down too much. You’ll get sunburned.”

The first thing I did after he walked into the terminal was to put the top down.

Because Hal had been in town for a while, he’d already purchased a SunPass, one of those radio-frequency identification tags that you charge to a credit card and use for toll roads and such. It came in quite handy after I dropped Hal off, because there was an express lane on I-95 down through the north end of Miami that let me cruise past the worst of the morning congestion. It was what got me to Terminal Island, a very nautical-looking facility, just a bit before 8. As a bonus, the guard let me in a few minutes early.

I found a visitor parking spot next to a good-sized ship of some kind with that familiar red stripe, and I was staring at it when I heard Garrett’s voice behind me.

“It’s something, isn’t? 210 feet. Our Reliance-Class cutter. Bad guys beware.”

I turned to shake hands with him and found him wearing civilian clothes instead of the uniform he’d worn the day before, jeans and running shoes, with a Hawaiian shirt under a windbreaker.

“I’m thinking it has a significant intimidation factor in addition to its real capabilities,” I said.

He laughed. “They probably didn’t design it that way, but, yeah. And there’s a high-speed pursuit vessel on the stern for the whack-jobs who think that they can out run us. Anyway, glad you found us. But speaking of intimidation, I didn’t think to ask if you were carrying.”

“I’m here on vacation, so I decided to skip the paperwork hassle of bringing anything.”

“That’s good, the not carrying part, because until you’re official it could be problematic here on the base.” His amusement took on a philosophical edge. “But if you didn’t bring anything with you, we’ll

have to get you something. And, well, this *is* Miami. We can probably find you whatever you want. Need a full-automatic Uzi, by chance?"

"Mmm. Awfully hard to conceal, I'd think. How about something compact that I can put in the small of my back?"

"You can do that? We've got a rule against it."

"So do we. Something about possible injury if you fall on it. But the rule is in Colorado and I'm here." I put a conspiratorial smirk into my smile.

"Well, everyone would sure feel better if you used a shoulder holster. That blazer looks big enough. Can you manage that?"

"Everyone but me, probably. You guys just don't have the right anatomy to appreciate how uncomfortable they can be. But maybe I can get things adjusted to make it work."

He took me into the main building, and a several hour processing process began. By the time I was finished, though, I was official, beyond official, actually, because I was authorized to ignore the base Captain's orders if I needed to, equipped with a really shiny gold-plated shield, and armed with their standard Sig-Sauer 229, a nicely compact .40 caliber automatic with a 12-round magazine that would have fit comfortably on my back if they would have let me wear it that way. As it was, it took quite a bit of fiddling to get the shoulder holster to work, and even then I wasn't going to win any quick-draw contests.

I knew that Hal liked them, and I did, too, for that matter. But sometimes they're just in the way.

* * *

The last stop was back in the main building's lobby, where I found Garrett waiting in a side chair, with a ball cap on his lap. He stood up and handed it my way, and it occurred to me that this just might be fun—tooling around South Florida in a Mustang convertible with a 30-something guy who bore a resemblance to Tom Selleck in his Hawaii days. I tried the cap on, adjusted the size a bit, and found I liked it.

He cocked his head sideways and smiled. "Perfect! Now you've got the CGIS look. Except you're going to have to learn to scowl."

I felt my knees go a little weak—it was the killer Tom Selleck smile that he had. But that happy thought couldn't hide the rumbling in my stomach.

"So, you said something about finding that other boat, the *Reel-Thing*, but I need some lunch first."

"Me, too, actually. Our people found out that the *Reel-Thing* docks at a marina just off Southeast 17th Street in Fort Lauderdale, Cove 17 Marina, it's called—there's a new Westin Hotel next door to it. And all sorts of restaurants around that area. Unless you're so hungry that you want to try the mess on the base here." He grinned. "To paraphrase a famous Hollywood guy, 'Just how hungry do you feel?'"

I considered it. "I'm hungry, and I'm sure that the mess has perfectly fine food. But let's go see what they have at this marina. We can scope the place out while we eat."

He told me that he lived in North Miami, so, rather than having to come all the way back south to the base, we took two cars up to Fort Lauderdale. With the GPS, I had no trouble at all locating the Cove 17 complex, and I found him next door at the Westin's outside lounge, at a table with a metal briefcase on it. He'd ordered a smoked fish appetizer, some kind of fish salad with crackers, and I stuffed a big bite into my mouth almost as I sat down.

“Mmm. Yum. I’m starving.” I looked over at the marina, which had a new look to it. “Not a bad place at all to have your boat docked, is it?”

“Probably pretty expensive, but they undoubtedly pick up charters from the hotel’s guests. I’m told that the marina there has been around a long time, sort of just existing, but when they built this Westin next door to it, business picked up dramatically. And I’m thinking their charter rates are what you’d charge Westin customers.” He waved at a server, and we ordered lunch.

“The *Reel-Thing* is over there on the second dock, almost all the way out.” He waved toward the left side of the marina. “We’ve had it under surveillance since this morning. Oh, and we found out that the other two boats in those satellite pictures aren’t worth worrying about. We’re all in on the *Reel-Thing*.”

Even though I was hungry, I stuck with a salad for lunch—a salad with shrimp on it, though—so I’d be ready for action if need be. Garrett ordered a fried grouper sandwich but got a side of fruit instead of fries.

“Jimmy—my partner—he’s been after me about eating better, and this way I can tell him I had fruit for lunch.” His grin was impish.

It took a minute for the comment to sink in. Sure, he probably had a regular CGIS partner. But would that person be concerned about Garrett’s diet?

Then I realized how lucky I was. I could flirt with a guy who reminded me of a movie star with total impunity. This, I thought, *was* going to be fun.

After lunch, we stopped by the dock-master’s office.

Garrett flashed his shield. “CGIS, federal agents. We’re going to take a stroll around the docks.”

The response was less than cordial. “Oh? Got a warrant do you?”

“Well, the way I look at it, you’ve got two choices.” Garrett smiled that winning smile again. “Either we get to walk around out there to our hearts’ content, or I make a phone call and a team of Coast Guardsmen shows up and sets to work on a detailed inspection of everything here, boats, docks, pilings, office paperwork, everything. And, of course, they’ll be telling boat owners about how you didn’t cooperate. Want me to make the call?”

He had pulled his cell phone from his shirt pocket by then, and the dock-master quickly got religion, not that he was happy about it.

“Let’s walk around a bit before we try that second dock there. Establish a casual presence, look at the boat from different angles, you know?” Garrett was doing his best tourist impression, so I started rubbernecking as well.

After a suitable interval of wandering, we strolled out the second dock, and presently came to a sign advertising the *Reel-Thing* as available for charter at \$1,000 for a half day and \$1,750 for a full day, for up to six people. But the boat was deserted and closed up, and the gangplank was sitting on the aft deck. There was a rubber boat on the cabin roof hooked to two little crane-like gadgets, which I’ve since learned are called davits.

Garrett, with the metal briefcase in his hand, hopped on board and walked over to rap on the hatch to the cabin.

When nothing happened, he came back to where I was standing on the finger pier.

“The thing is, if you were going to fire a missile from one boat at another over any real distance, you’d probably want to get as high as you could, right? That would help your missile’s infrared system

to lock on more effectively to the target, right?” His question was probably rhetorical, but I couldn’t help but lean back and look up at the big metal structure with the platform at the top. “It’s called a ‘tuna tower,’ and it’s helpful for spotting fish. And if the missile, or RPG or whatever, that took out the *Stream-Tracker* originated from this boat, chances are that it was from up there, right?”

I nodded, still looking up at that tower. “Makes sense to me. I’ll cover you from down here, if you want to go up. What’s in that briefcase?”

“A quick-and-dirty analysis kit, like the ones that TSA uses in airports, but better. More sensitive.”

“Huh?” I was beginning to feel that my relatively sheltered existence in the Colorado mountains was a little too sheltered.

“Haven’t you ever been at an airport where some TSA person swabs down someone’s luggage and then sticks the pad into a gadget? That does a quick-and-dirty analysis for explosive signatures. If they find it on your luggage, well, get ready for a thorough search, the rubber glove kind. This thing,” he wagged the briefcase, “is a better version of that. And, yeah, keep an eye peeled.”

He began to make his way up the ladder to the platform at the top of the tuna tower, and I tried not to watch only him.

Even so, I missed the scruffy fellow with the beard coming down the dock and didn’t see him making the phone call.

* * *

1.4

Garrett was busily taking swab samples from various spots on the *Reel-Thing*’s tuna tower when a golf cart carrying three uniformed security guards, all wearing sidearms, rolled down the dock. It was then that I noticed the scruffy, bearded guy off to the side, sitting on a dock box.

One of the guards, a large fellow whose uniform was a couple of sizes too small, walked toward me down the finger pier, his right hand on the grip of his automatic. Before he could say anything, I decided to try to defuse the situation.

I turned on my Level 2 voice, keeping Level 3 in reserve just in case. “Halt! We’re federal agents, CGIS. Take your hand away from your weapon, now!”

That was enough to bring him up short, and he was smart enough move his hand to a less threatening position. I backed up a few steps so that I could see his compatriots without looking away from him.

“I’m going to take my ID out of my pocket, so don’t get nervous.” I retrieved the little wallet with my new shield and ID card from my left hip pocket, and held it up with the shield showing. “We need to talk with the owner of this boat, or, barring that, with the captain.”

The guard had been squinting at my shield but finally seemed to be satisfied. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “That’s him with the beard, up there on the dock. He called us just now.”

“Thank you, Mr., ah, Clumley” I’d discovered his little name badge. “I think we can handle things from here.”

After just enough hesitation to make me wonder if he was going to take the hint, he did, turning back to the others. “Let’s go, guys. They’re for real, Rafe.”

“Rafe” turned out to be Rafe Wellingworth, skipper of the *Reel-Thing*. He was clearly conflicted about us—we weren’t the threat he’d first thought, but he was still nervous. The fact that he had not bolted when I identified myself was, I thought, a point in his favor, so I tried to evoke a casual demeanor as I approached him. We introduced ourselves and decided that a conversation in the *Reel-Thing*’s cabin would be a good idea.

He walked down the finger pier, jumped on board, and put out the gangplank for me. I couldn’t tell if he was just being polite or if I looked like that much of a landlubber. Of course, I *was* a landlubber all the way, but I was hoping I didn’t look it. I mean, I had those Topsiders, didn’t I?

Garrett, whom I’d noticed making a phone call, came down the ladder from the tuna tower about the time that Rafe unlocked the cabin. He rolled his eyes and nodded while Rafe was looking the other way.

We all got settled, and Rafe asked if we’d like some water, which he produced from a little refrigerator. The air conditioning felt good.

“Now, then, agents. What can I do for you? And why, pray tell, were you up there on my tuna tower?” He had looked past me and was now staring at Garrett.

Garrett blinked a few times. “You mean you really have no idea?”

“How would I know? You show up and start climbing all over my boat. What’s going on?”

“Well, you did make that call about an explosion on Tuesday. And talked to our crewmembers during the search, right?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. I was here on shore on Tuesday, doing errands.”

Garrett looked surprised. “But the boat was out, right?”

“Right, yeah. It was a bareboat afternoon charter. An Asian guy and a some others that I really didn’t meet. They must have been the ones that your crew talked with. I mean, I can probably find several people who will remember seeing me Tuesday afternoon, those guards, in fact. I had a long conversation with Jim Clumley about what the Dolphins need to do in the draft this spring, mid-day some time. He’ll remember, I’m sure.”

Garrett was astonished, but I didn’t know to be. “Bareboat? This? Really?”

Rafe was embarrassed. “Yeah, well...see, the thing is, it’s been slow this spring. And this guy offered me more than five times the usual rate, six grand altogether, cash, for the afternoon and talked a good line about his experience, how he used to own a Hatteras 60-footer and so on. He showed me the right documentation. And she came back in fine shape, even cleaned up. They were good customers. I hope they come back.”

“Well, I’m thinking you won’t see them again. What was the name on the documentation?”

He looked even more embarrassed. “Uh, well. John Smith.”

“An Asian guy with the name John Smith? Christ! What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking about how that six grand would help my balance sheet, that’s what. Times are tough.”

I could see that Garrett was trying to relax. “Have you done any cleaning since the boat came back on Tuesday?”

“Just the usual housekeeping, my stuff, trash and so on. What’s this about?” Rafe looked back and forth at the two of us.

“We’re going to need to have a forensics team examine your boat, Mr. Wellingworth—I already called them and they’re on the way. Because you’re here now, that probably means you don’t have a charter this afternoon, and that’s good. The team should be finished by this evening.” Garrett looked around the cabin. “If you don’t mind, I’ll take a little self-guided tour while Agent Trieri here gets descriptions of your Tuesday clients. We need as much information about them as you can remember, Mr. Wellingworth.”

Rafe could hardly object, but he obviously didn’t like it, so I treated him with kid gloves as I tried to coax all he knew about his Tuesday clients from him.

* * *

Garrett and I waited until the forensics team arrived and got to work, and then we retired to the table where we’d had lunch. I discovered I was exhausted.

He looked at his watch. “Well, it’s too early for me to have anything but iced tea.”

The thought of a lemonade sounded good, so I ordered two, which perked me right up. I guess I’d been dehydrated. Even though the humidity was high enough to make the air feel sticky, the heat was enough to dry you out, it seems.

“In addition to the usual stuff, that team of ours will take better swab samples than I could, and maybe we can find a pattern. I found evidence of something, maybe the missile fuel, but you could argue that it got that from passing through an exhaust plume, or from the smoke of the explosion. But if that’s the case, the residue would be pretty uniform. If there’s a pattern, though, that’ll tell us what direction the thing was fired.” He shrugged. “Thing is, none of that’s any help without those mysterious clients. How’d he do with descriptions?”

“He talked to only one of them, but he says there were four altogether. The other three were fetching equipment from a van, he said, fishing gear, ice chests. He was surprised because normally all that comes with the boat. Anyway, the guy he talked to, the one with the documentation that said he was John Smith, he was Asian, tall, maybe five-eleven, and thin, around 175 or so. Short hair, but he had a ball cap on. No particular accent at all, so it kind of sounds as if he grew up in this country. But that’s hard to tell. And Rafe, not being Asian, wasn’t very good at specifics. He actually went so far as to say ‘they all look alike to me at some level’. He couldn’t tell me if the others were Asian, too.”

“Well, we’ll have to get a sketch artist in here to see if he can produce a likeness that Rafe can buy into. There’s a good computer program for that now.” Garrett leaned forward and played bongo drums with the table top. “So, an Asian guy named John Smith with all the right boating-safety paperwork shows up, puts down a big wad of cash, and gets a bareboat charter on which he takes three accomplices and some equipment, presumably including a heat-seeking missile. They blow up the *Stream-Tracker* sometime around 1530, then take over an hour to call it in.”

“Presumably, they were looking for survivors or other incriminating things during that hour. That explains the second satellite picture.”

“Right. And they didn’t find that bikini top. I wonder what they *did* find.”

“Probably whoever was wearing it. If she’d perished in the explosion, they wouldn’t have cut the thing off.”

He looked up with pain in his eyes. “Ugh. Right. We’re dealing with some real heavyweights here, aren’t we?”

“Indeed. Back to basics, I guess. We’ve got means and opportunity. Hmm. Wait one.” And I stared at the sky for a minute. “Hang on, I need to go ask Rafe something.”

I was back in five minutes. “The bareboat charter was a walk-in, no reservation. I was thinking about opportunity. Either those dudes in the *Reel-Thing* were just out there and the *Stream-Tracker* blundered into them, or they knew the *Stream-Tracker* would be where it was and were waiting for them. And if it’s the latter, then our perps have real-time access to the Pompano State float plans, or something like that. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

Garrett looked thoughtful. “Yeah, it is something, something maybe important. What if the perps took the *Reel-Thing* out for some other purpose, to deploy something at that place, and the *Stream-Tracker* just happened to be working there, too, and had to be disposed of?”

“The wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time theory. It’s certainly one possibility.” I nodded.

“But it also means that maybe there’s now something deployed out there, something we could find that would help us.”

“Well,” I was feeling a little better about our path forward, “that gives us two lines of inquiry, who has access to the float plans, and what’s out there, along with the sketch artist. Except, how do you find out what’s out there?”

“Ah, you landlubber you, that’s what modern survey ships are for.” He grinned.

“Hey, c’mon. I’ve got these boat shoes, don’t I? And this official Coast Guard cap. Geez.”

He wagged a finger at me. “Uh-huh, but boat shoes don’t make the sailor, m’dear. Thing is, survey ships are expensive. Hmm. Maybe I can figure out a way to persuade Captain Galliari that his people need some survey training or something.”

“Weren’t Skip Nicholls and the others doing oceanographic measurements out there? Current measurements, or something? If they’re interested in that particular patch of ocean, maybe they’ve done surveys already. I mean, it would have been before Tuesday, but the old surveys would establish a sort of baseline, right?” I wasn’t sure what I was trying to say, but it felt close.

“You’re right, they would, at least in terms of what kind of equipment we would want for a new survey. Knowing the character of the bottom is important for getting the right instruments to find out more about it.”

“What do you use, anyway? Some kind of sonar?” I knew about air searches and some sophisticated equipment that Hal had described once, but water was different.

“Yeah, some special sonar systems. And a magnetometer, a gadget that will detect metal, iron. And if we need to, an ROV.”

“ROV?”

“Remotely operated vehicle. A swimming robot on a power and control cable. They usually have tools like grappling claws and cutters. And cameras.”

“Oh. Sure. And I guess it could bring back whatever you find.”

He nodded. “Unless it’s too heavy, but then the ROV can take a line down and fasten it on so the thing can be hauled up.”

I smiled. “No doubt Captain Galliari’s people could use some ROV training, too.”

He laughed. "I'll have to check. So, at least we've got some next steps. I assume you can follow up on the float plan thing, right, and any existing surveys? And I'll see about a new survey and make sure we get a sketch artist to talk with Rafe Wellingworth. For now, I'm going to wait to talk with the forensics people, but that could take quite a while."

"I need to go up to that OceanLab and make sure my husband found himself a car, so I can get started on some stuff this afternoon. What about tomorrow?"

"Depends on forensics. If we have to impound the boat, we may need to be here. I'll call this evening and leave a message again. At worst, we can get together here or somewhere and use one car for the day, seems like."

"Good plan. Now, after all the lemonade and Rafe's bottle of water, I need to find the ladies room."

"See? What'd I say? Landlubber. It's a *head*. And I think they're over that way."

* * *

Back at OceanLab, the main gate was open, so I went onto the site and found a parking place. But the receptionist was gone, so I was pretty much at loose ends, having been there only that once. Until, that is, I remembered my new cell phone.

I'd only made a couple of calls with it, so I had to learn that little trick all over again, but it helped me out by remembering Hal's number, which I didn't need it to. What I needed was for it to know numbers I didn't, but it wasn't that smart.

Because the phone was programmed with my old number, he recognized who was calling.

"Hi, sweets, how's your day?"

"Interesting. And, say, I'm an official Coastie now, cap, shield, and all. And a new handgun, even. Where are you?"

"In the office that Shorty is loaning me. Where are you?"

"In the main lobby, I think."

"Oh. Here. Well, sit tight and I'll come find you."

Two minutes later, we rewarded each other with a big hug and then, because no one was around, a big smooch. Hal guided back me to his loaner office, which even had an extra chair for guests. I settled in with a sigh.

"You know those winter days at home, the weekends where the highway is bumper-to-bumper with people trying to get to the ski area?"

He looked puzzled. "Sure. Why?"

"Well, it's just like that here, except that there's five lanes each way and everyone's going about 80. It's nuts." I snuggled my way deeper into the chair and felt some tension evaporating. The day hadn't really been that stressful, but I knew that working with a new partner always had its subtle challenges.

"That's what's so nice about our little corner of the world out there. Nuts is the exception rather than the rule." He smiled. "Anyway, I hope you made as much progress on your problem as I did on mine."

"Well, we did make some, and I've got some official liaisoning to do as well."

“Let’s get at it, then. It’s only 4:30. Whatcha got? No, wait. You said before, on the phone, that you’re an official Coastie now. I’ve gotta say this. I can’t help but think that ‘Coastie’ isn’t really the right thing to call people in the Coast Guard. I’ve probably used it myself, but it just sounds, well, demeaning, somehow.”

I had to smile. “I got a little lecture about that today, during my all-morning sign-up process. There seem to be two schools of thought. There’s an old school that hates it, fights against it, and gets their blood pressure up about it. A lot of those people are also the ones who think that the term ‘sailor’ should be reserved for the Coast Guard because the Coast Guard has a real sailing ship that they use for training purposes. The Navy doesn’t, and so Navy personnel aren’t really ‘sailors,’ although it’s not clear what they are. Most of the alternatives I heard aren’t fit for family consumption. And the other school is the ‘go with the flow’ school. They recognize that pushing back on this usage is just futile, and they’re trying to embrace it and make it respectable. I’ve heard you say that being a ‘weather weenie’ is something that you’re proud of. Well, I’m going to be proud of being a ‘Coastie’. End of lecture.”

He blinked a couple of times and let his breath out. “Right. OK. Well, then. Let’s see. You’re my Coastie and I love you. So. Whatcha got?”

I jumped up and sort of dove over his desk to give him another big smooch, messing up all of his nice, tidy piles of paper in the process. Then I sat back down, composed myself, and continued as if nothing had happened, while he tried to get the papers reorganized.

“We found out a variety of things and those have led to some new requests for information.” I proceeded to give him a sketch of what Garrett and I had discovered and asked about the float plans and existing surveys. “Oh. And just so you’ll know and never worry yourself, Garrett, who reminds me of Tom Selleck but seems smarter, is probably gay. So if it seems like I’m flirting with him, I’m really not.”

“Um. OK. Sometimes, dear, there’s such a thing as too much information. But I really do appreciate the worry.” His smile told me what I needed to know. “I’ll have to work on the float plan stuff and the old survey information tomorrow, because I don’t know whom to ask and because people seem to have been drifting away starting a little while ago. Like that receptionist who wasn’t there in the front lobby for you.

“On the other hand, I did find out all sorts of interesting things today. Let’s see.” He looked up at the ceiling.

“First, and it really was first, first thing this morning just after Shorty installed me in here, I met Dr. Pete Chu, who’s the director of this facility, and whose visit with me verified what Shorty said, that he, Pete, really, really wants to be the new principal investigator of this project, in fact, the whole program, all the bananas. He was quite polite, obsequious, almost. But he isn’t a happy camper with me here.”

“How tall is he? Just curious.”

“Um, maybe a couple of inches shorter than I am, five-eleven or so. Not at all heavy.”

“Short hair?” I hadn’t told Hal about the interview with Rafe Wellingworth.

“Yeah, I guess. What’s this about?”

“Ah, well, nothing much. I like to be able to identify people in case I run into them. You know how it is, I bump into someone and they know who I am but I don’t have a clue. So if I run into a sort of tall Asian-looking guy around here with short hair, I’ll be ready to think of him as Pete Chu.” My conscience was whapping at me mercilessly, but I ignored it.

“Anyway, I think I sucked up to him enough to make him feel less threatened. So. Second. I found out a lot about where the *Stream-Tracker* was, what it was supposed to be doing there, and why. And there’s additional information that allows us to track its position, and its pieces’ position, for the time period of those satellite pictures we saw yesterday and more. One helpful thing about this whole business is that Pompano State has a remarkable array of equipment watching that particular piece of ocean. About the only thing we’re not going to know is who and why—which, of course, are the payoff questions.”

“OK, well, now it’s my turn. Whatcha got?”

“We know where the *Stream-Tracker* was because the float plan says where, and because the boat had a sophisticated station keeping ability. You go somewhere that you want to be, push a button, and a GPS system that’s linked to an autopilot keeps you there. This, I understand, is something that’s pretty common for big ships with the right kinds of propulsion systems, but it’s not so common for boats the size of the *Stream-Tracker*. Where they said they’d be is where they were on that first satellite picture we saw. That position, it turns out, is a couple hundred meters upstream—south—of a bottom-mounted ADCP that they’ve got out there.”

“A-D-what?”

“Acoustic Doppler current profiler. It’s a gadget that sits near the bottom, looks up, and uses sonar technology to measure the current as a function of depth in the water column above it. Skip was a bit upstream with another instrument with different capabilities, measuring the current on smaller spatial scales. The idea was to combine the two datasets and figure out what might happen if you had an ocean current turbine system there getting turned by all that water with its turbulence and so on.”

He was on a roll, and I knew I had to pace him or get left behind.

“So this ADHD thingy sits there for a long time and gets the big currents, and Skip’s instrument, the one he was out there with, gets the small ones?”

“ADCP, right. And because both the big currents and the small ones are what a turbine would feel all at the same time, it’s important to know both, so you can engineer the thing properly.” He paused to take a breath.

“Now, there’s another thing. OceanLab here has some radar systems on the beach that measure the surface current. There are radar signals they shoot out over the ocean that are scattered by waves on the surface; the scattered signals are received by antennas. Some of the waves are moving on their own, some pretty much drift with the current. So you can do complicated math on the radar signal and figure out the surface current. That means we know what the current was doing the whole time, at least at the surface. And because everything was floating with the surface current during and after the time of those two satellite pictures, we can figure out exactly where they were. After the Coast Guard boat arrived, of course, we know their position from their log, and that’s a way to verify the other data.”

“What about the sub-surface currents?”

“The ADCP is measuring those, and its dataset is transmitted here by an undersea optical fiber cable. So we know the vertical structure of the current at that location—and we’re pretty sure that that structure doesn’t change very much over the time interval we’re concerned with, a few hours.”

I stared at him while I was thinking this over. “So if someone dropped something off a boat and it sank to the bottom, you’d know the currents that it was falling through?”

“We would. And I think I see where you’re going: you want to know where it would end up on the bottom. To calculate that, though, would require knowledge of what the object was, its size and weight, with some information about its shape, too.”

“But you could do estimates and provide, um, circles or ellipses on the bottom where things with poorly known weights and sizes would wind up, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” He looked surprised, and I knew he was surprised that I’d thought of that. “What are you thinking about?”

“Well, we don’t know why the *Reel-Thing* was there. Maybe it was there to deploy something. It would help to know where that something might wind up on the bottom.” I shrugged. “So, like I said. Garrett’s thinking about a survey—which is why we’re interested in old surveys, so they can provide guidance.”

“Hmm. Right. I see what you mean. Well, I’ll get on that tomorrow.”

“Y’know? I’m liking this liaison job. We make a good team.”

“We do. And it’s a good thing we’ve both got jobs now, because it looks like we’re going to be eating out a lot, or eating deli food, given how busy we are. How about I stop at Fresh Market and get something on the way home?”

* * *

1.5

At eight Friday morning, I found Garrett under a palm tree on the Westin patio next to the marina, at work on a very large cup of something Starbucks, reading the *Miami Herald*. The outdoor lounge where we’d eaten lunch the day before wasn’t open, but I’d found the Starbucks too, so I joined him to work on my own, smaller, concoction.

He looked up as I walked toward him. “Good morning, Annette. Y’know, I sure do like mornings in this part of the world, especially places like this where they water things overnight. Everything’s so fresh, and it’s still cool, at least sort of.”

I took a deep breath, and the freshly watered landscaping *did* smell good. “It is, isn’t it? Did you grow up down here?”

“Ohio. A small town about dead center. Summer mornings there were kind of like this—maybe that’s why I like them here.”

“I grew up in Chicago, and I can see the allure of this place for midwesterners. Winter there sucks.” I smiled. “Did we make the paper today?”

“Haven’t found anything. We did yesterday, with much the same story that was in the Fort Lauderdale paper on Wednesday. But today the *Herald* is all abuzz about a new political scandal they’ve uncovered in the county commission, as if that’s new news. And the Fort Lauderdale paper has decided that prom dresses are what’s important to report on. Seems that prices are up again, so second-hand ones at consignment stores are the new big thing.” He smiled. “Y’know? I never could find a prom dress that really fit right.”

I almost mentioned my own prom experience, but then his comment soaked in and I just laughed and changed the subject.

“Well, if the papers are losing interest in us, that’s just fine by me.” I dragged a chair over to where he was and sat. “So, I don’t know if you do this, but now and then I wake up in the middle of the night

because I've thought of something I should have thought of before. It happened last night. And what I thought of is this: Doesn't the Coast Guard, and DEA and every other agency, still seize boats used for smuggling operations? And if so, why in the world would Rafe Wellingworth, or anyone, send their boat on a bareboat charter? Seems like an incredible risk."

"Right. I thought of that last evening, too, when I was talking things over with the forensics team. Today, I'm thinking that we owe Mr. Wellingworth a bit more attention."

"Did they find anything interesting? The forensics team, I mean?"

"Some indications of more residue on the port side of the tuna tower framework, the outside of it, suggesting that, if there was a missile, it was fired off to port. A strange dearth of fingerprints, as if someone had polished a lot of the obvious places. And, in less obvious places, lots of Rafe's prints plus those of someone else, whom the fingerprint database computers have kindly identified as one Gustav Moroney. Goes by Gus, I'd imagine."

It took me a minute to catch up, as I'd been brought up short by his use of "dearth," not a word I'd have expected a CGSI agent to use in conversation. Maybe he writes, or something, I thought.

"Um, why does this Gus person have prints in the computer?"

"Well, they weren't in the criminal database, it was the military one that found them. He was a Marine. We have some resources that civilian law enforcement doesn't usually get to use." He grinned. "Anyway, we'll need to have another chat with our buddy Rafe. Maybe we can practice our good-cop / bad-cop routine."

"Any thoughts on an undersea survey? Hal's taken on the role of acting principal investigator on that ocean energy project at Pompano State, so he's getting access to all sorts of information that could be helpful." I filled him in on what Hal had told me about tracking the position of things from the oceanographic data they had.

"Good! That's important, because it'll help narrow down the survey area. Surveys cost a boatload of money, no pun intended, and the cost goes directly with the area." He was nodding. "I had a conversation with Captain Galliari late yesterday, so he's aware that we may need to do one."

"Are we going to impound Rafe's boat?" I surprised myself by using the "we." Strange how easy it was to slip into the CGIS role.

"Mmm, it would be a stretch at this point. Although I guess it'll depend on how our next conversation with him goes. I want to get the sketch artist finished before we put the heat on, though. If he cooperates, we'll get better information about our mystery charter client."

"Meantime, I guess we should corroborate his alibi. Do you suppose that security guard is around?" I glanced around the patio, not really expecting to find him. I didn't.

"Let's go talk to the dock-master. Maybe he'll be less surly than yesterday."

But he wasn't. "You people again? Why don't you go find some drug smugglers to arrest, or something. You'll upset our clientele, hanging around here."

I stitched my most charming smile on, or at least that's what I thought it was, and peered at his little name badge. "Well, Mr., ah, Wiggins, that's certainly one possibility, arresting drug smugglers. Right here, even, at Cove 17. Of course, we might have to call in one of our cutters to hang out here to prevent our quarry from escaping. And I'm sure that the locals would want in on the fun as well, you know, the Fort Lauderdale police, the county sheriff, the DEA."

"Ahh, get out of my face, lady."

“I will, and you can make it happen. We need to talk with that nice Mr. Clumley, the security guard whom we met yesterday. How can we find him?”

He looked daggers at me, but picked up the phone. “Hello? Wiggins here. Is Clumley over there? Yeah? OK, could you have him come to my office? These damned Coast Guard cops are here and want to talk to him again. I sure hope he’s not got his ass in any trouble.”

Garrett, I could see, was coming to a slow boil, so I steered him outside. “I’m not sure the good Mr. Wiggins needs to hear this conversation,” was my excuse.

Presently, the security guard rolled up in his golf cart. I couldn’t help but think that he’d fit into his uniform more comfortably if he’d walk instead of riding.

Garrett was still fuming, so I took the lead. “Mr. Clumley, thanks for meeting with us. We need to talk with you about Tuesday afternoon. I’m sorry we didn’t think to do this yesterday, but we didn’t know we needed to.”

He nodded and tried not to show too much curiosity.

“Specifically, we’d like you to tell us about conversations you had with boat-owners here in the marina on Tuesday afternoon. Can you do that?”

“I’ll try, but it’ll help if you’ll tell me what this is about.”

Garrett, who was standing off to the side where I could see him but Clumley couldn’t, winked at me and jumped in. “It’s all pretty hush-hush, but I can say it’s a national security matter involving one of the boats here. Uh, I can tell you that yesterday we were only using the *Reel-Thing* as a decoy, though.”

“National security, huh? Don’t tell me that we’ve got some of them damn’ raghead terrorists around here.”

“OK, I won’t tell you that. But what can you tell us about your conversations on Tuesday afternoon here at the marina?”

“Well, let’s see. There was Mr...no, wait. That was Monday. Tuesday, you want. Hmm. Rafe. I talked for quite a while with Rafe Wellingworth. About the Dolphins. He thinks they need to shore up their defensive line in the draft next month. I sure would like to see them find a real quarterback, though.”

I nodded. “Sounds like the conversations I hear in the hardware store out in Colorado. Same sentiments about the Broncos. Was this conversation down on the dock by the *Reel-Thing*?”

“No, it was over at that table there.” He pointed down the quay.

“Ah. Where was the *Reel-Thing*? I thought a good skipper never let his boat go anywhere without him.” I smiled and tried to make it a little joke.

“Yeah, well, Rafe had a long hard weekend. Clients from hell, he said. He sent Gus out with the Tuesday group. They were headed out just as I got here.”

* * *

After we had sent Mr. Clumley on his way, with profuse thanks and hints about how he could be most helpful to our “national security” investigation by paying close attention to any suspicious activity, Garrett and I retired to the chairs we’d used for morning coffee earlier. I thought our new information over while he fetched refills from the Starbucks in the hotel lobby, a decaf for me.

“That sheds a bit of light on things, doesn’t it?” I sipped at my coffee as he settled in.

“It explains what we talked about earlier, the risk of a real bareboat charter. But it also means that we can’t trust our good friend Rafe worth a plug nickel.” Garrett shook his head sadly. “I guess we’re going to have to lean on him.”

“We can just ask him who Gus is. We’ve got those prints.”

He agreed. “Good plan. That’ll give him a chance to volunteer more information and redeem himself. A little.”

It was getting on toward nine, and we’d seen the *Reel-Thing* in its slip from the dockmaster’s office. We decided to see if its skipper was around. He wasn’t on board, so we went back to our chairs under the palm tree to await the sketch artist.

He showed up about fifteen minutes later, just as we noticed Rafe walking down the dock to his boat. We hurried after him.

“Good morning, Mr. Wellingworth. I guess things *are* slow if you’re here instead of out there.”

“Well, good morning to ya both. Yeah, things are slow. To what do I owe another visit from the Coast Guard’s finest?”

“This is Randy Lin, our sketch artist, Mr. Wellingworth. We’d like you to work with him on a mock-up of that client of yours from Tuesday. It’s all computerized now, so you’ll find it easy.”

Rafe looked skeptical, but we set him to work and retired to our chairs on the patio.

An hour later, Randy walked up and showed us a computer sketch. He wasn’t optimistic. “I don’t know if this is going to help—it’s pretty generic. I think I did manage to get him to agree that the person was of a Chinese background, as distinct from Korean or Japanese, though. And I talked to him a lot about the accent business. He said he didn’t hear any hints of a Chinese accent, but maybe there was a bit of Spanish there. Of course, there’s so much Spanish spoken around here that he may have just assumed it or something. Anyway, good luck with this. Call me if you need me.”

As we headed back down the dock to the *Reel-Thing*, I decided I’d be the good cop, and I was curious to see if Garrett would pick up on being the bad one.

Rafe was fiddling with something at the dock box by his boat.

“Thanks for your help with that sketch, Mr. Wellingworth. I’m sure it will be a big help to us.”

Garrett spoke up. “So, we need to talk some more. Who’s Gus Maroney?”

Rafe looked surprised. “Uh, Gus who?”

“Wellingworth, you’ll be better off in the long run if you don’t give us trouble. As you well know, I’m asking about the Gus Maroney whose fingerprints are all over your boat, including lots in places where a client would never leave prints.” The menace in Garrett’s voice told me that he had indeed fallen into the bad cop role.

Rafe paused as if he were trying to decide whether to give innocence one more try, but then he caved. “Oh, yeah, that Gus. He’s my First Mate.”

It was my turn. “Ah, your First Mate. Well, obviously we need to talk with him. Where can we find him.”

“I’d like to know, too. Haven’t seen him since Tuesday. Must be off on a drunk somewhere. He’s like that sometimes.”

Garrett jumped back in. “What time Tuesday did you see him last?”

“Hmm, ah, well...”

“Mr. Wellingworth, we talked with the security guard, Mr. Clumley.” I put resignation and a bit of sadness into my voice.

Obviously glad to have the subject changed, Rafe perked up. “Yeah? And he told you I was here, didn’t he?”

“Among other things, yes. Mr. Wellingworth. Rafe. Is there anything you forgot to tell us about Tuesday?”

“Well, sure, I forgot to tell you about Gus, I guess.”

Garrett walked in close, getting in Rafe’s personal space. “And you still haven’t told us where and when you saw him last, have you? What are you trying to hide, Wellingworth?”

“I...I told you I haven’t seen Gus since Tuesday, but I don’t remember when I saw him on Tuesday.”

“Clumley does.” Garrett’s voice was perfectly flat.

“Well, then... Well, ask him. Why don’t you leave me alone? I didn’t do anything. I was here all afternoon, you said that Clumley verified that.”

His bullheadedness was beginning to annoy even me, the good cop. “One thing we can’t quite figure out, Mr. Wellingworth, is why you’d send this lovely boat, which is clearly worth a lot of money, out on a bareboat charter. The DEA and others still confiscate boats, don’t they? Why would you take that risk for a mere six thousand dollars?”

“Hey, maybe six G’s isn’t much to you, lady, but I had bills to pay. And I didn’t have any reason to think those guys were involved in anything illegal. They just wanted to go off fishing by themselves, is all.”

“C’mon, Wellingworth,” Garrett was practically snarling, “Don’t give us that crap. You’d never trust people you don’t know with that boat. It’s worth at least a hundred times what they paid you.”

“What can I say? They were persuasive. I needed the cash.”

I deliberately turned away from Rafe to talk directly to Garrett. “I’m concerned that he may be the next target, Garrett. And we can’t afford to lose him.”

Garrett looked appropriately concerned. “I thought of that, too. Protective custody, maybe?”

“Good idea. And I guess we’ll have to impound the boat.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on there.” Unlike Garrett’s superficial concern, Rafe’s was real. “What’s this about? What do you mean that I might be the next target? And what are you talking about, impound my boat?”

“Mr. Wellingworth, if you’re not going to cooperate, I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us. I suspect you should frisk him, Garrett, just to be official.”

Garrett’s eyes lit up, and he positively started to swish.

“Oh! Why yes! What a *wonderful* idea! And won’t that be just *so* much fun! I just *love* it when they assume the position,” he simpered.

Rafe looked alarmed and backed away. “Hold it! Hold it! Get away from me! I just remembered. Gus went with them. It was about noon when I saw him last.”

* * *

“I have to say, Garrett, that was a brilliant tactic. I wasn’t thinking of it when I suggested frisking him, and it was brilliant.”

He laughed. “I’ve used it before a couple of times, and it invariably works like a charm. If only these yokels knew that the very idea of frisking them actually creeps me out.”

Rafe’s confessions had persuaded us not to take him into protective custody—at that point, if he were to become the next victim it wasn’t going to bother us that much anyway—and we decided not to impound his boat because we might well need his continued cooperation. If we managed to find an Asian guy who resembled that sketch, Rafe could be helpful in identification of a photograph or a line-up.

It wasn’t a lie, Rafe insisted, that he’d told us it was a bareboat charter, because that’s what he called it when he, the skipper, didn’t go along. That the First Mate, who also had a captain’s license, went along didn’t change that, nor did the fact that the rest of the world took “bareboat” to mean a charter with no crew at all. And Rafe insisted that it was true that he hadn’t seen Gus since he left on the boat early Tuesday afternoon. When Gus didn’t return on it, the clients had explained that he had asked to be let off at another marina on the way up the river to Cove 17, so they’d left him there. They were vague about which other marina, even though there were few, but the \$1,000 tip that they left with Rafe had quelled his curiosity.

Garrett and I suspected that poor Gus was sleeping with the fishes somewhere.

We were back sitting in our favorite chairs on the patio under the palm tree, with iced tea and lemonade. It was going to be time for lunch before too long, and we decided to find somewhere else, after we planned the afternoon. The Cove 17 Marina was nice, but it was beginning to get old.

“I guess we know more, but it doesn’t really help us much.” Garrett stared off at the sky. “And that means we’re still stuck on the three basic possibilities about what happened to the *Stream-Tracker*, as far as motive goes, I mean. First, someone could have had it in, big-time, for one of the three people on board, and the chances are, I guess, that the person would have been Skip Nicholls. Second, someone could have had a problem with what Nicholls and crew were doing out there, at that place, for some reason. Third, it could just be a wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time kind of thing.”

“It’s hard to believe that anyone would object to current measurements. And if they did, you’d think they’d sabotage the permanent equipment out there on the sea floor, too.”

“Maybe they did. But I heard something about ocean energy related to all this. What’s that about?”

I knew I was not the right person to ask, but there wasn’t anyone else around. “Well, Hal mentioned something about the equivalent of underwater wind turbines. Maybe we should go see him and ask. But if we do, you’ve got to be prepared for a lecture. He turns into Mr. Science Person at the drop of a hat.”

“He seemed nice enough when I first met you guys on Wednesday. Not like some of the arrogant scientists I’ve met before, not at all.”

“No, he’s sweet as can be—he just gets carried away with explanations sometimes.” I scratched a bug bite on my ankle. “Maybe there’s value in knowing where the currents are fastest, and someone thought that Skip was finding out some secret about the best place to generate energy and make money.”

“Maybe, but it’s not like the Gulf Stream is a secret, or anything. I guess I’m betting on option three, wrong-place and so on. Our John Smith is really a foreign agent, or a drug smuggler—or a people smuggler—or maybe a terrorist.”

“I don’t know about smugglers, but the other two could well have put something on the sea floor that they don’t want anyone to find.”

“Or maybe the drug smugglers have a big, underwater warehouse out there they want to keep hidden.” He shrugged. “You’re right, though. Let’s head up to Pompano State and get the ocean-energy lecture. And maybe they’ve found survey information. What’s for lunch up that way?”

Once again, I knew I was not the right person to ask, so we had to wing it.

* * *

1.6

“Well, I don’t mind boring Annette to death with long, complicated explanations, but I don’t like those to torment other people. Maybe we could talk about the specific things you’re most interested in.” Hal, I could tell, was going out of his way to avoid becoming Mr. Science Person.

Shorty Ringwold, trying to suppress a smile, was in Hal’s office with Garrett and me. I expect he was used to long, complicated explanations from a variety of people.

“Annette said something about underwater wind turbines. That’s a good way to describe it, I guess, if it’s accurate. But could someone find value in measurements of the currents out there?” Garrett, seated so he could look out the windows of Hal’s office to the open Atlantic, didn’t even have to point. We knew which “out there” he meant.

“Of course, I’ve been on the job here for only a day, so I’m not completely up to speed. But I talked with several people, Shorty here for one, and other people who are also closely familiar with the overall project and have a pretty good feeling for what’s going on. The measurements are all about providing information for companies who want to build the underwater turbine systems. If you think in terms of wind, the power available out there is like a gale-force wind a lot of the time. But when it is, the forces on the equipment are ten times what they’d be in that gale-force wind in the atmosphere. So equipment has to be designed properly. And the measurements are in support of that.” Hal, too, was staring out at the ocean. “But it’s hard to imagine that the information content of those measurements would be worth killing for, to anyone.”

“Hal’s right. Proper design is important, but our measurements are meant to benefit everyone. There’s no trade secret information here,” Shorty agreed.

“So there’s nothing special about that particular spot they were at, where they were doing the measurements?” Garrett was getting to the heart of the matter.

“Nope. In fact, Skip and the others picked that spot so it would be as un-special as possible. There aren’t any big bumps on the bottom upstream of it, or anything like that. It’s just the Gulf Stream in action out there, just like the Gulf Stream is from, oh, Key West up to maybe Savannah. A big river of water in the ocean. Ah, an unsteady, surging and meandering river, for sure, but a big river. It carries more water than all the freshwater rivers of the world, they say.” Shorty’s expression told me that he wasn’t quite sure of that one, though.

“When Annette talked about underwater wind turbines, I started thinking about whales and dolphins and fish. All the swimmers out there. Wouldn’t this be dangerous for them? Are there people who might get worried enough about it to do something to prevent this? Or maybe people in the shipping industry?” Garrett, I could tell, was casting about for motives.

It was Hal's turn. "It seems likely that any turbines out there would be deployed below the draft of ships, so that's not an issue. Environmentalist wackos might be, though. The people here are concerned about sea turtles, so much so that they sent a mega-buck across town to Florida Atlantic, where there are several sea turtle researchers."

Shorty threw up his hands in frustration. "One legacy that the project is going to have to deal with for a long time to come is a remark that Skip Nicholls dropped at a reception for the project. Skip, I can tell you, was not shy about tossing back whatever beer or wine or spirits they had available at these things, or all three, for that matter. And some reporter who was there got him going about this business of risks to sea life. And he said... wait for it... he said 'Well, we *are* a bit concerned about the Cuisinart Effect,' as if that were a commonly used scientific term of some kind instead of a cute metaphor he made up to try to get into her knickers. God save us from tipsy, publicity-seeking faculty with clever sound bites. Still, a missile attack? Even Greenpeace doesn't go that far."

"Not that I've heard, and they're something of a thorn in the Coast Guard's side so I would have." Garrett was nodding. "Besides, it's just too hard to believe that one turbine would do much damage."

"And one won't. But commercial-scale power, like the amount from a conventional power plant, that would mean a lot of them, like an underwater wind farm. That's why the turtles are such a concern. They're all endangered, and even the turtle advocates say they're not exactly rocket scientists." Shorty's little joke made us all laugh.

Garrett looked at me. "You can't be sure until you're sure—just like it's not over until it's over—but it sounds like there's no good reason for anyone to have blown up the *Stream-Tracker* based on what they were doing out there, or where they were doing it. Unless that place just happened to be the wrong place. At the wrong time, maybe."

I had to agree. "Right. And, Hal, that's why I asked about the business of surveys. It must be that there's something special about that location, and it could only be something on, or maybe down by, the bottom."

Hal nodded and looked at Shorty. "Yeah, and I found out today that this place could as well be called 'Surveys R Us' instead of OceanLab. They've got 'em by the map-drawer full. And some are even digitized."

"A lot of them are mine, in fact, although those are the older, non-digitized ones, I'm afraid," Shorty said.

"That could be helpful, at least if there are any in our area of special interest." Garrett thought for a few seconds. "One of our possible scenarios is that the perps were out there to deploy something. And, of course old surveys wouldn't show that. But they might show other things of interest out there, and they'd be good controls for new surveys."

Just as Hal was about to respond, Garrett cocked his head just a bit and raised a hand for silence. Then he arose and walked carefully over to the door, which he yanked open, surprising a middle-aged woman there, who quickly put her hands behind her back.

She looked up, clearly frightened. "Oh. Very sorry. Excuse me. I was just looking for Dr. Weathers."

"Oh, hi, Emily. What do you need?" Hal's tone was mild, but I could tell he was curious.

"Oh, ah, just to tell you that I have to leave a little early today, for a doctor's appointment."

"That's fine. I hope it goes well. See you tomorrow." Hal gestured for Garrett to shut the door as she turned away.

“Sorry. But I heard something out there, and it went on for quite a few minutes.”

“You think she was eavesdropping?” Hal looked astonished.

“No idea, really. It is what it is, as people say, although it’s certainly curious.” Garrett took a deep breath. “Anyway, those surveys could help. And I’m going try to pin down a precise area for a new survey, full-out, with high-resolution sonar and magnetometers. We’ll have an ROV with both video and high-resolution still cameras as well. If there’s anything new down there, I want to find it. Who was that, by the way?”

“Emily Chu, Pete Chu’s wife. She’s the staff coordinator and budget person for the position Hal’s stepped into.” Shorty rolled his eyes.

It was a good thing that Hal was smiling when he said, “What’s that you say I stepped into, Shorty?”

* * *

It was my turn to figure out dinner, so Hal directed me to the grocery he’d been to the afternoon before—west at the light just north of our building, about a mile and across both Federal and South Dixie, on the left and obvious. I have enough experience with his directions that whenever he says “obvious,” I take it to mean “hidden away,” but in this case it actually *was* obvious.

Talk about a kid in a candy store.

Instead of dashing in and out, I actually did the shopping thing by exploring the entire store and stocking up on staples as well as by putting together dinner from their remarkable deli. Yes, I thought afterward, our isolated life in the Colorado mountains has its limitations.

When I got home, though, I was reminded of the hassle of living in a high-rise condo where you have to park in the basement and lug bags and bags of groceries up to the 15th floor. No more big-time shopping trips for me, I thought.

But we sure ate well. I couldn’t resist getting a couple of jumbo stone crab claws for us to start with, and then we had cold cedar plank salmon on top of a Caesar salad. There wasn’t any breeze and it was still warm, so we ate on the east-side balcony. We had to work not to gloat when we talked about the snowstorm in Colorado.

“Y’know, the staffing at OceanLab seems pretty cozy.” I’d been thinking about our eavesdropper. “Pete Chu is the OceanLab Director, and not only does his wife work there but she’s the budget person for their largest award, or at least I assume it is?”

“My thoughts exactly. I didn’t want to say anything earlier, but I’m going to talk this over with Shorty to see if that’s part of the train wreck he’s worried about. If so, maybe we can get her reassigned to the main campus.” He popped his last bite of salmon into his mouth. “It’s a weird arrangement overall. Shorty’s head of Oceanography—and it’s just “Oceanography,” not a department or anything, just a program—and he’s officially Pete’s boss. But Pete, who’s more like a landlord at OceanLab, with Shorty the owner, I guess, Pete has a tremendous amount of clout with the faculty there, because he controls their office and lab space. If you cross Pete, he’ll screw you by giving away your lab space and assigning you to an office the size of a phone booth. That leaks. In the basement. Next to the elevator and the air-conditioning equipment.”

“What fun. How’d he get himself in a position like that anyway?” The Caesar salad, I decided, had just the right tang and amount of anchovy.

“Good question. Shorty told me he was originally from China and came here after a stop for a while in Mexico, at some big oceanographic office there associated with the national oil company. That’s where he met his wife, in fact. Some under-the-radar Mexico – China exchange program, or something. Then he came here, worked his way up to full professor, and took over OceanLab while it was semi-autonomous, before Pompano State got serious about it.”

“Seems like Shorty could make a change, not fire him since he’s a full professor, but get a new OceanLab Director, and the faculty would like it.”

Hal nodded. “I get the impression he’s working on it. He’s got to find something else for Pete to do, something that sounds more important, so Pete can save face. That’s sort of the facts of life in a university. I don’t think, though, that the something else is going to be this project I’m baby-sitting, so that makes Shorty’s challenge harder.”

“Interesting background. I think I’ll suggest that Garrett run a check on him.”

“I’d be interested in one on Emily, too. That was too weird, the thing with my door this afternoon.”

I concurred.

* * *

Rather than wait for the next morning, after dinner I sent Garrett a short email suggesting that he use those computer databases he was so smug about to run background checks on Pete and Emily Chu.

Before I could close out the email program, I got an answer

Annette: How’s your bandwidth? Fast enough for really big files? –GK

I asked Hal and he verified that it was as fast as was available using the TV cable company’s service, and then told Garrett. It wasn’t two minutes later that I got another message, with attachments, over 15 megabytes with an introduction reading

Annette: I thought of background checks, too, and dug this up without trying very hard. I’m digging deeper now and should have more in the morning. Also, there’s more from the marina. –GK

I’m all for instant gratification, but that was ridiculous.

There were three attachments, Randy Lin’s sketch of the Asian guy at the marina, who was probably Chinese, as well as files on Pete Chu and Emily Chu. The first thing in Pete Chu’s file was a photograph that resembled the sketch, at least to my eye. I decided to show the sketch to Hal blind, meaning without Chu’s picture.

The biographies were basically elaborate versions of what Hal had told me earlier at dinner, China to Mexico to Florida for each of them. After getting a Ph.D. in oceanography at a Chinese university I didn’t recognize, Pete, then Chu Long-Bin, had spent two years working on underwater remote sensing—meaning sonar and such—at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Then he had disappeared for two years, apparently somewhere within China, and emerged to take a job at PEMEX in Mexico City. After five years there, he applied for a faculty position at Pompano State, within OceanLab, where he’d

been ever since. In the meantime, he'd Anglicized his name, become naturalized, and acquired a Secret-level clearance through the Navy, for whom he continued to do underwater acoustics research.

Despite myself, I felt superior for having a *Top-Secret* clearance.

Emily Chu, born in Beijing as Lo Shi, was mostly a mystery, known only to have earned a degree in history before taking a PEMEX job, again in Mexico City. Because her chronology was not complete, such tidbits as Pete's missing two years weren't available. She had not become a citizen but did have a green card.

As for the new information from the marina, I was suddenly addicted to the instant gratification, so I decided to call Garrett. But first I went and fetched Hal to show him the sketch.

He peered at the computer screen. "Hmm. Well, I can't say for sure I recognize him. Looks familiar somehow, though."

He went back to his March Madness basketball game, and I called Garrett.

Garrett answered the phone laughing. "I thought I'd hook you with that last mail!"

"Well, yeah. This is better than those stupid reality shows any time. Or basketball. What's the deal with the marina?"

"I had a team of six there this afternoon, interviewing other boat owners and anyone else they could find who was there Tuesday. The dock-master was his usual surly self, but my folks are good at yanking chains when they need to. He got his yanked good and he left them alone." He paused, and I heard background conversation. "Uh, where was I? Oh. They didn't turn up much, but what they did turn up was interesting. It seems that another group was making the rounds last week asking all sorts of questions. And the other group didn't show ID like our people do. They were polite but very firm, and several people reported being intimidated by them."

"What about those security guards with their golf cart? Clumley and friends?"

"A couple of the boat owners wondered aloud to my people about that. Apparently there were nowhere around. We've got lots of notes, and Randy Lin is going back tomorrow—he can use the Saturday overtime—to do the sketch thing with everyone he can find."

"And the dock-master didn't see this other group either?"

"Very good question. It was only after he'd had his chain thoroughly yanked that my people found out about the other group, and by then he was in such a sulk that they didn't even ask. But we can tomorrow. If you work on Saturdays, that is."

"Well, I won't say it's 24-7 on a case, but the seven part is pretty much unavoidable. Same time, same place?"

"Sounds good. And I'll have a better summary of today's interviews by then. For now, though, it looks like Group 2—meaning Group 1 is the Asian guy who chartered Rafe's boat and his friends—Group 2 was scouting out possibilities for Group 1. Or something of that nature. They acted as if they had a boat and were looking for a marina, you know, getting opinions from people with boats there. But some of the questions raised suspicions. Questions about clearing customs, how long it takes, frequency of inspections, stuff like that. Instead of dock rates and amenities, like you'd expect."

I laughed. "Like marijuana growers who are looking for a house to set up their hydroponics in. They don't ask about the usual stuff—schools, power bills, age of the appliances. They have other priorities."

“Something like that, yeah. I get the impression they were looking for invisibility and ease of access to the ocean. That’s one reason that marina is so attractive, because it’s right at the edge of Port Everglades.”

“Could Group 1 and Group 2 be the same people?”

He thought about it. “The descriptions are pretty diverse. One Asian guy in Group 2 but he was quiet, for example. All the others are mixed, apparently. I need to look at the reports more carefully, though, and we need sketches.”

“OK, tomorrow at eight, then. If I’m there first, what kind of coffee was that?”

“You won’t be. Do you get caffeine first thing in the morning?”

“I do. Americano, double shot in that small cup. Thanks.”

I found Hal on the west balcony, watching the lights of the metropolitan area winking at him.

“Sounds like you’re working tomorrow?” He looked up at me.

“Yeah, this is one of those all-the-time cases, I think. Sorry. Did you have something in mind?”

“Well, to tell the truth, there’s not much to do here if you’re not a beach person. And we’re not. Maybe we could get in a very early walk before you leave in the morning, though. And I thought I’d go down to OceanLab tomorrow and see about calculating some free-fall estimates for you. Make some of those ellipses you mentioned. And dig up some relevant survey information, if I can figure it all out.”

“That could be very helpful indeed. And if we’re getting up for a very early walk, we should go to bed early.”

“Uh, well, I’m not really sleepy yet.”

“Good. Neither am I.”

* * *

1.7

Our early morning walk, in the half-light before dawn, was the perfect beach activity for me. We had the whole strip of sand to ourselves, except for one jogger, there was no wind, and it was blessedly cool. Even the beachy smells were just right.

That early-to-bed business the night before was even better.

As he said he would, Garrett beat me to Cove 17 and was waiting in our chairs on the patio next door under the palm tree with two Starbucks cups, a huge one and a little one. But I made up for it by surprising him with a scrumptious pecan Danish I picked up at that same Starbucks. I figured he’d never get one for himself if he was being careful about food.

We spent over two hours drinking coffee—decaf after the first one, for me—and watching Randy Lin get sketches from as many of Friday’s interviewees as he could find. It didn’t take me long to start feeling guilty that we were sitting and watching Randy work. But Garrett had a Plan, as he assured me.

And, indeed, after Randy finished with the people on the first dock, he came back to talk with us. I could tell that Garrett was about to spring into action.

Randy was anything but springy, however. “Man, I should have brought someone else to help with this. There are an awful lot of these folks. And I need two people so we can separate the husbands and wives. As it is, I’m working with one, and the other is over the shoulder, kibitzing. ‘No, the nose is different.’ ‘Weren’t you paying attention at all? The hair wasn’t like that.’ Then I finish with one and they switch places and the other kibitzes in reverse. It’s driving me nuts, and it’s contaminating the results.”

Garrett laughed, but nicely. “Don’t worry about it, Randy. Dock One there had the most people on it, so the others will go faster. Anyway, the interviews produced all sorts of contradictory descriptions, and we shouldn’t be surprised if the sketches are all over the map, too. But whatever you get will help. And it’s also making people think about this, so when Annette and I go and talk with them—and we’re headed over to Dock One now—they’ve had their memories refreshed by their work with you. This is just right, really.”

It didn’t take long on Dock One for me to understand Randy’s frustration. There were six people there we had to interview, three couples, and they were just impossible, contradicting each other, bickering, trying to get us to take sides. If this, I thought, is how rich people with big boats live their lives, I’ll stick to a little cabin in the mountains, snow or no snow.

By the time we were finished with the first three couples on Dock One, Randy was finished with Dock Three and had only one more sketch to do, on Dock Four. He was looking far more chipper than we felt at that point.

We spent most of the afternoon at it, but we finally finished with all of them and, to our surprise, found that a pattern was emerging from the seemingly contradictory descriptions. What Garrett and I had been calling Group 1, the probably Chinese guy and his three cohorts who’d taken the *Reel-Thing* out on Monday, had split itself into two pieces the week before and wandered around as Group 2, in two pairs, for surveillance. But the probably Chinese guy who had dealt with Rafe Wellingworth had stayed in the background, leaving the questions to his partner. Meanwhile, the other pair, neither of whom was Asian, both tag-teamed their questions.

No wonder, I thought, that the initial interviews by Garrett’s team were so confusing. Without those sketches that Randy produced, we would never have figured it all out.

So we knew that the team of four perps was careful and methodical, and we didn’t know any more who was really in charge of it. Although only one guy had dealt with Rafe, who naturally assumed that he was the leader, that could just have been more of their sleight-of-hand.

It felt as if we were going backwards.

But Garrett was not fazed. “Last night, I was thinking we had two separate groups of people here, and now it looks like only one. I’d say that’s progress. And we got some interesting new bits of information today, like the tattoos, right?”

Even though the surveillance teams had worn windbreakers, one of them had an exposed tattoo on the back of his left hand, some kind of odd symbol. Another had what looked like the head of a snake on his throat, coming up out of the collar on his tee shirt, one of our fractious boaters had said.

“If we find them, those will help us identify them, sure. But how will the tattoos help us find them?”

“Frankly, Annette, I’d be surprised if they’re still around. I’m betting they blew up the *Stream-Tracker* and left town as fast as they could. Our only hope is to keep our eyes on Rafe and the other charter boats around here in case they come back. And if they deployed something out there, which I’m beginning to think is the case, they just might come back.”

“Sounds like you’re in favor of a survey out there.”

“Yep. I’ve been putting the pieces into place. And I’m thinking tomorrow might work, if the weather cooperates. Today, though, we need to see what we can get out of our very best friend Mr. Wiggins. Oh joy!”

It was getting late in the work day, but the good Mr. Wiggins was in his dock-master’s office hard at work chomping on the remains of an unlit cigar and ogling a girlie magazine. He greeted us with an ebullient “Oh, crap!”

“Well, good afternoon to you too, Mr. Wiggins. I’m afraid I have good news and bad news. What’s your pleasure?” Garrett, it seemed, was setting himself up to go either way, good-cop or bad-cop, as the situation called for.

“My pleasure would be for you both, along with all of the others, to go away and never come back.” He spat the cigar into a trash can for emphasis.

Garrett’s smile was especially self-satisfied. “Well, then I’ll pick. The good news is that we, in fact, are done with all of our questioning, so your clientele won’t be pestered anymore.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said that makes any sense,” Wiggins growled. “So what’s your bad news?”

In a deceptively smooth motion that was so quick I almost didn’t see it, Garrett’s Sig Sauer appeared in his right hand, leveled at Wiggins’ face. “I’m afraid that the bad news, Mr. Wiggins, is that you’re under arrest. Let me suggest you hold very, very still while my partner here cuffs you.”

That was all the hint I needed.

* * *

We made a point of parading the handcuffed dock-master through the Westin Hotel lobby, where we asked for the manager and informed her of our need to remove Wiggins from the premises next door and that perhaps her concierge should know that marina was closed. She was not amused, so not amused that I wondered whether Wiggins would ever get back into the hotel’s good graces.

Then, after reciting Wiggins’ Miranda rights, Garrett installed him in the back seat of the official CGIS Charger Hemi waiting in the parking lot. It had some interesting accessories, including a metal bar on the security screen to which, after getting the seat belt on him, Garrett fastened Wiggins’ handcuffs.

Garrett rattled the cuffs to make sure they were secure, then shut the door.

He turned to me. “Let’s go see if we can find Clumley. Thing is, one of the people interviewed yesterday, he wasn’t here today, but he told my guys that he saw Wiggins taking money from our mysterious group of questioners. Meanwhile, Clumley and company were never around. I’m thinking we might ask him a pointed question or two.”

“Good idea. He does get credit, though, for telling us he saw the *Reel-Thing* go out the other day with Gus on it.”

Maybe that reminder mellowed Garrett out, because he was positively polite with security guard Clumley and his compatriots. Their explanation for having missed the previous week’s visit by the gang of questioners was simple: they didn’t get any calls and stuck to their normal rounds, during which they saw nothing amiss. There were people on the docks talking, sure, but nothing that got their attention. If something had been wrong, Wiggins, they said, would have called them. We didn’t point out Mr. Wiggins’ new status.

Back at the parking lot, we discovered Wiggins asleep in the back seat of Garrett's car. It was parked in the shade, so Wiggins was in no danger of heat stroke, but there was a drip of sweat dangling from the end of his nose. He barely stirred when Garrett opened the driver's door.

Just as obnoxious payback, I think, Garrett slammed his door, hard, and Wiggins jumped so high that his head bounced off the roof.

"I'm going to ferry our friend here down to the brig, Annette, on charges of conspiracy and lying to federal agents. That bribe puts him in the bad guys' camp." He shook his head. "The turkey. If he'd been nice to us and a little more discreet, he wouldn't be in this ugly position. As it is, even a plea bargain won't get him much of anywhere. Although maybe we can get additional information from him now, or after he spends a while in our facility."

"And tomorrow's Sunday, too. Seems like he might just languish there for a bit, hmm?"

"Y'know, I actually did forget about that, truly. But you're right. Or, at the very least, his lawyer will charge him a lot extra for a Saturday night or Sunday visit." He put on a pout. "Sometimes I feel like such a mean person."

"Well, he made his bed and all that." I stretched and yawned. "Is there a plan for tomorrow?"

"I think I'll see if we have the assets to do a survey out there. I'll give you a call when I find out." He opened the driver's door again and climbed in, which elicited a long string of profanity from Wiggins, causing Garrett to turn slightly. "Shut the hell up, Wiggins, unless you want to ride in the trunk!"

I was about to hit the road for home when a thought struck me. Maybe, just maybe, there was information in the dock-master's office that we should know of. Because we'd made an arrest for activities that happened there, it was a crime scene and appropriate to search.

I headed back to the marina, half expecting the office to be locked up, or occupied by a substitute. But we'd told only the hotel manager about our arrest, and she didn't seem disposed to do anything to help the marina out. So the office was wide open and vacant, which suited me just fine. I closed the door behind me, put the little "Closed" sign in the window, and set to work.

The decor was early government-office metal, a desk and some filing cabinets, with a box fan on the floor. With the door closed, the odors of cigar, sweat, and stale beer quickly became toxic, so I put the fan in the window and turned it on for ventilation.

The desk drawers held office supplies, some keys, and, surprise, more girlie magazines, some in the full-out porn category. Wiggins obviously had a lot of time, among other things, on his hands, I thought. But there was nothing of interest to us.

The left-hand filing cabinet had labels on the four drawers indicating that the contents were alphabetized, or meant to be. In the top drawer, A-F, there were files with peoples' names behind a three-ring binder with slip occupancy information, and the other three drawers followed suit. In the bottom one, I found the Wellingworth file and looked through it briefly, but it didn't seem to have any information beyond the lease agreement and payment history. Rafe, I noticed, had a tendency to get behind on his rent.

Dusk was beginning to signal the end of the day outside, and I was getting discouraged. But then, in the right-hand filing cabinet, I hit pay-dirt, a cache of security DVDs in the top drawer. I hadn't noticed any cameras around the marina, though, so it was puzzling. But then I opened a door that I had assumed was the head (I was beginning to think like a real Coastie, I realized) and found instead a closet full of electronics, including a bank of ten TV monitors. From the pictures, it looked as if each of the four

docks was covered by two cameras, and the other two appeared to be at the ends of the quay, looking along the shoreline.

A more careful examination of the DVDs in the filing cabinet revealed that they were only in the top drawer—the others held old VHS tapes. The system must have had a recent upgrade, I decided, maybe associated with Cove 17's newfound prosperity. But DVDs were there for the past month, nicely labeled by camera number and date. It occurred to me that we could add to Mr. Wiggins' set of charges another one of concealing evidence.

I suddenly wished I were not alone. I needed a way to haul a bag full of DVDs to my car, and I didn't want to leave the treasure-trove unattended, even for a minute. Then I remembered the keys.

One of them, to my relief, fit the office door, so I locked it behind me and made my way to the hotel lobby next door, where I remembered seeing a gift shop next to the Starbucks.

Fifteen minutes later, with a beach-bag—an absurdly expensive, cheaply constructed beach bag with palm trees on it—full of security DVDs, I returned to my car. The Cove 17 dock-master's office was locked again, and I had the key.

* * *

By the time I got home, it was after seven. Door-to-door, I'd put in a twelve-hour day. On a Saturday. Are you ever going to get a real life, Trieri?, I asked myself. But that bag of DVDs had me feeling triumphant.

Hal had planned to spend the day at OceanLab, I remembered, but probably not twelve hours of it. And he hadn't, I discovered. Instead of getting home as late as I, he was there already, based on evidence I found in the kitchen. A big tossed salad was sitting on the counter next to a glass dish with marinating steaks, and the aroma of baking potatoes filled the air.

I heard a noise from the other room and discovered him on the west balcony, futzing with the gas grill out there. As I walked through the door, there was a startling *fwoosh* and a burst of flame, a fireball that looked as if it might have singed his eyebrows.

But Hal was fine, blinking a bit as he looked at me and smiled. "Just in time! I finally got this stupid thing working, and now that you're here I can cook the steaks."

That's how it turned out that, the week after the Spring Equinox, two days after a huge snowstorm in Denver and while another was pounding the Fraser Valley where we lived, dinner got cooked on one balcony, overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway and the City of Boca Raton, and eaten on the other, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, which was still just splooshing along. It was making me have serious thoughts about the attraction of the place, I can tell you.

But the splooshing was different that night. More, well, forceful, somehow. I mentioned the difference.

"Probably the late-season Nor'Easter that's going to swoop up the east coast and screw up Sunday and Monday for everyone up that way." Hal paid more attention to weather patterns and events than I, which really could be quite helpful. "It's the same system that dumped on Denver the other day, rejuvenated by some additional vorticity advection from the north and a surge of warm, moist, high convective potential energy air from the Gulf of Mexico and now from the Gulf Stream up by Cape Hatteras. And it's stirred up some waves that are starting to arrive down here." Hal bit into another piece of steak.

Of course, that helpfulness could go too far, as in those times when I didn't understand much of what he was saying. But I heard the part about the stirred up waves.

"So the waves are going to keep getting bigger?"

"Maybe. Probably, I guess. Depends on just where the storm goes and how fast and so forth. But we'll probably get a cold front through here—which, by the way, will make the weather truly spectacular afterward—and there are often north winds behind cold fronts. North winds blowing against the Gulf Stream, which is trying to *go* north, make for some serious swell out there."

That sounded worrisome to me. "Oh. Um. Garrett is talking about a survey. Would waves screw that up?"

"Ah. Good question. I guess it depends on the vessel and the instruments. A small boat with instruments mounted on it would bounce around so much that I doubt they'd be able to get any real work done. But a large ship that tows instruments on cables, well, it might be rocky for the crew, but I expect that the survey would still work."

"I don't know what kind of ship Garrett is planning, but I expect that they know what they're doing. You said you were going to look into narrowing down the survey area. How'd that go?"

"Fair to middlin' I guess. We know exactly where the *Stream-Tracker* was when it exploded, and presumably the outboard motors fell right to the bottom, and some other stuff, too, like anchors. And we know exactly what the current at that spot was doing, so it's easy to plot a downstream trajectory. Then it becomes a matter of deciding what you're looking for and how far downstream to keep looking, and also how wide, across the current, to expand the search downstream. The final area of interest would be shaped sort of like a cartoon teardrop. But it all depends on what's of interest. Heavy, small stuff makes for a small area. Bigger, oddly shaped, lighter stuff—assuming it still sinks, of course—makes for a bigger area. Stuff that didn't sink will wind up in the North Atlantic somewhere."

I tried to visualize it. "So if they start where the *Stream-Tracker* was and follow the current for, ah, a couple of miles?, I really don't know, and then move, say, west a skosh and head back to the starting point, that would do it?"

"Right. When they got back to the starting point, they could move a bit east and head downstream again. The instruments will have a cross-track range, so you make sure the tracks overlap a bit to cover everything. Kind of like mowing a lawn."

I nodded. "Right. That makes sense. I'll send Garrett some email. Also, I've got a bit more homework this evening. Does our computer have a way to play DVDs? And to capture individual frames?"

The beach bag full of DVDs was a bit intimidating to contemplate, but once I got started it went quickly. The security cameras were set to record a frame every five seconds, and each had a time stamp. Playing a DVD made for a jerky movie, with time flying by. But I knew that the *Reel-Thing* had departed on Gus Maroney's last cruise sometime around noon Tuesday, so I picked the disc for Dock 2, the camera looking back toward the dock-master's office, and searched for that time.

And there they all were, standing around, loading stuff, casting off. It must have been because the security system was new—perhaps the camera lens was still clean—that the pictures were crystal clear. In the background, off to the left edge, I could even see Rafe and Clumley sitting at a table on shore.

Because another of Hal's abilities was a good dose of computer geek-dom, something that came in hugely handy for me, he'd installed a DVD player application with various bells and whistles, including frame capture and zoom. I paged forward through the frames until I found one that had a suspect in it, well lit, and then zoomed in and captured it.

They were almost as good as mug shots, and they made me impressed with Randy Lin's abilities—I'd seen those mugs before in his work.

Flushed with success, I checked for other pictures from the other cameras, but the Dock 2 one was the best. And then I backed up to the previous week, when the suspects had been questioning people on the docks. That took longer, but by 10:30 I had about 25 megabytes of pictures of all four of them, from various angles, including one in which Dockmaster Wiggins looked like he was accepting his bribe, or payoff, or gratuity. Whatever it was, it sure looked like a bundle of cash.

Then it was my turn to ask Garrett about *his* bandwidth.

* * *

1.8

Back in Colorado, Hal and I have separate computers, something that, early in our relationship, we had decided was necessary after having tried to share one for a time. It seemed that we have different styles of computer housekeeping and they're not altogether compatible. He acts as my systems person, given my inability to do anything more than turn the thing on and log in, but he doesn't mess with how I organize things. Or don't.

But because I was on vacation, I didn't have a computer, so I was sharing Hal's laptop. And that earlier failed experiment at sharing had taught me to clean up after myself or get grumped at. It's sort of like my grumping at him when he doesn't pick up his dirty socks—something he learned to do rather quickly, actually. I guess he doesn't like me grumpy any more than I like him that way.

Anyway, after I sent the bandwidth question to Garrett, I was tidying up for a few minutes. So I was surprised to get an answer so quickly that late in the evening—yes he did indeed have bandwidth. I sent him the pictures, in five separate emails in case his system didn't like big attachments, and then did a little internet surfing to kill time for a few minutes.

As I expected, that's all it took for him to get back to me.

Annette: These are amazing, and I feel like I must be losing my edge. I looked and looked but sure didn't see any security cameras at that marina. Naturally, Wiggins wasn't going to tell us about them. It looks like we've got him dead to rights, and maybe that'll get him to cooperate.

Meanwhile, we're set for a survey tomorrow, departing from the Terminal Island at 0400 because it's a couple of hours' transit up to the area. The weather looks fine, but the seas are going to be rough. —GK

The computer was set up in the extra bedroom on the west side—we slept in the east-side bedroom where we could hear that wonderful splooshing surf—and a flash out to the northwest startled me. I paid attention and saw several more, and finally realized that it was lightning signaling the cold front that Hal had mentioned. At least, I thought, it would make its way through overnight. Like Hal had said, tomorrow's weather would be lovely, except for people in boats.

I composed a last message:

Garrett: I feel as if should volunteer to be on that survey, but I'm exhausted and I don't know how I can get to Terminal Island in time to make an 0400 departure. –AT

Almost before I could turn around, I got a response:

Annette: Don't sweat it. You can't come anyway because you haven't had the required training. But pay attention to email tomorrow. You'll be hearing from me.

And these pictures are truly amazing. –GK

Normally, I would have bounced around with glee, but I was just too tired. Hal was asleep, anyway, and such bouncing was always more satisfying with an audience. So I went to bed, too, eliciting a muffled “Mrrph” from him when I snuggled up, and then I fell asleep faster than I would have thought.

Sometime later, I awoke to thunder and wind blowing through the condo, but I just snuggled more and went back to sleep. That meant that, in the morning, just at first light, I awoke again after a dream about skiing in my underwear in a blizzard at the top of Winter Park. I had ski boots and skis, sure. And gloves. And a hat, I think. But as I got off the Zephyr quad chair, the bra and panties I was wearing were just not quite warm enough. Never mind that people were staring, it was the cold that bothered me.

And then I woke up and discovered that it really *was* cold.

Now, cold is relative. It really wasn't like being at the top of Winter Park in my underwear, blizzard or no blizzard. All I can say is that 55°, which is what I found out later that it was in that condo on that morning, was *cold*.

Hal was still there next to me—something I was glad for, because it would have been even colder without him—and I could tell somehow that he was awake.

“Well,” I said, “you did mention that there was a cold front coming.”

“Mrrph,” he said again. “But I forgot and left the sliders open. Got your fresh air in here this morning, don't we?”

“So, what are we going to do?”

“I'll get up and turn on the heat and then jump back in bed here, if that's OK with you.”

So he did, shutting the sliding doors to the balconies in the process, and presently the blower came on with a hot smell of burning dust, but it was circulating warm air instead of chilled.

I was resolved to snuggle until the temperature became tolerable, but then my phone started to make noises. In the other room. I could tell that it was my phone because Hal's was programmed to play music, the particular selection programmed according to the caller. His boss was the *1812 Overture*, for example. I didn't know what I was, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

My phone, on the other hand, played one of those generic electronic phone tunes, the annoying ones you hear everywhere, so I knew it was mine and had the choice of ignoring it or going out there into the cold. Garrett had said he'd email me, but the clock said it was 8:07, and I couldn't help but think that he was calling ship-to-shore. Maybe they had found something!

But by the time I untangled myself from Hal and what blankets—thin, inadequate, Florida blankets—we had on the bed, stumbled into the closet and found my robe, and figured out where in the other room the phone actually was, it had stopped playing its little tune. About the time I picked it up, it emitted an annoying *chirp* that meant I had voice mail, I'd figured out before.

So I went back to bed in my robe, which was nice and warm, altogether, and hid under the covers to retrieve the message.

“Good morning, Annette, it's Garrett calling from out here on the Gulf Stream. Fifteen foot seas this morning, I'd say, so be glad you're not out here. Even I'm a little queasy. But we've found some interesting possibilities on our first pass, so we're going back with the ROV and its cameras. I've already sent email, so I think it works, and I'll send more with pictures as they're available. Talk to you later.”

That, of course, made me feel guilty for not being there, but then Hal snuggled up with me and my nice warm robe, and I dozed back off.

* * *

An hour later I woke up again, sweating this time. Hal must have set the thermostat way up there, and the heating system had done its work. Even though he wasn't in bed at that point, my robe and those few blankets were making things just toasty, too toasty.

Talk about famine or feast, I thought.

But there were wonderful aromas wafting my way from the kitchen, bacon and French-toast aromas with a hint of coffee in the background. Ten minutes later, after a very quick shower, I walked up behind him and gave him a hug.

“Something smells like breakfast, and it smells wonderful.”

“Good. I was hoping it would mask that stale smell from the heating system. I guess it doesn't get used very much. Coffee's hot. Probably too chilly to eat outside, huh?”

“I don't think I brought clothes warm enough.”

“You realize, of course, that back home, with 55° and sunshine, we'd be outside in our shirt sleeves.” He smiled. “But we've become accustomed to the low 70s at night and the 80s during the day, South Florida wussies.”

“Yeah, well, I'm glad this place has a heating system. Although, is it OK if I back it down a bit? It's certainly warmed up enough.” I went searching for the thermostat and turned it back to 74°, at which point the heater turned off.

After breakfast, I tackled the email and found five new messages from Garrett. The first was labeled “Test in transit” and the second “Test on station.” To my expectations, those had no real information. The third, a few minutes after the second, was a report of conditions and their location on station.

It was the fourth and fifth ones, sent after the phone message, that were most interesting—they had pictures. The message in email number four said

Annette: The attached image is from the on-board multibeam sonar, medium resolution and annotated. We also have a high-resolution image from a special sidescan sonar that I can't send by email. It shows that the circled things on the attached image are outboard motors. So we're on the right track.--GK

Email five, time-stamped 20 minutes later, said

Annette: The circled object on this image looks in the sidescan image to be a human body. It was about 500 meters downstream from the outboard motors. We're staying with the original survey plan, but we'll be back to get photographs of this with the ROV later.
--GK

I'm pretty fit, for a middle-aged woman with a mostly desk job, but I discovered the second day I was in Florida that I float in the ocean. And Hal had said that only very heavy things sink fast and objects that don't sink wind up in the North Atlantic somewhere. How, I wondered, did a body wind up on the sea floor a few hundred meters downstream from those motors?

As I was tidying up, another message arrived:

Annette: Could you please check with the people at OceanLab (maybe Hal?) to see where they've placed underwater buoys out here? We found the one near the explosion site, probably the ADCP that Hal talked about. We've also found another buoy farther north and a bit west (inshore), a much bigger one. Is that a Pompano State deployment? Thanks! --GK

Probably, I thought. There seemed to be all sorts of measurements going on to support this curious business of generating energy from the ocean. But I knew I should ask anyway.

Hal was busy with the Sunday paper, outside on the east balcony. The sun on all that concrete had warmed things up enough to be quite comfortable out there.

"Hey? You talked about that ADCP whatever gadget that's out there on the bottom where the *Stream-Tracker* got blown up. Does OceanLab, or anyone, have other such measurement gadgets out that way, a bit farther north?"

He looked at me for a few seconds before responding. "Sounds like Garrett and his folks found something, eh? And the answer, I'm sorry to say, is I don't know. But I can call Shorty."

"OK, that would be helpful. And, uh, tell him that they also think they've located a human body on the sea floor about 500 meters north of where the boat exploded. They'll go back and get pictures after this first set of passes."

"Uh-oh. Any indication of who it might be?" He looked stricken.

"No, just a body. Uh, wait. I mean, 'an unknown body', nothing 'just' about it. But bodies float, right? How could one be lying on the bottom?"

"You mean to tell me, growing up in Chicago, that you never heard of 'concrete overshoes'?"

"Oh. Well, like you said, 'Uh-oh'."

* * *

Shorty and Hal had a long telephone conversation, and from what I heard it was mostly concerned with instrument deployments instead of the body.

From a perspective of pure investigative detachment, I knew that the body was actually of secondary interest, as it was not surprising that one was found and it could be identified in due time. The new information about some kind of unknown instrument out there, however, carried a greater urgency, because it needed to be identified. Who was measuring what, and for whom?

But from a more human perspective, the body worried me.

When he was finished with the phone, Hal came and found me. “As far as Shorty knows, and from what other information I found out in the past couple of days, we don’t have anything else out there. Just that one ADCP mooring. How about you let Garrett know, and then we can figure out a plan for the day?”

So I sent the appropriate follow-up email to Garrett and then went back to the east balcony. “So, what’s this about a plan for the day?”

He looked up at me. “Oh, well, see, it’s Sunday. You’ve been working twelve hour days since, what?, Wednesday? Everyone needs a bit of down-time for rest and relaxation, otherwise you just burn yourself out. Right? And Garrett is on a ship somewhere on the ocean, so there’s not really much you can do, right? You came down here for vacation, so, well, let’s vacationize for a bit.”

It was hard to argue with that bit of logic, so I said, “OK, so what’s your plan?”

“Let’s leave our phones here and go wander around Morikami Gardens. Have a late lunch there. Relax. Contemplate the bonsai collection.” His look was serene.

“What’s this ‘Morikami Gardens’? Not that it doesn’t sound like a good idea, mind you.”

“A Japanese garden, with a museum and a restaurant. Something of a local institution, about ten miles or so northwest. This is a good day to go there, because the temperature’s nice and cool. And the humidity went down after that front. We can wear hats and sunscreen and summer clothes. All the locals will probably be wearing parkas.”

I giggled. “Yeah, I sympathize. I wanted a parka in here this morning.”

“Me, too, especially when I was running around in just my skin shutting those sliders and turning on the heat. Geez. But this is a perfect day for a walk there. In fact, the cold—or not-so-hot, or whatever—it’ll probably keep the visitor count low, so we may just have the place almost to ourselves.”

I’d been to the Denver Botanic Gardens once, and that was enough to get me interested in this Japanese garden. What such a place was doing in Boca Raton, or wherever it was in the vicinity, wasn’t at all clear, but it seemed like a good outing for a Sunday afternoon. And Hal was absolutely right: some vacation was in order, for both of us.

I thought about cheating by taking my phone but then decided that getting away from it all made more sense. There wasn’t really anything I could do for Garrett beyond sit and wait for more email, which didn’t seem especially productive.

Hal took us north on Highway 1A, which changed from condos and commercial buildings to parks, golf courses, and beach and made for much more pleasant scenery. But then we turned inland and had to negotiate several miles of the Boca Raton arterials lined with strip malls. And apartments. A proliferation of apartments.

When I was planning this little trip, I’d used the Google satellite pictures to try to get an idea of where I was going. Zoomed back, the Florida peninsula looked benign enough, but as I zoomed in on the southeastern part of the state, I began to realize that the different colors showed a metropolitan area about ten miles east-to-west, between the ocean and the Everglades, and maybe 100 miles long north-south. In that thousand square miles were some five million people, meaning 5,000 per square mile or so. And considering all the golf courses, those people were crammed together in far less space.

Meanwhile, my little corner of the world, Grand County Colorado, boasted about eight people per square mile. No wonder I felt crowded on the Gold Coast.

But Morikami, especially on a day with temperatures in the low 60s, was the antidote to the feeling of being crowded. We took a turn around the lake, stopping to check out the bonsai collection on the

little island and to sit on a bench in the sun. And just before lunch—a perfectly done teriyaki salmon—we strolled through the bamboo grove, the hundreds of culms clacking in the breeze. After lunch, we studied the museum’s special exhibit of ancient kimonos, some from the 17th century, on loan from a private collector in Japan. To top it off, we walked around the lake again in the opposite direction, bamboo first. It made me want a grove in our back yard—they’d make a nice complement to the aspen, I thought, except they’d freeze to death even before the truly cold weather set in.

And all the while we encountered only about a dozen other people, dressed, as Hal had suggested they would be, for winter conditions.

The peace and quiet, plus the exquisite views across the lake, motivated us to take our time and sit on every bench we came to, at least the ones in the sun, so we managed to while away the rest of the afternoon. Just what a vacation is supposed to be.

The drive home was a reality check—more strip malls and apartments, with, on the different route that Hal took, gated entrances to fancy subdivisions. Everything looked remarkably green and manicured, even after the careful pruning that was the hallmark of the Japanese garden we’d spent the afternoon in. But it also looked sterile somehow, and obviously full of people. I kept thinking how much better I liked the empty and natural look of the forests out west, even the dying ones.

About the time we got to downtown Boca Raton, Hal said, “Do we have a dinner plan?”

“No. And it seems funny to be hungry again, but I am.”

“Well, I think we should cap off a Japanese day with sushi for dinner. Shorty told me about a place downtown here somewhere. Let’s see if I can find it.”

Like stone crabs, sushi was not something we could get in our part of Colorado. Denver and the other Front-Range cities had it; so, I’d heard, did Aspen, all flown in fresh daily. But it just made more sense to me to eat raw fish near the ocean.

A nigiri-sushi boat for two, which followed cups of miso soup, finished our day in style. We would be back, I knew.

* * *

1.9

Monday morning was not nearly as relaxed as Sunday had been, but, in our condo, it was a lot warmer. In the face of even cooler temperatures forecast for Sunday night, we’d left the windows closed and the heat on.

I had not quite succeeded in staying on vacation throughout Sunday evening, and so around seven I’d read the email that Garrett had sent me, telling me that he would be at OceanLab at eight in the morning to talk about the survey and would I try to get Shorty Ringwold to be there, too, please?

As a result, Hal and I had an early breakfast, during which we pored over a front-page, above-the-fold story in the paper about a political assassination down in Miami. Drug wars, we knew about, but this seemed like something new and, even for South Florida, over the top.

But our own case was commanding attention, and by eight Shorty, Hal, and I were in the OceanLab secure conference room talking over what we knew about it when Garrett arrived, with a guest. Both wore blue dress uniforms, but the new guy’s was different from Garrett’s in subtle ways.

I understood why when Garrett introduced him as Commander Rick Vanderhoff of Navy Counterintelligence, which, Garrett said, was part of NCIS.

“Commander Vanderhoff has been brought into this because of what we found yesterday. We want to talk with you folks about it because you’re probably the most knowledgeable about what’s offshore in this area.”

Hal looked surprised. “Well, I’m trying to come up to speed, but I’m sure there’s lots I don’t know yet. I’ll help out as much as I can, of course. Shorty, that is, Dr. Ringwold here, he’s the real expert.”

Garrett nodded. “I understand. One reason we need to talk with you is because the three of you have the highest clearances of anyone here at OceanLab. A generic ‘Secret’ clearance just won’t suffice for this. Before we get to that, though, I’m hoping that you, Dr. Ringwold, can identify this individual. Ah, this is a disturbing picture, let me warn you.”

He slid an 8x10 photograph from a folder and passed it to Shorty face down.

Shorty turned it over and gasped. “Disturbing is right, Chief. Ah, well, this looks like Amelia Albright to me.”

I understood. “Was that the body you found in your survey yesterday?”

“That’s correct. On the bottom in about 900 feet of water. Death by drowning. Someone had put a 50-pound weight belt on her and bound her hands to it. As we surmised, she wasn’t wearing her bikini top, either.”

Shorty was staring at the picture, looking distraught. “Amelia, I’m so sorry. We’ll get them for you, I promise.”

The events clicked into place for me, and I started to get angry. “So, those yahoos blow up the *Stream-Tracker*, but somehow Ms. Albright survives and gets rescued only to have half her clothes ripped off, and then they throw her overboard, alive, with those weights and her hands bound so she can’t possibly save herself. I agree, Shorty, let’s get these bastards.”

Commander Vanderhoff spoke up for the first time. “We’re highly motivated to do just that, Ms. Trieri. But the Navy’s motivation has to do with the other discovery from yesterday, with all due respect to Ms. Albright.”

“Right,” Garrett said. “Remember I sent you email about other deployments, Annette? Here’s a picture of what we found, first an image from the sidescan, and then we went back and got real pictures with the ROV.”

He passed around a series of pictures showing a strange-looking contraption hovering somewhere in the water column. It was big enough that the lighting wasn’t very good for the whole thing, but it reminded me of a hot-air balloon with three baskets, one below another, plus a little balloon at the very top. Close-ups of the basket-like things and the balloons showed more details, but they didn’t mean anything to me.

But Shorty knew what to look for. “That’s an odd bit of hardware. The big float looks like a syntactic foam buoy, nothing remarkable there. The little one above it is, too, probably. But what are those other things? I’ve never seen oceanographic instruments that look like those. And they’re certainly not ours. For one thing, we paint ours up with the PSU logo and so on.”

“So you don’t think, Dr. Ringwold, that the three bottom packages are some kind of instrument?” Vanderhoff, I could tell, wasn’t being entirely forthcoming with us.

“It’s hard to know what kind of instrument they could be. I’ve never seen anything that looks like that. They must be something else. They’re containers, rectangular boxes, but I’ve got no idea what

could be in them.” Shorty looked puzzled. “But you know where this mooring is, right? Why not just bring it in? You must have a cable cutter on that ROV.”

“And we almost used it yesterday, Dr. Ringwold.” Garrett smiled. “But then we came to our senses. Like you said, we know where it is, and it’s not going anywhere without our knowing. Our Exec Officer pointed this out yesterday, and he also suggested that it might not be safe to just cut the thing loose. He said it might be some kind of unusual mine.”

“A mine at 900 feet?” Hal, I could tell, was trying to understand this. “What’s that about? Surely it wouldn’t be a threat to shipping.”

Vanderhoff nodded. “Not surface shipping. And that’s proven by the fact that it’s been sitting there with all sorts of ships overhead. Although, if it went off, there’d be quite a disturbance on the surface, maybe dangerous to smaller boats. But the thing is, we have submarine operations offshore now and then. There’s a sub test range down by Port Everglades, in fact. Our working hypothesis is that the small structure at the top is a hydrophone package that’s being used to capture information that they download every now and then—that’s probably what the *Reel-Thing* was out there for—and they’re preparing to use it in ASW.”

He must have seen my blank look. “Anti-submarine warfare. It could be that the three packages below that spherical float are each full of an explosive and are designed go off in close sequence, which could devastate any subs in the vicinity.

“I see. They process the hydrophone data until they think they can recognize specific targets, then they program the mine to go off when one is close by.” Shorty was nodding. “But if that’s right, the existence of one means there must be more, don’t you think?”

“That’s what we think, Dr. Ringwold. This is CI’s top priority just now, in fact.”

It sort of made sense to me, except for one thing. “I don’t understand how they can communicate with it. To download data, I mean, or program it to explode with a specific sound pattern.”

“I bet you remember computer modems, Ms. Trieri, before we all had internet connections and Wi-Fi, right?” Vanderhoff wasn’t calling me old, I decided, just experienced. “Well, there are such things as acoustic modems, they translate digital computer signals into a sequence of sounds and transmit them as chirps and squeals and so on. Another acoustic modem picks the sounds up and re-digitizes them. It’s slower and a bit more error-prone than the kind of computer modem everyone used to have, but they work. And that fishing boat would be a perfect platform from which to lower a hydrophone with an acoustic modem and talk to a hydrophone package.”

“So the *Stream-Tracker* was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” I looked at Garrett.

“Looks like, Annette. Of course, if there are more of these hydrophone-mine combinations along the coast, doing this kind of research anywhere could be dangerous. The *Stream-Tracker* was just the first unfortunate, innocent victim.”

Hal cleared his throat. “Are you at liberty to tell us your plan? I’m not sure we’re in the need-to-know mode here, but I bet we’re all curious.”

Vanderhoff smiled. “Well, Dr. Weathers, we’re actually hoping to get your cooperation. We could use the help. Your resources here, we understand, include an extensive archive of undersea surveys from Key West all the way north to Cape Hatteras. And you have this secure facility and the right clearance to work with us. If we provide our submarine tracks, could you compare them with the survey data and infer where such devices as this might be placed? This one, for example, is in a fairly flat, sandy-bottom area, not a lot in the way of rock piles or anything to interfere with sound propagation.”

Hal looked at Shorty. “Do we have additional T-S cleared people?”

Vanderhoff spoke up. “We can provide those, Dr. Weathers. What we need is someone to coordinate the effort, someone with oceanographic experience and organizational skills.”

Shorty looked at Hal, Hal looked at Shorty, and they both nodded.

“We’re in.” Hal said.

“Damned right,” Shorty said. “Let’s get these bastards.”

“So here’s the plan,” Vanderhoff leaned back and stared at the ceiling in thought. “We’re going to retrieve that top float this morning, cut it loose from the mine and hope that the mine doesn’t go off. If it does, well, we lose an ROV and are back to square one. But if we can retrieve it and it *is* a hydrophone and modem, then we can crack its coding, I’m certain, and figure out how to talk to it. Then we run towfish along the coast chattering away and listening for these things to talk back. When we find one, we disable it, the mine, at least. Naturally, we’d like to start in areas most likely to have these things, and that’s where you folks come in.”

The need for stealth occurred to me. “What if they come back to download more data? Won’t they find out their hydrophone is missing and get suspicious?”

Garrett smiled. “That’s one nice thing about acoustic modems that have been underwater for a long time, for our purposes, at least. They get unreliable and sometimes fail. So they’ll come back, theirs won’t answer, and they just won’t know if it’s gone or broken or what. The water’s way too deep to go diving for it, and a fishing boat like the *Reel-Thing* won’t have the ability to carry an ROV. Anything big enough for that, we’ll notice, for sure. There’s going to be surveillance there, right, Rick?”

Vanderhoff laughed. “I’d say just a little, yeah. In fact, Dr. Weathers, I’d suggest that you folks include us in all float plan distributions so we’ll know it’s you out there. Otherwise your folks might have some unplanned adventures with Navy assets.”

* * *

We spent several hours talking strategy and tactics both, and by late morning Hal and Shorty had figured out the best way to help with the use of OceanLab survey information. Garrett and I listened but really weren’t part of all that—I could tell he wanted to talk with me instead. He had the chance when we all went to an early lunch.

OceanLab operated a pleasant little cafeteria just off the patio by Hillsboro Bay, and it had warmed up outside enough to make the open-air tables comfortable, to us at least. To others, it must have still been too chilly, because we had the patio to ourselves. That helped, though, because having no potential eavesdroppers made our conversation easier.

After we had settled in and sampled our various lunches, I spoke up. “Garrett, I brought you a present today, a big bag of DVDs. Better you keep them than I. They’re in the car.”

He nodded. “Excellent. I’ll get people to go over them frame-by-frame to see if there are any other useful pictures, although I have to say the ones you sent were great, just what we need. But maybe we can also get an idea of what they took with them on the boat, for example.”

“And even though the big picture seems to be under control, we still need to apprehend those four guys somehow.”

“We do, and the pictures you sent will help with that. They’re being run through the facial recognition system this morning. The guys with tattoos should be easy to recognize, if they’re in the database, at least.”

Hal was shaking his head. “I’ll tell ya what. All this modern technology, you can’t even rob a bank any more without some computer getting your picture and identifying you. Where’s the fun in that? And you know what I saw in the paper the other day? They’re using the SunPass information about when you go through the new no-stop toll plazas to calculate your speed so they can give you a speeding ticket automatically. Privacy is becoming a thing of the past. What’s the world coming to, anyway?”

We three law-enforcement people couldn’t help but laugh. Garrett got control of himself first.

“What’s interesting, Hal, is that people don’t seem to mind. There are insurance companies that will give you a price break if you’ll install a driver behavior monitor in your car. People seem to love it—they value the price break more than their privacy.”

Vanderhoff had his own take on it. “People are using credit cards, or debit cards, for more and more stuff now, down to cups of coffee. And those cards are anything but anonymous—you really lose privacy by using plastic. But what *is* anonymous—cash—is going the way of the dodo. Hell, my bank won’t take coins for deposit any more unless I pay them to count them first.”

I had to ante up my two cents’ worth. “Add all that to the personal stuff that people post on social media sites like Facebook and so on, and the computerized information gatherers are having a field day. And making gobs of money by selling that information to marketers.”

Hal snorted. “Yeah, well, by the time you all get to be grumpy old geezers like me, everybody will have little transponders in their heads monitoring their thoughts for bad ones. Check out some boobs, get a shock. Hmmph.”

Vanderhoff looked at me with a grin. “Why, Ms. Trieri! Don’t tell me you have a dirty old man on your hands.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s the beach. He goes for walks on the beach and checks out all the twenty-somethings. Comes back with this wild look in his eyes. If he had one of those transponder things, he’d just wear out its battery.”

“Well, ma’am, I can promise you that would never happen to me,” Vanderhoff said with a straight face.

“Nor me, Annette.” Garrett managed to look serious, too.

I couldn’t help myself. “Easy for you to say.”

Garrett cracked up, but Rick Vanderhoff just looked confused.

“Hmmph, again.” Hal looked like he wanted to change the subject.

He was rescued when Garrett looked surprised and pulled out his phone. He must have it on vibrate, I thought.

“Kraus here...right.” He listened for a minute. “OK. Good work. Let’s start tracking them down.”

He looked my way. “Hits on two of ’em.

I raised my eyebrows, and he continued. “The Asian guy and the one with the tattoo on his neck. About a 60% on the Asian guy and a 100% on the other one, who’s Bulgarian, it turns out. His name is Grozdan Petrov. Long Interpol rap sheet. The Asian guy is another matter, because he seems to have a bunch of possible names. That’s why the ID is less solid. We’ll pull all of the other pictures we can find of him, from those DVDs you liberated, and run them all. Maybe we can narrow down the possibilities.”

“One of those names wouldn’t be ‘Peter Chu’, would it?” I thought it time to voice a suspicion I’d been nurturing.

Garrett looked surprised. “Someone you know? I’ll have to ask. I’ve got the pictures you sent here, though, if you want to look at them again.”

He pulled the pictures out, and Hal, Shorty, and I studied the ones of the Asian guy.

Hal started. “I don’t think that’s Pete, do you, Shorty?”

“No, but he sure looks familiar somehow. Why’s that?” Shorty looked up and smiled. “And, no, it’s not because all Asians look alike to me. We have all sorts of folks from the West Pacific Rim countries here, and I’ve learned that their features are just as distinct as those of us Europeans. But he does look familiar. Hmm.”

Another thing had puzzled me. “What about this guy Petrov, Garrett? If he’s so well known, how did he get into the country? False passport?”

“Probably. Customs tries, but like everyone else, they’re understaffed and undertrained. It’s pretty easy to slip in with fake documentation and a tourist visa. But we’ve got his fingerprints, so that might be helpful.”

“Every little bit will help. We just *have* to get these guys,” I said.

Shorty’s set jaw and flashing eyes told me he agreed.

* * *

After that early lunch, Garrett and I talked it over and decided we both should head back to his office, at the Miami Station, where he had access to a sophisticated array of computer technology to process the DVDs I had in my car. Between the two of us, it seemed as if we would have a better chance of discovering whatever else there might be of interest. Also, he wanted to show me the details of the survey results, information that he had not brought up to OceanLab. So we hit I-95 for the 40-mile trek in that crazy traffic.

And it actually worked—we pulled through the guard gate just about 35 minutes later. By some miracle, there were no accidents or other slow-downs the whole way. I had my fingers crossed for the return trip.

Before we got down to business, Garrett took me to pay respects to his superiors, and we were able to give a bit of a progress report at the same time. It’s always a good idea, he pointed out, to let the bosses know you’re hard at work and getting results—even preliminary results—especially when you’re out of the office a lot.

I think that Garrett was assuming he could just breeze by various offices and give them some kind of equivalent of a “thumbs up,” but that didn’t work. His immediate boss, Commander Snedaker, was in the office of *his* boss, Captain Galliari, when we stopped by. Galliari I remembered, had authorized the previous day’s survey by the excuse of the need for training, and it turned out that he wanted to know what return there was on his investment. Or maybe we just caught him with some extra time on his hands.

“Ah, Agent Kraus. And Ms. Trieri! How nice to see you again. I had a lot of seasick sailors last evening, Garrett. What did it get me?”

“Quite a lot, sir.” And Garrett continued with about the same explanation he’d given earlier at OceanLab.

“A possible mine, that’s what your email said last night. And those pictures you sent do look suspicious.” Galliarì’s stern look bespoke his concern. “And there might be more of them? Got any additional pictures for me?”

“Uh, well, yessir. On the main server.” Garrett waited until Galliarì got himself behind a keyboard and then rattled off a string of numbers and letters with ‘slash’ interspersed. I guess it was a file pathway or something. “They’re chronological, sir, and you can see everything about the mooring there.”

“Right. Hmm. Right. I see. Some of these, of course, are what you sent me last night. And they looked pretty interesting. But these others are helpful, too.” Galliarì looked up at us. “Did you see the markings?”

“Markings? Uh, well, sir, I’ve been processing all of those and everything else we found, including the body, little by little, and I guess that I didn’t notice any markings, no.” Garrett seemed to be a bit embarrassed.

Snedaker spoke up. “Well, it made us wonder, and we sent out another ship first thing this morning. Navy CI is on this too, as I expect you know, and they went along to retrieve that top-most float there. We also put a rad counter on the ROV this time, but it didn’t find anything unusual. But we got better pictures of the markings.”

Galliarì did some things to his keyboard and mouse, and another picture appeared.

“Could that all be Chinese? Except for that symbol there. What’s that?” My afternoon at the Morikami the day before had involved a lot of Japanese characters in the museum, and these didn’t resemble what I’d seen. The exception was some kind of modern-looking emblem, a circle enclosing three arms and big dots on the ends of them.

Galliarì was solemn. “Good call, Ms. Trieri. It’s Chinese. And it translates to mean that those three box-like structures are full of warheads for RPGs. Rocket-propelled grenades. What you’re pointing at is the international symbol for chemical weapons.”

I think that both Garrett and I were stunned when we walked out of Galliarì’s office. The ante for our investigation had just gone through the roof, and I was feeling completely out of my depth. A chemical weapons cache in the ocean offshore of Deerfield Beach?

“Annette, I need to think about this. And talking will help me. How about a cup of coffee or something?” Garrett looked drained.

We headed for the station’s dining room, what Garrett called the ‘mess,’ although I was hoping it wouldn’t be. I was relieved when it turned out to resemble a no-frills Starbucks, only with more food choices. We assembled our drinks—one of those gigantic black coffees for him, a decaf peppermint mocha for me, because I needed the comfort value—and found an empty table.

“OK, well, mines with modems are one thing. Chemical warheads are another altogether. What’s your take on all this Annette? I’m just, well, I’m just mind-boggled.” And he looked it.

“Yeah, me, too. Still, this doesn’t change what we’ve found already—that the group we have pictures of chartered the *Reel Thing* and went out to talk to the modem the Navy has grabbed, most likely, and in the process they wiped out the *Stream-Tracker* and her crew. Right? These warheads are just bigger, much bigger, threats than the regular mine would have been. Right?”

“Which makes the whole thing that much more urgent. And I think we’re a long way... Uh, Annette?”

He stopped because I’d stopped listening, which was because I’d spotted someone I recognized, someone so unlikely that I was stunned all over again.

I stood up and tried not to shout, too loudly, at least. “Mac? Mac MacQuarrie?”

And that’s who it was. He turned at the sound of his name, took a couple of seconds to locate my voice and another to recognize me, broke into a huge smile, and walked over toward us. “Annette! Annette Trieri! Well, by damn. What in the world are you doing here?”

We had our old home minute, reminiscing briefly about the cruise ship caper on which we’d met while ferreting out a shipment of special nuclear material that had been stolen by a terrorist group. And I introduced him to Garrett, who was looking quite baffled.

“You’re a CGIS Special Agent, too?” Mac was looking at the logo on my ball cap.

“Oh, am I ever. But what in the world are you doing as one? I thought you and Sam were living in the Keys while you were learning to bonefish. And she’s painting or something?”

“We are, and I was, and she is. But I’ve got this temp job just now, so I’m here in Miami for a while. Let me get a coffee refill, and I’ll come back and tell you all about it.”

* * *

2.0

When the reticle of his Leupold 16x40mm scope found the target’s left ear, the shooter allowed himself a small sigh. Now, he thought, it’s just a matter of time while I wait for the right part of the speech, a little while for me to think over the Plan once again.

He’d heard the speech a half dozen times, and he knew the cues to listen for, the build-up to the Big Moment when the target would stand perfectly still while his audience went nuts. At least that’s what had happened on those other occasions—and the shooter was confident that it would happen again during this Sunday noon-time speech to the rich condo geezers, giving him time to get off the shot without the target’s moving. And the crowd’s applause would cover what noise from the report and the sonic boom of the bullet that might reach them a half-mile away.

He had selected this event, a mid-day Sunday rally, for the hit because the speech was on the radio, loud and clear through his ear-bud. The build-up, he knew, was coming.

Another reason for selecting this particular event was the background, where the sun glinted off the waves, a bit of a distraction in the scope’s field of view but one that was worth the benefit. Even though his hand-loaded, match-grade .50-caliber hollow-point would lose its aerodynamic shape after blowing off the right side of the target’s head, the shooter knew it would continue to tumble for several hundreds of yards and splash into the turquoise water just past the sundeck over there. The chances of its ever being found were minimized by his having salted that part of the bay the day before with various bits and pieces of metal, including a dozen rounds he had put through watermelons as practice.

Snug up against his shoulder, the weapon he was using would, he knew, provide exceptional accuracy. Mounted on its bipod, his McMillan TAC-50 A1-R2 low-recoil, long-range sniper rifle was perfectly balanced, rock steady, and, with the technology of the scope, sighted precisely to compensate for the distance, the downward trajectory, and the light breeze from his left. His position, prone on the balcony of a vacant fourth-floor condo with its hurricane shutter opened just enough to aim through, was a bit claustrophobic, but it was also quite secure. And it provided him with a panoramic view of the sundeck four buildings down, over there beside Brickell Bay Drive, the sundeck that was now occupied

by several hundred people, many bundled up against the cool weather, who were enthralled by the speaker's charisma.

All things being equal, he would have preferred not to take the head shot. Even though putting a cluster of rounds in a four-inch circle at 900 meters was routine for him, just too many things could go wrong in an open-air situation—an unexpected puff of wind or a twitch of the target's head could ruin the whole setup. Indeed, the breeze off the peninsula, only partially blocked by all the big buildings, would make today's shot challenging.

Much better were torso shots, through the sternum from the front or the spine between the shoulder blades from the back. His special hollow-points were made of such soft stuff that, when the half-inch slug mushroomed, it would do so much damage that death was certain even if the entry point was a bit off.

But this time the head shot was necessary. His perch on the balcony was to the side of the target, who was surrounded by other people anyway. The only view of the target was his head, elevated slightly above the others on the stage with him. The guy was short, so he must be standing on a box or something, the shooter thought.

With all of the preparations complete, the remainder of the Plan involved post-shot activities. The shooter began some deep breathing exercises to calm himself as he reviewed what had to be done.

Given the muzzle velocity of the load he'd prepared, he would see the results of his shot within about a second of squeezing the TAC's trigger. Then he would watch the crowd for a few seconds to see if there were any hints of his being discovered and slowly pull the muzzle of the TAC back into the darkness of the balcony. The real work would begin after that: folding the bipod, removing the stock, sliding the weapon carefully into the golf bag that was now leaning on the wall behind him, placing a cute driver sock over the muzzle so it would look just like the real three-wood already in the bag, and heading for the car. It wouldn't make sense to take the stairs—no one who lived in the building would ever carry a golf bag down four flights of stairs to the underground parking and he couldn't risk being seen with it—so he would have to take the elevator. Then it was just a matter of driving casually and carefully away in the other direction, hopefully before any roadblocks were set up. He'd timed the elevator and discovered that he could be in the car and on his way within two minutes if everything went according to plan.

If everything didn't, well, then there was Plan B: abandon the rifle and the golf bag and become a pedestrian, blending in with the foot traffic along Brickell Avenue. That would be a shame, because the TAC and its accoutrements were a twenty-thousand-dollar investment. At least he'd leave no fingerprints.

Ah, there was the first cue in the speech. The shooter felt his heart rate jump slightly, and he took another deep breath, letting it out slowly. Now for the Big Moment, right on time, and he squeezed gently. The TAC boomed and the target's head exploded, but he saw no particular interest from anyone looking in his direction—they were all too shocked and panicked down there—so he got busy with the rest of the Plan.

* * *

Just about the time that I was thinking how easily manipulated the crowd was, what a bunch of gullible morons they were, and why don't I try out that interesting-looking sushi restaurant for lunch instead of listening to all this crap yet again, the speaker's head exploded into a pinkish mist. Then there was chaos.

I'd staked out a vantage point on the seawall next to the bay, a nice, warm spot in the sun, and just as his head disappeared, I saw in my peripheral vision something splash into the water a bit outside the first slip in the little marina. It was easy to note my exact position and take a fix on the splash—it was about fifty feet away from me, slightly past that first piling, on a line stretching toward a little spoil island way off to the east across Biscayne Bay. Given that and the position of the victim, I tried to extrapolate back in the other direction toward the shooter's location. But the queue of high-rises off to the south offered just too many possibilities for me to guess where he could have been. I hadn't heard a report, but the crowd noise could have covered that, I thought.

The chaos meant that I might as well stay put—fighting my way through the panicked crowd didn't seem practical, even if I'd had a clear destination in mind. So I leaned against a lamp-post and tried to relax. It would have been the perfect time for a cigarette, except I'd given up that smelly habit several years before. Instead, I fished in my shirt pocket for a piece of gum to chew while I watched the excitement.

Back in the day, during my posts overseas in Southwest Asia, cigarettes had been *de rigueur*. In fact, if you *didn't* smoke, you were out of place—people looked at you funny and you would have a hard time getting anyone to trust you. And it had been my job, or part of it, at least, to blend in and to foster trust, so I was happily addicted to nicotine for quite some time.

But retirement had changed all that. For one thing, I'd taken up woodworking for a while, until my house got blown up by a disgruntled Arab, and the fire hazard was just too risky. Also, I'd developed a nagging cough—which disappeared when I weaned myself from sucking on those obnoxious little paper tubes. And I was certain that the lady I'd taken up with, despite her politically incorrect past, would disapprove if I fell off the wagon.

So chewing gum had to substitute. Sugar-free gum. I liked my teeth.

I don't mean to sound blasé about the murder I'd witnessed, but I guess I was. I'd seen worse and, indeed, had perpetrated similar things, from close-up, even, during my years overseas. That's what happens when you work for those secretive three-letter agencies that make up the national security establishment in Washington, you get some truly nasty assignments.

And I can't say I was particularly sorry to have seen that day's speaker meet his demise. I certainly wasn't at the rally to participate; in fact, it was rather distasteful to have to attend. But I'd accepted yet another post-retirement consulting job to observe and report on the whole thing. And some report it was going to be.

The pocket where I'd found the gum buzzed, and I pulled out my cell phone. "Mac MacQuarrie here."

"What the hell's going on down there, Mac?" The newly familiar growl of my new Washington contact on this case, Preston Sands, was a bit more frantic than usual. "The police frequencies are going crazy."

"Our boy got popped, Pres. Head shot, not from close-in. I couldn't tell from where, though, there are just too many possibilities. But it's obviously a professional job."

"You been made yet?"

“I’m about the only one who’s not running around like a headless chicken. But I don’t have an easy way out of here, so I’ll probably have to show some ID. Got a preference for which one I should use?” Sands’ people had supplied me with a wide choice of expertly prepared documentation, all bogus.

“Hmm. Aw, you might as well show ’em the Homeland Security one, I guess. But tell them that you can’t discuss why you’re there, OK?” In the short time I’d been working for him, Sands had often given instructions that were hard to comprehend and even harder to accomplish.

By that time the place was beginning to swarm with uniforms, and I could tell that it was going to be a while before before I was going to get any lunch.

* * *

Frankie Muñoz, the individual whose head I’d seen explode just as I was contemplating a lunch of raw fish, was a not-quite-typical, second-generation Cuban-American. Decades ago, his father, Ubaldo, had been convicted of embezzlement and was languishing in a Cuban prison when Fidel Castro had the bright idea to export Cuba’s ne’er-do-wells, and Ubaldo, along with so many of his fellow Cuban convicts, was put on a boat in the Mariel Armada headed for Miami.

Once ashore in his new land, it didn’t take Ubaldo long at all to impregnate one Maria Sánchez, whose brothers, when they learned of Maria’s predicament, offered Ubaldo the choice of making an honest woman out of her or having his penis and testicles removed in what sounded to Ubaldo like an extremely painful fashion involving electric hedge-clippers. A consummate survivor, he wisely chose matrimony.

As a Sánchez in-law, Ubaldo became a part of the family’s business empire, laundering both clothing for the Miami Cuban ex-patriots and money for the burgeoning community of cocaine importers in South Florida, some of them Ubaldo’s Mariel comrades. Given his background in questionable finance, Ubaldo fit right in, so much so that it took him only a few years to rise to the top of the greater Sánchez empire, which at that point was earning itself about \$75 million a year in profit, all cash, mostly small, well-used bills.

Ubaldo and Maria had thoughtfully kept young Frankie in the dark about the family’s business affairs as he was growing up; instead, they sent him off to the best private schools that drug money could buy. A bright young fellow, he did quite well, eventually finishing in the top ten in his class at Harvard Law. Then, per the family strategy, he returned to Miami to go into politics. After several small successes, Frankie was ready for something bigger.

So it was that Frankie had been touring Miami-Dade County for the past several months, giving the same campaign speech over and over in his attempt to win the April primary in the race for State Attorney for Florida’s most populous county. He was a wonderful speaker—I knew this because I’d seen most of those speeches—who exuded the sort of charisma that folks of my generation associated with rock stars of the ’60s and ’70s. And Frankie was the perfect South Florida candidate, seamlessly bilingual, charmingly handsome, and, a particularly attractive attribute to young, unmarried women, single. Of course, he was also on track to become something of a Sánchez-empire fox in the henhouse of public interest, even if he didn’t know it.

Why had I seen most of those speeches? Well, I had been retired comfortably into a rental house on Big Pine Key with my significant other, a lovely lady named Samantha Winslow, and was trying to improve my fly-fishing abilities, when I’d received a call from a Preston Sands about a consulting job. He told me that he worked for the NSA and that he had been assigned to take over Bill Petersen’s portfolio of special operations personnel. Bill, who had been something of a burr under my saddle

throughout my career in the Washington agencies, was my contact on my previous consulting job for them, a nuclear terrorism case that Bill didn't survive.

This time, it seemed that a special task force Sands was working with, a task force coordinated out of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, was quite interested indeed in Frankie's chances of becoming South Florida's chief prosecutor. The Sánchez clan had apparently expanded its business interests beyond money laundering for drug smugglers and was now involved in that activity and several others, including gun-running, in association with a couple of groups on the international terrorist watch lists. Sands' task force had decided that some boots on the ground were needed to pay attention to young Mr. Muñoz, and I, being in the area and experienced in such things, seemed like a good candidate, even though my preferred footwear had degenerated to flip-flops rather than boots. For me, it was a case of too-easy money and, relative to my fly-fishing skills, too-smart bonefish.

But obviously there was no young Mr. Muñoz to pay attention to any more. Why that was, though, was not quite so obvious.

* * *

It took about a half hour before any of the uniforms noticed my presence, and I congratulated myself on looking so nondescript that they would have ignored me for so long. Of course, they were all busy with hysterical bystanders for most of that time. Eventually, though, a comely young woman in a crisp blue uniform wandered over my way. She was young, but with an old woman's cynical eyes

"Officer Holden," I tried not to stare at the bulge under her Miami PD name badge, "I'm sorry your afternoon is so upside-down today."

"You and me both buddy. You been here the whole time?"

"Yes, officer, I have been. Here's some ID for you, and I think I can save everyone some time if I talk with your senior investigator." I flipped open the wallet with the DHS shield in it, and she looked startled.

"Homeland Security, huh? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Yes, well, that's a bit problematic. But I can make up for it with some critical observations about what went down. If you want to find your lieutenant, or whoever, I can wait right here."

She squinted, making those cynical eyes dark with suspicion. "OK. But you wait here, right here, because if you're not here when we come back, it's going hit the fan for sure, right?"

"Absolutely, officer." I smiled and went back to gum-chewing and people-watching.

After about fifteen minutes she returned with a black man in street clothes who wore a shield on a chain around his neck. "This is the DHS guy I told you about, detective." She put her thumbs in her belt and stared at me. The classic police stance seemed odd for someone so pretty.

I stuck out my hand. "Ben Worthington, detective." I'd remembered to check out the name on my DHS ID.

"Detective Charles Jefferson, Mr. Worthington. What have you got for us?"

"A few observations, detective, and just maybe the rifle slug that killed that poor guy." I maintained a poker face while he looked surprised.

"You've got the bullet?"

“No, but I might be able to direct a diver to it. It’s over there in the bay, I think.” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder and then nodded toward the sushi place. “Have you had lunch? Maybe we could go over there and get some while you debrief me. I’m starving.”

I don’t know whether I was more surprised that he agreed or that he was able to manage asking questions, taking notes, and eating sushi all at the same time. For my part, I decided to go with a mixed tempura, something nice and cooked. That pink mist of blood and brains had put me off raw fish for the time being.

I told him everything I’d seen and, with some dancing around the issue, persuaded him that my interest in the rally as a DHS official had to do with how important South Florida was in the overall DHS scheme of things—how the Coast Guard, for example, was our first line of defense against smuggling, blah, blah, blah—so naturally we’d be interested in the State Attorney campaign. The business of Frankie’s possible connection to the Sánchez empire didn’t come up. I decided to pad my consulting hours bill to reflect that little success.

Not surprisingly, he was most interested in my having noticed the splash, which was possibly an indication of the location of the bullet that killed Frankie.

“So, you saw a splash just after the shot, right?”

“Right. In my peripheral vision. But then I looked over there and saw the ripples and got a fix on it. So I should be able to direct a diver to the spot, within a reasonable distance, of course. A few yards, probably.”

“What do you think this was all about?”

“Well, it seems like it must have been a professional hit with a military-grade sniper rifle. I don’t really know much about this kind of thing,” I lied, “but it seems like the shooter must have been quite a ways down south, several of those big buildings down. I kind of extrapolated from the splash and where the victim was, and that line extends down the coastline. And it probably came from several stories up.”

“Got any ideas about a motive for this?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. And I can’t say I do. I mean, here’s this guy running for public office, but it’s only in the primary election. And someone assassinates him. Sure, the bad guys don’t like the State Attorney, even candidates for the office. But the sitting SA hasn’t had any attempts on her life, has she? So this must be about something else, something bigger. Much bigger.”

“Yeah, well, we’re in the very early stages of this investigation, obviously.” Jefferson let out a huge sigh. “Information gathering, and all that. We’ll be looking at his family and everything else, you can bet. Um, how about tomorrow morning for the search for the slug? You available?”

By the time we were finished, the crowd outside had mostly dispersed, and I was able to be on my way. But I didn’t quite know where that was. I’d planned to be at Frankie’s afternoon rally, down in Coral Gables on the University of Miami campus, but that, I thought, would probably not be happening. So I called Sam.

“Hi, kiddo. How’s your day going?”

“Well, I got some shopping done, at least.” She sounded flustered, I thought. “The traffic up here is ridiculous, though. When did you say you’d be done?”

I’d commuted alone from Big Pine Key for most of Frankie’s speeches, but this time she and I had driven up together early that morning. When we moved to the Keys, she had been eager to get out of the city and enjoy the peace and quiet down there, but she had underestimated her attachment to urban amenities. Necessities—groceries, gas, some pharmaceuticals, at least, hardware, tourist clothes—were

available there, but the choices were limited. After nearly a year of the mail-order consumer experience, Sam was more than ready for some serious time at a high-end mall.

But it sounded as if the reality of urban population density, with all its cars, was taking her by surprise.

“Well, my plans have changed. I’m done now, I guess, although I need to be back here tomorrow morning for a while.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up where I let you off earlier, and let’s head back south. It’s nuts up here.” She sounded relieved.

Her pink VW Beetle convertible showed up about fifteen minutes later, and we worked our way over to South Dixie Highway, where we joined the southbound stream of cars. It was somewhere in South Miami that my pocket vibrated again.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“You’re debriefed by now, I expect.” Preston Sands’ raspy smoker’s voice was quite distinctive.

“Yeah, and I’m headed back to the Keys. Somehow I don’t think the afternoon rally will be happening. You need me to send you an invoice?”

“Huh? Are you resigning?” His confusion was obvious.

“Uh, well, I signed on to keep an eye on Frankie Muñoz, to go to the political rallies and get a feel for his politics, right? Seems like that’s all over now. I do owe you a report, I guess.”

“Well, yeah, that part is and you do. But now we need to figure out who did this and why. And we sure could use your help with that.”

“Oh? You positive? The Miami PD is all over it. And the detective I talked with seems like a competent guy. Are you planning a parallel investigation, or what?”

“You said it looked like a professional hit. That means we can call it ‘terrorism.’ And the cops think you’re DHS, right? Everyone knows DHS does terrorism. Seems like you could work your way into their shop and keep tabs on where they are.”

I didn’t like the sound of that one bit. “Until the real DHS shows up, maybe. And you can bet the local investigative team will really resent anything that they perceive to be federal interference, whether it’s a fake DHS guy or a real one.”

“Well, figure something out. That’s what you’re good at. We really need to be in the loop on this.” He sounded frustrated.

“OK, but my fee is doubling as of today. Watching speeches is one thing. Investigating is another altogether.” And I hit the disconnect button.

“Should I turn around?” Sam was trying to look at me and the road at the same time.

“Hmm. Well, that’s a good question. I’m going to have to spend more time up this way, it looks like. So you’ve got to decide if you want to be down at the house by yourself or up here with me, in a hotel or something.” I patted her leg. “It would be great to have you here with me, but I think you’ll be pretty bored. At least at home you can work, right?”

She cocked her head and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, thinking. “How about this: we go home and pick up some stuff, then come back up here prepared for a long stay. I’ll bring my paints and so on—there are plenty of places around here I could do. The zoo might be fun. And Vizcaya! And maybe I can get in some golf. I’m bored with the courses down at home.”

When we'd moved to the Keys a year before, Sam took up painting, with water colors and acrylics and oils, as well as sketching with pastels and charcoal. And she rocked. She had a great eye and a sort of minimalist style, not quite abstract but certainly not what you'd call "realism." Whatever you do call it, people ate it up: her stuff was selling like hotcakes from the galleries of Key West all the way up to the metro area.

"Now, that sounds like a plan. I'll rent a car so that you don't have to shuttle me around, and we can find one of those suites places, with a kitchen." Having her with me, I knew, would make the whole consulting thing much more pleasant.

"So, you're going to do some kind of investigation. Did something happen?"

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know. Well, see, I've been watching this guy Frankie Muñoz's campaign rallies, his speeches and all. But today someone shot him. I guess I'm going to see if I can work with the local cops on finding out who and why." I could see worry lines taking shape around her eyes. "But, look, it's just an investigation, nothing with real action, OK? I don't see any danger here, or anything. I wouldn't want you with me if there were."

"Yeah, well, if there were, I wouldn't want you involved, either, y'know? We had enough of that before. Now we're just a middle-class retired couple living in the Florida Keys. No more spook stuff, OK?"

I think I managed to suppress my smile. "No, this is probably just boring detective work. Finding the right people to ask the right questions of. Stuff like that."

But I was wondering how difficult it was going to be to smuggle my Sig Sauer 9mm up to Miami with me. It looked like separate suitcases for sure.

Even though the traffic was murder—spring break was in full swing, after all—we made it home by late afternoon. I was packed and ready to go within about fifteen minutes, but Sam was still scampering about gathering all that she wanted to take along, so I got online to find us a place to stay. It turned out that the Residence Inn on Tigertail in Coconut Grove, about a block from the orgy of shops at the Mayfair and Cocowalk, had the perfect vacancy for us, so I grabbed it. I knew there were places with more local color available, but I was certain that the Marriott plumbing would work, so it was my preference.

Eventually we were on our way, northbound for the second time that day on the Overseas Highway. Because it was getting toward suppertime, we stopped in Islamorada at Marker 88, the venerable old seafood restaurant with the great view of Florida Bay, and had a glorious dinner before heading into the Grove.

Preston Sands didn't know it yet, but I always doubled my expense account whenever I doubled my consulting fee. He and his bean-counters were just going to have to figure out workarounds to the normal federal travel rules.

I was thinking about all this as I ordered the evening's special, all-you-can-eat stone crab dinners, for both of us, accompanied by a \$200 bottle of the vintage Meursault. Thanks, Uncle Sam!

* * *

At nine-thirty Monday morning, I met Detective Jefferson and a police department diver at that sundeck just by Brickell Bay Drive. I'd spent some time Sunday evening rehearsing my role as Ben Worthington, DHS official, but I knew it was going to be tough getting used to being called "Ben" after a lifetime of responding to "Mac."

When I arrived, Jefferson was sipping at a huge cup of Starbucks something and the diver was gearing up, wet suit, tanks, everything. "Morning, Mr. Worthington, let's see if we can find that hunk of lead, shall we? This is master diver Randy Simms."

"Good morning detective, Mr. Simms. Please, call me M..., ah, Ben."

"And I'm Charles. And everyone calls this guy Randy." Jefferson smiled, the first time I'd seen him do so. "So, you say you got a fix on a splash you think was the slug?"

I lined him and Randy up with the sight I had taken toward the spoil island and told Randy to look around just outside the first piling. While Randy was swimming out to the spot, towing a little orange float to use as a marker, I exercised my curiosity.

"So, Charles, I thought everyone worked with a partner these days. Are things so tight you're on your own?"

He shook his head. "My partner got demoted, and I'm solo until someone else is available. It's actually not all bad, because he was something of an impediment. And this way, I can run this Muñoz case my own way."

A plan materialized in my head a plan that would fit with my persona, if only I could remember my name. "Hmm. Well, y'know, my bosses at DHS are more interested than ever in this whole thing. Muñoz the candidate was one thing, but Muñoz the dead guy has really got their attention. Need an observer? Um, I'll stay out of the way unless you need backup, and that's something that I'm good at, very good."

He look at me sharply, then stared out at the bay, watching the trail of bubbles from Randy's search pattern. "If you were FBI, I'd say 'no.' But federal credentials can come in handy now and then. How about we try it on a provisional basis, meaning I can call it off any time, for any reason? I mean, I don't want to sound paranoid, but some of the complexities on this one could get sticky, and the last thing I need is sensitive information floating around out of control."

I stuck out my right hand. "Done. And I'm also very good about sensitive information. Ah, see, I used to work for the folks at Langley, out in the field. Middle East. Being sloppy with information over there gets you killed. And, well, here I am, alive and healthy."

He grinned, and we shook. About then Randy surfaced and spat out his regulator.

"How many shots did you say?" He had to shout a little.

"Ah, well, I only know of the one. But I didn't hear it, I saw it. I guess there could have been others. Why?" That, I thought, was puzzling.

"Got two so far. And counting. I haven't finished the pattern yet." And he stuffed the regulator back in his mouth and submerged.

"What the hell? Two? And he thinks there's more?" Jefferson looked my way, suspicious. "What are you not telling me?"

"I've told you everything I know about this. I saw one shot, the one that killed Frankie Muñoz. And it's hard to believe that the shooter was just wailing away, because no one else was hit. I don't have a clue here, Charles." I shrugged.

Randy spent another twenty minutes under water, and then he surfaced and headed for shore, towing his little orange marker. We helped him out, and he handed Jefferson a net bag.

“Did I see a pool over that way?” As soon as he got rid of the regulator, Randy was looking over our shoulders. “I bet it’s fresh water. I’m going to go rinse off. Oh, and there are four slugs in the bag there. I didn’t look at them too closely, but they all look to be about the same caliber. Big.”

He stripped off his flippers and headed off toward the pool, still wearing his scuba tank.

Jefferson was carefully extracting the slugs from the net bag, trying not to damage them. After a couple of minutes he had a row of four large-caliber hunks of lead with mushroomed ends sitting on the railing.

“Must have been hollow points. And, damn, I’d say a .50-caliber.” He looked at me.

“Agreed. And I’d say it was definitely professional hit, given that kind of weaponry. And accuracy.”

Randy Simms took off in his own direction in his own car, and I followed Charles Jefferson in what I’d rented, a plain-vanilla Ford Focus. I wanted to be invisible, and I knew that Sam’s pink VW Beetle wouldn’t work for that. Besides, I didn’t want to be caught dead driving that thing. But I was surprised that Jefferson—a plainclothes detective—would be driving a seriously red Lincoln Navigator, not what I’d call invisible. At least, I thought, I probably wouldn’t lose him.

The Ben Worthington business, I knew, would get old fast. And even if I were able to remember the pseudonym, there was a good chance that someone would do a background check on me and find out the subterfuge. So, at a stop light, I fished out my phone and called Preston Sands.

“Pres, I need a *bona fide* ID of some kind, one with my real name on it. Not FBI, though, people here don’t trust them. But if I’m going to work closely with the locals, I can’t use a fake name. They’ll find out for sure. Or I’ll slip up somehow.”

There was a long pause, and I began to wonder if the call had been dropped. But then he responded. “Yeah, well, how are you going to explain yourself? I mean, you already got introduced as someone else, right?”

“Only to a couple of people, the lead detective, a uniform. And I think I can earn some trust with the detective by coming clean.”

“OK, well if you don’t want an FBI shield, what’ll it be?”

“I used the Homeland Security ID before. And one of the concerns about our late friend Frankie was that his family’s got itself entangled in drug and gun running with some of the nasty groups, right? Smuggling, at least down here, is a Coast Guard thing, right? So how about some kind of Coast Guard credential? They’re even DHS, so it’ll make my explanation easier.”

“Hmm. Not a bad idea. Let me pull some strings and see what twitches. Um, there must be a Coast Guard station down that way, right? Maybe I can set it up so you can run over there and pick up whatever you need. I’ll call you back in a while.”

The light had long since changed, and I had resumed making my way through Miami’s absurd downtown traffic behind Jefferson’s red Navigator. Finally, in the midst of a number of government buildings, he pulled into a parking lot filled with squad cars, and, without any real alternative, I followed. He parked, got out, and walked over to my driver’s window, which I lowered.

“Ben, on the way over here I got a phone call, and I’m going to have to abandon you for a couple of hours. Sorry. But we’re having some internal affairs people poking around my section, and I need to handle it. I’ve got no say in the matter.” He looked chagrined, to say the least.

“That’s OK. It’s after eleven, and I’m starting to think about lunch—I didn’t have much in the way of breakfast. How about I go find some and wait for a call from you? Maybe we can move this thing along a bit this afternoon.” We exchanged phone numbers, and I headed out, back toward Coconut Grove.

But just as I was passing the Rickenbacker Causeway entrance—I’d made my way over to Brickell Avenue to head south—my pocket vibrated.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“OK, you’re all set, Mac, or will be by the time you get there, which is to the Miami Coast Guard station on Terminal Island off the MacArthur Causeway. You’re going to be a Coast Guard Investigative Service guy, for real, as a matter of fact. They hire civilians all the time for special projects, and they’re going to hire you.” Preston Sands sounded quite pleased with himself.

“And no doubt you’re going to make up the difference between whatever salary they offer and what my consulting fee is, right?” I wanted to make sure he wasn’t pleased with himself for saving a lot of money at my expense.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, well, right, sure. That’s all just bookkeeping. No problem.” Now he sounded unsure of himself.

“Pres, you’re not a good liar. But I’m sure you’ll figure it out. Anyway, I’ll head up there right now and get sworn in, or whatever their process involves.” I could see the light for 17th Avenue up ahead, so I put on my turn signal.

* * *

A while later, I had a quick lunch at the Coast Guard Station’s mess, where, to my surprise, I ran into Annette Trieri, who was also working on a CGIS case. She and I traded war stories and phone numbers, and then I proceeded with more paperwork than I would have thought necessary until I was an official CGIS investigator, shield and all. They even gave me a ball cap like Annette’s and an extra box of shells for my Sig Sauer.

I checked my phone and found a message from Charles Jefferson, so I headed back to downtown Miami. On the way, I called him for information about where to park, and he met me at the parking lot entrance with a hang tag for my mirror.

That gave me the opportunity I needed.

“Charles, before you go introducing me around or anything like that, you need to see this.” I handed him my new CGIS credentials, which I’d made sure to put in an old, battered, leather flip case. “‘Ben Worthington’ was a cover I was using for the political rallies I’ve been at. But if we’re going to work together, well, I need to be straight up with you. Call me ‘Mac’.”

He looked at the ID card and shield, at me, and back at the ID card. Finally he shrugged. “Yeah, well, whatever. But why was CGIS interested in Muñoz, anyway?”

“His family, the one he married into, the Sánchez clan. They run drugs and people, and we think they’re moving into guns, big time. A State Attorney with those connections had us worried. I was keeping an eye on him and the people at his rallies.”

“So why shouldn’t we think that you people shot him?”

That certainly took me by surprise. “Good question. But I never heard it mentioned, even joking. It’s still before the primary, after all, kind of premature to be quite that worried, seems like.”

He thought for a minute and finally nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right. We knew about the Sánchez connection, by the way, and about their, uh, business interests. But that information isn’t something we want to go public with.”

“OK, makes sense to me. But now that it’s out in the open between us, do you have any thoughts about the shooter you haven’t mentioned? It’s occurred to me that it could have been someone working for a Sánchez competitor. I mean, if we in the Coast Guard were worried about Muñoz becoming State Attorney, it must have made competitors crazy with worry, right?”

He looked straight at me. “That’s our primary theory right now. It could change, of course, but that’s where the smart money is. C’mon, let’s go inside.”

He led me through the front entrance and past a main desk, which was the center of the sort of turmoil you might expect for a downtown police station, to a conference room at the rear of the building. It was occupied by four others, three of them plain clothes. They looked at me, the new guy, with some combination of curiosity and suspicion.

“Captain, guys, this Special Agent Mac MacQuarrie, CGIS. He’s the guy who helped us find the slugs in the bay.” Jefferson looked at me. “And we’ve got something interesting, Mac. Captain?”

The uniform spoke up. “Good to meet you Special Agent MacQuarrie, and thanks for the help with the slugs. What’s interesting is that of the four we found, three are similar and one is different. Our ballistics people put all they had into it for the past couple of hours to come up with this.”

I cleared my throat. “Just call me ‘Mac’, everyone. They looked like fifties to me, Captain. Three alike, one different, eh? Interesting. That makes it sound like the unique one was the kill shot.”

Jefferson spoke up. “Randy Simms is back out there now, looking for more. And, you’re right, they were .50-caliber hollow points. Must have been some special load.”

“Which means your guess about this being a professional job was a pretty good one.” It had been my guess—more than a guess, really—but I thought Jefferson should get the credit in front of his boss.

“I thought you were with Homeland Security. That’s what Charlie told us.” The Spanish-accented voice was from the end of the table.

“He’s right, I am with Homeland Security, that’s where the Coast Guard sits, not in Defense. But I wasn’t using my CGIS ID at those political rallies, that’s all.” I smiled to try to defuse any suspicion. “And from what Detective Jefferson and I talked about just now, it sounds as if our interest in this thing is similar to yours, the connections of the victim to the Sánchez clan.”

They all nodded in agreement except for the guy with the Spanish accent, who just looked suspicious.

“So, anyway,” I continued, “I’m glad to be of whatever help I can with this thing. If it was in fact a professional hit, and it sure does look like it, I guess we have two challenges: find the shooter and figure out who hired him and why.”

Jefferson nodded. “Captain Davis has been making assignments about these very things. We figure there can’t be too many people out there with .50 caliber sniper rifles for hire. And the who part is already a short list, the Sánchez competitors we talked about.”

Davis looked around the room. “That about sums it up, gentlemen. And Jefferson here has the lead, right? Let’s get out there and see what we can find. Perez, I need to see you in my office.”

The guy with the Spanish accent followed Captain Davis out, and Jefferson turned to the remaining two.

He grinned. “Well, with two main tasks and the four of us, it looks like an easy call here. Want to flip for it?”

“What about Perez?” The thinner of the two managed to look bored.

“I think he’ll be assigned to something else. Mac, that’s Jordan Miles, and next to him is Bill Sharp.” Jefferson pulled a quarter from his pocket. “You guys got a choice? I’d just as soon look into the Sánchez competitors, unless you guys want to.”

They looked at each other, and Sharp answered. “Nah, we’ll go after the shooter and his big rifle. That should be interesting. A .50 caliber? I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those.”

I had to smile. “They’re, well, big. And they’ll dislocate your shoulder unless they have some kind of recoil mitigation. I took out a tank with one over in Iraq a few years ago, using a Mark 211 round. I think it was a pretty cheap shit, Chinese tank, though.”

“What’s a ‘Mark 211 round’?” Miles looked puzzled.

“Armor-piercing, high-explosive, incendiary. I don’t think it would work on one of our Abrams tanks, but it did its job on that Chinese one.”

“Well, whatever, the choice is OK by me.” Jefferson nodded. “Maybe start with some follow-up interviews of the people at the rally. Mac and I’ll see about talking with some other folks, starting with Frankie’s family.”

* * *

Jefferson and I headed out. On the way through the front room he stopped, tossed his car keys at the sergeant behind the front desk, and said “I need a beater.”

The response was laughter, a different set of keys, and “The SST.”

Jefferson shook his head. “My favorite. I’ll get it detailed for you.”

I didn’t quite understand this until we had walked the length of the parking lot, to its rear fringe, where there sat an early ’90s Chrysler Concorde that, I imagined, had been white at one point.

Jefferson patted its roof. “We call this baby the ‘SST’ because we actually had some landings at Miami International by the real Concorde a few years back, before they retired it. I figure that we need something expendable, where we’re going. That red Navigator I was driving wouldn’t last five minutes there. We got that one when we busted a big drug ring, and I want to keep it as long as I can.”

He drove us south, across the river, and west on SW 7th Street, the beginning of the westbound Tamiami Trail. A couple dozen blocks later, in a seedy section with nary an English-language sign in sight, he turned right into a small lot and parked beneath a “Fire Lane Do Not Block” warning in both English and Spanish.

“This is the back of one of the Sánchez commercial laundries, where their business offices are. Frankie’s father works here, mostly. The entrance is around to the front.” Jefferson and I got out, and he locked the SST’s doors despite its lack of appeal.

The front of the building was on a side street and surprisingly stark. In an era when businesses put significant effort into marketing themselves, the Sánchez operation appeared to be attempting invisibility. Still, it was easy to see that the place was prospering—the heavy-duty steel door was but one example.

Inside, Jefferson broke into fluid Spanish, which I was able to catch only a bit of. It sounded as if he was asking, rather nicely as far as I could tell, to see Ubaldo Muñoz. He was told that quite naturally Ubaldo was at home with his family in this time of grief and why didn't Jefferson go somewhere else and do anatomically impossible things to himself? All-in-all, it came across to me as a straight-forward, if spirited, exchange.

We left without much in the way of pleasantries.

"Thing is," Jefferson was looking thoughtful, "Ubaldo lives in Coral Gables, in a big mansion down off Old Cutler Road, out by the bay. Not my jurisdiction."

"But it's mine, though, right? I'm a federal agent, after all."

He looked at me with new respect. "Right. Yeah. But, tell you what, let's go back and get the Navigator. Down that way, we'd be picked up for vagrancy, driving this piece of crap."

I arranged for him to pick me up at our suite in central Coconut Grove, so that I wouldn't have to make another trip into downtown Miami that day, and he followed me south.

Once back in his Navigator, I was glad not to be driving. I'd been down Old Cutler Road a couple of times, once to scout out the Saudi Consulate down there in the home of a rich sheik and the other, by kayaking in from Biscayne Bay, to take some isotope readings from his dock, where I almost got caught. But I'd always used Le Jeune Road, not the old highways, Main and Ingraham, south from the Grove.

With Jefferson driving, I was able to take in the banyan-canopied road and its variety of classic South Florida homes—most of which, I've since discovered, start at about \$1,000 per square foot and head up from there. Eventually, we came to Le Jeune and then its traffic circle, where the right-of-way widened and things opened up a bit. But that was also where the real estate became truly palatial.

A mile or so farther, Jefferson turned left onto a newer side street and pulled up at a guard gate a block in, where the next adventure began. The guard, an older fellow who, obviously, didn't want any trouble, said he was under strict instructions not to admit anyone asking about the Muñoz family, because they were in mourning and there were too many media people chasing after them. And Jefferson's Miami PD affiliation didn't impress him at all. On the other hand, my casual mention of a federal obstruction of justice charge did get his attention, and he caved. So the little gate rose, and we drove through. After another mile or so, the street took a hard right, and we found the address on the left side, the bay side.

Actually, the Muñoz estate wasn't nearly as overbearing as many of the others in the neighborhood. There was a tennis court between the house and the street but no fence or stone wall, just lots of pointy-looking shrubs. Between them, we could see a reasonably sized house. Frankie, I remembered, had been an only child, and Ubaldo, with his accounting background, would naturally be something of a penny-pincher, relative to his big-spending neighbors, at least.

The driveway held a half-dozen vehicles, all large, black sedans of one or another German marque. Ubaldo and his wife weren't the only people in mourning, it appeared.

"Looks as if we're badly outnumbered, Mac. What do you think?"

"I think you're right. But we didn't come for a fight, just a conversation, right? And it's a necessary conversation, although our timing sucks. So we ought to be sensitive to that. I mean, if we *didn't* show up to talk with them, they'd be justified in thinking that the PD is incompetent, right?"

"Yeah, that's true enough. I'd sure feel better with backup, though." Jefferson was looking worried.

“Think of it this way, Charles. I was there. I saw it all. I bet that Ubaldo and...what’s her name? Maria? Anyway, I bet that Ubaldo and Maria would like to hear that I can assure them that Frankie didn’t suffer in any way.”

“That’s probably true, Mac, yeah. OK, well, let’s go knock on their door and see what happens.” He started to open his car door, but stopped. “Hmm. So. Do you think we should be carrying in there?”

“Well, I’m supposed to. Everywhere. It’s part of the CGIS policies. But I do think we should be discreet about it.”

We both got out, started up the driveway toward the walk, and turned for the front door. Before we could reach it, however, two very large, bored-looking gentlemen men in black suits carrying what looked to me like Uzis, the big, standard model, stepped out of the bushes behind and ahead of us. Jefferson and I froze.

“I don’t know about you, Charles, but I’m going to stand very, very still.”

* * *

2.3

Their suits didn’t fit very well, and the two gorillas didn’t look comfortable wearing them, even though it wasn’t too awfully hot. I think they just weren’t used to being all dressed up. But those thoughts were interrupted by a burst of rapid-fire Spanish from the one in front of us. Jefferson responded in his fluid way, showing a remarkable calm. I’m pretty sure the gist was a question about what the hell were we doing there and who the hell did we think we were. And I heard *policía* somewhere in Jefferson’s answer. That didn’t seem to impress them, however.

I say this because they both continued to look bored into a stupor—I was swiveling my head back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match—and as menacing as ever. Then the guy ahead of us made a little jerking motion with his Uzi, which both Jefferson and I interpreted as “go back.” So we did.

But then the guy who had been behind us made his own little jerking motion with his Uzi just as we reached the driveway. We were being steered into the garage, I thought, and, as verification, the big double door, the one on the right, began to rise. In we went.

It turned out to be a quadruple garage, with two of those big double doors, and our side was missing a car. The other spaces contained a trio of practical but expensive rides, no Ferraris or Lambos to be seen. In the empty space we walked into, followed by the goons with the guns, there was an armchair with its back to us, occupied by someone smoking a cigar, and two uncomfortable-looking straight-back chairs facing him. We didn’t need prompting to figure out which chairs were to be ours.

To my surprise, as we did, Jefferson brightened up.

“Almaro! What in the world are you doing here?” He looked both surprised and tickled to death.

“Why, if it isn’t Detective Charles Jefferson. And a new partner? Or what?” The cigar smoker acted as if we were meeting in his favorite dinner club.

“Almaro, this is Special Agent Mac MacQuarrie, CGIS, uh, that’s the Coast Guard Investigative Service, meaning he’s a federal agent. Mac, this is Almaro Sánchez. He’s the public spokesman for the Sánchez business empire and I know him from a bunch of news conferences and so on.” Jefferson, I could see, was relaxing a bit. “Almaro, Mac is with me on a sort of inter-agency cross-training deal.

And, of course, we're here both to pay our respects to Ubaldo and to make sure he understands that the Miami PD has this case as its number one priority. Also, Mac was at the rally yesterday, and he saw the whole thing."

That last got Sánchez's attention. His eyebrows shot up in close proximity to his hairline, and he looked quite impressed.

"Ah. Well, now. I should think that Mr. Muñoz will want to talk with you about this. And Mrs. Muñoz also, if you, Mr. MacQuarrie, can be respectful of her grief." His eyes shot a question at me.

I took a few seconds to give myself a bit of control of the situation. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Sánchez, and, if I may say, that smells like an extraordinary cigar. Now, I'll be happy to answer whatever questions Mr. and Mrs. Muñoz have, and, of course, I'll be as respectful as I possibly can be, given the situation. I think the best message I can pass along is that Frankie's death was instantaneous. No suffering or anything. Just whatever death is, in a flash."

Sánchez was nodding. "That, Mr. MacQuarrie, is the best thing you could tell them. I think that Maria...I mean, Mrs. Muñoz, she has some fantasy that Frankie is in the hospital with injuries and will come home someday. If she hears from you that his death was obvious and quick, well, maybe that will help her understand. I don't know what to suggest about, um, clinical details, though. Maybe not too explicit."

"I understand. And, of course, we need to have a formal conversation with at least Mr. Muñoz about the legal side of this, the murder. May I suggest that we suggest to Mr. Muñoz that we conduct that conversation as soon as possible? It could help us with the investigation before the trail gets any colder."

A look of incredulity, with just a hint of indignation, morphed onto his face. "Surely you don't believe that Mr. Muñoz was involved with it somehow."

Jefferson jumped right in. "No, no, Almaro, on the contrary, we suspect just the opposite, that someone did this to get at Ubaldo somehow. I'm sure that he's going to try to avenge this himself, and I'm not even going to try to head that off. But if he helps our investigation, there's a good possibility that we can do more harm to whoever did this than he can, at least at the organizational level. Believe it or not, we're best positioned as allies on this one."

Sánchez smiled, a wide, satisfied smile. "Well, there's always a first time for everything."

Then he tapped the arm of his chair. "Of course, I can't let you in to see them without having you frisked, you understand?"

Jefferson nodded. "We get them back when we leave, though, right?"

This time, Sánchez's smile was more like the Cheshire Cat's. "Sure. Unless you're carrying something we haven't seen before."

* * *

Sánchez had the goons relieve us of our weapons and sent them back outside to watch for more unwanted guests. Then he set his cigar carefully in an ashtray by his chair and led us into the house and up what must have been the back stairs into a large family room with a wall of windows looking out at Biscayne Bay. On that day, however, the windows were covered by semi-translucent shades, making the room rather dark.

But that was appropriate for the mood. There were a dozen people, one obviously a cleric, sitting on various couches and chairs talking in murmurs with each other, and a couple sitting separately, over by the windows in a corner. The woman was dabbing at her face with a handkerchief and moaning softly. It

was to that corner that Sánchez led us, and the man, whom I decided must be Ubaldo Muñoz, became increasingly steely-eyed as we came closer.

“Mr. Muñoz, I’m sorry to intrude, and I’m very, very sorry for your loss. It’s horrifying.” Jefferson pre-empted whatever Sánchez might have been going to say, and continued in Spanish with additional apologies.

It also sounded as he was introducing me, something that made itself clear when Muñoz looked at me and his expression softened.

“You saw it all, Señor? Tell me.”

I looked around for a chair so that I wouldn’t be literally talking down to him, and he waved me into one nearby.

“Mr. Muñoz, Mrs. Muñoz, let me express my sincere condolences as well. This is a terrible, terrible thing. I’ve never had children, so I can’t really know, but it must be truly heartbreaking to lose a child, even a grown one.” At this, Mrs. Muñoz let out a more anguished groan, which helped me because it meant she understood English. “I was at the rally yesterday morning, standing off to the side about, oh, twenty feet away from the speaker’s platform. Your son was a dynamic speaker, and he held my attention, so I was watching him when it happened. The assassin’s bullet struck the left side of his head, and he died instantly. I’m sure he felt nothing, knew nothing. It’s tragic. But at least he did not suffer.”

Mrs. Muñoz commenced to sob, and one of the other women in the room came over, shot me the dirtiest of looks, and led her slowly away.

“Mr. Muñoz, I’m so sorry to have upset her even more, but you said to tell you.”

“I did, and I’m glad for it, thank you. She needed to hear that, because I don’t think she has quite believed it. We haven’t seen Frankie, after all.” With this, Muñoz looked at Jefferson. “When will we be able to bury my son, detective?”

Jefferson, who had pulled up a chair of his own, took a deep breath. “I have to be honest with you, out of respect. I can’t say exactly. I promise, though, to make it as soon as possible. Truly.”

Muñoz sighed. “I guess I understand. You’re conducting a murder investigation. But I hope you understand that we need closure on this.”

“I do, Mr. Muñoz. And I hope you understand that an important part of our investigation is a conversation with you about such things as who your son’s enemies might be, and so on. Not here, this is not the time or place, of course. But as soon as you can manage it.”

Muñoz looked at the door through which his wife had disappeared. “The sooner the better, as far as I’m concerned. Let’s take a little walk outside. I need a cigar.”

We followed him down the main staircase—three or four times as wide as the back one, and curved—and through the lower level to a bay-side patio door. Because the entire house was about as dimly lit as that upstairs room had been, it was quite a shock to walk out into the sunlight. We all fumbled for sunglasses, and Muñoz reached into an inside jacket pocket and came out with three cigars.

“*Cohiba Limitada?*”

I knew that I would still stink of the thing when I finally returned to our suite, and that Sam would give me hell. But, then, I had the rest of the afternoon to think up an excuse, didn’t I?

I’m no cigar connoisseur, but I could tell right away that this one was far better than what Sánchez had been puffing on in the garage. If Muñoz didn’t splurge on cars, I thought, he made up for it with his smokes.

“What a country, America. There is so much freedom and opportunity, you can make a fortune, but the women have so much power that you can’t smoke in your own house.” Nicotine seemed to make Muñoz wax philosophical. “Now then, Agent MacQuarrie, perhaps you can tell me why the Coast Guard Investigative Service was so interested in my son that you were at his rally yesterday?”

“Actually, Mr. Muñoz, I’ve been at most of his rallies. I was ordered to attend, to watch and listen, and to report on anything unusual. And the only unusual thing at any of them happened yesterday. I’ve almost got your son’s campaign speech memorized by now, I’ve heard it so many times. But why I was ordered to do this, I’m not so sure.” I was glad to be outside with sunglasses, as I probably didn’t have an especially honest look in my eyes just then. “I expect that it has to do with our interest in someone who might wind up as State Attorney for one of our busiest jurisdictions. This is the best cigar I’ve ever had, by the way. Thanks.”

He had walked us over to the seawall, and he put his foot up on it and stared out at the bay.

“Mmm. Well, that makes a good enough cover story, I guess.” He puffed in expectant silence for a minute, but I didn’t rise to the bait. “Anyway, detective, you mentioned something about asking me some questions for your investigation.”

“I’m glad you’re so understanding about it, Mr. Muñoz. The obvious one is if you can think of anyone who might have done this.” Jefferson had his notebook out.

“You mean who shot my son?”

“Or who is responsible for it. It’s possible that this was done by a professional hit-man, hired by someone else. Did your son have enemies who would do this?”

“My son was a politician, and all politicians have enemies, detective. But I don’t know of any who would go to this extreme.”

“It’s also possible that someone did this to get to you, Mr. Muñoz.”

“It feels narcissistic to think that, detective, but I admit that I have. And, as you know, I’m sure, I have plenty of enemies.”

“Is there anyone in particular whom you think we should concentrate on?” Jefferson had a strategy, I was sure, but I couldn’t quite figure it out.

It may have been that Muñoz couldn’t either, as he smoked without saying anything for another minute.

“If I were going to take the law into my own hands, detective, and I assure you I’m not, I would begin with Jimmy Maldonado and his people. Jimmy has held a grudge against me ever since I got us the Jackson Hospital contract.” He looked at me. “You see, Agent MacQuarrie, I work for the Sánchez Commercial Laundry Company, and one of our capabilities is to be able to sterilize our product. And the Jackson contract was for five years, truly huge. It’s made us quite a pretty penny, if I don’t say so myself.”

Now, I thought, it’s *his* turn to hide his lies behind dark glasses.

* * *

“Well, that wasn’t very productive.” Jefferson, once again at the wheel of his red Navigator, back onto the street and headed toward the mainland.

“You’re discounting the Maldonado suggestion?”

“All the way, just like I’m ignoring his assurance that he’s not going to take the law into his own hands. In addition to a variety of small-potatoes gambling operations, the Maldonados run another big laundry company, so that business about the Jackson Memorial Hospital contract could well be true. But Jimmy M isn’t behind Frankie’s killing, I’m certain. Ubaldo said that just to send us off on a wild goose chase.”

“To divert our attention while he goes after the real perp, huh? That means all we have to do is to keep an eye on him, and on his people, I guess, to see who’s the real suspect, in his mind, at least.”

“Or just wait and see who turns up dead, or missing.”

“I’d imagine that a wait and see approach wouldn’t go over too well with the powers that be, however.”

Jefferson laughed. “Hell, they probably don’t want me to eat, sleep, or even take a dump until I clear this one.”

“Well, then, best you watch your diet, my friend. And I guess I shouldn’t make any social plans for the future, huh?” At least, I thought, I could take Sam out for a special dinner somewhere. “Got a schedule for tomorrow?”

“Y’know, maybe we *should* have a chat with Jimmy M. As far as I know, laundry is all he does that could possibly compete with Ubaldo, but he may just have some ideas for us. And after that, we need to have a conversation with Willie the Manatee.” He shot me a look to see, I was sure, how I’d react to that, but I kept my poker face on.

“I’m sure there are plenty of other critters at the zoo we could talk with as well,” I said instead.

“Ha! No, not at the zoo, and don’t tell her I called her that. Willie’s more than a little sensitive about her weight these days. The manatee thing grew out of her size and her real nickname, which you can’t use until you get to know her well, ‘Wet Willie’.” He shook his head and laughed. “She used to be a working girl who was, uh, always ready to go, if you know what I mean. Now, she’s Miami’s most successful madam, with something like a dozen brothels in various parts of town. There’s one near you in the Grove, as a matter of fact. But what’s useful for us is that she used to be into drug smuggling in big way, until the various cartels, including the Sánchez operation, squeezed her out. She hears all the gossip, though, and maybe she knows who’d be out to use Frankie to get to Ubaldo.”

“Do you think that Ubaldo was up front about Frankie’s having no real enemies?”

Jefferson tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Hard to say. I do know that Frankie wasn’t quite the little angel that Ubaldo and Maria think he was, so there are probably people outside the Sánchez empire who would have been in a position to pull Frankie’s strings if he’d gotten himself elected. That being the case, there are probably other people who were worried about that.”

“Right. Well, you remember that I told you that we, I mean CGIS and Homeland Security and so on, we were interested in Frankie because of his father’s connection to all the smuggling, including their new venture into gun-running? I sort of hinted at that to Ubaldo, told him the truth but not the whole truth. Right?”

He looked quickly at me and went back to watching the Navigator’s position on the narrow stretch of Ingraham Highway he was negotiating. “Right.”

“That’s all true. What I haven’t said is that we think that the Sánchez empire, because they’re new to the guns part of all this, is small-fry. What we’re really worried about is whoever it is that they’re trying to take over from, or who they’re working with. Or whatever. And, see, the thing is, some of those people seem new as well. It’s like there are gunslingers with automatic weapons moving in on the

territory of people with old-fashioned six-shooters. And we don't know all of the players. I'm still trying to sort them out. For example, I didn't know about Almaro Sánchez. Who's he?"

"Ah. Well, see, the Sánchez empire started with old Raul, Alamaro's grandfather. He had three children, Maria, whom you met just now, Raul Junior, and Pablo. Raul Junior and Pablo persuaded Ubaldo to marry Maria after she got pregnant, 'persuaded' being a polite euphemism here. And then, about a year later, Raul Junior, the smarter of the two, according to legend, got himself killed in a cocaine cowboy shootout." Jefferson shrugged. "So the lineage is now old Raul, Pablo, and his son Almaro, who's putting in his time as the empire's PR person. But meanwhile, Ubaldo, because of his skills with accounting, has taken over. Pablo is the chief enforcer, but Raul listens to Ubaldo when it comes to strategy and business decisions. Pablo, I hear, isn't too fond of this arrangement, but it's been in place for years."

This all fit with the briefings I'd had, except no one had told me that Raul Junior had died. "Was Raul there today?"

"No, the story is that he's bedridden just now. He's about 90, and he picked up some kind of pneumonia or something. May recover, may not. If he doesn't, there's going to be an interesting power struggle within the Sánchez empire, Ubaldo versus Pablo, smarts versus muscle."

"Well, my money's on smarts in the long run, but the muscle could sure create havoc in the short run."

* * *

2.4

I got lucky. Sam was still out painting something somewhere when Jefferson dropped me off at the Residence Inn, so I scurried about to put my clothes on hangers outside on our little balcony to air out, to take a shower and wash my hair, and to brush my teeth, which I did twice.

I'd been honest with Muñoz about the exceptional quality of his cigar, although its nicotine buzz was a bit more than I really needed. But good as it was it still smelled like a cigar. Sam had a very sensitive nose, as she'd proven on several occasions, and I knew I was at perilous risk for sleeping on the couch.

But my scurrying worked, mostly. She arrived about an hour after sunset, carrying her bag of charcoal and pastel supplies, along with a sketch book. All it took was a welcome-back hug.

"Eww. Where have you been? A pool-hall? You smell like cigar smoke."

I made the excuse of having spent much of the day on interviews with people from the Cuban community—quite true, all-in-all—where cigars are the vice of choice. But I didn't tell her about my involvement in sharing the vice.

Then I distracted her by asking to see her new sketches.

"Mmm." She looked unsure. "I don't know quite what I managed to do. I was out on Key Biscayne. The last ones are of the sunset across the bay."

For my eye, not especially sophisticated but well-experienced with her work, this was some of her best yet. Her style, which captured the large scales and then filled with bare hints of detail, was perfect for the afternoon sun as it sank into the mainland across the bay.

“Geez, you’re good at this. These sketches work so well, it’s like there’s no need for you to go back and fix them or do another version. Do more, yeah. but these are ready for one of the galleries.” I smooched her on the ear, and she melted. “Where were you? You said out on Key Biscayne?”

“Yeah, on the seawall out in the state park on the south end of the island. There’s a great view across the bay from there, right at the setting sun. These aren’t quite finished, though. I took some photos with my phone to help me tomorrow. I’m thinking about a sunset sequence, all framed together.”

“You’ll sell a million copies of that, I just know.” Maybe, I was thinking, she’ll forget about the cigar thing. “So, I think I’m going to be pretty busy this coming week, but maybe we can go out tonight? There are all sorts of restaurants around here. Within easy walking distance, even.”

“Good idea. We can walk and get you aired out a bit. And maybe this room will get aired out while we’re gone.”

So much for the forgetting, I thought.

Although most of the cool air from the weekend storm had lost its punch, it was still a bit brisk as we walked over to the heart of downtown Coconut Grove. We vowed to eat somewhere that we could sit inside.

The noise and crowds at the nearby tourist malls were unappealing, so we kept walking and wound up at the corner of Main Highway and Commodore Plaza, where a place called Lulu looked good. That is, it looked good until I saw that it specialized in something called “small plates”. But when Sam saw that, she dragged me inside. I started to protest, but she patted my stomach and gave me one of Those Looks.

Ah, well, I thought. If they’re real small, I’ll just have two or three of them.

But they turned out to be quite nice, all-in-all. There was a wonderful variety, rather like a *tapas* menu, and we had a ball sharing and trying different things. I also remembered to tell Sam whom I ran into earlier.

“Remember that cruise we went on last year? And Annette and Hal?”

It didn’t even take her a second. “Of course! That was a wonderful time for the two of us, and the four of us, too.”

“Well, oddly enough, I ran into Annette today, when I was getting things straightened out at the Coast Guard station.”

“Uh, wait. Coast Guard?”

“Yep. I’m an official Coast Guard cop now, for this investigation thing. Shield, very cool official ball cap, and all. And so is she. She and Hal are staying up in Boca Raton for a while as some kind of working vacation for him and a real vacation for her, but she got pulled into a case up there. Someone blew up a research boat belonging to the university where Hal’s visiting. A place called Pompano State U.”

“Why would anyone do that? A university research boat?”

“Yeah, well, see, Annette’s thinking it was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Coast Guard did an ocean survey and found something underwater, something that they think is a kind of underwater weapons storage container. And it looks like,” I suddenly felt a flash of paranoia, peered around Lulu’s dining room suspiciously, and lowered my voice “it has some kind of chemical weapons in it. Annette and this real Coast Guard guy that she’s working with think it’s some kind of weapons smuggling operation.”

She whispered, “Weapons smuggling? That sounds pretty heavy-duty.”

I nodded sagely.

Cocking her head sideways just a bit, a familiar gesture that I always found to be delicious, she said, “Wait. Didn’t you tell me, uh, yesterday, when we drove back up here, that this investigation you’re involved with has to do with a bunch of people here in Miami who are getting into gunrunning? I mean, isn’t that just weapons smuggling with a different name?”

“Oh, but...” My reflex was to dismiss this connection, but that was just my mouth kicking in before my brain.

When my brain caught up, I realized that it made sense as a possibility. We, Jefferson and I, were in the very initial stages of our investigation, after all. As I thought more, I realized that this was a case of the old proverb “out of the mouths of babes...”, except this was a different connotation of “babe.”

“You, sweetie, are brilliant. I need to talk with Annette first thing tomorrow.”

“Well, thanks, but just make sure you also find out when we can all get together. I want to see them again.” She smiled and patted my hand.

We loved each other a lot and got along quite well, but our priorities weren’t always the same.

* * *

“What? That’s all you’ve got? And I’m supposed to waste a half day on I-95 for this?” Charles Jefferson, during our early-Tuesday phone conversation, rightly pointed out the tenuous connection between Annette’s case and ours.

“Charles, you said yourself that you folks are aware of the ambitions of the Sánchez empire. And we’ve hypothesized that there is some kind of gang rivalry going on to dominate weapons smuggling in South Florida, right? But weapons smuggling, especially exotic stuff, probably means some foreign group bringing contraband here and, most likely, a local group taking charge from that point. At least that’s one scenario. Seems like that Coast Guard case up in Boca could be the foreign group. And if it’s Pablo Sánchez or Jimmy M or whoever on this end, it’s likely to have a bearing on our case. See?”

I decided that the extended silence was a good thing—at least he was thinking about it. For my part, the coincidence of two weapons-related smuggling cases only about 50 miles apart was too much to ignore, even for South Florida. I just don’t believe in coincidences.

“Annette said she’s got pictures of suspects, some of whom they can’t identify. Maybe you ought to at least look at them.” I hoped that would reel him in.

“Yeah, well, I suppose that couldn’t hurt. You got a Sun Pass? I’m not going up I-95 without using that express lane.” Charles sounded resigned to the journey.

Fortunately, my rental car had a such a gizmo on its windshield. “I do. Where can I pick you up?”

He had to explain to me about the express lane and, even so, I almost missed its entrance. But I could see right away why he wanted to use it. We cruised smoothly by miles of bumper-to-bumper, stop-and-go traffic that filled the three peon lanes, and I saw the worth of the \$7.50 toll. It all came to an end at about the Broward County line, and joining the peons for the last few miles was quite the let-down. But before too long we were able to exit at Atlantic Boulevard and head east to the ocean, where we turned north to our meeting with Annette.

The meeting place was a Pompano State facility, OceanLab, on something called Hillsboro Inlet, and it turned out to be an enviable place to have a meeting. Even though we assembled in a secure room

with no windows—it turned out that the Coast Guard guy had a Navy guy with him, and they wanted to talk secret stuff—the air of the whole place was at once both operational and researchy in a spectacular setting. It seemed like a very cool place to work.

Hal Weathers, Annette Trieri's husband, was there, so we had our "good to see you again" moment, and then the introductions went all around. There was an oceanographer from the university, a tall guy incongruously called "Shorty" along with Hal and Annette, plus the two guys in uniform. Although Charles and I were outnumbered, everyone made us feel right at home.

Finally, Shorty cleared his throat. "Well, since this is sort of my conference room, maybe I should call things to order. Um, I thought I'd review where things stand with the *Stream-Tracker* tragedy, both for the benefit of those of us involved with it and to bring our guests up to speed. And then perhaps they can fill us in about events in Miami."

Charles and I were then treated to a fairly detailed presentation of everything that was known about the attack on the university's research boat and about the mysterious package the Coast Guard survey had found underwater, which the ocean experts were calling a "mooring". The pictures were interesting.

"So, you said it's on the bottom in about 900 feet of water? How high up is this set of packages?" The light in the pictures didn't tell me much.

"The bottom box is about 100 feet up, and the whole string is about 50 feet long," Shorty responded.

I thought for a minute. "OK, but why so deep? Doesn't that make it harder to get to?"

"Ah, good question. Two things. First, there's probably what's called an 'acoustic release' that holds this string of boxes and the floats to the mooring's anchor. Go out there in a boat, lower a hydrophone, make the right noises, and the release lets go so it all floats to the surface. That float, the big spherical thing, has a lot of buoyancy." Shorty took a breath. "Second, the current is strongest near the surface. Down there, the water's still flowing northward, but much more slowly."

"Ah, let's see. Some oceanography background. Bear with me." Shorty looked just a bit embarrassed. "At the surface the power you can get out of the Gulf Stream is about the same as what you could get from a gale-force wind, right? That's because the water is almost a thousand times more dense than air. Power goes as the cube of the speed, and the Gulf Stream is flowing about a tenth the speed of that gale-force wind. But I won't bother you with the full equations unless you beg. Thing is, the same factor means that the *forces* on equipment are about ten times more than in the air, because the forces go only as the square of the speed, and the density is still part of the equation. So, down deep, with the slower current, the force is much lower, and that's where you want to put things, so they don't break. Uh, end of lecture."

I wasn't going to beg for equations, and I didn't think Charles would want to, either. "OK, I think I understand. To retrieve the stuff, you do that acoustic thing, so it doesn't matter how deep the stuff is. Um, unless it's too deep for the acoustic signal, I guess."

Shorty looked surprised and a little impressed. "Ah, good point. Turns out that the depth isn't too much of an issue, around here, at least. But proximity is. What I mean by that is that the boat with the hydrophone you do the signaling with has to be pretty close to the mooring, right over it. And, because of the current, the boat tends to float away unless you use the engines. But they can mess up the acoustic signal. So, it helps a lot to have a very precise location of the mooring, so you can drift by and signal at just the right spot."

The Navy guy, Commander Vanderhoff was laughing quietly and shaking his head. "You're making me feel like I'm back at underwater warfare school, Professor. But that's OK because I can

always use a refresher. Anyway, we've got a plan to defuse the immediate threat of those RPGs down there. And, maybe, we can also catch these guys."

"You said you've got pictures of them?" Charles spoke up for the first time since the introductions.

"Oh, right." It was the Coast Guard guy's turn, a Chief Kraus, who started some 8x10 prints passing around. "We've identified this first guy with the tattoo as a Grozdan Petrov, originally from Bulgaria. He's got quite an international criminal record and is known to be active in arms trafficking all around the world. And this second guy is someone that our facial recognition search thinks it recognizes, but we don't have an solid ID for him."

"Oh, that reminds me." Shorty spoke up, and took an 8x10 print out of his portfolio case. "I scanned this in from a photograph this morning."

The picture he passed around looked remarkably like Kraus's second picture. Annette and Kraus were both taken aback.

"This is him," she said, and looked at Shorty. "Where'd you get this?"

Shorty smiled. "Remember I said that your picture of him looked familiar? Well I figured it out. This morning, early, I came in and took it out of a frame that was sitting next to a picture of Pete Chu on a shelf in Emily Chu's bookcase, in her office. This is a pretty good scan, so I put the original back."

* * *

"Shorty, I'd say that you have a little personnel problem. Or somebody does." Chief Kraus had a sympathetic look in his eyes.

"Yeah, that's occurred to me. It's not my problem, really, because technically she works for OceanLab here, and her husband is the director. For now, I'm thinking we should just keep this quiet, though." He looked around with a question on his face.

Annette nodded. "Until we get everything sorted out, that's probably a good idea. Anyway, let's pass those other two pictures around, Garrett."

I was sitting next to Kraus, so I saw them over his shoulder. They didn't mean anything to me, nor anyone else as they were handed around in the other direction. But when they got to Charles, he looked surprised. He carefully put the first one on the table in front of him, face up, and then, looking positively startled, laid the second one next to it. He stared at them as he adjusted their positions, squaring them up to the millimeter.

He turned to glance my way. "Thanks, Mac, for dragging me up here today."

Scanning around the table at all the faces staring at him, he continued, "Sorry to be melodramatic, but I'm surprised as hell and don't quite know what to say. Uh, probably I should start by saying that I recognize these two guys. But it'll help you all understand who they are if I go over the case that Mac and I are working on."

"Commander, I'll try not to lecture, but if I do, don't worry, there won't be a test." He smiled. "You all have probably read in the paper about the assassination of Frankie Muñoz a couple of days ago down in Miami. A relevant point is that he was shot from long range with a .50 caliber sniper rifle, not a piece of hardware that just anybody has access to. And the shooter wasn't a neophyte, either. He was an expert, probably a professional."

"Without going into more detail than you probably want to hear, I may gloss over something, so don't hesitate to ask questions. But, sound-bite version, this is connected to greater Miami's Sánchez

family, who have been getting rich laundering drug money for several decades and now are trying to move into gunrunning. Or weapons smuggling, whatever you want to call it. Now, the patriarch of the family is 90 and won't last much longer—and who's next in line is up for grabs. One of them is Frankie's father, Ubaldo Muñoz. The other is this fine fellow, Pablo Sánchez." He turned the second photo he'd received around to face those across the table.

"Meanwhile, this upstanding citizen," he turned the other photo around, "is Arturo Ventador. Arturo is one of Pablo's best friends, and he works for the family off and on. He's ex-Army Ranger. I've seen his DOD file, and he was quite the success in sniper school. But he's also an expert at hand-to-hand combat and, believe it or not, computers. What you might call his day job is coordinating the activities, such as they are, of an outfit that calls itself '*Omega Nueva*'. It's one of the few third-generation Cuban ex-patriot para-military groups. Uh, see, after the first wave, or first generation, of Cuban refugees around 1961, there were lots of these groups, some pretty serious. After the second wave, the Mariel boat-lift in about 1980, which was the second-generation from the first wave, these groups continued to be active, but at a somewhat reduced level. And the third-generation from the original wave, which matches up, sort of, with the second generation of the Mariel wave, has *Omega Nueva* and a couple other groups. Most of the original ones have faded away. Of the new ones, *Omega Nueva* is the most active and probably the most dangerous."

"So, what's all this mean?" Charles looked around the table. "I probably need to think this over more carefully, but I've got two first impressions. Pablo and Arturo, from the pictures that you've explained, were on the cruise during which your boat, Shorty, the *Stream-Tracker*, you said?, when it was attacked and sunk. They were with a couple of shady characters, one of whom is involved in international weapons trafficking. Probably, they, and I mean Pablo and Arturo, they were out there to learn how to retrieve the cache of stuff that had been put there for them to pick up. From what you've said, Shorty, it sounds non-trivial and some instructions about the pick-up are necessary. This means that Pablo is trying to move the Sánchez empire into weapons quickly, and that Arturo may be his first real customer. I've gotta say, if *Omega Nueva* gets its hands on chemical weapons, real trouble is brewing."

He drummed his fingers on the table. "Second, it seems like Arturo is a prime suspect for Frankie's murder—maybe he did it as partial payment for the shipment, who knows? But that means that Pablo has decided to go to war to eliminate Ubaldo Muñoz as competition for leadership of the Sánchez empire. Getting rid of Frankie puts Ubaldo in a much weaker position to take over the empire."

He looked at me. "And it probably also means that Ubaldo knows all this, and that's why he tried to send us off on chasing after Jimmy M yesterday, Mac. Oh, for the rest of you, Jimmy Maldonado is, as far as I know, a mostly legitimate businessman who competes with the legit side of the Sánchez empire. Commercial laundry."

There was a long pause while everyone assimilated the information. Finally, Shorty spoke up. "Well, I'm not in law enforcement, but it seems like we ought to just lock all these people up and throw away the key. Oh, yeah, and do something about that underwater cache of chemical weapons. Commander, you said you have a plan?"

Vanderhoff looked surprised to be called on so suddenly, but he recovered. "Oh. Right. We do—it's like a bait and switch. We thought we'd get a work boat out there with an ROV—that's a remotely operated vehicle, for you landlubbers—and cut the cable on the mooring right at the release. We've decided it's probably not a mine, so that ought to be safe. Then we'll pick it all up when it surfaces. We've already got the top-most part of the string of stuff, and we'll reattach that with identical hardware. And we'll empty those cases—very carefully, mind you—and fill them back up with something that looks just like whatever's in there, only dummies. And we'll include a tracking beacon, probably several. Then, we'll hook it to an anchor, put it down at the same place as the existing mooring

and, with the ROV, transfer the bottom of the cable over to the existing acoustic release. When someone comes out to pick it up, and it sounds like Pablo Sánchez might be that someone, they won't be getting the merchandise they think they are, and we'll be able to track them as well with the beacons."

"Um," Vanderhoff looked at his watch, "in fact, this should all be happening right about now."

Hal Weathers, I noticed, seemed puzzled. "Impressive planning and getting the logistics to work so fast, Commander. But there's something I can't figure out. Garrett showed us several satellite pictures, in sequence, of the time around the *Stream-Tracker* explosion. If Pablo, or whoever, goes out there in a boat and releases the mooring string, won't that show up? This all seems like a pretty risky way to do weapons smuggling. I mean, why not just drive into Port Everglades and unload things before you clear customs?"

Kraus nodded. "Good questions, Hal. But the satellite pictures are a half hour apart. If you know their timing, and that's no real secret, you just do the pickup in-between shots. It doesn't take very long to grab the floating string. And using a local boat from out of a marina here for the pickup is a lot safer than driving a foreign ocean-going vessel into port, from a clandestine perspective. There are so many sport-fishermen going in and out each day that you'd get lost in the crowd, whereas we keep pretty good track of the foreign ships."

He continued. "Well, folks, I don't know when I've been at a more productive meeting. We've got everyone identified, or almost, and we may just have clear paths forward to clearing both of these cases."

Annette spoke up. "Yeah. And maybe, just maybe, we *will* get these bastards."

* * *

2.5

Charles Jefferson and I were creeping along in the southbound I-95 traffic—we hadn't reached the beginning of the express lanes yet—and deconstructing everything we'd heard and inferred from it.

"So, Charles, I'm glad I was able to persuade you to come up here today, but, gotta say, I had no idea. I figured there was an off chance of a little progress. But, damn."

"Yeah. Like I said, I'm glad you dragged me to that meeting. Really glad."

"And I have to say that I rather agree with what Shorty said about locking all these guys up and throwing away the keys."

He laughed. "Right. Except for the problem of the lawyers they'd bring in. Hell, right now, I don't think we could even hold them overnight if we did arrest them. I mean, we've got damned little."

I realized he knew a lot more about the nuances of the legal system than I did.

"Y'know, Mac, I'm sure that you can understand that I did a bit of background checking on you. And I have to think you'd expect that." He paused long enough for me to look at him and nod. "So, I found out that you've worked for CGIS for, like, almost 24 hours. And I also found out that you've worked some places that I'm not allowed to find out about. I've decided not to be upset about that, because it means that your experience is likely to be very helpful. After all, you did say you're very, very good at backup and you're also good at being, ah, discreet. Right?"

None of this worried me—in fact, I found it rather amusing. “Where is this going, Charles?”

“Well, I’m thinking that those places where you worked, the places I’m not allowed to know about, probably didn’t have much to do with domestic law enforcement activities. So I’m the expert at that, and I’m hoping you understand. On the other hand, I’m also thinking that there may be some, um, skills at which you eclipse me completely. And, though I hope not, it could be that those skills could come in handy for some things I’ve been thinking about.”

“Yeah, well, I’m certain that you know volumes more about domestic law enforcement than I do, despite my time with the New York PD. And it worries me that I might screw up and do something to blow the case because of the way, oh, I don’t know, the way evidence is supposed to be handled or the rules of evidence gathering in the first place.” I shrugged without letting go of the steering wheel. “And as for those other skills, well, I’m committed to this thing. I agree with Annette Trieri. Let’s get these bastards.”

I decided to take the plunge, at least up to my knees. “Oh. And if you’ll keep it to yourself, I can tell you that before I worked for the NYPD it was the NSA and CIA, mostly overseas. After the NYPD I moved here to retire and just kick back, but the NSA pulled me into something. So, last year, I was involved in clearing that nuclear terrorism business that happened down this way, and, maybe you didn’t hear about this, I also managed to get an outfit on Miami Beach called ‘Sun and Sand’ put out of business, although I had help with both of those.”

“No shit?” He broke into laughter. “Willie the Manatee would sure like to hear that story. They were one of her big competitors. And that was you on the nuke case, huh?”

“Yeah, with help. But this thing now is really what I told you, although it comes from higher than DHS or the Coast Guard. That’s just my operational identity. The weapons thing is the real deal. People all the way to the top of the food chain are worried.”

“So the only thing that’s bogus is your ID?”

“Nope, that’s real. But you’re right about its being less than 24 hours old.” I looked at the clock in the instrument cluster. “Getting close, though. Almost my one-day anniversary. But no gold watch, probably.”

“Meaning we’ve got, what, me, the local yokel, with people from Naval Counterintelligence, the CGIS, meaning Annette and Kraus, and, oh, who knows, something like the Director of National Intelligence’s office, meaning you, all working on this?”

“Yeah, well, I’m not supposed to comment on my specific pedigree, but that’s a reasonable operating assumption. And, as far as I’m concerned, you call the next steps.” I looked at him and grinned. “But, you know, no pressure, or anything.”

“OK, well, how about some advice? What would you like to do?”

We’d finally come to the entrance of the express lanes, so I was preoccupied with driving for a minute.

“If we were operating somewhere that I didn’t feel the need to have so much respect for the law, I’d go after this guy Ventador and just shoot him. Then I’d have a chat with Ubaldo and make sure that he understands the situation—that I know about the Sánchez empire’s aspirations about gunrunning and that I’ve killed his son’s assassin and that Pablo was behind the whole thing. And I’d show him the pictures of them together.” I paused to think. “And then I might just walk away from it all.”

“Um. Well, that does have appeal, I admit. But from my perspective, respect for the law is pretty important. So I’m not sure about just shooting Arturo, as good an idea as that is. And walking away after

telling Ubaldo about Pablo's being behind the assassination sounds problematic, too—it might start an extended shooting war in my town. Still..." He stared out the side window in thought.

I let him stare while I guided us south past all of those roller-coaster ups and downs through the north part of Miami. When we were closing on his headquarters, though, I had to interrupt.

"So, what's next, boss? Do we need to see Willie what's-her-name? Or who?"

He looked up, scratched his head, and squinted at the car's clock. "Lunch-time yet? Well, almost. Why don't we head on down to the Grove? You can follow me from the PD. We'll get some lunch and then go see Willie—maybe she'll have some good gossip."

* * *

We picked up his Navigator downtown, and I followed him to a little open-air, bay-side restaurant next to a big indoor chain one, ours a small, local place that specialized in fresh seafood that was in season rather than stock menu items from the freezer. Our lunch was delicious.

Afterward, our destination was up on what passed for a bluff and turned out to be only a bit over a block from my Residence Inn, so I just parked there and walked back to where Charles was waiting for me. He was leaning against his Navigator, across the sidewalk from an eight-foot stucco privacy wall. There was a door in the wall just down the block a few yards with a column of little numbered signs stuck to the wall next to it. He started talking just as I walked up.

"Years and years ago, this neighborhood was way back on its heels. Businesses were struggling, crime was up, no one wanted to live here, houses were dirt cheap. So Willie bought up an entire block of little bungalows and had this wall built around the whole thing to make a secure compound. This wall's got a security system on top of it to make it even more secure. Now, there are probably a dozen little houses in there, each nicely equipped for Willie's, ah, business operation, two girls to a house. And what she's managed to do that's just brilliant is to keep the official addresses of the houses separate, despite the wall. That way, it's impossible to raid the entire place without individual warrants for each separate address." Charles laughed. "Vice has tried, and what happens is, they show up with warrants for an address or two, that's all they can get at one time, and the guy at the gate here reads the warrants carefully and signals Willie somehow. She then calls a fire drill that clears out any illegal activity in those specific addresses. It's brilliant. Vice has given up. With all the drugs on the streets, they figure they've got bigger fish to fry anyway."

He was laughing and shaking his head as we walked over to the gate. "So, I thought I'd mention the Sun and Sand thing to her when I introduce you. Is that OK?"

"Uh, I guess, but you don't need to make a big deal out of it."

"I won't, but don't be surprised if Willie does, a little bit, at least. Oh, and don't get the wrong idea when they greet me like an old friend. I'm not a customer." He looked a bit embarrassed. "Honest."

He pushed a doorbell button by the gate, and I heard a soft chiming from inside.

A speaker by the signs with numbers came to life. "Yeah?"

Charles cocked his sideways a bit. "That you, Roscoe?"

"Javod. Who you?"

"Oh, hey, Javod. Charles Jefferson, and a new partner."

"You got a warrant?" There was a hint of a giggle this time.

“C’mon, Javod, you know I’m not with Vice. We just want to talk to Willie for a bit. Share gossip and stuff like that.”

“Oh, well, I gotta ask, so hang on a minute.”

Charles looked at me. “Don’t let Javod scare you. He’s big, very big, and his job is to be intimidating. But he’s really a family man with three teen-age daughters, none of whom, I might add, will ever wind up working here.”

After a couple of minutes, the door opened, and Charles led me through. Inside the wall was a well-landscaped yard with brick sidewalks wandering off in various directions. Standing on one was a huge, ebony-skinned fellow wearing a sleeveless tee-shirt, no doubt to show off his full-sleeve, technicolor tattoos. This, plus his shaved head, piercings, and totally black sunglasses, on top of his size, maybe 6’10” and 350 pounds, did indeed add up to a significant intimidation factor. But then Charles asked him about “his girls” and Javod broke into a wide, happy grin.

“Oh, man, they’re a handful, being teenagers and all, but they’re great. Sharina, she’s going to graduate in May, as, what’s it called, val-dic-terin?”

“Valedictorian? No kidding! Well congratulations!” Charles shook his hand vigorously. “So, Javod, this is my temporary partner, Mac MacQuarrie. The case we’re working has nothing at all to do with you guys. Like I said, we just want to gossip with Willie.”

“She said OK. Over in the big house.”

We headed down a sidewalk to the right, toward a larger bungalow. About the time we got to the porch, the door opened to reveal a very large—not as big as Javod, but *big*—African-American woman in a flowing muumuu with draping long sleeves.

“Willie! How are ya, mama?” Charles walked up to her, took her two hands, and gave her a smooch on her right cheek. Then he stood back and looked her over. “Say, I think you’re losing weight.”

Her skin was light enough that I could just see a blush on her face. “Aw, you just sayin’ that. But my doc says my blood pressure is down a bit, with no drugs. So that’s a good thing.”

“It is, it is.” Charles turned to me. “Willie, meet Mac, Mac MacQuarrie. He’s with the CGIS, you know, the Coast Guard equivalent of NCIS, and he’s working the Frankie Muñoz killing with me.”

After a polite “pleased to meet you, Mr. MacQuarrie,” a look of concern and even sadness flowed over her face. “That was a bad, bad thing, Charles. I mean, sure, we lost a steady customer who tipped big, but a daytime assassination like that is just not what we need around these parts, is it?”

“I didn’t know he was one of your customers, Willie.” Charles looked quite surprised.

“Oh, yeah. For years now. Not here, though. He mostly went up to North Miami Beach, sometimes down to Kendall. I guess he wanted to be as far from his father as he could get.”

Charles shook his head. “Well, not only did you lose a customer, you lost a future friend in the State Attorney’s office. From what I hear, he was likely to win this fall.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Well, anyway, why don’t you boys come on in?” She led the way into a tastefully furnished combination living/dining room, the two separated by only the shape of the room. In the dining part, there were two young women working at sewing machines on the dining table, and in the living area another was watching TV.

“Tiffany, how about getting our guests some coffee?” Willie looked at Charles and me. “Or would you boys prefer lemonade? We got a rule here, no booze, not even beer, before three pm.”

We chose lemonade, and the young woman on the couch disappeared through the dining room and another door.

“Willie, I don’t want to embarrass Mac, but there’s something you should know about him. Last year, he was the person responsible for getting Sun and Sand Escorts shut down.” Charles smiled in anticipation of her reaction.

Which was, all-in-all, fun. Her eyes got big, and she looked back and forth at Charles and me for a few seconds. Then she burst into delighted laughter, huge belly-laugh that shook her all over as if she were made of Jello.

When she finally got control of herself, wiping tears from her eyes with a muumuu sleeve, she said, “Well, don’t that beat all. Damn. Mr. Mac, I owe you a *huge* debt of gratitude. Those dirtbag Russians weren’t such tough competition, but they treated their girls bad. And that makes people like me look bad. I can’t tell you how happy I was to hear about what happened to them.”

“Willie?” A timid voice came from behind the couch that Charles and I were on, and I turned to see one of the young women, red hair, pale skin, rather Irish to my eyes, from the dining room standing there. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I heard him say something about Sun and Sand. Um, sir? Do you know whatever happened to Dolly? She was my best friend there, at Sun and Sand, I mean. Is she OK? Oh, and, say, I remember seeing you at that shithole hunting camp out in the ’Glades. I can’t thank you enough for saving us all from that nightmare.”

Willie smiled. “Crystal used to work for those dirtbag Russians, or maybe a better word for the situation is ‘enslaved’. And, Crystal, remember to watch your language around guests.”

* * *

As Tiffany returned with our lemonade, I had a minute to think. Crystal’s question sat me squarely on the horns of a dilemma, and those horns, sharp ones, were poking me in the ass. Dolly now went by her real name, Samantha, and she was staying with me in the Residence Inn just couple of blocks away. I was keenly aware that Sam had been working very, very hard at putting her past behind her as completely as possible. Yet here was a friend, and maybe more, whom she hadn’t seen in a year or so.

I decided to split the difference as best I could. “Well, I don’t know if you knew it, but Dolly’s real name is ‘Samantha.’ And, uh, we saw so much of each other last spring, you know, when Sun and Sand went out of business, that we hit it off. So I can say for sure that she’s just fine. She’s an artist now. If I can get a way for her to contact you, maybe she’ll call soon. And if there are any other ex-Sun-and-Sand girls here, she might like to see them, too.”

“Oh, thank you so much, sir. I hope she calls.” Crystal was almost breathless.

I was embarrassed at being called “sir.”

And Charles was staring at me with his jaw hanging down.

“Aw, close your mouth, Charles,” I said. “Didn’t you ever take in a stray puppy and have it turn into a best-of-show champion?”

“Now, see there girls? Here’s an example of how it’s possible, if you treat your clients right, to wind up with a better life. Much better. Just remember that.” Willie looked smug.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about the implications of that statement for my situation, but I decided to let it slide.

Charles was still staring at me, but he had finally closed his mouth. “Working girls’ hero, huh? I’ll be damned.”

“Anyway, Willie,” he looked over at her, “have you heard anything new about Frankie’s murder? Anything not in the papers?”

“Well, now, you know that what I hear isn’t always credible.” She made a show of thinking. “But from both the papers and other things I’ve heard, it sounds like a professional hit, some kind of sniper-for-hire sort of thing. Ain’t many of those guys around, at least not with the skill to make the shot, is what I’ve heard.”

“What would you say if I told you that *Omega Nueva* was behind it?”

Her eyes got big. “Uh-oh. I’d say, uh-oh. But I guess I’d also say it don’t really make sense. Why would they shoot Frankie? Last thing they need is for the Sánchez clan to get on their case.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I guess I’ll have to think about this some more.” He looked at me, eyebrows raised, and I took it to mean it was my turn.

“Willie, one thing we’ve done is to have a chat with Ubaldo Muñoz, Frankie’s father. He said we ought to go after Jimmy Maldonado because Jimmy is carrying a grudge about some big laundry contract.”

“Jimmy M?” She laughed and jiggled like Jello again. “Well, that’s just dumb. Jimmy’s mostly legit—hey, he even does my laundry, and a good job of it, too. And what ain’t legit is small-fry stuff, a little gambling, stuff the Sánchez clan don’t care about. Ubaldo’s trying to send you guys off on a wild goose chase so he can take steps on his own, without police interference.”

“What about the theory that it’s an internal Sánchez family power play? We hear that old Raul is not long for the world.” Charles’s question was something that had occurred to me as well, but I didn’t know if it was OK to ask it.

“Well, now, that makes lots more sense. Pablo undoubtedly sees Ubaldo as a rival, and he also saw Frankie as a rival for his own son, Almaro. So even though Frankie was his nephew—his sister’s son—I’m sure that Pablo feels better that he’s out of the way now.” Willie was nodding. “But I don’t think Pablo has the skill to have done that. Or the *cojones*, either. But I guess he could have hired somebody or something. And if he did, I bet anything that he and Ubaldo were together at some kind of family gathering on Sunday, when it happened.”

“Good thinking, Willie. We should have asked Ubaldo. But we haven’t talked to Pablo yet, so we’ll see if we can ask him about Sunday when we do.” Charles made a note in his little book. “And there’s one other thing I wonder if you’ve heard about. We’re hearing rumors of weapons smuggling. Not just the usual guns, though. Something bigger, more potent. Hear any noises about anything like that?”

“I think you know that’s something I’m very sensitive to, on account of my son.” She looked at me. “See, Mr. Mac, I don’t much care about drugs, as long as my girls don’t use ’em, or a buncha other stuff. But gun smuggling, or other weapons, well, my son Shakeem got killed by an illegal Uzi machine pistol in a gang fight. He was an innocent bystander. We don’t need those things on our streets, no sir. Anyway, Charles, there *has* been some talk about something more than guns. I thought it might be something like explosives, or grenades, but that ain’t it. Don’t know what it is, though. But it’s got me a little worried, I’ll tell you.”

“Thanks, Willie, and thanks for the lemonade. And, listen. If you’re worried, I’m worried. We’re going to stay on top of this one, you can bet. Last thing we need is some kind of new more dangerous weapon on the streets down here.” Charles stood up, and I did as well.

Willie disappeared into the dining room for just a minute, but then returned to walk us to the door. “Mr. Mac, I remember Dolly, or Samantha, I guess, too. She’s a good lady. You take good care of her, now, hear? And if she don’t want to call, well, I’ll understand.”

She slipped me a business card that she conjured from somewhere inside that muumuu.

* * *

2.6

Charles said that he had more internal affairs issues to deal with and headed back downtown, and I walked back to the Residence Inn. Sam was out somewhere, either golfing or sketching, so I took the opportunity to fire up the laptop and work on reports for my Washington overlords. But just as I was getting started, my phone buzzed. I recognized the number as Preston Sands.

“What’s up, Pres?”

“Just thought I’d check in, Mac. Haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I was starting a report for you before you called. I think we’re making progress. We’ve got possible suspects for the shooter and for who hired him. But, in a way, that’s the least of it. We also hooked up with CGIS investigators on what turns out to be a related case, and it looks like chemical weapons smuggling.”

“What? I guess I need to hear about this.” He sounded worried.

I gave him a condensed version of everything that Charles and I had learned without putting names to anyone, including the people whom we’d met with that morning. But I did bring in the possible role of a Cuban ex-patriot para-military group with respect to the chemical weapons. What I got in response wasn’t at all what I expected.

“Well, that’s all very interesting, Mac. But what we’re paying your outrageous consulting fees for is your clearing this assassination of Frankie Muñoz, not chasing around South Florida looking for submerged weapons caches or para-military groups, right?” Now he sounded angry.

“Maybe I didn’t explain...”

“You explained all I need to hear. And I’m telling you to forget all that other crap and concentrate on Frankie Muñoz. Understand?”

“Ah, well, I guess so. Like I said, we’ve got possible suspects. We’ll develop those leads. Is that what you want?”

“Exactly. Forget all the other crap in your written report. Just focus on Frankie.” He disconnected.

I just sat for a few minutes, stunned. Because the high-level group that Preston Sands was working for had concerns about weapons trafficking, I had assumed that the connections that Charles and I had stumbled into would please him to no end. But it was just the opposite.

Something very fishy was going on, and I, never a shrinking violet, decided to confront it head on. That meant making contact at a higher level.

So I called “Henry,” the pseudonym of a very high-up White House national security advisor whom I’d been in close contact with during my previous consulting job, that nuclear terrorism case.

But all I got at the number I had for him was voice mail. Even though that made me grumpy, I left a pleasant enough message and my number. Then, still in a grumpy mood, I tackled the report that Sands has asked for. After about a half hour, my phone buzzed again, and my grumpiness faded after I answered it.

“Mac, it’s Henry, sorry I missed you. How are ya? Haven’t talked with you in a while.”

“Ah, thanks for calling back, Henry. And I’m pretty good, although quite puzzled about something I’m working on. That’s why I called.”

“How can I help?”

“Well, I don’t know what you know about my activities. So stop me if I’m wasting your time.” I took a breath. “Anyway, I’m working for a task force up your way out of the DNI’s office that’s got some new concerns about weapons smuggling. My contact is a guy named Preston Sands. My initial job was to surveil one Frankie Muñoz, who was a candidate for State Attorney.”

“Right. I’m on that task force, and I was the one who recommended you for the job.”

“Oh. Well, thanks, I guess. And that’ll save a lot of background here. So, after Frankie got shot, Sands had me continue working for your group in a new role, working with the Miami PD to find his killer. And today we had a breakthrough.” I proceeded to fill him in about all Charles and I had learned, and this time I didn’t leave out names. “Now, the thing is, when I told Sands all this, he got angry and scolded me for going on a wild goose chase and ordered me to focus only on Frankie. Even though I told him very clearly about the chemical weapons that we think are headed for this *Omega Nueva* outfit. That’s obviously within the purview of your task force, yet I’m being ordered off. What the hell is going on?”

There was a long silence before he responded. “Well, you know, in situations like this, there can be all sorts of different threads being pulled from up here. And it could be that Sands has someone else working the *Omega Nueva* end of this, and he doesn’t want you messing that up.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve thought of that, but that’s not the impression I got when he called me off. Or maybe, I suppose, he just needs to work on his people skills.”

“He definitely needs to do that, in any case. Thing is, I’m not aware of any other personnel he has in play down there on this or on anything else. And I would be.” There was a huge sigh. “I have to let you in on something we were keeping from you Mac. And I hope you’re not too pissed off about it. See, Preston Sands screwed up big time on another matter that you really don’t need to know about. This was about six months ago. He’s on probation now. We assigned him to this in that mode, probation, because we didn’t think it would be too sensitive or critical. And I recommended you precisely because of your track record and my trust in you. I figured that if anything went haywire, you’d just call me. And you have. Thanks.”

It took me a minute to figure out what to say. “Oh. Well, that all makes sense, Henry. I’m glad I called you. Do you think that this is just another Sands screw-up from incompetence, or is it something more nefarious?”

“Make no mistake, Mac. Sands is a really, really sharp guy. So, I’m thinking Door Number Two.”

* * *

Henry and I agreed that I should continue doing what Sands expected me to do, and to report to Sands on that, and I could also send that documentation to Henry along with information about all the other things I would be doing. Which was whatever I thought was appropriate to do.

So, in a much better mood, I went back to my report. I decided to write a comprehensive one to send to Henry and edit it down to send to Sands. That way the committee would understand the connections we were finding, even if my handler didn't. And it occurred to me that Sands' activities couldn't be too nefarious, at least if he was as smart as Henry seemed to think. If they were, Sands would have encouraged me to report to him all of my suspicions about all the connections between Frankie's killing and the weapons smuggling that Annette had found herself in the middle of.

Thinking about Annette reminded me of the morning's meeting up at OceanLab, and I recalled that the Navy, or the Coast Guard or both, had planned to implement their bait and switch plan. It seemed to me that Henry would like to know the outcome of that operation, so I called Annette.

"Annette? Mac here. Hey, I'm putting together a report on what's going on, a report to a guy who works directly for the President. He, I'm pretty sure, would like to know about what happened with that plan that Commander Vanderhoff discussed, the bait and switch business. Got any updates?"

"Hey, Mac. Interesting meeting this morning, wasn't it? Let me ask." She probably sat the phone in her lap while she was discussing things with someone, if the muffled noises were any indication. "Mac? Garrett tells me it went off without a hitch. Naval CI is now in possession of those weapons, and the whole mooring business is back in place down there underwater, at as close to the same spot as before as possible—he said within a few meters—so the dummy cache can be picked up by whoever knows the acoustic signals to use."

"I'm sure that'll be a relief to everyone. And there's surveillance? To spot who triggers that release thing?"

There was another pause with muffled conversation in the background. "Yes, but it's not close-in surveillance, because they've got the tracking beacons to go by. Apparently they're foolproof."

"Foolproof", eh? Where have I heard that before, just in time for things to go all to hell? Well, anyway, this will make the White House feel better. But it'll get to them through an informal channel, meaning me, so don't discourage Garrett or anyone from making it more formal, OK?"

"Uh, Mac? Does that mean I should keep your channel confidential?"

"Well, Garrett knows about it, since you just announced it, but you might caution him that it's really a backchannel that isn't official. Does that make sense?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry. You've got so much more experience with this sort of thing than I do. But, yeah, I'll relay that."

"Say, Annette? Sam wants us all to get together for dinner sometime. Can we make that work somehow?"

"Absolutely! I'd really like to see her. Maybe she can call me. How about we get together somewhere in, oh, North Miami or, uh, whatever's equivalent to south Fort Lauderdale? Some place with stone crabs on the menu. I've got to eat as many of those delicious guys as I can before we go back to Colorado."

I was chuckling as I disconnected, but her comment about Sam reminded me—I was also supposed to have Sam call Willie's place. I patted my pockets and found the card that Willie had given me in my shirt. The front said, in engraved type, "Wilhelmina Block, Personal Services Consulting" and had a phone number. While I was pondering the meaning of "personal services consulting" in the context of what I knew about Willie's profession, I turned the card over out of habit. On the back was a handwritten note that said "Samantha—I really hope you'll call. Several of the girls would love to see you. I would, too. W."

As I finished the report for Henry and sent it off, and then edited down a copy for Preston Sands, I worried at the issue of getting Sam in touch with her past. For the life of me, I couldn't decide whether she'd really want to do that or not, and, for a while, I considered tearing up Willie's card and forgetting the whole thing. But it seemed like she ought to be the one to make that decision. And it wasn't as if I'd waltzed into Willie's parlor and announced my role in the demise of Sun and Sand or in turning Sam's life around. Charles did that for me. And then Crystal recognized me. It just wasn't my fault!

I couldn't help it, I finally decided, if I was the working girls' hero. All I could do is to hope that Sam would understand.

A more pressing matter was Annette's news about the success of the Naval CI operation, so I put in a call to Charles Jefferson. I was glad to have his personal number so that I could bypass the PD switchboard.

"Jefferson, Miami PD"

"Charles, this is Mac. Sorry to bother you, but I'm glad you answered. I just got off the phone with Annette Trieri, and she told me that the bait and switch operation the Navy guy talked about this morning went off without a hitch. The replacement package on the new mooring, at the same site, has beacons in it, so they'll be able to track whoever picks it up."

"Glad to hear it worked. But I've been thinking about it. Suppose we're right. Suppose that Pablo and Arturo go pick that thing up. Eventually, they'll discover that the weapons are bogus. I guess when they figure that out will depend on what the Navy put back down there. I suppose it could take a while, even until Arturo tries to use them. But they'll find out, right?"

"Eventually, yeah, I guess. So?" I couldn't figure out why he was worried.

"Well, that's going to create a big rift between Arturo and Pablo, don't you think? Particularly if part of Arturo's payment for Pablo's smuggling services was the hit on Frankie. I mean, I can see this degenerating into a serious problem between the two of them."

"Presumably, by then we'll have tracked the boxes, using those beacons, to somewhere that we can arrest Arturo for having them, though. And arrest Pablo, too, for helping Arturo get them. Right? Or Naval CI or someone will move in ahead of us and do it for us. So I don't see the problem."

"The problem is if CI or whoever, including us, doesn't arrest them soon enough. If Arturo finds out about the bogus weapons and tells his *Omega Nueva* pals that Pablo screwed him, there's likely to be a war between them and the Sánchez family. And that would make the old cocaine cowboy wars look tame by comparison. I mean, who knows what other weapons of mass destruction those Omega guys already have? Did you account for every single speck of that, what was it, that 'special nuclear material' that went missing a while back?"

* * *

The WMD reference was something I could have done without. But it woke me up, I'll give Charles that. The Naval CI guy hadn't specified what all they knew about the contents of those underwater boxes, but he'd alluded to chemical warheads. So I called Annette back.

"Hi, Annette, it's Mac again. Sorry to bother you. But do you know what those weapons that Naval CI recovered were? Chemical, yes. But do you know what specific agent?"

"Mac! Hi! And, listen, you can call me any time. Ah, let's see. The weapons. So, what we heard, based on the information printed on those boxes you saw, that Chinese-language stuff that the Navy

translated, is that what was in those boxes were binary warheads for RPGs. Rocket propelled grenades. The chemicals in there react to create sarin. Relatively safe until fired, but then, well, bad, bad stuff.”

“Sarin?” I felt like someone hit me in the stomach. “Bad stuff indeed. OK, thanks, Annette. And I’ll have Sam call you, I promise.”

What, I wondered, was *Omega Nueva* going to do with sarin? Attack Cuba? Kill off all the relatives they’d left behind?

The binary warheads would make them safe to handle—at least sort of safe—but they’d also produce *full-strength* sarin, not the weaker stuff that has sat around for a while. At least, I thought, it wasn’t going to be getting into the hands of those Omega crazies, thanks to the Navy’s preemptive recovery of the containers.

It was after mid-afternoon, and I began to wonder about where Sam might be. That morning, she’d talked about heading back out to Key Biscayne to make more sketches, but she’d also taken her golf clubs with her.

As I was thinking about where she might be, there was a knock on the door of our suite. Ah, I thought, she must have forgotten her key card this morning.

But when I opened the door, ready for a hug and all that, I was surprised to see Ubaldo Muñoz standing there, with one of his two gorillas standing behind him, the larger of the two I’d met at his house, if memory serves. The gorilla looked more comfortable this time, because he wasn’t wearing a suit but rather a loose-fitting guayabera shirt over too-short slacks. Or maybe they were plus-fours. And flip-flops. In any case, it all looked more comfortable than his suit had, which was much better—uncomfortable gorillas make me nervous. Even better than that, this time he wasn’t holding an Uzi.

“Ah, Mr. MacQuarrie, as I remember. I’m glad that you’re here.” Ubaldo’s tone was appropriate for ordering from a Starbuck’s *barrista*, and he smiled as if asking me to add an extra dollop of whipped cream to his order. “May we talk? I think you’ll find it worth your time. My man here will wait outside.”

I think I managed to recover from my surprise with reasonable composure. “Ah, well, of course. But, please tell him not to interfere with a woman who may be seeking to come in. She’s blonde and will be carrying a sort of large briefcase. OK?”

An exchange of Cuban-tinted Spanish ensued, and Ubaldo stepped across my threshold. I got him seated and offered refreshment—all I had was beer and wine, which he declined—and asked about his visit.

“Yes. Well, I’m certain that you can understand that I’ve been able to discover more about your background than the small amount that you and your friend the detective told me about. I guess I should say that I have the utmost respect for Detective Jefferson, by the way. And, based on what I’ve discovered about you, I have to admit to the same degree of respect for you.” His smile, though shark-like, seemed genuine.

Rather than interrupt, I simply nodded in a way that I thought would both acknowledge his compliment and encourage him. It seemed to work.

“Now, I’m sure that you know about my background. Certainly Detective Jefferson has told you. And you probably know that very soon, the revered patriarch of the company I work for will pass on. In anticipation of that sad event, there are forces at work positioning themselves to take advantage of this impending change of leadership. Naturally, I am seeking to make things evolve in a way that is favorable to me. Others have different agendas. Does all of this make sense?”

Once again I nodded without saying anything.

“I hope that you will believe me when I tell you that my aspirations for our company would take us in a completely opposite direction from the aspirations of others who are going to try to take it over. We have had a long history of, shall I say, somewhat shady dealings with the law. It is my hope that we can move away from that and move toward more, ah, conventional business practices. I’m absolutely confident that, with our talent and connections, we can grow and prosper in this way. Others, however, hold the opposite view, that the company should move into even more shady business dealings. Indeed, they are already moving us in that direction” He shrugged, as if helpless. “That may well be why you have connected with both Navy and other Coast Guard interests.”

This time, I didn’t nod but rather maintained my best-ever poker face.

“Now, I won’t insult you by asking what you and those interests have discovered,” he continued, “even though we might well be better off working together. It would, however, be very useful to me to know whether you and Detective Jefferson have made any progress toward finding the killer of my son.”

I decided I couldn’t really duck the implied question. “Mr. Muñoz, if you’ve investigated my background, I’m sure you know that I have some law-enforcement experience. But I have to say that it was not here in Florida, nor was I anything approaching an expert at evidence gathering. My partner and I, before I retired, we were concerned mostly with street crime, including drug dealing. My point is that I’m not really sure what it will take to convict someone for the murder of your son. Forensic evidence, certainly, would be the best. But we have none of that, yet, at least. Circumstantial evidence might not be so certain. So Detective Jefferson and I are hoping that circumstantial evidence that we may uncover will lead us to something more solid. Of course, we would value any insights you may have.”

It was his turn to nod but say nothing.

“One thing that we do have is the bullet that killed your son, Mr. Muñoz. Although that’s not much, it could be quite valuable, especially if we can also recover the weapon from which it was fired. I’m sure that you know about ballistics fingerprinting. Then, of course, we might be able to trace the weapon to the individual.”

“Mmm. I didn’t know about the bullet.” He stared at me for a few seconds, then reached into an inside pocket of the sports jacket he was wearing. “Perhaps this will help. It’s parked at the main lot of the Shark Valley Visitors’ Center area of the national park, out west on the Tamiami Trail.”

He handed me a 4x5 photograph of a large, white SUV with a variety of antennas stuck to the roof. It reminded me of a white version of the vehicles that I’d seen the Secret Service use.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news, though.” Now, his shark-like smile was not at all friendly. “It seems that the owner of this vehicle met with an accident that involved some hungry alligators that he encountered while fishing.”

“Ah, it sounds, Mr. Muñoz, as if you’re suggesting that we might just be able to find the weapon and even get a ballistics match, but that we won’t be finding the weapon’s owner?” I tried to sound as innocent as possible.

“That, I believe, would be a good assumption, Mr. MacQuarrie. And I hope that this little gesture gives you some indication of how I want to cooperate with you and Detective Jefferson?”

“Oh, it does, Mr. Muñoz, it does. And perhaps I can return the favor. Ah...well, you have to understand that our investigation is really in its infancy,” I waved his picture, “but this will certainly move it ahead. We have, however, developed some theories, and one of those has to do with the person who may have had that unfortunate accident. You see, we believe that he may have been expecting a clandestine shipment of some, ah, rather remarkable and very dangerous items. Items that you might not

want floating around South Florida. Well, let me reassure you that no one will be receiving that shipment. It's in safe hands now, very safe hands."

His smile morphed into a happy grin. "Really? My goodness, that *is* good news. Hmm. And that must mean that everyone who was associated with that shipment is in some jeopardy of being apprehended?"

I smiled and looked up at the ceiling, trying to maintain my innocence. "I'm afraid I have no idea, none at all, of anything about that, Mr. Muñoz. But I'll be glad to let you know if anyone is apprehended, if I have a way to contact you."

He started laughing as he handed me a business card with a phone number on it and was still laughing as he walked out the door.

* * *

2.7

Charles Jefferson wasn't answering his personal number, and the PD switchboard was no help at all. But it occurred to me that the National Park Service might well expect its parking lot to empty out at the end of the day and become suspicious of cars remaining after the visitors' center closed.

So I left Sam a note and headed west. Although it wasn't far, it was all the way across the metro area through some of the thickest of its traffic. Rush hour was starting, and there was really no through, limited-access highway westward from my part of town. So I listened to the radio as I made my way down Bird Road. Once on the west side, I was able to pick up the turnpike north to the Tamiami Trail, and by then there wasn't too much development left to negotiate, so the 25 miles out to my destination went quickly.

As a result I made it to the Shark Valley Visitors' Center about a half hour before its closing time. It was easy to spot the big, white SUV with its antennas, so I parked next to it and walked over to the center to let the personnel there know about my presence and its purpose. I made sure to wear my CGIS ball cap.

I expect that it was the shield that impressed them most, though. The volunteer behind the counter promptly fetched a real Park Service Ranger, whose name badge read "Molly Curtin." She and I launched into a little conversation about procedure and so on, and, ultimately, because we were both Federal officers, she deferred to its being my case and said they'd leave the gate unlocked for me. That way, I could do a leisurely and thorough search of the vehicle without worrying about their closing time and still get home that evening. I promised to lock the padlock on the gate after I was finished.

Her main concern was the vehicle's owner—what might happen when he showed up and found me searching his car without a warrant. But after some discussion, during which I alluded to national security concerns and the dreaded "terrorism" possibility, I managed to reassure her that I'd be able to handle things.

One of the more valuable skills I'd learned in association with my assignments in the Middle East had to do with defeating automobile alarm systems and car locks. Before the battery-powered remote-locking systems so common today, it actually used to be harder to break into a car without damaging it. Of course, if you didn't care about damage, punching a lock out or just breaking a window worked fine. But picking one of those car-door locks of yesterday was actually pretty hard.

Remotes changed all that. All you needed was a very special piece of equipment, which I just happened to have kept from my time at the three-letter agencies, that had programmed into it the various radio-frequency and ultra-sound codes that manufacturers used for their cars. Turn it on, let it scan through the possibilities, and, presto!, the target car, along with several others nearby, probably, would unlock itself. Starting the ignition was another matter, unless the target had a remote start feature, but unlocking it was actually boring.

I found the gadget in my bag of goodies in the back of my car, along with some gloves, and it took about ten minutes to find the right code for the white SUV. While waiting, I conducted a thorough search of the bumpers, fender wells, and other likely spots that someone might stash an extra key, and I was rewarded with a dirty little magnetic box stuck to the top of the muffler. It was an interesting spot for it—of course, the box and its key would get quite hot when the car was operating, but, mostly, you'd need such an extra key only after the car had been sitting and was cooled down. I used the key to re-lock the door, then to unlock it, and to start the ignition. Whatever alarm system there was kept politely silent.

The glove box, which was not locked, held a registration card made out to one Arturo Ventador along with other assorted glove-box junk, including a small flashlight, and the box under the arm rest on the console had a phone charger, some loose change, and a pair of driving gloves. Overhead was a flip-down sunglasses holder with a snap case for wrap-arounds in it, but no sunglasses.

I decided that somewhere out there, beyond the visitors' center, its parking lot, the board walk, and the bike trail, was a 'gator hole with a 'gator in it wearing cool new shades.

But all-in-all, aside from the confirmation of Arturo's likely demise, the front seat area was unremarkable.

Things got more interesting in the back. Like in most SUV's, the back seat folded to increase the cargo area, first by lifting the seat cushion forward and then by folding the seat backs down flat. Under the seat cushion was a bit of storage, perhaps originally for a small tool-kit or the tire-changing tools. But instead there was a padded box containing a new-looking Steyr 9mm L-A1 automatic with several extra magazines, all full.

I picked it up and folded the seat backs forward. Surprisingly, they didn't fold flush with the rear but rather were set about 4" lower. It seemed clear that the cargo deck had been raised somehow.

That was even more apparent when I opened the rear hatch and lifted the rubber mat and the carpet under it back there. The plastic deck had been replaced with a sheet of painted plywood. And on the rear end of that wood deck was a fold-down door about 4" high that ran the width of the cargo area. Behind the door, under the deck, was a wide slot, and in that slot was a gun case with a handle presented to me, a big case that was quite heavy.

I removed the gun case and transferred it to the trunk of my car, and put the box with the Steyr in there, too. Then I got the flashlight from the SUV's glove box and examined the rest of the under-deck storage in the back of the SUV. There were two other flat boxes, which turned out to be holding the tire tools from under the back seat. Finished, I returned the SUV, minus its two weapons, to the condition in which I'd found it, and locked it back up.

Although the big gun case had a briefcase-style lock, it opened right up when I popped the latch. And even though I'd seen one before, and fired it, during an assignment in Afghanistan, the TAC-50's size and bad-ass appearance surprised me, despite its being broken down. Then and there, I made a promise to myself to figure out how to keep it in my personal collection.

As I was driving back east to the metro area, having locked the padlock on the visitors' center gate behind me, the problematic nature of that promise got me to thinking. After all, the TAC was evidence

in a high-profile murder case. If Arturo's fingerprints were on the weapon, it could be argued that the TAC as evidence was moot because the murderer was dead. But, with no body for verification, the evidence that Arturo was dead wasn't really evidence, just hearsay. And it seemed very unlikely that anyone would be examining the stomach contents of every alligator in the vicinity to see if that hearsay could be substantiated.

Maybe, I thought, I could exploit my CGIS status and the national security aspects of the whole thing to my advantage. So I called Annette.

"Hope I'm not interrupting your dinner, Annette."

"Mac! Wow, third time today. You're on a roll."

"I sure am, but I could use some help. Could you ask your partner, that Chief Kraus, if CGIS has a bullet trap strong enough to handle a fifty BMG round? I need a ballistics sample."

"Ballistics sample I get. But what was that round?"

"Fifty BMG. Big, honking bullet. He'll know what it is, and he can do a better job of explaining it than I can."

"He's right here, why don't you ask him?"

I looked at the dashboard clock and saw that it was past 6 pm. Annette, I thought, you need to get a life. As do I.

"Kraus here."

"Chief, I've got a favor to ask. I need a ballistics sample of a big-bore rifle, a TAC-50. Have you folks got a bullet trap that can handle one of those?"

"Hmm. Well, not a real bullet trap that I know of, but there's an indoor range north of here that's equipped for fifty BMGs. And it's very well padded to catch rounds without shattering them. Up in Pompano Beach. Seems like that ought to do the trick. Is this connected to that assassination you're working?"

"It is, but I need to keep this very quiet. How about I bring the TAC up to you tomorrow? Maybe someone can dust it for prints and then fire off a couple of rounds. And I'll fill you in on some interesting developments."

"That'll work. Looking forward to it, Mac. And we've got some new info for you as well."

* * *

I got back to the Residence Inn at about 6:45 and found that Sam had returned from her painting/golfing outing. With a hint of sunburn.

"Ooh," I said. "I hope this isn't too tender. I may want to ravish you tonight."

"Mmm? Had a good day, did you?" She smiled and pulled me into a big hug.

"Maybe this whole investigation business won't take as long as I thought. I have to say, I really don't like it here, in the middle of all these people and traffic and stuff. Oh! But I can't forget to tell you to call Annette. I've got a phone number somewhere." As I was patting my pockets, I remembered Willie. "And, uh, I've got another number that I hope will be OK for you."

She leaned back from our hug and looked at me with those big blue eyes. "Oh? What's that about?"

“Ah, well, see, today, this Miami cop I’m working with took me to interview someone he thought would have helpful information for our murder case. A woman called ‘Willie’, she runs, um, some brothels.” I watched her big blue eyes get bigger. “And, well, he introduced me to her and mentioned that I had a role in shutting down Sun and Sand. So she made a big deal out of that. And then one of the girls that was there got all excited and asked about you. So, well, I’ve got this note for you.”

I handed her the card that Willie had given me.

While she read it, I continued. “And, thing is, Willie’s got a place here in the Grove, just a couple of blocks away. Seems like it’s her sort of headquarters.”

I have to say that I really didn’t know how she’d react. After all, she had been working hard to put her past behind her. For all I knew, she’d throw a fit. But I’d never have predicted what really happened.

“Aw, this is sweet.” She looked up from reading and there were tears in those big blue eyes. “Is it OK with you if I call her and go see them?”

I was stunned, speechless for just a bit.

“Of course. Geez, it’s your decision completely. But, ah, well, maybe not tonight. You know, they could be getting busy about now...”

“You think I don’t know that, you big dummy?” But she was smiling.

“Anyway, I’m hungry. What do you want to do about dinner?”

“I’m not sure. But the places here stay open late. And I’ve got an idea for *right now*.”

A few hours later, we found our way back to our little apartment at the Residence Inn, satiated by another wonderful meal and by its prelude, during which the sunburn hadn’t been a problem at all. I was ready for some sleep, but I discovered a voice mail message.

“Mac, it’s Charles. Listen, I’m sorry I was out of touch all afternoon. My phone says I missed some calls from you. But this damned Internal Affairs business has got me all tied in knots. I’m basically being ordered to drop everything else and deal with it. I’m sorry. Call me when you get this, if you can. Anytime, meaning, really, any time. Whenever you get this.”

So, even though it was about ten in the evening, I called him.

“Sorry it’s so late, Charles. I just got home.”

“Mac! Ah, good. Thanks for calling. I’ve gotta say, this IA thing is making me crazy, not to mention keeping me away from what I’m supposed to be doing. So, what’ve you been up to?”

“Well, oddly enough, after our little visit to Willie’s place after lunch, our friend Ubaldo paid me a social visit, here at the Residence Inn. I’m not sure how I feel about his knowing where we are.”

“No shit? And, yeah, no shit. Maybe you should consider moving.”

“He found me here so quickly that I expect he’d find me anywhere else. Besides, I’m not sure it’s really warranted.” I proceeded to fill him in on what Ubaldo had implied and about the white SUV I’d found in the parking lot out at Shark Valley. I conveniently forgot to mention the guns, however.

“You say you’ve got the key? Well, why don’t we drive out there in the morning and bring it back to our impound lot? Then the forensics guys can go crazy.”

“Ah, it might make sense to take someone out there and at least get prints off the steering wheel and so on.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, I’m half asleep. I’ll pick you up around eight with a tech, OK?”

* * *

So, early the next morning, Charles, I, and a forensics tech named Joe O'Reilly were on our way west. At least we were headed the opposite direction of most of the traffic, so it took less time than it had taken me the previous afternoon.

On the other hand, the parking lot at the Shark Valley Visitors' Center wasn't quite as sleepy as it had been the day before. The "Reserved for Ranger" and handicapped spots near the Center's entrance were full of official NPS patrol vehicles and an ambulance.

Meanwhile, our white SUV was sitting quietly by itself, where I'd left it, so Charles and I sent the Joe off with the key to do his forensics thing, and we headed into the Visitors' Center.

The same volunteer I'd talked with the previous day was behind the counter, looking nervous. When Charles and I showed him two separate agency shields, it didn't help to calm him down.

"Um, well, I'm afraid I'm the only one here just now. All the Rangers are down on the boardwalk." The volunteer nametag on his shirt said "Bob," and Bob was clearly wishing it was his day to stay home.

"You see, officers, first thing this morning, a visitor who was out there scouting for early morning bird activity found an arm. A *human* arm."

He looked back and forth between us in a conspiratorial fashion.

I nodded, trying to project a sense of calm and wisdom. "I see. Do you know if the hand is still attached?"

Bob turned a little green. "Uh, no, no I don't. Is it important?"

Charles nodded, Sherlock-like. "Identification. Fingerprints, you know."

Bob's greenness ripened a shade.

I looked at Charles. "Looks like we've got another job for Joe. Let's go see what's going on out there. Oh, Bob? Which way to this boardwalk?"

Bob was, I think, very glad indeed to have Charles and me out of his hair, what was left of it, anyway. And Joe wasn't at all upset by having another set of prints to take, assuming there was a hand left to take them from, so we all started off in the direction Bob had indicated, down a one-lane paved road.

Shortly, we came to a sign indicating the start of the boardwalk, which had yellow police tape across its entrance. We managed to bypass that and made our way along a pleasant-enough tourist walk for several hundred yards before coming upon a good-sized group of people in Park-Service ranger uniforms, all standing around with not much to do, apparently. I wondered if I'd see that alligator wearing its cool wraparound shades.

Charles and I had our shields held up, so we didn't get challenged by any of the Rangers; in fact, I recognized the young woman I'd talked with the day before.

"Ah, Ranger Curtin. I guess this means you won't be worrying about that SUV's owner now, eh?"

She rolled her eyes. "The paperwork on this is going to be horrific. And we'll have to close this boardwalk for weeks, right in the middle of prime birding season."

"Molly, this is the Miami police detective I'm working with on the case I mentioned yesterday, Charles Jefferson. And we brought a forensics tech with us, Joe O'Reilly. He's been getting prints off the SUV before we impound it."

Her expression brightened. “Oh, good. We’ve been debating about whether to call the FBI techs to see if we can get an ID.”

The mention of “FBI” caused Charles to shake his head. “No offense, Ms. Curtin, but even though this is federal land, getting the FBI involved will just make your paperwork all the worse, believe me. We heard something about an arm, from that guy Bob in the Visitors’ Center, but he didn’t know if there was still a hand on it. If so, Joe can get prints and we can run them for you.”

She looked relieved. “Thanks. You’re not the only one with reservations about the FBI. And because this looks like an accident, I don’t think they need to get involved. And, yes, there’s a hand, sort of chewed on and spat out, but the thumb looks intact.”

Joe was happy to have more work, it seemed. “Oh, good, a hand. I hope it’s the right one. I already got a really solid right thumb print off the door-handle of that SUV. I phoned it in, and it was easy to find in the database, because he was in the Army. Guy named Arturo Ventador, whose name is on the car registration.”

Good thing, I thought, that we left Bob back at the Center. His hue would be the color of ripe avocados about now.

The chewed-up hand turned out to be the left one, but its print was close enough that Joe gave it a 90% probability of belonging to Ventador. And, after some more work on the car, he also found a partial of a left thumb, which showed as good a match as possible under the circumstances; both matched the database. So we came away from the visit to Shark Valley convinced that, as implied by Ubaldo Muñoz, Arturo had perished in a most unpleasant way.

That made me feel better about absconding with that TAC-50, but I still wanted to get prints and a ballistics sample from it. Fortunately for me, Charles had yet more IA meetings for the rest of the day. I could tell his frustration was becoming unbearable.

I called Annette to let her and Chief Kraus know I was coming and discovered that they were up at OceanLab, so I hit the road for points north. Mid-morning traffic was not very much better than any other traffic, but the western bypass north and then east helped a lot.

Garrett Kraus had a simple fingerprint kit in his car, powder and lifting tape, and he used it to good effect. He found latents in various spots, but, oddly, none where you would expect them from someone firing the rifle. Then we headed out to the shooting range. It turned out to be fairly close, a couple of miles away on the west side of I-95 on Atlantic Boulevard. Kraus, it seemed, was a fixture there because he used the place to keep his skills honed, and we had no trouble talking them into letting us get our samples. We fired off three rounds from the TAC-50, creating quite a sensation among the other customers, retrieved the slugs, and went on our separate ways, Annette and Garrett back to OceanLab, me back south.

I was hoping that the prints Garrett had lifted from the TAC would match those that Joe O’Reilly had lifted that morning and that the slugs from the TAC would be a ballistics match to the unique one that Randy Simms had retrieved from Biscayne Bay. That would close all the loops involved with the Frankie Muñoz murder. I’d still have to dance around the issue of where the TAC had disappeared to, but maybe, I thought, the other evidence, including Ventador’s death, would let Charles Jefferson clear that case without the weapon itself.

Then, as I negotiated the late-morning traffic southward toward Miami, the issues that could arise if the prints Garrett had lifted were not Ventador’s began to gnaw at me. If the ballistics matched but the prints didn’t, Charles would need the TAC, barring some miracle. That was going to be tough to deal with, because I was already thinking of it as mine.

I'd learned, from my many years in the field, that having too much firepower in your arsenal, like having too much horsepower in your sports car—or, according to the Duchess of Windsor, being too rich or too thin—is just not possible.

* * *

2.8

The TAC problem, though, was solved for me in a most unexpected way. Just as I was passing the exits for downtown Miami, my phone demanded my attention.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Mac, it's Charles. I need to make this short. Your phone will show I'm calling from a new number, so please don't lose it. It's a throw-away phone, but I'll have it for a couple of days. Long story short, I'm on administrative leave, relieved of duty on the Sánchez case, and everything else. Luis Perez, you met him on Monday downtown, he's assigned to take the case over. I think he's been working with Pablo all along, but he managed to persuade the powers-that-be that it's me who's working with Pablo. So, buddy, I'm afraid you're on your own, at least you and the two CGIS people I met.”

“Holy crap, Charles, that sucks, really sucks. If there's anything I can do to help, let me know. Meantime, I'll stay out of the PD picture as much as possible, OK?”

“Fine by me. Listen, I gotta go, because they may be listening to your phone. I'll leave messages for you with our mutual friend, the big one up the block, OK?”

It took me a minute to figure out that he probably meant Willie. “Ah, yeah, I think I know what you mean. Good luck, pal.”

I wasn't as worried as Charles that my phone was vulnerable, because it wasn't except to the most sophisticated eavesdroppers. Working closely and clandestinely with the White House has its advantages sometimes.

But I was worried about him. And puzzled. The tension in the PD conference room when I'd met the various detectives on Monday had been palpable, and Charles had alluded to some issue that Perez was involved in. And, of course, there was the ongoing IA mess that Charles was dealing with. But I had no idea it would lead to his being suspended. If anything, I'd assumed that it was Perez who would be put on leave. But now Perez was in charge of the case. It occurred to me that the PD probably had Charles' cell phone and contacts now, and I'd very likely be hearing from Perez at some point.

Maybe, I thought, I should find a storage locker somewhere, a place that takes cash. The gear in my trunk seemed like it needed a better home. Hmm. Or maybe there's a better alternative.

Back at the Residence Inn, I found a note from Sam that she'd gone up the block to Willie's for lunch. I thought about it a minute then called her.

“Hi, sweetie, sorry to interrupt your lunch.”

“It's OK—did you get home?”

“I did, all safe and sound. Do you suppose I could talk with Willie a minute? Is she there?”

“Sure.” She said something I couldn't quite hear, and a new voice came on the line.

“Mr. Mac, I want to thank you for passing my message to Sam here. I’m so glad to see her doing so well. You have my forever gratitude.”

“Willie, it’s my pleasure to make sure she’s doing well. And I treasure your gratitude. Do you suppose I could trade in some of it for a favor?”

“Well, I guess I could sure give it a try. What is it you need?”

“Thanks, Willie. And if this is too much or too risky for you, just say so. I’ve got a plan B. Anyway, I need some stuff hidden for a while. Uh, a couple of guns, actually, an automatic and a rifle. I’m worried that a corrupt cop is going to come after them.”

She laughed. “You know, Mr. Mac, it happens that we have several places here that are quite useful to hide things in. Turns out that some of these cottages have been around since Prohibition, and when we remodeled them we found various hidey-holes. So it’s not a problem at all. Bring ’em by.”

That little problem taken care of, or at least it would be as soon as I got the gun cases up the block, I decided it would be politic to let Ubaldo Muñoz know about the dust-up at the Miami PD. The number on the card he’d given me must have been his personal cell phone, because he answered immediately in that recognizable cigar-smoke voice.

“Yes?”

“This is Mac MacQuarrie, Mr. Muñoz. I have some information that you may find interesting. Can you talk?”

“Not on the phone. How about I come see you in an hour?”

“Ah. Yes, a very wise idea. Same place as yesterday?”

“I’ll be there.”

He’d said an hour, and I had the feeling that it would probably be less. So, if I hustled, I had time to walk up the block. It felt a bit foolish to be carrying the two gun cases along the sidewalk, but I didn’t run into anyone until I rang the bell on Willie’s gatepost.

It was the same routine as the day before. “Yeah?”

I didn’t recognize the voice, so I guessed. “Javod?”

“Yeah. Who there?”

“Javod, my name’s Mac. I was here yesterday with Charles Jefferson.”

“OK, yeah. Hang on, I gotta ask.”

I felt even more foolish standing there like some kind of traveling salesman, but the street wasn’t busy.

“OK, c’mon on in.” The door opened, and there was Javod looking as intimidating as ever. He didn’t like the looks of the two cases I was carrying. “What you got there?”

“Ah, well, I talked with Willie and she said she could keep these for me. I’m a little uncomfortable leaving them in the trunk of my car. Guns. Want to see them?”

His curiosity was apparent. “Gotta a rule here, sir, can’t carry on the premises.”

That made me feel guilty for having been there with a sidearm before and now as well. But this time I looked around and found a park bench to set the cases on, nodding all the while. “Smart idea, Javod. They’re not loaded—I checked personally—and the big one’s broken down. Here, let me show you.”

I opened the rifle case first and got an appreciative whistle in response. “Oh, man, that’s some piece of artillery. A fifty?”

“Yep.” I held up a magazine to show him its top cartridge. “Not what you want to get shot at with. But, see how it’s broken down, so it’s not any danger, right? And this other one’s interesting, too.”

I opened the smaller case and got another low whistle. “Now, that, sir, is something I can appreciate more. What’s that key for?”

He was referring to a little key sitting in a custom-cut depression in the foam lining of the case.

“This model has a key lock. And it’s locked, so it’s safe. And unloaded. Want to feel its heft?” I picked it out of the case and handed it to him. “It’ll feel light, because there’s no magazine in it. And the mag holds 17 rounds.”

Being a big fellow, Javod had accordingly big hands, but the Steyr fit him perfectly somehow. “Oh, this is a nice piece. I gotta get me one. Nine millimeter?”

“This one is. As I recall, there’s a .40 caliber model, too, but its mag is smaller.” A thought occurred to me. “Say, Javod, you want this one? I’m all set with sidearms, and Sam, that lady you let in for lunch a while ago, I guess, she thinks I’m way too set, if you know what I mean. I don’t need this one. And the owner is, ah, well, he met with a little accident, and he won’t be needing it.”

He took off his dark glasses and gave me a close look. “You serious? Really?”

“Sure. Now, I’ve got to warn you, I don’t know anything about its history, whether any of its slugs are in the local or federal databases. You know, for ballistics comparisons. Just to be safe, you might want to get the barrel re-machined. And I haven’t looked for a serial number, although it wouldn’t surprise me if they’re missing.” I shrugged. “But like I said, I don’t need it. And, well, it ought to have a good home, seems like.”

He held out his big right hand to shake and managed not to crush mine in the process. “Thanks, man, thanks. I’ll take good care of it, you can be sure.”

* * *

Of course, that exchange meant I had a friend for life. He showed me and the rifle case into the house. Crystal, the redhead from the day before, answered the door, grabbed me, and gave me a big hug. Most pleasant.

“Damn, Mr. MacQuarrie, you a popular fella ’round here.” Javod headed back to his post, shaking his head and laughing.

Inside, I found Sam at the head of the dining table regaling a group of quite attractive young ladies, plus Willie, with stories about, well, me.

I could tell this because when I walked into the room, Sam said “Oh, here he is now.”

And everyone giggled.

I said “Hi, girls. Don’t believe anything she says about me. Willie?”

I tapped the case I was carrying, and she excused herself from the group. I followed her into a kitchen area, where she sized up the case.

“Hmm. Not too big, not too small. You say it’s a rifle? No, wait, you said there were two.”

“Right. The other’s a pistol, an automatic. I gave it to Javod. I don’t need it, and Sam’s not really happy with guns anyway. Uh, Javod was really pleased to get it, and I hope it won’t be a problem for you.”

She shot me a stern look that made me glad I didn’t work for her. “No, it won’t be. I bet he already has a piece at home, so this will just be another one. But I’m not sure I really approve.”

“I’m thinking he’ll be careful about it. And it’s got a key lock for safety.”

“Yeah, and I sure won’t let him forget to be.” She scratched her head. “So, Mr. Mac, what’s in here and what are you worried about?”

I figured I owed her a full explanation, so I gave her one, culminating with my wish that it be hidden from the Miami PD, should they choose to raid her place in the near future. “See, I think this new guy, Perez, he’s replacing Charles Jefferson on the Frankie Muñoz murder case, I think he’s dirty. I don’t have much to go on but instinct, but I’ve learned to trust that.”

She squinted in thought. “Perez. Hmm. Maybe Luis Perez? Dirty is too polite a word for him. So, I know just where to put this thing.”

She took the case from my hot, sweaty hand and disappeared down another hallway, then returned after only a couple of minutes wearing a smile.

“All set. No one but me and maybe Javod or Roscoe will be able to find it.”

“Thanks, Willie. I’ll pick it up before we head back south to the Keys, OK?”

“You gonna tell Sam about it?”

“Ah, in a way. Sort of. She’s not a big fan of guns, but she knows I use them in my work and she knows they’re helpful when they’re needed. So I’ll sugar coat it somehow.”

“Mr. Mac, you the best thing that happened to her, ever. I’ve known her for a long, long time, and she’s never been so happy before. You take care of that lady, hear?”

That admonition stuck with me—and still does, for that matter—on my walk back to the Residence Inn. But Ubaldo had arrived, as I could tell by the gorilla leaning against the black Audi A8L parked next to the hotel’s entrance. He recognized me and tapped on the rear window; the door opened and out stepped Ubaldo.

But it worked out—he apologized for being early, I for being a bit late, and we went upstairs to Sam’s and my suite. After I offered him a drink, which was once again declined, I got to business. For openers, I related the change of lead investigators on the Muñoz case without too much elaboration, but I didn’t fill him in on Pablo’s relationship to it all.

“Luis Perez, you say? Hmm. That changes everything. He’s in Pablo’s pocket for sure, I’ve known about that for years. And they’ve somehow set up Jefferson for a fall.” His validation of my instincts made me feel good.

“And there are a couple of other items, Mr. Muñoz. First, an arm that apparently used to be attached to Arturo Ventador’s left shoulder was found near a ’gator hole out west by Shark Valley. And that SUV you gave me the picture of had a rifle in the back, an unusual one that matches the caliber of the bullet that killed Frankie.” I watched Ubaldo nodding sagely. “Oh, and one more thing. My colleagues in the CGIS have photos of Arturo and Pablo Sánchez together in a situation that leads us to think they were involved in chemical weapons smuggling, the stuff I referred to yesterday. Uh, now you know pretty much all of what I know.”

“Right caliber? Any matches?”

“Not yet. And I’m a little worried that the slug that we think killed Frankie will mysteriously disappear from the PD evidence room. We also got fingerprints from the rifle, but I haven’t had a chance to run them—but if they’re Arturo’s, well, that’ll be pretty conclusive.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie, I appreciate very much hearing from you about this. I said yesterday that I have high respect for you, and this conversation has verified that for me. If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.”

“Well, Mr. Muñoz, Charles was worried about the possibility that your actions could start some kind of gang war, and I’d hate to see that happen. Maybe you could give me and the other CGIS people a couple of days to make some progress before you go after Pablo?” I held my breath, hoping I hadn’t offended him.

“Mmm. I’m afraid, Mr. MacQuarrie, it’s a little late for that.” He shrugged almost apologetically. “But don’t worry. I don’t see any kind of war coming out of this. Maybe another little skirmish or two, but no war. And thank you again for the information about Perez. He’ll be extra dangerous now, and I’m glad to be warned.”

“Ah, just so you’ll know, I don’t think he will be getting his hands on that rifle. Ever.”

“Oooh. Really, Mr. MacQuarrie? Well, now, that would be just fine indeed. Just fine. If you can prevent that, I’ll be more in your debt than ever.”

“Well, Mr. Muñoz, I don’t think of it that way. But I’m very pleased that we can have such a cordial relationship.”

“Exactly so. After all, we know where each other lives.”

Just as I had the day before, I took several deep breaths and poured myself a glass of wine after he left. About the time I was contemplating a second one, Sam walked in.

“Oh, you’re here! I’m so glad. Mac, that was such fun. I didn’t know how it would work out, but it was great. And maybe I was able to give those girls some hope.” She pulled me to my feet and hugged me even more pleasantly than Crystal had.

Then she leaned back and looked me squarely in the eyes. “So what was in that case you had, anyway? Did Willie keep it, or what?”

“Case? Oh, yeah. Ah, well, see, it’s like this. You and I have talked about how I spent most of my childhood growing up overseas, right? Because my Dad worked for the Foreign Service? Well, one year, he had an assignment in Washington, at the State Department, so we spent my sophomore year of high school in Silver Spring, Maryland, a high school where they had a big concert band. And I was discovering girls and trying to learn to flirt. So one day I saw a pretty girl who was in one of my classes carrying a case about like that one I had today, and I sidled up to her and asked her what was in it. She said something like ‘it’s my bassoon, stupid’ and walked off with her nose in the air.

“So, I won’t stick my nose in the air or call you stupid, but maybe it’d be better if we both pretend that the case I gave to Willie to store for me has a bassoon in it. OK?” And I smiled my most boyish, genuine smile and kissed her.

It was interesting to watch her sequence of expressions as she processed all that. First, it was curiosity—what the hell is he talking about this time—and then it was comprehension that I was actually being up front about not being up front. Then it was curiosity about what I wasn’t being up front about, and finally I guess she decided she really didn’t want to know.

“Hmmp. Well, I sure hope it doesn’t put Willie in any danger.” She pulled away and began pattering in the little kitchen area, a tactic I knew meant that she wasn’t entirely happy with me. “Oh,

and I called Annette this morning. I hope it's OK for us to go up to Fort Lauderdale this evening for dinner with her and Hal?"

"That would be wonderful—I'm glad you called her." I felt as if I was getting off easy. Too easy.

* * *

I spent the afternoon thinking about the conversation with Ubaldo. His comment that it was too late for him to give me, Annette, and Garrett Kraus a couple of days to go after Pablo Sánchez suggested that something had already happened, just as something had happened to Arturo Ventador. And even if a gang war wasn't likely to develop, those skirmishes he'd mentioned could be messy, even for South Florida.

But the Frankie Muñoz case appeared to be cleared, even if there were a few loose ends. That reminded me of the fingerprints that we'd taken from the TAC, so I got busy with my computer and discovered that the ones of Arturo Ventador in the confidential files I had access to online sure looked like the ones from the TAC. Because there were no others on top of Arturo's on the TAC, that confirmed for me that he was the shooter, despite the lack of prints on the trigger or other appropriate places. A ballistics match would probably be needed for an indictment, but that wasn't going to be happening—the justice system didn't normally put detached left arms on trial.

That being the case, my involvement in the whole thing would seem to be over, I thought. Of course, I'd have to write up a final report, tally up all the hours, and expenses, I'd put into the thing, and send Preston Sands a bill, but more actual work on the case would be hard to justify. It began to look as if Sam and I could head back to the Keys as early as the next day.

But my experience suggested that such an optimistic outlook might well be naïve. So I decided to call my White House contact, Henry, even though that meant going over my handler's head again. But what the hell. Henry didn't trust Preston Sands anyway.

"Henry? Mac MacQuarrie here. Glad I caught you."

"Sometimes you just get lucky, Mac. I'm between meetings. Oh, and thanks for that report yesterday. I was glad to see that the chemical warheads didn't get onto the street."

"Me, too, Henry, as well as everyone down here. No one needs sarin to be on the loose."

"Sarin"? Did you say 'sarin,' Mac? Holy Christ."

"Yeah. I didn't find out until after I sent you the report. But not only is it not going to make it to the street, the guy that was getting the shipment is out of commission permanently." I explained the demise of Arturo Ventador and the likely demise of Pablo Sánchez. "And because of the fingerprints on the rifle that probably shot Frankie Muñoz, it seems like my role here is over. Although I don't know what Preston Sands will think."

"Does he know about Ventador?"

"Not from me."

"OK, well, here's what I'd like to see. The thing is, you've closed out Frankie's murder, high probability at least, and shut down the recipients of those RPG warheads. Sarin warheads, no less. Jesus." Henry took a deep breath. "Anyway, we still need to shut down the purveyors of the weapons. What I'd like, and I've discussed this with the senior members of the task force, is for you to string Sands along and team up with whoever's on the trail of who was delivering them. I think you said you've talked with some other CGIS people, and the Navy. We have reason to believe that Sands is in bed with the smugglers, though, so don't let him know what you're up to. OK?"

“Hmm. I take it that you’d like to get the kind of information on Sands that will let you put him away, then?”

“Right, along with putting away whoever’s behind this smuggling.”

“All right. Do me a favor and pass the word to the Coast Guard and Navy that you want me to continue on the case, would you? And I’ll stay in touch, Henry. Oh, and I guess I need to ask something. I was just a consultant and then Sands got me made into a genuine CGIS investigator. But CGIS isn’t paying me. Should I keep sending my invoices to him? Or what?”

“Ah. Good question.” There was a pause. “Um, to me, I think. That way, Sands won’t have the opportunity to screw them up, and you’ll get paid. We need you, Mac.”

Always good to feel needed, I thought.

“Are you about ready? I told Annette we’d meet her and Hal about six, up in Hollywood.” The tone of Sam’s voice, impatient and still annoyed with me, reminded me that feeling needed sometimes requires cultivation.

She was silent most of the way north while I negotiated the rush-hour traffic on I-95—when, I wondered, was it *not* rush hour in Miami? Once again, the express lane saved the day. I finally had to ask where we were going, so she had to speak to me again.

“A place on the Intracoastal called Billy’s Stone Crabs. Take Hollywood Boulevard east.”

I used that as an opening to chatter about not knowing the area very well, blah, blah, blah, and worked in a reference to a date we’d had early on at a lounge in one of the big hotels along the beach in that vicinity. This was in her working girl days, and she hadn’t entirely trusted my assertion that all I wanted to do was talk. But since that’s all we did do, things got off on the right foot between us, and it had been delightful ever since.

I made sure she understood how I felt about that, and it started to melt her hard freeze a bit. Then, when we walked into Billy’s and found Hal and Annette at a waterside table, she warmed up more.

I’d seen Annette several times recently, of course, and Hal at that meeting, but Sam hadn’t seen either of them since our cruise-ship adventure. So we had the usual round of hugs and handshakes, along with the sort of “looking good” comments you’d expect in such a situation.

They had only just arrived, so we all needed to order something. That accomplished, Hal looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“So, Mac, I was surprised to see you at that meeting. Annette explained a little about what you’re doing here, but I don’t quite get it. It seems like a really crazy coincidence that you’d run into each other at the Coast Guard Station. What was that all about?”

“Surprised the heck out of me, too. But it turns out we’re working the same case, just from opposite ends. We just didn’t know it at first. And you must be involved, too, I guess?”

“Yeah, well, I was here for a while to work with a renewable energy group at Pompano State. And then their boat got blown up by these weapons smugglers. So I’m now a sort of oceanography consultant for Annette and her CGIS partner, Chief Kraus. Oh, yeah, and I’m trying to keep the Pompano State faculty’s fingers out of the renewable-energy-project cookie jar.” Hal shrugged. “I guess my administrative experience as a dean put me in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I had to laugh. “Wrong place at the wrong time—that’s the story of my life recently. Well, except for the bonus part. I wouldn’t have met Sam if not for that nuclear materials case and the cruise ship thing where we met you guys.”

I gave Sam's knee a little squeeze and felt her put an arm around me, completely melted, apparently. She smiled. "We supposedly retired and moved to the Keys to relax, but I'm having trouble getting Mac to understand what relaxing is."

"C'mon, I took up bonefishing, didn't I?" I smiled at her and then looked over at Hal. "She makes a wonderful guide, poling the boat where I need to go to get to the fish."

Sam snickered. "Yeah, I get him there and then he scares all the fish off with his casting."

Hal laughed. "Come on out to Colorado, Mac. There are lots of dumb trout out there. Annette's even catching some."

Annette was in the middle of sipping her gin and tonic, but she managed to swallow before showing her indignation. "Hey! Are you saying I can catch only dumb trout? Watch it, buddy."

"Colorado, huh? Hmm. I'm thinking I might like to paint some mountains someday. All this flat scenery is good, but mountains would be really interesting." Sam had a far-away look.

"She's taken up painting and sketching. And selling. The shops in the Keys can't keep her stuff in stock." I felt proud to tell the story. "She's a genius at capturing the essence of her subject with just a few strokes of a brush."

"Is it cold out there?" Now Sam looked worried.

"It gets chilly in the winter. But summer days are in the 50s and 60s, sometimes 70s, where we live. Nights get down to the 40s or maybe a little lower." Annette didn't realize the irony of her comment.

"Uh, no offense, Annette, but that's winter to me. Of course, I could just go shopping..." Sam looked at me and batted her eyelashes.

It made me glad that Henry and I had discussed my consulting fees.

* * *

3.0

It was time, he decided, to deal with liabilities.

Those bumbling Cuban fools in Miami he had delivered the merchandise to would undoubtedly make their fatal own missteps when they went to pick it up, so they weren't a worry. Their pet cop could be, though, maybe. But the Bulgarian, well, he was definitely, very definitely, an issue to be dealt with. And, regrettably, my half-sister and her husband know far, far too much to be allowed to live, he thought. The others, the people at the marina where the boat had been docked, the guy in Washington, those people back there on the west coast; decisions on all of them would have to wait until after an initial round of clean-up.

At least Lo Shi and Chu Long-Bin would not have to suffer. They could be dispatched quickly and relatively painlessly. But that pig Grozdan Petrov was different. Maybe, he thought, I can put that warhead I took out of the package to some use. Perhaps a series of small doses would draw out the sarin's debilitating asphyxia into a horribly torturous nightmare. Petrov deserved no less.

But Petrov was a professional. He wouldn't be so easy a target, even for a quick ambush, as would Pete and Emily Chu, as they were now known. On the other hand, Petrov's death, if done right, would

not be so publicly visible as the Chus' would—they would be missed at their university offices right away.

So it would have to be Petrov first and then the Chu couple. And then, probably, the Cubans and their cop. How to deal with Petrov was the question.

As he drove the several hours back from the Tampa Bay area to Fort Lauderdale, he pondered this, along with various other matters he was concerned about, as a distraction from the truck traffic on the two-lane road across the low, flat country north of the big lake.

That other package moored offshore Clearwater was something of an issue. It was in shallower water, which would make the recovery easier, in principle, but that also made it more vulnerable to accidental discovery. And the buyers in Tampa were no less incompetent than those in Miami had been—in fact, their training had been something of a fiasco compared to that of the Miami Cubans. Given what a bunch of buffoons those guys were, the potential for error was huge. That was why he had withheld the coding for the acoustic release until he returned to the southeast coast—he didn't want any screw-ups while he was in the vicinity of Tampa Bay.

On the other hand, that list of other al-Qaeda contacts they'd given him was a nice bonus. He was glad to have it in an encrypted file stored on his phone. It could well prove useful in the months to come, along with that duffle bag full of cash, of course.

Ah, finally, the interchange with that big highway called the Turnpike, where I head southeast toward Miami, he thought. And maybe I can get hold of Petrov and set up a meeting.

He reached for his cell phone.

* * *

3.1

Aside from the company, I think maybe the best thing about the dinner that Hal and I had with Mac and Sam at Billy's Stone Crabs that Wednesday evening was that we talked business only very briefly.

Well, check that. Those stone crabs, along with that great wine that Mac ordered, were the best thing.

But the almost-no-business was a close second.

It would have been no business at all, except Mac, on the way out when he had me to himself for a minute, said in a low voice, "It looks like the Miami end of this is a wrap, and my boss in the White House wants me to work with you and Garrett on finding the guys who smuggled that stuff in. Can we make that happen?"

"Sounds like a plan to me, Mac. I mean, we're all CGIS, right?"

As I thought about it later, though, I wondered just *how* to make it work. Garrett and I had developed a great working relationship. As much as I liked Mac, I wasn't sure I'd be comfortable with working with him—his agency background had instilled in him something of a loose-cannon approach to investigations, as I'd learned on that previous escapade on the cruise ship.

Maybe, I thought, he and Rick Vanderhoff could team up. Intel and counterintel together again, or something like that.

On the other hand, my instincts told me that Sam would want Mac to team up with me, so that I could keep an eye on him. And it was obvious from our dinner together that their relationship was the best thing that had happened to her for a long, long time. So, despite my reservations, I felt compelled, for Sam's sake. Besides, I was the one who had agreed with Mac's suggestion to team up, and, not knowing how Garrett and Rick felt, I decided I needed to partner with Mac as a result.

A few phone calls on Thursday morning set the wheels in motion. Mac and Sam, it turned out, had decided to move north to be closer to OceanLab, a sensible decision given the perpetual traffic hassle. I suggested a meeting for late morning, and Mac said he'd be there.

Upon calling them, I found that Rick and Garrett would be coming too, and they both had interesting news. It seems they'd each received orders from the tops of their respective chains of command to the effect that Mac was to be a new team member and integrated fully into our investigation. My worries of the evening before were eased when they both suggested that they partner up and that Mac and I should do the same.

Mac also told me that Sam would drive north a bit later in the morning to begin a hunt to find just the right accommodations for the two of them. I almost started in with advice, but then I remembered that they'd spent quite a while in our neck of the woods a year before, so Sam probably didn't need advice. Instead, I suggested that their move up our way would make it easier to dine out together.

Then I sat back and tried to figure out my role in this new scheme of things. One thing that I realized in all this figuring was that, as a control freak, I probably didn't measure up to the others involved, so perhaps I should just chill out and let things take their course. It wasn't really my case, after all, even though I—as well as my premier cheerleader, Hal—felt strongly compelled to see it through.

We both wanted, first and foremost, to get those bastards.

It was Tuesday morning when Shorty had mentioned that he recognized the Asian guy from the Cove 17 Marina docks as a match for a picture in Emily Chu's office. By late Wednesday morning, Hal, the clever devil, had managed to weasel out of Emily the fact that the picture was of her half-brother, Fu Lin, whom she described as a Chinese embassy diplomat associated with their cultural affairs office.

Even Hal and I, the hicks from the Colorado sticks, knew that was baloney that had been hanging under the rafters for too long—it just smelled rank. Worse, to the best of Hal's judgement, Emily was most politely described as “evasive” when Hal asked if she'd seen her half-brother recently. Not that he was a trained interrogator or anything, but he'd had years of experience dealing with homework excuses from negligent college students, after all.

We convened in the secure conference room at OceanLab at ten, with Mac not yet arrived. That gave everyone else a chance to gossip about him a little—the two military officers were most impressed that the unassuming guy they'd met earlier in the week had the clout to generate orders from such lofty heights. Shorty was also suitably impressed, but Hal and I, having worked with Mac previously, already knew that he had serious connections in Washington. Really, it didn't surprise me at all.

Instead of getting started right away, we waited until Mac walked in, and then, of course, there was a long round of guy-type banter, including some sarcastic derision, about his superstar status, given the origin of the orders about him.

He took all that good-naturedly. And when he had a chance to respond to the jibes, he said that he had new news about the Miami end of the whole thing and emphasized that what was really important was to find the people on our end, the people who put that mooring out there in the first place.

That sobered everyone up.

“I’ll start,” Mac said. “Remember how the Miami PD detective I was with on Tuesday identified the two guys in your marina pictures? OK, well, first, that detective is all wrapped around the axle of some strange Internal Affairs investigation down there and has been put on leave. So he’s out of the picture for now. I’m convinced that things will work out for him, though. But, more importantly, one of the two guys he identified, the Ventador guy, he’s dead. And the other, Pablo Sánchez, is probably dead, too. It looks like Ventador was the shooter who whacked Frankie Muñoz, so that part of the case is cleared. The reason you guys got those orders is that the real priority now, and this is a special task force out of the White House talking, is to find out who put that cache of sarin warheads out there in the ocean for the Miami guys to pick up. That means identifying the other two faces in those marina pictures. And it sounded the other day as if we have a good start on that.”

Mac looked around the table to make sure that everyone understood.

“Right.” Garrett seemed to understand completely. “Our facial recognition software identified one of the two other guys as an international arms smuggler from Bulgaria, Grozdan Petrov. But the other is not someone whom we can really identify yet, although Shorty found his picture here at OceanLab, in an office of a staff member who was listening at the door the other day.”

“And, yesterday, I got a name.” Hal jumped in. “That staff member, Emily Chu, works for me, and I made a point of striking up a casual conversation with her yesterday, in her office. Turns out that the Asian guy is her half-brother, a Fu Lin, who works for the Chinese embassy in some role. She said he’s a ‘cultural attaché,’ but I think we all know what that means.”

Garrett pulled out some papers from his briefcase and sorted through them. “Fu Lin. Right. That’s one of the names our computers came up with. Except the file doesn’t say he’s with the Chinese embassy. It says he’s an independent businessman specializing in heavy machinery. And he works mostly with companies in Taiwan.”

“Well,” it was Rick Vanderhoff’s turn to chime in. “We know who they are, now we just have to find them.”

* * *

About that time, Mac looked startled, said “Aw, hell,” and pulled his phone out of his shirt pocket.

He peered at the number on the screen and looked up. “Sorry, folks, I’ve got to take this...Mac MacQuarrie here. Secure...Ah, good morning...Well, I’m in a meeting with the team, but we’re in a secure room. At least it’s supposed to be secure. I’m not sure how this cell call went through, though. Anyway, everyone here is TS cleared, at least...OK.”

He squinted at his phone’s screen, finally poked at it a couple of times, and, as he set it down, he said, “On speaker now.”

A tinny little voice started talking. “Good morning everyone. I’m sorry to interrupt your meeting, but I have some information you need. And I’m sorry I won’t be identifying myself, but that’s standard protocol between Mac and me. Perhaps it’ll suffice for me to say that I made some phone calls to the Pentagon yesterday, and you’ve probably heard the results of them by now. They included the term ‘Task Force Matador,’ and I hope that term got to you in your orders.”

I saw both Garrett and Rick nodding and looking surprised.

“Anyway, one of the things our task force has been doing is setting up arms sales scams, or maybe I should call them ‘arms *purchase* scams,’ to try to catch the bad guys. One of them involves a fake al-Qaeda cell over in the Tampa area, and they hit pay-dirt. They’ve been negotiating for some time with

an arms dealer who's calling himself 'Fang Lu,' and this past weekend they finally met him. He took them out onto the Gulf of Mexico a few nautical miles and briefed them on how to retrieve an underwater package. Supposedly, it has in it more of what you folks recovered out in the Gulf Stream. He didn't give them the coding for the release at the time, though, but that came through yesterday. And he walked away with a duffle bag stuffed full of cash, a special duffle bag that had a tracking device sewn into its structure. But he ditched that bag over in central Florida, at a road-side park near a little town called Bartow. Thing is, we anticipated that and put into the cash a special RFID transponder. And we have access, uh, not entirely in an authorized fashion, mind you, to the highway RFID readers all over Florida that the toll roads use. From Bartow, he went east and then south on the Florida Turnpike at a place called, believe it or not, 'Yeehaw Junction.' And he got off the turnpike somewhere between the toll plazas at Lantana, in Palm Beach County, and at Pompano Beach, in Broward County. At Lantana, we got a picture of his car and its license plate—it's a rental—and I'll send it to Mac. Questions?"

Garrett had shuffled his papers. "Ah, sir? The dealer also calls himself 'Fu Lin,' according to both our recognition software and his half-sister. Along with several other names with the same initials. She, I mean the half-sister, she thinks he works for the Chinese embassy, but there is other contradicting information as well. Anyway, has the package from the Gulf been successfully retrieved?"

"'Fu Lin,' eh? Thanks." The tinny voice might have sounded pleased, but it was hard to tell. "And, yeah, Navy assets picked up the package on Tuesday. Anything else?"

Mac looked around with his eyebrows raised. When no one spoke, he picked up his phone and poked it again. "Guess not, sir. Anything for me? You're off the speaker...OK, you can be sure we will. I can't give you a time estimate, though. You wouldn't believe how many cars there are down here...OK, talk with you later."

He put his phone back in his pocket. "He says he'll let us know if there are any more RFID hits, although he's not optimistic about that. The transponder in the cash is built into one of the bands securing a packet of bills, and he may unwrap the packets and toss the bands. Still, there's a possibility."

Shorty cleared his throat. "You're right about all the cars, Mac. But he said something about a license plate number. Maybe that'll help."

"How about a three-county BOLO?" I didn't know if a wide-spread be-on-the-lookout would really help, but it seemed to me that some local law-enforcement involvement could be useful.

Mac looked at me with his forehead wrinkled up, so I guess he was thinking.

"I can't think of a down-side to that." Garrett sounded optimistic.

"Well," Mac's thoughts were coming to life. "There's at least one dirty cop involved in all this, on the Miami PD."

He filled us in about the relationship of a Detective Luis Perez to the Sánchez family. "The thing is, my information is that he was in the pocket of Pablo Sánchez, who's probably dead. And the guy behind Pablo's probable death knows of this relationship. So it could be that Perez is out of the picture already. Anyway, that's a factor, but I don't think a big one. Perez probably never met Fang or Fu or whatever he calls himself."

Rick Vanderhoff spoke up. "I like the BOLO idea. And when we get the license plate number, we should track its owner down, the rental car company. Maybe the car has a GPS chip in it so the company can track it, meaning we could, too."

"Track??" Hal was livid, or at least pretending to be. "Track? And I here was griping about piddly speeding tickets the other day. But track? Christ, we've got *two* rental cars, Annette and I, and they can *track* us? Sheesh. I need to get back to the cabin in the mountains and go fishing."

“Yep, they’ve got ya, Hal. All those trips out to the casino. Not to mention that other place—what was it called?—that ‘gentlemen’s club’?” Shorty grinned and did a Groucho Marx waggle with his eyebrows.

“Hmmpf.” But my grumpy old man winked at me.

And I noticed that everyone else was looking at me, too, as if I needed to come up with a response.

So, naturally, I said the first thing that popped into my head, “Oh, yes, that place. Wasn’t that a nice dinner we had there, dear?”

That shut ’em up.

But Mac, who had been poking at his phone some more, rescued them. “Here it is. White Chevy Malibu, rented from Budget at the Fort Lauderdale airport.” He rattled off a Florida license plate number, and I noticed that Garrett wrote it down.

“I’m going to make a phone call to our new cyber-enforcement people to see if Rick’s idea about tracking that car will work.” Garrett got up, walked over to the opposite end of the room from where we were all sitting, and fiddled with his phone.

Rick said, “OK, suppose we have this Fu Lin guy under control. What about the other one, Petrov? And are there others? This Emily Chu person, maybe?”

“If she’s involved, her husband probably is, too.” Shorty, I could tell, wasn’t at all happy that OceanLab personnel might be part of this whole thing.

“And then there’s the Miami cop, Luis Perez.” Mac said. “Like I said before, he may be out of the picture, but I don’t know that. And because he has law-enforcement credentials, he could be problematic.”

A discussion ensued, but there was nowhere much for it to go, so it just meandered around. When Garrett put his phone away and returned to the table with something of a Cheshire Cat grin, however, it found a direction.

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “Rick, you were right. Most rental cars now have some combination of GPS and cell-phone technology in them that lets them be tracked, almost in real time. And track them the rental companies do.”

“Aw, shit,” said Hal. “Even though it’s likely to work for us this time, well, aw, shit.”

Garrett smiled. “Y’know, Hal, I agree. But this time we can take advantage of it. In fact, there’s a waypoint list, along with a map, headed for my email as we speak.”

Garrett and Shorty messed around with a video projector and some cables for a few minutes, Shorty powered up a computer that was on a rolling stand, and then Garrett checked his email, via the computer, again.

“Hal, I don’t know what your driving habits would reveal, but here are Fu Lin’s.” Garrett clicked the mouse, and a map of Florida appeared on the screen with a dozens—maybe hundreds—of little triangles overlaid on it, most of them in Southeast Florida with a few leading up to Tampa.

Garrett zoomed the map in on what looked like the biggest and most dense blob of the triangles, and we saw that they were all in the vicinity—a parking lot, probably—of what turned out to be, based on Google information, a long-term-stay business hotel in Deerfield Beach, on SW Tenth Street just west of the railroad tracks.

“Apparently, on this map each triangle is the car’s position sampled on five-minute intervals, when the car’s ignition is on.” Garrett said. “So this must be where he’s staying, or something like that. Maybe we won’t need that BOLO after all.”

* * *

Garrett forwarded the email that included the map of Fu Lin’s tracking data, and we four federal officers piled into two cars to head for the Deerfield Beach business hotel with the dense cluster of triangles. I think that was probably the very definition of “going off half-cocked,” as we didn’t know which room might be his, nor did we have a search warrant anyway. At least maybe we could locate the car, I thought.

But, although there were several white Chevy Malibus in the parking lot, none had a license that matched Fu Lin’s rental car. While we stood around and discussed next steps, Garrett fiddled with his phone.

“Ah, I found something. The map was only some of the position data, and they also sent me a list with all of it, point-by-point. With times and dates. He was last here late Tuesday afternoon, it looks like. Uh, and apparently he arrived Sunday evening and stayed put, pretty much.”

“And with all the other points on the map, he must have been here before that,” I observed.

Garrett fiddled a bit more and said, “Yeah, if you sort the points by position, there are locations here starting about three weeks ago.”

“Well,” Mac chimed in, “if he was here that much, maybe the office will remember him. Or Petrov.”

As we started walking, in a little group, toward the hotel’s office, Rick stopped. “Ah, let’s consider this. If we all troop in there, we’re going to scare the crap out of whoever’s at the desk. And probably the manager, too. Is that what we want to do?”

He, at least, seems to be trying to avoid a Keystone Cops episode, I thought.

“Good point, Rick. You think we can get them to cooperate? I mean, we don’t have a warrant or anything.” I was glad to be able to voice my concerns.

“Maybe scaring the crap out of them is what’s needed.” Mac shrugged. “I mean, look, they’ve had an international weapons smuggler, one who is proffering WMDs to terrorist groups, no less, staying here for the past three weeks, right? If they don’t cooperate, it seems like that could be interpreted as aiding and abetting, right?”

Garrett laughed. “Mac, that’s true. But telling them that would do more than just scare the crap out of them. We’d likely have a heart attack on our hands. Or two. Surely the management here has no idea of what’s going on.”

“What’s that old saying about catching more flies with honey than with vinegar? Anyway, why don’t we have a polite conversation with the manager, in private, and see if we can get some voluntary cooperation.” I paused to consider the scowl on Mac’s face. “And if we don’t get cooperation right away, we can start in with the good-cop-bad-cop approach. Mac can be the bad cop.”

I smiled at him, and he blushed a little and broke into a grin.

Shortly, we were all sitting around one of the little tables in the breakfast area just off the main lobby with an Asian Indian fellow wearing a name tag that said “Lal Krishnamurthy, Manager.” It was about at the five minute mark of our conversation with him that he began to sweat visibly.

“So, you are telling me that one of our guests is implicated in a matter of the gravest threat to national security?” His hands, folded together on the table in front of him, were quivering. “Can you describe him to me?”

“Better yet, I’ve got pictures.” Rick pulled pictures of Fu Lin and Grozdan Petrov from his briefcase and placed them on the table facing Krishnamurthy. “There are two of them, actually.”

“*Two* of them? Oh, my...But, yes, this fellow has been here for several weeks now. I remember him because he has been paying in cash. And he made sure to tell us in no uncertain terms to have housekeeping stay out of his room. We give him fresh sheets and towels in person, at his door. And he puts trash out for us to collect.” Krishnamurthy had picked up the picture of Petrov.

“We need to see his room.” Mac’s soothing tone made me proud of him.

“But, of course, you understand that we must follow the law in this, as well as everything.” Krishnamurthy sweat was making his face shine. “For example, a search warrant is needed for law enforcement to enter a guest’s room, unless there is immediate probable cause or some other emergency.”

Rick opened his mouth to say something, but stopped and closed it again. Mac just looked disgusted, and raised his eyebrows in my direction as if to ask if it was bad-cop time. But Garrett, who had been fiddling with his phone the whole time, bailed us out.

“Mr. Krishnamurthy, I believe that we are justified in proclaiming both immediate probable cause and an emergency, but we also have this.” He held his phone up for Krishnamurthy to see the screen. “If you have a wireless printer here, I can print this right off my phone. Otherwise, I can have my people fax it to you. Ah, in case you can’t make out the small print, it’s a warrant. And I’d say we need to get into that room as soon as humanly possible. Otherwise, we’re going to have to call in a large contingent of SWAT officers.”

“May I see this, please?” Krishnamurthy took the phone from Garrett’s hand and fiddled with the screen. “Ah, I see, yes. Well, that’s all I need. Let’s go.”

He led us down the west-side central corridor on the second floor, almost to the end, finally stopping before a door labeled “254.” As he took a key-card from his pocket and prepared to swipe it, we all drew our weapons, causing him to stop.

“Ah, if you don’t mind, I will let you do this.” He smiled and handed the key to Garrett, who happened to be closest at hand, and scuttled down to the end of the hall, well out of potential harm’s way.

“Easy or hard?” Garrett looked at the rest of us and placed an ear on the door. “Sounds like some TV game show blasting away in there.”

“Well, we didn’t see Fu’s car down in the parking lot, so at least there’s only one of them. See if you can be quiet about it.” Mac’s suggestion produced nods all around.

“Oh, wait one.” I gestured for Krishnamurthy to re-join us. “Mr. Krishnamurthy, we need to know the layout in there.”

“Ah, yes. That makes good sense.” He nodded, took out a pen, and drew us a little map on the wall by the door.

The door opened into a main room that had an efficiency kitchen just inside it, and there was a door to the bedroom toward the left rear. The bathroom was accessed from inside the bedroom.

“OK, let’s do this.” Garrett swiped the card, and Krishnamurthy scurried back to the end of the hallway.

Garrett opened the door slowly and carefully, peaking in the whole time. Eventually, seeing nothing, he walked into the suite and gestured for us to come in as well.

Although sorely in need of housekeeping's attention, the kitchenette area was in reasonably good shape, and the rest of the main room looked very lived in but not particularly messy. As Garrett had noticed through the door, the TV was on, with its sound level set to be somewhat louder than I would have chosen, except it wasn't tuned to a game show but rather to a CNN newscast. The air-conditioning system had been set to a cool 68° with the fan blowing all the time, and the door to the bedroom was open about an inch. Privacy curtains on the main windows were waving in the breeze, and it turned out that a sliding patio door was open.

With the main room cleared, we turned our attention to the bedroom. Once again, Garrett took the lead, shoving the door open with his foot while holding his automatic in front of him at the ready. But that room was empty, too, with its windows opened as well. Garrett shrugged at the rest of us and gestured toward the bathroom door, which was closed.

"Sounds like the ventilation fan is running in there, so maybe that's where he is," he whispered, "sitting on the pot."

"So we caught him with his pants down?" Mac responded.

"Or maybe he just went out to lunch," Rick was trying not to laugh.

Garrett motioned for us all to stand away from the door and any line of fire from anyone in there and then pounded on it. "CGIS. Federal agents. Open the door. Now!"

Nothing happened, so he tried the knob, which turned. He shoved the door open and stood aside. Still, nothing happened.

"Spot on, Garrett, Mac. We caught him with his pants down, sitting on the pot. I can see him in the mirror." Rick was looking at an odd angle into the bathroom. "It's Petrov. He looks dead."

And indeed he was. Someone, and our bets were on Fu Lin, had tied Petrov, naked, in a sitting position to the commode and proceeded to kill him somehow.

It was Mac who made the first guess of how. "Looks like symptoms of a nerve gas to me. The rigid, tortured expression with muscles contracted, the foam around the mouth and nose from the mucus membranes especially. Saw a lot of it in Iraq. It's just what a dose of sarin will do to you."

* * *

3.2

Garrett was the only one of us who'd touched anything—doorknobs—so we backed out of the suite carefully and called in a CGIS forensics team to go over the place carefully. Mr. Krishnamurthy was naturally curious about what had happened in his hotel, but all we told him was that there had been an unfortunate death from unknown causes. We didn't allow him into the room, much to his disappointment—or maybe he was relieved, I couldn't tell.

While awaiting the arrival of forensics, we had a conference at the end of the hallway.

"Well, we know that Fu Lin was here for a couple of days. If the medical examiner puts the time of death before Tuesday afternoon, Fu has to be our main suspect." Rick started things off.

“And the fact that he and Petrov were working together cements that. No doubt they had some kind of falling out, and Fu killed him. With some of the sarin—Fu must have kept some of those RPG warheads for himself.” Garrett looked worried about that last deduction.

“The real question, of course, is where did Fu go next. We’ve got those GPS locations, so we need a better map. Some kind of chronological route, starting Tuesday afternoon.” Mac was, as usual, looking forward.

Garrett fiddled with his phone again. “Putting the list of all the locations back in chronological order provides a hint. The listing is in GPS coordinates as well as latitude-longitude points. And, from here, it looks as if he went straight west about, ah, um, nine miles and then a couple of miles north. After that there was some local wandering, or something.”

Rick stared at him, thinking and visualizing. “Hmm. Tenth Street here heads west and turns into the Sawgrass Expressway in a couple of miles. And, farther west, north of it is a country-club-type subdivision called Parkland. Or maybe it’s a town or something. But why would he go out there?”

Garrett poked his screen and squinted at it. “It looks as if he’s been out there two or three times. But there’s no blob of locations, so he’s never stayed for long.”

He poked some more. “And he didn’t stay long this time, Tuesday afternoon. Looks like he came back east in the evening. We need to get these points on a high-resolution map to make real sense of them, though.”

I walked down the hall a few yards and called Hal. “Hi, it’s me. We found one of them, dead. The Bulgarian.”

“Well, I suppose that’s progress. Although I’d rather get the bastards alive.” He sounded almost disappointed.

“Yeah. Looks as if the Asian guy, Fu Lin, killed him. Listen, I called because I have a hunch. Can you find out Emily and Pete Chu’s home address?”

“I’m sure I can, but I don’t how long it’ll take. I’d ask Emily, but I haven’t seen her since Tuesday. Hold on, here’s a big phone book.” He rustled some pages. “Yeah, it’s on a Majestic Court in some place called Parkland. Want the number?”

I poked at my phone until I found a way to input both the street and phone numbers. “Oh, Hal? I’m going to forward to you the email that Garrett got with Fu Lin’s rental car GPS record. In addition to that map we all saw, there’s a complete list of locations, lots more than were on that map. Could you make a map of the full list? With a chronology? We need to see where he’s been recently, full resolution. Um, I don’t want to be demanding, but we need this like, yesterday.”

“Uh, OK. I expect I’ll be able to get what help I need here.”

I thanked him and tried the phone number he’d given me.

No answer, but a nice enough voice message came on, apparently recorded by Emily, asking me to leave my number.

I walked back to the others and announced, “Pete and Emily Chu live in Parkland. And Hal hasn’t seen Emily since Tuesday.”

Mac nodded, Rick looked puzzled, and Garrett said, “Ummmm...?”

“Look. Fu Lin goes up to Tampa and gives instructions to our bogus weapons buyers about where to find a cache up there in the Gulf of Mexico. He comes back here Sunday night and goes to Petrov’s place, where he stays for a couple of days. Petrov winds up dead. Then he goes out to Parkland.”

Mac was still nodding. “Housecleaning. I’m thinking we ought to get out to Parkland, stat.”

When we’d left OceanLab earlier, Mac and I had managed to keep our discussion of which car to take—his or mine—short. He agreed on mine and immediately began transferring several bags of gear into its trunk, including an odd hard-sided one that looked as if it was made for a big musical instrument.

And on the drive west, I was glad to have the Mustang—I needed its get up and go to keep up with Garrett’s Charger Hemi. I could see out of the corner of my right eye how Mac settled in, adjusted his seat so that he could brace his feet, and found the hand-holds to grab.

Garrett reached out and stuck a magnetic, red emergency beacon on the roof of his car, and then Rick did the same from the passenger side. Garrett also must have done something with a special switch inside, as his car’s various taillights and turn signals started blinking as if on steroids. Then he roared out of the parking lot with me in pursuit.

His lights helped a little; what helped more was when the street morphed into an expressway and we didn’t have to worry about cross-traffic. We were doing about 100 when we blew by a State Trooper parked in the median, and I watched in my mirror as his lights all came on and his spinning rear tires caused him to make little fish-tails on the grass as he accelerated after us.

I flashed my headlights a couple of times, and Garrett must have noticed both me and the trooper, as he stuck his hand out the window in an “OK” gesture. So I decided just to go with the flow.

And flowing we were, so fast that the few miles to the exit Garrett decided on flashed by almost instantly. As we slowed down the off-ramp for the intersection with the cross-street, its stoplight inevitably red, the trooper zipped by us on the left shoulder and slid into the middle of the intersection, lights ablaze. He jumped out and signaled Garrett, and me, as I was sticking to Garrett like a leech, to turn right. Then I watched in my mirror as he jumped back in his cruiser and made little fish-tails again, this time on pavement, as he took off after us.

“Well.” Mac was just an observer, but a very interested one. “I guess he’s more of a friend than I would have thought. Garrett must have a radio. Or something.”

“Ah. Good thinking. I’ve been a bit too preoccupied to figure that out. I’m glad. A speeding ticket for what we were doing would be really expensive, I bet.” Just then I noticed that Garrett had put on his left-turn signal. It managed to blink clearly amidst all the other flashing that his car was doing.

Garrett turned left onto a street whose name I didn’t catch, and almost immediately he switched on his right-turn signal. But there was no place to turn, so I just slowed and stuck behind him as he slowed in the right lane of the manicured boulevard. The landscaping reminded me of the drive Hal and I had made to get to Morikami and back.

As we slowed, the trooper flashed by, Garrett pulled out to follow, and I stuck to his rear bumper as well as I could. Shortly, his right-turn signal came on, and I prepared for another change of direction. But this time, we didn’t speed up after the turn. Instead, we came to a stop, confronted by a guard house and a security gate. The State Trooper was, apparently, negotiating entrance.

I really couldn’t see what was going on, with the two cars in front blocking my Mustang-limited view, but eventually the trooper exited his cruiser and forced his way into the guard-house. And then the right-hand-lane gate—the residents’ gate—rose. Garrett pulled into that lane, and I followed.

It finally dawned on me that Garrett had a GPS in his car that had been programmed to find Pete and Emily Chu’s house, because a couple of turns on an affluent-looking residential street took us right to the house number that Hal had given me on Majestic Court. Garrett pulled into the driveway, and I pulled in beside him. As we were getting assembled, the State Trooper slid to a stop at the foot of the drive.

He left his motor running and lights flashing, got out, and walked up to us with a big smile on his face. “Folks, I haven’t had that much fun on the job, ever. I sure hope it’ll be worth it all. Trooper Eduardo Diaz here. Call me Eddie.”

“Eddie, I’m the one you’ve been on the radio with. Garrett Kraus.” Garrett stepped forward with his shield in his left hand and his right hand extended for a shake. “We’re all federal officers working this terrorism case, which involves chemical weapons smuggling, and we’re going in that house. Hope that’ll be OK with you.”

Eddie nodded. “I’ll be right here if you need me.”

I heard all this as Mac and I were headed up the sidewalk to the front door. Mac tried the door and found it locked, but then he pulled something out of his pocket that he set to work on the lock with. The lock yielded in about ten seconds. He opened the door, and we both recoiled from the overwhelming stench of rotting meat. Even in air-conditioning, things in Florida spoil quickly.

Mac looked at me. “Tuesday evening. We’re too late for us to do anything but pick up pieces.”

* * *

We decided that Pete and Emily had been at dinner, no doubt on Tuesday evening, with a guest, no doubt Fu Lin. Pete had sat across the table from Emily, with the third place setting on the end between them. We found Pete face-down in a plate of something I didn’t want to know the name of. Mac grabbed his hair with a napkin to lift his head, and we found a small bullet hole, pencil-sized, in his forehead. Emily, meanwhile, was slumped sideways in her chair, a similar hole behind her right ear.

“Fu must have excused himself somehow, walked behind her, and shot him and then her. Probably grabbed her first. Quick and clean. No evidence of sarin I can see.” Mac’s expression was grim but analytical.

It all fell into place for me. “More housecleaning. And he has a 36-hour head start. Who else is on his list, do you suppose? Who’s next?”

“Well...” He paused as Garrett and Rick walked into the dining room.

“Ugh. How about I open some windows?” Rick, despite his military background, wasn’t liking the aroma.

“And I’ll see about getting forensics out here.” Garrett didn’t look hopeful, but he pulled out his phone. “Maybe the team at the hotel is finished.

“Forensics is necessary, but all we need to know is what we’re seeing here. One tap each. Very different approach from how Petrov was killed.” Mac looked at each of them in turn. “Small caliber, probably a .22, maybe suppressed. That’s what I’d do. Annette was just asking about who might be next. And I’m thinking we need that GPS data from his rental car.”

I nodded at Mac. “I asked Hal to make a high-resolution map for us. And, Garrett, how real-time is that rental car data you got for us?”

But Garrett was in conversation with someone. Rick looked ready to toss his lunch, and both Mac and I had seen all we needed to. I led everyone back out to the front yard and heard Trooper Diaz say “bye, sweetie” before he quickly put his phone away as we came out the door.

“Anything I can do to help?” He seemed eager for something besides writing speeding tickets.

Mac thought for a couple of seconds and then marched over to the cruiser. “Trooper Diaz, my name is Mac MacQuarrie. Like Agent Kraus there, whom you were talking with, I’m a CGIS agent. But he’s

local, while I'm really not. My assignment is working with a special task force out of an office in, ah, Washington, a task force that's concerned with smuggling. That's highly classified, by the way, you mustn't breathe a word of it to anyone. So, what's in this house needs protection from prying eyes. The owners of the house were executed by person or persons unknown, people whom we're certain are involved in a matter of highest priority national security. WMD—that's weapons of mass destruction—WMD smuggling, with al-Qaeda cells involved as the recipients. Does this make sense?"

I could tell that Eddie's head was spinning. "Uh, well, ah, sure. Sounds like you want me to keep the house secured, right? Um, until when?"

"A CGIS forensics team is going to show up soon. If you're hungry, well, order a pizza. If you need to go, I noticed a lavatory inside the door and to the right, just let the forensics team know that you did. We'd stay, but we're on the trail of the killer and we need to get going. Oh, and one more thing. I don't care what kind of security clearance you have, this is all way, way above it. That means if any of this appears in your report, you won't have any back-up on it. I'm sorry about that, but that's just the way these things work. Your report needs to show that you had a really, really boring afternoon watching law-abiding citizens obey the speed limits."

Eddie looked quite surprised. "What? You're kidding, right? Nobody would ever believe that!"

Mac smiled and patted Eddie's shoulder. "Well, yeah, you're right. But you'll think of something."

I was still laughing when I called Hal from the car. I'd decided to let Mac drive so I could focus on where to go next. Besides, driving that car was *fun*, and he deserved a turn. Except that his turn was going to be less wild and crazy, as we all agreed to meet back at OceanLab, and that there was really no big rush. We didn't know where we were headed next, after all.

Hal answered on the second ring, with a smile in his voice. "You again? And I was just beginning to enjoy the peace and quiet."

"Hi, guy. Ah, I should tell you that you won't be seeing Emil Chu again. Or Pete, either."

"Huh? What happened?"

"It looks like her half-brother shot both of them. Anyway, we're headed back your way to see if there's a good map of Fu's locations yet."

"Yeah. Sort of. Gotta say, though, this is harder than you might think." He was on the verge of shifting into his Mr. Science Person mode, I could tell. "Visualizing three-dimensional datasets effectively is always a challenge. Computer screens are two-dimensional, after all."

"Three dimensional data'? C'mon, it's not like Fu is a bird. He sticks to the ground, and that's two dimensions, isn't it?"

At least he was patient. "Yeah, but time is a third dimension here. So without an animation, the visualization is hard. We finally settled on six-hour segments, with arrows indicating directions and some time labels. So you'll be getting four maps per day, although some are blank, like at night when he wasn't moving around."

"Oh. I see. Well, for viewing on our phones and so on, I expect that's a good approach. Animations would take forever to download and probably be confusing on the little screen. But, say, the data you've got is obsolete now. Time is passing and more locations may be available."

"Yeah, we thought of that. I talked with Garrett and found out his CGIS contact for this, so that guy and I have set up a way for new locations to be added to the latest map as they come in. Apparently, the rental car makes an automated phone call to its office each hour and sends the previous hour's worth of

locations. So there are a couple more hours since Garrett's first download. And that's on the latest map now." Now he sounded almost smug.

"Damn, that's perfect. You're good. I knew I married you for some reason."

"Yeah, well, I'll show you how really good I am tonight. 'Bye now."

I hoped I wasn't blushing too much to be respectable and quickly changed the subject.

"So, Mac, I heard what you told the trooper. And I'm surprised. I would have thought even those not-quite-half truths are too classified to talk about."

"Hmm? Oh. Well, you heard the last part, right? About how he wouldn't get any confirmations from anyone if he reported on the whole thing? And, of course, the particulars were all pretty vague." He managed to shrug with his hands on the steering wheel. "I'm sure the CGIS forensics people will thank him profusely and send him on his way without giving him any information. And we really did need his continued cooperation, not to mention being able to ditch him. We sure don't need him following us around like some lonely puppy. Uh, I hope I can find OceanLab from this direction."

"Yeah, I get confused, too. Most of the east-west streets don't go through to A1A." I poked at the rental car's GPS display. "Ah. Hillsboro does, a half-mile north of us. Then south on A1A. We're staying about a mile north of Hillsboro on A1A, so I know that neighborhood fairly well."

Mac's forehead wrinkled up again. "Hmm. Yeah, I remember that area, sort of. See, I lived in far west Boca for a while, and then Sam and I stayed in a place in Boca, closer in, while I was sorting out that SNM business. That part of A1A is tall condos on the beach, right?"

I laughed. "Right, and we got a great one, a place owned by some professor who's off in Australia for the spring. Not at all like what we have at home, a little cabin in the mountains. Well, maybe not so little."

He glanced over at me. "That sounds better than what's here in South Florida. Fewer people, I bet."

"If you can stand the winter. It can be brutal out there." I shook my head. "Say. You said Sam's up here looking for a place for you guys to stay, right? But you won't be settled in right away. Why don't the two of you come over for dinner tonight? Hal can grill steaks and we can watch the ocean over drinks."

"Well, I'm driving. Why don't you call Sam and ask her?" He recited a telephone number slowly enough that I was able to punch it in.

* * *

While I set up a dinner arrangement with Sam, who was getting increasingly frustrated with her accommodations search, Mac got us back to OceanLab without incident. I think he was hoping for some excitement, so that he could test the Mustang's capabilities, but all he got was South Florida tourist gridlock.

Eventually we arrived, only to discover that we'd somehow managed to beat Garrett and Rick. That gave me the time to brief Shorty and Hal about what we'd found out in Parkland and about the demise of Grozdan Petrov. Rick and Garrett walked in when I was about half-way through.

"The autopsy will tell us more, but I'm betting that Petrov didn't die quickly. Fu was there for at least 48 hours before we found Petrov's body." Mac looked around the table. "What we don't know yet is how much more sarin, or its constituents, Fu has with him."

Rick spoke up. “Actually, we might. Turns out that there was one less RPG warhead in the cache in the Gulf of Mexico than there was offshore here. Each warhead, though, has four little capsules of each of the two constituents in it. So we might infer that Fu had four sarin doses available.”

It was Garrett’s turn. “But we don’t know how many of those he used on Petrov. Still, it seems prudent to assume he has at least one dose left, one capsule of each constituent.”

“Anyway, we’re all here now. Let’s see the maps.” Mac, obviously, was impatient.

But just as Shorty put the one with the most recent locations of Fu’s car on the screen, Mac looked pained and pulled out his phone.

“Ah, crap. Sorry, gotta take it.” He stood and walked to the far corner of the room and then, within about a minute, waved at us to continue and walked out the door.

“So, it seemed to me that you’d want to see where Fu is now, or was most recently, and that we could work backwards to Parkland. Track his routes and all that.” Shorty looked around for questions. “It looks like he went into downtown Boca around lunchtime, and before that he made a stop just south of that at the Boca Raton Resort and Club, just off Camino Real.”

“We can see that from our west balcony. It’s that big, pink monstrosity, Annette.” Hal looked over at me, and I nodded.

Shorty put up a new slide. “Last night, it looks like he was in Fort Lauderdale, down by Port Everglades. There’s a Westin Hotel about where this little cluster is.”

Garrett looked surprised. “That’s also where the Cove 17 Marina is, where the *Reel-Thing* docks. Do you suppose he was after Rafe?”

“Maybe he went out to check on his off-shore package.” Rick pulled out his phone and wandered over to the other end of the room.

Garrett looked at me and shrugged. “Guess it’s just you and me left, Annette, along with our OceanLab colleagues here.”

Then Shorty’s phone rang, and Garrett could only shake his head. I took advantage of the lull to update Hal.

“I invited Mac and Sam over to dinner tonight. Told them you’d grill steaks. Will that work?”

He nodded. “I’ll leave early and pick some up.”

Garrett, meanwhile, had picked up a used copy of the *Miami Herald* that was sitting on the table. He was into it by a couple of pages when he looked up.

“Hey? Didn’t Mac tell us about a dirty cop in Miami, name of Luis Perez?” Garrett looked at me, and I thought about it.

Hal spoke up first. “Yeah. Something about his being connected to the Sánchez family.”

“Yeah. And how Perez got put in charge of that assassination that Mac witnessed.” I nodded.

“Well,” Garrett squinted at the paper, “seems that the Miami PD found a body floating in the Miami River last night, way west of downtown, out by the airport where the river is more of a canal. Fingerprints identified him as Detective Luis Perez. Death by drowning, apparently. Very high blood-alcohol content.”

“That’ll interest Mac. There must be some housecleaning going on down there, too.” I mentally checked another one off the list.

About then, Mac returned from wherever he'd gone, so Garrett showed him the newspaper story.

"Can't say I'm surprised. That Sánchez outfit is a real snake nest. But maybe this will be the last of it all." Mac looked around. "That phone call was for my ears only, but I've got to talk about some of it with y'all. Did I miss anything?"

Garrett summarized what we'd talked about and explained why Rick was on the phone. Mac, I noticed, perked up visibly when Garrett mentioned Fu's stop at the Boca Raton Resort and Club. By the time he was finished, both Shorty and Rick had rejoined the group.

"No particular activity in the vicinity of the mooring, today or yesterday," Rick announced, "and nothing unusual at that marina, either."

We all looked at Shorty, who looked embarrassed.

"My call was something entirely different. Another faculty squabble. At some point, I'm expecting a call from the administration about Pete Chu's death, though."

I nodded and looked at Mac. "Your turn."

"OK. But why don't we let Shorty finish with the maps first?" Mac looked around for agreement.

Nobody objected, so Shorty picked up where he'd left off. "So, today Fu is in Boca. Last night he was at the Westin in Fort Lauderdale, by the marina, and he spent most of yesterday down there. But Rick just said nothing much happened."

"We should probably check to make sure Rafe isn't dead, though. Maybe he is and nobody's noticed," Garrett said. "I'll just make a very quick call to have someone go look."

"Good idea. Anyway, Tuesday evening, it appears he had dinner with Emily and Pete Chu, and after that he got a room just south of there at a cheap motel in Coral Springs." Shorty looked around. "That's what we know about Fu Lin's movements in the past couple of days."

Mac waited until Garrett rejoined us, which wasn't long. "OK. My turn. This is going to be a little awkward, for two reasons. First, some of it is officially compartmentalized and limited to people with need-to-know. So I'm going to tell you only what you need to know. Some of it may be a bit, or maybe a lot, over your clearance levels, so treat all of it carefully. We should discuss it only among ourselves. Second, some of it falls into the category of 'agency dirty laundry.' Used to be I worried about stuff like that a lot, but not so much anymore. Still, I'll not name the agency."

"Now, you already know about the part of this whole thing that involves catching this Fu Lin guy. Uncle Sam is—rightly, I suppose—indignant about folks' trying to sell WMDs to terrorist groups, particularly on US soil, and that's what Fu Lin tried to do in Tampa. And here in South Florida, too, as far as that goes, although I imagine that not everyone would consider that Cuban group to be terrorists." He looked around at all of us again. "Here's what you don't know. Fu Lin is paying a guy in Washington, a guy connected with that Matador task force, to pass him information. That is to say, we've got a traitor in our midst. So in addition to catching Fu Lin, Uncle Sam would like it a lot if we could catch the traitor as well. We know who he is, but we don't have *prima facie* evidence of his traitorous activities."

"Now, I'm using the word 'traitor' in a specific way here. If this guy were a regular US citizen, what he's doing would be criminal—aiding and abetting an arms smuggler. But he's a sworn intelligence officer, so his activities make him a traitor. There's a sort of gray area here about whom he's helping, but it could be seen that he's helping an enemy that we're in a shooting war with. This means he may earn himself the death penalty." Mac looked around the table again. "I'm telling you this because you need to know how serious the situation is."

“Also, I’m telling you this because the guy is coming here to South Florida, most likely to meet with Fu Lin. He’s using the cover for his travel paperwork that he’s meeting with me, but that’s not the case. I’ve talked with him on the phone, but I’ve never met him, and there’s been no contact about today or tonight.” This time, Mac looked only at Shorty. “What’s interesting about your maps, Shorty, is that he’s got a reservation for tonight to stay at the Boca Raton Resort and Club.”

* * *

3.3

Mac and Shorty figured out how to print pictures from Mac’s phone, and he passed out copies of a nondescript, middle-aged fellow wearing glasses over brown eyes, a conservative haircut, and no facial hair. There was a label reading “Preston Sands” at the bottom. Combined with the photos of Fu Lin we all had, we were prepared to identify them on sight.

But it turned out that not all of us were going to have the chance to.

“Now, the final bit of information I have was tough for me to swallow. But, all-in-all, I have to admit it’s probably reasonable.” Mac threw up his hands in frustration. “See, I’m involved in this as a consultant to Task Force Matador, which is to say that I’m a civilian. From Uncle Sam’s perspective, so are you, Annette. This means that Rick and Garrett get to have all the fun. Ah, along with quite a number of their colleagues, I should add. You guys will be getting, or already have, some orders about all that. I guess I should add that this would normally be handed off to the FBI, but there just isn’t time. Even the FBI guy on the task force agrees with using CGIS and Naval CI to bring this all down.”

Garrett and Rick immediately began checking their email, and almost simultaneously they rose, wished us all a good afternoon, and left in a hurry.

As Shorty was disassembling the projection and computer equipment, Mac, Hal, and I sat and stared at each other.

“Well, I guess we just have to wait.” Hal seemed to be waxing philosophical. “At least we can have a pretty good feeling about how this is all turning out.”

“Actually, that’s fine with me. I’m not sure I want to be involved with taking down a guy who could be carrying sarin with him.” My sense of relief was even greater than I was letting on.

Mac nodded without saying anything, and I could tell he was just stalling for time.

Eventually, Shorty excused himself to deal with that faculty squabble, and the three of us were left to ourselves.

“Out with it, Mac.” I shot him my best school-teacher look.

“Yeah, I didn’t want to say anything in front of Shorty. Hal, Annette mentioned that you guys live on the island just south of the Boca Raton Inlet. If I remember my local geography correctly, I’m betting you can see the Resort and Club from your place.”

“Yeah. I mentioned that when you were on the phone, I think.” Hal looked surprised. “It’s one of those faux Moorish, ugly pink buildings just northwest of us.”

“Right. Well, another bit of information I got is that Preston Sands here,” Mac tapped the picture, “has reserved a room on the southeast corner, up high. I expect we can see it, if we have appropriate equipment. He’s supposed to arrive around five.”

“Ah! Well, I got a spotting scope for us, to check out the shore birds. Zooms, big objective lens, tripod, the works.” Hal looked pleased.

“And I’ve got some good field glasses and an amazing rifle scope, still in Annette’s trunk. I saw those orders, and we’ve got a couple of hours to get set up to watch the show.” Mac’s grin was infectious. “In fact, it’s still a while before Pres is going to arrive, although I guess he could be early. He’s flying on an agency plane into Boca airport.”

“I wonder if Sam found you guys a place yet?”

“Probably ought to call her, huh?” Mac drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “The thing is, she’s going to be upset about that rifle. But its scope will be the best way to watch whatever might be happening.”

“She doesn’t like your weapons?” I could understand this, even though I owned several.

“Not really. And she thinks this rifle is a bassoon. Well, that’s what I told her to pretend.”

That cracked me up. “You must mean that hard-side case I saw. A bassoon? Mac, I can just picture you playing a bassoon.”

Hal jumped in. “C’mon, now. I happen to think bassoons are quite dignified.”

Then he cracked up. “Let’s get out of here.”

With some help from me, Mac transferred his bags, and that “bassoon” case, back to his rental car, and then he followed me north toward home. I could see him talking on his phone during the drive.

After we got settled at our place—I made us some iced tea, as it was still early—Mac related the happy news that Sam had finally found a Residence Inn suite with a kitchen up in Delray Beach, a bit far north but still reasonably convenient.

“Trouble is,” he continued, “it looks like this is going to be all over with tonight, and we can go home tomorrow.”

“You said that she’s drawing now, or painting, I guess. You ought to stick around for at least a day so she can do some sketches at the Morikami.” Our visit the previous Sunday was still fresh in my mind.

It took Hal an extra half hour to get home because of his detour to the market for dinner. When he did arrive, we set up our various bits and pieces of equipment on the west balcony, all trained on a corner room in that big, pink building just north and across the Intracoastal Waterway from our condo. Hal moved our spotting scope over from the east balcony and found a camera tripod for Mac’s field glasses. Then he had an inspiration and put his longest lens on his camera, setting it up on another tripod. All the while, he and I watched Mac use the little cocktail table to set up that scope he professed to be so fond of, the one that was mounted on a rifle. Or maybe I should call it a cannon.

In any case, we wound up with four big lenses trained on that hotel across the way, on the balcony of a specific room where we thought there might be some excitement a bit later.

By that time it was getting on to about 5:30, and Mac started to fidget. I assumed it was because he was wondering when Preston Sands was going to show up, but he proved me wrong. We had made drinks and were sitting on the west balcony keeping an eye out for any signs in our various lenses but generally trying to relax.

“Annette? Where do you suppose Sam is? I thought she’d be here by now.”

“She probably decided to do some errands. I mean, she thinks you’ll be there for at least a few days, right?”

“Oh, yeah. OK. And I guess that means I need to be prepared to stick around, don’t I?” He grinned.

“Good plan, pal. Unless you want to be doing those kinds of errands yourself.” Hal raised a glass to toast this idea.

“OK, well, the other thing I’m thinking about is whether we should call Garrett and let him know that we have eyes, big eyes, on that balcony. I don’t know if it’ll be helpful or not, but he should know.” Mac returned Hal’s iced-tea toast with a scotch-rocks toast of his own. I raised my wine glass in a general salute to whatever needed saluting.

“I like that idea. We might also be able to get a better idea of what’s going on over there.” I grabbed my phone and speed-dialed Garrett’s number.

“Kraus here.”

“Garrett, it’s Annette. Listen, I don’t want to interrupt whatever you’re doing, but I have some information that might be helpful. Mac and I and Hal are sitting on a condo balcony with big eyes on the balcony of the room that Preston Sands is supposed to check into. Now, or soon, or whenever. Could that be helpful to your people?”

“Uh, well, I’m not in charge here, but I can’t imagine it would hurt. Is Mac there? Can I talk with him?”

On one level, my feelings, not to mention my ego, were crushed. But on another level, I understood. Mac was obviously the more experienced in terms of real-time operational savvy. So I handed him my phone.

“Garrett?...Yeah. What she said. I can see the screws in the deck railing with my scope...Well, I’m just using it to watch, and we also have other eyes like it. Kind of an observation gallery on this end...Oh, well, yeah, that. I’m not planning on using it, you understand, just to watch. It’s on the TAC...Well, of course. Wouldn’t you?...those match-grade BMGs we fired a couple of...OK, OK, I know. Look I’ve seen the orders you got. But that was version one, so I don’t know what the end game is. And, well, I *am* zeroed in...So, it sounds like this isn’t really your show. Who’s in charge down there?...Hmm. Don’t know the name. You remember our conversation about additional sarin doses, though, right?...OK. This is Annette’s phone, but I’ll use mine with a headset so we can talk in real time if something starts to happen that I can see...Yeah, later.”

As he handed me my phone, he rolled his eyes. “Someone else got put in charge, even though he isn’t fully briefed. I didn’t want to do it, but I’m going to have to pull rank.”

* * *

He fumbled in a shirt pocket and pulled out his phone, poked at it, and put it to his ear. “Henry?...Good, glad I caught you. I *am* following instructions—I’m a half-mile away from the location. Thing is, I’ve got a great view of Sands’ room, so I can provide intel as needed. But the ground-crew leader doesn’t know me and isn’t fully briefed...Fu may have more sarin on him...OK...But, look, it’s pretty clear on this end that Fu is doing housecleaning, and it wouldn’t surprise me if Sands is probably the next dust-bunny...Ah, can I take that as an official finding with a Presidential pardon to back it up?...OK, yeah. My contact down there is a CGIS Agent named Garrett Kraus. I’m going to set up a phone link as soon as I see Sands in his room...Yeah, I won’t forget. What about Fu?...OK, got it.”

Just as he was putting his phone back in his shirt pocket, the entrance buzzer started making noises, which startled all of us. It turned out that Sam had arrived.

She still had to negotiate the elevator and hallways, so it took her another five minutes or so to get to our door. When I heard her knock, I opened it to find someone hidden behind two completely full paper grocery bags.

“Sam?”

“Yeah, I’m in here somewhere. Uh, I thought maybe some appetizers would be fun.”

I took one of the bags and led her into our kitchen, where we began unpacking. It turned out that “some appetizers” was something of an understatement, and I had to wonder if the refrigerator would be able to hold the leftovers.

But as soon as Mac and Hal saw what she’d brought, I began to wonder if there would be any leftovers. After giving Sam a big hug, Mac prepared *two* plates full of various things and disappeared back to the west balcony, where he could monitor activities across the way, and Hal just started eating on the spot.

“Where’d he go?” Sam was looking around.

“Well, it’s a long story. But, basically, we’ve got a ring-side seat, sort of, for what may be the culmination of the case that Mac and I, and Hal, too, for that matter, have been working. Something’s going down soon in a building we can see, and Hal suggested setting up our spotting scope to see it better. Then Mac brought in some gear he has, so we’ve got four long lenses set up on our balcony.” I shrugged. “It’s not what I had in mind for a dinner party, but it’ll probably be over before too long. And then Hal can grill those steaks.”

“Yeah!” Hal was talking with his mouth full. “But in the meantime, thanks for bringing all these goodies. It’ll keep us from starving until I can grill.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “I’ve gotta see this.”

I led her through the spare bedroom to the west balcony, where she found Mac sitting at the little table staring through the rifle’s scope. She was not exactly tickled.

“What the hell? What’s that thing, anyway?”

Mac looked up, sheepish. “Uh, well, I guess you wouldn’t believe me if I said it was a bassoon, huh? But don’t worry, I’m just using it to see with. I’m not going to shoot anyone. Well, probably not.”

He should have left off the last part, I could tell. I left them to sort things out and headed back to the kitchen to monitor Hal’s calorie intake.

It couldn’t have been too bad out there, because Hal and I didn’t hear any yelling or screaming, so several minutes later we wandered back that way. Mac was once again looking through the rifle’s scope, and Sam had an eye glued to Hal’s spotting scope.

“He’s standing on his balcony with a drink in his hand, talking on the phone. And he’s wearing a shoulder harness with a piece on one side and several mags on the other.” It took me a few seconds to figure out that Mac was talking to his phone’s headset. “Yeah, I’m told he came down on a private plane, so he’d have no trouble with airport security. No sign of anyone else in his room.”

Sam looked up, wide-eyed. “Hal, this thing is amazing. I can read the monogram on his shirt pocket. It says “P S” in fancy script letters.”

“We’ve been having fun identifying sea birds down on the beach with it.” Hal smiled. “Some of their distinctive markings are kind of like that monogram, in a way. But it would make it a lot easier if they wore initials.”

Sam and I nibbled while Mac and Hal stuffed their faces, Mac watching through the scope most of the time, for an hour or so. Nothing happened in that hotel room across the Intracoastal until the lights went off. Then there was no sign of Preston Sands.

We waited another five minutes, and I could tell that even Mac was getting bored. Time to play hostess, I thought.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “Nothing’s happening over there, and we’ve been stuffing ourselves already. How about a walk on the beach before Hal starts dinner? We can see if our appetites come back.”

Mac thought about it. “Probably a fine idea, Annette. I expect that Sands is smart enough not to meet with Fu, or anyone, alone in his room. A public place would be better. Safer. As long as Fu keeps his, ah, chemicals in check.”

We all left our shoes in the condo and took the elevator down to the lobby, then we walked out to the seaside deck and down the stairs to the sand. Mac had on a baggy Cuban shirt, and I suspected that he was carrying something in his belt underneath it. For my part, I’d taken my promises to CGIS seriously, and I had on a small shoulder holster with my Sig Sauer in it under my light jacket. It seemed dumb at the time to go for a walk on the beach armed, but dumb is better than dead, all-in-all.

We headed north, toward the Boca Raton Inlet, along the water’s edge, with a light breeze from the southeast tickling our right ears from behind. It was dinnertime, deepening dusk, and the beach was almost deserted. The life-guard towers were empty and all closed up, and except for a couple of people up by the inlet and, as I’d noticed before turning north, a jogger well to the south of us, we had the entire beach to ourselves.

Late March, barefoot on the sand with comfortably warm water splashing at my ankles occasionally, no real need for the jacket I was wearing except to cover the Sig. I tried to think of what it must be like at home in Colorado—even if the weather was called “good” out there, it would be cold and breezy, at the least, with two or three feet of snow in the meadow in front of the house and more in the woods. Overnight it would likely get below zero. There might even be a blizzard in progress—I hadn’t been paying attention.

Yeah, I thought, there’s a reason people move here, and it’s this.

We wandered up the beach, chatting quietly, lost in the peacefulness of the subtropical evening.

When we were a few hundred yards from the rip-rap of the inlet’s breakwater, Mac looked up.

“What kind of drama do you suppose that’s all about?”

He was referring to the two people we’d seen earlier. The one on the left, wearing a light-colored sports coat and standing on a big rock, was gesturing wildly, but whatever noise he was making was either carried away by the wind or covered by the splooshing of the surf. The other reached into his jacket and pulled something out, pointed it at the guy on the left, and we heard a faint “pop” at almost the same time as the first guy’s head snapped back and he collapsed.

Mac said, just loudly enough for us to hear, “Get down,” and took off up the beach in about the 11:00 direction, inshore from where the guys by the inlet were standing.

Ah, I thought, he’s going to cut the shooter off.

Then the other three of us hit the sand—there was really no cover to speak of, but lying on the ground seemed like a better idea than standing up. It was dark enough that maybe, just maybe, it would be hard for the shooter to see us.

But he seemed more interested in escape, as he took off across the beach toward the grove of thick vegetation that separated the beach from the street. Mac had a head start, though, and was ready to intercept him—we even heard garbled shouting about “federal agent” and “halt.”

But he didn’t halt. Instead, he turned left, south, toward Sam, Hal, and me. It wasn’t clear that he saw us, but he was headed right at us. I heard a sharp report, a 9mm Parabellum from Mac that must have been headed out to sea, because the shooter kept coming. My turn, I thought, and my stomach did a little flip.

I rolled to my right side just enough to extract my Sig, assumed the prone firing position, and bellowed “FEDERAL AGENT, FREEZE” in my Level Four voice.

But he didn’t. I wondered briefly if he didn’t speak English or if he was just stupid, but, whatever, he kept coming. So I sighted through the gathering dark as best I could at his torso, exhaled, and squeezed three times. The shots weren’t perfect, but they were good enough to knock him down. He fell on his right side, spinning a little, and he landed with his hip on his jacket’s side pocket.

He lay still for a few seconds, but then he began struggling to get up. First, he got to his knees and began rubbing his eyes. He patted his right jacket pocket—the one he’d fallen on—and screamed. Looking around frantically, he managed to get oriented and then stood up and stumbled into the water.

* * *

Mac came running back our way and was panting when he reached us.

“Damn, I’m getting too old for this stuff. Keep him covered, Annette. We can only watch. At least we’re upwind.” His short sentences were punctuated with deep breaths. “Good shots, by the way.”

“But he got up.”

“Vest, probably. And I’m thinking he crushed some binary sarin capsules when he fell. A vest would be stiff enough to make that happen, maybe. Stupid of him not to separate those capsules.”

“Shouldn’t we try to help him?”

“Nothing we can do without danger to ourselves.” He pulled out his phone and poked it.

“Garrett?...Yeah, the first one was me and the rest were Annette. She got him with all three, and he went down. But he must be wearing a vest, because he got up...Now he’s in the ocean trying to wash off. I think he dosed himself somehow. Don’t know how bad. Got any hazmat people with you?...We’re just south of the inlet. Upwind of him.”

Hearing our conversation, Hal apparently decided it would be OK to get up from his position on top of Sam—why he tried to protect her and not me was something I was going to have to deal with later—and helped her up. Except for Mac, we then all spent a minute brushing sand off ourselves and keeping an eye on the person flailing in the shallows. He seemed so preoccupied with his ablutions that he didn’t pose an obvious threat, except perhaps for what vapor might be drifting off him.

About that time, all hell broke loose out of the vegetation up by the sea-wall. A half dozen vehicles with more lights than I’ve ever seen poured out of a break in the bushes and roared in our direction. Hal saw Mac waving his arms over his head and began to do the same. It took only a few seconds for an official-looking SUV to get to us, at which point Mac gestured in the direction of the guy in the water.

“Careful,” he shouted. “He’s armed and dangerous.”

The vehicles formed a sort of semi-circle with their headlights illuminating the shooter, who was still splashing water on himself and rubbing his face. He seemed oblivious to the lights and the activity. I was expecting some kind of strongly amplified command directed at him, but, except for the idling motors, and the surf, everything was strangely quiet. Then I noticed a pitiful moaning from the guy splashing in the water.

It took him about two more minutes to collapse, at which point three people in protective suits rushed him. And Garrett Kraus, dressed in a camouflage uniform, emerged from that first SUV and walked over to us.

“You folks look OK, but I need to ask.” He smiled. “Oh, and I bet you’re Sam. Nice to meet you, finally.”

“My pleasure, although this isn’t the best time or place.” She’d regained her composure, apparently. “And I’m fine, although Hal managed to knock the breath out of me.”

“Hey, even with all this sand, you seemed like the softest place to land, so…” Hal shrugged and winked at me. I gave him a “you’re in trouble, now, buddy” look, although I was laughing when I did.

“Garrett, there’s another body over by the breakwater there,” Mac waved in a northerly direction, “and I expect that’s Preston Sands. It looked like a small-caliber head-shot from where we saw it, about here.”

One of the suited-up people, this one carrying some kind of briefcase-sized gizmo, walked up to us. “No contamination there, Chief Kraus, but there probably was at one point. We found some shards in a pocket, and a .22 automatic. And he’s wearing a vest, some kind of body armor that I haven’t seen before.”

“Must be some good armor. What’s his condition?” Garrett asked.

“Not good. We got some atropine in him, and an ambulance is on the way. Not sure his eyes will ever be the same, and his breathing and heartbeat are pretty ragged just now. We’ll see.”

“Well, treat him with care. Care for yourselves. He’s way dangerous.”

“Say, Garrett,” Mac looked curious. “Before, on the phone, you said you weren’t in charge here. Where’s the boss? Um, or CO, if that’s appropriate?”

“Well, there must have been close interest in this thing up high. After Sands slipped through our fingers over at the Resort—that’s how he got here, I guess—I got a field promotion. I really don’t know what all happened.”

“Well, I’m sure there are obscure details, but the main thing is that we really *did* get the bastard.” I couldn’t help but be relieved that it was all over.

Later, after we had walked back down the beach to our condo and our respective adrenalin levels had returned more or less to normal, we discovered that all the excitement had rejuvenated our appetites. So Hal fired up the grill—on the downwind, west balcony, after we put all the gear away—and broiled those steaks. He opened a couple of bottles of Cabernet, I whipped up a big salad, and with the rest of Sam’s appetizers to nosh on, we had a splendid dinner on the east balcony with that splooshing surf as background.

And even though I’m still not a beach person, it really did begin to feel like I was on vacation.

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Valley of Death

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A Four Corners Mystery



Valley of Death: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

Channeled by a small ravine and nearly invisible in the moonlight, the yellow-gray mist slid down the mountainside, its progress marked only by the rocks and bushes that vanished as they were enveloped. When it reached the valley floor, the mist oozed outward, obscuring the trunks of spruce and aspen in the glade, engulfing the tents filled with sleeping women and children.

Down by the stream, the campfire was burning low, and the men hunched near it, passing around the last of a fifth of Jose Cuervo *Reserva*, were about ready to turn in. The fire had warmed them outside and the tequila inside, but the topic of the conversation still chilled their souls.

Miguel Parada, expressing himself in his Cuban-accented Spanish, had summed it up when he suggested that they adopt military tactics to protect themselves, by posting armed guards and so on. After all, he said, it was one thing to be called greasers and wetbacks, but it was entirely another to have people threaten to burn you out. Sometimes threats like that could be ignored, written off as mere noise made by harmless loudmouths. But then Jorge's son Roberto had been roughed up by the gang of toughs in town, and that was worrisome.

At least, they all agreed, this camping spot was pretty safe, even if access was somewhat inconvenient, a good thirty kilometers out of town winding around on roads so bad they made the back lanes in Mexico seem like super-highways. But the fact that the location was hard to find made it all the safer, and no one could possibly complain about the site—a high mountain cirque with clean air, a stream full of trout, and unbelievable scenery. And there was even plenty of firewood, trees so dry from the summer's drought that they burned without having to be dried out first or even split.

The mention of firewood prompted Jorge to reach out with a boot and kick the unburned end of a log into the center of the bed of coals, where it promptly burst into flame. Then, as it continued to heat, what moisture remained turned to steam, causing it to split with a loud pop and a shower of sparks. Startled gasps turned to nervous laughter as the men realized that it was just the fire, not someone shooting at them, and they began to make jokes and poke fun at themselves.

As it wafted across the glade and crept toward the men by the stream, the mist spread out, rolling down the gentle slope like a slow wave coming ashore. And it was thinning, mixing with the ambient air, becoming even more invisible than it had been on the mountainside.

So it was that the spark arcing over Jorge's head landed in a rich mixture of fuel and oxygen.

Because there was no confining container in which to build up pressure, the explosion was relatively mild. But when the gas-oxygen mixture ignited with an audible *whump*, it had enough force to shove Miguel backwards into the stream, where he was knocked cold when his head hit a rock. Everyone else ended up sprawled on the ground, watching in horror as the flame front raced uphill through the glade, torching all in its path. They all sprinted toward the camp to try to save their families.

But it was not to be. The dry trees ignited, and the gas tanks in the cars and trucks soon caused real explosions, adding their fuel to the conflagration. For a time, a new Circle of Hell replaced the sub-alpine glade with flame, and everything organic was cremated. Only charred rocks and the frames of burned-out vehicles remained.

In the moonlight, with no wind to stir them, the ashes revealed shadows of what had been—tents and toys, trees and tools. And ghost-like patterns of skeletons. Many, many skeletons.

* * *

Part I: Up in the Air

One

Angela Espinosa's arrival in the Fraser Valley, coinciding as it did with the discovery of what looked like mass murder, could not have been more timely.

I had called in a couple of favors to persuade my boss at the Denver office of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, CBI Director Rod Andersen, to let me hire a deputy. I was working the increase in crime in the valley that's just over the Front Range of the Rockies from the northern end of the Denver metro area, helping Grand County Sheriff Fran Schmidt and his people get a better handle on things in the eastern part of his county. Angela's experience with the New Mexico Bureau of Investigation, not to mention her command of Spanish, made her the perfect choice, because all of us were completely baffled by the upsurge in hate crimes against the burgeoning Mexican labor force in the upper Colorado and Fraser River Valleys. The laborers were documented, most of them at least, and they gladly took all the jobs no one else wanted, making them indispensable in both the construction and tourist sectors of the local economy—and those were about the only sectors of any significance. Without the Mexican workers, the economy would have stumbled to a halt.

Angela had arrived Saturday evening after driving up from Santa Fe, and she spent Sunday getting situated in the condo that she and her boyfriend were renting in Fraser. On Monday she was busy with CBI paperwork and meeting the people that I was working with in the sheriff's office. And then it all hit the fan on Tuesday morning.

I got a call from Fran Schmidt at about 8:15—he was relaying a message from Forest Service personnel on the scene of a small wildfire that had burned itself out overnight, leaving a several-acre patch of hot ashes with burned pickups and other evidence of people. It was located at the head of a valley high on the northwest slope of Byers Peak, in the Keyser Creek drainage. Next to Keyser Creek itself they found a young man, suffering from hypothermia, with a lump on the back of his head and a concussion. He spoke no English and was confused about the situation to the point of incoherence even in Spanish, an odd version of Spanish that no one at the scene recognized.

Hal and I—Hal is my husband, on an extended sabbatical from his job as Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University in Durango—had just moved into an eclectic house on the mountainside above Crooked Creek Road on the northeast flank of Byers Peak, so Fran Schmidt offered to pick me up on his way to the scene of the fire. I called Angela and managed to describe well enough how to get from her place in Fraser up to my house on the mountain that she was able to arrive a few minutes before Fran, who had to come over from Hot Sulphur Springs. Shortly after, we were in Fran's Ford Explorer, using its all-wheel drive in low range, grinding our way up the bumpy jeep roads to the fire scene.

“Angela, I’m afraid you’re going to be thrown into a tough situation on your first real day of work here.” Fran was fighting the steering wheel as the Explorer clawed its way over loose rocks. “We’ve got a very confused person who speaks only Spanish at the scene of what may be multiple deaths. The Forest Service people told me they counted four burned-out vehicles up there.”

I looked back to see Angela trying to take notes despite the rocking and rolling of the SUV. She cleared her throat. “Sheriff, is there any indication of what may have caused the fire?”

“They told me they found the remains of a campfire across the creek from where they found the confused guy, and it hasn’t rained for weeks. The forest is bone-dry. So maybe a spark from the campfire set the bigger fire off. The preliminary indication, at least, is that the fire started there and worked its way uphill to where the vehicles are.” He shook his head and sighed. “With four vehicles and only one person accounted for, it looks as if we may have a number of deaths in this thing.”

I grabbed the hand-hold with both hands and hung on while Fran maneuvered through a little stream bed. “Is anyone on the Forest Service team a fire expert? I mean, can they spot evidence of arson?”

Angela’s voice from the back seat was modulated by the jostling of the car’s suspension. “Annette? Maybe I can. I’ve had arson training courses and was involved in a couple of cases as well. You just have to know what to look for in terms of accelerants or other residue. Burned up matches, for example, you’d be surprised how many times they turn up. I sure hope they haven’t compromised the scene with footprints.”

“They said they were going to stay clear of it. But I guess we’ll see.” Fran’s stare, straight ahead out the windshield, was grim.

And well it should have been grim. After another 45 minutes of bumping and grinding and rocking and rolling, we reached the scene and found three green-uniformed Forest Service employees using a surveyor’s field tape to measure the perimeter of a burned-over area on the side of a beautiful sub-alpine cirque, at the head of a valley, across a pretty little stream from where we pulled up. The remains of several vehicles were visible in the center of the burn. One of those barf-green Forest Service pickup trucks was sitting on our side of the stream, near several boulders, idling, with someone wrapped in a blanket sitting in the cab.

Fran stopped, thought for a minute, and parked directly behind the pickup, blocking it in. Then we all got out and worked our way upstream several hundred yards to find rocks to cross on. I couldn’t help but think how nice the place would be under different circumstances—circumstances involving free time and a fly rod.

Once on the other side of the stream, we walked over to where the Forest-Service people were waiting.

“Morning, Tom, Hank, Alice. Good to see you again, although I’m sorry it has to be this way.” Fran seemed to know them, but I’d come to expect that. The population of permanent residents in the east county was small enough that they all were friends, almost.

“Folks, let me do introductions. This is Annette Trieri and Angela Espinosa, they’re with the CBI, assigned to work with my office.” Fran gestured at me and Angela, and we responded with the appropriate smiles and nods. “Ladies, Tom Allen, Alice Long, and Hank Welton. You can probably tell from the uniforms they’re with the Forest Service.”

We all shook hands while Fran looked around. “Is this as bad as it looks?”

“Hard to tell until we look at what’s over there.” Tom Allen nodded toward the burned-out vehicles. “We’ve been working the perimeter so as not to track up the ashes.”

Angela spoke up. “Good idea, because this doesn’t look like a natural fire to me.”

“I had the same thought.” Hank Welton was nodding in agreement. “The start line down here is too broad. I don’t think it started from a single point, not without some kind of accelerant.”

“Exactly.” Angela swept her arm along the charred line by the creek. “No way would this happen by itself. That must be your survivor over there in the truck?”

“Right. He’s in there with the heater turned up high.” Alice Long shrugged. “We gave him some hot coffee and leftover donuts, so maybe he’ll be OK. Poor guy was lying in the creek most of the night, we found him curled up in a ball on the far bank, shivering, undoubtedly hypothermic. We would have taken him into town for a medical exam, but we thought you might have questions for him. I hope one of you speaks Spanish, though.”

Angela, the Spanish speaker and arson expert in our group, had to decide where to begin. She suggested that the Forest Service team continue with their measurements and put Fran and me to work photographing the scene with the cameras we had brought. Then she turned toward the pickup truck.

But it was too late. Its occupant must have decided that he didn’t really want to talk to someone who had arrived in what was obviously a police car—Fran’s SUV had a light bar on the roof and a big decal on the side proclaiming its officialdom—so he slid behind the wheel of the pickup and put it in reverse.

That Forest Service truck may have been a putrid color, but it was quite some piece of equipment. The first hint of this was a sickening crunch, the truck’s rear bumper caving in the passenger side of Fran’s SUV, which started sliding sideways. Then the SUV’s driver’s side tires caught on the rocks and it began to tip, the pickup’s engine revving only slightly from the exertion. Finally, as Fran was making little whimpering noises, the Explorer fell over onto its side with another crunch, creating room for the pickup to jockey itself out of the space and take off down the hill.

“Son of a bitch! My car! And it’s only six months old!”

Hank Welton had a different concern. “Well, sorry, Fran. But let’s hope the radio still works. Otherwise, it’s a damned long walk out of here.”

* * *

Because the Explorer’s passenger doors were caved in and stuck shut and it was lying on its driver’s-side doors, getting at the radio was going to be challenging. At least the air bags hadn’t triggered. But Fran was able to open the rear hatch and find what I’ve since discovered is called a “come-along,” a sort of hand winch that he kept in a box of emergency gadgets back there. The men went to work on righting the SUV, and Angela, Alice, and I proceeded to examine and photograph the burn.

Alice and I were taking pictures of everything we could, focusing mostly on where we planned to step next, so it was Angela who discovered the skeletons.

“Oh my God! Annette? Alice? Over here. And please try to stay in my footprints as much as possible, OK?” She sounded almost panicked.

They weren’t really skeletons, just ashes of a distinct color and texture in the pattern of skeletons. The breeze had blown the ashes around a little, but they were still recognizable—it was apparent that a number of people, people of all sizes from infant to adult, had died in the fire.

When we got them all counted, we discovered that the number was 23.

Alice, who told us later that she joined the Forest Service to work on ecosystems restoration, sat down on a rock and cried. Angela and I couldn't help but be affected by the tragedy, but we had a job to do, so we did it, taking pictures until the digital cameras were full, then taking pages and pages of notes. Even if it never rained—and the way things were looking, that seemed like a real possibility—the wind was going to destroy the scene soon enough.

Early in the process, while we were about halfway through making a grid of footsteps in the ashes to document things—Alice had taken several archeology courses in college and suggested this approach—there was a creaking, crashing noise from the other side of the stream. We looked over to see the dust settling from under Fran's Explorer, which was sitting on its tires instead of its driver's door. He immediately scrambled into the thing and, to everyone's surprise, started it up on the first try.

I wanted help documenting the scene before the wind destroyed everything. "Alice? Could you run over there and ask Fran to get some people with video cameras up here as soon as possible? Assuming his radio still works, I mean. Oh, but not by helicopter. We don't want things to blow around, right?"

She must have been relieved to have something to do besides examine the ashes, for she dashed off toward the stream crossing we had used earlier. I turned back to the work at hand, only to find Angela staring up at the ridge-line high above us, deep in thought.

"Annette? Something's strange here. I mean, well, of course the whole thing's strange, but there's something I don't understand. Some of these skeleton patterns are sprawled about, but many are, well, sort of arranged. Know what I mean?"

I had noticed it as well. Many of the victims appeared to have been lying down, as if asleep. "Right. Like they were asleep and didn't wake up. But wouldn't a fire wake you up? The heat, I mean? And aren't fires this big noisy?"

"I'd think so. You don't suppose they were dead before the fire? Or maybe unconscious?" She squatted down, fished in the ashes, and came up with a gold ring. "Oh, God. A wedding ring. A smaller skeleton, with two very small ones nearby. A mother and children. God."

I could see she was fighting back tears, so I changed the subject a little. "You said that this didn't look natural, like it wasn't started by the campfire down there."

She shook her head and wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her shirt. "Yeah. A natural fire would have started in one or two spots and spread uphill, making a characteristic V shape, or two or more Vs. But this looks like it started on a line almost parallel to the creek, as if someone poured gasoline along there and lit it. Or something like that."

"If someone did that, there would have been a line of fire working its way up the hill to here, right? But it couldn't have been very fast, because that would mean wind, and wind would have destroyed these patterns we're seeing. And a slow fire would have given everyone time to wake up and get out of the way. So maybe you're right, they were already dead, or unconscious. If that's the case, maybe they didn't suffer." I was keenly aware that there was something I didn't understand at all.

We continued our note-taking for another fifteen minutes or so, until we were interrupted by Fran's arrival. He looked relieved.

"Well, I'm glad to say that my radio still works. I've got a half-dozen people coming up here, including all my forensics experts, and they're bringing food. I'm thinking they'll be here most of the day." He stopped and took a deep breath. "Alice said you've found evidence of at least twenty-three deaths. And, Angela, I heard you say that the fire didn't look natural. What that means to me is that we may have some kind of mass murder here. Or at least a horrible accident, a mass manslaughter, maybe.

Plus we've got that guy on the run, and he has to be considered a suspect. I called in the information and he'll have a tough time driving that truck out of the valley, either ours or the Blue River Valley."

Byers Peak, I remembered, sits in the Vasquez Range, which runs north-south between the Fraser and Blue Rivers. Hal had taught me the local geography: east to west there were the Front Range, the Fraser River, the Vasquez Range, the Blue River, and the Gore Range. Then it got all jumbled up, as there were no more north-south rivers.

I opened my mouth to tell Fran about my confusion regarding the skeleton patterns, but stopped. It was just too confusing. "Ah, well, Fran, what's your plan for now? I guess your people should be here in, what, an hour or so?"

He nodded. "I expect so. Meantime, we need to keep this scene secure, at least as much as we can. Nothing we can do about the wind, I guess. Listen. Could you two stay here and wait for my people? I need to take those folks down the hill. I think my car will make it OK—it seems like the damage is mostly cosmetic. Damn his eyes."

Angela and I had to agree that it was a reasonable plan, so we watched Fran and the Forest Service team drive off down the hill in Fran's bugged-up SUV.

"Angela, tell you what. We've got our notes and pictures, and there are several other folks on their way up here to get more. Let's go sit somewhere comfortable, somewhere that we can watch this place, and see what we can do to get our minds off this tragedy. OK?"

A little way up the hillside, we found a flat rock with a commanding view of the valley. Fortunately, there was a thin, high cloud cover, and the sun wasn't too harsh.

"Annette, I didn't have time to say anything earlier, but that's some house you've got. I couldn't believe the view."

"We lucked into it. This new research institute that Hal is setting up is funded by Charles Shure, he's an industrialist from Colorado Springs. And Shure bought the property, several hundred acres, to build himself another bigger house up the valley from us. So we got that older one, it came with the property. We're sort of junior partners in the whole deal. But you must know about the institute, that's where Sandy is going to be chief scientist, right?" I wiggled around, trying to get my bottom to conform to the texture of the rock more comfortably.

"He's told me a little about it, but I don't think I understand it very well. What's it called? Em-park?"

"MPARC, right. Middle Park Advanced Research Center. Hal's taken to referring to it as 'computer simulations are us'. They're scheduled to move into their new building sometime next year. He hopes." I had to smile. "You should have seen what they started with. That building was a steel framework, a real eyesore. I think the town of Winter Park will love them forever for making that thing into something attractive. Also for changing its name. It started life as a condo development called 'Mount Epworth Arms'."

She laughed. "Sounds like some kind of geezer rest home. Anyway, Sandy's been excited about this whole thing, moving here and going to work at MPARC. I think he was done with Santa Fe."

"Easy for him, he grew up in Indianapolis, I remember he told me. But what about you? You've got family down there, right? Are you OK with this move? I mean, I'm sure glad you took the offer, you're just the person I need to help me up here, but what does your family think?" I stood up to move to a different spot—one, I hoped, with fewer sharp bumps to poke my backside.

“I’m trying hard to get them used to my independence, even though they’re fighting tooth and nail to keep me in their traditional little box. And I’ll be OK with this move when Sandy gets here, which should be sometime today, I think. This evening, maybe. He was going to stop in Colorado Springs to meet with this Mr. Shure, he told me. His house closed yesterday, and the rest of our stuff is on a truck somewhere.” She looked at her watch.

“Renting that condo was a smart move—it’ll give you time to find just the right place to buy, if that’s what you decide to do. We stayed in a guest house belonging to one of Hal’s college friends for a while before lucking into our house.”

She stared off into space. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s a nice place, our condo. But the thing is, it has this great view of Byers Peak. At least it was a great view this morning. But I’m thinking that the view won’t be so great for me any more, now that we’ve found this ... this Valley of Death.”

* * *

Two

Somewhere in the vicinity of Wagon Mound, Sandy Livingston finally figured it out: it was the newspaper, or, rather, the lack of one, that had finally launched him out of his Santa Fe rut.

For the past 50 miles or so, he’d been mulling over his rationale for leaving. As usual, the scenery of Glorieta Pass and the southern foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Range had kept him enchanted for the first forty-five minutes east, south, and then finally back north from Santa Fe. But after that, beginning at about Romeroville, Interstate 25 was perfect for mulling things over all the way up to Colorado, an hour and a half or so through high plains pasture, overgrazed, parched, and browning nicely in the August heat. Normally, about the only way to stay awake on that stretch was to count the pronghorn, those unique critters called by scientists *Antilocapra americana*—“American antelope goat”—that, although American all the way, are really neither antelope nor goat. But even they were smart enough to have moved to higher ground during the several months of drought.

Sandy had been trying to figure out why he was feeling so liberated, leaving Santa Fe behind. He knew he’d be back to visit—after all, it was a *great* place to visit, and Angie’s family was there. Visits would be unavoidable and even welcome.

Angie, he knew, was as excited about her new career opportunities as he was about his. For him, becoming chief scientist of a new research institute that would focus on complex systems simulation represented a potential capstone for his career. And for her, the position within the Colorado Bureau of Investigation represented a huge step up from her flunky position in the NMBI, both in terms of the positions themselves as well as the respective organizations. He knew Annette Trieri well enough to know that she would treat Angie as an equal, and being attached to a CBI Deputy Director had to be a Good Thing.

And more than that, relocating to Colorado for the new jobs was the perfect excuse for them to move in together, putting an end to the nightly lottery of whose place to stay at. Her family, tradition-bound from its three-century history in Santa Fe and close ties to the Church, would never have let her hear the end of a cohabitation arrangement anywhere local. But 400 miles north on the other side of the Continental Divide was enough distance to get away with it, they decided. Besides, Sandy was having serious thoughts about making an honest woman out of her—truly serious thoughts indeed, given his status as a forty-ish life-long bachelor.

But what really made him feel so good about heading north and leaving Santa Fe behind, he decided, was that he'd not have to put up with missed Sunday newspaper deliveries any more. Not that yet another missed delivery was such a big deal in and of itself—but it was a symptom of all that was wrong with Northern New Mexico: the condescending notion that incompetence could be excused by calling it “charming” or “quaint”; the deep-seated indifference to—even contempt for—the fundamental value of education. Thirteen years of living in a third-world society was plenty, he thought, way, way more than plenty.

He had been surprised by how easy it was to shed that thirteen years' worth of his life. His house sold for its full asking price within a week of its being put on the market, proving that his personal investment in compulsive maintenance had been worth the effort. And the guys at Automotive Resources who maintained his restored Porsche 959 found a buyer for it in no time. While the people at the Santa Fe Institute were sorry to see him go, the prospect of future collaborations with a new, well-funded organization that worked on issues similar to theirs was something that they relished.

So he had the movers come and pack up the stuff in his house, add Angie's stuff to it, and head north. All things considered, it was easy—so easy that his car wasn't even very full for this trip.

He had left Santa Fe early, just after dawn, so that he could get to Colorado Springs with time to spare. It just wouldn't do to be late for his lunch appointment with Charles Shure, the benefactor of the new research institute in Winter Park. Hal Weathers had emphasized that Shure was a “regular guy” and that Sandy shouldn't be intimidated. But even to someone with Sandy's experience with high finance—he had amassed a low eight figures in the stock market while in his late twenties and early thirties—a self-made multi-billionaire was just flat-out intimidating.

As he drove north, Sandy's thoughts shifted from his liberation from the velvet shackles of Santa Fe to the future. Having a Ph.D. in mathematical physics from Berkeley with a specialization in the behavior of complex nonlinear systems made him a natural for MPARC—even if its first major topic was to be earth-system simulation, his more general background opened a range of opportunities for the future. But staffing, he thought, will need to be balanced between the topic at hand and his own type of background so that MPARC would not become locked into climate as its only forte.

Staffing and other issues for MPARC occupied his thoughts through Springer, Maxwell, and Raton, and then the change in landscape over Raton Pass got him to thinking about living in Colorado generally and about living with Angie in particular.

He knew that the condo he'd leased for them to share was far too big for two people, but it would allow them the luxuries of avoiding complete unpacking and of having a lot of room. Folding two separate households into one wasn't going to be an issue, but they were both used to their personal space. Besides, it came cheap because he'd made the arrangements during the mud season back in late April, while on an interview trip to Winter Park. But they'd have to work at finding a house to buy before the lease ended in December—renting the place during the ski season would put a big dent in even his bank account.

As he was cruising into Trinidad, at the base of the north side of Raton Pass, his cell phone began to make the squawking noise that indicated it held voice mail for him. He checked it, and found that Angie had left a message a little earlier, apparently while he between cell towers somewhere in the mountains going over Raton Pass, telling him she would probably be out all day on a new case that had come up—the first case of her new appointment. She didn't know details, but she hoped to be home to welcome him that evening when he arrived.

It made him feel warm all over, and the miles between Trinidad and Colorado Springs flew by.

Interstate 25 through the Springs reminded him—not with fondness—of Albuquerque, only with the mountains closer. But soon enough he was on the north side and looking for the glass office building with the headquarters of UNELECO, Charles Shure’s company, on its upper floors. He found it at about 11:45, so he took a little time in the lobby men’s room to put on a tie, something out of character but, he thought, probably appropriate under the circumstances.

The directory on the wall by the elevator listed UNELECO as occupying the top three floors, with the lower floors full of various religious-sounding organizations, so Sandy punched the button for the top. No point, he knew, in pretending that the big boss would be on a lower floor.

He hadn’t really thought about what to expect when the elevator doors opened, but it certainly wasn’t what he stepped into. The top-floor elevator lobby was an atrium with a glass ceiling, full of plants. They looked tropical, and, while he was trying to figure it out, a hyacinth macaw, deep blue with a four-foot wingspan, flew down from somewhere, landed on a branch within about three feet of his head, and let out a loud screech.

“Oh, Burgess, be nice!” The voice was human and, as Sandy discovered on turning around, belonged to a lovely woman wearing an almost invisible wireless telephone headset and a big smile. “Dr. Livingston, I presume? Sorry, that must get old for you, but I couldn’t resist, especially given our atrium here. I’m Glinda—and if you want to get me back for the stale joke, you can ask if I’m the Good Witch of the North or the South. Unless you happen to remember.”

“Very nice to meet you, Glinda. And, uh, Burgess, too. If I did ask, which would it be? North or south, I mean, I’m afraid I don’t remember.” Sandy felt he was succeeding moderately well in retaining his equilibrium under the circumstances.

“Oh, definitely the North. But I never wear dresses like the poofy one in the movie, I promise. Also, I don’t have a magic wand.” She smiled even more. “Mr. Shure is expecting you, but he’s running just a little late. Lunch is in the conference room, and he’d like you to meet him there.”

She led him through the greenery down a path that ended in a door camouflaged by palm fronds.

If this is what they have for a lobby, he wondered, what in the world could their conference room be like?

* * *

Sandy didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed. It was just an ordinary conference room. A huge, extremely well appointed conference room with an unbelievable view, to be sure, but just a conference room. He noticed a small table over by the windows that was set for a meal, meaning, he guessed, that they wouldn’t be eating at the main table, the solid teak one about the size of his garage floor.

He didn’t know what “running just a little late” might mean, but he was prepared to wait. The view of Pike’s Peak was stunning, and there were binoculars on a credenza.

A while later he heard a door close, and a voice said “I never get tired of that.” Sandy lowered the binoculars and turned to find a medium-height man wearing jeans and a plaid shirt, making his own tie and jacket seem overdressed.

Ninety minutes later Sandy was back on the road, with instructions about how to get off I-25 and take a county road up to the Denver by-pass, thereby avoiding the congestion in Castle Rock and the south side of Denver.

And he realized that Hal had been right: Chuck Shure was a regular guy, even if he didn't wear clothes like that every day, only, he said, when he was touring his timber operations. He'd been over by Norwood earlier in the morning, and his helicopter didn't get the tail-wind they were expecting—that's why he was late for lunch.

It took only about five miles of the interstate for Sandy to realize how valuable the advice about a back road would be, at least if that five-mile stretch was any indication of the traffic to Denver. And, after he turned off I-25 at Monument and found the county road through Perry Park, his appreciation of the advice increased, for it was beautiful countryside, rolling horse country next to the Rampart Range, with almost no traffic. For as long as it lasted, he enjoyed it, putting off further introspection until the road got boring again.

He finally reached Fraser a little before 5:00, after taking the by-pass around Denver and then I-70 through the foothills and up Clear Creek Canyon to the exit over Berthoud Pass. Except for the parts around Denver, which were suburban superhighways through tract-house subdivisions, it was all beautiful, especially the last few miles down from the pass, with a view across the upper Fraser Valley. On the way up Berthoud Pass, he had spent most of the time in the passing lane, blowing the doors off the summertime tourist traffic. But at the top, he found himself behind a semi with a big sign proclaiming its owners as something called "Western Slope Environmental Services" and, unable to pass, he simply fell back to enjoy the vista.

As he had been during his springtime visit, he was saddened by the dead trees on all the mountainsides. Like the loss of the piñons all over northern New Mexico, the loss of the lodgepoles to that drought-driven invasion of hungry beetles was a flat-out tragedy. But, still, what a place to be moving to, he thought.

Having no idea of when Angie might arrive home, he decided to stop at the Safeway in Fraser to find something special to make her for dinner, and then he pulled into the parking lot of the condo complex just after 5:30. But he had no further phone messages, and their place was empty—four bedrooms and three other rooms of echoing emptiness, because it held only the personal possessions and, on the floor of one of the bedrooms, the queen-sized air-bed that Angie had brought up in her Forester. The moving van, he remembered, would arrive on Wednesday. Meanwhile, he was glad to have brought in his car a box full of kitchen equipment. Cooking would be at least possible, perhaps even civilized.

He had also brought a computer, so he set it up on the breakfast bar and plugged in his broadband card to get email and reconnect to civilization. A priority, he knew, would be getting some kind of real internet hooked up. Maybe the cable company would have it.

Because Angie wasn't home, and because he didn't know when she would be, he decided to return to the store to get something to bake in the oven, a casserole of some sort. It would cook and be ready whenever, and he could unpack and plan for the arrival of the movers.

But when he returned with the ingredients for baked ravioli, her car was in the parking lot, there was a pile of very dirty, truly filthy, clothes in the corner of the bedroom opposite to where the bed was, and he heard the shower running.

He decided to go with the ravioli anyway, and, as he was futzing with putting it together in the kitchen, he felt her arms close around him.

"Mmmm. I'm so glad you're here. Sorry I wasn't home before, but we were way up in the mountains." She smelled well-scrubbed.

"And I'm glad to be here, really glad. This place, this valley, is even prettier than I remember it. And so are you." He picked her up in hug. "Gotta say, though, you sure could use some furniture."

She giggled. “Right, wise guy. Hey, at least there’s a bed! Why don’t you put that dish in the oven and come try it out with me?”

Later, eating dinner sitting on big cushions she had brought in her car, he talked about his drive up. She had come the other way, straight north from Santa Fe on US 285 and other two-lanes—more scenic by far, but somewhat longer. And he told her of his encounter with the force behind MPARC.

“He’s a sharp guy, no doubt about it. We’re really a test-bed for this new computer-chip technology his company is developing. We get free computers, but they’re experimental, so life could be interesting. At least he’ll be around some, so he can take a personal interest in us, not just pull strings from far away. He said he’s building a house up here, up some valley he described.”

“Oh, right. He bought this big piece of land with a small house on it, and that’s where Hal and Annette live. And he’s building himself a new house up there. I was at Annette’s place this morning, so I have a vague idea of where the other house must be. Sort of.” She spooned more raviolis onto her plate.

“But other than that, I just drove and drove all day. You, on the other hand, started your first case up here. Although it looks from your jeans like you just played in the dirt. How was it?” He winked at her.

“Oh, geez, Sandy, I’m not sure I know how to talk about it.” She stopped eating and put her fork down. “We don’t quite understand what we found. There was a small forest fire last night, up there on Byers Peak, that mountain you see from the front window. And we think there were twenty-three people killed in it. And it may not have been an accident.”

Her big brown eyes were starting to tear up, he noticed. “Most of the victims were women and children.”

He put down his fork and leaned over to hug her. “Angie, I’m sorry I brought it up. I didn’t know. I figured it would be something trivial. Sorry. Twenty-three women and children? Not accidental? I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s OK, really. And maybe it will help if I talk about it a little. We certainly talked about it all day, Annette and I and the other folks up there, and I feel better for that.” She took a deep breath. “There was one survivor, but he drove off in a Forest Service truck. We found the truck this afternoon, so he’s probably still up here in the Fraser Valley somewhere. Maybe if we find him, we’ll be able to learn more about what happened. And it will involve me, because he speaks only Spanish, we were told.”

He looked puzzled. “So, there were two dozen people—uh, camping?—up on this Byers Peak and all but one died in a fire of suspicious origin? If the survivor speaks only Spanish, it stands to reason that the others would, too, although maybe some were bilingual. So they weren’t locals, right? What, then? Workers from Mexico, or Central America? Illegal immigrants?”

“That’s what we don’t know, and that’s one of the things we need to ask the survivor, if we can find him. Annette told me there have been incidents involving Mexican workers here. There are lots of them in construction and the tourist industry, she said. Some of the locals resent them, even though these same locals don’t want the work they do.” She took another deep breath and picked up her fork. “I may be a little upset, but I’m also starving. All they brought us for lunch was a batch of white-bread ham sandwiches.”

“Where is this place, anyway? I mean, you said it’s on Byers Peak, but I want to look it up on my computer atlas.”

“Keyser Creek. It’s a valley way up there, around the other side a little.” She popped another ravioli into her mouth. “But I think everyone’s going to call it by the name I accidentally made up this morning. The Valley of Death. *El Valle del Muerte*.”

* * *

Three

I finally made it home about 5:30 and sent Angela on her way post-haste. Hal, bless his sweet soul, had potatoes baking in the toaster oven and a couple of steaks marinating in something that smelled barbequey and made my mouth water.

But the first thing I had to do was to get clean. The hot sun and hard work up there on the mountain had got me to sweating, and the breeze stirred up the ashes, which stuck to the sweat. I was covered with a gritty, gray film. And those ashes, I couldn't help but remember, were partly people.

It was just all too creepy.

So I stood under a shower—a cool refreshing one—for about fifteen minutes, and it did wonders for my disposition as well as my cleanliness. Then I went Hal-hunting.

Our house is an interesting structure, built little by little over the years by its previous owner, a reclusive writer named Michael McMurphy. Years before, he had purchased three adjoining mining claims, two of which were on opposite sides of a lovely little valley—the one that Chuck Shure built his house on the side of—and for his house McMurphy remodeled and added onto an old mining cabin on the spot with the best view of the backside of the Colorado Front Range. And, true to his nature, he wound up with an eccentric house. It included a wine cellar in an old, abandoned mine shaft and a step or two up or down between just about every room, definitely not wheel-chair friendly.

Hal wasn't in the wing with the bedroom and the business study, so I poured myself a glass of chardonnay on my way through the kitchen to the guest wing. We had turned one of the bedrooms there into a recreational study, and I thought I might find him tying flies to re-stock his vest. Our last outing to the Colorado River below Parshall had depleted the inventory.

But he wasn't there, either, and I wandered back into the living-room area and out to the side porch—the one with the view. Hal was asleep in the net hammock we have strung between two of the porch posts, shaded by an aspen tree, rocking gently back and forth in the breeze. I sat on the porch swing and enjoyed my wine rather than wake him up right away.

It occurred to me that this could well be about the last chance I might have to relax for quite some time. By all appearances, it looked as if we had come across a mass murder up there on Keyser Creek—in Angela's Valley of Death. And there was no doubt in my mind that a mass murder with 23 victims would become media fodder sufficient to create a feeding frenzy the likes of which the Fraser Valley had never seen, not even when that wacko with the bulldozer had demolished half of Granby. The fact that the victims were most likely Mexican nationals would make the whole thing even crazier, because it would become an incident involving international diplomacy, and it would also attract the publicity-hungry and politically correct immigrant rights crowd. Oh, I thought, won't the locals just love *that*.

At least the windfall for the merchants would help make up for the slow summer tourist season. The drought, with all of its restrictions on outdoor fires, had scared most of the campers and picnickers into staying home, and the economy had been slow for months, ever since the ski season had ended.

Partly as a result, I suppose, throughout the spring and summer we had been seeing more than the usual number of culture clashes, and it was worrisome that this tragedy up on Byers Peak could be the latest chapter. For the most part, Fran Schmidt's people had been managing the issue well with warnings

and a few arrests for disorderly conduct and harassment. There was a significant uneducated, entry-level labor force in the area, but they wanted no part of the work they were qualified for—instead, they seemed to think they deserved the few white-collar jobs available.

Yet they resented the eagerness of the folks from Mexico and Central America to take the service jobs they disdained, and they were confrontational about it. Previously, the worst incident had been that assault, the gang of young thugs from the east side of Granby who beat up that poor teenager at the arcade in Winter Park.

We still hadn't found out just who was involved, because there was a conspiracy of silence among the witnesses, including the victim. But in questioning everyone, we discovered something peculiar—not only was there tension between the lower social strata of the local population and the immigrant workers, there also was tension among various factions of the immigrants themselves. The worst was actual enmity between the Guatemalans and the Mexicans—they truly seemed to have it in for each other.

Caught in the middle of all this was a group of US citizens from New Mexico, people from the poor mountain villages north of Santa Fe who came up to take advantage of employment opportunities not available in their region. The locals dismissed them—incorrectly, of course—as just another group of Spanish-speaking foreigners, which the Norteños, as they called themselves, naturally resented. And they didn't want to associate with the immigrant communities at all, feeling themselves to be superior by virtue of their citizenship. The whole situation was a mess.

Like I said before, Angela's arrival on the scene was just what I needed.

My wine was gone and Hal was still asleep, drooling through the net hammock. As much as I love the guy, that was something I didn't need to watch, so I went back inside to check the day's email.

Even though Hal was still working at getting his institute set up, it was already paying off in fringe benefits for us and for the community. A super fast network connection, some kind of ultra-internet using new technology that was mumbo-jumbo to me, had connected the Fraser Valley to the rest of the world, and the dial-up access we had to put up with for our first months here was history. The school system was set to take advantage of it when classes began at the end of August, and Hal's institute would be putting it through its paces in the coming months.

I hadn't told anyone about it, but somehow it seemed that Rod and the rest of his CBI staff in Denver had figured it out almost from day one. Ever since the new network came up, they had been sending me volumes of information by email, including case files with pictures and fingerprints, huge graphics files. Hal had long since upgraded my computer with a giant hard disk, but I wasn't sure how long it would take for it to get filled up at the rate they were sending me stuff.

Among Tuesday's email haul was something new—an analysis of how small-scale production of methamphetamine in kitchens and other jury-rigged laboratories had become epidemic in rural areas. These “meth labs” produced toxic by-products—not that the methamphetamine itself wasn't toxic—that could contaminate the building and poison the neighbors. And the byproducts could also blow up, and did on occasion, creating spectacular fires.

Because one of the ingredients needed was available in over-the-counter antihistamines, the state legislature had long ago passed a law restricting sales of allergy pills, but that didn't have any real impact on what had become, literally, a cottage industry. The analysis I got via email provided the latest details of all this and gave suggestions about what to watch out for. Fran, I knew, would be interested in it.

And there was also a long discussion in the weekly terrorist alert bulletin, distributed by the Department of Homeland Security in Washington DC, about what they described as an imminent threat.

The bad guys, they said, were planning to rent or buy small airplanes, fly around over the mountains, and toss out incendiary devices. This would start massive forest fires and act as a diversionary tactic, allowing these same bad guys, or their friends, to do something even more nefarious in a populated area, like blow up the Golden Gate Bridge or, much worse to the Federal crowd, topple the Washington Monument.

Normally, I would have filed this electronic bulletin along with the others, in its special Homeland Security folder that I never looked into. As far as I could tell, worrying about terrorists in Grand County Colorado was akin to worrying about stampeding kangaroos in Chicago.

But, given how I had spent the day, the discussion of forest fires made me take a second look. I'd have to ask Angela whether our fire could have been started that way, I thought.

"Hungry yet?" Hal's voice from behind me told me he'd finally had enough nap.

I turned and burst into laughter—the entire right side of his face was covered with a half-inch grid of red lines, made, I guessed, by the net hammock. That'll teach him to drool on my porch, I thought.

But what I said was "You bet! Starved. And glad to be home at last."

* * *

If Hal can't nap gracefully, he's an artist with the grill, and my steak was done just the way I like it, seared dark on the outside and medium rare inside. Plus, the marinade had the perfect tang.

"Are you telling me that there was a mass murder of some kind? With 23 victims? My Lord!" Hal's reaction to what we'd found was pretty much what I expected. "But the evidence for homicide is just the fact that you, or Angela, think the fire wasn't natural, right?"

"Right, but one of the Forest Service guys thought so, too. And we found more evidence that backs that up. See, the sides of the main valley up there are scored with little ravines, and this fire burned up one of them. But it burned higher than there was real fuel—there are rocks high up in the ravine, past the grass and bushes, where the lichens are charred. It's hard to see how that could have happened without some kind of additional fuel source. It's like there was a giant fireball up there that ignited whatever else would burn." I sliced off another bite of beef.

"I don't suppose there was any evidence of an impact crater, like from a small meteorite?"

"We didn't think of that, actually. But, well, let me think. No, at least not a 'crater' in the sense of something as big as, say, a car. I guess there could be something smaller, which could have filled up with ashes and therefore been hidden. But nothing very big." I made a mental note to check on this. "What we really need to do is to find the guy who drove off in the Forest Service truck."

"Except you said that he might have had a concussion, implying that he could have been unconscious when it all went down." He was eating his baked potato skin with his fingers.

"But, still, maybe he saw or heard something. He's all we've got to go with for now." I was using my potato skin to mop up steak juice. "Anyway, do you know if Sandy Livingston arrived? Angela was all a-twitter about it."

"He sent me some email late this afternoon, said he was sitting in a big empty condo looking at some mountain. Probably Byers Peak. Didn't you say their place is off County Road 8 on the first ridge?" He watched me nodding. "Said he's going to wait around for the moving truck to arrive tomorrow, so I probably won't see him until Thursday. Except maybe I'll go by and say hello."

He stopped and cocked his head. "Do I hear a car?"

Our place is up about a half-mile of steep, winding driveway, so visitors usually announce themselves with their laboring car engines, or, if it's after dark, with their lights flashing through the woods. It was still too early for lights, but I heard it, too—the deep rumble of a big V-8. I got up to clear the table, and Hal started a pot of decaf coffee.

Shortly, we were sitting on the porch watching the last of the sun on the Indian Peaks across the valley. Fran Schmidt and his principal undersheriff, Janelle Kennedy, had driven up to talk strategy with me, which meant that Hal got to play waiter.

Janelle and her husband Roger met each other in the Shore Patrol and could hardly represent more of a contrast, both visually and culturally. She grew up on what she calls the wrong side of the tracks in Savannah, and his New York Irish heritage is apparent in both his ruddy complexion and his accent. The first case of my CBI assignment with the Grand County Sheriff had involved both of them, because a murder victim was found near a ski run at the Mary Jane side of the ski area, where Roger was head of security.

“We’re going to have to go with homicide for now, Annette.” Fran was sipping the coffee that Hal had fetched for him. “The origin of that fire is just too suspicious. Although, I’ve got to say that I can’t imagine how it could have started the way it looks like it did.”

“I worked this thing all day, from when Fran first came back with the Forest Service team. We found some aerial photographs taken last summer.” Janelle was drinking herbal tea. “There was a small grove of trees about where the burned-out vehicles are, so that would explain how the fire was so hot right there—how it incinerated everything except for the metal and the teeth we found. The forest has been so dry, it’s not surprising that it burned like that. But Fran’s right about the fire’s suspicious origin. From the pictures that came back, it just doesn’t make much sense.”

“I heard late this afternoon that the Forest Service pickup turned up.” I was hoping for confirmation of this and for a lead on the whereabouts of the missing survivor.

“Right, over below Hot Sulphur on Beaver Creek Road, down by where it comes out on the highway at the bottom of Byers Canyon. It’s like the guy knew the roads, because he got over there without getting lost. That’s no small feat, what with all the logging roads up there.” Fran looked thoughtful. “But there’s no sign of him. He must have hitched a ride from where he left the truck.”

“Tom Allen told us he’s worked with Hotshot firefighting crews from New Mexico, so he’s learned some Spanish. But he said that the missing guy’s Spanish was heavily accented in a way he didn’t recognize—he dropped a lot of his consonants, Tom said. Not the usual New Mexico accent and not like the Mexican or Central American immigrants around here, either. So that’s another puzzle.” Janelle looked perplexed.

“Dropping consonants sounds like it might be a Cuban accent.” Hal spoke up. “I went to graduate school in Miami—didn’t ever really learn Spanish, but their accent down there is pretty distinctive.”

“Cuban? We got Cubans here, too? Along with the Mexicans and the folks from all those different Central American countries? How am I ever going to keep them all straight?” Fran was shaking his head.

“Maybe Angela can help, at least I’m hoping so.” I took another sip of tea. “And, you know, if the guy’s really Cuban, not just from Miami, maybe he’s not documented and that’s why he took off this morning. Meaning he’s going to be hard to find.”

“Assuming he’s still in the county at all.” Janelle shrugged.

“Anyway, Fran, have you given any thought to dealing with the media? When word gets out that there’s been a homicide of this magnitude, the sharks are going to close in. Or maybe piranhas would be

a better analogy—they travel in schools, I think.” But I could tell from Fran’s expression that this was something he hadn’t considered.

“Ah, crap, you’re right, Annette. And that’s probably going to take a full-time person to deal with them, too. Crap.”

Hal laughed. “Think of them as guppies, Fran. They’ll nibble you to death if you let them, but mostly they’re harmless.”

Fran smiled. “Or mosquitoes, a cloud of them. Annoying, all that buzzing around and blood-sucking.”

“Or roosters, strutting around, crowing about themselves, pecking at every little thing they see, squabbling with each other.” Janelle was getting into the spirit of it.

“Maybe you can get Axel to do it.” I was referring to the district attorney, A.D. Sonos. “Isn’t he up for re-election? He’ll be looking for the free publicity, right?”

“Hmm. Not a bad idea, Annette. Although I’m sure he wouldn’t have the stamina or attention span to do it full time. Besides, he and I have this agreement about division of labor. We investigate, he prosecutes.” Fran looked thoughtful. “I guess I’m going to have to look for volunteers.”

He was carefully avoiding looking in Janelle’s direction.

“Ten-four, sheriff. I get the message. But you’re going to have to do the first news conference, you’re the boss, it’s your county. And you’re also up for re-election, right? So you need the publicity, too.” Janelle’s smirk told us that she knew the news conference would be her revenge for having been conscripted.

* * *

Four

Angela Espinosa’s phone had a message from Tuesday afternoon that the movers wouldn’t arrive until about noon on Wednesday. With plenty of time available, she decided Sandy could start learning his way around the county by taking her to work Wednesday morning, to the sheriff’s office in Hot Sulphur Springs. Later, he could come and pick her up, or she could catch a ride with Annette, whose route home went by their place anyway, more or less.

Although they both had tiring Tuesdays, Angela and Sandy stayed up late talking and testing out the air bed again, so it wasn’t until just past nine the next morning that they arrived at the sheriff’s department. And because Angela wanted to introduce him around—she had learned on Monday that it was a small community and everyone knew everyone, so Sandy needed to be introduced around—she took him into the departmental offices, where they blundered into the beginning of the news conference.

Fran Schmidt had convened it on short notice, hoping that it would be sparsely attended. But word of the tragedy had leaked down to Denver somehow, and the piranhas—or guppies or mosquitoes or roosters, depending on your viewpoint—had arrived in force. Angela and Sandy knew something was up, from all the trucks with satellite dishes parked everywhere, but they didn’t know that the conference was being held in the lobby.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice.” Schmidt’s knuckles were white from his grip on the sides of the podium, and his eyes were squinted against the television lights.

“I want to provide you with what information I can about a tragedy that’s occurred here in Grand County. We don’t have all of the details, and we may never have all the details, but I want to tell you what I can.”

He stopped to take a breath and was immediately interrupted by a man with carefully coiffed blonde hair and an absurd amount of makeup. “Sheriff, does this concern the fire?”

“Let me make my statement, and then I’ll take questions.” Schmidt looked worn down already, even though the fun was just getting started. “Monday night, there was a small forest fire up in the Arapahoe National Forest, in a valley on the flank of Byers Peak. It occurred in an isolated grove of trees and destroyed about a hundred acres altogether. Because the grove was isolated, the fire didn’t spread but just burned itself out. From the perspective of wildfire, this could have been worse, because so much of the forest lower down is dead and it’s all so dry. If it had spread, we wouldn’t be here talking about it because we’d be working it.”

He leaned back from the microphone and coughed. “Because the grove was dry, it burned hot, leaving only ashes. But in the ashes we found evidence that there were people up there. So we didn’t have just a little fire, we have a tragedy of major proportions. We’ll probably never know exactly how many people there were, but we have evidence that at least 23 people perished in that fire.”

Jaded as the reporters were, there was a collective gasp from the crowd, followed by murmurs and whispers.

“There are two more things I can tell you about this. First, my office has been aware for some time that there was a group of people camped up there, we believe they were guest workers from Mexico. To our knowledge, they had appropriate documentation to be in the country and the people with jobs had work permits. Camping in the national forest is perfectly legal, as I’m sure most of you know. We had some questions about whether they were staying too long in one location and whether they were obeying the fire restrictions we have in place because of the drought, but generally it looked to us like these folks were not doing anything to warrant our concern. We’re understaffed here, and minor stuff like that tends to stay under our radar screen.”

He took out a white handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “Now, we knew there was a group up there, but we never fully identified them, unfortunately. Presuming those are the people who were killed, we have no idea who they were. The fire destroyed everything except the burned-out frames of some vehicles and some other metal items. We may, and I stress ‘may’ because the fire was pretty bad, we may be able to extract vehicle identification numbers and learn more that way. That work is in progress.

“And the second point I want to make is this: we have suspicions about the origin of the fire. There are indications that point toward the possibility of arson. Consequently, we may be looking at a very serious criminal matter. Now I’ll take questions, but I need to say …” Schmidt held up a hand and the rising swell of shouts subsided. “But I need to say that my answers may have to be vague because of our lack of knowledge or because of our need to protect the integrity of the investigation.”

In awe, Angela and Sandy watched the sheriff field questions from the assembly. Even though it was not even 9:30, there was a sense of urgency to the questions, as if a deadline was only seconds away, and every sentence that Schmidt finished was immediately followed by a babble of new questions.

After about five minutes, Angela felt a tap on her left shoulder and turned to see Annette Trieri standing behind her. Annette gestured toward the door, and she understood. Tugging on Sandy’s hand, she led him outside behind Annette.

“Glad to see you made it, Sandy, although you probably feel like you walked into a feeding frenzy of some kind.” Annette was wearing a grim smile.

“That’s for sure, with the sheriff as the bait. I thought I was just going to get introduced around.” His expression read: “Why me?”

Angela squeezed his hand. “Sorry. I should have figured that something like this would be happening. Annette and I talked about the publicity this thing was going to get when we were coming down the mountain yesterday.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know the timing until first thing this morning.” Annette shrugged. “Fran thought he’d get only a small crowd at this time of the morning, but they sure came out of the woodwork. And it *is* a big deal, with 23 deaths, or more.”

“Uh, do you have a plan for the day? I was going to drop Angela off and then go back and meet the movers, tell them where to put boxes and so on. If I know where you’ll be, I can pick her up later.” Sandy was looking back and forth between the two women, looking for an answer that would make his life easy.

He looked so pathetically hopeful that they both burst into laughter.

“Oh, Sandy, don’t worry, we’ll figure out something easy. Maybe Annette can drop me off on her way home.”

“Angela’s right, Sandy. And I don’t quite know what’s on the agenda for today. We have a meeting with Fran when he’s through getting skinned alive in there. Poor guy. But I’ll drop Angela off late this afternoon. That’ll give you a chance to get everything arranged and unpacked, no?” Annette’s impish grin suggested that she knew what moving to a new place entailed.

“OK, well, I’ll be off, then. Let’s see, I just head back through Granby, right? We were talking on the way over and I wasn’t paying too much attention.” He looked both relieved and a bit confused.

“Right.” Annette thought briefly. “But there’s a shortcut, it bypasses Granby. A back road, it’s easy and shorter. Don’t bear left at the Y in the highway a few blocks back, bear right. It’ll take you over Cottonwood Pass, you can actually see it from here. Just watch out for cattle.”

“Huh?” Sandy looked confused. “I thought Cottonwood Pass went over to Crested Butte from somewhere ... ah ... somewhere in the Arkansas Valley. Or something like that.”

“Not that one, a local version. It’s just a little saddle, really.”

“She’s right, Sandy. We came over that way on Monday morning, it’s easy. And in your car, it’ll be a snap. I’ll see you this afternoon sometime.” Angela stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Have fun with the movers.”

* * *

With Sandy on his way, Angela and Annette sat down in Annette’s office to follow-up on the reports from the fire scene. They wanted to be prepared for the meeting with the sheriff.

Fran Schmidt’s statement at the press conference about identifying the victims had shaded the truth a little, because the investigators at the scene had found the vehicle identification number plates—the small strips of metal with the VINs etched on—from two of the pickup trucks. The others were missing, meaning that they were either buried in the ashes somewhere or had been removed for another reason. These VINs, though, were all they had to go on. The license plates had not been stamped, just painted, and the other vehicle identification tags were as burned off as the plates.

But extensive searches of the national stolen car database had not turned up either of the two VINs they had, and sales records in Colorado and the other states they had access to didn't reveal them, either. Searches would continue, but things were looking bleak.

It was about 9:45 when Fran Schmidt walked into Annette's office, looking as if he had just finished the Ironman Triathlon. He sat in an empty chair and shook his head.

"I escaped, thank God. They're working over Janelle now. But she's better at this sort of thing than I am, so I think it'll be all right." He sighed. "Any progress?"

"No, sorry, Fran. Those VINs are just not showing up. But we ..." Annette was interrupted by the telephone.

"Yes? She's here, hang on." She handed the receiver to Angela.

"Hello? Oh, hi Sandy. Don't tell me you got lost ... What? Alive? Did you call 911? ... OK, we'll get right over there." And she handed the phone back to Annette.

"Sandy found a guy, badly injured, along that road we told him to take. He called 911 and is doing what First Aid he can. I told him we'd get right there." She looked back and forth between her two superior officers.

"Any ID?" Schmidt looked somewhat less exhausted all of a sudden.

"He didn't say. And his description wasn't any help, either. Uh, sheriff? Annette and I can probably handle this." Angela felt a little worried about overstepping.

"Good idea. But keep me informed, OK?" Schmidt looked relieved.

They made it over the local version of Cottonwood Pass in five minutes, and down to where Sandy's Audi allroad was parked in another two. In response to Angela's call, they heard his voice coming from behind a little stand of willows. They found him kneeling on the ground next to a prone figure in a plaid shirt and jeans.

"That was quick," he said as they approached. "Got a First Aid kit? I'm out of tricks."

Annette turned and ran back to her car, and Angela knelt beside Sandy. "What happened?"

"Looks to me as if someone wanted this poor guy dead but botched the job. He's had the crap beat out of him, and there's also an abdominal puncture wound. No idea how deep. He's got a fast, shallow pulse and his breathing isn't real good. But he's alive. Quite a bit of blood loss." Sandy was holding pressure on a spot on the victim's left side, near the base of the rib cage.

Annette came running up with a small case, and they got to work just as the siren of an emergency vehicle chirped back by the cars. Angela jumped up and ran that way.

Ten minutes later, the victim was on his way to the hospital in Kremmling, about 20 miles west, the scene was surrounded by yellow tape, and Angela, Sandy, and Annette were sitting on a log beside the spot where the victim had been lying.

"No ID on him, so for now he's a John Doe and, from what the EMTs said, maybe a DOA one. How'd you find him, Sandy? We couldn't see you from the road." Annette had a notebook out, pencil poised.

"Birds. I was taking it easy, because I don't know this road and you said to watch out for cattle. There was a big flock of magpies that spooked when I rounded the last curve above here, and I wondered what they were about. So I got out and looked. Uh, it was supposed to be a good excuse to recycle some of that breakfast coffee I drank." Sandy shrugged. "I'm glad I had all that emergency training back in Santa Fe, that's for sure."

“Annette? What about if we have those Forest Service people get over to the hospital to see if they recognize him. Maybe it’s our missing guy from the fire scene. You know?” Once again, Angela felt unsure of herself.

“Wonderful idea! Call Fran, here’s my phone, the number is on the contacts listing, and let him know about this and your suggestion.” Annette passed a cell phone to Angela, who looked surprised.

As Angela wandered off with the phone, Annette turned to Sandy. “Sandy, I can’t tell you how happy I am that Angela came up from Santa Fe with you. Yesterday, at the fire scene, she did a fantastic job, and you just saw how good her instincts are.”

“And that was a good move, having her make that call. She’s used to being stifled a little, at the NMBI. The Nimbies are, shall I say, somewhat less than progressive. She did a pretty good job of ignoring it, but I think she needs just the kind of shove you gave her with this phone call.” Sandy smiled. “I’ll be interested to see how she fits in with the locals here. So, are you done with me? I’ve got furniture to meet pretty soon.”

“Let me get you some Tyvek gloves so you won’t mess your car up with that blood. And you can come in later and give us a more formal statement, OK?” She arose and led the way back to the road.

They reached the cars just in time to hear Angela say “OK, sheriff, I’ll tell her. And we’ll be back shortly.”

“Tell me what?” Annette was all ears.

“Huh? Oh, hi.” She handed the cell phone back. “Tell you that the sheriff’s office got a concerned citizen’s tip about a drunk shooting his mouth off in a bar last night. Talked about picking up a Hispanic guy hitch-hiking—only he called him a ‘greaser’—and beating him silly before dumping him in a pasture.”

“Sounds as if we should get back and interview this concerned citizen.” Annette reached into the back of her car, rummaged around in a box and handed Sandy a pair of blue plastic gloves. “Good luck with the furniture, Sandy. I’ll drop Angela off later, OK?”

With the civilian sent on his way, the two CBI officers headed back to the sheriff’s office in Hot Sulphur Springs, back over Cottonwood Pass.

“How the call go? Did Fran like your suggestion?” Annette looked over at her passenger.

“When I mentioned that the victim didn’t have an ID on him, he jumped all over it. Said he’d try to get the Forest Service people there by noon, or at least one of them.” Angela looked pleased with herself. “I hope it’s OK for me to shoot my mouth off like that. I have these ideas and they just pop out sometimes, you know?”

“That’s exactly what you need to be doing. Nobody here has any reason to worry that you’re after their job, right? I mean, you’re CBI and they’re all with the Grand County Sheriff’s Office. Except me, and I have to say, if you want my job, you can have it. Hal keeps coming up with things for me to do at his institute.” Annette smiled with the memory of one in particular, a role as Hal’s sexy receptionist.

“The sheriff won’t think I’m too, um, forward or something?”

“Well, he’s big on credibility. If you’re wrong with hunches and so on, eventually you’ll get ignored. But he likes good ideas. And he likes initiative. And this particular case is one that we can be full participants on—he wants it that way. Sometimes we need to sit back and just be advisors. But this is a big one, and we need to be out front if necessary.” Annette pulled her car into the sheriff’s department parking lot.

“Now. Let’s go see if we can dig up the dirtbag who beat up our John Doe, shall we?” Annette’s smile was not a happy one.

* * *

Five

It turned out that the concerned citizen who phoned in the tip was a bartender. Wendy Wallenstein worked late shifts at the Shadow Mountain Tavern, a decidedly blue-collar dive just off the highway on the way to Grand Lake. One of the few remaining places in the east county that didn’t cater to tourists, it had a reputation with the sheriff’s office as a trouble spot.

Fran sent a forensics team, with a metal detector, off to comb the pasture, and Angela and I made arrangements to meet Wendy for lunch at a diner in the middle of Granby, about half way between our respective locations. Wendy didn’t want to risk being seen at the sheriff’s office, and there was no way she wanted us to come to the bar.

“I don’t like ratting out my customers, you know? I figure bartenders are the poor man’s shrink, and we need to keep what we hear confidential. But this guy is just too much. He’s always puffed up about something, usually something pretty slimy, and this was just over the top.” Wendy was fidgeting, in need of a cigarette, apparently, but forced into holding off by the state law about restaurants. “Besides, we’ve got some Mexican people working at the tavern, ya know? And they’re just the nicest folks you’ll ever meet. Hard-working, family-oriented. It just pissed me off, what he was saying and his attitude and all.”

Somewhere in her late 40s, but with the smoker’s aged look, Wendy Wallenstein was probably once a high-school cheerleader and prom queen somewhere. During introductions, she told us that she was divorced with kids out on their own—in fact, she was about to become a grandmother. It was pretty obvious that she was conflicted about that.

“And he was boasting about having beat up someone?” Angela had adopted the fresh approach, keeping the information about our stabbing victim to herself.

“Yeah, he said he picked up a hitch-hiker down toward the bottom of Byers Canyon, headed west. Turned out to be a Hispanic guy, only spoke Spanish, he said. Seemed to think that beating him up would teach him a lesson, like he needed to learn English, or something.” Wendy twirled her table knife like a little baton.

“Did he say anything about where he left the victim?” Angela was taking careful notes.

“Something about a pasture, and a Cottonwood Pass. I didn’t recognize the place, so it sort of slipped by me.” Wendy stirred the bowl of chicken vegetable soup the waitress brought her.

“So,” I said, “it sounds as if this guy is a regular, if you hear his stories a lot.”

“Yeah, Stick Murcheson. Local family, father’s a county commissioner. He had a brother killed a while back, maybe you know about it.” She looked back and forth between us.

Angela didn’t, but I did. Stick’s older brother, Junior, had been murdered by the woman who had since become known as Grand County’s black widow killer, the wife of a developer fallen on hard times. It was that first case I’d become involved in after Hal and I relocated from Durango.

“Stick can’t be his real name.” Angela had her ballpoint ready.

“No, it’s Randall. He was a local high-school basketball star, would have made it big in college, probably, except for a snowmobile accident that tore up a knee real bad. And if you saw him now, you wouldn’t call him ‘Stick’ any more—not with the weight he’s put on.” She stirred her soup some more, not really eating.

“Ms. Wallenstein, this has been very helpful. I think we need to get our sandwiches wrapped to go and check out this pasture as soon as possible. We’ll get the bill. And we’ll keep this meeting to ourselves.” Angela nudged me under the table with her foot. “One more thing, though—did Mr. Murcheson say anything about more than just a fist-fight? We need to know what we’re likely to be up against out there.”

“No, he just talked about beating him up, broke his nose and maybe his jaw, he said.” She finally took a sip of soup. “And he, Stick, I mean, he had some blood on his shirt, little spatters. So maybe he really did.”

“You wouldn’t know where Mr. Murcheson lives, by any chance, would you?” I always think that it’s worth trying.

“I heard he moved into Junior’s place, that cabin where they found him dead. Kinda morbid, if you ask me.” She seemed to like the soup and was now shoveling it in.

“Did you know Junior?” I couldn’t keep my curiosity bottled up.

“Oh, yeah. He was quite the ladies’ man, and I was one of the ladies, there for a while, at least. Before he hooked up with that Summers broad.” She grinned. “From what’s come out about the case, it sounds like he got what he deserved. No great loss to mankind, but that place of his was somethin’, I’ll say that.”

“Oh, one more question, then we’re done, I promise, Ms. Wallenstein. Do you happen to know what kind of job Randall Murcheson has? Where he works?” Angela was once again ready with her pen.

“Feed store here in Granby, just down the street, west. He’s real proud of a promotion he just got, to some kind of assistant manager or something. Got himself a loan for a new dually pickup. Said he’s gotta find a dry cleaners for his clothes now, because he has to dress better. Not that it’ll help his looks, until he loses about a hundred pounds. Or more.” She broke a cracker into her soup and continued eating.

On the drive back to Hot Sulphur, I filled Angela in.

“Junior Murcheson’s cabin was a bachelor love pit. He had it all set up to look romantic, with lots of candles and mirrors and a big flat-screen TV. Lots of DVDs. Plus, and I bet Wendy doesn’t know this, full video recording capabilities with two cameras focused on the bed. And a library of his conquests. That was our case against Mandy Summers. She killed him while they were having sex, and it’s all there on DVD.” I shook my head at the memory, to help to get it out of my consciousness.

“So Wendy is on DVD, too?” Angela looked to be scandalized.

“Probably, but I’ll never know. We destroyed all of the DVDs except for the ones we needed. Didn’t even look at the names. It seemed unfair to all those innocent women. Well, sort of innocent.” I had to smile.

By the time we returned to the sheriff’s office, the field team from the pasture was back. They had nothing in particular to report, so there was no telling what had made the hole in John Doe’s side. Fran Schmidt was therefore not in a very good mood when we reported our findings.

“Stick Murcheson? Well, damn. I always thought those boys would come to no good, and Junior sure didn’t. Now Stick, eh? You say she saw blood stains on his shirt?” He looked thoughtful.

“That’s what she told us, Fran. I’m not sure how cooperative she would be if we brought her in, though. I think she’s worried about her standing in the community, the part of it she hangs out with, at least. The lowlife crowd.” I thought I knew where Fran was going.

“This is almost enough to get a warrant for him, for a search at least. Almost. If his father weren’t a commissioner, it would be, I’m sure. Hmm.” Fran scratched his head.

Angela was looking puzzled, so I explained. “This came up before, Angela. Simon Murcheson is not only a county commissioner, he’s in charge of Fran’s budget, and he’s pretty tight with the district attorney. We need rock-solid evidence to go after his son.”

“You don’t suppose he’d take that blood-stained shirt to his new dry cleaners, do you?” Angela was looking at her notes. “Seems like that would be pretty solid evidence, if we could get hold of it.”

Fran’s head snapped up, and I reached for a telephone book.

Hal and I had moved to eastern Grand County from a small city, Durango, and were beginning to feel well settled. But one thing we were still getting used to was the much smaller range of choices for services and retail than had been available in Durango.

For once, though, this turned out to be a blessing. It took only one phone call to find where Stick Murcheson took his laundry and, after some persuasion by Fran, for them to tell us that he’d dropped off quite a load that morning, which was awaiting its turn in the equipment.

* * *

“I always thought that Junior was a about five beers short of a six-pack, but it looks like he was a brain surgeon compared to his brother Stick.” Fran Schmidt was staring at the huge shirt we had liberated from the dry cleaner’s in Granby.

Angela and I had hustled over there and, with the help of another phone call from Fran, had persuaded the manager there to “lose” this particular shirt for a day or two. Hey, everyone knows that weird stuff happens at dry cleaning establishments, right?

The garment in question was in a plastic bag with the dry cleaner’s logo prominently displayed, hanging neatly, if not cleanly, on a hook on the back of Fran’s door. Fran’s forensics people were overwhelmed with trying to understand what happened at the site of the wildfire, so the medical examiner was on his way over to get a blood sample out of the shirt.

Fran’s telephone rang, and he absently reached for it while continuing to stare at the shirt. “Hello? Oh, yeah, good ... you what? ... Really? Well, that’s something. I don’t suppose there’s any hint of a name or anything ... There is? Miguel Parada? Outstanding! ... Are you on your way back to Grand Lake or what? ... OK. Could you stop by my office on your way through town so we can get a formal statement about all this? And maybe you could get the hospital to make copies of all his documentation? ... Great! See you about two.”

He was beaming. “Alice Long and Hank Welton—remember them from the fire site yesterday?—they went to the hospital over in Kremmling and identified the stabbing victim as the guy they put in their truck yesterday. And the hospital staff found that he had ID on him after all, a flat, zip-lock bag taped to the inside of his left thigh, passport, foreign driver’s license, some cash.”

“What kind of passport?” Angela was first to ask.

“Cuban. But he’s got a driver’s license from Mexico, with an address in Monterrey, so he must have been there for some time. No US documentation, so he’s here illegally, looks like. Oh, and he’s in intensive care. Critical, but still alive. They aren’t optimistic, however.”

“So we’re looking either at assault, maybe assault with a deadly weapon if we can link the knife wound to Murcheson, or at murder, if he dies, I guess, right, sheriff?” Angela, I was learning, liked things neat and tidy.

“We need a match between the blood on that shirt and Parada’s, first. Speaking of which, where’s George, anyway?” Fran looked impatient.

It didn’t surprise me that George Neering, the medical examiner attached to the district attorney’s office, hadn’t shown up. He was as free-spirited a person as I’d met in a long time, and he pretty much kept his own schedule. But despite his casual attitude and laid-back ways, he was as sharp as anyone I’d ever met. If anyone could get a positive identification on those blood stains, he could.

“I hate to be the one raising this, but the Murcheson thing is just a diversion. What we need is for Parada to survive so we can find out what he knows about that fire the other day, right?” I looked back and forth between them.

“Ouch, a reality check if there ever was one.” Fran winced. “Yeah, of course. And maybe we ought to proceed as if Parada’s not going to regain consciousness. Then if he does and we can learn something from him, it’ll be a bonus.”

“What I’m still trying to figure out is the behavior of that wildfire.” Angela scratched the back of her head. “Even with an accelerant to start it, I just don’t understand how it could have been so fast and so hot at the same time.”

Fran sat up straight. “What we need is to re-create it somehow, do a controlled burn or something to see if a natural fire would behave at all like that. The Forest Service people are coming by in a while, maybe we can ask them.”

I had a simpler idea. “What about a computer simulation? Hal talks all the time about how advanced computer simulations are becoming the third leg of science, along with lab experiments and field measurements. He talks about how it’s all tied together by theory, wrapping everything into a neat package, blah, blah, blah.”

“And we do have this new institute here, don’t we?” Fran looked pleased with the idea. “Do you think this would be possible?”

“Well, I *do* have some pull with the director.” I tried to look innocent. “Let’s ask him. Is that a speaker phone, Fran?”

Getting Hal took only a few seconds. “Hal? I’m here with Fran Schmidt and Angela Espinosa, we’re on a speaker phone. And we’ve got a technical question for you.”

“Oh, *man*, and here I thought I’d won the sheriff’s charity raffle or something.” The speaker made the voice tinny, but it was definitely Hal.

“In your dreams. Anyway, remember the fire I told you about last night, the one I spent the day at yesterday? Killed all those people?” I was sure he did, but I wanted to start us all on the same page.

“Right. Up on the side of Byers Peak. You talked about how it didn’t behave like a normal fire would.”

“Angela thinks that, and the Forest Service people do, too. So, here’s the question. Do you think you guys, I mean at MPARC, could you do a computer simulation of this fire? Help us figure out what happened?” I nodded at both Fran and Angela, who nodded back.

There was a much longer pause than I expected. “Hal? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. And I’m trying to figure out why I didn’t think of that myself. But wait, don’t answer that, it’s rhetorical. I know damned well why—it’s because I’m doing all of this administrative crap instead of using my brain being a scientist. I think maybe I’ll swap jobs with Sandy. Who I just talked with, by the way, and we even talked about what a tragedy that fire was. Arrgh! But he’ll love this idea. So, anyway, of course we can do a computer simulation of that fire, a whole bunch of ’em, in fact. We’ll need all sorts of information, naturally, and the more help we get putting it together the faster we’ll have answers. But, sure, what a great idea! Let me make some calls. ’Bye.”

Angela and Fran were staring at the phone in either shock or disbelief, I couldn’t tell.

“Yep, that’s Hal. Once you wind him up, he makes the energizer bunny look lazy.” I laughed.

Fran started to respond, but there was a knock on the door, and a bewhiskered face peeked in. “Hey, sheriff, I heard you called, man. And, yo, Ms. Tri-er-i, hey there. And hello new person, too!”

George Neering had arrived.

“Thanks for coming by, George, come in. And this new person is Annette’s deputy, Angela Espinosa. She’s CBI, too, and she’s already made herself indispensable. Angela, this is George Neering, our medical examiner.” Fran said all this with a straight face, trying hard, I could tell, not to influence Angela’s first impression of George.

“Annette’s told me all about you, Dr. Neering.” Angela smiled and held out her right hand for a shake.

“Uh-oh.” George looked at me nervously, but took the hand.

I laughed. “Don’t worry, George. I just raised her expectations of your good work. Speaking of which, we’ve got something for you. Fran?”

“Right. George, I can never keep up with all the latest techniques you use. What would it take to match blood on clothing, a shirt, say, with the blood of a particular person?” Fran pointed at the shirt on the back of the door.

George looked carefully at it through the plastic. “Well, man, it sure helps if you have a particular person in mind, and it helps even more if that person is available for a blood sample. I mean, first things first, ya know? Any idea how old these stains are, man?”

“Maybe a day. And, yes, we have the person available. He’s in the hospital over in Kremmling. Still alive, barely.”

“Ah. You want to confirm an assault suspect, or something like that.” George poked at the shirt. “Well, get me some blood from the vic, and this’ll be a piece of cake. I’ve got a DNA lab down in Denver that owes me a favor, so I can get a quick turn-around. Maybe a day.”

“George, will the shirt be damaged? Uh, the perp doesn’t know we’ve got it. If there’s no match, we’d just as soon get it back to him without anyone knowing.” I tried a hopeful smile.

“Hmm. Well, I think I can handle that.” He nodded.

“Also, Dr. Neering, the victim lost a lot of blood and there’s a chance they’ve been giving him transfusions. A blood sample might not be, you know, his real blood, all of it.” Angela looked worried. “Should we maybe substitute some of his clothes or something?”

“Very good—no, make that *extremely* good thinking, Ms. Espinosa. A sample and some clothes both, I think. I like it when new people are smart.” George nodded at her and then looked around the office. “This is cool, y’know, man? Another thing I like is being in on this stage of things instead of having to wait until everyone’s dead.”

* * *

Six

Hal Weathers was feeling incredibly stupid.

Here he was, director of an advanced computing center, a center that would have one of the world's fastest supercomputers pretty soon, if everything went according to plan, and he had to wait for his wife to come up with the bright idea of simulating that tragic wildfire.

Good grief.

But he knew the feeling would pass quickly, all the more so if he plunged into the problem. So he put in a call to his new chief scientist.

"Sandy? Sorry to bother you, can the movers do without you for a few minutes again?"

"Sure. I'm at the wave and point stage. What's up?" Sandy was still supervising the furniture unloading, it seemed.

"So, let's see if you feel as dumb as I do. Annette just called and asked if we could do some simulations of that wildfire we just talked about."

There was a long pause, and then Sandy laughed. "Well, I don't know, how dumb do you feel? I bet I feel dumber. I'm supposed to be your chief scientist, after all. Can I assume you told her we could?"

"Oh, yeah. Although, I have to say, now that I think about it, I really don't know quite how. We got the small-scale NCAR model up and running about a month ago, but that's just weather, not fire." Hal was referring to the National Center for Atmospheric Research, which made copies of its production codes available to the user community.

"Right, MM5. I remember talking with your guys about it when I was up here in April. And that'll be the perfect starting point. We can do a high-resolution simulation of the local weather up there using all the data we can find, then use those results to provide boundary conditions for this wildfire behavior model I know about. A friend of mine at Los Alamos developed it, we used to go rock climbing together, and he'll think this is a great use for it. We can run it at a couple meters' resolution and see what kind of fuels would have been necessary to create a fire like that." Sandy must have realized he was running on, because he stopped.

"A couple of meters? Must have some kind of different turbulence closure, huh?"

A half-hour later, they had talked themselves out and developed a plan in the process, so Hal called his wife back.

"Annette Trieri, CBI."

"Hal Weathers, MPARC, here. I hope you don't need those simulations done by this evening."

"Well, why not? You're the one with the super-duper computer, or whatever it's called." She loved to tease, as he knew from years of experience.

"Of course, of course. But we have data to assemble, some of it from you guys. We figured that would take several days of requisitions and requests and God knows what all paperwork to break through the CBI bureaucracy. Seriously, though, it *is* something of a big task, considering we haven't

done it before. But Sandy's on board, and he knows of a fire-behavior model that has just the capabilities we need."

"'Knows of a model'? So you agreed to do this without having a computer model to do it with? Pretty confident, I'd say, Mr. Director." The humor in her voice was unmistakable.

"Yes, well, you just wait and see." Hal felt it best to change the subject. "So, I know it's only Wednesday, but do you have a feeling yet for how Angela is going to work out?"

"Well, Fran called her 'indispensable' today, so that's a pretty good start, I'd say." Annette was proud.

"Excellent! And based on my two phone calls with Sandy, I'm feeling good about him, too. I think we picked a couple of winners. Maybe you and I can take more time together now." Hal remembered conversations between them about all work and no play.

"Why, that would be lovely." She sounded pleased. "The immediate future looks busy, but maybe we can plan a long tour of the changing aspen this fall. That would give you an excuse for a new car."

Ouch, Hal thought. Another subject I need to avoid just now. "An aspen tour sounds great. We can start here in the north and wind up in Durango, maybe. Follow the changes south. See some old friends down there while we're at it."

She was delighted. "I'll put it on my calendar in ink. But I've got to go now, OK? See you for dinner at home?"

"You will. We can invent something. 'Bye."

Hal felt relieved that the topic of a new car had been avoided, because, in his mind, what they really needed were *two* new cars.

Oh, the cars they had were fine. But the one that was happy off the pavement was not all that happy where they now lived, at 9100'; and the one that didn't mind 9100' definitely preferred pavement. What they really needed were two cars that both liked the thin air at 9100' and also relished going off-pavement. Not truly off-*road*, necessarily, although one of the two ought to manage that as well, he thought.

Annette, he knew, really liked her Subaru Outback, so all that was needed was an upgrade of it to the six-cylinder version, which would handle the elevation better. And as much as he enjoyed his twin-turbo Audi S4, it was getting a bit long in the tooth, and running it up and down all those gravel roads every day wasn't really to its liking. Audi had been ignoring the non-pavement market sector, though, at least recently. Something with a turbo and off-road capability seemed to be the thing, along with enough refinement to pick up important people at the airport, go to the opera in Denver, and so on.

There was only one vehicle that he knew of that combined all of those attributes, but, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out how to persuade Annette that buying a Porsche Cayenne Turbo made sense. Maybe, he thought, I should just do it and then ask for forgiveness instead of permission.

But he wasn't going to figure it out today, because this wildfire simulation business had to come first. He put in a call to his institute's benefactor, Charles Shure, using the private number that only he, Annette, and a few others had.

"Chuck? Glad I caught you. It's Hal Weathers. Have you got a minute to chat about an MPARC matter?" Hal was certain that the time would be made, if it didn't already exist, for Shure was always ready to talk MPARC.

"I've got a plane to catch as soon as this car gets me to the airport, but until then I'm all yours, Hal." Shure sounded eager.

“We’ve talked about a development plan for MPARC, I know. But I’m wondering if you think it’s flexible enough for us to drop everything and work on a special project for a while.” Hal filled Shure in on the wildfire simulations that were being discussed.

When Hal was finished, Shure didn’t hesitate. “Sounds to me like a no-brainer, Hal. This is going to sound awfully self-serving, I know, but consider the good publicity that MPARC can get from this, helping out local law enforcement shed light on a mysterious tragedy. And apart from that, MPARC gets a new computer simulation code that we can figure out new uses for, plus we’re doing good science. Have you got all the resources you need?”

“Well, not really. As you know, our new system isn’t fully configured yet, so we don’t have all of the computer horsepower we will in a year or so. And these simulations will gobble up computer time, I’m told, and I hope we have the speed to do what we need to. But I’m a little concerned about it. The timing is awful.” Hal was trying to avoid raising expectations too high.

“Don’t worry about that. It sounds like you’ll need to do lots of separate calculations for this problem, meaning you can do them on distributed systems instead of a single, central one. I’ll make sure you have access to the appropriate systems to do them on. We’ll get her done, count on it.”

Hal couldn’t help but think how nice it was to have powerful friends who understood his problems.

* * *

Feeling comfortably accomplished, Hal turned to his computer to make notes of his conversations with Sandy and Charles Shure. Email, however, was waiting.

There were two messages from someone called “sgl3@mparc.org” labeled “Data needs” and “Data needs 2”, the second about twenty minutes newer. Hal opened that one first.

Hal – In addition to that first list, there’s something else we’ll need, and I don’t know where to find it. I’ve talked with a couple of other people at MPARC whom I remember from my visits, and they agree: we need to pinpoint as closely as possible the time of ignition of that fire, if we’re to simulate it successfully. The burn was too small to be visible on most of the weather satellites, though. Let’s talk about this. SGL3.

It took a minute, but Hal eventually remembered that Sandy’s given name was Sanford Gentworthy Livingston III, a passed-down combination, Sandy had mentioned, of his paternal great-grandfather’s and grandmothers’ maiden names, a combination that Sandy had no intention of passing on to the next generation. Sandy’s MPARC email using his initials had been set up the day that his hiring process was completed.

Curious, Hal opened the first email and found a list of data that made perfect sense: digitized topography, in as much detail as possible; all available satellite imagery including LANDSAT and anything hyperspectral; whatever information about fuels the Forest Service might have; and all available weather data, beginning two days before the fire, for Colorado and Wyoming.

Hal picked up the phone.

“Sandy? How’s the moving going?”

“They finally left, so now I’m alone with ten thousand boxes. Or so. I’m glad you called—I need the diversion.” Sandy sounded overwhelmed, Hal thought.

He got right to the point. “I called about the ignition email.”

“Right. Good. See, one of your weather guys I called earlier—he’s all excited about this project, by the way—he mentioned that there was a little system that went through Monday night. A weak trough, but it caused some wind shifts. The timing of the fire relative to those wind shifts is going to be crucial to its behavior. MM5 will reproduce the trough and the winds, I’m sure, but if we don’t start the fire at the right time, it won’t behave realistically. The timing is a variable that we need to eliminate first.”

“Ah. Understood. There’s a chance that GOES might have picked it up, but maybe not, with that low resolution. And even if it did, that would pin it down only to within a half hour.” Hal was thinking out loud about the geostationary weather satellite.

“The only thing I know that might have it is something I don’t really know anything about, and I couldn’t talk about it if I did. The NRO monitors for rocket launches globally, I think. And this fire would have been seen by their birds. But how to get hold of their data is way beyond me.” There was a hopeful note in Sandy’s voice.

“Hmm. It would. Have been seen, I mean. I don’t know if they archive that data, though. Even though it was only a couple of days ago, it may be long gone.” From his service on government advisory boards, some of them classified, Hal knew just a little about the capabilities of the National Reconnaissance Office, the super-secret watchdog in the sky. “Good suggestion, though. Let me check into it. Chuck Shure has connections to that world, because his aerospace division supplies the feds with all sorts of gadgets. And I know some other folks, too. I’ll tell you what I can.”

“I think my clearance is still alive.” Sandy had mentioned during his job interview that he also had a security clearance, for his own set of advisory committees.

“Yeah, it is. I checked. But this phone isn’t secure, so we’ll have to talk about it some other way. I’ll let you know.” Hal disconnected.

Hal thought the problem over while he disposed of several routine emails, some by literal disposals to the Trash icon, some by quick responses to the sender. He finally decided he should call Mac MacQuarrie.

MacQuarrie, Hamish Angus MacQuarrie in full, was a retired CIA and NSA officer whom Hal and Annette had met and become friends with on a cruise ship. A rag-tag band of terrorist wannabes had managed to steal several containers of Special Nuclear Material—the stuff of thermonuclear weapons—and had smuggled the material aboard the ship to move it from Florida to California. Hal, aboard to provide scientific entertainment for the passengers, happened to notice the containers, and MacQuarrie, out of retirement to assist in the national effort to find the stuff, was called in. A year later, they’d run into Mac again when he was working a case of weapons smuggling in South Florida and Hal and Annette were enjoying Spring Break in the sunshine.

Annette had gone so far as to suggest that MacQuarrie might be an appropriate security officer for MPARC, a position Hal had yet to fill. Security—in the sense of securing the premises from unwanted intruders—didn’t seem to Hal to be much of an issue in the Fraser Valley, except maybe for simple burglaries. But now security—in the sense of having a secure facility capable of handling classified information—had become an issue, so maybe Annette’s idea had merit, he thought.

Hal, grateful for the computer search function, was able to find old, post-cruise email that he and MacQuarrie had exchanged, and soon had a telephone number.

“*Hell-o.* Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Mac, it’s Hal Weathers. How’ve you been?”

There was a brief pause. “Oh. Right. Hal Weathers. Sure. Of course. I’m good, Hal, and how are you and Annette? You get moved to wherever it was yet? I recall you talked about a new house or something.”

“A couple of months ago. We’re all settled in, way up on a mountainside above where we were. Uh, is it appropriate for me to ask about Sam?” Hal remembered that, last time they’d seen each other, Mac had still been in the company of an ex-call girl, Samantha Winslow, whom he and Annette has originally met on the cruise.

MacQuarrie laughed. “Sam’s just fine. We’re still renting this place in down here in the Keys, have been for, well, I guess it’s way over a year now. I’m talking to you from a flats boat, as a matter of fact, trying to out-wit some bonefish. So far, the bonefish are winning, like they always do. Huh? Oh, Sam says hi.”

“And hi to her as well, from me and Annette both. Listen, Mac, if you’re out fishing, this isn’t a good time, but I’ve got a little puzzle I thought you might have some advice about. Let me give you the sound-bite version, and maybe we can talk more when you’re on shore with a drink in your hand.” Hal proceeded to sketch the situation.

“Arson? 23 people? Racist overtones? Nice place you moved to, Hal. Geez. But I get the drift, and, yeah, I think I can help. The Washington spook shops are keeping me on retainer, based on that little weapons caper you folks helped with, and I have what access I’ll need. I’ll call you this evening, OK? Uh, let’s see. My cell phone will remember this number you’re calling from. Will that work?”

“Sure will. I’ll forward it home. And thanks, Mac. Good luck with the bonefish.” Hal disconnected, feeling good about the progress he was making.

One more bit of good luck, Hal thought, and I can declare the battle a success. He logged in to the UNELECO computer network and clicked his way to the corporate directory. Ah, right. Phillip Peters, computer security director. Hal picked up his phone, selected the line with the red button, and punched in a series of seemingly random numbers. There was a muted beep, and he punched in Peters’ number from the corporate directory.

“Peters.” There was another muted beep. “Secure.”

“Phil, it’s Hal Weathers. Glad I caught you.”

“How are things up north, Hal?”

“Ready to rock, I hope. We might have an opportunity to use that secure network sooner than originally planned. That’s why I called.” Hal crossed his fingers.

“Far as I know, it’s ready. You’ll need to get someone on site with the right clearance to make it really functional, though, a systems person. But my people got all the hardware in and the encryption software is what we use here. Can I ask what the application is?” Peters’ curiosity was obvious, but the question was appropriately polite.

“We may be getting some NRO data to provide verification for a non-classified project we’re starting up. A wildfire simulation, you’ll probably read about it in the paper tomorrow. And we don’t have a systems person with a clearance yet. We weren’t planning on using this secure network until the new system is up, sometime early next year, probably. But now we need it. Do you suppose I could borrow someone from your shop for a week or two?” Hal’s fingers were still crossed.

“Don’t have to wait for the paper, it’s all over CNN now. An arson fire that killed 23 people? Pretty serious stuff. What’s the NRO data for?”

“Time of ignition, and the fire’s progression if there’s a sequence of images. We’ll see. I’ve got a guy looking into it. But if he can get the data, we’ll need a way to get it here and a place to store it.” Hal paused to let that sink in. “And we’ll need someone to process it, too, but I’ve already got that under control.”

Peters understood. “Right, got it. And I can lend you one of our guys, I think. Someone with some processing experience to boot, maybe. I’ll let you know.”

Hal stared at the red button on the phone. Looks like, he thought, all this spooky stuff I let Chuck talk me into will come in handy after all.

* * *

Seven

Angela and I, doubled up in my little office, were working through a day and half of unfinished CBI paperwork. This, of course, was routine drudge work for me, but for her it was new and different and exciting.

Ha! I was thinking. Let’s see how long that attitude lasts.

We were interrupted, to my relief and Angela’s annoyance, when Anna Hermanson, one of Fran’s junior deputies, burst in.

“Quick, turn on Fox News! Sheriff Schmidt’s on TV!”

When we didn’t immediately jump, she turned to my little television and hit the on switch. A picture materialized, with a voice intoning in solemn pronouncements.

“... at a press conference today. There are no suspects at this time. In fact, it is not clear that a crime has been committed. Still, the fire is a major tragedy.”

The scene shifted to a nervous-looking Fran Schmidt standing behind a podium, brow glistening, eyes squinted. He must have been answering one of the questions we missed.

“Now, I wouldn’t go that far. Uh, after all, we don’t know for sure that this was arson. We, uh, just have, er, these indications, the ones I mentioned before, you know, the strange burn pattern and all. Like that.”

The scene cut back to the solemn talking head. “Harold, wouldn’t you say this appears to be a cover-up of major proportions?”

A split screen appeared, with the first talking head on one side and a frazzled-looking suit in the other. He started shouting. “Cover-up? That’s something of an understatement, don’t you think? I don’t know what these small-town cops think they’re going to pull over our eyes here, but you can bet they’re going to look like real hicks when we find out the truth. And find it out we will!”

I couldn’t stand it. “Anna, will you *please* turn that off. That’s not news, that’s, that’s ... oh, just turn it off.”

She complied, to my relief, and began apologizing. Getting that stopped was another effort, but I got her shut up without hurting her feelings. Eventually, she excused herself and went back to work.

“Welcome to Grand County, Angela.” I had to laugh.

“Poor Sheriff Schmidt. They certainly didn’t pick very flattering video of him, did they?” She seemed indignant.

“By design, I’m sure. But ...” I was interrupted by the telephone, which Angela grabbed.

“Espinosa, CBI.” She winked at me and grinned. “They are? Thank you, we’ll be right down.”

She hung up the phone. “The Forest Service people are here. Interview room one.”

We joined Fran, Janelle, Hank Welton, and Alice Long. Anna was rustling up coffee for takers, and we had to borrow extra chairs from the other interview room. After everything was organized, Welton plunged right in.

“He’s unconscious, Fran, but alive. Prognosis isn’t good, though. And it’s for sure the same guy we found by the creek yesterday. Like I said, he seemed hypothermic, so we gave him what warm coffee we had and some food, wrapped him in a blanket, and put him in our truck with the heater turned up high. And then you showed up and, uh, well, you know what happened after that.” Welton was trying to hide a smile.

“Don’t remind me.” Fran was still grumpy about his Explorer. “Alice, what about it?”

“Just like he said, Fran. Same guy. Same clothes, for that matter, we brought ’em along with a blood sample the hospital wants your ME to have. Seems he was badgering them.” She wasn’t bothering to hide her smile.

“Good old George. And how about the documentation they found?” Now Fran was smiling, too.

“Oh, right.” Welton took a plastic bag out from his inside his jacket. “They said we could have the originals. I guess they got copies of what they need.”

The plastic bag contained a passport, Cuban as advertised, a Mexico driver’s license, a little over \$900 in cash, and several photographs of a woman with several small children. Despite his continued Cuban citizenship, it appeared that Miguel Parada had settled down in Monterrey, Mexico and started a family. No doubt he, like so many others, was illegally earning money here in the states to send home.

“Did they say anything about the wound in his side?” Fran was studying the pictures.

Welton thought for a few seconds. “It was clean enough they think it was a knife, a hunting knife, from the size and depth of the incision. It missed most of the important stuff, but it cut open his intestine and they’re fighting serious peritonitis. And he lost a lot of blood, so they’ve been transfusing him.”

Fran nodded. “Ten points for Angela. Thanks for that suggestion. Anna, could you call George Neering and tell him we have the blood samples from Kremmling?”

She had been hovering about and now, with something to do, ran off.

“OK, Hank, Alice, thanks for everything. I think this part is a wrap. But the fire itself is still something of a mystery. However, we may have a handle on that soon. The folks at that new institute, MPARC, they’re going to put their computers to work on the problem. I expect they’ll need to talk with you, and Tom, too, about the whole thing.” Fran looked back and forth at the two Forest Service employees.

“You mean they’re going to run some model studies? Very cool, right Hank?” Alice seemed excited at the prospect.

“Absolutely. I want to be part of that. Please have them call us, Fran.”

Back in Fran’s office, we settled in to discuss the day’s progress. Fran had his TV on, with Fox News now fixated on the latest overseas crisis *du jour*.

“Sheriff Schmidt, it’s too bad about that clip from the press conference they used, especially given that this is an election year.” Angela had been indignant when she saw it, and that indignation returned with this comment.

But Fran was unfazed. “Hmm? Oh, that video clip of me? Well, thanks for the worry, Angela, but it’s all right, really. Better than all right. I hope every voter in Grand County saw that. It’ll get me re-elected by a landslide. Whenever the suits in the big media centers like New York and Los Angeles do things to make us folks out here in the real world look bad, the voters always side with whoever is the target of the media spotlight. Doesn’t matter that I looked like one of the suspects on America’s Most Wanted. That clip will get me a ton of votes. Really.”

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. “OK, folks, here’s what I think. I think we’ve run this horse about as far as it will go today. We can’t go home yet, because all those media types outside will think we’re slacking off, even though everyone put in a lot of extra time, hard time, up on the mountain yesterday. At least Janelle and I can’t go home. You CBI types can, though. Plain clothes have their benefits, I guess.”

I was ready to leave, but I was also wondering about the next day. “Fran? Is there anything in the works for tomorrow?”

“Well, I’d like to have Angela standing by in case Parada regains consciousness and can talk. And maybe George will work a miracle with the DNA sampling and we can arrest Stick Murcheson, get him to tell us what he knows. But mostly, Annette, I’m interested in what your husband and his scientists can find out. That’s about our only real hope for understanding what happened up there.”

Not, I thought, that this puts Hal and company under any pressure or anything.

* * *

Fran was right: plain clothes do have their benefits, at least when it comes to ducking the screaming media horde. Angela and I made it out to the parking lot and to my car without being noticed. Given the large numbers of satellite-dish-topped vehicles and people with cameras and notebooks wandering around outside the sheriff’s offices, we considered that to be something of a victory.

Unfortunately, I’d come to work in my CBI car, quite unmistakable. Compared to the underpowered version of Fran’s Explorer that I had been stuck with in Durango, my new CBI vehicle, a Jeep Grand Cherokee with a Hemi V-8, was a hot rod. But it had a light bar and big decals on the doors, so when I pulled out of the parking lot with Angela in the passenger seat, it attracted the media people like an open bar. One of those idiots, an over-dressed, made-up, and coiffed blonde woman with a microphone in her hand, even stepped in front of the thing, as if to stop me. But I just turned on the siren and both Angela and I had a good laugh as she ran for cover, hands over her ears. I heard a satisfying crunch as the right rear tire ran over her microphone.

“Well,” Angela was philosophical, “I guess we won’t be able to be anonymous tomorrow.”

“We can if I bring my Outback. And then on Friday you can drive. Did I hear something about a Forester? Hats and sunglasses, that’s what we’ll do.” I laughed. “So I’ll drop you off, but I’m not totally sure where.”

I had taken the right at the Y, and we were headed over Cottonwood Pass. It seemed like an eternity since Sandy had called us that morning.

It turned out that their condo was in a development off County Road 8, to the east of the highway and just north of Fraser. Five minutes or so to the supermarket, compared to the twenty or more from my house. I was jealous.

But when I finally arrived at home, after a stop at that supermarket for salad makings and some staples I remembered, the jealousy evaporated. Our view and privacy trumped any convenience of other locations in the valley. I wasn't sure how I would like it in winter, way up there, but we had done just fine before in a place well off the beaten path that was only a little lower down.

When I walked in the house, I heard Hal talking, and it quickly became obvious that he was on the phone, so I put the salad stuff away and began thinking about what to invent for dinner. It didn't sound as if Hal was close to being finished, so I decided I was on my own. Whenever that happens, my first instinct is to concoct some kind of tomato-based red sauce for pasta, using distant memories from how my grandmothers used to do it.

A while later, Hal walked into the kitchen where I had a credible sauce ready, water waiting to boil pasta, a salad, and a loaf of garlic bread in the toaster oven. He came over and kissed me on the back of the neck.

“Mac and Sam send their best. They're still down in the Keys.”

“Mac? ... Oh, sure, Mac and Sam. Are you going to finally hire him to do security for you?” I'd suggested just that some time before, but it never went anywhere.

“That's not why I called him. We're going to need some satellite data to do that simulation of yours right, classified satellite data. I wanted to ask about his connections in the world of spooks.” He began setting the table.

“My simulation?” I put the pasta, a linguini, in to boil.

“You suggested it, so you get credit for it. The wildfire simulation. Both Sandy and I feel pretty dumb for not thinking of it ourselves. It's a great idea, your idea. Sandy pointed out that we'll need to get as precise a time for when the fire started as possible. And the fire was too small to show up on weather satellites, probably. But it might have shown up on one of the spy satellites, the ones that watch for rocket launches.” He retrieved a wine glass for me from the cupboard by the refrigerator.

“How's Sam?” I was hoping she was still in her new line of work, as a landscape artist.

“Uh, well, we didn't really talk about them much. When I first called him this afternoon, though, they were out fishing together. That's something. Maybe they've settled down. How heavy is that sauce? Will this Bardolino work?” He was holding a bottle of wine for me to inspect.

I glanced up from the making salad dressing. “Just fine. Could you grate some of that Romano? And that sounds like a good thing, them settling down. I really mean her, of course.”

He laughed. “You never did like her profession, did you? You know, in some cultures, being a courtesan is a high calling that's considered an art form.”

“Hmmp. Yeah, well, in our culture, being a whore is just considered slutty. Besides, it's dangerous. She's a nice person, and I'd hate for anything bad to happen to her.” I gave the salad an emphatic toss and some of it ended up on the counter.

Five minutes later we were both twirling forks of linguini and chowing down on garlic bread.

“So, if this is going to be ‘my simulation’, I guess I need to know more about it.” I took a sip of the Bardolino.

“Well, I’m sure you don’t want the seminar.” He looked up and grinned. “But the short version is that it’s just like a weather forecast calculation, only really, really hot. What you do in a weather forecast is divide the atmosphere into lots of boxes and, in each box, calculate the winds, the temperature, and the humidity. One of the things that affects the temperature is radiation, solar radiation and infrared radiation from the ground and from the air itself. That’s the heat you feel, for example, on a cold day standing by a brick wall that’s been warmed by the sun.”

He took a bite and chewed for a minute. “To make this a fire calculation, you add some equations for the chemicals that combust, the volatile gases given off by wood when it’s heated. Then you ‘ignite’ the fire by raising the temperature in one of the boxes enough to combust those gases, and off it goes. The combustion releases heat, raising the temperature, and that releases more gases from the fuels that combust if the temperature is hot enough. Meanwhile, because hot air rises, winds get created. So it’s a really hot weather calculation.”

I thought for a minute, realizing that I sort of understood it despite the lecture. Hal sometimes goes into what I call his “Mr. Science Person” mode, which I often tune out. But this was interesting, given the case we were working on.

“So you put fuel into these boxes, the ones on the ground, I guess, and it releases the volatile gases when it heats up?”

“Right.” He nodded. “Think of it as evaporating sticks. A little heat, the ignition temperature we specify, releases a little gas that ignites, further raising the temperature, which releases more gas. And off it goes, until the fuel is all burned up, or, more specifically, until all the volatile gases are used up. By then, though, the hot temperature has spread, by the wind or by the radiation, to the next box over, and the fire has spread.”

He reached for the Romano. “Two more details might be useful for you to know. First, the topography plays a strong role. Because hot air rises, it will flow up a hill and carry the fire with it. This can produce fast-spreading fires up hillsides, and these models simulate this quite well. And, second, fire calculations use very small boxes, so that the fuel can go into the ones next to the ground, simulating, say, grass, or the next higher up ones, simulating bushes and trees. If the numbers start at one on the ground and go up as you go higher, you can have grass and small bushes in box one, nothing much in box two, some fuel simulating crowns of small trees in box three, and more fuel simulating crowns of taller trees in box four. That part is going to be important for your simulation because of that grove of trees that burned. Also, we can put in the gas tanks of the trucks in box one at the locations where the trucks were. That’ll make a difference, too, a big difference.”

I nodded. “It sounds horribly complicated, but I think I get it. You can do the calculation lots of times with different fuels at different spots and see how the computer fire behaves. Then you compare that to what we saw up there. Makes sense, somehow.”

And I did get it. In fact, I got it too well. I almost asked if he was going to put the people in as part of the fuel.

But we were eating.

* * *

Mac MacQuarrie didn't really care if the bonefish were winning, because he wasn't keeping score. For him, just being out on the water was what it was all about. And the fact that Sam had learned quickly how to handle the flats-boat pole and never tired of the job of moving him quietly from spot to spot made it all the better.

When Hal Weathers had called, he was reeling in his fly line, having just spooked another boney with a sloppy cast. The phone call was a welcome diversion. But the subject was troubling, and although he spent the next couple of hours casting at unsuspecting bonefish, with no success, his heart wasn't in it. Just before sunset, they headed back to their rental house on Big Pine Key.

What troubled him was not Hal's request for NRO data, but the reason Hal called in the first place, the fire. Mac had years and years of overseas operations experience for various three-letter federal agencies under his belt, and he had seen it all. But when people burned to death—women and children especially—it got to him. He'd seen it happen in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, in Africa. And no one deserved that, no one.

Probably because of her own years of experience, Sam wasn't the nosey type. But their relationship had grown to the point that she could tell when he was upset, and she always sought ways to fix the problem.

"That phone call got to you didn't it, Mac?" She waited to ask until the boat was tied up with everything stowed away for the night.

For his part, Mac had learned that she never asked such questions idly, and that it was a good idea to be responsive. That, he thought, was part of the reason their relationship had grown so.

"Yep, sure did. Hal told me the short version of a real tragedy that happened out where he is, a fire that killed at least 23 people, including women and children. It's seriously depressing, brings back bad memories for me." He wanted a hug and reached for her.

"I heard you say 'arson'."

"Hal did, and so did I. Yeah, they think maybe that someone set the fire intentionally. Give me just five minutes alone with whoever did that, is all I ask." He realized that the sea air and sunshine had made her hair smell especially fresh.

"Do they know who did it? What are you going to do?" Her voice was apprehensive.

"No suspects. And Hal called to ask if I might be able to get him access to some information, classified information, that could help the investigation. And that's what I'm going to do, get that information for him." He leaned back and kissed her on the nose.

"Does that mean you're leaving? I don't want to be here alone. It's hurricane season. Last year it got scary, and this year hasn't been any picnic."

"Well, except for certain buildings in and around Washington, and some rooms in other places, you go wherever I go, I promise. But I don't know if I need to leave for this one. I'll find out when I call Hal in a while. What do you want to do about supper?" He had discovered that she was quite the chef when she wanted to be.

"Call Hal first, and let's go out. My arms are too tired to cook." She smiled. "I need to save my remaining strength for later."

That sounds interesting, he thought. "Out we will go, then. I'll shower and then call Hal back."

Clean and dressed in white tennis shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and flip-flops—summertime going out to dinner clothes on Big Pine Key—Mac listened to forwarding clicks before the phone on the other end rang.

“Hal Weathers.”

“It’s Mac, Hal. Gotta say, pal, that fire thing is first-class depressing. I’ll do whatever I can to help. But there is the issue of how classified the NRO data is.”

“Indeed. Except we’re set up for it.” Hal proceeded to sketch MPARC’s secure computing capabilities, going as far as he could over the unsecure phone connection.

“And you’ve got people with the right clearances to use the data?” Mac was impressed, but still careful.

“I think so. Me, for one, and my chief scientist. Also a couple of the scientific staff.” He sounded confident, no doubt about that.

“Impressive, Hal. What kind of outfit is this MPARC thing, anyway? Never heard of it before.” Retirement, Mac thought, has its perks.

Before Mac knew what was happening, Hal had launched into the MPARC Briefing. As Hal talked, Mac became ever more aware of two things: Hal had found something that really excited him, both intellectually and on a much deeper, emotional level; and the organization Hal had created had a unique potential to tackle any number of issues that his former employers were never quite able to get their arms around.

They had developed a surprisingly close friendship on that cruise, a friendship rekindled on the second case, so Mac was happy for Hal in his involvement with the organization he was building. But what really got Mac’s attention was that unique potential, made all the more attractive by the facts that they already had classified capabilities and that they were funded through an endowment and therefore financially independent. Too many of the agencies’ usual contractors depended on those contracts for their very existence, so they were always just full of good news to keep the customer happy. Those agencies needed a dose of reality now and then, no matter how harsh.

Mac knew that more phone calls were going to be in order even after this NRO business was concluded.

“Y’know, Hal,” Mac waited until Hal wound down, “when we talked about your position at the university, back when we were wandering around on that damned cruise ship, you never had the excitement in your voice that I’ve just been hearing. It sounds as if you’ve found your true calling.”

Hal laughed. “Well, I don’t know about that. Setting MPARC up and being its director seems every bit as bureaucratic to me as when I was dean. But this fire problem that sort of got dumped in our laps does have me on a roll, I’ll say that.”

“Nothing like a scientific challenge to get the juices flowing, eh? Tell you what, Hal. Let me get the technical information, and then I’ll make some calls tomorrow. It’s too late tonight. I guess approximate time and the precise location are what I need.”

Hal rattled off some numbers, Mac wrote them down, and they said their goodbyes. The whole conversation made Mac feel much better. Sam was going to have a far less depressing dinner partner now.

* * *

First thing Thursday morning, Mac sat down at the computer and navigated his way to the web site of the National Hurricane Center. Sam’s comment about not wanting to be alone in the Keys during hurricane season had haunted him all night.

He knew it was hurricane season, of course. Everyone in Florida with more intelligence than grapefruit—meaning at least a third of the population—followed such things closely. And their favorable rental rate on the Big Pine Key house was because of the year-round lease. Just try for a rate like that in, say, February and watch the owner giggle himself into hysterics.

On his own, Mac would have paid just enough attention to the whole thing to be prepared should a storm head his way. He had survived mayhem and destruction on five continents, at last count, so a little weather wasn't something that was going to bother him.

But Sam was another matter. If storms worried her, well, then they worried him, too. And that meant he was questioning the sense of spending the rest of another summer in the Keys.

The NHC web site provided more information than he ever wanted to know, including a discussion of a new depression that was forming up over the Virgin Islands. It was expected to re-curve northward up through the Bahamas, but the uncertainty was big enough that the Keys were in the forecast cone beginning at day 4. That thing, he thought, bears watching.

Back at the NHC home page, he followed other links that looked promising, and at one he discovered a general discussion of conditions in the Atlantic Basin and what the hurricane experts were saying about the future. A train of tropical waves was progressing westward toward the Leeward Islands—that depression he had looked at had developed from an earlier one, he learned—and conditions, including the warm ocean surface and the uniform winds with height, were favorable for development of any of them. Or all.

The depression, then, was the first of a series of potential hurricanes, any of which could keep on their present track until they got right over Big Pine Key.

Maybe, he thought, it's time to get out of Dodge.

He heard a whining, rattling noise from the kitchen and recognized it as the coffee grinder. Sam was up and making the morning pot of caffeinated. He knew from experience that she preferred to be left alone in the morning until she had most of a cup of coffee in her, so he continued to study the NHC information. And the more he read, the more he was persuaded that it was time to beat the traffic and head north. Not that there was a pack-up-and-run emergency brewing, but sometime within the next couple of days would make sense.

Besides, those damned bonefish were too smart for him anyway. What I need, he thought, are some really dumb fish, hungry ones.

Shortly he heard the floorboards creak a little, and a cup of coffee was placed on the computer desk beside the keyboard.

“Morning, tiger. Say, I thought you were supposed to be an old, retired guy. Where'd you get all the energy, anyway? Got some secret pills or something?”

It was their long-running joke. The first time he almost responded by saying “Aw, I bet you say that to all the guys,” but realized just in time that it might be true, given the profession she'd left. But then he told her he almost said it, a sort of confession, and she just laughed. No, she'd said, what I used to say to all the guys was “Mastercard or Visa?”

But it was true—she brought out the teenager in him, and, by treating her like a real person instead of a use-and-throw-away sex toy, he humanized her.

They had been together for over a year, having bonded during the cruise on which they had met Hal and Annette. Sam, seeing how a comfortable relationship can actually work, let her guard down and fell for Mac like a ton of bricks.

Mac's first retirement pastime had been woodworking, but he knew he wasn't very good at it and gave it up at the first excuse. Now he was working at fly-fishing. He'd actually landed a tarpon, so he had enjoyed just enough success to keep him interested. But the bonefish were too wary for his skill level.

Sam, meanwhile, had become an artist. She had a natural eye for form and color and the ability to capture the essence of whatever her subject was with a few strokes of a brush. Her minimalist paintings—watercolors and acrylics—and her pastels were hanging in galleries up and down the Gold Coast.

He took a sip of the coffee. "Umm. Thanks. See what I'm looking at here?"

He had navigated back to the forecast track for that tropical depression, and he pointed the mouse cursor at their location in the Keys.

She snuggled up beside him and leaned down with her chin on his left shoulder. "Uh-oh. Is that coming here?"

"Too soon to say for sure. But maybe. Thing is, there are more behind that one." He tilted his head just enough to brush her ear.

"Are you trying to say something here?" She stood up and began a shoulder massage.

"I'm not sure. One thing I do know is that I don't want to be part of an evacuation. That kind of traffic nightmare just isn't something I can deal with. I'd rather stay here and drown." He felt the tension draining out of his shoulders and neck. "Oooh. That feels *very* good."

"Well, then, let's just beat the crowd. I mean, didn't you say we got a really favorable out clause on this second year of the lease? Screw it. It's not like this place has a hold on us, you know? Hell, you can't even catch any fish." She giggled.

"That's right. Rub it in. Just remember, though, if I were catching them, you'd have to take the hooks out. That's the guide's job. And they're all slimy. So I'm just doing you a favor." He smiled and patted her hand. "Anyway, I'll probably have some business in Washington, we could go there. When was the last time you saw all the museums and so on?"

"That'd be fun for a little while, but Washington isn't really the place to go in the summer, everyone says it's so hot and muggy. What about after you finish your business there? No point in coming back to Florida in hurricane season, right?"

"Let's go somewhere that they have dumb fish, that's what. And new things for you to paint. I don't know. There's time to think about that. But as far as I'm concerned we can start packing for Washington." He closed the browser, glad to have the hurricane threat dealt with.

After a two-mile swim in Florida Bay and breakfast, Mac started making phone calls. It wouldn't do at all to just drop in on people at the National Reconnaissance Office. Those people, he knew from experience, didn't like surprise visits.

He started with a contact of his in the White House who always went by the pseudonym "Henry" in his dealings with Mac. His position was just too sensitive for him to use his real name when dealing with the sorts of things Mac got involved in.

Media hysteria notwithstanding, the world was quiet, so Mac found Henry in his office.

"Henry, Mac MacQuarrie here. I thought you were going to retire after we brought that terrorist group down last year, the ones in bed with the Cuban mafia in Miami." Mac remembered the stress Henry had been under during that particular crisis.

“Hey, Mac, how are things? Yeah, well, I can’t afford to retire. Unlike someone I know, I haven’t spent enough time overseas with easy access to Swiss bank accounts for my ill-gotten gains. Looks like you’re still in Florida.”

“Just for a little while. There seem to be some storms headed our way. Hurricane season, you know?” Mac heard a chuckle.

“So, I called to see if you might know about a couple of our old friends, if they’re still working the eyes in the sky. Harley Talbot and Tom Ciccorelli.” Mac knew Henry wouldn’t answer without knowing more, but he was ready for questions.

“The Big Bird twins? Good question. Haven’t heard from them in quite a while. What in the world would you need them for? Tracking schools of fish or something?”

“Well, now, there’s an idea I hadn’t thought of. Gotta say, though, it wouldn’t help me. I’ve discovered I’m the sort of fisherman who would starve if it weren’t for the grocery store.” Mac knew that poking fun at himself would put Henry in a helpful mood. “No, it’s something more interesting, potentially at least. There’s this organization, it has the right kind of secure computers, that needs some data they probably have. And I’d like to get it to them as a sort of test of their capabilities, because I think you folks would be interested in what they can do. They’re developing simulation capabilities that’ll make your beltway bandits look foolish.”

Henry was skeptical. “Don’t be too sure, Mac. Everyone has a supercomputer these days.”

“Yeah, but not the world’s fastest supercomputer. And this group isn’t working for profit, either, they don’t need customers, so they’ll give straight answers to hard questions. Plus, their focus is on earth simulation issues. I seem to recall that you folks and the boys over at Langley are interested in how climate change is going to affect economies and political stability in various regions. These folks could be quite a resource for you. That’s why I want to try this little test.”

Despite his skepticism, Henry was smart enough to recognize opportunities worth pursuing. Mac got his contact information.

* * *

Nine

Given that my CBI Jeep was a media magnet, on Thursday morning I picked Angela up in my Outback. Just to thumb my nose at them, though, I wore a CBI ball cap.

But when we pulled into the parking lot at the sheriff’s office in Hot Sulphur Springs, we didn’t see any reason to have worried—the crush of satellite-dish-topped trucks and other traffic had vanished. Inside, I asked and Fran was more than happy to explain.

“It was such a zoo out there that we had to do something. I decided that freedom of the press doesn’t include freedom from obeying parking ordinances, so we started enforcement. After I had the first truck towed—I picked on Fox News, just to be mean—the exodus began. All the others teamed up and made a deal with the hotel over by the river to set up shop in the parking lot there.” He was grinning from ear to ear over this little success.

“Well, that makes life around here a lot easier.” I smiled back, sharing his success. “What’s on tap for today, anything new?”

“Press conference at ten. Miguel Parada died overnight. We’re going to play it as being due to injuries from the fire and all, just to keep whoever beat him up off balance. But it’s new news, and that’ll give that school of sharks something to justify their existence for a while.” Fran shook his head. “Poor guy. The only survivor of that awful fire, and he gets killed for the heck of it by some local yahoo.”

Angela spoke up. “Did the hospital tell you a cause of death? Was it that knife wound?”

“They’re saying it was probably the head injuries. George will do an autopsy, though, so we’ll have an official cause later today. Along with, I hope, those DNA results he promised.”

“Is Janelle handling the press conference?” I had my fingers crossed that there wouldn’t be any need for a CBI presence.

“Right. I’m going to pay attention to all the other county stuff that’s going on. And I’m thinking maybe we ought to see if we can make some discreet inquiries in the local Hispanic community about all this.” Fran looked at Angela.

“My job for sure, sheriff. I’ll need a car, though. Probably an unmarked one would be better.” Angela had that official “let’s get to work” tone.

“Are you OK with using your car?” I looked at her and she nodded. “Good. I’ll run you back to your place, and then I think I’ll pay a little visit to that feed store where Stick Murcheson works. That all right, Fran?”

“Check him out, eh? Good idea. I’ll be interested in your impressions.” Fran couldn’t hide his smile.

Angela and I discussed strategy on the way back to Fraser. She was going undercover, essentially, into what could be a risky situation. Even though she was confident of her ability to handle whatever might come up, I was concerned. The local Hispanic community had all sorts of internal factions, and it would be easy for her to run into the wrong bunch.

“Have you thought about where to start?” I didn’t want to undermine her confidence, but I wanted to minimize her risk.

“Well, I thought I might stop by that arcade up in Winter Park, where the teenager got beat up. See who’s there, maybe ask some questions.” She shrugged. “Maybe that’ll lead to the next place.”

“Good idea, although you need to be very careful there. Another possibility is with a home cleaning service I know about. We stayed in a guest house belonging to one of Hal’s rich friends when we first moved here, and their service took care of us. We had Norteño housecleaners. That would be a group you wouldn’t be threatened by, I’d think, and they could point you in other directions. Maybe give you some tips about who hates whom and why.”

She looked surprised. “Norteños? Really? I wonder if any of my cousins are up here. Small world. And you’re right, that would be the place to start—I didn’t know about that lead. Thanks.”

I suddenly felt embarrassed. “Uh, I don’t mean to, you know, act like your mother or anything. But things have been rough up here for a few months now, and you’re new on the scene.”

She laughed. “Are you kidding? My mother? She’d be so preoccupied with the fact that Sandy and I are shackled up that she wouldn’t be able to think about anything else. Besides, you’re right. I really don’t have any background on what’s going on here. I don’t need to go blundering about, either getting myself in trouble or scaring off potential sources of information.”

I provided contact information for the housecleaning service, and we agreed that she would call me with a progress report around noon. After I let her off by her car I turned back toward Granby, trying to

decide on an excuse to go into the feed store and chat up the help. It came to me just after I passed the turnoff to Cottonwood Pass, when I drove by a little ranch where a half dozen horses were loafing around a stock tank.

Granby Grain was—dare I say it?—a seedy-looking place on the northwest end of town, next to the railroad tracks sandwiched between other non-tourist businesses in what passed for the industrial zone. The parking lot in front was occupied by a couple of battered, working pickup trucks and a shiny new red one with an extended cab, dual rear wheels, and all sorts of chrome. They made my Outback seem out of place. At the last minute, I remembered to leave my CBI ball cap in the car.

Inside, it smelled like a feed store, dusty and, well, fertile, somehow. There were sacks of various kinds of animal food piled everywhere, and a small section with a variety of esoteric ranching implements took up space by the window.

The clerk behind the counter looked up from his magazine when I walked in. “Help you, ma’am?”

I smiled at him. “Yes, well, I have some questions about horses, and a friend recommended I speak with a Mr. Murcheson. Is he here?”

“Sure is.” He turned toward the rear of the store. “Yo! Stick! Gotta customer with questions. Up front!”

One thing we do in law enforcement is to describe people, to notice and categorize features, and to size them up, literally. This is something that I have years of experience with. Mostly, though, we do this with people who fall into some kind of average category. Very small people present problems when it comes to estimating height and weight, because we just don’t run across that many. And the same applies to very large people.

I’m therefore not certain that my estimate of 6’10” and 400 pounds for Stick Murcheson is quite accurate. But it doesn’t matter, because whatever the actual numbers, this was one huge fellow. I was forewarned by the size of the shirt we’d retrieved from the drycleaner’s, but the seeing him in person was even more impressive.

Obviously, his nickname came from his younger years, when he was a skinny kid. But in his middle twenties, bulked up, he was overwhelmingly large and intimidating, even dressed in the white short-sleeved shirt and tie. Although he was trying to dress for his new job, he’d already sweated through the shirt, and the tie appeared to be choking him.

“Stick Murcheson, Assistant Manager, ma’am. How can I help you?” He wiped his hands on his jeans before sticking out his massive right one for a handshake, a surprisingly gentle handshake, it turned out.

“Mr. Murcheson, someone told me you were the person to ask about something I’ve been thinking about. My husband and I bought some property, several dozen acres above Fraser, and we’re thinking about horses. But we want to make sure we know what we’re getting into. So I’d like some advice on how much they eat, what costs are involved, and all that sort of thing. I mean, we both know how to ride, but we’ve never had horses of our own. I wouldn’t know what to feed one, for example, except, you know, hay and oats.” I tried to look earnest.

“Well, ma’am, you’ve come to the right place. Let me show you some of our products for horses.” And he launched into an educated-sounding sales pitch for a variety of horsie things.

But I pretty much had him tuned out, because I’d seen what I’d come to see, the backs of his hands. All of his knuckles were scabbed over, and his left pinkie was taped, sticking out straight.

Mr. Murcheson had been involved in serious fisticuffs in recent days.

* * *

It took me a half hour to escape gracefully, during which time I took enough notes about amounts and prices to seem credible as a potential customer. And even though I had tuned him out, enough of his pitch soaked in so that I learned that, despite being enchanted by them, I really didn't want to own horses. Given all the things that can go wrong, I had no doubt that I'd wind up with a dead horse in short order and a guilty conscience on top of that.

Back in my car, I took a minute to think about my next move. It was getting on toward lunch time, but that was still too soon to expect DNA results from Denver. Arresting Stick based only on bloody knuckles and hearsay testimony from a reluctant witness seemed premature. But Parada's death would likely be all over the mid-day news on Denver TV, and that could put a scare into him, even if the cause were reported to be fire-related. On balance, it seemed best to wait. I knew where he lived and where he worked, after all.

I decided that catching the noon news was a priority for me, because there would undoubtedly be some video of Janelle's press conference. I wanted to see how the story was being spun on the Denver stations. The Long Branch, the restaurant where Angela and I had met with Wendy Wallenstein, had televisions, I remembered.

I arrived early enough to beat the local lunch crowd and so was able to get a table to watch the news on a TV at the back of the main room. Angela was due to call at noon or thereabouts, and I needed to check in with Fran and report the condition of Mr. Murcheson's knuckles. I remembered how much Wendy had liked her soup, once she'd gotten started, so I ordered that.

The soup arrived, Angela called, and the TV news report about the news conference came on all at once, so I was busy there for a minute. Rather than put Angela off, I gave her a blow-by-blow of the news story, in which Janelle reported that the sole survivor of the fire, who had driven away from the scene in a Forest Service truck that was later recovered, had been found injured a short distance away and had subsequently died from head injuries apparently suffered at the fire scene. I was certain that Janelle had her hands full of questions after that statement—any reporter with even half a brain would be all over the truck business—but the news report cut back to the talking head. There was no mention of a cover-up, just that the investigation was proceeding.

Angela was as relieved as I was by the spin of the news report, and she had news of her own. The housecleaning agency had been most cooperative, and Angela had managed to talk with a Northern New Mexico couple who was on staff. I asked and found that it was not the same people who had cleaned the house Hal and I had stayed in.

They told Angela that the intra-Hispanic bad blood was troubling to everyone but that no one knew how to put an end to it. There were cultural issues between people from Mexico and from Central America that they didn't fully understand, and everyone from south of the border was hugely jealous of the Norteños' US citizenship. The bad blood extended throughout the Hispanic community and even included the children.

They also provided Angela with a helpful list of the places the various groups liked to congregate for social purposes, and, based on Miguel Parada's driver's license, she was going to see if the Mexican community could help with the identification of the victims of the fire.

Once I assimilated all this and ate my soup, I called Fran.

"I saw part of Janelle's press conference, just a little bit, her statement, and I thought she came across well." I saw my server emerge from the kitchen and waved at her.

“Better than me, that’s for sure. I was there, at the back of the room, and she handled the questions like a real pro, too.” He sounded relieved.

“It must have worked, because there was no particular spin on the story that I could pick up. Nothing like that Fox business yesterday.” I pointed at pecan pie and coffee on the menu, and she nodded.

I filled Fran in about Angela’s progress and reported the state of Murcheson’s hands, which elicited a low whistle.

“And the guy died, from head injuries according to the hospital. I’d say that Stick’s in serious trouble.”

“Have you heard from George about the DNA?” I suspected it was still too soon, but asking seemed like the thing to do.

Fran sighed. “No, but he said it ought to be ready sometime this afternoon. I’m also putting the autopsy on high priority. Do you think that Stick has any inkling about what’s going on?”

“Not that I could tell. I used a cover story—horses and horse feed—and that seemed to persuade him I was a real customer.” The coffee arrived, and I took a sip. “It didn’t seem like I had a good enough reason to arrest him on the spot.”

“Probably not. But if we get a DNA match, we’ll get a warrant in a flash. I’ll send my biggest deputy and have him take a Taser, no, two.” Fran chuckled. “Stick’s a big boy, isn’t he?”

“And he seemed nice, all in all. But carrying that much weight around isn’t going to let him live very long, even in prison.” The pie arrived, so I dug in.

“Will I see you back here soon? Janelle wants to get together to go over her, ah, performance. She’s always wanting to improve.”

“I’ll head back right after I finish lunch. I’m in Granby, so it shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

My server saw that I was finished with the pie and held up her order book, so I nodded. The check arrived, and I paid in cash with a big tip—the cost of living in eastern Grand County was far outpacing service industry wages, and I always tried to help a little.

There were restrooms in a back hallway, I noticed, so I went in to wash up. But as I came out and turned toward the main room, a large hand was clamped over my mouth from behind and an arm wrapped itself around my torso.

I struggled and tried a couple of the standard tricks—a heel kick to the groin, which didn’t connect with anything, a stomp on an instep, which did but to no effect—whoever had hold of me was very big and very strong. Before I knew what had happened, really, I was dragged out a back door at the end of the hallway, where a large, bright red dually pickup truck was sitting, diesel engine idling.

Then the lights went out.

* * *

Ten

Fran Schmidt's county, spread across an area of Colorado's high country almost the size of the state of Delaware, was a law-enforcement challenge. Most of the action and money was east of Hot Sulphur Springs, the county seat, because the Fraser and upper Colorado River valleys contained the ski areas, the lakes, the western entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, and nearly all of the new development. To the west was more the traditional western economy based on ranching, mining, and timber. So the sheriff's department dealt with drugs and similar big-city problems over half of its jurisdiction and cut fences, trespassing, and other such rural issues over the other half.

When the Colorado Bureau of Investigation had finally granted his request for a presence in the county the previous winter and Annette Trieri had turned up, he really didn't know what to expect. But it was working out for everyone. Now that she had a deputy, a Spanish-speaking one at that, Fran was optimistic about the future.

Although he had an election coming up in the fall, he really hadn't given it much thought. Depending on the timing of the resolution of this Valley of Death case, he could either be the hero or the goat, he knew, and there was any number of unpredictable things that could sway voters at the last minute. But overall he was confident that his approach to law enforcement worked for Grand County and that the voters would recognize this with another term for his leadership.

His Thursday morning was busy, but the fact that he had such good people working for and with him helped a lot. Janelle Kennedy's outstanding job at the morning's press conference was but one example.

That reminded him: the issue of notification of kin was still hanging out there. Janelle had dodged the questions about the victim's identity using the standard excuse that the family hadn't been notified yet. But because they had Parada's driver's license, they had information available to do just that. Except the family was in Monterrey Mexico, and a simple phone call didn't seem appropriate. Maybe, Fran thought, there's a Mexican consulate in Denver.

It turned out to be easy to find, and, when he called, he was greeted in Spanish by an automated answering voice followed by a "For English press 2" instruction. Grateful for the choice, he did.

This time it was a real person. "Good morning, Consulate of the Republic of Mexico."

It took some explaining, but finally he was connected to someone with the right credentials to be helpful. But the situation was still confusing.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Sheriff Schmidt. You say that this Miguel Parada has a Cuban passport?"

"Yes, but he has a Mexican driver's license with a Monterrey address, and pictures of family. So I'm assuming that he lives with family in Monterrey. They should be notified, and that's where your office comes in. I think. I mean, it seems better if your office handles this notification than if our State Department does, or if I just call down there, you see?" Fran was resolved to be a patient as necessary to get the job done.

"I think so, but shouldn't you also contact the Cuban embassy? Oh, wait, maybe there isn't one. Well, there's some kind of Cuban diplomatic office somewhere, isn't there?"

"Candidly, I'm not at all concerned about the Cuban connection. I'm concerned about this poor guy's family. They should be told about this in some official way." There's also the issue of claiming the body and so on, Fran thought. The next bridge to cross.

"Yes, of course, you're right. Hmm. I'll have to see what to do. Is there a cause of death we can provide?"

Fran hesitated. “Well, the hospital believes it to be a head injury, but the official autopsy will be later today. We’ll know more then. Now, I don’t know if you have followed the local news recently, but Señor Parada’s death is part of a bigger issue. Have you heard about the fire we had here in Grand County, the fire that’s being called the Valley of Death?”

“Oh, yes, *El Valle del Muerte*, indeed. This Miguel Parada was connected with that?”

“Yes, he was found at the scene with a head injury. He stole a truck and disappeared, then was found with fatal injuries. But I bring this up because the victims in the *El Valle* may have been Mexican nationals. Everything was burned in the fire, so we haven’t been able to verify anything yet. We do have two vehicle identification numbers, from the burned frames of trucks. We haven’t been able to locate those numbers on any US databases. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to check in Mexico?” Fran was hopeful that such things existed.

“I see. If he lived in Monterrey, it’s possible that he was there with others from the same region. If you can fax me the numbers, I can have them checked on.” The voice was troubled, Fran could tell.

Relieved, Fran made a note of the fax number he heard. “Thank you, that will be most helpful. I’ll also fax you the documentation we found on Señor Parada’s body. Perhaps that will also help.”

“It will, thank you very much. I’ll be getting back to you.”

Well, Fran thought, that was pretty easy. This next one probably won’t be. He dug out an list of obscure emergency telephone numbers he had assembled when he was new to the job.

“US Department of State. How can I direct your call?”

“This is Sheriff Fran Schmidt, Grand County Colorado. I need to speak with James T. Green, please.” As he waited, Fran hoped that Green was still in his old job, because he didn’t know who else to ask for.

“Jim Green here. What can I do for you, Sheriff Schmidt?”

“Mr. Green, I have a dead Cuban national on my hands. We haven’t yet determined if it’s an accidental death or a homicide, and there are various complications that you probably aren’t interested in. For one thing, this person, a Miguel Parada, was carrying a Cuban passport, but he also had a Mexican driver’s license and family pictures. It appears he emigrated to Mexico but kept his Cuban citizenship. As far as we can tell, he was in this country illegally, probably with a group of guest workers from Mexico.” Fran wondered what kind of reaction that would elicit.”

“You don’t know if it’s an accidental death or a homicide. Hmm. Do you know cause of death?” Green had the cautious tone of a second- or third-generation bureaucrat.

“The autopsy is later today, but the preliminary indication is a head injury. He was the only survivor of a group of people who perished in a forest fire. It appears he hit his head on a rock. But the autopsy will provide an official determination.” Fran heard the clicking of a computer keyboard in the background.

“Well, I don’t find any Miguel Parada on any of my watch lists, so that simplifies matters. Have you informed anyone else?” It sounded to Fran as if the tone was asking if he’d started an international incident.

“The Mexican Consulate in Denver, to get the family notification process started. Should I call whatever offices Cuba maintains in the US? Is there an embassy?”

“No, but there are offices. But, you know, I think the best approach to this is to treat the guy as if he’s Mexican, at least unless the Mexican government bows out. If he’s got family there, they’ll want

the body, probably, and if they get it then it's out of our hair completely. The Mexicans can deal with Cuba." Green sounded pleased with himself.

It felt to Fran like passing the buck, but he sure didn't want to deal with the Cuban government, and he completely understood why Green wouldn't want to either.

Talk about starting an international incident.

* * *

It was getting on toward lunch time, and Fran was wondering what Mary had made him. Last night's dinner didn't have leftovers, he remembered, so it would be a sandwich of some kind. But just as he was about to fetch it from the refrigerator in the copy room, the phone rang. Annette informed him that she had surreptitiously interviewed Stick Murcheson and observed lesions on the backs of his hands. With Parada dead, Stick was in deep. If the DNA results from Denver implicated him further, it would be time for an arrest warrant.

That meant that it was time to call Simon Murcheson, Sr. He and Fran weren't on the best of terms, but Fran depended on Murcheson's good will to keep his department functional, given that one of Murcheson's county commissioner roles was budget oversight of the sheriff's office. But this wasn't a case of sucking up to a politician, because Murcheson, Sr. had lost his Junior to the black widow killer. Having his remaining son in trouble with the law the way Stick was would break his heart. Fran empathized and wanted to deliver the bad news personally.

Fran knew that it would be better to do this face-to-face, but Annette was due soon and Murcheson lived on a ranch near Kremmling. So it was going to have to be a phone call. But his stomach reminded Fran that lunch was waiting.

He reached Murcheson after downing a wonderful home-made meatloaf sandwich. The connection sounded like a cell phone near the edge of its coverage, and there was the sound of lowing cattle and the creak of leather in the background. Simon, Fran thought, is moving his herd.

"Simon? Fran Schmidt. Sounds like you're busy."

"I can move cattle in my sleep, sheriff. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm afraid I've got some bad news about Randall." Fran knew that Stick's parents never did like his nickname. "I'm not sure just how bad yet, but it'll be at least a little bad. I thought I ought to let you know before it all comes to a head."

Fran listened patiently to a string of expletives, some aimed at him, some at Stick, some at the cattle or the world in general, it was hard to tell. When Murcheson wound down, Fran explained the situation and made sure that Murcheson understood the gravity of the worst case scenario.

"It's all going to depend on the autopsy results, Simon, and that's in progress now. If the cause of death is the head injuries from the beating, well, then it's homicide. I don't think there would be a case for murder one, but any kind of homicide charge is serious, as you know." Fran held his breath, waiting for the explosion.

But Murcheson was surprisingly calm. Sad, even. "Ah, Jesus, Fran. You think you raise your kids right and then something like this happens. I guess all I can do is hope for a different cause of death. What then? Will there still be an assault charge? Sounds like the evidence is circumstantial, and the victim won't be able to testify."

“Not my call, Simon. I’m thinking we’re probably going to have to bring him in, though. I’ll make sure you know when we do that and keep you informed about the bail situation and so on. That’s the best I can do, I’m afraid.” Fran hoped it would be good enough.

“I understand, Fran, and I appreciate it. And thanks for the call. I think I’ll have to throw my phone in the lake so I don’t call A.D. and try to influence him.” Murcheson’s reference to A.D. Sonos, the district attorney, served as a reminder to Fran that other forces would be at work in the resolution of the case.

Annette had still not arrived. Well, Fran thought, she must have gotten tied up somewhere. Maybe I can knock off some of this damned email.

Like everyone else in the world, Fran was the lucky recipient of more email spam than real messages. Unlike those more fortunate, he didn’t have spam filtering on his official email box. It was available, and the county information management people urged him to use it. But he didn’t trust it to deliver everything he wanted delivered. As sheriff, he received some strange emails from some truly odd addresses, and every time he’d tried to use the filter, some important messages got filtered out.

Of course, that meant simply that the spam filter for Sheriff Fran Schmidt’s mailbox was Sheriff Fran Schmidt himself. So much of it was obviously bogus that he could simply trash it without reading it. And, because he’d discovered that the spam ran in cycles and that there were periodic floods associated with new tricks invented by the spammers, he was able to learn to separate the wheat from the chaff quickly.

But if there were this much chaff on my farm, he thought, I’d go into another line of work.

And, like everyone, he occasionally ran across something that was legally questionable, something that, as sheriff, he would forward to the appropriate place. Kiddie porn solicitations, for example—he sent them to an FBI address set up for that purpose and kept his fingers crossed that the feds would catch the slimy bastards.

Wading through the day’s haul, he ran across the usual questions about the size of his manhood and suggestions about how to improve matters, a range of hot stock tips, and a variety of innocent, even authentic, sounding subject headings that were really solicitations for one of those two categories or maybe new girlie pictures. He had figured out the trick of highlighting groups of mail headers without opening the messages, so he was quite adept at trashing large numbers of bogus messages quickly. And trash he did, with vehemence, until a subject line reading “The Deadly Valley” stopped him cold.

It was dated early that morning, and the sender had a *hotmail.com* address, meaning it was probably sent anonymously and could be anyone, anywhere. Fran moved it to his “Pending” folder and continued his culling process.

After trashing about 50 messages a good spam filter would have caught and dealing with 5 authentic messages, Fran returned to his “Pending” folder. The only message was the one he’d put there earlier. It had no attachments indicated, and Fran was confident of his anti-virus and -spyware software, so he opened it.

Sheriff— The whole thing was a tragic accident. Those poor people were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing like that was ever meant to happen. I’m so sorry. Mortified.

It took Fran a minute to decide that “Mortified” was the *nom de plume* of the sender. The mail address was *razzmatazz975468@hotmail.com*, which sounded as if might be a one-use temporary address, but Fran decided a response was worth a try.

If you're truly “Mortified”, helping us clear this case will make you feel better. We are most interested in the identities of the victims. A good explanation of the behavior of the fire would also be welcome. Fran Schmidt.

PS: Only I open my email, so you can consider this correspondence to be confidential.

He pushed the “Send” button and held his breath for a few seconds. When the system didn’t send an immediate “undeliverable” message, he felt better. Maybe, he thought, this will lead somewhere. Lord knows we need all the help we can get.

* * *

Eleven

I awoke with a headache, to find myself lying on my side with my hands tied in front of me and a burlap bag over my head and upper torso. It smelled of feed store. I was stretched out enough that I seemed to be on the back seat of that red pickup truck, facing the seat back, which I could feel my face pressing against. The truck was on the move, purring along a paved roadway, it felt and sounded like.

Deja vu washed over me, quickly resolving to the other time this sort of thing had happened. At least those guys, I thought, didn’t knock me out, and the bag they used was velvet. Or maybe soft wool flannel of some kind, I couldn’t remember. Not nearly so itchy.

This time my head hurt, but I knew I had to ignore that. Of the two courses of action I could think of, passivity and trying to take charge somehow, taking charge, or at least trying to, seemed worth a shot. I took a couple of breaths and cleared my throat to make way for my Level Three Command Voice, as Hal likes to call it.

“Mr. Murcheson! Do you have any idea at all how much trouble you’ve made for yourself?”

I waited for what seemed like a full minute but got no response. Finally, I decided I had his attention, probably, and toned it down a little.

“I’m going to assume you can hear me, that you don’t have earphones on or something like that. And I’ll also assume that you’re aware that what you’ve done here constitutes kidnapping. Is this something you do to all your customers, or what?”

That got his attention for sure, because there came a snort from behind me. “Jesus, lady, how stupid do you think I am, anyway? I was sitting right behind you in the Long Branch, and I heard everything you said on the phone. Jesus.”

That, at least, explained a lot for me. “Then you know that you’ve kidnapped a police officer, a state police officer, as it happens. Like I said, do you have any idea of how much trouble you’ve made for yourself?”

“Lady, you’re my ticket *out* of trouble. I heard that TV report, about how that greaser I stomped died. And you were in the feed store checking me out before. Well, you may think I’m just a big, dumb ex-jock or something, but surprise, surprise. Look who’s in charge now. That big dumb ex-jock. And like I said, you’re my ticket out of trouble. It so happens I know who you are, from the black widow case. And the sheriff ain’t going to be letting a Colorado Bureau of Investigation VIP get herself hurt, no way.”

I eased my Voice back a little more, trying to sound just a little conciliatory yet still rock-solid firm.

“Mr. Murcheson. Stick. Listen carefully. Sheriff Schmidt will have no say in the matter. We have unshakeable policy not to meet kidnapper demands, any demands of any kind, in situations such as this. When you call, or write or whatever you do, and try to make a deal, you’ll get no cooperation whatsoever. That’s the way we work these things. No cooperation whatsoever. The only way out of this for you is to try to minimize your legal exposure. And to do that you need to untie me, right now, no more screwing around, and drive us both to Hot Sulphur. The longer this goes on like this, the worse it’s going to be for you. I hope you understand me.”

“Don’t bullshit me. Murder is way worse than kidnapping. And I don’t believe you. They’ll negotiate. You’re too important for them not to.” Did I hear just a hint of uncertainty in his voice?

“So far, we can’t prove murder, Stick. We can prove, circumstantially and with hearsay testimony, that you beat up that poor guy, yeah. And he died. But he did indeed have a head injury yesterday, long before you picked him up. For all we know, he may have died from that. Or from delayed effects of exposure. He was unconscious and lying in a mountain stream most of the night. So we can’t prove murder. But we sure as hell can prove kidnapping, and like I said, the only way you can keep this from spinning completely out of control is to untie me and drive us to Hot Sulphur. You do that and I’ll testify to your good-faith actions. That’ll help you. Anything else, though, will only hurt you more.”

I felt and heard the truck slowing down, and then it veered to what seemed to be the left. I could tell at once that we’d turned onto a gravel road, and it seemed to be climbing. A little gamble couldn’t hurt, I thought.

“Oh, Stick, *really*? Are you taking me to your place? C’mon, man. Now it’s my turn. How stupid do you think the sheriff is, anyway? This is the first place he’ll look.”

“Shut up! I’ve gotta think.” I realized he had a Command Voice of his own.

“Well, while you’re thinking just remember, we can’t prove murder, as far as I know. That means this kidnapping is by far the worst thing you’ve done, and, like I said, I can help with that.”

“Shut up, dammit!”

We bumped along the gravel road for a while and then seemed to come over a crest, for all of a sudden we were descending. I felt myself slipping off the seat little by little. And the road worsened, so that the big truck was pitching about as it eased down the hill.

“My daddy’s a county commissioner, you know. He’ll help me out of this.” Now the uncertainty in his voice was obvious.

“Not with kidnapping he won’t. Maybe with the assault he could, though. I don’t really know how these things work in Grand County.” That, of course, was a bald-faced lie, but I figured he wouldn’t know that. “Stick, if you want to help yourself, you need to untie me and drive us to Hot Sulphur.”

“Well, what about if I take you back to the Long Branch and we just pretend this never happened?” Now he was in the pleading mode, almost. My original attempt to take charge had finally worked!

“Hmm.” Playing along was the obvious course of action, but I knew it couldn’t be too easy. “Well, that might work. But I’m not certain, because maybe someone saw you putting me in the truck and called it in. Or maybe the sheriff’s office is looking for me and has already found my car—they knew where I was having lunch. What I mean is, you and I could pretend it never happened, but it might not be in our control any more. That’s why I think you should untie me and drive us to Hot Sulphur Springs, to the sheriff’s office.”

He didn’t say anything more, but shortly the truck lurched to a stop and then jockeyed back and forth to reverse direction. I could tell because at the end of the jockeying I was sliding into the seatback again, meaning we were heading back uphill.

But instead of climbing the hill, the truck stopped and the engine was turned off. I heard a door slam.

* * *

Lying there inside the burlap bag, it was difficult for me to tell how much time passed. It couldn’t have been too long, but it sure seemed like an eternity. Eventually, the door opened and the truck’s suspension shifted with new weight. The door slammed, the engine started, and up the bumpy hill we went. After a while, we were over the crest and headed back down.

Finally, after we were back on pavement again, he spoke. “OK. So. We’ve gotta make a deal. You’ve gotta promise me you’ll forget this ever happened, right?” His pleading had an undercurrent of resolution this time.

“Stick, weren’t you listening? I can’t promise that this will work. The sheriff may already be looking for me.”

“I’ll take my chances on that one. We’re heading back to the Long Branch, and you’ve gotta promise me. You said you would.”

Actually, I hadn’t, but I wasn’t going to push it. “Stick, I can promise I’ll just forget the whole thing, sure, but I can’t promise you’ll get off scot-free. I don’t make promises I can’t keep. It isn’t fair.”

“Well, like I said, I’ll take my chances with others. I just want your promise. Do you?”

“I said ‘sure’ didn’t I? And I meant it.” I summoned up an authentic-sounding sneeze. “So now that you’re going to let me go and we’re going to forget this happened, do you suppose you could take this bag off my head? I think I’m having an allergic reaction or something.”

But instead of slowing, I felt the truck speed up.

“It won’t be too long. We’re pretty close,” was all he said.

I could tell when we reached Granby because of the stop sign and subsequent left turn, and then after a little while we turned left again, into the Long Branch, I guessed, because the truck came to a stop on gravel.

“OK, now, you’re gonna forget this ever happened, right? And here’s what’s gonna happen now. I’m gonna put your shoulder bag, with the piece in it and keys and everything, on the ground next to your car. The Outback, right?” He was talking fast, and I treated his questions as rhetorical. “Then I’m gonna drive over to the other side of the parking lot and untie your hands and set you on the ground on your feet, and I’m outta here. You can take that bag off and walk back to your car, but I won’t be around by then.”

“Where are you going?”

“None of your damned business, lady. And don’t come looking for me, because you promised.”

A door opened and slammed again, and we moved a little way before coming to a stop. The same door, it sounded like, opened, and then another. I felt myself being turned on my back, and I resisted the urge to kick out. Then I was lifted bodily and set on my feet on the gravel, and my hands were untied. I guess I should have been grateful that he didn’t try to grope me in the process.

“OK, I’m leaving. You can take that bag off. Uh, it’s sort of tied with a drawstring in the front.”

As I fumbled with the string, an awkward thing to do because the bottom of the bag was drawn tight around my elbows, I heard the truck door slam and the tires spin on the gravel as it roared away. I couldn’t tell for sure, but it sounded like it turned left, southbound, headed for Fraser, Winter Park, and eventually Denver.

I got the bag off my head and looked around, squinting in the sunlight. No one was there, though, so Stick had managed to let me off with no witnesses. And because he grabbed me in the back hallway and put me in the truck behind the building, there were probably no witnesses then, either.

Maybe, I thought, this bag with “Granby Grain” stenciled on it will count for something.

True to his word, Stick had left my shoulder bag, with everything in it including my Glock, sitting next to my car. I fished out the keys and my cell phone, and hit the right speed-dial keys.

“Fran? Annette.”

“I thought you were coming right back here. What’s going on?” He sounded half worried, half annoyed.

“I’m on my way right now. I had a little, ah, detour. I’ll tell you about it when I get there. Meanwhile, I think that Stick Murcheson is in his red truck headed southbound on US 40. If you have anyone south of Granby, they should stop him, arrest him for assault and kidnapping, and bring him in. I don’t know if he’s armed, but he’s so damned big he’s for sure dangerous.”

By then I was behind the wheel and moving. I turned right out of the parking lot, making my own little spray of gravel, from all four wheels. I fear I broke any number of speed laws getting back to Hot Sulphur Springs.

When I arrived, I went straight to Fran’s office. He looked up, surprised to see me so soon, I guess.

“Well, you look a sight. Whatever happened? I’m guessing he kidnapped you, based on that phone call.” His surprise changed quickly to worry.

“Indeed he did. He overheard our conversation before and decided to use me to bargain his way out of the murder charge.” I realized I had dust on my face and grabbed a tissue to wipe it off.

“That’s not going to do it, Annette. What did he do, throw you in a feed bin or something? That looks like rabbit chow in your hair.” Now he was smiling.

“He put a sack over my head. This one.” And I plopped the burlap bag on his desk. “Be right back.”

Ten minutes later, I was feeling much better, pretty clean even, with no more rabbit chow in my hair. I returned to Fran’s office and fell into a chair.

“Much better. And I bet you feel better, too. And this should help: we got him, up by Snow Mountain Ranch. He didn’t even make it to Tabernash. Looks like he was planning on a long trip, as he had a big pile of clothes and some other stuff in the passenger seat.” Fran shook his head. “I kind of feel sorry for the guy. According to your interview notes, Wendy said he just got a promotion. My deputy says it’s a brand new truck. He was on something of a roll, and now he’s crashed and burned. How’d you persuade him to let you go?”

I tried to relax a little. “Well, first I told him that we don’t have proof of murder. And that’s really true, isn’t it? Even if the autopsy shows that the cause of death was the head injuries, Parada had a lump on his head from something that happened up at the fire scene. A good lawyer would be all over that. Anyway, that persuaded him that he didn’t need me as a bargaining chip. And then I pretended to promise him that he could drop me off at my car and I’d just forget the whole thing. So he did. Even gave my Glock back. And you’re right. It’s easy to feel sorry for him.”

“That explains it.” He nodded. “My deputy, Roger Traubman, was saying that Stick kept repeating ‘but she promised’ over and over.”

“But I really didn’t. Too bad there’s no transcript. Anyway, I’ll swear out a complaint, and that way we’ll have him in custody pending the autopsy. How’s George doing?”

“Last I heard, he was just getting started. He should be done in a couple of hours, I guess. And maybe that blankety-blank DNA result will come in. Do you really think Stick can avoid a murder charge if there’s a match?” Fran looked puzzled.

“I think it’ll all depend on the head injuries. The first one was in the back, as I recall, like Parada hit his head on a rock. The others from the beating are on the sides and in front. We’ll see what George says. But there’s certainly assault and battery, maybe assault with a deadly weapon if the knife turns up, and now assault on a police officer and kidnapping of a police officer. Stick’s in deep, deep shit, I’d say, even if his daddy is a county commissioner.” Suddenly I felt tired. “I’m headed for my office, I think.”

“Go home, Annette. You look beat. We can criticize Janelle’s acting tomorrow.”

“Right. That’s a better idea. See you tomorrow. Oh. Angela. She’s out doing interviews and is supposed to call me. I’ll be sure to let you know if anything comes up.”

I hurried through the complaint forms and left for home a little later. On the way, I decided to call Hal to see about dinner plans, but I only got his voice mail.

“... please leave a message, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. And in the meantime, I hope you’re having a great day.”

You owe me one for that, buddy, I thought.

* * *

Twelve

Despite his laid-back demeanor and outwardly casual approach to just about everything, George Neering was a classic workaholic. He spent far more time in his office and in the morgue than he did at home, making it a good thing he had never married. And when he wasn’t working on an active case, he was reading and studying the latest techniques and developments in his field as well as writing his own refinements up for publication. As a result, he had a surprisingly long list of technical articles to his name and had received several awards from his professional societies.

If his boss, the district attorney, and the local law enforcement establishment had any idea of how many big-city job offers, at what huge salaries, he had turned down, they would be embarrassed by their treatment of him. But he was happy in his little world of work and delighted to be living in Grand County.

He'd been delighted to be living in Grand County, in fact, ever since he'd arrived from the West Coast in a beat-up Porsche Speedster in the early '70s. He had used his freshly minted MD degree to get a job at the only clinic in the area and shopped for land. Where he got the money to purchase outright nearly two square miles on a mountainside southwest of Granby was something that he was always extremely vague about. Even back then that was quite a bit of cash.

In the intervening years, of course, the value of that land had skyrocketed. Around the turn of the century George had made a deal with an environmentally sensitive developer—an oxymoron, to be sure, but George had him checked out carefully—to turn one and a half of the square miles into an exclusive subdivision. It would include only as many lots as the land could reasonably carry and ownership of one of those lots came with restrictions and covenants designed to preserve as much of the native ecosystems as possible. George made millions and promptly got the old Speedster completely restored. Mostly, he drove a battered, fifteen-year-old Subaru wagon, but the Speedster came out when the weather was good.

He kept the other 300-plus acres for himself, living in a modest cabin at the end of the road that wound through the new subdivision onto his land. He used some of his money to hire local high-school students to build a log fence, made from lodge-pole pines he thinned from his land, around the property. When the bark-beetle invasion killed so many of the trees in Grand County forests, George's already thinned stands fared relatively well. Meanwhile, the fence didn't do much but allow him to post prominent "No Hunting" signs, because it was designed so that elk, deer, moose, and everything else in the woods could walk right through it.

His job at the clinic lasted had only as long as it took for something more interesting than fixing skiers' bunged-up knees came along, and eventually that led to the office of the medical examiner. When he was finally promoted to head that office, there were plenty of skeptics in county government, but his skills, dedication, and innovations had won everyone over. George had made himself truly indispensable.

But he still felt left out. His job, after all, was cleaning up the mess, in a sense. Bodies arrived from around the region—he was so good that other western Colorado counties used him, too—and he figured out what had happened. What he wanted was to be in on the action at an earlier stage.

That explained the glee with which he took on the task of obtaining the DNA analyses associated with the Miguel Parada assault and, eventually, death. It also explained why he had been nagging the lab in Denver for results, results, results!

The autopsy itself gave the people in Denver a respite from the nagging for a couple of hours, but as soon as he was finished, George called. Again. His persistent affability finally paid off. He wandered off, head nodding to the internal rhythm he carried around, to the sheriff's office.

George arrived just in time to overhear the end of a telephone conversation.

"Simon, I'm sorry. If he hadn't pulled this stunt, well, maybe this could all wind up OK. But, c'mon, even here in Grand County where we try to act like family, we can't have police officers' being kidnapped ... I don't know about the assault charge, maybe she'll drop that. But I'm going to insist on prosecuting the kidnapping charge. I've got to protect my officers ... No, I'm hard over on that one, sorry. I'll let you know when bail is set." Fran was staring at the telephone in disgust when George walked through the door.

George decided on the spot to pretend he hadn't heard. "Hey, there, Fran. Got some info for ya. Results I bet you've been waiting for."

It wasn't clear whether it was George's cheery disposition or the prospect of results, but Fran smiled. "I'm all ears, George. Results from you are good news, by definition."

George had to laugh. “Yeah, well, man, I sure wish everyone felt that way. Anyway, I got two things. First, the DNA all matches. Sample from the vic’s clothes matches the sample from perp’s shirt matches the vic’s blood sample, although that’s a bit more complicated. But they all match.”

“And, so you’ll know, Annette found that Stick Murcheson has lesions on the backs of his hands, as if he’d been in a fight. So that’s all consistent. What else?” Fran nodded.

“OK, well, second, the person whose body was delivered to my morgue by the hospital in Kremmling, identified as one Miguel Parada by documents found on him, died from head injuries. He also had a knife wound in his left side, just below the rib cage, but cause of death was the head injuries.”

George could tell that he had all of Fran’s attention, and he passed Fran several photographs before continuing.

“There were multiple head injuries, one to the back of the skull with some bone damage, and several to the facial area with extensive fractures. See that?” He pointed to a picture Fran was examining.

“These were consistent with a beating. The injury on the back of the skull, however, was consistent with blunt trauma. It’s in the third picture. I think I heard something about a fall up at that *Valle del Muerte* site. My determination of cause of death is clotting associated with that blunt trauma injury.” Pleased with his summary, George stopped.

“So you’re telling me this is an accidental death rather than a homicide with Stick Murcheson the suspect?” Fran wanted things crystal clear.

Unfortunately, George wasn’t able to oblige. “Well, now, sheriff, that’s an interesting question. See, we might ask if Mr. Parada would have suffered those clots if he’d been left to recover from the blunt trauma injury in peace. What I mean is, would he have died if Stick hadn’t beat the crap out of him?”

“You’re the ME, George. I’m just the dumb cop. What’s the answer?” Fran’s eyebrows were arched in the question.

“Figured you’d ask.” George was smiling. “Thing is, that’s a subjective judgment. Generally speaking, the worse a beating like that, the worse the effects on the body generally. This was a severe enough beating that it probably affected that other injury. So the answer is probably no, Mr. Parada might not have died.”

“Hmm. Well, if we’re going to persuade a jury of even manslaughter beyond a reasonable doubt, you’re going to have to make a stronger statement than that on the witness stand, and then you’re going to have to answer tough cross-examination questions unequivocally. From the way you’re being careful with me, it sounds as if you might have to waffle on the stand.”

George felt slightly offended. “Hey, man, remember. I’m the ME. I provide facts and educated opinion, and I label that opinion carefully. I’m not on anybody’s side up there, on the witness stand.”

“Right, right. I know, and I’m not suggesting otherwise. Moreover, you do a stellar job at what you do. I’m just thinking of this from the prosecution’s perspective. If you can’t testify unequivocally that Parada’s death was due to Stick’s actions, or, more precisely, the actions of whoever beat him up, then I’m not sure we have a case. No offense intended.”

George accepted the apology gracefully. “And none taken, man. We’re all working together on this, but there is a line between us, has to be. Say, y’know? I was tickled to get involved with the DNA analysis, to call in those favors and get it done fast for you guys, but maybe I crossed that line, huh? Hmm. I’m gonna have to think about that one, man.”

* * *

Normally, George was not an especially introspective person. He probably wouldn't have given the line between providing forensic information to the district attorney's office and helping the investigating team much more thought, had it not been for a voice mail waiting on his office phone.

"George, this is Simon Murcheson. Listen, I have some official county business I need to talk with you about. It's, ah, getting on to three on Thursday afternoon. Hope you have the chance to return the call today, it's important. Thanks. Oh, and you'll need to call me on my cell phone." He left a number, which George dutifully wrote down.

Having overheard the last part of Fran's call with Murcheson a few minutes earlier, George had a pretty good idea of what the "official county business" was all about. A county commissioner doing damage control on behalf of his delinquent son, no doubt.

It was inevitable that politics would intrude into George's little world now and then. He usually dealt with it sticking to the facts and letting them speak for themselves. It was up to the sheriff's office and the district attorney to make value judgments about whom to charge with what and how to prosecute them—and that's where the politics came in.

But because he had crossed the line into the investigator's world, George knew that he would now have to deal with the associated politics.

And George also knew that this particular brand of politics would be particularly odious. Simon Murcheson was as conniving as they came, and it didn't help that George couldn't really sympathize with the plight of son Stick.

For over twenty years, George had been volunteering with the local school district in a variety of roles, one of which was as a referee for both boys and girls basketball. In all his years wearing stripes, he'd never seen a dirtier player than Stick Murcheson. The irony was that Stick had natural talent to go along with his size, and he didn't need to play dirty. But he did, throwing elbows and even punches, when he thought he could get away with it, and complaining excessively when he got caught and a foul was called on him.

To make matters worse, Stick's parents were always in the audience, and they always sided with their son to the point of abusing the officials on the court.

George considered blowing off returning the phone call, but he knew that Simon Murcheson was as tenacious as he was conniving. Sooner or later, they would be talking about the "official county business" that Simon had on his mind.

Oh, well, George thought, might as well make it sooner rather than later. He punched the cell-phone number into his desk set—but stopped before hitting the last digit. Maybe, he thought, I should have someone else here to hear what Simon has to say. A witness.

But who? Murcheson had his hooks into the DA's office and the sheriff's office as well. No one would be willing to take the risk of offending him. It couldn't be a county person, then. Of course! That CBI lady, or, because there were now two, either of them. He looked up Annette's office number on the county directory and called it.

"Angela Espinosa, CBI." Ah, the new one, George thought.

"Hey, Ms. Espinosa, how are ya? This is George Neering, the ME, we met this morning, remember?" George always asked this to be polite, but he actually took for granted that everyone remembered. They always did, it seemed. "Say, I wonder if you could do me a favor, if you're not in the

middle of something? I need to make a phone call that, well, I'd kind of like to have a witness to, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, Dr. Neering, I do remember. Well, let's see. First, when? I just walked in the door and need to make sure my field notes are in order. And, ah, can you tell me about the nature of the call? What I mean is, I believe it would be inappropriate unless it's official business." She came across as being quite formal. I'm gonna have to loosen her up, George thought.

"Oh, well, sometime before the end of the work day would be fine. I need to return a call to a county commissioner who said he called me about official business. But I'm thinking it may be about going easy on his son, the suspect in that assault case that's connected to the *Valle del Muerte* business, ya know? And I'd like someone to listen in on the conversation so it's not just my word against his. And because you're CBI, well, that gives you more objectivity than someone in my office or the sheriff's office, right?" George discovered he was actually nervous about this whole thing. "Does that all make sense?"

"It does, I guess. I'll ask at the front desk where to find your office and be there in a half hour." A no-nonsense one, that Angela Espinosa, thought George.

Half an hour later, right on time, she knocked on his door.

"Oh, hiya, thanks for coming over. This means a lot to me, I owe ya one. So, I've been thinking, and I think we should use two handsets instead of the speaker phone. OK?" George realized his nerves hadn't calmed down.

"That will be fine, Dr. Neering. I'll take notes, if that's all right."

"Oh, yeah, sure, that'll be fine. And, say, could you call me 'George'? Everyone does, and sometimes the 'Dr. Neering' thing just goes over my head, y'know?"

"And I'm 'Angela', George. Any time you're ready." She had positioned herself by an extension phone on the other side of the office from George's desk. He punched in all of the digits this time.

Murcheson answered after five rings. "Yeah?"

"Commission Murcheson? This is George Neering returning your call." George looked a question at Angela, and she nodded.

"Ah, yes, George. Thanks for calling so promptly. George, I've been paying close attention to the coverage of this fire business, all aspects of it, and we're certainly in the media spotlight. I'm wanting to make sure that everything is proceeding as quickly and as correctly as possible. How is your part of it going?" Murcheson seemed to be asking something without asking it, George thought.

"Well, commissioner, my part is moving right along. I finished the autopsy of the survivor of the fire, the person who died at the Kremmling hospital, and my full report should be ready tomorrow morning." George wondered if Murcheson was going to ask for an advance copy.

"Good, good. I'll be sure and have a look at it when it's ready for the public. I also understand that you have been running some tests for the sheriff?" Murcheson had finally showed his hand.

"DNA tests, right. All of their forensics people were tied up with the fire scene, so they asked me if I could help out. I know a lab in Denver that can sometimes do fast turn-around tests." George decided to be extremely careful about this one.

"Ah, I see. Helping because of the big work load. Makes sense. But I need to understand more about these DNA tests. What can you tell me, George?" Murcheson had slipped into an oily tone of voice.

“Well, see, they had blood samples, blood directly from the victim, the hospital took a sample, blood on the victim’s clothes, and blood on an article of clothing from someone else.” George wondered if Murcheson would go so far to ask.

“What someone else, George?” He did!

“I dunno, a suspect, I guess. Anyway, the results came back and I gave them to the sheriff this afternoon, the written report. I was busy with the autopsy, though, and didn’t really study the report.” George saw Angela taking notes.

“I see. Well, thanks for all your help, George. Gotta go.” Murcheson disconnected.

George looked at Angela. “That went better than I feared. Sorry to drag you over here.”

“Glad you did, George. I’m the new person, remember?” She smiled. “I need to learn whom to watch out for. I think he made my list.”

George laughed. “Like I said, I like it when new people are smart.”

* * *

Thirteen

Even though I’d cleaned up a bit at the office, it was a relief to get home and stand under the shower for a long time. Washing the remnants of the rabbit chow, or whatever it really was, down the drain did wonders for my disposition.

When I was out, dried, and dressed, I noticed that the message light on the phone was on.

“Hi, sweetie, they said you’d gone home but you must not be there yet. Anyway, we’re making great progress on getting these simulations going and I’m wanting to stay in the middle of it. I haven’t had this much fun at work in years. How about giving me a call on my cell phone and we can figure out this evening. ’Bye.” Hal *was* excited, I could tell.

I called him right back. “Hi, there. Sounds like you’re making progress.”

“Definitely am. Or we are, I should say. It’s just great to have a team of experts all working together on a problem. Want a progress report?”

“If it’s not too technical.” I hoped he could dumb it down to my level.

“OK. In order to simulate the fire, we have to provide the fire model with detailed weather information, what the background weather is doing, right? The fire makes its own weather, locally, but it’s strongly affected by the background weather. Anyway, we’ve got that all ready to rock. And the fire model itself, it’s a computer code we got from a guy at Los Alamos, and he’s coming up tomorrow to work with us on this, the fire model is working on our computers, actually they’re UNELECO computers that Chuck has given us access to. That doesn’t sound like much, but it’s really a big deal. With me so far?” He paused.

“I think so. What’s next?”

“We just started a cold run with the fire model, meaning that we’re running it with just the background weather, no fire. Assuming that works, we’ll light a fire using our best first guess of what the fuel situation was like up there. Maybe later this evening.” He paused again, but then continued.

“Anyway, I hate to abandon you, but I really want to stay with this for a while. Can you manage dinner?”

“Of course, but, more to the point, what about you?” I had visions of him and his staff forgetting to eat in all their excitement.

“Oh, we’ll figure out something. I don’t know what, but something.” He sounded distracted.

“Well, how about if I show up with a bunch of pizzas? Would that help? Then we could at least eat together.”

“*Great* idea. Um, let’s see, there are at least a dozen people here. Bring lots, OK?” Now he sounded hungry.

I called the pizza place in Fraser that we’d adopted as our own and placed an order so large they didn’t believe me at first. An hour later, I pulled into the parking lot of the MPARC headquarters, the refurbished condo building. There were two piles of pizza boxes in the back of my car, and inside it smelled like the restaurant had, only more so.

I was greeted by the MPARC staff like a conquering hero, but that lasted only a minute or so. Before I knew it, everyone was back at their computers, munching pizza and probably getting grease all over their keyboards.

Hal was in his office, deep in a discussion with Mary Schmidt, Fran’s wife. I think he smelled me coming, with his favorite combination of toppings, essentially an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink pizza.

“Annette! Like I said, this pizza thing was a great idea. Mary, there are probably more out there if you don’t like all these toppings.” He cleared a space on a work table and took a roll of paper towels out of a drawer. “There are soft drinks and water in that little refrigerator over there.”

Mary, after looking at Hal’s pile-o’-toppings, wandered off in search of a slice of something simpler, and I walked up behind Hal and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hmm?” He turned half-way around.

“Hug time.” I said.

A while later, he leaned back and looked at me. “Hard day?”

I told him to start eating, then I told him about my day.

When I was finished, he nodded. “Yep. Hard day. Wow. You’re sure the bump on the head is no big deal?”

“It’s sore, but I think I blacked out briefly more from lack of oxygen than the bump. He has hands the size of baseball mitts, and my mouth and nose were covered while I was struggling.” I took a bite of the everything pizza and chewed for a bit. “Anyway, it’s over and I’m fine. And to tell the truth, this pizza idea of mine was so I wouldn’t have to be alone this evening.”

He reached over, patted my hand, and smiled. “Well, since you’re here, we’ll just put you to work. Mary’s working on a press release. I hired her as a PR consultant for this thing. But you can make sure that, first, it’s accurate, and, second, it’s not going to step on official toes.”

“What I should really do is call Angela. She was out on her own today, and I want to make sure she’s home safe.”

“I think Sandy just talked with her a few minutes ago. Ask him. Last I saw him, he was out in the big room on the other side of the lobby.” He started on another slice.

“Then she must be OK. I think I’ll stay here with you.” I’m normally not the clinging type, but that evening I just needed to be close to him.

* * *

Friday morning was late starter for me. At the institute the night before, Hal kept coming up with reasons for not leaving, and I didn’t want to go home alone, so by the time we finally left and got home, it was close to two in the morning. I took him back to MPARC at ten and went inside with him to see what updates there might be.

The level of activity was more subdued than it had been the previous evening, but everyone was still busy. Sandy was there, sleeves rolled up, talking with a small group of the staff. When he saw us arrive, he broke off and came over to talk with us.

“Well, we’ve got fire, we’ve got winds, we’ve got everything except temperatures hot enough to cause the observed damage. You could roast marshmallows with what we’re simulating, but not much more. Fuel’s too sparse, air’s too thin.” He shrugged.

“And you’ve packed in the fuels, dried them out, and so on?” Hal was instantly engaged.

“Yep, and even though that sends the temperatures up, it’s still not enough, not with any realistic amount of fuel. One thing we did find, though: to reproduce the burn pattern requires a linear ignition source, sort of along the bank of the creek. That campfire couldn’t have caused the wildfire all by itself.” Sandy shrugged again. “I suppose that means some kind of accelerant, like someone poured gasoline along a line by the creek and lit it.”

Hal asked, “Did you put the trucks with gasoline in?”

“That’s running now. And it will certainly change things, make it a lot hotter. But a simple energetics calculation suggests that it still won’t be hot enough to do the damage that was observed. We’ll see.” Sandy smiled this time instead of shrugging. “Hope you both got some sleep. This could drag on.”

As Hal and Sandy launched into a discussion of how to improve the turn-around on the computer graphics renditions of the results—I interpreted this to mean animated cartoons—I took my leave and headed north and then west to Hot Sulphur Springs.

Angela’s Forester, I saw, was already in the parking lot. She had come by MPARC the evening before in time for the last of the pizza, and she and Sandy were still there when Hal and I left. Yet she beat me to the office. The virtues, I guess, of being young.

I went directly to Fran’s office to check in with him and to update him on the progress, or lack of it, at MPARC. He was working at his computer and waved me toward a chair, handing me a sheaf of paper in the process.

On top was a strange email message, apologizing for the Valley of Death fire and asserting it to have been an accident. As I was finishing it, Fran’s printer hummed.

“I’m actually having an exchange of correspondence with this yahoo.” He reached for the printer and handed another sheet of paper my way. It included the message I’d just read, a response from Fran asking for more information, and a response to that.

“Just so you’ll not think I’m a big, fat liar, I consider you to be in my circle of confidants.” He smiled impishly.

The message was cryptic at best.

Sheriff – I fear that nothing will ever make me feel better about the tragedy in the Valley of Death. It will haunt me for all my days. The innocent victims, at least, probably did not suffer as much as it might seem. No one knows who they might have been or what they were doing there. The valley was supposed to be empty.

As to the behavior of the fire, I doubt that the MPARC people will be able to simulate it properly, although I dare not say why. I can say it was not at all natural. Again, I'm so sorry. Mortified.

“Hmm. Dated this morning. I haven't seen the papers, Fran. Is the MPARC press release there?”

“Yep. Both Denver papers picked it up. That explains the MPARC comment in that message, I guess. Also the reference to the “Valley of Death.” The papers are having a field day with that one. I'm wondering about two things in the message: the business about the victims' not suffering and the fire's not being natural. Do you suppose there might be a connection?” He tilted his chair back and put his boots on his desk.

“How could they not have suffered? They burned to death.” It didn't make sense to me.

“Maybe they didn't burn to death, at least not all of them. Remember how it looked like some were lying down, asleep? What if they were already dead. Or unconscious?”

I remembered the positions of the ash-skeletons all too well. “Angela and I speculated on this when we were up there. But what are you saying?”

“I'm not sure. But what if something killed them first, asphyxiated them, maybe, and that same stuff caused the unnatural fire?” He moved his feet and knocked a pile of papers onto the floor.

“Like some kind of gas or something. I get it. So, somehow, this Mortified person and, presumably, his pals, they release gas into the valley, where they didn't know any people were, and it kills everyone, or almost, and then explodes because of the campfire.” I closed my eyes to think about this possibility. “It sounds like a stretch. But, then, the whole thing is a stretch.”

I explained the MPARC non-results as best I could.

“So, basically, you're saying that Hal and his staff have confirmed that the fire wasn't natural, it sounds like, right?” Fran nailed it.

“Right. But they don't know what unnatural things to put in the model to make the simulation work. Maybe this gas thing would be worth trying, I don't know.” I yawned, in need of coffee. “Anyway, they're doing remarkable things with their computers, and they're not done. We'll see what they come up with. How's young Mr. Murcheson? Did his daddy come get him?”

Fran looked abashed. “Yeah, bailed him out this morning. And he's been putting pressure on everyone, Simon, I mean. Called George, called me, called Axel, probably more than once.”

The call to Axel Sonos, A.D. Sonos, as he likes to be known, was predictable, but those to Fran and George seemed to me to be over the top.

“George got your Angela to sit in on his call, as a witness. But all Simon did was to try and get the DNA test results,” Fran continued. “I don't know what he and Axel talked about, but even without those calls I'd be surprised if Axel decides to prosecute a murder charge, or even reckless manslaughter. I talked with George, and a good defense lawyer would be able to nit-pick him to pieces, at least from a

jury's perspective. The other stuff in that pile of paper is pictures George gave me, that Miguel Parada guy. From the autopsy."

"So, no murder charge." I recognized Parada from his driver's license. "But there are still my assault and kidnapping charges."

"Yes, and I need to mention something about that. When I talked with Simon, I suggested I might talk you into dropping the assault charge but that I'd have to stick by the kidnapping charge. I was trying to placate him. But now that I know he's been putting pressure everywhere, I say let's not drop anything." He looked slightly embarrassed.

"OK by me. I ..." I was interrupted by Fran's phone.

"Oh, hi, Hal. Say, Annette's here, let me put this on the speaker." Fran pushed a button.

"Hi, Hal," I said.

"I just got an interesting phone call from Mac MacQuarrie. Can I get you both to come over here sometime soon? This is something we have to discuss in person."

Hal's voice was pleasant enough, but it had an official edge that I've heard on only a couple of other occasions.

It was edge that meant "do this and don't argue, please."

* * *

Fourteen

After Annette's departure, Hal and Sandy continued their discussion of the use of advanced visualization techniques for presenting the model results for a half hour. Because, fundamentally, the model results consisted of numbers representing temperatures and winds and so on, it was possible to simply look at the numbers and tell what was happening in the model. But the problem was the sheer number of numbers—millions. It's simply not possible for people, no matter how smart, to assimilate such a volume of numbers and learn anything.

The trick, then, is to make pictures from the numbers. For simple things, these are the familiar bar charts and line graphs that spreadsheet programs generate with a push of a button. For something as complicated as a fire simulation, the pictures need to show patterns in color, and they need to show changes over time. Computer animation is the tool for this.

How to do this quickly and efficiently was what Hal and Sandy were discussing, and they finally agreed that additional resources in that direction were needed. Hal planned to call Chuck Shure to see what UNELECO group might be borrowed for the duration. And they both resolved to make visualization more of an MPARC priority for the future.

They were going take up the topic of how to make the model fire hotter when, to his surprise, Hal got a phone call, on the phone line with the red button. Sandy went back to work, and Hal picked up the handset and pushed the red button.

"Hal Weathers." Hal heard the muted beep. "Secure."

"Hal, Mac MacQuarrie here. How are things in Colorado?"

“Pretty good, all things considered. Say, I’m impressed that you got me at this number.” Hal knew Mac was connected, but this was a whole new level of connection.

“Yeah, well, you just gotta ask the right computers the right questions. So, I called on this line so I wouldn’t have to tiptoe around. Can I assume that you’re alone and can say whatever you need to?” Mac was being careful, Hal decided.

“Yeah, I am. I may want my chief scientist here, though. He’s Top Secret, too.”

“OK, well, let’s wait and see. Here’s what I called about. I got your NRO data. More than that, I’ve looked at it with some people who know their stuff,” Mac said.

“So you know the ignition time? Great. That’ll help our guys.” Hal felt elated at finding that bit of missing information.

“Yeah, maybe it will, but that’s the least of it.” Mac paused and cleared his throat. “God-damned Washington DC is full of cigarette smoke. Ahem. Sorry. Anyway, the real interesting stuff comes from the sequence of images they got. The ignition triggered an automatic, high-speed, very-high-resolution digital camera. At least that’s the layman’s explanation, what they told me. So they have the ignition and a movie of the fire itself.”

Hal felt the hair on his neck stand up. “So there are fire spread rates and so forth?”

“Absolutely. And the thing is, the guys I looked at it with said they’ve never seen anything spread that fast. Well, almost. They’ve seen one thing, which I’m not going to talk about even on this phone. I’m landing at Denver International late tonight. What do I do after that?” Mac, Hal realized, was a real take-charge type when he wanted to be.

“Uh, you mean to get here? Well, you rent a car and drive up. If you’re arriving very late, the traffic will be down and it should take, oh, maybe two hours. Let me give you some URLs for on-line maps.” Hal spelled out the web site addresses carefully and heard typing noises. “How can I help? Can I get you a place to stay?”

“OK, I see where you are. Well, I think what I’ll do is get a car, get a motel room by the airport for a few hours, and head up your way early, try to beat rush hour through the city. I’ll be up your way by, maybe, eight or so. We can worry about tomorrow night tomorrow. OK?”

“OK with me, although you may be surprised by the traffic anyway. But you’ll get here eventually. What about the ignition time. Can you tell me that?” Hal had a pencil ready.

“I can do better. Here’s a URL.” Mac spelled out an address on a classified computer system, and Hal reminded himself to shred it after typing it in.

“OK, well, thanks, and I’ll see you in the morning.” Hal knew his head wasn’t really spinning, although it sort of felt like it.

His first move was to pass the classified URL to someone with a clearance and to warn him about its sensitivity, with the instruction to see what data was there and grab it if possible. That new secure network connection was going to be put to immediate use.

He then considered his next step. Obviously, there was something truly odd about that wildfire, something so bizarre that Mac wouldn’t talk about it on the secure telephone. That meant that Fran Schmidt should be given a heads up. Hal called the sheriff’s office.

Twenty minutes later, which, allowing for walking to and from cars and so on, implied an average speed of just over 70, Fran and Annette were sitting in Hal’s office.

“I’m sorry to be so spooky about this, but that call I had from Mac was just too weird.” Hal sketched the gist of the information Mac had provided as well as what he didn’t provide.

“Sorry, but who’s this Mac character?” Fran needed filling in, and Hal and Annette provided a tag-team response.

“OK, I see.” Fran thought for a couple of seconds. “You now have the time of ignition, right?”

“11:13 pm Monday night.” Hal was proud of how fast his people had accessed and downloaded the data from the classified URL Mac had given him.

Fran nodded. “Well, at least that’s something. Now, what about this sequence of images?”

“We’re working on that data now. And, uh, I don’t quite know what I can show you, Fran. There are classification issues. I’m not really sure if I should have told you that this data even exists.” Hal felt worried that he’d already violated some protocol or other.

“I’ve got a clearance, although I don’t know if it’s up to NRO standards. It comes with the territory.” Fran rolled his eyes.

“I do, too, Hal. CBI got clearances for all people above some level I’ve forgotten. It has to do with Homeland Security stuff, as I recall.” Annette shrugged.

“Well, that’s good. At least I won’t get thrown in jail for talking to you about this.” Hal actually felt relieved. And a little mad—this security stuff was a pain, he decided.

“Anyway, when my people get that data processed and put into some form we can make sense of, we’ll know more. But Mac has the punch line, I guess, and that’ll be tomorrow,” Hal said.

“Meanwhile, I’ve had my own little break-through. Well, maybe not break-through, but it’s something.” Fran handed Hal a copy of the three email messages.

Hal read for a minute and handed the paper back to Fran. “Interesting. He’s implying that the victims were dead before the fire happened. And that the fire wasn’t natural. Well, that agrees with what my people have found and what Mac hinted at.”

“Annette and I talked about this, and here’s something. Suppose some kind of gas was in that valley, moving along the ground, and it killed the people and then, when it reached the campfire by the stream, it ignited. Seems like that could explain a lot of things,” Fran said.

“Hmm. Some kind of gas, something like that.” Hal’s thought processes went into overdrive. “I wonder what we’d need to do to simulate that.”

* * *

“Well, look, even though it’s sort of my idea, it’s just speculation.” Fran seemed to be getting cold feet all of a sudden. “Maybe we should think this through before you put a lot of effort into it. I mean, sure, some kind of flammable gas could explain the fire, but we’ve also got to explain the gas, right? Like, how could it get there? Saying that our mystery email guy put it there isn’t really an explanation unless we know how he put it there. Right?”

Hal nodded. “Right. And, further, there are all sorts of possibilities, really, far too many to just start computing away on. Getting a better idea of how this mystery gas got there would help narrow those down. I’ve actually got some of my guys trying to work the problem in reverse, meaning we’re starting from the end result and working backwards. Mostly, this means figuring out what temperatures were needed to cause the damage, estimating the amount of energy that would have needed to be released by combustion, inferring the necessary fuel source from that. We’ve already decided it wasn’t just bushes

and trees, there was something else. Maybe the gasoline in the trucks will explain it, but I'm not that confident."

Annette remembered something. "You know, when Angela and I were up there, waiting for your forensics people to arrive, Fran, after you took the Forest Service people down the hill, remember? We were pretty far up the hillside, and we noticed that the lichens on the rocks were charred, way higher than there was any real fuel, I mean natural fuel."

"So, if it was a cloud of gas, it filled the area from the creek to somewhere up the hillside, above the trees, I guess. We could estimate a volume ... no, that wouldn't work. But knowing the fire went up that high is important." Hal stared off into space.

There was a knock on the door, and Sandy stuck his head in. "Oh, hi, everyone. Am I interrupting?"

Hal shook his head. "Not at all. Anything new?"

"Well, the gasoline from the pickup trucks, even if we assume they have full gas tanks, when it ignites there's a huge surge of heat, of course. But the temperature patterns are all wrong, and they're still not quite hot enough anyway. And the only reason they're still that hot is that we left in an unrealistic amount of natural fuels."

Annette spoke up. "Sandy, with the gasoline, how high up the mountainside did the fire get?"

He looked surprised. "Good question. I'll get some pictures."

Annette looked at Fran. "I hope that briefcase you grabbed on the way out the door has the fire documentation in it."

Fran began to shuffle through papers, and pulled out a file just as Sandy returned. He put several sheets of paper on a table, and they all gathered around.

Sandy's pictures were aerial views of the Valley of Death, one a blown-up color satellite image, the rest computer renditions that included various-sized puddles of bright yellow, orange, and red colors superimposed on a black-and-white version of the satellite image.

Sandy put the picture with the largest puddle of color on top. "Here's the maximum extent of temperatures hot enough to be called 'fire.' The deep red is the hottest here in the middle of the grove and on its edge by the trucks, and you can see this yellow, which is hot enough to ignite tinder and dry fuels, extends to here on the hillside."

Annette pulled the satellite picture out from underneath the pile, studied it, and pointed to a rocky outcrop. "So, the yellow on that picture looks as if it extends to about here, right? I think that Angela and I were sitting on these rocks, and we saw charred lichen well above this, several hundred feet above us up this little gulley. We even scrambled up to look at it, just to make sure it was not simply black or dark-green lichen. But it was charred for sure."

"We could probably deduce flame lengths from the model data. I bet they would be pretty impressive just downwind of that grove. But I can't imagine they would reach that far up the mountainside." Sandy unconsciously nibbled a thumbnail. "So there are two anomalies, temperatures and the extent of the burn pattern up the side of the valley there."

"Uh, guys, I hate to bring this up." Fran looked slightly embarrassed. "But you're getting computer model results that don't match reality. Isn't one explanation for this that the computer model is just wrong?"

"Oh, it sure is." Sandy nodded. "That's what I meant by anomalies. In general, though, if you tell this model the right conditions, it will do quite a good job of reproducing the behavior of real fires. The guys who developed it have tested it against real fire data in a wide variety of conditions. And whenever

their results weren't right the first time, they tracked it down to something that was wrong about the conditions they gave the model to work with. The model physics do a good job of describing how fires work if you give the model the right data to work with. Otherwise it's just the old garbage-in, garbage-out thing."

"So you're saying that the model would reproduce what we see in these burn patterns and so on if we gave it the right conditions to work with?" Fran wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"Always has in other circumstances, so it should with this one. We're just missing something." Sandy shrugged. "There was some energy source there, probably some fuel source, that we're missing."

"Well, that fits with this, I guess." Fran handed Sandy the email printout.

Sandy read for a minute. "Do you know who ... oh, hotmail. Never mind. Well, this confirms what we've been thinking, that the natural fuels couldn't have produced a fire of this intensity. What's this bit about the victims' not suffering?"

"One possibility is something that Fran suggested, that there was some sort of poisonous, inflammable gas in the valley that asphyxiated the victims before it exploded." Annette looked grim. "As for this being an 'accident,' I'd say that someone needs to do more than just apologize for it."

"Seems like," Fran was looking thoughtful, "there are several possible felonies that might have taken place. Tell you what. Why don't we find Mr. Mortified and his pals and see just how many of those felonies we can charge them with?"

* * *

Fifteen

Fran and I, having planted the idea of an inflammable and possibly toxic gas cloud with Hal and his crew, left them to it and headed back toward Hot Sulphur Springs in the replacement for his dinged-up Explorer, another one a bit older, with a big V-8 but no low range for truly off-road work and various dents and scratches. He told me he'd borrowed it from the motor pool, and that it was definitely not up to his standard.

Just north of Winter Park, half-way to Fraser, my cell phone rang. I could see from the display it was my office phone. "Angela?"

"Yeah, Annette, it's me. Are you and the sheriff coming back here soon? I think you should meet with someone, one of my contacts in the Hispanic community." She sounded excited.

"Sure, any time. Have you got any details?"

"Well, he's here now, in our office." Now she sounded tentative, so I decided she didn't want to say much more.

"OK, well, how about fifteen minutes?" I looked at Fran and pointed down the road, and he sped up. It felt nice to have such a good rapport with him that I didn't have to say anything.

I hadn't been paying attention to the calendar, but it must have been Murphy's Law Observance Day—an obscure holiday about which Fran and I found out the hard way.

We were just past Fraser, headed toward Tabernash, when Fran's police radio crackled. "10-46 at the 34-40 stop sign."

“Aw, crap.” Fran activated his lights and siren and sped up.

I had to think about it, but then I decided it must mean that there was a traffic accident of some kind at the intersection of US 40 and US 34, just on the west side of Granby. I called Angela to warn her that we might be delayed, and discovered I should start holding on. Fran was suddenly in a big hurry.

We blew through Tabernash without incident, but halfway up the long grade to Snow Mountain Ranch, at the intersection with north end of County Road 5, that all changed.

An overloaded logging truck, headed downhill toward us, was trying to take the right turn onto CR 5 without slowing down—maybe he thought he was driving a sports car or something. But his trailer jack-knifed and then spilled. We were suddenly faced with dozens of tree trunks rolling down the pavement toward us. Before Fran had time to express himself using colorful expletives, as I’m sure he would have liked to, he was preoccupied with maneuvering to avoid the logs.

That took us off the right shoulder, perilously close to the edge of the roadbed, which was built up at that point to cross a small drainage. I could see that going over that edge into the drainage was not an option, as it would have rolled the SUV catastrophically. I was hoping Fran realized this, too. He must have, because, after dodging the first few logs, he swerved back left onto the pavement. Unfortunately, that maneuver put us sideways right in the path of another rolling log, which was, ironically, the last one. It undercut the wheels on my side and that force, combined with our off-balance stance associated with the swerve, pitched the vehicle over onto its side—my side. But there was still too much momentum, so we rolled another quarter turn. After sliding for several dozen feet, we came to rest on the Explorer’s roof, hanging from our seat belts and cushioned solidly in place by the airbags, which had all exploded into action.

“Shit!” Fran took a couple of deep breaths, and I followed suit, trying to get my equilibrium re-established. It was challenging, though, hanging upside down and all. “You OK, Annette?”

I wiggled my extremities carefully and thought about it. “All things considered, I’d say so. Been better, but I think there’s no damage. How about you?”

“I think my dignity is all that’s damaged. Except that’s just going to get worse. We need to crawl out of here somehow.” He fumbled around by the steering wheel and came up with the radio microphone.

“Schmidt here. I’ve got my own 10-46, at the north end of CR5. No injuries, we think, but we’re going to need a tow truck and another vehicle. I expect mine’s totaled. And there are logs all over the highway, so traffic is going to be a real mess real quick over here.”

A muffled “ten-four” came from somewhere on the dashboard.

It wasn’t very long before people came to check us out. Because I saw feet outside my window, I lowered it up a bit to let them know that we were not injured. A crowd quickly gathered, and before long someone suggested rolling the vehicle upright.

By then the airbags had deflated, for the most part, but the seat belts were still holding us tight. Fran and I looked at each other and shrugged, upside-down shrugs.

“What the hell. Might be easier than getting out of here this way.” He looked resigned to the fun.

At least the crowd out there managed to minimize the rocking. With only a couple of back-and-forths, they pushed the Explorer back over onto my door, and Fran was suddenly dangling above me. By then, someone with a winch had happened by—lots of guys with Jeeps in the Valley have winches, as if it’s a way to display their manhood, or something—and the trick that Fran had used with the come-along before was repeated, except with him, and me, inside the car this time. Thud.

After the Explorer was finally upright, we sat inside for a minute to gather our wits, making thumbs-up and A-OK signals to the crowd outside.

“Well,” Fran tried to appear optimistic, “the other one started that other time, after it got tipped over. Cross your fingers.”

It wasn't going to happen, though. The electrical system had stayed on, so the radio was functional, but the engine just wouldn't fire. Sideways had been OK for the other one, but upside down for this one was just too much.

Although his window didn't work, Fran's door still did. It creaked and groaned as he opened it, and I creaked a little, and felt like groaning, when I stepped out my door. I had a stiff back, and there was a twinge in my ankle. I heard noises from the crowd to the effect that “it's Sheriff Schultz!” and “that's the CBI lady.”

Fran, I guess, decided that there were enough people assembled to warrant a little politicking. He climbed up on the hood of the Explorer and scanned the crowd.

“Thanks very much, everyone. That was good thinking, getting us upright like that. And that's one of the things I like about Grand County—people willing to pitch in to help others. It's one of the reasons I'm proud to be your sheriff.” Whether he was starting into a canned political stump speech or just speaking off-the-cuff wasn't clear.

Whichever it was, I tuned him out and worked my way to the back of the crowd. I needed to do some serious stretching and try to walk off the ankle problem. Also, I reminded myself, to call Angela. Our delay was getting stretched out. She was just going to have to figure out how to keep her guest entertained a little longer.

All-in all, it took about an hour to get things sorted out. Finally, Fran and I made it back to his office, and shortly thereafter we were all seated in an interview room in the sheriff's department.

Angela introduced Fran and me to Don Nuestro, as she called him, a wizened gentleman, nattily dressed in classic clothing that was a tad worse for the wear.

“He speaks only Spanish, so I'll have to translate. I met him very briefly yesterday and gave him my card. Well, your card, Annette, with my name on the back. And, um, he's ‘Don Nuestro’ as in ‘Mr. Neustro’. I mean, Don is not his first name, right?” She was smiling and looking back and forth between the three of us. Mr. Nuestro was looking a bit confused.

“Don Nuestro, how nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to talk with us.” Fran smiled as Angela translated his greeting.

The response was long, emphatic, and obviously more than Angela could handle at once. She and he talked, and it appeared that he started over, stopping after a couple of sentences this time.

“Don Nuestro says that he is pleased to meet you, Sheriff, and he wants to know where his family is. Um, the first time through was more than I could remember accurately, so I got him to start over. But the rest concerns his family and how he thinks that his people are getting the short straw up here in Grand County.” She shrugged.

“Please tell me about your family, Don Nuestro.” Fran looked at Don Nuestro as he talked while Angela translated.

They soon got into a rhythm, with Don Nuestro stopping after every two or three sentences to let Angela catch up.

His family, a good piece of the Nuestro clan, had come to the U.S. eighteen months ago after obtaining coveted work visas. He had been receiving mail, and bank account deposits, from them ever

since they got themselves established up here, and a small nest egg was accumulating back home in a Monterrey bank. Its purpose was to provide a legacy for the next generation, his great-grandchildren.

I could tell, even without words, that he took great pride in passing around the photographs.

It was picture number six that stopped me short, and I handed it to Fran. “Look familiar?”

His eyes got big, and he looked over at me. Then he took a deep breath and turned to our guest. “Don Neustro, who is this person?”

“My son-in-law, Miguel Parada, who married my daughter Rosalina. He’s originally from Cuba, but he has lived in Mexico for over ten years. He and Rosey were here with my sons Jose and Eduardo and their families.” Don Neustro smiled with pride, but Angela looked scared as she translated.

I started counting the different people in all the photographs and, leaving out Don Neustro himself and a woman of his generation who appeared in several pictures, tallied up sixteen. In a single stroke, two-thirds of the Valley of Death victims had identities.

What a tragedy for Don Neustro. And what a headache for Angela, who was going to be breaking the bad news.

* * *

How I managed not to doze off, face down in my dinner, is something I’m not entirely clear on. By the time that Hal and I made it home that evening, after a very pleasant dinner with Angela and Sandy, I was completely done in. I think maybe Hal noticed this and hurried the meal up a little on my behalf.

At least I stayed awake enough to enjoy it. I’m no expert, mind you, but as far as I can tell, the folks that run Fontenots, in Winter Park, have New Orleans cuisine down pat. Hal and I had been curious about the place, but we’d never managed to get there. When Sandy suggested it, we jumped at the opportunity.

“I can tell that I’m going to miss Santa Fe food, so I want to try out the alternatives early and often,” was Sandy’s excuse.

We were halfway through appetizers—fried green tomatoes with a remoulade sauce, and crab and crawfish cakes with a ginger-lime sauce—when the day’s progress came up.

“Angela tells me that you had a tough day today, Annette, but made some headway.” He bit into another tomato slice.

“I think it was Angela who had the toughest day. But we did manage to get IDs on many of the fire victims, we think.” I took a sip of wine.

Hal looked up from dissecting a crab cake. “What’s that all about? I thought there weren’t any bodies to identify.”

I looked at Angela and nodded, so she launched into the story. I was hoping that it would help her to talk about it.

“... and I think that was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, tell poor Don Neustro about his family.” By the time she finished, she was on the edge of tears, but she hid it behind a gulp of her giant margarita.

“Angela, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what I was asking.” Hal looked as contrite as his words.

“No, no, it’s OK, really. It’s the job, and I have to deal with it. But, geez, I hope it isn’t like that very much. This case is a bitch.” She downed another huge swallow of cocktail. “But, so, yeah, we made

progress. And according to what Sandy told me earlier, it sounds like you're making progress, too. With that computer stuff."

"We did." Hal seemed relieved to be able to change the subject. "It's too soon to be sure, but the idea—Annette's, or maybe Fran's idea, actually—that there was some kind of inflammable gas near the ground when the fire started looks promising. Without a really serious extra energy source, we're not able to reproduce what happened up there. But early results with propane in the air look better. Of course, that begs the question of where propane or any such thing would have come from."

Hal paused to chew, and I took advantage of the silence to jump in.

"I keep thinking about the charred lichens and so on that we found way up the valley sides." I speared myself another crab cake. "You guys talked about flame lengths today, and maybe those would provide an explanation with a source of energy near the ground, like the propane thing. Of course, if the propane were up there, too, that would *really* explain the burnt stuff, right? But there's still the question of how it got there."

"Mmm. I don't know about these green tomatoes, but this sauce is just outstanding." Sandy licked an index finger. "Annette, you've said you thought you saw burn marks and so on, but did you really look closely? Take samples? What I'm asking is, would it be worth a trip up there to do that? Maybe to see if there is any residue that could be analyzed?"

Angela grinned. "Aw. Isn't that cute? My very own hunk, the scientist. Thing is, Sandy, I don't know if we could get to some of the places we thought we saw burn marks. They were high up on the sides of the valley, above sheer cliffs and so on. Serious climbing terrain."

"Well, somewhere in all that stuff we brought up from Santa Fe is some serious climbing equipment. I did several BERT rescues involving stranded climbers." Sandy's involvement in the Santa Fe Back-country Emergency Rescue Team had provided him with a variety of outdoors experience, I remembered.

"You could be right, Sandy." I thought back to Tuesday. "When we were up there, we were so shaken by finding all that evidence of the deaths that we really didn't do a complete area analysis. And I don't think that Fran's forensics people got very high up the sides of the valley, either. Maybe another trip up there would be a good idea."

Hal swallowed a mouthful of crab cake. "Seems like a good idea would be to have a theory of how this inflammable gas—propane or whatever—could have been in the valley and especially high up the sides of the valley. It's not like something such as this occurs naturally."

"How about swamp gas? Isn't that methane, sort of like propane?" Angela didn't seem to be arguing, just asking.

"Sort of." Hal nodded. "But methane, which is just natural gas, is lighter than air while propane's heavier. So I guess if there are bogs in that valley, there could be methane released, which could then flow up the hillsides. But in that environment, it's hard to see how enough methane could have been released all at once to cause that fire."

Sandy agreed. "I don't think that the simulations with propane will provide enough heat, although the results will be better. What that means is that some other more energetic gas is indicated. And it's about 99.9% likely that such a gas would be heavier than air. Meaning that it would flow down, not up. So where could it have come from?"

I couldn't help but sigh. "Well, folks, it looks like we need to trek up there and find out. Believe it or not, I've had climbing classes. Do you suppose I could borrow some of that equipment of yours, Sandy?"

* * *

Sixteen

Samantha Winslow had spent all of her life south of Orlando, getting even that far north, to visit the Disney complex, only a couple of times. Oh, there were the quick trips with Johns up to Atlanta, Boston, New York, even to Washington DC with that South American diplomat, but those had all been limited to the cities. And big cities tend to be the same everywhere.

So her trip out west to the Fraser Valley with Mac MacQuarrie was eye-opening in the extreme. The film and television versions of the Rocky Mountains that she had come to be so familiar with over the years had done nothing to prepare her for the real thing, she discovered.

For one thing, it was bigger in real, three-dimensional life, flat-out huge, with views of more landscape than she ever knew existed. For another, when the sun went down last night in Denver, it had turned into winter, at least the South Florida sort of winter she was used to. What, she wondered, will it be like up here in the mountains, and, worse, what will *real* winter be like? Do they make heated underwear?

And beyond that, it was scarier, especially riding in the passenger seat with those unbelievable drop-offs zipping by just out the window half the time and those menacing walls of rock the other half.

It was a good thing, she decided, that Mac had been driving, because she would have had to stay right in the middle of the roadway, with that permanent double yellow line smack between the car's tires. No way would she be able to stay in the right lane, over there where gravity might reach out and suck her into the abyss. And there were all those big trucks and busses coming the other way. Yikes!

But mostly her eyes were opened by the spectacular, rugged beauty of the landscape. Each time they came around another of those sweeping curves and a new expanse of view opened up, she delighted in the thought that she'd brought her art supplies.

In the months or so that she and Mac had been living in that rental on Big Pine Key, she had turned out paintings and pastels of sunrises and sunsets, clouds and gulls, sailboats and palm trees, all in her distinctive minimalist style that people were snapping up as fast as she could get them framed. With its complexity and visual impact, this new subject matter was going to be a challenge, she could tell, but that would be just fine. Nice as they were, she was done with the Keys.

It occurred to her, though, that she might just have to re-evaluate this conclusion come the weather of February.

The whirl of activity and travel over the past couple of days had her head spinning, and the low-oxygen atmosphere of the Colorado high country wasn't helping any, either. But her car, Mac's, too, and a load of their personal possessions from the Keys house as well as from a couple of storage locations they had been using up on the Gold Coast would all be arriving within a week or so. As soon as she could get her breath, she was going to find them a place to stay for at least several months, a place big enough for her to have a studio. Maybe with a nice view—although she was beginning to understand that the two words were automatically linked up in the Fraser Valley, where there just didn't seem to be any mediocre views available. Hell, she thought, even the parking lots seem picturesque.

I just have to find *something* before the moving truck gets here, she reminded herself. Mac was going to be too involved in this business with the mass murders to be much help, she knew. And even

though he seemed to like playing the gallant hero by fulfilling her every wish, she knew that their partnership would be all the stronger if she pulled her weight.

One possibility, she realized, would be to put their various pieces of furniture in storage and negotiate a long-term lease here, at the place Mac had found somehow. It was an elegant, three-bedroom house on the hillside across the highway from the ski area, completely furnished and with weekly housekeeping service. Probably costing us an arm and a leg, she thought.

It was nice, but it would never feel like home. Just like the house in Big Pine Key. Nice, but not home. She wanted a home, even if it was going to be temporary.

Well, she had a map, a computer with a fast internet connection, and the rental car while Mac was tied up at that institute place. And she had Annette's cell phone number.

"Annette? Hi, it's Sam Winslow. I don't know if you heard, but Mac and I got in this morning. Oop, excuse me, I think I've got to breathe." Sam panted.

"Sam! I knew but didn't know the timing. Glad you're here." Annette was delighted. "And, yeah, you've got to breathe a lot up here, especially at first. But your body will adapt, trust me. It will help if you drink lots of water, lots. Like, quarts, plural. Where are you staying?"

"Mac found us a short-term rental house, across from the ski area. Really nice, but it seems kind of isolated. My job is to find something more permanent, and find it before the moving van gets here." Sam panted again for a few seconds. "I thought maybe you might have some advice."

"Hmm. Well, Hal and I are still kind of newcomers here, so I don't know all the ins and outs. You probably want a long-term rental, right? I mean, you're not going to buy something right away, are you?"

"Yeah, we need to rent something. Mac is here to work that mass murder case, I guess it's your case? I don't know how long that will take or what's next after that." More breathing. "Also, frankly, I don't know if I'll survive the winter or, if I do, be up for a second one."

Annette laughed. "Don't you worry. We'll teach you to ski and you'll never want to leave. Here's an idea. Let me have Mary Schmidt call you. She's the sheriff's wife, and she grew up here, knows everyone and everything. She's working for Hal now, but helping you guys will fit in with her job at the institute. At the least, she'll be able to put you in touch with a real estate agent who can help."

"Uh, the sheriff's wife? You don't think that my, you know, my background might be an issue?" Sam's previous career as a high-priced Miami Beach call girl weighed on her at unpredictable times.

"Not with Mary, don't worry. And if it is with anyone, I want to know about it. That kind of hypocrisy I don't need around here." Annette, Sam realized, could sound fierce when she wanted to. "I'll give her this number you called me from OK? Sam, I'd like to talk, but I've gotta go. We're planning a little mountain climbing expedition for tomorrow and there's a ton of stuff to organize. I'll have Mary call."

"Uh, Annette? Tomorrow's Sunday, right? I don't think I'll get much accomplished on Sunday up here. It strikes me that people here probably go to church on Sunday. Do you need any help tomorrow?" Sam wasn't sure what she was getting herself into, but she did want to help.

"Oh. Well, let's see. I think I heard Hal mention something about how you guys were flying in and staying in Denver for a night, and tonight you'll be up here. Which you are already, I guess. So, anyway, you have a start on getting used to the elevation. Meaning you'll probably be OK up there, where we're going, if you don't have to work too hard. And we need a spotter. Somebody to stay at the bottom of the

valley we're going to and watch us through a telescope. Talk to us on a radio. Like that. How's that sound?"

"I could do that, I bet. What should I wear?"

"Outdoor gear, in layers. Good, solid boots. A hat. Sunglasses. You can use my sunscreen." Annette paused. "You just arrived, right? From Florida? There's an outdoor shop in Winter Park that has that stuff."

"Oh. Shopping. Well, that's something I can handle, for sure. I'll call you later, Annette. Thanks." Sam and Mac had really arrived from Washington DC, but she still needed clothes for the occasion. And for most every occasion up here, she suspected.

* * *

The next morning, it was about halfway up the hill—Sam asked—that she began to question her snap decision to volunteer to help Annette and the others on the expedition up Byers Peak. Sandy was driving Annette's CBI vehicle, the Jeep SUV, and he seemed to be managing its scramble up what passed for a road quite well, all things considered. Angela, the petite Latina who was Sandy's girlfriend and Annette's assistant, was sitting in the backseat with Sam, riding comfortably, it appeared. But holding on amidst the bouncing and jerking turned out to be real exercise, and Sam was having to breathe hard just sitting beside Angela, strapped in.

At least she felt well equipped. Her life in Miami Beach, as socially questionable as it had been, had taught her two quite practical skills: expertise in bed, and How To Shop. The nice folks at Mountain Duds in Winter Park were amateurs by comparison, and Sam felt a bit guilty about her ability to take advantage of them.

Her first step was to observe. Yesterday she had driven the two or so miles from the rental house across from the ski area down to the Winter Park strip, parked, bought a latté at a Starbucks, and sat on a bench under an aspen tree to watch what people were wearing. It took her only a few minutes to separate the tourists from the locals—shoes were a big tip-off—and then she realized that there were subtle differences between local "business" and "casual" attire that provided important hints about what she should invest in, style-wise.

Then she walked into Mountain Duds, explained her situation, and pretended to turn herself over to them. Despite all the big "sale" signs in the windows, she was the only customer, so she got the royal treatment.

Two hours later, she walked out of the place to fetch the car—so that the Mountain Duds employees could load it up with her purchases, clothes from the skin out, from toe to scalp, from cool- to hot-weather conditions. All acquired at well better than twenty percent below those "sale" prices. Compared to Sam's experience with the merchants on Miami Beach, the Mountain Duds people were pushovers.

Some of the wardrobe she understood—good sports bras seemed necessary—and some she didn't. The business about materials that were both water-proof and breathable, something called "Gore-tex," sort of made sense but was still a bit mysterious. The finer points of shoes—boots, actually—were also a bit obscure, but it was easy to agree with the suggestion of "comfort first." And why she needed a sales pitch about spending the extra money to buy wicking underwear that didn't retain body odor instead of cheaper underwear that did—well, duh.

So, the next morning, sitting in the pitching SUV—she was reminded of a john who had insisted on taking her for cigarette boat rides on the ocean before he got the sex he was paying for—she began to appreciate all the high-tech jargon in those sales pitches. The exercise of holding on had her working

pretty hard in a warm car, but she was quite comfortable—just as she had been comfortable first thing in the morning, at that ungodly hour before dawn, when thermometer in the car had told her it was 40°, something she'd experienced only once before in her life, on a trip to New York.

But, holy crap!, they were only half-way there, and it kept getting worse and worse. How the SUV didn't just break, crumble into lots of little metallic parts, or something, she couldn't understand. And she was lost beyond any hope of finding her way back, should there be a need to, and, besides, there were probably bears or mountain lions or wolves out there. Or all three.

She didn't want to be the wuss, though, so every time Annette or Sandy or Angela asked if she was OK, she gamely replied "You bet!" The rest of the time, she just tried to hold on and listen to their conversation, what there was of it. Mostly, it seemed like uncertain directions—"I think it's a left here, Sandy"—which naturally reinforced Sam's concerns about becoming lost in the wilderness and ending up as a snack for something with Big Teeth.

But they eventually got there, "there" being an unbelievably spectacular valley surrounded by high, rocky ridges. It was so beautiful that Sam could only stare.

They all stepped out of the vehicle and, following the others' leads, Sam did some stretching, which helped with the kinks. Then Annette and Angela gave both Sam and Sandy a quick overview of what they had seen the day after the fire and how it had changed—mostly ashes blowing around—since.

After Sandy's questions were answered, and he had lots, the three climbers began plotting their route up the side of the valley. And when Sam figured out what they had in mind, she had to sit down before she fainted. They were climbing *that*? What was really a surprise was Sandy's comment to the effect that it probably wouldn't require ropes—that they could just scramble up to get the samples they were after.

While they were talking, Sandy was unloading equipment, and one of the first items was a folding camp chair, which he set up for Sam's use. She sat, facing the burn, and studied the side of the valley while the other three talked. Then Sandy handed her a pair of binoculars to help to give her a better perspective.

Yes, it was steep and got steeper with increasing elevation. But what cliffs there were extended across very limited spans, and there were ways around them. And everywhere there were plenty of hand-holds. So maybe it wasn't impossible, as long as someone else was doing the climbing, she decided.

As she studied rocks, alternating between the binoculars and her regular vision, she began to notice a pattern.

"Annette? Angela? Is the edge of the burned area you've been talking about up there by that, um, big, sort of pointed square rock? I think I see a sort of stripe that goes up to the right of that rock and down toward its left." Sam pointed.

Annette came around and stood behind her. "Let me see the binoculars... Yes, that looks like it. Angela and I were sitting way to the left, much lower when we saw it, though."

Sam squinted at the mountainside, then defocused her eyes—a trick she'd figured out when she was painting—then asked for the binoculars back. "So, what I think I see is a sort of big arc, like McDonalds Golden Arches, only it's a faint black-ish stripe, that goes from there, up around, and then down to there."

She made a sweeping left-to-right arch with her right arm. All three of the others were studying the rocks carefully.

“I think I see it, too, Sam. The highest point is...” Angela was holding her left hand at arm’s length, cocked back as if she were going to press it onto the mountainside, “...oh, maybe four fingers to the right of that pointed square rock you mentioned, right?”

Sam, Annette, and Sandy held out their arms, too, and Sam agreed. “Yeah, something like that. There’s a little overhanging rock at the top. Well, maybe it’s a big overhanging rock. The perspective has me all confused.”

“Foreshortening.” Sandy had found the rock and was studying it through the binoculars. “When you look up, or down, it’s very hard to judge distance and therefore sizes of things. You can do it on flat ground pretty well, but hillsides like this get your eyes and brain all confused. But you’re right, Sam. That looks like the top of the charred rocks. And that’s where I’m going to climb to, I guess. Oh, boy. What fun.”

* * *

Seventeen

When Sam volunteered to accompany us on our little expedition, I was just a little concerned about how she would do. Even though our job for her involved sitting in a chair all day while the rest of us climbed, my recollection of her from our cruise-ship time together was not entirely compatible with mountaineering.

But after she made it up that ridiculous jeep road with us in one piece and then spotted that burn pattern right off, I knew I’d made the right decision.

It was Angela who asked, so I didn’t have to. “So, Sam, how in the world did you see that pattern so easily? I’m still not sure I see the whole thing, just parts.”

“Well, I just saw it, that’s all. It sort of jumped out at me without the binoculars, and with them, I could see details. Which made the whole thing easier to see.” Sam thought for a minute. “Maybe it’s my painting style. I do these sort of minimalist paintings, where I try to capture the essence of a scene with as few strokes as possible. And those are what I look for first. So with this mountainside, I’d probably use a palette knife to cut in the ridge line, a few vertical blotch-strokes for the big, dominant rocks, and the arc of that burn pattern, in a faint grey-blue. Maybe add a cloud against the deeper blue sky.”

“Let me know when you get some paintings ready for sale, Sam. We’ve got lots of bare walls.” Sandy grinned as he passed around radio sets. “Now, these are hands-free sets, which means the mike gets activated when you talk. Or breathe really hard, or burp, or whatever. You can set the sensitivity with this little slider. I recommend wearing the headset under your climbing helmet. And even though we’re not going up together, I recommend helmets. Rocks can let go at the most inopportune times, like when your head is in the way.”

“So, it sounds like you have a plan, Sandy.” I was staring at the mountainside, trying to get psyched up.

“How about I go straight up the middle of this shallow gully, to the top there, the top of Sam’s arch, and take a sample every ten meters or so? Here are plenty of plastic bags for all of us, and you’ve got knives, right? We just take scrapings of burned lichens from the rocks, put ’em each in a separate bag.” He handed around bunches of zip-lock bags. “Annette, you and Angela can go straight up on the sides of the burn, maybe twenty meters to my left and right, and take samples the same way. Then we’ll have a

crude grid of samples, when we're done. Oh, and here are some indelible markers, we each get a different color. Number the bags, please, starting at the bottom."

I had to smile. "Seems as if you may have done this before, Sandy."

"Not exactly, but close. We did a ground search this way one time, looking for a lost kid. Much bigger area, flatter terrain, more searchers, but we used the same basic technique. Grid it out. Let's see. For you and me, Annette, ten meters is probably four body lengths including reach. For shorty here," he twitched his thumb toward Angela, "I'd guess five."

He got punch in the arm for his wisecrack, a hard punch, it looked like, and Sam giggled.

"Now children. Play nice." As the oldest by several years, I couldn't help myself. "I guess we ought to get started, and maybe we'll be done by lunch. What do you think, Sandy?"

"Well, maybe, but don't rush. Remember, you're on your own up there. This isn't really free climbing, it's just steep scrambling. But you don't want to lose your balance and tumble back down, so let's be careful up there, right?" And he started walking toward the middle pitch of the mountainside.

I looked at Angela and shrugged. "You want left or right?"

She chose left, and off we went, leaving Sam behind in her folding camp chair, with the binoculars and a high-powered spotting scope on a tripod to keep her company.

"Radio check." Sandy's voice was suddenly inside my head.

"Check." I responded.

"Check," said Angela.

"Um, I guess it's my turn, and I heard all you guys. So, ah, we're all here. Be careful, OK?" Sam hadn't been to radio training, I decided.

We labored up the slope more or less in parallel with each other, and after a while Sandy came back on the radio. "I've got a nicely charred lichen here on a rock, so I think I'll start sampling. See what you can find at about this elevation. Then we can try to stay more or less in sync as we climb."

It quickly became routine. We'd walk or step up or scramble, using our hands for balance and climbing assistance, for a short distance, and Sandy would come on announcing he was taking yet another sample. Angela and I would work our way to about his elevation and find samples for ourselves. Scrape, bag, label, repeat. The pauses for samples were actually quite helpful, because we were able to rest and catch our breaths each time.

It was between samples eleven and twelve when Sam came on the radio. Annette? You're just about to cross the charring line. Another couple of feet."

"When you cross, it, Annette, get a sample, then get another uncharred one a few feet above, OK?" Sandy had it all figured out.

Shortly after I took my uncharred sample and was preparing to start carefully back down, Angela crossed the charring line and took her last samples.

Then she realized how far up we'd climbed. "Holy shit! Sandy! I haven't been looking down until now. We're way the hell up here, aren't we?"

Her voice was not quite to the level of panic, but it was getting close. And, of course, her comment made me look down, which I hadn't been doing, either, and I immediately understood her situation. The mountainside had become increasingly steep, and looking down made it feel like we were clinging to the face of a cliff. Gulp.

“Angie, all you have to look down at is your feet, not the whole mountainside. And because you got up here pretty easily, I think, you can get down. Just take it step by step, like you did on the way up. You, too, Annette. Slowly and carefully. And Sam can give you advice about where to step if you need it, right, Sam?”

“I guess so. I can read the label on the back of Angela’s boot, if I zoom this thing in, so I can see where her feet should go. If she needs it.” Sam’s voice was also tentative.

“And if you both want to, you can just wait and rest until I get all the way up and come down to this level again. And we can all descend together.” Sandy was the only one with any real confidence at that point.

He had continued to climb and take samples while we dithered, and because he wasn’t waiting for us, he sped up. It took him only about ten more minutes to reach the top of the charred arch.

“OK, last sample of charred lichen, now I’ll go up a bit and get some uncharred ... hello. What the hell is ...?” Sandy stopped in mid-stream.

“Sandy! You OK?” Angela was instantly on alert. “Sam! Is Sandy OK?”

“It looks like it. He climbed up to that overhanging rock, and he’s under it, poking around.”

“I’m fine, gang, really. Just surprised by what I’ve found. I think we now know where our mystery gas came from. There’s a little tunnel into the mountainside up here, under this overhang. About, oh, a foot and a half in diameter. Maybe two feet. And it’s lined with pipe, that corrugated steel stuff that culverts are made from. There’s a lightweight screen grate over the end here. Somebody must be using it as ventilation for whatever’s going on inside this mountain. This is just nuts.”

* * *

We climbed down without incident and, because we were concentrating on not falling, in relative silence. Descending was a challenge at first, but it got easier the lower we were, and eventually we all turned around and just walked back down to where Sam was sitting. Sandy, who had been climbing with a backpack full of what-all, had taken several photographs of the exhaust pipe. And then, for good measure, he spray-painted the end of the overhanging rock fluorescent pink, to mark the outlet of that little tunnel.

If we didn’t talk on the radios on the way down, at the bottom we made up for it.

“A tunnel, what the hell is *that* about?”

“Where’d you get that shocking pink paint, Sandy?”

“What’s going on inside that mountain that someone needs an exhaust stack, anyway?”

“Wait ’til the sheriff hears about this.”

“Sandy, you said that propane wasn’t strong enough. What kind of stuff could have been coming out of that pipe?”

“Is it lunchtime yet?”

That last question, asked by Sandy, got everyone’s attention.

Angela, Sam, and I looked at each other, and said altogether “Yes!”

Along with all the climbing equipment and Sam's chair, Sandy had brought a cooler full of goodies, and we were able to make an elegant picnic by the stream before starting down what passed for a road. I was hoping this would be my last trip on it.

At least I wasn't trying to drive. Before leaving Fraser earlier, I'd asked Sandy if he had any back-road driving experience. He allowed as to some, and that was enough for me—I put him behind the wheel of my CBI Grand Cherokee, and he did a great job getting us up the hill. I figured it would be for the best if he took us back down as well.

And I'm sure it was, because I don't know if I could have handled a couple of the steeper downhill stretches. Between the grade and the loose rocks—plus the ruts and boulders in the “road”—I bet I would have run that Jeep into a tree or something. But Sandy did fine, even to the point of making it possible for us to talk about our discovery.

“So, now that we've got all those little plastic bags full of charred lichen, what are we going to do with them?” Angela, ever practical, was leaning forward between the front seats.

“What *is* that stuff, anyway?” Sam's curiosity got the better of her.

“Lichen is a sort of plant that grows on rocks and on tree bark up here.” Sandy seemed eager to lecture—maybe, I thought, he was hanging around Hal too much. “It's actually a pretty interesting organism, because it's two things that live together symbiotically. Another example of that symbiosis is coral reefs. Lichen, though, is an algae and a fungus, most often. I think. Green mushrooms, sort of. But I don't know what the plan is. Annette?”

“To get it analyzed. Uh, somehow. Back in Durango, I used to take anything and everything to a chemistry lab at Hal's university. Gil—meaning Gil Taylor, the lab guy—he could tell you what was in anything. But I don't quite know how to get such a thing done here.”

“Well, isn't that what FedEx and other overnight delivery services are for?” But Angela still looked puzzled. “So, I guess the idea is that this Gil person could detect chemical residue on the samples we got?”

“Right.” And I had to brace myself as Sandy slid the Jeep to a stop.

“Be right back.” He jumped out, rummaged around in the back, and disappeared into the woods.

“What's that about?” Angela couldn't hide her surprise.

“Potty stop, I bet.” Sam said.

“Nice of him to let us know, eh?” I had to chuckle.

A few minutes later, Sandy appeared out of the woods, carrying one of the little plastic sample bags.

“Ewww. I've heard of the ‘leave nothing but footprints’ thing about low impact wilderness hiking and camping, but that's gross!” Angela's nose was all wrinkled up.

Sam gasped. “Do you mean...? Ewww, for sure.”

Sandy hopped back in behind the wheel and held out the bag for me.

“Uh... What's that?” I just looked at it as the car started rolling forward, down the hill.

“Here, take it. I need to drive. It's more lichen. For a control. You know, uncontaminated. I bet your chemistry lab guy will appreciate a control sample.” He was concentrating on the not-quite-road.

“Oh.” I turned back to look at Angela and Sam, and they broke into laughter.

“What did you think it was? And take it, would you?”

I relieved him of the bag and tried to think of a polite answer.

“You jumped out and ran off so suddenly that we thought you had an urgent call of nature, Sandy.” Angela was more direct.

“You mean...? Ewww.” Sandy looked disgusted. “OK, time to change the subject. Anybody know anything about mining around here?”

“Hal and I live in a house with an old mine shaft for a wine cellar. So there is, or was, some,” I volunteered.

Sam chimed in. “I remember, on the way up, just before we went around a real sharp curve up toward that pass—uh, Bertha Pass?—there was a sign for a turnoff to the Henderson Mine. So maybe there’s still some today.”

“I think it’s ‘Berthoud Pass’, Sam. With a ‘d’ on the end. Yeah, I remember seeing that, too.” Sandy looked thoughtful. “And I think that was one of the locations proposed for the doosle.”

“‘Doosle?’” The three of us were once again in unison.

“Yeah, it’s an acronym—uh, let me think, um, the Deep Underground Science and Engineering Laboratory, DUSEL. The National Science Foundation had a competition a few years back to see where to site this new facility, and a bunch of universities and the state of Colorado and the mining company proposed a part of the Henderson Mine.”

“Did they win?” I hadn’t heard of such a thing.

“No, it wound up going to the Homestead Mine in the Black Hills. South Dakota. Some people say it was a political decision all the way, but the Homestead site does have a somewhat deeper set of tunnels. I read about it in *Science* magazine or somewhere like that.” Sandy jerked the steering wheel to avoid a large rock, and we all grabbed for hand holds. “Anyway, you’re right, Sam. I bet there are still active mines around here today. And it must be that one of them is under that ridge we were climbing up, and that it has a vent, that pipe I saw.”

“What do they need a deep underground laboratory for, anyway?” Angela looked even more puzzled.

“Believe it or not, cosmology and astrophysics, for one thing. See, there are these elementary particles called neutrinos that pass all the way through the planet. But you can detect them with the right equipment. It helps a lot, though, to be deep underground so all the other particles flying around through space get filtered out and don’t contaminate your neutrino measurements. It’s high-energy physics stuff.” Sandy shook his head. “When I was in graduate school, it was all so weird for me that I concentrated on nonlinear and chaotic systems dynamics instead, which is pretty weird in its own right. But I have some friends who are up to their eyeballs in neutrino physics.”

“Particles flying around? Where?” Sam, unclear on the concept, was swiveling her head around looking for something.

“Everywhere, all the time, Sam. From the Sun. From deep space. You can’t see ’em. Most of them are completely harmless, so don’t worry.” Sandy looked at her in the mirror and winked. “But it’s a good thing you saw that charred lichen up there. I bet I wouldn’t have found the vent pipe otherwise.”

“So, I’ve heard about mine explosions. Could the gas that caused the fire up there be the same thing?” The connection between the mine vent and the mysterious fire finally came into focus for me.

“Well, like swamp gas, the gas in mine explosions is usually methane, which is lighter than air. And methane explosions are usually in coal mines. I think what’s underground here is all metallic ore, molybdenum or something like that. Maybe the mines got started looking for gold and silver, though.”

Sandy thought a minute. “But we need to ask about toxic gas hazards in these mines to see if that could be an explanation. Maybe this whole thing was just an accident.”

“Yeah, that’s what that anonymous email from our mysterious friend ‘Mortified’ said. But accident or not, we’ve got two dozen people dead, and we need answers.” I was haunted by those skeletons.

“‘Mortified’?” Now it was their turn to ask questions in unison.

“Email? What’s that about, Annette?” Angela was the first to solo.

“Fran got anonymous email apologizing for the whole thing, calling it an accident. He responded and now has an exchange going. In the second one, this Mortified person suggested that none of the victims suffered.”

“Annette, I haven’t been here very long, but I can tell you that there are some real cracker-jack computer guys at Hal’s institute. Maybe they could find out more about who this anonymous emailer is.” Sandy shot me a quick glance but returned his focus to the road immediately. “Say, it looks like we’re getting down to the better part of this road.”

“Good thing, too.” Sam said. “I was beginning to wonder if y’all had an air-sick bag.”

* * *

Part II: Down to Earth

Eighteen

“It’s what?”

Gil Taylor finally called me Wednesday morning with the lab tests of the residues on all those lichen samples we had bagged on our climb up the side of the little valley on Sunday. We shipped the samples, along with the control that Sandy had thought to obtain, Monday morning, overnight; Gil got them Tuesday; he worked all night on them and called me Wednesday. Sometimes progress on an investigation is constrained by the reality of distance and testing procedures.

I wondered if my reaction would be typical of what everyone else would think. Gaseous trinitrotoluene, meaning evaporated TNT, just didn’t make sense for me. I thought TNT was supposed to come in sticks or bars or something like that, after all.

“You remember how this equipment works, Annette. It finds molecular weights of the constituents of whatever you feed it, and it also provides information about what individual elements are involved. The closest formula I can match up to the residues on those lichens you sent is TNT.” Gil and I had worked closely on analyzing various weird substances over the years, so he has learned how to explain things to me—a political science major who didn’t do very well in the real science courses that Northwestern required of everyone. “And I’m glad to have that plain sample as a control. Lichens are strange organisms with all sorts of oddball molecules of their own.”

“That was Sandy Livingston’s idea. He got it from the forest lower down than that valley I told you about.” I’d called Gil with background information on Monday, when I shipped the samples. “We also got samples across the char-line, as we’re calling it. Is there any difference between those?”

“Well, yeah, for sure. The charred samples show evidence of oxidized TNT and the un-charred ones evidence of un-oxidized TNT. But, remember, Annette, I’m calling this TNT because I don’t know what it really is. It’s close to TNT but not spot on.”

“Everything else we know suggests that it was a gas, and I never heard of TNT as a gas.”

“Me neither. But maybe that’s consistent with what I’m seeing. If someone has invented a substance with the same properties as TNT but that can exist as a gas, well, that would be something. And it might have the subtle differences from TNT that I’m seeing. Tell me again where this stuff came from?” Gil curiosity came through loud and clear.

“Out of a pipe in the ground that vents to the side of a mountain. Way high up in the Rockies. It must be from a mine shaft under the ridge we found it on.”

“A mine shaft? Something pretty strange is going on in that mine, let me tell you.” He rang off with his best wishes for our investigation.

Angela had walked into our shared office in the Grand County Sheriff’s office about half-way through this conversation. “Did I just hear you talking about dynamite on that lichen we put in those bags?”

I nodded as I tried to sort out what I’d just heard. “Not dynamite, that’s something very different. It’s made out of nitroglycerin, he said. What Gil found was TNT, but not exactly. Maybe we can find out more, though. Let’s set up a conference call with Hal and Sandy at the institute. And I hope Fran’s around to hear all this.”

It took about a half-hour to get everything organized, but we were all finally assembled, and I related Gil’s findings.

“It’s *what?*” was the response from everyone, just like I’d suspected it would be.

“You heard me. Gil’s best description is that it’s TNT, but he says it’s not precise. He doesn’t know a better name for it, I guess.”

“Well,” I recognized Sandy’s voice, “that will let us refine our simulations, right Hal?”

“I’d imagine that this would put more energy into the system than what we’ve been doing, right?”

“Way more. Maybe we’ll get the fire hot enough to match those...ah...indications we’ve seen.” Sandy’s careful and indirect reference to the highly classified NRO data on this open line made me smile.

Fran Schmidt, who was in the office with Angela and me, cleared his throat. “What I’m hearing is that you may have found the—what did you call it?—the fuel source for that hot fire. Some unexpected gas that must have spilled out of the pipe and down into the valley. Right?”

Because Fran and I were sitting across from each other, I could use body language to emphasize my response. “As I understand it, yes and no, Fran. Nothing that Hal and Sandy have been able to put into that computer simulation has been able to make the heat that the real fire made. This new information suggests that there was a fuel for the fire that they’ve not yet simulated, this gaseous TNT-like stuff. And the pipe that Sandy found, along with the lichen samples, suggests a source for that fuel. Right, Sandy? Hal?”

“Uh, right.” I recognized Sandy’s voice. “We don’t have anything definitive, just a lot of indications. We’re going to re-run the simulations with the extra heat source implied by something like a TNT-like chemical and see what happens. And we can also use that pipe I found as the place in the computer model where this chemical comes from.”

“I’m still not clear on where this is getting us.” Fran, sitting across from me, looked skeptical. “Suppose you put some chemical like TNT into this computer model and the results look like what we saw up in that valley. What’s it going to prove—prove in the sense of admissible evidence in court?”

Hal’s voice was more than familiar, it was comforting to me. “The way we look at this, Fran, is that we’re trying to answer the question ‘how could this have happened?’—‘this’ being that very hot fire that killed all those people and melted almost everything except the frames of the trucks and so on. And the answer we can try to provide is that the only way we can account for that amount of heat is for some very energetic chemical to have been present, something that would act as a significant fuel source not only to get the trees burning but to do significant damage itself. Without a chemical of that nature—an unnatural fuel source, I guess you could say—without that we just can’t get enough heat generated to do the damage that you’ve all seen up there. Of course, the computer is still grinding away on its latest set of simulations, so we’ll have to wait and see what the results tell us.”

“But up to now, you’ve got squat, right?” Fran, I could tell, was only trying to understand matters from the law-enforcement perspective.

“I’d say we have lots more than that, Fran.” Sandy, at least, wasn’t offended. “Our simulations so far replicate everything we know from observations except the heat and the spread-rate of that fire. And the observations of those things are not likely to be made public, even for a trial. I really shouldn’t say more on this phone line.”

Hal took over. “I think what Sandy’s saying, Fran, is that we’ve eliminated a lot of possibilities, especially natural causes, for this fire. Combine that with the vent pipe that Sandy found, plus all that information from the lichen samples and the burn pattern and so on, and it seems pretty clear that some kind of inflammable gas from that vent pipe was what caused the intensity of that fire. So the next step would seem to be to find out where that pipe comes from and what’s going on down there. Right?”

“You seem pretty confident of what the computer is going to say.” Fran was steadfastly skeptical.

“Yeah, well, I hope not over-confident. See, we’ve been doing a lot of these simulations, and they all point in the same direction, the direction of needing more chemical energy to make the results look like those observations. We’ve been careful not to put into the model any conditions that have no basis in reality. But with these lichen results, that reality has changed. And we may be able to match the observations now. We’ll see.” Hal’s confidence was shining through for me, and it felt good.

“So.” Fran had his feet up on the desk, twitching a western-booted toe in random patterns. “It sounds like what we need is to find more about what’s under that damned mountain.”

* * *

I had trouble not laughing, for I’d spent the previous two days trying to learn as much as I could about what was under Byers Peak and its neighbors in the Vasquez Range.

It had taken me only part of Monday morning to exhaust the mining information resources at the county offices, after which I tackled the information resources of the State of Colorado’s office that dealt with mining. Finding my way through *that* maze of confusing jargon and curious identification terminology was made a little easier by virtue of their on-line mapping tools, but I when I tried to discover what was actually going on at a particular mine claim, I hit a dead end. So I’d learned that something was going on under that ridge on Byers Peak, but not what that something was.

On Tuesday, I’d talked with Sandy about the DUSEL competition, and he’d been able to unearth the interesting fact that the Henderson Mine proposal was one of the Phase 2 entries in the competition, meaning it had passed muster in Phase 1. It turned out that there were several other Phase 1 proposals

that had not been invited to the next level, and one of those involved the same mine claim that I'd discovered to extend under that Byers Peak ridge—Monument Ridge, it was called, named for the rock formations along its spine—that we were so interested in. An extensive network of shafts and drifts called the Ute Mine, the entrance to which was a tunnel that surfaced over on the other side of the Vasquez Range off Ute Pass Road, simply wasn't deep or extensive enough to make the cut in the DUSEL competition.

The state's mining records, however didn't have any information about what happened to the Ute Mine after it was eliminated from the DUSEL competition. It was as if time had stopped at the end of the NSF Phase 1 program. So it was back to the county's property ownership records for me.

Angela was bugging me about what could she do to help, but because she had worked all day Sunday—Saturday, too, for that matter—I sent her home to get her place whipped into shape. Sandy, I figured, would be at MPARC, babysitting the computers.

At least the county offices were there in Hot Sulphur Springs and I could invoke the authority of the Sheriff's Department to get help. That made things much easier than trying to navigate obscure web sites for information. After I pulled rank a couple of times on Tuesday and became a general nuisance to everyone, the assessor herself assigned one of her staff assistants to, surprise!, assist me.

Jan Miller, in her early thirties, nondescript, bookish and shy, ripe for a makeover, turned out to be a wizard with the county's property database. I made a point of getting us on a first-name basis as soon as I could.

“So, Annette, what you're trying to find out is the history of this mine's ownership, right?”

“Right. I found out yesterday that there was a proposal to use this mine for a deep underground laboratory, for scientific research. The National Science Foundation declined to consider it beyond their first round, however.”

“Oh, right. I remember reading about that somewhere. The Henderson Mine, west of Empire, they made it to round two, right? Too bad they didn't get selected. It would have given the economy around here a real shot in the arm, I bet. Let's see what this says about the Ute Mine's ownership.” She had pulled up a spreadsheet with names, dates, and dollar amounts. “Hmm. Well, according to this, the current owner is something called ‘Ute Holdings, LLC’ out of Las Vegas. Before that it was something called ‘Ute Mine Associates, LLC’ also out of Las Vegas. They sold to Ute Holdings five years ago.”

“I wonder how we can find out who controls these organizations. I mean, these two sound like the same bunch with a slight variation on the name.”

“Yeah, we see that a lot, Annette. Probably has to do with tax dodges and stuff like that. A new company gets created just to take over the holdings of the old company, and then the new one has some number of years to show a profit, before they have to pay taxes and so on. Meanwhile, the old one goes bankrupt or something.” Jan shrugged. “Anyway, all we have here is this. It doesn't tell us anything about the company, or anything like that.”

“Or what they might have been doing with the property.”

“You mean, like working the mine? Well, for some things they'd need specific permits. But that could be hard to find, because this Ute Holdings outfit could have leased the mine to some operator, and the permits would be under the operator's name.”

“So what's the easiest way to find out what's going on down in that mine, anyway? I mean, assuming it's just not sitting there idle.” I was finding the whole thing too frustrating.

“Got me. Find the entrance and watch to see if anyone goes in or out, and ask them, I guess.” Jan wanted to help, I could tell. But the county’s database had only so much information.

At least one of those bits of information was a long code number for the assembled claims associated with the Ute Mine. Armed with that, on Tuesday afternoon I checked both the county’s and the state’s environmental permit databases and discovered that the Ute Mine was not permitted for mining operations by anyone. But there was an organization calling itself AirDX, LLC that had put in for permits for “underground research” of an unspecified nature. AirDX had a post-office box in Evergreen, in the foothills above Denver. I’d heard the name but never been there, and I was surprised when Google Maps told me that Evergreen was just a few miles down I-70 from the interchange with the road over Berthoud Pass, US 40. Maybe, I thought, a visit there is in order.

Or, because it was so close, it occurred to me that someone local might know something. I went looking for Fran.

“AirDX? Hmm. Sounds familiar somehow, but I can’t place it.” Fran scratched his head. “Maybe I’ve seen a sign or something. Mary and I go over to the Wal-Mart in Evergreen a lot. So does everyone around here, for that matter.”

“It’s funny. They have a post-office box but no listed phone or web site. But according to the county, this is the outfit that’s got the permit to work in the Ute Mine. And that’s what’s under that valley up there, at least if the mining claims are any indication,” I said.

“Do we know it’s their ventilation pipe that Sandy found?”

“Yeah, good point. No, I guess we don’t. Although it’s hard to believe it could come from anywhere else. Monument Ridge is smack in the middle of the consolidated Ute Mine claims.”

“Things are still pretty circumstantial, don’t you think, Annette? Yes, there’s the pattern of charred plants on that mountainside and so on, plus the chemical sampling results. But I’d be really surprised if any judge would give a search warrant on the basis of this stuff.”

“Maybe we could persuade the postmaster over at Evergreen to tell us who really owns that post-office box. Don’t they require a street address and so on in their application?”

Fran nodded. “Couldn’t hurt to ask, I guess.”

* * *

Nineteen

Angela, I assumed, had taken my advice to go home and be domestic, although part of me suspected that she was out interviewing people in the Hispanic community. Because it was only a bit after 1:30, I decided to make the drive to Evergreen to see if the postmaster might cooperate.

Given that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation needed to speak with AirDX principals, and given the obscure nature of their public presence, surely the U.S. Postal Service would want to protect itself and provide contact information for whoever rented the box. It sounded persuasive to me, at least. Maybe I could persuade the postmaster, I thought. If not, well, I could always stock up on toilet paper and so forth at the Wal-Mart.

After fighting the summer tourist traffic on I-70 in both directions, I finally made it home about 5:30 with a car full of paper towels and tissue, rolled and boxed. Hal’s car wasn’t in the garage, so I put

myself to work on making an interesting dinner. By the time he arrived an hour later, the mix of red and green bell peppers was nearly sautéed, and I was slicing the Italian sausages I'd grilled—grilled all by myself, no less—to add to them. When they finished, I was going to warm up some slices of polenta in the pan and then deglaze it for a bit of sauce.

He looked too pleased with himself for me not to be curious.

“Good day at the institute?” I asked.

“Encouraging. And interesting too. Let me set the table and pour you some wine.”

He studied the pepper-sausage mixture for a minute and disappeared into the wine cellar.

“How about a *Chianti Classico*?” There was a slight echo from the recesses of the old mine shaft.

“Sounds fine. What was so encouraging?”

“The numbers we found for TNT chemical energy. Assuming that the real thing is close to that should give us the energy we've been looking for, to make that fire realistic. Of course, we'll have to experiment with gas concentrations—too much would just blow the whole place up, I expect. But we can start with what would be toxic if you breathe it, on the assumption that some of those people were poisoned by it.” He reappeared and set to work with a corkscrew.

“How long will the computers take?”

“Until tomorrow, probably. At least for the first set of results.” There was a muffled *pop*.

He looked up at me with a frown. “You know, when we're working on this, like that business of deciding what gas concentrations to use, we get all involved in the technical details, hot on the trail, sort of. We tend to forget that we've got a couple dozen victims for this whole thing. And every now and then something reminds me of it, and it's quite a shock.”

“Happens all the time to me, too. The thrill of the chase, or something, it makes you forget about what started the whole thing, sometimes. But it's good to remember now and then, because it restores your motivation to succeed.” I poured a shot or so of vermouth into the sauté pan to deglaze it. “Let's get this on the table and eat. I'm starving.”

After a couple of bites, Hal looked up, surprised. “Say, this is different from the last time you made it. Got a secret? And how was your day, anyway?”

“Secret Treiri herbs and spices.” I winked at him. “And I grilled the sausages first. My day? Well, I drove down to Evergreen this afternoon. Seems that there's a company called AirDX that rents a PO box there and also leases something called the Ute Mine from its ownership. And the Ute Mine includes the claims up there where that fire happened.”

“Sounds like progress. But I thought that the postal service was protective of customer privacy.”

“They are. I got a lesson in that. But they cooperate with law enforcement, because they're very risk averse when it comes to their PO boxes' being used for anything illegal. So I found out who rented the box and how to contact him, some guy named Glenn Marquardt. With an 'Esquire' suffix. A lawyer, it seems. He's tomorrow.”

“AirDX?” Hal stopped chewing to think. “AirDX. That reminds me of something, or it's familiar or something. Hmm.”

“AirDX, LLC. Like I said, they're leasing the mine from some Las Vegas outfit called Ute Holdings, LLC, who bought it a while back from Ute Mine Associates, LLC.”

“Sounds like people are trying to limit their liability with this property, huh?” He grinned around his mouthful.

“Yeah, well, whoever’s working underground there just now would appear to have stepped into a big, fresh, steaming pile of liability. And if there’s any hint of negligence, in terms of standard practices for whatever was going on in that mine, well, it could turn into manslaughter in a New York minute.”

“Seems like there’s a good chance that the EPA, or maybe the state’s Air Quality Control Commission, might get interested as well. If that stuff was really toxic and they released a significant amount, that’d be some kind of violation.” He sipped his iced tea.

“Now, that’s an interesting angle. We found pretty strong evidence of a release of some kind, didn’t we? All those lichen samples, I mean, with the vent pipe there. Hmm.” I’m not a huge multi-tasker, but chewing and thinking I can manage. “I think I’ll take that approach, because if state air quality regulations were broken, I’ve got jurisdiction as a CBI official.”

Just as Hal was going to respond, the triumphant theme from Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* burst forth from his shirt pocket. He look flustered, and said “Sorry, this is one I have to take...Chuck? What can I do for you?”

I decided that he’d programmed his phone with that melodramatic bit of music for when Charles Shure called, and that’s why he took it at the dinner table. Normally, we ignore the phones while we’re eating.

“When did you get in?...And the house is OK? Good. Want to come down for dessert and coffee? OK, we’ll see you in an hour or so.”

He put his phone away. “Have we got anything that would make a credible dessert? Coffee I know we can manage.”

“I got some blueberries and raspberries at the store yesterday, and I could marinate them in some Cointreau. And I think there’s some cookies around. What’s going on?”

“He said he wanted to talk about a couple of things, that’s all. Rebecca is in Europe doing a photo-shoot, so he’s probably lonely up there all by himself. He’s staying in Win’s house again, and it’s way too big for one person.”

“Well, I’m glad we had the chance to talk at dinner. I’ve got a clearer path forward now.” I began clearing the table. “Pollution violations, even for toxic chemicals, are not nearly as serious as manslaughter, but they’re easier to prove. So that gives me something to start with. AirDX, in the person of this Glenn Marquardt, has some explaining to do. And it might give us the leverage we need for a warrant.”

* * *

Charles Shure rumbled up our hill in his Cadillac Escalade about 45 minutes later, and shortly we were sitting on the porch watching the alpenglow across the valley.

“I don’t know, Hal. Sometimes I think you got the better end of the deal we made for this land. This view is remarkable.”

“C’mon, Chuck, yours won’t be so bad, either, especially with those giant windows you’re putting in. You’ve got that wonderful aspen grove to watch, after all. Anyway, are you up here for vacation this time? You keep threatening to do that, but you always seem to be working.” Hal loved to poke gentle fun at his boss.

“Both, as usual. And I’m rattling around in that place all alone without ’Becca there. Thanks for inviting me down. These berries are great, Annette.”

“In any case, you’re here in time to see some interesting new results from the wildfire simulations we’re doing.” Hal proceeded to fill Shure in on the latest effort to introduce sufficient energy into the computer model.

“TNT-level energies in a gas? That’s pretty strange, because one of my divisions is looking at something like that as an investment. I shouldn’t talk about it, though, unless you guys really need to know about it.” Shure looked question marks at us.

“We’re both probably cleared for it, but I’m not sure of the need-to-know.” Hal, with more experience than I in the world of classified information, seemed to want to avoid hearing about things he didn’t need to. “At least we can wait for our new results, right?”

“Right. There’s something else I want to talk to you about, anyway. Biotechnology. Know anything about it?” It was pretty clear that Shure had shifted into his business mode.

“Well, as you know, my specialty is earth science, in particular atmospheric science. But biology is a natural science, as least as Frémont State defines it, and there were any number of attempts to get a biotech program going while I was dean.” Hal picked up his coffee cup and swirled the dregs around while he thought. “There were two camps, those who thought we should focus on bioinformatics and those who thought that bio-engineering was the way to go. I was a sort of referee, so I learned enough about all of it just to be dangerous.”

“Hmm. There’s overlap of course. We’ve got a Biotech Division—you probably remember it from that business with the old Nazi concentration camp journals, right?” He paused, and Hal and I nodded. The X-S ranch case was a hard one to forget.

“Thing is, as a corporate division, they’re very bottom-line focused. And I don’t think we’re getting enough cutting-edge work done. The profit motive is fine—look where it got me, after all—but it doesn’t lend itself to risk-taking. That’s one reason I set up MPARC, Hal. I figured that with the endowment, you’d be willing to take bigger risks than if you had to earn your way. And I guess that’s what you’re doing with this wild-fire simulation stuff.”

“You’ll recall that I phoned you before taking it on, right? But I think I know what you mean. In my field, it’s like it used to be when you could get an NSF grant to work on something as compared to, say, a NASA contract to work on the same thing. The NASA contract would specify ‘milestones’ and ‘deliverables’ and all sorts of other bureaucratic crap. The NSF grant took the approach of ‘find out a bunch of interesting new stuff and publish on it.’ Guess which arrangement produced the really interesting advances in the science?” Hal shrugged to indicate the obvious answer.

“Right. And what I want to do is to encourage more risk-taking at the cutting edge of research in my Biotech Division. With all due respect, Hal, it’s more complicated in biotech than in the world of computer chips, like the MPARC work, because in biotech you’re not only doing all the computer analysis and simulation, but you’re also growing real beasts in a laboratory, and sometimes they don’t want to cooperate.” Shure rolled his eyes as if he ought to be able to control those “beasties” but couldn’t. “Anyway, what I’ve thought of is another institute, only not quite as independent as MPARC. Here in east Grand County somewhere.”

Hal stared at the backside of the Front Range while he tapped his fingers. “I haven’t talked to you about this much, but maybe now’s a good time. I’m not sure how the local folks would feel about such a new venture here. I mean, we’re doing computer simulations of various things, mostly related to weather and climate, and we’ve run into an astonishing amount of...well...call it ‘know-nothing-ism,’ for lack of a better term. Seems like biotech, with all of its threatening things like gene splicing and stem cells, it

could have trouble getting support from the community. Or, worse, it could engender significant opposition. I know that there are some folks among the county commissioners and on the school board that would put up a fuss.”

“Even with all the new jobs and money flowing into the economy, huh? Idiots.” Shure leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath of the evening mountain air.

“Absolutely. In fairness, I expect that you’d find the same push-back anywhere you proposed such thing, except maybe at the University of Colorado medical campus down in Aurora.”

“*Aurora?* Hell, why not all the way to Kansas? Why in the world would anyone want to start an institute there? Anyway, it seems like your success in getting MPARC rolling suggests that another high-tech research institute up here could work.” Shure seemed to me to be revealing a pre-determined agenda bit-by-bit.

“Lab facilities for such a thing would represent a bigger start-up investment than MPARC, though. I mean, our computers are going to cost a bundle, but most of them are going to sit down in Colorado Springs on your nickel, right? You’d need biological labs up here to do what you’re talking about. Maybe even a level 3, or possibly 4, biohazards lab. That’s a huge investment. And the public relations problems could be show-stoppers.” Hal’s experience with the local residents was an ongoing source of frustration to him.

“I figure it would cost two to three times as much as MPARC per research scientist. But there are models for an organization like this. Take the Scripps Research Institute, out in La Jolla, and I guess they’ve opened a branch down in Florida somewhere. They run what’s essentially an academic shop, with senior scientists who manage lab groups of post-docs and students. And I get it about the PR problem, but that what’s those overpaid PR people are for. Let them deal with it.” Shure dismissed the issue with a small wave.

“So, Chuck, what are you suggesting?” I couldn’t keep quiet any longer. “A new, independent institute with some kind of big endowment like MPARC has? A second MPARC operation, like a second division or something? Or what?”

Shure laughed. “I think ‘what’ is the best idea, at this point. I do know that your husband is doing a cracker-jack job of setting up MPARC. He’s good at that sort of thing.”

“Uh-oh,” Hal said, looking at me. “Does this sound like what I’m afraid it sounds like?”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Don’t look at me, sweets.”

Shure forged ahead. “I know that you look at directing MPARC as a full-time job, Hal, but now that you’ve got a chief scientist and a chief operating officer along with computer support from UNELECO, you can offload a lot of the stuff you’ve been doing. Delegate, and so on.”

“Hmm.” Hal, I could see, was interested but also cautious. “Seems like I should ask for a raise, but I’m already getting an obscene salary.”

“You academics live in a different world, don’t you?” Shure smiled rather like I thought a shark might. “Tell you what. I’ll double your salary but put the new part into tax-deferred retirement annuities instead of giving you the cash. Then you won’t feel so guilty.”

“Well, I’m all for living guilt free,” said Hal. “But, look, how about we think way ahead here. You started with MPARC as an institute to help your computer division move forward, and now you want to expand it to do the same thing for your biotech division. UNELECO does lots of other stuff, too. Should I, as the director of MPARC-next, be thinking of other potential areas for expansion? Like, maybe, your

defense work? I mean, it seems like a good idea to think big at this point rather than ooze along governed by unexpected, random mission creep.”

“Got to admit, Hal, that the thought had occurred to me, most recently a a few minutes ago. That stuff about TNT as a gas switched on a light. In fact,” Shure looked around, pretending to be suspicious, it appeared, “as long as no one else is listening I might as well tell you about that. See, the Defense Department is always looking for more effective munitions. And one modality they’re interested in is conventional explosives for the Air Force, what are called ‘fuel-air explosives,’ in particular. We’re looking into purchasing a small start-up company that’s made a significant advance in that area, and it’s occurred to me that another institute like MPARC, or an MPARC division, could advance defense research as well.”

Although I was hoping that Hal wouldn’t take the bait to turn MPARC into a military research organization, Shure’s comments also got my antennae perked up. “Chuck, what’s the company you’re trying to purchase, can I ask?”

“Sure. It’s a local outfit, more or less. Something called AirDX. You probably haven’t heard of it, though. Their work is all classified.”

* * *

Twenty

Hal and I stared at each other for long enough that Chuck Shure began to fidget.

“What?” He finally broke down. “What’d I say?”

“Chuck, two things. I now have need-to-know about what came up before, this gaseous TNT stuff that you shied away from talking about. And, second, if you’re in the process of purchasing AirDX, let me suggest that you postpone any offers for a while.” It occurred to me that perhaps I was giving the guy inside information about a possible financial transaction, but what the hell, I thought, he’s got information I need and I owe him something.

“Uh, OK. Let me make a quick phone call.” He got out of his chair and wandered down across the yard in front of the porch while Hal and I stared at each other, exchanging shrugs, for a couple of minutes. “OK. I took you at your word and put our negotiation on hold. Now, tell me what all this is about and I’ll tell you everything I know about AirDX.”

I picked up on Hal’s subtle body language and took over.

“So, you know a lot already about the fire that killed at least 23 people, about how it just doesn’t seem like it could have been natural, about MPARC’s simulations and their search for energy sources, right?” I paused, Shure nodded.

“The business about the gaseous TNT-like substance came from two steps in our investigation. A bunch of us went up to that valley last Sunday and climbed up the mountainside that the fire had burned. We got lichen samples from the burned area. And Sandy, Sandy Livingston, your MPARC chief scientist, he found a ventilation pipe up at the top of the charred area. Then, we sent the samples out for chemical analysis, and it turns out that there were traces of something resembling TNT on them. So I looked in the mining records and discovered that there seems to be a mine under that area, the Ute Mine, the owners of which have leased the property to a company called AirDX. They have a permit for

underground research of an unspecified nature. Naturally, I, meaning the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, I am interested in AirDX at this point.”

He stared for an uncomfortably long time, and finally let out “Oh.” After a few more seconds of contemplation, he continued.

“Right. So, thanks for the heads-up that let me put our negotiation on hold. Here’s what I know.” Shure took a deep breath. “AirDX is a start-up company formed by a retired Air Force Academy professor, Herschel O’Donnell. The company name is a take-off on ‘RDX’, which is a military explosive developed in World War II and still the munition of choice for most applications. Its chemical make-up is rather close to TNT, but it’s far more energetic. O’Donnell’s idea was to develop something with the power of RDX in gaseous form, hence ‘AirDX.’ As I understand things, he and his staff have been working on developing variations on the RDX molecule that would exist as a gas but be stable until ignited. The application of interest is for fuel-air explosives.”

He looked at each of us, as if seeking questions, and continued when he saw none. “In our purchase negotiations, they’ve listed as liabilities a multi-year lease on an underground research facility and as assets a multi-million-dollar Department of Defense contract and a whole load of laboratory equipment, plus the intellectual resources of O’Donnell and three Ph.D.-level assistants.”

“I’m puzzled, Chuck.” And Hal did indeed look puzzled. “I know that UNELECO does lots of defense-related work, in several different divisions, I think. But I don’t recall any actual weapons work. Surveillance equipment, communications, yeah, and all sorts of other things. But this weapons business seems like a new direction.”

“Our interest isn’t for its potential for fuel-air explosives so much as it is for fuel, period. For rockets. The disclosures that O’Donnell provided included information that their latest chemical can be cooled and pressurized to liquid form, then ignited through nozzles to power rockets. With, he said, about ten times the efficiency of traditional fuel mixtures.”

“You said the company was O’Donnell and three assistants. There’s another person, a Glenn Marquardt, who rented their post-office box for them. He’s a lawyer.” Maybe, I thought, I won’t have to drive down to Evergreen to interview this guy after all.

“Right. He’s who we receive mail from and so on. I’ve had only limited contact with O’Donnell. Marquardt is on retainer as a mouthpiece, I think, and, probably, for legal advice. But he’s not an employee or an intellectual resource.”

“Have you met any of the assistants?”

“Not yet. But I’ve seen their CVs, and they’re an impressive bunch. So those intellectual resources are truly an asset worth a lot.”

“I don’t suppose you have any of the chemical formulas of the new chemicals they’ve been experimenting with?” I knew that was a stretch, but I could hope.

“Some were included in the disclosures, but they’re proprietary, of course. I can get them for you, I guess, if you don’t disclose them out in public.” Shure looked a bit worried about this.

“How about names and contact information for the assistants, and O’Donnell?” Might as well try, I thought.

“That’s easy. I’ll email it tonight. So, suppose the chemicals match, the ones I give you and ones you found on the plants...”

“Lichen”

“...lichen, whatever. Suppose they match. And you interview the assistants and one breaks down and talks about a release through that vent pipe. Then what?”

“Well, they I’d say that AirDX has more liabilities than just that multi-year lease.”

Shure sat back and let out a long breath.

“OK, well, if that happens, then I guess there will be two good things to come from this. You’ll get your mystery of—what’s it being called?—of the Valley of Death solved, and I’ll be able to purchase AirDX for a song.”

“Just remember, Chuck, it could take a while. We’ll need to investigate to see whether there’s any negligence involved. If so, that would change the entire complexion of this thing. You just might end up with fewer intellectual resources than you think.”

* * *

Having checked on the progress of the latest simulations before we went to bed Wednesday night, Hal was motivated to get up and out the door on Thursday morning. I dallied around the house trying to decide how to start my day and finally settled on a trip into Winter Park to see what results Hal and Sandy and company might have.

It was one of those spectacular summer days we have up in the high country, and there were serious-looking clouds forming up over the Continental Divide—a good sign, for the drought had been going on far too long. It occurred to me that Hal and I needed to spend some time on the water somewhere, maybe up in Summerland Park northeast of Grand Lake. North Inlet Creek always provided both beautiful scenery and interesting trout action.

But there was work to do. Fran had hinted that he would be holding another real news conference on Friday—Janelle Kennedy had been providing daily updates since the last one, but it was time for the boss to stand up and take his lumps. I needed to decide on the right approach to the AirDX crowd and to see how much of that information should come out to the media. And sooner or later, we needed to arrest someone. I wasn’t quite sure of whom or what for, but maybe the air pollution charge would come in handy.

At MPARC there were all smiles. Hal hustled me into an inner office, a conference room with no windows and an electronic lock on the door. Sandy was waiting.

“Welcome to our secure facility, Annette, the place where we can freely discuss classified information.” He waved his hand around the room. “It’s not much to look at, but it’s all ours and it serves the purpose. We dragged you in here to show you the results we got overnight, along with some hush-hush data that Mac found for us.”

“Where is he, anyway? Haven’t seen him since they got into town.”

“He’s in Hal’s office, which is also secure, trying to get more information about that Ute Mine you found. Seems he has access to all sorts of very interesting classified databases.” He picked up a little remote control gizmo from the conference table. “Hal? I think this will show better with the lights dimmed way down.”

It made me feel quite academic, actually, based on things Hal had told me over the past few years. A seminar of sorts, using what I assumed to be Microsoft Powerpoint slides, given by a guy shining a laser pointer on the screen to emphasize his remarks.

“This first slide is actually an animation that I’ll start in a minute. It’s from a series of surveillance images that Mac got for us.” Sandy was referring to a nearly all-black image with various pinpoints of

light here and there plus a cluster of lights over to the right side. As I stared it I saw that the black was really various shades of gray, and eventually what looked like the Front Range emerged along the right side of the image.

“This is just before the fire ignited. Here’s Fraser,” Sandy hit the cluster of lights with the laser pointer, and then moved it left and waggled it, “and Byers Peak is about here. Now watch carefully.”

A little hand appeared on the screen, and Sandy clicked a button. Almost immediately a new pinpoint of light appeared just above and slightly to the left of where Sandy had indicated the location of Byers Peak. It quickly grew back in the direction of the peak, moving across the landscape with remarkable speed. After a few seconds, most of it faded, leaving a flickering bright area about in the middle of where the large patch of light had been.

“That’s speeded up by a lot, so the 15 seconds of video there was really an hour and a half of real time. The lingering bright patch was the forest fire, which got started by that initial fast-moving fire. We’ve dissected this frame-by-frame, and that gives us solid estimates of the speed of that initial fire, and the intensity of the bright patches on the frames gives us the heat output. Quantitatively. So we can compare it with our simulations.” He looked quite pleased with himself.

“This is the background topography in our model, with a Google Earth image showing what it looks like.” A picture of the mountains, with a snow-capped peak just off center, appeared overlain by a bulls-eye of little lines. Elsewhere the lines reminded me of a plate of spaghetti.

“Now I’m going to zoom in on our little valley, with its ridge to the left. The red spot is where I found the vent pipe, and here’s the grove of trees where the truck frames were.” Obediently, the picture expanded to include only Monument Ridge and its adjacent valleys, with the Valley of Death to the right. The grove was obvious even without the laser pointer’s illumination.

“Now I’m going to show a series of videos, each 15 seconds long, like that surveillance data. But the real elapsed time for each is different, and it will appear on the last frame.” Sandy made the picture fade and the little hand appear again. “Here’s what we think of as a ‘natural’ fire, with grass by the creek to get it started and moving up toward that grove of trees.”

Against the darkened background, a spot of light appeared and began moving left, becoming bigger as it moved. After a few seconds, there was a “V” of light, and when it reached the grove, it brightened considerably. It did not progress much past the grove, though. After the 15 seconds of video, a little notation of “8:45” appeared in the upper right hand corner of the screen.

“You saw the time, and, what’s not obvious from that, the temperatures of the fire are way lower than from the data as well. So that natural fire doesn’t resemble the data at all, right?” Sandy was looking at me, so I nodded.

“Now, we’ve got a whole boat-load of these videos, but it seems like a good idea to cut to the chase instead of boring you with all of them. So here’s what we got overnight, after we heard about this gaseous TNT stuff or whatever it is as fuel. We had to make a bunch of assumptions about how much there was and its actual chemical composition. That was complicated by the information you got from Chuck Shure last evening. So we assumed a chemical energy equivalent to half TNT and half RDX, and we used just enough of the resulting gas to probably be toxic to people who breathe it.” Sandy twitched his thumb, again the hand appeared, and again the fire took off.

This time, at the end of the 15-second video, the notation said “1:15.”

“So,” Sandy took a deep breath, “an hour and a quarter of computer simulation compared to an hour and half in the data. And the burn patterns match well. Best of all, from the perspective of accuracy of the simulation, the temperatures match up almost perfectly. So we’re quite pleased. We could mess

around more, decrease the gas concentration or the mixture, but because we really don't know what this stuff was, that doesn't seem all that useful yet."

"I think you're probably right. If we ever do find out what it was and how much was released, we can re-run that last simulation to see if it improves. But this is pretty good, all things considered, I guess." I stopped to think for a minute.

"So." Now it was my turn to take a deep breath. "There's a vent pipe up on the side of the ridge there, and some amount of some toxic, highly energetic gas gets vented out of it. The gas is heavier than air, so it flows down the mountainside, into the valley, and eventually gets to that campfire we saw, where it ignites and turns the valley into a firestorm. The people who weren't killed by the toxic gas were killed by the fire. Does that make sense? Did I miss anything?"

"I think that must be what happened, Annette." Hal was persuaded, it sounded like.

Sandy was staring off into space, deep in thought. "Y'know, we could take this one step further. We've been concentrating on the fire so much we haven't really paid attention to the gas before it ignited. We could do a dispersion calculation, let the gas out of the pipe by injecting it into that model gridpoint as a source term, track its flow down the side of the valley and so on. It would help a lot to know its exact molecular weight and concentration, of course, but we could probably pinpoint the time of the release by working backwards."

Hal said, "After the fire simulation, that would be pretty easy, I'd think. Hell, we could even use the same code, don't you think, Sandy?"

"Right, yeah. That's just what I was thinking. Would that be helpful, Annette?"

"Anything that provides more insight into this will be helpful. For all we know, there's a record in the lab down there documenting the release. The timing could be useful."

"We'll work on that, then. Um, one thing to keep in mind is that the surveillance data can't be made public. So whatever timing we're able to work out isn't something that could be used in court, or even to get warrants." Sandy looked uncomfortable. "Mac worked hard to impress on Hal and me how highly classified that data is, and we have to respect the restrictions on its distribution. Right, Hal?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. The existence of data from surveillance satellites about events in the US is extremely sensitive stuff. In fact, officially, it doesn't exist." Hal shot me the "why me?" look.

"Oh," I had to smile. "Don't you boys worry your pretty little heads about that."

* * *

Twenty-One

Hal, I knew, would have taken my wisecrack for just that. I wasn't so sure about Sandy, but, then, I didn't care all that much. Rather than worry about it, I followed Hal back to his office.

Mac MacQuarrie was there, and he looked up from whatever he was absorbed in on the computer screen.

"Annette! Good to see you. Double good, because I think I'm finding some things that will interest you."

“Uh, Annette? I’ve got to meet with a business group for lunch, so I’ve got to get going. See you for dinner?” Hal was on the way out the door, but I grabbed him for a quick hug.

“You will. Knock ’em dead.” I turned back to Mac. “Haven’t seen you since you got here, Mac. How are you and Sam settling in?”

“She’s making lists of places to rent. That house across from the ski area is great, but it’s just not our style. Too, oh, plastic, I guess. And she’s been going on and on about your little adventure on Sunday. Won’t shut up about it. She’s even talked about signing up for climbing classes somewhere.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. I forgot how rugged the terrain is up there, and that jeep road as well. I wondered whether I’d made a mistake taking her along. But she saved the day, actually, by spotting something, a burn feature, that none of the rest of us saw. She made the process of getting those samples all the more effective.” I realized I should thank her again. “Say, why don’t the two of you come up to our place for dinner? You haven’t been up there, and you’d enjoy the view, I bet. And maybe it would give Sam new ideas about places to rent. Uh, I know it’s last-minute and you could have plans already, but tonight would work for us.”

“Why, thanks. Let me give her a call.” He reached for a phone.

Five minutes later, we were staring at Hal’s computer screen, dinner arrangements complete. Even better than dinner arrangements, Mac had found an interesting set of drawings of the Ute Mine.

“I’m not going to tell what web site this really is—that URL you see at the top there is completely bogus. But it turns out that certain agencies in Washington like to keep close track of defense contractors, what they’re doing and where they’re doing it. As soon as that AirDX company was awarded the Air Force contract, they leased part of this mine. And one of those agencies decided to find as much as there was to find. This is part of it.”

We were looking at what amounted to an underground map, drawn in a three-dimensional perspective that allowed various levels to be shown together. Per the normal convention, north was up, but up was also up.

The entrance to the mine was a horizontal shaft—called an adit, I learned—into the western side of Byers Peak, and after several hundred yards of sloping slightly down to the east, it became a decline, sloping downward in a clockwise spiral to access various horizontal drifts at different levels. Several of these were aligned, like hallways in a skyscraper, apparently to access the same ore body, and one, labeled “ore belt” apparently served as a second entrance to the mine on the south side. Others sprouted off in different directions and led to large, excavated caverns. One of these, at the end of an upward-sloping drift near the main entrance, appeared to me to be more-or-less under where Monument Ridge ought to be, although it was hard to tell.

“Mac, is this to scale? Is there a way to superimpose the surface topography?”

“I already thought of that. It’s not trivial, because of this 3-D perspective drawing. But I grabbed a Google Earth image and played with tilting it. This,” he clicked the mouse on an icon at the top of the page, “is as good as I could get. It’s backwards, of course, with the mine on top of the topography, but I think it shows the relationships of everything.”

“You can see that the entrance lines up, here...” he pointed the mouse cursor over that spot on the two figures, “...and there’s a second reference where the old conveyer belt surfaces over here. Things line up there, too.”

Because the map of the mine was perched above the topography on the computer screen, it took me a few seconds to figure out that, in real life, Monument Ridge had a large excavated cavern under it.

There was even a faint line labeled “air vent” running up to the side of the ridge, above a valley that, in the Google picture, had a grove of trees in it.

I pointed to that cavern. “I bet this is the space that AirDX is leasing, right?”

“As near as I can tell. And there doesn’t seem to be any information about what, if anything, is being done with the rest of the space down there. But there are pictures.” He proceeded to flip through a slide-show of photographs, some from satellites and some obviously taken from ground level.

“Whoa, stop. Go back one, please. That’s the entrance, eh? Presumably the main one, because that looks like a good-sized overhead door.”

“Right, let’s see…” Mac stepped forward three slides, “...here’s a shot of that door with a truck coming out, so it’s big enough to drive through.”

It was a highway semi-tractor, a Peterbilt, by the nameplate on the radiator, of unknown vintage, and the entrance was three times taller and more than twice as wide. Big door indeed, I thought.

“So, do you suppose AirDX was having a delivery that day? Or what?”

“Got me, Annette. I guess I had the impression that they were involved in laboratory chemistry experiments, but supplies for those shouldn’t need that size of truck. Here’s another.”

This one was a side shot of a delivery van, a side shot that revealed no corporate markings. The mine door’s size dwarfed the van.

“So, if you found all this, you must have found information about the lease arrangement and the company that owns the mine, too, uh, Ute Holdings, I think?”

“Annette, I’ve got more information than you could possibly want. And I haven’t had time to really study it all, but there some interesting parts. The AirDX lease is, I guess, what you’d call ‘prospective,’ in the sense that the monthly cash flow is small but future promises are high. Ute Holdings gets a percentage of eventual stock sales or whatever. That made me wonder what kind of outfit Ute Holdings is, and this is where things get really interesting.” He minimized the window with the mine drawing in it and brought up a word processor. “I’ve made these notes—you can see that Ute Holdings is at the end of a series of shadow companies that eventually track back to these eight, uh, gentlemen.”

“I don’t recognize any of those names. And they all have Las Vegas addresses, so that isn’t surprising, I guess. Who are they?”

“My connections at Treasury and at the FBI were able to provide some very interesting comments earlier this morning. Apparently they represent various shady organizations from all across the country. Two of them are associated with New York and New Jersey outfits, then there’s Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. My guy at the FBI got all giddy when I told him that they were all co-owners of this network of companies. He actually giggled on the phone.”

“Well, let’s see. There are, ah, 1, 2, 3, 4 layers between Ute Holdings and these fine gentlemen.” I was pointing to Mac’s list. “This traces Ute Holdings up to them. Is there a way to start with them and work down, to see what other companies there are in the various layers?”

Mac’s smile was serene. “Used to be, you really couldn’t do that very effectively. But now, with computer search capabilities, you can. And I kind of thought you might be interested in something of that nature.”

One time, when Hal was at work on his computer, I looked over his shoulder and saw a diagram of how the climate system works. There were boxes for parts of the system, circles for processes between and within them, and curvy arrows showing all the links. It looked like a map of the Los Angeles freeway system that had been drawn by a very inebriated individual.

The picture that Mac brought up next was rather like that, but instead of boxes for “ocean” and “atmosphere” and so on, there were company names. I couldn’t help but notice that many of those names involved the words “Environmental Services.”

“Mac, did you think to run the license plate on the front of that Peterbilt that was coming out of the mine, in that picture you showed me?”

* * *

After all the work he’d done, I felt petty for the little charge I got when he said “no.” But then he ran it, faster than I could have, and I decided I needed all the charges of that nature I could get. I was supposed to be the CBI Director in control of things, but he was a master.

The Peterbilt, it turned out, was registered to something called “Western Slope Environmental Services,” and it took us only a minute to find it on that corporate freeway diagram. Relative to the Eight Gents, as I had begun to think of them, it was at the same vertical level as Ute Holdings, but far removed horizontally.

On the other hand, it had a web site—a single-page web site—with a clever WSES logo, contact information, and virtually nothing else. On a lark, we picked several of the other “. . . Environmental Services” companies at random and looked up their web sites. They were all similar. Obviously, someone, or eight someones, was trying to be very, very private in their business dealings.

It was getting on toward lunch time—a fashionably late lunch time at that—and I was starved.

“Mac, we’ll see you at, say 6:30 or so for dinner, OK? And I’ll have Hal print you out a map. I think I need to find that AirDX lawyer as a next step. This stuff you’ve uncovered is all very interesting, and it’ll help us move ahead, I’m sure.”

Forty-five minutes later, including a stop at City Market for some lunch goodies, I arrived at the sheriff’s department in Hot Sulphur Springs, having played good citizen with respect to speed limits most of the way. A note from Angela told me that she was in the field doing her Hispanic community investigation again.

So I dialed the number of Glenn Marquardt, Esq. while munching on a ham sandwich.

“Attorneys’ office,” was the response, in the voice of a Minnie Mouse sound-alike.

I maneuvered ham and sourdough into my cheek. “Hello. This is Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. It’s most important that I speak with Mr. Marquardt.”

“Please hold.” This was just fine, because it allowed me another bite and a gulp of lemonade.

“I’m sorry, but he’s not available just now. May I take your number, please?”

I paused long enough to swallow. “Well, Ms. . . . um, I’m afraid I missed your name?”

“I’m Poppy Stanople.”

“Thank you. Ms. Stanople, I’m aware that you’re a staff assistant of some kind, and it’s completely inappropriate for me to badger you. So I won’t, if you will please communicate to Mr. Marquardt in the strongest possible terms that the Colorado Bureau of Investigation needs to speak with him—the alternative being that we will visit him in person and in force and very shortly.” I knew I had command of sufficient resources to make this only a small bluff.

This time the pause was long enough for me to finish the rest of my sandwich. Just as I polished off the lemonade, I heard a click.

“Ms., uh, Treery? This is Glenn Marquardt. How can I help you?”

“Thank you for taking my call, Mr. Marquardt. I’m calling because you are the registrant of an Evergreen post-office box in the name of AirDX, LLC and you are also representing them in a pending financial transaction. You and I need to talk about AirDX, and then I need to see their facility at the Ute Mine.”

I began to wish I’d bought some dessert to while away this new pause.

“Ms., uh, Treery, I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about. And even if I did, it sounds as if some legal documentation, for example a warrant, would be required for me to comply with what you’re suggesting.”

“One of my hobbies, Mr. Marquardt, is keeping track of how many lies people tell me, and it’s the big lies that I find particularly interesting. I’ll chalk a big one up for you. Now. Would you like to do this the easy or the hard way? I have your office address, your home address, your automobile registration, your driver’s license, which, of course, has your picture, and impeccable information concerning the statement I made previously. If I obtain a warrant, it will be for your arrest for obstruction as well as for aiding and abetting 23 capital felonies, which crimes are the single highest priority of the CBI just now. How much trouble do you want to make for yourself?”

I know. I came on rather strong. Thing is, I just don’t like lawyers, and lawyers that lie to me just plain piss me off.

“As an officer of the court, Ms. Treery, I’m afraid that I find your threats to be hollow. Good day.”

It took me all of an hour to provide CBI central in Denver with what they needed to obtain an arrest warrant for Marquardt. Rod Andersen, my boss, was delighted with all of the information we’d assembled about the fire and its origins—even though I managed to avoid sending him anything remotely classified—and he agreed to apprehend Marquardt with an appropriately flashy show of force. Poppy Stanople, after some persuasion, let me know that Marquardt would be attending an Evergreen Chamber of Commerce meeting later in the afternoon on behalf of un-named clients—I didn’t push her—and I let Rod know that would be an appropriate place to find him. We agreed that Marquardt could spend the night in Grand County’s finest facility, the Hot Sulphur lockup, and that I would question him in the morning.

Then I went shopping.

My drive home included passing the two big grocery stores of the Fraser Valley, so I had choices. What, I wondered as I left the office, should I feed Mac and Sam? And, of course, my dear husband, who was developing just a bit of a paunch. It was hot—those clouds I’d noticed earlier had moved off east—so something summery and cold seemed in order.

On the way, I called Hal on my cell phone. Surely, I thought, he’d be back from the luncheon.

“Weathers, MPARC.”

“Treiri, CBI here. How was lunch?”

“Oof. Too much by half. Can we have a light supper?” He must have read my mind, I thought.

“We can indeed, although it needs to be nice. I invited Mac and Sam to come up. Could you print him out a map, please?”

“You bet. How was your afternoon?”

“Well, between you guys and your simulations and Mac and his on-line sleuthing, we’re going to make an arrest tonight. Ah, well, there’s also the fact that the guy we’re picking up is a lawyer and he lied to me. Turkey.”

“You know what? I’m sure glad I’m a scientist. I don’t think we’d be happy together if I were a lawyer.”

That kept me smiling all the way to City Market.

* * *

Twenty-Two

My drive to the office in Hot Sulphur Springs on Friday morning was leisurely, because I was in no real hurry to confront Glenn Marquardt, Esq. And it was in stereo.

The right side of my brain was thinking about the lovely evening that Hal and I had spent with Mac and Sam over dinner—salmon that I got for Hal to grill, placed in chunks on top of a Caesar salad—and then dessert and coffee on the porch, watching the alpenglow. Mac’s comment earlier in the day had been spot on: Sam’s horizons for places to live were expanded significantly.

Meanwhile, the left side of my brain was grinding away at various analytical issues related to the day ahead, plus a more pleasant one: where to find a good framing shop. Sam had made us a present of a charcoal sketch of the Back Range—what the locals seemed to call the backside of the Front Range—more or less as seen from the house we stayed in when we first came to the Fraser Valley. I immediately understood why she had developed the reputation that Mac had talked about—it captured the essence of the parade of 13,000’ peaks by using just a few strokes and omitting needless detail. Sam, I could tell, would be able to open her own gallery if she wanted to.

Remembering the sketch, of course, was a right-brain activity, but the thought of a gallery and all its logistics switched things back to my left brain, and it wasn’t long before less pleasant thoughts—Mr. Marquardt, Esq., in particular—intruded.

I’d checked my email before leaving home and found, via a message from Rod Andersen, that the arrest had gone as smoothly as possible, all things considered, although Marquardt’s threats of a lawsuit—no, several lawsuits—made for a rough spot or two. Per our plan, he was waiting for me at the Grand County facility in Hot Sulphur.

Fran’s news conference was scheduled for 10, so I thought I would soften Marquardt up a little first, leave him alone to ponder his fate a bit longer while I watched Fran’s performance, and then see how far Marquardt would take me along a path to getting inside the Ute Mine.

I found Marquardt in an interview room, wearing an orange jump suit accessorized by wrist and ankle shackles. For some odd reason, he was out of sorts.

“Mr. Marquardt. How nice to meet you in person. Let’s talk about hollow threats, shall we?”

“You’ve made a huge mistake, Ms. Treery. The CBI will find itself awash in lawsuits, as soon as I get out of here.”

“Well, that certainly gives us an incentive to release you, doesn’t it? Now, just so you don’t embarrass yourself further, my name is Trieri. Tri-er-i. I expect that Ms. Stanople may have mispronounced it for you. And with respect to any lawsuits you may file, there were plenty of witnesses

to your arrest and our people are good, so I'm sure you weren't mistreated. And your incarceration here is purely by-the-book. Further, we have credible, first-hand knowledge of the matters I mentioned on the phone yesterday, the ones you denied knowledge of, so the obstruction charge is a foregone conclusion. That, of course, will result in your disbarment and your own suits will be tossed—unless you can find someone to represent you in a hopeless situation. Good luck with that.” I tried to keep my smile pleasant.

“So. Where things stand is this: if you cooperate, we can cut a very nice deal for you with respect to a plea bargain on these charges, one that will save your status before the bar, I think. So why don't you consider your options for a little while so that I can attend to some other business? I should be back in an hour or so. Should I have someone bring you coffee or something? No? Well, I'll be back shortly.”

As I left him, he was staring a hole in the wall opposite the door to the interview room.

I found Fran Schmidt in his office, pumping himself up for the press conference. He, too, had received email from Rod Andersen about Marquardt's arrest, and I took a minute to brief him on some of the background, carefully tip-toeing around anything classified.

“You're saying the simulations finally worked? What did it take for that to happen?”

“The right kind of fuel, not the natural fuels but the gas we've talked about. And, as you heard, Sandy found that vent pipe, and using that place as the source for the gas helped the simulation as well. This guy Marquardt is connected to AirDX, which has a permit for research in the mine, but he lied about it. That's the obstruction. And because he was involved with trying to sell AirDX, that's aiding and abetting whatever happened—a stretch, but credible at this point.”

“Yeah, well, the arrest last evening is all over this morning's papers, so there will be questions. Do we know who the AirDX principals are?” He put his feet up on the desk.

“We do, but we haven't found them at their homes. Our next step is to get a warrant for the mine and their lab space in it, but I'm hoping I can talk Marquardt into cooperating and taking us in.”

Rod looked up at the wall clock. “OK. Showtime. I'm glad to have some progress to report. Thanks, Annette.”

A few minutes later he was out in the lobby, behind the podium, looking stressed. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Sheriff Fran Schmidt, and I have some items of interest related to what you've called the ‘Valley of Death’ case. I...”

“Was that arrest in Evergreen last night related to this case?” The voice was deep in the crowd so I couldn't identify the speaker, and the question unleashed a torrent.

Rod backed away from the microphone a couple of feet and stood patiently, waiting for the hubbub to subside. It finally did after about a minute.

“Folks, I think this will be much more efficient if I make a statement first and then take questions, OK? There are two major items of interest.”

He proceeded to sketch the outline of the simulations and emphasized the conclusion that the fire could not have been natural, and then dove into the matter of Glenn Marquardt, Esq. I thought he did such a good job that all possible questions were answered, but, then, I'm not a hungry journalist.

Once again, Rod managed an admirable job of bobbing and weaving among the questions, answering those he could and either avoiding or ignoring those he couldn't. He was even casual about mopping the sweat from his forehead a couple of times. The final question he took was one we'd asked ourselves:

“Sheriff, could this have been just a tragic accident?”

“I don’t think that ‘just an accident’ is the right way to put it, in a circumstance where 23 people may have burned to death. But this is a question we are asking as well. The answer will depend on what we discover about the nature of that fire, meaning what un-natural fuels may have been involved and how they got there. I do believe it’s safe to say that this was not an intentional mass murder. But there could well be negligence involved somehow, meaning that ‘accident’ is not really the right term. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. We will be providing daily updates as we have been.” And with that he walked off the stage, ignoring the din of additional questions that followed him.

“Great job, Fran. You covered everything without giving away the farm.”

“Thanks, Annette. Is it too early for a shot of scotch?”

* * *

At that point, I decided that Glenn Marquardt had been allowed enough time to contemplate his options. But before I could see him again, I discovered that I had a little gantlet to run, in the form of Steven Sheffield, Esq., who was sitting dressed in his usual over-the-top western lawyer outfit on a bench in the hallway.

“Why, Mr. Sheffield. I haven’t seen you up here since you lost Mandy Summers to life without parole. What brings you up this way?”

“Ms. Trieri.” He touched the four-inch brim of his western hat. “I read about Glenn Marquardt’s arrest last evening and found out that he’s being held here. He’s a friend of mine, and I thought he might want representation.”

“How thoughtful. Well, I’ll be sure to call you if he asks for you. Nice seeing you again.” I’m not very good at hypocrisy, but I can pull off a bit of it when I need to. He had made our prosecution of Ms. Summers far, far more complicated and expensive than it really needed to be.

In the interview room, Marquardt was still staring at the wall.

“Ready for a conversation, Mr. Marquardt? The arrest reports says that you were fully Mirandized. Any opening comments?”

“You’re bluffing, Ms. Trieri.” He managed, at least, to get my name right.

“The Evergreen postmaster provided us with the record of your renting the AirDX post office box. For you to have told me you don’t know about AirDX was a lie. That’s obstruction of an active investigation, one that’s potentially 23 separate capital cases. We’ve got you dead to rights on this, Mr. Marquardt. Like I said, if you help us, we can help you. What’ll it be?”

“I think I should have an attorney present.”

“That’s certainly your right. You’re aware, I’m sure, that this is being recorded, so that request is on the record. And, for the record, Mr. Steven Sheffield is out in the hall awaiting your call. However, and this is your last chance, if he enters this room as your attorney, any help we can offer you with respect to the obstruction charge will evaporate. Mr. Sheffield may be able to ameliorate the damage from the aiding and abetting charge, but the obstruction in a case this serious will get you disbarred. Your choice. Work with us, or call in Sheffield. Or anyone else, for that matter, but that will take longer.”

“What’s Sheffield doing here?”

“He told me that he read about your arrest in the paper, found out, somehow, you’re here, and came up, as a friend, to offer assistance.”

I was patient as Marquardt looked around the room in thought, first at the hole he'd stared in the wall before, then at the door in opposite wall, then at the one-way mirror that he knew a deputy was behind, then at the table top, where he was drumming his fingers.

"You know the old saying, I'm sure, that 'with friends like him, who needs enemies?' It applies here, so let's leave him sitting there indefinitely. It turns out that your obstruction charge isn't as solid as you think, because I can invoke attorney-client privilege. Except I haven't seen my client for a couple of weeks, and I'm getting worried. So maybe I should work with you, for his sake as much as mine. What can you provide to make me trust you?"

I knew that attorney-client privilege would not apply to my question about his knowledge of AirDX, so he was blowing smoke. But all I wanted was for him to work with me, so this was a breakthrough.

"As tough as it may seem, Mr. Marquardt, we'll have to trust each other. I'll drop my charges, you'll drop your threats of lawsuits and cooperate, and we can move this whole thing ahead. My main concern is clearing the Valley of Death case, and we are certain that AirDX is involved somehow—probably involving some kind of accident, maybe or maybe not involving negligence. That's what I need to figure out. And find evidence for. But what's this about your client's having gone missing? How often do you normally speak with him?"

Because his wrist shackles were not fastened to his waist, he was able to hold out a manacled hand. "Deal. You drop charges, I won't sue, and I'll cooperate." We shook on it.

"Lately, we've been speaking every few days, by phone, because of this financial transaction you mentioned. We had a possible purchase offer in the works that I was negotiating on behalf of the AirDX owner."

"Who is?"

"Professor, professor emeritus, actually, Herschel O'Donnell, chemistry department at the Air Force Academy." Because I already knew this, his answer let me relax a little—it looked as if he was actually sincere about working with me. I waved at the mirror for the deputy to come in and remove the shackles.

"He has this idea of how to re-engineer the military explosive called RDX into a gas, and the Air Force is funding him so that they can improve their fuel-air explosives."

"I read about those somewhere, how they are the largest non-nuclear munitions. Why would they want bigger ones, anyway?"

"Well, I think bigger is always better for these things. But they're also interested in what they call 'efficacy,' is my understanding. More bang for the buck, or something. Anyway, O'Donnell leased some space in the Ute Mine for the research. He needed a facility that could be highly secure and would offer blast protection in case of an accident." He massaged his wrists and waggled them as the deputy removed the cuffs. "Thank you, by the way."

"When was the last time you were at their laboratory?"

"I don't go there much. It's been over a month, I'd guess. Let's see." More finger drumming. "I guess it was four and a half weeks ago, I went up to talk with him about the latest developments in the purchase offer. He instructed me to haggle about some of the conditions, and that's still in progress."

"You went up there? So you know where it is and have access?"

"Right. The mine entrance has a keypad with codes, and so does the AirDX section, different codes. All you have to do is avoid getting in the way of the trucks."

"Trucks?"

“Yeah. There are semis going in and out of there at odd intervals. Completely unpredictable. No idea what that’s about. You just have to stay out of their way. Fortunately, once inside the entrance, we turn left and head up, the trucks turn right and head down.”

Now it was my turn to think for a minute.

“I believe that we will have to make a little expedition up to that mine, Mr. Marquardt. Now, you said you’re involved with negotiating the potential purchase offer. Did you also file the environmental permit application?”

He nodded “I did, but that was trivial. We made it as generic as we could because of the classification issues.”

“And did you negotiate the lease that AirDX has with Ute Holdings, LLC?”

This time he looked surprised. “I’m impressed with your research, Ms. Trieri. I did that as well. It was dicey, let me tell you. AirDX is cash-poor, so we had to provide them with the equivalent of stock options against the company’s future value. It was all I could do not to give up control. Of course, this means that Ute Holdings wants us to succeed, so that’s helpful.”

“What can you tell me about Ute Holdings?”

“Not much, beyond the fact that they’re shrewd negotiators. They’re based in Las Vegas. I flew out there once, and I met with their people in Silverthorne on a couple of occasions, one of them to take a tour of the space. This all happened after the Air Force contract came in, so we’re paying nominal rent on the space from that cash flow. But the real payoff for Ute Holdings will be when this purchase is finalized.”

“Hmm. That raises another question. You mentioned that AirDX is cash poor. It’s my understanding that O’Donnell has three Ph.D. level assistants, and then there’s you. Are their salaries and your fees paid from the Air Force contract as well? What’s your financial interest in AirDX?”

Once again he looked surprised. “You *are* good, Ms. Trieri. The assistants’ salaries are paid from the Air Force contract, but my arrangement is rather like Ute’s. The contract pays out-of-pocket expenses, but my fees are against the company’s future value. So I’m motivated to see it succeed as well. And, of course, Professor O’Donnell isn’t drawing salary either, so he’s got the same motivation.”

“I see. OK, one last question, Mr. Marquardt, and then we’ll get you out of here. What do you know about email from someone calling himself ‘Mortified’?” I had my fingers crossed, hoping for a home run.

But he looked genuinely mystified. “‘Mortified’? Huh?”

Disappointed, I looked at the mirror, ran my finger across my throat, and pointed at the door. “Let’s go see if Mr. Sheffield is still sitting in the hall, waiting for your request for assistance. Be sure to give him my regards. We’re old ...um... acquaintances.”

* * *

I made sure that Marquardt was treated with kid gloves for his release—Fran’s policy of having the street clothes of jail inmates cleaned and pressed overnight helped a lot—and we parted on good terms, all things considered.

By then it was lunchtime, and I decided to celebrate by having a pizza delivered to the office so I could catch up with paperwork. If some of the pizza grease got dripped on the paperwork, well, whatever.

Just about the time that the pizza arrived, so did Angela, back from another morning of trying to sort out the relationships among the various factions of Hispanics in the Fraser Valley. She’d been at it since our climbing expedition on Sunday, and although I’d been reading her daily reports, we needed to catch up in person.

The look on her face suggested that my taste in pizza agreed with hers, and she filled me in about her activities while we ate.

“I’m starting to figure out the different Hispanic groups, at least a little.” She chewed thoughtfully. “I thought maybe I’d know some of the Norteño folks, but I really don’t. Some of them know a couple of my cousins, though, so we were able to connect at that level. That’s helped.”

“I remember that someone—one of the forest rangers, I think, anyway, someone—talked about how that Cuban guy’s Spanish had a difficult accent. Are you running into that? Seems like it might be a clue to who’s who.”

She grinned. “Yeah, you’re right, except I’m finding that my own accent, the Northern New Mexico brand of Spanish I grew up with, it has its own, um, distinctive characteristics. I remember that it was pointed out to me when I was in college in Boulder. I found myself talking with the non-New-Mexico groups over there using the best text-book Spanish I could summon up. But I think they still recognized my origins.”

I had to smile. “There have been times when my midwestern accent hasn’t exactly fit in, like when I had to deal with fourth- and fifth-generation ranchers down in the Four Corners.”

“Right, probably like that. So, anyway, I’ve still made a little progress. There’s an interesting pecking order, in terms of jobs and stuff. The Norteños, being U.S. citizens, they seem to get the pick of the jobs, for example.”

“Really? We have a housecleaning service, we started with them before we got our current house, last winter, and they’re from Cebolla or someplace around there. I mean, the service is this company they work for. An older couple.”

“Well, yeah. Compared to most of the jobs the Hispanics are working in this valley, housecleaning for the likes of you is almost a desk job.” She smiled before chomping on another slice of pizza. “A lot of the Norteño guys are truck drivers, seems like. Good pay, relatively easy work, overtime—they’re doing all right.”

“Truck drivers? Like, for construction jobs, or what?” A little bell in my head was ringing.

“Highway trucks. Someone mentioned an environmental cleanup company, or something like that.”

The ringing turned to clanging. “Did anyone mention the company?”

“Something about ‘environmental services,’ I think. So, anyway, they’re at the top of the pyramid. Then everyone else, all the other groups, I mean, they have their own niches lower down until you get to the folks from Central America. They’re working the scut jobs.”

“Could it have been ‘Western Slope Environmental Services’?”

“Huh? Oh, well, yeah, I think. Why?”

She was eyeing the last pizza slice, so I slid it toward her and launched into an explanation of the Ute Mine and its interest for us. By the time I was finished, she'd wiped out the pizza.

“So, this trucking company is doing something in the mine where this other company, uh, AirDX, right?, where they've got some kind of lab?” She looked around for a napkin and came up with one from under the pizza box.

“And our main concern is with AirDX, but there's something strange about those big trucks, too. It might be interesting to interview some of the drivers.”

“Well,” she looked skeptical, “I'm not sure how much cooperation you're likely to get if they think their jobs are in jeopardy.”

“No doubt. But our real interest is the AirDX operation, and it could be that the drivers have information about that. Comings and goings, people they might recognize, that sort of thing. And that shouldn't be a problem with their jobs, no?”

“I'll just have to ask someone and find out, I guess. But they seem like a pretty suspicious bunch.” Angela's expression wasn't encouraging. “Anyway, it sounds like you're planning a trip into this Ute Mine, huh?”

“‘Huh,’ indeed. I'm not much for underground exploration. That climbing we did Sunday, out there in the wide open air, that's more my style. But I guess we might need to.” Just the thought of entering the Ute Mine had sent a shiver up my spine. “Maybe Fran has some people with experience underground.”

“Uh, I guess this mine's under that mountainside we climbed up, or somewhere close. But where's the entrance? I mean, if those big trucks are going in and out of there, it's not up that jeep road we took, right?” She looked puzzled.

“Ahh...well, that's a good question. I know where the entrance is, because I saw a map. But I don't know exactly how to get there. That lawyer, Marquardt, told me he met with people about it in Silverthorne, and that's in the next valley over, the Blue River Valley. Maybe the road is over there. Let's go find Fran and see if he knows.”

We found him in the staff break room, a sort of combination kitchen and lounge, socializing, apparently still decompressing from his ordeal at the hands of the piranhas.

“Annette! Glad you stopped by. How did your interview turn out?” I had mentioned it to him earlier.

“Better than I would have hoped. Let's go talk about it.” And the three of us retired to his office, where I filled him in about the Marquardt interview and the Ute Mine connection, and he filled Angela and me in about access.

“I think you get there on Ute Pass Road, which is improved and maintained over in Summit County, off State Road 9 along the Blue River. It winds over a range of foothills, down into a valley, and then branches out into the Vasquez proper here in Grand County. Lots of times when we have something to deal with over there, we sort of sneak in through that Summit County road, because getting there from the Fraser Valley can be slow and unreliable. It should work now, there's a turnoff to the south just before Parshall, but in the winter it can be a chore.” He leaned back and put his feet up on his desk. “You're telling me that this Ute Mine is the key to the Valley of Death case? Really?”

“Like I said earlier, we’re almost certain that the fire was caused by some kind of gas that came out of a ventilation shaft from that mine. So, yeah, it’s the key to it all.” I paused and took a deep breath. “And I think we’ve got to get in there. As much as I really, really don’t want to.”

He cocked his head to the side and frowned. “Really? Some kind of claustrophobia thing? Maybe I can get some people to handle it. I mean, it’s a Grand County investigation, you know.”

It was ever so tempting. I wasn’t concerned about the diagnosis—claustrophobia, achluophobia, cleisiophobia, whatever—as much as I was about the reality of stepping inside that mine and having that huge overhead door close behind me.

But I knew that I couldn’t let someone else take my place. It had to be me.

* * *

We spent an hour or so briefing Fran, and he pointed out the road to the Ute Mine on a topo map for us. After that, well, it just seemed like a good idea to case the joint.

So Angela and I headed for Kremmling and then points south, toward Ute Pass Road, in my CBI Grand Cherokee. Angela, a willing participant in the little outing, was nonetheless dubious about its advisability. She asked me about it on our way down the canyon just west of Hot Sulphur Springs.

“You sure you want to do this today, Annette? You seemed pretty nervous about this business with the mine. Maybe we should plan it all out more carefully.”

“Oh, we will, don’t you worry. All I want to do today is to get the lay of the land. Reconnaissance. No way am I planning to go through that door today. Besides, Marquardt said it’s locked, some kind of keypad thing. Although I expect the truck drivers have something like garage door openers, or something, so they don’t have to stop. But that kind of stuff is what I want to check out.”

“So, this guy Marquardt didn’t give you the codes?” Angela had a way of getting right to the heart of the matter.

“Uh, well, right. Yes he did. I’ve got them written down in a notebook in my bag. But I’m not planning on using them today.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good. I don’t think we’re prepared for, what’s it called?, spelunking? Either equipment-wise or psychology-wise. And I don’t mean to be forward, Annette, but I’m a little surprised. I mean, you and Hal showed Sandy and me your wine cellar when we were up there for dinner on Monday. And you didn’t seem to be worried about that particular mine shaft.”

And she was right. She and Sandy had come up to our house for dinner on Monday—with the progress of the case from our climbing expedition and the optimistic computer results, a celebration was in order—and had the grand tour. And that wine cellar wasn’t a problem for me at all. What, I wondered, was bothering me about the Ute Mine?

“Yep. You’re right. Again. As usual. I don’t know—maybe our wine cellar is small and familiar. But even at first, it didn’t bother me. I don’t know.” It was exasperating, not understanding my own psyche. “But this Ute Mine has the hair on my neck standing up, that’s for sure.”

She kept quiet, and I turned the problem over and over in my head, all the way to the turnoff southward at Kremmling. About five miles past Green Mountain Reservoir, there was the sign for Ute Pass Road, so I turned us east, back toward Grand County. It annoyed me that my heart rate jumped a bit.

Once again, Angela proved her worth by navigating us flawlessly along a maze of county roads. I kept my speed down to try to minimize the dust cloud, but I could see in the mirror that the attempt really wasn't working.

"OK, Annette, the next left should be the road up to the entrance of the mine."

"I remember that on the map—there's nothing else on that last bit of road except the mine." I considered the matter briefly. "I think I'll just drive past and see what we find farther up this road. We can always turn around and come back."

Shortly, we passed a turnoff to the left, one that was well-used and, by the way the gravel was tracked, used only by vehicles coming up the valley and turning in, then turning out back down the valley. No tracks turned in the other direction.

About a half-mile later, the road crossed the creek and began a series of switchbacks up the side of the valley, and at the apex of the third I pulled to a stop.

"Let's see what we can see back there." I said, and got out. My heart rate had evened out since we'd passed the mine entrance road, and I felt much better.

Back across the valley, there was the mine entrance, the big roll-up door set into the hillside, with about a half-acre of cleared and almost level gravel in front of it, a big enough space to turn around a big truck. Angela was studying the scene with binoculars.

"The only sign I see is a huge 'No Trespassing' sign, Annette, good-sized, red letters, on that door. 'Danger!' 'No Parking—Trucks May Exit at Any Time' Lots of warnings but no name or anything." She played with the focus wheel. "Oh. And there's a little post just to the left of the door, maybe 20 feet out, with what looks like a keypad or something like that on it."

"Any sign of vehicles there, in the trees, maybe?"

"No, it looks deserted. I don't see any place to hide a much of anything up that entrance road." She was scanning the area carefully.

"I guess those pictures I saw were taken by someone on foot, hiding in the woods or something like that."

"Pictures?" Angela looked up, surprised.

"Mac showed me a secret web site, some un-named agency he knows about, with all sorts of pictures, including ones with trucks going in and out." A plume of dust down the valley caught my eye. "We got a license plate number and that's how we found out about Ute Holdings and Western Slope Environmental Services and all that. Look at the dust. There's a truck coming up the valley."

"Mac? Oh, yeah, Sam's guy. He's working with Sandy and Hal, right? He sounds like a piece of work—I've got to meet him." She was looking down the valley toward the dust. "Yep. A big semi dump truck, red tractor and a sort of dirty gray trailer. It's full of dirt, or gravel or something like that."

She looked at me and grinned. "Have we got good timing, or what?"

"We do indeed. Let's see the procedure here."

But there really wasn't one. About the time the truck reached the intersection with the entrance road, the big door started to roll up, and the truck barely slowed down as it disappeared into the mountainside. The door immediately began to roll down.

"Damn." Angela was clearly impressed. "They've got that timed out all the way. I mean, from when you mentioned the dust to when that door closed was barely two minutes. It must be such a routine that it's like clockwork."

“Yeah. I was thinking that, too. And that means there are lots of trips in and out of there. With lots of loads of whatever was in that thing. I don’t suppose you could see a license or anything like that?”

“I could see that it had one, but I couldn’t read it.” She was looking at the mountainside with the door again. “Hey, it’s opening. That’s a quick turn-around in there.”

“That’s for sure...oh, wait. The tractor on this one is green. Say, see if you can see a company name when it turns onto the main road.”

Just as the red truck’s entrance had been perfectly timed, the green truck’s exit was as well. It came roaring out of the mine entrance at a good clip, and the door started closing immediately. And the truck was empty.

“That’s some operation they’ve got there.” I was as impressed as Angela. “It sure would be interesting to know what they’re leaving behind down in that mine.”

Angela was sitting on the back bumper of the SUV, her elbows on her knees to steady the binoculars. “Nope, I couldn’t make out what was on the door. Sorry, Annette. But you’re right. I wonder what they’re dumping in there?”

“I guess the only way to find out is to go exploring. At least I’ve got the code for that keypad you said is down there. For when we need it. Not today, though.”

“Hmm. Well, getting in there might not be so easy as you’d think. Now that I’ve got these glasses steady, I can see more stuff. Like, what looks like a camera above the door, scanning back and forth across that sort of parking lot they’ve got there.” She looked up at me, blinking in the sunlight. “It looks as if they don’t want anyone sneaking up on them.”

* * *

Twenty-Four

We took the more leisurely, and scenic, route back to Hot Sulphur, along the continuation of the Ute Pass Road from where we had turned off to find the mine. Although slower and less well-maintained than the main highways, it was really something of a shortcut, north through the heart of the Vasquez Range, along the eastern flank of the Williams Fork Reservoir, and then back to US 40 just east of Parshall. Angela noticed it on the map we had, and Fran had mentioned it, so we just went for it rather than retracing our original route.

The two of us were uncharacteristically quiet along the way. I don’t know what Angela was thinking about, but I was trying, with some desperation, to figure out how to avoid entering that mine. Every time I thought of the possibility, my heart rate jumped and I could feel the sweat beginning to ooze.

We had waited another half hour at that switchback turnout for the red truck to emerge from the mine, and by that time a third truck, a dingy burnt gold, had entered. It seemed as if there was an assembly line of two trucks per hour or so dumping something or other into the depths of the Ute Mine. On top of the AirDX matter, my psychosis about that mine made it all almost too much to deal with.

“So, I think we’ve got to keep our focus here.” I’d turned the SUV back eastward on US 40 toward Hot Sulphur Springs. “Whatever’s going on with those trucks is really not what we’re concerned with. It’s the AirDX business that’s related to our Valley of Death case, right?”

Angela's nod was easy to see in my peripheral vision. "You're right, but I'm not sure that we can ignore the one in favor of the other. And I guess I'd turn it around. Maybe we need to bring in some big guns, and I think I'd bring them in for the AirDX business. Isn't that related to Defense Department stuff? The dumping, whatever it's about, that seems like more of a Colorado thing. Right?"

"Well... Hmm. Maybe so. Those two dozen deaths up there are a Colorado matter, for sure. But if that's all related to something highly classified, well, maybe there's a federal connection that we shouldn't ignore. Yeah. Hmm." I took my eyes off the road to glance over at her. "Angela, I'm sure glad to have you here. You make a great sounding board. I like to think I have good common sense, but you're even more sensible. Don't ever let me discourage you from speaking your mind."

I couldn't watch her, because the canyon twists and turns demanded my attention. But I got the feeling she was blushing.

Back in our little shared office in the sheriff's department, I put a call in to MPARC. Because I knew that Hal had not yet hired a receptionist, it wasn't too much of a surprise when he answered.

"MPARC, Hal Weathers here."

"Trieri, CBI, here. How's your day, guy?"

"Quite a nice day, love. We're putting the finishing touches on those simulations for your wildfire. I think we should have everything sanitized and packaged up by later this afternoon, and that means that you can make our results public."

"Really? Despite all that classified stuff?"

"Yep. We're packaging everything for public consumption, including what is likely to be needed in court. Should it come to that."

I felt a surge of elation and told him I'd thank him later, which provoked a comment that made me blush.

"Yes. Well, I'll certainly look forward to *that*, Hal. Ahem. Anyway I also need to talk with Mac. Is he there?"

"You're probably blushing, aren't you? And changing the subject is a good idea. Let me see if I can find Mac. I'm pretty sure he's around somewhere."

By the time Mac came on the line, I was beginning to recover.

"Annette? Hey, how are you? I heard that you were off on a recon expedition today, to that mine I showed you the pictures of." Mac's voice, humor, concern, and all was unmistakable.

"I was, and I'm back, and I need advice from someone who knows a bit about how our agencies in Washington work."

"And you want to talk to me? Oh, you poor confused soul." It was all humor now, that voice.

"Confused is right. Thing is, we have two issues here, the business with that wildfire that you've helped so much with, and another thing, what looks like it might be some kind of environmental issue, a waste dumping thing. And the wildfire business for sure looks to have federal connections, you know, connections that I really don't know much about. But you probably do." I took a deep breath. "I guess what I was hoping was that you'd know if it's time to call out the cavalry, I don't know, the FBI or somebody to investigate what was going on in that AirDX part of the mine."

"Mmmm." Just his murmur, somehow, was comforting. "Well, even the dumping could be a federal thing, I suppose. But I'm more concerned about the other thing, this AirDX stuff. And maybe you're on the mark here. Maybe we *should* think about bringing in the cavalry. Or, more precisely, a team that can

get to the bottom of this without compromising your local investigation. I saw one of those press conferences, and, gotta say, your sheriff is a stand-up guy. We don't want to do anything to screw up his investigation, right?"

"Absolutely not. But it may be over his head, at least if there are classified issues about AirDX that should be forever protected." I tried to think of the most constructive approach to my dilemma. "If we could only find the AirDX principals, that ex-professor and those research scientists, well, that would be a good start, no?"

"Absolutely right, Annette. And addresses, at least, are easy, I've got 'em for you. Plus a bit more. Herschel O'Donnell and two of those assistants haven't been heard from for over a week. But the third assistant has, at least in terms of his cell phone and credit card records. I'll send you all the stuff I have on him."

"Why, Mac, have you been snooping around?"

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing? I mean, I could be out there trying to catch those trout that everyone talks about, the dumb ones at least. But I do like to help out where I can." His smile almost showed through the phone line. "I mean, I've got to make a place for myself here, now that Sam has dug her heels in to stay."

"She has? That's great. I was worried that the outing last Sunday would make her want to move back to somewhere more flat."

"Not a chance. She's sticking with the mountains. Maybe it's the possibilities for her artwork, I don't know. Maybe it's just the rarefied air. But she's working harder than I would have believed on finding us a better place to live. More permanent, even."

"I like what I'm hearing. If there's anything that Hal and I can do to help you and her find something, just let us know." This was certainly good news for me. "But what about the cavalry for this AirDX business? Who might they be?"

"Well, if I understand things, what's needed is to find the principals, all of them, and to figure out what's happened in that facility they have, that underground lab, right?" He paused to let me answer, but I didn't. "So we need to find the guy with the newer credit and phone records, and we need to figure out what happened to the others. And it seems like a trip into that underground facility is in order. Right?"

I knew he was right, but I couldn't bring myself to say so, because I also knew that I'd have to be making that trip underground.

"Anyway, what I thought was that you could track down that guy whose records are active, Annette, based on the stuff I'll send you, and we could get a team of specialists I know to get into that underground lab. How does that sound?" His voice had lost the humor and concern in favor of all business.

It was a good thing that this conversation was on the phone, or I'd have kissed him with just a bit too much passion to be respectable.

* * *

Before leaving for home that Friday afternoon, I sent my boss, CBI Director Rod Andersen, an email that asked:

Does anyone know what Western Slope Environmental Services is dumping into the Ute Mine?

By time I was home, I had an answer, in the form of questions:

What makes you think that is happening? And how is the Valley of Death investigation going?

Without revealing my concerns, I responded simply that I'd seen evidence of such dumping and that the investigation was moving ahead expeditiously. And it occurred to me to wonder about what kind of political minefield I might be getting myself into. For the most part, Rod had never questioned my activities. It seemed an odd time for him to start.

But it was Friday evening, and I decided to forget the whole thing. In the morning, I'd get someone over in Summit County to pick up Luke Peckham, the AirDX research scientist who was still using his cell phone and credit card, at his condo in Frisco, and we'd proceed from there.

On the drive home, just after I dropped Angela off at her place, Hal called with dinner plans, a table for six at Carlos and Maria's, the Santa Fe style restaurant in downtown Winter Park.

"A table for six? You mean we've got four friends?" I was feeling cute.

"Well, I promised to pick up the tab. That's probably what persuaded them. Sandy, Mac, and I had a powwow earlier, and it seems that Sandy's homesick for Santa Fe food. He thought Angela might be, too."

"And she told me today that she wants to meet this Mac character she's heard so much about. Want me to meet you there, or are you coming home?"

"I am home, awaiting your arrival. We're not expected until seven. See you soon."

Dinner was grand, especially after the interlude that Hal and I managed to sneak in before we headed out to the restaurant. The food was delicious, the margaritas were just right, and we even managed to keep away from the topic of our mutual business. Sam, having tasted only the bland, South Florida version of Mexican food, ate cautiously, but in the end she declared that she wanted to come back and try everything. And Angela and Sandy were tickled that they could find something so close to their home cooking in the Fraser Valley. Even if the levels of chile-related heat were moderated compared to what they were used to, they pronounced the place first-rate.

First thing Saturday morning, I called over to the Colorado State Patrol office in Frisco, gave them what information I had about Luke Peckham, and asked them to pick him up for questioning. My relationship with the Patrol was on sufficiently good terms that they even offered to bring him to us in Hot Sulphur Springs.

But it wasn't to work out that way, as I found out when my cell phone demanded attention a half hour later.

"Director Trieri? This is Trooper Jim Chance, Frisco office. I'm here at the address you gave us for this Luke Peckham fellow, but he's not at it. His mailbox is overstuffed, and there's a pile of newspapers with his name on them, in the lobby of the building. It looks like he's been away for some time, maybe a couple of weeks."

"Hmm. Well, thanks, Trooper, I guess all we can do is try, eh?" I heard him chuckle as I rang off.

But Mac, I remembered, had emailed me some files with the cell phone calls and credit card transactions that told us that Peckham was still among the living—or, at the least, that someone was using his card and phone. The list of credit card transactions was especially helpful when viewed in chronological order, as they told a story of Peckham’s travels from Frisco down to Denver (with a stop for gas at Georgetown, and lunch near Evergreen) and then his stay in the Queen City. Most recently, he’d been eating at restaurants in the Washington Park part of town. But there were no hotel or other accommodations receipts, so, I decided, he must be staying with friends.

The cell phone records pinpointed his location nicely, because Mac had processed the cell tower triangulation information onto a couple of maps. The large-scale one of the Denver area showed that he was traveling around a bit during the day, and the zoomed-in map of the Washington Park neighborhood revealed a large number of evening calls at a particular address in the eleven hundred block of South Corona. I called Rod Andersen.

“Hey, Annette. How’s your Saturday?” His voice was distinct but there was also background noise, crowd noise of some sort.

“Fine, Rod, how’s yours? And where are you? There’s some odd background noise.”

“The ball park, Coors Field. There’s a Rockies game in an hour or so, and we’re settled in to have a couple of hot dogs for lunch and enjoy the pre-game warm-ups and so on. The crowd is still pretty thin, but, yeah, it’s a bit noisy. What’s up?”

“Well, maybe after the game, you can make arrangements to have someone picked up for questioning about this Valley of Death case. It’s one of three Ph.D. scientists that worked for the AirDX outfit, the company that lawyer Marquardt was representing. By the way, that whole thing worked out great. I got everything I needed from him, after he’d spent a night in the wonderful accommodations in Hot Sulphur.”

“Not a problem. And I’m glad the Marquardt thing worked out. He was certainly upset when we arrested him. Is he going to follow through on those threats of lawsuits and so on?” He made a chomping noise, and I envisioned mustard on his phone.

“Not a chance. I showed him the error of his ways, and he cooperated quite nicely. We also have been getting information from, um, sources I can’t reveal just now, on the phone. But I’ll email you the info about this AirDX guy. His name is Luke Peckham, and he seems to be staying with friends near Wash Park, at least in the evenings.”

“That’s my neighborhood. Maybe I’ll walk over and get him after dinner.” His mirth came through loud and clear. “Oops, gotta go. Here come the Rox for batting practice.”

“Wait one. Please? Just a quick question. Is there something sensitive about that business of the company, ah, Western Slope Environmental Services, possibly dumping stuff into the Ute Mine?” I realized I was holding my breath.

“Ah, right. Well, not really, but sort of. And I’m sure that’s as clear as mud. But it’s not something I want to talk about on the phone, either. Are you coming down to get this Peckham fellow, or interview him or anything? We could talk about it then.”

“Sounds like it might be worth a trip into the big city for me. Tomorrow? Monday?”

“Let’s make it tomorrow, my place downtown. Is 10:00 OK? We’ll have Peckham there, too.”

“That works. Thanks, Rod. Enjoy the game.”

Great, I thought. A Sunday morning trip into downtown Denver. Well, it'll be a good opportunity for Angela to meet the big boss. And, it appears, to hear about some of the internal politics that makes law enforcement in this state so amusing.

* * *

Twenty-Five

At least we were headed opposite most of the traffic on Sunday morning, toward the city when everyone there was making a mad dash for the mountains. And I knew that, later in the day, it would all be reversed, so we'd still avoid the bad traffic. A small thing, I know, but unless you've been in one of those weekend traffic jams on Interstate 70 in the mountains west of Denver, you really can't appreciate how bad it can get. From what I'd seen, the afternoons tended to be worse than the mornings—Mom is exhausted, Dad has had a couple too many beers, the kids are getting cranky, everyone has to pee. And they're all trapped in this cramped little rolling box that's not rolling fast enough for any of them. When three lanes of bumper-to-bumper rolling boxes all have this problem in common, it's just a nightmare.

As it was, we managed to make it from Angela's place to downtown Denver in a bit over an hour. CBI headquarters, in a high rise office building near the venerable Brown Palace Hotel, had its own parking for employees, and, because it was Sunday, we found a spot right next to the elevator. In a couple of minutes, we were on the 19th floor, just outside Rod Andersen's office.

Angela was nervous and fidgeting, adjusting her hair and clothes—she'd worn a crisply pressed uniform for the occasion—and wiping a spot off her shiny black shoes, so I thought to calm her down.

“Chill, Angela, really. This isn't an interview or inspection, or any such thing. Rod's probably wearing really ugly plaid golf pants, and he'll want to make it short so he can get to his tee time.” I'd worn weekend casual clothes for the occasion, just nice enough to give Luke Peckham the right impression, but comfortable.

“Oh, I know. But I can't help myself. This is the Director, after all.”

“Right. And I'm chopped liver. You don't have to try to impress him, because you've already impressed me and he knows it. Hell, my big worry right now is that he'll assign you to his own staff.”

Just then Rod's door opened, and he strode out with an empty coffee cup in his hand, clad, as I expected, in hideous green and yellow plaid slacks and a purple polo shirt. “Oh! Annette! Good morning. And this must be Angela Espinosa. Very pleased to meet you, Angela, very pleased indeed.”

“And you, sir, it's an honor. May I fill that cup for you?” She almost clicked her heels together, she was so formal.

“Huh? Oh, well, I'm afraid there's no coffee. I'm under strictest orders from Sandy, she's my admin assistant, to stay away from the coffee equipment, so I don't dare make any on weekends. I was just going to get some water in this.”

“Yes, sir. Right away. Ahh...I guess the kitchen is this way?” And she turned about face, quite smoothly, all-in-all, and marched off down a hallway.

“Right. Second door on the left. Ice cubes in the fridge.” Rod smiled.

I lowered my voice a bit. “She's, well, a bit nervous, meeting you for the first time.”

“I’ll be nice, don’t worry. From what you’ve been reporting, it sounds like she’s working out well.”

“No question. She’s been with me for only two weeks and is already indispensable. We’d better leave the door open, or she’ll feel compelled to knock.”

We found chairs in Rod’s office, and, after knocking anyway, Angela joined us with a coffee mug—freshly washed, I was sure—full of ice water for Rod. She had to be invited to sit down, and even then she was sitting at attention.

Rod smiled even more broadly. “Angela, Annette’s had nothing but praise for you. I’m glad we were able to entice you away from our colleagues in New Mexico. Their loss is our gain. I hope you’re enjoying your new assignment?”

“Absolutely, sir. I’m learning a lot, and I feel like I’m contributing, too.”

“Good.” He sipped at his cup. “Well, I’m glad you’re both here, because I can brief you a bit on this business with Western Slope Environmental Services. You saw full trucks entering that mine, the Ute Mine, and empty ones exiting?”

I nodded; Angela said “Yes, sir.”

“This is something we’ve been aware of for some time, and we’re watching them closely in cooperation with the Summit County Sheriff and the state environmental folks.” He stared out the window toward Mount Evans. “It seems that most of what’s going down that hole in those trucks is quite innocent. But there’s reason to believe that maybe one truck-load out of ten is not so innocent. But we have no real evidence that we can take action on the basis of. How much do you know about the company?”

“Well, Western is part of a very complex network of companies that all seem to operate under the same board of directors, a bunch of guys in Las Vegas. They also control Ute Holdings, the company that owns the mine. Part of our Valley of Death investigation turned this all up, when we needed to find out about the Ute Mine.” I thought for a second. “Are there any ideas of what these one-in-ten bad truck-loads contain?”

“Some kind of toxic waste, either radioactive or chemical, we’re not sure. Or maybe, God save us, both.” Rod sighed. “That kind of stuff is supposed to be processed, which is extremely expensive. It’s cheaper to just dump it. We think Western is doing this, and then covering up the toxic stuff, literally burying it, with the innocent stuff, fill dirt and so on. But we haven’t been able to get a warrant to get in there.”

“Well, if we’re going to clear the Valley of Death case, we’re definitely going to need to get into the AirDX part of the mine. I’ve got the keypad codes to do it, and I think I can get authorization from an AirDX representative. Is there some way that this access can help your investigation?”

“From what we’ve seen, it just doesn’t look healthy to go wandering around in there. For one thing, you’d run the risk of getting squashed by one of those trucks. And then there are the guards.”

Angela gasped and then realized she should say something, having gotten our attention. “Ahem, sorry, sir. But we didn’t see guards. There is a surveillance camera, though.”

“Yep. And now and then a guard, armed with an assault rifle, pops out and cleans it off. We’ve had our own surveillance there for quite some time.”

“Well, maybe the best that we can do is to avoid screwing up your investigation, Rod. But I don’t see how we can not get in there, at least if we want to understand what happened to those 23 people. And we thought to do it without ruffling Ute Holding’s feathers as best we could. Right now, that means

some kind of special ops team, which has explicit permission and keypad codes from that lawyer Marquardt.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “What do you think about that approach?”

“Hmm. What’s this ops team?”

“Probably some team from somewhere in the Defense Department. They have a close interest in this AirDX business, and they’re probably the best equipped and trained to do something like this. Thing is, this guy Peckham that you picked up for me? Well, he’s one of four people who were the AirDX principals. And the other three have been missing for several days now. It’s possible that they’re in that AirDX space in the Ute Mine, dead. And if that’s the case, how they got dead is important for us, for the Valley of Death case, and for the Defense Department, for security reasons. I’m thinking if we can keep the AirDX investigation completely separated from yours, maybe Ute Holdings and those guys in Vegas won’t change anything that will interfere with what you’re doing.”

Rod, staring at the mountains out the wall of windows, looked pensive. “Keeping these investigations separate seems like a good idea. I think the thing for me to do is to give you *carte blanche* as long as you keep the separation in mind. What I don’t know won’t come back to haunt me if Ute Holdings, or Western, gets their shorts all twisted up.”

I nodded. “Right. And it works the other way, too. If I don’t know the particulars of what you’re doing, well, I can play dumb as needed. But, you know, we do need to communicate about this, so we don’t blunder about into each others’ way, right?”

He looked straight at me. “Absolutely. And nice meeting you, Angela. Keep Annette on track for me, will you?”

* * *

Our interview with Luke Peckham was to be held in one of the little rooms on the 17th floor, so we took the stairs.

“So, Angela, what do you think of the boss?” My voice echoed in the stairwell, even though I kept it low.

“Sharp, perceptive, on top of things. If he’s fair, then I’ll like him.” She seemed to have relaxed, although it was hard to tell walking down stairs.

“He’s always been more than fair with me, so I think this is a good start.” I pushed open the door to the 17th floor hallway. “Now. Let’s see what Mr. Peckham has to tell us. Or is willing to.”

“Annette, I’m not really sure of the status of my security clearance. I had a good one with NMBI, but I don’t know now. Is that going to be an issue?”

“Oh.” I hadn’t thought of that. “Well, I’m sure paperwork is in progress to get it transferred to us. But if this whole thing is to be recorded, and it will be, then the guys behind the one-way mirror will hear it all, and they may not be cleared. I’ll just let Peckham know about that.” We had arrived outside the little room. “Good thinking. And I think having you in there, with your spit-and-polish uniform and all, I think that would be helpful.”

I waited to let her blush fade a little then opened the door, and in we went.

We must have interrupted his pacing back and forth, because he was turned toward us but standing near one of the side walls of the little room when we first saw him.

“Who are you and what the hell am I doing here?”

I took the time to seat myself at the room's little table—his pacing had been on the other side of that table—and to compose myself carefully.

“Good questions, Mr. Peckham, very good questions, both of them. I'm Annette Trieri, Deputy Director of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation in charge of what's called the Valley of Death case. This is my assistant, Angela Espinosa. You're here because you're the AirDX employee whom we've been able to locate. Your colleagues seem to be missing. And AirDX is front and center in that case. Potentially, at least, it's a capital case involving 23 unexplained deaths. We know that AirDX has some connection to it, and because you're connected to AirDX, you're on the spot here.” I paused and drummed my fingers on the table. “Let me add that we should not discuss classified matters here, at least not in detail. Why don't you have a seat, and we can talk this all over?”

During this little speech, I'd watched him progress from his initial pumped-up bluster to looking as he was about to faint, to regaining his color to the point of looking about to burst.

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I want to see a lawyer. Now.”

I turned to Angela. “You, I recall, told me that you're pretty good at reading credibility. What about this guy? Is he telling the truth here?”

“Not very likely, Annette. I think he's lying through his teeth.”

“That's what I thought, too. Thanks.” I turned back to Peckham. “Would you be wanting to call Glenn Marquardt, Mr. Peckham? You should know that he and I are the best of friends now. He's told me all he knows about this.”

This brought him up short, and he decided to sit down.

“What am I charged with?”

“Ah. Another good question. You Ph.D. guys really *are* smart.” I paused to smile. “Just now, nothing. To the extent that you're our guest here at the CBI, you're being treated as well as we're able to treat anyone. We'd just like to get some questions answered. However, what with the federal Patriot Act and all, we do have plenty of latitude to charge you with all sorts of awful things, some of which would put you outside the reach of civilian courts. Perhaps a visit to Guantanamo would even be in order.”

“Now you're bluffing.” Given his position, he was being quite obstinate.

“Not more than a little. I mean, you well know the security level at which you were working. Even a hint of impropriety to your Air Force sponsors would put you away instantly, and for a long time. You know that.” I paused to let that sink in. “Now. First question. Are you using the *nom de plume* ‘Mortified’ in email correspondence with Grand County Sheriff Fran Schmidt?”

Physically, he reacted as if I'd punched him in the stomach. But he just said, again, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

I had only to turn to Angela, and she said, “Another lie.”

“My thought as well. Mr. Peckham. Listen carefully. Based on what we know now, your comments to Sheriff Schmidt about how the entire Valley of Death tragedy was an accident are actually quite credible. We have a team of specialists who will be entering, very carefully entering, the AirDX space in the Ute Mine to see what evidence there is about that, and our opinion of the matter may change. But right now, I think it might well have been an accident. If it was, this would be a very good time for you to talk to me about it. Then, whatever evidence our ops team finds can be interpreted in that light.” Once again, I paused for effect. “So. One more time. Was that you using the email handle ‘Mortified’ in correspondence with Sheriff Schmidt?”

This time he didn't answer right away, and, to me, that was progress. Instead, he leaned his elbows on the little table and put his head in his hands. All I heard was his breathing. He took a good two minutes to think about it, a long stretch of complete silence in that little room.

"OK. Right. That was me. And the whole thing was an accident, a horrible accident. I don't know what all you know, but the accident also killed Professor O'Donnell as well as Rick and Miller."

"Rick and Miller?"

"Rick dePoint and Miller Hague, the other two research assistants. See, the Ute Holdings people were getting impatient for results that would produce cash flow, and we were under a lot of pressure. So we had a system of shifts. O'Donnell was practically living in there, and the rest of us would work for 24 hours and take 12 off. I was outside, and they were all inside when it happened."

"How do you know what happened?"

"There's a live web camera link, one that we record. So I happened to look at the live link and saw the mess in there, with bodies on the floor, then went back and looked at the recording. It looks as if they had a gas leak or something and didn't turn on the air evac system soon enough. And when it turned itself on, automatically, all the gas got dumped out the ventilation shaft, into that valley of yours. And there must have been a campfire up there, or something." He heaved a huge sigh. "It was all a tragic accident. Truly."

"And instead of raising an alarm, or getting up there yourself, you decided to hide out in Denver."

"Well, yeah. But that was related more to my concern about the Ute Holdings people than with anything else. As the only survivor, I knew they'd expect me to finish the R&D work and get to their payoff. So I came down here to town to think about it all." He shrugged. "You probably haven't met their local muscle. Those dudes are, well, scary."

"Hmm. Mr. Peckham, let me propose something. Let's see. Unless we find evidence that directly incriminates you in the willful cause of that event in the AirDX lab—and I have no idea what will be found up there—but if we do not find a smoking gun that shows you were willfully at fault, I think we can offer you both protection from Ute Holdings or anyone else as well as immunity. What I suggest is that we find an appropriate place to have this discussion at the appropriate level of classification."

"I still think I should have a lawyer. But, on the face of it, that sounds pretty attractive. Where do you have in mind?"

I knew I'd be pushing the envelope to new limits, but I also knew the best place.

"Let's take a little drive in the mountains. And, say, on the way, we can stop and pick up all your mail. How's that?"

* * *

Twenty-Six

We slogged through the paperwork to get Luke Peckham released, treated him to a wonderful gourmet lunch that included two glasses of wine at the Denver Art Museum's cafe, drove by the Corona Street house to let him pick up what possessions he had there—I was glad to see they included a laptop computer—and hit the road westward. And, when we merged off the Sixth Avenue Freeway onto I-70 out in Lakewood, I was once again glad to be going opposite to the main flow. What was simply heavy

eastbound traffic in Lakewood got heavier and heavier all the way to Silverthorne, 60 miles to the west and on the other side of the Eisenhower-Johnson tunnels under the Continental Divide. Even the Department of Transportation's trick of switching one of those twin tunnels into two-way traffic, to create an extra east-bound lane, wasn't helping much.

Our passenger, with the entire back seat to himself, had begun the journey full of conversation, but by the time we crested Floyd Hill, the wine he'd had for lunch put him to sleep. That was the opportunity I was waiting for, and I pulled out my phone.

"Hal? Oh, good, I found you. I hope you're getting some R&R today. It's Sunday, after all."

"Well, you're working, and I figured I should, too. So I'm at the institute. How'd your morning go?"

"Quite well, actually. And that's why I'm calling. We, meaning three of us, are headed into Idaho Springs shortly. We need to make a brief detour to Frisco, so it'll probably be another hour and a half or two before we get back. But what I called about is this: do you know if Chuck is in the Valley today? Or is he in the Springs?"

"Well, before coming into the office here, I took a little walk in the woods this morning, after you left. And from that little view spot where we can see to the north, I saw what looked like his car in the drive over there at Win's place. So maybe he's here. Why?"

"I've got a present for him, of sorts. Do you suppose you could entice him into the institute this afternoon, say, around 3:30? We should get there by then. And it might make sense for Sandy to be there, too."

"Oh, he's here now. You stole Angela away from him, remember?"

"Oh, right. Tell him I'm sorry about that. But, anyway, I'll be seeing you by about 3:30, OK?"

"Sure. Drive safely. I'll get Chuck down here, don't worry."

My phone went back into my pocket, but it sat there for only a couple of minutes before it demanded my attention.

"Trieri, CBI, here."

"Annette, it's Fran. Listen, I just got a call from the Gilpin sheriff's office. They found Glenn Marquardt's car at the bottom of a canyon this morning, with him in it, dead. It looks as if it ran off the Central City Parkway, southbound, sometime overnight. Apparently there are some skid marks and so on suggesting he may have been forced off the road."

"Hmm. So maybe he was on his way back to Evergreen from an evening at the Black Hawk casinos? I guess it's too soon for blood alcohol and so on."

"Yeah, but they're going to get it done, for sure. Also, the news reports this evening will include a request for witnesses to contact the Gilpin office, so maybe there will be more information. Anyway, what's your schedule today?"

"I'm delivering a package to MPARC, which, with this sad news, is all the more valuable. I ought to be there by 3:30, if you want to meet us there."

"OK, I'll do that. See you later."

"Oh! Say, Fran? If those skid marks are being interpreted as foul play, then maybe it would be a good idea to get someone, I guess it would be JeffCo, to check Marquardt's office in Evergreen, maybe his home, too. I don't remember the addresses, but you can probably Google him and find the office one. Just a hunch."

“Good hunch, Annette. Will do.”

As I put my phone back in my pocket, I noticed that Angela was looking question marks at me, so I filled her in.

“Oh,” she said, jerking her left thumb in the direction of the back seat. “I see what you meant about the ‘package’ being all the more valuable.”

The stop in Frisco for Peckham’s mail took longer than I would have liked, because he insisted on fetching more clothes from his condo in addition to his mail, and that led to the discovery that his place had been thoroughly tossed. After a short, contentious argument, during which I had to suppress my law-enforcement instincts, we decided that it would be best simply to leave things in their disheveled state without any police report. That way, whoever had been through Peckham’s things wouldn’t know that Peckham was aware of it. At least, though, Peckham vowed to tell the post office to hold his mail delivery for the time being and to stop the newspaper delivery. Along with the mail, we also gathered up all the newspapers in the building’s lobby for recycling.

I guess sometimes I’m just a little compulsive about these things.

Rather than become embedded in the traffic back east through the tunnels, we got off I-70 eastbound at Silverthorne and headed north along the Blue River, toward Kremmling and then Hot Sulphur, Granby, and finally Winter Park. It was nice to have the alternative.

* * *

MPARC was crowded when we arrived at 3:15. I’d used my emergency lights and flouted the speed limit to make up for the time that argument in Frisco had taken, and I guess I overdid things just a bit. At first, I couldn’t figure out why there were so many people standing around—after all, I’d invited Fran and Chuck Shure, but that was only two extras. Where, I wondered, had everyone else come from?

But then I noticed that most of the strangers were standing together in a group around the conference room doors. And when I looked more closely, I was jarred at how out of place, yet how normal, they all looked. All were what we law-enforcement people call “above-average” height by a couple of inches, and all were quite fit looking, extra fit, even. All mid-twenties or so. Quiet. Self-assured. Something of a military bearing. And some looked vaguely familiar.

Mac, fortunately, had the answer.

“Annette, let me introduce you to Commander Ross Bierkens. I don’t remember if you met him on that little cruise we all took or not, but he was leading the SEAL team that made the transfer of that material off the ship. Hey, Ross!”

One of the ultra-fit crowd, and this one looked to be in his thirties, a slightly taller, blond fellow with bright blue eyes, it turned out—all-in-all a real hunk—looked up, said something to the guy he was speaking with, and strolled over our way.

“What’s up, Mac?”

“Ross, this is Annette Trieri, Deputy Director with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I first met her on that little cruise ship caper that you and your guys handled so well, and she and her husband Hal are the reason that I’m here—and therefore the reason you’re here.”

“My pleasure, Ms. Trieri.” He even got my name right!

“Mine, too, Commander. It must be that you and all the other gentlemen I see over there are the team of specialists who are going into that underground lab. But Mac said something about SEALs. Isn’t this a long way from the ocean for you?”

“Ma’am, we go wherever we’re needed. And I guess there’s something hinky, maybe, about the air in this lab of yours. Well, we’re used to operating with no air, underwater and all, so bad air is just as easy for us.” His smile was making my knees weak.

“Better you than me, Commander. And it might be easier than we were all thinking it would be. I’ve brought a present, the last surviving person who knows anything at all about what was going on in that lab.”

“Someone with real intel? That, ma’am, is the best news I’ve heard all day. I owe you one. We were beginning to think this would be sort of catch-as-catch-can. And that’s always a bit of a worry.”

How, I was thinking, can I get him to stop with the “ma’am” thing?

I had sent Angela, with Luke Peckham in tow, to Sandy’s office, on the theory that either it would be empty or that Sandy would be the best person for Luke to meet first—scientist to scientist, as it were. So many people were going to want to talk to him, I now understood, that we almost needed a sign-up sheet.

“Mac, do you and Commander Bierkens have a time-table yet?”

“We did, but with new intel I think we should put that on hold until we can be fully briefed. Right, Ross?”

“Absolutely. And that will give my guys a chance to find accommodations and to settle in.” He looked back at me with those wonderful blue eyes. “We got here just before lunch. It’s a resort area, so there must be lodging—but have you got any suggestions for us, Director Trieri?”

I suppressed the urge to make some kind of wisecrack like “It’s too bad my bed is already full, Commander.” Get a grip, Trieri, I thought. You’ve got at least fifteen years on him. He thinks you’re his Aunt Marge.

“Well, Commander, that’s the trouble with living in a place like this, you never get to stay in the commercial lodging. I bet that someone here at MPARC has some ideas, though. They get lots of visitors.” I looked around the room. “Mac, do you know where Hal is?”

“In his office, talking with someone who looks important.”

“Ah yes, probably Chuck Shure, the big money behind all this. And he’s got an interest in AirDX as well. Hmm, let’s see. Commander, I’m thinking that you and your guys get top priority with our newest guest, the AirDX survivor. He can brief you in one of the secure rooms here, and then you’ll be able to get onto a schedule again. After that, I think he should meet Chuck.”

It turned out that Sandy was indeed in his office, and I interrupted what sounded like an extremely technical discussion between him and Luke Peckham. But it was good that Sandy was there, because he was able to get things set up in a secure room for the SEALs to talk with Luke.

With that organized, and not seeing Fran anywhere, I went to find my husband and his boss.

“Annette! Well, the cop bearing gifts or something.” Hal, facing the door, saw me first.

“I am. Hi, Chuck. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait just a bit longer though. My present is closeted with those SEALs, I guess Mac brought them in?”

“What? You gave my present to the SEALs?” Chuck didn’t quite manage to look hurt. “Well, as long as it isn’t food, or girls, I guess it’s OK.”

“Girls? C’mon, what would Rebecca say. Sheesh.” I shook my head. “No, it’s actually better, because we can always go out and get food. It’s a scientist named Luke Peckham, the last of the AirDX crew. The other three scientists are dead, he says, including the senior guy, O’Donnell. And the lawyer that was representing them, Marquardt, he was killed in a suspicious car crash last night.”

“Oh! Well, it *is* better than food, or girls, too, because you can always buy them.” Chuck grinned. “Not that I’d know anything about that personally, mind you. Excuse me a minute.”

He pulled out his cell phone and walked away to a deserted corner of the outer room.

Hal and I looked at each other, shrugged, and I drifted over for a hug.

“I think, love, that we’re making real progress with all this.” My voice was muffled, talking into his shoulder as I was.

“Glad to hear it. You’ve been working too hard these last couple of weeks. We need to go fishing somewhere.” He kissed the top of my head. “Oh, hi, Fran.”

“Hi, guys. Uh, I’m guessing I’m not really interrupting too awfully much.” Fran sounded just a bit embarrassed.

“Not at all, Fran.” I turned to greet him. “I just got back from Denver, and I brought the last surviving AirDX employee, the guy who was emailing you as ‘Mortified’.”

“Aha!” His eyes lit up. “I need to talk with this fellow.”

“You surely do. But I think it’s a matter of getting in line. The SEALs are with him now, no doubt pumping him for information about the AirDX lab and how to get in and out safely. And Chuck Shure wants him, too, although I think you’re probably a higher priority.” I rolled my shoulders to try to get the last of the driver’s kinks out. “He says that the gas release, and it was a gas release, toxic and flammable, out that pipe we found, the gas release was completely accidental. It killed his colleagues as well as fueling that fire in the Valley of Death.”

“What about culpability, negligence or something of that nature?”

“Don’t know yet, Fran. But Peckham, that’s his name, Luke Peckham, he says there’s an on-line video archived somewhere that he knows of, a video that shows the entire sequence of events that winds up with his colleagues dead in that underground lab. He said that they were working shifts, and he was at home when it all went down. So maybe there will be some evidence of negligence or something, perhaps by the company, but Peckham is just a salaried employee. He’s probably clean.”

“Is he cooperating?”

“It didn’t start out quite that way, but, then, he was picked up by CBI central and held overnight without much information. So he started out pissed. But I told him that Marquardt had been cooperating, so he caved.” I had sat in a side chair to flex my neck muscles, and now I looked up at him. “By the way, have you heard anything more about Marquardt’s crash?”

“Just that the skid marks look as if an eighteen-wheeler was involved somehow, maybe forcing him off the road into the canyon. It was a long way down, apparently, and the tumbling of the car, combined with the air-bag deployment, broke his neck.”

Hal cleared his throat gently, and it got our attention. “Based on what Chuck said to us about his acquisition of AirDX, I’m betting he’ll want to hire this Peckham guy on the spot, maybe have me hire him, even. What that means is that he will be around here to help dot the i’s and cross the t’s in this whole thing.”

“As well as to help Chuck move into the AirDX business sphere quickly and with less expense.” I couldn’t help myself from being a bit cynical. “But there will still be the AirDX assets and liabilities to contend with, at some point.”

Fran nodded. “I’m thinking that some of those liabilities may well be serious, too.”

“Right,” I said. “Especially because AirDX has some obligations to this strange group that controls Ute Holdings and Western Slope Environmental Services. And, by the way, Western seems to consist mostly of a fleet of eighteen-wheelers. So, tell me, Fran: to what extent do you believe in coincidence?”

* * *

Twenty-Seven

For the rest of that Sunday, and for part of Monday, it was definitely the Luke Peckham Show at MPARC, the Grand County Sheriff’s Department, and the CBI.

As he explained to the SEAL team, and then to all of us, everything that AirDX did was kept in the Cloud, that nebulous computer world that no one really understood very well. AirDX information, including the web-cam videos, was all encrypted at state-of-the-art levels, and it was scrupulously *not* kept in any other form, anywhere, including that underground lab in the Ute Mine. Experimental procedures were dictated, in real time, and recorded and stored in the Cloud, so all that was in the lab were raw chemicals and various bits and pieces of equipment. And now, of course, three dead bodies.

Therefore, the SEAL team’s role, entering that lab with the goal of protecting national security information, was really superfluous. There wasn’t any such information there to protect. They could have packed up for home, except Ross Bierkens, backed up by a unanimous vote of his team, felt they should still effect the entrance just to be sure there were no extraneous notes left around. Besides, someone had to go in there sooner or later, and they were the best trained and equipped to do so.

Luke’s formal statement to Fran Schmidt was consistent with his briefing and the comments he’d made to Angela and me in the car—it was all an accident, as seen in the web-cam video, and he wasn’t there at the time.

Chuck Shure, after that curious phone conversation he initiated, was insistent that Hal hire Luke as a research scientist at MPARC for whatever role Hal could dream up. That suited Luke just fine—when Sandy showed him the simulations of the Valley of Death wildfire, Luke’s only comment was “Holy crap, how’d you do that?” He was eager to work with such an advanced group.

The question of who would own the AirDX assets, and who would be responsible for their liabilities, was left in the hands of UNELECO corporate attorneys. But from a practical perspective, Shure had control of everything good, because Luke now worked for him via MPARC.

And, after all of the other interviews that included question-and-answer sessions bordering on inquisition, Luke was kind enough to talk with Rod Andersen using a video conference link that we set up. That conversation filled in the blanks about the actual operations of the Ute Mine *vis-a-vis* entering the AirDX space for Rod and me. Luke had already covered the same ground in careful detail in his secure session with the SEALs.

“It’s like you suggested, Mr. Andersen. The main entrance operates by either a sort of garage-door opener device or by that keypad you can see on the pictures. And then, a couple dozen meters down the

main tunnel, there's an alcove on the left with another door and another keypad. No automatic opener there, though. You have to enter the code."

"What about those big trucks?"

"Well, the alcove has plenty of space to get out of the traffic lane in the main tunnel. That traffic lane continues down in a sort of clockwise spiral. But I never went down past our alcove, so I don't know what's down there."

"So the way it worked was, you got in between the trucks, ducked into the alcove, and then opened the lab door and you were in, right?"

"Right. And the trucks had a kind of schedule, with a couple of windows per hour of safe transit into and out of our lab. The Ute Holdings people were always quite clear that we were at risk of death outside of those windows. They sent us a schedule. But there was time to get a delivery truck in, when we needed to. And out again. Without that schedule, though, well..."

"This is all quite interesting, Dr. Peckham. Hmm. Do you know how often the schedule gets updated?"

"As I recall, there's a daily schedule posted on a web site they told us about."

"Ah. I hope they're still doing that. Now. A payoff question. Do you have any idea what those trucks might be transporting?"

"Not really. One thing, though. We have, or I guess I should say, we *had* a variety of monitoring systems in our lab, for all sorts of things. All of the data from them were recorded and stored in our space in the Cloud. One of the instrument systems records radioactive decay, to monitor the mine's background count. And I remember looking at that out of curiosity one time. Every now and then that instrument would spike, showing a high decay count. Like when a Geiger counter goes nuts. But I never thought to figure out why, or what it might correlate with. The intermittency and short duration weren't a health consideration for us, so it was just an odd measurement that I didn't have time to figure out."

"Interesting. Is there any record you know of about the timing of the trucks entering and exiting the mine?"

"Well, we probably have that too, or at least it can be inferred from the seismometer data we recorded. They probably make the ground shake enough to register. Those are pretty sensitive instruments. Oh. Hey. I think I see what you're getting at. What about correlations between the radioactive spikes and ground shaking from the trucks? Right. Well, I never looked at that. Maybe, if I get a chance, I'll do that. These folks here at MPARC seem to have some computers that could do that kind of analysis pretty easily."

* * *

By early Monday afternoon, the SEALs were ready. They had everything Luke Peckham could tell them about the workings of the mine, and they'd even talked with Rod Andersen about what he knew. Fran Schmidt, the cognizant law enforcement official for civilian crimes, was acting as a cheerleader for their activities, and I was breathing easy, now that I was absolved of the responsibility of going in there. Still, it was a strange afternoon and evening for me, starting out normally and, it seemed, speeding up until it was all over. If I hadn't had a break in there for some supper, I don't know but what it would have seemed like fast-forward toward the end. But, as I said, it started normally enough, with a briefing.

Given the variety of national, state, and local interest in the matter, Commander Bierkens decided to bring in all the senior leadership, public and private. Hal, Mac, Fran, Angela, Sandy, Luke Peckham,

Chuck Shure, and I were seated around a conference table in the secure room, and the SEAL team were seated in chairs along the room's walls, making it all quite cozy. Ross was standing at the end of the table, in front of a projection screen.

"Now, I'm given to understand that all of you have an appropriate level of security clearance for what I'm going to talk about. Dr. Peckham and I have discussed some things that you may not be cleared for, but that's complicated chemical formula stuff, which isn't really relevant for this briefing." He looked at Luke, smiled, and shook his head. "And I don't understand it well enough to tell you about it anyway.

"One thing I want to emphasize right off the top, though. All of you have been through some kind of training associated with your clearances, and I bet my mortgage, or I would if I had one, that was training for *information* security. As its name suggests, that's for the protection of information. Well, what we're dealing with in this briefing is covered by something else, *operational* security. In some ways, it's far more sensitive, because slip-ups could get people killed, specifically me and my people. And, well, we all have this odd aversion to that. So it's critically important that what's said in this room stays in this room. If you want to talk about it among yourselves—and it needs to be *only* among this group of people, no others allowed—do it in here with the door closed.

"I hate to be melodramatic, but I'd like to go around the table and have each of you agree to this."

And, like passengers in the exit rows of an airliner, we each looked at him and said we agreed.

"There's a second thing that I think I should mention as well. This is an off-the-books operation. My team is active military, Navy special operations. And my friend Mr. MacQuarrie has been telling me about the national reconnaissance assets he's been using for the investigation. None of this is supposed to be happening, but the folks at the Pentagon and in the White House—and, yes, it's gone that far—they've decided to invoke some rather obscure Presidential powers to authorize it. The level of concern about what happened in that lab is a matter of the highest national security, particularly given the rather slippery nature of the group of businessmen behind the ownership of the mine. Because it's all off the books, we won't be arresting anyone or doing anything to generate publicity—Sheriff Schmidt has agreed to provide several units to back us up, should anything like that be needed. From our perspective, if anything happens to come out for some unpredictable reason, any accidental publicity, this is all a training exercise. OK?"

He looked around the table, and we all nodded—it occurred to me that he was getting us trained.

"So." He fumbled with a hand-held gadget of some kind, and the screen behind him lit up, showing the map of the Ute Mine that Mac had shown me the previous week.

"Here's the objective. More specifically, we're interested in this upper area here." A little green dot appeared on the screen from his laser pointer. "All these other tunnels and so on down lower may have interest for some of you, but our objective is this upper area, which this next slide shows magnified. Notice that there's the entrance, just off the main entrance of the mine itself, and there's also a long ventilation shaft. I understand that Dr. Livingston discovered its outlet on the mountainside."

He looked at Sandy, who was nodding. Ross continued. "Apparently, the shaft is lined with a corrugated steel galvanized pipe about 18" in diameter, not unlike a larger driveway culvert. When I first saw this diagram, I thought that the ventilation shaft might be a clandestine way in, although only a couple of my team members would be able to do it. Nonetheless, the clandestine approach has significant advantages."

The mere thought of wriggling through that shaft gave me goose bumps.

“However,” Ross sighed in apparent frustration. “Dr. Peckham provided critical information that changed my mind about this. It seems the shaft has two very high-volume fans, one at the bottom, and another about two-thirds of the way up. They are designed to replace the air in the lab in under a minute. Ah, the replacement air comes from the main tunnel, through some one-way vents by the lab’s main door. Now, although the fans wouldn’t be likely to come on during an ingress attempt, they’re welded in place, effectively blocking anyone who might try to get in that way. We could take tools in, but the noise associated with breaking the welds would eliminate any chance of the truly clandestine approach.”

Sandy raised his hand. “Sorry, Commander, but I’m a life-long academic, and we always have questions.”

“Not a problem, Dr. Livingston.”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but I can’t help but wonder how that fan in the shaft got there. It’s hard to believe that someone crawled in and actually did welding in an 18” pipe.”

Luke spoke up. “May I, Commander?” Ross nodded, with obvious relief.

“It was put in when the old, bare rock shaft was lined with the pipe. The rock shaft is quite a bit bigger, and the pipe was pulled through using some kind of complicated mining trick that I still don’t understand. But that piece of pipe had the fan in it when it was put in place a couple of years ago. The empty space between the outside of the pipe and the original shaft was ultimately filled with grout to prevent leaks.”

“In any case, we’re not going in that way. And I expect a couple of the guys here are OK with that.” Ross grinned. “But that leaves the main entrance, which has the truck traffic and a most annoying video surveillance camera. Because we don’t know what kind of lens it’s using, we don’t know how much of the area it really sees. But the scanning is quite suggestive.”

He had advanced the slides to one showing the gravel area outside the mine entrance. “We do have the truck schedule, and there is surveillance in place to verify that schedule as we speak, and it appears that there is plenty of time for us to stage in the woods here to the sides of the entrance area, get across the gravel, open the door, and get into the AirDX alcove without any issues with the trucks. The camera, though, is something of a concern, at least if we don’t want to have our presence advertised.”

This business of the camera was the only issue that generated any discussion. Ross was willing to listen to suggestions, even if some of them were, well, less than constructive.

“How about taking a picture of what the camera sees, then suspending the picture in front of the lens? That would fake out whoever is watching it, right?” Sandy, I decided, had seen too many spy films.

Ross was diplomatic. “Well, we’d first have to sit at the place where the camera is to take the picture. Then we’d have to make it a movie, because the camera scans. That seems pretty complicated.”

“Could you just spray the lens with black paint? That would black everything out and give you time to get in. The people monitoring it would probably just think it broke, or something.” Hal, I thought, just stick to what you know, OK?

“Yes, that’s true. But to do that, we’d have to get to the camera without being seen. And that doesn’t look feasible from these pictures.” Ross looked around. “Any other suggestions?”

“Aw, just shoot the fucker.” Mac’s voice was so distinctive that I almost giggled, and I heard some chuckles in the room.

Ross couldn’t help but smile. “Um, yes, well, that’s what we were thinking, too.”

* * *

Twenty-Eight

As preparations were being made for the assault on the mine—and it was clear that the SEALs were thinking of the operation as an assault—Luke Peckham poked his head into Hal’s office, where I was holed up.

“Ms. Trieri? Could I trouble you for a minute?”

“Sure. Ah, do we need to go into that secure room?”

“Not for this. And I think you’ll be interested, too, Dr. Weathers.”

I saw Hal wince. “Hal, please, Luke. Commander Bierkens’ approach notwithstanding, we don’t stand on formalities around here.”

I piped up, “Right, and I’m Annette. At least now that you’re not in my custody.”

Luke smiled. “I’m having a lot more fun this way, let me tell you. And the latest fun is something that I talked about with Director Anderson and you, Annette. Remember I mentioned that we, meaning AirDX, we had both a seismometer and a decay counter in the lab, with the data stored in the Cloud? Well, take a look at this.”

He laid on the table a piece of legal paper covered in squiggles, red and blue ones, which ran lengthwise across the page six times.

“This is a time series of the decay counts and the seismometer record—each separate graph is a month, so what this page shows is six months of data. You can see that the decay counts, the red line, are pretty flat most of the time, but it spikes now and then.” He pointed out several places with these spikes. “And you can also see a pretty regular pattern of seismic motion, several times an hour, at least during the day, all these bumps throughout each month. Those, I’m sure, must be the trucks going in and out. And note how the decay spikes always, *always*, occur during one of the seismic episodes. And it turns out that they always occur during the more *active* seismic episodes, which are probably the full trucks entering the mine. Now, this is just the raw data on a graph, but you can actually do some statistical processing of this pretty easily. Very easily, actually, given the computing resources here. I envy your systems, Dr. . . . er, Hal. Anyway, the statistics clearly show a highly significant correlation between the counts and the stronger rumbling. I’m convinced that some of those trucks, one out of every 15 or so, maybe 2 a day, ones entering the mine, are the source of the radioactivity we’re seeing in these spikes.”

“Two truckloads of radioactive waste a day? Those are big trucks, so that’s a lot. Rod needs to hear about this. I don’t know what he’s going to want to do, but we should call him now.” I motioned for Luke to follow me and headed for the conference room with the video setup.

“So let me see if I understand.” Luke had run through his data analysis again for the boss, and now Rod Andersen was trying to make sure he had the facts straight.

“Among other instruments in the AirDX lab, there in the Ute Mine, you’ve had a radioactivity instrument, what you’re calling a decay counter, like a Geiger counter, and also a seismometer that measures ground vibrations. Every time a truck goes by, the seismometer detects it. The in-bound trucks give stronger signals than the out-bound trucks, because they’re loaded and heavier. And some of the inbound truck signals correlate with the spikes in the radioactivity?”

“That’s right, Director Andersen.” Luke looked pleased that his message had gotten through.

“Are these instruments reliable? Are they calibrated?”

“Yes, sir, they are. Now, I’ve not been talking about absolute decay counts, or absolute seismometer measurements, just relative ones. And as long as the instruments don’t drift, the correlations are solid. We know they don’t drift because of our calibrations.”

“OK. Thanks. Well, Annette, this looks like a smoking gun to me. What’s the plan for the AirDX lab? Can we...oh, wait. I guess I’ll have to get some kind of court order to shut down the WSES operations, and that’ll take a couple of days, most likely. What’s your schedule?”

I was quite aware that our videoconference link was not a secure one. “Well, ah, probably on a very different schedule. I really can’t talk it about it here, though. Maybe we should just continue to keep the two things separate.”

“Hmm. Right. OK, well, I’ll work the court order, and you all do what you’ve got to do. Let’s stay in touch.” He leaned forward, reached out with his arm, and the screen went blank.

“Great work, Luke. He’ll probably need some written documentation, though. Could you put all this into some kind of report I can email him?”

“I’ll get right on it. But do you think I’m supposed to go over to the mine entrance with Commander Bierkens?”

“Probably not. It’s likely that you’ll be patched in to the voice communications, though, in case they have any questions about what they find.”

No, Luke, I thought. The SEAL team won’t be taking along civilian passengers, nor me, either. We all get to watch from a safe distance.

I found Ross in the big conference room, checking equipment along with his team members. He was dressed all in black, apropos the late evening operation they’d settled on.

“I didn’t say anything before, Ross, but shooting that camera will bring someone out to look at it. My boss has been watching that place for some time, and there are guards with assault rifles.”

“I’d be surprised if there weren’t, Ms. Trieri. And Director Anderson briefed us thoroughly. But it’s OK. We’ll be inside by the time a guard gets there, and he’ll be, um, harmlessly neutralized for the duration. Our mission is to collect any national security information. But from what Luke Peckham told us, there’s none in there, so there’s not going to be much for us to do in that lab except check to be sure. And we’re going to bring out the bodies. We’ve got body bags for that.”

“So the truck schedule is still on?”

“That’s what we’re hearing. Really, this looks like it will be pretty easy, as these things go.”

“I’ll be here with Luke, and available by whatever radio link you have, if questions come up.”

“Good, that might be extremely helpful. We need to stay in touch.” He smiled, shouldered a knapsack of gear, and led his team out the door.

It would take them an hour to get there, I knew, plus another hour or so to get staged in the woods near the entrance. During that second hour, Fran Schmidt’s people would also be getting into place as inconspicuously as possible, in case real law enforcement might be needed.

So, with two hours to kill, I went looking for Hal again.

“Hey, lover.” I’d found him still in his office, staring at the computer screen. “I’ve got a couple of hours of waiting coming up. Want to go out and get a bite?”

“That’s probably a good idea. I’m certainly not making any sense of all this.”

“What’s ‘all this’?”

“A mistake, I suppose. This whole operation was put together in a big rush, and Mac gave the folks who support Bierkens and his team the MPARC address here, for deliveries of their equipment and so on. And, I guess it’s just government bureaucracy at work, a bill of lading was sent separately to the general MPARC email address for some reason.”

“So you’ve got a list of their equipment and so on?”

“Right. All sorts of stuff you’d expect. Night vision scopes, some very interesting communications equipment, weapons. But, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why they’d need so much thermite.”

“Thermite?” I couldn’t place the familiar term, for some reason.

“It’s a mixture of some kind of metal, like aluminum, with an oxidizing agent that creates an extremely hot chemical reaction when ignited.” Hal scratched his head absently. “I recall reading about how it’s used in underwater welding and so forth. And there are military applications as well.”

“Well, SEALs are underwater experts, so they’re probably familiar with the stuff. But why would they need it for this mission?”

“That’s what puzzles me.” He shrugged. “Anyway, you’re right. Let’s go find something to eat and be back here for the fun. Or whatever it turns out to be.”

* * *

We walked down the street to Randi’s, a venerable Winter Park hangout with reasonable, if not terribly creative, food with an Irish spin. An hour and a half later, just after dark, full of corned beef, we were back at MPARC, where we ran into Mac.

“Hal! Annette!” He looked relieved. “I’ve been looking for you. We need to have a conversation in that secure room of yours, Hal.”

We found ourselves some coffee—someone had made a fresh carafe—and followed Mac down the hall. I closed the doors behind us, and the rules then allowed us to talk about anything.

Mac seemed reticent to start, so I went ahead without him. “Any word on progress over there?”

“All’s going to plan so far. Ross and the guys are about in place, and Fran’s backup units are ready.” Mac sighed. “It’s that plan I need to tell you about. There was one part that Ross left out in the briefing earlier. I don’t know if it’s a big deal to you or not, but it seems like you might as well know. It’s probably too late to call it off, anyway.”

“What’s this about, Mac?” Hal’s voice was full of concern.

“Well, Ross and his guys have orders to destroy whatever is left in that lab. They’re going to get the bodies out, like they said, but they’re going to pretty much melt down the place after they do.” He looked back and forth at the two of us. “The boys in the Pentagon don’t want anyone to take that lab over and try to recreate what AirDX was doing. Now, Luke doesn’t think that would be possible without the information that’s squirreled away in that computing cloud he keeps talking about, but the Pentagon isn’t taking any chances. So when Ross and company leave, it’s all going to be turned into melted metal mush. Like I said, I don’t know if this is a big deal to you or not, but I just thought I should let you know now.”

I couldn’t tell if he was acting or if it was real, but he managed to look guilty.

Hal spoke first. "Well, it's certainly no big deal with me. I wonder what Fran will think?"

"Me, too. I mean, both of those things." Now it was my turn to shrug. "I can't imagine that's there's evidence in there that would interest Fran. He seems to have bought into the story of the accident. And this will shut the lab down for good, eliminating any possibility of another such accident, right? And I sure don't care."

"Oh!" Hal looked surprised. "I guess this explains all that thermite."

And then he had to explain to Mac how he knew about it, which produced its own little explosion.

"They emailed you the shipping list? Holy Christ! Those people in Washington are hopeless. No wonder our ops get so screwed up sometimes. My Lord!"

There was a knock on the door, and Sandy stuck his head in. "Showtime. We set up all the communications stuff in here."

As other people filed in, Sandy fiddled with some equipment in a cabinet and nodded to Mac.

He looked at his watch, cleared his throat, and said, in a normal voice to the room at large, "Base live."

"Terrier live," came a response from the speakers in the ceiling.

Sandy held up a remote control. "This mutes our microphones so we can talk. Mac will have it."

"Terrier'?" Hal looked surprised.

"Yeah, what the hell, you know, little dogs that go into holes after rats." Mac grinned and pushed a switch on the remote. "We copy five-by-five, Terrier. Status?"

"Nominal. Camera down, tunnel accessed. Lab door open...now! Ugh! Breathers on, squad."

Mac wrinkled his nose as he pushed the switch. "I wondered about that. It's been a couple of weeks, right? Those bodies..."

He pushed the switch again. "Terrier, don't forget the ventilation system."

"Copy, Base. Thanks." The sound of a powerful fan soon emanated from the ceiling.

Mac pushed the mute. "Well, we probably won't hear much because of that fan, and they can operate on hand signals. But so far, so good, sounds like."

In fact we heard nothing at all but the fan for about 15 minutes. It was something of a shock when it stopped and the ceiling started talking again.

"Terrier clear, subjects evacuated, no anomalies."

"Good work. Base out" Mac tossed Sandy the remote.

"Well, that was pretty anticlimactic." I couldn't help myself. "What did he mean by 'no anomalies'?"

"They shot the camera, remember? I guess none of the guards there came out to investigate. Everything went perfectly." Mac looked relieved, and then shrugged at me with a "hell if I know" look. I took it to mean he couldn't tell about the thermite business.

Luke, who had come in with Sandy, spoke up. "Can I assume that the 'subjects' they 'evacuated' were the Professor and Miller and Rick?"

Mac put on his fatherly face. "I suspect so, son. And it wouldn't surprise me if you get asked to identify them at the morgue."

Luke looked at the floor. “Yeah. Well, they were good people.”

To my surprise, my cell phone was buzzing.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Hey, Annette, it’s Fran, and this connection may not last because it’s a radio patch through God knows where. Anyway, we’re all headed back. Everything went smoother than I could have imagined. See you in an hour or so.”

“Fran? Are you coming to MPARC? Or what? I need a conversation, tonight.”

“MPARC will work. I’ll come back through Georgetown. See you later.”

The Monday evening traffic must have not been like Sunday’s was, because Fran made it through those tunnels, then down past Georgetown and back over Berthoud Pass, in 55 minutes. Even Hal was impressed.

“Long day, Annette. What was it you wanted to talk about?” Fran was all business as he strode into the conference room and sat.

So I told him about the thermite and the SEAL team’s orders. I think his feelings were hurt, because they didn’t tell him themselves, but he wasn’t really upset.

“One thing, though—this is going to make the next press conference a little dicey. I’m going to need to talk with someone at the Pentagon so we can get our stories straight.” Fran leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the conference room table. “I’m thinking that those bodies that Ross and his guys recovered tonight are really ‘charred remains’ of a catastrophic and extremely hot fire in the lab two weeks ago, at the same time as the Valley of Death. But if we can pull this off, I think it may just be the last press conference. That’d be a relief.”

* * *

Twenty-Nine

It bothered me for a couple of days, that fib that Fran was conspiring with the Pentagon about. The time of death, of course, wasn’t a fib, and, just like some of the Valley of Death victims died from inhaling that gas, the guys in the lab had, too. Fran didn’t need to lie about that. So it all came down to the time of the fire in the lab and the condition of the remains. I finally rationalized the whole thing by telling myself that, given that the victims hadn’t burned to death, “charred remains” would probably be less traumatic for the families than “really gross remains that had sat around and rotted for two weeks.”

In the end, the Pentagon put out a press release about an accident in a research laboratory in Colorado that killed three researchers with toxic gas and then started fires both in the lab and in a patch of trees on a mountainside, which killed more people. They also obfuscated the matter by talking about how the gas, had it not burned up, would have been degraded by sunlight in a matter of a few hours—never mind that the release had happened at night. And while Fran had been eager to modify reality about the time of the lab fire, some of the other official lies began to really piss him off.

But there was nothing we could do, as we were all rounded up and, under the shadow of penalties associated with various National Security criminal matters, were made to sign a complicated non-disclosure form about the whole thing. And that would have been the whole story, except, on Wednesday, Luke Peckham disappeared.

We had made arrangements for his car to be brought up from Denver on Tuesday, and he was using it to look for a permanent place to stay. According to Hal, he had received a phone call Wednesday morning, excused himself to go look at a possible apartment to rent, and simply never returned.

“We were discussing the benefits plan that MPARC offers—I was trying to guide him through the maze of retirement program options. A phone call for him was routed to my office. It seemed to be about an apartment somewhere, a deal that sounded good to him, from what it looked like. So as soon as we could wrap up, he took off to check it out.” Hal shrugged. “I haven’t seen him since.”

We had been sitting on the deck, watching Wednesday evening creep up the other side of the valley.

“Is there any reason to suspect foul play?”

“Well.” He took a sip of iced tea. “He and Sandy were deep into some kind of new calculation or other. The kid worked fast, I’ll say that, and he really seemed to like our shop. Sandy was certainly expecting him back after lunch. And there wasn’t even a phone call.”

“Does Mac know?” At one level, I knew it could all be perfectly innocuous, but on another level something about it bothered me.

“Uh, well, he didn’t see Luke all afternoon, but I don’t know if that concerned him.”

“Luke mentioned to me being scared of some goons that Ute Holdings put onto the AirDX team. And now that Luke’s the only one left, well, maybe his fear was justified.”

“Except that he spent all day yesterday shut up with several people that Chuck Shure brought in, with the Pentagon’s blessing. I think they were pumping him for everything he could tell them about AirDX.”

“Are you saying he’s expendable?”

“Well, no. But I guess I am saying that he’s not as indispensable as he was on Monday, as far as the AirDX stuff is concerned,” he said. “But I’d hate to lose him, because it looks like he’ll be a valuable member of our team.”

That made me feel better. “If he’s been gone only for the afternoon, I don’t think we can do much yet. Did you happen to hear an address for that apartment he got the call about?”

“No, but he wrote it on a notepad on my desk using a ball-point pen I handed him. And I haven’t touched the pad. Maybe there’s something there.”

“If he doesn’t come in tomorrow, let’s follow that up.”

Peckham didn’t show up at MPARC on Thursday, and the address we were able to recover from the imprint on the notepad was an apartment building with no vacancies. No one there had called him on Wednesday.

Around noon, we had a meeting of the minds at MPARC and decided to call the folks at the Pentagon who had made us sign those nondisclosures. They, being only spineless lawyers, referred us to the FBI. Neither Fran Schmidt or Rod Andersen was especially happy about that.

“Oh, crap. The Feds poking around in my county. Just what I need,” was Fran’s reaction, when I called him.

“Aw, geez! Those guys will screw up my illegal dumping investigation for sure.” Rod’s concern also came through loud and clear on the phone.

But Rod also had good news, and it concerned that dumping investigation: Luke Peckham's analysis of the radiation and seismologic data from the Ute Mine lab had persuaded a judge to sign a search warrant. If Rod was concerned about the presence of the FBI, he was elated about the warrant.

"We'll shut down their operation while we go in and see what we can find. If we get lucky, shutting down their operations will include detaining a truck full of whatever that radioactive stuff is. I'm putting together a task force that'll cover all the bases. Can I count on you, Annette?"

Like a bad dream that wouldn't let me wake up, the specter of having to go down that damned mine was still hovering around.

"Of course, Rod. I'll start by assembling everything we know about that hole."

To do that, I went looking for Mac MacQuarrie, and, after searching all the usual places, found him in a new one, an office Hal had provided.

"Annette! Say, how do you like my new digs? Not so big, but some view, huh?"

And it was, toward the east over the treetops to the foothills.

"Does this mean you're going to work here, Mac?"

"Well, we haven't got that far yet. I don't quite know what I'd do here anyway. I'm a retired spook, not a computer weenie."

"Don't sell yourself short, Mac. Just look at the job you did for us on that AirDX business. Speaking of which, we're now interested in what's going on deeper in that mine. Tell you what. Work for me, and it'll give you a better bargaining position with Hal."

"What's the pay?"

"Um. Well...oh, I know. How about a shiny shield to wear on official business? And I can throw in 52 cents per mile when you use your personal car, too. I'll deputize you!" I thought a minute. "Actually, that's probably a good idea anyway. In all seriousness. That way, you'd be doing the data gathering on the mine in an official capacity, if it ever comes up in court or anything."

"Do I have to swear on a Bible? I might get struck by lightning if I do."

"Huh? Oh, well, we'll figure something else out. I need to find my CBI field kit to do it anyway. I mean, it's not like I carry spare shields around all the time. And it'll be a new experience for me." I winked at him. "Anyway, would it be possible for you to put together high resolution, or as high as possible, maps of that mine, everything that's known about it? We don't care so much about the AirDX part any more, just the deeper stuff."

"I'll get right on it, boss. Does this mean I get to go along on the bust? I've never been in a deep mine before—sounds interesting."

If only, I thought, I had his fortitude.

* * *

It occurs to me that I've not been shy about expressing my dread about going underground into that stupid mine. Strangely, as the time to do it got closer, and as the preparations got busier and time seemed to speed up, a lot of that dread up and vanished. Not all, but a lot.

Rod Andersen's task force really was quite some force. People showed up unexpectedly late Thursday afternoon at Fran's offices to measure me and Angela—who was also going to have the pleasure of going underground—for Demron suits, so our exposure to whatever ionizing radiation might

be down there would be minimized. I made sure that they also stopped by MPARC to measure Mac. And we were all treated to a mine safety training session, and then an advanced one.

Mac's research produced even better maps of that mine than he'd found previously, and I made sure to send them to Rod. That ore-belt entrance on the south side got a big red circle around it on one of the maps. I sure didn't want any escapes by that route to go un-noticed.

By early Friday morning, there was even a plan. Rod had left his comfortable office suite in downtown Denver to be in on the action, and we assembled in the MPARC secure conference room for a pre-deployment briefing.

"OK, people, let's go over this whole thing." Rod didn't get to do this very often, and he seemed to be having fun.

"First, as Annette pointed out, there's a back-door escape tunnel that comes out on the southeast side of the mountain. Sheriff Schmidt and his people will be monitoring this and will arrest anyone who tries to escape that way.

"Second, there's the question of the regular truck traffic in and out of the mine. We're handling that with three steps. A, we've found out the radio channel—this isn't a regular CB channel, they have HAM radios—the radio channel they use, and we'll simply jam it in an area about ten miles around the mine. B, at T equals minus 10 minutes, we'll begin stopping WSES trucks anywhere on Ute Pass Road. C, we'll block the mine entrance using loaded dump trucks in such a way that the inbound WSES trucks can stop without crashing, assuming they choose not to crash. If they choose to crash, well, it's on them. There will be only a couple of outbound trucks to deal with, and we'll handle that easily.

"Third, when the outbound trucks exit the mine, then the roadway in there will be clear. That's when we'll send our units. Three armored vehicles will enter the mine and penetrate to the bottom. Our presence and purpose, serving a search warrant, will be broadcast over loudspeakers. Any resistance will be met with force, deadly force as necessary.

"Is this all clear?"

No one had questions, or at least no one dared ask any.

"Excellent. When the mine is secure, the fourth armored vehicle will enter, the one with the science team. They will take samples from where those loads of debris have been dumped, and they will have equipment to be able to monitor radioactivity. When they obtain enough samples—and it's at their discretion when this will be—they will give an 'all clear' signal and all four vehicles will proceed up the tunnel to the entrance. When the four vehicles are clear of the mine, we will proceed to Part Two as necessary."

Rod stopped for a minute to catch his breath. He scanned the room for questions again, and, although I'd thought of one, I kept quiet. I decided to ask it privately, later.

"OK, well, Part Two depends on what the real-time measurements of the science team reveal. If they find significant radioactivity, meaning something much greater than would be expected in natural background radiation in such a mine, then we will do our very best to evacuate any and all personnel in that mine, no matter who they are, no matter who they work for, and we'll seal it up. Otherwise, we'll take our samples and simply leave, having executed our search warrant and obtained what evidence we need for future prosecution. Clear?" Rod looked around the room for questions, but again found none. "OK, the show starts at 1500 hours today. You all have instructions about where to be and what to do. Let's make this as easy and safe as we can, folks. Good luck!"

A couple of people didn't quite know whether to applaud or not, but their feeble attempts didn't start anything—the meeting just broke up. Mac hustled around to the table to find me.

“Annette, can you introduce me to your Director? I have some questions I need to talk with him about.” He looked worried.

“Me, too. Let’s go.”

For an old spook, Mac was really quite diplomatic. After I introduced him to Rod with a brief outline of his background and, half-jokingly, as my newest deputy, he allowed as to his curiosity about the vehicles that Rod had lined up for the trip into the mine.

“Oh, right, I didn’t mention that, did I? Well, we know that full-sized semi-tractor trucks go in and out of there at a good clip, so there’s plenty of room for just about anything. But we really don’t need anything too big, so I contacted an old friend of mine who’s high up in the National Guard and arranged for Humvees. I figured with their maneuverability and ground clearance, they’d be the most useful. Everyone going in there will be wearing Demron suits for rad protection, and I doubt we need really heavy armor.” Rod looked pleased with himself.

“Any real firepower? Um, all of my own is in transit.” Mac smiled. “We flew out, and you know how hard it is to get an HK417 past the TSA guys at the airport these days.”

I could tell by Rod’s expression that he had no clue what an HK417 was—for that matter neither did I—but he sure wasn’t going to admit to that.

“One of the Humvees has an M134 Minigun on a ring mount. That ought to do it.” He looked even more pleased with himself.

Mac nodded. “Sure should. Um, if you don’t have anyone with real experience with that thing, I’ll volunteer. They’re a bit, well, different from most armament. It takes some practice to get it to do what you want it to. And it’s all too easy to chew through a box of shells before you know it.”

Rod’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Hmm. Annette, you say you deputized him? I think I’ll take you up on that, Mac. How about the rest of the plan? Do you see any holes?”

This was the opening that Mac had been waiting for. “Well, I don’t know if Annette told you, but I’m the guilty party who put together that portfolio of information about the mine. So I’ve had a chance to study its layout. That long, spiral decline has several drifts branching off it, at various places on the descent. I suppose the main chamber at the bottom is where the dumping is happening, but those drifts are a bit worrisome. They could get us set up for an ambush, maybe cut off our retreat if things get rough.”

“I was wondering about this, too, Rod.” I didn’t know whether this would help Mac’s credibility or make Rod think I was piling on, but it had been worrying me as well.

“I’ve discussed this with several people, and we don’t think there’s any threat from those side tunnels.” For the first time, though, there was indecision in Rod’s voice.

Mac pressed his advantage. “Well, yeah, I was part of an operation once where...oh, never mind, you don’t want to hear my old war stories. But it seems like we have plenty of time, there’s no rush once we get the truck traffic stopped and the mine entrance secured, right? We could easily clear those drifts one-by-one as we ease our way down that decline. I mean, the driver could back the Humvee with the Minigun into each one that has any sign of recent activity—you know, tire tracks, footprints—until we make sure it’s empty. And, say, that makes me think of something. At the last drift before that big chamber at the bottom, we could turn all the Humvees around and back down the last bit of the decline, with me on the Minigun taking the lead. That way, if we run into resistance, at least into any significant resistance, we’ve got the opportunity to get out of there quicker, while I hose down the place if need be. I mean, if the rate of fire on that thing doesn’t make whoever is in there back down, well, it’ll be time for a strategic retreat and a Plan B, y’know?”

Rod's mouth was open slightly, and he blinked two slow, stupid, cow-like blinks. "Ah, well, I guess that all makes sense to me. No reason not to do it that way, I suppose. Uh, glad to have you on board, Mac. Er, let me know if you have any other suggestions."

* * *

Thirty

Rod's meeting broke up at around ten Friday morning, and the five hours between then and zero-hour at three that afternoon were jam-packed, so much so that I missed lunch and had to descend into that stupid mine on an empty stomach. But not everything was quite so grim, and it proved to me that, when things hit the fan, they're not necessarily all foul-smelling.

What made me miss lunch was a very excited Rod Andersen. He jumped up from the computer workstation he'd borrowed, rushed over the printer, and let out a whoop. The rest of us, our attention thoroughly got, stared at him in surprise.

"Got him!" he exclaimed. "And a search warrant to go with it."

He looked around the room as if he was expecting applause or something, so I bailed him out. "Got who, Rod?"

"Oh, yeah, I didn't mention it earlier, did I? Well, see, we didn't have any trouble with a warrant for the mine, based on that analysis that Luke did of the trucks' shaking the ground and the radiation. But we were waiting on another warrant for the people involved, especially the boss of the thing. There's this guy named Silvio Estrada who's connected to the Las Vegas crowd. He's the head of Western Slope Environmental Services. And we figure he's likely to have some records of their shipping manifests, or some such thing. Because he works out of his home, we had to get a separate warrant, and it just came through. They faxed it to my email and I printed it out." He waved the paper in his hand. "It also looks as if he's a principal in Ute Holdings, too, the company that owns the mine. That makes for conspiracy among the companies and their directors and owners, assuming we find evidence of illegal dumping in there."

"Any idea where we can find this Silvio guy, Rod?" I was wondering whether our schedule would get changed again, but most everyone else had returned to what they had been doing before Rod's whoop.

"That, Annette, is the beauty of it. He has a small ranch on the east bank of the Blue River, a couple of miles upstream from the turnoff to Ute Pass Road. And by 'ranch' I really mean a mansion on the river, with a horse or two. It was built as a fishing lodge a few years back, but the original owner got wiped out in the housing crash and had to sell it." He smiled. "So we can secure his house and office pretty much on the way to the mine. That way, if there's communication down in the mine, like a telephone or something, his people in there won't be able to warn him, and he won't be able to shred any paperwork or whatever."

We decided that securing the mansion and the people in it could take some time, so we hit the road two hours before we'd planned to. And I missed lunch.

It turned out that the mansion was a huge, full-log house sprawled on a high bank next to the river, set back from the highway by a couple hundred yards. There was a closed gate, but our Humvee made quick work of that. Because we hadn't put on our Demron radiation suits at that point, at least we didn't

look like aliens on the attack, just normal law enforcement personnel on the attack, to the poor housekeeper who answered the door.

“Si? Ay...,” was all we got from her as we hustled into the foyer and spread out.

We didn’t have any advance knowledge of the layout of the place, so we had to wing it. Angela and I went left and wound up clearing the dining room and walking into in the food-preparation area, where I immediately came down with a severe case of kitchen envy. All I could do was stare at the restaurant-grade everything organized in enough square feet to hold a barn dance. It occurred to me that I really didn’t have any special use for a 60” Wolf dual-fuel range with two ovens, six burners, a griddle, and a charbroiler, but I sure wanted one.

The kitchen staff, though, weren’t so distracted. They froze in place, terror in their eyes, as we, with our Kevlar vests, helmets, and automatics pointed here and there, explored various nooks and crannies.

Once again Angela proved her value by launching into a little speech in Spanish. Even I was reassured just by the sound of it, and I could see the staff relax. “I told them not to worry, that we’re not ICE, that we’re not after them. I also suggested that they hold off on cooking dinner.”

Just as I was about to respond, we heard shots from another part of the house, so I switched on my headset. “Trieri here. Kitchen and dining area clear. What were those shots?”

“Petersen here. Subject has barricaded himself in a study. He put a couple of holes in very nice hand-carved oak door. Flash-bang is next.” And about five seconds later we heard the thud of a door being kicked in and then the bang part, which rattled the pots and pans and scared the bejesus out of the staff. Angela went to work on them with more reassurance, and, when she finished, we headed out for the other end of the house, back through the dining room to the foyer, and then right this time.

But right turned out to be wrong—it was some kind of guest wing—so it was once again back to the foyer, where we tried straight ahead. Down a long hallway, there was smoke through which we could see a door askew.

I keyed my microphone. “Rod? Are you in the room with its door blown half off?”

“Roger, Annette. And you might want to get in here.”

Rod and two other CBI agents were lifting a limp form from the floor. Another individual, looking quite dazed and confused, was seated in a straight-back chair, arms behind him. Angela and I secured our weapons.

“Those flash-bangs are quite something, aren’t they?” My question was rhetorical, designed to let Rod know we’d arrived.

“Unless you’re prepared, yeah.” Rod pointed at the second figure. “Recognize this guy?”

Even through the smoke I could see that the unconscious person they’d placed in a second chair, securing his arms with handcuffs, was Luke Peckham.

Rod continued. “We’ve had a computer watch on his bank account, and when it got a hundred-thousand dollar electronic deposit yesterday, we thought we might find him here. It was Estrada who shot up his own door, though.”

He gestured toward the desk, where a long-barreled .45 revolver lay.

“So, Rod, what do you suppose all this means?”

“Well, that guy you brought in, Mac what’s-his-name. He’s pretty smart. Maybe he can figure it out.” Rod shook his head. “I’m just glad no one got really hurt in this. I don’t like getting shot at one bit.”

“You’ve got that right. Let’s hope that none of the Western employees in that damned mine take shooting into their heads.”

Rod laughed. “Hey, your friend Mac volunteered to go in there first on that Minigun, right? Let ’em shoot. He’ll make ’em wish they’d taken up knitting instead.”

* * *

And Mac did.

We arranged for the detention of our two captives, Peckham and Estrada, and for careful searches of computers and paper files. Then we backtracked to the Ute Pass Road turnoff and made our way to the mine entrance, where a surprisingly large group of people was assembled, along with several more Humvees including one with a menacing-looking machine gun mounted on its roof. That, I thought, must be Mac’s Minigun.

And there was also one of those semi-tractor dump trucks sitting off to the side. Its driver seemed to be the fellow sitting on the ground, leaning against a front tire, hands behind his back. One down, I thought, and who knows how many to go?

Angela, however, had a more personal perspective. “Oh, shit. Annette, I think that’s my cousin Ernesto sitting over by that truck. And is he cuffed?”

“If he was driving it, he just might be. Rod doesn’t want any interference with the plan.” I thought a minute. “Why don’t you go ask him what’s going on? Ernesto, I mean.”

“I think I will.” And she headed off in the direction of the truck.

It occurred to me that the only thing I had to do was to put on my Demron anti-radiation suit, so I decided I’d rather go with Angela. I trotted after her to catch up.

“I thought you said that you didn’t have any cousins up here.” I was only slightly winded.

“Not over in the Fraser Valley among the folks I talked to, no. Ernesto must be staying somewhere else.”

As we got closer, I saw the instant of recognition in Ernesto’s face—his eyes got big and his mouth dropped open.

“A-a-angela! Buenos dias!” He managed to blurt this out, and more Spanish followed.

Angela, though, answered in English. “What I’m doing here is busting your bosses’ asses, Ernie. Did you know that you’re involved in an illegal dumping operation? What’s in this truck, anyway? Where’d you get it filled?”

“Oh, uh, well, we’re not supposed to talk about that stuff, with anyone, you know? That was the deal when they hired me on.” He looked a bit embarrassed.

“Annette? Do you suppose anyone here has checked this truck load for radioactivity?”

“Good question. You see what you can get from him, and I’ll go check.” I turned, located Rod standing by the other Humvees, and headed his way. He had his anti-rad suit on, but the headgear was sitting on the top of one of the vehicles, so he looked a bit like a pin-headed astronaut. I started to get the giggles.

Mac, dressed the same way but able to pull it off better, was standing with his torso sticking up out of the roof of one of the Humvees, fiddling with the Minigun. I walked over to talk with him while I got my mirth under control.

“So, Mac, is that going to serve your purpose?” My voice got his attention, and he looked down and grinned.

“I’d know better if I knew what my purpose was supposed to be. But it’ll probably do. Like I told Rod, I’ve used one. And, more to the point, I got shot at by one of these things once. Well, not *at*, exactly, but in the direction of. Just before I met you on that cruise-ship caper, as a matter of fact. It really is like a fire-hose of lead.” He shook his head and looked at the mine entrance. “I don’t know who or what’s down there, but this ought to make ’em think twice about giving us trouble.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re in charge of that damned thing. I don’t think this is the time for rookies. Say, Mac, do you know if there’s anyone around here with a rad counter? Seems like we should check that truck over there.” I gestured Angela’s way.

“Been done. It’s clean, mostly. Readings a bit higher than the background, but not enough to suggest that the load is hot. Maybe he’s carried a hot load in the recent past, though.” Mac shrugged, then looked up past me. “And here comes another one, looks like.”

Someone else had noticed it, too, because a whistle blew, one of those sharp, piercing whistles that basketball referees use. I turned to see what everyone was looking at and saw Rod the pin-headed astronaut taking a whistle out of his mouth. A convenient fit of coughing covered my snicker as he raised a bull-horn to his face, making himself look truly loony.

“OK, team, another inbound truck coming. You did great work on the first one, so you know what to do.”

A half dozen people sprang into action, including Mac, who spun the Minigun around to point at the entrance in from the main road. As the truck made the turn at a good clip, given the curve and all, several of the rad-suited CBI folks set up a relay of signals that reminded me of how aircraft are guided into the gate. It worked, because the driver caught on immediately and began a counter-clockwise circle around the big parking area, slowing the whole way. He finally slid to a stop next to Ernesto’s truck, and three people wearing rad suits—including helmets—and carrying gadgets of some kind sprinted toward him.

It took them only a few seconds to start backing away, and they gestured for Angela, Ernesto, and the new driver to join them. That truck, I decided, must be a hot one. A fourth guy in suit carrying a different, bigger gadget went over the truck more carefully and, after a few minutes, came my way with his helmet shaking back and forth like a robot with new, high-voltage batteries.

Rod, I realized, had come up beside me. “What’ve you got, Anton?”

“Bad shit, Director, bad, bad shit. Can’t possibly be just uranium mining waste like we thought. Not with this range of energies. Looks more like the kind of weird isotopes they make down at Los Alamos. Or a whole truckload of medical isotope waste, maybe. An alphabet soup of nasty elements, Americium, Barium, Cesium, you name it. We’re probably OK here, but I wouldn’t get much closer. And for sure don’t expose yourself to the contents of that trailer.” He shook his head some more as he walked off.

“Time for you to suit up, Annette.” Rod wasn’t shouting, but his no-nonsense tone told me not to argue. “And get Angela suited up, too, pronto. It looks like we’ve hit pay-dirt, so to speak. If it’s in that truck, there’s more down that hole there.”

He looked over my shoulder and raised his voice. “Angela! Over here!”

“What do we do with the drivers?” With all the radiation flying around I wasn’t comfortable letting them just sit in the parking lot.

“We’ve got just the thing.” He pointed toward an armored truck parked in the shade on the other side of the clearing as Angela walked up with the two truck drivers.

And she was not happy. “Jesus. H. Christ. On. A. Crutch. Annette? This another of my cousins, Ernesto’s brother Alberto. Next thing I know, *my Mom and Dad* are going to drive up the road, for God’s sake!”

“Uh, Bert? And Ernie?” Where, I wondered, had I heard those names before?

“Well, yeah, we had *Sesame Street* in Santa Fe, just like everyone else.” Angela looked grumpy. “My Aunt Consuela was enchanted with it. I think my cousins got tired of it pretty early on, though, and now, what with all the innuendos, they’ve started calling themselves ’Nesto and Al. But I’ve known them since the Bert and Ernie days. Right now their names are Dumb and Dumber, as far as I’m concerned.”

Angela’s two cousins were standing behind her, towering over her but trying to look small, shifting from foot to foot, staring at the ground. I struggled to keep a straight face in the presence of this little family comedy-drama.

“Well, I think we’re going to have to confine them for the duration. Over there.” I gestured toward the armored truck. “Gentlemen, don’t take this the wrong way—it’s just temporary. We’ll certainly want to talk with you about what you know, and I’m sure that your cooperation will be rewarded.”

Angela walked off with them toward their accommodations for the afternoon, and I decided I couldn’t put off getting into my Demron suit any longer.

* * *

Thirty-One

I couldn’t reasonably complain. They had provided me with a radiation suit that fit quite well, even with my Kevlar vest underneath, and it didn’t bind in the armpits or other uncomfortable places I thought it might. Now I, too, looked like a pin-headed astronaut, of course, but we’d all look the same with our helmets on, I knew.

I had Angela’s suit ready for her to climb into when she returned from delivering her miscreant cousins to our paddy wagon, and we were ready to go just as Rod blew that damned whistle again. It was 3:00 sharp.

“OK, team, saddle up! Time to lock and load!” If he were to use those sorts of clichés all afternoon, I thought, I just might have to shoot him instead of the bad guys.

Maybe it was just my nerves. I’d been trying to avoid thinking about entering that mine, but, with the rad suit on, the reality was starting to sink in. Angela, on the other hand, was ready to rock.

“I think we’re in the Humvee with Mac, Annette. If there’s any action, that’ll be where it is. This could get exciting!”

Even with her full suit on, her enthusiasm was infectious. I watched her practically jump into the Humvee that Mac was sticking out of and tried to psyche myself up.

Inside, there was Mac’s south half, standing on a little platform that provided access to the roof hatch and the Minigun. I took a seat across from Angela just aft of Mac’s backside. It took a little

adjusting, but soon I was plugged into the communications network that let us talk from inside the helmets. At first it was buzzing with conversation, but then it went off and on again, and everyone shut up.

“OK, people, the entrance door is going up. Humvee Alfa goes in first.” Rod’s voice came through loud and clear, and I felt my lower abdomen clinch up. I’d passed him the passcode for the doors without thinking of the consequences for myself, but as we began to move those consequences hit home.

I have to say, though, after that it was boring for quite some time. Progress was slow enough that I couldn’t feel any sense of turning the curves on the spiral ramp I’d seen on the underground map. We stopped and backed up several times, to clear side tunnels, I assumed, without incident and then continued. In between backing into those side drifts, we bumped down the washboard created by the outbound dump trucks’ grinding up the grade of the decline. I kept my jaw clamped shut to prevent my teeth from chattering.

Talking wasn’t possible because of radio discipline, so I stared at Angela and made shrugging gestures from time to time. Two other CBI officers, whom I couldn’t identify, had joined us in the back of the Humvee, but there was no way to make polite conversation. I finally noticed the chevrons on my sleeves and, out of curiosity, felt for and found the insignia on my shoulders, where epaulets would normally be. Neither Angela nor the other two had them.

Great, I thought, I get to be In Charge, even though I’m so scared I might toss my cookies into my helmet. At least I had that empty stomach working in my favor.

After a while, there was one last side drift, and then, after some jockeying around, we kept going backwards, down the final bit of the decline into the chamber at the bottom.

Just as I was thinking it, Rod came on the radio. “Showtime, people.”

I saw Angela fumble around under her seat and come up with a weapon, an assault rifle of some kind, so I followed suit. Mine turned out to be an Uzi SMG with full automatic capability and the extra-large magazine. A sort of hand-held mini Minigun, all things considered. I reminded myself that the magazine wouldn’t last for even a second-long burst, probed around for more clips under the seat, and found a shoulder bag.

About that time, the vehicle leveled off and our backing up came to a gentle stop. Mac had turned around during the entries into the drifts, so we were no longer seated by his backside. I patted his right knee and, using the voice-activated microphone, wished him well; he tapped his right heel twice in response.

Just then Rod’s voice came through the radio set and through the air as well, with a slight echo, from a loudspeaker. “This is the Colorado Bureau of Investigation executing a search warrant. Anyone present is commanded to present themselves, hands raised. Resistance will be met with deadly force.”

Then there was a pop from somewhere far away, and, as an answer, Mac let fly with a several of seconds of Minigun fire, a few hundred rounds, I guess. It made a sort of loud purring noise, far more civilized than I would have thought.

“OK, folks,” Mac’s voice was purring more softly than the Minigun had. “That ought to make them keep their heads down, at least, so I think we’re secure. You can pick up the pieces while I cover you.”

They guy on my right popped the door and jumped out, and his companion followed, with Angela behind him. Then it was my turn.

What was it, I wondered, that bothered me so? I’d been sitting in a little window-less box for probably an hour during the descent, and now I was to get out into a much larger chamber.

Claustrophobia should surely affect me in the little box more than outside. It just didn't make sense. Even with flying lead, the cavern wouldn't be such a confining space, I knew.

But it still took everything I could summon up to follow Angela out that back door.

There was nothing straight out the back except cave, but to my left at about 11:00 there was a building, or what was left of one. I guess it had been a metal, pre-fab warehouse building, with windows, at one time. Now, though, its top half was sagging and the whole thing looked like Swiss cheese. Aware of my exposure, I scurried around to my right to hide behind the Humvee. Angela and other two, I discovered, had taken the same approach.

I peeked around the open back door of the Humvee, using it for cover, and was rewarded with a little flash from the remains of the building and a clanging noise on the door. And Mac opened up.

After about fifteen seconds, a very long time for a weapon like that to fire continuously and for its shell casings to rain down where I was standing, the building was unrecognizable as anything but a ruin. My earpiece came alive.

“Rod? MacQuarrie here. I'd like to think that it's safe for your rad team to take samples now, but I can't be sure. Whoever is, or was, in that building over there doesn't seem to have an ounce of sense. I can provide supporting fire—there's still plenty of ammunition left—but there could be stray shots coming our way. Maybe you can back one of the vehicles in for them to use for cover.”

Somehow, the round that clanged off the door I was behind got me going. Maybe it pissed me off; maybe it just gave me the hit of adrenalin I needed to quit moping. I patted my three companions on their shoulders and began making hand signals. They followed me around the front of our Humvee and across a short open space to a jumble of boulders.

“Rod? Trieri here. I'm going to take a small team and approach what's left of that building from its left side, using these rocks as cover. Mac? I'll assume you can see us.” I heard two sets of double clicks in response as I slipped from boulder to boulder, hoping that my companions were following.

* * *

Unlike the yellow and orange Nomex firefighter suits I've seen, our rad suits were a dark gray, almost black, and I was glad for it. The lighting in that big chamber was limited to the Humvee headlights and a few work lights here and there, apparently meant to guide the dump trucks in, and the dark suits helped us feel hidden as we made our way toward the remains of the building in the gloom. It was sitting on a mound at the side of the chamber, and as we approached it from one end I could see a pickup truck parked behind it. I sent the two unknown CBI officers to secure it and watch the back of the ruin while Angela and I carefully picked our way toward what once must have been a door.

“Mac? Trieri here. Can you see us? We're between you and a whole bunch of bullet holes just now, so I'd appreciate it if you stood that damned thing down for a bit, OK?”

“Roger that, Annette. And you're like a shadow up there. You be careful now.” His reassurance was just what I wanted to hear.

“Thanks. I think we'll see if we can kick this door in.”

Angela and I used the standard drill, where she stood flush against the wall while I exposed myself enough to give the door a good, hard kick right next to its handle with the flat of my right foot and then dodged out of the line of fire from the inside. It was a good thing I didn't really put my full weight into the kick, though, because the door didn't offer any real resistance as it flew open on the remaining hinge.

What followed was a lovely bit of choreography of the kind you see on TV cop shows, in which Angela and I alternated peeking into the room and quickly pulling back, then exchanging official-looking hand signals. And I'm sure that it would have looked every bit as cool as when the big TV stars do it, except for the rad suits we were wearing. No doubt they made us look like robots trying to learn the cha-cha. At least, I thought, we're not pin-headed robots, given that we're wearing our helmets.

After a few of these peeks, Angela and I agreed that it was safe enough to duck into the building, so we dashed in and flattened ourselves against the walls on either side of the door, so as to avoid presenting a silhouette target.

But there was no need. If the outside of the building looked like Swiss cheese, the inside was grated, like maybe the Parmesan you put on your spaghetti. Oddly, the ceiling lights still worked, and we could see two dark forms on the floor to our left. I had Angela cover me as I walked over to them.

"Rod? Looks like we're clear in here, with two casualties. Can't tell their condition, as they're wearing something...ah, something that looks like the suit I'm wearing. But they're not moving and the suits have lots of holes."

"Rad suits? Interesting. Along with the truck outside and what our team in here will probably find, I'd say we've got these guys dead to rights."

"Well, they sure do look dead, I'll say that." Sometimes my radio discipline slips a bit.

"OK, team, Andersen here. I'm told we've got the samples we came for, and you just heard about the house up there. Let's wrap this up and get the hell out of here. We can let the real pros deal with this place, given its probable contamination levels."

After that, it was all pretty anti-climactic. Angela and I, plus our two colleagues whom I never did manage to identify, trudged back to our Humvee, climbed in the back, and, with Mac sitting with us this time, began the ascent of the spiral. After about fifteen minutes, we emerged from the mine. The daylight streaming in through the roof hatch was most welcome.

I was stripping off my Demron rad suit when I thought of it.

"Angela! Hey! This is our chance to see the AirDX lab in there. Maybe our only chance."

She looked up at me. "You're right. Got the code?"

"No, but Rod has. And he ought to see it, too." I looked around. "Hey! Mac!"

He was sitting in the shade over by Rod's Humvee and turned his head my way, a question on his face.

"Where's Rod? We all need to go into the AirDX lab, that first drift up here by the entrance. Right?"

Mac's face broke into a serene grin as he nodded.

I had to assert myself, but only a little for Rod to see the wisdom of that plan. He did indeed have the AirDX door code, so we all trooped into the mine again—and I was OK with it this time—and down the hundred yards or so to the lab entrance.

The code worked, and the steel door clicked open. A little puff of smoke, or maybe dust, poofed out. It was easy to see why.

Inside, the place was a mix of what you'd expect in a chemistry lab and something else that resembled blobs of melted candle wax, except it wasn't wax, it was metal and other things. I looked and looked, and finally decided that one puddle used to be a computer—it was a suggestive puddle, somehow. The others, well, I had no clue.

Neither did anyone else, except maybe Mac. But he was keeping his thoughts to himself, about the specifics of the ops team, at least. Other things were another matter.

He pointed at a ceiling vent. “This must be the intake for that ventilation system that pushed all the gas out to the valley up there, ya think?”

I looked around and didn’t see any other candidates. “Might well be. So, up there is a half-mile of tunnel that leads to that mountain-side outlet that Sandy found, huh?”

Mac was standing by a big, red panic button on the wall. “Let’s see. Hang onto your hats, kids.”

He slapped the button and it sounded like a jet engine was winding up. The dust or smoke or whatever that had been lingering in the air all started whisking away into the ceiling vent. I could feel the breeze in through the main door on my exposed skin, and some blotter paper on the lab table under the vent were fluttering around the edges as if they wanted to launch.

Mac hit the button again, and the fans started to wind down. He was shaking his head as he walked over to the door opening.

“Yeah, even with the door closed, there’s plenty of ventilation from outside to let that thing pull air in. We should check the main door to the mine to see how its ventilation works, but I expect that it lets outside air in as well.” He thought for a minute and looked at Angela. “They must have had a gas leak in here that killed them before the fans turned on automatically. But then the fans did turn on, and all the gas got shoved up the vent shaft and out to the valley up there. Into Angela’s Valley of Death, where two dozen people died.”

Rod had been standing by the doorway quietly. “And meanwhile, there was this dumping operation going on under the whole thing, the Hell Below, a radioactive and chemical nightmare that has the potential to kill thousands of times that number, hundreds of thousands, maybe millions altogether. Stuff that leaches from this mine could well contaminate the Fraser River, which provides water for the cities of the Front Range, and the Blue River, which drains into the Colorado and provides water for everything downstream, including Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and San Diego. Those two dozen people in the Valley of Death died in a tragic accident, but it was because of them that we were able to do this today. Without that incident, we’d not have been able to get in here to shut this place down. And to get a cleanup started.”

* * *

Thirty-Two

Angela, bless her soul, once again proved her worth on our way home. She suggested to Rod that we stop by that mansion to see how our two suspects, Peckham and Estrada, were doing.

But her real motive was to get back into that house so we could get cleaned up and use the bathroom.

What began as a check on our suspects and a rest stop turned into something more interesting, though. When we pulled into the long drive to the mansion, we found a luxury car in the driveway, a Bentley Continental GT that we hadn’t seen before. Mac wandered off somewhere while Angela, Rod, and I went in the house.

Inside, we found Mr. Steven Sheffield, Esq. looking glum, sitting in the foyer with two State Patrol troopers. I could see down the hallway the door askew, like it had been before.

“Ah, Ms. Annette Trieri, CBI. I’m glad to see you here. I’ve been waiting quite some time for someone with authority. These gentlemen and their colleagues in there,” Sheffield nodded toward the hallway, “are not being particularly cooperative.”

“Mr. Sheffield. How, um, interesting it is to see you again. Let me introduce Rod Andersen, the CBI Director. If you want someone with authority, he’s it.”

“Director Andersen? Yes, pleased to meet you at last. I’ve heard your name on any number of occasions. Now. You will please tell me when I can see my client.” Sheffield, in his usual way, was taking charge, or so he thought.

“Client? Hmm. Now, who might that be?” Rod, I could tell, was going into his stodgy bureaucrat mode.

“My client is Mr. Silvio Estrada, the owner of this beautiful home. Or what was beautiful until your people trashed it.” Sheffield nodded down the hallway.

“We trashed it? Goodness. That’s a serious allegation, Mr. Sheffield. I hope you have proof. After all, there are four witnesses here, all sworn police officers.” Rod was shaking his head. “Now, let’s see. You say that Mr. Estrada is your client. I guess that means he provides you with a retainer of some kind? Or is there something specific that brought you here today?”

Sheffield stood up, straightened his tie, and looked down his nose. “Well, I came here on a business matter. I’m a board member in the company he runs, Western Slope Environmental Services. But I saw the damage down the hall and was intercepted by these two officers, so there must be some issue I need to become involved in. When can I see my client?”

“Oh! You’re a WSES board member? Really? Well, then, Mr. Sheffield, it’s my pleas...um, no, my duty to inform you that you’re under arrest. I think ‘conspiracy’ will suffice. You have the right to remain silent, as I’m sure you know. And the right...”

I tuned Rod out as he recited the rest of the Miranda warning that we all knew so well. But just as I started down the hallway toward the den, where we’d last seen Peckham and Estrada, Rod must have finished, because I heard a roar. Turning, I saw Sheffield being restrained by the two State Patrol troopers and Rod wearing a Cheshire Cat grin.

“Guys, I’m sure you know how to handle unruly suspects. Just remember he’s a trial lawyer though.” Rod got confirming nods from the troopers and looked my way. “How refreshing, don’t you think, Annette? Could this day turn out any better?”

“Well, maybe not. But, say, maybe. Do you suppose that Luke Peckham has recovered from that flash-bang? Let’s go see.”

He and Estrada were sitting in chairs in the den, hands behind them, with two more State Patrol troopers, who were reading magazines. They looked up sharply as we walked in.

“At ease, officers. Thanks for coming and watching our two suspects here. Any trouble?” Rod smiled as the officers shook their heads. “Good. Your two colleagues out there are now busy with the arrest of that fine fellow they were sitting with. If you’ll take the chance here to stretch your legs, I think we can have you on your way with these two shortly. Oh. Wait. How about a bathroom break for everyone first?”

With a “Yes, sir, Director Andersen” from one of them, they took Peckham and Estrada down the hall. Rod scratched his head and came up with an idea.

“Angela? Could you please check out what’s behind that door over there?” He pointed toward the wall to the left. I thought it might just lead to the dining room, but I wasn’t sure. “Annette? I think we might question these two gentlemen separately. Would you like Mr. Peckham?”

Angela came back. “It’s some kind of game room, Director. Couches and overstuffed chairs, with a pool table in the middle.”

“Good plan, Rod. We’re going to take advantage of this bathroom break business first, though.”

After that all got sorted out, Angela and I wound up in the game room with Luke Peckham, and I sent her off to that glorious kitchen to calm the staff some more.

To say that Luke was nervous would understate things by quite a bit.

“Luke, we sure would like to know what you’re doing here.”

“I was kidnapped. Honest.”

“But not for ransom, apparently.”

“No, it was for information. Estrada wanted me to tell him everything I know about AirDX. He said he knew that everyone else in it was dead, even Marquardt.”

“And his stock options, or whatever, were riding in the balance. But, c’mon, Luke. We know about that big deposit in your checking account.”

“Huh?” And he really did look surprised, too much so for me to believe that he was faking.

“Yesterday. A hundred large. Seems kind of coincidental that you’d disappear, wind up here, and suddenly get rich.”

“Uh, well, I don’t know anything about a deposit yesterday. Honest.”

“I guess we can put that aside for the time being. What have you told Estrada in the meantime?”

“Well, of course, he wanted to know all of our classified stuff. So what I’ve been doing is a sort of *1001 Nights* thing, like Scheherazade. Letting little tidbits out, mostly all garbled up.” He shrugged. “It seems like it’s been working, because he’s been treating me real well, food, great wine. I’m pretty sure everything has been recorded, in that cabinet behind the desk in the den. So you can check out my story.”

“Ah. Well, that’s interesting. If the recordings check out, maybe we’ll let you keep that hundred grand.” I smiled. “And I’d hate to disappoint Chuck Shure. He’s keen to have you on staff.”

* * *

We found Mac on the back deck overlooking the river. He was finishing a Heineken Light and watching the water.

“Beautiful river, huh?”

“Sure is. It looks just like the trout stream of my dreams. Any fish in there?”

I smiled. “It’s one of the best fisheries in the state.”

He didn’t smile. “Hmm. That probably means it gets a lot of pressure. And that means smart fish. I came out here to find dumb fish.”

I laughed. “Well, this stretch, probably as far as we can see in both directions, is likely to be private, which means not so much pressure. And we’ll have jurisdiction over this house for a while. So if you

want to come back and, you know, check for more fingerprints or something and get a little time on the water in the process, it'll be your call. But if you really do want dumb fish, Hal and I can take you up some little streams where they're positively brainless. Kind of small, but no smarts at all."

He nodded and looked up at the trees and the hillside across the river. "Sounds like both are in order. And I bet that Sam could find things to sketch in both places too."

"That's what Colorado is really about. All this crime investigation stuff is just the excuse to live here."

* * *

Saturday evening, Hal and I had a dinner party for eight despite the rain. Given the long drought we'd been having, rain seemed like a cause for celebration. It was the slow, all-day drizzle sort of rain instead of one of those violent mountain thunderstorms we get in the summer sometimes, just the soaking that everything needed. There was no reason not to go ahead with the party.

I took the day off and so had plenty of time to talk with Hal about my little adventure, including that strange business of my phobia about going into the mine and how it all played out. His only comment was "Geez, and here I thought you had a desk job."

I also had time to get things organized for the dinner, but that was easy because everyone insisted on bringing something anyway. Mary Schmidt made such a big tossed salad that Fran had to carry it in. Sam exercised her shopping muscles and, with Mac's helpful advice, found wonderful pastries for dessert at a bakery in Winter Park. Angela and Sandy, not knowing what we were going to eat, brought a case of wine, three different grapes, more than we could possibly drink. Despite the rain, Hal put himself in charge of the grilling the split Cornish game hens I'd marinated, and I wound up having an easy time of it by making a side dish from some orzo with a few diced vegetables for flavor and color. Everyone even pitched in to get the kitchen whipped into shape afterward.

By the time we got to dessert, the stars had begun to peek out of the clouds, and we all gathered on the porch with pastry and coffee of various octane levels to listen to the roof drip.

"So, Sam. I've been busy lately. Any luck on finding a home?" I hoped it wouldn't put her on the spot to ask.

"Oh, you didn't hear, did you? Mary found us a place. It's a guest house that no one uses, and the owner would rather have it occupied than empty. Nominal rent. Great view. Uh, I guess it's over that way a bit." Sam waved generally northward.

Mary laughed. "It's Win Fredrickson's guest house, Annette. Where you guys stayed. I'd heard that it's been empty, so I made some calls."

I was smiling so big that I couldn't talk.

Sandy perked up. "I guess that means you're going to move out of that house you mentioned, the one across from the ski area, huh?"

Mac and Sam both nodded at him.

"Well, how about we take over your lease? In Santa Fe, the ski area, a little home-town place, was about a half hour up the hill from my house. But living across the street from Winter Park / Mary Jane would be the stuff of dreams. Uh. Assuming that Angela thinks so too." He remembered her just in time, I could tell.

She was sipping her coffee and looking as relaxed and contented as I'd ever seen her. "Hmm? Did I hear my name? Something about a house? We have a pretty nice condo in Fraser, but a house by the ski area? Sandy's right, that's the stuff of dreams."

Hal laughed. "Well, it sounds like musical houses solves everyone's problems. But what about you, Fran? Is this case going to help your re-election chances?"

Fran looked pensive. "I can probably make some good out of it, I guess. As long as the public doesn't find out too much about yesterday. My guys and I were watching that southeast entrance to the mine, the one over here with the conveyer. And nothing happened all day. We got a lot of naps in. Other than that, though, it seems like it was a victory all around. The Valley of Death tragedy was a horrible accident, so I'm not running a county with mass murders. We got a serious illegal dumping case cleared. CBI did that, of course, Annette, but you know that I'll be able to make points because of it. I'm pretty sure I came across well in all those press conferences. Yeah, I'll be OK this fall. How about you guys, Hal? Did this come out OK for you?"

Hal smiled and put his arm around me. "Oh, I'd say so. Rambo here impressed her boss in a combat situation. I impressed my boss with how I'm running his new institute, and he's got a new employee who's going to make the company yet another fortune because of the whole thing. My friend Mac here tells me that there's likely to be interest in our capabilities from various federal agencies looking for honest answers. And we've got living in the Fraser Valley to help us keep our heads clear. And you all, of course."

He looked around the bunch, and then stared off through the mist. "I've said it before, but I'll say it again. Durango was great, but this is home. We're staying."

* * * * *

Climate for Murder

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A Four Corners Mystery



Climate for Murder: A Four Corners Mystery

Prologue

Phil Linton was relishing one of the best rides of his life, right up to its unexpected and abrupt end. Of course, that was how it had all been planned.

As was usual for him, only half of his brain—no doubt the right half—was enjoying the spectacular late-August day. The cerulean blue of the sky peeking through the emerald aspen leaves rattling in the breeze and the deep, almost-black green of the spruce and fir framing the extremely challenging trail down the mountain only added to his exhilaration.

Meanwhile, also as usual, the other half of his brain was busily analyzing whatever needed analyzing. On that Friday morning, what needed analyzing was the degree to which he'd succeeded, by the half-way point, in subverting the purpose of the two-week-long meeting in which he'd been participating. Would his new sponsors think he'd pushed hard enough? Would they keep funding him? And how would that affect his future?

If Linton was honest with himself, which was only part of the time, he had to admit to being a little surprised that he had been invited to the meeting in the first place. It was being conducted under the auspices of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a U.S. strategy session for the next scientific report on the future evolution of global climate in the face of ongoing greenhouse-gas emissions, not a body to which he was in any way connected. But the meeting's local organizing group and host institution, the Middle Park Advanced Research Center, seemed to have been given the discretion to issue a few invitations of its own.

Luckily for Linton, MPARC's director, Dr. Harold Weathers, was Dean of Natural Sciences at Frémont State University in Durango, just now on a very long sabbatical at MPARC, in the Fraser Valley, just west over the Colorado Front Range from the Denver metroplex. Linton's position as Assistant Professor of Earth Sciences at Frémont State, along with a stellar publication record over the past several years, no doubt got his application special consideration.

For Linton, the big question was whether that publication record would earn him tenure next year. His average over the past five years of a half-dozen solo-author technical papers per year in A-list refereed archival journals, plus probably twice that many as a co-author, was quite impressive, he knew. But his teaching record was not as solid as it really ought to be for tenure at a place like Frémont State, which valued teaching above all else. In fact, it was pretty dismal. His impossibly high standards, at least for the caliber of students attending Frémont State, kept his teaching scores pitifully low, and his file in the departmental office bulged with student complaints. He knew these complaints to be bogus, but, still...

A factor in his favor was that he'd been successful for several years at winning grants from the National Science Foundation and other top-flight agencies, until, mysteriously, those funding streams had dried up recently. His new sponsors, however, were most generous—they even paid full overhead rates—so perhaps the funding record plus the publications would make up for his weaker teaching accomplishments.

Earning tenure was the number-one goal in Linton's mind, indeed in his entire life. With tenure, he could shop his publication and funding success to more prestigious institutions and possibly be appointed Full Professor right away. Harvard, MIT, UC Berkeley, Princeton—when he was feeling optimistic, the times when his honesty with himself lapsed, he pondered which might offer him the best deal.

He was also surprised at how easily he'd been able to manipulate the direction of this IPCC meeting so far. His expertise, reflected in his publications, was concerned with various feedback mechanisms affecting the climate system. But despite several possible destabilizing feedbacks, he was unrelenting in his emphasis on how basic physics implied that the planet had a very strong, fundamental stabilizing feedback built in, which undoubtedly had prevented a runaway climate in the past, he maintained. He hammered on the point that if the planet could survive whatever killed off the dinosaurs, a little warming from additional greenhouse gases in the atmosphere didn't seem like too much to be concerned about. His new sponsors, he knew, were quite happy with that message.

If the environmental advocacy groups wanted to play Chicken Little, well, that was their business, he thought. But a solemn, well-credentialed group such as the IPCC panel ought not to go off the deep end about so-called "tipping points," given that fundamental stabilizing mechanism.

As a result of his efforts to bend the will of the larger group, the subcommittee drafting the strategy recommendations from the meeting's first week of discussions had requested Friday morning to complete its work. The second week, to be devoted to a plan for the implementation of those recommendations, would be less crucial to the overall outcome, and Linton felt that most of his work was done. In any case, he and the rest of the meeting's participants had some time off, and he and a colleague, that loser of a post-doc from the University of Colorado at Boulder, had decided to spend the free time to try out the Winter Park mountain biking opportunities.

And so here he was, happily zipping down the mountain for the second time that morning. The first time had involved quite a bit of uphill pedaling above the top of the chairlift and then a long, moderate descent, a sort of warm-up. But this trail was one of the most difficult, and it even had several expert-only sections. This suited Linton just fine, as he had gained considerable mountain biking experience during his years in Durango. And he was pleasantly surprised by the bike he'd been able to rent—it was at least as good as his own, which was sitting in his apartment back at home.

He was wondering where that guy from Boulder had got off to, when he came over a little roller and around a blind curve to find the single-track trail weaving between two good-sized lodgepole pines—with a bowling-ball-sized rock smack in the middle of the trail between them, just where his front tire needed to go to make the turn safely. Coming off the rise of the roller had put him in the air just enough to un-weight his tires and almost eliminate any real traction—he was gritting his teeth merely to make the curve—and grabbing the brakes didn't have much effect on his speed at all. So he hit the rock hard, with his front wheel a bit askew, and over the handlebars he went, his torso bouncing off the downhill tree in the process.

He landed face-down on the edge of the trail, knocking the wind out of himself, and slid into the woods down the hillside, where it was steep enough that he kept going for several yards, head-first. He could tell that he had lost some skin from his arms and legs on both the gravel of the trail and the ground-cover of the forest—rocks, sticks, and pine needles—and the sharp pain in his right side suggested perhaps a cracked rib.

As he was re-orienting himself through the pain and trying to figure out the best way to stand up from his awkward position, on his belly, head downhill on the steep mountainside, he heard feet crunching through the trees.

“Whoa! That was some spill! You OK?” The voice definitely wasn’t the Boulder guy’s, but it seemed friendly somehow. His ears were buzzing, though, so he couldn’t really identify it.

He found that his own voice didn’t work yet, so he just grunted a response as the footsteps came closer.

“Here, let me give you a hand.” And he felt someone picking him up by his armpits, raising him to his knees, so he sat back, looking downhill, seeing stars from the pain in his side, his heels digging into his butt, and tried to focus. He shook his head to clear the fog, glad for the helmet he was wearing, and unsnapped the chin strap and took it off. The breeze in his hair was refreshing and helped him regain his equilibrium.

As he was turning around to thank his benefactor, he noticed movement in his peripheral vision. Then fireworks went off in his head, and everything switched to black.

* * *

Part I

One

My first impression was that the sheriff wouldn’t need my help on this one. But you know how misleading first impressions can be. Maybe mine was just wishful thinking. That’s something I’ve been guilty of on a number of occasions.

It didn’t sound as if he’d need my help because, at first, it looked like just another mountain bike accident—a bad one, to be sure, but bike accidents on mountain trails had become pretty common in recent years around here. Eastern Grand County, and especially the ski areas, had become hotbeds of mountain biking as the local merchants latched onto it as a way to increase their summer business traffic. And there’s no doubt that the economy had seen the benefits—the summers had become almost as clogged with visitors spending money as the winters have always been because of the skiers, and the bike business was booming. The hiking community, though, wasn’t especially happy about all those bicycles on the trails. And many local residents had become grumpy about all the crowds and congestion, including the other kind of traffic, the cars—summer used to be their quiet time, relatively speaking.

It didn’t surprise me that I first heard about it through the grapevine. When the body was discovered by a small group of mountain bikers descending the expert trail early that Friday afternoon, they called 911. The sheriff’s office, as well as the ski area’s security people, were all over it right away. My deputy, Angela Espinosa, heard about it before I did, probably from water-cooler gossip at the sheriff’s department offices in Hot Sulphur Springs, and she called me right away.

She caught me on my way back from a late lunch with community movers and shakers in Winter Park. I’d finally figured out how to deal with my phone’s Bluetooth connection to my car, so it was easy for me to poke the appropriate button on the steering wheel and say, “Treiri, CBI.”

“Annette, it’s Angela. I just heard there’s been a mountain bike accident up at the ski area, with a fatality. I thought you’d want to know soonest.” She was a bit breathless.

“Good call, Angela. Thanks. I’ll head right up there. Which base?”

“Uh, Winter Park side, I think.”

So I turned around and headed back south, up the valley to the ski-area base. Any unattended death gets the attention of us law-enforcement people, and even though I knew that it was the Grand County Sheriff’s jurisdiction, it seemed like it wouldn’t hurt to have the Colorado Bureau of Investigation on the scene, if only to observe.

And, as I said, at first it looked purely like an accident. I arrived just about the time that the body and the bunged-up mountain bike arrived at the base, carted the rest of the way down the mountain on a little trailer towed by an ATV, and I was able to listen to the sheriff’s deputy on scene take statements from the guys who had run across it. What they had to say certainly made it sound like an accident—an expert-only trail and a sharp, blind curve between two trees with an imposing bump just above it that would make braking difficult. And, apparently, a crash with a fatal skull fracture, helmet notwithstanding. Open and shut, right?

If only.

The first hint of something other than an accident was provided by the bike-rental-shop technician. He’d come by to retrieve his mountain bike and was dismayed to learn that it would have to be impounded at least until the autopsy was completed. But he had a chance to look the thing over and, upon hearing the supposed sequence of events, became skeptical.

“That front rim looks like he hit an obstacle, like a rock or maybe a log. And the way the fork is bent proves that he was trying to turn when he crashed. But I know the spot where this happened, I mean, I ride that trail all the time. And there’s no rocks on the trail there, or any other obstacles that could do that damage, either. Also, if he was going too fast to make the curve, he’d have skidded down and ended up on the uphill side of the trail, most likely, or crashed into one of those trees.”

Not being at all familiar with the trail, except possibly when it was covered with six feet of snow, I couldn’t make sense of these comments, so I simply filed them away.

At least the victim had identification and a hotel key, one of those magnetic card keys, in one of his pockets. The key really got my attention, because I recognized the hotel as the one where Hal’s conference attendees were staying. So I got the guy’s name from his driver’s license—it was a Phillip Linton from Durango—and called Hal right away.

“Weathers, MPARC.”

Hal had been unsuccessfully trying to find an administrative assistant ever since he’d founded the Middle Park Advanced Research Center, so he still had to answer his own office phone. Not very dignified for a Research Center Director, as I kept reminding him, but his own fault.

“Hal, it’s me. Listen, is there a Phillip Linton at your conference?”

“Phil? Yeah. He’s an assistant professor at FSU. Why?”

FSU, to us, was Frémont State University in Durango, where Hal was working when we got married and I was just starting out with the CBI.

“Bad news. Really bad news, and I’m sorry to be the one to tell you. He’s been killed in a mountain-bike accident on one of the Winter Park trails.”

“*What?* Good Lord! When did this happen?” He was hit hard by the news, I could tell.

“His body was found early this afternoon, so it probably happened late this morning. But how come he wasn’t at the conference?”

“Everyone but the committee members drafting our first set of recommendations had the morning off. And, yeah, I remember he said something about going mountain biking. He told me it’s his favorite summer sport back in Durango.” I heard a big sigh. “This is horrible. I guess I should find out if I should notify someone.”

“Well, officially, that’s the sheriff’s job. But he may come to you for information. I figured out to call you because of the room key Linton had on him, and I’m sure that Fran will figure that out, too.”

Fran Schmidt, Grand County Sheriff, and his wife Mary had become friends of ours during the time we’d lived in Fraser, and he and I had worked several cases together. My assigned role was to be a liaison between county law enforcement and the State of Colorado, but pitching in when things got busy was also expected. And get busy things did, because eastern Grand County had become an increasingly popular destination for both Colorado Front Range residents as well as people from the rest of the country and even the world. The Chamber-of-Commerce types who played at being Grand County boosters had done their jobs too well, from my perspective.

“Yeah, it would be better for Fran to be the bearer of the bad news. More official that way. But I’ll call down to the U to find out next of kin and whatever. Geez. How depressing.” Another big sigh. “I can’t say I’m personally too upset, but this is probably going to be a public relations nightmare. I’m glad Mary’s so good at what she does.”

Mary Schmidt had become Hal’s Communications Director at MPARC. Some people thought it was all too cozy, but he’d interviewed several applicants and found her to be far and away the best.

“OK, sweetie. Don’t forget we’re having Mac and Sam over for dinner tonight.” Given the circumstances, I was glad that I’d already done the necessary shopping.

“Aw, crap. I forgot about that. And I was really looking forward to it. Hmm. Well, I hope I’m not too late. I’ll try hard, really.” His blood pressure was escalating, I could tell.

* * *

“To tell the truth, I’m a bit embarrassed that I invited him to our conference. After all, this thing is supposed to be a sort of showcase meeting for MPARC, and we need to present our best side to the world with both expertise and elegance. To have one of the people I invited take it over in such an outspoken fashion wasn’t what I had in mind.”

Hal, having made it home in time to greet our guests, had been asked about the victim and was doing a good job of venting, in a restrained sort of way.

“But, well, I feel beholden to the university that’s treated me so well during my academic career and more recently. What began as a simple year-long sabbatical leave from my deanship at Frémont State has been extended several times, and I feel like what this I want to do permanently. I mean, in my mind, I have no intention of ever going back. Nor, I think, does Annette.” He shot me a look, and I nodded.

“We even put our house in Durango up for sale. But I know they, FSU, I mean, they’re assuming that we’ll return at the end of the year. This coming winter, I’ll ask for another extension of my sabbatical, and they’ll probably grant it, because it’s not costing them anything. And maybe they think I’ll eventually come back and bring MPARC with me or something.” He smiled and shook his head. “Anyway, getting one of their young faculty members involved in this IPCC strategy session for U.S. contributions is something only I could have managed to do—indeed, they were stunned at the news of Phil Linton’s invitation, and delighted. It was a first for the university, and something they can get a lot of mileage out of.”

He shrugged. “What I didn’t know at the time I invited him was that he’s started singing with a different choir about matters related to climate. Because he’s something of a prodigy in the scientific community and definitely a superstar by Frémont State standards, and because climate always has been one of my primary scientific interests, I’ve kept up with his publications. And, for the most part, they’re carefully neutral about future consequences to society of greenhouse-gas emissions in the process of thoroughly analyzing a remarkable variety of feedback processes in the climate system, some positive—which would amplify any change—and some negative. His analysis of the complexities of cloud feedbacks has set a new standard for both its summary of their net effect and its scholarship in developing that summary.”

Hal forged ahead. “And then, at this meeting we’re hosting at MPARC, he’s been spouting the standard drivel you normally hear from the professional anti-climate-change lobbyists, the ones funded through all the shell organizations that operate under the fossil-fuel-industry umbrella. It all came out of nowhere, as far as I could tell, this change of tune.”

“Not that it’s a bad thing to have a variety of points of view at the meeting—indeed, the IPCC organizers invited several people with well-known opinions about the uncertainties involved in projecting future climate change and its root cause, and nearly half the participants are sitting on the fence about what to do, if anything. But it was meant to be a *scientific* meeting, and advocacy just wasn’t on the agenda. That is, until Phil Linton started brow-beating everyone.” He looked around the dining table and shook his head. “Oh. Sorry. I’m lecturing again.”

Mac MacQuarrie, now Hal’s Chief of Security at MPARC, laughed. “Go ahead and lecture, boss. It gives me time to drink up this delightful Merlot you’re serving.”

Samantha Winslow—Sam to everyone she knows—looked puzzled. “I know about ‘feedback’ when it comes to rock bands, but not when it comes to climate. So when you got to that point, I just got confused.”

“It’s just like rock bands, Sam. If the microphone picks up, you know, a guitar riff from an amplified speaker, it amplifies the riff more and sends it through the speaker even louder. And the microphone picks up *that* and amplifies it yet some more. And eventually something gives and you get those horribly distorted, and very loud, noises. That’s positive feedback.”

Hal could see Sam nodding, so he forged ahead.

“In the climate system, examples abound. Take clouds—they can be spectacular to look at, and you sketch them beautifully, but they’re also quite important in climate. Some, like low marine cloud decks, reflect sunlight that would otherwise warm the underlying ocean. Others, like high, ice clouds, the ones called ‘cirrus,’ they let sunlight through, pretty much, but they absorb the Earth’s heat that would otherwise get radiated out to space, just like the greenhouse gases do. So if, in a warmer climate, there are more cirrus clouds, that’s a positive feedback because they’ll warm the climate even more.”

“The thing is, climate is so complicated that there are lots of these feedback processes, positive ones like snow and, maybe, cirrus clouds, and others, negative ones that slow down change and tend to stabilize things. So far, what’s going to dominate ultimately isn’t really clear. And what happens in the meantime could be pretty bad as well, in terms of stress on ecosystems and so on. And society. After all, our society is pretty vulnerable to even small changes in the *status quo*.” Hal took a breath and toasted the table with his iced-tea glass. “Really. I mean it. No more lectures.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. Hal has this Mr. Science Person persona that he slips into at the drop of a hat, and I’ve teased him enough about it that he gets embarrassed when he realizes he’s doing it.

Mac set down his wine glass. “Fair enough, although someday I’d like to hear more. Sam would, too, I bet. But, really, the issue now is that guy who died up on the mountain. You don’t seem too

broken up about it on a personal level, although it probably upsets your conference. But what I'm wondering about is the 'accident' part. Is that certain? I mean, from what you were just saying, it sounds as if this guy wasn't too popular."

Hal's smile was grim. "Yeah, well, there were several times this past week that I wanted to wring his skinny damned neck. But I've got pretty good alibis. For today, at least."

He looked me and winked. Mac laughed.

"Good thing, too," he said. "But what I meant was that it sounds as if there are plenty of people with a motive to do him harm, if he was so unpopular. And, if everyone except a small group had the morning off, plenty of people with opportunity as well. Assuming it wasn't an accident, that is."

Sam rolled her eyes. "I hope you can forgive Mac for being suspicious. That's pretty ingrained in him from all his years as a spook."

It was Hal's turn to laugh. "Exactly. That's why I hired him to be the MPARC head of security. If we're going to protect our classified work and facilities properly, we need a suspicious person in charge of it all. Someone with lots of experience in the classified world. My own classified experience is limited to those committees I'm on for Los Alamos, and I've got enough other details to worry about without having to become a classification expert as well."

"You did just fine last summer." Mac raised his wine glass to acknowledge Hal's efforts.

"But you've really got us organized now. I'm more certain than ever that we're in full compliance with all those rules, and will be even more when we get into our new building, thanks to your design help. Of course, this IPCC conference isn't a problem in that regard. But it's going to be seriously out of kilter when I report today's events at tomorrow morning's session." Hal looked glum.

"No doubt. I recommend being as vague as possible, though. If it wasn't an accident, the folks at your meeting will be under some suspicion, for sure." Mac shrugged.

I had to nod in agreement. "More than that, I expect that Fran will want to talk with at least some of them to see what they might know about it all. Even if it *was* an accident."

Hal looked even more glum. "Ouch. Well, tomorrow's session is scheduled for all day, so they'll be around. Fran has time tomorrow to talk with anybody."

* * *

After our guests had left and we were cleaning up, I mentioned something I'd seen that afternoon.

"Hal?" He had soapsuds up to his elbows, working on a particularly stubborn sauce-pan that we didn't want to run through the dishwasher. "Remember when I called you this afternoon? To tell you about Phil Linton's accident?"

"It's too soon for me to have forgotten that." He was scrubbing at a cooked-on spot of some kind.

"Well, when I was on the phone with you I noticed that another guy who was dressed for mountain biking approached the sheriff's deputy on the scene and had something of a conversation with him. A guy about Linton's age. Not quite so tall, but thin like Linton, with longish blonde hair and a beard." I paused to think about the description, but that was about all I could remember. "It seemed like maybe he and Linton had been biking together and got separated. He was in the crowd at the base when I arrived, when Linton's body was being brought down."

"Hmm. Sounds like it could have been Chris Brothers. He's a post-doc at CU-Boulder, attending our meeting as a *rapporteur*."

“A what?”

“A note-taker. Meetings like this almost always invite junior scientists to act as note-takers, all expenses paid. But *rapporteur* sounds fancier and helps their egos. If they do a good job, it turns into a nice entry on their résumés. And, in this case, a good recommendation from me, should he ever need one.”

“OK, well, he’s probably someone Fran should talk with. And any suggestions you might have in that direction will be most welcome, I’m sure.”

“Good idea. I’ll have to give it some thought. I…” But he was interrupted by the weird noise he was using for his cell-phone ring-tone just then—he liked to switch it around, for some reason. “Ah, crap. Where is that damned thing?”

He grabbed a towel, dashed off, and came back in mid-conversation. “...Annette said she was there at the ski base when the body was brought down. You want to talk with her, Fran?”

And he passed the phone to me. “Fran? I presume that you’ve got a report from your deputy by now?”

“Oh, I’m way past that, Annette. I had the most interesting experience of descending that trail on a mountain bike late this afternoon. Very, very slowly. But it was still pretty hair-raising. Anyway, it’s beginning to look as if there’s more to this than we first assumed.”

“How so?”

“Were you there when the bike technician talked to Roger Traubman, my deputy?”

“Yeah, I overheard all that. The tech was skeptical of how the accident was described by the bikers who found the body.”

“And now so am I. The area was disturbed when they retrieved the body, but I’m going back up there tomorrow morning with Norm Dzeng.” Fran didn’t sound overly thrilled by the idea.

The name bounced around in my head for a few seconds before I could put a face on it. Dzeng, a wilderness expert, had been most helpful on my first case in Grand County by reconstructing ski tracks that had been buried by fresh snow.

“Oh, yeah, your tracking guy. What do you think he’ll be able to tell you?”

“Like I said, the scene isn’t at all pristine. But maybe he’ll be able to reconstruct what happened, at least partially. I don’t want something to be called an accident unless it really was. Hey, I’ve got an idea! Want to come along?”

“I haven’t ridden any kind of bicycle for more years than I care to count. Let alone a mountain bike on an expert trail.”

Fran Schmidt’s voice turned gleeful. “Well, then, I think you’re precisely the right person. Today I learned the meaning of ‘just like riding a bicycle.’ It’s really true.”

“Ah...are you sure that I wouldn’t be more valuable if I were to be at Hal’s conference tomorrow? He’s going to have to tell them about this, and they’re going to have all sorts of questions, I just know it. Scientists are like that.”

“Mmm. Well, I guess you’re right, Annette. As usual. But remember, we have to wait for an autopsy before we can really think in terms of anything but an accident.”

“I’m pretty good at being vague. Any idea of when George will get around to it?” George Neering, the medical examiner for our part of Colorado, was one of the best in the business.

“Monday, probably. He’s out of town at some meeting or other. And I want him to do it, highest priority.”

“Good idea. Say, would you like Angela to come with you tomorrow?”

“Hadn’t thought of that. Yeah, sure. If this turns out not to be an accident, CBI on the scene will be helpful. Tell her I’ll meet here in Hot Sulphur at eight, and we can drive up together.”

“OK, I’ll call her right away. Have fun tomorrow. On the bike, I mean.”

As I poked the “End Call” icon, I heard a derisive snort.

Fortunately, Angela Espinosa was at home.

“Hi, Annette! Find anything out about that biking fatality?” She’d learned quickly that most of my phone calls were business related.

“I just got off the phone with Fran Schmidt. He’s wondering about whether it was really an accident.”

“Ohhh...that tidbit isn’t making the rounds yet. Is there evidence?” She sounded eager to hear details.

“Well, that’s what I called about. Fran’s going to ride the trail where the body was found, it’s an expert trail that I didn’t get the name of, with Norman Dzung tomorrow. To look for evidence of whatever happened. And, um, he has the notion that a CBI presence could be helpful. I was hoping you could go with them. Eight in the morning at his office in Hot Sulphur.”

“Norman? I met him a while back. What an amazing guy. And his lab is just too cool, with all those plaster casts of tires and animal prints and everything. So, I guess I get a lift pass, huh? Sure, I can manage that, Annette.”

“Just remember, Fran’s not a mountain biker like you are.” I remembered that she and Sandy had taken up the sport with a vengeance. “Go easy on him, OK?”

She chuckled and disconnected.

Hal had finished the dishes, so I wandered off to find him, something harder than it sounds in our modernized and added-onto mining cabin. But, as I’d figured, he was in front of his computer.

“I don’t know how much of all that you heard, but Angela’s going with Fran and I’m coming with you tomorrow. OK?”

He looked up and nodded. “Sure. But we need to go in two cars so that you won’t be trapped all day.”

“Good idea. Can we talk about other people at the meeting? I mean, you know, people who might have some kind of vendetta against Linton?”

“I guess I already put myself in that category.”

“Yeah, but you’re off the hook. I don’t want to waste my time investigating you. Again.”

Startled, he tore his gaze from the computer screen. “Huh? What do you mean, ‘again’?”

I just winked at him. “Besides, I can’t imagine you on an expert mountain-bike trail anyway. I’m more interested in people at your meeting who knew Linton already, before the meeting, and may have had some conflicts with him in the past. Stuff like that.”

“Well, I’ve got everyone’s CV, and I guess you could look through those to see if there were any past connections between Phil and anyone else. I don’t know of any offhand, though.”

“Ugh. Well, it’s pretty early yet. Can I get to them tonight?”

I knew the rest of the evening would be mind-numbing.

* * *

Two

It took me longer than I’d thought it would to cross-correlate all those *curricula vitae*—meaning long-form academic résumés—on Friday night, so Saturday morning, bright and early at Hal’s meeting, I was groggy and in need of extra coffee. Fortunately, in trying to impress everyone, Hal had ordered breakfast catering from a local coffee roaster who had some super high-test available.

And although it took a long time, the CV exercise was worth it. Several of the meeting attendees, it seemed, had been in graduate school around the same time at Georgia Tech, including Phillip Linton. Moreover, Linton’s post-doctoral appointment at Penn State had put him in close proximity with several people for long enough that enmity had had plenty of time to develop. In addition to Chris Brothers, Linton’s biking companion, I had come up with several others to talk privately with.

That part seemed straight-forward to me. But something I’d gleaned from all those CVs was a puzzle. Hal’s meeting was a climate conference, a strategy session, he’d said, for the U.S. contributions to the next report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. But only about half of the people at the meeting had climate science backgrounds, and the other half seemed to have an odd mixture of ecology and botany and zoology backgrounds. The next morning, I cornered Hal while his group was still noshing on the breakfast goodies the caterer had laid out.

“So, since you went to bed so early last night, I couldn’t ask you then. But what’s the deal with the scientific backgrounds of this group? Only about half are actual climate scientists.”

He cocked his head sideways and scrunched his eyebrows in puzzlement. “Oh. I think I know what you’re asking. See, the business of what’s happening, and what’s going to happen, with the *physical* climate system—temperatures, sea level, ice, all that—is not really the cutting-edge science any more. Not that we’ve got it all completely licked, mind you. We’re still improving our simulations. In fact, MPARC is going to be part of the physical climate simulation ensemble for the next IPCC report, along with all sorts of other organizations. But what’s become more and more important to figure out, as we learn more and more about what the physical climate is likely to do, is what’s going to happen to life on Earth. Ecosystems, species, the entire web of life. So you’re probably talking about all the people at the conference with those backgrounds.”

“Ah. That makes sense. You said that Linton pissed off a lot of the folks here.” I waved my hand around the room. “Were these, um, biological scientists among them?”

“Probably more than the physical scientists, to tell the truth. I figure that if you study some critter for all your life, you can develop an emotional attachment to it and don’t want to see it be stressed any more than it already is.” He shrugged. “All week, Phil was hammering them about ‘Bayesian probabilities’ and what he called ‘compounded uncertainties’ and how it’s impossible to justify taking specific actions to deal with possible risks to individual species or even ecosystems. I guess you’re homing in on motive, eh?”

“Assuming we find real evidence that it wasn’t an accident, it’s important to pin motive down as soon as possible.”

“Understood. And I’m going to call some people I trust down in Durango to see if I can find out what’s behind Phil’s change of tune I mentioned at dinner last night.” He looked at his watch. “But first I’d better get this show on the road.”

The breakfast goodies were spread on tables in the back of the auditorium, which had a rostrum with a lectern on it at the front, a couple of long rows of tables for the official delegates, and several rows of seats for the audience behind the tables. Hal walked up to the lectern and tapped on the microphone, producing a loud thumping throughout the room and getting the crowd’s attention.

“Good morning everyone! Welcome to the half-way point of our IPCC strategy session. We have a full agenda today—more full than expected, in fact—so we need to get going.”

While the participants and the audience took their seats, Hal continued an ongoing patter about that agenda and what needed to be accomplished. In the process, little by little he lowered his voice to a more conversational level, and the chit-chat among the audience faded into silence. I thought it was a clever way to bring the meeting to order.

When everyone had settled in, Hal continued. “Now, first off, you need to hear about something that happened yesterday. Some of you may already know about this, but I’m sure that not everyone does. Um...”

He looked directly at me. “We haven’t talked about this, but I think an official sort of announcement would be appropriate.”

My heart sank as I realized that he wanted me to tell them.

“So let me introduce Deputy Director Annette Trieri of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.” His apologetic smile helps, I thought, but he’s going to need more than that to make up for this little surprise.

As I made my way to the lectern, amidst the audience’s buzz of speculation, I hastily organized my thoughts about what to say.

“Good morning, all. The Colorado Bureau of Investigation maintains offices around the state to provide liaisons with local and county-level law enforcement, and I’m stationed here in Grand County. I work closely with Grand County Sheriff Fran Schmidt.

“Yesterday, about mid-day, his office was called about a mountain bike accident at the Winter Park Ski area—as I expect many of you know, mountain biking has become a popular summer activity in these parts, and Winter Park has some outstanding trails. Unfortunately, the accident involved a fatality, and, worse, that fatality was an attendee at this conference. I’m sorry to report to you the death of Dr. Phillip Linton, Assistant Professor at Frémont State University in Durango. My condolences to everyone.”

I had to raise my voice, because the previous buzz had returned in force. “Now, this accident was not witnessed, so this is what we in law enforcement call an ‘unattended death,’ and unattended deaths need investigating. That means that we need to gather other information to make sure that it was really an accident. There will be an autopsy, on Monday, probably, and that will be crucial for gathering some of that information. In the meantime, I need to interview several of you as well. Let me emphasize that these interviews are for background purposes only. No one—I repeat, *no one*—is under any suspicion or classifies as a ‘person of interest.’ I’m sure you’ve heard that term on TV, but it just doesn’t apply here. I anticipate that these interviews will be short. Several of you worked with Dr. Linton in his previous positions, and you can be very helpful for background.”

I could tell that suspicion was rampant in the audience, so I nodded at Hal, stepped off the rostrum, and headed for the back of the room, ignoring the several raised hands. To my delight, his expression morphed to panic as he realized that he'd be the one facing the questions.

“Ah...um...well, I certainly understand that you'd have questions after an announcement like that. But I'm afraid that, at this stage, there really aren't any answers. Phil...er, Dr. Linton's body was found by other mountain bikers, off the trail, by itself, and his bicycle exhibited clear signs of a crash. But, as Annette...er, Deputy Director Trieri said, with no witnesses an investigation is necessary. Because Dr. Linton is—or was—not a resident here in the Fraser Valley, she needs to put together background information on him, and that, as I understand it, is the purpose of the upcoming interviews. We'll certainly make more information available to everyone when we have it. Perhaps we should observe a moment of silence out of respect for our late colleague.”

I had a great deal of trouble not laughing out loud during that moment of silence, recognizing it as a gambit to, in effect, change the subject and avoid those questions. As usual, the silence was well short of a true minute when Hal broke it.

“Thank you all. And let me add my condolences to those already expressed.” He raised his hands, palms up, in an elaborate shrug. “Now, I'm afraid we really need to get down to business. At the least, we should think of our ongoing work as a sign of respect for our late colleague. Would the drafting committee chair please provide an overview of the committee's work yesterday?”

Time to go, I thought—this isn't going to be meaningful to me at all. I signaled Hal to join me out in the hall.

* * *

He showed up five minutes later with a cup of coffee in one hand and a giant sticky cinnamon bun, the kind with pecans stuck to the goo, this one with a big bite out of it, in the other hand.

“Second breakfast, hmm?”

“Mmmrph.”

“Seems like that went as well as I could have imagined. Great idea, by the way, the moment of silence. It defused things nicely.”

He managed to swallow the bite of bun. “I'm glad I thought of it. Anyway, now they're absorbed in this document we're all supposed to agree to, and I think that'll keep them occupied all day.”

“I don't want to interrupt things in there, so could you be the one to go in and ask the people I want to interview to come out when I need them? Please?” I was hoping I wouldn't have to play the “you owe me one, pal” card.

“Good idea. It'll be less intrusive that way, I think. Uh, no offense, but now that they know you're the law, they'll be a bit antsy around you.”

“Thank you, for fetching them, I mean. Based on the CVs I looked through last night, there are seven people I'd like to talk with. Plus, of course, Chris Brothers. I hope that's not too many. They're all people who knew Linton before he got the job at FSU.”

“Eight altogether? Oh, that sounds doable. When do you want to start?”

“Is there a mid-morning break?”

He looked at his watch. “In about ninety minutes, just before ten.”

“OK, let’s start after that. During the break, you can let the first person know. Um, let’s see…” I shuffled through some papers I had. “How about Callie Wentz?”

“Works for me. I’ll let her know during the break. Why don’t you use my outer office? It’s pretty non-threatening.”

“Yeah. And I can threaten them with the inner office if they don’t cooperate.”

I was smiling, so I think he knew I was kidding. Maybe my wink helped.

Seven hours later, at around five that afternoon, I was bushed but pleased with the day. I’d managed to work in all eight interviews plus a bite of lunch and even another, unexpected, conversation.

Callie Wentz, Associate Professor of Biology at Penn State and yellow-bellied marmot specialist, which critter she touted as an indicator species for climate change, turned out to be a good start to the day. She admitted to having had a little “fling” with Linton during a lonely year when he was a post-doc and she was an Assistant Professor seeking her way. But she had soon recognized him for the self-centered jerk, according to her, that he was and broke it off. That was years ago, and they had had no contact since then except for the current IPCC meeting.

Rod Stringer, now a research scientist in the Earth and Atmospheric Science group at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, had been a couple of years ahead of Linton during graduate school in the atmospheric science program at Georgia Tech. He, immersed in his own self-importance, didn’t have anything much to contribute beyond directing me toward Pat Grover, another of the conference attendees on my list. She and Linton had been what Stringer called an “item” during graduate school until a rough break-up, he said.

But my interview with her, the last of the day, didn’t exactly corroborate that perspective. According to her, she and Linton had simply drifted apart after a few months of twenty-something lust together, the drift associated with a lack of mutual scientific interests. Her specialty was peat bogs, after all, she noted with a shrug. In the early stages of a promising career as an agency program manager in Washington, she’d moved far beyond the indiscretions of her student days, it seemed.

Chris Brothers, who’d been mountain biking with Linton the day before, got interviewed over the lunch hour so that his duties as *rappporteur* for the conference would not be interrupted. I think he was relieved, actually, because it meant he didn’t have to eat with the others and deal with their questions. But deal with my questions he did, most satisfactorily, and I was left with no suspicions about him. His comments about the sequence of events at the top of the expert run before Linton’s and his descents were quite helpful in establishing additional context.

The remaining Penn State scientists and Georgia Tech graduates also passed my personal, law-enforcement sniff test with flying colors—even my most leading questions didn’t faze them in the least. But the last conversation, the unexpected one, turned out to be quite rank indeed.

Dexter Lemone was sitting at a table in the auditorium lobby amidst similar pamphlet-covered tables of organizations not officially invited to the IPCC meeting but there nonetheless. He turned out to be the state coordinator for climate and ecosystems at Students and Citizens for Animal Rights and Biodiversity, or SCARAB as it was called, an acronym that got my attention because it rang an unidentifiable alarm bell in my head, one with unpleasant connotations. As I talked with him, trying to identify that alarm bell, he was not at all shy about expressing his contempt of Linton’s anti-climate-change stance at the conference. He even made an off-hand remark about how Linton and his type deserved to be taken out and shot, not, under the circumstances, a smart thing to say to a suspicious investigator like me.

Even though I was exhausted after that full day of interviews, during which I had to be “on” the entire time, I still needed to be debriefed by Angela concerning her day on the mountainside with the sheriff. I couldn’t help but wonder whether she followed Fran around or whether he had to keep up with her. I called her when I finally got home.

“Angela? Annette here.” I heard jazz in the background, a saxophone backed by a small combo, so I figured she was at home. “How was your day?”

“Hi, Annette! Super!” She was not unwound yet, I thought. “I even got in a couple of extra rides down the trails!”

“I hope you didn’t wear Fran out completely.”

“Aw, he did fine. Although he needs more practice to build up his confidence.” She took a breath. “Anyway, you probably want to know what we found out. Or, rather, what Norm found out. How was your day, by the way?”

“Not so exciting as yours, I’m sure. And isn’t Norman quite the resource?” I wanted to keep the focus on her side of the investigation.

“Awesome. He’s just awesome. It’s like he’s got magic eyes, all the subtle stuff he sees. But when he points it out, it’s as obvious as a zit on your nose.” Another breath. “So, bottom line, he thinks it’s no accident. Fran wants to wait for the autopsy, but I think we can assume there will be a homicide investigation at minimum.”

“What makes Norman think it was no accident?”

“Various little things. The hillside where the body was found is all messed up, of course, from the recovery team, but he found several things. Like, there was this bowling-ball-sized rock on the hillside that had been picked up and set back down in a somewhat different position. Not upside down, but different. You can see that from lichens and so on, and from how the rock didn’t quite fit into its, uh, resting place. And how some new sticks and pine needles had fallen into that spot when the rock was picked up, and then were squished under it. They looked completely different from the older sticks there. Norm thinks the rock may have been set onto the trail to make a barrier and then, afterwards, replaced. And he found a couple of footprints that really can’t be accounted for. He took impressions and is going to compare them with the recovery team’s shoes. I’ll write everything up and I’m sure Norm will, too.”

“Hmm. So, the theory is that someone used that rock to make an obstruction on the trail, and that caused the bike crash that killed Linton?”

“Something like that. Norm was puzzled by how the crash itself could have killed him, though. He said he’s taken worse spills himself with just scrapes and bruises. Although he couldn’t tell how fast Linton was going. And even though Linton suffered a bad skull fracture—that’s probably what killed him—we couldn’t really tell what he’d hit to cause the fracture. I guess, though, his helmet was off when those guys found him. Linton, I mean.”

I thought for a minute. “Sounds credible to me, I guess, although the thing with the helmet needs some thought. Why would his helmet be off? I’m not surprised that Fran’s being cautious, though. He’s pretty conservative about things like this. And publicity shy. News about a bike accident with a fatality is way less of a hassle than news about a homicide.”

“And I think he wants to avoid putting the perp on alert at this point. Assuming there is a perp. Let him think he’s still in the clear. All that, you know?”

I found myself nodding even though she couldn't see me. "Actually, that's a good strategy. Especially if it's someone who's at Hal's meeting. They'll be around for another week, seems like, so we know where we can find them, if need be."

"I thought I'd follow up by getting a list of everyone who rented a bike on Friday. Anything on tap for you tomorrow?"

"Well, it's Sunday, and you need the day off. And I'm not sure there's much to be done about that list until Monday anyway. Thanks for today, Angela. I couldn't have managed that hillside on a bike, I'm certain."

* * *

I was ready for a little Saturday-night R&R, and not the least interested in cooking, so I had stopped off before heading up the hill to home and picked up a couple of pizzas, a loaded-with-everything one for Hal and a more restrained one—mozzarella and basil, mostly—for me. That, plus a feel-good rental movie, would put me right, I decided.

And it almost worked out that way. As a start, the pizzas were just fine. But when we were about to agree not to talk about the Linton case, Hal made a "time out" signal.

"OK, let's watch a movie. But I need to tell you something before I forget. I heard it from Sandy this afternoon. He's been sitting in on our sessions due to his interest in climate change as a nonlinear physics problem."

I nodded, cautious but agreeable, at least a little.

"He said that he and Angela were out to dinner at Fontenot's Thursday evening and saw Phil Linton and Pat Grover having what he—Sandy—described as an 'intimate dinner for two' off in a corner. Sandy recognized them from our conference, of course."

Inwardly, I groaned. Another complication I didn't need. But then it occurred to me that Grover hadn't really lied to me—all she'd said is that she and Linton hadn't seen each other until the IPCC conference at MPARC.

"Mmm. He's sure?" I tried to maintain an poker face.

"Uh, well, I didn't really press him. But he seemed to be. I mean, he didn't use equivocal words, and he made the comment as a sort of afterthought. So I've no reason to doubt him."

"I wonder if Angela saw them, too. She wouldn't recognize them, of course, but corroboration would be nice."

"Well, just like your MPARC ID has your picture, all the people at the conference have IDs with pictures, too. And they're on our computer system somewhere. Sandy can show a bunch to Angela, I guess, and see if she recognizes anyone."

The little knot that had tightened up in my midriff loosened a tad. "That would be an excellent thing to do. I'll give Sandy a call while you pick out a movie. A romantic comedy, please."

"Aw. No exploding pickup trucks?"

I shook my head with emphasis. "And no half-naked bimbos, either, OK?"

"Aw, *man!*"

Sandy, as it turned out, was not only cooperative but in full agreement with me about getting Angela's corroboration. He said he'd set up a photographic line-up of conference attendees and see if

she could pick out the couple they'd seen at Fontenot's. And he pointed out that it must have been a special occasion for them, given the intimacy he observed, and the prices there.

Hal, bless his soul, picked out one of my favorite movies to watch again, *The American President*. Even with that contrived drama toward the end, it never fails to delight me. For Hal's part, I think that he has a sort of crush on Annette Bening, so he didn't really need exploding pickups or bimbos to enjoy it. And what can I say about Michael Douglas, except for, perhaps, "Yum!"? At that point in our relationship, Hal and I had been together for long enough that those sorts of movie-star—um—fantasies served only to bring us closer together.

So Sunday morning I awoke late, refreshed and full of energy. Hal was already up and about somewhere—maybe, I thought, out for a morning run on the old logging road up the valley and back. He needed it, given his sedentary but stressful job. I got to work on a light brunch, an appropriate repast for what the clock was telling me and for limiting Hal's calorie intake.

Of course, there was always the possibility that he'd just eat leftover pizza anyway, but I thought I'd try.

That Sunday was a beautiful late summer day, and I set our brunch up on the front deck, the one with the big view of the west side of the Front Range. Back in Durango, Hal and I had made a practice of Sunday breakfasts—which were often more like brunches—on the patio, surrounded by food and the Sunday papers, print version. Since we'd switched to reading the papers online, it wasn't quite the same, but at least pages of newsprint didn't get blown around like they used to.

I was working on my second cup of coffee and listening to the breeze whisper in the aspen leaves when Hal came huffing and puffing up. It seemed that he'd actually run down our driveway—a half-mile and about 250 vertical feet down to the road—and back up. He stood at the base of the deck's steps and panted for a while, hands on his hips.

"Well." More panting. "That looks inviting. Do I have time for a shower?"

He trudged inside to get himself cleaned up, and shortly we were munching on the last of the season's Rocky Ford melons, in an updated version of our traditional brunch.

One thing still the same was the presence of our phones, though, and I was disappointed when mine started tweeping at me.

"Trieri, CBI"

"Annette, it's Fran. Sorry to pester you on a Sunday morning, but I thought you'd want to hear about our little excursion yesterday."

"Angela gave me the Cliff Notes version last night."

"So you know that Norman thinks it wasn't an accident?"

"That's what she said. Do you suppose that George will be able to do an autopsy tomorrow?"

"He got home last night, and I'm on his case to do it today. I think he'll cooperate. How did your interviews go yesterday? Any reason to suspect any of those folks?"

"I don't believe so. They'll be here for another week, and we know where to find them if need be after that. And they all live here in the U.S." I paused to take a breath. "There were a couple of things that came up during the interviews that got my attention, but no real red flags. And, well, based on what Angela told me, it seems like it would have been almost impossible for a single person to pull this off. I mean, assuming that it was intentional, someone had to know that Linton was heading down that particular trail at that particular time and be in place to move that rock around."

“Turns out that there was a ‘Trail Closed’ sign at the top until shortly before Linton took it. One of the employees up there told me, but he didn’t know why it was closed—he just assumed someone was doing maintenance.”

“Ah. I didn’t know that. Still, it seems like at least two people were working together on this. One to monitor everyone at the top and take down the sign, one to move the rock and, I guess, put it back.”

“So you think maybe *two* people at that conference were involved in this?” Fran sounded skeptical.

“I don’t know if any were. But I don’t quite get how just one person could have managed it. And, look, we need to be sure it wasn’t an accident. George should be able to address that, don’t you think?”

“I sure hope so. I’ll turn up the heat and let you know if he’s able to do it today. Want to be there?”

“Um. No, not really. George is so good that I’d just be in the way. But call me if you hear anything, please.”

* * *

Three

Hal looked up at me from his tablet. “Well, it’s in the *Denver Post* this morning, but without MPARC, thank you very much. It’s short and to the point, calling it an accident and noting that Phil was from Durango. It mentions a Monday autopsy.”

“Short is good. And congratulations about staying off the radar screen so far. I bet there will be lots more if we decide it’s not an accident, though.” I couldn’t help but sigh.

“Did Fran have anything new?”

“Just that he’s going to put the heat on George to do the autopsy today. You’re sure that all of your meeting people are staying for the second week?” I had my fingers crossed.

He scratched his head. “As far as I know. I could probably find out from the hotel if anyone has checked out, given that we’re picking up the tabs.”

“Before I came home yesterday, after I finished my interviews, I ran into a guy in your lobby at one of those tables. What’s that all about?”

“Transparency. Inclusion. We have this set of invited delegates, the official people, who are developing strategy, and a subset of them were on the drafting committee that worked all day Friday. But the whole thing is basically open to the public. And there were groups who wanted space to distribute their propaganda—uh, sorry, I mean ‘information.’ Rather than let them wander through the crowd and possibly be disruptive, we set up tables in the lobby. What guy?”

“Funny name. Lamond or something, from an outfit called ‘SCARAB.’ That’s an acronym, and it rings a bell for me, but I can’t quite identify it.” It was my turn to do some head-scratching.

“Mmm. I bet you mean Dexter Lemone. Students and Citizens for Animal Rights and Biodiversity, SCARAB. He’s a real pain in the ass. Remember back when we met? That guy who got blown up in that irrigation tunnel up above Lake Vallecito, he was the FSU chairman of SCARAB.”

The light bulb went on for me. “Yeah! Right! Now I remember. You mean that group is still around? And they’re here in the Fraser Valley?”

“Well, maybe not here in our valley. Dexter seems to be from Denver.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, well, count your—our—blessings.”

“Did you make the folks with tables in the lobby register for the meeting, or anything like that?”

“You bet. There are probably a few people in the audience section—not the delegates, of course—who haven’t registered, but we made people who have some formal, or semi-formal, presence register. To get a table, you had to register, and without a table, you were going to get tossed if you tried to distribute propaganda. We’re being inclusive and transparent, and we want accountability in return.”

“So, from those registrations, we’ll know where to find them if we need to. Thing is, this guy Lemone told me that Linton deserved to be taken out and shot because of his views on climate change. Yesterday, after knowledge of Linton’s death was wide spread.”

“Yeah, some of those people aren’t what you’d call ‘tolerant.’ Sometimes they remind me of those religious fanatics over in the Middle East. But you’re right, we know where to find him, and the others.” Hal sighed. “That sure doesn’t seem like a very politic thing to say to you, but, still, it doesn’t really seem like it makes him guilty of anything more than bad judgement.”

“Or just plain stupidity.”

Hal burst into laughter. “I seem to remember a hefty dose of that in the Durango guy...oh, what was his name, anyway? Bradford, or something.”

A fuzzy memory tickled my brain. “Yeah...Will...no...Wh...Whitby, Whitby Bradford, that’s it. Died most unpleasantly, as I recall.”

“Yes, and I think the FSU chapter of SCARAB never recovered. But apparently the parent organization is still with us. Ah, well.” He shrugged. “I suppose Dexter will be around for our week two, playing the role of gravel in our hiking boots.”

“What’s the conference doing during week two?”

“Well, yesterday we agreed on the draft recommendations that emerged from the subcommittee on Friday afternoon. Now we have to come up with an implementation plan. A plan that involves as many participants as possible—not just our meeting participants, either—and one that doesn’t require any new infusion of funds. Something of an impossible task, if you ask me. MPARC can do its part without additional funding, but I don’t know about the university folks.”

“But your committee’s recommendations ought to have at least some influence on the funding agencies, no?”

“Sure, but those agencies are already stretched pretty thin, even without new mandates. And Congress sure isn’t going to pony up for additional climate change research, not this Congress. If anything, their agenda is in the opposite direction.”

“I understand completely. As far as most of them are concerned, the whole climate-change thing is a big hoax. A socialist hoax, if you listen to their leadership.”

“Hmmp. Tell that to the folks living on those Pacific and Indian Ocean atolls, or to the Inuit up by the Arctic Ocean.” He shook his head. “Anyway, today’s a day off for everyone, including me, from the conference. Although I do need to spend a little time this afternoon closing out a couple of our summer things. Almost time for the interns to head back to school, for one, and there’s paperwork to be done.”

“Interns? What interns? You never told me anything about that.”

“Really? I thought I mentioned it last spring. Anyway, it’s no big secret or anything. We’ve had a couple dozen undergraduate students from smaller universities in Colorado with us for the summer. They earn some money, quite a bit, actually, and get experience in a variety of high-tech roles. The universities think it’s great, of course, and it actually benefits us, too.”

“What universities?”

He started counting on his fingers. “Well, let’s see. University of Northern Colorado. And maybe I can remember all the others: Mesa State in Grand Junction, Western State in Gunnison, and Adams State in Alamosa. Metro State in Denver. And, naturally, FSU. Can’t forget them.”

“How about that? I didn’t know there were any FSU students here. Do you suppose any of them knew Phillip Linton?”

Hal looked up at me, surprised. He blinked a few times, cocked his head sideways a bit, and said, “Don’t know. But I guess we ought to find out.”

* * *

There were three of them, and, as Hal had access to MPARC computer files from home, he was able to pull up their transcripts. Two of the FSU student interns that summer, Raoul Martinez and Sandra Winkler, had taken a course from Phillip Linton, it turned out, and each had received a “B.” Not, we decided, a compelling reason to want to kill anyone. The third, a Daniel Santini, was a history major who had fulfilled his general science-course requirements via the biology department instead of earth sciences.

Wait, I thought. A history major at MPARC? So I asked Hal.

“Sure, why not? He applied and wrote a well thought-out letter that outlined his interest in the history of science and how he wanted to see how modern institutions work.” Hal shrugged. “Most of our interns are either computer science majors or budding engineers or something, but it didn’t seem like branching out a little would hurt. And he’s been doing well. He spent this last week listening in on our IPCC meeting, and he even wrote a couple of nice drafts for Mary’s regular news releases.”

“Mmm. Well, I guess all I can do for now is to keep a list.”

“Still not sure about the accident thing, eh?”

“No, but maybe Fran will talk George Neering into getting the autopsy done today.”

It seemed that Fran did, because later that afternoon, close to dinnertime, I got a phone call.”

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Hey, there, Ms. Tri-er-i” George always pronounced my name carefully after he’d initially screwed it up on our first case together. “Howya doin’? Thought I’d deliver some news myself. Got a minute?”

“George! Good to hear from you. Uh, I think. I hope you’re not too put out at having work to do on a Sunday?”

“Well, y’know, man, whenever I’m out of town for a few days, I begin to miss my lab here, so I woulda prob’ly come in anyway. And, given that there was something that needed doing, well...”

“So what’s the news, George?”

“Very low probability of an accident. I just don’t see how that skull fracture and the resulting trauma, not only a serious hematoma but also some bone fragments that penetrated, I don’t see how it

could have happened accidentally. Especially because the recovery team has photographs showing the helmet right there by him, as if he'd taken it off after the crash. And Norman says he couldn't find any rock or log or anything that would have made the fracture. So that'll be my official finding, at least a suspicious death and a high-probability homicide."

"Angela told me there was a rock, about the size of a bowling ball, I think she said, a rock that looked like it had been moved."

"Yep, Norman and I talked about that. He said he didn't find any signs of blood or hair on it, though. He said that it was probably used on the trail, and something else was used to whack the vic. The whole thing's a real bummer, man."

"It is at that, George. Especially as we're short on motive. I mean, nobody seems to have really liked the guy, but to bash him with a rock or something? That's a stretch. Also, Angela told me before that his helmet was off when his body was found, and you just said there are photos."

"Yeah, and that's pretty weird. The helmet would definitely have prevented that head trauma, or at least mitigated it. It's not part of my own findings, though, so I don't really have an official opinion about it. Except that it's weird." He paused and took a breath. "But it's also strange that it happened out in the woods like that. I mean, it's not like they were in a bar, where they might have got into a fight. This seems like murder one to me, but I'd have trouble with a cross-exam if I said that in court."

"Right. You'd get chewed up by the defense, I bet. I wonder if there's any point in looking for the weapon up on that hillside?"

"Pretty big hillside, man. Norman said they covered quite a bit of it, but it could be anywhere. And I'm betting it was a rock. The wound looks more like a rock made it than a log or a branch."

"Thanks, George, that helps. And thanks for doing this today. At least nobody's going to leave town for a week, so we have a little time."

"No problem, Ms. Tri-e-ri. You take care, now."

I called Angela immediately, but her phone went to voice mail. So I tried her condo's land-line number.

"Hello? This is Sandy Livingston." The familiar voice of the MPARC's Chief Scientist took me by surprise.

"Oh, hi, Sandy. Is Angela there? Her phone must be off."

"She's here, but she's in the shower. Should I have her call you?"

"Please, right away."

"OK, will do. And, say, Annette—want to hear some good news for a change?"

"Good news I can always use."

"Anj and I are going to get married. We talked about it again the other night and decided to take the plunge. So I guess it means we're intending to get formally engaged, but I have to ask her father first."

"Sandy! Why, that's wonderful! Congratulations! But I thought she was avoiding all that because of the fuss her family would make."

"Yeah, it'll be a big deal. We'll need to have a giant, formal ceremony down in Santa Fe at the Cathedral. Probably not for a year or so, it'll take so much planning." He sounded a little embarrassed. "Uh, and what do you think about it if I ask Hal to be Best Man?"

“Well, I think that would be wonderful! And you’ll look quite elegant in a tux. Of course, Angela will look spectacular no matter what she wears.”

“You know, I hadn’t thought of that yet. But you’re right. Oh, here she is.”

After I heard the murmuring of some background conversation, Angela came on the line. “Hi, Annette! Sandy told me that he let the cat out of the bag.”

“He did, and congratulations! But I guess it’s going to be a work in progress for a while, huh?”

“My family is sooo traditional. Yeah, we’re going to keep a lid on it until we can go down to Santa Fe and do things their way. And it will probably be a long time, really. But we finally decided, which is a step in the right direction.”

“Well, I won’t tell anyone, except maybe Hal, if that’s OK. I’ll make him take an oath of secrecy, though.”

She giggled. “Sure, that’d be fine. Anyway, what’s up?”

I did a quick mood switch. “George called me with the autopsy results. He says he thinks it’s a homicide. I thought I’d let you know soonest.”

“Oohhh. Well, I guess I’m not too surprised. And that certainly changes some things, doesn’t it?”

“No doubt. Fran’s going to have to deal with a different sort of publicity, for sure. And maybe Hal and Mary, too, given that Phillip Linton was in town to be at the MPARC conference. You and I can sort of stay in the background, though. At least I hope so. And I think we should all keep quiet about it, at least until Fran makes an announcement. He may want a head start on the investigation.”

“For sure. And if all you had was a phone call from George, it’s not really official yet. Not until he has a written report ready to go. I bet Fran told George to go slowly with that, to buy some time.” She paused. “And, speaking of that, I just remembered something. Sandy showed me some pictures, from ID badges, I guess, pictures of people at the MPARC conference. Turns out that we saw two of them having dinner together at Fontenot’s the other evening, uh, Thursday, it would have been. That’s when Sandy and I got serious about this engagement thing. Anyway, one of the people we saw was the victim, Phillip Linton. And the other was a woman named Patricia Grover. They seemed to have had quite the romantic *tête-à-tête* going. I don’t know if that’s relevant, but it was definitely the two of them.”

“Ah. Thanks very much, Angela. And I don’t know how relevant it is, either, but it means I need to have another conversation with Ms. Grover. It seems that she wasn’t entirely candid with me when I talked with her yesterday.”

* * *

First thing Monday morning, Grand County Sheriff Fran Schmidt convened an all-hands meeting in his briefing room in the departmental offices in Hot Sulphur Springs. Angela and I were there, of course, along with George Neering and everyone in the department except the receptionist.

“Well, folks, it was looking like we might make it through the summer with nothing worse than a bad accident here and there. Like that so-called ‘mountain bike accident’ on Friday, I mean.” Fran shook his head. “No such luck, though. George here doesn’t think it was an accident.”

George Neering, believing it was his turn, started to stand up.

“No, hang on, George. In a minute. I need to make two more points. First, this is one of our busiest times of the year anyway, the coming weeks especially, and a homicide investigation like this we don’t really need. But we’re stuck with it. I’m going to ask our CBI colleagues to help out as much as they

can,” Fran’s glance in the direction of Angela and me was almost pleading, “so that we don’t have to divert too much manpower to this. Second, and George and I have already talked about this, he’s going to be so kind as to drag his feet on his official autopsy report to buy us a day or two before it all hits the fan. In the meantime, I want total secrecy on this, OK? There’s a bunch of visitors here who now qualify as ‘persons of interest,’ and I want them to be kept in the dark.”

He looked around the room. “Questions for me? No? OK, George, they’re all yours.”

George ambled up to the podium and turned on his folksy persona, the one with more than his usual bit of hippy-dippy thrown in. Everyone there knew him well enough that they expected this but weren’t going to underestimate him because of it, like most newcomers did.

He proceeded, with the help of a few rather gruesome pictures, to give a more technical explanation of his conclusion than he’d told me on the phone the day before. But the conclusion was still the same: at least a suspicious, unattended death and probably a homicide, likely premeditated. Like Fran, as he wound down he asked for questions.

Angela raised her hand. “Dr. Neering, I was with Norman Dzen and the sheriff on Friday afternoon, and there was no sign of a rock that might have been used as a weapon. We examined several in the vicinity. Do you have an estimate of its size from the shape of the wound?”

Hardly anyone, ever, called George “Doctor,” and it took him a few seconds to recover his equilibrium. “Hmm. Excellent question, man. About the size of a softball, I’d say. And, assuming I’m right about all this, the perp could have carried it off with him and got rid of it somewhere else entirely. If it were me, I think I’d have found a creek to drop it into—that’d wash off the blood and so forth. And any prints I might have left. Like I said, good question, Ms. Espinosa.”

He grinned at her and winked, not a come-on but rather a compliment. “Any other questions?”

No one spoke up, so he took his seat as Fran again took the stage.

“So, now what we’ve got to do is to use whatever time that George can buy us to make some progress. I’m thinking that we need to look carefully for both motive and opportunity. Means, we pretty much know about. Annette Trieri interviewed a number of people who are at the meeting at MPARC that the victim was attending. Anything there, Annette?”

I shook my head and cleared my throat. “Not too much yet, sheriff. With this new information, I need to talk with a couple of them again, and that may help with opportunity. I’d like to know, for example, more about exactly the sequence of events up on top of the mountain, say, from an hour before Linton started down that trail until his body was found. And one of the people at the meeting was biking with Linton on Friday.”

Fran nodded. “Right. That’d be this guy Brothers, I guess?”

“Yep. And there are a couple of other potential leads associated with MPARC that I’ll follow up on.”

“Good deal. I guess that’s all for this group. Remember, people, this coming week is going to be crazy, what with that heavy metal music festival that started yesterday and the crowd it’s attracted. And there’s another festival that starts, uh, Wednesday or Thursday, country and western. Put the heavy-metal head-bangers together with the folks here for the rodeo in Granby and we’re looking at the potential for some real trouble.” He shook his head. “Let’s all be careful out there. Norman? Angela? Could you meet with me for a few minutes please?”

The meeting broke up and the tracker plus my deputy followed the sheriff into his private office. I noticed that it was about nine, an hour or so before Hal's conference would have its morning coffee break, so I hit the road for Winter Park.

By pushing the speed limit—all of the officers likely to stop me were still back in Hot Sulphur Springs, anyway—I made it to Hal's rented MPARC building at the village of Winter Park's main intersection a little before ten.

He was, I knew, champing at the bit to get out of the rental and into MPARC's new, permanent home. The new building had begun life as a failed condo development, the bare frame of which had been a huge eyesore for several years before MPARC came along. Hal and his team of architects—with Mac's recent advice for computer and other security matters—were turning it into something of a showcase, a showcase that would provide five-star office space for holders of the high-quality jobs in eastern Grand County—a place where most jobs were medium-quality at best—that MPARC was providing. But it was still a work in progress.

The lobby of the auditorium in the rental building looked like it had on Saturday, with several tables laden with pamphlets off to the side. SCARAB's setup was still prominent, something that encouraged me. Dexter Lemone's comment concerning Linton's deserved fate echoed in my head. And why had Pat Grover not mentioned the dinner with Linton? Also, that Stringer guy seemed like he was hiding something, the way he diverted my attention to Pat Grover.

These and other cynical thoughts swirled in my head while I waited for the morning coffee break to begin. I would have much rather that George Neering had decided that Linton's death was an accident, but, with the opposite finding, I was ready to assume my suspicious investigator guise and not trust hardly anybody. Maybe Hal. Maybe.

I heard crowd noises from inside the auditorium and watched while people filtered into the lobby. Some were just wandering, some were on a mission. One of those, Pat Grover, had her sights set on the Ladies' Room, I could tell at once. Too much pre-conference, coffee, I thought. So I camped outside the door to await her exit. No sense in disturbing her in a moment of some urgency, after all.

Hal and his architects, I remembered, had planned on outfitting the new MPARC building with facilities to take into account the relative amounts of time that men and women tend to spend in those facilities, but in that rental building the line outside the Ladies' Room was what I'd learned to expect. I understood why Pat Grover had been in such a hurry.

That meant, of course, that she was one of the first to emerge, and it was easy for me to walk up to her and catch her unexpectedly.

"Dr. Grover? I hope you remember me from Saturday. Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation?"

"Huh?" She looked appropriately surprised. "Oh, yes. Ms. Trieri. I hope your Sunday was more relaxing than your Saturday."

"Somewhat." I managed what I thought might be a disarming smile. "But it seems that the more people I talk with, the more questions arise. May I have a few more minutes of your time?"

Still looking surprised, she glanced around the room. "Well, I was hoping to... Oh, but I can do that later. Certainly, I have a few minutes. Maybe we can find a spot to sit and talk?"

I pondered her switcheroo, from nervous and hesitant to calm and confident within the span of a sentence, as I led her outside. We found a great amenity provided by the Town of Winter Park, a bench on Vasquez Road under a grouping of aspen trees, in large pots, just beginning to hint of their upcoming switch to fall colors.

“Interesting things keep coming up about Phillip Linton, Ms. Grover. Now, as I recall, you mentioned that you and he were romantically involved years ago, when you were both graduate students.”

She smiled. “My perspective these days is that it wasn’t so much ‘romance’ as it was that we just had the hots for each other. It was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time.”

It was my turn to smile. “You mentioned something about that. Anyway, you also said that this meeting at MPARC was the first time you’d seen him since back then?”

“Yes, I was surprised to run into him, actually.”

“And so you had what’s been described as a ‘romantic *tête-à-tête*’ Thursday evening for old times’ sake?”

This startled her. “Well, I don’t know about ‘romantic *tête-à-tête*.’ Although he was definitely hoping to do *something* for ‘old times’ sake.’ But that wasn’t in my plans, not no-how. Am I under some kind of suspicion here?”

All of her body language suggested that she was being forthright with me, so I decided to move on. “I’m sorry if it seems that way. I’m just tying up loose ends, that’s all.”

I think we parted friends. Pretty much.

* * *

Four

Back inside, the lobby was crowded with conference-goers, and all of the tables, including the SCARAB one, were occupied. But I didn’t see Hal anywhere. I almost giggled out loud when it occurred to me that perhaps he was standing in line for the Men’s Room. What, I wondered, do men talk about in situations like that? Or do they talk at all?

Because Dexter Lemone had no one at his table, I decided to tackle him next. He graced me with a truly dirty look as I approached.

“Mr. Lemone, good morning. We need to talk a bit more. Would you like to do it here or perhaps somewhere less public?” I tried to present him with my least threatening smile.

But he just scowled. “Now what? I thought I made it clear on Saturday that I didn’t know anything about that guy Linton.”

“Except that he deserved to be shot.” I let my smile slip just a bit. “What I wanted to ask, though, was whether SCARAB had ever managed to replace Whitby Bradford down in Durango?”

“Whit? How do you know about him?” Now he was on alert.

“I was chief of detectives in the Police Department there when he got killed. It wasn’t my case, of course, but I certainly heard a lot about it. Especially his role in the local drug trade. Is that something that SCARAB personnel participate in generally, selling drugs? I guess it could be an effective fundraising tactic.”

“What? No, of course not. SCARAB is concerned with environmental issues. Like the name says, biodiversity, animal rights, stuff like that.”

“And, of course, wishing death on people who don’t agree with you.” I took out a notebook, opened it to a blank page, and held a pencil at the ready. “Perhaps you could fill me in about where you were and what you were doing from about mid-morning Friday on.”

“What’s this all about anyway? You’ve got no reason to treat me like this, just because some guy I don’t like got himself killed accidentally.”

“That, of course, remains to be seen. The autopsy report, when it’s available, will clarify matters, I’m sure. In the meantime, though, I’m still in the business of gathering background information. Would you rather wait and talk with me after the report becomes public?”

He stared at me for a few seconds. “Given your attitude, I think that would be the most appropriate course of action. I’ll have legal representation, of course.”

“Your call. I’ll make a note of it for future reference.” I shrugged as I turned to walk away. “The folks here at MPARC are being most cooperative, so we’ll know where to find you if we need to.”

The coffee break was winding down, but I managed to catch Chris Brothers just as he was headed back into the auditorium.

“Dr. Brothers? Do you suppose we could have lunch again?”

“Oh, Ms. Trieri. Uh, well, sure. I guess. Especially if you’re buying.” He grinned. “More questions?”

“I want to go over your morning on Friday in more detail. We’re tying up loose ends, and you can be very helpful. This isn’t what you’d call ‘adversarial’ at all, just getting facts straight. OK?”

“Sure. Meet you out here? I mean, after this next session. Um, I’ve got to get in there now, though.”

“Thanks very much. See you then.”

As the lobby emptied, I caught sight of Hal coming from the direction of his office.

“Well, Director Trieri! To what do we owe the honor this morning?”

“Hmmp. I guess that means no big hug and kiss, eh?”

“Well, there’s always my office...” He looked around. “But proper public decorum will improve your credibility, don’t you think?”

“One of these days, I’m going take you up on your offer to retire to your office. Like I did that other time. Then what’ll you do?”

He actually blushed. “Well, we did get away with it that once. But now, if you call that particular bluff, I’ll probably have an important meeting. Today, though, I just have some news for you. I made some calls down to the U.”

“Oh? Doing my job for me?”

“Not exactly. Just setting the table a little. I figured I might pull some strings down there. Turns out that I’ve still got some influence in the provost’s office. And you may remember that he’s got legal responsibilities there as a state official.”

“Uh-oh. What has my ex-Dean done now?”

“Good things, I think. First off, I talked him, John Martin, I mean, into sealing up Linton’s office. Then I persuaded him to get their computer people there to change the password on Linton’s computer account. They use an omnibus password system now, so that’s pretty easy, as it gets pushed out to all of a user’s devices. And John is also going to lean on HR to pull and secure Linton’s entire personnel file,

both in HR and in the college and departmental offices. You know. Just in case any of that stuff might be relevant for your investigation. He didn't volunteer to send copies our way, but at least the files will be preserved."

Proper public decorum be damned, I grabbed him for a big smooch.

"Thank you! Something of that nature was on my to-do list, and I'm glad it's done."

"I'm glad you're glad. I was told that it might take a court order to pry the personnel files loose from HR, but, yeah, at least they'll be secure in the meantime. And John can get you into Linton's office, if need be."

"Sounds as if you're suggesting a trip down there might be in order."

"That's up to you. I'm just trying to be helpful where I can, and FSU seems like one of those places. Oh, and I didn't spill the beans about the autopsy results. I just told him that there was an ongoing investigation."

"Good deal. I don't know when I'll have time to get down there, though."

"Well, if it's after this week, I'll come along. I can be your driver, or something." He winked at me. "So, any progress this morning?"

"It seems that Mr. Dexter Lemone, of SCARAB, isn't going to be talking to me again without a lawyer. I consider that a victory, of sorts. And I'm going to have lunch with Chris Brothers. I want to know details of Friday morning."

"Are you harassing my *rapporteur*? Again?" He poked me in the ribs.

"Me? Of course not. I just think he's hot, and I want to seduce him over lunch."

Hal's chuckle made me uneasy. "Well, go easy on the poor kid. He's apt to want to call you 'Mom'."

"Oh, you *rat!*" I whapped his shoulder with my bag, an object of significant heft, and he almost stumbled.

"Hey, now!" He rubbed his shoulder. "Ouch. Look, Chris is something of a prodigy, a post-doc at age twenty-five. As in *twenty-five years old*. I mean, do the math."

I did. "Mmm. Point taken. But you knew I was kidding anyway. About the seduction, I mean."

"Of course." He grinned at me. "Not, mind you, that I think you wouldn't be good at such a thing..."

He dodged out of range before I could whap him again.

* * *

I decided that getting Chris Brothers away from the MPARC crowd would make our conversation easier, and so I dragged him down the street to that old Winter Park standby, Randi's Grill and Pub, which had recently eased back from its original Irish flavor but still retained its sports-bar *milieu*. Hal even provided dispensation to take until the afternoon break—he promised to assume the *rapporteur* duties himself, despite what he described as a dislocated shoulder. After Chris and I were seated and got our orders in, I pulled out that old cliché.

"So, Chris, you're probably wondering why I asked you here."

“Well, you said something about talking about Friday morning in detail, and that makes sense to me. But it must mean that there’s more to the whole thing than you thought there was when we talked on Saturday.”

“Hal said you’re smart, and that’s coming through loud and clear. So let me say that yes, there’s more, but I can’t talk about details yet. What that ‘more’ means is that everything is ratcheted up a notch or two. Now, I’ve done enough checking to be persuaded that you’re unlikely ever to be in the category of a person of interest or anything like that. But you do know, perhaps more than anyone, about what all happened Friday morning. So I’m hoping to pick your considerable brain for details.” I was a little surprised that the flattery seemed to go right over his head.

He nodded and stared at one of the TV screens for a bit, then looked back at me. “That must mean that you’ve concluded somehow that it wasn’t an accident. I recall something about an autopsy today.”

“What I’m hearing is that the autopsy report won’t be available for a few days. And, like I said, I can’t talk about details yet anyway. This is the Grand County sheriff’s jurisdiction, after all, and I’m just assisting him.”

He nodded. “So, first, I have no idea of what really happened to Linton. I wasn’t on that trail with him when it happened. But, second, I’m smart enough to know that someone who was with him that morning must be, clearly *has* to be, under suspicion at some level. So I’m worried about having anything I say misinterpreted.”

“We have a witness from the top of the lift there who says that he saw you going off in a different direction onto a completely different trail from the one that Linton headed down, your trail being one with no connections to Linton’s. Even the sheriff’s back-country expert doesn’t see how you could have been involved with whatever happened to Linton.”

“Yeah. I looked at the trail map and decided I just didn’t want to try that expert section. Phil was all gung-ho about it, but I’ve done enough mountain biking, including various spills and a couple of real crashes, that I’m over being gung-ho. I just like smooth descents with moderate excitement.” He grinned. “I’m discovering the same thing about skiing. I guess that comes from having done both since I was about eight.”

“So, take me through the morning from the time you met up with him.”

“We’d agreed to take Friday—neither of us was stuck with that job of being on the committee that had to work—and go mountain biking. He suggested it to me on, oh, I think it was last Wednesday during the afternoon break. Or maybe the post-meeting reception. I guess he picked me because I’ve been riding my bike from the hotel instead of walking or taking the shuttle—I brought it up from Boulder on my car. I’d never met him until this meeting, but he talked about how he’d become interested in mountain biking down in Durango and wanted to take advantage of the Winter Park lift system.”

He stopped to think for a minute. “So, on Friday we met up for breakfast at the hotel and went up to the base in my car. I took my bike, of course, and his rented one, which he got for the two weeks of the conference at the ski area. He was bubbling with enthusiasm because he said the bike he’d rented was better than his own.”

“We rode up the main lift from the base and did a long, easier trail down, sort of to get warmed up, but that was really just my excuse. I didn’t want to get too technical too soon. I wanted to check out his skill level before agreeing to hard stuff. But he was good, so we decided that the section with the expert trails might be interesting.” He took a breath.

“I guess the way this all works is sort of like skiing. You get on the lift, although with a bicycle somehow, and at the top you get off and figure out which way down?” I was studying a trail map as I asked.

“Right. The lift operators help with loading and unloading the bikes. And then you do the prep, like tightening your helmet strap, popping one foot into the pedal clip, stuff like that. And, like skiing, if it’s an expert trail down, you get psyched up in your own special way. I just take a lot of deep breaths, but some people, and Linton did this, they make noises, like grunting or something. He was actually demonstrative enough that I got a little embarrassed about it.”

“That’s probably why the witness I mentioned noticed you guys.”

“Oh. Yeah. I hadn’t thought of that, really.” He nodded his understanding.

“Anyway, after all that, we headed down our respective trails, with him first. He said something like ‘See ya at the bottom—don’t make me wait too long.’ Turned out that I was the one who had to wait. A long time, actually.”

“I was there and saw your conversation with Roger Traubman, the deputy. But I’m interested at the top. Were there other people around when you and Linton got off the lift?”

“Oh, yeah, mmm, a dozen or so, I guess, plus the lift guys. And, the thing is, I could swear that I saw a barrier, meaning a yellow or orange tape, across the top of the trail that Phil eventually went down. That’s why I was looking at the map and came up with the idea of a different trail.

“Then, when Phil got all excited about the trail I thought was closed, I looked again and the tape was down. So he went that way and I went the other, having talked myself out of that truly expert-only section.”

“I see.” A puzzle was assembling itself in my head. “By the time that Linton started down that newly opened trail, were there still that dozen people up there?”

“Well, not the same dozen. More had come up the lift, and some of the originals had headed down.”

“But they were not on your radar, so you probably can’t distinguish them, huh?”

He looked at me and squinted. “Look. You mentioned skiing, so it must be that you’re familiar with it. Right?”

“Well, yes, some.”

“So, think about what you remember from getting off a lift. I mean the people around you. They’re all dressed in ski outfits with all sorts of colors and so on, but you really don’t pay that much attention. You’re too focused on, first, getting off the lift cleanly, and then what’s next, where you’re going. All that stuff, right?”

I closed my eyes and thought about it. “OK. I see what you’re saying. It’s a crowd of people in colorful outfits, but they all blend together and so no one sticks out. Combined with your own distractions, it’s hard to recall a picture of it all.”

“Exactly. So all I can say is that there were other people up there, one of them must have taken that closure tape down, and I have no clue who it could have been. We hung around for a couple of minutes, he got himself psyched up with a lot of grunts, that kind of deep breathing accompanied by a series of ‘unh, unh, unh’ noises, and we headed down the mountain on our respective trails. And that was the last I saw of him alive.”

“You said you hadn’t met him before this conference.”

“Correct. I’ve read many...most?...all?...of his papers, but I’d never met him. His output and his analyses truly impressed me. I guess that’s why I decided to go biking with him. I’m just a lowly post-doc, and his invitation was flattering. But at the conference, he came across as something of an asshole, er, excuse the expression.”

“You’re not the only one with that opinion.”

“It’s like he was on someone’s payroll and trying to live up to their expectations. Not at all like most of the scientists I know. Someone must have got to him.”

The files that Hal and I had discussed, the ones down at FSU in Durango, I thought, could well reveal who that might have been and whose expectations weren’t being met. Along with any number of other things of interest. How, I wondered, could I get copies of those files?

* * *

My first impulse was to jump in my car—my CBI Jeep Grand Cherokee Hemi, actually—and head south and west. But that just didn’t seem like a good use of my time. It would take a good six hours each way without traffic hold-ups, even using that hot Jeep with its emergency light bar to push the speed limit.

Maybe, I thought, I could get my friends at the Durango CBI office involved. I knew I’d end up owing them a huge favor, but I decided I could live with that.

After lunch, Chris Brothers and I walked back to the MPARC offices, and he managed to return to the MPARC conference in plenty of time to resume his *rapporteur* duties—something he was glad to do, as I think he didn’t trust Hal to carry the ball without fumbling. Because the afternoon session hadn’t begun yet, I also had time for a couple of follow-up conversations with Linton’s old grad school cronies. But they didn’t lead to anything new. Then I left Hal at the conference and took over his office, so that I could use his phone.

My first call was to Derek Petersen, the crack field agent whom I’d turned into an equally crack administrator, and who’d replaced me in CBI’s Durango field office when I moved to Fraser.

“Hey, Annette! Glad to hear from you! How are things up your way?”

“Ugh. Here I thought we were moving to a winter-sports valley. But summer’s almost as crowded as Durango now. I guess that’s happening everywhere, though. At least the locals are making some money.”

He laughed. “You got it. Year ’round craziness. What’s up?”

I filled him in on the Linton death and the still-confidential autopsy results. He agreed that searches of Linton’s apartment and office would be a good idea and volunteered to obtain warrants for both.

Chalk one up for the good guys.

My second call was to the FSU Provost, John Martin. As Chief Academic Officer at Frémont State, Martin was Hal’s boss, at least when Hal was on campus. And Martin had also been an almost suspect in that case where I’d first met Hal, so he and I had an odd sort of relationship. But I’d kept his confidences and even helped out the university on other occasions, so he’d begun to trust me.

“Hello, Annette. After Hal’s call, I had a suspicion that I might be hearing from you.”

“John, I need first to offer condolences on FSU’s loss of someone who seemed to be on track for superstardom. Hal’s told me of Professor Linton’s accomplishments and potential, and he sounded like a prodigy.”

“Thank you. And by our standards, he certainly was a prodigy. I have to say, though, that it’s doubtful that we would have been able to retain him. Or, really, that we would have chosen to. With his research accomplishments, he was ripe for being poached by one of the big research factories, and he really wasn’t that solid as a teacher, which is something we value highly.” Martin sighed. “We’ve learned, or at least some of us have, like Hal and I, that we can’t have it all ways, down here in our little outpost of higher education in the mountains. I think we would have likely let Linton advance his career elsewhere without too much of a fight.”

“Hmm. Not to speak ill of the deceased or anything, but I heard from Hal that Linton had made enemies at the conference up here in the span of only a week. How were his relationships there?”

“Oh, I guess I’d call them ‘mediocre.’ His faculty colleagues were somewhat in awe of his research output but not complimentary about his collegiality, in general. And I’ve discovered that he had a wide range of conflicts with students who took his courses. In fact, he was regarded as something of a pariah on the student grapevine. Word on the street was to avoid signing up for one of Linton’s courses unless you’re something of a masochist.” He voice took on an air of curiosity. “All we’ve heard down here is that he was killed in a mountain bike accident. But that doesn’t explain why you’re calling.”

I knew Martin as a sharp cookie, so I’d been expecting some probing of this nature. “It looked like an accident, for sure, but the sheriff up here—and it’s his case—he’s making sure to cover all the bases. It was an unattended death involving some violence, and, even if the violence was accidental, it needs a full investigation.”

“Hal mentioned something like that. So, what do you need?”

“Everything. And, so you’ll be covered, I believe there will be a warrant.” I explained my call to Derek Petersen. “We’re hoping for insight from his files down there at the U. Oh. By the way. Is the next of kin thing covered and so on? Hal said he’d call you, but I don’t know how that went.”

“It’s covered, at least as far as we can manage it. Someone, I think it’ll be Linton’s brother, will be coming into town probably next week to take care of things. I’ll say, *that* was a phone call that I don’t want to repeat.” There was a pause. “I suppose I should have the university legal counsel vet any paperwork, like a warrant, but we’re all State of Colorado so I’m not going to worry too much. And I already pulled all of Linton’s personnel files as well as his files from the contracts and grants office—I figured there might be interest in them. So you can have those, with an IOU, of course, if we can get them to you somehow. It’s too much paper for the mail, about a two-foot stack.”

This was welcome news to me, two-foot stack or no. I wondered if anyone from Derek’s office would be interested in a quick courier run.

“Hal said something about a computer password.”

“Oh. Right. The systems people changed it, and I’ve got it written down here. I’ll put it into the first file folder of this stack. If his laptop, which he probably had with him up there in Winter Park, if it’s powered up, it’ll have the same password. We’ve got this system that pushes passwords out now, kind of like the way that Microsoft does system updates.”

“OK, good. I don’t remember if you’ve met my replacement at the Durango CBI office, Derek Petersen. Anyway, he’s the one getting the warrants we need, so you’ll probably be seeing him. Or maybe the new dean will be seeing him. Er, interim dean, I guess. How’s he doing, by the way?”

“She, actually. And quite well, as a matter of fact. It’s the former chair of physics, and her specialty is nonlinear systems, which are by their nature unpredictable. I think that helps her deal with the faculty.”

“‘Nonlinear systems,’ eh? Hal hired a guy with that background to be the Chief Scientist at MPARC. And, yeah, he’s used to things that are unpredictable. Takes ’em right in stride. He came from the Santa Fe Institute, where I guess that’s pretty much what they all do.”

“How’s that new MPARC thing coming along? Hal mentioned it when he called, but we really didn’t talk about it.” Martin’s interest, I knew, was much greater than he was letting on.

I knew I had to be careful, as FSU was expecting Hal back in a few months. “They’ve come a long way in a short time. I mean, this conference they’re having is a big, prestigious deal, it seems like. But Hal really wants to see MPARC get into this new building that he’s shepherding along. All in all, though, I think he’s having fun, with both MPARC and the work he’s doing for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.”

“Well, be sure and tell him for me that we’re looking forward to seeing him back here. You, too, Annette. The two of you were stalwarts at those fund-raising parties the president has all the time. We miss you both.”

But Hal and I had no real intention of returning, and the conversation started my feelings of guilt building. I was glad when Martin brought the conversation to a graceful end, allowing me to escape without having to get caught in a lie.

During the conversation with Martin, I’d heard my phone booping for attention, the signal for another incoming call. I checked voice mail and discovered that Derek had left a short message, so I called him right away.

“Any luck, Derek?”

“Yep. Judge Sandoze is still as cooperative as ever. We found Linton’s home address and got a search warrant for it. Also a warrant for the university, in case we need it. Linton lived in an apartment, a pretty nice one, up on the north side. There’s a manager who will let us in. We could have a look this afternoon, if you want.”

“Sounds like a plan. While you’re at it, I’ll check in with the PD and say hi to folks there. And let them know what’s up with all this, to be polite. Give me a call when you get there so I can listen in on what you find at the apartment, OK? Oh, and I wonder if there’s anyone around down your way who could run a big pile of paper up to me. Linton’s personnel and other files from the U. I’m sure I can figure out how to pay the overtime, or whatever.”

“Not a problem, Annette. I’ll give you a call from Linton’s apartment.”

Fred Winders, who’d been promoted into my position of Lieutenant and was in charge of the investigations unit at the Durango Police Department, was glad to hear from me. I called him first, and he immediately put me on the speaker and dragged Captain Jankowski, under whom I’d worked during my tenure at the PD, into the conversation. Then Amy Hodges, now Vanderberg, I learned, who got gently kidded a bit about being seven months pregnant, wandered in. It was old home week there for a while.

I managed to escape after only about a half hour by promising to be sure and keep in touch, and that made me available for Derek Petersen’s call from Phillip Linton’s apartment with minutes to spare.

* * *

I'm not quite sure what I was expecting from Linton's apartment, but, whatever it was, it wasn't there. Derek gave me, over the phone, a blow-by-blow description of his team's search and documented it with a series of near-real-time photographs. That, it seemed, involved a nifty phone trick that I vowed to learn.

From what Derek described, for an early-thirties bachelor Linton was the most compulsively clean and tidy man imaginable. I suppose that, given he knew he was going to be away from home for the better part of a month, he'd want to return to things in good shape. But apparently the place was spotless, even the main bathroom. And his wardrobe was hung just so in the closet; the kitchen cupboards were arranged to perfection; and even all the bookshelves—a good many—had the look of a professional librarian's organizational touch, according to the CBI team.

Spotless and well-organized it may have been, but it was also sterile. There were no family pictures, personal tchotchkes, or much of anything else in the way of personality. And, on a writing table where you'd normally expect to find a computer, there were the attachments—monitor, keyboard, mouse—but no actual computer. After a bit of discussion, we decided that Linton must have used his FSU laptop for everything, carrying it with him and plugging in the accessories wherever he was. That made Fran Schmidt's examination of Linton's hotel room in Winter Park all the more relevant. Linton's FSU office was also going to be an important place to search, we realized.

That, we speculated, could well be somewhat more of a challenge. Frémont State University was still in its adolescence as a full-spectrum research university, and it retained some of its long-time traditions from its liberal-arts college days. One of those was the lack of a true university police force—they still operated with what they called a "security team," a group of people who were basically only a couple of steps above rent-a-cops. The CBI, however, was the state criminal investigative agency, and FSU was a state institution, so we definitely had jurisdiction. It was just a matter of persuading FSU officialdom of that fact and getting them to cooperate. Fortunately, I had laid the foundation for that cooperation with my earlier conversation with the provost. So Derek and his team headed for the campus while I tried to contain my impatience.

Derek called me again when they opened the door to Linton's office. His initial reaction was that someone had tossed the place—apparently, the contrast to Linton's apartment was staggering. Because Derek was escorted by John Martin, I was able to hear both sides of a conversation.

"Provost Martin, I think we need to wait here in the hall until my guys can dust in there for prints from whoever turned this place upside-down."

"Huh?" Martin's voice was familiar. "What's wrong? It looks like a typical faculty office to me."

"Uh." Derek's eloquence was in full flower. "Surely someone came in here and searched everything and turned it over in the process."

"You think so? Really?" Martin seemed incredulous. "To me, it looks like most all of the other faculty offices I've been in. And not just recently. This is the way they always look, more or less. Even mine when I was teaching. I'll give you that this one is in the 'more' category, though."

"Maybe it's the contrast. We, I mean, these other guys and I, we just searched Linton's apartment. It was neat as a pin." Derek was clearly skeptical.

"Ah. I'll stipulate that this doesn't fit that description. But I see no reason to think it's been disturbed since he was here last. There's more organization here than you think, I bet. I'll leave you folks to it."

At that point, Martin excused himself to let them get to work.

To Derek's, and my, surprise, the team's discoveries validated Martin's point of view. What had first appeared to be random jumbles of paper were actually somewhat disordered piles of different sets of notes, homework assignments, test papers, and correspondence associated with publications. It seemed that Linton, though organized, simply wasn't very good at constructing and maintaining neat, squared-up stacks of paper.

While there was the same set of computer accessories that they'd found in Linton's apartment, there was no actual computer in the office, either. This helped validate our conclusion that Linton's laptop was his sole device—and that it was probably in Winter Park. There was, however, a large-capacity external USB drive, which we decided might be a back-up drive. Whether Linton also kept information stored on the FSU servers—or another server somewhere, for that matter—was something that was unclear.

Like his apartment, in his office there was little in the way of a personal touch. His name, of course, was either written or stamped on just about every piece of paper, but personal effects *per se* were absent. Apparently, they guy had lived for his work. And Hal's comment about his prodigious research publication record fit right in with that.

In any case, Derek and company didn't find anything of interest in that office. I was therefore hoping that something of interest would emerge from those files that John Martin was going to send my way. Derek verified that he had them and was going to send them off by courier, probably in a State Patrol car. And maybe, I thought, Linton's laptop will be helpful, assuming we find it up in Winter Park.

After finishing with Derek, I called Fran Schmidt. "Fran? Annette here, I'm calling from MPARC."

"Annette! Good to hear from you. Any progress?"

"Not yet. I got my CBI colleagues in Durango to go through Linton's apartment and campus office, but there was nothing of interest at either place. I've got a pile of file folders being sent my way, though, to go through, his personnel files and so on. But one thing they didn't find was a computer there, so I'm thinking that the one he had with him up here is what he used for everything. Which makes it all the more important."

"We got a laptop from his hotel room. Do you suppose that's the one you're interested in?"

"Probably. Was it turned on?"

"Yeah. It wants a password."

"Ah. Well I may just have one for it, or I will when the files get here. I'll let you know, OK?"

At that point, it was getting on toward suppertime. I could tell that going through those files was going to be a chore, but they wouldn't arrive before midnight, or, more probably, noon the next day. Instead of worrying about it, I went looking for Hal and found him in the lobby at an after-session wine-and-cheese party.

He lit up when he saw me. "Hi, Sweets! Hope your afternoon was good."

"Yeah, it was fine—Derek Petersen and his team in Durango got Linton's places searched. And John Martin is sending me a stack of file folders, personnel files and what he called contracts and grants files. By courier somehow, through Derek's people. Or the State Patrol. Or something."

"Ah, yes. Maybe those grants files will provide some hint about why Linton changed his tune recently."

"Oh. Hadn't thought of that. But, yes, maybe they will. Anyway, my assignment for whenever they get here is to go through these files so I can give them back to John soonest. Maybe I'll end up copying a bunch of stuff, though." I paused and took a deep breath. "And there's something I need to talk with

you about. See, I talked with John on the phone for a while. He seems to think that you'll be returning to FSU, this fall or next January. He got to talking about it and I started to feel all guilty that he doesn't seem to know our plans to stay in Fraser."

"Hmm. Well, I expect that he was *trying* to make you feel guilty. The thing is, I already put him on notice that I was going to need to spend at least another year here. You know, to make sure the new building gets finished and moved into. I told him in writing. Well, email. But that's writing these days, because he acknowledged it. And he asked about what after that, and I just said 'We'll see.' So don't let him get you feeling guilty, OK?"

"Hmmp. Now I just feel manipulated. But I guess that's one of his skills that you've told me about." I sighed. "I have to say, I respect him, but I'm not sure I like him."

"Bingo. I've been glad to have him as my boss for these several years, but I've never considered him a close friend. He's too much of a chess player with everyone he deals with. And, yeah, being manipulative is definitely a big thing in his skill set."

"Anyway, I have homework at some point. But not this evening. That's a hint."

"Hmm. Hint taken. Want to go out? Pick a place."

"Good idea. I'll think about where."

"Good. And look. You probably don't need to copy stuff in those files when they get here. Just keep 'em until all this gets sorted out, and then you can ship them all back to the U. Scan what you need to keep. Save some trees, and all. That means you can start with triage, or something like that."

"Well, now, there's a good idea. I'm told the pile of folders is a couple of feet tall. Sounds daunting." I remembered something. "Oh, and I should tell you that Fran says he has Linton's laptop, got it from the hotel room. And the new FSU system password, which is supposed to work, is coming with the files. So, even though we didn't find anything in his apartment or office, maybe there's something on that computer of interest. And they also found what's probably his back-up drive, it's coming with the files."

"Sounds like you did have a good afternoon, even if it was just ordering Derek and everyone around." He paused and scratched an ear. "You know, some time back—I forget when—we talked about doing an aspen tour this fall. Now's the time to plan that. Seems like a few weeks from now, down that way, would be a good time frame. You could return the files to John in person."

I tried to remember what he was referring to. "Yeah, I remember that conversation. What are you thinking?"

"Well, with the drought we've been having, another horribly dry summer, the aspens will probably start changing up here pretty soon. Get this Linton thing cleared, and we can do a southwest Colorado tour a week or two later after they start here and take those files with us. And come home via Silverton and Ouray. If we get lucky and catch the aspens at their peak, it'll be spectacular."

"Great idea! Let's do it. But now I've got to figure out what I want for dinner."

* * *

Angela's mention of Fontenot's as the setting for Sandy's and her decision to become engaged made it just too tempting—I couldn't *not* want to eat there. As it tends to be, they were busy, but Hal made some kind of magic happen and we were seated at a relatively secluded table for two out of the main traffic patterns.

Fontenot's had begun calling itself a "fresh seafood and grill" sort of restaurant, but their menu still grew from their New Orleans roots. Hal started with their gumbo, the traditional deep-red Cajun soup, and I opted for something I'd never get at home, fried okra with a *remoulade* sauce. For his entrée, Hal went toward traditional French with the *bouillabaisse*, and I took the in-for-a-dime approach by ordering the shrimp *étouffée*.

We promised each other to eat frugally all weekend. But we broke the promise we'd made on the way to the restaurant to avoid talking shop.

It worked for a while, at least, the no-shop-talk promise. Hal had obviously been thinking about itineraries for our aspen tour, and that occupied most of the gumbo and okra course. Because he'd previously found several web-cams down there in the San Juan Mountains, he allowed as to how we ought to get on with precise planning because he was seeing early changes in the leaves. One place he was hoping for was a stop-over in Lake City, where an exceptional restaurant, Bruno's, beckoned. Besides, Hal pointed out, the previous time we'd fished the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River, we'd nearly been skunked. Maybe we'd have better luck this year, he said.

Somehow, it surprised me that it didn't surprise me that our aspen tour would involve fly-fishing. And that I'd expected it and, even, would be looking forward to it.

But eventually, about the time his fish soup and my shrimp arrived, curiosity got the better of us, and our mutual promise for no shop talk bit the dust. I think we'd both hoped for one of those romantic dinners like Sandy and Angela's, but we were too wrapped up in recent events for that to happen.

I spent Tuesday morning catching up on paperwork at my office in the Sheriff's Department, trying not to fidget. I was expecting the files to show up there, but didn't know exactly when. It turned out to be a pleasant surprise when a State Patrol car slid to a stop in the gravel parking lot about ten-thirty.

I decided to take the files home so I wouldn't be distracted by the hustle-bustle of the office. On the way, I realized that the triage idea would be a huge help with all those files, so I put it to work as I settled in at home with a new pot of coffee. That big pile of paper seemed not quite so intimidating at that point.

It also helped that I started with the files of Linton's research awards, because they were arranged in reverse chronological order. It turned out that the first thing there pertained to a grant—a very generous grant, as I later figured out—from something called "Partners in Energy and Economic Security." At the time, that didn't mean anything to me, but as I dug deeper into the awards files, more familiar names, such as "National Science Foundation" and "National Aeronautics and Space Administration" began showing up, so my curiosity about those Partners was piqued. Some background research on them was needed, I decided, so the Partners information went into my "priority" pile.

That worked so well that, when I found that Linton's personnel files were arranged chronologically, I simply started from the bottom. The newest section, which dealt with his pre-tenure review process, was interesting, as it contained letters from people around the country—including some from both Georgia Tech and Penn State—attesting to Linton's stellar research accomplishments as well as a couple from other FSU faculty with very careful wording, not entirely laudatory, about Linton's teaching record. And there was a portfolio, apparently assembled by Linton himself, making his case for tenure. It appeared that a decision would have been imminent, but for his demise.

I set aside those materials in the "maybe" pile I was building. There were also annual performance evaluations, which included advice to the young professor, and a more substantial review of his initial performance that had been done toward the end of his second year. The evaluations and that two-year review also went into my "maybe" pile.

The rest of the file folders that John Martin had given me included some labeled, in big, bold typeface, as “Student Perceptions of Teaching” forms, a sort of multiple choice test, they looked like. Mixed in with these were also what turned out to be complaints at various levels of formality from students. Once I figured out the SPOT scoring system and skimmed a couple of the complaints, I decided that Linton hadn’t been popular with the students—which validated one of Martin’s comments—even to the point of having quite formal, legalistic complaints filed against him. These went into my “priority” pile as well. It wasn’t at all clear that any real leads would emerge from a more careful reading of all the “priority” material, but at least a clearer picture of Linton’s history at FSU would come into focus. And, perhaps, Hal would be able to figure out why Linton suddenly defected into the climate-change opposition camp.

That seemed like the simplest question, so I had a closer look at the “Partners in Energy and Economic Security” paperwork. PEES, eh?

A verse of doggerel popped into my head, something I’d heard many a time at big family gatherings during the holidays. One of my great aunts, on my mother’s side, had married a first-generation Swede, a farmer from Iowa, Ole Sorenson, who wore Farmer John denim overalls everywhere—even to church, where they were always clean and pressed, with his tie tucked in the bib—and was a consummate cut-up. That made him quite the character, especially to all of us city-bred youngsters of distinct Italian extraction. In his not-quite Swedish accent, he’d crack us kids up by reciting, usually at the dinner table,

I eat my peas with honey ...

The first thing, chronologically, from PEES must have been a response to an inquiry made by Linton. “Dear Dr. Linton: Thank you for contacting us...” The rest made it clear that they were indeed glad to hear from him and provided information about how to submit a proposal.

I’ve done it all my life ...

This was followed by a glowing letter about how pleased they were to receive his proposal and how scholarly it was. I couldn’t help but notice a reference to how Linton’s views “*seem to fit with ours...*” There was also language about their expectations and how they might use his research findings.

It makes the peas taste funny ...

The rest was in the nature of budget negotiations and contract-like paperwork. It was interesting that PEES seemed to be offering a good bit more funding than Linton had asked for.

But it keeps them on the knife.

What was missing from the PEES paperwork was any hint of where the Partners got their own funding. For all I could tell, they were just printing money and, from the looks of things, lots of it. Like the ones stuck to the knife, there was something funny about this other PEES.

By that time, it was getting on toward mid-afternoon, so I called Hal, hoping to catch him at a coffee break.

“Well, good afternoon. Hope your day’s going well?” He sounded like he needed coffee, and, I decided from the background noise, he was probably getting some.

“Just fine, Hal. I’m finishing up with the Linton files—they arrived this morning—and I want to alert you to something. Got a pencil and paper?”

“Right. Sure. Somewhere in my jacket pockets. Hang on a minute.” There was a pause and some fumbling noises. “OK, got it. What’s up?”

“I thought I’d let you know something I found out about Linton’s research files. It seems that his most recent grant, or I guess it’s been two grants, were from some outfit that calls itself ‘PEES,’ with two ‘e’s, which stands for ‘Partners for Energy and Economic Security.’ There’s no information here about where their money comes from, but it doesn’t seem like one of the usual government funding agencies.”

“ ‘PEES,’ huh? Can’t say I’ve heard of them. And they’ve been funding Linton?”

“Linton seems to have written them a letter of inquiry or something, and they jumped at it. Then he must have written a proposal, and they funded it. Most generously, in fact. But none of their correspondence includes the usual contact information, like a web site address or even a phone number. There’s a mailing address, though, a post office box in Arlington, Virginia. Very odd.”

“Indeed. Well, good work. I’ll see what I can find out about them. I can skip this last afternoon session, I think.

“Thank you! I’ll see what I can come up with for dinner. And I promise no shop talk this evening, OK?”

* * *

Wednesday morning, I stayed home to comb through the Linton files more carefully. The previous afternoon’s triage had been a good start, and it was time to pay close attention to the contents of the “priority” pile and sort through the “maybe” pile again.

And although I tried, I just couldn’t find anything of any real interest in those files beyond the PEES business. It was disappointing, but at least it was done. Maybe, I thought, Hal had come up with some information about PEES. I headed down the hill to town to see if he had anything for me. The no-shop-talk the previous evening had held, for once.

The people at the MPARC conference were just breaking for lunch when I walked into the lobby. As I saw Hal coming out one of the doors from the auditorium, I heard a voice over my shoulder.

“Ms. Trieri? Do you have a minute.”

I turned to find Pat Grover standing behind me. “Uh, yes, if you’ll give me a minute first.”

I chased Hal down. “Hi, guy. I finally finished those files. Had lunch?”

“I was just thinking about it. How about we take a stroll?”

“Um, I want to have lunch with you, but someone needs to talk with me first. Can we manage that?” I had my fingers crossed.

He nodded. “No problem. I’ll go find some take-out sandwiches and meet you in my office, how about?”

“Excellent. Now, let’s see what Dr. Grover wants.” I walked back over to where she was waiting. “Sorry. I wanted to let my husband know I’m here, so we can have lunch.”

Her eyes got big. “You’re married to Dr. Weathers? Really? He seems like a great catch.”

“That’s my feeling, too. Now, what can I do for you, Dr. Grover? Shall we go see if that bench of ours outside is available?”

It was, and we sat in the shade of the aspens again.

“So, Ms. Trieri, you told me you were looking for background information about Phil Linton. And I told you everything I can think of about me, or, I mean, my role in his background.” She paused, using what I think of as a professor trick to make sure the student is keeping up, so I nodded.

“Anyway, I thought of something else. It doesn’t involve me, that’s why I didn’t bring it up before. But it’s something about Phil’s background.”

“I’d like to hear it. At this point, we’re casting a wide net.”

“Well, let’s see if I can get it to make sense. Like I said before, he and I were an item for a while, when we were both grad students at Georgia Tech. After we parted ways, I didn’t see him anymore, socially or anything, because we had very different circles of friends and we were in different departments. But I would see him around campus sometimes. I mean, Tech is a good-sized place, but after you’ve been, um, close to someone, it’s easy to recognize them in a crowd, right?” Another of those pauses, so I nodded again.

“I realize that this is going to sound like catty gossip, and it was all eight—nine?—years ago. But you said you wanted information about Phil.” She waited for me to nod again. “To make a long story as short as I can, it was toward the end of our time there, his and mine both, shortly before he moved up to Pennsylvania, I guess, that I was seeing him around campus in the company of another woman. At the time I really didn’t think anything of it. I believe I told you that our parting was mutual, so I wasn’t jealous or anything.”

This time her pause was for a deep breath. “Now, I don’t know exactly when he left Tech for his next thing, that post-doc he had in State College. He told me about that at dinner the other night. But I was around for another semester, and it was just after the beginning of that semester, the next fall after he got his Ph.D., I mean, that there was a story in the Atlanta paper, with a picture, about a woman who had committed suicide. I recognized the picture as the woman I’d seen Phil with.”

“Hmm. To be clear, you’re saying that a woman whom Linton had been seeing, or at least you’d seen them together, she committed suicide shortly after he left town?”

She nodded. “I saw them together on several occasions, but I don’t know anything about what sort of involvement they had going. And, see, in the newspaper article, it mentioned her name, Miciela Abercrombie, and said that she was a program assistant somewhere in the administration, the registrar’s office, maybe. And, um, that she was married to a soldier, an Army guy, who was stationed in Korea, I think it was.”

“Ah. So Linton was seeing a woman who was married to a soldier stationed overseas; he, meaning Linton, left town; she killed herself. The plot thickens.”

“Yes, well, to push the metaphor, I’d say the plot’s congealed. Thing is, there was a rumor around campus—she was an employee on campus, after all—that she was a few months pregnant when she died.”

“Oh. Goodness. Miciela Abercrombie, you said? I guess I’ll have to do some digging. Presumably, the Atlanta paper keeps archives I can search.” I tried to stop looking shocked and smiled. “Ms. Grover,

thanks so much for this. I don't know if it will have any bearing on Linton's death, but it's certainly the sort of background I was looking for. We'll just have to follow up and see where things go."

"Well, it seemed like I should tell you about it."

"I'm glad you did. Do you suppose that any of the other Georgia Tech alums who are here would know about this?"

"Mmm. Let me think." She stared off into the distance. "I believe they all were long gone by the time of the suicide. Except maybe Dex. Uh, Dexter Lemone. He's got a table here for his organization, that SCARAB outfit."

"Dexter was at Georgia Tech? I didn't know that."

A rosy blush crept upward from her collar-bones to her cheeks. "Another of my youthful indiscretions, I'm afraid. Back before I figured out how to pick 'em more carefully. Uh, I'd dumped Dex a couple of years earlier in favor of Phil. Duh."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Happens to the best of us."

I switched my smile to the apologetic mode. "And thank you again. Now, though, if you'll excuse me, I've got to find out what sort of sandwich Hal rustled up for me. I promised to have lunch with him."

The big deli sandwich—a sort of club with three meats and cheese—Hal bought for me took care of my hunger and left enough over for supper. When he saw that I was slowing down, he decided that conversation was once again possible

"So, I looked into that PEES outfit you mentioned yesterday." He was still nibbling around the remaining edges of some kind of Italian sub he'd got for himself. "They're quite coy about providing the sort of information that you'd normally expect from a non-profit. And they're not tax-exempt, so they don't have to file public tax returns."

"Do they have a web site?"

"Yep. What would we do without web search engines? It's not one of the usual suspects, though, like pees.com or pees.org. In fact, pees.com is some German electronics company. Anyway, I found it and learned quite a bit. It must be that Linton found it a couple of years ago and sent them the letter you mentioned." He heaved a sigh. "And I guess I should have expected what's there. It's obviously some kind of front for the activist fringe of the fossil-fuels industry. The people who are digging in their heels against anything that interferes with their business-as-usual profit-making, climate change be damned. If Phil was getting funded by them, then he was in the business of creating propaganda for their so-called education campaign. The one that provides fodder for the right-leaning wingnuts and the anti-environment politicians."

"So Dexter Lemone is right? Not that Linton deserved to be shot, I don't mean that. But that he sold out? And that he wasn't doing real science these days?"

"Seems like. But, you've got to remember, plenty of scientists have become active in political issues. And that means that the objectivity of their science comes into question, too. It's not just the climate skeptics like Linton. Fortunately, our meeting here has been relatively free of that stuff, with the exception of Linton. And, of course, he's not disrupting things this week."

"Lemone isn't really part of the meeting, I guess."

"We have public comment opportunities now and then, and people like him can say their piece. But they're limited to two minutes, and if the list is long, those who haven't spoken get priority. I think he's

had only a couple of chances since the meeting started. And our official meeting people, the delegates, they saw right through him during his first time behind the microphone.”

“So Linton became a shill for the fossil-fuel industry. Does that make him a target for murder?”

“Doesn’t seem likely. I mean, there are lots of shills like that, many far more visible. Surely, an environmentalist hit squad would go after the visible ones first. I mean, for all his local celebrity, at FSU and at this meeting, he was really very small potatoes.” He cocked his head sideways. “So, I saw you talking with Pat Grover yet again. Anything new?”

“Ha! Is there ever. Had your dose of soap opera for today?”

* * *

Six

After discussing dinner plans—we agreed that finishing the rest of those big sandwiches along with tossed salad would be plenty—I left for points north and west, specifically the sheriff’s office in Hot Sulphur Springs. I needed a look at Linton’s laptop, and I was hoping that the department’s computer wizard could help both with that and with an online search for information about Miciela Abercrombie. And, especially, her husband. Where, I was wondering, had he been the previous Friday?

Fran’s department had managed just enough budget restructuring to hire Linda Welch as their very own computer person. Previously, the sheriff’s department had shared one of the county’s people, but so much in the way of police work had begun to depend on computer wizardry that a dedicated specialist was needed. Because there was only one of her, she was stretched pretty thin, given both the hardware and software worlds to manage, not to mention that new, very weird world of social media. But she liked challenges.

In fact, it surprised me that she hadn’t already cracked Linton’s password. But then I looked at the slip of paper that John Martin had put into that top folder and found a twelve-character string of random letters, numbers, and oddball keyboard characters—just like what all of the computer security people recommend and what no one uses because it’s impossible to remember.

When I showed her that new password and told her how it was supposed to have been pushed out to the laptop, she was skeptically hopeful.

“I think it’ll depend on how the guy who owned this laptop—Linton did you say his name was?—how he had it set up. Maybe the push worked, but maybe he had to give it permission. Anyway, we’ll see.”

I handed her the USB drive I’d liberated from Linton’s office.

“This goes with it? Ah, backups, maybe. Well if that password works, we’ll be in business. Let me finish this for the sheriff, about ten minutes. Then I’ll have a go at the laptop.”

That gave me the chance to hunt down the sheriff and fill him in about my trip, and especially about what Pat Grover had told me.

“You said that was eight or nine years ago? Seems like a long time.” Fran was clearly not encouraged.

“Fran, it’s about the best thing in the way of motive we’ve seen. A guy goes off in the service, his wife gets seduced by another guy, or at least he sees it that way, she gets impregnated and commits suicide. I’d say he’s got reason to have a grudge. And if he was stationed overseas, it might take a long time for him to act on it back here in the states.”

“But you don’t even know his full name.”

“ ‘Abercrombie’ is a good place to start, at least. I’m hoping to be able to search the Atlanta paper’s archives online. He’ll be mentioned in the obituary. And Linda might be able to help with that.” I looked at my watch. “Oh, she may be started on Linton’s computer by now. Want to see?”

His curiosity got the better of him, so he followed me back to Linda’s cubicle.

When she noticed him standing there, she jumped up and almost saluted. “Sheriff! Ah, sir!”

“She was in the Navy.” Fran said this looking at me, then he turned to Linda. “Easy there, Linda. Down, girl. When it’s just us, we’re casual around here. If you feel the need to be formal in public, fine. Otherwise, casual is better. Now, Annette tells me you’re going to be able to get into this computer.”

“Yes, sir. All done. Uh, the password worked, Director Trieri.”

Fran smacked himself on the forehead. “Linda, c’mon. Really! It’s just us. I’m Fran, she’s Annette. Really. Chill. It’s fine. Please. Sit down and show us.”

“OK s..., uh, Fran.” She sat and turned to the keyboard. “The password worked, but there’s nothing out of the ordinary. Just a computer running Windows, the newest version. And that USB drive is a backup, uh, Annette. I thought I’d restore those files onto another disk someplace, just to see if there’s anything unique there.”

“Linda, can you tell if there are notes from this meeting that’s going on up in Winter Park?” I was interested in anything that Linton may have had to say about other meeting participants.

“Not without a search. Although there’s a folder here on the desktop called ‘IPCC.’ Could that be of interest?”

“Perfect. I’ll take the laptop, if you don’t mind, and let you work on that backup drive, how about?”

“OK. Um, ma’am, can I suggest that we change the password again, first? And that I disable that business of how new passwords get pushed to it?”

“Outstanding idea, Linda. Please do it. And, hey, make the password something we can remember, OK? I mean, it probably won’t be connected to a network again. We’ve got other systems for that, right?”

“If it’s OK with you, Fran, Annette, I’ll be making some changes so that this computer will be under our full control. That way, we won’t have to worry about anything.”

“Mmm. Look on the bottom of that thing, Linda. I bet there’s a property sticker there proclaiming it as FSU property. That means it’s State of Colorado property, and I’m a State of Colorado law enforcement officer. Therefore, I have jurisdiction over that little box. And having full control is just right. Thanks in advance for the changes.”

Linda looked a little dazed, but that was all right with me.

While she was working on Linton’s laptop, I returned to my office, to find Angela Espinosa concentrating on paperwork that I recognized was part of her required firearms requalification. Seeing it reminded me that she and I would be spending part of a day at the firing range down at the base of Byers Canyon sometime soon.

“Annette! You’re back! Do any good this morning?” She was still new enough in my office that she was full of enthusiasm, even for paperwork. Or maybe it was youth in action. Whatever it was, it made me feel tired.

“I did. And also a tad more when I stopped at MPARC on my way in.” I sketched a summary of my various findings for her.

“Married, with her husband overseas in the service, and pregnant? And abandoned by the father? No wonder she couldn’t handle it all.” Angela was indignant. “Do you think this has something to do with Linton’s death? And what about this guy Lemone? He’s got a reason to have a grudge, too, if he thinks Linton stole his girlfriend, that woman Pat Grover.”

“No way of knowing, yet, either of those things. I think a little more research into this Miciela Abercrombie would be worth the effort, though. At the least, maybe we can find the newspaper article that Pat Grover referred to. And I need to talk with Lemone again. Ugh.” I shrugged. “The thing is, we’re light on motive in this case.”

“So you think maybe her serviceman husband did this, for revenge or something?” Angela looked skeptical.

“I’m not ready to suggest that, at least not yet. But I want to check it out. If you’ve got a better idea, I’ll sure listen. Anyway, we’re into Linton’s computer now, and maybe we’ll find something of interest there.”

“Ah, that’s definitely progress. And something I thought of, Annette. Linton and the post-doc guy, um, Chris Brothers, they planned to go mountain biking last Friday. But, assuming this really was a homicide, whoever did it must have known about their plans. Do we know who they might have talked to about going up there on Friday, the lift, the timing? Or who could have known about it somehow?”

“Hmm. Good thinking. I didn’t ask Brothers about that specifically, and maybe it would be a good idea to. He certainly didn’t volunteer that anyone else knew about it, beyond saying that Linton had proposed the outing at a coffee break, I think it was. Or maybe he said a reception. But this is important, because it’s a huge component of opportunity. If the perp, or perps, didn’t know about the biking plans, they wouldn’t have been able to set up that so-called ‘accident.’ And the means, that rock, which was lying there on the hillside. Motive, means, opportunity. That’s what we need.”

“I guess the conference is over tomorrow, right? Seems like Brothers might not be around too much longer.”

I checked my watch. “Right again. OK, tell you what. How about you tackle the computer search—you’re better than I am at that anyway, and you can email me the results—and I’ll hightail it back to Winter Park and catch him at the end of today’s session.”

* * *

Wednesday supper was decidedly more casual than Tuesday’s, at Fontenot’s, had been. The sandwich leftovers were just fine, especially when washed down with some Beaujolais. While we ate, we caught up on our respective afternoons—mostly mine.

“I had another interesting conversation with Chris Brothers this afternoon.”

“Yeah, I saw the two of you over there in the corner by yourselves.”

“Angela, and she’s doing the computer search on Miciela Abercrombie, by the way, she pointed out that if this really was a homicide, the person, or persons, who were responsible for it had to know that Brothers and Linton were going mountain biking last Friday, and they also must have had some idea of

where they were going. Chris said that he didn't tell anyone, but, of course, he couldn't speak for Linton."

"Mmm. Seems like Linton stayed pretty much to himself during the evenings, although I don't really know that. But he didn't seem to socialize much."

"Yeah, well, what Brothers did say that was interesting was that he and Linton talked about going biking the Wednesday before, during one of your meeting's coffee breaks. He clarified that for me today. And he said there were all sorts of people around, and they could have been overheard."

"Did they talk about where they were going? Like, what trails?"

"Apparently. Brothers said that Linton was talking about a map he'd downloaded, and that he, Linton, I mean, was especially interested in some expert trails he saw. They talked about details quite a bit, I guess."

"So it's someone at the meeting, then. Great." Hal looked pretty disgusted at that point.

"Or someone at the meeting told someone else. I have to say, I'm going to have to look more closely at Mr. Lemone, the SCARAB guy. I found out that he was at Georgia Tech around the same time Linton was. *And* he got dumped in favor of Linton by Pat Grover."

Now Hal looked surprised. "You really think that Lemone, or maybe SCARAB, put out a hit on Linton? Really?"

"Yeah, well, I guess it's a stretch, isn't it? But there's something about that guy that pisses me off."

"Hmm." He laughed and shook his head. "Just don't neglect other possibilities in the meantime. I mean, everyone leaves town Friday night or Saturday. Well, mostly. No doubt some people will hang around for vacation time, but I don't know who."

"Oh. So I've got all day tomorrow to get this figured out, eh?" I tried, but probably failed, to waggle my eyebrows, Groucho-style. "Well, on that note, I'm going to indulge in dessert. I stopped at the Safeway and got some ice cream and cookies to bring home. Want some?"

Hal, of course, was not going to say "no" to that offer, so we indulged. I wound up eating too much that evening by half at least. But I didn't drink too much, so Thursday morning I was ready to rock 'n roll when I saw Angela's email about the results of her computer search. It provided new, and quite interesting, information.

Miciela Spadaro Abercrombie had married one Jason Albert Abercrombie thirty months before her suicide. The groom was a third-year student at Georgia Tech and part of the ROTC program there; his initial deployment, immediately upon graduation, was as a U.S. Army Second Lieutenant in a quartermaster company in South Korea. He had therefore been overseas for about a year before his wife killed herself. Angela noted, in a sort of footnote, that based on her research it was improbable that Lieutenant Abercrombie would have visited stateside during that year. Jason Abercrombie's current location was unknown, although, because Angela couldn't find anything about him on the internet, including its social media branches, she suggested that he might still be in the Army.

More interesting, to me, was what Angela found and didn't find about Miciela's family. Her father, Tony "the Ferret" Spadaro, according to archived newspaper stories, had been quite active in the New York crime syndicates until a year after Miciela's death. His role was not quite clear, but his arrest on a variety of mob-related charges and subsequent ratting out of his entire organization had made large-type headlines for some months. Then he, as well as his wife Fabiana, had simply disappeared along with Miciela's two brothers, Antonio Junior and Danilo.

It seemed obvious to me that Antonio Senior had taken advantage of the federal witness protection program and had since been living somewhere obscure under a different name and, most likely, in disguise. Barring some sort of miracle, any further investigation of Miciela's family was very likely going to be a dead end. On the other hand, if Phillip Linton's callous behavior had somehow precipitated Miciela's suicide, the Spadaro family's personal motivation to extract revenge could well be right up there with Jason Abercrombie's. And their cultural motivation could well be even stronger, if she really had been pregnant. All this made, for me, any motivation that Dexter Lemone may have had pale by comparison.

So, finding the whereabouts of Jason and of the Spadaros seemed to be a priority, despite their being far removed from the scene of the action and from both means and opportunity.

Rather than have Angela work at a task at which she'd probably not be able to succeed, I decided, after considerable debate with myself, to call in the heavy artillery.

"Mac MacQuarrie here. Oh, wait. I'm supposed to say, 'MPARC, Mac MacQuarrie speaking.' Sorry, I'm still learning." It was early in the day, and he sounded like he needed more coffee.

"Mac, good morning. It's Annette. And I really don't care what you're supposed to say, I'm just glad I caught you."

"Annette! Good morning! Say, Hal said you went to Fontenot's a couple of evenings ago. Is that as good as I've heard?"

"Best in town, assuming you're looking for seafood with a southern Louisiana bent. Most satisfying. Take Sam there, and insist on a table away from the crowd. Hal managed to pull that off, and I'm sure you can, too."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Sam and I need an evening out for some conversation. And I should warn you, that conversation may come your way eventually. She's making noises about wanting to move over to Estes Park, and I'm betting she'll want to talk with you about it."

"Really? Oh, Mac. Hal and I would hate to lose you guys. Except, I guess, it's just over those hills, the big ones to the east. But thanks for telling me, so I can be ready if Sam raises the topic."

"Thanks, Annette. And it's not like I need you to talk her out of it. I mean, what she says makes a lot of sense in some ways. But she needs someone to listen, someone besides me. Anyway, what can I do for you this fine morning?"

"Mac, I remember that you did a lot of magic with computer searches, searches on computers that people like me don't have access to, for that mine investigation."

"Yeah, well, I do still have some connections to that old, weird world I used to live in." He sounded hesitant. "But I don't know how I could help."

"You know about the Linton case, right? That guy at Hal's conference that turned up dead?"

"I'll tell ya, Annette—it's the talk of the town. Or at least my little part of it."

"Well, I don't know if this classifies as an MPARC security thing or not, but it would help us make progress on clearing it—and, here's a secret, it's a homicide, according to the ME—it would help if I could get some restricted computers searched."

"Oh. That's easy. What do you need to know?"

As I was telling him, I decided I didn't want to know what he had thought I wanted, when he'd hesitated before.

Unbeknownst to me, Fran Schmidt had decided to make the autopsy results public on Thursday. That explained the influx of non-sheriff's people into the departmental offices about the middle of Thursday morning, something I noticed after my phone call with Mac. Many of those people were of the overly-coiffed, hyper-made-up types that marked them as TV reporters even without their camera guys tagging around after them.

When I figured out what was going on, I went looking for Fran and finally found him in his office behind a closed door.

"Big day today, huh?" I decided to let him tell me about it all.

"Yeah, well, George has been bugging me, says it'll make him look bad if his report isn't released, and he's right. I owe it to him. So I'll have myself the usual little show-and-tell out there." He was oddly calm about it all, given his usual case of nerves before going on such public display.

"It's been almost a week, and they're going to want to know about suspects and so on. Got a story?"

"Not unless you've managed to pull a rabbit out of your hat in the past couple of days, I don't." He shrugged.

"Maybe you could calm things down if you said that we have no reason to think that anyone from here in Grand County is responsible." I rubbed the end of my nose. "That's true enough, after all. It could raise questions about where we're looking, but you can dodge those by talking about not compromising the investigation."

"Won't they ask about people from Hal's conference?"

"Ah. Good point." I thought for a few seconds. "And if anyone at the conference talks to the press, that could make things a bit dicey. No one there seems to have thought very well of our victim."

"But you've talked to them, and you got only helpful information, right? No reason to suspect any of them, is what you said."

"Not really. I mean, there's nothing of any real substance. And maybe that's the answer if questions about the conference come up. Everyone there is shocked, and they've cooperated fully, and there's no reason to think any of them is involved."

"Angela told me that she was doing a computer search for you. Want to tell me about that?" He stared right through me, clearly not too happy.

"I think I'd rather wait until this press conference is over, Fran. For one thing, she didn't get very far. And, for another, it's all pretty removed from this Grand County homicide. Also, we don't want to show our hand on this one too soon. We might frighten someone off."

"Hmm. OK. Well, does that mean you've got a solid lead?"

"'Solid' is probably too strong. It's more like a Jello lead. But I think that if you were having Mary do this press conference, you wouldn't tell her about it in advance." I shrugged. "We can talk about it over lunch or something, OK?"

So it was that my colleague the Grand County Sheriff went into his press conference as less than a happy camper.

But it worked out well, all-in-all. He started with his usual announcement, a summary of the press release that was simultaneously handed out.

“Thank you for coming, all. It’s been almost a week since we recovered the body of a white male, a fatality near a mountain bike trail here in eastern Grand County. He was identified as Phillip Linton, age 32, single, a resident of Durango. It was our initial assessment that the death was accidental, but we now have autopsy results that suggest otherwise. We’re now treating this fatality as a suspicious death that may be a homicide, and a priority investigation is in progress. I’m afraid, however, that so far the headway we’ve made is limited to eliminating possibilities rather than closing in on a suspect. To complicate matters for us, this week was full of the sort of petty crime that’s kept us busier than we’re staffed for, what with some local events that attracted, well, less than upstanding citizens to our valley.”

He looked around the room. “I’ll try to answer questions, but I have to warn you that I’m going to have to declare a broad area of interest off limits, to protect the integrity of our investigation.”

One of the TV people, a middle-aged man who, from the back, was obviously wearing a hair-piece, jumped up. “Why did the autopsy take so long, sheriff?”

That didn’t faze Fran in the slightest. “‘Take so long’? Really? I guess you folks from the affluent parts of Colorado, like the Front Range, are used to instant gratification or something. Up here, we’re under-funded and, like I said, under-staffed on all quarters. Given all the activity we’re dealing with this time of year—the summer tourist season has begun to rival the ski season, after all, and this was the summer week from hell—I’m quite happy that we had the autopsy results when we did. Our Medical Examiner, George Neering, is the best in the state, as far as I’m concerned, and lots of others, too, and he did a superb job.”

“What was it in the report that led you to conclude that the fatality might be a homicide?” Hair-piece guy wasn’t giving up easily.

“That, actually, was Dr. Neering’s conclusion. And he won’t be telling you any more about it than I will, because we need to keep that confidential as part of our investigation.”

“Sheriff? Lou Wendelstadt here, Grand County Times. Could you elaborate on your ‘week from hell’ comment?”

“Lou, you know what all’s been happening up here this past week as well as I do. All sorts of summer events that draw crowds from the rest of the state and from even farther afield. Lots of non-residents in town, more than the usual number. Groups that don’t necessarily get along. And my job, and the job of my staff, is to play referee. Very time-consuming and manpower-intensive.”

“Sheriff Schmidt? What is the role of the FBI in this investigation?” A woman both over-dressed and overly made-up, at least by Grand County standards, had arisen.

This question did surprise Fran a bit, and he looked it. “Role of the FBI? Huh? Uh, as far as I know, no role at all. We haven’t called them, and they haven’t called us. And there’s no reason for them to be involved, as far as we can tell.”

“That’s not what I’m told, sheriff.”

“OK. But what you’re told isn’t at all relevant to me unless *I’m* told, and told by the FBI, not by some rumor-mongering bystander.” He stared bullets at the reporter, and she sat down.

It occurred to me that perhaps she had meant “CBI,” and so I decided that it was a good time to escape gracefully. I noticed, as I walked out the door, that Angela was following me.

“Whew! Angela, I think we got out of there just in time. I bet that TV lady really meant to ask about our role, not the FBI’s.”

“I think you may be right, Annette. So, did you get that email about the Spadaros?”

“You mean the one where you said they just disappeared?”

“Right. I’ve done some more digging, but there’s nothing there. Or, at least, nothing on the computers I can search.” She looked discouraged.

“When I read that—and, by the way, good job on what you *did* find—when I read that I thought of the federal witness protection program. It’s their job to disappear people, not in the South American way, of course, but just as effectively.”

Her eyes got big. “Oh. Yeah. I see what you mean. Of course. I feel dumb that I didn’t think of that. I mean, Tony the Ferret turned snitch. He’d be dead meat without some kind of protection.”

“And any information about where he is and what his name is now and, I suppose, what kind of plastic surgery he’s had is buried way deep in some super-secret computer somewhere in the U.S. Marshals Service offices. Way too deep for the likes of us to have access to it.”

“Annette, you have a funny look in your eyes.” Angela and I had been working together for only a couple of months, but she’d learned to read me right away.

“Who, me?” I tried to look innocent. “Anyway, if I find out anything, you know, if a little birdie tells me or something, I’ll be sure to let you know. Meanwhile, though, I had that chat with Chris Brothers you suggested.”

“Huh? I didn’t suggest it, you did.”

“You suggested that we need to figure out how the perp, or perps, knew that Linton was going to be on that trail at that time, and you mentioned Brothers. Anyway the answer is that Linton and Brothers talked about their plans in the middle of a crowd at a coffee break at that conference.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t help much.” She was obviously let down.

“Except that it means that someone at the conference is involved somehow. I’d about given up on that. Oh. And Fran doesn’t know this, yet. Nor does he know about your computer search results. You need to be available to explain it all to him. I promised that we would. I should say, though, that when I talked with him before, he seemed put out that he didn’t know about your work already. So when you explain it to him, you can mention that you just started yesterday afternoon. And a brief summary is probably all that’s needed.”

“I have to explain it to him?”

“Don’t worry. Let’s go find him together. We can gang up on him. He’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

* * *

Seven

To his credit, Fran was patient with both of us. Angela went first and, as I’d suggested, provided only a summary of her findings about the Spadaro family. My comments about what Chris Brothers had told me the day before were more interesting to him.

“And this conference ends tomorrow? So people will be leaving town? That complicates things, doesn’t it?” He leaned back in his chair and put his cowboy boots up onto a pile of paper on his desk.

“At least we have solid contact information for all of them.” Although I was trying to be as upbeat as possible, the prospect of traveling all over North America for more interviews didn’t seem very appealing to me.

“Mmm. I’d sure hate to see this case go cold.” He tapped the pointy toes of his boots together. “Annette, you’ve maintained that there must have been two people involved in this, right? I guess that means that one was up at the top of that expert trail, by the top of the lift somewhere, and the other one was down the mountain a ways, in the woods. So they communicated by walkie-talkie or something.”

“Or maybe text messages, or phone. There’s cell service up there, right?”

“Right. I forgot. Hmm.”

Angela jumped in. “Sheriff, we could get cell-phone records from the tower that reaches that part of the mountain, couldn’t we? And I finally got a list of everyone who rented bicycles at Winter Park last Friday. But I haven’t had a chance to look at it yet.”

He looked impressed. “Good thinking about the phone records, and the list could help, too, because of this: Where I was going before was to suggest that it’s possible that this guy Brothers you talked with is the person who was at the top, acting as a look-out and so forth. I’m not saying it’s true, just that it’s possible.”

“Fair enough.” I didn’t believe it, but it *did* seem possible.

“Right. That takes care of how the perps knew about the biking arrangement, where they were and when they were there. Now it’s just a matter—well, maybe not ‘just’—but it’s a matter of figuring out who was down there on the mountainside moving rocks and bashing heads.” He pointed a finger at the ceiling. “And I think you told me that this guy Brothers lives over in Boulder, which is close enough that some friend of his could have come up here for the day. They discussed the mountain biking on Wednesday, you said. That’s plenty of time to set all this in motion.”

I opened my mouth to object, but then I had to close it when I realized that he was right. Except for one thing.

“What about motive, Fran?”

“Aw, hell, I don’t know. Maybe something early in the meeting, like on Monday or Tuesday, pissed him off. Or maybe there was something from their past, like at some other meeting or something. Don’t all these guys travel in the same professional circles?”

“Actually, they don’t, Fran, as I found out when I went through all their credentials last weekend. They’re all over the scientific map. Although I don’t remember specifically about Brothers and Linton. Brothers said he’d never met Linton before this meeting, though.”

“Mmm. Let’s make sure their respective backgrounds corroborate that. If so, well, I’ll be less inclined to waste time and energy on Brothers. Of course, that puts us back to square one.” He looked at Angela. “Except for the cell-tower records. That’s a good idea. And maybe we could get a list of all the people at the conference and see how that compares to the rental bike list. Any one of them could have done what I was just speculating about.”

And another idea, although perhaps not exactly such a good one, had popped into my head. Someone who did have motive was my favorite scapegoat, Dexter Lemone. If he’d overheard the conversation between Brothers and Linton, he could have been the second guy, the one on the mountainside. And Brothers, at the top, might not even have known Lemone’s plans. As much as I’d decided that Brothers was not involved in Linton’s death, this possibility was making me re-think my earlier conclusion. Lemone’s whereabouts the previous Friday suddenly became important for me to know.

I remembered that Lemone had declined to talk with me about where he had been on that fatal Friday until after that autopsy report was public. And now it was. He’d also suggested he would be

wanting a lawyer. Given that, it seemed to me that we ought to pick him up for questioning and hold him in Grand County's resplendent public facilities until his legal team showed up. At least, I thought, that would give me a warm, fuzzy feeling all over.

That reasoning gelled in my head as Angela and I were leaving Fran's office, so I turned back and outlined it to him.

"You want to pick up a guy for questioning because, first, he said the victim deserved to be 'taken out and shot,' I think you said, because of his political views, plus he has a personal grudge, and, second, because he wouldn't talk to you about where he was last Friday?" He frowned. "Seems like the former is just stupid, but the latter could be interpreted as withholding evidence or some such thing. How do you think he'd react? Could be he'd sue us, I guess."

"He'll want a lawyer, I'm pretty sure. That'd give us some time to make him cool his heels and wake up to how seriously we're treating this." I shrugged. "He did a pretty good job of just blowing me off before."

"C'mon, Annette. I don't see a justification to bring him in. The last thing we need is a harassment lawsuit to deal with."

"Fran, aside from that connection to Linton's girlfriend committing suicide, Lemone is the only person we've found who has anything resembling a motive. And he was in the right place at the right time, by which I mean he was here in the valley last Friday with a day off from the conference. And he could well have overheard Linton's and Brothers' plans. At least we should find out if Lemone has an alibi." I understood Fran's desire to avoid unnecessary litigation, but it was frustrating that he didn't seem to want to pursue this lead.

"Well, go question him again, and lean on him this time. Make sure he knows that we know it wasn't an accident. If he's got a verifiable alibi, then he ought to tell you about it, I guess."

Although I didn't relish the notion of talking with Lemone again, this was enough of a victory that I felt successful.

I checked the time. "All right, I guess that makes sense. And if I hustle, I can catch him during the conference lunch break."

I may have set yet another record for getting from Hot Sulphur Springs to Winter Park Village. Partly, it was my frustration, but I really did want to avoid having to drag Lemone out of the afternoon session. That, I knew, would be the penultimate afternoon session, and no doubt he'd want to observe it.

I was glad to find him sitting behind his propaganda table, as I'd begun to think of it, munching a sandwich. There was a mountain bike leaning against the wall behind his chair, and it bothered me that I couldn't remember if he'd had it the other times I'd seen him in the lobby.

"Ah, Mr. Lemone. I'm glad I caught you before the afternoon session starts."

"Ah, crap. Now what?" He, it seemed, was his usual not-so-gregarious self.

"When we talked the last time, the sheriff's office hadn't released information from Phillip Linton's autopsy, and I wasn't authorized to do so. But now it's been discussed in a press conference." I paused for effect, but it didn't work—he didn't react. "It turns out that Linton's death was not accidental. Rather, it appears to have been a homicide."

That did have some affect, although perhaps not what I'd expected. He continued chewing and swallowed, then picked up a bottle of water and took a long drink. No doubt he was buying time to think.

"And? You want to talk with me why?"

“You declined to discuss your whereabouts last Friday morning before, and, well, I’m sure you can see that it’s more important than ever now.”

“Meaning I’m some sort of suspect?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. Yet. But, based on your comment to me about Linton’s deserving to die, I do need to put you in the ‘person of interest’ category. If, however, you have a verifiable alibi for last Friday morning, you’ll be in the clear. Understand?”

“What I understand is that you’re harassing me for no good reason. And those Denver lawyers with all those ambulance-chasing TV ads do more than chase ambulances, they also take on harassment cases.”

“Mr. Lemone, you can make your life much easier if you simply tell me about where you were, and when, last Friday morning. By not cooperating, you’re deepening my suspicions, and that will apply ten-fold with the sheriff. He may just decide it’s too risky to let you leave his county. And if you’re held for the twenty-four hours allowable without a charge, I doubt if any of those lawyers will be interested in you when they hear that you’re there on a possible murder one.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh good grief. Look, pal. I might look to you like a member of your mother’s bridge club or something.” I was remembering Hal’s wisecrack about how Chris Brothers would likely want to call me “Mom.” “But I’m an honest-to-God law enforcement officer with all the tools of the trade, including a service weapon and cuffs and various other doo-dads. And I know how to use them. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget a poor schmuck a few years ago who was also probably thinking ‘you wouldn’t dare’ when I had him in my sights and he didn’t obey my command to drop his weapon and I blew him away. Do you really want to play bluff here? I mean, c’mon, man, all you need to do is to talk to me about where you were last Friday.”

My little speech had been delivered in a gentle, conversational tone, but, at the end, he began to slide his hands off the table-top, where they had been resting, toward his body. So I turned up the gain.

“Mr. Lemone, I command you to *freeze!*” And I reached behind my back toward where I was wearing my Glock. “Keep your hands on the top of the table where I can see them!”

* * *

Like a good boy, he froze. This also had the effect, I could see in my peripheral vision, of attracting a good bit of attention, part of which involved people who, it seemed, had been directly behind me and suddenly decided to move off to the sides.

I was glad to see that I’d turned up the gain enough, to about my level two-and-a-half voice, to get Lemone’s undivided attention. He suddenly stopped with the sneering, arrogant look and become frightened.

“Ah, OK. Shit. Everyone’s staring at us. Um, I’m frozen, OK? And maybe we can just chill for a minute until people lose interest, how about?”

As casually as I could, I slid my hand around and into the front pocket of my slacks, and I also resumed my gentle, conversational tone. “Can I now assume you’re going to cooperate, Mr. Lemone? And you should know that the fact that I had to use that command level at you puts me fully in the driver’s seat here. I did it because it appeared to me that you might be reaching for a weapon. With lots of witnesses. I now have probable cause to arrest you and incarcerate you pending a judicial hearing.

Given all the attacks on law enforcement officers in recent times, judicial hearings of that nature tend to favor positions such as mine. In other words, pal, you either cooperate fully or you're fucked. Got it?"

He reminded me of a bouquet of daisies that had been neglected—he flat-out wilted. I wondered if he'd burst into tears.

The tap on the shoulder was startling, but it was gentle enough that I didn't jump too high.

I turned my head, still staring at Lemone, just enough to say, "Yes?"

Hal's voice was reassuring. "Everything OK here, Ms. Trieri?"

"It is, Dr. Weathers. I hope your afternoon session goes well." And I turned just enough to wink at him.

He smiled and turned to the onlookers. "OK, folks, I think we need to get our afternoon session started. Let's head on in there."

And, to my relief and even more to Lemone's, probably, Hal sort of shooed everyone ahead of himself into the auditorium. I waited until the lobby was cleared out.

"Mr. Lemone, I was trying to get our conversation finished in time for you to be part of this session. But your attitude and all foiled my plan. Do you want to have our conversation here, or would you like a bit more privacy?"

"Uh, well, I ..."

"I don't want to have a conversation with me standing here and you sitting there. That's stupid. So I could snag another chair and sit here, if that would work for you. Or, we could go outside and sit on a bench out there, where I had a very nice conversation with another conference person, one of your old girlfriends, in fact. It's under some lovely aspens."

He picked the aspens. I found it amusing that he was extraordinarily careful to keep his hands away from his body and visible to me at all times during our walk outside to that bench I had in mind. I was wondering if he'd rise to my bait about Pat Grover, and also about why he'd lied previously about knowing Phillip Linton.

"So, Dexter—I feel like we should be on a first-name basis by now—what's the problem here? Why don't you want to tell me about last Friday? Are you always this obstreperous? Is it my law-enforcement credentials that put you off? Or what?" It occurred to me that five questions might overload his circuits, but I was prepared to be patient in case he needed a reboot.

"OK. So here's the deal. Yeah, I said that I thought Linton deserved to die. But, c'mon, that was a figure of speech, you know? I was as shocked as everyone else when he did die. And, I have to say, I was more upset about it than some of the other people at this meeting. During that first week, he made some people really mad, and they never met him before. I mean, here he is, an assistant professor at an obscure little university out in the boondocks, and he's coming on as if he's a National Academy member or something."

He let out a big sigh. "That sort of arrogance fits him perfectly, always has. I'll never understand why Patty was so attracted to it. In retrospect, though, I'm sort of glad she was. It's worked out better for me that she dumped me."

"So you'll know, what you're saying is pretty much in line with what others have said, including Dr. Weathers. He, in fact, mentioned that he would like to—let's see if I can quote him—'wring his skinny damned neck.' Linton's, that is." I smiled, trying to be encouraging and heartened by his admission about Pat Grover.

“Right. Exactly. I think a lot of people in there,” he jerked a thumb in the direction of the building, “felt that way. But everyone was pretty shocked to hear of his death. And when they hear that the sheriff thinks it’s a homicide, well, they’ll *really* be shocked.”

He heaved a huge sigh. “So, anyway, what was I doing last Friday morning? Well, I was trying to avoid talking about it because I’m embarrassed about it. But at least you can verify it, if you need to. What I was doing was being interviewed for a job. A job with a real, competitive salary and great benefits. I mean, with all due respect for SCARAB, it’s not exactly a career capstone, if you know what I mean.”

I waited for what seemed a long time before I just had to ask. “And, of course, you’re going to tell me with whom this interview took place? And where? And the timing?”

“Yeah, shit. It was last Friday morning, all morning, with a guy from the National Rifle Association, for a position that they call ‘wildlife resources officer’ for the Rocky Mountain region, meaning that my job would be to lobby the Colorado Division of Wildlife, as well as similar agencies in other states in the region, to increase the number of hunting licenses for, well, for whatever critters they sell hunting licenses for. And I went down to Evergreen and met with this NRA guy, I’ve got one of his cards I can give you.” He fumbled in a pocket, after a careful look to see if I would let him, and handed me a business card. “Thing is, I grew up hunting with my Dad and an uncle, so it’s something that is part of me. Advocating for it would be a natural. And the NRA, like I said, has a real job doing it.”

I looked at the card and saw a telephone number and an email address. “I’ll be sure to contact this guy to verify what you’ve told me. And then you’re completely off the hook, as far as I can tell now. But, geez, this seems like a big change for you, this NRA job.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have it yet. So, please, when you verify that I really had this interview, don’t scare them off, OK? And like I said, I’m all in favor of more hunting. My favorite things to do in the outdoors are hiking and backpacking. And it looks to me as if there are way too many deer and elk and so on out there. Not to mention the bears. That’s how you control the population, hunting.”

* * *

The confessional with Lemone hadn’t taken *too* long, although he wound up missing the first part of that afternoon’s session. And I immediately decided to treat it as a confessional, because he’d revealed a side of himself that, despite my bad attitude about him, deserved to remain in confidence. It was still suspicious, though, that he’d initially lied about knowing Linton.

With all of the morning events—the press conference, my not-quite-contentious discussion with Sheriff Schmidt, and then the rush to lean on Lemone, which, at least, had worked, mostly—I’d not had lunch. As much as I loved Hal dearly, missing another part of his meeting wasn’t going to bother me in the least, so I went hunting for food. I was also hoping for some solitude to mull over all I’d learned, so I crossed the highway and walked a block or two down the valley.

I wound up at a place that seemed to specialize in Hatch-green-chile-topped burgers, meaning those famous chiles from New Mexico, something that rather surprised me to run across in the northern Colorado mountains. A green-chile cheeseburger sounded like such a treat, one that I’d learned to enjoy during my visits to Santa Fe. The Santa Fe versions were always a little too hot for my tender taste buds, but I couldn’t resist trying the Winter Park version. Perhaps, I thought, it would be toned down.

The taste part worked out as I hoped, but the solitude part didn’t, although it turned out well anyway. Mac MacQuarrie, as it happened, was having a late lunch there, too.

“Mac! Well, fancy meeting you here, if I may resort to a cliché.”

“Well, hey, Annette! Good to see you. Gonna have lunch? That’ll give me the excuse to order another of these.” He raised a nearly-empty beer glass in my direction.

I pinched up my face into a disapproving-old-aunt look. “Does Sam know about this?”

That surprised him enough to give him pause. “Uh…”

So I broke into laughter. “Aw, don’t worry about it, Mac. I won’t tell. And I think I want something like that, too. Or maybe a margarita. How are the burgers here?”

“Quite respectable, although I’m not sure about this green-chile business.”

About then, a server showed up, and I ordered a margarita, rocks and no salt, and as plain a green-chile cheeseburger as the menu offered, without fries.

“I understand completely. It’s an acquired taste. You need to spend time down in New Mexico to really get it. Anyway, how are things going?” After I said it, I realized that he would probably take that to mean I was asking about his progress on what I’d asked him to do only a few hours ago, and, to my dismay, he did.

“Well, I think I found what you’re interested in, although I ran into a roadblock that I haven’t managed to break through yet.”

“Ah. Well, that’s good to hear, but I didn’t meant to grill you about that. I was just asking generally. How’s Sam?”

He broke into a huge smile. “Busy as hell. She can’t crank out those paintings of hers fast enough to keep up with demand. I keep telling her not to worry about it, to slow down and let her prices inflate. But she’s somehow compelled to try to keep up.”

“At least she’s successful, even if it keeps her busy. She likes it in Colorado, though?”

“Oh, yeah. Like I told you, she’s agitating to move over the Front Range to Estes Park, but that’s not because she doesn’t like it here. It has to do with a bunch of little things. I think I’ll let you hear it from her, because I’m kind of on the fence.”

“Hal’s told me that you’ve done a stellar job of setting up all the security protections that MPARC needs, and I’m sure he can find someone to take over if you decide to move. Did you ever meet Charles Shure, the money behind MPARC? Oh, yeah, he was at the big pow-wow we had in connection with that waste dumping business. Anyway, he runs this big international conglomerate that has a huge computer security group, and I bet that at least one of those guys would love to move up here and take on your role.” I made sure to look him squarely in the eyes. “What I’m saying is that if you and Sam want to move over to Estes Park and really be retired, well, don’t feel like Hal has you under some kind of obligation here. And, like I said, it’s just over there, sort of northeast. We can still get together.”

He smiled. “One thing I learned after all my years working for those secretive agencies in Washington was to look after myself first. So I will. But thanks for your encouragement. I mean, I do have some little bit of conscience left in me, and I don’t want to let Hal down.”

“Don’t worry about it. And anyway, if you’re over there, then I’ll have a friend on the other side of the mountains when the CBI needs some kind of help or other.” I tried to make my smile disarming. “Since you mentioned it, though, did you have any success with what we talked about?”

“Like I said, up to a point, and then it stopped. Let’s see if I can explain things in a way that makes sense. There were basically three lines of inquiry, Miciela’s two other names, Spadaro and Abercrombie, and her death.”

He held up an index finger. “First, her death. Suicide, by official decree. But it seems that the decree was a close call. Her body was found at the base of a large cliff, at the top of which is a regionally famous scenic overlook. It’s in a park. Her car was found in a public parking area there, and it had a note on the dashboard about why she was going to kill herself. The note was computer generated. Only her fingerprints were found in the car, so despite some ambiguities and unresolved questions, it was ruled a suicide.”

He stuck up a second finger. “Second, her maiden name, Spadaro. This is where I ran into the roadblock. You said you know about her father’s background, that is, Antonio Spadaro, and that you suspect that he might have been subsumed into the witness protection program. I almost certain that you’re right. I don’t know of any other way for people to disappear so completely.”

“However,” and he wagged his two stuck-up fingers for emphasis, “I’m not sure that you appreciate his position before he turned snitch. This guy Antonio Spadaro had big-time involvement with just about everything underground in the New York mafia scene. A real player. Turns out that his turning snitch brought down no less than four dozen—*four dozen!*—made men in the City, including at least two bosses. Even I remember, from when I was a New York cop on the drug beat, I remember hearing his name come up. Point is, there’s considerable enmity floating around out there, which probably includes some hefty contracts for his head on a platter. For his sake, we should both hope that the U.S. Marshals Service is taking his protection seriously. Assuming that he’s under their protection, I mean.”

Then he poked a third finger up. “Finally, there’s the Abercrombie business. Yep, our girl Miciela married a Jason Abercrombie when he was a student at Georgia Tech and she was an employee there. He was in the ROTC program, and he became an Army officer when he graduated. He was assigned to the 339th Quartermaster Company at Camp Humphreys in South Korea, about fifty miles south of Seoul, and he spent several years there, during which he extended his original enlistment, the one he was obligated to for his ROTC benefits. And, since then, he’s re-enlisted again, maybe become a lifer, and is now stationed at Fort Carson, just south of Colorado Springs. He’s done well enough to become a Captain. And it appears that he’s now married to a Korean woman, original name Seong Bun-Hae. He’s got a solid record with no hints of any improprieties.”

My margarita had arrived somewhere between fingers one and two, and, by finger three when my burger arrived, I was contemplating a second one, maybe a double, with salt this time. But trying to keep up with what Mac had found made me glad I hadn’t.

* * *

Eight

I’d first noticed earlier, when I was sitting outside with Dexter Lemone, and then, more in the background when I was in the restaurant with Mac, that there seemed to be an unusual number of emergency sirens wailing away, especially for a Thursday. There were sirens on vehicles that seemed to be coming and going in all directions, and the variety told me that the vehicles were associated with at least two different agencies in the Fraser Valley, maybe three. What really got my attention was, as Mac and I were walking back up the street to MPARC, when I saw Fran Schmidt’s vehicle headed south toward the Winter Park Ski Area base, adding to the cacophony.

Rather than bother Fran, I phoned Angela. “It’s me, Angela. What’s with all the activity up here? And was that Fran I saw zoom by just now? I’m on U.S. 40 in downtown Winter Park Village.”

“Yeah, Annette, I was just about to call you. We saw you walking on the sidewalk there.” She seemed rather breathless. “Remember what Sheriff Schmidt said in his press conference about how this was the ‘summer week from hell’? Well, it seems that something of that nature has busted loose.”

“Oh. You were in Fran’s car, huh? I didn’t see you.”

“Yeah, well, he’s big and I’m little, and I’m hunkered down to brace my feet. He’s in a hurry.”

“Uh, do you guys need me?” I was hoping they didn’t, but I had to ask anyway.

I heard a muffled consultation, and Angela came back on the call. “Fran says probably not. Although you might be able to help back at the office. We may have some people to process. And having you available could help if some other call comes in, he says.”

“OK, I’ll head back to Hot Sulphur.”

I tried to sound enthusiastic, but I’m afraid I didn’t succeed—I’d been hoping to head home early. But, no rest for the wicked, I decided, so after thanking Mac for his information, I cruised up north and west toward whatever was waiting at the sheriff’s office.

Whatever it was, though, wasn’t there when I arrived. It was true that everyone except a new deputy sitting at the front desk, a young woman whose name badge read Norma Spears, was out, apparently a part of all the sirens zooming about the valley. Meanwhile, Norma was calmly filing her nails and talking on her headset.

“Oh, sorry, Charlene, someone just came in. Gotta go.” She poked a button on her desk phone and looked up at me. “Can I help you?”

I smiled. “I don’t think that we’ve been introduced. I’m Annette Trieri, Deputy Director with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I work here with my deputy, Angela Espinosa. Perhaps you’ve met her? Short, wearing khakis today, as I recall.”

She hesitated. “Uh, well, I’ve been meeting so many people that I’m afraid I can’t recall everyone. Is she the young woman who ran out the door with the sheriff a little while ago?”

I nodded. “Probably. She called me and said she was with him on the way to something going on at the ski area. Any idea what that’s about?”

“Some kind of rumble, I guess, at that big concert they’re having there. Everyone, well, almost everyone, is up there trying to get things under control. We’ve also got a couple of traffic accidents being dealt with.”

“And you got left here to mind the store, eh? Well, maybe I can help. Let me go put my stuff in my office, and I’ll be back to keep you company.” I couldn’t tell if she looked relieved or un-nerved.

Two minutes later, I was back in the lobby, and this time she was definitely un-nerved. Perhaps, I thought, it’s because I’d taken off my jacket, and my shoulder harness with its six magazine carriers, as well as my Glock in its small-of-back holster, were visible.

“Norma, could I make a suggestion?” I watched her reaction carefully and was happy to see her nod. “I think it would have been a good idea for you to ask to see my shield before, just for identification. Especially before I went back down the hall there. You didn’t really know who I was, and I could have been anybody. You know?”

She winced. “Oh, yeah, you’re right. And I’m here alone. Sorry.”

“There’s a lot to learn, I know. But you’ll get it figured out, don’t worry. Now, I think I’ll just sit over here and try to deal with this paperwork. If you get a call that you don’t know what to do about, put them on hold and ask me about it, OK?”

At that point, she was definitely looking relieved.

But, in the typical feast-or-famine fashion of Fran’s office, nothing at all happened for at almost two hours. I could have as well been in my office, which would have let Norma go back to her conversation with her friend Charlene. As it was, Norma had to find something else to do, so she wound up reading through the departmental policies and procedures manual and trying to stay awake.

That particular famine ended in style, though, at about four, when the front door burst open and several large and very scruffy individuals tried not to bump into each other on entering. The ones wearing only leather vests for tops were definitely men, but some of the others were ambiguous on first glance. All had their hands zip-tied behind their backs and were being herded in by Angela, Fran, and several of his deputies. I decided it would be polite to give up my seat in the lobby to one of our new guests—which one didn’t really matter to me.

“Roger? I guess you’re the lucky one to get the processing of these folks started.” Fran Schmidt looked around and finally spotted Roger Traubman, who seemed to be trying to hide behind a couple of the larger scruffies. “Meanwhile, everybody listen up! Any more misbehavior and we’ll zip-tie your feet together, all of them, in one giant tangle. And my people all have instructions to use their Tasers at their own discretion. I don’t care how tough you feel, you don’t want one of those used on you. So behave!”

When he spotted me—I’d retired to hide in a corner and try to figure out why my personal lawyer alarm was going off—I gave him a big smile. “Hey there, Fran. How’s your day going?”

“Ugh. Don’t ask. And this is only half of the trouble-makers. The Winter Park police have the others. Seems there was a kind of brawl took place at the music festival.”

“I thought the heavy metal bands were last weekend, no?”

“Yeah, well, this time it’s country-and-western, but it seems that these yo-yos here decided to stick around. And the cowboys didn’t like it too much.”

“So the Winter Park police got the cowboys, and you got, what, the Indians? No, that’s not fair at all. To the Indians, I mean. Looks like you got the dirtbags.”

“Hey, lady, it’s not like we can’t hear you, OK? There’s no call for insults.” One of the biggest of the scruffies, a very tall and fairly wide fellow wearing a studded leather vest open down the front and sporting approximately equal amounts of hair on his head, face, and chest, with his head a distant fourth place, had shouldered his way to the front of the pack. That set my lawyer alarm off even more than ever.

“Look, sheriff, my name’s Tony Sands. I’m an attorney, licensed before the Colorado Bar with a practice in Montrose, and these fine gentlemen are all my clients. And you know as well as I do that what happened back up there wasn’t really our fault, it was those damned rednecks.”

Fran looked at him with a jaundiced eye. “That remains to be seen, Mr. Sands. And you know what they say about lawyers who represent themselves, right? Meanwhile, you and these other fine gentlemen with you are going to be spending some time in our holding cells, so enjoy it out here while you can. Oh, and in addition to all the questions we have about this afternoon, we’re going to be asking you about where you were last Friday. If you claim not to have been in my county, you’d better be ready to prove where you were.”

That surprised me. “Fran, you don’t think ...?”

“I don’t quite know what to think, Annette. There are parts of this you haven’t heard about yet. Let’s just keep an open mind, eh?”

It occurred to me that Fran and I needed to have a private conversation, ASAP.

* * *

The scruffies’ having been consigned to two of the holding cells, not quite what you’d call “packed in” but quite cozy with standing room only, Fran had a minute to talk with Angela and me in our little office.

“Sorry I was short with you out there, Annette. It’s been a stressful day. And I hope you’ll hang with me on this. We’ll question all of them, and see what we can find out. We do have an opportunity to press charges—these bozos are no way country music fans. They were at that big concert to make trouble, it’s pretty obvious. And, from what I heard on site, the cowboys were goaded into the rumble.”

“Is this bunch, like, a motorcycle gang, with a name and all?”

“That’s one thing I want to find out. I’ve got some people back up at Winter Park figuring out what motorcycles belong to which of these guys, and we’re going to impound them and bring them back here. Maybe they’ve got insignia or something. Geez, these guys just piss me off, you know?”

“I have to say, they’re not people I’d invite to dinner.”

“Right. And they’re not people I want in my county. On the other hand, the cowboys, they’re mostly the guys from the Granby rodeo, I’m fine to have them here. Good guys, all of them.”

“So, this motorcycle guy Sands is a lawyer, and he’s going to represent his gang, I guess.”

“Apparently. A lawyer with a fool for a client, if he really decides to represent himself and the others.”

“Hey, it could be worse, Fran. Maybe Steven Sheffield is hanging around here like the vulture he is, sniffing about for possible clients.”

“Oh, Annette, spare me, please. Don’t even suggest it.”

Sheffield had proven himself to be a burr under Fran’s saddle on several occasions, most recently in the case involving the illegal dumping of toxic materials into the underground sources of the Denver water supply. Somehow he’d managed to dodge disbarment for legal entanglements of his own in that case, and he was still sniffing about for new clients, I knew.

About the time I finally got home, Mac called. Fortunately, Hal had decided to make dinner for us, and the fact that I’d completely forgotten about it turned out fine. That also allowed me to take Mac’s call instead of scrambling to make dinner.

“Hi, Annette. I need to ask you a question about the computer searches I’m doing.”

“Hiya, Mac. Shoot.”

“Well, remember I mentioned a roadblock? I need to know what lengths to go to in order to get around it. I’ve figured out that I’ll need to call in a favor from a very-high-up person I know in the White House to do it, and he’ll probably have questions. Also, if I do get into this blocked computer, they’ll know it, the computer’s owners, I mean, and that’ll alert them that something’s going on. They’re very, very sensitive about such things.”

“Hmm. Sounds like you know whose computer it is.”

“U.S. Marshals Service.”

“Ah. Well, that validates what I’ve been thinking, that the Spadaros are in witness protection. And knowing it for sure is probably sufficient for now. I don’t see much point in your calling in favors from the White House or in alerting the Service to our interest.”

“So you’re OK if I just leave things alone now?”

“I think so. We can always start up the search process again if we really need to. Thanks for the help, though. Just knowing whose computer it is helps a lot.”

“Any time, Annette. Say, why don’t you talk with Sam? She’s right here.”

That was a change of pace, for sure, but Sam is someone I always like to talk with. There was a pause, and her voice came on the line.

“Annette? Hi. Mac says you want to talk.”

“Well, he said that *you* might want to talk. About moving east, I mean.”

“Oh!” She was obviously surprised by my directness. “Well, um, see, we, I mean Mac and I, we’ve been talking about it. And I feel a little guilty, because we came out here because Hal asked us to. And paid us to.”

“So? Mac has done for Hal, and MPARC, everything Hal brought you both out here to do. You’re not bound by any sort of long-term arrangement or anything, at least not that I know of. But, to be candid, I’m curious about why.”

“Well, I guess it’s a combination of things. Services. Access to the Denver airport. Proximity to the Front Range cities, as far as that goes.” She chuckled. “You know, malls. I’m feeling isolated up here, in terms of things I’d feel better about being closer to. Medical things. Stuff like that. I hope you understand.”

“Oh, I sure do. We moved here from Durango, a small city down in southwest Colorado. And it has much more in the way of what you’re talking about than this place does. I’m still getting used to some things here. Can you say ‘gynecologist’? It’s been getting better and the future looks good, but it’s still a long way from where it needs to be. I can’t blame you in the least. And, hey, Estes Park is just over those mountains we look at.”

I remembered that she and Mac had just moved into a “guest house” that one of Hal’s old friends had, a house with a remarkable view of the western side of the Front Range. We’d stayed in it for a few months when we first moved from Durango.

“Just get a place with a guest room, and we’ll come and visit. And you can do the same here.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. But I’ll miss having you in the same town.”

“Me, too. But, look. Over there, you’ll have a whole new set of mountains to sketch. And a whole new set of galleries to get your stuff into. You’ll make out like a real pro.”

“I never thought of that. But I guess you’re right.”

“I’m sure I am. Your stuff is great, and it’s selling like hotcakes over here. I bet you do even better over there. And there’s something else that I already mentioned to Mac. Having you in Estes Park gives me a contact there, one with credentials, as he’s still got that deputy’s shield I gave him before, remember? Not that he’ll be using it much, but having him there could be quite helpful to me.”

Her voice brightened. “And it could give him something to do. Before we moved here, I was getting a little worried that he was too bored with his retirement for it to be healthy. He’s been better with this

MPARC job, but I don't know if he'll be able to find anything to do over in Estes Park. Maybe you can throw some stuff his way."

"Exactly. So, do you guys have a schedule for this?"

"Not yet. We'll probably drive over and check out real estate sometime soon. The area looks good on paper, or on a computer screen, but we really need to see it in person and explore around."

"Be sure to let me know if there's anything Hal and I can do to help, OK?"

"Thanks, Annette. Thanks so much."

* * *

I managed to get back on track Friday morning. Even with an active investigation in progress I knew that a twenty-four/seven work schedule would be counterproductive, so time off was important to have. And Angela, being still relatively new to CBI, was even more apt to burn herself out from enthusiasm, so I practically had to order her to take days off. I wanted to make as much progress as possible on Friday so we could both have a bit of weekend.

It turned out, though, to be a good start to the day, as Angela had information for me. She must have beat me to the office by a couple of hours, and she was bursting to get going.

"Annette, I finally got the list of bicycle rentals compiled, the ones from last week."

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten about those. Any interesting names there? And what took so long?"

She looked embarrassed. "I had to lean on a couple of the bike rental places some. They said they were busy, they'd get to it someday, blah blah. And I had to go back to a couple of them. They gave me lists of their daily rentals for last Friday but not for all the bikes they had out that day. There were others that were weekly rentals and so on. And then I had to get all the separate lists organized. Sorry."

"Too bad it was such a hassle. It's not a problem, though. And, say, you were going to get cell phone records, too. Any luck with that?"

"Well, I've got those, too. The phone companies came through like champs. You're going to like all this. Bicycles first."

She handed me several sheets of paper with spreadsheets printed on them. I scanned through them and found Phillip Linton's name on page two and then, on page three, one Anthony Sands.

Tony Sands, outlaw biker and Montrose lawyer, had rented a mountain bike on the Friday of our homicide? That was too weird not to take notice of.

Fran stuck his head into our little office. "Morning Annette, Angela. Guess what we found out? Those bikers we brought in yesterday are indeed an organized motorcycle club. Not one of the American Motorcycle Association clubs, though, so that means that they don't just look like it, but they actually do fall into the nebulous 'outlaw biker' category. The 'Swords of Satan' is what they call themselves. Their membership is all from the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Valleys out west, from Grand Junction south."

"Is that lawyer of theirs, the one who was barking yesterday, is he going to represent them?"

"I think he's chosen discretion over valor. Right now, they're demanding public defenders."

"Which is going to overwhelm the office here, no doubt. How about I talk with this Sands person, the lawyer? See what his thinking about this all is."

Fran shrugged. “I guess that makes sense, Annette. I’m not sure I’d want to be locked into a little, stifling-hot, airless room with him, though. He’s probably pretty rank by now.”

The thought made me wince, but I tried to keep to the high ground. “Do you suppose there’s any percentage in getting him to promise to keep the club out of Grand County for the rest of eternity in return for dropping charges?”

I knew I was supposed to be working on behalf of all the people of Colorado, but my first loyalty was to where I lived.

“I’ve been thinking about that, Annette. Prosecuting these guys is going to be a huge pain in the ass without a lot of return on investment. We don’t have much on them.”

“How about if I float that idea with him?”

“I’d say let’s try it. Don’t make any promises, because I don’t know what the DA might want to do. He sometimes gets strange notions because of his political agenda. But maybe he’ll be reasonable this time. Besides, I do have some discretion in these things. Thanks.”

As he was turning to leave, Angela spoke up. “Wait, Sheriff. There’s something else. The cell phone records came in.”

Fran looked interested. “Anything there?”

“Well, since we’re talking about him, there are calls recorded between cell phone numbers registered to Anthony Sands and a Daniel Santini. Santini to Sands at about 11:30 last Friday. And then another about fifteen minutes later, Sands to Santini. Uh, and I mentioned to Annette before that the rental records have an Anthony Sands on a mountain bike Friday morning.”

Fran looked surprised. “Well. I guess I need to think about all this, but, Annette? How about we don’t let this Sands guy out of our hands, even if all the others walk, OK?”

“Good plan, Fran. If he, as spokesman, agrees to keep the club out of the county, they walk except for him, right?”

“Right. I’ve gotta go, an appointment with the DA.”

After he left, Angela looked me in astonishment. “You mean that you’d just let these guys go free?”

“In return for staying away from here, yeah. Except for Sands. Like Fran said, potential charges on the others are pretty weak, overall, and the hassle factor is pretty high.” I stood up and stretched.

“Are you really going to talk to him? Sands, I mean?”

“Just what I wanted to do with my Friday, spend it alone in a little bitty room with a big, sweaty guy who needs a bath.”

“Ugh.”

“Exactly. But after today, I’m going home and staying there until Monday. And you get tomorrow and Sunday off, too. Remember, your position here doesn’t carry overtime, like you got down in New Mexico. You have to pace yourself.”

It took about a half hour to make arrangements to interview Anthony Sands—there were other interviews in progress and only so many rooms, and there was a worse shortage of people to act as monitors from behind the one-way mirrors.

But eventually I was settled in one of those little rooms, sitting on an uncomfortable chair across a little table from Mr. Anthony Sands, Esq., of Montrose, Colorado, who must have been even more uncomfortable than I was, given his size relative to his chair. And, yes, he could have sorely used a bath.

“Mr. Sands, my name is Annette Trieri, and I’m a Deputy Director with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation.” My affiliation definitely got this attention.

“CBI, eh? What are you doing questioning me? This was just a little dust-up at a concert.”

“I thought I’d see if I could find out various things that might guide the sheriff’s investigation here. He reports to the local DA, but I don’t. The sheriff is likely to follow my recommendations with respect to how hard he pushes the case. My formal role is to be the CBI liaison to this fast-growing area and to help out locally when appropriate. Like now.”

“What’s in it for me? Cooperating now, I mean. After all, we’ve put in a request for a public defender. That means we’ve requested a lawyer, and you can’t question us until we get one.”

“If you’re any kind of a lawyer, you know we can question you when and where and how we want to. What your request means is that any evidence our questions may reveal is likely to be inadmissible in court, should it come to that. And I’m not going to be asking those sorts of questions, anyway. I’m also sure you know that we’re being recorded, audio and video.”

“I’d be surprised if that were not true.”

I nodded. “So, you stepped forward yesterday, when your group was brought in, as if you were going to represent them all. But you’ve now changed your mind?”

“We want a lawyer, yes.”

“Does that still mean that you speak for the group somehow? Are you its leader in some sense? What I’m asking is if you’re in a position to make an agreement on behalf of everyone. You see, I think the sheriff might be prepared to drop charges associated with that, er, adventure yesterday at the concert and release all of you, provided you all agree never to enter Grand County as a group, ever. Individually, entry would be negotiable, but as a group, if you’ll accept a ban from Grand County, you’re out of here.”

That obviously surprised him, because he thought about it for quite a while. “I can’t speak for the others, but I could take the proposal to them and see what they say.”

“That works for me. I think they’ve been dispersed into several separate holding cells, though.” I switched gears. “One more question, first. Just curiosity. What’s with this ‘Swords of Satan’ business? Isn’t that sort of thing just so, well, last century? Do you people really mean to come across as outlaws? Aren’t most of you dentists and doctors and accountants? And lawyers?”

He rolled his eyes. “Well, yeah. And grandparents, a few of us. The name is a long, long story that’s just stupid. But mostly we’re the good guys. Check with the Grand Junction TV stations. Every year we do a “Gifts for Grandkids” thing around Christmas, to help out all the poverty-level old folks on the Western Slope, and a food drive around Thanksgiving. And a blood drive, believe it or not, around Easter.”

“But in the summer you go on road trips and get into rumbles with locals in other parts of Colorado and the West, eh?”

“Hmm. No comment. Are you really serious about dropping charges if we promise not to do a road trip back here?”

“Formally, as you know, it’s the DA’s call. But I don’t think that he’s heard about this yet. So it’s still in the hands of the sheriff. And I’m pretty sure he’ll take my advice. So we can probably settle the business of yesterday’s rumble ourselves.”

“But I need to talk with all the guys.”

“And I can’t promise anything except that I’ll talk with the sheriff.”

“Shit.”

“I hate to say it, but that’s what you’re starting to smell like. You sure you don’t want out of here? Go in there and don’t ask. Just tell all your other guys that you made a deal and everyone’s free if they don’t come back. Is that so hard?”

He took a tentative sniff at his armpits, an easy thing to do in that vest he was wearing. It made him wince.

“OK, I’ll do it. Anyone who doesn’t agree, you can keep. How’s that?”

“Thank you. That’s what I was hoping for. Let me talk with the sheriff.” I turned to leave but remembered something. “Oh. You understand, of course, that we’ll be checking your credentials and so forth. Over in Montrose, I mean. So everything we’ve discussed depends on all that checking out. Right? And we have to check on everyone else, too. Anything that comes up could scotch this deal for anyone who’s flagged somehow. OK?”

Despite his scruffiness, his nod was surprisingly dignified.

* * *

Nine

It was quite a relief to get out of the stuffy little room, and I breathed deeply as I walked back to my office. I was disappointed to find it to be as crowded as the little interview room had been—with three other normal-sized people this time, rather than a single very large, and stinky, one.

But in there with Angela were two colleagues, Norman Dzung and George Neering, both wearing the sorts of grins that would put the Cheshire Cat to shame.

Norman was the first to notice me as I came down the hall. “Ah, here she is. Greetings and felicitations, Annette. We’re here with interesting news.”

I hadn’t seen him for a while so our handshake was extra warm. “Good to see you, Norman. You’re looking fit.”

George couldn’t contain himself. “Hey, man, good to see you again. Man, do we have something for you!”

“Hey yourself, George. What’s up?”

Dzung twitched his left thumb toward a large plastic bag on Angela’s desk. It appeared to hold a softball-sized rock.

“I spent parts of the last several days quartering the mountainside below where we found the body last week. It occurred to me that the perp might have just tossed his weapon down the hill. Because the damned thing is almost round, it rolled a long way, but eventually I found it about five hundred yards down. It hit a big log and stopped there.” He looked pleased with himself.

“Um, you must have some reason to think that’s the murder weapon.”

George opened his mouth, but Dzung spoke first. “Well, it wasn’t sitting in a normal position or place. Erosion causes rocks to break loose and roll downhill spontaneously on occasion, but this one was

quite new because it was sitting on top of everything else. So I had a close look at it and saw what appeared to be hair and blood on one side. Then I bagged it and brought it to George.”

I nodded and looked at George, who had decided to play coy. “What have you got for me, George?”

“Well, man, it’s too soon to be conclusive. We’re going to get a DNA test done on the hair and blood.” His grin got bigger. “However ... HOW. EVER. ... we also have some indications. See, I discovered during the autopsy that Phillip Linton, the vic, he had a very rare blood type, the most rare, in fact, AB-negative. And the blood on Norm’s rock is AB-negative.”

Dzeng jumped in. “Plus, and I’m embarrassed I didn’t notice this up there in the woods, there was a partial fingerprint in the blood on a sort of smooth spot on the rock. George has already determined that it’s not Phillip Linton’s print.”

It was Angela’s turn, and her excitement was bubbling over. “So I worked this up, Annette. We got fingerprints on all those guys we brought in yesterday, when we booked them, right?”

She handed me a piece of paper showing a gray-scale photograph of a partial print on a rock side-by-side with a booking print time-stamped the previous afternoon. I’m no fingerprint expert, but they sure looked similar to me.

Before I could ask the obvious question, however, Fran Schmidt came bustling in, and my little office was suddenly overcrowded. We had to put up with it, though, because all the conference rooms were occupied.

“Bad news, folks.” Fran shook his head. “A.D. is all up in arms about something he heard from the Feds.”

“A.D.” was A.D. Sonos, the District Attorney for Grand County, a showboat and politician first and the people’s prosecutor second. Still, he was in charge of what cases would move forward in his jurisdiction.

“Seems that they think they have a runner, a person who was in the witness protection program who’s vanished.”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, Fran? WITSEC is part of the U.S. Marshals Service. I’ve had reason to become acutely aware of that recently.”

Fran nodded. “Right. That’s who I meant by ‘Feds.’ Anyway, A.D. is all up in arms because the they wouldn’t tell him anything that might help us, not that we really want to get involved. But these WITSEC protectees are often the sort of people who could become a danger to the public. Our public.”

“Did they tell A.D. anything at all? Like, a name or anything?”

“Nothing. He does have a point of contact, though. Here.” Fran fished in a shirt pocket and handed me a crumpled piece of paper. It said “Mason Niemeyer” above a phone number.

“All right. Be right back.” And I stepped out of the jam-packed little office, grateful for the elbow room out in the hallway. I wandered outside to the parking lot as I punched numbers into my cell phone.

The call was answered on the second ring. “Niemeyer.”

“Mr. Niemeyer, I got your name and this number from District Attorney A.D. Sonos in northern Colorado. My name is Annette Trieri, and I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I need to ask you some questions about the information you gave Mr. Sonos. I understand the sensitivity of this, but it’s highly relevant to your investigation or search, or whatever you’re doing, as well as to something I’m working on.”

There was a small grunt of dissatisfaction, or maybe frustration, from the other end of the call. “May I ask, Ms. Trieri, what your relationship to the District Attorney’s office is?”

“It would be more appropriate for you to identify yourself fully, Mr. Niemeyer. All I have is a name and this telephone number. I understand you’re a point of contact with the U.S. Marshals Service, but that’s rather vague.”

“Oh. Of course. Deputy U.S. Marshal Mason Niemeyer, WITSEC Program.”

“Ah. I see. Thank you. Well, I’m assigned by the CBI to be a liaison with the Grand County Sheriff and help out when their resources become stretched. Grand County is part of Mr. Sonos’ district. As you may know, the CBI is a state-level agency and so remains above the local politics in which the sheriff and DA are involved. I also hold a federal security clearance at a level that would surprise you if I were able to divulge it over the telephone.”

“Hmm. That’s encouraging, but I’m afraid that, just like your clearance level, my information can’t be discussed over the telephone, either.”

“Ah. I guess that doesn’t surprise me. Well, my clearance gives me access to a SCIF down the road that has an elaborate communications setup. I can be there in a hour or so. Would that work?” I had my fingers crossed that Mac would help me work the equipment in MPARC’s Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, Mac’s pride and joy.

“A SCIF? Really? I’m impressed. And, yeah, that’ll work fine. Call this number on a secure phone from there and we’ll talk next steps. And don’t rush—I was just out the door on my way to lunch.” Niemeyer’s voice took on a level of respect I hadn’t anticipated.

“OK. And have a leisurely lunch. I’m going to have to round up some help to work their comm gear, and it might take me a little time in addition to getting over there. Talk with you later, Marshal.”

When I walked back through the door of my crowded little office, the conversation I’d heard from the hallway came to an abrupt halt, and I found everyone staring at me.

“What? I hope I didn’t violate any protocols by calling the name on that piece of paper, Fran. In any case, it all worked out well. I’m going to get details from that guy over a secure line in a while.”

“I didn’t have the chance to tell you, Annette. The fingerprints on the sheet I gave you. The prints that look like the one from the rock.” Angela cocked her head sideways as she spoke. “They belong to Anthony Sands.”

* * *

“Niemeyer.”

Over the secure line from MPARC, his voice sounded the same as it had previously on my cell phone.

“It’s Annette Trieri, Marshal. And I’m on a secure line this time.”

“Excellent. Have you got video there as well?”

I looked a question at Mac, and he nodded. “It seems I do. And help to make it work as well. Secure help.”

“All right. Here’s a URL.” And he slowly recited a long and complicated internet address.

Mac and I had both taken the dictation and, after we compared notes and found they matched, he started typing. An official looking U.S. Marshals Service screen appeared on a large monitor on the wall.

“OK, we’re looking at a Marshals Service screen. There’s a ‘Home Page’ link in the middle. This looks like what most organizations call an ‘About’ page.”

“Right. That’s for people who stumble on this page accidentally. The link goes to our public home page. But that’s not your path. Here’s what to do: Type in a question mark, my last name, no caps, followed by the six digits of today’s date, month, day, year, and a pound sign. You won’t see what you’re typing on the screen, but it’ll work and initiate an encrypted connection. If you don’t make a typo. If you do, hit ‘Escape’ and start over. And if nothing happens after you hit ‘Enter,’ you made a typo without knowing it, so hit ‘Escape’ and start over.”

Mac typed, and shortly the official screen dissolved to a picture of a middle-aged, nondescript man sitting at a desk. His closely cropped haircut and cheap-looking suit gave him the distinct appearance of some kind of middle-level government person. He nodded.

“Afternoon. I’m speaking to you from our office in Grand Junction.”

It occurred to me that he must be able to see me, and I suddenly felt camera-shy. But I managed not to fiddle with my hair.

“And we’re in Winter Park. I don’t know what you’re seeing, Marshal, but I’m here with Mr. Mac MacQuarrie. He’s cleared even more highly than I. Do you need to see my credentials?”

“No, but thanks. I’ve had time to do a bit of homework, and all’s well. I also was able to infer the location of your SCIF and discover some very interesting information about Mr. MacQuarrie. I must say, I would not have expected anything like this in Winter Park.”

Mac cleared his throat. “This research institute, MPARC, has some high-level classified work with the Pentagon and, um, some other agencies, Marshal. Ms. Trieri is married to the director here. I’m involved only to help Ms. Trieri with the equipment, though, and now that it’s working, I’ll excuse myself. I’ve no need-to-know about what you’re going to discuss.”

“Thank you, Mr. MacQuarrie, although I have to say that this is trivial compared to some of what you’ve been involved in. Now. Ms. Trieri, I understand that you have some questions?”

“More than what I had before, because I’ve since received some additional information. First, could you tell me what you told District Attorney Sonos? Only with more specifics?”

“My call to him was part of our routine. On occasion, one of our protectees disappears, and we inform DAs in the region so that they can pass the information along to their law enforcement agencies at their discretion. But we don’t provide much in the way of specifics, because we can’t control the information’s distribution. I’m sure you know, Ms. Trieri, how sensitive our work is.”

“Absolutely. Life and death, in many cases. And if you called everyone within an area out to our distance from Grand Junction, that’s a lot of calls and people to talk to. No wonder you weren’t exactly generous with specifics. The thing is, we have a murder case here that may have some connection to your work, possibly even to this disappearance of yours. Is there anything else more specific that you can tell me?”

“A few years ago, we relocated an individual, along with his family, who had provided information that resulted in successful prosecution of a large number of people in organized crime in New York. It’s this person who has disappeared. His wife is still at their home, which is in a senior living community, and his sons, the two of them, have not exhibited any odd behavior, although we’ve just recently lost

contact with one of them. The gentleman who's disappeared is in his seventies and is in poor health, as is his wife. It seems that he left his medications at home, so his medical situation may become an issue."

"Marshal Niemeyer, the victim in the murder case I'm investigating had an affair years ago with a married woman whom he impregnated and who subsequently committed suicide. Or that was the coroner's decision, at least. This was in Atlanta. Her name was Miciela Spadaro Abercrombie. And when I looked into it a bit more, I found out about her father, Antonio Spadaro. Tony the Ferret. Shortly after his testimony resulted in the conviction of so many crime bosses in New York, he dropped out of sight. Completely and utterly. I mention this to see if you'll volunteer any more information rather than to ask you directly for it."

"Because we're on a secure line and you know how sensitive all this is, I can tell you that it was indeed Antonio Spadaro who disappeared recently. He has a new name, of course."

"Of course, as do his wife and their two sons, no doubt."

"Right. They're the Santinis now. Although the older son, Antonio Junior, uses Sands. He opened a law practice down in Montrose and thought that would be more, er, marketable, I guess. Danilo Spadaro is now Daniel Santini. He's a college student in Durango."

I felt a huge weight lift from my shoulders. "And, as you probably know, Daniel is presently here in Winter Park finishing up a summer intern job at MPARC, in whose SCIF I'm sitting. Further, and you may not know this, his older brother Tony is sitting in a holding cell at the Grand County Sheriff's Department awaiting me. He thinks I'm going to release him on the stipulation that his motorcycle club never enters Grand County again. But, because we have forensic evidence linking him to the murder I mentioned, he's sadly mistaken. His fellow club members may be released, but not him. And we expect to arrest young Daniel on an accessory-to-murder charge as soon as we can get a warrant. This conversation not only clears up the name issue for me, but it also provides us with a clear motive. It seems that there are questions about whether their sister's death was really suicide. And her pregnancy by our murder victim provides motive even if it was."

There was a long pause. "Oh. I see. Well, I guess that all makes sense. It explains why we've briefly lost track of Tony Junior, for one thing. I don't know whether you know about our policies, Ms. Trieri, but in cases such as this, when our protectees run afoul of the law in their new locations, they're on their own. Tony Junior is all yours, as is Daniel if you arrest him. I'm still concerned about Tony Senior, though."

"And from what I've read about it all, your concern is justified. I'll be sure to let you know if I learn anything about Tony Senior from our questioning of his two sons."

"Thanks very much, Ms. Trieri. I'm glad the CBI is willing to be such a good partner in this sort of thing."

"The pleasure's all mine, Marshal. You've dotted the i's and crossed the t's in this case of ours."

The screen on the wall went blank, but I didn't know how to shut down the system so I went looking for Mac. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to find him in Hal's office.

"Gentlemen, glad I found you. Uh, Mac, we finished and the screen went blank. But I didn't touch anything so the equipment's still on."

Mac shrugged. "It'll be fine. Hope your conversation went well?"

"Indeed. Except, Hal, I've got some bad news. I'm probably going to have to arrest your intern Dan Santini as an accessory in Phillip Linton's murder. His brother Tony is the killer, and they conspired on the opportunity and means."

Hal's face went white despite his summer tan. "Dan? Really? Why would he get involved in something like that?"

"The brothers believe that Linton was responsible for their sister's death a few years ago, in Georgia. Linton impregnated her and left her; she committed suicide, or at least that was the official finding." I tried to look sympathetic. "Do you know when his internship ends, when he'll be leaving for home?"

Hal looked thoughtful. "His internship ends today, and I had what amounts to an exit interview with him yesterday afternoon. He told me he's going to take a week for a backpacking trip before he returns to Durango. Something about some of the interns and friends they'd made this summer doing the Continental Divide Trail from Grand Lake south to Berthoud Pass. He said it was something like 55 miles. They're getting a ride north to downtown Grand Lake tomorrow morning, first thing. He said they're going north-to-south to make the first couple of days the easy ones. They've got some kind of schedule to keep because of the camping permits involved. Sounds like a killer hike, actually."

"Ah, to be young and full of energy. At least I guess we'll know where he is, more or less, when we get his arrest warrant."

* * *

On the drive back to Hot Sulphur, I was congratulating myself on clearing a murder case in only a week, probably a record for me. Of course, I had loads of help.

Back at the office, I went looking for Angela. She, conveniently, was in Fran's office already, so I didn't have to drag her off looking for him. He was holding a piece of paper up to the light, one that I recognized as Angela's side-by-side of the fingerprints.

She was asking, "Do those two fingerprints look alike to you, Fran?"

"Sure do. Hey, Annette. I think we've got our man dead to rights this time."

"And now there's a motive." I explained my conversation with Deputy Marshal Niemeyer, emphasizing the sensitivity of the information as I did.

"So we've got the murderer in custody and know how to find the accomplice, for now at least. I imagine that D.A. will figure out a whole list of charges for them, but murder one will be the biggie. We need to get a warrant for the brother, I guess." Fran had his feet up and was looking thoughtful. "Do we have any loose ends that we'll need to bargain with them for?"

"Not that I can think of, Fran. I do owe Tony Sands a conversation about letting his buddies go in return for staying out of your county. He, though, won't be going anywhere, and I need to let him know about his arrest on the probable murder charge."

"He was asking for a public defender for the disorderly conduct charge we were contemplating, last I heard. You suppose he'll stick with that?"

"Good question. I'll find out when I interview him."

"Should be interesting. Mind if I watch, Annette?"

"It's your department, Fran. Maybe you can run the video camera." I winked at him, and headed for the interview room.

Tony Sands had managed to clean himself up a bit, but he still needed a change of clothes. It occurred to me that he'd be offered one shortly, a nice, clean, orange jumpsuit with "Grand County" stenciled on the back. It probably wouldn't fit too well, though, unless the county had the XXXL size.

“The sheriff agreed, Mr. Sands. Your friends can depart subject to their agreeing not to return. Their release is in progress.” I shrugged. “I’m afraid, though, that your situation is different.”

He looked surprised. “Why? I’ll promise not to come back, too. Ever.”

“Mr. Sands, or Mr. Santini if you prefer, I need to inform you that you are under arrest for the premeditated murder of Phillip Linton last Friday.” And I read him his rights.

He squinted at me, apparently thinking. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you’d discover my professional pseudonym. But I can assure you that’s simply for business purposes, with no deception involved or intended. Out there on the western slope, ‘Santini’ sounds just too foreign to some potential clients. But what’s this about a murder?”

“There’s no point in bluffing here, Tony. We have sufficient forensic evidence to make a defense hopeless. Formal charges, of course, will be filed under your legal name, which we’ll research and get right. But I’m happy to call you whichever you feel most comfortable with. I guess I’ve already assumed it wouldn’t be ‘Spadaro’.”

I watched his reaction carefully.

And I have to give him credit: he was as good at maintaining a poker face as anyone I’ve dealt with. But years of experience plus some formal training have taught me to notice the little changes of expression that are subconscious when someone is put under stress, little twitches and tics, nearly invisible, and other such things. He had them all.

“Oh, and I guess it’s appropriate for me to add that we’re going to pursue an arrest warrant for your brother Daniel as an accessory to the murder. Because it’s murder one, it wouldn’t surprise me if the DA manages to develop a set of capital charges against both of you.”

This time his reaction didn’t need my skills to see. He deflated like a beach ball stuck by a hat pin. But he recovered fairly quickly, given the circumstances. Much of his previous bluster had evaporated, however.

“Well, this time I won’t even pretend to want to represent myself. Or ask for a public defender. And whether a defense is hopeless remains to be seen, of course, based on your evidence. So I guess I won’t say anything, except I have to tell you that Danny’s case needs to be separated from mine. He’s innocent of anything related to murder one. Oh. And you might as well stick to ‘Sands.’ Fewer syllables.” He managed a weak grin.

“I’ll do that, Mr. Sands. Now, just like our first conversation, your request for legal representation means that anything you say here in its absence is unlikely to be admitted in court. And, of course, there’s a video camera behind that window and a microphone in here.” I drummed my fingers on the little table. “But you’re a lawyer and should be quite familiar with all of these matters, so any claim you may make about being duped by us is very likely to be rejected. To me, this means that we could make useful progress, particularly where your brother is involved, if we continue to talk about all this.”

His facial expression indicated suspicion, but he nodded slightly.

“Good. I’ll start. Your brother Daniel Santini is a student at Frémont State University in Durango, and he’s been here in Grand County all summer as a student intern at the Middle Park Advanced Research Center in Winter Park. He owns a mountain bicycle. Last Friday, you rented a mountain bicycle from a rental shop in Winter Park. The Wednesday before, Daniel attended a coffee break at MPARC at which the victim, Phillip Linton, and an acquaintance discussed going mountain biking at the Winter Park Ski area on last Friday. Around noon that day, Friday, you and Daniel exchanged cell phone calls, two of them. Shortly after that, Linton’s body was found about half-way down one of the expert trails there with its head bashed in. The trail he’d been descending had been blocked with a rock,

which we have in our possession, and another rock, which we also have, was used to crush Linton's skull. That second rock has traces of Linton's blood and one of your fingerprints on it, in the blood. We are confident that we'll find your prints on the first rock as well." I stopped to take a breath. "This covers the opportunity and means parts of the crime."

"As for motive, we have testimony that, some years ago, Phillip Linton was engaged in an affair with your sister, Miciela Spadaro Abercrombie, while he was a student and she an employee at Georgia Tech in Atlanta and her husband was stationed overseas in the Army. Linton broke off the affair after she became pregnant, and she subsequently committed suicide, or at least that's the official version. Regardless of how she died, you and your brother therefore have a clear motive for your crime. I have no doubt that any jury will take but a few minutes to convict you both."

There was a pause while he processed all this. "What's your theory of Danny's alleged involvement?"

"He was the lookout at the top of the ski lift and manipulated a closure tape across the beginning of the expert trail to keep everyone off it but Linton. When he saw Linton get off the lift, he opened the trail, then he called you when Linton began his descent. After that, he put the closure tape back up to keep others off the trail. After killing Linton, you called him to tell him that his role was complete and he could leave."

It was his turn to drum his fingers on the table as he stared at the one-way mirror in front of the camera. After a long enough time for the drumming to become annoying to me, he sighed and shook his head.

"Well, my first priority has to be to protect Danny from all this. So I think I'll tell you a story, a true one, Ms. Trieri. I hope the folks back there with the camera have lots of blank video tapes or memory sticks or whatever, though, because it'll take some time. But it'll all be true, scout's honor. And, for the record, I'm doing this of my own volition, with full knowledge that I am voluntarily waiving representation and that anything I say can be used against me in a court of law."

"It sounds like it's going to be a long story, Mr. Sands. I suggest we begin tomorrow morning, after you have a night of sleep in a cell of your own and get into a change of clothes."

The offer startled him, and he looked grateful.

I realized that my weekend plans for time off were going to have to be shelved, but it seemed as if it just might be worth it.

* * *

Interlude

Yesterday, you said something that suggested to me you know my family name was originally "Spadaro." I don't know how you found that out, but I guess it also means you know something about my family history. Still, you'll probably be hearing some new details from a new perspective, so bear with me. And, say, how about a bottle of water? I've never quite managed to get used to the dry air out here in the mountain west.

That's because, of course, I grew up in humidity of the City, the only city on the planet that counts for anything, as far as I'm concerned, New York City. I was born there, went to school there, all the way through law school, and I didn't leave until I joined the Army after I got my law degree. Then I spent

five years traveling, courtesy of Uncle Sam, most of it in far east Asia. Afterwards, well, things changed for me, but I'll get to that later.

But growing up in the City was the best. Lots of reasons for that. The place is alive, twenty-four hours a day, and it offers anything you want. And everything. Like, the food. I'd sacrifice my left...er, let's just say I'd make a big sacrifice if I could find a source out here for real New York bagels, for example. Or a bowl of matzo-ball soup like from Zeppie's Deli down the block from our apartment, the one when I was a sophomore in high school. Or Chinese food made the right way. What passes for Chinese in these parts just doesn't cut it. And we don't have anything out there in Montrose County that even pretends to be French, and don't bother to ask about Italian food, especially pizza. There's just no place else where you can get pizza like in the City. If I could get authentic New York style pizza at home in Montrose, I'd die a happy man.

Don't get me wrong. I love it, living on Colorado's western slope. Elbow room. Peace and quiet. Unbelievable scenery. And skiing! I never really knew about skiing until I moved out here. It's the closest thing to flying I've ever done. And, to be fair, you can get most anything now online, if it's not available in local stores, so it's really quite comfortable.

Still, I miss the City. As I was growing up, especially as I got a little older and started dating, all the variety of things to do got more and more interesting. Museums—I mean, is there any place else with museums like in the City?—and galleries and shows and sports and...well, I could go on forever. But I'm sure you get the idea.

Naturally, it helped, helped a lot, actually, to have money. I mean, the City is expensive, very expensive. I didn't know how expensive until I moved out here. Clothes, a place to live, food, you name it. There's this nice place in Montrose where I eat breakfast a lot. Great breakfasts, way too much good food. You can get it for under ten bucks. In the City, at a similar place with similar food, if you could find such a place, it'd be three times that. I mean, it's crazy there. That's one nice thing about living here. On the other hand, wages are much lower here, so that makes up for a lot of it.

But, anyway, when I was growing up, money wasn't a problem. We had plenty, not that my parents let us kids spend much of it. Missy and I, that's Miciela, my sister, Missy and I had allowances, sure, but we also had chores to earn it. Cleaning, errands, that kind of thing. And it wasn't as much as the other kids in our building got, because our parents were careful not to spoil us. That's how I learned to hustle, in fact. The other kids with more money were easy marks for all sorts of little games I ran on them. But that's another story.

So where am I going with all this? Well, eventually I'm going to get to Danny and how he shouldn't be part of any murder charges you might have in mind. But to do that, I need to give you a lot of background about us, because it figures in to how things all went down. So I'm starting with my childhood in the City. It's not like I have this all scripted, so it'll probably come across like some kind of disjointed stream of consciousness thing. But I'll get there.

Ah, thanks for the water.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, growing up in the City.

I remember living with my parents and Missy and, after a while, Danny, in a sequence of ever-bigger, and nicer, apartments. We'd move every couple of years to something better as my Dad's business ventures became more and more successful. Huh? Oh, don't worry, I'll get to that bye and bye. Anyway, one thing that all those different apartments did was to get me familiar with different parts of Manhattan, where all of them were. When I was in grade school and middle school, I explored a lot on my way to and from school and learned my way around everywhere.

And then in high school, when Danny came along, much to my parents' surprise, Mom had to look after him, and I had a lot of freedom to do whatever I wanted to. Or what I could get away with. And moving around so much also meant that I never had long-term friends, like a gang that I was with for all of my childhood, like lots of kids do. I wasn't exactly a loner, but I was never part of a gang of kids, either. So I explored a lot on my own and picked up little odd jobs here and there to earn a few bucks now and then.

Whenever we moved, I had a whole new neighborhood to learn about and, especially, a whole new gang of other kids to get to know. And that was challenging almost every time because those other kids were always suspicious of the new guy. But I never had trouble from these new gangs of kids whose neighborhoods I moved into because I was always big for my age. I just kept outgrowing my contemporaries. And so the older, and bigger, kids in the new gang didn't mess with me, or if they did it was only once.

The trouble is, I've noticed that the business of outgrowing my contemporaries is still happening, except it's horizontally rather than vertically. I guess maybe it's a good thing I don't live in the City any more, with all that great food.

Anyway, because I was big as a kid, I never got picked on by bullies. Because I never got picked on, I never became a bully myself, I guess, although I was always very protective of Missy, who was a couple of years younger than me. In fact, I've come to understand that it was probably because I was so protective of her that she chose to leave home to go away to college, to Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. It was for women, so that made my folks happy, and it was far away from my over-protectiveness.

I stayed in the City for college, though, at NYU and then law school there. It was probably my first two years at NYU, which were also Missy's last two years of high school, that convinced her to get far away for college. Seeing the behavior of first- and second-year college guys made me so over-protective that I don't think she dated at all. So, as much as I hate to say so, it's my fault that she left for Atlanta, which led to all the other stuff that happened there and, eventually, her death. I've been searching for ways to purge my guilt about it all ever since.

Anyway, because I was always good in school—it came easy to me, and I never really had to study very much—I blew through the NYU undergraduate program and then their law school in five years. Law school was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time. My undergraduate degree, it was in business, a pretty nebulous major that I made even more nebulous with my choice of elective courses, that degree didn't seem to offer the sorts of career opportunities that the professors touted. But I figured with the business background, a law degree on top would open lots of doors for me. What I didn't know about at the time was the glut of new lawyers that were coming into the job market at the same time that I was. And many of them had worked harder in law school than I did, including taking internship positions in law firms and so on. I was too lazy to do that. So my opportunities were considerably more limited, much to my chagrin.

You might ask why I didn't go to work for my Dad. Well, first, I don't think he would have hired me. He had a good idea of how lazy I was, even to the point of ragging on me about it almost continuously. I guess I should have got my own place to live while I was in college, but the free rent and incredible food I got at home were just too good to give up on. And the other reason I didn't go to work for him was that he operated on his own. If you know anything about him, it's probably from the newspapers back during trials he was involved in. And that probably gave you the idea that he was part of some big New York crime family, or something like that. But that's all wrong.

* * *

Maybe I should spend some time setting the record straight.

Antonio Spadaro Senior, my Dad, was born in the City just after World War Two, about nine months after my grandfather returned from his Army service overseas. Granddad was wounded, not too bad but bad enough to get sent home, in the reinvasion of the Philippines. He arrived stateside in the late spring of 1945, a couple of months before we dropped those A-bombs on Japan, the ones that ended the War. Granddad settled down out on Long Island, got himself a civil engineering degree on the GI Bill, and was part of the big post-war building boom, so his family prospered. Although I've pretty much lost touch with them, I've got two uncles and three aunts back east, my father's younger siblings, plus a host of cousins. Most of them live in Jersey now. None of them, that I know of at least, got involved in the sorts of things that Dad did.

Just like I turned out, Dad was something of a loner growing up. What I mean by this is that he didn't run with a single group of guys all the time, but instead spent time with different groups, what I guess you'd call "street gangs" with various agendas. And, in doing so, he got to know them all pretty well and was able to play the role of peacemaker between them when trouble arose and to forge alliances when there was something that required combined resources. And, as I understand it, he started down this road when he was ten or twelve and just kept at it until he developed a niche for himself on the streets, a niche that provided him both protection and income. Nobody else could do what he was able to, so he was indispensable in his own way.

Now, all this isn't something that I've spent a lot of time discussing with people over the years, but there have been the occasions that the topic came up. Activities on the wrong side of straight-and-narrow, I mean. And those times that I've discussed it, I've found that almost everyone has the wrong idea about organized crime in the City—and the rest of the country, too, for that matter. I expect that's because of Hollywood and the popularity of movies and TV about it all. You know, *The Godfather* and its offspring; *The Sopranos*; stand-alones like *Goodfellas* and *Casino*; all that sort of thing. What's important to understand is that almost all of those sorts of movies, and even the TV shows, are pretty dated. The whole culture of that underworld evolved considerably over my Dad's lifetime. It's not at all like it was in the 1950s.

For one thing, among the original *mafia* families, the ones from Sicily, most of the immigrant and first-generation guys have died off from old age, and many of the second-generation guys have, too, or else they got themselves whacked for some reason. So what leadership there is in that group is made of guys who not only grew up in New York, their parents grew up in New York. Almost all vestiges of the old country are long gone. The old clichés about the godfathers and so on don't apply so much the way they used to.

For another, there's a wider range of cultural backgrounds represented in organized crime these days. African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, South Americans, you name it. Remember that movie *American Gangster* with Denzel Washington playing the head of the drug-dealing family in Harlem and—what's his name?—oh, yeah, Russell Crowe playing the cop? That was based on a true story. And the Russian influence, which was a tidal wave after the Iron Curtain fell back in the '90s, is both far-reaching and quite powerful. Naturally, all these groups are concerned with turf and so on, and conflicts abound. And that's where my Dad came in. Just like when he was growing up, he found his niche as a peace-maker and truce-negotiator. In the process, he got to know the hierarchy all over the City, who was in charge of what and where they operated, stuff like that.

I asked him about what he did—what his job was—one time when I was fourteen or so and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with myself.

"What's my job?" He thought about it for a minute. "Well, I'm a kind of broker. You know what a broker is?"

“You mean like a stock broker? Those guys who work down on Wall Street?” We lived on the Upper East Side at the time, but, like I said, I knew Manhattan pretty well.

“Well, sort of.” He thought for another minute. “Stock brokers are the middle-men in deals between buyers and sellers of stocks and bonds. I broker deals that involve information, mainly. I get information from all over the place and know who might need it, so I make deals to get it to them. It’s more complicated and more of an art form than being a stock broker or a real estate broker, but it’s basically the same thing. Being a middle-man. Why? You looking for a job or something?”

We weren’t in the habit of having talks of this nature, so the question embarrassed me a little. “Naw, not right now. I’m plenty busy. But I gotta think about my future, y’know? Lots of my friends have their lives all planned out, or I guess their parents do. And I’m just wondering about possibilities.”

He thought about it for a minute. “What I do is pretty specialized. I don’t know what kinds of opportunities there are for it. Also, it’s not the kind of thing that there are, you know, companies or partnerships or whatever for. It’s more of a lone wolf job. I’m probably not a good role model for you.”

“But you seem to make lots of money.”

“Some, yeah, but there are lots of ways to do that. What you need to do is to figure out what you’re good at, and what you like doing, and aim at that. Like, a career in business maybe. You seem to have lots of little business things going all the time. Or maybe business law. Lawyers are always in demand, and it’s getting more and more complicated to run a business without trouble.” He paused and stared off into space. “One thing I can say for sure is that you need to learn how to earn and keep people’s trust. That means, in my world, at least, knowing what to keep confidential and what to pass along. When to tell the truth, and how much of it to tell and how much not to. And when, and how, to lie.”

Even at an earlier age than fourteen, I’d learned not to ask too many questions about my Dad’s business associates, the people he was now telling me he brokered information among. Given the strange hours he kept, I knew he didn’t go to some office every day, like so many of my friends’ dads did. It wasn’t too hard for me to figure out that he was working on the fringe of legitimacy. And even though that fringe seemed exotic and attractive to me, his advice stuck, so I went to the NYU Business School and then Law School. And it’s worked out pretty well for me.

Anyway, as the middle-man, or go-between, who brokered deals for information among all the outfits in the City, he was privy to all sorts of their secrets, probably more so than anyone else ever. That advice about trust he gave me was based on his own experience—he earned and kept the trust of all sides, of all the different outfits. And because he kept such a low profile—he never, ever, participated in any of their jobs—he wasn’t a target for law enforcement at any level, not the NYPD or the FBI or anybody.

I was in the Army and out of the country when it all came crashing down on him, so I don’t really know the details very well. He’s never talked much about it. And even if I’d still been living with my folks, I don’t think I’d know much more than I do. I’ve talked with Danny about it, and it’s all pretty much a mystery to him as well.

But, apparently, things were going along quite nicely with his little lone-wolf business of brokering information, when one of those FBI RICO stings ensnared him. The Feds had high-tech surveillance on a couple of the outfits, and they got sound and pictures of Dad talking with the bosses. Because he was the only common thread between the two outfits, they started focusing on him, and that got them sound and pictures of him talking with yet more bosses. Eventually they pulled him in and confronted him with it all, and offered him a deal if he’d spill. The deal included the witness protection program, and, because he knew a good deal when he saw one, he took it. Next stop, Grand Junction, Colorado and new identities for all of us. Except Missy. She was dead by then.

Like I said, I was in the Army at the time, so I wasn't in the middle of it all. First I heard of it was when I got pulled into my CO's office in Seoul for a little chat with a U.S. Marshal. But that's getting ahead of myself. First, I need to talk about how I got to Seoul, too.

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The old slogan used to be "Join the Navy and see the world!" I don't know if the Army ever tried something similar, but if it did, it would be more along the lines of "Join the Army and see whatever. And don't gripe about it." Although I guess I should feel lucky that they wanted me to see east Asia rather than Iraq or Afghanistan, it would have been nice to have some say in the matter. But maybe I'm just a control freak.

How I got to Korea, I guess, started with that advice that Dad gave me about Business School and then Law School with a business-law focus. Thing is, by the time I finished high school and college, including the law degree and passing the New York State Bar and all that, ten years had passed and things had changed. Lawyers were a dime a dozen on a good day, and newly minted lawyers were way, way less than that. About the only things available to me were hourly, contract jobs, no benefits, proofreading briefs for real lawyers. If you were an exceptional proofreader and got lucky enough to be able to work over a lousy brief into something successful, maybe that law firm would offer you something more full-time and permanent. That happened to a couple of my buddies. But not to me.

I needed the job, though, because I was too proud to continue living with my folks—also, that was too confining. I couldn't have dates over at home, not with Mom there. So I needed an income stream to pay rent. But, as everyone knows, rents in the City are absurd, so I was barely getting by.

Then Missy came home for a visit from Atlanta, it was for one of the holidays, I think, maybe Thanksgiving, and she started talking about her boyfriend, a guy in the Army ROTC program at Georgia Tech. Guy named Jason Abercrombie. Ha! Good old Sicilian name, right? Boy, was Mom ever freaked out.

But anyway, Missy talked about him for the whole time she was home, and I heard a lot of stuff he'd told her about opportunities in the Army. College grads who had been through ROTC got officers' postings right away, and people who had graduate degrees also got special consideration for enlisting. And my law degree was a graduate degree. So I looked into it. And it looked good.

It turned out that there was a requirement for a sort of accelerated officers' training program upon joining up. I'll spare you all the Army jargon for this stuff, but it was six weeks of kind of a gentrified basic training. That turned out to be a snap for me. All that experience from when I was a kid, getting along with different gangs of guys and so on, fitting in, those kinds of things, all that got me through it without any problems at all.

After that, there was a special training program for the JAG Corps, a couple of months in Virginia. Specialized law school, sort of. Oh, sorry, Army jargon is hard to shake. JAG is Judge Advocate General, the Army lawyers. That training made me a real Army lawyer and ready for whatever they decided they needed me to do. But no way was I in any kind of training for combat.

While they were figuring it all out, I had some leave coming, and I used it to visit Atlanta, to see Missy and her boyfriend Jason. I figured I ought to check him out and thank him at the same time. I probably wouldn't have enlisted if Missy hadn't been so full of information about Army opportunities from him.

As much as I love the City, I have to say that Atlanta in the springtime is just glorious. No wonder Missy liked it so much there. And Jason turned out to be a stand-up guy. He was a bit younger than me,

but we got along just fine. It made me proud that I was the first person to know of their engagement. But I got shipped out before the wedding, something that I regret to this day.

Because of what I concentrated on in the NYU Law School, the Army decided that I was best suited for their contract law needs, with some possibility of working in administrative and labor law. That was something of a relief, as I knew I'd be no good at criminal law or some of the other more traditional specialties. And it turned out that the Eighth Army's mission in South Korea, combined with rising tensions with that wacko dictatorship to the north, was motivating a build-up of personnel, meaning there would be lots of new contracts with both U.S. and Korean civilian suppliers. Meaning they needed more lawyers.

All I knew about Korea was that I loved their barbeque. When I was in high school, there was a take-out place down the block, and it was a favorite of ours when we wanted a change from pizza and Chinese. Not much, but at least it was a start in the sense that I wouldn't have to starve.

Camp Humphreys, or, more formally, U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys, is some sixty or so miles south of Seoul, enclosed in a big oxbow bend of the Ansong River. I heard that it's the biggest U.S. military installation anywhere overseas, and I'm not surprised. The place is huge, and it's got so much in the way of familiar amenities—familiar to Americans, I mean—that I didn't have to worry about ordering Korean barbeque to keep from starving. After all, there were Whoppers with fries, or maybe one of those Spicy Chicken sandwiches, as well as truly lousy pizza.

It was easy to settle in and start my new job as an Army lawyer. It turned out to be a lot like the old job, though, only this time it was reviewing and proofreading contracts, mostly for construction and maintenance work that the base outsourced. Except this time, the pay was better, by a bit, and there were benefits and job security.

To my everlasting surprise, after I was there about a year my brother-in-law, Jason Abercrombie, showed up. He and Missy had got themselves hitched, with my parents' blessings, fortunately, and he'd graduated, after which the Army had made him a Second Lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps and shipped him off to Korea.

I got a heads-up from my sister about his deployment, in a letter, so I was ready to find him when he arrived. I think he appreciated having family around to help him learn the ropes of both the base and the local culture. And it was especially helpful for him that I was there when he got the message, a couple of years plus a few months later, that Missy had committed suicide. It affected me, too, of course, but I just couldn't believe that she'd killed herself. I knew there was more to the story. But he was crushed. What created in me a cold rage that was going to find out the real answer to it all turned him into a puddle of mush.

I knew that she couldn't have killed herself because I knew Missy. Growing up, she and Mom went to church every Sunday without fail, and it was to one of the most conservative Catholic parishes in the City. To Missy, suicide was a mortal sin. And later, when I looked into the whole matter more and found out that she had been pregnant, well, that only reinforced my conclusions, because to her abortion was another mortal sin. She just wouldn't have killed herself, no way.

Anyway, we both got stateside leave to attend her memorial service, and we travelled together. Good thing, too, because I don't know if he could have managed by himself. And it was also a good thing for him because it seemed to give him some closure. But it didn't do that for me.

After we returned to the base in Korea, we sort of went our separate ways. I guess the shock and sorrow just made it too painful to see much of each other. Time slid by, and it was a something over a year later, maybe eighteen months, when I was summoned to my CO's office, where a U.S. Marshal was waiting to see me.

“Captain Spadaro? Have a seat.” He turned to my CO. “Thanks for the use of your office, Colonel.”

The dismissal was clear, and it surprised me that Colonel Winston got the message so quickly. I sat in the chair the Marshal indicated as Winston closed the door behind him.

“Captain, I have a package of information for you here, but it needs explanation. The bottom line is that your name is now ‘Santini,’ and you’re to be honorably discharged within a month or so and shipped back to the States. New York, though, is going to be off-limits to you.” And he proceeded to fill me in on Dad’s arrest and plea deal, which included having the Witness Security Program oversee our new lives.

The Army, apparently, didn’t have a place for someone in the Program or the resources to provide the level of protection that WITSEC did. And, I guess, they had plenty of new, eager lawyers available to proofread contracts at Camp Humphreys. So strings were pulled and deals were struck and I was mustered out with full benefits, such as they were after only five years, an honorable discharge, and a complicated sequence of air travel arrangements that would take me to Grand Junction, Colorado. My first reaction to that, of course, was: *Where?* But it turned out to be fine, after the initial shock wore off.

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Even though my time in the Army had set me on a course to be a solid, upstanding citizen, there was still plenty of New York street operator left in me. WITSEC was helpful with my transition from the military to the civilian world, even to the point of providing funds for some of what I wanted to do. But I didn’t want them poking their noses too closely into my new life. So one of the first things I did was to move the sixty or so miles southeast to Montrose, change my name again, this time to something less ethnic, Sands, and set up a law practice. That, in part, was to keep me busy while I made plans to travel back to Atlanta and do some snooping around about Missy’s death.

It didn’t take much snooping, although it did take some time, to find that the coroner’s report was less than definitive, at least by the legal standards I’d been trained to in the Army, and that there may well have been foul play. I managed to track down some of her friends and co-workers, which put me on the trail of one Phillip Linton, who’d been in the Georgia Tech grad school while Missy was employed in an administrative office on campus. It was her car found with the note in it at the scenic overlook where she went off the cliff—he, I was told, didn’t have a car but rather got everywhere by bicycle. So I figured that he’d put the bike in her car, they’d driven to the overlook, and he’d pushed her off. It would have been easy for him to ride the bike home, mostly downhill, in fact.

So, in addition to making a new life for myself as a small-town lawyer, I had a personal mission: find the dirtbag who murdered my sister and confront him about it. Several years passed, I lawyered successfully and got interested in motorcycles, and Phillip Linton remained elusive.

Eventually, my little brother Danny, now Danny Santini, finished high school and went off to college at a small university south of Montrose, a place called Frémont State U in Durango. He and I had been having conversations about Missy’s death—he had bought into the suicide story, and I felt I should let him know the truth—so that when he ran across a Professor Linton at Frémont State, he let me know. And, it seems like the rest *you* already know about, or at least some of it. But there are a couple of additional things I need to sum up with.

First of all, Danny. Like I said, he’s not culpable in Linton’s death. Yeah, he told me of Linton’s being in Durango, and he also told me when Linton showed up here in Winter Park last week. And we talked on the phone last Friday. But he had no idea, no idea at all, what I had in mind about confronting Linton. Never during our conversations about it all did I mention anything about that. OK? If he’d known, I’m certain that he would have tried to talk me out of it. That’s one reason I didn’t mention it, in

fact. So whatever charges you come up with for him, they shouldn't relate to the murder one you're probably going to charge me with. And if they do, he'll be found innocent, or should be. If you have the evidence you claim to, it doesn't matter whether I'm really culpable, because it's likely to look that way to a jury no matter what.

Finally, I need to talk about my Dad, because that relates to why I've been so candid here about the whole WITSEC thing. Normally, we're not supposed to talk about that, no way, never.

And even with what I'm about to tell you, it would be better for all involved if this video recording never found its way into public consumption, or anything close. The fewer people who see it the better. Not only will that help Danny and me and my folks, it'll also help law enforcement, because you'll have several fewer unexplained deaths to investigate.

When Danny went off to college, my folks moved into a senior living complex in Grand Junction, one of those places with graduated levels of care. As you get older and need more and more assistance and care, they are set up to provide it. This move was mainly because of my Mom. She never quite got over the shock of Missy's death, and it seems to have set her on a downward spiral of early-onset dementia, or maybe it's even Alzheimer's. Dad was having trouble taking care of her, so they moved into this new place. And, well, that downward spiral has been *really* downward, because Dad told me she's not expected to live more than a couple more months.

This development has set Dad on a new course. He's pretty much persuaded himself that, with Mom no longer at risk, he can get Danny and me off the hook for retribution from the New York crowd if he makes it known where and who he is now. Sort of like he's thinking about sacrificing himself for us. Needless to say, I've tried to talk him out of it, and I'll continue to. But, with Mom gone, or leaving, or however you say it, he says he's got nothing left to live for. A dead daughter, no grandchildren—he wants to do the right thing by Danny and me and get us out from under the WITSEC cloud.

And just like Dad, I want Danny to have as good a life as possible, because he's going to be the only one left. One reason I'm coming clean with this long story is that you seem to have the goods on me. But another is that it really doesn't matter. Given how long cases like this, particularly capital cases, take to get through the system, I'll probably die before I get to trial. See, I was diagnosed with early-stage pancreatic cancer a couple of months ago, a type that has no cure. The symptoms aren't too much of a problem for me, but I've noticed they're progressing. And the outlook was for three to four months more before it kills me.

So if Dad sacrifices himself, Danny will be the only one left. That's why I'm so concerned that his alleged involvement in last Friday's events isn't linked to the worse charges against me. Anyway, I'd be surprised if you can convict him of capital charges anyway, because whatever evidence you have is circumstantial. Phone calls? So what? Mountain bike? Another so what. Lots of people have mountain bikes. Even if you can get a witness to identify him as having been on that mountain last Friday, that's still under the heading of circumstantial. Maybe you can get him convicted for knowing about something in advance and not taking steps to prevent it, but we both know that's not anything like accomplice to murder.

Anyway, that's the story, and I appreciate your patience for letting me tell it. And thanks for letting all the other guys off the hook. I'm sure they'll abide by the agreement not to come back here to Grand County, no matter how grand it is.

* * *

Part II

Ten

For a big, hairy guy who liked to wear smelly leather vests and ride disreputable motorcycles with a gang of other guys similarly inclined, Tony Sands gets credit from me for both his candor and his perspicacity. It turned out that his assessment of his brother's legal exposure was virtually spot on, as all of our evidence against Dan Santini was circumstantial. We had found no witnesses who could put Dan at the top of the ski lift, and, because his phone call was picked up by only a single tower, his location could not be triangulated. Those phone calls with his brother might have taken place with Dan anywhere on the mountain. So we really didn't have much on Dan besides his not having told law enforcement about what he knew of his brother's plans. I began to doubt our ability to get an arrest warrant for him.

I had set up our Saturday interview—or, perhaps more accurately, Sands' soliloquy—in a different room from the Friday interview, one without an observation window and with the video camera in a corner instead of next door. I operated the camera myself, so I was the only one who saw and heard what Sands had to say. Given his admissions concerning the WITSEC Program, that was probably just as well.

It occurred to me that I should remind everyone in the information loop of the sensitivity of it all and also apprise Deputy Marshal Niemeyer of the situation, especially Tony's comments about his father's intentions. Maybe, I thought, the recording could remain confidential, as our evidence against Sands was complete without it. The fewer people who heard about the Spadaro-Santini connection the better, in terms of the family members' life expectancies.

I found the right number in my phone's recent call list and turned it into a new contact, name and all, then poked it.

"Niemeyer."

"Marshal, it's Annette Trieri again, from over in Grand County. This is not a secure line, but I have some information I think I can give you anyway."

"Greetings, Ms. Trieri. I hope you have good news."

"Mmm. I doubt you'll think this is good. The person whom I'll call 'Junior,' I think you'll know who I mean, he gave a long statement today, which was recorded, but I was the only one present and I have the only copy of the recording. It includes what amounts to a confession to the murder I've been investigating, or at least as close to a confession as possible without actually admitting anything specific, and it also includes some information you'll be interested in."

"I'm all ears, Ms. Trieri. And I infer that you may be in a position to keep that recording confidential."

"Correct, Marshal. The information for you is that Junior has the idea that his father is planning to sacrifice himself to try to ensure the family's safety. Apparently, Junior's mother is at death's door from Alzheimer's or something, and Junior says he is also, from an especially aggressive cancer. So if his father's plan works, it will get his younger brother out of trouble, while the other three, most likely, won't be living much longer anyway. I thought this might perhaps explain your runner problem."

“Well, if that doesn’t... Sometimes, Ms. Trieri, I wish I’d followed in my father’s footsteps and become a plumber. Even fixing clogged toilets would be more fun than what situations like this present.”

“I sympathize, Marshal. And if I hear anything about, uh, Senior, I’ll be sure and let you know soonest. But I don’t think that Junior knows that his father is missing. He said his father talked about outing himself, with respect to your program, but he didn’t suggest it had happened. And he’s been here for several days, out of touch with events over your way. Given the situation, I expect the sheriff here will be keeping Junior in protective confinement, to the extent that’s possible in a small, rural department like we have here.”

“If you want to bring your suspect to trial, that’s probably wise. I doubt that Senior’s plan to get his family out of jeopardy by sacrificing himself is going to work. Some of the, um, ghosts of his past are just too vindictive for that, and from what I hear there’s a very substantial bounty out there for public evidence of a successful hit on any in that family. Not only do those ghosts want revenge, they need to make an example of all the family members as a warning to potential turncoats in the future.”

“I thought that might be the case. It’ll be hardest on the younger brother, and because our case against him as an accomplice is mostly circumstantial. I’ll be surprised if we can get a warrant for him. And he’s just a college kid.”

“I’ll be letting my people in...uh...where he goes to school know about all this, for sure. Let’s just hope that whatever Senior is doing, it doesn’t include anything to do with the name he’s been using. Or anything that would identify that name. Thanks for the call, Ms. Trieri.”

My stomach growled, and I noticed that the clock on the wall was reading 1:15—I’d missed lunch. Maybe, I thought, Fran’s around and we can go get a sandwich together. I needed to discuss some things with him anyway.

I found him in his office, cowboy boots on his desk, reading a sheaf of stapled-together paper of some kind.

“Hey, Fran, had lunch? I got busy and forgot, and now I’m starving.”

He looked up. “Hey, Annette. What time is it? I got so absorbed in this crap that I forgot, too. One-fifteen? Shit. Ettie closes in another fifteen minutes on Saturdays, if I remember. Let me call over there.”

He picked up his phone and poked at it. “Ettie? Hi, it’s Fran Schmidt. Hey, I forgot lunch. Can I come by and get something before you close? I’ll leave right now...Oh, great. Thanks. See you in a couple of minutes.”

It was a beautiful day, so our walk the few blocks to the west, down the main drag of Hot Sulphur Springs, was quite pleasant. Fortunately, the traffic on that main drag, U.S. Highway 40, was pretty thin at that time of day.

Because it was about to close, the Glory Hole Cafe, a breakfast and lunch counter with a few tables, was deserted when we walked in, and Fran talked Ettie into not throwing us out until we finished. We took a table by the window, to watch what traffic there was.

“Glad you asked me, Annette. I completely forgot. Then I would have binged on junk-food snacks from the vending machine this afternoon, and Mary would have found out—she always does—and I’d be in trouble. Again.”

“I got wrapped up in stuff this morning, too. And even though I’m starving, I want to talk about it. It’s pretty sensitive stuff.”

Fran swiveled his head around. “Well, it looks like just you and me and Ettie. And she’s pretty deaf. Whoever’s back there in the kitchen isn’t going to hear us, not with that exhaust fan.”

After we’d ordered, I plunged in.

“I think you know I was taking a statement from Anthony Sands this morning, right?”

“Yesterday, I heard him warn you about a long story, so you wanted to wait until today.”

“Right. It wound up being his life story, and it took all morning. I’m not sure quite why he felt like he had to tell it. Maybe it was to justify what he did, which is murder Phillip Linton a week ago, although he didn’t exactly confess to doing so. One thing he tried to emphasize is that his brother, Dan Santini, isn’t culpable in the murder. And, culpability aside, it’s not clear that we have a solid case against Dan anyway. Everything we have is circumstantial. I don’t know that we’re going to be able to get a warrant for his arrest.”

“Does the case against Sands depend on his brother in any way?”

“Well, we’ve talked about how Sands would have needed an accomplice to be a lookout at the top of the ski lift. And the circumstantial evidence sure points to his brother. But with the bike rental, the murder weapon—that rock—and the motive, I think we’ve got a lock on his case. Talking about the motive in open court, though, is going to put the entire family in jeopardy, because it will entail making public the connection between the Spadaros and the Santinis. Once that happens, Tony the Ferret’s past will undoubtedly show up to haunt all of them.”

“So to convict a murderer, we’ve got to endanger his parents and brother? Great.” Fran shook his head.

“Oh, I don’t know. Sands told me that he has terminal cancer. Maybe that will get him first, before this all has to come out in court.”

* * *

After we finished lunch, Fran and I thanked Ettie profusely and left her a big tip for staying open late for us on a Saturday. Then I made a point of doing what I’d essentially ordered Angela to do—take time off. I spent Saturday afternoon relaxing, and on Sunday Hal and I took advantage of the late summer weather and went for a long walk in the woods up the valley from our house. The aspens in the big grove were showing signs of the coming autumn.

That reminded us to talk over his idea of making an aspen tour to see the fall foliage in the southwest part of the state. Such a trip would also let me return the files on Phillip Linton to FSU, and we could touch base with old friends and colleagues in Durango. Hal promised to check all the web cameras he could find to see if there were any hints yet of how the turning leaves might be progressing. The extremely dry summer we had endured could, he suggested, mean an early change of color statewide.

And then on Monday it was back to work, although, with the Linton case cleared, the pressure level was much lower. Knowing this, I took it easy that morning and didn’t get to the office until about nine-thirty. Angela was there already, up to her elbows in paperwork, but Fran was nowhere to be found. I asked and was told that he had an early appointment next door in the District Attorney’s office.

It was about ten when my desk phone buzzed, signaling an intra-office call. “Yes?”

“Um, Ms. Trieri, there’s a gentleman out here looking for the sheriff, and he’s not taking ‘no’ for an answer.” The voice of Norma Spears, whom I’d met on Thursday before the motorcycle gang was brought in, registered in my head. “I thought maybe you’d know what to do.”

“Has he introduced himself, Norma?”

“He gave me a card that says he’s Wilson Lingenfelter, a lawyer from Grand Junction. He says he’s here to represent Anthony Sands.”

“Ah, I see. Well, tell him to have a seat and I’ll be right out. Don’t ask him, tell him. But you can say ‘please’.”

I stopped at the restroom to check myself in the mirror—I wanted to look as professional as I possibly could—and while looking at myself staring back in the mirror, I had a scary thought. The very next thing, I stopped by the holding cell with Sands in it.

“Morning, Mr. Sands. Tell me. Did you call a lawyer?”

“Huh? Uh, no. I mean, after that long session on Saturday, I figured it would just be a waste of time and money, at least until you file charges and I know what I have to deal with.”

“Ah. Well, there’s a Wilson Lingenfelter wants to see you. Says he’s your Grand Junction lawyer.”

“Lingenfelter? Hmm. The name’s familiar for some reason.” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “If I remember, he’s a high-profile defense attorney in Grand Junction, so that part fits. Calls himself the ‘Cowboy Lawyer’ as I recall. I don’t know how he’d know to be here for me, though.”

“You didn’t call him.”

“Not a chance. Say. Maybe one of my guys sent him to help, you know, someone from Friday who you released. They certainly knew that I wasn’t being released and that I’d be here.”

Even though the possibility seemed reasonable, I was still puzzled when I walked out to the lobby.

“Mr. Lingenfelter? I’m Annette Trieri, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I understand you’re here to see your client, Mr. Sands?”

He was sitting in one of the lobby’s chairs, briefcase primly on his knees, and he didn’t bother to stand up. The nickname of “Cowboy Lawyer” fit, by the looks of him—big western hat over too-long hair; full beard with a handlebar moustache.

“Right. But first I need to see the sheriff.”

“I’m afraid the sheriff isn’t available—he’s in a meeting with the District Attorney as we speak.” Why, I wondered, did that voice seem sort of familiar?

“I need to know what my client is charged with before I talk to him.”

“I’d like to know that as well, Mr. Lingenfelter. Mr. Sands is incarcerated because of a disorderly conduct episode, and more serious charges are pending. Would you like me to arrange a meeting, or would you rather wait here?”

“What’s all this to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation?”

“The CBI has been assisting the sheriff in the investigation. That’s our job, as I expect you know. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll see if the sheriff’s meeting is wrapping up. Sit tight, and I’ll be back shortly.” I walked back down the hall to my office and took the long route to the DA’s office.

Thinking about it all later, I guess I should have noticed that my internal lawyer alarm, usually quite a trusty, if mysterious, warning system for me, wasn’t activated by Lingenfelter. I suppose I’d become so used to its presence during all my time with Sands on Saturday, and then again that morning, that I just tuned it out. Then, when it wasn’t there, I didn’t notice that either. And that turned out to be a tragedy.

I reached the District Attorney's office, unmistakable with its large, hand lettered, palindromic door sign saying "A.D. SONOS D.A." on it, just as Fran Schmidt was coming out. He looked annoyed. I had barely opened my mouth to say something snarky, when my phone started demanding my attention just as Fran's did his. I poked mine first.

"Trieri, CBI"

"Annette, it's Angela." Her voice was shaking, and she was panting. "I walked out to the lobby a minute ago and found Norma, she was on duty at the front desk, I found her slumped over, face down in a pool of blood. And the back of her head's been blown off by the exit wound."

"Oh, Christ. I'll be right there." Fran was already running in that direction, phone pressed to his ear.

But at a junction of corridors, he turned toward the holding cells while I kept on toward the lobby. By the time I got there, a small crowd was gathered, and I heard an ambulance siren outside. Although its increasing volume told me it was headed our way, it was clear that Norma Spears was beyond its help.

The small crowd was all sheriff's department employees, with no signs of the recent visitor, Wilson Lingenfelter, the supposed Grand Junction lawyer. It dawned on me why Fran had been headed for the holding cells—Tony Sands was in there.

When I reached Sands' holding cell, Fran was already on his phone setting up roadblocks. As soon as he saw me he handed me the phone.

"It's dispatch. Give her a description of the guy."

I had to work to focus on describing the man who had claimed to be Wilson Lingenfelter, because I was distracted by Tony Sands' body lying inside the cell. Both of his knees were shattered, his lower legs at very odd angles, and his torso was leaning sideways against the back wall, an arc of blood from the back of his head showing where he'd toppled to the floor.

As I passed along Lingenfelter's description, it registered on me that it certainly wasn't the Grand Junction Wilson Lingenfelter that Sands had recalled and, in any case, he'd probably not look that way now. What I had to say sounded very artificial—as if he'd been wearing a wig and a fake beard he could dispose of along with the big hat. The only thing distinctive I remembered were his eyes, an unusual shade of turquoise that made them seem quite penetrating. Colored contact lenses? And I hadn't really paid attention at the time, but the thousand-word picture of him in my mind now included "disguise" repeated over and over. I was no help when asked for a vehicle description.

Although there were only two directions in which he, presumably a visitor who didn't know the area, would have fled—east or west on U.S. 40—I verified that the local county road providing a shortcut bypassing Granby to the east was also going to be monitored. His only alternative to those possibilities would put him so deep into the back-country on such lousy roads that he'd need camping gear and a modified Jeep or some such vehicle. Surely, I thought, he'd want to get as far away from Hot Sulphur Springs as he could as quickly as possible.

So even without a solid description, it seemed to me that we had a good chance of catching him.

* * *

As Fran, Angela, and I settled in to deal with the mess and wait for updates from the roadblocks, my phone once again demanded my attention. Its screen told me that Deputy U.S. Marshal Mason Niemeyer was calling.

"Ms. Trieri? I hate to have to tell you this, but it's started." His voice was grim.

I realized that he couldn't possibly know about our situation that soon. "What's happened to whom?"

"Fabiana Spadaro, now called Filomena Santini, had a peculiar accident last night at her nursing home. Fell down a flight of stairs and broke her neck. Normally, she doesn't leave her room after she's brought back from supper, but this happened in the middle of the night sometime. I thought you should know so that you can decide about protection for Tony Junior."

I let out a huge sigh. "Well, yeah. We would like to provide that. But it's too late."

I told him of the events of the past hour or so.

"Ah, crap. That's certainly not what I wanted to hear. Although I guess I can't say it's unexpected. Let's see. I suppose there was plenty of time for the person who was here dealing with Mrs. Santini to have driven over your way overnight or early this morning to deal with Tony Junior. Maybe that's just wishful thinking. That we've got only one killer on our hands, I mean. But I'm going to go with that until we have reason not to."

"Makes sense to me, especially because it's probably not random bounty hunters but rather someone sent out by whoever Tony Senior contacted."

"My thoughts exactly. I've already alerted my people down in...er, down south so they can take steps to get Danny in protective custody if he returns from his summer job. Do you know his plans?"

I remembered my conversation with Hal and Mac. "I'm told that he's on a week-long backpacking trip. I don't think I'll say where on this call. But being out in the wilderness seems like a pretty safe place for him, assuming our killer is a city guy. And, listen. When Dan does head for home, I used to run the CBI office down there and I know all the guys. If you need help from them, let me know and I'll pave the way with a phone call."

"I'm hoping we can handle it, but thanks. That could come in handy. Sorry I didn't call sooner, Ms. Trieri, but I just heard about Mrs. Santini a few minutes ago."

"Good luck with Dan, Marshal, for his sake."

Fran was looking question marks my way after I disconnected, so I filled him in.

"Mmm. That makes our roadblocks all the more important. Can't have a stone killer wandering around the state whacking people. Besides, he needs to be called to account for Norma. Geez. She just started last week. And she's got a three-month old baby, or I guess her husband does now." Fran shook his head in despair.

At least, I thought, she hadn't suffered, having been killed by a single shot through the forehead from close range. No doubt Lingenfelter, or whatever his name was, had taken the weapon from his briefcase, hidden it behind the case, and innocently strolled up to her as if to ask a question.

Tony Sands, however, had obviously suffered from the double knee-capping before being dispatched with the shot through the forehead. Because none of the four shots had been heard, the killer had used a very effective suppressor on his weapon, and the hollow-point loads, which the exit wounds suggested, only made his attacks that much more effective. It was clear that we were dealing with a professional.

I began to wonder whether Dan Santini really was comparatively safe up on the Continental Divide Trail, as I'd suggested to Niemeyer. Maybe my throw-away thought that the killer had camping gear and a Jeep wasn't so unlikely after all. If Dan had written to his parents about his CDT plans, he could well be in big trouble up there in the woods—and his friends, too. It seemed likely that everything that Tony Santini Senior had known about his family was now known to whoever put out the hits.

These thoughts came spilling out to Fran and Angela in a rush. As time was passing with no reports of success from the roadblocks, they began to seem less and less far-fetched.

“I’ve hiked most of those stretches of the CDT,” Fran was staring off into space, “and even done some camping up there. Most of it’s in either the National Park or the Wilderness Areas, and you need camping permits this time of year.”

“Hal mentioned something like that—they have a schedule to keep, he said.”

“Maybe we could get a look at those permits in the Forest Service office. Or offices. See where the group is supposed to be when. Intercept them or something. You said they started Saturday from Grand Lake? They’ll be a bit past Monarch Lake by now, I’d guess. It gets harder after that, steeper and higher.”

“Fran, I bet you were going to tell me what Sonos told you before we got those phone calls.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, some of what he said is moot. He was positively giddy about the prospect of a successful prosecution of Sands, but obviously that’s not going to be happening. And he also said that there’s no point in pursuing a warrant for Daniel Santini. Everything’s just too circumstantial. I don’t think that Sands’ death will change his mind on that.”

“So if we intercept Dan and his friends, it’ll be for his own protection, I guess. Theirs, too. But not to arrest him.”

Fran nodded. “Right. And we can keep an eye on the places where Jeep roads cross the CDT, or where it follows one. Places where our killer might be able to access the Trail and get at Santini.”

For the first time, Angela spoke up. “Could we use horses, Sheriff? I know that motorized vehicles aren’t allowed in Wilderness Areas, but how about horses?”

“If I remember correctly, we can. Good idea, Angela. Also, we can do a helicopter fly-over and see if we can spot them, of course.”

“And I don’t mean to be a wise-ass, Sheriff, but, look—we have his phone number from that call list I got. Why don’t we just call him first?” Angela shrugged. “Maybe he’s somewhere in cell range—there’s pretty good coverage on the sides of the valley up here, seems like, at least at the ski area. Maybe the east side of the valley, too. We owe him a call anyway, to tell him about his family.”

Fran and I looked at each other, and he spoke first. “Annette, do you feel as dumb as I do just now? Maybe I should look into retirement options.”

“That’s the trouble with these new-fangled gadgets we didn’t grow up with. We don’t automatically think of them. Anyway, Fran, is there an end game? I mean, if we manage to keep Dan safe from this particular killer, that’s just this one guy. Don’t you think whoever put out the hit will keep at it?” I hoped I didn’t sound as depressed as I felt.

“I sure would like it if we could turn Santini over to his WITSEC people safe and sound. After that, well, it’s on them, I guess. But I already lost one of their charges here in Grand County. I don’t want to lose any more. And certainly not any more of my people.”

“Sheriff, it seems like we should be able to do that, get Dan Santini back to the WITSEC people, I mean.” Angela looked thoughtful. “From what Annette said, our killer is probably a city guy, sent here from New York or someplace. Even if he’s equipped for the outdoors, he’s probably not an outdoors person, and he’s also probably not familiar with the territory here. But you are, and Annette and I are sort of familiar with it in general, if not this specific trail. So we’ve got the huge advantage of all that, in addition to numbers and technology. If we can find out about their camping permits, we can narrow

down where to find them on a given day, then move in with horses to get them out, or at least get Santini out. I think this should work out in our favor.”

Fran nodded, then broke out in a big grin. “I hope you’re right, Angela—I hope that’s more than just a pep talk. Although I guess I can use all the pep talks I can get right now.”

* * *

Eleven

Dan Santini was either out of cell tower range or he had his phone turned off, as my call went straight to voice mail.

Because Dan had worked all summer at Hal’s institute, and because I was married to Hal, I got nominated and elected to make the call. The reasoning appealed to both Angela and Fran, but it just seemed like an excuse to me.

Still, it was useful to be able to invoke Hal’s name in my message. “Mr. Santini, my name is Annette Trieri, and I’m married to Dr. Weathers, the MPARC Director. He’s told me about your backpacking trip, and I’m hoping you’ll turn on your phone and check for messages somewhere that there’s a signal up there. Please call me back when you get this, as it’s essential that I talk with you as soon as possible. Thanks very much.”

It surprised the hell out of me when he called back about lunch time.

“Trieri, CBI.”

“Ms. Trieri, this is Dan Santini. You asked me to call you?”

“Mr. Santini! Thank you so much for calling. I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon. Um, how’s your battery situation?”

“I’ve got a solar charger, so I’m fine.”

“Oh, good. And I’m not going to ask where you are—you’ll understand why shortly. Now, first, I’m afraid I have some tragic news for you. It’s about your family. Sometime last night, your mother died from a fall down some stairs at her assisted living place in Grand Junction.”

There was a long pause followed by a low moan. “Oh. God. That’s...that’s awful. Geez. She wasn’t doing very well at all, last I heard, and I guess that’s what happens when people become frail and unstable on their feet. But that’s awful.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say I’m not done with the bad news yet, and it will help you to understand if I give you some background first. I’m with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and I work with the sheriff’s office here in Grand County. I’ve been involved in the investigation of the death of Phillip Linton, whom I expect you remember from that MPARC conference the past couple of weeks. And because of the investigation, I’ve found out all about your family’s history. *All* about it. I’ve had several conversations with Deputy Marshal Mason Niemeyer of the WITSEC Program. So the bad news is really bad, I’m afraid. Can I get you to sit down, please?”

I heard faster breathing. “I’m sitting on a log now, actually. We stopped for a lunch break.”

“OK, well, here goes. Your brother told me that your father had decided to turn himself in, so to speak, to the people in New York who are after him, who you all ran away from. He must have done so

sometime in the last few days and been made to tell all, because your mother's death was meant to look like an accident but includes some suspicious circumstances. Worse, your brother was murdered this morning, execution style. The killer is at large here in Grand County, and we think you're likely next on the list." I paused for a breath. "I would have much rather been able to talk to you in person about this, but it seems like telling you soonest takes priority. And I should say that this is just an ordinary cell phone call between us, so please take care about what you say concerning your location just now."

"Jesus Christ!" More rapid breathing. "I...I need to turn off my phone's GPS, hang on."

My heart sank. That would probably be too little, too late if someone was already onto him, I thought.

"OK, that's done. And I told all my buddies to turn theirs off, too. I hope that'll help. And it's not like, you know, we're walking in Times Square just now. We'll be hard to find."

"My colleagues in the sheriff's office have suggested several ways to find you, though, so I expect that others could figure out the same approaches. What we'd like to do is to get you back into the arms of the WITSEC people for your own protection. Does that make sense?"

"Fat lot of good they've done us."

"I'm not sure that's quite fair, Mr. Santini. It seems to have been your father who's responsible for the lapse of security. Your brother told me that he, your father, had decided to turn himself in with the hope he could persuade whoever it is to leave you and your brother, and your mother as well, out of it all now. But that didn't work, it seems."

"You talked with Tony?"

"I did. He and his motorcycle buddies got into a rumble last week, and they were all brought in by the sheriff's people. So I helped with questioning them."

"Yeah, but why would he talk to you about Dad?"

"Because of what I found out about your family during my investigation of Linton's murder. It starts with your sister, of course."

"Oh. Right. But wait! Tony was in jail when he got whacked? What the hell kind of crap sheriff's office is that, anyway?"

"One that lost a desk officer in the incident, a young woman with a new baby, as well as your brother, Mr. Santini. The killer was a professional who didn't care about anything but doing his job. I'm very sorry for your losses, Mr. Santini. My main concern now is your own well-being. And we're proposing to get you back with the best protection we know of, the WITSEC people. Understand?"

"And you think this hit man is after me now, huh? Yeah, I guess that makes sense. If they've got Dad and they've done Mom and Tony, well, I'm the only one left. And it means my friends here are probably at risk, too. But do you really think he'll come up...er, come to where I'm going to be? Most of the hit men I've heard about aren't exactly, you know, mountain men or anything."

"I hope you're right, Mr. Santini. Without realizing who it was, I got a glimpse of the guy this morning; he was disguised as a lawyer claiming to be your brother's attorney. Quite harmless looking, actually. By now, though, I'm sure he's changed his appearance. And the thing is, we don't have any idea of his whereabouts now. He could be on his way to where you go to school. Oh. that reminds me. Did you write to your folks this past summer about where you've been and your plans for right now?"

There was another long pause. "I made a point of writing every week and including postcard pictures for Mom. She likes those. And, yeah, I talked a lot about my internship, and then last

week...no, two weeks ago I talked about this little walk I'm on now. Crap. If they've got Dad, he'll have been made to tell them, I'm certain."

"I don't suppose that you have any idea of who "they" might be, would you?"

"Tony and I used to talk about that a lot. But it was all pure speculation. One outfit that was especially hard-hit by my Dad's information, though, was a bunch of Russians who operated out of Brooklyn. Letivshenko, or something like that. Boris Letivshenko, maybe. But it could be just about anybody. Dad had his fingers in lots and lots of pies in the day."

"So I've heard. I hope you realize how much of a hero he is in law enforcement circles. And I'm sorry about his current predicament. Anyway, I expect it's time for your group to be on your way. If your phones are all off, GPS-wise, then where you are now is your last recorded location. The sooner you get away from there, the better."

"Ah. You're right. Good thinking. We'll be on our way shortly. But I want to make sure you and I cover everything we need to first, because I don't know about cell signals where we're headed."

"Good idea. What we need to do is figure out where to pick you up as soon as possible. In your letters, did you tell your folks about your precise route? Which direction you were going, where you were starting from? And when?"

"I see what you mean, I think. When, yes. Direction, no. It wouldn't have made any sense to Dad anyway, and Mom doesn't have much of a clue about anything."

"So all your father could have told anyone is pretty general stuff that wouldn't let anyone pinpoint your position. Good. Now we just need to settle on a rendezvous spot and a time. Without telling each other where. Any ideas?"

"Well, you know, I spent a lot of time over the summer planning this trip, so I know the terrain pretty well from maps and also from short day hikes on parts of it. So let me suggest this. Ask Dr. Weathers what the ring around the Sun is called. I'll be there late tomorrow afternoon. If you're there in a way I can identify as safe, I'll show myself. OK?"

"Ring around the Sun? Huh?"

"He'll know. And you'll figure it out. See you tomorrow afternoon."

* * *

Not surprisingly, Hal was puzzled about why I called him and asked about the ring around the Sun. But our years together have included all sorts of odd requests for information in his various areas of expertise, so he didn't extract a price for telling me.

Not that "corona" helped me a lot. But, when I mentioned it all to Fran, things became clear as crystal.

"Hmm. I figured before that he was headed southbound somewhere just past Monarch Lake, right? I guess if he busts his tail, he can make it to Corona by tomorrow afternoon, and maybe even get some sleep tonight while still below tree-line. Did he say if the whole group was going to be there? That might take longer."

"No, but he did mention that they were probably at risk, too. And he had all of them turn off the GPS in their phones."

"So the thing to do is to take several vehicles up there, four-wheel-drive patrol cars, and park where they can be seen. Maybe have all their lights going. And if there are other cars there already, we can call

in the plates to see if they might be rentals. Presumably that's what our guy's driving." Fran scratched his head. "How about you and Angela and Roger Traubman in separate vehicles, armed to the teeth? You can take that hot-rod CBI Jeep of yours and see how it does on that road. I'll probably need to stay here and continue to deal with the fallout from this morning."

"Where are we talking about, Fran?"

"Corona, the site of the old railroad stop up at Rollins Pass. Up on the Continental Divide. I'm sure Roger's been up there. It's something like fifteen miles up a county road, Grand County Road 80, I think. It starts across the highway from the ski area."

I thought for minute. "There's that stoplight where the cross street leads to condos up on the east side of the valley across from the ski area. That place?"

"No, it's just a gravel road that takes off from the highway about a half-mile north of where you're talking about, between there and the old Idlewild campground entrance. The county road is an old railroad grade, and there's only one steep section at a creek crossing where the railroad bridge isn't safe to drive on, about half-way up. All fifteen miles get graded in the spring, but by now it'll be full of potholes from all the traffic and some wash-outs from the weather. People do it in regular passenger cars, but an SUV with clearance is a lot better." He looked wistful. "I wish I could go. The last few miles are above tree-line, and except for all the bumps it's quite scenic, a beautiful ride."

"Passenger cars? So it's not like that so-called road up to Angela's Valley of Death?" Fran had driven us up that one during an earlier investigation, and my shook-up insides had taken a long time to recover.

"Huh? Oh, that one. No, no, this one's lots easier. Safer, too. You'll want to go slow in a big vehicle, though, so I'd plan on its taking at least an hour up to the top."

The rest of the afternoon and most of the next morning was involved with i-dotting and t-crossing concerning the two deaths in Fran's departmental offices. We found a picture of Grand Junction lawyer Wilson Lingenfelter, and I verified that it didn't look at all like the guy I'd seen in the lobby. Fran dealt with the sad task of informing Norma Spears' husband about her death. We interviewed everyone carefully and found that no one had any information concerning what sort of vehicle the killer had driven away in. Four flattened 9mm hollow-point slugs were recovered and bagged to allow a ballistics comparison should a suspect gun ever be found. Myriad other tasks, big and small, associated with what little there was to do in the way of investigation were completed.

I slept badly that Monday night.

If Sunday had been a beautiful late summer day for Hal and me to walk in the woods, Tuesday was one of those overcast, drizzly days when you want to sit at home drinking hot chocolate. I was too busy to have noticed what was happening Monday, but it was probably some sort of transition. It seemed that the Southwest Monsoon had decided to undergo an end-of-August resurgence.

I wouldn't have minded Tuesday's weather except for our planned excursion up to the Continental Divide on an unpaved road. Drizzle in the valley often meant heavy rain, or even snow, way up there. And I also knew that the otherwise spectacular views would be limited to close-ups of fog banks. At least, I thought, it might hide some of the drop-offs.

Fran was right—Roger Traubman had been up to Rollins Pass numerous times, most recently the previous June, so he led the way with Angela following, both driving sheriff's department Ford Explorers. I brought up the rear in my CBI Jeep. Roger suggested, and I agreed, that as soon as we climbed high enough to be in the cloud bank we all turn on our emergency lights. That way, we'd not

only warn others of our presence but also be able to keep track of each other more easily in the cloud-turned-fog.

He also allowed as to how that road would normally be a piece of cake, albeit bumpy, but that with the rain it could be slick in places. He was glad to have the four-wheel drive and warned us to pay attention to his wheel placement, as much as possible in the fog. We didn't, he emphasized, want to get stuck or to slide off the edge.

Angela's big, brown eyes got even bigger than usual when she heard that.

Despite the nasty weather, I was glad not to be hanging around headquarters Tuesday afternoon. The morning had been bad enough, because media interest was snowballing. A sheriff's deputy shot on duty and a prisoner executed in his cell—the media sharks, you could tell, were relishing the blood and potential scandal.

Given the weather, we didn't know how long the drive would take, so we doubled Fran's estimate. Fifteen miles in two hours wasn't going to set any speed records, but it would allow us to take special care. We left after lunch with the idea of getting to the top by about three.

I hadn't known what to expect, but it turned out to be pretty boring. There wasn't anything in the way of scenery, even before the cloud turned to fog, because the rain obscured the forest around us. And the drive itself wasn't especially demanding. The only tricky place was where Fran had mentioned the creek crossing—climbing up out of that gully gave all three of us a chance to exercise the low-range of four-wheel-drive in our SUVs. At least we had radios on which we could talk with each other, although, because anyone in the department could be listening in, we kept that to a minimum.

The cloud turned into fog at about tree-line, and the rain turned to big, fat snowflakes a couple of miles above that, but it was still melting on surfaces. My car's outside temperature readout had it a couple of degrees above freezing, and by the time we reached the top it was in the high 20s with the snow just beginning to accumulate on the ground.

I'd taken the time to look carefully at satellite pictures of our destination, so the parking lot at the top wasn't unexpected to me, nor were the trails and vehicle tracks marring the tundra. The tourist signs, though were a surprise, a reminder that we weren't as far from civilization as it might have seemed. Fortunately, the weather was so lousy that there were no other tourists up there, at least not that we could see.

We got out and talked together about it, and then decided to park in an outward facing triangle, far apart enough to make our lights separated in the fog but close enough to be able to see anyone who might be approaching from the rear of any of the vehicles. We weren't feeling exactly paranoid, but the fog was spooky enough to make us feel cautious. Then we each settled in to wait for our intrepid hikers to appear out of the mist.

It was like being inside a snow globe, a well-shaken one. A snow globe with disco lights, as the red-and-blue emergency lights on all three of our SUVs reflected off the snowflakes in gay abandon. The effect was mesmerizing, and it became hard to concentrate on watching for approaching pedestrians, especially as the snow came down harder.

That, I suppose, explains why I was so surprised, and why neither of my colleagues noticed his approach, when there was a tapping on the passenger-side window of my SUV. I couldn't see very well, so I decided to take a chance by lowering the window.

Imagine my surprise to see the wet, bedraggled face of Dexter Lemone staring in at me.

* * *

He looked utterly miserable.

I'd been sitting, bedazzled by the light show, in relative quiet, hearing only the soft rumble of my idling Hemi V-8 and a slight whooshing from the heater fan, and it took me a few seconds to realize that the strange, new clicking sound was his teeth chattering.

"Why Dex! We've just *got* to stop meeting like this, man. Want to climb in and warm up?"

I flicked the "unlock" switch on my door's armrest and heard a click. It surprised me that he was polite enough to take off his outer jacket and shake it off before climbing into the passenger seat. I turned up the heater fan for him.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Ms. Trieri. And the others will be, too."

"Are you with Dan Santini's group, Dex?"

"Right. When Dan mentioned your name, I told him I knew you, from the meeting. So I got chosen to check out the occupants of these vehicles. Kind of glad they chose me, actually. It's nice and warm in here."

"So the rest are around here somewhere?"

"Yeah. Waiting for an all clear signal. Dan's initials in Morse code. Horn or lights or whatever."

"OK. But, uh, I don't know 'D'."

"Dash Dot Dot. At least that's what Dan told me. He thought all this up."

So I set to signaling "D-S" using Morse code on the horn, and after a few repetitions and a comment on the radio to Angela and Roger about what I was doing, a group of backpack-bearing, snow-covered forms emerged trudging through the fog. Two of them climbed into the back seat of my Jeep, after tossing three backpacks in the rear hatch, and the others climbed into the other vehicles. My two turned out to be a young man and a young woman.

"Thanks, Ms. Trieri. I'll talk with you more when we get back to town." And, with that, Dexter Lemone was out the door and sprinting to Angela's SUV, into which a lone backpacker had climbed.

A woman's voice from the back seat said, "Where's he going?"

"To sit with Rhonda, I bet. You know how he's been coming on to her. Probably wants to snuggle on the ride down. Cop a feel," the man's voice responded, eliciting a giggle

Hearing the voices had drawn my eyes to the rear-view mirror, where I saw the young man's clean-shaven face looking back at me, bright green eyes under a long shock of black hair sticking out from under a stocking cap. The face lit up and said, "You're Annette Trieri! I recognize you from the MPARC conference last week."

I smiled. "I was there, yes. And you are?"

"I'm Dan Santini. And, boy, am I glad to meet you here. Oh, and this is Allison, by the way. We're both glad. This weather sure went all to hell."

"Dan, I saw six people come out of the fog. Is that all of you?"

"Yeah. Looks like we're evenly divided among your three cars."

"Then I vote we head downhill." I got on the radio and relayed the sentiment, receiving full agreement from the other two.

Once again, Roger took the lead, with me in the middle this time.

“Dan, I’m sorry I don’t remember you from the conference, but I’m glad to meet you now. Glad to meet you, too, Allison. Why don’t both of you call me Annette?” I tried to watch the road instead of the mirror. “Is it warm enough back there? I can turn the heat up more.”

“This is heavenly,” Allison said.

“Dan, congratulations on coming up with a great plan, Well, except for the weather, but I guess that’s not on you. And you were right. Hal knew about ‘corona.’ He didn’t even have to think about it very long.”

“How’d you find out about the place called Corona?”

“Sheriff Schmidt has lived here forever. He knows all the place names. And the deputy in the car ahead of us has been up here lots of times. Which reminds me. The sheriff thought when you called me on Monday that you were probably a bit this side of Monarch Lake. How right was he?”

“Not bad, actually. I’m impressed.”

“And he said you’d have to bust your ass to get up to Corona in a day and half. I’m glad you made it, but how was it?”

Allison laughed. “Annette, this guy is a regular slave driver. Before he called you, we were having a nice walk in the woods, camping out under the stars. After your call, when he had a destination to get to, it was a forced march.”

“Hey, c’mon. I was motivated. You get a New York hit man after you, you get motivated. And we made it, didn’t we?”

“Well, look at it this way.” I tried to sound philosophical. “If not for the forced march, you’d be looking at a couple of nights above tree-line in that weather up there. As it turned out, you’re in a nice, warm, dry car.”

“Annette?” Allison sounded worried. “Is all that stuff Dan told us really true?”

“I’m afraid I really don’t know what all he’s told you.” I decided to dodge that question as much as possible.

“Pretty much everything, Annette.” Dan sounded resigned. “My family history, what you told me about Tony and Mom. And Dad.”

“About Phil Linton, too?” I wondered how much I should push on that topic.

“Dex knows about Phil, of course. He said you thought he was a suspect.”

How much, I wondered, should I divulge here? If the district attorney was not going to go after an arrest warrant for Dan as an accomplice, then his part in the whole thing was a non-issue. Tony’s death had put to rest his prosecution. It seemed like the entire case would simply fade away now. Also, had Dex told them about his NRA interview?

“For a while there, pretty much everybody at that conference was a person of interest, Dex included. And he was acting strangely—threatened to get a lawyer every time I asked him a simple question. It made me suspicious. But he was never a real suspect.”

“Did you ever find out who killed Linton?” Dan’s question was guarded.

“We did, but I can’t talk about it. I don’t know how much will ever come out. Given the thing about your sister, I hope it all brings some closure for you, Dan.” I wondered if he’d told his friends that part of the family history.

“Tony was more obsessed with that than I’ve ever been. But it’s all over now.” He was looking side-to-side out the windows, I saw in the mirror.

And there was more to look at now. We’d descended to an elevation below the snow line and emerged from the cloud base, which had lifted, and it was drizzling again, a fine, misty spring-like rainfall. The temperature was up by a good fifteen degrees, and you could see the terrain around us.

The road, having started life a hundred or so years ago as a railroad grade and been subject to periodic maintenance over all those decades, was in much better shape than I would have thought. Enough gravel had built up the base that it was not just mud, and somehow, with all the water, the potholes were less nasty.

It wasn’t too long after we’d entered the forest again that I noticed that my two passengers were fast asleep in the back seat. That forced march must have exhausted them both.

Because I didn’t have to keep up my side of a conversation for the rest of the drive, I had time to think about next steps. Angela and Roger could take their passengers to wherever they had left cars, or to wherever they were staying in town. But I realized that my situation was different. There was a fair chance that Dan’s car, or his apartment or whatever, was being watched. What I needed was advice from WITSEC.

Maybe, I thought, I could head for MPARC and contact Deputy Marshal Niemeyer from the SCIF. He could talk with Dan about next steps. I wondered, had Allison been an intern there as well, or was she someone Dan had met in town?

When we finally reached the stop sign at US 40, across from the ski area, the clock in the instrument cluster said it was 4:45. I’m pretty sure my colleagues, the drivers in the other two SUVs, shared my sigh of relief.

* * *

Twelve

At the stop sign, Roger, Angela, and I got out to confer because three-way radio conversations were just too stilted. The drizzle had become a minor nuisance, most of it evaporating well before it hit the ground at that point. It almost felt like August again.

They agreed with my approach for Dan, and we transferred Allison and her gear to Roger’s SUV and Dex’s gear to Angela’s. They both turned right, north down the valley, to take their passengers home or to their cars.

Dan woke up during all the shuffling and wanted to know what was going on.

“Everyone but you is going wherever they want to, Dan. I’m worried, though, that your car is being watched. Or your apartment. Or both. So I thought we’d go to MPARC, where we can set up a conversation with WITSEC for you.”

“Hmm. Dex and Allison have cars waiting up at the top of Berthoud Pass. We left them there for when we finished the hike. Mine’s in front of my apartment building. Up Vasquez Road a ways.” He yawned and scratched at an armpit. “You think that hit man might be watching for my return, huh? I guess discretion trumps valor here. And I think I do want to hear what WITSEC says. Did you say you’ve been talking with Mason? He’s the senior guy on our case.”

“Mason Niemeyer, yeah. I’ll call him now and alert him to the MPARC conversation. There, both ends will have video as well as voice.”

Although it was a bit past five when we got to MPARC, I didn’t have any trouble rousting the help I needed to use the SCIF’s communications facilities. Sometimes having special pull with the Director comes in really, really handy. It was only five-thirty when Mason Niemeyer’s face appeared on the big screen.

“Ms. Trieri, good to see you again. Hey, Danny. Heard you had a little adventure.”

“Hello, Mason. Annette here tells me my family’s all dead.”

“I know first-hand your mother is, because I identified her body today. Ms. Trieri told me about Tony, and it’s all over the news as well. And all I know about your father is that he disappeared last week and hasn’t been seen since. But I’m not very hopeful, given what he apparently told Tony, that he was going to go visit one of the New York outfits. Let me offer condolences all around.”

“Thanks. But what’s going to happen to me?”

“That partly depends on the situation there, Danny, or at least what the sheriff has in mind. Ms. Trieri? How circumstantial is that evidence you alluded to the other day?”

“Too circumstantial for the district attorney to want to pursue it. And with Tony dead, I think the whole thing will be closed on our end.” I didn’t know that for sure, but I decided to trust my instincts. “As far as we’re concerned, whatever you think will keep Dan here alive and well is the best thing to do, going forward.”

“Fair enough. Mmm. Ms. Trieri? Could you please excuse Danny and me for a while? I hate to ask, and I don’t mean to be rude after all you’ve done, but the fewer people who know our plans, the better.”

“I was just thinking that, Marshal. I can’t imagine that I have any need to know your plans, and if I do I’m sure you’ll fill me appropriately.” I turned toward the door. “Dan, I’ll be down the hall and to the right, in the Director’s office.”

Hal, it appeared, was just about to walk out the door to head for home when I interrupted his end-of-the-day routine.

“Well, this is a surprise. Ah, do you have an appointment, Miss?” He grinned.

“I tried to call your secretary, but you know how that goes.” One of my favorite ways to tease him was about his lack of an administrative assistant.

“Yeah, well, it’s all your fault. I keep offering to hire you, if only you’ll wear that little black dress of yours. Sure would make my day a lot more fun.”

“And mine a lot more uncomfortable.”

Hal liked my little black dress because it was so short that all I could do was to stand still in it. Just about any movement at all, especially sitting, was simply indecent. And getting in and out of cars was, to say the least, quite drafty.

He wrapped me in a hug. “I know, I know. But you sure look delicious in it. Anyway, you’re too good to be an administrative assistant. But what brings you here this time of day?”

I told him about the not-so-scenic tour of the afternoon and our guest in the SCIF.

“I hope he appreciates being rescued from the weather as well as from the hit man. It seems OK outside here, but four thousand feet up it’s probably miserable. Are you still thinking of him as a possible accomplice?” He leaned back to watch my expression.

“The D.A. decided not to pursue it even before that murder yesterday, so I’m sure he’ll drop it completely now. Dan’s in the clear, looks like, at least as far as we’re concerned. But his family history may dog him forever. That’s why he’s in the SCIF, to talk with a witness protection guy about the future.”

“I hope they work something out. I have to admit to mixed emotions about this whole thing. There’s no question that Phil Linton was really getting under my skin, and my opinion plummeted when we found that he sold out. But that doesn’t mean I wanted to see him dead. And, although it seems rather like karma for his killer to have been killed, that’s not something I’d have wanted either. I guess I’ll hold on to Dan’s being eliminated from the legal side of all this as something positive.” Hal rolled his eyes. “But it’s too bad he’s going to have to carry this burden forever. I suppose the witness protection program will get him yet another new identity and so on, and move him somewhere else. Not a fun way to have to live your life.”

“No, but a lot better than being charged with murder one, even if only as an accomplice. Or being dead.” I shrugged. “Anyway, I think we’re done with it. Want to stay down here and eat out somewhere before we head up the hill?”

“I like that idea. I wonder if we can get into the Ranch House over at Devil’s Thumb? Seems like you were up by its namesake today and it would be a good place to go.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, yeah, with this cloud deck you wouldn’t have seen it. But I’ve pointed it out from home, that rock outcropping up there north of Rollins Pass? That’s the Devil’s Thumb. I suspect that the ranch is named after it, but maybe it’s the other way ’round.”

“You mean, which came first, the ranch or the rock?”

“Right. I recommend we discuss it thoroughly over a glass of something.”

“Suits me. I hope they’ve got a good wine list.”

“I think you’ll be satisfied.”

* * *

I was. And even more with dinner.

We left my CBI SUV at MPARC, and Hal drove us down to Tabernash and back up the county road to the Devil’s Thumb Ranch and Spa with its great restaurant. That way, I was able to sample the wines-by-the-glass to my heart’s content without worrying about driving home. As always, Hal stuck to iced tea.

The next morning, we went into MPARC together, and I picked up my SUV and headed north to Hot Sulphur Springs and my office. I was hoping that all the mess of Monday would have been taken care of and that even the media crowd would have dispersed. I discovered my hopes were a bit optimistic, but it wasn’t too awful. First thing, I went looking for Fran to give him a report of Tuesday’s excursion.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised that Angela had already beat me to the punch, though. All Fran still wanted to know was the end game for Dan Santini, which, of course, I really knew nothing about anyway. In fact, it turned out that he actually knew more than I did.

“I got a call this morning from the Winter Park police chief, who told me about a request he got from a Deputy U.S. Marshal, name of Niemeyer.”

“Ah, yes. He’s the guy I’ve been talking to. Sort of the case officer for the Spadaro/Santini/Sands crowd.”

“OK, that makes sense. It seems that Deputy Marshal Niemeyer asked the chief to ticket a car parked up Vasquez Road in front of an apartment building, and then, after the appropriate time, have it towed away as being abandoned. Apparently, at some point, a moving company is going to clean out an apartment there and tote away all the personal stuff in it.”

“Sounds like that’s how Dan Santini’s presence in Winter Park is going to be erased without putting him in jeopardy. We kind of think that his car and his apartment are being watched by that hit man who’s on the loose.”

“Ah. Sure. It all fits together. Meanwhile, Santini can be spirited away by the Marshal’s Service to whatever future they have planned for him. And we here in Grand County can wash our hands of the entire episode.” He stared out the window for a minute. “I think I’ll make sure that we have someone watching when the car’s towed and the apartment is cleaned out. We might get lucky and catch the hit man watching for Dan.”

“That’s a good idea.” I nodded. “And you’re right. I think that’ll close the book on this whole thing. Except for those media people who are still hanging around.”

“Why, thanks for reminding me, Annette! Makes my day, that does.” He shook his head. “As a matter of fact, I’ve got a press conference scheduled in an hour. Oh joy.”

“I’ll let you have some time to prepare, then. I’ll go talk with Angela about how things worked out with the other backpackers.”

“Thanks, Annette. Maybe I’ll meditate.” He closed his eyes. “Ommm…”

Angela was in our shared office, focused on her usual task of paperwork. She was better at it than I, and I was her boss, so she was the lucky person who got to handle it.

“Morning, Angela. How’d it go with the hikers yesterday?”

“I was glad to have the company on the drive down the hill. It was lonely going up. And they helped me keep my mind off that road.” She winced, then smiled. “I don’t think I’m cut out for that four-wheel-drive recreation thing.”

I agreed. “I’m not either, even as a passenger. Between the jouncing around and the stress of the narrow roads and drop-offs and everything, I’d rather sit at home by the fire. But it’s a useful skill to have in our jobs, the ability to navigate those Jeep roads. At least if you want to live here. A hundred miles east it’s probably not so important.”

“I get that, for sure.” She looked puzzled. “And what’s with that guy that jumped in my car, what was his name, Dex? He’s sure a piece of work. If I hadn’t been in the front seat in my uniform, I think he might have forced himself on the girl he was with in the back.”

“Mmm. And just as I was beginning to give him the benefit of the doubt, too.” I filled her in about my interactions with Mr. Lemone. “I guess it was good that he was along on that backpacking trip, as he was able to identify me up there at the top and tell me how to signal the rest of them. But I also guess I hope he doesn’t cross my path again.”

She smiled, in a sort of wicked way. “Actually, I wouldn’t mind at all if he tried to pull some of those fast-hand stunts on me. I can always use the practice with my karate moves. Without pulling the punches like we do in practice.”

As I was trying to think of what to say, George Neering wandered in, head bobbing to his usual internal music.

“Hey, good morning, ladies. Lookin’ good! Hope your day is going well? I hear you both took a little excursion up to Rollins Pass yesterday.” He looked back and forth at the two of us, still keeping time to some inaudible music. “I was hoping that you might be able to fill me in on how the road is this year.”

This time, Angela’s smile was friendly. “Morning, George. How did those autopsies go?”

He put on a professional mask of non-expression and shook his head, internal music interrupted. “Mmm. Bad, bad business. Poor, poor Norma. At least it was quick for her. But that Sands guy, he had to live with those shattered knees for several minutes, at least. Nothing unexpected, though, on either of them. Only real evidence is the slugs. Bad karma, man.”

“Bad karma, indeed, George. Especially because we don’t have any idea about where the shooter went. He could be hanging around here, or he could be long gone.” I shrugged.

“Thanks, George. Anyway, I don’t have a good standard of comparison for that road. It was way better than the so-called road up to that *Valle del Muerte* we rode up earlier this summer, but not nearly as good as, say, Cottonwood Pass.” Angela, I could tell, wanted to be as helpful as she could.

“Hmm. No rock falls or big trees? Wash-outs?” He was back to the music.

“Just lots and lots of potholes. And that stream crossing wasn’t bad at all. That help?”

“Sure does, man. Thanks. I like to get up there at least once each summer, and it helps to know which car to take.”

George, I’d learned, had a small collection of vehicles ranging from a restored classic Porsche 356 Speedster to an almost new Land Rover. I was betting he’d take the Land Rover.

“It was wet, of course, and muddy,” I chimed in, “but it’ll dry out with a day or two of good weather. And all that snow will melt quickly, I bet.”

“Thanks, sounds good. I got a secret place up there I go skinny dipping.” He grinned. “Ice cold, but refreshing. Gets me all shriveled up, though.”

My imagination pictured George skinny dipping, making me wince. Angela looked as if she was going to break into giggles any second.

“George, man, way too much information, OK?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, man. Anyway, thanks for the info. And, say, if that shooter does turn up, I hope he’s still got the weapon. I’d like to get ballistics tests done.”

He ambled off, and Angela and I looked at each other and burst into laughter, badly needed laughter, given all that had been going on.

* * *

It was just after lunch when Hal called, bubbling over with enthusiasm.

“Afternoon, sweetie. I’ve been decompressing from that conference, doing some serious internet surfing. And there are various real-time web cams that show aspens changing here and there.”

“Really? So soon, eh? Well, it sounds like we ought to plan our tour.”

“My thoughts exactly. We could drive to Durango and back, a day in each direction, easily. But that seems too hurried to me.”

“Agreed. This time it’s truly the journey more than the destination. So I guess the question is, how many nights on the road in each direction? How much do we want to wander around?”

“Well, I’m looking at a map right now. Google, naturally. I guess the first thing to do is to figure out where we want to stay for those nights.” He paused briefly. “Hmm. How about from here to Steamboat Springs, via Willow Creek Pass, Walden, and Rabbit Ears Pass, and then south to the Eagle River Valley, for starters? Take it easy and stay somewhere in Avon, maybe. Then, um, up to Leadville via Tennessee Pass, south to Twin Lakes and over Independence Pass to Aspen, and then down to Carbondale and over McClure Pass to Paonia and then Delta? That’s right next to Montrose, and there’s got to be someplace to stay there. And then down to Ouray and the Million-Dollar Highway south to Durango. Oh, wait. Grand Mesa would be worth seeing, I bet. Hmm.”

I had a pretty good map of Colorado in my head, so I was able to keep up with this itinerary reasonably well. I couldn’t fathom distances or times, though.

“Um, how about we talk about this at home, looking at a paper map? We must still have some of those somewhere.” A thought occurred to me. “And are you going to want to fish? If so, we need to build in time for that, you know, instead of just driving and driving all day.”

“Yeah, good point. Gotta put more thought into this, I guess.”

“What’s your time frame?”

“When I planned that IPCC conference, I intentionally left my calendar empty afterwards. I figured I’d need some time to relax. And the aspens seem to be turning now.” He waited, but I didn’t rise to the bait. “How’s your schedule in the next couple of weeks?”

I checked my computer calendar to be sure. “Good, actually. I think this business with Tony Sands and Dan Santini is cleared, from our end, at least. And I’d like to get Linton’s stack of paperwork back to John at FSU. What’s the situation with getting reservations likely to be? Have the aspen peeps started to fill places up yet?”

“Good question. Hopefully not. The leaves are turning early this year—I saw some spectacular scenes on those web cameras. So if we treat ourselves to multi-star places, maybe we can find something. Lots of times, the aspen crowd is on a budget.”

“If we do most of the tour during the week it could work. Traffic might be bad on the weekends, anyway.”

“Agreed. I’ll do some checking, and we can figure something out this evening.”

That exchange buoyed my spirits all through the afternoon, something quite helpful amidst the gloom of the departmental offices. Those two shootings on Monday had cast an impenetrable pall over the place. Angela was especially affected—I think she had developed a friendship with Norma Spears, as they were in the same age group. Norma’s new baby seemed to have Angela thinking about her own ticking biological clock.

I decided to see if bringing her into the aspen tour conversation would help.

“Hal and I are thinking of driving down to Durango, take our time and wander around to see the aspens turning. I’ve got to deliver a bunch of paperwork back to the university there, you know, Linton’s stuff.”

“Really? An aspen tour? That sounds wonderful. I wish I’d taken that approach when I drove up from Santa Fe to come to work here. You know, see the real Colorado instead of just those main highways I took.”

“I remember when Hal and I drove up here from Durango. We were *moving* and not the least interested in the scenery. We just wanted to get here. Like the horse to the barn, even if it was a new barn for us.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I felt that way. And there was this new job, too. Anyway, an aspen tour sounds fantastic. Have you got a route figured out?”

“Hal started in with suggestions on the phone, and I got lost right away. I need to be looking at a map for that sort of exercise. We’ll tackle it tonight, I expect—he’s always keen to get planning done. So much so that I bet that he’s spending all afternoon assembling information.”

She squinted at me, obviously thinking about that tidbit.

“I think you should have your own route ready to lay out to him. Not let him dictate your itinerary just because he’s a compulsive planner.”

I had to laugh. “I don’t know what he’d make of that. But, yeah, that’s a good idea. Tell you what. Let’s sit down, pull up some online maps, and see what we can figure out. This afternoon, so I’ll be ready. You don’t have anything truly urgent, do you?”

“Only the usual paperwork. Which, to tell the truth, I’m getting a little tired of.”

“OK, well, here’s something. This little, cramped box we’re sitting in is an official office of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I’m the boss of this office. And I say that CBI personnel need to be familiar with the state in which we operate. And you’re new to that state. So a CBI Geography Training Session is about to begin. Want to get a cup of coffee first?”

She giggled. “Good idea. That’ll give you a chance to develop an official lesson plan. Um, will there be a test?”

“No test, but a practical exam instead. After the lesson, you get to plan your own tour for you and Sandy to take when Hal and I get back. To tell the truth, I think we’re going to be a bit early, so you may just be seeing the best colors in a couple of weeks.”

When she returned with her cup of coffee, and one for me, too, my “lesson plan” was all set—I’d pulled up Google’s version of Colorado onto my desktop computer’s big screen, with the zoom level set so that it was all Colorado everywhere in front of me. Angela rolled her chair over next to mine, and I made room so she could see.

“You know,” she said, “I never really paid attention before. But there’s lots of federal lands in the western half of Colorado—at least I think that’s what all those green areas are, right?”

“Yep. National Forests, mostly, and a few National Monuments and National Parks. And something called generically ‘BLM Land.’ Bureau of Land Management holdings. Most of that, along with the National Forests, is leased to ranchers for grazing. Cattle and sheep.” I pointed to a green area at the northern edge of the right half of the map. “Not all of it is forests, though. The Pawnee National Grassland here is prairie.”

“So, where are the best places to see the aspens changing?”

I waved a pencil in a big oval over the center part of the map, just to the left of the north-south, wavy line indicating Interstate 25. “In this area with the texture. The mountains. I don’t know the exact numbers, but native aspen groves grow above eight thousand feet or so. Something like that. Of course, people plant them in their yards in Denver, but they need extra water to grow there.”

“And we’re here. Fraser, I mean.” Even though it wasn’t labeled, she did a good job of pointing to our home valley.

“Right. There are plenty of aspen groves to see around here, too. But a tour should take you somewhere away from home, don’t you think?” I looked at her. “I mean, ours will, because we have a destination in mind, Durango. But even without such a destination, a tour ought to get you somewhere else. Maybe spend a night in a romantic bed and breakfast, or something.”

“Agreed. So. Where are the best areas, broadly speaking, for aspen groves?”

Suddenly I felt completely inadequate as a geography teacher. For years, I’d been reading the late-summer articles in the Denver paper’s travel section about where to go to see aspen turning, but I couldn’t remember them at all. Then I had an idea.

I squinted at the screen and pointed out the little label that said “Aspen.”

“They don’t call this town “Aspen” because of the sycamore trees, right? And I remember postcard pictures of the Maroon Bells—those are two fourteeners, you know, fourteen-thousand-plus foot mountains—looking up a valley with groves on the sides. Just here, I guess.”

I indicated a north-south stripe in the texture on the map just to the west of the “Aspen” label, and she squinted at it.

“Trouble is,” I continued, “it’s so popular that you can’t drive in there anymore. Gotta take a shuttle bus. That’s always full, I seem to remember reading.”

“Oooh. Just what Sandy and I crave. Crowds.”

“Yeah, well, the big valley that Aspen’s in is also something to see. And Glenwood Springs here, where its river—ah, the Roaring Fork, I think—flows into the Colorado, Glenwood has hot springs and a grand old hotel. Plus, I seem to remember this area here, the Flattops Wilderness, is also pretty remarkable.” I indicated a broad green area north of Glenwood Springs on the other side of Interstate 70. “But there are no real towns or other amenities in there, except primitive campgrounds. I think.”

“Hmm.” She looked thoughtful. “I’ll remember this. Maybe Glenwood Springs would make a good place as a base for day trips. I guess Sandy and I will have to discuss whether we’re going to camp or what. And, if not, how posh we want our accommodations to be. Decisions, decisions, decisions.”

“That’s what Hal and I are going to have to deal with this evening. I hope I can get my ideas across.” I shrugged.

“Knowing him, all I can say is good luck with that, Annette.” She chuckled. “And, say, it just occurred to me that a tour like this ought to be done in a convertible. Really see the colors, you know? Breathe the fresh air, smell the fall aromas. All that.”

“Now there’s an idea. Hmm. Maybe I can use that as a trump card if Hal doesn’t like my choices of routes.” The very idea made me smile.

* * *

Thirteen

It turned out to be just fine, the discussion that occupied our evening. We started out, during supper, using the paper maps that Hal had found somewhere and then shifted to the computer, the one with the biggest screen, for dessert and coffee. When we got it all figured out, we transferred it back onto paper, using a highlighter pen. The route reminded me of the track of an ant foraging for crumbs.

And when I mentioned Angela's idea of a convertible—I did so to ease Hal's disappointment when we couldn't figure out how to work Grand Mesa or dinner in Lake City into our itinerary—he jumped all over it. Tomorrow, he said, he'd go down to Denver to fetch something appropriate.

Although Grand Mesa and Lake City didn't work, Hal managed to include several other roads I'd not considered. The Poudre Valley west of Fort Collins, and the Peak-to-Peak Highway south of Estes Park both required that we get ourselves over to the east side of those mountains we looked at from our living room windows, but that was easy. We really didn't need any excuse to drive over Trail Ridge Road—even twice. That meant that our trip to Durango, in the southwest corner of Colorado, started toward the northeast. There were also various twists and turns to accommodate obscure secondary roads and a couple of side trips that would allow us to see special places we'd otherwise miss.

Mostly it was set up for paved highways—there were a couple of interesting exceptions, as I discovered at the last minute—and mostly it avoided the interstates. That meant we'd miss the Vail Valley, but Hal promised a possible side trip at the end of our first day, should there be time.

Thursday, while Hal stayed home to arrange accommodations and find an appropriate convertible to rent—no Ferraris or other exotics, I insisted, and he just looked innocent and asked what I meant by “exotic”—I went into the office prepared to offer a second, more advanced geography lesson for Angela. That, and a long lunch “hour” all the way up in Winter Park, made the day fly by. After a flurry of packing on Thursday evening, we were ready to hit the road Friday morning. It left me somewhat breathless—we'd been thinking about a tour of the fall aspens for some time, but it had really only come together on Wednesday. And we were leaving Friday, first thing.

That ant track on our map added up to somewhere in the vicinity of 1300 miles altogether, and Hal began calling it our “Grand Aspen Tour,” capital letters and all, you could tell by his voice. Overnight stops at very nice places in Avon, Ouray, Crested Butte, and Breckenridge, with three nights in Durango between the outbound and inbound legs, meant a bit over a week on the road. That seemed just about right to me. A vacation, but not an over-long one.

Somehow, Hal found, at a car rental place in Denver, something from Mercedes-Benz called a CLK63 AMG (I had to write that down so I'd remember it). Stylistically, it seemed more age-appropriate for us than one of those exotics I'd warned against. On the other hand, its performance made Hal's grin stretch from ear to ear and my teeth clench as I held on for dear life. But, then, when I drove it on a couple of fun stretches of those highways on our map, those roles reversed. And it had plenty of room to spare even with a week's worth of my luggage packed into it. By some miracle, I managed to remember the box of paperwork about Phil Linton that I was taking back to John Martin at FSU.

Hal had reluctantly decided to forego fly-fishing, so we didn't have all that gear. He allowed that there were so many exceptional streams on our route that it would add several extra days. I'm not sure if we could have managed to fit all that stuff in anyway.

And so, dressed in white, sun-proof clothes with SPF50 rubbed into our faces, and wearing hats, we hit the road north and east on Friday morning, destination Avon via Estes Park and Steamboat Springs. It took only to Granby for me to realize just how perfect Angela's suggestion of a convertible had been.

I can't possibly describe all the details of the scenery, or the aspen groves, we drove through that day, or the other days, either. Some of the roads were quite charming, though. After descending the Big Thompson Canyon from Estes Park, and slowing way down for the tight curves through the deep chasm at the bottom, we turned onto a sequence of county roads toward the north, along the very base of the Front Range for a while, winding through horse ranches and foothills farms. And we only took one wrong turn in the process, a small victory.

We left early enough that, after Cameron and Rabbit Ears Passes, we were able to have a late lunch in Steamboat Springs—and we took our time at lunch, savoring the freedom and unwinding from the hustle and bustle of our everyday working lives. Even so, we arrived in Avon with plenty of extra time, so we decided on that side trip east on the interstate up to Vail Pass and back—and we got to see the Vail Valley’s turning aspens as a bonus to the day.

And the trees were indeed switching into their autumn colors. All day, we’d seen patches of trees as well as individuals in all shades of yellow and orange. Some of the big stands were uniform; some were in transition, with various greens and golds intermixed, looking from a distance like a French Impressionist painting.

Avon, a few miles west of Vail along the interstate, is one of those new communities spawned by the ski industry. Many of its ritzy hotels are up at the Beaver Creek base, but Hal had found us a nice room in the Westin, on the valley floor overlooking the Eagle River, which we would follow to its headwaters the following day.

“Don’t get *too* used to it,” he warned, as I was oohing and aahing over the modern amenities in our upscale room. “For the next couple of nights after this, we’re in what’s optimistically called ‘historic’ lodging. I’m sure it’ll be nice, both in Ouray and in Durango, but it won’t be new like this.”

And he was right. Day two found us at the Beaumont in Ouray, a lovely old place that opened in 1891 and had played host to President Theodore Roosevelt. In fact, Hal had procured for us the Presidential Suite, where Teddy had stayed. Fortunately, the mattress had been replaced since then. And in Durango, we were booked at the Strater, downtown on Main Avenue. We’d stayed there on our first New Year’s Eve together, back when we lived in Durango, and it was an old favorite, emphasis on “old.”

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The Eagle River begins just south of Leadville, over the Continental Divide from that old mining town. It’s not what you think, though, as Leadville sits at 10,150 feet and Tennessee Pass, the Continental Divide crossing, is only 275 feet higher. Whereas the Eagle River is a tributary of the Colorado, which drains, if you can call it that (“dribbles” is probably more appropriate, given its lack of water at that point), into the Pacific, Leadville sits in the upper Arkansas River basin, which drains, via the Mississippi, into the Gulf of Mexico.

South from Leadville, with Mounts Massive and Elbert—Colorado’s highest fourteener—on our right side, we turned west toward Aspen after a few miles. The Independence Pass road, narrow and twisty, was full of Saturday traffic, but we just took advantage of the slow pace to enjoy the scenery all the more. Aspen itself was something of a disappointment, a victim of its own success, but below town the Roaring Fork Valley opened up and was just splendid. It was so nice we didn’t want to leave it behind, so at Basalt we took a little side trip up the Frying Pan River to Rudi Reservoir, where we had a picnic lunch. I drove back down the river road while Hal watched the water, and I could tell he was having second thoughts about his decision not to bring the fishing tackle.

Then it was on down the main valley to Carbondale and south over McClure Pass into the valley of the Gunnison River’s North Fork. The colors were just as spectacular as the day before, and the different geology of that area was a nice contrast from Friday’s.

The North Fork joins the main stem of the Gunnison just west of Hotchkiss and is then joined by the Uncompahgre at Delta, where we turned south and followed that river’s valley all the way to Ouray. The valleys of these two rivers are mostly wide and flat, agricultural land surrounded by distant mountains. But Ouray is at the base of those mountains, where the valley has narrowed to almost an abyss. The aspens up on the sides of the cliffs were breathtaking.

Even more breathtaking, for me at least, was the Beaumont's spa. I suppose it was their way of competing with all of the natural hot springs places in town. Hot springs, of course, are nice, but a massage followed by a spell in the sauna and then a hot tub were just what I needed after our second day of driving.

Sunday morning, we slept in and then went for a long walk before rustling up brunch. The drive down through Silverton to Durango was a short day compared to the first two, so we decided to take it easy. Although a local map showed us a perimeter trail around the whole town, we decided to focus on what's made Ouray famous in recent years, the slot canyon on which the winter ice-climbing competitions were held. So we found the trail on the southwest side of town called "Ice Park Loop" and got some exercise in before our last couple hours in the car. The very thought of climbing the ice-covered walls of that slot canyon made me glad to be visiting while the weather was warm.

* * *

By stopping to enjoy the views, we stretched the short drive down the Million Dollar Highway from Ouray to Durango to three hours. The best part was in the big valley around the old Ironton site, north of Red Mountain Pass. Although not all of those sweeping groves were in full color, some were, and the others provided the contrast needed to avoid having the entire valley a mono-color shade of gold.

Durango was both familiar and at the same time a bit strange. Just enough had changed that we felt like visitors, but visitors who knew their way around quite well. We arrived in time for a late lunch but much too early to check in, so we decided to play tourist and wander around downtown, and the changes in the restaurants and shops were part of the strangeness for us.

But old favorites were still there, notably the Toh-Atin Gallery on Ninth Street, whose southwest art collection had tempted us for years and had provided several of our most prized pieces at home. Hal, I could tell, was in the mood for more, so I had to drag him away before he put another big dent in our bank account. But it was only Sunday, and we weren't leaving until Wednesday. And there was still a bit of room in the car, with more to come when that box of paperwork got delivered...and he had that look in his eye.

Another old favorite was the Palace Restaurant, on the south end by the train station. During our wandering, we stopped in and made reservations for dinner. We remembered that it could fill up quickly when the afternoon run of the Silverton, the historic narrow-gauge steam train up to the town of that name, returned with its load of sunburned tourists. Sunday evening was going to be our last time to ourselves for a while, so we thought we'd do it up right.

The room at the Strater that Hal got for us certainly did it up right. Old-looking, and even old-feeling, it was indeed, but everything was shiny new and up to date. He'd said something about treating ourselves when we first planned this trip, and that's what we were doing.

Monday morning, however, put us back in the saddle, because we had things to do and people to see. On my list were old colleagues from both the regional CBI office out south of downtown and the Durango PD in town. And Hal wanted to drop in on various faculty colleagues up on the campus to touch base.

We both, of course, had Provost John Martin on our lists, for different reasons. My reason, to give him back all of the Phillip Linton files, was easy. Hal's was tougher—he wanted to say hello, naturally, but he knew that Martin would bring up the question of Hal's return to Durango permanently yet again. Hal didn't want to deal with that one at all.

However, our plans were interrupted by a phone call for me just after we returned from our fancy, Monday-morning breakfast downstairs in the Mahogany Grille, the Strater's restaurant.

"Trieri, CBI."

"Mason Niemeyer here, Ms. Trieri. I'm taking you up on your offer to provide an introduction to the CBI office down here in the southwest part of our fine state."

"Marshal Niemeyer, good morning! Sounds as if you're in Durango. It happens that I am, too, so I'll be glad to do that, in person, even. I can run over and see them this morning. I was going to do that anyway, to stop in as a courtesy call and say hello to everyone."

"How about if I meet you there? The sooner the better, from my point of view."

"All right. Hang on a sec." I poked my phone's "mute" button. "Hal? Sounds like something has come up. Can I drop you off at the campus?"

"When?"

"Well, it sounds like I'm needed soonest."

"Hmm. Tell you what. I can use the walk. Where are you going to be?"

"Over at the CBI offices, at first, at least."

"Oh. *That* kind of business. Well, please don't get the rental car all shot up full of bullet holes. It's expensive enough without having to buy the damned thing."

I'd never asked about the cost of renting that hot-rod convertible we were driving, and now I was afraid to.

Another poke of the button got me back to Niemeyer. "I'll leave in a couple of minutes. I'm downtown, so it'll take only a few more. See you there."

"Thanks. And I'll fill you in when I see you. Don't want to on this phone."

I made it down to the CBI office in fifteen minutes, five of which were involved with my getting organized and changed into appropriate clothes. I'd put on a summery tourist outfit, and it sounded like whatever Niemeyer wanted was going to be all business.

He walked up to me as I was getting of the Mercedes in the CBI parking lot.

"Whoa. Nice wheels. Looks like the CBI treats its people well." The grin told me he was trying to push my buttons, so I went with it.

"Well, you know. Now and then we bust a big drug pusher and confiscate his property. And it'd be a shame to let something like this sit and rust, don't you think?" My wink served its purpose, because he started laughing.

It took him a minute to stop. "And all we get is those government-issue Chevys. Ah, well. Anyway, thanks for coming. Before we go in, let me tell you what's going on."

"Thanks."

"As I'm sure you've guessed, it's about Danny Santini. Or Dan. I need to stop thinking of him as a little kid. I guess you know he's a student at the university here, and he was just going to start his senior year. So that means that he's got an apartment here and so on." He sighed. "Well, it seems that he's both rich, or his daddy is, or was, and he's careful. So he got a fancy security lock installed, a biometric one that's keyed to his thumb print."

He shrugged and raised both hands in the what-can-you-do gesture. “We were planning to relocate him someplace else without having him return here, in case that shooter is lurking about. But he’s adamant about cleaning out the apartment to retrieve the rest of his stuff. He took most of it with him for the summer, but there’s still some of it here. And I can’t really blame him. He’s now the last of his family, and he deserves to keep whatever family items he has in there. Anyway, with the biometric lock, he has to be here. And I thought some serious back-up would make his activities here safer. I’ve got a couple of guys available, but the more the merrier, as far as I’m concerned.”

“The Durango PD might be able to help.”

“Like I said, he’s a rich kid. Not an arrogant one, but he lives well for a college student. So he lives up by Purgatory, the ski area, in a condo he’s renting. Helluva a commute to classes, but he told me he crashes at friends’ places in town a lot and they stay with him a lot during ski season. Anyway, I don’t have any information about the capabilities of the sheriff’s office.”

“Mmm. Then I think you’re right about going with the CBI. At least our people have the sorts of security clearances that you’re used to.” I nodded my head toward the door. “Shall we go inside and see who’s available? Oh, I should warn you. I used to be the boss of these people, so there will probably be sort of a family reunion for a few minutes.”

There was, and, to his credit, Niemeyer waited patiently, wearing a polite smile and shifting a bit from foot-to-foot while everyone made a fuss over me. Eventually I was able to introduce him to Derek Petersen, and we decided rather quickly that we should retire to Derek’s office to conduct our business.

* * *

I let Niemeyer explain things, and he did so without going too deeply into the background of the Spadaro clan. But he did note that Spadaro used to be Dan Santini’s name, and that was enough for Derek.

“Marshal Niemeyer, we’re just a far-removed division office of the CBI, stuck way out here in the sticks of southwestern Colorado, but we do hear things. Sounds like this Dan Santini person is under your protection because he’s Tony the Ferret’s kid.”

“That’s right. And I’m sorry if I seem to be secretive. Force of habit, mostly, in cases like this. Although this time I have to remind myself that it doesn’t matter so much. Tony the Ferret’s probably dead, and we know that Dan Santini’s mother and brother are. Despite our best efforts.” He sighed. “Anyway, our concern now is for Dan, and we need to make it safe for him to get into this condo he rents up at Purgatory. The plan is to clean out all his stuff and move him somewhere else, so he can start over yet again. We owe him that much.”

Derek cocked his head to the side a bit and thought it over. “Seems like we could help out with the protection thing easily enough. Send a car full of agents up there when you take Dan and blanket the place. I can’t imagine anyone would be brazen enough to try anything if we had a visible presence, your guys and mine.”

“Well, Derek, maybe, maybe not.” I told him about the shootings at the sheriff’s office up in Grand County. “We’re dealing with a real pro here, one who seems to be willing to take risks.”

Derek grinned. “Well, I guess we could fire up our new Bearcat G3. Actually, it’s ‘pre-owned,’ as they say, but the dents and dings make it all the more intimidating. That ought to make anyone think twice about poking their nose in.”

Niemeyer looked surprised. “You guys have a Bearcat? Damn.”

Derek laughed this time. “Yeah, I know. A bit much for what we need in these parts. We got it with some left-over Homeland Security money, and it’s a pretty bare-bones version. The off-road capability is very helpful here, though. But it has no real armament. Scary as hell anyway, because it has a camouflage paint job. And even though it can’t shoot, it’s pretty well armored. We share it with the PD and the sheriff when they need the help. So we might as well share it with you. Mostly, it just sits in our lot.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I inferred it was some kind of SWAT vehicle. And Niemeyer’s surprised reaction impressed me.

Now he looked thoughtful. “Y’know, that baby could be just what the doctor ordered. Dan would be pretty invulnerable if we transported him in it, especially in a convoy. And we could shield the door to the condo with it when he enters and exits. Thanks for the offer.”

He looked at me. “Annette, you want in on this? What are you doing down here, anyway?”

I explained about the part-vacation, part-business nature of our trip. “And I guess I’d be glad to come along, provided I can get a ride. Um, I lied about the car, Mason—it’s really a rental. And my husband already asked me not to get it shot up. When are you planning to do this?”

“That’s the question. Derek, what’s a good schedule for you?”

He thought for a minute. “It would be easier to arrange things on my end if we did it tomorrow. And I’d guess first thing in the morning would be a good time. I’d like to take a drive up there this afternoon and get the lay of the land.”

“That’s my plan, too. We can go up together this afternoon, if you’d like.” Niemeyer gestured at Derek’s computer. “Get the Google satellite image of the area, and I’ll point out the place to you now.”

Within a few seconds, Niemeyer and I were behind Derek’s desk, peering over his shoulders. An image of the Purgatory base was on the screen, with US550 running just to its east, through the middle of the picture. Niemeyer leaned over and pointed.

“His place is here, on the east side of the highway, in the, uh, seven-o’clock building here on Placer Court. Just south of this big pond.”

He pronounced it as a mining term, with the “a” short.

Derek snorted. “Well, hell. What good is that? Rich kid doesn’t even have a place at the base of one of the lifts? Hmmph. How’s he gonna get chicks with something way over there?”

Niemeyer laughed. “I asked him almost the same question. It seems these places on the east side are much newer and therefore a lot nicer than the ones at the actual base. And not so cramped together and loud and crazy when they fill up. Most of ’em are detached, single-family houses, in fact. And there’s a shuttle during the season. Also, notice the Nordic Center there, north of that pond? His condo has easy access to the cross country trails in the woods there.”

Derek looked at me. “Want to come on our scouting trip this afternoon, Annette?”

As tempted as I was, discretion prevailed. “I think I ought to check in with old friends at the PD and then see how Hal’s doing. Tomorrow sounds like it might take some time. I mean, I’m supposed to be on vacation, you know?”

“OK. I’ll call you and leave a message if I need to about tomorrow’s timing. Uh, do you need a weapon?”

“I’ve got my Glock in a traveling safe in the trunk of the car. Will that do?”

He and Niemeyer looked at each other. “Probably. Like I said, the Bearcat itself doesn’t have weapons itself, but we’ll put several options in it, I’m sure. Of course, I’m also sure we all hope that no weapons will be needed.”

Niemeyer nodded in agreement. “Right. The last thing we need up there is a big shoot-out. All we want is what stuff Dan didn’t take with him to Winter Park this summer, and he told me it’s really not a lot. Just some winter gear and a few family mementos, he said.”

I visited for a bit with other old colleagues in the office and then made my way back north to the police department downtown. Everyone there was surprised and pleased to see me, and a little group of us went out for lunch together. It occurred to me that eating so well, and so much, along with sitting in the car so much was going to mean a lot of remedial exercise once Hal and I got back home.

And one topic of conversation was “home.” I’d been recruited to the CBI’s Durango office when I was chief of detectives at the PD, and the nature of the CBI job was that I continued to work closely with the PD. So they knew that the move Hal and I made to Fraser was initially intended to be temporary. It was something of a diplomatic chore for me to let everyone know that we’d come to think of the Fraser Valley as home now, and that, while Durango was always a place we’d like to visit, it would just be a place to visit.

Hal, I was certain, would need even more diplomacy to break that news to his colleagues on the campus, especially to his old boss, John Martin.

* * *

Fourteen

I knew that Hal’s chore of breaking the news to his old boss would be tough for him, but I didn’t know it would be so tough that he’d seek my help. I found out that evening, however.

After a pleasant lunch with former PD colleagues, I returned to the Strater and found Hal immersed in catching up with email.

“There you are!” His greeting seemed a tad artificial to me. “I was wondering whether you’d got yourself lost somehow.”

I hoped my expression communicated “puzzled.” “No, just catching up with everyone. And dealing with that little matter that came up earlier.”

I proceeded to sketch for him the situation with Dan Santini and our plan for the morning. “Sorry to be caught up in this, but it feels like I ought to be there. And it doesn’t need to change our itinerary, after all.”

“No, no, it’ll be fine. I saw only about half the people I wanted to anyway. I can go back up there tomorrow.”

“Did you run across John today?”

“Just briefly. Uh, just enough to suggest to him that we all have dinner this evening. ‘All’ meaning John and his wife Edith.” He winced. “I hope that’ll be OK with you?”

What could I say? John and I had interacted on numerous occasions, and one of those gave me a creepy feeling about him, as he’d once had to confess to me his patronizing Durango’s strip clubs when

Edith was out of town. Although he was able to provide me with information about those sleezy places, valuable for a case I was working on, it was still creepy.

And, based on gossip I'd heard around town, those strip club visits weren't all that surprising, as Edith had the reputation of being something of a battleaxe.

And we were going to have dinner with them? On our vacation? And tell John that his prized earth scientist and ex-dean wasn't going to return from his sabbatical, ever?

Oh, joy.

But, what could I say? "It'll be fine. Did you guys settle on a restaurant?"

"He suggested one, actually, here at the Strater, where we had breakfast this morning. At seven. I made a reservation for us."

At least, I thought, I could come down with a strategic case of, say, indigestion and excuse myself easily.

So it was that, at about 6:45, Hal and I, wearing the best clothes we had packed, went down to the Mahogany Grille. In its foyer, perched on the edges of side chairs, sat John Martin with a woman who reminded me of my grandmother. I knew she couldn't have too many years on me, but in appearance she was at least two generations older. And maybe eighty pounds heavier.

As we walked up to them, I heard, "I just wish people would be on time these days, John. It's so rude to make others wait."

Game on, I thought. When they noticed our presence, I stitched onto my face the most artificial smile I could summon and found my perky voice.

"Evening, John! Here we are, six-forty-five, for our *seven o'clock* reservation! Good to see you again! Perhaps we should retire to the bar?"

Although I was glad for the glass of wine—from a more-than-adequate wine list—and the Martins had martinis, it really didn't help matters.

It was about half-way through the main course, during Act III of the melodramatic "Durango's Flaws According to Edith" that I decided on a headache rather than indigestion. I didn't want to insult the kitchen staff, after all.

During a short break in the monologue—she had to chew now and then—I smiled around the table and said, "I hope you'll excuse me."

And as I arose, I leaned toward Hal and whispered "surprise migraine. Good luck."

"I understand," Hal whispered back.

He knew, of course, that I was not a victim of migraines, although it wouldn't have surprised either of us if that one had been real, given the situation. I felt bad for leaving him alone in it, but, then, he'd set the whole thing up in the first place.

I still had the keys to the Mercedes in my purse, so I detoured to the car on my way to our room to fetch the travel case with my Glock in it. I figured that it might be therapeutic, not to mention precautionary, what with the plan for the next day, to give the thing a good cleaning.

Hal finally wandered in at about ten-thirty, looking drained. By then, the Glock was clean as a whistle, well-oiled and ready for anything, and I was feeling lots better.

His smile at me was rather weak, all-in-all. "I'll tell ya. Every now and then I regret having given up drinking. A couple of good, stiff belts would have made all that a lot easier."

I walked across the room to give him a big hug. “Sorry I deserted you down there. But I just couldn’t take another second of her whining. I don’t know how John puts up with her.”

“I’ve wondered that, too. Maybe one of the reasons he’s been so successful in his academic career is that he’s not distracted by wanting to be at home.” He leaned back and kissed me on the nose. “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn. And I *like* it at home, especially when you’re there.”

“I hope at least something constructive came out of the evening for you.”

“John and I did have a chance to catch up a bit. It seems that she *really* likes fancy desserts, and so she shut up while she ate two, a concoction involving a chocolate brownie with chocolate ice cream and chocolate mousse, with chocolate on top, and then Bananas Foster. I was hoping the table-side prep for the bananas would set that hair-do on fire, but no such luck.”

He smiled. “And I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, ‘Did you tell him?’ And the answer is ‘yes,’ sort of. Not explicitly, but implicitly. What I did was to talk about retirement, but completely in the context of retirement from FSU and the state college system as a way to let me pursue other interests. I’ll stay officially on sabbatical and eventually transition to emeritus. That way, they can get some mileage out of keeping me on their faculty roster. But I think he now knows, deep down, that I won’t be back on campus in any kind of permanent role in the future.”

“A toast to you for that, my friend.” And I gave him a big smooch.

“Yum,” he said. “Better than champagne, by far.”

Then he noticed the travel case. “Got out your Glock, I see. Was she really that bad?”

I had to laugh. “No, not really. But I did find that cleaning it was quite helpful for me. Erased that ‘migraine’ completely.”

“Generally, you don’t clean that thing unless you’ve got some reason to think you might use it. Is this business of emptying out Dan Santini’s apartment tomorrow worrying you?”

I thought about that for a minute. “Only to the extent that the others involved aren’t taking the Hot Sulphur shooter seriously enough.

“I guess that makes it all the more important that you’re with them tomorrow. Well,” he gathered me into another hug, “you be careful out there.”

“Always.”

“Hmm. But you’re not going anywhere just now, are you?”

“No, not just now.”

“And, you know, that bathtub in there looks big enough for two, don’t you think?”

“Well, yes, I think it might be.”

“And I seem to remember seeing that it has those water jet thingies in it, like a Jacuzzi.”

“I noticed that, too.”

“Be a shame to let it go to waste, since we’re paying for it, don’t you think?”

“A shame.”

“Well, then...”

* * *

Tuesday morning, Hal dropped me off at the CBI office before heading up to the campus in the car. He said he'd managed to wangle a parking pass on his visit Monday, so he'd be able to take the box of Phil Linton's paperwork back to the Provost's Office. That would check another to-do item off the list. And it would create room in the car—I wondered if Hal would make a trip to the Toh-Atin Gallery while I was busy up in Purgatory.

At the CBI office, Derek, dressed in a military-looking jumpsuit, was supervising the loading of several long guns and ammunition boxes into a camouflage-painted, boxy, SUV-type vehicle, one bigger than most and not designed to win any awards for its sleekness. The Bearcat G3, I assumed. It was idling with a low rumble, getting ready for its run up to the ski area.

It was about 8:30 when two gray Chevy Suburbans pulled up, and Mason Niemeyer climbed out of the first one. He looked around, signaled the second one, and two other men dressed much like Mason was—that cheap government suit look—climbed out, as did Dan Santini, from one of the rear doors.

“I get to ride in that thing?” He eyeballed the Bearcat in wonder. “Cool.”

Derek laughed. “You say that now, but you'll find it's actually pretty hot in there. It wasn't designed for comfort. And it's noisy, and the ride's pretty rough. But it'll get us there.”

Niemeyer spoke up. “Intentional overkill, Dan. You know what we're worried about. We could try to do this by stealth, but you never know if that's really going to work. We're taking the approach of doing it in the open, but with overkill in the way of manpower and security. I don't see how an out-of-town hit man could muster the resources to take us on. Even if it's a team. No way they'd have anti-tank missiles or anything like that.”

Santini shrugged. “At least it looks big enough to hold all my stuff. Which reminds me. Did you get everything from the Winter Park apartment?”

“Yep, and it's headed for our new destination as we speak. And your car and bike are getting shipped there, too.”

“But you won't tell me where.”

“Not yet, sorry. Soon.” Niemeyer looked Derek's way. “Derek? You about set?”

But I spoke up first. “What did you guys decide, anyway?”

They had been hashing over details when I'd left for the PD the previous afternoon.

Derek answered. “Oh, yeah, you weren't there. Well, you and Mason go in the first SUV, then Mason's two guys and Dan go in the Bearcat, with me driving, and then my two guys follow in the other SUV. We've got all the way north through town to manage, with all the traffic lights, and Mason's going to keep an eye on their timing, so we don't get separated. We're not using emergency lights or anything, so we're staying as legal as we can. Out on the highway, we'll be at the speed limit, if possible. I figure about 45 minutes.”

“Derek, you know about the timing of the lights?” I decided to show off my old knowledge from being in the PD.

“Uh...they're timed?”

“We get on the highway out there,” I waved toward the east, “at a traffic light a ways up the frontage road. Then there are two sets of lights, at the second one we go straight, which is into downtown. Then there are lights at, let's see, College, Ninth, and Main Avenue, where we keep on straight onto North Main Avenue. Uh, there's also a fire station emergency light at Twelfth, but that's probably not an issue. Anyway, if we keep to just the right speed, and it used to be about three over the posted speed limit, which changes, all the lights all the way up North Main will be green for us. Seven,

eight intersections. The first sets, though, are hit-or-miss, although they're green most of the time in the direction we'll be going."

Derek and Niemeyer stared at me for a minute, assimilating all that trivia.

I grinned, trying not to be embarrassed. "Used to be, I'd try to make it all the way through town without a red light, kind of a contest with myself and the traffic engineers. I got good at it."

One of Derek's CBI agents, one whom I remembered, Stan Hauser, had sidled over to where we were talking and, apparently, overheard my trivia.

"Uh, Annette? It's changed. I've got a place up north now and commute via Main Avenue. They've put those metal loops in the side streets to switch the lights now, and there are also school zones. Those seem to have kicked in today."

Now I *was* embarrassed. I managed a sickly grin. "Oh. Uh, sorry. Never mind."

Niemeyer laughed. "No problem, Annette. I'll just put you in charge of watching the lights way ahead, so I can watch the traffic instead. And we'll be in touch over the radio. If someone gets stuck at a red light, those of us in front will pull over and wait."

I turned to Stan. "Thanks for setting me straight. And, say, you're still here. I thought you were in that CBI rotation program."

He smiled down at me—at 6'10" or so, he had to. "Still here, Annette. I did leave for a while to finish that program, but Director Petersen and I conspired to get me back here. I like this place."

Niemeyer had been fidgeting. "OK, folks, let's mount up and roll. We're losing time."

Everyone climbed into their assigned places and Niemeyer took the lead out of the parking lot. We had a long wait at the frontage road light to get onto the highway, but then it was clear sailing all the way to Main Avenue, where things got complicated. But we made it north through town with only one stop to let the others catch up. I failed to warn Niemeyer a light was about to change, and they got caught.

Once out on US550 north of town, we sped up. It was interesting to look at the scenery with fresh eyes—on Sunday, southbound into town, I'd been a little burned out with the car trip. But sitting way up high in that Suburban provided a new perspective. Of course, the roof and the window pillars were different from our convertible, but it was still possible to see the changing trees well. Not that I'd want to be doing our tour in it.

Niemeyer was watching his mirror carefully, I could tell. "I wonder how that Bearcat is to drive on the highway?"

"I'd suggest that it's a bear to drive, but you'd probably not like it."

He turned to look at me for longer than was really safe. "Groan. Even compared to this big beast, you're probably right, though. Sluggish acceleration even with all that power—the thing weighs over eight tons, or some such thing. And with those off-road tires and suspension, it's probably noisy as hell. I wonder if Derek would let me drive it on the way back?"

"He said it gets hot. Surely it has air-conditioning. But probably not leather seats with ventilation."

"You're spoiled by that rental, Annette."

"Darn right. And proud of it. It wouldn't do to own that car where we live, though. Grand County is Subaru and Jeep country."

The radio came to life. "Hauser to Petersen. Derek, you there?"

“Petersen.”

“We might have a tail. Hard to tell, though. Could just be regular traffic.”

Niemeyer poked a button on his steering wheel. “Niemeyer. I’ll slow down a lot for this hill coming up. If he doesn’t pass us, I’ll pull off at the top, I remember a big gravel area on the shoulder up there.”

That elicited two “rogers.”

It turned out to be regular traffic, two adults and two kids in a mid-sized SUV with junk in the back. They zoomed by, at about the speed limit, when Niemeyer slowed down on the hill.

That, I hoped, was the day’s excitement. We surely didn’t need any up at Dan’s condo.

That big hill put us up on the plateau with the ski area, and it was high enough that the aspens thrived. If not for the odd mission we were on, it would have qualified as a repeat of part of our Grand Aspen Tour. Shortly, buildings began to appear in the trees along the highway, and Niemeyer eased over into a right-turn lane. He watched as the two following vehicles did as well, then turned right and came to a stop several car-lengths in.

He poked the radio button again. “We take the second left in to the condo’s parking lot, correct, Derek?”

“Roger that. I’ll take lead, you two can cover the entrance after I’m in.”

The Bearcat pulled around us, and we followed it into the parking lot of one of those ski-area condo complexes with a modern look. On closer examination, it appeared that there were six pairs of duplexes in a semi-circle. The Bearcat pulled into the parking place of the left-side unit of the building second from the left. We stopped at the parking lot entrance, partially blocking it, and Stan Hauser’s SUV did the same, blocking the other half. Phase one complete, it appeared.

* * *

Someone had to stay with the Suburbans, just in case a resident needed access. Niemeyer and I nominated the two CBI guys, Stan Hauser and his companion. The rest of us formed a sort of moving cordon around Dan Santini on his walk up to his front door. I think we all felt kind of dumb, except perhaps for Niemeyer.

Dan put his right thumb on what looked like a touch screen, the thing lit up and buzzed, and the lock clicked. Quite slick, actually.

I’d read about biometric locks but never seen one, even at EcoARC, that relatively high-security place in Arizona where I’d been. One question that always came up was whether the lock could be spoofed, with a counterfeit of someone’s thumb- or fingerprint. The manufacturers all claimed that they also had other sensors built into the thing, sensors for moisture (sweat), biological activity (like a heartbeat), or some other secret sauce sort of thing. But other people claimed it was pretty easy to get around those protections. Even so, it was an impressive gadget, and I could see why Dan felt he had to be there personally to get into the condo.

“Pretty slick, Dan.” I said. “But it’s a good thing the battery didn’t run down over the summer.”

He grinned. “The battery’s only for backup. It’s powered from low-voltage contacts on the striker plate. All the wiring is in the wall.”

Niemeyer stopped him as he reached for the door handle. “Hold it, Dan. I’ll go in first and clear the first room, and the rest of you can come in there. Then we’ll clear the rest of the rooms before Dan gets to wander around, OK?”

“You really think someone’s in there, Mason?” Dan was a bit incredulous.

“No, but I’ve learned it pays to take as few chances as possible. Give me a minute.” And Niemeyer disappeared inside.

He opened the door after just a short time. “OK. The big room down here and the lavatory under the stairs are clear. Let’s everyone step inside, and we’ll fan out. Let’s see. How about this? Annette, you clear the kitchen. Gerry, Will, you take the upstairs. Derek and I will stay here and play human shield.”

Inside the front door, we were gathered in a corner of what Realtors would call the unit’s “great room,” a living and dining area, part of which had a high ceiling, that together occupied about two-thirds of the overall footprint. There was a coat closet straight ahead of us that provided some cover and then a staircase leading up to a second floor with an open loft area looking over the living room area and two doors that no doubt led to bedrooms. Mason’s two Marshals Service colleagues started up the stairs, and I decided to give them a bit of a head start. Almost immediately I heard “loft clear.”

I leaned over to Dan and asked, in a whisper, “Upstairs? How big is this place, anyway?”

He whispered back, “Two bedrooms, each with a bathroom, plus the area you see up there, I use it for a TV room. Down here, there’s the kitchen, that lavatory, and this big room on this floor. Yeah, it’s big, but you should see how full it gets on ski weekends.”

“With all those people, how do you deal with the door lock?”

“Oh, I just turn it off. I figure safety in numbers, you know? Like now.”

Ah, to be young and naïve again, I thought.

I hustled my way across the living room area and into the kitchen, under the right bedroom, and looked around, Glock in the ready position. Empty. “Kitchen clear.”

At least it was clear in terms of anyone’s being in there. But it was something of a mess, with fast-food and frozen-dinner boxes overflowing a trash can and a sink full of dishes. It didn’t smell clear, either.

“Dan, get in here.” He arrived at once. “You went away for the summer and left this mess for when you came back? What were you thinking?”

He looked surprised. “No, I didn’t. In fact, I got it completely cleaned up, washed the counters with bleach and everything. My Mom would have been proud.”

“So someone else has been here, then. Probably not Goldilocks. Which of your college friends is keyed into that fancy lock?”

“None of my friends are. That’s why I leave it unlocked when they’re here. Tony, my brother, and my Dad are, though.”

“Well, that’s not good news at all.” I raised my voice. “Hey, Mason?”

He stuck his head in the kitchen door. “What’s up? Ugh. What a mess!”

“You’re sure right about that. Look. Dan says the only other people keyed into that lock are Tonys Senior and Junior. I don’t know what-all people have touched—various door-knobs, I suppose—but now we’ve got a crime scene. Breaking and entering at least. We need to be very careful about everything.” I had switched into detective mode instantly.

“You’re right. What did you hear cleared from upstairs?”

“Mmm. The loft, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and one balcony, I think. Does each of the upstairs bedrooms have a balcony?” The urgency in my voice got Dan nodding right away.

Niemeyer spoke up. “Derek? Get Dan here outside and into the Bearcat, now. And call your two guys to be with him there. And call 911. Get the sheriff up here with his crime-scene people. And reinforcements. Uh, please.”

“Got it.” Derek came into the kitchen. “Dan, c’mon, outside. Into that big, safe metal box we’ve got out there. Now.”

They left, and I heard the front door shut.

“Will? Gerry? What’s happening up there?” Niemeyer’s query, undoubtedly loud enough to be heard upstairs, was greeted by silence.

“Annette? Have you heard anything? Any odd noises?” He switched to whispering.

“Nope. This isn’t good. You and I need to cover that staircase. Carefully.”

“Got it.” He crouched by the side of the doorway where he would be in a position to see the stairs. “I’m going to scoot out this door and across the room to the other side of the stairs, by the front door. Then you can take my place here and we’ll have the stairs covered from both directions. I don’t know what’s happened upstairs, but I think we should wait for backup before doing much else.”

“Roger that. Derek will help, of course, if he comes back in. And I bet he does, after making that phone call.”

He did. Niemeyer declared that Derek was sufficient backup and it was his own responsibility to check out the upstairs. Those were his colleagues up there, after all.

There was a tense fifteen minutes or so while he crept up the stairs and eased his way around the various rooms. He decided to forego the fully automatic AR-15 that Derek had brought in from the Bearcat, so I got to stand around and hold it while Niemeyer searched. Damned thing was heavier than I’d thought.

Eventually, he came back down the stairs shaking his head. “Jesus. He got ’em both somehow, Gerry and Will. With a knife yet. Stabbed Gerry through the heart, from behind, and slashed Will’s throat all the way back to the spine. And he must have jumped off one of the balconies. There’s another parking lot about fifty yards across a field, so he’s probably long gone.”

I bit my tongue so as not to say “I told you so.”

* * *

Fifteen

“Gone, maybe, but not for so long. He’s got only two choices, north, to Silverton and points beyond, and south, back to Durango.” I was hoping I wasn’t just pointing out the obvious. “And, in either direction, it’ll take a while for him to get to where there are more choices.”

“Sounds like you think a couple of roadblocks are in order.” Derek whipped out his phone, poked a button, and winked at me while he waited. “Already did that, Annette. La Plata and San Juan sheriffs’ people. Just north of Hermosa and at Molas Divide, just south of Silverton. I’ll update them now.”

Niemeyer was staring at me. “Well, Annette, I shoulda listened to you more carefully. I underestimated him, the son-of-a-bitch.”

“Makes two of us, Mason. The question now is, how’d he get in here?”

“Somebody’s thumb, no doubt. Probably Tony Senior’s. Tony Junior wasn’t missing his, was he?”

“Not that I heard. Tony Senior makes sense. Well, anyway, now the U.S. Marshals Service is after him, and the sheriff of my county wants a piece of him, too. So as good as he is, he’s now got law enforcement after him with a vengeance. That never ends well for such folks.”

Niemeyer nodded. “And in the meantime, we just grit our teeth and do our jobs.”

Derek had finished and now spoke up. “The two sets of roadblocks now know the situation. I made sure to emphasize the ‘armed and dangerous’ part. Oh, and the crime scene people are about fifteen minutes out.”

Niemeyer blinked a few times. “Tell you what. Why don’t you and your guys, and Annette here, head back to Durango in the Bearcat and one of the two SUVs. I’ll stay here and deal with the crime scene people. Annette, if you ride with Dan, you can debrief him some.”

“Seems like Dan needs to disappear, Mason. When the New York crowd finds out their first guy failed, they’ll keep sending them, keep trying to kill him, won’t they?” I shrugged. “It’d be nice if we could make it look like Dan got killed somehow.”

Niemeyer nodded. “Good thought, Annette. Maybe I can get the crime scene people to go along with that, although as long as our guy is somewhere out there in the world he’ll be able to contradict it. Then, you’re right, there will be more such attempts.”

I shrugged again. “Maybe Dan had himself a heart attack from the stress when saw his condo had been broken into. Poor fellow has been kind of sickly all his life because of a bad heart...er, a bad heart *valve*, and the shock fibrillated him, and we tried CPR and everything but couldn’t save him. Tragic, really.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about that one. Say! If you get going, get Dan away from here, I can tell the crime scene people that little fib and how Dan’s being transported to the hospital, where, of course, he’ll not make it. Or, better yet, he’ll be DOA. Maybe we can make that stick somehow.”

“La-la-la-la, I can’t *hear* you.” Derek was staring at the ceiling with his fingers in his ears.

Niemeyer waited until Derek unplugged his ears. “All in a day’s work, Derek. We WITSEC people have been known to use subterfuge when it suits us. It’s even within policy, at least this sort of subterfuge that doesn’t hurt anyone. We’ll get a death certificate from the local ME and plant a story in the paper. Dan will be tragically deceased, killed by the shock-induced heart thing, and that’ll be that.”

“What! Subterfuge? The Feds pulling one over on the local hicks? Why, who ever heard of such a thing?” Derek sounded offended, but he was smiling.

“Ha! As if you never pulled one on the FBI or anybody.”

I decided to head off the budding inter-agency squabble. “He could even finish up his degree at FSU, if he took a semester off to get his appearance changed a little. And a new name. My husband and I have connections in the administration there, and I’m sure we could help with the details.”

“Actually,” Derek looked serious now, “I rather like this whole idea. We need to discuss it with Dan, obviously. Mason, can Annette do that on the way back to town? We can find a safe place to stash him for a while, I’m sure, until he’s officially dead. Then you can deal with the death of your guys here, and the crime scene people and so on.”

Niemeyer nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Ten minutes later, I was sitting in the back of the Bearcat with Dan. Stan Hauser was riding shotgun, Derek was driving, and his other CBI agent was following us in one of the Suburbans.

Sitting with Dan, I took the opportunity to explain to him our idea to make it appear as if he'd died. There would be, I suggested, a certain amount of hassle-factor to deal with, but, if the idea worked, he'd be off the radar screen of those New York outfits that had killed the rest of his family.

He looked thoughtful. "Y'know, this morning, when Mason explained today's plan and all, I thought it was just ridiculous. And then when they put me in this Bearcat the first time, I couldn't believe how stupid the entire thing was. But now I understand. Those guys, whoever they are, are serious shit. They got Mom and Tony, and it looks like they got Dad. And that's still not enough for them."

"No, and it probably never will be until you're dead. Or they think you are."

"And that's where that plan you outlined comes in."

"Exactly. It's not all-or-nothing, though. It might be possible to break it into parts and make substitutions if you're not happy with parts. What I thought of was trying not to make you start completely over again, in a new town and all that. Like you and your family had to do before. But maybe that's what you'd rather do. Anyway, you need to give it a lot of thought."

"I sure would like to finish up my college degree. I've only got about thirty more credit hours to take. Two more semesters."

"Like I told Mason, my husband and I have some pull with the administration at FSU. I'm not sure if you'd be safe in Durango, though. Certainly not with your present name. Or your old one. And it might be weird to be on campus with yet another new name, but with the same old group of friends."

"I guess I *do* need to do some thinking about this. One thing for sure, I don't want to live with having to run away forever."

"Can't blame you for that."

"Y'know, I had the best time this summer. That internship was just too cool. And Durango's a great little city, but I really liked Winter Park. And Allison lives there."

"I never heard what you were doing, exactly."

"GIS mapping of various old datasets, trying to get them all registered consistently so GIS tools could be used to analyze them together. Climate data, ecosystem data, all sorts of stuff. Um, 'GIS' is geographic information systems."

"Yeah, I've heard of GIS. But, let me think, I seem to remember you're a history major."

"I am. Many of these datasets are what's called 'historical datasets.' History research is required to make them fit into the bigger picture."

"Oh. That makes sense. Anyway, do you suppose you could get those last thirty credits on-line? Or maybe through independent study courses?"

"Probably. I've got good grades, and that gives me lots of flexibility with my study plan. The U is good about that."

"How about a new name, another internship at MPARC, new digs in Winter Park, and an FSU degree via independent study? Hal is an FSU professor, you know."

"Hal?"

"You probably think of him as Dr. Weathers, the MPARC Director."

“No kidding? Geez, that’d be awesome. I mean, really awesome.”

“But Dan Santini, or Danilo Spadaro, if you prefer, has to have died today. We, I mean Mason and I, we figured it was a heart attack. You were born with a weak heart, or something like that, and the accumulating shock of having your family all killed and your place broken into was just too much. You just keeled over. Terribly, terribly tragic.”

“Well, I just hope it was quick and painless.” His grin told me he was all in.

* * *

Wednesday morning saw Hal and me cruising east on US160 in our overly indulgent rental convertible with the entire world to ourselves once again. Oh, there was some traffic, of course, but that didn’t upset things at all.

Our destination that day was Crested Butte, via Lake City—not the most direct route, but perhaps the most scenic, with two Continental Divide crossings and only a few towns. Because of that, we’d brought a gourmet picnic lunch that Hal had arranged for us at the Strater the previous day.

Hal insisted on a debriefing, of course. We weren’t able to that Tuesday evening because of another dinner date, this one far more pleasant, with old colleagues from his College of Natural Science, including his replacement as Dean. Instead, he started quizzing me Wednesday morning as we left town, in order, he said, to get the conversation going before the aspen groves became too compelling to talk.

So I filled him on the previous day’s little adventure, without, as usual, providing the sorts of details that would worry him. But, as usual, he filled in such details himself and worried.

“So you were in this condo with that mob hit man upstairs?”

“And four other law-enforcement professionals downstairs with me and all of us armed to the teeth. It was perfectly safe.”

“Not for those two U.S. Marshals, apparently. Sheesh. And what’s this about Dan’s being killed?”

“No, no, not at all. We’re floating the story that he died, a heart attack, probably. That way, the New York mob people will think he’s dead and quit coming after him. See?”

“Oh. Well, I guess that does make sense. But what’s really going to happen to him?”

So I outlined the plan Dan and I had discussed. “But, I said, I’ve got to stop calling him ‘Dan.’ He’ll need a new identity, once again. But at least he can move to a familiar place and work with people he knows. That is, if you buy into this senior year for him at MPARC.”

“Oh, that’s the easy part. That project he started interests me a lot. I can think of all sorts of analyses to do when he gets the data assembled. The hard part will be his new name.”

“Nick Parker. Nicholas, when formality is needed.”

“Huh?”

“Well, that’s what he picked. We talked about the senior year at MPARC and then it was time to think about a new name. He seemed stumped, so I asked him who he saw when he looked in the mirror, don’t think, just answer. Like those ‘what’s the first word that comes to mind...’ psychological tests. And he said, after about ten seconds, so he did think about it a little bit, ‘Nick Parker.’ Said it just popped into his head. Seems fine to me.”

“Fair enough. No other Parkers at MPARC, so that won’t be an issue. Any news about that hit man that got away?”

“Not yet, really. That call I got last evening was from Deputy Marshal Niemeyer, and it was encouraging. He told me that the crime scene team found blood smears on the railing of one of the bedroom balconies, and another smear on the balcony deck below the one on the railing. And there were somewhat deep foot impressions on the ground below that. So the guy stepped over the railing, holding onto it, held onto the deck, and dropped. That means it was only six feet or so. They also found a chunk of what looks like the heel of a hand, along with some material they think is from a glove, in the teeth of one of the dead Marshals. So it looks as if the hit man has a chunk of hand missing, and we have solid DNA samples from that hand. The U.S. Marshals Service will be all over that, and they’re usually successful in these things. If he’s still carrying the gun he shot Fran’s deputy with, that’ll be two more charges of murder one in Grand County.”

I stopped to see if I could remember anything else germane, but got distracted. “Ooh. Have a glance at that big grove up the side valley to your left.”

That change-of-subject was just what we needed, and we concentrated on the scenery for the rest of the day.

And what scenery it was. The San Juan Valley northeast of Pagosa Springs, still green and lush in the late summer. Wolf Creek Pass and the South Fork Valley, full of aspen trees and enchanting rock formations, and then the Upper Rio Grande Valley, with broad vistas of extensive aspen groves climbing the valley sides.

We stopped for our picnic at a little side-road bridge over the Rio, and, once again, Hal expressed second thoughts about having left the fly-fishing gear at home. Then we tackled Slumgullion Pass and the valley of the Gunnison’s Lake Fork. By the time we reached Blue Mesa Reservoir, Gunnison, and finally Crested Butte, we were once again so bedazzled by the early fall colors that we were glad to stop for the day. Thursday was to be a bit shorter, so we deferred the side trip Hal had planned to the next morning.

He had booked us a room in the old part of town rather than at the base of the ski area, so we stayed at a lovely bed and breakfast on a quiet side street—the kind of place where you’re treated like family, including the sort of breakfast that Grandma would serve.

Thursday morning, our side trip to Kebler Pass, a few miles west of town on a county road, provided the perfect start to the day’s drive. Aspens right next to the road made a tunnel of leaves of all colors that turned the morning sun into a light show. Driving back to town, into that sun, was actually something of a task, as it made it hard to see the roadway.

Then it was back on pavement, for a while, south toward Gunnison but then northeast up a county road to Taylor Park Reservoir. Another section of gravel followed that, almost all the way to Cottonwood Pass. That entire crossing of the Sawatch Range was the perfect mix of conifers and aspens, from the perspective of showing off the colors of each.

At Buena Vista, we turned south for a short stretch, and then back northeast, across the Arkansas River at Johnson Village, up over Trout Creek Pass and into South Park, an elevated high prairie that is the headwaters for the South Fork of the South Platte River. A northward turn at Fairplay took us over Hoosier Pass and into Breckenridge, and once again we were ready to stop and relax instead of pushing on.

In Breck, Hal had changed gears and booked us into a lift-base hotel, a Marriott this time. We had a lovely room overlooking a dammed-up bit of the Blue River, something called locally “Maggie’s Pond.” Lift-base it may have been, but it was still easy to walk downtown to dinner, and we took advantage of that opportunity.

Friday morning saw us once again on a gravel road first thing, this time over Boreas Pass. Of all the roads on our tour, this one was perhaps the least suited for that convertible of ours, but it was still just fine. Like the Kebler Pass side-trip, the smaller scale of the narrower road put us much closer to the overhanging trees. That made it all the more impressive when the scenery opened up on the way down the pass, back to the highway.

From there, it was east over Kenosha Pass, with its groves climbing the mountainsides, and north at Grant on the county road over Guanella Pass, to Georgetown and I-70. But the four-lane craziness lasted only a few miles, and then we exited onto the Central City Parkway, which took us over some foothills and down to the Peak-to-Peak Highway. I'd never seen that famous scenic byway, so its sixty miles to Estes Park were a new experience. Not only were the aspen groves beautiful, the east sides of the mountains with whose west sides we'd become so familiar were fascinating.

From Estes Park, we were truly the horses headed to the barn, even if the trail was the road over the ridge in Rocky Mountain National Park. After that, we discovered that, despite 1300 miles or so of breath-taking scenery and fall colors, home felt just right.

* * *

I hadn't thought about it beforehand, but it turned out to be a bonus that we arrived home on Friday afternoon. It meant that we had the weekend to decompress, do laundry and shopping, and try to wrap our heads around going back to work on Monday.

And I can't find words to describe how wonderful it was to sleep in our own bed once again.

Saturday morning, Hal asked me if I wanted to go down to Denver with him, to turn in the rental car and, incidentally, do whatever shopping I might have on my list. Between local stores in eastern Grand County and online mail-order shopping, we did pretty well, but there were certain items that I just had to purchase in person that weren't available locally. So I jumped at the chance, especially because it was Labor Day weekend, and there would be sales to take advantage of.

While the drive itself was as scenic as ever, in both directions, the traffic in the Denver metro area reminded me for the umpteenth time how much I enjoyed our lives in the Colorado mountains. When so many people are packed into such a small area, life is just too hectic for my taste. And I say that knowing that Denver is not, by national standards, crowded. So it was good to polish off the big city errands and settle in back at home again.

Although I had set up one of those "I am out of the office until..." auto-reply messages on my office email before we left on our tour, I had also kept up with incoming mail on the trip so I could be aware of and reply to emergency messages as necessary. I'm glad I did, because it let me know that the memorial service for Norma Speers was planned for that Sunday, and we were able to attend. Angela and Sandy were there, too, so we all sat together.

Hal and I aren't church-goers by any means, so we found the service at the charismatic evangelical church in Tabernash quite odd, to say the least. Angela and Sandy did, too, but in her case, I think it helped her get better closure on the whole sad episode. Still, she told me later that she was sure glad she wasn't getting married there—the wedding at the Cathedral in Santa Fe would be weird enough, she said.

But it seemed to help Norma's extended family that we were there—in a situation like that, the more community members who show their respect, the more comfort is available for the deceased's loved ones. Regardless of how we felt about the service, the sight of Norma's husband—about her age,

early twenties—sitting straight and proud in the front row, holding their infant daughter, was both heartbreaking and inspirational.

As in many tourist towns, Labor Day, although well before the autumn equinox, is the last real weekend of summer up in Grand County, and everyone local is grateful for the upcoming break between summer and winter tourist seasons. Skiing doesn't begin until late October—and that's being optimistic—so, apart from a few aspen peeps and, later, the elk-hunting set, things quiet down.

The holiday weekend itself can be a nightmare for law enforcement, of course, but for once it turned out to be relatively peaceful, a blessing for Fran's stressed-out department. Angela and I, as third wheels in a fraternity that had closed ranks because of their shared tragedy, didn't mind the quiet a bit.

It gave us a chance to catch up on all the paperwork we'd been deferring, and to talk about things we'd not had time to before. I could tell she was affected by Norma Speer's death more than she was letting on, especially when she brought up the baby and how, now that she and Sandy were going to make honest people out of each other, that was something she was thinking about a lot. It felt good that she trusted me enough to expose that new and vulnerable side of herself to me.

Wednesday, Hal and I took a very nice bottle of *Morgon* over to Mac and Sam's place on the ridge, where she served an exceptional *cassoulet* that she'd been saving bits and pieces of various critters for. Chicken and turkey and pork and beef and even a little duck made a delicious potpourri of flavors in with the beans, and the fresh herbs she'd found at the farmers' market didn't hurt at all.

And they had a surprise for us. Sitting on the patio overlooking the Fraser Valley, watching the alpenglow on the mountains across the way, we were finishing after-dinner coffee. Sam seemed to be working up to some kind of announcement.

"Well, we did it. We think. While you were out of town, we spent couple of nights over in Estes Park, house-hunting. And we think we found one." She looked a little embarrassed, but pleased as well.

"We did." Mac beamed. "And it's even got a view. Not quite as impressive as this, but still amazing for an old flat-lander like me."

"Now," she said, "we have to wait to see if they take our offer. They didn't like our first deadline, but they countered with a promise not to consider any other offers for a week if we'd give them some time. I think they were surprised by the possibility of a sale and now have to find someplace to move to."

"Well, congratulations, both of you! As I've said all along, we'll miss having you as neighbors, but Estes Park is just over there." I waved my hand in the general direction of northeast. "You can visit us, and we can visit you. Winter holidays are coming up, after all. I hope everything works out."

And I really did. Sam and I would stay in touch, I knew, and having Mac over there to look into this and that, instead of making the trek myself, would be very helpful.

I went into work late on Thursday, where I found waiting for me a package, via FedEx, from Mason Niemeyer. It contained a copy of a recent death certificate for one Daniel Santini, with "Danilo Spadaro" noted on the blank for other names used, along with newspaper clippings from the *Durango Herald* and the *Grand Junction Sentinel* describing the sad death of a Frémont State University Student from Grand Junction. The cause of death was reported as due to a congenital heart defect and stress induced by the recent, accidental death of his mother. The newspaper stories were not in the form of obituaries, so there was no mention in either of such things as survivors or other family members.

The US Marshals Service WITSEC Program, I realized, knew how to work quickly when it wanted to.

Friday, Hal and I had a lunch date, and I drove up to MPARC to meet him at his office. The building seemed emptier than usual, but that was only because I'd become used to all the people from the IPCC conference in there wandering around.

Coming around a corner on the second floor, in the hallway leading to Hal's office, I almost bumped into a young man who was going somewhere with a purpose. He had dark brown eyes behind heavy-framed, horn-rim glasses, surrounded by a week's worth of reddish-brown crew-cut and what would someday be a luxurious full beard. I thought he looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place him.

"Oh, sorry," he said, "my bad. I need to slow down. Oh! Ms. Trieri! Nice to see you again!"

"Not at all." I smiled. "Um, do I know you?"

With no small amount of confidence, he stuck out his right hand for a handshake. "Nick Parker. Good to meet you."

His smile broadened as he took off his glasses, and a familiar face emerged. "And, to quote Mark Twain—correctly, I hope—'the report of my death was an exaggeration'."

* * * * *

Wet Work

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



Wet Work

Prologue

What, he wondered, is that full moon up there called?

His thinking was muddled, for good reason, but slowly it came to him.

It's September, he thought, so maybe it's the Harvest Moon. Or the Hunter's Moon. One of those autumn moons. Well, whatever, it sure is spectacular now that it's starting to set over there, behind that big peak across the valley.

It occurred to him that wondering about such things was ridiculous, given his predicament, but the wonder offered consolation. As consolations go, it was a small one, even trivial. But it was the only consolation he had, so, well, he thought, why not make the most of it? Whatever else you might say about the situation, that scenery is amazing, even now, getting on toward morning.

They had planted him facing west, where he had been able to see both the peaks of the Front Range and the sunset without moving his head. That was good, because moving anything, anything at all, he had discovered, resulted in just too much pain. It hurt even to blink. Those slices on the soles of his feet that had been so painful at first, slices by unfortunately dull knives, they now seemed like playful tickles. At least he was held securely by all the duct tape wrapped around him, arms, legs, even his mouth, so he didn't have to try too hard *not* to move.

Now, many hours later under the light of the full moon, that tallest peak—Longs Peak, he remembered, a landmark that even the most outdoors-averse Estes Park resident like himself couldn't miss—was a showcase for the interplay of shadows and light. As the night had progressed and the angle of the full moon had illuminated different facets of the big, flat cliff on the face of the peak, the scene had kept changing like a slow-motion movie. It was all too beautiful for words.

But if the scenery served as consolation, the sounds of the night did not. At first, the breeze in the trees was soothing, but then he noticed various strange creaking and moaning episodes. And there was the startling rustle of little feet in the leaves on the ground, in the underbrush.

It was the yips and yowls, the baying, that bothered him the most, though. Whatever they were—coyotes? wolves? neighborhood dogs gone bad?—they seemed to be zeroing in on him, coming from various directions, approaching ever closer, as if they were talking with each other: *Find anything over there? It sure smells like there's something around here somewhere. Where is it? Find it yet?* It was taking hours, but the canine conversation came steadily closer.

Suddenly there were the eyes, golden glints around the edges of his peripheral vision, down in the trees. And snuffling sounds. Growling.

It was when one of them bit down on his left foot, at first a little nip but then ripping, jerking at his flesh, that he began screaming, the noise muffled by the duct tape. And even though he knew that no one would ever hear him, he screamed on and on, for as long as he remained conscious, a terribly long, long time while more and more of the hungry carnivores became brave enough to tear loose dinner for themselves and their whelps.

By the time the moon completely disappeared behind the big peak across the valley, peace and quiet had returned to the high mountainside, and the only sound was the satisfied snoring of the satiated pack.

* * *

One

After everything that's been written and said about that poor bastard's murder—all the TV talking heads' reciting their sound bites, the newspaper reporters' strutting the results of so-called investigative reports, the internet bloggers' spewing misinformation, the editorial teams' tsk-tsking about how it was handled, or not—I don't know that there's very much left for me to say about it.

And I suppose that I'd be well-advised to avoid referring to the decedent as "poor" anything, given what we discovered. It's just that it's hard not to, he died so horribly. In all my years of overseas covert operations, including my involvement in episodes in out-of-the-way countries where the natives' behavior defines "barbaric," I never saw such a thing, not even close.

So even though much of the public commentary suggested that he got what he deserved, well, they didn't see what I saw, along with the sheriff and his team on that first day. I can't imagine that anyone, no matter how embittered, would really wish such an end for anybody.

Except, of course, for the sadistic psychopaths who set the whole thing up—it was clear from the initial stages of the investigation to its end that it was no accident that he died that way.

I'll say this, though: what I saw certainly wasn't what I was expecting to see, on that lazy Labor Day.

It was a bit past noon, and I was working my way slowly, carefully up the nascent Big Thompson River, what had started out as the Forest Canyon branch, past the upstream end of Moraine Park, catching and releasing six- to ten-inch rainbows and brookies almost as fast as I could get my fly dry. Out in the meadow lower down, I knew that the fish would be wary, having learned their lesson from all the pressure they get. But up in woods, they were still learning, and I was having fun playing teacher.

It was what I'd been looking for when I moved to Colorado. Those bonefish in the Florida Keys were just too smart for me. They'd inspect the perfect imitation of a baby crab that I'd offered just where they were looking, and they'd turn their noses up with that "neener, neener" look of superiority that told me that I was just not in their league.

But these Rocky Mountain trout were the right amount of dumb.

And then, to my surprise, my phone buzzed. It was just my luck that the unpredictable cell-tower coverage in the Estes Valley happened to work at that particular spot in woods above the upper meadow, somehow. Maybe the signals were bouncing off that cliff face over there across the stream.

"Mac? It's Annette Trieri. How are you guys? Do you like it over there, now that you've had a chance to really get to know the place?" Annette and her husband Hal Weathers had been our closest friends when we were living on the other side of those mountains I could see at the head of the valley, over the Continental Divide in Grand County, on Colorado's Western Slope.

I noticed that my fly, a tan elk-hair caddis, size 18, was now affixed to the lip of a jumpy little trout. Fishing with one hand wasn't going to work, I could tell. Maybe, I thought, he'll spit it out. They can do that fairly easily with the barbless hooks I use.

“Pretty much, Annette. We’re finally getting comfortable. Sam seems to love it over here and I guess I do, too. You should pop over for dinner some afternoon this summer, while Trail Ridge Road is still open.”

“I imagine we will pretty soon, Mac. Listen, it’s a holiday weekend, so I’m covering a couple of districts, including the northern Front Range. And I got a call from the Larimer sheriff’s office. Are you available for a case?”

Besides being a good friend, Annette was a Deputy Director for the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and she had deputized me for some work we did together over on her side of the Divide when Sam and I lived over there. It suddenly dawned on me that there had been no term of appointment specified, and she had never asked for the shield back.

“Depends on where, I guess, Annette. Right now I’m standing in a stream in Moraine Park. It’s something of a miracle that my phone works, actually. And I don’t have my shield with me.” Where, I wondered, had I put the thing?

“Well, the case is over there on your side. Some hikers found a body, or maybe half a body, up on the west side of Twin Sisters Mountain. It sounds like the missing half may have been eaten. The hikers managed to call in the sheriff, and he’s asking for help. I’m busy with about five different things happening over here, and it would take me a quite a while to get there anyway.” Annette sounded a little breathless, something odd compared to her usual calm and professional comportment.

“Uh, OK. A hiker turned into a mountain lion’s breakfast or something? Why call you?” I knew from my conversations with Annette that the CBI usually got involved in only difficult or high-profile cases, and didn’t seem like mountain lion attacks would qualify.

“The circumstances, at least as they were related to me. I need you to get up to the site soonest. Where are you? I’ve got a high-altitude helo on the way, and I can tell them where to land. Just in case, I asked, and the Park Service people told me that there’s a helipad on Upper Beaver Meadows Road, wherever that is. Think you can find it? I’ll send them that way. And don’t worry about the shield for now—I’ll call the sheriff and let him know who you are and all.”

A helicopter? Must be more than just a big-cat attack, I thought.

“I think so. I remember seeing a sign for Upper Beaver Meadows out on the main road. Ah, and my phone probably won’t work after I start moving, so I’ll go find the helipad and call you from the air.”

I disconnected, released the still-hooked little trout—a seven-inch rainbow, pretty tired out at that point—and sloshed across the stream toward the road and my Jeep. About the time I made it to the far bank, I could hear the familiar thwack-thwack of an approaching helicopter in the distance. That sped me up some.

* * *

Finding the waiting helicopter was easy—its presence in the pastoral scenery of Upper Beaver Meadows, usually the domain of elk herds and wandering tourists, was obvious. The traffic was already getting jammed up by the time I reached it a few minutes later.

What was hard was finding a place to get me on the ground again, near the scene.

It was a short flight from the meadow just north of Moraine Park to the mountainside across the valley from Longs Peak and below the little unnamed summit to the south of Twin Sisters Peaks. I barely had time to call Annette and tell her I was on the way.

We circled a group of official-looking people several times, spooking a couple of the horses they had tied at the edge of a clearing, while we looked for a suitable landing site. The pilot finally sat the bird down about a half-mile to the south of the gathering, in a less-steep, treeless spot. I gave him a thumbs-up and climbed out; he waited until I cleared the rotor wash and took off again.

Shortly, a sheriff's deputy rode up, leading a rider-less horse. He looked so comfortable in the saddle that I decided he must have been a rodeo cowboy at one point, and his slight, wiry frame only added to that impression.

"Mac MacQuarrie? CBI?" He sounded hopeful and a little intimidated, so I didn't point out that random, middle-aged fly-fishers were unlikely to have been let off a helicopter in that particular location.

"That's me. And I'm glad to see you. I don't think I would have found my way to where you all are by myself." I managed to mount up with minimal loss of dignity, considering I still had on my waders, vest, and felt-soled boots. I wasn't really dressed for riding.

He wheeled his horse around, and I followed. "It's over this way, sir. Not a pretty thing, either. Frankly, I'm glad I got picked to come fetch you. I'm Deputy Aaron Smithy, by the way, Larimer County Sheriff's Department."

"Glad to meet you, Deputy Smithy. And what can you tell me? All I've heard is that a body's been found with some indications of a wild animal attack." I was glad he kept his horse at a slow walk, because the steep terrain and low branches everywhere made riding challenging.

"Sir, I don't know who told you that, but he gets the award for understatement of the year. I think you should see for yourself, rather than let me prejudice you, though. I'll say that those basic facts are correct. And I hope you have a strong stomach." He shook his head.

We picked our way northward across the steep side of the mountain, climbing a little in the process. Now and then we had to detour around a rock outcropping, and dodging aspen and lodgepole pine branches was just part of the routine.

It took about fifteen minutes for us to reach another less-steep, treeless spot on the mountainside, a sort of almost bench, on which a half-dozen people in uniforms were conducting a careful search of the ground. Little flags of various colors marked spots where one of them had found something, apparently. Smithy led me to the uphill end of the bench, to the edge of the trees where seven additional horses were tied. I wasn't paying too much attention to the people and horses, however, because an odd structure in the middle of the clearing had grabbed my attention.

Two lodgepole pine trunks, each about four inches in diameter and maybe fifteen feet long, had been stripped of their branches and fastened into a large X, the feet of which were set into the ground somehow so that the structure was standing up. The X was leaning back slightly, against a third, shorter, tree trunk that was providing a stabilizing third leg for the contraption. The intersection of the three logs appeared to be about six feet above the ground, but it wasn't possible for me to be precise right then, because my view of the intersection was obscured by something strapped onto the X, strapped with what turned out to be gray duct tape. The something appeared for all the world to be a rather bulky, legless body, arms taped to the upper legs of the X, torso and head completely wrapped in the same material, the duct tape, except for a cut-out where the eyes would be and what looked like a slit to breathe through. That, and the duct tape that dangled in tatters at the base of the torso, where the legs weren't, sent a shiver up my spine.

As the scene registered in my consciousness, I understood Deputy Smithy's comment about having a strong stomach. And when I put the scene together with what Annette had said about the victim having

been eaten, the horror of the situation almost made me lose my balance on the horse I was riding, along with my half-digested lunch.

Like I said, I've seen—and done, as far as that goes—some truly brutal things in my various assignments around the world, but this was way over the top for me.

Deputy Smithy was tying my horse as I dismounted, and when I turned around to face the meadow, I saw a large man in uniform wearing a drooping western moustache headed my way. His cowboy hat was pushed back on his head, and he was sweating.

“Mac MacQuarrie, I expect. Annette Trieri called me. I'm glad you're here. I'm Sheriff Brad Winchester, Larimer County. We've got us quite the deal here.”

“Sure looks like it, Sheriff, and I still don't really understand what it's all about. This remote location isn't helping any, is it?”

“Nope. My crime scene van is down by the highway, where the trailhead used to be, before they moved it, so we can process evidence as needed. But getting down there is something of an adventure.” He pulled a red bandana out of a hip pocket and mopped his face. “We're thinking that we'll gather everything up, package it somehow, and have it lifted out by helicopter. They can lower a line and winch it up.”

“No doubt your people have been careful, Sheriff, but what about before you all got here? Were things disturbed?”

“Well, the climbers who found all this said they didn't get out of the trees—they saw enough to scare the crap out of themselves and skedaddled. Fortunately, one of them had a GPS receiver and the presence of mind to get a fix, so they had a precise location for us.” He gestured over his shoulder toward the north. “They said they were climbing a rock formation back over there and saw an unusual number of birds circling, ravens and even a couple of vultures. So they contoured over here to investigate. And they called us right away. There are enough houses in the Tahosa Valley, along the Peak-to-Peak Highway down yonder, to have a cell phone tower, I guess.”

He paused and surveyed the scene. “And as far as ‘disturbed’ goes, well, those little flags you see represent various things. The red ones are bones, or bone fragments. The yellow ones are pieces of duct tape or clothes—it looks as if the vic was wearing jeans. And the blue ones are other things, including human footprints possibly left behind by the perps, maybe.”

“And it looks as if you haven't touched the victim. Yet.”

“Right. And I don't know who's going to draw that short straw. I'm thinking it would be best if we could just airlift that entire assembly to the lab, or at least into Estes, for processing.” He gestured toward the X with its gruesome cargo.

“Excellent idea. That bird that brought me in should be able to carry both the evidence package and that thing, too, I imagine. I wonder who that was?”

“That's the payoff question, of course. This whole setup is obviously carefully premeditated, and if the vic was alive and strapped to that thing, then left to the critters—by the way, we have lots of tracks out there, maybe coyotes, maybe something bigger—well, we're dealing with some real crazies.” He shook his head. “Not the sort of folks I want to have loose in my county, that's for sure.”

“Yeah, well, Colorado, especially the mountains, seems to have its share of whack-jobs, but you're right—we surely don't need this sort of thing. So, no one's touched the victim. How about looking closely enough to see, uh, well, what's left?” The thought of doing that made me glad it wasn't my job.

“Yeah, well, I checked that part out. Behind that dangling duct tape is the remains of a pelvis, with teeth marks on the exposed bones. It looks as if most of the intestines have been pulled out, which is consistent with what flesh has been eaten.” He coughed. “I almost tossed my cookies when I saw that. Never seen anything so awful, in nearly forty years in law enforcement.”

“I suppose that his legs were taped to the lower part of those logs, the way the arms are above, so those critters were able to eat their way up to where they couldn’t jump high enough to reach any more.” I shook my head to clear the picture. “Presumably, the vic died somewhere in the process, either from blood loss or shock. And he probably passed out fairly quickly. I remember reading something about how prey animals go into a sort of shock when the leopard, or whatever, grabs them, so their suffering isn’t what it might appear to be. I wonder if that happens with humans? I sure hope so, for this guy’s sake.”

I realized I was starting to babble, so I shut up.

“Yeah, well, that’s for sure. You can only hope he didn’t suffer too long.” Sheriff Winchester shook his head. “We’re going to need the CBI to help us clear this one, Mr. MacQuarrie. I hope you folks can come through.”

“Call me Mac, sheriff. And all I know is that I’m here, in Estes Park, I mean, and available. I’m just a part-timer, and I don’t know what CBI central has in mind for this one. But, yeah, I’d say this is one of those cases that the CBI ought to help with.” Little did I realize, at that point, how prescient that comment was.

* * *

Annette Trieri had told me, ’round about the time she deputized me, that the whole purpose of the CBI was to assist local and regional law enforcement in whatever ways they need. Her main assignment was working with the Grand County Sheriff, across those mountains I’d been staring at earlier, to help his office deal with the explosive growth that eastern Grand County had seen in recent years—and with the increasingly sophisticated violent crime that came with it.

She’d told me that her way of helping local law enforcement had started during her first assignment in the CBI office in Durango, where she learned quickly that the best approach was to stay in the background, let everyone do their jobs, make whatever suggestions seemed appropriate, and resist the temptation to take credit. It didn’t take me long to see the wisdom of this, and I decided to adopt it as my strategy in this case I fell into. After all, I wasn’t looking for a job, I just happened to be fly-fishing in the wrong place at the wrong time, meaning within cell phone range.

That’s why I spent the most of Labor Day afternoon trying to stay out of the way by hanging around the horses on the edge of that clearing up there on the west side of Twin Sisters Mountain. With nothing better to do, I made some phone calls.

“Sam? How’s the project?” She had left early that morning to sit on the north side of Deer Mountain and sketch the peaks of the Mummy Range. Given that her phone worked, she must have returned home.

“I got a good start, but I’ll have to go back, I think. I’m trying to do one mountain at a time, and there are so many. How’s the fishing?” Her minimalist style, which had succeeded so well in the Florida Keys and over in the Fraser Valley, looked like it would in Estes Park, too. Several galleries and up-scale shops were already sporting “Landscapes by Samantha Winslow” signs in their windows.

“Well, it was just fine. But I got sidetracked.” I filled her in without mentioning any of the gory details. “Right now, I’m standing on a hillside watching all the folks up here doing their jobs. I think I’ll

be riding down in a helicopter in a while, maybe a couple of hours. The situation is under control, I can explain it when I see you later.”

“You’ll be home in time for supper?”

“That’s my intention, for sure. See you later.”

After that, it seemed politic to call the boss.

“Annette? Mac. The helicopter and a horse got me to the scene, and I’m on top of things as much as I can be. Really, though, Sheriff Winchester and his people have it all under control.”

“So, what’s the back-story, Mac? Did I really need to ask you to go up there?”

“I think it’s wise for CBI to have a presence here, so, yeah, it was probably a good call. And it’s hard to be accurate, but it looks as if someone did something to get himself set out as bait for hungry carnivores, and it worked so well he turned into dinner. What’s left of the corpse is still wrapped up in duct tape, of all things, so we don’t have an ID. All we can say at this point is that he—and, really I don’t know that it was a ‘he,’ I’m just saying that—that he or she was probably obese. The sheriff is thinking about airlifting the body and what it’s tied to out for examination in a real lab, instead of on this mountainside.” I tried to think of what salient information she would like to hear, but there was so little that I was pretty stumped.

“What real lab? Does Brad have a facility in Fort Collins?”

“Not sure, although he mentioned Estes Park. I don’t think that he has a specific facility in mind, though. The logistics are going to be challenging, because it’s a sort of crucifixion, with a pretty big cross, except it’s a X.” As a newcomer, I wasn’t familiar with Larimer County enough to know whether the sheriff even had an office in Estes, let alone a forensics lab.

“I like the idea of keeping the investigation close to the site of the crime. Let me make a call or two and get back to you ... No, actually, I’ll call Brad. Keep your eyes peeled, Mac. This sounds like it may become a high-profile case. The media just love it when someone gets attacked by wild animals, even accidentally. They’ll be all over this one in a heartbeat.” There was a pause. “Say! I just had a thought. This sounds like it’s going to be a pretty unusual post-mortem. Do suppose George would be able to help? I don’t think he’s got much going just now.”

She was referring to a guy I’d met before we moved, George Neering, the medical examiner for the judicial district that included Grand and Jackson Counties. Although he was eccentric, he was well-respected state-wide.

“Excellent suggestion, Annette. Why don’t you pass it along to the sheriff when you call him?”

I disconnected and looked around the clearing. The ground search was completed, and the deputies who had been searching were now bagging the items they had flagged previously. I hadn’t seen it, being preoccupied on the phone, but I hoped that someone had taken pictures of the scene with all the flags before the bagging started. There probably wouldn’t be any patterns to the colors, but you could never know.

Sheriff Winchester was standing near the X-shaped contraption at the center of the clearing, conversing with Deputy Smithy. I walked over to them, being careful to avoid stepping near any of the flags.

“...so I’m thinking we should just hitch this thing up and haul it out of here with that helicopter.” Winchester pointed at one of the legs buried in the ground. “I can’t imagine that whoever did this sank these too deep. I bet that chopper could just pull ’em up.”

“Well, I don’t know, Sheriff. I mean, I could rig this thing with a couple of additional small tree-trunks so it would be stable—we lifted stranger things when I worked for the crane company, and I did helicopter lumber-jacking for a couple of summers—but you’ll have to ask the pilot if he’s willing to try to pull it loose. That sounds risky to me. But what do I know?” Smithy shrugged.

“Ah, I’ll just suggest that he grow a pair if he balks. That works every time.” The sheriff turned my way as I approached them, trying to ignore the remains on the X. “How you doing, Mac? OK?”

“Sure. I have to say, though, this is far and away the strangest thing I’ve ever been involved with, and I’ve had some strange ones, I’ll tell you.” I surveyed the mountainside as a way to keep my eyes off the X. “If you’re going to yank this out of the ground, maybe I’ll just ride down on a horse, if you have an extra one. But I thought I’d give you a heads up, Sheriff. I just talked with Annette Trieri, and she had this idea she’s going to call you about. I don’t know the medical examiner over this way, but she suggested bringing in George Neering. He’s a tad odd, but he’s just incredibly talented and has a huge range of experience.”

Winchester laughed. “George, yeah. He’s a character. But, you’re right, he’s the best. And I already suggested that to Lindon—that’s Lindon Hanks, our ME. He agreed and said he’d call George right away, so he’s probably already on his way over here. And we do happen to have an extra horse. Hope you’re up for some rough terrain, though.”

* * *

Two

A word to the wise: Don’t try to ride a horse, especially not down a steep, rock-and-forest-covered mountainside, while you’re wearing fly-fishing gear. The felt soles on the boots don’t hold the stirrups; the nylon covering on the outside of the neoprene waders slides around in the saddle; the gadgets hanging on the vest click and clack and jingle, making the horse nervous and spooky. Even if you like adventure in your life, find another way to get some.

To add insult to injury, neoprene doesn’t breathe well, so my waders were hot and sticky inside and stayed that way until I got home. I wound up with a nasty case of something resembling diaper rash. Afterward, I ran right out and bought new ones made from some high-tech material that breathes. I still don’t ride in them, though.

But I did make it down to the highway, finally. Sheriff Winchester assigned a deputy down there to take me back through town to my car, and I discovered that professional courtesy, or something of that nature, allowed sheriff’s patrol cars into the national park without the usual fee. It got me to thinking about where I might have put the CBI shield that Annette had given me the previous summer—maybe I thought, it could get me into the park for free. Sam and I had an annual pass, but only one. Earlier that day, I’d had to fork over the twenty clams to get in because Sam had taken our park pass up to the Deer Mountain trailhead with her in her pink VW bug.

As I had expected, she was back when I got home that evening, fussing about in the kitchen with a new recipe. A few months earlier, we had waited out the last big snowstorm of spring with several rented movies. The one about Julia Child and the lady with the blog had motivated Sam to try out the business of making all the recipes in that French cookbook, so I’d been eating exceptionally well for weeks. My job was to critique her results—a task that tested my meager diplomatic skills with some of

those recipes—and to pick out wine for whatever she was cooking. That evening, the first thing I had to do was to figure out what she was making.

“That looks like scallions in the sauté pan, but, um, I smell something else I can’t identify. Something different. What are you up to this time?” I was sniffing at things while leaning over the island on which the cook-top was at work on a couple of pots.

“That’s because this is just the white sauce without any flavorings yet. There’s nothing much to smell except butter and flour. You’ll recognize more ingredients when it bakes, probably.” She had her back to me, separating eggs over the sink. “I’m making a crab soufflé. Want to beat some egg whites?”

I couldn’t help myself. “Why? Have they been naughty?”

She stopped with the eggs, shook her head slowly, then turned and gave me one of Those Looks.

“Ha. Ha. Read up on it in Julia’s book there.” She nodded her head toward the thick volume on the counter. “Follow her instructions carefully, and the whites will be perfect.”

That’s how I came to be flailing away with a whisk at a copper bowl full of egg whites when my phone buzzed again. The process didn’t seem to be at a critical stage—the bowl’s contents were getting frothy, but they were still fairly runny—so I put down the whisk.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Brad Winchester, Mac. It looks like we’re going to need you and the CBI more than ever. We identified the remains.” He sounded more stressed than he had up on that mountainside.

“Fingerprints? Or what?”

“Fingerprints as verification. We got the duct tape off the head, and one of my people recognized his face. Sorry, wait one, OK?” There was a muffled conversation I couldn’t quite make out, but it lasted only a couple of seconds. “Anyway, then we ran the ’prints through the NCIC database and got a match. We’ve also put in an order for dental records, but the ’prints and the facial ID do it for me. It was Trevor Swent. Looks like his trial isn’t going to happen after all.”

“Trevor Swent? You mean that local philanthropist who’s in the papers all the time for endowing this or that? Really? Gotta say, Brad, that’s pretty strange. Seems like I remember he got indicted for some kind of child abuse thing recently, though. Could that have anything to do with it?”

Winchester agreed. “Yeah, I thought about that, too. The child abuse was my collar, because it was outside the Estes Park town limits—we picked him up down in Glen Haven one day. The kid’s identity is being carefully shielded, though, and even I don’t know who she is. And then that stuff about his sex club activity came out, which could be related as well.”

Sam was making “wrap it up” gestures and pointing at the egg whites. “Listen, Brad, I’m in the middle of something and I have to go, but I’ll call you later, OK? And, say, have you thought about how to handle the media and all? There’s going to be a firestorm. That always happens when wild animals are involved, and with Swent as the victim, it’ll be crazy.”

“I know. That’s our next big challenge, at least in the short term. Talk to you later, Mac.”

I was back to flailing when Sam asked, “Where have I heard the name Trevor Swent before?”

“Well, let’s see. We’ve lived here how long? Less than a year? I think I’ve seen his name in the local paper, often with a picture, at least a dozen times, pretty impressive given that the paper is out only twice a week. And there was his recent arrest.” I was glad to see that the egg whites were thickening, as my wrist was beginning to complain. “Something about contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that. He was taking smutty pictures of underage girls, or some such thing. At least that’s the charge. That’s what you were doing this afternoon? What was that about wild animals?” She was folding the egg yolks together with the contents of a carton of lump crab meat.

I gave her a sanitized version of our discovery on the mountainside.

“It was truly bizarre. Of all the people for that to happen to, Trevor Swent is just not someone I’d have guessed. How’s this?” I held the copper bowl her way, showing her the perfect egg-white peaks I’d managed to produce.

She approved and proceeded to assemble the parts of the soufflé while I watched and thought about wine.

“Wasn’t there some suggestion of a sex club thing, in the newspaper article?” She slid the soufflé dish into the oven.

“Well, you can’t believe everything you read, especially about this kind of stuff. But the *Denver Post* was saying that he liked S&M parties, and one went too far. Someone actually got injured or something.” I settled on a crisp, but slightly fruity, non-oaked French chardonnay that was already in the wine cooler and poured myself a taste to make sure it was in good shape. Was it just right? It turned out I needed another taste or two. Fortunately, we had more than one bottle of it.

The soufflé was perfect, the wine complemented it nicely, and, with a spinach salad and a loaf of artisan bread, we had yet another elegant French dinner. It occurred to me once again that I was going to have to get more exercise if Sam really intended to go through that entire cookbook.

She was nibbling on a final bit of bread, looking thoughtful. “Y’know, I think I remember one of my friends in Miami Beach talking about S&M parties down there. I never went to them, but other S&S girls did, on occasion. And I think I remember she mentioned the name Trevor Swent. Yeah. It’s an odd sort of name, and I’m pretty sure I heard used it a couple of times.”

When I met Sam, she had been a Miami Beach working girl using the pseudonym Dolly, along with an appropriate blonde wig, on contract to a shady outfit called Sun and Sand Escorts, S&S. The shadiness of Sun and Sand had meant that Sam’s “contract” was really more of an indentured servitude, enforced by the company’s goons. With the help of a squad of Navy SEALs I met on a case, I was able to liberate her from that situation, along with all of her co-workers, who showed their gratitude to the SEALs in various creative ways. Sam and I have been together ever since.

“I remember you had some oddball jobs with them—that party where you were a nude cocktail waitress, for example—but I hope you didn’t have to do S&M parties. That sounds dangerous.”

“No, I never did. But the stories I heard made it sound more like play-acting than real, you know, sadism. But who really knows? That girl who called herself Cindy Sweet, only she spelled it S-I-N-D-E-E, she came back from one of those parties one time and talked about something going on in a back room that she wasn’t part of, something more secret.” She shook the thought out of her head. “So, it’s pretty crowded downtown, but how about we go out for ice cream anyway? I didn’t get anything for dessert.”

Calories or no, I’m a sucker for ice cream cones on a hot summer evening, so we were going to be braving the crowds downtown.

* * *

The crowds and the ice cream kept us busy almost to ten, and I didn’t call Brad Winchester until Tuesday morning.

As the eastern gateway community for Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park is a popular destination during the summer. The weeks between Memorial Day and Labor Day, pretty much, see the town overflowing, and the transition to Fall throughout September and early October also attracts crowds. People come up from the Denver area metroplex for the day, especially on holiday weekends, and they come from all over the world to stay longer, either in accommodations in town, at the giant YMCA complex, or at one of the several camping areas in and around the national park and the nearby forests. Lines at the grocery and liquor stores are long, restaurants boom, and the downtown area labors under a nearly perpetual state of both traffic and pedestrian gridlock—and that’s not counting the occasional elk, or elk herd, wandering down the street. Throw those critters into the mix, and things become pretty ridiculous. Getting caught in an “elk jam” is just something we residents get used to.

But it’s actually refreshing, once in a while, to go downtown and mingle, as long as the intervals between those whiles were long enough. An advantage of living there is knowing where the one-way streets go and how to find parking. So Monday night we mingled with the tourists and ate ice cream.

Early Tuesday morning, I called the sheriff’s office and was told that he was already in Estes Park, at the temporary forensics lab that had been set up in a vacant building on West Moraine Avenue near Beaver Point. I got an address, but the person I talked to mentioned that the crime scene van was parked there, so I was sure to recognize it.

And I did. The hulk of the super-sized Winnebago camper van, converted to its new job and covered with official-looking graphics, took up several parking spots in the little lot out front. There was a hand-lettered sign taped to the building’s door with an access phone number, and my phone recognized it as the sheriff’s.

Although the outside of the building was spartan, that aluminum-siding, pre-fab look with no windows, on the inside it had been transformed into a modern crime-scene laboratory. One end was being used for the autopsy, and, inevitably, stray chemical odors floated about the entire space despite the humming ventilation fan. The other end had been laid out, using at least two dozen folding tables, as a reconstruction of the scene on the mountainside, down to a miniature X made out of popsicle sticks on one table, with bits and pieces of bone and cloth and other things, including the colored flags, scattered about the other various tables. The original, full-sized contraption was leaning against a wall. Brad Winchester was seated in the middle of it all in a complex of desks covered by computer monitors, and he looked up as I approached.

“Well, good morning, Mac. Hope you got rested up yesterday evening, because it’s just getting better and better on this end. As if there wasn’t enough other stuff to keep us busy.” He grinned through his big moustache, but I could see the stress behind the smile.

“It’s certainly looking better than yesterday, although I expect that’s not what you’re talking about. Any new developments?” I twitched my head in the direction of the autopsy setup.

“Yeah, well, some. Mostly, it’s what we expected, what I told you yesterday. But it turns out that there was bruising all over the remains, torso, arms, neck, even some on the head. George over there says that the vic got beat with something, probably a stick of some kind, after he was all taped up but before he died. Oops, excuse me for a minute.” Winchester’s phone had rung, so he picked it up.

Rather than eavesdrop on the sheriff, I walked over to talk with George Neering, who was absorbed in paperwork at another of the desks.

“George? Brad tells me you found some additional injuries on the victim.”

Neering, his long hair tied back in a ponytail, looked up from the paperwork and broke into a big smile. “Mac, dude! Far out! I didn’t know you were over this way, what’s happenin’, man?”

“Annette called me and asked if I could represent the CBI on this case. Sam and I moved over here last winter.” I worked my way around his desk to a side chair and turned it toward the end of the building with all the tables. I had noticed a large chest freezer in the autopsy end of the building, and I didn’t want to look at it or be reminded of its contents more than I was already.

“Oh, yeah, yeah, I remember she said something about you having moved. I dunno if I could manage it over here, though. It’s kinda crowded for my tastes, y’know? Anyway, yeah, we found hematomas, lots of them, all over him. No broken bones, though, the ones that were left, at least. Like he was used for a piñata or something, for quite a long time, probably. And of course he was bled out, but you’d expect that from the missing legs and so on. Oh, yeah, his vocal chords and his larynx were totally ruined, like he’d been screaming for a long time, probably. Gotta say, man, this is an awful way to die. Guy must of had some seriously negative karma going for him, or something, man.” An unreconstructed hippy, George was nevertheless the best in the business in the Rocky Mountain region.

“So far, we’re light on motive. He was arrested recently for an underage sex thing, and there’s a history of sex parties, but that doesn’t fit with how elaborate this whole setup was. Seems like someone, someone really evil, would have had to have been really, really pissed at him.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right, man. Like, why go to all these elaborate preparations and so on, just because your kid was involved with him? There must be something more. Maybe there’s layers. So, you know, maybe the beating was done by the kid’s dad and the rest was set up by someone with a more personal grudge. Someone looking for serious vengeance, like.” He shook his head, and his pony-tail waved about. “Anyway, it’s about a wrap for me, here. Annette called and said she’s got some car-crash bodies for me over on the other side, so I’ve gotta get going as soon as I finish with all this paper. Listen, man. You and Sam stop by and see me when you’re over my way sometime, right?”

I let George go back to the paperwork and returned to Brad Winchester’s desk. He was off the phone, staring into space thoughtfully.

“Well Mac, it looks like we’re going to have ‘help’.” He made quote marks in the air. “Turns out that Swent is a person of interest for the DEA in some kind of drugs thing that also includes something about federal bank fraud. So the Feds consider him their guy. That was a Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid, FBI, and he says he’s coming to take over. I guess I don’t know how to feel about that.”

I had to smile. “Relieved, maybe? If you’ve got a hint of that, go with it. I mean, he’ll take over anyway, no matter how you feel about it, so you might as well try to like it, right?”

He nodded. “Yep, that’s occurred to me. And something else did, too. I’m not sure exactly where we were yesterday relative to the national park boundary. The top part of Twin Sisters is in Rocky, and the boundary is a ways down the mountainside. So I think maybe this one belongs to the Park Service after all. And I guess they’d just call in the FBI. Let’s just hope that this Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid is more of a stand-up guy than he sounded like on the phone, at least if he wants anything from us.”

“Yeah, from me, too. I don’t know about CBI central, although I do know that Annette has little patience for FBI prima-donnas.” I scratched my head, something I tend to do when I’m thinking. “George agrees with my suspicion that this setup on the mountainside was just too elaborate to be related only to his recent arrest. I wonder what other skeletons there may be in Swent’s various closets?”

He looked up and nodded. “Right. There must be more somewhere. Well, I guess we’ll see just how good this Special Agent Reid is, won’t we?”

* * *

My years working in the Washington intelligence establishment had resulted in a wealth of contacts in that shady world, and one of my recent jobs for them—the one in South Florida where I'd met Sam—had put me in touch with the highest levels of the administration. It's quite a thrill to get a phone call on which a melodic voice says "Please hold for the President of the United States," let me tell you. And because that job had been about as successful as it could have been, I had plenty of friends in high places.

Maybe it's time, I thought, to call in a favor or two. I found an empty desk and started making phone calls.

Those phone calls probably explained what happened when Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid showed up later that morning. Tall, thin, patrician-looking, he sneered down his nose at us and started in with quite the attitude, the one that FBI agents are notorious for, but then his pocket played a little tune. He pulled out his phone.

I could only guess who it was from the one side of the conversation that Brad Winchester and I heard.

"Yes? ... Who? The Director? Of course I'll take it. ... Hello, sir. ... Yes sir. ... You got a call from *who*? ... Of course, sir, I'll do my best. ... Yes sir ... Yes sir." As he carefully and deliberately put his phone away, I could tell he was doing some serious thinking.

"Sheriff, Mr. MacQuarrie, let's start over, shall we? I've just learned some things that suggest I ought to re-boot this whole conversation." He managed a weak smile.

I decided to take pity on the poor schmuck and rescue him. "That'll be fine, Agent Reid. Let me say, though, that both Sheriff Winchester and I know that this is appropriately your case, because it's pretty clear that the remains were found within the Rocky Mountain National Park boundary, on federal lands. That wasn't obvious at the time, but we've been able to pinpoint the site more closely today. Besides, I understand that Swent is a person of interest for the DEA or something."

I held up my hand to forestall Reid's response. "Now, Sheriff Winchester has certain responsibilities to the people of Larimer County, and I have responsibilities to the people of Colorado. So we need to be involved, at least with respect to information flow. But it's your case, and you get credit for whatever comes along. And you can be sure we'll both share any information we develop with you."

I didn't tell him that I had my fingers crossed during that last statement, so my little speech worked. By the time I was finished, he was falling all over himself with gratitude. Winchester made him copies of all the paperwork we could find, and, having just arrived in town, Reid hustled out to find himself a place to stay. He was going to need some luck, given how full the town was, but I wasn't wishing him any.

"So," I watched the door close behind Reid, wondering if it would actually hit him in the ass, like I'd been thinking about, "Maybe that'll calm him down a bit. And he probably doesn't know that I was lying about sharing all of our information."

"You and I think along the same lines, Mac." Winchester smiled. "Now, who the hell could that be?"

The desk phone turned out to have Annette on the other end, so Winchester put her on the speaker. We filled her in about George's autopsy findings and the FBI's involvement. And she had news for us.

"I'm not there on site, but I have some resources over this way, serious computer horsepower. One thing Hal's people have been doing at his institute is working on new search techniques, some project for the Google people. Something about how to implement searches on these super-fast computer chips

that Hal's institute has. Plus, of course, there's that secure access you set up while you were here, remember, Mac?"

I did. The supercomputer at Hal's institute, the Middle Park Advanced Research Center, had been able to simulate in exquisite detail a wildfire that killed two dozen people, opening the door to Annette's clearing that case.

"Anyway, I talked the Swent business over with Hal at dinner yesterday, and he set up a search across the entire network, including the classified part, last night. It came up with all sorts of interesting, new stuff, but I can't get it to you without a secure connection of some kind." I could tell she was asking a question without really asking it.

"Now that the weekend is over, maybe things will calm down a little for you. Couldn't you just drive it over? We can probably rustle up a safe." I looked at Winchester. "I expect that Brad here has the same clearance that your sheriff does, right? Is that good enough?"

Winchester was nodding. "Right, Annette, I've got the same credentials that Fran Schmidt does, you, too, probably. Unless something that I don't know about got the ante upped for you."

She was evasive, and I knew why: last summer, I had been the ante-upperer for her clearance. "Fran's clearance would be sufficient for this, I think. Maybe that's the easiest thing to do, just zip over your way. I'll fetch Hal and head right out. How about a late lunch?"

"On me, Annette." I told her where to find the temporary forensics lab, and she promised to show up in a couple of hours. I called Sam to let her know that Hal and Annette would be in town for lunch, and she promised to join us up the street at the Sun Deck Restaurant.

There being no Vaults R Us store in the little mountain town of Estes Park, Winchester and I had to work at finding an appropriate place to put whatever classified material Annette was bringing us. In the end, he called down to his main office in Fort Collins, and just about the time Hal and Annette pulled up in Annette's CBI vehicle, a couple of burley guys were unloading a weighty strongbox from a pickup truck for us.

"How's Trail Ridge Road today?" I knew Hal was an impatient driver and a worse passenger, so I couldn't resist yanking his chain. "Nice view of the backs of big lumbering camper vans?"

He grinned and nodded the sheriff's way. "Now I know why these guys in uniforms drive around with all those lights on the tops of their cars. Helps with traffic."

We figured out where to put and how to use the strongbox, stashed a thick folder Annette was carrying in it, and she, Hal, and I headed on foot up the street toward the Sun Deck, hoping for a nice view of Flattop Mountain and Hallett Peak.

Sam and I had become completely spoiled by the bewildering choices of restaurants when we were first together in southeast Florida, and then in the Keys we had to go almost cold turkey by comparison. That experience served us well in Winter Park, where there were a few good choices, but only a few. So when we moved to Estes Park, we had lost the habit of eating out—which was one of the reasons Sam had decided to tackle *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. All this is a round-about way of saying that I'd never been to the Sun Deck before.

Connected to a nondescript motel, it sat diagonally across from the grocery store at Beaver Point. The crush of the weekend was over, and we were able to get a window table, with almost the view I had in mind. Flattop was screened by a foothill, but the peaks to the south of Hallett looked down at us.

Because it wasn't especially busy, the server was hovering about trying to be helpful. To make him go away, we ordered lunch—I got Sam one of her favorites, a mixed salad. And because they offered it,

I added the pecan smoked trout appetizer, as she had grown to like smoked fish when we lived in the Keys.

Just as the server walked off, we saw Sam headed our way down Marys Lake Road—she was hard to miss in that Mary-Kay-pink VW Beetle of hers, the one she had when I met her in Florida.

A gift from long-gone client, someone I didn't want to know about, it was her pride and joy, and, if I closed my eyes, I really couldn't fault it. Up in the Fraser Valley, she'd put studded winter tires on it, and it did just fine in all the the snow and ice. With the intercooled turbocharger, it had way more get-up-and-go than my Jeep at the 7500' or so where Estes Park sat, and the leather seats were lounge-chair comfortable.

But that leather was *pink*, along with the dashboard, the carpet, the convertible top, and the body all the way down to the bumpers. Even the wheels were pink. I was afraid to open the hood for fear that I'd find a pink intercooler in there.

Trouble was, I couldn't really insist that she get rid of it—first, it was all hers, and second, I had a car of my own that had followed me from Florida, an even more impractical car at that, a restored and tweaked up '66 Shelby Cobra, the racing version.

At least my Cobra was a traditional racing red. And was it ever fun up on the Peak-to-Peak Highway—in the summer. But the Cobra was useless in any kind of nasty weather, so in the winter I kept it in a rented storage unit and drove my Jeep.

The other thing I kept was my mouth shut, tight, about that pink VW, having learned that the alternative just wasn't worth the heartburn.

“Annette! Hal! What a great surprise to see you here!” Sam waltzed up to our table, bubbling over. “What brings you over the mountains?”

After the three of them traded hugs all around, Sam said, “Oh, I bet you're over here because of that business with the guy who got eaten by coyotes, or whatever, right? Trevor Swent. Mac told me about it, and I've been doing a lot of thinking. I may know something that could help.”

* * *

Three

“So, anyway, I was never close friends with Sindee Sweet, but, you know, we all worked for the same people so we talked with each other a lot.” Sam was packing away her smoked trout – salad combination with gusto while she talked about her time on Miami Beach. “She had these great stories about those parties that Trevor Swent hired her for—she got to dress up in a leather dominatrix outfit and swat people with a sort of whip, but it was made out of felt strips so it didn't hurt. She said it was an easy job, really, because she wasn't involved in any of the sex. She just bossed people around with her boobs hanging out.”

I could tell that Annette was trying to keep a straight face and doing her own dominatrix thing with kicks under the table to keep Hal from bursting into laughter.

“But Sindee also mentioned other stuff that she wasn't part of, stuff going on in private rooms. She wouldn't talk about it a lot, but from what I heard it sounded like the real deal, S&M-wise, where people get hurt. She used the words “nipples” and “needles” together one time, for example, and she overheard

people wondering about whether some of the girls were really of age. And she said that Swent would come and go from those private rooms throughout the party.”

“Where were these parties, Sam? Miami?” The “real deal” thing must have grabbed Annette’s interest.

“No, not just Miami. All over. Sinee told me she flew to San Diego once, Denver, and I think New Orleans. And she thought there were other parties she wasn’t part of.” Sam looked thoughtful. “Maybe the Denver parties could be a link to what happened here?”

Annette nodded. “Maybe indeed. It would sure be helpful if we could talk with Ms. Sweet, or whatever her name really is.”

“I never heard her real name. And Sun and Sand isn’t around to ask, thanks to Mac and his friends.” Sam patted my hand to let me know she wasn’t upset about this state of affairs.

“Sounds like a dead end, then.” Annette drummed her fingers on the table, annoyed, and the server took it as a signal and came over to inquire about dessert. We didn’t want any, and there were people waiting for tables, so we asked for the check.

But I had good news in the process. “Maybe not, Annette. When Sun and Sand was, um, closed down, I was there, and it happens that I liberated the contents of the office safe and stashed everything carefully away. Well, everything except for some cash, which turned up as an anonymous donation at a battered women’s shelter in Miami-Dade County, strangely enough. But there are all sorts of records. I’ve never really looked at them.”

“We need to examine those records, then. And you need to see what I brought over, those documents in that lock-box down the street.” Annette looked at me. “Mac? Where are these Sun and Sand records?”

They were at home, so Sam shuttled me back there to get them and then delivered me to the temporary forensics lab before heading across town for an appointment. Annette had sent Hal off fly-fishing for a while, and she was in the middle of a briefing by Sheriff Winchester when I got there.

“...and that’s about all we’ve got, Annette. The business about all the bruising adds another dimension to the whole thing, of course.”

“Is there any way to trace the origin of this tape?” Annette was holding up a piece of the duct tape that had been wrapped around Swent’s body, what was left of it.

“We’re doing that, but I doubt we’ll find out. If it’s a standard brand, like 3M, you can get it just about anywhere. I mean, there are at least four places here in Estes Park that sell it, for example. But lots of hardware and home improvement stores have those checkout scanners for inventory control, so we’re going to track down all recent purchases in the region. It’ll be a long list, I bet.”

“Well, sheriff, if you run across any large purchases, lots of rolls, by anyone who isn’t a contractor, be sure to let us know, OK?” She looked my way. “And Mac’s back, so let’s get that package out of the lock-box, shall we?”

It turned out to be a copy of Trevor Swent’s FBI file. That Annette was able to get her hands on it surprised me, and it showed me that I wasn’t the only one with connections in Washington.

“Aside from the fact that it’s an FBI file, meaning it’s not supposed to be public information, there are only a few truly classified documents in here. But we still have to treat it with care. We wouldn’t want our new friend Oglethorpe to know we have it, would we?” Annette was shuffling through the papers. “I looked through it all on the way over while Hal drove. It seems that the feds were paying attention to Swent for drugs and some strange bank thing. He had a big-time coke habit and was buying

in bulk, partly for his parties and partly for himself. As a result, he was into serious debt to one of the Mexican cartels.”

No wonder Hal was unconcerned about the trip over Trail Ridge Road, I thought. He’d been *driving* the car with the light bar on top.

But I decided to stick to business. “So Swent had some seriously bad people mad at him. That helps with the motive business.”

Annette nodded. “And there’s more. This information corroborates what Sam was telling us, and it goes a step farther. There are notes that tie a couple of deaths to those parties, one in Denver late last winter and one in San Diego a few years ago. We’ll want to follow up on the Denver one, at least, to see if whoever died might have left relatives bent on revenge, or something like that.”

Winchester chuckled. “Man, I’ve heard of people with baggage, but this guy takes the cake. I guess all that stuff he’s been doing up here in Estes, the philanthropy, that was meant as atonement or something. A smokescreen, maybe.”

“But, as they say on TV—wait, there’s even more. I haven’t even got to the classified stuff yet, Brad.” Annette was grinning. “That’s information that was passed over to the FBI through national security channels. Counterintelligence. I’m not sure of the protocols, but it looks as if it came from CIA or NSA. Isn’t that your old turf, Mac?”

“Mmm. I’m supposed to say ‘no comment’ right about now. It’s curious that the information would have ended up in an FBI file, though. Those folks don’t generally play well together.”

“It’s mostly related to Swent’s use of overseas bank accounts to squirrel away his fortune, so maybe the spooks didn’t think it was worth their effort. But there’s also one additional tidbit of interest. Swent worked at the Federal Reserve for about a year, some time back. And the file has something about deals he was making for Iraqi antiquities, back during Saddam’s downfall. Seems he was trading banking secrets for them, or something like that. But there’s only one reference to this, and it’s cryptic.”

Winchester had stopped being amused and was now shaking his head. “So we’ve got a victim who was a sex pervert involved in things, including maybe things with children, that maybe got people killed, and who was a drug addict in debt to a Mexican cartel, and who was a traitor. And I bet he didn’t use his turn signals, either. Christ!”

“Well, just remember, Brad, we’ve decided that he died on federal property, in the national park. So it’s the FBI’s problem now. You’re off the hook.” I couldn’t help but think, though, that my connections to the CBI and those no-comment agencies in Washington were going to keep me on it.

* * *

Sam and I conspired to keep Hal and Annette in town for an early supper at our house, and they were treated to a dish based on one of Julia Child’s wonderful recipes, a poached salmon *en crouete* with a delicate sauce that involved raspberries. We ate on the patio, with hummingbirds zipping around trying to claim exclusive rights to our feeders and the late afternoon sunlight chasing the shadows on the crags up on the mountainside to the south. I could tell that the state of domestic bliss that Sam and I had slipped into pleased our guests.

Annette, Brad Winchester, and I hadn’t had time to get to the S&S records earlier, so I’d brought them home with me. That evening, I tackled them along with the on-line crime databases as well as a couple that required the use of my special encrypted communications protocols.

About the only thing of interest in the S&S records, unfortunately, was a phone list of their girls, what looked to be home numbers. Sam was in there, as was a Sindee Sweet. I made a mental note to try that number the next day.

But the other databases were more productive. It turned out that the person in Denver whom the FBI had already tied, loosely, to one of Swent's parties there was an Amanda Purdy, barely seventeen, a runaway who was supposed to be living at a half-way house for girls on the streets. Her parents lived about 55 miles south of Estes Park on the Peak-to-Peak Highway, in Gilpin County a few miles north of Black Hawk. The gruesome details in the autopsy report made it clear that, shortly before her death, Amanda had been involved in no-holds-barred S&M activities, including ones with needles, but the actual cause of death was an overdose of heroin. Her body had been found two days after, and on the opposite side of town from, Swent's party.

Swent's indebtedness to the Chávez clan of Ciudad Juárez was documented at several on-line locations, the most interesting one being at the Department of Homeland Security. In addition to drugs, a significant source of Chávez income was derived from smuggling people into the U.S., and DHS was watching them closely. The clan had a reputation for extreme violence at the drop of a hat, and several cases were detailed in which they had made examples of enemies or people who owed them something, or others whom they just didn't like very much. Juan Chávez ruled the clan with an iron fist, a bloody one at that, from a mansion in the countryside west of Juárez.

It was getting late by the time I got to the question of the Iraqi antiquities. That didn't seem to be a high-priority lead at first, but then I discovered, using a link to an organization I can't possibly name, that the people in Iraq whom Swent was dealing with were both vicious and patient. I had dealt with them myself on a couple of occasions on my assignments in the region, and they were not people you wanted to cross. The fact that this shadowy group was known to wait for a decade or more to extract its revenge for slights real or perceived was not lost on me, then or now. If Swent's payments in the form of banking secrets had turned out to be of no value, then he faced risks of a sort that would make the Mexican cartel seem like a bunch of nannies.

So we were swimming in possibilities, in terms of potential suspects with a motive to kill Swent.

It was after midnight when I'd finished pulling all of this together, so I waited to call Annette until Wednesday morning after finding out that Sindee Sweet's old phone number had been disconnected—she had disappeared.

But Annette still saw my information as progress.

"This gives us plenty of places to start, no? Lots of people and groups 'of interest,' as we say." She paused just long enough for me to agree.

"I'd definitely like to have us, probably the CBI western suburbs people, look into the Gilpin County connection, the Purdy family. Mac, have you got suggestions about what to do with the Iraq connection and with the cartel?" She was on a roll.

"Isn't Juárez just across the border from El Paso? And that's where I-25 starts, right? So those folks have a superhighway straight from home to Denver, with a convenient stop in Albuquerque. Also Santa Fe, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs." I wasn't quite sure what this all meant, though. "Maybe there's, like, a Chávez office or something in Denver that the Denver PD knows about, or maybe CBI central for that matter. And, about the Iraq connection, I'll have to dig a bit more into the Washington databases I have access to."

"Sounds like a plan, Mac. Let's stay in touch." She disconnected.

While I was on the phone with Annette, I'd heard Sam making noises in the kitchen, and I found her sitting with a cup of tea, staring out the dining room window at the mountain to the south—Twin Sisters, as a matter of fact. Her contemplation, unusual for her on bright and beautiful summer mornings such as that one, was obvious. I walked up behind her and commenced to rub her shoulders.

“Mmm. That feels good. Thanks—I need it.”

“You look like you're far away somewhere.”

“Oh, just thinking about the past. But we sure had a pleasant evening with Hal and Annette, didn't we?” She perked up a bit.

“You knocked their socks off with that salmon. Some of those recipes are just wonderful.”

Her giggle told me she was perking up more. “Is that supposed to imply that some aren't? How about calf's liver for dinner? Or those sweetbreads I told you about?”

“Well, you know, with this big case and all I may have to work late, way past dinnertime. But go ahead and make 'em for yourself, if you want.” I worked my thumbs under her shoulder blades and smoothed the muscles downward. “What's bothering you about the past, anyway?”

She took a deep breath and let it out in a huge sigh. “It never seems to go away. Like yesterday, at lunch.”

I made sure to let out a sigh as well, and held the pause for a minute. “Hal and Annette know about your past, of course, but they're not concerned about it. I don't think anyone else knows, not around here, at least. And you're so successful with the painting and sketches that you're creating a new persona entirely.”

“I just worry that it'll embarrass you.”

“Me? Not a chance. I've got so many skeletons in my closet that nothing can embarrass me.” I kissed her ear.

* * *

One lesson I'd learned from my years working with the various three-letter agencies in Washington was about the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Trouble is, I have a short memory.

But it came back to me when I got the call from Washington later that morning. It seemed that my phone calls to pull in favors and have rank pulled on Oglethorpe Reid was going to haunt me.

“Mac? Henry here.”

I recognized the voice of my erstwhile contact in the White House, someone very highly placed who had always used a pseudonym with me. My normal agency handler, Bill Petersen, had been killed on that South Florida post-retirement case I'd met Sam on. And then I'd had a disastrous stint with a replacement, after which Henry got the permanent assignment.

“How are things out in the mountains?”

“Fine, until yesterday. I seem to have got myself tangled up in a pretty strange murder case out here.”

“I heard, and that's why I'm calling. See, some folks at the very top of the food chain here have concerns.”

My personal radar began setting off alarms. “Uh, concerns about me, or what?”

“No, no, not about you. In fact, your involvement has these people quite relieved. You’re golden. But it seems there’s a lot of sensitivity here about this Trevor Swent business. Something I don’t quite understand about family connections, something in two parts. One, they want everything to be as hush-hush as possible. Two, they want to make sure that FBI doesn’t pull any stunts.” Henry paused long enough for me to understand how serious he was. “We’d like to know if you think that Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid is withholding information from you and the other local investigators, now or any time in the future.”

I knew better than to withhold information myself. “I presume you know that I’m deputized by the Colorado Bureau of Investigation on this matter?”

“That’s why we want to know about the information flow. The case, overall, has federal implications, but we know that it’s really a Colorado matter. That sleight-of-hand you and the sheriff are trying to pull about the murder’s having happened on federal lands isn’t persuasive to everyone. And we want it handled as locally as possible to keep it as low profile as possible. ‘We’, of course, are me and the people up the food chain above me.”

“Is Reid going to be called off?”

“Can’t do that. It would raise questions and the overall profile of the thing. Like I said, hush-hush.”

This time it was my turn to pause.

“Hmm. Well, I certainly want to cooperate. But I have to say, for me to do this right, meaning hush-hush and all, I need to know the precise reason that your higher-ups are so worried. Without knowing that, I could easily put my foot in it accidentally. Right?”

He paused again. “Yeah, I understand. I’ll have to get back to you.” And he disconnected.

Sam was in the middle of her morning Yoga routine, so I went for a walk to think about it all. We live in a subdivision on one side of a little valley, and the street crosses the valley into the subdivision on the other side, making a nice walking loop that includes quite a bit of elevation change. I figured I could think and work off some fancy-French-food calories, if I walked fast enough, at the same time.

I knew from previous experience that Henry trusted me, and I trusted him. That meant that there was indeed significant concern about this Swent thing in the White House. And it also meant that Henry would find out for me what the concern was all about. His comment about the “top of the food chain” made it quite interesting. I knew of only two people higher on the food chain than Henry, the guys who lived in that big house at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and the other one at 1 Observatory Circle.

And although Henry was straight on a business level, that didn’t necessarily mean that I was going to be getting all of the best information as soon as it was available. He had his own agenda, and I was, and always had been, something of a pawn in the game. Our mutual trust went only so far.

But I was already a move ahead of him. Naturally it would be to the advantage of the concerned individuals in the White House for this not to be a federal case. But, whether they were persuaded or not, it sure looked as if it was, because the GPS position called in by that group of climbers was definitely within the national park boundary. Of course, the exact coordinates were on the edge of that clearing up there on the side of Twin Sisters Mountain, and the park boundary did run through that clearing. So where were the climbers? At the highest point of the clearing? That might make a local case. At its mid-point? Maybe it really would be a federal case. We were going to have to find the caller and ask—but he’d called in using a throw-away cell phone that wasn’t being answered.

That, in itself, was interesting, because it opened the possibility that the group of climbers was involved with the whole setup.

In any case, manipulating facts to serve the interests of high-placed federal officials wasn't going to be in anyone's best interests, even if they wished it so.

From my own perspective, and Sheriff Winchester's, too, it seemed like a good idea for the FBI to continue to think of this as a federal case. Then they'd do all of the hard work involved, and we could sit back and play peanut gallery.

I'd taken my cell phone on my walk, in case Sam should miss the note I left and call me. So when it buzzed, as I was slogging up a hill and breathing hard, I thought it was her. But it turned out to be Henry again.

"Mac? I think I've got what you need. It seems that a not-quite-proximate relative of a very highly placed federal official—an elected federal official, mind you, but that's all I can say—was involved in Trevor Swent's, um, flamboyant social circles and has wound up institutionalized at an unfortunately young age as a result. A female relative."

Between breaths, I asked "What's 'not-quite-proximate' mean? First cousin? Or what? And is it a relative by marriage or by blood?"

"What and marriage. Gotta go. You know how to reach me, right?" And he disconnected before I could answer.

By the time I had huffed and puffed my way to the top of the hill, I'd decided on a worst case: a niece of the President's wife had been photographed in a compromising situation, or maybe just so identified, at one of Swent's S&M parties and was now in prison or, possibly worse, a psychiatric hospital. My, my. Wouldn't *that* provide fodder for the tabloids and the internet bottom-feeders!

No one, not even a politician's wife, should have to go through that, I decided.

But as much as it might be patriotic to save the First Lady the embarrassment of having her family's tragedies aired in public, the Swent killing was just not something we could sweep under the rug. Whoever the psychopath was who set that up, we needed to get him. Or her, or them.

And I needed to get to work on it, which I vowed to do as soon as I walked back up the other side of the valley to home.

As I was breathing hard on that chore, my phone buzzed again. Why, I wondered, does this happen when I'm breathing too hard to talk?

Annette's voice was excited. "Mac? Maybe this will be easier than we thought. I called some folks I know in Denver and found out about Amanda Purdy's family. It seems her father is pretty well known in Gilpin County for his outspoken politics, which are well to the right of Rush Limbaugh's, and his religious views, which are extremely fundamentalist. He works at all sorts of odd jobs for cash, construction mostly, and he guides big-game hunts in the fall. But the most interesting thing, and this is what's possibly relevant, is that he keeps a pack of wolf hybrids—breeders call them wolfdogs—Purdy has a license and everything. They're all half wild, I'm told. It sounds like simply going onto his property is pretty dangerous because of them."

* * *

Annette had been busy, doing things I guess I should have been doing. Except, without her contacts, I really didn't have anywhere to start the way she did. I alternated fretting and rationalizing while she filled me in.

I'd reached home, and, because of the flat section on the final stretch, caught my breath just as Annette wound down.

"Wolf hybrids? Hybridized with what, I wonder."

She snickered. "Probably anything they want. But, given the nature of Swent's remains, it sure sounds suspicious."

"It does. And it just occurred to me that maybe executing a search warrant at Purdy's place would be a good job for the FBI. Seems like Special Agent Reid would be the perfect person to check into things up there." This didn't square in my mind with my White House contact Henry's information, but that wasn't my main concern just then.

This time her laugh was just a bit mean. "Excellent idea! And, you know, maybe it would be a good idea for them to collect some wolfdog scat, because there might be relevant DNA, like, Swent's, no?"

That certainly brought me up short—literally. I stopped walking and just stood there, at that point in the middle of my driveway. The technical issues associated with her suggestion that some of Swent's DNA might have survived the wolfdogs' digestive processes, combined with the vision of Oglethorpe Reid doing pooper-scooper duty, were just about all my comfortably retired mind could handle.

I decided to tackle the technical issues first. "Uh, DNA in wolfdog crap? Wouldn't it be the wolfdogs' DNA that you find? I remember reading about someone trying to identify condominium dog owners who didn't pick up after their pets using that kind of DNA testing. But that was to identify the, uh, origin of the dog shit. Wouldn't DNA that's consumed be digested into oblivion? Oh! I just thought of something—that wolfdog crap should also be tested for duct tape shreds, seems like."

"Duct tape! Right! But you may be onto something about the DNA, Mac. I'll check into it. Meanwhile, let's get Special Agent Reid busy with a shovel and a bunch of plastic bags, shall we? Maybe I could even go so far as to recommend he wear plastic gloves."

Not for the first time, I decided I was glad that Annette and I were on the same side.

"Let's hope we can make that happen." I thought about how to relate my conversations with Henry to her. "Oh, and I need to tell you that there seems to be some pressure from high up in Washington to diminish the FBI role in all this."

I gave her a very sanitized version of my call from Washington.

"Really? They think that they can slough all this off on us? Let the hicks from the sticks take the fall for whatever strange things are going on? Really?" Annette was so mad she was amused, it seemed.

"He said that there's no way to call off the FBI completely without raising a lot of red flags, and they sure don't want to do that. But they do expect us to assume jurisdiction. It sounded as if they'd actually figure out how to move the Park boundary if necessary, retroactively."

"Do we have any way of knowing precisely where the murder took place; I mean, exactly where you found the body and that contraption you described? Did anyone get an exact fix?" She was thinking just what I had been thinking.

"I didn't, but let me find out if the sheriff's people did."

Down on Moraine Avenue, at Sheriff Winchester's impromptu crime lab, things were different—the lab was now an empty room, for the most part. The Sheriff was nowhere to be seen; instead, Deputy Aaron Smithy seemed to be in charge of the operation. He looked up from a computer screen as I walked across the open space, my footsteps making little echoes.

“Mr. MacQuarrie! Good to see you sir. I hope you're not looking for any of the physical evidence we had here.”

I looked around, puzzled. “No, no. But what happened, anyway?”

“Well, when the FBI thinks it owns a case, well, I guess they own it. Everything got packaged up and put on a truck headed for Denver.”

“Hmm. What about that safe we had here? Did that go to Denver, too?”

“Safe? Oh, yeah, the one we brought up yesterday. No, the sheriff took that with him last night. He said he didn't feel that it was secure enough just sitting here, even though it weighs a couple hundred pounds. All that's left is this computer, which I managed to keep out of their hands. I told them it had no evidence on it, which is true, and that it's our main communications tool up here, which is also true. They, I mean, the FBI guys, they looked suspicious but let it stay. I was just composing a report about this all.”

At least, I thought, we still have Swent's file and the feds don't know it.

“So, I don't suppose you'd happen to know how to contact Special Agent Reid?” I'd lost the card he'd given me.

“He thought there might be questions, so he gave me a card.” And Deputy Smithy pulled it from his shirt pocket. “They left, oh, about 45 minutes ago, so maybe they're out of the mountains and can get a cell signal by now.”

He was right.

“FBI, Special Agent Reid.”

“Reid, I thought we had an agreement about cooperation on this case. This is Mac MacQuarrie, CBI.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie. Right, I thought I'd hear from you. And we do have an agreement about cooperation, don't get your shorts all twisted. However, we also had overriding concerns about the security at that makeshift crime lab that the Larimer sheriff set up. The last thing any of us needs is for the evidence to be compromised somehow. We have a fully secure facility, and, if I may say, a much more advanced crime lab in Denver. With all due respect to Sheriff Winchester. The evidence will be safe there, and you and the sheriff will have full access.”

I couldn't help but recognize the sense of this. The building I was standing in wasn't very secure at all, and it was in a busy tourist area, with all sorts of people coming and going all the time.

Reid continued. “And I just got off a call with one of your CBI colleagues, an Annette Trieri. She understood our concerns and agrees with the transfer. She said you'd be able to smooth things over with the sheriff's office.”

Thanks so much, Annette, I thought. But I kept that to myself.

“Ah,” I said. “She must have called you about the Purdy wolfdog pack, then.”

“That's correct. ‘Wolfdog.’ I've never heard that description before. Anyway, we've started a search warrant process on the basis of her information, some of which we already knew. Purdy, in fact, is a person of interest for us for other reasons. We're hoping to execute the warrant this afternoon.”

“Well, I don’t want to intrude, but do you suppose it would be useful to have a CBI observer? It surely would be a sign of our cooperation on this whole thing, wouldn’t it?”

The pause went on long enough that I decided he was taking the request seriously.

“I guess that’s a good idea, although I’m a little concerned about safety issues. Ms. Trieri suggested that there’s some danger about entering that property, what with those wolf hybrids—er, wolfdogs—wandering around and all.”

“You must have already thought of a strategy to deal with that.” A little flattery now and then can be extremely helpful in greasing wheels, I knew.

“I really haven’t had time to figure it all out, but it’s on my mind, let me tell you. Any suggestions?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you could put a bunch of Denver animal control officers on contract and get them to do the control part while you do the search part. What would they use? Nets? Drugs?”

Reid laughed. “Both, I hope. To tell the truth, I’m actually more of a cat person.”

* * *

The FBI can be ham-handed and seriously secretive, but they certainly can get things done when they’re motivated. I had to wonder what Henry and his White House higher-ups were going to think. At least, I thought, the lead about Purdy’s possible involvement kept the spotlight on Colorado matters. At the same time, Amanda Purdy’s name was sure to come up, and that could lead to media interest in other Swent victims. I needed to know more about the specifics of the White House connection. Even if my assumptions were correct, they needed verifying.

I thought about this and other things—how beautiful the Colorado mountains were, how to get Sam to quit worrying about her past, whether Purdy was really as strong a suspect as Annette seemed to believe—as I drove south along the Peak-to-Peak Highway toward Black Hawk. I was to meet the FBI team at one of the casino parking lots there, by the main stoplight, and we were all going to caravan to Purdy’s place. Having never been to Black Hawk, I wondered if “the main stoplight” was going to be a useful landmark, but I wasn’t going to let that spoil the drive.

It was a beautiful, blue-sky summer day without the threat of the usual afternoon thunderstorms, and I had the top off the Jeep. Given the drive, I’d been tempted to take the Cobra, but I knew there could be some challenging, unpaved roads to get to Purdy’s. So I just cruised and listened to the Wrangler’s off-road tires sing on the pavement.

The “main stoplight” location turned out to be obvious, particularly given the crowd of suspicious-looking characters hanging out in the parking lot there. Several individuals wore padded jumpsuits, which I took to mean that Reid had succeeded in recruiting some animal control specialists. Some of the others wore camouflage fatigues. All-in-all, there were nearly two dozen people standing around trying unsuccessfully to look nondescript. I pulled in and parked, and because none of them knew me, I was instantly the object of a group stare-down.

“Is Special Agent Reid here? I’m the Colorado Bureau of Investigation observer on this little shindig, Mac MacQuarrie.” I held my shield—which I’d finally remembered the location of—up for all to see. That broke the ice a bit.

One of the guys wearing a jacket with “FBI” stenciled on it sidled over. “Not yet, Mr. MacQuarrie. We’re expecting him momentarily. Do you know what this is about? We have some rather odd orders.”

“Well, I know what it’s partly about, although Agent Reid might have a broader agenda. We’re going to execute a search warrant to obtain possible evidence related to the Trevor Swent murder a

couple of days ago. He was partially eaten, and this guy Purdy has a motive related to his daughter—and he also has a pack of wolf hybrids, what are called ‘wolfdogs’. We, or you, the FBI team, are going to check for evidence in the wolfdog crap up there, duct tape and DNA.”

“Oh.” He looked crestfallen and heaved a mighty sigh. “Well, that explains the supplies they gave me, a package of tongue depressors and a bunch of plastic bags. Some of us are going to be busy, I guess.”

I had figured that Reid would delegate the pooper-scooper duty. “I’m puzzled, though. I guess I figured the digestive process would destroy Swent’s DNA.”

“Well, some, yes. But not all. A number of studies document that. There should be enough to tell if there’s human DNA there and, if so, whether it’s Swent’s. And if there’s really duct tape, well, that’ll be obvious.” He grinned. “We just need a shitload of the stuff, is all. Uh, pun intended.”

“I guess that’s why they pay you FBI guys the big bucks.” I noticed a car headed up the hill toward the spotlight. “Maybe that’s Agent Reid.”

“Whoever it is, he’s got a tail.” And the agent was right—following the first car I’d noticed was a police cruiser, lights flashing angrily.

It slid into the parking lot close after the first car, and its occupant, short and rather round, wearing a tan uniform with a western hat, scurried to the door of the car it was following. From that car emerged Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid, with his FBI shield prominently displayed. The uniform stepped back and removed his hand from his still-holstered sidearm. The rest of us clustered around to watch the fun.

“I don’t know who the hell you are, fella, but in my county you either stay within the speed limit or you use emergency lights!” The “my county,” along with the uniform, suggested to me that this might be the Gilpin County Sheriff.

I decided some diplomacy would be in order, so I stepped toward the two. “Sheriff? Excuse me. I’m Mac MacQuarrie, with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. And I’m glad to see you here. As it says on his ID there, this is Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid, FBI. And the rest of these folks are the team he’s assembled to execute a search warrant up the road a piece. I’m here as a CBI observer, and your presence as a county law enforcement observer would be, I think, most welcome. Isn’t that right, Agent Reid?”

Reid looked sharply at me, but finally nodded. Although the uniform was dripping suspicion, I could see that he relaxed a bit.

And he was full of questions, short ones. “FBI? CBI? Search warrant? Who for?”

“I’ll explain on the way, if you’ll ride with me, Sheriff. And I think Special Agent Reid will provide some insight about now. Looks like a briefing coming up.” I herded the uniform toward the group that was clustering around Reid.

Reid’s voice amped up a notch. “OK, men. You’ve probably heard only part of the story on this. We’re here to execute a search warrant on the property of an Elias Purdy, rural Gilpin County. It’s up the road a few miles and then off on a county road a couple of additional unpaved miles. I’m told the property of interest is securely fenced, probably with a locked gate, and inhabited by a family of two plus at least a half-dozen semi-wild wolf hybrids, I understand they’re called ‘wolfdogs’. The animals will be the responsibility of the animal control people who have graciously agreed to help us.”

He waved at the guys in the padded suits. “I hope those suits won’t be needed, gentlemen, but I’m glad to see you’ve got the protection, just in case.”

He continued to the crowd. “Now, when the wolfdogs are subdued our team will split in two. Half of you have orders to take samples of the wolfdog feces, for laboratory analysis. The rest of us will search the house for other pertinent evidence. That sub-team will also maintain contact with whatever residents we find to keep them both safe and out of the way of the search. Such restraint as needed is authorized.

“I have the telephone number for the house, and when we’re all assembled on location, I’ll call and announce our intentions. My hope is that the wolfdogs will be in a separate enclosure instead of just wandering the property. I...uh, yes?”

Someone in the crowd had raised a hand. “Won’t the phone call alert them to destroy evidence and let these wolfdogs loose?”

“There’s no way they can destroy all of the evidence, because there’s just too much of it. Wolfdog feces, I mean. Other evidence, well, we’ll take our chances. And if he lets the wolfdogs loose after the call, that’ll tell us where things stand, won’t it? We’re planning to subdue what wolfdogs we need to subdue using nets and drugs, with lethal force only as a last resort. Any other questions?” Reid looked around and saw none. “Well, then, let’s saddle up. I’ve got a GPS navigation system with the location programmed in, so I’ll take the lead.”

The navigation system must have been old and in need of map updates or something, though.

The Gilpin County Sheriff, a rather nice fellow who introduced himself to me as Harve Little, and I followed the caravan of official-looking dark sedans up the hill north on the Peak-to-Peak and then west on a county road.

“What the hell?” Sheriff Little looked quite confused. “This isn’t the way to Purdy’s place. This road dead-ends about five miles in, and only the first couple of miles are graded. The rest is going to give those cars ahead of us more than they can handle.”

I had to laugh. “That’s why it’s so nice to be ‘observers’ on this little caper, Sheriff. We can just sit back and enjoy the scenery and the confusion.”

There must have been a rain shower that morning or maybe overnight, so what would have been a dusty ride was really quite pleasant. And sure enough, after about two miles of graded gravel, the road went all to hell, turning into a low-grade jeep trail. I suppose that most all-wheel-drive SUV-type vehicles, and some others like Subaru Outbacks, could have handled it, but the various official FBI sedans, loaded down with a full complement of adults and equipment, were just out of their depth. Reid gamely led the caravan about another mile in before the entire group came to a halt, brake lights blinking and then turning solid red all along the line ahead of us. We didn’t have a radio, but the others must have, because after about five minutes, the backup lights on the car just ahead of me flashed on.

Sheriff Little was laughing quietly and shaking his head. “Don’t know if you noticed, Mac, but there’s no way for these fools to turn around ’til a mile or so back there, where the road grader turned around.”

I swiveled to look at what was behind me. “Yeah. But I bet I can.”

The two-door Jeep Wrangler I’d bought when Sam and I had settled in Colorado was the Rubicon version, the baddest off-road capability that just about any car company offered. And the guy who’d owned it before me had added all sorts of bells and whistles. It was far, far more vehicle, in terms of off-roading, than I’d ever need, I knew, but that gave me the confidence to deal with the situation at the back of that caravan.

I fiddled with levers and switches until the Jeep was in low-range with all the axles locked, and I backed down that excuse for a road until there was a space between the trees to my left. Then I backed

up the little bluff that was pretending to be the shoulder and into that space, and set the parking brake so that the sheriff and I could watch the fun.

The various sedans bounced and bumped bottom and scraped things as they slowly backed by us down the hill. I'm sure the drivers, to a man, were all wondering why it was so much more difficult going backward down than it had been going forward on the way up—and up had clearly been hard enough for most of them.

When the last car in line finally arrived at our vantage point, it stopped, pulled forward a few feet to get out of my way and stopped again, and Agent Reid got out. He kicked the left rear tire, which was flat, and made his way to us, lugging a bulky day pack.

“Gentlemen, I've about used up all of my x-rated vocabulary on this little cluster-fuck, and I feel like a goddamned idiot. Do you suppose I could ride with you?”

* * *

The Sheriff and I did admirable jobs of keeping our faces straight and our mouths shut as we three, with Reid jammed into the Wrangler's tiny back seat, slowly followed the backward caravan down the hill. Of the dozen cars that had made the climb up, only nine made it down—in addition to Reid's flat-tire casualty, there was a ripped-out oil pan with an associated blown engine, and a broken suspension. Except for Reid's, each of those cars had to be pushed by hand off to the side as far as possible so that the others could squeeze by. There were also four instances of cars' becoming stuck in deceptively deep mud puddles, and they had to be pushed out by hand as well. All-in-all, it was a good day to be an observer, especially an observer sitting in a Wrangler Rubicon.

When everyone was finally assembled, tired, muddy, and not a little cranky, at the upper end of the graded gravel road and pointed in the right direction, Agent Reid held another briefing, this one with the benefit of some advice from Sheriff Little.

“Well, men, my apologies. Thanks to the miracle of GPS navigation technology, combined with a mapping function that doesn't know its ass from a hole in the ground, we're not on the correct road. As you've no doubt guessed. Sheriff Little,” Reid nodded toward the sheriff and me, standing off to the side, “kindly set me straight, and he'll be leading us to where we need to be. We're quite a bit behind schedule, but the sheriff tells me it's not far, and there's plenty of daylight left to get our search finished.”

With Reid and Sheriff Little in my Jeep, I was at the head of the parade down the graded county road, and glad to be in front. The additional couple of hours in the bright sun had dried out the road surface, and I was raising quite the dust plume. The surviving sedans, I was sure, all had their windows up and their air conditioners set to recirculate.

When I reached the Peak-to-Peak, Sheriff Little had me turn left and then, after about a half mile, right onto another county road, oiled gravel this time. He turned toward Reid in the back seat.

“Same county road number, just a different part of it. I expect that your GPS system didn't really know how the house numbering goes, so it sent you west instead of east.”

A sigh of despair was the only response.

After about three miles of winding and up and down through little valleys, the Sheriff had me turn right again, this time onto graded gravel.

“Now, Purdy's place is just over that rise up there, and we might think about stopping soon and sending someone up there to scout things out. Before we go spilling over the top, I mean. Last time I

was up here, they saw me coming down the other side of this hill and were waiting for me.” Harve Little clearly knew the terrain.

Just like in those old horse-soldier movies, I raised my hand, palm flat, as I slowed to a stop just before the crest of the little hill, and the caravan eased to the sides of the road and came to a halt behind me. Reid hopped out, walked back down the line of cars, and came back accompanied by one of the guys in camouflage.

“...I’ve got some binoculars, and you can probably get a good view from that little clump of trees up there.” Reid was pointing off to the right of the hill’s crest.

While Reid was digging through his pack, the other guy, who reminded me of the Army Rangers I’ve known, introduced himself. “Sheriff, I’m Rick Jepperson, FBI. I wonder if you can tell me what I should expect to see over there?”

The sheriff looked impressed—I imagine he thought Reid’s headstrong behavior was typical of all federal agents. “Well, let’s see. Last time I was up here, there was a fenced compound about two hundred yards down the hill, with several buildings including a house facing this way. It’s cleared enough that you can see the front windows from the top of the rise. And there was a big pickup and a battered SUV of some kind, maybe an old Ford Explorer, in the yard in front of the house. His and hers, I suppose.”

As Jepperson made his way up the little hill toward the trees, I asked Reid, “Agent Reid, I don’t suppose you have an extra radio in that goodie bag of yours? It would be useful if the sheriff and I knew what was going on.”

As Reid was digging in his pack again, the sheriff nudged me and said quietly, “Good thinking. I want to hear this.”

Reid kept digging and finally came up with a radio, fiddled with it and handed it to us just in time for us to hear “Jepperson here. It looks just like the Sheriff described it. Fenced compound with several buildings, a house in a clearing facing this way. No vehicles at all, though. Whoa! What’s that? They’ve got some damned big dogs walking around in there, inside that fence.”

Reid keyed a switch on his radio. “Reid here. Those must be the wolfdogs. Are they fenced off separately from the main compound? And how many are there?”

“I see two—no, wait, there’s two more lying down. So I see four. And they’re just in the yard there, not in a separate cage or anything.”

Sheriff Little clarified matters. “Yeah, they’ve got the run of the place. Like I said, when I was last here they saw me coming, Purdy and wolfdogs both. But the time I got to that gate down there, Elias was on the porch with a shotgun and those wolfdogs were at the gate, growling and looking hungry. But if there’s no cars, nobody’s home, probably, at least nobody human.”

Reid scratched his head and keyed his radio again. “OK, Rick, come on back, quietly, though. And all hands, listen up. All but the last car, no, make it two cars, will drive down to the compound gate and get turned around. The last two cars, I want a road block just on the other side of the hill here, so that if anyone shows up, they can be detained here. I don’t know how you animal control folks feel, but if those wolfdogs line up at the gate like the sheriff just described to me, maybe the easiest and safest thing to do is to tranquilize them right there. Comments?”

“Ah, Agent Reid?” The voice was tentative. “It would be better procedure to observe their behavior before we make any final decision about that. Our tranquilizers are pretty safe for the animals, but not as safe as not using them at all.”

Reid frowned. “Yeah, well, I’m more concerned about our safety. Let’s roll.”

After all the fooling around with the detour and the tension of scouting the wolfdogs and all, the rest was pretty anti-climactic. The caravan rolled over the hill, and, being first, we could see four large animals in the yard setting up a ruckus—and they were quickly joined by two more. The six of them lined up at the gate and commenced to act about as fierce as I’ve seen any canid act. That persuaded the animal control personnel of the need for tranquilizers, and by the time that one of Reid’s team members had the gate unlocked, using the expedient of a lock-pick set, the six wolfdogs were snoozing peacefully.

Then the sheriff and I watched and tried to stay alert while the FBI teams searched the house and wandered around the yard doing their laboratory-grade pooper-scooper duty—scoop, bag, label, over and over. It occurred to me somewhere in there that I’d never seen pay grade 13 or 14 federal civil servants so preoccupied with shit before. The leader of the team kept shouting instructions about getting both fresh as well as days-old samples, and about making sure there was no cross contamination.

After about an hour and half, they were finished. Everyone left the compound, the animal control crew administered some kind of antidote and scurried out the gate, and, after fiddling with the padlock again, an FBI guy locked things up.

Reid looked satisfied. “Maybe, if we’re lucky, the Purdys will be grateful that we didn’t toss the place. And I’d say we finally deserve some luck.”

Harve Little could only shake his head in disbelief.

* * *

Five

The rain began on Thursday morning.

Now, summertime means thunderstorms over the Colorado Front Range—it took me only a few weeks to figure that out. Nearly every day, fluffy little cumulus clouds build over the high peaks of the Continental Divide, grow into thunderheads, start growling at whoever cares to listen, and roll out over the plains by late afternoon after ruining various picnics and other outdoor activities up in the foothills.

Unless you're needing the excitement of possible lightning strikes, you start early in the morning to climb those high peaks.

But this rain was different. The low cloud deck was the first hint of that, and the winds from the east pushing the moisture in those clouds up the slopes of the foothills was the second. And it was drizzle, steady and fairly hard as drizzle goes, rather than the brief, fast-moving showers from the thunderstorms. Still, rain in this normally parched part of the mountains is always welcome, especially in the summer, as it helps keep the landscape green and the threat of wildfires down.

I checked the Weather Service radar loop and found that a large area of precipitation was covering most of the Front Range between Denver and Wyoming and not moving much of anywhere—it was looking like it was going to rain all day. What I didn't know at the time was that it would also rain for the next four days, dumping well over a foot of water on the east side of the Front Range and causing one of the worst flooding events in history. All I knew at that point was that it would be soggy going if I had to work outside. And it was a good thing that the FBI guys had managed to get those wolfdog crap samples yesterday, I thought, chuckling at the memory.

By the time I'd taken Harve Little back to his car, listened to a long debriefing speech by Special Agent Ogelthorpe Reid, and driven the hour plus back to Estes Park, it was getting late, too late for east coast telephone contacts. Henry, I knew, was available to me any time, but there was no real reason to disturb his evening. But computers never sleep, so I was able to spend my evening working on some other possibilities for the Swent killing. Elias Purdy and his wolfdogs seemed to be too good to be true.

Because my time with the three-letter agencies had involved increasingly sensitive security clearances and computer access privileges, I had, at one point, been able to log in to virtually any federal computer anywhere. My official retirement had put that on hold, but it was all restored when I started working with Henry. It was the DEA computers that I was interested in.

Thursday morning, I called Annette to fill her in. After we shared yet another set of jokes about FBI agents and pooper-scooper duty, she changed the subject.

"Is it raining over there?" From the west side of the Front Range, it was often hard to tell how the east-side weather was behaving.

"Yeah, drizzle. What the locals call 'upslop'."

"Hmm. Well, listen. Hal's guys at MPARC have been doing regional-scale weather simulations as part of their tests of the new computer equipment they keep getting. He told me last night that all of their weather models agree that the rain you're seeing now is going to last for several days. There's a good chance for some serious flooding over there. The official Weather Service forecast is saying that, too, but Hal's simulations paint a much worse picture. You and Sam need to be prepared, whatever that means." She sounded worried.

"You mean that we left Florida to get away from hurricanes and now we've got floods to contend with? What's next? Plagues of locusts and frogs?"

"More likely forest fires, but not this time. Look up 'Big Thompson Flood' on the internet. There was a stalled rainstorm in 1976 that flooded the canyon and killed, oh, something like 120 people. Hal says this looks like a more wide-spread event, covering the whole northern Front Range. Who knows what could happen?"

"Is it raining over your way?"

"Some, but the computers don't have us getting nearly as much." She paused and took a breath. "Anyway, I thought I should tell you. So what else is going on with this Swent business? I've been thinking about Purdy and his wolfdogs, and I'm having trouble believing that he could have set up that crucifixion."

"On top of that, Annette, there's the issue of the wolfdogs themselves. I saw them yesterday, and they're big. Tall, as dogs go. It's occurred to me that if they had eaten Swent, more of him would have been eaten. I think whatever was out there was smaller." Now it was my turn to pause and take a breath. "We'll see what comes back from the FBI lab, but in the meantime I've been doing research in a different direction. I spent several hours last night and this morning poking around in the DEA's computer system. They have quite a bit of interesting information about the Chávez cartel, the group that Swent owed big bucks to. And some stuff about Swent himself, as well. I'll send it over to you."

"Any preview?"

I thought for a few seconds. "Chávez and his gang are highly diversified, apparently. They started with the usual drugs, cocaine, grass, and have moved in various other directions that include all of the other drugs as well as smuggling people and other commodities including weapons. DEA estimates they net over a billion a year. Dollars, not pesos."

“Sounds like Swent is small potatoes, even if he was seriously in debt to them.”

“Yeah. There wasn’t any indication of how much he owed, but there was commentary about how Chávez and company don’t hesitate to make examples of people. Also—and this is especially weird—Chávez himself is apparently something of a Puritan, sex-wise. He doesn’t allow his organization to deal with prostitution or any form of white slavery. Or anything like that. So he probably had a special enmity for Swent’s libertine ways.” I had to laugh. “I ran across a very recent, confidential memo suggesting that Chávez is responsible for Swent’s murder that also specifically warned against sharing this information with the FBI.”

“Nothing like Washington infighting, is there?” I envisioned Annette shaking her head in amusement.

* * *

With the rain pattering down outside the study window, I encrypted the Chávez information and sent it off to Annette. Then I spent an hour or so exploring the third possible Swent antagonist I’d discovered, the group associated with the Iraqi antiquities scam he’d pulled. Much to my surprise, though, I ran into an off-limits filesystem, one that even my strongest credentials wouldn’t get me access to.

I called Henry, but all I got was his voice mail. “Henry, I’ve run into an unexpected roadblock with this Swent business. Maybe you can help. Give me a call, please, when you have a minute. Thanks.”

At some level I understand that people like Henry can’t possibly be available to me at my every whim, but, maybe because I’ve become an old geezer, it still makes me grumpy when they’re not. So I was sitting there, staring grumpily at my cell phone, when it startled me by ringing, that odd electronic tweedle that’s always a surprise. I must have turned on the ringer accidentally.

“Hello?”

“Mac? Brad Winchester. You up to braving this rain for a search through Trevor Swent’s house? We got a warrant for anything and everything.”

“No shit? You going to bring in the FBI on this?”

“Well, I expect that Special Agent Reid and his guys are pretty tired out from their expedition yesterday. I thought I’d bring them into the loop after we do the search.”

“Tell me where and when, and I’ll be there, Brad. Good work.”

It took me a bit longer than I would have liked, as I’d had the top off the Jeep the day before—and today that just wouldn’t do. So I put on the winter top, a composite affair that was almost like a hardtop. At least, I knew, it was passably waterproof. And I had to let Sam know what was going on and reassure her that this wasn’t anything dangerous for me. Still, I managed to arrive at Swent’s address before Winchester and his crew.

From what I’d learned from my computer-file snooping, it seemed as if Trevor Swent had been teetering on the billionaire threshold at the time he died. Subtract out the debts to the Chávez cartel, and maybe he was just in the very highest nine figures, but even so, that’s way up in the financial stratosphere from my point of view.

So it was a bit of a shock to me that his residence was so modest, relatively speaking.

Now, “modest” for a billionaire is rather different from the rest of us. I mean, his place would have fetched, maybe, somewhere near the low seven figures on the market—a tenth of a percent or two of his net worth. My house, on the other hand, represented probably 30-40% of my (plus Sam’s) net worth—a

figure not too far out of line with most folks, according to the magazine articles I've read, at least folks who aren't hugely in debt.

And what was more surprising, Swent didn't have other residences. Apparently, when he traveled, he liked to stay at four-star hotels instead of having houses and condos and villas scattered around the world like others of his means.

Still, for me, a mega-buck house was something to see. Swent's was on the north side of Estes Park, snug up against a hillside amid five acres of pines and rocks, looking out at both Lake Estes and the high peaks of the northern Front Range, including Mount Meeker and Longs Peak, Hallett Peak and Flattop Mountain, and all of the foothills of Rocky Mountain National Park that led up to those highest places. The sunsets must have been remarkable.

The house itself, perhaps 5,000 square feet on three levels, was in keeping with a kind of modesty—as I would discover, it included good-quality appliances and furnishings, but nothing that you couldn't find at regional, high-end retailers, nothing truly exotic. Its design was typical of such houses—a boat-front wall of windows on the west side under a steeply peaked roof, with a deck shading the lowest level, which included the garage stalls. A green metal roof with multiple chimneys covered the whole.

Brad Winchester's team soon arrived and went to work like army ants, invading every space, poking into every corner, and gleefully carrying out anything that they could reasonably justify as germane to the investigation. I took the other approach, standing back and trying to assimilate the bigger picture. And what I assimilated was puzzling.

There seemed to be missing spaces—at least a garage stall's worth on the ground floor, a bedroom's worth on the main floor, and a big, walk-in closet's worth on the second floor. What, I wondered, was that about?

I made such sketches as I could manage and brought it all to Brad's attention about the time that things were wrapping up.

"What? Missing square feet? Why didn't we figure that out?" Brad turned to his chief investigator. "You got anything about this?"

"Uh, no sir. We've been concentrating on what's in what we know about, not what's not there that we don't know about. And we've had our hands full. Sir."

The sheriff grinned. "You don't know what you don't know, eh? Where have I heard that before? Let's do a space inventory and make sure that we've found all the rooms and closets and so forth."

It took another hour or so to discover the hidden storage rooms.

Originally, I suppose, the two bottom-floor garage stalls had run the entire depth of the house, separated by a row of 6"x6" posts supporting one of the main joists in the floor above. Each stall had been deep enough to hold two vehicles, so the house actually had a four-car garage, never mind the nuisance factor of having to jockey cars around to get the inner two out. Somewhere along the way, about half of the inner two spots had been walled off, with a workbench and tool pegboard installed on the garage side. As we saw it, the house had a two-car garage and a small workshop. Very neat and convenient.

I was the one who noticed that the workbench had casters on its legs and that there was evidence—faint tracks on the epoxy-finished floor—that the workbench was moved once in a while. So we moved it and discovered that the pegboard slid on a track to reveal a doorway to the missing quarter or so of the original garage. This room was full of small wooden crates, a miniature version of that government warehouse scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

On the main floor above, a modest wine cellar off the kitchen turned out to have a swing-out wall of wine racks, behind which was another room that was filled with file cabinets and a large safe, the legs of which were bolted to the floor with tamper-proof hardware.

And on the top floor, a guest bedroom must have originally had a walk-in closet, because at the back of the standard closet, which was paneled with cedar, was a hidden door that opened to another closet. This held all sorts of odd costumes and paraphernalia, which we decided were related to Swent's S&M fetish, plus an impressive collection of pornographic videos and magazines—many of which seemed to be oriented toward underage girls.

With what I'd learned from my internet searches, these new discoveries solidified my opinion. Trevor Swent may have been locally famous for his philanthropy, but in real life he was a secretive pervert without a shred of morals or integrity.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to think that he deserved to die that way.

Brad Winchester made a phone call that I overheard—he was summoning a team of specialists to get the safe open. And then we started on the crates in the storeroom on the bottom floor. We might well have been unpacking a museum, but instead it was Swent's stash of Iraqi antiquities, the ones that he'd supposedly traded banking secrets for during his year at the Federal Reserve. We found statues large and small made of both gold and beautifully carved marble and other stone along with no small amount of jewelry. To liquidate the invaluable collection would require its sale, bit by bit, to shady private collectors, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. One of the medium-sized statues alone would have paid off his debt to the Chávez cartel—which made Swent a financial moron on top of his other failings.

This was emphasized for me when Brad Winchester's guys finally got the safe open. That took a couple of hours—first they had to get themselves up to Estes Park, and then they had to get into the thing.

While they were fiddling with an electronic safe-cracking gizmo, Brad and I browsed through the file cabinets in storage room with the safe. What at first appeared to be a random jumble of papers turned out to be a reverse chronological filing system—older stuff behind newer stuff—without any other organization by topic. Tax records, including large annual packets each year around the April time frame, were mixed in with credit card receipts, monthly statements for various household bills, insurance policies, and, oddly, personal correspondence. But they were all in careful, reverse chronological order.

When the door to the safe finally swung open, we were greeted by piles of cash, bills of various denominations carefully sorted and stacked, and dozens of plastic bags containing a white powder.

“Any bets on what that stuff is?” Brad looked around the room but didn't get any takers from among his deputies.

“Probably just laundry detergent, don't ya think?” At least I was able to break the tension a bit.

* * *

On my way across town toward home, it seemed like it was raining harder, but maybe that was just my imagination, as it was getting dark. I'd called Sam a couple of times during the afternoon to let her know our progress, and she made us a late supper, another new recipe from that French cookbook, Julia's version of French onion soup. It was the perfect thing for a rainy evening.

“I'll bet you're glad that you didn't have to get involved in another outdoors search today.” Sam's eyes were twinkling.

“That’s for sure. And, say, I talked with Annette. She says hello.” I tried not to burn my mouth on a piece of scalding hot cheese. “And she also said that this rain may last for several days, and we should be prepared for flooding. Hal’s institute has been making weather forecasts, it sounds like.”

“What does that mean, ‘be prepared for flooding’?” She looked puzzled.

“That, my dear, is a very good question. I guess we could get some water in the crawl space down there,” I thumped the floor with my foot, “but I can’t imagine what else. Well. Except the usual craziness at the grocery store and so on. And gasoline. Like when there’s a hurricane lurking, you know, everyone stocks up on everything in a panic.”

“How ironic. I mean, we moved out here to get away from hurricanes.”

“Right. Well, there’s always something, I guess. At least we’re not in any sort of flood plain or anything like that. I expect that whatever happens, it’ll mostly be an inconvenience for us. But I wouldn’t want to live down in the canyon just now. These little trout streams have a history of getting nasty when there’s too much water.”

Her eyes got big. “I saw an exhibit at the library about that flood back in, uh, 1976 I guess it was. That was horrible.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“So, what were you doing all afternoon, anyway?”

“Well, I guess it was a kind of scavenger hunt.” I proceeded to fill her in about our search of Trevor Swent’s house. “The thing is, though, I’m not sure we learned anything that will help us figure out who set him up and got him killed.”

“But it sounds as if you got confirmation of all the stuff you found about him online, right?”

“Well, some. His stash of museum-quality pieces from the Middle East would seem to validate those suspicions about him. And there was a huge amount of what’s probably cocaine, plus all sorts of porn and sex toys. So various people probably had plenty of reason to hate him.” I polished off my soup and sighed. “That, sweetie, was great. Much better than anything I’ve had at a restaurant. You can make it any time you want.”

“It’s all in the stock. Are you interested in dessert?”

But before I could answer, my phone rang—I checked, and it was Henry. “Oh, sorry, I really need to talk to this guy. I left him a message this morning.”

I pushed the special red button to secure the call. “Henry? Thanks for calling back.”

“Sorry that it took so long, Mac. It’s been one of those days. I did have time to check out what you called about, though, that Federal Reserve computer you couldn’t get into. I’m sending you some new credentials by encrypted email, the secure route.”

“Excellent, thanks. And it’s all the more important for what we found this afternoon.” I filled him in on the search of Swent’s house including the stash of relics. “Now, as far as I know, you’re the only federal official who knows about this. The FBI wasn’t involved with the search. I hope that’s what you meant by ‘hush-hush’ when we talked about all this.”

“It is, but this, plus the drugs you mentioned just now, means that things just got ratcheted up a notch or two. We’re going to have to get Treasury involved, along with the DEA. Probably some kind of emergency interagency task force. Got any further leads on possible suspects?”

So I told him about the search of the Purdy compound, and we shared a laugh about the foibles of the FBI team. “But, I’ve gotta say, Henry, I don’t think that this guy is a credible suspect, even if he

thinks his daughter was killed at Swent's party. He certainly couldn't have pulled that crucifixion off by himself. And his wolfdogs would have eaten more of Swent, probably."

"So, you're saying that this is probably going to go beyond your part of the Colorado mountains? Should I pass that information up the food chain here?" Henry sounded discouraged.

"It would probably be a good idea to prepare the First...uh, whoever has concerns about this for some national-scale publicity. Right now, the other main possibilities are a Mexican drug lord and the Iraqis whom Swent swindled, assuming that's what happened. Hence my interest in that computer."

Henry let loose with a few choice expletives. "This is the last thing I need to deal with right now, Mac. If you can work some magic and just make it go away, I'd be eternally grateful. And I'm sure you can imagine how you could benefit from that."

I decided to gamble. "It would help me, Henry, if I knew exactly who's worried about this and why. You can be sure this isn't something I'd ever share with the FBI or any other agency. But I'm trying to understand who this guy's enemies could be, and that means both passive and active ones."

"Huh?"

"Active ones I know about include the drug lord and the Iraqis, maybe. Passive ones are people who have a stake of some kind in Swent's activities, recent activities especially. If—how did you put it?—a 'proximate relative' of a high-up elected official was involved with Swent somehow, then that official has a stake in Swent's activities. I'm not suggesting that official is even a person of interest here, but I am suggesting that I've got to know what it's all about so I can put the pieces of this thing together. Right?"

The pause went on for a long time, and I couldn't decide if that was good or bad.

Finally he sighed. "All right. You talk about this to anyone, and my ass is fried, meaning yours is, too. Got it?"

"Got it."

"OK. Remember that the Vice-President is on her second marriage?"

"Uh, yeah...ah, didn't her first husband die of cancer or something? I don't remember his name, though."

"Correct, and you can look it up. So he had a sister, her married name is Stacy Riverton, and she and her husband have a daughter named Lauren. Lauren is presently in a vegetative state in a private hospital in Connecticut. Her condition appears to be the result of a drug overdose combined with some very unusual injuries. Injuries apparently sustained at one of Swent's infamous parties. Probably the drug overdose, too."

"Time-line?"

"Huh? Oh, right. This all happened after the VP remarried, so she's not really involved. Still, you know how the opposition party is when it comes to playing up scandals, and the VP is very sensitive to that."

"OK. Thanks, Henry. I'll be the soul of discretion on this, I promise. And I'll keep in touch."

* * *

Friday morning was as gloomy as ever, with the rain coming down harder than ever. And it had rained all night, as I discovered when I got up a couple times—hey, I’m an old guy and it’s necessary.

I was in the study trying out my new credentials on that Federal Reserve computer system when I heard Sam calling me from the living room. “Mac, you’d better come and see this.”

“...and, as you can see from this map, there’s a continuing Flash Flood Warning for the Front Range foothills between Golden and the Wyoming state line.” The morning weather girl was waving vaguely behind her backside at a radar image with red rectangles superimposed on a large blob of blue, green, and even some yellow over Northern Colorado. “And, folks, this isn’t *going* to happen, it’s already happening, as we hear now from Bobbi Bishop in Boulder.”

The shot cut to a remote location with a slicker-clad young woman standing in the rain, looking quite miserable. Behind her was a stream out of its banks.

“That’s right, Crystal, I’m here on the bank of Boulder Creek just west of the library in downtown Boulder, and as you can see, the water is running high, very high, and fast. We have reports that other foothills streams are also in flood stage, from Coal Creek south of here; Left Hand Creek, both the North and South Saint Vrain branches coming into Lyons, north of here; and both the Little and Big Thompson Rivers. And the Cache la Poudre also. If this rain doesn’t stop soon, we’ll have a real flood on our hands. This is Bobbi Bishop reporting from Boulder.” The shot cut back to the studio.

“From that, it looks like they’ve already got a flood. Hal’s forecasts were right.” I leaned over and kissed Sam on the top of the head. “Thanks for letting me know about this. I’ll turn on the TV in the study.”

As Crystal breathlessly finished up her forecast—rain and more rain—I started my search on the Fed’s computer system. I suspected that my every move on that system would be tracked and logged somewhere, given the highly sensitive nature of some of the data it contained. But I wasn’t snooping to find information that I could use to get rich, I was looking for specific file systems that documented Trevor Swent’s time at the Fed. That information, I thought, should be somewhere in the personnel records, perhaps in that top-level directory called “Personnel.”

Ya think?

Trevor Swent’s year at the Fed had been turbulent, I discovered. Early on, he advocated for several innovative policies that the stodgy long-timers opposed. But he’d persevered and got a couple implemented—and their results had made Uncle Sam billions. This, naturally, had infuriated the stodgy long-timers, but the folks at the top appreciated results, and Swent’s stock climbed. He got moved into a position of more influence and autonomy.

It was the autonomy, I thought, that tripped him up.

All this was at about the time of Saddam’s downfall, and Swent’s personnel file was suddenly filled with confidential memos that flew back and forth and around among his peers and superiors—nothing from Swent himself was in the filesystem—concerning their suspicions about his contacts with unnamed people in Iraq. But there was no real evidence, just suspicions. One memo even went so far as to suggest a clandestine search of Swent’s Washington DC apartment and his house in Colorado—he lived in Estes Park even then, apparently—to seek out the artifacts that people suspected him of trading banking secrets for. Whether that happened wasn’t clear. But it was clear that nothing ever turned up.

Until yesterday. Maybe, I thought, that would explain the odd address labels we’d found on all those crates—they were addressed to a Thomas Smith, Suite 235, 812 Big Thompson Avenue, Estes Park.

One advantage of small-town life, I'd found, was that the folks who still bother to print up telephone books were starved for content. In Estes Park, they made up for it by printing both the usual alphabetical name section, along with as many Yellow Pages ads as they could sell, as well as a reverse-lookup section, arranged by address.

812 Big Thompson Ave. was a Package-and-Mail store, one with post-office boxes, their Yellow Pages ad told me. And next door, at 816, was Foothills Storage, whose ad touted units of all sizes including weather-proofed ones.

No wonder nothing ever turned up in Swent's residences.

Try as I might, I couldn't find a hint of what Swent's Fed colleagues thought his *quid-pro-quo* was for all those packages, at least not any specifics. But it was clear that he'd weaseled himself into the higher echelons of Fed policy-making and so was privy to all sorts of sensitive information.

All of this simply confirmed what I'd inferred previously, but it confirmed it in greater detail. I grabbed copies of the most relevant memos and of Swent's career trajectory at the Fed for my report. Report to whom, it wasn't quite clear, but the documentation seemed appropriate.

The only thing missing was the details of whom Swent had been dealing with. I knew quite a bit in a generic sense, but exactly who were his Iraqi contacts was still obscure. No doubt they were vindictive mothers, though, I thought. If Swent had sent them bogus—or even innocently mistaken—information for all those ancient goodies, he'd have earned himself some serious enmity with no expiration date, interest-earning enmity at that, so the longer it festered the worse it would be.

And what finally happened to him was, after all, pretty nasty.

I logged off the Fed's computer system and stood up to stretch, just in time to catch a late-morning news and weather update on the TV in the study. I'd had the sound low so I could concentrate on my computer search, but now I turned it up. A new weather guy was standing in front of the map, which still looked about the same—warning boxes of various hues superimposed on a large, multi-colored blob of rain. He repeated the flood warnings and, as Crystal had done, cut to a live remote reporter.

This time, Bobbi Bishop looked like a drowned rat. No doubt she had been sitting in a warm, dry, satellite truck most of the morning, but her time outside, however brief, was taking its toll. What was left of her makeup had streaked, and her hair was drooping out of the hood of the rain slicker that was obviously not doing its job for her.

“Yes, Brian, this situation is starting to move toward disaster. We've relocated north to investigate the Saint Vrain River just east of downtown Lyons, and its condition lives up to the reports we were getting and then some. I'm standing in the middle of US Highway 36, which is closed now, and I'm going to move over here by squeezing between these barricades to the side by the river so we can get a good shot of how high it's running...” The camera obligingly followed her, and she stayed in the picture as the river appeared in the background. “...and, as you can see, it's not just water flowing by out there, there are trees...oh, there goes a storage shed of some kind, and, my goodness, a car. Brian, I don't...Oh! Wait! What's happening?”

What appeared to be happening was that she was losing her balance, as her arms were waving about, which moved her hand-held microphone away from her face.

Then, with a shriek, she disappeared.

The picture jolted sky-ward, then stabilized on the river again and began panning downstream. The floating storage shed came into focus as the picture cut back to the studio, to the very nervous-looking weather guy.

“Uh, we seem to be having technical difficulties with Bobbi Bishop’s report, but, uh...” he cocked his head sideways, obviously listening to his earpiece, “...oh my God!”

The picture cut to a Pampers commercial.

* * *

It was during the fourth commercial, one for animated, singing, blue bubbles that were positively giddy about the opportunity to clean your toilet, that Sam came in from the living room, eyes wide.

“Did you see what happened?” She was clearly shaken.

“Looks like that TV station is light one field reporter. I assume the bank of the river caved in under her. Not so smart to cross that barricade they had set up.”

“Mac! That’s so cold!”

I sighed and walked over to give her a hug, and she was as tense as a weathered two-by-four. “We have such different backgrounds. I’ve seen so many people die that it affects me differently from the way it affects you. Sorry. I don’t mean to seem cold or heartless or unfeeling. I mean, that was really awful.”

That, at least, relaxed her just a bit.

The commercials finally ended, and a middle-aged man with perfectly coiffed hair that had been dyed a hideous yellow color appeared, looking somber.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you have been with us, you’ve seen a horrible tragedy. Journalist Bobbi Bishop was swept away by the raging Saint Vrain River near Lyons, north of Boulder. Photojournalist Steven Weeks tells us that the highway, US Highway 36, on which she was standing collapsed, and she fell into the torrent. We can only pray for a miracle now.” He paused and looked down at papers on his desktop.

When he looked back at the camera, he had stitched an expression more like anger onto his face. “News Eight reporters will be initiating an investigation of this tragedy to uncover who is responsible. Was it the contractor, for building an unsafe roadway? Was it the Weather Service forecasters, for underestimating the severity of this flood event? Was it public safety officials, for allowing anyone to be at that location? News Eight wants to know, and when we know, you will, too.”

And the station cut to another commercial, one for some kind of scented panty-liners.

This time Sam sounded cold. “Gee. Could it have been the fault of that idiot reporter for crossing that barricade line and getting too close to the river?”

I hugged her again. “My thoughts exactly. Maybe the thing to do here is to turn the TVs off.”

“Good idea. I need to get organized to make dinner anyway, because it’s going to be something of a production. You think we can get to the store?”

“The sooner the better, probably. We should take the Jeep, though. That pink bug of yours might float away.” I had to dodge the punch she aimed at me.

I’m sure her VW Beetle would have been fine, although even she admitted it felt more secure in the bigger, high-clearance Wrangler. We really didn’t get a full-scale view of what was going on—the little seasonal creek in the valley below our house was running quite full, and some of the houses lower down looked like they were going to get very wet at some point, but most of the way into town was on high ground. The ditches were overflowing in places, though, with water on the road.

It was when we had to cross the main bridge over the Big Thompson just as it enters Lake Estes that we got a look at the flooding in action. Although the 1976 Big Thompson flood had left Estes Park nearly unscathed, a 1982 dam break up in the national park on a tributary had flooded the downtown area. Subsequent rebuilding had included channelizing the river bed through town and bolstering the bridges—a good thing, too, given the present situation. As we crossed the river, we could see that the water was almost up to the roadbed. Fortunately, there were several bridges just upstream that must have caught the trees and other debris that could have taken the main bridge out.

As I had speculated the day before, the grocery store, a full-sized Safeway supermarket, was crowded with panic shoppers. Produce, meat, and dairy products were in short supply, and there had been a run on toilet paper. The checkout lines were ridiculous.

Sam, though, was not bothered at all. “I’m going to make the cassoulet recipe, and I’ve been saving bits and pieces of the meats I need just for today. What I don’t have are the right herbs, and I’m hoping that there are some white beans left, dried ones. For wine, have we got something red, but light, like Beaujolais?”

“We do. I hope we already have salad fixings, though. What’s here looks picked over.”

It was, so all we bought were herbs, beans, and a few other odds and ends; and our little grocery basket was almost empty, particularly as compared to what others were buying. We used the self-checkout line, which made life a bit easier, but not much.

After thinking it over, I decided to go home the long way, around the east side of the lake, just to see what was happening on that end of town. Like South Saint Vrain Avenue, Big Thompson Avenue followed the high ground, for the most part, until it passed the Olympus Dam, which held Lake Estes back. Today, though, it wasn’t doing that, as they had opened the flood gates and water was pouring out. The meadows on both sides of Mall Road were inundated, and the roadway itself was under water in a few spots. But the lake was acting as a reservoir for not only water but also debris, so the bridge seemed to be in no real danger.

South of US Highway 36, though, Fish Creek Road was blocked off. It wasn’t obvious why, but I was taking no chances, so we headed west across the causeway toward town and the way home we knew would work. The arm of Lake Estes on the south side of the causeway, into which Fish Creek drained, was full of floating logs, bushes, and all sorts of brightly colored plastic. It occurred to me that the houses built along the creek were having their yards cleaned out whether they liked it or not.

At home, warm and dry once again, we settled in to wait out the storm. Sam got to work on her cassoulet recipe, and I decided to call the sheriff.

“Brad? Mac MacQuarrie here. Thought I’d check in.”

“Hey, Mac. Good to hear from you. You all OK up there?”

“We’re fine, but it’s beginning to look as if some others aren’t. Did you hear about that TV reporter?”

“Yep, and although I hate to wish trouble on anyone, I’m glad that was down in Boulder County. I’ve got my hands full. That Swent thing is going to have to go on the back burner for now. Huh? ’Scuse me a sec, Mac.” There was a muffled side conversation on the other end. “Mac, I’m going to have to call you back. It seems that the Big Thompson Canyon is starting to wash out.”

“Anything I can do up here, Brad?”

“Well, if you can get over there, you might check on Swent’s place. We sealed it up yesterday evening after we removed that bunch of stuff, but I’ve got no one up there now. Everyone’s down here,

even my Estes Park guy, Smithy, and if the Canyon is going, I don't know how or when we'll get back up there. Gotta go, sorry." And he disconnected.

If Brad's so busy with this flood thing, I thought, the local cops probably are, too. So I'm on my own with the Swent business.

Except for the FBI guys. Where, I wondered, might they be? I called Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid.

"FBI, Reid."

"Mac MacQuarrie here, Agent Reid. I thought I'd check in with you to see if things are still on track."

"Good to hear from you, Mac. This rain is something, isn't it? And I guess it's way worse up where you are than it is here in Denver."

"I don't know how it is there, but here it's getting bad. We're starting to get isolated because of road closures. Anything new on the Swent business?" I was prepared to tell him about the search of Swent's house, but only if he played nice.

"It's too soon for lab results, if that's what you're asking. Although there didn't appear to be any duct tape shreds in all that crap. I'm thinking that search may have been for nothing. Anything new up your way? I expect the sheriff and his people are busy with this flood emergency."

"They are, and it's looking like I'm on my own with this thing." I made a snap decision. "One thing that happened yesterday was that we did a search of Swent's house here in Estes Park, before Brad got so busy with the emergency."

I explained about the hidden storage rooms and what we'd found. "I think that Sheriff Winchester's people impounded all the antiquities, and they locked the safe back up. It's not going anywhere."

"Sounds like we ought to get up there and have a look-see." He didn't sound mad, which was a relief.

"Fine with me, Agent Reid, but good luck getting here."

* * *

Sam wasn't too happy with my going out to check Swent's place and leaving her behind.

"Mac, it's getting dangerous out there. And I don't like being here alone in all this."

"Sweetie, I'll be fine. And you will, too. Just keep working on that recipe, and I'll be back before you know it. And don't worry, I've got all that recovery gear in the back of the Jeep, remember?"

The Wrangler had a winch, and the gear included tow straps, chains, and various useful hardware to get unstuck, along with a plethora of unnecessary off-road accessories. I'd bought it barely used, after the previous owner had gone on an accessory binge and then couldn't make the payments.

But I didn't mention that I had my Sig Sauer 9 mm automatic locked in a metal box in the back.

Swent's house was still accessible, although the creek spilling out of Black Canyon was creating havoc along its channel. I was surprised, though, to find a late-model Lexus SUV in Swent's driveway, snug up against the left garage door. I parked the Jeep snug up behind the SUV, blocking it in, and made a call to CBI central to run down the license plate. It was registered to a Michael J. Decker of Estes Park. My CBI contact obliged me by performing a Google search on this name and came up with him as an attorney in private practice.

What was even more surprising was that the front door had been kicked in, the seal and prominent notice that the sheriff had posted on the door notwithstanding. I went back to the Jeep and retrieved my Sig Sauer, checked to make sure the magazine was full, and slid it under my belt in the small of my back.

Then I had a little debate with myself. Here I was, with no backup, about to silhouette myself in the open front door—there was no other practical way to get into the house. On the other hand, as I remembered from the day before, the front door opened into the living room, and to think that whoever did the break-and-enter job on that door would be sitting in the living room watching TV or whatever was just silly. But with just one person, clearing the various rooms in the house was going to be both slow and tricky. At the same time, it was unlikely that an Estes Park lawyer would be much of a threat—he probably had some left-over business with Swent and was taking this approach, illegal as it was, to completing it.

Finally, valor—or maybe just stupidity—won out over discretion, and, making myself as skinny as possible, I eased into the living room. With the shades down and all the gloom outside, the room was poorly lit, making it difficult to see. But there was a light on in the kitchen. With darkness behind me, I was more confident as I peered around the door frame, only to find nothing—except the door to the wine cellar was open. Looking through that door, I could see that the hidden storage closet was open, and a man in a trench coat, with his back to me, was looking through one of the file drawers. And he was male, at least by the haircut, which was revealed to me by virtue of the fact that his hat was sitting on top of the file cabinet.

I pulled out my Sig Sauer and chambered a round. The noise made him jump, but he must have recognized it because then he froze.

“Excellent. You just stay perfectly still, except I want your hands on the top of your head. Now!” He complied. “I’m a law officer, Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and you’re under arrest for breaking and entering, among other things.”

“Entering, yes; breaking, no. And what other things?”

“Are you Michael J. Decker?”

“Yes I am. I’m also Trevor Swent’s attorney and the executor of his estate.”

“And because of this you think you were entitled to ignore the sheriff’s seal and break in here? What are you looking for, anyway?”

“I told you, I didn’t break in. The door was kicked in when I arrived, and I entered to assess the situation. Despite the sheriff’s seal, yes, but I thought the kicked-in door provided sufficient extenuation to justify my entry. And what I’m looking for is none of your business.”

“I guess all that will be for a judge to decide. I want you to stand up slowly, hands on head, then reach forward and lean on that cabinet. Feet apart.” After he’d accomplished this, I frisked him quickly, finding only his wallet and a key ring with eight keys, including the one for the Lexus. I relieved him of them.

“You’re making a big mistake. I’m an officer of the court.”

“You’ve already made a big mistake. It’s called ‘looting’.” And I chopped the back of his neck with my gun hand just hard enough to put him out.

I hated to do it, especially because, as a lawyer, he’d probably sue me for excessive force and general impoliteness. But I’d hit him with the fleshy part of the edge of my hand, albeit wrapped around

the pistol grip, and I knew there would be no marks. And because I was alone, any other approach, such as trying to tie him up, would have been too risky.

The thing was, as a part-time cop, I didn't carry around all the gadgetry that real cops do, no handcuffs, in particular. But then it occurred to me that there just might be some in Swent's closet upstairs, mixed in with his S&M gear. I used Decker's belt to bind his hands around one of the feet of the safe and went exploring.

Along the way, I couldn't help but notice that the house was in the same shape we had left it the day before. Whoever had kicked in the door didn't toss the place or even muss it up. I made a mental note to check the bottom-floor storage room.

Upstairs, the porn closet wasn't disturbed, either. Rummaging around in a couple of trunks full of all sorts of weird sex toys, I found some handcuffs, complete with a key, hidden under a huge, black dildo.

Back on the main floor, I freed Decker from his belt and cuffed him, sitting on the floor, to a sturdy section of wine rack out in the wine cellar. Then I had a careful look at the storage room.

The safe was locked, just as it had been yesterday when we left, and still bolted to the floor. Presumably, what was in there yesterday was still in there today. The file cabinet that he had been looking in still had its drawer open. I could see where Decker had been examining its contents—the hanging folders were compressed on either side of the one he'd been looking through.

That folder, about an inch of papers, covered the previous February and part of March, around the time, I recalled, that Amanda Purdy had been found dead in Denver. I pulled the folder out of the drawer and, after shutting the front door, sat down with it in the living room to have a look at its contents, starting at the back.

Although filing by date rather than by topic was unusual, it turned out to be perfect for my purposes, as I was able to get a glimpse into Trevor Swent's life that would be hard to see otherwise. Mixed in with normal, monthly bills and statements were special, one-time invoices. Around the middle of February were several from caterers, a liquor store, a "party company" (whatever that might be), a booking agency called Hit Players, and an escort service—all associated with one of Swent's elaborate parties, no doubt. Then, dated only a week later, there were two invoices from my sleeping friend Michael J. Decker, one for Decker's hours and one for a variety of strange expenses that included transportation, consulting services, and expendables.

The date on which Amanda Purdy's body was found suddenly became more important to me.

But just as I was about to call Annette to see if she could find that out, there was a crash from below, the sound of metal tools hitting the concrete garage floor.

* * *

Seven

The noise startled me, and it woke my sleeping lawyer friend up, apparently, for I heard a groan from door to the kitchen. I walked through it and on into the wine cellar.

"Ah, Mr. Decker," I whispered, "I see you've recovered from your fainting spell."

“Fainting spell? You hit me, you motherf...” He stopped when he found himself looking at the 9 mm hole in the muzzle of my Sig Sauer.

“Easy, my friend. Just now you need to be silent. There was a noise downstairs that probably woke you up.” I paused for emphasis. “We can have a conversation about your health after I find out what that was. Meanwhile, your continued well-being depends on your silence. If there’s someone down there, he’s very, very unlikely to be your buddy, remember that. It’s probably nothing, but you never know.”

He nodded.

I’d learned the day before that the stairs down to the lowest level were not under those going upstairs, as they are in most houses. Rather, they topped out at another of the doors into the kitchen, probably for the convenience of bringing groceries up from the garages below, for they started at about mid-point of where the four cars, in a full garage without that hidden storage space, would sit. At least, I thought, the stairs headed away from the pivoting workbench, meaning toward the garage doors, instead of the other way. I wouldn’t be a total sitting duck, maybe just partly one.

But then I thought of the keys I’d liberated from Decker. There was an outside door in the floor below, I remembered, off the room with a pool table. That, at least, will give me a chance, especially if whoever dropped those tools is in the garage, I thought.

As quietly as possible, I went out the front door, across the deck and down to the ground, and around the side of the house to the outside door. The noise of the rain, I was hoping, would cover what sounds I couldn’t avoid, such as the key in the lock and the door mechanism. By the time I found the right key, I was getting pretty wet, though.

The lock didn’t click, the door opened silently—rich guys, I thought, buy the best—and then I was in the house again, on the bottom floor in a room with a big pool table. The window in the door let just enough light in from the gray outdoors that I could see my way around. And there was a bar of light under the interior door to the garage. I was sure that we hadn’t left any lights on after our search the previous day. Maybe Decker had come down and left a light on, but, then, maybe not. Now, I thought, if I can just get this last door open quietly...

But as I reached for the doorknob, the lights in the room came on, and a calm voice said, “*Careful, Mr. MacQuarrie, no sudden moves.*”

It took me several seconds, during which I stood perfectly still, to realize that he had said that in Arabic, Iraqi Arabic.

My father had been a State Department diplomat specializing in Middle Eastern cultures and issues, and I’d grown up in embassies all over the Arabic-speaking part of the world. My resulting fluency in Arabic, as well as several other regional languages, along with a penchant for adventure, had been the basis for a mutual attraction between me and those spooky agencies in Washington that I’d worked for. Although I was sure that my skills were a tad rusty, half a lifetime of speaking the languages of Sand-land meant that they were as much a part of me as English.

So it didn’t puzzle me that I’d understood the command to freeze without realizing at first that it wasn’t in English. What did puzzle me was that this person knew my name.

“*May I turn around?*” I asked this in my most respectful, deferential manner, and I asked it in Iraqi Arabic.

“*By all means, Mr. MacQuarrie, but, please, first use only two fingers to remove that pistol from your belt and place it on the table there beside you. I prefer to be able to see it at all times.*”

I did precisely as requested, even to the point of setting the pistol down pointed toward the wall and in a position that would make it very difficult for me to pick it up quickly, all before I began to turn around.

“Wonderful, wonderful, Mr. MacQuarrie. I see you’ve lost none of your skills. Except, of course, that I seem to have—ah, how do you say it?—‘got the drop on you,’ I believe.” The cliché was in English, but the rest continued the Arabic as before.

I turned slowly, wondering just who the hell this guy was. He was sitting comfortably in an easy chair, across the pool table from me, a suppressed automatic of some kind sitting on a table under the lamp he’d turned on. Slight by western standards but of average size in the Arabic-speaking world, his smile looked vaguely familiar, rather like the actor Omar Sharif in his middle age, big moustache and all. But I couldn’t quite place him.

“Ah, with all respect, you seem to know me, but I’m afraid...”

His smile broadened. *“Oh, Mr. MacQuarrie, I’m crushed. You don’t remember me? Well, maybe it was because I used to follow the Qur’an far more rigorously by maintaining a full beard. I’m afraid that my time here in the west has led to a certain level of, ah, religious improbity on my part.”*

He shrugged as he fingered his moustache. *“My name is Raheem al Muhammed.”*

That lit the mental lightbulb for me. *“Colonel al Muhammed! It is you, now I can see it. What a surprise to find you here, of all places!”*

Colonel Raheem al Muhammed was a political chameleon whom I’d run into both before and after the fall of Saddam’s regime. His before color was distinctly red, as in bloody. Afterwards, he turned white, or maybe baby blue, and espoused the new attempts toward democracy with the best of them. All the while, he’d been up to his eyeballs in Iraqi intelligence operations, especially what we in the US called “black ops.”

As far as I knew, based on our history together, he was neither an ally nor an enemy; rather, he classified as a neutral party. Maybe, I thought, this isn’t going to be as bad as it first looked. I began to relax.

“And I’m just as surprised to be here, frankly.” He had switched to English. “Is this some sort of outpost of Ireland, or what? This rain is absurd.”

I laughed and switched as well. “‘Absurd’ is a good description. Also, it’s getting dangerous, unfortunately. May I ask how it is that you’re in this house?”

“I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me.”

I pondered the offer and decided it was fair. “Well, I stopped by in my capacity as a law enforcement officer, a part-time member of something called the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Right now, we’re investigating the death of the former owner of this house, who was murdered under very, very strange circumstances. Yesterday, I worked with another law enforcement official to do a search of this place—all quite legal, you understand. I was just checking things today and found the door open. By the way, there’s a fellow upstairs whom I found going through some file cabinets. He’s handcuffed to a wine rack. I’m betting he isn’t with you.”

Al Muhammed laughed. “No, no, he’s not. Although I did indeed break in, I had carefully closed the door behind me. The fellow upstairs must have left it open for you to see. I heard him walking around, so I finally made some noise to lure him down here. Imagine my surprise when you show up. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Was that enough of an explanation that you’ll now tell me your involvement here?” I tried to be polite.

“Hmm. Well, I may have some questions for you, but, yes, it fits with what I already know. And, indeed, wasn’t that an extraordinarily creative way to deprive Mr. Swent of his life?” This time the smile was evil. “I expect that you have inferred that my involvement has to do with some, ah, museum pieces that came into Mr. Swent’s possession some years back. I’m commissioned to recover them, without regard to cost, and to see that Mr. Swent is appropriately chastised. It appears that someone did the latter for me, though. Would you have any ideas concerning who that could be? I might consider sending a thank-you note.”

“Well, if it wasn’t you or one of your compatriots, I can check that possibility off my list, I guess.” I smiled to reassure him. “Another possibility is a Mexican drug lord. There’s also a local guy whose daughter died at Swent’s hand, more or less, but I don’t think he could have managed this—what did you call it?—‘extraordinarily creative’ execution. And that’s what it was, an execution, not just a murder. Other than those two, I’m stumped.”

“Agreed about the execution. But in any case, that’s all—ah, what’s the expression?—water under the bridge. An appropriate expression in these circumstances, I think.” He sighed. “What’s important now is the location of the museum pieces, those artifacts that Swent obtained from us. All obtained illegally, transactions based on Swent’s lies, I may add. To put it mildly, our people were swindled. Unfortunately, not a one of the people involved is still alive, including Swent himself.”

It was my turn to sigh. “Right. Well, it could all be complicated, but maybe I can help. Personally, I think the artifacts should be returned to your country, assuming that they’ll be put back in museums to revitalize the Iraqi culture and heritage. But for now they’re in the hands of our legal system. The sheriff—the other law enforcement official I mentioned—has impounded them. I think they’re somewhere in the city of Fort Collins, but I don’t know where. And you can’t get there just now. The roads are closed.”

He looked sad. “Oh, dear. I’m afraid that’s going to cause no end of problems.”

* * *

Al Muhammed was kind enough to agree to a sort of truce—he was right, he did indeed have the drop on me, so I was happy to accept his terms. But he never really explained the comment about “no end of problems.”

We exchanged cell-phone numbers and promised to keep in touch about those antiquities. It had occurred to me that I might be able to help him get them back to Iraq, by hook or crook.

Ultimately, he walked off in the rain, toward a car parked somewhere, leaving me to deal with Michael J. Decker and various other problems—one of which was my significant other, who undoubtedly had been expecting me home long ago.

“Hello?”

“Hi, sweetie, it’s me. I’m done and ready to head home. But I thought I’d check to see if I should stop at Safeway to pick up anything.”

“Are you OK? It’s been a long time. You said you’d be back soon.”

“I’m fine, really. I ran into some people who needed long conversations to bring them up to speed on what’s going on with the investigation. That’s all. Can I pick anything up on the way home? How’s the cassoulet coming?”

She was pouting, I could tell. “It’s fine. Maybe get some dessert? I don’t think we’ll want to go out in this rain.”

“You’re right about that. Any specific dessert requests?”

“No, just get whatever you think would be good.”

Uh-oh, I thought. Expensive chocolate, roses, and ice cream at least. How can I be creative?

I unlocked lawyer Decker, gave him his keys, except the ones for Swent’s house and cars, and sent him on his way with an official-sounding admonishment not to leave town. I didn’t tell him about al Muhammed; instead, I made up a story about searching the entire lowest floor and finding nothing.

He was full of bluff about his rights and so on, but I reminded him of the probability that a looting charge would stick, given the circumstances. That shut him up. Then, taking the file folder I’d looked through with me, I headed to Stanley Village, the shopping area.

The lady at the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory was a big help, especially as I was her only customer. She made sure I got the richest, darkest, pure chocolate truffles anywhere. And the Safeway still had its usual selection of Häagen-Dazs ice cream flavors—it occurred to me that people were worried about the power going out and therefore not buying perishables. But I decided that roses, or even a single one, would be too much. Like admitting guilt. No, I’d just bluff my way through with the dessert—but I did pick up some Pepperidge Farms cookies to go with the ice cream and chocolate. And a sad-happy romantic chick-flick movie from the Red Box machine.

It was getting on toward dusk when I finally got home, and I couldn’t help but notice the effects of all of the runoff. The ditches were eroding; the watercourses were more than full; there was a significant amount of water in the middle of the streets and roads.

But the house smelled heavenly when I arrived—a wonderful mix of herbs, spices, and simmering protein. Sam was keeping herself busy with a salad, a device, I’d learned, that she used to keep from hollering at me when I walked in the door.

But I needed to deal with it *now*, so she wouldn’t holler at me later.

“What a mess out there!” I announced cheerfully. “But I got everything done, and I even found us a movie to go with dessert. Gotta say, that cassoulet smells wonderful!”

“Well, it’s a good thing it gets better as it cooks longer, as long as I keep putting more wine in it to keep it from drying out.” She turned and tried to look stern. “What movie?”

“Oh, you know, that old, old one that we never saw together, about the beauty shop friends or something? I hope it’s OK”

“Ooooh! *Steel Magnolias*? Oh, that’s perfect, Mac. We can snuggle and cry together.”

Yeah, right, I thought. Better than me washing the dishes alone. But then, as she unpacked the shopping bag I’d brought in, she caught on.

“Wait. Wait. You just wait right there, buster. *Steel Magnolias*? Chocolate and ice cream and cookies? *What* is going on here? What happened out there? How much trouble are you in this time?” She had struck the classic pose, standing straight with her arms crossed under her breasts, a stern expression pinching her face.

I thought it made her look incredibly sexy, but I quickly decided it wasn’t the time to say so.

“Huh?” I was determined to bluff it through. “Trouble? No trouble. But I *am* late and I know it. So I’m just trying to make it up in the little ways I can. Anyway, that cassoulet is probably even better now.”

She relaxed a little. “Well, that’s probably true. At this altitude, those damned beans don’t behave the way they’re supposed to. So more cooking is probably a good thing. Yeah, you’re late, dammit. But are you at least hungry?”

And I was, so I could answer honestly, a first for the evening. “Starved. Let me wash up and open that Beaujolais, OK?”

The cassoulet was wonderful, although Sam was right about the beans—at our house, the boiling point of water is about 15° lower than at sea level, so beans and noodles and all sorts of things don’t cook the same. I rather liked their *al dente* texture, but she didn’t. She did like dessert, though, which we poked our way through during the first part of the movie.

As for that movie, well, the best thing about it for me was that it got me some serious snuggling time on the couch. And it was interesting to see Dolly Parton doing something besides vamping her way through songs—it reminded me of how Sam had costumed herself during her working-girl days, as a dead ringer for Dolly. It didn’t seem politic, though, to bring that up. The whole thing was teary for her—she went through about half a box of Kleenex—and she dragged me into bed afterwards. After *that* I tucked her in and gave her a last, big smooch, and she was already drifting off to sleep.

Still jazzed from the day’s adrenalin and those dark chocolate truffles, not to mention Sam’s various bedroom skill sets, which never ceased to amaze me, I was wide awake. I put on a robe and went into the study to write up the day’s events before I forgot them. But just as I was getting started, my phone rang. Who, I wondered, would be calling me at ten-thirty?

“Mr. MacQuarrie, my friend.” Even without the Arabic, I would have recognized al Muhammed’s voice. “You were correct, all the roads out of town are closed. But I need to get to this Fort Collins place. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Which roads did you try?”

“I have a map, of course. So the first one was the most direct to my destination, Highway 34 down the Big Thompson Canyon. It’s closed a few miles down where the road has washed out. The map shows a smaller road that bypasses the washout, it goes through a place called Glen Haven, but that’s closed, too.”

“Right. I’m not surprised. Glen Haven is on the north fork of the Big Thompson, and that’s probably creating havoc down there. Did you try Highway 36? To Lyons?”

“Yes, and it’s closed about ten miles down its canyon. Apparently the road there is simply gone for a half mile or so. Also, Highway 7 is closed up by something called Lily Lake.”

“Well, there’s one more possibility, that’s Highway 34 west. It goes over what’s called Trail Ridge Road, through the national park. Do you see it on your map?”

“Hmm.” I could picture him tracing the long road over the top of the park. “Yes, it goes to some place called Grand Lake.”

“Right. Fill your car with gas here, because not much will be open over there. I think one of those gas stations below the Safeway has pumps that work all night. After Grand Lake, 34 goes to Granby, where it ends. But you turn left, meaning south, onto Highway 40. From what I understand, it’s not been raining much at all over there, so the roads should be fine”

“Yes, I see. Highway 40 twists and turns over what must be a pass of some kind and then merges with Highway 70, which goes into Denver.”

“Right again. And 70 is a four-lane interstate. It’s not been raining so much in Denver, either, so you should be OK at that point. I don’t know what you’ll run into heading north from Denver to Fort

Collins, though. Also, I don't know if Trail Ridge Road is open, either. But that's your last hope. Be prepared for a long drive."

"Thank you, my friend."

"Well, I owe you one for not shooting me this afternoon. And let's talk tomorrow. I'm working on an idea to get your artifacts back to you."

* * *

Saturday morning was still wet and dreary. I tried to sell myself on the idea that the rain had slacked off overnight, but I wasn't buying it.

Neither did Sam. "Mac, this sucks. Let's get in the car and go somewhere sunny."

"As good an idea as that is, it might not work. Most of the roads out of town are closed. Maybe Trail Ridge is still open, but the others are all washed out or something."

"Trail Ridge? That goes over to Grand Lake, right? And then the highway goes to Fraser, where we spent last winter? Maybe it's sunny over there. I'm going to pack a bag." She headed off to the bedroom.

"Uh, well, OK, but I've got some stuff to do this morning." I followed her and waited to see if she'd complain, but she didn't. "Actually, your idea of getting out of Dodge is a good one. If all the main roads are closed, trucks can't get here to resupply the stores. The Park Service doesn't let commercial vehicles on Trail Ridge. So food and gas and everything are going to run short pretty quick, unless they get another road open."

She turned to look at me, stunned. "You mean people here are going to starve?"

"Oh, I doubt that. I mean, remember all the canned stuff in the store? And, geez, if people start to get hungry, there are more elk around here than anyone knows what to do with. Nobody's going to starve. Listen, I've got to go out for a bit. I'll call you before I come home to see if you think of anything I should stop and pick up." I dashed off before she could object.

After al Muhammed's phone call the previous evening, I'd looked more carefully through the file I took from Swent's house, the file that Decker had been studying. Aside from the party invoices and the two from Decker, the only other document of any interest was Swent's will, a version that had been signed, dated, and notarized in early March. I decided I'd put the file back, after copying any and all documents of interest, to see if Decker might succumb to the temptation to return for another look. And if he found what he was looking for and took it, I'd be able to document the theft.

The trouble was, getting to Swent's house, over on the other side of town, had turned into an adventure. The main bridge over the Big Thompson had about three inches of water running over it, and an Estes Park police officer was turning people back, at least the people I saw in front of me. They were all in compact passenger cars, though. I finally got to the front of the line.

"Officer? Mac MacQuarrie, CBI." I showed him my shield. "I need to get over to the north side, off McGregor. This thing will make it through that water, don't you think?"

"Maybe. It should, I guess. Take it nice and slow, though." His voice betrayed how dubious he was.

"Is Mall Road still open?"

"Not right now. It's worse than this. Maybe if they lower the flow through the flood gates, it'll become passable, but we're not counting on it."

"How about upstream? Riverside? Marys Lake Road? Or are the two sides of town severed?"

“Riverside’s closed. Last I heard, Marys Lake Road was still open, though. Good luck.”

I put the Jeep into four-wheel low, and crept across the inundated bridge. I could feel the pressure of the water on the car through the steering wheel, but the off-road tires did their job and got me across. In my mirror I could see people arguing with the beleaguered cop, poor fellow. They were pointing my way in the “if he can do it, why can’t we” mode.

The rest of the streets to Swent’s were easy, and it took all of about three minutes for me to get there, slip the file back in its place in the correct drawer, and leave. But on the way out the door, it occurred to me that it really needed to be secured. Looting—real looting, not the trivial kind I’d accused Decker of—was probably not going to be an issue in Estes Park, but there was no point in taking chances. Maybe, I thought, the hardware store by the Safeway will have what I need.

Because I was going there anyway, I called Sam to see if she’d thought of anything she needed.

“Hardware store? Well, no. But you might get some serious snacks for the road at the Safeway.”

“Will do. But remember, we don’t know if Trail Ridge is still open.”

“Oh, it is, Mac. I called their hotline number. At least it was open a few minutes ago. Hurry home so we can get out of here.”

Between the tools I had in my Jeep and the inventory at the hardware store, I was able to put together a plan to secure Swent’s door. And, well, shopping for snacks is something that I’ve always been good at.

Back at Swent’s house, though, I had a surprise, a not altogether unexpected one except for its timing. Decker’s Lexus was back in Swent’s driveway. It didn’t take him long, I thought.

I found him just as I had the day before, looking through the files in the hidden storage room behind the wine cellar. Whatever he was looking for, it was obviously extremely important to him.

I hung back in the wine cellar, managing not to cast a shadow to alert him, and watched. He was paging through the same hanging file folder as before and mumbling to himself.

After a few patient minutes on my part, I heard a whispered “Yes! Thank God!” He removed several pieces of paper from the file, folded them, and slid them into his inside jacket pocket. Then he closed the file drawer and stood up.

When he turned to leave, he found me blocking his way, holding my CBI shield out for him to see. I’d decided that I wouldn’t need my weapon. The satisfaction of beating the crap out of him, should he try anything stupid, would be worth any skinned knuckles, I thought.

He was shocked into silence, so I took the lead. “Mr. Decker, I arrested you yesterday in identical circumstances and, based on your ties to the community, released you on your own recognizance. That event is documented in a report I wrote and submitted last night. This time, I should arrest you and take you to the police department. Trouble is, I just don’t have time to deal with you today. I will take those papers I just saw you put into your pocket, however. And please don’t try anything, because if you do I’ll take out my frustrations on you in a most unpleasant way.”

So what did I get for being so polite and business-like, lenient, even? The moron hopped into a taekwondo defense stance. I had trouble not breaking into laughter at the sight of a balding, flabby, nearsighted bumbler pretending to be Bruce Lee.

“I’ll have you know that I’m an expert in the martial arts. If you lay a hand on me, I’ll be forced to defend myself.”

“Mr. Decker. I’ve identified myself as a law enforcement officer and pointed out to you that I should place you under arrest. You are now resisting even that state of affairs and threatening me with violence. How much trouble do you want to make for yourself, anyway?”

I took a small step forward, as a feint, and he launched into action. I didn’t launch into anything but instead made one simple move, and the next thing he knew he was lying on the floor, on his back, with my right foot on his throat and his left hand in a wrist lock that was about a millimeter short of breaking something.

This time, he really did pass out.

Sam, I knew, was waiting, so I dragged Decker outside, being none too gentle with him down the steps on the porch, and hurried through the task of securing Swent’s front door. Then I frisked Decker, retrieved from his jacket pocket the papers he’d taken, dropped his keys on his chest, and left him lying in the rain.

Sam had said she had called the national park’s information line and found Trail Ridge Road to be open; now the question was, could we manage to get to the park entrance? I cut through the side streets and found that downhill, on Elkhorn, there was a serious amount of water flowing down the street. Most all of businesses had sandbags in front of their doors. But the intersection was clear, and Moraine looked free of water.

But where Moraine turned to the west, at the little amusement park, the water was almost up to that donut shop. Fortunately, Moraine itself was still above water level, and it stayed that way all the way to Marys Lake Road, which, somewhat to my amazement, was also passable although water-covered. The fact that the bridge was relatively new helped, no doubt. From there to home was easy, although the washouts along the sides of the streets, meaning the ditches, were getting serious. There were places where, if you let a tire stray off the pavement, you’d drop into a five-foot hole.

Sam’s idea to get out of town was looking better and better.

* * *

Eight

Sam was positively itching to hit the road, so much so that she’d packed several nights’ worth of clothes and such for me in addition to her own. And, to tell the truth, whatever was making her itch was contagious—I wanted out of town, too. Several loose ends needed tying up, however, before we got out of cell-phone range up on Trail Ridge.

My first call was to the Estes Park Police Department. “Hello? This is Mac MacQuarrie, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I know you’re all busier than you need to be just now, but I’ve got something you need to know about.”

I told the officer all about Michael J. Decker’s escapades, with minimal embellishment. I’d let him free the previous evening on a personal recognizance bond, given how busy the PD was, I told her, but his return to the house meant he violated that bond, was therefore incorrigible, and really needed to be watched. Given that his activities amounted to looting, I was sure the PD would be interested. At the least, I thought they should pay attention to the security of Swent’s house.

Privately, I thought I had what Decker had been looking for—those papers—and that he wouldn't be back, but the PD needed to be on the alert. The officer on the phone appreciated my information and said they'd keep an eye on Swent's house.

Then I called Brad Winchester and Annette Trieri to fill them in on the latest developments. The conversation with Brad included a discussion of the location of the Iraqi artifacts, and the one with Annette offered a heads up that Sam and I were coming over their way, flood refugees. That produced an instant invitation to stay in their guest wing, something I knew would please Sam to no end.

My call to Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid, FBI, however, didn't go through, and his voice mailbox was full. What, I wondered, was that about?

Finally, I called Raheem al Muhammed. "Colonel? Mac MacQuarrie here."

"Ah, Mr. MacQuarrie. I should tell you that I'm no longer a Colonel. And, please, I would be honored if you'd call me Raheem."

"In that case, Raheem, please call me Mac. Can I assume that you made it over Trail Ridge Road last night?"

"I did, and I'm forever in your debt for suggesting it. But you were right—it's a very long drive. And I'm still not in Fort Collins. Many roads down here out of the mountains are closed due to the flooding."

"Raheem, I'm not sure you actually need to get to Fort Collins. Let me suggest an alternative." I proceeded to outline the plan I was formulating to recover the artifacts.

"Ah, Mac, my friend, that is quite brilliant! I'm going to need to arrange for some tactical support, but I'm sure that will be no problem."

"Just remember, Raheem, this is all preliminary. To make it work really well, I need to persuade some people high-up in the government about its wisdom. But I'm pretty sure I can do that. If I do, you'll need much less tactical support than you might think. Let's stay in touch, OK?"

I debated whether to call Henry—I was going to need his support, and that of his boss, too—to pull this off. The payoff in diplomatic terms, however, could be enormous.

"Mac, are you ready to go yet?" Sam was out of patience, and Henry would have to wait.

She'd piled everything into the Jeep while I'd been on those phone calls; I checked it out to be sure that she had her paints and added to the load our hiking boots and day packs. No point in sitting around idly when we could be enjoying the outdoors over there, I thought.

At the last minute, I decided to shut the house down as completely as possible—all of the electronics got turned off as well as the main water valve.

Then we were finally ready and headed out. It surprised me how much worse some of those eroded ditches had become in just the past hour or so. Here and there were houses with driveways full of mud—I hated to think what their basements must be like. And halfway down Marys Lake Road, my fears were realized. Some poor schmuck had drifted too far to the right, and his car was on its side in the five-foot-deep ditch.

At the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, we showed our pass and got a little lecture from the lady Ranger on duty. "We're allowing everyone to pass through west-bound, but only Estes Park residents east-bound. And be aware that there are rocks and water on the road in many places. Please drive carefully. And enjoy your time in Rocky!"

That last, in the cheery voice they must rehearse, seemed out of place under the circumstances, but I suppose her training just made her spit it out.

In the rain, Trail Ridge Road, also known as U.S. Highway 34, is just another twisty two-lane road. At first, there are trees along the sides, mostly, and then, above about Rainbow Curve on the east side, there is nothing along the sides. Flatlanders—and I did this too, when I was new to the area—tend to drive down the middle of the road, using the double yellow line rather like a monorail track, when the drop-off is on the right. They seem to think that gravity is going to suck them off sideways, into the abyss, so they drive far, far from the edge of the road.

This, of course, makes it exciting when a big vehicle comes their way, forcing them back into their lane.

On that particular Saturday, though, there was less traffic than usual for a late-summer weekend. Based on what the chirpy Ranger had said, only Estes Park residents were being allowed to come east-bound at us and there were very few of those. As a result, I was able to use the passing zones to good effect and get around the west-bound slowpokes.

Would, I wondered, my new friend Raheem al Muhammed have been a “slowpoke” last night? We had a potentially good thing going, but could I really trust him? Well, he wanted those artifacts returned and I had a (sort-of) plan. Maybe he’d just have to trust me a bit.

I don’t want to give the impression that I was ignoring the incredible scenery of this drive. At that time, I had crossed Trail Ridge Road probably a half-dozen times as a driver, and each trip had revealed to me new and breathtaking views of the interplay of light and topography on that highest paved through road. One day, I thought, I’ll have to make Sam drive, so that I can watch the scenery instead of that double yellow line that I’m desperately trying so hard to keep a couple of feet off my left front fender.

Once a flatlander, always a flatlander, I guess.

By the time we got over the top to the Alpine Visitor Center, the rain was really, truly slacking off, and it looked like the clouds were starting to break up. We stopped for a coffee break and found a couple of not-too-tacky gifts to take to Hal and Annette in Fraser.

Then, after descending the west-side switchbacks and cruising down the Kawuneeche Valley, we stopped at the west-gate visitor center just north of the town of Grand Lake, to recycle that coffee. The sun was out, and we felt like just standing around in the parking lot to soak it up. Sam was babbling about how she could feel the vitamin D that was being created in her skin cells.

The sun felt good to me, too, but what was really interesting was the conversation I had with one of the national park folks behind the desk at the visitor center. He confirmed the quick rules overview that we’d heard at the east-side entrance an hour earlier—everyone was being let out of Estes Park, but only residents were being let back in.

“Because of all the road closures, the strategy is to get the tourists out before they eat all the food, and use up all the toilet paper and gasoline,” he said. “There are going to be caravans of buses to bring people out of there before they eat the residents out of house and home.”

Although this sounded like a good plan to me, I couldn’t believe that it would ever be written down as official policy at any level.

* * *

Hal Weathers and Annette Trieri lived at about 9100’ on the side of a mountain just west of Fraser. Their house started out as a mining shack that got added onto over its early years, then remodeled and

upgraded by the previous owner, and then renovated and upgraded some more by them. As a result, it was a rambling series of wings on different levels, with a deck across its east side overlooking the Fraser Valley. Their 180° view started at the Winter Park ski area on the south, almost next door, and swept north to the Never Summer Range, 30 miles away. In between, across the valley, was the backside of the Rockies' Front Range including the Indian Peaks and several of the same high peaks in Rocky Mountain National Park that were visible from Swent's house in Estes Park.

Their guest wing may as well have been a separate, private cabin, for it included a sitting room with a fireplace, bedroom and bath, and was connected to the rest of the house by a short hallway with steps. Because the sitting room had a microwave, electric tea kettle, small refrigerator, and sink, we were pretty self-contained. Still, I thought we'd probably be eating meals with our hosts, especially as Sam had mentioned on the way over that she'd brought her favorite cookbook. I was grateful that she didn't sleep with the thing.

Annette greeted us warmly, mentioned that Hal was supposed to return from his afternoon at the institute shortly, and showed us to our rooms. Dinner, she said, was coming home with Hal, probably steaks for the grill.

That comment set Sam off. "Cooking outside will be the perfect antidote to what we've been through for the past few days, Annette. It's been so gloomy and wet over there that even this partly cloudy sky is a relief. And thanks so much for inviting us to stay here. It'll make our escape into a vacation. Oh, but we don't want to be any trouble, so can we help with things? I brought my cookbook, if you'll let me make dinner sometime."

"I doubt you two will be any trouble. This guest suite sits empty all the time, and our housecleaner will be thrilled to have it used so she can do more than just dust. And, what cookbook? I think it would be fun to team up for meals."

"Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. I got inspired to make all the recipes—well, as many of them as I can manage, at least. And some of them really need more than two people to eat them."

As they nattered on, I escaped to bring more of our stuff in from the car. Eating well was something that I was glad to do, but talking about it in advance was just not my thing.

The concept of traveling light doesn't seem to be part of Sam's universe, so it took me five trips to get everything, and Annette and Sam had disappeared by the third one. With the suite to myself, I was able to poke around and find the storage closets and start putting things away. I also discovered that our sitting room had an outside door that opened onto a little, private deck with a spectacular view to the north. Its chairs were just too inviting for me to pass up. Besides, I needed to talk with Henry.

"Henry? Mac MacQuarrie here. How's your Saturday?"

"Hey there, Mac. Saturday? It's Saturday? Then what the hell am I doing here in my office? Oh, yeah, trying to keep the world from falling apart."

"Well, Henry, I may have come up with a way to help, a little bit, at least. What would you think about a clandestine operation that would help mend fences with Iraq and score huge public relations points for the White House?"

"How can anything clandestine score big PR points? What are you talking about?"

"Presumably, you know something about Trevor Swent's escapades by now, given that you're so concerned about him. Well, we found the hoard of Iraqi antiquities that he'd accumulated through shady deals with people over there."

“Mm-hmm. I remember that. This all happened while he was working at the Fed, right? And there was speculation that he traded banking secrets for them.”

“Right, but apparently the so-called secrets were bogus. He swindled them. Now, if all this came out, it would be huge embarrassment for the Fed specifically and for the US generally. But returning those artifacts to the Iraqi government, with a stipulation that they not disappear into private collections over there, would be an incredible good-will gesture, don’t you think? I’m thinking that there’s a way to avoid the embarrassment and get the artifacts home. The first part of the plan would be to minimize any government involvement. Fortunately, right now they’re in the hands of the sheriff here, instead of the FBI, and I think he’ll play ball with us.”

Henry paused, probably to think. “But with no government involvement, where’s the PR score?”

“I said ‘minimize government involvement’, not ‘eliminate’. We get the artifacts to Washington, put a couple on a table, and have the President do a press conference announcing that, say, an undercover investigation run out of the White House discovered the existence of the artifacts and recovered them so that they can be returned to Iraq. The Iraqi ambassador could be there to thank him, and so on.”

“OK, I think I see how this could be a winner. But the press will be all over it, asking about details and snooping into every aspect of it.”

“Of course. But the official line is that it was an undercover investigation that’s ongoing and there’s no information because it can’t be compromised. Unofficially, you can leak something that you make up, something far from Colorado. Maybe some rich dot-com guy on the west coast, someone who insists on anonymity, bought the collection thinking that it was legit, and when he found out it isn’t, he had pangs of conscience. Turned himself in or something. Cooperated with the investigation. Hell, you’ve got people there who can make up better stories than I can.”

Henry laughed, a happy laugh instead of his usual embittered one. “Mac, I think this could work. Lord knows, the President could use a feel-good appearance like this. Let me talk it over with a couple of people and get back to you. You say your sheriff will cooperate?”

“I’m thinking he will, but if he needs persuading I know how to make that happen, too. Thanks, Henry.”

I pushed the red button a second time, which closed the secure connection.

As I was sitting there thinking that the conversation had turned out as well as I could have hoped, I heard Sam. “Mac? Where’d you go, anyway?”

I opened the door to let her out onto the deck.

“Wow, this is pretty nice. I thought this door was a closet,” she said, looking around at the view. “This will be great. I’m glad I brought my pastels and paints.”

“Oh, good. Annette and Hal and I have a lot of talking to do about this murder case I’m working on. Having your supplies will keep you from getting too bored.”

“Hal? What’s he have to do with it?”

“The computers at his institute are probably going to be helpful, like last summer with that wildfire business, remember? At least I hope so. I need all the help I can get.”

* * *

After dinner, which was, as Annette had predicted, steaks, enhanced with a *bordelaise* sauce courtesy of Sam, Annette, and that cookbook, Hal and I sat on the porch to talk database searches.

“I can’t help but think I’ve missed something, Hal. I’ve got login credentials for just about every federal database there is, even the ultra-secret ones at agencies I shouldn’t name, but what I’ve come up with is pretty thin. And, well, superficial. Swent wasn’t in a position to have scrubbed his records, nor would he have known how to do that anyway. It just seems like something’s missing.”

“I don’t know if you heard, but we got an interesting contract from one of your old employers. The NSA has got us developing cross-platform search capabilities. They don’t know it yet, but we’re combining that with some of the new algorithms we’ve developed for Google to take advantage of our advanced hardware, and it allows some pretty remarkable, plain-English queries.” Hal sipped his decaf coffee.

“Uh, that sounds good, but I’m not sure what it means.”

“Well, maybe I can think up an example. Like, say you were interested in more information about that wolf-hybrid owner, that guy Annette told me about. Or, better yet, the dead guy—Swent?—himself. We could take your login credentials, all of them, and make up a script that would automatically search through every computer you have access to, plus all of the ones we do, like the Google and Apple clouds and more. The search would be in parallel, all the computers at once, and it would be recursive, meaning that it would start with his name and then proceed to search on any unique attributes associated with the search of his name, all the while doing cross-correlations. So, if searching on his name on, say, Google showed that he was a member of some organizations, those organizations and the relationships among them would also be discovered.”

“It sounds like that process could go on forever.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s for sure. You’ve got to build in some kind of boundaries, or you’ll get so much data from the search that you’ll be swamped. But, and this is the kicker, that data will be local, and it can be searched using the same technique with different parameters. And because it’s local, it’s way faster. I mean, say the first multi-computer search gives you a petabyte of results and takes, oh, twelve hours. Well, that local petabyte can be searched at MPARC in just a few seconds. I guess it’s sort of like harvesting all of the apples in the entire orchard and then sorting them to keep only the good ones. Hmm. Nah, that’s a bad simile. But you probably get the idea.”

“You mentioned ‘plain-English’ queries.”

“Yep. It’s not quite as conversational as talking with an iPhone, but close. So ‘Find Trevor Swent’ would get you everything. ‘Find Trevor Swent organizations and associates’ would narrow it quite a bit. Like that.”

“So, what if it was ‘Find who killed Trevor Swent’?”

“Ah, now you’re getting to the edge of the science. Absent concrete information in the databases, our algorithms would recognize the need to draw conclusions from the data. In this case, you’d likely get a list of possibles with some estimate of probabilities. But that’s an interesting idea. Let’s try it tomorrow. Hell, I’d start on it now, but it’ll be a lot easier with the equipment in my office.”

“Uh, sounds like you’ll need a list of computers and my credentials for each, right? I’m a little worried about the sensitivity of such a list, even with your security levels. I mean, you don’t provide your own credentials to others, right?”

“Correct. We’ve thought of that. Each search requires defining the network of computers involved. And those computers have all sorts of login procedures and various different operating systems. So, for a given network, the first time requires significant human intervention. What we’ll do is to have you sit

down and login to each of the computer systems you want included. Our system will then put each of those on standby and, while it's at it, figure out what the operating system is and so on. Then I'll sit down and do the same, and we'll also automatically login to the standard systems like the Google cloud and so on. As all this happens, our system will record the sequence in an encrypted script file, so the next time it'll be automatic. You and I will have the encryption keys, both required, to keep our credentials secure and allow only us to do additional searches on this particular network."

I had to smile. "I knew you guys were good when I worked with you last summer. But this is something else, a whole new level. Does NSA know you can do this?"

He grinned, somewhat sheepishly. "Actually, NSA is paying for it, but they don't have a clue. There's a guy in the White House we're working with. He's coming out Monday for a demonstration. Arrives tomorrow night."

That set me to wondering. "Well, if your computers can come up with who killed Swent, that'd make for some demonstration indeed. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but there's someone in the White House who's very interested in the answer."

The door opened and out walked our two ladies. Annette was carrying a tray with more coffee and two additional mugs, and Sam was carrying a tray of cookies.

"OK, guys, enough shop talk. Time to socialize." Annette's tone brooked no argument.

"Yes, dear," Hal said. "But that means we can't tell you about the potential breakthrough on your case."

"I can live with that. Whatever it is can wait until tomorrow." She paused long enough, looking around at all of us, to generate a bit of dramatic effect. "Tonight, though, Sam has a big announcement."

* * *

Nine

"Sam has a big announcement?" I thought. What the holy hell does that mean?

Then it dawned on me.

Sam was in her early forties. Living with a woman, you get to know her rhythms, and she still had hers. Nor had she complained about anything such as hot flashes. And even though I'm getting to the age of those guys in the purple pill commercials, I sure wasn't slowing down. Well, not much. All along, I'd been assuming that she was a birth control expert, given her previous occupation and all, and we never talked about it.

Uh-oh.

The next thing I knew, there I was lying back on the chaise lounge on the deck, with a cold, wet washcloth on my forehead. Sam and Annette were fussing over me, for some reason, as I could see through what seemed to be tunnel vision.

Hal was expounding. "Why, Sam, that'll be *great!* You're the best! It'll liven things up, and pass on a legacy for future generations."

The lighted tunnel of my vision started receding, getting smaller, smaller, and it closed down to a pinprick, then went out.

Oddly, I could still hear.

Female voice number 1: Oh, crap, he's out again. Any idea what's this all about, Sam?

Female voice number 2: Nope. It's scary. Nothing like this has ever happened, that I know about. Maybe we should call 9-1-1.

Male voice: Aw, just toss a glass of cold water on his face. He'll come around.

The notion of a face-full of cold water worked miracles, and the tunnel opened back up to reveal three faces staring at me, all looking on with some concern. I took a deep breath and shook my head.

It took a second deep breath before I could figure out how to talk. "OK, folks, show's over, nothing to see here."

Sam's face leaned in. "No so fast, buster. How many fingers?"

She was holding up three, index, ring, and pinkie, and I told her so. And I had to ask. "So, I'm sorry, I seem to have drifted away. Maybe it's the wine and the thin air way up here. But just so I'll know, what's this big announcement, anyway?"

I tried not to hold my breath, to keep breathing. Deeply.

"Why, I'm going to paint Hal and Annette a mural of their view, sweetie. What did you think?"

I was actually rather proud that I managed to keep the tunnel from receding away again.

One nice thing about all that—I got fussed over more than I deserved. They helped me to bed, tucked me in, and left me to lick the mortal wounds to my dignity alone, just as I needed to. I knew that I'd probably have to explain, at least to Sam, the reason for the whole episode, but at least I'd have some time to think up a good alternative to the truth.

Sometime later, I felt Sam slip into bed and snuggle up, and I drifted off into a very comfortable sleep.

Because I'd been put to bed so early, I woke up early Sunday morning. Sam was fast asleep, purring rather than snoring, and looking sweetly contented. It took me a few minutes to remember the end of the previous evening, and, when I did, I was both relieved and alerted to the need for an explanation for my fainting spell. Hmm.

I eased out of bed, found what I needed, left Sam a note where she'd find it right away, and went out through the door to our little deck to go for a run.

Although I'd assumed I'd go around the house and down the driveway, there was a clear trail off into the woods that appeared to contour along the elevation as it curved toward the west, rather than either climb or descend. That was so inviting that I followed it.

Stress, elevation, and maybe a tad too much wine for dinner. That seemed like a good explanation for my lapse. Of course, that would mean I'd have to watch the wine intake tonight and after, a restriction that I didn't need. Hmm.

As the trail contoured deeper into the woods, the downhill side began to open up, to reveal a pretty little side valley covered by an aspen grove. Across the way was another house, big, new, borderline ostentatious. But, then, ostentatious houses were almost run-of-the-mill in this part of the Fraser Valley.

How about blaming something in the food, some kind of allergic reaction? Of course, that would initiate a deconstruction of everything we'd eaten to figure out what it could be. And, really, there was nothing truly different that I could blame. Hmm.

After about a mile and a half, the trail just sort of petered out at the top of a hillside meadow. Even this late in the season, it was filled with wildflowers, mostly something I recognized as Indian Paintbrush, but there were some yellows and whites thrown in to make it all just lovely. I turned to retrace my steps back to the house.

Maybe I should just brazen it out. Bluff my way through. Shrug it off. That would be harder with Sam than with Hal and Annette, I knew. Hmm.

I discovered on the way back that the trail had not really been contouring but rather descending a little—I knew this because the slight upgrade got me out of breath right away. OK, I thought, this is just what you need, dude, a bit of a physical push. But it was a relief when the house came into view.

Of course, there was the option of just telling Sam the truth, that I thought her announcement was going to be that she was pregnant. But, then, that would just lead to questions, like, “why would that make you faint?” Hmm.

Obviously, I was going to have to play it by ear.

She was in the shower when I stepped back into our suite, so I did stretching exercises until she was finished.

“Oh, you’re back. Thanks for the note, by the way. How was your run?”

I told her it was the perfect way to start the day, and that she looked well-scrubbed and radiant.

“You probably missed it last night, being out and all, but we talked about going out for breakfast this morning.” She winked at me. “You should hurry up and shower.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then realized there was nothing I could say that would help. So I went to shower instead. Shut up and follow instructions—that’s always a good way to get out of a jam.

* * *

Hal and I rode together to the restaurant in his new Jeep Wrangler Unlimited, the four-door version of my Jeep and the same model, the Rubicon version. With its longer wheelbase, its ride was much less bouncy, but, damn, the thing felt *big* compared to mine. Because we were headed straight to the institute after breakfast, Sam and Annette rode together in Annette’s Subaru Outback.

This arrangement suited me just fine, as I didn’t think Hal would quiz me about my odd behavior last evening, whereas Annette and Sam, together, could have been counted on to do so. Maybe, I thought, we can get through breakfast without an inquisition.

Sharky’s, a Fraser institution, served the sort of breakfasts that skiers on their way out for a day of strenuous exercise in sub-zero temperatures need—huge piles of protein and fat in the form of eggs and meats along with lots of carbs, and more fat disguised as hash-brown potatoes. But why they also did this the rest of the year is something of a mystery to me. Maybe the mountain biking crowd needs the calories. In any case, after my episode the previous evening, I thought it politic to go easy, so I ordered oatmeal with a glass of grapefruit juice.

In order to avoid questions about my behavior, I took the initiative on the conversation. “So, Annette, you wouldn’t let us talk about the Swent case last night. But we do think there may be a break. We’ll see today.”

She swallowed a mouthful of French toast. “Are you going to tell me what the break is, or is this just teasing?”

“Just like last summer, it’s Hal’s computers in action.”

“Hey, they’re not mine. If they belong to anyone, it’s Chuck Shure.”

“Well, OK.” The oatmeal was actually pretty good, I thought. “Call them MPARC’s computers. Anyway, we think the new database search techniques they’re developing might help. I did searches on all the agency’s—agencies’, plural, actually—computers, but those were computer-by-computer searches. A unified search of all the systems could turn up things that I missed, relationships among the data that are revealed only when all of the data are combined.”

Hal chimed in. “Right. And what we find related to Swent can be searched in and of itself to see what additional possibilities arise.”

“Our interest list is pretty thin right now, Annette. We’re hoping to fatten it up a bit with the results of these searches.” Before I could continue, I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. Its display told me that it was Henry. “Ah, crud. I need to get this. Sorry, excuse me.”

I pushed the red button, said “wait one” and made my way outside to the parking lot.

“Sorry, Henry, I was in a restaurant with some other folks.”

“Not a problem Mac. How’s your weather out there?”

“Well, here in Fraser—that’s across the mountains from where we live in Estes Park—it’s a beautiful late summer day. Sunny so far, and it’ll probably get hot later.”

“Good, good. I’m at the airport waiting to board a flight to Denver. But I thought I’d get back to you on those antiquities. I talked with The Man himself about your idea, and he loves it. He’s got to get it vetted with State, of course, but you know how easily he persuades people. Maybe you can have a chat with your sheriff to prep him for the whole thing.”

“Good news, Henry, good news. I’ll do that. And I’ll also prep another fellow I ran into, the guy that the Iraqis sent over here to do the recovery. This’ll make his job a lot easier. And more legal.”

“I’m not sure I want to know more about that, Mac.”

I laughed. “No, you probably don’t. Let’s just say that this approach will prevent considerable heartburn all the way from Colorado to Washington. Say, Henry, you said a flight to Denver. Can I ask where you’re headed?”

“It’s no secret, really. I’m flying to Denver and then driving up to some small town by a ski area, it’s called Winter Park. There’s an institute there...wait a minute. You’re the one who put me on to this place, last summer, so you know all about it. MPARC. They’ve been commissioned by the NSA to do some algorithm development.”

“Right. Winter Park is about four miles from Fraser, and Sam and I are staying with Hal Weathers, the MPARC Director. I’m glad I asked.” I thought about how to phrase the next part. “Now, the question I have is about whether we should run into each other and what to do if that happens. I’m aware that ‘Henry’ isn’t your real name. Are you traveling under another name? Do we know each other? I don’t want to screw up on this one.”

“Good thinking—I’m glad you asked, too. Well, let’s see. Maybe we should just give up the whole charade of ‘Henry.’ My real name is Harmon Jameson. In the White House, I keep a very low profile, but I work between the President and Vice-President on the one hand and the National Security Advisor, the Director of National Intelligence, the Secretary of Defense, the DCI, and the FBI Director on the other. But I’m traveling to MPARC as a lowly White House staffer who’s interested in database searches. That part of the charade we need to keep alive, OK?”

“Absolutely. And should I call you ‘Harmon’ now?”

“Actually, that’d make my life a lot easier, Mac. Oops, they’re calling my flight. I’ll probably see you tomorrow.”

Holy crap, I thought. My friend Henry—er, Harmon, Harmon Jameson—is higher up than I imagined. I wonder why I’ve never heard the name? “Very low profile” indeed.

I walked slowly back into Sharky’s, hoping my oatmeal would still be warm and wondering how to handle Jameson’s visit. For one thing, he hadn’t said whether he’d be using that name or a different one. For another, I wasn’t sure if I should greet him like an old friend or what.

“Sorry again. I hate it when I have to take a call during a meal, but that was Washington. It’s better if I don’t ignore them. So, did Hal explain this search stuff well enough, Annette?” I dug into my oatmeal, which was now lukewarm.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I understand it.” Annette winked at her husband. “It’s a good idea, though. Who knows what other tidbits about Swent will surface?”

“So, Hal, you mentioned that MPARC is having a visitor tomorrow. Do you remember his name?” I decided to grasp the nettle.

“Hmm. Let’s see.” Hal pulled out his phone and started poking at it. “Ah, here it is. Jameson, Harmon Jameson. He’s some kind of database guy at the White House acting as the liaison between us and this, ah, agency project.”

“Interesting. I’m looking forward to meeting him.” And I was, actually, because I’d only talked with him on the phone, never in person.

* * *

The multi-platform search process was just as Hal had described. MPARC’s computer opened windows for me to login to the various agency computers I had access to; Hal logged into several others using yet more windows; some standard ones were added to the mix; and then a master window of sorts was used to start the search itself, which integrated the activities going on in all of the various windows. Or at least that’s how it looked to me. What was really happening was probably far more complicated.

“Let’s start with information about Swent in general,” Hal suggested. “That way, we can pull in the remote data to our system here and process it locally. Additional remote searches will probably be needed, too, but we can keep all of these various systems logged in for that purpose. OK?”

“Works for me.” I wasn’t going to disagree with the expert. He typed something, and lines of code started racing across the master screen. They were scrolling by too fast to read, but after fifteen seconds or so, they stopped and a message appeared:

Estimated Search Time – 90 Minutes

“That’s a property of the network we set up, meaning all of the computers we’re logged into, rather than of the search itself,” Hal said.

Perfect, I thought. That will give me time to catch up on phone calls. I walked outside to the roof garden.

MPARC, the Middle Park Advanced Research Center, was the brainchild of Charles Shure, the electronics (and other products) tycoon from Colorado Springs. He had recruited Hal to be its founding

Director a few years back and set up a generous endowment to run the place. It functioned as an experimental platform to test new computer-chip technologies that Shure's company developed on real-world problems and therefore as a center for high-performance simulation of just about whatever needed simulating. I first got involved with them the summer Sam and I'd moved to Colorado, when Hal and his wizards had simulated a wildfire that had, tragically, killed an extended family of campers. And according to Annette, they were simulating the Front Range flood event this summer. Apparently, the database searching thing was a new direction for them.

MPARC was housed in a brand new building that had originally been planned to be a condominium development. The developer went belly up at the stage of construction at which the building looked like an erector set, and the thing had sat as an eyesore in the middle of downtown Winter Park for a couple of years. Using Shure's clout, and money, Hal had been able to buy the property for a song, finish the building after some clever redesign—condos turned into computer-scientist offices turned out not to be too much of a stretch—and create a showcase for the community along with a large number of new, high-tech jobs. MPARC was second only to the ski area as a jewel in the Winter Park crown, and Hal had become something of a local hero because of it all.

One of the building's features was a third-floor roof garden, located outside the cafeteria and used for various activities year-round. It had radiant heating in the floor powered by waste heat from the supercomputers, and a variety of flower boxes and trees in big pots that were lovingly tended by a group of the employees. Previously, MPARC had been housed in rental space, which was fine, but this new building was the workplace equivalent of a five-star hotel.

I picked a secluded corner of the garden and called Brad Winchester.

"Brad? Mac MacQuarrie here. Any sun over your way yet?"

"Hey, Mac, how's it going? Yeah, well, not quite. But it's trying. Thing is, our problems are just starting. The water from all that rain just about destroyed everything in the foothills, and now it's spreading out all over the east county—and it'll continue to get worse downstream. What can I do for you?"

I filled him in about the Iraqi antiquities and the plan I'd hatched with Jameson to get them out of our hair and back where they belong, legally, even.

"Well, now, Mac, we impounded them because it's illegal for private citizens to own such stuff. But I don't know that I can just turn them over to the government."

"But you *are* the government, Brad. Believe me, Larimer County doesn't want to own this stuff, neither does the State of Colorado. And, for that matter, neither do the Feds. They want to give it all back. You give it to the Feds, they give it back to the Iraqis, you and the President both come out smelling like roses, especially you, because you can take all the credit for initiating the whole thing. I mean, it's not evidence in Swent's murder. Inventory it, photograph it, and get rid of it, that's your best bet."

"Y'know, I do worry about having custody of it. It's priceless stuff, I guess. So, how do we do this?"

"I'll get you a phone number to call, and you tell the person on the other end what you've got and ask if they'd like to take this stuff off your hands so it can be returned to the Iraqi people. Couldn't be easier." I'd be able to find the right person through Jameson, I knew. "Presumably, they'll come pick it up in an armored truck, or something. You can arrange for some publicity, pictures and so on, when they get there. And I think I can arrange for you to fly to Washington and meet the President the day he does whatever he does to give the stuff back. Probably a press conference. You may not like the President's

politics, but this kind of opportunity for good PR is something you can't pass up. I mean, there's an election coming up soon, isn't there?"

"OK, OK, Mac, I'm convinced. I'm not sure a picture of me and the President would help my chances of getting re-elected, but some part of this will. No doubt. I'll wait for a call with the telephone number."

Ha! I thought. One down, one to go. I called Raheem al Muhammed.

"Ah! Mac, my friend. I have done as you asked and been patient." He laughed. "And patient it's easy to be in a place like this. I found a room at the Brown Palace in Denver."

"Your taste is impeccable, Raheem, as always. And we have a plan. I hope you like it—I'm afraid I've had to be just a bit presumptuous, though. I remember from, ah, the old days, that you were always extremely publicity-shy, and I've assumed that you are still that way. I hope I haven't made a mistake."

"No, no mistake. Publicity is, to me, like death, because it would mean my death."

"I'm glad I assumed correctly. Now. Here's the plan." I outlined what I'd discussed with Jameson and with the sheriff. "I don't know how it will be handled at the end. Probably it will involve your embassy somehow, and then shipment across the ocean in some careful manner. It wouldn't surprise me if the President offered Air Force One."

"Mac, you've outdone yourself." He switched to Arabic. *"The only thing, a small thing, that I don't like is that the public part of the whole affair will involve the ambassador, who, in my humble opinion, is the human equivalent of a fresh pile of camel dung. But everything else is so brilliant that I'll just live with that."*

I switched, too. *"Raheem, I want to thank you again for not shooting me the other day. And let me say, we are still investigating the execution of Trevor Swent. I don't know where the investigation will lead, but I can guarantee that it will not lead in your direction."*

"Why, of course it will not. I had nothing to do with it." His eyes, I knew, would have been twinkling if I could have seen them.

"Of course not. And I'll make sure that everyone else understands that, too, if your name should come up in any way."

"Ah. I see. Thank you again, my friend." He disconnected.

I must admit to having had mixed emotions about how al Muhammed's part in all this turned out. In some ways, it would have been both convenient and, well, appropriate for him to have had a role in Swent's death and to have come to some kind of justice as a result. The world, after all, would probably be a better place if cold-blooded killers such as al Muhammed were not in it.

But, then, I suppose you could say the same thing about me.

* * *

Ten

I wandered back inside and, after looking around, found Hal in his office, working behind the biggest computer screen I'd ever seen.

“Oh, there you are. We’re getting interesting results.” He grinned.

“Already? Surely it hasn’t been ninety minutes yet.”

“No, but the results come in as they come in. That estimate was for completion of everything. What do you know about where Trevor Swent got his money?”

I thought for a minute. “Well, I know that he was a member of the billionaire club. And I remember seeing something about family money and investments. He worked at the Federal Reserve for a year, and did some dirty deals in the process, but I don’t think that was the source of his fortune.”

“That’s the basics of what we’ve got here. But the ‘investment’ part of it is looking interesting. He eventually worked at the Fed, but he got that job as a result of his time as an investment banker and counselor and trader at a bunch of different Wall Street brokerages. His family money was in the low eight figures, but by the time he went to the Fed, he was up to ten. And that several-ten-fold increase is interesting indeed. It appears that he got a lot of it by thrashing retirement funds and endowments.”

“Uh…”

“He earned percentage commissions on trades, and he made lots of trades within retirement funds, pension funds and so on, some big ones, some small ones and also within some endowment funds that had been set up for non-governmental organizations, NGOs, non-profits that are generally charities and so on. The trades sometimes worked, sometimes didn’t, in terms of doing good things for the funds, but he still got his commissions no matter what. In fact, several of the funds went bust as a result of his trades, especially the small funds. He was able to bet the ranch on trades with the small funds, while he could only trade a portion of the big ones at a time. So the big ones did better, especially the big, visible ones, which did pretty well, well enough for him to advance and eventually wind up at the Fed. And the interesting thing is that he linked his own money to the big-fund trades, the ones that worked. He didn’t put any of his own money into the trades that lost money, the small-fund trades. I’m not a banking expert, but it sure looks like he knew those small-funds were going to get hit hard.”

I had to put all this together. “Ahhh… and should I assume that this all means he ruined a bunch of retirees’ lives, and made enemies in the process, with these small-fund failures?”

“Good assumption, and he undoubtedly pissed off lots of people whose pet organizations lost their endowments. More to the point, a couple of the those group retirement funds he ruined are based here in northern Colorado. And some of them look like groups I wouldn’t want to have as enemies.”

“And you figured this out already? Damn, you’re going to impress this Harmon Jameson fellow tomorrow.”

Hal grinned at me. “Well, you wandered off somewhere—I thought it was to the john—and then didn’t come back. This stuff started coming in at about the fifteen-minute mark.”

“So…let’s see. We talked about secondary searches. Is there a way to find out who may have lost their shirts in the retirement- and endowment-fund failures and also has other specific motives to hate Swent?”

“Well, at this point, ‘hate’ is a term that’s not part of the search process. But connections are. We don’t have those yet, but the a few of the funds that Swent ruined are coming up.” He waved at me to come around to where I could see his gigantic screen and pointed at it.

“So, here’s one that doesn’t look especially threatening, at least as far as what happened to Swent, but it hurt a lot of people.” Hal was pointing to an account owned by something called Front Range Independent Teachers’ Organization.

“‘FRITO’? Is this for real?”

“Hey, I don’t make this stuff up—it’s in the computers. These folks got wiped out. It looks like several hundred retired teachers are now without a pension because of it.” He sounded offended at the possibility. “Here’s another group that lost everything, the Rockies Animal Breeders and Independent Dealers fund. And, yeah, that’s RABID. And here’s Big Game Outdoor Guides. These little groups of like-minded people must have set up retirement funds for themselves, and Swent trashed them. I mean, look how long this list is. I’d say he made a lot of people really mad.”

“OK, so, this provides the basis for motive, for killing Swent, that is. I guess we have lots of folks to choose from as far as that goes, on top of those we’ve already identified. Where do we go from here?”

“Well,” Hal scratched his chin, “I think we should let this first search play out and see what we’ve got. Then we can set up secondary searches.”

“Does the system know about the usual ‘motive, means, opportunity’ basis for suspecting someone?” I had no idea how these searches worked, but I had a suspicion that it wasn’t like how a human investigator did it.

“Not the way that, say, you would think of it. It doesn’t understand those concepts. Rather, the system looks at locations and times of the individuals, and then it correlates those with other bits and pieces of the data. What I expect it’ll come up with is a list of possible perps, whom you can then filter through the MMO part of the process. So it’s a sort of backwards investigation, with MMO last.” Hal looked quite pleased with himself.

“Well that’s a relief. I’m sure that I and all of my fellow investigators everywhere are glad to hear that we’ll still have a pivotal role in the investigative process.” I realized that this came across more sarcastically than I’d intended, so I back-pedaled. “What I mean is, as long as there are juries to persuade, there’ll be a human element to this investigative process, so it’s nice to hear that the computer side of the whole thing still needs it and relies on it.”

But I need not have bothered. He was absorbed by the new results coming in.

“Now, here’s something interesting. The search is finding and correlating names. It’s found Amanda Purdy. Annette told me about the FBI search of Amanda’s father’s place, and the system is processing him now. It’s as if it recognizes a possible motive, but that can’t be the real reason. It’s just these correlations instead.” He pointed at the screen. “Look at this. He’s a member of two of those small funds I mentioned a minute ago, the animal breeders and the backcountry guides. And his wife is a member of that independent teachers’ fund. Wow. A triple whammy.”

“Plus the thing about their daughter. Well, I guess that establishes motive.” Special Agent Reid, I remembered, had never returned my call. “I wonder what the FBI lab found.”

“I think we’re just getting started.” Hal was studying his big screen with interest. “Elias Purdy turns out to be a very interesting fellow, by virtue of some other groups he associates with. The Tea Party, as you’d expect, I guess, but also a survivalist forum, several gun clubs and chat groups, something called Americans for the American Heritage. Uh...and that outfit is on the DHS terrorist watch list.”

“Hmm. Sounds as if Purdy had the means as well as motive, even if he didn’t use his wolf hybrids.”

Hal stood up and stretched. “Well, OK, this thing says its basic search is 45% complete, and results are already coming in thick and fast, too fast to keep up with. Let’s see if there’s any coffee in this place on a Sunday.”

* * *

We hunted around and, in the end, had to make some. But there was time to kill, so we started a pot in one of the break rooms and eventually took our mugs outside, back to the roof garden. The sun was even warmer than when I'd been outside earlier, and the main drag through Winter Park was humming with both car and foot traffic, Front-Range residents up for the day to enjoy a mid-September weekend in the mountains. In a few weeks, I knew, the aspens that were just starting to turn would be finished for the season, the weather would be making the unpleasant transition from early fall to winter, and the place would be almost deserted until the ski area opened, probably in late November.

“So, what’s your plan for tomorrow, Hal? I probably don’t need to be in the way all day, but I’d like to meet this Jameson guy. I’m the guilty party who told the White House—I’ve got a special projects contact there—I told them about your capabilities here at MPARC and suggested that the agencies might want to enlist them.” I took a sip of java. “See, you folks aren’t in the profit-making mode, like all the Beltway Bandit operations, so you can give the agencies straight answers instead of just telling them what they want to hear.”

“I wondered how NSA had heard of us. I guess I owe you one, or at least Chuck Shure will when he sells them the operational version of the stuff we’re developing. And these contracts with them are good for the institute, too. They pointed us in an interesting new direction.”

“Of course, now that all the electronic snooping has become public, it could put the brakes on their need for what you’re working on.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that. Anyway, tomorrow I’m going to pick Jameson up and bring him here to the institute for breakfast, and then we’re going to regale him with background information and demonstrations. He’s bringing his credentials for some computer systems we don’t normally have access to, and we’ll do something like you and I did earlier, only on a more limited scale. Meaning the network we set up will be smaller, and therefore whatever search he chooses will be quicker.” He finished off his coffee. “You want to come to breakfast?”

“Good idea. After that, if the sun stays out, I expect we’ll think about heading home tomorrow.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to get out my camera and tripod and take a panorama sequence from the deck, so that Sam can have something to work with.”

“That’ll probably help her quite a bit.” The subject of the mural, however, wasn’t one that I wanted to linger on. “Say, how do you deal with classification issues in these computer network searches? I mean, I can’t know if you’re cleared to look at information from some of the systems I logged into this morning. And vice versa, I suppose.”

“Well, in principle, everyone involved has to be cleared for everything. Alternatively, one person with a clearance for the entire network used in a particular search can take on the job of working up the results. But, yeah, it’s an issue. After this project started, NSA got my credentials bumped way, way up, and so did Sandy Livingston’s. So maybe I’m OK for what we did this morning. And you probably are, too. I remember you’re cleared through the roof, and the computers I accessed are pretty low level.” He thought for a minute. “I think, though, I’ll put all of the results from the search on Swent into your filesystem, so it can be seen only by you. I’m certain I didn’t see anything already that I shouldn’t have, but, as the deeper results come in, you can never tell.”

“Where is Sandy, anyhow? I sort of expected to see him here today.” Sandy Livingston was MPARC’s Chief Scientist.

“He and Angela are probably driving back from Santa Fe right now. Or maybe in a couple of days, I don’t remember. They went down there to see her family a week ago. I think they were making plans for their wedding.”

I had to laugh. “Well, that’ll make her parents happy, for sure. Sandy told me they moved up here so they could live together without interference. But, man, I feel sorry for the guy. I bet there’s a wedding the size of the Super Bowl.”

“He mentioned something like that.” Hal looked at his watch. “Let’s go see if that search is finished.”

It was. Hal sat down at his desk and fiddled on the keyboard for a few minutes, then looked up.

“OK. So all the results are now your property, and I can’t see them any more than you can see what’s in my own filesystem. This computer is fully secure, so no one can hack in and get them, and they’re encrypted as well. I’ve emailed you the key and wiped my copy.”

I pondered. “Uh, OK, but how do I search the results?”

“Oh, right. You’ll need to use the search engine, because the data amounts to about a half a petabyte. We have an in-house, meaning local, and enhanced version of Google’s search engine. It’s called, believe it or not, Loogie, l-o-o-g-i-e—you’ll see an appropriate screen icon for the program—I’m afraid that some of our people have a juvenile sense of humor. Anyway, if you type something like ‘Loogie Swent’, it’ll scroll more data than you can manage. ‘Loogie Swent plus murder’ would narrow it down. But if you just type ‘Loogie’, it goes into a fully interactive mode, which is pretty intuitive, or it’s supposed to be, at least. I’d recommend that. If you can trust me not to look over your shoulder, that computer there should be what you need.” Hal gestured toward another desktop system, one with a somewhat smaller display, sitting on a side table. “I need to work on my presentation for tomorrow for a while.”

As Hal went to work, I fired up the other computer and got started, uh, Loogieing, I guess. It took me about two minutes to figure out how to implement Hal’s instructions and then another five to become astonishingly productive, by my standards, at least. The interactive version’s help menu provided both hints and a vocabulary, and Loogie’s syntax was both conversational and versatile. As I burrowed deeper and deeper into the network search for information on Trevor Swent, the results became more and more interesting.

About the time I’d documented fully the convoluted relationship between Swent and the Juan Chávez cartel—and pretty much eliminated the cartel as a suspect—my phone buzzed in my pocket. The display said “Henry”, so I pushed the red button and made a mental note to change his name in my contacts list.

“Mac MacQuarrie.” I was keenly aware of Hal’s presence.

“Mac, it’s Harmon Jameson. We just landed in Denver. And, listen, they have TVs on this flight, and I was watching news. There’s a story out of Denver about a car with government plates that turned up in the streambed of something called the Little Thompson River. It’s an FBI vehicle. There’s no sign of occupants. Apparently a small dam of some kind got breached up in a mountain subdivision, and the water ripped down the river taking out a half-mile or so of highway between a town called Lyons and Estes Park. I’m thinking that this may have been—what was his name?—Special Agent Reid.”

“Hmm. Could be, I guess.”

“Oh. It sounds like you’re not really able to talk just now.”

“Right.”

“Well, anyway, I thought you should know. And, say, did you talk with your sheriff?”

“I did. He’s on board all the way. But I had to promise that he’d get full credit for the idea and that he’d be in on the press conference, or whatever happens. I hope that’s OK.”

There was a pause, with all sorts of background noise.

“Y’know? I think that’ll make it even better—like, ‘small town sheriff initiates diplomatic coup of the decade.’ Something like that. This’ll be great. So, the way it’s going to work is that a guy named Algernon Simpson, he’s an archaeologist who specializes in the middle east and works in the cultural affairs office at State, he’s going to organize and handle everything. You need to call him at this number,” he rattled off a phone number, and I typed it onto the computer, “which is his cell phone. He’s so excited he’s probably hyperventilating, so call him anytime. And thanks for your help with this, Mac. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“I expect so. Thanks for calling.”

I went back to the keyboard mumbling to myself, “I love it when a plan comes together.”

“Hmm?” Hal looked up.

“Oh, sorry to disturb you Hal. I’ll tell you later.” I dove back in to the results I was getting.

* * *

After three more hours, we were both burned out. I had a huge file of information, which I emailed to myself before I remembered that I could access the MPARC computers, remotely and securely, from my laptop or my desktop at home. Hal, I presumed, must have a pretty spiffy presentation ready after all that work.

In any case, it was Sunday and time to call it a day.

Back at Hal and Annette’s place, the first thing I did was to accept, quite gratefully, a scotch and soda. Then I fired up my laptop to see what information I could find about the FBI car found in the river bed. The Denver TV stations and the *Post* all had about the same stories, and the newspapers to the north of Denver essentially repeated them. Friday afternoon, after Bobbi Bishop had been swept away by the Saint Vrain River, Boulder County sheriff’s deputies were posted at the road closure on US Highway 36 in Lyons, cutting off access to Estes Park via that route. The deputy on duty reported that a dark sedan sporting federal plates with two people inside pulled up to the roadblock and demanded to be let through. When they were denied, they showed FBI credentials and informed the deputy that they would be going to Estes Park whether the road was closed or not. The deputy warned them about the danger and especially about partial washouts to be watched for. The sedan proceeded toward Estes Park.

Sometime shortly after that, a dam had let loose on a small reservoir on the Little Thompson River up in the foothills, sending a wall of water downstream. Several miles above Lyons, the highway parallels the Little Thompson in a steep-walled stretch of canyon, and the wall of water completely obliterated the roadway, scouring that section of canyon clean. Because the car was found a half-mile down-canyon past the place where the highway used to descend into it on its way from Lyons, it appeared that the car had been in precisely the wrong place at the wrong time.

Of course, if the FBI agents had listened to the sheriff’s deputy, the tragedy wouldn’t have happened. But they didn’t, it did, and the agents’ identities were being withheld pending notification of relatives.

One article speculated that the agents might have abandoned the car at the last minute and climbed the canyon wall to safety, and crews had been searching the area ever since the car had been found. Other reports were not so optimistic.

Well, I thought, that will set back the FBI investigation a bit. And Jameson will likely be relieved.

Thinking of Jameson reminded me to call the State Department archaeologist, Algernon Simpson. By then, it was about 8:30 in the evening on the east coast, but Jameson had said to call him any time.

“Mr. Simpson? My name is Mac MacQuarrie. I’m sorry to disturb your Sunday evening, but I’m calling about the inventory of Iraqi antiquities that you’ve recently heard about.”

“Oh. OH. Well, yes, I’m so glad to hear from you. Have you got them? What sorts of items are we talking about? Do you know their provenance?” His excitement was palpable.

“I’ve seen some of them, and what I saw were statuettes smaller than about three feet tall and a variety of jewelry, all in pristine condition. But the reason I’m calling is to explain the process here. You’ll be getting a call tomorrow from Sheriff Brad Winchester of Larimer County Colorado. He has charge of the items just now. He’s going to suggest the plan that I believe has been discussed with you. It will simplify matters if we all take the approach that Winchester originated that plan. Right?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. But what’s the real story? This cock-and-bull business about an Iraqi expatriot who spirited them out of the country for safekeeping during the revolution and now wants them to go back, I mean, really.”

“That, Mr. Simpson is the story, and your instructions, I’m certain, are for you to stick with it, no ifs, ands, or buts.”

“Well, yes, of course, but…”

“No buts, Mr. Simpson, no buts. If you handle this the way you’re capable of, the President himself is going to be quite grateful.”

“Well, I suppose that *is* something of an incentive for an obscure civil servant like myself, isn’t it?” His question, I assumed, was rhetorical. “Since you know more about this than I, Mr. MacQuarrie, perhaps you could answer a question. Do you suppose it would be possible, after the ceremony, for the items to stay in the U.S. for a little while, to be displayed at, say, the Smithsonian?”

“That, Mr. Simpson, is between you, the President, and the Iraqi ambassador. But, hey, you’re a diplomat. Go for it.”

“I believe I will, Mr. MacQuarrie., I believe I will. Thanks for your call. Good-bye.”

If he can stick to the script, I thought, we’ll be fine.

Next, I called Brad Winchester to pass along the phone number for his call on Monday. I also suggested that he need not say anything to anyone about where the artifacts came from, because the State Department would be handling that. He seemed relieved.

My glass was empty, so I wandered over to find a refill in the main wing of the house, where he kitchen was humming with the final stages of dinner preparation. Sam and Annette, it seemed, had found some quite nice veal cutlets at the Safeway in Fraser, and we were having them with another of Julia’s sauces, along with some kind of exotic-looking potato recipe. I couldn’t believe that Annette would ever work her way through that entire book like Sam was doing, but I would have been willing to bet that Hal was going to be eating a lot better for a while.

Glass refilled, I found an inconspicuous corner of the kitchen in which to stay out of the way. “Annette, did you see the local news today?”

“Just the Sunday paper, this morning.”

“Well, this may be more recent. It looks as if Special Agent Oglethorpe Reid, FBI, may be a flood victim.” I summarized the stories for her.

“What? That sounds awful.”

“Compared to previous big floods, this one’s pretty benign, in terms of loss of life. Still, this particular death would be especially unfortunate.”

“It is, although I expect the Bureau will assign a replacement fairly quickly.” Annette looked me, staring for a few seconds. “But I wonder how that will affect the investigation?”

“You remember I told you about when Reid showed up at Brad Winchester’s portable forensics lab? He was all piss and vinegar, but then he got a phone call and turned into a pussycat?”

She nodded and smiled at the memory.

“Well, that call was because of a call *I* had made. I’m thinking I won’t make such a call this time—instead, we can just let the FBI do its thing. See, with what we came up with today, we probably don’t need them. I mean those computer search results.”

“But they’ve got all the evidence from the scene, right?”

“Right. And they’ll probably wind up getting whatever’s in Swent’s house, although the most important stuff is taken care of. I’ll tell y’all about that at dinner. But we’ve got the leads now, and we don’t need the feds. I think I’ll be able to have this thing wrapped up in a week.”

* * *

Eleven

Monday morning, Harmon Jameson and I had no trouble treating each other as new acquaintances, as we’d never really met before in person. He, Hal, and I had a great breakfast at the MPARC cafeteria, at which I learned that Jameson was a master raconteur with a repertoire of stories from his travels all over the world. He was clearly enjoying being out of the White House hustle and bustle for a few days.

I left them to their business, and drove back to Hal and Annette’s to pick up Sam and hit the road. While dinner was being prepared the previous evening and I’d been hiding out in the kitchen, Hal had taken some spectacular photos of the entire view from their house, including the view from the little guest deck. Then, after dinner, he fed all of them into computer software that stitched them into a panorama photo. Sam had just what she needed to do her mural.

At dinner, I’d sworn them all to secrecy and explained the plan for the Iraqi antiquities, leaving out any hint of Jameson’s role. That had both amused and impressed them. Annette, in particular, was glad to hear that Brad Winchester would be getting his PR boost from the whole thing. She wanted to see him re-elected.

By Monday, though, it was time to head home. The word from Estes Park was that the weather had returned to its usual September glory, and, even though it was only two nights on the road, both Sam and I wanted to sleep in our own bed again.

So I lugged the five loads of bags out to the Jeep, got Sam and me tucked into it, said goodbye to Annette, with profuse thanks for her hospitality, and hit the road north toward Grand Lake and the west gate of the national park. Sam had checked to make sure that Trail Ridge Road was open again—they had closed it overnight on Saturday because of ice.

At the west gate, we had to show identification, and we got the same little lecture about who was allowed through and who wasn’t. The Highway 7 collapse near Lily Lake was due to be fixed Tuesday

or Wednesday, and that would open a second route into Estes Park, but for the time being Trail Ridge was it.

The road itself was much as it had been on Saturday, when we'd escaped, but the sun was out and the sky was blue. The dusting of new snow on the highest peaks only added to the beauty of the drive.

Our route into town wasn't quite so lucky, although the Marys Lake Road bridge was still intact, with river water lapping at its underside. But those car-swallowing ditches were worse than ever, and the road itself was starting to collapse in spots. If this was typical of damage throughout the Estes Valley, it was clear that the rebuilding process was going to be long, arduous, and expensive.

But we were fortunate. Back home, I turned the water and the electronics back on, and everything was normal, as far as we could tell.

I was extra glad for that, because I had some work to do.

The various motivations within the Purdy family to see Trevor Swent dead were only the tip of the iceberg of what had come out in the search results. Almost every name that arose was associated with some event in the past that earned Swent hatred. The Purdys, with the triple financial whammy that Hal had discovered plus their daughter's death, had perhaps the strongest motivation, but others had plenty of their own.

Swent had become locally famous in the past few years for his philanthropy, but, according to the information we recovered and obvious inferences from it, people still hated him behind his back—virtually everyone did.

The question now was not who wanted him to die but rather whose hatred was so vicious that they wanted him to die in that horrible manner. And with the sheriff's office and the FBI out of the picture for the present, and the Estes Park PD overwhelmed by the flood-related issues, I was going to have to answer that question for myself.

Fortunately, I had the Trevor Swent reference manual at my disposal as well as the capability to find online updates, should they be needed.

Sam went off to the store with the hope she'd be able to find something, anything, to make into dinner, and, having forgotten, I figured out how to login to the MPARC computer from home again. That Loogie search engine of theirs had been so helpful the day before that I knew not to bother to proceed without it.

By the time that Sam returned, all a-twitter about how the Safeway must have received a delivery, a big one, because they had everything she needed, I'd managed to have Loogie organize Swent's family, associates, financial victims, sex-party invitees, and philanthropy recipients, along with all their various connections, into separate groups. It was then trivial to pull out names that appeared in more than one of the groups—Elias Purdy, for example, was prominent on that list.

But that cross-group list was much longer than I would have thought. If virtually everyone hated Trevor Swent for one reason or another, there were dozens of people with multiple reasons for hatred. It was a bit surprising that he'd lived as long as he did.

To narrow the list down, I needed another criterion to add to my Loogie search parameters, and so I chose the obvious one: money. Who would benefit financially from Swent's death?

A good starting place was the will I'd found in the file folder that Michael J. Decker had been examining—as well as the curious invoices that I'd also found in the folder. Then there was the paperwork I'd retrieved from Decker's pocket—similar invoices dated six months earlier.

Thinking of Decker reminded me, had the Estes Park PD followed my suggestion to keep an eye on Swent's house? I considered giving them a call but then decided that an in-person visit would be a better approach.

The PD is in the municipal building, downtown on Elkhorn. It turned out that getting there was a bit more involved than usual, because Elkhorn was closed and looked to be under a foot or more of mud. But at least the water under the main bridge across the Big Thompson was a little lower than it had been on Saturday.

The officer behind the front desk looked up as I walked in.

"Good morning—no, it's afternoon now, isn't it? I'm Mac MacQuarrie, with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation." I showed her my shield. "On Saturday, I called you folks about a collar I'd made but couldn't deal with. This was a Michael J. Decker. I thought I'd follow up with you."

"Yes, Mr. MacQuarrie—that was me you talked with. And we did make sure to keep an eye on that house you were worried about."

"Did you see anything unusual?"

"I wouldn't know about that, but the one of our officers would. Let me see if he's here." She pushed buttons and talked into her headset.

Five minutes later a uniform walked out from a back hallway. "Mr. MacQuarrie? Sergeant Alf Strzpyk. Ah, for your report, that's s-t-r-z-p-y-k. You're here to find out about that house up on the north side, used to belong to Trevor Swent?"

I nodded "Right. I'm responsible for asking y'all to keep an eye on it."

"We did the best we could, Mr. MacQuarrie, given how busy we are with this flood business. Several patrols every 24 hours. And we didn't see anything suspicious."

"Any indications about Mr. Decker's activities? He's the guy who got this all started."

"No, sir. We weren't tasked with watching him. I've heard the name—I think he's a lawyer here in town. But we weren't really paying special attention to him."

"No, I wouldn't have expected that. But, on the other hand, nothing about him turned up?"

"No, sir."

* * *

I'd expected that Decker would have taken the invoices because they could possibly link him to Swent's questionable activities. But the will was curious. The one I'd taken from Swent's file was the original, by the looks of the signatures. If Decker really was Swent's lawyer and executor, he'd have a copy.

The only possible reason I could think of for him to want that original would be to clean up a paper trail—meaning he intended to modify it somehow.

Sam had lunch ready when I reached home, and it was a relief to eat simple ham sandwiches rather than some fancy French concoction.

"So how do things look out there?" She knew I'd been to a different part of town from her trip to the store.

"Elkhorn's full of mud and closed. You probably saw that the river's down just a bit but still way full. Did you notice that all the streets leading down to Fish Creek are blocked off?"

“I did. There must be some problems down that way. I was looking online to find out about damage, and it looks like the roads down the canyons are going to take a long time to fix. But they’re talking about having the Peak-to-Peak ready this week, except it will go only to Black Hawk. All the other canyons are out, too.”

I shook my head. “This is going to be tough on people who live here and work in Loveland or Boulder, and *vice versa*. We should count our blessings.”

“I am. And I’m going to volunteer for cleanup needs. There’s a way to do that on the town’s web site.”

“Well, make sure you get a tetanus shot and whatever else they recommend. Floods come with all sorts of weird pathogens. Broken sewer lines and so on. I’m afraid I’m going to be tied up with this investigation, though.”

“Yeah, I figured that. This volunteer cleaning stuff will give me something to do so I won’t worry so much.”

I reached across the table and patted her hand. “This one is figuring out things by computer. I don’t think you have anything at all to worry about.”

“But that’s what you say every time, isn’t it? I sure hope you’re careful out there.”

After lunch, I dug out Swent’s will. After the usual “sound mind” introductory legalese, it got down to the business of disposing of his property and assets, starting with heirlooms. These were bequeathed to various family members, all of whom were noted as living in other states, mostly in New England. Swent had moved far away from his roots.

The house and its contents were to be sold and the proceeds lumped together with his investment portfolio and bequeathed to various organizations, an approach consistent with Swent’s recent philanthropic bent. The bulk of it all, laid out in percentage terms, was to be split among several universities, some familiar national charities, and several local non-profits. One of these was called the Central Rockies Associated Foundations and Trusts, Inc. and another was called the Center for Retreats of the Army of God. CRAFTI, according to its web site, was a clearing house for non-profits throughout the Colorado mountains, and it redistributed funds widely.

I also discovered that CRAG, located just south of Estes Park on the Peak-to-Peak Highway at the north end of the Tahosa Valley, proclaimed itself the premier mountain retreat center for evangelicals interested in promoting their religion to non-believers. Every army, they asserted, needed to undertake strategic retreats, and the Army of God used its retreats, at the Tahosa Valley center, to formulate and fine-tune new strategies to bring the unwashed into the fold. Like the universities and the familiar charities, they were tax exempt—meaning, I suspected, that these beneficiaries collectively would offer tax shelters for almost all of Swent’s estate.

The question of who might benefit financially from Swent’s death was therefore not going to be answered by his will—unless a bunch of professors, or maybe the rugby team, knocked him off so that their university’s endowment could grow.

On the other hand, Swent’s relatives were basically getting stiffed—but they wouldn’t have known that, and if they had it wouldn’t enhance any previous motivations they might have had to kill him.

It didn’t surprise me that there was no mention of the cocaine or the sex gadgetry in the will, but I would have thought that the Iraqi artifacts would have warranted a paragraph or two. As it was, the instructions would have required them to be liquidated along with the house and furniture.

Well, I thought, that part had been taken care of, courtesy of my clever idea and Brad Winchester's good sense.

I fed the will into home-office scanner, and the optical character recognition software automatically digitized it so it became incorporated into the overall Swent database. Searches would now include its information as well as everything that Hal's original multi-system search had found. Out of curiosity, I re-ran the Loogie searches I had earlier, but with the will included this time.

The new results changed everything.

* * *

The computer network that Hal and I had assembled for our search process at MPARC on Sunday had included all of the federal computers that he and I had access to plus some usual suspects such as the Google cloud. We had not, however, included any State of Colorado systems, because they were out of our respective universes, computer-wise. But several of the non-profits that had emerged from my Loogie search processes were Colorado corporations, and State of Colorado computer systems held their records.

It was mid-afternoon, and I suspected that Hal would still be tied up with Harmon Jameson, so I called Annette.

"Annette? Mac. Say, I wonder what it would take for me to get credentials for the State of Colorado's computers that hold public records, especially corporation records. The thing is, the computer search that Hal and I ran yesterday didn't include any Colorado computer systems."

"I think I understand. It shouldn't be a problem, Mac. Let me make a couple of calls." She paused. "How are things over there?"

"It's going to be a long, long road back, Annette. Lots of people have lost homes, and access to cities down on the plains is going to take several months. Sam and I are OK, but many others just aren't. And we're not all that far from winter, are we?"

"Well, if you need to get away again, we're here for you. Like I said, our guest wing hardly ever gets used, and we'd be delighted to have you here. And I'll call right back with the computer information."

While I waited, I set up a new Loogie search, using Sunday's results, the ones that Hal had put into my filesystem on the MPARC computers, to be combined with data from the new, Colorado computers that Annette was working on for me. That would make the whole thing faster, and I couldn't replicate Sunday's searches without Hal's involvement anyway.

Twenty minutes later, an impatient twenty minutes for me, Annette called back with the login information I needed, and it took me only another five minutes to get my new search started. Then I had to wait again, but the smaller network this time produced results that almost felt like instant gratification—and gratifying it was, because it validated the suspicions I'd felt after including Swent's will in the search domain.

Got 'em, I thought. Now I just have to prove it. Or, better yet, figure out how to flush them out in a way so that they prove it themselves.

As I was pondering this, the doorbell rang.

When we'd bought our house, the two sidelight windows on either side of the solid front door had been clear—and that seemed too public, so we had them frosted. But then there was no visibility out,

and Sam had insisted on installing one of those little peep-hole viewers. I'd become accustomed to using it.

And this time, what I peeped at was a Boy Scout, fidgeting. So I opened the door, and he launched into an obviously prepared speech.

"Hello, sir, We, the Estes Park Boy Scouts, are going door-to-door delivering these." He handed me a sheet of paper. "I'm sorry to say that the flood has destroyed the sanitary sewer downhill from here, and you're in the 'no-flush' zone. Have a good day."

He didn't waste time turning to leave, but our porch, with sets of steps and a sharp turn, doesn't lend itself to quick escapes.

"Wait!" I had, as you'd think, questions. "What about..."

He turned. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir, but I really can't answer questions. There's a phone number and email address on that sheet, if you have questions"

And he scurried off.

As I closed the door, I heard a toilet flushing, and Sam walked into the living room. "Who was that?"

I handed her the sheet of paper. "Now, don't you get going and feeling guilty. You didn't know."

I watched her eyes get big as she read it, and I continued to watch them as she read it again. The second time through, they narrowed into little slits.

"Well, what the hell are we supposed to do, anyway?"

"Right, well, you saw the deal. Public facilities for now, neighborhood port-a-johns pretty soon. All over this end of town. This must affect three or four thousand people."

"Port-a-johns!! Like, like..."

"Yeah, like your great-great grandmother used to have out back of the farm house. But these are fiberglass and will probably be conveniently located down the block. And hopefully they'll get pumped out every now and then."

"But...but..."

"I know, it seems bad now. And, y'know what? I think it'll seem lots worse as time goes on and winter weather starts to move in. I mean, I can probably manage by peeing on the bushes in the middle of the night, but, well..."

"Yeah! Exactly! But what about *me*...well, this is just impossible. Do something!"

She'd adopted that classic stance again, and, to me, it was just as sexy as ever.

"Well, let me see if I can find out how long this may go on."

Atypically, she followed me in to the study and stood behind my chair as I started trying to find information on the internet. The Estes Park web site offered little hope.

"Oh, see this, Sam?" I pointed at one of their recent updates. "The town is saying that it'll probably take about six weeks to get even a temporary sewer line installed."

"SIX WEEKS OF NOT FLUSHING THE TOILETS?" Sam was livid. "What are we supposed to do? This is the twenty-first century in the U-S-A, for Christ's sake. Not some third-world place in Africa or Asia where you have to use a hole in the yard!"

“Now, now. The damage has been pretty severe, according to what they’re saying on this web site. A couple of miles of ruined feeder pipes. And you don’t want all that sewage to just go into the watershed, do you, or the lake?” I had an idea, and stood up to hug her while I filled her in. “Say, maybe you could pack up your car and go stay with Hal and Annette. They’d be happy to have you, because you could paint their mural from real life, with all the changing light and so on, rather than from Hal’s photograph. And the aspen will be turning colors pretty soon, and that should be spectacular over there.”

She stopped yelling, and I could tell she was thinking about the idea. “It doesn’t sound like you’re going to come with me.”

“Well, I need to be here for this murder investigation. I can’t do it right from over there. But maybe, you know, I could come over now and then to visit and to work more with Hal’s computers.” Wait! I thought. Priorities, pal, priorities. “Mainly to see you, of course.”

She snuggled into my hug. “So, Mac, really. Why did you faint over there at Hal and Annette’s the other evening? What did you think I was going to announce, anyway?”

I’d known this would be coming, and I’d resolved to wing it. Let’s just say that I did so in such a way that our last night together was one to remember for a while. We opted for a motel that wasn’t in the no-flush zone and, lo and behold, the room we got had a Jacuzzi tub big enough for the two of us.

The way that worked out made me think about getting one installed at home.

* * *

Twelve

It took most of the morning for Sam to get started west on Tuesday. She decided to pack for six weeks, not that she had forty-two sets of undies or anything, but the upcoming changes in the weather were going to require a versatile wardrobe. By the time she was finished packing, she had so much luggage that I couldn’t see how it was all going to fit in her pink Beetle. Since I wasn’t coming, though, we managed.

As she was deciding what to take, I put the winter tires on her car, so that she’d be ready in case—or, more likely, when—it snowed at Hal and Annette’s place. Living almost next door to a ski area as they did, being prepared for snow after mid-September was part of the routine. I also made sure that Sam had the right maps to find her way back home after Trail Ridge Road closed for the season.

Sam had called Annette the previous evening to explain the situation and take her up on her offer of hospitality. Annette, of course, was shocked at the state of affairs, sanitation-wise, and virtually demanded that Sam get herself over to Fraser right away. She eased up a bit only when Sam told her that we were in a flush-capable motel for the night.

Although I was listening to Sam’s end of the conversation, it didn’t sound as if my name came up at all. Sure, I thought, worry about Sam—guys like me can just make like bears and do our business in the woods. Or, because there aren’t any woods in our neighborhood, at one of the several public restroom facilities around town. None closer than a couple of miles away.

Well, I thought, at least there are those bushes out in the yard.

Eventually, the car was loaded and Sam, after a more extended goodbye than I thought necessary, was on her way. The first thing I did was check the refrigerator to see what there might be for me to eat,

and the second thing was make a trip to the Safeway. I knew that frozen dinners would seem like a big come-down from Sam's cooking, especially her cooking as guided by Julia Child's cookbook, but I figured I was going to be busy.

Before I picked up those frozen dinners, though, I took a turn through the neighborhood on the hill above Stanley Village, the shopping center where the Safeway was. It was a higher-end development, rather pricy by my standards, and one with houses of upwards of thirty years old. This meant that the landscaping was mature, something that pleased me, for Michael J. Decker had a house there and I needed to get into it.

My overseas work for the three-letter agencies had included all sorts of sneaky episodes, including clandestine searches of buildings of various kinds. Office buildings were the easiest, even those with 'round-the-clock guards, but residences were not far behind. Well, except when there was a family dog.

I knew, though, that a search of Decker's house would be of little use unless I could eventually use what I found as evidence, and that would require a search warrant.

So after I returned home and put my groceries in the freezer, I called Brad Winchester, explained my problem, and outlined the background on Decker.

"You found him in Swent's house twice? With the door kicked in? Seems like he ought to be in jail, estate executor or no," he said. "Tell you what. We've got a judge down here who's been really tough on the two looters we've caught so far. Send me your reports of these incidents and I'll see what I can get him to do."

"Outstanding, Brad. Naturally, the broader and more comprehensive the search I can do, the better. And it needs to include whatever office papers there may be. But I hope you can keep this between us and the judge. Estes Park is a small town and word gets around fast. We don't need Decker knowing about this, right?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. And, say, do you need help? Aaron Smithy is going to get up your way this afternoon—they got the Peak-to-Peak Highway open, finally. He's going to be my deputy in Estes Park for the duration."

"No, no thanks, Brad. I think I can handle this myself." Smithy's involvement, I thought, would be the last thing I'd need.

"OK, then, Mac, I'll fax you the warrant as soon as I get it. What's your number?"

I gave him the number of the fax service we used, which would forward the document to me as an email attachment.

That taken care of, I undertook a little trip into our crawl space.

Our house doesn't have a basement, but, unlike the house I'd owned in Florida, it wasn't on a concrete slab, either. Instead, under the main floor was a crawl space with somewhere between 4-5 feet of clearance between the ground and the floor joists. It had not been something that Sam paid any attention to when we were house-hunting, but it was a major attraction for me. I needed a location to store, in a very private and secure way, the tools of my trade—various and sundry gadgets and supplies that I'd learned could come in handy at unpredictable times, as well as my weapons and ammunition. It's not like I have a huge collection, but some of the weapons, in particular, aren't meant for civilian use, and they don't need to be out on the streets. I'd built several locking storage cabinets in the crawl space, all suspended from the floor joists and off the ground.

Good thing, too, because when I got down there I discovered that seepage from the days of rain the previous week had turned the ground into mud, sandy mud, given the soil in our area, but it was a good thing that nothing was sitting on it.

I found what I needed, probably way more than I needed, actually, locked the cabinets back up, and crawled out the little door into the garage. Then I went looking for the box fan I knew was stored somewhere, found it, and set it up to blow fresh air into the crawl space—and, I hoped, to dry it out.

At least we didn't have a basement full of water, like so many folks did. And, yes, Sam was right—the no-flush thing was a bit too third-world to be acceptable. Still, it was just an inconvenience rather than a tragedy. I resolved to shut up and deal with it, and not to complain.

With that in mind, I called Annette.

“Mac, how are you? Did I get the idea that Sam is coming over here all by herself?”

“Uh, I don't know about your ideas, but she is. She ought to arrive shortly. I'm up to my eyeballs in this Swent murder. And all the database searches paid off. That's what I called about. I'm going to need some CBI help.”

“I thought that Sheriff Winchester was on top of things.” She sounded puzzled.

“Yes and no. He's got more flooding in the eastern part of the county to worry about now. And the thing is, I'm pretty sure some of his personnel are compromised, maybe even part of what happened to Swent. Not Brad, and I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't know anything about it all. But I can't really ask his office for help.”

“Oh. Well, what do you need?”

“Brad's getting me a search warrant for Michael Decker's house, and it would help to have a solid forensics team here to execute it, tomorrow morning. I'm told the Peak-to-Peak Highway is open, so they wouldn't have to come in through Fraser.”

“I think we can manage that. I'll have a team there by ten, how's that?”

“Perfect, Annette. Thanks.” As I disconnected, my thoughts turned to the few hours after dark, this evening.

* * *

Michael J. Decker's name had turned up over and over again in my database search results in association with a variety of individuals, groups, and organizations. The combination of the various federal databases with what was on the State of Colorado computers was especially powerful in finding these links. For example, the 16-year-old girl whom Swent had been arrested for taking dirty pictures of was identified deep in one the Colorado databases as one Leah Grossman, whose divorced mother, Janice, was a client of Decker's. Apparently, they were doing nude modeling together for Swent's camera, but it was Leah's participation in these questionable photo-sessions that got Swent busted.

Of somewhat more interest to me, aside from the curiosity factor of the Grossman arrangement, was that one of the organizations in which Decker was involved, to the point of being a board member, was the outfit that ran the Center for Retreats of the Army of God, CRAG. Further, they held weekly meetings up at their retreat center in the Tahosa Valley every Tuesday evening. I figured this would keep him occupied for the better part of three hours, after dark.

I'd also learned that Decker was divorced but had kept the house, in which he now lived alone and maintained his legal office. It was therefore the perfect time to have a look through the place before the

CBI team executed the search warrant that Brad Winchester promised me. I thought there might be some information there that I wanted to keep to myself for the present.

The warrant came to my email box late in the afternoon, and to celebrate I heated up a package of frozen mac and cheese, adding to it some extra pecorino Romano for zing. Then I put together my kit for the evening and stashed everything carefully in the Jeep. Its previous owner had installed, in addition to the wealth of off-road gear, a locking strong-box in the back, and I filled it with a variety of useful gadgets.

Decker's house sat on a cul-de-sac on the hill above the Safeway, and I'd seen the signs of a national home-security company when I'd toured the neighborhood earlier. For me, that was good news, because it meant that Decker probably relied on that company's technology, rather than a dog, to secure his house. And, well, with all due respect, that technology was a piece of cake to defeat.

A bigger worry for me was where to park and how to avoid being observed by accident—if Decker didn't have a dog, others did, and they sometimes walked them in the evening. Running across a stranger all dressed in black and wearing camouflage makeup would likely make for interesting neighborhood gossip—after, of course, a phone call to the PD.

But all that mature landscaping, plus the rain that had started up again, did the trick, and within a half-hour after dark I was inside Swent's house with the security system disabled. He'd left several lights on, but all I had to do was to avoid walking between them and the windows. And in the unlit rooms, I had my blue-bulbed flashlight to show me the way.

I spent about fifteen minutes unsuccessfully looking for hidden closets or other storage areas, as at Swent's house but didn't come up with anything. That left me perhaps an hour and a half to examine Decker's office carefully.

It was an old-fashioned study, dominated by dark wood and leather furniture with plush, floor-length drapes covering most of the wall behind the desk. The only thing missing was the smell of stale cigars. I thought a second door would open into a closet, but it turned out to be a lavatory. It occurred to me that Swent's house was not in the no-flush part of town, and I decided to spend a few minutes taking advantage of the opportunity.

Feeling relieved, I stood in the lavatory doorway and surveyed the room. Aside from the desk, the most obvious thing in there, prominently displayed against the wall next to the desk, was a gun cabinet. That must make clients feel comfortable and secure, I thought, a lawyer with guns close at hand.

Against the opposite wall stood several file cabinets and bookcases, all of the same dark, polished wood as the gun cabinet and the desk. There were two comfortable-looking, leather-upholstered side chairs facing the desk, the surface of which was empty except for the usual accessories—an in-box, a fancy pen in a holder, a telephone, and a large, flat-screen computer monitor. Behind the desk was a throne-like executive swivel chair. Decker apparently liked to work an intimidation factor into meetings with clients. I turned to the file cabinets.

Decker's files were arranged more traditionally than Swent's, alphabetically by client, which suited my purpose perfectly. I found Swent's file easily, but it was too big either to read or photograph in the time I had, so I slipped the whole thing into the courier bag I'd brought. Janice Grossman's file included an unlabeled DVD as well as several pictures of her and Leah in what can only be called "compromising positions"—so much for my curiosity factor—and it occurred to me that these pictures made Decker guilty of possessing kiddie porn, "officer of the court" or no.

I spent all the time I felt comfortable with, collected three other files I found, and photographed key documents in several others. Decker's computer was sitting there, humming contentedly, beckoning, and I noticed that there was an external USB drive sitting next to it and a flash drive stuck into one of the

USB slots in the CPU box. I unplugged those without ceremony and put them into my courier bag, and, after some thought, decided to let the CBI team deal with the computer itself in the morning. After checking the room carefully to ensure that I'd left no trace of my presence beyond the stuff in my bag, I closed the lavatory door and turned to leave.

But just then I heard the click of a lock's being forced in another part of the house, and then there were stealthy footsteps headed my way.

I thought of the lavatory—it had another door leading into some other room—but remembered that its hinges had squeaked when I'd opened and closed it before. The only other option was behind the drapes, so I eased to the end by the gun cabinet and slid behind them, making as little disturbance as I could manage.

Between the gun cabinet and the corner, so close I could almost reach out and touch it, was a large, framed photograph of Decker posed with a bull elk he'd apparently shot, an impressive 7x7 specimen, and I noticed that there was enough light to see a reflection of most of the room off the glass in the frame. I could only hope that whoever was coming down the hall wouldn't see a reflection of me.

A few seconds later, that individual crept into the office, someone dressed not unlike I was, all in mottled black, but with a black ski mask instead of camo makeup. In his right hand, he—and the skin-tight black coverall made it pretty clear that it was a he—held a very large, long-barreled revolver that looked like a .44 magnum, maybe a Colt Anaconda, fitted with a suppressor. It was a huge piece of hardware, its size emphasized by his small, slender stature, on which a small backpack gave him a humpish look. He looked around the room and slipped over to the lavatory door, opened it, cringed when it squeaked, and stepped inside, closing it behind himself, but not all the way.

Stalemate, I thought, except he didn't know about my presence. As I was trying to figure out what to do, I heard a rumbling and decided it was the garage door opening. Decker must have arrived home from his meeting with the CRAG people.

Over the next several minutes I worked hard at breathing very quietly, mouth wide open, while I listened to noises from what must have been the kitchen—doors of various sizes opened and closed, ice cubes clinked, and a liquid was poured. Eventually, Decker walked into the room carrying a briefcase in one hand and a glass containing the ice cubes and an amber liquid in the other. He walked around the desk to sit down on his throne, about four feet from where I was standing behind the drapes, and set both the glass and the briefcase on the desktop.

"Stupid sons-a-bitches," he muttered, as he reached out to open the briefcase.

"What the..." It was the squeak of the lavatory door hinge that surprised him and caused him to freeze, and then he stood up when the small, black-clad figure emerged into the room.

"Who..." Decker stopped when he saw the revolver pointed at him. "Wait..."

But there was to be no waiting. The suppressor was only partly effective, and the report of that big gun reminded me of the time Sam had dropped a five-pound bag of rice on the kitchen floor when I was down in the crawl space. The first shot hit Decker almost in the center of his chest, between the sternum and the left nipple, and knocked him back into his chair. Beside me the curtain twitched and the window shattered. The second shot blew his head apart like it was a water balloon filled with Campbell's Cream of Tomato soup. The curtain twitched again, and the rest of the glass in the window fell to the floor.

The figure in black took just enough time to pull out a smart phone and take a couple of pictures of his victim before getting busy. First he tipped over the bookcases into the center of the room and broke up the chairs, adding the wood to the mess. After that, he walked around the desk and, with obvious effort, rolled it over on top of the books and bookcases, and hauled Decker's body onto the pile. Then he

opened the file drawers, tossed the paper around the room, and smashed the front of the gun cabinet, which gave him the opportunity to pitch ammunition boxes in with the debris. Finally, he removed his backpack and took out three liter-sized canisters. These he emptied onto the pile of paper, wood, and protoplasm, and the cordite smell in the room took on the aroma you'd expect from a mixture of kerosene and acetone.

He paused and took the time to survey his handiwork, then decided on a finishing touch, tipping the empty file cabinets onto the pile. That done, he took an old-fashioned cigarette lighter from a pocket, lit it, tossed it at the rubble, and dashed down the hall.

With a deep *ker-whump* that I could feel in my stomach, the room exploded in flame.

I hadn't noticed, but that window I was standing next to was really a French door, now missing its glass and open to the outside. But the explosion of flame had pushed the drape next to me out the window, and I was tangled in the rest of it, all wrapped up in soft, plush fabric that smelled dusty. It was quickly getting hot, and I noticed that I was beginning to have trouble breathing.

Just as I started to panic, and to my everlasting relief, the drape was sucked back in the window, and it untangled itself from me in the process. As I stepped out into the fresh air, I noticed two things—there was a stiff breeze into the house, no doubt the draft of the fire, and the rain was more intense than before. Even though I knew that more rain would cause only more problems, I was glad to see it. Maybe, I thought, all that mature landscaping vegetation would survive this fire.

* * *

My first instinct, of course, was to get away from there post-haste. But as I was working my way back to my Jeep, listening to the ammunition in the fire beginning to explode and keeping to the shadows and bushes as much as possible, it occurred to me that I had law-enforcement credentials plus that search warrant. Maybe my makeup would be a bit suspicious, but I really didn't need to run. My instinct kept me moving, however.

Lights were coming on in the neighboring houses, and about the time I reached the Jeep, I heard sirens. Even though the local fire department comprised volunteers, it was on the ball, I thought. And a good thing, too, if the CBI search team was going to have anything to search in the morning. I expected the office to be completely destroyed, but I really hadn't inspected the rest of the house in detail. Maybe there would be something left to shed light on this whole thing.

Back at the Jeep, I used a towel I'd brought, along with some rainwater, to scrub most of the camo makeup off my face, and then I sat back to think. That hit on Decker had been about as professional as I'd ever seen, at least in the category of "make a big splash" hits. Of course, the Swent crucifixion was splashy, too, but it was both crude and sadistic. Decker was whacked by a professional, as far as I could tell. But why? And who was that guy with the Anaconda, anyway?

Maybe, I thought, I could use those databases I'd already searched to generate a list of CRAG members and see if any of them had the sort of background that would suggest the skill set I saw in action back there. That sort of professionalism came from training and experience, as I well knew. A three-pound revolver with the extra weight of a suppressor on its business end wasn't something that you shot accurately without lots of practice. And that guy's accuracy had been quite good, particularly the head shot.

When my breathing and heart rate finally calmed back to something resembling normal, I started the Jeep and, as quietly as possible, eased it down the street and out toward the main road. Because I had to pass Stanley Village, I pulled in there to try to blend in with the late-evening shoppers who were

picking up last-minute items from the Safeway. After a couple of turns around the parking lot, I headed out the other exit and pointed the Jeep toward home.

Part of me was repeating the “I’m getting too old for this…” mantra, and part of me was wondering what the hell I’d just witnessed. That second part, I knew, would be keeping me up for a while yet.

Just before my turnoff from South St. Vrain, my phone came to life, reminding me that I’d forgotten to turn it off during my little escapade in Decker’s house. As I pulled it out of my shirt pocket, I thanked my lucky stars that no calls had come in while I was hiding behind that drapery.

“MacQuarrie here.”

“Mr. MacQuarrie, this is Sergeant Alf Strzpyk, Estes Park PD. You asked us to keep an eye on Mr. Michael Decker.”

“I did, and thanks for calling.” I had a suspicion what this call was about.

“Well, I’m at his residence, which is on fire. There’s no sign of him, however.”

“Hmm. Well, presumably he’ll turn up at some point. How bad is the fire?”

“Looks like it’s pretty well confined to one wing, the east end of the house. They’re getting it knocked down, so it doesn’t look like the entire structure is going to be lost, but that end, whatever those rooms are, they’re gone.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Sergeant.” I thought a minute. “And, say, are you on duty tomorrow morning?”

“I clock in at eight for a day shift tomorrow. Let me know if you need anything.”

I was pretty sure I’d be calling him.

Back at home, I finished the job of washing that makeup off, took a shower, still allowed under those pesky no-flush rules, and poured myself a generous B&B on the rocks. Part of my brain had been busy processing Decker’s shooting ever since it happened, and a couple of questions were rattling around up there.

For example, it appeared as if the shooter was familiar with Decker’s house. He forced the lock and showed up in the office almost immediately, as if he knew where it was. And he headed right for the lavatory door, as if he knew to hide in there—although its squeaky hinge had surprised him. Maybe, I thought, the squeak was a recent development. Or maybe he hadn’t really been in the house before but had only a map or some such to go on. That would mean that someone who had been in the house had prepared that map—which meant that whoever set Decker up was a friend, associate, or client.

Then there was the question of the shooter’s identity. If this whole affair was a truly professional hit, then the shooter would not be someone local. A pro from outside would have been brought in. That assumption fits with the notion of a map, I thought. And it would also be better for all concerned if that were the case, because the last thing that Estes Park needed was an expert assassin on the loose. An outsider, I knew, would already be on the road out of town, even if that road was over Trail Ridge.

Then there was the muttered “sons-a-bitches” I’d heard from Decker, nearly his last words. They could only refer to people at the CRAG meeting. Yet the hit had clearly been planned well in advance—professionals like that guy in the black coverall, especially ones from out of town, don’t operate on last-minute instructions.

Finally, there was the splashy nature of the whole thing. I’m ashamed to say that my years working for Uncle Sam included several assignments that involved, as we called it, “wet work”—all authorized under various statutes and regulations, of course. But all of my jobs of that nature had been as

clandestine as possible, usually involving close-up head-shots using a suppressed .22 pistol. The only conceivable reason to use such a large-caliber weapon as shot Decker and then to set the fire would be to send a message to someone else. Who, I wondered, could that be?

Such message-sending would fit perfectly into the Chávez cartel's motivation for killing Swent, but I had seen no indication in all of the database search results that Decker was in their bad graces, nor was there any connection between them except Swent. Unless they knew Decker to be Swent's executor and had been turned down for a payment already. That possibility seemed worth exploring.

And a splashy hit would also be one possible means for revenge by the Iraqis who were so put out with Swent—except I'd dealt with that. Also, despite its brutality, Decker's death was just too quick for that Iraqi bunch. They'd want extended suffering and lots of it, just like the way Swent was actually murdered.

It was getting late, I'd neglected to call Sam as promised—a gaffe that I'd have to figure out how to make up for—and the combination of an adrenalin crash and the B&B had relaxed me into somnolence. There wasn't going to be any more computer database searching, using Loogie or anything else, tonight.

But I had one more chore. I had to go outside and check on the health of our bushes. When we bought our house, it had enough landscaping so that it didn't look barren, but, having spent almost all of her life in South Florida, Sam's idea of landscaping was far, far more lush than what came with the house. So we'd spent a pretty penny on both bushes and underground drip irrigation to nurture them.

My chore was to go out there and decide which of those new bushes needed nourishing in the form of various salts and uric acid.

It turned out that, given how heavy the rainfall had become, I didn't have to worry about providing those bushes with too concentrated a dose of that nourishment. That was the good news. The bad news was that I got good and soaked taking a leak.

* * *

Thirteen

Wednesday morning dawned gray, gloomy, and raining like cats and dogs.

Getting soaked the night before had revived me just a bit, and I had spent a while lying in bed trying to figure out an alternative to getting soaked again in the middle of the night. But then it occurred to me that showers were allowed, so whatever went down the shower drain was deemed OK. That meant that the key was sufficient dilution. *That* meant I could deal with the old-guy-getting-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night problem in any number of ways.

Having figured that out, I slept like a baby.

Because the CBI forensics team wasn't going to arrive until about 10 Wednesday morning, waking up at 6:30 meant that I had plenty of time to get a start on the day. That start included, of course, breakfast, but while I was eating my fried-egg, ham, and cheese sandwich, a home-made, gourmet version of the famous McDonald's creation, I was also working the databases for more information on CRAG.

As a tax-exempt non-profit, CRAG's directors, structure, and tax-returns were all public information. In addition to the connections I'd noticed previously, a new one jumped out at me: the

CRAG director's background. One of the more deeply classified databases told me that Lemuel Purdy, the current CRAG director and Elias Purdy's brother, had spent three decades working for the CIA, mostly as an analyst at Langley. But he also had some field time in South America. Now retired, he lived on the CRAG campus in the upper Tahosa Valley on the west slope of Twin Sisters Mountain, and apparently he was putting his career experience to work for the Army of God.

The implications of this were not all clear to me, but one thing was obvious: Lem Purdy would know all sorts of people with the skills I'd seen in action the night before at Decker's house—and he might well have some of those skills himself.

Because there was time before the CBI team arrived, I decided to take a quick look at CRAG headquarters.

That turned out to be more of an adventure than I'd anticipated. State Road 7, the designation of the Peak-to-Peak Highway just south of Estes Park, was once again officially closed, as I discovered in a conversation with a dripping-wet State Patrol officer at the base of the long grade out of the Estes Valley. He told me that the highway department had fixed the problems that had closed the road over the weekend, but there was concern that this second episode of rain would create new problems in the form of more mudslides, pavement undermining, and cave-ins.

My CBI shield got me past him only after he warned me to stay away from the edges of the pavement, and I hoped that the same would be the case for the CBI forensics team headed north from Black Hawk.

The drive up the grade was something of an anticlimax after that discussion. Yes, there were places that had clearly suffered considerable damage and others that looked ripe for new damage, and the eroded ditches made those I'd seen the previous week along Marys Lake Road look benign. But, with no traffic, negotiating the road up and over Wind River Pass was easy.

It was different on the other side, at the very upper end of the Tahosa Valley, though. The west side of Twin Sisters Mountain had undergone significant terra-forming over the past week, and it would never be the same again. Mudslides—or, more properly, because they included trees and rocks and Lord knows what-all, debris flows—down normally placid drainage gullies had wreaked havoc on the pastoral setting of the two guest ranches up there, and a truly massive one had, somewhat miraculously, stopped just short of the buildings of one of them.

But the highway had been cleared, and I was able to cruise past all the devastation to the entrance to the CRAG property another couple of miles south. The gate was shut, and there was nothing much to be seen from the highway, so I decided to gain a bit of elevation to improve my vantage point by ignoring the "Closed" sign on the county road up to the Longs Peak Ranger Station on the opposite side of the valley.

I'd noticed that the rain, although continuous, had been spotty, sometimes heavy and sometimes light. Although the heavier downpours blurred things beyond recognition, I could see the CRAG campus when the rain let up a bit. In the meadows in the valley, there were several buildings, all painted white with red roofs, that looked to be dormitories and meeting halls. Closer to the base of Twin Sisters Mountain, there were barns and corrals, with a small herd of horses loafing around under overhanging roofs. The whole property was landscaped in a way that didn't look landscaped, with stands of tall aspen mingled with conifers interspersed with meadows that still supported wildflowers. It was quite beautiful, and I could see how people who came for conferences from flat, dusty places to the east would find it inspirational.

I set my binoculars aside to get a big-picture view of the whole campus, and it presented a scene of pastoral elegance, albeit wet elegance, given the rain. And I noticed another building above the barns, on the lower slope of the mountain.

With the binoculars, I could see it was a remarkable house, probably, I thought, the residence of Lem Purdy. It looked like two houses, actually, built about fifty feet apart and connected by a large and complicated bridge/deck structure. Part of the structure, the bridge part, I supposed, was roofed over; the other, deck-like part had several chairs and tables on it. In good weather, that would be a spectacular place to sit and enjoy the view of Longs Peak and its neighbors, especially in the early summer when there would be a little brook running under that bridge.

Now, however, that brook was raging, and it looked dangerous. Using the binoculars, I scanned up the mountainside along the drainage and discovered evidence of slumping into the gully higher up, with the brook's spilling over part of the slump. Whether there was a new pond forming up there was something I couldn't tell from my vantage point, but seemed possible. Given that, to my decidedly un-expert eyes it looked as if that little brook over which the house sat was ripe for one of those debris flows. And if a big one got started, it looked as if it would take out not only the house but also the barns and much of the campus infrastructure in the meadow.

This presented me with something of a moral dilemma—should I try to warn Purdy and the CRAG facility's residents? This seemed like a responsible approach, what a good citizen would do under the circumstances. But, knowing what I knew at the time from my database searches, there was also a voice in my head that was urging me to just wait and see.

Resolving that dilemma was deferred for me when my cell phone buzzed in my shirt pocket.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“MacQuarrie, this is James Levenger, CBI. I'm heading the forensics team you requested, and we're just passing Allenspark.”

My mental map of the Peak-to-Peak Highway was not quite what I would have liked, but it was at least fresh in my mind from the trip down to Black Hawk and back.

“Good to hear from you! I'm glad they let you come up the highway instead of sending you around through Granby. Turns out I'm about five minutes up the road from you, doing some recon. I'll be in a black Jeep with my flashers on, just past the turnoff for the Longs Peak Ranger Station.” A memory of my recent trip popped into my head. “Not the Wild Basin turnoff, the Longs Peak turnoff. I can lead you into town and to our search site.”

“That's the best news I've had all morning, MacQuarrie. Thanks. This whole thing with the flood you've had seems pretty on the edge up here.”

“It is, actually. See you shortly.” I disconnected.

* * *

I hopped in the Jeep, drove back down to the Peak-to-Peak, and parked just north of and across from the road up to the ranger station, with my flashers on. A few minutes later, two cars appeared in my rear-view mirror, and the lead one flashed its headlights. I pulled out and headed back towards town with them following.

Decker's house was, as I expected, a smoky mess surrounded by yellow tape, but there was no one present when we arrived. The flooding, I decided, was a justifiable priority for the local authorities.

The CBI forensics team went right to work, and I, with nothing much to do, called Sam.

“*There* you are. About time you called.” She sounded more relieved than mad. “Were you out partying all night, or what?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Nothing like having an all-night party with lots of hot babes and no working bathrooms.”

I heard a giggle. “That reminds me of when you found me at that cabin out in the Everglades. We were a bunch of hot babes, that’s for sure, but not really in a mood to party. Did I ever thank you for rescuing me?”

“Ever since. But you’re welcome to thank me more.” That memory made for sweet feelings for me, too. “Anyway, I’m sorry I didn’t call last night, but it just got too late by the time I had a chance. This case has kept me busy, what with my being the only person working it. How are things over your way?”

“Beautiful. Kinda chilly this morning, actually, but beautiful. Sunshine and late summer flowers.”

“Well, that makes me jealous. It’s raining again here, started last evening and hasn’t let up since. I think this flooding business is only going to get worse. They closed the Peak-to-Peak again.” It occurred to me not to be overly gloomy. “But our forensics team got through, so we’re making progress on the case. That’s something, at least.”

“Progress is good. And speaking of that, I’m making good progress on this panorama. I’m going to sketch it out in my usual style and then see how much detail I can fill in. That’ll keep me busy so I don’t worry to much. About you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going all Bierstadt.”

“Huh? Who? Oh, you mean Alfred Bierstadt. No, no that’s too much detail. And he made his stuff up anyway, or so I read. I’m doing the real deal here.” She paused. “So when am I likely to see you?”

“I’m hoping this weekend. Like I said, the case is progressing nicely.” As much as I liked talking with her, I felt the urge to do something productive with the CBI team. “Listen, I need to say goodbye for now. The forensics guys need me for something. Talk to you later?”

“I sure hope so. Call me this evening, OK?”

The fib wasn’t really that far off the mark—the forensics team would surely appreciate some coffee, I decided. And there was a Starbucks just down the hill. Talk about being productive!

But they did appreciate it, especially the trio who were involved in the dirty job of sifting through the rubble of the burned-out study. Between the accelerants and the wood furniture, that entire wing of the house had been reduced to ashes, brass cabinet fittings, metal gun parts—and some teeth. I decided not to mention that they were Decker’s teeth, but rather to let the team find that out from dental records. My visit the night before was going to be my little secret, along with the documents and computer gear I’d made off with.

In contrast to the search of what had been the study, searching the remainder of the house was routine, although the smoke smell everywhere was annoying. James Levenger had brought seven CBI forensics experts with him, and three had spread out to examine thoroughly all the unburned rooms. Just as I was delivering Levenger his coffee, his radio crackled.

“Jim? Louie here, I’m in the master bedroom. I think I’ve found a safe behind a false set of shelves in the closet.”

Levenger pushed the button on the microphone on his lapel. “Good work. I’ll be right up.”

I managed not to spill any of the remaining coffee as I followed Levenger up the staircase, embarrassed at myself for not finding that safe the previous evening. But I kept that to myself.

The guy named Louie was in the biggest bedroom, staring out a window at the ashes of the study. “Gotta say, Jim, it sure looks like whoever set this fire was interested only in that wing that burned.”

“It was raining, I’m told, and the fire department got here pretty quickly. Otherwise the whole place would probably have gone. It’s frame construction with wood siding, after all” Levenger looked about the room. “So, what did you find up here?”

“In there.” Louie pointed at an open door and headed that way holding the cup of coffee I’d given him.

The door led to a large bathroom with another door in a near wall. Through that door was a walk-in closet with clothes on hangers along two of the walls and a set of shelves holding folded clothes on a third.

“Watch this.” Louie stooped and reached under the bottom shelf.

There was a sharp click, and the shelving unit and the wall behind it began to pivot. He stepped back and gave the shelves a pull, and a doorway to a hidden room appeared. There was a large safe immediately to the left.

Levenger was nodding. “*Very* good work, Louie. I wonder if we can get this thing open?”

“I’ll get right on it.” Louie looked eager to tackle the challenge.

I followed Levenger around as he wandered the house, checking with his other team members, but no one had found anything else of interest.

“Looks like the interesting stuff was in that study or it’s still in the safe, I guess.” He looked discouraged. “And I wonder what happened to Mr. Decker? Do you suppose those teeth we found downstairs are his?”

“Good question, Jim. But didn’t you set one guy to checking the yard?” I thought it best to change the subject.

We found the final CBI team member outside in the rain. He was studying part of the back yard, just uphill from where the study had been.

“Boss, I think I might have something here. The metal detector picked something up, two somethings, actually. I’m trying to get a good fix on their positions relative to the house before I dig.” He was wearing a full rain suit and so didn’t look too miserable.

I had retrieved an umbrella from my Jeep, so I wasn’t getting too wet, either.

But Levenger wasn’t so lucky. “We can figure that out later. Just dig, willya? I’m getting soaked.”

“OK, I already got pictures. But look at this.” He pointed to faint marks in the mud. “It looks like the rain has almost washed away some grooves or something, grooves pointing toward the house.”

A few minutes later, Levenger was holding two mis-shapen lumps of lead in his hand, letting the rain wash the mud off them.

He held them out to me. “What do you make of this, Mac?”

“They look like large-caliber slugs to me. Hollow points, maybe, although who knows what they hit in the ground there.”

“That’d be my guess, too. And I’ll want the lab guys to verify this, but they look pretty new. I bet they haven’t been in the ground for more than a day or two.” He put the wet metal into a plastic bag he’d pulled from a pocket. “And those grooves in the dirt we saw are probably the entry points. They’re not going toward the house, they’re coming from it.”

I knew that already, of course, and it occurred to me that as soon as Decker's teeth were identified, he'd be declared a victim of the fire, which was clearly arson. The question I had to confront was whether to bring up the fact that he was actually killed by those slugs the CBI guys found. And the answer to that depended on all the stuff I'd taken home with me the night before. With all the excitement and then my adrenalin crash, I'd not had a chance to look through it all—Swent's and the other paper files from Decker's cabinets, as well as his computer media—and it was clearly time to do so.

I made excuses and left the CBI forensics team to their work.

* * *

As I headed for my Jeep, I thought about the portfolio of secrets that I was accumulating. Before too long, they'd turn into unwanted baggage, I knew. Much of my time with the spooky agencies had been spent operating alone, on my own in various sandy foreign countries, places where secrets were not only a way of life but also a way to stay alive. But it was becoming more and more obvious to me that working with a team of law-enforcement personnel meant that secrets could get in the way.

The trouble is, I thought, once you've got 'em, secrets are hard to let go of without raising everyone's suspicions about other things. Even Annette would probably be royally pissed at me.

But if I could pull a rabbit out of the hat of all that paper and computer gear I'd purloined, maybe that would help. So while I was waiting for Decker's safe to get cracked, I'd get cracking on some analysis.

I also thought about the rain. It had turned into an annoying drizzle, but it was still falling steadily. And that meant that the river through town was something to worry about. If the town wound up getting cut in half by impassable bridges, I'd be on the side with no groceries. So I decided to stop at the Safeway to stock up a bit.

Fortunately, it was still quite warm, so it didn't seem likely that Trail Ridge Road would get iced up permanently. The Park Service had a reputation for closing that highest through road when there was any sort of potential hazard—they'd already done it a few days previously, in fact. And that would mean the town would not only be cut in half, it would be isolated as well. Of course, the cut in half part would isolate my half anyway, given that my half was on the wrong side of the river to get to Trail Ridge, but maybe some fast talking could get me out of town via the Peak-to-Peak Highway, as it had earlier in the morning.

Judging by the crowd in the Safeway, I wasn't the only one concerned about the rain, nor, apparently, about isolation. Once again, the shelves were getting bare. But I found enough in the way of groceries, non-perishable ones at that, to last me for a couple of weeks.

And on the way home, I found that the river had once again begun to over-top the main bridge, and I had to pull strings to get across. At least, I thought, there's a liquor store over here on my side of town, and a hardware store plus a lumber yard, too, should the needs arise. And my refrigerator was pretty full, so, with all the new canned goods, at least I wouldn't starve.

Back at home, I put on a can of soup to heat up slowly, a bachelor lunch, and got down to work. I had previously scanned Swent's will into my combined database, but the other material in his file was still hard-copy, as was the material from the other paper files I'd taken from Decker's study.

Because I'd been scanning my personal financial paperwork—bills, statements, and so on—for the past couple of years, I had a routine, somewhat tedious but a routine nonetheless, so it went fairly quickly, pretty much on autopilot. With that complete, I added the contents of the USB and flash drives from Decker's study, and then ran my Loggie searches all over again while I ate.

After lunch, I discovered, for the second time in three days, new information that changed everything. I was trying to put all into context when my phone buzzed.

“Mac? Jim Levensger here. We got that safe open. Need any drugs? Money? How about a beautiful antique necklace?”

“Antique necklace?”

“Yeah. Looks really old, kind of primitive, in a very elegant fashion. There’s other jewelry, too.”

I thought for a minute. “Is that it? Money, drugs, jewelry?”

“Yep. Were you expecting something else?”

“I didn’t know what to expect, exactly. Maybe some paperwork of some kind. I guess all that got burned up with the study, though.” I paused again. “Did you guys figure out the combination to the safe? Or what?”

“We’ve got the combination now.”

“Outstanding. I guess the thing to do is inventory everything and lock it all up again. It didn’t look like that safe is going anywhere, it’s so big and heavy. And, if I recall, bolted to the floor. Please be sure to take pictures of the jewelry, OK?”

“Will do. We’ll take the info back to Denver and then email you copies, OK?”

“That’d be great. And good luck getting out of here. You might want to take Trail Ridge Road this time.” I disconnected.

It would take an expert to be sure, but I suspected that the jewelry was part of the haul of Iraqi antiquities that Swent had acquired. Why it had been in Decker’s possession was something of a puzzle, however.

Except, as I began to review the documents I found at Decker’s, it was really not so much of a puzzle after all. A Loogie search of “Decker plus jewelry” yielded, among other items:

*M.J. Decker, Esq
Estes Park, CO, USA*

*Nellsworth Appraisers
Denver, CO, USA*

Gentlemen:

I’ve enclosed detailed photographs of the items I discussed on the telephone with Mr. Nellsworth, Jr. I trust that this will be sufficient for you to provide a rough estimate of the value of these pieces.

As I mentioned, this is in connection with an estate planning exercise I am conducting for a client, and there are many more such items. Our hope is that these representative examples will provide us with information—no matter how rough the estimates—to allow us to complete the exercise.

Sincerely,

The response was interesting, especially the business about the “private market”:

Dear Mr. Decker:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with our services. As we discussed, we cannot provide valuation using photographs as authoritatively as we can if the items in question are available to us. Accordingly, we hesitate to offer estimates on all of the items.

However, we are particularly impressed by the necklace. It appears to us to be of middle-eastern origin and is likely at least 1500 years old. If its composition is, as it appears to be, gold, and if the gemstones are of the quality they appear to be, the open market value of this necklace is inestimable. If our assumptions are correct, this is a museum quality piece that would probably fetch in the middle seven figures on the private market, should the provenance allow such an approach.

If we can broker this item on the private market for you, we would be happy to discuss terms. And if the other items are of the same provenance as our assumptions about the necklace, our terms will be most generous.

Sincerely,

The dates on the letters were more than three years old, and it dawned on me that Decker was not simply involved with estate planning for Swent. He obviously had other plans for Swent's fortune, plans that went well beyond the terms of Swent's will, plans that fit right in with my conjecture that Decker was in the process of altering the will. After all, if one necklace would fetch something around \$5 million, well, the entire collection could rival the rest of Swent's assets.

That would run into real money indeed.

* * *

Fourteen

Like the cliché about being either the bug or the windshield, sometimes good fortune just shines. And given the dreary weather—it was still raining that Wednesday afternoon, a light, steady drizzle—for anything at all to shine was welcome. The weather forecast was for the system to move out, finally, and I'm sure that everyone in northern Colorado had their fingers crossed.

But because I was warm and dry, and under no particular threat from all the rain, I could revel in what I found on the USB drive that I'd taken from Decker's place. It turned out that it was a high-capacity drive of some three terabytes that Decker used for system backups. And the most recent backup, an incremental one, had taken place earlier Tuesday evening, before I'd broken in—er, I mean executed the search warrant—at Decker's house.

With that incremental backup and all the previous ones, I had everything that had been stored on Decker's computer.

I celebrated with a beer while I figured out how to recover the information there. It took a while—I had to look up some tricks on the internet—so I was into a second beer by the time I got the recovery process underway. While that was happening, I called Harmon Jameson.

“Mac! Good to hear from you! And, listen, let me thank you again for putting me on to that bunch out in Winter Park. What they’re doing is going to be of immense help in our national security efforts. We’re dealing with so much information from so many different sources that analysis is impossible without some super-fast system like theirs.”

“Quite some system, isn’t it? I’ve been using it on this thing I’m in the middle of, the one that involves the Iraqi stuff.” I heard a Hmm? of surprise. “In fact, that’s what I called about. There are two things. First, not all of the items in the collection are in the sheriff’s possession, or in transit or whatever. Swent’s lawyer—Swent, remember, was the guy who traded the Fed’s secrets, or supposed secrets, for the stuff?—his lawyer had several items in his own safe.”

I related the events of Tuesday evening, including what I’d seen while hiding behind the curtain.

His reaction was predictable. “Well, seems like you could get these additional items into the main collection in time for the President to hand it off. That’s going to take a while to arrange. And it sounds like this Decker guy got what’s coming to him. Any ideas about the shooter?”

“Just that he’s a real pro. And, speaking of that, I wonder if you could sort of bless some snooping I’m going to do. Seems that one of the people out here is ex-CIA, a guy named Lem Purdy. Used to work at Langley, but he also did some field work in South America. I don’t know if he has the skills to have been the shooter, and I haven’t met him so I don’t know if he fits what description I have. But his connections would surely involve people with those skills.”

“I can ask around for you.”

“Oh, no need for you to call in favors on this, unless you want to do it to help out the FBI. Swent’s murder is their case, but Decker’s murder is part of the arson investigation, a Colorado affair. I’m just trying to tie up some loose ends, is all.”

“Well, if you get caught snooping, I don’t think I’ll be able to cover for you. Or, wait, maybe I can, a little at least. If there’s a connection, or a possible one, between this Purdy guy and Swent’s case, then background on Purdy is justified. And since it’s a federal case and you’re cooperating with the FBI, your snooping is probably justified. But it’d be better if you don’t get caught.”

“Harmon, I’m pretty sure you know that’s been my motto for years.” I heard only laughter.

After the phone call, I checked and found that the computer file recovery was complete. The big USB drive had been only about 10% full, so I’d expanded the backed up stuff onto it and now had all of Decker’s files laid out in their original formats. And because a lot of them were files associated with particular applications—word processors, spreadsheets, email clients, etc.—there were a lot of formats. But the backups had been comprehensive, so I also had information about all of those applications, and it was simply a matter of matching up the data with the programs, many of which, being the usual suspects, I had installed on my own computer.

Somewhere during Hal’s briefing me about Loogie, he’d mentioned that the search algorithms were able to translate just about any word processor format and any email format into forms compatible with the search process. That left the spreadsheet files, including those associated with a checkbook program Decker used, as the most interesting unsearched data.

Follow the money, I thought.

The identifiable spreadsheet files had descriptive names, and none seemed very interesting. But a rather large file whose extension I couldn’t identify was called MJDAccounts. Fortunately, anything you need to find out is somewhere on the internet these days, and it didn’t take me very long at all to discover the name of the application for this big file. A few more clicks, and the application was installed; it opened the MJDAccounts file so smoothly I was almost disappointed.

Inside were separate account listings for Decker's banks and credit cards, and a couple of others called "CRAG Cash" and "CRAG Reserve." A quick look at the CRAG Cash account showed me that the organization was in serious financial trouble and had been for over a year—balances were chronically low and there were transfers into the cash account from the reserve account every other month or so.

I returned to Loogie for a search on "Decker plus CRAG" and discovered that not only had Decker been a board member, he was Secretary/Treasurer of that outfit, which was badly in need of a large infusion of new funds.

The thing was, Decker was also trying to get a rough estimate of the value of Swent's Iraqi hoard. And it sure looked as if he had been planning to alter Swent's will.

But then someone had him killed, in a most professional fashion—and, I realized, with that fire they'd done it in such a way as to destroy all documentation Decker might have assembled about his activities. Or so they thought.

The question was, had CRAG got itself into financial trouble because of Decker's handling its funds? In that case, the hit could have been retribution by Lem Purdy on behalf of CRAG. Or was the trouble because of some other issue? If the latter, I couldn't see quite why Purdy would have had Decker whacked.

It could be, I thought, that CRAG isn't involved at all, that Decker planned to get rich by altering Swent's will to somehow benefit himself and selling Swent's antiques on the "private"—which I took to mean at least gray, if not black—market. Of course, that would have written CRAG out of Swent's will, so there was motive there as well.

Curious, I checked the results that had turned up in the Loogie search Hal and I had done the previous Sunday and discovered once again that CRAG was one of the groups whose retirement funds had been wiped out by Swent's stock-trading strategies, along with those teachers and the hunting guides and so on.

Oh.

* * *

For someone like me, someone who's spent his entire life operating with very limited information, much of it incorrect, and making life-or-death decisions without really knowing what's going on half the time, this ability to access and analyze such diverse data was both fascinating and eye-opening.

The process had held my attention most of the afternoon, as I sat in front of the computer in the extra bedroom we used as an office, blinds drawn to keep the gloom outside. I finally got up to stretch and, out in the living room where the shades weren't closed, discovered that the rain had stopped and the sun was shining! Maybe, I thought, this weather system has finally moved on, or dissipated, or whatever—that would sure be welcome. In any case, it felt like time to get out of the house.

About the time I was getting seated at a restaurant just down the road, Cables, a family-style Italian place—not in our no-flush zone, conveniently—my phone started vibrating in my shirt pocket. It tickled.

"Mac? This is Sandy Livingston."

"Hey, Sandy! How are ya? We heard from Annette and Hal that you and Angela were in Santa Fe. How's that going?"

I heard laughter. “It went about as well as it could have. But it’s a long story. Right now we’re headed up your way. We thought we’d cruise through Estes Park on the way home. Say hi to you and Sam. Check out that road over the top of the national park tomorrow.”

“Uh, well, where are you now?”

“On a scenic road called the Peak-to-Peak Highway, according to the little signs. We went past a bunch of casinos at some little town, and now we’re up higher. We just passed...oh, wait. Here’s another sign. It says ‘Nederland’.”

“Hmm. Does Angela have her credentials, her CBI shield?”

“What? Well, sure. Her piece, too, I think. Packed away somewhere. But no uniform, as far as I remember. What’s up?”

I gave him a brief run-down of the flooding situation. “I guess we can trade long stories when you get here. Ah, I’d invite you to stay at our house, except our toilets don’t work just now. You’ll be better off at a motel. The town’s pretty empty, so you shouldn’t have any trouble. And, let’s see, Nederland. I think that’s about an hour out, given the road conditions, maybe a bit more. Give me another call when you get into town and we’ll figure out where to get together this evening. OK?”

“Got any motel suggestions?”

“Well, how about a hotel? Best in town, the Stanley.” I chuckled. “They’ve probably got a john in the lobby I can take advantage of.”

“We’ll try it. Anj is a wizard with cell-phone reservations.”

I ordered a drink and an appetizer on the theory that I could have a full dinner with Sandy and Angela later. The Stanley Hotel, among its other amenities, offered arguably the best restaurant in town, and I didn’t want to miss the opportunity.

As I sipped and nibbled, I killed time by calling Sam, who was predictably worried about me, and the CBI guy, Levenger, to make a final check that the search of Decker’s house had wrapped up well. It had.

Then I called Annette, who was probably expecting me to call because I’d just talked with Sam.

“Hey, boss, I thought I’d check in. How’s things over your way?”

“Just fine. Sam’s a wonderful house guest—tonight she’s making *moussaka*. Smells heavenly.”

“Yeah, she told me. Didn’t like it when I asked how you cook a moose, though. Anyway, I’m jealous, but not too much because eggplant’s not my thing. And I’m going to eat at Cascades, in the Stanley, probably. I think that Sandy and Angela are going to stay there on their way through town.”

“So they must be coming back, then. Are they going to be OK with the flood and all?” She had a bit of worry in her voice.

“I think so. It’s stopped raining and the sun’s even out. And they must have eased up on the road restrictions, because Angela and Sandy are coming up the Peak-to-Peak Highway.” I thought popped into my head. “Say, something’s occurred to me. The Estes Park police and the sheriff’s people are pretty much occupied with the aftermath of this flooding, so our part of the Swent investigation is ours alone, for now at least. And so is the Decker arson. Now, I’ve got a fairly good path forward because of all the information that Hal’s computer search technique dug up. But I’m concerned about the end game.”

“How’s that? Oh, and how did the our search of that lawyer’s house go?”

“Jim Levenger just told me it went fine, although most of the relevant information got burned up in the fire.” I decided not to play my hand just then. “But they’re forensics guys and probably on their way back to Denver by now. And the thing is, I’m only a deputized part-timer. At some point, it seems like a full-fledged CBI person ought to be in charge of this thing. I mean, I’m happy to continue to help and all, but, well, you know me. I’m potentially a loose cannon. I’d hate to screw up something and have you lose this case.”

There was a pause during which I heard kitchen noises in the background.

Finally she responded. “I’m confident that you won’t screw anything up, Mac. But having another person working this case does make sense. Two heads are better than one, and all that. And you might just need backup at some point. Hmm. How about Angela? I could assign her to you.”

Now it was my turn to pause. “Well, only if you assign *me* to *her*. She ought to be in charge. She’s fill-time CBI, after all.”

Another silent interval. “That’s actually a good idea Mac. It’ll give her some valuable experience and boost her self-confidence. But, are you sure your ego will survive reporting to a five-foot, twenty-something *chica* like her?”

“Are you kidding? I saw her in action last summer, in that damned mine, remember? Besides, maybe I can teach her some clandestine technique she’s never been exposed to. I do have some skills, after all.”

She laughed. “Great, just great. Then I’ll have a five-foot, twenty-something *chica* with spook skills on my hands. Want me to call her?”

“How about if I raise the issue this evening and mention I talked about it with you? I think I better be completely and totally transparent with her on this. Wouldn’t want her to feel manipulated, y’know?” I had already begun pondering how much of the unwanted baggage that I’d accumulated on the case I could unload on Angela.

“Good idea. Tell her she can call me anytime.”

“Thanks, Annette. I’ll tell her.” I heard a beeping on my phone, which I’d figured out meant another call was coming in. A glance at the screen told me it was Sandy Livingston. “Oop, sorry, Annette, gotta go. Sandy’s calling.”

I pushed buttons. “Sandy! Did y’all get here yet?”

“Hi, Mac. We did and we’re checking in at the Stanley. Good suggestion.”

“Did you guys have dinner? There’s a great restaurant there where I could meet you in a few minutes.”

“OK, but not too few. We need to get settled in a bit.”

“Fine. I’ll see you both in the Cascades bar shortly.”

Now, I thought, I need to compose a little speech about how Angela is the perfect person to take over this case. Or both of ’em. Hmm.

* * *

The speech I came up with in the subsequent twenty minutes, which included a quick explanation for Sam’s absence, turned out to be perfect, although Angela balked at first when she understood that she

was to be my boss. And Sandy seemed perplexed at the idea that he was irrelevant to the plan. But Angela came to the rescue, cementing her role as leader of the whole thing.

“But, Sandy, weren’t you involved with developing this search program, what’s it called?, ‘Loogie’? That means you can be invaluable here. I mean, with all due respect to Mac, you’re probably better with it than he is. Right?” She looked back and forth at both of us.

“I’m sure that’s spot on, Angela.” I was nodding so vigorously that I thought my teeth might come loose. “I’ve been fumbling around with Loogie and it’s amazing what I’ve come up with. But an expert user could do wonders, I bet.”

We were sitting at a quiet table in the corner of the restaurant after having ordered dinners and a bottle of wine. It seemed to me like the place should have been much busier, even on a week-day in the middle of September—that flooding was probably cutting into business everywhere in town.

“Well, maybe. Probably, I guess.” Sandy was trying to figure out his role, I could tell. “But, c’mon, we were headed home. How long is this going to take? I mean, are we going to set up shop here in the hotel? Or what? We’re running out of clean clothes. Again. And Hal has probably got a long list of stuff I need to be working on.”

“Oh, c’mon, Sandy. First of all, it’s only an hour, or maybe two, back home from here. And I’m sure that there are lots of alternatives to this hotel, nice as it is. I mean, think about all the condos and so on you can rent in Santa Fe. There must be places like that here in Estes Park. Right, Mac?” Angela shot me a “say yes, buddy” look.

I did. “With the weather improving, Trail Ridge Road will probably stay open for quite a while. It’s only mid-September, after all. And, yeah, you have lots of accommodations options now, especially with the town so empty. No doubt some of them have laundry facilities. Ah...just be sure you don’t wind up in the no-flush zone I’m in.”

“What’s that mean?” Angela now looked suspicious, so I had to summarize the situation I was living with.

“Basically, though, it means stay out of my part of town, the south end. There are several property management agencies that you can check with to find just the right thing. Um, stream-side cabins don’t seem to be indicated just now, though.” I wrote suggestions on a cocktail napkin. “Here. Call these folks, see what they’ve got. When Sam and I were looking for a home over here, we in one of their places, and it was all great.”

I handed her the napkin and changed the subject. “So, what’s the long story about your Santa Fe visit, anyway? Did it all work out?”

Sandy and Angela looked at each other and broke into laughter. Because Sandy was laughing harder, Angela spoke first.

“Work out according to whom? I guess that’s the best answer. My folks have known that Sandy and I have been shackled up, but they’ve been quietly ignoring it. When we got engaged, though, they sort of had to confront it.”

Sandy finally got control of himself. “I think I’m good with her family because last year I formally asked her father if I could marry her. He was pretty cool with it, actually, but I think he went through with the charade to make her mom happy.”

“Yeah, and Mama got all fluttery after Dad said ‘yes.’ And not only that, she immediately started in on wedding planning. I mean, I’m twenty-eight years old, for crying out loud, and she’s acting like I was

sixteen.” Angela shook her head in dismay. “She’s been at it for a year or so, and this trip was supposed to finalize things.”

“Thing is,” Sandy held up his left hand, revealing a gold band on the appropriate finger, “we actually got married already. She knows a priest in Santa Fe who’s pretty progressive, so we visited with him, explained things, and he offered to marry us right away, if we could get the paperwork together. Seems like he thought that would be the right thing to do so that we’d not be living in sin any more. So we did and he did.”

“But Mama is still going to demand some kind of formal ceremony, so I’m going to have to deal with her conspiring.” Angela grinned. “She’ll probably invite everyone in Santa Fe. That’s what’s taking her so long.”

I looked back and forth at the two of them. “I guess that means I should say ‘Congratulations!’ Uh, and I guess I’m sorry to interrupt your honeymoon with this business of the Swent case. And the Decker case. Maybe I can find a wedding present to make up for it all.”

Angela laughed. “Not a problem, Mac. We talked about a real honeymoon all the way up here from Santa Fe today, and it’s going to be next winter, somewhere in the Caribbean, probably. Besides, we’ve been having something of a honeymoon ever since we moved in together.”

Sandy actually blushed.

I decided to pretend not to notice. “How’s the house working out?”

When Sam and I had arrived in Winter Park the previous summer, we’d rented a house across the highway from the ski area as a temporary place to stay. Then we found something a bit more permanent, and Sandy and Angela had moved into the house we vacated by taking over our lease. Skiers both, it was a dream location for them.

“Extremely well. There was a neighborhood shuttle over to the base all winter, and it’s high up enough to stay cool in the summer. We’re discussing whether to make an offer to buy it.” Sandy’s complexion had returned to a more normal shade. “It’s big enough to accommodate guests, like Angela’s parents. No doubt they’ll want to visit. Uh, after the wedding, of course.”

“Sandy, if you can put up with having my parents as house guests, I’ll be truly, truly impressed.” Angela smiled. “Especially with Mama asking all the time about when she’s going to get a grandbaby.”

The look that passed between them made me glad to be too old to have to worry about that sort of thing, at least the parental nagging part.

Sandy, at least, seemed eager to change the subject. “So, maybe I can help with Loogie searches, but I have only my laptop. I guess I could use the MPARC systems, though, if we find a place with a good internet connection.”

“Maybe tomorrow you can check around for a condo with one. And the Stanley here probably has it available.”

“No doubt. I haven’t checked yet, though. But I like the idea of a condo, maybe one with a view. I’ll spend some time tomorrow checking out availability.” Sandy grinned. “You’re probably going to keep Anj busy anyhow.”

“Yeah, although tomorrow morning will be mostly with reading and questions for me. I’m going to be interested in how she sees this whole thing.” I looked at Angela. “You don’t know anything about it, right?”

“Not a clue. Annette insisted that I take a real vacation and not call in or use the computer or anything.”

“Well,” I had to smile. “You’re in for quite an interesting tale tomorrow, then.”

* * *

Fifteen

Thursday morning, I spent a couple of hours giving Angela a big-picture overview of the Swent and Decker cases while Sandy worked on finding a place for them to stay. Angela, quite sensibly, had suggested a two-bedroom rental condo somewhere convenient so that the extra bedroom could be used as a sort of CBI office. I would have volunteered my place, but the porta-johns hadn’t arrived yet—and I wasn’t sure it would do even if they had.

By check-out time at the Stanley on Thursday morning, Sandy had found a nice townhouse on West Moraine—well away from, and above, the river—that was fully furnished down to kitchen supplies plus a washer and dryer, so I helped them move in. The moving process, finished by shortly after noon, was made all the more pleasant by yet another day of sunny, blue-sky weather. Except for the river, which was still running perilously high, and the muck and destruction here and there, it could have been a normal September.

I ordered us an extra large pizza from the Domino’s just up the street—junk food was beckoning to me after all the French stuff Sam had been cooking—and I brought Sandy up to date on the cases while we waited for it and he was getting his computer on-line. Then I was able to give him access to my database of Swent & Co. information at MPARC. Because I’d uploaded them earlier, this database included all of Decker’s files.

After we polished off the pizza, Sandy went to work on his accumulated MPARC email, and, after making ourselves a big thermos of coffee to take along, Angela and I went out to look at the various crime scenes.

The closest, Decker’s partly burned house, offered me the opportunity to confess my presence when it all started up in smoke. And because I thought Sandy might figure out that the database he was searching included Decker’s computer, it would have been a good time to bring Angela into the information loop. But I just couldn’t do it. Instead, I told her a sanitized version, all about the relationships, the history, and our plans for the Iraqi antiquities as a way to persuade her to let me rifle Decker’s safe for those necklaces and other jewelry that were still in there. Conveniently, Jim Levenger had included the combination to the safe in the report he’d sent me.

“Wait. Go back. I’m confused.” Angela was shaking her head. “You say that some Iraqi guy was in Swent’s house, but you made a deal with him to get him those antiquities back? How come he’s not a suspect?”

I was busy with the rifling and a bit distracted. “Hmm? Oh, well, see, he’s an old acquaintance of mine, and, besides, I owed him one for not shooting me in Swent’s basement. And he was in Denver when Decker got killed. Anyway, we’re pulling off something of a diplomatic coup here, returning all these artifacts to Iraq.”

I held up one of the necklaces from Decker’s safe. “Sure are pretty, aren’t they?”

“Mac, this is nuts. You said the CBI forensics team opened this safe and found all this stuff. How are you going to explain its disappearance?”

“Well, now, you’re watching me take it all out of the safe, right? I’ll send it all off to Washington tomorrow. And I’ll arrange a special phone call from someone important in Washington to thank you for your help with this, you’ll see.” I tried not to sound too conniving. “Eventually, we’ll have to sit down with Annette and explain it all, but I’m sure she’ll understand.”

After that, Angela got a tour of Swent’s house, including the secret rooms where we’d found the interesting material. This time, I didn’t take anything, so she didn’t have any reason to get on my case. But I could tell that she was hugely amused by the cache of sex toys in Swent’s top-floor closet, although she tried to hide it. And when I told her that the ground-floor room had been packed with stacked boxes of the Iraqi antiquities, she began to see the wisdom of returning them to Iraq—so that got her on board with my returning the stuff from Decker’s safe.

Two-for-two, I thought—I’m on a roll!

It seemed appropriate at that point to show Angela the original crime scene, if not up close then at least from a distance. So we drove south to the northern end of the Tahosa Valley, finally ending up on the county road—still officially closed—to the Longs Peak Ranger Station. From the vantage point I’d found to scout the CRAG property on Wednesday morning, we could also see the clearing where Swent’s crucifixion had taken place. The view was much better without all the rain I’d stood in the previous time.

We both had binoculars, so Angela studied the clearing while I focused on the CRAG buildings, that interesting house on the hillside in particular.

“So, I guess I can see the ground disturbance in the clearing where that cross must have been.” Angela was playing with the zoom feature of her glasses.

“Hmm? Oh, well, it was more of a big X than a cross, and it had a third leg propping it up from behind. I remember three holes.”

“Yeah, that’s what I see. And this guy Swent was taped onto that X? And his lower half got eaten?” She sounded grossed out.

“That’s what seems to have happened. Whatever ate him couldn’t reach any higher, so it was just his legs, mostly, that were missing.” I scanned up the hillside along the little stream, which was now even more full than it had been the day before. Near its top, just below the clearing Angela was studying, there seemed to be a second new slump that was blocking its flow.

“It looks like there’s a trail over to the left a few hundred yards.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s where I came down, on horse-back. After the sheriff’s folks got all the evidence collected and so on.” As I scanned back down the hillside toward the house, my sense of foreboding increased. “Someone said it used to be the main trail up the mountain there, but the Park Service moved that to the north, up over that little pass up the highway to the left there. That old trail sufficed to get me down the hill, but it wasn’t in very good shape.”

I’d worked my view down to the house, where I saw movement through a window. “This was all before the rain started, of course, before that big debris flow above the ranch over to the left, there, by the pass. And that stream flowing down the hillside straight across, the one below the clearing, it was probably dried up when the murder went down.”

“And you’re sure it was murder, not just some kind of really weird accident?”

“Not with all that duct tape and the beating he got.” It looked to me as if someone inside the house was looking back at us. “Thing is, they could have made it look like an accident, if they’d wanted to. But

this was a pretty elaborate setup. Obviously thought through, well planned. Seemed like it was designed to send a message, although I can't figure out to whom."

I lowered my binoculars to flex my arms a bit and noticed that Angela was looking at the house.

"I don't know for sure who lives there, but it seems to be part of that CRAG property. Maybe it's the director's house, or something," I said.

"What the hell's he doing?" Angela sounded completely baffled, so I raised my binoculars and focused on the house, where I saw a guy lying on the deck behind a bipod.

"Ah, well, looks to me like he's settling down behind a sniper rifle that's pointed in our direction. I'm thinking we should probably get behind that big boulder over there." I nodded my head toward the woods on my right.

"Excellent idea." Angela's quickness surprised me, and I hustled after her.

Just as I was about to wonder aloud why anyone over there would even own a sniper rifle, let alone prepare to use one, there was a powerful smack on the other side of the rock and the unmistakable whizz of a ricochet, both followed a couple of seconds later by the echoing report of a large-caliber rifle.

"Well, that tells us something, doesn't it, Angela? And that was a big-bore gun, that's for sure. Not something that your everyday Colorado hunter has in his arsenal, unless he's after elephants. What the hell is he thinking, anyway?" I could tell by the way my mouth was running that the adrenalin was pumping.

Lem Purdy or whoever's over there, I thought, is someone to be very, very careful of.

* * *

We both had our handguns, but the house across the valley was well out of their range.

I had my cell phone, and Angela probably had one, too, but there was really no one to call for assistance—at least no one closer than a couple of hours away—given how busy the rest of the local law-enforcement community was with the flooding and all.

I'd parked my Jeep a hundred yards or so down the road, around a curve, at a spot from which the hillside across the valley was hidden behind trees. That meant that we might be able to work our way carefully down to it through the woods in relative cover, compared to the exposure of using the road. But then I remembered that the road farther east, down closer to the Peak-to-Peak Highway, included a rather long, straight stretch from which you could see the hillside over there, with that house in plain view. Which, of course, meant that our shooter could see whatever was heading down that road. How lucky, I wondered, should I feel today?

The alternative was west, up toward the Ranger Station. Which was closed and no doubt empty. Or, of course, north or south, along the contours of the hillside we were on. But to what end? It would be a long hike to anywhere safe, and there would be exposed places along the way. And neither Angela nor I was really dressed for hiking, especially given the soggy conditions of those hillsides.

So, try as I might, I couldn't figure out anything better than the last resort—to shoot back.

Although our handguns weren't going to be much help, one of the items I'd stashed in the Jeep's lock box before heading to Decker's house the other night was my own sniper rifle, a McMillan TAC-50 that I'd liberated, high-power scope and all, from a hired gun who'd used it on a politician in Florida some months back. And, with careful persuasion of a SEAL squadron commander I knew, I'd managed to acquire some high-explosive rounds for the thing along with a large box of standard military .50

BMG rounds. The HE rounds meant that our antagonist across the valley was in for a big surprise, assuming we could get down to the Jeep and find a reasonably protected place to set up the TAC.

I explained my plan, and Angela was fine with the idea. “I hope you blow the fucker away. We’re standing here checking out the scenery, and he starts taking pot shots at us? Get him, I say.”

“Well, what I’m planning to do is to try to cut the legs off that deck he’s shooting from.” We were already sneaking downhill toward the Jeep, so I had to assume she remembered the scene over there. “If he’s still set up to take shots at us when I can see over there again, I’ll just fix that, and then we can beat a hasty retreat.”

It took her a little while to respond, as we were scrambling through a thick stand of trees, more work than I would have expected, and when she did she was breathing hard.

“OK, right. I have to amend what I said. We need to do whatever we need to do to get out of here, and then take legal steps. Whatever those might be. Although I still sure would like to shoot the fucker.” Her sentiment resonated perfectly with me.

It took us maybe five minutes to work our way down our hillside to the Jeep and then another five for me to get the TAC set up with a view of the hillside across the valley. I ended up lying on a blanket in a wet ditch just uphill of a driveway culvert, with the business end of the TAC at ground level. By raising myself a bit more than I felt comfortable with, exposure-wise, I could see that our adversary was still prone on the deck of that house over there peering in our general direction through his sniper scope. My first notion, to shoot out the legs of that deck from under him, seemed risky, as I would have to expose myself even more to get the right angle for the shot.

But a Plan B popped into my head. Rather than expose myself, I hunkered down into the ditch so that I could scan the hillside above the house through the rifle’s scope. About the point at which my chin was brushing the blanket, I could see that slump of mud just below the hillside clearing where the crucifixion X had stood.

I racked an HE cartridge, adjusted the scope’s various settings, and remembered Angela.

“Hey?” I was not quite whispering. “Stick your fingers in your ears, OK?”

Which reminded me to get out the ear protectors from my bag of gear and put them on before I gently squeezed the trigger of the TAC.

Back in Florida, I’d practiced with it a few times, but its recoil—despite its hydraulic mitigation system—and its report were still something of a shock.

Angela thought so, too.

“Holy crap!” As conversation, her reaction penetrated my ear protection easily.

“Yep.” I probably said that louder than I needed to, but, then, I was distracted by watching the effects of my shot through that wonderful scope. “Check out the stream just below the clearing, Angela.”

What I saw, one-eyed, was interesting enough, and I hoped that Angela had her binoculars trained on the spot so she’d be seeing it with both eyes.

At first, there wasn’t much at all. I saw just a little sort of splat where the round penetrated the mud of the slump I’d aimed at. But then there was a bulge, like the hillside was burping or something. And then all hell broke loose in the form of a new debris flow.

It started slowly. But I suppose there was some kind of pond up there that had been created by the slump, because suddenly there was a gush of water, followed by mud, more mud, and then rocks and

trees. And it accelerated as it went, so that it was shockingly fast by the time it reached the house on whose deck the shooter had set up.

And then the shooter, the deck, and the house were gone. Not “crushed” or “destroyed” or “obliterated.” Just gone. Disappeared. In an instant.

This time it was my turn.

“Holy crap,” I said, while I watched the slurry of forest parts ooze to a stop in the meadow below where the house had been.

I suppose I should have felt guilty about it all, but, hey, the guy was shooting at us. So all I could come up with was matter-of-fact.

“Oops.” I said. “My bad.”

“Yep,” she responded, as she pulled her cell phone out of a nicely-stuffed shirt pocket and began taking pictures.

“Know what, Mac? I’m thinking that we just got here, and this is what we found. It’ll make the paperwork a lot easier that way, don’t you think?” She kept an admirably straight face as she said this. “Besides, from the looks of that hillside, it was going to happen on its own anyway, right?”

“I hate paperwork, Angela, thanks. And I was thinking the same thing about that hillside over there, even yesterday when I was up here. It sure looked unstable. I owe you one. Or a dozen.” I scanned the debris with my binoculars. “But I guess we’ll never know for sure who that shooter was. Probably Lem Purdy, I imagine.”

“Seems like we ought to head over there and check out the mess. It would be a miracle if anyone survived that, but you never know.” She, too, was scanning the devastation. “Let’s get this cannon of yours packed away.”

We did just that, and then eased the Jeep down to the highway and north the half mile to the CRAG entrance. Somewhat to my surprise, the gate, although closed, wasn’t locked. Angela hopped out, opened it, let me through, and then closed it before climbing back into the Jeep.

She looked vexed. “Think this car’s high up enough? Sheesh. I’m sure glad you’ve got that step out there.”

She was referring to the rock rails that the previous owner had installed, which made convenient running boards to climb up on.

“And don’t say anything, Mac. If it was Sandy, he’d make a joke about how short I am, and I’d bop him for it. That’s probably not appropriate for us.”

I couldn’t help myself. “You mean the joking or the bopping?”

“Hmmp,” was all I got.

We drove down a well-kept gravel driveway that meandered across the meadow between little aspen groves, all quite picturesque, until we came upon the bottom end of the slide debris. I was relieved to see that the slide had missed the horse barn by 50 yards or so. The small herd was clustered in the corral next to the barn, looking nervous but unharmed. We pulled up to a garage that was by the barn.

“Maybe,” I said, “we can get an idea of who was in the house by what cars are here.”

The side door of the garage wasn’t locked, so I opened the door to look in. It was dim in there, the only light from three small windows and the open door, but I could see that there was a single vehicle inside. A Larimer County Sheriff’s SUV.

* * *

“Brad? Mac MacQuarrie here. Got a second?” We had explored the grounds enough to have decided that there was no one around—no one alive, at least—so I’d decided to call the sheriff.

“This damned flood, Mac. I’m so busy I can’t see straight.”

“Well, sorry to do this to you, but I’ve got something up here that you may need to put high on your priority list.” I told him the story Angela and I’d agreed on and that I’d found a Larimer Sheriff’s Department patrol car in the garage at the CRAG facility. “And we’re not finding anyone on the premises. But I recall seeing a house on the hillside the other day, before this new debris flow let loose. It’s not there now.”

“What are you saying, Mac?”

“Well, either whoever’s car this is went off with someone else somewhere, or he’s probably buried in the debris of the slide.”

“Ah, shit. OK, listen. There’s a number on the right side of the trunk, or the rear hatch.” Winchester sounded more tired than depressed.

I went back to the garage and walked around the vehicle. “0532, Brad, 0532.”

“OK, thanks. Wait one.” There was some muffled discussion on his end of the call. “Yeah, I figured. That’s the car Aaron Smithy has out. And you think he’s buried in that slide?”

“Well, I think that’s a possibility. But, like I said, he could be off somewhere with someone else. There are no other cars here, and I think the house was occupied.”

“Oh. Well, all right. I’ll give his phone a call and see what happens, and if he doesn’t answer I guess we just need to wait a while and see if he turns up. Thanks for the call, Mac.”

Almost immediately, I heard an odd chiming noise and, after some puzzling, identified it as coming from inside the SUV. The passenger door was open, and there was a cell phone on the seat, chiming away. So I answered.

“Hello”

“Aaron? Brad here. What…”

“Whoa, Brad, whoa. It’s Mac. The phone was on the car’s front seat. And there’s a duty belt here, too, weapon and all. Looks like a Glock.”

“You mean he went off and left his piece in the car with it unlocked! Ah, crap.” I heard a distinct sigh. “Listen, Mac. Do me a favor? Pop the hatch and see what else is unsecured back there, OK?”

“Sure.” With the hatch up, I could see a jumble of equipment, semi-organized, including two gun cases. I opened the longer one. “Well, there’s a shotgun back here in an unlocked case.”

“Lovely. Well, could you lock up the car for me?”

“Will do. I think I’ll check to make sure I’m not locking the keys in, though.”

“Thanks, Mac. I’ll talk to ya later.”

I’d seen a ring of keys on a clip on Smithy’s duty belt, and I figured out which was the SUV’s ignition key and removed it. Then I returned to the jumble of equipment in the back and opened the smaller gun case.

There sat a Colt Anaconda. I stuck the car key in the barrel and raised it enough to be able to see that two of the rounds in the cylinder had been fired.

Maybe, I thought, it'd turn out for the best if Deputy Smithy really is buried somewhere in all that debris.

I locked up the SUV and went outside. Angela was walking around the base of the debris field, so I hustled to catch up with her to let her know what I'd just discovered.

"What?" Her reaction was predictably incredulous. "What you're saying, of course, is that, unless he shows up with whoever he might have gone off with, that was him shooting at us, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. And, also, I guess I'm saying that the Decker case is cleared now. Uh, at least if we can get a ballistics match between that revolver in the SUV and those slugs that the forensics team found in Decker's back yard. If we're lucky, there'll be some traces of Decker's blood or something on those slugs, too." I shrugged. "Dirty cops exist out here in the boondocks, just like in big cities, I guess."

She thought for a minute and then fixed me with a stare that made Sam's look tame. "Mac, you said you wanted me to have the lead on the CBI parts of these cases because I'm full-time CBI and you're just a part-timer. And you said Annette agreed to that. But I think of it as a partnership, a collaboration. Don't you think it's time you told your partner everything? I mean, you said you owe me one, right?"

How, I wondered, could this diminutive young woman do such a good job of making me, at least twice her age with more than two lifetimes of additional worldly experience, feel seven years old with my hand in the cookie jar? Not that my hand *wasn't* in the cookie jar, metaphorically speaking, but I'd been an expert at all sorts of prevarication throughout my career, supposedly comfortable with being brazen in such circumstances. At least that expertise let me run through several snappy comebacks in a flash, all in my head, but in the end none seemed appropriate.

Still, I wasn't going to swallow my pride completely. "The briefing this morning was just the big picture, and, yeah, there *are* some details that will make more sense now that you've seen the territory. How about a cup of coffee? You think it's still hot?"

We found a reasonably dry place to sit by the barn upwind of the horses, who seemed to feel better for our company because they'd settled down quite a bit since we'd arrived, and found that the coffee was indeed still hot. And I told her everything in all its detail, even including how Raheem al-Muhammed had got the drop on me and the adventure at Decker's house. I couldn't possibly provide all the details of my Loogie searches, but I used them as needed to flesh out my own involvement as much as possible.

She took it all in with only a few questions for clarification of ambiguous pronouns I used. But when I was finished, I could tell she'd been saving some up. Just as she was about to start in with them, however, a car drove in, a Hummer H2 with oversized tires. Only one person got out.

He stopped in front of the garage, and stood by the car staring at the slide debris for a minute. Finally, he walked over to us.

"This is private property, folks. You're trespassing." He sighed, stuck his hands in the back pockets of his jeans, and nodded his head at the slide. "But I guess that's not the big story, is it? You folks know anything about all this?"

"We're with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, and we saw the debris. We thought we ought to check to see if there was anyone needing medical attention. And the gate out by the highway wasn't locked." Angela showed the man her shield. "We haven't found anyone, but there's a Larimer Sheriff's vehicle in the garage. He's not with you?"

The man looked even more distressed. “No, I left him here, in the house, and went into town on an errand. Deputy Aaron Smithy. He’s not around anywhere?”

“If you left him in the house, then he’s probably around all right, somewhere under all that. Along with the house.” I nodded in the direction of the slide debris.

For the first time, the man looked up the hillside. Then he turned bone white and had to steady himself on a corral fence post. “Holy Mother of God! I was just looking at the mess down here before. Holy Christ. It’s gone. All gone.”

“I’m Inspector Angela Espinosa, and he’s Inspector Mac MacQuarrie, sir. Can I get your name?” She had her notepad and pen out.

“I’m...I’m...well, y’know, it really doesn’t matter now, does it? It’s all gone.”

“The house, yes, and its contents. But, look around, the rest of the buildings are still intact. And I’m sure that the insurance will let you rebuild.” I was feeling sorry for the poor guy.

“We had no insurance. And all of the business records were in the house. Membership and donor contacts. What cash we had. Everything. And it’s gone.”

“Sir? Your name, please? And are you the owner here? Or what?”

“No, no. The property belongs to a non-profit organization, the Center for Retreats of the Army of God, we call it CRAG. I’m the director, Lem Purdy, Lemuel on my driver’s license.”

* * *

Sixteen

We stuck around at CRAG, or what was left of it, long enough to help Purdy get his bearings and decide what to do next—he was going to stay in the apartment over the garage. And then, despite Purdy’s protests, we impounded the Larimer County Sheriff’s SUV for evidentiary reasons. We figured Purdy didn’t need to know, or at least didn’t need to know we knew, about that Anaconda in the back, but we needed it for both ballistics and fingerprint testing. I gave Angela the key, and she followed me down into town behind the wheel of the SUV.

As much as I would have liked to arrest Purdy based on the results of my database searches, we just didn’t have appropriate probable cause, and we certainly didn’t have a warrant.

I led Angela back to the condo that she and Sandy had found and, on crossing the Big Thompson, was glad to see that it had receded a bit more. Maybe, I thought, all this wet weather is over with—now if they can only get that sewer line fixed, I’ll be a happy camper.

The condo had a two-car garage, and Angela pulled the sheriff’s SUV into the empty half. It made Sandy’s Audi station wagon look short. I found a pair of gloves and began to search through the SUV’s interior systematically, looking for that suppressor I’d seen on the Anaconda at Decker’s house specifically and anything else of interest generally.

All afternoon, I’d been aware of a nagging in my head about the priceless Iraqi jewelry that was sitting in my Jeep—it was something I needed to get on its way to Washington as soon as possible. And the Anaconda and its suppressor needed to be united with the CBI forensics team in Denver. It looked like I was going to have to make a trip into the big city. But it was getting on toward dinnertime.

So, I waited until Friday morning for the expedition. The necessity of taking the Peak-to-Peak Highway added nearly an hour to the normally two-hour trip, but that gave me time to make various phone calls. Of course, given the spotty cell coverage up there, that took longer than usual as well, and I had plenty of time to enjoy the scenery and lovely blue sky.

I'd had dinner the night before with Sandy and Angela, during which she and I had brought Sandy up to date on everything and decided that Angela didn't really need to come with me to Denver. Given the circumstances, it seemed like a good idea to maintain a CBI presence in Estes Park. I was just as glad to have the Jeep to myself for the day, all-in-all.

Setting up an appointment at the forensics lab at CBI headquarters was easy, as I knew it would be. It turned out that, of the two remaining tasks, the most difficult was dealing with the FBI. I had no luck at all on my first attempt, so I gave up in disgust and called my Harmon Jameson instead. Fortunately, I was on a stretch of the highway with cell coverage.

I pushed the red button as soon as he answered. "Harmon? Mac MacQuarrie here. Got a minute?"

"Secure. I do, actually. What's happening in your neck of the woods?"

"Well, I'm driving through some beautiful woods just now, in fact, on my way to Denver. With the rest of those items I mentioned, the ones that your boss is interested in. I need to get them off my hands and into his. Any ideas?"

"Probably not a good idea to give them to FedEx, right?"

"Well, I expect the insurance premium would exceed my credit card limit, if you know what I mean."

"Right. And I'm hearing that the sooner they get here, the better. My boss has lit a fire under people, especially that Simpson guy. Not sure I've ever seen an archeologist move so fast before." He chuckled. "Maybe the best thing to do is for you to take them to an Air Force base, there must be one somewhere close. Let me call you back."

"OK, that's fine. There's something else, though."

"Oh?"

"Well, I thought that while I was in Denver, I'd have a talk with the new FBI agent assigned to the Swent case. I don't know if you remember, but the first one, Special Agent Reid, seems to have got himself killed during the flooding. So there's a new guy. And I haven't heard word one from him. I figured it'd be politic if I had a chat with him in Denver. I've got quite a lot of new information he ought to find interesting. Thing is, I can't make any headway with getting to him."

"Why should I be worried about that? I want you CBI people to handle this."

"But the FBI thinks that Swent's death is their case, and you know how they are. And the information I've seen shows no connections, none at all, to the circumstances you're concerned about. By cooperating, and being proactive about it, I think I can make sure that they stay well away from sensitive areas."

There was a long pause. "What's this information you're talking about?"

"I've been using that database query program you saw demonstrated earlier this week to examine anything and everything about Trevor Swent in just about every computer there is. And there's just no hint of any connection to the...to your concerns."

"Oh. *Oh.*" Another long pause. "So what do you want me to do?"

“An appropriate call to this new agent, and I don’t know his name or anything, telling him to meet with me today ought to be enough.”

“Hmm. I think I can manage that. I’ll call you back about the, uh, transportation matter and this, too, OK?”

At that point, I was just coming into the little mountain town of Nederland, where Sandy had called me from Wednesday, so I knew the cell phone coverage would continue to work. Good thing, too, because it didn’t take long for my phone to start demanding my attention.

“Mr. MacQuarrie? This is Special Agent Winifred Small. I’ve been assigned to the Trevor Swent case. I understand that you’d like to meet with me?”

A female Special Agent, I thought. About damned time!

“Thanks for calling, Special Agent Small, and I apologize for how you probably found out to call me. Thing is, I’ll be in Denver in a few hours and I just couldn’t get to you through the switchboard. Anyway, I’ve got some information about the Swent case that you should have. Can I stop by your office?”

She was most gracious about it all, even going so far as to give me careful directions. We exchanged contact information, including secure methods, and rang off.

It didn’t take long for the next call to come in.

“MacQuarrie. Secure.”

“Mac? Harmon here. I think I got the FBI thing taken care of. You should hear from someone shortly.”

“Already did. I’m all set, thanks.”

“Ah. A serious fire got lit. Good. And here’s the deal with the...ah...transportation. You’ll get a call from someone at Buckley Air Force Base, it’s out on the east side of Denver but not as far as the civilian airport. They’ll have you deliver the items directly to a pilot who’s going to courier them here to DC. There’s some concern about the size of the package, though, so I hope it’s small.”

“Hmm. Tell you what. I’ll stop somewhere and get some kind of compact container for it all. Got a name for the Buckley contact?”

“No, sorry. This is all happening on the fly. But I decided to have them use the nationality of the items as a sort of code, OK?”

“Roger. Thanks. I’ll let you know when they’re in the sky.”

* * *

The phone stayed quiet until I was past the hamlet of Gilpin and just about to descend into Clear Creek Canyon. I pulled over to make sure I didn’t lose the cell signal and noticed that the phone’s red light was on again.

“MacQuarrie. Secure.”

“This is Colonel Skip Jefferson, I command the Air National Guard Wing at Buckley Air Force Base, Mr. MacQuarrie. I understand you have a package for me that’s to be couriered to Andrews. And I’m told to work the word ‘Iraq’ into the conversation.”

“Glad to hear from you, Colonel. I do indeed have a package, but I understand there’s concern about its size.”

“How big is it?”

“Well, right now it’s not what you’d really call a ‘package.’ But I thought I’d stop somewhere and buy a container of some kind. It’ll certainly fit into something like a normal computer briefcase, like they have at, you know, Office Depot.”

“That’ll be about right. When will we see you?”

“Well, I’m up in the foothills above Black Hawk right now, and I need to make that stop. I don’t know. Maybe an hour? 90 minutes?”

“Excellent. Plenty of time for us to deploy.”

“Great. And thanks loads for doing this for us.”

“Not a problem, Mr. MacQuarrie. Actually, it’s helpful. I’ve got guys who need time in the air above Mach 1, and it’s nice to be able to do that on someone else’s dime. The same applies to the mid-air refuel.”

I laughed. “Well, hey, glad we could be of help.”

He asked me what I was driving, gave me instructions about how to get to the north gate of the base, off East Sixth Avenue, and said he’d meet me there.

That taken care of, I descended into the canyon, past the Black Hawk congestion where I’d met the FBI team before the Elias Purdy search, and on down toward Golden. At the bottom of the canyon, when the cell signal returned, I pulled over and did a quick search for a place to buy a computer bag. That was easy enough, and, lo and behold, there was even a place to have lunch nearby.

It was about 1:30 when I pulled up to the guard shack at the base’s north entrance. Before I could start the vetting process, a tall African-American in uniform walked up to me.

“Mac MacQuarrie? I’m Skip Jefferson.”

“Good to meet you, Colonel. Hop in. Um, don’t I need a tag or anything?”

“Not with me here. And, anyway, I found out that you’re not only CBI, you’re also cleared so many levels above me that I can’t count ’em. Straight ahead, then left.”

The advantages of having the wing commander in the car, I discovered, extended to being able to drive right out onto the taxi-way, up to the airplane.

I’d forgotten how imposing an F-16 really is when you’re sitting right next to one. It’s not a very big airplane, but it sure looks mean.

I passed the pilot the now-bulging computer bag, backed the Jeep away a bit, and watched him taxi off and then, with the remarkable capability those jets have, climb almost vertically into the sky. When I called him, Harmon was glad to hear my confirmation of that phase of the transfer and told me he’d personally meet the plane at Andrews Air Force Base.

It was something of a relief not to have the responsibility of all that priceless loot any more. I certainly didn’t want all those jewels in my car while I was parked at the FBI building—you never know when someone will swipe something right out from under their noses.

That building was also on the east side of Denver, about half way between downtown and the Air Force base. I’d removed the TAC-50 from the Jeep the night before, and I’d put my Sig Sauer back in the lock box with all my other gear, so I felt reasonably secure.

Special Agent Winifred Small was waiting for me in the lobby, having already smoothed my entry at the guard gate and the main entrance. She took my upstairs to her office.

After another pleasant dinner with Sandy and Angela on Thursday evening, I'd spent several hours collating the relevant information about the Swent case I'd discovered using Loogie searches and emailed it to Reid's old FBI email, with the assumption that would be forwarded to the new Special Agent in charge of the case. That strategy worked, and it meant we had a good head start on our conversation.

"I want to thank you for all the information you sent last night, Mr. MacQuarrie. It's most impressive, and it fills several gaps in the evidence and other information we have." She smiled. "And, ah, I should disclose that I've done some background research on you as well. I have a pretty solid clearance, so that research revealed some very interesting history. I'm betting the CBI doesn't know quite who it's got carrying one of its shields."

I tried not to blush. "Well, see, I'm supposed to be retired. Fishing and stuff like that. But I got deputized by one of the CBI directors as a part-timer for a case, and she never asked for the shield back. And then she called me about the Swent thing. And *then*, rather to my chagrin, the sheriff up there, Brad Winchester, he got all wrapped up in that flood business up in Larimer County, so the local part of the case just sort of fell in my lap. Actually, I'm quite happy that you folks have the jurisdiction. And it's a good thing your predecessor had all the evidence shipped down here, because it wouldn't really be secure at all up in Estes Park."

"I need to ask about that evidence. I understand that the CBI executed a search warrant at Swent's house the other day."

I suddenly felt the need for caution. "Well, we had a CBI team go through his lawyer's house on Wednesday, the day after the lawyer, the guy named Decker, was killed in a fire there. And the sheriff's guys did a search at Swent's a week ago. But I think I'm the only CBI person who's been in Swent's house."

"Yes, well, based on what we knew before, and confirmed by your information of last night, we think there is a considerable amount of evidence missing." She maintained a pleasantly soft demeanor, but I could tell there was steel behind it.

"I guess it depends on what you consider to be 'evidence.' There's certainly a lot of Swent's stuff still in his house, including several file drawers full of papers."

Her demeanor hardened a fraction. "Please don't patronize me, Mr. MacQuarrie. I'm speaking of the artifacts."

"Ah, all the Iraqi stuff. I'm not sure it's really 'evidence,' but that's your call, of course. In any case, it's in Washington DC, or on its way."

Her eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline, and her voice went ice-cold. "Oh? And who, may I ask, authorized this?"

"Well, I guess that would be your boss's boss, the famous guy who lives in the mansion on Pennsylvania Avenue. See, the plan is for him to have something of a ceremony in which he'll turn it all over to the Iraqi ambassador for repatriation. Scoring diplomatic points in that part of the world is a priority, I guess." I shrugged. "There are pictures of everything, and we found some appraisal paperwork at that lawyer's house, so just about anything you need to know about it all is available. Like I said, I'm not sure how important it is as evidence."

Her obvious annoyance morphed into resignation. "I see. And I guess there's nothing to be done about it now. But are there any other surprises that you need to warn me about?"

“There are a couple of relevant things that are associated with the Colorado cases, CBI cases for now, I guess. First, the fire at the lawyer’s house, that guy Decker, that fire was pretty obviously arson. It looks like he died in it, so the arson makes it murder. And we, meaning the CBI, are working on some evidence that may connect a Larimer Sheriff’s Deputy to it. Meanwhile, it looks as if that deputy himself was killed in a debris flow—meaning a big mudslide—yesterday. You may recall that there are some hints in all that stuff I sent you that the deputy, name of Smithy, he might have been involved in Swent’s killing. But there were clearly other people involved as well, given the means.”

“Smithy. Hmm. Why does that name ring a bell for me? Oh! Wasn’t he part of the crew that the sheriff had on site, the day the body was discovered? So he was part of the team that gathered all the evidence we’ve got here?”

I remembered that Smithy had been the person who’d met me at the helicopter, when I got dropped off.

“He was, now that you mention it. Good thinking.” I smiled. “I guess that’s why they pay you Feds the big bucks.”

Her derision was clear from the snort I heard. “Right. But do you think it would be worthwhile to search that area again?”

“Oh. Well, I doubt it. It’s rained like crazy up there for about the past week. And most of that evidence was just Swent’s body parts and clothing, right?”

She was nodding as her phone rang. She picked it up, listened for a few seconds, and said “I’ll be right there.”

Then she stood. “Mr. MacQuarrie, I’m afraid I need to run to a meeting. But this has been very helpful. Let’s stay in touch, shall we?”

Control, that’s what FBI people are all about. Control.

* * *

My final stop, at CBI headquarters in a big downtown office building, was much more collegial. I’d arranged for Jim Levenger to meet me at the parking garage entrance to pick up the Colt Anaconda and its suppressor, which I’d found loose in the back of Smithy’s SUV. He invited me upstairs to his office to review the case, and I spent an hour or so with him in a cordial exchange of information. I asked Jim if his lab had had trouble with the ballistics on the two slugs they’d found in Decker’s back yard, and he said they were still being processed but that they’d found some tissue in a crease of one of them. This was undergoing DNA testing along with hair they’d found in Decker’s bathroom. In turn, I filled him on developments from my end, including the final disposition of the Iraqi jewelry.

By the time that little errand was finished, it was getting toward late afternoon, so I headed west, just in time to get caught up in the midst of rush-hour traffic. But at least, I thought, that all went pretty quickly, and I can get home before too late. And it turned out that the congestion from downtown all the way out west to Golden gave me time to catch up on phone calls.

Sam was preparing dinner, another Julia Child recipe that took a while, and she didn’t have enough hands to cook and talk at the same time. But she missed me.

Annette was helping her to cook but had time to hear about my closing the Decker case and about how the FBI was still claiming possession of the Swent case. She liked both developments.

Angela's phone went right to voice mail, which seemed odd, but, then, they were still on a sort of honeymoon and young enough to be doing goodness knows what. Although I had an idea of what that might be.

Brad Winchester appreciated hearing that the remainder of the Iraqi artifacts were on a fast plane to Washington. He was looking forward to a trip back east for the White House ceremony.

Raheem al-Muhammed was also glad to hear about the rest of Swent's booty and its inclusion in the return of everything to Iraq—even though the ambassador was still a fresh pile of camel dung, to Raheem's way of thinking.

After the call to Raheem, which was just about the time I passed the Coors brewery complex in Golden, I realized that I was finished—quite a liberating feeling. The couple of hours' driving I had ahead of me were on one of the most spectacular highways in the world, it was nearing sunset, and the weather was lovely. I felt the accumulated tension of the day begin to melt away. What, I thought, could go wrong?

The answer turned out to be: nothing much, at least not for the next hour or so.

But about the time it was getting just past dusk, when I was headed up the grade north of the Caribou Ranch entrance, things changed.

The first hint was when a jacked-up pickup truck, one with those giant off-road tires and some kind of odd-looking camper on the back, pulled up on my tail and, with a roar of acceleration and a cloud of diesel smoke, passed me despite the double yellow line. Then it was a Boulder County Sheriff's patrol car, lights and siren proclaiming its right-of way. Although I'd held my ground for the pickup, I obediently pulled over for the patrol car.

I thought to call 911, just to be a good citizen and all, but discovered that I was in a no-signal stretch of the highway. So I tried to re-relax and just cruise on home.

But on the long downgrade into the Left Hand Creek drainage just north of the Gold Hill turnoff, where the highway is cut into the mountainside with a serious drop-off on the right, there were signs that something bad had happened. As I came around a curve, my headlights revealed deep skid marks across the wide gravel shoulder, a parking area from which a view of the fall aspen would be spectacular in a week or two. And there was something of a flickering glow from over the drop-off.

I slid the Jeep to a stop in the parking area and jumped out to see about that glow.

Because of the light bar, it appeared to be the patrol car, although it could have been just another white sedan with a ski rack—the fire damage made it hard to tell. It sure wasn't the pickup that had roared past me earlier. I checked my phone and found that this time there was a signal—must be from a tower over by Ward, I thought. I called the accident into 911 and said I'd be on scene, fetched the first-aid kit and the fire extinguisher from my Jeep, and then began to scramble down the steep hillside.

But I didn't have to go far to see that I was too late to be of any help. The fire had nearly burned itself out—fortunately, the woods were wet enough from all the rain that they didn't catch, but, unfortunately, all that was left of the car was a very hot, burned-out shell. And there was a well-roasted lump of something on the remains of the seat behind the steering wheel inside that shell.

Although I had my suspicions, I wasn't too keen to find out for sure what that something was, and the residual heat made it too dangerous anyway. So I took the opportunity to climb back up to the parking area and set some flares into the gravel, both to provide some guidance to the real first responders I knew were on the way and to protect the patrol car's skid marks as evidence. I was there and I was first, but I had no idea of how to respond.

It turned out that the first help to arrive was a Colorado State Patrol trooper who had been just finishing supper in Nederland. After making sure there was nothing to be done about the car over the edge, in terms of a rescue or anything, he took a statement from me and sent me on my way. But part of our conversation included his observation that it looked as if there was evidence of a rear-end collision on the burned car's back bumper, as if something had rammed it from behind and possibly shoved it over the drop-off.

That certainly gave me something to think about as I headed on north toward home. And it also motivated me to drive more carefully than I might have otherwise. The careful driving slowed me down, and going slower gave me time to think about it all. That pickup truck, especially, seemed worth some thought. I worked at recalling a mental image of it all.

Try as I might, I couldn't remember having seen a license plate. Maybe it was the surprise at being passed on that curvy upgrade; maybe it was the cloud of diesel exhaust. Or maybe the plate was just obscured by dirt. I just didn't catch it.

Then there was the odd-looking camper shell. Instead of a side window like most campers have, I was picturing in my mind a series of three smaller windows, each set in what looked rather like a door. Trouble was, the pickup zoomed by so fast that I really didn't get a good look.

But one thing that did come into focus is the image I'd seen in my rear-view mirror as the pickup closed in behind me. There was some sort of attachment on the front bumper, kind of like what I'd seen called a "bull-bar" in Jeep parts catalogs. The State Trooper had one of those on his car, I remembered. A very useful add-on for those times you needed to give another car a push from behind.

I ran through these thoughts several times as I progressed past Peaceful Valley, Allenspark, and Meeker Park. Then, as I passed the Larimer County line, I felt myself breathing easier, for some reason. But shortly after, just north of the Longs Peak Ranger Station turnoff, I couldn't help but notice that the garage and barn at the CRAG facility were lit up like an all-night truck stop. I immediately began to slow to get a better look but then thought better of it. Brake lights are surprisingly bright, especially on a deserted highway.

Instead, I let the Jeep coast and found that I didn't need brakes to make the right turn into the old trailhead entrance just north of CRAG. So I cut the headlights and eased up the gravel road to the closure gate, then pulled off into some bushes there. I switched off the overhead light before opening the door, then got out and walked around to see if I could get a good view of the CRAG buildings. Through the trees, I could just make out two vehicles sitting in front of the garage, which was completely alight inside, and some kind of well-lit, fenced-in area behind the barn. Angela and I hadn't noticed that the day before.

In the dark, getting the lock-box in the Jeep open was a bit of a fumble, but, once open, I was able to use my blue flashlight to find everything I needed for a quick night-time surveillance. The third generation night-vision device, one not available on the civilian market, would be useless in the vicinity of the buildings with all the light there, but it would help me get through the trees on the mountainside more quickly and quietly. The black coverall I'd worn for my search of Decker's house would be important in staying invisible in those trees, as would the tin of camo makeup. My Sig Sauer P226 Combat pistol would, at the least, feel comforting snugged into my shoulder holster, and the suppressed HK 417 Recce with the accurized barrel, 20-round magazine and infrared laser sight would provide me enough firepower to deal with whatever might be happening over there.

Not that I was expecting trouble, but a quick look through the trees with binoculars showed that one of those vehicles by the garage was a jacked-up pickup truck with a weird-looking camper on the back.

The car over there was a dark, generic-looking sedan of a make I couldn't identify from that distance, but it reminded me of the sedans I'd seen inside the fence at the FBI building in Denver. And it was blocked from leaving by that pickup parked close behind it.

* * *

Seventeen

I was about half way through the woods, working my way carefully and using the NVD to avoid pratfalls, when I heard a chain saw start up, go to work for a minute, then back to idle as there was the crash of a tree falling. It didn't sound like a big tree, but it was sizable enough to make a good thump when it hit the ground. Then it happened again, and following that the saw went to work bucking the branches off the two downed trees, it sounded like. Finally, there were three longer cuts.

I'd used the noise of the saw to make considerable progress through the woods on the hillside, and by the time the saw was shut off, I was nearly to the back of the barn. I settled behind a low bush that was growing between two lodgepole pines and tried to get comfortable. As I settled in, it seemed as if time was slowing down, at least compared to the earlier part of my day. Maybe I just needed some supper, or maybe it was the tension of all the sneaking around.

The fenced area behind the barn was another corral, but the usual wood post-and-rail corral fence, at least six feet tall, also had woven wire fencing attached to its inside, as if to contain much smaller animals than horses or cattle. A vehicle gate on the far side was open, and shortly I saw three people enter it, dragging logs. Two men had tree trunks about four inches in diameter and maybe twelve feet long, and a woman had a shorter piece that was about six feet long. They hauled them to the center of the corral and dropped them in the mud.

One of the men—I recognized Lem Purdy—went into the barn and came out with a single-bit axe and a bucket, then went to work making notches at about the centers of the longer tree trunks. These he fit together and, from the bucket, took some long nails and hammered them into the joined notches using the poll of the axe.

He stopped to catch his breath and scratched his head while staring at the logs. “Hey? Why don't we make life easy for ourselves and just lean these two legs up against the fence? I put these posts in, and they'll hold it for sure.”

The other guy pondered a bit, then nodded. “Well, brother—you've had a bright idea for once in your life!”

He pulled a roll of wire out of the bucket, and they proceeded to reinforce the nails by lashing the logs together. Then, with grunts of effort, they raised the logs and walked them over to the side of the corral nearest me and wired the thing onto the top rail to secure it. Finished, they celebrated by popping open some beers.

I couldn't help but be fascinated, even though I was dreading what might be next.

They seemed to know what they were doing in constructing the thing, but apparently they were a bit weak on just how to go about using it, because what came next was a beer-lubricated argument about how to proceed. At least it introduced me to the others.

“Look, Elias, without Smithy and his horse, we can't tilt the thing up with someone tied on there. It'll be just too heavy. Besides, it's already fixed in place.” Lem Purdy took a gulp from his beer can.

“Well, what the hell are we supposed to do? You think that either of them is going to climb up there willingly? Give me a break!” Elias Purdy, who the other guy must have been, threw his hands in the air, slopping beer in the direction of the woman. “Oh, sorry, Arlene. And, look, Lem, how are we going to get them tied on anyway, even if they do climb way up there? And what are they going to climb on?”

The woman spoke up. “Will you two boys calm down? You’re always so quick to argue. It’s all easier than you think. We threaten the woman and that’ll get the man to climb up there. Although he does need something to climb on, like ladder rungs across the legs there. And you can climb up on the fence behind him to get up high enough with the rope and tie him on. Right?”

It was her turn to take a slurp of beer, after which she belched in a most unladylike manner.

“You, Lem, go cut some rungs from the rest of those two trees you dropped, and Elias and I’ll help you wire them onto the legs.” She shook her head at the sorry state of the Purdy brothers. “C’mon, Elias, we better go tend to our guests.”

Lem Purdy picked up the axe and walked back out the gate and up toward the trees, and she and Elias went back into the barn.

I was about thirty yards from the uphill fence line and somewhat above the corral, and I took advantage of being alone to move closer and improve my position a little, both to be more well hidden and more comfortable. I found a log to support the binoculars I was using to watch the action down in the well-lit corral, and I made sure that my field of fire would include the entire corral if it were to become necessary. I also made appropriate adjustments to my laser sight to account for the new distance and the downhill trajectory I might need to use.

After some chopping noises well over to my left, Lem came walking back carrying three pieces of tree, all somewhat smaller than the main X but still sturdy looking. He got out the wire and a fencing tool and started lashing one to the two main legs of the X about a foot off the ground.

“Elias? Arlene? You gonna help me out here or what?”

He finished the first rung and started on the second just as Arlene and Elias came out of the barn. She was first, holding two ropes, the other ends of which proved to be tied around the necks of a man and a woman walking side by side, their hands bound somehow behind them. I didn’t recognize the man, who obviously had been beaten and was considerably worse for the wear, but the woman, despite the disheveled appearance and dirt, I recognized Special Agent Winifred Small. She still had a glint of steel in her eyes, although it was considerably dulled compared to my encounter with her earlier in the afternoon. The man, I thought, must be one of her team of agents.

Following her came Elias Purdy, holding a shotgun pointed toward the captives, about half way between them.

This confirmed for me that I wasn’t dealing with the sharpest knives in the drawer, as Elias would have killed his wife along with the captives if he had pulled that shotgun’s trigger. Still, it was a dire situation for Agent Small and her companion, probably more dire than they knew. But all I could do for the time being was to wait and watch.

The Purdys, however, weren’t completely incompetent. Exhibiting some expertise in rope handling, Elias and Arlene secured their captives to the corral’s fence, by the gate, in such a way that no escape was possible, and went to help Lem with the remaining rungs on the timber X. They wound up with three, each about a foot apart. And they must have decided to behave in front of the FBI agents, because this time their squabbling was kept to a minimum.

I was puzzled by how quiet the FBI agents were—after all, they, as I knew well, were all control freaks, and here were two who seemed totally cowed by the events. At least, as I could see, Small was taking interest in what was going on. Her companion, however, seemed oblivious.

As the Purdy clan was finishing up, Agent Small finally broke her silence. “Mr. Purdy! I don’t know quite what’s happening here, but I need to repeat what I’ve said already. Our office knows where we are, and they’ll come looking for us. Are you really planning to take on the Federal Bureau of Investigation? Really? Do you have some sort of martyr complex or something?”

Lem looked up from twisting wire around the timbers.

“Martyr complex?” His smile was somehow evil. “Martyr complex? Lady, you’ve got no idea where this is going. Remember Waco? The FBI looked like a lot of damned fools after Waco. And we’re going to make you look like complete idiots and, better yet, we’ll survive and prosper. You show up here without a warrant and start throwing your weight around, and all we’re doing is just trying to protect our privacy.”

“That does not justify your treatment of us, Mr. Purdy.”

“Hell it doesn’t, lady. I asked you to leave, and you wouldn’t. That makes you trespassers and home invaders. Colorado’s got a ‘stand my ground’ law that lets me protect my home. And that’s what I’m doing, protecting it.”

“Mr. Purdy. Colorado’s law is not like that, not what you’re thinking, not at all. We introduced ourselves as FBI agents and showed you identification, and that alone told you that we were not common criminals intent on invading your home. Moreover, we were outside, in the driveway out there for God’s sake. You don’t have a hope of using Colorado’s law in your defense.”

Lem Purdy looked straight at her, his face grim. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?”

He turned to his brother. “We all set? Let’s get this guy up there.”

He then walked off into the barn.

Elias walked over to Winifred Short’s companion, untied his rope from the corral fence, and gave it a jerk. “Let’s go, pal. Over here.”

The agent stumbled in the only direction he could, the one the rope was pulling him in.

“OK, now here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to take these cuffs off you,” Elias dug into a pocket and came up with a key, “and you’re going to climb up this ladder here and then turn around, right?”

The agent looked at the apparatus with a blank stare just as Lem Purdy returned from the barn with what looked to me like a fistful of zip-ties.

* * * * *

“Charlie! Charlie! Don’t listen to him! Don’t do anything!” Winifred Small’s voice was in command mode.

“‘Charlie’ is it? And you introduced him as ‘Charles.’ Well, I like ‘Charlie’ better,” Arlene pulled a large combat knife out of her right boot and waved it about. “Charlie, you just do what Elias says or I’ll cut one of Miss Bossy-Face’s ears off, get it? And if that doesn’t work, there are lots of other possibilities.”

Charlie was obviously conflicted, but the knife was persuasive. As soon as his hands were free, he climbed up to the third rung of the X and turned around, wobbling a bit while trying to maintain his balance. Meanwhile, Lem had climbed up on the fence behind him.

“OK, good move, Charlie. Now, lean back a little and raise your arms.” Lem grabbed an arm and zip-tied it to the upper part of the X and then shuffled over and did the other arm.

After that, he took the tag end of Charlie’s rope and wound it around his waist and the timber, right at the middle intersection of the big X, just below the top rail of the fence. Lem looked satisfied and Elias was nodding. Charlie only looked confused.

“Ready to have some fun, brother?” Elias had a peculiar look on his face.

“Guess so.” Lem looked around. “How about I back the truck in here? Then you can handle ’em. You’re better at it. Oh. Arlene? You ought to get her outside the fence, for now at least.”

Arlene untied Agent Small and, carrying the shotgun, towed her out of the corral through the big gate. They took up a position between the barn and that gate, and Arlene tied off Small’s rope again. Over by the side of the barn, out of sight, a big diesel engine fired up.

Presently, the jacked-up pickup truck backed into the corral. The gate was wider than the truck, but the truck backed in so that the passenger side was right up against its gate post. And the truck stopped so that the passenger door would open outside the post. Elias Purdy opened the truck’s back gate, fumbled around, and came up with an old-fashioned buggy whip, or what looked like one. And he also found a fat stick of some kind, maybe more of a club. But then I zoomed the binoculars in and saw that it was some kind of electrical device, like a cattle prod, maybe. This he handed to his brother, who had taken a position between the truck’s driver’s side and the open portion of the gate.

That’s when Elias started opening the doors on the sides of that camper shell. He started on the front of the passenger side, opened all three there quickly, and backed around to the driver’s side. There he started from the rear and, with all three open, ended up standing by his brother. Nothing happened immediately, but then out from one of the doors jumped a very big dog. It took me only a few seconds to recognize it as one of Elias Purdy’s wolfdogs. The other five soon followed. They grouped up, sniffed at each other, and then made a circuit of the fence, pretty much ignoring Charlie. When they came to the Purdy brothers, Elias flicked his whip, and the wolfdogs whined and cowered. Purdy used his advantage to herd them to one of the far corners of the corral while Lem pulled the truck out of the corral and closed the gate.

Elias backed over to the side of the corral where Agent Small was tied and climbed up to sit on the top rail of the corral fence, leaving Charlie, tied to the big X, alone inside with the pack. His earlier lethargy had become replaced by obvious fear. Even I, outside the fence, 25 yards or so away, holding a fully automatic assault rifle, was scared.

The wolfdogs, though, were just curious. They spread out, sniffing the ground all over the compound, an especially big one with a white right ear carefully marking all of the fence posts. At first they continued to ignore the tree-trunk apparatus on the fence nearest me. Charlie, wisely, I suppose, remained as still as, well, death. Maybe he was just too scared to move.

The Purdys, meanwhile, were patient. Lem had returned from moving the truck and joined his brother on the top of the fence, and Arlene was standing near where Agent Small was tied, watching through the wire.

“I forgot. When’s the last time you fed ’em, Elias?” Arlene broke the silence.

“Tuesday, remember? After we got back from town. I reckon they’ll be getting pretty hungry about now.” His smile was not friendly.

Lem spoke up. “Taking them long enough, don’t ya think? Maybe we should have given them some blood to smell like we did with Swent.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll find him. Can’t miss him in this little space. Not like those coyotes we had to attract up there on the mountain-side.” Elias was watching his pack with great interest.

“Charlie? You’re doing great by holding still. You can also tuck your legs up high, very, very slowly. That might help.” Winifred Small’s voice was surprisingly calm and soothing, all things considered.

That, I knew, would offer only temporary hope. Charlie, even though he looked pretty fit, would quickly tire of using only his abdominal muscles to hold his legs up.

“Shut your mouth, bitch!” Arlene grabbed the hair on the back of Small’s head and, with a scrubbing motion, smacked her face-first into a fence post. Blood appeared on Small’s forehead, and immediately the wolfdogs’ noses poked up into the air, sniffing at the new scent.

That got them interested in the meat on the timber X. The big one with the white ear circled the two legs, sniffing at Charlie from the ground, and then he put his forefeet up on the second rung to smell Charlie’s feet. I could tell that Charlie was having trouble staying still.

It was about then that I powered up the laser sight on my H&K, still wondering how I should handle the situation. After all, the wolfdogs were only being themselves, following their instincts. And, really, they were magnificent creatures. Their behavior showed them to be both smart and sociable. If there was a villain in all this, it was the humans, Elias Purdy especially.

But simply letting them eat Charlie was obviously a no-go.

While the big one continued to sniff at Charlie, I picked up the binoculars and studied the Purdy brothers carefully. I’d seen Arlene set the shotgun against the barn, near where she was standing. But I was curious about where the FBI agents’ weapons might have ended up. Because the brothers were sitting side by side on the fence, at nearly a right angle to me, I couldn’t really tell if they were carrying, though.

Then I noticed that the wolfdog with the white ear was tugging at Charlie’s pants cuff, worrying at it with something between a whine and a growl. Time, I thought, to fish or cut bait.

But then the alpha wolfdog, as I’d begun to think of him, backed off, studied Charlie again, and began another circuit of the corral.

Elias, who was closest to me, must have become impatient, because he pulled a folding knife out of a pocket and turned to his brother.

“Maybe you’re right, Lem. I think they need some encouragement.”

I had a clear view of Elias’s right thigh. Before Lem could answer, I made sure that the H&K was set on single-shot mode and pulled the trigger just enough to put a dot of infrared light—which only I could see, courtesy of the sight’s lens system—in the middle of his right knee. A little more trigger pull produced a sort of fart from the weapon and an omnidirectional crack from the supersonic round just about the time that Elias Purdy’s knees shattered—the round penetrated the right one completely and took out the left one, too.

Elias screamed as he toppled into the corral, then screamed louder as he hit the ground, knees first. His whip went flying and landed in the mud near Charlie, which scared the wolfdogs gathered under Charlie’s feet. But it was only a few seconds before their attention turned to Elias.

Lem, meanwhile, had a grimace on his face, and his right hand was pushing on his right thigh. It occurred to me that the round must have passed through both of his brother's knees and imbedded itself in Lem's leg.

Arlene had begun shrieking "Elias! Elias! Get out of there. Climb out!"

But Elias only writhed on the ground in agony as the wolfdog pack gathered around him, deep, rumbling growls signaling their intent. Arlene looked around frantically and picked up the shotgun, pushing its muzzle through the fence toward the pack. I couldn't help but notice that it was also pointed toward Charlie.

"No! Arlene, don't! You'll hit Elias!" It seemed that Lem Purdy's wound was not serious enough to prevent him from being lucid.

"What are you, stupid? A little buckshot is better than getting eaten alive!" She was practically snarling as she put the shotgun to her shoulder and took aim.

But I was ready and had an infrared dot painted on the stock of the shotgun almost immediately. Before she could fire, I did, and my shot knocked the stock sideways into her right jaw. She crumpled like a prizefighter taking a clean right hook.

Lem looked in my direction, but I was still hidden. I saw him grit his teeth, swing his legs back over the fence, and drop to the ground on the outside. He landed with a yell of pain, then hobbled around the corner of the barn.

* * *

He wasn't going to be running very fast, so I knew I could catch him. But then I remembered the truck, so I leapt up and hustled after him. About the time I reached the corral's fence, near Charlie's position, I heard the truck fire up, and when I got to the corner of the corral, where I could see it, it was starting to move.

I flicked the H&K's fire-mode switch to full auto, hit the ground, and let loose a several round burst toward the truck's rear tires. It worked. The truck's rear end slewed to the left, and it skidded to a stop. Because I couldn't see the driver's door, though, I couldn't tell what was happening for a minute.

But the sound of another engine starting made it obvious, and I remembered the sedan parked in front of the garage. Jumping to my feet, I ran in that direction, but by the time I got there, it was disappearing down the driveway. I watched, impotent, while it turned right at the highway and headed toward Estes Park.

There was no point, I could tell, in trying to follow in my Jeep, as it was parked a good five minutes away. Lem's Hummer was probably in the garage, but it wasn't going anywhere without keys. So I tried to congratulate myself on my successes—the two FBI agents and the wolfdog pack were all still alive. Elias, though, was not going to be so lucky, I thought.

Back by the corral gate, I found the combat knife Arlene had been waving about and cut a piece of rope to tie her up with. She was still unconscious but seemed unharmed apart from that.

As I started to untie Agent Short, she said, "Leave me. Go get Charlie out of there."

Because he was right next to the fence, and because the wolfdogs were completely ignoring him at that point, that turned out to be easy. I also spent a minute untwisting the wire that held the X to the fence and managed to shove it over—a way, I hoped, to keep the pack from escaping. Charlie and I walked back around and untied Agent Short, who was a bit woozy, and bloody, from her encounter with the fence post but otherwise fine.

During this activity, all three of us were studiously trying to ignore the action inside the corral, a stomach-turning feeding frenzy. It occurred to me that Elias had stopped screaming about the time I was chasing after the sedan. Given all that was going on, it took him quite a while to die.

“I didn’t recognize you at first, Mr. MacQuarrie, but I was sure glad to see you running out of those trees up there. And I was right this afternoon. The CBI clearly has no idea of who they have carrying one of their shields.” The steel in Winifred Short’s eyes had softened, and her smile was genuine. “If it weren’t for these stupid cuffs, I think I’d give you a big hug, unprofessional or not.”

“I’m afraid that one of them, Lem Purdy, got away in your car, Agent Small. But my car’s just down the road. We can get into town in that.”

“Maybe there’s some water inside the barn that we can wash up a bit with, first.”

I heard a cough and Charlie said, “I’ve got a spare key for the cuffs in my left sock. And I suppose it’s too much to hope that there’s some ice around here. I hurt all over. Mr., ah, MacQuarrie, was it? I’m Agent Charles McMullen, Charlie to my friends. And you, sir, are definitely my friend now.”

He held out a hand and we shook. “Please, call me Mac, both of you. It’s about all I answer to these days.”

Charlie managed a smile. “Will do. And, I hate to ask, but could you fish out the key? It’ll hurt like hell to bend down, I just know it.”

We got Winifred Small, who wanted me to call her “Winnie,” something I was going to have to work at, unshackled and, in a gesture of payback, put the cuffs on Arlene and tied her to a fence post. After that, we went looking for a water tap.

The one in the barn had a “non-potable” label on it, which made me feel sorry for the horses, but we did find a stash of belongings including personal and ID wallets, cell phones, and Winnie’s purse. No weapons, though. But in the garage we hit pay-dirt. The second-floor apartment, where Lem Purdy had been staying after the debris flow took out his house had not only *hot* water, but also towels and even a medicine cabinet. And ice.

Winnie’s bleeding had been due to a deep abrasion that had turned into an egg-shaped lump on her forehead. I got her cleaned up and bandaged, and fed her a couple of Advils from a bottle in the medicine cabinet. But she wasn’t going to be winning any beauty contests in the near future. Charlie, meanwhile, gulped down four of the things with several glasses of water. He also found a plastic bag and made himself an ice pack with it.

“Mac, I’m almost sorry you didn’t shoot that woman Arlene instead of just knocking her cold. What a sadist she is.” He sighed. “If you ever have the opportunity to get beaten with bamboo sticks, I recommend that you pass. I never would have thought something could hurt so much.”

“Well, assault and battery of a federal officer would seem like a nice complement to conspiracy to commit murder and assorted other felonies, right?”

Our final victory of the evening was the key to the Hummer that was hanging on a hook by the apartment’s door. But we still had one more job to do.

“Let’s get Arlene into the car, well trussed up, of course. Then we have to decide what to do about the, um, mess in the corral.” Winnie Short was back to being in control.

“And there’s also the matter of Lemuel Purdy,” I reminded her.

She looked at me, steel back in her eyes. “Oh, yeah. How could I forget him? Let’s do the easy stuff first. Where’s my phone?”

She proceeded to call her office and pass instructions for an armed-and-dangerous be-on-the-lookout for Lem, even giving a solid description of him and her FBI car in the process. She made it clear that the Estes Park PD and Park Service law enforcement needed to be high-priority recipients of the BOLO.

That done, it was time to fetch Arlene from outside the corral and decide to do about what was inside it.

We'd taken enough time to clean up and so on, however, that the feeding frenzy was about over. The wolfdog pack looked reasonably content, all-in-all, some asleep, a couple gnawing on larger bones that I didn't want to know more about. I'd been hungry earlier, but now I wasn't. At all. For anything.

We decided just to leave the pack inside the corral with some water in a big pan we found in the barn. Some outfit such as the county animal control group was going to have to decide what to do with them. And then we bundled Arlene, who was still out cold, into the Hummer, turned off all the lights we could find, and left.

They dropped me at my Jeep, and I put away my equipment and led them into town, first to the Estes Park Medical Center. There, Arlene got revived, placed formally under arrest, and shackled to a bed for further recovery, Winnie got her wound looked at and fixed a bit with a butterfly bandage, and Charlie, bruised from shoulders to ankles, got tsked-tsked over and given a strong prescription for painkillers. Fortunately, he had no broken bones or other serious damage, just lots and lots of bruises.

I steered Winnie and Charlie to a local motel that wouldn't completely blow out their *per diem* and had toilets that could be flushed, and let them have time to check in, then we all met at a local pizza joint in Lower Stanley Village for a late supper and debriefing.

"You two must have left Denver right after our meeting, right, Winnie?" I was puzzled by how they'd managed to get to CRAG before I did.

"That was the phone call I got, Mac. Time to leave. In all that info you sent me, I noticed that the person who interviewed the locals up there in the valley about the Swent case was Aaron Smithy. We wanted to talk with people again, and we started with Lem Purdy, as our bad luck would have it."

Charlie nodded. "And he was—how would you say it?—paranoid in the extreme. He was a clear person of interest for us, but it would have been just a routine interview if he hadn't over-reacted. He surprised us with that shotgun and called his brother."

"That explains the hurry." I related my encounter with the pickup truck and the circumstance involving the Boulder County deputy. "It'll be interesting to see if forensics finds traces of the deputy's car on that truck's bull-bar."

"Well, I think..." Winnie's pocket buzzed, and she pulled out her phone. "Agent Small...Yes, that was me...Oh! Well, that's interesting. Where?...OK, thanks. We'll be there soonest."

She looked at me. "Estes Park PD has found our car, abandoned in the parking lot of a grocery store. A Safeway, they said something about Upper Stanley Village. You know where that might be?"

"Let's go for a short walk," I responded.

* * *

I made a triple-decker pizza sandwich to carry in one hand and held my big cup of Coke in the other, and we walked up the outside stairway to the upper part of the shopping center. There, with an Estes Park PD car sitting next to it, was Winnie's FBI sedan, looking none worse for the wear. The keys were even still in it.

After a bit of negotiation with the officer, Charlie opened the driver's door using a knuckle, reached inside, and popped the trunk. From there, he took out a roll of what looked like clear packing tape and proceeded to lift what fingerprints there were from the door handle, the steering wheel, and the car key. That done, he had the officer initial the backside of the tape, thanked him, and sent him on his way.

By that time I was finished with my pizza and feeling the effects of the long, stressful day. They were too, so we all agreed to meet first thing in the morning at a local breakfast place just across the parking lot and called it a day.

I went home, cleaned up, and was about to fall gratefully into bed when I remembered Angela. Although she'd missed all the excitement, she needed to be part of the next day.

So I called her, late as it was getting. Fortunately, I heard something like television news in the background, so she was still up. These youngsters, I thought, have more energy than they know how to handle. With a minimum of fuss, I persuaded her to join us for breakfast the next morning and to let me yank some chains a bit during the conversation.

And then I did fall into bed. This time, the message in my head wasn't that I was getting too old for this stuff, it was that I'd gotten too old some time ago.

But Saturday dawned bright and beautiful, and I felt rejuvenated, especially because the breakfast at the Notchtop Cafe was sublime. They didn't have a change of clothes, so both Winnie and Charlie looked a bit wrinkled, but that just meant that they fit in with everyone else in Estes Park.

The introductions went over swimmingly, and we spent most of breakfast reviewing, in terms suitable for a family restaurant, the events of Friday for Angela's benefit.

Over our second post-breakfast cups of coffee, Winnie finally broached the elephant in the room. "Well, I checked this morning, and there are no reports of stolen cars since last night. So where could he have gone? I mean, we still have possession of the Hummer, so even if he had extra keys, he didn't take off in it."

I'd slept well and, after a double serving of eggs Benedict, was feeling just fine, maybe a little too fine. "Well, you know, this is a big town for hiking. Maybe he just walked off."

I guess she saw the twinkle in my eye. "Yeah, right, with a bullet wound in his leg. What is it you're not telling us, Mac?"

She shot Angela a sort of "here we go" look.

"Well, I mean, that's really his only option, right? Your folks have the park entrances under surveillance and the State Patrol is watching the only other road that's open, the one we came in on last night. Unless he stole a horse. Or rented one."

She sat and stared at me, not especially steely-eyed, just patiently. Angela and Charlie kept quiet.

"Or he could be camping out, I guess. Weather's pretty nice, finally. Did you have equipment in your car that he might have walked off with? A tent or anything? There are lots of places to camp around here. Besides the camp grounds, I mean."

This got me a skeptically raised eyebrow. I noticed in my peripheral vision that Charlie was working very hard not to giggle. Maybe it was those prescription painkillers. And Angela was doing eye-rolling exercises, I guess.

“Or,” I continued, “maybe he’s decided to hole up somewhere until things cool off a little. Of course, even though this is a pretty small town, it’s kind of big for a real house-to-house search. And there are lots of crotchety folks up here, folks who’d insist on a warrant before they’d let you search. Even for someone like the remaining Purdy brother.”

Winnie started drumming her fingernails on the table.

“So, what you need is a strategy to search the right places first. The places he’d most likely be, right?”

She finally broke her silence. “Why, who would ever have thought of that, Mac? C’mon, man, can we cut to the chase here? Please? Is there something you want from me?”

I tried to look surprised. “Hmm. Hadn’t thought of that. But, y’know, maybe there is. See, if the story about last night gets out, I’ll be in very, very hot water with my, uh, my significant other. Is there some way to keep my role in that whole thing, you know, secret, just among us?”

I shot Angela my most serious look.

It was Winnie’s turn to look surprised. “Well...no, wait. Now that I think about it, I don’t believe that either Arlene or Lem got a look at you, not at all, let alone a good enough look for an ID. Hmm. Well, maybe we can. For sure we can downplay it to make your role appear passive.”

“‘Passive,’ huh? Hmm. Well, that should do it. I suppose that there should be *some* mention of CBI involvement, just to keep the local bureaucrats happy.” I held out my hand and got a handshake. “Now. Let’s pay the bill, and I need to get something out of my Jeep. Then we can take a short drive and another little walk.”

I retrieved my lock-pick set from the box in the Jeep, and the FBI agents followed Angela and me up the hill to the subdivision above the shopping center. There, we left the two cars at the end of the street and walked, to everyone else’s chagrin, through back yards to the house where I’d spent the previous Tuesday evening. It was still surrounded by yellow crime scene tape and it still smelled smoky. I led them on a round-about route that involved lots of bushes.

“Now,” I whispered, as we flitted behind a good-sized lilac, “if you were going to hide out for a while, you’d want someplace familiar, but someplace where you wouldn’t get disturbed, right?”

“Sounds good to me.” Winnie, I noticed, had her backup handgun, a Glock 9mm from her car’s trunk, drawn.

“So, this house with the burned wing is where Michael Decker lived, and where he died. Thing is, he was an officer on the board of that CRAG outfit, where Lem Purdy was director. So Purdy had probably been here on various occasions, and he knows it’s empty now.”

“Ohhhhh...” Comprehension dawned on her face, and on Charlie’s and Angela’s, too.

“I’m thinking that he won’t exactly answer the doorbell. And we should probably try to cover all the entrances, at first. Until we clear the first floor. Right?”

“Right.”

“*But*. But if we can make it seem like a routine follow-up to the search that the CBI forensics guys did, ah, last Wednesday I guess it was, then he’ll be less likely to be spooked into doing something stupid, right?”

“Oh. I see where you’re going.” Charlie was nodding, and I could see that Angela was, too.

“So I’ll go in the front door and make a bit of noise doing it, while you’re covering the back door and the side door on the garage and the hall that used to go into that burned-out study. I’m thinking that

if he opens the main garage door, we'll all hear it. After I'm in, I'll let you all in and we can clear the first floor. At which point, if he's in the house—and there's no guarantee he is—he'll be trapped on the second floor. OK?"

Winnie said, "And when you let us in the house, we'll make normal conversation about mundane things while we're clearing the first floor. To make it sound all routine."

"Perfect. But on the second floor, at some point we'll have to be stealthy." At that point, we were at the back door, so I left Winnie there, waved Charlie toward the end of the house where the study had been, and took Angela around the garage with me, leaving her at its side door.

I got around to the front and made something of a racket getting the door open, and things fell into place from there. We cleared the first floor with no surprises, and I managed to find a flashlight in a utility drawer in the kitchen. Charlie, Angela, and I cleared most of the second floor while Winnie guarded the stairs, after which we all eased into the master bedroom. I held my finger to my lips as I led them into the bathroom and then into its big closet. Under the shelves at the end, I found the latch, opened it as quietly as I could, and pulled the shelves out.

The flashlight lit up the little hidden room back there, where Lem Purdy was looking bewildered, all wrapped up in a sheet on a mattress on the floor next to that safe.

* * *

He probably wasn't exactly happy to see us, but, then again, I think maybe he was relieved, at some level. For one thing, his leg obviously needed real medical attention. For another, there was very little in the way of food in the house—Decker had been an eat-out bachelor, it seemed—and, on that bad leg, a trip to the store was going to be almost impossible for Purdy to manage. When we surprised him in his little hidey-hole, he didn't even go for the handgun—Winnie's, it turned out—that he had in there with him.

Charlie cuffed him, and we dragged him out into the bathroom, where we could see the severity of that leg wound. That motivated Winnie to call an ambulance, and she rode in it with him to the medical center. As that was happening, Charlie and Angela searched the hidden room for additional bits of evidence, but it was clean except for the mattress that Purdy had been sleeping on. We concluded that, in addition to the safe, the room had been used for storage, and that the mattress had been in there all along.

After that, it was a matter of dotting "i"s and crossing "t"s. At the medical center, Arlene had awakened and was making a god-awful nuisance of herself, but because her jaw was broken and wired shut, it was mostly unintelligible and muffled. And it was easy to promise the center's staff that she'd be whisked off to Denver that afternoon—Winnie, after all, had called in reinforcements. Lem Purdy was hustled into surgery on arrival, and the anesthetic would keep him under full control at least until the FBI's ambulance arrived.

I'm sure that the Sergeant Alf Strzpyk of the Estes Park PD, who had pulled duty at the medical center to keep an eye on things, was eagerly awaiting their departure, in order to get these two felons—excuse me, alleged felons—out of his little tourist town as soon as possible.

Having wrapped up everything that I could think of, I was itching to get home, do a little packing, and head west over Trail Ridge Road. The prospect of seeing Sam for the first time in a week was beckoning. Also, the flushable toilets.

I mentioned this to Angela while we were sitting in the medical center's waiting room, and she agreed—she and Sandy had been away from their new home in Winter Park for a long time and wanted

to get back. So I suggested that she head out. I was planning to dictate as full a report as I could manage on my drive west, and she, I promised, would get the first draft. It didn't take my suggesting that a second time before she was out the door.

While I waited around to hear the results of Purdy's surgery, I thought over the events of the past 24 hours. It occurred to me that someone needed to call animal control. But what animal control? Larimer County's was based in Fort Collins, a good three-hour drive given the road situation. And on a Saturday, they'd not have resources to get up here. Gilpin County, the smallest in Colorado, might or might not even have one, I decided.

That left the county in between, Boulder County. Strictly speaking, the CRAG place was not in their jurisdiction, but it wasn't too far removed, only a couple of miles. And they, I suspected, would empathize with the plight of Elias Purdy's wolfdog pack. So I fiddled with my phone until I found their number and called them. I made sure to work into the conversation the tidbit that there had been an accident and the pack had eaten its owner, whatever relevance that might have. And I told nice person on the phone that the alternative to their group's involvement would be that those six magnificent animals would probably be summarily euthanized.

That got me the response that "OK, I know just what to do. Where is this, now?", and I knew that things would be taken care of.

Then I called Annette.

"Mac! Good to hear from you. How's the weather over your way?"

"Well, since Thursday afternoon, it's been perfect. And you'll be glad to hear, I think, that everything to do with those cases over this way is a wrap."

"Really? Already? How'd you pull that off?"

"Well, I guess I should probably make you wait for the report. See, I'm going to run it by Angela first. She's my boss, after all." I could hear a small groan. "But, but, hold on. I need to do that because she was involved in clearing our for-sure case, the arson at Decker's place and his murder. And our not so for-sure case, Swent's murder, is going to come out as an FBI success, with us getting credit as bit players. So I think it's all good."

There was a long pause. "No damage?"

"Ah, not to me or Angela. But the new FBI agents got dinged up a little. And, of course, the first set got themselves killed in the flood."

"Umm. Well, OK, that sounds about as good as it can be under the circumstances. But I'm going to be impatient to see a full report."

"Oh, you will, you will. But, I gotta warn you. It won't be fit for polite dinner-table conversation. Far from it, in fact." I tried to put a little lightness into my voice. "So, how are you and Hal and Sam? I'm planning to come over this afternoon. Can I pick anything up on the way in?"

"Oh, good. Sam will be thrilled. And, um, I think we're fine, because we'll be making a trip into town soon." She paused and I heard a chuckle. "And she's got a big surprise for you."

"Uh-oh. Does this mean I'm going to swoon again?"

"Ha! You'll just have to wait and see. But I think you'll find it...um...oh...adorable. Heartwarming. Just what you've never had and always wanted. What your life has been missing."

Oh, *man!*

* * * * *

Murder on the Rocks

* * * * *

A Four Corners Mystery



Murder on the Rocks

Prologue

Of all the bad things that could have ever happened to her, in her worst nightmare Lucy could never have imagined being stuffed into the pit of that outhouse.

It made her want to die.

This was a different wanting-to-die from the time she embarrassed herself two years ago, when she wet her panties in front of her classmates for fear of not getting that arithmetic problem right, and it was also different from those painfully uncomfortable times in the dentist's chair.

It was those put together and much more. Much, much worse.

At least that horrible man was gone, the one who had done those awful things to her. But now it was dark. And cold. Smelly, putrid, foul, too gross for words. Hard to breathe. Standing chest-deep in this...this disgusting glop was the worst, so bad she almost wanted the man to come back. Almost.

Her mother had told her, over and over, "Lucinda Smith, you must never talk to strangers, or take candy or anything from them. Never ever."

But he seemed so nice, she remembered. And he smelled good, like Daddy when he was cleaned up, with a whiff of that Old Spice I bought him last Father's Day. And he was good-looking, not all fat and sweaty like Daddy usually was.

And he even had a bit of a limp like me!

Lucy wondered if she would smell anything good ever again, if she would ever walk anywhere again.

That horrible man had taken her clothes, ripping them off her as she struggled, then done those awful things to her, the things that hurt so much. After that he stuffed her down this disgusting toilet, into the pit. At least she had been able to land on her feet and prevent her head from going under. That, she just knew, would have killed her in the most horrible way possible.

Then the lid banged shut, the door slammed, and she heard tires scrunching on the gravel, driving away. Everything got quiet.

The depth of the quiet put another scare into her, and she screamed for a time. But that made her breathe hard, and the putrid air choked her. So she tried to calm herself, and to listen. While she listened, she sang songs in her head, and hummed softly.

"Jesus loves me, this I know..."

The song put her into a different place, into a sort of trance where she was sheltered from her pathetic circumstances.

How long this went on, she had no idea. There was no day, no night, just the putrid darkness. And the cold.

“Jesus loves me, this I know...”

She had been shivering for what seemed to be an eternity when she imagined she heard tires scrunching on the gravel again, getting closer this time. But they stopped and nothing else happened—the deep quiet returned.

So she went back to her little song, slipping back into her trance, trying not to breathe too deeply, wanting to die.

Soon. Maybe she would die soon.

* * *

Part I

One

I went so far as to look it up. The original version of Robbie Burns’ contrite musing about that mouse included the stanza

*But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!*

All I can say is, our scheme had been laid quite carefully indeed, and I thought it was foolproof. But then in the winter another big stock market “correction” happened while I was too busy to notice, along with a hiccup in housing values, and it all went extremely *agley* for us, far more so than I would have ever thought possible. It just didn’t seem fair, even to an old cynic like me. On top of that, the early September flood added actual injury to the financial insult, although we came through it relatively unscathed.

And all that financial turmoil, and the disruption of the previous fall’s flood, was immediately followed by the hugely annoying, official inquiry into what had happened in that investigation of mine during the flood. At least Angela Espinosa stuck resolutely with me through it all, despite some risk to her career with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Annette Trieri, too. But, rather quickly, actually, it came out in my favor, which helped all of us feel vindicated. It soured me on working with the CBI, though, despite my friendships there.

I guess one characteristic of us folks of Scottish descent, especially the MacQuarrie clan, must be perseverance, because I soldiered on, and, stalwart companion that she was, Sam soldiered with me. Although my stocks, the ones I’d picked so carefully for their supposed balance of income and stability, had tanked, my two pensions still provided their monthly checks, for what that was worth. And even

though our house lost some of its value, the market in Estes Park wasn't hit as hard as some places. In fact, the aftermath of the flood was probably a bigger hit overall. But because our house wasn't affected, it did well on the market, at least as well as I could have expected, and sold right away. It helped, I'm sure, that it was springtime, when people thought about moving to Estes Park. I guess we should have asked more for it—but we just didn't want to push out luck.

We had paid for it with cash, mostly Sam's cash, and we were still able to sell it for a tidy sum and buy a townhouse, all in a whirlwind of activity, and have quite a bit left over. We wanted to travel the Rocky Mountain West, and the lock-and-leave nature of the townhouse was just a better fit for us than that detached house on the big lot with all its upkeep—and its higher taxes. Besides, the townhouse was within walking distance of downtown, so we could wander down there on summer evenings for ice-cream cones.

So we made plans to hit the road.

I knew right away we couldn't possibly do that in my restored '66 Shelby Cobra racer, nor would Sam's pink Volkswagen Beetle convertible work. So we sold them both—I was flabbergasted at what that Cobra brought, which helped the overall financial situation quite nicely, and the VW did pretty well, too, despite (or, I suppose, possibly because of) its pinkness. We kept my Jeep, though, to use when we were staying “at home” in Estes Park.

A bit of research put me onto a company that built and sold all-wheel-drive, ruggedized conversion vans, including full-sized ones with big turbo-diesel engines and twin 25-gallon fuel tanks, adjustable suspensions, transfer cases with a low range, and oversized, knobby off-road tires, all of which would be able to take us just about anywhere the Jeep could. We found one in stock that would let us sleep and cook in it, and it even had a way for us to avoid having to do in the woods what bears do there.

I was just too old for that sort of thing, and, though Sam had taken to life in the Rocky Mountains with gleeful enthusiasm, she hadn't quite embraced that level of outdoors-woman proficiency. Besides, having put up with an out-of-commission sanitary sewer from the flood, after it had washed away the pipes down in the valley, we both deserved some creature comforts.

What with the inquiry, selling the house and moving, selling the cars and finding the van and getting some custome work on it done, it took us a year to be ready for an expedition. We finally managed to get our act together in early October for our first tour, planned for the weeks before the transition to winter hit the mountains, through northwestern Colorado, into the Uintah mountains of northeastern Utah, and then toward points south, where we hoped we might see the very last of the changing aspen.

We were going to make a big, counter-clockwise loop and return to Estes Park by Halloween, or perhaps a week later if we decided to stretch things out. By then, we figured that Trail Ridge Road would be closed, so we started off on it to the west while it was still open.

It took a week or so to shake things down—a week of glorious fall sun and blue skies, during which we cheated and stayed in a couple of motels—but by the time we made it over to Flaming Gorge, we were settled into a comfortable routine in our home on wheels. The aspen in the high Uintahs were mostly bare, so we wandered the back roads seeking out places with interesting scenery for Sam to sketch and streams in which I could torment the trout, or at least try to.

That back-road wandering was how we came upon the little picnic area and campground at the Bald Mountain Trailhead. As nice as the van was—captain's chairs with lots of adjustments; stereo with a Bluetooth connection as well as satellite radio and navigation; cold drinks within arm's reach—it was not what you'd call roomy. After only a couple of days into the shake-down week, we had discovered the therapeutic value, both physical and psychological, of day hikes to exercise our legs and to stave off

the incipient cabin fever. The Bald Mountain summit, it appeared, might offer a good view of the surroundings.

We were standing in the gravel parking area, stretching and listening to the cooling engine tick and play a counterpoint to the wind sighing through trees, when Sam looked puzzled.

“What’s that?” She cocked her head sideways.

Her hearing, I had discovered, was much better than mine, so I just tried to keep quiet and listen harder.

“It sounds like someone singing.” She listened some more. “Humming, maybe. And I think it’s coming from over there.”

She was looking toward the privy.

* * *

It took us about a half hour to get that poor child even to tell us her name. By then, we had her out of there and pretty well cleaned up, wrapped in a sheet and several big towels that I doubted would ever wash completely clean. We made her some hot cocoa and soon she stopped shivering, although her lips stayed blue for a while longer.

But it took me only about ten seconds to decide what to do with the motherfucker who put her in there, if I ever got him alone for long enough. It seemed like the same treatment he’d given the little girl would be a good start, except he’d go in head first, inch by slow inch.

Lucy Smith was ten, she told us, and, as you’d expect, scared witless. Sam’s presence helped, I’m sure, as did the cocoa, the warm sunlight, and the sponge bath Sam gave her. It was pretty clear that she’d been sexually abused, so I tried to stay in the background as much as possible and let Sam go into her mother/nurse mode.

Fortunately, we’d invested in a satellite phone—our experience with spotty cell phone coverage in the highly civilized town of Estes Park had suggested that something more reliable would be worth having in the real outback. I called the 911 service, and in a blink was routed to the Summit County Sheriff’s office in Park City. I summarized the situation and, in the process, told them about my Colorado Bureau of Investigation connection and suggested that they call Annette Trieri, the CBI Deputy Director with whom I’d worked a lot, for verification. Given the circumstances, that was sufficient for me to persuade them to let us bring Lucy in rather than send an ambulance out for her, which would save time, and for someone from their office to meet us at the medical center.

Although it was only about 45 miles, the road was such that it took me a bit over an hour. I suppose I could have made it faster—certainly so in that Cobra I’d sold, or even Sam’s Beetle—but I had a couple of people rattling around in the back of the van and I wanted to make it easy on them. For the whole drive down, I listened to Sam’s voice murmuring in reassuring tones about things I couldn’t quite catch.

My GPS navigation system, along with a couple of very obvious signs close in, guided me to the emergency entrance of the Park City Medical Center, where I found a sheriff’s patrol car, a white SUV with decals all over it and a light bar on top, waiting. As soon as we pulled up, a team of people in scrubs emerged with a gurney.

I swiveled my captain’s chair around. “We’re here, Sam. It’s a hospital. Ready for a bit of excitement?”

“Nope. Not at all. No excitement. I’ll step out and talk to them.”

Sam and I had met a few years before down in South Florida on an assignment I was involved with for a special group operating out of one of those three-letter agencies in Washington DC that doesn't want you to know what they do. At the time, I was recently retired, so they hired me back as a consultant, and it was because of my efforts, with indispensable help from a variety of very highly competent people, that a serious threat involving special nuclear materials was contained. Sam, more by coincidence than anything, was on the fringes of it all, and that's how I'd met her. At the time, she was a Miami Beach working girl, but as our relationship evolved, she gave that life up in favor of being an artist with remarkably marketable skills as well as being my Significant Other, or whatever that's called now.

But one thing her working-girl days had taught her was how to be assertive when it was warranted. Of course, she could also be submissive, too, almost on demand if needed—but that situation at the Park City Medical Center called for assertiveness. And even I, who'd been living with her for the past few years, was impressed. It made me so proud of her that I almost burst.

I watched in the right outside mirror as she opened the big sliding door of the van just enough to slip through, and then she stepped carefully down. No hurry, no rush, just dignity. Then she gathered the scrubs and the sheriff's deputy together into a little scrum, which lasted for almost five minutes. By the end of that, everyone was nodding, and all of the scrubs disappeared into the hospital pushing the gurney ahead of them. Almost immediately, one of them reappeared pushing a wheelchair. And the sheriff's deputy sat back down in her SUV, the passenger side, so I inferred she had a partner.

Sam then helped Lucy, talking softly to her all the while—the passenger-side window was open, but I couldn't hear what she was saying—out of the van and into the wheelchair. Lucy was looking pretty good, actually, alert, curious, staring around at the surroundings with interest. Then they disappeared into the emergency entrance.

I got out, walked over to the passenger window of the sheriff's patrol car, and flashed my CBI shield. She lowered her window, and I got a glimpse of another officer behind the wheel, a thin middle-aged man, fit looking and hidden behind the cliché of mirrored aviator sunglasses. I told the deputy I was going to park the van legally and be right back. She looked suspicious, but I suppose that was to be expected, part of her personality, even. When I returned to her window, it eased her suspicion, and we walked into the waiting room together as her partner remained in the SUV. Sam and Lucy were nowhere to be seen.

I spent the next while establishing my identity with her, first by repeating what I'd told the 911 operator, then by referring to my CBI credentials, and then with new information: what Sam and I were doing in northeastern Utah in the first place. Being tourists. And tourism, after all, was something that Utah was trying to encourage, despite some odd cultural issues. The deputy recorded my entire recitation, so it was official.

I decided not to reveal anything about my rather remarkable federal credentials unless it seemed absolutely necessary. I knew that Utah was one of the fifty states that scored low on the trust scale with respect to the federal government—I'm not sure but what that low score worked both ways, actually—and I figured my connections in Washington might not be all that helpful.

But, fortunately, what I told her was good enough to make Deputy Lisa Hamilton, according to her little name badge, relax a bit. We even made casual conversation, during which I learned that she was an immigrant from Wisconsin who found the local culture a bit mystifying.

Sam, bless her soul, was one of those people who took interest in whatever woo-woo therapeutic marvels came along, and, much as I hate to admit it, some of that had rubbed off on me. Turns out that it was actually helpful, in situations such as that one in Park City, to be able to put myself into something

like a meditative trance whenever there was idle time to be passed. It sure beat watching the Fox News feed on the TV in the waiting room.

But even a deep trance wasn't enough to allow me to ignore the commotion that blew in about 45 minutes later.

First, there was a screeching of tires trying to make a turn they weren't really able to, and then those same tires complained loudly about having to stop the car so abruptly. Right outside the ER door. Almost immediately, the automatic door opened just barely in time for an obese, frazzled-looking woman, probably in her early 30s, to burst in, disheveled and hysterical and sweating, and run up to the admitting desk yelling at the top of her lungs, "WHERE'S LUCY, MY DAUGHTER LUCY? OHMYGOD WHERE IS SHE?"

Deputy Sheriff Hamilton leaned over my way. "There was a state-wide Amber Alert out for that little girl."

"Ah. I guess that means that, when the kid is found, the parents are notified as part of the process?"

"Pretty much. Law enforcement would look bad otherwise. Even when it's maybe not the best idea." She was shaking her head.

I sighed a huge sigh. "Well, it sure would be in Lucy's best interest right now for that woman to calm down. Like, a lot."

"I agree completely. And, you know what? I think the absolutely best thing we could do here would be for her to have a talk with the heroic person who rescued her daughter." I could see just a hint of a smile on Deputy Hamilton's face.

"Well, Sam's inside there somewhere. She did all the rescuing. I just drove the van."

"Yeah, but you're here and Sam's not." She stood up and walked toward admitting.

Oh, shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

* * *

Even though I prayed a little prayer to the Vacation Gods to save me, they didn't listen. Assholes.

Then Mr. Smith showed up, followed by a noisy pack of seven children who were being herded by the oldest, a girl of perhaps twelve. He was about twice as rotund as his wife, which gave him the physical presence to get her under control. A bit. But not completely.

Anyway, I don't want to talk about it. Suffice to say that I was indeed able to get her calmed down even more than her husband had, and so when the staff decided to let them see Lucy, it probably wasn't too traumatic for the poor kid.

And Sam managed to escape the entire thing. She was upset at having to leave Lucy in the hands of such obviously questionable guardians, but, then, it wasn't as if Lucy was up for adoption like a stray puppy. Thank you very much. Maybe the Vacation Gods were listening after all.

But that didn't mean we were through. Deputy Sheriff Lisa Hamilton, in a most polite fashion, suggested that we needed to spend some time at the Sheriff's Office there in Park City to be interviewed, in order to help them apprehend the kidnapper. And, well, it was hard to argue with that, no matter how much Sam and I wanted only to be on our way. So Deputy Hamilton rode with Sam and me as we followed her partner over to the station. I was careful to signal all turns and lane changes.

To be fair, even though they interviewed us separately and I heard some shouting coming from the room where Sam was, it wasn't completely unreasonable. And I learned some things, such as the little tidbit that Lucy's disappearance wasn't the first to have happened in recent months. Law enforcement all over Utah was trying to work together to deconstruct the circumstances involving at least six other such missing little girls. Who, if anyone, was behind the whole thing was, of course, a priority, and theories ran the gamut from simple accidents with no body found—all of the girls had disappeared in pretty remote rural areas—to international child prostitution rings. At the same time, Lucy's case was the first with any evidence at all of a kidnapping rather than a mysterious disappearance. But because we'd found her where we had, the kidnapping was confined to Utah, and Utah law enforcement was still in control of the whole situation.

One thing that triggered my intellect more than just a bit was a comment about how Lucy limped because of a genetic defect manifested in her left foot. I'd noticed the limp up at Bald Mountain, but I'd put it off to her condition, just plucked from an almost frozen-over version of hell, at the time. But the defect seemed important somehow. I just couldn't place it.

We were finished about dinnertime. The sheriff's people thanked us and, because we'd given them contact information, let us go our merry way, even to the extent of leaving the county and Utah altogether if we wanted to, although Deputy Hamilton expressed her hope that we'd continue our visit. Strangely, we didn't see her partner after our arrival at the station.

It took Sam and me just a simple exchange of looks to decide that we weren't going to pick up where we left off—to drive back northeast to that Bald Mountain picnic area and its campground. Nope. Time for some comforting rewards, we both agreed.

So we found a room at something called Hotel Park City, a place with suites, Marriott amenities, and a spectacular view. For us, it was a budget-buster, but, then, we were heroes who deserved some luxury, at least for one night.

Maybe not best of all, but a really Good Thing was that the hotel had an amazingly fast internet connection, something that we had just begun to learn to live without on the road. So we ordered dinner from room service and hunkered down in front of our respective computers.

When we were in the downsizing process and planning for extended time on the road, I gave quite a bit of thought to our communications needs. The satellite phone I mentioned was only one part of it all—an emergency link to civilization when we might need one. And it had already paid off. But I also got rid of my desktop computer and bought one of those new combination tablet-laptop gadgets, the kind with a detachable keyboard and a solid-state hard disk, and got another for Sam as well. Mine was all tricked out with lots of memory and a fast processor, and hers was not quite so fancy, but they both had cell-phone capability in addition to the usual Wi-Fi networking. Because the van also had a built-in cell-phone link and a Wi-Fi router—one of the bells and whistles that we had installed—I shopped around and got a 5-phone family plan for the van, the two computers, and our two phones. Expensive on a per-call basis, given how little we used any of the things, but a good investment in flexibility. At least that was my rationale for it all.

At the Hotel Park City, of course, we were able to use our computers in Wi-Fi mode, which, being much faster than the cell-phone link, helped with catching up on a backlog of email and so on. Our week in the Uintahs had been almost completely off the grid.

We ate and answered email and read news and other communications. I was just about to stick a fork into the carrot cake I'd ordered for dessert, when I heard a little sigh from Sam.

“Oh, no. My Aunt Rebecca died.” She was staring my way, eyes glistening, when I looked up. It took me a minute to recall a Christmas card we’d received the previous winter, when we were still living over the mountains from Estes Park, in Fraser.

“Well, that’s too bad. I’m sorry. Didn’t you say she was getting pretty old?”

“Yeah, 92. She and Uncle Dean are in an assisted living facility in Fort Meyers.”

“Y’know, until we got that card from her, I didn’t know anything about your family.”

“We just never talk about things like that, do we?” She sighed again. “Anyway, Uncle Dean—he’s 90 but still sharp, uses email and everything—he says they’re having a memorial service on Sunday. I think I’d like to go.”

It took me a few seconds to remember that it was Friday evening. “Uh, sounds like there’s time to get there if we hustle. Want me to come?”

“No, that’s OK. I’m fine to go by myself.” She frowned a little. “I mean, it’d be great to have you there, but that would involve a lot of explaining to Uncle Dean and my cousins and whoever else shows up. And I don’t want the focus to be on me and you. If you come, I bet it would be.”

I was feeling guilty for feeling relieved. “Oh. Yeah. Hadn’t thought of that. Well, OK, at least we’re pretty close to a big airport. I seem to remember that Delta has a hub in Salt Lake City, so Salt Lake to Atlanta to Fort Meyers is probably your best bet. Want me to see what’s available?”

“Thanks. I’ll see about a place to stay. I guess I should plan to come back Monday. No, let’s make it Tuesday. That’ll give me an extra day to spend time with whoever’s there. Especially Uncle Dean. He’s such a cool guy.” She looked at me again. “You, my love, should be so cool when you’re that age. And I intend to keep you around for at least that long.”

We spent the rest of the evening on travel arrangements, which turned out to be fairly straightforward. The plan, much to my relief, was for me to proceed south, rather than stick around the Salt Lake City area for four days, and we could figure out how to get back together when I found out where I’d be. Given the time change, Sam could get back to Salt Lake or somewhere appropriate pretty early on Tuesday, and she’d have time to catch a regional flight to Durango or St. George or Flagstaff, or maybe she could even fly directly to Phoenix, where I could pick her up. She’d have to change her west-bound flight to get to either Durango or Flag easily, but we would work that out in the days to come.

The last thing we did—well, no, the second-to-last thing we did—was to sit together in the oversized tub our suite had, which we filled with hot water, and to turn on the water-massage jets. Not something we’d be doing much of in our home on wheels, I was sure. And it helped erase most of the tension of the day.

The last thing we did erased it all.

* * *

Two

When I spend a night in an expensive hotel, I always like to check out as late as possible—I figure if I’m paying all that money, I should get as much out of it as I can. But Sam’s flight Saturday morning was bright and early, so we had to get up well before dawn and head down to Salt Lake City International

Airport. Fortunately, the Saturday morning rush hour wasn't too bad at that time of day, and it was almost all interstate anyway.

I dropped her off at the third Delta departure door, and I could tell she wasn't happy to be leaving me. She didn't want to let go of our goodbye hug, and she hid her tears behind a little domestic advice.

"Be sure to stop somewhere here in the metro area and get a sheet to replace the one we tossed, and four new towels, too." And she turned and marched inside to check in.

We'd disposed of the linens we'd used to clean up poor Lucy rather than try to launder them—some Forest Service maintenance guy was going to have an unpleasant surprise when he emptied the Bald Mountain trash cans. But her advice was a good thought. I'd not have remembered otherwise.

On my own again—Sam and I had weathered the worst of the Estes Park flood on different sides of the Continental Divide the previous year—I contemplated what I'd planned the night before. After helping Sam sew up her travel arrangements, I'd spent a while with online maps considering my route south for the next several days. It would be easy to pick and choose in real time with the GPS navigation in the van.

But first, of course, I had to find a place with sheets and towels for sale. Trouble was, it was only about six-thirty in the morning.

I hadn't had breakfast yet, and I was in possession of all that communications gear, so while I was sitting at the airport's departures curb I turned to my laptop and started searching. I was looking to find a suitable breakfast place with access from the southward interstate I'd be taking through the city. A long, leisurely breakfast there could well kill enough time for me to find some sort of linen outlet farther south.

The airport, I'd discovered with my maps the night before, was on the north end of a very stretched-out metropolitan area. The world seems to think of Utah as mountains, desert, and slick-rock with some small towns and farms, but that applies only outside of the long north-south valley that starts almost at Idaho and runs at least 150 miles south, well past Provo.

But, conveniently enough, there was a Denny's just east of the airport, although it involved negotiating a spaghetti-plate of roads to get there.

Spaghetti or no, I found it, and settled into a booth with a local paper I bought from a machine at the entrance and with my laptop. I ordered a carafe of decaf coffee—having a rest-stop on wheels made it easy to do things like that before a day of driving—and settled in. And then my phone vibrated in my front shirt pocket. I could tell from the screen that it was Sam.

"Hey kiddo. You finding breakfast at the airport? Everything OK?"

"Hi, Mac. Yeah, a really good breakfast, in fact. But I miss you already."

"Well, yeah, me, too. But we're sort of committed to this. And you'll like seeing your uncle and going to that service tomorrow."

"I know. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry I gave you an errand and walked off."

"Huh? Oh. Well, I'd have forgotten if you hadn't mentioned it. I'm going to sit here at this Denny's until they throw me out or until the nearest Bed, Bath and Beyond opens up. Listen—I hope security isn't too much of a hassle. And you have a good flight."

She probably wanted to talk, but I figured that it would only deepen her loneliness. I think she understood, because we didn't keep talking for much longer.

When my server came back with the decaf, I told her that I'd start with a glass of grapefruit juice, that I wasn't in a hurry and hadn't figured out what I wanted to eat, and that if the place filled up I'd get a move on. She liked the last bit and strolled off.

The newspaper, the *Salt Lake Tribune*—I just couldn't bring myself to buy the *Deseret News*—had a small piece on Lucy Smith's reappearance. It referenced the Amber Alert that had been out for her and how she'd been found, abandoned, at an undisclosed site in the Ashley National Forest. This was the first clue for me, because I knew we'd been in the adjacent forest to the west of Ashley, the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest. The second clue was that there was no mention of any rescuers, let alone Sam or me specifically. It was all passive sentence construction—Lucy was found... and so on—with no other information. Someone was trying to keep this kidnapping, and perhaps news of all the other disappearances, low-key, seemed like.

That could be a clever strategy, or it could be part of a cover-up, I thought.

My grapefruit juice came, and I ordered a breakfast that would last me for days and went back to the newspaper. All I found, though, was that the University of Utah Utes, the football ones, at least, were expected to do better in the Pac-12 conference this year; given their fast start, that the Utah Jazz professional basketball team had high hopes for the season; and that there was a big sale, four pages worth, at Macy's. That last was the most helpful, by far, and I fired up my laptop. The Denny's, to their credit, had Wi-Fi, and I quickly found a Macy's not too far off my intended route out of town. Macy's sold dry goods, as I remembered, and this one opened early, at eight, for the sale. All of a sudden I was motivated to accelerate the pace of my leisurely breakfast.

Aside from a mention on the *Salt Lake Tribune* web site, a summary of the print article I'd already seen, I found nothing else recent about Lucy Smith on the internet, so I moved on to other things. Road conditions on my intended routes—I still had some decisions to make—were something of interest, both the weather and construction activities. I hadn't had time the previous evening to look into that sort of thing.

About then, my breakfast showed up, three plates worth, and I got busy. But all the while, that business with Lucy's foot was nagging at me. So, after I'd polished off the big plate of breakfast meats, eggs, and potatoes and the smaller one of toast, and was starting on the medium one of pancakes, a sort of dessert in my mind, I called Special Agent Winifred Small, FBI Denver.

Winnie and I had worked that case in Colorado during the flood the previous fall that resulted in the inquiry about my conduct during its investigation. She wasn't involved in the inquiry—she was FBI and the inquiry was Colorado politicians—and she and I had worked quite well together. I figured she might be able to provide information about regional alerts for missing children and more details about how the FBI approaches such cases. At that point, my laptop was telling me it was 7:30AM, and even on a Saturday that seemed to me to be late enough for an FBI Special Agent to sleep.

"Small." It was hard to tell, but her voice sounded crisp, not groggy from sleep.

"Winnie, this is Mac MacQuarrie. Hope I didn't wake you up."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "Mac? Well, damn. Mac MacQuarrie. How you doin'? I heard about that inquiry thing last winter. And, no, I'm sitting here reading the papers online and drinking coffee."

"Ah, good. I hate to wake people on weekends. And that inquiry, ugh. Anyway, I hope all's as well as it can be at FBI Denver."

"Y'know, Mac, I wasn't asked to be part of that inquiry, or I would have testified in no uncertain terms about how full of shit they all were. But I guess it all came out OK?"

“Yeah, it was some kind of political witch-hunt. The CBI Deputy Director who first enlisted me, Annette Trieri, she almost resigned in protest over the whole thing, she was so pissed. Even the CBI Director wasn’t happy with it all. But there were some political powerhouses behind it that he and Annette couldn’t just dismiss. So I got used as a piñata for a couple of weeks. Kind of like I was a scapegoat for the rest of the organization to the people behind the whole thing. Like you said, though, it all came out fine for me. But it was a sort of catalyst for what I’m calling about, I guess.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, one thing that I decided to do after the inquiry wound down was to get out of Dodge for a while. Go on the road. So over the last six months or so we managed to sell our house, buy a townhouse, and gear up for travel. I bought a conversion van and have been touring the intermountain west. I’m in Utah now.”

“Ah. The Beehive State.”

“Oh, yeah. And they’re busy like bees. Except I’m not sure at what.” I gave her the soundbite version of the last 24 hours in my life.

“Uh, so. Six girls disappear, the seventh is found, although she wasn’t supposed to be found, by you. And your lady. Girl seven has a gimpy foot. Do you know anything about the other six?”

“Nothing. I expect there were Amber Alerts when they first disappeared, though. I haven’t looked them up.”

“OK. Well. Now, don’t take this the wrong way, but why are you calling me?”

“Like I said, I’m curious about how the FBI handles these things. Apparently law enforcement here in Utah is making an effort to coordinate local investigations, but it seems kind of behind the scenes. I’m not looking to get involved, or at least not more involved than I have been. My plan is to go fishing.”

“Fishing? In Utah? Good luck with that.”

“Yeah, I’m spoiled by Colorado. But I bet there’s some fish somewhere. There are mountains, after all.”

“Mmm. Anyway, look. I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but you are CBI.”

“Sort of.”

“Well, that’s good enough. See, one of the hats I wear is as head of a confidential regional task force concerned with child prostitution, and kidnapping related to it. So what you’re telling me is *very* interesting. I didn’t know about some of it.”

* * *

On the other hand, there were things that she did know about, such as several unexplained disappearances over the past several years of middle-school-aged girls in Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho—far western Colorado, southwest Wyoming, and southern Idaho. And the ones in Utah as well, of course. All girls of Anglo descent, all from Mormon families who lived in rural, even remote, locations. The first had happened eight years ago. And the girls had all just disappeared—no bodies, no ransom demands, nothing.

I repeated my intention to just be a retired guy looking for interesting fishing spots but promised her to let her know if I heard anything else related to her task force’s interests.

By then, my pancakes were pretty cold, but that just meant they needed more syrup. After polishing them off, I left Denny's a little after eight, comfortably stuffed and ready to do battle with the other shoppers at the Macy's sale.

But, despite my aversion both to shopping generally and to crowds anywhere, it turned out to be fine. For one thing, Google found me a Macy's at a mall a few miles south of the Denny's, right on the interstate that I was already headed south on. For another, being in a mall, it had easy parking—that van we bought is big. And the crowds weren't really gathered in force yet. It all made me feel better and better about those Vacation Gods. I was on the highway again by about 9:30 with a bag full of replacement linens. Whew.

Interstate 15, Utah's north-south thoroughfare, seemed busy for a Saturday. Maybe, I thought, everyone is headed to Las Vegas for an afternoon and evening of debauchery—something hard to find in staid Salt Lake City. But I cranked up some favorite tunes, got in the right lane, and cruised along right at the speed limit to watch almost everyone flashing by me in the passing lane.

I knew I would have to make a decision at Spanish Fork—would I go southeast, on US-6, toward Moab, or southwest on I-15 to St. George? After thinking about it for forty miles or so, I finally decided to stay on the interstate. It seemed like the maps I'd studied the night before showed mountains more likely to include trout streams down toward Cedar City. Any place with a ski area, I figured, must also have some streams.

By time for a late lunch, I was at Cedar City, but after all that breakfast more food didn't interest me. So instead of stopping, I left the interstate behind and headed up State Road 14, toward Cedar Breaks National Monument and the mountains where that ski area was.

It was a pretty enough little road, and it ran beside a stream for the first several miles. But there wasn't enough water there to keep a guppy alive. Maybe it had been a dry summer in those parts, or maybe that was just how Utah streams behaved; I couldn't tell. Then the road left the creek and began a serious climb up onto a high plateau, which looked ever drier. I began to think that Winnie Small knew what she was talking about.

After a bit more than an hour, during which I passed through something called Duck Creek Village, a place with no creek to speak of, not much of a village, and a definite paucity of ducks, I came to the stop sign at which SR-14 ended. US-89 north, I remembered, ran more or less parallel to the mountain range I'd just crossed to the east of the interstate I'd left an hour earlier, so I turned south.

Just under an hour and several hamlets later, I passed through Kanab, kept on straight onto US-89A, crossed into Arizona, and shortly arrived in Fredonia, on an arid plateau. Even what irrigated fields there were looked parched.

How ridiculous is this? I thought. I'm trying to find some place to go fishing and there's no water anywhere. So I stopped to top off my fuel tanks and took advantage of the local cell service to check some online maps. I suppose I could have fiddled with the van's GPS system to do this, but I tend to keep that set on a zoomed-in map with about a mile radius around the van, rather than zoom out to anything regional. The screen's just a bit small to do a wide-area search anyway.

But what I found online reminded me that I was not very far from Jacob Lake, where the road down to the north rim of Grand Canyon National Park began, and maybe an hour and a half away from Marble Canyon and Lees Ferry.

Lees Ferry! Southwestern trout fishers' Mecca! Colorado River access and huge fish in the tail-water because of the exceptional cold-water habitat maintained by releases from the Glen Canyon Dam just upstream. With a campground to boot. Why didn't I think of that before?

A boat, I knew, would be the best way to fish that part of the river, but, what the hell, casting from shore might just produce some takes, too. And a little voice in my head suggested that there just might be boats for hire, anyway.

Best of all, it would keep me in Arizona. Out of Utah.

I shortly discovered that Marble Canyon, the settlement, was a little bump in the road with a lodge, a couple of gas stations and restaurants, and an airstrip, all on the north side of the Colorado River at Navajo Bridge. There's a new bridge now, circa 1995, but they left the original one from the 1920s up next to it and made it into a historic site with a visitors' center and everything. The two of those steel-arch bridges, each about 900 feet long with the arches of girders under the roadbed and railings on each side, are quite a remarkable site, out there in the middle of nowhere almost 500 feet above the river.

After checking it all out, I turned upriver on the road toward Lees Ferry, about another five miles across the desert. I was hoping that the campground would have a vacancy, and I was pleased and a bit surprised to find it only about half full, even though it was Saturday and getting on toward five in the afternoon.

With our sleep-in van, putting up camp was especially easy—set the parking brake and mess with the air suspension to level it, if needed. We'd gone a step further and acquired a fairly cheap, self-standing picnic canopy, basically a tarp with poles, to put up at a campsite in order to claim it as ours. Then we could drive away in the van for the day and have at least some hope that we'd have a site upon our return. And if the thing was stolen, well, there was always a Walmart somewhere, and we could just get another one.

So, after picking out one of the empty sites, one at the uphill end of the campground, I pattered around, put up the canopy, walked down to the river and back just to have a good look at it, and then drove up to the restaurant at the Marble Canyon Lodge for supper. And to call Sam. There was cell service by the highway there, and Wi-Fi as well, but not over at the campground.

As I sat down at the restaurant table, I felt thirsty, and stupid. I'd grown up in the Middle East, yet even living in the dry Colorado climate I'd forgotten the desiccating effect of real desert—and there was certainly an abundance of rocks and sand for ground cover around Lees Ferry. So I drank the first glass of water, and when the server came with a refill, I drank that, too. And then I ordered two margaritas, rocks, each in a tall glass. And more water. And I tried Sam's cell phone.

It went immediately to voice mail, which told me that she'd probably forgotten to turn it on after her flights. Or that she was still in the air somewhere, poor kid.

But that gave me a chance to gather information that I wouldn't have access to over in the campground. I'd brought my laptop, too, so I got busy downloading everything I could think of.

Full-resolution satellite pictures seemed like a good idea. The Google ones were pretty good, but, because I had access to a number of encrypted databases from the secret Eyes-in-the-Sky people, I was able to pull up even better images than are publicly available. It took a while, but by the time I was finished with the first margarita, I had screen-captures of the campground-side riverbank for a couple of miles upstream. It looked as if there were several spots that had shallow sand bars to accommodate a wading fly-fisher.

My internet feeding frenzy was interrupted when I was asked to order dinner, but that was easily handled. My request for a medium-rare New York strip steak with a baked potato and a double-sized dinner salad, to be accompanied with a bottle of the medium-grade Cabernet Sauvignon they offered—plus more water—only took a minute. And then I started looking for web sites of local fishing guides—a particularly easy search, it turned out.

After the long day of getting Sam to the airport so early and then driving most of the length of Utah, this was just what I needed. I called Sam again after I finished the steak, successfully this time, and we had a nice, long, intimate conversation. Then I drove back to the campground with the remaining half bottle of Cabernet and settled in for the night.

Tomorrow was going to be the first day of battles with big trout. Or so I hoped.

* * *

Despite the indulgence of the night before—I'd finished the Cabernet while sitting under an unbelievable array of stars overhead in all directions—on Sunday morning I woke up refreshed and ready to go. No doubt the much lower elevation than I'd become acclimated to helped, all that extra oxygen and so on.

At the campground, I ate a hearty breakfast, packed a bit of lunch along with my backpacker water-filter kit, and, after some thought, put together my strongest and longest fly rod (a 9½'—6-weight, for you fly-fishers; I had two spools for the reel, a tapered floating line and a sink-tip line), and headed out for the day. My plan was to start at the river's edge below the campground and work my way upstream as far as I had energy to. Online, I'd found several interesting hints about how I might fish from shore, including casting out to the center of the river, or at least as far out as I could, with a big, delicious-looking streamer to imitate some kind of minnow or other, on the sink-tip line; and casting upstream, right next to a vegetation-covered stretch of bank with some kind of terrestrial imitation—grasshopper, beetle, big ant, cicada—on the floating line.

And both strategies worked well enough to keep me interested. But what was really interesting was when I ran into a pair of guys doing the same thing. I was working upstream faster than they were, and protocol dictated that I leapfrog around them by getting out of the water and taking the shore-side trail to a point well upstream from them. As I was doing this, I heard their conversation, and it became obvious to me that one was a guide and the other a client, what's called a "sport". So I stopped to watch. And when they took a break I asked the guide if his Monday had any openings that I might be able to sneak into. Turned out that he was doing a float trip with the same guy, up to the dam and back down. After some discussion, I weaseled my way into the boat—it was big enough for four, at least, and two sports would make it less expensive for each of us. More fun, too.

So I spent the afternoon working my way farther and farther up the river while anticipating Monday's float fishing. And even catching a nice trout now and then.

The hike back downriver at the end of the day was a lot longer than I remembered walking upriver. But I had plenty of water—the Colorado River in Marble Canyon there is really too big to drink it all—and I had the motivation of next day's excursion.

Another pleasant dinner at the Lodge—I tried their trout, and it was, well, a bit of a disappointment—and a chat with Sam closed out the day. I didn't indulge as much because I wanted to be extra-sharp for Monday's fishing trip. Guides are supposed to, well, guide, meaning to be helpful and instructive as needed. But I wanted to be as sharp as I could to impress him. To impress him so I could pay big bucks and add a big tip? Huh? Well, anyway, I wanted to be sharp.

And we had a great day. So much fly-casting that my arm got really tired, and then when I'd get one on, it would be so big that it would tire my arm out more to bring it in.

I'd become hooked—pun intended—on fly-fishing in Florida when I tried it with a guide and caught a tarpon—a really, really big fish. But then I'd taken up bone-fishing. It's sort of like trout-fishing, but the fish are faster, smarter, and stronger.

Fail.

So my move to Colorado was rewarding in that the trout in the streams were easy pickings by comparison.

That day in the boat on the Colorado in Marble Canyon somehow did it for me—it erased the frustration of failure in Florida, it showed me that catching big fish was just a matter of being in the right place at the right time with the right gear (and the right amount of money, if needed). I guess it persuaded me that I didn't have anything to prove, either to myself or anyone else. Ever since, I've been comfortable in my own waders in my own streams, so to speak. Fly-fishing is a wonderful thing to do, but it doesn't need to feel competitive.

Our guide, having done all this before, of course, timed it out perfectly, and had us back at the Lees Ferry boat ramp at four in the afternoon, exactly eight hours from when we'd left. It was just right—I had time to get cleaned up before supper. Even better, I had time for a celebratory drink at my campsite before getting cleaned up.

That was when the otherwise perfect day got strange.

The campsites had little wind-breaks sheltering the picnic tables, and, as I mentioned, I'd put up our canopy to use as a campsite-holder. But the weather was so spectacular that I set my folding chair to look north, with the shelter and my canopy behind me. Because I was at the north end of the campground, I had a great view of rocks—the wall of red sandstone providing the southern buttress for the Vermillion Cliffs National Monument.

And, as I was contemplating the scenery and reviewing the day in my head, across my field of view walked a young woman. Although tired-looking, she was pretty, wearing a simple, ankle-length cotton dress, a kerchief on her hair, and, oddly, running shoes, not unlike the Mennonite women I recalled seeing at the Safeway in Estes Park. Except this woman's dress wasn't as nice, and she was carrying a big bag over her shoulder and what looked like a long-handled pooper-scooper. She was just outside what I guess would be considered the boundary of my campsite, about 50 feet away, staring at the ground, and picking up things with that pooper-scooper. I knew she'd seen me and still could, in her peripheral vision. But she just stared at the ground.

Normally, I tend to leave people to their own little worlds, to avoid interrupting whatever they're absorbed in. But I was feeling especially good after the successful day on the water, and no doubt the gin-and-tonic I'd just finished was helping with that. So I cleared my throat loudly enough that she couldn't possibly miss it.

“Evening! Beautiful day, isn't it?” I smiled my most friendly, megawatt smile.

She peered around nervously with a deer-in-the-headlights look.

“You probably spend a lot of time here, if this is your job, but for a first-timer like me, well, this is sure a spectacular place. Sorry to interrupt.” More big smile, but this time I turned down the wattage a bit. Why, I wondered, was she so nervous?

Then it occurred to me that we were on the edge of the campground with no other campers around, she was alone, and I looked, after all, pretty scruffy, having not shaved in a couple of days, and I probably smelled fishy, literally. But I was sitting still, at least fifty feet away from her. Not making any moves at all.

She looked all around again and then went back to pooper-scooper duty. But she sort of eased in my direction. And then I heard a quiet voice.

“Mister? Mister, could you do me a favor? I need a letter mailed, but I need it mailed in someplace like Flagstaff. Not here, not Page, but someplace big and far away. Could you do that?” All the while she kept her head down and concentrated on picking stuff up—what I decided was litter.

My thought processes have become pretty well honed over the years, particularly in bizarre situations involving transfers of information with other operatives, operatives who are both unskilled and possibly under surveillance.

“Sure,” I said in a lower tone than she’d used. “Why don’t you pretend that your picker-upper gadget there is messed up somehow and bend down to fix it. Then you can put the letter under a little rock for me to pick up. I’ll do it soon. And I’m going into Flagstaff tomorrow. Will that work for you?”

She bent down, reached into her bodice and plucked out an envelope, fiddled with the scooper, and at the same time made a little pile of sand on top of the envelope.

“Thanks, Mister. And please, please don’t tell nobody.”

“It’s safe with me, I promise. And you take care, hear?”

As she worked her way around the periphery of the campground, past the other sites to my left, I sat there for a while longer, staring at the rocks, and crunching on the ice cubes in my glass until they were gone. After she’d disappeared down the hill, I got up, stretched, looked around, and began a seemingly aimless stroll around the premises, peering at the sparse plant life, kicking the occasional rock, and looking around in all directions at the scenery. She was well down by the bathrooms by then, and there was no one else in sight except for a few people at their campsite picnic tables. At one point, I dramatically twisted my ankle, bent down to give it a bit of a rub, and, in the process, slid the envelope from under the sand and into the top of my hiking boot, which was covered by the cuff of my jeans.

I said it got strange. But all that was before I had a chance to read the envelope. There was a Forever stamp on it, but no return address. And the main address was not up to the Postal Service’s standards, but I thought it might work anyway. It was written in school-girl block letters:

Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington DC USA

* * *

Three

I figured that I now had two phone calls to make, one to Sam and one to Special Agent Winifred Small, FBI Denver. I was confident that Winnie would not want to wait for me to mail the letter in Flagstaff on Tuesday and then for it to get to her via Washington—surely she’d ask me to repackage it with her address—so I made an executive decision. I opened it. Carefully, and I didn’t touch it again with my fingers, instead putting on gloves for the entire procedure.

Part of the electronics gear that I’d assembled for the van included a portable scanner/printer gizmo. Not super-fast, black-and-white only printing, and designed for only a page at a time, it was still high-resolution and easy to use. I figured that if we ever needed to print out a whole book or something, we could find a Kinkos.

So I slit open the envelope with a my Swiss Army Knife, unfolded the sheet of paper that was inside, and scanned it to a file on my laptop. And, of course, there was no way that I was not going to read it. It was written in the same block letters as the envelope.

Dear FBI,

I hope this letter reaches you. I am risking all to write and send it.

When I was a small child, my name was Melissa Alcott. I was taken from my parents in Fruita Colorado when I was 10 years old and given the name Esther by the man that married me, Levi Templeton. So now I am called Esther Templeton. I am 16 years old now, and I have two children, ages 4 and 2 years old. And I think I'm going to have a third.

I don't know where I live now, exactly. But it is probably in Utah somewhere near Arizona. When we go to our jobs, I always see a sign about Arizona, and then one about Utah on the way back to the farm. And the road goes over a big bridge next to a dam with a deep canyon on one side and a lake on the other.

The other girls with me are Rachel Templeton, Naomi Templeton, and Leah Templeton. They are younger than me, and Naomi also has babies. But those are not the names they used to have which I don't know. But I do remember the name I used to have. Melissa Alcott.

The first two years I was here at the farm, I was locked up. And then I had a baby and couldn't escape. With two babies now, and one on the way, I think, I'm stuck here. But I don't want to be stuck here. I just need some help to get me and my babies away. Is there some way you could help?

Sincerely yours,

Esther Templeton (Melissa Alcott)

You want strange? I was suddenly swimming in it.

Another thing I did when we took possession of our new ruggedized van was to equip a place for some of the equipment I'd previously kept stashed in secret, locked containers in the crawl space of our house. Some of that was now in storage in our townhouse, but other things were squirreled away in special compartments in the van. These included a couple of automatic pistols, my fully automatic, military assault rifle, and my .50 caliber sniper rifle with its incredible scope.

And after reading that letter, it was all I could do to restrain myself from getting that weaponry out, heading across the bridge—no doubt the one I'd had a view of the underside of earlier in the day—below the Glen Canyon Dam and into Utah, and finding where Melissa was being held. Someone, as far as I was concerned, needed shooting at.

But it's big country up that way, and I knew better than to just go running off on a fool's errand. So I took my laptop, with the file of the scanned letter, and made plans to head up to the restaurant for dinner.

The request by Melissa (and I made a vow to myself to call her that) that I mail the letter somewhere far away stuck in my head. It meant she was afraid that it would get intercepted if mailed locally, even in Page. So, after I got cleaned up, I made sure to take both my CBI shield and my Sig Sauer 9 mm, in a shoulder holster under my windbreaker, with me up to the Lodge.

This time, I asked for, and got, a table well away from the other customers—the place was only about half full at that point, about a quarter to six. I ordered the Monday night spaghetti special with a glass of their house red and, like before, a double house salad.

Alone again, after getting my laptop connected in a secure mode, I called Winnie.

“Small.”

“Winnie, Mac MacQuarrie again. Sorry to bother you this late in the afternoon, but I’ve got something you’re going to want to see. I assume you can access your secure email from wherever you are?”

“I’m still in my office, Mac. No rest for the wicked.”

“OK, I just clicked the ‘send’ button. And I’m going to put the original paper into the real mail to you tomorrow, when I go into Flagstaff.” I sketched the background, my encounter with Melissa Alcott, for her.

“Hmm. ‘Melissa Alcott,’ eh?” There were keyboard noises in the background. “Well, here she is, on that list of missing little girls I told you about the other day. Disappeared six years ago a few miles west of Grand Junction. Never came home from school one day. You saw her where?”

I filled her in on my location and activities.

“Well, at least you got some fishing in. Oh. Here’s your mail.” There was a two-minute pause. “Jesus. Jesus H. Christ. Three other girls, too. And it’s too bad she doesn’t know their real names. All these are Biblical names that this Levi Templeton dirtbag has given them, no doubt. But I guess they’re probably not allowed to talk about their pre-kidnapping lives. Got any ideas where this ‘farm’ might be?”

“Try ‘Page, Arizona’ on Google maps, and pull back a bit. You’ll see the Glen Canyon Dam, with its bridge. That’s probably what she’s referring to, because the Hoover Dam, below Lake Mead, is something like five hours away from here. And you’ll see where I am, Marble Canyon, if you pull back enough and move Page over to the right side of your screen. And a place called ‘Big Water’ that’s in Utah due north of where I am, although you can’t get there from here directly. I figure the other girls she mentioned work at the Wahweap Marina on Lake Powell, and Melissa gets taken around to Lees Ferry here. They probably work under some kind of Park Service maintenance contract.”

“Man, there’s nothing much out that way, is there? You think this ‘farm’ is in Big Water?”

“Maybe. Or over by Kanab, or in between. Hell, I suppose it could be north of Kanab, even. She didn’t say how long their drive is.”

There was another long pause. “Well, I guess that this is as good a place as any for my task force to start on some real work, instead of just meetings. Say! I bet this explains why you found that girl in the outhouse, what was her name? Lucy?”

“I’ll bite. Why?”

“Well, someone is kidnapping these little girls and giving them, or selling them, to polygamous Mormons, there’s a bunch of them scattered around southern Utah. I remember a famous case in a town called Hildale a few years ago. In fact, there it is, on the map I’m looking at, west of Kanab. Anyway, these people are isolated, and they need new blood for their extended families, to avoid more inbreeding and so on. And they’d want only perfect specimens who would tend to comply with their cultural, ah, peculiarities, or at least be easy to brainwash. Remember I said the missing girls were all from Anglo, Mormon families?”

“Yeah. I meant to ask you. Aren’t all Mormon families Anglo?”

“Well, most, yeah. But the LDS Church has opened its doors to non-Anglos, too, so there are some other folks. But not in those fundamentalist sects. They’re lily white. The thing is, Lucy had that gimpy foot. I bet she got kidnapped but then rejected because of that.”

“And raped and sodomized in the process, not to mention being left there to die.” I sighed. “But at least she’s not part of somebody’s harem now.”

“Yeah, well, like the frying-pan or the fire. Each pretty awful. So, listen, Mac. You know I had you checked out thoroughly last year, right? And your credentials are stellar, with the CBI appointment just the icing on the cake. I’m going to want to get you on board with us at the FBI for this thing.”

* * *

I managed to avoid bursting into hearty laughter, but not to contain a hugely audible snicker. “Winnie, I guess I should be flattered, but if you’d ever heard what all I’ve said about the Bureau over the years, you’d never, ever suggest such a thing. And your boss would have a stroke.”

“Meh, I’ve always felt that a little inter-agency rivalry is a good thing. Keeps people on their toes. Besides, I’m sure that Harmon Jameson would want this.”

I was speechless for a few seconds. “What? How did you know about him? That’s supposed to be unknowable.”

Harmon Jameson was my super-secret, very-high-level contact in the White House.

It was her turn to snicker. “C’mon, Mac. The FBI does have *some* capabilities. Why don’t you plan to stop at our Flagstaff office tomorrow when you’re in town and pick up a package of stuff? And I’ll think I’ll arrange for a video conference.”

“Aw, geez.” Something occurred to me. “Do I get a ball cap?”

“A ball cap?”

“Yeah. For my collection. I’ve got CIA and NSA and CGIS and DNI. How about an FBI one? I prefer the trucker style with the deep crown. Stays on better when its windy. You pick the color.”

“Are you always this much of a wise-ass? Oh, yeah. Now I remember from last month. Incurrable.”

“Hey, I’m not even getting started yet. But I’m serious about the ball cap. And, yeah, OK. If you’re going to pull rank by invoking Harmon, I guess I’m stuck. When he sends you my consulting statements to pay, though, be sure to be sitting down when you read them. I’m expensive.”

“Mac, these are little girls. Aren’t you going to do this *pro bono*?”

“Ha! You haven’t seen my pension checks. And I just about got wiped out in that stock market thing last winter—I need the money. I’ll call you if anything else comes up. Meanwhile, there’s not much in the way of cell-phone coverage out here. I have a satellite phone, but it’s too expensive for me to use except for emergencies.”

“Well, consider this a 24/7 emergency. Keep it turned on and charge it to us. We need to stay in touch.”

“OK, that works for me, but you’ll be surprised at the bills. Anyway, so, say you get me some kind of official credentials. What is it that you want me to do?”

“We’ll talk about that tomorrow. Let’s see. You’ll probably be there in the afternoon. How about I arrange the video conference for two in the afternoon?” She disconnected.

Cool, I thought. I can get Uncle Sam to cover expenses now. Mileage. Satellite phone. Lodging and food. Now, how do you suppose I can charge him for the cost of fishing guides?

On the other hand, I knew I was going to be getting involved in a rat's nest of nastiness. But, given the topic, maybe Sam wouldn't be too upset this time.

Thinking of Sam reminded me to call her.

"Mac! Hi! How's your day?"

"Hi, darlin'. Good. I'll tell you all about it. How was yours? Did you spend time with your Uncle Dean?"

We chatted for quite a while, ending with a confirmation of her scheduled arrival. She'd managed to switch her return flight to Phoenix and then get a one-way up to Flagstaff that was supposed to arrive at seven pm.

"But it's all going to be way expensive, Mac. The changes and the extra ticket, on top of that last-minute ticket we got last week." She sounded worried. "And we talked about trying to save money and all."

"We did, and we should. But just now it's not an issue, because I got another job. Uncle Sam is hiring me again."

"Oh, no. Does that mean what I think it means? Guns and bad guys and I don't see you a lot?"

"Well, it's sort of related to our little adventure with Lucy Smith last week. So I figured you'd be OK with the whole thing." I held my breath waiting for her reaction, but it didn't take long at all.

"OK with it? Hell, I want to help. Got an extra gun? I never told you this, but I know how to shoot handguns. And long guns, too. I'm even pretty good." Her enthusiasm didn't surprise me. She wanted to find Lucy's kidnapper, I knew—and I didn't want to think about what she might do to him if she caught him.

"I'm thinking we'll be doing some driving on Wednesday, so we can figure it all out then. So far, I don't know what my role is going to be. I'm supposed to find that out tomorrow afternoon. I figured we'd stay in Flag tomorrow night, so I got us a room at the Springhill Suites. For old times' sake." I'd been living in a Springhill Suites in Florida when Sam and I first became a couple. It seemed like an easy solution to me when my house got blown up by a pissed-off Arab.

"So, is this another job for that guy in Washington?"

"No, it's for the FBI, some kind of kidnapping task force out of Denver. But there's probably a connection at the office in Flag."

"FBI? Really? I don't think I've ever heard you say a good word about the FBI. Why would they hire you? And why would you want to work for them?"

"Yeah, well, that was my reaction, too. But they made me an offer I couldn't refuse. And I'm wanting to get Lucy's kidnapper, too. Besides, it'll pay my consulting rate plus all of our expenses."

"Well, OK. Especially if it will give us a chance to get that guy who did that to Lucy."

"And that isn't the half of what he's done. Wait 'til you hear the rest. Now. You asked about my day." I launched into a fish tale, but it was all true—the day in the boat was so good I didn't have to embellish anything. And after I wound down, I could tell that Sam was happy for me—up to a point.

"So, I'm glad you caught all those fish, but how much did all this cost?"

“Well, let me think. I guess it would add up to about two hours of my consulting rate on this new job I got. So I’ll just work a couple of extra hours to make it up, OK?” I hurried on. “And one thing that it did was to get me over the hump of feeling like a real fly-fisher. I mean, you know I could never do that in Florida, where those bonefish were always smarter than I ever was. And in Colorado, yeah, I was having a fine time, but there was this nagging thing about how the fish and the stream and everything were small and easy, and so I didn’t really have it figured out. But it’s figured out now, and I can go back to dumb fish in small streams.”

“What?”

“Well, OK, maybe that didn’t make a lot of sense. Tell you what. I’ll see you tomorrow evening and we can talk about it over the next few days. As I said, I think we’ll be doing a lot of driving around.”

To my relief, that let me escape without any further questions, and I paid the dinner tab and packed up. I was going to head back to the campground, take down the canopy, and hit the sack in preparation for a big day on Tuesday.

Except there was this little hoop to jump through out in the parking lot.

From long years of experience, I’m pretty good at what’s called “situational awareness.” And I quickly became aware of a potential situation involving the three large young men in the vicinity of my van. So, I walked past it and around the passenger side, quickly unlocked and opened the passenger door to put my laptop on the seat, closed the door, and walked around the back. As I rounded the left-rear corner and started toward the driver’s door, the three guys were standing between me and the restaurant, blocking the way between the van and car parked next to it. They each looked a bit smug, as if they’d caught me. What they didn’t know was that I’d planned it that way. Situational awareness is always a big help, no matter the situation.

The largest, and oldest looking, seemed to be the spokesman. “We need to have a chat, little buddy.”

I’m sure that they expected me to retreat, but I didn’t. “Oh?”

“We want to know what was going on between you and that girl in the campground.”

That was quite interesting to me. I’d surveilled both the campground and the area around it, with bare eyes only, of course, as I was taking that little stroll around the premises. There was nobody watching that I saw. That implied someone pretty far away using a very good set of binoculars. Or someone intentionally well hidden. My response was intentionally vague.

“Huh?”

“The more shit you give us, the more trouble you’re in, sport. What was that interaction between you and the girl in the campground?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Now, any further trouble from you will not be in your best interests. I know that sounds hollow, but I have to say it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Go around, Jared.”

One of them made the same circuit of the van I had to get behind me, which was something I’d hoped for.

I sighed, shook my head, reached into my jacket, and pulled out the Sig, holding it carefully with thumb and index finger by the end of the handgrip. “I’m going to put this in the van here, because I don’t want it to be damaged in what’s about to happen, OK?”

Their eyes got big. Jared didn't see this, as he wasn't around behind me at that point, but the other two took a step back. Then, when I started to open the driver's door, they took two steps forward, right into position. So I opened the door hard, knocking both of them onto their butts, spun around and delivered a heel kick to Jared's jaw—he'd arrived right on schedule—and then turned back to the two sitting on the asphalt. I dispatched the smaller of them with another kick, this one to his chin, and then grabbed a leg of the bigger one, the spokesman, and broke its knee with yet another precisely aimed kick. I held onto his foot and bent down.

"You *boys* need to learn not to mess with folks you don't know." And I gave the foot a good shake for emphasis. He got the message, or at least I think he did. For sure, he screamed and passed out.

I got in, started up the van, and left them lying in the parking lot.

* * *

Going back to the campground, it seemed clear, was a non-starter. Even though I was annoyed to have to leave that nice little canopy behind, well, that was its purpose, in some sense. So once out of the parking lot I kept on straight, across the new Navajo Bridge to points south. It was just after seven in the evening, mountain standard time because it was Arizona but toward the western side of the time zone, so it was just after dark. That was both an advantage and a disadvantage. The boys in the parking lot would be out of action for quite a while, but I didn't know what other potential threats lurked out there. And I didn't want any interactions with law enforcement, either. So I cruised south at a respectable eighty when there were no other car lights visible and my radar detector wasn't warning me about anything.

And I poked at the GPS navigation screen until it was zoomed out to a more wide-angle setting than I usually employed. No way did I want to stop and look at paper maps.

I was on US-89A, and about fifteen miles south was the junction with US-89, which was the road from Page. About another forty-five miles farther south was the US-160 junction, which came in from the east via Tuba City. Then, after fifteen more miles, there was a turnoff to the west on State Road 64, which became the east entrance to Grand Canyon National Park after about thirty more miles. I knew these estimates were very rough, but they translated into well over an hour of fast driving, so I put it at ninety minutes or a bit more, say, 9:00 pm latest. I decided that if I could get into the National Park without being caught, I'd have a better chance of surviving the night. And there might well be side roads where I could park the van overnight, unseen. I had no idea of how many sets of sympathetic eyes those guys had out there.

The drive gave me time to ponder the situation. That the Templeton clan, as I decided to call them, watched the work of their women so closely, at least when they were out in public, was unexpected. It meant that there was both organization and at least some expertise to be dealt with.

The big guy with the broken knee wasn't going to be a problem, but the other two would probably have a fight to pick with me, if I ever ran into them again. And they'd probably bring weapons the next time.

But the real question was the brains behind it all. It wasn't those three guys—they were just muscle. Maybe this Levi Templeton person was someone to be reckoned with. Or maybe there was someone else. Winnie had suggested that there had been a dozen or more of these Mormon kidnappings, and Templeton's little harem seemed to account for only four.

And then there was the van. Whoever was watching the campground had seen me with it, and all three of those guys had seen me with it in the restaurant parking lot. Even if I'd killed them, there was a good chance that they'd already passed the information along to someone else. And I had seen only a

couple of other vehicles on our entire trip that looked remotely like it. As wonderful as it was for our road trip, it was also distinctive. And I really didn't want to be distinctive if I was going to get involved in an investigation.

Between staying on the alert for anyone following me and for cops with radar and a directive to increase their monthly ticket counts, on the one hand, and considering the overall situation from every possible angle, on the other, the miles flew by. It was just after eight-thirty when I finally reached the park entrance.

Before our trip, I had bought an annual pass good at every federal "fee area," but it requires identification to be presented as well. That always means at least a little interaction with the park employee at the entrance.

"Good evening, sir." She leaned out her little window and looked over the van. "Desert View and the South Rim shuttle buses are closed for the night now. Do you have a reservation at the campground or the trailer village? If not, I'm afraid they're full. And unauthorized overnight parking is not permitted anywhere in the Park."

I smiled a friendly, disarming smile. "No reservation in the Park, although I wish I did. No, I'm just passing through. I've got a room in that little village that I can never remember the name of. At the other entrance."

"Ah, Tusayan, of course. Well, please drive carefully and watch for wildlife. Enjoy your stay in Grand Canyon National Park."

I'd seen no lights behind me on SR-64 at all for the past half hour, but that didn't mean I was in the clear. I thought about stopping at one of the view points and waiting to see if anyone came looking for me, but that carried the possibility of a shoot-out, something that just seemed not to be appropriate in the Park. So I cruised the highway west toward the main South Rim visitor area, keeping my speed down to something reasonable. The last thing I wanted to do was hit a deer.

Forty-five minutes later, I eased through the village of Tusayan, its hotels, restaurants, and other attractions all lit up like a miniature Las Vegas, and kept on south. It took me another 45 minutes to get to Williams, on I-40, a town big enough to offer a variety of lodging. I drove around for a while, looking for someplace well off the interstate and on a side street, and finally found a Best Western on the far west end of town where I could park the van in a reasonably hard-to-spot place. It was just after ten in the evening, and I was bushed—that long day on the water had been both exhilarating and tiring, and then I'd driven for quite a while under stressful circumstances.

Another nice, hot shower, though, helped me relax, and I fell asleep when I hit the bed.

Tuesday morning, I awoke feeling better than I had for quite some time. Sam and I had spared no expense on the bedding for the van, including the mattress, but it still didn't measure up to a real bed. I checked the time and Sam's schedule, and it looked like she'd be in the air to Atlanta at that point. So food beckoned. The Best Western's room rate—a tad high, by my lights—included breakfast, so I wandered downstairs and loaded up a plate-full to take back to my room. Then I went back and got more, including a couple of cups of real coffee. The stuff offered for the in-room coffee maker was, well, not so good as what they had downstairs. It all felt iconoclastic, not to be eating in the dining area, but I wanted to take advantage of the motel's Wi-Fi to spend the morning on research.

I didn't know what Winnie Small had in mind for me, but I suspected that it would be some kind of undercover assignment, maybe acting as an advance scout and checking out the lay of the land where Melissa's farm might be. We'd have to figure out a different vehicle for me—us, actually, as Sam was coming—of course. And we'd have also to figure out cover. Sam was a natural—she could be an artist painting the rocky scenery. I'd have to pose as something other than a fly-fisher, though. Birdwatching

occurred to me, although I was betting the bird life up in that high desert was pretty sparse. Lizard-watching? Hmm. Maybe photography? Yeah, nature photography.

We could transfer our own equipment into the new vehicle easily enough, but we'd need some additional gear. And that would depend on the vehicle we got. An SUV of some kind, which meant car-camping? A tent came to mind. Water containers and a wash basin. A portable camp stove. Oh! Air mattresses. And then, of course, there was the whole sanitary situation. It was something of a relief to see all the options available, though, compared to how it used to be. I speculated whether Sam would insist on a camping toilet with its own little tent.

Car-camping, I realized, would be an entirely different world from ours. I wondered where I'd find all the stuff we'd need, and then I discovered an REI store in Flagstaff. Bingo!

Based on what Melissa had said, it seemed that the farm might be somewhere in the vicinity of US-89 to the north and west of Page. That road ran more or less along the southern boundary of, and partly through, the Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument, which I discovered was some 1.9 million acres of protected federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management with a few private inholdings scattered here and there. Depending on just what all Winnie needed me to do, I decided that camping in and exploring the Monument to paint and take artsy pictures would make a pretty good cover for us.

My last task for the morning was to figure out if my satellite phone could be used as a data link for the computer. That took me most of the time until check-out, but I finally decided it would be possible if I could find a couple of bits of hardware. Radio Shack stores, I knew, were far less ubiquitous than they used to be, if they existed at all, but maybe the FBI techs could help.

Late Tuesday morning, after figuring out as much as I could, I packed up and set out east on I-40 for Flagstaff and the FBI meeting. And, of course, Sam.

* * *

Four

The drive east to Flag took a bit more than half an hour, and on the way I called Winnie to find out what I should do when I got there. It had occurred to me that walking in the door of an FBI regional office and announcing myself as if I were someone important might be taken the wrong way. After all, I thought, that's how people must turn themselves in, if they choose to, when the FBI is out to arrest them.

She understood and told me to ask for an Agent Rothstein instead. He was Flagstaff office representative on her task force and, naturally, would be quite interested in what I'd stumbled upon. I figured he'd be even more interested in my encounter with the three not-so-tough guys the previous evening.

Seth Rothstein turned out to be an interesting character study. I'd spent enough years working the drugs beat for the NYPD that I knew a New Yorker when I encountered one, and that's what he was. And he knew it, too, as he launched into a little explanation of his being in Flagstaff.

"See, when I was growing up in Queens, I was fascinated with the west. Not the west coast, but the west of Cowboys and Indians. So after I got past my FBI rookie try-out, I specifically requested an assignment somewhere out here. And this is probably the best place ever, for me, because we have a lot

of involvement with what goes on in the Navajo Reservation. And what's so cool is that they actually like me, the Navajos. Except I talk too much for them, and I think they think I'm sort of nuts."

Truth be told, he talked a little too much for me, too, and he did seem a little nuts, but we connected because of my experience in the City and because of our shared interest in this latest business of all the kidnappings of little girls.

I had arrived at about 11:30AM, and he was already gearing up for the 2:00PM video conference and wasn't going anywhere for lunch, so I used the time to broach the issue of my need for a different vehicle from my van.

"I don't really know what I'm going to be asked to do, but I expect it'll involve scouting around southern Utah to see the lay of the land with respect to what we've learned so far. And, of course, trying to learn more. But that van of mine is not even close to anonymous."

He passed the little test I'd set up by not offering me the usual black, full-sized, FBI sedan or some other vehicle with FBI decals all over it. On the other hand, that's all they had available. So instead he provided me with the paperwork necessary to rent an RV of my choice at a local outlet, at Uncle Sam's expense. And then he truly earned my respect by offering to store our van in the FBI lot, and for it to be covered with a big tarp to keep it out of prying eyes and help maintain our cover.

After dealing with such wonderful competence, I felt a little guilty for all the bad-mouthing about the FBI I've done over the years. But just a little. And even that waned when I went off to find an RV at the rental place. The experience made me appreciate our van that much more, but at least I wound up with something serviceable that Sam, I hoped, would find to be acceptable. Based on one of those Mercedes-Benz Sprinter commercial-van platforms, it was almost as small as ours—small being relative to the highway-bus-sized behemoths they also had—meaning it would be pretty easy to drive as those monsters go. Although it was far, far less off-road capable than what we were used to, it sported graphics on the sides that loudly proclaimed us as tourists, something that would enhance our cover. I thought it would do, just.

The FBI office in Flagstaff was out by the airport, in a retail wasteland, so I took the opportunity to say goodbye to our van by whipping up a quick lunch and a huge, flavored-up mug of coffee to take into Winnie's video conference. That took place in a big room with theater seating and various cameras and microphones pointing this way and that.

Right on time, the very wide screen at the front of the room lit up, and there was Winnie, filling the left half of the screen, bigger than life, staring at us. A couple of seconds later, Seth and I were there kind of scrunched onto the right half of the screen, staring back at ourselves. I blinked and watched myself blink several milliseconds later. Then the half of the screen we were on split in half, which unscrunched us but made us smaller on the upper quarter, and the lower quarter came to life showing another group, eight people sitting around a conference table. Finally, Winnie's side of the screen split in half, and a group of six around a table appeared.

"OK." Winnie's voice thundered, but it was instantly throttled back. "Looks like we're all here. I see the St. George contingent and the Salt Lake City people around tables. And a couple of people in Flagstaff in theatre seats. If anyone is having trouble with the feed, you should know whom to call on your end. So I'd like to get started. Let's introduce ourselves. I'm Special Agent Winifred Small, Denver office, the chair of the task force you all know about. SLC?"

The people around the table on the bottom half of our half of the screen introduced themselves, and I wasn't able to keep up. But then I recognized Summit County Deputy Sheriff Lisa Hamilton as she was introducing herself as a task force member. How about that? I thought. The St. George group, on Winnie's side of the screen, were next, and once again I couldn't keep up.

After that, Winnie took over again. “Before the Flagstaff duo gets started, let me introduce its newest member. You got an abridged file on him today. Mac MacQuarrie is going to be working with us in an undercover role that I’ll explain more in a few minutes. I’m sure you’ve seen that his credentials are impeccable, and I’m certain that his experience in the Middle East will be useful as well, given the similarity of the landforms. He knows deserts. And I can tell you from personal experience that he’s just the right person for what we need to accomplish. He saved my life, and the life of another agent, last year under truly menacing circumstances. Wave at the camera, Mac.”

I was so startled that I did, and I could see a few smiles. I decided Winnie must have pulled other stunts like that now and then.

While I was recovering from my embarrassment, Seth introduced himself, and we got on with the agenda.

I was glad to have brought a notepad and a pen, as there was a remarkable amount of information presented. Perhaps most relevant for me, Melissa’s letter had been thoroughly deconstructed, and the location of Levi Templeton’s farm compound popped into view on the screen, relegating Winnie to a little box in the upper left-hand corner. The compound turned out to be just south of the National Monument and a bit north of the hamlet of Big Water, at the end of a long, private access road off of a gravel BLM road.

“Those of you with need to know will be receiving classified satellite pictures of the location.” Winnie maintained an inscrutable poker face. “We’re in the process of obtaining a federal warrant for the premises on the basis of that letter you’ve all seen. When we get the warrant, and it’ll be a federal warrant because of the fact that Melissa Alcott was kidnapped in Colorado, we’ll set a schedule for serving it. And we’ll need a tactical plan, of course, which I want you folks in St. George to work on. I’ll fly down for executing the plan, but I’m not going to micro-manage this.” She smiled. “Yet, at least. Questions?”

I waved my hand. “Win—er, Agent Small, can you pull that map back? There’s a little track, or a road or something, headed west from that compound. I’d like to see where that goes.”

The map zoomed back in little steps, until the faint road-like feature I’d seen began to disappear, then it zoomed in a step. Whoever was in control of the picture proceeded to pan the view to follow the road. I couldn’t tell distances, what with all the zooming, but shortly a greenish, flat-looking field appeared, with a barn or something next to it. I knew I was going to have to get some of my own satellite imagery and study it in detail.

“Thanks, Agent Small. The planning people need to look that over carefully.”

“I’m sure they will, Mac.”

Rothstein had a question. “Winnie? What kind of tactical plan do you have in mind? We surely don’t want another Waco or anything close. And those people might be pretty well armed. Plus, they might have sympathetic neighbors, like that deal in Nevada that the BLM people ran into a couple of years ago.”

“I thought of that. But it seems that on Mondays and Thursdays a good-sized group of Templetons leaves to get to maintenance work they do for the Park Service. They all formally work for something called ‘Templeton Enterprises, LLC,’ and it’s contracted to an outfit called ‘Big Water Services, LLP,’ which has a Park Service janitorial contract at Wahweap and Lees Ferry. We haven’t sorted out all the partners yet. Anyway, if we intercept that vehicle, we would get some of them out of the action before we go in. You’re right, though.” She emphasized her comment with raised eyebrows. “The plan needs to avoid any hostilities.”

What they didn't know was that hostilities had already begun, the night before in the Marble Canyon Lodge parking lot.

* * *

I fixed that by calling Winnie on the phone and pulling Rothstein into the call right after the video conference adjourned. They both understood the implications of my little altercation for planning how to serve the warrant.

"At least you seem to have put one of them out of commission, Mac." Winnie was quick to see how it changed things. "But you don't know his name?"

"No. He was the biggest and was calling the shots, but the only name I heard was when he called one of the others 'Jared'. But no last name."

"Hmm. Based on what we learned in records searches, that's probably Jared Templeton, Levi's third-oldest. Apparently, there's quite a brood out there, some twenty offspring, by various wives, according to their tax returns. The three oldest are boys in their late teens, so that's probably who you encountered." She shuffled some papers. "What's interesting is that there's been no mention of that little fracas in any news or police reports. But a Jeremiah Templeton was admitted to emergency at the Page hospital with a broken leg. They set it, put him in a cast, and he left with relatives, apparently."

"With a cast, he may be able to get around on crutches, but that's about it." I knew I'd done considerable damage to his knee.

"OK, well, I'll pass this along to St. George so they can take all this into account when they plan. And, Mac, you're good with the business of scouting around?"

"Yep. We'll get my cover firmed-up this afternoon. Oh, and you'll be getting *per diem* statements for two. Hourly consulting for one, but *per diem* for two. Part of my cover, and necessary for my sanity." I got a muffled "Hmmp" in response, which I took for assent.

Rothstein and I spent the rest of the afternoon getting me organized. Rather than try to modify my satellite phone, he gave me another gizmo that was a satellite computer link with a small, magnetic antenna to stick on the roof of the RV and plug into a USB port on my laptop plus a twelve-volt port in the RV when needed. And he also provided a hand-held radio with a little stick-on outside antenna for me to use if I needed it in the field.

I made a quick trip to the REI store to pick up some of the gear we'd need for the RV, including a picnic canopy to replace the one I'd left at Lees Ferry, but I suspected that Sam would be wanting her own trip before we left Flagstaff for points north the next day. And I spent a couple of hours transferring gear and personal items from our van to the RV as well. I also pulled all of the perishables from the van's refrigerator and put them into the cooler in the RV and a big ice chest I'd bought.

Rothstein and I also spent some time going over satellite photos. We sat down at a computer console, I figured out how to log in to some sites he didn't have access to, and what I downloaded surprised him.

"I didn't think these birds were supposed to be imaging over the U.S. That's why we contract those small planes to follow people around with high-resolution gear. In fact, there's a fly-over scheduled for the Big Water area tomorrow." His indignation was evident.

"Yeah, well, these pictures aren't admissible in court, that's for sure. But they can help in situations such as this. And there's no way I know of to target specific domestic scenes, like we can overseas. You just have to get lucky with the automated imagery."

And we did get lucky, finding several scenes with the Templeton compound in view taken at much higher resolution than anything that Rothstein was able to find. And then he surprised me by loading three of them, taken from different line-of-sight angles at very different times of the year, into software that combined them into a strange-looking three-dimensional rendering of the place. That, we agreed, would be extremely helpful, despite its odd, multi-season mix, no matter what operational plan emerged. I made a point of emailing all of the images to myself, especially the ones showing more details of that road I'd asked about in the meeting earlier.

We spent the entire afternoon with all this, plus the paperwork I needed to deal with in order to earn my FBI ball cap and windbreaker—neither of which I'd be using in my undercover role, I was sure—and I managed to get to the airport to pick up Sam with only a few minutes to spare. She hadn't eaten either, so we stopped at the first place that looked acceptable, a chain restaurant with unlimited salads and all sorts of other stuff. Not fancy, but reliable.

We managed to stick to superficial chit-chat until the entrées came and we knew the server would leave us alone for a while—except for the mandatory “how's everything?” visit—before getting down to business. Her first question was whether we would need to find someplace to buy her a handgun the next day. That told me she was serious about helping with the investigation.

“Well, we probably need to go shopping, but not for a handgun. I've got a Glock you can use, a 9 millimeter. Same ammo my Sig Sauer uses, Parabellums, which we have a lot of. Maybe we can find a range so you can try it out.”

“Which Glock?”

“Uh, a Glock 26. The small one, but it has a ten-round mag.”

“OK, that'll work. I used to have one. I can try yours out and get used to it again once we get out in the boonies. You've got that automatic Heckler and Koch?”

As I was nodding, I realized that this was a side of Sam that I'd not seen before, and it took me several bites of dinner to get adjusted to it.

“So,” she was two hours ahead of me because of the time change, and she was shoveling dinner down, “what other shopping do we need tomorrow?”

That opened the flood gate for me to tell her about what Winnie and I had figured out about the case, my attempts to make the RV as well outfitted as our van and what was still needed in that regard, and the still-vague plan for our participation in the next couple of days of FBI activity.

“Sounds like we get to wing it.” She looked up and smiled, her eyes twinkling. “But that's probably the best way. I seem to remember that winging it is what you're especially good at.”

I wasn't sure whether I'd just had a long, tiring day or I'd been transported to the Twilight Zone. This sort of talk had always been something that Sam had carefully avoided. So I decided simply to ask.

“I've never heard you talk like this, Sweetie. Are you OK?”

“I'll be OK when we get the gob of phlegm who kidnapped Lucy Smith. Meantime, I'm motivated.” She looked up and smiled again. “Mac, I'm certain that you're way better in the field than I am, but I think I just might surprise you. I mean, I've been careful to learn how to protect myself over the years, and I've practiced. A lot. I just never mentioned it. I don't especially like the idea of guns, let alone going after people with one, but, well, when there's no alternative that's what you've got to do. Right?”

I just stared at her. “Did something happen in Florida? You seem, um, different.”

“No, I'm not. Except I've had a lot of time to think about this. I mean, look. From what you've told me, there's some guy on the loose who's kidnapping little girls and selling them to dirty old men so that

the girls become, essentially, brood mares. And when the kidnapper isn't satisfied with one he grabs, he rapes her and stuffs her into an outhouse pit, for God's sake. In America? This is just...well, it's simply intolerable. Even in...in Afghanistan it would be intolerable. But it's here in the United States!" She finally noticed her voice level and looked around before lowering it. "And it's something we need to stop."

I could only shake my head. "You're right, you're absolutely right. And the FBI thinks so, too. So I guess we're all in on this, huh?"

"Damned straight we're all in on this. Now." She looked around for our server. "What do you suppose this place has for dessert, anyway?"

* * *

I'd fetched her from the airport using our van, so our first errand the next morning was to swap it for our temporary home-to-be, the RV I'd rented and, with Seth Rothstein's help, outfitted, partially, at least.

As I'd expected, Sam found a bunch of stuff in our van that I'd not thought to transfer, so the RV got quite a bit fuller before we drove off in it. And we hadn't even been shopping yet.

But because it was somewhat bigger than the van, with surprisingly more interior space, I didn't think that would be a problem. On the other hand, its size, and its generic, rental-vehicle quality, meant that it handled like a pig and that it sure wouldn't be doing much in the way of real off-road wandering. Bumpy gravel, sure, but not really off-road.

After the repacking and the shopping, we finally managed to hit the highway north out of Flagstaff just before noon. We'd had a late, and large, breakfast, so our plan was to have eat-on-the-go snacks for lunch and see what we might run across for dinner.

It didn't take Sam very long to get bored. Although the Painted Desert north of Flagstaff has its scenery—scenery that I thought she could do a marvelous job of depicting, in fact—it's large-scale scenery and takes a long time to change at highway speeds. Then she discovered the satellite link that Seth Rothstein had fixed up for us. By alternately poking at the laptop and looking out the window, she was able both to watch the scenery creep by and scout out our route.

"So, you said we're going to this Big Staircase Monument place, right? Oh, wait, it's Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument. Well, whatever it's called, it says here we need an overnight permit for camping. There's an office in a place called Kanab where you can get those. Ah...it looks like it's about three and a half hours from Flagstaff to Kanab, if we go through Page."

"The route through Page is also through a town called Big Water, right?" I was trying to recall the maps I'd seen. "That's good, because we can check out the turf there. And I wonder if parking this thing by the side of a back road and sleeping in it counts as 'camping'?"

"Good question. I'm not seeing a whole lot in the way of RV parks, you know, those places with electricity and water. There are some by Lake Powell, looks like."

"If we get to Kanab by three, we could get back to the lake by dinner-time, easy. That way, we'd get a second look at Big Water, and maybe we could detour a little up the side road that the FBI is interested in."

"Yeah. It's only about an hour from Kanab to a place on the lake called 'Wahweap.' And that's in Arizona. I'm a little creeped out about Utah just now."

I nodded. "Yeah, me, too, although I'm thinking that there's not a lot of difference between the two in the part of Arizona north of the river where we're headed."

At least the RV was made for American highways, and we were able to lumber northward at the speed of the rest of the traffic, which, thankfully, was pretty sparse. At Bitter Springs, we stayed on US-89, instead of taking 89A back to Marble Canyon, and shortly passed Page just before we crossed the river on the bridge next to the Glen Canyon Dam. Then there were a couple of turn-offs to the Wahweap Marina, with a road to a lookout in between, a little built-up area, and the state line. The “Welcome to Utah” sign wasn’t very welcoming, but it did verify the contents of Melissa Alcott’s letter.

Big Water, I’d found out from the internet, was originally called “Glen Canyon City” and had been built for the workers on that big dam back in the ’50s and ’60s. But in today’s world, it was really more like “Little-Bitty Water”, three of them, in fact, separate clusters of dusty, weathered buildings strung out along several miles of the highway. It was a good thing we hadn’t planned to eat or stay there, as nothing looked remotely hospitable.

We’d just passed the third when Sam, having been absorbed in her poking at the laptop, spoke up. “Big Water Utah, renamed by one Alex Joseph in 1983 when he and his wives took over the deserted settlement of Glen Canyon City and he named himself mayor. Wives, plural. Geez. This whole part of Utah is like some other planet.”

By then, we were off across the desolate high-desert and slick-rock country.

An hour later, Kanab turned out to be somewhat more inviting, and, when we got deep enough into town to come to the 89 / 89A intersection, I even remembered it a little from my earlier trip through in the other direction on Saturday. We turned south on 89A toward the Monument Headquarters, and I stopped at a gas station to top off the RV’s gas tank, because, in addition to handling like a pig, it drank like one as well. And, having had a close look at the countryside we were going to be out in, we bought three extra cases of bottled water.

At the gas station and its convenience store—where water sold for the about price of a good Chardonnay in California—and at the Monument Headquarters, it seemed to me that our cover was working. We played the role of dumb tourists, successfully as far as I could tell, and got various bits and pieces of not-quite-condescending advice, even a semi-formal lecture by the BLM person who gave us our overnight permits. About half-way through that lecture, I realized that its intent wasn’t so much to keep Sam and me safe and healthy as it was to decrease the chances that a search team would have to be sent out to look for us. It even made sense. If I were in their position, I’d sure not want to get rousted out on yet another search for clueless tourists lost in the slick-rock country.

After a last quick stop to get more ice—I really didn’t want to be running the generator unless necessary—we headed back east. Our plan was to take a little side trip into the Monument and then continue on to Wahweap for a civilized overnight in the RV park there. That rental RV was a new vehicle for us, and it seemed like a good idea for a shake-down night in a relatively civilized place.

Remember the Robert Burns poem I quoted way back?

* * *

Five

With our satellite phone, now being paid for by the FBI, and that satellite computer link that Rothstein had set up for me, I was surprised when the cell phone in my shirt pocket began demanding my attention. We’d just cleared what passed for the eastern city limits of Kanab, but the towers were still

able to find me. Rather than try to keep the pig on the highway while I talked, I pulled over to the nice, wide shoulder.

“Mac MacQuarrie here.”

“Mac, it’s Winnie Small. Looks like you’re headed east out of Kanab.”

We were, but it took me several seconds to process the implications of that statement.

“Shit. So Rothstein put a tracking device of some kind on me? Geez. No wonder I don’t trust you guys.”

“Hey! Calm down! He didn’t tell you? Well, I didn’t know that. Sorry. I’ll deal with it. But it’s useful anyway. Our plan for tomorrow needs you for a critical backup.” She coughed, softly. “I’m sorry, but there’s no way can we have you going in with us. You understand? It has to do with credentials and so on. And your history. If the locals found out that a new FBI agent who’s an ex-spook was part of our contingent, it would really hit the fan in a big way. But we do need you to watch the end of that road that you noticed during the briefing yesterday. Those satellite pictures you found, and I really don’t want to know all the details, they show a faint track going past that barn by the field and then eventually joining the BLM road, just inside the Monument boundary, it looks like. It could work as a back-door escape route, and we need it covered tomorrow.”

In looking over those satellite images, I’d noticed the continuation of the track I’d mentioned during the briefing and was curious about it as well. That Winnie was onto it made me feel better about her leadership.

“Ah, OK, I think I understand. But don’t you dare let him put a tracking gadget on my own van, OK? Anyway, what’s my role tomorrow specifically?”

“Any vehicles come out that way, you detain them however you need to. Although I hope you don’t have to shoot anyone.”

“Timing?”

“We’re going to wait for the van with the people going to work at the Park Service units to get out to the highway. That should be around six-thirty or seven. After we get them secured, we’ll go into the compound and execute the search warrant. We’re going to use a delivery service truck, or something that looks like one. So if anyone tries to get out the back way, it’ll be after seven tomorrow morning, probably closer to nine, actually.”

“Got it. If you’re tracking me in real time, you’ll see in a little while that I’m going to head up that BLM road past the compound turn-off and keep going at least until I pass the back entrance you want me to watch. Or try to. I don’t know how the road is relative to what this RV can do. Then we were going to head back to one of the marinas on Lake Powell, but I expect we’ll find some place to park this pig of an RV we’ve got up there for the night, by that road you want watched. That way, we’ll be on site bright and early.”

She laughed. “‘Pig of an RV’, huh? You saying you don’t like the RV lifestyle?”

“No, both of us do, actually. But this particular vehicle is just not up to our standards. We’re spoiled.” At least I left her laughing.

About an hour later, we turned off the highway at the middle of the three Big Water clusters of buildings and headed north toward a state fish hatchery. The gravel road was in reasonable shape up to the hatchery, but then it bisected and began to deteriorate. It wasn’t long before I was wishing for our off-road-capable van. But the road had been graded at some point, so various potholes and washboard sections were the worst. We took it slowly and carefully, playing intimidated tourists, which was easy.

From the highway, it took us about fifteen minutes to pass a turn-off to the left, clearly marked with multiple “No Trespassing” signs, which had to be the entrance to the Templeton place. Another ten minutes passed before we crossed the Monument boundary, where we were greeted by several signs reminding us of all the rules and providing a warning about being prepared for unexpected road conditions.

Somewhere in the next few minutes, we passed the back road out of the Templeton lands, the place we were to guard the next morning, without seeing it. So as soon as I could find a spot where I could get the rig turned around, I did, and we crept back the way we’d come, watching the roadside carefully for signs of a track coming in. Once we found it, of course, it was obvious, but just as obvious was the fact that it was not used very much, perhaps not for more than a year. With that task taken care of, we once again reversed direction and headed deeper into the Monument to look for someplace to park the RV for the night.

The farther north we got, the more the road deteriorated, so I didn’t wait too long before taking advantage of a nice pull-off that would be in the morning shade of a bluff to our east. I managed to get the RV parked on a flat spot, so we didn’t have to use the self-leveling jacks, something I was glad for in case a hasty exit was in order for some reason.

We were not quite at the top of a broad mesa, having climbed out of the dry wash a ways back, in almost completely barren rock and sand country. There was the occasional small juniper trying to eke out a living and some other very woody bushes with leathery leaves I couldn’t identify. I remembered something about “greasewood,” so maybe that was it. And, of course, everything was desiccated.

But as the sun began to set and the air to cool, it was actually quite pleasant—a little breeze was stirring and whispering among the rocks, but otherwise the silence was complete. Sam and I didn’t do much talking, just so we could listen to the nothing.

But I did have a mission—I needed to see just how well Sam could handle those guns of mine. Miles from anywhere, no one around, it seemed like the perfect place for some target practice.

To avoid disturbing the peace and quiet as much as possible, I screwed suppressors onto the small Glock and the HK assault rifle and put a full magazine in each. Then I paced off fifty- and hundred-yard distances and set up piles of rocks at the end of each. She watched all this with some amusement, sitting in a lawn chair under our new picnic canopy, sipping an iced tea.

“What? You don’t trust what I told you about my experience handling firearms?”

“Oh, I do, I do. But I’m thinking it’s been a while and, well, you know, people do get rusty. Besides, I want to see how good a shot you really are with this rifle. Also, you probably don’t have much experience using a weapon with a suppressor.”

She rolled her eyes theatrically, finished her iced tea, and got up. I handed her the Glock, and she expertly popped out the magazine, checked it, put it back in, and racked a round, almost all in one motion.

“You’re right. It feels different with this thing on the end. Out of balance, or something.” She was hefting the piece, trying to get a feel for it.

“You get used to it, but then it feels funny without it.” I pointed downrange. “Try that closer pile of rocks.”

She stood in the classic shooter’s stance, braced herself, aimed, and squeezed off a round. With the suppressor, the noise of the gun was barely audible, but fifty yards away there was a sharp crack as the topmost of the rocks I’d stacked exploded. Then she let loose with the rest of the magazine, and the pile

of rocks flew apart into smaller pieces of gravel and dust. I was busy picking up shell casings for a minute.

“No rust on you, I’d say. Nice shooting.” I looked up to see her grinning. “What I’m thinking about tomorrow is that the best approach will be for you to cover me with the HK if I need to stop any vehicles. So let’s see how that suits you. I expect that prone would be best.”

“You want me to lie down in all this dust?” She gave me one of Those Looks.

“Mmm. Good point. I’ll get a ground cloth.” I rummaged around in the RV, came up with a six-foot square of some kind of high-tech material, and spread it out for her.

After I showed her the various bells and whistles of the HK—and there were several, as this was the military HK417 Recce, with an accurized barrel and an infrared laser scope—she lay down and snuggled up to it, almost making me jealous. After checking to be sure it was set to single-shot mode, she let a round go at the hundred-yard pile of rocks, with the same result she’d had with the Glock—no noise to speak of but for the exploding rock at the top of the pile combined with the muted sonic boom of the bullet.

“Oooh! I *like* this rifle.” Her next two rounds also picked individual rocks off the pile. “Those rocks are too close, though. See anything out at 400 yards or so I can try?”

* * *

As I’d been the previous evening, I was dumbfounded at seeing this side of Sam’s personality—not to mention her ability with an unfamiliar rifle.

“OK, I guess I understand how you came to be proficient with a handgun. Self-protection and all that. But where’d you learn to shoot a rifle?”

“Well, c’mon, Mac. This one’s easy. Especially with the scope. That old thirty-thirty my Dad took me deer hunting with was a whole different thing. But the principle is the same, right? Aim and squeeze.” She snuggled it even closer. “And this thing gives you the range and adjusts the scope. Too cool.”

I was staring at an outcropping a long way past that rock pile she’d picked apart, when chips started flying off it. “OK, well, that’s pretty far. Did you hit what you were aiming at?”

“Seems like. I think it needs just a little correcting up, though, at that distance. Maybe the suppressor is the issue.”

“OK, well, keep that in mind. Having you as a quarter-mile backup tomorrow makes me feel a lot better. Want to try full auto? See if you can hit a target with a spray?”

She looked over at me and shrugged. “Well, OK. I think I’ve got another dozen rounds in the magazine.”

That made me fall even more deeply in love with her. She counted her shots!

As I was reveling in this latest surprise, there was a second-long brrring sound. I didn’t even have to tell her where the auto switch was. Wow.

“Mmm.” She sounded critical. “It really lifts on auto. I’ll have to remember that.”

“Yeah, it does. Remember, those rounds are like thirty-ought-six rounds, lots of energy. On auto you’ve got to hold it down with force. How’s your shoulder feeling?”

“Good. This has great recoil absorption. You think we’ll see the kidnapper tomorrow?”

“No idea. And, look. You can’t just go shooting people, OK?”

“Well, then, what’s the point?”

“Tomorrow, I may need you as backup if we have to intercept a vehicle coming out of the back road we found, right? And the trick will be for you to stay invisible and use that thing to intimidate whoever might try to make trouble. Only not to shoot him. Or her. You know, hit a rock or something to let them know you’re there. Thing is, we don’t know who’s going to be in this hypothetical vehicle we may need to intercept. Right? Besides, I’m pretty sure we won’t be running into Lucy’s kidnapper. These Templetons just don’t seem to have the abilities to pull that off.”

During that little speech, she’d sprung up and begun picking up brass. “Twenty. Was that what I started with?”

“It was.” A woman not just after, but already in possession of my heart. “I’ll show you how to load that mag later this evening. You getting hungry yet?”

She was, and, just a day out of town, we had plenty of possibilities on ice. We decided to try out the new portable charcoal grill on some steaks with a baguette we’d found at the grocery store, and a salad. And, of course, a bottle of wine, a Bordeaux we’d been saving for a special occasion.

We ate outside, under the new canopy in the last of the day’s light, and discussed whether our situation fell into the category of “roughing it” or what. Sam, with much less outdoors experience than I, was leaning toward roughing it, while I decided on the “what” option. After all, the mattress in that RV was better than the one we had in our van.

And that nice mattress gave me such a good night’s sleep that I woke up before dawn. I suppose it had something to do with the time of year—that far south, with just a hint of fall in the air, sunrise was rather late—and going to sleep early. Out there in nowhere-land, when it got dark, there wasn’t much else to do, after all. Although we did manage to find something interesting to keep ourselves awake for a bit.

Having parked to take advantage of morning shade, I couldn’t see the eastern horizon when I rolled out of bed, but it wasn’t completely dark out, either. Once I got myself dressed and outside, it instantly became lighter—I hadn’t realized that the windows on that RV were so darkly tinted. I walked up the road—or what passed for the road—far enough to get out of the shadow of the bluff and watch the sun ease its way up over the horizon. With the long shadows and the color of the early morning light on the rocks, I began to get a feel for why this part of the country had been designated as a National Monument. It was strikingly beautiful. And the cover we’d concocted—Sam as artist, me as photographer, an ersatz photographer, but I did have a pretty fancy camera—became all the more credible because of that striking beauty.

I was going to have to remember to carry the thing around, though, to be credible.

Back at the RV, Sam was up and had coffee ready—it smelled quite homey in there, to my surprise. We dawdled over breakfast, and, a little after 7, the satellite phone tweedled.

“Mac? Winnie here. Surveillance tells me that a van just left the Templeton compound and is headed into Big Water. We’ll intercept it when it’s out on the highway, probably ten minutes or so. Then we’ll set things up to move in and serve our warrants.”

“Got it, Winnie. We’ll get organized here and be set up at the end of that back exit road in a half hour or so. We can’t move this thing very fast on the BLM road up where we are.”

“That should do it. I’ll let you know when all the dust settles. Good luck. And, um, be careful out there, hear?”

Careful was going to be my main consideration, given that Sam was involved with it all. I'd like to think that I was always careful, but her participation made me really think about it. It was in that frame of mind that, after we cleaned up from breakfast and packed for the day, I drove the RV carefully down to the end of that faint road, more of a mere track, we'd found the previous afternoon.

Our BLM road was descending just slightly at that point through a gap in the slick-rock, and I decided to park the RV across the entrance of that track so that it would not quite block it off and pretend to have a flat tire. I made sure the RV was positioned so that the bumper jack I planned to put under the left rear bumper would be visible from the track. Uphill, there were plenty of places for Sam to set up with the HK, places where she would have both cover and visibility.

We found an excellent perch for her, behind a sandstone boulder that gave her a view of where any vehicle coming up that track would have to squeeze around the rear of the RV. I helped her sight in the scope to compensate for the slightly downward trajectory involved.

Then, back at the RV, I got out a shovel and the tire-changing tools and set up what I hoped would be a persuasive, albeit false, scenario of a hapless tourist trying to change a tire.

Just about the time everything was in place, the satellite phone tweedled again.

"Mac? Winnie. We're in the house with no resistance to speak of. The only people here are Levi Templeton and two women, late twenties, I guess you'd call them 'senior Templeton wives.' They're mum about where the kids are."

"You got the van thing under control?"

"Right. Stopped it just south of Big Water, after they crossed into Arizona. Two guys, one in a leg cast, and four young women, dressed for their custodial duties. It's weird. I'm thinking that not only were these girls kidnapped to become wives for this Templeton guy, but they're also *de facto* slaves for him, working so that his operation can have some cash flow. I have to say, this farm compound doesn't look all that prosperous."

"Seems like maybe those kids could be up the back road at that barn, or something. Maybe that's where the child care operation is."

"Good thinking, Mac. I'll send someone up there. But that might flush someone out your way, so heads up."

"Got it, Winnie. But wait. Well, send someone that way anyhow, but they may not find anything. Here comes something up that track we're watching. Gotta go."

* * *

Sam and I had a set of walkie-talkies, the kind that hunters and other outdoors people use, so I let her know what I was seeing. She verified, using her scope, that a vehicle was headed our way, but the wind was up the slope toward us and there was too much dust for her to see what it was. By walking around the front of the RV, where the wind direction was less unfavorable, I was able to see a farm tractor, driven by a teenager who looked a lot like Jared Templeton to me, pulling a flat-bed wagon full of children and one adult, a woman in one of those long, cotton dresses, toward us. They weren't moving fast at all, but the several tires on the four-axle rig, combined with the desiccated soil, were raising quite a cloud of dust.

Because I expected that Jared would recognize me, I decided to stay hidden until the last second. It wasn't clear that the tractor and trailer would be able to make it onto the BLM road, given the way I'd parked the RV, but I was betting that Jared would try it.

I let him squeeze the tractor between the RV and the boulder that was sitting just past the track's exit, and, as he slowed to maneuver the wider trailer through, I walked up to him while he was looking the other way.

"Well. It's Jared. How's your jaw?"

That startled him so much he almost fell off the tractor's seat. But then he recognized me and started for something in his belt. I had my Sig Sauer leveled at him, though, so he thought better of it. When I flashed my FBI shield, he jumped to the ground, on the opposite side of the tractor from me, and took off running back down that track, back toward the farm.

I got on the walkie-talkie. "Let him go, Sam. I think we're going to have our hands full with all the kids on that trailer. Why don't you come on down?"

"Yeah, I see 'em. I hope that woman will be helpful. At least they're sitting tight, for now."

I put the Sig into my belt in the small of my back, but kept my shield out, and walked around to the back of the RV, where the trailer was sort of wedged in between the vehicle and the rock. The kids, about a dozen of them, from infants to high-schoolers, were getting squirmy, and the woman was looking bullets at me.

"Ma'am." I held up my shield so she could see it. "My name's Mac MacQuarrie, and I'm with the FBI. I'm part of an operation that's serving Federal search and arrest warrants at the house back down there a ways, but I don't know if you're aware of that. My role is to make sure that no one that no one escapes this way. I don't think that applies to you, exactly, but it did to Jared. It looks like he's headed back for the barn, though."

"How dare you defile God's special place with your blasphemous presence!" Her tone set some of the smaller kids to crying. "This is private property, and there's no trespassing allowed."

"Well, actually, ma'am, right now we're standing inside a Federal reserve, the Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument. The boundary is about fifty yards down this road here. But even so, the warrants legally allow us to be on the farm property. I'm hoping that you'll cooperate, ma'am. It'll sure be a lot easier for the kids if you do."

Some of her bluster faded. "What's going to happen to us? Am I under arrest?"

"The children are definitely not under arrest. As I said, I'm hoping you'll cooperate with us, and if you do I won't arrest you, although I can't speak to the other FBI agents who are part of this. The arrest warrant was only for a Levi Templeton, no one else, but people who interfere with serving that warrant can also be arrested. As I understand things, at least. And what I'd like to see happen is the reuniting of these kids with their mothers, at least the four that left for work this morning. Those women seem to be minors, meaning they're under eighteen, so their status is a bit nebulous. In any case, they're in FBI custody now, along with the two oldest Templeton boys. Their van got stopped just past the state line, over in Arizona. I guess if we get their kids back to them, you and the two other women at the house, being legal adults, are not really part of all this, unless you want to be."

"Huh? What? What does that mean, 'unless we want to be'?" She was clearly surprised to be consulted.

"Well, I guess that depends on how long you've been in the household and how you got there. And the same applies to your adult-age, uh, co-wives. Or whatever you call yourselves."

"We think of ourselves as sisters."

"Ah, right. 'Sisters' who alternate in Levi's bed, along with those underage girls, huh? I'm thinking that DNA testing is going to be able to sort this all out, and that Levi is going to prison for a long, long

time for his treatment of those young girls. Not to mention how he acquired them in the first place. Were you also kidnapped and imprisoned when you were middle-school age?" I shot her a hard look, sitting up there on the farm wagon with crying children draped all over her. But she was staring at her shoes.

About then, Sam walked up, and I turned my back on the wagon. "Glad to see you, but where's the HK?"

"I left it up there. It didn't seem necessary here now. That guy ran away around the curve down there. I'll go get it when we get this all sorted out."

"Excellent idea. And sorting is what we need to do." I turned back to the wagon and introduced her. "Ma'am? This is my friend, Samantha Winslow. Everyone calls her 'Sam.' And, like I said, I'm Mac. What should we call you?"

She looked up from staring at her shoes and sighed. "I'm Ruth, Ruth Templeton. And, well, before, so long ago now, it seems, I was Roberta Ludlow. Back when I still lived with my parents up in Ogden. I haven't seen them in eighteen years. I don't even know if they're alive."

And she began to sob, which had the odd effect of shutting all the kids up. Instead of continuing their clamor, they huddled around her as if to offer comfort, as if they knew just what to do. The Templeton household, I decided, must be a sad, sad place.

"Well, Roberta, if they're still alive, maybe we can find them and get you reunited. And you can introduce them to their grandchildren." I looked at Sam and lowered my voice. "I'll go retrieve the HK, and then we can figure out how to get all these folks into the RV, so we can get out of here. Maybe you could do a head-count?"

She grinned. "You just want to get away from all this weirdness, I know. The HK's up by those rocks I was behind. Hurry back."

After I'd recovered the rifle and stashed it back in the RV, I called Winnie rather than interrupt Sam's herding the kids, plus Roberta, into it.

"Winnie? Mac here. Listen, we've got a dozen and a half or so kids plus one adult here. Jared, the youngest of the guys I ran into the other night, ran off, back in your direction, at least if you're at the house. Where should we take everyone?"

"Thanks, Mac. We'll keep an eye out for Jared. Is he armed?"

"Not sure, although he looked like he might be. But he's just a teenager, Winnie."

"Don't I know that. And, well, I guess the thing to do is to take all the kids over to the Wahweap Marina. That's where we took the other van and the young women. And Jared's two brothers. They're all at the Park Service office there. For now. We're going to take Levi and the other two women we found here at the house over there, too."

The extra half-ton or so of people from the trailer, even though many were small people, crammed into the back of that RV sure didn't do anything for its handling. I had to be extremely careful creeping my way back down that BLM road, although things improved a bit once we got to the fish hatchery and the grading was more recent. Then it was a matter of cruising southeast on the highway, into Arizona and down the road to the marina. The National Park Service offices had their own private area, but the signage plus the GPS display made it easy to find.

And if the signs weren't enough, the contingent of official-looking vehicles, including several of those dark, full-sized sedans that might as well have had neon "FBI" signs on them, didn't hurt, either.

It appeared that the entire St. George office plus several agents from Salt Lake City had driven over for the take-down, as there were almost as many FBI people as Templetons, putting the entire contingent

at about 50, not quite half children. But it eventually got sorted out—the children were grouped with their various mothers, Levi Templeton, in shackles, was eased into the back of one of the sedans and his sons into others, and, when a large passenger bus finally showed up and everyone was on board, a motorcade to Salt Lake City set off.

Melissa Alcott, the last person to get on the bus, gave me a big hug before boarding.

* * *

Six

“Now what happens?” Sam, whom I’d introduced to Winnie after the bus departed, still had her mind on Lucy Smith’s kidnapper, I could tell.

Winnie sighed. “Well, the women and children get the kid-glove treatment, and Levi gets the book thrown at him. We’ll have to work out what to do with those teen-aged boys. We picked up Jared, by the way.”

“Roberta, that older woman who came in with us, she told me she’s been on that farm for eighteen years.” I shook my head. “That’s probably like two-thirds of her life. At this point, she doesn’t know anything else.”

“Sure would be nice to get that kidnapper.” Sam’s single-mindedness wasn’t going to let go of that notion.

“That’s our next priority. Maybe we’ll find some information when we process all the stuff from the farm. And we’re going to be questioning Levi with some urgency to find what he knows about that guy. As well as where the other missing girls might be.” Winnie smiled in a way that made me glad to be on her side. “The agents he’s riding with have some special instructions about his trip up to Salt Lake. We may know more soon.”

“Well,” I said, “we’re glad to have been able to help. I’m thinking we’ll head down to Flag and trade this RV back for our van. It’s really more our style.”

“Then what?” Winnie tried to make her question sound innocent, but I wasn’t buying it.

“Hmm. Good question. I don’t know. Maybe we’ll come back up this way via the Grand Canyon South Rim. I don’t think that Sam’s ever seen it in person. And I drove by Monday evening, but it was after dark, so I’d like to really see it, too. Maybe after that we’ll check out the North Rim and some of those National Parks in Utah, west of here. Bryce Canyon, Zion. What do you think, Sam?”

She squinted at me, suspicious, looked at Winnie, then turned back to me. “So that’s it? We just walk away and let that kidnapper keep on kidnapping?”

Winnie was engrossed in fiddling with a hangnail or something, so I was on my own.

“Uh, well, Sam, see...um, I mean, what can we do? We more or less blundered into finding Lucy Smith last week, and then I blundered into this Templeton business. It’s not like we can expect to go blundering about and find this guy. We might as well continue on our way and leave the whole thing to the FBI and the other professionals. Don’t you think? Winnie? Isn’t that right?”

But Winnie was completely absorbed in picking at a bit of peeling nail polish.

Meanwhile, Sam had assumed her truly annoyed pose, weight on one foot, the other tapping impatiently, arms crossed under her breasts—something I found extremely sexy but didn't dare say so—all in support of a steely gaze that seemed to slice right through me.

“Ah, geez. Look. At least we need to wait to see what Winnie's people learn from Levi Templeton and whoever else they question. Right now, nobody has a clue about the next steps. And while we wait, we might as well do some sight-seeing. Besides, it's more likely that whatever next steps there are will be up here in Utah somewhere. So let's go down to Flag, get our van, and then head back this way to check out the South Rim. Winnie knows how to get 'hold of us. Right, Winnie?”

She blew some flakes off the peeling nail and looked up at me with a hint of a smile. “Sounds like we can count on you if we need you, Mac. And we just might at that. Thing is, Sam, he's right. It'll be a couple of days before we figure out what our next steps are, at least. We're going to have to work this carefully, because there's bound to be some publicity about the women we rescued today, probably a lot. That'll put the kidnapper and whoever's got the others on high alert. I think if y'all just do the tourist thing for real, maybe at those parks west of here in Utah, you'll be in place to help us out when we need you to.”

Her switch from “*if we need you*” to “*when we need you*” didn't escape me or, apparently, Sam.

“Well, OK then.” Sam stuck out a hand toward Winnie to seal the deal. “That makes me feel better. Hope to hear from you soon, Winnie.”

We climbed into our big RV for the trip south to Flagstaff, and Winnie took off in the last of the FBI sedans toward Salt Lake City in pursuit of the convoy that had set off earlier.

It wasn't until late afternoon that Sam and I had finished the process of returning all of our stuff back to our van and turning in the RV. On the way south from Wahweap, Sam had used the computer satellite link to find us accommodations in Tusayan—the hotels at the actual South Rim were completely booked, as usual, as were all the campgrounds. Because the deal that Sam and Winnie had sealed put us on call, I decided that the FBI could continue underwriting our expenses, so the cost of the motel in Tusayan, even worse than the one in Williams, didn't bother me.

Instead of heading west to Williams and then north to the South Rim in a reverse of my Monday / Tuesday route, we took US-180 north from Flagstaff and were rewarded, for the first part, with a meandering drive through the foothills of the San Francisco Mountains—much more scenic. After the last straight shot across the desert, Tusayan finally came into view at about suppertime, so we checked in and found food.

Having accepted the notion of sight-seeing for the time being, Sam threw herself into planning, and over supper we discussed strategy. Then, for the rest of the evening, she used the motel's Wi-Fi to make arrangements. The North Rim, it turned out, had closed for the season earlier in the week, despite the fine weather, so that was out. That motivated Sam to wangle a second night's stay in Tusayan so we could have a full day on the South Rim. Then, on Saturday, probably after lunch, we would head north to Bryce Canyon, where she'd secured a spot for a couple of nights in an RV park at a famous old place called Ruby's Inn. She did not, she said, want us to become overly accustomed to motels.

We hit the sack early, with a plan to arise before dawn and see the sunrise over the Grand Canyon, a plan that worked to perfection. That success began a run of three days of consummate tourism that included a day of walking on the South Rim trail, a drive along the South Rim road, in the opposite direction from my previous one, with stops at all of the viewpoints, a beautiful, late afternoon and evening trek back north on US-89 up to Bryce Canyon, and a day of hiking among the astonishing hoodoo assemblage in Bryce itself. These weird pink and orange rock formations, formed by frost and

rain erosion of a very soft mudstone layer, stand like sentinels overlooking the valley of the Paria River to the east.

Although Sam and I had planned to continue our roles as artist and photographer—hers as a professional, mine definitely amateur—we were both just so overwhelmed by the scenery that we didn't know where to start with either pursuit.

Ruby's Inn, which started as a way-station for travelers to Bryce Canyon in the early 1900s, presented itself to us as a veritable tourist village, and we were glad that our RV site was on the opposite side of a little lake from the main buildings. That made for a bit of a trek to and from the restaurant, but we were getting used to longer walks, what with all the hiking .

It was late Sunday evening, after a day of such hiking and then dinner, when we were just settling in for the night, that Winnie called on the satellite phone.

* * *

“Mac? Oh, good, glad I caught you. Where are you folks?”

“Mmm. I guess you wouldn't believe me if I said ‘Outer Mongolia,’ huh?”

“Now, now, don't hurt my feelings. I've been nice to you guys—I even told Rothstein not to put a tracking device on your van, after all. But that means I really don't know where you are.”

“OK, OK. We're just outside of Bryce Canyon National Park, at a place called Ruby's Inn. In the RV park there.”

Winnie purred in appreciation. “Sure. I've stayed there, a couple of years ago when we did a car tour out that way. Beautiful area. Out in the middle of nowhere, though, right? But isn't there a little airport close by?”

“Uh, an airstrip, yeah, but I don't know anything about it. Probably not much in the way of amenities. And, for sure, there isn't much around here. A little town called ‘Tropic’ a few miles east, I guess, but I don't know anything about it. Why?”

“We need to talk. I'll see you both at eight tomorrow morning, for breakfast over at that buffet place in the hotel, OK?”

I relayed the message to Sam, and she smiled. “Oh, good. I was getting tired of this tourist business anyway.”

Monday morning, bright and early, we transformed the van from its house-on-wheels configuration to its travel mode, packed up at our site in the RV park, and drove around the lake to the main lodge. It was about 7:55AM when we got there and found Winnie in a booth addressing a plate overflowing with breakfast from the buffet and sitting across from a uniformed police officer of some pedigree or other who was nursing a cup of coffee.

She looked up and blushed. “I can't seem to control myself when there's so much to choose from. Folks, this is Garfield County Sheriff Paul Ronson. He was kind enough to give me a lift over from the airstrip this morning. And he's quite interested in our upcoming conversation. Paul, this is the civilian couple I mentioned, the ones who were instrumental in the rescue of that passel of kids down in Kane County last week. Couldn't have succeed without them. Mac MacQuarrie and Sam Winslow.”

The large, well-fed man under the big, silver western hat touched its brim and nodded. “Good to meet you, folks. And thanks for doing your part last week. Beyond the legalities, it's personal with me. Uh, see, in addition to being sheriff in these parts, I'm an LDS Church...ah, official here. All the

publicity over this thing had the potential to really make us look bad, even though those people aren't part of our church. But the way it was handled, with your help, made it turn out fine."

"Publicity?" I looked from one to the other of them.

"You mean you don't know?" Winnie looked amused. "Well, get some breakfast, and I'll fill you in."

Sam wound up with a small plate of fruit and a bowl of oatmeal, but I followed Winnie's example. No way was I able to get that much bacon in one sitting at home.

Back at the booth, the sheriff had disappeared, so Sam and I sat on the side where he'd been. Winnie leaned forward toward us, almost putting her blouse in her breakfast.

"He's off for more coffee, or whatever. Although I didn't think Mormons drank coffee. Hmm. But, quickly, let me say that he's got a reputation as a straight-shooter and should be trustworthy. That may not be the case with the Kane County Sheriff, so I'm glad we're up here. Oh, here he comes now." She scooted sideways to make room for the sheriff, who, I couldn't help but note, was carrying something that resembled pearl-handled Colt .45 six-shooters in low-slung western holsters, one on each hip. All he needed was a horse.

Winnie swallowed another mouthful of eggs and hash-browns and daintily picked up a crisp piece of bacon to nibble on. "Publicity. Right. See, Mac, Sam, when that bus full of kids got to Salt Lake City, there was a contingent of TV news cameras waiting for it. My doing. I figured there'd be a firestorm anyway, so doing it our way seemed like the best approach to maintaining as much control as we could. It's been an ongoing story ever since, kind of like those mass shootings around the country we've had. Interest will fade, especially if something else comes along, but the message is out."

"And that message is?" Sam, I could tell, was curious about this strategy.

"We broke up a kidnapping ring and rescued the kids." Winnie smiled. "And, as we've been saying, we're relieved and happy to celebrate this success. Full stop. We're meeting questions about further arrests with a sort of blank stare."

"Mmm. I don't know what I'd do without decaf coffee. It's cheating, but just a little." Sheriff Ronson smiled as he set down his cup. "So, the thing is, behind Winnie's blank stare is a plan for phase two of all this."

Winnie nodded. "Right. Remember I said I put Levi Templeton in a car with two fully briefed agents? Well, what I didn't say was that they're both LDS Church members and that they both have middle-school-aged daughters. Of course, I emphasized that it was crucial that Levi arrive in Salt Lake alive and healthy. But I also mentioned that they were free to take their conversation wherever they wanted to. And apparently they took that conversation in the direction of introducing Levi to the parents of those kidnapped girls. It didn't take much of that kind of talk to get Levi to cave completely. We also got quite a bit of interesting information from that youngest teenage boy, Jared Templeton."

"Did they say who's been doing the kidnapping?" Sam was literally on the edge of her seat.

Winnie's pained expression answered for her. "Unfortunately, no. It seems like neither one really knows. Levi told us that he got the girls from his brother Obadiah Templeton. Levi wasn't clear how they came to be part of Obadiah's family."

Sheriff Ronson spoke up. "And that's where I come in. Obie Templeton—nobody calls him that to his face, though, not even me—he lives down in Kane County, but his access is on county and BLM roads that head southeast off Highway 12 a few miles east of Escalante, meaning his access roads are here in Garfield County, for the most part. Obie owns a good-sized chunk of private land within the

Monument, a fertile valley with a good water source. He's got quite a productive farm operation over there, from what folks say."

It was Winnie's turn. "Jared told us that his job last week was to ferry all those kids, with the woman Roberta, up to Obie's place. I guess there are BLM roads from Big Water up to there."

"Part of the way." The sheriff was shaking his head. "The other part is serious jeep trails, and that would have been a long, very rough trip for all those kids on that farm wagon I heard about. It would have amounted to child abuse, if you ask me. That's why Obie uses the roads in my county for his access. They're maintained. His valley is a lovely place, but the rest of the country over that way is slick-rock, desert, or cliffs, mostly. Rough, rough country."

Winnie smiled. "And that, Mac, Sam, is where you come in. But we probably shouldn't talk strategy here. Too insecure, too public."

* * *

Ah, the good old days, when I worked for this or that three-letter agency and my middle name was "Security." For good reason, I was obsessed with OPSEC—operational security—on a full-time basis. After all, it was what kept me alive.

And I was glad Winnie had thought of it. If Sam and I were going to become involved in the next phase of her operation, we didn't want our role bandied about in public. Where such bandying might be secure, however, was not clear.

She first suggested the airstrip. The only thing there was her helicopter, she said. But I asked "what helicopter" and she said the FBI one she was using. The one with "FBI" in big black letters on the side? Oh.

Ultimately we settled on another public place, but one outdoors where it would be all but impossible to eavesdrop on us and where we wouldn't worry that equipment would already be set up to do so. Pretty good OPSEC, all around.

Sunrise Point, on the rim of the main amphitheater of Bryce Canyon National Park, was set up for tourists, with parking, put-in-a-quarter telescopes, and sturdy fences to keep the kids from falling off the cliff. Next to the attraction of the point itself was a walkway along the edge that almost no one frequented. The four of us made a point of arriving separately and casually meeting up, as if by coincidence, for our conversation. The view, of one of the main regiments of those pink and orange hoodoos, was much better than the topic of the discussion, what Winnie wanted Sam and me to do next.

"What I'd like to do, Mac, is to put to use one of your best skills, surveillance."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Oh, *man*. Of all the skills I've acquired and put to use, that one is my least favorite. Calling it 'boring' is understating it by a lot."

I looked at Sam. "But, given that you don't want me involved in any real action and that Sam's here with me, I suppose surveillance is not unreasonable. What do you want us to surveil?"

"It'll make more sense in the context of our plan." Winnie looked around for eavesdroppers, but the nearest people, tourists who were herding a covey of kids around, were a good hundred yards away.

"So, what we're going to do is based on a federal search warrant we obtained today. We got that because of statements from the women—the *mothers*, actually, insofar as some of them are still girls because they're not eighteen yet—the mothers we rescued from Levi Templeton's place down by Big Water." Winnie looked down at her hands and sighed. "Thing is, no one seems to know much about Obadiah Templeton's place, at least no one here in Garfield County. So we need some surveillance.

Apparently, Obie and his clan live almost off the grid. I guess there's a propane truck that goes in there now and then, but it turns out that one of Obie's sons drives it. They use the propane for who knows what, but it could be running a generator as well as providing fuel for other household needs. The company's records, which we've managed to get 'hold of, show that it's quite a lot of propane, though."

She drummed her fingers on the railing. "We can't just go busting in there, however. And the trick we used at Levi's place won't work. What will work is going to depend on what's there, which is why we need the surveillance."

"Seth Rothstein mentioned that y'all were using small planes with imaging gear for pictures of Levi Templeton's place. Isn't that possible here, too?" I knew I'd be grabbing more satellite pictures, but real-time imagery seemed like a good idea as well.

"We're doing that, but about all that gets us is a couple of pictures per day. Too many fly-overs is likely to get us shot at. Real-time eyes on the place, especially when we're executing the warrants, will be critical." Winnie looked around at all of us. "Oh, and I should say that we need to get on with all this. The longer we wait, the more likely that Obie and company are going to hear about it and get prepared to mount a defense."

My heart sank. "Ugh. 'Defense' implies an offense to defend against, which implies bad things, as far as I'm concerned. Uh, presumably, sheriff, you've got that access road of his covered?"

Sheriff Ronson looked sheepish. "Well, not us. See, first of all, the private road into Obie's valley starts across the county line. Everything he uses up here in Garfield County is public roads. And there's no real point in covering them, because they get lots of other traffic. And, second, well, I'm not sure my department is the right group to do such covering anyway. I imagine that quite a few of my folks actually sympathize with Obie, or would if they knew the score."

Winnie was nodding. "Yeah, we talked about this. I've got a couple of guys watching Obie's road, but they're not blockading it or anything. Far as I know, there hasn't been any real traffic in or out since we started that."

Sheriff Ronson stole a glance at his watch. "Folks, I'm sorry, but I've got a court date up in Panguitch I need to get to. Winnie? Can I give you a lift back to the airstrip?"

She thought for a few seconds. "Thanks, Paul, but I think I can manage. We'll stay in touch, OK?"

"For sure. And if there's anything my office can do to help your operation, let me know." He turned toward the parking lot and walked off to his car.

Winnie leaned over toward Sam and me. "Recall I said that he *should* be trustworthy, at least compared to the Kane County Sheriff. That doesn't mean he really is, though. So I'm glad to have a chance to talk with you alone. What say we head for your van and hit the road?"

She began to herd us toward the parking lot.

"Ah, sure. But is it wise for the van to be seen over by that helicopter of yours?" OPSEC was still on my mind.

"Nope, at least not in this part of the state. I'll call Curly, my pilot, and tell him to meet me in St. George. We'll have a couple of hours to talk in the van on the way there."

My mental map of southwest Utah was still pretty fuzzy. "Uh, can you get there from here?"

Winnie looked surprised. "Well, I assume so. Maybe not in a straight line, but there must be a way."

Sam looked smug. “Not to worry. I’ll get on the internet and find the best way before you know it. But what’s in St. George, anyway? I thought that this Templeton place we’re interested in is the other direction.”

We reached the van and took a couple of minutes to get ourselves comfortably settled inside. Winnie sat in the front passenger seat with Sam just behind me on one of the benches in the back normally used to sit at the little fold-down table. She had it folded down and the computer set up in a jiffy.

As we set off north out of the national park, Winnie answered Sam’s question. “We’ve got a satellite office in St. George, Sam. And I’ve made arrangements for some gear you need there. See, one thing I didn’t mention when Paul Ronson was with us is that there’s a BOLO out for this van down in Kane County.”

Sam was puzzled. “A ‘bolo’? Isn’t that a kind of western necktie or something?”

Winnie laughed. “‘Be-on-the-lookout’. An old cop term. Levi’s sons must have given the description of the van to the sheriff down there. To make matters more interesting, this is an armed-and-dangerous BOLO.”

“But our little altercation was in Arizona!” I couldn’t see how a Utah sheriff could have anything to do with that.

“And that’s relevant how?” Winnie’s cynicism was evident.

“Well...the Kane County Utah sheriff has no jurisdiction in Arizona! I mean...uh, well. OK, I see.” Reality had dawned on me. “So what’s this gear?”

“Mac? You want to turn west on Highway 12 and then north on 89, OK?” Sam, busy with route finding, must have found one.

“The BOLO includes the fact that you’ve got Colorado plates, but not the number, and a mention of the van’s color.” Winnie started ticking things off her fingers. “So you need new plates, which means a different registration, and that means an ID to match it. Seth got the VIN on the van when it was in Flag, and we’ve put together a package. New Utah plates and registration, and a Utah driver’s license that says you live in Ogden. That’s a bit north of Salt Lake City. It’s got your real name on it, because we’re assuming you didn’t introduce yourself to those guys. The BOLO doesn’t mention it.”

“OK. What color? It was pretty dark in that restaurant parking lot, and I don’t know how those guys could have seen its real color.” I couldn’t remember how close I’d parked to any flood lights.

“Tan, close enough to what it is. And they mentioned the body lift and the big, off-road tires. The BOLO is for a tan, full-sized van with Colorado plates, a body lift, and off-road tires. It pretty much nails you.” She smiled when I glanced over at her. “In fact, I’m glad that you made it up here from Arizona. You had to drive through Kanab, which is the county seat, and across the whole north-south extent of Kane County to get here. They must have been asleep that day. But I’ve got a plan.”

“Uh-oh.” It was a shark’s smile that I’d noticed.

“Naw, it’s all good. We’ve arranged for you to get a body wrap, it’s called. Uh, not for you, but for the van. Vinyl sheets custom cut to cover the outside. It’ll have advertising on it, for an off-road van conversion shop in Ogden, where you supposedly live now. And it’ll completely disguise the color. Best of all, when this is all over, it can be stripped off with no damage to the paint job.”

“Ah, geez, Winnie. This sounds crazy. Is it really necessary? I mean, this is a Kane County BOLO, not Garfield.”

“Yeah, but, thing is, you need to get to where we need the surveillance by going in through Kane County. Northeast from Big Water on those BLM and jeep roads into the Monument.”

That little tidbit persuaded me of the wisdom of letting her put a GPS tracking beacon into the van this time.

* * *

Seven

Sam’s route to St. George took us north through Panguitch, then west on a short, curvy stretch over a mountain range to the interstate, and back south. Definitely not anything close to a straight line, but I pushed it a bit and we made it in a couple of hours. Somewhere in there, Winnie called her pilot and arranged to meet him after lunch at the St. George airport, and we reached the FBI office about 11:30.

The van went immediately into the motor pool’s garage for its makeover, and, curious, I went with it. What I saw there—the raw sheets of vinyl for the forthcoming wrap—was both encouraging and horrifying. The garish color pattern, orange racing stripes on a green background, with a variety of huge graphics advertising the conversion shop in Ogden, would, I was sure, disguise us from the BOLO. But, geez, what a thing to be driving around in. It reminded me of my life in South Florida, where I was continually exposed to the colors of the U of Miami—a van with that on the outside was not going to go un-noticed in Southern Utah.

So, for surveillance purposes, some way to tone it down was going to be critical in the backcountry. With Winnie’s help, I made arrangements to borrow one of their vehicles, and Sam and I set out to find an outdoors shop that sold camouflage tarps or nets or something.

That errand accomplished, we returned to find our billboard on wheels ready to roll, picked up the new identification papers for me and the license plates, and headed out. Ninety minutes or so later, we pulled into a familiar parking lot at the headquarters of the Escalante – Grand Staircase National Monument in Kanab. We’d agreed with Winnie’s suggestion to stop there to discuss the conditions of the BLM roads on our route with the people at the information desk. We could also, we decided, ask some questions about how challenging the jeep roads might be up that way.

During our previous visit, when the pig of an RV had been our home, I’d been the one asking questions of the BLM lady behind the counter. This time, behind the counter was a volunteer of some kind, a large, balding fellow whose belly was overlapping his belt by several inches, and it was funny to see him try to suck it in as Sam walked up to him to do the questioning. I held back and pretended to be browsing the various pamphlets they had on display in the lobby, but I heard snatches of conversation about the roads, the challenges of the jeep roads, and, ultimately, what kind of vehicle we were driving?

Sam mentioned that we had a camper van equipped for off-road travel, and it got my attention when he said that maybe he ought to have a look at it to see if it would handle the jeep roads. At that point, Sam ramped up the charm by a factor of ten or so, and he sort of pranced around her like a puppy on their way out the door. I watched through a window as he strolled around the van, taking a long look at the license plate as if trying to memorize it and trying not to be too distracted by Sam’s attention. Or her curves.

We still had most of the expensive bottled water from our previous visit to Kanab, so our only other stop before heading east on US-89 was to top off the fuel tanks. It was about 45 minutes later that we

slowed to turn off to the north at our favorite almost town, Big Water. Our plan was to head north on the same BLM road as we'd used before, the one past Levi Templeton's place, until we were well into the Monument. Then we could turn east and, we hoped, not have our dust plume visible from the highway.

The van's GPS navigation system showed the BLM roads on its map, but there were no smaller roads, jeep or otherwise, no matter how closely we zoomed the thing in. I'd come prepared for that, though, with a separate GPS receiver that plugged into one of the ports in my laptop and software with honest-to-goodness USGS topo maps that would show our position among all the detail of those high-resolution, 7.5° renderings of the topography, including jeep roads galore.

As nice as that was, even nicer was the way the van handled that lousy road. Where the RV we'd been in previously wallowed, bottomed out, and felt tippy, the van just took it all in stride. We not only made better time, we made it in far more quiet and comfort. A bit later, when we hit the real jeep roads, I had to slow down and crawl along—even using the low range for several stretches—but the off-road package performed even better than I expected.

It took us a couple of hours, almost until dark, to work our way north and east onto and across the mesa just south of Obadiah Templeton's valley. We searched around and found a scraggly juniper next to a house-sized rock where we could park the van and put the camo net we'd found to good use. By the time that was all ship-shape, it was too dark to do any real exploring in such unfamiliar territory, so we settled in for the night, keeping our use of lights to a minimum.

One of those minimum lights was my laptop's screen, which provided a shifting glow inside the van as I downloaded all the satellite images I could find showing our location and the layout of the Templeton place in the canyon, just to the north of us below our mesa-top. A sprawling ranch house was complemented by several out-buildings, some with corrals attached holding a variety of farm animals—hogs, goats, a few sheep, and at least two cows, it looked like. Of particular interest to me was the contrast between an eight-year-old image and a contemporary one. Sometime in the last eight years, a new out-building, looking more industrial than agricultural, had been added just below our location, almost against the canyon's south wall. Between that building and the rocks of the canyon wall was the biggest propane tank I'd ever seen, one at least the size of five normal tanks of the domestic variety. This fit with the comment that Winnie had made that morning.

Before I shut things down for the night, I also caught up on my email and found several additional images from Winnie, close-ups by comparison, obtained by the small-plane flyovers from the past couple of days. They confirmed the information in the satellite imagery and, because of the different angles overhead, also showed an additional building, far-removed up the canyon to the west of the main ranch compound. It had something resembling a bell tower, so I decided it was either a schoolhouse or a chapel.

Sam was outside, wrapped in a blanket and sitting in a lawn chair, staring upward at the universe. The stars, and the Milky Way especially, were even more overwhelming than they had been during our overnight near Big Water the previous week. But the quiet wasn't so pervasive—there was a purring hum of some kind that disturbed the silence. Still, it was so nice out there, if a bit chilly, that I dug around and came up with the other lawn chair. And a jacket.

“Could be worse, huh?” I said quietly.

“Unbelievable. I suppose it gets lonely, though, living way out here.” She reached over and squeezed my hand. “What do you suppose that noise is?”

“Yeah, I'm wondering that, too. Maybe a motor of some kind, like a propane generator. Well sound-proofed, but the exhaust is bound to make a little noise. Maybe we'll find out more tomorrow.”

“Is there a plan?”

“We’ll probably wake up fairly early, because the sun rises right over there.” I waved my other arm in a general southeasterly direction. “As soon as we get fed, we can take a little hike northward, see if we can find a good observation post on the rim of the canyon overlooking Templeton’s place down there. The satellite pictures I just checked out seem to offer several possibilities.”

“Sneak around like spies, huh?”

“Yeah, well, that’s what I’m supposed to be good at. I can’t wait to see what you look like with your face all smeared with camouflage makeup.” I squeezed her hand back.

“Yuck.”

* * *

It turned out, though, that with the cloudless sky the next day and the colors of the rocks we’d be among, the best thing to smear on our faces was high SPF sun-block. As I’d predicted, we awoke quite early, for a couple of retired people on vacation, at least, and I even got some credible sunrise photos. After a hearty breakfast and carefully considered loading of my day-pack, I was ready a little after seven. Sam, though, was still puttering around, trying to decide what to carry with her.

So I took the broom and walked back down our route of the previous evening, erasing what tire tracks I could find to where we’d turned off the jeep road. Although we’d left fresh tracks in the sand of that seldom-used road, we’d turned off it while on solid rock, so our presence wasn’t too loudly advertised. And I verified that the van couldn’t be seen from the road at all.

Back at our cozy little campsite, I found Sam ready and waiting to head out, and we started off north across the mesa. This turned out to be somewhat tougher going than I’d imagined, but a hand-held GPS kept us going in the right direction despite the need to make various twisting detours among the rocks. We managed to accomplish these detours by staying almost exclusively on solid rock, so we weren’t leaving footprints to speak of. And I made certain to record numerous waypoints on the GPS unit so we’d be able to find our way back to the van, even in the dark.

What with the route-finding and all the meandering, it took us an hour and nearly two miles to progress the straight-line half mile or so between the van and the canyon rim. It occurred to me that more route-finding later in the day might be a good idea. Surely we could cut that two miles at least in half.

But find the canyon rim we did, and once there we became extra careful to avoid exposing our silhouettes against the sky. The rock layering must have been much the same stuff that composed the Bryce Canyon amphitheater, a hard cap-rock formation overlying some kind of mudstone, I’d read, because the canyon rim dropped off into a small cluster of hoodoos. Below them there was a sloping bench of rubble that ended in cliffs extending to the canyon floor, where several buildings sat. I recognized the ranch house from the photos I’d examined the previous evening. We explored a little and eventually found a spot just to the west from which we could see all of the buildings, even the schoolhouse, or whatever it was, with a minimal chance of our being seen. After a bit of housekeeping—picking up sharp rocks, mostly—we settled in a little past nine to see what life on an isolated ranch in the Utah slick-rock country might be like.

I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that, to us, from our vantage point a half-mile or so from, and a few hundred feet above, the buildings, it seemed pretty boring. Once in a while, someone, usually a young man but on a couple of occasions an older one, would walk from one building to another. I used the binoculars I’d brought to examine them and took notes on their appearances. In the meantime, the

animals got fed, bit by bit. And the motorized humming we'd heard the evening before and all night was louder, probably due to our proximity.

But there were no women or children to be seen.

Time passed, slowly, as it does in such situations. Sam took a nap; we had lunch; I took a nap; we took turns standing up and walking around—out of sight of the canyon—to work out the kinks. We had a couple of conversations about how boring it was and whether we could stand very many days of it.

But at about four that afternoon, two things happened to stir our interest. First, we saw the door to the building we thought might be a school open, and a long file of children, with a few taller women included, walked out and headed for the ranch buildings. When they got there, the children dispersed in various directions, some entering the buildings, others that we could see going to work on various garden plots over by the canyon's north wall.

And there must have been a wind shift. What breeze there had been all day was from our left, from the west, blowing down-canyon. But all at once we began to smell the farm animals down there. And there was something else, an out-of-place odor, a sort of industrial smell. The words "volatile organic compound" popped into my head. What, I wondered, could that be?

Sam's voice, a loud-ish whisper, seconded my opinion. "Eww. What's that smell? That's not what farms smell like, even old horse barns."

I shrugged and went back to watching.

At 5:30, there was a second motor noise, and I noticed a two-person all-terrain vehicle descending some switchbacks down a less-steep section of the north wall, well down-canyon from us. That, I thought, must be the entrance road. The two people, both young men, climbed out of the ATV after parking it in front of the ranch house, dusted themselves off, and went inside.

At 6:00 sharp, a bell rang, and everyone working outside put tools away and converged on the ranch house. The children all lined up for what looked like an inspection, after which some went inside while others washed up in a large trough by the barn. After they went in the house, four other people dressed in protective coveralls and full-face breathing masks came out of the newer building, the industrial-looking one by the big propane tank. They shed their coveralls and masks, revealing themselves as three men and a woman, stashed them in an outside locker, washed up in the trough, and entered the ranch house. We waited another two hours, getting increasingly restless and hungry, and finally headed back to the van without seeing any other activity.

After an interesting exercise in reverse route-finding, in the dark through all the rocks across the top of our mesa, we reached the van about an hour later, relieved to have found it in the dark. Because the generator at the ranch had run all night, I assumed it would again, so I took advantage of the covering noise to start the van's engine to keep the batteries topped off while Sam cooked dinner. As that was happening, I called Winnie to report on our first day's observations.

"So," she summed up my report, "something like ten men, all but one pretty young, a half-dozen women, and a whole bunch of kids, right? Two of the men came in at the end of the day on an ATV, three men and a woman were in that newer building. Hmm. What do you make of all that, Mac?"

"Presumably the older guy is Obadiah Templeton and, I guess, at least some of the younger ones are his sons. I'm thinking the women are his wives, but that's maybe a stretch. Did your guys out at the end of the entrance road see that ATV?"

"Nope. All was quiet out there, except for a group of jeeps headed south into the Monument, presumably for some recreational off-roading."

“Then maybe the two guys on the ATV were out there in a sort of observation post, or a guard shack or something. Keeping watch for trespassers. But I’m really more interested in the four people who came out of that building wearing what looked a lot like hazmat suits. What’s that about?” I had an idea. “Say! Can you get an imaging spectrometer with good coverage in the infrared bands onto that airplane you’re taking the pictures from? Maybe an instrument like that could pick up a chemical signature of what we were smelling.”

“Good question, Mac. I’ll have to look into it. What’s your plan for tomorrow?”

“Get a really early start and check out their morning routine, then find an easier route between here and that observation post we established. There’s got to be a better way. Are you going to serve that warrant you got?”

“Let’s give it another day at least. I want to know as much as I can about that place.”

* * *

I told Sam she should sleep late, and, next morning, got up before dawn and made my way carefully back to the canyon edge in time to see the sun coming up over the horizon. Over the next hour or so, I watched the reverse of the previous evening’s activities—two guys heading up those switchbacks on the ATV, kids filing off toward the schoolhouse, four people suiting up to enter the industrial building. It all seemed quite normal, somehow.

I then spent an hour finding us a better route between our campsite and the canyon, finally managing to get the time down to about 20 minutes for the half mile. It had a bit more up-and-down but nothing truly strenuous, and it would be far easier to follow in the dark.

Sam had a sumptuous breakfast waiting for me—a good thing, as I was starved—and we both returned to our viewpoint on the canyon rim for another boring day of watching the gardens down by the base of the north wall grow.

We did have one interesting episode, though. A little after noon, a small plane, what looked like a single-engine Cessna, made a pass over the valley at a low enough altitude that we could hear it over the hum of the generator down there. Almost immediately, two of the men we’d been seeing ran out from the ranch house with binoculars and tracked the plane as it flew off to the west.

I had the satellite phone with me, so I made a call at once.

“Winnie! Listen, a small plane just flew over the Templeton ranch here. If that’s yours, get in touch with them *now* and tell them not to make a second pass. They were watched carefully, and I’m sure they’ll will be recognized if they make another pass.”

“No kidding? OK, hold on for a minute, will ya, Mac?” She was gone for only about thirty seconds. “I think that’ll do it. At least I hope so. Tell me exactly what you saw.”

I related the events in detail. “Anyway, it’s clear that the folks down there are pretty suspicious of flyovers. Was that just more photographs?”

“No, I managed to get your spectrometer on there, Mac. I don’t know if that one pass will get any readings, but it seemed worth a shot. Are you smelling the chemicals?”

“No, but the wind hasn’t shifted like it did yesterday. That happened late in the afternoon.”

“Well, call me tonight. Maybe we’ll have some data from the plane.”

Sam and I hung around the canyon rim long enough for the wind to shift, and, once again, there was the distinctive odor of some kind of industrial chemical mixed in with the farm smells. Given that we'd seen the evening routine the previous day, we started on our way back to the van well before dark.

As we walked, Sam let me know she was discouraged by our experience. "Mac, is this what you used to do when you were assigned in the Middle East? Sit around and watch the shadows change?"

I turned around, stopped, and wrapped her in a big hug. "Sometimes. It can be long periods of tedium with brief events interspersed. Occasionally very exciting events. Maybe tomorrow you can stay back by the van and paint. Or pick a spot half way over here—I seem to remember some interesting rock formations."

I recalled my earlier conversation with Winnie as I set off again, this time behind her. "And maybe, just maybe, tomorrow will be the last day we're needed here. Hanging around too long would be pushing our luck anyway."

"It doesn't seem like we're getting any closer to identifying that kidnapper, out here in nowhere-land." She turned and shot me a cynical look.

"True. But, I've gotta say, I don't know what we *should* be doing to get closer. The best lead I know of is this other Templeton guy, don't you think?"

"But Winnie's people questioned that other bunch all weekend. Don't you think they found out something?"

"As if she'd tell us. I mean, the last thing she wants is for us to do is to act like vigilantes and go chasing off after somebody."

I thought I heard a big sigh, and the tone of her voice confirmed it. "Well, I guess you're used to operations like this, where you don't know what all is going on. But it's pretty strange from my perspective."

"Just as long as Winnie keeps us in the loop about stuff that concerns our safety, that's all I ask. And don't give up hope. We may get a line on this kidnapper yet."

Our new, shorter route was both quicker and easier, and we arrived back at our campsite well before dark. I made us drinks, and we sat and watched the day fade into evening for a while. Then Sam started on some dinner and I bent to the task of emails and so on.

The most recent email was from Winnie. It included a list of complex chemical names and some numbers, along with a note to call her at my first opportunity. So I did just that.

"Oh, Mac. Glad you called. Did you get that email I sent?"

"Yep, but I haven't figured it out."

"Yeah, well, that makes two of us. And I have to say, that was a brilliant idea of yours, to put that spectrometer on our plane. Anyway, I had to have the results translated, so I emailed them to a friend of mine at the DEA. Seemed like I'd barely pushed the 'send' button before he called me, all excited."

"That airplane must have measured something interesting, eh?"

"To him, yeah. He says that the various combinations of chemicals that thing saw provide *prima facie* evidence of a meth lab down there. And he's getting a warrant to bust the place. Tomorrow."

"Uh, won't that screw up your operation?"

“I’ve had time to think about it. And cool down a bit. At first, I was pretty pissed, I’ll tell you. But, thing is, if they go in, then they’re really just doing my job for me, without real risk to me or my people. So it’s all good.”

“Well, OK, if you say so. Anyway, I’m surprised. But a meth lab in the back-country of Southern Utah? I thought all these Mormons were teetotalers.”

“Just because they don’t use the stuff doesn’t mean they don’t make it for others. And Utah has been a hotbed of meth for some time. It was one of the last states to outlaw uncontrolled sales of the ingredients. They finally did, and there are fewer labs than there used to be, but consumption is still pretty high, up in the Salt Lake metro area especially, and it’s got to come from somewhere. And apparently DEA hasn’t figured out where the stuff showing up in Denver and the rest of Colorado is coming from. Maybe these Templetons stockpiled ingredients just before the restrictions kicked in. Or they’ve got a supplier somewhere.”

“They do seem to have quite the operation there. Like I told you, that propane tank is huge. And the building I saw the people in hazmat suits coming out of is, oh, maybe forty by a hundred feet. What’s that? Four thousand square feet of meth lab?” Put that way, I even surprised myself. “So what’s the plan? You said DEA is doing a raid tomorrow? Can Sam and I get the hell out of here?”

There was a pause, and when it ended, Winnie sounded apologetic. “I’m afraid I let slip about your surveillance, Mac. My DEA friend wanted to know how come we put the spectrometer on the plane, and I told him about what you were smelling. So he asked if you could stick around and provide support.”

“Support? Our observation post is a long way from any action that’s going to happen. All I could do is shoot in their general direction, and I probably wouldn’t hit anything anyway.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I know. But have you got that nifty H-and-K 417 that you saved my ass with a year ago? I figure that if you sprayed a full magazine, or several, at them, on automatic, that’d get their attention no matter if you only hit dirt. And that could be all the DEA guys really need.”

I did, of course—that was the rifle that Sam had smuggled up to so closely during target practice. And Winnie didn’t know it, but I also had my McMillan TAC-50, sniper rifle extraordinaire, and various loads, some decidedly illegal for civilians to have. Together, Sam and I would be able to provide serious tactical support, of the long-range variety at least.

“Uh, so, you want me to shoot up the place if the DEA guys get into trouble? Or what? I thought you wanted me to stay in the background for all this, with my history in the agencies and all.”

Another big sigh. “I did. And if this were my show, I would. But the DEA guy specifically asked for tactical support if it should be needed.”

“When’s this all supposed to go down?”

“Just before noon, is the plan.”

“Well, at least all the kids and most of the women will be in the school. It’s far enough up the canyon to be away from the action, probably. This could get very, very nasty.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. And, without your help, it could get even nastier, at least in terms of casualties on our side.”

“I understand. Let’s see. Did you tell your DEA friend about your two watchers, and about the Templeton people I saw on the ATV?”

“My observers have orders to stay out of any action. Their job is to watch and report. And, yeah, DEA knows they’re going to run into some kind of gatekeepers on the road in.”

“OK, tell you what. Let’s set up a sort of sat-phone conference call tomorrow, with your observers, me, and you. Then we can all be on the same page with what’s going down, and you can tell me if it’s OK to shoot. I mean, I might accidentally hit something or somebody, and I want legal cover.”

“Good idea.”

“And, look, your part of this still relates to the kidnappings, right? So are you going to have resources available to deal with the women and kids? They may just need to be evacuated if this all really hits the fan like I’m afraid of.”

“Mac, gotta say, you’re on top of things. And the answer is ‘yes’. We’re going to follow the DEA in, after you and my watchers give some kind of all-clear, with vehicles to get those folks out of there.”

“Well, all righty then. Let’s talk some more first thing tomorrow, OK Winnie?”

“Absolutely. Have a good evening, Mac, and best regards to Sam.”

* * *

Eight

“She wants us to *what?*” The notion of tactical support for the DEA team clearly wasn’t what Sam had been thinking about for the next day.

“That, sweetie, was precisely my reaction. We’re here to watch and report, not to spray bullets around. But, look, the DEA has a warrant to go in and bust that place for being a meth lab, and they might need our help. Seems like the least we could do is to provide a little backup in case something goes south. No?” I shrugged not only with my shoulders but with my arms, too. “And Winnie says she’s going to send in a bus or something to pick up the women and kids. That way, there will be more people who can give us leads to the kidnapper, right? So by helping out, we get closer to catching the guy who snatched Lucy Smith. And all the others.”

“Well, I guess that’s something in the way of an incentive.” She looked over at me while scrubbing at a sauce pan. “Is there a plan?”

I was drying the last of the flatware. “She said the DEA raid is supposed to happen late morning, just before noon. So I figure we can get over there after breakfast and set up on the rim. You seemed to like that HK rifle when you tried it out the other day. I’ll use the other one.”

“I did like it. But what other one? You mean the TAC-50? How big an arsenal do you have, Mac?”

“Uh, well, just that one other one, in terms of rifles. Yeah, it’s that, um, ‘bassoon’ of mine, remember?”

The reference was to a little, not-so-effective, subterfuge I’d tried on her when I’d first acquired the TAC-50, back in our South Florida days. Broken down, in its case, it resembled a bassoon. Or maybe a contrabassoon. If you used your imagination.

“The one I saw set up on Hal and Annette’s balcony that time down in Boca, yeah. I’m still not quite sure what that thing’s really for.”

“It’s a military sniper rifle, big caliber. And I’ve got some special rounds that will magnify its effectiveness if we need it tomorrow.” I held my breath, because I had no idea what her reaction would be.

“So, I get the full-auto H-and-K, probably near the limit of its range, and you get a slower but more accurate long-range rifle? Hmm.” She tapped the slicing knife she’d been washing against a pot lid. “I guess we might be able to help out, if we have plenty of ammunition.”

Once again, I wondered who this person was. The Sam I’d met in Florida and moved to Colorado with just didn’t fit.

“We’ll take as many full mags as we have for the HK. I think there’s a dozen or so. And I’m pretty sure I’ll need only a few shots with the TAC.”

“TAC-50. Hmm. Does that mean fifty caliber? As in, a half-inch?” She watched me nod. “Jesus. And I bet I know what you meant by ‘special rounds.’ I guess we really are in the armed-and-dangerous category, huh? Just like that BOLO says.”

“Bonnie and Clyde had nothing on us, Sweetie.”

Wednesday morning, we ate a leisurely breakfast and then proceeded to assemble our assorted gear, the amount of which wound up to be a bit daunting even though we cut back on the creature comforts we’d taken the day before. This time, our food was limited to some high-energy protein bars instead of a serious picnic lunch, and I decided not to take my camera equipment—our cell phones would have to do, if it came to that. But I did remember an empty mesh bag and a small roll of duct tape.

I also went about the task of prepping the van for a quick departure, should things go all to hell over at the canyon. I’d decided that, if any shooting got started, we weren’t going to be sticking around very long afterward.

At least the walk over to the canyon rim, despite its ups and downs, wasn’t too long or strenuous. We arrived at our perch around 10:30, spent a while to get things arranged, and settled in to wait. Without knowing what might actually be needed, I sighted the rifles in as best I could on a spot at about the middle of the canyon floor in front of the main house. And I used duct tape to fasten the mesh bag over the ejection port of the HK so that we wouldn’t have to spend time picking up brass, should Sam have to let fly with the thing.

After we got organized, I put on my headset and called Winnie on the satellite phone.

“Morning, Winnie. We’re here and all set up. ‘Armed and dangerous,’ as Sam put it.”

“Good to know, Mac. From what I’m hearing, things are on track at our end as well. Although it sure would be nice if we had better inter-agency communications. The DEA guys are playing their cards pretty close.”

“Do you know their tactics?”

“What they told me is that they’re going to drive in there in two or three vehicles full of agents and take the place down. They’ve got all the intel we have, including your reports. And my guys out by the main road will be able to see the first part, at least, when they confront Templeton’s people who are manning the gate, or whatever it is.”

“Hmm. Sounds like a dozen or so agents, then. If it were me, knowing what I know, I think I’d want more. Winnie, I sure hope they’re not setting themselves up for a disaster.”

“Me, too, Mac. But, hey, they’ve got you and Sam watching their backs, don’t they? I mean, what could possibly go wrong?” Her voice betrayed her amusement. “I’m going to patch in my observers so that you and I can hear what’s going on in real time.”

I heard some clicking noises, and another voice joined the call. Winnie introduced him. “Mac, you know Seth Rothstein. And his partner is Henry Runninghorse. I brought them both up from Flagstaff because, well, I’m not by nature a trusting person and I’m not sure I trust the Utah people for this.”

“Seth! Glad to know you’re on this, man. And, Agent Runninghorse, are you on the call?”

But Rothstein jumped in. “Hiya, Mac. And, yeah, Henry’s right here and listening, but he’s one of those silent, noble, Indian types.”

“Huh.” A fourth voice, low and rumbly, joined the conversation. “Noble, maybe. But silent only because this paleface I’m teamed up with talks enough for at least ten people. *Never* shuts up. *Never*. Anyway, please call me ‘Henry’, Mac.”

After a few more jibes, I had Seth give me a careful description of what he was seeing. As he was talking about the daily routine of the gate guards, he stopped.

“Wait one,” he said. The pause was brief. “I’ve got a vehicle entering the side road, stopping at the gate. Hmm. An SUV, with a law-enforcement decal. ‘Kane County Sheriff’ it says. The Templeton guys are at each front side window, having a conversation with whoever’s inside. They’re generally smiling.”

“Any indication of how many people in the vehicle?” Winnie voice had changed to command mode.

“Can’t really tell, because the windows are pretty well blacked out. OK, arms sticking out the windows, waving, and the SUV proceeds toward the ranch. Mac, you ought to be able to see it coming down those switchbacks soon.”

I checked the time on my watch and responded. “And just how soon will be useful to know. I’m timing it.”

We all waited. I remembered to breathe and hoped the others did, too. Finally, after about four-and-a-half minutes, the SUV appeared over the rise across the canyon, at the top of those switchbacks down to the ranch.

“OK, they’re here, or at least at the top of the hill, heading down. Give it another minute plus for reaching the bottom and it’ll be about six minutes, gate to house. I’m not sure if that’ll be helpful to know or not, but there it is.”

“It could well be, Mac,” Winnie said. “Although it seems like they weren’t in a hurry. The photos make it look like only a couple of miles.”

“OK. That might be important to keep in mind.” I studied the scene by the house through the scope on the TAC. “I guess the people out at the gate have radios, because there’s a greeting party coming out of the house. An older man and another guy.”

“They do have radios, Mac. We’ve seen them using them,” Rothstein chimed in.

“Ah, yes. Old home week. Two people in uniform getting out of the SUV, handshakes all around. A powwow of sorts. Everyone’s headed back into the house together.”

“Interesting,” Winnie sounded thoughtful. “I guess now we wait some more.”

“Not for long, Winnie.” Rothstein’s voice had a tinge of excitement. “Here comes the cavalry.”

* * *

“What the hell?” Rothstein was obviously taken aback. “Two big, black SUVs, Chevy Suburban sized, with several antennas each. Real clandestine, guys, sheesh. But, thing is, the Templeton guards each have some kind of...well...shoulder-held device, and they’ve blocked the road, the side road, before and after the two black SUVs. Oh. And here come a half-dozen other guys out of the rocks and what bushes

there are carrying what look like M-16s. The DEA guys are surrounded. I wonder what those shoulder-held things are?"

"Anti-tank weapons, probably M-136s, looks like. Those dudes have got serious firepower, folks." Henry's deep voice sounded impressed.

I jumped in. "And out of the house come running the two Kane County law enforcement people. They must have had a radio call. They're into their patrol car and headed up the hill. Mark the time, Seth. This trip will be faster."

As I watched, two Templetons also came running out of the house, the young one heading toward an out-building that, because it had no front wall, I could see sheltered a tractor and other pieces of equipment. He jumped onto the tractor seat and fired the thing up.

As he was backing the tractor out of the shed, Seth said, "Here they are. Just a bit over three minutes this time. But the Templeton guards aren't lowering their weapons. What's up with that?"

"What's up with that is that they're all pals, remember?" A grim note had crept into Henry's voice. "I, my friends, have a bad feeling about this."

Seth, with an occasional comment from Henry, proceeded to narrate the scene for Winnie and me. Weapons drawn and with the assistance of the bevy of civilians helping, the two Kane County people disarmed and took captive the fourteen occupants of the black SUVs—the DEA crew, if the big yellow letters on the backs of their jackets meant anything—and bound their hands using plastic zip-ties. Then they loaded the captives back into the SUVs, and the two sheriff's people got into the drivers' seats. A little convoy of the two DEA SUVs, the sheriff's car, driven by one of the M-16-armed Templetons, and two ATVs started back toward the ranch. It was only at that point that the two remaining Templetons stowed their anti-tank weapons and resumed their usual guarding routine.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the fellow on the tractor had been busy. I hadn't noticed before, but the tractor was equipped with a front loader bucket, which was now being used to dig a trench between the hog pen and the far canyon wall. I mentioned this to the others.

"A trench? Huh?" Winnie was dumbfounded.

"Yeah. And, like Henry, I've got a bad, bad feeling about all this. I've gotta talk to Sam, so I'm going silent for a bit." I poked my phone's mute button, and ignored the conversation in my ear-piece.

"Hey, kiddo, looks like we're going to have to provide that backup we promised." I racked a round into the TAC. "Don't know if we'll need to use these things, but we need to be ready."

Sam took the hint and followed my lead with her HK. It made a reassuring, well-oiled *ker-chunk*, and she settled in behind its scope.

"And do you have those earplugs I gave you? Put 'em in good and tight. You'll be glad for them if I have to fire this thing. Wait for me to fire off a round—you'll hear it, for sure, and I'll yell a warning first anyway—and then lay down a full magazine without hitting anyone. Just get their attention with the first mag. Then shoot to kill if I keep shooting, OK?" I smiled my most encouraging smile before I poked my phone's button again and started listening.

"...and Henry? Can you put some of your old Ranger skills to use and get those two gate guards out of action?" Winnie, I could tell, was going to take charge.

"Winnie? I'm back. Sorry to butt in. Before anyone leaves, though, I'd like them to hear you explicitly authorize me to use force, if necessary deadly force, as I believe to be appropriate. Even with all my law enforcement credentials, including yours, I'm basically a civilian, after all. You need to tell me to use my discretion to shoot, or something else that clearly protects me from liability, especially as I

may need to shoot a sheriff's deputy or someone like that. Right?" I decided on the fly that I'd pretend that I was using both of our rifles and that Sam was just a spotter for me. That way, she would be an accessory at worst.

"You are so authorized, Mac. Let's see if we can keep those DEA guys healthy." Winnie took a breath and I felt relieved. "Henry, what about those guards?"

"Fast, boss? Or quiet? Don't think I can do both."

"Fast. Seth can take one, you the other."

"Then no way will it be quiet."

"Hey!" Seth, I could tell, was trying not to laugh. "I can hear all this, you know."

"Just don't try to talk him to death, Seth. We need to be quick. I want to get in there, or at least be ready to."

I'd been watching the road, so when the first of the black SUVs came into sight it didn't surprise me. "That convoy is on its way down the hill, Winnie. Here we go."

"OK, Mac, keep us informed. Henry and Seth will be able to hear us, but I don't think they'll be talking. Except maybe Seth."

"Hey!" His indignation was a stage whisper this time.

"Got it Winnie. Good luck, you guys. What's happening here is that the vehicles are coming down those switchbacks. The guy digging the trench down at the bottom of the canyon has a hole about the size of a car dug. Hmm. Maybe they're going to bury those DEA SUVs or something like that. And Old Man Templeton is watching him...no, he's turned his attention to the approaching vehicles."

"Old Man...huh?"

"You know, Obadiah. I can't bring myself to call him 'Obie', and all four syllables just give him too much cred. OK, so he's waved the vehicles over to where he's standing by that hole the guy on the tractor is digging."

"Mac, is there some kind of diversion you can create?"

"Winnie, I can create God's own havoc down there, believe me. But only briefly. Which is what a diversion is supposed to be. Thing is, what happens after that? Unless you or someone else is on deck to show up pretty quick with more firepower, it'll just make a lot of noise and smoke."

"Shit. You're right. How come you're always right?"

"Don't know if you noticed it, kid, but I'm older than you by a long shot. And I was doing this sort of thing over there in Sandland for a long time. Experience is what I have, along with the wrinkles." I managed not to laugh at myself.

"Oops. Well, here's Act One Scene Two—the vehicles are down on the canyon floor by the hole in the ground, and Templeton's people, including the sheriff's uniforms, have got the DEA guys lined up standing more or less at parade rest—that's what it looks like with their hands bound behind them.

"And Templeton's hollering at them. Walking up and down the line, shouting and gesturing. The two sheriff's guys are standing off to one side, and the seven other Templeton guys, the six with M-16s and the guy from the tractor, are in a line more toward the house.

"Uh-oh. Templeton's walked over to his guys and grabbed an M-16, or whatever it is, from one of them. At least he's got it pointed at the ground. Uh, more or less. Ah, shit. There's a quick burst at the

feet of one of the DEA guys. Crap. Oh, by the way, those weapons are full automatic, it would appear. Yeah, there's the report. Six or so rounds, full auto."

"Mac! Do something!"

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

I had the left side of Old Man Templeton's upper torso in my scope's reticle, a sure kill-shot. But as I relaxed before firing, I lowered my aim to his left hip.

"Sam! Brace yourself!" I knew the earplugs were designed to allow normal conversation.

Then I exhaled part way and gently squeezed the TAC's trigger. As my ears were ringing, Templeton jerked as if hit by a baseball bat and landed a few feet farther away from me than he'd been, at an awkward angle that showed his pelvis to be completely shattered. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sam sort of levitate a couple of inches and turn to look back at me.

"Holy crap!"

I think that's what she said. Her mouth moved, at least, but I didn't really hear anything as my ears were still complaining about the report of the TAC, despite the earplugs. Then she turned back to her HK, settled in, and let fly the 20 rounds from her first magazine. I hardly heard them, but I saw them stitching a ragged line of divots in the ground between the DEA guys and Templeton's assembled troops.

At that point, things got pretty busy. Sam, I noticed, changed magazines immediately and more quickly than I would have expected, to her credit. Down on the canyon floor, everyone but Old Man Templeton scattered—the DEA guys had the good sense to dive, despite not having hands available to break their falls, into the new hole behind them; the sheriff's people scurried to hide behind their patrol vehicle; the younger Templeton guys bolted for the house, leaving the patriarch sprawled in the dust.

I quickly put a round from the TAC into the radiator of the sheriff's vehicle—the poor thing immediately started to bleed pink goop onto the ground—and another into one of the posts holding up the roof of the porch on the house, causing a minor collapse just before the Templeton crowd got there, which gave them pause. That, per my earlier instructions, provided Sam her signal, and she emptied another magazine into the general area where those young fellows with their M-16s were. One of them fell to the ground. Then she reloaded and did it again.

All the while, I was trying to keep talking to give Winnie a play-by-play, sketchy as it necessarily was.

"Even if they start returning fire, Winnie, I doubt we're in any danger. We're maybe three hundred feet higher and a half-mile or so away from them. But it's really a stand-off, because there's no one on the ground to take over. All we can do from here is to plink away at them."

"Yeah, Old Man Templeton's behavior forced our hand before we were really ready. I'm in that helicopter you know about with an assault team, but we can't land safely until those M-16s and whatever other weapons they may have are out of commission. Those M-136 things they have out at the gate worry me. Any ideas?"

"Oh, yeah, for sure. That 'diversion' you wanted. Big medicine, as Henry might say."

"Hey!" This time the indignation was in a deep, rumbly voice.

“Henry! Glad you’re still with us, my friend. No offense intended. Winnie? If you can get that chopper someplace where you can see the ranch, then do so and watch what happens. That way, you’ll be able to tell when it’s safe for you to land, I think. And if you can do it up-canyon from the main compound, up by that schoolhouse, you should be OK, I think. Hold onto your hats.”

During this conversation, Sam had fired off at least two more magazines on full auto and graduated to more carefully aimed two- and three-round groups on semi-auto at specific targets. The people in the valley were pretty well pinned down. Just for the hell of it, I put a round from the TAC into the motor blocks of each of the ATVs. The second one must have been a little off, because the gas tank exploded.

Then I reached into the bassoon case, where my stash of ammunition for the TAC was. I’d used up the five-round mag I’d started with—match-grade sniper rounds for accuracy—so I needed a re-load anyway.

With a little fumbling, I found one of the green-tipped rounds that I’d managed to acquire, well outside the law, from a friend of mine in the military. I won’t risk getting him into trouble with further identification.

The .50 caliber Mk211 round is a versatile sucker, having high-explosive, armor piercing, and incendiary capabilities. It works quite well for targets such as armored personnel vehicles and light-to-medium battle hardware.

And I knew it would work even better for what I had in mind.

Before I let fly with the thing, I got Sam’s attention and had her stand down and clear all her stuff out to a safe spot behind a big rock, away from the edge. As she was doing that, I picked up my five spent shell casings and other gear and moved it all well away from the canyon rim to where I directed her.

Then I went back, racked the Mk211 round into the TAC, and put it into that big propane tank.

I didn’t see the real-time effects in action, because as soon as I fired I grabbed the TAC, rolled with it away from the rim, and, after five feet or so, hugged the ground.

Propane needs oxygen to ignite, so the contents of that tank, which I presume was fully ruptured by the high-explosive nature of the Mk211 round, didn’t explode as would, say, a barrel of nitroglycerine. But it did ignite as it mixed with the ambient air, and in the process expanded mightily, in a sort of slow-motion explosion. The noise, through my earplugs, at least, was rather like thunder echoing down across a mountain range. And then there were several secondary explosions, which I later decided, after I was able to have a look at the rubble, must have come from flammable materials stored in that industrial building down there.

That building had completely vanished, and the ranch house and the various farm buildings were all flattened as if by a tornado. The vehicles were tossed about like the toys of a child’s sandbox tantrum.

It was a good thing, I realized, that the DEA team had had the good sense to dive into that new hole in the ground. It probably saved their lives. I mean, it would have been horribly embarrassing if my diversion had killed the people it was supposed to protect. As it was, I learned later on from Winnie, only Old Man Templeton, who was in critical condition from his wound, and one of the sheriff’s people, the sheriff himself it turned out, had survived, along with the women and children in the schoolhouse. It was built so sturdily that it withstood the shock wave and protected its occupants as well as a storm shelter would have.

My assessment, of course, took some time to assimilate; the more immediate aftermath of my shot at the propane tank was Winnie’s exclamation in my ear-piece.

“Holy Mother of God, Mac! Did you do that?”

I was still hugging the thin layer of sand that overlay the rock of the canyon rim about five feet from the edge, and I could still feel the heat of the fireball, so I didn't move.

“Who, me? Uh, what did I do? I'm in hiding just now.”

“Well at least you're talking. I thought you might have gone up with everything else down there. Jesus!”

“I'm thinking you might be able to land pretty soon, up by the schoolhouse. There'll be some fires, but the main fireball will burn out quickly, I think.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Winnie?” I recognized Seth Rothstein's voice. “What the hell happened? The ground shook a little, we heard what sounded like thunder, then a big orange cloud, like a fireball, popped up from the direction of the ranch. Is everyone OK? Oh, and I should say that we, I mean Henry and me, we're the new gate guards out here.”

“Great work Seth, Henry. Great work. And I hope the good guys are all OK. Don't know about the bad guys yet. Uh, that little excitement was the diversion I talked with Mac about. Remind me in the future that he doesn't scrimp on the special effects, OK?”

About that time, Sam crawled over to me. She had tear tracks down the dust on her face, and she was quivering. I grabbed her into an all-enveloping hug and just held on.

“Mac? Is it over? Can we go home now?”

* * *

Nine

That was the best idea I'd heard all day, so she didn't have to ask twice.

We quickly undertook to gather up everything. I had to hunt around a bit for the casing of that explosive round, so I was especially glad for that stuff sack I'd taped onto the HK—tracking down her hundred or so bits of brass would have been truly tedious. Then we struck out for the van. As our home, it beckoned, and when we got there after the ups and downs of the route across the rocks, home never felt so good.

Better yet, it was mobile. I checked my watch and found, to my surprise, that it was still a little before noon, so a brief consultation between us concluded that we could easily skedaddle and eat those protein bars when we got hungry, instead of making an actual lunch before departing.

Because I'd made preparations for a fast get-away, and because I'd driven the jeep and BLM roads before, we made it south to Big Water in half the time the north-bound trip had taken. Or I suppose I might have been extra motivated. In any case, I may have abused the suspension components somewhat, but our van performed wonderfully. Then we headed southeast toward Arizona and past Page, where I stopped at a self-service car wash to get the dust off the van, and by three in the afternoon we were back at that campground at Lees Ferry. Arizona. Whew.

And waiting for us was the campsite I'd used ten days before, accidentally held in reserve by the portable picnic tarp I'd left behind. The fact that we now had two of those useful little things didn't bother me in the least.

When we'd first set out, we were both too amped up to talk much, and then I had to concentrate on those lousy back roads. But once on the pavement and out of Utah, we both relaxed and were ready for some mutual debriefing. The miles between Page and Lees Ferry were just the ticket.

"OK, so what happened back there, anyway, Mac?"

"I blew up that big propane tank, remember it? The one between that newer building and the canyon wall? And I think there were some other explosions from whatever was in that building. It wasn't there anymore when I looked."

"I think I killed a guy."

"I saw one of the Templetons hit the ground after one of your bursts, but he was moving after he fell. Anyway, that explosion, or all of them, probably killed everyone down there anyway. Don't beat yourself up about it. Overall, good shooting, by the way. The two of us kept nine—no, ten, counting the old man—people, armed, pinned down." I'd buried a little white lie in there to make her feel better. That Templeton guy hadn't moved at all after he hit the ground.

"Why'd you shoot the propane tank?"

"Winnie, she was in her helicopter, she told me she was ready to land with an assault team, and we were going to run out of ammo at some point. I warned her, and I think she landed about the time we got out of there. No doubt we'll hear all about it from her eventually."

"Well, I'm not sure I'm cut out for that sort of thing." She reached over and patted me on the thigh. "Anyway, what's next?"

"I suggest we head for a campground I know about and take advantage of its bath house to get cleaned up. Then we can take the van up to a restaurant nearby and have a drink or two and dinner. The food there's pretty good. Uh, I stayed there when you were down in Florida."

"Ah! *That* place, with the fishing. Where you got all your questions answered, or whatever." She grinned and reached over to poke me in the ribs.

"Probably it was 'whatever.' Anyway, it's a nice place. Maybe we could hang out there a couple of days and decompress. Take some long walks. You could do some drawing."

"I'd like that. And a shower, a couple of drinks, and dinner, even if it's early, sound perfect right now. Do you suppose there's a laundromat up by that restaurant?"

It was my turn to grin. "Had your fill of back-country sand in your undies, eh? Well, we'll check it out before dinner."

At Lees Ferry, we took our time getting cleaned up and organizing our camp. With two of the picnic canopies and the window-shade awning on the van, we had something of a mansion under the stars to stay in, and we almost decided to skip the restaurant dinner. But not having to cook or clean up, for the first time in a while, won the day. And the trip up to Marble Canyon Lodge was worth the effort—there was indeed a laundromat up there, and Sam was pleased that she'd be able to have the chance to get our dirty clothes clean.

We spent all of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at the campground, decompressing and, finally, relaxing. Long walks along the river, up toward the dam, which Sam really didn't want to see, and down to the bridges, which, although magnificent, were something of a blight on the landscape as viewed from the river, took up two of the days. We also hiked north, out into the desert, where Sam spent some time sketching rock formations and I, having carted along my laptop, put the finishing touches on a report of my actions as the DEA team's backup at the Templeton ranch. Sam's role, as I'd planned, was downplayed as far as I could bury it. I emailed it to Winnie around noon on Saturday.

During our long walks, we spent time discussing where our journey should take us next, and I was a little surprised to hear that Sam was ready to head back to Colorado. She regretted having lost the motivation to continue the hunt for the Lucy Smith's kidnapper, but that shoot-out episode at the ranch had pretty much exhausted her yen for adventure. So we agreed to pack things up and head out east, across the Navajo Reservation on US-160 toward the Four Corners and Colorado, on Sunday morning. As a sort of celebration, we decided on one last dinner up at the Marble Canyon Lodge on Saturday evening.

But it turned out to be yet another case of best laid plans going all to hell. When we walked into the dining room, there, off in a corner, was Special Agent Winifred Small, sitting with her colleague Seth Rothstein at a table set for four.

I was trying to be the suave gentleman by gently guiding Sam using my right hand on the small of her back, and when Winnie and Seth came into view I could instantly feel her tense up. I probably tensed up as well. I know for sure I mumbled some rather grumpy—and only marginally printable—things under my breath.

But we were trapped. They saw us right away—I think they were expecting us—and waved us over their way. So we stitched polite smiles on our faces and sat. Sam and Seth had met briefly in Flagstaff, but I made sure to re-introduce them to each other. After we put in our drink order, Winnie took the floor.

“Mac, thanks for that report, especially for the electronic version. I'll file it away in my personal files and include a carefully edited version in the official files. It needs to match what information has been released publicly.”

I knew better than to argue, but that didn't mean I was happy. “We've been avoiding keeping up with the news, so I don't know the public story. Sorry if the truth in my report didn't match it.”

“You know how these things work, Mac. Can't be helped. I'm sure this has happened to you before.” She shrugged. “Anyway, the changes downplay your role. Such as, in the public report, the meth lab blew up accidentally and set off the propane tank, killing everyone except those in the schoolhouse. This happened a bit before the DEA team arrived to serve their warrant.”

“Did those explosions really kill everyone?”

“Not the DEA people—that trench saved them. And, like I said, the women and kids are OK. And Obadiah Templeton survived, but in really, really bad shape. Someone seems to have shot him in the left hip with a very large caliber weapon. Oh, and the Kane County Sheriff, who's pretty beat up himself, he survived, too. But everyone else by the house was killed. Templeton and the sheriff have been, ah, detained at a facility we have for when someone needs to disappear. And the two young Templetons who were out at the gate are in custody as well.”

Sam, seated to my right at the little square table, looked startled, but covered it by picking up her glass of water.

“Presumably, you rescued the kids and their mothers. I hope you're getting coherent stories from them. That kidnapper still needs to be caught.” I stole a glance at Sam's face and saw her nodding.

“We did and we have been. It should help our investigation, because a description of him is emerging. But there's more information on that score, and that's why we're here to see you.” Winnie looked down at the table and tapped a fingernail on it. “See, it looks like he's struck again. Three girls, ages 10 to 14. And this time it's not just kidnapping. It's murder.”

* * *

She told us that, on Thursday afternoon, hikers had run across the bodies stuffed into a crack in a rock formation near a jeep road off Highway 12, in the vicinity of Red Canyon just to the east of Bryce Canyon National Park. Three little girls, the youngest of them sexually assaulted, all strangled. Garfield County Sheriff Paul Ronson, who was now on the warpath, had immediately called Winnie. Times of death were established as a bit more than 24 hours earlier.

“My working hypothesis is that our perp called Templeton’s place Wednesday morning to let him know he was on his way, and Templeton warned him off because he knew, from the Kane County sheriff, about the DEA raid. Seems that the DEA informed the Kane County Sheriff’s Department in Kanab that they would be conducting the raid, as a courtesy.” Winnie shook her head in disgust.

“That would explain the presence of the sheriff and his deputy at the ranch on Wednesday morning.” That puzzle piece fell into place for me.

“Right. And, like he didn’t have any use for Lucy Smith, he didn’t have any use for those three little girls. So he disposed of them. That tells us that Templeton was his only, uh, ‘client’.” Winnie made quote marks with her hands.

“Any forensic evidence?”

“Two things. DNA, from semen—which we also got from Lucy, by the way, so we’re hoping for a match. And tire tracks, interesting ones. The tread pattern is for a specialty brand of off-road tires. And the guy would have needed a serious off-road vehicle to get to where the bodies were found.”

“Did your people check carefully for new scrapes on rocks? Paint flakes would be helpful.”

“We did but didn’t find anything. Just the tracks.”

I sighed, looked at Sam, and shook my head. “So, what do you want from us? Even with three days of R&R, we’re pretty burned out on this whole thing.”

“Well, one of the girls was from Colorado, north of Grand Junction, up by Rangely. And, see, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, whose credentials you hold, would like to have a representative to be part of this investigation. Uh, it seems they’ve suggested you.” Winnie looked almost apologetic.

Sam spoke up. “What do you need us to do, Winnie?”

Winnie looked over at Seth, who cleared his throat. “If it makes you feel any better, Mac, I’ve been drafted, too. And Henry. Seems the boss here doesn’t quite trust the people in our offices in St. George or Salt Lake. And I suppose that she’s got a point.

“Anyway, from the interviews with the women at both of the Templeton ranches, all of whom were kidnapped at one time or another, we’ve concluded that this guy operates out of the mountains east of Salt Lake, the Wasatch Range. We don’t know exactly where yet, but we’re hoping to track down vehicles with the specialty tires. It’ll help that we have the wheelbase and track-width, too, along with the tire identification whose tracks we found. Because we don’t want to use any of the Utah FBI contingent, though, we’re way shorthanded. If we bring in FBI personnel from other states, like lots of me, the locals would find out and start raising questions. But you’re an unknown and already have a good cover to go driving around the back roads in those mountains and check out possibilities.”

“What’s your best guess about the model of the vehicle?” I was wondering how many matches there would be—a Ford F-150, for example, would be way too many.

“Hummer H2. The combination of wheelbase and track width is unique, as far as we can tell. And the tires are, from the tread, something called Dick Cepek Extreme Country tires. I’ve got a file for you with a picture of ’em.”

The server, a wholesome-looking young lady carrying a few too many pounds, finally decided it was time for us to have dinner, so she came by with order pad firmly in hand. We made her effort well worthwhile because Rothstein, it seemed, had an appetite stimulated by the desert air, or something, and I ordered their most expensive wine.

After she left with our order, Sam took advantage of the break in the conversation to jump in. “So, I’ve got a question. Mac and I were on that canyon rim watching that ranch, and we smelled a strange chemical odor, right? And based on that, the plane flew over with some kind of instrument that I don’t quite understand. But, whatever, based on the instrument’s results, the DEA decided there was a meth lab there and planned a raid, and, in the process told the Kane County Sheriff’s Office about it. They told the ranch owner, this Templeton guy. And he called the kidnapper and told him to stay away, so the kidnapper killed those little girls.” She paused and took a deep breath.

“So, can someone tell me why I shouldn’t feel responsible for getting those little girls killed?” By that point, tears were beginning to flow, and she was sniffing.

Rather than even try to respond, I took a very long drink from my second gin and tonic.

Rothstein opened his mouth to say something, and then shut it and just stared at the tabletop.

Winnie sighed. “It wasn’t your fault, Sam. It was the DEA that screwed up first, and then, of course, the sheriff was dirty. If the DEA hadn’t made that courtesy call, and that was a major breach of operational security, *or* if the sheriff had been honest...well, who knows what would have happened? But the kidnapper wouldn’t have killed them. You can’t blame yourself.”

I leaned over and rubbed Sam’s back. “She’s right, Sweetie. When you do the right thing and the next person does the wrong thing and creates bad consequences, you can’t put the blame on yourself. Believe me, I know. Been there, done that, many times.”

Rothstein looked up. “Good way to put it, Mac. Why, I remember once...ouch!”

His glare at Winnie, following the *thud* from under the table, was not at all friendly, but she shut him down with a single lifted eyebrow.

Sam excused herself and headed for the Ladies’ Room. She came back quickly, though, eyes dry and no hint of sniffles, just in time for the server to bring our salads.

The rest of dinner went as well as could be expected, all things considered. I was proud of Sam for using her emotions as the basis for motivation to identify the kidnapper. It became clear to me that we weren’t going to be heading east the next morning, but rather north toward the Salt Lake area.

Although we tried to be sociable and avoid shop talk, we didn’t really succeed, and I’m afraid that I was the main culprit. The trouble was that wandering around the Wasatch looking for Hummers with that odd tire brand didn’t seem like a productive use of my and Sam’s time.

“Uh, can I assume that, even though you don’t trust any of the locals, you do have access to the Utah car registration database? So you know where the Hummers are registered?”

“We do.” Rothstein’s grin was slightly evil.

“So your plan is for me, us, I mean, to take the list, find which of those Hummers has those particular tires, and then knock on the door and ask whether the owner would be willing to have us take a DNA sample?”

Rothstein’s grin faded. “Uh...”

Winnie spoke up. “The first sample doesn’t have to be voluntary, Mac, or even legal. If we can get a match with an inadmissible sample, then all we have to do is to watch the guy until he slips up enough

for us to take a legal one. And if you find the car, well, this is a federal crime, given that one of those girls was from Colorado, and we should be able to get a warrant from a federal judge I know. And trust. A careful search of the car would probably turn up more DNA, his and maybe some from those girls, which then would be admissible.”

“Hmm. OK, another question, completely different subject. Do you have access to the Utah law-enforcement alerts? I’d like to find out if the BOLO that was out for us in Kane County is still active and especially if it’s active up in the Salt Lake area. See, I’d like to get that wrap off our van.” I looked back and forth between the two FBI agents.

Winnie looked embarrassed. “Um, well, the BOLO has gone state-wide, so it would probably be better if you kept that wrap on. And for sure continue to use the Utah plates. The Kane County folks, and by extension the rest of Utah law enforcement, are a little stirred up just now. Somebody seems to have poked a hornet’s nest with a stick.”

* * *

As much as I detested that orange-and-green advertising all over the outside of our van, nice clean and shiny orange-and-green advertising, thanks to the car wash in Page, discretion triumphed. From Marble Canyon, we had to drive through a big chunk of Kane County—including the county seat—and then an unknown number of other counties and municipalities to get to Salt Lake, nor did our risk end there. It occurred to me that we might need to wait until we crossed back into Colorado to peel the thing off and get the van back to its original beige-gold color. And we’d already pushed our luck once with the previous trip up to Bryce Canyon.

So, Sunday morning, bright and early, we set off west on US-89A, toward Jacob Lake and the intersection with the road down to the North Rim, and then toward Fredonia, Arizona, Kanab, Utah, and other points north. We made it without incident to Hatch, across the county line into Garfield County, before noon, and I began breathing a little easier with Kane County behind us. No doubt the high rate of Sunday morning church attendance in that part of the world made our passage a bit less risky. We stuck with US-89 north through Garfield County all the way to its intersection with I-70 and headed west on it for the few miles to I-15, where we turned north to Salt Lake, joining the stream of traffic returning home from the Saturday-night debauchery of the Nevada casinos.

We could have taken I-70 east and north just as easily, but I didn’t want the temptation of just staying on it all the way to Denver. Even with the disguised van and identification, I was nervous hanging around in the presence of that state-wide BOLO, so the temptation would have been pretty strong. But the opportunity to catch up with the guy who was kidnapping those little girls motivated me to soldier on.

Sam spent the time navigating, watching the scenery—and it was worth watching—and eventually searching for a place to stay with the mobile internet link. The cornucopia of choices in the Salt Lake City area, though, gave her pause.

“We’re going to be spending time in those mountains to the east of the city, right? The Wastash or whatever they’re called. Should I try to find something up there? Or what?”

“Wasatch. It’s an old Indian name, I think. How about that place we stayed at before, in Park City. What was it called? The Park City Lodge or something like that?”

“Uh, Hotel Park City, I think. Wasn’t that awfully expensive?”

“Yep. But we’re on an expense account now, and I’m an expert at manipulating expense accounts. We can even pig out in their fancy restaurant. Hmm. How do you think their wine list is?”

Before I knew it, she had a reservation—Sunday night in mid-October didn't seem to be their prime season—and all we had to do was to spend the rest of the afternoon cruising along in the stream of northbound traffic without attracting attention. At least there were plenty of other vehicles of all shapes and sizes sporting garish advertising, so it was easy to blend in.

After checking in and spending a couple of hours in the restaurant over the best meal we'd had in two weeks—and their wine list was just fine indeed—I picked up the Sunday papers on our way back through the lobby. Each of them had long articles about the events of Wednesday morning down in Kane County, and both articles repeated the “public” version that Winnie had related to us as well as plenty of background on the problem of methamphetamines in the greater Salt Lake metropolitan area. Buried in the stories was the tidbit that both the Kane County Sheriff and Obadiah Templeton were missing and presumed dead, completely cremated by the explosions and ensuing fires. And it was the Drug Enforcement Administration that received all the attention; the FBI was not mentioned in either article.

Chalk one up for Winnie.

I decided to call her to see if congratulations were in order.

“Mac! Good to hear from you. Looks like you got to Park City. I hope you're not calling from the Sheriff's Office.”

I reminded myself to find the GPS tracker that Seth had stuck on the van—maybe not to remove it, but knowing where it was would make me feel better.

“No, we're spending your expense money as lavishly as we possibly can. Were the articles in today's papers up to your expectations?”

“Pretty much what I was hoping for. No mention of my involvement or the sex trafficking. DEA got all the play. And nothing about you at all. Does that work for you?”

“Well, I'm not sure how it could have been better. And, of course, since you know where we are, sort of, you know that we made it here. It may be that they're Being On the Look Out everywhere, but I guess that today they were being in church instead. Or something.”

“Sort of?” Ha! Looks to me as if your van is parked at the Hotel Park City. You know that place is a Marriott, right? Founded and run by Mormons? Who are probably out to get you?”

I paused long enough—maybe for a couple of seconds—to think up a couple of snappy come-backs, but then I changed the subject instead.

“So, I got the list of Hummer owners you want me to check out, and I'm thinking we should rent a plain-vanilla car to do the checking. Our van's going to attract attention. You know, suspicious neighbors and stuff like that.”

“Not a bad idea, Mac. Please make it a cheap rental car, though, OK?”

“Plain-vanilla usually means cheap, in my experience. And I've got another question. Is there anyone at all that you trust? A member of that task force, maybe? Thing is, I'd feel a lot better if there were additional contacts I could call on in a pinch.”

“Well, the only person on the task force up your way who isn't with my office or a Utah native is Lisa Hamilton. She's a Summit County Deputy Sheriff. My information is that she moved to Utah to be with her boyfriend, whom she met in college. At, um, I forget. Colorado State, maybe? He's a Park City native. Anyway, she seems pretty outside of any local conflicts of interest.”

“Right. She was part of that conference call we had a while back. And I met her on the day that we brought Lucy Smith to the hospital here.” I made a snap decision. “OK, I'll get in touch with her and let

her know what's going on as far as the search for the Hummer goes. Um, that means disclosing the forensic evidence of the tire tracks and so on. Is that OK?"

"Yeah. Hmm. Y'know, there's trust, and then there's *trust*. I guess I'd feel better if you told her as little as possible."

"How about the Levi Templeton take-down?"

"Oh. She knows about that. I held another conference call, while you and Sam were hanging out at Lees Ferry, and told the task force about it. They also know about what the Templeton women told us, how it seems like our kidnapper operates out of the Wasatch somewhere."

"OK, and the Hummer's old enough that it could have been used in some of those kidnappings, so I can pretend that we know about it that way, too."

"Mac, you're a genius. And I bet if you tell Lisa about how you ferreted out the whole thing via that note from, um, Melissa, was it?, she'd be on your side in a flash. I got the impression that she's majorly pissed off about all this kidnapping stuff."

"Yep. And Sam would like any news about Lucy Smith, too. Maybe Lisa will have something about that. We were, well, a bit concerned about how competent her parents would be to take care of her after all that trauma."

"Oh, yeah. Speaking of Lucy, I bet you don't know that we've had time to carefully debrief her, using a top-notch child psychologist. She a remarkable little girl, smart, grounded—despite her parents, about whom I agree with you—and with a first-rate memory. I'll send you the report."

"Really? Interesting. Anything I should know?"

"He limps. Lucy identified with it and it helped him to get her guard down so he could grab her. He also smelled like Old Spice, which reminded her of her Dad. There may be other inferences that the shrinks will come up with, but, so far, that's it."

"Interesting. Let us know if you hear anything else of interest. Meantime, Sam and I will get on with trying to find that Hummer."

* * *

Ten

Monday morning, in the middle of an overly indulgent room-service breakfast, Sam and I had a mutual crisis of conscience about living in such luxury at the expense of the taxpayers. We didn't send the breakfast back, mind you, but we did resolve to find accommodations a bit more modest than the suite we'd taken at the Hotel Park City.

But that turned out to be easy. Even more than our home town of Estes Park, Park City offered plenty of alternatives—in particular, condominiums galore, most empty because we were there during the lull between the fall aspens and the upcoming ski season. The groves had shed most of their leaves with those left turning brown, and the weather was deteriorating day by day—gray and cloudy with occasional flurries of snow—and going outside was generally unpleasant. The locals, of course, were hoping for snow and even doing little snow dances. But that kind of weather just made us visitors depressed.

After breakfast, we packed up and spent the time until check-out looking for just the right place to stay, and there were so many possibilities that we may just as well have thrown darts at a Park City map.

As amusing as that all was, though, it didn't get us any closer to that Hummer with the particular tires that we were supposed to be looking for. By lunchtime, we'd reserved a condo, on the top floor, right in the middle of old downtown, with a view of the still-bare ski slopes, found a suitable rental car—small, white, anonymous—and were ready to dig in.

But dig into what? Yes, we had a list of Hummers that were registered to addresses in the mountains to the east of Salt Lake City, but that didn't count the ones registered down in the city itself to people who might have second homes in the mountains.

It occurred to me that this would be the perfect job for that software that I'd used back during the flood, the "Loogie" search engine developed at the Middle Park Advanced Research Center run by my friend Hal Weathers. It could correlate information from diverse databases and come up with the most interesting conclusions almost instantly. But I didn't have access to the databases I needed for this Hummer business.

In any case, I needed more nuanced information, so I called Winnie.

"Small, FBI."

"Winnie, it's Mac. Got a minute? I need to explore some of the background you've got."

"How can I help?"

"Well, Saturday night at dinner down at Marble Canyon, Seth said that your interviews with the Templeton women led you conclude that our kidnapper was operating out of the Wasatch somewhere. But he didn't say why you concluded that. What'd they tell you?"

"Ah. Right. Well, each of their stories was a little different, of course, but they all matched up in two respects. First, none was sexually assaulted. I guess that the perp was supplying only virgins to Obie. At least they were all young enough, and religious enough, that we can assume they were virgins. Probably. Hmm. In this day and age, maybe. Second, the mechanics of the kidnappings. They were all snatched, had a hood or a bag or something like that put over their heads and their hands bound, and then were forced into a vehicle and driven somewhere for a while. Now, some of the whiles were quite long, some not so much. Relative to where they were snatched, the various times of the whiles all seem to point to somewhere in the vicinity of Salt Lake. Then they were put into a basement room, or something like that, a sort of suite with a bathroom and everything, but no windows, and kept there until they were taken to the Templeton place, Obie's place, with bags on their heads again. Some of them were in this basement room all alone for the whole time, and some others were there with other girls. Anyway, an important point that most of them remembered is that it was pretty quiet, hardly any house noises, even, but the early part of the subsequent ride—not the very first part but the early part—sounded to them like a city, with lots of traffic. A big city, because the traffic noise lasted quite a while. Oh, and they said that the driveway to the house is gravel but the local subdivision streets are paved, and there's some kind of gate that needed unlocking. They heard all that."

"So you're saying that the girls from Utah towns close to Salt Lake had relatively short initial car rides while the girls from farther away, like Melissa, from over in Colorado, had longer rides? And, taken together, it all looks like a destination somewhere near Salt Lake? With a gravel drive?"

"Exactly. All the initial rides were different, but the later rides, after the stay in the basement room, were all pretty much the same, the way they described it. And the entire initial trip was on paved roads except for the very last, slow part. The driveway. The later trips all had quite a bit of gravel, bumpy toward the end, which is consistent with the road into Obie's place. Oh. And a couple of the girls talked

a bit about how the pavement noise was different on the initial and later rides. The later rides were noisier, so it may be that two different vehicles were used in each case.”

“And the girls all stayed in this basement room, or whatever it was?”

“Right.”

“OK, so that means one of two things. Either this guy is single and has a place up here in the mountains, maybe where the Hummer is registered, where he keeps the girls. Or, he may not be single, but the place up here in the mountains is a second home, a vacation home or something, where he can go alone when he’s keeping girls there. Meaning that it’s not just Hummers registered to mountain addresses we’re interested in, but ones in the city also. Right?”

“Hmm. Well, yeah, Mac, I guess that makes sense.”

“So, is there some way to find out the marital status of these Hummer owners? I mean, Hummers registered to addresses in the mountains that are home to a family, or even just a couple, probably aren’t what we’re looking for.”

“OK, I’ll buy that. Conversely, Hummers registered to addresses down in the metro area might be. At least if the man of the house has the sort of job that allows him plenty of unquestioned time away from home.”

“Right! Good thinking, Winnie. So if we can correlate addresses with marital status and occupation, we’re in business. And there’s another thing. The woman I brought in from Levi’s place, she was with all those kids on that farm wagon. She said her name is ‘Ruth Templeton,’ but she also told me her real name was Roberta Ludlow, a long time ago. She said hadn’t seen her parents in eighteen years. So the perp, assuming it’s the same one, and, I guess, assuming he hasn’t moved his operation, he’s been at this for nearly twenty years, seems like. So, well, maybe it’s a stretch, but continuity at a given address might be a good thing to look for, too.”

“I remember that from her statement, Mac, but I didn’t put it together with the rest until just now. Jesus. This motherfucker has been snatching little girls for almost *two decades*? I come across him, somebody needs to relieve me of my sidearm or I’ll just shoot the son-of-a-bitch on the spot.”

“I’ve got a better plan, actually, which I’ll tell you about over a drink sometime soon. But first we’ve got to find him. And the more we can narrow down the computer search, the more likely we’ll get what we need to find him. So. Registrations in the greater Salt Lake area, including the Wasatch, of Hummer H2s, longevity, marital status, occupation. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of offhand.”

“Then let’s see what we can uncover.”

“Sounds like a plan, Mac. I’ll get Seth on it. He’s quite the computer whiz.”

“OK, good. And Sam and I will cruise around having the time of our lives in this cramped little car we’ve rented and checking out the low-hanging fruit, meaning the Hummers here in the vicinity of Park City at houses with gravel driveways. But, look, Winnie. I can’t imagine that it’ll really be that simple.”

“Probably not, Mac. But we have to start somewhere, right?”

* * *

So we got started on those low-hanging fruit.

We still had most of the FBI gear that Seth had equipped us with, plus my separate GPS system with its USGS topographic maps, so we took it out of the van and set it up in the living room of our condo. We used the condo's internet connection and typed in the addresses we were interested in to see them both on the street grid shown on the topo maps and in satellite images on Google's mapping program. Unfortunately, the satellite images weren't quite good enough to tell us which of the driveways were gravel.

Having exhausted those possibilities, we put the gear into the rental car. With Sam behind the wheel so that I could operate the laptop and other gadgetry, we spent the afternoon driving around the Park City area narrowing our list of addresses with Hummers registered to those that also had gravel driveways. There were four, but none of the cars was visible in those driveways.

What was visible, though, was a large number of those Neighborhood Watch signs, at least in the residential subdivisions that we were searching. That bothered me, so I suggested to Sam that we find a coffee shop or something and stop to discuss tactics. At that point, we were up by the interstate, well north of Park City proper, maybe in a place called Snyderville although it was hard to tell where one community stopped and another began, given the sprawl everywhere. Sam pulled into a commercial area, a sort of shopping center.

"I noticed a Starbucks back a little...oh, but look, here's a place called 'Park City Coffee Roaster.' Local is better, don't you think?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure." I looked up from studying the computer screen, which told me that we were near someplace called "Kimball Junction" and discovered that there was actual, three-dimensional scenery out there.

She found they had tea as well as coffee and ordered something exotic-sounding. I stuck with a regular decaf, which turned out to be surprisingly good.

"It feels good to get out of that cramped little car." I took a careful sip—despite the elevation, the coffee was quite hot. "Now, what are we going to do about this Neighborhood Watch thing? With all this snooping around, sooner or later we're going to come to someone's attention. And the last thing we need is to be stopped by a local cop."

"Yeah, we need a cover story." She grinned at me. "But that's what you're supposed to be good at, right Mr. Spock?"

I held up my right hand, making a "V" with my two middle fingers. "'Live long and prosper.' No, wait. That's Mr. Spock."

Her grin faded to that blank "Huh?" look.

"Sorry, dated reference. Probably before your time. Or in a different universe. But, yeah, we need a cover story." I thought for a minute. "Y'know? Seems like we've been seeing a lot of 'For Sale' signs in all these neighborhoods. Could it be that we're house-hunting?"

"Now there's a good idea. Like, we're driving around to check out what some of the places we found on-line look like in person. Before we make a list to tour. Before we even hook up with a Realtor. Right?"

"Exactly. I'll go and fetch the laptop. How about getting me one of those scones over there? Please?" I put the nicest whine I could summon up into the request, but she still looked skeptical. "Tell you what, I'll split it with you."

"Just what I need." But she stood up and headed for the counter as I went out to get the computer.

I fiddled briefly, found the coffee shop's Wi-Fi, and was soon looking at a listing of Park City residential real estate for sale. There were pages and pages of the some thirteen hundred homes on the market, topping out in the low eight figures. I picked one more or less at random from that last page.

"Oh, here's a nice little cottage. Six bedrooms, seven bathrooms, fourteen thousand square feet, only nineteen million. Sounds cozy."

"What? That's nuts! Who needs seven bathrooms to clean?"

"Use 'em each only once a week and they don't get very dirty. Makes life simple."

"Ewww. That's gross."

"Yeah, well, maybe a housekeeper, or a team of them, would be appropriate. Anyway, if seven bathrooms are too many, here's one with only five. And it's a bargain at twelve million. Oh, wait. Only nine thousand square feet! A hovel."

"C'mon, Mac, surely there are normal houses for sale. I mean, when we were looking for our new place in Estes, there were some real mansions available. But mostly it was the usual three, or four, bedrooms and so on. The house we sold, it was something like two thousand square feet. Right? And it seemed plenty big, at least for the two of us."

"Of course. But what fun is that? If we're going to pretend to be looking, we may as well pretend big." A new thought occurred to me. "Seriously, though, this business of a gravel driveway is something to think about. That might suggest a house on a big lot, acreage, even. Maybe I can figure out how to sort these listings by lot size."

That trick wouldn't work, but I did figure out that only a bit over 400 of the nearly 1300 listings were detached, single family homes and that nearly 600 were condos like the one we were staying in. I fiddled with the web site filters a bit.

"No, it won't let me do that. But here's something interesting. It says that the median price for condos downtown, where ours is, runs to just a bit over a megabuck. Seems that we're in a high-rent district."

"Median? What's that?" She had her face scrunched up in concentration.

"Um. Statistics. Kind of like the average, but it takes out really big, or little, single data points. In this case, it's the middle of the price range, in the sense that if you count up from the bottom and down from the top, it's where the two counts meet." *Finally*, I thought. Those tedious agency training sessions about such stuff that I'd managed to sit my way through had paid off. "I bet that during prime time ski season it rents for five times what we're paying. Or ten."

"Oh. I think I understand. Not that I'm that interested in statistics, mind you. But I sure hope that our place is in the low end of the range. I sure wouldn't pay a million for it."

"Me, neither. But we don't ski, nor do we care, or at least I don't, about being seen in the company of the Beautiful People who spend time here." I reached over the table and patted her hand. "But y'know, Robert Redford has that film festival of his around here each year. I bet you'd like to be seen with him. How much would that be worth?"

She actually blushed. "Oh, give me a break, Mac. He's too old for me. Besides, he just reminds me of you."

* * *

On that note, and as a way for me to escape gracefully, I started to gather up our cups and saucers to leave. It looked to me as if the coffee shop's culture was bus-your-own-table.

Sam stood up as well. "Well, what's next, fearless leader? More cruising the neighborhoods?"

"Oh, yeah. I need to check my email and see if Winnie has sent any more addresses." I sat back down and so did she.

Because I hadn't disconnected my laptop from the coffee shop's Wi-Fi, that took only a minute. "Nope. No new information. Tell you what. I'm kind of burned out on this for today. How about we head home—I mean, you know, the condo—and decide about dinner and so forth?"

So we started back downtown. Because she had the car keys, she naturally got in the driver's door and, a bit to my surprise, didn't waver in her sense of direction toward our destination. Despite having driven all around the Park City area all afternoon, she seemed to know just where to go to get 'home.' I hadn't realized that she had such a good compass in her head.

As we crossed from the suburbs into Park City proper—I noticed the little sign this time—she said, "I remember a pharmacy around here, by an Albertson's supermarket. I need to stop for a few things, OK?"

I suppressed a groan. I always tried to do my drug-store errands on my own, shopping for deodorant and shaving soap and so on without her looking over my shoulder. Partly, I did that to be able to avoid tagging along on her similar errands. I mean, I usually avoided even walking down certain drug-store aisles, let alone doing shopping in them. Some things I just don't want to know about.

"Well, it looks like we're getting close to home. And it's just after five. How about you drop me off and come back? Then you won't have to worry about being in a hurry, and I can go get some take-out dinner from that sushi place I saw across the street from us."

"Sushi? In the Utah mountains? Really?" As someone who grew up near the ocean, her skepticism was understandable.

"Yeah, I know. But, look, a lot of that sushi you got in Florida was from the Pacific. They flash-freeze it and ship it all over. And a hoity-toity place like Park City—pretty close to the Salt Lake airport, remember?—I'm sure they have quality stuff here. Really, it depends on the chef and the restaurant rather than the city. And here the competition is probably pretty stiff, so I think it ought to be OK."

During this little speech, I'd noticed that we were passing an Albertson's off to our left, so I decided I'd been persuasive enough. A few minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot of our condo building and let me out. I unhooked the loose computer equipment, not wanting it to disappear overnight, and sent her on her way.

"Don't rush, because I've got to take all this stuff upstairs and then go over there and place our take-out order. It'll be at least forty-five minutes, I expect. Maybe I'll walk around the block in the meantime to stretch my legs." I blew her a kiss and off she went.

Once upstairs, I plugged the computer back in and made sure it acquired the condo's Wi-Fi signal, then decided on a quick shower. All that sitting in the car had made me want a change of clothes. Then I grabbed a couple of twenties from my wallet and my room key, put on a warm jacket—the air was cooling quickly as the sun was going down—and went down the stairs and across the street to the sushi place.

Given the season, how empty the town was, and the fact that it was a stay-at-home night—Monday Night Football was coming on in just a bit—it didn't surprise me that the place was pretty empty. Still, they were open and had a list of daily specials on a chalk board.

I ordered a pint of miso soup—the microwave in the condo would revive its spirit, I knew—a chef’s selection for two of nigiri sushi, a sashimi appetizer, and, because I couldn’t help myself, a double shrimp tempura appetizer. Although I was tempted to sit at the bar and have a drink, I decided that the short walk I mentioned to Sam would be the better part of valor, so I told them I’d be back in twenty minutes or so, paid for the order with my twenties, and strolled off.

Park City was one of those old-west mining towns that had successfully reinvented itself as a modern destination ski resort. In doing so, it managed, from my naïve perspective, to preserve plenty of its old-time charm. In downtown, for example, it appeared that buildings were limited to three or four stories, a restriction that helped considerably with our own view. And, although there was quite a bit of new construction, there were also many buildings that seemed to be updated versions of much earlier architecture.

I’d turned south on Main Street and crossed Heber. A couple of blocks later, I turned left on Fifth and again on Swede Alley, intending to head back to pick up the sushi order and to see if I could talk them into selling me a bottle of wine to smuggle back to the condo. I hadn’t bothered to figure out where the state liquor stores were.

But, just as I was about to turn left on Heber to get back to Main, I noticed, across the street in a public parking lot, a black Hummer H2. It wasn’t one of the gravel-drive Hummers that Sam and I’d been looking for—all their registrations listed other colors. But...

What the hell, I thought, might as well check it out. Couldn’t hurt. So I turned right at the crosswalk to get over to the parking lot. Even though it was only a bit before six in the evening, the lot was almost empty, just a few cars and no people hanging about. In the summer or in ski season, I thought, I bet this place is bursting at the seams.

The Hummer was parked behind a screen of conifers of some kind, small pines or big junipers, I guess, and that, with the fading light, made it hard to see the tires. I circled the big vehicle, looking for the best light, and in the process noticed an accumulation of dust, of a much lighter color than the black truck, on its rear bumper. I used the tail of my tee-shirt to wipe up teaspoon or so and carefully folded it into the fabric. Unfortunately, the license plate was obscured by that same dust, but I could tell that it was a Utah plate.

On the right front fender, just forward of the tire and about half-way up the wheel well, there was an odd scratch in the black paint, the kind that just might “buff right out.” I looked carefully at it and noticed an odd loop shape at its aft end—as if the driver had contacted a hard surface, proceeded a few inches in contact, hit the brakes causing the nose to dip, then backed up. I ran my fingers over it and memorized its shape. And since I was already squatting down, I picked the right front tire as a good one to inspect—all the better, it was closest to the trees and not as exposed as the left side of the car to the empty part of the parking lot. As I peered at the letters on the sidewall, I was wishing for my cell phone so I could take a picture of the tread. And, using its flashlight app, to read the lettering better.

It was just as my eyes finally adjusted to the fading daylight, and I could make out the raised letters proclaiming the tire to be the Dick Cepek Extreme Country model, that fireworks exploded inside my head and then everything went dark.

* * *

Part II

Eleven

It wasn't until about midnight that Mac finally showed up. By then I was so worried that I had forgotten about being mad that he'd left his cell phone in the condo.

My little trip to get toothpaste and dental floss was about as uneventful as could be—what “rush hour” there was in Park City had long passed. Because the pharmacy was next to a supermarket, I stopped in there to pick up a few items I knew were running low, so the errands took me 45 minutes or so.

Then, not finding him in the condo when I returned, I assumed he was across the street picking up our dinner from the sushi place. I waited around another 45 minutes and began to wonder where he might be, so I went looking. The young Asian woman at the cash register remembered him and said he'd gone for a walk while they were preparing our order. But he never came back. And she said the order was paid for, so she went into the kitchen to fetch it for me, out of the refrigerator. But she hadn't seen which way he'd gone, when he left for his walk. Oh, she said, just heat up the soup in the microwave.

As you can imagine, this information started me tumbling down the slippery slope of panic. It was close to eight in the evening, and we'd not eaten much in the way of lunch, so I was hungry. But even the delicious smell of that armful of Japanese food couldn't tempt my clenched-up stomach.

After about another hour, during which I'd found Mac's phone and his wallet—I couldn't help but think it odd that he'd go out to buy something without his wallet, but he'd apparently managed it—I decided I was going to have to eat something, so I re-heated the miso soup and drank it down like tea.

That actually helped calm me down a bit. I thought of calling the police, but then remembered that adults didn't really go “missing,” from the law's perspective, for at least a day. And I had the notion that I'd probably just be condescended to and called “little lady” if I explained my worries to them.

Finally, I found some local news on the condo's TV and settled in to wait. The news segued to the late-night talk shows, which, at least, helped me feel less alone.

Then, just before midnight, the door opened and Mac walked in, looking bedraggled and worn out. “Hi there, beautiful. Geez, I'm famished. We got anything to eat around here?”

After a long, snuggly hug, I told him I'd picked up the sushi order.

“That'll do. How about putting the tempura into the oven on foil or something to heat it up while I shower? I don't think it would survive the microwave.” And he kissed me again and headed for the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, he emerged, all clean and in fresh clothes. “There's a tee-shirt in there, a dirty one, folded up. Please don't wash it. It has extremely valuable dirt folded up in it.”

And then he hugged me again. Eventually he leaned back and kissed my nose. “Well, I can tell you one thing. I'm getting too damned old for stuff like this.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened, or what?” I was so overjoyed to see him in one piece that I couldn't really be mad, but I figured he owed me some explanation.

“Absolutely. While I eat, and you can eat, too. I got plenty, if you didn't already.”

“I just drank the soup.”

“OK, then there's that tempura, shrimp and vegetables, some nigiri sushi, you know, the kind with rice, and some sashimi. Man, I'm hungry.” He licked his chops. “And, well, is it OK if I call Winnie and tell her the story, too? She really needs to hear it, and there may be a time factor.”

I set the food out, and Mac laid his phone on the table and poked the speaker button. As the connection to Winnie went through, he snarfed down a piece of salmon and another of tuna, both with lots of pickled ginger and wasabi.

“Small. This better be good.” The voice was in that jerked-out-of-sleep mode.

“Yeah, sorry, Winnie. It’s Mac, and I’ve got something important. And maybe time-critical.” He chomped the end off of one of the pieces of shrimp tempura. “I guess I should say that I’m a little embarrassed to have to tell you about this. I must be losing my edge.”

“What happened?” Winnie’s sleepiness had vanished.

“Well, what *didn’t* happen is that I didn’t get killed and dumped in the slick-rock somewhere nor did I get sold to some dirty old man and his family. But I did find out where our perp kept his kidnapping victims before he did those things to them.”

“How about starting from the beginning?”

“Yeah, but one more end result first—I did not see the perp, and all I learned is that his Hummer is black. Anyway, here’s the story.

“Sam, who’s here, the phone’s on speaker, by the way, took off on an errand, and I went across the street to get take-out for dinner. While they were preparing the order, I went for a walk here in downtown Park City, the old part. I noticed a Hummer, a black one, in a public parking lot and thought, why not?, I’ll check out its tires. But while I was doing that, I got cold-cocked by someone. No idea how he managed to sneak up on me. I’d swear there was no one around.”

“You OK now?” Winnie sounded worried.

“Sore neck and I’ll probably have a doozy of a headache tomorrow, er, later today. Anyway, before the next part, there are three important points from this first part. The tires on the black Hummer were the right ones, those Dick Cepek whatever. There’s a distinctive scratch in the paint on the right front fender. And there was quite a bit of dust accumulation on the rear bumper. I managed to collect a good bit, which I have wrapped in a tee-shirt here. It can be analyzed and compared with the dust from that road where the three girls’ bodies were found last week. It seems like it might be that reddish sandstone they have down there, something that I haven’t seen a lot of up here in the Wasatch.”

“Did you get the license plate number?”

“No, it was all dusty. I was going to brush it off and memorize it as my last thing, but I got jumped first.

“So now the next part. He didn’t hit me very hard, I guess, because I came to lying in the back of a vehicle. My hands were bound in front of me with a zip-tie, and there was a bag over my head. Shortly after I woke up, the vehicle took some sharp turns, ascended a pretty steep bit of road that turned to gravel after a turn-off and then ascended some more. We stopped, the vehicle jockeyed around a bit, and the lift-gate opened. I heard that and felt the fresh air. There was some clanking and a rusty-sounding rumbling, and I was dragged out of the back and across some gravel, then across what felt like carpet. He had me under the armpits and my feet were what was dragging. I pretended to be still unconscious. Then there was more rumbling and clanging and things got quiet, very quiet.”

“This is all consistent with the stories the Templeton girls told us.”

“Yep, it is. And this dude must have thought he was dealing with another little girl instead of me. He’d secured my arms in front of me, so getting the bag off my head was easy. I fumbled around for a time in the dark and finally found a light switch, and it took me only a few minutes to get the zip-tie off my wrists. Then I looked around the place for a short while. It seems to be a series of shipping

containers with doors cut into the sides and joined up somehow. Turns out that they're all underground, in an old mineshaft, I guess. There's electricity and plumbing, with a refrigerator. And it sure didn't look like the guy's an obsessive housekeeper, which is why I think there may be some time sensitivity here. See, I bet there are all sorts of DNA samples in there, hair especially. But when he returns to get me for whatever next thing he has in mind for me, I won't be there and he may panic and clean the place."

"So you know where this is."

"Well, sure, Winnie. I let myself out and walked home. Got back about, oh, a half hour ago. Sam's told me she was getting worried."

I couldn't help myself. "*Getting* worried? Ha! I was going nuts here. He didn't even have his cell phone with him, Winnie!"

Mac patted my hand. "Yeah, I was just going across the street for the sushi, didn't think I'd need it. But it's a good thing I left it here. He'd have found it. As it was, all I had was our room key, which he didn't bother with."

"What do you mean, you 'let yourself out'?"

"Like I said, this time he wasn't dealing with just another little girl. I may be getting old, but I do still have some skills. And, better yet, I carry some clever gadgets in my shoes and my belt, which he didn't even look for. I mean, we're not dealing with a criminal mastermind here. So getting out was pretty easy. Didn't they ever teach you how to pick locks, Winnie?" He winked at me, ever the conspirator.

* * *

"So, where is this place?" By now, Winnie's voice, although tinny on that little speaker, sounded like she was ready for action.

"Up at the end of a dead-end road just outside of town, in an old, locked-up and abandoned mine. It was dark when I got out, but that's what it must be. Maybe five miles from here in downtown. It's not on a road to one of the ski areas, but rather a narrow, local road. The houses along it are quite modest, obviously residents, working folks. And most of the cars parked up there are old beaters. I didn't get an address, though. Sorry."

"So what's your recommendation, Mac?"

"Well, if it were just me, and if I weren't so exhausted plus maybe concussed a little, I just might go back up there and do some clandestine evidence-gathering. Like, now. Before he comes back. And if I had the manpower, I'd set up surveillance and maybe grab him when he does finally come back. I mean, it seems like my little adventure gives you probable cause to go in without a warrant. Particularly if you've got a good lock-picker available."

"Sounds like a plan, Mac. And it just so happens I do have the manpower available, including the lock-picker, although I guess they won't like getting waked up any more than I did. Uh, but I don't know where this place is, really. Can you manage a car trip up there to show us? Then you could get back and sleep the rest of the night away."

Mac stuffed another piece of nigiri sushi—one of those eel-with-sauce things that I'm scared to try—into his mouth and looked at me with his eyebrows lifted. I nodded and whispered "Yes, but I'm coming, dammit!" That made his eyes squint in thought, but then he nodded back.

“Dang, Winnie. I thought you’d be back in Denver by now. If you’re here, well, great, but you get to sit in the back seat of our cramped little rental car on the way up there. Your guys can follow. Deal?” Now Mac was smiling.

“All right. How do I find you?”

Mac told her, and she said it would be an hour or so. That gave us plenty of time to finish the food. I’m glad Mac had ordered a lot, as I found that I’d become quite hungry. Reviving the tempura in the oven had made it crisp again, and I discovered that sushi at 12:30 in the morning turned out to be quite tasty, even if we were a thousand miles from the ocean. Yum!

Ninety minutes later, Mac, Winnie, and I were crammed into our little car, and Mac was driving us up a canyon on a narrow, paved road. He had only his parking lights on, so he was taking it very carefully. The two black SUVs following us also had minimal lights showing. The first several blocks, on downtown city streets, had been deserted, and up there in the canyon, almost all of the houses were dark. In the last half of October, Park City seemed to roll up its sidewalks on week nights.

Eventually, Mac turned sharply right, and the hill became steeper and the road changed to gravel. After another hundred yards or so and one more curve, it came to an end at something resembling a parking area with old, ramshackle mining buildings up against the mountainside.

We all piled out, the six FBI agents in the two SUVs as well, and Winnie introduced everyone. Seth Rothstein was there, and Mac and I both met Henry Runninghorse in person. He was looking quite bemused at the whole thing. Three of the new agents were wearing coveralls, and Winnie introduced them as forensics specialists.

“OK, behind that collapsed building over there,” Mac gestured off to his right, “is a gate made from iron pipe and corrugated sheet metal. It has a padlock and chain on it. That’s how I got out. Inside that, and the gate is set pretty much into the hillside, is what seemed like to me to be the end of a shipping container. It also has a lock on the door you’ll see. A surprisingly well-oiled lock. Pick them both, and you’re in. Got it?”

He looked around at the little group. “If you don’t mind, Sam and I will be on our way. Oh, here, Winnie, that tee-shirt I mentioned. Don’t unfold it until you’re somewhere you can capture the dust it’ll release. And, listen, if I see anything odd on the way down—you know, like a black Hummer headed up this way—I’ll phone you.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were back in our snug condo and just a few minutes after that, in bed. Mac went right to sleep, and, with him beside me, it didn’t take long for me to as well.

We both slept late, and, true to his word, Mac woke up with a headache. But it wasn’t so bad that aspirin, coffee, and a hot shower couldn’t fix it. Although a dusting of snow had fallen overnight—I’d thought it was cold up there by that old mine—it was quickly melting in the morning sunlight, so we decided to go foraging for breakfast in downtown Park City.

Mac and I have a wonderful relationship, even better than I ever imagined a relationship could be. But, I guess because of the connections he still has and what they expect of him, it’s punctuated by episodes of, well, adventure. Or maybe terror. Like that shootout the previous week, where I think I killed a guy and Mac blew up that propane tank and the meth lab.

It goes back to when we first met. There he was, gun in hand, standing next to a date of mine who was dead and bleeding all over the kitchen floor. It wasn’t like I was upset about the guy getting killed—it was a professional date, after all, and I didn’t even know his real name. But it was spooky.

And it keeps happening. Ever since, there's been one thing or another. To make matters worse, I'm certain that I don't know about everything. Mac has this habit, long ingrained from his days overseas, I suppose, of keeping things to himself.

But, for sure, I've never been happier. Hell, I never expected to be this happy.

That morning, foraging for breakfast in a quaint little town in the mountains, was a really good one. We wandered for blocks—some walking wasn't going to hurt us a bit, given how much time we'd been sitting in cars—and finally ran across a likely-looking diner. It looked clean and reasonably modern, but it also seemed like it must be a fixture of the community. And the menu they had posted in the window offered both breakfast and lunch. Because it was about 10:30, that meant we could choose.

The cliché about Chinese food is, of course, that you're hungry ten minutes after you finish a meal. For me, Japanese food isn't quite like that, but, still, I was ready for something hearty. And I could tell that Mac was, too. Maybe all that excitement the night before had something to do with it. In any case, we had the biggest breakfasts they offered, he a breakfast burrito and me a full order of eggs Benedict. And then we shared a Belgian waffle for dessert. It occurred to me that the walk back to the condo was going to have to be just the introduction to some real exercise if I was going to be able to maintain my girlish figure. Well, maybe that's a bit too optimistic.

Even so, that walk was helpful in settling all those calories. We detoured up the hill to Empire Avenue for a few blocks, which was just enough to get us breathing hard and to give us a bit of a view.

We were discussing how to spend our afternoon when we reached home, the condo building on Main Street. But it appeared that the discussion was going to be moot, because sitting there was one of the big, black, FBI SUVs that had followed us to the mine site the night before.

* * *

About the time we came into view, the driver's door opened and Winnie stepped out. I thought that she was looking pretty chipper, given that she'd spent most of the night on that investigation up at that mine site.

"Morning, Winnie." I beat Mac to the punch.

"Sam, Mac. Glad to see you made it back OK last night." And she sounded chipper, too. "Had breakfast yet?"

Mac groaned and patted his stomach. "We sure have. Too much of it. But I could probably manage another cup of coffee. Sam?"

"Sure. Tea, though. And maybe only a half cup."

"Well, I haven't and I'm starved. Hop in. I know just the place. And we can talk there, too."

She turned north on Main Street and wound up taking the same route I'd used to get to the pharmacy the day before. And when she turned into the same parking lot, it was *deja vu* all over again for me. But then we stopped next to the Doubletree there.

"I'm staying here, and I can charge breakfast to my room," Winnie offered by way of explanation.

After a little haggling on Winnie's part, we were shown to a table offering a spectacular view of the mountains as well as privacy. We put in our beverage orders, and Winnie picked something from the menu with just a glance.

“So, Mac. That old silver mine you showed us to turned out to be a gold mine for our case. You were right. All sorts of interesting DNA floating around in there. Although I guess I’ll be surprised if any of it is the perp’s.”

“Have you got samples from the kidnapped girls we liberated?”

“We do. And I’ve got my guys watching that place twenty-four / seven now. When our kidnapper shows up to get you, we’ll get him.”

Mac scratched his chin. “Presumably, that will be fairly soon. I’ll be really pissed if he doesn’t show for a couple of days. After all, I’m supposed to be in there, all tied up. I mean, hell, that’s no way to treat me!”

“Well, I’m not so sure, Mac. See, I had plenty of time to think about all this while my techs were going over those shipping containers in there—and you were right, that’s what they were. It was boring as hell—well, except for the little excitement with the deputy.”

“Huh?”

The server came with our coffee and tea for me, took Winnie’s order, and scurried off.

“What do you mean, Winnie, ‘excitement with the deputy?’” Mac had picked up on that phrase.

“Oh, about forty-five minutes after you left, a Summit County sheriff’s car pulled up. He was shining a spotlight around, and it found Seth standing with both hands visible and his shield displayed. And Seth keeps his shield well-polished, so it positively sparkled. The deputy couldn’t miss it. Anyway, they had a little conversation and the car left. Seth told me it was a sheriff’s deputy on routine night-shift patrol who saw some lights where there shouldn’t be any. So he came up to check it out. Other than that, it was just a matter of waiting around for the techs to finish. We locked everything back up when we left.

“Anyway, what I was thinking about was our perp. Could be that he intended to just leave you there, let you starve, or whatever. Thing is, he knows that someone’s onto him now—you for sure, and, to him, you’re out of the way. But he doesn’t know who else is with you on this, if anyone. He can’t afford to take the chance that you were working alone. And he’s lost his only client for those girls anyhow. I’m thinking he may just shut down his whole operation. Never go back to the mine. Maybe even get rid of the Hummer.”

“You think he’s that smart? I mean, he did a crappy job on me, remember?” Mac looked doubtful.

“Yeah, but like you said, he’s used to dealing with ten-year-old girls. And he’s obviously good at careful planning, given the complexity of some of those snatches he pulled off. Anyway, I’m going to keep my guys up there for a couple of days and see if he shows. If he doesn’t, well, then we need to figure out where to go next.”

“Winnie? How long will it take for the DNA analysis?”

“Well, Sam, not as long as it used to. I’m pulling out the stops to expedite this. We ought to know later this week, probably Friday.”

“OK. And I expect you’ve got samples from those three dead girls from last week as well as the kidnapped ones? And Lucy?”

“We do. And if we can connect this guy—assuming, of course, we can catch him—to that mine site, then he’s in a helluva lot of trouble. Three murders, a whole bunch of kidnappings, Lucy Smith’s abuse, human trafficking. More federal and state felonies than you can count.”

The server came with Winnie's breakfast, a mound of food comparable to the ones Mac and I had put away earlier, and refills for us all. Winnie shoveled it in, Mac sipped his coffee, and I stared at the scenery for a while.

Finally Mac came back to life. "Well, let's see. We've made a little progress. We know the Hummer is black. We can stop looking for houses with gravel driveways. If the dust I got you is a geological match with the dust down in Red Canyon where those girls' bodies were found, that puts the Hummer there. If the DNA all matches, my testimony will put both him and his Hummer at that mine site where some of the girls' DNA was found.

"Now." He drummed his fingers on the table. "Suppose you're right about his shutting the whole operation down and just leaving me there, the rat. Unless he sells the Hummer for cash on the black market—meaning independently of a valid title transfer—it ought to be possible to find out where and to whom he's sold it. And I think, unless Utah is way different from other places, that'll give us our perp's name and maybe address, too. Also, we can filter your Hummer data for black ones and see what turns up. His address ought to be in there already. Oh, and then there's the mine site. Who owns it? How did our perp get the control to build that bunker in there, with plumbing and electricity? Is he pirating the electricity? And this all points to his being local to this part of the mountains. I can't see someone who lives in Salt Lake getting all this organized way up here."

He stopped to take a breath.

"Got anything else for me, Sherlock?" Winnie's tone was as dry as the desert we'd been living in the previous week.

Mac grinned. "Uh, well, since it seems like he was just going to leave me there to starve, I guess it's getting personal with me. And I think it's been personal with Sam ever since we found Lucy Smith in that outhouse, so that makes the two of us. I don't think that either of us wants to miss any potential leads."

Winnie nodded and swallowed the last of her breakfast. "On the other hand—and don't take this the wrong way, Mac; you either, Sam—you're not really full-time FBI and there's this statewide BOLO out for you. With what you discovered for us, I'm now in the position that I can call in help that I trust. You talked about being burned out on this thing, and I'd think your little adventure last night would only emphasize that for you."

I felt a little surge of hope, but Mac frowned. "It sounds like you're going to fire us."

"More like get you out of the line of fire. Or try to. I've been looking at maps, and it turns out that we're only about sixty miles from Evanston, Wyoming. No BOLO there. I'd feel a lot better if you and your distinctive camper van were somewhere safe, at least as far as Utah law enforcement is concerned. I think I can get that thing rescinded, at least outside of Kane County, but it'll take a few more days." She grinned. "Besides, I'm tired of hearing you bitch about that nice rental car I'm paying for. Maybe driving your van around will make you feel better."

My little surge of hope turned into a tidal wave.

Now Mac was nodding. "Actually, that does make sense, Winnie. Time for us to depart quietly and with some shred of dignity. And if you're going to call in FBI reinforcements, do you really need us?"

"Good question. Let's think about it. I can tell that Sam's relieved at the prospect of getting away from all this nonsense. But, really, wouldn't both of you like to be around when we catch this guy? Play a role in the take-down, maybe?"

* * *

Twelve

As Winnie was driving us back to our condo after her breakfast, I was marshalling arguments to just keep on driving east when Mac and I got to Evanston. We could be home by evening, it seemed like. I didn't have a good map of the intermountain west in my head at that point, but I did remember that Interstate 80 went through Laramie and that you could get to Fort Collins from Laramie—and then to Estes Park easily.

I, for one, was done with all this. Let the FBI do their thing and get the case cleared. And, as for being part of the kidnapper's take-down, well, a week or so back I'd have been jumping at the chance. But now? Let's just say that the take-down's entertainment value for me had taken a serious dive in the days since.

The first step, I knew, would be to pack up and get all of our stuff from both the condo and the rental car into the van. Then, after we turned the rental car in, there wouldn't be any excuse to return to Park City in another rental car from Evanston. I figured I could do the packing even if Mac and I were involved in a discussion about the whole thing. I was pretty sure he wouldn't actually argue about this, but he has a way of being persuasive without really arguing, something I was going to have to resist.

Winnie dropped us off. I said good-bye to her, and Mac mentioned that we'd think about further involvement. To my surprise, he didn't sound very enthusiastic, though. Maybe, I thought, there's hope.

He watched her drive off, then turned to me. "So, I reckon we should pack up, huh? I think I'm ready to get out of Utah."

I started toward the building's front door and tried not to sound relieved. "This seems like a good opportunity, what with Wyoming so close and all."

Upstairs, I began the packing process while he sat down behind his laptop. After about fifteen minutes of fiddling, he said, "Winnie's right, Evanston isn't far, and after we clear Park City, it's all interstate. Seems like we could call her from there and decline further involvement in all this."

My heart leapt. "You mean just keep on going east for home?"

"We could. It's not quite noon, and we'd probably get to Estes Park this evening some time." He poked at the computer a bit more. "Or, we could finish this road trip in a bit more style than heading straight home with our tails between our legs. Get east far enough to be north of Colorado, head south, and make a loop through the San Juans down to, say, Durango before going home. Avoid drifting west into Utah, of course."

I hadn't thought of that possibility, and, as I did, I was surprised to find it attractive. The times we'd lived in the van, before finding Lucy and then together at Lees Ferry, were among the best I could recall. Perhaps there was something about the enforced togetherness that I found comforting. God knows that, in my previous life, genuine togetherness was something lacking—artificial togetherness on the basis of a business deal I'd had plenty of, but that's something completely different.

"That's an interesting idea. I don't have all the roads memorized, so how do we do it?"

"Well, if we don't go into Utah at all, it looks like we need to get pretty far east, then head south to Craig. Meaning Colorado. We drove through there on US-40 a couple of weeks ago on our way to Flaming Gorge. It looks like it's not quite two hundred miles past Evanston on Interstate 80 that we'd turn south. I think that's all high plains, rolling pasture with not much in the way of trees. Then it's quite

a ways down to Craig, but I seem to remember that there were several places to stay once there. And some restaurants. Oh! That reminds me. When we get to Evanston, I want to stop at a bank and get some serious cash. I'm running low. Maybe there's a Wells Fargo branch. And, y'know what? Maybe we could find a car wash in Evanston, get that hideous wrap off the van, and get her cleaned up. Anyway, that seems like enough for today, get to Craig and crash for the night."

"OK. What after that?"

He poked at the computer again. "Well, south from Craig there's a state highway that splits near Meeker. One branch keeps south and intersects Interstate 70 at Rifle. The other branch heads west through, let's see...not much. It follows the White River. There's a state wildlife area and eventually a town called Rangely. That's familiar somehow—oh, yeah—one of the Templeton girls was kidnapped from there, or maybe it was one of the dead ones from last week. Anyway, at Rangely we'd turn south toward Grand Junction, and then keep going south to the San Juans. That's probably a morning's drive, if we get an early start from Craig. Then we can have lunch somewhere, maybe Montrose, and plan the afternoon. The weather could be a factor in where we go after that."

"Sounds good to me, Mac. Look, I've got most everything ready to go. Why don't we get the van and turn in the car? Then we can load the van here, OK?"

It took most of an hour to deal with the two vehicles, get the van loaded, and check out of the condo. It was about 1:30 in the afternoon when we crossed into Wyoming and cruised into Evanston at milepost 5. I think we both felt liberated not to be under the cloud of that stupid BOLO any more.

Mac said he'd found out that there was a Wells Fargo branch just north of the interstate on Front Street just past Seventh, and Front Street turned out to be at Exit 5, so we were in business.

Mac pulled the van into the bank's parking lot, which was right next to a Chevrolet dealership with a lot full of shiny new pickup trucks along with a few sedans and SUVs. He went inside and I got out to stretch my legs. I took a good look around, although all there was to see were parking lots, a few low hills off to the east, and the bank building, the most impressive structure in view.

And there was a black Hummer H2 sitting in one of the customer parking spots in front of the dealership next door, not 100 feet from me. Two guys were squatted down examining something on the right front fender, one rubbing at the paint. I pretended to ignore them while continuing to stretch. Eventually they stood up and, after a short, but animated, conversation, they shook hands and went inside the show room. I wasn't sure exactly what to do, but then an idea occurred to me. I found a notepad and pencil in the van's glove box, slipped under the little railing separating the bank's parking lot from the dealership's, and wandered around looking at the prices and features of the cars in the lot.

In the process, I copied down the Hummer's license plate number—the thing had apparently been washed—and verified the scratch on the fender. I didn't worry about the tires, though, figuring that a close look at them might be too obvious. Then I returned to the van, locked it, and went into the bank to find Mac. He was just coming out the door.

"Hold up, Mac. We need to talk strategy a little." I looked around, but no one was paying any attention to us. "There's a black Hummer H2 in the Chevy dealership next door, in one of the customer parking spaces. It's got a scratch on its right front fender. I wrote down the license number, so that's taken care of. I guess I saw its owner and one of the dealer's sales guys looking it over, maybe for its trade-in value. They finally shook hands and went inside."

He looked surprised and kissed me on the forehead. "Bless you, my child. Can you see the Hummer from our van?"

"Maybe, through the back window. Or the door back there if it was opened."

“Good. And, ya know what, Sam? I think that Winnie was spot on about this guy getting rid of his Hummer. Makes sense that he’d do it in another state, too, because the information won’t get into the Utah computers so quickly. That handshake makes it sound like he’s got himself a new car. Maybe we can hang out and get a look at it. She’ll be interested in that, I’d think.”

“Why not? If we’re going to duck out on her, maybe we owe her that favor.” At least, I thought, we can help with the pay-back for that dirtbag. “Should we just sit and watch?”

“Well, first thing, let’s find the binoculars, and I’ll check out the scratch, just to be positive, and see if I can identify the tires. Then we can wait and see what happens. Did you get a good look at the guy?”

“Yeah, but he was unremarkable. Not fat, not thin; not short, not tall. Dark hair. Mirrored sunglasses. Jeans and a red-and-blue flannel shirt, with a green windbreaker. He limped just a little when they walked inside.”

“Excellent. Let’s just see what the binoculars reveal and settle in. I think I’ll turn the van around so we have a better view.

* * *

The binoculars revealed that the scratch I’d seen was also the one Mac saw the previous evening and that the tires were those special off-road ones that made the tracks where the little girls’ bodies were found down in Red Canyon. So we settled in to those comfortable captains’ chairs to wait. Mac had the computers all ready to go anyway, so he started composing what he said was a report to Winnie, and I got online to see about a reservation for us in Craig. I thought I’d then see what I could find about the route into the San Juans that Mac had described.

We were still focused on our laptops’ screens about a half hour later, when we heard a rumbling noise coming from the dealership across the railing. We both looked up in time to see a silver-gray coupe coming around the side of the building toward the front. About the same time, our perp and the sales guy came out the front door, and the car pulled up right next to them.

“Will you look at that? The guy’s bought himself a muscle car, must be a Camaro.” Mac picked up the binoculars. “Oooh! A Z/28 no less. I’m betting the dealer is glad to get that thing off his lot—it’s surprising that he even has one. Our perp must have issues about his manhood.”

“Is that some kind of hot rod?”

“Oh, yeah. Serious hot rod. I forget, but it’s probably 500 horsepower, or something like that. But, geez, why in the world would you want to have one of those in a ski town? Even with snow tires, it’ll suck in the winter. Too much torque, rear-wheel drive. Dumb, dumb, dumb. Oh. Got that other license plate number? Here, write this down with it. It’s his Wyoming temporary tag.” He rattled off a string of numbers and letters, then put down the binoculars and picked up his laptop.

After a look at my notepad and more typing, he poked the touchpad’s button with a flourish. “OK. Done. Winnie should appreciate that. I think I’ll call her to warn her.”

He pulled his phone out.

“Hey, Winnie. You’ve got, as they say, mail. And you were absolutely correct this morning. Our perp has ditched his Hummer. Also, you can have your guys at the mine site stand down, he’s not going to be there. I expect he’ll be back in Park City in an hour or so, assuming that’s where he goes from here. And I’d suggest that you get your techs on their way over here to Evanston. Have them take Exit 5 and go north on Front Street to about Seventh. There’s a Chevy dealership there. It just took the Hummer in as a trade...Hmm?...Ah. Good idea. We’ll wait ’til he leaves and then go over and let them

know. I've got my shield here, that shiny FBI one you gave me, so that ought to do it...Right. New car info, plus the Hummer's tag, is in the email. Happy reading."

"She wants us to hang around, eh?"

"Yeah, but that's better than asking us to follow this dude. I doubt we could keep up anyway—he'll probably give his new ride a little test run, whichever way he goes."

By that point, both the sales guy and our perp were inside the Camaro, and we watched the various lights blink on and off. Once again that rumbling noise told us that he'd started the engine. Eventually, the sales guy got out the passenger door, stuck his hand in the window for what must have been another handshake—the window tint was too dark to really see—and the car pulled away sedately. Out at the street, its left-turn signal blinked at the stop sign for a minute, and then it pulled away toward the interstate with considerably more authority, its tires giving us a couple of good-bye chirps as he went through the first two gears.

Mac looked at me and grinned. "Well as long as Winnie and her team aren't involved in a car chase with that guy, they ought to be able to get him, given all the information they have. Let's go talk with the dealership about that Hummer before they detail it for sale."

I was surprised at how well that went. It must have been that the FBI shield that Mac flashed, along with his reassurance that it was only a delay in their processing the Hummer for its next life that was needed. An FBI forensics team was on its way, he said, and they'd go over it and release it for re-sale. Given Mac's solemn pronouncements about all the dastardly things, both federal and state crimes, the Hummer had been involved in, I think the dealership's manager was overjoyed that it wasn't going to be confiscated.

We celebrated by peeling that orange-and-green wrap off the van and then giving it a good cleaning at a car wash down the street. Mac mentioned something about its needing a thorough detail job including a clay-bar treatment and hand wax as soon as possible, but allowed that what we were able to do was sufficient for the time being. After all, he said, we'd probably just get the thing all dirty again in the next few days anyhow.

And, by about 3:00 that afternoon, we were on our way east on I-80, Utah and all of the Templeton crap behind us and receding in the distance.

A little over four hours later, we pulled into Craig and, first thing, found a place for dinner. We had our doubts that anything would be open fashionably late. That worked as well as we could have expected, and we were in our room at the Hampton Inn by nine, then up and on the road at seven the next morning. It was liberating to be on our own again, with no commitments or deadlines to worry about. Or BOLOs, either.

Because we'd driven clear across northwestern Colorado on US-40 at the beginning our road trip, we were not expecting much in the way of new and different scenery on this leg, at least not until we began to get into the San Juans. But we were pleasantly surprised. To the south of Craig, the grasslands that we'd driven through the day before alternated with stands of trees as the elevation of the highway rose and fell in response to the topography. It was still big country, mostly empty, with ranches, a few small towns, and evidence of oil-and-gas development just about everywhere. The morning passed quickly, and we reached Montrose, about an hour southeast of Grand Junction and an important regional center of commerce, for a late lunch. We found a diner with Wi-Fi, and Mac took his laptop in.

We ordered lunch, a soup and salad for me, and a burger and fries for him, he got the computer connected, then looked up and smiled. "So, what's today? Tuesday? No, Wednesday, right?"

"Wednesday, I think."

“Meaning the last time we didn’t stay in some kind of commercial accommodations was, what, last Saturday night at Lees Ferry? Well, three days in a real bed isn’t too bad, especially as our expenses were all paid. But it’s time to start roughing it again, don’t you think?”

I had to smile back at him. “If you call staying in the van ‘roughing it,’ then I’m just fine with that. I’ve come to like it, even.”

“Good! Exactly what I wanted to hear. This weather report I just pulled up makes things look encouraging for the next few days, at least in terms of what weather is generally like this time of year. So let’s find a supermarket after lunch and stock up on food for, oh, let’s say four nights. Then we can go down to a place called Yankee Boy Basin, I read about it somewhere, just south of Ouray, which is an hour or so south of here. It, the basin, I mean, is up an old mining road. We may see other people up there, but not many. We can spend a night or two there, do a little hiking and some serious relaxing, and figure out where’s next.”

“How do we figure out where’s next without the internet? I mean, this place up an old mining road is not in cell-tower range, is it?”

Mac grinned. “Oh, dear. That’s right. But, y’know, I seem to have forgotten to return all that satellite internet gear that Winnie loaned us. I must be getting old and senile.”

* * *

Even with the grocery stop and another to top off the diesel tanks—Mac keeps bugging me to think “diesel” instead of “gas”—we made it to Yankee Boy Basin by a little before 3:30. And all I can still say is “wow. Just wow”—and this comes from someone who lives in Estes Park, not such a shabby place for mountain scenery. It was a good-sized, well, basin, not big or flat enough to be called a “park,” in Colorado terminology. About half way between Ouray and Telluride, but accessible only from Ouray, it sat between tree-line and about 12,000 feet surrounded on three sides by ridges and peaks above 13,000 feet, with Mt. Sneffels, at a little over 14,000 feet, dominating the skyline. Wow. I couldn’t see the sky, that deep-blue Colorado high-country sky, without risking a crick in my neck. We stopped at just about tree-line, plenty high for me, as I discovered on getting out of the van to walk around. A dozen steps and I was dizzy, even with a lot of extra breathing.

I’m glad we’d had those jeep trails in the National Monument down in southern Utah to get me used to the idea of off-road, or really-bad-road, travel in our van. I suppose that you could get up to Yankee Boy Basin in a regular car, as long as it wasn’t too low-slung. I bet my VW Beetle would have made it. Hmm. Maybe. But it was a lot easier in our properly equipped conversion van, that’s for sure. One interesting thing about the road in was that, long after it stopped being a “regular” gravel road and started being more jeep-like, we came upon a working mine, to which, I guess, workers commuted up the mountain each day. Amazing.

When we got up there, Mac explored around a little, looking for the perfect spot to set up our little camp site. He settled on a promontory above a bend in Sneffels Creek, overlooking a meadow and a wall of rock that ascended to the 13,700-foot Gilpin Peak, or so the topo map told us.

Then we got the bad news.

It was about five in the afternoon, after we were settled in for the evening, we thought, that we heard a faint call of “Hello the van!” shortly followed by a knock on the door.

Tyler French, as he introduced himself, was an outfitter and, this time of year, a big-game-hunting guide. It seems that we’d set up our little camp in an area in which he had not only brought clients with

elk licenses but also, by local custom, had first rights of refusal for his clientele. It seemed that, at the least, he wanted us to move, and, if we were there to hunt, to get the hell off his turf.

I had started to work on supper, so I wasn't interested in arguing with him. Besides, Mac is a better negotiator—his experience in the Middle East, in fact, turned him into a master haggler by my standards.

So he invited Tyler French in for a drink and a chat. That raised my hackles, but, at some level, I saw the wisdom of the approach. Besides, the young, strapping, handsome, and still reasonably clean Tyler French was quite decorative, from my perspective, at least. When Mac introduced him to me, I made sure to be as welcoming as I could manage. But I tried not to flirt.

There were two issues. If we were there to hunt elk, the turf thing was going to be problematic. But we were just sight-seeing, so that wasn't a problem. However, French had come up with a group of sports, paying clientele, with several vehicles full of equipment. It turned out that we were camped right next to the only spot that would hold his party. In point of fact, he was warning us that we were in for a boisterous night, should we elect to stay where we were. Proximity to his camp would guarantee that. On the up side, it would also, most likely, mean that we wouldn't be getting any stray rifle shots in our direction, but you never really knew.

Mac was great.

“Oh. Y'know, we're sort of new to Colorado, and we live in Estes Park, where there's really no hunting conflicts because of the national park. So I just forgot about hunting season. Is this one of the rifle season weeks?”

“Yes it is, Mr. MacQuarrie. And, of course, those of us who depend on these weeks for our year's livelihood take it most seriously.”

“I bet you do, Tyler. I remember seeing all sorts of blaze orange hats and so on where we stopped for fuel down in Ridgeway. Guess I should have bought one of everything. Need a refill?” Mac poured before French answered. “Anyway, I understand the problem. And I know how your clientele can get, um, keyed up the night before a hunt. Have you any suggestions about where we could move to? I mean, around here, out of your way, and so on, of course.”

He sent us back down the “road” we'd come up and then back up another, well, a track that didn't deserve to be called a “road” that ended in a aspen grove. The bare branches still allowed us a good view of everything, so it turned out to be an even better spot. All I could hope for is that no one would mistake our van for an elk.

The night outside was cold and a bit blustery, judging from the rocking of the van, and in the morning the outside temperature was 15°. That wouldn't have discouraged us from staying, but the presence of a camp full of guys with high-powered rifles intent on out-drinking each other did. After breakfast, we decided to move on. The question was, to where? The only parts of the Colorado back-country off-limits to hunting were the national parks and monuments.

I found that I couldn't do much in the way of an internet search for where next on our way back down to Ouray—the jostling of the van on even the better parts of that sort-of road was just too much for the signal to hold. And in Ouray, the box canyon's walls blocked the satellite. Still, we needed to decide which way to go—south to Durango, or back north toward Montrose.

Mac pulled onto a side street in Ouray and parked the van to give us a good view—although there really weren't any bad ones in that little town.

He took off his ball cap—his FBI one that day—aand scratched his head. “If I remember correctly, there are five national parks and monuments here in Colorado. Colorado National Monument, up by

Grand Junction. In fact, I remember passing a sign for it yesterday, on our little section of Interstate 70 up there. There's Mesa Verde National Park, south of here and west of Durango and Great Sand Dunes, uh, I guess it's a National Park now, way east of Durango in the San Luis Valley. Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, east of Montrose, where we had lunch yesterday. And, of course, Rocky, up by home. What's your pleasure?"

"Well, Mesa Verde is ancient ruins, cliff houses, right? It's in the wrong direction, though. The Sand Dunes are, well, you know, just big piles of sand. I hear they're beautiful in the right light, but... What's at Black Canyon? At least it's close. And it's on the way toward home, right?"

"What's at Black Canyon is a big canyon with walls of black rock, I think. And probably some hiking trails. I wonder if they're open for camping this time of year? Tell you what. We can head north and, as soon as you can get a satellite signal, you can check to see if it's open. No, wait. There's a cell signal here, right? Let's try the van's cellular connection." He reached over for my laptop, fiddled with it, and handed it back with the Black Canyon web site showing. "I knew that would come in handy at some point."

It turned out that they did indeed have camping, so we turned north, back toward Montrose, and then east on US-50. After a few miles, there was a sign, and we took a side road that climbed onto a plateau and then onto another. Up there, the vegetation was scrub oak, I think it's called Gambel oak, growing ten feet tall or so in wide-spread thickets. It actually worked quite well to provide a surprising amount of privacy in what would otherwise have been a very public place. In the summer, I expect it would have been better, but even in late October, the little trees, or bushes or whatever they are, clung to brown leaves, which rattled in the breeze. (Hmm. Do the trees cling to the leaves, or do the leaves cling to the trees? I picked the former, as the leaves are dead but the trees are not.)

Anyway, it was so private, and quiet, that we spent three nights there, in the process doing just about everything there was to do. We hiked, Mac fished—there was the steepest road I've ever been on down to the river—and I sketched, getting some good ones in the process.

Finally, having run out of new things to do—the trails were just fine, but we felt no urge to hike them twice—and eaten most of our food, we decided to declare victory. We'd been on the road for over three weeks, after all.

Sunday morning, we packed up and headed east, toward home.

* * *

Thirteen

Our three weeks on the road had included a range of hotels, in terms of quality, a condo, a rental RV, and, of course, the van, so we were used to variety. But it was good to be home. Our queen-sized bed was not only comfortably familiar but huge, compared to the mattress, merely full-sized, we had in the van. And having elbow room while making breakfast seemed almost decadent.

The new home we'd bought, or maybe it just amounted to switching around in a fit of downsizing and making a profit at it, was a townhouse, technically a condominium, but not in the usual sense. Most people think of condos like the one I owned on Miami Beach—an apartment in a big high-rise—or like the one we had stayed in the week before in Park City. What we found in Estes Park was actually a

small, detached, single-family house, but one built on almost no lot. In fact, the land was all part of the association, so we didn't have any outdoors maintenance responsibilities.

And the association was limited to the houses on the same piece of land, ours and seven others. Yes, there were rules, but they were just fine with us, especially the one that prohibited short-term vacation rentals. All the members of the association were owners and more-or-less full-time residents of their houses. And they all were in favor of low association fees.

With two bedrooms, one of which we used for an office, and two bathrooms plus a double garage big enough to fit the van and the Jeep into—although the garage door just barely cleared the van, so we always lowered the air suspension as much as possible—we had just what we needed. And the location was an improvement as well. Instead of being three or so miles from downtown, we were within walking distance. After-supper trips for ice cream cones were possible on foot, meaning that the walk home helped with the calories of the dessert, especially that little hill we had to walk up.

With no yard responsibilities, we could up and leave for any sort of vacation—which isn't to say that retirement is not a permanent vacation anyway—with no fuss or special arrangements. To make this work even better, just before we moved we changed our mailing address to one of those package / mail / office-supply stores here in town that offered post office boxes. They took our mail *and* our packages and would hold them for as long as we were out of town.

Of course, that meant that, after a trip, we needed to make sure to pick up mail and packages as soon as possible. Mac was just about to do that Monday morning, in fact, when his phone, hooked up to a house-wide system, started all the extensions chirping in their annoying manner. He picked up the most handy one.

“Yes?...Oh, hi, Winnie...News?...Oh. OK. Um, let's see. Yeah, this thing I've got here has a speaker button. Let me get Sam and we can all talk.”

I'd been cleaning up after breakfast, so I dried off my hands and walked over to where Mac was on the other side of the great room, as it was called—the combined kitchen / dining / living areas. We sat down next to each other on the couch, and Mac poked a button on the handset he was using.

“Sam, are you there? Can you both hear me?” Winnie's voice was more clear than it was on Mac's cell phone speaker.

“Hi, Winnie! Good to hear your voice. How's everything?” I was actually happy to hear from her. I'm sure Mac was even happier.

“For me, everything's good. I'm back at home in Denver, for one thing. Travel to all those exotic places like Flagstaff and Page and Bryce Canyon and St. George and Park City, you know, it's all well and good, but home is better. For another thing, we got our guy, thanks to you folks. I wish there was some way to really recognize your contributions.”

Mac laughed. “Hell, Winnie. All you need to do is to pay the consulting invoices I'm going to send you today.”

“Ha! I've already figured that part out. Most of it is going to get billed to the DEA. I'll pick up your Park City expenses, of course, but everything else is on their dime. Make sure you charge double for that explosive round you used on Obie Templeton's propane tank. I mean, you've got overhead just like we do.” Then she laughed. “Do you guys want to hear about our kidnapper?”

“You bet!” Even though I tried, I couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice.

“I just I wish I had some time alone with him. But, sure, whatcha got for us?” Mac winked at me.

“OK, let’s see. Your tip about his new car and his old license plate gave us everything we needed. We used the plate to find his address and set up surveillance, and we grabbed him when he finally came home late last Tuesday evening. It seems he’d been driving around all afternoon and had put almost six-hundred miles on his new Camaro. Lots of very fast driving, if you do the math. Turns out he’s one Michael Young, no less than a deputy with the Summit County Sheriff’s Department. Moreover, he was the deputy who showed up at the mine site when we were there that night—uh, a week ago, I guess. Meaning, of course, that he really, really knew that someone was on to him. And, oddly enough, he’s been the usual partner for my contact there, Lisa Hamilton. She, of course, was blind-sided by all this but has since been able to provide considerable insight into his activities, things she never paid attention to before but remembers. Oh. And my forensics techs came up with all sorts of interesting things from that Hummer he traded in. Mac, this was just about a perfect take-down.”

“Yeah, well, we helped, but remember that it was your idea that we get out of Utah by going over to Evanston and that the guy might be shutting his operation down and getting rid of that Hummer. The fact that we found him there really comes down to your insight, Winnie, and the coincidence that we bank at Wells Fargo. I’m just sorry that I won’t be able to do to him what he did to Lucy. He deserves some time upside down in a vat of liquid shit, as far as I’m concerned.”

She laughed. “Well, it’s all good, Mac. He’s in a really serious vat of *legal* shit for the foreseeable future. By now he’s all lawyered up, of course, but both the state and the federal prosecutors are positively giddy about what we’ve got on him. Interstate kidnapping, murder, child-sex trafficking, hell, being a general bad-ass. It wouldn’t surprise me if the Utah people push for capital punishment for this guy. They’ve talked about how the girls he killed and left in Red Canyon constitute aggravated murder one. And they’re really, really pissed about Lucy Smith, although what he did to her is actually not a capital crime in Utah.”

Mac nodded, and I was nodding, too. He said, “Keep digging, Winnie, especially into the statements of all those Templeton women. There may be more there. Meantime, I’m happy to help out with this stuff, and I can sure use the consulting fees. Let me know if you need help in the future, OK?”

There was a noise from the phone that sounded like a snort. “Yeah, well, I’ll wait until I see your invoice before I decide on that. You guys take care, now.”

The phone extension went dead, and Mac looked up at me. “Well, I’m sure glad that’s over with. And that the good guys won. Whew. So. Where were we? Need anything in town? I’ll go get our mail.”

But before he could stand up, the phones all started jangling again.

“Hello?...Ah...OK...Oh, hello Chief...Well, I was just about to come down to Stanley Village to pick up our mail—we’ve been out of town for about three weeks. Can we stop by?...OK, will do. About, oh, 45 minutes. See you soon.”

He looked at me. “Odd. That was Estes Park police chief Val Walker. He needs to talk to us about something. So let’s go get the mail and then stop by the town offices.”

* * *

The Estes Park town offices, including the police department, were on Elkhorn, normally a gridlock of tourist traffic with no parking available anywhere. But, on Monday of Halloween week, it was pretty empty. We easily found parking in the municipal lot next to the police department.

Chief Val Walker’s front-desk person kept us waiting only briefly, until, he said, a phone call was completed. Then the Chief, a compact, trim-looking, grandfather type with a crew-cut that made his bald spot seem less obvious, came out to greet us and lead us into his office.

Once we were all seated, he stared at the ceiling for a time that started to become uncomfortable, and then looked back and forth at us.

“Sorry, I’m trying to figure out how best to begin.” He looked at Mac. “You, sir, are Hamish MacQuarrie, whom everyone calls ‘Mac,’ and who has a very interesting background. Suffice it to say that you’re now affiliated with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, right?”

Mac nodded.

“And you, ma’am, are Samantha Winslow, a local artist of, may I say, remarkable talent and a growing reputation?”

Surprised as I was, all I did was nod.

“I’d like very much to have the opportunity to talk with you about your paintings, Ms. Winslow. Some other time, however, because today I’ve something else more important. Just to be clear as a start: last spring, the two of you sold a home on the south side of town and bought a condo up on the bluff above the west end of Elkhorn, more or less?”

“Yeah, that’s us, Chief. What’s going on?” I couldn’t help but wonder what he wanted to know about my paintings.

“This.”

And he passed to Mac a document encased in a clear plastic envelope. At first glance, it appeared to be word-processed in a generic fashion and printed in a large font on some kind of computer printer, maybe a laser printer. I leaned over to read it along with Mac.

Hey, there, Little Buddy –

You probably thought that breaking my leg and then getting my brothers and me all arrested was the end of your involvement in this. But what you don’t know is that we are part of a support network that takes these kinds of things personally. So now you’re in deep, deeper than you ever expected. Your treatment of us, not to mention my father and the rest of his family, has earned you and your whore the sentence of death and eternal damnation, from...

The Army of God

As Mac and I read and re-read this a few times, I felt the hairs on my neck stand up. Finally, Chief Walker cleared his throat.

“The thing is, this note, and you can see the slit in the paper if you look carefully, it was found on the front door of that house you sold, held there by a good-sized, fixed-blade knife that was stuck nearly an inch into the wood. Now, the new owners actually moved here only recently, because they had some work done on the house over the summer. And they made a last trip back to Iowa to get a final load of belongings just last week. When they returned here a couple of days ago, they found this note. As you can imagine, they’re a little spooked. They told me they didn’t even read the thing but just called us when they saw the knife.”

Mac nodded. “Certainly can’t blame them for being spooked. Let’s see. As I recall, they moved here from Council Bluffs, and he’s retired from his job managing some kind of big store. I think he said something about a Macy’s at a mall there, when we were chatting at the closing. Point is, it doesn’t seem at all likely that this note was meant for them.”

“Which means,” the Chief said, “that it was meant for you.”

“Mmm. You have the knife?” Mac had on his poker face.

Chief Walker looked surprised, then opened a desk drawer and took out a plastic bag with a knife visible. It looked to be about eight inches long and resembled a sort of hunting knife. He handed the bag, gingerly, over to Mac, who inspected it through the plastic.

“Says here ‘Made in China.’ And it looks like a cheap imitation of a Ka-Bar combat knife, Chief, a sort of miniature one. No doubt you’ve dusted it for prints and so on?” Mac handed the bag back to the Chief as he was nodding.

“Well, Chief, I guess I could try to weasel out of this by trying to persuade you that these bozos just made a mistake, but that doesn’t seem very neighborly. So. Because you know about my CBI connection, I’ll assume that you’ve read all the reports about that business with Trevor Swent last year, and about the death of the lawyer Michael Decker. What wasn’t in those reports, because it just happened over the past couple of weeks, is that I also have this now.”

He’d reached into an inside pocket—I’d wondered why he was wearing a sport jacket—and taken out the wallet with his FBI shield, which he handed to the Chief. Walker looked at it, and the accompanying identification card, carefully and handed it back.

“CBI *and* FBI? What are you, some kind of super-cop?”

Mac laughed. “Too bad I don’t have my old NYPD shield. That’d *really* impress you, I bet. No, I’m definitely not a super-cop. But I do have a lot of experience, and some connections at a much higher level, which I really can’t talk about, but which these folks like to tap into now and then. So they’ve put me on a sort of stand-by as a consultant. Anyway, Sam and I were over in Utah for the past few weeks, and we got all wrapped up in an FBI investigation. It seems to have made some folks mad. And, based on the language in that note, I know exactly who. But I doubt that he’s the one who stuck the knife in the door, because he has a broken leg and may still be in jail. It sounds like this Army of God is acting as his surrogate over here in Colorado.”

“Ah...OK. I guess that’s a beginning.” Chief Walker obviously wanted more.

“I understand, Chief. And, to be candid, I’m a little surprised. I thought the Army of God was over with after that business with the Purdy brothers and that lawyer Decker, last year, the whole Swent thing. Maybe the thing to do is for us to have a little conference call with my FBI contact. She can decide how much information she’s willing to pass along. And she’ll definitely be interested in the circumstances of this note. Is there a scan of it I could email to her?”

* * *

I tried to be patient while Mac and Chief Walker dickered about who should email what to whom. It finally worked out that Mac realized that the Chief needed Winnie’s email address anyway, just on general principles, so the Chief might as well email the scan of the note, which they had on file, to both Mac and Winnie. And, because the Chief’s desk phone was set up for conference calls with a high-quality speaker, he also got to call her.

But she was on another line. We were assured that she’d call back with a few minutes.

“Actually, Ms. Winslow, I’m glad for that. Can I ask about your art work?” The Chief’s official manner changed completely.

“Call me Sam, Chief. And, sure, ask away.”

“Well, I’ve taken up painting, especially landscapes, as a way to relax. My doc says I need to get my blood pressure down. And if I could paint even just a teeny bit like you do, I bet that would do the trick. What’s your secret?”

I was pleasantly surprised. I knew my stuff was popular, but no one had really asked me for advice before. “Well, I majored in art in college, Chief, so I learned some basic technique there. Probably any kind of quality art lessons would do that for you. But I think what makes my style so distinctive, and maybe unique, is how I try to minimize what I put on the canvas. And I do it in a way that a book I read talks about. ‘Sensory Awareness’ it’s called. If you Google it, I bet you find a lot of information.”

“Thanks very much, Sam. I’ll...” But his phone rang, and he poked a button as he picked it up.

“Chief Walker.”

“Chief, this is Agent Winifred Small, FBI. I believe I missed a call from you. Sorry.”

“Thanks for calling back, Special Agent Small. I’m here, on a speaker phone, with Mac MacQuarrie and Samantha Winslow. Do you have a few minutes?”

“I’ll make a few minutes. Hey, Mac. Hey, Sam.”

I jumped in first. “Hey, Winnie. We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

“Hi again, Winnie. Did you get that email from the Chief here?” Mac jumped in second.

There was a little pause before she responded. “Oh, yeah. Just now. Uh...give me a minute...What? What’s this ‘little buddy’ stuff?”

Mac tried not to laugh too hard. “That’s what the Templeton kid whose leg I broke called me, in that parking lot down at Marble Canyon. What was his name? Jerold? Oh, yeah, Jeremiah. Jerry. And, of course, the other stuff makes it clear that he, somehow, wrote most of that note, or dictated it. So one question is, where is this guy? If he’s out free, well, then I can understand how he passed this message along to whoever these Colorado people are. But I thought you had him incarcerated.”

“Yeah, well, turns out that all three brothers are juvies, Mac. We had to release them to relatives. But they’re on a short leash.”

Mac looked at both me and the Chief, with an “it figures” eye-roll.

No one spoke for a few seconds, so I jumped in again. “Winnie? I feel really bad for these people who bought our house. They come by, new, proud owners, and find this stupid note stuck into their front door with a big knife. I know that it’s not our fault, but I feel bad. Isn’t there something we can do to get this Army of God bunch off their case?”

“Well, Sam, life isn’t always fair, as I’m sure you know. And as long as these vigilantes have their sights on these poor folks, they’re not really likely to find you and Mac, are they?”

“C’mon, Winnie! That’s bullshit. Yeah, I know that life isn’t fair, but, geez, we need to try to make it as fair as possible. Do you know where this Templeton kid is? Could you let him know that we don’t live there any more without giving up where we do live? Maybe he’d pass the word along. Especially if you could make some kind of deal with him about his, um, legal exposure.”

There was a long pause, during which Chief Walker nodded at me and winked. “Good going,” he whispered.

“Sam, you’re right.” Winnie had finally made up her mind, I guess. “And maybe I can find out how, and with whom, Jerry communicates with this Army of God.”

It was Mac's turn. "Well, you remember, right, that the Purdy brothers, whom we took down that evening up at their ranch, and that lawyer who got killed earlier, Decker, they were all part of the Army of God? I'd thought that was the end of it all, but I guess there are more of those scumbags. We just need to identify and go after them."

"I agree, Mac, except for the 'just' part. I don't think it'll be that easy."

"Yeah, well, it never is. But I've got an idea or two. Why don't you see if you can get Jerry Templeton to call off the dogs, in terms of these poor folks from Iowa who bought our house, and I'll see about Army of God members who might be involved here?" Mac looked at me and winked.

"That sounds like a good start."

I felt a little better. "Thanks, Winnie."

"OK, at least we have something of a plan forward...Oh, wait. Hell. Chief Walker, my apologies. This was your phone call, and Mac, Sam, and I seem to have hijacked it. I'm sorry. No doubt you have some questions of your own." As Winnie waited, the Chief broke into a big smile.

"I do, Agent Small, I do. I've been taking notes, and each of them ends with a question mark. Those, of course, are on top of the questions I had going in. On the other hand, I think I'm able to infer some things I didn't know before, so some of those questions are getting answered. One thing I'm wondering about—and this is sort of idle curiosity, because so far I don't see a direct bearing on matters here—is whether all that stuff I read in the papers recently about a DEA raid on a meth laboratory in Utah, a place associated with the name 'Templeton,' has any relationship to the Templetons that Mac mentioned just now."

"Mmm. As you said, Chief, that was a DEA raid. We federal agencies are, unfortunately, not very communicative with each other about things like this. And, I don't really know, but I'd be willing to hazard a guess that 'Templeton' is a fairly common name over there in southern Utah."

The Chief's smile turned into out-loud laughter. "An exceptional non-answer, Agent Small. I think I owe you at least a cup of coffee for that. If you're ever up here in Estes, look me up, and we'll go across the street to a very good local roaster. At the least, we can swap yarns about this fellow MacQuarrie who's sitting in front of me."

Mac actually blushed.

"I'd like that, Chief. The son-of-a-bitch saved me from being eaten by that pack of wolves, or wolfdogs or whatever they were, the ones the Purdys kept, did you know that? Anyway, I'll do all I can to get this Templeton kid to tell his Colorado associates to call off the hit on the people who bought Mac and Sam's house. Seems like that's a high priority in all this."

"Thank you, Agent Small. That's what's been worrying me the most. Of course, there's also the welfare of the two fine, upstanding, Estes Park citizens who are sitting right here, but I kind of have the idea that they can take care of themselves."

"It all depends, Chief. Give them guns and they seem invincible. But I'm not sure you want old-west-style gunfights in Estes Park these days. Maybe that would add historical authenticity, but I bet that eventually it would scare away the tourists. Or kill 'em off. Not good for commerce."

The Chief laughed some more. "Too true, Agent Small, too true. Thanks for your time. And if you get any sort of confirmation about calling off the Army of God, please don't hesitate to let me know. I'm going to worry about these Iowa folks in the meantime."

"I'll do that for sure, Chief. Anything else?"

“Not just now. And thanks again.” The Chief poked his phone and it went silent. Then he looked up at us, back and forth to each of us.

“Yeah. Well. First and foremost, assuming we get these Iowa newcomers out of danger, I want you both to know that I’m really, *really* not in favor of gunfights in my little town. Right?”

“Especially not with the firepower that Mac would bring to the show.” I saw Mac wince out of the corner of my eye. “Chief, we really are in the business of being the kinds of citizens you just described us as, believe me.”

“She’s right about our attempts at good citizenship. But I don’t see how this Army of God will not eventually find out our new street address. So it seems like we ought to go after them before they come after us, don’t you think?” Mac, I could tell, had an ace up his sleeve.

“I do think that. From what I’ve gathered from reading all the reports on last month’s excitement, it looks like the murder and fire at Decker’s house was Army of God related, as were reports of significant gun-fire up at the headquarters of that conference center in the Tahosa Valley where the mud-slide was. And that wolfdog pack that Agent Small referred to somehow disappeared. I sure don’t want them loose, either, especially if this Army has them.”

“Don’t worry about that, Chief. I talked Boulder County animal control into sneaking over the county line to rescue them. They’re probably in some plush wildlife sanctuary by now, lapping up specially prepared carnivore smoothies. After all, it wasn’t the animals’ fault that they were that way, it was Elias Purdy’s fault. He got what he deserved, as far as I can tell.”

Chief Walker looked both relieved at this news but also distressed. “But, c’mon, Mac. They ate him, for crying out loud, ate him alive, if that report of yours is accurate.”

“Just goes to show, Chief, how karma can come back to bite you.”

The contrast between Mac’s grin and the Chief’s look of dismay was precious.

* * *

Fourteen

Mac was quiet on the short drive home, obviously deep in thought. I could tell he was formulating some kind of plan.

He had this way of withdrawing into himself whenever there was a problem that he had to confront, partly, I guess, because that was how he had operated for years and years in his assignments in the Middle East and partly because he was trying to protect me from having to worry about all the risky things he got involved in. Of course, that just made me worry all the more. No matter how many times I told him that, it didn’t seem to take.

This time, though, I knew we had to be in this together, so, as a reminder, I took a stand on it while we were eating lunch, a couple of sandwiches I whipped up using what was left from the cooler in the van.

“What’s your plan, Mac?”

“Hmm?” He tried his usual trick of looking innocent. “Plan for what?”

I put on my not-quite-mad face. “Don’t try to pull that one on me again, pal. You know exactly what I mean. What are you going to do about this ‘Army of God’ outfit? We’re in this one together.”

He stared at me, drummed his fingers on the tabletop, and finally sighed.

“I guess you’re right. This once.” He smiled and winked to take to let me know he was teasing, something he does a lot of. “But my first move is going to disappoint you. I need to do more computer work.”

“What? And wait until those goons find out where we live now and stick a knife in our brand new front door? Really?”

“Somewhere, stored away from when we unpacked, is one of those high-capacity external hard drives. I made off with it from Michael Decker’s house last year, the night he was killed, when you were over in Fraser with Hal and Annette, you know, when we couldn’t flush the toilets because of the flood. I swiped it just as the Decker house was burning down. No one but me, and now you, knows about it. Thing is, Decker was secretary and treasurer of that conference center the Chief mentioned, CRAG, the Center for Retreats of the Army of God. The one that part of got wiped out in the mud slide from the flood, along with that Larimer Sheriff’s deputy—what was his name? Oh, yeah, Smithy. Aaron Smithy. Anyway, maybe, just maybe, there are names on that thing of Army of God members, or something else useful like that. I really never looked at it.”

He shook his head. “With that deputy’s having been a member, I wonder about other people, both in the sheriff’s office and on the police force here. Although, really, that’s hard to imagine. But it’s a worry.”

“Oh. Well, I guess, dig it out and see what’s on it, that hard drive.” Then I discovered that his worry was contagious. “Do you really think we’re up against local law enforcement in addition to this Army of God bunch?”

“I sure hope not. I think it’s in a box in the study closet, so I’ll look there first.”

“OK, and I’ll finish with the laundry. Oh, boy—what fun!” I’m certain the sarcasm wasn’t lost on him.

It was about a half-hour later that I heard a loud “Aha!” from the hall, and then Mac showed up in the kitchen holding a small metal box. “Got it! It was out in the garage.”

I was in the middle of folding stuff from the dryer as he disappeared back down the hall. After I finished that, I found him busy at work on his computer.

“Finding anything of interest?” I looked over his shoulder and kissed his ear.

“Just started. Fortunately, the directories on this thing don’t seem to be encrypted or anything like that.” He turned his head to look up at me, and looked back at the screen. “Oh, hey, what’s this?”

It was hard for me to tell—I was standing a little too far back to be able to read the small text on his screen—but it looked like a directory listing of some kind. Lots and lots of sub-directories. I leaned in closer and saw that the names of those subdirectories all took the form of Abernathy_John_G.

“Looks like it might be a gold mine. Want some coffee? I think there’s some left from the trip. Beans, I mean. Uh, we need a real trip to the grocery if we want dinner.”

“Hey, thanks! That would be great. This could take a while, and it doesn’t look all that exciting.” And he clicked open the first of those subdirectories.

Fifteen minutes later, after the coffee maker had finished its cycle, I took a big mug of coffee into the study. “Find anything else?”

“You were right—it’s a gold mine. Decker must have arranged all this information to be used in some kind of database program. Not a real one, but one that uses these plain text files, which helps, because they’re all easy to read. But there are all sorts of cross-references and just about anything else you’d need to figure out everything about the Army of God. Like, they’re organized in a para-military fashion, only their hierarchy doesn’t use military titles, like sergeant or major. They use church terminology. Deacon, bishop—titles like that. And they seem to have a variety of church affiliations, although none of them seems mainstream.”

“Can you tell where they are?”

“Looks like all over, at least all over the big square states out west here. I ran across a map that showed something like Congressional districts—fewer and bigger, but they’ve got the states divvied up with units in each. We’re in a northern and western Colorado unit, a big rectangle with a dividing line sort of along Highway 34 out east, but a little south of it, including about everything north and west of Glenwood Springs. Big area with only something like fifty or sixty members.”

“And, apparently, some here in Estes Park.”

“Actually, not that I’ve found, at least none except the guys involved with that CRAG center, who are all out of commission. So whoever’s after us now must be a bunch from either east of here on the plains or out west somewhere.” He remembered something. “Oh, yeah, look at this.”

He clicked on a couple of things and that directory of names popped up again, the one with Abernathy_John_G at the top of the list. Then he scrolled down to the Ts, and there were the two Templeton brothers, Levi and Obadiah, along with several more Templetons whose first names didn’t ring any bells for me. Levi’s sons weren’t there, though.

“It all fits together, doesn’t it?” Mac looked satisfied with the information he’d found. “All we have to do now is to identify which of these yo-yos are the ones looking for us here in Estes. And deal with them somehow.”

“I don’t suppose there are pictures on that hard disk somewhere? Have you looked through the whole thing?”

I was still looking over his shoulder, and he turned his head just enough to see me from the corner of his left eye, a disgusted squint if I ever saw one. “Think I’m a dummy, don’t ya? Well, I am. I’m sure I saw a directory somewhere called something like ‘PhotoIDs.’”

It took him all of thirty seconds to find it, and then he said, “OK, but how are these pictures going to help us? We’ve got names and faces, but how do we match any of them up with the people who are looking for us?”

I was as stumped as he was. But at least, I thought, he’s including me in his research on this. I couldn’t help but remember the previous time the issue of our working together on such things had come up, last spring when we were unpacking. I had needed to come on lots stronger.

* * *

Mac had been at work on getting the garage organized. I remember it had high stacks of packing boxes lining the garage walls, with our new knobby-tire shod, off-road-ready Jeep and my cute Mary-Kay Beetle squeezed between. At that point, the van was still a gleam in Mac’s eyes.

The master bedroom (our clothes and bathroom stuff) and the kitchen (more this-and-that than I would ever have thought) were unpacked and, pretty much, put away. That left the boxes in the second bedroom, the study, all unpacked thanks to Mac, and the boxes of books in the living room. There were

dozens of shelf-feet of empty bookcases awaiting those books. And, although the book boxes worked nicely as footstools, we really didn't need that many footstools. So I decided to pretend to be a librarian and do my best to ignore all the odd noises coming from the garage.

Because I was only pretending to be a librarian, my effort at organizing all the books we had—a surprising number—was limited to putting tall books on tall shelves and short ones on short ones. So, about an hour later, I had a pile of flattened cardboard boxes and full, if not very well organized, bookcases. It sure looked impressive, but I was not at all confident that either of us could find anything we might be seeking. “Tall or short?” didn't seem like a very effective search method.

But it was done, so I went out to the garage, only to discover that Mac had moved both vehicles outside and created a mound of full packing boxes in the middle of the emptied space. He was assembling a storage shelf against the outside wall.

“Wow. This is going to be some job, looks like. Can I help?”

“Oh, hi. And, yes, you can. I've got this first shelf done. I can put up the second one next to it while you fill this first one up. That sound doable?” He gestured in the direction of the mound of boxes. “I got them organized, a little bit at least, so if you start on the end here by the shelves, those boxes are what goes here.”

“Uh, I can't possibly reach those top shelves.”

“Neither can I, without a ladder. If you put heavy stuff on the bottom shelves, then the step-ladder will let you put the light-weight stuff on the upper shelves.” He grinned. “Hey, you asked if you could help, right?”

I looked everything over and steeled myself. “OK. Where are my garden gloves?”

He grinned again. “Found 'em already. Over there in the corner on top of those small boxes. I thought you might ask.”

Out of excuses, I decided I should just pitch in. “Ah, good, thanks. Um, one more thing. What if I run across something of yours that needs to go into your Secret Place? Is that ready yet.”

“Huh?”

“You know, like those cabinets you had in the crawl space of the south-side house. Where should I put the stuff that was in those, if I find any of it?”

Remembering the next part was still fun for me because at the time I wasn't supposed to know about any of that, crawl space, cabinets, secret stash. He didn't understand that I'd known well all the nooks and crannies of our house. Hell, *my* house, at least if you count whose money paid for it. Sheesh!

“What?” The Mr. Innocent persona tried but failed.

“Oh, *c'mon, man!* You think I didn't hear you clunking around down there in the crawl space months ago? And you think I never went down there to figure out what was happening, to see what all that stuff you were hiding was? The rifles, the handguns, everything else? I live here too, you know. Give me a break, will ya?”

To my amusement, and gratification, he opened and closed his mouth three times before answering. And his face got all red, not the red that I'd seen so much of when he was stressed but the red of embarrassment. I bit the inside of my lower lip hard enough to keep me from breaking out in laughter. I loved the guy more than I've loved anyone else, ever, but now and then he needed a little spanking. I figured that I could make it up to him later. God knows I'm an expert at that.

“Uh. Oh. I guess I never thought of all that. So, what do you do with such things, you ask? Well, I’m hoping that you won’t run across any of it, starting from this end with the finished shelves. See, I haven’t quite figured out what to do with it all, or the rifles. No crawl space. I’m pondering the space up there through that little door,” he pointed up at the ceiling, where there was an access door, “but I bet it’s all full of blown-in insulation up there. Messy.”

“No Plan B? Where are the rifles?”

“Um, I put them in the Jeep with, uh, the other stuff while we’re sorting all this out.”

“Really? In the Jeep? Outside? And I bet it’s unlocked out there. Mac, I’m disappointed in you.”

“Oh. Well, shit.” And he walked over to the wall by the door to the house, slapped one of the buttons there, and the garage door on the Jeep side started its way up. “Good point. Very good point. Even without a good hiding place, they’ll be safer in here than out there.”

Shortly, he returned with the two rifle cases, the one he’d tried to pass off on me as a “bassoon” case once and another one, less bulky, for the smaller rifle.

“I’ve got second trip for a few more things,” he said as he set the cases down.

By the time he returned with a duffel bag and another hard-sided bit of luggage, I’d worked things out.

“Where’d they go?” He looked completely bewildered.

“See? Hiding things in plain sight is sometimes the best approach. Let’s see how many more of these shelves we can get done before supper.”

So he assembled shelves, and that was slow-going enough that it was easy for me to keep up. I unpacked some of the boxes—they held yet more labeled boxes of garage stuff like electrical parts, plumbing parts, parts for other parts—and some I just set on the shelving without unpacking. The pile of flattened boxes grew little by little and then had a growth spurt when I fetched the ones from the books in the living room and from the assorted office stuff in the study.

I found Mac looking carefully at what I’d stowed on the shelves. “So, where’d you hide those rifle cases, anyway?”

“You mean that ‘bassoon’? And, oh, what does it look like? That ‘bass clarinet’?”

“Yeah, yeah. OK, I’m sorry for jerking you around before. Truly. I was just trying to keep you from worrying.” He really did look repentant.

“I appreciate the thought. But you have to know, lover, that all it did was to make me worry more.” I made a show of a big shrug. “Anyway, since you don’t seem to have recognized the cases, maybe we should talk about what better idea you have for them.”

He stared at me, blinked several times, and caved. “Uh, good point. But it would probably be a good idea if I knew where they were.”

“Point taken. But I need to understand some things. Like, did you really think that those crawl-space cabinets in the other house were completely secure? And secure from what? Search warrants? Burglars? Why all the hocus-pocus?”

He’d caved before, but it must have been about just the rifle cases. Now he sat down on a still-full packing box, slumped his shoulders while staring at the floor, and heaved a huge sigh. Then another as he looked up at me.

“Well, hell, Sam. I’m just doing the best I can. Keeping all my professional tools out of sight and out of mind, and out of the hands of everyone else, that’s just in my nature.” He smiled at me and shrugged again. “I’ve been trying to keep you out of the loop on all that stuff in my world. Not because I don’t trust you or anything like that, but to keep you from worrying.”

“Don’t you understand that I’m going to worry all the more when I don’t really know what’s going on? How many times to I have to tell you that?”

“Oh.”

“Maybe you just never thought this through. You met me a few years ago, when you were involved in that business about the nuclear materials stuff. But, c’mon, think about all of my years before that. It’s not like I’m completely naïve about the gray—even the black—side of the law. Your spook stuff, I’ll admit, is another level for me. But it’s really all the same. I spent—well—lots of years immersed in that same stuff, just not so international. And consider this: all those years and years I spent doing what I was doing, you don’t think that a whole lot of that wasn’t done in some clandestine fashion or another?”

“Ah. Good point.”

“I’m pretty sure that you don’t really think of me as just a dumb, blonde bimbo, but sometimes you seem to treat me that way. It’s like you picked up bits and pieces of Middle Eastern culture over the years, or something, and think of women, well, like they do in those Sandland places. But I really do have a brain in my head, y’know? Like now, with the gun cases. Why don’t we just get a gun safe big enough for them and all your other stuff? The kind that can be bolted to the cement floor out here. Seems like this space in the garage is big enough. And that would be secure, I’d think.”

He stared at me, using his poker face, for quite a few seconds before breaking into a grin. “You’re right. Good idea, actually. I never did like that crawl space anyway, and I’m sure I wouldn’t like the attic here. And, in fact, I used to have a gun safe, although I kept it in a secret closet. Until my house got blown up.”

“OK, well, end of lecture. Sorry. And I’ll show you where the rifle cases are when the safe arrives. Unless, God help us, we need them before then.”

* * *

From the perspective of twenty-twenty hindsight, I now understand that the episode in the garage last spring was a sentinel moment in our relationship. Ever since then, Mac has been far more transparent with me about his “consulting” activities, even bringing me into them whenever I could reasonably play a role. He seems to need reminders occasionally, but maybe that speech of mine, in which I unloaded on him more than he really deserved, probably, took root. Whatever, we’ve been happier together ever since, and I haven’t worried so much.

Remembering all that made me laugh at myself—a South Florida girl who moved west and somehow became assertive. Where had that come from? I’d been a South Florida resident for almost all of my entire life. Mostly, when people asked me how many South Florida years that added up to, I gave them a steely look and said something about “enough to know better.” But it was a lot.

As much as I was terrified at first of Colorado—the terrain, so different from the South Florida flatness, the very concept of winter, and even summer nights with lower temperatures than I’d ever encountered before—it all clicked for me. And our move from over on the west side of the Front Range to Estes Park, on the east side, made it all seem like I’d been searching for such a place forever. And now, moved into this nice cozy townhouse near downtown, it truly felt like home.

It was both familiar and different. Familiarity came from the legions of tourists that over-ran the town, but in Colorado during the summer and early fall instead of the Florida invasion in winter and early spring. One thing that made it so different from South Florida for me was the preview I gleaned about my own possible future. I realized that, instead of pretending to stay young with radical cosmetics, plastic surgery, and clothes even more stupid than I had worn on the street, I could simply age gracefully. That, after all, seemed to be the approach of the other full-time residents older than I was—natural aging plus comfortable shoes, jeans, and, mostly, flannel shirts. And it gave me valuable suggestions: from what I was seeing, short gray hair could be way, way more attractive than long gray hair. And, no doubt, easier to take care of.

Although its alarm wasn't going off yet, that inevitable biological clock was ticking away inside me, and I was keenly aware of it. Mac, I was convinced, would much prefer the natural approach, and I was going to make sure that my experience would trump any potential trophy's attractions. It occurred to me that all the gun-related stuff we'd been through over in Utah would only add to my credentials in that regard, although it wasn't how I really wanted to spend my time.

As crusty an old buzzard as he was, I was determined to make sure that he was stuck with me. Together, I thought, we'll figure out how to deal with that Army of God.

I pulled his chair back—it was on castors—swiveled it around, and sat down on his lap, then grabbed him into a hug. The chair squeaked in protest, but he just hugged me back.

* * *

Fifteen

That hug of ours was one of those from which one thing leads to another, and, quite a while later, we both realized that it was time for dinner, that we were somewhere beyond being merely hungry. But the cupboards were still pretty bare. We'd forgotten our intention to do real grocery shopping somewhere between examining that stupid hard drive and the later distraction.

"No food in the house? Woman, what am I ever going to do with you?" We were wrapped together in a tangle of sweaty sheets, and he was not at all successful in looking stern.

"Hmm. Seems like you just did, sir. But I do understand the problem here. I'm famished. How about we go out and find someone to prepare something for us?"

"Ah. Good plan. That's why we moved to this part of town, after all, to make foraging easier. We can walk downtown. I remember a place down the hill called the Big Horn. Uh, Grill. Restaurant. Inn. Something like that." His eyes lit up. "They have barbecue!"

"Oh, yeah. That tasty, low cholesterol, health-food stuff, eh? The kind of thing I'm trying to feed you to keep you alive and healthy?" I flicked my eyelashes at him a couple of times.

"How about if I don't order the French fries with it?" He looked so hopeful that it made me giggle.

"Barbecue, huh? Y'know, now that you mention it, that does sound good. Yum, ribs. And if we walk, we'll be smelling it for a couple of blocks. I'll probably be drooling by the time we get there." I tried to look thoughtful. "Suppose it's cold out? Do I need a warm coat?"

"Well, you need more than what you're wearing just now." He smirked and dove for my chest, but I wriggled away.

“Food! I need food, and so do you. We can start over later.” My wriggling wound up with me on the floor, but that only made scrambling to the bathroom, to a quick, hot shower, all the easier.

Our walk down the hill to West Elkhorn was almost a connubial strut, partly resulting from the previous hour or so, but mostly from the steepness of the hillside—we seemed determined to walk arm-in-arm despite the grade. We quickly made it down the hill and then up West Elkhorn a couple of blocks to the Big Horn and its siren call of smoking meat. Late October, a Monday; it took us no time at all to get a table, put in our orders, raid the salad bar, and commence eating.

Mac was still gnawing at bones when he lifted an eyebrow and asked, “So, you do realize that we need to walk back up that hill to home, right?”

Trying to be lady-like, I smothered a belch, but with only partial success. “Yes, we do. And, as I recall, it was a pretty steep hill. I’m glad I’ve had those three big glasses of wine to fortify myself for the task. But there are a couple of flat blocks first to get our legs going, no?”

“There are, and to figure out how to put one foot in front of the other without tripping as well.” Mac tucked some bills under the tab and stood, somewhat more steadily than I thought I could.

But he gave me confidence, and, after bundling into our jackets, gloves, and so on, we tottered out the door and turned left down the main drag, Elkhorn Avenue, to head home. I was proud that my eyes were able to focus on the street sign.

The brisk air and walking didn’t take long to yank me out of my half-hammered cocoon, and by the time we turned left again to head up the hill, I was feeling much less fuzzy. I’m certain that, if we’d been able to keep walking up that hill and on to home, I’d have been pretty sobered up by the time we got there.

But it didn’t happen that way. Oh, eventually I got home sober, but it was much later than I’d thought it would be, and it involved considerable excitement in the meantime.

Although the street seemed deserted, it was full of parked cars, something pretty common in our part of town, what with all of the old cottages rented out for short-term vacationers. About half-way up the hill, a car up ahead pulled out of its parking place into the center of the street, flicked on its high-beam headlights, and waited, stopped in the middle of the street.

It was the sound of its engine, more than its lights, that told me another car was doing the same thing behind us. We were lit up like it was noon, and boxed in to boot.

“Shit.” It surprised me how calm Mac’s voice was. “And it doesn’t even look like there’s anywhere to run.”

“Tell you what, lover. If I ever, ever object to your carrying heat, ever again, you remind me of this situation. OK?” I could feel the adrenaline pumping.

“OK, well, thanks. But this doesn’t look like a very auspicious time and place for a shoot-out anyway. We’re out-gunned, no doubt. And collateral damage could be pretty bad. The Chief wouldn’t like it at all. Let’s show ’em our hands.” He took his hands out of his jacket pockets and held them out, with fingers spread. I did the same.

Derisive laughter filtered up the hill from behind us. “Good to see we’re dealing with people who have at least a bit of brains. You two just hold that pose for now, don’t move even a little bit, and you won’t get hurt. Yet.”

The “yet” part didn’t sound good at all.

Footsteps came closer and closer up the hill behind us, and then I noticed in my peripheral vision that Mac's arms were yanked behind him. I heard a scratching noise that I recognized as that of a zip-tie being tightened. Then it was my turn. Whoever was back there did it so tight that it hurt.

After that, Mac got frisked, and so did I. Except my frisking really fell into the category of a whole-body grope. At least I had long experience with such treatment, so it wasn't too traumatic for me.

"Damn. I'm amazed that you're walking around clean, MacQuarrie. It sure makes things easier." There was a little push in the small of my back. "We're all going to stroll up to that car up there now, OK? Nice and easy. This piece I have has a silencer, so I don't need to worry about noise. And I've got a full, 15-round clip in it. Get me?"

I didn't notice Mac's response, but I nodded gently.

As we walked up the hill toward the blaze of light, the guy behind us must have made some sort of signal, because all but the parking lights were suddenly extinguished. As my eyes adjusted, I could see several figures standing by the sides of the vehicle, with what looked like baseball bats on their shoulders. And either those were toy baseball bats or those were very large humans holding them.

Our captor's eyes must have adjusted, too. "Ha! Reckon we won't be needing the persuasion just now, boys. Let's stash the bats for later. We'll put these two in the back and pull the cover over them."

The vehicle turned out to be a boxy, full-sized SUV that I didn't recognize. True to his threat, our captor marched us up to its rear and shoved us into the luggage space after its hatch magically opened. So I was left wondering about what full-sized, boxy SUVs have remote-control hatch openers.

As the window-shade rear cover was pulled out over us, and everything went dark, I was thinking how nice it was that the luggage space had carpeting. At least it was a little soft.

* * *

Lying there in the dark, hands bound behind me, I could feel Mac wriggling around. Eventually his breath tickled my right ear.

"Sam," he was whispering, "can you hear me? I think I can tell if you nod. We need to be pretty quiet."

I nodded.

"Good. So, I'm going to narrate what I think our route is. If you disagree, shake your head, and I'll guess again. But if you understand, keep nodding. That way, we'll both have some idea of where these bozos are taking us, OK?"

Another nod.

"Wup, here we go." His nose bonked the side of my head as the SUV started to move.

It eased down the hill, and shortly I felt myself rocking to the right. "That's the left-hand curve at the bottom...Here's the stop sign, and...we're turning left, eastbound on Elkhorn. So far, good...Um, that little roll must have been the curve into downtown...and now we're stopping at the light at Moraine...and turning right."

It all felt correct to me, so I kept nodding. Mac tracked us south on Moraine, around the deceptively sharp curve onto the west-bound stretch, and then was silent for a time during our progress toward the National Park. But then there was a little roll to the left.

“Ah! That must have been the slight right turn onto High Drive, by the Domino’s. We’re going up into the High Drive area somewhere. That narrows things down a lot!” The glee in his whisper got me smiling as I nodded. “Must be that they’ve rented a place up here, given that they’re probably all from out of town. But there are lots of vacation rentals hereabouts.”

A long straight stretch, a right and then up a hill on gravel, another right, then some jockeying around finally brought us to a halt. I couldn’t have told you an address, but I did have a good general idea of where we were.

Then it was time for the next thing. I heard a garage door closing and the click of the hatch unlocking and a hum, probably the motor that raised it. The cover over us retracted, and I was grabbed by the feet, turned, and pulled so that my lower legs cleared the back end of the SUV. Then one of them grabbed my shirt front and, as he groped me, lifted me into a sitting position. There were lights in our faces, but I could tell that the same thing was happening beside me with Mac.

“OK, folks, end of the ride. Now, what’s going to happen is that we’re all going to walk into the house together and down a hallway, right? No funny stuff from you or we’ll have to get rough. There are five of us, we’re armed one way or another, and the two of you can’t use your hands, can you?”

The lights were flashlights, and were wavering around. I could tell, between wavers, that the speaker was not at all like the other four but rather more my size—several inches shorter than Mac, and maybe a foot shorter than the other goons.

I decided to offer at least a little push-back. “Do you really want us to get gangrene in our hands? These zip-ties are seriously tight. My hands stopped tingling on the way over here and feel dead now.”

“We’ll take ’em off when we get inside. Let’s move.”

And they actually did take the zip-ties off, just before shoving us onto a couch in what was a rustic, mountain-cabin living room. Mac and I both rubbed our hands and wrists to get the circulation going again. At least it had been only fifteen minutes or so that the zip-ties had been in place.

Because that first little push-back had worked so well, I decided on a second. “So, you must know that we were at a restaurant just before you grabbed us. Can I make a trip to the bathroom, please? Before we get started on whatever next thing you have in mind? I don’t really want to embarrass myself.”

The Twerp, as I’d decided to call him, scratched his chin. “That seems reasonable. Tommie, take her into the first bedroom down the hall and let her use the john in there. Keep the door open a little so you can see if she tries to get out the window. And don’t screw up.”

I put phase one of my plan into play as soon as I could. The first step was to walk toward that bedroom, with the young fellow called Tommie following, putting as much sashay in my hips as I could manage without being over the top. I could feel Tommie’s eyes watching every motion. The bedroom in question, apparently occupied by one of them, was a mess, and my expectations for the bathroom plummeted. I did notice, however, a new-looking Louisville Slugger standing in a corner.

Tommie, who seemed to be a football-lineman-sized teenager, was polite enough to let me close the bathroom door to a crack, so, despite the bathroom’s fulfilling my plummeted expectations, I took the opportunity to recycle some of the wine I’d had for dinner before I made the appropriate flushing and hand-washing noises.

Then it was time for phase two of my plan. I scrubbed my face with a clean towel—at least there were a couple of those—to get some color into my cheeks and unbuttoned my top two shirt buttons. With some subtle adjustments of my bra and a tight tuck of my shirt-tail in back, I made The Girls pop

to front-and-center. With enough cleavage showing to hide that SUV in, there was no subtlety there, none at all.

I sashayed back out to where Tommie had sat on the bed to wait for me and knelt on the floor in front of him, all the while wiping my hands on that clean towel.

“Tommie?” I made my voice a throaty whisper. “That was very polite of you. Thank you. And I’d like to *really* thank you for it. Can you stand up for me?”

“What? What are you doing?” His whispered response told me what I needed to know—he was not ready to shout for help. “Uh, wait, we don’t have time to fool around!”

As he stood up, I fumbled with his belt buckle and then the button and zipper on his jeans. He seemed to have figured out what I was doing, because he didn’t ask again.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be quick.”

All this wasn’t something I’d never done before, and it took just seconds for me to get his jeans and underwear—a grungy pair of plaid boxers—down around his knees. Out of practice, it did take me quite a bit of self-restraint not to gag at the disgusting odor, something resembling stale mushrooms and old horse sweat, that I was confronted with, however. If I’d been planning to do what it was that he was expecting me to do, and no doubt fervently hoping for, I’d have insisted on washing him up first.

Making sure that my head was tilted back enough for him to be able to see, I licked my lips as I slid my hands up the inside of his thighs and said, “Ooh. Impressive package, Tommie. Very impressive. I’m going to really enjoy this, and I hope you do, too.”

His breathing told me that he was planning to enjoy it a lot.

But, alas, it didn’t work out that way. When my hands reached his crotch, I grabbed that package of his, as high up as I could, in a death grip with my right hand. Then I pounded on the bottom of my right fist and his parts below it, those extremely delicate parts, with the palm of my left hand, like in the countdown for rock-paper-scissors, only much harder, and began to yank, twist, and tug without mercy, pounding all the while.

I’m no musician and certainly don’t have perfect pitch, but it wouldn’t surprise me if that scream of his was a high C. And he held it for maybe fifteen seconds, during which I continued to yank and pound, until I began to hear sounds of a ruckus coming from the front room.

After one final smack, I left Tommie, still screaming, on the bed in a fetal position, arose, and picked up the Louisville Slugger I’d seen, the one in the corner. I pretended that Tommie’s head was a low, outside pitch that I needed to bunt down the first-base line. Besides stopping his annoying screaming, putting him out just seemed like the humane thing to do.

Then, despite the sounds of the ruckus in the other room, I washed my hands. It was an important priority for me.

* * *

When I was in high school down in South Miami, I tried out for girls’ fast-pitch softball and wound up making the varsity team. That success earned me a full-ride scholarship at the University of South Florida, where I even helped win a championship for the softball team in addition to getting my combined journalism and art degree. And this despite the fact that all of my coaches, with some disgust, proclaimed that I threw like a girl.

But for some reason, I was a wonder with the bat, so the position I played was Designated Player, like the Designated Hitter in the American League but able to bat for any of the defensive players, not just the pitcher. The coaches gave up on trying to teach me to throw and let me take batting practice almost full time, so I got really good.

That fateful day, by the time I'd finished washing my hands and wiping down the handle of the Louisville Slugger, the front-room ruckus had calmed down a bit. The reason, I discovered when I walked back down the hall with the bat on my shoulder, was that two of the large fellows were lying comatose on the floor, one of them with a leg at an extraordinarily impossible angle. He wasn't going to be walking any time soon, if ever.

The third large fellow I'd left with Mac and the Twerp had his back to me, and Mac, struggling with his arms pinned behind him, was not quite in view, most of him hidden behind that broad, muscular back I was confronted with. The right arm attached to the massive shoulders above that broad back was cocked to throw a haymaker at Mac, but his struggling made the target difficult.

"Hold him still, willya? I don't want to miss and hit you instead." The deep rumble of the command only made Mac struggle harder.

I wasn't clear on how the Twerp was at risk, because he was invisible behind Mac. But that really didn't matter, as the delay was all I needed. I took my stance and treated the goon's right kidney as if it were a letters-high fastball right down the middle. The relatively soft tissue compressed enough that the bat contacted something harder, which I could feel crunch. Then, because the opportunity presented itself, I switched to leftie—my full-time batting practice had allowed me to become a switch-hitter—and knocked his left knee out of the ballpark.

After that, it was trivial to subdue the Twerp.

Mac was still breathing hard when he winked at me. "Good work, Sam. Two for me and two for you. We make a pretty good team! What did you do to the guy in the other room, anyway? I've never heard that noise before."

I wasn't really breathing hard, but my adrenalin level was sure high. And I was sober as a judge.

"Let's just say that his future as a biological father may be in some doubt." I took a couple of deep breaths and looked around. "I think I see a badly broken leg on one of these guys. What happened to the other one?"

"Crushed larynx, maybe a broken neck. I'm a little worried about him, actually."

"Ouch. But it's hard to feel sympathy for bruisers who come after you with baseball bats." I shrugged. "Anyway, what now?"

"Not sure. I'm, er, a bit distracted." He was staring at my chest, and I noticed that the Twerp was, too.

I'm certain I blushed a little, but I didn't take the time to worry about it. Instead, I turned my back, buttoned up, and readjusted The Girls into a configuration more presentable for uncertain company.

"OK, can we be serious now?" I turned back to Mac and gave him a dirty look.

"We can. How about you watch shorty here while I get the other four trussed up? His piece is on the table by the door, unless you want to stick with the bat." The gleam in Mac's eye showed his amusement. "After that, he and I need to have a little chat."

I chose the pistol, the suppressed Glock that the Twerp had pointed at us earlier. That way, I wouldn't have to stand so close to him. Apparently, he had soiled his pants.

Shortly, the four unconscious big guys, thoroughly immobilized with their belts and other sundry means of tying them up, were lined up in a row by the fireplace—Mac had dragged Tommie in from the bedroom and even, in a fit of decorum, pulled his pants up. The Twerp was sitting in one of the straight chairs that had been at the dining table, arms zip-tied behind him and to the back of the chair, legs zip-tied to the chair legs. Mac was across from him in an arm chair, gently cleaning his fingernails with the tip of a large chef's knife he'd found in the kitchen. The contents of the Twerp's wallet were on display on a side table next to Mac's chair, the table on which the pistol had been sitting, along with a cell phone.

“Eustus Winters' it says here on this Colorado driver's license. Address in Rifle. Tell me Eustus, are all these other fellows from Rifle as well?”

The Twerp was sulking. “I'm not telling you shit.”

“You'd rather sit in it than tell it, huh?” Mac grinned at his own joke. “Well, let's see. Perhaps I ought to provide you with a bit more about my background than you probably found out already. I expect, knowing my name and all, you also know that I have experience working for some interesting agencies, with many assignments in the Middle East. I can't imagine, however, that you know much about those assignments, so let me fill you in a little. See, one thing I ran across over there were techniques for making people cooperate, techniques that make our tricks, such as water-boarding, seem like punishing a boisterous kindergarten kid by sitting him in a corner. A lot of folks here in the U.S., being pretty civilized and all, think of water-boarding as torture. The fighters I ran into in the Middle East, those on both sides of the conflicts over there, they laugh at that notion—they're not so civilized, I guess. You'd be amazed at what they can accomplish with nothing more than a simple kitchen knife. Care to find out?”

The Twerp continued to sulk, but Mac had his full attention. “You wouldn't dare.”

“You saw what I did to your two friends there. You saw what Sam did with her baseball bat. And I don't think that either of us would have wanted to see what she did to poor Tommie. What makes you think I'll be nice to you?” Mac paused for effect and stabbed the knife through the Twerp's driver's license into the tabletop, where it stuck, quivering from the impact. “So, one more time. Are all these other fellows from Rifle as well?”

The Twerp's eyes were locked onto the chef's knife. “Not exactly. Out that way, yeah. But why don't you just look at their IDs?”

“Just trying to establish rapport, Eustus. That's a useful interrogation tool, especially as a prelude to the real stuff. So you're saying that all of you are from the western part of Colorado District 3 of the Army of God, that right?”

The Twerp looked startled. “What do you know about all that?”

“More than you might think, Eustus. For example, it's pretty clear that you're in charge of this little operation, disaster though it may be. Does that mean you're a Deacon? Or what? And who's your Bishop?” Mac gave the handle of the knife a little sideways nudge that made it sway back and forth. “More to the point, where'd you get your orders to harass us? And from whom?”

“I never know where orders come from. That's the way our system works. All I know is that we were supposed to capture you and your whore and be ready to turn you both over to someone else. Who and where and how weren't specified. Yet.” The Twerp was beginning to sweat, little droplets forming on his forehead.

“Tsk, tsk. You should be nice. One more hint of disrespect, to either me or the lady here, and I’m going to smash your right hand with that baseball bat. Absolutely pulverize it. You’re right handed, aren’t you?” Mac, voice still calm, had fire in his eyes. “And you notify these folks of our capture how?”

“Uh, text message.”

“Good. Maybe we’ll send that message. Can I assume that further instructions will arrive to your phone the same way?” Mac picked up the cell phone that was on the table. “Your phone? Oh, look, it wants a password. What’s the password, Eustus?”

The Twerp’s eyes were on the still-swaying knife. “Uh, it’s my zip-code.”

“Now, isn’t that clever! Who would ever think of trying that?” Mac glanced at the driver’s license and poked at the phone’s screen, nodded, and continued poking. “Oh, look. ‘Deacon Winters.’ I was right! How gratifying...Ah, yes. Email. Hmm... ‘Send text “Pickup completed” to my number when ready for transfer.’ Now, whose number might that be, Eustus?”

The Twerp’s sweat was heavy enough to begin running down into his eyes, which still watched the knife. “OK, look. I’m cooperating, right? I told you my password, and it worked, right? So you’ve got to believe me when I tell you that I don’t know who it is. Yeah, the phone number is there, but I don’t know whose number it is. Honest to God. All I know is that he’s an Archbishop.”

“Your Archbishop?”

“I don’t know for sure. Probably not, because my Archbishop knows me and he’d just call me and we’d talk about this all. But I really don’t know. Honest to God.”

“Let’s see. 435 area code. Wonder where *that* is. Sam? Do you know how to look up area codes on your phone? Here, I’ll take the Glock.”

It took me a couple of minutes of poking to find it. Without a phone app, I had to get to the internet and do a search, always a more cumbersome process.

“Oh, here it is. Southwest Utah. Where we were a couple of weeks ago, right?”

“Yeah, when we were...ah, well, when we were out that way. Goodness me.” Mac scratched the back of his head. “How depressing. Looks like we’re going to have to call Winnie. But first, we have to deal with our friends here. Eustus, how do you think we should proceed here? Go off and leave y’all like this? Or what?”

I could tell that the Twerp didn’t know whether or not to be hopeful. “Well, uh, it would sure help if you could cut me loose. So I could, you know, get cleaned up and help the others.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Uh, we’ll get in our cars and head home, I guess. Or I’ll get them in the car somehow. That is, if you bring the one you take back here. Or else, you could just leave it parked somewhere. I don’t think any of the guys can drive anyway.”

“And how do we know that Sam and I will be safe in the future? You do still have those orders, after all.”

“Are you nuts? You took out the four best Army of God operatives in the State of Colorado. You’re radioactive, man. We’re staying far, far away from you in the future.”

* * *

Sixteen

We talked it over and finally decided that the Twerp's suggestion was the most reasonable course of action. It meant that we'd have to trust him, of course. But it also meant that he'd have to trust us not to press charges for the kidnapping. And, after all, we knew his address now. I made a point of getting pictures, using my phone, of their drivers' licenses, and we took fingerprints from each of them as well. And, because he was still zip-tied to the chair when we announced that we were going to take his cell phone with us, the Twerp couldn't really put up too much of an argument. We promised to mail it back to him when we were finished with it.

So there was a sort of uneasy truce, with Mac and me holding the trump cards. Just to be polite, we even gave him back his suppressed Glock, minus its magazine and ammunition, of course.

The SUV was the obvious choice for the Twerp and his crew to ride home in, so Mac and I left in the other car, a several year old Honda Accord. At home, Mac stripped it of its personal property and identification, except for the vehicle identification numbers, and I followed him in our Jeep across town to a parking lot that seemed to be a likely place to leave it indefinitely.

Much to my surprise, we were finished with everything by 9:30. I guess we'd had an early start on dinner, and everything else went more quickly than it had seemed. It felt good to get home.

This time the big hug was one of relief, and it didn't go anywhere. I was glad for that, because, after the interlude with Tommie, I wasn't feeling sexy at all, not a bit. Even though I'd washed my hands, I still had a sort of icky feeling all over, especially in my stomach, and I don't think it was from bad coleslaw. I was just very out of practice—but I guess that classifies as a Good Thing. Sure beats being *in* practice for that sort of activity.

Anyway, we pattered around a bit, took showers—separately—and retired earlier than usual. Our respective dosages of adrenalin had worn off, and we were both exhausted.

The next morning, I slept in. Mac, per his usual routine, got up early, made coffee, and sat down behind his computer, which was where I found him when I finally managed to greet the day. Still bleary-eyed, I hastily set down my cup of coffee when he jumped out of his chair to give me a morning hug.

“Aha! Sleeping Beauty awakens just in time for some amusement. I'm about to call Chief Walker.”

“Er, fine with me. Except don't expect me to contribute much, at least not until some of this caffeine kicks in.”

But the Chief was in a meeting, so Mac had to leave a message. Then he tried Winnie.”

“Small, FBI.”

“Morning, Winnie, it's Mac, and Sam's here with me. How's everything?”

“Good as can be expected, I guess. Except when you call, there's always the chance that things will go downhill.”

He laughed. “Yep, that's me. The guy with the dark cloud. But maybe this time it's not so dark.”

He filled her in about our little Army of God encounter and its outcome and managed to send her email with the drivers' license photos I'd taken all at once.

“It's early yet, but so far I've found out that the 435-area-code number is for an anonymous, pre-paid cell phone with no other information. 435 is southwest Utah. And, as far as I can tell, there were no emergency-room visits here in Estes Park last night by guys with broken legs or bruised balls. I guess they just headed west for home.”

“Sam, did you hurt that poor boy?”

I quickly swallowed the sip of coffee I'd just taken. “I heard that his church choir needs another soprano, Winnie.”

As the only guy in the conversation, Mac didn't even try to hide his wince.

“And, man, did she ever succeed. In any case, I think that these Army of God fools are out of our hair now, the Colorado ones at least. And out of Chief Walker's hair, too, what there's left of it.” He paused to take a sip of his own coffee. “Trouble is, it's not clear that whoever has that Utah phone will be satisfied with all this.”

Winnie's voice sounded depressed. “Yeah, probably not. And, what's worse, I've got my own little dark cloud this morning. Seems that last night, Michael Young got sprung from where we were holding him by an unknown group of masked gunmen. Nobody got hurt, but they got away clean.”

“Really? Where were you holding him?”

“A county lockup, down in Utah County on the south side of the metro area. It was supposed to be hush-hush. From what I've heard, it seems that the locals may have looked the other way while it happened. It's hard to explain how no one got hurt otherwise.”

Mac paused for long enough that I could tell he was thinking carefully about something. Winnie wasn't so patient, though.

“Even though it wasn't an FBI screw-up, Mac, I feel responsible somehow. I know how much you two wanted to see Michael Young prosecuted for everything we could find on him.”

“Not blaming you, Winnie. Just thinking.” Mac reached a decision. “I'm going to send you a batch of text files, computer files, that I have. It would be better if you didn't ask me how I got them, for now at least. But I can tell you that they're legit, as far as I know. It's the database of Army of God members. And I'll also send a couple of executables that probably assemble the text files and let you do searches and so on. I'm afraid to run them on my computer, but your computer guys should know how to deal with them.”

“But you don't want me to ask you where you got these files?”

“It would be better to wait until I can get a couple of drinks into you in a social setting, when you're in a good mood.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, well, don't fret about it just now. Just see what you can figure out from the files, OK?” He'd been fiddling with his keyboard, attaching files to a new email, and he finally clicked the “send” button.

“Wherever this came from, I bet there's more. Lots more. That you're not telling me about.” Winnie sounded like she might be getting mad.

“Not that's pertinent to this thing now. And you'll be the first to know if something I have becomes pertinent.” Mac winked at me. “Not to change the subject, or anything, but what's your plan for Michael Young?”

This time it was a long pause from Winnie's end, but finally she spoke up. “How hard did you look at all this information you just sent me, Mac?”

“Not very. Just enough to verify that there are no Army of God members living in Estes Park. Like I said, the guys we beat up were all from western Colorado.” Mac looked a question at me. “So, what are you finding, Winnie?”

“Well, there’s this sub-directory with all the names as sub-sub directories, right?”

“Right. We found the senior Templeton brothers in there.”

“Did you happen to notice the one labeled ‘Ronson-underscore-Paul-underscore-D’? Or the one labeled ‘Young-underscore-Michael-underscore-M?’”

* * *

We hit the road in the Jeep about eleven that morning, after hearty breakfasts and a quick job of packing that included both of Mac’s long guns and other sundry equipment. Winnie had talked us into joining her in St. George, where she was meeting Seth Rothstein and Henry Runninghorse, who were driving up from Flagstaff. The four of us, she said, were the only people she felt she could trust for what had to be done. She didn’t really elaborate on what that was, though.

I was a little surprised that Mac just seemed to assume I’d be coming with him. Maybe, I thought, he was accepting me as a full partner than as a protectee.

Our mapping program told us that it was a bit over ten hours of driving time, but Mac pushed both the Jeep and the speed limit enough to make it in nine. We saved time by nibbling in the Jeep rather than stopping for meals, and staying on the interstates helped a lot. It was a bit before eight in the evening when we pulled into the parking lot of the FBI office in St. George, the same place where that hideous wrap had been installed on our van some two weeks before. Seth and Henry, with a much shorter drive behind them, were already there, in a conference room with Winnie, a pile of topo maps, and several empty pizza boxes.

“Henry, Seth—long time no see.” Mac was still working out the kinks of the long drive as we walked into the conference room. “I see that Winnie charmed you into being part of this little shindig as well.”

Seth rolled his eyes as, uncharacteristically, perhaps, Henry spoke up. “You’re the ones charmed, Mac. We’re here on orders. Although, you know, when I heard what’s up I think I might just have volunteered anyway. And it’s good to see you again, Sam.”

I smiled and nodded at his greeting.

Winnie finally jumped in. “Glad you made it in such good time, Mac, Sam. Find a place to stay yet?”

“I made us a reservation from the road, using one of Mac’s sets of fake IDs. Just in case our real names are still mud over here in Utah.” I’d found a small, comfortable suite at a La Quinta for us, something I thought Winnie would approve of when our travel expenses got to her.

Winnie could only shake her head. “As much as I have to officially disapprove of fake IDs, this time it really does seem smart. You guys are a pair of real cowboys, though, I’ll say that.”

“Yippee-ki-yay, as a famous movie star once said.” Mac grinned. “Anyway, got a plan yet?”

“I dug around in that mystery database you sent me and discovered that Ronson is an Archbishop in this Army of God bunch, looks like the senior member in all of Utah. That doesn’t mean he’s a party to anything that’s been going on, of course, but it’s sure suspicious, given what those Colorado guys told you.” Winnie shrugged. “But we’ve got no probable cause to arrest him. And he is a county sheriff, after all. Elected official and all that. We can’t go off half-cocked on this one.”

“OK, sounds brilliant. Plan A: don’t go off half-cocked. I’m also kind of hoping for a Plan B.” Mac held up his hands in a “surrender” gesture. “Sorry, sorry. I’m a little burned out and cranky from all the

driving. That Jeep of mine is a horrible high-speed road car, is all. Let me try again: you're right about having a solid reason to take Ronson down. Any ideas?"

"The best thing we've come up with is to use you as bait, Mac. From what you said, Ronson's most likely the guy that put that Colorado Army of God bunch after you. How about I invent some reason to meet him up in Red Canyon, where those girls' bodies were found? New evidence or something. And I can let slip that you'll be with me."

Mac scratched his chin. "That's his county, isn't it? So he'll be interested in any new evidence. But I'm not sure about the idea of my being bait."

"Me, neither. I mean, he's my bait, and I don't want him eaten." I tried not to sound too whiny.

"We can get there early and set up Sam, Seth, and Henry in the rocks with rifles around the parking area up at the end of the road, where you have to turn around, and plan to meet Ronson there. Then we'll all be covered."

"Unless Ronson shows up in force and we're outnumbered."

Winnie smiled. "I seem to remember that you two managed to deal with being outnumbered up on the top of that canyon wall at the Templeton meth lab."

"Not my cup of tea, Winnie. I don't want to go through that again." I was shaking my head. "But if you can get only Ronson to show up, maybe that would work, with the three of us in the rocks and you and Mac waiting to talk to him. Assuming he didn't know we were there."

"Then we'll set it up that way. It'll take us a few hours, maybe two or a bit more, to get up there, so I'll see if I can get Ronson to meet us around noon. That sound OK to you?"

"I need a good night's sleep first." Mac was yawning.

"Works for me, Winnie. I'm not sure that all five of us will fit into the car we brought up, though." Seth was looking dubious about the prospect.

"Sam and I will drive up in our Jeep and meet you there, by the highway, how about?" Mac, I knew, wasn't about to let the FBI team see his rifles.

"Let's plan to get there way early, so we can find good positions up in the rocks." Henry was thinking ahead, it seemed.

"Ah, man. I've got all sorts of ideas. But I'm beat. Can we talk about this while we're driving in the morning?" Mac yawned yet again. "I've still got that satellite phone, Winnie. Have you got one, too? We could have an all-morning conference call on the road."

"Good idea, Mac. Let's plan on that." Winnie looked even more relieved than Mac did. I guess he wasn't the only one who wanted a good night's sleep.

We were on the road by 7:00 Wednesday morning, after a quick bite at the La Quinta's free breakfast bar. The phone didn't ring until we reached the turn-off for Panguitch several miles north of Cedar City, a good thing because the lower speeds on that curvy state highway across the mountain range quieted the rumble of the Jeep's tires somewhat, making it easier to hear the conversation. Mac had figured out how to run the satellite phone through the Jeep's Bluetooth system, so we were able to do a real conference call on our end.

"Morning, Mac, Sam. Is this connection working?" Winnie's voice, while friendly, was all business.

"Five by five, Winnie. You're on our speaker system." Mac nodded at me.

"Morning, Winnie. Hey Seth, Henry. You guys just getting started out?"

“We’re a bit north of St. George at this point. We’re turning at Cedar City to take State Road 14 over to US-89. It’s a bit longer than the way we came back from Bryce a couple of weeks ago, but I don’t want this SUV being seen in Panguitch. Too obvious.”

“Ah. Good idea, Winnie. We’re taking that quicker route, the one we used before. But Jeeps are a dime a dozen out here, even ones with Colorado plates.”

“Just don’t get popped for speeding, Mac. We’ve got plenty of time. I sent email to Ronson last night, and he agreed to meet us at the end of that road in Red Canyon at noon.” Winnie paused and took a breath. “So, Mac, you mentioned ideas last night. Want to tell us?”

“The best one I’ve come up with is that throw-away phone I’ve got the number of. How about if I call it when we’re meeting with Ronson? Call it and see what happens. It could be a hoot.”

“I didn’t mention that you’re going to be there, Mac. Thought I’d save that tidbit for extra persuasion if Ronson balked at the evidence ploy. But he bit on it right away.”

“Hmm. Well, I don’t know the exact layout of the place where we’re meeting him. In particular, I don’t know if we can hide our Jeep up there. If not, he’ll see it and know something’s up right away.”

“As I remember, there are a couple of turn-offs up near the end of the road that might work. We’ll have to play it by ear, though. Anyway, I like the idea of calling that phone. And, you’re right. If he pulls it out of a pocket and says ‘hello,’ it would be a hoot. And maybe, just maybe, enough evidence to arrest him then and there.”

“For what?”

“Oh, conspiracy. Interstate racketeering. Maybe something with the word ‘terrorism’ in the title.” She chuckled. “I’m sure I’ll think of something. Or maybe Seth or Henry will. Use your imaginations, fellas.”

“OK, sounds like we have a plan. Sam and I are well ahead of you, so rather than wait out by the highway, I’m going to drive up to that parking lot you talked about and get Sam set up to cover us. When you get there, Seth and Henry can do the same, from other directions, and we’ll be ready. And I’ll see about hiding our Jeep, or at least disguising it a little.”

“Sounds like a plan, Mac. See you up there.”

* * *

After turning south on US-89, Mac was very careful with the speed limit through the little town of Panguitch. A few miles later, we turned east on State Road 12, and, after a few more miles, Mac turned left onto a gravel county road. He pulled over to the shoulder as soon as there was a wide spot.

“Disguise time.” He winked at me and jumped out. “How about you find this road on the maps, then call Winnie and verify that it’s the right one?”

As I was fiddling around with the computer and its various maps and then the satellite phone, I heard Mac digging around in the back and then doing something at the rear end with a power screwdriver.

He appeared a few minutes later, dusting his hands off. “I just put that Utah plate Winnie gave us for the van on the back. It’ll get all dusted up going up the road here and look realistic wherever we park this thing. All we have to do is park it nose in, so the front plate doesn’t show.”

“Or,” I tried to look cheery, “you could just also put on the front Utah plate, too.”

My cheery look was answered with a dirty one, and grumbling ensued. But the front plate got put on.

Meanwhile, my computer fiddling, which included the Google mapping utility, showed me that we were on a county road that appeared to be all gravel, headed northward for a couple of miles, that ended in a large cul-de-sac that was apparently used as a parking lot, if the several cars there in the satellite image were any clue. There were several off-shoot roads, or maybe wide trails, to the west and one to the east, into what looked like slick-rock territory. They all sort of petered out instead of ending with parking or anything like that. And Winnie, via a quick phone call, had verified that we were on the correct county road.

So when Mac climbed back behind the wheel, dusting his hands off all over again, I was ready with the information he was wanting. Computer research sure beat screwing on license plates.

“Ah, excellent. It must have been one of these little side roads up by the end where they found the bodies. Winnie was talking about how difficult it looked to get that Hummer in there. But we can go and park in this lot and pretend that we’re hikers.” Mac put the Jeep into gear, and we started up the gravel road.

“And what then?”

“Well, what I’d like to do, and you need to weigh in on this, is to walk with you and the TAC up past the lot and into those rocks to the north. See if we can find you a nice, cozy niche to hide in that will allow you a clear field of fire at as much of the parking lot as possible. We’ll all use those headsets we had before, so we can all talk to each other. You get a comfortable one. Winnie and I get the uncomfortable ones, the ones that are pretty invisible. Good thing I need a haircut.”

“So I’m supposed to set up with the TAC and be ready to shoot someone?”

“Yeah, well, not just any someone. There’s no telling what Sheriff Ronson is likely to do, and Winnie and I might need some help, and fast. If he threatens us in any real way, I’m hoping that you’ll shoot him, kill him if necessary.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, I know. This isn’t your cup of tea. But if it’s him or me, what’s your choice?”

“I’ll blow the motherfucker’s head off.”

“That’s my girl. And with the TAC, you can do just that, if necessary. But I’m hoping it won’t be. We’ll just have to play it by ear. And, remember, Seth and Henry will be on your flanks, with the same operational plan.”

Mac accelerated the Jeep on a couple of straight stretches to generate dust, and shortly we arrived at the end of the road with its big, circular parking lot. Mac backed the Jeep into a parking place next to a large boulder—I refrained from mentioning my advice to put on the front plate—and we got out to unpack a bit.

He was trying to be solicitous and provide me with an array of creature comforts, but I insisted on traveling light. Still, we wound up with the TAC, in its case, a backpacking sleeping pad, one of the slick-rock camouflage tarps we’d bought for our trip in the van, and several bottles of water. Plus the radio equipment, ball cap, sunglasses, and other such stuff that I wore.

“What if we have to get out of here in a hurry?” That was my main reason for wanting to travel light.

“Leave everything but the TAC and any brass that gets ejected from it. Pack it up pronto and hustle down to the Jeep.” He gave me a rather stern look. “You’re way more important than the sleeping pad or the tarp. But they’ll help you be comfortable and invisible.”

And then he gave me a big smooch.

He strode over to the other side of the parking lot, and raised his voice. “Let’s do a radio check…”

And he lowered it to verify that my system worked. Once satisfied, he waved at me, and we started up the hill toward a likely-looking set of rocks.

It took 45 minutes or so for us to find an effective spot and for me to get situated, adjusted, and settled in. I was in the morning shadow of a big boulder, so it wouldn’t be too hot, at least until after noon. After Mac set up the TAC and screwed its suppressor onto the muzzle, he let me look, and I could sweep the TAC on its bipod across the entire width of the parking lot. The tarp blended in with the rocks even up close, so I knew I’d not be spotted from down there.

Finally, after puttering around and fretting about every little thing, Mac had no excuse not to leave me. But he seemed reluctant to. That made me feel a lot better.

Winnie’s SUV, though, arrived in the parking lot, and he had to scurry off. He made several more radio checks on his way down the hill, and with the last one told me that he was going to leave his microphone on full-time so I could hear all the conversation.

I watched through the TAC’s scope as Winnie, Seth, and Henry piled out of the SUV and the two guys started unpacking their own equipment, and I listened to their greetings.

The conversation was mostly social until I heard Winnie ask, “Where’s Sam?”

I could imagine Mac’s grin as he waved his hand in my general direction and said, “Up there, hidden away. Pointing a big-bore rifle at us. Careful up there, Sam.”

Henry immediately fumbled in the SUV, came up with a pair of binoculars, and began scanning the hillside in my general direction. Eventually those big lenses settled directly on me, and I almost waved at him.

I could see his grin as he said, “Man, you guys are good. She’s really, really hard to spot. Hope I can do that well.”

And he headed off into the rocks on my right. Seth stared in my direction for a while, shrugged, and headed off toward the rocks on my left, a series of boulders reaching to maybe thirty feet before topping out. Radio checks all around verified that we could all hear each other and be heard.

Mac finally got around to tactics. “So, Winnie, I’m parked there to look like I’m off hiking for the day. Notice the Utah plates? That’s my disguise. People come up here to hike all the time, I’m sure. For that matter, I hope we’re not interrupted by civilians out for a day hike when things start happening. How about you park your SUV over there, kind of haphazard like? So it doesn’t look like you’re a hiker. Whatever that means.”

She did, and came back to where Mac was standing. “I can’t figure out how to handle this exactly, Mac. He doesn’t know you’re here. At least I don’t think so.”

“How about if I wait behind that rock over by your SUV, listen to your conversation with him, and give him that phone call at some point? If he has the phone and answers, well, I can come out on his flank and surprise him. If he doesn’t, you can mention that I’m here, off taking a leak or something, and I’ll walk in.”

Winnie didn't have time to answer, because a deep rumbling, which I heard in my headset as well as felt in my innards, had become loud enough to be a distraction. Shortly, a large SUV with "Garfield County Sheriff" decals pulled into the parking lot, casually coming to a stop in a way so as to block Winnie's SUV in. Mac had disappeared.

Showtime.

* * *

Seventeen

Sheriff Paul Ronson, with his big western hat, pointy-toed western boots, embossed, low-down, leather holsters with the two pearl-handled six-shooters, and general air of western-ness overall eased himself out of his SUV and stood to stretch. I couldn't really tell, but it seemed like there was a sort of buzzing noise in the background. But the conversation soon drowned it out. I could hear Ronson through Winnie's microphone, I guess.

"Winnie! Good to see ya again. Hope things are going OK?" Ronson seemed genuinely happy to see her.

"Oh, you know how it is, Paul, working for the Feds. Two steps forward and one back, or one-and-a-half. But getting that whole meth lab thing taken care of was sure a happy ending. For us and the DEA, at least. I hear the Templetons took a big hit, though."

"I heard through the grapevine that you caught and lost the suspect for those kidnappings."

"Yeah, that's a real shame, but I'm sure we'll get him back at some point. With this new stuff we're finding up here, we've got even more on him for the three murders, too, so he'll become a higher priority."

"Well, I wish you luck finding him. Again. First time is always the easiest, of course. Now, what's this new evidence? I've got some meetings." He pointedly looked at his watch.

"Right. Remember where the bodies were found? Up that last side road and stuffed among those rocks, right?" Winnie gestured toward my left, where Seth had hidden himself.

"Right. I, ah...oh, hell. Sorry, I've got to take this." And Ronson reached into his left front pants pocket and retrieved an old-style flip phone. "Yeah?"

Mac's voice said, "Archbishop Ronson! How nice to speak to you again."

And he walked out from behind the boulder he'd been using to hide. "I'm sure you immediately understand the implications of my calling you on your phone. So please don't do anything stupid."

Of course, he did. But it was so smooth and fast that there was nothing to be done at that point. He dropped the phone and did an amazing quick-draw of both of those six-shooters, pointing one at Mac and one at Winnie.

"These are .45 hollow-points, folks. Please don't mess around here, because they'll be fatal almost anywhere I hit you. And I'm a good shot."

The Mac-Ronson-Winnie angle was only about 30°, so he could easily see both of them. And the distances were less than fifteen feet, so if he was any good at all with those revolvers, they were dead meat. I settled in, switched off the safety on the TAC—having previously racked my own hollow-point,

one a tad bigger and far more powerful than what he was sporting—and settled the scope’s cross-hairs on a point just under his lifted right arm. He was standing at about a 45° angle to me, and Mac, the target of his left hand, was clear of my field of fire.

“Mac, Winnie,” I tried not to whisper but kept my voice quite low, “if I have to shoot, I’ll try to do a count-down from three and fire on zero. I suggest you hit the dirt at about one, or maybe a half.”

“Good deal, Sam.” Henry’s voice surprised me. “I don’t have a good angle.”

“Yeah.” This time it was Seth. “I’ll probably hit Winnie without a truly remarkable shot.”

“Click, click.” I whispered, not wanting to move my hands off the TAC.

That entire exchange must have taken only a few seconds, during which Ronson continued to keep his pistols pointed at Mac and Winnie. It occurred to me that he was going to get tired of that pretty quickly—those were large weapons—at about the time he must have noticed the problem.

“Now, you folks saw how fast I got these babies out and up and aimed, right? I’ve actually won a couple of fast-draw competitions with them. So don’t go screwing around. I’m going to lower them, but remember, they’re cocked and ready for anything. OK?” He looked back and forth as his two captives.

“I can’t speak for her, but I’m holding quite still, Sheriff.” Mac had his poker face on. “You got a plan here?”

“I think so. Those girls were found by hikers because their bodies weren’t hidden well enough. But there are better places up here. We’ll use one of them for you two.

“Mike! Hey, Mike! You up there yet?” He’d shouted this last.

A voice came from the rocks to my left. “I am, Paul. Up here. And lookee what I found!”

Two figures appeared at the top of the boulders, one with his hands on his head being covered by the other’s handgun.

“I found me a New York Jew-boy FBI agent hiding in our rocks. How about that!”

“Ah, shit. Seth’s between me and the perp. I’ve got no shot. Anywhere.” Henry’s voice was completely disgusted. “Sam, you need to stay on Ronson. If you don’t mind a little friendly advice.”

“Gotcha,” I whispered.

Mac’s voice was a snarl, a loud one. “Kidnapped and raped any other little girls lately, scumbag?”

Michael Young laughed. “Just the dead one. Oh, yeah, and the crip. But I’ll tell you a little secret. I never kidnapped anyone. Ever. I *bought* those girls, fair and square, all of them, from their fathers. They each cost a bundle. So, Paul, what should I do with the Hebe here?”

“Good work, Mike. Shoot him.” Ronson lowered his voice. “There’s plenty of room in these rocks for three. Unless there’s more? Winnie? Would you be holding out on me?”

As Ronson raised the pistol in his right hand, there were two loud pops from the rocks on my left, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Seth’s body jerk, sag, and then fall the thirty feet or so into the parking lot, bouncing off a rock on the way down.

“You son-of-a bitch!” Winnie’s voice cracked as she said it.

“Whatever you say, nigger whore.” Ronson raised the pistol in his left hand. “I think I’ll do you both at once. Nice, clean ending.”

My temper had come to a boil, and, starting on Ronson’s “nice”, still keeping my voice low, I began counting, “Three, two, one...”, and gently squeezed the TAC’s trigger on zero.

* * *

I hadn't fired the TAC before, and my first time was quite the surprise. The headset I'd been using, combined with the suppressor Mac had put on the thing, damped the sound down to something like a close-by thunderclap, and I'm sure its recoil absorption system helped. But, geez, what a kick I got.

It took me a few seconds to regain my equilibrium, and so I missed what had happened in the parking lot. But Mac and Winnie were getting up and dusting themselves off while Ronson was lying in a crumpled heap a couple of yards from where he'd been standing. It appeared that a big section of his chest was missing. I had to fight to keep my breakfast down.

There was also a consistent popping noise from over on my right, which I decided was Henry shooting at Michael Young, or at where he'd been. I sure didn't see him up there to my left.

"Sam? Thanks very much. Good shot. Let me suggest you pack up and hustle down here. Michael Young is still around somewhere." Mac's voice had that deadly calm he managed to adopt in tense situations.

"Yeah, Sam. Thanks. Oh, God. Seth!" Winnie voice was shaking with emotion.

"I'm packing up now. And, Winnie, I'm so sorry about Seth. That was just awful. And I feel awful about shooting Ronson, too." I tried to keep my voice steady.

"*You're* sorry?" Henry's voice was bitter. "I'm the one who's the sorry SOB here. Shit. I couldn't do anything. What a loser. I'll be down in a minute, Winnie, to give you my shield."

"I'm going off the air. I'll be down there in a minute. With the TAC, Mac. Don't worry." And I tossed my headset into the TAC's case, picked it up, and headed down the hill.

On the way down, that strange buzzing I'd heard before started up again. It took me a minute to realize that it was a two-cycle engine of some kind, like a heavy-duty chain saw.

I started running.

By the time I reached the parking lot, I'd swear that that bassoon case and its contents had tripled in weight. And I was gasping for breath. Sam, old girl, I thought, you need to get to the gym more.

Mac had fiddled with the Jeep to set up one of its split back seats—I've since found out that they were a custom addition by the first owner, quite convenient—and pulled it out of its parking place. He grabbed the TAC's case from me and put it carefully in the back.

"Sam, could I ask you, please, to sit in the back? It wouldn't surprise me if Young tries to shoot at us from that motorcycle of his, at least if we can catch up to him, and I'd feel better if you were behind me. Please?"

How could I object to that? Besides, it occurred to me that Winnie would be better riding shotgun, should the need to shoot back arise.

But Winnie and Henry were having a little argument.

"Henry! Attention! You can't possibly resign now. You need to secure the crime scene here. Call in reinforcements from St. George. Tell them to use my helicopter. I think this parking area is big enough for them to land in, although it'll be dusty as all hell."

"Boss, I'm no good for anything right now. Hell. How can you trust me?"

"Prove to me that I can, Runninghorse. We've got to get going." And she jumped into the Jeep's front passenger seat as Mac sprayed gravel all over Ronson's SUV.

“Henry? You still have that earbud in place?” Mac still had that deadly calm voice going. “Oh, good. Listen, could you do me a favor? After you get things squared away down there, in whatever way you need to, and you get help on the way, how about a little cleaning up? There’s a chunk of sandstone missing from the boulder on the left of the parking lot entrance, facing downhill. Maybe you could ram that Sheriff’s SUV into it, to obscure its cause. I picked up Sam’s slug from the ground there, but that chip of rock might give people ideas. I’d rather not have anyone know what kind of weapon Sam had...Well, I guess I can tell you. A McMillan TAC-50. Nice little pea-shooter.” Mac paused and laughed at Henry’s reply as he disconnected and pulled out his earpiece.

“Mac, you never stop being clandestine, do you?” Winnie was shaking her head.

“Sam? Did you remember the brass?” Mac was looking at me in the rear-view mirror as I pulled the four-inch cartridge case out of my shirt pocket. “Thanks, Sam. Winnie, I guess I’ve been at it for so long that clandestine is just second nature for me. Although Sam’s talked me out of a bit of it, with her at least.”

“Yeah, but I’ve got special leverage.” I winked at him in the mirror. “Think you could take these curves any faster, sport?”

We had been racing down the gravel road doing four-wheel drifts through the curves and accelerating on the straight stretches. Hair-raising. I thought I was seeing a dust plume over the road in front of us.

“All I want to do is see which way he turns at the highway. That engine sounded like a little two-banger, not a lot of power for high speeds on the road. And he’s had to slow for the curves more than I have. This gravel is pretty loose.”

A stop sign appeared at the end of a short straight stretch, and Mac slid the Jeep to a halt at the edge of the pavement.

“I vote left.” Winnie said and pointed. “See that dust track on the asphalt just there?”

“My thinking exactly,” Mac responded, and off we went up the hill toward Bryce, or wherever Michael Young was headed.

Although the region is a hotbed of tourism, mid-day on the Wednesday of the last week of October didn’t seem to involve a lot of traffic. Mac ignored the double yellow line a couple of times to pass very slow pickup / vacation trailer combinations, but we really weren’t impeded. Eventually, at the top of the grade where the curves gave way to an arrow-straight few miles across the mesa, we could see, far ahead of us, a motorcycle, its rider leaning far forward over the handlebars to minimize wind resistance.

“Now all we have to do is not lose him,” Mac muttered, as he held the gas pedal to the floor. “Any thoughts on this road after it passes the Bryce Canyon turnoff, Winnie? I’ve never driven that part.”

“Oh, man, I should know this. I think there’s a long grade down off this mesa, and then it sticks to the valley over there as it goes through several little towns. Escalante, the place that Ronson talked about, is some miles yet.”

“Well, that dirt bike he’s on could eat this Jeep’s lunch off road, but I’m thinking we may be able to catch him if he stays on the pavement. Especially if there are more hills to climb. Where do you suppose he’s going?”

“No idea, Mac.” Winnie thought for a bit. “Maybe somewhere he’s familiar with, somewhere he thinks he can lose us? Hmm. Maybe the Templeton place. DEA found an arms cache there, down-valley from the main compound.”

Mac slowed for the curves on the downgrade off the mesa, and then sped up again for the few miles into the village of Tropic, hardly slowing for its speed limit signs. As we came through them, Cannonville's and Henrieville's speed limits were treated with similar disdain. Between towns, I noticed the speedometer hovering just over 100 mph on the open sections of road, and barely less elsewhere. Meanwhile, the motorcycle was steadily losing ground.

After Henrieville, there was a long, empty stretch of road with no towns or, except for a truck or two, traffic. We gained significant ground when the highway climbed up another mesa, as the motorcycle was too underpowered to keep up the pace. And, after we flew through Escalante, with Mac marveling at the lack of law enforcement anywhere—a good thing under the circumstances—we saw for the first time the motorcycle's brake light.

"Finally. I've been expecting him to head off on a side road for a long time now. Wonder what's special about this one?" Mac took a hand off the steering wheel to scratch his left ear.

Winnie nodded. "I thought so. I do believe that this is the county road that Ronson talked about. The one that Obie Templeton used to get to his ranch."

* * *

Mac braked hard to make the turn-off, and then we were back to the gravel-road method of four-wheel drifts and hard acceleration. The dust plume in front of us grew thicker as we continued to gain ground. I didn't want to know about the plume behind us—no doubt the big, knobby tires on the Jeep were creating a regular dust storm that could be seen for miles.

Although it seemed like quite a distance, I expect it was really only a few miles before Mac slid the Jeep almost to a stop and turned onto a much-less-maintained side road.

"Points for you, Winnie. That mailbox said 'Templeton' on it. And hang on, both of you. This is going to be rough. But we've almost caught him."

"Rough" was more than Mac's usual understatement. The Jeep had plenty of hand-holds and grab-bars, but I found the best approach, in the back at least, was to brace my feet against the back of Mac's seat, push myself into the back of my seat, and use my arms on the Jeep's roll bar to push myself down as well. I noticed at one point that Winnie was doing something similar up front.

We crested the rise I had seen from the opposite side of the canyon, such a long time ago, it seemed, and started down the switchbacks to the valley floor, where the ranch had stood. Michael Young was a full set of switchbacks below us all the way. But at the bottom, instead of turning toward the remains of the ranch house, he turned onto an even worse road, more of a track, really, down the valley.

"Toward the arms cache it is. Won't he be surprised when he finds it empty," Winnie chuckled.

"He knows we're behind him, of course. But he probably also knows the terrain down here and thinks there's a way out that he can manage but we can't. Those dirt bikes can do amazing things, so he may be right."

"Then we've got to catch him as soon as we can."

"I'm trying, Winnie, I'm trying. Hope you're hanging on."

The track actually improved a bit as we worked our way down the valley, and soon we were almost back to the gravel-road tricks. But on one deceptively sharp, left-hand curve, it all fell apart. We were only a hundred yards or so behind Michael Young's motorcycle, when, entering the curve, the cycle went into a sideways skid, hit some larger rocks on the outside edge of the curve, and flipped sideways,

sending him flying with the bike following but on a lower trajectory. Mac skidded the Jeep to a stop just in time to avoid hitting those same rocks.

We couldn't see what had happened to Young at first, or his motorcycle, because of a small berm, but, mounting it, all was clear. Well, clear as mud. For Young was stuck in a foul-smelling pit of some muddy substance, a thick gooey glop that showed a film of oily slicks on its top here and there. Perhaps fifty feet across, it was impossible to tell how deep it might be, but Young was submerged to his armpits, and his motorcycle was on its side, slowly sinking. As we watched, one of the oily slicks burst into flame from the heat of the engine block. As the cycle continued to sink, slowly, more of the oil flowed into the depression it was making, and the fire gained strength.

"What *is* this place?" I couldn't help but be curious despite my revulsion.

Mac was standing, watching Young slowly recover his wits, thinking. "I do believe it's the cesspool for the ranch. Sure smells like that. With some industrial wastes from that meth lab included, probably—that would account for the volatiles that are burning. Um, I'd say our boy there is in a bit of trouble."

As Young started shouting for help, Winnie recognized the danger. "Mac, have you got a rope? We need to get him out of there."

"A rope? Yeah, I think so. A brand new one, spanking clean. Not sure I want to throw it in that crap. It'd be ruined."

"*MAC!!*" Winnie and I were almost in unison.

"Oh, all right. But remember who this is. The sheriff's deputy, a sworn law enforcement officer, we just saw murder Seth Rothstein, back there on those rocks in Red Canyon. The guy who murdered those three little girls, put Lucy Smith in that outhouse pit, bought all those other girls to be used as sex-slaves." He opened the back of the Jeep, looked in, and scratched his chin. "Now, where did I put that rope?"

Despite his reluctance, Mac got a loop tossed out to Michael Young, who put his head and arms through it, and tied the other end to the Jeep's front tow hook. Then he eased the vehicle slowly away from the pit, pulling Young toward the shore. I don't think we could have done it ourselves, because even the Jeep was laboring a bit.

Unintended consequences, though, have a way of being sneaky. I guess it was the stickiness of that goop in the cesspool, because there was a sort of wake created by Young's body, a deep depression in the goop behind him. And, about half-way to shore, it burped, or something like that.

I saw a video of the mudpots in Yellowstone once, burping and bubbling away, and this was sort of the same, although I can't imagine that the Yellowstone pots smelled that bad.

Mac told me later that the burp must have been methane, because it immediately flashed into a fireball. Young screamed as his hair caught on fire. And it kept burping, and exploding, as Mac continued to pull Young toward shore, so he finally stopped. The oily substance on the surface of the pit near where Young had landed flowed into his wake and ignited as well, and he continued to scream in agony as he was boiled in a pit of burning sewage sludge, finally going silent only when it flowed into his mouth's grimace of death.

I'm not sure I'll ever forget the last look in his eyes. As much as I'd come to loathe the guy for what he'd done, I can't really say that he deserved to die that way.

"Jesus. No one should have to die like that." Winnie agreed. "Not even a dirtbag like him."

Even Mac was dumbstruck, at least for a few minutes. "I guess that didn't turn out so well. Although I'm not sure that there's anything we could have done."

Mac cut the rope a few feet from where it had been in the cesspool and began wrapping the cut end around a football-ball-sized rock. When the wrapping almost reached the dirty part of the rope, he heaved the whole thing as far out into the pit as he could. Then he untied the other end from the Jeep, coiled it up, and stashed it in the back.

“Winnie, if you or your bosses want to come back here and retrieve the body, that’s OK by me. But I’m done with this. And I’m pretty sure Sam is, too.” He looked at me and I nodded.

“Sam killed Sheriff Ronson.” Winnie looked grim.

“Yeah, about a half-second before he was going to kill us. I saw his index finger begin to move. It’s a good thing the triggers on those Colts had a long pull.”

“You’re right. Last year it was you, this time it’s Sam. Saving my life, I mean.”

“What kind of rifle was Henry using?”

“AR-15, I think, why?”

“Full-auto?”

“Of course, but he was using single shot there, after Seth got killed.”

“Maybe a big full-auto burst could explain the damage to Ronson’s body. Then Sam and I weren’t there. Nor here, if we all get on our merry way soon enough.” He gestured at the pit, into which the motorcycle, Young’s body, and the rope had almost disappeared. “Nothing to see here, folks, might as well move along.”

The ride back to the Red Canyon parking lot, where we found Henry Runninghorse in charge of a bustling forensic operation involving only FBI personnel, was a relief.

Not exciting at all.

* * *

Epilogue

At a time when print newspapers were struggling against a tide of on-line content, which in turn struggled with its own credibility, both reporters and the public found only frustration in their attempts to understand events in Utah that October. The DEA was engaged in a game of know-nothing concerning the events at the Obadiah Templeton ranch in southern Utah, and the FBI investigation of the deaths of popular Garfield County Sheriff Paul Ronson and FBI Agent Seth Rothstein smacked of cover-up.

Evidence presented to a special grand jury convened in Salt Lake City by the U.S. District Attorney exonerated FBI Special Agent Henry Runninghouse in the Ronson/Rothstein matter. Because that evidence was sealed and withheld from public review despite several Freedom of Information Act lawsuits, it all cast a permanent shadow on Ronson’s involvement in the matter.

The shadow only became darker when a story appeared on a website, short on credibility but long on readership due to its penchant for publishing salacious celebrity news, about a shadowy “Army of God” that operated as a domestic terrorist group intent on overthrowing the federal government. It went largely un-noticed in Utah that, in the weeks following the story’s appearance, large numbers of sworn officers in police and sheriffs’ departments around the state, along with a surprising number of city

counsellors and county commissioners, resigned, ostensibly for health or family reasons. No one anywhere paid attention to the fact that these resignations extended to many of the other states in the intermountain west.

In other legal news, or lack of it, the FBI case against Levi Templeton, who was eventually charged with sex trafficking involving minors, statutory rape, and related crimes, plodded along at a snail's pace, the lawyers for both sides trying to out-do each other with grandstanding tactics, obfuscation, and delays.

And then there was the mysterious, yet official-sounding, leak of the information that the kidnapping and disappearance of numerous young girls over several years around the region, of which the Levi Templeton case was but one example, was not kidnapping at all, but rather, in every case, a financial arrangement in which the fathers of the girls had sold them to an unknown individual who, in turn, sold them to various fundamentalist (and polygamous) Mormon sect members, including the Templeton brothers.

This rumor spread like wildfire, and an epidemic of domestic violence episodes followed, in some cases involving murder, in all cases involving violence done to a husband by his wife (or, in some of the cases, one or more of his wives). For example, one Edgar Smith, of rural Summit County, was castrated by a serrated-blade bread knife at the hands of his wife Dora. The connection of this crime to the supposed kidnapping of the Smiths' daughter Lucy, who was later found abandoned in the pit of an outhouse, was never established clearly, but it seems to be beyond coincidence that many of the domestic violence cases involved couples whose daughters had been, purportedly, kidnapped.

Meanwhile, in a small, tourist-oriented mountain town in the foothills of the Colorado Front Range, a middle-aged couple spent their winter evenings warming their toes in the glow of the fireplace in their new townhouse. They sipped various *après-ski* concoctions while savoring memories of their last ice-cream cones of the season, eaten on the unseasonably warm Halloween Night the previous autumn, along the town's main street, amidst the annual downtown trick-or-treat celebration with its costumed children, spooky decorations, and general gayety.

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Lilies of the Valley

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Historical
A Four Corners^Mystery



Lilies of the Valley

Prologue

Timmy Greenwood would forever be haunted by the fact that it was *his* rock that filled up the canyon and dammed up the stream down there.

The *Las Cruces Sun-News* quoted his mother, Louise Greenwood, as saying that it wasn't really Timmy's fault, and, anyway, it was only an obscure side canyon up there in the middle of nowhere. But that didn't make little Timmy feel any better.

After all, Louise had scolded him, "What if *everyone* threw rocks in there? Do you want to fill it up?"

And when his rock, or perhaps it was the noise of it or something, or maybe just coincidence, whatever, when it triggered the massive debris flow down the cliff on the far side, well, he couldn't help but wish he'd listened to her. As it was, he burst into tears and ran for the car as his Mom and Dad stood there by the roadside, staring in wonder at the snow and rocks and trees and mud rumbling into the stream below.

Fortunately, it was too early in the spring for anyone else to be around. Timmy and family had been on an early-season scouting trip for possible campsites later in the summer, and, when they pulled over so that Timmy could get out and pee, they were the only people within miles. Still, as good citizens, they stopped at the Forest Service office in Alamogordo on their way home to report what they'd seen.

Maybe, in the scheme of things, Timmy got off lucky—he was merely haunted by it all. My friend LeRoi Sandováł, on the other hand, knowing what he knew, wound up in shock, an incoherent, babbling-idiot sort of shock. That set in right away and evolved into denial, then anger, and eventually a black depression. LeRoi was just never the same again.

And that was a shame, really, because he had been one of the premier fly-fishing guides in Northern New Mexico. We used to go on expeditions to his various favorite stretches of water on days when he couldn't scare up any clients, "sports" as he called them. The Chama, the Pecos, and the Rio Grande itself, especially up north around Taos, they all had pools and pockets that he considered his private territory, and he was generous enough to share their secrets with me.

Until, that is, that big chunk of mountainside in Nogal Canyon southeast of Carrizozo slid, and he went all to pieces. I don't think that anyone who knew about it was very surprised to read, a couple of weeks later in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, that his body was found at the bottom of the Rio Grande gorge, under the Taos high bridge. That was a favorite regional spot for despondent teens and desperate adults to end it all—there was the occasional murder that involved involuntary attempts to fly as well—and LeRoi's depression made it an obvious finale for him.

I thought that was the end of the entire sad matter, but then came a telephone call one spring day while I was wrapping up my affairs at the institute, in preparation for the move to Colorado I've come to be so glad I made.

"This is Sandy."

“Mr. Livingston? Sanford G. Livingston III? This is Humberto Garcia, I’m the attorney settling the estate of LeRoi Sandoval. You’re named in his last will and testament, and the reading is Wednesday afternoon at two.”

“You mean I’m getting a bequest or something?” I knew that LeRoi had been single, and the notion that he would even have a will was a surprise, let alone name me in it.

“That’s the purpose of the reading, Mr. Livingston. We’re on the Plaza, I hope to see you Wednesday.”

And that’s how I got involved in the whole thing. I suppose I should think of it as a fitting climax to my dozen or so years in Santa Fe—that’s what Angela has been urging on me, at least. And it did fit in with some of the other strange things that happened there.

* * *

To most people in the rest of the world, the mention of Santa Fe conjures up images of a dusty desert town with connections to food, celebrity, and, maybe, high art. Tombstone with smothered enchiladas and Georgia O’Keeffe, perhaps. Few realize that, in the winter, it’s a ski town, or that its location in the foothills of the southern Sangre de Cristo range of the Rockies makes it more like Colorado than Arizona, climate-wise.

And as with the Colorado ski towns, spring is the down time in Santa Fe. Summer, fall—the changing aspen draw crowds, it seems—and, of course, winter are all quite busy. But after the resorts close in late March and before the summertime activities spin up toward the end of May, everyone in town draws a deep breath of relief and takes a well-deserved break from servicing the visitors.

That role, though, has never really applied to me, beyond my doing my civic duty to be nice to them. Patience, tempered with polite amusement, goes a long way in helping people who are unfamiliar with Santa Fe’s peculiarities to get around. I don’t have to do that much, given the sheltered corner of town that I stick to, but it does happen. One such episode led to my involvement in the investigation of the death of Senator O’Malley’s daughter and to my meeting Angela.

Usually what I spend my time investigating is the nonlinear behavior of complex systems such as the climate or the economy. My position at the Santa Fe Institute has led me in various interesting directions of that nature. That other investigation—what turned out to be murder, cleverly disguised—came along by accident. It’s not as if I go looking for crimes to solve. Life’s just too short for that.

Anyway, that Wednesday I left the institute in time to get to the Plaza for a leisurely lunch with Angela and make it to the reading of LeRoi’s will by two. She, of course, was all questions.

“I thought LeRoi was just a fishing guide, Sandy. How could he have enough of an estate for a will and all that?”

She was using a tortilla to soak up bites of the Plaza Restaurant’s “medium” green chile stew. As a native to the area, she could eat that stuff with impunity. Most everyone else, including me, had taste buds that cringed at it.

“You’ve got me there, Anj. I know that when we went fishing together, he appreciated it when I’d drive. It saved extra miles on that ancient Suburban he kept alive somehow. I guess he saved his tips, or something.” I was having the meatloaf, far more lunch-like for anyone with a normal palate.

“I checked all the reports. The Taos County Sheriff did the investigation, and it’s a pretty clean suicide, looks like. They found his car at the end of the bridge, at the parking area there, and there were no signs of prior violence. The fall, of course, messed him up some.” She was able to take violent death

in stride by virtue of her position as an officer with the New Mexico Bureau of Investigation. “I remember you told me he was depressed for some reason—that slide into the canyon somewhere down south, right?—and that’s what depressed people around these parts do sometimes, jump off the Taos bridge. But why would a slide into an obscure canyon down there in the middle of nowhere get him so depressed, anyway?”

“I talked with him about it a bit, but it didn’t make sense to me, either. He seemed to know the terrain down there like, well, like I’ve come to know the lovely terrain underneath your blouse.” I leered; she blushed and kicked me under the table. “There must have been something in that canyon that he was very attached to for some reason. Not a fishing hole, though. That little stream is just too small for him to have bothered with.”

When we had first met, Angela wore an NMBI uniform all the time, but a recent promotion had put her back into civilian clothes, something I appreciated. Sure, she looked fine in starched and pressed kakis, but she looked even better in civvies. That day’s silk blouse was a great example.

“Well, from what I’ve heard, you’re not likely to be going in that little canyon any time soon. The state geologist has the entire area closed off. It’s filling up with water behind the debris pile, but it’s leaking. No one knows when the whole thing is going to let go, and everyone downstream is extremely nervous.” She looked around and waved to the waiter for more coffee, which she asked for in a to-go cup. “Anyway, I’m sorry I can’t come to the reading with you. I’ve got a meeting with the new boss in an hour. Even though we’re not long for Santa Fe, I have to keep him happy while we’re still here. Gotta run.”

“Hey! Wait!” The usual question had popped into my head. “Where are we tonight?”

“Oh, right. Hmm. Well, I’ll be done about six. How about your place?”

“OK. I’ll think up something for supper, something light. See you later.”

Angela’s family, a traditional Santa Fe Hispanic clan, were able to overlook our “visits” with each other, but as much as we wanted to, there was just no way we could actually move in together, not without a huge, formal wedding at the cathedral first. Even Angela’s younger brother Jaime would have frowned on our shacking up. And keeping Jaime on my list of friends was a high priority for me. He was just not the sort of individual you wanted to be enemies with.

That, along with career opportunities, was why we were working toward the move to Colorado, where we’re now happily settled in together, finally married, even. But back then we bounced between her place and mine. Fortunately, we both lived on the same side of town, so the commute was easy.

Besides, we were both motivated. There was just something about the chemistry.

* * *

After killing twenty minutes or so, sitting on a park bench on the Santa Fe Plaza watching the tourists bickering about what souvenir shop to visit next, I made my way to the office of Garcia and Garza, LLP, a suite above the Starbucks franchise on San Francisco. The coffee smell was strong enough to keep you awake all night, never mind drinking the stuff. I handed my business card to the receptionist and was shown into a small conference room full of well-dressed, somber-looking people.

The most well-dressed of them, seated at the end of the table, looked at my card. “Ah, yes. Mr. Livingston. Finally. We’re ready to begin.”

“Oh, yeah, one of LeRoi’s fellow fudgepackers.” An early-thirties man with a huge Zapata-style moustache sneered at me.

“Hector! Behave yourself!” The woman seated beside him swatted his leg.

The reference was to something of which I was aware, if not part of. LeRoi—originally plain old Leroy—had made something of a name for himself as the area’s first gay fly-fishing guide. It wasn’t something he advertised, although he was able to tap into an extremely lucrative clientele through his connections in that world. Rather, it was something that he had to compensate for by being absolutely the best guide on any of the local rivers. And he had succeeded so well that his colleagues, those of them aware of his orientation, had long ago lost any of their attitude problems in favor of respect for his abilities and knowledge.

I decided not to rise to the bait but took my feelings about it out on the lawyer instead. “You said two, Mr. Garcia. My watch, which is correct to the second because of its radio link to the atomic clock at NIST, tells me it’s one-fifty-five.”

“Yes, well, we’re all here and we can get started. Mr. Livingston, your bequest is the simplest, so let’s begin with you. Hmm.” Garcia covered his unease by shuffling papers and clearing his throat. “This is LeRoi Sandoval’s last will and testament, dated a week before he died. Given his manner of death, this could have caused problems, but it was properly witnessed and filed, and now it’s been successfully probated. Much of the actual text is commentary for his family here, so I’ll skip over it for now. Mr. Livingston, he has left to you several of his fishing poles and this envelope.”

He held out a standard business envelope to me and gestured over his shoulder. “The poles are all in that carrying case over there in the corner. The language is a bit peculiar, specifying as it does that the case, the poles—he calls them “rods”—the tubes they’re in, and their entire contents are to be yours in perpetuity. And that concludes your part of this, Mr. Livingston. I believe it would be appropriate for the family’s part to be conducted privately.”

“You’re undoubtedly right, Mr. Garcia, and I’ll be on my way. But first I would like to say something. LeRoi was a remarkable fly-fishing companion, one whom I miss already, and the season hasn’t really started yet. Regardless of how any of you may feel about his lifestyle, you should all be very proud of his accomplishments in the world of Northern New Mexico fly-fishing. He was the best.” Feeling fortunate that they didn’t start an argument or even say anything, I took the case of fly rods and turned to leave.

On the walk back to my car, and then on the short drive home, I analyzed and re-analyzed my behavior at the lawyer’s office. As far as I could tell I’d maintained a perfect poker face the entire time, hiding the elation I had felt when Garcia had told me about the fly rods. The fact that he referred to them as “fishing poles” told me that he had absolutely no clue about them. And I hoped that the family didn’t, either. As the outsider, keeping a very low profile was the best way for me to avoid trouble.

What they all didn’t know, but I sure did, was that I was in possession of a matched set of five custom bamboo fly rods, hand-made by Mike Clark at South Creek, Ltd., up in Colorado, all in perfect condition, together worth somewhere in the vicinity of fifty large as a set. They had been LeRoi’s pride and joy, and he had loved showing them off to me on our excursions. And if those yo-yos in that conference room had any clue, I’d probably never have seen them. The tubes would be full of something made out of graphite, or, worse, fiberglass.

It occurred to me that perhaps that was what the tubes were actually full of, so I hurried home to check things out. Or tried to.

My experience in Santa Fe was that it runs on some kind of weird time. The physicist in me has wondered about Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity and how it might relate to the phenomenon. Maybe Santa Fe attracts gravity waves from distant black holes, or something.

What used to happen, to me at least, was that whenever I'd be in a hurry, events would conspire to slow me down. If I was in a car, there'd always be a big traffic jam, or an accident blocking all lanes, or a construction project, or something else unexpected. It happened repeatedly. On that particular Wednesday, as I recall, it was a school bus letting kids out—and stopping all traffic to do so—every half block. I finally got home at about a quarter to three, a good half hour after I might have, except for that weird time thing.

Quality fly rods are stored in soft cloth bags inside aluminum tubes, and the five tubes in LeRoi's set were all packed into a ballistic-cloth carrying case, made with five long, skinny pockets for the tubes to slip into. As I unpacked it, I recognized the South Creek logo on the tubes, a hopeful sign. Shortly, I had five glowing bamboo rods, some in three and some in two pieces, each with an extra tip piece, laid out on my dining table. They were beautiful, true works of art. Beyond that, though, they were extraordinarily functional, well balanced with action—springiness—designed to match their five different purposes. From short and quick, for small streams with lots of willows that confound casting, to long and powerful, for big rivers on windy days, they composed a collector's tool kit for expert-level fly-fishing.

I stared at them for a while, then put the 8-foot, three-piece, 4-weight together and waved it gently to feel the flex, being careful not to whack anything with it. It felt wonderful. Reluctantly, I disassembled it and began to pack them all away. The rivers were still running too high to contemplate fishing, unfortunately.

When I picked up the tube for the third rod, it was upside down, and a little piece of plastic fell out onto the carpet. It turned out to be one of those miniature memory cards that are used in digital cameras and other such devices. What, I wondered, could that be about? Then I remembered the envelope.

It had my name, as "Sandy," on the front, and LeRoi's initials were scrawled across the seal on the back. I slit open an end with a steak knife and slid out the single sheet of typing paper.

Eventually you will discover you need this: the name of the hole you fell into two years ago, when I had to pull you out, spelled right. Please burn this after you read it. All the best, LS.

It appeared to be computer-generated using an ink-jet printer, in black. Despite feeling foolish, I did as requested, outside in the charcoal grill.

The incident came back to me. LeRoi and I had been fishing a run on the Rio Grande up north in the gorge, deep slots interspersed with pocket water, and I had tried wading beyond my ability. A foot slipped, and in I went. Icy cold, the water was fast enough that it carried me down a little chute into a big pool, where my waders quickly filled with water and some kind of strange downwelling began to suck me under. LeRoi, laughing merrily the whole time, stripped off his wader belt and threw out an end to me; I caught it and he pulled me in. Too embarrassed to want anyone to know, I bribed him to be quiet about the whole episode with a bottle of twenty-one-year-old Glenlivet.

But I didn't know the pool had a name or why I might need to know it, let alone how to spell it right.

* * *

The why I might need it part became apparent when I stuck the micro-diskette into my computer's multi-disk slot. The disk's contents appeared, one file named "diary.pdf" and a separate folder. When I tried to open the folder, a password box appeared, haughtily informing me that access to the contents required me to provide the correct response. But the diary was readable, and I began to see the method in my late friend's madness. He knew I'd either forgotten or never known the name of that pool I fell into, but he undoubtedly had it noted, along with my foibles, in the log book he kept religiously—his fly-fishing diary. It occurred to me that, while not as valuable as the set of bamboo fly rods, any number of local guides would pay handsomely for LeRoi's diary. His family was probably better off not knowing what they missed out on, all-in-all.

It took me several minutes to find the right trip, and then I couldn't help but read about my little spill. LeRoi had captured the events quite faithfully, downplaying his role and noting with some glee my promise of the Glenlivet if he'd not gossip about the accident. He also noted that he accepted the Glenlivet "reluctantly," for stories as good as that were hard to come by.

And I discovered that I'd fallen into Don Juan's Pool. On impulse, I searched through the document for other occurrences of this name, and found that it was one of LeRoi's favorite spots, and a very productive one at that. He always caught fish there, and one time he'd landed a twenty-eight-inch rainbow, a veritable submarine of a trout.

With a sneer almost like Zapata-man's, the computer rejected my attempt to use "DonJuansPool" as the password to the micro-diskette's folder, and, rubbing salt into the wound, it informed me that I had used up one of my three tries. I didn't really expect it to work, given LeRoi's note, but I had to try it—although I wouldn't have if I had known about the three-tries limit.

To people in the real world, the name "Don Juan" evokes romantic notions of the Spanish libertine, smooth and irresistible to the ladies; opera buffs know him as Mozart's Don Giovanni. In California—and there will be those who might debate whether California is part of the real world or not—many people associate Don Juan with Carlos Castañeda's books and the various mind-bending chemical substances discussed therein.

But in Northern New Mexico—and there's just no argument about whether *that* region is part of the real world, it's so far removed—Don Juan is definitively Don Juan de Oñate Salazar, the sixteenth century conquistador, arguably the last of those Spanish explorers and conquerors. He founded Santa Fe, revitalized Spanish culture in a region that had been seriously back-sliding since the death of Coronado—that is, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado y Luján, the Southwest's original European explorer—and subdued the natives in a most uncompromising fashion.

For example, when the people of the Acoma Pueblo, west of what is now Albuquerque, demurred at kowtowing to Oñate's dictates, he had the right feet of all of the adult males amputated, which, in those times, meant chopped off with broadswords. That memory still rankles today, and there are often angry demonstrations at the annual celebrations of Oñate's achievements. And up by Española there's a statue of Oñate that goes through about a right foot per year.

With two tries left at figuring out the password, I had two obvious possibilities to choose from, the more obscure but easy-to-spell "Salazar," and the well-known "Oñate," common usage of which almost always reverts to the English "n." But using the correct spelling as a password would involve a computer keyboard trick that not everyone knows—one that does not work in many circumstances, depending on the proclivity of the software in question. On the off chance that this particular software—it was some third-party password scheme, I could tell—might lock up if the keyboard trick were attempted, I tried "Salazar." This time, the sneering message box told me that I was down to one more attempt, after which the directory in question would be permanently locked.

I was therefore quite relieved when “Oñate” worked. The first thing I did was to copy everything to my computer’s main disk and verify that it wasn’t read-protected by that same software any more. My own password system, I knew, would be quite sufficient.

The relief I felt surprised me—somehow, I didn’t want to lose the opportunity to follow up on my friend’s wishes. Looking at the files, now readable on my own computer, I found one titled “readmefirst.pdf,” and I had an idea about where to begin.

It was another note from LeRoi.

Sandy – Given the medium, the delivery method, and the password, I figure there is a 99.99% chance that you’re the person reading this file first. I certainly hope so. And I should say that I’m sorry for all the hocus-pocus with the will, the rod set, and the files on this little diskette. The thing is, I don’t trust my family to do the right thing. If I’d just given you all this stuff, it wouldn’t surprise me—well, I guess nothing much is going to be surprising me, but you know what I mean—if they made some kind of trouble for you. But I think it’s all cool this way, or at least my lawyer says it is.

The purpose of this note is to provide you with the background for the other files here. Aside from the diary, which is just my professional flyfishing log book, everything else is related to a sort of hobby I’ve had for several years now, chasing the legend of Coronado’s great treasure. I knew going in that it was supposed to be just a legend, but I was still curious, so I looked into it. And years of research in libraries all over the Southwest and interviews with at least two dozen people have led me to the point that I thought I had all figured it all out. But then two things happened—that landslide down by Nogal and a diagnosis that I’ve acquired HIV. I just don’t know how that happened. I’ve been so careful all these years.

Anyway, put those together, and I’m done with it all. But you’re not, and maybe this material will provide you with the same level of amusement and challenge that it has me.

So sit back with a few hours and a bottle of something—sorry, but that Glenlivet you gave me is all gone—and read the file called “lilies.pdf.” It’s a transcribed version of one of those interviews I did, one of the last ones, edited just a bit to remove redundancy and unnecessary detail, and to make it more readable.

It turns out to be a remarkable story. I heard it from an old fellow called William White at a nursing home down in Alamogordo. He’s undoubtedly passed on by now, but when I talked to him several years ago, he was as sharp as a brand-new #10 streamer hook. The story is so fantastic that it’s hard to know how true it all is, but one thing’s for sure. I discovered on a scouting trip that his description of the canyon above Carrizozo, up by Nogal, the one that’s now filled in, is spot on. True or not, it’s quite an amazing tale, as you’ll see.

And let me say that you should know that our friendship is something I’ve truly cherished. You’re the best fishing companion ever. Take care, LS.

* * *

One

No one's asked me about Coronado's great treasure ever since, well, ever since it all happened, pretty much. I don't know how you found me or why you think I know about it, but since you did, and you do, and I do, I guess I might as well tell the story. Don't see why not, after all these years. I don't think you're going to believe it, but, then, I'm not sure I care. You can be certain of one thing, though. Whether you believe me or not, everything I'm going to tell you is God's own truth.

It was what turned out to be the year 1941, when Bucky disappeared, that my suspicions—and my sense of adventure—began to grow and the whole thing really got started for me.

I was a few weeks shy of thirteen at the time, and Bucky was a couple of years younger. Among all of the other boys, in the school and not, he was my best friend, despite the crooked way his teeth had grown in and his lousy eyesight, because he was funny as well as smart. Looking back now, from the perspective of the all the additional decades, I can see that his continual cut-ups were his way of compensating for his less-than-perfect smile and his need to squint to see the pages of the books he was supposed to be reading. He was the only boy anywhere near my age like that. But he was great fun to be around.

And then, one day, he disappeared.

I asked about him, but none of the other boys knew anything—they didn't seem to care very much anyway, even the other boys in the school, so they dismissed my questions as just dumb. And either the Matrons didn't know or they weren't saying anything beyond "Oh, he got sick and had to go away." Actually, as I learned since, there was a lot the Matrons weren't saying. A whole lot.

Maybe it would all make more sense if I backed up a little and explained where we lived. My situation and all.

Before Bucky disappeared, my entire world was the Cave and the Yard, along with the other boys there. Oh, we all knew there was something beyond the high palisade enclosing the Yard, because we could see, over its pointy top, treetops and the mountainsides of the Valley ascending up and up to the sky. And in the sky there were birds, stars and sometimes the moon at night, and very occasionally some odd sort of flying machine. But what was out there just on the other side of that imposing wall was something of a mystery, a mystery that we all speculated about despite the Matrons' admonitions not to. Boys, being the curious creatures they are, don't generally listen to such admonitions, and our speculation ran wild. Even the boys who had been moved out of the school and into the various other training programs the Matrons had going wondered about what was out there, on the other side of that wall of logs.

We could get a little better view by climbing the rocks on either side of the entrance to the Cave, getting up higher and looking out there. But all that did was to let us see lower on the mountainsides and the trees out there, not the ground, really. That was because we could never get high up enough—the Matrons always caught us, and punishment followed. Several of us did get quite good at climbing fast, though. All that curiosity of ours was a powerful motivator.

That school was not at all like schools out here in the real world, I have to say. They started us boys in school when we were five, and to stay in school you had to be smart and work hard at it as well. Those too lazy or not smart enough were moved into the other programs, and from what I heard those other programs were not at all as interesting, fun, or comfortable as school. Some even sounded dangerous. And the standards to stay in the school were pretty high—when Bucky disappeared, there were only three of us older than him still taking the classes out of more than three dozen boys altogether.

But he didn't disappear into one of the other training programs, because the boys in those programs still lived in the Cave and the Yard. And, being only eleven years old, Bucky didn't move on to wherever the older boys went. That, of course, was another thing we all speculated about—where did

you go when you turned fourteen? The question became more and more important to me as I got closer to that age.

Anyway, I learned, when I got out into the real world, that the education the Matrons provided was quite good, all-in-all, assuming they let you stick with it. When I finally quit, just before I turned fourteen, I wound up with the equivalent of what real-world kids got high-school diplomas for, although my knowledge of history was severely distorted. And the quality of the Matrons' education also explains some of the things I was able to pull off during my teen-aged years—they instilled in us both initiative and what's now called critical thinking. Of course, what they wanted us to think about critically was pretty restricted.

But I was talking about the Cave and the Yard. They were our little world, the Yard an expanse of packed dirt, mostly, a couple of acres or so in a tight V-shape, with rock walls—high cliffs—on two sides and that tall palisade on the third. A little waterfall spilled over a cleft in the south cliff out near the logs, so we had a place to take showers, really cold showers, especially in the winter months, which the Matrons forced on us at least once a week and at other times when they noticed that we were extra dirty.

At the other end of the log wall, there was a row of outhouses for us that, with periodic filling of old pits and digging of new ones, were slowly making their way along the base of the cliff. There was also a fenced-off garden area, placed where it would catch the most sun, for the boys who were in training to be, well, gardeners, I guess. The Cave's entrance was at the point of the V, opposite the log wall and sheltered by the cliffs that we'd climb if we thought we could get away with it. I found out later that it was an old mine entrance.

And inside, the Cave was quite mine-like in shape, as I learned when I found out about mines. A long, narrow room, where the Matrons had set up a big table for meals and so on, ran into the mountain and slightly upward, and there were side rooms off it at about twenty-foot intervals or so. Some of these were sleeping rooms of various sizes, including a special one with a door—the only door in the Cave—for the Matrons on duty; other rooms were used for the school and the first stages of the other training activities. The Matrons arranged the sleeping rooms by age and by assignment, with boys eleven and up in separate rooms from the younger ones and with those of us in school segregated from the boys in the training programs. They also moved us around to different sized rooms whenever the sizes of the various groups required it. This turned out to be a huge bonus for me.

Meals were cooked outside on two woodstoves in the Yard, under a little shelter there, by the Matrons with help from the boys in training to be cooks. Firewood, food, and other supplies were passed into the Yard through a small door cut into the palisade. Or maybe it was more of a window, as it was only about four feet square, set about four feet off the ground. Anyway, we boys had tried it on numerous occasions, only to find it securely barred on the outside somehow. The fact that the Matrons made all of us stay inside the Cave when the door was opened only increased our speculation about what was out there.

Although I'm calling it the "Cave," mostly out of habit, it was really quite cozy, because there was a hot spring trickling out of the far end of the main room, its water channeled through metal pipes that heated the whole place. Once outside, the hot water was used in the cooking area for clean-up, and the excess continued through the pipe along the base of the north cliff and under the palisade. And there were even electric lights, in the main room where we ate and in the classroom and the training rooms. At the time, I knew about electricity from science class, but it didn't occur to me to wonder what the source was, how it was generated. Later, I learned that the Matrons had steam generation, an engine that powered a generator, using an underground heat source that eventually turned on them, as I'll describe eventually.

Now, I've come to understand that all this must sound really, really strange to people, like maybe we boys were abused or some such thing. That's what it would be called today, probably. To us, though, it was just our reality. And we were well-fed, provided with comfortable, if used, clothing, kept warm, except for those showers, educated, and treated pretty well, for the most part. Once in a while, someone would get a good caning for some transgression or other, but that happened in the real world, too, back in those days.

What I didn't know, at the time that Bucky disappeared, was what happened when you turned fourteen. Or, of course, what had happened to Bucky. The answers to both of those mysteries turned out to be much worse than merely strange.

* * *

"Boy!" The eight of us in the classroom looked up to see who was being addressed.

The Matrons never used our names; in fact, they probably didn't even know them. Hell, we didn't even *have* names, really, just what we came up with for ourselves. Bucky was Bucky because of his teeth. I was Whitey because of my blonde hair. Another kid was Spots because, naturally, of his freckles. And, in a similar way, the Matrons didn't have names either. They were all just "Matron" or "ma'am."

I asked about it one time, after I'd read a book where the boys had names—two names, actually—and was told only that things weren't done that way in our community. We'd just have to wait to get our names when we turned fourteen. Another mystery. And I decided then and there I'd probably be better off if I just didn't ask about the things in the book, all with two names, called "girls."

This time, it turned out that the Matron was looking at me, so I was the boy she was addressing.

"Yes, Matron?" I'd learned from bitter experience that being polite and being nice about it was the best way to minimize whatever trouble there might be.

"Come up here, please." She was sitting at her little table at the front of the classroom, dressed in the clothes they all wore, a plain, loose, neck-to-floor, long-sleeved cotton dress—light cotton as it was almost summer, as I recall—with a kerchief covering her head.

As I walked from my place near the back of the room toward the front, she returned her gaze to the papers on her table, and Booger—you can guess how he got his name—stuck out a foot to trip me. He was almost fourteen and had barely squeaked into the school again for his last year with the rest of us. I saw his foot just in time and hopped over it.

But then I made the mistake of turning around and walking backward for a couple of steps to make a face at him, and I tripped over my own feet in the process, winding up landing hard on my butt. Everyone laughed with gusto.

"Boys!!" This time we all knew she was addressing all of us. Her tone of voice made that clear.

I got up and dusted off the back of my pants, ignoring the pain at both ends—I'd also bitten my tongue—then turned and walked to the Matron's table, standing at a sort of parade rest, wondering what I'd done wrong this time. Getting called to the front of the room was generally not a good thing to have happen to you.

But her tone was a relief. If you were in real trouble, Matrons would always speak loudly enough for everyone to hear. This time, she kept her voice down.

“Boy, this essay you wrote on King Arthur is very, very good, so good that I want to show it to my sisters. However, it has a number of spelling and grammar errors. I’m sure you’d like to have those fixed before other Matrons read it, wouldn’t you?”

That question was what people today would call a “no-brainer.” In fact, when a Matron asked you just about *anything* with the words “wouldn’t you?” at the end, it was a no-brainer.

“Yes, ma’am, it would be an honor, ma’am.”

“Oh, good. Then why don’t you stay in here after class and make the corrections before supper? I’ve marked them with a light hand so that you can find them and erase my marks.” She smiled sweetly, at least as sweetly as her puckered-up old face could manage.

That was another thing about the Matrons in the Cave and the Yard: they were all old-looking. Wrinkled, for one. We had no comparisons to make, of course, with what young Matrons might look like, although I suspected that the girls in the books I’d read were young Matrons, but the ones we interacted with sure didn’t look like any of us.

Puckered-up smile or not, this was about the best news I could have had that day, with my butt smarting and my tongue bleeding in my mouth. Having to stay in the classroom during what was normally free time—free to goof around outside or whatever—wasn’t the best news, of course. But I figured I could make the corrections during the remainder of the school day, as I’d already finished the evening-study work she’d assigned. Then I could read during the free time. There were still a couple of books in the long bookcase against the west wall that I hadn’t gotten around to.

See, along with a good education, the Matrons gave us books to read. Looking back, it’s clear to me now that they were carefully selected books, and some seemed to be missing a page here and there. But they believed in what are now called the “classics,” and we were encouraged to read as much as we wanted to. That’s how I came to write the essay about King Arthur, because I read a book written by a guy named Thomas Malory.

So I went back to my place at the last row of worktables and spent the rest of the school day erasing and correcting my mistakes and erasing her faint correction marks. By the time everyone else was dismissed for free time, I was finished. But I knew not to give the edited essay back to the Matron—she’d have just found something else for me to do. I decided to wait until right before supper to ask her when she wanted me to give it to her.

While I was contemplating whether to try reading *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* again—the first time, I gave up because it was too boring—it occurred to me that the Matron who’d assigned me the task of fixing my essay might not be around at supper. They had a mysterious way of disappearing every couple of days, to be replaced by others who appeared just as mysteriously. We boys had speculated on that, too—it just didn’t seem reasonable that they’d climb in and out through the door in the log wall. Too undignified, and some of them were pretty fat along with being old.

Thinking about the vanishing Matrons made me remember the map, and the fresh air.

As cozy as the Cave was, it had a tendency to get stuffy at times, especially the sleeping rooms full of semi-washed boys. But the classroom stayed much fresher. And I remembered one day when I’d seen the map covering the wall behind the Matron’s table moving a little, like the tops of the trees outside the palisade when they swayed in the wind.

It was a big map of the world, one that we used in our geography class, with a second, pull-down map of North America for when we needed more detail. Where our Valley was located was discussed only in general terms, but the two maps came in quite handy for all sorts of things. We’d used the North America map to talk about and trace out the Lewis and Clark expedition, in fact.

And it swayed in the wind, a wind that kept the classroom's air fresh.

I remember that it took twelve-year-old me a while to screw up my courage. As I said before, Bucky's disappearance had boosted my suspicions and my sense of adventure, and here I was, alone in not only the classroom but also in the back end of the entire cave—everyone else was outside, preparing supper or goofing off. But I was still scared, because the idea that had popped into my head was so outrageous as to be unthinkable. I knew, though, that I had to find out if it was correct.

My first move was to the classroom entrance, really just a missing wall where it joined the main room. I peeped around the corner as carefully as I could, but no one was around. I could see some activity out in the Yard, but that was to be expected. The interior of the Cave was empty, as far as I could tell. The door to the Matrons' room, out by the Cave entrance, was closed, but that didn't really mean anything. They always kept it closed, and locked, even. Good thing, too. We curious boys would no doubt have figured out how to poke around in there otherwise.

With no one around, there was nothing to do but to go for it, so I tiptoed quickly up to the left side of the map and eased my way behind it, nose rubbing the heavy map paper, fingers feeling along the wall behind me. The light from the room penetrated the paper, so it wasn't completely dark back there, but I still couldn't see much.

About a third of the way across, right behind Mexico, the wall behind me vanished, and I almost fell down backward onto my butt again. But I managed to catch my balance and stepped to the right, where my hand caught the corner of the vanishing wall. Turning around, I could see in the feeble glow a corridor running gently downward ahead of me. It was hard to tell, but it looked for all the world as if there was a door about ten feet in.

My unthinkable thought was correct!

* * *

If I'd been scared before, now I was petrified. I'm surprised I didn't wet my pants. The first thing I did, instead, was to ease back to the edge of the map and peep out. I fully expected to see all three Matrons who were on duty that day standing at the entrance to the classroom, hands on hips, looking bullets at me. But, no, all was quiet and empty.

Despite a heart rate that would have killed a hamster and hyperventilation so extreme that my head was spinning, I eased back behind the map toward the corridor. I just had to see about that door, and then, I vowed, I'd get back out to my place in the classroom and apply myself to that boring Lewis and Clark book.

When I felt the wall disappear, I turned and stared down the passage for a minute or two, getting my eyes adjusted to the dimness. The floor was smooth and even, though, so I could have walked with my eyes closed, except I'd have bumped into that door.

I don't know what I expected to find, but it was just a door, not unlike the one to the Matrons' sleeping room. I tapped very gently and decided it was solid, rather than hollow, and it had no window or any kind of ventilation grate. I could feel a draft on my ankles from under it, though. There was a simple latch and, because I could see the hinges, it opened toward me.

After a little internal debate, I gently turned the handle on the latch, carefully, trying my utmost to anticipate any noise and stop. But it seemed well-oiled, as there was only a slight click, and the air pressure on the other side pushed the door my way. That, of course, scared me all over again, and I caught it when it was open about an inch. Peeking through the crack, all I could see was blackness.

Pushing firmly and slowly, I closed it and got the latch to catch. Then, with deep breaths of relief, I walked carefully back to the map and slid behind it back into the classroom. Once again, no one was waiting for me, and I thanked my lucky stars that I hadn't been found out.

The Journals of Lewis and Clark was as boring as ever, and I gave up trying to read it after about a page. I suspect that even one of my favorite stories wouldn't have held my attention, though, because I was too fixated on the implications of my discovery.

For one thing, I now knew how the Matrons switched places without our knowing. It would be easy for them to come and go after lights out or when all of us boys were out in the Yard. For another, it was obvious that I now had a way out of the confinement of the Cave and the Yard, should I choose to make use of it. It wouldn't do to just go blundering through that door and down the black passage, though—some exploring was a first order of business. And for that, I was going to need a light of some kind.

But it wasn't if I could find a Matron and ask to borrow a lantern or something, so the problem brought me up short. And I couldn't do anything right away because I was stuck in that classroom for a while anyway. I tried to start the Lewis and Clark journal again, and, briefly, even considered something I would really enjoy, such as re-reading *Tom Sawyer* once more. Of course, just thinking about that book reminded me of the cave adventure that Tom and Becky had—they'd used candles, I recalled. Maybe, I thought, I could stockpile lots of candles and lots and lots of matches. The breeze that puffed through that door when I'd opened it would be tough on candles and matches, after all. And even though I knew the Matrons had candles, stealing enough for my exploration would undoubtedly raise questions. Besides, where would I stockpile them? Our personal possessions were limited to our clothes and a toothbrush, all of which we kept in footlockers by our beds. A stash of candles and matches might be hidden under the clothes, but a Matron would be sure to find it during an inspection. That wouldn't do at all.

I pondered the matter while waiting for the supper bell to ring, but the idea didn't come to me until the next day.

The Matrons, whose jobs were to educate and train us, and to keep discipline in the process, were remarkably versatile in their abilities, teaching, as they did, the full range of elementary- and high-school curricula as well as various practical skills such as carpentry, plumbing, electrical systems, metal working, and various others. Not all Matrons taught everything, so there was some specialization, but they all taught more than one thing, unlike the teachers I encountered years later out in the real world. And they tried to impart their versatility onto us boys, even those of us who remained in the school, by requiring us to take once-a-week classes in one of the practical skills. I'd picked wood-working, what I took to be a sort of artistic carpentry.

The next day must have been a Tuesday—that's when the wood-working class was, as I recall—when it occurred to me that I could fabricate a false bottom for my footlocker and hide candles and matches under it. The space needed to be only one candle thick, and if the wood I used was thin enough, it wouldn't make the footlocker look too shallow and raise any suspicions. At the time, I was working on a pencil box for one of the Matrons—the one who liked my essay so much had become the lead candidate for recipient—and the false-bottom idea emerged as a much larger version of that.

I knew I couldn't use one large, thin plank for the bottom, because there weren't any pieces of raw wood the right size, so I'd have to make a number of smaller planks. They could sit on stringers placed a candle-length apart. The hard part would be rounding the corners to match the footlocker, so that the false bottom would fit closely. First, though, I'd have to look carefully at the locker's real bottom to see how to match it.

Lying in bed the night before, trying to go to sleep with a zillion ideas zooming around in my head, it had dawned on me that, in addition to the candles and matches, I was going to need some other

equipment if I was going to explore successfully, and without being caught. A mirror on a long handle for peeking around corners, for example, would be very helpful. And some kind of box to protect a lit candle from drafts would make things lots easier. No doubt, I knew, other things would come to me.

The notion of a wood box with a candle in it didn't seem very smart, though. And, obviously, wood wouldn't do to make a mirror. So I cleaned up my workspace carefully and walked up to the Matron's desk there in the carpentry shop.

"Um, excuse me, Matron? Can I ask a question?" Again, being polite and nice worked best with them.

"Yes, boy?" She didn't even look up.

"Well, see, I'm working on a project that is kind of in between a wood project and a metal project. It needs both. Do you suppose I could also take some metal-working classes? They meet tomorrow, I think, so it would not interfere with this class."

This unorthodox request—generally we boys in the school grumbled about having to take any shop classes at all—did make her look up. "What project?"

"Um, well, it's a surprise. Uh, for another...er, one of your sisters. A present." That produced a puckered-up smile, this one a bit less prune-like than the one the day before.

"Well, how nice. And you need both metal-working as well as wood-working? I'll have to see how your progress in the school is, but if you're doing well, I think we can arrange it."

"Thank you, Matron." And I went back to my scheming.

I spent the rest of that class creating a make-shift ruler from a long, pencil-sized wood scrap that I could take with me to measure my footlocker. The tools in the class were carefully monitored, so borrowing anything was impossible. The ruler went down my pants, along my thigh and held in place by my belt, a bit uncomfortable but a good hiding place, as long as I didn't have to sit down, until I could get it back to my bed.

I was doing just fine in school, as I knew well, so the next day I was sent into the metal-working shop. I wasn't going to be doing real metal-working, welding and so forth, just ornamental stuff, and, quite reasonably, the Matron in charge wanted to know what I had in mind.

"Well, ma'am, I'm making a present, a pencil-box. And I thought I'd make some shiny hinges to dress it up."

"Hinges? *Hinges* as your first project? My, you do have ambition. Tell you what. How about making a fitted lid in wood shop and ornamental, as well as functional, corner braces here? As a first project, corner braces will be far less likely to frustrate you. And if you use the right material, you can polish them to a high shine to dress up the box."

That was just fine with me, especially the high shine part. Unless I could get my hands on a piece of real mirrored glass, that was going to have to do.

It took me until about my birthday to get the pencil-box finished, along with all of the other, clandestine, parts I was putting together. It seemed appropriate that I was going to begin my explorations just as I was beginning my fourteenth year.

Or at least it was going to be sort of close to the beginning of my fourteenth year.

* * *

The thing is, all of us boys had birthdays on one of two dates, July first or January first. We didn't really question this, but I think we all knew it was just another strange thing about that place. Of course, it was quite convenient for the Matrons to do it that way, because with three dozen of us altogether, there would have been almost a birthday a week to deal with. And that many parties were just not in the cards.

But by lumping everyone into one of those two dates, there needed to be only two parties a year. Actually, I guess we were lucky to get those two parties, because there weren't any other holidays, not even Christmas.

Anyway, my birthday was on July first, along with about fifteen of the other boys. And it was also a good-bye party for the four of them who were turning fourteen—including Booger and another boy named Red who was in the school, too. The rest of us knew we wouldn't be seeing them the next morning. And it dawned on me that I'd have a sleeping room all to myself, for at least a couple of years. Unless the Matrons changed the rules. Again.

Of course, there are parties and then there are *parties*. Given the kind of place it was, ours was one of the former, quiet and staid by comparison with what we would have preferred, with gifts of clothing for the birthday boys. In fact, now that I remember it, that was the only time we ever received clothing, unless something got completely destroyed somehow and was replaced with a ragged, thrice-used item. Everyone did get sweets, though, as a treat. I guess that twice-a-year-only candy was one of the reasons that most of us had perfect teeth.

The festivities, if that's what you can call them, were watched over by a double shift of sharp-eyed Matrons for about an hour, and then it was time, as usual, for evening study and then bed.

But ever since my discovery of the passage behind the map, bedtime for me had become a new and very interesting part of the day. At first, I practiced staying awake and trying to tell when the other boys in my room finally fell asleep. When I got that figured out, I began trying out short excursions to the outhouses in the Yard, which was permitted, to see if anyone would wake up and notice.

With the departure of Booger and Red, none of that mattered so much, because I was going to have my own room. Even better, I knew they'd move me to the smallest of the sleeping rooms, which was back by the classroom.

Having my own room also meant I'd be able to modify my footlocker without having another of the boys notice, and I pushed ahead with that project. Soon, I had a place to hide a supply of candles and matches, along with my other paraphernalia, and the problem became how to acquire those candles and matches.

I finally decided I didn't really need candles. I could make a metal holder, like a lantern box, and use wax with some kind of wick in it—a home-made candle, of sorts. Of course, that just meant I'd need wax instead of candles. And matches. Wouldn't it be nice, I thought, to find some strike-anywhere matches?

It seems like it took me a couple of months after my birthday to pull everything together. I managed to snare matches from the outdoors kitchen one day, when the Matrons out there ran off to break up a fight in another part of the Yard and all the cooking trainees went with them to watch the fun. I'd been paying attention to their activities for a couple of weeks and figured out where they kept their extra boxes. A whole box of kitchen matches seemed at the time like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow to me, and I hid them away under the false bottom of my footlocker.

The wax took a little more creativity. For a while, I kept a sharp eye out for candle-drippings—the Matrons would usually take a candle with them when they went out to their special privy in the evening, and every now and then a piece of a drip would break off. That, however, quickly proved itself to be far too slow a way to accumulate enough wax to be useful. Then, one day I noticed that one of the

classroom Matrons was polishing the bookcases in the classroom, using some kind of goop from a little can and rubbing to beat the band.

“Um, Matron?”

“Yes, boy?”

“Well, I’d like to polish the wood on a project I’m making. If I finish the bookcases for you, could I use that stuff on my project?”

“Project? What project?”

“Ah, well, it’s a secret, actually, a present for, um, someone. Ma’am.”

This wasn’t the Matron I had in mind for the pencil-box I was making, so I could have told her. But I thought she might be jealous or something and not cooperate.

“A secret, eh? I’m sure that you know that secrets among the boys are not allowed.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. And none of the other boys knows about it, just me. I want it to be a surprise.”

She stopped rubbing and shook her wrist. “This beeswax polish does get a bit tiresome, so it would indeed be very helpful if you could finish this for me. I’ll tell you what. Finish up here and you can take the wax to the wood shop when you go. I’ll show you where we keep it.”

“Um, I see that you’re putting some on that cloth and then rubbing it in. Does it need more than one, er, coat?”

“Ah! Good observation, boy. A second coat is always a good idea. But you have to let the first one harden up for a while, say, overnight. And these bookcases have been polished many times. Your wood project probably needs several coats to be truly sealed and polished.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll finish the bookcases today and do them again tomorrow when I have a chance. And I’ll put several coats on my pen ... er, my project. Thank you!”

As I said, being polite and being nice about it went a long way with the Matrons. This sort of groveling, though, was a struggle for me, and I was glad that none of the other boys saw me at it. I’d have been accused of brown-nosing for sure, and that was always grounds for a fight. The last thing I needed at that point was to get into trouble. Besides, post-fight caning always hurt more than the fight itself.

Finally, the day came when I was ready for a little night-time exploring. I had my candle-lantern with a hardened pool of beeswax in it and a wick made from twined together threads from an old sweatshirt, and the mirror I’d made was polished to a fine sheen. It was just a matter of screwing up my courage.

That short excursion into the passageway behind the map with my gear was both terrifying and exhilarating. I was worried about time—with no watch, I couldn’t tell how long I was out of bed, and bed-checks were always a risk. I was worried about making some noise that would alert someone. I was worried that someone would see my light in the first part of the corridor, before the door, shining through the map. I was worried that I would run into Matrons coming or going. I was worried that I would have a heart attack.

But it turned out to be easy.

* * *

Two

I spent the next ten months or so exploring. At first, it was every night, not so much from a sense of urgency as from a sense of curiosity. It did turn to urgency more and more as I approached my fourteenth birthday—but I'll get to that later.

It took me a couple of weeks to develop a routine that I could sustain. The first few nights weren't the problem—on each of those little explorations, I was so nervous about being discovered that I spent no more than an hour or so in the tunnels, tunnels that turned out to be so complex that I began thinking of them as the Labyrinth.

But I got away with it, so I quickly became braver and increased the time I spent at it. Those longer, every-night explorations, however, soon caught up with me, and I started dozing off in class, a serious transgression if there ever was one. I'm pretty sure that the only reason I didn't get kicked out of the school was that I had become their star student. For a while, I cut back to every other night, and then just to make sure I'd get enough sleep, every third night. As my explorations continued, I probed deeper and deeper into the Labyrinth behind that door, so each trip took longer. Those two nights of sleep became more and more important.

I discovered that the network of tunnels was quite extensive and on several levels. Some were obviously used more than others, and some seemed never to have been used at all, at least recently. It didn't worry me to walk the used tunnels, but it made me nervous to explore the unused ones, as it was easy to spot my new footprints in the dust. I eventually solved this problem by fashioning a crude broom to obscure my tracks.

One time, my excursion lasted almost until dawn, because I got lost. I'd come to realize early on that behind that door was a complex of nearly identical tunnels, mostly straight but intersecting at all angles in a bewildering maze. I thought about creating a map, but knew that, should such a thing ever be found, it would be about the most damning evidence of my transgressions possible. I finally did create one, but I found a place to hide it in one of the unused tunnels, and soon transferred my supply of wax and matches, along with the other stuff, there as well.

The time I got lost, I'd intended to re-explore some familiar ground, so I didn't take the map with me. Naturally, I took a wrong turn at some point and wound up somewhere in that maze that I didn't recognize. Panic set in—I knew that not showing up for breakfast would be the end of the world as I knew it—and I was fortunate to finally blunder into a corridor I recognized.

That experience got me to thinking, though. How, I wondered, do the Matrons not get lost in there? On my next excursion I began a systematic inspection of the walls and ceilings of the corridors, especially in the vicinity of intersections. It took a while before I realized that each corridor had subtle labels in the form of symbols at about shoulder height that had been chiseled into the rock walls, mostly triangles with notches cut in them. At first glance, they weren't distinctive, but when you learned what to look for, they jumped right out at you. The main corridor, from behind the map and through that first door, was labeled by upward-pointing triangles with a single notch cut into the right-hand side. Corridor Up-One-Right, I started to call it. Once I'd transferred those various symbols onto my map, the Labyrinth began to make more and more sense—there was a pattern! Triangles with vertices pointing up were main, through corridors; those with vertices pointing down were connectors, cross-streets, as it were. And the few rectangles I'd found signified sloping tunnels to other levels.

And then came the big epiphany, where it all fell into place for me. The tunnels all had smooth floors that weren't quite flat—there was a low point right down the middle of the corridor as if water was supposed to drain there. Also, the corridors were mostly straight, except for the sloping ones, which

were gently curved. And those all curved to the right as you were descending. The labeling triangles and rectangles were all placed at easy-to-find spots, once you knew what to look for and where to look. And, because they were chiseled into the walls, you didn't really have to look at them, all you had to do was feel them. *So you didn't really need light in there!* The chiseled symbols would tell you where you were, and the shape of the floors kept you walking down the middles of the corridors.

When I figured that out, I felt so smug that I almost got myself in big trouble at the school. At that point, it was October and I was becoming increasingly aware that my fourteenth birthday was just over the horizon. Not only was I the star pupil, I was also the oldest. Humility and the associated obsequiousness expected of us boys were becoming harder and harder for me—and the Matrons knew that.

To put me in my place, I suppose, the Matron that day assigned me what she no doubt thought was an especially difficult math problem, one of those “story problems” where you have to figure out the right equations to describe the question in the story and then solve them. The details escape me, but I do remember that the problem was indeterminate—either you'd have to divide by zero or there just wasn't enough information available, something like that.

But, silly me, I made the mistake of telling her, in no uncertain terms, that it was indeterminate. Bad mistake. Not only did it get me an extra turn cleaning the privies—and if you know anything about boys, you know that's a really disgusting job—it also got me extra time in the classroom, where I had to *prove* that the problem was indeterminate. That turned out to be harder than I'd thought, and I lost a night of exploring because of it.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, gloating about having figured out that you could get around in those tunnels in the dark. That made it a lot easier, believe it or not, because, before, exploring around with my home-made lantern, I lived in fear that someone else in there would see its light. Or that I'd open a door to a dark room and they'd see the light. Operating completely in darkness made life a lot easier, once I got used to it.

The thing is, now that I've talked about how I managed to explore around, my tools and schedule and all, I still haven't said anything about where those corridors went. When I worked up the courage to find that out, well, a whole new world opened up for me.

* * *

Ironically, it was my favorite thoroughfare, Up-One-Right, that got me started. In retrospect, I suppose that this shouldn't be a big surprise—after all, the Matrons used it all the time to come and go from our Cave, so it only made sense that their route would be as simple as possible. Simple, in this sense, would suggest that the other end of Up-One-Right would be where they came from.

But I didn't know that or, really, think it through that far. All I knew was that I had to start somewhere, and finding the other end of Up-One-Right seemed like a good idea at the time. So one night, after I'd learned to navigate with confidence in the dark, I followed it. As a through corridor, I expected a door at its far end, but it actually ended at an intersection with an upward-sloping corridor with its gentle leftward curvature. That corridor, I discovered, ended at a door, a door just like the one behind our schoolroom map, as far as I could tell. The gentle draft I felt on my ankles was outward, under the door, and I hoped that my feet didn't smell too bad.

It took me some time to persuade myself that there was likely to be a bit more corridor beyond the door and then a curtain of some kind (although probably not a map) before any opening to a room, just like at the school-room end. The clincher was that I could see no light at the bottom of the door, where the draft was going, despite the fact that my eyes were well acclimated to the dark at that point. Still, I

had my fingers crossed as I carefully turned the knob and eased the door open. I found that my suspicion was correct—there was more corridor ahead, plus a very faint glow. Whatever was over the end of the corridor wasn't completely opaque.

As I approached, I began to hear the murmur of soft voices, which nearly made me gasp with alarm. If they pulled back that curtain, or whatever it was, I was a cooked goose! But the conversation had already grabbed my attention.

“Louisa told me that 8H9 is getting more and more arrogant in school. That he not only knows he's smart, but he seems to think he's smarter than she is. I mean, this happens a lot with the thirteens, but he's a bit over the top.”

The combination of “school”, “smart”, and “thirteen” made me realize that she was talking about me. It took me only another second to understand that I was called “8H9” as well.

“It sure makes him a pain in the ass to put up with, doesn't it? But he's just the kind of seed-bearer that we need. Smart, assertive, good-looking, or he will be as he ages, and a strong physical specimen. We've heard nothing but good things about him from Mother Elaine and the geneticists.”

I was so shocked by her crude language, language that would get us boys whacked a couple of times, that her compliments about me almost didn't register. And what was this about a “seed-bearer”?

“Yeah, I guess she knows best. Oh, crap, look at the time. We'd better scoot. Where's that lantern?”

The mention of a lantern suggested to me that they were coming my way, so I beat a hasty retreat, back through the door, down to the end of Up-One-Right, and into the first cross-corridor I came to. I hid around a corner until they passed by, and then, as much as I tried not to, I couldn't help myself but to follow them.

I think that's when I first got the idea of camouflage. They were easy to follow, carrying their lantern and all, but I kept thinking, what if I make a little noise that they hear and they turn around? They'll see me for sure, with the light reflecting off my white skin and blonde hair and all. I made a vow then and there always to use something to make me black, like the darkness of the surrounding tunnels, in the future. Charcoal, from half-burned logs, seemed like a possibility, for my skin. And I needed a black cloth for my hair.

Even with worrying about being seen, though, I had to keep close enough to listen to their conversation.

“Y'know, I think that Mother Elaine is right about 8H9. He's going to be a real man. It'll be too bad when he gets gelded.” She giggled. “He's almost enough to make me want to be on the milking team.”

“Eww, that's gross! I know what you mean about it's too bad, though. I have to say that I feel even worse about the culls. I mean, sure, they've got their imperfections. But so what? All that's needed is to keep them from being seed-bearers. Like that poor kid with the bad teeth last spring. And the bad eyes. He was a great kid! Smart, happy, funny, a good influence on the other boys. What a waste.”

“As much as I agree with you, I also have to agree with Mother Elaine's decisions about these things. It's for the good of the community, after all.”

“Oh, sure, I know that. And I'm not trying to go against her decisions. It's just that...well, it's just that there seems to be so much waste of the potential of these males to help with securing our future.”

“But that's part of doctrine, surely you remember that. To the extent that there's waste of that nature, it balances the havoc that too many of them would create for the community. That's one of our founding principles. All they're good for, ultimately, is their seed. Oh, here we are. Ready for your shift again? I wonder what we'll hear in the debrief this time.”

I knew what a “cull” was, from the flock of chickens the farmer-trainees kept. And it sure sounded like they were applying the term to Bucky. The description fit, and so did the timing. I could feel myself getting mad.

But I was confused about the word “geld.” We were taught additional languages in the school, and I’d become fairly fluent in both classical Spanish and German. And “geld” in German, I remembered, meant “money.” But that didn’t make any sense to me at all, the way she’d used it. I made a mental note to check the big dictionary the next time I had a free minute in the classroom.

It was the business about the “waste of potential” and the “havoc of too many of them” that really got me to thinking, though. What kind of community was this place?

* * *

The comment about a debrief reminded me that these two Matrons would be joining the three already in our Cave, in their own sleeping area, I supposed, talking things over, and then the two coming off-shift would be headed back into Up-One-Right. And then the new ones would undoubtedly then do a bed check.

With that hint, I had no trouble getting into my bed in time to be counted. But when I found the time to look up “geld” in the dictionary the next day, I had trouble keeping my temper, that’s for sure. It only compounded the anger I felt about Bucky having been culled. Whatever attitude problems the Matrons had been having with me before took on another flavor altogether after that. Gelded? Really? That’s what happened to boys after they turned fourteen?

I suppose that it was a good thing that the Matron in the classroom was the one who had stayed over, the one with the double shift. I think I just might have confronted the others, I was so mad. But thirteen-plus years in that place had taught me the value of self-control and patience. And at that point I made a vow to myself to channel my anger and energy into using my next eight months preparing for escape, just before my fourteenth birthday.

Escape to where wasn’t clear, but escape it would be. Maybe, I thought, I could also figure out how to rescue some of the other boys from that awful fate as well. Fantasies of becoming a champion of the downtrodden filled my head for days.

Now, for all that I’ve been saying good things about the quality of the schooling I got at the hands of the Matrons, I need to emphasize something I hinted at earlier—it was, compared to a comprehensive education in modern terms, spotty. History, as I suggested, was somewhat biased toward what the community saw fit to teach. And, relevant to my motivation to escape, any discussion of human physiology and, especially, sexuality was not only ignored but actively suppressed. Further, those farmers-in-training had a little flock of chickens to take care of but no other farm animals at all—no mammals, in particular. So we boys didn’t even have the rudimentary knowledge that all real-world farm kids get from watching the behavior of the stock. To us, the notion of sex was about as meaningful as quantum physics would be to a gopher.

In fact, I was so uneducated about all that stuff that after I looked up “geld” in the dictionary, I had to look up “testicle” to see what the hell that was. (Oh! *That’s* what they’re really called, was my reaction.) Then I had to look up “sperm,” and gradually the notion of a “seed-bearer” dawned on me. Eventually, after tracking down all sorts of definitions, a blind-person-appreciation-of-color understanding of sex began to emerge for me. It seemed to explain, at least, why there were both roosters and hens in that little flock of chickens and, maybe, why they had that peculiar style of “fighting” with each other, as the Matrons insisted on calling it.

That understanding, meager as it was, also helped me cope with those “stirrings,” to use a polite term, that I was undergoing and, apparently, the other older boys were, too. But we all knew not to mention them to each other and certainly not to the Matrons for fear of punishment. Looking back on it, I have to say it was quite bizarre when my body decided to head into puberty without my really knowing what it was all about. When hair started growing out of my face, I was totally freaked out, for example. But, as we’ll see, all that worked itself out before too long.

In any case, the outcome of my having overheard that conversation was that my motivation to explore, with a particular goal of finding a way out of there, snowballed. I changed my schedule back to skipping only one night for sleep, and I began opening more and more of the doors at the ends of those upward-triangle corridors.

In class, when I knocked off my daily assignments before anyone else, I spent a lot of time thinking about the design of the Labyrinth and the rest of the community. All of the corridor-end doors had a draft blowing under them, outward, from the dark corridors to whatever was on the other side. That meant an air source of some kind, and, like in *Tom Sawyer*, that meant a possible route to the outside. It also motivated me to keep myself extra clean—any odd smells coming from the Labyrinth could well raise suspicion, I thought. I even got hygiene points for my cleanliness during inspections.

As I opened more and more of those doors, I also explored beyond them a little. It took all the courage I could screw up for the first such exploration, and I chose my old favorite, peeking past the curtain behind which I’d heard that conversation about my being gelded someday. I picked a day just after a Matron shift change, on the theory that no one would be in there, unlike on a shift-change day, and, when I peeked out, the room was blessedly empty. I studied it for a while and finally decided it was a changing room for Matrons going on and coming off shifts in our Cave. There were benches and rows of pegs along the walls, from which hung the sorts of dresses that the Matrons wore as well as other garments that I didn’t recognize.

After some careful thought, I picked the “in for a dime, in for a dollar” approach and slipped out into the room. An opening led to what turned out to be showers, and there were several toilet stalls as well. And a closed door led somewhere that I didn’t, at that point, have the courage to check out.

The other garments reminded me of something like an over-large shirt, almost knee length, with a cord running through loops about where a waist would be. The material was a wonderfully smooth, fine fabric, not at all like the dresses that I was used to seeing the Matrons in. And these silky shirt-like things were in a variety of different colors, bright, cheery, and not at all like the drab dresses I was used to seeing.

Another time, I opened a door and, when I got close to the curtain over the opening to whatever the next room was, I was assaulted by the most delicious aromas I’d ever smelled. A peek showed me that there was a kitchen in there, and several Matrons, dressed in those silky outfits I’d seen before, were making bread. But it sure didn’t smell like the bread we had to eat in the Cave.

A couple of those bakers in there were young, not like the old and wrinkled Matrons we boys always dealt with. I could see actual legs from the knees down, and interesting wobbling motions under the fabric covering their chests. When one of them leaned over toward me to pick up something she’d dropped, I could see a lot of what was causing that wobbling, and I was surprised to discover a clear connection between young, pretty Matrons and those stirrings I mentioned before. I still didn’t quite understand it all yet, but I did understand that having old, wrinkly Matrons in the Cave with us, dressed in those long dresses with their hair covered, was meant specifically to keep us older boys from noticing what I was noticing at that point.

At the time, I was too stirred up to recognize the importance of finding that kitchen, but it turned out to be one of my most critical discoveries.

Another critical discovery happened when the curtain I came up to hit me with another class of smells. I didn't quite place them at first, but they were much less pleasant than the kitchen smells had been, more earthy, pungent. It turned out to be an entrance to an animal husbandry facility, a sort of big stable. There were animals I recognized from pictures—horses, cattle, goats, sheep; all the farm stock that we boys didn't have access to. But more importantly, there were tools there, tools of all sorts. Because the stalls and aisles between them offered plenty of places to hide, I explored the stable at length and made mental notes of all the equipment that might come in handy for my escape plans.

But the biggest discovery, the most critical of all, was when I opened a door at the end of a corridor and found myself in a library, a small one about the size of my single-person sleeping room, but one with shelves and shelves of more books than I ever imagined existed.

* * *

As much as I wanted to devour every book in that library as soon as possible, caution held me back. I realized that, first, I needed to prepare a place where I could do my reading. What if, I reasoned, one of those old biddies couldn't sleep one night and came into the library looking for a book? It wouldn't do for me to be in there. Also, I couldn't find a second door to this library. As I discovered later, that was because it was the restricted library, one hidden from all but the most senior and trustworthy of the Matrons. This, of course, made it all the better for my purposes.

But the most important thing was my escape plan, which hinged on my finding a way out of the underground Labyrinth, maybe through that air inlet I'd deduced must exist somewhere.

As I marked my discovered rooms—the stable, the kitchen, the library, and so on—on my map, I also studied it for reading-room possibilities. It became apparent that there were sections of the unused part of the place that I'd not fully explored. That became a priority, but first the footprint problem needed solving. I managed that by borrowing a real broom from the stables one night and sweeping as many of the unused corridors as I could, figuring that beyond where I'd swept, no one would go looking for more dust.

It was when I was sweeping one of those dusty corridors that wasn't being used by the Matrons that I discovered the source of the fresh air, that breeze that blew outward under all the doors. At the end of a long ascent that included more than a full-circle curve, which I had to crawl the last fifteen yards through because the ceiling had lowered to three feet or so, it opened up into a little room with a window. A window to the world outside.

The window had a grating of bars over it, and no glass, and it was an irregular shape about four feet square that had a view that seemed endless. The grating was hinged and held closed by a simple latch, albeit one that couldn't be reached from the outside. The first time I began to pull it open, it made a God-awful screeching that echoed down the corridor I'd come up. But I fixed that with some of the beeswax I'd purloined for my home-made candle lantern. And I did an experiment: I left my lantern lit in the little room and crawled then walked back down the curving corridor to where it branched off from the main hallway that was in use by the Matrons now and then. As I left the little room at the top farther and farther behind, the candle's light became fainter and fainter until it was no longer visible at all. Nor, as the incoming air diffused, could I smell the burning wax.

So I had my reading room, an aerie in the side of the mountain with a window looking out over a desert. Oh, it took more work to make it truly hospitable—several wool blankets, which smelled of horses, that I borrowed from the stable were especially helpful—but it served me perfectly over the next few months as a private, hidden place in which to read to my heart's content. And some of those books

from the library I'd discovered turned out to be just what I needed to flesh out my education, at least as far as my background was concerned.

I can't possibly describe all of them here; hell, I've probably forgotten more than I remember. But there was one, I think it was called something like "History of the Oscura Colony", that helped me understand a lot of stuff that was just completely opaque before.

It seems that at the beginning of the Mexican War, in about 1846, the United States Army of the West formed something called the "Mormon Battalion," which set out on the Santa Fe Trail for California. It included not only soldiers, but family members as well. The ordeal, however, was just too much for many of them, and at Santa Fe several fell out sick and many of the women and children were sent back north to Colorado. Three of the soldiers plus their wives—they were early Mormons and seriously polygamous—and children headed off on their own, to the south. Apparently, the men had heard of gold or silver or something in the Sacramento Mountains, and they were going to get rich, or so they thought.

For whatever reason, maybe placer signs in the creek, they staked a claim in Nogal Canyon, southeast and over the mountains from where Carrizozo is now. And they started digging. But after many months, they decided the hole was barren, and, anyway, winter had come and, even that far south, it played havoc with their plans. Two of the men died, or maybe they killed each other, and several of the women and children died, too. To complicate matters, the third man turned sickly. I think those three soldiers started with something like twelve wives altogether and fifty-one children and wound up with nine women and forty or so children for the one guy left after that first winter. So he, now the clan's patriarch, gave up on the Sacramentos and headed west. They all crossed that hellish lava flow just west of where Carrizozo is now—not a trivial accomplishment—and wound up staking a claim, or, I guess, several claims, in the Oscura Mountains just north of Oscura Peak. The west side of their property was an amphitheater-shaped escarpment down to the desert of what's now called White Sands, the *Jornada del Muerto*, and the east side was a Valley carved into the more gentle eastern slope of the Oscuras there. They must have found signs of minerals for them to have staked the claims, and there were also a couple of robust springs that made the land in the east-side Valley suitable for ranching. So they settled in.

Well, to make a long story short, two things happened. First, the nine women decided somehow that their communal husband was irrelevant to their future, so they eliminated him. The details are obscure, but it seems clear that he didn't die of natural causes. Their leader in this was a woman who began using her maiden name exclusively, Lily Hobbes. They switched from being a patriarchy to a matriarchy, and they started calling themselves "Lilies."

Sometime about then, the Lilies rejected Mormonism and, apparently, all other modern religion, too. And because they'd already had experience with mining, probably from their time in Nogal Canyon, they, the women, I mean, kept at it. And that led to the second thing, the even more amazing thing.

You see, in the process of the mining, they ran across some natural caves, one of which contained what turned out to be the great treasure of Francisco de Coronado, the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador. By that time, and we're talking somewhere in the early 1850s here, that treasure had passed into legend. But those women who'd started out from Colorado with the Mormon Battalion found it. That, of course, gave them the resources to prosper. They must have had some genuine US gold coins, because they made molds, melted down some of the Coronado gold, and made their own coins. Counterfeiting, sure, but it was real gold in the same amount as the original US gold coins, so it was both ethical, from their perspective, and undetectable by the methods of the time, at least out here in what was no-man's land at that point. After that, it was a matter of figuring out how to get northwest to Socorro, the closest real settlement back then, and setting up a connection for supplies and so forth.

It seems that they prospered for several decades in this way and raised cattle in the process, which provided a legitimate cover for their overall operation. In the meantime, a governing structure developed that, probably from books they bought, took an interest in the so-called science of eugenics. I found in their library there an old book by some guy named William Goodell, who advocated castration to prevent procreation by men with inferior traits. And I found some other writings by members of the Oscura Colony who discussed their problem of having a limited gene pool from which to draw and how to avoid inbreeding as much as possible. They seemed determined to remain as independent of the outside world as they could, so inbreeding was a problem for long-term success.

Somehow, these ideas took firm hold in the Colony, and years later, when I came along, they'd evolved into the system that I was born into, where male children were segregated and eventually either culled or gelded to be used as, well, slaves.

Now, you've got to understand that, for me, reading all this was both eye-opening and, well, quite reasonable, in a way. It was what I'd implicitly been force-fed all my life. It felt like home, somehow. But it still made me even madder than I'd been when I'd first heard about the gelding business.

Fortunately, among all those books—and, remember, this turned out to be their version of a “classified” library, for there was another, bigger one with a huge variety of books in it that I eventually ran across—among all those books were others that provided useful information about the day-to-day workings of the Colony, maps of the surrounding region, and, of more than casual interest to me, a comprehensive map of the Labyrinth, that cave/tunnel system I'd been mapping for myself. Including the location of the Coronado treasure room.

But all of that became of secondary interest to me the night that I, quite unexpectedly, bumped into Clarisse.

* * *

Three

They say that hindsight is twenty-twenty, and, in hindsight, I guess I should have expected that I would not be the only curious and adventuresome young person in that place. Naturally, there would be others who accidentally discovered the secrets of the elders and who decided to investigate those secrets. I suppose that, if I'd thought of it at the time, I'd have expected such an investigation to involve one or more of the other boys; but, then, we boys were pretty much kept in a state of submission, cowed into obedience for fear of retribution from the Matrons. If I'd known about the lives of the girls there, which involved much more freedom and encouragement toward independence, up to a point, I probably wouldn't have been surprised to run across one in the Labyrinth.

As it was, though, I'm not sure who was more startled—and scared—when she opened the door to that restricted library and found me in there.

In retrospect, I have to give her credit for not bolting and hollering for help. But, then, she wasn't supposed to be in there, either, and I think she had some of the sense of arrogant superiority that most of the other women seemed to have, certainly the Matrons I was familiar with.

I have to say, I remember that encounter like it was yesterday. I was in there, way toward the back, using my lantern to look at the titles of the books on the shelves on the last row, trying to find something

good to read next, when the ceiling light—one of those electric ones they had here and there—came on. I blew out my lantern, but that must have made a little noise.

“Hello? Anyone there?” The voice was not one of the boys’ voices, nor did it sound like a Matron.

I stayed perfectly still and, through gaps in the shelves, could see someone over by the door, someone who began to move toward one of the side walls and then past the ends of the rows of shelves toward the back of the room. As she—and I saw she was wearing one of those shirt-like garments with the rope belt—eased past the rows, I could tell I was trapped. If I tried to circle around the other end of the rows, I was sure that she’d see my movement. So I slowly crouched and, on hands and knees, crawled to meet her when she finally came around the end of the last row, where I was. I’d risen, so that when she peeked around the corner, she was looking at my chin.

She squeaked and jumped back, but I was expecting something like that and had set down my lantern in anticipation. I therefore had both hands free to grab her, with one hand around her waist and one on her mouth, just as she turned to run. I was a little busy to be paying attention, but I did notice she felt different from the boys I’d grappled with in play wrestling. Softer.

“Ssshhh! Now hold still! I’m not going to hurt you, I promise. If anyone hears you, we’ll both be in trouble, because you’re not supposed to be in here either.” I was whispering, but forcefully, and I think that last bit got her attention because she relaxed and stopped struggling.

I carefully took my hand off her mouth, ready to clamp it back if she screamed, but she didn’t.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” She still looked terrified, but at least she was whispering.

I smiled and remembered how well being nice and polite worked with the Matrons. “Well now, I’ve got the same questions for you. But, look, first we ought to put out the ceiling lights and use this lantern I’ve got. It doesn’t make so much light under the door, you know?”

She nodded, and I put my index finger to my lips in the “sshh” gesture as I lit my lantern again and then tiptoed back to the light switch. We settled into a back corner that was well-sheltered by the shelves to continue our conversation.

“So, you asked first. Here’s the thing. I’m White ... uh, I’m William White, and I’m here to find something interesting to read.”

Just in time, I’d realized that “Whitey” wasn’t how I wanted her to know me, and I remembered “William” from some book I’d read. “White” as a surname just seemed logical.

“Oh, well, I’m Clarisse, and I’m here for the same reason. Our other library has lots of books, but these are way more interesting.” Her forehead crinkled and her eyes got squinty. “Hey, wait a minute. How old are you?”

“Almost fourteen. And, even if you don’t, I know the implications of my next birthday.”

She scooched away from me a few inches. “You’re one of *them*!”

I guessed what she meant and nodded. “Yeah, but if I don’t figure out a good plan, I won’t be much longer. Don’t worry, though, I’m not going to hurt you or anything. You’re the first girl I’ve met, and I don’t want to scare you off. How old are you, by the way?”

“I *am* fourteen, almost fifteen, in fact.” Her look of superiority was unmistakable. “But you’re not even supposed to know about girls.”

“I know, but I do. And I also know a lot of other stuff I’m not supposed to. This little room here is full of forbidden knowledge. As I bet you’ve figured out.”

She blushed a little.

“Well, yeah, that’s true. That’s what’s so interesting about it. And you were right. If the Sisters found me here, I’d be in big trouble. I’m not even supposed to be in this section of the Colony. It’s off-limits to everyone except council members.” She cocked her head sideways a bit. “So, what are you training to be?”

“Training? Oh. No, I’m not one of those boys. I’m still in the school we have.”

Her eyes got wide. “Oh. You’re a seed-bearer, then. You must be smart.”

“Mmm. Smart enough to have found this library, at least. But listen. I was here for quite a while before you came in. And I have to be back before first light.”

She looked surprised, fished into a pocket in her garment, and pulled out a metallic disk, which opened in half. “Oh! Goodness! It’s late. I’ve got to get back, too.”

“What’s that thing?” Curiosity got the better of me.

“This? A pocket watch, silly. See?” She held it out to me, and I saw a little clock face there, familiar to me because of the clock at the back of the school room.

“Wow! I’ve never seen such a tiny clock. Very amazing.” I was envious, but too proud to let it show too much. “So, can we get together and talk again soon?”

She smiled. “I’d like that. Not tomorrow night, though. How about Friday night?”

“Uh, does that mean that tonight is Wednesday night? Or, I guess Thursday morning? See, we don’t have a calendar or anything like that, and it’s hard for me to keep track.”

“Yes, it’s Thursday morning, quite early. But dawn’s coming, and I’ve got to get back.”

“Want me to guide you? I’ve got my lantern.”

“Guide me? Do you know where I’m going?”

“Uh, not exactly, unless it’s to that changing room that our Matrons use. Or ... well, or somewhere else I’ve been. I don’t know what they’re all called, though.” I’d realized that it might not be a good idea to tell her about every location I’d discovered.

“Hmm. We can go faster with the light, I expect, so, yes, let’s go together. But I’ll have to show you the way.” She gestured toward the door. “Let’s go, and pay attention so you don’t get lost. You need to find your way back. Oh, and we need to be quiet out there. Sound travels a long way in the Colony.”

We closed the library door carefully, and she turned toward the opposite direction from which I’d come. So, I thought, all I have to do is to remember how to get back here from wherever we’re going, and then I can find my way back to the boys’ part of the caves.

It turned out to be fortunate that I’d become adept at remembering my way around in that Labyrinth, because her route involved several unfamiliar turns at intersections and some ups and downs to different levels. And she didn’t hesitate but rather walked fast enough to keep me breathing hard.

When we came to a closed door, she turned to me, finger on lips, and whispered softly, “OK, see you back in the library, two nights from now.”

“Um, right. Nice meeting you, Clarisse.” I could see a hint of a blush on her cheeks as she gestured for me to blow out the lantern.

As soon as I felt the door close, I re-lit the lantern and hurried back the way we’d come. At the library, I fished out my map to refresh my memory about how to get back to my school room and practically ran all the way. Her pocket watch had read 4:26, and morning, I knew, was imminent.

* * *

I was generally well-practiced at daydreaming in the school room, at least when the Matron's attention was on the other boys. But the day after meeting Clarisse was the first time I'd ever daydreamed about a girl.

And what a girl I had to daydream about! Of course, because she was the only girl I'd ever met, I didn't have any standard of comparison, but, still... Soft flaxen hair, blonde like mine, falling to her shoulders in a slight wave; sparkling blue eyes alive with intelligence and, once she stopped being scared, humor; a cute little nose with just the right bit of upturn at its tip; full, red lips over a mouth of perfect white teeth; and a well-proportioned chin with just a hint of a dimple in it. The picture was burned into my memory, and I spent the day focused on it while trying to avoid thinking about the very interesting, and more than a bit mysterious, curves I'd noticed under that shirt-thing she was wearing.

But reality intruded when the Matron made her little end-of-school-day speech.

"Now, boys, remember that July first, a birthday for some of you, is coming up soon. In just about two weeks, in fact. You need to be on your best behavior so that you'll be eligible for the treats we have for you at the party."

As usual, there was no mention of who was turning fourteen—me alone, this time. But I didn't need to be reminded.

So my escape planning took on a new urgency. But it had evolved since I'd first had the idea of escape. I'd found the kitchen, after all, and my reading room appeared to offer useful shelter from the elements, although I decided it would be a bit windy and cold in the middle of winter. But those blankets would be helpful for that.

"Escape" now meant something more like escape from the boys' Cave and Yard, but not necessarily from the Colony altogether. Before it made sense to venture out into the real world, it seemed like a good idea to do some exploring from a familiar base, and the Colony seemed to be as good a base as any.

Really, I decided, all I had to do was to take my clothes and toothbrush and, probably on the night before July first, simply disappear into the Labyrinth. There would likely be some kind of alarm raised, at least within the little group of Matrons, but the other boys wouldn't really notice anything, or at least they'd pretend not to, like we always had. And I could sleep, or read, by day and explore outside by day and inside by night.

Best of all, using the Colony as a base would let me continue to see Clarisse. We had, I realized, lots to talk about.

One of those restricted books I'd read discussed how the Colony managed its future population by selective breeding, carefully planned. In recent years, they had changed an earlier practice by requiring girls, for long-term health reasons, to wait until their eighteenth birthdays before becoming mothers.

For some reason, that made me feel better when I thought of how the future might treat Clarisse.

That night, even though I'd been up almost all of the night before, I went back to the library and found the book with the comprehensive map. I made a point of doing this while I still remembered the route that Clarisse had taken to the door where she'd left me, and I copied that part of the map onto mine. I wasn't going past that door without good reason, but it was nice to know where it was and how to get there. It was also interesting to see what was in that part of the Labyrinth—it appeared to be the girls' and Matrons' living areas, including some large rooms meant for meetings and so on.

When I finally got to sleep, I was dead to the world until a Matron woke me up on Friday morning by banging a metal pot with a metal spoon right next to my head. Still, the first thing I thought of was that I was going to meet Clarisse again that night.

The every-other-night pattern with her continued for the next two weeks while I used the “off” nights to stock up on various borrowed items for my transformed reading room. Slowly, it began to accumulate enough gear to become a sort of apartment. I knew I couldn’t shut off the air flow through the opening in the mountain, but I built a sheltered area off to the side that, I hoped, would help me to stay warm in the winter.

Drinking water and toilet facilities puzzled me for a while. But then I realized I could use the changing-room toilet stalls, assuming I could figure out the Matrons’ shift-change schedule. And I could use their showers, too, and started doing so right away so that I’d be nice and clean for my meetings with Clarisse. Ultimately, I solved the drinking water problem the same way I solved the food problem—raiding trips to their kitchen at night.

Clarisse, bless her soul, solved a couple of problems for me as well. On our third meeting, she brought me presents—a pocket watch, the one she’d been carrying on our first encounter, as a matter of fact, and a multi-year calendar, with the date marked, yet. For the first time in my life, I really knew what day it was and I could keep time without counting seconds or days or phases of the moon. I almost felt civilized.

The calendar she brought me must have been copied by hand from another source, but how she could give me her watch was hard for me to fathom. When I asked her, she just shrugged and said she’d told the Matrons, only she called them “Lilies”, that she had lost hers and needed another.

It seemed that the Colony had resources that I couldn’t quite get a grasp of.

As the first day of July approached, Clarisse became more and more concerned about how I was going to avoid the fate of all the other fourteen-year-old boys on that birthday. Without telling her of my specific plans, I tried to reassure her that I’d be fine. As much as I wanted to trust her completely, a little portion of myself, a portion with an out-of-proportion amount of influence on my decision-making, persuaded me to keep specifics a secret from her. We would, I decided, continue to meet in the restricted library while I lived in my reading-room aerie. Maybe, someday, I would show that retreat to her, but not right away.

There was just a part of me, no doubt associated with all those years in the clutch of the Matrons, that was too paranoid of the Colony women to trust her completely. I mean, she was going to become just as much of a Matron—or a Lily, to use their word—as all the others as she grew into a woman.

I pretty much worked myself to a frazzle during the last two weeks of June that year. I’d left the calendar and watch, along with everything but my change of clothes and toothbrush, in my reading aerie so they wouldn’t be discovered by a Matron, and I made sure to cross off the days faithfully so I’d know when my time was up. All the preparations, and the meetings with Clarisse, kept my nights busy, and I made sure to apply myself diligently to school work during the days. I guess I was running on pure adrenalin the entire time.

But the last day of June finally arrived, and even though I was pretty much of a nervous wreck, the time passed somehow, although I was sure that the classroom clock had slowed down. At supper, an especially tasteless concoction involving, if I remember correctly, corn and chicken, I didn’t have much of an appetite, but I knew I needed to eat just for the fuel. It might be some time before I could manage a meal with real calories, I thought.

At long last, though, the after-supper study period passed and the daily pre-retirement muster was called. The Matrons, of which there seemed to be a double shift on duty, were pleased that everyone was present and accounted for. Then it was lights out, and things got quiet.

Except, I couldn't help but notice, there was still a faint light coming into my sleeping room from the main room, the one with the big dining table. As the minutes dragged by, I noticed that it flickered occasionally, and now and then I heard a murmur of voices, not whispering exactly but talking in very subdued tones.

After what seemed to be an eternity, I decided I had to check out what was going on, so I settled on a trip to the privy. And, I'm pleased to say, I discovered that my brain was still functioning, because I had a new idea—a diversion. I put on my clothes, including both shirts, and, rubbing my eyes as if I'd been asleep, wandered out into the main room. Sitting across from each other at the inside end of the table—the end by the classroom entrance—were two matrons, an older one I recognized and a younger one who I didn't. And the younger one was big and obviously quite fit—she looked as if she could take on about six of us boys and not even breathe hard. A real bruiser.

What was most distressing was that they were sitting with two candles and enough reading material to make it look as if they were there for the duration.

* * *

As distressed as I was, I knew I had a part to play. “Oh! Sorry, uh, ma’ams. I need to use the privy.”

I turned toward the entrance, and the younger one, who was on the far side of the table from me, said, “Why didn't you go before, boy?”

Between her size and her deep voice, she could have been a man in those Matron's clothes she was wearing.

“Uh, well, there was a line, ma’am, and I didn't want to be late for lights out. Sorry.” I crossed my legs and did a little hop to emphasize my urgency.

“I see. OK, then, but hurry up.” Although not nearly as old as most of our Matrons, including the one with her back to me, she'd already perfected the sourpuss look.

I scurried outside, taking my second shirt off as soon as I was out of their view, then dropped it and kicked it along ahead of me. Before doing my business, I walked all the way to the corner where the palisade met the rock wall and stuffed the dusted-up shirt into a chink of the logs, where there was a little stump from a branch sticking out. I made sure the shirt was a bit torn and hooked onto the stump. Then I headed back toward the cave entrance, stopping at the privy on the way.

All the while, because my brain had kicked back in, I was getting madder and madder. Matrons *never* stayed up late in the main room like that. And could it have been a coincidence that the first time, *ever*, that they did that was the day before my fourteenth birthday? Obviously, they were watching me. Didn't they trust me? I was their star pupil, after all—surely I deserved some trust!

At the time, the irony of that line of thought completely escaped me.

Maybe I think well when I'm mad, though, because I also had another idea. Inside the cave, I walked all the way to the back, where there was a little sink that took advantage of the hot water spring.

“Where do you think you're going now, boy?” The sourpuss voice was almost threatening this time.

“To wash my hands, ma’am. We're taught always to wash up after using the privy, ma’am.”

“There's a sink outside, you know.”

“Yes, ma’am. But you said to hurry, and I didn’t want you to think I was dawdling outside, ma’am.”

And what was she going to say to that, I thought, as I let the water run as long as I could get away with and splashed it about noisily.

I was back in bed for only a few minutes before I heard the sourpuss voice again, this time more quietly.

“Oh, fiddle. Now *I’ve* got to go. I shouldn’t have had that second cup of tea. Back in a minute.”

I expected to be checked on, and I was, but I had arranged my position so that I could just peep through my almost-closed eyes to see her depart for the cave entrance.

That, I knew, might be my only chance. I quickly arranged the bed-clothes, including an extra blanket from my footlocker, to make it appear as if I was lying there, grabbed my remaining clothes and toothbrush, and stepped as quietly as I could to the entrance of my room. The familiar, more elderly Matron, whom I knew to be somewhat deaf, was still sitting with her back to me, bent over and concentrating on something on the table in front of her.

The next few seconds were at least as nerve-wracking to me as was the first time I stepped behind the classroom map, and, in hindsight, just as unremarkable. She didn’t hear me sneak behind her into the classroom, and, by that point, I’d had enough practice to be able to slip behind the map without touching it. It took until I had that first door latched behind me for me to let out my breath, but then I was able to use my familiarity with the tunnels, along with those chiseled sign-posts I’d figured out, to do what I’d planned, disappear into the Labyrinth.

I’m certain that I set a personal record getting from the classroom to my personal reading aerie. Once there, I slept better than I had for months.

I awoke to sunshine outside my window and smelling, I could tell, somewhat horsey, from those blankets from the stable I’d slept on. I was going to need a shower before meeting with Clarisse that night.

As the events of the previous evening came back to me, I couldn’t help but wonder what was happening in the boys’ compound. I could tell that the sun was high enough that breakfast was well over—if there had been any breakfast at all—and that I’d turned up missing. If I knew anything about the Matrons at all, and I was pretty sure I did, they’d be taking it with a calm determination, calm so that none of the other boys would realize that there was anything wrong and determined to find me if it was the last thing they did. I suddenly wished that, instead of hanging it on the palisade, I’d tossed my other shirt into the privy, just to make one of them poke around in there to look for a body.

Despite having stuffed myself the night before, I was hungry, so I ate a little of the food and drank some of the water I’d swiped in preparation while I thought over a plan for the day. I’d been so preoccupied with getting away from the boys’ compound that I’d not really thought of what I’d do once I succeeded. For one thing, I could now explore during the day, I realized. For another, I needed to think ahead about more food.

Between reading, exploring the Labyrinth, and, more recently, meeting with Clarisse, I hadn’t really looked outside much. It had always been pretty dark anyway, except for the days when the moon was in the right phase to illuminate the mountainside and desert out there, and I’d been busy. But now it was daytime, and exploring the Labyrinth seemed risky when the Lilies community was awake.

So I opened the grating, without noise, thanks to my application to its hinges of the beeswax, and was confronted with my first decision: should I leave it open or close it behind me somehow so that I could get back in? It came to me after some thought that closing it would not serve any purpose,

because, with all of the gear I had stashed in there, my presence would be obvious. So I tied it open with some rope I'd acquired in order that it not, for some unforeseen reason, slam shut behind me.

Then I leaned out as far as I could for a good look, and discovered that it took only about five seconds before the exposure got to me and I had to pull back into the room. Sure, I'd climbed the rock walls of our Yard, to a height of maybe fifteen feet. But outside that window was a sheer cliff that extended downward, in my first wild estimate, maybe fifteen *hundred* feet.

I sat, leaning against the wall, breathing deeply to stop my head from spinning—no matter that the hyperventilation probably just made the spinning worse for a while—and tried to screw up enough courage to look out there again.

It took, I suppose, about five minutes, and that gave me the time to plan a little experiment. I found a reasonably round rock, or maybe you'd call it a big pebble, on the floor of my little aerie and held it as far out the window as I could, then dropped it. By focusing on its fall—and lots and lots of bounces before I lost track of it—I was able to avoid the sense of vertigo that my first look had given me. And, because the rock fell only a couple of feet before it bounced off a little ledge perhaps three inches wide, and then it bounced again almost immediately, I realized that the cliff out there wasn't really vertical, it sloped. As I looked more closely, I saw the little ledge repeated, in various widths, almost endlessly. Further, the three-inch ledge just below my window widened to at least a foot just a yard or two to my left. Maybe, I thought, I can get out there and find a way to the top.

But the mere thought of going out there to climb scared me enough that I had to sit back down and breathe some more. I then tried the experiment again with a much bigger rock, so I could track its fall down that not-quite cliff. And the second experiment worked—I watched the bigger rock fall much farther, and farther, and farther, and faster all the while until I actually got dizzy. Once again, I had to take some minutes to recover.

Despite my reactions, seeing the real world was a powerful motivation for me. One possibility, which seemed both easier and safer, would be to find another way out. There could well be, I thought, multiple air vents such as this one, maybe even one not cut through the side of such a cliff. My thoughts returned to the full-Colony map in the library. It also occurred to me that other air vents might allow me to block this one off during the winter. Fresh air was nice, but I knew well how chilly the winter winds could be.

There were so many plans of that nature swirling around in my head that it seemed like a good idea to start writing them down, and I spent the rest of the day doing just that. The first draft was just a jumble of ideas, but it gave me the start I needed to develop priorities and the beginnings of a time-line for the future. Even if I had to climb up the cliff outside my little window, the outside world beckoned more than ever, and one way or another I was going to heed its call.

* * *

Although I was doubly keen to get to the library to study that map for other exits, I knew I needed a shower before I met Clarisse. So I waited until just after a Matron's shift change, cleaned up, and, somewhat later than usual, made my way to the library.

By that point, Clarisse had procured her own lantern, and I found her sitting behind the back row of shelves sort of cowering in a corner. When she saw me, she jumped up, ran to me and threw her arms around my neck, and clinched me into a huge kiss, our first ever. Although it surprised me, it didn't take long—maybe a second—for me to get into its spirit. After quite a while, during which I discovered the importance of breathing through my nose, she pulled back.

“Oh, William! I’ve been so worried! You’re late, and I thought ... well, I thought something bad had happened to you.”

I smiled. “Mmm. Yum. Come back here. I was just figuring out how to do that.”

She giggled and pulled away more. “Now, stop. I shouldn’t have acted that way. It’s forbidden. We just can’t.”

“Hey, c’mon, everything we’re doing is forbidden. A little more forbidden-ness won’t hurt.” And, because I had hold of her hands, I was able to pull her to me.

The second time, although not so vigorous, was definitely better.

She wound up a little out of breath after that one. “Now, where have you been, anyway?”

“I wanted to get cleaned up, and I had to wait until no one was around. But here I am, all squeaky clean and healthy and, now, very, very happy.”

“You got away!”

“No, they caught me and threw me in the deepest, darkest dungeon. This is all just your imagination.” And I hugged her again.

“Well, see, I was worried because of all the fuss going on today. Things were pretty crazy there for a while, this morning.”

I had to laugh. “You mean that someone noticed that the birthday boy was missing?”

And she laughed, too. “Did they ever. Just before lunch there was a grand assembly, with mandatory attendance, where Julia and Louisa got dressed down in public. They’re going to be assigned to cleaning the bathrooms for a year, and they’ve lost all privileges.”

It took me a minute. “I see. They must be the two Matrons that were supposed to be watching me last night. Boy, for a minute there, I didn’t think I’d be able to get away. I had to sneak past the old one.”

“They said they found your shirt on the log wall, and that you must have gone over it. Somehow. There’s a search party out in the Valley now, on horses.”

“Clarisse, I’m sorry I gave you such worry. But I got away as planned and even had a long sleep last night. So everything’s fine. And, well, I spent the day today making plans for the future.”

“And?”

“What do you say that we, slowly and carefully, figure out the best way to get away from this awful place, go somewhere far away, like one of those places in one of the books we’ve read? You know, like Paris or someplace. Leave all of this behind, like a bad dream. It might take a while, but I’m sure we can do it.”

Even scared, she looked beautiful. “Oh.”

“I don’t mean now or next week or even next month. To do this right might take a couple of years. And I’m not expecting an answer now, either. I just wanted you to know my idea, that’s all.”

“I like your idea. I’m not sure I want to spend my whole life in this place. It’s ... it’s too unfair, somehow. And too structured, rigid. But I need to think about this, you know?”

“I understand. We need time together to build trust along with friendship. Also,” I grinned, “I’m sure that more kissing practice would be worthwhile, too. I know I could use some, to get better at it, I mean.”

“It scares me.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, it scares me because I like it so much. Too much.”

I made a growling noise, deep in my throat, that I thought might sound like a bear or something. She giggled and melted into my arms, and we practiced for a bit.

Those stirrings of mine went crazy.

But before things got out of hand, we both came to our senses. We realized that we really didn’t know what we were doing and that, besides, that dusty old library floor just didn’t seem like the place. And what if a Matron, or a Lily, as I was learning to call them, walked in on us?

So, once again, we parted ways at the library door, only, this time, feeling a little guilty, I returned for more time there. I needed to study that map.

Looking at it with familiarized eyes, it dawned on me that it was drawn the same way that the big map in our classroom had been, with North up. I found my reading aerie and its air vent, sort of, although its corridor wasn’t connected all the way and it was marked “impassible.” It was on the west side of the Labyrinth.

There were three other such corridors that ended in air vents as well, another on the west side and two on the east, and none had that “impassible” notation. And there were several things labeled “gates” on the east side, too, one near the sleeping area that was behind the door I’d followed Clarisse to, another near the stables, and a third, what looked like a large one, by the kitchen I’d found. There were also several things labeled as “gates” in the tunnels themselves, including one that separated the parts of the Labyrinth I’d explored, plus that Coronado treasure room, from what appeared to be more traveled areas.

Out of curiosity, I examined the shelf where I’d found the map more carefully and discovered that it was one of three copies. Well, I thought, I reckon these good ladies don’t really need *three* copies, and that’s how I ended up with a complete description of the Labyrinth and its eastern Valley to study at my leisure.

* * *

Four

Now, I’m aware that any account like this would be a lot more dramatic if there were a close call, or maybe several, in which I, the young man who escaped from the evil Lilies, was nearly apprehended and escaped (again) only by the skin of his teeth. Or maybe if I were caught, thrown in an oubliette, which, of course, would have at least an inch of cold, slimy water covering the floor, in the deepest part of the Labyrinth and fed only moldy bread and water until I managed, miraculously, to escape (again). But I’m afraid that nothing like that happened to me. And, to tell the truth, that was fine with me at the time—even teen-aged boys can take only so much excitement. And excitement I had aplenty over the years of this tale, even if it seems like I had it easy. But, as is obvious from my being here to tell the story, I made it through.

During my time in the Labyrinth, either I was good, or I was lucky, or they just weren’t equipped to deal with someone like me. Over the years, I’ve pretty much persuaded myself that it was the last of those possibilities—having one of their boys escape their control just wasn’t something that happened often enough that they knew how to handle it. Of course, I was careful with everything, especially for

my first week of freedom, but I think they just didn't know what they were doing, at least in my case. I don't mean to give the impression that the Lilies were a bunch of dim bulbs, although I'm certain that some of the low-level workers among them weren't what you'd call rocket scientists. Rather, I think it was probably their mind-set—they lived in such a structured community, each with an assigned role, that they didn't think independently, and they couldn't handle much in the way of new or unique situations. So I was able to avoid detection, as long as I was careful.

Clarisse told me that their search of the Valley to the east lasted only a day, and then the whole subject was swept under the rug—they all pretended it never happened. She said that the official finding was that I died trying to cross the desert over there, and the wind buried my body with blowing sand. It seems that the search party went down the Valley on the main road, which they assumed I'd taken, and found that the wind was so strong that it would have covered any new footprints, so they gave up. And, although it took her a while to tell me, just like it took me a while to really begin to trust her, she would have known this stuff, given her place as a sort of junior council member, a leader in training.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Immediately after my escape from our Cave and Yard the day before my birthday, and then, after my first make-out session with Clarisse—the Best Birthday Present Ever!—when I absconded with a copy of the library's map of the Lilies' entire place, I made a point of just settling in. It was the first time in my life that I felt free—free of the Matrons' rules, free to decide what to do with myself whenever. It was quite liberating.

One of my first realizations was associated with the copy of the map I took from that library. Not just a folded-up piece of paper with the Labyrinth on it, it turned out to be a whole map portfolio of not only the Labyrinth but also its locale and the surrounding region as well. My first decision as a revolutionary was to take from that library the other two copies of this portfolio as well—hey, I figured: archival copies of the maps of their little world aren't something I need to let them continue to have access to. If they don't have their own copy, well, tough.

At the same time, I realized the need to continue to be careful. It wouldn't do, for example, to walk off with foodstuffs and other commodities that they could count easily. Even with sloppy inventory control, they might well notice. When Clarisse had given me her watch with the excuse that she'd obtained another, that was a message that they had ample resources. But I had no way of knowing about the precision of their keeping track of things.

Anyway, where I'm going here is toward this: for the next couple of years, I spent my time exploring the Labyrinth more fully as well as the region outside. Nothing truly dramatic happened, beyond a few almost-encounters with Lilies in the tunnels—all of which I managed to dodge by slipping into a convenient side-tunnel to avoid being discovered. And somehow I managed to avoid running into anyone at all once I got outside.

Yet, there were significant developments in my overall strategy. One of my first explorations involved those other air-vent tunnels I found on my map—by which I mean the map I swiped from the library, *their* map. It turned out that one of the east-side tunnels was not only an air-vent tunnel, it was also, pretty obviously, an emergency escape route. Unlike the tunnel to my aerie with its notation on the map as “impassable,” the other one was a thoroughfare. This northeastern air-vent tunnel had a ceiling at least six feet high and a smooth floor, and the eastward-looking opening was full-height, a true door in the mountainside covered by the same sort of grate as mine, right down to the latch. But—the most significant difference—outside was a walking path that appeared, on my first look, to head down toward the Valley's floor. Upon finding all this, I decided that the climbing to be done from my aerie qualified it as my own emergency exit and that this northeastern vent was my main highway to freedom.

And some day, I resolved, I would get out there and explore.

As a prelude to a real exploration, one night when the moon was full I did a little localized exploring via that northeastern portal. At first it made me nervous—the only other time I'd ever been without a roof over my head was in the old Yard, but that felt protected by the rock walls and the palisade. Outside in the Valley, it was totally different and took some considerable getting used to. And I found that the trail led not only down to the road in the Valley, but up as well, over the top of the Oscuras—and over the top of the Labyrinth. At that point, I didn't follow it to wherever it was going, but it was clearly meant to connect with something, as it was well-used. In fact, it looked as if the trail out of the northeastern portal was a little-used side trail that was carefully disguised near its intersection with the main trail, which was some kind of highway for foot traffic, and maybe horses, between the Valley and somewhere to the west, up higher.

That excursion, during which I'd walked down to the road in the Valley, got me thinking about the concept of distance, because the walk back up from the Valley seemed like a very long haul that just went up and up forever. The thing is, having been raised in that confined space for fourteen years and then having experience only with the somewhat greater distances within the Labyrinth, I had no real notion of what, say, a mile was. Yes, I knew it was 5,280 feet (although, never really having counted that high, I really didn't *know*), but until you've walked that far in a straight line, you can't really grasp it intuitively. And because my regional map had a scale on it, I discovered that it was some thirty-five straight-line miles northwest to Socorro and perhaps twenty-five just south of east to Carrizozo—not that I knew anything about either of those places, but they were towns marked on the map. To make it worse, it looked as if the terrain between the Valley and Carrizozo wouldn't allow for straight-line travel, so getting there would undoubtedly be lots farther.

Another of the maps in the portfolio was a local area map of the Valley and the mountains just to its west, and it, too, had a scale. I was dismayed when I deduced that I'd walked about a half-mile on my little excursion, a quarter-mile down to the Valley floor and the same back up.

That meant that one or another of those towns was sixty or seventy times as far as I'd walked, what seemed like an unimaginable journey to me. And, although I didn't know the lay of the land to the east, toward Carrizozo, I could see from my aerie's window to the west that what the map called the *Jornada del Muerto* looked like it might live up to its name—crossing it would indeed appear to be, as my classical Spanish told me, a journey of death. But that fun experience, of course, would depend on my being able to get down there in the first place—that fifteen hundred feet of not-quite-vertical cliff outside my aerie's window presented its own challenges.

Whatever the lay of the land to the east, Carrizozo looked better and better, even if it turned out to be farther because of the topography.

Comprehension of distance spawned in me the realization that I needed to be in better physical condition to do what I wanted to do. If I couldn't walk up even a gentle trail a quarter of a mile without getting winded, how could I ever think about getting to Carrizozo or anywhere? And it also made me realize that I was going to need some kind of mechanized transportation if my long-term plans were going to have a chance of succeeding. Of course, first I'd have to get somewhere that such a thing was available. It occurred to me that maybe I'd have to steal something from the Lilies.

My physical conditioning program started out by my turning myself into what I thought of as the world champion of jumping jacks. That was the only callisthenic exercise I knew of, given that it was a favorite of the Matrons, so I embraced it. Boring as they were, I found jumping jacks to be both useful for conditioning and for losing myself in thinking, at least after I truly mastered the physical part.

I also took to actually *running* down and back up the trail from the northeastern portal to the Valley, at least when there was enough of a moon to do so safely. And before too long, I extended those runs

down the Valley road, which helped me understand more fully some of the notations I'd seen on the map.

* * *

If the jumping jacks were boring, well, that fit in with most of my existence for those next couple of years, at least in terms of story-telling.

As my confidence in exploring outside into the Valley increased, so did my exploration coverage. As soon as I'd increased my wind—what's now called “aerobic capacity”—I decided that a walk *up* the trail outside the northeastern portal was in order. And so up I went.

It didn't take too long for me, walking up that trail, to discover that it indeed was used by horses—evidence of their use became clear in the aroma, the road apples, and the damage their shod feet had caused. I had become sufficiently familiarized with the part of that trail from my northeastern portal down to the Valley floor—about a quarter-mile—that I could estimate distances by comparison. And it seemed to be about four times that far—a mile or so up—with switchbacks and a couple of long traverses across the eastern side of the Oscura ridge, to the top. Most of the landscape there was covered with the usual New Mexico piñon-juniper scrubland, trees, if you want to give them the honor of that word, up to fifteen, occasionally twenty feet high spaced widely enough that they could eke out a living in that harsh, dry environment. Occasionally, in a little draw, there'd be a stunted Ponderosa pine, a struggling relative of the more healthy trees that grew down in the Valley in the vicinity of the springs down there.

What I found at the end of that trail was interesting. Just at the crest of the ridge under which the Labyrinth sat was a cleared area with what I learned was a long-distance radio antenna. I learned this by subsequent research in the Lilies' libraries, both the restricted one and the other, which I'd found using that map I'd swiped. When I first discovered it, the antenna was pretty clearly a receiver, a multi-band (including short-wave) antenna that would be able to listen to signals from anywhere and everywhere. Some months later, as I'll get to, it changed.

The antenna had its cleared spot, but it was apparently meant to be disguised by the piñon-juniper scrub, because there was evidence of careful pruning of the trees. That, I decided, along with the long time-scale for regeneration of the landscape, would explain the evidence of both horse and human traffic on the trail up there.

So, I realized, despite their isolation and the care they took to enforce that isolation, the Lilies could hear what was going on in rest of the world.

I mentioned that the Valley had water enough to grow healthy Ponderosa pines. Those, it turns out, were what I'd seen swaying in the wind from my vantage point inside of the Yard, when I'd still been confined there.

I figured this out one full-moon night, when I was running up from the Valley floor back to the northeastern portal. I'd learned the trail well enough that I didn't have to stare at my feet and so could look around a bit—I didn't say I ran that trail *fast*, after all—and noticed a cleft down there with a log wall across its Valley end. My Yard.

The revelation made me stop, and I stooped, leaning my hands on my knees and breathing hard, while I inspected the scene.

It all looked so small. And as I increasingly caught my breath and thought more carefully about it all, my sense of indignation grew and grew. *That*, I thought, is where I spent the first fourteen years of my life, along with about three dozen other boys? That little-bitty place?

Even including the inside rooms of the old mine-shaft, it was pathetic.

The Lilies, quite obviously, thought of us humans of the male persuasion as nothing more than animals, like dogs, to be caged and trained and used for their purposes, whatever those purposes may be.

There had always been a simmering resentment within me about my childhood, but I think seeing our little world from above, how tiny it was, and how confined, catalyzed a new attitude in me, one that suddenly didn't care quite so much about how I might have to treat some of them to effect my goals of escape to the real world. I was suddenly ready to kill my way to freedom, if that was going to be necessary.

As my full-moon runs down to the Valley and on down from there took me farther east, I eventually came across an important piece of the Lilies' defenses. Later, when I was able to match up where I'd been with my maps, it jumped out at me as something I should have noticed previously. But at the time, it was something of a surprise.

As the Valley floor sloped to the east, the walls began to converge, at first little-by-little, and then more dramatically. It wasn't too long before, on this first run so far down-Valley, I discovered myself in a true canyon, with cliffs for walls that continued to converge more quickly. And then I rounded a somewhat more abrupt curve in the canyon floor and found myself confronted by a familiar sight—a tall, pointy-topped, palisade.

"Tall", of course, is relative, and these logs were probably no more than fifteen feet out of the ground, whereas the palisade of our Yard had extended at least twenty feet upward. But this one wasn't just a single wall, it was a set of them. I explored a bit and decided that, with their maze-like layout, they were meant to slow to a crawl any group that might attempt to make a dash up the Valley toward the various gates into the Labyrinth. There were several places with evidence that cars or trucks, or something with tires, at least, had needed back-and-forth jockeying maneuvers to get through.

The thought popped into my head that this place could well explain the location of the Labyrinth's southeastern air-vent. That portal, as I recalled, was oddly positioned, a bit farther east, lower, and past a number of strange twists and turns of its tunnel. I made a mental note to examine the map of the Labyrinth and compare it to the map of the valley quite carefully. It didn't seem possible that there was an underground route to that set of log walls in the Valley's narrows, but maybe the southeastern portal opened onto a path for lookouts or something.

It didn't surprise me that the Lilies seemed to be defending their privacy in a most serious fashion, but what I saw in that east end of the Valley appeared to be over the top. It was like they were taking a militaristic approach to that defense. I thought about that as I huffed and puffed my way back up the road in the Valley and then the trail up to the northeastern portal.

I guess I should say a few words about the Valley itself. It included the Yard, of course, but that was just a very small enclosed area. One day, I ventured outside onto the northeastern portal trail and made a careful visual survey of it all, even to the point of making a sketch. From my vantage point well above the Valley floor, it appeared as a bucolic agrarian scene, one that might have been lifted right out of one of those dioramas that I saw a few years ago up in Mesa Verde National Park. There were gardens, several corrals, and quite a lot of what looked like irrigated pasture-land. Roads led to several spots at the base of the cliffs on the west end of the Valley, and I discovered later that those spots all corresponded to the gates into the Labyrinth.

So, putting this altogether, especially in the context of the local area map, I began to see a picture of an elaborately planned and executed haven from the world outside, one that would allow complete control of its inhabitants for generations, at least as long as its secrets were kept.

At least that was what I put together at the time. It wasn't too much of a stretch for me to see myself as the one who might well let those secrets out. If I were to be able to rescue Clarisse, after all, then my ties to the place would be completely broken, and whatever needed to be done to save the rest of the boys from their grim fate could be done without any regrets on my part.

Yes, I wanted to escape. But maybe, I thought, I could also send help in the process.

* * *

If the southeastern portal, the one with the good view of the log-wall maze in the Valley's narrows, was meant as a look-out post, it didn't work on me. The night I'd run all the way down the Valley to the narrows wasn't a truly full moon, and there were intermittent clouds. I'd either not been spotted, or they ignored me as someone already inside their little domain. But, even so, it meant to me that I'd need to find another way out of the place. This set me to exploring the trails more fully.

Up at the top of the ridge, where the radio antenna was installed, I discovered three other trails leading away from the clearing in addition to the one I used from the northeastern portal. I followed them, one per night, when the weather and the moon cooperated, and found that one worked its way down toward the southeastern portal, one went off in a direction that I interpreted as the southwestern portal, and the other circled to the north and descended into the next valley out to the desert to the east, a long hike but one that avoided that narrows section of the main Valley. Eventually, I discovered that the trail off toward the southwestern portal bypassed it, with a disguised access spur similar to what I was using from the northeastern portal, and descended into a valley farther to the south, another long hike that avoided the main Valley entrance maze. And it turned out that the southwestern portal wasn't cut into the sort of cliff that my aerie's northwestern portal was—it was far more accessible. I made a mental note to find it from the inside some night.

Based on this network of trails, a plan for my ultimate escape began to form in my head. I could borrow one of the horses and ascend to the top of the ridge using the northeastern trail from the Valley, and then I could take the trail that bypassed the southeastern portal around to the next valley to the south and on out to the desert. If I got an early start—meaning just after dark—I'd have all night to cross as much of the desert as possible.

The flaw there was that I knew absolutely nothing about horses, not what they ate or how much water they needed, and certainly not how to ride one. From the looks of the horses I'd seen in the stable—very large animals that peered at me through squinty, suspicious eyes—I could tell that flaw needed fixing somehow.

I tackled that one pretty much like I tackled all the other challenges I ran into—with plenty of reading up on the topic first and then slowly, methodically, and mostly in the dark using lots of trial and error. It turned out, though, that the Lilies kept a set of low-level background lights on in the stable, maybe to keep the stock from spooking in what would have been the total darkness of their space otherwise. That lighting helped me see to get around and, I think, it helped the horses to see me and not be too fearful. I discovered that almost all of the horses were suckers for a handful of grain, so I made friends that way with as many of them as I could while I tried to figure out which one was the most gentle. I've learned since then that they were all quarter horses, mostly mares (surprise, surprise) with a few geldings, too. The one I picked was a chestnut mare, not that I knew that at the time. It was only after I got to know her better that I noticed she was missing some equipment. She didn't shy from me in her stall, and when I finally got up the courage to sit on her, she just stood there and looked back at me as if to say "Now what?" Lots of nights sitting on her, and feeding her a handful of oats now and then, got me to feeling almost confident that we could make it across that eastern desert together.

I don't know what I would have done without those libraries. They helped me with the horses—how else would I have figured out a saddle, I don't know, or even a bridle—and so much other stuff, too.

Food, for example. I've since learned that teen-aged boys are chronically hungry even in the best of homes, but at the time I thought I was going to starve to death just about every day. As I've said, I didn't want to abscond with too much in the way of food, because I worried that someone would notice. But I couldn't take food ingredients—flour, for example, was pretty useless to me, and what was I going to do with raw meat?—and what prepared foods I could find didn't seem to provide much real food value. One time, I remember looking in one of their coolers and finding a leftover cured ham. It was irresistible, but I also was pretty sure that someone would miss it if it just disappeared. I stared at it for a good five minutes and actually drooled for the last two or so. Then I caved in and grabbed it, taking big bites all the way back to my aerie. It turned out to be a *salt-cured* ham, so that meant I was horribly thirsty the following day, all during the time I needed to lie low so as not to be discovered. Live and learn was just part of my existence during those years.

Eventually, with the help of some of the library books, I realized that I could take ingredients outside and cook them over little campfires, if I was careful. Although that turned out to be more time-consuming, and it involved additional trial-and-error, emphasis on error, it also improved both my diet and my self-confidence considerably, especially when I contemplated the journeys ahead.

The books were also helpful to me in understanding what it would be like to live in a town such as Carrizozo or Socorro. Or Paris, for that matter. The concept of money was completely new to me, although once I figured it out I realized I had, potentially at least, a source of it in the Coronado treasure. That motivated me, one night without a moon, to use the map of the Labyrinth to find my way down to that room. And, when I finally found it, it was quite revealing for several reasons.

For one thing, it was clearly a part of what I'd come to think of as the hidden part of the Labyrinth. That hidden part included the restricted library and the hallways to three of the four air-vent portals. Only the northeastern portal, that emergency exit, was part of the main corridor system. For another, its door was locked. From my perspective, all that did was to present me with another challenge, another puzzle, one that I solved without too much difficulty, although it took me quite a bit of fiddling. The thing is, if I, a fourteen-year-old boy with the help of only some books and a bit of wire, could get past that lock, it meant that the Lilies in charge weren't too worried about internal thievery. There was a pretty trusting community.

What was really interesting, though, was what the room held. In some ways, it was much like a library, with shelves of holdings carefully arranged, in this case by weight, as I discovered. The heavy items were on the bottom shelves. And the lightest stuff—bundles of paper money—was on the top shelves. From what I'd read, it would be far easier to fit in when I got to civilization if I had paper money rather than gold. Some of that was coming with me, I decided.

I remembered reading that the treasure had been discovered in a natural cave when the Lilies were digging their mine tunnels, but it was clear that they'd moved it to this new location. The locked door I'd unlocked was the only entrance and exit, and it wasn't at all natural. But, I realized, that wouldn't make the task I had in mind all that much more difficult.

* * *

During those two years or so, before I'd organized myself sufficiently to set off across the desert, all that time I spent exploring and learning as much as I could about the world at large, Clarisse and I continued our regular meetings, although toward the end of that time their frequency declined.

Because she was being trained for a leadership position within the Lilies community, her responsibilities grew during those years, and she had increasing amounts of difficulty getting away to see me at night.

Another thing that increased in difficulty was my ability to understand her explanations of certain things. There had been hints that she was changing, but it really came to a head in early June of 1944—that calendar served me well, as I checked off days religiously—when I mentioned that I’d been seeing more and more airplanes flying over the *Jornada*, many at low altitude.

“Oh,” she opined, with a recently adopted air of superiority that I was having trouble getting used to, “I’m sure that’s part of the war effort here, as feeble as it is.”

As I’ve mentioned, I was a smart young fellow with a better-than-average education, so I responded appropriately. “Huh? War effort?”

“I guess you wouldn’t know about it. It’s a long, long story.”

“I’ve read about the Great War, but I thought that was over, uh,” I did some quick math in my head, “something like twenty-six years ago.”

“Yes, well, since that time the treatment of Germany and Japan by the rest of the world became so unfair, so unjust, really, that they had no choice but to fight for their rights, their destiny. America was pretending to stay out of it until about two-and-a-half years ago, but then they got involved when the Emperor’s Japanese forces struck a blow for freedom in Hawaii, Pacific islands that Japan has a valid claim to. I’m afraid, though, that the Americans and their friends don’t have much of a chance. The Führer and the Emperor will prevail, I’m sure. Even this latest attempt by the Americans to re-take France is futile, and it will be crushed.”

My upbringing in that place, with only the other boys, had lacked a lot of things, one of which was patriotism, for either the USA or any other country. Still, it was very odd to me to hear Clarisse refer to our country as “they.” And who, I wondered, was this “Führer” person?

“How do you know all this, Clarisse?”

“We’re not exactly aborigines here, William, we have modern conveniences. Radio, for instance. We hear both the American propaganda as well as all the news from abroad. I just hope that this war is over quickly and not too many more people get killed. Although, I have to say, this is a pretty efficient way of improving the gene pool. I think it’s going to be quite effective over in Europe, because some of the Führer’s efforts are aimed at just that.”

“So, radio news from America is propaganda, but radio news from overseas, like, say, Germany is not? How can you be sure?”

She actually looked down her nose at me. “It’s obvious, silly. The Führer and his people have no reason to lie to anyone. Their message is taken from the Führer’s own writings, which are the unvarnished truth about the world and its future. All that the Americans and the others can do is to respond with lies and their own foolish propaganda.”

I found myself unable to think of a constructive counterargument, one that would avoid turmoil between us, so I let it slide. But I stopped asking her about news of the world after that.

Her comments about improving the gene pool bothered me as well, but they didn’t surprise me quite so much. After all, that seemed to have been the Lilies’ way of dealing with Bucky, and it was their excuse for gelding all the boys when they turned fourteen. Their leadership had written extensively about it, as I’d discovered in their libraries.

Those libraries, though, didn’t hold a clue about this “Führer” guy, at least not that I had ever found.

Between our infrequent meetings and her new arrogance, what had started out as a nice relationship, with, I had thought, great potential, went downhill quickly. I even became worried that she'd break what degree of trust we'd established by giving me up to the rest of the Lilies.

Fortunately, I was just about ready to head out on my own, across the desert to the east.

* * *

Five

The mare in the stable that I'd made friends with, at least that was what I was hoping, had a little sign on her stall reading "Honey." And, I'd found, when I soothed her with that name, quietly, sometimes whispering, she seemed to twitch her ears in a responsive way. I was too scared to whisper random words at her, though, so I didn't actually test her name-recognition skills. I really wanted her to be my friend—it was a matter of life or death for me.

It took me until the end of July to complete my preparations, and I didn't have a final get-together with Clarisse to say good-bye. I left her a note, though, saying that I'd probably be back some day and she could check in our usual place now and then for future notes.

Now, it might seem that crossing the desert in August is setting out for disaster, especially one whose neighbor is called the *Jornada del Muerto*. For the previous two summers, looking out the window of my aerie, however, I'd discovered that, in August, there was often the kind of weather that would make such a journey possible. I've since learned about what weather people call the "Southwest Monsoon," a regional climate phenomenon that often provides clouds for shade and sometimes even rain. Of course, that rain can be too much now and then, causing flash flooding, but that wasn't something I'd seen, so I wasn't concerned about it.

So I got as well-organized as I possibly could, including hiding all that I was planning to carry—or, rather, have Honey carry—outside the Labyrinth near the trail up past the northeastern portal, and waited for what looked like a good opportunity, weather-wise. I'd read everything I could find in the library—most of what I needed was in the big one—about horses, especially how much they could be expected to carry, what to take for food (I chose some hay and oats, and hoped that there would be some grass along the way) and how to handle the tack. I'd even practiced saddling Honey several times, each experience eliciting from her that "Now what?" look that she'd given me when I'd first sat on her, bareback.

The first time that the weather looked like it would cooperate, the moon was new. I really didn't want to chance the first part of the journey in the dark, so I, reluctantly, postponed my departure. But about ten days later, the weather again took on that appearance of monsoon clouds for a few days, and I decided to set out.

As soon after dark as I thought it was safe, I hid all my possessions, the ones I wasn't taking, in the aerie as well as I could—this after considerable planning—and made my way to the stable. Getting Honey into her bridle and putting on her saddle, with careful attention to making her exhale before tightening the cinch strap, took only a few minutes, I'd practiced so many times. And then, for the first time, I opened her stall and led her out. This time, her look said "Well, it's about damned time!"

The gate out to the Valley, the hinges of which I'd carefully waxed in advance, opened without a sound, and we were out in the open air. I'm not sure who liked it more, Honey or me.

Rather than try my first attempt at actual riding in the Valley, I led her down the hill to the point where the northeastern trail joined the Valley road, and then up the trail. She balked just a bit when I turned her left toward the trail, as if to say “What? Really? Are you kidding?”

But a gentle tug on her reins got her to follow me. The monsoon clouds had almost dissipated by that time of the evening, and we had plenty of moonlight to find our way. I got the impression, after only a hundred yards or so, that she knew the trail better than I did. That helped my confidence considerably.

When we came to my cache of supplies, I loaded her up with everything I’d packed—in two sets of saddlebags, getting some grunts of dissatisfaction at the weight—and then realized I didn’t know how to get into the saddle.

All of the time I’d practiced sitting on her, with or without a saddle, I’d just climbed on the rails of her stall and swung a leg over her back. But now, standing on the ground next to her, I discovered that my nose was just about at the level of her back, and I was looking straight at the seat of the saddle where I needed my butt to be. I’d noticed I’d undergone something of a growth spurt in recent months—my raids on the storage room of boys’ clothes had increased accordingly—but that wasn’t nearly enough to get me up there.

Realizing that I needed a better solution for the long run, at that time and in that place—at night on a trail on a mountainside—I opted to find a rock beside the trail to help me up. That took about a quarter-mile of uphill walking, with me still leading her, but finally I was sitting in the saddle, not exactly tall in the saddle, as I was slumped over a bit to keep my balance, but in the saddle nonetheless.

And it worked fine, at least for a while. We made it, going at a slow walk, to the top of the ridge and the clearing with the radio antenna without incident. But then I brought her to a stop to have a look at the thing. It was different somehow—bigger and with a different configuration of all the little rods and so on that stuck out from the main mast.

I was pondering this change when I leaned to the side just a bit to get a better look, and Honey *really* exhaled—apparently, she’d been faking it in the stable. The saddle slipped in the direction I was leaning, and before I knew it, I was on the ground in a heap, having crashed, hard. I hadn’t realized that hitting the ground from eye level would be such a traumatic experience, either. So I lay there for a couple of minutes, during which I noticed that Honey hadn’t moved—something I was thankful for, because she might have stepped on me—taking stock of my condition.

Eventually, I felt a soft, breathy nose nuzzling the exposed side of my neck, and I managed to roll around to be able to get up to my knees. I don’t know if Honey was laughing at me or apologizing, but I decided to accept whatever her intentions with the nuzzling as something friendly.

The cinch strap, which I’d fastened securely, was just as tight as it had been before, although the saddle was nearly upside-down. I noted where it was fastened and resolved to make the thing even tighter when I got the saddle upright. That took a little doing, but I was finally satisfied—I’d managed to get it at least two notches tighter.

And then I had to get back up on her. There weren’t any big rocks around, and I couldn’t remember any on the first part of the trail I was going to head down. So it seemed that my better solution for mounting my horse needed figuring out right then and there. At least the ground was flat and the moon was out.

Although I’m sure I’d read somewhere about the correct side from which to mount a horse, at least one that had been trained in the traditional fashion, I forgot it at the time. So, initially I happened to choose her right side, and, naturally, she shied away from me. The first time that happened, I already had a foot up in the right stirrup, and so as she shied, I had to hop along next to her to keep up. The

second time, I managed to lever myself up enough to avoid that, but my full weight on that right stirrup made her shy even more emphatically, so I realized that something was wrong.

It all went perfectly well from the left side, however, and shortly I was back in the saddle again and sitting even taller this time.

Then I saw that her reins were dangling onto the ground in front of her.

As frustrating for me as that was, I realized it just meant that I needed practice, so I dismounted, took the reins, and mounted again, all quite smoothly, and felt accomplished. But then she looked back at me with a new expression—“You done fooling around, Bub?”

* * *

I checked my watch and discovered that it was just after eleven, meaning we had six or seven hours before the sun became a factor—plenty of time to get beyond the observation posts of the Lilies. We started out at a walk down the southeastern trail, which I’d scouted carefully several times, to take that next valley to the south down to the desert floor. My plan was to let Honey walk the entire way at her own speed, so as to avoid tiring her unnecessarily and, of course, to keep me in the saddle. She seemed to know this trail as well as she’d known everywhere else we’d been to that point, so I just let her have her head. The only place I needed to steer was where the trail joined the road down the valley—and this was well east of where the Valley’s narrows were—and she wanted to turn for home.

She balked enough that I finally dismounted and fed her a small handful of oats and some water, and I talked to her quietly about my plan. That seemed to remind her of our friendship enough that she was then willing to keep on toward the southeast.

There was what passed in those years for a road in those parts, two parallel tracks with weeds growing in between. And Honey felt comfortable enough on it that I let her walk with the reins slack. It gave me a chance to begin to enjoy the night, and to appreciate what was happening.

Despite the nearly full moon, the stars were just incredible, with the Milky Way a wide streak of sparkling dots on a background of white mist across the sky and various constellations crying out for my recognition. Of course, they never look like they do in books, but I did manage to recognize several, including, importantly, the Little Dipper and its Pole Star. And, from that, I knew that we were on the correct road, heading southeast between a couple of small mountain ranges for now. I was hoping that it would still be night when the road turned east, so I could tell.

And what was happening? Well, I was out on my own, away from the Lilies for the first time ever. It was a little scary, but mostly it was exhilarating.

As the night wore on, of course, the exhilaration faded and eventually turned to boredom. My hip and knee joints began to complain about the time spent in that unfamiliar, spread-legged position atop Honey, and the gentle surging motion I was subject to became practically hypnotic. I began to worry about falling asleep and then falling off. That fall up by the antenna had hurt, and I didn’t want to repeat it, even for Honey’s amusement.

Just as the sky was beginning to reveal hints of the coming dawn, I made a point of relocating the Pole Star and found, to my surprise, that the road had slowly been turning to the east and even just a bit north of east, meaning we’d rounded the range of mountains between the Lilies’ Valley and Carrizozo. Maybe, I thought, I can make it there today. I began to experiment with Honey’s gait a little, having become accustomed to keeping my balance as she walked.

It took only a little encouragement for her to break into a trot, as I've since discovered it's called, and I spent several minutes banging up and down on the saddle before I decided that was too uncomfortable for me. With a bit more encouragement, she sped up into a lope, which seemed smoother to me, so I let her stick with it for quite a while—and I was amazed at how much ground we covered during that while. But even though it seemed smooth to me, it sloshed my insides around quite a bit, so before too long I needed to stop and pee. I took the opportunity to stretch my legs and work my creaky hip joints, and to feed her a bit of hay and water, and then we started off again, this time back to the familiar walk.

It was somewhere about mid-day, and the monsoon clouds were forming up, when we came to the *Malpais* lava flow. Of course, I didn't know what it was at the time, just that it looked impossible to cross. Impossible for me, let alone Honey. Because we'd been traveling for more than twelve hours at that point, it seemed like a good time for a rest, anyway, so I explored around a bit and found a dry arroyo with some grass growing in it for Honey and some shade for me. I even un-saddled her and took off her bridle so that she could graze. Reluctantly, I hobbled her—she seemed to trust me, but that didn't mean she wouldn't run off—and settled in for a little nap. I felt hugely guilty about the “Aw, c'mon—you're not *really* going to put that thing on me, are ya?” look she gave me when I hobbled her.

Rain, just a sprinkle, really, and thunder woke me up, and my watch told me I'd slept for three hours. And there was a little creek running in the bottom of the arroyo. Honey had wandered about a hundred yards off and was grazing contentedly, so everything seemed fine. But that little creek bothered me.

I walked over to Honey, put on her bridle and took off the hobble, then led her back to where I'd set her saddle on the ground. This time, the saddling went smoothly, and I managed to get the cinch as tight as it had been before. As I looked around to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind, I couldn't help but notice that the little creek had trebled in size, at least. So, remembering the reins this time, I mounted, and Honey and I made our way out of the arroyo—and just in time, as the flow by that point was covering nearly the entire bottom of the little waterway, and the water itself was full of all sorts of debris.

It hardly rained at all where we were, just enough to be refreshing. But somewhere it must have rained hard, as that arroyo was running almost full at one point. I could only sit there and marvel at my first flash flood. Honey was patient with me, even when the thunder got closer—it was never right over us, though, so she didn't panic.

We'd climbed out of the arroyo on its northeast side, and near the edge of the lava beds it made a turn to the southwest, along their edge. I hadn't noticed it before, but we must have crossed it a ways back, as the nearest mountains were just a little west of north relative to our position. But even as I watched, the water level began to recede, so it was clear that these floods were short-lived events. The road we'd been following had turned northeast, along the edge of the lava beds, so we followed it—I knew that Carrizozo was in that direction anyway.

Nowadays, there are a couple of crossings of the *Malpais* in the vicinity of where Honey and I were, a very rough one to the south and the main highway northwest from Carrizozo to the north, but then there was just the highway. It was shown on my regional map—you can bet I brought one of those map portfolios with me—but the western side of its *Malpais* crossing looked to be several hours northeast. Still, the alternative of trying to cross that forbidding terrain, especially without knowing how far it would be, didn't seem attractive at all.

So we kept following that old road we'd been on. Honey had chowed down on fresh grass for several hours, and I'd eaten a bit during our rest stop, so we were able to make good time. It wound in and around some low hills, and now and then I could see the black rock and knife-edge texture of the lava

beds off to my right. But it wasn't until just about sundown when we reached that main highway, what I found was called US Highway 380.

From what I could tell from my map, it looked to be about five or six miles southeast to Carrizozo, and I was faced with my first hard choice, the first truly hard choice of my life, really.

Those five or six miles sure would be easier, I reckoned, if I could ride Honey into town. But she was branded, a stylized sort of "S" on top of a little circle on her right hip. And I'd read enough about the American west to know that horse thieves were considered to be the worst sort of outlaws, at least back in the nineteenth century. Because it was nearly the middle of the twentieth century, it might be that things have changed, I thought, but can I take that chance?

Ultimately, I opted to be careful. I found a protected place, near the lava beds and a ways off the highway, to spend the night and settled in. A hot dinner, made over a little fire, for me and a night of rest and more grazing for Honey—and there were even water sources around there, from another flood, probably—put us both in good shape the next day. I stashed the horse tack in a hidden place where I could find it another day if I needed to, took off the hobble from Honey's front legs, pointed her in the direction of home, and gave her a slap on the rump. She looked at me with a "Really?" look and then trotted off southwest on that two-track road, back toward the Valley.

I was truly on my own in the real world for the first time ever, and I picked up my two saddlebags and started toward the highway, the only way I knew into town. I was actually glad to find it deserted, though, because it took me at least a half hour to stop crying.

* * *

My first experience with Americans was about as pleasant as I could have imagined. That highway wasn't much in use—I discovered soon after that rules about wartime rationing of gasoline—but people in the cars that passed me going the other way waved at me, and the first car, actually a small truck, headed my way stopped and I climbed in the back. It took only about fifteen minutes, and I found myself standing on the town square, what's now a historical marker, I think, in the middle of bustling Carrizozo, New Mexico, USA.

Well, maybe "bustling" is a stretch.

I picked a park bench at random—the town square had several—and sat down to take stock. First off, I'd made it to civilization, real civilization, not that contrived one that the Lilies had fabricated. Second off, I didn't have a clue about what the hell to do next. Those two saddle bags plus the rest of my gear were pretty heavy to carry around all day as I explored the town. But I knew I couldn't just leave them lying somewhere, especially the one with all the cash I'd borrowed from the Lilies' Coronado treasure room. It was only about nine in the morning, so it seemed early to find a place to stay for the night—I didn't want to raise suspicion about myself.

I happened to be facing southeast, at least that's what it seemed like from where the sun was, and I found myself looking at a building with a sign that said US Post Office, and next to that was a much smaller building with big posters in all the windows. One said "US Army" in big letters and, below that, "Recruiting Center." Another had a cartoon picture of an old guy with facial hair who was wearing a top hat and pointing right at me that said "I Want YOU for US Army!" I decided that I ought to interpret that as a message about what the hell I should do next, so, after resting a bit, I picked up my gear and headed across the street.

Inside the little building, which was still cool from the night air and the fact that the windows faced northwest, there was a man in a crisp, khaki uniform sitting behind a desk and working on a pile of paper. He looked up at me when the door hinges squeaked.

“Morning, son. What can I do for you?” His appraisal of me made me a tad uncomfortable.

“Uh, well, sir, I saw that sign in the window where the guy’s saying that he wants me. I thought I’d find out for what.”

He squinted. “You fooling with me, son? That’d be a bad idea.”

“No, sir, not at all, sir. See, I’m new in town, new to any town, actually. I’ve, uh, I grew up on a ranch out in the desert and haven’t been anywhere else until now. I have no idea of much about anything here in the world. Although I did hear something about a new war. Is that what he wants me for, sir?” I could tell that the “sirs” were helpful.

“You heard something about a war, huh? Well, that’s understating things a lot. Yeah, there’s a war on. And Uncle Sam, there, he needs people to join the fight against the Japs and the Nazis. But, first, how old are you, son?”

“Sixteen, sir, last month.” I could tell he was both impressed and disappointed.

He nodded. “Son, you’re the first young man to come in here who hasn’t told me he was eighteen, even if he looked only twelve. Thanks for the honesty. But, see, you’ve got to be eighteen to enlist. Now, be honest again. If you’d known that, what would you have told me?”

“Uh, I don’t know, sir. Do I look eighteen?” I tried to look old, thinking maybe I could find a different recruiting office somewhere.

“Smart question.” He looked me over some more. “I have to say, almost. I reckon if you’d shaved that fuzz off your upper lip, maybe you would.”

I mentioned before how strange it was for me when hair started growing out of my face, and that fuzz was the first of it. I’d been trying to ignore it up until that point, but it was definitely there. I rubbed at it.

“Oh. Well, I guess I thought it would make me look older.” I looked around the little office. “Uh, sir? Since there’s no one here, do you have time to tell me a little about the history of this war? See, I really don’t know anything about it, except, I guess, Germany and Japan have teamed up to fight America and some of the countries in Europe. It sort of sounds like the Great War all over again.”

“‘Great War?’ Oh, yeah, you mean what we now call World War One. What we’ve now got going we’re calling World War Two. But you’ve pretty much got it right, except that Italy was on the other side, too. Italy surrendered last year, though. Anyway, a guy named Adolph Hitler took over in Germany and has stirred up what he calls National Socialism—also known as Nazism—there. He invaded countries to the east of Germany and then to the west, including France. And his airplanes tried to bomb London into oblivion a couple of years ago.”

“Is he what’s called the ‘Führer’?”

“Yep. He calls himself that. It means ‘leader,’ although we here in the US think of him as an evil dictator.”

“And I heard something about the Emperor of Japan and Hawaii.”

“Oh, you did, did you? Well, see, two, no, it was three Decembers ago, he had his navy, I mean the Jap Emperor did this, he had his navy use airplanes to make a sneak attack on our navy base in Hawaii. Sank a bunch of our ships and killed lots of sailors. Completely unexpected and, from a military point of

view, unprovoked. Cowardly, even. But since then, our guys have started to make real progress toward defeating the Japs. The Nazis, too, for that matter. In fact, just a couple of months ago, there was a big invasion by us and our allies into France. This may disappoint you, but I think everyone should be hopeful that it's all over before you turn eighteen."

I thought for a minute. "I guess you're right—the shorter the war, the better. And I guess I should count my blessings if I don't have to go off to the end of the world to fight. But, uh ... Oh! How rude of me. I never introduced myself. I'm William White."

"Why thanks, son. They must have raised you right on that ranch or wherever you've been." An eyebrow shot skyward in skepticism. "I'm Master Sergeant Stephen Jennings. Sergeant Jennings, or 'sir' to recruits. But you're not a recruit."

"I hope I can call you 'Sergeant Jennings' anyhow, sir. It would be a privilege." That, I could tell, pleased him—the old lesson from the Matrons about being nice and polite, in action. "And, say, if I'm too young to join up, is there any other way I could help? Are you here all by yourself?"

He looked me up and down again. "Well, now, you look like a healthy young man. With all the boys just older than you off fighting, there are plenty of jobs around for young men your age. Got any skills?"

"Skills? Hmm. Well, mostly book-learning, I guess. I speak Spanish. And German, although I don't think I'll go advertising that."

"You speak Spanish? Do you write and read it, too? What kind of Spanish?"

"Book-learning Spanish, sir. Probably the kind in Spain, although I really don't know. And, yes, I can read and write it, too."

"Well, I don't know that I need someone full-time, but having a translator on call would sure be a big help to me. I get locals in here nearly every day who speak only Spanish, and I don't. Stupid Army didn't post someone here who does, when at least half of the locals do."

"I'd be glad to do that, sir. At least, if I'm around. I've got to find a place to stay, and I guess I should look for a full-time job."

"Well, now, let me think. There are some other things I could use help with, too. Like cleaning up around here. And running errands. And, say, making courier runs over to Socorro during the week. That'd be a big help."

"'Courier runs'?" I wasn't sure I wanted to run anywhere.

"Trips with packages of paperwork and so on. There's a bigger office over there that this office is a branch of. You know how to drive a motorcycle?"

"A motorcycle?" I wasn't even sure what that was. "Uh, well, no but I bet I could learn. I've taught myself all sorts of useful stuff. And I had some classes on how engines work."

That was true—one of the school-boy training courses I'd taken from the Matrons dealt with internal combustion engines.

"Hmm. I don't think I can pay much—my office budget is miniscule—but you could have a free room here, if you don't mind sleeping in the back. There's even an indoor bathroom."

"Sergeant Jennings, I'd be proud to work in your office, sir. If I'm not old enough to fight, at least I can help out in other ways." I stood at what I thought might be attention.

* * *

He showed me the back room, which even had a cot, and I put my two saddlebags and other stuff in a little closet back there. Then my first task for him was to run across the street to the diner there for some coffee and doughnuts, which he proceeded to share with me.

The doughnuts were just unbelievable—like the treats we used to get on birthdays, only much better. I decided that I was going to be spending lots of time at that diner.

Then, after he worked on his pile of papers some more, he showed me the motorcycle. A three-wheeled model with what Sergeant Jennings proudly called a “sidecar,” apparently a hard-to-get add-on, it had, in addition to US Army insignia all over it, a label on its gas tank that said “Indian” and a smaller one that said “841,” both painted over, along with the rest of the machine, with that inescapable Army greenish color.

And it wouldn’t start. Sergeant Jennings allowed as to how it had been misbehaving worse and worse for about a month, but the Army never sent anyone to fix it. So he’d been using a car he’d borrowed for his courier runs, and the Indian had just been sitting.

That training course I’d taken wasn’t the full-scale training for mechanics that the Matrons put some of the boys into, just a short version for those of us in the school, like my woodworking and metal-working classes. Still, they were serious about it. The final exam involved starting a little engine to be sure it worked, then taking it completely apart, so that it was in pieces, which the supervising Matron put into a basket and scrambled, reassembling it, and starting it. If it didn’t start, or if you had leftover pieces, you were punished and had to do it all over again. It took me two tries.

Even though that test engine hadn’t been attached to a motorcycle, much of the Indian’s engine looked familiar. So I volunteered to try to fix it. It took me all afternoon, and I got incredibly gunked up in the process, but I finally figured it out—the magneto assembly hadn’t been cleaned recently, and it was packed with gooey dirt, so the thing wasn’t getting electricity for a spark. I decided that Sergeant Jennings just wasn’t mechanically inclined.

When he heard the thing start up, he came running out of his office with a look of astonishment and glee on his face. He didn’t want to shake my hand just then because I was too dirty, but he did run over to the drug store to get me some heavy-duty soap. By dinner-time, I was all clean, and he treated me to supper at the diner. Mr. Apodaca, the owner, served us a delicious meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy. And I got cherry pie for dessert—my first ever. What a treat that was!

The next day, I spent most of my time cleaning and arranging that back room so that it would be suitable as both storage and a place for me to live. That meant, essentially, cleaning and arranging things more efficiently, and that effort, on top of my having fixed the motorcycle, put me in good graces with my employer. And because the Indian worked, he decided to show me the ropes for those courier runs.

He usually did one every weekday late in the afternoon, he said, and on the Friday one he stayed over. It took him about an hour and a half each way, and the route was easy. He wanted me to do the Monday through Thursday runs, and he’d continue to do the Friday one—he had friends in Socorro he visited on weekends. As I was to discover, some “friends” those were.

That day, we closed up the office a little early, and he gave me a pair of goggles and put me in the sidecar to accompany him—he wanted to introduce me to his boss in Socorro. And he also told me to pay attention, as I could learn a lot about how to operate that motorcycle by watching him carefully.

Well, now, that little ride over to Socorro was something, let me tell you. My heart was pounding with excitement the whole way. Mostly, I watched the road ahead rushing toward me at an unbelievable

speed, because watching him, to learn how to drive the thing, only mattered for starting and stopping, as far as I could tell.

It had been interesting to urge Honey up to a lope—as I mentioned, that long stride of hers ate up the miles. But compared to that Indian, it was like she could have been standing still. And I was going to learn to operate the thing! This business of being in the real world was becoming more and more interesting.

Compared to Carrizozo, Socorro was a real city, and I was a bit overwhelmed when we got there. My job was going to involve finding the Army office building, but I was quite lost after only a couple of turns. I knew I'd have to get Sergeant Jennings to create a map for me.

Meeting his boss was an interesting experience, a little window into Army life. Captain Jonas Walker, a short, rather soft-looking, middle-aged fellow in a wrinkled uniform, elicited a remarkably formal manner in Sergeant Jennings. I saw clearly that what I'd thought was standing at attention was more like loafing around. When Sergeant Jennings entered Walker's office, he was ramrod straight and saluting to beat the band.

“Sir! Sergeant Stephen Jennings reporting with today's portfolio, sir.”

“At ease, Jennings. Anything new?”

“Sir, no sir. At least no recruits, sir. But I do have someone for you to meet, sir.”

“Who might that be, Jennings?”

“Sir, may I present Mr. William White. He's offered to assist my office, sir, and I respectfully would like to request that he be allowed to, sir. Ah, by way of example, he fixed my motorcycle yesterday, sir. I'm certain he'll be making himself invaluable in other ways, sir. I thought he could make the courier run during the week, sir.”

On hearing my name, I stepped forward and tried to stand as straight as Sergeant Jennings was.

“Nice to meet you, White. Where are you from?”

“Here in New Mexico, sir. I've been on a ranch west of Carrizozo all my life, sir, and I'm now off to make my way in the world. Because I'm too young, I can't enlist, sir, but I thought I might be able to contribute in other ways. For one thing, I can act as Sergeant Jennings's translator, sir. It seems that many people in these parts speak only Spanish.”

The Captain looked surprised. “That, Jennings, is the best idea you've had this year. Permission granted.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Sergeant Jennings was still standing at attention, so I was, too. I noticed that it became old quickly.

“William White, did you say? William, translating for the recruits would be extremely helpful, I think, but you know what would be even better? Classes, English classes. For the recruits before they ship off to basic training. If they had some English going into basic, we might have more success with them.” Walker was looking at me with a question, I could tell. “Do you suppose you could teach some English classes? In Carrizozo, I suppose, but also here. And maybe my colleagues down in Alamogordo would also like to be part of such a thing. We could make up a simple vocabulary for the recruits to help them in basic.”

“Well, sir, I suppose I could give it a try. I'm not a real teacher or anything. And my Spanish is the kind from a book, probably Spanish from Spain rather than New Mexico. But I guess it could work.

Meantime, I'll be glad to make the courier runs and help out how I can. Uh, I think I better get a map of Socorro here, though. It's such a big city that I'm afraid I might get lost."

Walker burst into laughter. "Socorro? Big city? That's rich, Mr. White. But, sure, we'll get you a map."

As we walked out of that Army office, Sergeant Jennings slapped me on the back, knocking the breath out of me. "Great job, son! He likes you. And those English classes are a great idea—I know some of our recruits have an extra tough time in basic training without any English. Now, let's get some supper before the trip home."

Because it was a Wednesday, he wanted to return to Carrizozo that evening, something I couldn't object to. So we had a quick supper at a little cantina he knew, and where some of the staff seemed to know him. It was quite congenial, and I even had the chance to exercise some of that Spanish I was becoming so proud of. Except, I couldn't help but notice, my Spanish wasn't what the locals spoke at all. I could manage it, but those translations and classes I'd promised were going to be a chore.

On the way out of town, across the railroad tracks on the south end, we passed a street corner at which a small group of young women were gathered, and I discovered that Sergeant Jennings had more friends in Socorro than merely those at the cantina. The women yelled greetings and waved, and one of them noticed me and asked who his new friend was. He only smiled and waved back, enjoying it all, but I was a bit embarrassed.

"Who are those women?" My curiosity got the better of me.

"Oh, friends. Maybe I'll introduce you to them one of these days."

I didn't know it at the time, but my education was about to take a decidedly more practical turn.

* * *

Six

I settled into a routine that was both easy to handle and easy to like. Because the recruiting office was less than a block from a busy main-line railroad—Carrizozo had been founded originally as a railroad town, I learned—that had a five-in-the-morning daily through town, I had an alarm clock whether I wanted it or not. But that gave me time to wake up, get myself and the office clean, and have a cup of coffee and a doughnut on Sergeant Jennings' desk when he arrived about seven thirty.

He liked that a lot.

Then I could go back to sleep if I wanted to, or, assuming I could be available for translating duties, I could just goof off. That, however, quickly became stale, so I began looking for other stimuli.

But I didn't need those right away. The day after my first trip in the sidecar to Socorro, I had my first lesson on how to drive that motorcycle. After the lesson, Sergeant Jennings sat himself down in the sidecar—he looked kind of uncomfortable, all folded up in it—and told me to drive him to Socorro. I was a little un-nerved at first, but it worked out fine. And when that gaggle of girls waved at us on our way out of town, I couldn't help but think they were really waving at me.

My second lesson was off the road, in case I ever needed to handle the thing with gravel underfoot. Sergeant Jennings didn't know it, but I had that very thing in mind, so I found that lesson most useful. The best piece of advice was not to try to take corners fast.

On that first Friday I spent in town, Sergeant Jennings took off for Socorro earlier than we had done the two previous days, telling me that I was on my own for the weekend—he'd see me Monday morning. At first, I wasn't sure about that, but it took only a few minutes for the freedom of it all to sink in. I started by having dinner by myself at the diner, surprising Mr. Apodaca, who'd come to recognize me, and pigging out on desserts.

Saturday morning, I walked over to the drug store and hung about looking at stuff until the owner there, a tall man wearing both a white jacket and a large amount of hair on his upper lip, asked me if I needed some help.

"Well, sir, I think I need to shave. But, see, I grew up without a father, so I really don't know how to go about it."

He looked me over with interest.

"Hmm. Well, now, I guess you're about ready to shave. It'll make you look more handsome, I expect. You've got a ways to go before you can hope to grow one of these." He stroked his huge moustache carefully. "One option is to get a barber shave, just down the street at the barber shop. And you could get a haircut, too. That'd help you look more cleaned up."

I hadn't thought of a haircut. While I'd been in the Cave and Yard, the Matrons gave us rough haircuts now and then, and, since, I'd sort of chopped at it with a knife I had borrowed from the Lilies' kitchen.

"But, you know, barber-shop shaves will run you into money, especially if it turns out you need one every day. So I'd recommend one of these safety razors and a package of blades." He'd steered me over to a counter with several odd-looking thingamajigs inside a glass case.

"I forgot about my hair. I bet a haircut would be a good idea. Do you have any idea how much that costs, sir?"

"I think about a half-dollar, maybe, including a shave."

"How about I go over to the barber shop this first time, get all cleaned up, and then get one of your safety razors for future use. Uh, that is, if you'll show me how to use it."

"A good plan if I ever heard one. Need anything else, son?"

"Well I've got a toothbrush. And soap and so on."

"Tell you what. Stop by here on the way back from the barber shop and get some tooth powder along with the shaving stuff. It makes your teeth cleaner, and your breath sweeter, and the girls will like you better for it."

I promised to do so and made my way down the street. Looking back, I have to say that I'm glad I didn't know the traditional barber-shop symbol, that candy-cane striped pole, derived from the old blood-letting practice that barbers used to offer. If I'd known, I think that my first time in that chair would have been too much for me. I mean, even without knowing that, it was pretty traumatic.

It started well, however, when a short, stout, dark-haired man, also with a large amount of hair under his nose, but this time with its ends twirled up into big curls, addressed me as I came in the door. He was working with a pair of scissors on another fellow who was mostly covered by a striped sheet.

"Good day, sir. Can I help you?" He smiled at me while he snipped at the sheet-covered guy. "I am Luigi, the barber."

I didn't quite know about his accent, which came across so strongly that I had trouble following him, but I thought it might be English derived from Spanish, so I tried Spanish on him. "*Thank you for asking, sir. I'd like a haircut and a shave, please.*"

He looked dumbfounded. "Ah, I'm sorry, sir, but I'm don't speak the Spanish. I wish I did."

"Oh. Sorry. It's just that your English is a little different for me. I was asking for a shave and haircut."

"Ah! Yes! I unnerstand. My, er, speaking is a little bit, ah, different because I'm from the old country, Ee-taly! And shave and haircut I can do, as soon as I'm done with this gentleman." He smiled under that glorious moustache, and I was relieved.

While I waited, I amused myself with an odd booklet called the *Police Gazette*, which had an interesting—to me, at least—picture of a woman scantily clothed and tied up with ropes on the cover. Her clothing, such as it was, covered more obvious versions of all those curves under the Lilies' dresses that I'd wondered about. But just as I was getting interested in the associated story inside, Luigi summoned me.

The relief I'd felt before vanished as I sat down in that chair, he looked me over, and then started in on me. From where I was sitting, those scissors he pulled out first looked like instruments of death. And, when he was done with my hair and he'd lathered up my face with some kind of soapy goop, he pulled out his razor.

I couldn't help but remember Sergeant Jennings' comment that "... Italy was on the other side, too..." I don't think I really fainted, but it seems like I went into some kind of catatonic trance.

But then it was over, and he'd slapped some kind of mildly stinging stuff on my face, stuff that I couldn't help but smell. It was odd.

He handed me a mirror.

I looked carefully at it, twice, and then said "Who's this a picture of?"

I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone laugh in such a delightful way. "You like?"

"I sure do. What do I owe you. Oh! And I've got a question."

"Four bits. And no charge for a question."

"OK. Two questions, though. What's 'four bits'? And the real question is this. I don't think I can come here for shaves all the time. Should I get myself one of those things," I gestured toward where his razor was now awaiting the next victim, "or what do you suggest?"

"Ah ... four bits means fifty cents. And, no don't buy yourself one of these." He'd picked up his razor and was slashing it about in the air. "You might cut you nose off. Get one of those new, ah, safety razors. OK?"

Well, I thought. Convergent advice from competitors. Good deal. I stopped at the drug store on my way back to my room and bought a safety razor, some shaving soap and a brush to apply it with, and a supply of blades. Tooth-powder, too. You can't underestimate the importance of clean, fresh-smelling teeth.

* * *

The following Monday morning, Sergeant Jennings found his coffee and doughnut waiting for him, as usual, and he also found a little group of local people sitting in his office, awaiting his arrival. I'd found them outside, asked about the reason for their visit, and let them in, early.

"White! Where are you?"

I came scurrying out from the back room. "Here, sir."

"Who the hell are you? Where's my usual guy?" But I could see a glint of humor in his eye.

"It's me, sir. I got a haircut. What do you need, sir?"

"You got refreshments for me, but you forgot these folks?"

"Oh! Sorry, sir!" And I scurried out to the diner to get more coffee and doughnuts.

I amused myself during the errand by imagining the interaction, or, more likely, the lack thereof, between my friend the Sergeant and his visitors. I'd asked them, in Spanish, their reason for their visit, and learned, after some negotiation about how fast they were going to talk at me, that Mr. and Mrs. Esqalo Gomez were delivering their only son, Humberto, for enlistment in the Army, as was their responsibility on Humberto's eighteenth birthday.

Actually, as I'd discovered during my brief association with the recruiting office, it was Humberto's responsibility to report on his eighteenth birthday, but it seemed that parental oversight was strong in that part of New Mexico.

When I returned, with ample refreshments, they were all looking at each other, not even trying to speak, but trying to maintain polite smiles.

After that, it was pretty cut-and-dried. Naturally, the Gomez family tried hard to negotiate the best deal possible for Humberto—like, could he take my place as the assistant at the Carrizozo recruiting office, please?—and Sergeant Jennings, with me as the intermediary, assured them that Humberto would be placed in the best possible situation relative to his skills and the Army's needs, and the Army would certainly consider their request carefully.

Even after only a couple of days there, I knew that what he meant was that poor Humberto would probably wind up in the mud of some South Pacific island as a practice target for Japanese troops hidden in the undergrowth. If the enemy sharpshooters didn't get him, some kind of exotic tropical disease, or a stray mortar shell, probably would.

But, for the Gomez family, the assurances worked—so much so that, as I walked them outside, they invited me to dinner at their home. I told them that I had to work—true, because of the courier runs all week—but then they asked about Friday. And, with no good excuse, I caved.

So dinner with the Gomez household, Friday evening, was on my calendar. In retrospect, I wish they'd warned me about Alejandra.

The week passed quickly. I helped with several other recruitment interviews—with much the same probable outcome of an untimely and nasty demise far overseas awaiting the new recruits in each case—and made the courier runs without incident. Well, without incident except that each time I had more fun than I ever deserved to have driving that motorcycle. I can honestly say that the fun of that never wore off.

Then Friday afternoon arrived, and Sergeant Jennings departed for his weekend in Socorro. And I, remembering my commitment, made preparations for my dinner with the Gomez family.

That included my first attempt at shaving with the new safety razor I'd purchased after my haircut. The drug-store owner had given me something of a lesson in its use, but that had been nearly a week

ago. The brush-and-soap part was easy, but that razor felt clumsy and I was worried to death about cuts. Then I remembered that a blade needed to be put in it, if I was going to scrape that little bit of stubble off.

But somehow I managed and got to dinner on time. On the way, I stopped and purchased from the grocer a little bouquet of flowers for my hostess, and carrying that to the Gomez house made me feel sophisticated. That their household was on the southeast side of the railroad tracks, where the houses were of a distinctly different character from those on the northwest side, escaped me at the time.

My first hint of a difference was on the street in front of the Gomez house. A small group of young men, my age and a bit older, it appeared, was awaiting me.

“Oh, look, the gringo, he has flowers!”

I wasn't sure what a “gringo” was, but it didn't sound like a compliment. Looking them over, however, I recognized Humberto.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I'm here to have dinner with Humberto here and his parents. Thank you for welcoming me.”

Appropriately, Humberto looked embarrassed, and then everything changed when the front door opened and Esqualo appeared. The young men, who had surrounded me at the edge of the yard by that point, suddenly vanished into the twilight, leaving Humberto and me standing there.

“Hello, papa, I'm just bringing our guest inside.” Humberto's voice was not much different from how it had sounded in his recruitment interview.

When I'd purchased the shaving equipment at the drug store and Mr. Erickson gave me a lesson on how to use it all, he also tried to counsel me into purchasing other things, something he called “sheaths,” in particular. Young women, he suggested, sometimes tried to trap young men into marriage by seducing them into fatherhood.

From my perspective now, I understand exactly what he was talking about. At the time, though, I didn't have a clue. To me, back then, sex was just not something I had the faintest notion about—although those “stirrings” should have perhaps given me a hint.

Anyway, I didn't buy any of his sheaths, and I began to wonder after we all sat down to dinner whether maybe I should have.

We sat around a very nicely crafted dining table, with me between Humberto, on my left, and his sister, introduced to me as Alejandra, on my right. The parents were across from the three of us. Alejandra, who seemed to be about my age, was something of a distraction, as she was wearing an alluring perfume of some kind, and the bodice of her dress was cut quite low. Her plump, ruby-red lips, her big, brown eyes, and her coal-black hair, pulled back into a pony-tail, only added to the overall effect.

All the conversation, of course, was in their New Mexico Spanish, and I was having trouble keeping up. And then, just as Mrs. Gomez placed a big dish of what they called *enchiladas con queso* on the table, I felt a hand on my right thigh, and it began creeping toward my crotch.

It was hard to concentrate on trying to augment my Spanish vocabulary with new, local culinary terms with that hand working its way upward, so I managed a determined, and very squirmy, change of position. That helped, at least until the *enchiladas* were served. I tried one and found it to be delicious, but, a couple of minutes after I'd eaten it, I felt little beads of sweat on my forehead, and my mouth was suddenly burning. But, somehow, it all felt good—quite tasty despite the heat. And when the hand grabbed my thigh again, that felt pretty good, too.

Once again, I managed another position-changing squirm.

The next course was something called *carne adovada*, pieces of meat, which I decided might be pork, marinated in a very red sauce of some kind, a sauce that turned out to burn my mouth more than the *enchiladas* had. But, even so, it was wonderful, somehow. At that point, I was beginning to sweat uncontrollably, but it felt as if I was glowing.

And, the now insistent hand on my thigh felt better than ever.

This time, in addition to squirming away, I started asking my hostess questions, recipe questions. She was delighted to respond, and I couldn't help but notice, out of the corner of my eye, that Alejandra seemed disappointed.

Ultimately, it all worked, and I learned about New Mexican home cooking, including the importance of chiles, and also about exactly what Mr. Erickson was talking about. Perhaps best of all, my behavior at the dinner table didn't give Humberto and his friends a reason to beat me up on my way home.

* * *

The next day, my second Saturday in Carrizozo, offered several possibilities, but many of them meant I might run into Humberto Gomez and his friends somewhere, something I really wanted to avoid. Time, I thought, to get out of town. And there was an idea I'd first had in the Labyrinth that needed checking out.

By then, I'd spent several hours wandering the streets of Carrizozo, on both sides of the tracks, and one place that intrigued me was a livery on the far southeast side of town. "Horses," the sign said in big letters. And I missed Honey. So, early that Saturday morning, I wandered over there, where I found the owner to be less than trusting, although it started out pleasantly enough.

"Help ya, sonny?" Mr. Levesque, as he introduced himself, was a little, bent man of indeterminate age who had an unlit cigar clamped in his teeth.

"Yes, sir. I'd like to take a ride up into those mountains over there," I gestured in a generally eastward direction, "and I'd like to ask about hiring a horse for a day. Or maybe a couple of days."

"You don't want to just buy a horse?"

"Well, sir, I don't really have the ability to take care of a horse, at least not the way I think it should be done."

"You know about horses, then?"

"Certainly not as much as you do, sir. But I recently arrived in town after riding over from the Ocuras on a horse. I learned a lot on that little trip."

"From the Ocuras? How'd you get over there?"

"Well, that's a long story that you don't have time for, I'm sure. And, anyway, for me it was all a bad experience, with worse memories. But compared to how I got there, the ride over from there was easy." Somehow, lying while not really lying had begun to come easy to me.

"You need just a horse?"

I thought about the tack I'd left hidden about seven miles northwest—maybe next time, after I picked it up on a motorcycle run. "No, I need tack as well. But I can pay. You need a deposit?"

I think that was what got his interest. No doubt my haircut and shaving had made me look older than I had a week prior, but there's just no doubt that money talks.

He kept grilling me in his crotchety way and watched while I saddled the horse he led out of his corral for me. I'd asked for a gentle one, and it looked like Pepper, a gray and white gelding, who was a few inches taller than Honey, met my needs. Eventually, after about an hour of fooling around, plus a hefty payment of cash, I had my horse. I decided to show off by loping off to the southeast, and somehow I managed to keep my seat.

I hope I didn't look too dumb. My desert crossing, the first part at night, went just fine, but the day I spent out there had made me wish for a good hat. And riding Honey for all those miles gave me an appreciation for riding boots with heels. So, during the week before, I'd made the owner of the General Store in Carrizozo very happy by spending some of the Lilies' cash on a western wardrobe with special attention to the hat and the boots. Based on my readings, I knew I'd have fit right in fifty years earlier, but, with cars driving by on the highway, I felt a little odd. But, what the hell, I thought, I'm off on my own to another little adventure. Life is good.

The main highway east, or, really, east-southeast, from Carrizozo ascends toward something called Indian Divide, but I was going to turn south toward the hamlet of Nogal several miles before that. One of the maps in the Lilies' portfolio showed a section of Nogal Canyon, marked with the original mine that the three Mormon soldiers had started. That would be, I knew, too far for one day, but an initial scouting trip of the first part of that route seemed like a good idea.

Except for one thing.

I'd not managed an early start because of a surprise I'd had that morning, one related to the dinner that Mrs. Gomez had fixed me the evening before. The chile that she made went in hot enough to make my mouth feel like it was on fire, and, well, the next morning it came out elsewhere in a similar fashion. I thought I'd dealt with that earlier, before heading over to the livery, but about fifteen minutes of loping on Pepper made me realize I hadn't completely.

I don't think Pepper was surprised with I turned him around and we headed back to town—he was even galloping on one stretch—but he might have been when I kept him going past his stable, across the tracks, and into the back yard of the Army recruiting center. I didn't even have time to tie him properly, but rather just dashed right inside. He was well-trained, though, and so waited patiently with his reins hanging down until I came back outside. I think he was glad to see me, maybe, because I didn't just leave him standing there all day, even relieved. And if he wasn't, I sure was.

After that second surprise, I wasn't about to set out on any long trips of any nature, so, after walking Pepper around town a bit, I returned him to the livery. Mr. Levesque looked him over suspiciously but didn't find anything amiss, and I think he was happy with me. It was hard to tell.

When it came time for supper, I walked over to Mr. Apodaca's diner. Somewhere I'd read the old aphorism about when you fall off a horse, get right back on, and I decided that maybe that applied to food, too. And besides, the next day, Sunday, I didn't have anything better to do than, er, sit around.

Mr. Apodaca's menu, however, didn't have anything but American-looking foods like the meatloaf I'd had a few days before. But then I noticed, at the bottom, a little suggestion to "... ask about our daily home-made special!"

I was sitting at the counter, so it was easy to get his attention. "*Mr. Apodaca, may ask about your home-made special today?*"

He responded in kind, "*Yes, today we have green chile stew, with chicken and potatoes in it. It's delicious, because the new green chiles are coming in.*"

Then it hit him that I'd spoken Spanish to him, and he was floored, staring at me with his mouth open.

"Hmm. It sounds good, but is it very hot?" I used the word for spicy, *picante*.

Still with his mouth open, he nodded, then seemed to realize his gaffe and shook his head. *"A little hot, maybe, but not too much. I have some hot green chile sauce I could add to your bowl, though, if you like it that way."*

I laughed and shook my head. *"No, no. I'm afraid I'm not used to truly hot chile just yet. Maybe I could try a taste of the stew?"*

He brought me a very small bowl with only a couple of tablespoons of the stew in it, and a spoon. I tried a bite, waited for it to take hold, and then tried the rest. It was just hot enough to make me notice it, but not to burn so much as Mrs. Gomez' concoction, and it had a very interesting, and unique, flavor. I decided to go for it.

"Ah, that's wonderful. A bowlful, please. And a refill on my water, please."

"It comes with two tortillas. Would you like corn or flour?"

I remembered that Mrs. Gomez had served corn tortillas with the *carne adovada*, so I decided to try the flour ones.

When he brought my stew, Mr. Apodaca said, in his barely accented English, "I didn't realize before that you speak Spanish, *señor*. You speak it quite well, classically."

"That's one of the things I'm doing for Sergeant Jennings, translating for men who want to enlist or need to register, if they don't speak English."

"That, I think, will be a great help to many of my people, *señor*. All of us want to help defeat this *diablo* Hitler and the Japanese, too. They are evil."

"Maybe you can tell me something, Mr. Apodaca. The Army people have asked me to offer English language classes to new recruits, to help them when they begin their basic training. Do you think that might be worthwhile?"

"Excelente, señor, exquisito! I think that would be a great help to them. I have heard that many who speak no English have great difficulty with their training." He looked thoughtful. "And, you know, there may be others here in town who would like to learn some English, as well. Maybe they could take your classes, too."

I laughed. "Well, the Army's idea is to have a very simplified vocabulary for the recruits to learn. I don't know how many people here in town need to learn about 'Attention,' 'Parade rest,' 'Clean the latrine,' and that kind of thing."

That got him laughing along with me.

* * *

The next day, Sunday, having learned my lesson on Saturday, I didn't want to stray too far from home, so I kept myself busy with more organizing chores. Even though I had that little closet for my possessions—both those I'd brought from the Valley and the increasing pile of new ones—I was concerned about all that cash I still had in one of the saddlebags. I'd read about "banks," and there was a building with such a name just down the street, but some of that reading had to do with bank failures some years back. I wasn't sure I wanted to trust such an institution, if it might go belly-up and lose my money.

I was relieved, in more ways than one, when Saturday night's green chile stew didn't have the same effect on me that Mrs. Gomez' food had. It meant that I could enjoy those recipes—I certainly found them more tasty than the other menu items at Mr. Apodaca's diner.

It was about mid-morning, and I was trying to decide what to do next, when the telephone on Sergeant Jennings' desk rang. I'd seen him talking on it and asked about it, so I had an idea of how to use it. Because I was the only one around, I picked up the handset.

"Hello?"

"Son? Glad you're there. And, hey, listen, you should answer the phone like this: 'Carrizozo Recruiting Center, US Army, William White speaking. How can I help you?' That makes it more official."

"Uh, OK, I'll try to remember that. Is it OK that I answered today? We're closed, after all."

"It's fine. If it rings on a weekend, it's probably me wanting to talk to you, anyway. And that's why I called. I wanted to make sure that you're there."

"Yeah, I'm here. Uh, 'How can I help you?' Sir."

He laughed. "Well, don't wander off, too far at least. I'm coming back this afternoon with someone who needs to talk to you. See you in a couple of hours."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. Say, is the diner open? I haven't been over there on Sunday for a long time, and I don't remember."

"I had lunch there, but I think they close early on Sunday. Three, maybe."

"Ah. Glad I asked. Tell you what. Run over there, it's only two-thirty, and get him to make up a plate of sandwiches or something you can take out. So we'll have food for supper this evening. Enough for three people, and, remember, I eat a lot. I'll pay you back."

"OK. Does that wood stove in the main room work?"

"That's how I keep warm there in the winter."

"Good. There's some wood out back. We can heat up coffee or something if we need to."

"Good thinking. See you in a couple of hours."

He was making a special run back from Socorro so someone could talk to me? What was that about?

But I didn't have time to think about it, because I had to go get our supper. Mr. Apodaca, having become my friend the evening before, was most accommodating and made us more food than we could possibly eat. I didn't know what either Sergeant Jennings or the new guy would like, so I got a variety of sandwiches, and Mr. Apodaca loaned me a big cooking pot that he filled with some of that green chile stew. I planned to keep it warm on the stove. And he also gave me everything we'd need to eat with, down to the napkins.

I fidgeted around, tried to amuse myself by making a fire in the stove—which was a bit of a disaster because I didn't know what to do about the damper while the front room filled up with smoke—and generally fretted until Sergeant Jennings and his passenger showed up about four-fifteen. The passenger, a smallish man in uniform but sporting a moustache and neatly trimmed beard, who looked somewhat shell-shocked, introduced himself as Major Saul Bernstein, US Army Counter Intelligence Corps. I

watched him suck at his teeth while Sergeant Jennings introduced me, in such glowing terms that I felt myself blushing.

“That’s all well and good, Sergeant, but it’s also what we’re here to find out, isn’t it?” Bernstein turned to me. “Now, Mr. White, you and I need to have an interview, a special one. It will determine the extent to which you will work with Master Sergeant Jennings here on a special assignment. He’s being given a new Counter Intelligence Corps assignment, and he’s specifically requested your assistance.”

“Yes sir. May I ask what the Counter Intelligence Corps is, sir?”

“Whether I can answer that question, my young friend, will depend on how our interview goes.” He smiled in a surprisingly gentle fashion. “In wartime, William—well, other times, too, but especially in wartime—the Army needs to deal with certain matters in a confidential manner. A secret manner. For some things, a *top* secret manner. We need to be able to trust the people who are privy to the secrets involved in these matters. One of my jobs is to decide whom we can trust in that way. So, this interview we’re about to have is designed to provide me with the information to decide about you. It’s a standard set of questions, lots of them and some of them repeated using different phrasing, to check for consistency in your answers. That will tell me whether you’re trustworthy, from our perspective. Understand?”

“Ahh ... well, probably as much as you want me to, sir. I get the impression that there are things you’re not telling me.” I shrugged. “First, though, wouldn’t you maybe like to get cleaned up first? My rides in that sidecar always leave me dusty, and with bugs in my teeth.”

Bernstein looked at Sergeant Jennings. “I see what you mean.”

But he took my suggestion and visited the little bathroom in the back room.

While he was in there Sergeant Jennings grabbed my arm. “Now, listen, son. Here’s the deal. The Major is one of the Army’s smartest guys, and this interview of his is like a test. But the only way you have a hope of passing the test is to answer his questions with the absolute, complete truth. Every time. The test is designed to find out if you’re lying, and if he thinks you are, he’ll be like a shark after blood. Just remember. Tell. The. Truth. I told him already that I want you working with me on this new assignment, but you’ve got to pass this test first. OK?”

“Yessir,” I was saying as Bernstein walked back into the front room.

“Sergeant, let me suggest that you go get cleaned up at your place. I’m sure that Mr. White and I will be fine here.”

Like the “suggestions” that the Matrons used make to me, I realized that “suggestions” from officers like Major Bernstein were automatically taken by people like Sergeant Jennings.

* * *

Seven

“Let’s start at the beginning, Mr. White.” Major Bernstein’s smile was as gentle as ever. “Is your true name William White?”

He had us sitting facing each other, only about a foot apart, and he had a clipboard with a stack of paper on it on his lap. I felt my insides do a flip-flop, as I knew this was going to be complicated. This first question set the tone.

“Ah, well, that’s what I call myself, sir. And, when I was younger, all the guys called me ‘Whitey.’ But I don’t know for sure what my real name is. Or my ‘true’ name. Or if I actually have one.” I shrugged. “I mean, Shakespeare asked ‘What’s in a name?’ And I’ve asked myself that many times.”

He blinked, obviously surprised, and took a deep breath. “Is it appropriate for me to continue to call you ‘Mr. White?’”

“Sure, sir. Or ‘William.’ Or even ‘Bill’ or maybe ‘Will’ I guess, although no one’s called me those names so I don’t know if I’d recognize them.”

He paused and stared at me for an uncomfortable number of seconds. “This, Mr. White, may take a while.”

The “test” was in the form of many, many questions, some of them of the simple “yes” or “no” variety, but others open-ended, which required explanations from me—in some of those cases, long, complicated explanations. It didn’t take me any time at all to see the wisdom of Sergeant Jennings’ advice to stick to the truth. Eventually, we got through his list, and I watched as he made notation after notation on the sheets of paper those questions were listed on. Some of those notations seemed more like he was writing essays.

One of the first things I admitted to was not telling Sergeant Jennings every little thing about my background, and, as that background emerged in response to Major Bernstein’s questions, I saw that he was getting more and more excited. And, yes, there were a number of questions that he repeated, only phrased differently. At one point I realized that if I’d been trying to lie, I would have undoubtedly become so confused that I would have given myself away. So I stuck to the truth, even when it was painful.

“Have you ever had contact with anyone who is associated with the National Socialist Party, the Nazis, or is a Nazi sympathizer?”

So I had to tell him about that conversation with Clarisse. At that point, he already knew about where, and how, I’d been raised, so the admission about Clarisse probably wasn’t too damaging. And it was fascinating to me to watch his reactions to various answers I gave. At one point, I mentioned the radio antenna and how it had been altered, and he actually dropped his pencil in astonishment.

It occurred to me, after quite a while of the grilling, that one of the strategies of the test was simply to wear down the person being tested. That thought, at least, gave me a little boost, but it didn’t last long.

When he was finished, he looked around as if expecting to see Sergeant Jennings waiting. “Now, where do you suppose he went?”

“Sir, you told him to go home and get cleaned up. He’s certainly had time, so maybe he’s in the back room.” I gestured toward the connecting door. “If I know him, sir, he’s probably hungry. Hmm. Or maybe not. The sandwiches are back there. Or were.”

“Ah, yes. Supper. Good thinking. I’m hungry, too. Don’t tell me he ate everything, please don’t tell me that.”

“I’ll check, sir. Cross your fingers.” I stood up, stretched and rubbed my butt, which was all tingly from having sat on that hard-backed straight chair for so long, and walked to the back door of the front room.

Sergeant Jennings was sitting in there, looking nervous, and I couldn’t help but notice that there were fewer sandwiches than I’d brought from the diner.

“How’d ya do, son?” He had his hands clasped together, twitching.

“Got me, sir. You’ll have to ask the Major. But he wants supper now. If you’ve left him any. The green chile stew is hot on the stove, though, so maybe that’ll satisfy him.”

Sergeant Jennings leapt into action, organizing things for an informal supper in the front room, with his meager furniture put to use in an efficient, if unusual, way. Despite my jibe, there were plenty of sandwiches left, especially because I was going to eat more of that stew.

Although it wasn’t up to the burn-your-mouth-out standards of Mrs. Gomez’ recipes, I thought I should warn Major Bernstein. “Major, sir? Are you from these parts? Have you been here long?”

He looked up from tallying my test answers. “Hmm? From here? Oh, no indeed. I’m from New York City originally, although I’m posted in Washington, DC just now. And I arrived out here last Tuesday, in Albuquerque. I’m part of the detail that’s setting up this CIC activity here.”

“CIC” registered with me as “Counter Intelligence Corps” quickly enough that I felt part of the club.

“Well, sir, what’s in this pot on the stove is some of the local style of food. I’ve come, pretty quickly, actually, to like it. But, well, let me warn you that it has its spiciness.”

Sergeant Jennings snorted. “Got that right, son. Major, I’m still trying to get used to it. It’s not at all like what I grew up with in Kentucky. Or like what the Army serves. Watch yourself, sir.”

Bernstein scribbled for another minute, then looked up. “Sergeant, Mr. White, I’ll have you know that New York is the center of the culinary universe, at least on this side of the Atlantic. And, even compared to Paris, it’s far more diverse. Moreover, I’ve sampled just about everything it has to offer. I’m sure that the local cuisine here in central New Mexico will be a wonderful new experience. I’m interested to see how it compares to the Puerto Rican cuisine that I’m so familiar with.”

I’m not sure if he was comparing it with that Puerto Rican food after his first big spoonful of the green chile stew or what. But, after the five seconds or so of delay for the chile to kick in, he sort of turned all red and puffy and managed to blurt out a muffled “Holy crap!” before retiring, in a bit of a hurry, to the back room.

Sergeant Jennings sported a huge grin. “Like I said, son, I’m still trying to get used to it. You really like it?”

“This stew, yeah. I got my first taste in the Gomez household—remember last Monday morning’s recruit?—on Friday night. This is bland by comparison—I had a little trouble with Mrs. Gomez’ cooking. But even this milder stuff still has that surprise for you the next morning. Or, I guess, that evening if you have it for breakfast. Hot going in, hot coming out.”

He looked at me for a minute then burst into laughter. “That’s my experience, too. But, hey, it keeps you regular, right?”

It wasn’t too long before Major Bernstein returned.

“That, gentlemen, was not like anything I’ve ever had. Definitely spicy hot. But also an interesting flavor in there somewhere. White? You said you got this across the street at the diner?”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Apodaca is quite proud of it. But, I should say, it’s pretty mild compared to some of the food around here.”

“Mild? Really? Ah, well, it must be an acquired taste. Jennings? Are you ready for a return to Socorro tonight?”

“Ah, yessir, if that’s what you’d like. Um, if I may suggest, sir, there’s a hotel down the street a couple of blocks that might have a vacancy for the night. It’s another couple of hours in that sidecar to get back to Socorro. And it gets chilly at night.”

“Good thought, Sergeant. How about calling them for me? I need a word with Mr. White here.” He nodded toward the front door as Sergeant Jennings got on the phone.

My two servings of the stew had resulted in beads of sweat on my forehead, and that comment made sweat pop out all over the rest of me. I followed Bernstein out to the street, wondering what would be next—which turned out to be watching him fish around in his pockets for his pipe.

“White, I have to say, that interview with you was unique in my experience, and I do have quite a lot of experience.”

He fished around more and came up with a little tobacco pouch and matches. I fretted.

“But, I also have to say, it was perhaps the most refreshing interview I can remember, in terms of your candor and consistency. Thank you for being truthful with me. And you should believe me when I say that I would have known if you weren’t.”

“So. I have three points to make here. First,” he pointed the index finger of his right hand skyward, “Army CIC needs good men. Good men are hard to find stateside just now, because of the big pushes we’re making in both Europe and the Pacific. So when we find someone who we think can help us, we jump at the chance. Master Sergeant Jennings’ endorsement of you is a big plus here as well.”

“Second,” his middle finger poked up beside his index finger, “your test results are stellar, demonstrating a high degree of both innate intelligence and a solid education. Those are important attributes for CIC. We need people who know how to think.”

“And third,” his ring finger joined the others, “your answers are sufficiently consistent that you passed our security test. With flying colors. I couldn’t find anything that would suggest that you won’t be a useful asset for the CIC activities we have going here in New Mexico. And, especially for someone your age, your answers, especially the long explanations, were thoughtful, lucid, and quite clear.”

That was very good news to me.

“Now,” he puffed to get his pipe lit, “one of the things you told me is that you believe yourself to be sixteen, plus a month and a half or so by now, but that you don’t really know exactly when you were born, right? No birth certificate or anything, right?”

I found that my mouth was too dry to talk, so I just nodded.

“I think what that means, and this will be in my report, I think that you were really born on the third of August, 1926. Which means that your eighteenth birthday, as far as the US Army is concerned, was, let me think, a week and a half ago. This is a highly unusual step, but yours is a highly unusual case. I’m staking my considerable reputation that I’m making a good decision here.” He grinned. “Congratulations! Have you registered with Sergeant Jennings’ office yet? Eighteen-year-old young men are required to do that, you know.”

“Uh ... ”

“Joking, son, joking. As far as I’m concerned, and that’s what counts here, you’re cleared to work with Jennings on his CIC assignments. Unless he hears otherwise, he’ll be authorized to read you in to whatever information comes his way—and by ‘whatever’ I mean everything, even classified material—and to assign you to whatever roles he thinks you can help with. He’ll have paperwork documenting all this tomorrow. Understood?”

I found my voice, or at least a bit of it. “Yessir. And thank you sir.”

“What we’ve got happening out here in this Godforsaken place, White, is something so big that even I have trouble believing it. And we’re worried sick about Nazi spies and saboteurs. CIC’s job is to ferret them out and stop whatever plans they have. And I’m not exaggerating when I say that the outcome of the entire war may well depend on your success.”

Not, I thought, that there was going to be any pressure on us, or anything.

* * *

The next morning, bright and early, Sergeant Jennings sent me off to Socorro with Major Bernstein folded into the sidecar. It was a little early for the daily courier run, but Bernstein needed to get back, he said. My instructions were to get the major there in one piece and then wait until he had a package ready for me to carry back on the return trip.

At first, I waited patiently in the Socorro Army office building, then I got called into a back room. There, a lady sat me on a stool, told me to look at the “camera,” and was surprised when I asked her what that was. A very bright light flashed, making me see spots for a few minutes, and she told me to go back outside and sit.

So I did, for what seemed like a long time, now and then wandering around to read whatever I could find. There was a wealth of material in a sort of picture frame on a wall, which material turned out to fall into two categories, either the familiar “I want YOU” sort of thing or various admonitions about not discussing sensitive information in public. “Loose lips sink ships!” was especially amusing to me.

Finally, I told the soldier at the front desk—he wore fewer stripes on his arm-patch than did Sergeant Jennings—that I was going to stretch my legs and would be back by lunchtime. Because I wasn’t in uniform, I think he decided he couldn’t really tell me what to do, so he just said he’d let the Major know.

The Army building was located in downtown Socorro, at least that’s what it seemed like to me, surrounded by other business buildings. Down the block was a town square, which reminded me of the square in Carrizozo, except the Socorro one had more trees. And there were more, and a wider variety of, stores. I might have gone on a shopping binge if I had not been given my new job as a CIC employee—I didn’t even know what color clothes I should buy.

Our early start meant that I’d had an earlier breakfast, so I reasoned that an early lunch would be appropriate. Something called a “cafeteria,” with pictures of food in the window, looked interesting, so I went in. And I found that “interesting” was an understatement. It turned out that you took a tray, walked along a counter, and picked out what you wanted to eat from the offerings. It was early enough that I was one of the first customers of the day, for lunch at least, and that was a good thing. I was so overwhelmed by the choices that I would have held up the line, if there had been one. I was totally stuffed when I got back to the Army building.

At that point, there was a different soldier at the front desk, and, as I walked in, he asked, “Can I help you?”

“My name is William White, and I’m waiting for Major Bernstein.”

“Ah, White, yes. I’ve got a package for you.” He held up a large, fat envelope.

When I walked over to pick it up, he handed me a clipboard and said, “Sign there.”

“Huh?”

“Your name. Sign your name on the next blank line there. What are you, stupid?”

So, for the first time, I wrote “William White” and knew, somehow, that my name had become official.

That, plus the friendly—overly friendly, actually—greeting from the young women on that street corner on my way out of town, put me in a cheerful mood as I pointed the Indian down the highway toward Carrizozo. At first, the road ran north-south, more or less parallel to the Rio Grande, with green, irrigated fields on my left and a barren stretch of hills on my right. Then it turned east at a little town called San Antonio, where it crossed the river before climbing out of the valley through some of those barren hills before heading straight as an arrow across the *Jornada*.

When Sergeant Jennings had taken me on the courier run the first two days I was working for him, he’d opened the Indian up, although, in the sidecar, I really couldn’t see the speed gauge. On that return trip, without the Major sitting nervously beside me, I noticed that I managed to get the Indian going eighty-five for a stretch, at which point I backed off the throttle.

Eighty-five miles per hour? I didn’t want to think about what would happen if a tire blew.

By the time I returned to the recruiting center back in Carrizozo, there was an Army truck in front of the building, and Sergeant Jennings was sitting in a chair out on the porch, leaned back, enjoying the afternoon.

“That Major Bernstein works fast.” He saw me walk around the side of the building after I’d parked the Indian out back.

“Yeah, what’s this all about, Sergeant?”

“New phone. I’m supposed to be getting orders about it. Got ’em?”

I handed him the fat package I’d brought.

“Hmm. Looks like lots of reading. Tell you what. Until those guys in there are finished, we might as well sit out here. Go get a chair and we’ll talk.”

I went inside to find a crew of telephone workers, only these were Army people, fiddling with the phone on Sergeant Jennings’ desk. In the bathroom, I cleaned the dust off, then came back and took a chair outside.

He started in even before I’d sat down. “Major Bernstein told me that he was going to clear you to work with me on CI. Is that what he told you?”

“CI” could mean only counter intelligence, I thought. “Basically, yes. I guess this is some kind of extra assignment for you, eh, sir?”

“Well, I’ve got to read these orders carefully, but I’m thinking it may turn out that recruiting is the extra assignment. But first things first.” He tilted his chair back upright and turned it to face me. “We’ve got to get our names straight.”

“Huh?” When I wanted to, I could be positively loquacious.

“Right. First thing. When we’re not here, being regular Army people, I mean, there will be times when we need to seem to be civilians. So. You’re going to need to learn to call me something besides ‘Sergeant’ and ‘sir’ all the time. And I can’t keep calling you ‘son’ all the time, either. That means, unless there are other Army people around, especially officers like Major Bernstein or Captain Walker, you need to call me ‘Steve.’ That’s what my folks called me, except it was ‘Stevie,’ but don’t you call me that, and ‘Steve’ is what my friends call me. OK?”

“Uh, OK, sir ... I mean, Steve.” It felt funny, but I figured I’d get used to it.

“And I need to call you by some first name, but ‘William’ seems too formal and I don’t know if you like ‘Bill’ or what. I won’t suggest ‘Billy,’ though.”

“Oh. Hmm. I never really thought about it much.” I scratched my head. “Say! How about ‘Will’? I read somewhere that Shakespeare was called that, and he’s one of my favorites.”

His jaw dropped. “You read Shakespeare?”

“Yeah, we had a book of his. I like the plays better than the poetry, though. The language takes some getting used to—they really talked funny back then—but the stories are just fascinating. Some are funny, some are sad, and others are full of murder and treachery. Amazing stories.”

He shook his head as he found *something* amazing. “OK, then, ‘Will White’ it is. Now, second thing. I haven’t read everything here, of course, but there’s a note from Major Bernstein telling me that your test results, I guess those are his notes from that interview, your test results are in here and I need to read them. Is there something you want to tell me about that?”

“No sir ... I mean, Steve. I just did what you said and told him the truth about everything. There’s stuff in there that you haven’t heard, though, stuff that I never had the opportunity to talk about with you. Maybe that’s what’s he’s referring to.”

“Anything you’re embarrassed about? Or ashamed of?”

I shrugged. “Well, I didn’t have control over how and where I was brought up, so whatever’s there, it wasn’t my fault. I guess it’s true that I had a pretty strange upbringing, though. Maybe the best thing would be for you to read it and ask me questions about it, if you want.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. What did the Major tell you about our CIC assignment?”

“Well, he said that, first, the Army had some big project around here that was so big that even he couldn’t believe it and that, second, we’re supposed to find and stop Nazis from messing it up. Do you know what this big project is?”

“Not exactly, and it may all come to nothing anyway. What I heard is, the Army needs to test some kind of new weapon, and they’re looking for possible test sites. Somewhere over there in the *Jornada* is a candidate. If they decide to do the test there, well, that’s where keeping spies from sticking their fingers in the pie comes in.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. The Major said that the outcome of the entire war might depend on our success. With preventing sabotage, I mean.”

Steve blinked several times as he stared at me. “Must be some helluva a new weapon they’ve got.”

* * *

He didn’t seem inclined to rush off, so, while we were sitting on the porch waiting for the phone guys to finish up, I took the opportunity to ask about some things I’d been wondering about ever since talking with Major Bernstein.

“Steve, one thing in that packet, at least I think it’ll be in there, is that the Army now thinks I’m eighteen. Uh, the Major, see, he decided to change my birthday by a couple of years. Anyway, does that mean I’m in the Army now, since I’m working for you?”

He looked surprised. “You’re eighteen now? My goodness, doesn’t time fly? Kinda young-looking for eighteen, seems like, although it’s better now that you’re shaving. And you were looking old for sixteen, so it’s probably fine.”

“Now, then.” He scratched his chin. “I don’t know what’s in these orders, but I doubt they’ve put you in the regular Army. You haven’t been through any kind of basic training. And I doubt you’re going to be sent there, because if you’re assigned to this CIC job, there’s no time. Hmm. I guess I should provide you with at least some. We can call it ... ahh ... ‘rudimentary’ training. But not right now. Tell you what. Go get us some coffee, a couple of cups for me so I can stay awake while I read all this.”

I walked over to the diner and had a fun conversation with Mr. Apodaca about our New York visitor’s reaction to New Mexico green chile stew.

Back at the office, or on the porch in front of it, I found Steve absorbed in the contents of the envelope I’d brought from Socorro. He looked up as I came back with the coffee.

He seemed relieved. “Ah, thanks. I’m going to need that. Oh, and here ya go. Don’t lose it. And you were right. The Army thinks you’re eighteen.”

He handed me a little card with my picture on it and a bunch of information including my name and the birthday that Major Bernstein had given me.

“I never saw a picture of me before. Where’d they get this?”

“Didn’t they take your picture? You know, with a camera?”

“Oh. Was that what that thing was for? Never saw one of those.”

“I’m reading your interview, and now I see why. It explains a lot about you, why your background knowledge is full of holes.”

“Yeah. I know some stuff, but there’s lots I don’t know. I’m learning, though.”

“I’ve noticed. Oh, and did you see what it says on that card? Where it says ‘designation’?”

“ ‘Special Agent – CIC.’ That’s me? A special agent? Gee.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let it go to your head, sss ... uh, Will. And here’s a pen. The card needs your signature.” He watched as I carefully wrote my name just the way I’d written it in Socorro.

“So, uh, Will, I never asked before. Have you got a driver’s license?”

“A what?”

“Ah, crap. A driver’s license. You’re supposed to have one to operate a motor vehicle—and our Indian is definitely a motor vehicle—on public roads. I’m glad you didn’t get stopped by the sheriff on any of those trips to Socorro or back.”

“How do you get a driver’s license?”

“Hmm. Don’t know. Mine’s from where I used to live, Kentucky. It’s probably different here. But, look, now that you have that ID card, it should do the trick. Just be sure to have it with you on those runs, OK?”

“Why would I get stopped?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Going too fast, maybe. Maybe some cop’s just bored. Who can tell? But if you *are* stopped, just show the cop that card and tell him that you’re on top secret business for Army Counter Intelligence. That ought to get you out of trouble. And if it doesn’t, have him call me.”

He went back to reading the file of paper for a while as I admired my new card. “Who’s this ‘Clarisse’ person? Your girlfriend?”

I felt a blush coming on. “Well, sort of yes and sort of no. I thought she was, or maybe she’d become my girlfriend someday, but then she started talking about ‘Führer this’ and ‘Führer that’,

meaning Adolph Hitler, of course. And she seemed to think that the Japs did the right thing when they bombed Pearl Harbor. So when I left, we weren't on the best of terms."

"Is that how they all think in there, all those women?"

"I got that idea, but I don't know for sure. She probably didn't just make it up, though. And I do know that she was in training for their leadership, whatever that means. So she had access to inside information. There's no doubt that some of the crap I've been reading in the papers about Hitler fits right in with their approach to managing, you know, babies and who gets to make them."

"Ah, geez. I gotta say, we're hearing some real horror stories out of Europe these days. We're beating the son-of-a-bitch, but not before he's committing some real atrocities. Anyway, you got any maps of this place, Will?"

If the doughnuts and coffee in the morning were making him happy, that map portfolio put him in seventh heaven. He was sitting when he first looked at the maps, and then he stood up and paced as he paged through them. Eventually he stopped, and it turned out he'd found my map, which I'd put into that copy of the portfolio.

"Here's a different one." He showed it to me.

"Oh. That's mine. I made that when I was exploring around in there, before I found that portfolio of the other maps. The maps the Lilies made."

"Lilies? What ... OK, never mind. What's this place labeled 'Coronado room'? Sounds like a fancy restaurant."

"No, ss ... Steve, it's not. It's their vault, sort of. It's got some cash," less, I thought, than it did, "and shelves and shelves of things made out of gold. I read in a history of the place, one of their restricted library books, that they'd run across what they thought was Coronado's great treasure early on, while they were still mining. Ah, Coronado the early Spanish conquistador, I mean. That's why I called it the 'Coronado room.' Seems they broke through into a natural cave, and there was all this gold in the form of artifacts, mostly. Pots, bowls, what's called 'fetishes', whatever those are, statues, lots of things. I read about Coronado in school, but I didn't know that he really found gold."

"Wait. I couldn't have possibly heard that right. You're saying there's a room full of gold in this place? Really?"

"I saw it. And, um, well, I borrowed some of the cash they had in there before I left. I didn't know how long it would take me to find a job out here in the world."

He looked at me, an eyebrow cocked up in a funny way. "You going to pay that back?"

I grinned. "I don't know. I'm still trying to figure out how much they owe me for all those years they kept me captive there. Maybe I need to borrow some more."

He laughed. "You sit still. I'm going to check and see if that phone's ready yet."

Turned out that it was, and he called me in for the briefing. The Army, in a rare stroke of genius, had decided that Steve's office needed a scrambled telephone, in case there were CIC-related conversations he needed to have with someone, somewhere. Apparently, they were taking seriously their mission of preventing possible sabotage of whatever might be a target for sabotage, out there in the middle of nowhere.

So on Steve's desk sat a new telephone set, one slightly bigger than the regular set and with more buttons and a little light. It seemed that, to make a secure call, you dialed up someone with a similar telephone set, pushed some buttons and waited for the light to come on, and proceeded to talk. In between, through the miracle of telephone science, the signal was all scrambled up, and no one could

listen in. I didn't have much of an idea of what they were talking about until someone explained how easy it was to listen in on normal telephone calls.

The crew chief—he wore sergeant's stripes a little less elaborate than Steve's—explained that just about all Army outposts all over New Mexico were getting one of the scrambled units, just in case.

Just in case of what wasn't clear, until Steve and I talked about it when the phone crew had departed.

"Sounds like the *Jornada* is a short-list candidate for testing out that new weapon, whatever it is. If not, I'd sure like to know what the Army's gearing up for."

"So, does that mean that the business about sabotage is going to get more important?"

He laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "Probably. Probably so much more important that they'll bring in all sorts of new people who don't know the area. And what they'll do is to barge around like bulls in a china shop and make our job all that much harder."

He picked up the handset of his new telephone. "Now, let's see if this thing really works."

He dialed, spoke to someone, pushed buttons, and waited. "I figured this wouldn't be easy. Damned Army. Remember Captain Walker? He's been my boss as far as recruiting is concerned. Right now, I'm calling his boss, Colonel Wright. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Wright, CIC in Socorro. He reports to a full Colonel up in Albuquerque, who's the big cheese here in New Mexico, and *he* reports to a General up in Denver. I ... Yes, sir, Lieutenant. I need to speak right away with Colonel Wright on scramble."

He waited another minute and pushed two buttons. Then he stood at attention. "Master Sergeant Stephen Jennings, CIC, here, Colonel. Sorry to bother you, sir, but I have urgent information."

I heard an odd-sounding voice coming from the desk-top telephone set. "What is it, Sergeant?"

"Sir, have you seen the file on my new, ah, protégé, William White? The file from Major Bernstein, sir?"

"I saw it earlier today, Sergeant." The voice was weak and tinny. "Is there a problem?"

"On the contrary, sir. Mr. White has just provided me with information, a first-hand observation about that underground facility in the Oscura Mountains, the facility from which he escaped. It's just east of the main Alamogordo range. And he's told me that, in there somewhere, there is a room full of gold artifacts. A significant find. Given the attitude of the inhabitants there, it would seem that protecting those assets from foreign hands could be a priority. I thought you should know at once, sir."

"How fast ... no, never mind. Master Sergeant, I'll see you at your office in ..." There was a short pause. "... two hours. Be available."

"Yessir. And, because of the time, I'll have a light supper ready, sir. See you soon, sir."

He sat down and wiped his forehead. "Whew. I never called a colonel on the phone before, even a light colonel. Will, my friend, I hope you're right about that gold. Colonel Wright seems *very* interested in it."

* * *

A little over ninety minutes later, a tan-colored car, one with four doors, slid to a stop in front of the Carrizozo recruiting center. In the meantime, both Steve and I had walked over to Mr. Apodaca's diner and eaten ice-cream sundaes while Mr. Apodaca and his kitchen staff put together that "light supper"

that Steve had promised the Colonel. It was good-old American food, nothing New Mexican that might upset the Colonel's innards.

As he heard the car arrive, Steve ran out the front door and held himself at attention as the Colonel stepped out of the back door of the car. It took him a minute, as he was quite rotund, obese, even, with saggy jowls and a belly hanging over his belt, and getting old. I, acting on instructions, stood as straight as I could, but I didn't salute when Steve did.

"Sir. Master Sergeant Stephen Jennings. Welcome to Carrizozo, sir."

The Colonel saluted. "At ease, Jennings. Smoking lamp is lit. This must be Mr. White."

Steve kept quiet, and I had to find my voice. "Ahem. Yes, sir. William White. Um, we have some supper inside for you, sir."

"And I understand you have some information for me as well, White. Let's retire to the office there and get on with a briefing." He looked at a watch he had on his wrist. "And the food is a good idea, too."

He leaned down to the driver's window. "Corporal, there's a diner across the street. Let me suggest you see what they have to eat. We'll be returning shortly."

Inside, Colonel Wright sat at Steve's desk, using it like a dining table, and Steve and I sat with plates on our knees, watching him eat—and eat he did, quickly, efficiently, and unashamedly. I think that Steve was as glad as I that we'd had those ice cream sundaes at the diner. The Colonel vacuumed up almost all of the food we'd provided.

And, between bites, he asked me questions about the Labyrinth, questions that required long answers, which gave him the chance to stuff himself. When we finally came to the part of my explanation that concerned the room with the gold and cash in it, the focus of his attention changed from the food to me. By the time I finished, the food was gone and he wasn't chewing, so he started in with the questions.

"So, White, you say this room is in the lower reaches of this, this Labyrinth place?"

"Yes, sir. And I couldn't help but notice how hot it was down there, sir. I suppose that must be related to the hot water springs in the place. Even the floor, solid rock, was hot."

"And how big is this room again?"

I looked around at the recruiting center's front room, where we were sitting. It seemed to be about fifteen by twenty feet or so.

"I'd say a little bigger than this room, sir. With a slightly lower ceiling, maybe eight feet instead of nine or ten, or whatever this is."

"And there were shelves...?"

"Shelves all around the walls, except for where the door was..." I tried to picture the room in my mind, "...six shelves high, I think. And, ah, three rows of six shelves in the middle of the room, probably fifteen feet long each. But all the top shelves had packages of some kind, box-like packages wrapped in brown paper. That probably wasn't gold."

Colonel Wright fumbled in Steve's desk drawer and took out a pencil, then scribbled on the blotter.

He looked up and asked, "Were the various items packed closely on the shelves? Or were the shelves sort of empty looking?"

"Oh, they were crammed full, sir."

“Hmm. Gold’s heavy stuff, so those must be very sturdy shelves.” He scribbled some more, and then his voice got excited. “I’m probably overestimating this, but it wouldn’t surprise me if there’s a fortune in gold in there. Not even counting the historical value—and that’s probably highly significant, given how ancient some of that probably is—we’re talking probably four million dollars at the official government price. Four *million* dollars!”

Steve and I just looked at him.

“What I’m thinking of, naturally, is how this could be used against us in the war, if it fell into the wrong hands. And given the politics of those people there—what did you call them, Lilies?—that could happen. We need to make sure it doesn’t.” He had managed to get hold of himself, apparently. “Sergeant, I’ll need to consult with my superiors about this, but I think we need to secure that gold. I’d like you to prepare a tactical plan to do that, emphasis on clandestine, and I’ll get back to you when I have appropriate orders. The fewer people who know about this, the better. Need to know only, and all that.”

He popped a last bite of one of the desserts into his mouth and walked out to his car, where he found that his driver had returned from the diner. With a spray of gravel, they sped off.

“Will, my friend, I’m afraid I don’t trust that fellow. We’re going to have to be on our toes with this.”

“I’m glad he didn’t ask about those top-shelf packages. He probably would have drooled all over your desk.”

* * *

Eight

Although neither of us trusted Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Wright farther than we could throw him—which wouldn’t have been very far at all—it was the Army and orders were orders. Steve began thinking about a tactical plan to raid the Labyrinth, and, of course, he needed my help, given that he didn’t know the place from our closet. The matter was formalized with both a follow-up telephone call, scrambled, from Wright and then written orders in one of the packages I brought back from Socorro a couple of days later. Two sets of orders, actually. One for a reconnaissance visit and another for emptying the Coronado treasure room.

Steve pointed out to me that Wright’s was the only signature on those orders.

The more complex operation would be the theft—and that’s all you could honestly call it—and the plan he came up with, which he called a “straw-man” plan, designed to be knocked down and burned if need be, was constrained by the amount of gold involved. He pointed out that the government had set the price of gold at \$35 per troy ounce, which meant that a ton of gold was worth about a million dollars. Therefore, Wright had been talking about four tons of gold or so. It wasn’t as if we could just pick it up and carry it away.

“Well, not all at once, Steve. But maybe little by little. Suppose we figure out how to carry, oh, a hundred pounds per load? There are two of us, so that would mean, what, forty loads?”

He looked surprised, did some scribbling and said, “Yeah. Forty loads. What are you? Some kind of human calculator?”

I shrugged. "I can do simple math like that in my head, so maybe I am. Anyway, the trick would be to minimize the distance over which we have to carry those loads, and especially how much climbing there is."

"You said that gold room is in one of the deepest parts of that place. That sounds like out means up, too."

"Afraid so."

"Maybe we can figure out something like a cart. But it has to fit in there." He shook his head and heaved a sigh. "I suppose that's the point of a recon trip. Is that possible?"

"If I got out, I expect we can get back in."

"Can we get close with the Indian?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I think so. The road is good enough, as far as I remember. But it would be a wise to figure out how to get the thing to run more quietly. Even if it's not working hard, it's pretty noisy. And it's quiet out there on the desert. They could hear us coming from a long way."

"Good thinking. And, say, do you suppose we could get into that gold room on our first trip? I just had an idea."

"I picked the lock before, and I guess I can do it again. I'll have to remember to take some wire."

"Wire? Hell, I've got a lock-pick set. Will that do?"

"Better, probably. What's your idea, Steve?"

"You don't trust Wright any more than I do, I bet. And I was thinking we might give him a little test. Swipe some gold artifact, something small, and show it to him, give it to him and see what happens. See if he turns it in. If so, well, maybe he's honest. But ... " He saw me nodding and stopped.

"Yeah. If he *doesn't* turn it in, we'll know we have a crook for a Colonel. But what do we do then?"

"I know just the thing. We'll have to call in some heavy guns, so to speak, but we can bring him down, I'm sure. Now. When should we go out there? Do those women have any kind of schedule we need to worry about?"

"No real schedule I know of. The way I figure to do it the first time is on a night with a full moon, or close. There's a way in and out that they can't really watch, although it's longer than straight in. But I expect they watch the straight-in approach. If we can get the Indian quiet, we can drive right up to the end of an access trail and take it up to the ridge-top and in. Pretty easy, really."

"How wide is the access trail?"

"Ah, geez, let me try to remember. I came down on a horse, so it was wide enough for that. Without the sidecar, the Indian could get up it, I bet. Hmm. But the trail goes close enough to one of the portals that someone might hear it."

"Portals?"

"That's what I call their air vents. As opposed to the actual gates into the main tunnels. I got out one of those from the stable, with Honey, the horse I rode. Anyway, one of the portals would be where we actually enter the Labyrinth. And the one near the access trail might be used to watch the main access road, so someone in there could hear us. Would for sure, the way the Indian sounds now."

"I'm confused. Let's get out your maps."

The maps helped clear up his confusion, and they also gave us an estimate of our task in hauling that gold around.

“Will, I’m thinking the thing to do is to get us a cart of some kind, one we can take down in there, load up, and wheel out. It’ll make those forty trips a lot easier. And maybe fewer trips, if we can load it up more.”

I nodded. “We’ll have to measure the width of the tunnels, especially turns and so on, to see how big a cart we can fit. But that’s a good idea. And maybe we can create an intermediate cache somewhere between the gold room and wherever we need to get the gold to for transport, so we can do a couple of trips, or more, a night.”

“Say! I read in Major Bernstein’s report that you saw a radio antenna up on the ridge out there. Do we get anywhere near that?”

I pointed to the local area map. “Yep. It’s right about here. We have to go right by it every trip.”

“Hmm. That gives me a chance to have a good look at it. That could be important.”

It turned out that the next full moon was only a couple of nights away, so we took the Indian to a local garage that afternoon to see what could be done to muffle its engine noise. The mechanic there, after admiring the machine, was dumbfounded that we’d want it quieter. Weren’t motorcycles *supposed* to be noisy? he asked. But after some persuasion, he allowed as to how he could weld a small muffler made for a car onto the exhausts. It spoiled the Indian’s looks, and Steve and I agreed to have it removed when our operation was completed, but it did the trick.

That’s how, two nights later just before dark, we turned off the highway west of Carrizozo onto the dirt road I’d come up on Honey. We stopped to check, and the saddle and bridle were still where I’d hidden them, so we planned to pick them up on the way back. Then we headed out across the desert toward the Lilies’ place with the dirt track lit by what Steve called this year’s early Harvest Moon.

Although I was both nervous and keyed up about the whole thing, it turned out to be routine—almost as routine as all those trips to haul the gold out wound up being. But more on that later.

We found a place to hide the Indian at the point where the southeastern access trail joined the road across the desert, and hiked in. Up on the ridge top, Steve had a long, careful look at that antenna, and then, after I showed him around, we headed down the northeastern trail to the access portal I’d used so many times. Nothing had changed, and, well before midnight, we were inside the Labyrinth’s northeastern portal, the one with the big door that I thought of as the Lilies’ emergency exit.

It surprised me that, after only a month or so, it didn’t feel like home any more.

* * *

If it didn’t feel like home, it did feel familiar to me, but not, of course, to Steve. After about fifteen minutes of winding our way toward the gold room, I felt a tug on my waist, so I stopped.

“You actually lived in this place?” He was whispering.

“For a couple of years, yeah. You get used to it.”

We’d brought what Steve called “flashlights,” hand-lanterns powered by batteries, but we were trying not to use them so as not to attract attention. I was therefore guiding him in the dark most of the time. I’d tied a short length of rope to my belt for just that purpose, and he hung on for dear life.

Down several of those curved corridors we went, and, as I had on other occasions, I noticed that it was getting warmer and warmer. I could feel through the soles of my shoes that the floor was getting

hot. Eventually, we came to a locked door, and Steve took out his lock-pick set and went to work. It took him almost as long as it had taken me with my piece of wire, something that pleased me greatly, for some reason.

Once inside, we used our lights only briefly, to look for the stack of burlap bags I'd seen before. By putting a rolled-up bag at the base of the door, we had the room sealed off from light, so I used the switch on the wall. Steve gasped as he saw all of the artifacts.

"Holy Mother of God!" He was still whispering. "And here I thought you were exaggerating. Forgive me."

Neither of us wanted to hang around very long, so Steve quickly found a small golden eagle, one of those fetishes, I've since learned, and I hauled down a package of currency, one the size of a big book—it reminded me of the dictionary in the Lilies' classroom—from a top shelf. It had a big "20" written on the outside, meaning, as I'd learned from my previous experience, when I'd taken a package that said "10", that it contained packets of twenty-dollar bills, each tied with a bit of string. If the other package I'd borrowed was any indication, there were about four thousand of those bills in there. There were many such packages, even some with "50" or "100" on them, and some of the packages were larger in size. I learned later that despite the standardization of currency into its smaller size in 1929, there were still larger-size notes in circulation—and the Lilies seemed to have a significant number of them.

After that, I put the burlap bag back on the pile and we found our way out to the northeastern portal. The moon was lighting up the Valley in a most lovely fashion, and the fresh, cool air tasted good, especially to Steve, I could tell.

"So, we get to do that forty times, only carrying a hundred pounds each on the way out? I just can't wait." He sounded intimidated.

"Maybe we can carry a hundred pounds each and put another two hundred on a cart. Then it's only twenty trips."

"Oh. Well, then. Let's get right at it." But he slapped me on the back to let me know he was just joking.

Back up on the ridge top, he inspected that antenna again, this time even more closely, and then we headed back down to where we'd hidden the Indian. It started right up, quietly, and we motored back to the highway. There, we retrieved the saddle and bridle I'd stashed, and we cruised back into town about three in the morning.

I was tired but too excited to be sleepy. Still, my cot felt wonderful.

Another thing that felt wonderful was that I had another \$80,000 of currency to augment what was left, which was most of it, of the \$40,000 I'd borrowed previously. Somehow, though, my increased indebtedness to the Lilies didn't bother me at all.

We both slept late, and, when he came in about ten, Steve took me across the street and introduced me to the concept of "brunch." It felt quite civilized, and I even offered to pay. He, though, suggested that we check out that currency first.

The Bank of Carrizozo was just down the street, and he took me there, along with three of the new bills plus three of my older tens. At the bank, he asked for the manager and was introduced, instead, to the owner, a Johann Schmidt, who'd founded the bank some years before. Steve gave Schmidt a little song-and-dance about getting the bills from a suspicious character to whom he'd sold a car and said he was worried about authenticity. Mr. Schmidt took the bills and us into his office, pulled out a magnifying glass, and looked them over carefully before pronouncing them genuine. And then, of course, he proceeded with a pitch about opening a savings account.

On the walk back to our building, Steve was thoughtful. “You know, I’m glad you didn’t mention those packages of cash to Colonel Wright. I didn’t take an inventory, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s as much cash there as that gold is worth. How much do you think there is in that package you got last night.”

He whistled when I told him. “That means that the packages of fifties are worth, what, two hundred Gs and the packages of hundreds are worth four hundred Gs. And there were lots of those packages. Will, I try to be a good, honest citizen, but I have to tell you, there’s an awful lot of temptation there.”

I offered to share my bounty, but he demurred. “No, that wouldn’t be fair. You’re taking what you figure you earned, or what they owe you, is what you told me. If I took their money, that’d be stealing. But, tell you what. I’ll be glad to let you buy me lunch and dinner now and then.”

“Happy to, Steve. And, you know, I really don’t need to get paid by CIC.”

“Oh, yes, you do. That’s part of the fairness thing. You’re working for CIC and they need to pay you what you’re worth. I’d say, actually, that’s a lot, so far. So, given what your paycheck is going to be, you’re a real bargain for our dear Uncle Sam.” He slapped me on the back again, and I was glad I’d done all that physical exercise to get in shape. “Now, the next thing is for us to get that little fetish I swiped over to our friend Colonel Wright, to see what he does with it. We need a plan.”

The plan turned out to be that I’d take the fetish over to Socorro on my afternoon run along with Steve’s report on our recon mission, give both to Wright personally, and suggest to him that he send the fetish up to the Albuquerque CIC office for testing. Steve knew a guy there who would watch for it, and if it didn’t show up then we’d know that Wright was a crook. It sounded good to me.

I made the courier run a little early that day, so that I could get back to Carrizozo before too late. Returning with new orders, mail and so on after office hours worked for Steve, but sometimes he needed to interact with other offices that same day. So the earlier I made my return run, the better, it seemed. That, in fact was the beginning of a discussion between us about the timing of those runs, although, for reasons that will become clear, that discussion sort of faded out.

Anyway, that day, after delivering the fetish and the report to Colonel Wright as we’d discussed, I got back about four-thirty. It was a good thing, too, as there was important news in the mail. It seemed that the *Jornada* site had been selected for whatever that important, and super-secret, test was going to be. Our CI role was suddenly ramped up significantly.

And that also put the pressure on us to get Colonel Wright’s other orders completed, moving that gold. Orders being orders, those came first unless countermanded. But because no one else seemed to know about them, there was no one to countermand them, and it was going to make for conflicts if new orders with respect to that test-site decision came through. The sooner we could get that gold moved, the better.

“We’ve got some work to do, Will. Hope you’re up for a few long nights.

* * *

It took us a week. If those physical conditioning workouts I’d developed for myself before—the jumping jacks and the running and all—were strenuous, moving that gold was downright punishing. Steve took my suggestion, which I wished I’d never thought of, and on each trip had us each carry a hundred pounds in Army rucksacks while we put another two hundred onto a cart he came up with from somewhere. I pulled, he pushed, and all the while the gold on our backs tried to squish us into the dust. I was glad for those burlap bags—we wrapped the artifacts in them for the transfer and used them over and over. If I could manage the trails and corridors in the dark before that, well, afterwards I could have

done it in my sleep. And that was our routine—work all night, eat a huge breakfast, sleep, and eat a huge dinner before going back for more hauling.

But we got it done. After the week from hell—or, given the heat down there, maybe *in* hell—the entire contents of that Coronado treasure room were hidden carefully in a jumble of rocks out near the desert dirt road, awaiting pickup somehow.

Meantime, we'd neglected the Socorro courier runs and just about everything else. I didn't have anything to take to Socorro the first time after we were finished with the gold, but I sure had a lot to bring back. Among it all was a note from Colonel Wright to the effect that he'd meet us in the agreed place, meaning that desert road, with a truck three nights hence. We were under his orders to be there.

Orders being orders, and the Army being the Army, that's what we did. We took the Indian out there and arrived near the place where we'd cached the artifacts and the currency—I *said* we cleaned that room out—and hid ourselves as best we could to await the arrival of the good Colonel Wright. We made a little bet about whether he'd bring a crew or just himself—and we had to flip to see who wound up with the 'crew' option.

It was around ten-thirty when we finally heard an engine noise in the distance, one that evolved to a combined rumble and whine of gears as it approached. Its driver had the lights all off, so we could see only a shadow in the dark as it crawled along the road. When it came close enough, Steve signaled it with a flashlight, and it stopped to let him approach.

"It's over here, Colonel," Steve announced, as the driver's door opened and a blob-like figure climbed down to the ground.

The truck, what Steve later described to me as the Army's G535 prime mover cargo truck, a six-ton six-by-six, was huge. Then again, it had some four tons of cargo to haul. Except those four tons first had to be loaded.

Steve, who had won the coin flip and didn't have to take "crew," also won the bet. That fit with the fact that Steve hadn't heard from his friend in Albuquerque about the fetish that was supposed to have been sent there for testing. In any case, we were going to have to load the stuff ourselves.

Fortunately, the truck had a winch that allowed the cargo to be lifted, somewhat unceremoniously, over the tailgate. That made it all much, much easier, and, in a couple of hours, we had it all on board, carefully packed away. Still, Steve and I were sweating hard despite the cool night air, and Colonel Wright, who had been operating the winch and packing the artifacts, was beginning to melt into a puddle.

Then Steve sprang his surprise.

"Colonel, we didn't mention it before, sir, but it seems that the people who run the show here must have sold off some of the gold in the past, or maybe they've got the most successful ranching operation in all of New Mexico. Or something. It seems that the room inside there with the gold also had packages of what turn out to be cash. Lots of it. We assumed that you would want to pass it to headquarters along with the gold. Would that be correct, sir?"

"Huh, er, did you say bundles of cash, Sergeant?" Wright was dripping wet and bedraggled, breathing hard and all red in the face.

"Yessir. The individual bundles are about the size of, oh, big books, maybe like big family Bibles, wrapped in brown paper, but there are lots of them. Some, apparently, with big bills. We piled them all up, separately from the gold, and the pile of currency is about the size of a big bale of hay."

Wright was panting, trying to get his breath. “A hay bale of cash? Big bills? Sergeant, we need to load that onto this truck. Let’s get to it.”

So Steve and I started carrying the cash, several of those packages at a time, from where we’d stashed them in the rocks to the truck, and I followed Steve’s lead of handing them up to Wright over the truck’s tailgate. On one of our trips, when he passed me going the other way, Steve told me to hurry up. So we really got moving there for a while.

We were almost finished when I understood Steve’s strategy. I’d just handed Wright an especially large armful of those packages, many with the “100” label.

“Looks like hundreds, Colonel.” I tried to be casual about it.

He took the load I’d passed to him and then tried to lift and turn it enough to see the numbers, which he’d figured out by then.

And he made a sort of gurgling noise, dropped the armload, and grabbed one of the truck’s canopy supports with one hand and his chest with the other. His panting grew louder, and faster, and he looked at me in terror.

His next noise wasn’t gurgling, but an exhalation of pain, and he pitched off the tail end of the truck onto the ground, four feet or so, landing on his head a bit off kilter. I heard a snap.

Steve came up with his next load of packages, dumped them in the back of the truck, and looked at Colonel Wright, lying there on the ground. I noticed an unpleasant smell.

“Damn, Will. What did you say to him?”

“Just that it looked like I had an armful of hundreds. Geez, I’m sorry. What happened?”

“I guess it was just too much excitement for his overloaded heart to take. If the heart attack didn’t kill him, the fall sure did. I heard the snap of his neck.”

“He’s dead? Geez! What’s that smell.”

He looked at me in a funny way. “Oh, yeah. I forget. You have holes in your knowledge. Ha! A knowledge-hole about an ass-hole! What happened is that his sphincter let loose.”

“His what?”

“His sphincter. That’s the muscle that holds your asshole closed, so you can control when you go, as long as you’re alive, at least.”

“Eww.”

“Yeah.” He looked around and paid special attention to where the truck was parked relative to the rocks we’d hidden the gold among and in, and I picked up the dropped bundles of cash.

“Will, it looks to me like, if we dig a shallow grave about right here,” he waved at a patch of ground next to the rocks, “we could roll him into it, pile the dirt onto it, and then move some of these rocks onto the top. I can’t imagine that anyone would ever notice.”

“You mean just leave him here?”

“Buried, yeah. Can you think of anything better? We need to get his uniform off, though, and all identification. His dogtags.”

“His what?”

He flipped out from under his shirt a couple of little metal tags that were hanging on a chain around his neck. “These. You don’t have them, but he probably does. ID tags.”

“And we have to undress him?”

“Just his uniform. Not his underwear.”

“Well, still. Eww.”

* * *

It didn't take us very long, and I didn't mind digging because Steve handled the other business, the uniform thing. Dead people weren't part of my young experience at that point, and I was having a lot of trouble with it all. Still, the guy had dropped dead from, basically, greed, so I couldn't be too upset about it.

We finished that little chore in time for us to get back to the office in Carrizozo by about three in the morning—Steve drove the G535, I the Indian—but our night was not yet over.

“We're going to see if we can get this stuff into the back room before the town wakes up,” Steve announced. “We can trade off with the unpacking and the moving.”

We gave it our all, and we just made it. It was actually becoming light in the east, and there were early-riser waking-up noises here and there in town, but we moved that entire truck-load into the back room of the Carrizozo recruiting center by dawn. Before we both collapsed, Steve managed to maneuver that huge truck out to the street in front of the center, making it look more like a normal Army thing, rather than a late-night delivery. Everyone in that part of New Mexico was pretty used to Army things that would, in any other time than war-time, seem extremely weird, so a huge truck in front of the Army building was no big deal just then.

And we both went to sleep, then and there, me on my cot, Steve just sprawled out on the floor.

Hey, *you* try moving four tons of anything *twice* in a night and see how you feel.

We woke up a bit after noon and, first thing, at least after we'd washed up a bit, we walked over to the diner and had both breakfast and lunch, back-to-back, as Mr. Apodaca watched in amazement. I was more than happy to leave him a twenty dollar bill for it all without even asking for change.

“OK, Will.” We were back in the office, and Steve was sitting at his desk, ready to be a Master Sergeant again. “I don't think I want more nights like that one. Shooting people and getting shot at, maybe. But the pack horse thing, no way.”

“I don't know about you, Steve, but I'm sore all over. What now?”

“We're doing the courier run, you in the Indian and me in the truck. The story is that Colonel Wright showed up here, discovered that he needed to be in Albuquerque soonest, ordered me to return the truck, and jumped on a north-bound train.” He smiled. “Last night, I found paperwork in it that says the truck is from the Socorro motor pool. I'm just a lowly sergeant, and I do what officers tell me. I don't know what happened to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Wright after he walked off in the direction of the train depot.”

“Sounds like you've got it figured out.”

“I hope so. The trip west is going to be slow, because that truck isn't meant for speed. You need to watch me in your mirrors and not run away from me, OK? Or, better yet, just follow me.”

“Maybe I should drive it.”

He broke into laughter. “No offense, Will, but you’d be a disaster in that thing. It’s a beast. Maybe you’d do OK after a couple of days of lessons, but not if you just jumped into it. Hell, making the transmission work practically needs an advanced college degree.”

“So, we convoy over to Socorro, you turn in the truck and act innocent, and we bring back the mail and so on. What about everything in the back room there?”

“I gave that a lot of thought on that long, slow drive across the desert last night. And that’s why we worked so hard to unload the stuff before dawn. See, this is an Army building, signs all over it and so on. Also, there have been other Army deliveries at odd times of the day. And everybody knows it isn’t an ammo depot or anything that might house interesting stuff, it’s just a recruiting center. All that’s here are enlistment forms. So I’ve persuaded myself that the gold and cash are really quite safe here. Hidden in plain sight, so to speak.”

I thought about that carefully, and, even though it seemed risky, I couldn’t think of a better idea. Well, not one that we could implement right away.

“If you say so, Steve. But you aren’t planning to have it here forever, are you?”

“No, no. I’m going to figure out who to call and have come and look at it and decide what to do. Some officer or other. See, even though I’m a Master Sergeant, I’m just an enlisted grunt. It’s the officers who make decisions about stuff like what to do about four million in gold and maybe that same amount in cash.” He stared off into the distance. “However, I do think that all that work we put in this week and especially last night deserves a bonus over and above the Army pay scale. And it’s not possible that anyone will miss a couple of packages of that cash, is it?”

Impeccable logic, I thought, impossible to argue with. And I was actually glad to hear that he was going to reward himself, although I really didn’t want to know with how much. I certainly had all I needed already, but, when it turned out that he urged a package of fives on me, I couldn’t turn it down.

He did his best to catch up on what paperwork there was, including what had been in my last courier run, and then we set out for Socorro, at a much slower speed than I was used to. It turned out that we were supposed to drive slowly, or at least the civilians were, to conserve fuel and especially tires. My zooming around on that Indian was decidedly unpatriotic, I learned later. But I’d become so used to higher speeds that the trip to Socorro behind that huge truck seemed to take forever.

* * *

Nine

Finally, after what seemed an interminably slow trip to me, we completed the west-bound run to Socorro, turned the truck in, and headed back east, with me in the sidecar once again. It actually felt like old times. And the girls on the street-corner on our way out of town were especially enthusiastic with their greeting when they saw that Steve was driving.

I thought for a minute and remembered that it was Thursday, meaning that Steve would be making the run alone tomorrow. I wasn’t sure, but, I thought, maybe that explains their enthusiasm. I had no idea why that would be.

Back in Carrizozo for the evening, he allowed as to how he wasn’t going to worry too much about all the mail and so on, but he was going to scan it over first, just in case. And nothing really got his attention except for one set of papers.

“Will, looks like we’re going to be moving over to Socorro.”

“Huh?”

“New orders here. Because the *Jornada* site was picked for this big test of whatever they’re planning, they think that Socorro is going to become a hotbed of spies, or something like that. Something about how the roads out there make it easier to get to Socorro than to here, so all the personnel will use Socorro for leave. They’re consolidating CIC activities there.”

“But Lieutenant Colonel Wright is in command there. Oh. Wait. Er ...”

“Correct. But they don’t know about the ‘Er’ part yet. When they do, though, they’ll just replace him, and probably with someone higher up. And the town is going to get full of civilians and Army people, and housing is going to be tough to find. I think you should come with me for the weekend tomorrow, and we’ll see what we can rustle up.”

“But, well, what about ... ?” I pointed toward the back room.

“Same plan. Leave it here until I can figure out who to get here to deal with it. I did my part, based on orders from my superior at the time, Colonel Wright. Written orders that I can show anyone who asks. Now I’m passing the buck. So to speak.” He grinned with mischief.

Even though reading Shakespeare had taught me to appreciate puns, I almost missed that one. After a minute, though, it dawned on me.

“Did you really say that?”

“Say what?” His look was pure innocence, so what could I do?

After making sure to lock our building up as tight as we could, and closing all the blinds and so on, we left for Socorro that Friday afternoon a bit early. I’d packed a weekend bag, probably more than I needed, but, then, I didn’t know where I was going to sleep. Steve seemed already to know about his situation, though. He told me he’d send me back for more of my, and his, possessions if need be.

And even though we’d been to Socorro the day before, it seemed busier than ever that Friday. Maybe I was looking at it with new eyes, or maybe it *was* busier. There certainly were plenty of “No Vacancy” signs on the rooming houses. And because the place was a sort of college town—the New Mexico School of Mines had been there since 1889—there were plenty of those.

Naturally, we stopped in at the Army building. Steve had labored hard all afternoon to catch up on paperwork that he’d been ignoring for several days, and, with all the changes in the works, he needed several briefings as well. I was invited to join a couple of those, in which I learned that Major Bernstein’s report on me was making quite the impression at CIC. People were getting the idea, particularly in light of the *Jornada*’s selection as the test site, that the Lilies might be worth scrutiny.

It wasn’t until after six that we were finished with all that, a time that I normally contemplated supper, but Steve insisted that we find a place to stay first. And, oddly, he was nervous about it. Instead of heading out somewhere on the Indian, he guided me over to the town square, where he had us sit down on a bench for a chat. Why, I was wondering, couldn’t we chat in the cafeteria with big trays of food in front of us? So I asked him.

“Not a bad idea, Will, but I need this conversation to be between us. With nobody eavesdropping.”

“Why? Is there some CIC thing involved with where we sleep?”

“Not at all. It’s just ... OK, well, see, I’m not sure how much you know about this. But when I come over here on weekends, I stay at Effie’s.”

“Is that one of the boarding houses we’ve been seeing?”

“Not exactly. Uh, remember those girls who always wave when the Indian goes by that corner south of town?”

“Sure. They wave at you and at me, too. They probably think it’s you, though.”

“That’s quite possible, as I’m friends with most of them. *Good* friends, if you know what I mean.”

I thought for a minute. “I don’t. Know what you mean, I mean.”

“Ah, crap. OK, well, those girls are what we call ‘prostitutes.’ They sell their bodies. They have sex with people for money.”

“So?” I still didn’t really know what sex was, but I had no reason to think of it as a big deal the way that Steve seemed to be implying.

He looked surprised. “Well, that’s the way I feel about it, actually. But most people, civilians in society, I mean, they don’t think of it that way. They think that it’s some kind of sin. There are even laws against doing it. It’s an important thing to a lot of them.”

“Oh. So those girls are outlaws?”

“Sort of. Around here, thankfully, the police sort of ignore it, though. Anyway, the girls work at Effie’s. Effie’s is what’s called a ‘brothel,’ a place run by a ‘madam,’ and that’d be Effie in this case, where the girls ply their trade, selling sex.”

“Oh. And you stay there. It sounds, well, busy.”

He laughed. “Sometimes it is. And sometimes it’s real quiet. You’ll see.”

“You’re taking me there?”

“The Army thinks you’re eighteen, and if you show your ID card at Effie’s, and they’ll probably ask you to see it, they’ll think you’re eighteen. So, as far as everyone is concerned, it’s quite OK for you to be there.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that would be an issue, but if it’s OK, it’s OK. The thing is, though, it’d probably help if I knew what sex really is. I’m afraid I don’t. Does it hurt?”

His jaw dropped and he stared at me for what seemed like a full minute. Then he groaned as he slapped his forehead, stared at the sky, and whispered, “Why me, Lord?”

* * *

Steve decided that he needed to think things over, and, besides, it was time to eat. So we walked over to the cafeteria, where we made a point of getting our money’s worth. Unlike my late-morning lunch visit previously, the place was crowded, and I could tell that we’d never have had the possibility of a private conversation. I certainly overheard what all the people around me were talking about.

As we were polishing off second desserts, Steve, sitting across the long table from me, looked up. “I know what. I won’t tell you about it. Instead, you can just learn by doing.”

“Doing what?” I was so absorbed in the dish of ice cream that I’d forgotten the pre-supper conversation.

He leaned far out over the table and beckoned me to do the same.

“Sex.” He used what I’ve learned is called a “stage-whisper.”

So I stage-whispered back, “I can learn by doing sex with you?”

He looked hugely surprised, shocked, even, and sat back into his chair, except it was a bench and he almost fell off backwards. When he re-established his balance, he looked around nervously at our neighboring diners. None seemed to have heard, however, and he seemed relieved.

“No. Not on your life. Are you finished eating?”

I was, so we took our trays of dirty dishes to the window into the kitchen and left.

“OK. You can learn by doing with one of the girls at Effie’s. Definitely not me. See, Will, sex is a thing between men and women. At least for most people. It certainly is for me, and it probably is for you. We’ll see what you think in the morning. Let’s go find the Indian, and we can get over there.”

Effie’s was a large, nondescript house, although one with fancy decorations on the outside that I was told are called “Victorian,” on the south end of town, near that street corner where the girls had been waving at us. Inside the front door was an old-fashioned parlor, which led to a sizeable living room. The parlor had a stand-up desk on one side, and at it stood a woman with what looked to me to be a lot of paint on her face. Her hair, a sort of reddish brown, was piled high on her head, which helped disguise the fact that she wasn’t very tall, about to my chin. She was probably about Steve’s age, which was a lot older than I, and obviously a good friend of his.

“Ah, my hunk of real man! I was wondering what had happened to you.”

“Oh, I’m here, Effie. Just a little late this week. Busy tonight?”

“It seems to be getting busier and busier these days. But that just lets us raise our prices.” She smiled, showing white teeth behind the wide slash of red paint on her lips.

“Well, I hope you can accommodate a friend of mine. He needs a place to stay.” Steve turned my way, and I knew that was my cue.

I’ve said how being nice and polite worked so well with the Matrons, and with other people, too, so I used that tactic with Effie. She ate it up.

“Good evening, ma’am, I’m William White, Will to my friends, and you look like a friend to me. Steve tells me you have a nice place here, and I’m hoping I’ll be able to stay. We’ve been reassigned over here in Socorro. And, well, ma’am, the rooming houses all seem to be full.”

Effie sashayed out from behind her little stand-up desk and over to Steve, where she put her arms around his waist.

“Well, now, you didn’t tell me about that, big man. Oooh! Does that mean I get you *every* night now?”

“I think you know how I’d feel about that, Effie.” As he kissed her on the forehead, he looked over her scalp at me in a perplexed way. “And that was the next thing I wanted to talk about. We need to live here now. In Socorro, at least.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want you living anywhere else.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his chin. “Now, Will, what are we going to do with you?”

Steve whispered something in her ear and her eyes got big.

“Really? It’s been a long time since a virgin came through that front door. But I think I know what to do about that. Will, tonight’s taken care of, but in the long run, you’ll need a room of your own. I’m afraid about all I have is space up in the attic. It’ll need some cleaning up, but it should work.” She looked me up and down. “My, but you’re a tall one. You’ll have to watch your head up there, except in the middle.”

I turned on the charm, wondering what was in store for me that first night. “I’m sure it will be fine, ma’am. I’m just staying in the storage room of Sergeant Jennings’ office in Carrizozo now. I’m sure I can make whatever you have quite cozy. And I think that, most of the time, Sergeant Jennings and I are going to be pretty busy, ma’am, so we won’t be making a nuisance of ourselves around here.”

She giggled, a sort of little twitter. “Oh, I can’t imagine you’d ever be a nuisance. Now, come in here with me. I want to introduce you to Hannah.”

In the living room there were a half-dozen young women—too old to be ‘girls’ really, but much younger than Effie—sitting around in house robes in various colors with all sorts of ruffles. One was staring out a window and smoking a cigarette, a couple were reading, two were involved in a card game of some kind, and one was sewing, darning a sock. They all looked up as Effie walked in, and in a subtle way they shifted around to pose in what looked like rehearsed positions.

“At ease, girls. An old friend just brought in a new friend. Hannah, let me introduced you to Will. Will works with my friend Steve, and both of them are going to be here quite a bit now.”

Hannah turned out to be the young woman who was darning the sock, and she put it aside and stood up. She was a bit older than I, but not much, and almost my height. I could tell, despite the robe, that she was considerably curvier than Clarisse had been, with much longer legs. And, under a head of wavy blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, she had her face painted up, too, but not so much as Effie did. She cocked her head sideways, looked me over, and smiled.

“Pleased to meetcha, Will. You like girls with blonde hair?” She was chewing on something, I could see, as Effie leaned over and whispered in her ear.

Just as Effie’s had, Hannah’s eyes got big. “You don’t say! I’ll be damned. Will, I think we’re going to have a very pleasant time. Want to come upstairs with me?”

She deposited the wad of whatever had been in her mouth into an ashtray and took my hand, pulling me gently toward the staircase. For some reason I couldn’t fathom, I felt those old stirrings acting up.

“Hey, Will?” Steve was standing with an arm around Effie’s shoulders. “It doesn’t hurt.”

* * *

Except for my right arm, I woke up the next morning sometime after dawn, yet still early. My arm was still asleep, almost numb, because Hannah was lying with her head on it, snoring softly. I couldn’t tell the time because I could see my pants, with my watch in a pocket, on a chair across the room. And I had to pee.

I managed to slip out from under Hannah, get out of the bed without having it squeak at all—and certainly not like it had squeaked almost all night—and dress without waking her. I remembered the door squeaked, too, so I applied pressure to the hinges as a way to minimize that.

My business taken care of in the bathroom down the hall, I descended to the first floor, where wonderful smells were coming from a room off the living room. There, in the kitchen, were Effie and Steve, plus three of the young women I’d seen the evening before.

“Morning, Will.” Steve was in high spirits, it seemed. “Hope you slept well.”

“Not much, but well.” I couldn’t hide a bit of a grin.

Effie spoke up. “I hope you enjoyed yourself, then.”

“Well, ma’am, if I’m going to stay awake most of the night, I’d rather be doing that than playing pack horse and hauling tons of stuff around, that’s for sure.” I looked around and made sniffing noises. “Boy, something smells *good*. I’m hungry enough to eat a whole cow.”

That got the attention of the young women, who began fussing over me like mother hens. I was poured a cup of coffee almost immediately, then seated at the table where Effie and Steve were, and, miraculously, a plate of eggs and sausage, with green chile on the side, and tortillas appeared. I ate for a while.

About the time I’d cleaned my plate, into the kitchen came Hannah, yawning and stretching, but composed-looking, more beautiful, to me, at least, than ever. And, in the daylight, as in the candle-light the night before, she looked much better without her face paint, what she’d told me was called “makeup.” I’d asked her to scrub it all off after it got smeared early on.

I then watched an interesting little pantomime. As the three young women looked at Hannah, she raised both hands with all but her thumbs spread wide and mouthed at them “eight times.” One of the women pointed at me and mouthed back “him?” And Hannah shook her head, pointed at herself, and mouthed “me.” And they, almost all together, squealed and burst into giggles as I tried not to blush.

Blushing about such things was something I learned quickly wasn’t worth worrying about in that household. Even my first night, when Hannah asked me if I was indeed a virgin and then had to clarify for me what that meant, she worked hard to overcome my natural shyness.

“Will, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, everyone starts out that way. Everyone has a first time. The trick is to have a *good* first time. We have a saying here about that: Virginity is an illness that everyone is born with, but its cure is easy, foolproof, and, if properly administered, great fun.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“Just look at me.”

And, wearing nothing under it, she’d dropped her robe on the floor. Those stirrings of mine kicked into high gear, and my cure was soon underway.

Although Hannah sort of latched onto me at breakfast when she came down, I didn’t want to be rude. “Ladies, Effie introduced me last night as ‘Will,’ and that’s short for William White. I’m very pleased to meet all of you, but I’m afraid I didn’t get names.”

The shortest of the three, a plump young woman with remarkable curves, said, “I’m Paula, and this is Cindy and Kathy.”

The latter two nodded at me in turn, then Kathy spoke up. “Does this mean that you want Hannah to share you with us?”

It took me a few seconds to understand her meaning, and my brain went into overtime trying to concoct a suitable answer. Finally, I thought of something.

“Well, Kathy, as attractive and intriguing as that sounds, I think I’d like to make sure that Hannah has, er, completed my lessons first and that it’s OK with her.”

It must have been a good answer, as Steve raised his coffee cup in a kind of toast. And Hannah, who had taken my arm somewhat possessively, squeezed harder.

Steve broke a brief silence. “Will, I’m happy to report that Effie and I have agreed on a suitable role for us here. It will help keep our costs down, and it will help Effie with an issue she has to deal with sometimes.”

His mention of costs recalled to my mind one of the conversations I'd had with Hannah several hours earlier. I'd decided I wanted to settle up whatever financial matters there were as soon as I could—Steve, after all, had told me that these girls did this for money.

“Hannah, I don't want to offend you, but no one explained to me about prices here.”

She looked surprised and a little sad. “Well, all night is twenty-five dollars. I hope you're going to stay all night?”

I got up, walked over to my pants, and took five tens out of my wallet.

“I'm curious. How does this work? Do you keep all twenty-five?”

“Oh, no. Only half. The rest goes to Effie, for room and board and everything. She sometimes calls it 'overhead.' So I get half, unless you give me a tip.”

“What's a tip?”

“Something extra because you think I've been really good. I don't keep all that either, it gets split up among all of us. The other girls get a share of my tips, and I get a share of theirs.”

I laid the five ten dollar bills on the bedside table beside her.

“Wow, Will, that's a huge tip. Usually, for a night, it'd be a five or maybe a ten at the most.”

“OK, I'll remember that. But this first time is extra special for me. And, besides, I'm not done with you yet.” I dove under the sheet, making her squeal.

I tried to remember if that had been time number three or number four.

“Here's the plan.” Steve's voice pulled me back to reality. “You're going to make a place to sleep for yourself up in the attic, and I'll be staying down here somewhere.”

Effie poked him in the ribs. “Whattaya mean, 'somewhere'? You going roaming around, big boy?”

He grinned and looked at her. “OK, I'll be staying with Effie. But we don't get charged the usual rates, because we're doing some on-call work for her. As muscle. See, now and then a customer will get rowdy, maybe making trouble with other customers in the living room or maybe treating one of the girls badly. Our job will be to, ah, persuade that customer to behave himself or, perhaps, punish him for his transgressions if he doesn't learn the first time. With any means necessary. Make sense?”

I thought about it for a minute. “I guess you can't just call the cops, huh, Effie?”

She laughed. “Not on your life. They leave us alone, but, well, that leaves us alone. I suspect that if the house caught on fire, the fire department would come, but that's because they wouldn't want the fire to spread. Most folks in this town would be fine if the place burned down with us in it.”

“Steve, I'm fine with that arrangement, especially if you can give me some lessons. Don't you Army guys know hand-to-hand combat or something like that?”

Steve looked at Effie. “He skipped basic training, but I can fix that. You're going to have the two best bouncers in the southwest, Effie dear.”

By then it was getting on toward time for the Army office to start its day, so Steve and I got cleaned up and headed downtown. We had a brief opportunity to talk on the walk from where we parked the Indian to the office.

“Steve, I need to tell you about last night.”

“Will, c'mon. Gentlemen don't kiss and tell.”

“Huh? Oh. No, I don’t mean tell you about Hannah. I mean about something else. See, I went to the bathroom down the hall from Hannah’s room at one point, fairly early, and I overheard a bit of a conversation in one of the other rooms. And it got my attention, despite all the other noises up there, because they were speaking German.”

That brought him up short. He stood and stared at me.

“Did you catch what they were saying?”

“Not much of it, because I didn’t want to stand in the hall in just my pants and eavesdrop. But what I heard was a man’s voice and a woman’s voice, and something about a new, uh, installation, I think the word means, and new customers that might be able to provide information.”

“Man, Will, you’re a regular counter-intelligence bloodhound. Do you know which girl’s room that was?”

“I know which room, but I don’t know which girl. But she speaks German.”

“Yeah, but I bet she keeps that quiet from everyone else. Oh! That reminds me. Don’t tell anyone we’re living at Effie’s. It’ll just make for trouble if you do. If anyone asks, be vague about it. If they push, be offended. We can use the Army office here as our mailing address and so forth.”

“It’s too bad that Effie’s is so unrespectable. I like that place.”

He slapped me on the back again, something I was getting used to even if it did almost knock me down every time. “I feel that way, too. Anyway, we’ve got to deal with CIC now. We’re going to need to talk to an officer about that German conversation. I wonder if CIC has replaced our dear, departed Colonel Wright yet?”

* * *

The answer was “not exactly.” Instead, Colonel Wright’s boss, (full) Colonel Granger Sherhold had arrived from Albuquerque for the duration. Duration of what wasn’t clear, but that he’d arrived and taken over was.

As we walked in the door, the front-desk corporal flagged us down.

“Sergeant Jennings? You and Mr. White are to report to the Colonel immediately.”

“Corporal, I heard that Colonel Wright has turned up missing.”

“Yessir, that’s true. He still is. I meant that you need to report to Colonel Sherhold. He’s come down from Albuquerque, Master Sergeant.”

Steve was straightening his tie as we were ushered into the Colonel’s office.

“Sir! Master Sergeant Stephen Jennings reporting, sir! Welcome to Socorro, sir. This is my aide, Mr. William White, Special Agent, sir.”

“At ease, Sergeant, and good to meet you, Mr. White. Take seats, both of you.”

He rummaged in an “Out” box on the top of his desk and pulled out a folder, opened it, and read for a couple of minutes. Then he looked at Steve.

“Sergeant Jennings, what do you suppose happened to Lieutenant Colonel Wright? He seems to be missing.”

Steve sat up extra straight. “Yes sir. I just heard that, sir. And all I can tell you is that the last thing I heard from him was that he was going to catch a late train to Albuquerque. Then he walked off toward the depot. This was in Carrizozo, sir.”

“And you drove the six-by-six he checked out from the motor pool back here the next day, I understand.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what do you suppose he was doing with a *six-ton six-by-six* in Carrizozo, Sergeant?”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know, sir. It puzzled me, too. I’ve got an order from him, right here, sir.” Steve pulled out a folded piece of paper from an inside pocket.

The Colonel unfolded it and read. “What’s this ‘agreed place,’ Sergeant?”

“In Carrizozo, sir. We’d spoken on the telephone, a new scrambler unit that was installed for me, the day before. Or maybe it was two days before.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“Yes, sir. It’s very odd to me. For one thing, officers don’t generally drive around in G535s, sir. It’s not very dignified, and it takes special training. For another, I doubt there’s six tons of anything in Carrizozo that the Army wants. Sir.”

“Well, if you hear anything more, you be sure to let me know. Me, personally, understood?”

“Yes sir.”

“To clarify matters, Master Sergeant, I’ve assumed command of this office. Captain Walker has been reassigned to recruiting duties in Albuquerque, and we are now a purely CIC operation. You’ll be reporting to me directly and assigned to special projects for CIC. As you know from experience, such an arrangement is not traditional, but CIC is operating in a non-traditional fashion in non-traditional times. Clear?”

“Yes, sir. Sir. We have information for you this morning, sir.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sir. Permission to speak freely, sir.”

“Granted.”

“Sir, the request was mostly on behalf of Special Agent White here. He’s unfamiliar with much of Army protocol, sir. I’ll provide some background, sir, and I hope that you withhold your judgement until Agent White is able to finish what I start, sir.”

The Colonel took on a look of skepticism but said, “I’ll do my best, Sergeant.”

“Thank you, sir. Sir, we were recently reassigned from Carrizozo to the office here in Socorro and arrived late yesterday afternoon. We discovered that the town is essentially full up, and so we were forced to spend the night at, ah, a local establishment of ill-repute called Effie’s.”

“You’re telling me the two of you spent the night in a whore-house, Sergeant? This had better be good.”

“I hope you think so, sir. I truly do. Anyway, Mr. White arose during the night to use the facilities and overheard a conversation in one of the other rooms, he’s told me. Will, why don’t you pick up the story from here?” He looked over at me.

I was already sitting as straight as I could, so I just started talking. “Colonel, sir, this normally wouldn’t be of any interest at all. I wouldn’t have even noticed the conversation, sir, except it was in German.”

That got the Colonel’s full attention. “German? How do you know?”

“I speak German, sir. Learned it in school. Once you know it, of course, it jumps right out at you. It sounds funny compared to English, so just about anyone would notice something odd, but when you understand the words, it’s attention-getting.”

“What did you hear these people say? And who were they?”

“It was a man and a woman, sir. I assume that the woman was one of the girls working at the brothel, but I don’t know which one. And I don’t know the man. And I was just walking by in the hallway so I didn’t listen to the full conversation. But I heard something about potential new customers, for her, I think, from a new installation somewhere. Sir.”

I stopped talking, and we all sat quietly while the Colonel stared at the wall over my head for, maybe, two minutes. It seemed like a long time.

“Well, shit.” Colonel Sherhold’s first comment seemed to me to be entirely fitting. “But this is what we’ve been expecting, I guess. German spies, trying to find out what the hell is going to happen out there.”

“Sir?” Steve’s voice was tentative. “I’ve heard that the Army plans to test some kind of super-weapon out there, that the *Jornada* has been chosen for the test site. That’s all I know sir, not what the weapon actually is. May I request to be read in on that, sir? If we here at CIC are to do our jobs, it might help us if we knew what those jobs are really about. With respect, sir.”

“Jennings, your record is as clean as a whistle. And White, I’ve read Major Bernstein’s report on you and was extremely impressed. Because you’re both CIC agents, you have our highest security clearances, pending such things as need-to-know. Jennings, you seem to be suggesting that you and White have a need-to-know here, is that what I heard?”

“Again, with respect, yes, sir. I feel hampered in my ability to perform counter-intelligence operations that involve another military program of which I’m ignorant. I’m deathly afraid I might miss something out of my ignorance. Sir.”

“What do you think, White?”

“Well, sir, my experience is too limited to have an informed opinion, sir. But what he says makes sense to me. I mean, if there are German spies out here in the middle of Nowhere, New Mexico, there must be something they’re interested in. If we knew what that was, maybe we’d have better luck catching them. Sir.”

“You’re persuasive, both of you. OK, what I’m about to tell you is to go no farther than the walls of this room. Besides the people actually working on the project itself, only I and my adjutant in Albuquerque know about this. And now you.

“For several years now, there has been an activity code-named the ‘Manhattan Project.’ A group of scientists and engineers, physicists, mostly, somewhere northwest of Santa Fe at a place called Los Alamos, an old boys school on a mountainside, they have been working to use the power of the atom for military purposes. Atomic power has far, far more potential than chemical power, which is what traditional bombs use. They’ve developed a new technology to integrate atomic power into a bomb, and the first one is going to be tested out in the *Jornada*. Assuming it works, it will dwarf anything else ever

used in warfare. And, naturally, there are plenty of people working for the other side who'd like it very much if this test failed."

"Thank you, sir." Steve was nodding. "I don't know anything about the technical aspects of this, of course, the physics, and I'm sure I don't need to. But if it really will dwarf anything else, it's going to attract serious attention from our enemies, sir. Obviously, we're going to have to increase our vigilance, sir."

"That's why we're all here, Sergeant. Now. What are we going to do about this whore who speaks German?"

* * *

Ten

"Well, sir, I haven't had time ..." Steve had barely begun when Colonel Sherhold held up a hand.

"Let me state some obvious things, Sergeant. First, I said before that you better have something good to tell me to justify your having spent the night in a whore-house, or at least for having told me so. Well, check that off. It was indeed something good. And, as a result, I have to say that I'm quite happy that you spent the night in that whore-house, although maybe not as happy as you are. In any case, I hope you're able to continue to stay there. Obviously, we need to watch this woman, after, of course, finding out who she is. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." Steve and I said it almost together.

"So. First order of business. Find out who she is. That ought to be easy. It may not be so easy to find out who the man was, though, but that's a high priority. After that, I'm open to suggestions."

"Watching her is a good idea, sir. That may be the only way we can find out who the man is, after all. But if we watch her, perhaps we can also compile a list of all her ... ah ... clients to see if any of our people visit her. If any do, we'll need a plan for them, obviously."

"Good thinking. And any such plan would depend on what they talk with her about, I suppose. I'd hate to get CIC into the business of punishing people merely for having an active sex life. The old biddies in the Women's Christian Temperance Union might like that, but our ability to attract new recruits would go down the toilet."

"Sir?" I didn't know quite how to join in the conversation, so I'm sure I sounded quite timid. "Could we put some sort of microphone, like a telephone handset has, into that bedroom? Then we, I mean CIC, not necessarily me or Sergeant Jennings, we could listen to the conversations in there."

Sergeant Jennings jumped on the idea. "Exactly, sir! And if we had a wire recorder, or one of those new tape recorders, we could have a record of the conversations."

"And lots of grunting and moaning and squeaking bed springs, I suppose. How gauche." He was shaking his head. "But, I have to say, this is all a good idea. Instead of just arresting that German-speaking whore and whoever is with her the next time we hear a conversation in German, we can use them for information. Excellent idea. What's the access?"

"We'll have to see about that, sir. It's possible that we could get a microphone into it from the attic. We can let you know tomorrow. Uh, when do people for this big project start showing up? Do we have some time here?"

“I think we do, but we can’t put it off. Now, since we’re talking about electronic gizmos, let’s talk about radio antennas.”

“Ah. Yessir. You must be referring to the one that’s on top of the ridge over the facility where Will here grew up, sir.”

“Exactly. And, White, I have to say that that description of your upbringing I read is one of the most remarkable stories I’ve ever run across. That place needs to be shut down before they kill any more boys.” He sighed. “But that’s not why we’re here just now. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. What do you know about that antenna, Sergeant?”

“Looked to me like a big short-wave antenna, sir, probably with radio wave receive capabilities, too. And if that test is going to happen where I think it might, they’ve got a birds-eye view of the preparations.”

“We’re going to start monitoring on all frequencies and use triangulation to see what they’re transmitting. But it’ll probably be code of some kind. If not, it’s unlikely to be sending out anything too sensitive. But eventually we may need to go up there and destroy it.”

“That was my thought, too, sir. Although I suppose they could just replace it. Any chance of aircraft surveillance?”

“It’s a bombing range, so we can fly over there whenever we want without raising suspicions. But instead of bombs, the planes can carry cameras. How is it that you saw the thing, Sergeant?”

“Well, sir, Colonel Wright ordered us out on a clandestine, night-time recon mission, sir. We drove out there as far as we could and then took trails that Will knows about up to the ridge-top. This was about, ah, a week and a half ago, I think, sir.”

“Is there a report of this recon?”

“Couriered over here for Colonel Wright’s eyes, sir. The next day.”

Colonel Sherhold stared at the wall over my head again for a while.

“If that SOB ever shows up around here, he’s in deep shit. Sergeant, is there a copy of that report?”

“Yes, sir. The carbon is in my office over in Carrizozo. Uh, somewhere. Sir, is that office going to be closed? If so, I could make a quick trip over there to pack up my files—not the recruiting files, the CIC files—and bring them here, including that report. And, well, sir, I have personal possessions in my rooming house there that I didn’t bring yesterday. Um, it’s a men-only rooming house, sir, if that will make you feel better.” Steve had a glint of humor in his eyes.

“Er, sir?” I was again in my timid mode. “And I have some things there as well that I’d like to bring here. A quick trip over there and back, a half-day altogether, would be quite helpful, sir.”

“Sergeant, are you telling me that your orders to relocate here were not clear?”

“Well, in point of fact, sir, they were somewhat ambiguous. I don’t mean to be a suck-up, sir, but it seems obvious to me that you didn’t write them. I really couldn’t tell if the move was temporary or permanent. All I saw was the urgency. So we didn’t pack up, we just got the hell over here. Sir.”

“White, what do you say about those orders?”

“I didn’t read them, sir. Only he did, and when he said we were being transferred from Carrizozo to here, I didn’t really know if it was temporary or permanent, either. I mean, I follow his lead. And we packed only what we needed right away, so we could get right over here right away. Er, he’s my Master Sergeant, and I’d like to keep him. Sir.”

“Tell you what, Sergeant. Get your ass over to Carrizozo and bring me back the copy of that recon report. And whatever else you need to base here. And shutter that office for the time being, as far as its being a recruiting center goes. It can sit and gather dust as far as I’m concerned. CIC is no longer a presence in Carrizozo, and I’ll write up orders to that effect. When you’ve got everything CIC-related, and what personal stuff you want, get your ass back here in time to reconnoiter that attic in the warehouse where you’re staying here. And report to me about all this in the morning. Clear?”

“Ah, yes, sir. Except for one thing. My transportation is a motorcycle with sidecar. I doubt that will be sufficient for the transport of material involved, sir.”

“What? You got a lot of uniforms or something, Sergeant?”

“No, sir. But there are more CIC files over there than the Indian can handle, sir. Perhaps a telephone call to the motor pool could procure me a more appropriate vehicle, sir.”

“Fair enough. Dismissed, Sergeant. You too, White.”

Steve stood, saluted smartly, executed a snappy about-face, and marched out. I managed to sneak out behind him while the Colonel was studying something on his desk.

* * *

The motor pool’s offerings were slim, but the Colonel had made a phone call that provided us *carte blanche*. We chose a sedan, perhaps the very sedan that Colonel Wright had used for his trip to Carrizozo during which he’d eaten all the food we’d obtained from Mr. Apodaca, including most of ours. We hit the road for Carrizozo about mid-morning.

“Will, I have to tell you that I was a bit nervous there. I thought that Sherhold was going to have some crew of recruiting grunts clean out the Carrizozo office. Including the back room. Wouldn’t they have been surprised?”

“Actually, I was a bit surprised that the subject of what’s in there didn’t come up with Colonel Sherhold.”

“He’s not the right person to handle it. I’ve been thinking about it, and it’s possible that even the Army isn’t right. Maybe the US Treasury should be responsible. They’re the part of the government responsible for the country’s gold reserves. So I haven’t figured it out yet.” He seemed strangely evasive, but I wasn’t going to press the matter.

That car was sure more comfortable than the Indian, either its main seat or the sidecar. We cruised over to Carrizozo in style. Steve stopped at a residence a couple of blocks over from the Army center and parked on the street.

“I’ll be just a minute, gotta get my stuff.”

“What’s this place?”

“Oh. You’ve never been over here, have you? My rooming house. Why don’t you walk over to the center, let yourself in, and get all your things organized? That’ll give us a head start over there.”

I did, and a few minutes later he showed up with the car. What CIC files there were on site filled less than a filing cabinet drawer, so getting them into the car was easy. I’d carried out a load and, when I came back in, I found Steve deep in thought, staring at the huge pile in the back room.

“Will, what I’d like to do is to get all of the bundles of cash into the car and then find some sheets, or ground cloths, or some other kind of big covers and put them over the gold. It won’t hide it, but it will make it less obvious as something attractive. I don’t think our supply of burlap bags will work, though.”

“Maybe the hardware store down the street has something.”

“Good thinking. Let’s see. Enough to cover the floor of this room ought to do it. Say, fifteen by twenty altogether. It’ll probably take several sheets of whatever they have. Take some bills from here and go see what you can find, OK? I’ll start loading the car.”

As I walked down the street, I tried to imagine what Steve’s strategy was, but it escaped me. And, although I trusted him, there was this little nagging voice in my head that said he was behaving strangely, not unlike the behavior we’d seen in Colonel Wright.

The hardware store had just what we needed, so I returned with five large canvas tarpaulins, more than enough to cover the pile of artifacts.

Before returning to Socorro, we stopped for a last lunch at Mr. Apodaca’s diner, and I realized that I was going to miss the place, particularly the daily specials. They had been teaching my taste buds to be more tolerant of New Mexico recipes, even to learn to like those recipes.

Because I’d purchased what turned out to be an extra tarp, we were able to cover the stacks of currency packages in the sedan’s back seat. Between the car’s trunk and back seat, all of those packages fit, but it was a close thing.

On the way back to Socorro, I raised an issue I’d been thinking about. “Steve, all that gold back there is supposed to be Coronado’s treasure. And I remember reading about him some. He was one of those early Spanish explorers who wandered all over the southwest. I think he was the first European to see the Grand Canyon, for example. And he did all sorts of bad things to the Indians, like all those guys did. Presumably, in all that wandering, he ran across gold in various forms here and there and just confiscated it all. But we’ve moved all that stuff, twice, now, and it’s a huge amount of weight to deal with. I can’t figure out how the hell he managed to haul it all around.”

He laughed. “Yeah. It’s not like he had one of those G535s, is it? Well, let’s see. A pack mule can carry three, possibly four hundred pounds. But I don’t know if they had mules back then. Horses carry heavy people, so they can manage two hundred pounds, for sure. By your human calculator numbers, that sounds like a string of forty pack horses could have done it. And they didn’t get all the gold at once, I’m sure, so they could have added horses as they needed to.”

“That must have been some expedition, all those soldiers and pack animals. Lots of dust and everything. And they had to carry water, too.”

He nodded. “I’ve wondered about that. They undoubtedly stuck as close to water, like the Rio Grande and other rivers, as much as they could. So why they’d side-track east across the *Jornada* to the Oscuras to hide the stuff is beyond me. I guess they wanted it hidden *really* well.”

“So, why are we taking the cash to Socorro?” I was hoping that the abrupt change-of-subject might get the truth out of him.

“Basically, to separate it from the gold. The Treasury Department guys who will be interested in the gold will be different from those interested in the cash. And, besides, we may be able to use the cash for CIC operations. The Army is pretty stingy with money, and we need all the help we can get for this business of protecting that big test they’re planning.”

“What are we going to do with it? Put it in Colonel Sherhold’s office?”

“Actually, I was thinking of Effie’s attic, where you’re going to be staying. You can guard it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, really. I haven’t been up there—I don’t even know how to get up there—but if it can be done with reasonable privacy, and there’s room, it seems like a good hiding place for a while. I think we’ll

have to let Effie in on the secret, of course, but not all the girls. And if you sleep up there, that will discourage anyone from sneaking up there at night and stealing any of it. When we get back, I want to stop off to give Sherhold the copy of that recon report he wants, and then we can go check out the attic.”

“You’re not going all Colonel Wright on me, are you?”

He looked surprised, and laughed. “Not hardly. Remember I already rewarded myself with one of those packages? I don’t know if you noticed, but it was a package of fifties. I’m set for life, at least by my standards. No, I’m not going to be greedy. It’s like I said. It could come in handy for CIC operations, and we can always turn it in later, if we don’t need it.”

The attic turned out to be dusty, but it had good access. Effie’s old house had a back staircase that ended on the second floor near the bathroom at the rear of the house. And the attic staircase went on up from there.

I spent what was left of the afternoon cleaning the attic up for my own purposes and, in the process, we figured out where the bedroom on the second floor from which I’d heard that German-language conversation coming was relative to the attic floor.

Except for the dust, the attic was fairly empty, with just a few pieces of excess furniture stored up there. That helped me, because there was a real bed—and mattress—that I could use. The cot I’d had in Carrizozo was better than the floor, but the mattress was a big step up. There was also an armoire for my growing wardrobe—new clothes caught my attention all the time—and an easy chair. After moving the bundles of cash up there, we arranged my furniture near the top of the stairs to make an obstacle course, behind which, at the other end of the attic and under the eaves on the sides, we stacked all that currency, which we covered carefully with extra sheets.

And we left a big bare spot over the suspect second-floor bedroom.

I was set up in, what was to me, a real bedroom in a real house, a house full of willing, pretty girls, no less. What young man could complain about that?

* * *

Life settled in to a routine in Socorro. Every now and then we’d hear that there was going to be some big activity out there on the desert somewhere, but none of those materialized. There was plenty of activity in town, however, with merchants and others apparently gearing up for lots of new business in the near future.

Colonel Sherhold assigned a small group of radio technicians to set up surveillance of the German-speaking girl, whose name was Rachael, downstairs, but my involvement was minimal. I made it a point to be there when they invaded Effie’s house to plant the microphone, which they kept calling a “bug,” and run wires. Neither Steve nor I wanted them poking around in those rows of packages under the sheets in the attic toward the front of the house and under the eaves. But the wires were routed to a house next door, which Steve and I discovered had been rented to CIC for the time being. That was where the listening post was set up.

The same radio technicians had me make sketches of the antenna that I’d seen atop the Oscuras, on the ridge over the Labyrinth. I told them I had to make two sketches, because I’d seen two different antennas. The original one didn’t impress them, but the second one got them all excited. Steve verified the accuracy of my second sketch, and they went away happy.

We also let Effie in on the secret. She didn’t believe it at first, but we took her upstairs and showed her the big pile and even opened one of the bundles. That sizable a pile of cash was too much for her to

grasp, I think, but we made sure to give her a bundle of twenties for the use of her house for Army CIC purposes.

Although we had jobs at Effie's as "bouncers," as Steve called us, in return for rooms and breakfast (fringe benefits were negotiated separately—although, because he stayed in Effie's room all the time, I expect Steve's were implied), that cash paid any reasonable rent that she might charge for a long time. Still, we took our duties seriously and didn't hesitate to give the bum's rush to anyone who misbehaved. It helped that Steve gave me hand-to-hand combat lessons, which left me bruised all over, and firearms training. And those fringe benefits kept me busy in my spare time.

Weeks passed, and during the fall of 1944 we heard sporadic reports of progress on preparations at the test site out in the *Jornada* and construction of a base camp for test personnel at an old ranch house about ten miles away from the site. No one, other than project personnel, was allowed to visit the place, however, so we really didn't know what was going on.

One thing we did know was that the antenna on top of the Oscuras was transmitting every now and then. Colonel Sherhold's radio crew had triangulated Morse-code strings to that point and a decryption team was hard at work. The codes, however, seemed impenetrable.

One day in late December, Colonel Sherhold called us into his office along with a half dozen other CIC agents.

"At ease, men. I've heard some news I thought I'd pass along. This, as is usual with everything going on out there, is need-to-know only. The base camp for the test firings of new weapons out on the *Jornada* is complete, and there is a security team in residence. MPs. That means that our job is to deal with potential problems everywhere else, but we don't need to be so concerned with what's going on out there in the desert.

"Now, I'm hearing that there are going to be two tests. The first one, sometime in the spring, probably, is going to be conventional explosives, a huge amount. Its purpose is to have a dress rehearsal for the real thing and to calibrate some of the measurements to be made on the real thing. My information is that the first, conventional test will be the largest explosion ever detonated. And the real thing, probably next summer, will be *much* bigger, if everything goes right."

"Sir?" The question was from the other side of the room, someone I hadn't met. "How big are these tests? I've heard that we use one-thousand pound bombs in various configurations, and there was a rumor about a two-thousand pound bomb. Do we know what's going to happen out there, sir?"

"Two thousand pounds is a ton, right? So, if there's a two-thousand pound bomb, it's a one-ton bomb. Well, I was told—and, again, this is extraordinarily sensitive information, but I do think you all have need-to-know status here—I was told that the first test is going to be one *hundred* tons, the equivalent of one hundred of those one-ton bombs, all detonated simultaneously."

There were expressions of surprise from around the room.

Sherhold held up a hand, and things got quiet. "But, remember, this is only the rehearsal, the calibration shot. What I was told is that they really don't know what kind of yield is going to come from the real test, the July one, if that schedule holds. No one has ever detonated this type of weapon before. But, in terms of measurements and so on, they're planning on being ready for as much as *five-hundred times* the calibration shot."

This produced an appropriately more surprised reaction from the gathered CIC agents.

"Now, I expect you've all been hearing the news out of Europe. The big German offensive into northeastern France and Belgium looked pretty dismal at first, but our boys have been fighting back. And in the last couple of days, the weather has allowed our airplanes finally to get off the ground, so

we're gaining the upper hand. Word is, Hitler put everything he had left into this offensive, and if we can beat them back, we're on track to win the war in Europe this spring. So this big, new weapon probably won't be used there unless the Krauts pull off something completely unexpected. If it ever *is* used, it'll probably be in the Pacific. Still, our concern here is mainly with espionage by the Germans—but they'll be sharing information with the Japs in any case. So our CI efforts are more important than ever. That's what I have, men. Jennings, White, I need you to stay. Dismissed!"

As instructed, we waited while the others filed out.

"I've got more information for you two. At ease, and have seats up here by my desk." He shuffled some papers. "Two things. First, our listeners heard a conversation in German in that room underneath you last night. White, did you hear anything?"

I'd been involved in a somewhat rambunctious discussion, among other things, about fringe benefits with Hannah, so I hadn't. "Uh, no, sir. Was it very late? I'm a pretty sound sleeper, sir, and that place can be noisy. I've learned to tune stuff out, sir."

"Good thing we've got listeners next door, then. The conversation was a man and a woman, and it's troubling that he passed along to her the same news I told you about just now—that the base camp out there is ready. If any of those MPs end up in her room, she's supposed to find out as much about it as she can without raising suspicions."

Steve cleared his throat. "Sir, as we've reported, that's Rachael in there, and her English is clean, no accent. So that will help her quiz any MPs from the base. Perhaps we should warn their CO of possible security risks here in Socorro without being too specific."

"I'm meeting with him personally, Sergeant, and you can be sure that will come up. Anyway, we were able to observe the man who was with Rachael when he left last night, and we have him under surveillance. You don't need to be concerned with him, because I have another job for you both. We need to put the radio that's inside that mountain out there out of commission. And we need it to look like something besides sabotage by us."

"Mmm. Well, sir, anything that looks accidental is likely to be pretty easy for them to fix, sir."

"Do I remember that your report said that the cable was along the ground?"

"Yes, sir. The antenna itself is on the western side of the ridge, fairly close to an escarpment down to the *Jornada*. The cable leads eastward from the antenna along the ground among the trees up there, they're the piñons and junipers we have around here, a good mix on that ridge, as I recall, and it disappears into a hole after about a hundred yards. I don't know if there's a conduit for it or not, sir."

"You're probably right about accidents just getting fixed."

"And they would probably be able to transmit before we could create another accident, sir, even if we were in the vicinity. Also, sir, even sabotage could be fixed. And in either case, they might start posting guards."

"We're not quite ready to take that whole place down, Sergeant. Those are American citizens in there, and they have rights we need to respect. But we would very much like to get that radio out of commission. Let's all give it some serious thought. White, you know your way around inside there, correct?"

"Yes, sir. Not everywhere in there, however. The living areas and so on were places I didn't get to, for example."

"And that probably includes the radio room. Did you go anywhere that there was electrical power?"

The Coronado room popped into my head, but I didn't want to bring that up. "Probably, sir, although I can't be specific. I tried very hard to stay clandestine, and that included no lights. But there's obviously power in there."

"Let's make sure this serious thought we're giving this business includes the possibility of jamming their transmissions, OK? Anything else? No? Dismissed, then. We'll be talking about this again soon."

* * *

"Good grief." Steve was frustrated, I could tell. "First he wants a clandestine sabotage operation that looks accidental, then he wants a jamming device installed. Right. *That* would look accidental. Sheesh."

"I guess I don't know what it takes to put a radio like that out of commission."

We were sitting in the phone-booth-sized office they'd given the two of us, and he was busy with some paperwork. It seemed as if that was about all he ever did. But my comment made him look up at me.

"Now, there's a thought. I know some ways. A sledgehammer, for example. But maybe there are other ways that are more subtle."

"We learned a little about radios in one of the classes I had, but I'm not sure any of it would be useful here. Especially because we can't get to the real radio, just the antenna and its cable."

"Will, I have to say, the last thing I want to do is to go back into that Labyrinth and look around for the radio room. I never told you this before—I didn't want you to worry—but I'm not real happy in small, confined, dark spaces."

"The Labyrinth being a big, wide-open, well-lit space, after all." I grinned at him. "Did I ever tell you about the first time I looked out the portal I was using as a hideaway? It was just the opposite of your reactions to that place—the view across the *Jornada* and especially way, way down to it from where I was way, way up there scared the crap out of me. So it's all what you're used to."

"You know, for a sixteen-year-old kid—and don't fool yourself, I remember that birthday switcheroo that Major Bernstein pulled—you're pretty sharp sometimes. But I'm still not going to suggest to Colonel Sherhold that we go back in there."

"Didn't I hear that this entire part of New Mexico, I mean over there, the *Jornada*, the *Oscuras*, and the desert to the east all the way over to Carrizozo, practically, isn't all that federal land? Part of the Alamogordo Range, or something?"

"It is, and almost everyone else has moved out. There used to be a couple of ranches in the *Jornada*, in fact. But the Lilies are hold-outs. The land on top of their Colony there is federal land, but they still have mineral rights and so on underground, so they're allowed in there."

"Seems like we could make a trip to the ridge-top, tear out the antenna and its cable, and fix it somehow so they couldn't rebuild it easily. And the Air Force could watch, from airplanes, to make sure they don't. Wouldn't that solve the problem? It wouldn't be clandestine, but maybe it doesn't need to be."

"Like I said, you're pretty sharp, Will. I guess all they could do is take the Army to court to try to get a judge to let them put the antenna back up. But that would take a long time, and all we're worried about is the next six or seven months. Hmm." He drummed his fingers on the desk while he thought about it. "Tell you what. Let's march right back in there and propose this. We could get that antenna down this week, and, with surveillance, keep it down, even if they post guards. *We are* the US by-God Army, after all."

I discovered that the art of persuasion, when it involves enlisted personnel persuading officers, has its nuances but that it can work. Steve presented the arguments in favor of what we'd discussed with what seemed to be an extra dose of "sirs" and maintained a proper demeanor—which is to say, he didn't get mad or raise his voice—even when the argument ran against him for a little while. But he prevailed.

And that's how he and I led a squad of engineers to the top of that ridge over the Colony on New Year's Eve, 1944, a cold, blustery night on which I'm sure we'd all rather have been celebrating at Effie's.

Because the antenna was used for transmitting in addition to receiving, its cable was powered, and any interruption would be noticed immediately by anyone in the radio room below. So we needed to plan accordingly. On the other hand, we weren't disassembling the thing nondestructively for cold storage and later use, so we didn't need to be too careful, as long as no one got electrocuted.

We spent an hour or so scoping out the installation, and Steve showed the engineers where the cable went underground—into what seemed to be a disguised conduit, we discovered. A little digging eliminated the disguise, and a couple of the engineers pulled up hard on the cable and were able to pull it a foot or so out from the conduit. Another engineer took an axe that had its handle wrapped with rubber tape and chopped the cable about an inch above the conduit's top, with the result that the live end of the cable slid a foot or so down inside the conduit. All the while, a fourth engineer had been preparing some sort of semi-liquid concoction, which turned out to be concrete made from cement with iron filings and copper shot as aggregate, and that got poured, with some sparking, into the top of the conduit until it overflowed. Then we put rocks and dirt on top of the thing, in effect re-establishing the disguise.

After that, it was a matter of chopping the above-ground cable, now disconnected, into pieces and disassembling the antenna, then throwing everything over the edge of that escarpment. All-in-all, a good night's work.

There was a bit of excitement at one point, however. Apparently the power interruption that the first cable chop had caused was indeed noticed inside, for, about the time we were finishing up, one of the guys noticed a flashlight working its way up the one of trails through the trees. Everyone went quiet and took up positions on either side of the trail, making a trap to ambush whoever it was.

When the trap was sprung, we discovered that it was one of the Lilies, the bruiser Matron whom I'd had to outwit the night of my escape, in fact. I tried to stay in the background so she wouldn't see me.

The engineers thought of themselves as builders rather than fighters, but they had all the training and experience they needed to subdue Big Bertha, as they took to calling her. The ensuing discussion, guided by my suggestions to Steve, who was the highest rank present, wound up with our taking her back down the trail we'd used, the southeastern trail, and a couple of miles east in the troop carrier we'd brought, then letting her out and pointing her west toward the Colony's main entrance, that log palisade maze I'd observed so many times. Before we let her go, Steve wrote a note, including a greeting that I finally decided was a nice touch, to send with her:

Dear Lilies – By authorization of the President of the United States of America, under the War Powers Act, your communications antenna has been permanently disabled. Any attempts to reconstruct it will be met with overwhelming force. MSgt. S. Jennings, US Army CIC.

* * *

It took Steve more persuading to calm down Colonel Sherhold when he reported in the next morning. That note had not been part of our orders, and, apparently, initiative by enlisted personnel was not always appropriate.

“My belief, sir, is that, first, by addressing them as ‘Lilies,’ I sent the message that we know about their secret society, which we do, and that we are watching them, which we are to some degree. And, second, I did not accuse them of anything; rather I merely stated that their antenna would not be tolerated under provisions of the War Powers Act. My understanding, sir, is that this approach is being used widely all across the nation to curtail questionable activities. And, of course, they now have had fair warning that any rebuilding attempts will be prevented. None of this violates their rights in any way. I don’t see the problem, sir.”

“The problem is, Jennings, that you exceeded the scope of your orders. You looking to become an officer or something?”

Steve was horrified. “Sir, no, sir. I’m proud to be a Master Sergeant of the US Army, sir. In that sense, I’ve achieved my ambitions, sir.”

I suppose that the dressing down constituted nothing more than a slap on the wrist, from Steve’s perspective, but I was intimidated by it. However, life went on with no further repercussions.

The question of the German fellow with whom Rachael was conversing—and he returned to Effie’s quite regularly—remained open. He was being closely watched, and the conversations in Rachael’s bedroom were being monitored and recorded, but Colonel Sherhold seemed to want more, so, under the guise of furnace repair and ventilation improvement, a listening vent was cut through the floor of my attic—and the ceiling of Rachael’s bedroom—so that I could hear better. Just what I needed—more squeaking bed springs and gasping and moaning and giggling all night.

But it paid off. In March, I overheard a conversation that included a reference to “Trinity,” and when I reported that to Colonel Sherhold the next day he looked startled and then positively vexed.

“That’s the new code name for the testing project. Both tests, the site, everything. And it’s about two days old. What was the conversation about again?”

“Sir, it was similar to the others, about how Rachael should quiz her guys about the project. Before it was references to what’s going out in the desert, and now she’s to use the word ‘Trinity’ when she thinks it might help.”

“As I suggested, I heard about it a couple of days ago, and I was planning to keep it to myself to see if it came out in other ways. But I didn’t think it would come out this fast and from this source. This is extremely disturbing.”

“He, the man who’s speaking German with Rachael, I mean, he’s being watched, though, isn’t he, sir?”

“He is, but we haven’t found anything else that’s suspicious about him, besides these conversations in German. His name is Robert Schmidt, son of a Carrizozo banker named Johann Schmidt. Robert, who’s a second-generation New Mexico native, works as assistant district attorney in the county offices here in Socorro and has ever since he got his law degree from the university in Albuquerque. He’s married and has four children all under age twelve. His wife is a local woman whose maiden name is Rosella Garza. He’s a pillar of the community who happens to like to get some on the side, not an uncommon proclivity, given how well Effie’s does. That’s it.”

As I was contemplating how that last bit implied that the Colonel was having Effie's watched, too, Steve spoke up. "He heard the name 'Trinity' from someone, sir. Attorneys have all sorts of private conversations in their offices, which are nearly impossible to monitor, of course, but they have conversations elsewhere, too. Have our folks, the ones who are watching him, seen him talking with unidentified people?"

"That's the problem. They haven't. And we can't reasonably monitor everyone who comes and goes from the county courthouse, where his office is. Jennings, I haven't liked some of your ideas in the past, but so far they've turned out well. So if you have suggestions, I'd like to hear them."

"With respect, sir, this is wartime and anything that prolongs the war is going to cost American lives. And, as far as that goes, put the outcome at risk. If we have a new weapon, one that needs testing but that could end the war, *anything* that impedes that testing is going to cost American lives and put the outcome at risk. Seems to me, sir, that whoever does that impeding is committing treason. I say we pull this guy in and ask him where he heard about 'Trinity,' who his contacts are, both up and down the line, sir. And if he doesn't cooperate, sir, we lean on him as hard as necessary." Steve's jaw was set, so I knew he wasn't going to back down unless directly ordered to.

"Hmm. You know, Jennings, I've been in the Army a long time, West Point, First Infantry, now CIC. And I have to say that I don't ever recall, among all the men who've served under me, having had a Master Sergeant who's as much of a hard-ass as you are. Oh, for the most part *all* Master Sergeants are hard asses. But you take the cake. And, I have to say, I'm beginning to think that I'm quite proud to have you in my command.

"But enough of this girly talk.

"The down side of pulling Robert Schmidt in is that we'll lose the thread we're trying to follow with him—who he reports to and so on. What about that?"

"There's no indication it's Rachael, the girl at Effie's, sir. And if he's not talking to anyone else or using dead-drops or any such spy tricks, then it's who he's talking to in his office, sir. Isn't there some way we can find out who his appointments are with? Look at his appointment book? Ask his secretary if he has the same casual, drop-in visitor every week or something?"

"Jennings, the orders I have for running this office are long and complicated, and they include an entire section about maintaining cordial community relations. Can you imagine maintaining cordial community relations with a district attorney whom we're accusing of treason?"

"Sir, Schmidt is not the district attorney, he's one of the assistants. And surely the DA himself would like to be informed about a German spy in his office. Sir."

"Mmm. Point taken, Jennings. I'll have a conversation about this with the head of security out at the Trinity site and see what he thinks. Dismissed, gentlemen."

On the short walk back to our office, I asked, "So, are you going to be in a bad mood now? Should I skeedaddle? Or what?"

He heaved a big sigh. "See, what happens when you start dealing with a new CO is that you have to get used to him. And, to be fair, assuming he's fair, he has to get used to you. The Colonel and I, well, we're in the getting used-to period. He chews me out, but he also grabs onto my ideas and, maybe after some argument, takes my advice.

"And if I know the guy out at the Trinity site at all, and, here's a secret, I know him pretty well from past assignments, tomorrow at this time, we'll be in a little room having a very interesting conversation with Mr. Robert Schmidt, Assistant District Attorney, Socorro County, New Mexico, USA. And the first question I want to ask that son-of-a-bitch is: Mr. Schmidt, whatever made you, a second-generation New

Mexico native whose family has done quite well here in the USA, become a traitor to your country in time of war?”

* * *

Turned out, it wasn't the next day, but two days later. And I got to hear Steve ask that very question of a civilian dressed in a business suit, a middle-aged guy who had initially been full of bluster and defiance, but was at that time sitting uncomfortably in a straight-backed chair in a tiny, stifling room in the Army building, a windowless room with a sturdy lock on the door.

It wasn't exactly Steve's first question—there had been a series of backs-and-forths associated with our forcibly bringing in Mr. Schmidt for the conversation, during which he asserted various rights and privileges associated with being a US Citizen, to no avail.

But it was the question Steve had mentioned to me that really got Schmidt's attention. Maybe it was the word “traitor.” Or maybe it was when Steve pushed the “Play” button on the wire recorder and Mr. Schmidt heard his own voice, speaking German, discussing how Rachael should subvert Trinity site employees.

His defiance and bluster vanished like a balloon that's been stuck with a hat pin—only a little, wrinkled husk remained.

I think that perhaps one of Steve's most effective tactics was walking out of that little room, and taking me with him, after he played that recording, to give Schmidt some time to think. We went out for coffee and a doughnut—even though the Socorro doughnuts weren't nearly as good as Mr. Apodaca's over in Carrizozo.

After a relaxing break, perhaps forty-five minutes, we returned to Mr. Schmidt's little room to see how our guest was faring. As I recall, “poorly” is an appropriate description, despite the return of some of his earlier bluster and defiance. But before he could say anything, Steve held up a hand to stop him and launched into a speech.

“Now, Mr. Schmidt. As a prosecutor, I'm sure you know the law in cases involving treason in wartime and the potential penalties. And I'm also sure that you can guess how the publicity associated with being the defendant in such a case would be hugely embarrassing and damaging, especially to a prominent member of a small community and his family. And, of course, in your case this would be in addition to the embarrassment of a public discussion of just where that recording was made and with whom. The good news here, if there is any, is that I'm just a CIC investigator who has no particular connections to the Judge Advocate General Corps or to the US Attorney's office. So you have an opportunity, quite possibly, to avoid dealing with those sharks. The way you can do that is to cooperate with me by answering my questions. In addition to wondering how you managed to get mixed up in this, I'll want to know with whom you're dealing, in both directions—who you report to, and who reports to you, and about what. Clear?”

Schmidt drummed his fingers on the table for a minute and then cleared his throat. “Ahem. Can I ask how the war is going? Is the information in the papers accurate?”

Steve looked puzzled. “I don't see how that bears on my interests here.”

“Indulge me, please.”

“Well, as far as I know, the news reports are reasonably accurate, although a few days out of date, I suppose. I think it's fair to assume that Germany will surrender within a month or two, three at the most. Can't really say about Japan, though.”

Schmidt kept drumming his fingers on the table and stared off into space. “I guess that means they’re out of danger. If it’s that close, then the authorities over there will be busy with all sorts of other things.”

He let out a big sigh. “Sergeant, the answer to your question, about how I got mixed up in this, is, in a nutshell, that I’m being blackmailed. There’s a long story behind that, however.”

“Will here and I have all day. Oh. This is Will White, CIC Special Agent, and I’m Master Sergeant Stephen Jennings, CIC. Army Counter Intelligence has the job of keeping enemy spies out of the Army’s business around these parts, business that we have evidence that you’re meddling in.”

Schmidt nodded. “Let’s see if I can stick to the high points. My grandparents, that is, my father’s parents, immigrated from Germany, along with a group of other Germans from their district, just after the War Between the States back in the 1860s, landing, like so many others, in New York. They all traveled west together, pooled their funds—and they seem to have had plenty—and, after a couple of false starts, bought land around what’s now Roswell. My father was born over there. Eventually, my grandfather, who was a hard worker and crafty businessman, bought out all his compatriots and became something of a land baron in the community. My father, on the other hand, had no taste for hard work, but he did learn business, so when he inherited everything, he sold it off and decided to open a bank, but over this way in the new railroad town of Carrizozo. He and his bank are still at it today. I was born in Carrizozo.

“That’s just background. Here’s the main point. Before I went off to college, my parents, who had taught me German from the start, probably at the insistence of my grandfather, decided to send me on a trip to Europe, to visit Germany and the family we have back there. Well, it was toward the end of the roaring twenties, and, a young man by myself, I did some serious roaring of my own. One result of that, as I found out some months after I got home, was a set of twin girls. Their mother is now a respectable matron in the city where I met her at a beer hall, Munich, and the girls are probably in Hitler Youth or some such travesty. Just so you won’t think too badly of me, I’ll mention that I’ve been sending Gretchen money ever since she first sent me a picture of the girls. *And*, if you’re as suspicious an investigator as I am a prosecutor, I’ll mention that the picture she sent shows twins who are spitting images of pictures of me at the same age or so.

“Anyway, a couple of years ago, I was contacted by someone who turned out to be my worst nightmare. To make a long story short, he told me that, unless I cooperated with him, the *Gestapo* would put the girls, along with Gretchen, into a concentration camp, where they’d all undoubtedly become playthings for the guards. I’d heard just enough about the *Gestapo* to know that they’re no joke, so I really didn’t have much choice. But if the war’s about over, there’s probably not time enough for information to get back there before things change, and I can come clean.”

He pulled a handkerchief from an inside pocket and mopped his forehead, which had started to glisten.

Steve had been taking careful notes. “I’m betting this nightmare person of yours started you out easy and gradually asked for information of greater and greater sensitivity, right?”

“Exactly. Only recently has he become interested in the activity southeast of here, what seems to be called ‘Trinity’ now. I think his interest in all that started about late last summer.”

“A couple of loose ends. Does your wife, Rosella, know about your German family, I mean the girls and Gretchen?”

“I told her about them even before we were married. I think it made her trust me more.”

“And does she know about your visits to Effie’s?”

“She knows about them, too, because I’ve told her about the blackmailing. And about Rachael, although she’s a little suspicious that I’ll be tempted.”

Based on the night-time noises I’d heard coming from the room below my attic bedroom, it seemed clear to me that he’d succumbed to that temptation. I began wondering what other parts of his story weren’t completely accurate. But, then, he hadn’t actually denied succumbing.

“One thing we do in CIC, Mr. Schmidt, is to make lemonade out of lemons at every opportunity. In this case, that means to persuade you to help us by providing us with information and, indeed, gathering new information. In other words, by turning you into what’s called a ‘double agent.’ You keep on with what you’re doing, but you tell us everything, and we feed you false information for you to pass to whoever you’re reporting to now. By helping us you can make things easier on yourself.

“I suppose that we’re not that different from your nightmare person, in a way. It’s just that instead of threatening the life of your girls and of Gretchen, we’re threatening *your* life. Treason in wartime is, as I’m sure you know, a capital offense.

“That’s been on my mind, yes.”

“We can start by having you tell me who you’re reporting to and who this nightmare person is. Or was.”

* * *

It was easy for me to persuade Steve that I really didn’t need to be part of Schmidt’s full interrogation—the remainder of that day was enough for me. The question was, what would I do with myself in the meantime?

My first suggestion was that the Army recruiting center building over in Carrizozo could use an inspection, to make sure it hadn’t burned down, or something. Steve’s reaction, a forehead slap of embarrassment that he’d forgotten all about that place, being so busy and all, solidified my argument.

Just in case I might need it, I packed an overnight bag that included plenty of cash, and the next morning I set out for points east. In addition to checking on the building, I planned to finish up the scouting trip that had started on Pepper the rental horse but had been so rudely interrupted by the effects of Mrs. Gomez’ chile. It all seemed a long time ago, especially the idea that had motivated the scouting trip. But if Steve was going to keep forgetting about all those gold artifacts, I thought, there needed to be a backup plan. And maybe that old idea of mine would work.

I didn’t get an especially early start, and I didn’t hurry once on the road. It was just too nice a day not to enjoy it. The highway down the river was alive with birds and the insects they were after all the way to San Antonio. It was so beautiful that I stopped in a couple of places to explore the river bank. Once eastward up onto the desert and across to Carrizozo, I felt right at home, I’d made the trip so many times.

A quick inspection of the Army’s old building showed that it was in fine shape, with no hints of disturbance. Across the street, Mr. Apodaca was offering an interesting new dish, for me, as his lunch special, pork *tamales* in a red chile sauce, but I decided, given I was going to be sitting on that motorcycle seat for several more hours, to go easy on my insides.

If the morning was familiar, the afternoon was a new adventure. I’d spent a good bit of time the evening before studying the regional scale maps I had, and I’d decided to make a run all the way over to Capitan, a little town on the main highway to the east of Carrizozo. From there, I would head south to a place called Angus, then back northwest, toward the hamlet of Nogal. Except, before Nogal, I planned to

turn southwest up Nogal Canyon. If the map I had of that locale was correct, I would be looking for a place about six miles up the canyon, about a half-mile before the road curved to the west.

I missed it the first time and, after I realized that I was heading almost due west, had to turn back. I wound up creeping along so I could watch the hillside across the creek carefully—at least there was no traffic on that dirt back road. But the map was correct, there it was, an abandoned mine-shaft with a crude but effective, and locked, cover over the entrance. Several “No Trespassing” signs emphasized the owners’ wish for privacy there.

The owners, though, were the Lilies, and they weren’t around, nor was anyone else. Still, I maneuvered the Indian off the road and behind some bushes so I could explore less obviously.

The creek was flowing, but not especially full—what snowpack there was hadn’t begun to melt into its spring runoff yet. Across the creek, I found the remains of an old path, what now looked like a seldom-used animal trail, up to the mine entrance, and Steve’s lock-pick set made short work of the lock there. I’d been worried that it might have rusted solid, but it yielded after a bit of vigorous encouragement.

This time, I didn’t care if the hinges squeaked, but I did care if I was seen. So I opened the cover just enough for me to slip inside and let it shut behind me. Using the flashlight, I found myself inside a long, littered tunnel that sloped down into the mountainside. It was much more rough, and, of course, not used at all, compared to the tunnels in the Labyrinth, but it felt familiar to me, somehow.

I worked my way downward and, after forty yards or so, found just what I needed, a side room, this one with an entrance that wasn’t visible from the mine entrance behind me because of a rock outcropping. It would be perfect, I thought—the right size, hard to spot, yet pretty close to the main entrance. Some cleaning up would be needed, as the litter of rocks up to about melon-sized would make for hazardous walking. But all the rocks would come in handy when it came time to close the room’s entrance off.

Back outside, I locked the main entrance cover again and made a mental note to see if I could find a newer used padlock with which to replace it. Having a key would make the whole business I had planned much simpler.

On my way back northeast and then west to Carrizozo, I watched the Indian’s odometer carefully to keep track of the miles. The mine entrance was just under six miles from intersection with the highway, right at the south end of the hamlet of Nogal. From there, it was another twelve miles or so to Carrizozo; the entire trip took me a half hour.

Then it was just a question of how much weight the Indian’s sidecar could handle. Steve and I had managed four hundred pounds a trip when we were lugging all the gold out of the Labyrinth. Maybe, I thought, the Indian could do that, too.

Cruising back to Socorro on the main highway, I mustered various arguments in favor of moving the gold as soon as possible. After all, if Steve ever remembered to get someone from Treasury to come look at it, they could look at it in the mine almost as easily as in the Army building. And surely it would be more secure in the mine. Further, if I didn’t have to do it all by myself, Steve might be able to weasel some kind of truck—any kind, it wouldn’t have to be that G535 monster—from the motor pool. The trouble was that he had so many other things on his mind at that point.

I knew it wasn’t really my problem, but, even then, I felt a sense of responsibility for it. I’d been the one to find it and tell him about it, after all.

I checked in at the Socorro Army building when I returned, to find Steve in our cubby hole in his usual paperwork mode.

“I’m back and everything’s fine over in Carrizozo. Mr. Apodaca says hello.”

“Y’know, I miss his cooking. And everything’s fine here, too. More than fine, actually. We’ve got a wealth of information from Robert Schmidt. He seems eager to redeem himself, and he’s chock full of interesting insights into the Germans’ intelligence network, and not just out here in the sticks.”

“Did he give up his next up the chain?”

“Yeah, but it’s someone we’ve never heard of, a guy in Albuquerque. He makes rounds every couple of weeks, here and at several other stops that we’re checking out. And Schmidt also has—or had, because we’ll probably shut them down—some underlings who are supposed to do what Rachael’s supposedly doing, quizzing people who work on Trinity for what they know.”

“Well, that sounds like success, then.” I gave him a salute of respect.

“I think so. And there’s another interesting thing, one that I wasn’t too happy to hear about. Apparently, there’s a document in that Labyrinth we need to go fetch. It’s in that restricted library you’ve told me about, I guess.”

“Really? What could that be?”

“It seems that the German intelligence establishment has been working on contingencies in case Germany wound up invading the United States. They, I mean the *Abwehr*, as they’re called, they started a process here in the US of setting up organizations of sympathizers, groups who meet in secret and plan how they can help the German invasion, if it ever happens. Turns out that the *Abwehr* has had some success in various places scattered around the country. And, the thing is, each organization needs to know there are others just like it and that it’s not alone, and, critically, they need to know how to contact each other. So, the *Abwehr* made up a little address book. Needless to say, it’s as secret as secret can be for them, and each organization keeps theirs in the safest place they have.”

“So...it sounds like you’re saying...” I was surprised but, then, maybe not, when I heard him say it.

“Right. According to Schmidt, the Lilies are one of those groups.”

* * *

Not only, it turned out, were the Lilies one of those groups, they were the central bank for all of the groups in the country. Apparently, that cash we’d made off with was the property of the pro-German underground in America, and the gold, of which Schmidt had heard but a rumor, was their reserve.

That news made both Steve and me feel better about having stolen it all from the Labyrinth—he began saying “liberated” rather than “stole.”

But he was obviously not happy about the need for another trip in there to find that address book. After stalling around for a day or two, though, he finally ran out of excuses.

The trouble was, we didn’t know exactly what we were looking for. Schmidt had not seen the address book, so he couldn’t describe it, and I recalled that the restricted library housed a huge number of a wide variety of books. To look at each one might take days, and the more time we spent inside that place, the riskier it would be.

Steve was philosophical about it, though. “At least we can use the lights in there, and that’ll make it feel like a real room instead of such a confined space. We’ll take some tape to seal the door.”

It took us two tries.

For the first one, we put together gear for two nights and the day between in the Labyrinth, rode the Indian out to the end of the southeast trail, hiked up and over the ridge to the northeast trail and down, and discovered that someone had locked that emergency escape door over the northeast portal. From the inside. On reflection, we decided that it wasn't surprising that they were taking security more seriously, after Big Bertha's adventure with us when we took down the antenna.

Without a backup plan, we turned around, hiked out, and headed back to Socorro on the Indian. For me, if not for Steve, that was a lot of hiking in one night, and I slept most of the day.

The next night, we reassembled our gear and added to it two hundred feet of climbing rope. Steve was determined to get in there, and he decided that rappelling down to the window of my aerie might do the trick. I warned him about the steep pitch of that escarpment and its height, but he shrugged it off.

"We can tie off an end of the rope to a sturdy tree up top, and descending will be trivial. Getting back up will take a bit of muscle, but I'm sure you're up to it. And I've done this a lot, starting with basic training. You told me at one point that you'd closed the grating over that window but you didn't lock it. So it's probably still not locked."

And Plan B worked. I was nervous about the descent, but he showed me how, using what seemed to be a foolproof clamp and a climbing harness to sit in. Finding the window involved a little trial-and-error, but the map turned out to be quite accurate, all-in-all.

It must have been about midnight by the time we managed to climb inside my aerie. Steve looked around and nodded approval, but then he wasn't so happy when he saw the cramped tunnel out of there into the main Labyrinth. I discovered I'd grown a bit since I'd last used it, so it was awkward to get through. Steve, still bigger than me, had to work hard at it, but he finally made it through with considerable wriggling and squirming.

Then it was a matter of sneaking down to the library and sealing the door behind us. The room, though relatively small, had enough air for us to last quite a while.

It was boring, looking through all those books, but at the same time fascinating in a morbid sort of way. I'd picked through them previously, but at that point I was looking for interesting things to read for information about the Lilies and especially their Colony and its Labyrinth. Most of the books I was able to skip over with but a glance. This time, though, they all needed a close look, as it didn't seem likely that there would be a title on the spine like *The Nazi Underground in North America: Names and Addresses*.

We tried various strategies by looking for small books, address-book-sized books that would fit in a pocket easily, looking first at titles in the letters of the alphabet that seemed like a priority, looking for relatively thin, pamphlet-type books. The idea to look at thin books evolved when we discussed how many addresses, meaning how many of those underground groups, there might be. Even if there were hundreds, Steve suggested, it wouldn't take many pages to list them all.

Finally, though, we just had to start looking at the books one-by-one, riffling through each in case there were extra pages inside one. That, after all, would be the most effective way to hide the address list—inside another book whose name only the top leadership of the Lilies knew.

All the while, we didn't really know that what we were looking for was actually in that library, so the hours dragged by as we became increasingly frustrated.

After twelve hours or so of futility, Steve decided we needed a break, so, despite the time—it was a bit after noon—we turned off the lights, removed the tape sealing the door, and peeked outside. It was as dark as ever out there, and we didn't hear any noises, so we crept back up to my aerie. This time, as he

wriggled through the tight part of the tunnel, Steve moved some of the offending rocks out of his way to make his passage a little easier.

Even though I'd come to like my little aerie with its view out over the *Jornada*, it never seemed so welcoming as it did that day. There was a nice breeze coming in the window, and, outside, the sun was beginning to warm up the west-facing escarpment.

And our climbing rope was patiently hanging there, outside the window, waiting for its chance to assist us up. I had my fingers crossed that it would still be there when we were ready for it. A climb up to the top without that rope wasn't something I wanted to attempt.

After a nap, we ate, drank, and, as much as I hated to do it, relieved ourselves in a corner. I showed Steve my cache of possessions from the time I'd lived in there, and he complimented me on my resourcefulness.

But eventually, we needed to get at it again. So we made our way back into the darkness and down to the library. It seemed to have aired out a little, at least, so it didn't seem so stuffy when we sealed ourselves inside it again.

Then it was back to leafing through every single volume in there. The place was organized alphabetically, so, previously, we'd started at opposite ends, each working his way toward the middle. And, after several more hours, Steve finally found what we were looking for in the "L"s—"L" for "Ledger." The list of addresses was stuck into the banking ledger the Lilies kept. As they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty, and, after we found the list, that seemed like the logical place for it to be.

Of the two of us, I had the emptier pockets, so after tearing out a large number of pages from the ledger, Steve folded them up with the list and handed it all to me for safe-keeping. We doused the light, unsealed the door again, and headed back toward the aerie. Flushed with success, we crept silently through the dark toward our route out of there.

But about half-way, a light flashed on us from behind. Steve, in one of those stage-whispers, told me to GO, and I didn't hesitate. Then we heard shouts and at least two voices yelling "Stop!" All we could do was to take off at a run, Steve, in his unfamiliarity with the Labyrinth, trying desperately to keep up with me.

* * *

Twelve

They had lights, but we had adrenalin. Despite Steve's inability to run full out like I could, we held our own as we dashed for the aerie, and, as we pounded up that long spiral tunnel toward it, we probably gained on our pursuers.

At the narrow, low spot in the tunnel, I dove right through, practically without touching rock. Steve, however, was grunting and straining his way through as I turned back to look at him in the remaining light filtering in through the window.

"Go! Get out there and up that rope as fast as you can! I'll be right behind you."

I hated to leave him, but it occurred to me that perhaps he could climb faster than I, and I didn't want to hold him up. So out the window and up the rope, like a monkey, I went. When I reached the top,

I lay on the ground to look down at the rope trailing down the escarpment. My heart leapt when I saw him come out the window—he'd made it through that narrow place!

But, just as he turned with the rope in his hands to start climbing, there was an explosion inside the aerie, a partly muffled boom that echoed for a few seconds. Instead of climbing, Steve let out an "Ooof!" and clutched his chest.

And the rope slipped from his other hand as he toppled backward into space.

It was getting into dusk out there, but I could still see quite a way down that escarpment. Just like the experimental rocks I'd dropped so long ago, Steve's body didn't fall down; rather, it fell and bounced and bounced and fell until it was swallowed by the darkness below.

About the time I couldn't see the body any more, a hand reached out the window and grabbed the rope. I was undoubtedly in some sort of shock, but I did have the presence of mind to give the rope a hard jerk up and sideways, then to pull it up. The jerk made the hand let go, and, with the rope on top of the ridge where I was lying, I doubted that anyone would be following me up that way. But because other ways seemed possible, I bolted down the southeastern trail toward the Indian without looking back.

By the time I was riding the thing down that two-track road across the desert, I was probably getting dehydrated due to all the water loss from my tears.

Once at the highway, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Part of me wanted to turn west, toward Socorro and the comfort of what I'd come to think of home at Effie's. Another part of me wanted to turn right, to head out on the road and just keep going, to find someplace new and start over.

But then I remembered the folded-up list I had in my pocket. That, I realized, needed to get to the CIC office in Socorro as soon as possible—it would be a waste of Steve's entire existence if it didn't.

And then there was the revenge factor.

So, at the highway, I headed west for home. I decided I'd turn in, get a good night's sleep, if I could, then clean up and meet with Colonel Sherhold in the morning to deliver the list and report on Steve's death.

For the hour-plus back to Socorro, I second-guessed myself mercilessly, thinking up all sorts of ways I could have prevented what had happened. I was the one who knew the Labyrinth, so I should have led us up to the aerie by another route, a route that would have lost whoever was chasing us. I should have pulled Steve through that narrow place to get him onto the rope sooner, so that bullet through the window wouldn't have hit him. Looking back at it, I'm impressed at all the ways I managed to beat myself up during that ride across the *Jornada*.

When I finally got home, it was still early enough that Effie's was jumping, but I was in no mood to join in the fun. I knew, however, that I couldn't just sneak up to my room and hide—Effie needed to be told. So I got cleaned up a bit and went into the parlor, where she was greeting customers from behind that stand-up desk of hers. I'd thought I would get her away from there to somewhere more private, sit her down, and explain things. But she took one look at me and knew something was terribly wrong, so she reversed the roles—she sat me down in her room and asked.

I managed to tell her through a new round of tears, and we held each other until we were both cried out. I'd lost my best friend, ever, and she'd lost someone who she was hoping to spend the rest of her life with. As the news filtered to the girls via their incredibly efficient rumor mill, they came by to console the both of us and wound up sharing our grief—I just hope that Steve knew, somehow, how much all those fine people loved him.

I managed to get to sleep that night, although it's still something of a mystery to me—I suppose I was just exhausted, both physically and emotionally—but I did. And the next morning, I spent a good two minutes feeling rested and ready for the day before I remembered what had happened. Then I got mad.

My first order of business after breakfast was to report to Colonel Sherhold and get that list to him. It took me what I thought was an absurdly long time to get in to see him, so I wasn't as timid as usual.

“Colonel, Special Agent White reporting, sir. I need to tell you about our operation, sir.”

“Successful, I hope? Where's Master Sergeant Jennings?”

“Here's the list of Nazi underground groups, sir. Also, there are pages from their accounts book, sir. I'm afraid that Master Sergeant Jennings didn't make it, sir.” Even at the time, I was surprised that I was able to keep my voice steady.

He, of course, wanted details, so I went over the events as thoroughly as I could remember them, twice. Then he asked enough questions that I essentially told him everything a third time.

The first action he took was to make a phone call that, as best as I could tell from hearing only one side of it, involved getting the Trinity MPs to drive over to the base of the escarpment and retrieve Steve's body. There also seemed to be a discussion of whether to clean out the Labyrinth by force. They couldn't seem to agree on whether aerial bombing or a ground invasion would be more appropriate and effective, though.

Colonel Sherhold mentioned in there somewhere that he was going to recommend both Steve and me for Bronze Stars, maybe Silver, Steve's posthumously, naturally. At least, I thought, the Army understands the importance of our operation and how dangerous it was.

I think to give me something to do, to keep me occupied and my mind on Army business, the Colonel assigned me to write up the report I'd given him verbally and to make sure to include whatever new information I thought of. Steve had always done his reports on the typewriter on his desk, so I decided I'd do mine that way as well. Because all I'd done was to watch him at it, though, I really didn't know what I was doing. Perhaps that was for the better, as I'm sure it took me much longer to complete that report than it would have otherwise. At least it gave me some practice on the thing.

Because I was learning to type as I wrote it, the report took me several days to finish, and when I met with Colonel Sherhold to give it to him, he informed me that Steve's body had been found by the Trinity MPs and given a burial at Trinity headquarters that included full military honors. And he once again expressed his condolences, which I couldn't help but appreciate. It helped me close that chapter of my life.

Then, however, the Army seemed to forget about me.

* * *

At that point I'd been working with, or maybe for, Steve for long enough that he'd put through the paperwork for me to be a real Army person, albeit with no rank other than “Special Agent,” and to get paid and so on. When I say that the Army forgot about me, it wasn't with respect to all that bureaucratic stuff. Instead it was the day-to-day stuff in Socorro. I came into the office each day, that same little office that Steve and I had shared, and took care of what paperwork I could, scribbling an illegible signature when one was called for. And, because I heard about them from others there, I attended the all-hands meetings that Colonel Sherhold called now and then to fill us in about significant developments. The first one of those, the one where he told everyone about Steve's death and made me stand to accept

congratulations for having completed the mission anyway, was the only one at which anyone paid attention to me. Otherwise, I was almost invisible.

It's not as if I didn't have anything to think about. The cash and especially the gold preyed on my thoughts daily. It was about mid-April when I finally decided to do something.

I'd been giving serious consideration to moving the gold by using the Indian, even though it would take a large number of trips. Eventually, though, a light-bulb turned on in my head, and I realized that all I had to do was to purchase a truck—maybe not a six-ton truck like that G535, but one that would allow me to cut the number of trips down.

Anyone who knows anything about that time, though, knows that “all I had to do” is a phrase that, when applied to buying a vehicle, was so naïve as to be foolish. By early 1945, cars for sale were becoming like hen's teeth, only less plentiful. On the other hand, it wasn't clear that I needed actually to *own* a truck. Just like I'd hired Pepper for a day, maybe, I thought, I could rent a truck from someone, for, say, a week or ten days.

I certainly had plenty of money. And, as it happened, I had a typewriter and access to official US Army stationery. Plus, I had a CIC ID card that put me in a category of people who needed to work undercover at times. I finally settled on a scheme that involved an incentive for the vehicle's owner: I'd use my Army connection to purchase new tires for the truck and offer the owner a ridiculous amount of money to use it for two weeks. The truck would go back to the owner with the new tires, and he'd be a happy camper.

It took some doing, but I worked it out. Although none was new, there were plenty of trucks in town to choose from. I walked around until I found one that looked to be in good shape but was resting on two flat tires. A closer inspection revealed that the tires were far worse than merely tread-bare; there were spots where the inner-tubes were showing through. So I simply told the owner that I needed a truck for a special Army mission and how he'd benefit. He jumped at the opportunity for new tires—especially the heavy-duty Army tires I mentioned to him—and some cash.

The motor pool had plenty of those heavy-duty tires, but getting a set for that civilian truck required appropriate authorization. That didn't worry me, however—I had the stationery and the typewriter, after all. Those, plus one of my illegible signatures, gave them the cover they needed at the motor pool in case questions arose. Naturally, they tried to talk me into using one of their trucks, but my CIC ID card persuaded them that my special mission—which I had declared top secret by that point—required a civilian vehicle.

Then I went AWOL. I didn't know it was called that at the time, and I ended up getting away with it—I *did* come back, after a while—but that's what it was. I guess I could have argued that, because I stayed at the Army's shuttered office in Carrizozo and because I had orders that were orders, despite the illegible signature, I wasn't *truly* AWOL. But I never did. I just took the eventual tongue-lashing and hung my head. Colonel Sherhold went easy on me, I think, because he knew I was still upset about Steve.

I *did* let Effie know that I was going to be away, though, because I didn't want her to worry. And because it had forgotten about me, I knew the Army wouldn't worry, at least not too much.

Although I'd rented that guy's truck for two weeks, I didn't need it that long. Over in Carrizozo, I had time to visit everywhere that Steve Jennings had been, in order to let them know that he'd died in action, plus time to load up that truck I'd rented and cart all that gold over to the mine just off Nogal Canyon Road. The truck did fine with only three trips, because it was a tough piece of machinery. I, however, worked my butt off moving all that stuff again, twice. That, I decided, was the last time. So it's been there ever since, except for a couple of times early on that I took special pieces to pass to special

people as gifts. Last I heard, which was years ago, Effie still adores the solid-gold grizzly bear fetish I found for her.

Moving the artifacts from the building in Carrizozo into the truck, and then from the truck into the old mine, was exhausting physical work, but it was actually less difficult for me than all the visits I made in Carrizozo. Everyone I'd met in town, including Mr. Apodaca, banker Johann Schmidt, the hardware store guy, the Italian barber, and even the crotchety old livery owner, Mr. Levesque, had known Steve somehow, and they were all devastated by the news of his death. I suppose it helped them all a little when I told them about the pending Bronze, or maybe Silver, Star, but they were still saddened by the news.

With the Carrizozo building emptied, I felt better about what had been dumped on me in the way of responsibilities, and it was a much less stressful trip back to Socorro in that rented truck than the eastward drive had been. The truck's owner was overjoyed with his new tires, and, candidly, I was glad to give the thing back to him. It just wasn't the sort of road vehicle I'd become accustomed to after driving the Indian around.

And, back in Socorro, that was when I had to confront Colonel Sherhold about having been nowhere to be found. AWOL. He ranted and raved, and I stood there at what I thought of as "attention" and took it. But he made the mistake of asking what I might have to say for myself.

"Sir. Thank you for the opportunity to speak freely." I'd heard Steve use that phrase, so I was going to take advantage of it. "I was in Carrizozo, sir, providing information about his heroic death to those who knew him there, sir. Some of them were hard to track down, sir, so it took a few days. You should know, sir, that he'd established himself, while he was involved with the recruiting office there and more recently, as something of a community leader, and those folks needed to know about his death, especially because of its important service to his country. Civilians need to know about military heroes. I believe that you mentioned to me the importance to you of community relations. Sir."

He stared at me and blinked at least a dozen times. "I won't argue with that, Mr. White. But you need to understand that, as an employee of Army CIC, you are not authorized to wander off on activities of your own, no matter their, uh, worthiness. And this one was worthy, I'll grant you that. But you need specific orders from your superior officer, and in this case it's me, before you do things. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Do you have new orders for me, sir?"

"I will. You need to stand by for them. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

That, of course, meant that I was just being put on the shelf for some unspecified activity, unless the Army totally and completely forgot about me again. Which they did, for a while.

Still, there were some things I could accomplish.

The civilian from whom I'd rented the truck was most appreciative when it was returned to him in better condition than he'd provided it to me, as well as with a full tank of gas, so he gave me a suggestion about a local car mechanic who could return the Indian to its original specifications. I'd cleaned its magneto out, impressing Steve in the process, but, really, a good overall tune-up seemed like a good idea, and getting it washed and waxed was a nice touch on my part. And having that extra muffler removed was something I'd neglected. When I offered the mechanic cash, instead of an Army purchase order that could take months or even years to be paid, he jumped at the opportunity.

And, speaking of cash, there was still that pile of it in my bedroom, Effie's attic.

* * *

I reckon that most people think of cash as something they'd like to have more of and something they know how to dispose of easily by buying things they want. And while that may be true for normal amounts of cash—whatever that means—it's just different for huge amounts, far more difficult.

The first thing I did was to count it, not bill-by-bill but rather using the amounts written on the outsides of the packages and my earlier estimate of how many bills there probably were per package. Including the packages that Steve and I had set aside for ourselves, for we'd been keeping them with the rest of it once we'd moved it out of the Coronado treasure room, I figured out that there was about five-and-a-half million dollars there—and, remember, this was a long time ago, so that'd be worth over *eighty million* in today's dollars.

Now, almost all of that cash was packed tightly into those approximately dictionary-sized bundles, sixty-five of them altogether, each package with four thousand or so bills in it. I knew I wasn't going to be able to just walk into a bank anywhere and put it all into an account, at least not without having to deal with more questions than I wanted to deal with.

The first time I had a free day, a day during which I could do anything without worrying about the AWOL business, I packed up a several of those bundles and rode over to Carrizozo. There, I looked up all of Steve's old friends, except the banker, Johann Schmidt, who was already swimming in money, and gave them bundles of cash in various large amounts under the guise of bequests from Steve's will. It was all a lie, of course, but it made everyone happy they'd been a friend of his. Naturally, many of them had questions, but I just played dumb.

That took care of five of those packages, leaving sixty more. This was about when I first realized the difficulty of dealing with such a large amount of cash.

My next step was to have a sit-down with Effie. She was, even three weeks later, still pretty broken up about Steve's death—I was, too, for that matter—so our conversation was an odd mixture of sadness, nostalgia, and business. What I wanted to do was to give each of her girls a big nest egg—Hannah, I'd decided, was going to get a double one—so that they could each find better lines of work and to give Effie about ten of those nest eggs. When she realized the implications—that her girls wouldn't need to work lying on their backs anymore and that she herself could retire—she expressed mixed feelings.

“Will, I appreciate what you want to do, but it worries me some. Not all of my girls are ready for such a big chunk of money. I'm afraid it'll just get them into trouble.”

“Well, first, it's not going to get *you* into trouble, is it?”

“No, I know just what I'm going to do. I'll close this place down, sell the building—and it will be easy to sell, I think—and move somewhere else where people don't know my past. Maybe Santa Fe. I visited up there once, and it's beautiful. I want to learn to paint. And some of the girls will do fine. But a couple of them aren't very worldly, except for what they do here. I'm afraid they'll just blow the money and end up where they are now, only some place that doesn't treat them so well.”

“Any ideas?” I scratched my head.

“I heard about something called a ‘trust fund’ one time, where a big chunk of money is managed by a bank or somebody and the earnings go to the owner of the trust fund. But they can't touch the money in the bank. So it goes to them little-by-little, steadily, over time. Keeps them on a budget.”

“I guess I could look into that for them.”

“Say, one of our steady customers here is a banker in town. Maybe I'll ask him about the idea. I may just set one up for myself.”

“Hmm. Maybe I should do that, too.”

We really didn't know enough about high finance to know what we were talking about, but, slowly, we converged on the idea of trust funds for everyone.

It was a little awkward when it came time actually to hand the money over to the bank, but it helped that I decided to set up one fund at a time, which meant that I had to deposit only one nest egg at a time. And I started out with the smaller ones and, gradually, built up to Effie's and mine. All this was before the present-day banking regulations about reporting big cash transactions, anyway, so that made it a lot easier than it would be today. And it sure didn't hurt that, as Effie had said, the banker we dealt with was a customer of hers. He certainly didn't want to make any waves, and he was delighted to have the new business. He even gave us better than usual rates of return.

Anyway, that was how I managed to get that pile of cash out of Effie's attic and into the banking system. My own trust fund has kept me comfortable ever since, although I've never shied away from interesting jobs that came my way. I lost track of Effie years ago—she's probably passed on by now—and the girls all disappeared soon after Effie's closed. I just hope that all those trust funds I set up for them have helped them out over the years.

As for Coronado's gold, well, as far as I know it's still in that old mineshaft over there in Nogal Canyon, east of Carrizozo. I haven't been back there since, oh, I guess the Korean War, and I don't think that anyone else has found it, either, in the past seventy-odd years. I'm pretty sure it would have made news if someone had.

So that's the story. It was a long time ago, but the details are burned into my memory.

What's that? The Lilies? I thought you were just interested in the story of the treasure. Coronado's gold. The Lilies' part in that was over a while ago.

Well, if you want to hear about what happened with them, you'll just have to listen some more. That thing still recording?

* * *

Now, by the time I got all those trust funds set up, it had turned into early May in 1945. Every day there were rumors that the war in Europe was about to end. In the Pacific, though, it wasn't so positive. Our forces were well on their way to re-taking the Philippines, but everyone was worried about how bloody an invasion of Japan itself would be.

Like I said, the Army had mostly forgotten about me, but I heard from other people about important meetings and so on, so I made a point of attending.

Early in the first week of May, Colonel Sherhold told us two interesting, if unrelated, things. The first was that Hitler had committed suicide on April thirtieth. We cheered. The second was that there'd be the first of the Trinity test firings that week, on the fifth. But then a couple of days later he told us that the first test had been postponed to the seventh, a Saturday, and was to happen about an hour before dawn. Our orders were to tell anyone who asked afterward that it must have been thunder a long way from Socorro.

Turns out, I slept right through it. Effie's was still hopping in those days, although Effie herself was making plans to close down little by little, to fade away gracefully, I guess, and I'd been taking advantage of my fringe benefits late into Friday evening. A couple of people mentioned later that they'd heard far-off rumbling, though. From what I heard, the test went off without a hitch, and the early July schedule for the second test, the real thing, looked solid.

The real excitement that day, of course, was the signing of the first surrender agreement between the German high command and the Allies, in Reims, France. The news flashed through the state-side Army installations as fast as gossip spread among the girls at Effie's. By Saturday evening, everyone was celebrating in the streets. And the celebration went on for a second day with the news of a more formal surrender agreement signed in Berlin on Sunday.

But even though the Nazis surrendered, our anti-spy operation didn't let up. Robert Schmidt, at that point a devoted double agent by all accounts, was under close observation twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—what you youngsters call “twenty-four / seven” now—and he was providing us with all sorts of useful information. Apparently the Japanese were paying the North American Nazis well for anything they could pass along, given the difficulty that people of Japanese extraction would have had being incognito in the general population.

Because Trinity didn't close down after that first test, interest in what was going on out at the site on the *Jornada* heightened, not only among members of the Nazi underground but among the newspapers and just about everyone else. That only made the Trinity security team clamp down on information, which put pressure on us, and it also led to all sorts of outrageous rumors. It seemed that the good citizens of central New Mexico were quite susceptible to stories of the most unlikely nature, not a few of which involved a variety of supernatural overtones.

Although I was mostly the long-forgotten Special Agent at CIC, Socorro, there were a few times that Colonel Sherhold remembered my existence and called me to a meeting of some kind. Most of those were related to the problem of what to do about the Lilies. I was by far the most knowledgeable person they had on that subject, so he and his staff used me as a resource in their discussions with the Trinity MP team.

As far as I could tell, the main problem was two-fold: the Trinity MP team just wasn't big enough to take down the Colony, given all the other things they were concerned with; and the Trinity MP team was not about to have any other unit trespassing on their special turf, which meant anywhere within about fifteen miles of ground zero at the Trinity site.

In that sense, the Trinity MP team had created their own unsolvable problem, but they still wanted to argue about it with us. So I sat in as part of a number of interminable discussions about what to do. In the process, I was read in on some of the details of what was going on out there, and it didn't take long for me to appreciate the difficulty of their dilemma.

The main issue was that the Lilies had a front-row seat. Ground zero was about five miles west of the escarpment down which Steve had plunged after being shot. And the two west-side portals were some fifteen hundred feet up. Anyone with a good telescope could have read the newspaper over the shoulder of ground-zero personnel.

But there was also the point of view, strongly expressed, of “So what?” The Lilies hadn't tried to rebuild their radio antenna, and CIC was monitoring all radio and shortwave frequencies thoroughly, so they couldn't communicate what they were seeing with anyone that way. And the spies on the ground were under control because of Robert Schmidt's cooperation with us, so if anyone attempted to pass information that way, we'd know.

Some went further, arguing that even if whatever the Lilies, or anyone else, might see at the Trinity site, it didn't matter who knew about it as long as there was no sabotage of activities there. It might even be the case, that argument went, that information leaked out in that way could provide a deterrent to further Japanese hostilities. Maybe they'd surrender!

I did my best just to listen and avoid expressing an opinion. I'm certain that no one would have listened to me anyway. I knew about the Lilies, sure, but I was a nobody in every other way.

While the discussion became more and more extended, and nothing happened in the meantime, activity in Socorro ramped up in connection, we all assumed, with a ramping up of activity at the Trinity site. We in CIC knew that it was all associated with the upcoming full-scale test, but nobody else was supposed to know about that. Still, even the civilians knew something big was up.

What all the discussion missed was just how paranoid, and crafty, the *Abwehr* had been in setting up the underground network in the US and how they didn't trust any single contact for their information-gathering efforts. Basically, they didn't trust Robert Schmidt not to turn, the *Gestapo* and concentration camp threats to his daughters and their mother notwithstanding. Put simply, they had a back-up plan.

And even though Germany had surrendered, the network and the information-gathering lived on. The Japanese were desperate for information and paid handsomely for the continuation of the old *Abwehr* infiltration.

We didn't stumble onto all that until a couple of weeks after the initial, massive, conventional explosives test. After plenty more ego-driven discussion about what to do about the Lilies and how everything, besides them, was under control.

My best friend Steve had said it on another occasion, when I'd overheard Effie's girl Rachael and who turned out to be Robert Schmidt having a conversation in German: I was like a CIC bloodhound. I surely can't think of another reason why I would have been the one to uncover the remaining connection for the espionage, even if it was accidental.

* * *

Thirteen

It was ten days after that first, conventional, explosives test, a Wednesday. The Army once again seemed to have no need for me, and I'd taken to walking the couple of miles from Effie's north to the Army building downtown without worrying too much about when I got to my office. The walking was good for me, I could tell, and no one seemed to care about the timing.

If I recall correctly, that morning I was contemplating which activity I was looking forward to more eagerly, the scheduled reminder briefing by our health and safety officer—who was merely a strutting non-com instead of a real officer—about various trivial aspects of safety and, his favorite subject, the health risks of taking up with “fallen women,” or the next episode of that ongoing squabble about what to do about the Lilies. Safety was just a bore, and I'd become burned out on what to do about the Lilies. But I found that health topic hilarious, given that I lived in a house full of such women, and no one there had any health problems. They were scrupulous about that. Maybe he'd start with the health thing, I thought, and I could sleep through the rest.

As I approached the downtown area, I heard from across the street a car horn honk-honk-honking, so, naturally, I looked up. It turned out not to be a car but rather a venerable, well-used farm truck. And even from across the street I could see that the tires had patches on the patches. I couldn't imagine what the inner-tubes looked like. And I couldn't see who was making all the noise, as the sunlight was reflecting off the windshield and the cab was in a dark shadow.

Imagine my surprise when out of the cab jumped a young woman, who proceeded to run across the street, dodging several cars that started their own honking, and up to me, finally throwing her arms around my neck while saying “Oh, William, William, I found you! William!”

She was wearing farm clothes—overalls covering a flannel shirt and sturdy boots—including a wide-brimmed, floppy hat, so I hadn't seen her face. But with her clutching me, I could smell her.

And she smelled like Clarisse.

When that hit me, my knees buckled, so I grabbed her to support myself, and we stood there in a mutual hug for at least a minute. When she pulled back to look at me, her eyes were all teary.

“Oh, I found you! I was so afraid I'd never see you again. And it's been so very long. But I found you!”

Now, I've said how we'd parted on much less than the best of terms, and, of course, I'd learned, since that parting, of the Lilies' perfidy. And I'd also had my share of experiences with various women—experienced women at that—since then, so I wasn't the naïve young boy who'd never seen a girl before.

But she smelled just right, like Clarisse. And then she kissed me, and the memory, the physical memory, of our nights so long ago of make-out sessions overwhelmed me. Hannah, whom I'd actually come to be quite fond of, evaporated from my consciousness.

Eventually, reality came back to me, however. She'd pulled the truck off to the side of the street, at least, but we were standing on the sidewalk in the sort of clinch that was just not seen in public in those days. So I offered a suggestion.

“Clarisse, I can't tell you how good it makes me feel to see you, and to hold you. But, look, let's go up the street to the plaza, where we can sit under a tree and talk, catch up, you know?”

She nodded happily, and we turned north, toward the plaza.

My brain's analytical abilities were returning quickly, and I realized that, in some sense, I was suddenly consorting with someone who classified as a Nazi spy, or at least her compatriots did. I needed to deal with that.

“Hey? I was on my way to my office, I've got this job now. I ought to call my boss and tell him I've been delayed, so he won't worry about where I am.” I thought of that because there was a pay telephone, a new amenity for the dusty town of Socorro in those days, on the corner. “Maybe you ought to park your truck more carefully while I make the call. The police here just love to give parking tickets for anything they can think of.”

The subterfuge worked. She ran off toward the truck, and I called Colonel Sherhold's number. “Colonel, sorry to interrupt whatever you're doing, sir. It's Will White, and I've got a bit of an urgent request here. I've met one of the Lilies I know on the street downtown. She and I are going to walk up to the plaza, sir, and talk. If you have someone who could follow her after we're through, well, sir, we might make some progress on what's going on. Did you know Lilies were coming into town, sir?”

“Jesus Christ! I didn't know that, White. I'll get someone out there to follow her, just give me a little time, say, fifteen minutes. I'll see you when you get here. Good work, White!”

I hung up the phone set just as Clarisse walked back across the street, this time without eliciting motorists' anger.

“He's fine if I'm a bit late, no problem.” I smiled but inwardly felt like a hypocrite, the first of many such feelings.

A couple of blocks north, we found ourselves a nice park bench under a tree on the little plaza. At that time of day, we were the only people there, for which I was glad. Around lunchtime, we'd have had to share our bench.

“So you have a job?” Her euphoria under control, she was now searching for something to talk about, I sensed.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. Out here in the real world, you’ve got to have money to eat, and that means a job.” I tried to be casual, offhand. “But what’s been happening with you? It’s been, like you said, a long time.”

That seemed to embarrass her. “Oh, I guess I’ve been growing up more. I’ll be eighteen next month, you know. And, um, that also means that I’ve been doing a lot more thinking lately, thinking for myself.”

I wasn’t sure where she might be going, so I tried to remain noncommittal. “I guess that’s what people do. I know I have time to do a lot of thinking.”

“What I mean, William, is that I’ve given a lot of thought to the last conversation we had. Do you remember it?” Her look was pleading, as if she truly wanted me to remember so she wouldn’t have to repeat it.

“Sort of. We talked about the war, I think. It was a lot different back then, of course.”

“And I was talking nonsense, William. I’ve since learned more about everything, and I was talking nonsense. I’m so sorry. It’s bothered me ever since.”

That made me feel better about our having met again. “These days, it’s looking like it may be over soon. Anyway, what are you doing here in town? I didn’t think any of you, I mean, you or your sisters, were allowed to.”

“Supplies. I came in for supplies. That’s one of my tasks now. And, um, for some other business. But, listen, I’d like to stay and talk all day, but I have to get back. I’ll get in trouble if I’m too late. They expect me back around noon.”

“Supplies? Interesting. I thought you folks were self-sufficient. And supplies cost money.”

“Oh, we have lots of money. I get what I need for these monthly trips from the treasurer. She seems to have a whole box of it. Hmm. But I guess I don’t know where it comes from.”

“I’m sorry you have to go. I was hoping we could spend the day together.”

“Not this time, William, I’m sorry. But next month I could. You see, I came over yesterday and spent the night last night, at a rooming house that ... that we use. Over on the west side, north of the campus. Mrs. Hale’s. It’s run by, you know, by someone we trust. Next month, when I make my supply run, I could spend all day with you and then leave the next day in time to get back without creating suspicion. Could we do that?”

“Clarisse, I’d like that very much. I’ll figure out a day of fun things to do. We could meet here, at, oh, nine in the morning. Uh, four weeks from today?”

“Perfect!” She kissed me again, thoroughly, and jogged back south toward her truck.

I watched carefully but didn’t see anyone following her. Colonel Sherhold’s tail for her hadn’t shown up, apparently.

At least, I thought, I know when and where to meet her next month, so we ought to be able to get something arranged.

I also decided that I was going to need a new ID card that said: William White, Hypocrite First Class.

* * *

I sat on that bench in the plaza until I saw a guy I recognized from one of Colonel Sherhold's meetings approach. He must have recognized me as well, and, because I was alone, I guess, he walked right up to me.

"Where is she?"

"Gone. For now. You didn't get here in time."

"Ah, crap. Sherhold is going to be furious."

"C'mon, let's walk over there together. I'll tell him what happened, and you'll be covered. She said she had to leave, and she's on her way back to their place in the mountains now. So you would have needed a car, and you would have found yourself almost all the way to Carrizozo before you knew it." I borrowed Steve's trick of a shoulder slap. "Besides, she's coming back next month. Four weeks from today. I'm meeting her here in the plaza at nine. In the morning. You can follow her then."

"At least there's that. Any new information?"

"When she comes into town, she stays overnight at a place on the west side, north of the campus, she said, a place called 'Mrs. Hale's.' We ought to check it out."

"Good deal. Maybe Sherhold won't pitch a fit. He's sure on edge these days."

"I'm thinking that it's only going to get worse, up until that test in July. Six weeks, or whatever, ugh."

Colonel Sherhold wasn't real happy, but he did see the bright side of having time to prepare for next month. He also assigned someone to do a thorough background check on Mrs. Hale's right away.

And I went back to being invisible again, as far as the Army was concerned.

But that lasted only for a couple of weeks. About the end of May, I was summoned to the Colonel's office.

"White, have a seat. I want to show you some very interesting material we've come across. It's the first concrete evidence that your Lilies are actually involved with the old *Abwehr* network."

The reference to "your Lilies" made me flinch. "Uh, you mean beyond shooting Steve ... I mean, Master Sergeant Jennings, and having that bank-book and list of groups in their possession? Sir?"

"Right, right, of course. What I'm talking about is real-time information gathering and transfer. Have a look at this."

He passed me a photograph, rather grainy, of something sitting on the desert floor, something I couldn't identify. It appeared to be a large cylinder sticking out of the ground with its top end rounded. It was four or five times as tall as the human standing next to it, and the whole thing was surrounded by a tower made of steel beams that was in turn four times the height of the cylinder.

"Uh ..."

"That was my reaction, White. Turns out that it's a picture of what the Trinity people call 'Jumbo,' a big steel container that they were going to use for the main test. I guess they're not, now, however, so it's just sitting out there at the site." He reached a hand toward me, and I gave him back the picture. "Now to get to the point. I got that picture from Robert Schmidt, who said he got it from one of his network contacts. And there was a message with it that he saw. The people in the network think this is what is going to be tested out there, that it's the bomb. Never mind that it's obviously too big to go into an airplane, it still scares the hell out of them. Further, from the angle and so on, the Trinity people say

that the picture must have been taken from a spot east of the site. And, because it's grainy, it's probably a blow-up of a section of a bigger picture taken with a very long lens. It looks as if your Lilies took it and passed it to someone in the network."

"First, sir, with respect, they're not 'my Lilies.' I know something about them, and I met one in town a couple of weeks back, but they're not mine by any stretch of the imagination." I shrugged. "And if it scares them, so much the better, I'd say, sir. Did Schmidt give you any information about this network contact he got the picture from, sir?"

"Turns out that it's a new guy, someone we didn't know about before."

"I wonder if he has any connection to that rooming house, Mrs. Hale's. If the Lilies are taking pictures and getting them to the network, that would be an obvious pathway. Sir."

"Our thoughts exactly, White. And we've now got this new guy under surveillance. Much more of this and we'll be watching everybody in town." He shook his head in disgust. "Anyway, I wanted to ask you about where this might have been taken from. In your report about Jen ... Master Sergeant Jennings, you talked about a window-sized 'portal' that you'd used for ingress and egress."

"Yes, sir, but there's also another portal on the west side of that ridge, farther south, one that, on the maps I've seen, looks as if it has better access from inside. Remember my comments in that report about the narrow spot in the tunnel where Sergeant Jennings almost got stuck, sir?"

"Where's this other portal?"

"About a half mile south of the one we used, sir, meaning a half-mile south, or so, of where the Trinity people found Sergeant Jennings' body, sir. I'm not sure how high up the escarpment wall it is, though."

"Hmm. I'll have to discuss this with the Trinity people first, but I'm thinking that maybe there is an artillery unit around here somewhere that could use some target practice. Thanks for the information, White.

"Second thing. There's this next meeting between you and the Lily girl. When is it, in a couple of weeks?"

"Yes, sir. Two weeks from, ah, yesterday. I'd planned to spend the day with her, a long date. Of course, what I'll really be doing is watching her. If she has appointments or anything like that, I'll be able to report on them, sir."

"And there will be others keeping tabs, too." He shot me a sly grin. "Hope that doesn't spoil your fun, White."

I grinned back. "I'll keep it in mind, sir. We may, uh, disappear from sight some, but I'll make sure that we don't try to give anyone the slip for real, sir."

"You do that. And I'll tell our watchers to cut you some slack."

"Thanks, sir."

"White, I know you've been at loose ends lately, but every time I need you, you come through like a champ. I'm glad to have you on my team. And if we handle this thing in a couple of weeks right, we may be able to roll up this part of the network we didn't know about before. Keep up the good work, White. Dismissed."

Well, I thought, at least I'm good for *something*.

* * *

While waiting for Clarisse to return to town, one thing I had to do was to deal with Hannah. My relationship with her was complicated. As I've mentioned, I was quite fond of her, and she of me, too, I think. We'd spent enough time together that all of the other girls at Effie's had been leaving me to her, once their initial curiosity was satisfied. After Hannah's pantomime that first morning, there was no way they were going to let me slip through their fingers without at least a one-nighter. To tell the truth, those experiences were good for me as well—my curiosity about different shapes and sizes of girls also was satisfied, along with my teen-aged libido.

But Hannah was decidedly a working girl, so I couldn't think of her as "mine." On the other hand, feelings about such things aren't entirely rational, so I was always just a little jealous when she took one of the customers up to her room of an evening.

Similarly, I expect she'd begun to have some feelings of possessiveness about me, because after my reunion with Clarisse, she noticed the change in me, and she didn't seem altogether happy about it. I expect that some of the problem had to do with the fact that I was counting the days until Clarisse came back to town, and Hannah noticed my distraction.

Eventually, she asked me who this person was and whether we were going to Do It. Unfortunately, I didn't hear the capital letters correctly, and so naturally I asked her what it was that we might do that she was asking about. This earned me a look that informed me, in no uncertain terms, that I was the biggest nincompoop in the history of the world, if not of the entire universe. Then, to compound matters, when I figured it out I said something about how I didn't think Clarisse was that kind of girl. Big, big mistake.

But we managed to work things out. After all, she was still earning money on her back, the extra-generous trust I'd set up for her notwithstanding. She really couldn't be too jealous. Like I said, these sorts of feelings are never fully rational.

Finally, about mid-June, Clarisse turned up on her monthly trip for supplies for the Lilies. As we had agreed, we met in the town plaza, and I couldn't help but notice that she was dressed more attractively this time. Perhaps she'd seen enough examples provided by the women in Socorro to give her ideas about how to improve her wardrobe beyond the farm clothes she'd been wearing in May. My ego, naturally, assumed that she'd done it for me.

Although she was definitely dressed better, her greeting was considerably less enthusiastic this time. That was perhaps a good thing, as we were once again in public, and making a scene would not have been a wise idea.

"I've figured out a way we can spend most of the day together, William, but we won't have transportation. I need to leave the truck at a garage so it can be serviced." She looked more worried than such a simple statement would seem to warrant.

"The transportation is easy, because I have some." I smiled. "And I know you're used to calling me 'William,' but it seems so formal. Everyone I know calls me 'Will' now. I'd like it if you call me that."

"You mean, like Will Shakespeare?"

"Exactly. Tell you what. Let's get in your truck, and we can go pick up my ride. Then I'll follow you to the garage, and we can take off for the day. How about a picnic down by the river? It's green and cool with lots of birds. And, of course, the water."

"Sounds perfect. We need to talk."

I'd learned the hard way that "we need to talk" was often female code language that stood for "you're in trouble now, buster," but I tried not to worry. I was determined not to let anything spoil that day.

At first, she was surprised by and perhaps a little nervous about the Indian, but once she was tucked into the sidecar along with the lunch we assembled at the grocery store, she really started to enjoy herself. I was almost disappointed that we were going only the few miles to a place on the Rio Grande I remembered. But, I thought, we would have plenty of time for long rides in the future.

Our picnic spot was on a dry sand bar at the river's edge, one completely secluded by the riverside *bosque*, which, at that point was a dense thicket of willows set under a towering canopy of cottonwoods. We had our choice of sun or shade, and the down-river breeze kept the insects at bay. I'd borrowed one of the blankets I had at Effie's, and, with it spread on the sand, we had a perfect picnic site.

Once we got ourselves unpacked and organized, Clarisse sat down and patted the blanket beside her for me to sit as well.

"Now, uh, Will, I've got a little story to tell you. It's something I've been thinking about ever since last month when I found you in town."

Uh-oh, I thought, here it comes, whatever I'm in trouble about.

She heaved a deep sigh. "I've thought about this a lot and even rehearsed what I'd say. But now ... well, it's like I'm not sure where to begin. And some of it's going to be embarrassing. For me and maybe for you. So I need to work up to that part. I guess it starts, though, with the fact that I'm turning eighteen soon. Later this month, in fact."

"Is your birthday on July first? Like mine?"

"Huh? No, it's June twenty-fifth. Why?"

"Just wondering. See, all the boys have their birthdays on either July first or January first. I sort of figure that the Matrons did that to make things easy for themselves. But never mind. It's not important. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Huh. I never knew that. But I guess it fits with a lot of stuff I've heard about." She flipped her hair out of her eyes and took a breath. "Anyway, here's the thing. Lilies, and I'm one, like it or not, have their first babies when they're eighteen. That means we get impregnated pretty close to our eighteenth birthday, within a couple of weeks of it. That part has to do with fertility cycles. It's complicated."

At that point in my young life, I'd been living with a houseful of un-self-conscious women for quite some time, and I'd learned a lot about the mysteries of the female body and its cycles. So I just nodded as she continued.

"Now, the older Lilies don't just spring this on us younger ones like some big surprise. We learn all about it and even observe the procedure on older girls, so we know what it's all about in advance. I'll spare you the details, but it's like some kind of medical exam. All very clinical. And I'm scheduled for it next month, about four weeks from now, in fact."

I kept nodding. "I remember when you called me a 'seed-bearer'."

She looked surprised, and pleased. "Right! I never did find out if you really are, but that doesn't matter now. Now you'll understand, though, because what happens is that the impregnation procedure uses seed-bearer seed chosen by the council. They'll actually vote on whose baby I get to carry."

"I've learned a lot out here in the real world, Clarisse. And I can tell you that regular people manage it all quite differently. The Lilies have their own particular way for all this."

“I’ve figured that out, from reading and from, uh, watching the farm animals we have.” She grinned, trying, I think, to hide the embarrassment that was sneaking up on her. “And, so, well, see, I don’t want it to happen to me the Lilies’ way, all that clinical medical procedure stuff. I want it to happen the *real* way.”

By the time it all soaked into my muddled brain, she had arrived at her punch line. “And I don’t want any bunch of old ladies voting on whose baby I get. I want yours, Will. I want *your* baby.”

* * *

Needless to say, I was blind-sided. I’d thought I was in some sort of trouble, and it turned out to be something completely different. But as I thought about it more, the possibility that this was just a different sort of trouble occurred to me. And that spawned the question of whether I really wanted a baby I’d fathered to grow up in the Lilies’ world. I mean, what if it was a boy? So, as soon as I could find my voice, I responded to her with my usual eloquence.

“Uh ... ”

“And, well, the thing is, today’s the right day to make it happen. I mean, the best chance this month. And if I’m already pregnant with your baby next month when they do that medical procedure, well, ha! It won’t matter what they do or whose seed they choose. See?”

“Er ... ”

“Now, I’m pretty sure that people don’t go about this the way that our farm animals do, but I expect we can figure it out.” As she said this, she stood up and began fumbling nervously with the buttons on her blouse, starting with the top one. “It seems like, though, the first thing is to get out of our clothes.”

Things were spinning out of control almost too fast for me. I jumped up and grabbed her hands just as she was getting to an especially interesting button.

“We’ve got all day, you know.” I kissed her knuckles one by one. “No rush. And I need to know something. Something I asked you a long time ago. What do you think about my idea of getting away to somewhere? I think I mentioned Paris before, but it could be anywhere. Anywhere but here. See, I don’t want to father a child, especially not a boy, who’s going to grow up with the Lilies.”

“When you brought that up before, it scared me and I said I’d have to think about it. And I have. And I don’t want to stay with the Lilies, I want to get away, too. But I have to go back and get through that procedure, because otherwise they’ll come and find me. It’s happened to other girls who ran off before their procedures. But after the procedure, they let us alone for a long time, assuming that it works and we’re pregnant. I can get away then and no one will notice for long enough that we could *really* get away.” Her smile almost made me melt.

“I like that idea. It will give me time to figure out a strategy and put it into motion. Hmm. It sounds like we should plan to disappear in two months, assuming things work out. Then they’ll know your, ah, condition, and they’ll start ignoring you, right?”

“Right!” She cocked her head to the side. “You learned about this stuff.”

“I’ve learned about a lot of stuff, Clarisse. You’d be surprised.” I grinned. “Maybe you will be, in fact. Now, I know I said that we have all day, and we do. But I have the idea that we might want to try this more than one time. I mean, that would seem to increase chances of success. Right?”

“Oh.”

“Mmm-hmm. And you know, it might just be fun if *I* undid those buttons of yours.”

“Oh.”

I took my sweet time by starting at the bottom and working my way up her buttons to the one I'd interrupted. And when that was undone, it was her turn to grab my hands.

“I'm a little scared.”

“Clarisse, there are millions and millions of people in the world, and each and every one of them, almost, was conceived in the old-fashioned way. That means that what we're going to do is something that virtually *everyone* has done.” I smiled. “Let me tell you a joke I heard.”

The “virginity is a disease ...” joke, after she thought about it for a minute, cracked her up. And that was all it took to overcome her case of nerves.

Somewhere in there we had lunch, splashed in the river's shallows, and acquired ridiculous, all-over sunburns. And, given our teen-aged enthusiasm—and stamina—I was pretty sure that our chances of success were going to be high indeed.

It was late afternoon when I got her back to the garage where her truck was being worked on, and they had it ready. Parting, per *Romeo and Juliet*, was indeed such sweet sorrow, but it was buffered by our mutual promise to meet again in mid-July, after she had her little date with the Lilies' medical people over and done with.

The day with Clarisse had pretty much erased from my head the bigger picture, the one in which the Lilies were Nazi spies now working for the Japanese and in which Clarisse was a courier of their information. But I was rudely reminded of it when I stopped at an intersection so a pedestrian could cross in front of me—we still were polite about such things in those days—and a guy in a suit hopped into the Indian's sidecar. I recognized him, but only sort of. He didn't even say hello.

“Colonel Sherhold wants an immediate debriefing. Go there now.”

That was something I couldn't really argue with, so I took both of us to the Army's offices downtown. Inside, even though it was getting on toward dinner time, I was ushered right in to the Colonel's office.

“Afternoon, White. You have a good day, did you?”

“Sir. If your watchers have debriefed you, sir, I'm sure you know the answer to that question already. Sir.” I thought I just might be able to “sir” him to distraction.

“Don't get snippy with me, White. I told you that I'd have them cut you some slack. All we know is that you and the girl spent the day down by the river. Getting sunburned, from the looks of you.”

“Yes sir.”

“So what have you learned, White? Anything helpful?”

“Well, sir, all I learned is that she is disaffected with the Lilies and wants out. And she left her truck at a garage for service. I hope that your people saw that and have it under observation, sir.”

“We do, and it appears that the truck was being used to pass the information from the Lilies to the network. Your girl may not even know what's happening. The information was apparently concealed in the truck, and one of the mechanics at the garage was the recipient. He knows to look in a hidden compartment.”

“That's good news to me, sir. I hope she doesn't know what's happening with that information. But it sounds as if you had a productive day, sir.”

“We did, White. And it was productive because you were able to occupy that young lady’s attention all day while we made our moves. Good work, White.”

“Thank you, sir. A question, sir?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been out of the information loop a bit, sir. Is there any word on the timing of the upcoming test next month?”

“Mmm. Trinity is being very careful about that information, White. And I don’t think you have need-to-know just yet. But they’re still talking next month.”

“Yes sir.”

“Next month” echoed in my head as I thought about the mid-July meeting that Clarisse and I had planned.

* * *

Fourteen

After reporting to Colonel Sherhold, I discovered I was hungry, no doubt from all the fresh air and sunshine of the day by the river. Or something. I stopped at the downtown cafeteria and loaded up on calories before heading home. While eating, I pondered two lessons I’d learned that day: that sex on a beach is sexy indeed, but the sand tends to get into places where it shouldn’t; and that men possess body parts that do not do so well with a sunburn. At least, sitting on the cafeteria bench as I ate, I managed not to wriggle around too much as I tried to get comfortable.

At home, I discovered that I was exhausted. So, after checking in with Effie to make sure she didn’t require my services as a bouncer that evening, I went upstairs to my attic to sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night, after the sounds of revelry in the house had evolved to the usual night-time grunting and gasping, someone slipped into my room and into bed with me. I barely woke up, but I did notice that someone was there, because she cuddled. It felt good.

Imagine my surprise in the morning when I discovered that it was ultra-curvy Paula who was in bed with me. Under normal circumstances, I think that discovery would have motivated me to enjoy some fringe benefits, the morning version, but the circumstances were far from normal. Overnight my sunburn, especially the burned part of me that doesn’t usually see the light of day, had matured. I was wondering how I was going to be able to wear pants.

And I was also wondering what Paula was doing in my bed, so, when she awoke, I asked.

“Hannah told me it was OK. She seems upset with you, and, besides, she was busy last night. And I wasn’t.”

“Why is she upset with me? I always treat her like a princess.”

“You’ve got another girl now, she said.”

“And she was busy last night doing what? Playing cards?”

“It’s different. She says you’re in love with this other girl. She’s not in love with her guys, she just pretends to be. That’s her job.”

“She’s not worried that I might be in love with you, I guess.”

“Well, you’re not, are you? I mean, that’d be sweet, but really we’re just friends, right?”

I had to sigh. “Paula, before I came here, I spent a lot of time reading books. Lots and lots of books. Many of them talked about ‘love,’ but, try as I might, I could never really figure out what love *is*. Anyway, all this must mean that Hannah loves me but doesn’t think I love her. But I’m pretty sure I do, at least in some way.”

“What about this other girl?”

“I probably love her, too. But not in exactly the same way as Hannah. I hate to have Hannah mad at me, though. And I wouldn’t want you mad at me, either.”

That made her flutter her eyelashes at me. “Well, I know one way you can keep me from being mad at you.”

“Uh, well, see, I got a pretty bad sunburn yesterday. All over.”

“Really?” She stripped the sheets off us and began inspecting me, all over. “Ooh, is my little man sunburned? Mmmm, well, look at this! I guess he doesn’t care if he is.”

My friend Steve had assured me, before my first experience, that sex doesn’t hurt. The experience that morning with Paula taught me that it can, if sunburn is part of the deal. On the other hand, I found out that my sunburn wasn’t nearly as bad as I’d thought.

At least there wasn’t any sand involved.

That conversation with Paula got me to thinking about how to tell Hannah that I was going to be leaving. She’d want to know why, of course. And, despite my wish to be truthful with her, I didn’t see how it would do any good to tell her that I was planning to run off with Clarisse. One option, not a good one, but an option, would be to avoid telling Hannah anything. Just disappear. Trying to figure that one out was one of the things that kept me busy for the next month.

Another thing that kept me busy was due to the fact that Colonel Sherhold didn’t forget about me again. In fact, it was just the opposite—he actually put me to work by making me his principal advisor about Trinity issues. He discovered that I was a fast reader with good comprehension, so he introduced me, first, to the concept of triage and, second, to all his Trinity paperwork. My job was to sort that paperwork into an “ignore” pile, an “immediate action” pile, and a “re-read carefully and decide” pile. As I got things sorted and had the time, I was to start on the “re-read” pile and write suggestions on each document.

I expressed concern that I, not even a ranked Army person, a young pup, really, was being given all this responsibility, but he wasn’t having any of it.

“White, I’m certain you can do this and do it well. Remember when I called Master Sergeant Jennings a hard-ass who I was proud to have in my unit? Well, just put on your best hard-ass hat and do what you think your friend Steve Jennings would do.”

That was encouraging and made me feel better, but it was also my introduction to the notion of job-related stress.

One part of it that turned out to be of help in my personal life was that I suddenly had access to everything that Colonel Sherhold did. I felt flattered when I realized that this meant that he considered me to have the same need-to-know as his.

It was early in the first week of July when I discovered that the date for the Trinity test had been recently changed from July thirteenth to the sixteenth, to occur an hour or so before dawn, meaning

about four-thirty in the morning. That gave me a benchmark to base plans on, finally. And it also gave me just a bit more flexibility.

Clarisse came to Socorro every four weeks for supplies, on Wednesdays. The trip on which she'd found me was on May sixteenth, and her June trip, with our romp on the beach, was on the thirteenth. The July trip was scheduled for the eleventh. Her procedure, she'd told me, was scheduled for the morning of the tenth. Our tentative plan was to run off together sometime shortly after her August trip, on the eighth, by which time the other Lilies would know of her pregnancy, although not the father.

I was glad to have my calendar, because it let me circle important dates well in advance instead of trying to remember them. July eleventh got two circles, and the sixteenth got one.

My first few days of paperwork triage were learning days, something that Colonel Sherhold was smart enough to insist on—I think I would have insisted if he hadn't. It surprised me how much of the paper that crossed his desk he consigned to the “ignore” pile, and when he began asking me why he'd done that to a particular document, I began to understand why. So much of the Army's paperwork was either gobbledygook or worthless information on various irrelevant topics that such triage was the only way to find the important things.

On the other hand, the documents appropriate for the “immediate action” pile were pretty obvious, even to me. Even some of those weren't truly important, just from a superior officer and required some sort of timely response.

It turned out that it was the “re-read carefully and decide” documents that were the most interesting. And it was in that category that I discovered one that shot down the tentative plan that Clarisse and I had made.

It seemed that higher-ups had decided that, sometime shortly after the Trinity test, whenever it was going to be, there was to be a full-scale assault on the Lilies' Colony. The evidence of their traitorous activity, in part due to my work, had persuaded the Army that the Lilies were sufficiently dangerous to the war effort that they had to be put out of business.

* * *

Reading all those documents as quickly as I could, in order to make the effort “triage” rather than full-scale reading and analysis, wouldn't accurately be described as boring, but it was definitely soporific—I quickly learned how easy it was to fall asleep at my desk. One thing that would always wake me right up was a mention of my name, or Steve's, or something about the Lilies.

All three of those wake-ups were in that memo about the assault on the Colony. What *wasn't* in there was a specific date; it just mentioned that the assault would happen sometime soon after the test.

Consequently, it became an imperative for me that I figure out how to get Clarisse out of there before the test. After all, they could decide to move in on the seventeenth. And getting her out on the sixteenth didn't seem like a smart strategy—who knew what would actually happen when the new type of bomb detonated?

At least, I thought, we had our July eleventh meeting to make whatever plans we would need. Obviously, if the Lilies were going to be put out of business, they wouldn't be out looking for Clarisse when she vanished. We wouldn't have to wait for August to make our move.

All of this circled around and around in my head as I read through the documents that came to Colonel Sherhold. Little by little, amid the circling of my personal situation, a fourth wake-up word soaked into my head, “Gadget.” It seemed that the people at Los Alamos were using that term to

describe their new bomb, although I couldn't tell if it was an official code word or just a nickname. When I ran across a memo mentioning that the Gadget, without some of its critical components, was supposed to show up at Trinity during the first week of July, I knew to watch for increased tension on the part of just about everyone. And that tension would undoubtedly increase significantly when the missing critical components showed up. That, I learned, would be on July twelfth.

Meanwhile, as June turned to July and the firm date for the Trinity test was set, more and more people came to work at the Trinity site. Along with all of the various merchants and service providers in town, Effie's had more business than they could handle. That helped me, actually, because it meant that everyone, Hannah in particular, was too busy to bother about me. I could come and go without anyone noticing. And, with all the hubbub, even Colonel Sherhold's attention was too distracted to really pay attention to me, at least on a day-to-day level.

All that made my July eleventh meeting with Clarisse easy. As usual, we met at nine in the morning at "our" bench on the plaza, and, as in June, she was right on time. And this time, she was dressed in her overalls, flannel shirt, and boots again. I guess the better clothes in June were part of her agenda to seduce me. And, to tell the truth, I guess they worked.

She was even more reserved than before, almost shy—our hug of greeting was proper enough even for that public place.

"I'm so glad to see you again!" I was trying to break the ice.

"Oh, me, too, Will. I've missed you. And it's been a tough month."

"But you're here now, and you can let go and relax."

"Yesterday was pretty horrible. I'd hate to think that's the right way to make a baby." She looked like she might cry.

I took her hand, stroked it, and smiled. "You liked our way better, huh?"

That made her blush. "Did I ever. But, well, I don't know about today. Um, I'm not feeling like ..."

I interrupted her as gently as I could. "I wasn't thinking of anything like last month. For one thing, we've got some planning to do."

"I'm sorry I don't feel like it, but after yesterday, well, I think I need some time to recuperate."

"Did they hurt you?"

"Oh, no, it's not that. I just feel sort of violated. Like a laboratory rat or something. I'll be fine after some time with myself, I'm sure." Then her expression cheered up, and she looked around to make sure we were alone. "But the bright spot here is that I think our plan might have worked. I think maybe I'm already pregnant, not from yesterday, I mean."

I hadn't thought about how I'd feel if she told me that, so my reaction was un-premeditated—I had to work hard not to burst into tears, for some reason I still don't understand. Maybe that's what happens to all guys when they hear they're going to be a father.

I think that it was appropriate for me to grab her into a somewhat better hug. It sure seemed as if she liked it.

After a while, I leaned back and kissed the tip of her nose. "I didn't really make plans for today. I thought we'd talk about the future and maybe have lunch at a place I know close to here. Do you need to do anything? Like last month with the truck?"

"Well, I'm supposed to have the truck serviced each month. It's old, and we want to keep it going as long as we can. But I drove by, and they're closed today, for some reason. I guess it'll be OK."

“Well, that makes things easy. Is this a comfortable place to sit and talk?”

“I like it here. We don’t have trees like this at home.”

“All I remember, from when I was little, was looking over a tall wall of logs at the tops of pine trees. Nothing like this. Nothing like those trees down by the river, either.”

“That was so beautiful, by the river.” She poked me in the ribs. “For lots of reasons.”

“Glad to hear you think so. I’ve been thinking of that as the best day of my life. Ever.”

“I want more days like that.”

“Well, you know, so do I, but I’m also concerned that too many of those days might just kill me. Whew!”

She poked me in the ribs again. “Baloney. You loved it, just as I did.”

“Yeah, well, sure I did. But I’m going to have to stay in shape to do all that again.” I leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Anyway, we need to talk about our plans. See, they need to change.”

“Change? How?”

“I’m not sure how I can explain it. Partly, maybe mostly, it has to do with my job, which I really can’t explain to you. And I hate to say it this way, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to trust me, if things are going to work out for us.”

“Trust you about what?”

“You told me that you needed to wait until next month to get away, so that the Lilies would have started ignoring you and not come after you. Right?”

“Right. They’re very concerned about runaways at this point in my, er, development.”

“What if I told you that I know for sure that by next month they won’t be in a position to worry about you? That you can get away now, or in the next few days, with no worries about them?”

“What are you talking about?”

I shrugged. “This is the part where you have to trust me.”

“Oh.”

“I know some things that I can’t explain to you, or anyone, for that matter. But those things mean that the Lilies won’t be coming after you. So you can get away sooner than next month.”

“Um, OK. So, suppose I do trust you. What’s your plan?”

“Can you still disappear into the Labyrinth like you could when we first met?”

“Sure. It’s not quite as easy, but it’s still easy enough.”

“So, what I’d like you to do is to disappear into the Labyrinth and then find your way to that outside gate on the northeast quadrant, the gate that seems to be a sort of escape route. You know where I mean?”

“Sure. In fact, we found it unlocked for some reason and locked it back up. But it’s easy to get out of there from the inside.”

“Good. So, if you get out that gate, you can follow the trail to where it meets the trail up the hill. I’ll be waiting for you there. And then, off we go.”

“Wow. Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“When?”

“This next Saturday night. Bring whatever stuff you don’t want to leave behind. And wear good walking shoes.”

* * *

It was a huge relief to me when she agreed. I’d worried that she would balk and need persuasion.

But she just looked at me, smiled, and said “OK. I’ll be there.”

That allowed us to spend the rest of our day together talking about future plans. Paris got a lot of attention. And I took her to that cafeteria I’d come to like so much for lunch, her first experience at such a place. She declared that she had an excuse to eat for two now, and put away more food than I ever could have imagined. I began wondering if she would turn into a taller version of Paula.

We spent the afternoon walking and talking. Our wanderings took us all over town, including to the School of Mines, a park-like campus that was mostly deserted due to summer break. That was my first look at the place, and I fell in love with it. Some years later, I managed to enroll there, by taking advantage of the GI Bill and passing some entrance tests, and I eventually got a teaching position for a while, teaching a course I called “Mining Shakespeare.” It seemed to be popular even with those engineering students, who were definitely not English majors.

The day had to end, of course, and I saw her to her truck, in which she headed off to Mrs. Hale’s for the night. She was to pick up supplies in the morning and head back, so I wouldn’t see her until early Sunday morning. We set our meet-up for one-thirty, so she’d have plenty of time to sneak away into the Labyrinth and then outside, and so we’d both have time to hike to the Indian and drive across the desert before daylight.

Then it was a matter of my figuring out what we were going to do when we got across that desert. I really didn’t want to go AWOL again, especially not with someone I needed to take care of, but finding housing in Socorro had become harder than ever. If everything went according to plan, we’d arrive in town before dawn on Sunday, so we’d have all day to get that sorted out. And I had three days, or most of three days, to decide how to go about that sorting.

My first order of business, though, was to report to Colonel Sherhold on my day with Clarisse. He’d agreed to call off his watchers if I reported faithfully.

I was surprised, pleasantly, when I didn’t have to wait long to see him.

“Sir. Special Agent Will White reporting, sir.”

“You have a good day today, White?”

“A fine day, sir. I hope your people had a chance to find whatever messages might have been hidden in her truck, sir. She mentioned that she was bit perplexed to find the garage closed, sir.”

“That’s what we intended, White. And you did a good job of keeping her away from it all day. We found the package that the truck was supposed to deliver.” He smiled like a shark might smile then laughed. “We’re going to substitute some faked-up photos for them. Maybe if the Army and Navy can’t beat the Japs in battles, we can scare them to death with fake photos of what’s happening at Trinity.”

“I hope you still believe that Clarisse, that’s her name, sir, that she doesn’t know about this information delivery, sir.”

“White, I have no reason to think that your girl is complicit in the spying activity. She’s a Lily, yes. But I believe her to be innocent of willful espionage.”

I could tell that my knees were wobbly. “Colonel, may I please have permission to sit down?”

He looked surprised, but waved at a side chair. “Of course, White. What’s the problem?”

“Thank you, sir.” I tried to decide where to begin. “Sir, you’ve read that interview I did with Major Bernstein, I believe. And, well, there’s one part of it that’s not completely true.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes, sir. The fabricated part concerns my age. You see, when I first approached Master Sergeant Jennings, when he was the recruiter in Carrizozo, it was in early August of last year, 1944. I tried to join up, but when he asked me my age, I answered as honestly as I could, and I said ‘sixteen’.”

He stared at me, no doubt doing math in his head, and he looked surprised.

“Yes, sir, you’re correct. I’m now just a few days over seventeen, and I’ve already been an Army CIC Special Agent for a year. You see, Major Bernstein, after our interview that you’ve read, he decided to sort of reset my birthday for me to be eighteen last year. Sir.”

“Mmm. All I can say is that I’m very glad that you haven’t been wounded in action or anything like that, White. The paperwork, assuming that it was discovered that you’re a minor, would have been horrendous. But what does this have to do with anything now? The Army thinks you’re eighteen, and that’s good enough for me.”

“Well, sir, you’ve read my history. Master Sergeant Jennings was the closest thing I ever had to a father. I consider him to have been my best friend as well. And, ah, without him now, I’ve been trying to serve my country and figure out how to grow up at the same time. And part of growing up has to do with women. What I’m getting to, sir, is that I need to rescue that young woman, Clarisse, the one that I saw today, from the Lilies Colony before the assault that’s in planning happens. So I need to be over there this weekend. Sir.”

“You know that the big test is on Monday morning, about an hour before dawn?”

“Yes, sir. That’s why we’ve planned to meet on Saturday night. Late. Who knows what the test is going to do to that place? Sir.”

He nodded and spun around in his desk chair to look out the window that was behind him. I could tell that he was thinking about it all.

After at least two minutes he turned back to me. “Right. White, I’m going to write you an order to provide us with critical recon over there on the east side of the Oscuras this weekend. You get over there Saturday evening and stay until you’ve seen enough. Write me a report. You’ll have written orders to this effect in the morning.”

“Thank you, sir. Sir, from what I’ve seen in your correspondence, it appears that I may be—I’d probably *better* be—stopped by the Trinity security people. We’ll see. I’ll be sure to report on that as well.”

“Good thinking, White. I have to say, you’re the finest seventeen-year-old agent I’ve ever had working for me. Let me know what happens, White.”

“I will, sir. But what’s *going* to happen, sir? When they detonate that new type of bomb, I mean?”

“Excellent question, White. And, as far as I’ve heard, no one really knows. There’s one theory that has been discounted, that it will set the atmosphere on fire. I kind of doubt that myself, although I’m no scientist. But what they say is, assuming you’re not next it and get vaporized, that there will be basically

three things you'll notice. The closer you are, the more you'll notice them, if they don't just kill you. First, a bright flash of light, lasting a few seconds, I guess. Then, second, some ground shaking. Not a real earthquake, but what they call a 'seismic wave' in the ground as it passes by. And, third, noise. A big bang or rumbling, depending on how far away you are. It'll happen this way because light travels fastest and sound slowest. The seismic waves are in the middle."

"How far is far enough? You know, to be safe?"

"White, you're just full of good questions, aren't you? No one knows, White. But some of the scientists and other big-wigs who are going to be there will be something like five miles or so away, maybe a bit more, in what they call 'shelters.' And these are important people. So that should be far enough."

"Thank you, sir." I couldn't help but remember that the Lilies' escarpment was only a little farther than that from ground zero.

* * *

Colonel Sherhold was true to his promise of orders, and, when I picked them up the next morning, he told me that he'd called over to Trinity and warned the head of security there about the importance of my mission. I should, he said, be able to get access to wherever I needed to.

I also had a chat with Effie, to warn her that I would be bringing an outside guest up to my attic apartment for an unspecified time. It took some explaining, but it seemed that Hannah had decided to move on anyway and had disappeared. The income from her trust would follow her, of course, so she was set financially. It hurt a little that she didn't say goodbye to me, but, then, I can't complain too much. I'm sure she felt betrayed.

Then it was a matter of cooling my heels until Saturday night, and I had another experience with clocks that seemed to slow down almost to a stop. But eventually my departure time arrived, and I set out for points east on the Indian with a couple of blankets for Clarisse and food and water for the two of us in the sidecar. And a handgun. It felt odd carrying one, but I wasn't going to take chances. If the Lilies shot at us like they had Steve, I was darn sure going to shoot back.

I planned my approach for late in the day Saturday, so that, if I were stopped by Trinity security, it would still be light and it wouldn't seem so suspicious to them. I'm glad I did, because they stopped me and were hugely suspicious, but, fortunately, they'd been briefed. My ID and orders got me past their checkpoint. I arrived at the desert end of the familiar southeastern trail shortly after dark, and hid the Indian carefully away. Because I didn't want to spend any more time on the mountainside above the Valley than necessary, I settled in for a short nap before my hike in.

I woke a few hours later, with the nearly quarter moon just about to disappear over the Oscuras, and thought I'd screwed up and slept too long. But the watch that Clarisse had given me said it was only eleven-thirty, so I had a couple of hours to get up and down the mountain to meet her, plenty of time. It was about a quarter after one when I hid myself in the rocks near the junction of the northeastern trail and the spur to the portal there. And then I settled in to wait.

And wait, and wait some more. When dawn finally lightened the eastern sky, I knew something was wrong, but not what. Before sunrise, I crept to the portal's gate, only to find it locked, and there were no new footprints in the dust outside it. So she hadn't made it out.

Maybe, I thought, she just got the day wrong. Maybe I'll see her tomorrow morning at one-thirty, Monday morning.

Or maybe she changed her mind. Or maybe she got caught. Or maybe ...

It was a long, long day for me. Fortunately, I'd brought the food and water I had, but that really didn't help me pass the time; it just made it less hungry and thirsty time to be passed. At least I managed to catch up on some of the sleep I'd missed while waiting the night before.

Sunday night, the moon was a little bigger and the sky, at first, was as clear as ever, but it began to cloud up around midnight. I was a nervous wreck as it approached one-thirty Monday morning. But, as before, the time eventually passed, and I finally realized it was getting on toward two. At that point, my case of nerves gave way to the shakes—probably partly from lack of food and water, as I'd been stingy on myself—and I had trouble getting them under control. But still no Clarisse.

I must have dozed off, because I came alert just as the sky was beginning to hint at dawn. One of those piñon jays that inhabit the scrublands in those parts was sitting in a juniper tree over my head and squawking at me. My watch told me that it was a twenty past five. But the big test, I recalled, had been originally set for four-thirty or so. Surely that would have wakened me. Later, I found that they had postponed it an hour due to weather, but at the time, I was totally confused as well as increasingly panicked that Clarisse hadn't come and anxious about why.

All my confusion was cleared up, though, a few minutes later, when there was a remarkably bright flash that lingered in the western sky, not lightning but something even more dramatic. A few seconds later the ground vibrated enough to have knocked me down, I think, if I hadn't already been lying down. And, more seconds later, there was a thunderclap followed by rumbling echoes for almost a minute, all the while with the ground shaking. When a rock from up the hill where I was hiding bounced past my head, I jumped up and gathered my things.

I started down the spur trail toward the portal, but rocks bouncing down the hillside made me hide behind a big boulder, hoping that *it* wouldn't be displaced. And still the ground movement continued, even though the other phenomena had faded. I couldn't help but remember my friend Steve's comment, so long ago, that it must be a helluva weapon.

From my protection in the shelter of the big boulder, I could see the Valley floor, and it was beginning to fill with avalanche debris. The last I saw of the stable gate, where I'd led Honey out so long ago, was an odd glow, as if molten rock was oozing out of it. Then a new slide covered it over. From where I was sheltering just downhill of the big boulder, I could see the northeastern portal's gate, and the same thing happened there as well. Apparently, the entire Labyrinth had filled with lava, and a good part of the mountain was crumbling into the Valley.

I remembered the hot floors in the lower levels of the Labyrinth and the hot springs, and wondered whether there would be an actual volcanic eruption. But that never materialized—the lava just sort of oozed out and was buried by the landslides.

I don't know how long the seismic activity went on, but when it finally stopped, I realized that I wouldn't have to walk up over the ridge and then back down to the Indian to get out of there. And I also realized, with a sharp flash of pain, that Clarisse and my unborn baby were buried inside the Labyrinth somewhere, probably encased in cooling lava, lost to me forever. And I thought of Honey, which made the pain all the worse. Of course, all the other Lilies were in there, too, but I couldn't seem to get worked up about them.

I've read, since then, about the phenomenon of "shell-shock," and I'm sure that I was suffering from that, on top of my previous thirty hours of anxiety, as I walked out through the remains of that log-palisade maze, scrambling over slide debris on my way.

But get out I did, and I found the Indian waiting for me and ready to start up and ride out of there. I must have been operating on some sort of automatic pilot to be able to get back to Socorro and find

Effie's. Everyone there, first thing in the morning as it was for them, was still groggy and wondering what that big noise had been, and I had the presence of mind to remember orders to describe it as an accident at a big ammunitions depot out in the desert.

And then I slept for two days.

Hannah, it turned out, hadn't gone far—she'd just left Effie's and found a room for herself at, ironically, Mrs. Hale's. It was easy to find her. And, bless her soul, she listened to my sorry tale with sympathy and took me into her embrace forever after. When I finally lost her a few years ago, after more than fifty years, it was even worse for me than when I lost Clarisse and the baby. We, Hannah and I, had a wonderful and full life together, and, now that I'm coming to the end of mine, I'm glad to have been able to tell my story without worrying about what anyone might think.

Regrets? Well, not really. Maybe it would have been nice to have had children. And grandchildren. But Hannah couldn't, because of something to do with her, ah, job before I met her, I guess. But she wound up teaching elementary school kids, and, as I mentioned, I wound up teaching at the college. So we both had lots of contact with young people.

And, y'know what? That God-damned treasure that I lugged around so many times can just sit in that old mineshaft and rot, as far as I'm concerned.

* * *

Epilogue

In his last letter to me, my good friend LeRoi's characterization of Will White's narrative as a "remarkable ... fantastic ... amazing tale" certainly resonated with me, both as I was reading it the first time and every time since. But I'm a theoretical physicist, not a historian, so telling fact from fiction is not something I have real expertise for. However, a couple of interesting things have grabbed my attention.

You see, when I first moved from Cambridge, after my post-doc at MIT, to New Mexico to join the Santa Fe Institute, I became interested in southwestern history. That got me started on the early years of the Spanish conquistadors and so on. And when I accepted an invitation to serve in an advisory position to the Theoretical Physics Division at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and got a security clearance, I used that clearance to satisfy my curiosity about more recent aspects of southwestern history by reading various World War II era documents about the Manhattan Project and Trinity that were still classified.

Imagine my surprise when I found various bits and pieces of information in White's narrative that I knew to be true from those classified documents but that were not in the public domain. It's like he must have been there, just as he described. And if those bits and pieces hang together so well, perhaps, just perhaps, all the other parts are also true, including the business about Coronado's great treasure.

And there was a second, completely unrelated, hint that Will White's story might just have credibility.

I mentioned that Santa Fe has a reputation based on its arts community, and that includes both the museums and a wide variety of galleries—maybe more galleries per capita than anywhere else in the world. Many of them, of course, cater to the tourist trade, but many others cater to people who come to Santa Fe specifically to purchase true collectables, pieces running to five, six, and even seven figures.

Now, I was fortunate enough, in my twenties, to have used some of my skills as an expert in nonlinear systems to play the stock market successfully. I quit that game after I realized that there were events so unpredictable—the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City was an example—that my system would not always work, and since then I’ve been carefully investing in, among other things, art work that seems to have lasting value.

One day, fairly early in my Santa Fe experience, I was walking east up Palace, down by the El Dorado, and I saw in the window of an up-scale gallery a remarkable piece, a four-inch long sculpture of a grizzly bear, a Native American fetish of some considerable vintage, apparently done in gold. At the time, I assumed it was a reproduction in plate, but on inquiry I discovered it was an original artifact from a collection. The sales person, who told me that it had been appraised as being hundreds of years old, let me hold it, and I was surprised to find that it weighed at least three pounds, so it wasn’t hollow. I asked about its provenance and was told that it had been on the market for a while, originally offered from the estate of an Efigenia Williams, a long-time Santa Fe philanthropist and artist of some repute. Would I like, she asked, to see some of Efigenia’s original pieces?

At the time I was too new to Santa Fe to invest so much in an unfamiliar genre, but now I wish I’d bought it.

I can’t help but think that it’s no wonder the debris flow in Nogal Canyon had my friend LeRoi so upset.

* * *

When Angela and I moved up here to Colorado, the first thing that happened was that we were thrust into an investigation of a wildfire in a remote area that she called the Valley of Death, a wildfire that had killed two dozen people. We’d not even had time, really, to get settled.

It was some time before I had a chance to go fly-fishing with Hal Weathers, my boss at the Middle Park Advanced Research Center, where I had taken the job of Chief Scientist. He and I had met in Santa Fe during that investigation into the death of Senator O’Malley’s daughter I mentioned before, and when he needed help up in Colorado at the new institute he started, he called on me.

When we finally did make the time to head down to Parshall and fish the Colorado River there, I made a point of showing Hal my bamboo rod set, and he practically fell over himself in envy. I let him fish one for a while, but I think he really didn’t get into it, probably because he was afraid he’d break it. I worry about that, too, in fact, every time I fish one of them. And I’m positively paranoid about getting one caught in a closing car door. That may be the number one nemesis of fly rods, but it’s not going to happen to those beauties LeRoi left me.

All that gold may be buried forever, but LeRoi’s legacy to me, that remarkable set of bamboo fly rods, deserves tender loving care, and I’m going to make sure they get it.

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