

A Liquidation Sanction

A Phoenix novel

By

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Other books by Kreig W. Vens

Prosecuted Innocence

Trail of Bodies

Tears of Blood

Shadow of the River

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To Judi:
You are amazing beyond words.

When plotting the theft of another man's property, particularly if said property is as precious as the only son of a United States federal judge; one must be prepared, if caught, to suffer the consequences.

Prologue

On 19 April 1995, six years before nineteen Muslim extremists commandeered commercial airliners and flew them into select high-profile east coast targets, domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, obsessed with teaching the United States government a hard lesson, constructed a deadly truck bomb. He packed agricultural fertilizer and diesel fuel into the back of a rented Ryder box truck and detonated the lethal cocktail it in front of the Albert P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. One hundred sixty-eight civilians and federal workers, including nineteen children, lost their lives.

A week later the federal government responded to the rising threat of domestic terrorism with a clandestine, pre-dawn meeting held inside the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, a bomb-proof subterranean bunker located beneath the East Wing of the White House. Seated at the long conference table in comfortable swivel chairs, wall-mounted large screen televisions silently playing the major news networks in the background, the President of the United States sat with department heads of the intelligence-gathering community. Represented were the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Security Agency, and the United States Attorney General's Office; the meeting's agenda: to develop a definitive plan of action in response to the ever-increasing nuisance of 'homegrown terrorists.'

In accordance with the government's official policy "...we do not negotiate with terrorists...", and after ninety minutes of haggling the pros and cons of circumventing the United States' constitution, a consensus was reached and course of action outlined.

The president of the United States picked up a pen and affixed his signature to a highly classified National Security Directive, and in so doing modified former President Gerald Ford's 1976 Executive Order forbidding the intelligence community of the United States government from engaging in assassinations, both at home and abroad.

POTUS returned the pen to the table, leaned back in his chair, rubbed sleep-deprived eyes and drew in a deep breath. "May the people of this great nation never discover what we have set in motion here today," he said with a weary sigh, "and may the good Lord above forgive us...one and all."

Washington D.C.'s political war machine never had much subscribed to the power of prayer, so even before the president's signature had a chance to dry, the shadowy movers and shakers inside the beltway went to work. They recalled a coterie of Special Forces operatives from overseas, and to further compartmentalize the operation, trained those individuals at a top secret desert facility know as *Paradise Ranch*, located deep within the mysterious—and according to official government channels, nonexistent—Area 51 northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada.

A man named Phoenix had been one of those elite warriors.

Chapter 1

RJ Clayburn sat on the porch chain-smoking. He knew cigarettes were nothing more than a slow form of suicide, but didn't care. For the last fifteen years of his life Clayburn had welcomed death as an escape. He listlessly watched two kids pedal their bicycles down the tree-lined street, remembering when he could do that, ride a bicycle.

His thoughts returned, as they often did, to the accident that had left him wheelchair-bound; to the dark imagine of Colton Blaine standing on his doorstep on that cold rainy night. He often wondered if he had simply closed the door, not invited Blaine inside, would that have slammed the door on the bad karma that seemed to follow the Clayburn household. Would his life have turned out different?

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Colton Blaine's senior year in high school had not been a happy one. His mother had passed, and while death relieved her suffering, it had not softened the blow for Colton Blaine. The organs cancer had not sucked the life out of, chemotherapy and radiation treatments had. During the last months of life, Eva-Lynn Stokes withered to a gaunt, ninety-eight pound emaciated shell of her former self. And if the loss of his mother wasn't trauma enough for then teenage Blaine, two days after the funeral, on his eighteenth birthday, Blaine's cantankerous, lazy, pot-smoking stepfather shoved a hastily-packed military surplus duffle against his chest and unceremoniously evicted him from the trailer.

It was a cold, rainy October night when Blaine pedaled his bicycle up his best friend's driveway and knocked on the door. Drenched to the bone, his worldly possessions slung over his shoulder, Blaine demurely asked if he could set up housekeeping in the shed attached to the back of the Clayburn's garage. Richard James "RJ" Clayburn mumbled something about 'loser', and then waved Blaine inside.

Sleep in the garden shed indeed! Mother Clayburn shooed Blaine off to a hot shower while she whipped together a plateful of leftover meatloaf, roasted garlic mashed potatoes and gravy, with a side order of creamed corn and broccoli. When Blaine returned to the kitchen there was a steaming mug of hot chocolate next to the heaping plate.

Blaine spent the first few nights snuggled inside a sleeping bag on RJ's bedroom floor, but by the end of the week, Mrs. C., queen of garage sale and thrift store shopping managed to procure a serviceable daybed and chest of drawers. And not unlike a puppy brought home from the shelter, Colton Blaine was adopted into the Clayburn household and eventually moved into the unused attic bedroom.

With a lot of help from Mrs. C. and RJ and younger sister Sara, Colton Blaine squeaked through his senior year and managed to graduate in the bottom third of his class.

At six foot four, two hundred sixty-five pounds, Blaine was a blonde hair, fair skinned, blue-eyed Teddy bear off the field, but quickly earned a reputation as a fearsome, hard-hitting Youngstown State University Penguin defensive lineman, able to crush offensive rushers with ridiculous ease.

“I’m going to drop down to channel nine and see if I can raise a Smokey before he kills somebody,” Gizmo said, and then dialed in the emergency channel and called for the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

For eight consecutive years Silver Fox and Gizmo had consistently won safety awards for annually logging over 100,000 incident-free miles while hauling dry freight between Buffalo, New York, and the greater Warren-Youngstown metropolitan corridor. Things were about to change.

One of the Cadillac’s rear seat passengers bounced forward and cajoled the driver to nudge the little red VW ahead of them out of their path. The teen driver instead whipped the stolen Cadillac into the left lane and almost clipped the back of the box trailer in the passing lane.

Gizmo couldn’t dial the CB back to the trucker’s channel fast enough. “Silver Fox,” he screamed into the microphone, “he’s coming up on the outside. Damn fool’s going to pass you on the shoulder!”

“I’ve got my eyeball on him,” Silver Fox said. For a moment he thought about crowding the aggressive driver into the median strip, but decided it wasn’t worth anyone getting hurt over so eased off the throttle instead.

RJ’s eyes darted between the inside and outside mirrors, and at one point he even turned in the seat and looked over his shoulder out the rear window. The Cadillac was gone. “I have no idea where that knucklehead went,” he said aloud.

The Caddy pulled alongside Silver Fox, two wheels on the shoulder, two riding the medium and kicking up clumps of grass and roadside debris. When it pulled alongside the cab, Silver Fox turned to give them his best scowl.

The passenger window rolled down and a boy no older than fourteen leaned out. He pointed the stainless steel 9 mm Taurus he’d found in the locked glove box he’d pried open, and fired two shots at Silver Fox’s rig, the weapon almost bucking out of his hand.

“Holy bat shit!” Silver Fox screamed as his front left tire disintegrated. He slammed on the brakes, and fought for control of the rig as he steered away from the carload of future wanted poster candidates.

Hidden in the truck’s blind spot, the Clayburns’ subcompact was sucked into the trailer’s vortex like a dust bunny to a Kirby. The tiny VW disintegrated in a shower of sparks and the high-pitch screech of sheet metal being violently ripped apart. The cargo-laden trailer rolled over the subcompact as effortlessly as a Humvee rolls over a sand dune.

Mrs. C. was pronounced dead at the scene. RJ was placed on a life-flight helicopter and flown to St. Elizabeth Hospital’s trauma center, where he languished in a coma for weeks, Sara and Colton Blaine at his side. Once he regained consciousness he was transferred to a rehabilitation facility, where he spent the next two months learning how to function as a paraplegic.

Although his physical injuries were catastrophic, RJ Clayburn’s head injury had had the most profound effect on his personality. Already derisive, sarcastic and condescending, RJ became even more mean-spirited and unpredictable, exacerbated when under stress. He treated those who cared about him most with the greatest contempt, as if they had been driving the tractor-trailer rig.

RJ did, however, temper his tongue when in his cousin Johnny’s Clayburn’s presence; because Cousin Johnny was the only other person who harbored as much anger about how his life had turned out as did RJ. That and Cousin Johnny twice had knocked RJ out of the wheelchair when he got too lippy for the older Clayburn’s liking. Sara and Blaine, however, remained favorite targets of RJ’s acerbic tongue lashings.

It took several years before the Clayburn’s \$1.5 million dollar wrongful death/personal injury lawsuit against Erik Marshal (aka Silver Fox), and the Gordon Brothers’ Trucking Company wound its way through the courts.

RJ, Sara, and Blaine arrived at the courthouse in anticipation of finally, after five long years, seeing the light of day.

And a short day it was.

During a status conference hearing in Mahoning County Common Pleas Court, Judge David Seymore had exercised sound jurisprudence. He dismissed the Clayburn family's lawsuit, citing for the record the truck driver's attempt to control the runaway semi did not hold him culpable in the eyes of the law. Nor, vicariously, was his employer responsible for the behavior of the hoodlums in the Cadillac.

A week after the accident the stolen car had been located partially submerged in the Mahoning River near the Division Street Bridge, a known dumping ground to police for stolen cars. The judge had gone so far as to commend Silver Fox's driving skills, noting for the record that while unfortunate for the Clayburn family, Marshal's quick actions probably saved many other lives. Two weeks after his twenty-fourth birthday, RJ Clayburn sat in the courtroom gape-mouthed, while Judge Seymore awarded summary judgment in favor of the defendants—case dismissed.

Happy belated birthday RJ.

RJ watched in shocked disbelief as the defendants *walked* from the courtroom glad handing and slapping one another on the back. He turned his malevolent glare on the judge as he, too, stepped from the bench, black robe billowing behind like a full sail, and *walked* from the courtroom.

Nearly twenty years had passed since that day, and RJ's cancerous yearning for revenge still burbled below the surface. It was not rage in remission; it was metastasized evil waiting for opportunity to knock.

Chapter 2

“You are not going to believe this shit, RJ,” Sara said as she walked through the living room of the house they shared and out onto the front porch. She handed RJ two sheets of computer paper.

He set the pages in his lap without looking at them. “What am I going to see?” he said as he stubbed out a cigarette in the overflowing ashtray on the rail, and lit another.

“The goose just shit a golden egg,” she said with a sardonic grin.

Sara leaned over his shoulder and watched RJ prop his cigarette in the mound of butts and pick up the pages from his lap. He finished reading and slowly turned to her, then re-read the pages a second time and looked at her with a face that did not belying his astonishment.

“How did you find this?”

Sara gave her best *innocent-little-girl* performance. She coyly shifted from foot to foot and explained. “For grins and giggles I did a people search of the old man’s name on AOL, again, and that popped up.” She nodded to the papers in his lap. “I looked at the profile and knew it had to be his kid. It’s either a new account, or I missed it the last time I checked.”

“Of course it’s him.” RJ picked up the pages as if made of delicate parchment. “Same last name, the age is about right...who else could it be?”

RJ, never one to give a compliment kind of guy, surprised Sara when he took a hold of her hand and brought it to his lips with a gentle kiss.

“My dear, you are a genius.” RJ dropped his hands to the wheelchair, spun himself around and rolled into the house. “Come on, it’s time for some long overdue payback.”

RJ viewed Sara’s perchance discovery of Judge David Seymore’s kid on AOL not so much serendipitous, but as divine providence—sociopaths do weird thinking like that.

He launched the plan to insinuate himself into the boy’s life he had been forging in his mind’s eye for years. Sara sat in at the computer and typed, while RJ dictated. They quickly learned through young Seymore’s postings how he was less than discreet with the people he allowed on his America On Line ‘Buddy List’, and even less circumspect if they were of the female persuasion. Like many young people his age, Seymore had the dangerous tendency of posting for all to see far too many details about his personal life. It was a mistake that would forever change his life.

The first thing RJ and Sara did was build a fictitious profile. At RJ’s direction, Sara visited several Internet sites where aspiring young actors, actresses and models indiscriminately post photographs and detailed biographies—often without parental supervision—with hope of a Cinderella-like discovery by a big name movie or television producer. Sadly, more predators than Hollywood moguls peruse those sites. RJ and Sara spent the afternoon creating an ersatz, yet believable AOL profile hosted by one fictional *Michelle O’Kelly*.

The Clayburn’s *Michelle* was a seventeen-year-old girl who lived in Jefferson, Ohio, a stone’s throw away from the private boys’ academy where Seymore resided, according to his profile. *Michelle* indicated she was shy, a little on the ditzy side, liked making new friends, was a bit boy crazy, and beginning to wonder about sex; personality traits designed to attract the attention of a horn dog like Seymore. Included with the profile was a picture of a pretty coed with soulful hazel eyes and fire-red hair Sara had filched from one of the young actor sites. When finished, Sara logged onto the anonymity of the ‘*dark web*’ and posted *Michelle*’s page so it could not be traced back to the Clayburn’s ISP address.

Over the next several weeks, Clayburn, as *Michelle O’Kelly*, sent Seymore daily IMs and instant messages. She invited him to view her page, and join her buddy list. The boy fell for the ruse hook-

line-and sinker; you could also toss in the fishing rod, tackle box, bass boat and trailer, too. And just that easily, RJ Clayburn became a part of Livingston Todd Seymore's life.

Michelle and Seymore were soon chatting, via instant messaging, two and three times a week. Seymore viewed *Michelle* as the next notch on his bedpost, and Clayburn's *Michelle* toyed with him. She played coy, begged off invitations to meet in person with such believable excuses as: "...gotta' babysit my nephew..." "...grounded this week, missed curfew..."; "...going to dinner with parents, today's mom's B-day..."

Twice they'd talked on the telephone, with Sara playing the part of *Michelle*. At RJ's direction, she kept the calls brief by telling Seymore she was using her dad's cell phone without his permission, and if she ever got caught she would "...be, like, grounded, like, until, like, forever..."

The big moment came during one of their instant message sessions. Seymore boasted of a place called Grumpy Granny's, a bar he liked to 'chill' at in Geneva-on-the-Lake. He embellished his relationship with the gruff proprietor. Seymore told *Michelle* he and the owner were "cool with each other" and assured *Michelle* he could sneak her inside "...like, no prob-lem-o..." where they could get to know one another over cocktails and see what happens.

Clayburn's *Michelle* played to Seymore's ego, fanned the fire going by telling him how mature she thought he was to hang out in a bar. She also let him know she could hardly wait to meet him face to face. Clayburn nearly fell out of his wheelchair laughing when Seymore emailed *Michelle* the 'personal picture' she'd requested, a shirtless selfie. The picture Seymore sent had obviously been taken with a cell phone camera in front of a bathroom mirror. He showed just enough flesh and pubic man jungle to deduce he was naked, the camera angled discreetly shy of his private parts.

Sara photoshoped the image, cropped away the risqué lower portion, and then printed the head and shoulders snapshot.

RJ had patiently waited years for opportunity to knock, and now it was pounding on his door like nobody's business.

Ready to move the charade to phase two, RJ called Cousin Johnny Clayburn.

Chapter 3

As a little boy Johnny Clayburn had always been an outsider, with few friends. He had two pastimes; either he spent countless hours bow hunting, or with his nose buried in books checked out of the library that had anything to do with aviation. He used his paper route money to buy model airplanes, and would then spend countless hours meticulously painting, decaling and assembling them. No one was in the least surprised when little Johnny Clayburn grew up and enlisted in the United States Air Force's delayed entry program. He shipped out for basic training at Lackland Air Force Base a week after graduation. Always the loner, he didn't bother his family with the news he'd aced the pre-test for fighter pilot training school.

Not all who applied were accepted to the rigorous training program. The Lone Ranger had finally found something to belong to, something bigger than himself, a camaraderie of the elite. That afternoon he and several other flight school candidates treated themselves to a few celebratory beers, and a pick-up game of softball. It was during the third inning when everything went to hell in a hand basket for Johnny Clayburn.

With the score tied at one apiece, Clayburn rocketed a burner across home plate, and the batter sent it back to him at double the velocity. Johnny barely had enough time to turn his head to avoid taking a direct hit between the eyes. The sledgehammer blow impacted his left cheek and fractured the ocular orbit bone, permanently damaging the oculomotor nerve that controls movement of the eyeball and eyelid. The damage to Clayburn's eye left him with a permanently dilated, cloudy pupil that looked like a cataract, with zero peripheral vision in the left eye. On occasion, and without warning, the eye rolled around the socket and gave him the droopy, hangdog look of a rheumy-eyed basset hound.

The impairment disqualified him from fighter pilot school, and embarrassment drove him to hide the infirmity behind dark sunglasses. Johnny Clayburn received an Administrative Medical Discharge from the U.S. Air Force. He returned to Ohio with a cinder block-size chip on his shoulder, and an unquenchable thirst for Budweiser. Because the incident occurred while 'active duty', and because it had taken place on a military installation, Clayburn received a life-changing, lump-sum settlement and full disability pension, compliments of Uncle Sam.

Although the infirmity disqualified him as a fighter- or commercial pilot, years later Johnny Clayburn was cleared for a private pilot certificate. He used some of the government's largess to finance the purchase of a used six-seat Cessna 206.

When Cousin RJ reached out to him with a plan to fly up north and kidnap a federal judge's son, Johnny, who was usually pissed off at the world anyhow, didn't give the scheme much thought. He went along without question mainly because he was bored, with nothing better to do until hunting season opened.

"When we finish with the judge," RJ lifted his bottle from the table with an evil cat-like grin, "we'll be a little richer, and he'll be minus one bratty kid. Hell, the good judge should thank us for doing him the favor."

RJ and Johnny Clayburn clicked long neck beer bottles to seal the deal.

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Nearing the end of the flight, Johnny Clayburn took over the Cessna's controls from Cousin Sara, whom he had been teaching to fly the plan. He banked thirty degrees out over Lake Erie,

leveled the wing tips, and brought the Cessna in for a soft landing at Burke Lakefront Airport, runway 6 L, in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. Johnny continued along the taxiway until they reached the tie down area on the east side of the terminal. He brought the aircraft to a stop and shut down the engine.

First to disembark was Sara, who jumped to the tarmac and walked around the plane to the rear cargo door. Colton Blaine hit the ground next, and by the time Sara returned with a folding wheelchair, Blaine had lifted RJ from the back passenger seat and was waiting to set him down in the chair.

Johnny dropped to the ground and handed Blaine the airplane's keys. While the latter unpacked their bags and equipment and set them on the ground under the wing, Clayburn secured the Cessna with two fore and one aft tie down straps.

Blaine's size alone usually drew unwanted attention, so he remained with the airplane. And no matter how hard people try not to, they tend to take that extra-long glance at someone wheelchair-bound. When she entered a room Sara's exotic beauty turned most men's heads, except those testosterone depleted or gay. Because he was able to hide his milky, wandering eye behind tinted lenses, and was the least likely to be remembered, RJ tasked Johnny with renting ground transportation.

Burke Lakefront Airport is a small airstrip that caters predominantly to light business class jets and flight schools. Due to its minimal security, the Clayburn clan moved unnoticed through the terminal with silent, military precision, like a *Mission Impossible* team.

Sara played the part of dedicated wife or dutiful healthcare provider and pushed RJ's wheelchair through the terminal. Johnny used stolen traveler's checks and a counterfeit driver's license (procured by Sara from the Dayton Bureau of Motor Vehicles office where she worked) to rent a windowless extended-body cargo van. Johnny completed the necessary paperwork without incident, and then drove the rented van to the tie down area and helped Blaine load their luggage inside.

Sara and RJ exited the terminal through the front doors and rolled down the sloped sidewalk, stopping near the entrance to the USS Cod exhibit, a declassified World War II submarine anchored in the harbor adjacent to the airport, and offering public tours.

After the van was loaded, Johnny pulled from the airport and followed N. Marginal Road until he reached the USS Cod exhibit. He stopped parallel to the curb and Sara bounded into the front passenger seat. Blaine stepped from the cargo hold and, like a human forklift, hoisted both RJ and the wheelchair off the sidewalk and deposited them inside. He climbed back into the van and pushed the sliding door closed; elapsed time, thirteen seconds.

They were westbound on N. Marginal Road when a station wagon filled with uniformed Cub Scouts—its driver focused on a cell phone map rather than look out the window to see the exhibit he was trying to find—drifted across the center line and forced Johnny over the curb to avoid a collision. Clayburn climbed from the van fighting for control of his volatile temper. He intercepted Mr. Station Wagon near the back bumper.

"I am so sorry, mister." Mr. Station Wagon reached for his wallet. "I have insurance. I'll pay for any damages."

They walked to the passenger side and saw the van had sideswiped a fire hydrant. There was a fresh crease in the sheet metal, along with a pale yellow stripe from fire hydrant paint between the wheel well and bumper; cosmetic damage that did not interfere with the vehicle's operation.

Mr. Station Wagon offered Clayburn his driver's license and insurance card.

Clayburn, however, forced an amiable smile and spoke with a jaw clenched. "Don't worry about it, dude. My brother owns a body shop; he'll fix it for nothing."

Clayburn returned to the van with Mr. Station Wagon tight on his heels and chirping in his ear. He pulled several bills from his wallet, and said, "Please...I feel horrible. At least let me give you something for your trouble."

Clayburn ignored him and climbed behind the steering wheel. "Forget it."

He tried to close the door and Mr. Station Wagon grabbed a hold of the frame to offer further protest. He quickly closed his pie hole and backed away when Johnny slipped his sunglasses to the tip of his nose and glared at him with the wandering eye. Johnny drove away and left the man standing curbside, apologizing for the mishap.

Clayburn made the traffic light at E. 9th Street in downtown Cleveland, crossed over the interstate, and after another quick left turn, joined the eastbound rush-hour stampede escaping Cleveland.

Johnny merged onto Interstate 90 to the collective sigh of relief from the back of the van. They settled back and headed for their destination an hour's drive east, Ashtabula County.

Chapter 4

Ashtabula, Ohio's largest county, lies in the northeast corner of the state and abuts the Lake Erie shoreline. Home to quaint communities with pastoral names like Roaming Shores, Rock Creek, Cherry Valley and Geneva-on-the-Lake, the latter a lakefront getaway halfway between Cleveland, and Erie, Pennsylvania, is the Midwest's answer to Brooklyn's Coney Island.

During the winter months Geneva-on-the-Lake's twelve hundred residents batten down the hatches and hunker inside against lake effect blizzards and frigid Arctic vortexes that roar out of Canada and across Lake Erie with hurricane force. It's during the summer months, however, between the Memorial and Labor Day holidays, that Geneva-on-the-Lake's population swells to ten times its norm. Its garish, two-lane mile-long *Strip* becomes a family-oriented playground of amusement parks and waterslides, carnival rides and penny arcades, restaurants and nightclubs, and a PGA quality golf course—Disneyland on a budget. But a short drive out of town, and you would find yourself navigating the labyrinth of scenic country roads, winding gravel lanes, and expansive vineyards that rival Napa Valley.

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After Sara's inadvertent discovery of Todd Seymore on AOL, RJ telephoned Aunt Bessie Fenton, née Clayburn, and asked if the *Lodge* was still standing. When she told him it was, RJ offered to rent it for a week, maybe two. Aunt Bessie gave her nephew a sound ear-thrashing about how you don't charge kinfolk, and then she and husband Charlie went about sprucing the place up.

The Fentons were in their late sixties; Bessie short and squat as a tea kettle, with a pallid complexion and mouse gray-brown hair and piercing hazel eyes. Charlie, tall and lanky as a scarecrow, had unkempt mostly gray hair and a perpetual two days' growth of stubble on his chin, even after he shaved.

Thirty years ago Charlie cleared a seventy-foot-wide swath of land at the back of his property near the forest line. Accessible by a gravel tractor lane that paralleled one hundred fifty acres of mature cornfield, he spent weeks brush hogging and leveling the parcel. He hand-dug stumps and excavated an outhouse pit, poured a six inch thick cement pad, and then brought in a seventeen-by-sixty-foot, two-bedroom singlewide mobile home. Secured to a double course of cinderblocks, aluminum skirting applied for aesthetics; he'd completed the project with a ten by ten Wolmanized-wood porch that faced the forest.

Concealed behind the cornfield a thousand feet off the highway, the *Lodge* was a fall hunting season man cave. Charlie and friends used it during the off season to play poker, sample his homemade sour mash recipe, and occasionally smoke a little herb.

After RJ's call, Charlie and Bessie spent two days cleaning the trailer and trimming weeds around the porch. Charlie filled and tested the gasoline-operated generator that powered the lights and appliances, made certain everything was in working order. He topped off the one hundred gallon propane tank that serviced the stove, refrigerator and furnace for those winter poker games, and then poured a five gallon bucket of emulsified lime into the latrine pit.

It was while cleaning the interior that Charlie asked what RJ's sudden interest in the *Lodge* was all about, seeing how he hadn't visited the farm since the accident all those years ago. Bessie dropped the sponge she'd been using to clean the inside of the refrigerator into a bucket of soapy disinfectant water, and said, "He didn't say, Charles, and I didn't ask."

Charles was Bessie's way of telling him *the conversation is over*. She blew an errant strand of hair away from her brow and ducked her head back inside the refrigerator. "Probably best you don't ask either."

The Clayburns were a tight knit group; those who'd married into the clan knew they would always be outsiders, not a real Clayburn.

Bessie smiled as she closed and locked the door, confident when RJ and the others arrived they would find the *Lodge* the spiffy-clean playhouse they all remembered as children. Back in the day when they'd pretended to be pioneers living in the hinterland, hundreds of miles from civilization.

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Johnny Clayburn exited Interstate 90 at the SR 534 exit and turned north, smart phone satellite imagery and a Garmin GPS guided him to Aunt Bessie's driveway without a glitch. Johnny Clayburn drove up the chipped, oil-stained concrete driveway and stopped the van next to the screened-in front porch. He stepped out of the van with a *déjà' vu* glance around.

Aunt Bessie's place hadn't changed much since his last visit, decades ago. The towering pin oak with the tire swing they'd climbed as children was gone, replaced by twin crimson maples. Overflowing flower baskets still hung from the eaves, purple geraniums and red and yellow begonias swaying with the gentle breeze. Behind the yellow brick house the detached three car garage and century-old red barn, the latter wearing a fresh coat of red paint, hadn't changed a bit. With the exception of a few new slate roof tiles, the barn looked as it had when first erected in the early 1900s, no doubt during an old fashion barn-raising.

Bessie and Charlie stepped from the porch and greeted their guests.

Johnny's firm handshake was cordial but absent affection. He tolerated Charlie because he was married to Aunt Bessie, "...but that don't make him no Clayburn, no sir."

Johnny remembered Charlie as a tall, solid-framed workhorse, but that was before an adolescent growth spurt in the sixth grade. Back then everyone had looked tall to the twelve-year-old. These days Charlie's middle was a little doughy, and his face seemed to have sunk in upon itself. He also noticed Charlie's crop of chestnut brown hair and Elvis mutton chops had turned mostly silver.

"Howdy, Aunt Bessie," Johnny stepped forward, picked her up and twirled her around like a little girl. With a warm hug and peck to each cheek, he set her down on the ground.

Aunt Bessie didn't look much different from the last time he'd seen her. She still hovered a finger's width over five feet, buxom as ever, with mixed-color hair that rested on top of her head in a harsh bun. Clayburn grinned, well almost grinned, at how the loose skin on the back of her arms still flapped like a bed sheet on a laundry line and always reminded him of a turkey's waddle.

Sara walked around the van and Aunt Bessie's eyes widened. She abruptly shoved her nephew aside and intercepted her niece near the bumper. It had been years since she laid eyes on Sara; some distant relative's wake or wedding. She couldn't remember which and wasn't sure there was much of a difference.

Sara, the Clayburn's ugly duckling, was obviously no longer the gangly preteen she remembered. She had blossomed into a beautiful swan. Time had not been kind to Sara, it had been downright generous. Sara's chocolate-brown hair was tied in a long plated rope that hung to the middle of her back. Her soulful brown eyes were highlighted with flecks of green, and augmented a swarthy complexion and perfect white teeth. Her niece possessed the exotic Polynesian beauty men

drool over. Had Bessie not been present on the night of Sara’s birth, she would have put up the deed to the farm her niece had been adopted.

Blaine climbed from the cargo hold and deposited RJ in the wheelchair Sara set up on the driveway. Blaine lumbered along behind RJ, hands jammed into his pockets. They joined the others and Blaine timidly raised a hand and waved to Aunt Bessie and Charlie.

Bessie Fenton could take or leave Colton Blaine, but since that crazy sister-in-law of hers—What could be expected, she wasn’t a real Clayburn?—had years ago decided to include the boy as extended family, she was at least cordial. “How-do, Colt?”

The big man dipped his head, and said, “Doin’ fine Miss Bessie.” He knew better than to call her *aunt*.

Driveway greetings complete, Charlie invited everyone inside for a slice of strawberry-rhubarb pie and coffee. Blaine squatted down, made ready to lift RJ and the wheelchair to the porch, but RJ waved him off.

“No thanks, Charlie. We’ve been traveling all day and want to get settled in; maybe visit the Strip for a cocktail, and then get some rest.”

What RJ Clayburn wanted more than a ‘cocktail’ and ‘some rest’ was to get his electronics equipment unloaded and set up, and then visit the place called Grumpy Granny’s.

Sara and Colt busied themselves carrying equipment into the trailer—Asus C-300 Chrome laptop computer; battery-operated miniature WiFi personal hotspot enabling Internet connection via broadband cellular towers; a digital Uniden Bearcat programmable police/weather scanner; and three disposable cell phones—while RJ connected USB and patch cables together, plugged everything into surge protector power strips, and then fired up his command center in a corner of the living room. Satisfied all was operational, he and Johnny left for Grumpy Granny’s in nearby Geneva-on-the-Lake, the bar young Seymore had bragged to *Michelle* about.

Chapter 5

When the Clayburns arrived at Grumpy Granny's, Johnny parked on New Street and jumped from the van. He slid his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose and spent a few minutes staring at the colorful military murals painted on the side of the building. He slid the sunglasses back in place, gave a one finger salute to the U.S. Air Force logo, and then walked around the van and dragged out RJ's wheelchair.

RJ unbuckled his seat belt and lowered himself to the floor between the seats, and half-scotched, half-crawled to the sliding door in the cargo hold. He didn't expect Johnny to help him out of the van, it wasn't his style, neither was it Johnny's. RJ settled into the wheelchair and followed Johnny to the establishment's front door.

RJ rang the buzzer and waited. When no one answered, he rang a second time, this time holding his finger on the button until he got a response.

"Get your damn finger off the buzzer, wiseass," a gruff voice crackled from the speaker.

"Sorry, wasn't sure it was working," RJ said, although the obnoxious buzzer could plainly be heard outside of the building.

"What do you need?"

"My friend here needs need a Budweiser, and I need to talk to you. Open the door."

Frank Gunther, Grumpy Granny's proprietor, stood behind the bar staring at the video monitor covering the front entrance, and in particular the guy in the wheelchair. "You guys ex-military?" he said.

"I'm not," RJ thumbed over his shoulder, "but my friend here is; former Air Force. He'd like to join."

Frank didn't like the looks of the two characters outside his door. But not letting them it would draw more attention than if he opened the door. He would give the big guy an application, and then deep-six it after he ushered them along. Frank buzzed the door open and stepped around the bar, his hand hovering close to the KA-Bar military survival knife he kept strapped to his belt.

The Clayburns met Frank in the middle of the bar. Without so much as a glance at the décor, RJ said, "I have a lucrative business proposition for you."

"I don't allow no dope sold in the bar," Frank said.

"It's not dope I'm interested in." RJ pushed his wheelchair to one of the booths, and said, "Why don't you grab my friend a Bud, and then you and I can sit down and have a friendly conversation." RJ nodded to the knife on Frank's belt. "And we ain't here to rob you."

Frank gave them his hardest scowl. When neither broke eye contact, he walked behind the bar and poured a draft. He set it on the table and took a seat on the edge of the booth. "What's on your mind then?"

RJ got straight to the point, while Johnny gave a tight thank you nod for the beer and walked around admiring the airplane lithographs hanging on the walls.

RJ showed Gunther the picture of Todd Seymore that Sara had cropped and printed. Initially the bar owner denied knowing the kid, but RJ easily overrode the dithering with an appeal to Gunther's avarice. He reached into the Fanny pack attached to the wheelchair and waved an envelope filled with money in Frank's face. And had that not worked, RJ had every intention of threatening Frank with an anonymous complaint to state liquor control board for providing booze to underage kids. Plan B became unnecessary when Gunther saw the stack of twenties and fifties RJ had fanned across the table while he explained their interest in the kid.

Gunther admitted that the kid came into the bar *occasionally*, and for the bargain basement sum of five thousand dollars would, with no questions asked, set the kid up for the snatch. Johnny took a seat across from Frank and glared at him with the evil eye. Frank settled for half his original asking price.

RJ slid a *half-up-front* stipend across the table with promise of the remainder when the job was finished. He also gave Frank the number to one of several burner cell phones back at the trailer, and then left instructions to call when the kid showed up on Friday afternoon.

“And how do you know he’ll be here Friday?”

RJ smiled a pointed-tooth, feline grin, and said, “Oh, he’ll be here...you just make the call.”

Before they left the bar, Johnny stepped in front of Frank and eased his dark glasses into place, followed up with the promise he would personally return and nail Frank’s testicles to the bar and set the place on fire if he ripped them off or called the cops.

There was something in the big blonde’s cold, watery eyes—especially the one that rolled around like an errant pinball—that made Frank a believer.

All that was left to do was reel the fish in. Two days from now, RJ Clayburn’s *Michelle* would lead young Seymore to Grumpy Granny’s by his little brain.

They returned to the trailer and Clayburn’s *Michelle* emailed Seymore the long awaited invitation to meet in person. To all but guarantee compliance, RJ attached a special file to the email. Whenever Seymore got around to checking his email he would find the proverbial dangling carrot. *Michelle*’s invitation to meet on Friday afternoon came with a .jpg attachment, a photo of a Trojan condom.

Chapter 6

The prestigious Grand River Academy, located in rural Austinburg, Ohio, is an exclusive, all-male boarding school. For nearly one hundred eighty-five years it has served the physical, intellectual and moral needs of youngsters, grades nine through twelve. It advertises a challenging curriculum for the scholastically advanced student, as well as remedial courses for youngsters experiencing difficulty reaching their potential in the public school system. The Grand River Academy—nationally recognized for classroom sizes that boast a ten-to-one pupil/teacher ratio—offers non-military, nonsectarian college preparatory courses, along with a variety of interscholastic sports—soccer, basketball, wrestling, baseball, tennis, to name a few. There were also afternoon activities for boys not athletically inclined. Some of the country’s bluest-blood is alumni; or their children have attended the esteemed school.

The academy’s immaculately manicured two hundred acre sprawling campus is replete with century-old hickory and oak trees and postcard perfect lawns to rival the most prestigious golf course. Its appealing blend of historic and modern buildings gives the campus an Ivy League ambience.

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Livingston “Todd” Seymore, age seventeen and a junior, stood an inch over six feet and weighed a lean one hundred seventy-seven pounds. With deep indigo eyes that bordered on iridescent, and the lithe build of a wrestler, Seymore’s swarthy good looks could easily have given George Clooney or Brad Pitt a run for their money as *People* magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive”, had Seymore been so inclined.

Jerry Kork, another seventeen-year-old junior, was a handsome, medium-skinned black kid. He wore his hair close-cropped, and with the gangly limbs of a marionette, Kork was the Grand River Academy basketball team’s answer to LeBron James. The *class clown*, he was fiercely proud of his African-American heritage and spoke with perfect elocution, except when he dropped into his “black-speak” routine to parody long-held white prejudices.

Claude Wesley Hart, great-grandson of Cooper Tires founder Claude E. Hart, at eighteen was the only senior in the group. Everything about Wes Hart was average. He wore his sable-brown hair an average length, had unremarkable brown eyes, and while neither tall nor short, was a little pudgy around the middle but not fat. Hart’s life goal upon graduation had been engraved on a silver spoon a birth. He would attend college, followed by four years of law school (he was currently prospecting Columbia and Yale), where he would specialize in intellectual property rights law. After passing the bar, which in his mind was a given, he would marry, have a few kids and settle into a cushy, middle six-figure income as an associate partner with his father’s well-established New York City law firm.

As mundane as Wes Hart was, Mark Lamp was a bounce-off-the-wall clinical neurotic. He resembled a walking picket fence—thin as a rail, pale as a vampire—who wore his auburn hair longer than most kids his age. Bangs hung to his eyebrows and an unruly flip spilled over his collar. A jittery, nervous hypochondriac, it was a wonder Lamp had survived to see his sixteenth birthday. Over the years he had *self-diagnosed* every incurable disease medical dictionaries defined, or the Internet offered. Twice he had tried to convince the family physician he was plagued with a debilitating malady yet to be discovered. That earned him a few sessions with the family shrink. In

the event of an asthma attack Lamp always carried with him an over the counter nebulizer, but had never been *officially* diagnosed as an asthma sufferer.

Zak Duncan, the newest member and baby of the group, joined them shortly after transferring to the academy at the beginning of the spring semester. Duncan had turned fifteen the previous month and stood five feet seven inches tall. He weighed in at one hundred sixty-five pounds of solid muscle. Two weeks after his arrival at GRA, he shattered the school's long-standing bench press record with an impressive five-rep set of two hundred fifty-five pounds. Duncan, sturdy as a fire hydrant, with a Californian's smooth surfer tan, he wore his blondish-white hair in a tight crew cut. He sported pencil-thin dark eyebrows over piercing crystal-blue eyes, and was often the recipient of the groups good natured teasing about his rugged good looks and working class roots.

The tight-knit group of overachievers had been given the sobriquet "the five Musketeers" by the chief of campus security. Their IQ categorization was off the charts. Todd Seymore's 131 "High Superior" was the group's low tide; all the way up to Duncan's high tide 146 "Genius" classification. The group generally avoided the puerile campus cliques, not because they were aloof or snobbish, rather, it was because their superior intellectual repartee usually ran far above the other students' level of comprehension.

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Grand River Academy West Hall

Todd Seymore strolled into the dorm room he shared with Wes Hart, stark as the day he'd been born, towel-drying his short jet-black hair. It was not that Seymore necessarily subscribed to the clothes-free European naturalism philosophy of "freedom of mind and body", it was how his blatant nudity outside of the locker room exasperated his classmates. While his family liked to claim Seymore precocious, most others found him annoying.

Jerry Kork's lanky six foot-three-inch frame was stretched across the foot of Seymore's bunk, head and shoulders propped against the block wall, thumbing through the current issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He glanced up when Seymore entered the room and shook his head. "Put some damn clothes on, you exhibitionist." Kork turned to Seymore's roommate. "Wes, how do you put up with him strutting around naked all the time?"

Hart shrugged his shoulders, and said, "To be perfectly honest, Jerry, I've learned to ignore him most of the time."

Sprawled on the floor between the beds playing a video game, Lamp and Duncan glanced up from the Samsung tablet, and then quickly diverted their eyes.

"So it's my fault," Seymore waded up his wet towel and threw it at Kork, "you guys are hung up about the human body?" He pulled a fresh pair of boxers out of his chest of drawers and stepped into them.

From where he sat in front of his computer, Hart rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, and said, "Todd, spare us the French Riviera stroll-along-the-beach-naked story and get dressed. We'd like to get out of here before the sun explodes into a black star in...oh, about five billion years."

"It's true." Seymore spoke over his shoulder as he rummaged through his closet, and then finished dressing. "When I was twelve years old my grandfather flew us all to France—"

Kork bounced to the edge of the bed and cut Seymore short. “Anyone who’s heard Todd’s French-Riviera, nude-beach-story...raise your hand.”

Four sets of hands shot into the air like a Fourth of July grand finale.

“Know what your problem is, Jerry?”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, oh wise one?” Kork said.

“You’re still pissed off because Mother Nature robbed you of your rightful heritage,”

Seymore said from the floor where he pulled on a pair of beige colored hiking boots. “I mean, aren’t all you blacks supposed to be...*gifted* down below?”

“I got enough to get by,” Kork retorted dryly.

“True,” Seymore said while lacing up his shoes, “as long as you’re by yourself.”

“Shee-it,” Kork dropped into his black-speak persona. “Seymore, da’ only reason you great granddaddy blueblood be bringin’ my peoples o’ here was so you great grandma be knowin’ what a real man be like.”

Lamp chuckled, but Lamp always chuckled, even when he was the butt of the joke, which was often. He brushed the Beatle bangs from his eyes, shut down the tablet and slid it into its carrying case.

Seymore leapt from the floor with forced impatience. “What are you guys waiting for?” He started for the door. “Time’s a wasting.”

The Musketeer’s jostled and shoved their way through the door, except for Lamp. They spilled into the hallway like a raucous group of inmates unleashed on the exercise yard. On their way down the hall they leaped up and swatted drop ceiling tiles; hooted and hollered and pounded on the doors they passed. Although highly intelligent, they acted at times like the immature kids they still were.

Chief McCord stepped into the corridor to investigate the commotion, and they crashed against one another like a collapsing row of dominos.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen...and I use the term *gentlemen* liberally.”

Seymore stepped forward and said, “How goes it, Chief?”

“It goes.” McCord stabbed his fingers into the air, bounced and shimmied side to side like a geriatric rapper. “And how goes it with you, Mr. Seymore?”

It had been decades since Jason McCord took an early retirement from a small village police department in southern Ohio to accept the position as director of campus security at Grand River Academy. Twenty plus years later he still managed to get along well with most of the boys, while cautiously strolling the outer fringes of teen argot, knowing full well an attempt to engage in *hipster-of-the-day* repartee with children a third his age would subject him to behind the back ridicule.

“It goes.” Seymore thumbed over his shoulder. “We’re going out.”

“And where, pray tell, are the Musketeers venturing on this beautiful summer afternoon?”

Kork’s sardonic wisecracks frequently cruised in the double entendre’s fast lane. “We’re going fishing for chicks and thought we’d take Todd’s...” his eyes fell to Seymore’s crotch, “...little worm along for bait.”

McCord suppressed a grin, for he too had once been young—back when Fred Flintstone was housebreaking Dino. The group’s sniggling quickly abated when confronted with the chief’s stoic gaze. “Gentlemen, let us pretend you’re speaking with an adult—one who has the authority to restrict your movements to campus.”

Kork offered a perfunctory salute and half-hearted apology. “Sorry, Chief. We’re headed to the lake to check out the Strip.”

“And you’ll be returning before curfew,” McCord said, his eyes holding court specifically with Seymore.

The Musketeers replied “Yes, sir.” with unrehearsed boy band harmony, and it truly was a shame none of them could carry a tune without a wheelbarrow, because boy bands get all the chicks.

For the next few minutes Chief McCord absolutely bored them to tears with an impromptu lecture on the virtues of self-restraint. Interwoven with warnings about the dangers of alcohol, the demon weed, and the horrors of STDs contracted through fraternization with loose women; nothing any self-respecting, hormone-charged teenage boy gave even a moment’s consideration.

The group burst from West Hall to a cloudless blue sky—frequently referred to in overcast northeast Ohio as a miracle—anxious to be under way. They raced each other to College Street, where Hart’s new *used* car sat in the student parking lot awaiting its first road trip.

They reached the car and waited for Wes to unlock the doors. Seymore’s voice dripped with salacious mischief. “You guys think McCord and his old lady still...you know...do it?”

Kork shrugged his boney shoulders, and said, “Who cares as long as we don’t have to watch?”

Seymore draped an arm over Kork’s shoulder and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “Stick with me, bro, I got something lined up. I’ll see if maybe she has a friend.”

Kork’s face puckered as he lifted Seymore’s arm off his shoulder like it was a piece of rancid meat. “Step off, you weird-ass cracker. And I ain’t your bro...*bro*...” Kork dropped Seymore to his knees with a backhand swat to the crotch. “You’re too tiny to be a brother.”

The boys piled into Wes’s silver metallic BMW sedan and headed toward Lake Erie for an afternoon of fun in the sun, oblivious to the dark clouds gathering just over the horizon.

Chapter 7

Hart pulled into the public parking lot, which was little more than a detritus-strewn dusty field, a block off SR 531, a.k.a. Lake Road, a.k.a. the Strip. He parked toward the back of the lot well away from other vehicles, whose occupants oftentimes were less than courteous when throwing open car doors. Before he could turn off the engine the doors sprang open and the Musketeers bailed out like someone had tossed a live skunk into the backseat.

“Lock the doors,” Wes hollered.

Kork reared back with sardonic incredulity. He gently patted the car roof, and said, “What, Wes? Are you telling us the chick chariot doesn’t come with automatic door locks?” He scoffed. “What a scrapheap.”

“They’re broke and I haven’t had a chance to get them fixed,” Hart retorted.

Kork leaned his arms on the roof and waited until Hart climbed from the car, then said, “The next time your old man buys you a car, Wes, tell him to test the door locks *before* he kicks the tires.”

Hart flipped off Kork over the roof line. “My old man didn’t buy the car, Jerry. I did. I used money from my trust fund.”

Kork grinned. He loved to agitate Hart, mainly because it was so easy to do. “Then it’s about time you climb off some of that moldy money your great granddaddy blueblood left you, Wes, and get the car fixed.”

“If the door locks bother you that much, Jer—” Two can play the agitation game, “—you can always *walk* back.”

Kork’s teasing grin quickly turned to a sour sneer. “You call me ‘*Jer*’ again, Hart, and I’ll fix you up with a size thirteen up your rich white ass.”

It was no secret Hart tolerated Kork, and only because the others liked him. As far as he was concerned, Kork could ride home on the bus...the back of the bus.

“Why don’t you guys kiss and make up?” Duncan shouldered past the others. “Because I don’t feel like listening to the two of you bitch at each other all day.”

The group turned and looked at the normally reticent freshman.

“Watch your mouth, *underclassman*,” Hart warned as seriously as the smirk on his face allowed. “I’ll put you on report for vulgarity and insubordination.”

“Yeah?” Duncan stopped long enough to give Hart a mock shudder, and then continued toward the carnival-like thoroughfare. “Now you’ve done it, Wes, I never get to sleep tonight...thanks.”

Kork dropped to his knees beside the car and threw his hands into the air with Baptist supplication. “Can’t we all just get along?” he wailed.

“Well,” Lamp brought his hands together with a sharp report, “today has the promise of a fun cruise on the Titanic.”

“Come on guys.” Seymore trotted after Duncan. “Let’s see if we can find the nude beach.”

Hart groaned and shook his head. “Honestly, Todd, is unleashing your dick all you ever think about?”

“Where to first?” Duncan asked as they’d reached the congested sidewalk with its overflow crowd.

The suggestions were as varied as the group: Hart opted for the put-put course a block from where they’d parked the car; Kork wanted to visit Woody’s World Arcade, the basketball toss game in particular; Duncan favored the Screaming Eagle GoKart track at the Adventure Zone; and Lamp,

as usual, acquiesced with “Whatever you guys want to do is fine by me.” Seymore suggested they start the afternoon at Grumpy Granny’s, where he planned to meet his Internet date, and knock back a few cocktails.

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Grumpy Granny’s Bar and Grill was the best un-kept secret at the Grand River Academy. All the Musketeers had visited Grumpy Granny’s at one time or another, although Lamp was not much of a fan of the place, to consume drinks at five times the going rate. Seymore, however, was the only one enamored with hanging out in the bar.

Located at the Strip’s midpoint, the corner of New Street and Lake Road, the squat cinderblock building’s New Street-facing wall displayed full color military logos painted on the exterior. The proprietor wore a military buzz cut and long beard, both of which were heavily flecked with silver. Although he looked like a relic of a bygone era, Gunther’s tattooed arms were still thick as tree trunks, and at two hundred fifty plus pounds, he stood six-six in his stocking feet. His size and gruff demeanor alone were discouragement enough for even the most impertinent trouble maker. There were but two rules at Grumpy Granny’s: rule 1) be good or be gone; rule 2) take your sissy ass credit/debit card to Starbucks and treat yourself to a French caramel iced latte, because Frank Gunther dealt only in cash.

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The group declined to join him and Seymore waved them off with a short obscenity-laced tirade. He dashed across the street between steady streams of bumper-to-bumper traffic.

The entrance to Grumpy Granny’s for the under twenty-one crowd was a short walk down New Street. Those not old enough to be inside the bar entered via the loading dock behind the building, where you pounded on the thick, vault-like steel door until Frank answered...or didn’t.

Seymore climbed the steps to the freight dock and pounded three times. He waited a few minutes, got no answer, and thumped his fist against the door a second time. Several more minutes passed, and still Frank did not answer. He turned to leave, but before he reached the bottom step, Seymore heard the interior security bolts slam back. He turned and ran back up to the loading dock as the door flew open and Frank’s bulk filled the doorway.

“What do you want, boy?”

The routine was the same every time. At six-one Seymore was no dwarf, but still had to roll onto the balls of his feet to look Frank in the eye. “Scotch and Coke,” he said with a disarming grin.

“You got cash?”

Seymore reached into the pocket of his tan cargo shorts and pulled out a wad of bills. Frank liberated a ten off the top, and said, “Cover charge; I got overhead and the cops want their cut too.”

Frank leaned his head and shoulders out the door for a quick left-right-left peek. Satisfied no one was watching, he grabbed the front of Seymore’s t-shirt and abruptly jerked him over the threshold. He slammed and locked the door, and said, “Go sit your ass out front. And don’t touch nothing in the stock room. I gotta’ make a quick phone call.”

Lest there be a misunderstanding should something turn up missing, Seymore buried his hands deep inside his pockets as he walked through the storeroom’s maze of motorcycle parts, aluminum beer kegs stacked end to end like miniature torpedoes, and empty cardboard liquor crates

that reached halfway to the ceiling. He stepped into the nearly empty bar and set his wad of cash on the counter. In the unlikely event the cops came and he had to make a hasty exit, Seymore pulled out and sat on the bar stool nearest the storeroom.

Seymore glanced along the bar to the only other patron inside the establishment. Six stools down sat a wizened old vet (Korea? Viet Nam? Maybe both) sporting three days' growth of whiskers and a faded green Army battle dress uniform shirt with the gold and black 101 Airborne's "Screaming Eagle" patch affixed to the shoulder. He watched as the old vet stared into his beer mug, no doubt reliving visions only he could see, battlefield nightmares he could neither escape nor drown. The old warrior threw back a shot of Wild Turkey, brought the glass to the bar and gave a long pull on his draft beer.

A few minutes later and Frank stepped from the back room carrying a mixed drink, Dewar's and Coke. He set the glass on the bar and plucked a twenty-dollar bill from Seymore's cash pile. Seymore stirred the drink with a plastic swizzle straw while Frank stepped to the cash register, made change, returned and laid a ten-dollar bill on the pile.

Frank, uncharacteristically loquacious, leaned against the bar and struck up a conversation with his underage patron. "Where have you been, kid? I haven't seen you around in weeks."

Seymore sipped his drink, which seemed a bit stiffer than Frank's normal watered down fare. He rolled the smoky, peat-flavored liquid around his mouth for a moment, and then gave a satisfied grimace as it slashed home. "I'm stuck on campus with no wheels," he said smacking his lips with pleasure.

"You ain't got no license?" Frank said as if he really cared. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Eighteen," Seymore lied as easily as he laced his boots. He took a second, smaller sip of the beverage, and then continued with the unexpected conversation. "Yeah I have a license, but at Grand River only seniors are allowed a car on campus." He shot a conspiratorial wink across the bar. "You'll be seeing a whole lot more of me come next semester."

Gunther noticed how the kid's eyes kept flicking to the overhead monitors reflected in the mirror behind the bar. The four camera closed-circuit television system gave Gunther a real-time view of the building's exterior. He nervously pushed away from the bar and picked up a towel, mopped the countertop on either side of his young patron, and said, "You look like you're expecting someone, kid."

Seymore set his drink on the paper napkin in front of him and grinned. "Well, actually...I am. I'm supposed to meet a chick I've been talking with on the computer."

Gunther relaxed visibly. For a moment he thought he was being setup by the wheelchair guy and his big friend. He reached across the bar and cuffed Seymore on the shoulder. "Going to get ya' a little, are you?"

"With some luck," Seymore downed his drink and set the empty glass on the bar, "I'm going to get more than a *little*."

Gunther picked up the glass and turned his back to the bar. He mixed another overpriced drink, this time filling the glass with cola and ice while surreptitiously pressing his thumb over the liquor bottle's pour spout. He added a swizzle stick, set the alcohol-free drink on the bar and plucked another ten-dollar bill from Seymore's cash pile.

Seymore chatted with Frank while he worked his way through the second drink. A half hour later he decided *Michelle* was going to be a *no show*, which was a huge disappointment. Her profile picture looked pretty hot, and coupled with the fact he'd never done a redhead before, was looking forward to sampling some of that. He slid off the stool and stood on legs that suddenly felt as if they were made of hot butter. He grabbed the chair rail for support, and mused, *Boy-ob-boy, Frankie, you sure mixed 'em stiff today.*

“Where are you going kid?” Frank snatched the glass off the bar, and said, “Sit down and have another...this one’s on me.”

Come on, come on. It was now Gunther who anxiously checked the monitors every few seconds. He set another alcohol-free drink on the bar, liberated a ten off the kid’s money pile even though he’d told Seymore the next one was on him, and breathed a sigh of relief when the big blonde with the lazy eye suddenly appear out of nowhere and banged on the loading dock door.

Seymore paused long enough to make sure his feet were pointed the right direction, and slurred, “I gotta’ uth da baffroom.” He staggered toward the men’s restroom at the far end of a narrow hallway.

Frank raced through the storeroom and slammed back the security bolts. He ripped open the door, and snapped, “It’s about damn time.”

Johnny Clayburn stepped inside and Frank closed the door and rammed the bolts home. “Where have you been? The kid damn near left fifteen minutes ago, I had to stand him a free drink to keep him here.”

Clayburn removed his sunglasses and tucked the stem down the front of his shirt. He stared at Gunther for a moment, and then said, “Friday rush hour traffic’s a bitch.” Clayburn shouldered the bar owner out of his path and walked into the bar. He claimed a seat two down from the old veteran.

Several minutes passed before Seymore returned from the restroom on unsteady legs, zipper undone, and reclaimed his seat. He looked up and saw two Franks, and both stared back at him while swaying to and fro at the end of a fuzzy tunnel. Seymore groped for his drink, sloshed the contents over the side, and stared at the glass like it was the first time he had ever seen a mixed drink.

Let there be no doubt, he could handle his liquor. Heaven knows he had been liberating booze from his mother’s and Grandpa Livingston’s liquor cabinets for years, which accounted for a preference of scotch over beer, favored by most of his peers. But getting plowed on three drinks? Even if Frank had mixed them stiff it made little sense. Of course Seymore’s addled brain had no way to know only the first drink contained booze, the second and third were straight Coke and ice, sans scotch. Frank had spiked the first one with enough powdered zolpidem to knock out an elephant with insomnia. And mixing the sleep aid drug with alcohol only served to intensify its affects.

Seymore’s glass slipped from his hand and clattered to the bar. The last sensation he remembered before melting from his chair like a Sno-Cone in July was that someone had drained all the blood from his body. Gunther reached across the bar and steadied him by the front of his shirt. Clayburn slide off his stool and stepped behind the kid, tossed Gunther’s second installment onto the counter. Gunther immediately let go and snatched up the envelope and counted the contents.

Seymore’s head lolled in lazy circles, a dribble of spittle formed at the corner of his mouth, oozed past his lips and down his chin. Clayburn steadied Seymore and nodded toward the old man staring into space at the opposite end of the bar.

Gunther shot a fleeting glance along the bar, and then returned to counting. “Pete ain’t seen nothing; ain’t that right, Pete?”

The old vet slipped off his stool without so much as a glance toward the goings on at the other end of the bar. He shoved his hands into his pockets, walked to the juke box and fed three one-dollar bills into the machine. “I ain’t seen nothing. Just playing my music and minding my affairs.”

He pressed a gnarled thumb against C-605 and a moment later, John Kay’s whiskey-soaked growl belted out the opening line of Steppenwolf’s “Born to be wild.”

“Follow me.” Gunther scooped Seymore’s money off the bar—Nice of the kid to leave a tip—added it to the roll tucked into his pocket, and tossed the envelope into a trash can under the bar. He led Clayburn past the restrooms to the rarely used door opening onto New Street.

Clayburn spun Seymore around and hoisted him onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He thumbed on a throwaway cell phone, pressed and held speed dial two, and brought the phone to his ear. The line was picked up without greeting halfway through the first ring. He heard steady breathing on the other end, and said, “Pick up in three.” Without waiting for a response he switched off the phone and dropped it into the pocket of his camouflage pants.

Two minutes and fifty seconds later they heard a vehicle stop alongside the building. Gunther reached for the angle iron bar securing the door and Clayburn grabbed his wrist. He shook his head *no* and adjusted Seymore’s weight on his shoulder.

Less attention provoking than a beeping horn, more discreet than rapping out a secret knock on the door, at exactly the three minute mark they heard from inside the bar the subtle rev of an engine—the coast is clear signal. Clayburn gave the bar owner a curt nod and Gunther lifted the bar and opened the door, its rusty hinges screeching protest.

Tight alongside the building, the passenger mirror almost touching the wall, a white van sat with the cargo door open and the engine running. Clayburn stepped across the divide into the van, the kid draped over his shoulder. The door slammed shut and the van was on the move before Gunther could close the bar’s door.

The driver glanced to the cargo hold by way of the interior rearview mirror, and said, “Any problems?”

“None.” Clayburn plopped Seymore down on a musty sleeping bag spread out on the floor.

Sara drove through the adjacent alley behind Grumpy Granny’s, made a right turn onto Mapleton Beach Drive, and came to a complete stop at the stop sign at Lake Road. Once she got a break in traffic, she joined the caravan of vehicles inching along the Strip, just one more tourist trapped in Geneva-on-the-Lake’s festive bumper-to-bumper cavalcade.

Sara had not covered a city block when red and blue flashing lights were reflected in the outside mirrors. Positive she had come to a complete stop before turning onto the Strip, and there was no way she was speeding in this congestion, Sara couldn’t understand why a Geneva-on-the-Lake police car was riding her bumper. She thought for a second about making a run for it, but even with open road and a turbo engine under the hood, it’s impossible to outrun police radios. Sara fidgeted nervously in her seat, clicked on a right signal and edged toward the curb lane.

“Company,” she hissed under her breath.

Johnny zipped the sleeping bag closed and moved to the passenger seat. He slouched down with his eyes riveted on the cop car’s reflection in the mirror. He reached for the glove compartment and pulled out a 9mm pistol and rested it in his lap. He cursed under his breath and vowed to return to Grumpy Granny’s and make good on his promise of nailing Frank to the bar. If they survived the traffic stop, that is.

Sara brought the van to a stop in the bicycle/jogging lane and slid the gearshift to park. She reached out and placed a trembling hand on Johnny’s knee. “Be cool, cousin. Be very cool.”

Both breathed an audible sigh of relief when the cruiser steered around them and gave an intermittent blast on the siren to move traffic from its path.

Fifteen tortuous minutes later and Sara turned south onto SR 534. She finally allowed herself to take a normal breath. “We did it. We actually pulled it off, Johnny.” She reached over and grabbed a hold of his cold, clammy hand and squeezed. “We-actually-pulled-it-off.”

Clayburn returned the handgun to the glove box and also let out a sigh of relief. “Yes we did,” he said sporting a rare smile.

Johnny glanced over the seat to the snoring kid cocooned inside the sleeping bag. He pulled out a burner cell phone and pressed speed dial one. The line was once again picked up without greeting.

“Bringing home pizza for dinner; *with pepperoni*,” Clayburn said and immediately disconnected the call without waiting for a response.

He crawled to the back of the van and unzipped the sleeping bag. He searched through Seymore’s pockets, confiscated the kid’s wallet and cell phone, and returned to the passenger seat. To eliminate being electronically tracked through Seymore’s cell phone signal, he removed the battery and dropped the phone to the floor, and then stomped it to pieces with the heel of his boot. On the drive back to their “hidey-hole” in the woods, Clayburn scattered the pieces of Seymore’s cell phone into the deep, weed-clogged ditches paralleling the roadway.

Chapter 8

After RJ's accident all those years ago, Blaine had continued his associations with the Clayburns for one reason, and one reason only. Sara.

Even before that first rainy October night when he'd moved in with the Clayburns, Blaine had had a crush on RJ's little sister. She was far too young to pursue at the time, not yet in her teens, but over the years Blaine had patiently waited and watched Sara mature physically and emotionally into a beautiful woman. Blaine nurtured, in his obtuse way, the one-sided relationship. He hoped that someday epiphany would strike, and she would see him as a suitable boyfriend, maybe husband.

It was Colton Blaine's unrequited love that drove him to agree to play a part in the Seymore kidnapping; that and his cut of the anticipated ransom wasn't anything to sneeze at, either.

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After the bartender's call notifying them the Seymore kid had arrived, RJ digressed into one of his foul moods. With Sara and Johnny away, presumably to snatch the kid, Blaine became the target of opportunity. RJ chain-smoked cigarettes while anxiously rolling his wheelchair back and forth across the living room.

"Colt!"

Blaine stepped into the trailer from outside, folded his arms across his chest, and said, "You called for me?"

RJ spoke with his back to Blaine, as if the latter was not worthy of the effort it would take to turn the wheelchair around. "Find my hand grippers, dummy."

Blaine balled his fists at his sides and flexed his hands, which sent undulating ripples rolling across muscular forearms. With a clenched jaw, he said, "Don't call me that."

RJ rolled his eyes to the ceiling and glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

Blaine shifted his weight from foot to foot, spoke with childlike purity. "I've asked you about ten million times not to call me names, RJ."

Clayburn squeezed the wheelchair's handrails until his knuckles whitened. He slowly turned the chair until he faced Blaine, and with a condescending sneer, said, "Ten million times? Seriously, Colt, ten million times? I do believe you're embellishing; ten million is an awfully large number...wouldn't you agree?"

Blaine would have been better served to ignore RJ's affronts, because like all bullies, Clayburn thrived on the reaction he got from his victim.

"Ah," RJ cooed with faux innocence, "you disapprove of my pet name for you? Does it offend thee, Colty, when I call you *dummy*, or *stupid*?" He watched with sadistic glee as each pejorative insult mottled Blaine's cheeks a deeper shade of purple. "How about...retard? Would that be better?"

Blaine chewed his quivering lower lip until the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. He actually stomped his foot, the cross toddler demanding the return of his toy, and said, "Stop it, RJ!"

"Oh, Colty, am I pissing you off?" RJ chuckled disingenuously. "Please, take no offense as the names are simple terms of endearment."

And then, like the shadow of a summer's cloud skimming the landscape, Clayburn's expression darkened. "Stop acting like a child, Colton, and do as you're told."

He spun the wheelchair around with a deprecating cackle and reached to the table for the cell phone vibrating beside a FedEx shipping box.

Blaine stood in the doorway shaking his head. There were times he still thought of RJ as a brother, and then there were times he would like nothing more than to wring his neck like a pheasant—this was definitely one of those pheasant times.

Clayburn pressed the answer call button and brought the throwaway phone to his ear. Cousin Johnny uttered the key phrase, “Bringing home a pizza for dinner; *with pepperoni?*” that told him the snatch had been successful and they were on their way back to the trailer with the kid.

RJ disconnected the call and screamed for Blaine, not realizing he was still stood in the doorway, fuming: “Colt! Get in here...NOW.”

Chapter 9

Blaine and RJ were waiting on the deck when Sara rounded the cornfield and brought the van to a stop next to the porch. Blaine hit the ground with a heavy thud as he moved toward the van, while RJ rolled the wheelchair as far forward as the deck permitted.

Cousin Johnny stepped from the van with a neurotic, guilty-man's look in both directions. Satisfied there were no prying eyes watching, he reached for the handle and slid the cargo door open.

Blaine approached the driver's side and, like a valet parking attendant, opened the door, chivalrously offered Sara his hand, and said, "Everything go all right?"

Sara accepted the proffered hand and slid from behind the steering wheel. She dropped to the ground, and with a perfect smile—at least in Colton Blaine's opinion it was perfect—she said, "Clear as glass; smooth as a seal's ass."

Johnny grabbed their catch by the ankles and dragged him to the opening. Blaine walked to the passenger side and offered to help. "You want me to carry him, Johnny?"

Clayburn said nothing; gave Blaine his *Does-it-look-like-I-need-your-help* glower, and draped the boy over his shoulder like a gutted deer. It doesn't get any more laconic than that.

Blaine shrugged his thick shoulders, grateful that at least Johnny didn't call him names.

Clayburn carried Seymore inside to the small bedroom at the back of the trailer and deposited him on a surplus military cot, then stepped back.

The day after their arrival at Aunt Bessie's, and upon conclusion of their visit to Grumpy Granny's, Colt and Johnny visited the Carter Lumber and Hardware store in, of all places, Austinburg, where they'd purchased the necessary materials to convert the trailer's smaller bedroom into a makeshift dungeon. Blaine then spent the afternoon boarding up the window and installing a single-cylinder deadbolt lock on the bedroom door. He reversed the lock so it could only be opened from the outside.

RJ rolled to a stop in the doorway and stared at the unconscious kid like he was a trophy marlin ready to be mounted and hung on the wall as a conversation piece. The rest of the clan gathered in the doorway, not quite believing they had successfully pulled off the snatch of a federal judge's son with so little effort. They also realized they were now pot committed to the game.

RJ's voice broke the group reverie. "Colt, you're up to bat."

He spun the wheelchair around so abruptly Blaine and Sara jumped out of his path to avoid having their toes run over. RJ raced the length of the short hall and coasted across the living room. He snatched the FedEx shipping box from the electronics table, spun the chair around and tossed the package to Colt. Blaine snatched it out of the air and pulled it in tight against his chest like it was the game winning interception.

"Do you remember what you're supposed to do, wonder boy?" RJ said.

"Yes, I remember." Blaine retorted, his indignation evident.

"So I'm sure you have a grip on the part you play, explain it to me." RJ leaned back in the wheelchair, folded his arms across his chest and closed his eyes as if deep in thought.

Blaine, once again embarrassed being treated as an inferior, particularly in front of Sara, shifted his weight back and forth. He nervously rolled the package between his hands and his eyes dropped to the floor. "Come on, RJ, I know what I'm supposed to do."

RJ opened a single, accusatory eye—the impatient teacher waiting for the unprepared pupil to begin his recitation—and said, “Well, Colt, let’s pretend you’ve never screwed anything up before. Explain it to me…” RJ motioned back and forth between Sara and Johnny, “to us. Tell us what you’re supposed to do.”

Cousin Johnny broke away long enough to walk to the refrigerator and pull out the last beer from the 12-pack they’d bought the night before. He popped the can open, downed a long swallow, and then rejoined the others in the living room.

With everyone staring at him Blaine felt as uncomfortable as a mentally challenged student about to explain the Pythagorean Theorem. When he looked up and saw Sara’s encouraging smile, he was eased over the hump.

With the occasional pause to regroup his thoughts, Blaine slowly explained how he was to transport the FedEx package to the National Shipping and Rental store in nearby Madison, Ohio, send it out same day service, and then return to the trailer.

“And what’s the last thing you do *before* you get out of the van?” RJ coaxed with a snake oil salesman’s charm.

Blaine rolled his eyes; an easy question. “I wipe it down for fingerprints,” he said with a prideful grin creeping across his face.

“Good boy,” RJ cooed as if Blaine had brought home his report card with all passing grades. He turned the wheelchair toward Sara, and said, “My dear, why don’t you ride along with the big guy, just to make sure there are no *surprises*.”

Blaine’s shoulders slumped. Although he’d given the right answers to the pop quiz, still RJ didn’t trust him with something as simple as mailing a package. Then again, Blaine chose to look at the bright side, at least he would get to spend time with Sara.

“While the two of you are out,” RJ added, “pick up some groceries and reading material—”

“And beer,” Johnny chimed in.

“—and beer. We’re going to be here for a couple of days.

“And make sure you wait until a few minutes before closing to mail the package,” RJ hollered after them as Blaine and Sara walked out the door. “They’ll be in a hurry to lock up and less likely to remember the customer.”

The trip to Madison, in adjacent Lake County, was like taking a twenty minute ride back in time to a previous century. Lake County, Ohio’s smallest county, is noted for its winding, two lane pastoral roads used as much by Amish buggies as automobile traffic. Expansive vineyards and thousands of acres of sprawling nurseries had earned it the distinction as the Nursery Capital of the World.

Blaine and Sara drove into the tiny village on a tree-lined thoroughfare dotted with an incongruous dichotomy of late 19th century two-story red brick buildings with patriotic red, white and blue banners strung across their fronts, and modern brick and glass strip plazas with garish neon signs in the windows. Their destination was one of a dozen plazas on the north side of the village, directly across the street from the newly constructed Walgreens at the intersection of US 20 and State Route 528. Blaine pulled into the pharmacy parking lot with seventeen minutes to spare. He parked the van so they had an unimpeded view of the shipping center across the street, and then rolled down the windows and turned off the engine.

Sara had busied herself sightseeing during the ride into town so hadn’t noticed Blaine’s melancholy mood until he flopped back in his seat with a heavy sigh. She turned and studied his profile as he stared out through the windshield, and then reached across and patted his Popeye-thick forearm. “What’s the matter, Colt?”

“Nothing,” he replied absent conviction.

Over the years Sara had learned to ignore RJ's affronts, but sensitive Colton Blaine always took them personally.

"I just don't get it," Blaine said after a moment's silence.

"Don't get what?"

"Why he has to be so mean all the time. I mean, sometimes he's like the old RJ, but most of the time he goes all Mr. Jykell and Dr. Hyde on me."

Sara turned her face toward the passenger window and trapped an escaping titter. She decided it best not to correct Colt's muddling of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jykell* and *Mister Hyde* characters. She leaned back in the seat, kicked off her sandals and curled fuchsia painted toenails over the top of the dashboard. It was not like she and Colt had never had this conversation before.

"Come on, Colt, you remember what the doctor said after the accident. He warned us RJ may experience personality changes, said it was normal after a severe brain injury."

While Sara paused to take a breath, Blaine interjected, "Yeah, he also said it would be temporary and that he would grow out of them."

Sara wagged her head side to side. "No, no, no, Colt. He said RJ *might* outgrow them. But if you remember correctly, he said there was no way to know for sure at the time."

Sara glanced at her watch, slipped back into her sandals and fastened the heel strap. She picked the FedEx box up off the engine cowling and used the kitchen towel and spray bottle of Windex she'd brought along to wipe down the package. Sara dropped it untouched into a plastic t-shirt grocery bag and opened the door. Before she exited the van, she paused long enough to pat the back of Blaine's hand, and said, "Colt, don't let RJ get under your skin, he can't help it."

Blaine shrugged his shoulders, again without conviction, and slapped the steering wheel. "It's just so darned flusterating when he gets that way."

Sara grinned; only Colton Blaine could combine *flustered* and *frustrating* to create a new word.

"You wait; once the kid's old man ponies up," Sara shook the grocery bag, "everything will be different...you'll see."

Blaine sighed. "I sure hope you're right." He looked at Sara with expectation. "Maybe after we have the money... Maybe you and me... Maybe we could take a vacation. I've always wanted to go to Florida and see Disneyland."

Sara's correction was gentle. "*Disneyland* is in California, Colt. *Disneyworld* is in Florida."

"Oh," he said, mildly embarrassed.

While Blaine said, "...you and me..." *as in us*, Sara heard ...we... *as in the group*, although she suspected Cousin Johnny would probably have nothing to do with a trip to Disneyworld...or Disneyland for that matter, neither seemed his style. Offer to send him to Ted Nugent's farm for some bow hunting—now that was a different story.

"Let's wait until we hit the lottery before we start spending the money," Sara said with an indulgent smile.

She closed the passenger door and walked to the corner, waited for the pedestrian traffic signal to change from a red hand to an animated green stick figure, and then crossed the street. With a few minutes to spare before she mailed the package, Sara killed time by window-shopping the fall line of shoes displayed in Neil's Shoes' window.

Chapter 10

Sara entered the shipping store two minutes before closing, took her place behind the 'Please wait here' sign, and waited for the elderly couple ahead of her to finish their transaction.

Sara gave a smile as they hobbled past on matching canes and then stepped forward. She spilled the FedEx package from the grocery bag and onto the countertop without touching it. The young clerk, obviously in a hurry to begin her weekend, glanced to the clock mounted above the door. Without focusing on her customer, she took less than four minutes to complete Sara's transaction.

"Does your package contain any of the following items; hazardous or biological waste, flammable or explosive liquids, alcoholic beverages or tobacco products, firearms or pornographic materials?"

"No," Sara tittered. "It's a birthday present for my nephew, a wristwatch."

The clerk read aloud the destination address zip code as she typed it into her computer, and then recited the customer's shipping options. Sara chose 'Same Day Service' and the clerk tapped the appropriate keys. She printed and affixed a FedEx shipping label to the package, with assurance it would reach Washington D. C. no later than the close of next day's business, and dropped it into the 'Outgoing Shipment' bin behind her.

"Will there be anything else?" she said, her relief obvious when Sara shook her head no.

Sara paid in cash, pocketed her change and turned for the exit with the clerk tight on her heels. She'd barely made it over the threshold before the heavy door lock thumped home and the clerk flipped the sign over from *open* to *closed*.

"Everything go okay?" Blaine asked as he climbed from the van mouthing along with Sara's pet phrase: "Clear as glass, smooth as a seal's ass."

They strolled into Walgreens and loaded up on junk food, munchies, four two-liter bottles of soda pop, and a 24-pack of Budweiser that would, hopefully, hold Johnny over for a day or two. On the way to the checkout counter they added a case of bottled water, several magazines, and a carton of RJ's cigarettes to the shopping buggy.

Blaine pulled from the parking lot for the return trip, giving an occasional glance across the van. Sara sat with her seat reclined, head pressed against the headrest, eyes closed and a smile on her face. Blaine smiled too; it was just too damned easy to smile when Sara was around.

Chapter 11

One by one the Musketeers drifted to the designated meeting place in front of The Great Wall Chinese stir fry stand near the intersection of Spenser and Lake Roads.

Hart, first to arrive, stood with his back pressed against the sun-warmed bricks, a sweaty thirty-two ounce Pepsi big gulp on the sidewalk between his feet. Balanced in one hand was a Styrofoam carry-out food container, while the other shoveled pork-fried rice, garlic chicken and broccoli into his mouth with a plastic spoon-fork combination.

A few minutes later Duncan and Lamp broke away from a passing herd of pedestrians, Lamp neurotically checking his wristwatch. "Six-0-eight," he announced. "We should make it back in plenty of time."

Hart chewed and swallowed the mouthful of food he was working on, picked up his drink, took a long sip through the straw and then returned it to the sidewalk. "Honestly, Mark, the way you fret over every little detail, I'm surprised you don't have an ulcer by now."

Lamp pondered Wes's observation for a moment, trying to recall if in the course of his medical history he had ever had a gastrointestinal endoscopy to check for ulcers. That might explain the occasional bouts of heartburn.

"I'm just trying to make sure we're not late, that's all," Lamp rejoined.

Duncan reached to the sidewalk and picked up Hart's Pepsi. Wes, in turn, stabbed the spork into the mound of rice and snatched it away before the underclassman could wrap his lips around the straw. "Go buy your own drink, Zak."

Duncan scrunched his face into a "bite me" snarl and stepped into the restaurant.

"Here Jerry comes." Lamp rechecked his watch and nodded toward where Kork worked his way between clusters of people milling about on the sidewalk.

Duncan emerged from the building with a quart of blue Gatorade and two shrimp and cabbage eggrolls tucked inside wax paper sleeves. It wasn't the normal high protein snack he indulged to facilitate his bodybuilding regime, but what the heck. He promised himself he would spend an extra hour in the gym tomorrow morning to burn off the empty, greasy calories.

Before Duncan could offer a protest, Kork snatched the Gatorade out of his hand, twisted the cap loose, and with three huge gulps drained half its contents. He replaced the lid and handed it back to Duncan.

Incredulous, Duncan's eyes vacillated between Kork, and the half-empty bottle of Gatorade. "Honestly, Jerry? You pig down half of my drink and don't even have the decency to say thank you?"

Kork responded with an enormous belch that drew the attention of several passersby, and said, "You have to think positive, young Hercules... The glass is half full."

Kork looked to Lamp and Duncan, and said, "Has anybody seen Romeo?"

"Not since we split up right after we got here," Lamp said.

Duncan shook his head as he wiped eggroll residue from his chin with a paper napkin.

Kork turned to Hart. "What about you?"

His mouth full of chicken and rice, Hart shook his head no.

Lamp gave another discreet glance to his wristwatch. "We have to leave in fifteen minutes, or we run the risk of being late for sign in."

"Good grief, Mark, will you give it a rest?" Hart picked up his drink and drew on the straw until he slurped his way to the bottom of the cardboard jug. "We don't have to be back until seven. It's not like we're hours away, it's only a twenty minute drive."

“I know that,” Lamp retorted, “I’m just trying to keep us on schedule.”

“So you’ve said...about a dozen times.” Hart sucked rice kernels from between his teeth and tossed the empty food container into a green refuse barrel decorated with colorful ladybugs painted on the exterior.

Duncan finished his second eggroll, what was left of his Gatorade, and then tossed his refuse on top of Hart’s. He mopped his mouth with a napkin and added it to the barrel as well.

Lamp leaped up onto a sidewalk bench in front of the restaurant for a better view over the heads of the crowd. “Nineteen after; what the heck is he doing?”

Kork, with a salacious grin, pumped his arm through his fist. “We all be knowin’ what ‘da horny white boy be doin’.”

Lamp jumped to the sidewalk, and said, “Yeah, but that was hours ago. He should have finished by now.”

Kork’s head lolled to the side as he studied Lamp’s profile through squinted eyes. “And exactly how would you know how long it takes to get laid, Mark? Because I’m pretty sure it isn’t from experience.”

Hart and Duncan laughed. Neither was any handier with the ladies than was Lamp, but they saw no reason to step into Kork’s sardonic crosshairs.

“I’ve got a girlfriend back home,” Lamp replied a little too defensively. “We promised each other we would remain faithful.”

Kork gave him a condescending, single shoulder shrug, and said, “I hate to tell you this, Mark, but that centerfold you keep tucked under the mattresses—for those cold and lonely nights—doesn’t constitute a girlfriend. If you’ll check your *Dweeb’s Guide to Dating* handbook, I believe you’ll find rule number one hundred thirty-seven specifically states, and I quote, ‘...the opposite sex must be breathing under their own power and have a pulse to be deemed a girlfriend...’ end quote.”

“You should know, Jerry, you probably have the book memorized,” Lamp retorted, childishly, and then tapped a finger against his watch crystal. “Twenty-four after, how long are going to wait for Casanova to show?”

“Todd knows the rules.” Hart pushed off the building and started toward the car, the others fell in step alongside him. “If you’re not at the car by six-thirty, find your own way back.”

Duncan pulled out his cell phone and called Seymore. The call immediately went to voicemail. Because he was new to the Musketeers, this being only his third trip to Geneva-on-the-Lake, Duncan felt uncomfortable returning to GRA without Seymore. “He’s probably waiting at the car,” Zak said hopefully, “rather than trying to find us on the Strip.”

Kork draped his arms over Duncan and Lamp’s shoulders and hung there like an un-tethered scarecrow. “Dat why you bees the massah, young Hercules; you bees all smart and shit.”

Duncan let out a nervous giggle and joined Kork’s charade. “Stick with me, *boy*, and in no time at all I’ll have you breezing through books...maybe even some without pictures.”

“Oh, I be stickin’,” Kork batted his dark lashes flirtatiously, “I be stikin’ fo’ sho’.”

On the return trek Kork prophesized how Seymore would be sprawled across the hood of Wes’s car like a worn out buck at the end of the fall rut. But when they arrived there was no sign of Seymore. Hart, much to Lamp’s neurotic chagrin, decided to wait an extra ten minutes. When Seymore was still a no show, they piled into Wes’s BMW and left for the return ride to GRA.

On their way back to the academy, Duncan voiced his concern about leaving without Todd. Hart explained how things were with Todd; how this was not the first time he had hooked up for an afternoon’s fling and had to hitchhike back to Grand River Academy. And, as they had done in the past, one of them would scribble Seymore’s name on the sign-in sheet, while the rest of the Musketeers covered for him until he dragged his sorry, worn-out self back to the academy.

Chapter 12

Clad in baggy, lightweight red and black plaid lounge pants, a fluffy towel draped across his shoulders, flip flops on his feet, Kork was returning to his room from a morning shower when Hart stepped into the doorway of his dorm room. Dressed in Grand River Academy blue and white soccer shorts and plain white t-shirt, Hart curled his fingertips over the top of the doorframe like he was dangling from a cliff. “Oh. I thought you were Zak.” He made the best of the awkward moment. “You have a minute, Jerry?”

Kork tilted his head to the side and bounced water from his ears. He pushed Hart out of the way, crossed the room and flopped down on the foot of Seymore’s bed. “What’s up?”

Hart pushed the door closed, crossed the room and spun his desk chair around. He sat with his arms crossed over the backrest, his chin resting on his arms. “Todd didn’t make it home last night.”

Not until Hart’s revelation did Kork notice Seymore’s bed had not been slept in. He rolled onto his side and propped a fist against his cheek. “Are you sure?”

Hart’s eyes snapped up from the floor with an exasperated *Are-you-kidding-me* air. “Jerry, he’s my roommate. I’m pretty sure I would know whether or not he was here last night. I’m telling you, Todd never came home.”

Kork remained quiet for a moment, and then said, “We all know the rules, Wes. Be at the car by six-thirty, or walk.”

“Jerry,” Hart strained to keep his dismay in check, “he could have crawled back on his hands and knees by now. Something’s wrong.”

Kork jerked upright on the bed and threw his long legs over the side. “You know what’s wrong, Wes? What’s wrong is Todd found himself some primo skank and left us holding the bag—again—to cover his partying ass. That’s what’s wrong.”

“I don’t know, Jerry—”

“Oh come on, Wes. You act like this is the first time he’s pulled this shit off. It’s not like he’s never spent an afternoon out getting laid.” Kork yanked the towel from his shoulders and fluffed it through his hair. “Need I remind you what he did during spring break?”

“That was different. He made it home; albeit at three-thirty in the morning... but he still made it home.”

“And,” Hart raised his index finger for emphasis, “Todd’s still on probation for that little screw up. There’s no way he’d risk getting booted from the academy for a second, class-1 violation while he’s on probation. His mother would kill him.”

Kork shrugged his shoulder innocuously. “Maybe the piece of tail he hooked up with was worth the risk.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Ah,” Kork scoffed and slapped the empty air, “Ya-buts run in the field, eat carrots, and have lucky feet, unless of course you’re the rabbit with his foot hanging from a keychain.”

Hart ignored Kork’s blasé attitude over Seymore’s unexplained disappearance. “What if Chief McCord checks the security tape and finds out—”

“Chief, Shmief...” Kork abruptly bounced to his feet, wrapped the towel around his neck and plodded toward the door.

“Why do you think McCord is at GRA, Wes?” Kork didn’t wait for an answer to the question. “McCord’s here at Grand River because he couldn’t cut the mustard as the real Five-0. Shit...he’d need a posse to help him track an elephant with a nosebleed through a blizzard.”

Kork yanked open the door and paused on the threshold. “Wes?”

Hart turned to him. “What?”

“You aren’t jealous because your roomy’s getting some and you aren’t, are you?”

Hart’s retort was dismissive. “Right, Jerry...that’s what it is. I’m jealous.”

“If you’re really that worried,” Kork stepped into the hall, “round up the others and tell them to meet at Dylan Field in fifteen minutes. We’ll take a run up to Geneva and see if we can find Sir Lancelot. I’m sure he’s ready by now to put his love sword back in the sheath and come home for a rest.”

Hart sat at the desk and eased his chin to the back of the chair. “I sure hope you’re right, Jerry,” he said to the empty room.

Chapter 13

RJ pulled the cell phone away from his ear and unleashed another barrage of obscenities. “I swear...” he hissed through clenched teeth, “If this guy’s jerking me around... He will be so sorry he ever gave birth to that brat.”

Sara, Johnny and Colt watched in silence as RJ pressed the redial button, but before the mechanical operator could, for the umpteenth time tell him, ‘I’m sorry, the number you dialed has not yet been activated; please try your call at a later time.’ RJ slammed the cell phone to the table. He was having a difficult time believing the kid’s old man had yet to activate the cell phone, and in truth was concerned the judge may have made the call to the FBI.

Johnny finished the beer he was working on, crushed the can and tossed it into the garbage bag on the kitchen floor. He grabbed two more from the fridge, shoved one into his pocket and popped the top of the other on his way to the door. “You keep pounding that phone on the table and it’s not going to work when you want it to.”

RJ spun his wheelchair around so violently it almost tipped over. “Why don’t you shut up, Johnny, I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

Johnny abruptly stopped in mid-step next to where his crossbow hung on a hook sunk into the wall, and glared at RJ. With barely contained rage, he said, “Well you got it anyway...whether you wanted it or not.”

Johnny and RJ engaged in an eye battle for supremacy for the few seconds it took the latter to break eye contact. “Why don’t you go outside and find something to kill?”

Johnny slammed back half of his beer, snatched the crossbow off the wall, slung it over his shoulder and spoke as he ducked his head through the door. “I don’t need to go outside to do that.”

From where he leaned against the countertop in the tiny kitchen, Blaine said, “I’m thinking maybe the guy didn’t get the phone yet.”

“I’m thinking maybe the guy didn’t get the phone yet’, ” RJ mocked with a child-like falsetto. “According to the website,” FedEx’s package-tracking page was displayed on RJ’s computer monitor, “it was delivered hours ago. So, boy genius, do us all a favor...don’t attempt something you’re not hardwired for...thinking.”

While they’d waited for the telephone to be delivered RJ had been at his truculent best, and Sara was tired of the snarky, condescending barbs. She slammed her coffee cup to counter. “That’s enough, RJ. Maybe Colt’s right. Maybe the kid’s old man wasn’t home when it was delivered. Did you ever think of that?”

Having outsmarted RJ, Colt barely suppressed a grin.

“Someone had to sign for it...*did you ever think of that?*” RJ spat back.

“You’re the one who looked up his address on Google Earth, RJ.” Sara gave him a sardonic sneer on her way to the door. “He lives in one of them ritzy-titsy, high-rises. The doorman probably signs for deliveries when the resident isn’t home.”

Sara stepped outside and RJ gave Blaine a disgusted grunt. “See what you started, dummy?”

Blaine pushed away from the counter, incredulous. “Me?”

RJ gave an impatient wave of his hand. “Go on, get out of here, dummy. Go chase your girlfriend. I don’t need your worthless input?”

Blaine wagged his head side to side with a combination pity and disgust. He crossed the room and joined Sara and Johnny on the porch, making sure he slammed the door closed good and hard behind him.

RJ rolled to the top of the hallway and glared with malevolent eyes at the door Seymore was locked behind.

You'd better pray to whichever God you believe in that your old man doesn't screw this up, kid. Because if he does, there won't be enough left of you for him to cry over.

Chapter 14

Indeed it was a rare occasion when the Honorable David Seymore asked his longtime secretary, Lidia, to work half a day on Saturday. With the burgeoning caseload before the United States Federal Court for the District of Columbia, he needed to chip away at some of the gathering mountain of paperwork.

Shortly before noon Lidia shut down her computer, used a sanitizing wipe to clean the polyurethane keyboard protector, and pushed away from her desk in Judge Seymore's anteroom. She popped her head around the doorjamb, and said, "I've finished entering the interrogatories and briefs into the appropriate case files, as you requested. If there's nothing else..."

"Bless you, Lidia; I don't know what I'd do without you."

Judge Seymore set aside the file he had been reviewing, leaned back in his leather swivel chair and stretched his arms overhead. He rolled down and buttoned his shirt sleeves, and said, "And what have you planned for the remainder of your weekend?"

"Tomorrow morning I leave on the bus tour I mentioned I'm taking with my lady friends." Lidia clutched a crème-colored purse to her chest with rapt anticipation. "*Phantom of the Opera* opens at the Chrysler Center in Norfolk tomorrow afternoon for a two-week run."

Judge Seymore gave a reserved smile. "I'm sorry, Lidia, I'd completely forgotten. You should have reminded me. We could have picked another day to catch up on the paperwork."

Lidia waved him off with a grandmotherly chortle. "It's only a three hour trip. The bus leaves at ten o'clock and returns after the matinee. I shall be home before the witching hour."

"And what's on your schedule, David?" she asked.

His Honor's leisure time was spent sipping a few drams of Old Grand-Dad bourbon while reading biographies, or well-researched historical fiction set in the 1800s.

"I'm currently reading the biography on Emperor Hirohito."

"Who?"

"Emperor Hirohito, the Japanese leader who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor."

"Well," Lidia patted her breast with mock consternation, "heaven knows how an exciting evening like that could trigger heart palpitations. I surely hope you'll keep the cordless phone at the ready."

Judge Seymore chuckled, closed the file he'd been reading and slid it to the corner of his desk. He shut down his computer, and then plucked his suit jacket from the mahogany coat tree behind his desk. Together they locked up the third floor office and then rode the elevator to the restricted parking garage beneath the William B. Bryant Building, home of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, often referred to as the second highest court in the land, a stepping stone to the United States Supreme Court.

Judge Seymore walked Lidia to her car, and once she was secure inside, continued on to his vehicle. He used the key fob to start the Lincoln's engine and unlock the doors. While the air conditioning went to work on the stuffy interior, Judge Seymore slipped out of his suit coat and carefully hung it on the clothes hook in the backseat. He climbed behind the steering wheel, adjusted the air vents, and then slipped the Navigator to reverse.

Seymore exited the parking deck onto C Street, made a quick right onto 3rd Street, and two blocks later managed the rare good fortune of catching the traffic light at Pennsylvania Avenue and 3rd Street green. He glanced to his left as he passed the U.S. Capitol's reflecting pool, crossed Independence Avenue, picked up Washington Avenue and ultimately merged onto the 695 Beltway, westbound.

Compared to Friday evening's five o'clock cavalcade, when Washington D.C. potentates fled the city as if it was the eleventh hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Saturday afternoon's commute across the Potomac to Arlington was a pleasant fifteen minute drive. Judge Seymore crossed the river on the 14th Street Bridge and exited the expressway at S. Arlington Ridge Road. He drove the winding, tree-lined labyrinth of residential streets until he reached the high-rise condominium complex on S. Nash Street.

Seymore stopped in front of a red-white and blue traffic arm that always reminded him of a horizontal barber's pole, and waited for the uniform guard to emerge from the air conditioned glass kiosk.

"Good afternoon, Your Honor."

Seymore glanced at the officer's nametag, and said, "Good afternoon, Officer Mutz."

The officer smiled a perfect, blizzard-white smile that was, no doubt, the result of cosmetic dentistry or exceptional genetic coding.

Officer Mutz glanced into the backseat and cargo area, then stepped back and pressed a button on the remote control attached to his gun belt. He waved the judge through with a pleasant smile. "Have a good afternoon, Sir."

Judge Seymore had purchased the sixth-floor unit at the exclusive S. Nash Street Condominiums shortly after his divorce. The cluster of three buildings was grouped in a horseshoe pattern and boasted a multilevel underground parking deck that protected its pampered residents from Washington D.C.'s harsh winters and scorching summers.

The age fifty-five and older community precluded carpet-munching ankle-biters riding Big Wheels in the hallways. Those children whom still resided with their parents were predominately collage and high school age, and that group of young people characteristically spent little time at home.

With manicured lawns, two tennis courts, a heated lap pool, six-hole putting green and all weather jogging track circumnavigating the complex, the gated community provided the closest thing to peaceful living one could expect while residing in the shadow of the nation's capital.

Seymore drove into the subterranean garage and parked in his assigned slot. He reached into the backseat for his briefcase and suit coat, donned the jacket on his way to the elevator, shiny burgundy Oxfords click-clacking against the concrete floor. He summoned the elevator and then rode up to the swanky atrium, ostentatious as any 5-star hotel.

Polished to a brilliant patina, the lobby floor was laid with chocolate brown marble tiles with cream-colored striations that resembled lightning strikes. Potted ferns sat atop decorative fluted plinths, while an enormous terracotta urn housed a fifteen-foot tall palm tree, its upper fronds brushing the mezzanine's filigree balustrade. Visiting guests were ushered to the plush sitting area opposite the concierge's desk. Expensive camel-colored Persian throw rugs offset the meticulous arrangement of burgundy and brown Louis XVI parlor chairs. A crystal chandelier bathed the lobby in a perpetual amber glow.

Seymore walked across the ornate lobby and came to a stop in front of the concierge's desk. "Good afternoon, Phillip; and how is that wife and new son of yours, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

Kean looked up from the computer Solitaire game he was playing, slid his chair away from the desk and discreetly pressed the screen's power button. On the way to greet his favorite resident, Phillip Kean tugged the hem of his dark vest and adjusted the already perfect knot of his silk gold necktie.

“Good afternoon, Judge Seymore,” Kean said with a gum-bearing grin bright enough to challenge the sun. “Martha and Phillip Jr. are just fine...thank you for inquiring.

“Who’d have thought,” Kean pressed his fingertips to his lips and stifled a titter, “that a confirmed life-long bachelor would, in his middle years, find a woman so gracious and caring? My mother,” Kean rolled his eyes heavenward, “God rest her soul, would have been thrilled with her daughter-in-law and grandson.”

Seymore returned the concierge’s smile, and said, “It just goes to show how blind Cupid is when it comes to affairs of the heart; as blind as Lady Justice with her judicial objectivity.”

“I suppose.” Kean turned toward the mahogany pigeonhole letter cabinet behind his desk. He retrieved Judge Seymore’s mail and a small FedEx package and slid them across the smoke-gray granite countertop. “Here you are, Sir.”

Seymore picked up the FedEx box and spoke rhetorically. “What’s this?”

“No idea, Your Honor,” Kean said. “It arrived with the afternoon deliveries.”

“I wasn’t expecting a package,” Seymore said.

He bounce-tested the weight, brought the package to his ear for a clue rattle, gave his shoulders an innocuous shrug and said goodbye to Kean. Seymore separated the mail’s wheat from the chaff on his elevator ride to the sixth floor. He keyed open his unit and stepped inside, pushed the door closed with his foot as he set his briefcase, mail and keys on the burnished foyer’s entryway table. He carefully hung his suit jacket on the coat rack behind the door, loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt. Seymore carried the mail and FedEx package to his home office.

The home office, accessible off the foyer, had once upon a time been Todd’s bedroom, but that was long before ex-wife Belinda polluted the boy’s mind with grossly embellished tales of his philandering. During Todd’s pre-teen years he’d spent part of his summer vacation in Washington D.C., the Circuit Court’s July 4th recess allowing for quality father-son bonding time. And with Seymore’s status as a federal judge, they were granted backstage passes to a number of restricted areas rarely seen by tourists. After the divorce, and three consecutive summers of Belle Livingston-Seymore providing lame excuses as to why their son would not be visiting, David Seymore accepted reality; his relationship with Todd had entered the ice age.

He’d grudgingly donated the bedroom suit and chest of drawers to the Covenant House homeless shelter, boxed up and shipped Todd’s personal effects to his mother’s Hilton Head Island condo, and converted the extra room into a functional home workspace.

Seymore stepped in front of the small computer desk and pressed the play button on his answering machine. He half-listened to the messages as he sliced open the FedEx box and spilled its contents onto the desk. He stared for a moment at the disposable cell phone and folded sheet of standard blue-lined white notebook paper.

The cell phone held no meaning until he unfolded and read the accompanying note, written in a choppy cursive hand: *Have SON~ no cops~ no fbi or he comes home in a body bag! Activate phone~Wait for call*

The prose rocked Seymore back a half-step, the note tumbled from his hands and fluttered to rest on the desktop. As if the communiqué were laced with anthrax, not an uncommon scare in D.C., Seymore backed away two steps. A full, contemplative minute passed before he composed himself enough to pick up the sheet of paper and re-read the threatening missive.

Judge Seymore raced to the foyer and fumbled through the pockets of his suit jacket until he located his cell phone. He hit the rarely used speed dial button and waited for Todd to pick up. The call went directly to voicemail: “Hi, you’ve reached Todd’s cell phone; leave a message and maybe I’ll get back to you...or maybe I won’t.”

Seymore left an urgent voice message instructing Todd to call him without delay, and then disconnected the call. He hit redial and once again heard Todd's familiar voice when the call jumped to voicemail. He terminated the second call without leaving a message, and quickly thumbed an urgent text: Call me immediately... EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!

Seymore walked to the kitchen and poured himself a much needed glass of Old Grand-Dad while he awaited Todd's call. He padded across the living room in his stocking feet and stepped through the French doors out onto the balcony. He stood there staring across the beltway with unfocused eyes, the five-sided bastion of the United States Department of Defense looming in the background. He couldn't help but think of the day he'd stood in the same spot, cradling a second cup of morning coffee as he watched in abject horror a commercial airliner descended out of the clear blue sky and slam headlong into the Pentagon.

Oblivious to the drone of beltway traffic wafting up from below, Seymore rested his drink on the balcony's wrought iron railing and squeezed close his eyes. An involuntarily shudder raced up his spine, gooseflesh bubbled his arms. He had the same foreboding as he'd had on September 11th. Seymore stepped back inside the condo with the feeling his life was about to forever change.

After several minutes of Todd not returning his call or text message, Seymore grudgingly telephoned his ex-wife.

Chapter 15

Late Saturday morning, shortly before noon, Belinda Livingston-Seymore received a telephone call from the Grand River Academy's headmaster, Mr. Dolwich. He succinctly explained that Todd was AWOL, but not to worry, the county sheriff's office was on the case, and in short order would no doubt have a resolution. After the conversation with Dolwich, Livingston-Seymore telephoned the Ashtabula County Sheriff's Office and demanded to know what they were doing to locate her missing son. Through insistent interruptions, the deputy attempted to explain that Todd's friends had been interviewed, and that they did not suspect foul play. He further tried to explain that Todd had been entered into the national database for missing persons, listed as a runaway.

Belinda in turn asked all the standard questions, as well as issued a few trite observations of her own: Have you searched the school? Did you issue an Amber Alert? What do you mean you're not calling in extra personnel? How dare you tell me there's not much more you can do! Listen, you flunky, if anything happens to my son I'll have your badge...

Monikers were nonexistent in ex-U.S. Senator Harvard Elmo Livingston III's vocabulary. He did not have a grandson named *Todd*, and neither was his daughter *Belle*. And it would have been scandalous to respond to anything other than Harvard, certainly not *Harvey*, or the more dreadful *Harv*. Without compromise; it was Harvard...Belinda...and Livingston.

"Oh for the love of Lucy, Belinda, don't you think you're being overly melodramatic? It's not as if Livingston has never before pulled off an equally foolish stunt."

Cute when she was twelve, Belinda's "But Daddy..." came across contrived.

"He's probably out sewing his wild oats," the Livingston patriarch said with an unconcerned chuckle.

Belinda let out an exasperated sigh. Need she remind her father how his grandson began sewing his 'wild oats', which Belinda blamed on his father's indiscretions, the minute he'd reached puberty, and probably before. By the time Todd was old enough to shave he had a reputation that made Bill Clinton appear celibate. It was, after all, Harvard Elmo Livingston III's generous fifteen-thousand dollar cash donation, delivered by his personal attorney, to the avaricious family of the little tramp who had deflowered his young grandson. The money was accompanied with a non-disclosure document assuring the ex-senator's future obituary would not list a great-grand baby as surviving kin...and a mulatto at that.

"Honestly, Belinda, please tell me you were kidding when you said you threatened the sheriff's office with the FBI." Grandpa Livingston switched the receiver to his right hand and checked the twelve-hundred dollar Maurice Lacroix timepiece strapped to his left wrist. "I prefer not to bother the boys at the Bureau with trivial matters."

TRIVIAL MATTERS! Belinda nearly screamed. From her point of view, a missing son was more than a trivial matter. For the love of all that is sacred; how could the sun rise; the full moon shine while Little Lord Fauntleroy was unaccounted for?

Ex-Senator Livingston, however, remained dismissive. "Have the school officials searched the campus? Livingston's probably hiding in a broom closet laughing his ass off over the fuss everyone is making."

"Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord assured me they searched the campus—twice—after they discovered he failed to return from a trip to Geneva-on-the-Lake with some other students."

When Belinda offered nothing further, the elder Livingston said, “And?”

“And nothing! Headmaster Dolwich notified the sheriff’s office and they sent some nobody deputy out to the school to take a report. The officer I spoke with said Todd was entered into the computer system as a runaway; absent evidence of foul play there was nothing more they could do. Can you imagine,” Belinda harrumphed at the indignant thought, “Todd a runaway?”

“Who?”

Belinda let out another exasperated sigh. “Oh, Daddy...Livingston...you know who I mean.”

“If you disapprove of his Christian name, then why on earth did you select it?” Harvard left his rejoinder hanging on the air.

“Daddy, I’m in no mood to quibble over Todd’s—Livingston’s—name.”

“Have you called David,” the senior Livingston asked, his impatience growing by the minute, “in the event Livingston contacts him?”

“I called his Royal Lordship as soon as I got off the phone with the sheriff’s office.”

“What’s David’s take?”

“I got his answering machine. I’ve left three messages this morning, but so far he hasn’t bothered to return my calls.” Belinda added as an afterthought, “I can’t imagine why Todd would contact him anyway; they’ve barely spoken in three years.

“Call it a *mother’s intuition*,” she warned, “but something is wrong. Mark my words, something is wrong.”

Former senator Livingston rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, not so much over his daughter’s proclivity for drama, but because the unexpected call was detaining him from important business. He had a 1:55 tee time at the country club and abhorred being tardy.

“I predict” the former senator pontificated, “after an exhaustive weekend of intimate and detailed anatomical research with one or more of the local hayseeds up there in Hicksville, Livingston will reappear as if nothing is amiss.”

“Honestly, Daddy, sometimes I wonder which one of you is worse, you or your grandson.”

The senator cackled. “I’ll have you know that when I was his age I, too, was quite the ladies man...if I do say so myself.”

“I don’t need to hear this,” Belinda segued. “I’m thinking about catching a flight to Ohio in the morning. Maybe if there’s someone up there cracking the whip the cops will get off their doughnut-eating lazy duffs and put an effort into finding Todd.”

The call waiting alert beeped and Belinda glanced at the caller ID. “Daddy, I’ll call you right back. David has finally decided to grace me with a return call.”

Chapter 16

Belinda disconnected the call with her father and picked up the incoming one from David. Without preamble, she said, “I am so glad you could take time out of your busy schedule and return at least one of my calls—emphasis on *calls*.”

The judge shook his head at the ex-wife’s reprimand. Then again, she always had had a knack for blaming others whenever she encountered one of life’s speed bumps.

Due to the shock of the FedEx package and letter, voices on his answering machine had become nothing more than background white noise. After the gravity of the situation sank in, Judge Seymore’s thought process became focused, analytical.

“When it comes to the welfare of our son one would think the father would return a telephone call more promptly.”

“What in the world are you talking about, Belle? I was in my office all morning.” What he didn’t say was: *The only time Todd is ‘our son’ is when there’s a problem. The rest of the time he’s a Livingston, not a Seymore.* Bickering with the ex-wife, however, served no useful purpose, so Seymore addressed the issue at hand.

“I take it they’ve contacted you, too?” he said.

Belle snapped her tongue against the back of her top teeth, her condescending tut-tut reserved for ne’er-do-wells. “Well of course they contacted me, David. I am, after all, custodial parent.”

Thank you, Belle, for the hot poker in the eye...so refreshing. “What did they say?” David asked, his patience growing thin.

Behind another toothy tongue snap, Belle relayed a rapid-fire explanation how her morning had been interrupted by Todd’s shenanigans.

“Mr. Dolwich said Todd went to Geneva-on-the-Lake yesterday afternoon with friends, but neglected to return to the campus. Apparently his buddies were able to cover for him overnight, because the school didn’t realize he was missing until late this morning. They searched the campus, and when they couldn’t locate him they filed a missing person report with the sheriff’s office. Mr. Dolwich called me with the news just before noon.

By mid-morning when the staff realized Todd Seymore was MIA, Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord were summoned to the campus. Together they reviewed the previous night’s CCTV security footage, and then confronted the Musketeers with the obvious. Of course the boys hem hawed until Headmaster Dolwich blew a gasket and demanded answers, as well as an admission as to which Musketeer scribbled Seymore’s name on the sign-in sheet.

Within the hour an Ashtabula County Sheriff’s deputy arrived on campus playing both sides of *good cop/bad cop*. Unable to glean additional information from the tightlipped group, she documented a missing person report with the promise: “If I find out you boys are lying to me, I’ll lock your collective butts up in juvie hall for obstruction of justice faster than you can say: “All for one and one for all.”

The tactic may have worked had the deputy not been dealing with a group of adolescents, all of whom possessed superior intelligence. And neither had she been amused with Kork’s suggestion: “Why don’t we round us up some horses, Deputy Dawg, and form us a posse?”

“I was on the other line telling Daddy—call it a mother’s intuition—but I don’t think Todd ran away. There’s something—”

Par usual, and on the rare occasion when David and Belle spoke, it was from different planets: *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.*

“Belle,” David snapped, “Todd’s been kidnapped.”

What Belle Livingston-Seymore intuited moments ago during the conversation with her father, she now refused to acknowledge. A moment’s uneasy silence passed, and then she said, “What in the world are you talking about?”

In succinct judicial fashion, Seymore relayed his account of the receipt of the overnight package and its contents.

“How can you be sure it’s not one of Todd’s pranks?” she said, obviously having entered the first stage of the grieving process—denial.

Seymore presented a compelling argument.

“This afternoon I receive an express package, shipped overnight from Ohio, and inside said package is a disposable cell phone, with accompanying note warning me not to notify the authorities; conveniently arriving the day after Todd goes missing?” David took a much needed swallow of bourbon. “Honestly, Belle, I don’t think even Todd is heartless enough to put us through something like this.”

Seymore walked to the kitchen and set his glass on the counter.

Another moment’s silence loomed while Belle digested and processed the new information. Once she put it all together, Belle loosed the strident wail of an animal with its paw caught in a leg hold trap. She unsuccessfully fought against chest-racking sobs as she demanded David use all his connections, all his influence, all his power to organize the largest manhunt since the Lindbergh kidnapping.

Seymore was several steps ahead of her. His mind was galloping at a mile a minute pace. He needed to make an urgent telephone call, but could not do so while dealing with a hysterical ex-wife. It took several minutes before he was able to calmly guide Belinda back to a semblance of control. He gave her explicit instructions to notify her father, but under no circumstances were they to contact the authorities.

Seymore terminated the call with hope Belle’s call to her father would occupy them both long enough for him to work his magic. He trotted back into his office and snapped open the lid of an electronic Rolodex. He entered the nine character password for access to the list of restricted telephone numbers, and then nervously punched in the number to an old law school associate, who also happened to be one of the most powerful men inside the beltway.

Chapter 17

The Musketeers discreetly snuck away to Dylan Field—the campus baseball field posthumously named after a promising student athlete killed in a motorcycle accident. Already in enough hot water with the administration for covering Seymore’s misguided adventure, they did their best not to draw further attention to themselves.

Hart, first to arrive, sat on the bottom row of bleachers swatting away mosquitoes and deerflies. Duncan and Lamp strolled up a few minutes later, the latter clapping a hand against the back of his neck while wishing he owned one of those hooded beekeeper suits.

“Explain again why we had to meet out here?” Lamp grouched. “I’m going to be a pint low by the time we leave.”

Hart ignored Lamp’s bellyaching. “Where’s Kork?”

“The last I saw him,” Duncan swatted vainly at a deerfly buzzing around his head, “he was doing his shuck and jive routine with Mr. Leon.”

Kork streaked across the adjacent soccer field like a black arrow, leaped against the chain link backstop behind home plate and scaled halfway to the top. He vaulted to the ground and dropped into a three-point stance in front of the others.

“Are you finished, Tarzan?” Hart sardonically asked.

Kork stood, his dark skin glowing with sweaty luminance, and said, “Tarzan be white fiction, bwana; my roots be Mandinka warrior.”

Lamp slapped another mosquito drilling into his arm. “Can we, like, go into the dugout or something?”

Kork chuckled as he slipped on the t-shirt tucked it into his waistband. “Wonderful idea, Mark, because there’s no possible way a mosquito would ever think of looking for us in there.”

“At least we won’t be standing out in the open,” Lamp shot back.

The group turned and looked at Lamp as if he’d suddenly sprouted the yellow wings and purple horns of a mega-maxi-dorkmeister.

“What?” Lamp groaned defensively. “Why is it I always have to explain myself to you guys? Mosquitoes are disease vectors: Malaria. Encephalitis. West Nile virus. Lyme disease...”

Duncan snorted a scoff. “Lyme disease is transmitted by ticks, you weenie.”

“Great,” Lamp turned on a diffusing grin and slapped his hands against his thighs, “now I have something new to worry about.”

If for no other reason than to appease Lamp’s hypochondria, the boys retried to the visitor’s dugout for a discussion of the morning’s events.

“Guys, we’re in some deep do-do here.” When none of the Musketeers picked up his thread, Lamp continued. “I mean...that cop...she was, like, really pissed off. She knows we know something.”

Kork leaned a shoulder against the chain link fence protecting the dugout from errant foul tips, folded his arms over his chest and grinned. “You *know*, Mark...we all know she knows we know...you know what I mean?”

“I’m serious, Jerry.”

“That’s what frightens me.” Kork stepped to the back of the dugout.

Future barrister C. Wesley Hart joined the conversation.

“What *exactly* do we know, Mark? All we know for sure is that the school and the police are aware Todd’s missing, nothing more.”

Inside the dugout Hart paced before the high court of adolescent deliberation.

“We—legally speaking of course—have no firsthand knowledge of Todd’s whereabouts, therefore,” Hart even had the gall to raise his index finger as if pleading a case before the bench, “we have neither civil nor criminal culpability pertaining to the disappearance of one Livingston Todd Seymore.”

The only thing C. Wesley Hart, future Esquire, forgot to include upon conclusion was: “Defense rests.”

Lamp opened his mouth to further defend his point, but found himself cut off by strident applause.

“Thank you...thank you...thank you, Counselor, for that well-articulated dissemination of the pertinent facts, or at least the facts as we know them. I’m sure Clarence Darrow is at this very moment prying open the lid of his coffin, preparing to emerge from the netherworld to extol that inspirational and most insightful oration with its just accolades.”

Hart stepped in front of Kork’s leering grin, lowered his index finger and raised the middle one, which served to broaden Kork’s grin.

“We don’t *know* squat, Mark.” Kork stepped around Hart and walked to the opposite end of the dugout. “All we know for sure is that Todd was headed for Grumpy Granny’s, most probably to get some honey on his stinger. We don’t even know who the chick is...or if he made it to the bar.”

“Yeah, but by omission we lied to the cop, and I’m pretty sure she knew we were lying.” Lamp’s eyes nervously scanned the dugout as he continued. “Do you have any idea the size of cow my parents will have if I get kicked out of Grand River Academy...let alone end up with a criminal record?”

“Do tell, Mark,” Kork threw a forearm over his eyes and shivered with mock indignation. “They’ll cut off your allowance? Ground you to the psych ward? Take away your nebulizer? Oh the inhumanity of it all!”

“Funny, Jerry, very funny.” Lamp brushed a phantom mosquito off his arm. “This isn’t a joking matter. We could end up with a criminal record that could, potentially, follow us the rest of our lives.

“I’ve pre-applied to MIT’s Health Sciences and Technology program. I’m willing to bet the Massachusetts Institute of Technology doesn’t process applications from convicted felons. Just a guess mind you.”

“Oh come on, Mark, keep things in their proper perspective.” Hart sat down on the player’s bench; probably the closest he would ever come to athleticism in this lifetime. “I seriously doubt the cops are going to throw a bunch of high school kids from a prestigious academy in jail because they covered for one of our friends while he was out getting laid. And do you really think—even for a second—the school would expel us and risk losing all that tuition money?”

“I think it is safe to say that each of our parents carries enough financial and political clout...” He let his supercilious observation hang on the air unfinished.

Kork, in his best ghetto voice, said, “I don’ know ‘bout you vanilla wafers, but fo’ sho’, da’ black boy don’t be much trustin’ when it come to dealin’ wiff’ da’ po-po.”

Lamp’s shoulders deflated. “Come on, Jerry, cut the clowning. We could be in a lot of trouble for not telling the deputy everything we know...just to protect our walking-talking-libidinous-hormonal floodgate friend, who can’t seem to keep his dick in his pants.”

During the conversation Duncan elected to remain on the sidelines, figuratively speaking, as he silently absorbed the opposing points of view. What he found bothered him most was how nobody was taking Todd’s disappearance seriously.

“Have any of you—in your *pathetic-privileged-ponderings*—given thought about what’s happened to Todd?” Duncan said. “I don’t know about you guys...but where I come from: friends don’t leave friends behind.”

“Well now, leave it to Mr. Working Class—”

Duncan spun around and shot Kork a frigid glower.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Kork stepped back defensively, and said, “Relax, Hercules, I wasn’t poking fun at your upbringing, I was referencing the ‘privileged, pathetic ponderings’ alliteration.”

Duncan impaled the group with crystal blue fire in his eyes, with passion in his voice. “I know you guys all come from rich families and shit. And that I’m just a lowlife, California surfer slug with a working class mom. But where I came from, dudes, we never leave the beach until we’re sure everyone is out of the water.”

They had all studied Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* enough in French class to know what Duncan was implying. A sudden wave of guilt washed through the dugout; guilt that it took the newest member of the clique to open their eyes to: Todd Seymore may be in serious trouble.

Duncan turned and stared out at the centerfield fence for a long, long time. “Dudes,” he finally said, “last night, because we were worried about our own asses, we abandoned our friend.”

His simple rebuke gave each Musketeer a moment’s pause. Kork collapsed to the bench beside Hart, and said, “So what’s the plan, Superman?”

Duncan shrugged his shoulders. To him the answer was simple. He turned to the others, and said, “We’re already in enough hot water for one day, so what’s the difference? I say we go back to Geneva-on-the-Lake first thing tomorrow morning and look for Todd.”

“Right,” Lamp plopped down on the bench between Hart and Kork, “we’ll check the Strip. If we can’t locate Seymore-the-semen-spreader, we can always walk into Grumpy Granny’s and demand from the psycho owner he tell us where Todd is, or else.” Lamp gave his fingers a capricious snap. “Problem solved.”

Duncan’s face broke into a smile. “What an excellent idea, Mark.”

Lamp turned to Duncan, his countenance incredulous. “I was kidding, Zak.”

“I wasn’t.”

Duncan stepped in front of the group, looked each Musketeer in the eye, and extended his hand, palm down. Kork and Hart quickly rose and committed their hands to the pile. Lamp stared a little longer than he should have. He reluctantly climbed to his feet and added his hand to the pile of flesh; their voices reverent whispers as each repeated after Duncan.

“*Tous pour un, un pour tous*—all for one, one for all.”

“Hang on, Todd,” Duncan whispered, “we’re coming for you.”

Chapter 18

From within the confines of the Grand River Academy's baseball dugout the Musketeers had sworn an allegiance to find their friend. And from not many miles away, that selfsame friend stirred with a somnolent groan, a trickle of spittle bubbled from the corner of his mouth and left a glistening trail across his cheek.

Comatose for nearly twenty-four hours, Seymore awoke from the drug-induced coma, nonplussed. It took a minute or two before his brain slipped out of neutral and back into gear. When it did, he found himself wrapped inside a tattered, musty sleeping bag, lying upon an equally smelly canvas cot. He wasn't sure if the room had absorbed the smell of the cot and natty sleeping bag, or vice versa. One thing was for certain; awakening in a strange place, with no idea how he'd arrived left him a psychologically emasculated eunuch.

Exhausted from the exertion it had taken to sit up; Seymore leaned back and inadvertently banged his head against the wall. HOLY MOTHER OF MERCY! White-hot spears of lightening shot from the back of his skull and out through his eyes. Sure he was about to puke, Seymore leaned forward and waited for the inevitable gush. A few minutes passed, and so did the sensation. He wiped cracked dry lips with the back of his hand, and then blinked the room into focus.

Buckled, water-stained sheets of vintage 1960s blonde paneling hung from the walls of the seven-by-ten room. The warped floor, stripped bare of carpeting, reminded him of the miniature moguls he'd skied over on one of the family vacations to Aspen. Overhead ceiling tiles, stained black with mildew and mold, sagged like a wet sail. Across the room narrow bi-fold doors hung precariously off their tracks in front of the closet. Faint pinpricks of sunlight filtered into the dank room from around the edge of a sheet of plywood covering what he assumed had once been a window. On the floor next to the door was a roll of duct tape, a pair of stainless steel handcuffs and a bottle of water.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the steady thrum of a small engine, and at a closer proximity the sound of indistinct conversation. Seymore scooted to the edge of the cot, dropped his feet to the floor and shook the cobwebs from his head. The effort made him want to vomit again. To take his mind off being sick he tried to focus on the muffled voices beyond the door. A few minutes passed and he found his head had lolling forward and his chin resting on his chest. He abruptly snapped his head up, determined; one cannot sleep when in motion.

Seymore pushed off the cot and rose to his feet, used the wall for support until he regained his equilibrium. Once sure he wouldn't topple over, or barf, he sucked in a deep breath of stagnant air and stretched his arms overhead, twisted side to side to get the blood moving.

He drew in a deep breath and tried to search his addled brain for the last thing he remembered. He remembered piling out of Wes's car at Geneva-on-the-Lake—No, that wasn't quite right. He remembered they were gathered on the sidewalk discussing what they were going to do for the afternoon. Wait—there was something about Grumpy Granny's, and a girl fit into the picture... somehow. He remembered using the bathroom at the bar, but everything thereafter was a blank.

Seymore, for the moment, gave up on his mental reconnaissance and padded across the room. He stood in front of the boarded-up window long enough to run a hand around the heavy two-by-four frame holding a sheet of plywood in place. Absent a pry bar and hammer there was no way he was going to loosen even one of the more than two dozen tenpenny nails sunk into its frame. He moved to the door and picked up the water bottle, leaned against the wall as another wave of nausea washed over him. He twisted the cap off and brought the bottle to his lips. A piece

of the puzzle suddenly fell into place. He held the bottle out and stared at it: *Frank spiked my drink!* Fury replaced nausea and he threw the bottle across the room, where it splattered against the opposite wall. There was no way he would fall for that trick a second time.

Seymore slid the handcuffs and duct tape aside with his foot and traced his fingers around the doorjamb sealed tighter than a clam's butt. The hole where the door handle should have been was covered by a steel plate, and secured with flathead carriage bolts, impervious to a wrench and socket set.

Whoever the jokers were behind this game of Dungeons & Dragons had certainly preplanned.

Seymore pressed his ear against the door and listened. He heard two, maybe three distinct voices but was unable to make out what was being said. He stepped back, drew in a deep breath, exhaled and pounded his fist against the door. Silence reigned supreme, save for the steady thrum of the distant engine.

Gathered together in the living room's command center, slash, sleeping billet, RJ turned to Johnny and said in a low voice, "It appears sleeping beauty has awoken. Why don't you go introduce yourself to our guest and educate him on how we intend to conduct business, and the kind of cooperation we expect of him?"

Dressed in the same camouflage garb he always wore, as if hunting season lasted from January through December, Johnny sat in a webbed lawn chair straddling the doorway and drinking beer. He gave a curt nod RJ's direction, set his beer on the floor beside his chair and stood. Wearing a nearly imperceptible smile, as if the brat had been kidnapped solely for his sadistic entertainment, Johnny walked toward the back of the trailer.

Seymore knew he was no Hulk Hogan, but neither did he consider himself a wimp. He'd had his share of scrapes over the years—some won, some lost—yet was confident he could take care of business when necessary. He heard the approach of heavy footfalls every bit as much as felt them vibrating through the floor. He balled his fists at his sides and prepared himself mentally. The time had come to open a can of whoop-ass on whoever was in charge of this game.

"What do you want?" a gruff voice asked from outside the door.

Seymore leaned closer, like he was placing an order at a fast food drive-thru speaker, and said, "I have to use the bathroom."

Dead silence. *This place is as bad as Frank's.* Seymore mused as he pounded on the door a second time. "Come on, dude. Let me out; I have to pee."

Clayburn spoke through the door. "Put a strip of duct tape over your eyes and the handcuffs on your wrists."

"You're kidding me, right?"

Seymore was about to learn Johnny Clayburn had no sense of humor.

"You want to piss, do what you're told."

Seymore contemplated telling the man to go perform an anatomically impossible sex act on himself, but he really had to go. He peeled off a strip of tape long enough to cover both eyes, and then snapped the handcuffs over his wrists. "Okay, I did what you said, now open the door." He backpedaled to the center of the room and waited.

Johnny Clayburn turned the deadbolt and pushed the door open. In the event the kid had a problem following instructions, he'd also slipped on a camo hunter's facemask and matching gloves. Three strides carried Clayburn across the room.

He grabbed a fistful of ear and twisted Seymore to his tip toes. "You promise not to piss me off and I'll promise not to break every bone in your body," Clayburn hissed with beer-tainted breath.

For once in his young life Livingston Todd Seymore made the right choice; he chose not to challenge authority.

Johnny Clayburn pressed his thumbs against Seymore's eyes to make sure the tape was secure, peeled off his hood and gloves and stuffed both into his pants' pocket. He marched Seymore from the room with a painfully tight grip on his arm.

Although he was blindfolded, when they emerged from the narrow hallway Seymore could sense that they'd entered a larger room, an area that smelled of stale cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies. Even though he could not see them, Seymore felt their presence. He was guided through another doorway where cool air whispered against his bare face, arms and legs. Chirping birds told him they were outside, which he found curious considering his Seeing Eye dog was supposed to be taking him to the toilet.

They crossed what he decided was a wood plank deck, only the tight grip on his arm kept him from tumbling down the steps his guide didn't bother to warn were coming up. They stepped off the porch into knee-high weeds, and continued across a narrow driveway, gravel crunching under the soles of his boots. Abruptly jerked to a stop, the man removed the handcuffs, and again grabbed a handful of ear.

What is it with this guy and the ear thing?

Seymore felt something cold drawn along his cheek, either a fingernail or the edge of a knife, and wasn't particularly anxious to find out which. "You try and run; if you take the tape off your eyes; I **will** cut off one of your fingers."

A spring-loaded door creaked open and Seymore was shoved inside what he first thought was a shed, but promptly recognized by the aroma as an outhouse.

"How am I supposed to take a leak if I can't see where to aim?"

Clayburn spun him around and roughly shoved him to the toilet seat bolted over the opening. Seymore mustered up as much sarcasm as possible. "Geez, thanks, I wish I'd have thought of that?"

He lifted his butt off the seat and lowered his drawers to half-mast, hoped he was hovering over the opening and didn't pee down his leg. When he finished he pulled up his pants and hollered through the door. "I need to wash my hands."

Clayburn ripped the door open and jerked Seymore from the outhouse.

Apparently personal hygiene was not high on Ear Twister's list, Seymore mused, oblivious to the predicament he was in.

Clayburn silently marched Seymore back across the gravel driveway, up the steps, across the porch and back inside the trailer. They reached the middle of the living room and Seymore jerked his arm free. He decided to employ what he liked to call: verbal judo. The problem was that he, the white belt, was squaring off with the black belt of callousness.

"What time is it?" Seymore demanded petulantly.

No response.

"At least tell me what day is it."

No response.

"What is it you want?"

No response.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders; RJ, Sara and Blaine watched with amused silence the kid's confidence wane with each unanswered question.

Seymore mustered up the last of his courage, and said, "Look, my old man's an important government official. Once the school realizes I'm missing, this place is going to be crawling with cops and FBI agents. So I suggest you end this silly game of yours, because you have no idea who you're fucking with, dude."

Incorrect young grasshopper of verbal judo, incorrect; those responsible for your abduction knew exactly with whom they were screwing, which was why they were screwing with you in the first place. And now that they had that *important government official's* loud mouth brat under their control, the real screwing was about to begin.

Johnny turned his head toward the others and grinned, maybe even smiled. But the smirk on his face couldn't disguise what was on his mind: *Is this little shit for real?* Without warning he drove his fist into Seymore's solar plexus and sent him crashing to the floor like a collapsed air balloon.

While Seymore writhed on the floor gasping for air, Johnny Clayburn took a hold of the handcuff chain and dragged him back toward the dungeon. He didn't bother to count the number of times the kid's head banged off the floor and the walls. He tossed Seymore to the floor at the center of the room and squatted to his haunches. While he remove the handcuffs, Clayburn said, "You ever talk to me like that again, shit for brains, I'll pull your tongue out with a pair of pliers."

Clayburn gave Seymore a good-bye kick to the ribs and on his way out, dropped the handcuffs next to the roll of tape and slammed the door.

It took several few minutes before Seymore was able to catch his breath. He sat up and gave the tape over his eyes a quick tug, followed by a loud curse. He looked down at a pair of anemic caterpillars, what used to be his eyebrows, stuck to the tape. *Great, I'll bet I look like a Caucasian Whoopi Goldberg.*

Seymore wadded the tape into a ball and threw it across the room. It landed next to the empty water bottle he now wished he had not so offhandedly flung across the room; he was thirsty.

He struggled to his feet and paced the tiny jail cell with one arm pressed against his throbbing ribs. It became apparent to him this charade was more than a practical joke. He was obviously in much deeper trouble than originally imagined. Seymore slumped into the corner nearest the smelly army cot and pressed his back against the wall. He brought his chin to rest on his knees and ruminated. It was time to execute an escape plan, as soon as he could come up with one.

Chapter 19

Phoenix stepped from the air-conditioned Publix Super Market on 53rd Street in downtown Marathon, Florida. In his early thirties, he sported a healthy tan and military-short blonde hair yet to show the first hint of silver. A tad less than six feet tall, he weighed a solid one hundred and ninety pounds, and was deceptively powerful, with the flexibility of a twenty-year-old gymnast. Sinewy, rather than muscular, was a good definition of Phoenix's physique. He had alert silver-grey eyes the color of shark skin, and was blessed with near eidetic recall and superior observation and perception skills. Once upon a time, Phoenix had been the quintessential warrior.

He worked a pair of white wraparound Prada sunglasses into place, and paused on the sidewalk to enjoy south Florida's bright afternoon sunshine. Standing outside the market Phoenix looked like any other Bermuda shorts, three-button short sleeve pullover, athletic shoe-clad middle age dot-com early retiree. But from behind the mirrored turquoise lenses of the sunglasses, Phoenix eyes quickly and efficiently scanned the parking lot, taking in everything. While he looked for nothing in particular, at the same time he looked for anything out of place, such as someone trying a little too hard not to notice him.

Old habits die hard.

Satisfied he was no more the focus of attention than the pair of brown pelicans gliding lazy circles overhead on the afternoon thermals, he stepped from the curb into the parking lot carrying three dark green, eco-friendly cloth shopping bags. He walked to his vehicle and packed the bags into the molded hard shell saddlebags of a two-tone metallic green Harley-Davidson Road King. Groceries secured, front forks unlocked, he started the engine and threw a leg over the seat as he cinched tight a forest green half-helmet. Phoenix slipped into a pair of fingerless leather riding gloves, raised the kickstand, and pulled from the parking lot. He turned west onto the U.S. A1A, the Overseas Highway, and headed for home.

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The Overseas Highway connects Florida's mainland to Key West, the southernmost inhabitable point of the continental United States. Consistently voted the second most scenic route in America, it's often mistakenly thought the Florida Keys run north and south, when in fact the archipelago runs east to west—which is why it's called Key West and not Key South. The city of Marathon, on Vacca Key, sits at the Keys' midpoint, with the Atlantic Ocean's deep blue waters to the east, the shallower Gulf of Mexico's slate-blue waters to the west. A tropical paradise that was good enough for Ernest Hemingway in his day; still good enough for Temple Phoenix.

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A pleasant afternoon breeze blowing across the peninsula from the Gulf of Mexico helped moderate Florida's sweltering mid-August inferno. Because he was in no hurry, Phoenix moved to the curb lane and let the steady stream of tourists pass by, most en route to the fabled city of Key West. He kept glancing at the strip plazas and Jet Ski/Waverunner rental huts, crammed in between ubiquitous souvenir and dive shops peddling polished conch shells, theme-related t-shirts and overpriced trinkets. It saddened him each time he passed them. There was more asphalt and concrete than sand and green space these days, and at the current rate of development, it wouldn't

be long before the only greenery left would be the professionally groomed hotel and strip mall lawns.

Phoenix reached Knight's Key and signaled a lane change. He moved to the center turn lane, dropped his feet to the pavement and waited for a break in traffic. Once the roadway cleared, he turned onto Knight Boulevard and followed the winding avenue past the eponymous Knight's RV Campground and Marina until he reached Kyle Way—the last bastion of privately-owned, single-family dwellings on the island—nestled in a secluded residential subdivision off the A1A.

Phoenix drove through the opening in the stucco wall that surrounded his property on three sides, the Atlantic Ocean being the fourth demarcation. Two thirty foot centennial palms flanked the entryway. Strategically planted islands of indigenes flora, and clusters of ornamental grasses in a variety of hues, augmented the eco-friendly yard of raked limestone and crushed seashells. A half dozen towering Buccaneer and Cabbage palms not only shaded Phoenix's 2,500 square foot oceanfront home, the unobtrusive landscaping aided in concealing it from street view.

Because Knight's Key sits barely one meter above sea level, it is vulnerable to tidal activity, storm surges and hurricanes. Phoenix's home, anchored atop ten fifteen-foot tall concrete pillars driven into the bedrock, was designed and constructed to withstand a Category 4 (130-156 mph sustained winds) hurricane. The outer shell was comprised of pre-poured interlocking concrete slabs slathered, like icing on a cake, with a thick layer of pastel blue stucco. It had carports underneath each end of the white vinyl wraparound porch, and a steel roof cleverly fabricated to resemble red Spanish clay tiles. Equipped with hurricane impact windows and roll down galvanized steel shutters that protected it from Mother Nature's fury, Phoenix's home had postcard-perfect views of the Atlantic Ocean sunrises and Gulf of Mexico sunsets.

Phoenix drove into the carport, parked the motorcycle and used the kill switch to shut down the engine. He climbed off the bike and peeled out of his gloves, helmet and sunglasses, setting them on the seat. He was in the process of unlocking the saddlebags when someone called his name.

"Phoenix," his neighbor's voice bellowed from next door. "I've got a bone to pick with you!"

Phoenix stepped from the shaded carport and walked toward the trimmed hedgerow of oleander shrubs that hid the wall separating his property from Mr. Witherspoon's.

Harold Witherspoon, retired owner and CEO of Witherspoon Fabricating & Manufactory, had a tangle of receding snow-white hair. At five-foot-eight inches tall he bore a strong resemblance to Thurston Howell III of *Gilligan's Island* fame. He even wore one of those silly white and black nautical captain's caps when at the helm of his seventy foot Riviera motor yacht, anchored at the private dock behind his house.

"Up here."

Phoenix tipped his head back and shaded his eyes with his hand. Witherspoon stood on the upper balcony of his home, neck craned forward, forearms resting on the rail, an afternoon Bloody Mary clutched between his hands.

"And which bone would you like to pick on first, Mr. Witherspoon?" Phoenix said with an affable smile.

Witherspoon wet his whistle and smacked his lips as the last swallow of the tomato juice cocktail splashed home. He wiped his mouth on the paper napkin wrapped around the glass, and pointed a boney finger over the wrought iron balustrade.

"Now you see here, Phoenix, it's your property," he pointed toward the living room windows, "and you can damn well do as you please—and mind you, the Misses told me I should tend to my own beeswax—but I need to get this off my chest."

Phoenix's smile faded. He couldn't recall Mr. Witherspoon ever being so...animated.

Witherspoon rested the empty glass on the banister and winked, twice. That or he had something in his eye.

"I'm an old codger...set in his ways...retired snow bird accustomed to long afternoon naps. Needless to say, I don't appreciate your guests—the three of them gussied up in their Sunday finest—skulking around banging on doors and causing a ruckus."

Witherspoon paused long enough to draw in a wheezing breath, exhaled and continued.

"Do us a favor would you, Phoenix?"

"What's that, Mr. Witherspoon?" Phoenix's attention was riveted on his neighbor.

"The next time you have company over, I want you to make sure you're going to be home. Or at least have the decency to leave the door unlocked so they can walk right in and make themselves at home...not disturb the neighborhood prowling around like they belong."

"To tell the truth, I'd half a mind to grab Lil Harold and get to the bottom of things." Witherspoon patted the pockets of his lavender velour warm up jacket like he was searching for one of those fat cigars he smoked. "You know me, Phoenix. I'm not in the least bashful about confronting a neighbor when there's a problem."

"I'll throw on a pair of shoes right now, be over in a jiffy; if you know what I mean?" Witherspoon winked again; definitely something in his eye.

"Not to bother, Mr. Witherspoon. I'm sorry about the alarm—"

"No alarm," Witherspoon interjected before Phoenix could finish, "none a' tall."

Phoenix shot Witherspoon a knowing grin. "I can almost guarantee you, Mr. Witherspoon, there won't be a repeat performance."

Witherspoon glanced to the Rolex attached to his wrist, picked up his glass, and said, "Well then...all right...it's time for *The Price is Right*."

"Next time I'll call the sheriff," he waved a final warning.

"No need for the sheriff, Mr. Witherspoon, I'll take care of the problem."

The old curmudgeon paused long enough to make sure Phoenix had a full grasp of the situation, and then disappeared through the sliding doors to his television room; which conveniently offered a bird's eye view of Phoenix's property.

In reality, Harold Witherspoon was the kind of *nosey neighbor* everybody wished they had.

Witherspoon's cryptic tirade had told his reclusive neighbor all he needed to know. Three suit-clad men were inside the house—the alarm had been bypassed—that he was armed and willing to act as backup—or summon the sheriff's office if need be.

"...it's your property and you can damn well do as you please..."

Witherspoon's pointed finger directed Phoenix's attention to the living room window, where from his higher elevation he could see the obscure silhouette of a man standing in shadow.

"I'm an old codger...used to long afternoon naps..."

All the residents on Knight's Key knew how each afternoon the septuagenarian power-walked the island for forty minutes, arms swinging like enthusiastic pendulums.

"I don't appreciate your guests—the three of them gussied up in their Sunday finest—skulking around banging on doors and causing a ruckus."

Three men in expensive suits was not the normal attire of the fashion-conscious burglar.

"...have the decency to leave the door unlocked so they can walk right in and make themselves at home..."

They were still inside.

"...I'd half a mind to bring Lil Harold over..."

Lil Harold was Witherspoon's moniker for the compact seven shot 9 mm Ruger he had in the pocket of his warm up jacket.

"I'll throw on a pair of shoes right now; be over in a jiffy..."

Witherspoon's offer to act as Phoenix's backup.

“No alarm, none a’ tall...”

Phoenix’s alarm system had not activated, it must have been bypassed.

“Next time I’ll call the sberiff in...”

Witherspoon’s offer to notify the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office, if Phoenix so desired.

Phoenix walked toward his house with all his senses on alert, a dozen scenarios, none of them good, raced through his head.

He had purposely loosened several floorboards throughout the house, so when stepped upon they creaked; a rudimentary alarm system founded in feudal Japan to protect the emperor against Ninja assassins. He stood in the carport a few moments and allowed a plan to develop in his head. He was not surprised he’d heard no movement from inside. Face it, there’s nothing stealthy about rumbling into an under-the-house carport on a Harley Davidson. His *guests* already knew he was here.

Phoenix walked to the front of the house and climbed the staircase high enough to see the security panel. The “alarm activated” light was extinguished. He snapped his fingers as if he’d forgotten something, knowing those inside were watching through the louvered window blinds, and retreated down the steps.

Once out of sight Phoenix dashed through the carport and crept along the rear wall. He made sure he remained concealed under the porch’s overhang until he reached the opposite carport, where he used a hidden key to unlock the black Dodge Ram 1500. Phoenix reached into the passenger compartment, popped open a cubbyhole secreted under the dash, and came out with a stainless steel Colt .45.

There was no need to check the chamber, or the magazine capacity, the weapon was kept locked and loaded. It was Phoenix’s opinion that an empty gun only served your adversary’s agenda.

Phoenix made his way to the back of the house, ascended the pool deck staircase and silently crossed the upper porch until he reached a set of French doors that opened into the kitchen and sunroom. His back pressed against the course stucco wall, weapon in his right hand, key fob in the left, Phoenix used Zen-like focus to bring his breathing and heart rate under control.

“What in the world is taking him so long?” The man peeking between the blinds said.

The two men with him, one jittery as a tropical storm, the other calm as the tropical doldrums, sat on a blue-green brushed-suede couch the hue of a frothy ocean wave and waited in Phoenix’s living room.

Phoenix did a quick-peek head bob and once he’d confirmed his *guests* were at the front of the house, slid the key into the lock. He slowly turned it until the brass mechanism released with a nearly inaudible click.

The man at the front window turned his head toward the back of the house, and said, “What was that?”

From his place on the couch the doldrums man leaned forward and picked up the mixed drink he’d helped himself to. “Unless I’m mistaken, you’re about to meet the homeowner.” He brought the glass to his lips, took a dainty sip, and then sat back and waited for the show to begin.

Phoenix eased the door open and stepped inside, a cool air conditioned breeze puffed against his cheek as he entered. He paused and listened for a moment, and once he’d pinpointed those who’d broken into his home, pressed the key fob that activated the security system’s panic alarm.

The first piercing wail reverberated through the house at an ungodly decibel, and Phoenix shot down the hallway with a burst of speed. He launched into the great room with the weapon held in a tactical, two-hand high-ready position.

The startled man at the window doubled over and clapped his hands over his ears. “What the hell!”

Phoenix swept the Colt's barrel in a 180-degree arch across the room. In a fraction of a second he'd evaluated the threat level of all three intruders. The twitchy man leaped off the sofa like his butt was on fire, the refined one gave a blasé nod his direction as he picked unseen lint from his trousers. The young fellow on the opposite side of the room, wearing the dark suit, tie, and J. Edgar Hoover haircut of an FBI agent, instinctively reached for the weapon belted to his hip.

Phoenix leveled the Colt's front ramp sight on the middle of the agent's forehead and shouted overtop the earsplitting siren, "Don't do it, junior."

Agent Gravelis froze in mid-draw. He stared down the tunnel of Phoenix's gun and wisely returned the half-drawn 40 caliber Glock to its holster and eased his hand away from the weapon.

Phoenix pressed the button on the fob that deactivated the alarm, thumbed down the Colt's hammer and lowered the weapon alongside his right thigh.

He gave the baby-faced rookie agent a patronizing smirk, and said, "Shouldn't you be in study hall or something?"

Phoenix turned to the older gentlemen on the sofa, nodded to the lowball glass cradled in his hands, and said, "Will you be staying for dinner, John? Or are you simply here to drink up my whiskey?"

John Mycroft held the drink up to the light and pretended to examine the contents. "Never could resist Jack Daniel's," he said, and then finished the last swallow before he set the glass on the bentwood mahogany coffee table in front of him.

Phoenix nodded toward the bay behind the house, where his forty-five foot fly bridge motor yacht was moored. In his most inhospitable voice, said, "Why don't you help yourself to a swim in the lagoon? The sharks are migrating and I'm told they're particularly aggressive this time of year." He tucked the pistol into his waistband. "And for your edification, you should never swim alone so you have my permission to take your playmates with you."

"I haven't heard from you in a while," said John Mycroft, CIA's Deputy Director of Clandestine Operations. "Because I didn't get a card this Christmas past, I thought I'd better stop by and make sure you still have my address."

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John Mycroft's pale blue eyes were the color and warmth of a polar icecap. He wore his mostly gray hair in a tight crew cut. In his youth Mycroft stood a stitch over six feet, but the passing decades and osteoporosis had peeled off an inch, maybe two. While not a physically intimidating figure when placed on the same stage as Phoenix, he still maintained his college field and track weight, a trim one hundred seventy-five pounds. It wasn't John Mycroft's physical stature that made him dangerous; it was his razor-sharp mind.

Born with the innate ability to sponge up languages at an alarmingly fast rate, a polyglot, Mycroft spoke nine languages fluently, and was conversational in six more. He also possessed the talent to absorb, digest, and mentally organize huge amounts of data, and had never been hesitant to make definitive recommendations based on rapid analysis; which was precisely why, as a young Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class, he had been recruited by the intelligence community, those many decades ago. Mycroft preferred to avoid the spotlight. He chose instead to be the Great Oz, the man behind the curtain. It was no accident he had survived five decades inside the Beltway as the shadowy figure behind D.C.'s power elite.

If the rumors about John Mycroft were true, he held enough secrets to make J. Edgar's private files about as hush-hush as a Sunday *New York Times* headline. Fifty years of government service and John Mycroft was one of the most feared men in Washington D.C.

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“I’m not sure I have your address, John,” Phoenix said, “but I certainly have your number.” He nodded his head toward the young agent and gentleman who’d reclaimed the cushion next to Mycroft. “Who are your friends?”

“Agent something or the other,” Mycroft said with a rolling hand gesture.

Phoenix grinned. He knew full well John Mycroft’s recall capabilities were equal to his own.

The FBI agent stepped forward and extended his hand. “Agent Umberto Gravelis, my friends call me Gravel.”

Phoenix’s eyes dropped to the outstretched hand, then back to the agent’s dark brown eyes, and without reciprocating, said, “That’s...nice.”

First impressions, it was Phoenix’s acerbic way, always dazzle ‘em with first impressions.

“Phoenix doesn’t shake hands on the first date,” Mycroft said, and then continued the introductions. “And this is David Seymore.”

Seymore started to rise, but found himself eased back to the sofa by the deputy director’s hand pressed against his shoulder.

Phoenix face remained expressionless, “As in Judge Seymore?”

“Very good, Phoenix,” Mycroft said, genuinely impressed. “Most people are hard pressed to name the chief justice of the Supreme Court, let alone one of the lesser judges.”

Phoenix rubbed a hand along his clean-shaven jaw line. He wondered if he was the only one who’d caught the judge’s incredulous look at Mycroft’s *‘lesser judges’* crack. He decided the junior G-man caught it too, but obviously didn’t feel it was his place to correct the deputy director’s insensitivity.

Deputy Director Mycroft walked across the living room’s sea-green ceramic tiles, set his glass on the bar, and then reclaimed his seat. He swept his hand around the room, and said, “It looks like you’re set up rather nicely, Phoenix.”

Phoenix bit his bottom lip and folded his arms across his chest. “I do all right. What was it you said you wanted, John?”

Mycroft leaned back, crossed his legs at the knee to expose a shimmering black Oxford and dark nylon dress socks, pale red and blue embroidered tiaras matching the stripes in his tie. He wriggled his foot in a circle as he spoke. “What I would like is to see you at the bottom of the Mariana Trench for the way you abandoned us. But the big guy likes you, so I suppose I’ll have to wait to broach that subject after the next election.”

“You’re still not mad because I won the lottery and you didn’t, are you, John?” Phoenix said with a mirthless grin that didn’t involve his eyes.

Shortly after Phoenix’s fortuitous win in the multi-state lottery game, he had resigned his position as one of Mycroft’s top *fixers*, and quickly departed the deputy director’s clandestine army. Mycroft and Phoenix’s professional relationship was symbiotic. On the surface they had mutual respect for each another’s abilities, but deep down, didn’t care much for one another.

“And speaking of the ‘big guy’...how is Albert these days?”

Judge Seymore and the young FBI agent regarded Phoenix with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. It’s a small circle of people who call the President of the United States by first name, but then again, it’s an even tighter circle that twice saved the life of the future leader of the free world in Iraq.

Mycroft's eyes crinkled with amusement. "In answer to your question, the president is fine...ever grateful for your service...blah-blah-blah... Sends his warmest regards, ya-dah, ya-dah, ya-dah..."

Phoenix returned the spymaster grin with an equally deadly flier, because he knew the President of the United States could never acknowledge that people like him exist, even if they were close friends.

"You know, Phoenix, you could show a little decorum and address the man as Mr. President. And yes, I am still angry over your departure. We invested a lot of time and money into your training, not to have you just get up and walk out on us."

"I think I've been pleasantly decorous...I have yet to unleash an F-bomb." Phoenix's eyes bounced with playful innocence between the two other gentlemen in the room. "But stick around; the sun hasn't gone down yet."

Phoenix strode toward the kitchen and spoke over his shoulder. "You'll have to excuse me, my rainbow sherbet is melting."

Without another word, he retraced his steps through the house and went out the back door, returned a few minutes later with the grocery bags. He set them on the white granite kitchen countertop and unpacked.

Mycroft moved his minions from the living room to the back of the house. The judge and FBI agent stood side by side in the dinette near the French doors, looking as uneasy as a pair of priests at a bar mitzvah, while Mycroft helped himself to a fresh drink from the sunroom's liquor armoire. He took a seat on a white wicker couch, its thick royal blue cushions printed with bright white and yellow hibiscus blossoms, set his sweaty drink on a glass top coffee table, and then relaxed back in his seat.

Phoenix stopped unpacking and rested his elbows on the island counter separating the sunroom from the kitchen. "Put a coaster under your glass, John, before you scratch my table."

Mycroft complied, and Phoenix continued putting away the groceries. When he finished he walked into the sunroom and stood halfway between where Mycroft sat, and where the judge and the FBI agent stood.

"Just so there's no misunderstanding—in the unlikely event you think I care to hear what you have to say—the next time you disable my alarm and walk into my house—*uninvited*—I will shoot you." He turned to the altar boys standing beside the chrome and glass dinette table. "And that goes for you too, Larry and Curly."

The Deputy Director of Clandestine Operations scooted forward and picked up his drink without partaking. "I've so missed your hostility, Phoenix," he said, sipped and returned the glass to a bamboo coaster.

"Stay beyond the few minutes I'll give you to explain why you're here, and you'll see some hostility."

Glass cradled between his hands, Mycroft said, "Why don't you draw back those claws for a minute, hot shot, and listen to what I have to say. It may save you making a horse's ass out of yourself."

Phoenix considered the deputy director for a moment, and then turned his attention to the two other men near the French doors. "Would either of you care for a beverage...before I throw you out with the rest of the trash?"

"Bourbon over ice...if you have it," the judge said sheepishly.

"Coming right up." He turned to the FBI agent, made a gun out of his finger and thumb, and dropped the hammer. "And for you, J. Edgar junior?"

"Nothing thank you."

“Are you sure?” Phoenix said, a condescending smirk creeping across his face. “I believe there may be a leftover chocolate Nehi in the fridge.”

Agent Gravelis’s rigid, academy-trained stoicism showed the briefest hint of a grin.

Phoenix cordially—or as cordial as it gets with Phoenix—invited his guests to retire to the deck overlooking the swimming pool and Atlantic Ocean. “Get the hell out of my house. I’ll be out after I change.”

The three suits filed outside and claimed seats around a patio table shaded by an oversized Tiki umbrella that resembled a conical thatch hut roof.

“How does a guy who worked for the government afford picture-perfect, oceanfront property?” Agent Gravelis asked while contemplating what his meager pension would allow when the day came he could pull the plug.

Mycroft finished the drink he’d carried outside with him, slid his glass to the center of the table, and said, “He hit the lottery.”

“Seriously? I thought you guys were kidding.”

Gravelis was a little too excited for Mycroft’s taste, and the deputy director’s stoic mien and frigid glare told him so.

“Right,” Gravelis fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat, “none of my business.”

The deputy director’s curt nod told the young agent he had come up with the correct answer, and all on his own.

They turned in their seats when Phoenix stepped from the house a few minutes later, and padded barefoot across the terrace carrying a drink-laden silver tray. He set the tray on the handcrafted PVC pipe and Plexiglas patio table Mr. Witherspoon had gifted him, and slipped into a Jerry Lewis parody of the confused waiter.

“Who ordered the bourbon over ice?” Phoenix asked in Lewis’s nasal falsetto.

Seymore raised his hand.

“Your eminence.” Phoenix set a short glass on the table in front of the judge and offered a delicate curtsy.

“Thank you, Mr. Phoenix.”

In front of the FBI agent he set an ice-filled plastic tumbler and sweaty soda can, “A Coke for the Cub Scout.”

Gravelis nodded a silent thank you.

Phoenix set a lowball glass filled with ice and amber liquid in front of Mycroft, “And a fresh JD over shaved ice for the keeper of secrets.”

Taking into account the two belts he’d downed inside the house, Mycroft was pushing the envelope. “You’re only an alcoholic if you indulge in a third cocktail before the dinner hour.” He checked his wristwatch, picked up his glass and mock saluted the table. With a perfect English accent, he said, “Mates, it’s after ten in London; let us drink up lads.”

Phoenix set his double scotch on the rocks aside, pulled out a chair and took a seat. He slid the Sterling silver tray under his chair, lowered his chin onto interlaced fingers, and rested his elbows on the table. “So why are you here, John?”

Chapter 20

Mycroft saw no advantage to beating around the bush, so jumped straight to the point of the unannounced visit. “It seems we’ve developed a bit of a national security issue within your,” he again rolled his hand in the air, “purview.”

Phoenix leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and said, “Apparently you didn’t get the memo—you’ll probably want to reprimand your secretary for the oversight—but I retired a couple of years back.”

“Well, I need you to un-retire,” Mycroft said while holding Phoenix’s steely gaze with one of his polar stares.

“Is that so?” Phoenix replied barely above a whisper.

“That is so,” Mycroft reciprocated with equal timbre.

Phoenix remained stone-faced for a moment, the judge and agent waiting for his response. When it came it was not what they’d expected. Their host abruptly snatched the serving tray from under his chair, loaded it with their untouched drinks, and pushed away from the table. “You boys run along now and find somewhere else to play.” He carried the tray into the house and closed the door, leaving his visitors in awkward silence.

Mycroft shook his head and silently stared out over the ocean’s undulating waves. A few minutes passed before he pushed away from the table, and with a heavy sigh climbed to his feet. Judge Seymore and Agent Gravelis fell in step behind the deputy director and followed him through the French doors.

The triad suddenly found themselves bunched together in the narrow doorway, like spawning salmon swimming against the current. The deputy director’s eyes were crossed and focused on the barrel of the Colt 45 bending the fleshy tip of his nose to a forty-five degree angle.

“What did I tell you people about walking into my house uninvited?” Phoenix snarled, the gun leveled on his guests. He stepped back inside, slammed and locked the door and drew the heavy room-darkening drapes.

Everything had happened so quick the rookie agent was, once again, caught off guard. He hadn’t even had a chance to draw his weapon.

Mycroft gave a rueful head shake and stepped forward. He knocked on the doorjamb, waited the full minute it took for beads of sweat to collect underneath his collar and run down his back, and then rapped a second time.

From inside the house Phoenix’s voice lifted to a lilting soprano. “Who is it?”

The arched brows and pursed lips did not contradict Mycroft’s irritation. “Come on, Phoenix; open the damn door and quite screwing around. It’s hotter than hell out here.”

Using the same squeaky, Asian housekeeping falsetto, Phoenix said, “So sorry...this Florida...you get off wrong exit...Phoenix farther west.”

Agent Gravelis’s indignant outrage finally boiled to the surface. He slammed balled fists to his hips, while mentally clicking off the dozen federal statutes Mycroft’s wiseass friend had, thus far, violated; surely enough for the United States Attorney’s Miami office to throw a Law Library of books at Mr. Wise Guy. The naïve agent stepped forward and made ready to kick in the door, with the intent of dragging Smart Mouth outside in handcuffs, and half-hoped he would resist arrest.

Mycroft clapped a hand against the eager agent’s chest and eased him away from the door. He paused long enough to take a calming breath, and then leaned his forehead against the cool glass. “Please open the door, Phoenix. I have a proposal I want to share with you.”

Chapter 21

Interior drapes flew back and the door thrown open so violently, Mycroft nearly tumbled over the threshold. “Tell me honest,” Phoenix’s face sported an amused grin, “you haven’t stooped to selling Amway have you, John?”

He stepped back from the doorway and waved them inside with the pistol.

“You might as well come in, because I know I’ll get no peace until you’ve had your say, whatever that may be.”

Judge Seymore followed Mycroft into the sunroom and sat beside him on the sofa. Agent Gravelis took up a position of advantage, stood near the French doors with his eyes welded to the nutcase homeowner’s every move.

Phoenix placed the Colt .45 in a kitchen drawer, and then helped himself to a bottle of chilled water from the refrigerator. He offered nothing to his guests as he strolled into the sunroom, claimed a white, fan back rattan chair across from Mycroft, and rested his water bottle on the armrest.

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence passed, the judge finally slid to the edge of his seat, and said, “My name is David Seymore—”

“So he said,” Phoenix tipped his water bottle toward Mycroft.

Mycroft rested a hand on the judge’s forearm. “Phoenix, we need your help with a *special project*.”

“Mr. Phoenix,” Seymore interrupted, “I have a predicament John assures me you can remedy.”

A plethora of scenarios flashed through Phoenix’s mind. Blackmail through marital indiscretion and hookers came to the forefront; followed by drugs, alcohol and gambling. None of which were within Phoenix’s skill set, unless the deputy director wanted one of the purveyors of vice dead, because death was Phoenix’s area of expertise.

Phoenix decided to rise to the bait and see where the conversation was headed. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “And what *‘predicament’* might that be, judge?”

Seymore began to speak but quickly found himself cut off by Mycroft. “Help us find the judge’s son; nothing more, nothing less.”

Phoenix’s hackles shot up. If a federal judge had elected to team with the number two man at CIA, along with the FBI, it was a safe bet there was a bigger play going on behind the curtain than what was being presented on stage.

Each morning over a pot of herbal tea Phoenix, a habitual news junky, used the television remote to flip back and forth between the major news networks, and at the same time peruse a dozen or more online newspapers from around the globe. He had seen nothing during the past week about a federal judge’s kid gone missing. Most assuredly one or more of the media outlets would have trumpeted that story across the headlines, if for no other reason than the drama-factor. Dirty laundry sells newspapers and boosts advertising dollars.

“Finding snot-nosed runaways is not my field of expertise, Judge.”

“My son is not a runaway,” Seymore said, indignant. “He’s been kidnapped.”

Phoenix sat back and contemplated the revelation for a moment, and then leaned forward in his chair, and said, “I’ll give you...most parents want their kidnapped child returned—” Phoenix glanced at Mycroft “—unless of course you’re John’s parents; then you pay the ransom with Monopoly money.”

“Kidnappings are a job for the FBI.” Phoenix thumbed over his shoulder to the rookie agent guarding the dinette service. And a fine job he was doing, not one chair or placemat had gone missing during his watch.

Phoenix’s chair creaked as he shifted his weight and held court with Mycroft’s unreadable gaze. “John, exactly what pie have you gotten your fingers into this time?”

Deputy Director Mycroft picked up his drink, leaned back in his chair and explained what pie he had his fingers in.

Chapter 22

Long before Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the National Security Agency's massive electronic data mining program, known in hush-hush clandestine circles as ECHELON, allegedly overseen by the highly secretive FISA court— Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act—select members of congress had been made privy to the program's existence. Provided with fruits of the harvest during closed-door Senate Intelligence Briefings, it was not until the invasion of America's—the World's—electronic privacy became widespread public knowledge did those same self-serving politicians throw up their hands and cry foul. And only then after they discovered they too had been violated.

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Devon Carver was a brilliant computer whiz and amateur hacker who, for his own amusement, illegally accessed highly classified government websites. Unfortunate for him he got caught on the wrong side of the Pentagon's firewall. At the time Mycroft had appeared, or materialized was probably a more appropriate term, at Carver's preliminary hearing before a federal magistrate. He offered the precocious teen the option of twenty-five years of hard time in Leavenworth, or gainful employment with the Central Intelligence Agency.

"You can be Bubba's prison bitch, or you can draw a paycheck and retirement auspice Uncle Sam, your choice, kid."

It had taken Carver all of seconds to decide working for the Central Intelligence Agency was the far better option than losing his virginity in a federal prison. That was how, five years ago, at the tender age of nineteen, Devon Carver had become one of the Agency's most promising IT *specialists*.

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After receipt of the kidnappers' FedEx package, Seymore had wisely contacted John Mycroft before he activated the cell phone. He hand-delivered the package to Langley, and Mycroft unleashed the CIA's geek squad. The forensics team went over the cell telephone and package with a fine-tooth forensic comb. They dismantled the phone and checked for trace evidence, DNA, and electronic anomalies that might give a clue as to which subversive terrorist group had the wherewithal to abduct a federal judge's son. After the geeks came up empty, Mycroft tasked Devon Carver to program the CIA's complex array of telecommunication surveillance computers to seek out two key phrases: "This is David Seymore", along with the missing boy's given name "Livingston", neither of which was frequently used in everyday conversation.

The use of those unique expressions allowed ECHELON to quickly filter the millions of cell phone, land lines, wireless telephones, fax machines and miscellaneous electronic devices the CIA and NSA monitored, and efficiently reduced the infinite number of intercepts to something more manageable.

After they cloned the cell phone—which enabled Carver and Mycroft to monitor incoming calls live—Mycroft quietly sat in his office, while David Seymore activated the phone.

The first call came through almost immediately, and the government's dystopian computers went to work. They literally snatched the signal out of the air. Within seconds Carver had pierced

the Cellular Message Encryption Algorithm (the electronic cipher used by North American cell phone carriers to keep telephone conversations private...so much for that idea) and back-traced the digital trail upstream to a CIA-monitored switching station high atop the Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia.

A few keystrokes, and seventeen seconds later Carver had computed signal strength, along with cell phone tower triangulation to locate the origin of the transmission. It was coming from a Sprint Communications tower, B-14/6577, located on the outskirts of Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio.

Based on enough electronic gobbledygook to confuse Marconi; the computer whiz kid had explained to Mycroft that, in his opinion, the kidnapper's signal was stationary. And in all probability, the abductors were within a two- to five-mile radius of the Sprint Communications tower he had identified in Ohio.

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Accustomed to briefing presidents, whose valuable time demanded succinct, detailed explanation, absent extraneous data, Mycroft spent ten minutes bringing Phoenix up to speed. He completed his tale of woe, leaned back and crossed his legs at the ankle, and rested his expressionless gaze on Phoenix.

Phoenix had learned a long time ago that engaging the brain *before* the mouth does wonders keeping one out of trouble. He stood, carried his empty water bottle to the kitchen and tossed it into the recycle bin under the island countertop.

Mycroft stepped to the armoire in a corner of the sunroom and refreshed his drink while Phoenix paced the kitchen, deep in rumination. Mycroft mixed the judge a replacement cocktail for the one Phoenix had snatched from him outside, and then returned to his seat on the divan.

Several minutes later, and on his way back to the sunroom, Phoenix stopped in front of the young FBI agent long enough to pull a chair out from under the dinette table. "Junior, you're making me nervous standing there like you're performing some worthwhile function. Sit down."

The agent's eyes flicked to Mycroft, who in turn gave his lapdog an imperceptible *sit-Fido-sit* nod. The agent sat, and Phoenix returned to his fan back chair.

"Kidnapping, like I said, is the FBI's expertise." Phoenix again thumbed toward Gravelis. "If you need extra boots on the ground, why not bring in more agents?"

Before Mycroft could answer Phoenix answered his own question: *plausible deniability*. Using the Seymore kidnapping as a "national security incident", an act of "domestic terrorism", would open the door for Mycroft to activate one or more of his 'domestic warriors.' And by using a retired warrior, it became the perfect win-win for the agency. The ends justify the means. If the mission succeeded, Mycroft would exploit its success, behind closed doors, during congressional budgetary hearings. If, however, the operation went south, he could fade behind the cloak of *plausible deniability* and claim an *ex*-warrior had turned mercenary, gone rogue, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

"Mr. Phoenix," Judge Seymore broke into his thoughts, "I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure the safe return of my son. And that includes employ a man of your talents. I'll pay whatever price you ask to bring my son home."

"Seymore," Phoenix scoffed and again thumbed toward the agent, "this is a job for law enforcement. You need the FBI's resources."

"Please, Mr. Phoenix...my son is in grave danger." An askance glance to Mycroft fortified the judge's fragile resolve. "As stated, I'm prepared to do whatever is necessary to assure Todd's return."

The judge's furtive glance set off a cacophony of warning bells and red flags for Phoenix. He dug his heels in. "Let the cops handle it."

"The people holding my son have assured me if I involve the authorities, they will send my boy home in a body bag."

"They always say that," Phoenix scoffed.

"Mr. Phoenix—"

Phoenix snapped forward and massaged his temples. "Enough with the 'Mister' already... It's Phoenix; just-plain-Phoenix."

Mycroft picked up the conversational thread. "We believe this is more than a simple abduction for ransom."

"And why wouldn't you, John?" Phoenix sneered. "It validates the program—justifies its existence."

Unfazed, Mycroft continued. "There are several cases before Judge Seymore's court that could be construed as having national security implications—"

"Save it, John!" Phoenix leaned over the edge of his seat. "I'm retired. I no longer take orders from you—or anyone else for that matter. Whatever harebrained, grassy knoll conspiracy theory you've cooked up, forget it."

Mycroft studied his former soldier for a moment, and then spoke *sotto voce*. "While it is true you no longer work *with* me, my boy, you will always work *for* me."

"Is that right?" Phoenix snarled, wondering where Mycroft had hidden the trump card this time.

"Absolutely flawless logic, my friend." Mycroft leaned back and sipped his drink.

"Do me a favor, John. Don't call me your friend, it is so demeaning."

Mycroft gave his shoulders a slight shrug as if to say, 'no offense intended', and then reached to the inner pocket of his suit coat. He withdrew a plain manila envelope and tossed it to the coffee table between them.

"Inside the envelope are federal warrants for your arrest," Mycroft said. "There is also an application for asset forfeiture, and an unsigned 'hold without bond' order pending a thorough investigation by the number crunchers at the IRS and the Securities and Exchange Commission. It has something to do with insider trading, money laundering and income tax evasion, or so I'm told."

Mycroft raised a brow and flicked his tongue across his lips with serpent-like speed. "Those, of course, have nothing to do with the results of the Bureau and DEA investigations into drug trafficking and RICO violations. There are, of course, a myriad of lesser statutes you have violated, but we'll just go with these for the present.

"And because said crimes have only recently come to light, the Attorney General's office assures me a statute of limitations defense would be null and void."

Mycroft gave an innocuous shrug and smile.

"If I were you I wouldn't expect much in the way of intervention from your friend in the White House, either. The media would devour President Cantor if he intervened. And we both know, inside the Beltway *party survival* supersedes an individual.

"You'll become a pariah to this administration, *persona non grata*. Even if you *somehow* manage to make bail, you will find your lovely home," Mycroft swept the room with icy blue eyes, "and yacht padlocked; all assets frozen, including those off-shore accounts we set up for you back in the day."

Across the room Agent Gravelis's face blossomed with a satisfied grin. *Let's hear one of your wisecracks now, smart ass.*

Mycroft adjusted his position on the sofa, and continued, "I'm afraid I see a major downsizing in your not too distant future, Phoenix."

Although his countenance remained stoic, Phoenix struggled against the acidic taste of bile gathering at the back of his throat. He had spent enough years working for Mycroft to know the spymaster's *people* were more than capable of creating a paper trail that pointed to him for every dirty legal breach alluded to. He also knew Mycroft was ruthless enough to follow through with the threats.

Mycroft set his drink on a coaster and dipped his head toward the envelope. "Inside you'll find a signed affidavit from the commodities broker who manages your accounts, attesting to illegally providing you with insider trading information. His statement, given voluntarily of course, was in exchange for retaining his broker's license and not doing time in federal prison as a co-conspirator.

"And should you care to look," —which Phoenix didn't— "you will note that after an anonymous tip, the IRS located copies of fraudulent income tax returns that date back several years; shame on you, Phoenix, for denying Uncle Sam his share of your lottery winnings."

Mycroft sipped his drink.

"I could go on and on and on about bank records of domestic and foreign transactions; deposits and withdrawals made within hours of each other, obvious attempts to launder enormous amount of cash...no doubt drug cartel profits. But why split hairs? I'm sure any federal grand jury would see the obvious."

"And what judge would buy into this load of crap?" Phoenix said knowing where this was headed.

"Oh, I'm sure I can find a federal judge willing to sign the orders," Mycroft rested a hand on Seymore's knee, "somewhere."

The deputy director leaned back on the sofa with a Cheshire cat's *check-and-mate* grin, and then rubbed salt into the wound.

"Those boys and girls at Treasury truly are amazing when it comes to creating authentic looking documents. Unequaled I'd say. But you don't need me to tell you that do you, Phoenix? You have, after all, trotted the globe under a variety of forged credentials."

Agent Gravelis's beaming smile slowly faded. His chair squeaked as he shifted uncomfortably at having just witnessed a blackmailing.

Phoenix knew Mycroft could never make the bogus charges stick, but neither was he so naïve as to not see his life become a nightmare as he expended millions of dollars to extricate himself from a protracted battle with the United States government.

At Mycroft's age he would be long dead, by natural causes, or by other means, before the smoke cleared. It was the *by other means* that gave rise to Phoenix's Mona Lisa smile, warming as a cup of mulled cider on a North Dakota winter's night.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious."

—Sun Tzu
The Art of War

"Well, John," Phoenix clapped his hands over his knees, "it seems you have the upper hand—for the moment."

Phoenix locked emotionless gray eyes on the judge, and said, "Remember this day, Your Honor. It's the day you cemented a deal with the devil."

He glanced over his shoulder at the uneasy look on the agent's face. "What's wrong, junior, you didn't think the deputy director of Central Intelligence would resort to blackmail?" Phoenix's laugh was absent humor. "How do you think he got a date for the prom?"

Judge Seymore erupted from his seat like he'd received the first jolt from the electric chair. "Enough!" Mycroft grabbed his wrist as he started around the coffee table. The judge jerked his hand free and stopped in front of Phoenix. He dropped to his knees and took a hold of Phoenix's hands. "I'm ashamed how I've allowed my love for my son compromise my better judgment, Mr. Phoenix. Forgive me." Tears rolled down the judge's cheeks. "But I beg you... Please help locate my son. Todd is my only child... He's all I have; my life."

Mycroft picked up the envelope and returned it to his inner pocket with a wink. There were other federal judges he could tap.

Phoenix pulled his hand away and Seymore rose from his knees. He wiped his eyes with a handkerchief and returned to his seat.

Phoenix rocked back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and gave Mycroft a subtle *go ahead* nod, permission for the spymaster to outline the plan to recover the boy.

Mycroft reached to his inner pocket and placed a digital micro-recorder on the table. He clicked the play button, leaned back and brought his right ankle to rest on top of his left knee. "This was recorded this afternoon, right after our people in the Science and Technology division went over the phone. Within minutes of David activating the phone the first call came through."

Phoenix listened to three mechanical rings, and then Seymore's voice accepted the call. "This is David Seymore, with whom am I speaking?"

"With whom am I speaking?" You talk real nice, judge," the voice began pleasant enough, but quickly turned vehement. "What took you so long to activate the phone? According to the tracking code it was delivered over two hours ago."

"The deliveryman left it at the concierge's desk," Seymore said. "I didn't get it until I returned home...less than half an hour ago."

"If you value your son's life, asshole, you'd best not jerk me around."

"I'm not jerking—"

"This," Mycroft said during a gap in the conversation, "is where our boy hangs up. We figured he would call back, and within minutes did so—six minutes and eighteen seconds, to be exact—but my computer guy Carver already had a fix on the call's location."

"This is David Seymore, please—"

"Well it's nice to know I dialed the right number," the kidnapper interjected in a voice thick with sarcasm. "It is so refreshing to know that a pillar of the community is also a loving parent. I had one of those—a loving parent—once upon a time."

Phoenix leaned forward attentively, rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together.

"Your precious baby boy—"

"I would like to speak with Livingston, please," the judge interjected using the agreed upon names and phrases.

The line seemed to have gone dead again, and then the man spoke with uncontrolled rage. "Do-not-interrupt-me-again. You ain't in charge no more, I'm in control now."

"Barely," Phoenix muttered as the caller continued to rant.

"From now on I control everything about your life, asshole. If I tell you to run around the White House in your skivvies, you'll ask me, what time? If I tell you to jump, you'll ask, how high? Whatever I tell you to do, you'll do without hesitation. Are we clear on that, *Your Honor*?"

"Yes," Seymore said.

"Yes...what?"

"Excuse me?"

“I demand respect...” the caller’s strident, over-modulated outburst caused the recorder’s tiny speaker to crackle and pop. “The same as you demand respect when you sit on your high and mighty perch in your black robe, making decisions that ruin lives.”

Phoenix looked to Mycroft, both having reached the same conclusion; the caller had an ax to grind. Whether his squabble was with Seymore in particular, or with the justice system in general remained to be seen, but the man was out of control, on a mission.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. How I have disrespected you?”

Phoenix envisioned spittle spraying from the kidnapper’s mouth as his voice exploded from the recorder.

“You will address me as *Sir*, and each time you forget,” his volume dropped to a jaw-clenching hiss, “I’m going to cut off one of your brat’s body parts and mail it to you. Now do you understand?”

“Yes,” Seymore said, and quickly added, “Sir.”

“That’s better,” the caller sighed, emotions back under control for the moment.

“I want you to get your assets in order, judge, because you’re going to need them. And don’t even think of calling the cops, because if you do, I swear to God I will make your precious *Livingston’s* death long and painful.

“I’ll be in touch.”

The call ended and Mycroft reached to the coffee table, switched off and pocketed the recorder. He picked up his glass, finished the last of his drink, set it on a coaster and leaned back against the cushion. “Your thoughts?”

Silence prevailed for several minutes while Phoenix pondered the call.

“It appears the judge’s a fan club is nearly as dedicated as mine,” he said with a smile. “Are you sure ECHELON’s fix on the call is accurate?”

“One hundred percent,” Mycroft said. “It’s coming from a tiny Ohio burg on the Lake Erie shoreline, Geneva-on-the-Lake. That makes sense since it’s about fifteen miles from where the Seymore boy is enrolled in a private boarding school.”

“And I take it—”

“Already checked,” Mycroft interrupted, his mind had been working overtime on the problem since Seymore’s noon hour telephone call. “He went missing about this time yesterday.”

“Is there any chance this is a prank?” Phoenix looked to the judge.

Mycroft waved off the idea with a flick of the wrist. “Not a prank.”

“Have you spoken with the school, the kid’s friends?”

“School officials and local law enforcement interviewed Seymore’s friends. Of course they’re covering for him for whatever reason, but the fact remains, no one has seen him since sometime late Friday afternoon.”

“Did anyone file a missing person report?”

“The school filed a report with the sheriff’s office, notified the boy’s mother—custodial parent and all of that domestic nonsense. Officially the boy is listed as a runaway; but that’s only because neither local law enforcement, nor school administrators are aware of our current information.” Mycroft patted the digital recorder in his pocket.

Phoenix thumbed over his shoulder to the FBI agent.

“In the works. Before we left Washington this afternoon I notified Director Penn. He in turn was going to contact the resident office—Painesville, Ohio, I believe—and have an agent re-interview Seymore’s friends first thing in the morning. He’ll also check with the shipping store where the phone was mailed from, but we don’t expect much in the way of additional information.”

“Strange,” Phoenix pondered aloud, “he didn’t mention a ransom. It’s as if money is an afterthought.”

Phoenix didn't need Mycroft's Behavioral Science profilers to tell him Todd Seymore's abductor, or abductors were amateurs, and that they probably had no intention of releasing the boy unharmed.

"Precisely," Mycroft said.

Phoenix slid to the edge of his seat, and said, "Exactly where does the Agency fit into the picture?"

Mycroft's ice-blue eyes hooded, and he said, "Executive Directive 19855."

"Oh, John," Phoenix slumped back in his chair with a groan, "you always were the master of making the ends justify the means. Is Albert been aware of this?"

Mycroft's response was succinct, "N-T-K, my boy, N-T-K."

"I'm pretty sure the president has a *need to know*, John."

"Not your call to make." Mycroft saw Phoenix's dubious look, and continued. "Harry said it best: 'The buck stops here'."

Phoenix shook his head and sighed. He should have known, because this was not the first time Mycroft had bypassed the Oval Office in the decision-making process.

It made little difference to Phoenix how he'd been drawn into the game, now that he was in he would, in typical Phoenix fashion, give the pursuit of Livingston Todd Seymore his all. He leaned back and steepled his fingers under his chin. His brain began formulating a plan to find and bring the boy home.

Chapter 23

The man wearing gray mechanic's coveralls hurried across the hangar toward the telephone. He reached over the counter and snatched the handset from the cradle on the seventh ring. "Ferguson Air Charter, Bob Ferguson speaking, how may we be of service?"

Robert Ferguson was in his middle fifties, had a working man's thick frame, with a truck stop diner's belly and close-cropped jet black hair. In coveralls he looked like a grease monkey, but cleaned up and donning a pilot's uniform, he looked like a professional aviator.

"Fascinating... Ferguson aviation owned by a Ferguson," the caller deadpanned. "Whoever came up with that inspirational name is obviously an understated genius and deserves a raise."

Ferguson smiled upon recognition of the voice. He set the wrench he'd carried across the hangar on a scarred Formica countertop and tucked the telephone receiver into his shoulder. He pumped a thick glob of pumice-enriched hand cleaner from the dispenser on the reception desk and worked it over his hands.

"Second generation aviators," Ferguson boasted, "and humping my way to a third...when the old lady lets me."

The father of six boys, ages eleven to twenty-two, all with a keen interest in aviation, there were enough up and coming Ferguson pilots to keep the company aloft for the next sixty years.

"At your age I'm surprised you can still find your landing gear," Phoenix quipped. "About the only one getting screwed these days by a Ferguson are the poor customers who overpay for the privilege of flying on Albatross Airlines. They might as well rent an ultralight."

Ferguson wiped his hands on the towel kept under the counter for that very purpose. He poured the last of the afternoon coffee into the sink, and said, "Well, my friend, there's always the option of flying commercial, where you'll enjoy long lines, crotch-groping TSA agents, and nasty latrine sludge that they pass off as coffee."

"Good point," Phoenix said.

"Where you been, ol' buddy? You too good to stop by for a cup of joe now and again, chew the fat with an old friend?"

"Been busy, Furgy."

Ferguson chuckled. "Please don't tell me you're cruising the Caribbean in search of the last virgin?"

"Something like that," Phoenix said, and then cut to the point of his call. "Need a plane, Furgy."

Back in the day when Phoenix had been an active government fixer he'd employed Ferguson's Hawker Beechcraft Premier on several "stateside" missions. Ferguson knew, or at least suspected, Phoenix was some sort of *secret agent* but wisely employed the: don't ask don't tell mindset.

"Now there's a novel idea," Ferguson said as he rinsed the coffee pot in the sink. "Call a charter service—and the best damn charter service in all the Keys I might add—when you need an airplane.

"Where we headed, and when?"

"North. Within the hour."

“Negative.” Ferguson set the coffee pot upside down on a kitchen towel to air dry. “I’ve got her torn apart for scheduled maintenance, replacing fuel lines and filters and whatnot. She won’t be ready until tomorrow morning.”

Phoenix knew that even if he flew commercial—which he could not because of the weaponry he needed to take along—he would not reach Ohio any quicker than if he waited until Ferguson finished the repairs to his plane. A student of *improvise, adapt, and overcome* principle, he said, “What time?”

“Zero-six-hundred; where we headed?”

“Ohio.”

“See you at six, my friend. And you’d better be carrying a bag of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, or you’ll be walking to Ohio.”

Chapter 24

The CIA's QSST prototype was still an anomaly in the sky. Not slated to begin commercial delivery until the fall of 2018, the Quiet Supersonic Transport travels at Mach 1.8, with a 60,000 foot flight level. Its thirteen-hundred miles per hour cruising speed turned the eleven-hundred mile trip from the Florida Keys to Washington D.C. into an hour's flight. Given priority landing clearance by Ronald Reagan International Control, they touched down on runway 15 and taxied to the CIA's private, and heavily guarded, hangar at the north end of the airport. Awaiting them inside the hangar was Mycroft's charcoal gray, blacked out windows armored SUV. His armed chauffeur, slash bodyguard, stood next to the open rear passenger door.

Mycroft and Seymore stepped off the plane and walked to the SUV. The spymaster stopped in front of the judge and rested his hands on Seymore's shoulders. "David, I want you to go home. I'll handle things from this end."

Incredulous, Seymore looked into Mycroft's eyes for any hint that he was kidding, but saw nothing. "What do you mean go home? John, this is my son we're talking about. I'm not going anywhere until I'm sure he's safe."

"David, we've cloned the cell phone they sent you and are monitoring incoming calls in real time. You're going to have to trust me on this. Phoenix will locate the people responsible for kidnapping your boy. He's one of the best there is at tracking down targets that do not wish to be found."

"And that brings me to another point," Seymore added as if he had not heard a word Mycroft said. "I don't understand why your man Phoenix refused to allow me to accompany him. As I said, we are talking about *my* son."

"David, men like Phoenix work alone. They are trained to work without a safety net, fend for themselves in the field. That's what they do. If something goes awry, they have no expectation of a John Wayne galloping over the horizon to save the day. It's all or nothing with these guys. Either they accomplish the mission and return home, or, sometimes, we never hear from them again."

Seymore fixed suspicious eyes on Mycroft. "Exactly how many of these *Phoenixes* do you have on the books, John?"

Mycroft flashed his best patronizing smile. "None of them are '*on the books*', David; and as to how many? I'm afraid that information is above your pay grade."

"You're simply going to have to believe me when I tell you I have the best people in the business on top of this. There's nothing more you can do, and frankly, if you stay in D.C., you'll just be in my way. Not to mention hear and see things a federal judge probably shouldn't hear or see."

"So, David, like I said...go home. I'll call your private cell with detailed updates as quickly as they become available."

Mycroft pointed to a waiting limousine on the other side of his vehicle. "One of my people will stay with you until we recover Todd." What Mycroft elected not to say was, *dead or alive*.

The deputy director disappeared into the back seat of his SUV and the chauffeur closed the door. He rounded the SUV, climbed behind the steering wheel, and drove off leaving Seymore standing on the tarmac, gape-mouthed.

The twenty-five-minute drive from Ronald Reagan International to Langley, via the George Washington Memorial Parkway, was cut in half. It is amazing what grill-mounted flashing blue strobe lights and a 135 decibel siren can accomplish when it comes to moving traffic out of the way.

They stopped at an employee entrance gate and waited while security checked their IDs, along with the vehicle. Even the deputy director and his vehicle are subjected to the scrutiny of bomb sniffing dogs, identification checks, and rolling undercarriage inspection cameras.

Once inside the George Bush Center for Intelligence, a.k.a. CIA headquarters, Langley, Virginia, Mycroft rode a private elevator to his third floor office. He dropped into the chair behind his desk, kicked off his shoes and brought stocking feet to rest on the corner of the desk. He rubbed his eyes with the uneasy feeling things were going to get worse before they got better...*if* they got better.

The chirping intercom broke into his thoughts. He pressed the speaker button, and said, “Yes?”

“We have an incoming call,” Devon Carver said from across the hall.

By the time Mycroft slipped into his shoes and scurried into the operations center, Seymore had answered the burner cell phone.

Chapter 25

“This is David Seymore.”

The man’s voice bubbled from the speakers at Carver’s workstation. “Don’t you want to know with whom you are speaking?” he said with a mocking titter.

“What I would like, sir, is to speak with Livingston so I can confirm he has not been harmed.”

“As the saying goes, judge, ‘Wish in one hand, shit in the other and see which one fills up first.’ But seriously, can I ask you a question?”

“You may.”

“What in the world possessed you to name your brat *Livingston*? I’m betting a double paycheck the boy hates you for that.”

For that, and many other intangibles, but those issues are beside the point. Seymore mused silently.

When the judge failed to respond, RJ Clayburn shrugged his shoulders and continued. “Well, anyway...I have decided that if you want to see your precious *Livingston* again, it’s going to cost you one-point-five million dollars—and it had better be used, untraceable twenties and fifties, in non-sequential order.”

RJ Clayburn obviously had not given much forethought to a demand for cash. Equally divided between the two denominations, one and a half million dollars would fill three large suitcases, and weigh over one hundred pounds. Not an unwieldy burden, but cumbersome to move about, to say the least.

“I have no means of acquiring that kind of capital,” Seymore glanced at his watch, “let alone at eight o’clock on a Saturday night.”

The only way Seymore could hope to get his hands on that kind of cash on short notice would be to involve his ex-father-in-law, the esteemed Harvard Elmo Livingston III. And while he would gladly drink the old windbag’s bathwater if it would assure Todd’s safe return, he also knew involving said windbag that Harvard would demand he negotiate directly with Todd’s abductors. And that was not in the boy’s best interest.

“Then I suggest you scrape together whatever capital you can and pick out a nice burial suit for *Livingston*...in the unlikely event you find the body.”

RJ terminated the call before Seymore could respond.

Mycroft stepped back from the whiz-kid’s workstation and silently willed the phone to ring. A few seconds later it did and he breathed a sigh of relief. He had to keep the Seymore boy alive long enough for Phoenix to reach Ohio and contain this thing.

Chapter 26

The subconscious mind is a remarkable machine; able to absorb, categorize, organize, and recall at will more information than the most advanced mainframe computer. Even while at rest it continues to process and sift through voluminous bits and pieces of elusive data until it arrives at a solution to a forgotten problem, like a movie title or name of an actor you couldn't recall yesterday.

From where he'd dozed off in a broken down recliner in what had once been the master bedroom, RJ Clyburn's eyes suddenly snapped open. His first foray into the criminal world of kidnapping and extortion, and it hadn't taken long for him to learn a valuable lesson. When toying with human emotions the ability to inflict psychological trauma on the victim is almost as satisfying as the promise of a big payday.

He crawled from the recliner and dropped into the wheelchair, and then silently rolled into the living room's communal sleeping billet. He saw that Cousin Johnny's cot was empty, and his crossbow missing from the wall hook. Johnny preferred to sleep outside, whenever possible, and was probably sawing logs in the van with the seat tipped back and the windows down. That or he was stalking the woods looking for something to kill. Johnny had always been a strange duck, but even more so after the eye injury.

RJ mentally shrugged his shoulders; he would have to settle for second best.

He rolled across the room and shook Blaine's shoulder; he barely stirred. The big man had always been a sound sleeper. RJ shook harder and harder until Blaine emerged from his somnambulant coma. His eyelids fluttered open and he sat up on the cot like a toddler awakened from a dream filled with gumdrops and sugar fairies.

"What's up, RJ?"

Clyburn pressed a finger to his lips. "You, finally," he whispered, and then signaled for Blaine to follow.

They stopped in front of the dungeon door, and RJ motioned Blaine closer. So as not to awaken Sara, or the kid, he spoke in a hushed whisper. "I want you to go into the room and slap a strip of tape over the brat's eyes before he has a chance to wake up."

"Why?"

"Because," RJ hissed, exasperation apparent, "I asked you to...that's why."

"You don't have to get all pissy, RJ. I just asked a simple question."

Clyburn bit his tongue. *Of course you did, you buffoon; simple questions are all you're capable of.* He brought his finger to his lips with a shushing sound. "Please, Colton, for once in your life, do as I ask without making me answer dozens of questions."

Blaine shrugged his shoulders and unlocked the door. He peeked around the doorjamb into a room stuffy as a swelter box. Absent ventilation it smelled, too. "He needs a bath," Blaine said fanning the air in front of his face with his hand. "I can't see a thing."

"Wait a minute." RJ rolled the wheelchair to the back of the trailer and returned a few moments later with an LED penlight. "Here," he handed the light to Blaine. "Remember to be quiet so you don't wake him up."

Blaine clicked on the penlight and peeked across the room. Seymore was curled into a fetal position, his back facing the door, hands clamped between his knees, snoring softly. His shirt, shoes and socks were on the floor next to the cot.

“Remember,” RJ tugged Blaine’s shirttail as stepped into the room, “get the tape over his eyes fast so he doesn’t see your face. If he gives you any crap, you have my permission to beat the shit out of him. Just don’t kill him, yet.”

If Blaine heard RJ’s *‘yet’* he didn’t let on.

Blaine pointed the penlight to the floor and located the tape. He tore off a six inch long strip, and then dropped the roll to the floor with a dull thud. It sounded like a cannon report inside the quiet trailer, which earned him another shush from RJ.

Blaine freed up his other hand by clamping the flashlight between his teeth as he crept across the room and stopped beside the cot. He stood over the sleeping boy for a minute and almost felt sorry for what they were putting the kid through.

“Colt,” RJ hissed under his breath. “Will you get with it?”

Blaine blinked away the reverie, reached down and hurriedly pressed the tape over Seymore’s eyes.

Seymore awoke and instinctively began thrashing his arms and legs. Blaine pinned the flailing arms overhead with one hand, and pressed a knee against Seymore’s chest and leaned close. “Don’t fight me; I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered.

Seymore could tell by the size and strength of the grip restraining his arms, and by the weight pinioning him to the cot that the man was huge, but with a soft-spoken voice. He knew it wasn’t the ear-twisting jackass who’d taken him to the bathroom on his previous nature call. Once he stopped struggling and lay still, Blaine released his grip and climbed off his chest.

More from reflex than conscious thought, Seymore reached for the tape. Blaine grabbed him by the wrist, and said, “Don’t.”

It took a few seconds, but Seymore realized there was a faint pinprick of light filtering in around a gap where the tape had not sealed. He heard something roll across the floor and swung his feet over the side of the cot. He didn’t know what these people had in mind, but from the past experience of a gut punch, was pretty sure he wouldn’t like whatever it was.

Through the slit in the tape he saw a pair of booted feet glide to a stop in front of him. There was something strange about the way they moved.

“Do exactly as you are told,” RJ snarled under his breath, “and I promise my rather large friend here won’t break your jaw. Understood?”

Two new voices, added to ear-twister’s gruff voice, and Seymore knew he was dealing with at least three people. The odds were certainly not in his favor, especially since he’d discovered that two of them were gigantic.

“What is it you want from me?” he asked.

Seymore’s question brought about a stinging slap across the face. “When I ask you a question,” RJ growled, “you do not answer with another question. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Seymore rubbed his cheek and covertly opened the gap in the tape a little wider, “I got it.”

The booted man retreated without moving his feet, like he was floating on air. Seymore suddenly realized what he was seeing; the footrest of a wheelchair. One of his captors, the one apparently in charge, was crippled.

He mused that maybe his odds weren’t so bad after all. He could at least outrun one of them.

“When I tell you to speak, state your name and then read word-for-word the paper I’ll hand to you. Understood?”

“Kind of impossible to do with a blindfold on,” he said.

A second crack across the chops drew blood from his bottom lip.

RJ silently mouthed to Blaine *Keep an eye on him*, and then left the room.

Chapter 27

David Seymore floated in the limbo between sleep and awake. The cell phone chimed (he'd begun calling it Todd's phone) and pulled himself back from dreamland. He blinked the digital clock on the VCR into focus, 2:11 A.M. Across the room his CIA babysitter sat propped up in a corner of the couch, stocking feet on the coffee table, a green and beige afghan spread over his lap, and sound asleep.

Seymore picked up the burner cell and clicked the answer call button. "This is David Seymore."

"Just checking to see how we're coming with my cash," RJ cackled and hung up before the judge could respond.

Chapter 28

Seymore heard the wheelchair bang against the doorframe as it left the room. What he did not hear was the big guy's footsteps follow, or the door slam shut and the lock thrown, and there was soft light filtering around the tape. Those clues all told him he wasn't alone.

"Is there anybody there?" Seymore said keeping up the façade he was sightless. He waited a moment, and then hailed a second time. "Hello, are you there?"

He knew if he reached for the tape; that would get the man's attention. But with his cheek still aglow, and his lip bleeding, he wasn't sure he wanted that kind of attention. But then again, if he could establish a dialogue with at least one of his abductors, strike a common cord, maybe he could find out what these people wanted, or discover a chink in their armor. Face-slapper and ear-twister were probably not the best ones to establish a dialogue with. He hoped the soft-spoken dude was their weak link. He drew in a silent breath, steeled his nerves, and reached for the tape covering his eyes, fully expecting to get belted again.

Somewhere from his left the man said, "Don't."

Seymore turned his head in that direction. "And what if I do?"

"I'll..." Blaine paused a half-beat, "...I'll have to hurt you."

Although Seymore detected the lack of conviction in the voice, he didn't want to outright piss the guy off, either. He needed to feel him out, find a way to manipulate him like he manipulated his mother and grandfather. If he could turn the tables, get them fighting amongst themselves, he might stand a chance of outfoxing them.

"Why are *you* doing this to me?" Seymore emphasized 'you' to make it personal. "I didn't do anything to you."

Blaine turned a nervous glance toward the door.

Early on RJ had cautioned them, especially Colt, about conversing with the prisoner unless it was absolutely necessary. He had tersely warned that conversation was off limits, fearing something revealing might be said by accident.

Johnny, of course was no problem. He rarely had anything to say anyway, especially to a snot-nosed brat. Sara had scrunched her nose with a mocking giggle, and promised not to add the kid to their Christmas card list. But Colt had taken the warning to heart. Not so much because he feared RJ, not in a physical sense—he could toss RJ and the wheelchair across the street if he wanted to—it was RJ's sharp tongue he feared. And that was precisely why he asked questions whenever RJ told him to do something. He wanted—needed—to make sure he understood completely, and wasn't about to do something to ignite RJ's acerbic tongue.

"Keep your voice down," Blaine whispered. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me," Seymore scoffed incredulously, and then lowered his voice to keep the dialogue going. "If it has nothing to do with me, then why did you and your buddies kidnap me?"

Of course Blaine couldn't tell Seymore it was all about getting even with his old man—not to mention picking up a healthy chunk of change in the process. "You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all."

"I call bullshit!" Seymore said as if they were playing some sort of drinking-party board game. To further the pretense he couldn't see, he groped around on the floor for his shirt. "You guys targeted *me*. And I'll bet twenty bucks the bar owner set me up, didn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Blaine trained the penlight on Seymore while he pulled on his shirt.

Seymore used the struggle to slip into his shirt as a means to peel the tape back and further expand his field of vision. When his head popped free he saw the blue-white beam of the flashlight and the shadowy silhouette of King Kong's stunt double. He had to fight the urge to bring his hands up and shade his eyes.

"I'm not stupid, you know. I don't get drunk on two drinks. Frank mixed something in my drink, and when I passed out you guys showed up and brought me here... wherever here is."

Blaine's brow knitted together in confusion. The kid seemed to have an awful lot of details. He almost wondered if maybe Johnny had slipped up during one of their outhouse trips. The more Blaine thought about it the less it made sense. Johnny Clayburn was not the chatty type. He was more apt to use his fists than his lips to communicate a point.

"What really pisses me off," Seymore ventured on, "I was supposed to meet a chick at the bar and get laid."

"You should pick your friends better." Blaine's quiet laughter confirmed Seymore's suspicion that *Michelle O'Kelly* had been a Trojan horse.

"Look, Livingston—"

"I go by Todd," Seymore spat, "not Livingston."

"I thought your dad called you Livingston?"

The big guy had just confirmed for him they'd been in contact with his family, which meant the cops were probably looking for him. He also realized the kidnapping would be having an adverse affect on his mother must be, maybe his father, too.

"I want to go home," he said, forcing his voice to quaver, his eyes to fill with crocodile tears.

"Look, Todd, just stay cool for a couple days." Blaine said.

To keep the dullard off balance, Seymore switched tactics, and he couldn't have picked a better ruse if he'd known Blaine's history.

He folded his face into his hands and loosed a shuddering sigh. "I need to check on my mother," he said with enough emotion to earn an academy award. "She's real sick."

Blaine's head perked up.

"I was supposed to fly home next week for her birthday."

Blaine listened as the kid choked back a sob. Because he had lost his mother at about the same age, he suddenly felt a strong pang of empathy for the boy. "Just stay cool for a couple of more days, and then you'll be home. I promise."

"But what if something happens to her before I get there? I would never forgive myself for not being there for her." Seymore swiped an imaginary tear from his eye and further widened the gap in the tape.

When Blaine asked what was wrong with his mother, Seymore told him she had the big-C. An involuntary shudder quivered up Blaine's spine as he was instantaneously transported twenty years to the past. He vividly remembered his mother's last days as if they were yesterday; mopping her brow; watching her struggle for her last breath. It brought tears to his eyes.

To hell with RJ and his rule of no talking to the prisoner! He walked across the room and rested a sympathetic hand on Seymore's shoulder. "You just have to do what RJ says for the next couple of days, and then you'll be home, I promise."

"I wish I could tell you everything's going to be all right with your mom, but sometimes life just ain't fair."

Blaine's head snapped toward the door and he hurried back to his spot in the corner. "RJ's coming. Stop crying. If he sees you crying it will give him an excuse to be a bigger pain in your ass."

Seymore snorted hard and wiped his eyes as the penlight was switched off. Blaine couldn't see the smile on the kid's face, neither did he realize he had just uttered the first name of their ringleader.

Chapter 29

For every waking moment, and even during the few minutes' sleep he'd managed, Seymore's thoughts were consumed with Todd's welfare. He put up a diligent fight against the images his mind's eye had conjured up, dark images of Todd's broken, mutilated body. More than once he had beaten down those negative inner voices, and reminded himself to stay positive. Todd was a scrapper. If he was still alive he would fight back, find a means of escape.

Judge Seymore jumped with a start when his private cell phone trilled. He picked up the phone expecting to see Mycroft's telephone number, but it was the ex-wife's number glowing on the screen. For a brief moment he considered directing the call to voicemail. He didn't need Belle's drama at the moment, but decided she was hurting too so accepted the call.

"Hello, Belle," he said with a heavy sigh.

A moments' silence held before she spoke. "I hope I didn't wake you," she said, her voice soft, eerie, almost seductive.

Seymore laughed at the notion that he was any more capable of sleep than was she. "No, Belle, under the circumstances sleep seems to be eluding me," he said a little more harsh than necessary.

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have called so late."

"It's okay, Belle. And I apologize for being short with you. I'm as worried and exhausted as you are, that's all."

Another long pause, and she said, "Have you heard from them?"

Seymore wasn't sure if *them* was a reference to their son's kidnappers or to the people he'd commissioned to rescue Todd. He responded with a neutral, "Not since a little after midnight."

He offered nothing further and Belle continued. "I don't understand why you can't be more forthcoming with details of what you're doing, David. Contrary to what you may believe, I care deeply for our son, too."

If spoiling the boy rotten, and poisoning him against his own father was on the Mother of the Year check sheet, Belle was a winner, hands down.

"I never once implied you don't love Todd, Belle. Unless I'm mistaken, it was you who convinced our son he was the spawn of the devil...hence our three-year hiatus."

After a moment's reflective pause, Belle said, "I deserve that. David, I apologize—"

"Belle, I told you I wasn't asleep," he said tersely.

Belle's weary sigh came through the receiver with a slight echo. "David, if you'll allow me to finish...what I'm trying to say," she trapped a sob, "...I'm trying to apologize for driving a wedge between you and Todd.

"Heaven knows I've spent the last thirty some hours looking at my life in the rearview mirror, and I'm not very pleased with the person staring back at me. What I did was wrong... Alienating Todd from you was horribly mean-spirited and selfish. I am very, very sorry."

Belle, no longer able to trap her sobs, broke down and wept.

Seymore quietly lowered the footrest and kicked free of the blanket spread over his legs. He stepped into the privacy of the kitchen in the unlikely event the agent snoozing on his couch was feigning sleep, eavesdropping on the conversation.

Belle brought herself back under control and continued. "I was devastated when I found out you were having an affair. All I wanted at the time was to get even, and the only way I could think of hurting you was to make Todd hate you as much as I did at the time. For that I was wrong...I apologize.

“If—” Belle quickly corrected her negative connotation, “no, no...when, when Todd comes home I swear on my mother’s grave, I will do everything in my power to set things right, David. I promise you, I will find a way to undo what I’ve done.”

Contrition was not what Seymore had expected. This was the first time they’d discussed their marital conflicts, his indiscretion, without the room full of high-price lawyers trying to outshout and outmaneuver one another.

“It wasn’t an affair, Belle, it was a fling; a one night stand fueled by too much Christmas party alcohol.”

Seymore reached for the coffee pot on the counter, and then thought better of another injection of caffeine. He was wired enough as it was, withdrew his hand.

“I know that’s no excuse for my puerile behavior, but I honestly am sorry for putting you—the both of you—through that kind of pain. I never meant to hurt you, or Todd. I hope you believe that, Belle.”

Mutual concern over the fate of their missing son had drawn them to neutral ground and allowed for a civil dialogue that, properly engaged years ago, would have saved savaging one another in court, and possibly even forestalled the acrimonious divorce.

“David,” Belle began anew as Todd’s phone began chirping and vibrating on the counter.

He reached for the cell phone, and said, “Yes, Belle?”

She trapped another sob in the embroidered hanky balled up in her hand, mopped her nose, and said, “I don’t know what you have up your sleeve, but I trust you to bring our son home.”

“Thank you, Belle. I’m trying. I’m trying.” Seymore picked up Todd’s phone.

“Try harder,” Belle said absent malice, and disconnected the call.

Judge Seymore brought Todd’s phone to his ear.

Chapter 30

To allow the tension to build, RJ had waited nearly half an hour after the hang-up call before he redialed Judge Seymore.

“This is David Seymore.”

“Would you like to talk to your brat?” RJ said.

Judge Seymore stepped out onto the sixth floor balcony and gazed down at the nearly deserted beltway below, an occasional big rig chasing its headlights along the dark ribbon.

“Why yes, of course I would like to speak with Livingston. But if this is another of your twisted attempts at humor...please spare me the drama.”

Tucked inside Langley’s control center ten miles away, Mycroft and Carver monitored the call. It was Mycroft who spoke his thoughts aloud. “David, David, what in the world are you doing? Don’t piss these people off!” He reached for the cell phone clipped to his belt. “Now is not the time to have a melt down on me.”

The deputy director speed-dialed the agent he’d left to watch over Seymore. When after six rings the call went to voicemail, he unleashed a string of curses. Along with a promise to personally see to it that if the agent had fallen asleep, he would finish his career scrubbing lavatories—with a toothbrush—in Allahabad.

“Don’t get lippy with me, judge,” RJ warned. “You best remember who’s driving this train wreck your kid’s riding on.”

For Todd’s sake Seymore adopted a conciliatory tone. “I apologize, sir. You must forgive me, but as you can well imagine, I’m under a tremendous amount of stress at the moment and have had little sleep.

“May I please speak with Livingston?”

RJ Clayburn smiled to himself. “That’s better. Let me think on it for a moment.”

Clayburn pressed the “mute” button and dropped the phone to his lap. He rolled the wheelchair back into the dungeon and stopped next to Todd’s cot. “Are you ready to read your lines, boy?”

Seymore turned his head toward the voice, and said, “Yeah, whatever.”

“Remember, you say anything other than what’s written on the paper I’m going to hand you, or if you try something stupid, the big guy is going to break your jaw.”

Blaine prayed for the kid’s sake, as well as his own, that Seymore did as he was told without pissing RJ off. He didn’t want to hurt the boy.

RJ guided a plain sheet of computer paper he’d printed his message on into Seymore’s hands. He motioned Blaine to stand behind the brat. “My friend is going to remove the tape from your eyes and hold a flashlight on the paper. If you so much as turn your head, try to look over your shoulder, I’m going to let him beat the shit out of you until your own mother won’t recognize you. Is that understood?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Seymore said, his tone impatient contempt.

Once they were in position behind Seymore, RJ nodded his head. Blaine clicked on the flashlight and reached over the boy’s shoulder and ripped the tape from Seymore’s eyes. RJ moved the phone in front of the kid’s mouth, un-muted the call, and whispered, “You’re on.”

Todd squinted against the light, cleared his throat, and with a quavering voice read his lines. “My name is Livingston Seymore. You have until midnight tomorrow to meet their demands or they will kill me.”

The instant Seymore finished reading Clayburn clicked off the call, but not before Seymore heard his father's tinny voice calling his name. RJ dropped the phone to his lap, snatched the paper from the kid's fingers, and motioned Blaine to replace the tape.

Back at Langley, Mycroft hovered over Carver's shoulder as the whiz kid's fingers danced over the keyboard. He brought up split screen images on his monitor.

"The signal is still emanating from the same tower...as best I can tell, Sir. They're still stationary."

Carver right-clicked the mouse, opened another window on the screen, and then dragged the bar graph imprint of the latest call across the screen. He overlaid it on the known imprint of Todd's voice, recorded from the kid's voicemail greeting. "The Spectrogram graph shows a positive match."

Another click of the mouse and Carver pulled up the Voice Stress Analyzer result of the most recent phone call. He used the cursor to trace peaks and valleys that resembled the arched lines on a polygraph. "As you can see by the extreme fluctuation between the peaks and valleys, along with the speaker's stilted voice, he was under extreme duress. My guess is he was reading from a scripted statement."

While Carver busied himself explaining to Mycroft the scientific principles of VSA and Spectrogram graph recognition, Judge Seymore received another call from the kidnappers.

Seymore surreptitiously loosened a corner of the tape as the light faded toward the door. If he was going to turn the tables on his kidnappers, he needed to find a way to engage the big guy in more dialogue, and fast, but couldn't do that with Mr. Wheelchair around. And then the idea came to him.

"I don't feel so good. I need to use the bathroom." He clutched his stomach and doubled over on the edge of the cot.

RJ paused outside the doorway for an instant, and then nodded his head. Blaine fitted Seymore with the handcuffs and escorted him to the outhouse.

RJ waited until Blaine and Seymore had left the trailer, and then redialed the judge.

"This is David—"

"Are you satisfied we have your kid?" RJ cut him off.

"I never doubted your veracity for a moment. But I would like to ask Livingston a few questions in order to make sure it was his voice I was hearing and not a recording," Seymore said.

RJ ignored the judge's request. "You are a pushy sum-a'-bitch. You heard your boy...midnight tomorrow. And don't even think about asking for an extension, because if you do I'll get an early start on cutting him up into itsy-bitsy, envelope-size pieces."

The line went dead and Seymore drew the phone away from his ear. He stepped back inside as his private cell rang.

"This is David Seymore."

"David, John Mycroft here. We ran a voice comparison on the last call you received, and it matched Todd's voicemail greeting. We're one hundred percent certain it was Todd speaking." Mycroft left out the *under extreme duress* part.

Seymore massaged his forehead with his fingertips. Did Deputy Director Mycroft really believe he needed the Central Intelligence Agency's sophisticated computer software to recognize his own son's voice?

"The question that begs an answer, John...is your voice recognition software able to determine if it was actually Todd speaking, or were we listening to a recording?"

The deputy director's pregnant pause answered the question.

“I thought so,” Judge Seymore said. “Todd could have been forced to make that recording any time over the past thirty-two hours. So we still don’t know if Todd is alive or dead.”

“David, Phoenix leaves for Ohio in a couple of hours. He’ll be on the ground hunting by late morning. I’ve instructed the FBI to re-interview Todd’s friends first thing this morning. They’re also going to check with the shipping store for additional information. I’ll have more for you in the way of particulars within hours.”

“You’ll have to excuse me, John, but those actions don’t instill much confidence in me as to Todd’s well-being. Realistically, we are no closer to finding him than we were yesterday afternoon when you talked me into this.” Seymore had been dreading the inevitable. “Maybe it would be best if I contact Todd’s grandfather and have him arrange to pay the ransom.”

“David,” Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose as he walked back across the hall to his office, “if you pay the ransom we lose our position of strength. Once they have the money in hand, the kidnapers can do whatever they like and we’d be powerless to stop them.”

“And it’s a bang up job you’re doing stopping them as it is,” Seymore said, his voice acidic.

“David, remember you called *me*. You have to let me handle this. I promised you I would see it through to its conclusion. All I’m asking is that you give Phoenix a chance to put an end this.”

“It’s the unknown *end* that concerns me, John.”

Because there was nothing he could say to assuage Seymore’s parental concern, Mycroft asked to speak with his agent.

“Hold on a second; I’ll see if I can wake him up.”

Chapter 31

Phoenix arrived at the Florida Keys Marathon Airport on Sunday morning at 0551. He parked in one of three slots reserved for “Ferguson Air Customers Only”, slung his duffle bag, laptop computer case, and smaller carry-on bag over his shoulder. Before he locked the truck he reached for the box of doughnuts on the passenger seat. Phoenix walked into the hangar, set his luggage on the floor, the Krispy Kremes on the reception counter. He helped himself to the coffee pot sitting atop a file cabinet.

Before he had a chance to take his first sip, Bob Ferguson stepped from the office casually dressed in a white Pink Floyd t-shirt, the *Dark Side of the Moon* multicolored prism emblazoned across the back, gray knee-length cargo shorts and black Nike tennis shoes, sans socks.

For the average customer Ferguson wore his captain’s best attire: white starched long sleeve dress shirt, plain black necktie, black slacks, socks, and patent leather shoes. Phoenix, however, was not the average customer. He always paid in cash, up front, and beyond destination never discussed the purpose of his trip.

First things first, though. Ferguson locked the thick envelope Phoenix handed him in the floor safe without counting the contents, there was no need for that. The next order of business was to slice the tape on the doughnut box with his fingernail. He inspected the contents, and satisfied Phoenix had included three of those glazed, lemon-cream gut-busters he liked so well. Ferguson poured a fresh cup of java, munched on the artery-clogging pastry as he walked toward the plane.

Phoenix stowed his duffle in the rear cargo hold, and set his carry-on and computer inside on the cabin floor. Sipping black coffee, Phoenix followed Ferguson as they walked around the plane doing an exterior pre-flight check. They chatted about the weather, about the prospects of the Miami Marlins making it to the World Series, about what the Ferguson boys were up to. Any topic was game except why Phoenix was flying to Ohio.

Exterior inspection complete, Phoenix helped Ferguson line up an electric airplane tug and tow the Hawker from the hangar. He trailed Ferguson up the boarding ladder and into the cabin. Ferguson went into the cockpit and Phoenix put away his carryon and computer in the aft storage closet next to the head, and then joined the pilot in the cockpit.

Phoenix dropped into the copilot’s seat and strapped in. “Have you had a chance to calculate our flight time?”

“Ashtabula County Airport is the closest airstrip to where you want to go. It’s a little over thirteen hundred statute miles. The Hawker,” Ferguson patted the steering yoke, “cruises at around five hundred miles per hour...so I figure a little under three hours, give or take. Of course that depends on the strength of the cross winds once we hit the jet stream. I figure we’ll refuel at Lonesome Pine FBO in Virginia. I’ve used it a couple of times in the past. There’s usually not much traffic and it’s an easy in and out.”

Ferguson belted in as he reached to the dash and flipped a series of switches. He waited for the avionics gauges to come to life and stabilize within normal operating range, and then fired the airplane’s power plant, a pair of FJ44 turbo fan engines. He cocked his head to the side and listened to the high-pitched whine. Once he was satisfied that all looked, felt, and sounded right with the aircraft, Ferguson released the brakes and eased away from the hangar. He rolled along the designated taxi lane until he queued behind a single engine Cessna in line ahead of them for takeoff.

Because Marathon Airport lacks a control tower to regulate inbound and outbound traffic, pilots use the Common Traffic Advisory Frequency, or CTAF, to announce arrivals and departures.

Five minutes passed with no announcement of an incoming flight, and still the Cessna sat blocking the taxiway instead of moving to the head of the runway.

“Oh, come on,” Ferguson impatiently pounded the center yoke as if beeping a car horn.

Phoenix laughed. “In a bit of a hurry are we, Furgy?”

Ferguson flicked his wrist and checked the time, 0622. He’d hoped by this time to be wheels up and climbing to cruising altitude. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to be home by supper time. Stephanie is making her world-famous Cajun shrimp gumbo for dinner, thank you very much.

“Bless you, Lord,” Ferguson said when the Cessna finally rolled onto the runway.

As soon as the Cessna began its roll out, Ferguson moved into takeoff position. As the Cessna rolled down the five thousand foot runway, Ferguson throttled up. The aircraft bucked and vibrated with the restrained power of a thoroughbred at the starting gate. The Cessna lifted off and banked west over the Gulf of Mexico.

Ferguson immediately announced his take off on CTAF, released the brake and streaked down the runway. The Hawker shot into the air and Ferguson contacted Miami Air Traffic Control Center to announce his intentions. He dialed in the transponder squawk code Miami Control assigned his aircraft, and then waited for the controller to clear his climb to cruising altitude.

Three hours by air beat the alternative, twenty plus hours by ground. Phoenix leaned back in the copilot seat and closed his eyes. He pondered how he was going to find a needle in a haystack, especially when he wasn’t sure which haystack to look in.

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The Painesville, Ohio, headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigation falls under the purview of the Cleveland Division Office, and serves Ohio’s bucolic northeast Lake, Ashtabula, and Geauga counties. The majority of investigations were comprised not so much of gang activity and counterterrorism, but more along the lines of public corruption and white color crimes. There was the occasional bank robbery tossed into the mix, which helped break up the boredom.

During his six and a half years with the Painesville bureau, Agent Alan Cluck could not recall ever having been authorized Sunday overtime.

“First thing tomorrow morning,” Special Agent in Charge Thomas Wynne said during a late Saturday evening telephone briefing, “I want you to run over to Ashtabula County and interview a group of kids, who may or may not have pertinent information, regarding a possible abduction.”

The Seymore case would be Agent Cluck’s first abduction investigation in more than ten years, if in fact it was abduction and not, as SAC Wynne speculated, “...a group of highly intelligent, spoiled brat, overachievers having fun at the expense of law enforcement, school officials and concerned parents.”

What piqued Agent Cluck’s curiosity was the senior agent’s adamant instruction regarding confidentiality, and his disclosure that Washington was calling the shots. Wynne told Cluck to hold close to the vest any information he gleaned from the kids and, for the time being, documentation was to remain *off the books*. Special Agent Wynne also instructed Agent Cluck to meet with a man named Phoenix, and to turn over any information gathered to him.

Chapter 32

On Saturday afternoon, from within the confines of Dylan Field's dugout, the Musketeers had hatched a plan to canvass the strip to see if they could locate their missing friend. They had decided if they were unsuccessful at finding Todd at one of his usual haunts, they'd return to Grand River Academy and come clean with Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was better than no plan.

Sunday morning the Musketeers were up bright and early, none ready to admit to a fitful night's sleep over the guilt trip Duncan had laid on them about Todd's whereabouts. They were gathered in Hart's dorm room waiting for Duncan to finish showering after an early morning workout; something about greasy egg rolls and empty calories.

There was a light knock at the door and the room fell silent. "Come on, Zak," Hart yelled without getting up from the desk.

The door swung open and all the boys leaped to their feet, mouths agape and eyes wide.

Several minutes later Duncan burst into the room without knocking, and for a moment thought he'd stepped into a funeral parlor. Then he saw Chief McCord standing in the corner ramrod straight, arms folded tightly across his chest. Only then did Duncan understand the pallid look on the faces of his friends.

Chief McCord succinctly informed the boys an FBI agent was waiting in Headmaster Dolwich's office to question them about Seymore's disappearance.

McCord walked behind the Musketeers barking orders like a Border Collie herding sheep. As they crossed the tree-lined commons they tried to sidle together and carry on a hushed conversation, but McCord wagged a stern forefinger, and admonished, "No talking, gentlemen, no talking. Into the office, boys, get to the office."

The foursome trudged up the administration building's ancient stone steps single file, like they were shuffling to a group execution. McCord ushered them into the Board of Trustees conference room and ordered them to take a seat at the long, U-shaped conference table.

The bright morning sunlight burst through the east windows and ricocheted off the polished oak table, warmed the peach-colored walls in a pink glow. Chief McCord marched around the table and took his place beside Headmaster Dolwich, the latter's arms folded across his chest. Hung on the wall above their heads were oil portraits, an anthology that dated back to the early twentieth century. The past headmasters, their long-dead eyes, glared down accusingly at the Musketeers' apparent insubordination.

Each boy pulled a chair from under the table and took a seat across from a middle-aged man in a dark suit and perfect double Windsor knotted neck tie. On the table in front of the agent sat a yellow legal pad and cheap ballpoint pen. With no change to his stoic mien, and making direct eye contact with each Musketeer, Agent Cluck addressed Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for your assistance. I will let you know when I've concluded my interview."

Dolwich and McCord turned to one another with incredulous looks. Neither had anticipated being ejected from the session.

Headmaster Dolwich cleared his throat with nervous unease. "Excuse me, Sir, but I must insist upon remaining in the room while you interrogate the boys. As headmaster, I have an obligation to stand," Dolwich tried a little Latin mumbo-jumbo on the agent, "*in loco parentis.*"

Unfortunately for Headmaster Dolwich, the agent held a Masters of Education, and had never had liked Latin much to begin with. He picked up the pen from the legal pad and rapidly clicked the cartridge in out of the barrel.

After a moment's contemplation on how to best address the dilemma, Agent Cluck turned to Dolwich, and said, "Then, Mr. Dolwich, we have a conundrum. My orders come directly from Washington D.C. Headquarters, and are explicit. I am to interview the boys, *en masse*, and *en privé*."

Federal Bureau of Investigation French trumps prep school Latin every time.

Mr. Dolwich shifted nervously from foot to foot, unsure if he was prepared to, or for that matter, capable of butting heads with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Then I'm afraid before I can permit this..." Dolwich, at a loss for words, gave his hand a rolling gesture, "inquisition to proceed, I must insist on speaking with the academy's legal advocate."

Undaunted, the agent tossed his pen to the legal pad. "That will be fine. Have him—or her—contact the US Attorney's Office in Washington D.C. I'm confident the United States Attorney General or one of his deputies will be more than happy to explain federal statutes and procedures to your legal advisor."

The agent waved his hand across the table toward the Musketeers, all of whom were perched on the edge of their seats deeply engrossed with the adult tête-a-tête.

"Because none of these boys are suspect to neither wrongdoing, nor are they in custodial detention, Miranda warnings do not apply. And neither is there a legal obligation to have a parent—" Agent Cluck pinned Dolwich and McCord with a fixed stare, "or surrogate present during the interview process...which is what this is, not an *inquisition*."

"You are, however, impeding a federal investigation. *And that, sirs, is a crime*. So would you please close the door on your way out?"

The headmaster and chief, both unaccustomed to so offhandedly being dismissed, again looked to one another for support. Neither could come up with legal justification to remain in the room, so they grudgingly closed the door behind them upon exit.

From *hands on* experience foster parenting "hard to place" inner-city children, Agent Cluck knew the surest way to shut down the lines of communication with adolescents was to come off like a hardcore, gang-busting Elliott Ness. He relaxed back in his chair with an affable smile, and said, "Good morning, gentlemen, I'm Special Agent Alan Cluck with the FBI."

"Seriously," Kork trapped a snort in his fist, "like the chicken?"

"Yes," Cluck grinned. It was not as if he had never heard that comparison before. "Just like the chicken. Your principal—"

"Headmaster," Kork interjected with a cherub-like grin intended to excuse his impertinence.

Cluck stared across the table for a moment, but the kid refused to break eye contact. Then he recalled the SAC telling him he would be dealing with a group of youths whose individual IQ's ranged twenty- to forty-percent above the average adult.

"You must be the class clown," Cluck said with a forced smile. "Every class has one."

"Dat be me, ossifer. I be Jerry Kork...dat be Kork wiffa' capital K."

"Right," Cluck said not in the least amused with Kork's sudden switch to Ebonics. "As I was saying, your *headmaster* filled me in on yesterday's interview with the deputy sheriff. So I'm sure I have all my ducks—" Cluck shot Kork's widening grin a warning glower, "chickens in a row, why don't you tell me what's going on with the Seymore kid."

When none of the Musketeers volunteered an explanation, Cluck downplayed the gravity of the situation. "Come on guys, if this is some kind of game you've cooked up to scare," he glanced at his notes, "Livingston's—"

"Todd," Kork again interrupted, this time without the grin. "Todd hates...*Livingston*."

Cluck saw that he was losing control of the interview and decided it best to switch tactics. He snatched up the pen and rapid-fire clicked the plunger with his thumb. “Kork—*wiffa’ capital K*—I hope you understand that if you interrupt me one more time I’m going to come across this table and pull out your tongue—*wiffa’ capital ouch*.”

Cluck tossed the pen to the table, folded his arms across his chest and locked eyes with Kork. “It’s your move, kid.”

Relatively confident the agent wasn’t about to lay a hand on any of them, Kork winked at the others and folded his hands together on the table. Mimicking the precise, stiff diction of the late William F. Buckley, he said, “As a representative of the United States government, Agent Cluck, I find the malevolent persona you’ve adopted in the presence of high school students unacceptable, and, quite frankly, offensive.”

Hart, Lamp, and Duncan closed their eyes and lowered their heads. Only Kork had the audacity to taunt the FBI.

“All of whom,” Kork raised a studious forefinger as he continued, “I might add, are scions of the upper-echelons of society, well-connected, politically speaking of course.”

Agent Cluck grinned benignly at the dressing down from a kid a third his age, and probably twice his IQ. He abruptly snapped forward and brought his nose to within inches of Kork’s.

“Nice try, kid. Save your cute speeches and veiled threats for someone who gives as shit, they get no traction with me. Now let’s get down to business before I slap a muzzle on you.” Cluck dropped back to his side of the table. “What do you think of that, Kork *wiffa’ K*?”

“What I think,” Kork fanned the air in front of his nose with his hand, “is that you need a peppermint Life Saver.”

Cluck almost grinned at the kid’s bravado, he at least had fortitude.

Duncan scooted his chair closer to the table, and said, “Jerry, will you stop trying to piss the guy off.”

Hart and Lamp quickly mumbled their agreement.

Kork flopped back in his chair with a “screw you” sneer, and scratched the tip of his nose with his middle finger.

Having regained a degree of equanimity, Agent Cluck began anew. “If this is some kind of *let’s-play-a-prank-to-see-how-much-attention-we-can-get* game you guys concocted to scare Seymore’s parents...tell me now before it goes any further. In other words, if you know where Livingston is hiding...give it up.”

The silence in the room was cavernous, with each Musketeer trying his best not to look guilty.

“Boys,” Cluck said with a tolerant sigh, “I’m not the enemy here. The Bureau is trying to determine if Seymore is in danger.”

A few more minutes of uneasy shifting in their chairs passed, and Duncan finally stepped up to home plate. “It’s not a prank, Mr. Cluck.”

The agent’s ego did not need massaged so badly as to correct the muscular kid’s *mister* versus *agent* faux pas.

“Todd didn’t show up back at the car on Friday afternoon.”

“What do you mean, ‘didn’t show up back at the car?’”

Duncan took the next few minutes to recount the details of their Friday afternoon trip to Geneva-on-the-Lake, which included a diluted version of Seymore’s split from the group to engage hedonistic pursuits.

Kork waited until Duncan finished, rocked his chair back onto two legs, intertwined his fingers behind his head, and said, “You see, Officer Chicken, my boy Todd has a bit of a problem keeping his dog on the leash...if you catch my meaning.”

Agent Cluck smiled. Yes, he caught Kork's meaning loud and clear, just had never heard teenage libido described quite so eloquently.

"And where was he supposed to meet this date of his?" Cluck said.

He had barely finished the question when Lamp blurted, "Grumpy Granny's."

"Come again?"

"It's the name of a bar," Duncan explained. "Grumpy Granny's is a, well, uh, kind of a biker bar we go to once in a while. Todd said he was headed there when we separated."

Hart joined the conversation.

"Todd mentioned earlier that morning something about hooking up with a chick he met on the Internet. When he didn't show up at the car later that afternoon," Hart shrugged his shoulders as if the answer was obvious, "we figured he'd either gotten drunk or laid... and with Todd's reputation, probably both.

"You see, Agent Cluck," Hart rested his hands on the table and leaned forward, "this isn't the first time Todd has disappeared chasing a piece of ass—tail. He's done the same thing a couple of times in the past... just never been gone this long. We've always managed to cover for him, but like I said, this time he's been gone longer than normal."

"Where's this Grumpy Granny's located? And who runs it?" Cluck picked up his pen and made ready to jot a few notes.

The nervous glances around the room told Cluck what the boys were thinking. He nodded toward the door, and said, "Guys, you have my word that anything discussed in this room, stays in this room. I won't say a word to the Gestapo squad."

"It's on the strip in Geneva-on-the-Lake," Duncan said. "Some biker dude named Frank runs the place, or owns it."

Cluck scribbled down the information and sat with his pen poised over the legal pad.

"Frank's last name?"

The Musketeers looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. They'd never had a reason to ask Frank his last name, like he would have told them anyway.

Cluck made a note to track down and have a chat with the mystery Frank sometime Monday afternoon.

"How often do you guys frequent this Grumpy Granny's place?"

The Musketeers mumbled figures that ranged from *once or twice* to *not that often*.

Cluck couldn't help but laugh. Leave it to a group of intellectual highfliers to think they were the first kids who ever sniffed out a bar where they could get served underage, and apparently pick up women.

Cluck spent an additional fifteen minutes trying to pry answers from the boys, but decided he had as much information as he was going to get, for the moment. He reached to his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a business card holder. He slid each Musketeer an embossed card with his contact information, in the event they recalled something of importance later.

Interview complete, Agent Cluck crossed the room and invited Dolwich and McCord back inside. They nearly knocked each other over trying to squeeze across the threshold at the same time. McCord eventually stepped aside and waved the headmaster through. "I should think so," Dolwich grumbled, his chin lifted with royal indignation.

Cluck slipped the pen into his pocket, and when he caught McCord trying to read his notes, upside down, flipped the legal pad over.

"Gentlemen," Cluck said addressing the headmaster and chief, "I've completed my interview for the time being. Due to the sensitive nature of the investigation, I have sworn the boys to secrecy."

The Musketeers glanced at one another wondering where the “sworn to secrecy” part had come in. The agent shot a wink across the table and they got it. Cluck, in his FBI way, was warning Dolwich and McCord to back off any thoughts of imposing administrative sanctions, or of trying to pry additional information from them after he was gone.

“As I stated, my orders are direct from Washington. I must therefore insist you refrain from *interrogating* the boys any further about what we discussed behind closed doors, or from levying administrative sanctions.”

The agent paused long enough to intimidate Dolwich and McCord with his practiced FBI glower, and then gathered together his notes and stood.

“I also trust you will permit the boys unfettered telephone access in the event they need to contact me with pertinent information.”

Headmaster Dolwich’s shoulders sagged visibly. He and McCord had been discussing those very issues in the outer office, appropriate punishment for not reporting Seymore’s absence, and for forging his signature on the sign-in sheet. This was a first for them, being told how to handle internal disciplinary matters. Headmaster Dolwich disdained being told how to administrate. He also realized obduracy would do nothing more than create a tenuous atmosphere between the board of trustees and the federal government. Not to mention potentially alienate the academy’s philanthropic alumni.

Chapter 33

During the brief fuel-stop at the Lonesome Pines Airport in Virginia, Phoenix capitalized on the opportunity to stretch his legs, while Ferguson topped off the fuel tanks. He walked into the tiny single-story, cinder block terminal and used the restroom. He nodded a silent greeting to the elderly gentleman behind the information desk, and then visited the vending machine alcove. While Phoenix munched a candy bar and sipped a soda, he perused a hallway featuring framed lithographs of vintage airplanes dating back to Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Electra days.

Phoenix walked up to the plane and Ferguson returned the fuel nozzle to its cradle, and said, "You're going to rot your teeth eating that crap."

Phoenix shrugged his shoulders and spoke as he mounted the boarding stairs. "I'm sure the American Dental Association lists sugar-glazed, cream-filled gut bombs as part of a dental-healthy diet."

An hour and a half later they were passing through Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport Traffic Control's airspace on final descent. Ferguson trimmed the flaps and throttled back the plane's airspeed. "About twenty minutes out," he said.

Phoenix turned in his seat and requested a last minute flight change. "Furgy, before you set us down fly the Lake Erie shoreline. Make sure I have a starboard side view."

Ferguson glanced across the cockpit, and then radioed Cleveland Hopkins Control Center to inform them of his flight plan change. "How much of the shoreline you want to take in?"

After Mycroft, Seymore, and Gravelis's departed yesterday afternoon, and after finding out Ferguson's plane wouldn't be ready until morning, Phoenix spent the better part of the evening on the Internet studying Google Earth satellite images of Ohio's north shore. He compared them with the high-resolution military satellite imagery Mycroft had made available to him. While military satellites were up to date to the minute, Google Earth maps could be as old as three years. Burned into his eidetic mind's-eye were images of the topography, but he wanted a bird's-eye view for confirmation.

"Cleveland to Ashtabula," Phoenix said.

With one eye on the airspeed indicator, the other on the altimeter, Ferguson held the aircraft at ten knots above stall speed, making sure he complied with the FAA's five hundred foot minimum altitude regulation. He glided along the shoreline from Cleveland's eastern suburbs to Ashtabula Harbor before banking inland. Phoenix stared at the scenery with déjà vu recognition. Thirty minutes later Ferguson brought the Hawker in for a soft landing at the Ashtabula County Airport on the outskirts of Jefferson, Ohio.

Ferguson stood at the base of the boarding steps with a hand on the safety rail, a moment later Phoenix appeared, luggage slung over his shoulder. He stepped to the tarmac, retrieved his stowed duffle from the tail baggage hold, and then extended his hand to the pilot. "Thanks for the lift, Furgy. I appreciate it."

Anxious to be back in the air, Cajun shrimp gumbo calling, Ferguson made his goodbyes brief. "Any time, my friend, any time. Give me a call when you're ready to come home."

Phoenix snapped a two-finger salute, walked to the apron and watched Ferguson lift off. The pilot rocked the wings with a fare-thee-well wave, and then banked the plane south for the return flight to Florida.

On his way to the terminal Phoenix's eyes scanned the landscape, a cornucopia of late summer corn, mature hay and soybean fields. He smiled as he recalled the *Weather Channel* special

he'd watched on northern Ohio blizzards. He puffed his cheeks full of air, and exhaled loudly. "O-high-O...what can you expect from a state that begins and ends with zeros?"

He shifted the carry-on to a more comfortable position, hoisted the duffle to the opposite shoulder and walked into the small terminal.

Phoenix stopped at the information kiosk and signed the rental truck agreement with one of the aliases the deputy director had provided. He accepted the keys, walked to the parking lot and found his ride, setting his luggage on the passenger floorboard. It wasn't the Dodge Ram he preferred, but Ford trucks weren't so bad. It could have been far worse. Mycroft, out of spite, could have arranged for one of those pregnant roller skates Toyota makes.

Chapter 34

Because of FBI Agent Cluck's impromptu visit, it was a little bit after noon before the Musketeers reached Geneva-on-the-Lake. While en route, each had silently harbored the unrealistic expectation of stumbling across Todd walking alongside the road, hitchhiking back to the campus after yet another drunken, orgy-filled weekend. When that didn't come to fruition, Hart parked next to the tennis courts behind the Geneva-on-the-Lake Visitor Center. They reached the sidewalk and Hart assumed control, issued search assignments.

"Zak, you and Jerry take the other side of the street. Start at the Adventure Zone and work your way east. Mark and I will check out the places on this side of the Strip. We'll meet up with you guys in an hour or so in front of Captain Gus's Seafood Shack."

Kork saluted with an aye-aye Captain's nod, and then he and Duncan darted between the streams of cars looking for those impossible to find curbside parking spaces. Hart kept Lamp with him figuring Mark would probably be less squeamish checking water parks, miniature golf courses and picnic areas, rather than some of the seedier joints Seymore often frequented.

"Come on, Mark, we'll start at the water park and work our way east."

It was no secret that Seymore spent part of his time in Geneva-on-the-Lake at the water park, where he would chat up the female lifeguards through the chain link fence surrounding the splashdown pool. Lamp paced the sidewalk while Hart spoke with the well-endowed lifeguard Todd was madly in *lust* with. She offered little in the way of help as to Todd's whereabouts.

"I'll check the pavilions behind the Old Firehouse Winery," Hart said as they broke away from the water slides. "Why don't you pop into the Hickory Room and see if anyone has seen Todd in the last couple of days."

Lamp canted his head to the side, wide eyed. Hart slapped him on the back, and with a good-natured laugh, said, "Relax, Mark, the topless dancers don't take the stage until after ten o'clock."

Lamp did his best to look disappointed.

Over an hour passed, and more than two dozen establishments checked, and still none had had a shred of luck at finding Seymore.

Kork and Duncan stood in front of the last business on their side of the Strip that needed checked: The Sports Center, a hangar-size game room housed inside a corrugated Quonset hut. Duncan looked up at the advertising sign hanging over the door that boasted modern, sit-down high definition digital consol games, as well as vintage pinball machines and air hockey tables. In days gone by college and high school kids roamed the floor, dressed in bright red smocks with coin changers clipped to their belts. The roving human banks had been replaced with automated change machines strategically placed throughout the build, and dispensing tokens rather than quarters.

Duncan and Kork passed through an old fashion revolving door and where immediately treated to a cacophony of heavy metal music, rocket explosions, machinegun fire, and screaming phantoms blaring from bank after bank of game machines. Barely audible from the back of the building were muted bells and piercing whistles of the more than two dozen antique pinball machines. To the over thirty crowd the dissonance was as overwhelming as the thick aroma of freshly buttered popcorn, soda pop and greasy French fries that wafted on the air.

Kork and Duncan split up and started their search from opposite sides of the building. After twenty fruitless minutes of going machine to machine, it was evident to Duncan that Seymore was nowhere to be found. What he did find, however, was Kork parked at the "Legends of War" video game near the back of the parlor. For the price of three tokens the game allowed a player to engage

in authentic battle scenarios that ranged from Genghis Khan's Mongolian conquests, to Norman Schwarzkopf's invasion of Iraq during the first Gulf War.

Kork was in the midst of beheading a Mongolian warrior with a double blade axe when Duncan tapped him on the shoulder and interrupted his game.

"Come on, Jerry, we're supposed to be looking for Todd, remember?"

Kork gave a quick glance over his shoulder, and said, "I love this game."

Duncan rolled his eyes and pulled out his cell phone, checked the time, and returned it to his pocket. "Let's go, Jerry. We were supposed to meet Wes and Mark ten minutes ago."

During the distraction a fur-clad defender fired a flint-tipped arrow through the opening of Kork's helmeted character. Kork slapped the joystick, and said, "Damn!" as his man bled out and stained the snowy mountainside red, then morphed into a cackling, smoldering skeleton.

Kork and Duncan paused on the sidewalk a moment and let their eyes adjust to the bright sunlight. Duncan spotted Lamp a half-block down, on the opposite side of the street, nervously pacing in front of Neptune's Cave like he was building up the nerve to rob the place. A moment later Hart pushed through the padded leather doors and bounded down the steps to the sidewalk.

"It doesn't look like their luck was any better than ours," Kork said. He checked traffic and then darted across the street, Duncan following close on his heels.

The Musketeers huddled together on the sidewalk in front of the Summer Hut, a beachwear clothing and bicycle rental shop directly across the street from Grumpy Granny's.

"I couldn't find anybody who's seen him," Hart said. "The water park pool guard he has the hots for said she talked to him through the fence, but couldn't remember what day or time."

"It had to be on Friday," Duncan said. "None of us have been up here for the past two weeks."

"She said he didn't hang out long," Hart continued, "said they talked for about ten minutes and then Todd left. He mentioned something about meeting a girl, but the lifeguard thought he was just trying to make her jealous."

"Todd interested in a member of the opposite sex?" Kork dropped to one of the sidewalk stone benches and struck *The Thinker* pose; dropped his chin to his left fist, and said, "Men, we must take pause in our quest to locate our missing friend and afford this new conundrum its proper and just contemplation."

"Rodin's *The Thinker* rests his chin on his right fist, Jerry." Lamp gave his shoulders an innocuous *so there* shrug.

Kork tilted his head to a quizzical angle, and said, "Mark, it frightens me you would know that."

Lamp waited until Kork rose to his feet and turned his back before sticking his tongue out."

In an attempt to cut off an impending tiff over a statue no one, other than a museum curator, cared about, Duncan asked Wes, "Did she happen to say which way he went?"

"She said the last time she saw him he was cutting through the Oak Room's parking lot toward the beach."

"So..." Duncan lengthened the word into a drawl, "did you check the beach?"

"Of course I checked the beach," Hart retorted, "what do you take me for, some kind of idiot?"

Hart spun on the balls of his feet and stabbed a warning finger in Kork's face. "Shut up, Jerry."

Kork flashed his best patronizing grin. "Not all of us need a tour guide to tell us we're up to our ass in alligators, Wes."

Hart ignored Kork, and continued, “I checked the beach; talked with the lifeguard on duty. He said he has no idea who Todd is, and that he was working his other job Friday. So he wasn’t much help, either.”

Hart lifted his arms to his sides and splayed his fingers in the universal *That’s all I got* gesture.

Kork eyes narrowed and his face darkened. He stared across the street at Grumpy Granny’s façade as he switched to his best Vito Corleone rasp. “Maybe we should go across the street and make Frank an offer he can’t refuse.”

Lamp choked down a nervous titter. “Jerry, you can’t just walk into the guy’s bar and accuse him of something he probably had nothing to do with.”

Kork’s dark eyes brightened to a mischievousness twinkle. “We don’t be A-qusin’ nobodys of nuffin, Boss. We just be axin’.”

“Jerry,” Hart snapped, “would you knock it off with the, *I ez jus’a po’ black child* bullshit. It’s getting really lame—and fast.”

Kork shot Hart one of his apologetic, deadpan stares. “I bees powerful sorry Massah Bossman.”

Hart rolled his eyes in disgust. He’d had about all of Kork he could take for the moment. Rather than escalate the verbal altercation into something sure to turn ugly, Hart stepped away from the group and inadvertently into the path of a jogger using the bicycle lane.

“Sorry, dude,” Hart apologized as the man narrowly missed colliding with him.

Chapter 35

After the long flight all Phoenix had on his mind was getting checked into the rental cabin Mycroft's people had reserved for him inside the nearby state park, and putting in two- or three-miles to work out the kinks and clear his head. Once that was out of the way, he would grab a hot shower, maybe a bite to eat, and snatch an hour's shuteye before his scheduled meeting with the FBI liaison Mycroft texted him about while in-flight. With a little luck the agent had uncovered some useful information to at least give him a starting point on where to look for the missing Seymore kid.

Phoenix drove the big Ford out of the airport parking lot and followed the rural country lane to it terminus. He made a left turn, relaxed back in his seat and enjoyed the view of rolling pastures, several dotted with herds of patchwork black and white cattle. Expansive pastures and grazing bovine were something one did not find in the cramped Florida Keys. He passed through the village of Jefferson, the county seat, and picked up SR 307 for an unscheduled detour through the borough of Austinburg, home of Livingston Todd Seymore; and a quick exploration it was.

The tiny community reminded Phoenix of the old joke about the town being so small its city limit signs were back-to-back. Half-mile square, Austinburg boasted six residential streets, a viable business district that comprised of a pizza emporium, a veterinary clinic, sawmill and two churches. A block off the main drag, nestled between a gas station that served as a convenience store, sat a hometown diner, slash, country general store that appeared to have been plucked straight out of the 1800s. His brief tour concluded within minutes, Phoenix followed the truck's built-in GPS directions north toward Geneva State Park on the Lake Erie shoreline.

Inside the park office a gregariously talkative campground hostess filled in the blanks on the vehicle registration card, issued Phoenix a parking permit, and informed him it that 'must be visible at all times.' By the time she finished completing the cabin registration forms, in triplicate, Phoenix knew how many years she'd been employed at the state park, the names and ages of her five grandchildren, as well as the number of years it had been since her husband passed.

She took a few minutes to bring him up to speed on which eateries along Geneva-on-the-Lake's garish Strip to avoid, and provided him with details of where to catch the breathtaking bus tour of all seventeen—count 'em, seventeen—covered bridges spattered throughout the county. She handed him maps of the state park and Geneva-on-the-Lake's attractions, provided him with the three-digit code that opened cabin #12's electronic lock, and concluded with a grandmotherly pat on his arm and a hearty "enjoy your stay in Geneva" salutation.

Geneva State Park's cedar-sided cabins came with a full complement of amenities: a kitchen stocked with cookware, dishes, flatware, stove, refrigerator and microwave; dining and living areas; private bathroom, shower, loft bedrooms with linens; air conditioning and a screened-in porch—five hundred fifty-five square feet of rustic efficiency that overlooked the slate-gray waters of Lake Erie.

Phoenix followed the winding road through the park until he reached a horseshoe-shaped clearing, where twelve cabins sat on a bluff overlooking the lake. He parked the truck in front of number twelve, turned off the engine and stepped from the cab with his duffle and carry-on bags. He punched in the code on the keypad next to the door and set his bags inside next to a drop-leaf hickory kitchen table. He unpacked and secured the important items—two untraceable, encrypted

cellular phones, a mini laptop computer, his stainless steel Colt 45, with extra ammo and magazines, and three counterfeit IDs—inside the complimentary safe bolted to a heavy steel plate in a closet behind the front door. Phoenix gave a quick walkthrough of the accommodations, and then carried his duffel to the loft bedroom and changed clothes.

He stepped through the sliding doors and onto a screened-in porch, wearing a white sleeveless t-shirt, black and lime green knee-length basketball shorts, and a pair of black and silver K-Swiss cross trainer athletic shoes. He clicked on the AM/FM radio on the patio table just in time to catch the local radio station's top-of-the-hour news and weather.

He sat on the floor and hydrated with a bottle of spring water purchased in Austinburg, and limbered up for a jog as the radio the announcer's animated voice came on with the less than favorable forecast:

"Monday morning's rush hour could be a little tricky. Here at Accu-Weather storm central we are closely watching a Polar Vortex that is building above the Arctic Circle. But don't break out those snow shovels just yet," the announcer said with a chuckle. "What we're talking about is a strong cold front trying to force its way out of Canada. With a shift in the winds aloft it could dip as far south as the Mississippi valley. While it should lose most of its punch before it reaches the U.S., it will have enough oomph left to moderate temperatures fifteen to twenty-five degrees below normal. If that happens, early Sunday night, and into Monday's wee hours, enough cold air will flow across Erie's warmer waters to condense into a heavy, zero visibility fog. Stay tuned to this Accu-Weather station for updates."

From where he sat on the floor of the screened-in porch, watching boats cruise in and out of the state park marina, Phoenix stood and clicked off the radio. He reviewed the maps the hostess provided, saw that the park bicycle and jogging path paralleled the shoreline through most of the park, but once it passed the beach and marina, arched through a copse of trees behind the Grand Lodge Hotel. Ultimately it connected with Lake Road, Geneva-on-the-Lake's "Strip."

Phoenix calculated a jog through the park, and along the Strip and back would cover a few less miles than his normal routine, but what better way was there to get a lay of the land than by blending in as just one more health-conscious tourist out for afternoon exercise? He could easily have covered the distance in half the time, but this run wasn't about pushing his limits, it was about building Intel. A leisurely jog would also afford him an eyes-on view of the myriad of rental cottages, private tree-lined streets and cul-de-sacs he'd seen on the satellite images last evening. It hadn't taken long to realize there were literally thousands of places to stash the kid. Even with a twenty-man SEAL team at his disposal, locating Todd Seymore was going to be a teensy-weensy bit more problematic than Mycroft had led him to believe.

The state park trail ended and Phoenix jogged onto Lake Road, and into the dedicated lane for pedestrian, rollerblade and bicycle traffic. His Internet research did not do justice to the volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic that prowled Ohio's secret playground.

Chapter 36

One need not have the razor-sharp observation and perception skills Phoenix possessed to appreciate Geneva-on-the-Lake's scenery. He trotted past the Wild Water Works Park and found himself looking a little longer than a fellow his age should at a pair of teeny-boppers climbing from the splashdown pool. They wiped water from their faces, unabashedly adjusted nascent breasts and revealing bikini bottoms, and then skipped across the concrete to rejoin the line snaking its way back to the top of the slides.

Phoenix shook away the prurient thoughts with an audible chuckle. He adjusted his gait to accommodate the pair of geriatric lovebirds ahead of him pedaling an oversized rented tricycle, with bench seat, souvenir-laden wire cargo basket, and orange slow-moving vehicle triangle attached to the back. He trotted around them, surprised to see how many of the eateries along Lake Road offered al fresco dining. Most had long waiting lines, with harried waitresses and busboys clearing tables as quickly as they were vacated.

He passed the Swiss Chalet Inn, whose marquee advertised the Pink Floyd tribute band Wish You Were Here performing nightly for a two-week run. Judging by the length of the line snaking around the building, they must put on a pretty good show. Phoenix made a mental note to tell Furgy, who was the Pink Floyd aficionado, about the band.

Phoenix's route took him past dozens of brick and mortar souvenir and gift shops, with enough greasy spoons to fill the belly of a third world country. Ad infinitum rental cottages, two- and three-star motels, with a diversity of lounges and bars broad enough to service social imbibers, weekend warriors, and power drinkers alike. The sidewalks were jammed with wandering streams of tourists not quite sure where they were headed, not quite sure where they had been. Geneva-on-the-Lake's festive atmosphere reminded Phoenix of a shrunken down version of Las Vegas Boulevard, sans slot machines and gaming tables.

Near the center point of the Strip, a colorful cluster of military murals painted on the outside of a squat cinderblock building caught his attention. Phoenix laughed when he read the establishment's name. "Are you kidding me?" he mused aloud. "Grumpy Granny's? This I have got to see."

A huddle of boys on the sidewalk ahead of him got his attention. The lanky black kid and one of the white boys appeared to be arguing over something, about to go toe-to-toe. The white kid abruptly broke away and inadvertently stepped into his path. With a nimble two-step shuffle, Phoenix avoided a collision. He found it refreshing the kid at least had the manners to apologize for the near mishap.

Phoenix came to a stop at the crosswalk and glanced at the MTM Special Ops Falcon timepiece strapped to his wrist. Seeing there was plenty of time before he was to meet Mycroft's FBI boots on the ground man, he decided to treat himself to a cold beer.

"What's it going to hurt?" Duncan cajoled.

"Right," Lamp grumbled under his breath, "it won't hurt at all until Frank gets pissed off, rips off our heads and shits down our necks."

Duncan waved him off. "You've been reading too many Marine Corp recruiting posters."

Kork began bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet, shadow boxing like a young Cassius Clay. "Cranky Frankie ain't no match for Jer-ee; 'cause I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee."

Kork's antics caught the attention of a passing police cruiser. The cop slowed down enough to evaluate whether or not the black kid was trying to pick a fight with the group of white boys.

Kork saw the cop watching, and knew what he was thinking. He draped his arms over Duncan and Lamp's shoulders and gave the officer his best simple-minded grin. The cop in turn stared for a few more seconds, and then drove on.

Hart had rejoined the group after his near collision with the jogger, and said, "We need to do something. We're just spinning our wheels in the sand. Todd's obviously nowhere to be found."

"Come on, Mark." Duncan ducked out from under Kork's arm. "All we're going to do is ask Frank if he's seen Todd. If he doesn't know anything, we're out of here."

Lamp, never much of a Grumpy Granny's fan to begin, had always been troubled by Frank's rough and tumble biker, ex-military clientele. Most times when the Musketeers visited Granny's for a quick beer, Lamp begged off, choosing instead to wait outside pacing the sidewalk. Under the current circumstances, however, he knew the others would give him no peace if he refused to go with them to confront Frank. *Un pour tous, tous pour un* and all that rubbish. Lamp acquiesced with a shrug of his shoulders, and said, "All right, let's just get it over with."

"Stick close, Mark," Kork delivered a good-natured punch to Lamp's shoulder. "Frankie tries anything, and I'll drop him like a naughty nun."

Lamp's eyebrows pinched together. "Like what?"

Kork looked at him as if he'd suddenly become a brain-dead zombie. "Like a naughty nun...you know...a bad habit."

"That was horrible, Jerry," Duncan pushed Kork off the curb and started across the street, "even for you."

Chapter 37

Because he was not a fan of war stories, particularly told by those who had seen little or no action, Phoenix typically avoided military-themed bars. But for some inexplicable reason, Grumpy Granny's was calling him. He crossed the street, putting his observation and perception skills to use. He instantly picked up on the closed circuit television cameras covering the exterior, which further piqued his interest in the bar. Phoenix pulled on the door handle. Locked. The sign above the doorbell read: Press buzzer for entry.

Phoenix wondered if perhaps Grumpy Granny's was a private club. It had been his experience that VFW and American Legion posts, nationwide, welcomed ex-military and visiting members. He rang the buzzer and stepped back again to admire the building's artwork.

Another minute passed, and still there was no answer to his second ring. Phoenix shrugged and turned to leave when the overhead speaker crackled. "Something you need?"

"A draft should cover it...depending on the choices." Phoenix stepped back and looked up at the camera monitoring the front door. He reached for the door anticipating to be buzzed in.

There was another short pause, and the scratchy voice asked, "You military?"

"Ex."

"Branch?"

"Corp." Phoenix offered one of the bogus rank and enlistment dates he'd used back in his 'black op' days as a government fixer.

The pneumatic lock hissed, and the door sprung open a few of inches.

Inside, and immediately to his left, the sign bolted to the wall spoke volumes as to Grumpy Granny's clientele: *No Club Colors Permitted*. He paused in the vestibule long enough to allow his eyes to adjust, and then stepped into the bar.

The compact interior was more a narrow galley-style setup than open great room, and it was surprisingly clean. Once his eyes had adjusted to the lower light, Phoenix crossed the room on a casual gait, while at the same time committing the room's layout and décor to memory.

As expected, the interior motif was all military. The walls had been decorated with framed lithographs of US war planes and attack helicopters, circa the Vietnam and Korean conflicts, incongruously mixed with World War II replica rifles, swords, and bayonets displayed on the walls. The four booths flaunted hand-carved Viet Nam-era decommissioned mortar casings, ingeniously converted into table lamps. In the alcove to the right a jukebox glowed neon blue, while a coin-operated pool table waited beneath a darkened Tiffany lamp suspended from the ceiling on chains.

Phoenix approached the bar and saw reflected in the mirror behind shelved bottles of liquor the exterior view the security cameras provided. And neither did it escape his notice that there were no cameras recording the inside activity. Apparently what happens inside Grumpy Granny's stays inside Grumpy Granny's.

Phoenix slid one of the padded chrome Harley Davidson bar stools away from the counter and sat. The grizzly bear-size man behind the bar, his thick arms folded against his chest, stood glaring at him with expressionless eyes. And if that wasn't supposed to be intimidating enough, he had a large hunting knife strapped to his belt.

Phoenix looked at the chrome three-tower beer dispenser at mid bar, and said, "What do you have on draft?"

Conan the Barbarian unfolded his arms and leaned on the bar. "Beer."

Phoenix smiled to himself. The big fellow had obviously opened the bar after a failed attempt at standup comedy, and apparently thought size was an intimidator. Phoenix, however, had

graduated from a school that measured size by a different yardstick: *The bigger they are...the longer it takes them to hit the ground.*

Phoenix seriously contemplated snatching ZZ Top by his straggly beard and bouncing his head off the counter. Probably not good for his anonymity, so instead reached into his pocket and laid a twenty-dollar-bill on the ceramic countertop. "I'll have whatever comes out of tap number three."

The barkeep studied his customer long enough to read something in the lifeless gray eyes that said this man was not easily frightened. If for no other reason than to take the guy for a few bucks, and move him along, Frank adopted a more amicable demeanor. He fetched a beer and set it in front of the patron, stood in front of the cash register, and returned with Phoenix's change and laid it on the bar.

"Vacationing...passing through...or you just another poor 'stuck in Ohio' sucker?"

Phoenix smiled, picked up his beer, chugged a gulp and set the mug back on the bar. He wiped his lips with a paper napkin, and said, "Traveling through on my way to South Carolina to visit my daughter."

"If you're headed south, how in the world did you get so far off the beaten path to end up in," Frank spread his arms like he was giving the village a bear hug, "Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio?"

"Lucky I guess." Phoenix flashed his best 'misplaced tourist' smile. "I have getting lost down to an art form. I probably should have MapQuested it."

Frank used his big paw to swat that annoying concept from the air. "Computer bullshit...I don't get none of it. We was better off before computers and satellite TV and cell phones. I got me one of them dishes on the roof at home...one hundred and twenty-five channels. Most times I end up watching the "Military Channel" or "The History Channel."

"Better catch up, my friend," Phoenix saluted the room with his mug. "Technology is here to stay. A growing field...the wave of the future, or so they keep trying to convince us."

"Cancer's here to stay, it grows too...don't mean it's any good for you," Frank retorted.

Phoenix eyes flicked to the monitor as a group of boys—the same group from across the street he'd almost collided with—walked down New Street, and a moment later appeared on the bar's loading dock. He tipped his glass to the CCTV images, and said, "Looks like you already caught up some."

"Them?" Frank glanced to the monitor and saw the Musketeers standing on the dock. His brow furrowed, while his eyes remained locked on the monitor as he spoke. "My computer geek brother-in-law set 'em up. It took me near on a week to learn how to turn the damn thing off and on. Half the time I'm not even sure they work."

"Kids!" Frank said as the muscular boy stepped forward and pounded on the door. "They sometimes hang around back and smoke weed. I don't need no cop headaches over a bunch of dope-smoking prep school kids."

"I'll be right back, friend." Frank tossed the towel he'd been swiping the bar with into the sink and headed to the storeroom, trailing a string of curses behind him like the tail on a kite.

When active as a field agent body language had saved Phoenix's bacon more than once. He watched the action unfold on the CCTV, and based on the group's body language, they weren't there to smoke dope. Buy maybe, but not smoke. What kid in his right mind pounds on a business's door to ask if he and his friends can borrow the loading dock to burn a joint?

Phoenix set his mug on the bar and eased from the stool. He walked into the dark storage room, careful not to bump into any of the stock of empty beer kegs, liquor cartons, and an ungodly amount of motorcycle parts, probably stolen, scattered about. He used the sound of voices to quietly work his way to the back of the building, where he slipped into a dark corner and listened.

The Musketeers worked their way to the back of Grumpy Granny's, hopefully unnoticed. But swiveling heads and nervous over-the-shoulder glances made them about as inconspicuous as a burqa-clad woman at a nudist camp. After a brief discussion over who would knock on the door, because whoever did so would become the de facto spokesman, Duncan finally stepped forward and pounded on the door.

After the first knock was not answered in timely fashion, Lamp, anxious to be anywhere other than where he was at the moment, said, "Maybe Frank's not open today."

"Mark," Kork chided, "we just watched that jogger Wes tried to trip go inside."

Hart scowled at Kork. "I didn't try and trip him."

"Frank's here." Kork said. "Knock again, Hercules."

Duncan stepped forward and delivered another series of thumps on the door. When they heard the first security bolt being drawn, they stepped back.

The door flew open and Frank's bulk filled the doorway. He struck the classic Mr. Clean pose; dangling earring, thick arms folded across his chest. He glared down his nose at the withering group of prep-school yuppie puppies huddled together on the dock. He fought back a grin at their timidity. "What do you little shits want?" he growled.

Kork, Hart, and Lamp stepped to the edge of the dock. It was, after all, Duncan who'd summoned forth the evil genie.

Duncan exhale nervously. "We're looking for our friend Todd, Mr. Frank. Todd Seymore. Have you seen him?"

Because Frank had yet to read anything in the newspaper about a missing kid, he was beginning to wonder if anyone even knew the brat was gone. Frank turned on his darkest mien, uncrossed his arms and balled his fists at his sides. He glared at each Musketeer the length of time it took them to break eye contact, seconds.

"No!" he snapped, trying not to burst out laughing at the quavering misfits.

"Todd said he was coming down here to have a drink," Duncan persisted, "maybe to meet a girl... That was the last time any of us saw or heard from him."

Frank refolded his arms across his chest and leaned forward, the boys in kind leaned back. "I told you, your buddy wasn't here Friday. He must've hooked up with the broad someplace else."

Frank rolled and flexed his big shoulders and stepped back inside. "Now you boys get on out of here, I have work to do." He slammed the door closed with a bang.

Kork waited until the second bolt rammed home, and then shot Frank a double flip-off.

After Frank's abrupt dismissal, the Musketeers stood on the dock speechless for a moment, and then made their way out front to ponder their next move.

Chapter 38

Phoenix remained concealed in the stockroom long enough to hear the boys plead their case, and more importantly, long enough to hear Seymore's name mentioned during the conversation. While the bar owner busied himself running the kids off the property, Phoenix quietly retraced his steps through the storage room and bar, and then exited the way he'd come in.

He did a quick survey of the street; spotted what he was looking on the opposite side, a half-block out of range of Frank's security cameras. He walked to the sidewalk display in front of a souvenir t-shirt shop. It would not help the cause if the bar owner got curious about his customer's sudden disappearance, checked the video feed and saw his patron tailing the boys who had just confronted him about their missing friend. Phoenix stopped in front of the Krazy K Shirts & Lemonade stand and waited. He rummaged through the sidewalk storage bin filled with an array of colorful tie-dye Geneva-on-the-Lake souvenir shirts. He couldn't help but thank his good fortune of being in the right place at the right time.

Ask any Texas Hold 'Em player and they'll tell you: *I'd rather be lucky than good!* Since Lady Luck had taken a shine to him, Phoenix had every intention of capitalizing on her gift.

Once the boys were out of sight of the bar he would intercept them and, hopefully, gather useful information, something severely lacking to this point.

Chapter 39

Phoenix surreptitiously watched the Musketeers briefly pause in front of Grumpy Granny's, obviously flustered with what they had, or more importantly, had not learned. He dropped the t-shirt he had been inspecting back into the bin and fell in behind the group as they passed. The Strip's cacophonous volume made it difficult to hear their conversation, but he picked up enough to know the group was, indubitably, connected with the Seymore mystery.

"I don't think Frank was giving us the straight poop," Hart said.

"Well no dah, counselor," Kork jibed.

Lamp, the proverbial conflict avoidance member, said, "What reason would Frank have to lie?"

"What the hell, Mark?" Kork bellowed, and then lowered his voice. "You can't be so naïve as to believe a guy whose main clientele are outlaw bikers and underage kids is Mr. Straight and Narrow."

Lamp paused on the sidewalk prepared to defend his position, but the others continued walking, so he hurried after them. "Okay, CSI Geneva...what's his motive?"

Kork turned a sympathetic frown to Lamp, wondering if Mark had lost his last working brain cell. "Um, let me see..." Kork rolled his eyes skyward, scratched the side of his chin with mock contemplation, and continued, "how about his cut of the ransom, dumb ass?"

"So far, Jerry, there's been no mention of a ransom demand," Lamp protested. "Don't you think if there was a ransom note we would have heard about it by now? Besides, there's still no proof Todd's even been kidnapped."

Kork let out an exasperated sigh. "Mark, you do remember Agent Chicken showing up this morning asking all kinds of questions, but not giving much in the way of answers, right? I mean, think about it. If there was no kidnapping, why would the FBI be involved, let alone send an agent out to the school—on a Sunday—to interview us? There has to have been a ransom note, or a phone call, something..."

Duncan entered the conversation.

"Am I the only one who's noticed a curious lack of media coverage pertaining to Todd's disappearance?" He looked the group over. "I mean, most times when a kid goes missing the media's all over it...like ugly on an ape.

"But in Todd's case there's been nothing. Wouldn't you think with his old man's status as a federal judge there would have been some kind of media attention? I mean if not nationally, at least locally. There's been nothing...nada...zilch. It's like it never happened. Like... I don't know... Like maybe something else is going on that no one is supposed to know about."

"Like what?" Hart said.

"I don't know," Duncan admitted. "But we all saw how Agent Cluck chased Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord out of the room before he talked with us. And if you guys can remember that far back—I know it's been a few hours, but try real hard—the agent stopped a cat's whisker short of threatening us not to discuss Todd's disappearance with anyone."

"Really, Zak?" Hart made no attempt to hide his mocking timbre. "'A cat's whisker?' Exactly where did that metaphor come from?"

Duncan's face blushed deep red. "My grandma used to say it all the time. Why, what's wrong with it?"

Kork, never bashful about interjecting his two cents into a conversation said, "Explain why the cops would keep Todd's kidnapping a secret, Zak."

“Because, Jerry, Todd’s old man is some highfalutin’ judge in Washington D.C. What if some terrorist cell kidnapped Todd in order to force his old man to like, who knows, rule in their favor on a case or something... Maybe the cops are trying to keep it hush-hush so other whack jobs—copycats—don’t get any bright ideas.”

“Then explain,” Lamp said, “why we just wasted our time talking with Frank? Because to be honest with you, guys, I don’t think Frank’s bright enough to organize the top rack of a dishwasher, let alone mastermind a kidnapping...if that’s what this is.”

“Maybe Frank’s just a flunky for the guys who actually grabbed Todd,” Kork offered.

Duncan, unconvinced, wagged his head. “No, I don’t think so, Jerry. I mean, how many times have you guys been to Grumpy Granny’s in the past, even before I got here, with no problems? I seriously doubt Frank suddenly joined a sleeper cell working out of Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio, just to give someone a place to grab Todd.” He glanced to Lamp. “Like Mark said, *if* someone actually grabbed Todd. There’s a bigger picture we’re not seeing.”

They stopped on the sidewalk in front of the Psychic Palms Fortune and Tarot Reading shop to further dissect the riddle. A gray-haired lady dressed in flashy gypsy garb stepped from the shop and tried to hand them discount coupons, they moved along.

“Zak may have a point,” Hart said continuing along the sidewalk. “Todd’s old man *is* a federal judge. And the truth be told, who knows what control the government exercises over the press these days. I mean...remember what Mr. Sieple said in government class; how the Patriot Act violates the very tenets of the constitution?”

Duncan, deep in thought, stared straight ahead as he spoke. “Dudes, there’s something Frank said that really bothered me.”

“Tell us what that is, young Hercules.” Kork stepped around the sidewalk display in front of the Glass Bubble, a glassblowing and crystal ware shop.

Phoenix shadowed the Musketeers the length of the strip until they reached the Geneva-on-the-Lake Information Center. With pedestrian traffic minimal, he stepped forward and said, “Excuse me fellows, you have a minute?”

They stopped their conversation and consider the intrusion. Hart thumbed over his shoulder, and said, “Hey, aren’t you the dude I almost ran into up the street?”

“That would be me,” Phoenix said.

“And,” Lamp retreated two wary steps before he continued, “the same guy who went into Grumpy Granny’s?”

“Me again,” Phoenix said with his most disarming smile. “Where’d you fellows park your car?”

Lamp pointed toward the tennis courts behind the information center. “Wes parked over—”

Racial profiling, everyone’s done it. Kork, suspicious of white guys who looked and acted like cops, stepped in front of Lamp and cut him off. “Why do you want to know?”

Phoenix realized his chance of finding Seymore by himself was limited, and taking into account the lucky break destiny had spoon-fed him, decided the best way to win the group’s confidence was to tell them the truth...sort of.

“Gentlemen, Seymore’s father hired me to locate him.”

“You a cop?” Kork said, his dark eyes giving Phoenix a scrutinizing once over.

“Nope.”

“A private eye?” Hart chimed in.

“Nope.”

A quick evaluation of the group told Phoenix the older boy had to be Wes. He based it on the conclusion that baby-face muscle-boy looked too young to drive, while the jittery kid with the

Beatle haircut had pointed out someone as the owner of the car, and metallic silver BMW's were not the tricked-out low-rider most black teenagers favored.

Racial profiling, everyone's done it.

"Boys, we're all on the same page here." Phoenix turned to Hart and said, "Wes, let's walk to your car and have a chat."

"How'd you know my name?" Hart asked, astonished.

Phoenix pointed to Lamp, and with an innocuous shrug, said, "He just called you by name."

Even Duncan joined in the accusatory glare the others were giving Lamp.

Confident of safety in numbers, they followed Phoenix to where Hart's car was parked in the shade of an ancient oak tree next to the tennis courts. Phoenix squatted to his haunches, picked up a twig and doodled in the dust for what seemed like forever. He looked up to the questioning faces, and knew he would get only one shot to win over the only people who may hold information on how to locate Seymore.

"You guys have any idea where your buddy's hiding? And don't bullshit me on this, because I have neither the time nor the patience to screw around chasing wild geese."

Still circumspect, Kork said, "You have any identification?"

Phoenix stood slowly and looked directly into Kork's eyes with an *I-can't-believe-you-just-asked-such-a-stupid-question* expression. And the same as he'd done with the FBI agent, Kork maintained defiant eye contact.

Lamp placed a calming hand on Kork's shoulder, and spoke through a nervous chortle.

"Come on, Jerry, undercover cops don't carry identification."

Phoenix dropped his thumb to his forefinger and shot Lamp with a "Bingo, sport!" gesture.

The Musketeers, unsure whether or not to cooperate with the stranger, looked questioningly at one another, and then Hart exhaled a deep breath and gave Phoenix the 50-yard dash version of Seymore's disappearance. He began with Friday afternoon's trip to Geneva-on-the-Lake and concluded with their minutes ago discussion with Frank, not realizing Phoenix had overheard most of the loading dock conversation.

Hart nudged Duncan, and said, "Zak, tell him your hypothesis."

Duncan's alert blue eyes darted back and forth between Phoenix and the Musketeers, and finally came to rest on Phoenix. "After we left Grumpy Granny's something Frank said hit me. When I asked him if he had seen Todd—I'm kind of interested in kinesics, that's the study of—"

"Body language," Phoenix interjected. "I'm familiar with science. Please continue."

"Oh," Duncan's face crimsoned with pretentiousness. "Well, anyway, when I asked Frank if he had seen Todd he threw all kinds of indicators that intimated deception."

Phoenix folded his arms over his chest and put muscle boy's skills to the test. "How so?"

"When I mentioned Todd's name, Frank looked up and to the right, which, as you know, is an indicator of deceitfulness."

Phoenix nodded in agreement. "Go on."

"He purposely stepped forward and invaded our personal space, crossed his arms over his chest and balled fists at his sides...all defensive hostility and intimidation flags. It was obvious he didn't want to answer our questions. The amalgamation of the indicators Frank displayed... Well, it wasn't too difficult to surmise he was lying."

Phoenix grinned at the kid's word choice, but to his defense, Mycroft had neglected to tell him Seymore and friends each, to varying degrees, possessed superior intelligence.

Kork stepped beside Duncan and rested a hand on his shoulder. "My boy Zak here be a genius; dat mean he be all smart and shit."

Duncan brushed Kork's hand off his shoulder and continued. "The epiphany came when Frank said, and I quote: *'I told you, your buddy wasn't here Friday...'* end quote."

“So,” Phoenix picked up Duncan’s thread, “how did Frank know Seymore went missing on Friday unless he’d been at the bar?”

“Precisely,” Duncan said.

Kork decided now that they had what appeared to be formidable backup, even if he was a white cop, they should return to Grumpy Granny’s and have a heart to heart with Frank. “I think we should go back and have another chat with Frank.”

He started toward the sidewalk and Phoenix hooked an arm around Kork’s chest and pulled him back into the fold. “Ain’t no *we* in this tale kemo-sabe, this ranger works alone.”

Using the well-honed basketball moves he’d learned on the court, Kork twisted free of Phoenix’s grasp. “Well in case you haven’t noticed, Lone Ranger, I ain’t no Indian,” he said, tongue-in-cheek. “And as much of a pain in the ass as Todd can be at times...he’s still *our* friend.” Kork’s eyes shot to Duncan and then back to Phoenix. “And friends don’t abandon friends.”

Phoenix understood their concern. He rested his hands on Kork’s shoulders, and said, “Look guys, I know you want to find your friend, but the best thing you can do right now to help me—help Seymore—is go back to the school and stay out of my way. If I need something I’ll get in touch with you.”

During his years of government service Phoenix had never worked from a preconceived script—*adapt, improvise, overcome*—but neither did he fly by the seat of his pants. There was no way he could permit a group of prep-school teenagers to tag along and witness the type of interview he planned to conduct with the only suspect in Seymore’s disappearance. After the loading dock conversation between Frank and the boys, Phoenix’s mind had already begun formulating a rudimentary plan, and the plan did not call for spectators. Neither did it promise a favorable outcome for Frank.

Duncan looked at Phoenix through squinted, suspicious eyes. “You’re more than some coffee slurping, doughnut munching, ex-cop turned private eye... Exactly who are you?”

“Name’s Phoenix.” He released Kork’s shoulders and stepped back. “One of you get something to write on.”

“Phoenix? Is that some kind of code name?” Lamp asked.

“Nope. Surname, 15th century Anglo-Scottish according to my grandmother.”

They waited while Hart keyed open the passenger door of the BMW, crawled inside and rummaged through the glove compartment for something to write on.

Kork shoulder-bumped Phoenix, and with a mischievous grin, said, “You’ll have to forgive Warren Buffett, the automatic locks are broke, and he doesn’t want to crack open the vault to repair them.”

Hart climbed from the car with a sardonic “Bite me, Jerry,” and the envelope he kept the vehicle’s registration and insurance card in, and a stubby green golf pencil. He jotted down the telephone number Phoenix dictated. In the unlikely event he needed to reach the Musketeers, Phoenix committed Duncan’s cell number to memory.

“You guys head back to the school. Keep your ears and eyes open and your mouths shut. Call me—night or day—if you hear anything you even think might be useful.”

“You want us to be your spies?” Lamp said, an uneasy feeling blossoming in the pit of his belly.

“No, I want extra eyes and ears around the school,” he said. “Look, guys, the boys and girls in law enforcement sometimes don’t play so well together in the sandbox. You might inadvertently overhear something useful the boys in blue forgot to share with the other boys in blue.”

“What are you going to do?” Kork said.

Phoenix flashed what could have been a smile. “I think I’ll go back to Frank’s place and have a cold beer with my new best friend.”

After Phoenix dismissed the Musketeers he decided to walk, rather than jog, back to his cabin inside the state park. A leisurely stroll would afford him the time to fine-tune the plan coming together at the back of his brain.

The Musketeers watched as the mystery man blended with the pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk, and faded into the sunset like the last frames of a Classic Movie Channel western.

Chapter 40

Based on perspective a person is either in the right place at the right time, or in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Grandma Dottie sat on the outdoor patio behind Zeppe's Pizzeria with her grandchildren, sipping raspberry-flavored iced tea while they waited for their order to be called. When the hostess sang out Grandma Dottie's number, she set her purse on the chair and slid it under the table, then walked to the serving window to pick up the Hawaiian pizza she'd ordered.

No sooner had she crossed the patio when an opportunistic pair of aspiring thugs approached the table where the grandchildren sat, and asked for the time. A rather ill-conceived notion considering few seven and nine year olds wear wristwatches.

The kids looked at one another and shrugged. One of the teens reached under the table and snatched granny's purse, and the pair bolted from the patio.

From his place in front of the outdoor pizza oven, Luigi Zeppe wiped his sweaty brow on the tail of his apron and at the same instant saw what was taking place on the patio. He roared over the counter brandishing a large wooden oven paddle overhead and cursing in Italian as the pair bounded around the corner with gazelle-like leaps.

Unfortunate for the purse snatchers, their world was about to collide with Phoenix's.

It took less than two seconds for Phoenix to observe what was taking place, process the raw data, evaluate the alternatives and react to the stimuli. The teen punks raced toward along the sidewalk, tossing the stolen handbag back and forth between them as they bounded over strollers and barreled past pedestrians. Luigi and his elderly customer were in hot pursuit, but quickly losing ground. Confident they were home free; the pair reached open space on the sidewalk and sprinted ahead.

Phoenix's elbow strike impacted the bridge of the first kid's nose as he ran past. His forward momentum came to an abrupt halt, similar to a charging dog's when it reaches the end of its chain. He was already unconscious when his head hit the concrete with the hollow thud of a watermelon dropped from a second balcony frat house. Boy number two barely had enough time to avoid tripping over his friend, who'd inexplicably sprawled out on the sidewalk for an afternoon siesta. He leaped into the air with the athletic grace of a track and field hurdler, and may well have made good his escape if not for Phoenix's trajectory-altering shoulder bump. The boy sailed off course and slammed face-first into a galvanized steel casing housing a window-mounted air conditioning unit. He joined his unconscious partner on the pavement.

Phoenix's intervention was conducted with such subtle aplomb that the gathering crowd scratched their collective heads as they tried to figure out what had happened. It appeared as if the thieves had run headlong into an invisible force field, but things like that happen only in Stephen King novels.

Phoenix continued along the sidewalk without breaking stride, as if nothing had happened; he had business to attend to at Grumpy Granny's.

The Musketeers alone had witnessed what actually occurred, and only then because their full attention was focused on the mystery man's departure. The four of them stood on the sidewalk gape-mouthed, unsure whether or not to believe their eyes.

Lamp whispered with awe. "Guys, I think we just met James Bond."

Duncan shook his head. "Dude's more like Jason Bourne on steroids."

"I think we need to get out of here," Hart said.

The Musketeers piled into Hart's car and left Geneva-on-the-Lake.

Chapter 41

After his fortuitous encounter with the Musketeers, Phoenix returned to the state park cabin, stripped off his running attire and grabbed a forty-minute powernap. He awoke to the vibration of his wristwatch alarm, showered, shaved, and changed into casual business attire for his meeting with Mycroft's FBI man.

Phoenix walked into the Geneva State Park's Grand Lodge fifteen minutes early.

Unlike most cops and covert agents who prefer the gunslinger's seat, rear booth, back to the wall, with a view of the room, Phoenix was of a different persuasion. By the time the hostess escorted him to the table he'd requested at the center of the room, Phoenix had already spotted all three exits, assessed and dismissed as insignificant for his purposes the two other patrons in the lounge, and adjusted his chair until the angle enhanced his view of the room through use of the mirror behind the bar.

Pleasantly surprised the establishment carried his preferred brand of scotch, he ordered a double Famous Grouse on the rocks, and then sat back and waited for Agent Alan Cluck to arrive.

Three minutes ahead of schedule a man stepped into the lounge wearing the conservative chalk-striped dark suit and necktie, matching slacks and shiny wingtip shoes of a federal agent.

Phoenix watched with detached amusement as Cluck's National Academy trained eyes scanned the room. They came to rest on the patron he assumed was the OGA—other government agency—representative he had been instructed to meet. The gentleman on the opposite side of the room sat in a rear booth hunched over the *USA Today* newspaper, opened on the table next to his dinner plate. He, too, wore a conservative, dark FBI uniform, although his powder blue necktie—sheer apostasy by FBI standards—should have alerted Agent Cluck that his focus was in the wrong direction.

Cluck marched across the lounge, his attention riveted on the man. When he reached the center of the room the gentleman seated alone at a table, and wearing pressed chinos, navy blue short-sleeve three button Polo shirt, and black athletic shoes, said, "Buy you a drink, sailor?"

Cluck, incensed by the gay lounge lizard clichéd pick up line, stopped in mid-stride and glared at the man. "Excuse me?"

Phoenix lifted his glass and saluted the indignant agent. "I said, buy you a drink, sailor?"

Cluck's face darkened. "I believe you've mistaken me for someone else, buster."

"Not with that fantastic J. Edgar Hoover disguise," Phoenix said, his eyes scanning Cluck from his immaculately combed hair to the tip of his polished shoes. "With that dapper look and bulge on your hip, I'm sure no one would ever peg you as an FBI agent about to make contact with a covert operative you've never met and know little to nothing about."

Phoenix finished the last of his drink, set the glass on the table and kicked a chair out from under the table. "Sit down, Cluck. And for goodness sakes, close your mouth. You look ridiculous standing there with your jaw hanging open."

The agent eased down into the chair as if he expected someone to pull it out from under him at the last second. "You're Phoenix?"

He let out a short sigh. "Please tell me you weren't expecting a mythical bird to emerge from the fireplace," Phoenix deadpanned.

"But I thought..." Cluck turned and looked to the rear booth, and then back to Phoenix. He extended his hand across the table. "Alan Cluck, FBI."

Phoenix never shook hands with strangers. It was a defensive thing. The scene from *The Godfather*, where Luca Brasi shakes hands with a stranger in a dark bar, only to find his hand pinned to the bar with a switchblade while he's being garroted, unnerved Phoenix and left a lasting impression.

Phoenix stared at the agent's outstretched hand for a moment, then turned and waved his empty glass at the bartender. "What are you drinking?"

Cluck slowly withdrew his hand, and said, "Nothing, I'm on the clock."

"Sorry, forgot, Boy Scouts only drink Kool Aid while in uniform." Phoenix flashed a playful grin. "If you loosen the tie, muss the hair a bit, you might sneak down a stiff Shirley Temple."

Phoenix slid his chair closer to the table and held court with the agent's pale brown eyes the color of wet sand. "What do you have for me, Cluck?"

The agent shifted nervously in his seat. Uncomfortable with the way the meeting was proceeding, he said, "Mr. Phoenix, before we continue this conversation, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask for identification to verify you're who you say you are."

Phoenix leaned back in his chair while the bartender replaced his drink and carried the empty glass from the table. Once they were alone, Phoenix leaned forward and stirred his drink with his finger.

"Look, Cluck, I have no idea what your people told you about me—nor do I care all that much—or why I'm here in god-forsaken Ohio. It's also a safe bet they didn't bother to tell you what's really taking place behind door number one; which is obviously a whole bunch more than meets the eye."

Phoenix lowered his voice. "I'm sure you're a wonderful agent, Cluck. Probably have a bright future with the FBI but, sadly, this isn't your *run of the mill* kidnap. And it most probably won't have the orthodox, textbook outcome they teach in the academy...if you know what I mean."

Phoenix caught the micro expression, the nearly indiscernible twitch in the corner of Cluck's left eye told him the agent was processing this new information and comparing it against what he had already been told. If Phoenix knew Mycroft as well as he thought he did, the information the agent received was precious little.

Phoenix elected to shoot for sensory overload.

"Think about it, Cluck. The missing kid's dad is a high-ranking federal judge—something they probably forgot to tell you—on the short list as the next nominee to the Supreme Court. There's obviously been a media blackout, and no Amber alert. And I'd venture to extrapolate by now the sheriff's office report has, on orders from Washington, been buried so deep it may never resurface, in spite of Freedom of Information or public records laws.

"And just to show you what a team player I am, I'll provide you with a little tidbit of Intel your supervisors again neglected to tell you. I'm here at the behest of the deputy director of the CIA," Phoenix slashed quotation marks in the air with his fingertips, "to evaluate the situation."

He leaned back in his chair and sipped his drink while his counterpart digested the information.

"And if the bad guys," Phoenix continued a moment later, "whoever they may be, indeed manage to survive this misguided adventure of theirs, the safe money would be that they'll never see the inside of a courtroom...other than a über-secret FISA court, you know, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court that's supposed to keep the government honest.

"Labeled domestic terrorists, or enemy combatants, they'll be whisked off to an equally secret internment camp that John Q. Public doesn't want to know about. Again, *if* they survive."

Phoenix knocked back half of his second drink in a single gulp and brought the glass to the tabletop with a gunshot-like report. He waved off the approaching barkeeper and turned to Cluck with an impatient sneer.

“Knowing what you now know, Cluck, do you still want to see the identification of a person who *officially* doesn’t exist; sent here by people who on their deathbed would swear this *event* never occurred?”

“Because if that’s the case,” Phoenix slid back his chair and made ready leave, “I’m out of here. You can explain to the powers to be in Washington why the mission went south.”

“Mr. Phoenix—”

“Phoenix is fine,” he interjected, “you can drop the mister.”

“Phoenix, my orders are to provide you with first-person Intel as it becomes available. As far as ‘off the books, black ops’, I know nothing about that. The FBI, unlike Langley, does not conduct *illegal* operations,” Cluck said smugly.

Phoenix smiled. There had always existed a professional animosity between the alphabet agencies in Washington.

“The Bureau works within the parameters of prevailing federal statutes, as well as adheres to the maxim *innocent until proven guilty*. Agents of the Bureau do not—and I repeat—do not assassinate US citizens.”

Phoenix grinned at the agent’s brainwashed denial. He decided to have a little fun with him. He tossed a twenty-dollar bill next to his glass and stood. “Tell that crock of shit to Sammy Weaver and his mother.”

Cluck’s brows pinched together at the bridge of his nose. “Who?”

“Come on, Cluck, don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Ruby Ridge.”

Of course Cluck had heard the “official version” of the 1992 standoff in the Iowa backwoods with separationist Randy Weaver’s family.

Phoenix rested balled fists on the table and leaned over the agent with smoldering eyes. “The real story—not the fairytale they teach at the National Academy—is that federal marshals shot and killed Sammy Weaver’s dog. When he ran to his dad for help, they shot him in the back. As if the murder of a thirteen-year-old boy wasn’t enough carnage, an FBI sniper blew Weaver’s unarmed mother’s brains out as she stood in the doorway of their cabin holding her infant daughter.”

Phoenix pushed away from the table and pinned Cluck with steely gaze. “Don’t kid yourself with the Bureau’s holier-than-thou attitude, Cluck. You boys at Quantico are every bit as dirty a player in the field as they are at Langley. So make up your mind, and do it fast. Either you’re going to be an asset or a hindrance.”

“Exactly how is it a *Company* man gets involved in a domestic kidnap?” Cluck shot back.

“I suggest you ask your boss that question. In spite of how I got mixed up in this debacle, I’m committed. My job is to find the boy and get him home safe, if possible. And to be honest with you, Cluck, I don’t care too much what happens to those who get in my way, if you catch my drift.”

Phoenix spun on the balls of his feet, paused, and then turned back to the agent. “And just so you know, Cluck, no one calls it the ‘*Company*’ anymore...you’ve been reading too many spy novels.”

Phoenix walked from the bar before Cluck could regurgitate any of the secondhand information he’d gleaned from his interview with the Musketeers, or the personnel at the shipping store.

On his way back to the cabin Phoenix pulled out his cell phone and thumbed a pre-set speed dial.

“Yes,” Mycroft answered half way through the first ring.

“The next time you assign me an asset, John, make sure his IQ is slightly higher than the outside temperature.” Phoenix abruptly clicked off and pocketed the phone.

Chapter 42

In the span of one afternoon, Phoenix had inadvertently stumbled across Seymore's posse of friends, developed a lead as to where to begin looking for the kid, covertly assisted local law enforcement with the apprehension of two purse snatchers, and had been blessed with the opportunity to snub the FBI. Maybe the trip to Ohio wasn't going to be the cluster orgy he'd originally thought it would turn into.

He sat at the kitchen table in the cabin sipping clove tea and using one of Mycroft's cell phones to search the Internet for nearby automotive and electronics stores. Unfortunately, no such animal existed in Geneva-on-the-Lake so Phoenix was forced to make the twenty minute drive to nearby Ashtabula city.

He wheeled into the parking lot of Audiax Communications a few minutes before closing, and stepped through the door just as the young salesman flipped the sign over from "Open" to "Sorry We're Closed." The one hundred twenty-five pound clerk's attempt to block his entry was about as successful as corralling a bull in a china shop. Phoenix pushed aside the scrawny tattoo, ear-eyebrow-tongue and nose pierced freak, and walked directly to the AUDIO SYSTEMS and SPEAKERS aisle.

"Sir, we're closed. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Phoenix gave the young man his best *I'm-sorry-I-didn't-hear-a-word-you-said* smile, and assured him he knew exactly what he wanted, with the promise to take less than ten minutes of the boy's precious time.

Eleven minutes later Phoenix walked from the store carrying a purple Audiax Communications bag, along with the clerk's assurance that the cheap JVC 4X6 speakers he'd purchased were a good buy for the money. The spool of 16-gauge wire, electrical tape and wire nuts the clerk tossed inside the bag were window dressing to make Phoenix's purchase appear legitimate. For the job he had in mind he needed only one of the speaker magnets.

Chapter 43

Upon his return to the cabin, Phoenix sat at the dining room table dismantling one of the speakers. When he finished, all that remained was a six-inch round, one-and-a-half pound heavy-duty magnet.

Since yesterday afternoon's meeting with Mycroft in his sunroom, all Phoenix had managed was a forty minute powernap. Because most bars kept late hours, and in anticipation a long night, he decided to catch a couple of hours' shuteye before his *interview* with Frank.

Before he slept, though, he thought it prudent to bring Mycroft up to speed on what he'd uncovered thus far; if for no other reason than to keep the spymaster from calling and waking him. During the call Phoenix identified the bar where Seymore had most probably been snatched, along with the first name of the owner.

After he hung up with Phoenix, Deputy Director Mycroft walked across the hall to his computer whiz kid's workstation, clapped his hands together as he stepped into the room, and said, "Time to go to work, Flipper."

Devon Carver rolled his eyes in response to the sobriquet he absolutely detested. It was the nickname Mycroft bestowed upon him after he'd placed fourth in the under twenty-five bracket at last year's Potomac 3-K Open Water Swim. He dropped tennis shoe-clad feet to the floor with a thud, tossed the *SwimmersNews* magazine aside, and rolled his chair in front of the workstation.

"Phoenix may have a line on the bar where the lad was snatched." Mycroft leaned over Carver's shoulder and exhaled Jack Daniel's and coffee-tainted breath. "See what you can come up with on a bar in Geneva-on-the-Lake called Grumpy Granny's, apparently operated or operated by a guy named Frank."

Carver's fingers danced across the keyboard. In under a minute he had accessed Ohio's Secretary of State web page and queried the index by business. Seconds later the information the boss sought appeared on his computer screen. Carver leaned to one side so the deputy director could read over his shoulder. Displayed on the monitor were the name and address of the business, an Ohio-registered L.L.C., its owner's name, home address and the establishment's number of years in operation.

"Frank Gunther." Mycroft stood upright and massaged the stubble sprouting from his chin. "Print that for me, and then see what you can find on Mr. Gunther."

Carver pressed the "print screen" button on his keyboard and then began a new metadata search of the CIA's massive database. It took him a bit longer to access Frank Gunther's personal information file, but in today's digital age 'a bit longer' is measured in nano-seconds, not minutes.

After a few clicks of the mouse there was little about Eugene Frank Gunther III the CIA's computers were unable to uncover. Frank's anemic file showed he had had an appendectomy as a child; did a brief stint with the Navy before a medical discharge due to a torn rotator cuff the third week of basic training; that his Ohio operator's license was currently under suspension for driving without insurance; and that he had been arrested three times; once for drunk driving, another for receiving stolen property, and once for an assault that was dropped when the victim failed to appear in court. Gunther had been denied an Ohio concealed carry permit based on his arrest record, had twice been married, but was currently divorced with no children or known affiliation or sympathies to extremist, white supremacy groups. Included in the file were copies of his city, state and federal tax returns; listed a home address that had not changed in seven years.

“Phoenix’s boy Gunther appears to be pretty much a ne’er-do-well,” Mycroft ruminated aloud. “Not someone you’d suspect of being involved in the kidnap of a federal judge’s son. Print all that out, too.”

Mycroft grabbed the sheaf of pages Carver handed over his shoulder and returned to his office.

Carver leaned back in his chair, brought his feet to the desk top and returned to the article he’d been reading, tips and suggestions on the best training methods for a 5-K open water swim.

Phoenix awoke to the vibrating alarm on his wristwatch. He rolled over, silenced the alarm, wiggled and stretched and let out a healthy yawn. He checked the time, 2100, and then crawled from bed feeling more tired than when he’d lain down.

He slipped on a pair of sweatpants and descended from the loft to the kitchenette. While the microwave brewed a cup of tea, and his laptop booted up, Phoenix stepped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. On his way through the kitchen he grabbed his tea out of the microwave and sat down in front of the laptop.

So as not to leave a digital footprint on the state park’s complimentary Wi-Fi server, Phoenix powered up one of Mycroft’s cell phones and created a personal hotspot. With his computer tethered to the Internet, via the government phone’s encrypted signal, he accessed the restricted National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency server. He sipped tea as he analyzed the NGA’s crisp, one-meter close-up images of the Lake Erie shoreline between the state park and New Street. The half-mile trek along the water’s edge was no challenge to a man who had, a lifetime ago, trekked across barren deserts and over frozen mountain peaks. The distance posed no obstacle to Phoenix. His concern was the probability of encountering people relaxing on cottage porches overlooking the lake, or stumbling across romantic couples on a midnight stroll pretending they were walking white sand beaches of a South Pacific paradise. In a past life in order to accomplish a mission Phoenix simply eliminated enemy Tangos that obstructed his goal. But he could hardly justify, even from Mycroft’s immorally twisted point of view, liquidating non-combatant citizens to achieve a desired objective.

He decided the best approach to Grumpy Granny’s, for the general public’s health and safety, would be to park at the Old Firehouse Winery. From there he would use the outdoor patio as an Infil point. The picnic area behind the water park next door should be abandoned at this time of night, and hopefully allow him to slip unnoticed over the embankment and down to the shadowy shoreline. According to the satellite images that particular stretch of narrow rocky terrain was far less hospitable to amorous beach walkers, with almost no water’s-edge cottages. He should be able to pass by completely unnoticed.

Phoenix checked his wristwatch, 2134. He rinsed and set his cup in the dish drainer, and then returned to the loft to change into his *work clothes*. He straightened the bed sheets and unpacked the military duffle, arranged across the foot of the bed the tactical apparel and gear he anticipated he’d need.

He stripped off the sweatpants and stepped into a pair of seven-pocket 5.11 black tactical cargo pants, the uniform SWAT teams nationwide wear. He covered his torso with a form-fitting lightweight night-camo long sleeve t-shirt, and his feet with crepe soled, black Rocky military boots. He loaded the pants’ pockets with the tools of his trade: an eight inch Spyderco lock-blade knife, black leather gloves supple enough he could pick a dime up off a mirror, a thin leather case of tungsten lock picks, just in case, and the stripped-down speaker magnet.

Cognizant if he walked into the Old Firehouse Winery dressed like an aspiring ninja he would stick out like a sore thumb. Upon return from the automotive store, Phoenix had stopped at a bicycle apparel shop and purchased a florescent yellow gilet with wide silver reflective stripes across

the chest and back. The cool air the weatherman predicted was beginning to blow across the lake from Canada and made the canary yellow, sleeveless vest the perfect guise to break up his otherwise black attire. Satisfied he should draw no more attention than a red cardigan at a Mister Rogers convention, Phoenix shut down the computer and returned it to the closet safe. With a quick pat down of his pockets he rechecked his gear, and then stepped outside, prepared to do what Phoenix did best—hunt.

Chapter 44

Phoenix drove a quick recon trip the length of the Strip. The dozen Harley Davidson's parked in front of Grumpy Granny's meant Frank would be in attendance. He turned the truck around at Eddie's Grill and returned to the Old Firehouse Winery, three blocks west of the bar.

He found a parking space at the back of the lot, climbed from the truck and locked the door. He stood for a moment near the driver side front fender, where to the casual observer it appeared as if he was contemplating whether or not to enter the crowded restaurant. In reality, Phoenix used those few seconds' pause to scrape a divot in the sandy gravel with the toe of his boot and surreptitiously drop the keys into the hole and cover them with dirt. He didn't want to have to worry about losing the truck keys in the event he needed to make a quick getaway from Grumpy Granny's, or more importantly, elude the cops.

The brass plaque attached to the front of the building proclaimed it as Geneva-on-the-Lake's first firehouse. Phoenix stepped inside and found pretty much what he had expected. The interior décor had been as painstakingly thought through as the establishment's name. Pinned to rustic support beams were fire department shoulder patches from around the globe. The cedar shake walls were adorned with vintage sepia photographs of long-dead handlebar-mustached heroes, as well as fire fighting paraphernalia and stationhouse pennants and department guidons. Everywhere you turned were glass cases filled with to-scale models of fire trucks, antique leather helmets, and a previous century's fire fighting gear. Standing in the corner where the modern kitchen had been added was the original brass pole—polished to a brilliant patina—that the firemen descended a century ago when the alarm sounded. The Old Firehouse Winery was a virtual museum diner.

Phoenix waited his turn at the bar, ordered a rum and Coke to better blend in with the boisterous crowd, and then worked his way through the busy lounge until he reached an equally congested two-tier patio. Red and yellow electric lanterns in the shape of pineapples bathed the porch in a soft glow, and reminded him of an evening he'd once spent on a lanai in Hawaii. Seated on the small riser beside the crowded outdoor bar was a Crosby, Stills, and Nash tribute ensemble, who was positively butchering "Marrakesh Express."

Harried waitresses and waiters weaved through a crowd made up of predominately baby boomers, serving the patrons seated at umbrella tables. Those who could not find seating on the upper deck occupied redwood picnic tables on the lower terrace, while still others clustered around a second outdoor bar, oblivious as to what was taking place outside of their immediate sphere of attention. Phoenix meandered across the upper level and worked his way down to the terracotta patio, where noisy conversations competed with the discordant racket the band was making. He casually edged his way toward the back of the patio and found a dark corner. He pressed his back against the stone wall that separated the festivities from the deserted picnic area behind the water park next door.

Phoenix inconspicuously tried the wooden gate leading to the picnic grounds. Of course it was padlocked; it would not be good for business if an intoxicated guest staggered through the gate and toppled over the precipitous behind the winery.

The C S & N clones broke into "Ohio", the 1970 Kent State University protest song, and the aging crowd went crazy. They leaped to their feet and exploded with applause as they sang along.

Phoenix used the thunderous ovation's distraction to roll unnoticed over the security wall.

Chapter 45

Phoenix melded into the shadows, where he paused long enough to see if he'd been caught on the wrong side of the winery's wall. Satisfied the coast was clear, he sprinted between picnic tables and stationary BBQ grills. He peeled off the yellow vest and ditched it, along with the untouched drink, into the first trash barrel he came across. He easily picked his way down the rocky slope and emerged on a sandy beach, if one could call a six-foot-wide swath of gravel real estate, strewn with bowling ball size rocks, a beach. He stayed out of reach of waves lapping against the shore—Floridians called waves that size ripples.

It took no more than minutes for him to reach the area where, in his mind's eye, he recognized the terrain from the satellite images he'd perused. He turned inland and crawled to the top of the twenty-foot embankment at the dead end of New Street, again using the shadows to his advantage. He remained motionless, listened to chirping crickets and clicking cicadas, and a block away, the heavy bass thump-thump-thump of the bar's jukebox. He stepped from the shadows hoping his invisibility would hold for a few more minutes. He strolled casually along New Street, just another tourist out enjoying a late-evening walk, albeit armed to the teeth and dressed in black.

Of the dozen or so cottages that faced the street, only one showed signs of life. Halfway down the block there was quite the party going on. Bright interior lights and loud voices and music filtered through the open windows. As he approached the party palace, a kid in his late teens stepped from the house and staggered to the narrow railing.

Phoenix slipped into the deeper shadow of an unkempt hydrangea, its fluffy white and pink blossoms floating in the darkness like fragrant softballs.

From the kid's uncoordinated movements it was obvious he was beyond drunk, and should anyone have missed that clue canoe, the boy leaned over the railing and projectile vomited into the shrubs. He followed it up with the strangled sound of wave after wave of dry heaves. Phoenix mused on how the next thing to come up should be the soles of his feet.

Two of Puke Boy's buddies stumbled from the house, beers in hand, mocked him with laughter and good-natured taunts that only another drunk would find humorous. One of the enablers slapped an unopened beer into the kid's hand and guided him back inside for additional imbibing. The porch light went out and the door slammed closed with a bang. Phoenix almost felt sorry for how miserable Partyboy was going to feel when he came to the next day, probably late in the afternoon.

During his earlier visit to the bar Phoenix had taken note of Grumpy Granny's camera angles. He decided the best approach to the loading dock without being seen would be to come in from a ninety-degree right angle, use the dumpster for cover and concealment. He completed the last thirty yards of his trek without incident, and then secreted himself between the dumpster and the loading dock. He overturned a plastic milk crate and sat down to wait.

As the interminable hours dragged, Phoenix occupied himself by listening to Geneva-on-the-Lake slip into night mode. He also watched the occasional rodent scurry past in search of discarded morsels. A large dappled gray and white rat stopped inches from his foot and rose to its hind legs, twitched its nose, and for a moment watched the watcher with beady black eyes. It dropped to all fours and scurried under the dumpster to do whatever it is rats do under dumpsters.

Chapter 46

In the wee hours of the morning the music faded, followed by the roar of half a dozen Harley's rumbling off; closing time at Grumpy Granny's. Phoenix slipped into the supple leather gloves and waited an additional twenty minutes before the storage room's first deadbolt was drawn back. Knowing Frank could no longer see him on the CCTV monitors; he leaped to the dock and positioned himself in the shadows beside the door.

The door swung open and a pale shaft of light speared across the dock and illuminated the dumpster. Frank used his hip to bump the door open wider and then, like a leather-clad Santa Claus, stepped outside with a garbage bag slung over each shoulder. He paused on the dock and Phoenix uncoiled like an over-wound spring.

He launched from the shadows and brought the big man to his knees with a kick to the groin hard enough to cripple a charging bison. The garbage bags landed on the dock a half-beat ahead of Frank. Phoenix was not about to give a man Frank's size time to recover. He stepped close and delivered three rapid snap-kicks to the man's ribs.

Frank curled to a fetal position with squawking, high-pitched curses. One hand protected his damaged ribs while the other cupped his wounded crotch.

Now that he was sure he had Frank's undivided attention, Phoenix thought it a good time to ask about the missing Seymore boy. He squatted to his haunches and in a soft voice barely above a whisper, said, "One chance and one chance only, Paul Bunyan, where's the kid? And I swear to god if you ask me what kid I'm talking about, I'll slit your throat."

Disoriented, Frank shook his head side to side trying to comprehend what had just happened. Frank remained unforthcoming a little too long for Phoenix's liking, so the latter grabbed a handful of tangled beard, snapped the barkeepers head back until they were eye to eye, and then brought the knife edge of his hand crashing down across the bridge of Frank's nose. The resulting snap of the cartilage in Frank's nose sounded like someone had broken a pencil.

Nearly impossible to breathe through a broken nose, especially when your attacker covers your mouth with a gloved hand, it took Frank seconds to catch onto that fact. He momentarily forgot about his broken ribs and throbbing crotch and frantically clawed at the hand sealed over his mouth.

Phoenix let Frank struggle long enough to reach maximum oxygen deprivation—waterboarding without need of a tank—and then released his grip. He sprang out of Frank's reach, and said, "Last chance."

Frank sucked in huge gulps of air, choked on blood and saliva gurgling down his throat, and said, "You broke my nose, asshole."

Frank's *pain compliance* threshold was a tad bit higher than Phoenix had expected, so he delivered a front snap kick and dislocated Frank's elbow. The bar owner crumpled to the dock with an ethereal shriek.

"And I'm going to continue breaking things," Phoenix said as he circled Frank like a panther moving in for the kill, "until I get an answer. I want to know where the kid is in the next ten seconds, or I'm going to take you apart, piece by piece."

"All right, all right," Frank moaned. He struggled to a seated position and guided his useless limb with his good arm. He brought it to rest in his throbbing lap, a torrent of blood pouring from his nose.

"I don't know where he's at—"

Phoenix stepped forward. "Wrong answer...say goodnight Gracie."

“Wait!” Frank pleaded, watery eyes focused on his attacker. He finally recognized Phoenix as the customer he’d chatted with earlier in the afternoon. “You? You bastard!”

“Nope, had a mommy and a *daddy*.” Phoenix easily blocked Frank’s feeble attempt to kick him. “Now start talking.”

Strings of bloody mucus hung from Frank’s beard like crimson stalactites. “A couple of guys came to the bar earlier in the week; offered me twenty-five hundred to set the kid up.”

“Who?”

Frank shook his head and globs of snot flew from his nose. “I didn’t ask for names. Big guy...my size...blonde hair...blue ice cube eyes...had a crippled guy with him in a wheelchair.”

“How’d they know the kid comes here?”

Frank sneezed and blood sprayed across the dock. “I don’t know...guess they’ve been following the brat for a while...didn’t say...I didn’t ask. Cash is cash.”

“How’d they get him out of here?”

“They gave me a number to call when he came in... Told me to stall him...they’d be here in twenty minutes. The day he came in I called the number...laced his drink and waited. The kid passed out and the blonde guy carried him out the side door to a van waiting in the alley.”

“Give me the phone number.”

“Had it written down...didn’t keep it.”

“Hand me your cell phone.” Phoenix knew he could pull the number up from Frank’s *recent calls* log, provided he hadn’t cleared the list.

Frank shook his head. “Didn’t use the cell; called off the landline.”

Phoenix paced the dock and continued his interrogation.

“How many people were in the van?”

“I’m not sure; didn’t see anybody else.”

Phoenix pulled up short in front of Frank. He knew Frank was hedging, so he gave the crippled arm a reminder love tap with the toe of his boot. “Wrong answer, try again.”

Frank wailed and dragged his arm out of Phoenix’s reach. “Somebody drove it here, dude. There had to be at least one more person inside, but I couldn’t see who it was.”

Phoenix leaned against the dock’s support post and crossed his arms over his chest, as if having a friendly chat with an old chum at a class reunion. “Describe the van.”

“Dodge, I think. White...older...late nineties...early two thousand; like I said, the guy carried the kid out the side door and they left. That was the last I seen of them.”

Frank’s eyes rolled in their sockets and his speech began to slur. Shock was setting in. Phoenix knew he had only minutes before Frank passed out.

“Look, partner, what do you want from me?”

“How far back does your video feed record?”

The subtle change in Frank’s expression gave him away before he even opened his mouth.

“I told you this afternoon...half the time the thing don’t work.”

“How long?” Phoenix persisted.

“It tapes over itself every eight hours.”

Frank’s chin faded toward his chest as his good arm snaked around his side. “Come on, partner, you broke my nose...you broke my ribs...you broke my balls; how about calling me an ambulance?”

With a motion surprisingly quick for a man who had just taken the pounding Frank had, he unsheathed the hunting knife attached to his belt and slashed at Phoenix’s legs. While he thought the counteroffensive had a chance of success, his movements were clumsily slow to someone ready for them.

Phoenix landed a well-placed kick to Frank's wrist and the knife skittered across the loading dock. Before Frank had a chance to recover, or try another defensive move, Phoenix crouched down behind him and snaked his arm around Frank's thick neck.

Phoenix drew in a quick breath and as he applied pressure to Frank's windpipe, exhaled forcefully. The blood flow to his brain cut off, Frank flopped and thrashed and bucked, and at one point groped over his shoulder and clawed at Phoenix's face, all to no avail.

Phoenix relaxed his arm muscles for a split second, and then with a violent torque, snapped cervical vertebra 1-2 and 3. Jagged shards of bone bit into Frank's spinal canal and severed the nerve bundle just below the brain stem. Frank immediately went limp. His vision blurred and his autonomic power plant that controlled respiration and other bodily tasks surceased. Frank Gunther's life blinked out like the last frames of a tacky late-night B movie. Phoenix stepped over the lifeless form on the dock and entered the bar.

It took several minutes for Phoenix to locate the CCTV recording unit on a high shelf in Frank's office. He dragged a scared wooden chair from behind the cluttered desk and reached to for the 4-channel CCTV system. He blew away several months' worth of dust, silently musing on how Frank needed to have a chat with housekeeping, and pressed the 'Home' button.

Phoenix fast-forwarded through herky-jerky images, his attention focused on camera number four, the New Street view. Halfway through the footage a white van stopped alongside the building and a moment later, Seymore was loaded inside through the cargo door. Phoenix jumped down from the chair and rummaged through Frank's desk until he found a stack of DVD+R recordable disks. He climbed back onto the chair, loaded a blank disk into the recorder, and pressed the 'record images to disk' button.

Several anxious minutes passed before the 'recording complete' light flashed and Phoenix ejected the CD. He slid it into an empty jewel case and slipped the CD into the pocket of his tactical trousers. From the opposite pocket Phoenix took out the dismantled audio speaker magnet and clapped it to the side of the recorder and left it there to obliterate all data on the hard drive.

Phoenix exited the bar and paused long enough to look into Frank's dull, lifeless eyes. "You, Frank, truly were a waste of oxygen. Your mother should have smothered you in the cradle."

He jumped to the ground and listened for a moment. In the still of the night all he heard were the waves gently lapping the shoreline a hundred yards away. Even the frat boys had called it a night. Twenty minutes after he left the bar he reached his truck, dug the keys out of the sand, and returned to the state park.

Chapter 47

Phoenix paced the floor while the laptop booted up and the microwave brewed his tea. The desktop screen opened and he sat at the table. He inserted the CD into an external drive and sipped tea, while the media software loaded and displayed the video images.

Because time was of the essence, he fast forwarded through the useless footage, slowed to real time when young Seymore appeared on the screen and sauntered up New Street with teenage swagger. Phoenix watched the kid duck behind the bar and, a few seconds later, appear on the loading dock. He watched the kid pound on the storage room door until Frank answered. There was a brief conversation, and then the boy pulled a wad of money from his pocket. Frank liberated the top bill and abruptly jerked him inside by the front of his shirt.

Because he knew there were no inside cameras to tell him what had gone on, Phoenix fast-forwarded again, and slowed to real time when a second person appeared on the dock dressed in camo clothing. It was obvious the other man had reconnoitered the building, as had Phoenix. His approach did not appear on the exterior cameras until he suddenly materialized on the dock, his back to the camera.

At least Frank's description had been truthful; the man had blonde hair and was big. Phoenix reversed and replayed the video several times, both in slow- and stop-motion, but was unable to get a glimpse of the man's face.

He sat back in his chair and sipped tea as he watched a white van turn onto New Street and pull tight alongside the building. Afternoon glare on the windshield obscured the driver, and there was no front license plate. The van stopped and the cargo door opened, followed seconds later by Grumpy Granny's side door opening. In the blink of an eye, camo man stepped across the divide with Seymore draped over his shoulder, again blocking a view of his features. The van pulled away before the door closed.

Phoenix leaned closer to the screen and replayed the van driving away more than a dozen times. He found himself squinting as he tried to make out the rear license plate, but the only thing he could read was the letter D, followed by a series of characters so distorted he couldn't tell if they were numbers or letters. The van turned into the alley behind Grumpy Granny's where, as luck would have it, the dumpster lid blocked a visual of the rear plate.

Phoenix set his cup on the table, but with his attention focused on the computer screen, misjudged and slopped tea over the sides of the cup. He gave a disgusted grunt, pushed away from the table and returned a moment later with a handful of paper towels.

He discovered that had he allowed the surveillance video to play all the way through at least once, instead of rewinding and trying to isolate specific frames, he would not have wasted the last hour looking for something that didn't exist. While in the kitchen grabbing a wad of paper towels the video had rolled past the snatch and picked up the van westbound on Lake Road, as captured on Grumpy Granny's street view camera.

Why Frank had not turned off the cameras during the abduction was beyond anyone's imagination, but Phoenix was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

When the van passed the bar something on the video feed caught Phoenix's attention. He tapped PAUSE and reversed the image frame by frame until he located the clearest view. He enlarged the image of the van's passenger side rear quarter, leaned his elbows on the table and stared at the over-pixelated blur. Not quite sure what he was seeing, he could make out a yellow streak between the wheel well and rear bumper. He rolled the computer's magnifier back and forth over

the image several times before he decided he needed a more powerful computer, one equipped with sophisticated video enhancement and clarification capabilities. This was a job for Mycroft's people.

He copied the file to his hard drive and opened it with Windows Essentials Movie Maker. Phoenix spent fifteen minutes editing the file until he had twelve frames he wanted Mycroft's people to enhance. His next order of business was to open an encrypted email client, compose a message enlightening the spymaster on what he'd learned, and included a description of what he wanted Mycroft's people to do with the attached HDMI file. He proofed the memo and then pressed send.

While the email routed through cyberspace to Mycroft's computer, Phoenix returned to the kitchen and poured the remnants of his tea down the drain. He needed a stronger jolt of caffeine than what herbal tea offered, so he brewed a strong pot of java in the coffee maker that came with the cabin.

Phoenix filled his mug, picked up the cell phone and pressed speed dial one. In the time it had taken the coffee to brew the file should have made the journey to Mycroft's inbox.

Chapter 48

Halfway through the fourth ring Mycroft answered with a sleepy, “Yes?”

“I remember the old days when you picked up before the second ring, John.”

“I’m not always at my lucid best...” Mycroft yawned into his fist and glanced at the table clock beside the foldout sofa in his office, “at 5:12 in the morning.”

“If I’ve caught you at a bad time, I can call back,” Phoenix taunted.

“No, that’s fine.” Mycroft sat up on the edge of the sofa bed. “I had the alarm set for five-thirty anyway. Mondays are my pull-the-wings-off-flies mornings.”

“It’s good to have a hobby, John.”

“Tell me you’re calling at this ungodly hour because this contact you were to interview told you where the boy is. Better yet, tell me he’s sitting next to you, safe and sound, eating a bowl of breakfast cereal.”

“Nothing quite so noble; like I told you last night, I had a lead which bar he was snatched from, now I’m sure. A few minutes ago I emailed you a file with the bar’s surveillance footage of the guy who grabbed him...and the getaway vehicle. The images are a little rough, but I’m hoping your whiz kid can clean it up and enhance them enough to give us some direction.”

Mycroft rubbed his eyes and remained reticent while Phoenix described what he had discovered on the video, along with the information gleaned from Frank.

“Should I dispatch some of our people to the bar and pick up the bar owner for enhance interrogation?” Mycroft cautiously avoided the term, *torture*.

“He told me everything he knows,” Phoenix said. “At this point he’s *persona non communicativum*.”

Mycroft needed no further explanation to know Frank Gunther would not be filing a U.S. Census Bureau form during the next headcount.

“Do we need to do some housekeeping?”

There was no need to dispatch the special team of agents whose sole function it was to sanitize ‘operational scenes’ and eliminate blowback to the Agency.

“Forget the *scrub-buds* and get me something definitive on the van.

“According to the bar owner it took twenty to thirty minutes for the bad guys to show up after he made the call. Unless I’m mistaken, that puts us in line with your computer boy’s theory that they’re somewhere close to Geneva-on-the-Lake.”

“I have Flipper on standby across the hall. I’ll get him to work on the video as soon as I download it. Hopefully he’ll have something for you in a couple of hours.”

“Tell me you didn’t hold that kid over all weekend?” Phoenix said. “You know, John, unlike you he probably has a life outside of the agency.”

“He has no life unless I tell him he’s allowed to have one,” Mycroft retorted brusquely.

Phoenix had another angle he wanted to pursue. And if the answer to the question gnawing at the back of his mind was yes; Seymore was not only in grave danger, he may well already be dead. He terminated the call with Mycroft and thumb dialed a number from memory.

Chapter 49

Duncan reached for the phone ringing on the night table next to his bed and brought it to his ear. “Hello?” he said, voice raspy, thick with sleep.

“Did your friend with the wandering-penis-syndrome ever cuckold someone who owns a white van?” Phoenix said.

Duncan sat up and rubbed matted sleep crust from his eyes. He swung his legs over the side, and said, “Who is this?”

“Phoenix. Well, did he?”

“I’m not familiar with the term ‘cuckold’.”

Phoenix couldn’t help but laugh. Of course the kid was unfamiliar with the term; he had probably yet to shave.

“Was the Seymore kid having an affair with somebody’s wife?”

Duncan didn’t have to put much thought into his answer. “I can’t say for sure, but knowing Todd, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Did he say anything on Friday about who he was supposed to meet in Geneva-on-the-Lake?”

“No—Yes—I don’t know.”

“Glad you’re able to narrow it down so conclusively,” Phoenix said giving vent to his habit of injecting sarcasm into conversations.

“He didn’t come right out and say it,” Duncan said through a yawn, “but like we told you earlier, Jerry and Wes got the impression he was going to hook up with someone at Grumpy Granny’s, some chick he met on the Internet.”

“Do any of you have an idea where on the Internet he may have found this...Miss Right—for the occasion?”

Duncan kicked free of his blanket and padded barefoot across the dorm room. He parted the blinds to the first tangerine-pink hint of dawn peeking over the horizon.

“Not really. I know he posts pictures and shit on Instagram, Facebook and AOL.”

Somewhere during their conversation Phoenix recalled Mycroft mentioning he had had Carver check Seymore’s social media sites, but couldn’t recall his specifically mentioning America on Line.

“Seymore has an AOL account?”

“Yeah, I guess so. He said his dad opened it about three months ago so they can send emails and IMs back and forth. But I don’t think Todd gets along so well with his dad, so I’m not sure how much he uses it.”

Now that he was fully awake, and thinking, Duncan said, “Did you find Todd?”

“I’m working on it. Get some sleep, kid, you look tired,” Phoenix said, and then disconnected the call.

Duncan’s eyes scanned the courtyard. Was Phoenix was out there, somewhere, watching him? He closed the blinds and backed away from the window.

Chapter 50

Mycroft hurried from the private lavatory attached to his office, teeth freshly brushed, face scrubbed and shaved, hair combed. He snatched up the cell phone sitting on the corner of his desk and pressed the accept call button. “Now what?”

“Come up with anything yet?” Phoenix said with a mischievous snigger.

Mycroft tipped his wrist and checked his wristwatch. “It’s only been fifteen minutes since you called. What do you think?”

“It’s been seventeen minutes, John. You really need to spring for an accurate watch.

“Anyway, I forgot to tell you this. Before Frank went to meet his maker he mentioned that the people who snatched the kid visited the bar earlier in the week. One of them was in a wheelchair, if that will help the whiz kid in any way. Also, they paid him to call when the kid showed up—get this—on Friday.”

When Phoenix offered nothing more, Mycroft said, “Okay...so what am I missing?”

“The question, John, is how would they know Seymore frequented that particular bar, let alone that he would be there this past Friday? And the bigger question; how did they know where to send the burner phone so quick?”

“John, this was no opportunistic snatch and grab, they knew exactly who Seymore was and where he would be. I’d be willing to bet *your* paycheck, they set him up to meet them there.”

“Explain...because that implies the boy knows his abductors.”

“Maybe, and maybe not,” Phoenix said. “I got to thinking about what one of his friends told me.”

Mycroft eyebrows arched. “I believe you neglected to mention you’d spoken with the boy’s friends. Do you think that wise?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Phoenix said. “I think the bad guys initiated contact, and then lured the kid to that particular bar because they knew he felt comfortable with the place.”

“Do you have a theory of whom we are speaking or, more specifically, how they managed to manipulate the boy without his being aware of it?”

“No to your first question; possibly to the second.”

“Good to see you have a firm grasp of the imponderables,” Mycroft said. “Will you be further using those razor sharp observation and perception skills to identify the suspects, or should we just sweep into town and detain everyone?”

Phoenix ignored the spymaster’s sarcasm. “Apparently junior has a bit of a problem controlling his trouser snake.”

“A teenage boy’s libido is noteworthy, how?”

“John, kids nowadays use the Internet and smart phones to stay in touch—unlike in your day when messages were beat out on hollow logs. They, figuratively and literally, put themselves out there in cyberspace through texting and the myriad of social media outlets. Amorous conversations are no longer conducted over a telephone.”

Mycroft walked around his desk and sat. He opened the email account Phoenix mailed the video to, and said, “I hope you’re about to explain what you’re talking about, because we’ve already checked young Seymore’s social media accounts.”

After David Seymore’s frantic Saturday afternoon telephone call, Mycroft instructed Carver to tap into Todd Seymore’s cell phone and social media activities. All they’d learned was that the cell signal went offline Friday afternoon at 4:36 P.M. The cell carrier had explained that either the

battery was drained, or it had been removed. They'd been pinging his phone every hour since last contact. Carver had rifled through Seymore's Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat accounts, uncovering nothing outside of normal teenage banter, and a variety of PG-rated selfie posts.

Phoenix thoroughly enjoyed one-upping the deputy director. "Have you checked his AOL account?"

The silence on the other end of the call told Phoenix all he needed to know.

"Well then, oh great spymaster, maybe someone should take a peek at the kid's America On Line account and see what it has to offer."

No better time than the present to rub salt into a wound, even if done playfully. "You do have that capability don't you?"

Mycroft not only heard Phoenix's smirk at the other end of the line, he felt it. "We can look into his dresser drawer and see if his socks match," he retorted defensively.

"Figured you could," Phoenix said. "Maybe after your people are done sorting socks and underwear they can work on digging up something useful for us to work with."

Phoenix terminated the call without further agitation.

Chapter 51

Albert Cantor clapped his hands together and stood, signaling the end of the Monday morning presidential briefing. When the President of the United States rises, the room rises.

“If there is nothing else,” Cantor looked over his staff. “I have other obligations this morning.”

John Mycroft lagged behind while the Secretary of State, the director of the FBI, and President Cantor’s national security advisors filed from the Oval Office. After the room cleared, Mycroft nodded toward the sofa arrangement opposite the president’s desk.

The men carried their third cup of coffee to the matching camel-colored sofas arranged in front of the Oval Office’s white marble fireplace. They set their cups and saucers on the polished walnut coffee table, and then sat facing each other.

President Cantor leaned forward, rested his forearms on knees, and in his easygoing way, said, “What’s on your mind this morning, John?”

Mycroft lowered his voice and also leaned forward. “A situation developed over the weekend I think—unofficially—you should be made aware of.”

Normally it was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency who conducted these one-on-one meetings with the president, but the DCI was home convalescing after an emergency appendectomy late Thursday evening.

His interest piqued, President Cantor raised an eyebrow at Mycroft’s word choice. He nodded for him to continue, sat back and listened attentively as the deputy director succinctly brought him up to speed on the Seymore kidnapping. When Mycroft finished, the president leaned back against the sofa, crossed his legs, and cupped his hands over his knee. His piercing gaze locked on Mycroft as he spoke. “Why was I not informed of the situation before this?”

“To be honest with you, Mr. President, we weren’t sure until a few hours ago if it was the real thing, or, rather, a group of high school overachievers horsing around pulling a prank looking for attention.

“Our ground asset verified the abduction’s authenticity after locating a video surveillance feed of the snatch, again, only hours ago.”

“Are you implying that this was not a coincidental abduction, that a high-ranking United States federal judge’s son was targeted?”

“It appears so, Mr. President. We’ve established a dialogue with at least one of the abductors. Thus far he has asked for one and a half million dollars.”

“How old is this boy?” President Cantor asked. His irritation at being kept in the dark growing by the second. “And why was there no protective detail on him?”

“A teenager, sixteen or seventeen I believe. We had no Intel to indicate a need for protection.

“The abductor communicates through a burner cell phone mailed to the judge over the weekend. So far we’ve traced the signal to a cell tower in northeast Ohio, fifteen miles from where the boy attends a private boarding school.”

“I’ll assume you’ve tracked down the phone’s purchaser?”

“Negative, Sir. We discovered that it was acquired with a stolen credit card several weeks ago from a Walmart store in Cortland, Ohio. The store’s video surveillance is archaic, to say the least. They’re still utilizing VHS tapes; retained for one week, then taped over. Our Science and Technology people informed me that even if we knew which tape was in service at the time of the transaction, it would be impossible to retrieve the images because of the amount of ‘tape-overs.’”

“And we’re sure this is the real deal?” President Cantor picked up his coffee and took a sip.

“Absolutely, Mr. President, no question. Our behavior science people have been monitoring the conversations. The consensus is that the man in charge of negotiations has a personal vendetta against either the judicial system in general, or against Judge Seymore in particular. Our people profile him as a white male, thirty-two to forty-five years of age, educated but not highly intelligent. They’ve identified regressive anger issues, with erratic personality traits that may indicate some sort of brain trauma.”

President Cantor heard more in what Mycroft *didn’t* say. “There’s more?”

Mycroft shifted his position on the cushion, and said, “Early this morning, around 2 A.M.-ish, we received an ultimatum, if you will. The boy recited a canned statement scripted by his abductors, the gist of which indicates that if their demands are not met by midnight tonight, he will be executed. Our people concur; the abductors in all probability have no intention of releasing the boy unharmed.”

“And we have no idea who mailed the package?”

Mycroft shook his head. “At my request, yesterday Director Penn had one of his agents check with the shipping store’s personnel, as well as interview the boy’s friends.

“The friends offered little beyond that on Friday afternoon they visited the lakefront community of Geneva-on-the-Lake. That’s the last time they saw their friend. The Seymore boy went off the grid while apparently chasing after a girl he met on the Internet.

“The shipping store has no video surveillance,” Mycroft continued, “and the young lady who, most probably, completed the transaction doesn’t recall any of the details. The store manager is in the process of comparing Friday’s credit and debit card transactions against the day’s shipping fees. If he comes up with a match—which is highly improbable—he will contact us. The working assumption is that whoever mailed the phone paid with cash.”

“Fingerprints?” the president asked, returning his cup and saucer on the table.

Mycroft again shook his head. “No, Sir. The lab boys found traces of talcum powder and ammonia hydroxide on the phone and packaging. Other than that there’s no trace evidence, or DNA.”

President Cantor arched a questioning eyebrow and Mycroft supplied the answer.

“Talcum powder indicates they wore surgical latex gloves, available at countless pharmacy and medical supply stores nationwide, while handling the telephone. Ammonia hydroxide is one of several ingredients found in common glass cleaner—Windex if you will. It’s often used by criminals to wipe down surfaces because it destroys trace evidence, fingerprints and DNA.”

President Cantor closed his eyes and pondered the information for a moment. “So what you’re telling me is that we have a missing federal judge’s son, with no idea who snatched him, or where to look for him.”

Mycroft released a weary sigh. “Outside of knowing they’re holed up somewhere around Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio, that pretty much sums it up, Mr. President.”

“And this is an Agency investigation rather than the FBI’s, how?” President Cantor opened his eyes and locked them on Mycroft.

“National Directive 19855,” Mycroft offered with a mirthless smile. “That, and Judge Seymore and I go back a long way—to law school, I had him in several classes on constitutional law.”

Mycroft leaned forward and pinned his hands between his knees.

“Mr. President, when David called me at home on Saturday afternoon I thought that with a little luck we could parlay this into a federal judge’s being beholden to the agency; someone who would look favorably toward our interests, toward the administration if we quietly resolved his *problem*.”

President Cantor shook his head with a dubious grin. “You always were the schemer, John. But you have to ask yourself this...” Cantor leaned forward, “how beholden is your friend going to be should things go south and something tragic—God forbid—happens to his boy?”

Mycroft gave his shoulders a slight shrug, and said, “I’ve activated one of our best assets.”

President Cantor drew in a deep breath, followed it with a heavy sigh, and sat back in his seat. “John, you keep speaking in the singular; am I to assume there’s only one pair of boots on the ground?”

“Only one...yes Sir, but the best.”

“John, I get the distinct feeling you’re trying to paint stripes on a jackass and sell it as a zebra?” Cantor scratched his graying temples, not sure if he liked where this conversation was headed. “Who’s the asset?”

Mycroft’s delay lasted long enough that the president snapped forward, and said, “I asked you a question, I want an answer. Who do you have in the field, John?”

Mycroft answered without further delay. “Phoenix.”

President Cantor pursed his lips and fell back against the sofa cushion. “I sure hope you know what you are doing. Because if this thing goes south... If the media gets wind of it there will be hell to pay, a full-blown shit storm will rain down from Capitol Hill.”

President Cantor relaxed his arms across the back of the sofa and pinned the deputy director with a fierce glare. “If word ever got out to the public—forty-two percent of which, according to the most recent survey, distrusts their government—that a super-secret assassin squad exists, the embarrassment to the office of the presidency, let alone the global fallout, would be uncontainable.”

President Cantor stood and walked across the Oval Office to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Rose Garden. He spent several minutes in ponderous silence, his back to Mycroft, and then spoke.

“May I ask how you convinced Temple to come out of retirement?” The president glanced over his shoulder to where Mycroft stood between the davenport. “Or don’t I want to know?”

Mycroft made his way to the president’s desk and stood at attention.

“Phoenix is a patriot and a warrior, Sir. And despite his financial good fortune, he remains sensitive to his country’s needs. I personally flew to Florida on Saturday and briefed him as to the delicate nature of the mission. Not surprisingly, Phoenix agreed to assist.

“As far as bringing embarrassment to the administration, Sir... Phoenix would rather fall on his sword before he would let that happen. He still considers you his friend.”

President Cantor turned from the window and sat on the edge of his desk. “It isn’t me I’m concerned with, John. You have to know if the lid blows off this thing, I’ll serve you up for slaughter faster than a Thanksgiving turkey. It’ll be you standing in the spotlight before a congressional investigative committee...not me.”

“Mr. President,” Mycroft straightened his stooped back and pulled his shoulders straight, “I have faithfully served my country for almost fifty years. During that time I have managed a number of *off the books* operations far more delicate than this one.

“I will stitch this together; leave no dangling threads to point back to this office, Sir. I have everything under control.”

President Cantor claimed the high back chair behind his desk and dismissed Mycroft with a wave of his hand. “Sad to say, John, what frightens me is that you’ve come to believe your own bullshit.”

Chapter 52

Duncan burst into Hart's room like the building was on fire. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw Kork sprawled across the foot of Todd's bunk. He wasn't sure how he felt about Jerry violating Seymore's personal space during his absence.

Hart spun his chair toward the door, and said, "Those with any up breeding customarily knock before entering someone else's quarters."

"Hey, Wes, why don't you kiss me where I shit, and I don't mean in the bathroom," Duncan said, and then pounded his fist on the doorjamb to further aggravate Hart. "You aren't going to believe what I found."

Kork grinned, swung his legs over the bed and sat up. "You found Todd hiding under the headmaster's desk pouring the coal to one of the housekeeping babes?"

"Not even close." Duncan curled a beckoning forefinger, and then retreated to the hall.

Kork shrugged his shoulders and bounced off of Seymore's bed. He swept an arm toward the door, and with Shakespearian flair, said, "Shall we follow young Hercules, perchance to behold what discovery doth he make?"

Hart pushed out of his chair and followed Kork from the room. Duncan stepped out of the room across the hall with Lamp in tow, and started toward his room at the end of the hall.

Kork leaned in to Hart for a little goading. "I'll bet he knocked on Mark's door before he entered."

The Musketeers converged in Duncan's dorm room, each curious what was so earth-shattering on a Monday morning. The host walked to his desk and jiggled the computer mouse. The screen saver slideshow of world-famous bodybuilders in their most brawny poses disappeared and the monitor sprang to life. Displayed on the screen was the *Star Beacon's* digital front page. Duncan swept his hand toward the 22-inch LED monitor and stepped aside. "Read," was all he said.

Kork, Hart, and Lamp crowded shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the monitor and read the *Star Beacon's* headline story.

Hart finished first, and all he could say was, "Oh. My. God."

Lamp finished seconds later, turned his blizzard-white face to Duncan, and said, "Is this for real?"

"What the hell, Mark, you think I made it up?" Duncan said.

Kork turned back to the monitor and reread the *breaking news* column for a second time. Lamp collapsed to a chair hard enough it rolled backwards and bumped against the chifforobe at the foot of Duncan's bed. He leaned forward and buried his head in his hands. "We-are-so-screwed."

An apocalyptic silence filled the room, the metronome tick of the old fashion windup clock on Duncan's nightstand the only sound.

"How are *we* screwed, Mark?" Kork asked.

As if the effort to answer the question was too ponderous to consider, Lamp, with an uncommon fire in his eyes, said, "You're an idiot, Jerry. You don't think the fact we had a conversation with the killer," he waved toward the computer screen, "and provided him with information he used to murder Frank makes us..." Lamp squeezed his thumb and forefinger together, "a tiny bit culpable?"

For a brief moment Kork contemplated charging across the room and bitch-slapping the sissy out of Lamp, but abandoned the idea as a lost cause.

"Mark," Hart said, "I think once again you're jumping to conclusions. You have no proof Mr. Phoenix was involved with—"

Lamp sprang to his feet and sent the chair ricocheting off the wall. “You don’t really believe Phoenix went back to Granny’s to...” he traced quotation marks in the air with his fingertips, “...have a cold beer and chat with Frank, do you?”

He paced the room on the verge of hyperventilating, struggling against a rising panic attack. Lamp stopped long enough to give each Musketeer a look that bespoke the paranoia he felt, and then resumed pacing.

“There’s something about this whole thing with Todd that just doesn’t feel right. I mean... I don’t know... The cops are treating it like Todd’s a runaway, but the FBI mysteriously shows up here asking all kinds of questions and offering no answers. Then the agent tells us we’re not to talk about Todd’s disappearance with anyone, including Headmaster Dolwich and Chief McCord.

“I mean, like, what Zak said before is starting to make sense. With Todd’s old man being a federal judge you’d have thought they’d inundate Geneva-on-the-Lake with SWAT teams and search dogs and black helicopters and road blocks. You’d think that by now they’d be kicking ass and taking names, but there’s been nothing.”

Lamp pulled the chair away from the wall and fell into it with a heavy sigh, continued his tirade in more a subdued tone. “And then there’s the Phoenix character—who, in case you guys haven’t figured out—is a whole lot more than some private eye hired by Todd’s dad. The guy gives me the creeps.

“He shows up out of nowhere; seems to know more about what’s going on than the cops and the FBI. Ironically, right after we tell him about Frank’s place, low and behold, Frank wakes up the next morning dead.” Lamp thumbed over his shoulder to the computer screen. “And according to the cops there are no clues or suspects, but they ruled out robbery because there’s a shitload of money in the cash register and nothing’s missing.

“Think about it guys, what if Phoenix is part of the gang who kidnapped Todd in the first place? Maybe they’re tying up the loose ends; Phoenix kills Frank, eliminates a witness. I mean, how do we know he isn’t coming after us next?”

For once Lamp’s paranoid negativism gave the Musketeers something besides a good laugh, it was food for thought. Duncan’s cell phone suddenly rang, a gong in a cathedral, and they all jumped.

“Dude,” Kork shook his head with a nervous chortle, “you really need to change your ringtone.”

Duncan picked up the phone and looked at it. He had a good idea who the caller was because no number was displayed, no ‘unknown caller’ notification, just a blank screen. He pressed the accept call button and brought the phone to his ear with a tentative, “Hello?”

Without preamble, Phoenix gave Duncan clear and concise instructions. “If the FBI or the cops show up to talk with you boys, tell them everything you told me. But under no circumstances do any of you mention you spoke with me. Is that understood?”

Duncan silently nodded, like they were on a video Skype connection.

Phoenix heard nothing but silence, so reiterated his point, more emphatically. “I asked you if you understand.”

“Yeah—” Duncan’s voice faltered. He cleared his throat and began again. “Yes, sir, Mr. Phoenix.”

“Your buddy Mark is the weak link,” Phoenix said. “Make sure you guys keep a tight lid on his mouth.”

Chapter 53

The call waiting alert beeped and Phoenix checked the number. “Hold on a second, kid, I have to take this call.”

Phoenix placed Duncan on hold and accepted the incoming call from Mycroft. “What do you have for me?”

The deputy director had been pushing Devon Carver’s computer skills to the limit since Phoenix’s early morning call.

“Hang on,” Mycroft said, “I’ll put Flipper on and let him explain.”

Carver typed a few keystrokes into his computer and joined the conversation through his headset.

Because he spent lonely hours in front of plasma monitors the size of automobile hoods, analyzing and logging data, it was a rare occasion when Carver got the opportunity to show off his talents, verbalize his skills. He launched into a discourse on auto white balance filtering, hue saturation, chroma balance color correction, deinterlace filter removal with mid-tone gamma contrast balance, and a few of the other techniques he’d used to enhance the grainy video feed Phoenix sent him.

Phoenix quickly burst Carver’s hubristic bubble. “Look, kid, I don’t have to know how to build an engine to drive a car, just give me the details I need.”

His ego sufficiently deflated, Carver said, “Open your email client and click the attachment I sent you.”

Phoenix took out the cup of instant coffee he’d brewed in the microwave and walked to where his laptop sat on the table.

“Once you get it open, step back and don’t touch your mouse or keypad.”

Phoenix typed in his password, stepped away from the table and blew swirls of steam away from the lip of his mug. Carver, from three hundred miles away took over remote access of the computer and began moving the cursor around the screen.

Carver clicked on the email he’d sent, and then the attached .jpeg file. He opened the file containing the enhanced screenshots Phoenix had captured from the video. Two clicks of the mouse and the right rear quarter of the suspect van filled Phoenix’s computer screen.

With his eyes glued to the screen, Phoenix set his coffee on the table to cool, and listened as Carver provided a scaled-back explanation of his work.

“To begin with, I was unable to enhance the license plate beyond the first character...camera angles were either wrong or blocked. I was, however, able to enhance the passenger side rear quarter panel. In particular, the curious yellow smudge you called Director Mycroft’s attention to in your email.

“If you’ll notice, Mr. Phoenix, what you originally thought was a painted on stripe or vinyl pinstriping is actually a contact transfer. In other words, paint transferred from one surface to another after contact with a foreign object. If you’ll look closely,” Carver got his student’s attention by moving the cursor, “you will see there is also minor cosmetic damage to the same area. Based on the height and extent of damage, and taking into account the hideous color, I think your suspect vehicle clipped a fire hydrant, that or it was involved in an accident with a school bus.”

“You’re telling me this guy got in a wreck?” Phoenix picked up the coffee and enjoyed its first stimulating jolt of caffeine.

“I can’t be certain without a sample of the foreign paint,” Carver said. “But as an educated guess, I would say yes, though it’s hard to say where it came from. Based on the height, location and extent of damage, my money would be on a fire hydrant rather than a school bus.”

Carver enlarged the van’s creased quarter panel to even greater magnification, showing a clearly visible silver-gray line.

“What you are seeing here, Mr. Phoenix,” Carver wiggled the cursor to draw his pupil’s eyes to the deep gouge in the paint, “is bare metal. As you can see there is no oxidation—rust if you will. Therefore I would venture to extrapolate the damage is new, done within the last two or three days. Depending on the humidity up there, I would give it a week at tops.”

“Mycroft,” Phoenix broke in, “have you checked police reports for a van versus school bus crash in the past week?”

Carver answered for the spymaster.

“I did a NIBRS search—”

Phoenix didn’t need an explanation of the National Incident-Based Reporting System police agencies nationwide use to submit statistical data to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report (UCR) statisticians.

“—and came up empty. Ohio Revised Code mandates any accident involving a school bus, no matter how minor, *must* be reported to a police agency of jurisdiction. Because there have been no reports of a white van versus school bus crash within a two hundred and fifty mile radius of your location, I am, once again, leaning toward the damage being caused by a collision with a fire hydrant. The driver very well could have clipped a hydrant in a parking lot or on a side street and not reported it. No one would be the wiser.”

Phoenix stepped away from the computer and walked the length of the cabin, thinking aloud. “So all I have to do,” he shook his head and grinned, “is cruise Geneva-on-the-Lake’s Strip and, out of the seven or so thousand vehicles that pass through here daily, locate a white van with passenger side damage carrying a stolen kid in the back.”

“I believe that sums it up nicely,” Mycroft said, tongue-in-cheek.

“Piece of cake,” Phoenix quipped, and then directed his attention back to Carver. “Kid, do me a favor?”

Phoenix explained what he wanted the young computer tech to do next, and then switched the call back over to Duncan.

Chapter 54

“You still there?”

“Yeah.” Duncan sat up on the edge of the bed and waved the others quiet.

“I need you to round up your buddies and meet me on the Strip at noon.”

“For what?” Duncan glanced to the others and shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll explain when you get there.”

“Where should we meet you?” Duncan asked.

“Just get your preppy asses to the Strip, Zak, I’ll find you,” Phoenix said with an impatient edge to his voice. “And make sure everyone brings their cell phone with them.”

The line went dead.

Phoenix set the phone down on the table beside his coffee, and then climbed to the loft and packed his duffle bag. He returned to the kitchen, gulped down the remnants of the tepid coffee, and opened the file Carver emailed. He forwarded the .jpep file to his phone and then printed a Goggle map image showing Geneva-on-the-Lake. He shut down the computer and slipped it into its carrying case. With the clock ticking down to the kidnappers’ midnight ultimatum, he knew he wouldn’t be returning to the cabin. He had a little over twelve hours to find Todd Seymore.

Duncan pressed the end call button and tossed the phone to his bed.

“Well?” Hart said.

“He wants us to meet him in Geneva-on-the-Lake, right away.”

Incredulous, Lamp sprang from his chair. “For what?”

Duncan shrugged his shoulders. “He said he’d explain when we get there.”

Lamp wagged his head side to side. “I don’t know about this, guys. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to meet with Phoenix.”

Kork crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “And why is that, Mark?”

“In case you haven’t picked up on it yet, Jerry, Phoenix is a dangerous man.”

“And how would you know that?” Kork pushed away from the wall and started for the door. “You don’t know anything about the guy.”

“Yeah?” Lamp retorted. “Why don’t you go ask Frank what he thinks of your pal Phoenix, Jerry?” Lamp snapped his fingers. “Oh that’s right...you can’t...because he’s dead.”

“Honest to goodness, Mark, you are such a pussy. I swear, for your birthday I’m buying you a matching bra and panties set, and a box of Tampons.”

Kork leveled an ominous gaze on the others. “In case you three snowflakes haven’t noticed, Phoenix seems to be only one around here seriously looking for Todd. So as far as I’m concerned if he needs our help...I’m in; even if I have to walk to Geneva-on-the-Lake.”

It went without saying that Duncan and Hart were solid in Kork’s corner, Lamp not so much so. But there was little he could do except go along with the others.

“Phoenix said to bring cell phones.” Duncan dropped his into his pocket and followed Kork from the room.

“Everyone meet me at the car in fifteen minutes.” Hart trotted down the hall to change clothes and grab his phone out of the charger.

Lamp shuffled across the hall mumbling under his breath what a stupid idea this was, not to mention a huge waste of time.

Chapter 55

With Labor Day—Geneva-on-the-Lake’s second busiest weekend—less than two weeks away, traffic was a beast. It was as if northeast Ohio had suddenly realized that in six short weeks winter’s first blizzards would roar out of Canada and plunge the tiny village into single digit temperatures, with double digit snowfall. The normal twenty-minute drive from the academy to Geneva-on-the-Lake took Hart nearly forty minutes, which included a pit stop for fuel.

Hart turned off the Strip onto Golf Drive and pulled into the congested overflow parking lot next to the municipal golf course. The Musketeers scrambled from the car and walked two blocks back to Lake Road, where they clustered together at the mouth of the alley leading to the Yankee Country Bar & Grill.

Lamp paced back and forth grumbling loud enough for the others to hear his plethora of reasons why they should not have answered psycho Phoenix’s call to arms. With everyone’s nerves already on edge, it was no great surprise when the normally reserved Duncan snatched Lamp by shoulders and shook him like a Bull Terrier on a rat.

“I swear, Mark,” Duncan said, eyes two blue flames, “if you don’t stop your bitching, I’m going to slap the dragon’s breath out of you.”

Kork stepped alongside Duncan and laid a benevolent hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, young Hercules, thank you...thank you...thank you. I was about ready to cut out his tongue myself.”

Kork turned to Duncan, and said, “Shall we assume ‘slap the dragon’s breath out of you’ is yet another Granny Duncan-ism?”

Zak shrugged and grinned.

“Are you sure that woman didn’t write George W’s speeches?” Kork added with a teasing grin.

Like an apparition, Phoenix materialized from the passing stream of tourists and fanned his arms wide, a protective hen funneling her chicks to safety. He herded the boys into the ally’s deeper shadows.

The shocked look on Lamp’s face was priceless, a toddler who had just witnessed his first magic trick. “Where did you come from?”

“My mother originally,” Phoenix quipped, “and you?”

Kork guffawed. “Dat be one point fo’ da’ mystery man.”

Kork, never easy to silence, came to order when Phoenix glared at him with cadaverous gray eyes. “Knock it off, kid, we got no time for clowning around today.

“I asked you guys—”

“More like ordered,” Lamp whispered loud enough to be heard.

”—to meet me here because we have a description of the vehicle we’re looking for. Hold out your phones.”

Phoenix opened the screen on his phone, and then used the ‘direct file transfer’ feature to send a copy of the van to each Musketeer’s phone.

“That’s the van we’re looking for. I want you to pay special attention to the passenger side rear quarter.”

Phoenix held back information about the deadline ultimatum, but did mention the incoming weather front.

“Boys, according to the weather report it’s supposed to turn to shit this afternoon. But before it does I could use some extra eyes on the Strip.”

“The pale yellow stripe you see on the side of the van,” the boys squinted at the picture on their respective phones, “is most probably a paint scrape from whatever the driver hit or backed into. We’re thinking it’s from a fire hydrant.”

“Is that why you asked if Todd was banging someone’s wife who drives a white van?” Duncan said.

“Yep.” Phoenix’s reply was succinct, and then he moved on. “I want the three of you,” he pointed at Kork, Duncan, and Lamp, “to fan out along the Strip.”

Uncharacteristically bold for him, Lamp interrupted. “How long are we supposed to hang around looking for a white van with a yellow stripe...that may or may not show up?”

Phoenix slid his sunglasses to the end of his nose and stared at Lamp long enough the others backed away, as if Mark had finally contracted one of the deadly maladies he constantly complained about.

“If the shoe was on the other foot, Lamp, how long would you want Seymore to look for you?”

The others nodded in agreement, but Lamp persisted, almost whined.

“But we have to be back on campus before seven, and in light of everything that’s happened so far this weekend, Chief McCord and Headmaster Dolwich are watching us like hawks.”

“If it becomes necessary, I’ll take care of McCord and Dolwich,” Phoenix said.

Like you took care of Frank? Lamp chose not to say.

“I want one of you at each end of the Strip, and make sure you’re on opposite sides of the street. That way no matter which way traffic is flowing, one of you should have a line of sight on the passenger side of passing vehicles.

“Lamp, you and Duncan stay on the north side of the street, Kork, take the south side.” On the outside chance one of them was directionally challenged, Phoenix gave them a quick compass direction tutorial.

“Mark, your area is around the water slides. Zak, you’re center. Park your ass near Grumpy Granny’s and keep your eyes open. Jerry, head east and take up a place near the Pavilion Restaurant. That should cover the biggest majority of the Strip.

“If you need to use the bathroom call one of the others so they can cover your side of the street while you’re gone.”

“What do you want me to do?” Hart said.

“Hang on...I’ll get to you in a minute.” Phoenix returned his attention to the foot soldiers. “If you spot the van don’t go all crazy. And whatever you do, don’t make it obvious you saw them. Let me know—”

Kork raised a hand. “How do we do that? And where are you and Wes going to be?”

Phoenix turned to Duncan. “You still have the telephone number I gave you yesterday, right?”

“Yeah,” Duncan nodded, “programmed it into my phone.”

“If one of you spots the van, get on the phone and relay your *exact* location to Duncan. Make sure to give him the direction of travel. He in turn will call me with the information.

“Like I said, try not to be conspicuous. If you can get a license plate number or description of the occupants, great, but only if you can do so without being obvious. It won’t do Seymore any good if the bad guys know they’ve been made.

“Stay cool...” Phoenix’s eyes darkened and he lowered his voice. There was no compromise on the next issue. “Absolutely...under no circumstances...are you to approach the van. Got it?”

He waited until each boy nodded in the affirmative, and then dismissed the trio with a final caveat. “Boys, these are extremely dangerous people. I don’t want any of you taking any foolish chances, or risk getting hurt or killed.”

Focused on how much a bullet through the chest would hurt, Lamp temporarily forgot his other ersatz health issues.

After the foot soldiers departed, Phoenix addressed Hart. “Where did you park?”

“Next to the golf course.” Hart pointed to the municipal golf course sign two blocks down the street.

Phoenix dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. “How much gas do you have?”

“Full tank; topped if off on the way here.”

“Good thinking.” Phoenix nodded his approval of Hart’s foresight and returned the money to his pocket. “I want you to check all the roads that run north off the Strip.”

“Where do you want me to start?”

Because Phoenix was privy to the direction the van had driven after the abduction, he handed Hart the satellite map of Geneva-on-the-Lake he’d printed.

“According to the tech geeks—”

“What tech geeks?” Hart interrupted, hoping for a crumb of information as to who Phoenix was, and who he worked for.

“Nice try, Wes,” Phoenix said without losing momentum. “For the past two days the kidnapper’s cell phone signal has been stationary. The strongest signal is coming from somewhere on the west side of town. Start with the condos next to the state park and work your way east until you reach the township park just outside of town.”

Phoenix pointed to the map in Hart’s hands. “After you check a road, or one of the condo or apartment complexes, mark it off so we don’t duplicate our efforts. I counted over two hundred streets that run off Lake Road, with plenty of hidden cul-de-sacs and driveways, so make sure you check every one of them.”

Phoenix didn’t really expect to find the kidnappers’ van sitting out in the open, and so close to the Strip, but short of renting an airplane and conducting a low-altitude reconnaissance, his options were limited. And with the weather forecast promising heavy fog by early evening, he would have been hard pressed to find a pilot willing to take him up.

“What do I do if the cops stop me and ask why I’m driving up and down the side streets?”

Phoenix tapped Hart’s forehead with his finger. “Use some of that superior intelligence of yours.”

“Huh?”

“Be creative, Hart.” Phoenix shrugged innocuously. “Tell them you’re from that exclusive preppy school of yours. How you’re up here with your parents looking for your little sister’s—emphasize *little sister*—new puppy that ran off. Explain how you and your folks are looking for little Duchess. If you smile a lot, don’t freak out and get all nervous, the cops will buy your story.”

Hart folded his eyebrows together, and said, “How do you come up with bullshit stories so fast?”

Phoenix smiled and said, “Practice.”

Hart shook his head; continuing the conversation would obviously go nowhere.

“Get moving. And make sure you call Duncan when you reach the park, I’ll start working the south side of the Strip.”

Phoenix walked back to where he’d parked his truck. He had a gnawing feeling in his brain that he was overlooking something, something simple.

Chapter 56

Johnny Clayburn stepped into the trailer wearing one of his *Open your mouth and I'll rip your head off* scowls. Because he was a 'sleep under the stars', 'come and go as you please' kind of guy his patience was wearing thin at having to hang around the trailer and run the brat back and forth to the outhouse. When not busy escorting the kid to the can, he spent most of his waking hours sitting on the porch sucking down beer, or trolling the woods with his crossbow looking for something to kill. He stomped across the trailer and yanked open the refrigerator door, pulled two cans of beer from the carton and kicked the door closed. On his way across the room he popped open a Budweiser and slugged down two colossal gulps that drained half the can. "Generator's running low on fuel, and we're almost out of beer."

Johnny could go days without food, beer not so easy.

RJ turned to where Sara sat on the battered couch thumbing, for the umpteenth, through a worn issue of *People* magazine. "Sara, my dear, why don't you and Colt go for a ride and fill the gas cans? While you're out you can pick up some cold-cuts and Johnny's beer." He reached into his wallet and handed her several twenty dollar bills.

RJ turned down the volume on the police/weather scanner. "An hour ago the Coast Guard issued a fog advisory. I want you and Colt back here before it settles in."

RJ didn't have to ask twice. Sara tossed the magazine aside and practically leaped off the sofa. Three days of sponge baths in the bathroom sink with bottled water, reading year-old magazines, she was ready for a change of scenery. She snatched the bills from RJ's hand on her way across the room, and said, "Come on, Colty, you can put some of those muscles to work and carrying the gas cans while I pick up munchies and beer."

Blaine sat up on the Army cot with a wide grin and slipped on his boots.

Until Johnny had refused to make anymore outhouse trips, it was Blaine and Sara who were stuck inside the trailer breathing RJ's secondhand cigarette smoke. Earlier this morning Blaine had taken over escorting the kid to the can, with ever-increasing frequency. He was apparently experiencing an unforgiving case of diarrhea, a delayed reaction to whatever the bar owner had slipped him. Sara had an idea how to fix that problem.

"Tell Johnny to come back inside in case the brat has to go while you two are gone. And pick me up a carton of smokes," he hollered as Sara and Blaine stepped onto the porch and drew in a breath of fresh air.

"Does that guy ever say please?" Blaine mumbled to himself on the way to the van.

Chapter 57

Blaine reached inside the van and adjusted the driver's seat as far back as it would go, then crawled behind the steering wheel. Sara jumped into the passenger seat, switched on the GPS unit suction cupped to the windshield, and waited for it to acquire satellite reception.

"I think I can get us to the gas station and back without that," Blaine said.

Sara set her cell phone on the dashboard and gave him one of her disarming smiles. "I know, silly boy, but I was checking Google Earth this morning and thought we'd try a different route. Do a little sightseeing while we're out; it looks like there's some pretty country around here."

Blaine drove down the gravel lane toward the road while Sara programmed the GPS and zoomed out for a broader view of the area. She curled one leg underneath, flopped back in her seat and snapped her seatbelt into place.

"When you reach the highway turn a right," she said. "And buckle up. We don't need the local-yokels pulling us over for not wearing a seatbelt."

Blaine glanced across the van as he snapped the shoulder harness into place. "Makes no sense to me; you have to wear a seatbelt to drive a car but not a helmet to ride a motorcycle. And why are we going right, instead of left?"

"Because I'm tired of sitting inside RJ's smoke box, that's why. And I'm sure by now you're tired of hauling the kid to the outhouse every half hour."

Blaine nodded enthusiastically. "You got that right. I think whatever the guy at the bar gave him made him sick. He's been crapping like a goose since early this morning."

"Johnny can deal with him for a while; we'll check out the scenery." Sara reached across and poked Blaine in the ribs. "That's unless you're in a big hurry to get back?"

"Good point," Blaine laughed. "I'll stay ten miles an hour under the speed limit."

They reached the highway and Blaine followed Sara's "...turn right", "turn left", "slow down..." directions while they leisurely cruised the forested country roads. The scenery repeatedly brought Sara's face to the passenger window, oohing and ahing, pointing to rustic farms, no doubt passed down from generation to generation. Most had two-story colonial houses with dark shutters, white picket fences and expansive pastures. She even made Blaine stop the van so she could *walk* across the covered bridge on Harpersfield Road.

Blaine watched without complaint Sara's pining; because when Sara was happy, he was happy. "Maybe after the kid's old man comes through with the cash we can afford a place like one of these," he said.

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Sara visualized herself milking cows and churning butter.

Sara's vision of owning a rural homestead was interrupted by her chirping cell phone. She plucked it off the dashboard, and said, "Yes?"

"Where in the hell are you two?" RJ snarled. "You've been gone for over an hour. It doesn't take that long to pick up groceries and fill gas cans. Get your asses back here...pronto." He abruptly disconnected the call.

Sara held the phone out at arms' length and stuck out her tongue, then dropped it in the cup holder between the seats.

"Don't tell me..." Blaine said.

Sara shrugged her shoulders. "RJ's bitching because we've been gone too long."

"He's always bitching about something," Blaine grumbled as he pulled up to a stop sign.

"I suppose we better get back before he blows out an artery."

"Which way?"

Sara checked the GPS and instructed Blaine to make a left, then guided him back to the main road. When they reached the intersection of Lake Road and SR 45, Sara pointed to a combination gas station, convenient mart on the corner. “Pull in there, Colty. I’ll run inside and grab what we need while you fill the cans. And you might as well put twenty dollars in the van, too.”

Blaine clicked on a turn signal, waited for traffic to pass, and then pulled into the Saybrook Corner Market on the outskirts of Geneva-on-the-Lake.

Chapter 58

After a fruitless afternoon of searching for the van, Phoenix had to admit his idea using the Musketeers as extra eyes on the Strip had not been such a brilliant idea after all. Although he'd hoped one of them would have spotted it, he wasn't surprised they hadn't. He called Duncan and told him to contact Hart to pick everyone up and meet at the township park on the outskirts of Geneva-on-the-Lake.

Hart made a last pass of the Strip, stopped at each lookout's post and picked up the Musketeers, then drove to the Geneva Township Park.

A few minutes later, Phoenix pulled into the park and stopped alongside Hart's car. He climbed out of the cab and was immediately met by four anxious faces.

"What's our next move, mystery man?" Kork said.

Phoenix tossed his sunglasses onto the dashboard and walked around the truck. "Our next move, my friend, is for you guys to head back to school and forget you ever met me."

It took all his restraint, but Lamp refrained from kissing Phoenix on the lips.

"We can meet you back here tomorrow morning," Duncan said.

Phoenix shook his head. "Negative. We've searched all afternoon and it turned out to be a bust. I appreciate your help, but I'll fly solo from here."

"But—"

"No buts, Zak! You guys are out; plain and simple. I want you back at the school before the weather turns to shit."

Phoenix saw the disappointment in their eyes, softened his tone and spoke with little more conviction than he felt. "Look, guys, I promise I'll keep searching for your friend."

"If you couldn't find him with four extra sets of eyes," Kork interjected, "what makes you think you can find him by yourself—in the fog?"

"Because, kid," Phoenix returned to his truck as he spoke, "that's what I do... I find people who don't want to be found."

"Yeah?" Kork, defiant as ever, folded his arms over his chest. "Sorry to burst your bubble, mystery man, but you haven't impressed me so far."

Phoenix ignored the taunt and kept walking, mainly because he hadn't impressed himself much either.

"Shut up, Jerry, and get in the car." Hart climbed in and started the engine. "All aboard...next stop Grand River Academy."

Lamp glanced to his wrist, a relieved smile on his face as he climbed into the back seat. They would be back at GRA well before curfew—provided while en route they didn't get into an accident, have a flat tire, or meet with some other unforeseen catastrophe, like an alien abduction.

Phoenix climbed into the truck and drove from the park without looking back; Hart went the opposite direction.

None of them had much to say during the ride, each harboring the same foreboding emptiness about leaving Todd behind, yet again.

Hart turned south onto SR 45 and Lamp suddenly sat up in his seat with a, "Yo...guys?"

Phoenix returned to the Strip with a disappointed knot gnawing in his gut. He still couldn't lay a finger on what he was missing. For nearly forty-eight hours he had been on the case, and was no closer to locating Seymore than he had been when Mycroft blackmailed him into this mess in the first place. Outside of identifying the cell tower the calls were broadcast from, as well as identifying

the van that had snatched him, they were no closer to locating Seymore than they had been two days ago.

Because he was deep in thought about what the next move should entail, Phoenix hadn't noticed his cell phone vibrating on the seat next to him. It began dancing again and he picked it up and looked at the screen. Three missed calls from Duncan. He couldn't help but smile. Apparently the overachievers had had enough time to put their collective heads together and come up with an excuse to keep them in the game. He considered letting the call go to voicemail, but decided he owed it to the boys to take the call. They were, after all, concerned about their friend.

He pressed the answer call button, and said, "Look, Zak, I know you guys—"

Duncan's voice exploded from the phone. "We found the van."

Chapter 59

“Say again?”

“What the hell,” Duncan shouted, “are you deaf? I said we—Mark—found the van.”

Phoenix couldn’t believe his ears. “Calm down, Zak. Are you sure it’s the right van?”

Duncan’s exasperated exhalation came across the line with the subtleness of a swift kick to the shins. “With all due respect, Mr. Phoenix, that’s a really stupid question.”

Considering their combined IQ, Phoenix had to admit, it was a rather stupid question.

“Where,” Phoenix said.

“In Saybrook, they’re at the Saybrook Corner Market getting gas.”

“Where’s Saybrook, and how do I get there?”

“You still on the Strip?”

“Affirmative.”

“The Strip turns into State Route 531 when you leave Geneva-on-the-Lake. Follow it east along the shoreline.”

Phoenix jammed on the brakes and laid down fifty feet of rubber. A cluster of people in the crosswalk scattered as the big Ford came to a stop sideways in the road. Traffic behind him braked hard, but not hard enough to avoid a three car chain reaction pileup. Phoenix stomped on the gas pedal, spun the truck around in the middle of the road amidst a smoldering cloud of burning rubber and irate horn blasts and curses. He pressed the gas pedal to the floor and headed east.

“Route 531,” Duncan continued, “crosses Route 45 a couple of miles east of where we met you at the park.

“There’s only one gas station on the corner; they’re sitting at the pumps. It will be on your right-hand side. We’ll wait here and keep them in sight until you catch up.”

“Negative!” Phoenix bellowed. “I’ll find it when I get there. I want you boys to clear the area.”

“Negative my ass, Phoenix,” Duncan retorted. “If they leave before you get here you’ll never find them. There’re at least a dozen side roads they could turn down.”

“Zak, these people are dangerous. You guys clear out.”

“Let me check with the guys, we’ll take a vote. I’ll get back to you in a few minutes with the results.” Duncan disconnected the call.

Phoenix snarled a string of curses about what a pain in the ass teenagers are. He tossed the phone to the passenger seat and pressed harder on a gas pedal already mashed against the floor.

Duncan pointed to a gravel gas well road a hundred yards beyond the gas station. “Wes, pull in over there and turn the car around.”

During Hart’s second attempt at making a three-point turn and Kork bounced forward and draped his arms over the front seat. “Dude, where did you learn to drive?”

Now was not the time for a quarrel. Duncan spun around and spat over his shoulder, “Shut up, Jerry, he’s doing the best he can.”

Hart’s attempt at a three-point-turn turned into a nine-point, but he finally got the car facing in the right direction.

“Wait here.”

Duncan opened the door and Lamp reached over the seat and grabbed him by the shoulder. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“You guys stay out of sight behind the tree line. I’ll run up to the road and keep an eye on the van. If it comes this way, I’ll signal so everybody can duck, make the car look empty.”

Phoenix sped through the S-curve east of town at nearly double the posted speed limit. The truck's tires yawed in protest, centrifugal force pulling it across the double yellow line. He fought the steering wheel, missed by inches slamming head-on into a blue minivan. Although Phoenix couldn't hear their screams over the noise of the straining engine, he saw their colorless faces as he roared past. He brought the truck back under control by the time he hit the two-lane straightaway through Saybrook Township, the speedometer pushing past the 85 mph mark.

It took only seconds before a State Route 45 junction sign flashed by in a white blur. Phoenix let off the gas and let the drag of the engine slow the truck. He grabbed the telephone off the passenger seat, and without looking thumb-dialed Duncan's cell.

Duncan stood behind a small cluster of trees, where, from his vantage point, he had a direct line of sight to the gas pumps.

The phone in his hand vibrated and Duncan answered without bothering to look at the screen, his eyes glued on the Goliath-size man pumping fuel into five gallon gas cans. He thumbed the answer call button, brought the phone to his ear, and said, "Yeah, Mr. Phoenix."

"You little prick, you hang up on me again and I'm going to rip your tonsils out. Situation report."

"I already had them out and the van is still at the pumps. There's a big guy—and I do mean big—filling up a couple of gas cans."

"I'm approaching the intersection as we speak, so listen carefully," Phoenix said. "And I don't want any arguments from you, Zak."

"You guys clear out, and clear out now. Because if you're still hanging around when I get there, I swear I'm going to beat the shit out of all four of you!"

"Got it."

Phoenix dialed back his anger and lowered his voice. "Zak."

"Yeah, Mr. Phoenix?"

"You guys did a great job. Tell Mark I said thanks; now, vamoose."

"Vamoosing," Duncan laughed into the phone, and then more sober, said, "Good luck, Mr. Phoenix. I think you're going to need it."

"Thanks, kid. I'll be in touch." He clicked off the phone and tossed it to the passenger seat.

Chapter 60

Phoenix pulled into the Saybrook Corner Market and eased to a stop beneath the canopy opposite the white van. He took a deep breath to bring his nerves under control, exhaled and then nonchalantly climbed from the cab and slid a credit card into the reader. He selected diesel, and began fueling the truck.

With his eyes hidden behind dark glasses Phoenix was able to surreptitiously watch the big man—Duncan certainly had not embellished—as he filled two five gallon gas cans. When both cans were full he inserted the nozzle into the van’s fuel port. While the pump ran he carried the cans to the open cargo door and lifted them inside as effortlessly as if they were empty.

Phoenix’s peripheral vision caught the movement of an attractive young lady exiting the store, the handles of two plastic grocery bags wrapped around one wrist, a 24 carton of Budweiser in the other hand. She approached the van and set the grocery bags and beer next to the gas cans in the back, and then joined the man at the pump.

An odd pairing, Phoenix mused. She was young with tropical Hawaiian beauty; he at least a decade older and bland as the Texas panhandle.

Blaine had been pondering RJ’s ultimatum since he’d made the kid read it to his father during the wee hours of the morning. Unsure how he felt about the threat, he’d decided RJ was bluffing. He doubted RJ actually intended to kill the kid. Now Cousin Johnny; he was a different story. RJ seemed to be enjoying himself a little too much to let anything happen to the boy, but still Blaine felt uneasy with the delays.

“Do you ever get the feeling RJ is up to something he hasn’t told us about?” Blaine said.

The question took Sara by surprise for a moment, and then she playfully socked him in the shoulder. “Oh, Colty, stop it. Quit being so suspicious all the time.”

The pre-paid pump clicked off at twenty dollars and Blaine returned the nozzle to its cradle. He leaned against the van, and said, “Haven’t you wondered—maybe even a little bit—why every time RJ calls the kid’s old man he goes into the back room, or out onto the porch? Like Johnny said, there’s been plenty of time to get the money together and it still hasn’t happened. Why do you think that is?”

Sara brought her hands to her hips and stood akimbo. “Honestly, Colt, if I didn’t know better I’d think you and Johnny don’t trust RJ.”

Blaine’s eyes found the toes of his boots. “It’s not that, it just seems like he’s dragging things out more than need be. It’s like he enjoys toying with the old man’s head.” He brought his eyes up from the ground. “I agree with Johnny, the longer we have the kid, the better the chance of something going wrong.”

Blaine wanted desperately to tell Sara about the early morning ultimatum phone call, but was afraid RJ would get pissed if he said anything to Sara.

Sara gave him a dismissive wave. “You heard what RJ said. The old man had to wait for the banks to open before he could come up with the money. By this time tomorrow we’ll be 1.5 mill richer, and on our way home. You’ll see.”

Blaine shrugged his broad shoulders. “I sure hope you’re right, Sara.”

“Give me the keys,” she held out her hand. “We’ll take the Strip back; it’s quicker.”

Blaine dropped the keys into her palm and climbed into the passenger seat, the van’s shocks settling under his weight.

Phoenix waited until the girl walked around to the driver’s side and climbed into the van before he clicked off the pump, returned the nozzle to its holder and climbed back into his truck.

He stalled for time by pretending to reset the trip meter on the dashboard, while he used his hidden hand he picked up the cell phone and speed-dialed Mycroft.

Mycroft picked up half way through the first ring. "I hope you have some—"

Without bringing the phone into view, Phoenix talked over Mycroft. "I've got the van; Ohio license plate Delta-Foxtrot-Lima 8-4-5-1 Bravo. We're currently at a service station at the intersection of State Route 45 and State Route 531," he glanced at the store's marquee, "the Saybrook Corner Market. I'll advise a direction of travel as soon as they start to move."

Mycroft ran across the hall to Carver's workstation. "Wake your ass up, Flipper, we have work to do."

The computer technician's head popped up off his desk. He snapped his chair forward and key-stroked his monitor to life. Mycroft leaned over his shoulder and repeated the license plate number Phoenix had provided. Carver's fingers danced across the keyboard like he was auditioning Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of The Bumblebee" for Juilliard's Board of Admissions.

Carver's workstation monitor blanked out for a split-second, and then came to life on one of the large plasma panels on the wall in front of him. He accessed Ohio's Bureau of Motor Vehicles L.E.A.D.S., typed in the license plate information and left clicked the mouse. He leaned back in his chair while his query was routed to Ohio's Law Enforcement Automated Data System. Before he could reach for the lukewarm Dr. Pepper on the corner of his desk, the information popped up on the wall screen:

rp.pc; Ohio, DFL8751B
—NIF

Mycroft looked at the screen, and said, "What's all that gobbledygook?"

Carver explained: "RP stands for registration by plate number; PC indicates passenger car; the state of query and license number are obvious."

"What the hell is NIF?"

"*Nothing-In-File*, Sir; which could mean several things. It could be a recently issued plate not yet entered into the system, or it could be a counterfeit plate, or Phoenix got the plate wrong."

"Trust me, Phoenix didn't get the plate wrong."

"I can send a request to Ohio BMV to hand-check the file, but depending on their query load, it could take hours, if not days."

"Phoenix, there's no information on the plate," Mycroft said working overtime to keep his voice even.

"Would you look at that," Sara pointed offshore as they pulled from the parking lot.

Blaine glanced to his right and saw the horizon being swallowed by a blanket of grayish-white clouds. "That must be the fog thing RJ has been worrying about all afternoon."

"Pretty," Sara said, "but eerie."

Blaine couldn't help himself, "Well, it is Lake Erie."

"Oh, Colty," she reached over and swatted his arm with a chuckle, "that was bad."

Blaine smiled; he'd made Sara laugh.

"Shit..." Phoenix snarled at the news there was no information on the license plate. "Can your boy get a live feed on us?"

Carver had already patched Mycroft's cell signal into his headset. "If I task a satellite it's only going to be good for a few minutes. We've been monitoring the fog phenomenon the weather forecasters have been promising. It's eight miles offshore and moving inland at about ten miles per hour. In less than an hour you won't be able to see ten feet in front of you, Mr. Phoenix."

"Well isn't that just great," Phoenix grouched aloud. "Do what you can."

Although he knew it was a waste of time, he wasn't calling the shots. Carver shrugged his shoulders and did as Phoenix asked. While Carver busied himself locating the intersection on an active, real-time surveillance satellite, Phoenix followed the van onto the highway.

"Mr. Phoenix," Carver said moments later, "I have no clear images of the north sector due to low level cloud cover. I'm assuming the leading edge of the front has reached the shoreline."

Phoenix grumbled an indistinguishable vulgarity, and said, "Not quite, but it's getting close. What about a heat signature?"

"Negative...too many targets with no way of distinguishing which one belongs to the suspect van. The best I can do at this point is track your cell signal, but, as you know, that won't give us *eyes on*."

"Do what you can on your end, I'll take care of things at this end," Phoenix said as the van pulled from the parking lot. "We're westbound on SR 531, headed back toward Geneva-on-the-Lake."

"The girl in the van called the big guy with her Colty, not sure if it's a first, last or nickname, short for Colton I'm guessing. She also mentioned someone by their initials, RJ. That's Romeo-Juliet."

"How Shakespearian," Mycroft chuckled.

"Don't shoot the messenger, John. Why don't you try running those names through your computers and see if anything connects."

"Flipper's already on it." Mycroft said. "Could you tell if the boy was in the van?"

"Of course he's not in the van, John," Phoenix retorted indignantly. "I looked inside the cargo hold when the guy put the gas cans in the back. It was empty. Do you honestly think we would be having this conversation if he was in the van? I'd asking for bail money."

Phoenix snapped his fingers. The *missing link*, the thought that had been plaguing him all afternoon finally bubbled to the surface. "Wait a minute," he said, "why didn't one of us think of this sooner?"

"Think of what?" Mycroft leaned over Carver's shoulder and stared at the blue dot on the map that was Phoenix's cell signal.

"Gas cans... Lake Erie... John, they're holding the kid offshore on a boat. That explains why I haven't been able to find the van all afternoon. I never thought to check the marinas. I was working under the assumption they were stationary on dry land. I'm betting they motor into the park's marina when they make their calls, which would give the impression they are stationary, and then they go back out to sea, so to speak, when finished."

Mycroft pulled the phone away from his ear and whispered, "Is that a viable hypothesis?"

Carver pursed his lips and slowly nodded his head. "Yes. By coming to shore whenever they transmit would give the impression they were on land, as long as they transmitted from the same approximate location each time."

"Flipper thinks you may be onto something."

"See if the whiz-kid can pull up any boats registered to either of those names I gave you."

"You gave us one name we're not sure of, and a pair of initials; that's not much to go on," Mycroft said.

"It's more than we had a few minutes ago, unless of course you have a better idea."

Mycroft glossed over Phoenix's sarcasm. He contemplated their options, and then suggested, "How about I contact the local authorities and have them stop and hold the van on some trumped up traffic violation? At least we'd ID the occupants so we know definitively with whom we are dealing."

Phoenix pondered Mycroft's idea for a split-second, and quickly saw the flaws in the plan. "I don't think that's a good idea, John. We already know the kid isn't in the back. If we spook them, we

may never find out where he's being held. There are obviously more people involved than these two. Someone has to babysit their catch while these people are away buying food and gas. We need more Intel before we make a move."

"Your call," Mycroft said, "for the time being."

"Let me follow them and see if I can find out which boat's theirs. In the meantime, contact the state park rangers. See if they have a patrol boat I can use? Get back to me when you have an answer."

He clicked off the call and set the phone on the seat between his legs. Steering with his left knee, Phoenix groped over the seat until he found his equipment bag. He wrestled it over the backrest and plopped it down on the passenger seat beside him.

Mycroft holstered his cell phone and turned to Carver. "Forget the state park people for the time being. Find me the closest HRT."

The FBI's famed Hostage Rescue Team was the Delta Force of public law enforcement.

Carver adjusted his seat in front of his keyboard and speed-clacked the keys. "It appears Cleveland, Ohio, has the closest team."

"Get the Cleveland SAC and Director Penn on a three-way," Mycroft said as he loosened his necktie.

Carver paused with his fingers poised over the keyboard and turned to the deputy director. "Sir, all due respect, HRT won't have time to muster, get a bird in the air, and find a place to land a helicopter before the fog moves ashore."

Mycroft pounded his fist into his palm and hissed under his breath, "Son-of-a-bitch."

The deputy director dropped into an empty chair next to Carver's terminal, leaned his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. He was getting too old for this nonsense; sleeping one or two hours a night, directing off the books operations, particularly one that was not going well. He was also having serious doubts about his promise to David Seymore to bring his son home safe. If things went any farther south, as they rapidly seemed to be doing, he would be hard-pressed trying to shift the blame to someone else, especially since he'd assured the judge his best people were on the case. And it certainly hadn't helped matters that he'd, maybe mistakenly, included the president in the loop. Too many important people knew this was entirely his operation. Because a high-ranking federal judge beholden to the Central Intelligence Agency was worth its weight in diamonds, maybe it was time to pull out the stops. Success was imperative.

Mycroft wasn't sure how much time had passed when he felt Carver shake his arm. Mycroft's eyes fluttered open. He looked around the control room, momentarily befuddled. Had he dozed off, or was he simply lost in thought?

"Sir, did you hear what I said about HRT?"

"What? Yes, yes, of course," Mycroft said. "Scratch HRT; put me through to Phoenix."

While Deputy Director Mycroft daydreamed, or dozed, or whatever it was he did, Carver took the initiative to contact the U.S. Coast Guard Station, Ashtabula Harbor.

"Before I do that, sir," Carver grinned sheepishly, "I'm on hold for the Coast Guard commander at Station Ashtabula."

The commander's voice broke across the line, and Carver said, "Commander Ross, my name is Devon Carver. I'm calling on behalf of Deputy Director John Mycroft, Central Intelligence, please hold for an urgent message."

While Mycroft took the call and explained what he needed the Coast Guard Commander to do, Carver typed a classified, encoded teletype verification of Mycroft's bona fides, and then transmitted it over the secure military C2OIX system, or Command and Control Official Information Exchange, messaging system.

“Commander: for your ears and eyes only,” Mycroft said, and then quickly apprised Commander Ross of the situation. “This is an official request to move all available assets toward Geneva-on-the-Lake. I want a blockade around that state park marina tighter than the one Kennedy threw up around Cuba.”

“Sir,” the commander replied, “my men are currently assisting with an offshore boat crash near Conneaut, a search and rescue operation. I can free up one patrol boat and move it offshore near Geneva-on-the-Lake, but it’s going to take us some time to get there. I don’t know if you are aware, but we are currently experiencing dense shoreline fog in this locale.”

DDCI Mycroft closed his eyes and again shook his head. He felt like he’d sailed into the perfect storm. Two of his most valuable assets, the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team, and the U. S. Coast Guard had both been lost to some silly weather anomaly that was socking the north shore in with a fog London would have been proud to claim. *Can anything else possibly go wrong?*

Phoenix’s voice broke through Mycroft’s reverie. “Where are we at, John? Have you heard back from the park police?”

Carver shook his head and mouthed, *Out of radio contact.*

Decisions needed to be made.

“We can’t mobilize HRT because of the fog,” Mycroft said. “And, unfortunately, the Coast Guard is tied up with a boat crash thirty miles east of your location.”

“Depending where this van is headed,” Phoenix said, “we’re totally screwed, because without a boat I have no way to follow them onto the water.”

Mycroft pulled the phone away from his ear and pressed it to his chest. He pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, organized his thoughts and drew in a measured deep breath. He slowly exhaled and stood. When he opened his eyes, Carver was staring up at him with a questioning look. Mycroft flashed his whiz-kid an apologetic “*Welcome to the big time*” smile, and then took the bull by the horns.

“Phoenix, my boy, it appears Mother Nature has joined forces with our adversary in an attempt to stymie your efforts to rescue the Seymore lad. HRT and the Coast Guard are both unavailable, as is the state park ranger, who is apparently out of radio communication at the moment.”

Deputy Director of Clandestine Operations John Mycroft laid an avuncular hand on Carver’s shoulder and continued to speak in a soft, resolute voice that Phoenix immediately recognized.

“Phoenix, my boy, I am authorizing a liquidation sanction.”

Devon Carver had read enough Brad Thor and Tom Clancy novels to understand what a *liquidation sanction* meant. He turned away from the deputy director as if he’d overheard something he wasn’t supposed to hear—which he had.

Phoenix disconnected the call without further conversation. He returned the cell phone to the passenger seat; operational stakes just went up.

Chapter 61

Phoenix tailed the van the length of the Strip and was not in the least surprised when it turned south on SR 534. The entrance to the state park's marina was only a few hundred yards outside Geneva-on-the-Lake village limits. He quickly formulated a plan.

When the van slowed to make the turn into the marina, he would bump it from behind. When the occupants emerged and walked to the back of the van to inspect the damage, he would take them out. The first target would be the big guy. He'd take him down fast and hard, and then turn his attention on the woman. Not that she was any less dangerous than her cohort, but with the big guy out of the picture he could focus on her without worry of being attacked on two fronts. Once subdued, he would interrogate them by whatever means worked until he knew which boat the boy was on, and then update his rescue plan.

Phoenix's plan went awry when the van drove past the marina access road and continued south on SR 534, *away* from the lake. He was in the process of reaching for the cell phone to inform Mycroft that his '*hideout on a boat theory*' had just been torpedoed, when, a few hundred yards beyond the park's entrance, the van abruptly turned off the highway onto a weed-choked gravel lane and doused its lights. Phoenix gave a quick glance through the passenger window as he passed, but between the thick clouds of dust the van was kicking up, and the leading edge of the weather front coming ashore, it was impossible to see anything useful. He continued down the road with his eyes riveted to the rearview mirrors as much as the road ahead. A few hundred feet beyond the gravel lane the van had disappeared down, Phoenix pulled in the parking lot of a woodworking shop that advertised handcrafted lawn furniture and garden sheds. He nosed the truck in between a pair of display sheds and left the engine running. He carried his laptop and a pair of binoculars to the back of the truck, dropped the tailgate and fired up his computer. Because live feeds were obscured by clouds, he accessed Google Earth's fixed satellite imagery and zoomed in on the lane.

Back in Washington one of the screens in front of Carver's workstation suddenly sprang to life. Mycroft and Carver leaned forward and viewed in real time the images displayed on Phoenix's screen. A moment later the deputy director's cell phone chirped; he answered without preamble.

"Talk to me."

"Are you people getting this?" Phoenix said.

"Just came online," Mycroft replied, his eyes locked on the screen. "What are we seeing?"

Phoenix rolled his finger over the laptop's mouse pad and traced the abandoned lane with the cursor. "The van turned down this driveway," he said, and then backed the image out a couple of clicks until the surrounding homestead was visible.

"You have it?" Phoenix said.

"Got it," Carver said taking control of the laptop's cursor movement. "What's this at the back of the property...near the tree line?"

While Mycroft and Phoenix discussed the significance of what they were viewing, Carver activated a third screen. He brought the same images up on a bigger screen and zoomed out until he was looking at an overview of the entire area. His cheeks rose with a satisfied grin. *Too close to the forest to see the trees.*

After Carver identified the cell tower the kidnapppers' calls were broadcast from, he'd taken the initiative to review high-resolution satellite imagery of the surrounding area. Those fifteen minutes of seemingly wasted time were now paying off in spades.

"Mr. Phoenix," Carver broke in on the conversation. "This is Devon Carver again. You wouldn't happen to be parked at Red's Redwood Furniture Shoppe, would you?"

“I am,” Phoenix said, succinctly.

Carver’s smile broadened. “Look to your left...about fifty yards south of your location, and tell me what you see on the opposite side of the road.”

Phoenix had no idea where the whiz-kid was headed with the interruption, but turned and looked south along the highway just the same. “I see trees...fields...road signs—”

“And something that looks like a miniature Eiffel Tower...if you use your imagination?”

Phoenix suddenly realized what Carver was driving at. “And something that looks like a miniature Eiffel Tower...” he softly repeated, “...if I use my imagination.”

Carver gave a satisfied chuckle, leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together behind his head. He brought his feet to the desktop with a satisfied thud, and said, “That, Mr. Phoenix, is Sprint telecommunications relay tower B14/6577, the very same tower we’ve been monitoring for the past two days. Every call received has originated from that tower, sir, which gives strong credibility to the van you just followed being the same van captured in the images I enhanced this morning, the kidnappers’ van.”

Mycroft re-joined the conversation. “Would someone care to enlighten me?”

“There isn’t enough time to explain in detail how it all works,” Carver said as he bounced forward and clacked at his keyboard, “and you probably wouldn’t understand most of it anyway.

“The short version goes like this: cell phones emit a digital signal, strongest during transmission. Signal strength tends to fluctuate as it seeks the closest relay tower. Because the kidnappers’ dBm—that’s short for Decibel-milliwatts—has remained constant, close to the thirty-three dBm range, it’s a safe assumption that whoever is making the calls—like I said before—is working from a fixed base of operation.”

Phoenix scuffed his temples with his fingertips. “So I’m sure I understand the short version...what you’re telling me is because their signal strength has remained constant, the group holding Seymore is most likely hiding in that trailer less than half a mile from where I’m standing, and not using a boat?”

“Um...” Carver hedged, momentarily, and then plunged forward with confidence. “Based on the computer models and signal strength comparisons, coupled with the fact the van you tailed corresponds in year, make, and model to the vehicle you’re looking for, I would say your probability of a match is extremely high.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” Phoenix said as he disconnected the call, “even a blind squirrel finds a nut occasionally.”

He remained stationary for another fifteen minutes to make sure the driver of the van wasn’t employing counter-surveillance maneuvers by ducking down the lane, only to reemerge a few minutes later and head off in the opposite direction. Once he was satisfied the van was bedded down for the night, and with visibility quickly diminishing, Phoenix returned to the truck and climbed inside.

Now that he’d found the haystack, it was time to bring home the needle.

Chapter 62

On the way back to the state park, Phoenix stopped long enough at the end of the weed-choked lane to shoot a beam from the hand-held laser in his equipment bag, and then drove off.

He entered the state park with one eye on the odometer, the other on the laser's digital readout. When he reached one thousand feet, or two tenths of a mile, he shifted the Ford into four-wheel drive and spun the wheel hard left. He drove off the paved road, bounded through the ditch and up the side of a weed-choked knoll. At its crest he stood on the brake pedal, gravity forcing him forward against the seat belt. He carefully shimmied down the leeward side, mowing down weeds and small saplings. Once Phoenix was sure the truck was hidden out of sight of the main road, he stopped and turned off the engine.

He retrieved the military rucksack from the passenger seat and exited the vehicle. Phoenix stripped to his underwear, and quickly changed into the grey and black camo shirt, dark trousers and military boots. He slid the stainless steel Colt .45 and two spare magazines into a tactical nylon holster strapped to his thigh, adorned his head with a black watchman's cap, and then quickly but efficiently ran through a checklist of the equipment in his pockets. He slipped on the featherweight leather gloves and mentally prepared himself for whatever would come next.

Chapter 63

He returned the duffle bag to the passenger floorboard and slid the laptop, with its sophisticated tracking software, under the driver's seat. Mycroft's people should be able to pinpoint the truck's location, accurate to within one meter. He pulled the special ops cell phone from his pocket, paled the screen's backlighting to a one-lux luminous, muted the ringer and activated the 'device location' app.

As Phoenix trudged across the field his clothes quickly absorbed accumulated dew on the waist-high weeds until he felt like he was rolled in a wet blanket. Visibility fluctuated between fifteen feet and seventy yards as wave after wave of fog boiled across the landscape. He reached the edge of a meadow and dropped to one knee, paused long enough to gather his bearings. Once he was sure he was headed the right direction, he sprinted across the open field and slid to a stop inside a tree line. His night attire camo clothing blended perfectly with the shadowy forest.

Phoenix remained stock-still for a few minutes, long enough to allow his hearing and night vision time to acclimate to the dark forest. A choir of crickets chirped, while somewhere close by a bullfrog thrummed; all around him he heard small game foraging on the carpet of damp leaves. Off in the distance a barn owl screeched, and in closer proximity his ears picked up the unnatural drone of a small engine. It took him but a moment to recognize the sound. It was the hum of a gasoline-operated generator, which made sense if the bad guys were indeed holed up in a trailer hidden on the edge of the woods. He used the engine's steady thrum to not only mask his approach, but guide him, like a beacon, to the kidnappers' lair.

Although Mycroft's behavior science profilers had not thought the kidnappers sophisticated enough to set booby traps, Phoenix didn't like entrusting his life to pencil pushers whose worst on-the-job-injury was a nasty paper cut. He pulled out a compact night vision monocular, switched it on and brought it to his eye. He cautiously moved forward, and at the same time swept the ground in front of him looking for trip wires.

When he reached the second clearing, he again stopped at its edge and crouched to his haunches. He speed dialed Mycroft.

"You have me?" he whispered, the tactical throat microphone pressed against his Adam's apple amplifying his voice.

Carver pointed the mouse pointer to the bottom plasma screen dedicated to mapping Phoenix's movements, via the cell phone signal, on a topographical overlay of Ashtabula County, reduced to Phoenix's theatre of operation.

"Of course we have you," Mycroft said. "Three hundred yards north, two hundred yards west of the state park entrance. What do you think we are here, a bunch of amateurs?"

"You don't really want me to answer that question do you, John?"

Carver sniggered. When the *mission* was over he really wanted to meet Phoenix. It wasn't often he got the opportunity to witness someone able to hold their own acerbic best against the deputy director.

Mycroft ignored the jibe, and said, "Absent additional ground assets, I went ahead and notified the locals to sit on the property and report any suspicious activity."

Phoenix propped his back against a tree trunk and waited for a particularly heavy band of fog to dissipate. He adjusted his watchman's cap, and said, "You think that wise?"

"I think it wiser than letting the bad guys get away clean should they elect to bug out while you're playing hide and seek in the woods."

“I don’t know, John. The chances they’re monitoring local police frequencies—if they’re using scanners—are a lot greater than the ability to monitor encrypted ultra-high federal frequencies.”

“At this point feasible options are limited,” the spymaster brusquely replied.

“I’m not sure about this, John. The fewer people that know I’m out here the better I like it.”

“Coming from the person who spoke with the boy’s friends, without authorization, don’t you find your position a bit hypocritical?” Mycroft continued without missing a beat, “Besides, I’ve instructed the locals to maintain strict radio silence, and to take no action without my explicit authorization. I’ll assume responsibility for their actions.”

“Your call, not mine,” Phoenix acquiesced. “I’ll let you know when I have something to let you know.” He clicked off the cell phone and moved forward, confident Carver was tracking him step-by-step.

Chapter 64

Upon Sara and Blaine's return from filling the gas cans and picking up snacks, Johnny Clayburn stormed across the room and snatched the beer carton out of Sara's hands. "What in the hell took you two so long?" he snarled.

"We checked out some of the back roads." Sara carried the groceries into the kitchen and set the bags on the counter. "I wanted to see if there was a shortcut around the Strip, in case we need a quicker way out."

The alcoholic in need of a fix, Johnny ripped open the 24-pak, set two fresh cans on the counter and stacked the rest on the refrigerator's empty shelves. He kicked the refrigerator door closed with his foot and popped open a can. "And?"

"It's a little longer, but with a lot less traffic and much better scenery," Sara said, her innocuous smile meant to placate Johnny's volatile temper.

Unimpressed, he pointed the open can at her, and said, "From now on stick to the main roads so you don't get lost."

"It's a little hard to get lost, Johnny," Sara shot back, "with a GPS stuck to the windshield." She stocked the refrigerator with cold cuts, sliced cheese and three two-liter bottles of soda pop. The instant coffee and loaves of bread she arranged on the countertop.

Johnny's nostrils flared like an angry moose. "I don't give two shits about scenery, Sara. Just stick to the main roads; you'll attract less attention from the cops on a crowded street than a lone van cruising back roads like your casing houses."

"Where's Colt," RJ said.

"Unloading the gas cans and filling the generator," Sara said.

From the back of the trailer the kid pounded on the door and hollered that he needed to use the restroom, for the third time in an hour.

Johnny gritted his teeth and slammed the half-empty beer on counter. Foam boiled through the opening. "That boy shits like he's had too much prune pudding. He's been banging on the door every twenty minutes since you and Colt left."

Sara rummaged inside one of the grocery bags and held up a box of Imodium capsules. "I'll take him. I bought a little something to take care of his problem."

Sara almost fainted when Johnny smiled. She wasn't sure if he was glad she'd had the foresight to pick up Imodium, or that she was offering to take him the bathroom. Regardless, he picked up his beers and started across the living room. "Shove a couple of them up his ass, maybe they'll work quicker." He flopped down on a webbed lawn chair just outside the doorway and gulped down the rest of his brew. He immediately popped open the second can.

From where he sat next to the electronics table fussing with his gadgets, RJ said, "I don't think that's such a good idea, my dear. Johnny can take him...or he can wait until Colt finishes filling the generator...or he can crap his pants for all I care."

Johnny stopped in mid gulp. "It won't be me taking him; I've been running his ass to the shitter all afternoon." He shot Sara a sardonic sneer, "While you and Colt were out sightseeing."

"Why can't I take him?" Sara protested.

"Because," RJ replied, "if he decides to try something stupid I want—"

"He's not going to do anything stupid," Johnny scoffed, "the kid's a pussy."

"Nevertheless—"

“Oh, RJ, don’t be so damned paranoid all the time.” Sara propped her elbows on the kitchen counter and brought her chin to rest in her hands. “I’m pretty sure I can handle a handcuffed and blindfolded teenager.”

RJ lit a cigarette, pondered the notion for a moment, and then said, “All right.” He exhaled a plume of smoke toward the ceiling. “But the handcuffs stay on this time.”

Sara pocketed the Imodium capsules, and said, “Whatever.”

Blaine stepped inside trailing the faint smell of gasoline. “Man, I’m glad we got back when we did,” he said as he stepped to the kitchen and rinsed his hands with bottled water. “You can’t believe how quick the fog settled in. I can’t even see the roof on Miss Bessie’s barn.”

“According to the scanner,” RJ nodded to the electronics table, “it will be zero visibility overnight; which, I suppose, is good for our purposes.”

After the forced recital of his pending obituary, Seymore’s plan came together quickly. He started by accusing his captors of poisoning him, and continued feigning cramps and diarrhea, all ploys to increase his bathroom trips, and therefore buy time to find a chink in their armor. The inadvertent discovery he could adjust the tape so he could at least see his feet had been a huge moral victory. He still walked like a blind man on a tightrope, but so far his escorts had not been the wiser. By rote he’d counted the number of steps and turns it took to reach the latrine, and now had a mental map of the route locked away in his brain. He’d also begun to build a rapport with the soft-spoken guy, who was infinitely more conversational than ear-twister dude.

So far he’d learned the guy loved football and had lost his mother to cancer when he was a teen. Facts Seymore played for all the empathy he could generate, while feeding him the crock of shit about his mother being ill too. It was evident soft-spoken dude was going to be the group’s weak link. Seymore hoped faking his mother’s illness had touched a sympathetic nerve with the man. He’d decided his best chance of escape, not to mention survival, would be if they couldn’t see him, so decided to wait until dark to make his move, if opportunity knocked.

Unfortunately the last three trips to the outhouse they’d switched horses on him; ear-twister dude was back in the picture.

Seymore pounded on the door with feigned urgency, hoping the soft-spoken guy was back in the saddle. “Come on, dude, I have a 911 crap that’s about to fill my drawers.”

Sara snatched a bottle of water off the counter and waved the Imodium overhead. “Three of these babies should dry up Old Faithful.”

Sara disappeared down the hallway, and RJ turned to where Johnny stood in the doorway. “Make sure you keep a close eye on them.”

Johnny tossed his empty can toward the kitchen, reached overhead and patted the crossbow hanging on the wall. “Relax, RJ, that kid ain’t going nowhere.”

Blaine leaned his heavy frame against the kitchen counter, and said, “He’s been complaining of diarrhea since early this morning. I think whatever the guy at the bar gave him has disagreed with him.”

“That was almost three days ago.” Johnny wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Instead of Imodium, maybe I should go back there and pound a cork up his ass. Better yet, give him a slop bucket and roll of toilet paper. He can empty it once a day when it gets full.”

Chapter 65

Seymore heard the now familiar *eyes and hands* command come through the door, his cue to cover his eyes with tape and snap on the handcuffs before he was allowed to use the bathroom. For a moment he thought he had lost his mind, that, or he was hallucinating. It was a female's voice he'd heard. But he wasn't so hallucinatory as to not recognize opportunity's knock.

He stepped to the center of the room and gave his best performance yet. "I have them on," he said urgently. "Please hurry, I'm about to have a real messy accident."

Sara shook her head and grinned, pocketed the handcuff key hanging next to the door and drew back the deadbolt. She saw the kid standing at the center of the room showing the handcuffs were in place, dancing a jig from foot to foot.

"Come on, poop boy." Sara stepped into the room and took a firm hold of his elbow. "I picked up a little something at the store for your problem."

Tape over his eyes adjusted so he could see the floor in front of him, he still allowed her to guide him from the room. "Yeah, what's that?"

"I picked up some Imodium; pop a few of these babies," Sara rattled the box next to his ear, "and your worries are over."

"Thanks, but if we don't hurry I'm going to need more than Imodium. I'm thinking a pressure washer."

Sara laughed aloud as they walked through the living room and out onto the porch under RJ and Johnny's watchful gaze.

A cool damp breeze slapped Seymore in the face and it was all he could do to fight the overwhelming urge to shove the girl aside, rip off the tape and run like hell. And a good thing it was he had checked the impulse, because Johnny Clayburn had followed them onto the porch with the crossbow slung over his shoulder.

When they reached the outhouse Sara propped the door open with her hip and guided Seymore inside. Then, against RJ's stern warning, unlocked the handcuffs and tucked them into her waistband. She returned the key to her pocket, stepped back and let the spring-loaded door slammed shut with a bang. A swarm of blowflies went airborne and buzzed around Seymore's sweaty face.

He dropped his drawers and squatted over the opening, peed, and then in furtherance of his gastrointestinal distress, forced himself to pass gas. When he finished, he tugged up his pants and peeled the tape from his eyes, an act that would precipitate the removal of body parts, or so said ear-twister dude.

Seymore tossed the wad of tape down the privy hole and drew in a deep breath of fetid latrine air. He was mentally committed. No matter which way fate tipped the scales, he knew he would get only one chance to launch a Hail Mary, game-winning pass. This nonsense of the last three days was about to come to a screeching halt, one way or another.

He nearly leaped out of his skin when Sara pounded on the door and, with a chuckle, said, "There'll be no playing with yourself in there."

Only Livingston Todd Seymore, abducted by a nefarious gang of thugs, could wonder what the face behind the voice looked like, and if under different circumstances might have been able to convince her to sleep with him.

Seymore slowly released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, rotated his head and snapped two vertebrae in his neck. He stood in front of the door with his fists balled at his sides, paused long enough to run through another quick prayer, and yelled, "Finished."

“It’s about time.” Sara pulled the squeaky door open and looked into the kid’s eyes, briefly fascinated by their deep blue color.

~ ~ ~

The Geneva Township Police Department is comprised of a dozen part-time and volunteer police officers. In a quid pro quo officers pay for their own schooling and equipment in exchange to gain road experience and build resumes that, hopefully, will make them attractive to larger, full time police departments.

“Unit 7, I have the Fenton property under surveillance... No activity.”

Dispatch quickly, and none too subtly, reminded Officer Pete he’d been instructed to maintain radio silence and await further instructions.

~ ~ ~

From inside the trailer, RJ unleashed a string of obscenities that would have made Ozzy Osbourne blush. Johnny stepped inside to see what the commotion was about. Blaine moved from the kitchen to the living room, and together they gathered around RJ’s electronics table.

“What in the hell is your problem?” Johnny said bringing his beer to his lips.

A short burst of radio traffic from the local constabulary, and RJ knew their hidey-hole had been discovered, that the cavalry was en route.

“We’re blown,” he spat with a second barrage of expletives.

He turned to Cousin Johnny with pure hatred burning in his eyes. “One of the local pigs has a line of sight on Aunt Bessie’s farm. Go find him and eliminate his line of sight.”

A mirthless grin teased the corners of Johnny’s mouth. It was as if RJ was putting to test Johnny’s lifetime curiosity as to whether or not he had the capacity to take a human life. Vlad the Impaler shouldered his crossbow and walked from the trailer.

Sara reached for the handcuffs tucked in her waistband as she opened the outhouse door. Because Johnny and Colt had escorted Seymore, uneventfully, to the outhouse a dozen times, Sara had grown complacent. It took a few seconds to realize she was not seeing a strip of silver duct tape across the kid’s face; rather, she was looking into a pair of indigo blue eyes staring back at her. By the time she realized her mistake, it was too late.

During that millisecond between *fight-or-flight*, when the body floods with adrenaline, Sara’s muscles tensed, her pupils dilated and her respiration and heart rate increased. But action is faster than reaction, and Seymore *acted* before Sara could *react*.

Ernie Shavers, who’d nearly KO’d boxing legend Muhammad Ali at their Madison Square Garden fight in 1977, would have been proud of the overhand right Seymore delivered. His fist slammed into the unsuspecting girl’s jaw with a dull thwack, and down she went for the count.

Chapter 66

Unless one toughens the hands through use of a heavy bag, or a martial arts' makiwara board, the experience of punching solid bone is quite painful, even if the opponent is a one hundred twenty-six pound beauty queen.

Seymore was momentarily taken aback with the unconscious girl's looks. For a split second he considered his own version of the autonomic response: *flight or fornicate*. But the girl was out cold, and although he prided himself as a gigolo, a rapist he was not.

Seymore shook away bolts of pain shooting from wrist to elbow, and then reached down and pulled the handcuffs from Snow White's waistband. He locked one cuff to her wrist, the other to the latrine's door handle. He carefully propped Sara upright against the door, and then stepped back and turned a three hundred-sixty-degree circle to orient to his surroundings.

The first thing that caught his attention was of course the amorphous fog. He wasn't sure if he should be grateful for the cover it provided, or concerned because of the significantly reduced visibility. The next thing to get his attention was the decrepit mobile home one hundred feet away. Pale light glowed through the windows with sulfuric yellow luminance. Beyond the trailer spread a vast cornfield, and behind him the ghostly shadows of a thick forest.

Seymore had no idea in which direction to run, but quickly abandoned taking to the cornfield. Once the people inside the trailer found their girlfriend out cold, locked to the outhouse door handle, they were probably going to be a very pissed off bunch. Not to mention the noise he would make blindly crashing through dried cornstalks would make him about as hard to track as a cow with a bell around its neck.

He turned to the woods, which in itself was not a bad move had he run north. A trek north would have carried him on a direct intercept course with Phoenix, or at least to the main roadway inside Geneva State Park, patrolled by state park rangers, with guns. The closest salvation south was Interstate 90 almost five miles away through thick forest and tangled underbrush. Dressed in cargo shorts and a lightweight t-shirt was not conducive to crashing blindly through foggy, unfamiliar terrain, but his list of options at this point was limited.

Seymore sucked in a deep breath and bolted for the tree line with no thought to obstacles he might encounter. He reached the edge of the forest and paused beneath the canopy of branches long enough for the fog to swallow him like a sinister presence.

Johnny made it only as far as the bottom porch step before it registered that something was wrong. He sprinted to the latrine and discovered why the door was standing wide open, with no one in sight. He dropped to his knees and breathed a sigh of relief when Sara's strong carotid pulse nudged his fingertips.

Johnny scream twice toward the trailer before RJ and Colt appeared in the doorway. When Blaine saw Sara dangling from the door handle, her arm handcuffed overhead, he launched off the porch like an ICBM. The knight in shining armor skidded to his knees next to his damsel in distress and elbowed Johnny aside, as if he'd belted Sara.

Seymore's mad dash had carried him thirty or so yards deeper into the woods. He stopped to catch his breath, paused long enough to make sure he wasn't being followed, and then bolted again. On his third such sprint, Seymore slammed face-first into a low hanging branch and dropped

to the ground like a lead zeppelin. Flashes of light danced across his vision like so many fireflies, blood oozed from a unicorn-size knot growing out of the center of his forehead. He lay on the wet leaves dazed and confused, and to make matters worse, mosquitoes began to feast on his exposed skin.

Blaine ripped the handle from the door with his bare hands and gently lifted Sara to his chest. He carried her to the trailer, like a newborn arriving home from the hospital, and gently laid her on one of the cots in the living room. He patted her pockets until he located the handcuff key, and then removed the cuffs.

“I told her not to take the handcuffs off,” RJ snarled. “She should have listened to me.”

RJ saw Blaine’s *this is all your fault* fire blazing glower. He managed to duck just in time as the door handle and handcuffs sailed across the room and dented the wall above his head.

RJ directed his attention to Johnny while Blaine’s anger cooled. “Go finish what you set out to do, Johnny. We need a clear path out of here.”

Johnny left without another word.

RJ cautiously rolled next to where Blaine knelt on the floor holding Sara’s dainty hand in his bear-size paw. “Colt, I know you’re angry with me right now, but we have to move. You heard what they said on the scanner.” RJ nodded to the table. “Somehow they’ve managed to find us. It won’t be long before this place is crawling with cops and FBI agents.”

Taste for revenge had not only dulled Blaine’s hearing, it had affected his limited thought processes as well. He turned and looked beyond the door, deep into the woods, and said, “I’m going to kill that little bastard.”

RJ had no problem with Blaine’s resolve, his dilemma was: with Colt and Johnny preoccupied, and Sara just beginning to come around, he had no way to load the van, much less drive it.

Sara bolted upright with the startled look of someone suddenly awakened from a deep sleep.

“Are you okay, Sara?” Blaine caressed the back of her hand with his thumb, and traced his other hand tenderly along her jaw line.

Sara worked her jaw back and forth and winced. “I’m fine,” she said, half embarrassed. “I didn’t expect the little shit to coldcock me, that’s all.”

She looked at RJ and Colt, and said, “Where’s Johnny? Did he catch the little shit?”

RJ turned his wheelchair to Sara and spoke softly. “Sara, my dear, we’re blown. The cops know where we are. We have to get out of here before they have time to organize an assault. I sent Johnny out to buy us some time.”

RJ could be smooth as pudding when he wanted something. He rested his hand lightly on Sara’s shoulder. “I need you to drive the van, my dear. Are you up to it?”

“I can drive.”

Sara rose on wobbly legs and stumbled. Blaine wrapped a protective arm around her waist and steadied her, his building rage focused beyond the trailer.

Before he could unleash Blaine on the Seymore brat, RJ needed to get the van loaded and destroy any evidence connecting them to the kidnapping.

“Are you sure you can drive, my dear?” RJ cooed.

Sara walked a couple of laps around the room to clear her head, Blaine following a half-step behind in case she stumbled. On her third lap she pulled up in front of RJ and, with a resolute nod, said, “I can drive.”

RJ rolled to the table and began unplugging cables and handing the electronics to Blaine and Sara. As quickly as RJ unplugged the equipment, Colt and Sara packed them into the duffle bag.

“We’ll leave everything else behind. Sara and I will pick Johnny up at the end of the lane on our way out, Colt. You take care of our problem running loose in the woods.

“If for some reason you can’t make it to the marina in half an hour, we’ll come back for you in the morning, after things calm down. We’ll pick you up in the beach parking lot at nine o’clock, sharp.”

They left behind the burner phones, clothes and other personal affects. In less than ten minutes they had the van loaded and were ready to roll.

While Sara turned the van around, RJ rolled to the edge of the porch and grabbed Colt by the arm. “Listen, Colt, I know I’ve been hard on you the past few days, but it was for your own good.”

Blaine’s thousand-yard-stare said what was on the man-boy’s mind. He was going to crush the life out of Todd Seymore for having had the audacity to punch Sara.

“Colt, pay attention.” Once RJ was sure he had Blaine’s attention, he continued. “Before you hunt down the brat, here’s what I want you to do.”

Blaine listened carefully to RJ’s instructions, and for once didn’t ask any questions. He carried the duffle to the back of the van, and then returned for RJ. Once Blaine had set him inside, he trotted behind the trailer and returned a few minutes later with the two five-gallon gas cans. He set one in the back of the van, the other he carried into the trailer.

Blaine went straight to the utility closet and used the wrench he’d taken from the van to disconnect the main propane supply line. The odor of rotten eggs began to fill the trailer as the gas escaped with a steady hiss. Next he walked to the kitchen and turned on the exhaust fan over the stove to expedite drawing the fumes from the hallway. He lit a votive candle and set it on the kitchen counter. Before leaving Blaine loosened the cap on the gas can and laid it on its side in the living room. He stepped onto the porch and pulled the door closed tight behind him.

They would all be well underway by the time the volatile cloud of propane and gasoline fumes condensed enough to reach its flashpoint.

Blaine jumped off the porch and walked to the van, reached inside and gently caressed Sara’s cheek like he was petting a kitten.

She gave his hand a squeeze, and said, “Be careful, Colty.”

“I’ll see you at the marina in half an hour,” he said, and then leaned in through the open window and kissed Sara on the lips for the first time. “Wait for me.”

Blaine stood in the driveway waving a solemn goodbye, as if the family was leaving for a Disneyland vacation without him.

Chapter 67

Johnny sprinted between mature rows of cornstalks like a jackrabbit with a pack of coyotes on its tail. When he reached the end of the cornfield nearest the highway, he crouched down and listened. The first few minutes he heard nothing other than his own breathing and heartbeat, but as those returned to normal cadence, he tuned an ear to the sounds surrounding him in the darkness. Somewhere in the distance an offshore cargo ship's Klaxon sounded. A thousand feet overhead a single engine airplane purred along with its flashing navigation lights briefly visible during intermittent breaks in the fog. Closer to the ground he heard the nocturnal sounds of the forest.

Clayburn wasn't sure where the cop was hiding and even less sure how he would go about finding him. But if anything, Johnny Clayburn was tenacious when it came to stalking prey.

He looked toward Aunt Bessie's house and saw it was as dark as a cave, save the glowing white halo emitted by the security light above the barn doors. They'd either gone to bed mighty early, or were out for the evening. Considering Charlie's penchant for line dancing, probably the latter.

Johnny crept to the edge of the cornfield and waited. He heard the approach of car tires humming on the asphalt and slid back into shadows. A set of headlights swept the radius of the curve in front of Aunt Bessie's when something across the street caught his attention, something reflective. A few minutes later another vehicle approached. This time he edged forward and watched the headlight beam sweep the field across the street and probe the shadowy tree line. Clayburn's eyes lit up like a kid at a surprise birthday party.

In the split second it took for the headlights to skim across the landscape, Clayburn found what he was looking for. The reflective badge on a black and white patrol car hidden on an old logging road across the street glowed like a beacon in the night.

After being dispatched to keep an eye on the Fenton place, Officer Pete backed his cruiser onto the old logging trail and killed the headlamps. He'd announced his arrival to the dispatcher, who in turn reminded him to maintain radio silence, and rather snippily, Officer Pete thought. He rolled down the windows and lowered the volume on the police radio, sat "blacked out" while the big police interceptor engine ticked as it cooled. His eyes and ears adjusted to the night, and each time he shifted into a new position in the broken-down seat, his gun butt scraped against the vinyl seat with an annoying rasp.

Although he couldn't see it because of the fog, Johnny heard the van start up. It was soon followed by the crunch of gravel as a van approached the highway. He had only a few seconds to make his move.

Mosquitoes rely on carbon dioxide, heat, and moisture to locate their target. With the air conditioning switched off and the windows rolled down, not to mention his expectation of rubbing shoulders with the federal boys, Officer Gerome Pete was sweating like OJ Simpson at a lineup. He was a perfect target for the swarm of mosquitoes buzzing around his head.

Officer Pete watched through a gap in the fog as a vehicle emerged from behind Charlie Fenton's cornfield. For a moment, Pete wondered if old Charlie was back in the moonshine business, but quickly dismissed the idea. *Probably a couple of kids bumping uglies behind Charlie's fields*, he mused.

Johnny dashed across the street and slipped into the woods, quiet as the shadows he was moving through. He snuck to within fifteen yards of where the cop sat, his face illuminated in the

pale light emitted by the police radio. Johnny sank to one knee, all but disappearing in the waist-high weeds.

Officer Pete thought he saw movement to his left, and glanced in that direction. He wasn't sure what he'd seen, if anything at all; a small deer perhaps, a coyote. As ramped up as the officer was, it could have been nothing more than a tree branch swaying in the breeze. His eyes swept back and forth across the landscape like he was watching a tennis match, and finally came to rest on the approaching vehicle.

Officer Pete had better things to do than horse-monkey around with a couple of parkers. According to dispatch there were real criminals in the neighborhood. Besides, he had been instructed to keep an eye on Charlie Fenton's place, not the cornfield behind it.

His dilemma was that when the vehicle reached the highway its occupants would see his cruiser backed into the woods across the street. He certainly couldn't allow a couple of parkers to spread the word they'd caught Gerome Pete napping on the job. He thought for a moment about flashing his blue and red emergency lights to let them know he'd seen them, but quickly put that idea to bed for fear of alerting whoever it was he wasn't supposed to be alerting.

Officer Pete reached to the passenger seat and groped in the dark for his flashlight. He decided to make a cursory check of their IDs, jot down the names, and threaten to call their parents and tell them of the compromising position he'd caught them in. He would send them on their way with a stern lecture about birth control and trespassing.

With one hand on his flashlight and the other on the door handle, Officer Pete heard the muted thwunk of a fiddle's G string being plucked, followed a split-second later by the white-hot light of a migraine exploding behind his eye. Except that Gerome Pete had never had a migraine in his life.

Johnny Clayburn's sixteen-inch razor-tipped crossbow bolt zipped through Officer Pete's gray matter like a hot knife through butter. The cop was dead before he flopped back against the seat. The arrow continued out through the open passenger window and buried itself in a tree trunk some twenty yards deeper in the woods.

Chapter 68

Lenny Bloom was on his way home from his new girlfriend's house, and was quite satisfied with how the evening had turned out. He'd managed a long goodnight kiss in the driveway without her little brother snickering and threatening to tell mom he'd seen Marsha swapping spit with her boyfriend. Before the evening had ended, Bloom even managed a couple of squeeze tests of Marsha's very ripe melons.

He'd had his driver's license for over two months, and considered himself a cautious driver. He never text messaged or talked on his cell phone when behind the wheel; always wore a seatbelt; paid close attention to the speed limit; and for the most part kept both hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road, for the most part.

Bloom reached to the dash and switched on the radio. Bobby Key's wailing saxophone solo on the rock classic "Can't you hear me knocking" erupted from the speakers like Bloom was front row at Woodstock, except that the Rolling Stones had not played Woodstock. Bloom groused aloud about how his old man could listen to that classic rock crap. To young Bloom's ear it had no rhythm, no soul, and all sounded the same. He ejected wrinkled old Mick and his geriatric band mates from the CD player, and then glanced to the dash long enough to tune into the mighty Z-107.9, Cleveland's top rap, hip-hop station—now that's music.

A motor vehicle travels at 1.466 fps (feet per second) for each mile per hour of its speed. For the six seconds Bloom took his eyes off the road, and traveling at 45 mph, he covered an astonishing 395.82 feet before the windshield imploded.

Lenny Bloom's father's 1999 mint green, pristine-condition Chevrolet Silverado pickup truck came to rest in the ditch leaning heavily to the right. Bloom's hands and face were peppered with shards of glass and splattered with blood. Unsure what had happened, Bloom unhitched his seatbelt, crawled from the cab and walked to the front of the truck. What he discovered nearly made him retch. He dropped to his knees on the side of the road, and wailed, "Oh, shit, Dad is going to kill me!"

Most of the truck's grill was gone. The hood looked like someone had smoothed out a sheet of crumpled aluminum foil, while the passenger headlamp swayed back and forth like a glowing, dislocated eyeball.

Bloom's eyes then moved to the chunk of pulverized meat embedded in the windshield. It took a few seconds for him to realize that deer don't wear Wolverine hiking boots and camouflage pants. It was then that he grasped the fact that most of the blood on his face and hands wasn't his.

After sending an arrow through the cop's skull, Johnny Clayburn shouldered his crossbow with a satisfied smile. It was by far the largest wild pig he'd ever taken. He trotted through waist high weeds shielding his eyes against the harsh glare of the approaching headlamps. Obviously Blaine was behind the wheel because the boy didn't have the good sense to use the low beams when driving in fog. Johnny was giving serious thought to putting a bolt or two through the headlights as he leaped over the ditch. He stepped into the roadway, right into the path of the pickup truck hidden in his damaged eye's peripheral vision.

Sara stomped on the brakes and clapped her hands over her mouth in a silent scream. She'd always suspected Cousin Johnny had it in him to kill, just had never expected to witness it firsthand. Her quick gasp when the cop flopped back in his seat was nothing compared to the mournful scream she let out when Cousin Johnny flew over the hood of the pickup and crashed through its windshield.

RJ closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his middle finger and thumb, and then quickly regrouped. He reached over the seat and gently drew Sara's hair away from her face. "If you want to bring home the bacon, my dear, you have to slaughter a pig now and again."

It wouldn't be much longer before the trailer erupted in a ball of flames, provided Blaine had followed RJ's explicit instructions. Now with the dead cop across the street, and Johnny wedged in the windshield of a truck sitting catawampus in the ditch, all hell was sure to break loose.

It wouldn't take the cops long to piece together the identity of the dead guy in the windshield, and why he'd killed one of their own. And it was a safe bet law enforcement would throw every resource available at their disposal into tracking down everyone even remotely involved.

Chapter 69

Phoenix followed the sound of the purring generator to the clearing where the trailer he'd seen on the satellite images sat on its foundation, with a white van parked near the porch. He slowly circled the clearing until he located a good observation point. He hunkered down behind a tree lying on the ground as ghostly waves of fog continued to roll over the landscape. He felt as if he'd stepped onto the set of a low-budget horror movie filmed on location in London.

From his hiding spot he watched three people emerge from the trailer and gather on the porch, one of them in a wheelchair. The big man he'd seen at the gas station carried a duffle bag to the van and then returned to carry the man and wheelchair to the van. A moment later the glow of taillights disappeared down the lane.

Phoenix's first thought was that he was too late. The bad guys had already loaded the kid into the van and were making good their escape. He reached for the cell phone in his pocket to alert Mycroft that the abductors were bugging out, but then the big man stepped onto the porch and looked to the forest, past where Phoenix was conceal. He was definitely not the same man Phoenix had seen on Grumpy Granny's surveillance video, he was thicker. The big guy cupped his hands around his mouth, and hollered, "I'm coming to kill you...you little prick!"

The only 'little prick' Phoenix knew of in the equation was the Seymore kid. He must have, somehow, escaped his captors. He returned the cell phone to his pocket and decided he'd let the big guy lead him to the kid.

Blaine jumped off the porch and trotted toward forest. He stopped at the tree line and raised his nose like he was air-scenting his quarry.

For nearly thirty minutes Seymore had crashed blindly through dark, unfamiliar terrain. With no sense of direction, and a budding headache from the blood-crusted knot on his forehead, arms, legs and face covered with scratches and mosquito bites; he was spent as much as from emotion as from physically activity. He had slowed to a fast walk until he heard the ominous threat echo from behind, and again bolted blindly.

A dozen strides later and Seymore felt as if he'd dashed onto a *Looney Tunes* cartoon set dressed as Wile E. Coyote. All that lacked was a handheld sign that read: "Oops!"

Seymore plunged over the lip of a steep drop off and somersaulted down the embankment, a tangle of arms, legs and curses. He landed face first in an ice-cold spring-fed stream. Hopelessly lost, with a psycho nut on his tail, now soaked to the bone, his ankle on fire, his stress bucket overflowed. Seymore slapped his hand on the water's surface and loosed a loud frustrated, "Shit!"

Growing up with the Clayburns Blaine had often accompanied Johnny and RJ on autumn hunting forays. Johnny had taught the boys the art of silent movement, something he liked to call 'moving like a whisper.' They'd once watched in awe as their mentor crept to within yards of a feeding buck and dropped it in its tracks with a single arrow through the heart.

Blaine heard the slap on a nearby stream and paused in mid-stride, his foot hovering above the ground. He knew it couldn't be a beaver because beavers almost never yell "Shit!" when they give a warning tail-slap on the water.

Now that he had a bearing on his prey, he adjusted his direction.

He'd once read an article in *Field & Stream* magazine on tracking humans. The article professed that absent visual clues, humans lost in the wilderness have a tendency to circle to their right. A half hour of stumbling blindly through the woods and it appeared the kid was employing the phenomenon. Blaine judged him to be no more than fifty yards from where he'd started.

He eased forward at right angles, his fingers wrapped around the handle of the hunting knife he'd strapped to his belt before leaving the trailer.

There was one mitigating factor that neither predator nor prey was aware of: there was a highly trained assassin in the woods hunting them both.

Phoenix used military-trained tracking skills along with an acute sixth sense that told him when he was close to a target. As he closed on Blaine's flank he had to admit that the big man's movements were impressively quiet, considering his size. The only sounds *Phoenix's quarry* made was the occasional rustle of leaves, or subtle snap of a twig. Had it not been for intermittent breaks in the fog that allowed him periodic glimpses of his quarry, the big man would have been more difficult to follow.

Seymore sat in the stream for a minute. Shivering violently, water dripping from his clothes, he finally stood and quickly realized that putting more than a few pounds of weight on his ankle was not going to happen. He also realized that his limited mobility spelled big trouble.

With at least one abductor in hot pursuit, no doubt with murderous intent for punching out their female accomplice, and now unable to walk, Seymore thought for a moment about giving up. How easy it would be to simply sit down and let them to find him. Hopefully they'd be kind and make it a quick death.

Of course all death is quick—one heartbeat you're alive, the next you're not. It's how one arrives at the Grim Reaper's door that causes the consternation.

Seymore snapped from his self-wallowing pity-party and, with chattering teeth, fortified himself. "No, damn it! I will never, never give up. These ass wipes will not beat me."

He entered into another deal with the Almighty: *God, if you get me out of this mess I promise I'll change my ways. I promise not to be such a jerk, and I'll stop walking around the dorm naked. And I promise to put a real effort into being less of a male slut. Amen.*

He crawled on his hands and knees to the edge of the stream with renewed verve, clawed his way to the top of the bank and struggled to his feet. He again tested his ankle, and then hopped forward as quietly as possible. He leaned his back against the scabrous trunk of a tall pine tree jutting out over the stream bank.

Blaine froze in place, cocked his head to one side. He listened to the unnatural sound of a large, clumsy animal tromping about in a foreign environment while trying not to make any noise. He made the adjustment and moved forward with an increased pace.

Intermittent spotting of the big guy through breaks in the dense fog was like experiencing a Sasquatch sighting, now you see him, now you don't. Phoenix's experience in the art of human tracking had taught him that sometimes you have to trust your instincts, regardless of the tricks the mind's eye played.

Another break in the fog and Phoenix discovered he had gained too much ground on his quarry. He found himself less than fifty feet behind Blaine, and dangerously exposed in the open. He froze motionless as a statue, hoped the fog rolled through to hide him before the big man turned around.

Blaine stopped dead in his tracks. He *felt* more than *heard* something, or someone behind him. He abruptly turned as a thick cloud bank rolled past and limited his vision to no more than fifteen feet. He waited a full minute as he listened intently, then shrugged his shoulders and moved forward.

With his ankle bugged up the way it was Seymore knew he couldn't outrun a herd of snails...uphill...with a tailwind. His only option was to hide, but where? The thick-as-pea-soup fog made it impossible to see beyond twenty feet, and at times less than that. It was a given he could not continue to stumble blindly in the dark making heaven knows how much noise. Neither could he remain in the open and hope the fog hid him. Both alternatives were unrealistic. Seymore looked sky ward, as if the answer to his predicament was hidden in the stars hidden by the fog. His face broke into a smile.

During his collegiate football days Blaine, the off-field teddy bear, had developed the ability to flip a mental switch. On the field he was an aggressive defensive linesman who guarded the quarterback at all costs. So when the little punk sacked his favorite quarterback, Sara, with a punch to the jaw, Blaine's mental switch flipped, and then short-circuited. Seymore was now nothing more in his eyes than an offensive tackle that'd broken the line of scrimmage and attacking the quarterback. Only this time it was personal. And he no longer had to worry about penalty flags, late hits, or unnecessary roughness. It was time for some payback.

Seymore hobbled around the tree until he located the lowest branch. Standing with his arms extended overhead, he was about seven inches short. He hoped he had enough strength in his good leg to make a one-leg hop to cover the deficit. All he had to do was get a hold of one limb; from there he could pull himself higher and higher until he was hidden in the trees upper foliage.

Blaine stepped from the fog and watched with perverse amusement as the little prick circled the base of a pine tree like a baby squirrel fallen from the nest. For a brief moment he considered charging in and punching the vermin's lights out, just like he'd done to Sara, but decided to allow the kid an extra minute of false hope before he lowered the boom.

Seymore drew in a deep breath, squatted down on his good leg, and mentally counted to three. He launched himself into the air and, surprise of all surprises, found purchase on his first attempt. He hung there a second, readjusted his grip, and then bucked and shimmied and swayed until he was able to hook his good leg over the branch. He dragged himself onto the limb and straddled dangling legs over the branch, his back pressed against the trunk, a triumphant smile on his face.

Seymore entered another note on his mental chalkboard: *If I make it out of this alive I am definitely having a talk with Zak about getting on a strength-training program.*

For the first time since awakening a captive, Seymore thought he just might survive this ordeal long enough to wake up from the nightmare.

Opening and closing his fists, clenching and unclenching his teeth, Blaine watched long enough for another cotton candy thick cloud to roll across the landscape. He decided he'd best help the brat out of the tree before he fell and hurt himself. That, and if Seymore made it any higher he would have to climb up after him, and Blaine was not fond of heights above a ladder's third rung.

Blaine drew motivation from the vision of Sara's swollen jaw. His eyes waxed vacant, his became blank, and he charged forward with the speed and grace of days gone by. Six powerful strides closed the distance between him and the person he wanted to kill. He latched a hold of the girl puncher's wounded ankle and used both hands to violently rip him out of the tree.

Chapter 70

The high-pitch, ethereal screams Seymore loosed could, in all probably, be heard across the lake into Canada. He slammed to the ground so hard the impact knocked the breath from his lungs. Before he could recover Blaine leaned over and wrapped his mammoth hands around the boy's throat. He jerked him off the ground so violently that Seymore wondered if someone had slipped a noose around his neck and hauled him up to his own lynching.

Seymore flailed with the ungainly movements of an un-tethered puppet, his hands groping wildly for purchase on anything that would relieve the crushing pressure on his throat. A constellation of light began to dance before his bulging eyes, and within seconds he began to lose consciousness. His eyes rolled back in their sockets and his vision dulled to a hazy red blur. Peaceful warmth descended over him like a blanket pulled from the clothes dryer. He began a slow glide down a dark tunnel, his last thought cognitive thought telling him he was about to die, and for some strange reason was not afraid.

The thick band of fog that momentarily blocked Phoenix's vision did not impair his hearing. He had seen and heard men die by the garrote, had himself sent several to the other side by that very method. Acutely aware of the structural weakness of the trachea, Phoenix knew he had only seconds to react before the man did irreversible damage to Seymore's throat.

Phoenix homed in on the sounds of the struggle. With an adrenaline-fueled burst, he charged forward. As he closed the distance he saw Seymore's feet suspended a foot off the ground, quivering with death throes, his throat in the big man's powerful two-hand grip.

The forest was suddenly rocked by an enormous explosion. The ground shook and the fog was painted pastel orange. A millisecond later a shockwave strong enough to rip leaves and small branches from the trees roared through the forest.

Phoenix capitalized on the distraction of the trailer exploding and charged toward the big man at full speed. A split-second before he made contact he leaped into the air and drove his shoulder into the big man's ribcage. The force of the impact would have crumbled a normal man, but Blaine brushed it off as a minor annoyance. He tossed the kid over his shoulder like a ragdoll, and then redirected his fury toward the new interruption. Seymore's lifeless body rolled down the embankment and landed face down in the stream.

Blaine backhanded Phoenix hard enough to send the latter airborne. Phoenix crashed to the ground, momentarily stunned. Blaine whipped out the hunting knife and charged the interloper with lethal intent.

Phoenix shook his head to clear the cobwebs. Just in the nick of time he barrel-rolled across the ground an instant before Blaine dropped to his knees and buried the blade to its hilt where Phoenix's throat had been a second before. Phoenix continued rolling away, with his attacker scrambling after him on his hands and knees, stabbing the ground. Each time he missed impaling Phoenix by a fraction of an inch.

Phoenix finally gained enough distance between him and Blaine to allow him to roll through a reverse summersault and spring to his feet. Sweat and dirt and froth dripped from his face as Blaine lumbered to his feet.

Phoenix was more than capable of holding his own in a fight. He toyed with the idea for a second of testing his meddle against the larger man, but with the Seymore kid face-planted in the stream, he didn't have the time.

Practiced thousands of times on the firing range Phoenix, in a smooth, controlled motion, drew the Colt 45 and brought it to eye level. He sighted down the front ramp and sent two 140 grain

projectiles into Blaine's center mass. The double tack rocked the big man back slightly, but he remained standing. Phoenix fired the third, coup de grace round through Blaine's left eye, that evacuated his brains through a softball size hole in the back of his head.

The big man staggered back two steps and, like a felled sequoia, crashed to the ground in slow motion, bounced once, and settled for the final time.

Phoenix wasted no time checking Blaine's vital signs. He'd killed enough men to know what death looked like up close and personal. He sprinted toward the creek and leaped over the embankment like a B.A.S.E. jumper.

Phoenix landed in the stream next to Seymore. He snatched the boy out of the water by the scruff of his neck and seat of his pants and carried him to the stream bank. He rolled the boy onto his back, lowered his cheek to the kid's nose and prayed he felt a warm exhalation. He felt nothing. Phoenix slapped the boy's face several times, positioned him on his side and delivered three sharp blows between the shoulder blades. Still nothing. He sat the kid upright and delivered two more blows to the middle of his back. Seymore gurgled, heaved, and then puked out a jet of stream water and bile from his mouth.

Phoenix sank to his haunches and breathed a sigh of relief as Seymore continued vomiting water and phlegm.

Chapter 71

A few minutes passed before Seymore's eyes flickered, and then snapped open with a bewildered stare. He blinked into focus the man squatted in front of him dressed like a commando. He quickly forgot about his injured ankle and crab-crawled backwards until his back thumped against the muddy bank. "Please, mister, don't hurt me... I'll do anything you want... I won't try to get away again, I swear." Tears streamed down his cheeks and his head drooped forward in shame. "I'm sorry I punched your girlfriend, I didn't mean to."

Phoenix couldn't help but smile. Obviously the kid was not the heartless badass people made him out to be.

"Relax, kid, I'm one of the good guys...well, kind of. Your dad sent me to find you."

Seymore wiped away the snot hanging from his nose with the back of his hand, and gingerly rubbed his throat. "My dad?" he said, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah, your old man... You are David Seymore's kid, aren't you?"

Seymore wiped his face on the tail of his shirt and shook his head. "Yeah."

"Whew," Phoenix ran a hand across his brow with mock relief. "For a minute there you had me scared. I thought I was at the wrong kidnapping."

Seymore checked his surroundings, and in particular for the man who had been trying to kill him. "What happened to the guy chasing me?"

Phoenix shrugged innocuously. "He's indisposed at the moment."

"Indisposed...how?"

Phoenix fixed Seymore with a blank stare. "Something to do with chest pains and a splitting headache."

"Are you a cop?"

"Nope." Phoenix stood, brushed debris from his clothes and extended his hand. "Can you walk?"

Seymore was understandably hesitant but finally accepted the proffered hand and climbed to his feet. He tested his ankle, as if would have healed in the short time since he'd injured it. "I don't think so...I think my ankle's broken."

"Can you walk on your hands?" Phoenix joked.

Seymore grabbed Phoenix's shoulder for support. "What?"

"Never mind." Phoenix patted his pockets for his cell phone, but couldn't find it. He must have lost it during the altercation with the big guy. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

Seymore sank to the ground with a concerned expression. "You're not going to leave me here—alone—are you?"

"I'll be back in a minute. Don't go anywhere."

Phoenix's irony sailed right over the kid's head.

He crawled back up the embankment and searched for the phone. Not only could he not locate the cell phone, the guy's body was missing, too. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, as if that would change the tableau. Even if the man had been wearing a Kevlar ballistic vest, which could account for the first two rounds not dropping him like a stone, the third round through his eye should have compensated. Phoenix turned a slow methodical circle, breathing a sigh of relief when he spotted Blaine's body twenty-five feet from where he had been looking. Phoenix pulled a mini LED flashlight from his cargo pants and swept the ground until he located the cell phone half-buried under a layer of leaves. It was vibrating an incoming call alert as he picked it up.

He unlocked the screen and immediately saw Mycroft had called seven times in nearly as many minutes. Phoenix thought for a moment about calling him back, but decided the CIA could wait until he put as much distance as possible between them and the dead guy's friends, who were probably in the woods hunting them both. Once he had the kid out of danger he would deal with Mycroft.

Seymore already frazzled nerves nearly caused him to jump out of his skin when Phoenix poked his head over the embankment and extended his arm. "Give me your hand, kid. We need to get you out of here as quickly as possible."

Seymore looked at Phoenix's hand, and then to the embankment. "I don't think I can make it."

Phoenix never had been tolerant of quitters. He let out an exasperated sigh, and said, "Look, junior, there's probably some very bad people out here who want to kill you—us. I really don't have time to argue the point. Either you give me your hand and I pull you up, or you wait here by yourself while I go find some help...your choice."

Seymore hopped forward and reached for Phoenix's hand. "Well, since you put it that way."

Phoenix dragged him over the embankment and up to level ground. He squatted to his haunches, and said, "Climb aboard."

Phoenix carried Seymore piggyback toward where he'd hidden the truck inside the state park, making sure he gave a wide berth to the three-ring circus taking place around the burning trailer and brushfire the explosion had started in the cornfield.

On the way to the truck, Phoenix's cell phone vibrated nonstop with incoming call alerts. Knowing Mycroft's whiz kid was tracking their movements step-by-step through the phone's locator beacon, he ignored the phone.

"Did my dad really send you to find me?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

Phoenix paused long enough to glance over his shoulder. "Because he loves you very much would be my guess."

"Right," Seymore scoffed, "we haven't talked in almost three years."

"Whose fault is that?"

"My mom said if he cared about us so much he—"

Phoenix abruptly stopped and deposited his cargo on a downed tree. He faced the boy, and said, "How old are you?"

"Almost eighteen," Seymore said, rubbing his throbbing ankle.

"Look, I don't know what the problem is between you and your old man, or what the family dynamics are, and to be perfectly honest, don't give a shit. But don't you think it's about time you pop your mommy's titty out of your mouth and start doing your own thinking?"

"You have no idea what he did to us," Seymore retorted with more than a little contempt in his voice. It was a rather hypocritical posture for someone who had little control over his own libidinous urges.

"Forget family dynamics," Phoenix said, "whether you want to believe it or not, that man dearly loves you."

"Yeah...right" Seymore said with enough cocky arrogance to flat-out piss Phoenix off.

He clenched his jaw and glared down at his young cargo. For a moment he pondered on whether to beat the hell out of the kid, or leave him behind, and considered doing both.

"Look, you arrogant little worm, I took this job because—"

"My old man, or probably my grandfather paid you a lot of money to find me."

Whether it was the shock from what he'd been through, or relief that he'd been rescued, Todd Seymore had become pensively obnoxious.

Phoenix shook his head with disgust. "You really are to be pitied you arrogant, ungrateful piece of shit. But just so you know; I didn't take the job for the money. I took it because your old man got down on his knees, and with tears in his eyes begged me to bring you home. Although I don't remember his exact words, the gist of what he said was something along the lines of how you're his only child...all in life that matters to him.

"To be perfectly honest with you, if you were my kid I'd put you up for adoption."

Seymore said nothing, but the expression on his face was clear that the wheels were turning. He looked up and segued, "Who are you?"

"Name's Phoenix; as far as who I am...let's just say your dad and I have a mutual acquaintance that asked me to help find you." He squatted to his haunches in front of Seymore, and said, "Climb on, we need to move."

"Speaking of..." Seymore wrapped his arms around Phoenix's neck, "how did you find me? And where, exactly, are we?"

"It's a long story, but the short version goes like this. I got lucky. Your buddies from school found the van that was used to snatch you, after that it was fairly easy."

"The Musketeers helped?"

Phoenix laughed. "Why is it you guys call yourselves that?"

Seymore gritted his teeth as a lightning bolt of pain shot from his ankle to his groin when Phoenix bounced him to a more comfortable position. "Actually, we didn't come up with the name. Chief McCord—he's in charge of campus security at Grand River—gave us the moniker."

Once Phoenix cleared the woods he picked up the pace across the last weed-clogged meadow. Minutes later he lowered the tailgate, and then eased Seymore down and arched his aching back in relief.

He reached into his pocket and brought the vibrating cell phone to his ear. "Domino's Pizza, will your order be for pickup or delivery?"

"Where in the hell have you been?" Mycroft's strident voice burst across the line. "I've called you a dozen times—"

"Nineteen to be exact," Phoenix said with exaggerated boredom, "but who's counting?"

"Flipper's monitoring local police and fire traffic up there. What the hell is going on? There's a dead guy stuck in the windshield of a truck and an explosion that consumed the trailer you identified. They also found a dead cop across the street. I gave you a liquidation sanction for the bad guys, Phoenix, not a population reduction order for the whole damn village."

Mycroft continued with rapid-fire questions.

"What in the hell have you done up there? Promise me you didn't have anything to do with the civilian body count. And where's the damn kid?"

"If I don't know better, John, I'd think you were angry with me. Please tell me I'm not grounded, I had plans for the weekend."

"This isn't about you, smartass. Have you located the boy or not?"

"Of course I did, he's with me. What do you take me for, one of your amateurs?"

Mycroft breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Is he all right? Please tell me he's unharmed."

"He's fine...banged up a little, dehydrated, hungry, but alive and kicking—with one foot, anyhow."

"What?"

"Never mind," Phoenix said. "Before you blow out an artery, John, patch this call through to the kid's dad. I think it a noble gesture on your part to let them speak so the judge knows his son is alive and safe."

Mycroft's annoyance bubbled to the surface. He spoke through gritted teeth. "That will wait. What I want right this instant is a detailed situation report."

Phoenix released an exasperated sigh. "Here's your sit-rep. The boy and I took a nature hike through the woods, went for a refreshing dip in the creek, and did some man-to-man bonding." Phoenix lowered his voice to a threatening snarl. "Now patch this call through to the boy's dad, John, or I swear I'll come through this phone and hit you so hard your great, great granddad will feel it."

Phoenix walked to the back of the truck and handed the cell phone off to Seymore.

Seymore's duct-tape plucked eyebrows pinched together. "Who is it?"

"They're patching the call through to your old man."

Seymore refused to accept the phone. "I told you I haven't talked to my dad in years. I wouldn't know where to start...what to say."

Phoenix grabbed Seymore's wrist and slapped the phone into his dirty palm. "Try something clever and witty...something thought provoking. Maybe start with Hello, Dad, this is Todd."

Seymore drew the telephone to his ear and listened to hissing static, followed by a series of clicks and chirps that told him the call was being patched through on a government scrambled line. It started to ring and Seymore tossed the phone to Phoenix like it was radioactive.

Phoenix shot him a malevolent glower and held the phone out. "If you don't talk to your father I'm going to break your other ankle, and then haul your ass back into the woods so you and your friends can play some more."

It didn't appear as if the man was kidding, so Seymore took the phone and reluctantly brought it to his ear as his father answered.

"This is David Seymore."

The pause lasted long enough the judge repeated himself. "Hello? This is David Seymore; with whom am I speaking please?"

Seymore swallowed the golf ball size lump in his throat, and said, "Hello, Dad, this is Todd."

Judge Seymore choked back a sob. "Todd? My god, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm with the guy you sent to find me."

The sound of his father's inconsolable weeping brought tears to Todd's eyes, too. He wiped them on his arm and reassured his father he was okay, banged up a little, but safe in Phoenix's company.

While Todd and his father engaged in a years' overdue conversation, Phoenix reached into the truck and retrieved the laptop. He typed out a message on the screen he knew was being displayed in real time at Langley. The incident debrief Mycroft insisted upon would wait. He typed in the location where he would drop Seymore, along with instructions for Carver to arrange accommodations for him at the nearest hotel with hot showers, soft beds, with the warning there had better be a bottle of Famous Grouse scotch chilling in a bucket of ice on the bedside table when he arrived.

Phoenix closed the laptop, returned it to the cab and walked to the back of the truck as Seymore was winding down the phone call with his father.

"That wasn't so bad now, was it?" He took the cell phone Seymore handed off.

"I guess not." Seymore's voice had lost most of its cockiness. He discreetly wiped his eyes when he thought Phoenix wasn't looking.

"Here's the way this is going to play this out." Phoenix spent fifteen minutes crafting a "cover story" that explained Todd Seymore's disappearance, and concluded with, "Come on, kid, let's get you out of here."

Phoenix helped Seymore off the tailgate and assisted him to the passenger door when another explosion shattered the night. This one originated at the state park marina.

Chapter 72

RJ Clayburn's escape plan was not quite as sensational as a Bruce Willis thriller, where bang 'em up car chases, exploding tanker trucks, with collapsing bridges and helicopters shot out of the sky with flare guns are the norm, but it wasn't far off.

RJ's plan was simplistic. While they waited for Blaine to arrive at the marina, Sara would steal a boat they would use to motor along the shoreline back to Cleveland, and then Sara would then fly them home in Johnny's Cessna.

"Johnny's gone," RJ said on the way to the marina. "There's nothing we can do for him. We have to save ourselves, Sara—Johnny would expect that—before anyone can connect us to the trailer."

RJ glanced out the rear window toward where Aunt Bessie's trailer was now a three-alarm inferno. It wouldn't take long before a phalanx of firemen and cops converged on the farm, and then the real chaos would begin. They would methodically connect the dots between the burning trailer, the dead cop across the street, and the body wedged in the windshield of the pickup truck.

Sara drove north on SR 534, sobbing softly, trying to block out the images of Cousin Johnny flying over the hood of the truck and crashing through the windshield. It was a fifteen second video she would forever carry in her head for the rest of her life.

RJ read her mind. He reached over the seat and brushed hair away from her face. "We all knew there were risks, my dear... Johnny included."

"A risk of getting caught, RJ," she spat vehemently. "Not getting killed."

"Unfortunately life doesn't come with a guarantee, Sara." He slapped his dead legs to prove his point.

Sara shook her head at RJ's callousness. She pulled a tissue from the box between the seats and wiped her nose. "What about Colt?"

"Colt knows where to meet us," he said. "We can't risk waiting around here for him. If he doesn't hookup with us tonight we'll rent a car and come back for him in the morning."

RJ wasn't overly unconcerned with Colt's well-being. Even if the cops did manage to arrest Colton Blaine, RJ knew he would never give them up. To do so would necessitate implicating Sara, and Colt would never do that.

"I don't think it's such a good idea to leave him behind," she said.

"As the saying goes, my dear, we need to get the heck out of Dodge. Even if the cops do put everything together tonight, they won't be looking for us on the water. We'll come back for Colt in the morning."

Somewhere behind them a second explosion erupted as the propane tank joined the trailer and brush fire conflagration. RJ patted Sara's shoulder as if to reassure her that all contingencies have been meticulously thought out. In truth, RJ was flying by the seat of his pants, changing strategies as he went.

Sara followed the park's winding road to its terminus at the marina parking. She clicked on the high beams and swept the unoccupied cars in the lot, and then parked so they had a clear view of anyone pulling into the lot.

To further his façade that he gave a rat's rump about Colton Blaine, RJ said, "We'll sit tight and wait for Colt to arrive."

"And what if the cops show up instead?" Sara turned off the van and rolled down the windows. In the distance they heard a cacophony of sirens.

"We'll play it by ear." RJ rested a Berretta 9 mm in his lap for quick access.

On a normal summer's night there would have been boats motoring in and out of the marina all night long, but with the Coast Guard's advisory in place, most boaters had come in off the open water. RJ and Sara passed the next hour in silence while they waited for Blaine to arrive.

"It's been over an hour, my dear," RJ finally said. "The time has come for us to take our leave."

While they had waited for Blaine to arrive, RJ had studied the maintenance shop and snack bar, side by side squat cinderblock shadows in the ghostly fog. "Park over there alongside that building," he pointed through the windshield. "While I get things ready you go down to the marina and find us a boat."

Sara's eyes shot to the rearview mirror. "And exactly how do you expect me to come up with a boat, RJ?"

RJ smiled his feline grin. "Look for one that's unlocked, preferably with the keys in the ignition. That way I won't have to waste time hotwiring it. Once you locate one, come back here. I should be ready to go by then."

Sara shook her head and parked the van alongside the maintenance building. She jumped out and disappeared into the swirling mist.

While Sarah searched for a boat, RJ prepped the van for another cataclysmic distraction that should keep the safety forces people busy for hours.

RJ flopped out of the wheelchair, dragged it to the cargo door and muscled it to the ground. He turned his attention to the duffle bag and carefully set the items he needed on the van's floor. He dropped the duffle to the ground next to his wheelchair, and then scooted on his butt to the back of the cargo bay. It took some doing, but he finally wrestled the second five-gallon gas can to the front of the van and placed it between the seats. He loosened the cap and used strips of duct tape to secure a book of matches to the mouth of the jug. He unwound a coil of 4 mm pyrotechnic cannon fuse and ran it from the mouth of the gas can out through the passenger window.

RJ returned to the cargo compartment and tied a strand of stout twine to the gas can, the other end he fastened to the door. After double-checking his work, and satisfied all was in order, he flopped from the van into the wheelchair and wriggled until he was situated. He set the duffle in his lap and rolled himself to where the cannon fuse dangled from the passenger window. He carefully uncoiled and pinched it to the side molding to hold it in place.

Sara stepped from the fog, and said, "I found a boat with a swim platform and low gunwale. The keys were sitting on the dashboard."

The swim platform and low gunwale would make RJ's boarding nearly effortless, and would also make it easier for Sara to drag his wheelchair aboard.

"This baby has a foot-a-minute burn rate." RJ popped the igniter cap attached to the fuse and checked his watch. "We have twelve minutes to clear the marina."

The last thing RJ did before they headed for the boat was slam the cargo door closed. The string snapped taut and tipped over the gas can. Fuel slowly burbled from the can and released an invisible cloud of highly volatile fumes inside the van's confined interior.

Sara trotted along behind the wheelchair with a firm hold on the handles to slow RJ's descent. She guided him the boat she'd located and helped him out of the wheelchair. RJ scooted to the edge of the plank dock, while Sara steadied the boat. He half-crawled half-rolled over the aft gunwale.

While Sara loaded the wheelchair and duffle bag aboard, RJ dragged himself across the deck to the pilothouse. He used the steering wheel to drag himself to the captain's chair, where he plopped down and took a moment to catch his breath. Seven minutes until show time.

Sara returned to the pilothouse breathing heavy from her struggles with the wheelchair and electronics equipment duffle bag. RJ turned the key and brought the 6.0 diesel engine to life. Water

gurgled beneath the transom. He located the switch that activated the nautical marker lights, but decided to wait until they cleared the marina to figure out the surface navigational radar, depth finder and ship-to-shore radio.

“Sara, my dear,” he glanced to his watch, “would you please be so kind as to cast us off.”

Sara retraced her steps through the salon and untied the mooring rope, pulled in the foam boat bumpers that protected the hull from scraping against the quay and pushed the boat away from the dock.

RJ slipped the transmission lever to reverse with an audible clunk, and idled away from the slip. Once clear of the dock, he eased the levers forward and piloted the boat toward the mouth of the marina. RJ again checked his wristwatch. In three minutes the van would explode with apocalyptic flare. Visibility was barely fifty feet, so RJ relied on the red and green marker lights on the breakwall to guide him into the deep water channel. He lined the bow up between them, and then rammed the throttles forward to full speed.

The bow rose out of the water like a breaching leviathan as they roared through the marina. One of the marina’s guests was standing on the dock next to his boat. He saw them coming at full throttle, shook his fist and cursed them for violating the “no wake” rule. RJ cackled as they sped toward the opening in the breakwall. At the last moment he spun the wheel, sent a tidal wave over the dock and swept the complaining boater into the water. After he shot through the breakwall he cut back the throttle and waited for the fun to begin.

The fog was thick enough that RJ knew he wouldn’t get to see his handiwork live, but that didn’t stop him from envisioning it in vivid, Technicolor detail.

The force of the first explosion, the gasoline fumes igniting, would lift the van three feet off the ground and engulf it in an orange-black mushroom cloud that would reach twenty-five feet into the air. Several minutes later came the secondary explosions, the overheated propane and acetylene tanks inside the maintenance shed, would detonate and fly through the air like missiles. The fire would quickly engulf the adjacent snack bar.

The first explosion went off and for an instant RJ was able to see the fireball’s glow through the fog. It was like looking at a full moon through wax paper. It took nearly a minute after the second explosions before flaming debris rained down on the marina and ignited a dozen canvass boat covers.

RJ unleashed a maniacal laugh, and then rammed the throttles forward. The boat quickly gained speed on the open water, the bow planing across the surface once it reached maximum speed of twenty-eight knots.

Inside the pilothouse RJ cajoled the boat for more speed. “Come on baby, show daddy what ya’ve got.”

Sara stared out through the windscreen with a fair amount of trepidation. The way RJ raced through the fog reminded her of the first time she’d been at the controls of Johnny’s airplane when they flew into a cloud. Johnny assured her they were safe, reminded her they weren’t on a highway with other vehicles around. Still, it had been disconcerting.

“RJ, maybe you should slow down a bit.”

RJ looked at her and cackled. “Remember the weather advisory, my dear. There won’t be any other boats on the water. Once we’re a mile or so offshore I’ll cut back to ten knots. We’ll be in Cleveland in a little under three hours.”

The shockwave of the explosion had brought the marina to life. Shaken boaters scrambled dockside and unraveled water hoses, frantically doing their best to contain fires on the unoccupied vessels. Others stood by in muted silence, wondering what had happened.

As RJ barreled away from the marina at top speed he heard five blasts of a cargo ship’s Klaxon. And had he bothered to turn on the ship-to-shore radio, or the surface navigational radar,

he would have heard the cargo ship's frenzied captain hailing him on channel 16, the maritime emergency channel. Those five blasts from the larger vessel were a desperate warning that the cargo ship was tracking the approaching boat on radar. The captain was trying to warn the other vessel that they were on a collision course with a six hundred foot, 78,000 ton freighter waiting offshore for the fog to lift.

RJ glanced down to the dash and saw that the old girl had exceeded her 28 kph maximum. When he looked up from the gauges, it was too late.

The thirty-five foot fiberglass sport craft was no match for the freighter's three inch hardened steel hull. It slammed into the barge at 31 kph, with the ensuing fireball charring the cargo ship's hull to a height of thirty feet above the waterline.

Epilogue

Within an hour of Phoenix's liberating Livingston Todd Seymore, Mycroft dispatched a "housekeeping team" out of Akron, Ohio. They waited until the fire department cleared the scene, and then covertly entered the woods and recovered Colton Blaine's body. Because no one other than Phoenix, Mycroft and Carver knew of Blaine's demise, the body was secretly shipped to an "agency friendly" crematorium in Cleveland, where a medical examiner on CIA payroll signed a John Doe death certificate listing COPD as the cause of death. Colton Blaine was quickly reduced to ashes.

A member of the same housekeeping team visited the Ashtabula county morgue on Tuesday morning and used false credentials to identify himself as Jonathan Clayburn's half-brother. He signed the necessary paperwork to have the body shipped to the same agency friendly crematorium in Cleveland once the coroner's inquiry was complete.

Under the cloak of "National Security" the Coast Guard conducted an aggressive search and recovery operation two and a half miles offshore from the state park. On day two, an hour after sunset, they fished two badly charred bodies from Lake Erie's waters. Sara and RJ Clayburn were quietly sent to the same Cleveland crematorium to finish the job the fiery boat crash had started. Within a month all four sets of *unclaimed* cremains had been "misplaced."

Charles and Bessie Fenton were surreptitiously arrested on superseding secret indictments. Charged with aiding and abetting domestic terrorism, each was given fifteen to twenty-five-years in a federal prison and fined \$50,000.00. Mycroft used his influence to reach out to the presiding FISA judge and get the sentence "stayed" and the record sealed, conditionally. For the Fenton's to stay out of prison they were forever prohibited from discussing the incident with anyone, even one another, for so long as they lived.

Because he'd lost his life in the line of duty while attempting to apprehend a poacher, Officer Gerome Pete was buried with full police honors.

Lenny Bloom was enrolled in weekly therapy sessions, paid for by one of the agency's shell corporations, to help him cope with the trauma of the accident. Ironically, he became a hometown hero for taking out the poacher who'd murdered Officer Pete.

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The Musketeers burst into Seymore's hospital room like a group of boisterous sixth graders unleashed on the playground for recess.

Kork made himself at home on the foot of Seymore's bed, where he busied himself tickling Seymore's exposed toes. Duncan and Hart sat on the windowsill surrounded by arrangements of get well flowers and fruit baskets. Lamp stood at the end of the bed with his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

"Stop it, Jerry," Seymore moved his casted foot out of Kork's reach. "That hurts when you make me jerk my leg like that."

“Then don’t jerk your leg like that...jerk.” Kork flicked Todd’s big toe.

“Ouch!” Seymore kicked with his good leg until Kork jumped off the bed.

The previous evening, after Seymore returned from X-ray, he found an FBI agent waiting inside his treatment cubicle. The man flashed a badge at the attending nurse, escorted her from the room, closed the door and introduced himself.

“Seriously” Seymore had said, “like the chicken?”

Agent Cluck shook his head with a somber smile, and then proceeded to order Seymore to stick to the cover story Phoenix had concocted. Cluck warned him, most emphatically, of the dire consequences he could face should he deviate from the scripted story, especially with regard to the media.

Phoenix’s cover story went like this: Seymore, while hiking the shoreline inside the state park got too close to the edge of an eroded bluff. The ground gave way and he tumbled down the embankment and tore his Achilles tendon. Unable to walk he’d lain at the bottom of the cliff yelling for help. By sheer providence, two hikers walking the shoreline Monday evening finally heard his calls and came to his aid. The Good Samaritans carried him up the cliff and then drove him to the Ashtabula Medical Center and dropped him off at the emergency room. The night receptionist, away from her desk at the time, had not gotten their names.

“So,” Seymore adjusted the hospital bed higher and the volume on the television lower, “Phoenix said you guys found the van.”

The Musketeers exchanged nervous glances, and Duncan said, “What van, Todd? We have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Seymore smiled knowingly; apparently Agent Chicken had forewarned the Musketeers, too.

“Thanks, guys,” Seymore said genuinely touched.

None said a word, but all pointed to Lamp, the real hero.

“Thanks, Mark.”

Lamp pulled his lips tight against his teeth and gave Seymore a curt nod.

“Well,” Hart said after minute of reflective silence, “have we learned anything from our weekend experience?”

“Damn straight,” Seymore said without hesitation, “Never go hiking alone,” and then lowered his voice, “or hook up with an Internet date named Michelle O’Kelly.”

Kork, with understated sarcasm, said, “Todd, one of these days that wandering dick of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

They all laughed.

A light knock on the door drew their heads in that direction. The door eased open and Lamp immediately backed away from the hospital bed. Duncan and Hart bounced off the windowsill and stood at attention. Kork, for once kept his mouth shut.

“We’ll see you in a couple of days,” Duncan said. The Musketeers filed from the room single file.

No matter how hard he bit down, Seymore’s lip still quivered with emotion at the sight of his parents standing on the threshold, hand-in-hand. Tears leaked from his eyes. “Dad, Mom, I’m sorry...”

The Seymore’s crossed the room and enveloped their son in a tight group hug.

Upon conclusion of a mission Phoenix always needed time alone to decompress. He'd spent the morning stocking the *Atrayyu*, his forty-five foot dual stateroom, fly-bridge motor yacht with enough provisions to last a few weeks at sea. He'd topped off the fuel tanks at Knight's Marina across the bay from his house, and was returning to the private dock when he spotted John Mycroft.

He used the reverse thruster to slow the boat's momentum, gently bumped against the dock and he shut down the engines. Phoenix walked through the salon and out onto the aft sundeck. He tossed Mycroft a mooring line, and watched as the *old salt* quickly and efficiently tied a perfect mooring hitch knot, and secured it to a dockside cleat.

Mycroft said, "Permission to come aboard, Captain."

"Let me check the house first," Phoenix said with a smirk. "You never know who's lurking around the neighborhood these days."

Mycroft grinned and Phoenix said, "I was about to shove off."

"Figured you would be, but I hoped to catch you before you left."

Phoenix folded his arms across his chest. "What do you want this time, John?"

"About half an hour of your time."

Phoenix thought for a moment about the request, and then waved the spymaster aboard. He disappeared into the cabin, returning a few minutes later with two lowball glasses; double Famous Grouse on the rocks for him, Jack Daniels over shaved ice for Mycroft.

Phoenix dropped to one of the aft deck's cushioned benches and stretched his arms across the back of the seat. "You wanted to talk...so talk."

Mycroft nodded over his left shoulder and Phoenix's eyes followed. He snorted a chortle, and said, "My watchdog misses little."

Phoenix shot Mr. Witherspoon's upper deck a "thumbs up" as he stood. "Follow me," he said as he entered the cabin. "I wanted to test her out before I hit the open water, anyway."

Mycroft followed Phoenix into the pilothouse, and with a sheepish grin, said, "You aren't going to throw me overboard when we get out to sea are you?"

Phoenix locked emotionless shark-gray eyes onto Mycroft, and said, "You're safe until I break out the shark chum, then you should worry."

Mycroft sat in the camel-colored high back leather chair next to the captain's seat and watched. Phoenix fired the twin diesel engines and brought the vessel's navigation equipment (weather and surface radars, Lowrance global positioning system, ship-to-shore radio, satellite telephone, depth finder, et cetera) online.

Phoenix checked the oil pressure and fuel levels, as well as the fresh water and storage tank gauges, and then retraced his steps through the salon. He released the mooring line, pushed the boat away from the dock, and returned to the pilothouse. He dropped into the captain's seat, eased the transmission lever forward and bobbed forward at idle speed over rolling two foot waves. Once he reached the deep-water channel he pushed the throttles forward and watched the numbers on the depth finder jump from eight feet to thirty-five feet as they headed for open water.

He tested the boat's steering while doing lazy S-turns and tight figure eights until they were seven miles off shore. He pulled back on the throttle levers, shut down the engines and let the ship drift with the Florida Current, a.k.a. the Gulf Stream.

He checked the surface radar, verified their free drift would not interfere with other vessels in the vicinity, and then ushered Mycroft to the aft sundeck.

They sat in the shade of a rollout awning. Phoenix took a sip of scotch, and said, "So, John, what pressing issue drags the keeper of secrets away from the nation's capital and into Hemingway's playground?"

Mycroft tasted his drink, gave a satisfied smack of his lips, and set the glass in the armrest cup holder. “On behalf of David Seymore...and myself, I wanted to express our gratitude for your recovery of the boy, unharmed.”

Ever suspicious of Mycroft’s motives, particularly during ‘in-person’ visits, Phoenix crunched on an ice cube, and said, “John, you are aware of this new invention called the telephone, are you not? It really wasn’t necessary to come all the way to Florida just to thank me. You could have called.”

“A phone call seemed rather...impersonal.”

Mycroft reached to the inner pocket of his suit coat and removed the self-same envelope he’d used to threaten Phoenix into action over the weekend. He tossed it to the deck at Phoenix’s feet, and sat back in his seat.

Phoenix glanced at the envelope, and then kicked it back across the deck. It skidded to a stop in front of Mycroft’s gleaming dress shoes. “If this is your subtle way of proposing another mission, John, forget it.”

“No mission.” The spymaster picked up the envelope and held it out to Phoenix. “It’s my way of saying *thank you* for the boy’s safe return, and for not making me look like a damn fool in the process.”

Phoenix hesitated a moment, and then leaned forward and took the packet from Mycroft’s hand.

“What’s inside?” Phoenix asked as he undid the metal clasps and opened the flap.

“The documents I threatened to use to blackmail you.” Mycroft glanced around the yacht for a moment, and continued. “I’ll assume your floating castle has a paper shredder on board.”

Phoenix spilled the contents into his lap and thumbed through the pages one by one. The bogus paper trail Mycroft’s people had created was nothing less than impressive. Mycroft’s subterfuge could have tied his assets up in court for years, forced him to spend millions of dollars, maybe tens of millions to extricate himself from the legal quagmire. He returned the pages to the envelope and set it on the bench beside him.

For the past few days Phoenix had been pondering long and hard his involvement with Mycroft. He had to admit that he missed the excitement of the hunt. Phoenix stood and carried his drink to the back of the boat, where he stared out at the Atlantic Ocean for a long, long time. He returned to his seat and leaned forward, rested his forearms on his knees. “You know, John, it wasn’t necessary to go to such lengths.” His eyes flicked to the forged documents. “If you hadn’t pissed me off by breaking into my house and threatening me, I would probably have accepted the assignment anyway. But as usual, you had to be the 800-pound gorilla in the room.”

To the layman Mycroft’s countenance never changed, but Phoenix caught the momentary look of surprise in the spymaster’s polar gaze.

“Do us both a favor, John—and I’m probably going to regret saying this—the next time you need my help, can the bullshit and just ask.”

Mycroft stood and extended his hand. “I apologize, my friend, but I was desperate.” Phoenix stood and shook his former boss’s hand.

“So I can count on you in the future?” Mycroft said.

“Let’s take it on a case by case basis, shall we?” Phoenix chuckled.

Mycroft reached to his inner pocket, came out with a plain white business envelope and handed to Phoenix. “One more thing; the boy’s grandfather—you remember ex-senator Harvard Livingston from Ohio.”

“A bombastic blowhard with a big mouth, and an even bigger bank account, if memory serves me correct.” Phoenix tore open the envelope.

“Ah,” Mycroft smiled his best sardonic grin, “I knew that photographic memory of yours would come in handy one day.

“Anyway, after he left the senate one of the energy conglomerates picked him up as a lobbyist.” Mycroft rolled his eyes. “He’s probably worth more than you are these days, but that’s neither here nor there. He asked me to express his gratitude for the recovery of his grandson. He told me to tell you to name your price.”

Phoenix stared at the blank check in his hands, and then walked to the outside wet bar and filled in the blanks.

The deputy director’s face broke into a genuine smile when Phoenix handed back the check, its “Pay to the Order of” line filled in. Mycroft folded the check and returned it and the pen to his pocket.

“The Wounded Warrior Project is a worthwhile cause,” Mycroft said. “I’m sure they will appreciate Harvard Livingston’s six-figure donation.”

“I’m sure they will,” Phoenix said dryly, as if a quarter of a million dollar donation was pocket change; to Harvard Livingston, it was.

Phoenix curled his finger and Mycroft followed him to the bow of the ship. Phoenix used his foot to push back the lid on one of the bait wells. Mycroft looked inside at the unctuous stench sloshing back and forth in rhythm with the waves.

“What the hell is that?” he said.

Phoenix flashed an amused smile. “Chum.”

For half a heartbeat Mycroft believed he would be sleeping with the fishes tonight, and then Phoenix laughed and threw an arm over the deputy director’s shoulder. “Come on, John. Let’s get you back to shore before I change my mind.”