

BEHEAD ME

by

Russell Atkinson

The Cliff Knowles Mysteries

Held for Ransom

Cached Out

Fatal Dose

Death Row

Gut Shot

Behead Me

All the Cliff Knowles Mysteries are available as Kindle ebooks and paperbacks from Amazon or from CreateSpace. Cached Out is also available from Audible.com as an audiobook.

Chapter 1

Abject panic permeated every nerve fiber in the pilot's body as he stared uncomprehendingly at the instrument panel of his Piper Seminole. He'd never seen the artificial horizon look like that before. The altimeter was plunging and a warning light was flashing a ruby red. He thought he had recovered from the roll, but he could feel the centrifugal force pressing him sideways. He had to level off and do it quickly. This was no flight simulator. A wrong move could mean death. Instinctively he looked up to orient himself through the windshield but saw nothing but white.

His twin engine Seminole was almost brand new. It had state of the art avionics and an excellent reputation as a sturdy, reliable performer. It should, for what it cost him – over half a million bucks. The problem wasn't with the aircraft, he knew, but with him. He had to correct this. They were descending at a rapid pace. Too rapid. He wanted to pull back on the stick to gain altitude, but he wasn't sure whether they were right side up or upside down as they were still rolling. If he pulled back on the stick he might actually accelerate the downward speed. He had no time to reason it out. He pulled back on the stick and felt the plane lurch.

"You're going to kill us!" screamed the voice from his right. The stench of fear filled the cockpit.

Ralph Morgan stood before the Vice President of Sales wondering whether he was about to be fired. As head of the spare parts division, his unit's profits had sunk to an all-time low.

"Have a seat, Ralph," the V.P. said, gesturing to one of the chairs. She was short and tending toward matronly in her appearance. Some Indian women her age still wore saris and lots of gold jewelry, but she was dressed in a smart slacks and blouse outfit of western design. Small stud earrings were the only jewels she wore besides her wedding and engagement rings. "We're waiting for Legal."

This remark did not reassure Morgan. He had a contract. Were they trying to find a way to break it? He sat. The V.P. offered him coffee or tea. This

was a good sign. That's not something he would do if he were about to fire someone. He declined with a polite "Thank you, no."

Legal turned out to be Sally Brolin, a senior counsel from their own legal department. Advanced Photolithics Inc. was a Fortune 500 company and could have hired outside counsel, but they considered this an internal matter. Brolin arrived in a rush, something characteristic of everything she did. "Sorry I'm late," she said without further explanation and took a seat without it being offered. She had a coffee cup in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other. "Hi, I'm Sally Brolin," she said to Morgan with a nod. He returned it silently.

"Let's get right to it, shall we?" the V.P. began. "Four years ago we were making eight million a year in profits from sales of spare parts. The chip companies are buying elsewhere. Our systems are still selling well, but not the replacement parts. I just got last quarter's numbers and it looks like we're going to be less than five million for the year. And the trend is downward. It will be even less next year unless we figure out how to stop the slide. Both gross sales and profit margin are down. Ralph, I've emphasized to you the importance of improving your unit's performance for quite some time now. What have you done to address this?"

Morgan was on the spot. He had expected to be put there, but he wasn't sure why Legal was there. This threw him off his game a bit. He looked at Brolin before replying. He assessed her age as early forties. She was an attractive brunette with a trim figure nicely displayed in designer jeans and a sleeveless turtleneck top. Large glasses, probably also a designer label, dominated her face.

"I've talked to every customer personally," Morgan replied. "It's the same everywhere. Our prices aren't competitive. Nobody will tell me where they're getting their spare parts. It's always 'we shop around' or 'we'd buy from you if you could match the prices of our current supplier.' I've cut our prices to the bone. We're actually selling almost half our parts at cost now, but we're still losing market share. On most of those parts we sell at only ten percent over our production costs. That doesn't even cover our engineering costs, commissions, or overhead. We're still losing sales. Many parts are still selling at their normal prices and markups, but it seems like fewer and fewer fall in that category every month. I don't see how anyone can make our parts and make a profit at lower prices. The costs to reverse engineer the parts alone ..."

The V.P. interrupted. "I've brought Legal in to begin an investigation, Ralph. You've done all you can do from a sales standpoint. I think someone is ripping us off. I suspect the Chinese. Maybe they hacked our system and got our

engineering drawings. We know their labor costs are much lower. We need to find out where our customers are getting their spares and shut them down.”

“No way,” Morgan retorted. “They don’t have the manufacturing capability. Our systems need a precision the Chinese just can’t do. There’s only one company that can match us in quality, and that’s Rabcon Engineering.” He turned to Brolin. “They’re run by former API employees. I thought maybe they were increasing their market share at our expense, but we had one of their engineers come to us last week looking for his old job back. He said Rabcon was losing sales too, and had to lay off some employees.”

Brolin nodded approvingly. “That’s useful to know. I’ve already talked to our Security Director about a private investigator. He’s former FBI and says he knows a guy who used to specialize in this kind of stuff. Cliff Knowles. You know him?”

Morgan shook his head no.

“I checked him out. He has a good reputation. He has a law office not far from here – in Los Altos. He’s agreed to meet with us on Monday. I’d like you to join us. I’ll have the Security Director there, too. My office at nine.”

“Fine. I’ll be there,” Morgan replied.

“That has to be it,” Cliff said as he rejoined his wife on the trail. He was referring to a plastic tube, a short length of PVC pipe, Ellen had found a few minutes earlier. The tube was painted a mottled brown color to blend in to the coloring of the tree trunk on which it was fastened.

Ellen rolled the stroller a foot deeper into the shade. Tommy fussed if he got direct sunlight on him. “Did you see anything on it, any writing or anything?”

“No, just an empty painted tube.”

“You think we’re supposed to move it?”

“No, it’s fixed solidly to the tree trunk.”

Cliff and Ellen were geocaching, a hobby they shared. Geocachers hide containers, called caches, and post the GPS coordinates on a website. Each cache has its own web page. The hider, or owner of the cache, posts a description and usually some hints on the page. Other geocachers then go out to try to find these caches and sign the logbooks inside to claim a “find” on the cache page. The caches are left in place for others to find. Geocaches can be easy or hard, small or

large. They could be a Hide-A-Key under a mailbox or a surplus army ammunition box tucked in rocks on a mountain top.

The cache they were looking for today was a multi-cache, a type where only the initial coordinates are posted on the web page. Finders are required to go to that location and find something – something not described on the page in this case – and use that to locate the next stage. The description said it was a two-stage multi and in the attribute section had an icon for a field puzzle. A typical multi would normally have the coordinates to the next stage in or on the first stage, or else the description on the web page would tell you how to derive them from stage one, such as by taking the digits from a plaque. This one required the geocacher to figure out how to get the second stage but didn't say how to do that. Hence, the puzzle.

"Stay with Tommy. I'm going to take another look." Ellen marched back to the tree while Cliff stayed by the stroller.

Cliff beamed down at his son and reflected on how lucky he was. After his first wife had been killed by a drunk driver and he'd left the FBI under a cloud, he'd thought he would never find happiness again. Then he'd met Ellen. Becoming a first-time father in his fifties had never been part of the plan, but then, there hadn't been a plan. Life just happened.

He watched as Ellen poked a stick through the tube then withdrew it. He admired her athlete's body as she proceeded to climb the tree. She wasn't a trophy wife – not in the traditional male chauvinist pig sense. She was much younger than he, yes, but naturally broad in the shoulders and thick in the middle with well-defined muscles. Her hair, once a light brown, was now almost entirely a premature gray. With her height and bulk she was sometimes mistaken for a man if she wasn't dressed in obviously female attire. To Cliff's eyes, though, she was beautiful and more of a trophy than he ever thought he deserved.

Ellen climbed down and circled the tree once more. The tube was about four feet off the ground and mounted at a very slight downward angle. She bent over and looked into the tube. Maybe there were markings on the inside. Of course it was dark on the inside of the tube and she couldn't see anything at first. Suddenly she realized what she was supposed to do.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed. "Come over here."

"I can't get the stroller through the shrubs."

"Leave it on the path and put Tommy in the Snugli. I need you to see this."

Cliff pulled the Snugli baby carrier from the basket on the stroller and strapped it on. Then he lifted his son from the stroller, causing him to wake, and placed him into it, chest to chest. The boy fell asleep again as he usually did in the Snugli. Cliff made his way the fifty feet to the tree.

Ellen addressed him like a science teacher explaining the planets' orbits to a class. "Look through the tube. In the distance you can just see something on that tree down the slope, a clump of some kind. I think that's the cache. This tube is both a clue and an instrument. You'd never spot anything that far away without it."

"I can't be sure." Cliff's eyes were not as good as his wife's. He'd worn thick glasses throughout his FBI career, but afterward he'd had laser eye surgery which freed him from those. The result, though, was vision that sometimes was not quite as good as his corrected vision had been.

"Do you still have that laser pointer?" Ellen was referring to a laser light they had bought after finding another cache recently. That cache had been cleverly hidden high in a tree on a motorized pulley. The pulley was activated, lowering the cache, by shining a laser light into an electronic receptacle by the motor. They had had to find the laser first, hidden nearby, then use it to lower and raise the cache. After that experience, Cliff had bought his own laser in case they ever encountered another one like it. Geocachers like to keep all sorts of tools and aids in their geocaching bags.

Cliff pulled the laser from his bag and handed it to her. She turned it on and laid it in the tube pointing downhill. She adjusted it until it was pointed exactly right. "There," she said. "See where the light is shining." Even in the daylight, the light illuminated a dark clump enough to make it stand out from the heavily shaded foliage around it, at least when the field of view was constrained by the tube.

Cliff looked through the tube again and this time could easily make it out. "Got it."

"I'm going to go down there and check it out. You need to stay here and keep looking at it. Once I move away from the tube it's really hard to spot. You keep watching and tell me which way to move if I go off course."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Ellen pushed him aside to get one more quick look and pointed one hand in the direction she wanted to go. She looked up and started walking that direction. Almost immediately she lost sight of the target. Everything blended into one big collection of foliage. She paused.

“Keep going,” Cliff urged, peering through the tube. “All I can see is your back, so you’re in line with the cache.” She looked like she had a sniper rifle trained on her back as she continued downhill. The clump was no longer illuminated since her back blocked the laser. After twenty yards she veered off course and Cliff corrected her. “Go more to the right. And sign my name when you find it. I don’t want to leave the stroller.” It was a four hundred dollar stroller. No sooner had he said that when he looked over to make sure it was still on the path. It was.

After a few more corrections Ellen spotted the clump and moved in on it. It was indeed the second and final stage, the geocache, a Decon container camouflaged with plastic leaves glued to its exterior. She opened it, signed the log sheet for both of them, and returned it to its place.

Back on the trail with Cliff, she described the cache and told him she’d signed his geocaching name, CliffNotes. He nodded approvingly. He enjoyed geocaching, but Ellen was absolutely crazy about it and very competitive in pursuing her geocaching goals. This one was a qualifier for a challenge cache she was pursuing. She couldn’t log the final challenge cache until she’d completed many other cache finds meeting certain criteria.

Satisfied with her accomplishment, she turned her thoughts to the next day. Today was her last day of maternity leave. It would seem strange to be strapping on her gun for the first time in six months and walking into the Palo Alto FBI office.

“You sure you’re okay with driving me into work tomorrow? I can have Matt pick me up on the way.” Ellen had had to give up her Bureau car during her leave, but was promised that she would get it back when she returned. Matt Nguyen was a squadmate she could carpool with for one day.

“No, no, it’s fine. I told you I have a morning appointment tomorrow. I’m going to have to drop Tommy off at your sister’s early anyway.”

“Where’s the appointment?”

“Advanced Photolithics, Incorporated, in Santa Clara. I’ll be going the right direction.”

“API. You didn’t mention that before. That’s big time. Fortune 500. Half the chips in the world are made with their machines. Are you going to send me another criminal case?” she teased. Cliff’s work had produced some good cases for her before. High-tech crime was her specialty, especially theft of trade secrets and economic espionage.

"I have no idea. I don't even know what it's about. I doubt it's anything criminal." He had no way of knowing how wrong he was.

* * *

"Let go! I'm taking over control," Tim Rothman shouted. From his position in the right seat he quickly completed the roll and brought the aircraft's wings parallel to the ground, but the plane was still losing altitude rapidly. He pulled back on the stick and leveled off only 1500 feet above the ground. The mountains around them were much higher than that. Then he removed the panel from the windshield so that he could see outside again. Looming directly in front of him was Kolob Mountain.

He was too close to go over the mountain, he realized. He banked hard right and managed to avoid the peak, then climbed to a safer altitude. He had waited too long before taking over. That was a mistake he would never make again, he vowed silently.

"Okay, let's go back up and try it again," the man to his left said. "I know I can do this. I was just a little nervous, that's all." His sweat-stained shirt disproved this self-serving description. Nervous, yes; "a little?" – hardly.

"I'm sorry, it's time to put it back down. I'm going to take it back to the airport." The clock wasn't the real problem, but as an experienced flight instructor he'd learned not to tell a student he'd failed until they were back on the ground. This joker could still fly his plane under VFR – Visual Flight Rules – but he was never going to get his instrument rating. Talk about pearls before swine: Rothman's own plane cost less than a third of this beauty. Some people just weren't meant to be pilots. Unfortunately, almost anyone with enough money and free time could eventually become one.

As he directed the exquisite craft through the southern Utah skies he soaked in the view, a view he never tired of. The Virgin River snaked lazily through Zion National Park to his right and Kolob Canyons to his left. This was so much better than surveillance duty in Oakland or San Jose, drilling doughnuts in the sky and trying to pick out one tan Hyundai Tucson from all the other SUV's crammed like sardines on the Bay Area freeways.

It was time to give up instructing. With clients like this one, it was more dangerous than anything he'd done in his twenty-eight years in the FBI. He had his pension. He didn't need a retirement job. Two of his buddies wanted to buy into his plane, modest as it was. He'd have to give up some freedom to choose

when to fly if he shared ownership, but he could afford to keep the plane if they split the cost three ways.

Chapter 2

This was the first time Cliff had ever worn a bunny suit. This one didn't have floppy ears or a puffy tail. It was fabricated from high-tech lint-free non-porous material and covered him from head to toe. He was required to wear it if he wanted to enter the cleanroom. Actually, it wasn't his idea. Sally Brolin had suggested it. They stood together and watched as the technicians produced another batch of integrated circuits on a single wafer.

Cliff had seen videos of the process during his days on the High Tech squad in the San Jose office of the FBI but he'd never seen it first-hand. Still, the tour gave him an unexpected jolt of excitement. This is what Silicon Valley is all about.

"What are these chips used for?"

"Just for our own internal purposes," Brolin replied. "Research and testing. They aren't assembled into any commercial product. We aren't a chip producer. We just make the machines that make the chips. This batch is just going through the quality assurance process. The chips will be examined and inserted into test units. If the chips are good, then the system is good. It'll then be delivered to the customer."

"What are those tanks there?" Cliff pointed to an array of tanks of varying proportions, all resembling tall scuba tanks, with brightly colored tubes slithering sleekly up the side of the enormous device.

"The various chemicals we use. I'm no expert, just a lawyer. Some are used for etching, others for depositing or removing material. Wafers go through the process multiple times to produce layers of circuitry. The chemicals are often exotic and expensive materials. Very caustic and dangerous, too, some of them."

Cliff was having a hard time hearing her over the roar of the high-powered fans sucking the air through the most expensive filters known to man. A semiconductor cleanroom was a thousand times cleaner than a surgical operating room. The bunny suit didn't make it any easier to hear.

"This has been great. Thanks for showing it to me. Why don't we get down to business now." Cliff sincerely enjoyed the tour, but time was money for both of them and he hadn't agreed to take the job yet. He didn't even know what the job was, exactly. For that matter, they hadn't agreed to hire him yet, either. He might not get paid.

Twenty minutes later, bunny suits gone, they found themselves in Brolin's office. Ralph Morgan was there as was Michael Dyer, the head of

security for API. Dyer had worked with Cliff in the FBI and the two had already caught up on old times earlier that morning. His function was mainly to make introductions and assure Brolin and Morgan of Cliff's expertise. Dyer never worked high-tech or white collar matters in the Bureau. He was there to oversee plant security, the guard force, cameras, badging, fire and emergency exit plans and the like, and to serve as liaison with law enforcement. He'd made clear that when the meeting was over, he'd bow out of the investigation.

"So if I have it right," Cliff was saying, "some unknown competitors are underselling you on the spare parts for these machines of yours. You want me to find out where your customers are getting the parts."

"Right," Brolin answered, "but more than that. We want to find out how they can produce parts of acceptable quality at prices lower than ours. On some of these parts we're actually selling below our cost and still losing market share."

"Could someone just be manufacturing them more efficiently?" Cliff asked.

Morgan spoke up. "We aren't losing market share on the ones we make ourselves. We can even keep a high margin on those. It's the ones we have vendors make that are getting hard hit."

"So are your vendors cutting you out? Maybe they're selling direct to your customers."

"We've thought of that, of course. But I don't see how that can be." Morgan ran his hand nervously over the top of his nearly bald pate as he spoke. He wore light wool slacks and an expensive tan Henley shirt, a bad choice for a man with a concave chest and convex belly. "We have dozens of vendors. Scores. Ceramics, rubber, metal, plastic, glass. Are they all conspiring with each other? And how do they know who our customers are? We have hundreds of customers worldwide. Over a thousand, in fact. Almost every company that makes integrated circuits uses at least one of our systems. We don't tell the companies that make our parts who we sell them to. Besides, they've all signed non-disclosure and non-compete agreements. They'd lose our business and that of many other companies if it ever was revealed that they'd violated them."

"Have you thought about bringing the manufacturing in house?"

Morgan acted irritated at the question. "There are all kinds of specialized materials, skills, and equipment needed to make some of the parts. These have incredible tolerances. The machining equipment alone would be prohibitively expensive. And the furnaces for the ceramics? Don't get me started. We can't

possibly do it all. We used to in the old days, the 1960s, of course. Everything was simpler then. That was before my time. But now? No way.”

“We think it’s the Chinese,” Brolin offered. “Or possibly one of the other Asian countries. Japan and Korea have the capability, but China has lower labor costs and plentiful natural resources. With access to all the necessary equipment, they could do it.”

“*You* think, not ‘*we* think’,” Morgan objected. “The Chinese don’t have the technical ability yet and the Japanese and Koreans’ labor costs aren’t that low. Not only that, but the costs to reverse engineer the parts alone should make it more expensive for them than our costs. We only have production costs on the spare parts, since the engineering is already done, yet we’re still being undersold.”

“How much money are we talking about? What is this costing you?”

Brolin jumped in again. “Millions. You don’t need to know exact numbers, but spare parts are a profit center. There’s a high markup over the costs. Or was. As Ralph said, now we’re actually selling some of them below cost. Some of our clients think we’re ripping them off, but we sell the big systems at very tight margins. These systems go through parts like crazy, what with the temperatures, chemicals, and radiation used internally. Even solid metal and glass don’t last long in those chambers. Some seals and gaskets have to be replaced daily. We make a good part of our profit supplying those. We’d appreciate it if you didn’t go spreading that around about our profit margins.”

“That’s a tried and true business model,” Cliff observed. “Nothing to be ashamed of. Polaroid sold its cameras at cost and made all their profits on the film. I’ve read that Amazon sells its Kindles below cost in the hope people buy ebooks and music and apps and sign up for the annual services.

“If you want me to solve this, I need to know what that margin is,” Cliff continued, trying to sound authoritative. “I have to understand the economics. If someone can make the parts for the same cost as you, for example, and you mark up ten percent, then they could sell them at five percent over their costs and still sell at five percent under your price. So how much of a margin is there?”

Morgan looked nervously at Brolin. She nodded with a tight-lipped look clouding her features. “Four hundred percent, roughly,” Morgan answered. “But remember, we cut prices to the bone on the parts that aren’t selling. Those are at or below cost.”

Cliff whistled. A part that cost API one hundred dollars would sell for five hundred. If someone – an insider, for example – knew the margins were that

high, they would have an incentive to jump into the business. There was money to be made. A lot of money.

Dyer, the Security Director, had been silent up to this point. “So let’s make a decision. Are you willing to take on the investigation? And what are your rates?”

“Yes.” Cliff reached into his briefcase and pulled out a fee agreement. He handed it to Brolin. Lawyers are always the ones with the final say on a contract, even though a manager may negotiate the price.

She read over the agreement briefly and showed the hourly rate to Dyer and Morgan, whose budgets would have to share the burden. Both of them whispered objections in her ear. Although Cliff couldn’t make out the words, he could tell they weren’t happy.

Brolin spoke again. “This seems high. Would you consider ...”

“No.”

Cliff stood, closed his briefcase, and walked toward the door. “If you want my services, sign it and fax it. You have my number. Or scan it and email it. It’s been a pleasure.”

He expected to be called back before he reached the door, and turned to look back at the trio as he opened it. Brolin smiled at him stiffly and said, “We’ll be in touch.” Dyer stood to show Cliff out.

* * *

Brigham Sullivan liked his job. He’d never been a good student, not at academics anyway, but he’d always been good with his hands. He was only twenty and already was as accomplished a lathe operator as anyone at the factory. He had a steady income. Soon he’d be able to take a wife. There were plenty of good Mormon girls in the area and he had his eye on one in particular. Rachel Wright. They’d been courting for only three months, but he was pretty sure she was the one.

He climbed into his truck, a used F-150 with 120,000 miles on it, and drove south on I-15 one exit, then made his way to the high school. He liked to play basketball with his former high school teammates. Since this was Thursday and the weather was nice, there would be a pickup game going. He almost always made it to the Thursday game. He parked in the near-empty lot and walked briskly toward the gate to the playground.

The Toyota Tundra had been idling, its driver waiting for this moment. He put it in gear, floored it, and let his foot off the brake. The truck lurched forward and struck Sullivan at shin level. His body slid over the hood and his head shattered the windshield, then passed through it into the dashboard area in front of the passenger seat, his body still sprawled on the hood. An instant later the truck hit a large speed bump placed at the entrance to the school parking lot, intended as a deterrent to the kids' drag racing. The violent upward and then downward movement of the vehicle had the effect of tossing Sullivan's body across the ragged saw-like opening in the windshield, severing his head from his body.

Police later estimated the truck had been doing almost fifty when it hit Sullivan. There were no skid marks or other signs of braking, not at the point of impact at any rate. Tire marks and the position of the body, what was left of it, suggested the driver had stopped suddenly seconds later, throwing the body forward onto the pavement. The head, however, had remained inside the truck when the body was flung forward. The driver had then driven over the body and departed the scene. The Toyota was found abandoned a few blocks away, Sullivan's head upside down in the front passenger footwell, blood and brain matter scattered liberally about the cab as though LeRoy Neiman had been commissioned to decorate it with organic media. A rental, the truck had been reported stolen the previous evening by a tourist from Sweden staying in a local bed and breakfast. The driver was never seen again. The police chalked it up as yet another unsolved hit and run accident, probably by some joyriding kids. They dusted for prints but found only those of the tourist and his girlfriend, both of whom had alibis, or, rather, one alibi as they were having drinks together at a local bar on camera at the time of the death.

* * *

Ellen Kennedy had kept her maiden name when she'd married Cliff. It was such a pain to get your Bureau name changed. New credentials had to be made and innumerable records had to be altered. Besides, all her professional contacts knew her by her Bureau name of Kennedy. So she was not surprised when she arrived at work and found a cake with the inscription "Welcome back, EK." Of course, she would have the same initials even if she'd changed her name to Knowles.

The name had been abbreviated to make room for the decoration underneath the inscription. It showed a cartoony car made of frosting with a woman driver leaning out of the driver's seat. Under the car in a smaller font was the label "Hell on wheels." This was a reference to her geocaching name Ellenwheelz since by now all her squadmates knew of her passion for the sport. A long candle had been stuck in the cake where the driver's hand would be and dangling from the top of the candle was a set of car keys.

"My Bucar!" she squealed, grabbing the keys without letting them fall onto the frosting. "You guys! Hey, this is great. It's so great to be back."

Hugs were exchanged all around, with men and women congratulating her both on her return and on the birth of her baby. Of course she was obligated to show pictures, and so everyone crowded around her smart phone as she paged through the photos. They'd all seen them before. She'd uploaded them to the cloud and sent the link around weeks ago, but they all oohed and aahed at little Tommy just the same.

Someone called to her to cut the cake and a knife was produced. She did the honors, still laughing. When she took a very small piece for herself, one of the women agents asked her jokingly if she was alright. Ellen, at five ten and built solidly, had a reputation for chowing down with the best of the men. But after Tommy's birth she was determined to lose the weight she'd gained during the pregnancy. It was easier than she'd expected since she'd been nursing him and he'd literally sucked the calories right out of her. She hadn't had to diet much until the fourth month, when she'd weaned him onto formula. Then she'd undertaken a fierce exercise and diet plan that had brought her weight down to a level even below her target. She was now a few pounds lighter than she'd been when she'd entered the Bureau, although no one would mistake her for a swimsuit model.

It really hadn't been hard for her, but Cliff was another story. She'd insisted he lose weight, too. After he'd retired early from the FBI at forty-nine, he'd dropped thirty pounds and gotten in great shape, but those pounds had snuck back on over the last couple of years. If he was going to stay around until Tommy was grown, she'd told him, he needed to get his weight back down again. He'd reluctantly agreed, and was now back below two hundred pounds, for the first time since high school. He'd given up weightlifting and tripled his running mileage. He'd even trimmed his full beard to little more than longish stubble to get those last few ounces off. She was prouder of her success in getting Cliff healthy than her own personal fitness accomplishments.

Ellen walked through the bullpen to her old desk and was happy to see it cleared off, just as she'd left it. There was no sign anyone had been there. "I thought someone was using my desk," she said to Matt Nguyen, who sat two desks away.

"Yeah, there was an FOA there," he replied, using the Bureau slang for a first office agent, the FBI's equivalent of a rookie. "He was using your desk and car to handle your cases while you were gone. They rotated him back to the City to do terrorist work when you gave them the date you were returning. He says he's glad to be done with the commute, even though it means giving up the car." Commuting into and out of Palo Alto from anywhere was one of the worst commutes in the Bay Area.

Ellen licked the last of the frosting off her fingers and sat at her desk wiping her hands with a wet wipe. She booted up her computer and was greeted with a boatload of cases, leads, and administrative matters to attend to. "Oh boy," she exclaimed, letting out a sigh. It was half in dread of the avalanche of work and half in joy at being able to tilt her lance at the forces of evil once again. Sure, it was hard work, but it was the work she loved.

Chapter 3

By the time Cliff got back to the office, the fee contract, signed by Morgan, had been received and printed out for Cliff to sign and return. Maeva, his assistant, was always very efficient. She had a pot of coffee ready for him, too, but he'd had all he wanted at API. Now that the agreement was in hand he could start to think about how he would approach the case.

After he signed it, Maeva made copies and put one in the outgoing mail pile addressed to API. She also sent a scanned email copy to Sally Brolin. Cliff sat down at his computer and saw that Morgan had already sent him two lists marked confidential. The first was of major vendors for the parts that were being undersold. These were the companies that actually manufactured those parts according to blueprints provided by API. The second list was a customer list, with a chart showing the purchases of spare parts two years earlier and the ones for the last quarter. The list was ordered by the size of the dollar difference between those two dates. In short, the companies at the top of that list were those causing the biggest loss to API, the ones who used to be top customers, but no longer were.

Cliff didn't recognize the names on the first list, the vendors. This was not surprising since they didn't sell retail products. They made esoteric industrial items. The second list, however, contained the name of almost every chip manufacturer he'd ever heard of, and quite a few he hadn't. Texas Instruments. Intel. Qualcomm. Maxim. The companies at the top all appeared to be American, or at least the shipping addresses given were all in the United States. That seemed like it must be important. If the Chinese or Koreans were making these parts, you'd think Samsung or SMIC, the biggest Chinese chip maker, would be near the top. But those companies, big customers to be sure, were near the bottom of the list because they continued to buy at the same rate.

Although all of the listed companies had a presence in Silicon Valley, even headquarters in some cases, the fabrication plants, or fabs, were all in other states. California, at least this part of it, was too expensive in land, labor, and environmental rules for chip manufacturing now. Intel, the jewel in Silicon Valley's crown and largest chipmaker in the world, now made its integrated circuits in Oregon and Arizona as well as overseas.

Cliff had an appointment with his tax accountant and would have to put this off until he could do some pressing work from other clients, too, but he wanted to get the ball rolling. He replied to Morgan, with a cc to Brolin and

Dyer, asking for the specific individual contacts at the top three customers on the list and a detailed description of the three parts at those customers where the loss was the biggest, the part numbers, vendor names for those parts and pictures of the parts. Blueprints would also be useful. He also asked who was going to be directing this on API's end, who needed to be copied and who was going to approve his expenses. He mentioned that he would probably have to travel to the out-of-state IC fabs.

He went through his other email and checked his business account online before leaving for the CPA's office. As he headed out he dropped the list of vendors on Maeva's desk and asked her to start a file on API then see what she could find on the top vendors online: location, officers, general background, anything that looked interesting.

* * *

Noah Sullivan put down his power saw when he noticed the property owner approaching. "Morning, Mr. Rothman," he said respectfully.

"Please, Noah, call me Tim. How's the project going?" Tim was having repairs done to his barn and expanding it so he had room for two more horses. His twin daughters were old enough to have their own horses now. If they were going to go on family rides, they'd need four horses.

"Fine. As long as the weather holds, we should be done ahead of schedule."

Tim nodded approvingly and started to fill the feed troughs in the corral. When the girls got their own horses, this would be their job, he thought to himself. They did the after school feeding now, but he still did the morning one,

"Mr. Rothman, uh, Tim, you were an FBI agent weren't you?"

"That's right, Noah."

"Umm, I'm not sure how to ask this. If it's right, I mean."

Tim stopped what he was doing and waited for Sullivan to come out with whatever it was, but the carpenter continued to hem and haw. Finally he prompted him. "It's okay, Noah, just ask. I won't bite."

"Well, you heard about my son Brigham?"

"Of course. A real tragedy. How is the family holding up?"

"It's hard on all of us, but mainly on my wife."

"I'm sorry to hear it. How can I help?" Tim was wondering what this had to do with his FBI experience.

“See, the police aren’t doing anything. They’re treating it like it was just an accident. But I don’t think it was.”

Tim didn’t like the direction this was headed. He wasn’t a private eye and certainly didn’t want to get involved in a case the police weren’t pursuing. But the grizzled carpenter hadn’t asked him to do anything yet. He decided to let the man get it all off his chest. “What makes you think that?”

“They said the truck was going over forty when it hit my boy. That’s in a parking lot. The driver had to have his foot on the gas the whole way to even get it going that fast. He never braked.”

“Maybe he was racing. Or drunk. Or on drugs.”

“Mebbe so. If he was, then the police should be trying to catch him. But I think it was intentional. No one saw any other car racing. You don’t race pickup trucks anyway.”

Tim disagreed, but didn’t want to argue the point. “So how can I help?”

“Can’t you look into it, unofficial like? You know the detectives over there, don’t you?”

This was not a total surprise to Tim. The whole area of southwest Utah was a retirement haven for former law enforcement. The cost of living was low and so were Utah’s taxes. The large Mormon population contributed to the conservative, law and order lifestyle that appealed to former peace officers. Tim knew at least a dozen retired cops, deputies, and feds living nearby. The two detectives in Cedar City were both former police detectives, one from Los Angeles, and one from Las Vegas. He played poker with both of them every other Friday. This was a small, tight-knit community, and everyone seemed to know who was friends with whom.

“Have you talked to them about your concerns?” Tim replied, dodging the question.

“All they say is that they’re working on it and that public safety is their highest priority. I asked them about fingerprints and they said there weren’t any except the Swedish couple who rented it. Whoever was driving must’ve worn gloves. It was eighty degrees that evening.”

Tim thought that over. He may have a point there. “I’m just a private citizen. I’m not even a private investigator.”

“Can’t you just talk to them?”

“Alright, I’ll bring it up the next time I see them, but they probably won’t tell me anything. You know, catching the driver isn’t going to bring your son back.” He started to add something about vengeance being the Lord’s but then

thought better of it. Tim was as atheistic as they come and it would have been hypocritical to be quoting scripture to this devout Mormon elder. “Maybe you should just let it go so you can achieve some peace.”

“Whoever did this is still out there. Whether it was intentional or an accident, it could still happen to someone else until he’s taken off the roads. I’m not seeking retribution. ‘Public safety is my highest priority.’”

Tim chuckled at the remark. Sullivan had done a dead-on impersonation of Manny Moreno, one of the Cedar City detectives. He was also bemused by the fact that right after he had refrained from quoting scripture to Sullivan, the carpenter had had no qualms about quoting cop platitudes to him. It was also something of a relief that the carpenter had not seemed obsessed with the case and had not asked for anything more onerous.

“Okay, Noah. Like I said, I’ll see what I can find out from them, and I’ll let you know whatever I can.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Sure.” Tim finished filling the feed troughs and went on to let the horses into the corral.

* * *

Cliff left work early to pick up Tommy. If you didn’t get out by three you were in gridlocked traffic for an hour. Once Ellen had gotten through the first tough months, he’d been able to put in full hours at the office. But now that she was back working full time, he’d agreed to be the primary responder for Tommy. His hours were going to have to change. He could see that he’d be putting in a lot fewer hours than he had B.T., Before Tommy. Well, Ellen’s salary would fill most of that hole.

He showed up at Theresa’s house right on time and took Tommy home. After some playtime, a diaper change, and a serving of formula, Cliff got him down for a nap. He logged onto his home computer and checked his work email. He started working and when he heard Tommy crying, he realized he’d been at it for an hour. He repeated the play-diaper-eat sequence. This produced an impressively substantial spit up response, requiring more fatherly ministrations.

Then his phone alarm rang to remind him to turn on the stove and put the leftovers in the oven. Tommy’s eruptions delayed this process, but Cliff eventually managed to get the dinner started. Just in time, too, because not ten minutes later Ellen arrived home. Cliff could tell she was jazzed at being back at

work, notwithstanding the fact that she complained nonstop about all the cases, both new and old, in her inbox. It was the complaint of the ten-year-old about how hard it was to choose a flavor at the ice cream store.

After dinner Ellen resumed parental duties and Cliff finally had a chance to buckle down on his work again. He saw that Morgan had replied to his request. The three biggest profit drops were with Intel's Oregon and Arizona plants and Texas Instrument's Houston fab. The parts these companies had stopped buying from API were a ceramic nozzle, a quartz ring, and a Vespel seal, whatever that was. All three sites had stopped buying those same three parts.

Ellen came up behind him, holding Tommy, who was having no luck trying to get at her boob through her tee shirt and bra. He'd been weaned for over two months but old habits die hard. "What are you doing?"

"Work."

"Not helpful."

"A client wants me to investigate the cause of a big drop in sales. They just sent me list of the parts that customers stopped buying."

"Doesn't sound like a job for Cliff Knowles, private eye." Her tone was playful.

"They pay well."

"Well, then. Have at it. Is this for API?"

"Right."

"What are the parts?"

Cliff was becoming mildly annoyed at the questions, but Ellen was clearly back in investigator mode and enjoying it. "Why? Are you planning to help?" he said with a touch of sarcasm.

"You never know. Try me." She pulled Tommy's hand off her shirt collar. He'd managed to pull the scoop neck all the way down sideways below her breast, exposing one bra cup and almost choking her in the process. She shifted him to the other side and adjusted the tee back to normal.

"A ceramic nozzle, a quartz ring ..."

"I've got one of those!" Ellen held up her left hand and wiggled a finger to display her engagement ring, which sported a diamond that could have choked a Burmese python.

"You're asking for it, lady. Okay, smart ass, what's a Vespel seal?"

"Hmm." Ellen thought about that for a minute. "You've heard of a vestal virgin, haven't you?"

"Uh huh."

"After their seals are broken, they're no longer vestal. They turn into vespels. So they call that a vespel seal."

They're no longer virgin, either, I take it."

"Exactly!"

Cliff imitated the blat of a game show buzzer and held up his arms in an X shape. The noise startled Tommy, who grabbed Ellen's arm tightly. Cliff and Ellen both laughed at his reaction. "Try again."

"Okay, I'll get this. Oh yeah, those are those seals that come out during evening prayers and balance beach balls on their noses."

Cliff, not being Catholic, took a beat to get it. "Vespel, not vespers. Last chance." By this time he'd typed "vespel" into Wikipedia.

"Okay, I give up," Ellen said good-naturedly as she leaned over his shoulder to read the entry. She began to read it out loud. "Vespel is the trademark of a range of durable high-performance polyimide-based plastics manufactured by DuPont. It combines heat resistance, lubricity, and creep resistance."

"Lubricity? That's a new one," Cliff said. He brought up a dictionary reference to lubricity on the screen.

"... something that arouses lasciviousness; pornography'," Ellen again read aloud. "See! I was right the first time. They're making pornographic seals to deflower the vestal virgins."

"I can actually read myself, you know," Cliff intoned with a mock severity. "That's meaning number four. First is 'oily smoothness'."

"Sounds pornographic to me. I like that part about creep resistance. I could have used that when I was single."

"You're slowing me down here."

"Good. You charge by the hour don't you?"

"For *productive* hours. I'm not on the government payroll any more. I have to actually work for a living now."

"Ooh, that hurts." Ellen plunged an imaginary dagger into her heart with her free hand. "If you're going to go all Donald Trump on me you can sleep on the sofa tonight. I'll leave you alone now." She planted a wet kiss on the top of his head. "Ooh, getting a little thin there, aren't we?" she said as she left.

Cliff prided himself on still having a full head of dark brown hair, in contrast to Ellen's premature gray despite being fifteen years his junior. He couldn't help but feel with his hand where she'd kissed him once she was out of

the room. Was she just joking, or was that really getting a little thin there? He decided to check it with a handheld mirror when he got into the bathroom later.

He returned to the email Morgan had sent. The full specifications and prices were there, both the original prices and what API was having to charge now. Also listed were the vendors for each of the parts and the unit costs API had to pay for those parts. Two of the vendors were in Silicon Valley. The third, the one that made the ceramic nozzle, was in Cedar City, Utah.

Chapter 4

The next morning Cliff drew up a plan for API's approval. He would form a dummy company that supplied spare parts for API systems. He'd create a website and flyers advertising these key parts, to look like a startup to the big customers at prices well below manufacturing costs. He felt sure he'd get some interest from them. He would then request a meeting with buyers from those companies to show them samples so they could verify the quality. API would supply him with original parts for this purpose. The idea was that once he got the interviews, he'd wangle information about where these chip companies were getting their spares and go from there.

He called Brolin to set up an appointment to discuss his plan. When he got through to her, she suggested a telephone conference would be fine. She put him on hold and got Morgan on the line.

"What about Dyer?" Cliff asked after Morgan joined them.

"He said to leave him out of the investigation," Brolin replied. "Too many cooks and all that. He's paying the freight for part of it, but that's his only involvement from here on."

"Fine. Here's my plan. I think I can do it for under ten grand plus a few parts for samples. I'll need drawings, too." He laid out the rough outline of his approach, although the details were a little sketchy at this point.

"The parts and drawings are no problem," Morgan said. "But what guarantee is there that they'll tell you who their current supplier is? We've asked them and they've refused to tell us."

"No guarantee, but if I price the parts low enough and get my foot in the door, I think I can get a name or two out of them. Do you keep a list of the companies you know supply knockoff parts, and their prices, your competitors, in other words?"

"We do, at least what we find with web searches and trade journals. They all have prices higher than ours on these parts, though, and from what we've heard, the reliability and quality control usually isn't as good. If they supply a screw for a chamber door hinge that isn't the exact right material, they can contaminate every chip they make or at least reduce the yield. There must be someone else out there keeping a low profile not on our list."

"Well give me a list of the ones you know about, along with their price lists so I can refute any BS they give me."

"Hold on," Brolin broke in. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Ralph is right. There's no guarantee of results on this. It doesn't sound like a very good investment to me. We aren't made of money here. Just because we're a big company ..."

Cliff cut her off. "If you want guarantees, then I can suggest something more certain. Why don't you just sue Intel or TI for unfair trade practices or something and depose their buyers. They'll have to reveal their sources."

"Not a chance in hell. We've already thought of that, but it never got farther than the first brainstorming session. The V.P. of Sales put the kibosh on that immediately. Suing your customers is not a good way to engender good will or increase sales. Not to mention the fact we don't have any legal grounds for a suit. It's not against the law to buy from someone else with a lower price. Judges don't like frivolous lawsuits either. You find me the supplier they're using, then maybe we're in the suing business if there's something dodgy going on."

"Okay, so as I see it, you can't get them to tell you where they're buying their parts and you can't legally force them to tell you. What's left? Trickery. This is my plan. If you have a better one, I'm all ears. And don't tell me you're going to balk at ten thousand dollars. Plus travel, of course."

"I'm a little worried about liability, too. Will you be making a deal for these parts at these extremely low prices? And then what, default? You could get sued for breach of contract or false advertising if you don't deliver, and ultimately that would come back to us."

"Look, you have to do something. You'll just have to trust me that I won't make any legal commitments and I certainly won't reveal that I work for you, not to your customers, anyway. My 'company' will exist only on paper and won't be traceable back to me, much less to you. I tell you what. I'll start with the vendors. My shell company will be represented as a consultant to you. You'll have to let the vendors know I'll be coming and require them to cooperate in a quality control inspection. The vendors depend on your business and will do whatever you ask. Maybe I can find out if someone else is buying API parts from them."

"I say go for it," Morgan replied. He figured if the plan went haywire, he might be fired, but he'd be fired anyway if sales didn't improve. He really had nothing to lose.

Sally Brolin sighed audibly but acquiesced. The plan was in motion.

* * *

The next day when Ellen took a closer look at her caseload, there were few surprises. Most of her cases, that is, the ones where she had been the case agent pre-maternity leave had been resolved while she was gone. Several were still there waiting for her to finish the investigation or get a prosecutive opinion from the U.S. Attorney's office. There were quite a few new leads on other agents' cases, too. That was to be expected. Her supervisor hadn't known for sure when she would be returning to work, or even if she would be returning to work, because she'd originally told him she wasn't sure, not until a few days earlier. Once she'd given him her return date, he assigned her what he had pending – some short deadline leads from other locations. It didn't make sense for him to assign her as case agent on anything big while she was out on leave, maybe never to return.

But there was one new case in her queue where she was the case agent, opened and assigned that very morning: an appy case. When she saw it, she was taken by surprise, not because she had an appy, as applicant cases were known, since that was normal. Palo Alto was a small office and did not have an agent dedicated to nothing but applicants, known as appys in Bureau slang. The local appy work was spread around among all the agents. An appy could be anything from a Supreme Court nominee to a prospective clerk in the FBI.

What surprised her was its classification: a pardon case. She'd seen the number first, a 73 file number, and didn't recognize it. FBI file numbers all began with the type classification, 7 for a kidnapping, 91 for a bank robbery, and so on. She'd never worked a 73 or even heard of one before. The official case title was "Maureen Little, Application for Pardon After Completion of Sentence." As always, appys were short-deadline cases and pardon cases were no exception. FBI headquarters would be monitoring her reporting in real time and demand quick progress. She knew she would have to put this one at the top of her to-do list.

She pulled up the Manual of Investigative Operations Guidelines, or MIOG, and read through the required steps. They were pretty much the same stuff that was done with other appy cases: criminal background checks, interviews with employers, associates, checks for substance abuse problems, and so forth. Of course, reading about the original case, that is, the crime for which Little had been convicted and is now seeking pardon, was one big difference. The most important step, though, was the interview with the applicant herself. That would be done last, after the agent had a good feel for the applicant and knew of

any troubling areas. It was to be a quasi-adversarial interview. Generally, pardons are not looked on favorably and only the most deserving convicts are granted pardons, the MIOG explained. The agent's job is to ferret out those who are trying to dodge responsibility for their prior crimes, trying to avoid the consequences of their life choices. Just because someone has completed his or her sentence does not mean they are entitled to a clean slate. Bearing the burden of a criminal record is one of the consequences of committing crimes.

As she read, Ellen thought that this would certainly be something different from any other appy she'd ever worked. Most applicant cases in her office were associated with Stanford University in some way, usually presidential appointees: federal judges who went to law school there, State or Defense Department personnel from Hoover Institute, scientists or engineers entering the Department of Energy or even NSA. By the time the case got to the FBI the applicant had already been chosen. You really weren't expecting dirt in those cases and almost never found any.

There was another difference. Most of the associates and employers to be interviewed in typical appy cases were also associated with Stanford or one of the defense contractors in the area like Loral or SRI International. They lived in posh neighborhoods, or in the case of Stanford faculty, in the so-called faculty ghetto on campus, whose million-dollar homes were considered near slums compared to the surrounding areas of Palo Alto, Los Altos Hills, Menlo Park and Woodside. Ms. Little lived in a trailer park at the far eastern edge of town, one of the few low-cost housing areas in Palo Alto.

Ellen next turned to the serials that set forth the charges for which Little had been convicted, and the summary done by the pardon attorney. The U.S. Department of Justice had a unit that reviewed all such applications and made recommendations to the White House, since only the president could grant a pardon. The president also had one or more staff members who looked at pardon seekers with a different eye, a political eye. Voters generally did not like presidents who were soft on crime. Giving criminals a free pass was sure to be a hindrance come campaign time, which is why most federal pardons were granted by second-term presidents. The ability to grant a pardon was one of the few powers presidents and governors had that wasn't checked by other branches of government and thus it was highly political. In fact, Ellen knew, many governors in earlier decades had openly sold pardons, even for criminals convicted of heinous crimes, especially as the governors got close to their departure from

office. It was an absolute power and everyone knew how that corrupted absolutely.

The file said Maureen Little had been convicted of dealing drugs, hard drugs. She was also a heroin addict and an alcoholic. The list of her wares included heroin, LSD, and meth among others, and in large quantities. She had also been convicted of conspiracy related to some gun charges. Apparently her boyfriend at the time had been involved in a shooting while she was at the wheel of the car he'd been in. No one had been shot, but it was probably because the drug-addled boyfriend couldn't shoot straight. This had all taken place in Berkeley twenty-odd years earlier. She'd been convicted and served five years in a federal prison. It would have been longer, but she'd cooperated with authorities and gotten a reduced sentence.

Her educational history was interesting. She'd been admitted to the University of California, Berkeley, as a freshman, which meant she had brains and a good high school record, but she'd dropped out almost immediately. After prison, she'd gone back to school while working as a waitress. After community college she'd gone to San Jose State and gotten a degree in counseling and a teaching certificate. She now worked as a drug counselor in East Palo Alto, a neighboring town known for its ethnic gangs and high crime rate. The file said she was a widow with a son, aged thirteen.

Great, Ellen thought, a single mom boozier dooper raising a kid on the edge of a ghetto and counseling drug abusers. Why is it that you have to be an addict in order to counsel other addicts? It's like all those crazy psychiatrists or optometrists with Coke bottle glasses. Some people are just drawn to occupations that appear to offer help for their own afflictions. In the case of psychiatrists and dopers at any rate it didn't seem to work, not in her experience. Ellen was not inclined to give Ms. Little the benefit of the doubt.

Ellen wrote out some leads for criminal checks in the various places where Little had lived. She also ran the names of her listed co-workers and references through FBI records and sent out criminal record checks on them, too. It would be useful to know if the applicant was still associating with known criminals. She'd worry about interviews after the results came back.

Chapter 5

Tim Rothman pulled the pot in, his three nines beating the two pair across the table. He was up about forty bucks for the evening. He usually won, at least when he kept his alcohol intake to one beer. His fellow players were not so judicious.

“So Manny,” he said casually, “what’s the story on that Sullivan kid? I read in the paper that it was a hit and run. You think that’s all it was?”

“Kee-rist, just like a fed,” came the retort. “You take our money and now you want to muscle in on our cases.” Manny Moreno, the holder of the two pair, looked to his left for support from his fellow detective, Bob Whitfield.

Whitfield gave a nod and a snort to signify concurrence, but responded more helpfully. He, too, was up a few bucks for the evening. “What else could it be? The boy was a good Mormon and good worker. Well-liked. Probably some drunk, or, more likely, some tweaker high on meth.”

Tim chuckled dutifully at Manny’s comment about the FBI, in the spirit of being a good sport, although he’d heard the gibe enough times to be thoroughly uncharmed by it. “I heard the car was stolen days earlier and the driver left no prints. That sounds like maybe it was planned.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Moreno asked huffily. “You been talkin’ to the father?”

“He’s helping build out my barn,” Tim answered. “I promised I’d ask.”

“It’s a real shame,” Whitfield acknowledged. “Clean-cut kid. Hard-working family all around. We feel for the parents. But who would have a motive to kill him? Sullivan wasn’t into drugs and none were found in the stolen truck either. He wasn’t in debt and there wasn’t a jealous rival or anything that we could find. No problems at work. The tourists who rented the truck were on camera in a bar when it happened and had reported the theft earlier. We did look into it. The excessive speed and lack of braking bothered us. The missing fingerprints too.”

“Gang initiation maybe? Kill a random stranger?” Tim offered.

“Nah, not around here. Vegas, maybe, but not here. We’ve never seen it. We don’t have local gangs and the Vegas bangers aren’t going to come all the way up here.” Moreno was opening another beer as he dismissed the theory.

“How about someone at work? Was Sullivan about to get a promotion someone else wanted? Or maybe he just pissed off someone else there.”

Whitfield continued to be the helpful one. "Tim, we looked into that, too. Like I said before, he was a good worker and well-liked. He was a lathe operator and not up for promotion. The only 'person of interest' there is Crazy Eddie Trane." He made air quotes and an expression of distaste as though the FBI, or maybe some conspiracy of the news media, had forced him to use the expression as a replacement for the word 'suspect.'

"Crazy Eddie Trane?" Tim leaned forward, as did the other players at the table. In addition to the two detectives, there was a retired Secret Service agent and a retired Nevada state gaming and alcohol control officer. The latter stopped dealing and looked at Whitfield. There was a promise of a good story in the name.

"He's a nut and sometime drunk who works at the plant. He works in the warehouse and shipping area. He packs the machine parts and loads and unloads anything coming or going from the loading docks. He was in a hit and run two years ago, and we suspect another one just three months ago. But he had an alibi and no motive for this one."

"Oh he had a motive all right," Moreno said with an exaggerated expression of shock. He paused for dramatic effect and looked around until he saw that he had everyone on the hook. "Trane's plum loco. He had a loco motive!" He hooted and slammed his beer bottle down so hard on the poker table a shot of foam sprayed out the top, wetting his chips.

The collective audience seemed to find the pun almost as funny as Moreno did as the raucous groans and laughter filled Rothman's downstairs rec room. Alcohol no doubt contributed to the hilarity.

"Trane with a loco motive," he repeated in case there were any dim bulbs.

"Yeah, we got it," the gaming control officer said, but continued to chuckle good-naturedly.

"Seriously, though," Tim broke in. "Why was he a person of interest? Just the prior hit and run? Did he have a beef with Sullivan?"

"No," Whitfield said. "Not at all. Apparently they hung out sometimes. They both liked to shoot hoops in the parking lot during lunch. We thought maybe Trane was in that Thursday night game at the school, too, but the guys there said he never participated. He's at least fifteen years older and didn't go to school with them."

“Is that normal? A drunk hanging out with a devout Mormon?” the Secret Service agent asked. He was the newest member of the group and still wasn’t very attuned to the local culture.

“Oh, Eddie was a Jack Mormon,” Moreno replied, as though that explained everything. A Jack Mormon was a slang term for a lapsed church member, someone raised Mormon but not following the teachings, yet still on good terms with his Mormon friends and family. “Let’s play poker.”

The gaming agent finished dealing as Whitfield turned to Rothman. “Tim, the truth is, we have no leads and aren’t really working it. The case is still officially open. If something comes up we’ll follow up on it, but it’s probably going to get closed as just another hit and run by someone unknown. You can tell Noah that you asked about it and we’ll back you up on that. I’ll make another call to him just to let him know it’s still a priority case for us.”

Tim nodded in agreement and picked up his cards. Four diamonds and a club, jack high. He’d go for the flush.

* * *

Two days later Cliff was the CEO of KE Solutions, LLC, his shell company. He chose the name because he knew he could give different explanations for the initials as needed. The first such name expansion would be as Knowledge Enablers, a consulting company. He arranged for API to contact the three key vendors and, exercising a clause in their contract, tell them that a consultant would soon be visiting to verify that the process at the vendor’s plant was following API’s specifications. The story would be that API’s customers were complaining about the quality of some of the parts and switching to other vendors. Cliff would be that consultant. The vendors had to give him full access.

Cliff didn’t expect to uncover any hanky-panky with this step. The vendors knew he was coming, after all. His main purpose was to familiarize himself with the products and how they’re made. He needed to see if there were any obvious short cuts to cheaper manufacture that API had overlooked, although he didn’t expect to find any of those, either. He just wanted to be able to talk a good game when he visited Intel and TI later. He still thought it was possible some of the vendors were selling directly to API’s customers, undercutting API’s costs. Obviously they would not have any engineering costs since API provided them the drawings and specs for the products. If API ordered a hundred parts, they could just make two hundred and sell the extra hundred themselves. He

probably wouldn't be able to find direct evidence of that with his visits, but if they were hiding anything, he thought his experience in reading people would pay dividends.

He provided his new shell company information to Morgan and asked him to notify all three vendors, the companies that made the quartz ring, the ceramic nozzle, and the Vespel seal, that a consultant from KE would be inspecting their production process. They were to expect to be contacted within the next two days.

Cliff had business cards printed in the name of David Anderson, president, KE Solutions, LLC, Kingston, Jamaica. The officers listed on the corporate registration documents in Jamaica were actually retired FBI agents he knew, a married couple now sailing the Caribbean and using a permanent address in the Cayman Islands. He had a standing arrangement with them. He paid them a nominal sum to use their names and they forwarded any mail to him. This arrangement wouldn't fool the FBI or other federal agency, but he was confident the companies he would be dealing with wouldn't have the resources to find his real identity.

So far, everything was going according to plan. Maeva had completed the criminal checks on the primary contacts at these vendors. The only criminal record she had found was a drunk driving arrest for Richard Belcher, the owner and general manager of Belcher Industries in Cedar City, Utah, the company that produced the ceramic nozzles. Cliff thought that if he had a name like that, he wouldn't use it as his company name. Belcher had pled guilty to a reduced charge of misdemeanor reckless driving.

All three companies appeared in corporate directories and many other places online. Their websites all looked professionally done. They weren't mom and pop operations. All of them were sizeable legitimate companies serving major business clients. The two vendors who were local would be his first visits, he decided. The quartz company was in San Jose. The Vespel seal company was in Menlo Park. Both were in easy driving distance.

Brolin had asked to be kept abreast of any developments, so Cliff called her on the phone to let her know his shell company was all set. They agreed to meet at B.J.'s, a trendy spot just outside Apple headquarters to go over the plan in detail.

* * *

Tim looked over the array of harnesses, reins, and other tack with a note of dismay. This wasn't going to be cheap. He could get a gentle, older trail horse for a few hundred dollars, but the saddle and the rest of it would double the price, not to mention the cost of the barn expansion and the feed and vet bills. Then double that since both girls would need their own horses.

He sauntered over to the bulletin board. Local ranchers and other horse owners often posted for sale notices there. The shop owner, a grizzled ex-cattle rancher named Tex, kept the bulletin board up as an accommodation to his customers. Tim noticed a flyer for a chestnut mare, nine years old. It said to see Tex. Since it was June, tourist season was in full swing and the shop was busy. Tim had to wait for twenty minutes before Tex was free from customers.

"Howdy, Tim," Tex said genially as Tim approached the counter.

"Hey, Tex. I may be interested in that mare you have advertised on the board. Is that from your school?" Tim knew that Tex's wife and sons gave riding lessons and horseback tours.

"Yup. Totally trail broke and gentle as a lamb." Tex knew that Tim was no rancher. Tim had a ten-acre spread in the mountains, but it was just for scenery and riding around. Tex figured the horse would be for family rides.

"What's wrong with her? You don't get rid of good trail horses."

"Nothing wrong with her. She's just a bit too small and getting old. We can't put anyone over one fifty on her. She poops out. This for you?"

"For the girls. I'm going to have to get them each their own horse."

"How much do they weigh? They're little things, aren't they?"

"Yeah. Delicate like their mother. Neither one tops a hundred pounds."

"Perfect. Maybelle does great with the kids."

"She's not lame? You have plenty of kids taking lessons. I can't believe you'd let her go unless there's something wrong with her."

"No, no, of course not. Nothin' wrong with her. Healthy as a horse." He chuckled at his own joke, one he'd used a thousand times. "She's still a working horse. We use her at the school with the kids and sometimes on the tours. She just doesn't have the stamina that she used to, at least not with a full load. We need a horse that can go twenty miles with an adult male rider. Last week she did the whole tour with this Swedish gal on her, no problem."

At this Tim's ears perked up. "Swedish gal? An adult?"

"Yup. I warn't there. My boy led the tour, but the couple came into the store and bought some Stetson hats and tourist stuff. That's how they heard about the tour. I saw they was pretendin' at being cowboys and sold 'em on the tour.

She was mebbe one ten or so, bigger than your girls, I reckon. I tell you what. Why don't you bring your girls for our next tour. No charge if you and your wife ride your own horses. I'll have my wife put one of 'em on Maybelle and you can see for yourself."

"I might do that. Was this the same Swedish couple that had their truck stolen? The truck that killed the Sullivan boy?"

Tex stepped back and dropped his jaw in surprise. "Whoa! I heard about Brigham. Damn shame. I thought that was a hit and run. I didn't know it was a stolen truck, though."

"A Toyota Tundra, I heard. A rental stolen from some Swedish tourists."

"No shit! That was them. They parked at the curb right in front of the store. I saw that truck myself." After a short pause he added, "You know, I thought there was somethin' fishy about them."

"How do you mean?"

"They tried to pay for the hats and stuff by credit card, but it didn't go through. Then they dug through the gal's wallet. She had another credit card or two, but they talked in Swedish so I couldn't understand. They didn't try another card, though. I thought that was odd. I think they knew the other cards were bad, too. Instead they paid by cash, but they both had to dig through their wallets to come up with enough. I think they were near broke."

"You think the card was stolen?"

"Nah. A message comes up if it's a stolen card. They were probably maxed out on credit or the card was expired. That's not unusual. I just thought it was odd that a young couple like that would be scrapin' by in a foreign country with no credit and almost no cash. How're they payin' their bills, you know? And buyin' Stetsons? Shouldn't they be usin' their cash for food?"

"Do you know if they're still in town?"

"No idea. They were stayin' at the B and B over on Mesquite Way. Why? You aren't investigatin' this are you? You told me you was retired."

"No, no. It's just Sullivan's father is doing some work for me and asked me to look into it. He thinks the cops aren't doing enough. I told him no, but I said I'd let him know if I heard anything. That's all."

At that point a customer came up to the register line with a cart full of horse feed and someone else was right behind him. Tex smiled to the customers and said to Tim, "I got some folks waitin'. Why don't you bring your girls on that tour. The next one is Saturday. Let me know by Thursday so I can reserve space."

“Sounds good, Tex. Thanks for the offer. I’ll let you know. See you later.”

Chapter 6

Cliff was finishing breakfast when the phone rang. It was Theresa, Ellen's sister. Ellen had already left for the office.

"Cliff, it's me. I'm sorry to do this, but you can't bring Tommy over today. Ashley's sick. Flu, I think."

"Oh great. I have an interview today."

"You don't want him to get this. Trust me." She sounded sympathetic, but firm. Cliff knew she didn't want a baby to take care of either. "You're going to have to reschedule your appointment."

"I'll figure something out. Thanks for letting me know."

"Tell me if he comes down with it."

"I will. Talk to you later." Cliff hung up. He didn't want to cancel after he had made the quartz company general manager change his schedule to accommodate him. He decided to take Tommy into the office. Maeva would just have to babysit.

When he got there, Maeva was all too glad to take care of little Tommy. She was unmarried, but heavily involved with a Los Altos P.D. detective and Cliff thought she was anticipating a future of motherhood and apple pie. When she'd been hired, he'd made it clear that she wasn't going to be just a secretary or investigator. His was a one-man business and he needed someone to do whatever needed doing, including serving coffee and running his personal errands. Today it was baby-sitting. She liked the variety that entailed and never objected.

For his part, Cliff realized more sharply today how unfair the workplace ethic was toward women with children. They were always expected to be the one to deal with the sick child or the school emergency if something arose. He didn't let that deter him from his job, though. He gathered up his notes on the quartz ring and headed off to San Jose.

Kimball Quartz was located on Baytech Drive in north San Jose, almost to Alviso, the small community annexed into San Jose in the 1960s to give that larger city a connection to San Francisco Bay. The plant was nestled between an electrical substation and a dozen or so high-tech companies, big and small. Cliff drove up in a rental car so that no one could identify him from his personal car, which was a Tesla model S. Teslas weren't particularly noteworthy in Silicon Valley, the land of mega-millionaire entrepreneurs, but his license plate could be traced.

Cliff entered wearing a cheap polyester sport coat, slacks, and a polo shirt, an outfit he thought would convey the right level of formality for a consultant. Kimball himself was waiting in the lobby when he arrived. Kimball was a first-name as it turned out, Ouyang being his surname.

“Hi, I’m Dave Anderson,” Cliff announced. He’d had to practice the line in the car a half a dozen times just before arriving to be sure he would remember the name. He’d never done undercover work in the FBI and was always ill at ease when lying about himself, but he’d gotten used to role-playing since he’d started his private investigator business.

“I’m Kimball. Glad to meet you.” Kimball proffered a card. Cliff took it and reciprocated, silently congratulating himself for having taken that extra step of having cards made. “I am the president and GM. Whatever you need to see, just ask.”

“Why don’t we start with a tour of the plant,” Cliff suggested. “I can ask questions as we go.”

“Of course. Very good.” Ouyang emitted a forced laugh as though Cliff had made some sort of witticism. He waved toward the double door that led into the back area.

The first area they walked through was a bay of cubicles typical of high-tech firms. Most of the employees there were Asian, Chinese, probably, since Cliff recognized Mandarin being spoken in one corner. A dozen or so workers there were working on computers with spreadsheets and similar documents up on their double monitors. One woman was obviously making a sales call and another worker, a middle-aged white man, was looking at a paper engineering drawing while he punched some numbers into a calculator.

“What’s he doing?” Cliff asked.

“Preparing a quote. He is figuring out our cost and profit margin for another customer bid. I can’t show you the drawing. NDA, you know.”

Cliff harrumphed as though he’d been snubbed already, but he was secretly glad that he didn’t have to fake some engineering knowledge he didn’t have.

“Well, then, would you please show me API’s drawing for this part.” He held up a small quartz ring that Morgan had provided to him. Kimball had already been told the part number they were investigating.

“If you like, but why do you want to see that, if I may ask? You must have the drawing yourself.”

“You may *not* ask. I’m doing the asking and you’d better be doing the answering if you want to continue as API’s vendor.” Cliff barked this out haughtily in an attempt to intimidate Kimball. Cliff knew he couldn’t reveal the real reason he was there and also didn’t have enough technical knowledge to be convincing as a technical expert. After a beat he added, “You know we have had complaints about your parts from our customers. That’s why API’s orders from you are down this quarter. And the last three quarters. I think you have a quality control problem here.”

“No, never!” Ouyang huffed. “We make precision parts exactly to specifications. API hasn’t returned a defective part in over six months, and the last time it was only because of a package being dropped in shipping. We replaced those at no charge.”

“Let me see that drawing! Maybe you made some alterations to it. Cutting corners.”

“What?! That makes no sense. Why would we do that?” But he was scurrying over to a row of gun-metal gray lateral files against the far wall. Cliff followed. Kimball pulled out one of the wide, thin drawers and extracted a large paper engineering drawing. He adjusted his glasses and bent over to make sure he had the right one, then handed it to Cliff.

“See, that’s the original drawing. ‘Advanced Photolithics, Incorporated’ right on the title block. That’s an old part. It hasn’t been changed in decades. That’s not even a CAD drawing. You can see the handwriting. Some engineer drew that by hand back in the seventies.”

Cliff looked at it. It looked identical to the one he had been provided by Morgan. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a folded copy of the drawing. He began comparing the detail of different sections but couldn’t spot anything different or suspicious. Ouyang was right that the engineer’s handwriting was quite recognizable. He folded up the drawing.

“All right, let’s move on.”

They moved back farther through some more double doors into the machine shop. Ouyang handed him some goggles and ear protectors, explaining that it was OSHA rules.

“Are you making API parts right now?” Cliff asked.

“Not at the moment. Other orders.”

As they walked, Cliff realized he had no idea what he should be looking for. There were huge machines all around, making noise and producing heat. Men were looking through some sort of window or portal in the machines. He

gathered that the quartz was being cut or polished. He thought lasers were involved, but the actual process was concealed within the machines. At the far end he could see more traditional looking shop tools like saws and drills. Most of the noise seemed to be coming from there.

"We machine to a tolerance of one micron. That's one twenty-five thousandth of an inch," Kimball declared with pride. "API uses fused quartz for the purity. Over 99.995% pure Silicon Dioxide."

Cliff noticed one nearby worker had an engineering drawing spread out on a table under a glass or plastic cover and was looking back and forth from the drawing to some controls on a machine. He walked over to that station and started to look at the drawing but Kimball rushed around in front of him and held a hand up to stop him.

"That's another customer," he emphasized. "You cannot examine their drawings. I'm sorry."

"No problem," he said, backing away, and nodded in the direction they'd been walking to indicate they could move on.

"Quartz is the perfect material for IC fabrication," Kimball continued. "Low thermal expansion, low loss dielectric properties."

Cliff didn't respond to this technical sales pitch. He subscribed to the old saw that it's better to be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt. They left the machining area and entered into what looked like a cleaning and polishing area. He watched as a batch of clear tubes was submerged in a liquid and then fed into a machine of some sort. Ouyang explained that the parts were being cleaned and vacuum packed to prevent any contamination.

The individual tubes emerged encased in plastic film and then piled by hand into cardboard boxes, separated by layers of bubble wrap. The boxes had a large KQ logo imprinted on the sides and top.

"When you make an order for these," Cliff held up the quartz ring, "how many do you make?"

"What do you mean? We make whatever the order calls for."

"I mean do you make any more? Don't you ever have any breakage or imperfections?"

"Oh, I see. Of course we do have some rejects and breakage. If the order is for five hundred, say, then we might make five hundred twenty just in case. It's too expensive to set up an entire new run just to make a few extra to fill an order, so we make a bit more. Our quality is so good, though, we never come close to needing the extras."

“So you make five twenty and maybe have what ... three or four rejects?”

“Something like that. Maybe five to ten.” He made a noise like a nervous giggle. He could see where Cliff, i.e. Dave Anderson, was going with this.

“What do you do with the extra ten or fifteen good ones?” Cliff demanded accusingly. Cliff wondered whether Kimball could be selling extras direct to the customers.

“We destroy them, of course. That’s what the contract calls for. Look, I’ll show you.” He pointed to a bin off to the side. He scurried over there like a scolded pooch. Cliff followed.

Within the bin was a mass of shattered quartz in various shapes – pieces of what looked like they’d been disks, rings, tubes, flasks, basins. Mounted next to it was a large machine with a conveyor belt and flat metal component looming over the belt. It wasn’t running, but it was obviously a crusher.

“See, we destroy everything. We’d never keep extras to sell on the side. Not API, not anyone. We’d go out of business if our customers ever found something like that, or even suspected it.” Ouyang didn’t have to be told what Cliff had been thinking.

“Do you have a warehouse? Where’s your loading dock?”

Ouyang took him into another room through yet more doors. There were large rolls of the bubble wrap and bundles of flat cardboard boxes in various sizes. There were also racks of shelving along one wall. Cliff made a beeline for that area.

“Those aren’t API parts,” Ouyang called to his back. When he caught up to Cliff he continued, “These are all generic parts. Flasks and tubes for labs and like that. You can look.”

Cliff walked up and down the rows for over twenty minutes looking into various bins and boxes but didn’t see anything that looked like the API quartz ring. One whole wall was devoted to huge quartz cylinders looking like someone had frozen a backyard above-ground swimming pool solid. Ouyang explained those were ingots, the raw material they used to make the parts. Other ingots were dinner plate size or CD diameter. He couldn’t see into the boxes on the top shelf, but he knew that Ouyang, even if he was cheating API, wouldn’t have been so stupid as to have any extra API parts on the premises when he knew an API consultant was coming. He gave up on this effort and turned to Ouyang.

“So what is your explanation why our customers are having trouble with your parts?”

"I, I, ..." he stammered in response. "Our parts are perfect. Can you bring me one or two that they say are defective? I'll inspect them myself. Maybe they're getting chipped or scratched during shipping. Maybe they open up the seal and leave them around to get contaminated."

"We have the largest chipmakers in the world as our customers. You really think they're so careless?" This story was all a fiction, of course. API's customers weren't complaining about quality, they just weren't buying from API. Cliff tried his best to sound outraged.

"I don't know. Please just bring me a defective part."

"They throw them out after they've been used. They aren't broken. They just don't last as long in the chambers as they should, or the failure rate on the chips is too high, indicating some contamination from the components."

Ouyang brightened. "Oh, that's the problem! Contamination in the chamber. Then it must be some other part. Not our rings. Why do they think it's our rings causing the problem? It could be their air filters or a thousand other things."

"I'm asking the questions!" Cliff bellowed, and decided it was time to get out. He couldn't hold his own in a technical discussion. He hadn't gotten any answers, but he may at least have put the fear of God into Kimball Ouyang. In any event, he felt better prepared for the next step.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was time to get to his lunch appointment with Sally Brolin.

Chapter 7

Ellen reviewed the criminal records checks on the pardon applicant Maureen Little. She had no record after her release from prison, not even a parking ticket. Before that, though, she had quite a rap sheet. Possession of marijuana at first, then later, harder drugs. A shoplifting charge that was dropped. That was what the state records showed. When she looked at the federal record, she discovered that the arrest on the drug dealing had been an FBI arrest. She had assumed it had been DEA or Customs since most federal drug cases were theirs. She searched the FBI online database and got a file number, but the actual serials, the documents describing the investigation and arrests, were not there. This case had been prior to the computerization of the records. There would be a paper file stored in the western state archives unless it had been destroyed.

She requested the FBI file from the archives. Those were stored in Pocatello, Idaho. Some clerk would have to retrieve it from the massive stacks, a repository that was eerily evocative of the warehouse in the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It was important for her to get as much detail about that case as possible before the applicant interview so that she could detect any lies. If Little misrepresented her involvement or tried to minimize what she had done, or flat out lied about anything, Ellen needed to write that up.

She then reviewed the records checks on Little's deceased husband, teenage son, and references. Her ex-husband had been dead for over two years, so any minor records, like traffic, would have been deleted. There were no felonies or misdemeanors found. He had worked as an elementary school principal before suffering his heart attack. Telephone interviews with his coworkers had verified that he had been a caring, hard-working man who was well-liked. He did not use drugs or alcohol according to the interviewees. One of them said she knew Maureen, who also didn't use alcohol or drugs. Clearly, drugs were going to be an important topic to explore in this investigation and this was the first input she'd gotten on that. The son had no record, but you could never be sure with juveniles. Those records could be sealed if there were any.

After reviewing all the records checks and doing another phone interview she headed out to do neighborhood checks. Little had lived in five locations during the fifteen years she'd been out of prison. Two of those were out of the area and she had already sent leads to other offices to check those. The other three were local, all in Palo Alto: an apartment where she and her husband lived for three years when they first got married, then a house where they lived until

his death, then shortly after that, the trailer park where she lived now with her son.

Ellen went to the apartment building first. It was a two-story eight-plex dating back to the 1970s. Paper cups and similar litter decorated the forlorn-looking shrubbery in the front but the stucco siding had been recently repainted a cheery sunflower yellow. The driveway to the parking area in the back was cracked and bumpy from California's constant seismic activity, probably not repaved in decades if ever. The neighborhood was decent and in a good school district. Ellen pegged it as middle-class but a bit low-rent, if that term could ever be applied to any housing in Palo Alto. When it came to housing, everything was relative in Silicon Valley. It had been ten years since Little had lived there. Unsurprisingly, the manager didn't know her. The building had changed ownership in between and records of prior tenants were not transferred from the previous owner. Ellen asked if there were any tenants still living there from that time. The manager said that an elderly woman on the second floor had been there since before his time and might know her.

Ellen walked up to the second floor and pushed the doorbell to the woman's apartment. The woman came to the door. When asked, she said she remembered Maureen, and even still ran into her once in a while at the store. This was a stroke of luck for Ellen. The FBI's policy was to verify every listed address on any application, in fact identify and verify every location where an applicant had lived and the dates even if it wasn't listed. Some applicants, the ones with problems you were charged with ferreting out, would lie about where they'd lived, often omitting those spots where they'd been evicted for non-payment of rent or arrested. If this woman hadn't remembered her, Ellen would have had to look in old city directories or somehow try to identify apartment dwellers there from ten years earlier who could do so.

"Do you happen to remember when Ms. Little moved in?" Ellen asked. She was a tad annoyed the woman hadn't asked her in, but she'd done interviews standing at the door before and would no doubt do it again.

"It wasn't long after I moved in. I think it was the next month. That would be ... May of 2000?" The old woman's voice put a question mark at the end. She was pushing eighty but stood erect. She wore a long skirt and crocheted shawl that made her look like she'd just stepped from one of Grimm's fairy tales.

"She says it was June of 2000. Could that be right?" Ellen wanted the woman to state positively what the date was, but she was lucky to get what she did, and wasn't going to get picky. Even if the application form was wrong, the

applicant might not have remembered the month that far back. It was likely an innocent mistake if it was wrong.

"If that's what it says. I remember they were here on the Fourth of July that year. Bob complained about the kids throwing firecrackers under his car." Bob was Little's husband. This wasn't exactly confirmation, but as they say, close enough for government work.

"So she was living here with her husband Bob, then?"

"Oh yes. Just the two of them. He'd just gotten a job as a teacher here and they moved in to be close to the school. They were newlyweds."

Ellen ran through the litany of standard questions about good character, debts and financial responsibility, criminal conduct and so on. The woman was able to remember the month and year Little had moved out, which matched the application. She was very complimentary and positive about her neighbor being a nice person and knew nothing derogatory. This meant less work for Ellen since there would be no negative incidents to investigate further.

"Do you know why they left?" This could sometimes be a tricky one, so Ellen was keeping her fingers crossed.

"Oh, they bought a house nearby. She still lives there. I see her at the store sometimes. She has a son now."

Oops. This didn't mesh with the application. Ellen had to follow through. "Have you been to her house? Do you have the address?"

"I was there when they first moved in. They had a housewarming. I think I stopped by once or twice after that, but not in years. We weren't that close. It was over on Louis Road but I don't know the address." Okay, so there was no particular reason this woman should know that Little had since moved.

"One last question. To your knowledge, has she used illegal drugs or abused alcohol or prescription drugs since you've known her?" The wording of this question is very specific and always required. Any use of illegal drugs is a major black mark, even a puff of marijuana, but agents could only ask about abuse, not mere use, of alcohol and prescription drugs.

"Oh she's been clean and sober ever since I've known her."

Ellen gritted her teeth. She got this response all the time. Why couldn't people just answer with a simple "No"? She knew perfectly well what the woman meant but the reality was that the word "clean" could mean she took a shower every day and "sober" could mean she wasn't drunk at the moment. If someone knew of a relapse, and didn't want to have to lie to the FBI, they could always

phrase their answer this way and if caught, claim that they never actually answered the question as asked.

“So she has never used illegal drugs or abused alcohol or prescription drugs, I take it. Is that right?”

The woman seemed irritated and pulled her shawl together more tightly. “Like I said, she’s been clean and sober ever since I’ve known her.”

Grr. Ellen was getting peeved. Whether Little had relapsed into drug use even once was important to this investigation. She had to pin it down. “I really appreciate the time you’ve taken, and you’ve been a tremendous help, but I have to clarify one thing. Our headquarters is such a bureaucracy, you know. It’s our middle name, after all.” She forced a fake chuckle. “They require us to get a very specific answer to the question about drugs and alcohol. All I need is a no answer to my original question. To your knowledge, has she used illegal drugs or abused alcohol or prescription drugs since you’ve known her?”

The woman looked quite cross now. “For God’s sake, the poor woman’s an alcoholic. She’s very open about that. She goes to AA meetings and doesn’t drink any more. She’s been clean and sober for years. Why can’t you just say that?”

The woman thought she’d been forced into saying something bad about her friend but Ellen knew this was the best answer for Little she could have gotten. Confirmation that Little had been open about her alcoholism was a good thing.

“Please don’t be angry. I really appreciate how helpful you’ve been. Please, can we do it my way? I really have to. Let’s do this one at a time. Have you ever seen her use illegal drugs?”

“No! Of course not. She’s a good mother.”

“Or abuse alcohol or prescription drugs?”

“How would I know? I never saw her drink so much as a drop. I have no idea what prescriptions she has.”

Bingo! That took care of that check box. “Thank you ma’am. That’s all I need.” Technically, the woman still hadn’t answered the question fully. Even if she’d never seen Little drink, she might have seen her blitzed out of her mind or barfing Bushmills in the gutter, but Ellen decided to claim victory on this one and retreat. The important thing was that she’d verified the address and received no derogatory information that would derail the application or cause Ellen extra work.

Ellen went on to the house on Louis Street. The tenant there said she didn't know the applicant personally, but that Little was her landlady. She mailed the check to a real estate company that managed the property so she never dealt with Little directly. Ellen was able to verify the dates on the application.

There wasn't much more to be gleaned from this woman, so she went on to the neighbors. Fortunately neighbors on one side and across the street knew Bob and Maureen Little to some extent. They thought Bob was a fine man and what a shame it had been he'd died so young. They all had positive things to say about her and their son, too, and the interviews went smoothly. Ellen asked the neighbors if they knew why Maureen had moved out, but all they got was "She found a smaller place, I think" from one of the neighbors.

In fact, Ellen was pretty sure she knew why Maureen had moved out. Once she found out that Little still owned the house but lived in the trailer park, she concluded that it was a decision made of financial necessity. Without Bob's salary, she probably couldn't afford the mortgage and taxes. The house, modest as it was, would bring at least four thou a month. Her trailer rental would probably cost half that or less.

It was nearing lunchtime and she had planned to meet Matt Nguyen and his wife Gina, an FBI supervisor in San Jose. Matt had texted Ellen that they had changed the location and asked her to meet them at B.J.'s in Cupertino. She looked at her watch and headed south.

* * *

When Ellen got there, Gina was already there. They decided to get seated and Matt could join them when he arrived. Gina took the seat looking out the window. Ellen faced the crowded interior. The noise, if not deafening, was loud enough to make conversation very difficult. Both women leaned over the table and kept asking the other to repeat. Matt showed up minutes later and sat next to Gina.

This was the first time Gina had seen Ellen since she'd returned to work from maternity leave. Gina raved about her appearance. Indeed, Ellen had by now managed to get fully ten pounds below her pre-baby weight.

Cliff usually joined the group for these monthly lunches. He had mentored both Matt and Gina as new agents years earlier. He'd directed them to work together on a kidnapping case. They had become a couple during that time. Years later, after Cliff's wife died, they introduced him to Ellen in a

schizophrenic pay-it-forward, pay-it-back sort of way. They'd all kept the monthly lunch tradition going, but due to the nature of their work, it was not unusual for one or more of them to be unable to make it. Today Cliff was the odd man out. He'd told Ellen he had to meet with a client.

Ellen's antenna, then, went up when she saw Cliff walk into the restaurant with a rather attractive woman. He hadn't said the client was woman. Of course, she hadn't asked and there was probably no reason why he should have mentioned it. Probably. Cliff and the woman entered facing away from Ellen's table and when they were seated, Cliff's back was to them just as Matt's and Gina's backs were to Cliff. The woman, though, was facing Ellen and vice versa two tables away. The woman made eye contact with Ellen for a moment. Usually Ellen would have broken off eye contact when caught looking at a stranger, but her curiosity was stronger than her sense of etiquette. Ellen didn't scowl – she had no reason to – but she maintained her gaze in what she hoped was a neutral manner. It was the woman who broke off first, looking over to Cliff and beginning a conversation.

Ellen continued to check out Cliff's dining companion throughout the meal. She was probably several years older than Ellen, she judged, maybe mid forties, but considerably slimmer and certainly better dressed. The woman did her makeup well and her auburn hair had a stylish cut with subtle blonde highlights. When the woman smiled at Cliff, which was happening a lot now, her perfect teeth almost sparkled. After some effort Ellen caught a glimpse of the woman's left hand. There was no ring.

Ellen knew she had no reason to be jealous, but she couldn't help feeling the green monster nip at her heart just a little. She'd been staring at the woman so much that finally Matt asked her what she was looking at. Embarrassed, she told him that she'd just been trying to get the attention of the waiter for more water. She blushed when she realized her water glass was more than three-quarters full. She quickly guzzled most of what was left.

She forced herself not to look that way for the next ten minutes, and concentrated on finishing her lunch and listening to her two friends. When she'd finished and they were waiting for the check, she found herself staring at the woman again. The woman caught her doing so once again, and this time didn't break off eye contact. Cliff was laughing and having all too good a time with this woman, but now she was looking at Ellen. Why was this woman staring back? Ellen had her reasons, but the woman didn't know her from Adam. Or was it Eve? Ellen knew that with her height and broad shoulders she could seem

intimidating to some people but she didn't care. The lady darn well better not try anything with her man.

Cliff and the woman finished up their meal first. The woman picked up the check. Ellen saw this as a good sign. If Cliff was on the prowl, which of course he wasn't, she told herself, he would have picked up the check. This must really be a client. After signing the credit card slip, the woman returned her gaze to Ellen, who now felt chagrined at the heavy scrutiny she had subjected the woman to. This time Ellen broke off the eye contact. The check came to Ellen's table and they were figuring the split when Ellen noticed Cliff and the woman leaving. Ellen threw her share into the pot, which Gina was calculating.

Suddenly, Ellen saw the woman returning, without Cliff, and making a beeline for their table. She had something small in her hand. A piece of paper maybe. She came right up to Ellen as though they were old friends.

"So good to see you again," Brolin said to Ellen. "You must give me a call sometime. Sorry I have to run. Here, I've changed my number." She handed the slip of paper to Ellen, who sat dumbfounded and unmoving. The woman dropped the paper in front of Ellen and left hurriedly, looking back with a "Ta ta."

"Who was that?" asked Gina. Matt was looking around to watch the woman retreat.

Ellen didn't answer. She unfolded the paper, a B.J.'s napkin, and read it.

He's just a business associate. I like your look and I think you're feeling the same way. Call me. I'm Sally.

A telephone number completed the message.

Ellen could barely keep from laughing. Here she'd been jealous of this woman (she finally admitted to herself) for whatever designs she might have had on Cliff and all this time the woman was taking Ellen's interest as something entirely different. In the past, Ellen had had a bit of a butch look, with very short hair and a muscular, almost masculine, build. She'd been mistaken for a lesbian before and always felt insulted, but that was always by men. She'd interpreted it as her being unattractive. This was the first time it had been by a woman. Her own insecurity about her femininity had been a bugaboo before, but that had disappeared when she'd married Cliff.

Cliff must not have picked up on Sally's orientation, either, she decided. He'd been having too much fun. Ellen knew that look, that laugh. He might not have been consciously flirting but he'd sure as heck thought Sally was flirting with him and he was loving it. That dog! Oh, this was too precious.

“Earth to Ellen,” Gina went on. “Are you with us? Who was that woman?”

“Sorry. I would have introduced you but I forgot her name. Sally somebody, a business associate of Cliff’s. She looked so familiar but I couldn’t place her.” Ellen thought about letting Gina and Matt in on the joke. They’d certainly enjoy it, but it was just too personal.

“You looked like she’d served you a subpoena,” Matt volunteered.

“No, no. It was nothing. I was just embarrassed I couldn’t remember her. If we all run into each other again, I’ll introduce you.”

Matt and Gina accepted the answer and after paying the bill they all split up to complete the government’s business.

* * *

That evening after dinner when Tommy was quiet Ellen asked Cliff casually how his business lunch went.

“Fine.”

“Fine? That’s all? You usually like to talk about your business lunches. Your clients take you to nice places while we government humps have to eat at the taco stand.”

“Since when have you eaten at a taco stand?”

“I like tacos.”

“Don’t we all.”

“So are you going to tell me more? What did you eat?”

“A tuna sandwich, I’ll have you know. I even took the mixed vegetables instead of the French fries. I’ve been a good boy.”

“Who’d you eat with?” Ellen managed to keep the tease out of her voice.

“It was a client lunch like I said. Lawyer stuff.”

“Mm-hmm. Lawyers. What law firm?”

“They worked in house at the client. Not with a firm.”

“‘They’? So there were several lawyers besides you?” Ellen knew Cliff was a stickler for grammar and would never refer to one person as “they.”

“Just one, actually,” Cliff replied, on guard now. “Why? What piqued your interest all of sudden?”

“Maybe it’s the fact that you’re bending over backward to avoid telling me how many were at the table and whether ‘they’...” she paused for dramatic emphasis, “were male or female.”

“Oh come on. You have to be kidding. You’re jealous of someone when you don’t even know whether it was male or female?”

“I’m not jealous at all, love. I trust you implicitly. I’m just wondering why you’re blushing and still avoiding the question.”

“I’m not blushing,” Cliff almost shouted, and of course felt his cheeks burn as he did so. “And I’m not avoiding anything. She happened to be woman. So what?”

“‘Happened to be a woman’. Hmm. Quite a happenstance. Was she pretty?”

“You’re not serious. Now you want to know if she was pretty?”

“Very good. You got that from the fact I asked if she was pretty. Still dodging my questions, I see. She must have been a knockout of a young lady.”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t call her young or good looking at all. She was older than you.”

“What?!! So now I’m an old hag?” Ellen realized she’d set herself up for that. This wasn’t quite as fun as she’d intended. She resolved to finally color her hair. She was tired of being mistaken for Tommy’s grandmother, anyway.

“No, no. That came out wrong. I meant, you were acting all jealous thinking I was out with a younger woman and I just meant that I already have a young beautiful wife so why would I go for an older woman.”

“Good save.” She paused to see if Cliff had more to add, but when he didn’t, she went on. “So she wasn’t good looking, then? Not one of those slim, fashionable cougars with auburn hair and blonde highlights?”

“I wouldn’t describe her that way,” Cliff said nervously. This was hitting uncomfortably close to the mark. Was she psychic?

“And she didn’t flirt with you ... have you laughing at her repartee?”

“Don’t be silly. It was strictly business. We were sober as a judge.”

“Some of the biggest souses I’ve known have been judges. Lechers, too.”

“Speaking of judges, how’s that case of yours going ... the one ...” Cliff trailed off when he realized he couldn’t think of any of her cases. She had only been back to work a few days and he didn’t even know which of her old cases still were open and assigned to her.

“Uh uh. Not going to work. You should know better than to try to change the subject. You’re obviously hiding something. Come on. You called her old. How old? Older than me, maybe, but a lot younger than you, I bet.”

“Ellen, come on. You know I would never cheat on you. I had to discuss a case with a client. That happens. She’s the one the company chose to handle it, not me. She asked me to meet for lunch, not the other way around.”

“So, now we’re finally getting to the truth. You’ve avoided the last question, too, about her age. So, this youngish woman asks you to lunch and flirts with you and you don’t discourage her. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Cliff’s shoulders descended slowly in a gesture of defeat. “Look, I can’t help it if she was attracted to me. I didn’t encourage it at all, I swear. We just talked business. I didn’t ask for her number or anything.”

“You didn’t already have her number?”

“Uh, yeah, I did. Her work number. You know what I mean. I didn’t ...”

“But she was flirting with you then?”

“Maybe just a little, but you know, business flirting, not real personal flirting.”

“No, I didn’t know. I thought there was just one kind. Here’s what I think happened.” Ellen drew herself up and assumed as stern an expression as she could. “This forty-going-on-thirty female attorney wearing an apricot Tahari pants suit, gold hoop earrings, and black Coach pumps takes you to B.J.’s – hah! You think that name was a coincidence? – and throws herself at you while you lap it all up. Then you try to hide it from me.”

The ferocity with which she spewed out this accusation had Cliff reeling at first, sputtering a completely inept defense, but as Brolin’s description became more specific it began to dawn on him what was really happening. Or what he thought was really happening.

“Wait, you were there?” he stammered. “I thought you and the Nguyens were going to Erik’s Deli.”

“They changed it.”

“Look, then you know nothing happened. We talked and went our separate ways. Okay, maybe she came on to me a little, but I totally ignored that stuff.”

Ellen pulled out the napkin with Brolin’s number on it. “Explain this!” She was still keeping a straight face.

Cliff looked totally befuddled at first. He turned it around ninety degrees both directions. He even pulled out his cell phone and checked Brolin’s cell number. It was hers all right. “Where did you get this?”

“Did your buddy Sally go back into the restaurant just as you guys were leaving? I saw you stealing some of her fries, by the way.”

“Yeah, she did.” He ignored the gibe about the fries.

“She came over to our table to deliver this!”

“Wait! What?! She had the hots for Matt? And hit on him in front of his wife? That’s crazy. He’s ten years younger than she is and, no offense, but he’s a skinny little guy. If she’d done that, Gina would have disassembled her limb by limb. Or him, if he’d encouraged the woman. Tell me what really happened.”

“Dipwad. She hit on ME! She gave that napkin to me. I was staring lasers at her all lunchtime because I thought she was flirting with you. She took it the wrong way, apparently.”

“Hit on you?! You mean she’s ...”

“Gay as a maypole. And you thought she was flirting with you.” Ellen began giggling, then laughing out loud. She was only able to talk in half sentences she was laughing so hard. “I don’t know how ... I managed to keep it in.” Finally catching her breath, she lowered her voice doing her best Cliff Knowles impersonation. “‘I can’t help it if she was attracted to me.’ ‘Maybe she came on to me a little.’ ‘Matt’s a little guy; she could only be attracted to big stud Cliff Knowles.’”

By this point Cliff was blushing to his hairline. He was both embarrassed at this revelation of his own male ego and relieved that Ellen was neither mad nor distrustful. He tried to find the humor in it but couldn’t carry off a real laugh.

“Kennedy, you will pay for this one day. I swear. That was positively sadistic.”

“Oh, be a sport. It was funny. Were you sucking in your stomach the whole time you were eating? That must have been painful.”

“Did Gina and Matt see it?”

“Relax. No. They never even saw you. They were facing out the windows. When Long Tall Sally came over and gave me the note, I told them she was a business acquaintance of yours. Which is the truth, ‘as it happens’.” She lowered her voice again for the final phrase.

Cliff picked up the note again. After rereading it two more times he looked up at Ellen, who still had tears in her eyes from laughing, and said, “I like your look and think you’re feeling the same way.” He pulled her to him and kissed her hard on the lips. She yielded to him immediately.

Any thought she might have had of being unattractive left her brain in an instant. *Sorry, Sally. You’re not my type.* The path to the bedroom was soon littered with items of apparel.

Chapter 8

Cliff spent the next day visiting the Vespel seal manufacturer in Menlo Park using the identity of Dave Anderson, consultant from KE Solutions. The visit went much as the previous visit at the quartz part company. The general manager spent much of the time extolling the virtues of Vespel. When he mentioned lubricity Cliff grinned, thinking of his previous conversation with Ellen. The GM gave him an odd look, but Cliff didn't explain.

There was one significant difference on this visit, though. When they came to the manufacturing area, there was a production run going of that very same API seal. The company had planned it to coincide with the consultant's visit. The GM wanted to demonstrate that the seal was made to exact specifications and with excellent quality control.

Cliff stood there for some time as the machines cranked out the seals. They were rectangular with beveled edges and rounded corners, reminding him of a car valve cover gasket. The GM had his copy of the API engineering drawing and spec sheet laid out on a table. He pulled one of the finished seals from the conveyor belt and brought it over for Cliff's inspection. He laid it on the drawing and invited Cliff to compare it to the one he had brought. Cliff did so and couldn't see any difference. Since he had no instruments or expertise, he had no way of testing the quality of the product, but he didn't care about that.

"Where do you keep these drawings normally?" Cliff asked. "You don't need them here on the floor. Everything's automated once you program it in. Do you keep them secure?"

"Of course. No one could steal your drawings from us, if that's what you're thinking. They're kept under lock and key except when we're using them."

"That's exactly what I'm thinking. Show me."

The general manager, a short, bespectacled man named Leon Tatum and shaped rather like a tater, sighed audibly. He led Cliff back into the engineering area.

"The drawings are kept in these metal bar-lock cabinets," Tatum explained impatiently. During the day our personnel are constantly going in and out of them as needed, but after hours they're locked both with the built-in cabinet lock and with this bar lock and military-grade padlock."

"Are the API drawings segregated? Not everyone needs to have access."

“They’re alphabetical. All the API drawings are in that first cabinet. I think we make about two dozen different parts for API.” Tatum’s growing annoyance was evident in his voice.

Cliff strode over to the first cabinet and quickly opened the drawer labeled “Adapt – American.” “I don’t see Advanced Photolithics here,” Cliff declared accusingly.

“Hey,” Tatum object, “you can’t just go looking in our files. We have other clients, too. They ...”

“I didn’t look in any files. I just looked at the folder labels. So where are they? Just lying around unsecured?”

“We file them under API, not Advanced.”

Cliff immediately opened the next drawer down, labeled “Ampex – Arrista.” A row of large manila folders with “API” labels was evident right in the middle. He started to reach for one, but Tatum slammed the drawer shut.

“I told you you can’t do that. If you want an API file, ask me for it and I’ll get it.”

“Where’s the file folder for this drawing?” Cliff demanded, holding up the shop drawing for the seal.

Tatum stepped between Cliff and the cabinet and began to open the API drawer slowly, pushing Cliff back with his Kardashian-sized butt. “Give me some room, Mr. Anderson, would you please?” he snapped.

Cliff pushed back. He topped six feet and Tatum was five six at most. Cliff had no trouble peering over Tatum’s shoulder into the drawer. That’s when he noticed something odd. Interleaved between the API folders were similar folders labeled “APIX”. As Tatum withdrew the manila folder for the Vespel seal Cliff caught a glimpse of the APIX folder right behind it. Tatum slammed the drawer shut before he could get a good look at it, but he could have sworn the last three digits of the part numbers on the APIX folder were the same as the last three of the API part number.

“Why do you have APIX folders mixed in with the API folders?” Cliff asked in as menacing a tone as he could.

“Wha... what?” Tatum stammered.

“APIX. I just saw a folder labeled APIX right next to the one you pulled out. What’s in that?” Cliff glowered down.

“APIX is another customer of ours. It has a similar name, that’s all. It’s just a filing error. I’ll make sure our librarian fixes that.” He avoided eye contact with Cliff as he spoke and turned to point to a diminutive white-haired woman

sitting one desk away. The woman, who had been watching and hearing the conversation, looked completely taken aback. Cliff took a step toward her and saw that her nameplate read Dorothy Tatum.

“Leon, are you ...” she said in a scolding voice. This was clearly Tatum’s mother.

“Be quiet, Mom,” Leon Tatum broke in. “We’ll deal with this later. Now, Mr. Anderson, I must ask you to step away. These files are not API property. I’ve shown you that they’re all secure, yours and everyone else’s.” He took Cliff’s arm and pulled him out to the central aisle away from the cabinets on the wall. Cliff was taller, but the man’s corpulence gave him a considerable mass to work with. Now that Cliff had made it down below two hundred, Tatum must have outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. His grip was surprisingly strong.

“There was an APIX file after every one of those API folders. That wasn’t just one misfiled folder. Are you making API parts for another company?”

“Absolutely not!” Tatum virtually shouted. “How dare you! If you go telling Morgan that we’re doing that, you’ll be looking at a lawsuit faster than you can count to ten. That’s slander. We make API parts for API only, period. APIX is a different company and they supply us with their own drawings and specifications. It’s just an unfortunate filing error. It should have its own section. I’ll take care of it.”

Cliff allowed himself to be led away, but he shook off the hand on his elbow. “Are their parts exactly the same as API’s parts?”

“How would I know? I can’t memorize every specification on every part we make. We make over a thousand seals and gaskets for hundreds of companies and many of them look nearly identical. Are identical. No one here sits down and compares them with other customers’. They don’t tell us what they’re used for or who the end user is. We just get a drawing along with an RFQ and if we get the bid, we make the part.”

Cliff knew that an RFQ was a Request for Quotation. A buyer from API would send a drawing, along with a non-disclosure agreement, to several vendors asking for quotes. The low bidder would normally get the contract, assuming there were no disqualifying factors.

He also knew that Tatum was lying. He was almost certain now that this APIX, whoever it was, was getting identical parts made by the same vendors API was using and selling them cheaper; further, Tatum had to know the parts were the same. But did APIX provide its own drawings? That was the question. If they

reverse-engineered API's parts, that wasn't illegal. The parts weren't patented. But if they bribed Tatum's company or Kimball Quartz to make extras when they did an API run, violating their NDAs, and sell the overage to them, then that was a different story. It was certainly grounds for a civil lawsuit and might even be a crime.

Cliff decided not to press Tatum any further. He'd gotten a solid lead already, without even talking to the chip companies. He didn't want to upset any relationship between API and its vendors. API needed them as much as they needed API. He knew what he wanted to do next. He went through the motions of completing the tour of the plant and left satisfied.

* * *

Back at the office Cliff looked for a website for APIX but came up empty. All the logical extensions like com, net, or biz, came up non-existent or landed on redirects to unrelated businesses or domain name registration sites. What kind of high-tech company doesn't have a website, he asked himself? The kind that wants to stay under the radar, he answered.

He went to the California Department of State site and looked at the business search page. There were four listings for APIX. Two were old, dissolved companies, one in San Diego was listed as "forfeited", a status he was unsure about, and the last one, APIX Technologies, Inc., as active and located in Redwood City. He copied down the address and the listed agent for service of process, Michael Deal.

He gave Maeva the data on APIX Technologies and asked her to see what she could find on the company or on Deal. He wanted to check out the company in person himself right away. Maeva was better at the online stuff than he was anyway. He headed out to get a look.

Maeva dropped what she'd been doing to get right on this. She always enjoyed investigation more than billing and clerical work. She started with Google and Bing searches but got too many hits on different people to be useful. Deal was a common name. She'd need more to narrow it down.

Maeva plugged the corporate name into an online business directory database that Cliff subscribed to and was able to come up with a telephone number and a listing that Michael Deal was indeed president of APIX Technologies, Inc. Lori Deal was listed as Vice President. The address matched the listed Redwood City address from the Secretary of State page.

She wanted to do a criminal check on the Deals, but without dates of birth, middle or maiden names, or a home address, it would be unreliable. The name Lori might be a nickname for Lorraine, Lorelei or other variant. She decided to wait until Cliff brought her more information. It was unfair to the client to burn a lot of hours running down all the possibilities. She looked up the building in the San Mateo County Assessor's online search tool. It didn't show the owner's name, but it gave a different billing address for the property taxes, presumably the landlord's. That could be Deal's home address, but it was more likely that APIX was leasing the building from someone else. She texted this information to Cliff.

* * *

Cliff drove his Tesla down the street where APIX was located, cruising as slowly as traffic would allow. He couldn't pull into the small APIX lot without drawing attention, so he continued down to the end of the block and parked at the curb across the street. He pulled out his binoculars and checked out the building. It was a one-story stand-alone structure fronting on a busy four lane boulevard. The lot in front contained four cars: a Cadillac, an older Honda Civic, and two other cars Cliff had noticed as he drove by but couldn't see from this angle because there was also a box truck in the lot blocking his view. A driveway ran around back of the building, presumably to a loading dock of some sort since the building looked like a warehouse except for the windowed area fronting the street. There was no signage visible, but the address was painted on the building so Cliff knew it was the right place.

He was looking at this building as a gastroenterologist might look at a patient. He couldn't see what was going on inside, but he could find out a lot by examining what went in and what came out. The two things he was looking for now were the mailbox and the garbage. He decided to get out and check the building more closely on foot. He was still wearing his slacks and sport coat from the morning, so he shed the coat and got a windbreaker and ball cap out of the trunk. He blended in better and the cap partially hid his face. The sunglasses he wore completed his camouflage.

He crossed at the corner and walked back on the sidewalk until he was in front of the APIX building. The shades were drawn on all the windows. That seemed odd to him since the weather was nice and the sun was on a different side of the building, not in a position to create glare inside. This was another sign that

this company was being secretive. The front door was actually a large set of wooden doors. One of the doors had a mail slot.

Shit, he thought. He wouldn't be able to peek at the mail as he might if it were delivered to a mailbox. He used his phone to make a short video of the cars and truck in the lot. He could run those plates later. He kept walking until he could see down the driveway. He could now see that there was a closed metal roll-up door on the side of the building and a dumpster against the wall just beyond it. That was good. There were no windows on that side. He decided he could chance it. If someone opened the rollup door, he could pretend to be a scavenger.

He walked up the driveway to the dumpster. The lid opened easily. Inside were large plastic bags, no loose garbage. Quickly he opened one. It was full of a fine, soft almost powdery material. He recognized it as the output from a high-quality industrial shredder. He checked the other bags, but he could tell from the feel that they were all the same. Deal was destroying every piece of paper. There was one bag that held regular trash – lunch waste, coffee grounds, broken pencils and the like, but not a scrap of paper. That cut off the other end of the creature. He couldn't see the patient's "food" and now he couldn't see the excrement.

He'd made enough progress for the day, he decided, and returned to the car. As he was walking back he got Maeva's text about the building owner. The address was nearby, so he checked that out, too. It turned out to be a property management company, which meant it wasn't tied directly to Deal. Cliff headed south to pick up Tommy at Theresa's house.

Chapter 9

Ellen, now back to the blonde she'd been as a girl, was at her desk when the packet arrived. It was the case file on Maureen Little's drug conviction. That was unusually fast, she knew, but it was an applicant case that required presidential action, and those always got priority handling.

She pulled out the file. This was the original in the old-style FBI format: paper reports with two holes punched in the top and filed with the cardboard front and back covers. Most of the file dealt with other people. Little was a relatively small player. Her boyfriend at the time was more hardcore, and his supplier was worse yet. There were dozens of people involved and most of the criminal activity was not drug dealing, but flat out robberies and extortion. It had started as a RICO case, racketeering. Ellen could see that it would take a lot of reading before she had a clear picture of what Little had done and to get familiar with the other people involved. An important aspect of her current investigation would be to find out if she was still in touch with the bad actors in the case.

Little's role was dealing drugs to her shop's clients, if you could call them that. Customers, at any rate. The entire morning was spent reading through the surveillance reports, informant reports and telephone intercept transcripts. Little's name came up rarely, but it was clear she was a willing and active drug dealer. She was also a heroin addict and alcoholic. Her so-called boyfriend talked trash about her to the others in the ring.

After lunch Ellen finally reached the FD-302s, the investigative reports, on the arrests of all the subjects. When she came to the one on Little she was immediately struck both by its length and how well-written it was. Unless someone confesses, most arrest 302s are short and prosaic. Then she glanced down at the name of the arresting agent and gaped in surprise. "SA Clifford Knowles."

The arrest had taken place in Berkeley. Cliff had lived and worked in the East Bay for a brief time when he was first transferred to San Francisco Division, she knew, but she didn't think he'd ever worked drugs. It wasn't unusual to round up agents from other squads to help on big arrest scenarios, though, so it wasn't anything to be all that surprised about when she thought about it.

She began to re-read the document. Now that she knew her husband had written it twenty-odd years earlier, it took on a new significance, a curious attraction. The report described how Cliff and a female agent were assigned to arrest Little, whose maiden name, ironically, was Smart, at her place of work

since she was considered unarmed and non-violent. Larger groups of agents were assigned to the other subjects. Little worked at a head shop in Berkeley. Officially her job was to sell the legal paraphernalia the shop displayed in its windows: glass pipes, cigarette rolling paper and supplies, hookahs, and the like. Of course, her real job was to sell drugs. Drug buyers had to know the code phrase, if they weren't personally known to her, but that code word was spread around rather far and wide. Unknown people coming in off the street without the code would be treated as though it was a legitimate business.

Cliff and the woman agent had entered right after the shop opened at noon. Junkies weren't known as early risers. Little was behind the counter. No one else was in the shop. As they approached, the two agents displayed their credentials and told Little to put her hands up. They had been told she was likely to be compliant. Little had other ideas, though, and grabbed a hookah flask from the countertop and threw it at the woman agent as she screamed "Fucking bitch!" She tried to run out the back of the shop, ducking behind a beaded curtain that separated that area. Cliff had to jump over the counter and pursue her. He literally dove and tackled her just as she was going out the back door. She'd screamed more obscenities at Cliff and began screaming "Rape!" at the top of her lungs. The female agent was on the scene right behind Cliff. The flask had hit the wall next to her head, shattered, and glass shards had cut her ear and cheek, but she was not seriously hurt.

Ellen continued to read with fascination. It had taken both agents and an unusual amount of force to subdue Little. She bit, screamed, and swore the entire time. She had a strong odor of alcohol on her breath, too. No sooner had they gotten her handcuffed and into the FBI car when she vomited all over the female agent and the car seat. Cliff had been ordered to take her to the hospital and stay there. What had been expected to be a quick arrest in the morning had turned into an all-day ordeal, capped off by having to clean the Bureau car by hand. The female agent with him had been ordered to get her cut treated at the hospital, so that last task fell entirely to Cliff. HIV was new back then, too, and usually led to a fatal case of AIDS. It was also common among drug users, so the combination of cut and vomit on the woman agent was more than a little scary even though they had no information that Little was infected. Cliff was then also responsible for writing up the whole incident.

As she read, Ellen realized Cliff was trying to highlight how violent she'd been and how she had resisted arrest and attacked an agent. It was clear he was producing paper that would support a charge of assault on a federal officer.

Ellen already knew that such a charge had been included in the initial indictment, but that Little had eventually cooperated with prosecutors and that charge had been dropped in exchange for a guilty plea on the drugs and testimony against others.

When she'd finished reading, Ellen realized she was clenching her jaw. Although Ellen hadn't been in the FBI – she was still a teenager – when this had happened, she still pictured this woman as attacking her husband, the father of her child.

She wanted to discuss this arrest with Cliff, but agents are not supposed to interview anyone who was involved in the original arrest or prosecution unless there's reason to believe they know something about the person's post-release life. Her supervisor may even want to reassign the case now that there was a potential conflict of interest. Ellen might not write up the report free of bias now that she knew Little had attacked her husband.

She finished the 302s and considered how to approach this. She went in to see her supervisor and explained the situation. He asked her how much of the investigation she had completed. When she told him it was about eighty percent done if you included all the leads due in from other offices, he told her to keep the case but to make Matt Nguyen the lead interviewer for the interview with the applicant. Ellen could still write up the final report and get Matt to sign it with her, but he'd review the report for bias himself before approving it.

Next on her list were interviews of Little's references. She called up the acting principal of the elementary school where Bob Little had been principal. That woman told Ellen that she had known Bob and Maureen for ten years and considered them salt of the earth. Once again Ellen got the line that Maureen had been clean and sober that entire time. She was well aware that Maureen had been convicted of drug dealing and was an alcoholic, but she said Maureen had not touched a drop of alcohol since she went into prison and still attended AA meetings regularly, more to support the others there than for her own sake. She said that Maureen was kind and brilliant and in her opinion would make a fine teacher just like her husband did. The woman's testimonial to Maureen's character sounded more like a eulogy than an applicant interview. Ellen took that all with a grain of salt, but at least all the boxes got checked.

The next interview was with Little's AA sponsor. His praise for Little was no less than in the previous interview. Clean and sober for fifteen years. Devotes her time to helping troubled youth. Plays the organ in the local church

choir. Raised a fine son who's an A student. Ellen was getting two very different pictures of Ms. Little, past versus present.

The third reference was something new in Ellen's experience. The reference was a nineteen-year-old busboy working in a restaurant in downtown Palo Alto. Not only that, but he had a criminal record. He'd been convicted of misdemeanor possession of methamphetamine at age seventeen and tried as an adult. Applicants typically named pillars of the community as their references – pastors, teachers, employers, cops. Why would she name a miscreant like this? There was a note on the application, put there by Little, to contact him only at home, not at work. His address was in East Palo Alto in one of the worst neighborhoods in the entire South Bay.

Ellen called the number and was surprised to have the reference answer the phone himself. Agents are supposed to do all interviews in person, but in applicant cases many of them get done on the phone where they appear routine. It's simply impossible to get most busy people to take the time to meet with an agent. The choice is usually between no interview or a phone interview, and since the agent was also required to interview all these people, it really was no choice at all. But this was no routine interview. Ellen had a bad feeling about it and decided to do it in person.

"Hello, is this Dante Johnson?"

"Yes." The voice sounded rough, older than a nineteen-year-old's voice. He was clearly African-American, a fact Ellen had already surmised from the name and address.

"Mr. Johnson, this is Special Agent Kennedy of the FBI. I need to interview you. Are you available for me to come by this afternoon?"

"What's this about?" The tone was leery but not overtly hostile.

"I need to ask you a few questions about someone applying for a federal position." Agents weren't allowed to mention that the applicant was applying for a pardon. That was spelled out in the MIOG. It was considered unjust and a deterrent to applicants if the FBI was going to spread around the fact that they had once been convicted of a felony. If the applicant had been keeping a clean life, they were entitled to keep that dark episode a secret, at least among their acquaintances.

"Is this about Mrs. Little's pardon?" So much for secrecy. "She told me to expect you."

"Well, yes, since you already know, it is."

“My shift starts at five. I can’t be late. If you can get here and be gone by four-thirty I can do it.”

“Okay, I can be there at three. Will that work for you? It shouldn’t take long.”

“That’s fine. You have my address?”

She read the one on the application and he confirmed it was still good.

“Okay, see you then, Dante. Uh, is it okay if I call you Dante?”

“Yes, Ma’am. See you then.” He hung up.

Ma’am. That wasn’t the attitude she’d expected from a drug-dealing punk from East Paly. Still, she didn’t want to go into that neighborhood alone. Contrary to movies, books, and television, FBI agents don’t have regular partners, but they tend to pair up with the same people when a second agent is needed. Since Matt had already been designated, she went looking for him first. He wasn’t at his desk.

Palo Alto was too small to have its own radio operator, but there was a small radio unit on the clerk-receptionist’s desk. Ellen walked over to it and checked to make sure it was on the South Bay channel. She keyed the mic.

“Matt, what’s your twenty?”

“Heading back. About ten minutes out.”

“Can you do an interview with me in East Paly at three?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“10-4”

Twenty minutes later Matt showed up. If he’d been much later they would have had to hurry to make the interview on time.

“I thought you were ten minutes out,” Ellen chided. “I almost had to grab someone else.”

“I got stuck behind this lady going twenty in a thirty zone. And she came to a complete stop at every roundabout even though there wasn’t a car in sight.”

“Lemme guess. Asian?”

“Watch that racist talk. Of course she was.”

“Did you cite her for DWA?”

“Driving While Asian is a racist term. I’m going to file a racial harassment complaint.”

“Right. You do that, but I’m driving.” Matt had totaled two Bureau car in his brief FBI career. His reputation for balls-to-the-wall driving was a standing target of ribbing by his fellow agents.

“Fine with me. You look ten years younger with that hair, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Ellen both resented and appreciated the comment. She thought women should be judged by their abilities and their work, especially at the office. She didn’t consider herself vain, but she reluctantly admitted to herself that she liked being thought of as younger and it was a flattering cut.

When they got to Dante Johnson’s address, Ellen turned the car around and backed it into the driveway as far as she could. It could get stripped or vandalized if left on the street, and if something went wrong inside, she wanted it to be pointed the right direction to get out of Dodge fast.

Ellen knocked on the door and the two agents were allowed in after introducing themselves. Dante greeted them wearing cheap black polyester pants and a white T-shirt. Ellen guessed that he would be donning a white busboy’s jacket of some sort at the restaurant. He was skinny and very dark-skinned. There were two girls, younger than Dante, sitting at the kitchen table, which was visible from the living room. Both were reading schoolbooks. Dante looked apologetic even though the girls were quiet.

“I have to watch my sisters until my mom gets home. She gets off at three thirty.”

Ellen began the questioning. “That’s okay. This won’t take long. Can you tell me how you know Mrs. Little?”

“I was doing drugs a lot. I got rolled up by the cops and went to court. I pled guilty cuz they gave me the choice to go to treatment, you know. No jail time. She was the counselor at the agency.”

“When was this?”

“Two years ago. She saved my life.”

Both Ellen and Matt sat up a little straighter at this. “Tell us about that.”

“I was hanging with the crew, you know. And doing meth, stealing. All that kinda stuff.”

Ellen was surprised he hadn’t used profanity. Other stoners she’d talked to would have said “shit” instead of “stuff.”

Dante continued. “So she got me straight. Like that. You know that scared straight stuff you see? She lived it. She was like me. She went to prison because of her bad choices. I was like all *no way this white lady can know what it’s like and come tellin’ me how to live*, but I was wrong. She did hard time. She got herself straight. She made me realize what I was doin’ to my family. My mom works hard.”

“Did she ever tell you how long it’s been since she did drugs?” This was Matt’s question.

“Not since she went into prison. She got clean there. She stayed clean ever since.”

“How do you know?” Matt persisted.

“I’d know. You can’t fool me. I seen too much of it. I done it. She described how it felt when she kicked.” He shuddered involuntarily.

“How about alcohol?” Ellen asked. “Does she ever drink?”

“No. She’s in AA she told me. Clean since prison.”

“You never saw or smelled anything to suggest she’d abused alcohol?”

“No, ma’am. I see a lot of drinking at the restaurant. I can tell if someone’s been drinking.”

“Would you say Mrs. Little is of good moral character and loyal to the United States of America?”

“She’s the best. Without her I’d still be hanging with the crew gettin’ in worse trouble, hooked again. Now I got a job. I’m gettin’ B’s in school. I had to take my senior year over again.”

“That’s real good, Dante,” Matt said. “You should be proud. I take it that’s a yes to Agent Kennedy’s question?”

“Yes, sir. She deserves the pardon. She done her time. She just helps people like me now.”

“What about others like you? Do you know any who have worked with her, got counseled, I mean?”

“A couple. One of them went back to the life, but the other guy, he’s straight now, too. It’s not her fault about the first guy. She really cares, you know. I didn’t think no rich white lady would really care, would really understand. I thought I’d just get some like government worker, you know what I mean. Or a do-gooder dilettante. She’s not like that. She’s real.”

Ellen and Matt exchanged glances at the word “dilettante.” The world was full of surprises. Little was anything but rich, too, but everything’s relative. To someone like Dante, she almost was. After a few more routine questions Dante’s mother arrived home. She worked as a clerk at the local Costco. At first she was upset that a car was blocking her driveway but when she found out why the agents were there, her iciness melted.

“Maureen gave me my son back to me. You two do right by her, you hear? Anybody trash talk about her don’t know what they talking about. He was a lame-ass punk until she talked sense into him.”

Dante hung his head in silent acknowledgment of the truth of that statement.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ellen answered. “We appreciate Dante’s cooperation. We have what we need. Thank you both.”

They left. It took several minutes before either of them spoke. Matt was the first. “That didn’t go as I thought it would.”

“Me neither.”

“I guess we must be ‘like government workers, you know what I mean?’”

“Guilty as charged. I’ll write up the interview.”

Chapter 10

That evening Cliff told Ellen about his day, expecting she would enjoy his description of identifying and checking out APIX. Instead, she seemed distracted. Tommy needed attention, so Cliff got dinner on the table while Ellen took care of him. Afterward, Ellen cleaned up the kitchen while Cliff did Daddy duty. It wasn't until after 9:00 that Cliff got around to asking Ellen about her day.

"I've been working on this pardon case I told you about."

"How's that going?"

"Fine. I just did a couple of neighborhoods and a reference today. I had to go into East Paly for one."

"Alone?"

"No, I took Matt with me."

"Good."

Ellen was dying to tell Cliff about seeing his 302 on Little's arrest, but she knew he would respond, probably vociferously. In order to deflect his questioning, she asked him what was next in his case.

"I have to go to Cedar City, Utah to check out another vendor."

"Cedar City?! Tim Rothman lives right near there." Ellen had worked in Salt Lake Division before transferring to San Francisco to help her sister when her husband died. Tim had been Cliff's closest friend years earlier in the San Jose office, but transferred to Salt Lake when he married and eventually retired in the area. Ellen had met Tim in Utah when he was one of the Bureau pilots there and later learned that he and Cliff had been close friends. "You have to visit him."

"I plan to. It'll be great to see him again."

"Have you called him yet?"

"No, we need to figure out when I can go. With you working now we have Tommy to consider."

"Oh, you have to go. I'll call Theresa tonight and find out her schedule. I'm sure we can work out a good time. How many days do you need there?"

"I can do the inspection in a day. I'd like another day or two with Tim if that can be worked out." Cliff sounded as apologetic as he could, knowing that it would be something of a burden on Ellen and her sister to deal with Tommy.

"Oh, and you have to do two geocaches there for your Fizzy Challenge. I've done them already, but I don't think you have those squares. They're right near there."

Ellen was referring to a particular type of geocache that held a special importance for them. They had been married at the final location for the Fizzy Challenge in Big Basin State Park. Challenge caches required the finder to complete a series of finds or other geocaching conditions before finding and logging the final challenge cache itself. The Fizzy Challenge, named for an early geocaching pioneer, was a classic one where the geocacher must find caches with every possible combination of difficulty and terrain before qualifying for the final. There were nine possible difficulty ratings and nine terrain ratings, numbered one through five, including half-steps, meaning there were eighty-one possible combinations. Ellen had completed her qualifying grid, but Cliff was well behind. They had signed the cache logbook at the wedding ceremony, but only Ellen had claimed the find on the website cache page for official credit because Cliff still had not qualified. He wasn't as rabid as she about the Fizzy, but wanted to catch up with her so he could eventually claim the find too. It was sort of an unofficial wedding vow and one he took seriously.

"Top of Rocky and Grandpa's Improbable Point. They're both right in that area. Check your grid. I think those squares are still empty for you."

Cliff first logged onto the geocaching website to look up those caches. Then he logged onto the one that tracked his statistics and confirmed that the two combinations, 4 difficulty 4.5 terrain for the first cache and 5 difficulty 4.5 terrain were still empty for him. He set his jaw when he saw these numbers. The terrain rating on both was 4.5 out of 5 possible. That meant very difficult terrain. And the difficulty ratings meant they were also going to be difficult to find once there. With his poor eyesight he didn't like tackling difficult caches alone.

As though reading his thoughts, Ellen gushed, "Don't worry about the ratings. Top of Rocky is right near where Tim and his wife live. I'll bet you can get them to go with you. That's actually the harder of the two. With three of you looking it's not that hard. They probably have a jeep or something that'll get you most of the way there. That final hill is steep, though, and nothing but a rockpile. The other cache won't be that difficult since I can give you a lifeline by phone if you need it. You're flying into Vegas aren't you?"

"I suppose. Why?"

"It's halfway between Tim's and Vegas. Schedule an afternoon return flight. You can get there in the early AM and get the cache while it's still cool, and still make it to Vegas in plenty of time. The cache is big and not a super tough find, really, although the terrain is difficult – two miles of rugged desert scrubland each way."

Cliff was gratified that Ellen was taking such an interest, but geocaching was more her thing than his. At least this challenge was. Still, he knew how much it meant to her, so he mentally bookmarked these caches as must-do tasks for his trip. If nothing else, this geocaching aspect motivated Ellen enough so that she wasn't complaining about Cliff leaving her for three days. Taking a business trip, well, that's one thing, but going for two difficult Fizzy squares – that is not something to be denied.

True to her word, Ellen called her sister Theresa and got some dates when she could take Tommy. Cliff had no excuses now. Ellen told him to call Tim right away. It was getting late in his time zone. Like any obedient husband, he complied. He and Tim couldn't chat long, since as Ellen had pointed out, it was getting late, but they worked out a time the following week that fit Theresa's schedule. The trip was set.

* * *

The next day Cliff met Brolin and Morgan at API. He briefed them on what he'd learned about APIX and Michael and Lori Deal. They were both highly interested. Neither of them had heard of APIX or the Deals. Morgan reacted predictably impatient.

"We can nail this down right now," he blurted out. "I'll call my customers and confront them with the name. They've refused to tell me where they're getting the parts, but if I give them the name, they won't be able to avoid it. That'll save me the cost of having this investigation continue."

"Not so fast," Brolin replied. "That's a start, but it won't solve the problem. Even if we know who it is, which is still just a guess, that doesn't force the clients to buy from us. We have to verify who they are, but more important, how they're able to undersell us on so many parts."

"He has a point, though," Cliff offered. "I don't see any harm in confronting a customer with the name. It could save some of my legwork."

Brolin flipped her pen absently through her fingers in a practiced motion, apparently her "I'm thinking" habit. "Okay, make the call. Put it on speaker." She pushed her desk phone over to him, but he shook his head.

"I have it on speed dial in my cell," Morgan explained. He put his cell phone on speaker and punched the dial button for one of his bigger customers, one of many local Silicon Valley chip companies. The ring echoed loudly in Brolin's office. Then it was answered.

"Howard."

“Howard, this is Ralph Morgan at API. Is this a good time?”

“It’s never a good time. What do you need?”

“It’s APIX isn’t it?” Morgan said it with confidence like there was no doubt. This was followed by a long pause on the other end.

“I knew it was just a matter of time. Okay, But you didn’t hear it from me.”

“Why? What’s the big secret anyway? Customers usually throw the names of their supplier’s competitors in each others’ faces trying to get better deals.”

“It’s part of the contract. APIX is a small company. They insisted that we not tell you guys. They said their low prices could only be maintained because they didn’t have your overhead. They don’t advertise, not even a website. They said if you found out who they were you’d harass them or file a bogus lawsuit and they’d have to raise their prices to cover the cost of fighting you. Is that what you’re planning to do?”

Cliff jotted on a piece of notepaper *Ask about Michael Deal*.

“I don’t get into that stuff, Howard. I’m sure Legal will look to see whether there’s a lawsuit there. Who is it that said we’d file a bogus suit? Michael Deal?”

“It looks like you’ve done your homework. Hey, look. It’s not illegal to sell spare parts cheaply. Your prices are – or used to be before APIX came along – outrageous. It’s about time you got some competition. If you drive them out of business and go back to your old prices, the cost of your whole system goes up. We could be looking to move to another major manufacturer for the next generation. They’re doing you a favor.”

Morgan snorted. “That’s not how I see it. So how do they do it so cheaply? They must be using substandard materials or something.”

“The parts are just as good as yours. Our yields haven’t dropped an iota. I don’t ask how they do it. I just take them at their word that they don’t have your overhead. Look, I have to go. I’ve already violated the contract with them by confirming it for you. Don’t screw me on this, Ralph, or I’ll screw you from here on out.”

“Can you send me their price list?”

“Not a chance. Goodbye.” Howard hung up.

“Good work, both of you” Brolin said. “You got us the name, and you got us the confirmation.” She looked from Cliff then to Morgan as she said this. “But he’s right. It’s not illegal to sell cheap. Cliff’s on the right track. We know

they're using our own outside vendors. So they must be paying at least as much as we do for the parts. How can they do that under our costs? They have to hire engineers to reverse engineer the parts. They would have to shop around for vendors unless they already knew who our vendors are. How'd they find our vendors? Do our customers know who our vendors are?"

"No, they shouldn't. I certainly don't tell them. And I don't tell the vendors who our customers are."

"Do we have an internal leak?" Brolin asked, sounding alarmed.

"Hold on," Cliff interjected. "We only know for sure of one vendor providing APIX parts. We need to verify that's where they're getting the other parts. If they are, then it does point to an internal leak. You could be getting hacked or it could be something else."

Cliff went on to explain that he still had to go to Cedar City to the ceramic nozzle supplier, Belcher Industries. Now that he had confirmation that APIX was the low seller he hoped to be able to confirm APIX was also using Belcher.

"Let me ask you a question," he said to Morgan. "Is Belcher – or any of your vendors, for that matter – complaining about your decreasing number of orders?"

"No, not really, now that you mention it. Nobody seems to mind. I hadn't thought about that. So you think that's because they're making up for our reduced orders by making the same total volume by selling to APIX."

"That's seems likely to me. And that also means they're charging APIX at least as much per unit, maybe more. Why piss off a good-paying Fortune 500 customer and risk a lawsuit?"

Brolin broke in. "Hold on. I don't want to send you to Utah just to confirm that Belcher is selling nozzles to APIX. I think we know that already. We need to know how APIX is doing it so cheaply."

Cliff thought about this. Sally Brolin had a good point. He could probably do just as well or better investigating APIX right here in Silicon Valley where their offices were as he could in Utah, but he really didn't want to give up his planned trip.

"Just give me a chance," he said finally. "I have some ideas. But I need to know from you exactly what you need me to find out. Are you planning to sue APIX? Or the vendors? For what exactly?"

Morgan chimed in. "Forget the lawsuits. Just find out how it's happening so we can stop it. If we have a mole we can fire him. If a vendor is breaking the non-disclosure agreement we can get a new vendor."

"I understand, but APIX is probably too careful to find that out here. I've already been by their place. It's tight as a drum. I could try to recruit an employee as a snitch there, but probably that would just result in greater precautions and warnings to the vendors. I think I'll have better luck with the vendors, especially one remote from here out of the influence of APIX and Silicon Valley. Belcher is a lot smaller than your other key vendors. You're more important to them as a customer than to Kimball Quartz or the Vespel seal suppliers. Your vendors, especially Belcher, have a lot to lose. Give me a chance to find out what I can from Belcher."

Morgan looked over to Brolin and they both nodded their agreement. Brolin spoke. "Okay, Cliff, you're authorized to do your thing at Belcher, but keep the expenses down. No ski resort bills will be reimbursed."

"It's June. And desert."

"Dude ranches. Spas. Whatever. I don't know Utah. Just keep it reasonable."

"No problem."

When the meeting ended Cliff booked his flight and car rental. He called Tim Rothman to confirm he was coming. Rothman picked up on the first ring.

"Hey, Cliff."

"Hi, Tim. Or should I say howdy? I got approval from the client. The trip's on. The offer still good?"

"Of course. The mother-in-law unit's yours as long as you like it. Better you than my actual mother-in-law."

"I'm sure she's a lovely lady."

"Don't bet on it."

"I'm paying, of course."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're doing us a favor coming to visit. We've been trying to get you out here for years."

"I know, but I'm paying anyway. Or, more accurately, my client is paying. Just figure out what a cheap hotel charges per night around there and knock off ten percent. Call yourself a bed and breakfast. The client will be delighted."

Rothman laughed. "If you say so. You finally ready to go riding?"

Cliff took a deep breath at the thought, since horses made him nervous, but he didn't want to sound wimpy. He had ridden once and managed okay. Maybe he could joke his way out of it. He mustered as much swagger as he could. "Do I need to bring spurs and chaps?"

"More like ChapStick." Rothman made a kissing sound. "You have spurs and chaps? What kind of bars you been hangin' out in, podner?"

"You know where you can stick it, chap."

"This is Utah, not San Francisco. You must be unclear on the concept."

"Hilarious. See you in a couple of days."

Chapter 11

Maeva called in to Cliff that there was a woman on the phone asking for him. "She said she used to work with you. Janet Gullo. Do you want to take it?"

"I'll take it." After Gullo came on the line, "Janet. This is a surprise. Where are you these days?"

"Knoxville. I plan to retire next year."

"You'll love it. It's worked out well for me, but you'll miss the Bureau, too." Cliff was already beginning to tire of the small talk. Gullo was an agent he'd known years ago, but she had never been a close associate or good friend.

As if reading his thoughts, she replied, "That's what they all say. Anyway, you're probably wondering why I called. Do you remember Maureen Smart?"

"The name rings a bell... wait a minute, is she the one you and I arrested in Berkeley? The wacked out head shop girl?"

"You got it. I heard through the grapevine she's applied for a pardon."

"A pardon? You're kidding me! She must have done her time ages ago. What'd she do to get incarcerated this time?"

"No, she's not in prison. She's been out since that first sentence, I guess. She's trying to get the old conviction expunged or something."

"What a piece of work. She bit me. My arm was like a pincushion from all the inoculations I had to get afterward. That was back when we were all worried about HIV."

"Tell me about it! I got hookah shards implanted in my face. Then she puked on me in the car. So anyway, I wanted to let you know. You're out there where she is. Maybe you can slip the word to the case agent to make it clear what a douche bag she is. There's more than one way to write up a 302."

Cliff's sphincter tightened suddenly with the realization of what was coming. He didn't want to hear the answer, but he had to ask the question. "Who's the case agent?"

"Someone named Kennedy. You know him?"

"Her. Yeah, I know her." For a moment he considered telling Gullo that Ellen Kennedy was his wife, but some instinct told him nothing good would come from that. "Well, she's a by-the-book type, I hear. I'm sure she'll tell it like it is."

"By the book isn't what I had in mind. The 'book' says the agent isn't supposed to take into account anything that happened prior to conviction. That's

already documented back at DOJ. I was thinking more of an agent-to-agent thing.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I see where you’re coming from. I’ll think about it. I’m really tied up with my business now, though.” From his tone of voice it was clear Cliff had no enthusiasm for the task.

“Okay. Well it’s up to you. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Sure. I appreciate it.”

This was followed by an awkward pause. There wasn’t much else to say. Cliff knew Gullo considered him either a coward or a traitor of sorts for not wanting to get involved. The woman had attacked a fellow agent! There had to be payback. It was time to teach her that the FBI has a long memory. These messages hung silently in the air, or at least in Cliff’s imagination.

“Okay, then.”

“Right. Thanks for the call.”

“Yeah. All right. Take it easy. Let me know if anything comes of it. Your secretary has my number.”

“Of course. ’Bye.”

They hung up.

* * *

That evening during dinner Cliff got tired of holding it in. He asked Ellen if she’d read the 302s on the original federal case against her pardon applicant. She looked up, surprised. Only the FBI used the term 302 for an investigative report.

“What makes you think it was an FBI case? It could have been DEA, IRS, anyone.”

“So was it FBI?”

“What difference does it make?”

Her evasion told him that she already had read his 302. “When were you planning to tell me it was Maureen Smart?”

Her scowl was answer enough, but she replied, “I wasn’t.”

“You know what she did to me? And to Janet Gullo?”

“I can’t talk about it. I was almost taken off the case when my supervisor found out I’d read your 302. I can’t even be the lead interviewer when we talk to her. Matt’s going to do that. I’m lucky he let me be present at least. How’d you find out it was her anyway?”

“I can’t talk about it,” Cliff replied, mimicking her with an obnoxious snarkiness and screechy falsetto. No sooner had the words left his mouth when he realized that was a mistake. Ellen’s eyes narrowed to slits and her nostrils flared wide enough drive a truck through.

“Then don’t,” she hissed through clenched teeth. The rest of the meal went by in silence.

Chapter 12

The glitz of Las Vegas both fascinated and repelled him but was soon left behind as he drove north on I-15. Cliff had rented a Subaru Forester for its all-wheel drive. He knew Tim's spread was up in horse country south of town and figured the roads might be taxing on a regular sedan. The temperature was over 90° but the car had good air conditioning, and that was a pretty moderate temperature for June in Nevada.

As he moved farther from the city, the roadside trash and second-rate casinos disappeared and the beauty of the open desert made itself felt. After an hour of driving, though, the visual monotony got to him and he searched on the radio for something to listen to. He settled on an AM news station. As he passed into Utah, the increasing elevation provided cooler air and better scenery. After two hours of driving he stopped in St. George for lunch. The difference in atmosphere from Nevada was immediate once he walked inside. The popular tourist destination was so squeaky clean it almost screamed "Mormon Country." The artists' haven was a jumping off point for the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park and hosted all sorts of events from rodeos to rock concerts. It also contrasted starkly with Silicon Valley in lifestyle. The light traffic and easy pace of the people in the restaurant was immediately relaxing.

On the road again, he quickly passed into a deep valley with imposing mountains looming on both sides. Zion National Park with its sandstone canyons beckoned to the east. Pine Valley Mountains rose to the west, reaching over ten thousand feet elevation at the highest peaks. If he'd been religious, Cliff would have called it God's Country.

An hour later he was pulling into Tim Rothman's driveway. Luisa, Tim's wife, was the first to greet him, coming out into the wide gravel turn circle between the house and garage. She smothered him with a big hug before he had a chance to pull his suitcase out of the car.

"Cliff, it's about time you visited us. You should have brought Ellen. She's a kick."

"If I'd wanted a scolding I would have stayed home." He gave her a tight squeeze and let her go. Cliff had been an usher at their wedding and the Rothmans had socialized with Cliff and his first wife for two years before Tim transferred to Salt Lake Division. Luisa knew Cliff had eventually remarried after his wife's death, but she knew Ellen only slightly from having met her once when Ellen worked with Tim in the Utah office. That was before Ellen moved

out to California and got together with Cliff. “Ellen had to work and take care of Tommy, too. Her sister’s helping while I’m playing hooky.”

“That’s right! You’re a daddy now. Congratulations! Better late than never.”

“I’m a slow learner. Speaking of kids, where are these little darlings of yours I hear about? And Tim?”

“Tim’s down at the barn. I’m sure he heard you drive in. He’ll be up as soon as he finishes with the horses. Come inside and meet the girls.”

She started to lead him into the house but he hesitated as his car was unlocked and the suitcase was sitting in plain view.

“Leave it,” Luisa said, sensing his reluctance. “No one’s going to steal it around here.”

Cliff reached into the car anyway and pulled out a bouquet of flowers that he’d picked up in St. George. He handed them to Luisa.

“They’re lovely, Cliff. Thank you. Let’s get these in some water.”

Cliff stepped into the house and immediately stopped short. Before him was a massive plate glass window looking out over the cantilevered patio at the valley below and the mountains beyond. Cliff hadn’t realized how much elevation he’d gained just coming up the access road. The view was quite literally breathtaking. Water was as scarce as Mormon hip-hop stars around here, which meant the lots were from five to twenty acres. Further density could not be sustained. Combined with the mountainous terrain, that meant lots of privacy. Cliff could see a few ranch houses scattered down the hillside but not a single structure in the immediate vicinity other than Tim’s own spread.

Cliff turned when he heard a soft giggle behind him. Peeking out from a hallway was a head of blond curls. “Come on, Lizzie, and get Emma. I want you to meet Cliff. He’s a friend of Dad’s.” Luisa disappeared for a few seconds and returned shortly thereafter pulling on the arm of another girl, a brunette with something electronic plugged into her ears. They were twins, but clearly not identical.

“Elizabeth and Emma,” Cliff said to Luisa. “You must be Jane Austen fans.”

“Not really, but you would be the one to pick up on that. We didn’t even realize it until after the movie Emma came out. Come on, girls.”

Both girls approached and stood waiting for instruction. Although quite different in appearance, both were beautiful, which surprised Cliff not at all. Both Tim and Luisa were good-looking.

“Hello Emma, Elizabeth. I’m Cliff. I used to work with your dad.” Cliff held out his hand. The girls took turns shaking his hand. Emma’s grip was firm and dry; Lizzie’s was neither. Both said *hi* at the same time.

“Lizzie, not Elizabeth,” corrected the smaller girl.

“Okay, Lizzie. Call me Cliff.”

“You were in the wedding,” Emma, now unplugged, declared. “You’re in the picture next to Uncle Charlie.” Tim’s brother Charlie was the best man. Cliff was the first usher and did stand next to him. The girl was sharp. Cliff had looked quite different then. Aside from the years since the photo had been taken, Cliff did not have the beard back then and he wore thick glasses. He also weighed about thirty pounds more at the time. He was amazed she could recognize him, but then maybe he been pointed out to her before.

“That’s me.”

Tim walked in from the direction of the kitchen, which also had a mud room. He was in his sock feet. “Hey big guy,” Tim said, hurrying over to Cliff. “It’s about time you came out here.”

They grasped hands and performed the traditional male ritual of trying to crush the other’s hand. Even in his state of reduced body mass, Cliff still outweighed Tim by twenty pounds or so, but Tim’s iron grip was an even match with Cliff’s.

“Your wife already gave me that lecture. Aren’t you going to offer me a beer? It is legal to drink in Utah, isn’t it?”

“I’ll get them,” Luisa said, moving toward the kitchen.

“Only three-two beer, I’m afraid. That’s all the groceries carry, but it’s Coors, your brand.”

“No problem.”

Tim led him out onto the patio as Luisa brought them some chilled beers.

“I’ll let you boys talk,” she said, and went back in the house.

“Okay, so tell me about this case that brought you out here.”

Cliff told Tim the whole story. He trusted him implicitly. He had no worries about Tim leaking or misusing the information. Tim listened intently, without interruption.

“Do you believe in coincidence?” Tim asked Cliff when he was done.

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Neither do I. Three weeks ago I’d never heard of Belcher Industries. Now it’s come up twice.”

“I’m listening.”

Tim told Cliff the story of the hit and run killing, Noah Sullivan's suspicions, the Swedish tourists, and what he'd learned from the detectives.

Cliff felt there was something chilling about the story, something beyond the mere grisliness of the death. When Tim stopped talking he sat silent for a moment and shushed Tim when he started to talk again. Suddenly, it struck him.

"Behead Me!" he cried. "That's it."

"What in blazes are you talking about now?" Tim could swear like a longshoreman, but he didn't do it in the house with the girls around.

"You said he was decapitated by the edges of the windshield glass?"

"That's what the detectives said. The Medical Examiner said that was the first time he'd ever written 'decapitation' as the cause of death."

"That's eerie. Almost ironic. He was beheaded by glass."

"Gross maybe, but what's so ironic?"

"There's a classic geocache back in my area called Behead Me. It's a puzzle cache, a riddle really. You have to solve the riddle and enter the solution as a keyword into Certitudes to get the final coordinates." He paused to make sure Tim was following. "The puzzle says:

I sometimes stand on one leg. Behead me and I stand on two. Behead me again and I stand on four. Name me."

"I don't get it. Are you supposed to guess some kind of animal. A flamingo?"

"No. I mean, yes, an animal is part of the answer, but the right answer is the first part, about standing on one leg. The animal comes later."

"So are you going to tell me the answer, or what?"

"Glass."

"Glass?" Then it dawned on Tim. Glass. Lass. Ass. You behead the first word to get the second and then do the same to the next. He visualized a wine glass standing on one leg, a thin stem. "Oh. I see. That is kinda creepy." He took a long swig of his beer. "So can you help Noah? Maybe check out this ceramics company from your angle?"

"It could be relevant to my own case. I'd like to talk to that Crazy Eddie guy, preferably before I go in for the official inspection. Do you know how to contact him?"

"Not directly, but he's supposed to be LDS. Noah probably has a way. He's here now. Let's go ask him." He rose.

Cliff followed Tim down to the barn. Two horses were in their stalls, a chestnut gelding and a bay mare. The far end of the barn already had the framing done for an extension. Sullivan and a helper were nailing boards up for the walls.

"Noah, I have someone I want you to meet." Sullivan shifted his hammer to his left hand, anticipating a handshake. "This is Cliff Knowles. He's a private detective. He worked with me in the FBI."

"Pleased to meet you, sir." Sullivan was older than Cliff, but still used the honorific.

"Call me Cliff, please. May I call you Noah?" He extended his hand.

"Okay." They shook and Sullivan looked to Tim for what's next.

"Cliff has a question to ask of you. It may relate to Brigham's death."

"I don't have the money for a private detective," Sullivan replied anxiously.

"Not a problem, Noah," Cliff said. "I'm being paid by someone else. I can't officially investigate your son's death because I'm not licensed in Utah, but I might be able to find something out about it if the cases are related."

"How can I help?"

"I heard that he was friends with Eddie Trane at work. I'd like to talk to him. Do you have his contact information?"

Sullivan thought for a moment. "That's Sarah Bloch's nephew. I can get it. Why? Is he a suspect?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. I'm just trying to find out about the company, if there was anything funny going on there. Is there anyone else Brigham might have been closer to, anyone he might have talked to about his job?"

"At work? Not that I know of. He was courting a girl. Rachel Wright. I'm sure he talked to her about his job, about pretty much everything."

"Do you have her contact information, too?"

Noah pulled out a cell phone from his pocket and pushed some buttons. He asked Cliff if he was ready, and Cliff pulled out a business card from his wallet, the only paper he had handy. He always had a pen in his shirt pocket. Noah gave him a telephone number.

"She lives with her parents. That's their number. I think she has her own cell phone, but you can reach her there."

"Is there anything you can tell me about the place Brigham worked? Was he happy working there? Was it a good place to work? The people honest?"

“He liked operating the lathe. He got along with the other workers, but he did not like his boss. I told him we have to respect our bosses, even if they’re gentile.”

Tim spied a quizzical look on Cliff’s face and explained, “Gentile means non-LDS.”

“Do you know why he didn’t like his boss?” Cliff continued.

“He said he made him do things he didn’t want to do. But that’s a normal thing for a boss.”

“What kinds of things? Something dishonest?”

“Brigham would never do anything dishonest.”

Cliff knew an evasion when he heard one. He continued to go at the question from a few different directions, but Sullivan either didn’t know of anything dishonest at Belcher, or he wouldn’t speak ill of someone without being sure.

Tim tapped Cliff on the shoulder. “Let’s go back up to the house. Noah, please get that number for Eddie Trane and let us know when you have it. Oh yes, contact Rachel’s parents, too, and see if we can interview her.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

When they got back to the house Cliff discovered his suitcase had already been brought up to the guest house and Luisa had laid out fresh fruit in a bowl on the small table. Cliff excused himself and went to unpack and take a shower. When he emerged, Luisa announced that dinner would be in half an hour. The savory perfume of Italian spices wafted through the room.

“So, are you thinking Sullivan was killed because he was making trouble at Belcher?” Tim asked.

“It’s a possibility.”

“The police said they investigated his workplace, asked about any enemies or trouble.”

“They didn’t know about APIX. What if ‘the boss,’ whoever that is, is the one doing the dirty deed there. You think any of the employees would rat him out on a potential homicide?”

“Fair point, I suppose, but is this really worth killing someone over? How much money are we talking here?”

“For API it’s millions in lost profits, but only a small fraction of that would go to Belcher. There are hundreds of vendors. If I’ve done the math right, they can’t be making much more on the knockoff parts than on the original API parts. I’d be surprised if they’re netting more than an extra twenty or thirty grand

a year from APIX. I think they'd give that up in a heartbeat to avoid risking losing API as a customer. But if Sullivan was going to go to API, or go public somehow, Belcher could lose close to a million a year in business."

"Maybe that's worth killing for, but we have no evidence that Sullivan was causing any trouble, much less going to API. Why not just fire him if he was a reluctant employee?"

"Murder does seem drastic."

They continued batting ideas around until Luisa called them to dinner. They both realized all they could do at this point was speculate. Just as they were sitting down to eat, Noah Sullivan knocked on the door and handed Tim a slip of paper with the telephone number for Eddie Trane. Tim handed it to Cliff.

Tim's daughters came tromping down the hall freshly scrubbed and found their places at the table. They looked tired, moving slowly, their faces red. Tim explained to Cliff that the girls now mucked out the barn and corral. They had to prove they were responsible enough to take care of their horses before they would get their own.

After a superb meal of lasagna, salad, garlic bread, and Chianti, Cliff excused himself once again, this time to make the call to Eddie Trane. Trane was more than willing to talk to him, since Noah had told Trane's aunt that Cliff was investigating Brigham's death. Cliff wanted to talk to him in person, and Trane agreed to meet him at a local bar if Cliff would foot the bill. Trane didn't beat around the bush about the quid pro quo.

A half hour later Cliff and Trane were clinking glasses at Trane's favorite watering hole. Trane rambled and sometimes forgot the question, but he didn't seem evasive to Cliff. He answered without hesitation, but didn't really seem all that close to Brigham. Trane was over forty and Sullivan was just out of high school. They played basketball at lunchtime, just shooting hoops, playing HORSE. He didn't know about any trouble or enemies Brigham might have had. Brigham got yelled at by Mr. Belcher sometimes, but everyone did. Belcher was a tough boss, but fair. He knew Brigham had a girlfriend, but he'd never met her.

Cliff decided to switch tacks. "Have you heard of a company called APIX?"

Trane was momentarily befuddled at the question. He was working on his third whiskey sour. "Yeah, that's one of our customers. We ship parts to them all the time. What's that got to do with Brigham?"

"Probably nothing. Did Brigham make APIX parts?"

“I don’t know. Any part that needed to be on a lathe he probably worked on.”

“Do you ever see the drawings for APIX parts?”

“No. I don’t open the mail. The drawings are all in the office. But that’s funny you ask.”

“Why?”

“When I first started here we used to get a lot of drawings in the mail. Now hardly any. APIX is almost the only one.”

“How do you know that? If you don’t see the mail, I mean.”

“The tubes. The blueprints are pretty big and they’re not supposed to be folded, so they’re rolled up and mailed in those cardboard tubes, you know. A lot of customers used those before, but I think they must send ’em over the Internet now because we hardly see any. I empty the trash so I know. Almost all the tubes now have APIX labels. Is there something wrong with APIX?”

“You tell me.”

Trane just shrugged and drained his glass, looking at it forlornly. Cliff got the message and went to the bar to get a refill. When he returned he repeated the question.

“I don’t know nothin’ bad. APIX is just another customer. You still haven’t said what this has to do with Brigham.”

“Nope, I haven’t. It’s probably best you don’t tell anyone at work about this conversation.” With that he got up and walked out, leaving a couple of twenties on the table. He had gotten very little of use from Trane, but that part about the cardboard tubes seemed odd. As he had told Rothman earlier, he didn’t believe in coincidences. There had to be a reason why they provided paper copies when the rest of the industry didn’t. His gut told him it was significant.

Back at the Rothmans’ he and Tim went over Tim’s plans for the barn and two new horses. They joked about old times. Tim reminded Cliff about the time Cliff was introducing Tim around as a newly arrived agent and when Cliff walked him into the lobby of the Stanford Police Department and asked to see the Chief, the attractive young woman at the desk asked who Cliff was. When Cliff, in his suit and tie, had shown his credentials, she blushed and said “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t recognize you with your clothes on.” This of course had caused Cliff to blush an even deeper shade. He had had a hard time convincing Tim the mistake occurred because Cliff and a couple of the other agents were allowed the courtesy of changing their clothes in the police locker room to jog on campus. They would come to the side door without coat and tie and press the button,

whereupon the desk duty would view them through the camera, and buzz them in. The process was repeated when they returned after their run in their running clothes. The woman was used to seeing Cliff in running shorts through a fisheye security camera lens, not in his suit and tie in the lobby. They laughed long and hard over that one. It sure felt good to relive those times.

Chapter 13

Cliff was met in the lobby by Richard Belcher, the President and General Manager of Belcher Industries. Cliff was again using the identity of Dave Anderson of KE Solutions. Belcher immediately launched into a sales pitch about how important API's business was to them and how much they valued customer satisfaction. Cliff waved off the blarney and said he had no interest in a tour.

"Let's go into your office," he suggested. They entered the office and Belcher offered him coffee, but Cliff refused. When they got settled he began. "How many different parts do you make for API?"

"Over a dozen. I think it's fifteen or sixteen now."

"And your billings? How much do you gross from API?"

"Over three million a year. You probably know the exact figure. I don't offhand."

"That's about to end. If you and APIX are going to continue ripping us off, we're going to another vendor."

Belcher stood stunned for a moment.

"APIX? Why, what ..."

"Come on Belcher, let's not play games. We know what your little scam is. You're about this close to being cut off by API. You're selling our parts to APIX, our competitor. You've violated the non-disclosure agreement." He held his thumb and forefinger a half-inch apart.

"Th- that's not true. We would never do that."

"Prove it! APIX doesn't even provide you drawings. You use API drawings to make their parts. That's why they're underselling us. You're saving them the engineering costs."

"No, no, no. They send us drawings just like every other customer. They send us drawings, we bid, they order, and we fill it. The same as with everyone else."

"I don't believe you. Show me an APIX drawing."

Belcher spluttered for a few seconds but then regained his composure. "Now wait a minute. I can't do that. I can't show you their drawings just like I can't show them your drawings. Who do you think you are, anyway?!"

"I think I'm the man who's holding your API business in his hand and I'm about to yank it."

"Just wait. Let me think." Long pause. "Okay, okay, let's do this. Follow me. I can show you an APIX drawing." He led Cliff over to some dingy beige

four-drawer file cabinets that looked even more dilapidated than the ones in Cliff's old FBI office. He motioned for Cliff to come over and look, which he did.

Belcher pulled a drawing slightly out of a manila folder, revealing only the lower right corner, where the title block showed the APIX logo and engineer's name and date along with other data in a grid-like box. The part was a ceramic disk. Cliff didn't recognize the part, but he recognized the part number as being the same format API used. Belcher immediately shoved it back into the folder.

"See," he exclaimed, "just like I said."

"Show me this one," Cliff replied, pointing his finger to the same part number he'd mentioned before, the nozzle. "We know APIX makes it too." He read off the part number with the format APIX used.

Belcher nervously complied, riffling through the folders until he came to that part number. Again he edged the corner of the drawing out. Cliff grabbed it and yanked it from his hand.

"Hey! You can't ..."

"I knew it. It's a photocopy of the API drawing." Cliff pulled out the blueprint of the original nozzle. "Explain that!" He pointed to a feature on the upper right of the part drawing.

The nozzle was one of the oldest parts API used and the original blueprint had been hand-drawn by an engineer. He had made notes in the right-hand portion in his own handwriting. The APIX drawing had the identical notes in computer text, but they had been cut out on paper and taped over the handwritten notes, then photocopied. The tape job hadn't been perfect. You could still see bits of the original handwriting around the edge where the paper hadn't quite covered it.

"Oh. I'd never noticed that before. It does look like it was pasted over the API drawing, now that you mention it."

"And that. And that." Cliff pointed out two more places where it was an obvious photocopy. In fact if you looked carefully, you could see where the center portion of the drawing, containing the drawing itself, had been cut out and taped onto a large blank sheet containing only the border and the APIX title block. The center portion was slightly darker and you could see the faint outline of the tape where that portion had been affixed to the border. The line quality was fuzzy and the handwriting was barely legible. It was obviously a poor quality photocopy.

"I see what you mean, but it's not really a copy," Belcher huffed. "It's very close, but the dimensions are different. He pointed to one of the measurements. On the API drawing it read "0.2 mm". On the APIX drawings that was whited out and in a different hand was penned "0.199 mm." "This is a different part from API's."

"Bullshit!" Cliff bellowed. "That's a fake change made just to try to make it look different. A thousandth of a millimeter? Get real. Even this part doesn't need a tolerance that fine. I bet your fabricators wouldn't even try to meet that spec. They'd just set their machines to zero-point-two. In fact, I'll bet your machinists don't even use this drawing. It's just for show, for someone like me, so you can claim they sent you a drawing. You just take APIX orders right out of the same inventory bin you take the API ones from."

"No, no. We don't do that. I mean, our men aren't supposed to do that. If they do, it's a mistake. They should make a new batch just for APIX using the APIX drawings."

"You're a terrible liar. 'Not supposed to... if they do....' We both know they do. You've known from the start these drawings are photocopies of API drawings. You'd have to be blind not to. That's it. You're toast." Cliff knew it was a bluff since he didn't have the power to cut Belcher Industries off. API needed the parts to fulfill orders from its customers and didn't have another supplier in its back pocket. He locked eyes with Belcher. This was high-stakes poker.

Belcher caved.

"Okay, okay. We'll stop selling to APIX. As of right now. I'll call the president. You can listen. Please don't cut us off. API is almost half our business."

"That's not enough. I need to know how the whole scheme works. Who do you deal with?"

"Michael Deal. He's the president."

"Go on."

"I thought it was legit at first. He said he was a subcontractor to API and supplied some parts to them, but they had to use a 'clean channel' to avoid some tax and labor issues. He said he was licensed to use their drawings as long as he redid them with his own logo."

"So you knew these were copies of API drawings."

“Of course. You’d have to be an idiot not to recognize them as the same. But I thought he was selling them to API. I thought it was some way to avoid union labor issues.”

“When did you realize APIX wasn’t selling to API but in competition with them?”

“I didn’t, not really. I didn’t know where they were selling them.”

“I told you to cut the crap. You had to know.”

“I figured it out. Deal kept telling me not to mention this to API, that it would destroy the clean channel and result in losing the contract.”

“How much did APIX pay for the parts?”

“Five percent over what we charge API.”

“And what’s your profit margin on the API parts?”

“About five percent.”

“So your gross profit from APIX was ten percent of the price of the part, double what it was for API.”

“More or less. But APIX only gave us drawings for five or six API parts and their overall volume is only a tiny fraction of API’s. I can live without APIX’s business. I can’t lose API.”

“The drawings are ripped off. I can tell you right now that APIX does not have permission from API to use its drawings. It has no business relationship with API whatsoever. If you make or sell another part to APIX you are committing a crime, a theft of intellectual property, and you’re violating your NDA subjecting you to treble damages and a lawsuit, including liability for attorney’s fees.”

“We’ll stop. I told you. I’ll call him right now.”

“Go ahead. Put it on speaker. And ask him where he’s getting the drawings.” Cliff’s adrenaline levels were spiking now. He’d broken the case wide open. He was about to nail the bastard. He pulled out his phone and hit the video record app.

Belcher placed the call and was put on hold by Deal’s assistant. Deal took the call after two minutes.

Deal: Richard, how are you?

Belcher: Not good. I just got paid a visit by API.

Deal: So, what’s the problem?

Belcher: They told me you don’t have a license to use their drawings. They said I have to stop selling to you.

Deal: Of course they're going to say that. They have to keep the channel clean so the union doesn't force them to bring the work in house. But they really want the parts to keep flowing through us.

Belcher: That's not what they're saying. They say I have to cut you off or lose their business.

Deal: They can't do that. That's unfair competition. I'll sue them.

Belcher: That's up to you, but I can't keep supplying you. Where are you getting the drawings, anyway?

Deal: I told you. API gives them to me. It's all legit. At least send me all your stock in the parts we've given you drawings for.

Belcher: I can't. Sorry.

Deal: Who is it you're dealing with there, anyway?

Belcher: Dave Anderson. He's a consultant working for Ralph Morgan.

Knowles: Deal, this is Anderson. We're onto you now. We're coming for you. If you know what's good for you, you'll cut your losses now and close up shop.

Deal: We're a legitimate business, Anderson. You're going to regret this. My lawyers will be all over your ass. [Phone call ends before Cliff can reply.]

Cliff almost danced in his chair, he was so full of energy. He asked Belcher to send Morgan all the correspondence, contact information, drawings, and order information he had from APIX or Deal. Belcher agreed to get it together for him and have it shipped or emailed within the next two days. Cliff thanked him for his cooperation. He put the APIX nozzle drawing in his briefcase and stood.

"So we're good with API now, right?" Belcher implored as Cliff started to leave.

"That decision can only be made by Morgan, but I don't see any reason why not. I'll make clear you've cooperated fully."

As they walked out the door of Belcher's office, Eddie Trane was standing there waiting to talk to Belcher. He did a double take when he saw Cliff. "Whoa, Mr. Knowles. I didn't know you were coming here. You find out anything more about Brigham? Was it really an accident?"

Belcher blanched and looked at Cliff. "Knowles? What is this? Who are you?" then after a pause, "Show me some ID."

Just when everything was going great, some moron has to screw it up. "I'm just who I said I was, the guy who holds API's business in my hands. I'll have Morgan call you to confirm it. I don't know what this guy is talking about."

Cliff strode out purposefully before he could be called upon to explain further. Belcher was right on his heels demanding to know what this had to do with Brigham Sullivan's death. Cliff ignored him and dialed Morgan on his phone. By the time he got to his car he had Morgan on the line.

"Ralph, it's Dave Anderson. We got APIX cold. They're supplying Belcher with stolen API drawings. Belcher's been completely forthcoming and told us the whole story. He called Deal with me there and told them he was going to stop doing business with them. I have it all recorded. I talked to Michael Deal myself and told him to close up shop. Tell Belcher here that if he's true to his word and stops selling to APIX, you won't cut him off like you were planning to. Here, I'm handing him my phone."

Cliff couldn't hear what Morgan said to Belcher, but from Belcher's obsequiousness, all "yessir" and "no sir," it was clear that Morgan was backing him up.

Belcher handed Cliff the phone but stood his ground. "I want to know what he meant when he called you Knowles. What do you know about Sullivan's death?"

Cliff got in his rental car and rolled down the window and said, "I think that employee of yours must be nuts. Be sure to send Ralph all that stuff." He rolled up the window and drove away.

Chapter 14

Ellen and Matt drove up to the visitor's parking area in the Palo Alto trailer park nestled not so cozily between Highway 101, Arastradero Creek, and a string of auto body shops. This facility did not house the double wide luxury mobile homes or even the single wide you see in the high-class parks. People here were living in true trailers, the kind you pull behind a pickup and use for a camping weekend.

When they located Maureen Little's residence, it was larger than most, a fifth wheel, designed to fit over the truck bed, cab, and towed behind. Ellen was surprised to see it was freshly scrubbed and shining like a medal of honor. Perhaps that is what Ellen thought of because of the red, white, and blue bunting decorating the outside. A little early for the Fourth of July, but what the heck. There was a good-sized planter box outside the front door boasting cheery asters and dahlias. There were colorful curtains in the window and even the cracked pavement around the trailer was spotless.

Little invited them in and they sat at a tiny fold down table, all three of them close enough to hold hands. She offered tea, but the agents declined. Ellen had seen a mug shot from twenty years earlier, and a recent drivers license photo of Little, but the woman didn't much resemble either. It was she, no doubt, but looking much better. Ellen ran through the mental checklist she would put in a criminal 302, a white female, early forties, blue eyes, brown hair mixed with gray, 5' 5", 145 pounds. This was fine for fugitive work, but it didn't really describe the woman, she knew. Little looked like a typical suburban housewife: pleasingly plump, wearing new slacks and a clean, ironed oxford shirt. She had a nice smile and was well-groomed, with neatly combed hair and tastefully done minimal makeup. Ellen had no doubt Little had prepared for the interview and was determined to put on her best face, and it showed. There was nothing wrong with that, of course. It spoke well of the woman, but it didn't mean she was squeaky clean in other respects.

"I want to thank you," Little blurted out as soon as the introductions had been made.

Ellen kept silent since Matt was the lead interviewer. "We're just doing our job, ma'am," he replied. "You applied for a pardon and we investigate all pardon application cases that are referred to us."

“Oh, I didn’t mean you two specifically. I meant the FBI as an institution. Thank you for arresting me and sending me to prison. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Ellen and Matt exchanged skeptical glances. “How do you mean?” Matt replied.

“I was out of control. Drugs had taken over my life. I was a damn stupid kid who needed straightening out. Federal prison got me clean and straight. I don’t know what I would have become if you hadn’t caught me. I’ve had a good life – a wonderful husband and a bright, healthy son.”

“We’re glad to hear it,” Matt said sincerely, although without a lot of faith in Little’s assurances. “We already know a lot about your background. Let’s start with why you want a pardon.”

“I’m a drug counselor now. It’s rewarding work and I help a lot of people, but it doesn’t pay very well. My husband was a principal at a local elementary school and we could get by with our combined salaries, but not anymore. I want to teach school. As a convicted felon for drugs, by law I’m not eligible to teach in the public schools. A pardon would wipe the conviction off and I’d be eligible. Teaching doesn’t pay well, but it’s more than what I make. We could get back in our house again.”

“Your house?” Matt had not read all the prior investigation write-ups.

“Yes, after my husband died I couldn’t afford the mortgage. I either had to sell or rent the house. Rents are so high right now, I could make enough money renting it out to support my son and me if we lived here.”

As Matt went over Little’s life story, Ellen looked around at the tiny abode. There wasn’t room for much decoration, but pictures of her husband and son sat on the few surfaces that were available. Books were stacked on a bunk. There was no TV, but a laptop was visible on top of the small refrigerator. She noticed that Maureen had a small cross on a chain around her neck. So she’d gotten religion – or wanted them to think so. She remembered one of the interviews said she played the organ in church. Little, while still maintaining eye contact with Nguyen, slipped the necklace back into her shirt, out of sight. Either she was watching Ellen from the corner of her eye or she was genuinely trying to avoid displaying the cross.

As the interview progressed, Maureen talked more and more about her son Peter. He was now thirteen and deserved to live better than crammed into a trailer on the edge of a freeway across from a ghetto. He got his lunches through the subsidized lunch program at school. She had to serve him cheap food – a lot

of rice and beans and noodles, starchy food. They weren't vegetarian, but meat was a scarce commodity on their table. He was so skinny because she couldn't afford to feed him properly. She was a good teacher. She knew she could do a good job at the school. She was a top student in college and already had her credential. She just couldn't use it. The school had already offered her a job as soon as she got the pardon. Soon her eyes moistened and then the moisture became a flood. Tears ran down her cheeks in torrents.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't want ..." she blubbered. "I just ... It's for Peter. He's a good kid, really he is. All A's in school. If it was just me ... I deserve this. I made my choices. But Peter ..."

Matt squirmed uncomfortably as Little collected herself. When she finished crying and blew her nose he asked, "Where is Peter?" School had ended a week earlier.

"I had a friend take him for an hour, to play board games and get some ice cream. That's long enough, isn't it? If you need more time, I can call her and have her keep him a little longer."

"That's fine. We'll be done soon."

But Matt was wrong. He delved more deeply into what she had done with her life since getting out of prison. It was quite a story, a tale of Narcanon and AA, of minimum wage jobs, of reconnecting with her estranged parents, now deceased, of meeting her husband in a blind date set up by a friend, of the joy of Peter's birth, of her husband's early death from a heart attack. He cross-examined her about individuals from her Berkeley days, but she steadfastly denied having anything more to do with any of them after she went into prison.

"The pardon isn't just for me, or even for Peter," Little declared after a bit. "It would be a public service to the schools. You know what a starting teacher makes here? Fifty-one thousand a year, gross. That might be fine in Peoria, but not here. My house isn't a fancy house, or big, but it rents for forty-nine hundred a month. That's more than the gross pay of a teacher. The cheapest houses cost over a million dollars to buy. The schools here can't get teachers. High-tech firms hire away anyone under thirty who's competent at double the salary. The full-timers who are here are old-timers who are just hanging on for the pension and the rest are subs or first-year graduates commuting an hour or more each way. The kids are getting a raw deal without regular teachers."

Ellen was writing notes furiously when the door flew open. A teenage boy stood there looking surprised. This was obviously Peter. An Asian woman

stood behind him and apologized for interrupting. She asked if they should come back later.

“No, that’s okay. We’re done here,” declared Matt. “You must be Peter. I’m Matt Nguyen and this is my colleague Ellen Kennedy.” Matt extended a hand as he rose.

“Hi. Pleased to meet you.” Peter shook Matt’s hand confidently, like an adult. The boy’s large hands bespoke a full frame in the making. He was skinny, almost scrawny, as Maureen had said, and still had several inches in height to go, but he looked healthy. His handshake was firm and vigorous.

Ellen stood and edged out from behind the tiny table when Matt made room. Peter held out his hand to her, too, so she shook. “You don’t look like the woman FBI agents on TV,” Peter said.

“Now, Peter,” Maureen cautioned.

“It’s okay,” Ellen replied. “You mean I’m not twenty-five years old, stacked like a Playboy centerfold, and showing a lot of cleavage?”

“I .. I ... I didn’t mean ...” Peter said, turning an appropriate Stanford cardinal red.

Ellen laughed. “I’m just teasing, Peter. You’ll learn that a lot of things in real life aren’t like they show on TV.” She wanted to tousle his hair, but he was just a little too old for that.

As they stepped out onto the pavement Maureen stepped out with them. “What are my chances for the pardon?” she asked anxiously.

“We really don’t know,” Matt answered truthfully. “They’re pretty unusual and we don’t have enough experience with them to know. It’s very political, and with a Republican president ...”

“Will you recommend me for one?”

Ellen answered this time. “We aren’t allowed to recommend for or against. It’s purely a presidential power. Our job is just to investigate and report the facts.” Then softer, so that Peter couldn’t hear, “You seem to have raised a fine young man there. I’d tell you that you should be proud of him, but you obviously already are.”

Little beamed. “Thank you. And whether I get the pardon or not, thank you – the whole FBI – for putting me on the right track. I’m just sorry for how I was, for everything I put everyone through, including the FBI. I was a terror when I was arrested. I bit and scratched and spit. If I could apologize personally to those poor agents from back then I would.” Tears welled up in her eyes again. She pulled a tissue from a pocket and wiped her nose.

"I'm sure they'd understand," Ellen replied. "That's part of the job, too. Just stay clean and sober like you have been. And please, will you do me a favor and call me if you get the pardon? We aren't notified of what happens after we close the investigation." She handed Little her card.

"I will."

They turned and left. Ellen just hoped that what she said about the arresting agents was true. Somehow she wasn't so sure Cliff would be that understanding.

When they got back in the car, Matt said, "Again, not what I expected."

"Me neither. You know, you don't look like the male FBI agents on TV, either."

"There's usually a geeky Asian guy sidekick who's a computer whiz."

"You hardly know how to turn a computer on."

"True."

Chapter 15

As soon as Cliff got back to Tim's he called Morgan again. Morgan got Brolin on the line, too. Cliff related the entire interview in detail.

"That's terrific, Cliff," Brolin gushed. "We have proof now. You have that drawing, don't you?"

"Yes, I kept it."

"We need to know all the parts he's dealing in. We have a leak somewhere. We can trace it if we know what drawings he got."

"Belcher swore he'd send you the rest. We have options if he doesn't."

"I'm going to start contacting our customers' legal departments," Brolin continued. "I'll let them know that we've confirmed APIX is stealing our drawings and that's trade secret theft. If they continue to buy from APIX knowing that, they're co-conspirators and could face a civil suit. I want that proof in my hands, though, before I do that. Otherwise they could accuse me of unfair competition, threatening a customer to cut off goods if they deal with a competitor. Can you bring me that drawing today? Catch an early flight. You've done enough."

This was not what Cliff wanted at all. He had two days of vacation planned and Ellen wanted him to finish those two geocaches for the Fizzy Challenge. He did too. "Look, I only have one drawing so far. Let me go back to Belcher and see if I can get more while I'm here. It's a lot more persuasive if you can show a pattern. In fact, we should do the same with one or two other vendors before going that route. As you say, it is risky if you don't have proof."

"You're probably right. Finish up what you're doing there and then get something from another vendor. A few more days won't matter."

"Okay, I will. And you should start trying to find your leak. Belcher only gets paper drawings from APIX. They're obviously getting paper printouts of your parts drawings, not digital copies. If they had digital ones it would be simple to modify them to look different. With paper they have to use scissors and tape. So you should check your printer logs or whatever tracking system you have to see who has printed out copies."

"I'll get right on that," Morgan replied. "The only people who should have access to those are our engineers, salesmen, the librarian, our buyers, and the vendors who bid. And some executives like me, I suppose. But that includes hundreds of people."

"Okay. I'll see you in a couple of days." Cliff hung up.

Tim Rothman was in the room and picked up the gist of the conversation from hearing Cliff's end. "Smooth. You got to extend your stay with your golden tongue. Did you find out any more about the Sullivan case?"

"No, I really couldn't go into that. I was there to do a job for my client, not investigate a car accident. But one thing did happen on that front. That idiot Eddie Trane saw me come out of Belcher's office and called me by my real name in front of Belcher, then asked how the investigation of Sullivan's death was going."

"So Belcher knows you're looking into that."

"Probably. I acted like I didn't know Trane and thought he was crazy, which fits with his reputation. Maybe Belcher bought it, but he can probably wring the details out of Trane. My best hope is that Trane was so drunk when he talked to me that he doesn't remember my full name, or gets it wrong."

"I thought you said he called you by your real name."

"Yeah, he said 'Mr. Knowles,' but he didn't spell it and didn't use my first name. It's unlikely Belcher had anything to do with the death, of course, but I'd just as soon he didn't know who I really was or where I'm from."

"Hey, Noah got back to me. Rachel Wright can talk to us tonight at eight o'clock."

"Great. That gives the rest of the day. So how about that horseback ride?"

"You're on. I looked at those two geocache locations you mentioned. One of them, Top of Rocky, isn't far from here. I know that peak. It's accessible by horseback, the base of it anyway. The mountain is called Rocky Knoll. Get changed and let's go get it before it gets any hotter. It'll be in the high eighties by this afternoon."

Cliff needed no further persuasion. He changed into his jeans and a lightweight long-sleeved shirt. He didn't have riding boots, but he had some hiking boots with deep enough heels that would work to keep his feet from slipping through the stirrups. He slapped on some sunscreen around his face and neck and grabbed a baseball cap. He packed a bottle of water, his GPS receiver, and regular geocaching gear into a lumbar pouch.

It took almost half an hour to get the horses prepped and into the trailer. Tim had to check their hooves and shoes, bring carrots for treats and make sure he had the right gear for Cliff. Luisa helped them, mainly by giving Cliff a refresher course on riding horses. Cliff had been on a horseback vacation once with his first wife years earlier, at a "greenhorn" ranch, so he had learned the

basics, but he wasn't an experienced rider. He mostly remembered how much his knees and butt had hurt after riding. Still, it had been fun. He was looking forward to this ride even though he knew he'd pay for it tomorrow.

Since Tim still only had the two horses, Luisa couldn't come with them. Tim hooked the trailer up to the pickup and the two men set off. They drove twenty minutes to the "trailhead" such as it was and brought out the horses. Phantom, the chestnut gelding, was larger than Pearl, the mare.

"I'm going to put you on my horse," Tim declared, indicating Phantom. "You're a might heavy for Pearl. I'm lighter than you. Phantom's kinda spirited. You did tell me you've ridden before, didn't you?"

Spirited? What did that mean exactly? "Uh, yeah. Just that one vacation."

"You'll be fine. Phantom likes to follow anyway, and I'll take it easy. Just don't try to gallop or get fancy."

He might as well have told Cliff not to try to skydive without a parachute. Galloping wasn't on his agenda. The dude ranch where he'd ridden before was a very controlled environment. The horses were all very tame trail horses. The rides were all at a walking gait, not even trotting, and in large groups. The horses knew the routes and wouldn't get lost. The trails were all fire roads, with no rough terrain or low branches. Here was different. They were in open country with unmarked trails and lots of heavy brush and low limbs. And a "spirited" horse who had never been here before.

Tim saddled up the horses and locked up the trailer. They were parked at the end of a dirt road that led past a few isolated homes and came to a halt at the edge of the mountains. There were no homes or other structures to the west, just mountains. He told Cliff to go ahead and mount. Cliff put his left foot in the stirrup and grabbed onto the saddle horn, then tried to throw his right leg over the horse. Instead, the saddle slipped around the horse towards him and Cliff fell on his butt. Phantom seemed bored.

Tim came over and cinched the saddle one notch tighter. Phantom snorted and made his displeasure known. "When you mount, you need to grab the mane along with the saddle so it doesn't slip. Don't just grab the saddle horn."

"Oh yeah, I forgot," Cliff said, his pride more hurt than his rear. In his second attempt he mounted smoothly. Phantom skittered a bit left and right at the unaccustomed weight and shook his head.

Tim mounted and they began to ride at a leisurely pace up into the hills. As they rode, they passed large bushes and a few scruffy trees. Cliff didn't know

the local flora but he recognized pines and junipers here and there. The lower plants were sagebrush and many other varieties he didn't recognize. Vegetation tended to grow in clumps, with a lot of barren ground between supporting only a sparse grass. Water was obviously scarce here.

Phantom was well-behaved enough, but didn't seem to understand that Cliff's body stuck out on top and to the sides. He'd walk right next to a pine or juniper, causing Cliff's leg to rub on the plant or at times Cliff would have to duck or get a branch scraping against his shoulder or hat. Tim seemed to avoid them with subtle horsemanship Cliff hadn't mastered. After half an hour Cliff realized he'd drunk more than half his water and they weren't anywhere near halfway through. Tim noticed this, too and told Cliff that there was a full canteen of water on Cliff's saddle. Tim knew how dry it was in Utah in June.

They threaded their way through some prickly juniper and came out into a draw. Tim led them to the right, back toward the east and said the mountain that's straight ahead was the one they wanted. Cliff checked his GPSr and confirmed it. Top of Rocky was dead ahead. Ten minutes later they were at the base of what looked like an enormous rock pile. This was not terrain for a horse. It was both feet, both hands type climbing, boulder after boulder. They dismounted, hobbled the horses, and removed the bridles so the horses could stand in the shade and nibble at the sparse grass. The ride had only been about a mile and a half, but the terrain had been so steep that it had taken forty-five minutes.

They began the climb. Within seconds Cliff was flushed and sweating. The heat, almost non-existent humidity, and the altitude combined to make this climb alone every bit equal to the 4.5 terrain rating on the cache.

It took fifteen minutes, but both men reached the top. Cliff's GPS unit was telling him they were there. But the terrain at the top was even more difficult than on the sides of the mountain. Huge boulders rose like spires all around. It was treacherous moving. Any wrong step could result in a fall or a twisted ankle.

Tim was the one to make the find. A large cooler jug was wedged between two giant vertical stone slabs in a sort of small crevasse. Tim was perched atop the tallest spire when he saw it and couldn't get to it directly. He called to Cliff, who was on a closer level to the cache. Cliff made his way over and saw the cache. He couldn't reach it from his side, but he worked his way around to the other side of the crevasse. He lay on his stomach and reached down, pulling up the cache. Inside was a geocacher's nirvana – swag and a logbook. He signed CliffNotes and the date. He wrote a nice long log in the book,

a practice that experienced geocachers followed, but which newer cachers who used smart phones rarely did. This cache had only been found by four people previously. It always felt special when you found something very few others have found.

Only when the search was over did Cliff realize what a spectacular view awaited his attention. He could see for miles to the east. Higher mountains loomed to the west. He drank in the vista for a long ten minutes. He photographed everything with his phone – Tim, the view, the cooler, the logbook. Per geocaching custom, he did not photograph the cache in its hiding place.

Then they made their way down the mountain and Cliff photographed the horses who were standing right where they had left them. They remounted and Cliff took a big swig of the canteen water. He realized he was a novice here and how lucky he was to have a friend like Tim with him who knew what he was doing. They began the downhill ride back. Phantom continued to follow Pearl obediently.

They had gone only a hundred yards or so when an ominous and unmistakable sound rose from beside the trail – a rattlesnake shaking its warning. The snake was between Phantom and Pearl. Both horses jumped sideways. Pearl began to gallop forward, but Phantom was afraid to follow her since the snake was in front of him. Instead, he reared and turned back the way they had come. Cliff nearly fell, but managed to grab onto Phantom's neck and mane to keep from falling onto the rocks. Phantom began galloping the opposite direction from Pearl. Cliff knew he should be pulling back on the reins and trying to calm the horse, but he was hanging on for dear life with both hands. His left foot had come out of the stirrup and he couldn't get it back in since he was half off to the right side. He kept yelling at Phantom to slow down, but the yelling just made the horse more excited.

Cliff didn't know what he was going to do. Phantom was coming to the mountain, Rocky Knoll. If Phantom tried to run up the mountain he'd break a leg for sure and Cliff would be thrown onto the rocks.

Suddenly there were hoofbeats to the left. Tim came galloping up full bore beside Cliff. Without missing a beat, Tim grabbed Phantom's bridle and began to slow him down. Cliff continued to hang precariously on the other side of the horse, his left leg the only thing keeping him on the horse. When Phantom finally came to a halt, he slipped off all the way on the right side and patted Phantom's neck to calm him down. Tim continued to hold the bridle on the other side until Cliff came around, took the reins and remounted. They turned around

again and headed back to the trailhead, avoiding the stretch of trail where the snake had been.

"It's a good thing you had those boots," Tim said. "If your foot had gone through the stirrup you'd have been dragged that whole way. You should have seen the look on your face." He laughed as he said it.

"I don't see the humor. Thanks, by the way."

"You did good. Most riders would have been thrown when he reared."

"I was just hanging on for dear life."

"Well, don't quit your day job for the rodeo."

"I'll take a nice safe job like FBI agent or food taster for the Borgias."

"Ellen will be busting your balls when she finds out how close you came to breaking your neck."

"Don't you dare tell her."

"Hey, you said this cache had a high terrain rating. You gotta expect it wasn't going to be easy."

As they neared the truck, Phantom and Pearl recognized the trailer and started trotting to get there faster. Cliff bounced in the saddle like a ping pong ball. His pelvis felt like a concrete mallet smashing his glutes with every step. He yelled to Tim to slow down but Tim just laughed and urged Pearl forward faster.

By the time they got back to the truck, Cliff was calmed down and so was Phantom. The horses gladly got back into the trailer because they knew that meant going home and getting fed and groomed. Cliff realized he'd drunk all the water in the canteen. Tim showed him there was a small cooler in the trailer with more water in bottles. Cliff downed another full bottle.

Soon they were on their way home in the truck. Cliff was both exhilarated and glad it was over. It was like a wild carnival ride with better scenery and without the safety bars and OSHA inspections. But that's what extreme geocaching is all about. He figured he'd earned every one of those terrain and difficulty stars.

When they got back to Tim's, they took care of the horses with the help of Tim's daughters, then adjourned to the house where Tim and Cliff each downed two chilled three two Coors in quick succession. Luisa heard the whole story of the ride, including the snake and Cliff's near-death experience. Like Cliff, she didn't find it funny and let Tim know in no uncertain terms.

Chapter 16

That afternoon Cliff could barely stand. Or sit. He could barely move at all. But they had the interview scheduled with Rachel Wright so he sucked it up and took a long hot shower and a nap. By evening he was even stiffer, but a couple of aspirin had made the pain somewhat more tolerable. At least he was finally rehydrated. He realized that his arms were sunburned. For that matter, so was his face and neck, despite the sunscreen. Too late he finally appreciated how thin and dry the air was at this altitude and how strong the sun this far south.

Cliff treated Tim and his family to a nice dinner at a restaurant in Cedar City. It was a tourist trap of sorts, but the food was good and the Rothmans ate there on special occasions. The theme was Cajun and the food was blisteringly hot. That's all he needed – more pain, Cliff thought, but the two cold beers were perfect accessories to get through the exquisite but scorching cuisine. They had real beer in the restaurants, not that anemic three two stuff. Luisa had driven them, since she hadn't touched any alcohol at home, but Tim stuck to water through the meal and took over driving when they left.

Emma and Lizzie had something mild to eat. They spent the meal asking Cliff a lot of questions about the ride. They giggled incessantly when they heard about him hanging on to Phantom's neck after the snake spooked him. Then when he said his butt was sore from the trotting, they totally cracked up. Lizzie spit her milk through her nose.

They had to cut the festivities short so that Cliff and Tim could get to the interview. After dropping off the females, the two men drove to Rachel Wright's house in Cliff's car. It was still light out as they entered New Harmony. Cliff noticed a man of about thirty-five walking along the side of the road with three women behind him. They wore long dresses of a solid color and had their waist-length hair in braids. The women walked single file. The one in front appeared to be about the same age as the man. Cliff assumed she was his wife and they were one of those conservative sects within Mormonism.

"Look at that," he said to Tim. "So that's a Mormon family, huh? A man, his wife, and ... I guess her sisters. They're too old to be their daughters. Why do they walk single file like that?"

"That's a Mormon family all right," Tim said nonchalantly. "But those aren't her sisters. At least most likely not. Men don't normally marry two sisters."

“Wait, you mean those are all his wives?”

“Yep.”

“I thought polygamy was outlawed in Utah now.”

“Yep. So’s jaywalking, but people do it.”

“Jesus.”

“That’s right. Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”

“But don’t they enforce it? They aren’t even trying to hide it.”

“Nope. There’s Mormons and then there’s Mormons. New Harmony’s this kind. A lot of it anyway. Noah says Rachel’s not from that sect. She dresses like a regular person. Her parents won’t make her marry an older man with more wives.”

“What about taxes and property rights and all that? Are all the wives legal heirs?”

“Oh, on paper only the first wife is the legal one, the one recognized by the state. The law is followed after a fashion. The others are just women in the household. I don’t do their taxes, so don’t really know. I suspect the man just claims one dependent, plus all the children from all the wives. The federal government may consider the latter kids bastards but those folks just see that as a normal family with three wives. His oldest child is probably baby-sitting the younger ones from the other wives. He must be very successful to have three this young.”

They were greeted politely, if rather formally, by Rachel Wright’s father. He invited them to sit in the drawing room as he called it, although with its television and sofas it looked like a living room to Cliff. As agreed, Cliff let Tim do the talking.

“Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Wright, Miss Wright,” Tim began.

Mr. Wright nodded a sober acknowledgment but Rachel spoke right up. “Call me Rachel, please.” Then to her father, “Daddy, why don’t you leave us alone. These are friends of Brigham’s. Mr. Sullivan said he asked them to help find out what happened to Brigham. I’ll be fine.”

“If that’s what you want. I’ll be just in the other room.” He got up and nodded once more to Tim and Cliff, and left the room.

Rachel began tentatively. “I know Mr. Sullivan thinks Brigham’s accident was ... well, wasn’t an accident. Do you really think that’s true?”

Cliff watched Rachel as she spoke with Tim. She was quite pretty in an old-fashioned sort of way. Her makeup was rather on the heavy side and she wore a dress, not jeans or slacks. She was dressed how a California girl might

have dressed in the eighties or nineties, although her blonde hair style looked modern with an asymmetric cut. Tim would later tell him it resembled Kimberley Caldwell's although Cliff had no idea who that was. Cliff couldn't put his finger on what it was at first that made her look old-fashioned, but then he realized she didn't have a tattoo or piercing except for pierced ears – a single stud earring in each lobe. And her hair was its natural color. She hadn't visibly mutilated her body! How Twentieth Century!

"We don't know, Rachel, and we're not police. We're just doing a favor for Noah because he's concerned. Cliff and I used to be in the FBI. Maybe you can help us."

"How?"

"There has been some trouble at the company where Brigham worked. Did he ever talk about that?"

Rachel played with her hair for a moment, twining one strand around a finger. "He was kind of worried about something. I don't know if I should say. I don't want to get anyone in trouble."

"You won't get anyone in trouble," Cliff said, knowing that may not be true, but people were going to get in trouble no matter what at this point.

"He said the company was cheating their biggest customer. He asked me if he should tell someone."

Cliff and Tim exchanged glances but both of them remained silent, the investigator's technique for forcing someone to talk. After a bit she continued.

"He said they were making double orders and selling the parts to someone else. He thought the customer was getting charged double."

Cliff knew this wasn't true. API wouldn't pay for parts it didn't receive, but he could see how the young lathe operator might not understand how the scam worked. This clarified something, though. Belcher wasn't even using the drawings APIX sent. They were just there as a legal defense so they could claim they were using legitimate drawings from APIX. In fact when API placed an order, Belcher would sometimes just make twice the quantity ordered and sell the extras to APIX at a higher price.

"Did he mention this to anyone else?" Tim asked.

"He said he told his father but his father said the customer could count how many parts it got. He said that Brigham must be mistaken. It didn't sound like anything was wrong to him and Brigham shouldn't risk making his boss mad at him."

"Anyone else?"

“I don’t think so. Wait a minute. He did say something about Reddit. He said he used to go to that forum for moral guidance sometimes. There’s a Mormon channel there.”

“Do you know his login ID there?”

“Not off the top of my head, but I have an account there. I’ll find the thread and send you a link. Give me your email address.”

Tim did so. Further questioning brought no more useful information. Tim and Cliff were invited to share in some cake Rachel’s mother had baked. Tim accepted for them despite the big meal they’d just had since it would have been an insult to decline. Hospitality is more than mere politeness in this household; it’s a moral imperative. Afterward they thanked the Wrights and returned to Cliff’s car. They headed back to Tim’s. Perhaps if Cliff hadn’t had that last beer he would have noticed the SUV following him. As it was, he and Tim talked over the interview the whole way back and decided they needed to follow up the Reddit thread that Rachel mentioned. He never noticed the headlights approaching gently then dropping back discreetly the entire time. It pulled away from them only when they made the last turn up Tim’s access road.

Tim logged onto his computer when they settled in. True to her word, Rachel had already sent him a link to the Reddit thread and pointed out Brigham’s user ID. He whistled when he read it. Cliff read over his shoulder. Brigham had said his company was double charging its biggest customer and asked what others thought he should do. Most responses said to do nothing and let the customer take care of itself, the same reaction Noah had had. But one respondent asked who the customer was and Brigham had named Advanced Photolithics. The user said Brigham should contact them and tell them about the double orders, but don’t tell his boss he’s doing it. Later on in the discussion Brigham said he’d decided to contact API without telling his boss or anyone else at the company. His Reddit profile also revealed that he lived in Cedar City, Utah and worked as a lathe operator.

“Now you have motive,” Cliff commented.

“But you really think APIX reads the Mormonism thread on Reddit? Come on.”

“Tim, trust me. Deal’s an operator. I’ll bet he monitors everything. All you have to do is put in a few Google Alerts, maybe one on API, one on APIX, one on Advanced Photolithics and this thread will pop up in your morning email. Or maybe Belcher told Deal one of his Mormon employees was having a bout of conscience.”

"I suppose you're right. We're going to have to go to the police with this. This could be murder."

"Absolutely. It could complicate my case, but I don't see any harm to my client. A murder investigation would just cause Belcher to drop APIX for sure."

"If someone bumped off Sullivan because he was about to squeal, it could be someone besides Deal. What if it was Belcher? He makes tons from this scheme, doesn't he? And he's here. Deal's not."

"Not that much, not by a long shot. I've talked to Belcher and even Deal a little bit. Belcher doesn't have the spine for murder and from Trane's account, liked Sullivan personally. Besides, he can still make a good living with just API's business. He caved so fast it was obvious APIX wasn't that big a deal to him. Deal has the bigger motive. His whole business could collapse if this comes out. He was feeling the heat when I talked to him on the phone. My gut says it was him."

"Does he have a criminal record?"

"Not that we found."

"There could be others with a motive – other vendors, even API's customers."

"For murder? I can't see it. I say it's Deal."

* * *

The next morning Tim called Bob Whitfield, the Cedar City detective, who was out on a case. He avoided Moreno who had seemed too negative to be helpful. He left a message that said he'd just learned something relevant to the Sullivan case and asked for a call back.

Cliff was still in bed when this occurred. He eventually emerged at the breakfast table, walking like he had a barrel cactus wedged between his thighs.

"There he is," Luisa declared. "We were wondering if we'd need to get the fire department here to get you out of bed." She placed a large plate of huevos rancheros in front of him and poured some coffee and juice. Cliff wasted no time in getting himself around it all.

"Ohh," Cliff groaned. "The things I do for a geocache."

"You loved it and you know it," Tim said chuckling. "You just need to get back on the horse as they say. Your butt gets used to it pretty quick."

"Not today, thank you."

Tim briefed him on his call to Whitfield then got more serious. "Cliff, if you're right that it's Deal, and he came out or sent someone out to take care of

Sullivan, that's a RICO case. Racketeering – murder. You should report that to the FBI back in California. Does Ellen work RICO?"

"No, and I don't think there's enough to open a RICO case, either. It's been declared a hit-and-run and it's just my theory that Deal could be behind it. Still, you have a point. We could have him cold on Theft of Trade Secrets and Interstate Transportation of Stolen Property, both of which Ellen does work. But we have to establish that he stole those API drawings, or got them illegally somehow. As soon as API nails down where the leak is, I'm going to urge them to report it."

"If it's murder, you have to report it to the FBI yourself."

"Oh, I will if it comes to that, but we don't have anywhere near enough yet. The Sullivan case is really yours and the Cedar City Police for that matter. What are you going to tell Noah? And Whitfield?"

The two ex-agents had been talking freely in front of Luisa, as they drank their coffee. She clearly had picked up most of the details of both the hit and run and the API investigation. During a lull she piped up, "What about the Swedish tourists? Can't you find out how their car ended up as the murder weapon – if it was a murder? That whole thing about it being stolen right before the accident seems fishy to me."

The men looked at each other and nodded agreement. "It's a lead," Tim said. "It can't hurt to check that out. I know where the bed and breakfast is where they were staying. They may still be in town."

"Sure. I'll go with you if you like. Good catch, Luisa."

She gave a little sniff like it was nothing.

* * *

The bed and breakfast turned out to be owned and run by the wife of one of the members of the local water district board. Since Tim also happened to be on that board, introductions were quick and cordial. She was happy to cooperate even though this wasn't official. She loved to gossip anyway.

When Tim mentioned that he'd heard the Swedes didn't have valid credit cards and were short on cash, she pooh poohed that. They'd made the reservation through AirBnB and it was all paid for through their account there. They didn't need cash or a credit card to pay her. After telling Tim this she paused and stroked her ample chin a moment.

"You know," she said, "now that you mention it, it was kind of odd."

“How so?”

“Well, like I said, they didn’t need money to pay me. But I remember they asked me to change some hundreds they had.”

“When was this?”

“It was the day before they left. They had five one hundred dollar bills. They asked for smaller bills. I keep a cash box here. We sell some tourist stuff, too. I gave them ten twenties for two of the hundreds, but that was all I could spare.”

“Was that before the car was stolen?” Cliff asked.

“Oh, right, the car. Let’s see. The police were there in the morning and they left that same afternoon when the replacement car came, so the money thing must have been the evening before. So they weren’t short on cash, although maybe they didn’t have any small bills.”

“They got a replacement car?” Cliff persisted.

“Oh yes. They had insurance. They weren’t concerned about the theft at all. They told the officers that they had bought that extended car insurance the car rental agency is always trying to push and it paid off for them. The company had another one driven out here and dropped off for them the next day.”

“Who was the detective who talked to you about them?” Tim asked.

“Manny Moreno.”

“Did you tell him about the five hundred?”

“No, at least I don’t think so. I don’t think he asked about that and it didn’t seem important at the time. Should I have?”

Tim shook his head. “No, no, it’s all right. What were they like? Clean cut types? They give you any trouble?”

“No trouble, but they were more like hippies or whatever you call the young ones these days with the long hair who go off into the wilderness to experience nature or find themselves. I know they were going to go to Colorado next because they were joking about toking. Hey, that rhymes.” She giggled. “They drank a lot, too. I serve wine and hors d’oeuvres in the evening and they would always finish the whole bottle, then they’d go out and drink in town. In fact, they were pretty drunk when they came in that night and asked me for the change.”

Cliff leaned in. “So let me make sure I understand this. The day before they left they went out in the evening, got drunk, and by the time they got back their car had been stolen and they had five hundred in cash. The next morning

they reported it to the police, the car company brought a replacement car, and after the police interview they left town. Do I have that right?"

The woman adjusted her too-tight tank top for a minute while she ran through the timeline. She should have given up that item of apparel twenty years and forty pounds ago, Cliff observed silently. "I think that's right. Yes, that fits. You think they sold that car, or let someone steal it for five hundred dollars and then got another one with the insurance?" the woman said, reaching the same conclusion that Tim and Cliff had both reached several minutes earlier.

"It's a possibility, but we don't want to accuse anyone of anything," Cliff answered.

"Should I cancel their reservation then? If they're crooks ..."

"Hold on," Tim said. "they have another reservation?"

"Oh, sure. They left here and went to Colorado to get wasted I guess, then they were going to go up to Yellowstone and Glacier National Park in Montana, then back through Idaho to here and out to Los Angeles where they were going leave from. They wanted to hit all the major national parks. They'd already done Yosemite and they hit Zion while they were here. That's a lot of driving, I told them. I don't think they realized how far apart everything is here."

"So when are they expected back?" Tim asked.

She checked her computer. "Three weeks." Tim wrote down the July dates she gave him.

"Don't cancel the reservation. The police may want to talk to them again. This is a big help. Thank you," Cliff said. Tim nodded his concurrence. The two men left in a good mood.

"Now we have something solid," Tim declared. "Whitfield will have to reopen the Sullivan case."

"I agree, but that doesn't tie it to Belcher or APIX. Even if we're right and the Swedes let someone take their car in exchange for money, it could be any common drunk or car thief. From the sound of it, they met someone in a bar that night. Maybe they cooked up the plot on the spot. It's actually consistent with some drunk running over Sullivan in a hit-and-run like the police concluded. The key is the Swedes. They can give us a description. I can't believe Deal sent someone out with a plan to find someone in a bar to let him steal a car."

"The police may be able to find the bar where they got drunk and question the bartender or waitress before the Swedes get back. There may even be surveillance video."

“After this long? Not likely, but that’s what I’d do next. You can take it to Whitfield and Moreno and let them run with it.”

“So what are you going to do next on your case?”

Cliff scratched his beard before answering. “Morgan wants me to get some more drawings before I return. He’s afraid his customers aren’t going to stop buying from APIX based on one allegedly stolen engineering drawing. Belcher promised to send them all, but he could get cold feet.”

“Let’s go there now before he has time to think about it.” Without waiting for Cliff’s agreement, Tim put the car in gear and headed toward Belcher Industries.

When they got there, Tim waited in the car and Cliff went in. Dave Anderson, KE Solutions consultant, came out fuming a half hour later. “The jerk refused. He contacted his lawyer and grew a spine. He demanded his APIX nozzle drawing back. Of course I didn’t give it to him.”

“So what now?”

“Morgan’s going to have to cut off Belcher from orders until he complies. My threats were actually a bluff. I don’t know whether API can afford to do that. How’s he going to supply the chip companies with those spare parts? He’s not going to be happy.”

“All the more reason we need to get the police in there on the murder case.” Rothman dialed Whitfield again. When he got voicemail again, he hit 0 for the operator and asked for Manny Moreno. Tim told him he had information on the Sullivan case. Moreno told him to come on in. Whitfield was expected back shortly so he could explain it to both of them.

When they got there Tim introduced Cliff to the two detectives. Like dogs sniffing each others’ asses they circled around their cop war stories until they got comfortable. Then they settled down to business.

Cliff explained the API case to the detectives and everything they learned about Sullivan and the Swedish tourists. It became clear rather quickly that the detectives didn’t really follow the nature of the fraudulent activity and why anyone would kill someone over some drawings.

“Look, you don’t need to know the details. It may just be a civil matter, but the bottom line is that millions of dollars are at stake. The Sullivan boy was about to spill the beans that Belcher was cheating API. He said so on Reddit. If API cuts off Belcher, his business could go into bankruptcy. Same with APIX. There’s lots of motive.”

Whitfield was still hesitant. “Well, I don’t know about that. There’s a lot of supposition there to make it a murder case. Traveling out from California in the hopes of finding someone who’s willing to let you steal their car? Why not rent one yourself and report it stolen? It still sounds like a hit-and-run to me, but if what you say about the tourists maybe selling or giving away the rental car for five hundred bucks is true, that’s at least insurance fraud or car theft. I can open a new case on that and see if we can find the bar where those two were drinking that night. They were pretty distinctive-looking and had an accent. A bartender or waiter would probably remember them. It’s only been a little over a week.”

“And preserve any video if you find the bar,” Tim said.

“We’ll ask, but I doubt we’d get that lucky. We’ll talk to the Swedish couple when they come back, too. We’re not going to go back to Belcher again without more. We already interviewed him on the Sullivan case and he seemed straight up. We’re not going to go harassing him just to help put the fear of god into him. You’ve got your own case, but that’s not ours.”

“That’s all we can ask,” Cliff replied.

* * *

Tim and Cliff decided they’d done all they could for the day. Tim drove Cliff around the area for the next two hours, stopping for lunch at a steak house called Fort Zion in a touristy little replica old west town. When Tim told Cliff they were in a town called Virgin, Cliff couldn’t help but think of the Vespel seal again.

Tim had a season pass to Zion National Park so they spent the rest of the afternoon hiking through the spectacular canyons and rock formations. Cliff thought about how perfect it would be for placing geocaches, but national parks are off limits except for virtuals and earth caches, two types that do not require placing a physical cache. They were taking it slow in order to enjoy the scenery and geological wonders. Cliff had a hard time at first due to his horseback experience, but the movement loosened him up and actually took his mind off the discomfort.

* * *

That evening Tim and Cliff discussed the two cases in depth and concluded that they had done their part on the Sullivan case. It was a police

matter and they'd gotten the police onto a promising line of inquiry. Tim had done more than Noah Sullivan could have reasonably expected. Cliff didn't see what more he could do on his own case here now that Belcher wasn't cooperating. He told Tim he had to get back and would be leaving early in the morning.

"You going for that geocache on your way back to Vegas?"

"Definitely. Ellen would have my head on a platter if I didn't give it a try." They both paused as they realized the significance of the choice of words. "She'd behead me," Cliff said, smiling.

"Be sure to take extra water, and get going early before it gets warm."

"I've set my phone alarm for 5AM. I will not be joining you for breakfast. Which reminds me, do you have PayPal?"

"For my flight instructor business."

"Send me an invoice."

"Really, Cliff, forget it. You're our guest."

"Tim, you aren't saving me any money since the client will pay it anyway. You'd be doing me a favor to bill me. If I don't submit receipts for lodging the client will think I came out here unnecessarily on a boondoggle."

"Which you did," Tim said with a twinkle in the eye.

"Guilty as charged, at least for the last day. And it was well worth it. You and Luisa have been wonderful. If you don't send me the invoice I'll just send you the money anyway. I know your email address."

"Have it your way. If you're getting up at five, you'd better get some sleep. I wouldn't want you to be out there in the desert wiped out from exhaustion. It's pretty rugged in that area."

"You're right. I'm off to bed. I want to be in condition for it tomorrow, too. Notice I didn't even have a beer tonight."

"Such an angel you are."

Handshakes and hugs were exchanged all around and Cliff went off to the guest house.

Chapter 17

Cliff was on the road by 5:30 and reached the launch point for the cache by 6:05. It was already light, with the sun about to creep over the horizon. The residential street ended, but there was a dirt road that led out west into the desert toward the cache. He was undecided whether to try to get closer in the car or hike from there. Ellen had told him she'd driven out on the dirt road, but she'd been using a Jeep. Cliff's was a rental and he wasn't sure of the terrain or the car's capabilities. He didn't want to get stuck or damage the car and he had a flight to catch later in the day. He checked and the cache was less than two miles away straight line. He decided to walk. It was still cool, quite nice for geocaching. He would normally put only one bottle of water in his pack for such a short hike, but heeding Tim's advice, he put a second one in his pack and checked his GPS unit's batteries.

He thought about calling Ellen, but it was just after five in California. He'd emailed her the night before that he was going for the cache early, so he really didn't need to wake her just to tell her that. He decided to wait until he got to the cache. It was supposed to be difficult to find, as the difficulty rating indicated, but Ellen had given him a good description of where to look. If he needed more help, he figured he could call her from the cache site. It wasn't so far from civilization that there would be no cell signal. He began hiking.

As he hiked he realized the terrain wasn't as flat as it looked. The elevation change to the cache was only five hundred feet, but the straight route passed through deep gullies and over bluffs. Sometimes he had to go quite a distance around these obstacles. He wasn't used to the three thousand foot elevation and soon found himself getting tired. His soreness from the horseback ride only exacerbated the situation. He stopped or slowed as necessary, knowing there was no rush. His flight wasn't until noon and he'd done hikes of much greater length many times. Still, it could take a long time finding the cache and he had limited water. As he reached what he judged to be the halfway point, he saw that he'd already drunk half the first bottle of water and the sun was only just above the horizon. It was going to be hot soon.

By 7:15 he was at the cache site and began looking. There were more places to look than he'd expected. It was a large sandstone formation with hundreds of nooks and crannies. He began looking and reaching in some of the most obvious places. After fifteen minutes he took the last swig of water from his first bottle. No problem, he thought. The way back is mostly downhill. Even as

he told himself this, he stripped off his long sleeve shirt and stuffed it into his pack. The temperature was almost eighty degrees already.

After another ten minutes, he decided to call Ellen. He pulled out his phone and dialed. She answered promptly and assured him it wasn't too early. She was excited that Cliff was on site at the cache location. He explained that he was having trouble. She went through her recollections again as to how to find the cache. After five minutes she located a photo on her computer of the Grandpa's Improbable Point cache in its hiding place. She transferred it to her phone and sent it to Cliff. With this in hand, he was able to see where he should be looking. He'd been on the wrong side of the bluff edge. When he pulled the cache from its hiding spot, he let out an excited whoop and called her back.

"Got it!"

"You found it? That's super, Cliff. And you got Top of Rocky already, too."

"I did. Those two Fizzy squares are now filled. So I'm heading back now."

"Are you still due in around three?"

"Yes, the same flight. My car's at the airport so you don't have to pick me up. I should be home by four."

"Okay, call me when you get boarded or if you get delayed so I know when to expect you."

"I will. So how are things there?"

"Good. Real good. Tommy's been good, but I think another tooth is coming through. I finished that applicant case so I'm working on some criminal matters now."

"The pardon case? You nailed her to the wall, I hope."

An awkward pause followed. "Cliff, you know I can't tell you what I found or what I wrote."

Cliff knew Ellen too well not to read between the lines. "Wait a minute. You wrote her up all sweetness and light, didn't you?"

"Cliff, you're being unfair to her. You don't know what she's like now, what she's been through. She's not that Berkeley junkie you busted."

"I can't believe this! I come all the way out here into the desert to fulfill my wedding promise to you and this is how you repay me? She bit me and almost gave me AIDS. She's a scumbag dope dealer."

"AIDS!? Now you're being ridiculous. She's never been HIV positive. And she *was* a dope dealer, but not anymore. I can't tell you about the

investigation, so just quit being such a drama queen. She probably won't get the pardon, anyway, from what I hear about the process, if that's what you want to hear."

"Christ almighty!"

"Don't swear at me." Ellen was a semi-devout Catholic.

Cliff was trying to place the log book, swag, and everything else back in the cache as he was talking to Ellen, the phone wedged between his shoulder and cheek. The conversation, however, got him so agitated, he stopped being careful. The phone slipped from its perch and fell onto the rocks below.

Immediately, Cliff bent down and retrieved it, but it was obvious it was dead. The front was shattered and it did not respond to the power switch. Cliff instantly regretted his haste. More than the cost of the phone, he realized Ellen would think he had hung up on her in a fit of pique. She'd been right about the pardon case, of course. She had to write up her case as the facts deserved. He wouldn't have compromised his findings if he had been in her place, he knew. Why had he been such an ass? That call he'd received from Janet Gullo had prodded him into a knee-jerk blue wall mentality – agent solidarity above all else. He'd apologize profusely when he got home.

He finished replacing the cache, opened his second bottle of water, took a drink, and began the hike back to his car. The temperature was now over eighty. As he walked along he saw a desert tortoise lumbering by a rock. He was about to take a photo, but when he pulled out his phone, he realized the camera was useless. He considered tossing the phone away, but he reckoned the chip inside would still have his contacts and photos. He might be able to get those off even if the phone itself was a goner.

Cliff couldn't see his car yet. There were too many bluffs and arroyos and a few scraggly desert shrubs obscuring the distance. He had marked the location of the car, like any smart geocacher, and his GPS unit had not been damaged. If he'd been using only his smart phone with its geocaching app, he'd have been in a sorry position. As it was, though, he knew exactly which direction to go, although the terrain made him zig and zag.

He was about halfway back, and halfway done with his second water bottle when he saw a vehicle in the distance. It wasn't his. A large black Porsche Cayenne SUV was parked at the end spot of the rough dirt road that led out into the desert, the one he'd decided not to take. He knew the Bureau of Land Management controlled this area and they had access roads here and there. He

was now beginning to regret his decision not to venture off the paved road. He was hot and tired and wished very much he had his car right there with the SUV.

Then he noticed that there was a man sitting in the shade of the truck. Maybe that guy would give him a ride back to his car! The dirt road led right back to it. Cliff picked up the pace and headed right for the man. The figure stood when he saw Cliff approaching. The sun was still low and toward the east, behind the man, so all Cliff could see was his silhouette, a dark outline of a short male.

When Cliff was about a hundred yards from the man, the figure lifted his right hand in Cliff's direction and a sound rang out, a very familiar sound to any FBI agent. It was the report of a gun. The man was shooting at him!

Chapter 18

Ralph Morgan studied the log sheets intently. He was used to studying sales and production data on his screen, so using handwritten paper records was unusual.

The binder before him held document request logs for the last two years. The system hadn't changed in the decades that he'd been working at API. The engineering drawings were kept in a library, both an electronic one and a physical one. Drawings of recent vintage were electronic and stored on a server directly accessible only to the librarian, engineers, and few other people, like Morgan. Similarly, the paper blueprints or drawings, most of them created a decade or more earlier, were stored in large metal file cabinets. These, too, were accessible only by the librarians and higher management.

Engineering drawings were the repository of the company's crown jewels, their intellectual property, and were treated as such. When anyone requested an engineering drawing, the normal practice was for the librarian to check whether the person had the authority to view a particular drawing, then assuming he did, to print one out and notify the person by email that it was ready. Even the digital drawings were often printed out rather than emailed because it was felt that it was a security risk to send out drawings by email. Paper could be tracked. The requester would have to come to the library front desk and show ID, sign the log book, and enter the date along with the part number. When the user was done with the drawing, he had to return it to the library and sign it back in. The librarian would then shred or file the copy, depending on whether they needed extras. Requesters were usually engineers, buyers, or salespeople.

Morgan was meticulously typing the names of every requester listed in the logbook into a spreadsheet. Every time someone made a request he would enter the date and part number in the columns adjacent to the name. The more requests, the more columns got filled. As he continued to enter data, it soon became clear that buyers were the most frequent requesters. These were the people who had to send out drawings to vendors to get bids on manufacturing the parts. Since there were thousands of parts in all the different systems API made, or had made in the past and were still in use, there was a continuous need to get parts made, and to do it at the lowest cost.

If a buyer wanted to get quotes from three rubber companies, for example, he or she would request four copies of the drawings with the accompanying spec sheets, keep one drawing for himself for reference, and send

the drawings out to the three companies and details of required timing, quantities, and so forth. Bidders would have to sign non-disclosure agreements before receiving the drawings. When the bids came in, the buyer would choose the best one and notify the vendors whether or not they got the contract. The vendors were supposed to return or destroy the drawings if they did not get the contract, and most complied, but the system was imperfect. Some drawings never made it back.

After filling a few hundred rows on the spreadsheet, Morgan became aware that one name had more columns to the right than any other. A lot more. Ligaya Santos. Santos was a Filipina and long-time API employee. She was a reliable and productive worker and probably handled more purchasing than most of the other buyers because of her efficiency, but Morgan had never kept close track. He just knew she met her deadlines and got decent prices.

He began to examine the requests she had made. Her duties encompassed only the older systems. The newer ones were assigned to other buyers. Some of the parts in the newer systems were the same as those in the older ones; some were not. So it was difficult at first for Morgan to determine whether she was requesting drawings for parts she worked on or not. Then he saw it: a request a month ago for a drawing of a part to the newest system, one with a unique design. Morgan recognized the part number because it used a new format. There was no reason for Santos to be requesting that drawing. She was on the authorized list because she was a buyer, but the authorizations were not finely tuned. Buyers' areas of responsibility changed often enough that the lists could not be updated all the time. Any parts buyer was authorized to see any parts drawing.

He stopped recording all the requesters and began skimming through the list for all of Santos's requests. The pattern emerged quickly. Two and half years earlier she had requested the drawing to the ceramic nozzle Belcher made. That was a part in her area of responsibility, but Morgan knew that Belcher already had that drawing since it had been making that part for years. It was conceivable that Santos had sent out an RFQ to other vendors to see if Belcher's price could be beaten, but she should only have done that if Morgan ordered it. He knew he hadn't. That drawing request was two months before the sales of that part had begun to drop noticeably. Further examination of the requests confirmed his suspicions. He called Brolin.

"I found our mole," he declared excitedly when she came on the line. "One of our parts buyers."

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. She’s requested almost twice the number of drawings as anyone else, and at least half of those are ones she has no legitimate need for. Not only that, but the timing matches exactly when the parts stopped selling. Two to three months after she requests one of those, the sales of that part start to drop.”

“Tell me about her.”

“She’s a Filipino and worked for us over twelve years. I know she has a family and is well-liked, but I don’t know much about her personal life. She’s been a good reliable worker.”

“We need to get Cliff working on her background.”

“Should I fire her? She’s still requesting drawings. We need to plug the leak.”

“Not yet. That’ll raise her suspicions. We need to find out if she’s working with others. Can you reassign her, or stop her access or something that wouldn’t be obvious we’re onto her?”

“Uh, yeah, I can change check-out procedures that apply to everybody. I’ll figure something out that doesn’t look like we’re singling her out.”

“We need to talk to Cliff about the next step. He’s got experience with this stuff. When’s he due back?”

“He flies back tonight.”

“Okay, good. I’ll give him a call and let him know. We’ll want to get together first thing tomorrow.”

“Right. I’m jazzed. We’re getting somewhere now. The bleeding is about to stop.”

They hung up. Brolin called Cliff and got directed to his voice mail. She left a message that they’d identified the mole and wanted to meet the next day. Morgan called his Vice President with the news. She congratulated him on the progress and said she’d let the security head know.

* * *

Ellen was steaming. Here it was 1:15 and Cliff still hadn’t called. She knew he was mad, but he was being way too petty. He’d hung up on her and was refusing to take her calls. She’d called him twice and gotten nothing but voice mail. She’d checked and the flight had left on time. Had he stopped off for a drink on the way home just to piss her off? He was going to get a piece of her mind when he got home.

When it hit three o'clock and Cliff was still out of pocket, Ellen began to get seriously worried. Even if he was angry, Ellen didn't think Cliff would put her through this. She called the airline to make sure Cliff had made the flight, but she couldn't get anyone to tell her because they couldn't verify she was a relative. She called the FBI agent who was stationed at the airport. He had access to flight data for all the airlines. She got through to him and explained that Cliff had not called and she was worried since he'd been out in the desert hiking. She didn't bother to explain geocaching. The agent said he'd call her back. In five minutes she got the word back that he had not made the flight.

This news sent her into a near panic. The agent asked if she wanted him to do anything, but she declined. She was afraid it would turn out to be that Cliff was fine, just being angry, and she'd have to explain about the argument they'd had over the pardon case. She should have told her supervisor about Cliff's demand that she write up the interview in a derogatory way and she didn't want to get in trouble for not reporting it. She told the airport agent it was probably just a change of plans and not to worry.

She was all too worried, however. She called Tim Rothman.

"Tim, it's Ellen Kennedy."

"Ellen, this is a pleasant surprise. Next time you'll have to come out with him and bring that little one."

"Um, Tim, Cliff didn't make the flight home. Have you heard from him?"

The reaction on the other end was visceral and immediate. "What do you mean? He didn't call you?" Tim said with obvious concern.

"I talked to him this morning. He was at a geocache he wanted to find. He said he found it, so I thought he would just go on to the airport. That was hours before his flight. We had a sort of ... disagreement and he hung up on me. I've tried to call him three times but I just get voice mail. It doesn't even ring so he's either out of range or turned off his phone. Or worse."

"Stay calm. It's probably nothing. Was that the Grandpa's Point thing?"

"Yes."

"He told me about it. I know he left really early and was excited to get that square as he called it. He said you'd want him to."

"I did. I was glad he found it, but we just got into some work stuff. He was pretty ticked off. Look, Tim, don't take this wrong, but is there any chance you're covering for him and helping him punish me? Did he come back to your place?"

“No way, Ellen. I swear. Look, I’m worried, too. I’m going to go see if he’s okay. Can you give me the location of the cache?”

“Tim I can’t ask you to ...”

“You aren’t asking me to. I’d do it in a heartbeat for you if you did ask, but I’m doing it because he’s my friend and I’m worried. Give me the location of the cache.”

“You can’t drive all the way there. I told Cliff the best place to park. I’ll send you the location of where the Jeep trail meets the regular streets. His car would be parked there unless he drove out onto the trail.”

“Send me the coordinates of the cache, too.”

“Okay. Hold on a minute. Give me your email address. I know Cliff has it, but I don’t.”

Tim gave her the address. Ellen looked up the cache coordinates and the street address where she’d told Cliff to park.

“I’m on my way. It’s still light here. It won’t get dark for another couple of hours.” He hung up.

Tim grabbed some food, water and a first aid kit. Something inside him told him to bring his gun, too. He didn’t have a GPS unit, but his car did. He knew he could get to the parking spot easily enough, but if Cliff was still out on the desert, Tim wasn’t sure how he’d find him. He wasn’t a geocacher and didn’t have the app on his phone, nor did he have time to download it and learn how to use it. The cache was forty-five miles away and light wouldn’t last forever. He knew one thing, though: if Cliff was still out there he’d be in danger of dying. It had already hit ninety-five and the air was bone dry. On the desert it would be even hotter – probably over a hundred degrees. Overnight the temperature would drop to the forties at that altitude. He could die of exposure, thirst, or simply fall and break his neck.

He told Luisa where he was going and why. He thought about notifying the local police in St. George, the city nearest the cache, but figured there wasn’t enough evidence Cliff was missing yet. He knew police didn’t treat missing adults as missing persons unless they’d been missing for twenty-four hours except in unusual circumstances. It wasn’t like Cliff to treat Ellen badly over an argument, although he didn’t know exactly what it was all about; but he knew Cliff was just too deliriously happy about his marriage and new baby to make Ellen worry this way. There was something seriously wrong. His friend was in trouble. He could feel it.

He raced down the freeway at ninety miles an hour. There was almost no other traffic for most of the way, but it got heavier as he entered St. George and forced him to slow. He made his way to the parking spot Ellen had mentioned and a sickening feeling wrenched his stomach. Cliff's rental car was right there where the dirt road began. He must still be out on the desert. He knew his truck could handle the dirt road. He needed to get out there and see if Cliff was somewhere along the road. He pulled out onto hardpan and began driving. The road was marked well enough that he didn't need GPS navigation. There was only one direction to go – follow the road.

Tim started driving. He considered calling Ellen to let her know the car was there, but figured that would just make her worry. He'd wait until he knew something. He did, however, call the local police as he drove. He explained the situation and said where he was. They told him to return to the paved street and some officers would meet him. He explained that every minute counted and he was already on the dirt road. He said he'd go as fast as he could toward the cache and then return to meet the officers. Then he hung up.

He drove slowly. The road was quite rough and he had to look all around. Cliff could be collapsed on the ground by the roadside. Then he saw another vehicle, a dark Porsche SUV, coming his way, headed back toward civilization. This person might have seen Cliff. He stopped his truck and waited for the SUV to pull up to him so he could talk to the driver. He put his head out the window and waved to the other vehicle. As it neared, however, it began to speed up.

Chapter 19

Three hours earlier

Cliff instinctively dove and rolled to his right. He had seen the muzzle flash and heard the gunshot. He knew it was live ammunition, not a blank. He also knew it was a handgun, not a rifle. After the roll he came up onto his haunches and began to run in a zigzag pattern away from the shooter. This lasted only a few seconds, however, because his brain began to process this information. It would take world-class marksmanship to hit someone moving at this distance with a handgun. Not only that, but he had heard only one shot. He turned to look back.

The shooter was walking toward him steadily, gun hanging down in his right hand. The sun was still behind him so Cliff could only make out his general form, but it was clear he did not have a rifle. Cliff was sure this must be connected to his investigation, either the API one or the Sullivan one, probably both, since he was now sure they were connected to each other. This was probably the same person who had run down Brigham Sullivan. Then he began to doubt his own conclusions.

He wondered why the man had shot at such a long range. Cliff was walking right toward him, obviously intending to come right up to him. If he'd wanted to kill him, he could have just waited until Cliff was ten feet away. Perhaps this was just some paranoid who thought Cliff was coming to steal his truck or do other harm and he was firing a warning shot. Cliff called out to him, "Don't shoot! I'm not armed. I don't want anything from you. I just want to hike back to the street." He stood still with his hands out and fingers splayed to show he had no weapon.

The man continued to advance, not rushing. When he reached about fifty yards from Cliff he lifted the gun again. Cliff raised his hands higher, but tensed his whole body to be ready to run. A second shot rang out. Cliff could literally hear the bullet pass by his body with a rush of air. The man had missed by only a few inches. This was no joke. He turned and began running again in the irregular zigzag, ducking and weaving unpredictably. No more shots came. When he stole a look back, the man was still coming steadily, gun down.

This made no sense to Cliff. The man was smaller than Cliff, that much he could tell, not overweight and not limping, so he could presumably jog straight toward him to close the distance. If Cliff dodged back and forth and the

shooter walked in a straight line, he would catch Cliff quickly enough. Cliff was dehydrated, tired, and sore and not able to move fast. Why didn't the man rush him?

He knew that he couldn't continue to run at that pace. He also knew he didn't have to. If he could just keep a distance of two hundred yards between them, he should be safe. The guy apparently wasn't that good a shot, and certainly hadn't planned the attack well, nor was he moving fast. Cliff changed his pace to a brisk walk, just a little faster than he thought the man was walking. He turned to look back every few paces and confirmed that the gap between them was growing. The shooter hadn't stopped, though. He still seemed to be stalking Cliff.

Cliff was traveling in the direction of the cache and knew the terrain now. He came to a deep arroyo and trotted down to the bottom. Here the shooter couldn't see him. Cliff turned left and hurried down twenty yards or so. He remembered seeing a large rock formation there when he had passed by earlier. He crouched down behind the rocks and rested in a kneeling position a moment. Then he unzipped his geocaching lumbar pack and pulled out a small dental mirror. These were useful tools for geocachers to peer into tree holes and other places where you don't want to reach blindly. He held the mirror up above the rocks just high enough so he could see back where he had entered into the arroyo. In moments the shooter appeared at the top edge. Cliff watched as the man looked around. He showed no signs of having spotted the tiny mirror. The man started walking along the top edge of the arroyo in the opposite direction. He must have guessed that Cliff had turned right instead of left when he'd descended out of sight.

Cliff breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived. An overwhelming thirst hit him with a vengeance. He looked at his water bottle and there was less than a quarter left, a few good swigs. He wanted to save it, but he needed a drink now. He lifted the bottle to his lips and forced himself to take only a very small drink. Then he capped the bottle again and returned it to his pack. It was time to make a decision. He had to either move or hide. Attacking an armed man was not an option, not in this open country. He decided to move while the man had his back to him. He lifted the mirror up one more time and confirmed that the man was still walking the opposite direction along the top edge of the arroyo.

Cliff stood and started walking fast the opposite direction, increasing the distance between him and the shooter. The arroyo bent to the right and Cliff followed it around until it became shallower. Slowly he was beginning to come

back up to the same level as the gunman. When he got near the top he stopped and pulled out the mirror again. After some maneuvering of the mirror, he was able to spot the man. The shooter had crossed the arroyo and reversed direction, obviously having realized Cliff had gone the other way. Since Cliff had made the turn in the arroyo, he was walking at a right angle to the shooter and the distance wasn't increasing; it was decreasing. Still, the shooter was over three hundred yards away, so Cliff's ploy had worked to gain some distance and time.

It was obvious that Cliff couldn't stay in the arroyo. There was no place to hide in this section and his only choices were to walk back toward the shooter or to come up to the top again and continue to increase the separation. He began climbing up the steep side of the arroyo. Once on top he looked back and saw the gunman heading his direction, still at a slow steady pace. He had been spotted. There was nothing more to do than keep going the opposite way.

As he started his retreat Cliff realized how hot he was. He had peeled off his long-sleeved shirt earlier, stripping to a tee shirt. Now his arms were bare. He realized he had not spread on sunblock when he'd started out because he'd expected to be back before the sun got high. He dug through his bag again and retrieved a small tube of SPF 15 and spread it liberally over his arms, face, and neck as he trudged along.

He was no longer moving toward the cache, but more to the southwest. Every time he checked, the shooter was still tracking him, but making no effort to shoot him nor did he break into a run to try to catch him. One time when he looked back, the man was lifting something to his mouth, probably a canteen of some sort. So the shooter had water, apparently. This gave Cliff pause. The man must be playing the long game, figuring that Cliff was in a worse position and unprepared to last the day in the hot sun. He realized the man had a hat with a brim, while Cliff only had a baseball cap. These were small differences, but they could provide a significant advantage for the shooter. Cliff needed to come up with an idea or risk dying.

First things first, he decided. He needed water. He was nearly crazed from thirst, he realized. He draped his flannel shirt over his head and drank the last of the water. This cleared his head enough to enable him to think more clearly. Cliff knew he couldn't last the day in that blistering sun. The only resource he had was his geocaching bag and he knew it now contained no water. But it held one thing of importance: information. He pulled out his Garmin GPS unit and hit the buttons to display nearby caches. When he had loaded Grandpa's Improbable Point into the unit he had also loaded in all the nearby caches on the

off chance that he might be passing by one or more of them and could pick up some additional finds. He had taken a brief look at them on his laptop the previous day to see where they were and get an idea whether they were worth going for. He had a vague recollection of a cache called Oasis. He was pretty sure the owner had put bottles of water in it for finders to take if needed, hence the name.

He had to stop walking in order to scroll through the listed caches, but he found it in short order. Sure enough, it was there. He didn't have the full description in his unit but the hint said it was a tan ammo box. Cliff remembered that from when he'd read the description, so he was now sure that was the one that had the water bottles. At least it had held water bottles when the cache was placed. But did it now? It was a relatively new cache, only eight months old, and only had twelve finds. The last four logs didn't say anything about the bottles and he couldn't pull up further information about earlier finds, so there was no way to know. He looked at the map screen and saw that the cache was to his northwest, further out into the desert, well past the cache he had just found. He decided it was his best hope, but it was a big risk. If he got to it and there was no water, he didn't think he could make it back. He would be stranded in the desert with no water and a gunman stalking him. His only hope at that point would be a rescue.

Cliff altered his direction of travel, heading for the Oasis cache. The gunman altered his course to match, cutting off the angle. The gap between them was shrinking. The man fell in behind Cliff only a little more than a hundred yards away. Cliff was so exhausted he knew he couldn't dodge back and forth any more. If the man made a good run at him, he could get close enough to shoot him. Cliff didn't even bother to turn around. If he got shot in the back at least he wouldn't experience the fear of oncoming death. But no shot came. He could hear the man behind him, but he didn't seem to be coming closer. In fact, he seemed to be farther behind.

After several minutes, Cliff could no longer ignore the diminishing sounds. He turned and saw that the man wasn't following him any longer. Instead he was climbing up a high knoll that rose above the desert floor. From there he could see for miles. Cliff finally realized what the man had been trying to do. He didn't want to shoot Cliff. He just wanted to keep Cliff from returning to his car, to civilization. He wanted to kill him, but not with a gun. He wanted it to look like a natural death, like Cliff had gotten lost or disoriented and wandered off into the desert. From his perch the gunman could see where Cliff was going and stay between him and the city. Farther west was just more desert, nothing but

desert and two mountain ranges before hitting Fresno, three hundred and forty miles away. The only nearby civilization was to the east and south. Cliff had to come back past him to get back to safety. The shooter was essentially playing the role of a goalie – a goalie with a gun.

Cliff stopped and watched as the man reached the top of the peak. The shooter looked back down at him and took another long drink from the canteen he had. Cliff noticed that he tipped the canteen almost all the way back, to a near vertical position. *He must be almost out, too*, Cliff thought. With the sun still behind him the man was still only a silhouette to Cliff's eyes. Had it not been for his sunglasses Cliff would not have even been able to look in the man's direction due to the brightness of the sun.

They stood there for several long minutes, each assessing the other's position. Cliff realized that the shooter held all the cards – or all the firepower at least. Cliff had to continue on to Oasis. It was his only hope. He began trudging in that direction once again, but stopped after twenty yards to look back. The man was still sitting where he had been. He could watch Cliff for miles, as long as Cliff stayed out of the deep arroyos.

Cliff's gait soon turned to a stagger, then to a stumble. He fell once but managed to get back to his feet. He looked down at his Garmin. It showed the Oasis cache as only five hundred feet away. Then four hundred. Cliff blinked and suddenly he couldn't read the GPS. The numbers blurred and his head swam. He had to sit down and put his head between his knees. His vision returned momentarily. He dug frantically, if clumsily, through his bag for his water bottle before realizing he had thrown it away long ago. He wasn't thinking clearly, he knew. He thought he saw rain clouds on the horizon, but the next instant they were gone. He was hallucinating. But his brain was still telling him to follow that red arrow on the GPS so he stood up slowly and started staggering toward the cache once more.

Two hundred. One hundred. There it was, a cairn of rocks by the side of a rough Jeep trail. He fell onto the top of the rock pile and began pawing away the rocks. After moving the top two he could see it – an army surplus ammo can. It took every remaining ounce of strength he had but he managed to wrestle it free from the remaining rocks. He pried open the lid and looked inside.

Chapter 20

Tim quickly turned his truck at an angle to stop the oncoming SUV, kicking up a cloud of dust, but the driver just swerved around him onto the desert floor and then back onto the road. The driver's maneuver added to the swirling dust and Tim realized he was unable to get a license number. He also didn't want to break off from the search to chase the SUV. He'd gotten a rough description, a dark Porsche driven by a dark-complected male. If it became relevant, he'd give that to the police.

Tim continued on along the dirt road until he came to a groomed circle in the dirt, the obvious end of the road. There was a narrow dirt driveway leading up to a water tank, but that wouldn't help him. He thought about trying to get to the cache, but he didn't have any way to do that. His truck couldn't cross the open desert, the gullies and arroyos. He didn't have a handheld GPS unit, either, so he couldn't walk to it. He had no way to navigate without the truck. He decided to return to the street where the police were supposed to meet him. He'd seen no sign of Cliff.

He hurried back in a transmission-punishing race to the street. When he got there, one police car was waiting. Tim parked and rushed over to the two officers in the car. He identified himself and explained the situation. They told Tim what he had expected, that it wasn't yet a missing persons case. With considerable arguing, Tim convinced them that it wasn't just a missing persons case but a rescue. Cliff wasn't missing. He was out there injured or otherwise incapacitated. They agreed to alert the SAR, the local search and rescue team, a volunteer group. They contacted their dispatch and relayed the coordinate information. They estimated it would take two hours to get a team out there but assured Tim someone would be looking for Cliff.

Tim asked about sending a helicopter to the cache location but the police said they didn't have that capability. When he asked about a fixed-wing plane they weren't sure one would be available before dark. They said there was probably someone who would volunteer as part of the SAR, but couldn't guarantee it.

"I'll do it myself," Tim stated with irritation. He explained that he was a former Bureau pilot and had his own plane. "I have to drive back to Cedar City, though. It'll be an hour there and an hour to get the plane back here." The officers passed this on to dispatch and got Tim the necessary radio frequency to communicate with the SAR.

Already frustrated and anxious, Tim knew he was going to have to add one more layer of unpleasantness. He had to let Ellen know the situation. He called her on his cell phone as he pulled out onto the freeway – illegal, of course, but sometimes you just have to bend the rules.

Ellen took the news without histrionics, but her voice cracked after a few minutes and Tim could tell she was becoming desperate.

“Ellen, I’m sure it’s going to be okay. Cliff is smart and resourceful. They’ll find him and bring him home safe. Where are you now?”

“I’m in the office.” She was barely intelligible.

“Is Matt Nguyen there?” Tim knew Matt from his days in the San Jose FBI office.

“Yes, he’s standing right next to me.” She could be heard talking to Matt explaining the situation.

“Listen to me. You shouldn’t be alone. Have Matt drive you home and stay with you. We’ll call you as soon as we know something.”

“I have to get Tommy. He’s at my sister’s.”

“Then have Matt drive you there and then go home. Or better yet, stay with her. There’s nothing you can do there for Cliff. Leave it to us. I’m going to take my own plane up.”

Tim was halfway back to Cedar City before he realized he had forgotten to mention to the police the Porsche SUV that sped by him. As he thought about it, it seemed more significant now. That trail was a Jeep trail and got pretty rugged pretty fast. ATVs and other off-road vehicles were fine, but a Porsche? The SUV could handle it, but it wasn’t really designed for that kind of terrain, and it was just too expensive to be used for it. Could it be someone connected with the murder case? It seemed far-fetched, but not impossible. Why else would the driver speed off instead of stopping? He had to be doing something wrong.

He called Bob Whitfield and reached him quickly. He explained that Cliff had gone missing and there were some possible indications of foul play. He didn’t want to get into details since he was driving, but he felt this could be one additional spur toward treating the Sullivan case as a murder. Whitfield was non-committal about his view of how this might affect the case, but he asked if Tim needed any help. Tim said yes, a spotter would be a great help.

Tim pulled into his parking spot at the Cedar City airport in a screech of brakes. Whitfield was there waiting for him. Within fifteen minutes the plane was fueled and ready to go. The air temperature was well over ninety and that made

for a difficult takeoff from the thinner atmosphere and reduced lift, but they became airborne and turned south.

When he arrived near St. George, Tim coordinated with the local air controller and then the police dispatch. He let them know he was accompanied by a Cedar City detective. He was the only plane in the search area and had clearance to fly low without fear of other air traffic. He spotted the SAR party collected near the start of the dirt road, already en route to the Grandpa's Improbable Point cache. Tim was used to flying surveillance in the FBI, but Whitfield was not. It wasn't something Cedar City police normally did. Typically the pilot does what he's supposed to – fly the plane – while the spotter is the one looking at the ground.

It took only a minute to arrive over the coordinates of the geocache, but Tim didn't see anything there of note. No people, no road or other markings, just rocky terrain. Whitfield confirmed that he didn't see anything either. Tim reported to the SAR that there was nothing visible from the air and he was going to begin an outward spiral. After fifteen minutes of circling, he still hadn't seen anything. The SAR party had arrived at the geocache site by then. One of the searchers was a geocacher and had found that particular cache in the past. He retrieved it from its hiding spot and reported that someone named CliffNotes had signed the log that day. Tim confirmed that was Cliff's geocaching name.

Neither the airborne or ground-based searchers saw anything amiss either. It appeared that Cliff had found the cache and started back toward his car. Although the ground was mostly too hard to show footprints, there were a few bootprints that they assumed were Cliff's, as they were distributed all over the area consistent with someone looking for a cache. They assumed the most visible prints were likely from the most recent visitor, Cliff. The troubling thing about them, though, was that there was a trail of them heading back toward the trailhead. Why didn't he make it back, and if he stopped or ran into trouble partway back, why didn't they find any sign of him? If he had collapsed from heat exhaustion or some other medical problem, his body would have been easily spotted from the air and probably from the ground as well.

Now that they knew what his bootprints looked like, they began to track his return. This was more difficult than it sounded because of the hard ground. Prints were few and far between and not always in a straight line toward the car. As they were slowly tracking his progress Tim continued to expand the radius of his search circle. Whitfield continued to report nothing of interest below other than the search party.

It was a high school girl who spotted the shell casing near the groomed circle that served as the end of the marked road, the spot where Tim had turned around in his truck. One of the men in the party recognized it as a .32 caliber shell and declared it had been fired within the last day or two. The brass had no cordite smell, but it was still shiny. Brass left out in the elements becomes noticeably tarnished after a few days. He was smart enough to bag it using gloves so that it could be dusted for prints. When this find was reported over the air, Whitfield commented to Tim that there could be something to his murder theory. Tim again realized that he had still not reported the SUV to the St. George police. He contacted the police dispatcher by radio and reported it then handed the mike to Whitfield. The dispatcher put out a lookout request for the SUV on behalf of Cedar City police.

The whole outlook of the search party changed at this news. They had tracked Cliff back to the end of the marked dirt road. The terrain from there to his car was too level and well-marked for him to get lost or fall. A single shell wasn't much to go on, but the working assumption at that point was that Cliff had been chased back into the desert by someone wielding a gun. There was no sign of blood or a struggle, so he could have been taken hostage. But if he'd turned back, where would he go?

Tim knew Cliff was in trouble but he didn't know what to do about it. He continued to circle the skies until he got low on fuel and had to land at the local airport.

Chapter 21

The cache held four bottles of water. Cliff lay prostrate on the ground as he struggled to open the first one. He wrenched the plastic cap free so hard that he dropped the bottle, spilling some of the water onto the ground. Cursing silently at his clumsiness, Cliff snatched it up again and guzzled the remaining contents. The effects were immediate. His head cleared. He began sweating again.

As soon as he dropped the bottle he lifted his head and looked behind him. In his lying position he could not see over the small rise behind him, which he quickly realized meant the shooter could not see him. The man would have seen him fall, but he wouldn't have been able to see him open the cache and drink. Maybe he should stay down, he thought, but gave up on that idea quickly. He was still out in the open exposed to the sun. He couldn't just lie there until he'd drunk all the water, nor could he crawl to safety. For all he knew, the man had seen him collapse and was now on his way to verify he was dead, or finish him off. He had to know what the greater danger was. He stood up and looked toward the high knoll where the man had been. There was no one there.

Cliff scanned the ground between the knoll and himself and saw nothing. He shook his head and scanned again, not sure whether he could have missed the man. There was no movement. Nothing. He had to assume the man had headed back to his vehicle, convinced that Cliff was stranded or even dead. The man would have shelter and possibly more water there. The gunman couldn't stay out in the scorching heat all day without water, either. He was probably going to stand watch back near the car all day to make sure Cliff couldn't get back there. Cliff now had some water to take with him, but he was still extremely dehydrated and would go through the water pretty quickly. If he headed back to his car and the man was there guarding the path, he would have no option. There was no second Oasis.

He needed to find shelter until nightfall. That was his only option. But how? The cache he'd found had been tucked in a recess, a shady spot, but it had not been big enough for a person to shelter in. Still, that made him think that the terrain did have enough deep arroyos and similar features that it could have some shallow caves. He strained to recall what he had read the previous day when he had been looking at the descriptions of nearby caches. He cursed himself for not studying those more closely. He had spent most of his time reading the logs on the main target cache.

Wasn't there a log by someone on another cache who said he, or was it a she, could barely squeeze in to get the cache? Squeeze in what? A cave? Squeeze in an arm or an entire body? He couldn't remember which cache or exactly what had been written. He lay down again and pulled the flannel shirt up over his head for protection from the sun and began scrolling through the cache list in his Garmin. One by one he pulled up the caches and then the logs. He wasn't connected to the Internet, so he could only read what was stored in his GPS unit, the last four logs on each cache.

He read one after the other but got nothing useful. Time and again the only log was that infernal "TFTC" the geocachers' shorthand for "Thanks for the cache." Long-time cachers like Cliff despised the laziness of this log, the characteristic log of the newbie cacher who used a smart phone and logged immediately. Smart phone users don't like to write long informative logs because of the difficulty of typing on a phone. They were Generation Text. Cliff felt it was the moral obligation of the finder to write at least a couple of sentences as a reward to the owner of the cache for putting the cache out in the first place, as well as to the following finders who use the log information as help in finding a cache or deciding whether it was worth going for. He always waited until he got home and could type something out on his computer.

Twenty minutes later he was near the end of the cache list he had loaded into his unit and was beginning to despair. Then he spotted it. The log he had remembered. Yes, it was a female geocacher who said something about squeezing her shoulders in far enough to reach the cache. So a body could be sheltered in whatever opening was there. The cache, unfortunately, was the opposite direction from his car, from civilization, and another two miles from his current spot. Still, he reasoned that he could get to it using only one more bottle of water and then if he could get into some shade, inside a cave or opening of some sort, he could rest until nighttime. He didn't think the shooter would stay put after that, and even if he did, maybe Cliff could approach his car from a different direction. Two bottles of water should be enough to get him back to his car during the cool of the night, he hoped, but it would be over five miles and the dry air almost vacuumed the air from the body even at night. There would be enough moonlight to see his way, he was pretty sure, and he had a small flashlight in his bag.

He realized he hadn't signed the logbook on the Oasis cache yet. He did this and marked it as found in his Garmin. He really didn't care about getting credit for the find, but he wanted a reminder so that when he got back to

civilization he could let the cache owner and subsequent searchers know that the water was all gone. He owed someone a huge thank you for that live-saving libation. He set his GPS destination as the cave cache, as he thought of it, and set out walking slowly, his flannel shirt now draped over his head and neck for protection.

As he walked, he crossed vehicle tracks several times. Motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles obviously used these trails for recreational rides. He wished one would come by now, but it was completely silent except for the faint drone of a distant plane. A plane! Could that be someone searching for him? He turned and looked up, but the sound was coming from somewhere near the direction of the sun and it was impossible to see anything. There was nothing he could do. Wherever it was, from the sound of it, it was too far away for him to get the attention of the pilot, and it might not be someone looking for him anyway. He had to find shelter. That was his first priority. If he heard the plane close overhead, he would make an attempt to catch their eye.

It took him an hour, but he made it to the cache site. He was exhausted and dehydrated, but he had managed to use up only three-quarters of a bottle of water. He had more than two bottles left. The arrow on the GPS pointed directly to an overhanging bluff with a deep fissure below it. He trudged up to the fissure and stepped into the shade afforded by the sheer wall of the bluff. The relief was exquisite. He removed his shirt and cap from his head.

Still, he was not out of the woods, or the desert, anyway. The sun was moving relentlessly westward and would soon be shining on this wall of the bluff. He had to get inside the fissure somehow. It was clear that he had too much bulk to squeeze into the upper part of the fissure, but it was wider at the bottom. He lay down in a prone position propped up on his elbows. He could have been doing a yoga plank position. The fissure was about four feet deep at the bottom, but only about a foot and a half at the narrow top. The cache was wedged in at the top, but he didn't care about that. He stayed on the ground and crawled into the fissure until his head hit the far wall. His feet and lower legs were still sticking out, but he had deep shade over most of his body and his jeans protected his legs from the sun. He relaxed for the first time in hours.

The gunman would never find him here, he knew. Whoever it was couldn't have known why Cliff had gone out onto the desert. Only Ellen and Tim knew of his plan to go for the geocache. The man must have followed him and spotted an opportunity when he saw Cliff walk out onto the desert. That meant he had no knowledge of the geocaches. He took another small drink of water. Then

he dug through his bag for the protein bar he knew was there. One small bar was all there was, but nothing ever tasted better. He checked his watch. It was now two P.M. He put his wadded up shirt under his head and within minutes was sound asleep.

* * *

When they landed at St. George, a member of the SAR team volunteered to be the spotter. Whitfield told Tim he had to get back to Cedar City now that he had a replacement, but said Tim didn't have to fly him back. He could get a ride from a St. George officer. He told Tim he was going to crank up the priority of the Sullivan case based on the new circumstances. It should be looked at as a homicide, at least for now. Tim thanked him for his help.

The spotter turned out to be a local pilot who was familiar with the area. He apologized for not volunteering his own plane, but said it was out of commission at the moment waiting for a part. Tim thanked him for his time and said not to worry about that. He was just grateful to have someone else in the cockpit who knew what he was doing.

"At least we know he's alive," he told Tim.

"How do you know?"

"No buzzards. If he was lying dead or injured out there, you'd see them circling."

Tim wondered whether this was a good sign or not. If there had been vultures circling, they would know where to look. Cliff might be lying injured. He could also have been captured by the gunman. He might have been trussed up in that Porsche he'd seen flee the scene. Still, at least Cliff wasn't lying dead, as the spotter had pointed out.

Tim called Ellen to let her know the status. This time her voice didn't crack. She showed that steely resolve that Tim had known was there – the tough FBI agent he'd worked with when she'd been in Salt Lake Division. She said she was at home with her sister and niece and Tommy. She thanked him again and told him not to give up. He assured her he wouldn't.

After Tim called, Ellen called Maeva to let her know the situation. She had been unaware anything was amiss up to that point, although she had been surprised Cliff hadn't called her after he'd landed. She had expected him to go home, not come into the office, but he always checked in after traveling.

As soon as she was off the phone with Ellen, Maeva called Sally Brolin to let her know the situation, who patched Morgan in so she wouldn't have to repeat the story. They hadn't met Maeva, but they knew Cliff had an assistant who was doing various parts of the investigation and recognized her name. They told her about identifying Ligaya Santos. Maeva said she'd begin background checks on Santos as soon as she could, but she was too worried about Cliff right now. They said they understood. When that call ended she pulled out a tissue and let herself cry.

* * *

Cliff awoke slowly, unclear for a moment where he was. His bones and muscles were screaming for mercy. The hard rock of the fissure floor was no Simmons Beautyrest. The sun was hovering just above the western mountains, about to take the final plunge into twilight. The sunlight reached his waist now and the tops of his legs were hot, but his jeans and boots covered his lower half. He wasn't worried about sunburn. His trunk and head had remained in the shade

Suddenly a spider fell onto his face and he jerked upright to brush it off. He hit his head hard on the rock above and lay back down. He was dazed but not seriously injured. He needed to be more careful. When he finally cleared his brain enough to work out his situation, he concluded that his plan was working. It would be dark soon and start to cool off. He wasn't sure whether he should start as soon as the sun went down, or wait until it got cooler. It would be over eighty for an hour or more, he thought, although he wasn't sure how fast it cooled off on the desert. Obviously it would be easier to see in the light of dusk than when it got really dark. He remembered the moon had been bright two nights ago, but that had been late, maybe ten or eleven. When did it rise? He hadn't paid attention.

Painfully he extracted his body from the fissure and stretched. What the hell, he thought, might as well sign the cache log. His arms were long enough to reach the cache without getting his shoulder in the upper part of the opening. He signed the log and replaced the cache. Then he marked the cache as found on his Garmin.

He saw no sign of the moon yet. The sun dipped behind the mountain as he looked around, and it was obvious the darkness would be enveloping the landscape very soon. He decided it would be better to hike with the twilight, even though the risk was that he would go through his water fast in the enduring heat.

He realized he had to urinate. Instinctively he looked around to see if anyone was looking, then realized how silly that was. If only someone was looking! He unloosed the yellow stream on the downhill side and watched it flow. He noticed it was much darker than usual. His body had extracted as much water from it as it could. Still, this was a good sign. If he had urine, his dehydration wasn't at a dangerous level yet.

He zipped up, drank the remaining dregs of the one bottle, checked his pack to be sure the other two bottles were there, tied his shirt around his waist, and set out toward his car. He planned to cut south as he got closer, both to avoid the shooter, and to provide an alternate escape route. There was civilization, Bloomington, to the southeast, then Interstate 15, and whatever lay along it. If the shooter approached him again, he could head that way and hope.

He looked at this watch. It was a little past seven thirty. The sun, although behind the mountain, wouldn't be all the way below the horizon for over an hour, so he had quite a bit of light left. Still, it was dusk and clouds were moving in from the west, adding another shade of darkness. He hadn't paid any attention to the weather forecast since he had expected to be home by now. He knew it didn't rain often this time of year, but he also knew that it could at almost any time, and when it did, it poured. Storms could come in from the west, but the real soakers came up from the Gulf of California to the south. Tim had told him about the fluky weather on more than one occasion.

Suddenly he felt something crawling on his left calf, under his pants leg. Whatever it was felt pretty big. He had visions of tarantulas. It must have crawled up his leg while he was sleeping. A shot of adrenaline excited his nerve fibers as he tried to decide whether to shake it out, dig it out, drop his pants, or squash it. It was moving fairly fast up toward his thigh and he didn't have time to do an analysis. He shook his pants leg vigorously in hopes it would fall out. In this he was successful; unfortunately, before it fell, it administered a painful sting. The creature that fell out and scampered away was an Arizona bark scorpion, the most toxic scorpion in North America.

Cliff emitted a gasp of surprise and pain, and immediately sat down on the ground. Standing was excruciating. His leg began to throb. Much as he wanted to stomp the offending beast to death, he watched helplessly as it scampered away out of sight between some rocks. If he couldn't stand, he couldn't walk; this much he knew.

He sat this way for half an hour. The pain seemed to have subsided somewhat. Finally he summoned the courage to test the leg again. Standing took

his breath away once again, but he found he could bear it if he didn't move. Then he took a single step and had to stop again. But he didn't fall. He took another big breath and stepped forward again. This time he was prepared for it and gritted his teeth as the pain washed over him. Again he stopped to recover. If he didn't move, the pain was a dull, bearable ache. Every step, though, ratcheted the pain level two notches. Taking one step every twenty or thirty seconds was useless. He'd never make it back. He'd have to wait for the pain to decrease.

As he contemplated this, he thought he felt a breeze pick up. It felt good in the heat, but if it portended a storm, he didn't want to be caught out in it. He took a look at his GPS unit again and suddenly realized its batteries were on their last bar. Damn! He'd meant to replace the spares he kept in his bag after the last time he had used them, but knew he had forgotten. If the batteries ran out and the darkness fell it would be pitch black out here. The clouds would blot out any moonlight. Even if his leg recovered enough to allow him to walk, he wouldn't be able to navigate.

How cold did it get overnight, he wondered? It was summertime and probably didn't get below freezing, but at that altitude he thought it could drop into the forties. He had heard of people dying of exposure in that temperature range, especially if they were wet. That opening where he had sheltered from the sun couldn't keep him dry, he knew. The rain would blow in and soak him to the skin. He had to fight off an approaching sense of foreboding. Giving up in despair wouldn't help anything.

Then he heard the distant growl of an airplane engine overhead. He scanned the skies but couldn't see it. It was somewhere generally to the north or northeast, but that's all he knew. He could tell from the sound it was a small plane, not an airliner. He was convinced it must be a search plane looking for him, although he had little to base that on except wishful thinking. He pulled off his shirt and waved it frantically as he looked to the north. The sound continued with no alteration in volume or direction that he could detect. He stopped waving when he realized he was just tiring himself out. Soon he could tell the sound was getting fainter. The plane was flying away from him. Anyone on board would not be able to look behind them.

Cliff turned the GPS unit off to preserve the batteries and sat down again. There was nothing he could do. He would just have to wait for his leg to get better, or for rescue.

Tim turned to the spotter. "We can't stay up much longer. It's getting dark quickly. That looks like a storm coming in."

"I agree. You ready to call it a day?" the spotter said hopefully.

"Not yet. Let's make one more pass. We haven't gone all the way to I-15. If I were trying to escape a shooter, I'd head south toward the freeway."

"It's hard to see that direction. It's in the mountain's shadow."

"Well, we've covered the area around his car and the geocache dozens of times. We need to expand our search area."

The spotter sounded concerned as he replied, "Okay, but keep it short. You aren't from here. This airport isn't easy to land at when there's a strong western wind."

Tim continued flying south until he was almost over I-15, then he made a wide turn north. He didn't spot anything on the ground nor did the spotter. It was time to head north again and land before the weather came in.

"We're headed back," Tim announced to the SAR team over the radio. "We see weather coming in."

"Roger that. We're about to call a day, too. We'll resume in the morning."

"What's that?" Tim said to the spotter, pointing to the west. "I thought I saw a reflection."

"Out there? Probably just something shiny like a beer can left by a four-wheeler. Your guy wouldn't head west. There's nothing out there but more desert. It's exactly in the wrong direction from his car."

"I'm going to check it out," Tim declared.

* * *

Cliff gritted his teeth in frustration as the plane passed by almost directly overhead. He was waving his arms as he tried to balance with almost all his weight on one leg, but the plane made no sign they had seen him. He watched as it made a broad turn and headed north again. He had only one chance. He pulled the small Maglite flashlight from his geocaching pouch and aimed it at the plane. Most geocachers carried flashlights. Some caches could only be found at night because the path to them is marked with miniscule reflectors placed on trees. They're virtually invisible during the day, but reflect a flashlight beam in the dark. The lights are also needed to peer into hidey holes day or night.

The small but powerful LED pierced the sky like a surgeon lancing a boil. Did he hit the airplane with the beam? Cliff continued to wave the light back and forth, hoping the angle was right. Bright as it was, he considered it a long shot to be seen from the air. He held it up by his eye and sighted right along the barrel of the flashlight. At least he could see the plane now. It was coming back his way.

Then it passed by again toward the north. When it was more than ninety degrees past him, he turned the light off. The plane hadn't seen him. Despair set in and he sat heavily on the ground again.

* * *

"I don't see anything. I guess that was just my imagination," the spotted urged. "We're just going to have to try tomorrow. That front is moving in too fast to stay out here."

"I guess you're right. What's the best approach to the airport from here?"

"With the wind picking up from the northwest you're better off approaching from the south. Head back that way and then come in from the southwest."

Tim made one last bank. The plane leveled off then began to gain altitude for the approach. Suddenly the cockpit with bathed in a bright green light, a blinding light.

"What the hell!" the spotter exclaimed. "Some jerk with one of those lasers."

"It's got to be him. I'm going back around." Tim banked hard left. The green light seared his eyes once again. He could tell it was off to the west somewhere, but the light was so powerful he couldn't look directly at it and thus couldn't tell exactly which direction to fly. He just kept flying. After a third blinding strike the laser light stopped almost instantaneously after hitting the plane. Tim looked down. This time he could see the white maglight, too. Then he could see the form holding it, a black shape in a slightly lighter darkness. He knew that shape even from a thousand feet up. It was Cliff.

"We found him!" Tim radioed. "He's way off to the southwest; he has a flashlight."

"Give us the coordinates," the SAR team leader replied.

Tim swung the plane around further. "When I pass directly over him, read off the GPS coordinates," he directed the spotter and handed him the mike.

It took all the skill of his twenty-five years as a Bureau pilot, but Tim brought the plane into a steep turn and dive so he could fly directly over Cliff at five hundred feet. As he did so, he wiggled the wings back and forth in the traditional signal to a ground observer that he's been seen. The spotter read the coordinates into the radio.

Tim made one more pass, wiggling his wings again and confirmed that Cliff was staying in the same spot. Then he pulled up and headed in. The clouds were closer and the wind speed was ramping up quickly. It was going to be a tough landing at St. George.

"We got it," the ground team radioed back. "We're on our way. You can go on in. Thank you for the help."

"Roger, and thank *you* for the help." He put back the mike and pulled out his cell phone. He punched the speed dial for Cliff's home number and handed it to the spotter. "Tell his wife Ellen we found him. I've got to fly this sucker. It's getting hairy."

* * *

It took two long hours, as the search and rescue team had to travel slowly over the gullies and gulches in the dark. A heavy rain began to fall. Wet, exhausted, and still in pain, Cliff plopped into the seat of the rescue Jeep like a sack of cement thrown from a roof. An ATV and another off-road vehicle were in attendance. They gave him water and a choice of candy bars or fruit. He went for the candy.

By the time he was back to the trailhead, an ambulance was waiting. He was recovered enough that he wanted to wave them off, but he was so tired that even a night in a hospital bed sounded nice and he hoped they had something for the leg pain. He was transported and checked out. The hospital had antivenin for the scorpion sting which reduced the pain greatly. He'd lost eight pounds of water weight, despite the water and candy bar he'd consumed in the Jeep. It was the first time he'd been below one-ninety since ninth grade.

A police officer met him in the hospital where he'd been admitted overnight for observation. Cliff told him about the shooter but had only a sketchy description. Male, dark complexion, not more than average height, maybe a bit short, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. The man had been careful to stay between him and the sun, so he never got a good look at his face. The dark Porsche was the best lead, he told the officer. After the interview ended, the cop told him he'd

write it up and give him a copy of the report, but that it didn't happen in the city limits. That was Bureau of Land Management land, owned by the federal government. He'd have to notify the FBI, he explained, and Cliff would have to be interviewed again. Cliff had not told the officer he was retired FBI and found it amusing that the officer had said this last remark as though it was a sorry thing to have to go through an FBI interview.

"No problem," was Cliff's only response.

When the officer left, Tim walked in. The handshake turned into a quick hug and pat on the back. "Hey, buddy," Cliff said; he didn't have to say anything further.

"Hey yourself. Didn't you know it's a federal crime to shine a laser light at an airplane?"

Cliff grinned. "Didn't you know it's illegal to fly at treetop levels?"

"There weren't any trees. Have you talked to Ellen yet?"

"No. My phone's busted. I dropped it on the rocks. The doctors were all over me and then that cop. I haven't had a chance."

"I just talked to her. She's somewhere between ecstatic and homicidal. Here, use my phone. I'd better not be here for this conversation." Tim stepped out of the room.

Cliff took it with trepidation. He was not looking forward to the call, but he knew it had to be done. He dialed.

"I love you. I'm so, so sorry," Cliff blurted out as soon as he heard the "hello."

"That's a good start, but this is Theresa."

"You two sound a lot alike."

"I'll put her on."

Ellen's voice came on. "Cliff..."

"I love you. I'm ..."

"Yeah, I heard. I was standing right next to her. You have a funny way of showing it. Are you okay?"

"I swear I did not hang up on you. The phone fell onto the rocks and broke. And you were totally right on the pardon case. I shouldn't have said anything."

The abject apology took away any residual anger Ellen may have had, but her relief was overwhelming in any event. "Oh God, Cliff, I was so worried. It was all my fault. I wanted you to get that darned geocache and didn't even think how dangerous it could be."

“No, no, no. It’s not your fault. Not at all. Some guy just came after me with a gun. It could have happened anywhere. The cache wasn’t the danger.”

“That’s just what Tim told me. He said the search and rescue people filled him in. Tell me the whole story.”

Cliff gave Ellen the short version, sparing her the harrowing details of his near-death experience.

“That’s federal land,” she declared when he was done. “That’s CGR – Attempted Murder.” CGR was the Bureau acronym for Crime on a Government Reservation. “Salt Lake has a new case.”

Cliff knew there was no fighting it. Whether he wanted it or not, the Bureau was going to take over his case. In truth, it was a relief. There was someone out to kill him and he wanted the FBI, the police, and entire U.S. Marine Corps if he could get it.”

“At least he only knows me as Dave Anderson, not Cliff Knowles,” he offered by way of consolation.

“And you’ve got an armed FBI agent living with you. Just come home safely. You can unseal a Vespel when you get here.”

“I’m on my way.”

Chapter 22

Early the next morning an FBI agent from the St. George Resident Agency interviewed Cliff in the hospital. He was a young, enthusiastic former accountant named Randy Berger. Berger was accompanied by Sheila Shaw, the Special Agent in Charge, or SAC, of Salt Lake Division. SAC's almost never got involved in individual cases, especially at the remote Resident Agencies. Shaw, however, had received a personal call from the Director the previous evening. She had been informed that Cliff was not only a former FBI agent, but that his wife was a current agent and the aunt of the Director's godchild. He had said he would be following the progress of the case personally and was sure Shaw would give it the attention it deserved. Indeed she would.

Cliff told them the story of the shooter. When they got to the part about motive, Berger, a financial whiz, had no trouble understanding the APIX fraud scheme. He speculated that the shooter must have been Deal or someone associated with him, but admitted there was no solid evidence linking the killing to Deal or APIX. This led into the story of Brigham Sullivan and Berger's eyes lit up. He may have a multiple homicide case that the Director himself was following. Whoever it was that went after Cliff was probably the same person that ran down Sullivan, and if so, had traveled interstate for that purpose. That made that one a federal case, too. Shaw assured Cliff that she had already been in touch with the U.S. Attorney and that the case would be given the highest priority there.

Cliff took an early flight out of Vegas. The SAR team had returned his phone to him and he was able to get a replacement in Las Vegas before the flight, so he spent his time on the plane writing a long and profusely grateful log to the owner of the Oasis cache, apologizing for taking all the water, but pointing out how it literally saved his life. He was back in his office by noon, and by one o'clock he was in Brolin's. He laid out the whole story in detail.

In turn, Brolin and Morgan told him about Ligaya Santos. The consensus was that they'd found the leak. Now the question was what to do about it. Cliff still had the one drawing from Belcher. Brolin said that was enough for them to file a civil suit, but they wanted more. The damages from a single drawing were minimal. They needed to show a widespread practice. Morgan had already begun compiling a list of the drawings that Santos had checked out and it corresponded almost perfectly with the parts that had begun to drop in sales. That was circumstantial, but Brolin wanted hard evidence. Belcher had called Morgan that

morning and said his lawyer had advised him against sending the remaining APIX drawings to API. They were at a stalemate.

“Cliff, I can sue and get a discovery order, but we don’t want to do that. First of all, the drawings are probably already destroyed, and if not, soon would be. They’re potentially incriminating. Also, we don’t like suing our vendors for obvious business reasons. But I need those drawings both for suit against APIX and to convince our customers they’re receiving fraudulent goods, knockoffs. Is the FBI going to search Belcher?”

Cliff had already given this some thought. “They probably could, but I don’t think it’s advisable. We’d only get a small percentage of the stolen drawings. Not only that, but the evidence would be in the hands of the FBI, not available to you for your suit. For now the FBI is going to be concentrating on identifying the shooter. They’ll focus on Deal at first. I have an idea. Let Santos get her access to the drawings back.”

“What are you going to do?” Morgan asked.

Cliff explained. Brolin and Morgan looked at each other and agreed that it could work.

Chapter 23

Cliff sat in his Tesla in the API parking lot, cell phone in hand. “Maeva, that’s her coming out your direction. She wearing black pants and a green blouse.”

“I see her,” Maeva replied. Maeva drove her own Korean compact on surveillances. It was discreet, especially since it was driven by a diminutive female.

Santos pulled out into traffic and headed home in her minivan. This was the third day of surveillance now for Cliff and Maeva, and they could tell immediately that was where she was headed. She took the same route every night. The first two days had not revealed any suspicious behavior. It was still useful to establish her pattern and get to recognize her and her car in different conditions and dress. Today was the first day, however, that Morgan had told them she had checked out drawings that she shouldn’t have, ones she had no legitimate need for in the course of her duties.

Maeva had done the background on Santos and learned that she lived in Morgan Hill with her husband Juan who worked at an auto body shop. Her turn toward home was the sign they were waiting for. If she had driven north toward Redwood City, that would mean she was dropping off the drawings with Deal. But since she went south, that meant she was taking the drawings home. Cliff had guessed that she would not want to drive forty minutes north and then two hours south through heavy rush hour traffic. The plan could be set in motion.

They followed her all the way home even though they were pretty sure they knew where she was going. It was necessary to be sure she didn’t mail anything or drop off the drawings somewhere unexpected. She made no stops en route home.

They waited as late as they could. The late June sun stayed up until 8:30 and the light lasted another half hour. At 8:45 Maeva knocked on the door to the Santos home. She was pulling a wagon with three boxes: one labeled plastic, one labeled cans, one labeled paper. Each box held several items of matching the parts. Ligaya answered.

“Hi!” she said brightly. “I’m collecting recycling for the school.”

“Is there a drive? I didn’t hear anything about it.”

“Really? I’m surprised. Well, we’re hoping to reach ten thousand dollars for the after-school program. Can you donate your recyclables? It costs you nothing. Cans, plastic, and paper.”

“I suppose. The city requires us to separate them anyway. Just a minute.” She closed the door and returned two minutes later. She had a bag of soda and beer cans and a separate bag of plastic items. She handed them to Maeva who dumped them into the boxes on her wagon with a smile.

“No paper?”

“Can you even make money from that? We don’t take the newspaper any longer.”

“Oh, newspaper isn’t very valuable. The recycling people like the white paper, like computer paper or your junk mail. The rate is much higher for that. Do you have any, like from a home office wastebasket?” Santos looked a little annoyed. “Pleeease!” Maeva begged.

“All right, just a minute,” Santos replied. She came back thirty seconds later and dumped a wastebasket of paper into the box labeled “paper,” although she made a show of pulling out two credit card receipts and juggling the wastebasket to make sure there were no other financial documents in it. Maeva watched as engineering drawings bounced up and down among the ad mailers and real estate flyers while Santos pulled out the “sensitive” stuff.

The goods in hand, Maeva headed back down the walk. She pretended to be going to the next house, but as she walked a few steps and looked back to thank Santos, she could see the door was already closed. She kept walking until she reached her car and loaded the boxes into the trunk. Cliff watched from half a block away.

When they got back to the office they checked their haul. The process wasn’t hard to figure out. The drawings in the waste paper weren’t the full-sized engineering drawings that Ligaya had checked out from the API library, but they were of the same parts. She had apparently taken the drawings to a photocopier and made a reduced size copy, small enough to be faxed. This much was obvious since there was also a fax cover sheet. The original full-sized drawing was apparently returned to the library as it was supposed to be. The “To” line of the fax cover sheet said only “Michael” without a telephone number. Below that the part number was listed. Deal must put the small faxed drawing on his own photocopier and enlarge it, then cut out the center and paste it onto his own APIX border. This would explain the poor quality of the drawings at Belcher’s.

They both marveled at how stupid Santos had been to leave the drawings for Maeva, but Cliff knew how common that was among lesser players in white collar cases. The real con men, the Michael Deals of the world, were more careful, as his shredding operation showed, but peripheral players often convince themselves that what they're doing isn't a crime, isn't even ethically wrong. Maybe at first they're scared and take precautions, but after the scheme goes on and they're making money with no problems, they become complacent. They assume that what they're doing must be okay or something bad would have happened by now. Deal probably used some smooth talking on Santos just like he'd done with Belcher. He had counted on that.

* * *

The next day Cliff brought the drawings to API. Morgan and Brolin were both ecstatic. One of the drawings was for a part made by Kimball Quartz. The other one was for a part made by a machine shop in Hayward. They now had a pattern established. Brolin announced that she was going to take this to her General Counsel and ask for authorization to file suit. Morgan asked Brolin if he could contact the customers now and give them an ultimatum.

Cliff answered for her. "Not yet. The word will get back to APIX. You still have hundreds, maybe thousands of drawings stored there. If they aren't seized simultaneously they'll just get squirreled away in some safe place and somebody else will just become the next APIX."

"He's right," Brolin agreed.

Morgan shook his head in frustration. "So, what are we going to do about Santos? We can't let her stay now."

Brolin mulled this over. "No, we've got to fire her, and soon. I'll contact H.R. Is she here today?"

"Yes, working at her desk. She'll be here until 4:30 or so."

Cliff said, "I have a better idea. It's time for the FBI. I didn't want to do it before because the evidence would be in their hands and not available to you for your civil suit, but with these three drawings and the evidence from the library check out logs you now have enough. The important thing is to get those fake drawings pulled and interview Santos at the same time, then fire her. Give me three days."

"You can get it done that fast?" Brolin asked, incredulous.

“Normally, no. But the FBI is already working that attack on me as a high-priority case. The FBI Director is watching the investigation. They don’t have a solid connection between that attack on me and APIX yet, but they’ll probably get there very soon. If we bring them this evidence, they’ll have probable cause to search APIX at least, even if it’s only on the trade secret theft and wire fraud, not the attack. I’m sure they can write up an affidavit and get a search warrant in that time. The Director can get the Deputy Attorney General to lean on the United States Attorney if necessary.”

“The Director of the FBI is personally following that attack on you?” Morgan parroted, obviously skeptical. “Just because you’re a former agent?”

“That’s a small part of it. The Bureau protects its own. But my wife is an agent and her sister was married to Congressman Mark Bishop, the Director’s best friend.”

“The one who died of a heart attack while running a race?”

“Yes. The Director is the godfather of their daughter. There’s Bureau family and then there’s family family.”

Brolin emitted a low whistle. “I had no idea. So how should we present this to the FBI? Through your wife?”

“Yes. Leave it to me. Are you available this afternoon? I’d like to bring her here.”

“All right. Three o’clock?”

“Fine. I’ll call her now.”

He called her and got her to agree to come at three, although she tried to pump him for details. He kept it to a minimum amount of information, knowing it was better for her to get the story from the victim directly.

* * *

At his office, Cliff reviewed Maeva’s research. She had run the license plates on the cars in the APIX lot that Cliff had recorded and obtained driver’s license data on all of them. Michael Deal was a thirty-eight-year-old male, blond hair, blue eyes, height 6’ 4”, weight 212 lbs. residing in San Mateo. He was good-looking even in his driver’s license photo. The other cars belonged to two females ages twenty-two and thirty-one, and one male: Ygnacio Garcia, who also topped six feet.

“It can’t be either male,” Cliff remarked to Maeva. “They’re too tall. I saw the attacker standing next to his SUV. I couldn’t get a good look at his face,

but I think he was dark complected and he was definitely shorter than average. Maybe five seven, tops. It wasn't the women, either."

"Belcher, or someone from his company?"

"No, not Belcher. I can't be sure about others in his company because I didn't see them all, but it doesn't make sense. They're just machinists and lathe operators and the like, not paid killers. They aren't making all that much money from APIX's business. They have no reason to kill me. They'd already given me the drawing. If it had been someone from Belcher, they probably would have broken into the car and taken the drawing."

"I've ordered Lori Deal's license info, too. Her car wasn't in the lot so I didn't get it on the first request and there were too many Lori or Lorraine Deals so I had to wait until I got the address for Michael. Her real name is Lorelei as it turns out."

"No problem. She's not the shooter."

"Anyone could be the hit-and-run driver, though. Even the women."

"True enough."

"So do you have enough to link the attacks with APIX yet? I mean, for the FBI, is there probable cause?"

"You tell me. You went to law school."

Maeva shook her head no without needing to think it over. "I don't think so. You have motive, but that's it. Not for the attacks. But there's probable cause to search APIX for stolen drawings."

"That's what the meeting is for this afternoon."

* * *

At the meeting Sally Brolin laid out the details of the APIX scheme to Ellen at great length while Cliff and Morgan sat mostly silent. Also present was Matt Nguyen. Ellen explained that right after Cliff had called to set up the meeting, a lead had come in from Salt Lake Division on the attempted murder case to obtain identifying information and criminal checks on Michael Deal, a possible suspect. Since Matt worked violent crimes, he was assigned the lead. Although the evidence linking the two cases wasn't there yet, it was obvious the cases should be worked together. Brolin provided photocopies of the three drawings recovered from Belcher and Santos.

"We need to do search warrants and we need to do them fast," Ellen offered when the story was over. "APIX and Santos could destroy them any time now that they're aware we're onto them."

Cliff finally spoke up. "APIX can't destroy them. They need them regularly for their business, but they may have hidden some off premises if they aren't using them currently. The best plan would be to do APIX, the Santos home, and the Deal home simultaneously. If you're lucky, do it while both Deals are present at one of those locations and do their cars, too."

Cliff had no right to tell the FBI what to do, of course, but Ellen respected his professional opinion because of, or perhaps notwithstanding, the fact she was married to him. This had been his area of expertise when he was in the FBI. While she sometimes resented his tendency to butt in, like in the Maureen Little case, she also knew that he knew his stuff. "What about the vendors?" she asked. "They've got the APIX drawings, too."

Cliff shook his head. "You can't search them all. There are hundreds of them. If you search APIX, the word will get out quickly. The vendors aren't going to want the FBI coming in and seizing all their records and possibly implicating them in a conspiracy to defraud API. You could bankrupt a number of legitimate firms. If API gives you a list of vendors suspected of receiving the drawings, which you can confirm after you've done the search at APIX, all you have to do is give them a call and ask them to collect all of the drawings for you to pick up. They'll comply. They aren't the real bad guys here."

Morgan broke in. "And we're the victims here. Our vendors need to keep producing parts for us. You don't want to shut them down."

Ellen nodded in agreement with all of this. "Do you know the phone numbers for APIX? They don't have a website, you said."

Cliff answered. "Maeva got them from the yellow pages. They have two listed land lines."

"They still have yellow pages?" Ellen laughed. "Let me see."

Cliff dug through his notes until he came up with the two numbers. Ellen dialed the second one listed. "Fax line," she said after hearing the piercing tone. "That's what I wanted. I can get a search warrant for toll records on Santos based on what we have. That will show multiple calls to the APIX fax line unless I miss my bet. That will help with our probable cause to show evidence, the faxed drawings, will be on the premises. Then we can go in and seize almost everything – the parts, the drawings, the computers."

"Smart," Brolin said. "How fast can you get this done?"

"A week."

“We need it faster,” Brolin replied. “Our customers are still buying from APIX and Santos is still requesting drawings. We can’t keep jerking her access in and out or she’ll get suspicious.”

“I promised them three days,” Cliff added.

Ellen shot him a withering look. “You promised? Since when do you ...”

Matt Nguyen finally broke in. “We can do it in three days. Ellen, I’ll help write it up or organize the search teams – whatever you need. The murder case is top priority and has to be connected. This is our chance to find evidence connecting Deal to the attack on Cliff and on Sullivan. Travel receipts, whatever. That stuff is time-sensitive. Cliff is right that we have to get it done immediately. You know the SAC will pull out all the stops for this.”

Matt, patient until now, began questioning Cliff about the man who attacked him. Even though Sandy Berger had already done that back in Utah, Matt wanted to know if Cliff had any more information about Deal and wanted to hear it first-hand. Cliff told him about Maeva’s research and assured him that Deal was too tall and too white. The shooter was shorter and darker. Even so, he made copies of all of it for Matt, although he knew Matt would get the original data from DMV along with photos.

“I’ll do a stakeout on APIX to see if there are any other regulars there you haven’t seen yet,” Matt said. “That will help with the probable cause for the search, too. We need visual confirmation that Deal does business there regularly.”

Further details of the plan were discussed and agreed upon. Santos would keep her access for now. As the meeting was breaking up, Ellen stood and pulled something from her briefcase.

“Miss Brolin...” she began.

“Oh, please, call me Sally.”

“Very well. Sally, I believe you dropped this.” She handed Brolin the napkin from BJ’s restaurant with her “call me” note.

Brolin looked confused for a moment until she unfolded it and read the note. Then she turned brick red for a moment. She had thought Ellen looked familiar but couldn’t place her until now, probably because of the new hair color and cut. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times rather like a fish out of water before she found the words of a reply. “Thank you. I can be rather clumsy at times.” She stole a sideways glance at Cliff.

Cliff had not known Ellen would do that, or even that she still had the note, but realized what she was doing immediately upon seeing the note make its

appearance. He watched the scene with a bemused detachment. Matt, who had been at the restaurant, didn't recognize Brolin from the few seconds he'd seen her before and was too busy thinking about what he had to do to pay much attention. Morgan, of course, had no idea what was going on and was totally perplexed, since he knew the napkin hadn't been dropped in the office.

"We need to get going," Ellen said, and pointedly stopped to give Cliff a peck on his bearded cheek. "See you at home, Sweetie." She'd never called him Sweetie in her life. Then she and Matt made their exit.

Chapter 24

The next day Ellen and Matt obtained an order for a pen register on the Santos home. Trying to get the phone calling records from the carrier was too slow, they decided. They needed immediate proof. The only way to do that was to put something on the line themselves. A pen register is a device that can be attached to a phone line and record the dialing data and date/time information. It's not the same as a wiretap because the content of the calls, whether voice, facsimile, or text, is not recorded or accessed in any way. For this reason the legal standard for obtaining one is much more relaxed. It can't be used on cell phones, but for land lines it works like a charm. They had it installed the same night by one of the FBI tech agents. It was done at the switch two blocks from the Santos home.

Within a day they had proof that calls were made from the Santos home to the APIX fax line. That was the final nail that sealed the probable cause for the search warrants. An affidavit was in the hands of the U.S. Attorney's Office the next day and the search warrant was issued that afternoon. Matt, backed up by the SAC of the San Francisco Division, had already organized and briefed teams for searches at APIX in Redwood City and the Santos house in Morgan Hill. Once the warrant was in hand, the teams were notified to report to designated staging areas at 9:30 A.M. and be prepared to enter at exactly 10:00. Unlike in drug raid situations, the searchers wanted to do the search during business hours, when everyone was present.

The FBI can't work directly with a victim, especially a big company, to coordinate a raid, or it looks like the government is playing favorites in a business dispute, fighting for the behemoth against the little guy in this case. A defense lawyer can do wonders with that. For this reason, API was not notified of when and where the raid would take place. Not officially, that is. Of course, Cliff happened to live with the lead FBI agent and was, shall we say, alerted to her plans to leave that day in her grubbies and raid jacket. A man has eyes, after all. The fact that this was the third day since Matt had promised he could do it in three days was something of a clue, too. Cliff took Tommy to Theresa's house early as he always did and made a beeline to API, where Brolin, Morgan, and the head of Human Resources were waiting since he had alerted Sally the night before that it was a go.

At 10:02 Cliff got a call from Maeva, who just happened to be sitting in her car across from the front of the APIX offices, stating that a team of FBI

agents had just entered APIX. Surprise, surprise. Brolin then notified Morgan to keep an eye on Santos and make sure she didn't get any telephone calls. He called her into his office for an impromptu performance appraisal. He said her work had been sub-par recently and he thought she was distracted by personal calls on her cell. She hotly disputed this and told him she would turn off her phone if that would satisfy him. He said that was a good idea. She turned it off in front of him, stowed it in her purse, and returned to her desk. Morgan continued to watch her throughout the day.

* * *

Ellen and a team of eleven FBI agents entered the premises of APIX precisely at ten. They marched in the front door and spread out to all the desks and warehouse area. The few employees began laughing nervously at first, thinking it was a joke.

"My name is Ellen Kennedy," she began in a booming voice so all the employees could hear. "I'm a Special Agent with the FBI and we have a warrant to search these premises. We have reason to believe this company is using stolen engineering drawings and other documents from Advanced Photolithics, Inc. in a scheme to defraud in violation of the Economic Espionage Act of 1996 and is transporting the stolen drawings interstate in violation of Title 18 United States Code Section 2314. Do not touch your computers or any documents. If you interfere in any way, you will be arrested. You are free to leave, but we would like to speak to each of you, so I ask that you stay until we can get a chance to do so."

By the time she had finished, the laughing had stopped. Michael had stepped out of his office into the open area and started to yell to the employees not to talk, but before he could get the words out, Ellen shouted at him "If you tell them not to talk to the FBI, that's obstruction of justice, yet another felony." He shut up at that point.

Agents began unplugging computers and opening file cabinets. As expected, they were full of API drawings, mostly altered to have the APIX title block, but some were still the original API drawings. A box truck pulled up outside, driven by the chief evidence clerk. The bagging and tagging had begun.

Ellen tried to interview Deal, but he immediately said he was calling his lawyer and didn't want to talk. She moved on to the two female employees. The one sitting near the front door, a secretary of sorts, was a thick-set thirtyish

woman wearing mom jeans and a bland polyester pullover blouse, very conventional in contrast to the one in the corner, a girl, really, maybe nineteen or twenty, whose race was hard to tell since her hair was in parts jet black, bright red, and a sort of orange while her darkish skin tone was obscured by the tattoos and piercings up and down most of the exposed areas. The heavy dark makeup around her eyes added to the camouflage. The secretary said she was willing to talk, so Ellen decided she could wait and asked the woman politely to stand by. She wanted to get to the girl before she rabbited.

Ellen headed to the corner where the girl was already standing, digging her keys out of the purse. Ellen asked her to sit a moment and the girl looked over to Michael Deal for guidance, but he was already walking toward the front door and on his cell phone.

“Please, just have a seat for a moment. You can leave any time you want. I just want to ask you about what you’re doing here.” Ellen pointed to the scissors and scraps of paper on her desk.

The girl hesitated before answering but finally responded, “Cutting and taping.”

“Cutting and taping what?”

The girl just gestured with a hand motion toward the drawings, unwilling to say the words.

“These drawings say ‘Property of API’. Do Not Copy’. Do you see that?”

The girl shrugged and gave a semi-nod.

“Who told you to cut and paste them, to copy them?”

She pointed to Deal, who was now at the front door. “My boss,” she said, finally proving her vocal cords still worked.

“Why would you copy something that said not to copy? Didn’t you realize that was wrong?”

“He said it was okay.”

“Michael Deal, that’s who told you?”

“Yeah. I want to go now. You said I could.”

“Okay, you can, but I need your name and address and telephone number.”

“I don’t want ...”

“The search warrant gives me the right to search anything on the premises.” She grabbed the girl’s purse, which was resting on the chair.

“Hey, I need that. My keys ...”

Ellen rummaged through it and pulled out the keys and handed them to her. She also pulled out the wallet and flipped it open.

“Okay, okay. I’m Jessica Piazza. Now can I have my purse?” Her mascara was beginning to run, the first obvious sign of distress.

“Is all this information accurate?” Ellen asked, indicating the driver’s license.

“Yes.”

“And your phone number?” She wrote it down on her pad as Jessica recited it. Then she let the girl go since she could tell she was a mindless minion.

As soon as she broke away from Jessica, three agents approached her needing guidance. One needed to know if she could take a personal laptop. Deal had told her that was his personal laptop, not company property and not to take it. Ellen told her of course she had to take it. The warrant listed all computers on the premises. Next was an agent with a drawing in her hand. He explained that most of the drawings were like that one, with the APIX logo in the lower corner, not API. He wanted to know if it was an API drawing and how to tell. She told him just to take everything. Haul out all the file cabinets to the truck. Deal could try to get it back if it wasn’t covered in the warrant. He’d have to testify in a pre-trial hearing as to where he got it and his lawyer would never let him do that.

The third agent was a woman who had been back in the warehouse area. She’d spoken to the man working there, Ygnacio, a Salvadoran immigrant with poor English. He said he just stored the parts that came in on the shelves and boxed up the ones to send out when orders came. He didn’t know what they were for. The agent described the man as “scared shitless” and speculated he was an illegal. She got his identifying information and let him go. He was now gone. The problem was what to do with all the parts. There were literally tons of parts of all kinds. She didn’t know which ones were API clones. The parts had part numbers on the shelf labels and most of them had individual packaging labels.

Ellen had anticipated this. She called Morgan and said it was time for the expert to come and identify the parts. It’s perfectly legal for the FBI to use a civilian expert to assist in identifying materials that meet, or do not meet, the description in a warrant. A senior engineer had already been designated by API and was standing by. Morgan told her he’d be there in twenty minutes.

That handled, Ellen went back to talk to the one remaining employee, the woman sitting patiently at the desk up front. This woman, Nicole, was more cooperative. She said Michael Deal was the boss of everybody and ran everything. His wife Lori was supposedly Vice President but never came into the

office. Deal told the employees that APIX had a license from API to make parts for them “off the grid,” essentially the same story he was using with the vendors. He said that it was better for tax purposes to have a smaller company do this.

“Do you know Ligaya Santos?” Ellen asked.

“Oh, yes. She’s our API contact. She sends us the drawings.” She pointed to the fax machine. “Some of the simpler ones come by fax. The more complex ones have to be mailed, or she drops them off on the weekend.”

“What do you do with them?”

“I give them to Jessica. She cuts off the edges and API markings and pastes them onto our border and then recopies them.”

“What do you do here?”

“The regular office work: answering emails from customers or vendors, the snail mail, billing, bookkeeping, phone.”

“You make the payments to vendors?”

“I prepare the checks, but I can’t sign them. Michael does that.”

“Have you prepared checks for Ligaya Santos?”

“No.”

“The markings on the drawings that said not to copy – did you wonder why they were marked that way if you were authorized to copy them?”

Nicole looked down before answering, having trouble keeping eye contact. “Yeah. I did. I always thought there was something fishy going on. But I didn’t know we were breaking the law. Really, I didn’t. Michael just kept saying that’s business. I don’t know anything about business. I don’t even know what these parts do. We just sell them to big electronics companies.”

“Do you know what the revenue figures are?”

“It keeps going up. Last quarter it was three million, but a year ago it wasn’t even one million.”

Ellen was surprised at the size of the number. She had expected maybe two or three million a year, not a quarter. There was a lot of incentive, a lot of *motive*, to commit almost any kind of crime.

“Nicole, does Michael travel at all?”

“Yes, sometimes. I usually make the reservations, but sometimes he does that himself.”

“Do you know if he’s been in Nevada or Utah recently, last week?”

Nicole looked perplexed. “No. He was in the office every day. He hasn’t been out of town in the last three weeks, not unless he went on a weekend. We

have a vendor in Utah, though, one of our biggest. He was on the phone with him, I know that.”

“Is that Belcher?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, surprised. “You know that already?”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“No. His office door was closed, but he was yelling loud. He was angry about something.”

“Have you ever seen Michael drive a Porsche?” Ellen already knew that neither Deal owned or leased a Porsche. Both cars were Cadillacs. But maybe he liked to rent them when he traveled. Even if he wasn’t the shooter, he might have rented a car for the goon, whoever it was.

“No.”

“How about Ygnacio?”

“Ygnacio? No way. He drives a beat up old pickup truck. Why?”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you.”

“Oh. Juan does, though.”

“Juan?”

“Ligaya’s husband. I told you she drops off the drawings on weekends sometimes. I’m not usually here, but one time it was a holiday or vacation day for Ligaya during the week I guess, because she came in with her husband Juan. He was the driver and they had a new Porsche. They even asked Michael to come out and see it. Juan was so proud of it. They were laughing and talking about the features and everything.”

* * *

Matt Nguyen was the team leader at the Santos house. At precisely ten o’clock he knocked on the door. Two agents were with him and one around back. All of them wore blue raid jackets displaying the letters FBI. A young male voice asked who was there. Matt said it was the FBI and to please open the door. This brought no immediate response.

“Go get your mom or dad,” Matt called in a loud voice.

“They’re at work.”

“Well, we have to come in. Please open up.”

“I’ll have to call my Mom to see if it’s okay.”

Matt didn’t think that evidence was likely to be destroyed, but he couldn’t be sure. Though he had the right, he hated to break down a door, which

would surely scare the boy and any other children in the house, as well as require them to secure the house later, but what if there was an adult in there who was even now shredding or destroying records? He told one of the agents with him to go around and see if they could get in the back.

Twenty seconds later the front door opened. The agent who had been stationed in the back was a young, pretty female. She had knocked on the sliding glass door to the back yard while Matt was at the front. There were two kids in the living room watching television; both looked to be younger than ten. She smiled and waved through the glass and asked one of the girls to open the door, which the girl did without question. The agent went up to the front and unlocked the front door while the teenage boy standing there with a phone in his hand stood dumbfounded. The little girl happily told him a real FBI agent was coming to see them.

The agents were in. Matt quickly determined that there were no adults in the house. The fifteen-year-old son was in charge and was clearly panicked. He kept objecting, saying the agents couldn't be there without his parents' permission. This had no effect on Matt or the other agents. Matt announced the warrant and told the teen he was going to search and to stay with the younger kids. The boy kept trying to reach his mother on the phone and finally gave up. The younger kids thought this was cool and tried to follow the agents around. Matt directed the woman agent to stay with the kids and keep them occupied with the TV so they could search.

"Why me?" she complained. "Because I'm a woman my job is the babysitter?"

"Okay, fine. You search the first bedroom on the right."

Matt assigned one of the male agents to watch the kids instead and the search began. It didn't take long to find the home office, a small recess off the living room. In it were a computer and fax machine, both of which were labeled and taken. Matt took charge of this room. There were checkbooks, credit card statements and all kinds of documents that were covered by the warrant, so he could see it would take at least an hour for this room alone. The other male agent was searching the two bedrooms on the left.

After ten minutes the woman agent came back to Matt and said the only thing of significance in that bedroom was a combination safe. It was locked and they didn't have safebreaking tools with them.

"Just take it then. If they don't give us the combination we'll drill it back at the office."

"I can't lift it. It weighs seventy pounds according to the label. Plus whatever's inside it." She turned to the agent who was watching the kids and asked if he could help take it out to the car. Matt and the other male were both skinny guys, while this fellow was beefy and fit.

The man's grin morphed into a smirk as he replied in a sarcastic parody of her earlier whine, "Why me? Because I'm a man my job is to carry heavy things?"

At this the woman blushed before spluttering, "Okay, fine. I'll watch the kids. Just take the safe out to the van."

The male agent lifted the safe with difficulty and got as far as the hallway when the front door opened. Juan Santos barged in angrily. Matt recognized him immediately from his drivers' license photo. He assumed the son had called his father when he couldn't get his mother.

"What are you doing in my house?" Santos demanded.

Matt stood and displayed the search warrant. "FBI. We have a warrant. Please have a seat. I'd like to talk to you."

"This isn't right. You can't just ..."

"Sir, calm down. We have an order from a federal judge. We can and in fact must execute a search. Your wife works at API doesn't she?"

"So what? That's a crime now?"

"Have you ever heard of a company called APIX?"

At this Santos stepped back and shook his head, not so much as a negative answer, but as a gesture of dismay like he couldn't believe what was happening.

"I'm not going to talk to you. I'm going to take my kids and get some personal effects and go. I can do that, can't I? They shouldn't have to see this."

The two young girls were obviously enjoying the whole experience, but of course Matt had neither the desire nor the right to keep them there. "You can take the kids, but I'll have to see what those personal effects are."

Santos saw that the home office was already torn apart, contents strewn all over. "In my bedroom. I have to get some clothes and personal items. Money for a hotel room."

"You don't have a credit card?"

"That's none of your business. Can I get my stuff?"

Matt nodded toward the bedroom. He and one of the men followed Santos that direction but they stopped when Santos saw the safe in the hallway. "Hey! My safe," Santos exclaimed.

“We couldn’t open it. If you give us the combination we’ll open it and search it here.”

“I’m not going to give you my combination.”

“No problem. We’ll take it to the office and drill it. You’ll get it back, but it will be useless.”

Santos paced for a minute in frustration then conceded to the inevitable. “I’ll open it for you.”

“Okay, then. Let’s do it.”

Santos punched some keys and started to open the door. Matt stopped him. “Hold it. We have to search first. Step back.” Santos complied reluctantly. Matt opened the door all the way and saw a sheaf of papers on the top shelf and bundles of currency on the bottom shelf. “Whoa. That’s quite a bit of cash you have there. Where’d you get all that?”

“None of your business.” Santos spoke English fluently, but he had a noticeable accent, which was becoming more pronounced as he got more excited. He started to reach into the safe, but Matt stopped him.

“Hold on. I have to see what’s there.” Matt looked through the papers. These included the birth certificates of all the family members, some certificates of deposit, wills, and passports for Ligaya and Juan. Matt took the passports.

“Hey. I need that,” Santos objected.

“Going somewhere?” Matt asked. The warrant included “travel documents” as items to be seized. He knew the intent had been to determine through hotel receipts, airline tickets, etc., who might have traveled to Belcher’s place in Nevada or to APIX customers’ locations in Texas or Oregon, for which the passports would be useless, but they fell within the plain language of “travel documents.” He put the passports in a plastic bag as Juan watched helplessly.

The currency was more of a problem. The warrant did not list currency. They had no probable cause to support a cash business going on. The Assistant U.S. Attorney who had approved and helped draft the warrant had actually anticipated this scenario. He was afraid that if they listed it, the judge would strike it out and then it would be clear that they could not take currency; doing so would be seen as bad faith. Instead, he had changed Ellen’s term “financial records” to “financial documents.” A \$100 bill may not be a record, but it was paper with writing on it and thus a document and certainly was financial in nature. Matt, however, was not aware of this, so he called Ellen for direction.

“Ellen, it’s Matt. Can we take currency?”

"Take it. The AUSA said we could. If we have to give it back, we'll give it back. Hey, is Juan there with you? A witness says he drives a Porsche. Can you verify that?"

"Okay, I'll have to call you back." Matt knew immediately where this was going. He didn't want to let Santos know he had become a suspect in the Nevada attacks, however. Turning to Santos, he said, "We parked in your driveway. You aren't blocking us in, are you?"

"No. I parked at the curb. Are you leaving now?"

"Show me."

"What? Why?"

"Interfering with our search is obstruction of justice and we can arrest you for that."

"I didn't interfere. Look, I'll show you. It's right there in front of the house." He led Matt to the front window where he pointed to an off-white Porsche Panamera sedan.

Satisfied, Matt said nothing and led him back to the hall area where he began to bag the money.

"What was that all about? You can't take the money. That's mine."

"I can and I did. You aren't blocking us. Why don't you take your kids and go, like you said you wanted to."

Santos shook his head disgustedly and went back to the living room to collect his children. As soon as he was out of the house Matt called Ellen back. "Ellen, it's a white sedan. Cliff said it was a dark SUV, didn't he?"

"Yeah, okay, that's not the car. Still, if he likes Porsches ..." she didn't have to finish the sentence. "Are you close to being done there?"

"Another half hour maybe."

"Okay, we're going to be here a long time. I'm going to leave the team to finish up. Meet me at API in an hour. Leave your people to finish up if you have to."

"No problem."

"Any drawings?"

"Yes, two in the office area so far."

"Give me the part numbers." He did. "How much currency?"

"I haven't finished counting it. Tens of thousands."

"Okay, thanks. I'll see you soon."

* * *

Ellen continued to question Nicole at APIX. “Did Michael ever pay Ligaya?”

“He never asked me to prepare a check.”

“How about cash?”

“He did carry a lot of cash sometimes, but I don’t know if he paid her. They’d meet on the weekend when I wasn’t here.”

“Didn’t you think that was odd?”

Nicole bit her lower lip. “Kinda. I guess. I mean I don’t know anything about business. Michael would just get mad at us if we asked questions. I always wondered ... I just thought something was fishy but I didn’t know we were breaking the law.” Nicole repeated this so many times it could have been her mantra, but Ellen suspected it was true.

Ellen continued to question her for a few minutes longer but Nicole was unable to provide any further information of value. Several of the other agents had questions for Ellen as search team leader. She took care of them, designated another agent to take over, and then left for API.

She met Brolin in the lobby and was told that Santos was still in a “performance appraisal” with Morgan. Ellen asked to speak with Cliff first. He’d told her he would be there. Back in Brolin’s office Ellen verified with Cliff that the vehicle at the cache site trailhead was an SUV, not a sedan. He assured her it was a Porsche, black. She then informed Brolin that she wanted to talk to Santos when she was available.

“We thought you might,” Brolin said with a straight face. “We have a room set aside for you. Can we be present?”

“No. You can interview her after we’re done ... or do whatever you want. Matt Nguyen will be joining me shortly. Keep her busy until he gets here.”

They didn’t have to wait long. Matt showed up within two minutes. They were ushered into a room and sat. Brolin said she would have Morgan escort Ligaya there, but Matt stopped her.

“I need you to do something first. Look at this. I found it in the Santos safe.” He handed her a large ziploc bag with evidence tags and tape on it. Inside was a document labeled “Licensing agreement.” It was one-page document so Brolin didn’t have to open the bag to read it all. In short the document said that API was licensing the right to use its engineering drawings to APIX. It was signed by Michael Deal and the Vice President of API, the same Indian woman

who had brought in Brolin and Morgan for their first meeting. "Is this legitimate?"

Brolin was aghast. If it was, then the whole case against APIX was worthless. Then a nervous smile crept over her features. She saw that "license" was spelled as "licence." No API lawyer would spell it that way; they were all American. The Vice President's name, typed under the signature, was also misspelled. "This must be a forgery," she told Matt. "I can take it to her right now and have her confirm that."

"Take a copy," Matt said. "This has to stay in my possession for chain of custody. Let's go to a copier." The two of them left the room and within ten minutes were back. "The V.P. said it's forged," he told Ellen. "Not only is that not her signature, but the date is wrong, too. She checked her calendar. She was in India that entire month. Plus it's amateurish. Misspelled words, legal terms used wrong." Ellen breathed a sigh of relief.

That business over, Brolin sent for Ligaya Santos. She arrived, escorted by Ralph Morgan, who told her the FBI was here to talk to her. He made clear that her assignment was to help them in their investigation, then he stepped out, leaving her alone with the agents.

Ellen looked her over before speaking. Santos was short and slightly squat without looking overweight. She looked every bit of the Filipina she was, with black hair and a slight Polynesian influence to her features. She wore brown slacks and a plain white blouse with a lightweight brown and white sweater vest. A small gold cross hung on a chain around her neck. "Mrs. Santos, I'm Special Agent Kennedy and this is Special Agent Nguyen. Please have a seat."

"What's this about?" she asked nervously. She began fiddling with the cross.

"We'll get to that. How long have you been working here at API?"

"Twelve years."

"All of that time as a buyer?"

"Yes. Well, an Assistant Buyer at first." Her accent was noticeable, much like her husband's, Matt noticed.

Ellen continued asking her questions about her duties, how she received her assignments, how she determined what parts she was supposed to obtain vendors for, how she obtained the necessary drawings and specifications for the parts, and so on. This was all necessary to establish what her legitimate access was and what wasn't.

Then she switched to Ligaya's personal life. "How long have you been in the United States?"

"Thirteen years. I came from the Philippines."

"Tell us about that. How is it you were able to come to the U.S.?"

"I came on a student visa, and when I was in school I met my husband. We got married and I got my green card. Now I'm a U.S. citizen." Her fiddling with the necklace became more agitated.

Matt knew she was lying and not only from her body language; he had seen her passport and other papers. She'd entered on a K-1 "fiancée visa." Still, he remained silent.

"When did you marry Juan?" Ellen asked.

This mention of her husband's name threw Ligaya off balance. Now she knew they had already looked into her personal life some.

"The same year I came over. Almost thirteen years ago."

"Is he from the Philippines, too?"

"No, he's a U.S. citizen. Natural born."

Matt finally spoke. "What Agent Kennedy means is, where was he born?"

"Here. His father Miguel was an exchange student and brought his wife. She gave birth here, but they moved back to the Philippines when Juan was an infant. He's still a U.S. citizen, though," she said almost defiantly, as though Juan's citizenship had been questioned. She seemed even more nervous. "I thought you were FBI, not ICE. What is this ..."

"Relax, Mrs. Santos," Ellen cooed soothingly. "We are. We're not here about immigration matters. Let's move on to something else. Did you request and obtain drawings for these parts?" She handed Santos a list of part numbers with a description of the part listed next to it.

Santos made a show of studying the list. "Maybe... I handle a lot of parts."

Ellen pointed to the one at the bottom. "You requested a copy of that one two days ago and checked it out from the library."

"Oh yes, of course. I didn't recognize it at first. I'm kind of nervous. I've never been interviewed by the FBI."

"Did you provide a copy of these drawings to APIX or Michael Deal?"

Santos was now drumming her fingers furiously on the table and her knees were bouncing up and down like pistons. "APIX is a vendor. I send drawings to vendors so they can bid on parts."

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“It’s all legal. They have a licensing agreement with API. They want to sell parts to API and need the drawings to bid on them.”

“Are they a vendor? Have they produced parts for API?”

“No, not yet. They keep getting underbid by other vendors.”

Ellen handed her the forged licensing agreement. “Is this the agreement you were referring to?”

“Yes. Where did you get this?”

“We executed a search warrant at APIX this morning.” The phony agreement had been seized from Ligaya’s home, not APIX, but Ellen didn’t want to reveal that yet. “In fact, the search is still going on. This document is a forgery. APIX does not have a license from API.”

“Forgery!? I didn’t know that. He said it was all legal.”

“Who said?”

“Michael. Michael Deal.”

“So you gave him these drawings, then?”

“Yes, but I thought it was legal. It’s part of my job to find vendors. I thought he could supply us parts cheaper.”

“Did he pay you?”

This brought her up short. She took a long time before answering. “Aren’t you supposed to read me my rights? You never read me my rights. Maybe I need a lawyer.”

Matt answered. “We only do that when someone’s in custody. You’re not in custody. You’re free to go at any time. I understand someone from the legal department and from H.R. are waiting to talk to you but we can’t keep you.”

Santos turned to look at the door, considering whether to walk out. “Are they going to fire me?”

“That’s up to them,” Ellen said.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“We won’t tell them anything. Whatever you say in here goes into the criminal case file, that’s all. Look, Ligaya, it’s time to come clean. It’s really Michael Deal we’re after, not you. Tell us the whole scheme.”

The agents could see she was wracked with indecision. She stood, turned toward the door, then turned back for a moment. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” She walked toward the door.

Matt said, "Maybe we should talk about your son before you go. He's not a U.S. citizen."

This caused Santos to whirl around, her mouth agape, her eyes ostrich eggs, sunny side up. "What are you saying? I told you, my husband's a natural born citizen. All his children are citizens."

"No, Ligaya," Matt continued calmly. "Your daughters are, but your son is not your husband's son. He was born in the Philippines to you and your first husband. I've seen his birth certificate and his passport. They were in your safe."

"You've been in my house?!"

Matt went on. "We have a warrant for that, too. You came over on a K-1 visa to marry Juan. You left your two-year-old son with your sister in the Philippines. He came over later on a tourist visa with her. She returned to the Philippines without him. He's overstayed his visa. He would have gotten citizenship if you'd gotten him a green card before you were naturalized. You never did that because you knew you'd have to return to the Philippines with him to do that and might be stuck there a long time. Your husband never adopted him. It's all in the papers in your safe. He's an illegal alien and subject to deportation."

"Where are my children? Did you take them?"

"They're with your husband. He came to the house while we were searching. Now we aren't Immigration, like we said, ..." He let his voice trail off without adding the "but." Threats, even implied threats, could be interpreted by the courts as coercion and render subsequent statements inadmissible.

Ellen took over from Matt. "Ligaya, it's now or never. You can walk out of here and get a lawyer, but you've already admitted giving Deal the drawings. That makes each occasion theft. You're a co-conspirator to mail fraud, wire fraud, interstate transportation of stolen property, trade secret theft. We know Deal is the bad guy here. The person who cooperates first gets the best deal. That's the one thing TV gets right. This is your one chance. Your only chance."

"And my son?"

"Like I said, we aren't Immigration."

Santos was shaking so hard she could no longer stand. She sat back down and put her head in her hands, elbows on the table. The agents waited. The hook had been set. This was not the time to jerk the line.

"What do you want to know?" Santos asked.

"Everything. How did it all work? Start from the beginning." Ellen spoke softly now. Reel the fish in slowly.

“I met Lori Deal through soccer. Her daughter and my daughter are on the same team. It’s a regional all-star team. We were on the sidelines talking one day and she asked where I worked. Michael was there and overheard us. He was curious and said that was fascinating. No one ever thought my job was fascinating before. I just take parts drawings and send them to vendors and then compare the bids when they come in. I make a recommendation and then my boss reviews it and sends it to Contracts. They actually sign the contracts. I can’t even do that except on contract renewals or regular repeat orders. Anyway, I was pleased someone thought my job was important. So they invited us to dinner and we became friends.”

“Did he already have the business APIX?”

“No, he was a salesman for some medical device company. He was used to the buying and selling of equipment, I guess. So he asked me if he could become a vendor to API. He wanted to start his own company. I told him who to contact.”

“Who was that?”

“My boss, Ralph. That was three years ago.”

“Go on.”

“I guess Michael talked to Ralph but Ralph told him he wouldn’t qualify as a vendor without at least three years of actual production so that a quality history and volume capability could be established. That’s what Ralph told me later, anyway. So I thought it was over.

“Then two weeks later Michael called me and asked if I could get him a couple of drawings so that he could get the parts made and prove to Ralph that he could produce good quality parts. I wasn’t supposed to give out a drawing to anyone who wasn’t an approved vendor who’d signed an NDA, but I didn’t see the harm. It was just one drawing and Michael had been so good to us. He and Lori threw a party for the soccer team and gave our daughter an expensive Christmas gift, a game station.

“Did he pay you for the drawing?” Ellen asked.

“No. I really thought he wanted to become a vendor and I would be doing my company a favor if he did qualify. It was a quartz part. There aren’t that many quartz vendors around. I told him our vendor was Kimball and they were pretty pricey. I’m not supposed to give out pricing information from other vendors, or even their names, but I only wanted to encourage him to come in low to get qualified.

“Then a month later he came to me and said he had made a deal with our V.P. He said Ralph didn’t like him so he went over his head. He showed me the licensing agreement, the one you have. He said I had to keep it secret because API was using a tax loophole. He struck a deal where he would supply the parts to our customers at lower prices than our regular prices and share the profits with API. He said he could sell them from a subsidiary in another state where taxes are a lot lower, both sales taxes and income taxes. He told me it was a dodge that all big companies use, but they keep it hush hush because it looks bad. They’re worried Congress will close the loophole. That’s when he offered to pay me to get drawings for him.”

“How much?” Ellen asked.

“Three hundred a drawing. And I had to tell him who our vendor was. I have access to that, too.”

“And you agreed?”

“Yes. I thought I was helping my company.”

“How did he pay you?”

“Cash. We’d meet at soccer games during the season. After the season, I’d drive up to APIX.”

“How many drawings did you give him?”

“The first time, I think it was five or six – our best selling parts. Then it was whatever he asked for. I don’t know how many it’s been altogether.”

“And you really thought him slipping cash to you was normal, ethical business?”

“No, but he said it was legal.”

“Did you tell Ralph Morgan?”

“No. Michael said it was over his pay grade. He wasn’t allowed to know. The fewer people that knew, the better.”

“Did Juan know?”

“He was the one that convinced me to do it. I wasn’t sure it was okay at first. He and Michael like to play poker. Michael took him on a gambling trip to Las Vegas about that time. Michael paid for everything. They got to be good friends. Juan told me to trust Michael, that everything was legal.”

“Did Juan win money that time?”

“Yes, he did. Almost two thousand dollars. How did you know?”

Ellen glanced at Matt for an instant. Could this woman really be that stupid? This was a classic recruitment right out of the KGB and CIA playbooks. Ellen was willing to bet Juan got treated to a trip to the local bordello, too.

“Just a guess. So then what?”

“After that Michael gave me a fax machine so I could send the drawings immediately. Most of them could be shrunk down to the size of my fax. Since then I just get a phone call with the numbers of the parts he wants and I send the drawings and vendor information.”

“When did you realize what you were doing was illegal?” This was a key question. Ligaya hadn’t yet admitted that she knew it was illegal. The phrasing made it easier for her to slip into that mode.

“It was when the layoffs came.”

“Layoffs? Tell us about that.”

“Our sales in the spare parts unit kept going down. Ralph was getting on edge and kept telling the whole department we had to start doing things better or there would be layoffs. He said someone was underselling us. I guess I suspected that’s what APIX was doing for some time, but I didn’t really know it. Ralph was mostly getting on the salesmen, but he also started talking to the buyers. He said that if the sales volume dropped any lower he’d have to start laying people off. He told me specifically that the parts I handled were among the ones hardest hit and that I was on the list to be first to get laid off. He wanted me to find lower prices or else I’d be out of a job. Of course, I had mostly given Michael drawing for parts I already handled because I had access to those.

“I went to Michael in a panic I’d lose my job. I asked him if he was selling parts to our customers and told him there were going to be layoffs, including me. He said not to worry, he’d stop selling the parts I handled, or only sell a few, but that meant I had to start getting drawings for other parts, drawings I didn’t have legitimate access to. So I did that and my parts list began to grow sales again, although not as many as before.”

“So you knew he was using the drawings to make the parts and undersell API?” Ellen wanted the criminal intent nailed down.

“By then I did. But I didn’t know it was illegal. Not like stealing. I thought I’d get fired if the company found out, but that’s all. It was too late by then. It was like a store clerk taking some of the product without permission. That’s not shoplifting. That’s just shrinkage. It’s a normal part of business.”

This was the nail Ellen wanted. Ligaya must have known it was illegal, but whether she did or not, the old saw “ignorance of the law is no excuse” applied. Did she really think taking merchandise in a store was legal as long as it was an employee stealing? It was amazing how people rationalized their crimes

to avoid feeling guilty. "How much money have you made from Michael or APIX?"

"I don't know. A lot."

"How many drawings do you usually send him in a month?"

She counted on her fingers before answering. "Maybe fifteen or twenty. Sometimes more."

Ellen did the math. This explained how she could afford the new house in Morgan Hill. Six thousand a month, seventy-two thousand a year cash, no doubt undeclared on her taxes. She decided not to mention taxes. That was something she could find out later from the IRS or from seized tax returns at the house. She didn't want to scare Ligaya any more than necessary. She didn't think Ligaya understood the seriousness of her crime yet. Many white collar crooks were more afraid of the IRS than the FBI.

"How about gifts? Gambling trips for Juan?"

"Michael is very generous."

"And that cash in your safe, that's from the drawings you sold to Michael?"

"Yes. We didn't know what else to do with it. Putting it in the bank ... there are rules."

Ellen had what she needed for now. She looked over to Matt, who leaned over and whispered in her ear. Ellen nodded. Matt took over the questioning.

"How often did Juan go to Vegas with Michael?"

"Once or twice a year. Michael's too busy to go more often than that."

"And does Juan always win?"

"Usually. He's a good poker player."

"When's the last time they went?"

"January."

"Juan didn't go there within the last month?"

"Oh, you didn't ask that. You said 'they.' Juan went by himself. Michael couldn't go, but he paid for the trip anyway."

"When did he go? What dates?"

"Which time?"

"How many times in the last month has he gone?"

"Twice. The first time was about three weeks ago. Then he went again five days ago. Michael called him and said he had some coupon or something that was going to expire."

Matt was the one doing the math this time. The dates coincided with the murder of Brigham Sullivan and the attack on Cliff. It was coming together.

“Do you or your husband own a gun?”

“Yes. My husband has one for protection. It’s legal. I know. The Constitution says so. The Second Amendment. I had to take a test.”

“Yes, I’m aware of the Constitution. Is it registered? Does he have a permit to carry it?” Matt already knew it wasn’t registered. That’s something that is always checked before a raid. There was no record of firearms at the Santos home.

“He told me he registered it. He keeps it in the safe so the kids can’t get it.” Matt knew there was no gun in the safe. Juan must have it in the car.

“Did he take it with him when he went to Vegas?”

“He flew the first time. He couldn’t. When he drives there he takes it in the car. In case he breaks down on the road or something. It’s dangerous out there. There are all kinds of gangsters and crazy people with guns.”

“And he drove the second time?”

“Yes.”

“With the gun?”

“I guess.”

This all made sense. The first killing had been with a rented pickup truck that he’d gotten from the Swedes. He didn’t have a gun that time so he must have improvised. The second time he went prepared for action. But he must have switched cars. Cliff had said it was a black SUV.

“In your Porsche?”

“Yes, it’s better for long trips. What does this have to do with anything?”

“Just a couple more questions and then I’ll explain. Did he rent another car when he was there?”

“Why would he do that? The Porsche’s brand new. He’d have told me if it had broken down.”

Matt’s phone buzzed on vibrate. It was a text from Sandy Berger, the agent in St. George handling the attack on Cliff, asking Matt to call him. He stood. “Excuse me. I have to make a couple of calls. I’ll be gone a few minutes. Why don’t you relax a minute. I’ll see if I can get some coffee and water in here.”

As soon as he was out of the room, Matt called Berger. Berger had been standing by for the results of the searches and interview. Berger told him that the

FBI Lab had raised a print from the shell casing found near where Cliff said the SUV was parked.

“That’s great news. It looks like it’s Juan Santos. He was in Vegas, or claimed that’s where he went, at the time of the Sullivan case and the attack on Knowles.”

Berger grew even more excited. “Do you know if he’s ever been arrested? They’ll run it through AFIS, but it’s a lot faster if they have a suspect to check against.”

“Yes. He had a drunk driving arrest. I ran him before doing the search at his house. He has an unregistered gun, too.”

“I’ll get his photo from DMV and prepare a photo spread. The Swedes are going to be here tonight.”

“The Swedes? I thought they weren’t due back for a while.”

“Whitfield, the detective in Cedar City, told me the B and B got a call. They’re coming in tonight. If they can make an ID, we could have both cases solved by tonight.”

Matt didn’t bother to get water or coffee. He barged back into the room. Morgan had been standing by outside the interview room and had overheard Matt’s end of the conversation. As soon as Matt went back in, he rushed over to Brolin’s office to brief them on what was happening.

Inside, Matt sat down again and confronted Santos. “Ligaya, we have you cold. Juan’s fingerprints were found on a shell casing. He was sent by Deal to take care of the whistle-blower, wasn’t he? Like Agent Kennedy said, the one who talks first gets the deal. This is a murder case now. The only question is whether you knew about it. We know Michael was the mastermind. You can help yourself now by telling us the whole story.”

“Murder?! I don’t know about any murder.” She put her hands to her face and propped her elbows on the table like she couldn’t believe this nightmare. She dropped her hands and continued to look down, shaking her head disgustedly.

Then Ellen realized she was doing something in her lap, below the level of the table. She stood and reached over, snatching the phone from Santos.

“Hey, you can’t do that,” Santos protested in vain. Ellen pulled up the last message sent, only seconds old. It was to Juan. It said, “take kids go now”. Santos reached for the phone but Ellen held it out of her reach.

“This is evidence, now, in plain view” Ellen declared. “You could be an accessory to murder. It’s time to tell us the whole story before it gets worse.”

"I don't know anything about murder. My husband would never kill anyone. He's a good person. I, I'm not feeling well. I'm going to go home." With that she turned and hurried from the room.

Matt turned to Ellen. "Let's arrest her."

"Hold on. For what? She hasn't admitted anything. On the murder, I mean. The AUSA told us not to or we'd lose everything she said during the interview. We never Mirandized her."

"She just warned Juan to flee. That's accessory to murder."

"That's not exactly what it said. 'Take kids and go now' could have a lot of meanings. Besides, the fingerprint only proves he was out on the desert shooting at some point."

"Actually, I was bluffing. They haven't matched the print yet, but I'm betting they will by the end of the day."

"Okay, so that case isn't solid and it doesn't tie him to the Sullivan case, which is a local case at this point anyway. Cliff was never shot and no one has ID'ed Juan yet as being there when Cliff was. Let's call the AUSA."

Matt stood, impatiently shifting his weight from one leg to the other while Ellen talked to the prosecutor. After a long conversation with the lawyer Ellen laid it out for Matt.

"He says we can't arrest her yet. We have enough to indict her for the fraud and trade secret theft. He said he'll prepare an indictment but we have to wait for the grand jury next week."

"What about the murder and the attack on Cliff?"

"He said it sounds like Juan is the guy, but we don't have enough on the Sullivan case. He said if we can make the case, he'd rather it be tried locally as a murder in Utah. They have the death penalty and probably a mostly Mormon jury. Even if he's the killer, we don't have proof or even much evidence that Deal directed Santos to go kill Sullivan. Santos might have just gotten the idea there. It's not a federal case unless he traveled interstate for the purpose of committing murder. Same for the attack on Cliff, except that was on federal land, so it could be prosecuted federally there. To make a case here, we're going to have to show the murder plans started here. He said he'll contact the U.S. Attorney's Office in Utah and the D.A. there to decide who's going to do what on that."

Matt gritted his teeth at the news. "All right, let's go let Cliff and Brolin know what's going on."

Chapter 25

Cliff watched Morgan arrive empty-handed, without Ligaya Santos in tow, that is.

“Where is she?” Brolin asked Morgan anxiously.

“She said she was sick. I tried to get her back here, but she insisted on going home. I couldn’t physically drag her here. I told her she was suspended and not to come back until she was notified she could. I made her give me her employee badge so she can’t come back in.”

“Damn. I wanted to see her fired,” Brolin said disgustedly. The head of Human Resources shook her head and left the room. “Cliff, so what now? I thought the FBI would arrest her.”

“If she’d confessed to murder, they would have. That only happens on TV. Here’s Ellen now.”

Matt and Ellen entered the room. Ellen told Brolin that she couldn’t discuss the details of the interview, but that it went well. She expected legal action to be forthcoming soon. Her dour expression conveyed the message that there was an unspoken downside. Then she asked Cliff to step outside the room for a moment.

In the hall she told Cliff that it was looking like Juan Santos was the shooter. She couldn’t be sure that Deal put him up to it, but that was likely. She said she’d get a photo of Juan to Cliff so he could be on the lookout, but so far as she knew, Santos had no way of knowing Dave Anderson was actually Cliff Knowles.

“I can’t tell API, but she gave up the copying scheme. It’s just like you thought. She was getting three hundred per drawing in cash. Matt took the cash and their passports. We got tons of ripped off drawings at APIX. They’re going to be out of business. She claims she thought she was helping API evade taxes. That was what Deal told her. I find it hard to believe she was that naïve. She admitted figuring it all out later.”

“People believe what they want to believe. She was getting rich. So what now?”

“I have to get back to the search at APIX. Thank them for the use of the room. I’ll talk to you more at home tonight.” She opened the door and motioned for Matt. The two agents left.

Cliff went back in to see Brolin and Morgan. Morgan was on the phone. Before Cliff could give them a further briefing, Morgan hung up and exclaimed

with unconcealed glee, “Seven hundred thousand in parts bookings already. That’s a month’s worth of orders in one day. And it’s only lunchtime. The word is out about the raid on APIX. My sales chief says the chip companies are calling with profuse apologies and denials that they knew they were buying bogus parts. A couple of them even offered to ship us the APIX parts they had on hand and buy replacements from us. They’re practically begging for us not to cut them off.”

Brolin held her hand up and Morgan gave it a resounding high five. Then she held it toward Cliff, who dutifully repeated the gesture. “I’ll call the V.P.,” she said, “then let’s celebrate. Like you said, it’s lunchtime. Your treat, Ralph.”

* * *

That evening Cliff knew better than to ask Ellen when the indictments would be coming down on Deal and Ligaya Santos. That’s grand jury information and revealing it is a felony. It was unlikely she would know the answer yet anyway. There was a lot of work to be done going through the records and determining how much the loss to the victim or gain to APIX was from the document theft. There could be several others involved, too. Ellen told him they had found that APIX had relationships with over two dozen vendors like those with Kimball Quartz and Belcher. Ellen guessed the losses could eventually be proven to be over five million dollars. The passports for Juan and Ligaya had been seized, so they weren’t going anywhere. Ellen had been worried that they might flee to the Philippines, where they had both been raised. They could sell their house here remotely and live quite nicely there. At least their cash had been seized.

Cliff’s real interest was in Juan Santos. Was he the shooter, the one who had driven him out into the desert at gunpoint? Ellen couldn’t say for sure, but it didn’t take long to find out. Ellen’s cell phone rang during dinner. It was Matt telling her that Sandy Berger had driven up to Cedar City to do the interview of the Swedish couple with Bob Whitfield. The couple was uncooperative at first, but when they were told they could be detained indefinitely as material witnesses and could be charged as accessories to murder, they gave in quickly. They admitted meeting a man in a bar where they were drinking. When he found out they were tourists with a rental truck, he offered them five hundred dollars cash for the truck and told them their insurance would cover it. Berger had prepared a photo spread using the driver’s license photo of Juan Santos with five others.

They had both picked out Santos immediately. They had their probable cause for murder now. Whitfield was going to present it to the district attorney first thing tomorrow and get a warrant. Juan should be in custody by the end of the day. The only question was the role Deal played in the murders. Did he send Juan out for that purpose or did Juan ad lib? Did Deal even know about it? He sent Juan a second time, the time Cliff was in Utah, so if he knew, then at least he would be an accessory after the fact.

Ellen gave Cliff the news. This time they gave each other high fives. Tommy was in his high chair and started clapping his hands, too. Cliff and Ellen laughed and of course had to give Tommy high fives as well.

“Where is Juan now?” Cliff asked.

“He never came back to the house during the search. After the search team left, they locked up. He probably just went home later. I assume Ligaya did, too.”

“You think she knew about the murder, or the attack on me?”

“She was lying to me about that; I’m sure of that, but she admitted too much on the stolen drawing scheme. If she’d known there was a murder involved, I doubt she would have admitted anything. Her whole demeanor changed when Matt told her it was a murder case.”

“What about Deal and his crew?”

“What about them? He’s not tied into the murder yet. Unless that changes, he’ll have to wait until the indictments come down on the fraud and trade secret theft.”

Cliff nodded knowingly since he was familiar with whole process. He raised his beer bottle and Ellen clinked her wine glass against it.

* * *

As promised, the next day a warrant was issued for the arrest of Juan Santos on the charge of first degree murder of Brigham Sullivan. It was issued under seal so that the press wouldn’t get it. Matt got the word from Sandy Berger. He called his wife Gina, who was the supervisor of the violent crime squad in San Jose to let her know that he had an arrest warrant for a murder case in Morgan Hill. She agreed to have two of her fugitive agents on standby to assist whenever Matt wanted them. He told her he was going with Ellen to try to spot him at home. If he appeared to be there, he’d let Gina know and she’d send the agents to assist with the actual arrest.

Matt and Ellen drove to the Santos home, but the Porsche was nowhere to be seen. Matt knew that the garage was too full of stuff for the car to be inside, since he'd just done the search there. The minivan Ligaya usually drove was in the driveway, and they saw her come and go twice during the hours they sat on the house.

Over the next two days Matt and Ellen checked the house day, night, and early morning and saw no sign of Juan or the Porsche. He must have decided to flee. They'd have to treat this as a fugitive case. If he was driving a Porsche Panamera, he shouldn't be too hard to spot. Even in Silicon Valley that's considered a pretty classy ride and not many are on the road.

An all-points bulletin or APB was put out on Juan and his car but he seemed to be in the wind. He didn't show up at his workplace or at home that entire period. Ligaya continued to come and go, taking the kids to soccer or other activities in her minivan. Since it was summer they did not have school.

Technically, the fugitive hunt was Matt's case, not Ellen's, so he called the shots. He decided there was no point in keeping the warrant a secret and tried to interview Ligaya about her husband. She refused to open the door to him or talk to him on the phone. She still wasn't under indictment or wanted for the murder either, so his hands were tied.

* * *

All the jubilation and high fives turned out to be premature. Two weeks went by and there was still no sign of Juan. Ellen kept Cliff apprised of the status of the fugitive case. Juan had tried to kill him, after all. Cliff also kept Tim Rothman up to date. It was likely, they'd decided, that Juan had spotted Cliff and Tim at Rachel Wright's house and followed them back to Tim's house. That's probably how he identified Cliff and his car and followed him when he left for Las Vegas. They couldn't see any reason why he would return to Cedar City where he was wanted for murder, but it was possible. Juan's picture, and a picture of his car, were all over the news there.

Cliff was beginning to get impatient. Juan had tried to kill him, so what was the hang-up? He also wondered whether Michael Deal had put Juan up to it and was now trying to identify Dave Anderson. Deal had money and could hire someone to check out the Cayman Islands company. If he succeeded in identifying him, might he hire someone else to finish the job, or try to do it himself?

“What’s the deal on Deal?” Cliff asked Ellen one evening when the suspense was gnawing at him. “No charges yet?”

“Not yet. He’s out of business, though, and he’s hired an expensive lawyer. His punishment has started already.”

“That’s not really what I’m worried about.”

“I know. Look, if you think he’s obsessed about you or this Dave Anderson person you cooked up, I don’t think you should worry. I hear he’s in Alabama with a new scheme. His secretary is cooperating and keeping us in the loop.”

“What kind of scheme?”

“Sportswear. Lori Deal’s brother has been trying to become the next Nike or Adidas or something. He’s gotten Deal to invest. Of course Deal the big shot has to be the CEO.”

“Why Alabama? Is that the new center of haute couture?”

“Football is huge there. He’s going for the college crowd, I hear. Wants to get some coaches or athletes to endorse. Something like that. He’s totally done with APIX.”

Cliff harrumphed but said nothing more. He knew there was nothing for him to do but let the scenario play out.

Ellen continued analyzing the evidence in the APIX case and the AUSA had begun presenting evidence to the grand jury. Michael Deal and Ligaya Santos were sent target letters advising them that the grand jury was investigating them. The FBI hated the lengthy process, but it was ubiquitous in white collar cases. It was loved by lawyers on both sides, who enjoyed working at a leisurely pace. It allowed the defense attorneys to bill more hours than a quick arrest would permit, and the prosecutors were able to beta test their case piecemeal before a friendly grand jury and find their own weak spots or witness problems before going to trial.

API, on the other hand, had no qualms about filing suit immediately. Within two days of the raid a civil suit for millions of dollars was filed, naming Michael and Lori Deal, Ligaya and Juan Santos, APIX, and Does 1-99, as defendants, claiming fraud, trade secret theft, violation of contract, and a dozen other causes of action. Cliff was no longer required to do active investigation for them, but Sally Brolin and her outside litigators contacted him regularly for clarification on the details of what he had already done and found, especially as it pertained to the vendors like Belcher. They were undecided whether to name any of them in the suit.

Cliff was out front mowing his lawn one Saturday when he saw the neighbors two doors down piling into their minivan with their kids wearing soccer clothes. This gave him an idea. When he finished the yardwork he went inside and asked Ellen if she knew what league the Santos kids were in. Ellen didn't need to ask why. As soon as he mentioned it, she realized where he was going with that.

She called Matt at home to get the names and ages of Ligaya's kids. He remembered the names, but wasn't sure of the ages. Unfortunately Santos was such a common name it wasn't very useful for searching, but Ellen remembered that Ligaya's daughter was on the same team as Michael Deal's daughter and it was some kind of regional team. With a few searches online she was able to identify the league and find its website. A little digging produced the team name and roster. Santos and Deal were both listed as defenders.

Ellen checked the schedule. The team was scheduled to play that day at three o'clock, at Homestead High School in Cupertino only a few miles away, the same school that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the Apple Computer founders, attended years earlier. She had two hours. She called Matt again. He was up for the plan to check out the game. Maybe Juan didn't go home, but he might sneak in to see his daughter play. They agreed to meet at the school parking lot at two thirty. The plan was that if Matt and Ellen spotted Juan, they should wait for backup to make the arrest. If he was there, Juan would likely be around for hours while the team played and then regrouped for the pizza party afterward.

Ellen told Cliff the plan. He nodded his acknowledgment, but he was never comfortable when Ellen made arrests. He knew she was capable but she was still the mother of his child and the love of his life. He worried. That was what FBI spouses do. He watched anxiously as she strapped on her holster and put on her protective vest.

As soon as Ellen left the house in her Bureau car, Cliff called Theresa and asked if he could drop Tommy off for an hour or so. She agreed without asking why. He drove Tommy over to her house and thanked her for the short notice help. Then he headed for the high school.

He approached in his Tesla from the west, along Homestead Avenue. He drove by the front of the school and pulled into the 7-11 lot just the other side. He didn't see Ellen's car on the street, so he guessed she was parked in the school lot. He got out and walked back to the entrance to the parking lot. Normally empty on a summer Saturday, it was over half full. He didn't want Ellen or Matt

to see him, so he stood at the end of the row nearest the street, shaded and mostly blocked from view by the post holding up the roof. The parking stalls were all covered by a roof that held solar panels, a popular feature now at many high-tech Silicon Valley schools.

He scanned the cars nearest him and recognized Matt Nguyen's car parked in a slot, but with no one in it. If Matt was here, Ellen must be, too, but he would have expected them to be in their cars looking for the Porsche to arrive. Possibly Matt had gone over to Ellen's car so they could talk and plan, a common practice on fixed surveillances. Then he saw Ligaya's minivan, the one he and Maeva had followed. He still remembered the license plate and bumper stickers. No one was in that car, either, since game time had started five minutes ago.

Cliff walked casually along the first row looking for Ellen's car. He spotted it finally at the other end of the lot closer to the entrance to the field area. Quickly he dodged between two cars and peeked again from behind another post. Unlike Matt's, Ellen's car was in the sun. She had parked facing out. The reflections on the windshield made it difficult to see inside, but eventually Cliff was confident that there was no one in the car. They must have gone into the school to scan the crowd. That meant they hadn't seen the Porsche in the lot and went in to verify Juan wasn't there. If they'd seen his car, they would have set up on it and waited for him to come out rather than risk having him see them and recognize Matt.

This gave him comfort. That meant Juan probably wasn't here. The school, with its crowds of parents and kids, would be a dangerous place to make an arrest of an armed murder suspect. Of course Juan worked at an auto body shop and probably had ways to get his hands on another car. He might be driving another make, which is no doubt why Ellen and Matt must have gone inside to see if he's with his family, even though there was no sign of his car.

Cliff had gone down one aisle looking for cars he recognized, but there were still two more aisles. As he got onto the next row he spotted Michael Deal's Cadillac. He'd forgotten that Ellen had told him the Deal's daughter was on the same team with the Santos girl.

A few cars down from the Cadillac was a spiffy-looking black Maserati. Cliff almost went on by, but something didn't look right to him. The Maserati looked off somehow. He couldn't place what it was for a minute, but then it came to him. The Maserati is Italian and comes new with Pirelli tires but these were Michelin, the factory standard for Porsches. He had to confirm his suspicions. He got down between the Maserati and the car next to it and lay on his back. He

squeezed his head under the low-slung body panel and saw it. On the under edge of the door panel the black paint job ended; the original pearl color could be seen. This car had recently been repainted. He slid out and looked at the front and back again. It bore the Maserati trident shield on its grille and the word Maserati on the rear, but these would be available to someone who worked in a body shop. He didn't know the body styles of the two esoteric cars well enough to be sure just by shape which this was, but he had a gut feeling this was the Porsche.

He took a look at the license plate. The number was a generic-looking California one. He didn't know Santos's license plate number because he'd never seen the car or investigated it, but he thought Ellen had told him it was a personalized plate. So maybe this wasn't the car. Then he took a closer look. The number began with a "5". The standard plates were now all beginning with "7". The last "5" was issued at least ten years ago, long before this car was built. Not only that, but Cliff could now see that the plate had some wrinkles in it, crumpled bends that had been hammered out. It must have been taken off some wreck the body shop had worked on. The shop was supposed to turn in all destroyed or unreadable plates to the DMV, but it would be easy enough to report that the plate had been missing when it came into the shop.

Juan was here; Cliff was sure of it. He pulled out his phone and called Ellen.

"What is it, Cliff? I'm kinda busy here."

"Have you spotted Juan yet?"

"No, I don't think he's here, but we're still looking. We were in the lot until just a few minutes ago. What's going on?"

"He's here. I spotted his car."

"Here? Where are you?"

"I'm in the parking lot. At the game."

"You're here!? Where's Tommy? Is he with you?"

"He's with Theresa. He's fine. Look, the Porsche is in the lot. Come out and I'll show you. You can set up on the car."

"Cliff, you have no business being here. Santos is armed and wanted for murder. He tried to kill you once. You can ID him, or he probably thinks you can. If he spots you ..."

"I know, I know. I just wanted to get a look at him so I could be sure he was the one who went after me. I'll leave now. Just come on out. He knows what Matt looks like, too, and if he sees Matt first, he'll get lost fast. You should set up on the car from a distance."

“Thanks for telling me how to run my case, dear.” She put withering sarcasm on the “dear.” “We looked through the lot and there were no Porsches. Did it just arrive?”

“He’s disguised it. It’s repainted black and he stuck a Maserati logo on it. It’s got a crumpled up license plate starting with ‘5’. There’s no way that plate belongs on that car. He worked in an auto body shop, remember. I’m almost sure that’s his car tricked out to look like a Maserati.”

“That black Maserati? Oh, crap. We saw that. I know the one you mean. You don’t have to show me. We’ll come out and run the VIN to be sure. Just get out of there. You should never have come.”

“I’m walking back to my car now. I’m parked in the 7-11 lot next door. Don’t worry about me.”

Cliff headed back to his car. He knew Ellen was right. He did not belong near the actual arrest scene. He settled into his car and watched for Matt and Ellen to appear. He was too far away to see clearly, especially since all the cars were in deep shade and obscured by other cars. There was nobody else in the parking lot at the moment. He was hoping it would stay that way if Juan came out. Ellen and Matt would not try to make the arrest if there were kids and families around, not with an armed murder suspect. He began to think maybe he should have disabled the car, let air out of the tires or something, but then dismissed the thought. If it was the wrong car, that would be rather embarrassing, and if it was the right one, it might cause a shootout or a carjacking there at the end of the game with a crowd in the parking lot when Santos realized he couldn’t escape in his own wheels.

* * *

Ellen and Matt had split up to cover more area. They both assumed that if Juan was there, he’d be on the side where his daughter’s team was, the side closest to the parking lot. Ellen was designated to go mingle in that group since Juan didn’t know what she looked like. Matt went to the opposite side of the field trying to spot Juan from a distance.

Ellen called Matt and said to meet her in the parking lot right away. She didn’t want to explain why out loud with all the people around. She headed to the lot and so did Matt, although he had to walk around the far end of the field. As Matt got to the end, beyond the uprights since this field doubled as the main

football field, Santos saw him and recognized him. Juan had been mingling with the other team's fans as a precaution.

Santos had to make a decision and make it fast. He didn't know if Matt was alone, but he doubted it. If they hadn't seen him and didn't realize he was there, he would probably be better off hanging back and waiting till the crowd dispersed. The agents would probably leave, but this had its risks. This was the last game of the day. If he left his car there until everyone was gone, it would stand out and might draw suspicion if the agents stayed behind. And if he left with the crowd and the agents were still there, they would probably spot him in the crowd. If they had spotted his car and knew he was there, they might have more agents there in the lot waiting for him now. Or maybe not. Maybe Matt was alone, just playing a hunch. If so, he could outrun him to the lot and there was no way the fed could catch his Porsche.

He made his choice, the same choice so many wanted felons make: he ran. He broke from the crowd on the far side of the field. He ran directly across the field through the middle of the soccer game toward the parking lot. This put him fifty yards closer to the lot than Matt. The crowd gasped and began calling out "Hey!" and some more colorful things as this man went running through the game. The ref blew the whistle to stop the game play.

Matt noticed the figure running across the field immediately and realized what was happening. He took off after him. Santos broke through the crowd on his own team's side. No one tried to stop him. Ellen, meanwhile, was halfway back to the parking lot and was unaware of what was going on behind her. The crowd noise just sounded like crowd noise to her, like at any soccer game.

Santos went sprinting past Ellen at full speed. He didn't know who she was and she didn't know who he was, either, at least not immediately. Then she heard Matt calling "Ellen, that's him. Get him." She was twenty yards behind Santos. She was a good runner for a woman her age, but she knew she couldn't catch him on foot. She started running and yelling at him "FBI. Stop!" Of course, he didn't.

Santos got to his car five seconds before Ellen got to hers, but she had a tactical advantage. She had had the foresight to park near the exit facing out. Santos had parked facing in like all the other cars. By the time he backed out of his spot and started forward, she had her car in gear and was moving forward. Just in time she drove her car forward, blocking the exit to the lane. Santos barely slowed. He saw that her car wasn't at a right angle, but at about eighty degrees to his direction of travel. He aimed his car for the rear of her vehicle and punched it,

wrenching the wheel at the last second so that his car struck at an angle, his right front fender hitting the right rear quarter panel of Ellen's car. Ellen's car slued backward from the impact, leaving room on one side, the one opposite to where Santos was, to get around it. Her engine sputtered and died as her fuel line had been momentarily disrupted. She pulled her gun, jumped out of her car, and aimed at the Porsche, but Santos was already backing up. She pulled the trigger. The crack of the shot was ear-splitting. The bullet glanced off the steeply sloping Porsche windshield like a stone skipping across a pond, barely leaving a mark.

By this time Matt was at his car, climbing in, but he was at the far end of the lot. He turned the key and backed out with a screech of tires and then pulled forward into the same aisle where Santos was backing up. Santos stopped and began going forward again, accelerating at an incredible rate. Ellen could see he would be on her within seconds. She dove and rolled between two parked cars as the Porsche went past her car on the opposite side. Matt was coming fast behind Santos, but came to a halt next to Ellen to make sure she was okay. She stood up and waved him on, making a shooping motion with both hands. He needed no further encouragement. He took off after Santos, who was now leaving the parking lot, turning left onto Homestead.

Ellen rushed to her car and saw that the rear axle was knocked out of alignment and one wheel was bent in. It wouldn't be drivable. She also saw a trail of liquid, probably water and coolant, along the track Santos had driven leading out to the street, so his car had damage, too. Her driver's door was still open, so she sat down and turned the key again. The engine didn't start, but she could see dashboard lights. She grabbed the mike and pressed the transmit key.

"Six oh seven to Control! We need backup. Six oh four is in pursuit of a murder suspect." She let her finger off the button and the radio crackled to life.

"What's your twenty?"

At that moment Cliff's Tesla screeched to a stop next to her car. He opened the door, which was faster than rolling down the window, and yelled, "Get in!"

Ellen yelled back louder. "Cliff, stop it. Let Matt do his job."

"I'm going with or without you. You want in or not?"

Ellen threw down the mike and ran around to the other side of the Tesla and jumped in. Cliff was moving before she even had her seat belt on. "Cliff, just go home. Matt's paid to do this. He has a gun and a vest."

"There's no way he can stay with that Porsche in his Bureau car. I'll just get close enough to keep him in sight. You call in his location." Cliff was already

on the street and punching it. He hit the first stoplight at Mary on the green, with no traffic, but he saw cars up ahead. Neither Matt nor Santos was in sight. "Call Radio and get a location. Matt should be on the air by now. See if he got on 85."

Ellen hit the speed dial button on her phone to get the main San Francisco switchboard. On weekends it rang at the Communications room where the radio operator and weekend supervisor sat. It was picked up on the first ring. She identified herself and asked where Matt was. The supervisor started to chew her out for not answering on the radio when he'd asked for her location but she cut him off.

"No time for that. My Bucar is disabled. I'm in my POV in pursuit. Where are we going?"

"Do NOT, I repeat, do NOT pursue a murder subject in your personally owned vehicle." In the background Ellen heard Matt's voice come over the switchboard radio. She heard him say the subject headed south on Foothill and he needed assistance.

"South on Foothill, got it," Ellen repeated to the supervisor. "We're on it." She hung up before he could say more than "Dammit, Kennedy ..."

"I heard," Cliff said. He was approaching stopped cars at Bernardo. On the left was the entrance to Highway 85 north onramp, while Bernardo was on the right. He could go around on the left or the right. He chose the empty bicycle lane on the right to blow through the red light at seventy between a FedEx truck and a Mini Cooper, both turning right from Bernardo onto Homestead. This put him behind the truck and he had to slam on the brakes to avoid plowing into its rear.

Ellen gnashed her teeth furiously as she was thrown back, then forward, straining against the seat belt, but knew it was useless to continue to harangue Cliff to break off the chase. He was an agent, too, at heart and she knew exactly how he felt. She wanted to nail that sucker as much as he did, but her lower testosterone levels did not overpower her judgment the way it did Cliff and other males she'd worked with. She'd learned to live with that long ago.

They crossed over the freeway. The next obstacle was the stoplight at the exit ramp on the far side. Cliff finally had to stop when the truck did, since he couldn't see around it. No one was behind him, so Cliff backed up and looked both ways. Seeing no cross traffic, he punched it again and passed the truck in the oncoming traffic lane, again blowing through the red. He hit green at the next two lights and within thirty seconds was in the left turn lane for Foothill Expressway. If he'd gone right, northward, he could have gone straight home

amid heavy traffic, but south was a different story. South headed up into the hills and the traffic got light as the expressway petered out into a regular residential street for a mile or so, then rose into the mountains as a country road.

He couldn't blow through the intersection; it was just too busy, but he didn't have long to wait for the left turn arrow to turn green. Finally he could open it up. He heard Ellen's phone ring. He knew it would be the weekend supervisor. If the supervisor knew she was not only in her personal car but that her husband was driving, she could be in real trouble. He hoped she wouldn't answer, but he also needed to know how far behind they were. She answered.

"I'm on Foothill southbound now," she barked into the phone without saying hello. "Where's the subject?"

"You are to break off the pursuit, six oh seven. We've notified Highway Patrol and the Sheriff's office. Six oh four will have backup very soon. Repeat: 10-22." That was the code for discontinue.

"Are you going to tell me or not? If not I'll just be tearing around the wrong neighborhoods. Matt's my squadmate and he needs help. It'll take forever for CHP and the sheriff to catch up."

After a pregnant pause the supervisor replied, apparently conceding defeat for now. "He gave us the vehicle description. It nearly had a collision in front of a cement factory, allowing Nguyen to catch up momentarily, but then it continued south on Foothill. That was maybe five seconds before I called you."

"10-4. I'll stay on the line. Let Matt know I'm on my way about a half mile behind him." She heard the voice of the female radio operator in the background making the transmission.

Cliff now had a good picture of the chase. Santos was entering the curvy section of the road where he should be able to leave Matt behind if he didn't crash or traffic didn't stop him. The Lehigh Cement Co. factory and quarry had been gouging limestone from the hills above Stevens Creek Reservoir for more than eighty years. Foothill snaked between the quarry and the reservoir, which was now almost dry due to the four-year drought. The road was popular with yuppie cyclists on their three thousand dollar bicycles, but had little motor vehicle traffic past the reservoir during midday.

He pressed the accelerator to the floor. The Tesla leaped forward, pressing him and Ellen back against the seats. As he crested the first rise, the car actually left the ground for a second before making ground contact again. The jolt on landing was surprisingly bearable. He was now at ninety and still accelerating.

“Good shocks,” Cliff said matter-of-factly in a soft voice so as not to be overheard on the phone.

“You’ll get some good shocks when we get home,” Ellen whispered back.

Cliff saw a cement truck ahead signaling to turn right into the Lehigh plant. The road was wide here so Cliff slid around him on the left without having to cross into the oncoming lane, but there was a sharp left-hand turn right after and Cliff had to slow to forty-five, testing the Tesla’s brakes to the limit. The car hugged the middle of the lane through the turn without drifting an inch. *What a machine!* was all Cliff could think.

Ellen heard Matt’s voice again along with his siren in the background. He was passing the Sycamore Group Area, a picnic spot that could be reserved for large groups. Cliff and Ellen both knew it well from geocaching. They were now only a quarter mile behind Matt and gaining fast. The Porsche, however, was out of sight, although Matt said he could catch glimpses of it on the straighter sections.

“They’re coming up on Mt. Eden,” Ellen declared anxiously over the phone. Santos would have to go left on Mt. Eden Road or right onto Stevens Canyon at the fork. Left meant a very curvy road where he could leave Matt behind more quickly, but that section was short and led into an expensive residential area with narrow streets and lots of construction where he could get bogged down. Stevens Canyon was curvy and steep enough, too, and led higher and deeper into the mountains where he would have more advantage in the long run.

“Shit! I lost him,” Matt yelled, the radio transmission coming over the phone. “I didn’t see whether he went left or right at the fork. I’m taking Mt. Eden.”

Seconds later, the Tesla reached the same decision point. “Go right!” Ellen screamed in her excitement. Cliff swung onto Stevens Canyon and opened her up. The Tesla almost floated through the curves. It was a joy to drive, but Cliff was beginning to feel the anxiety of what was going to happen if he caught up with Santos. Ellen was essentially alone with a gun and vest. Cliff was nothing but her chauffeur. Matt was no longer in the picture and they no longer had any red lights or siren paving the way for them as they had moments earlier.

After a few seconds she realized she had just yelled driving instructions to Cliff. The supervisor in San Francisco must have heard that. She hadn’t told him she was with anyone else. She hung up before he could ask.

Then it happened. They saw the Porsche ahead. "That's it. Slow down," Ellen commanded. Cliff slowed. They watched as the Porsche turned left from Stevens Canyon onto Redwood Gulch.

"Not good," Cliff muttered. "That has a one-lane section at the end. At the speed we're going that's a recipe for a head-on collision if anyone's coming the other way."

"Hang back. He doesn't know we're FBI. He hasn't seen the Tesla before. He'd never make this for a Bucar."

"No? We're, what, just some middle-aged joyriders overtaking him at eighty miles an hour on a road designed for twenty-five? He saw you shoot at him. He might recognize you in the rear-view mirror. Besides, if I hang back I won't know which way he goes when he reaches Highway 9. Once we're there we can hang back."

As if on cue the supervisor called again. "Six oh seven, we have CHP headed your way on Big Basin Way from Los Gatos. Can you advise which direction the subject turns?" Big Basin Way was another name for Highway 9.

"10-4," she replied.

Cliff maintained his position within view. Without warning, the Porsche's brake lights came on and smoke billowed from the road surface as the tires gripped the pavement with a stunning ferocity. Cliff slammed his foot on the brake pedal as hard as he could and came skidding to a halt, with less than six inches separating his front bumper from the Porsche. The seat belt's shoulder strap dug into Ellen's chest and shoulder with crushing force, squeezing the air from her lungs, but kept her head from hitting the windshield. Barely.

The stench of smoking tires and overheated brake lining permeated the cabin. She gasped to regain her wind and looked up. She didn't know what to expect, so she drew her gun in case Santos decided to attack them. Too late she realized she was holding it up where Santos could see it. He held his up in response. Cliff backed up quickly, but Santos didn't shoot. Instead, his gun hand came down and the Porsche took off again. The maneuver had been to determine whether the FBI was still on his tail or possibly the Tesla was just some jerk trying to race. It had succeeded. Santos now knew who they were. There was no being discreet now.

Cliff put it in forward again and followed Santos at a slightly safer distance but still at a frightening speed. A car coming the other direction pulled over to the side as Cliff passed by. The road was narrow and the driver of that car must have been intimidated by the speed of the two oncoming cars. Cliff became

aware that they were approaching the one-lane section of the road. If another car came from the opposite direction, it would mean a certain head-on collision. He laid on his horn as he and the Porsche approached, hoping that would serve as a warning.

The one-lane section was curvy as well as narrow. The Porsche fishtailed around one curve and its tail took out a wooden post holding two mailboxes. The Tesla took the curve with no problem. Seconds later the Porsche was through the one lane section, but as Cliff was almost to that point an oncoming car saw him and slammed on its brakes just before entering the narrowed stretch. That car skidded to its right and plowed into a cactus-filled yard, but came to stop without hitting anything hard. Cliff kept going, missing that car by inches and came out just in time to see the Porsche turn right on Highway 9.

"Control, the Porsche turned right, repeat right, on 9, heading toward Skyline."

"Copy. Will advise CHP. They set up a roadblock to the south. They are sending units to the intersection with Skyline to make another one there."

"10-4."

"Okay, slow down," she said, putting her hand gently on Cliff's right elbow as the Tesla made the same right turn. "The CHP can stop him now. They're going to block off that end, too."

Cliff eased off the pedal and slowed to somewhere near the speed limit. Ellen was right. He'd done his duty keeping the car in sight. It was time to let the pros take over. The highway patrol had the car trapped and knew where it was. Ellen wanted to get to the scene, though, to arrest him if she could. She knew the highway patrol officers would arrest him first on the Utah murder charge, even though he had just rammed Ellen's car.

"We're breaking off pursuit," Ellen said into the phone. "We're following behind out of sight at the speed limit. Advise us when it is safe to approach the roadblock at Skyline."

"We? Do you have someone else in your car six oh seven?"

"Oops," Cliff whispered to Ellen. "You're going to get your knuckles rapped now."

"Negative," she said loudly into the phone. "I just meant six oh four and I am breaking off pursuit." As soon as she said this, Matt's voice could be heard saying he had just come out onto highway 9 himself at Pierce Road and was heading toward Skyline, thus contradicting her. He would be three or four miles behind.

“Six oh seven, if you have a civilian with you, you are not to approach the scene. There could be a shootout. Copy? Pull over and wait for instructions.”

“No civilians. No problem.” She disconnected again, afraid that another exclamation from her or Cliff would give her away.

Now that he knew Matt was coming up from behind, Cliff decided the supervisor had been right. Pulling over and waiting was the right thing to do. Ellen would be disappointed at not being present at the arrest, but he’d put them both in enough danger already. He pulled over onto the shoulder and stopped.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Doing what he said. Pulling over and waiting for instructions. Matt’s got it now, and the CHP.”

“You’re the one who wanted to chase him back at the high school.”

“I know. But we’ve done that. We kept him in sight long enough. He’s trapped. That’s all I wanted to do. I don’t need to be in a gunfight, and I don’t want you to be either.”

“I get paid to arrest criminals. It’s my job. You don’t get to tell me not to do my job just because I’m your wife.”

“I get it. I won’t. But it’s not just you. We’re both here. Tommy needs at least one parent to get him past infancy. The guy was right. A civilian has no place at a possible shootout.”

This argument shut Ellen up. She knew he was right. She had wanted him to go home. Then they saw Matt Nguyen go flying by in his Bureau car.

“That’s Matt,” Ellen said needlessly.

“Yep. That’s Matt.”

Ellen’s phone rang again. She put her finger to her lips in a motion to signal Cliff to keep quiet.

“Six oh seven. You are to return to the parking lot where your Bureau car is disabled. The police are there and no one knows what’s going on.”

Ellen didn’t want to leave the scene. In only minutes the Porsche would be at the roadblock. Her car could be towed from the high school lot and that could all be straightened out later. Before she could refuse the command, though, she heard Matt’s voice once again.

“Subject has stopped. There’s smoke coming from his car. I think it’s tits up. I need backup here. Highway 9. He’s getting out of his car, gun visible.” The transmission stopped. Ellen shoved the phone into her pocket and drew her gun. The radiator damage from the ramming of Ellen’s car had finally taken its toll on the Porsche.

“Go,” Ellen commanded. Despite her acquiescence to Cliff’s rational train of thoughts moments earlier, she couldn’t let a fellow agent go without help in the face of danger. She and Cliff were cut from the same cloth. Ultimately, they were both warriors in the battle of good versus evil and warriors didn’t shy from battle when needed to save their fellow warriors from danger. They rushed to their aid.

Cliff peeled out again despite the steep uphill slope. Three minutes later they were on the scene. Matt’s car was stopped in the middle of his lane, angled slightly left to provide him a barrier to hide behind. He was crouching behind the front of the car, facing the Porsche, which was also stopped in the middle of the lane. Santos was crouching behind his car’s hood, trying to keep his engine block between him and Matt. Cliff pulled over to the left shoulder, then turned the car right to block the other lane and to put the passenger side, Ellen’s side, in the protected area of the car as she got out.

She leaped from the car and took a position behind her engine block as a shot echoed off the steep hillsides. She looked over toward Matt and saw him ducking down, head below the top of his car hood, service pistol in hand. Ellen peeked around the front fender of the Tesla and saw Santos pointing his gun Matt’s direction. Then she heard a car door slam. Cliff had emerged from his side, the exposed side, and was rushing around the rear of the Tesla to a position of cover.

As Ellen looked over toward Cliff, Matt maneuvered over to the other end of his car and popped up quickly to take a shot at Santos. The driver’s side window of the Porsche shattered. Santos ducked down behind his car once more and came crouch-walking toward Ellen’s side. She took aim and fired two quick shots in succession. Outmanned and outgunned, Santos dropped his weapon. He dropped to his knees and put his hands up.

Ellen and Matt both rushed forward, guns pointed at Santos. “Stand up and turn around,” Matt ordered. He didn’t want Santos to lie down where he was since the gun was within reaching distance. Santos complied. “Keep your hand up. Now walk backward toward me, very slowly.” Again Santos complied. Matt nodded to Ellen and motioned to her to keep the gun trained on Santos as he holstered his own weapon and pulled out his handcuffs.

At that moment an unmistakable roar came rushing at them from the other direction. A motorcyclist was barreling downhill, oblivious to the scene unfolding below. The rider, a man in his twenties, rounded the corner and saw the three cars blocking the road. As he braked hard, his bike slid sideways and he

fell hard, skidding on the pavement directly at Ellen. He wore a helmet but had nothing but jeans and a tee shirt for protection below that. His left arm was instantly rendered into a brilliant red, a literal blood sausage. Ellen jumped right to avoid him as the motorcycle slid by on the other side, lying flat, wheels first, coming to a gentle stop right next to the Tesla. The rider began screaming in pain, one leg contorted like a pretzel, a shin bone shard visible through the ripped jeans.

Santos saw his chance. Ellen was focused on the injured rider. Matt had holstered his gun and was standing with handcuffs in his gun hand. Santos turned and sprinted toward the motorcycle, its engine still running in neutral. Cliff was at this point standing up watching the arrest from behind the Tesla. He realized neither Ellen nor Matt could shoot Santos because he himself was directly in the line of fire. If Santos could get on the cycle, he could make it between the three cars and escape.

Cliff hurled himself over the hood of the Tesla just as Santos righted the cycle and straddled it. Santos tried to duck out of the way as Cliff flew at him, but Cliff's left hand caught a thick lock of hair and pulled Santos off the bike onto the ground. Cliff landed a knee in Santos's groin for good measure. There was no such thing as fighting dirty when you're in a fight for your life. That much he remembered from his FBI Academy days.

"Remember me, asshole?" Cliff grunted into Juan's ear and twisted the lock of hair hard. Santos emitted a strangled gurgling noise.

Matt joined Cliff seconds later and cuffed the moaning Santos without further trouble. Ellen already had her phone out and was on the line with 911 as the hapless motorcycle rider lay screaming in pain. Matt headed to his car, Santos in tow. Cliff followed closely to make sure he gave Matt no further trouble. At the car Matt belted Santos in the rear seat, then pulled out a pair of large plastic flexcuffs from the glove compartment and placed them on Santos's ankles, tightening them just enough so that he could hobble, but not run or even walk normally. That done, he got on the radio and reported to FBI radio that they had the subject in custody. There was a sharp exchange with the weekend supervisor who wanted all the details, but Matt refused to go into it. He said simply that the two agents had effected the arrest of subject, who surrendered after shots were exchanged, but no one was shot or injured except for a motorcyclist who fell when he came upon the scene. He made clear that Ellen had called 911 and an ambulance and CHP were already on the way.

Cliff stood there pointing at his chest and mouthing the words “I’m not here” silently to Matt, who nodded. It would have to come out, eventually, of course. At some point there would be testimony, so they would have to write up 302s about the whole incident, but for now he said nothing about Cliff to the supervisor.

The supervisor told Matt to render whatever aid they could to the cycle rider until the ambulance arrived or CHP took over, then bring the subject in for booking. The SAC was coming into the office to start an agent-involved shooting investigation. The CHP would try to keep them there all day and maybe try to take the Santos into custody themselves, which nobody in the FBI wanted. Under no circumstances were the agents to turn custody over to the CHP or give them the details. Just identify themselves and Santos and state they were taking in the subject for processing, then leave. The CHP could deal with the Porsche and the investigation of the motorcycle accident. Matt acknowledged the order.

“Ellen,” Matt called to her, “CHP will be here any minute. We’re supposed to maintain custody and just identify ourselves. What do you want to do?” With a head motion he made clear he was referring to Cliff.

She was bending over the injured rider, pressing his own torn tee shirt against the open road rash on his arm. The spot where his leg bone was sticking through was gruesome to see, but not bleeding much. She looked up and made a snap decision.

“Cliff, get out of here now. I’ll ride back with Matt. We need a second agent in the car anyway to transport the prisoner. If you go back the way we came, you shouldn’t run into any CHP.”

This was no time for debate. “I’ll see you at home. Call me when you can,” he said, and got into the Tesla. He was pleased to see it didn’t have a scratch on it. A moment later he was gone.

Chapter 26

Two weeks later

Ellen entered the house to be greeted by a rich aroma snaking its way from the kitchen. “What are you cooking?”

“Lamb ragout. It should be ready in about twenty minutes. I baked some cookies, too. Congratulations on the indictment. I heard it on the news.”

“Thanks. I should congratulate you. You brought the case to me.” She went into the bedroom, took off her gun and locked it in the gun box. Tommy was still way too young to get his hands on it, but she wanted to get herself into the habit before he got to that point. When she emerged, Cliff put his arm around her waist and drew her tight, then planted a lingering kiss on her lips. “Mm, nice,” she said, opening her eyes afterward. “I’ll have to indict people more often. Actually, it was the AUSA who filed the indictment.”

“I’d rather kiss you.”

“I should hope so. He’s too short for you.”

“That takes care of Deal. Any word on Juan Santos?”

“The FBI turned him over to Utah on the Sullivan murder charges. The prosecutor there promised to go for the death penalty. That should be announced tomorrow. They’ve got the firing squad there. They may indict federally there, too, on the attack on you and on Interstate Travel to Commit Murder.”

“What about his ramming you? And shooting at Matt?”

“Same thing. Probably indict but not bother to go to trial unless he somehow beats the murder rap.”

“Is he cooperating? Giving up Deal?”

“No. The word I’m getting is that he wants the death penalty. He doesn’t want to live his life in prison. He doesn’t want to assist us in any way or plead guilty because the judge might reduce his sentence to life for his cooperation. That’s what the Utah prosecutor thinks is going on.”

“That’s crazy. He wants to get executed and the only way he can do that is to fight the government at every step?”

“American justice at its finest. It looks like Deal is going to cooperate, though, as long as we don’t prosecute his wife or employees, and, of course, not go after him on the murder charge. The word from his lawyer is that the whole scheme was his and no one at APIX, including Lori, knew the drawings were stolen. They all thought he had a license from API.”

“And the murder?”

“Again, according to his lawyer he had no idea Juan was intending to do violence. He says he told Juan that there was trouble brewing, the Sullivan kid planning to go to API, then, later, that Belcher was worried about an upcoming API consultant coming in, but that’s all. It was totally Juan’s idea to go there and take action that way. Maybe even Ligaya’s.”

“So he says,” Cliff muttered.

“So he says, and we don’t have any evidence to contradict him. So for now it’s just the white collar stuff on Deal.”

“So how much time is he likely to get these days?”

“Losses are in the neighborhood of four mil, but he won’t plead to that. You know how it goes. He’ll probably plead to one count with a loss of maybe fifty grand and get fourteen months and only serve a year. The AUSA and defense counsel will work out the details including which prison so as not to inconvenience the defendant and the AUSA won’t have to actually try a case.”

Cliff let out a snort of disgust as he stirred the ragout. “Do you get to arrest him, at least?”

“Of course not. He’s a busy man and will have to schedule the first appearance at a time that won’t interfere with his new business as a clothing entrepreneur. He’ll get fingerprinted and photographed by the marshals when he returns from Alabama.”

“Of course. How foolish of me. We only perp walk the poor and the dark-skinned. Rich white guys are entitled to walk into the courthouse next to their lawyer to get processed at a time and place of their convenience. Why didn’t I think of that.” He snorted again.

Cliff finished setting the table as Ellen went into the bedroom and changed her clothes. When she came out she was looking at her phone. “I just got a text from that Brolin woman.”

“She still hitting on you?”

“No. She says to watch the evening news and stay for the sports at the end. Channel 7.”

“Sports?” Neither of them were big sports fan. Maybe if the networks started covering geocaching they would be, but ...

Cliff dialed in a local station, punched the record button on his TV remote, and turned off the TV. Dinner was too much of an operation with Tommy now to try to watch the news while eating. Ellen got Tommy from his playpen and undertook to get him ensconced in his high chair then got out his

baby food. When they sat down to eat, they took turns feeding him, which consisted primarily of Tommy delightedly smacking the spoon on the tray and making the Gerber goop fly. After the first few times they'd taken to spreading a sheet out underneath his highchair, in fact, underneath half the dining room. Dinner with an infant was an ordeal, but an ordeal Cliff and Ellen both relished, one they had once thought they would never experience.

After Ellen washed the dishes and Tommy settled in quietly, they got around to watching the newscast. They were both too impatient to sit through the usual reports of murder, politics and weather all interspersed seamlessly with ads and the latest viral baby panda video, so they fast forwarded to the sports. At first it seemed normal and boring, the Giants and A's latest games leading the coverage. Then the announcer mentioned something about the first runner-up to the Heisman Trophy being caught in a scandal in Alabama. It seemed that a Bay Area clothing company offered free signature clothing items to the entire championship Alabama varsity football team at a local store. Several of the players showed up and went wild, almost pillaging the place. They were taking skateboards and watches and all kinds of things besides the clothing they were supposed to take. The announcer said such gifts to college players violate NCAA rules and state sports bribery statutes. It endangers their amateur status. The University of Alabama could be fined or get recruiting sanctions, even be banned from post-season play. The Heisman guy will probably be required to sit out at least one game. That would probably kill any chance he had at the trophy next year.

As the story ran, the video in the background showed the security camera footage from the store as half a dozen players, all black, were yanking items off the racks and stuffing them in large gym bags as the store owner, also black, tried to stop them. There next to him was a tall, slim white man in a suit, Michael Deal, frantically pointing and shaking his head. Deal stood helpless as the players carted out thousands of dollars worth of goods. Then the announcer went on to other stories.

Ellen called Sally Brolin immediately after the story. Brolin told her that it wasn't on the news, but she heard that the police went and arrested Deal at his hotel after the incident. He told the police he'd paid for everything, but that wasn't the issue. He had threatened Alabama's chance at the national championship and the Heisman Trophy chance, too. Bribing a college athlete is a felony there. He was sitting in an Alabama jail at that very moment, she told Ellen. You don't mess with Alabama football.

Ellen relayed this information to Cliff.
“Fitting,” was his only comment.

Chapter 27

Four months later

Juan Santos sat in a Utah penitentiary awaiting the appeals process to work its way through the system. He'd known conviction was a certainty after they matched his DNA to a hair found in the pickup and Sullivan's DNA to blood specks on his boots. The Swedes had identified him and his rental car's GPS system had placed him in Cedar City at the time. The only question was whether he would get the death penalty or life. He preferred the former. He had taken the stand against his lawyer's advice and told the jury that he had killed Brigham Sullivan with pleasure and would kill again if he got the chance. Obliging, they came back with a death penalty verdict in less than two hours.

"So what are they waiting for?" Cliff asked Ellen when the case came up in their pillow talk.

"All death penalty cases are required to be reviewed by an appellate court. He'll have to wait a year or so for his shot at the firing squad."

"Ooh, bad pun."

"Good result, though. And I got the word on Deal, too," she added, stroking his beard gently with the back of her fingers.

"What now? I heard he was convicted of sports bribery. Alabama must have a rocket docket when you screw with their team. None of that federal due process and hand-wringing crap."

"Sentencing was today. Five years. And that's in the state pen. The judge recommended against the minimum security facility. He'll be in with the hard cases, the murderers, gang-bangers and rapists. A pretty boy white guy like him, a Yankee no less. California is up north to them."

"Holy moly," Cliff said, with a low whistle. "You steal five million dollars from a rich corporation and you get a year in a federal country club, but give some poor black youngsters free clothing and you do five years hard time in a state pen. Only in America."

"That's not the best part. The judge suspended imposition of sentence. He doesn't have to surrender for another two months. The judge acknowledged that the federal indictment was first and the feds are almost ready for trial. He granted Deal's lawyer's motion to allow him to go to trial in California. Assuming he's convicted there, or pleads guilty, he can do the state time

concurrently with his federal sentence. But he said he'd do that only if Deal was actually sentenced and had begun serving his federal sentence by that deadline. Alabama is happy enough to have the feds pay for his incarceration for the next five years."

"What happens if the federal sentence is shorter than five years? You said ..."

"The AUSA told me he's already been contacted by Deal's attorney. Up to now the defense has been stalling the federal case, hoping I'd quit the Bureau or get transferred or something."

"The usual. Stall until everyone gets sick of the case, memories fade, witnesses die or move, attorneys change. It's always like that."

"Of course. But now he's going to make a motion for change of plea to guilty. He's begging the prosecutor to ask for a *longer* sentence. Deal is desperate to avoid that Alabama pen. The state pen in Alabama is rough enough as it is, but the inmates are Alabama football fans, too. There could even be a few former 'Bama players in there, too. If he managed to make it out alive his Vespel would be unsealed so bad he'd never walk again. He's begging for a five-year federal sentence. The AUSA is now holding out for seven years."

"Incredible."

"And you know how slow the marshals are in getting the pre-sentence report done? Deal won't be allowed to surrender to prison until the report is done and the prison system determines where to send him and so on. That's standard. So even if he pleads guilty tomorrow and the sentence was imposed, he'd be lucky to actually be in custody by the deadline set by the Alabama judge. If he isn't, it's five years in Bunghole City, Alabama. The AUSA says he can get that processing expedited, but will only do so if the victim, API, receives full restitution. That's millions. Deal might just be able to do it if he sells his house and cashes in all his 401Ks and IRAs from his previous corporate job and his wife does the same. Deal really has no choice."

"Two defendants begging for maximum sentences. That's a new one, I have to say. And Ligaya?"

"She rolling over, too. She's worried about her son. She'll get two years and the son won't be deported. So far as we can tell she really didn't know about what Juan was going to do – the murder, I mean. She's a thief, that's all. Two years is plenty. Her kids will be taken by her sister while she's incarcerated."

"I talked to Tim Rothman today," Cliff replied. "He says Noah Sullivan sends his thanks to 'the fine people in the FBI who brought justice to my son.' Tim says he's found some sort of peace."

"I'm glad to hear it. Victims' rights and feelings are too often overlooked in the criminal justice system. That's really who we're working for. I hope Mr. Sullivan included you in those thanks."

Cliff squeezed her hand. "He did, but it was you and Matt and that agent in St. George, Randy, and the detectives in Cedar City who did the real work."

"Don't be modest. You know, Juan might have gotten away scot free if we hadn't chased him. Your driving saved the day."

"Naw, you would have caught up with him sooner or later."

"No, actually, we might not. It turns out he had dual citizenship since his parents were born in the Philippines. Matt seized his U.S. passport, but we found out later that he went to the Philippines Consulate and applied for a Philippines passport. It was ready and waiting for him there the day we caught him. He had an appointment to pick it up that Monday and a reservation for a flight to the Philippines the next day. We have an extradition treaty with them, but the judges are so corrupt there that anyone can bribe their way out of custody. We only get back about thirty percent of fugitives who flee there, the ones who are native Filipinos and can blend into the populace."

"I'll have to send a letter of thanks to Tesla."

"Mm-hmm," Ellen said, drowsiness finally overtaking her.

Cliff waited to see if she was going to say any more but within a minute he could tell from her breathing she'd fallen asleep. He stroked her hair and whispered good night. It had been a very good night.

Chapter 28

Some weeks later

Tommy was getting too big for the Snugli now, at least for longer distances, so the geocaching had to be in places where the stroller could go.

“So, Peter,” Cliff said to the teenager pushing the stroller, “how did you get interested in geocaching?”

“Oh, I’m in Boy Scouts and they give a merit badge for it now. I’m trying to make Eagle Scout. Thanks for letting me come along with you guys. I don’t have my own GPS, or even a smart phone. My mom says I can have one for my birthday. We can finally afford it.”

Ellen watched as Cliff and Peter chatted, happy that they’d hit it off. She’d been confident they would, but you never knew for sure. It had helped that Peter had spotted that second geocache ten feet up in the tree. Neither she nor Cliff was really into tree climbing these days. Peter had practically skipped up the tree and brought it down, then returned it after they’d all signed it.

Cliff had never been a Boy Scout. It had always seemed too goody-goody to him when he was a teen, something for the nerds, but Peter’s enthusiasm was infectious and Cliff wanted this exceptionally bright and confident kid to achieve his goal. “What do your parents do for a living, Peter?” Cliff asked, suddenly more attuned to the fact that not everyone was as fortunate as he was financially.

“My dad died a few years ago. My mom’s a teacher.”

“I thought she worked in the FBI somewhere,” Cliff said, puzzled. “Ellen never told me exactly what it was, but she said something about your mom working with her.” He looked over at Ellen, a perplexed expression furrowing his brow,

“I said I knew her from work,” Ellen replied. “That’s not the same thing as working with someone.”

“So how does your mom know Ellen?” Cliff asked.

Peter looked over to Ellen for guidance. She replied, “I met her on one of my cases. You’ll see her at the end. She’s picking Peter up back at the parking lot at three. You can meet her. It’s a long story. She tells it better.”

Cliff shrugged and turned back to his GPS unit as they were coming up on the next geocache. The foursome, if you counted Tommy, continued on the path for three more geocaches before stopping to eat the ice cream sandwiches

Ellen had packed in the insulated bag with a blue ice block. Strollers were a pain in some ways, but you could sure haul a lot of stuff in them.

“So, Mr. Knowles,” Peter said, “I read online about how you were attacked by a mountain lion and saved that lady cop. That was really awesome.”

“For the fourth time, you can call me Cliff. That was a long time ago.” Still, it was hard not to like a kid who thinks you’re awesome even if he was a little too good to be true.

They finished the loop, finding two more geocaches on the way and reached the trailhead as a plump middle-aged woman wearing cut-off jeans and a white eyelet blouse rushed up to meet them a few feet onto the path. Cliff did not recognize her.

“Ellen,” she gushed, and gave Ellen a big hug which Ellen returned.

The woman looked over at Cliff hesitantly and then back at Ellen. Ellen nodded. The woman walked over to Cliff and gave him a tentative hug. “Hi. I’m Maureen. Thank you so much. You don’t know how much it’s meant to me.”

Nonplussed, Cliff replied, “Peter’s a fine boy. It was my pleasure. It’s fun to introduce someone to geocaching. Really, it’s nothing.” He looked over to Ellen and rolled his eyes. *What is it with this woman?* “It’s obvious he’s been raised well. He told me your husband died. I’m sorry to hear it, but Peter obviously has a good mother.” *Might as well lay it on thick, but it’s true enough.*

At that Maureen burst into tears and grabbed Cliff around the middle in a fierce hug. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she sobbed.

Cliff was now seriously alarmed. Was the woman unhinged? He looked over at Ellen again pleading for some guidance on how to handle it. Peter was standing by watching, obviously embarrassed at his mother’s display.

“Cliff, I want you to meet my friend Maureen,” Ellen finally said. “Maureen Little.”

Cliff looked at her and still didn’t get it.

“Maureen Smart,” Ellen added.

The shock of it hit Cliff like a mudslide. Maureen looked up at him fearfully and let go. He saw her expression and then looked over at Peter who was almost cringing now. Cliff looked down at Maureen again, who had stepped back. Then he lunged forward and grabbed her. His muscled arms encircled her and squeezed in a crushing embrace such as she had just given him, his chin resting on the crown of her head.

He lifted his head enough to speak. “Maureen. I, You shouldn’t be sorry. Be proud. You have a right to be.” Tears welled in his eyes.

Ellen pulled a small packet of Kleenex from the stroller bag. They were all going to need it.

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If you would like to be on my mailing list in order to be notified of future Cliff Knowles Mysteries, or of promotions (including free download days) contact me at Russ.Atkinson@gmail.com. I also enjoy getting fan mail.