

DEATH

ROW

A Cliff Knowles Mystery

by

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Foreword

My second novel, *Cached Out*, was such an unexpected success that I was unprepared for all the requests I received to continue the story. I already had another story in mind, which I completed with *Fatal Dose*, but this did not satisfy all my fans of *Cached Out*. Now my fourth Cliff Knowles novel, *Death Row*, should serve to do so. Be warned: this book is a spoiler for *Cached Out*, which is a true whodunit. If you read far into this book, you'll ruin the mystery of that one, so I strongly recommend you begin with *Cached Out*.

My first novel, *Held for Ransom*, stars Cliff Knowles at an earlier time in his career. If you like Cliff, I think you'll enjoy that one, too, and it introduces some characters that appear in the later novels, but it does not involve similar story lines. For my geocaching fans, it takes place before geocaching existed.

Each of the novels can be read and enjoyed as a standalone book, but you'll enjoy the last three better if you read them in sequence. *Death Row* takes place chronologically after *Fatal Dose*. Cliff and Ellen are together as the book begins. The plot, however, takes up where *Cached Out* left off. And for you geocachers, you'll be more than satisfied with the amount of geocaching.

You don't have to be a geocacher to understand or enjoy this book, but one more word of warning is warranted for those who are. Several of the caches in the book are wholly fictional; others are real caches that are active as of the time of this writing. However, the book may or may not accurately portray the cache or caching experience, so rely on the original sources, not this book, if you decide to go for them. The scenery, geography, ratings, and so forth are written to satisfy the plot, not reality.

The Cliff Knowles Mysteries

Held for Ransom

Cached Out

Fatal Dose

Death Row

Chapter 1

Cliff paddled furiously, with strong, if inelegant, strokes, trying to keep up with Ellen. He always paddled behind her when they kayaked, partly because she was faster in the water, and partly because he enjoyed watching her. Her broad shoulders and well-muscled arms were those of a true athlete, something he was not. At five ten and somewhere north of one hundred fifty pounds – she wouldn't tell him how much she actually weighed – she was physically the complete opposite of his late wife. Fredericka had been five two, petite and very feminine, pretty in an old-fashioned sort of way. Ellen was not only powerfully built for a woman, she was aggressive, argumentative, even feisty, unlike Fredericka, who was sweet and deferential at home. He had loved her deeply until a drunk driver had ended her life; he never expected to love again.

When he had first met Ellen, introduced by mutual FBI friends he had mentored when he had been in the Bureau, he had not been attracted to her at all. Her build and even her facial structure, with its strong brow and jaw, were almost masculine, and she wore her graying hair very short. She looked so butch he had assumed she was a lesbian. In time he had learned that the premature gray was a family trait and her haircut was the result of donating her hair to Locks of Love to make wigs for cancer patients. But that organization would no longer take her hair since it was not of a uniform color, so it was now grown past shoulder length, giving her a much more feminine look. More importantly, he had learned what a generous, giving person she was, and come to enjoy her fearsome wit and intelligence. He was still amazed that a vibrant, brilliant woman fifteen years his junior could love him. He was even more amazed to realize he could love another woman after losing his wife, but he thanked his lucky stars every day that he did.

“Hurry up, Cliff,” Ellen called behind her. “The tide’s starting to rise.”

He paddled harder and began to close the gap. He knew the tide was a critical factor if they were going to be successful. Their goal was a geocache hidden under the Larkspur Ferry Landing. If they arrived when the tide was too low, they would be unable to reach the cache fastened above them. If the tide was too high, there wouldn't be enough room to kayak under the landing. Even worse, if they floated under the landing and took too long, then the tide rose, they could be trapped and held fast against the pilings and dock, where the wave action would batter them for hours unless they made the Hobson's choice of swimming out into San Francisco Bay with its strong winds, tides, cold water, and sharks. Bad timing could mean a life-threatening situation.

Cliff's arms and shoulders were aching already and he and Ellen were still fifteen minutes from their goal. A bear of a man, he lifted heavy weights regularly and had more brute strength than Ellen, but he didn't have her agility, coordination, or endurance. Even so, he was determined not to disappoint her. He knew how important this was for her.

Geocaching was a hobby they shared, but Ellen was the passionate one about the sport. In its basics geocaching is pretty simple. A geocacher hides a cache, which can be any kind of container, somewhere publicly accessible but usually camouflaged or out of sight, posts its coordinates and a description on a geocaching site web page, and other geocachers try to find it using a GPS receiver, or smart phone app. Finders log their geocaching names on a log sheet in the cache, replace the cache, then later log the find on the cache web page. If the cache is big enough, it may contain trade items to swap or take. Caches can be more complicated, too, like multi-stage caches, event caches, or puzzles requiring the finder to solve a puzzle to get the real coordinates. Some geocachers are passionate about being the first to find a cache, while others try to accumulate as many finds as possible. Others, like Ellen, enjoy challenges, which are caches where the finder must first complete some requirements before being allowed to log a find of the challenge cache. Cliff had taken up geocaching after he retired from the FBI, largely to pass the time and motivate himself to get outdoors and exercise a bit. He enjoyed it and had many geocacher friends, but he was nowhere near as obsessed with it as Ellen. Now, with his law practice booming, he didn't have as much time for it, but it was quality time he shared with Ellen, so he made the time where he could.

This particular cache had an iconic fame, or perhaps infamy was the better word, among geocachers, and Ellen was determined to get it. They had planned this assault for months and it was dependent on tides, weather, and the ferry schedule. If they didn't get it today it would probably be months before they could try again. The heavy fog, winds, and strong tides on San Francisco Bay rarely presented the right conditions. It was October, the month with the best weather in the Bay Area – all along the California coast, in fact – and once the winter storm season started, they would have no chance until spring at the earliest.

As they glided under the dock, Cliff and Ellen both had to duck to avoid the beams. He could barely sit up straight between the beams; it was obvious they wouldn't have much time. Ellen had studied photos of the cache posted by previous finders, but it was dark and all the beams and pilings looked the same at first.

“This way,” she yelled over the noise of the waves and machinery humming above, motioning to the far side with her GPS unit. Cliff paddled up next to her and looked at the arrow on her unit. The cache was thirty-five feet away if the unit was to be believed, but he knew the readings were only approximate and probably not very accurate since the dock and building above them blocked the satellite signals.

They moved in that direction and the distance readings got smaller. They had to be close. Cliff craned his neck upward but saw nothing but shadows and wet, barnacle-encrusted lumber. There was very little light, and it was getting darker by the minute as the tide rose. Every time the wave crest hit, his head would bump the underside of the dock if he didn't duck. Hunting conditions were miserable.

“I see it!” Ellen suddenly called out. It was right where he had been looking, but he had missed it. His eyesight wasn't nearly as good as hers, either. She had wisely brought a penlight and caught a glimpse of reflected light.

As she floated, Cliff watched her try to unfasten the cache container, a metal rectangle he instantly recognized as a surplus army ammo box. It was bolted to a cross-member that connected two of the pilings, flush against the dock. The bobbing from the water made this difficult to say the least. Cliff paddled right next to her and placed his paddle across the tops of the two kayaks, then clutched the paddle against the cockpit coamings of both boats, providing a stable platform for Ellen.

“Try it now,” he urged. “Fast. We gotta get outta here.”

Ellen half-stood for a moment. The ammo can was mounted sideways, that is, the broad, flat side up against the dock, so that the top could be opened laterally. She wrenched open the latch and yanked out the baggie holding the log book. It was double bagged. Quickly she pulled open both bags. Fortunately, the cache owner – the person who hid the cache originally – had tied a pen to the log book's spiral binding so she didn't have to fish out one from her vest pocket.

“Do you want me to sign for you?” she asked.

“Yeow ...” Cliff yelled back, intending a “yes” but emitting a howl when his head hit the underside of the dock hard when the wave crested. He sat dazed for a moment, and his grip on the coamings loosened. Ellen's kayak started to slide sideways, and she grabbed the wooden cross-member for support. With one hand she managed to scribble “CliffNotes” after her own geocaching name, “Ellenwheels,” and reseal the bag. She tossed the baggie into the ammo box, slammed it shut, and clamped it.

“That looked like it hurt. Are you okay?” The concern in her voice was obvious.

“I’ll survive. But let’s get the hell out of here.”

Ellen said nothing in response. She didn’t like it when Cliff swore, since she was a devout Catholic and former nun, but she knew he had made this trip for her and was in obvious pain on her account.

“This way,” she said after a moment. “It’s too far to go back the way we came. The tide’s too high.”

With perfect timing she slipped her kayak under the outer beam just as the wave trough was at its lowest. She had to flatten herself against the deck of her kayak and still scraped her back on the beam as she squeezed through. She could see that just in the few minutes they had been under the dock, the wind had picked up and the bay was choppiest. That meant the wave action was stronger than it had been. She looked behind her and Cliff wasn’t there.

“Come on, get moving. It’s getting rough out here,” she called to him.

“I’m trying.”

She could see the nose of his kayak hit the beam as he tried to squeeze out as she had, but he wasn’t timing it right. He was just missing the lowest point in the wave trough. She turned back and settled right next to the dock.

“You’re not in sync with the wave. When I yell ‘Now!’, go forward.”

After a moment she yelled, and the nose of Cliff’s kayak peeked under the beam for an instant. She grabbed it and yanked it out from under the dock, but the wave action rose again and pinned it against the beam. Cliff had to be bent over double to keep his head from hitting the dock. It suddenly became clear to her that he wasn’t going to fit. She was a big woman, but he was four inches taller and at least fifty pounds heavier. His rented sea kayak also rode higher than her slimmer model. He was too big and the tide was too high.

“This isn’t going to work,” he called back, obviously realizing the same thing she did. The strain in his voice was evident.

“I’m sorry, Cliff. This is my fault. We should have called it off when we saw how high the tide was.”

“It’s not your fault. I wanted this cache, too. If I could paddle as fast as you, we would have timed it just right.”

“I can call 911. My cell phone’s in a waterproof bag just like you told me.”

“No, don’t. I’m coming out.”

With that he flipped his kayak over as the wave trough hit and slipped out into the water. He was unprepared for the instant chill that bit to the bone. One calf muscle cramped, but he lifted his head out of the water, gulped a big breath, and swam under the beam to freedom.

“Thank God,” Ellen cried as his head popped up. “I was so worried, I—”

“I said it’s not your fault. Just help me get the kayak out.”

Cliff’s kayak rode even higher now without his weight, but the biggest item on its top surface – Cliff’s body – was no longer there, and it was now upside down with the smoother underside against the beam. With Cliff in the water and Ellen pulling on her side, they were able to slip it out during a particularly low wave trough. That still left Cliff floating in the water of the bay with his kayak overturned.

Righting a kayak and getting back in is not an easy feat even in a lake or swimming pool, much less in a frigid environment with the chop they were now experiencing. They had both taken the same kayak safety course and now were about to take their *real* final exam – for the kind of credit that really mattered.

Flipping the kayak over wasn’t too hard with two people. It was soon right side up. Cliff’s equipment bag was still in the cockpit. He had put his phone, GPS receiver, and a few other items in a heavy-duty Ziploc bag with two blocks of Styrofoam to ensure it would float. Cliff spotted his paddle just on the other side of the dock beam. Waiting for the wave trough again, he reached under and pulled it through. All the equipment was present and accounted for. Now to get back in the kayak.

Ellen maneuvered her kayak next to his and used the same procedure he had under the dock. She placed her paddle athwart the two kayaks and clutched the two coamings and paddle together. She did the same with his paddle behind her back so that his kayak was now stabilized by two horizontal supports. On the count of three he heaved himself up over the edge of the kayak, but it broke free from Ellen’s grasp and almost overturned again. He fell back into the water. She didn’t have his hand strength. It took two more tries, but on the third, Ellen’s grip held and he managed to flop onto the top of his kayak. Ellen continued to hold the paddles in place until he slithered his way back into the cockpit, exhausted and shivering.

“All right! Four point five, five! We did it. Only four more Fizzy squares to go.”

Ellen’s remark referred to a challenge cache she was trying to get. In order to qualify to find that challenge cache, the geocacher must first find caches of every combination of difficulty and terrain. When a geocache is hidden, the owner rates it on a 1-to-5 scale for both difficulty and for terrain, with half-steps included. That means there are nine possible difficulty ratings and nine terrain ratings, making a total of eighty-one possible combinations. This cache was rated as a 4.5 difficulty and 5 terrain. Such caches are few and far between. The next closest cache with this rating and old enough to be a qualifier was over five hundred miles away. Finding this one meant she wouldn’t have to arrange a

distant expedition to qualify, at least not for this particular combo. The challenge is called a Fizzy Challenge because the owner named it in recognition of Fizzymagic, the geocacher who first made available to fellow geocachers a program that would read their downloaded record of finds and display a 9x9 difficulty/terrain grid showing each combination or “square” that had been filled. Hence the term “Fizzy square.” The first Fizzy Challenge appeared in the Bay Area, but other, similar challenges copied it and have appeared worldwide. For Ellen, it was special that she now lived in the area where she could eventually find the original version, once she qualified.

Her enthusiasm soon waned when she took a good look at Cliff. Blood dripped from his hair. He must have cut his scalp when his head hit the dock. Scalp wounds bleed a lot, she knew, and he had been in the water for several minutes. Putting blood in the water in San Francisco Bay was not recommended. Large sharks usually limited their feeding to outside the Golden Gate, where sea lions provided ample fodder, but sightings inside the bay were not uncommon, and blood could draw a shark – or many sharks.

“Cliff, you’re bleeding. We need to get back and get that taken care of.”

“We still have one more cache to get.” He lifted his hand to his head as he spoke. He hadn’t realized he’d been bleeding. He had assumed the wetness he felt was just seawater.

“Forget it. We can do it another day.”

After a pause Cliff replied with a simple “Okay.” He had been about to protest that he would be fine because he knew that Ellen wanted the next cache almost as badly as the one they had just found. When he saw how much blood was flowing, though, and heard the determination in Ellen’s voice, he knew she was right.

They turned and headed back north toward their launch point on the other side of San Quentin. He knew it would be three miles of hard paddling, some of it against the wind. The chop was still light for now, but it would take them over an hour. He was doing okay, but he just hoped he didn’t get lightheaded from the blood loss.

These thoughts had no sooner passed through his head when Ellen spotted the fin. The dark shape moving just under the surface could be only one thing – a shark, and a sizable one at that.

“Cliff, look!”

He saw it too.

“That’s too small to be a great white,” he called back.

“That’s not my idea of small. Maybe it’s a bull shark? They attack humans.”

“They don’t come this far north. It’s too cold.”

“Maybe this one lost his GPS unit. Or he believes in global warming.”

“Very funny.” Cliff didn’t laugh, but he smiled weakly at her attempt to keep up his spirits. “No, other than the great white, I don’t think there’s a shark in the bay we need to worry about, except maybe that one with all the gills.”

“So I’m supposed to count the gills before I’m allowed to be afraid?”

They kept paddling for half an hour, but the shark fin stayed nearby. The trickle of blood from Cliff’s wound slowed but didn’t stop completely. Ellen looked back and saw that Cliff was falling farther behind. The cross-section of his kayak was higher than hers, and the wind was pushing him farther out into the bay. He had to paddle at more of an angle into the wind than she did, and he was getting tired, she could tell.

“Hold on. Let me see that cut again.” She stopped paddling and waited for him to catch up. “It’s still bleeding, Cliff.” A note of worry crept into her voice.

“And we’ve got another visitor.” Cliff gestured with his paddle eastward. A second shark fin could be seen circling thirty yards away.

“Are you sure they’re not dangerous?”

“Sevengills. That’s the name. This windsurfer I know told me about them once. He said they hunt in packs. Sometimes they kill marine mammals, if I remember right.”

“I’m no marine, but the last time I looked, I was a mammal,” Ellen quipped.

This remark caused Cliff to cast an involuntary glance at her sports bra. Not all that involuntary, actually, but reflexive, at least. When he saw the corner of her mouth rise into the smallest of smiles, he realized that had been her intent.

“Look,” she continued, “we can’t keep going like this. We’re going to land right here. You need to get that looked at now.”

“We can’t beach the kayaks here. That’s San Quentin. We’ll be arrested.”

San Quentin State Prison is the oldest prison in California, and the only place where condemned prisoners are housed. It’s situated on the northern edge of San Francisco Bay and, of course, is a very high-security facility. Many of the most hard-core, violent, repeat offenders are there.

“Perfect. They’ll have a medic there.” She turned her kayak and headed straight for the shoreline a hundred yards away where she saw a row of parked cars.

“Jes— ... Geez Louise, this is going to get hairy,” he replied, but he knew from the tone of her voice that she would brook no argument. Reluctantly, he followed her in.

By the time they reached the shoreline, two guards were already there. One held an assault rifle and the other was armed with a semi-automatic pistol. He was holding a bullhorn.

“Go back. You cannot land here. Repeat. Go back. This is a state prison. You will be arrested if you land.” The bullhorn was old and had poor audio quality, but it was loud enough and the meaning was clear.

“FBI. This is a medical emergency,” Ellen yelled back, but it was unclear whether the guards could hear her.

“I repeat. Go back. You cannot land here.”

Ellen continued to paddle to shore. As she coasted in, she pulled out the plastic baggie with her cell phone and other essentials. “I’m an FBI agent. My ID is in the bag. My boyfriend is cut badly and sharks are circling our kayaks. We ...”

“Hands in the air! Put the bag down,” the bullhorn guard barked.

For a moment Ellen didn’t know what to do since the two commands were contradictory, but she tossed the bag onto the rocky shore and then raised her hands as she clambered onto land.

Cliff coasted up several seconds behind her and ten yards to the left. The other guard moved his rifle threateningly toward Cliff and told him to raise his hands. Cliff was still sitting in his kayak and needed his hands to get out of his kayak. He placed the paddle across his front and raised his hands, still sitting. The kayak began to drift back into the water.

“I need to get out of the kayak,” he called to the guard. “I’m not armed. I’m injured.” He nodded his head, and a trickle of blood obligingly flowed down his forehead.

The second guard looked uncertainly at the bullhorn guard, who was preoccupied trying to examine the baggie without getting too close, and while keeping an eye on Ellen.

“Okay, get out the kayak, but keep your hands where I can see ’em.”

Cliff paddled back onto the shore and pushed himself up out of the cockpit of the kayak, making sure the guard could see his hands at all times. He lifted his hands in the air. He could tell from the signs and rows of cars that they were very near an employee parking area.

Ellen kept yelling at the first guard, even though she was close enough that a normal voice was plenty loud enough. “I’m an FBI agent, I just told you!

My ID is in the bag. I'm not armed, okay? Let me just show you. My boyfriend's hurt. We had to land."

The first guard finally took a good look at Cliff and saw the line of blood across his face, now drying in the hot sun. The wet glistening at the hairline showed that the wound was still oozing.

"Okay, pick up the bag slowly and pull out your ID," he said, finally somewhat assured that there was no weapon – at least no gun or knife – in the bag. He stepped back and held his pistol pointed at Ellen's feet.

She opened the baggie and carefully pulled out one sheet of paper, an ordinary sheet of printer paper from the looks of it, folded in quarters. She unfolded it and handed it toward the guard. He refused to take it, only glancing at it for a moment.

"That's no FBI ID."

"I don't carry my credentials or badge out kayaking. I could lose them in the water. I just made a photocopy of my driver's license and medical card for emergencies. My creds are in my car. But that's got my name and DOB. You can call the FBI office to verify ..."

"It's not even an original license."

The other guard and Cliff stood silent as the little drama played out between Ellen and the bullhorn man.

"My cell phone's in there. Just let me call the FBI switchboard and they can verify who I am. Or you can call them." She started to reach for the bag again.

"Don't touch that!"

Bullhorn man pulled a radio from his belt and spoke into it. "We have two intruders on shore, arriving by kayak, at approximately perimeter station Foxtrot. One adult white male and one adult white female. She claims to be an FBI agent, but has only a printout of a copy of a California Driver's License. No federal government ID. The man's bleeding from the head and they said it's a medical emergency."

"What's the agent's name?" the radio squawked back.

"Ellen Kennedy," she shouted, since she knew the guard hadn't yet asked her. He repeated the name into the radio.

"Hold on. I'll call the Bureau."

A minute passed, and Cliff's arms ached from holding them up. He started to lower them, but the second guard motioned with the barrel of his rifle to get them back up.

After what seemed like an eternity, the radio came alive again. "Does she have her phone with her?"

“Yes.”

“The FBI is going to call it. Tell me if it rings.”

A few seconds later Ellen’s phone rang. The guard looked at Ellen.

“Okay, you can answer it. Put it on speaker.”

Ellen did. “Hello, this is Ellen Kennedy.”

“What’s your credential number?” the female voice asked over the phone.

Ellen responded with a five-digit number, then blurted out, “I’m in the Palo Alto Resident Agency. I don’t work in San Francisco.”

“I don’t recognize your voice. Why don’t you have your creds with you?” Ellen had been in the division only two years and all of that time was assigned to Palo Alto. She didn’t know the switchboard and radio personnel in San Francisco, the headquarters city for the division.

“They’re in the car. I was kayaking. I’m with Cliff Knowles. You probably know him. He ...”

“Cliff’s there? Put him on.”

Ellen handed the phone to Cliff.

“Hi, Angie,” Cliff began. He had recognized her voice from the moment she had spoken. Angie was the weekend communications clerk in San Francisco. He’d been assigned there for several years, both as a young agent and later as a supervisor, although most of his career had been in the San Jose office. Angie was an old-timer, and Cliff had only been retired for four years. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

“I heard you were dating again,” Angie replied. The guard scowled at the casual conversation. “Good for you. So is that Ellen?”

“It is. Hey, I’d love to chat but we’re being held at gunpoint, so let’s wrap this up.”

Angie laughed. “Okay. I’ve got a good story to tell anyway. I’m hanging up now. Don’t be a stranger.” The call ended abruptly.

Within another thirty seconds the guard’s radio squawked, “The FBI has verified that’s a current agent, and the man is a retired agent. How bad is the man injured?”

“Not too bad, but the scalp wound is bleeding a little.”

“Administer first aid. Get their full names and particulars and escort them off the grounds. You’ll need to write this up as a security incident when you get back.”

“Yessir.”

With that the second guard lowered his rifle and walked back to an SUV parked on the side of the perimeter road as Cliff and Ellen finally were able to

lower their hands. He pulled out a first aid kit from the car and returned. He then pulled out a swab and a small bottle of some sort of antiseptic and began to clean Cliff's head wound.

It took another twenty minutes to complete the process, but once the guards warmed up to them, first aid was fully administered and personal information supplied for the guards' report. The four of them figured out how to get the kayaks into the back of the SUV, and one of the guards even drove them to their car. What would have been an hour's paddling around Point San Quentin through the chop and wind was only a ten-minute drive from the east gate of the prison complex. They shook hands with the guard and left.

Chapter 2

Seven months later

Ellen was up first as she always was. She had to be in the office by 7:30. Cliff worked long hours, usually getting home later than she did, but he had the luxury of sleeping in. That was one advantage of being the boss. She had finished her morning run, showered, and it was barely light out. She planned to grab a bite and get into work early.

The TV news droned on from the other room as Ellen poured milk over her cereal. She half-listened as her mind went over what she had to do that day. The weatherman was saying something about the record high temperatures for May, and the associated high-pressure system stalled over the Bay Area. She finished the cereal and was just finishing her coffee when she detected a change in tone from the newscaster. She heard the phrase “breaking news” and walked quickly into the living room to hear better.

“... on the scene. I’ve just spoken to the representative for the warden, who tells us that there are fatalities, but she does not know how many. The casualties are believed to be both guards and inmates. More ambulances are still arriving, Chip, so this has to be huge. I’ve counted over a dozen just since I’ve been here. One witness who wants to remain anonymous says it was the wing where death row is located. That witness thought it was carbon monoxide, but the fire department says they have not detected elevated levels of carbon monoxide anywhere near the scene. However, they have not been allowed into the affected areas, they said. The witness said the FBI was on the scene with biohazard suits. The security situation must be complicating the rescue efforts. There’s going to be a press conference in about an hour ...”

Ellen rushed into the bedroom to wake Cliff, but he was already up and in the closet getting his robe.

“Cliff, there’s some big news story on TV. A mass poisoning or something up at San Quentin overnight. Maybe carbon monoxide. It’s on death row, they say.”

“That would be ironic,” Cliff scoffed, “if PG&E could finally accomplish overnight what our entire justice system hasn’t been able to do in thirty years. Did any of the condemned inmates bite the bullet, so to speak?” Pacific Gas & Electric was the utility serving northern California.

“Don’t joke. Some guards were killed, they said.”

“Geez ...” He’d finally gotten used to not saying “Jesus” around Ellen. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. That’s terrible. I hope it’s not those two guys who helped us last fall when we were kayaking. They seemed like nice enough guys when they weren’t pointing guns at us. It’s not going to affect you, though, is it?”

“I don’t think so. It’s probably an industrial accident of some kind. If it’s a criminal matter at all it’ll be handled by the San Rafael R.A. or maybe the terrorist squad. Still, it’ll be all over the division today. Nobody’s going to get any regular work done.”

“Okay, well, I hope you don’t get drawn into it. Let me know if you’re going to be late. It’s my night to cook.”

She was in the bedroom but her back was to him so she could face the living room and hear the TV better. He walked over to her and placed his arms around her waist. She leaned back gently and pressed his arms against her body. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his fuzzy cheek. Like many tall women, she liked the feeling of being embraced by someone who made her feel feminine and small, someone who didn’t make her feel like the overgrown wallflower she was in high school. She felt so safe in his arms.

“Did you hear that? I think he just said something about hundreds of casualties.” She crossed herself.

“Christ ... uh, sorry. Hundreds? Does that mean hundreds dead or just injured or sick? This is going to be all over the news for weeks.” After a long minute of silence, “You’d better get into work.”

He pulled his arms from hers and gave her a playful slap on the rear. She ignored the slap but immediately began to collect her keys and jacket. Fortunately, she was already most of the way dressed – gray polyester slacks and a man’s Oxford dress shirt – since women’s shirts wouldn’t fit her. She wasn’t built to be a fashion plate, even though her sister was a model. He watched as she strapped on her gun. She grabbed her purse and fished out the keys to her FBI car, leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek, and then slapped him hard on his rear.

“See ya.” And she was out the door.

Cliff turned off the TV as he prepared his breakfast, which consisted of a doughnut and juice. He didn’t want to get wrapped up in the news story. He had a client meeting at 8:30. The news cycle was now twenty-four hours a day, and he knew he could find out the status any time, especially for a story this big.

After breakfast he showered and dressed. He no longer appeared in court and rarely wore a suit. Today it was Dockers and a polo. When he arrived at his office, Maeva had the coffee going. He grabbed a quick cup, checked his email

and phone messages, and by the time he was done, his client, a venture capital researcher, had arrived. Her firm was located in Menlo Park, but she lived in Sunnyvale and it was easier for both of them to meet in Cliff's Los Altos office.

"Coffee?" Cliff offered.

"Yes, please. I live on the stuff. If I could inject it into my veins, I would. Black."

Maeva brought the coffee. She had dropped out of Stanford Law School when she realized she wasn't cut out to be a lawyer, and had taken a job as Cliff's secretary. He had promoted her to Investigator with a bump in pay after she passed the state private investigator's licensing exam, but she still did all the secretarial work and anything else Cliff needed. He had talked about hiring a full-time secretary, making her a full-time investigator and giving her a separate desk, but the place wasn't large enough for another person, and Cliff did most of the investigation himself, anyway. Ninety percent of their work was corporate due diligence investigations.

"So I've done a written report," Cliff began, plopping a thick binder in front of the client, a painfully thin Eurasian woman with scarlet fingernails long enough to make Cliff wonder how she typed her emails. The cover simply read "Ripe Tomato," the code name the VC firm had given the company it was considering investing in, a biotech startup specializing in genetically modified vegetables and field crops. "Do you want the executive summary?" He made air quotes around the term "executive summary." He didn't have such a section in the written report since he thought it tended to diminish the seriousness and gravity of the contents. Venture capitalists were detail people, too, and would read every word. It was the corporate types, CEOs with big egos, who didn't care about the findings. They tended to buy smaller companies just because they could, because they wanted to, and their cash was burning a hole in their corporate pockets.

"Shoot."

"For starters, you have issues with some of the key personnel. Attila and Derek, the founders, are both gay – and into the rough stuff. SOMA bars, B&D, that kind of thing."

"I don't care about their sex life," the woman replied casually.

"Nor do I. But it could be an issue if you plan get them acquired eventually. Their logical buyers would be in places that are less, uh, tolerant, shall we say – Monsanto, DuPont, Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan. These two are the brains of the outfit. It has essentially no value without them. I don't think either of them would be willing to move to Decatur or Saskatoon, tolerant or not. The LGBT scene just isn't there. If the potential buyers want to keep a

research arm out here, no problem, or just want to buy whatever patents they develop and dump the talent, that would work, but if they're expected to relocate, big problem. And I don't think you expect them to go head-to-head with those giants. It's also a problem if they break up. They've been seen hooking up with others, so maybe that's not a problem if it's an open relationship, but they're supposedly a couple and if things go badly between them, like Steve and Woz, or the Beatles, there's no guarantee one of them will be a Jobs-like leader and keep it alive."

"Okay, point taken. What else?"

"Their facilities are not as large as they represent to you. I went over to Half Moon Bay and inspected it. Their request for funding says they have a 10,000 square foot lab. The plans on file with the county say it's 8,780 square feet, and it's obvious they aren't using all of it. They're actually renting out part of it to a company running a day care/kiddie gym. I'll bet they don't have more than 5,000 square feet of actual working lab."

"That's a good catch. They did tell me orally that the 10,000 included space they're renting out, but I didn't know the lab was that small. That may not be a bad thing, though. We don't want them overextended on real estate at first."

The conversation continued in this vein for another hour as Cliff explained the details of his investigation. Maeva handled the phone calls and made a second pot of coffee, as the VC woman was true to her word as a self-caffeinator. After she left, Cliff returned some phone calls and checked his email again. By the time he finished the usual press of business it was almost 11:00, the usual time he went to the gym. Then he saw through the window separating his office from her area that Maeva had her computer on the website of one of the local TV stations. He could tell from there that the photo on the screen was a helicopter shot of San Quentin. He walked out to talk to her.

"What's the latest on that thing in San Quentin?"

"Over eight hundred dead, including two guards. There's speculation it was an intentional poisoning. Inmates have been released from cells in the affected area, and there's been rioting and fighting in the yard. Dozens in critical condition. It's awful." Maeva's voice cracked as she described it.

Cliff closed his eyes a moment to absorb the news. "Worse than awful, I'd say." He stood staring at the screen for a minute, transfixed. When he couldn't think of anything more profound or useful to say, he told Maeva he was going to the gym and left.

Chapter 3

Special Agent Dan Porter sat stiffly in the office of the Special Agent in Charge of San Francisco Division watching SAC Fitzhugh talk on the phone and take notes. Actually, it appeared the talking was all one-sided, since Fitzhugh just kept grunting “Mm-hmm” and writing.

“Yes, sir, I will,” Fitzhugh said, and hung up. He jotted one more item and then looked up at Porter. “Sorry, Dan. That was the director. He just got off the phone with the attorney general. And the AG just got off the phone with the president, who got off the phone with the governor, who has been in contact with the prison officials at San Quentin.”

“Six degrees of separation ...” Porter replied.

“Whazzat?” Fitzhugh missed the cultural reference.

“Never mind. Sorry to interrupt.” Porter anticipated what was coming next and he wanted to get to it.

“The governor wants the FBI to take over, and the director was planning to anyway. They seem sure it’s a case of domestic terrorism. The director says he’ll give me a temporary squad. I’m putting you in charge of it.”

This was Porter’s chance. He was an eighteen-year veteran and currently serving as the Acting Senior Supervisory Special Agent (SSRA) of the San Rafael Resident Agency. He had applied to be the permanent SSRA, but the slot had been given to a man from FBI headquarters. That man was expected to arrive any day. Porter had thought that was probably his last chance at a supervisory slot – and a supervisor’s pay. But now they were creating a squad just to handle this one case, and he was going to run it.

“That’s great, Trey. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” He wondered whether to ask about the pay, but while he was hesitating, the SAC answered the unspoken question.

“You’ll get a fourteen of course.” FBI Supervisors were GS-14s. Senior brick agents like Porter were GS-13s. “That’ll bump your pension, too.”

“Super. Thanks, boss. So what are my marching orders on this? Did the director say anything about suspects or how it was done?”

“Your orders are to solve it and don’t screw up. You’re not KMA yet.”

KMA. Kiss My Ass. The Bureau’s term for someone who’s reached vested pension age, someone immune from discipline or transfer. The implied threat was obvious. Only Fitzhugh would be tacky enough to say something like that as a motivator, but Porter wasn’t concerned. Fitzhugh had been around the Division five years now, which is about as long as an SAC usually lasted. Fitzhugh *was* KMA and would probably be gone in a year. The case would

probably last for at least three years, even if they arrested a suspect right away. Whole platoons of Supervisors made their careers on the Unabomber case for eighteen years, and he'd killed only three people.

"Sure. So who's going to be on the squad? Do I get to pick?"

"You're the top investigator we have on domestic terrorism and a trained bomb tech. I want you hands on, not the usual paper-pushing supervisor. You'll get some new agents right from Quantico or second office transferred in, but if you have any key personnel you need, make a list and let me know. Keep it small for now. Probably only four or five agents, but we can give you an analyst and a clerk. We can ask for more later if you need it."

"Did the director say anything about suspects? I heard they think it's an inside job."

"No, nothing. Where'd you hear that?"

"One of the agents in the RA said he heard one of the guards say it. I don't know where that's coming from, though."

"Well, go on back and find out what's what. The next twenty-four hours will be critical. This could turn out to be quick like the Boston Marathon thing. Use the social mediums. Get a Facebook and Twitter account and tweet about it like they did there if you need to."

"Tweet."

"Right. Tweet. And you report directly to me. Not to the SSRA, not to the ASAC. The Bureau has already announced a million dollar reward for the capture, dead or alive, of whoever did this, and the public is adding to that daily. The director will be calling me personally on a daily basis for a briefing. Now go."

"Right. I'm on it. I'll call you by the end of the day with whatever we have."

Porter hurried from the office, giving a subtle fist pump as he left, a big grin on his face. He drove directly to San Quentin. The prison officials were already clued in that the governor had requested the FBI to take over the case, so there was no jurisdictional haggling. The warden, Paul Soto, was more than happy to put the responsibility onto the feds. Of course, no matter how it came out in the end, he knew it had happened on his watch and his career was over. Soto was a conscientious man, however, and sincerely wanted to help however he could. When Porter arrived, there was already an agent from the RA in the warden's office, a tough-as-nails black woman named Jo-Lene Holford. Her family and childhood friends all called her by her middle name, Renee, but like many agents, her credentials had been printed up by the FBI printing office using

the official first name and last name, and she was forever branded Jo-Lene or “Jo” to her peers. She didn’t mind. It was handy to have a separate work identity.

Introductions were not necessary since Porter and Soto had known each other for years. Soto always thought Porter was a bit too Hollywood for his taste – tall and classically handsome, and more than a little egotistical – but he knew him to be a competent, hard-charging agent. Soto himself was squat, dark, slow-talking, and introspective enough to wonder whether his distaste for Porter was deserved or due to envy, like the average kid in high school who resents the star quarterback.

“Jo, I just came from the SAC’s office. He’s forming a squad and I’m it, I guess, for now. Tell me what you’ve found.” Porter nodded and smiled at Soto without saying a word to him.

“Eight hundred seven confirmed dead so far. Most of those from poisoning, we think. Many had pink and green spots on their skin and foaming at the mouth. Those were at the north end of cellblock K. That’s where death row is. The building was evacuated at 4:48 AM when the staff realized what was happening, but that meant just opening the cells and letting the prisoners out the emergency exits into the yard. There was panic as they tried to leave, and fights broke out. The fighting continued in the yard. Several inmates died in the hallways near the exit doors. We don’t know if the poison overcame them, if they were stomped or crushed in the panic, or if someone shanked them. Even the deaths in the yard could be from delayed effects of poisoning.”

“What’s the status of the building? Is it safe to do a crime scene?”

“Our people are doing it now in biohazard suits, but they think it’s safe now.”

Soto chimed in. “They found insects lying dead all over when they entered, even a rat, but they’re telling us that flies are all over the bodies now and don’t seem to be having any trouble. The poison had to be a gas to be that fast acting, and the building has been vented now for hours. We think the air is safe to breathe, but there could be residue or something, so we can’t say it’s safe yet. There’ll have to be testing after the crime scene investigation is done before we’ll let anyone back in. If we ever do.”

“What about other casualties? Guards? Inmates at hospitals, anyone?”

Again, it was Soto who answered. “Two guards dead, two in the hospital. They’re expected to recover. The fatalities were guards who rushed in to help the inmates evacuate. They probably saved dozens of lives and lost their own in the process. We have inmates in the prison infirmary, and many still out in the yard. We’ve called in buses to transport the worst ones – healthy but most hardened

and violent, I mean – to Pelican Bay or other prisons. We don't have room to house them all here without that cellblock.”

“Foaming at the mouth and green spots doesn't sound like carbon monoxide. Does anyone know what it is?”

Holford replied, “The EMTs were mumbling about cyanide, but I wouldn't put anything out about that until it's been confirmed.”

“Suspects?”

“No one by name. Must be an inside job. The poison had to be in the air conditioning system, which was going full blast with this heat wave. There was a hundred percent death rate on that end where the HVAC output was the strongest. Farther down, the survival rate was higher.”

“Is there a public safety angle to be worried about here?”

“From the poison, no,” she continued, “but there's a boatload of bad guys carted to hospitals or other, lower-security prisons. I would expect some of them to try to escape or attack other inmates. The guards can't even handle what they have here, so local police and U.S. Marshals have been pitching in with security duty for the hospitals and other locations, but something's got to be done about them.”

“What about the death row inmates? You said they were on that end.”

Holford cast a significant look at Soto before replying. “All dead. Every last one of them. Most of them in agony from the looks of the remains.”

Porter heaved a big sigh. “Okay, I have to check in with the evidence team and get anything else they have, then write up something for the SAC and the Bureau. Keep me informed.”

Soto piped up. “I'll have a guard take you to the building. They won't let you in without a bio-suit, but you can get one of your guys to come out and talk to you.” He pushed a button on his intercom and spoke a command into it.

“Uh, Dan, am I going to be on this new squad?”

“I dunno, Jo-Lene. The SAC will probably pick, but I may have some choice. He said there would be some new agents or new transferees. You'd be high on my list. Is there a problem?”

“No. I just wondered. It would be a big change.” She had been working healthcare fraud for the last five years and would love a shot at something juicier.

The escort guard entered and Porter rose to leave. As he got to the door, he turned to Holford. “Jo, stay here until five at the latest – earlier if the crime scene team knocks off earlier – and do your 302 with everything you've told me. I'll tell the others to do the same. Make sure it gets filed tonight. Take whatever you have to the city and have the night clerk do it if necessary.”

“Sure.” She knew it would take hours to write up, which meant staying late – maybe past midnight. She was both thrilled to be part of the excitement and worried about what it would do to her personal life. “No problem.”

Chapter 4

The 5:00 news was on the TV and Cliff was crying. Tears streamed down his cheeks in torrents as he chopped the yellow onion. It got him every time. Whenever he made stroganoff or spaghetti he went through this; he just had to get one of those levered dicers that forced the onion through the grid of blades. They were a pain to clean, but so much quicker and easier to use than chopping with a knife – and, best of all, freed him from the ocular waterfall. One of these days he'd remember to buy one when he was at the store.

The newscaster was droning on about violence in the Middle East when the phone rang. Cliff's hands smelled of onion, and he considered not answering, but he thought it might be Ellen so he quickly ran his hands under the tap and grabbed the receiver just before the answering machine picked up. It was Ellen. He picked up the remote and hit pause so he could hear her.

"Hello."

"Cliff, something came up. I'm going to be late."

"I'm making stroganoff. I've already got the beef simmering."

"I know. I was looking forward to it. Go ahead and eat without me. It looks like I'll be here at least a couple of hours."

"What's going on?"

"I don't have time to talk about it. Just turn on the news."

Cliff turned and looked at the TV, still paused. The anchor's face was frozen in a humorous expression with open mouth and half-closed eyes. The window over his shoulder showed a map of the Middle East, but that map had been on the screen for several minutes without any mention of a terrorist incident or anything that should affect Ellen.

"Okay, I'll see you when you get home."

"Bye." She hung up.

Cliff hit the pause button again, and the news resumed playing. Within a minute a "Breaking News" graphic appeared on the screen. The camera cut to a reporter in the newsroom. At the bottom of the screen a crawler appeared with the words "WikiLeaks says group takes credit for San Quentin massacre."

The reporter read from a printout in her hand.

We have just received word that WikiLeaks claims to have received a message from someone identifying themselves as Vengeance Is Ours, or VIO. VIO has claimed responsibility for the massacre at San Quentin Prison. A spokesman for WikiLeaks disclaims any involvement in that

massacre and insists that it is a totally nonviolent organization. They claim to have no knowledge of VIO or why they were chosen to receive the message. They say they received a manifesto from VIO in its anonymous dropbox and will post it on their website shortly. The manifesto reportedly says the poisoning of the death row inmates was merely the people of California carrying out the death penalties of the convicts who were lawfully sentenced to death. The executions were in accordance with the sentences handed down by juries and judges and which were thwarted by a single federal judge. It says when a single judge puts herself above the law, the people must take matters into their own hands. The people are entitled to due process, too, it says. The deaths of the other inmates and the guards were regrettable collateral damage and were the direct result of the unlawful acts of the federal judge who stopped the sentences from being carried out safely, the manifesto claims. VIO said the judge is a murderer for causing this necessary result. Murderers deserve a death sentence; it's time the judge understood that, VIO claims. That's all I have for now. We will bring you more as soon as we get it. Back to you.

Cliff's shoulders fell. This wasn't good news. He didn't see how it involved Ellen yet, but he guessed it had to do with the implied threat to the judge. He knew that executions in California were currently in abeyance because of an order from U.S. District Court Judge Mildred Fassbinder, who found that the lethal injection method being used was cruel and unusual punishment, and thus unconstitutional. Fassbinder was local, sitting in the San Jose Federal Courthouse. She had been not-so-affectionately called The Fugitive Maker by the FBI agents he used to work with because of her tendency to grant low bail, or own recognizance, to every defendant, no matter how high the flight risk. That was when she was a U.S. Magistrate; now she was a District Court Judge, with lifetime tenure and much greater authority. She was a former defense attorney and a flaming liberal by any measure.

If VIO says she's a murderer and murderers deserve to die, that's considered a direct threat, and a federal violation in the FBI's jurisdiction. But Ellen worked white-collar crime, mostly intellectual property crimes like copyright violations and trade secret theft, not violent crimes like a threat to a judge, and not terrorism, either. All he could do was wait for Ellen to come home and fill him in. He finished cooking, ate his meal, and sat down to read a good mystery.

-o0o-

Ellen sat in her Bureau car in front of the Palo Alto home of Judge Fassbinder. She'd been able to get there much quicker than Woody Braswell, the San Jose agent assigned to investigate the threat. She'd been ordered to meet him there but didn't know why.

Braswell was big, black, and intimidating in appearance. He'd been on a SWAT team earlier in his career, and he'd been chosen largely to set the mind of the judge at ease. The judge had made clear that she expected round-the-clock protection. That was the primary responsibility of the U.S. Marshal's Office, but the investigation of the threat fell in the FBI's jurisdiction, and Braswell knew he would be spending plenty of time with the judge. The Marshal's Office had asked for help from the FBI until it could get more deputies assigned. The real investigation would mostly be done by the new squad investigating the San Quentin Massacre case, now code-named QuenMass.

He pulled up behind Ellen and motioned for her to join him in his car. She left her car and came over to him, opting to stand at the driver's side window rather than get in the car.

"What's going on, Woody?" she grumbled. "I don't work reactive, you know that." Reactive was an old term for bank robberies, kidnappings, and other violent crimes requiring immediate response.

"Get in. I'll explain."

"Look, I'm scheduled to testify before the grand jury on Tuesday. I have four boxes of documents I still have to review before then. I've been working on it over a year."

"Ellen, this is coming from the SAC, and he probably got it from the director. Get in."

With a resigned sigh she moved around the car and got into the front passenger seat.

"Okay, here's the deal. You heard the news report about the VIO manifesto. The judge needs twenty-four seven protection, at least for now. The Marshals don't have the manpower. I'm the case agent on the threat, at least until they can confirm this VIO really is behind QuenMass."

"But why me?" A tinge of whininess crept into her tone, and she regretted it immediately.

"The Marshals are short-handed on female deputies. They're bringing some in on temporary duty, but until that happens, we've promised some help. The Marshals can handle courthouse security, but during off hours the judge will

be out shopping, socializing, and all that. She's made clear she needs a female with her when she goes to the gym, the spa, shops for clothes."

"You've got two on your squad. You should –"

"One's out on maternity leave, and the other's under transfer. She'll be gone in two weeks. You're the only female in the Palo Alto office. You live close; you're fit and a good shot, too. Just what the doctor ordered for protective duty. Look, I'm just the messenger. We're wasting time. Let's go in. They're expecting us."

Ellen knew Woody was right. She had no recourse and decided it was time to shut up and obey orders. She nodded and climbed out. The house was of a hyper-modern style, all glass and concrete, with a steeply sloped roof that was high on one side and low on the other, giving the house a wedge-like shape. Together they walked toward the front door, passing through a substantial sculpture garden. The works were unidentifiable monstrosities in Ellen's opinion, abstract, but not too abstract to evince an obvious phallic symbolism.

They walked up to the front door and rang the bell. When there was no immediate answer, Woody looked up and saw the security camera in the eaves. He pulled out his FBI credentials and held them toward the camera. There was a rustle behind the door, and it opened a crack and a man's eye peeked through the opening. The deputy marshal let them in.

-o0o-

When Ellen got home, she explained it all to Cliff.

"She treated us like her servants," she fumed. "She called me Ellen, but when I used her first name, she corrected me and insisted I call her Judge."

Cliff wasn't surprised. Humility wasn't Millie's strong point. "At least you didn't have to stay overnight," he offered. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"Tea and cookies. She made us wait for her to finish eating dinner before we could interview her. The four of us – two deputies and Braswell and me – sitting in her living room with stomachs growling while she eats some poached fish or something in the dining room for twenty minutes. Won't even let us ask questions while she eats. Then all we get is tea and cookies. And I'll have to stay the next time. The marshals are drawing up a schedule and I'll be rotated in. Since it'll be off hours, I'll probably still be expected to show up in the office during regular hours."

"Just think of all the OT you'll be getting."

This was a joke. FBI agents were paid overtime, but it was capped at 25 percent over base pay, and since they routinely put in more than that just carrying

their normal caseload, extra duties like this were in effect unpaid. Ellen cocked one eyebrow rather fiercely at Cliff and harrumphed, but she let him give her a hug. It felt good.

“So tell me about your day,” she finally said as she took off her holster and gun, laying them on the dresser. She continued to change out of her work clothes as Cliff followed her into the bedroom.

“I had a productive meeting in the morning, but once word of the massacre got around, that was all anyone could talk about. What about that manifesto? Has it been released yet? The last I looked, the WikiLeaks site didn’t have it up. Just a summary, not the whole thing.”

“I don’t know. I hear that the WikiLeaks people are being coy about it. I think they’re afraid that if they give VIO a platform, they’ll encourage more killing. They may be redacting the document before releasing it.”

“That would be ironic. WikiLeaks withholding information from the public about alleged government misconduct.”

“Misconduct?”

“Well, VIO thinks it’s misconduct – stopping the executions. I mean, if it was the other way around ... if WikiLeaks got their hands on something that revealed misconduct in conducting executions, you can be sure they’d release it. They’ve got a political agenda they don’t admit.”

“That’s hardly news.”

“Come on. You must be starved. I saved you some stroganoff. You can reheat it.”

“Pour me some wine and I’ll be right there.”

Chapter 5

Dan Porter stood in the front of the assembled employees. Six fresh faces, all excited to be working on the biggest case in the FBI. He considered himself lucky to get his two first-round picks, Jo-Lene and a senior agent named Buck Daley, a veteran of the Unabomber investigation. The others were new transfers. One was a recent transfer in from Omaha, and the other two were right out of new agent training in Quantico. The sixth employee was an Analyst, a title the FBI gave some senior clerical and support personnel with college degrees. They were usually among the cream of the crop as far as support employees went, but their duties tended to include more clerical work – like records checks and data entry – than analysis.

Porter was skeptical of the transferee, Oliver Gulick, and had fought that assignment. Gulick was forty-nine and had come to San Francisco on an Office of Preference, or OP, transfer. Porter knew that most agents who transferred in at that age were doing so primarily to pad their retirement. San Francisco Division had the highest locality pay of any of the field divisions, more than 35 percent over what an agent in Omaha makes. Most agents in the San Francisco Division OP to low cost-of-living areas so that they can sell their dumpy three-bedroom one-bath tract homes for \$800,000 or so and buy a mansion in Tennessee or wherever, with the government picking up the tab for the move and real estate costs, then retire comfortably on the FBI pension after a few years. But some transfer in to get the higher salary for five years since the locality pay is included in computing the pension. If an agent and his family can gut out the high cost of living for a few years, he can get a 35 percent higher pension for life. Porter assumed that was the case with Gulick, who would likely coast to retirement. Gulick would be fifty and KMA in less than a year. Besides that, Gulick was older than he was and carried an air of authority. Porter didn't want competition any more than he wanted a slacker; he wanted obedience, hard work, and enthusiasm. But the SAC had assured him Gulick had a good reputation, and the Bureau had wanted more experience on the squad.

Well, it was what it was, he thought to himself. It was a small squad, but he knew he could call on whatever resources he wanted anywhere in the FBI for this case. It was time to set the course for the squad, to lay out the strategy. He cleared his throat and began.

“Everyone. You are about to experience what will almost certainly be the highlight of your career. You have all been entrusted with the responsibility of helping to solve the biggest case since 9/11. Mass murder on an almost unprecedented scale. You new agents” – and here he nodded to the young man

and woman who had just arrived from New Agent training – “are especially fortunate but also very unfortunate. None of your classmates will likely ever work on such an important case. On the other hand, when this is over – and I assure you, we will solve this – the rest of your career will be anti-climactic. I expect all of you to work on this case harder than on anything else you’ve ever done. Be prepared for long days and plenty of missed holidays and weekends. You will probably be yelled at and second-guessed time and again, sometimes by me, but more often by the Bureau, the press, other agencies, pundits, and maybe even your own families. It goes with the territory. Deal with it. If you can’t, then ask for a transfer now.”

He looked around as though he expected someone to ask to get off the squad, but, as he knew they would, they all nodded and murmured approval. Every face seemed to show a little more determination, a firmer jaw, a steelier eye.

“So let’s get started. Here’s what we have. VIO has claimed responsibility for the killing. The manifesto has still not been published on the WikiLeaks website, but we have obtained a copy of it. You can thank the NSA for that, and while you’re at it, tell all those so-called civil libertarians you know who want to shut down our anti-terrorist efforts to go screw themselves. Tea Party, ACLU, it doesn’t matter. I ...” Here he paused, realizing he had gotten off track. He dropped the sarcastic tone that had crept in and resumed his “professional” voice.

“We think WikiLeaks is withholding it because it is very specific about the poison used for the attack, apparently intended to prove its authenticity. Even they have some sense of responsibility, probably fearful that someone will use it as a recipe for a copycat. The poison was cyanide. The manifesto appears to describe it accurately, although we’re waiting for a detailed chemical analysis to confirm the details. There was enough in the early press reports that anyone could have guessed that much. VIO also says the poison was administered through the HVAC – the air conditioning – system. That much we knew, too. The manifesto does not say how it was inserted into that system, but we believe someone on the roof fed the poison into the outside air intake manifold. There were some granules of something clogging the filters and lying on the roof right in front of the intake vent. This means an insider was involved. The bottom line is that for now, we think the VIO manifesto is authentic – that VIO is responsible. That’s our working hypothesis, but we’re not ruling anything or anyone out.

“I’m dividing you into two teams. Jo, you and the new agents are to work the insider angle. You’re the team leader. I want you to look at everyone

associated with the prison: guards, inmates, contractors, former staff, released convicts, anyone who may somehow have had access to the roof or could have provided information about how to get that access. Inspect the grounds. Get a thorough knowledge of how the security system works. Review all the video records, the badges, door opening records – whatever they have. It will be a lot of tedious work. Ilsa can help you, if necessary.” Ilsa was the Analyst.

“Buck, you and Gulick will handle VIO. Try to identify who they are. I’ll be candid. We’ve never heard of them before. We’re already being roasted in the press for our failure of intelligence, as they’re calling it. Start with relatives of victims of the murderers on death row. Obviously, anyone who has threatened those inmates will rise to the top of the list.”

“What about the judge, the one who stopped the executions? It could be someone with a special grudge against her.” It was Gulick speaking. Porter was irritated not only by the interruption but also by the fact Gulick didn’t even raise his hand. He tried not to let it show.

“There’s a team down in San Jose working on that. She’s getting protection from Marshals and FBI, and there’s a case agent on the threat. You can liaise with them. It seems unlikely someone would commit mass murder just to embarrass a sitting judge, though. As I said earlier, we’re not ruling anything out, but let’s think of horses, not zebras, first. We’re going to focus on people with a vengeance motive against the inmates, the death row killers.

“I plan to be personally involved in every aspect. You’ll be sending out leads all over, so I’ll move the paper as fast as I can, but I also want to be brought in on key interviews or meetings. I’ll be spending a lot of time across the bridge, briefing the SAC or our press relations rep, too.”

“What about when you’re gone? Who’s the Relief Supervisor? If we need to get some urgent lead signed out ...” It was Gulick again.

“I was just about to get to that, Oliver,” Porter said curtly, cutting him off. “Buck is the Principal Relief.” Buck Daley nodded politely to Gulick.

“Well, I was a Principal Relief on my squad in Omaha, if you need a hand with the paper. I’d be happy to help out.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to the SAC about adding you as a relief. Now, if I can continue – without interruption – I want to share with you what we know from the bomb squad who did the initial crime scene.” The term bomb squad was a loose description since this incident did not involve a bomb. It was essentially a forensic team that handled hazardous scenes of any type and was comprised of agents from several different squads who wore a “second hat” as members of this team.

“The victims died gruesome deaths.” He passed around some glossy photos that confirmed that statement. The agents tried to conceal their shock and disgust. “The physical evidence pointed to poisoning right away. The poison seemed to be strongest on the north end of the building, where the main intake is of outside air. All of the survivors were on the south end, although there were plenty of deaths there, too. The death row victims were in one-man cells, but other inmates nearby were double-celled. In those, the man in the top bunk, nearest the vent, usually died in his bunk. The ones in the lower bunks sometimes made it to the cell door and were found curled up on the floor, faces as far through the bars as they could push them. In some of the cells on the south end, inmates stuffed the vents with blankets or clothing. It was obvious they could tell it was gas coming from the A/C vent. This protective effort actually seemed to work somewhat and probably saved several lives.

“The two guards lost their lives because they entered the cellblock to guide the inmates out the emergency exit. There’s the real tragedy. Seventeen inmates were taken to area hospitals for treatment. Two of those tried to escape while there. One was successful for a time. He ran from the emergency room and carjacked a Mercedes, throwing the driver, an elderly woman, to the ground and taking off. You probably already know from last night’s news that he died in the high-speed chase that followed. The other inmate hurt a nurse and a doctor but was subdued by the security team that was assigned to him. He’s in custody again.”

Jo-Lene raised her hand. Porter beamed at the show of deference.

“Yes, Jo.”

“Are all the inmates back at San Quentin yet?”

“No. Q still doesn’t have the capacity. We’re keeping it as a crime scene for now and will probably do more tests and searches over the next week. Then the state will do a safety inspection, clean off the surfaces and bedding if necessary to ensure the poison is gone. When it’s declared safe to use, most will be transferred back. But there’re at least thirty who have been moved to other prisons or jails. Since usually only death row inmates are single-celled, and there are none now, the seven hundred plus cells are going to be temporarily converted to double cells. That means in a few weeks the prison can hold 1,400 more prisoners than it now has.”

“So if we need to interview them, are we going to be traveling all over the state?”

“No, just send leads to whatever office handles the prison location. There’re too many for you to do them all. You and Buck’s team will have to work together to identify which inmates may have the most enemies, or the ones

with the strongest motives. It's not just victims' families with motives. Some of those guys were gang leaders and drug dealers who had plenty of other enemies."

Porter's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the screen and saw the word "SAC." He pushed the button to answer. "Hello, Trey. I'm just finishing up my squad briefing. Can you hold for thirty seconds?" Apparently receiving an affirmative answer, he resumed speaking to the squad. "Okay, that's all for now. Check your mail. I just filled them with leads."

Porter walked off, talking to the SAC on his cell. Some agents filed out of the room and across the hall. Their work space was a newly rented office across from the main San Rafael Resident Agency on the third floor of a nondescript office building in central San Rafael. Their desks, phones, and computers were in the new space, but they had to go to the main R.A. space for their snail mail, sign-in registers, and the break room.

Jo-Lene went to her new desk and logged onto the Sentinel system, the FBI's case management software. There had to be over fifty leads there. A quick electronic riffle through them showed them all to be the same: a form memo captioned QuenMass. The body said that the following employees and contractors of San Quentin may have information of value in the captioned case. They are to be interviewed and any relevant information pursued. That was all. She knew this meant they were all considered suspects, although the FBI didn't want to go on record calling them that. For now, they were just witnesses. Attached to the memo was a two-page list, obviously from the California Bureau of Prisons, with hundreds of employee names. She could tell she had been given all the senior personnel, including the warden and senior guards. Presumably the other two agents on her team had similar stacks with the other names checked.

She looked over at Buck Daley. He too was reading through his assignments. It appeared similar but was presumably relatives of death row inmates. She continued to scan casually. She sat wondering how she was going to organize and prioritize these leads. She was about to go get a cup of coffee when her heart caught in her throat. On the very bottom of the digital assignments was a simple one-line case assignment. "QuenMass." Underneath that were two words: "Reassign Holford."

She was now the case agent. Of course, she told herself, now that Dan is the squad supervisor, the case had to be reassigned. Supervisors don't carry cases. Dan would have to reassign it to an agent on his squad. He would still run things, but officially at least, she was now responsible for solving the biggest case in the FBI. It had never occurred to her that she would get the case. She had felt lucky just to be assigned to the squad. Now the director would be seeing her

name, hearing how “her” case was progressing – or not. Hundreds of victims’ families would be depending on her for justice, for resolution.

She had half-stood with her empty coffee cup in hand, but now her legs got weak. She sat down so she wouldn’t collapse. The responsibility was already weighing on her. She took two big breaths and recovered her composure. Here she was, a black woman, a GS-12, only in her thirties, now assigned the biggest case in the FBI. She would never have believed it had someone told her this when she was a new agent trainee. Indeed, had someone told her the same thing two weeks ago, she would never have believed it. She straightened her spine and resolved not to disappoint. She allowed herself a grim smile and grabbed her coffee cup again. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter 6

The first three weeks of the investigation had produced little in the way of positive results. Investigation at the prison had failed to turn up a viable suspect. Guards and other staff had been interviewed vigorously, and everyone denied any knowledge of or involvement in the insertion of the cyanide gas.

Forensic analysis had shown that the residue in the HVAC system was in the form of granules in the filter of the roof intake vent. That had to be the point where the gas was introduced. Yet there was no evidence on the roof other than some scattered granules there. The entry to the roof was a locked and alarmed door. Both a physical key and a badge with authorized access were necessary to go through that door. If it had been opened, there would have been an electronic record. There was none. There was also a camera on that door. The video feed showed that no one had gone through that door the night of the attack.

There was no motion sensor, pressure sensor, or other security device on the surface of the roof itself. There were guards at elevated lookout stations at strategic points around the perimeter of the compound, but not directly overlooking that building's roof. The moon had been below the horizon, so visibility would have been poor; it was obvious that the guards would have been unlikely to see anyone on the roof that night. If anyone could get onto the roof, then he could move about freely, undetected. The noise from the HVAC systems on all the buildings – and there were dozens of buildings in the compound – going full blast would have masked any noise of someone walking around.

The working theory was that someone inside the compound managed to get onto the roof by climbing up or using a ladder or possibly ropes. There were fire escapes on either side of the building, but they did not reach to the ground except when the lowest section was deployed from above. In other words, you could go down them, but you couldn't go up them from the ground.

Interviews with the inmates revealed that some of the guards were corrupt. They could be bribed to sneak in cell phones or drugs. Two of those guards were identified and eventually fired, but neither had been in the compound the night of the attack and their alibis were solid.

Initial interviews with the families of the murder victims of the death row inmates also failed to bring in any solid leads. Several of them expressed satisfaction that the murderer of their loved one had been killed. Many had long ago forgiven the killer-inmate and professed a great sadness or even outrage at the massacre. Others were uncooperative, telling the agents to go away. A few volunteered their whereabouts the night of the massacre, but most would not answer that question and terminated the interview when asked about their alibis.

None of them could be placed near the crime scene at the time of the poisoning. Many of them had criminal records, which was not surprising since many murder victims are involved in gang or drug activities, so even those who did cooperate were of compromised credibility.

It was thus a relief to Porter when a solid lead finally arrived in the form of a detailed chemical analysis report. The FBI Laboratory, working in conjunction with the chemical industry, which cooperated down the line, had determined the specific type of poison used. Before Porter even finished reading the report, he called Jo-Lene and Buck into his office. They could tell something big was up and hurried in.

“Sit down. We just got the chemical report from the Lab.” He started to read it from the beginning but was too impatient to read through all the bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, and after a moment he skipped to the synopsis section. “It says the poison was something called Zyklon B. It’s a form of cyanide made from prussic acid with a stabilizer and an odorant – something that makes it smell as a warning. That’s probably what alerted the inmates and drove them away from the vents. It says there are several brands, but none are sold in the United States. The Czechs make it under a different name now.”

“Dan, that’s what the Nazis used in the Holocaust.” The remark came from Oliver Gulick, who was standing in the doorway along with two other squad members. They had all seen the team leaders rush in and had sensed something big was up.

“My God, he’s right,” Buck Daley added.

Nonplussed, Porter flipped through the multi-page report looking for something to confirm what Gulick had said. Sure enough, on page 4 he found a mention of the Nazis’ use of Zyklon B.

“Right, it does say that here. But it says this is not the same form used in World War II. It has a different substrate – the granular substrate used that releases the gas. They warn against using the terms *Nazi* or *Holocaust* in connection with this massacre.” He flipped some more. “Here we go. This batch is from an insecticide made by an American company under license from the German company that patented it. The stabilizer and odorant were unique to this company. It took a long time to identify it because it is so old. Based on the decomposition of the stabilizer and the ... blah, blah, hold on ... they believe it is from a batch manufactured in the 1940s or 1950s. It was a product sold only to licensed exterminators, not the retail market. The company that made it is called CalChemCo. They’re still in business, although they haven’t made this product in decades. They’re headquartered in Morgan Hill. The Lab has identified a technical contact there. They’re expecting us to contact them.”

“I’ll do that,” Jo-Lene almost shouted.

“That’s San Jose’s territory. Take along an agent from there. We’ll need their help anyway if there are records to be searched. That’s too far for you to be driving back and forth every day. The case agent who’s doing the investigation on the threat to the judge, Woody Braswell, take him with you.”

“Fine.”

“Has he come up with anything on that angle, by the way?” Porter asked, turning to Buck Daley.

“No. The judge has been hard to work with, I hear. She seems to think all criminals are merely misguided lost souls and they all know how fair she is. No one she ever sentenced could possibly be mad enough at her to want to kill her. That sort of thing. Apparently she’s a very lenient sentencer. The Internet is full of negative tweets and posts and comments of all types over her decision to halt the executions, but she says she never reads that sort of stuff. She’s not on social media. Her only email address is her official one through the courts, and it’s not public. She hasn’t gotten any letters or emails of a threatening nature. She scoffs at the idea that she could be responsible for the massacre because of her judicial decision.”

“Criminals are lost souls? Easy sentencing? It sounds like there could be a few agents who would have a motive.” Porter chuckled at his own comment for a moment, but when he saw the uneasy expressions from a couple of the squad members, he hastened to add, “Joking.”

Daley continued. “Braswell and a female agent from Palo Alto have been spending most of their time on protective duty, not investigation. That should end soon when the Marshals get some more deputies brought in on TDY.”

“Okay, well, we have a game plan now. Continue with employee and victim family investigations, but farm out as much of that as you can. Those people are scattered all over the state, so send leads to whatever office covers the person’s residence. Don’t try to do all the interviews yourselves. I’ve got a request in for more manpower. In the meantime, let’s make following up on this chemical lead our number one priority.”

“I’m on it,” Jo-Lene said with more confidence than she felt.

Chapter 7

Jo and Woody sat in the office of Mel Hardesty, President of CalChemCo. The windowless office was spacious, but otherwise unpretentious. The administration building looked little different from the warehouses and manufacturing buildings that surrounded it. The only decorations on the office walls were two small oil paintings that Jo suspected were done by Mel's wife or other relative who fancied herself an artist. The desk at which Hardesty sat could have come straight from Office Depot. The room held at least ten large file cabinets, brimming with paper. A potted plant starved in one corner. Buckets and lamps and all sorts of clutter were crammed under tables.

Hardesty was in his early seventies and looked every minute of it. Deep furrows etched his brow. A thick dewlap hung from his neck, though he wasn't particularly heavy. What little hair he had was white and neatly trimmed around his ears, although several curly individuals were trying to escape up his back and past his collar.

"Are you two married?" Hardesty asked benignly.

The question threw both of them off. Both of them were black, in their thirties, and good looking in a fit, all-American sort of way. It wasn't necessarily an illogical assumption, but the two of them barely knew each other, and it simply hadn't occurred to them that they would be considered a couple. Neither wore a ring.

Woody was the first to recover. "No, sir. The FBI doesn't assign husband-and-wife teams to work together."

"Mr. Hardesty," Jo-Lene said, wanting to get on track, "as you know, the poison used in the San Quentin Massacre has been traced back to your company. We're here to find out what you know about that. We know you haven't made that Zyklon product for many years, and we're not suggesting you're responsible, but we're hoping you have records that can help us."

"Of course. I'll do everything I can. I've got my people researching this already. You know, I found it hard to believe when I first heard it, but my chemists have confirmed what the DPR found. It's ours."

"DPR?"

"Department of Pesticide Regulation. The state agency that we have to answer to. Every pesticide company doing business in the state has to supply samples to them of every product to be registered. Laws have been on the books since the early 1900s. There are over 10,000 different pesticides in use in California. The DPR must have many times that many samples registered and

analyzed. It's been a hundred years. I'm sure that's where the FBI made a match."

"So you were given a sample from the massacre? Can you pinpoint the age of the Zyklon used?"

"Yes, we were given a sample of the residue, along with copies of the spectrographic and other readings. The poison is a gas and dissipates, so the testing is on the residue. And please don't call it Zyklon. That's what the Nazis used in the concentration camps, in case you didn't know."

"So I heard. So what do you call your product?"

"Thanapest. *Thana* means death, and *pest*, well, you know what that is. It was used both as an insecticide and a rodenticide."

"But you confirmed the spectrographic readings match the Thanapest readings?"

"They do. Fortunately, we had some old samples, too, for our own purposes. Research, liability. We keep everything just in case. It took us days to find those samples. They go back to the 1940s. But there were some slight differences."

"What differences?" It was Woody who spoke this time.

"The spectrographic lines were identical to the chemicals in Thanapest. Our odorant back then was unique. We used garlic concentrate as an ingredient. As you probably know, this is the garlic capital of the country around here, so it was cheap and very effective. So all the ingredients from Thanapest are there in the exact right proportions. But there were some additional lines. I'm not a chemist, just a business guy, but my people tell me the lines show some iron and some kind of plastic that weren't in the original product."

"Could those have come from the container?"

"Yes. The product was packaged in steel tins inside drums back then. It was only sold to licensed exterminators, you know. If it sat in one of those tins for seventy years, it probably would pick up a lot of iron molecules. It's also possible the iron came from the surface where they got the residue. Was it from a steel surface? They didn't tell me."

Jo hemmed and hawed for a moment. That wasn't public information. She assumed the sample tested was from the inside of the HVAC pipes or filters, but she didn't know for sure. She wasn't even sure those were steel. They might have been aluminum or something else.

"I really don't know. There were granules from the HVAC. There were sample swabs taken everywhere, too, I'm sure. Maybe the gas reacts with metal or leaves a residue. The bed frames and sinks and toilets were steel. It could have been from any of those."

“What about the plastic?” Woody broke in.

“I don’t know. We didn’t use any in our packaging or in the manufacture. My people tell me it’s a modern compound. It probably just came from a tube or funnel used to direct the granules.”

Jo was excited. This was new information. “So you think a plastic tube was used?”

Hardesty shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just guessing. It’s pretty common to use a hose. How else are you going to get the gas to go where you want?”

The two agents looked at each other. Jo continued, “Tell us how the Zy-, uh, Thanapest, was applied.”

“It was before my time. I don’t know exactly what applicators were used back then, but there are some photos in our records of our products being used back in that era. Thanapest was a grainy powder. It came in compressed granules, almost like gravel. You popped open the tins, and they produced hydrogen cyanide when exposed to air and heat. You poured the granules into a closed container with only a small aperture, like a hose, and the gas would be forced out the end of the hose. We have an old applicator someone dug up in the back that could have been used. We sold those, too, back then, although we didn’t make them. I thought you’d ask, so I had one brought out.”

He pointed to what Jo-Lene had thought was a bucket under a table. It was a metal bucket, in fact, but had a fitted top with something like a mail slot on top and a spout-like thing protruding. Hardesty got up and walked over to demonstrate.

“These were used for grape vines or low-ground crops like tomatoes. The exterminators would cover the infested plants with tarps. They put this applicator on the ground next to the plant. The product – it could be Thanapest or something else – would be put in this little concavity. There’s a hose attachment that screws on here. You run the other end under the tarp and up to the top of the grape plant, then tie off the bottom of the plant. Then you pull this little lever here and the grains drop into the reservoir. The lever mechanism locks shut. It has a rubber seal to ensure the gas doesn’t come out of the applicator except through the hose. There’s a foot pump lever here. The exterminator steps on that for a couple of minutes to force air through the chamber to increase the rate of outgassing from the granules. This whole process was typically done during the day because the rate of outgassing is increased by high temperatures. You could do more plants per hour. Gloves and other protective clothing should be worn because skin contact with Thanapest could be lethal. There were some accidents because exterminators didn’t wear all the required gear due to the high temperatures they were working in.”

Hardesty exhaled heavily, as though recalling some particularly unfortunate incidents. Then he continued. “The cyanide gas flows up through the hose to the top of the tarp. The cyanide forces the air down and out the bottom. The exterminator would leave the tarp in place for whatever the time was supposed to be and then remove the tarp, being careful not to breathe the cyanide, and go on to the next plant. Every so often they have to clean out the powdery residue from the container, which is harmless after an hour or so. Thanapest was very effective. Dangerous but effective. The best available solution at the time.”

“Wouldn’t that poison the grapes?” Woody asked.

“I don’t know. I’m no farmer, either. I think the product was used to save the vines and keep them from dying, not to treat the fruit. Maybe it was applied when there was no fruit on the vine. The California wine industry was almost lost due to various infestations several times over the last century. Maybe they skipped a harvest. If they lost a season, it was better than losing the vines.”

“This is great,” Jo said sincerely. “You’ve been a big help. What we really need, though, is a way to identify where that specific batch of Thanapest came from. Do you have sales records? Or shipping records?”

“Some. I don’t know if they’re going to help you. I’m afraid I don’t have the people to search through them, and no one here has any personal knowledge of that product. It’s too old. Even I don’t remember much. My father started this business, and I’m the one with the longest tenure here. I had my people bring up the records. They’re outside on the loading dock in four file cabinets. You can have it all to copy if you bring me back the originals. My lawyer says there could be lawsuits when this comes out, and we need whatever records there are.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“I had to trust some people. My lawyer. My wife. Two of my chemists and one of my office staff. I’ve told them all not to talk about it to anyone, but I can’t guarantee anything. You know how hard it is to keep anything secret in this day and age. I’ve impressed on everyone how the company could be destroyed by litigation if it gets out. I think that’ll work for a while anyway.”

“Please try to keep it that way if you can. When did you stop making Thanapest? And why?”

“Somewhere around 1950. You’ll probably be better able to answer that after you go through the records. I was just a kid, but I remember my dad talking in hushed tones to my mom about it. It was the Nazi association. The enormity of the Holocaust was just beginning to become fully understood. No one wanted anything to do with Zyklon then. But it was probably more than that. By that time inorganic pesticides were on the way out anyway. Arsenic, lead, cyanide. All of that. Organic was getting big. DDT, parathion, many others. Considering

the safety record of those, it's a bit ironic that the inorganics were dropped for public health reasons. We got out of all pesticides in the 1970s. Too much regulation and liability issues. We still make weed killers, but they don't kill animals. Mostly we make lubricants, coatings, and some basic chemicals you'd find in a chem lab."

"So nothing sold after 1950?" Jo was taking careful notes.

"Oh, no, I didn't say that. We stopped making it around then, but we may have continued to sell supplies of our existing inventory after that. You'll have to go through the records to find that out. But the supplies could have lasted for years. The stuff was made in very big batches and the market dropped rapidly, so we might have sold it for quite some time after that."

The interview continued for another half an hour, but no further useful information was gleaned. The agents left with a bounce in their step. They had leads to go on now. They felt sure the case would crack open soon. They left without the file cabinets, since they had no way to carry them in their car, but they assured Hardesty they would send a truck for them, copy them, and return the originals.

"It's almost one," Woody observed. "How about lunch?"

"Sure. I'm starved."

Chapter 8

Cliff was having a play day. At least that's how he looked at it, even though he was getting paid handsomely. Google was considering buying a small drone manufacturer, and Cliff was conducting the due diligence investigation. The company didn't like the word *drone* and preferred to call itself an aerial solutions company. They made high-end multi-rotor craft for photography and scientific research. Who knew what Google wanted them for. Product delivery, probably.

The privately held company wanted to be acquired by Google and was more than happy to oblige. Like all acquisitions, they thought of it as a merger, while the whale that was swallowing them thought of it as a purchase. Today was the day Cliff got to try the products himself. The company's technical expert who served as his instructor took him to a property in the central valley where there were flat, open spaces. They had a test field there. The Bay Area was too windy and hilly and densely populated, they told him. Too many air corridors and restrictions for a good demonstration.

Cliff was maneuvering the Acerodon 1 around the distant stand of eucalyptus trees. The craft was amazingly easy to fly. One joystick was the throttle and yaw control; the other did pitch and roll. This was not a toy, he understood. It cost tens of thousands of dollars and weighed over fifty pounds. It could stay aloft over thirty minutes at a speed of forty miles per hour, depending on the payload. Several kinds of cameras could be mounted on it, suitable for agriculture, law enforcement, and filmmaking, among other uses. It had the ability to carry seven pounds with a shortened flying time and reduced speed.

"Climb, climb!" his instructor yelled. Cliff pushed up on the throttle, and the speck in the sky shot upward.

"Why, what happened?"

"You almost ran into that tree. It's hard to judge distances and height when it gets that far away. That tree is almost seventy feet tall. You were flying at sixty."

The instructor, an Israeli-American named Gabe, was looking at a separate display. Cliff was controlling the Acerodon by line-of-sight, but the instructor had mounted two cameras on it, both sending back first-person view, or FPV, to a receiver unit. The instructor could see what the cameras were seeing on a split-screen display in real time, like a cameraman. One camera pointed straight down; the other pointed to the front. All Cliff could see was a dot moving against the clouds. Ever since he'd shed his thick glasses after the laser surgery, a vanity move he'd made when he retired, his depth perception wasn't that sharp.

The instructor could see on his screen exactly where it was going from up close, and exactly what it was over. It was all being recorded.

“Okay, I’ll bring it back. I’ve had my fun.” He flipped the Home Lock switch as he’d been taught and pulled back on the pitch joystick. The craft started moving back toward him, although at that distance, it was hard to tell at first. The Home Lock switch told the drone that its takeoff point, locked in via GPS signal at the time of takeoff, was “back” regardless of what direction the drone was facing. Although the front had red lights and the rear had green, it was too far away to see them, especially with the bright sky behind it. Cliff looked over at the instructor’s screen for a few seconds. The video showed the ground moving swiftly and smoothly below.

“How do you keep the video so smooth?”

“A combination of gimbals and anti-jello technology. The gimbals keep the cameras pointed straight and level as the craft bounces around. It rotates in three dimensions to do that. The technology is pretty complex, but it’s essential for good photography. The video would also be jiggly from the vibration of the electric motors – that’s called jello – if you didn’t have something to damp that out. The camera mounts have special cushioning, and there’s some electronics at work, too.”

“Cool.” Cliff meant it, too. It was a blast flying this thing. As he got closer, he did some radical swooping and diving maneuvers. The drone performed flawlessly. “So how many models do you have?”

“Five out now. This is the largest one for the mass market. Three are smaller and one larger. Any larger and it could only be sold to commercial operators with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle pilot’s license. There’s no civilian market there yet, but the military and state agencies like police buy our big UAV. They’re exempt from some FAA rules.”

“Where’d you get the name Acerodon?”

“That’s a kind of bat – a fruit-eating bat. We tried out a bunch of bird names, but we kept running into trademark issues. Almost every kind of bird already has a plane named after it. We thought the name sounded kind of cool, too. Try landing it with this.”

The instructor clamped the FPV console to Cliff’s controller unit. The clearing next to where they stood had a ten-foot diameter circle chalked off with a cross marked dead center. As the drone got closer, Cliff took his hands from both joysticks and let it hover. He saw that it wasn’t facing him. He corrected that by using the yaw control to turn it toward him. Once it was facing him and the landing zone, he took the drone out of Home Lock so he could direct it normally – that is, so that the “nose” of the hexacopter was also the “forward”

direction of travel. Once he got that done, he changed his view from the craft to the screen. He used the forward-facing camera to edge slowly toward the chalk circle. When the circle disappeared from view, he looked at the other half of the display – the straight-down camera – and saw the circle appear. He overshot the correct spot by a few feet but quickly reversed that so that the circle was in the center of the screen. The drone was still fifty or sixty feet in the air. Once he was confident he was over the landing zone, he began to descend slowly. Down it came, gentle as a dandelion. And then there it was on the ground. Cliff killed the motors and looked up.

“Perfect. And this is your first time. You’re a natural.” The instructor was removing the cameras. He plugged one of them into his laptop computer and after some clicking and keystrokes, the video began to play.

“Ah, you have the time stamp and GPS coordinates displayed on the video feed,” Cliff remarked.

“Right. That’s optional. You can record with or without that. Filmmakers wouldn’t want it, but military and farmers would.”

“Neat. I could use that for geocaching,” Cliff joked.

“Geocaching. Now there’s a novel use.” Gabe laughed.

They packed up and drove back to the Bay Area in the instructor’s SUV. As Cliff was riding, the instructor told him to keep the Acerodon for a few weeks and get used to it. He’d loan Cliff one camera and FPV monitor/control unit, too, until the investigation was complete. Cliff saw the gesture for what it was – a not-too-subtle bribe – but it was also a legitimate offer. He’d be able to get a better feel for the product if he used it by himself under independent conditions and over a period of time. He thanked Gabe and accepted the offer, emphasizing that it was only a loan. He told him he’d call it Ace.

Cliff knew this company was the real deal. Drones were coming and coming fast. His report to Google was going to be positive, he felt sure. But he still had to research the law. The Federal Aviation Administration – the FAA – was furiously making regulations for drones, and there were already several lawsuits over the regulations. Lawsuits against drone users who acted irresponsibly, too, he suspected. Invasion of privacy, personal injury or property damage, trespass. There were all kinds of huge liability issues to be resolved, and he had to point that out. There was a segment of the population who already hated Google Glass wearers and demonstrators who picketed the bus stops where Google buses picked up its employees in San Francisco. What kind of public relations disaster would drones bring? They had a lot more enemies than the glasses. There would be some research there, but he wasn’t about to predict that

treacherous legal landscape. He'd let Google's lawyers venture into that minefield.

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When he got home, Cliff told Ellen about the fun day. She, too, had good news. She'd been released from protective duty. She could return to her usual white-collar caseload. She was almost delirious with relief. Oh, how she had grown to despise that woman.

With both of them in a good mood and full of energy, they soon found themselves in the bedroom doing what couples usually do under such circumstances.

Chapter 9

Trey Fitzhugh lectured to his audience, Dan Porter and Jo-Lene Holford, grumbling and griping the whole time.

“We don’t know where they’re getting it. The news people are getting it from somewhere, but WikiLeaks is saying publicly that they did not release it.”

The “it” he was referring to was the latest report that the VIO manifesto was calling upon “justice-seekers everywhere” to emulate them and see that murderers receive the death penalty. The manifesto claimed that the only western state not to have the death penalty was New Mexico and it had the highest murder rate of all of them. VIO claimed that California’s relatively high murder rate was due largely to the fact that California’s death penalty was in name only. Because of the ruling by Judge Fassbinder, it had no *effective* death penalty. VIO wanted the world’s murderers to know that was no longer the case. VIO claimed that with an effective death penalty, California’s murder rate could drop to below 3 per 100,000 people annually.

“The networks may be getting this direct from VIO. The director, or whoever it is back there second-guessing us, thinks VIO is impatient with WikiLeaks for not releasing the whole manifesto. He wants an investigation started on the reporters. The *New York Times* had the story first. The New York office has opened a case.”

“Trey, that’s crazy. Leak investigations never go anywhere. Doesn’t anyone remember Watergate? It’s got to be someone inside the government, but it could be anywhere. NSA, FBIHQ, the White House, DOJ. Deep Throat was FBI; Snowden was NSA. They aren’t going to catch VIO that way.”

“I know that, Dan, and you know that, but it’s probably coming from the White House. Leak investigations are always political. They want to know who’s disloyal or untrustworthy so they can get rid of them. It’s not about the criminal investigation.”

Jo-Lene wasn’t yet comfortable using the SAC’s first name. “Boss, is it true that the murder rate has dropped since this happened? That’s what NBC said last night.”

“It’s been down a little, but DOJ says it’s tastic..., satist..., statistically insignificant.” Fitzhugh had a marked tendency to stumble over his words when he got excited or angry, which was most of the time. “Maybe eight or ten fewer murders than normal in the state over the last month. The interesting thing, though, is that the conviction rate is going up. Several district attorneys around the state have reported that some murder cases that were death penalty eligible

suddenly pleaded out if they agreed to take the death penalty off the table. I just got this from the governor.”

Jo-Lene continued. “Warden Soto has reopened the cellblock. Without any death row inmates now, he says he can double cell. And he needs fewer guards. At least that’s one good thing to come out of this.”

This was more than a comment on a small economic saving. They all knew that California was under severe pressure from the federal appellate court, not involving Fassbinder’s ruling, to reduce the inmate crowding. They declared the crammed prisons to be cruel and unusual punishment and therefore unconstitutional. The court was on the verge of ordering thousands of felons to be released. Anything that helped alleviate the crowding helped delay that release long enough for California to build more prisons or find other solutions that didn’t endanger the public.

Fitzhugh scoffed. “That’s nothing. False savings. They’ve had to increase staffing and other security measures at Chowchilla, where the women’s death row is. Anyway, at least we don’t have to get involved in the leak case. Update me on the investigation. You said there’s been a new development.”

Porter took over. “Right. We got a call this morning from the warden. One of his staff noticed something unusual on the rocks near the perimeter road around the grounds. A dead seagull between the road and the shoreline of the bay. When he looked more carefully, he saw some sort of discharge around the mouth and noticed a small, white pellet inches away from its mouth. They called me without touching it. I went over there with my bio-suit and took the bird and pellet into evidence. Jo-Lene says the pellet looks like the Thanapest granules the company gave us. I brought the pellet in to be tested by the Lab. If it matches the residue from the attack, that means the attacker may have come in by boat and dropped a pellet or two getting onto shore – or leaving. That would change things.”

“Why didn’t our crime scene team find this pellet?”

“I can’t blame them. This is hundreds of feet from the cellblock building and outside the prison yard. The shore area is narrow, rocky, and separated from the secure area by a large wall. There’s no reason to search there, and seeing a tiny pellet – these are about half the size of a chunk of gravel – would be difficult among the rocks. It would just look like another speck of wind-blown litter. It was only because the guard spotted the dead bird that we got it.”

“Could the bird have picked it up and flown from some other spot and then died there?”

“That’s a good question, Trey,” Porter said, knowing that Fitzhugh would soak up the compliment. “If it was a cyanide pellet, that’s not likely. The

company says the instant it hit wet tissue – the bird’s tongue or throat – it would emit a burst of concentrated cyanide gas, killing instantly. Maybe if the bird carried it in its beak without it touching anything wet, but that seems unlikely. It’s inert now, but if it killed the bird, then that would have been around the time of the massacre.”

“Don’t they have a guard tower watching the bay? Wouldn’t someone have seen anyone approaching in a boat?”

“They do, but they probably wouldn’t have seen a very small boat, like a kayak, or someone paddling on a surfboard at night, especially if the person took pains to camouflage himself – using a black boat or board. It was a moonless night, remember. The guard tower is outside the wall and looks down over the wall into the prison compound, but it also has a clear view to the south over the bay. It’s right on the southern tip of the promontory. But the bird was found farther north, toward the employee parking area, just around the bend enough so that the guard in the tower would not have seen that area. That wall I mentioned would block it. A guard would have line of sight to a boat when it was farther out to sea, but they might not have noticed anyone out that way in the blackness. They concentrate their view on the yard and buildings, the opposite direction.”

“You said it’s near the parking lot. Maybe some employee parked there and ...”

“No, we don’t think so. You could walk over the rocks from the parking lot to that spot, but it wouldn’t be easy at night on that rocky surface, and why would anyone do that? You’d still have to get into the compound by going over the wall or the security fence – which is twelve feet high, electrified, and topped by razor wire. Unless of course you’re an employee and can go through the main administration building entrance. If it was an employee or anyone allowed to park there – like official visitors – you would just go through that building. There are cameras on the parking lot, too, and we had one of the agents review the video from that time frame on the parking lot camera again. No one came or went from that lot for two hours before the attack, nor immediately after. Then emergency vehicles started arriving, but no one walked out toward the rocks after that, either. No one entered through the main building during that time frame until the EMTs.”

“So where does that leave us? Someone scaled the wall and security fence, then up the side of the building to the roof of the cellblock carrying the poison and equipment, then took the stuff back over the same obstacles? I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t either. But how did that pellet get there in the rocks? And it seems like the perfect spot to avoid being seen by the tower if you did want to get

in without passing through the main drive-in gate and have your identity and car on record. An employee who knows the system there could paddle a surfboard to that spot, accidentally drop a pellet or two when moving the equipment, enter through the gate and somehow hack the security records, and then get up onto the roof by using the fire escape ladders, or maybe a longer ladder they had pre-stowed somewhere in the compound.”

“I don’t like it. Have the high-tech squad examine the video feeds and security records – the badged entries and exits. See if there’s any sign the records were hacked. And let me know when the Lab confirms whether or not that pellet is the same.”

“Will do.”

Chapter 10

As soon as he opened the door, Cliff knew something was up. The lights were on in the kitchen and he could hear something sizzling on the stove. The dining room table was set with the nice tablecloth and good china. He ventured in further, leaving his briefcase in the foyer. When he got close enough to see out the patio door, he saw Ellen lighting the barbecue. Two big steaks were sitting on a platter next to the grill. He turned toward the kitchen and saw the skillet held mushrooms and onions. Ellen must have heard the garage door open and started the meal. It was her night to cook, but it was a duty she never liked much, and she seldom made a big effort at it. He stepped out back.

“What’s the occasion?” He walked over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“Can’t a girl cook her man a nice meal without it being an occasion?” She avoided his eyes, concentrating on the steaks she was laying out on the grill, but her expression was that of the cat that ate the canary.

“In your case, no. The tablecloth and china? That’s not you. Come on, out with it.”

Ellen took a moment before she faced him. Cliff could see her expression change. She looked nervous, worried, yet happy at the same time.

“I was going to wait until after dinner, but I don’t think I could eat anything until I say it.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I’m pregnant.” She stared intently at him to see how he would take it. She knew it would be as big a surprise to him as it had been to her.

Cliff’s mouth fell open. “Omgod. Wait here,” he croaked, then rushed from the room.

Ellen, stunned, was crushed. This was not at all the reaction she had expected, that she had hoped for. He must be angry, disappointed in her. She had assured him she was on birth control. Somehow, it hadn’t worked. It was an accident, but did he think she intentionally let it happen to trap him? She grabbed the back of the dining room chair to steady herself. Was he going to demand an abortion? She was Catholic and would never do that; he had to know that was out of the question.

Cliff returned from the bedroom a moment later, eyes shining. “I was going to do this next month, on your birthday,” he said, bending down on one knee. “But I guess I’d better not wait. Will you marry me?” He held out an elegant ring box and opened it toward her.

Ellen staggered forward and grabbed him around the neck, almost bowling him over. “Yes, yes, yes! I will marry you, Clifford Knowles.” Then she

began to sob uncontrollably and buried her face in his soft, silky, George Clooney beard.

He stood, lifted her easily, and carried her to the living room sofa, one handed – the ring box still in the other hand. After a moment he asked her, “Aren’t you going to look at the ring?”

Ellen finally extracted herself and sat next to him. She took the proffered box and looked at it closely for the first time. “Cliff! That’s ... that’s ridiculous. You could trade that for a Tesla. You shouldn’t have spent that kind of money.” Her nose was running and she was trying to wipe it with her arm delicately, without much success.

“You don’t like it?”

“Of course I like it. I love it. But it’s huge. You didn’t have to try to impress me. I’d have settled for a Cracker Jacks decoder ring.”

“It wasn’t that much, really,” he lied.

“Cliff. I’m so sorry about the pregnancy. It was an accident, I swear. It must have happened that night ...”

“Shush. It doesn’t matter. There’s nothing to apologize for. You know how long my wife and I tried? Years. The doctors said it was her, but I always wondered if it was me, too. I guess now I know. I just feel sorry for the kid with an old fart for a dad. By the time he’s twelve, he’ll be embarrassed to have me show up with him at school.”

“He’ll? What makes you think it’ll be a he?”

“He, she, it doesn’t matter. I really don’t care.”

“You’re not an old fart. I’m the one with all the gray hair. Yours is still dark. It’s not fair. She’ll be embarrassed about me, not you.”

“So dye it. Dye it orange and get a tattoo. You’ll fit right in with her crowd.” Then after a beat, “Kidding, of course. I love you just the way you are, and I’m sure she will, too.”

Cliff slipped the ring on her finger. It fit. Suddenly Ellen stood, startled. “The steaks. They’ll burn.” And she rushed out to the patio. Cliff went back to the bedroom area to change his clothes and wash up for dinner.

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Hector Ruiz, at twenty-four years of age, had been the youngest member of his new agent class in Quantico. He had his college degree and three years of experience in a professional job – as an elementary school teacher in his case – the minimum qualifications to be an agent, but he knew he didn’t match up with

his classmates. The average age had been over thirty, and more than half had graduate degrees. Sure, he spoke Spanish and English fluently and was an excellent shot, but those weren't rare talents among FBI applicants. He knew he wouldn't have gotten the job if he hadn't been the son of an agent. His father was now retired from the Bureau and working a corporate security job in Texas. As a result, Hector was even more insecure than the average new agent. So it was with some trepidation that he approached Jo-Lene.

"Jo, I think you should look at this." He handed her a paper form labeled Security Incident Report and stood attentively at her desk.

She read through the report and quickly understood why he had brought it to her attention. It was the report made by the guards when Cliff and Ellen had landed their kayaks at San Quentin months earlier.

"Hmm, interesting."

"Do you know them?"

"Knowles was a Legal Advisor. He'd come up here once a year to lecture us on probable cause or whatever before he became a supervisor. He worked down in the South Bay, then in the city. He retired maybe three or four years ago. I met Ellen Kennedy at Firearms once, but she's down there, too. I don't really know her. She's pretty new to this division. I'm surprised they know each other. It doesn't say here why they were kayaking all the way up here."

"He was injured."

"Yeah, but how did that happen, and why were they up here? A head injury kayaking?"

"You think this is suspicious? They're agents. You don't really think they had anything to do with it, do you?"

"I didn't say that. But Knowles was involved in some other murder incident a couple of years ago. He was cleared, I believe, but I'm a little hazy on the details. Some guy was supposed to be a vigilante killing drug dealers. It was all over the news for a while. The bad guy was identified. I think he's still a fugitive. I'm pretty sure Knowles was considered a suspect at first because he found one of the bodies. It's something we should check out, anyway. If this kayak thing was a ruse, it would be a good way for someone to test the security at Q and identify a spot that was out of view of the guard tower. Good catch, Hector. See if you can find our file on that case on Knowles. There was an agent out from FBIHQ working on that task force, so we must have something. I'll talk to the SAC. We'll probably have to interview Kennedy."

Chapter 11

Ellen's supervisor told her to report to San Francisco. The SAC wanted to see her. She was surprised but not too concerned. She assumed it was to congratulate her on her engagement. She had shown the ring around the R.A. that morning and the word must be out. Still, she hadn't heard about other agents being called in for a face-to-face with the SAC when they got engaged.

When she got to San Francisco, the SAC directed her to talk to Dan Porter and Jo-Lene Holford in his conference room. Her initial confusion was soon cleared up when they explained that they had to interview her about the security incident at San Quentin earlier. She wasn't in any trouble. They just had to follow up every incident.

This made sense to her, although like anyone else, she wasn't happy about being treated as a potential suspect. She explained the whole incident in detail. She began by explaining geocaching and how she wanted to complete the Fizzy Challenge, which meant she had to get caches of particularly high difficulty, how the cache under the ferry landing was the only one within hundreds of miles that qualified, how Cliff had hit his head when the wave crested. They questioned her closely about who had broached the idea of going up to that particular spot, and who had decided to land at San Quentin. She assured them that she had done so, not Cliff. He was just acceding to her wishes.

Just when she thought the interview was over, Porter asked her if she would take a polygraph.

"A polygraph? Seriously?" Her cheeks began to burn. She realized this was more than routine. But she had nothing to hide and knew her refusal could lead to serious consequences, probably the loss of her job. "Well, I guess, sure. I mean, if you really need me to."

"I'm afraid we do. Come with me." Porter rose.

"You mean now?" Flabbergasted but compliant, she followed him meekly from the room to an adjoining office that had been closed off. The polygraph was already set up. The polygrapher was sitting behind the desk. She didn't know him. Porter left.

The polygrapher, an agent from another division, explained the process coolly and professionally. She had heard it all in training school, but being in the hot seat herself was another matter. The agent had her go over the entire story again, and he took extensive notes. Then he hooked her up and adjusted all the settings, testing the equipment. The first questions were control questions, ones used to establish a baseline for how she reacted. After a few of these, with the

examiner showing no reaction, she calmed down somewhat. It had taken a half hour to get this far.

Then came the key questions. She wasn't asked about the details. The questions were the basic ones: was she telling the truth, did she have any involvement in the QuenMass killings, did she know anyone who did? She answered truthfully in the negative to all of them. Then the questions took an odd turn; at least she thought it was odd. She was asked where she was the night of the massacre (in bed with her boyfriend, Cliff Knowles). She was asked if she had ever had access to exterminator-grade poisons, had she ever heard of an insecticide called Thanapest, did she know anyone who worked with such chemicals? Again, she answered truthfully in the negative.

The polygraph ended and Porter came in. He thanked her for her cooperation and assured her again that it was routine. He apologized for having to put a fellow agent through that and thanked her for her work protecting the judge. By this time he had found out about her engagement. He admonished her not to tell Cliff about the interview and polygraph. He was sorry, but Cliff would have to be interviewed. Porter said he was sure they would both come through with flying colors, not to worry.

"Of course, I understand. You can count on me," was her terse reply. It was also ambiguous, and not by accident.

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When she got back to the Palo Alto R.A., her supervisor asked her what the SAC had wanted. She told him it was just to thank her for her work protecting the judge and to congratulate her on her engagement. There was no way she wanted him or her squadmates to know she was a suspect in QuenMass. She was too upset to keep working, so she took a few hours of annual leave and went home for the day.

When Cliff arrived she was still fuming. She followed him into the closet while he got out of his slacks and polo and put on his favorite jeans and T-shirt, one he'd won at a geocaching event. She was talking so fast he could barely understand her.

"They even made me take a polygraph! A polygraph! Can you believe it? They don't trust me. They think I'm capable of mass murder."

"Whoa, slow down. A polygraph? That's cold. What did they ask you?"

"Just the usual stuff. Are you lying? Were you involved in QuenMass? They wanted to know whose idea it was to land at San Quentin, yours or mine. I assured them it was mine, Cliff. You're totally in the clear."

“This is my fault. It’s got to be because of the Geocache Murders case. I told you all about that. They must think I’m still possibly involved in that, and it comes down on you. That’s just wrong.”

“It’s not your fault. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m the one who wanted to go up there.” After a moment she considered what Cliff had just said, and it struck her that it just could be true. Maybe they did still suspect him. “Cliff, I know you told me all about that. The body you found, how the other bodies were near geocaches you had found. But the bad guy was caught, wasn’t he? What was his name?”

“Charles Price. At least that’s the name he was using. That’s the name on the wanted poster. He’s still at large. His real name is Kurt Leaming, but I wasn’t able to convince everyone of that. The army declared him dead in Afghanistan, so some people think the real Leaming died there; it’s just an alias Price used.”

“Maybe you’d better tell me the whole story again. I wasn’t around here when this all happened. I was back in Utah.”

Cliff sighed. “Okay, I’ll tell you after dinner. I’ve haven’t had a chance to decompress.

Chapter 12

When dinner was done and the dishes cleared away, Cliff could no longer avoid telling the tale. He laid it all out for Ellen. Almost all ...

“It started with me finding a body – just a skeleton with some clothing really – while geocaching. I didn’t know it at first, but it turned out to be a fugitive I was supposed to arrest years earlier during a drug task force raid. They were able to determine that he went missing, presumably killed, the day of the raid. Of course I cooperated and told them about the geocaching, but it turned out it was a puzzle cache and I had solved the coordinates wrong. So I was searching in the wrong place. This added to the suspicion. How did I know the body was there unless I killed him?

“Then two more bodies, fresh corpses, if there is such a thing, were found up in the Santa Cruz Mountains, both near geocaches I had found. Handcuff marks suggested law enforcement. That meant we had a possible civil rights case. A task force was formed with local agencies and the FBI. An agent came out from FBIHQ to work it since I had just retired and all the local agents knew me. I continued to cooperate, but I knew the investigators still considered me a suspect. All the caches involved were hidden by Enigmal. You know him; you’ve found some of his puzzle caches. He was a suspect, too, at first. He was unidentified for quite a while. I was sort of an unofficial assistant on the geocaching aspect even while they suspected me. Enigmal was a local college kid named Leaming. Leaming – Enigmal, get it? An anagram.

“Anyway, it was a big thing in the local TV news and papers at the time. I was hiking with one of the investigators to the site of one of the geocaches where a body was found in order to prove I was there for a legitimate purpose. That was in Castle Rock. You’ve been there. My signature would have been on the cache log sheet. Instead she got attacked by a mountain lion at the cache site. We both did. I was able to kill the lion with her gun after she got knocked out, but I got pretty chewed up. It broke some bones in my ankle and clawed me up pretty good. We were both rescued by a park ranger. The local *Mercury News* hack made it into me rescuing the damsel in distress kind of thing.”

Ellen’s interest was piqued even more. “So it was a woman. Was it the FBI agent?”

“The FBI agent was a woman. She’s an ASAC somewhere now. But that’s not who I was with there; I was out with an agent from the BNE. You don’t work drugs, so maybe you don’t know – that’s the Bureau of Narcotics

Enforcement, the state equivalent of the DEA. They're called special agents, too, from California DOJ."

"I've helped on a drug search and met a couple of BNE agents. What was her name?"

"Karen Delgado. You don't know her. She got promoted and transferred to Sacramento. Let me finish. The BNE was involved because two of the murder victims were members of the same drug gang, a Mexican group. They were growing pot in the hills and later found to be distributing cocaine, meth, pills, ... almost everything.

"Okay, so I figured out Enigmial was Bart Leaming; he was born missing an arm and was too young, so he was eliminated as a suspect. They interviewed him and found out he hid his caches in places he knew about from when he was a kid going hiking and camping with his dad, Kurt Leaming. Well, it's a long story, but Kurt Leaming turned out to be the killer. He was dumping bodies in favorite places he knew about, just as his son was hiding caches in those same areas. He was an army ranger who everyone thought was killed in Afghanistan. But he really wasn't. His helicopter was shot down as it lifted off, and he survived by luck and his athletic ability. Everyone else was burned beyond recognition. He just lost a little finger. Leaming was about to be court-martialed for the murder of a local police chief, so he switched identities with one of the soldiers in the copter and identified that body as Leaming's. The army sent him stateside under the other guy's identity to recover, and he deserted once here.

"Karen and I tracked him down through a geocache he placed to keep other geocachers away. Talk about irony. We went there, found his campsite, and were about to return with evidence when he confronted us. He got the better of us both. He's incredibly fast and strong. He had this crazy scheme about how the U.S. government or maybe Mexico should poison the drugs coming up from Mexico instead of intercepting them. We should let them come in with secret, slow-acting poisons to kill all the stoners and lowlifes. Karen, uh, Delgado and I were handcuffed to a tree there, and he might have killed us, but Karen managed to escape and get help.

"Leaming fled and is still at large so far as I know. He's very tech-savvy and had some Internet connection to get new identity papers. He'd been using the name Charles Price, but it must something else by now. He worked as a part-time bartender and sort of handyman and house sitter up in the mountains.

"The problem was, afterward, even though Charles Price disappeared and the murders stopped, not everyone believed us. The army insisted that Kurt Leaming had died; they wouldn't admit they'd screwed up the identification. No one had his fingerprints. The army had destroyed his records after he 'died.'

Whatever prints were recovered from where we were being held, well – there was nothing to check them against. He never made direct contact with his ‘widow’ or son, Bart. He was afraid he’d be court-martialed and Bart would also lose the death benefits that were paying his tuition, so he stayed away to keep them out of any conspiracy or criminal acts. And to keep them from turning him in.”

Ellen interrupted again. “But why wouldn’t they believe you? I don’t get it.”

Cliff hemmed and hawed for several seconds. “Leaming had cleaned up the evidence. One set of handcuffs he used was Karen’s, and the other one, the one from Afghanistan, got accidentally tossed at the hospital when they cut it off me. They couldn’t check my story. There are no prints on file for him either. He had no obvious motive or connection to the defendants.”

“So why did he do it?”

“He was an anti-drug vigilante. His wife was an alcoholic and party animal. She’d taken drugs in high school when she got pregnant. Bart was born missing an arm. Kurt blamed her drug use and the dealers. It was a blow for him because he was a star athlete and his son was born with a deformity. Then 9/11 happened, and Kurt joined the army. He has a strong moral sense of a sort – a distorted sort. He wants to cleanse the world of drugs, of all the ‘bad guys.’ He used to hear the drug dealing going on in the parking lot outside the bar where he worked, and he got sick of it. He did his own investigation and hunted down some of the drug gang members. One other victim was a drunk driver who had killed a CHP officer and his own girlfriend in an accident. That guy had survived and taken off. He’d been hiding out of state for several years. The couple were regulars in the bar, and Leaming recognized him when he came back to the area years later. That was sort of a killing of opportunity. One more bad guy gotten rid of. But if you don’t believe Price is Leaming, then there isn’t much of a motive there.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t really explain why they didn’t believe you. A federal agent and state agent, I mean, come on. You were found handcuffed to a tree.” Ellen had detected body language that said Cliff was still holding back. “There’s more to the story.”

“Yeah, well, the thing is, Karen and I got to know each other pretty well, and we, see, ... we started seeing each other, so the papers made it sound like I could have been the killer and Karen covered for me with this story. One of the killings took place in Santa Cruz County, and you know what it’s like over there – the People’s Republic of Santa Cruz. The D.A. is more like the ACLU. They would rather assume some evil fed was going around slaughtering recreational

drug users, which is most of the electorate there, than believe some shaggy bartender/mountain man was the perpetrator. He was a volunteer firefighter and popular with the regulars where he tended bar. But the task force officers believed us, at least that the killer was Charles Price. He was indicted and is now a fugitive. Except for Karen, I'm not sure they all believe Price is Kurt Leaming. There are still wanted posters out for Price, but I'm sure he's got another name by now. I heard it's in cold case status now."

"Couldn't Bart or his ex-wife identify him from his photo? Or some old classmates?"

"The only photo they had of Price was his crummy DMV photo. He'd grown a beard, grown out and dyed his hair, worn glasses for the photo, and of course was years older. His wife was a drunk and not cooperative. She received a \$400,000 insurance settlement; she'd have to pay that back if he was alive. Nobody even showed the photo to Bart since he was just a kid when his father disappeared, and he thought of him as a war hero who died in combat. His ranger buddies were either killed with him, uncooperative, or sticking to the army line that Leaming was killed in action. So, in a word, no. Officially, I'm in the clear, but there are a few people out there who never really bought the story. Some of it Leaming told me after Karen escaped, so I'm the only one who heard him admit those details."

"What about this Delgado woman? Is she under a cloud, too?"

"Not that I know of. While he was holding us, Leaming gave us a lot of good scoop on the drug gang he was exterminating. Once Karen escaped, he knew he couldn't hang around anymore and wanted the BNE or FBI to wipe out the gang for good. He told me where the stash house was, and I told Karen. So later she led a team and did exactly that. She became the big hero in the BNE and got promoted to Sacramento."

"Are you still in touch with her?" This question was not entirely motivated by a professional interest. She wanted to know whatever she could about this ex-girlfriend.

"No, absolutely not." Sensing her feelings, Cliff drew her close. "No, not in years."

Chapter 13

The daily briefing in Fitzhugh's office with the director was different this time. Porter was asked to sit in. This was the first time he'd ever spoken to an FBI director. Sometimes past directors would come down to Quantico for graduation ceremonies of new agents, and a perfunctory handshake and congratulations would be conferred on the awed graduates, but not for his class. It had been an assistant director who then retired a month later. For Porter, this was a heady experience.

"This time, I've got information for you," the director said over the speakerphone. "The Lab just told me they've identified the specific batch of Thanapest used for the killings. The stuff has some kind of garlic oil in it to make it smell bad – a warning smell for safety. So the Lab can do DNA analysis on the garlic. Those guys are amazing. They can identify these sequences. I don't know the details, but every batch has slightly different DNA in it. They've done the same analysis on the samples the company turned over to the California pest control authorities. It comes from 51G. That's the batch number. Manufactured in 1951. I just got this five minutes ago. Do you have paper records to trace that?"

"That's fantastic, Mr. Director," Porter bubbled. "We do. We can run with that."

"Super. Dan, I have the utmost confidence in you and your team. Trey has told me what fine work you've been doing, and I read your reports and 302s. The AG is following this herself. She'll be thrilled to hear it."

Fitzhugh frowned slightly at this exchange. He was used to being the one to heap effusive enthusiasm on the director and his ideas. It was not Porter's place to usurp that role. Still, it sounded like a breakthrough.

"I'll start the squad on those records as soon as I get back to the R.A.," Porter continued.

"Good, good. I'll let you get to it, then. You'll be getting the Lab report sometime today. I'll have them transmit it as soon as I'm done with Trey. But you can start on that 51G batch."

Fitzhugh made a two-handed shooing motion to Porter, indicating he was being dismissed.

"Yessir, thank you. I'm off now." He left without further pleasantries. His enthusiasm for this lead was genuine. He stopped in the anteroom of the SAC's office to open his briefcase and pull out some notepaper. He wrote "Batch 51G, 1951" on the top sheet and closed it. Like most agents, he was an incessant

note-taker. He had learned from hard experience that memory plays tricks on you surprisingly quickly sometimes.

When he got back to the San Rafael office, he called Jo-Lene and Buck into his office and explained the new information.

“Jo, do we have sales records by batch for the Thanapest?”

“I think so. I skimmed through them, but they aren’t well organized. My team has been working on the prison insiders and those records, not the stuff from CalChemCo. There are thousands of sales records and all on paper. Nothing’s computerized. Maybe Buck has looked?”

“No, Oliver and I have been going over the case files on the original murders from the death row inmates, looking for people with motive and opportunity, family members who would want revenge.”

“Okay, we’re reorganizing as of now. Document what you’ve done so you can pick up in the same place if you need to, but we’re going to put everything on these Thanapest records for now.”

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Over the next two days the squad was able to make sense of the mass of invoices, shipping orders, purchase orders, and production records. The sales records were organized by customer, not batch, but at least they were matched with shipping orders. When the sale was fulfilled, the shipping order number and date were handwritten on the purchase order. The agent could then go to the master shipping order binder, organized by date, and find the right shipping order. On it would be the purchase order number for reference and the product and batch number actually shipped. They quickly figured out it was more efficient just to look through the shipping orders for the batch number and then go back to the purchase order to get the customer name and other information, like the exterminator’s license number.

The process was tedious, but the time frame was mercifully short. 51G was one of the last batches made. The list of customers – all exterminators – began to grow. It was impossible to know for sure that every customer of this batch was on the list. They would have to examine every sale that took place after the date of manufacture, but there were a few missing batch numbers, or shipping orders that could not be matched up with a purchase order or address. Some records were stained, torn, or otherwise made illegible.

Still, a backbreaking, mind-numbing effort soon produced a list of 322 exterminators, almost all in California. The real breakthrough, though, came when Oliver Gulick found correspondence with the California Department of

Pesticide Regulation. It showed that the DPR was threatening to outlaw Thanapest due to its poor safety record. The company was planning to get out of that product line anyway, so an agreement was reached between the company and the DPR. CalChemCo would send notifications to its customers that the product line was being discontinued and the DPR was considering banning the product. The letter would state that the remaining supplies should be destroyed, with instructions provided on how to do that, and the customer should send a letter to the DPR certifying that he either used all of his supply or destroyed the remaining amounts. Carbon copies of the letters were sent to the DPR so they would have a list of who used Thanapest and could correlate responses from the exterminators. If the DPR still had these records, and if they were accurate, the 322 could be vastly reduced. Of course, the agents realized, some exterminators might not have followed instructions, or might have falsely certified that their supplies were used up or destroyed, but everyone sensed they were on a hot trail.

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Porter reported the progress to Fitzhugh.

“Good. That’s good, Dan. But we’re going to have to examine the records at that state agency. Sacramento Division is going to want in on that, and the state DOJ, too. I don’t want them getting the credit for our work. Your work. If anyone’s going to catch VIO, it’s going to be us.”

“Look, Trey. We can send someone to Sacramento. It’s only a ninety-minute drive from San Rafael. The director will give us what we need. We can always say that we need someone who is intimately familiar with the names of suspects and the whole investigation, that an agent in Sacramento wouldn’t know what to look for.”

Fitzhugh liked the idea, but his Machiavellian wheels were turning. “Do we have any suspects? The last I heard, as of yesterday, you said no.”

“It’s still no. I mean, we have a few names of corrupt guards and family members of murder victims who are boasting that they wish they had done it. There’s this one guy whose daughter was raped and killed by one of the death row inmates who said if we had done our job, VIO wouldn’t have had to do it for us. There are people out there who think we stopped the executions. FBI, federal judge. All the same to them. A fed is a fed. But no real suspects yet.”

“What about Kennedy? Did the polygraph results come back?”

“Yes. Clean as a whistle. No deception. She was just up there kayaking with Knowles, trying to get some geocache thing. It was all her idea.”

“Thank God. I’m glad I told you to keep her name out of it. Any suspicion on her would’ve just exasperated the situation.”

“Exacerbated.”

“That’s what I said. You still need to interview Knowles. I doubt he’ll take a polygraph. It’s easy with employees. They have top secret clearances and are subject to polygraph at any time, but not once they’re retired. We need to clear any of our own in this, and he’s still going to be associated with us in the public eye. We’re going to need help from the state people in Sacramento, too. They know their records better than we do. Check with the Lab to see who they’ve been working with. It seems like they’re cooperating and letting us run the show.”

“Right, boss.”

Chapter 14

Ellen was itching to go geocaching again. The weather was good and Cliff was free, too.

“Cliff, I’ve been looking at my Fizzy grid. Are you up for another high-terrain cache?”

“That depends. What did you have in mind?” He knew better than to commit before hearing what was entailed. Some of those high-terrain caches were beyond his physical limits.

“There’s one over near Pescadero. Three point five difficulty, four terrain. It’s a two-stage multi right at the beach – or, actually, the cliff facing the beach. The first stage is the hard one. It says there’s a large metal object halfway down the cliff face. You have to climb to it, either up from the beach or down from the top of the cliff, and get the numbers on the object. Then you just substitute some of those numbers into the coordinates to get the second stage. From the logs, it looks like the second stage is nearby and not too hard. Not on the cliff.”

“Perfect! This’ll be a good test for Ace.”

“Who?”

“Ace. The Acerodon. The drone they lent me for the investigation.”

“Cool. I get it. You think you can get a good enough photo of the object to read numbers on it? It might be on the side, or hard to read – rusted or something.”

“We’ll never know until we try. Let’s do it. Bring your climbing gear in case you need it.”

They drove over to the coast in Cliff’s convertible. The drive through the Santa Cruz Mountains was always scenic, but traffic was always heavy on the weekend when the weather was good. Soon, they were at the coast and turned north on Highway 1. Once they left Santa Cruz, the traffic thinned out. There wasn’t much development between Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay.

They passed through Davenport, picking up some caches en route, and continued north. They stopped at Greyhound Rock, ate a picnic lunch, and picked up the cache there. Then they drove on to the Pigeon Point Lighthouse, farther up the coast. The lighthouse was now a youth hostel. Situated above a spectacular coastline, with breakers crashing over a rocky shore, it was a superb location for photography of any kind. Cliff insisted on trying out the Acerodon. He turned on the controls for the drone and the camera, which was still mounted. He verified that he was getting a good video feed in live time from the camera – first-person view.

Then he connected the drone's battery and let it lock in the GPS signals so it would know its "home" location. It was programmed to return to its takeoff point if it lost the control signal. By this time a few people had gathered in the parking lot to watch what Cliff was doing. He got the bird in the air and began to maneuver it around a bit. Once he got comfortable with it, he flew it over to the lighthouse and circled the building. It wasn't long before he could tell he was getting some great video footage of the lighthouse, the surf, the whole scene. He knew he had limited battery life, though, and didn't have the recharger with him. He had a spare battery but didn't know how much he'd need at the cache site, so he brought the bird back after only five minutes. Satisfied, he packed it up again. This was the first time Ellen had seen it in action, and she was as fascinated and delighted as the rest of the onlookers.

They drove on to the site of the target cache of the day. The beach below was very small and accessible only by walking down a steep and somewhat treacherous set of steps carved into the cliffside. Surfers, fishermen, and sunbathers sometimes used this path, but it obviously did not get much use. The cliff wasn't very high, but it was nearly vertical. The first stage was an old anchor and easily visible from above, but neither Cliff nor Ellen could see whether there were any numbers visible on the topside. It was closer to the top of the cliff than the bottom, so if Ellen went down to the beach, it would be a longer climb, but at least then she could continue climbing up to the top, never having to climb down. Climbing up was always easier and safer than climbing down on a steep cliff.

Ellen wanted to go for the cache herself, even though Cliff had the drone out and ready.

"I know, let's race," Cliff suggested.

"So you think you can beat me with that Orwellian toy? Dream on, Big Brother."

"You don't stand a chance. The human body is old tech. This is the new world. A brave new world."

"If I win, what do I get?"

"I'll cook for a week."

"Hah! It's your week to cook anyway."

"So what do I get if I win?"

Ellen thought about it and then whispered in his ear. He chortled. "Win a race, get intimate relations. That's taking race relations to a whole new level. Literally."

They decided that she would go for the cache, first descending to the beach and then climbing up, while Cliff would try to get the numbers with the

FPV camera. He gave her a head start, not lifting off until she was on the beach. He didn't want her racing down the steep steps trying to compete. She began her climb, and Cliff sent the Acerodon aloft. He quickly positioned the drone to hover over the anchor, but whatever numbers it had did not stand out well enough for him to read. Ellen was only halfway to the cache. He lowered the drone so that the camera angle was more horizontal than vertical. He had to position the camera with a separate control. It was tricky, but he was fairly skilled by this time. He had to hover safely out away from the cliff while he did the camera movements, then move the bird in again. This time he could see a year imprinted on the metal: 1861. He was taking continuous video, so he didn't have to press a button or take a photo. It was all in the camera.

Cliff brought the Acerodon back to the car, detached the camera, hooked it with a USB cable to his laptop, and viewed the footage on the bigger screen than the small FPV monitor. Sure enough, there it was, 1861. He took the numbers and substituted the digits as directed on the cache page to get the second-stage coordinates of the cache. He was done before Ellen even got to the anchor. He went back to the cliff's edge and looked down. She was at the anchor and jotting down the number on a small pad. He watched her climb the remaining few yards to the top of the cliff. She looked tired but exhilarated. She held up her pad with the number on it, grinning triumphantly. Then Cliff held up the laptop with the screen shot showing the same number. She mimed an exaggerated pout and stuck out her tongue. Cliff put down the laptop and did a little victory dance, holding his hands up in the traditional V symbol as he spun around slowly. They both laughed and got back in the convertible, heading for stage two. God, could life get any better than this?

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The SAC had called her and told her that she had come through the polygraph with flying colors. He'd thanked her for her duty with the judge protection, a task he knew had to be unpleasant.

"One thing, though, Cliff," she said hesitantly. "He asked me to see if you would be willing to do one, too. An interview – not a polygraph, I mean."

"Why me? It was your idea to go geocaching there and to decide to land at San Quentin. The polygraph proved that. I was following your lead."

"I know, I know. But that's why you should do it. You have nothing to hide. Do the interview and get rid of that cloud you say is hanging over you. I'll just be getting grief until you do."

“Fitzhugh is a total ... uh ... total jerk. First he yanks me off my squad and transfers me up to San Francisco, then –”

“Cliff, you’ve told me all that before about why you left the Bureau. So he’s a jerk. So what. Please, will you just do this for me?”

He started to object some more, but she made doe eyes at him and hugged him gently. He melted.

“Okay, for you I’ll do it. Not for him.”

They retired to the living room and turned on the evening news. Yet more of the VIO manifesto had been made public. The announcer was explaining that VIO was claiming that their action in removing murderers from society would actually save lives. They claimed to have plans to undertake similar actions in other states and that society would see a significant drop in the murder rate. VIO estimated that over two thousand innocent lives would be saved over the next ten years as a direct result of the San Quentin “group execution.” They claimed to have thousands of members worldwide, including members of the corrections agencies who could assist in their mission.

Ellen shook her head. “It’s probably just one nut,” she declared.

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Three days later, Cliff showed up at the federal building at 450 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco, for the interview. It was the first time he’d been there since he had quit four years earlier. There were some new faces, but many of the support staff had remained unchanged and greeted him warmly. He knew some of the agents, too, and several from his administrative squad made a point to come by when they heard he was in the office. Most commented on the beard and the absence of those thick glasses he’d worn as an agent. There was some good-natured ribbing.

Fitzhugh wisely chose not to greet him personally. Dan Porter had that responsibility. After a nostalgic tour around the floor, he finally led Cliff into an interview room. Since Kennedy had already been cleared by the polygraph, the decision had been made not to ask Knowles to take a polygraph. They were fairly reliable, but they weren’t admissible as evidence, and they often antagonized the subject unnecessarily. Knowles was a former FBI supervisor, after all. A routine interview should take care of it. Porter introduced him to Oliver Gulick, who had been chosen as the second agent on the interview.

First they collected the usual identifying and contact information – name, address, phone, employment, and so forth. Then they asked him about what had happened that day he and Ellen had landed at San Quentin. He had made a point

to go over that with Ellen before coming up for the interview, and he was confident his story matched hers. This was easy since it was all the truth, but they had wanted to make sure they remembered it the same way.

Next came the normal questions about whether he knew who had committed the massacre and whether he had ever heard of VIO before the partial manifesto was first made public by WikiLeaks. Cliff had no trouble with any of these; he answered no without hesitation. Finally, Porter said he just had a few more questions. The first of these was “Have you ever heard of a poison called Thanapest?”

An electric shock ran through Cliff’s body. Not the kind of shock from a short-circuiting toaster. It was more like a lightning bolt. It was the kind of shock that ran through the brain and organs of someone who has just realized he is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people, someone feeling the weight of the world crashing down upon his shoulders, a paralyzing miasma of guilt and fear. He began to sweat uncontrollably. His vision was gone. He couldn’t focus and couldn’t hear what Porter was saying. His hands started shaking so badly he gripped the arms of the chair to try to steady them, to stay upright even. Somewhere in the back of his brain his instinct for self-preservation kicked in. He mumbled, “I’m not feeling well, food poisoning, I think.” He couldn’t even hear his own voice.

“You told me you were feeling fine and not suffering from any illness before we started. It was the question, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it? Tell me what you know about Thanapest.” The tone was sharp and insistent.

“I, I’m just ... I think I’m going to throw up.” This was no lie. A wave of nausea had overtaken him, and his bowels were telling him they were about to let loose.

“Tell me what you know! You do know something about Thanapest.”

“I don’t,” Cliff croaked, standing on shaky legs. “I’m sick. I have to go.”

“You can’t go! Come on, Cliff; tell me what’s really going on. You know me. I’m not going to screw you. Think of the victims.”

“I’m sick, Dan. Food poisoning,” Cliff gurgled, choking back the half-digested lunch. “I have to get to the bathroom.” He rushed toward the door.

“Finish the interview. If you leave like this you’ll be a suspect for sure.” Porter had caught up to him and had his hand on his arm, trying to detain him. But Cliff had thirty pounds of muscle on Porter, who wasn’t a small man, and the effort was in vain. Gulick remained seated. Realizing this, Porter continued, “Okay, look, I’ll accompany you, and when you get it out of your system you can finish the interview.”

Cliff virtually dragged Porter into the nearby bathroom, the location of which, fortunately, he knew from having worked there. He barely made it in time. Porter let go of his arm when Cliff entered the stall, but he stood by just outside. He told the man at the urinal, a supply clerk, to get some agents – big ones. While rude noises emerged from the stall, two heavyweights came rushing into the bathroom and waited for Porter to tell them what was going on. Porter just motioned for them to be quiet and stand by.

When the retching and flushing was over, Cliff emerged looking very much the worse for wear. His shirt was soaked with sweat and splattered with vomit. He stumbled to the wash basin and splashed his face with water as the three agents surrounded him, one of them with a billy club in hand. Cliff ignored them. After he'd washed himself, he was collected enough to speak.

"I'm sorry about that, Dan. It must have been food poisoning. It came on suddenly. I thought I was fine."

"Cliff, we need you to finish the interview. *You* need you to finish the interview. Take some deep breaths and when you're ready, we'll go back in there. There're just a few more questions. You remember what it was like to be a murder suspect. You of all people should know how important it is to get this cleared up so we can move on and leave you alone."

"Dan, I can't. I'm too weak, too shaken now. I'm sorry. I'll reschedule."

"Cliff, you really need to do it now. This –"

"No!" Cliff bellowed and started walking to the door. "I said I'll reschedule. Later, not today." Cliff had no intention of coming back, but he knew it looked better to appear to cooperate.

Porter stepped between Cliff and the bathroom door, and one of the agents stepped next to him.

"Dan, get out of the way. I'm leaving."

Porter didn't move. The two heavyweights looked nervously at each other and then at Porter for a cue.

"Cliff, this is a mistake. It's crazy to walk out now."

"Are you arresting me? For what ... barfing on government property?"

"No one's arresting you. I just know that you'll regret it if you walk out now. I'm saving you from yourself."

One of the two heavyweights was a young man Cliff didn't recognize, but the other one was a legal instructor he knew. They had worked together on the annual agent legal instruction in past years. Cliff turned to him, smiling. "Jon, would you please inform Special Agent Porter that unless he plans to arrest me, I'm free to go."

The agent cleared his throat and whispered something to Porter, whose shoulders dropped. Then Porter stepped aside and signaled for the other agent to do likewise. Cliff walked out, all three agents trailing behind closely. They said nothing. When they got to the elevator lobby, Porter told Cliff to call as soon as he could to reschedule. Cliff nodded curtly.

When Porter returned to the interview room, Gulick was still sitting calmly, jotting notes. He looked up at Porter and declared in a soft voice, "That man is guilty."

Chapter 15

Karen Delgado was a success story – by her own standards at any rate. A seventeen-year veteran of the California Department of Justice, she was still under forty and already a supervisor. People told her she could pass for thirty, and she knew she could still turn a few heads. She'd entered the DOJ right out of college, and it had been her life. Her short-lived marriage to another DOJ agent in San Jose was a failure, but she'd never wanted a family and kids anyway. She wanted nothing more than to protect the public from the evildoers all around them. To be a lifesaver, a hero – or heroine, since she also wanted to be a role model for women.

She was driven to succeed, an ethic imbued in her by her plasterer father, the son of a farmworker. She was the first in her family to even attend college, much less graduate, which she did with honors. Now she had been assigned to assist the FBI with QuenMass, the biggest criminal case in the country. The governor himself had told the attorney general to assign the best investigator he had to the case, and she had been chosen. She only wished her father was still alive to see her success.

Special agents of the California Department of Justice could be assigned to any of various bureaus or special projects, much as FBI agents could be assigned to different squads. She had worked drugs and firearms for most of her career, but in the last two years she had been assigned to a terrorism project and a law enforcement intelligence unit at DOJ headquarters in Sacramento. She enjoyed the variety in the job and some of the challenges in the intelligence work, but she missed the field work. Paperwork bored her, and she now had at least four times more of it than when she was catching drug dealers. She was a biologist by training and loved the outdoors. She'd made her bones by rappelling from helicopters into clandestine marijuana fields and catching the Mexican gang members who tended them.

At least now she was back on case work, and what a case it was. As she sat at a folding table in a rented warehouse listening to the two FBI agents, she felt the adrenaline rush coming on. She could be the one to identify VIO. God, case work felt good!

“Nice to meet you, too, Karen,” Jo-Lene was saying. “This is my colleague, Hector Ruiz. We really appreciate all the help you’ve been to our Lab people.”

“Anything I can do. I’ve learned more about insecticides and other poisons in the last two weeks than I did in four years of college biology courses. So what is this new effort about?”

“We asked you to pull out all the records on Thanapest for a reason. I see you’ve got them here. At least I assume that’s what’s in the boxes.”

“It is.”

“That’s the poison used in the massacre. Obviously, that’s tightly held information. It hasn’t hit the news yet, and we want to keep it that way.”

“I’d guessed as much. I haven’t said anything. I went through the closed file storage and tagged the boxes myself. I didn’t mention the word Thanapest to anyone. But I can’t guarantee we have everything. Our records aren’t organized by product brand name, not most of them anyway. Some are chronological, some are by company name or licensee name, and some just seem to be random.”

“We understand. Here’s what we want to do.”

Holford pulled out the list of customers the FBI had found in the CalChemCo records, the ones who had been notified to destroy any remaining Thanapest and report to the DPR. She explained that they wanted to compare the list to DPR records to see who had certified the destruction of the poison or confirmed they had used all supplies on hand. If there were any batches unaccounted for, they would start with those for further investigation. The purpose was to start winnowing down the 322 exterminators to a more manageable number.

Delgado understood and told Holford that she thought she knew the right box to start. She stood and walked over to one side of the room and rummaged around until she found what she was looking for. She hefted a banker’s box onto the table. Despite her petite 108 pounds, she had no trouble lifting the 55-pound box. It was labeled “CalChemCo 1950–1952.”

“It should be in here. Look for a folder called ‘Thanapest Destroy Notice’ or something like that. I saw one like that for another recalled poison. Different company. It was a manila folder, I think, so it’s probably going to look the same.” She dumped the contents of the box onto the table and shoved one-third of the pile toward each agent. They each began rifling through them.

“I’ve got it,” Ruiz crowed, holding up a thin folder labeled exactly as Karen had predicted. He opened it and held up a one-page business letter from CalChemCo with a six-page list of customer names stapled to it. The typed list was on carbon paper and some of the letters and numbers were so smudged they were hard to make out. Some 8’s and 3’s looked identical, as did some a’s and o’s.

Jo-Lene recognized the list immediately. It was the same list Gulick had found in the records they’d received from the company. This one had something different about it, though. Most of the names had check marks penciled next to

them. Some had little circles drawn, and some of those circles had checks inside. Others didn't.

The FBI list also had check marks next to the names, but those marks were the 322 who had received batch 51G. Cross-correlating them shouldn't be hard.

Delgado took the list from Ruiz. "I think this is where we say 'Eureka.' If I'm right, the check marks mean the DPR got a response from the exterminator company. The circles are probably those who didn't reply by the deadline, and the check marks would probably mean they complied late. So the empty circles would be the ones who never responded. Of course, you realize that some of these guys probably just sent the letter without actually destroying the stuff. I mean, they paid for it and probably kept it around until it was used up. There are cheaters who'll swear to anything to keep regulators off their back."

"We know," Jo-Lene said. "But someone didn't use it all up until a few weeks ago. We can start with the empty circles. How do we confirm what you said? Shouldn't there be a letter from the licensee actually certifying whether they used it up or destroyed it?"

"Yeah, there should. That would most likely be in the correspondence folder for each licensee. I didn't bring those over. I didn't know that's what you would want."

"Can you get 'em?"

"Of course. I'll go over to the storage facility when we're done here and find them myself. You want to keep this quiet, I know. But I may have something else here that will help."

She headed back to the boxes and slid out several more. The two FBI agents joined her. These were the records from the safety testing department circa 1950s. She explained that the determination that Thanapest was unsafe to use would have originated from this department. The concern back then wasn't for the environment; it was for the safety of workers and livestock. Incidents of employee accidents or deaths of cattle, chickens, and other farm animals would be here. If they recommended stopping use of Thanapest or any other pesticide during this period, there should be a record. She hoped that a final summary of the resulting voluntary destruction program would be documented there. The testing people would want to know.

The three of them began riffling through the testing records. The hours came and went.

"Are you two assigned here to Sacramento?" Karen asked Jo-Lene.

"No, San Francisco. We have a squad dedicated to this case."

“Hm. I used to work in the San Jose office of the BNE. Drug raids in the mountains around there. I worked with a lot of your guys. Did you ever hear of a task force case called Cojane?”

“I’m afraid not. We’re assigned to San Rafael. The judge mentioned in the VIO manifesto sits in San Jose, though, so a couple of our agents there are working that angle of this case. Maybe the judge could have received threats or other communications to give us leads, maybe dismissed as crank emails before, that sort of thing. Woody Braswell. You know him?”

“You work with Woody? Sure, I remember him. Tall, good-looking black guy. The girls were swooning over him. He was really new when I was on the task force. He wasn’t assigned to Cojane, but I was introduced to him somewhere along the line. Probably at a bar.” She laughed at this last remark.

Jo-Lene found the comment vaguely unsettling, although she had to admit it was an interesting tidbit. This was not a time for “girl talk,” especially in front of Ruiz. She said nothing and resumed searching. After an hour she suggested they break for lunch. They all drove to a local taco stand. Delgado and Ruiz exchanged some brief Spanish that elicited a guffaw from Hector. This just served to irritate Jo-Lene more, since neither of them offered to explain the joke to her. They ate lunch and returned to the warehouse.

Eventually they found the report recommending taking Thanapest off the market. Unfortunately, it was not accompanied by anything about the results of the destruction program. When it hit 3:00, Jo-Lene said they were going to drive back to the Bay Area and had better get going. It was a long drive. She said they’d be back tomorrow and help go through the correspondence with the exterminators to read the actual letters of certification.

As they gathered up the paperwork, Ruiz handed Jo-Lene something she hadn’t yet seen. Delgado had had the foresight to have a copier and evidence bags on hand. Ruiz had bagged and tagged the original list Delgado had found and copied it so they’d have something they could mark up. The original had to be kept pristine. He had been comparing the two lists – Delgado’s and the FBI list – and underlined the names that had both empty circles on the DPR list (showing they had not certified destruction) and check marks on the FBI list (showing they had received batch 51G). There were only twelve names. Holford was delighted.

“Great work, Hector. When we come back tomorrow, we’ll start with the correspondence from these guys.” She pulled out notepaper from her briefcase and wrote down the names and addresses. Handing the list to Karen, she said that these should be the first files to pull out for tomorrow. She thanked Karen again and headed off with Ruiz.

Karen looked over the list. There were two names in Oregon and one in Washington. It was not surprising that there had been no response. Out-of-state exterminators did not have to do anything for the DPR, although they usually complied with requests in order to stay in good stead with their own regulators. She continued down the list. Some of the names were companies still in existence, franchises that carried the names over decades, even though the current owners were totally different from the people who would have been involved in 1951. One name caught her eye, Philippe Heindryckx, a sole proprietor in Turlock, California. She'd never been to Turlock in her life. Why did that name look familiar? It was odd sounding, and she thought she would remember it if she'd met anyone with that name. It would come to her, she was sure. She gathered her things, locked up, and headed to the state storage facility to pull the files.

Chapter 16

Ellen enjoyed a cuddle after lovemaking and was always prone to pillow talk.

“I was thinking. You know that drone you were talking about?”

“Hmm.” Cliff was on the verge of falling asleep. He hadn’t been sleeping well since the aborted interview and was finally getting some relief from his sleep deprivation. This was an unwelcome intrusion.

“How much can that carry?”

“Seven pounds.” His irritation at being interrupted showed in his voice.

“Do you think that something like that could have been used at San Quentin?”

Suddenly awake, Cliff pondered the idea. He hadn’t considered the idea before, but if it was possible ...

“I doubt it. How could you fly it at night? It would have to have lights for navigation, and the guards in the towers would surely see something like that. And the payload. How much poison would have to be carried? A lot more than seven pounds, I think, to kill that many people. Then how do you get the poison into the air conditioning system? It was a gas, wasn’t it? That’s what the news is saying. It would just float away.”

“Aren’t there bigger ones? That could carry more?”

“Sure, but only the military or police or licensed drone pilots can have those, they told me.”

“They’re considering whether guards could be involved. Woody Braswell said they think it’s an inside job.”

“That doesn’t solve the navigation and other problems. I still don’t think it’s physically possible.”

“You’re probably right. That would be wild, though, you know? Wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm, wild. Go to sleep.” But Cliff didn’t go to sleep himself. Not for a long time.

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The next morning Cliff went into work early, even before Maeva. He didn’t want her around while he made the call. He called the drone expert he’d been working with. He knew Gabe would be at work because he did a lot of the flying early in the morning when winds were the lightest. Gabe turned out to be at work, but in the office.

“Gabe, I have some more questions for you.”

“Whatever you need.”

“Can your copters be flown at night?”

“Sure. They have bright lights on them. They really stand out against the night sky. You can see all kinds of videos on YouTube of people flying them at night – in the middle of fireworks, around brightly lit scenes.”

“What about if you flew them without lights? Like in stealth mode. Can that be done? With infrared or night vision or something like that? I’m wondering about police and military applications.”

“You’d have to physically block the lights. There’s no off switch on those, but duct tape should do it. We don’t have a mount that fits a night vision camera yet, but we’re working on that. Some police forces have asked about that. We’re losing that business, but we’ll be competitive in that space within a month or two.”

“Who’s your competition?”

“Our product line is the best and most reliable there is. We don’t have any competition, not real competition. We –”

“Spare me the sales pitch. I can find out easily enough. Just give me a list. You said you’re losing that police business. You want to look like you’re making full disclosure, not hiding things.”

Gabe sighed. “Okay, I’ll email you a list of our main competitors and a feature comparison list. This is highly confidential, though, understand? It’s for Google’s use only for this merger.”

Cliff’s computer was already on, and in only a few seconds Gabe’s email appeared in his inbox with an attachment. He opened it.

“Got it. Wow, there’re more drone companies out there than I thought.”

“The field is exploding in popularity. It’s important for Google to get in on this now. Most of them are toymakers. The ones at the top of that list are the only serious competitors.”

“Okay, I have another question. Can you program in a set of GPS coordinates – a waypoint – and direct the craft to go there?”

“Yes. That’s part of an upgrade package to our software. That’s mainly a military feature, but it works with any of our units. It wasn’t on the Acerodon you tested, so I didn’t show that to you. That list I just sent shows that as a feature. Most of the high-end competition has that, too.”

“Okay, good. So let’s say I was a farmer, and I wanted to fly it to several spots in my field to drop an insecticide or something. Do you have something that could do that?”

“I don’t think that would work. I haven’t heard of it. I doubt you could carry enough insecticide or apply it precisely enough to be effective. Liquid is heavy, and powder would just blow all over the place. The downdraft from the rotors is fierce.” He paused a moment. “Actually, I did read an article about something like that in the industry rag. There’s a third-party company that sells a simple servo mechanism that runs on a separate radio control. That can be attached to our units or several other models. The article said a farmer rigged it to drop poison bait pellets around plants that were being devoured by gophers or deer or something. I don’t remember the details. Payload weight would be the biggest limitation. But maybe you could do something like that. The possibilities are endless with these things.”

Cliff thanked him and hung up. Then he examined the list Gabe had provided. It took some searching, but he eventually narrowed down his search to one model drone. A fifty-five-pound octocopter, it had a carrying capacity of up to twelve pounds for short range and had a servo built in. It had infrared camera capability available linked to first-person view. You could fly it at night and see what was below you in real time. A note said it was especially suitable for identifying marijuana fields or grow houses by their heat signature at night. It also had special noise-dampening motors, designed for police use, to prevent “hostile parties” from shooting it out of the sky. He considered the theory a long shot, but if he was right, this would be the drone he would have used.

He looked up the manufacturer online and called the sales office. A representative was promptly on the line and very accommodating. Cliff claimed to be representing a California police agency that preferred to remain anonymous due to bad publicity about drones. He wanted to know about the availability of that model. He said they would use it to identify pot grow houses and for hostage situations, so it had to have night vision. The sales rep gave him the usual spiel, which Cliff patiently sat through, pretending to listen. When he asked the price and got a \$34,000 tag, plug add-ons and upgrades, he whistled like it was out of the question.

This was all a lead-up to the key questions. He said that was beyond his budget and asked if there was somewhere a person could rent or lease one of these. The rep said there were two dealers in California who trained police officers, cameramen, and others in using these aircraft and would rent them out if the trainee passed the course. They were too expensive and complicated to just rent out to anyone who wasn’t trained. One company was in Davis and the other in San Bernardino. He gave Cliff the contact information on both.

Cliff called the Davis company first and determined they were open. He told Maeva he had to leave for the day to do investigations on the Google

acquisition. She was surprised, since he had told her the previous day that he would be in all day, but she nodded and told him she'd call him if anything came up. It was still only 10:00 AM, so he had plenty of time to do what he needed to do.

He put the top down on his Volvo C-70 and headed onto the 237 freeway. He was already going 75 when he passed the new 49ers stadium and never slowed until traffic in the East Bay forced him to. He drove up 680 to I-80 and pulled into the drone company parking lot just before noon.

Davis is an agricultural town just west of Sacramento in the flat central valley of California. The university there is famous for its veterinary and horticultural research and expertise, although it also has fine medical and law schools. The company was located on the outskirts of town in an industrial section very close to a small airport. It soon became clear that the dealer was also a regular pilot with access to full-sized planes and helicopters.

Cliff claimed to be a sheep rancher who was having problems with coyotes. They were attacking his flock at night and killing the lambs. He couldn't patrol the 400-acre spread by jeep at night. He wanted to monitor them from the air silently, or at least quietly enough not to scare off the coyotes, and drop poisoned meat chunks on their trails just ahead of them when he spotted some. He asked if they had something that would do that job.

At first the owner tried to sell Cliff his services as a helicopter pilot, saying that was the way to go, but Cliff insisted the coyotes would be scared off by a real helicopter. The man then mentioned that he had a drone that might work, but it took a skilled operator. Again, he offered his own services as a drone pilot. Cliff again rejected the idea and insisted he wanted to be able to do it himself.

As expected, the owner pointed out the model drone Cliff had previously identified from the list and explained that he was a dealer who could sell or rent that unit. He didn't have a mechanism to drop the bait, but he showed Cliff where the pin moved a few inches behind the camera mount when the servo switch was activated. You could hook a cord to that to open a door in a container, he explained. Cliff was interested.

“So how do I learn to operate this thing?”

“We give lessons. On these high-end units we don't rent them until you pass our course. We start you on the basics with a smaller unit, like the Phantom here. We'd rather you crashed a fifteen hundred dollar unit than a thirty thousand dollar unit, but by the end you work these large ones. After five days of training, if you pass, you can rent this unit.”

“Can this be done all in one week – one lesson a day?”

“No, it’s all done on weekends and it’s a group thing, so we can’t move one person through ahead of the others.”

“You talked about crashing these. Are they hard to fly?”

“Not if you follow our instructions and exercise good judgment. There’s always some yahoo who thinks he’s right out of *Top Gun* and tries to do some fancy aerobatics on day one. As soon as the first guy does that and gets charged an extra repair bill for a ruined Phantom, the rest of the class behaves.”

“Okay, well, I’m wondering. This could get expensive. If it’s that tricky ...”

“No, man. You got me wrong. It’s really easy. You can do it. If you can drive a car, you can drive a multicopter. You just need training, that’s all. Here, we got a video of one of our classes. You can sit over here and watch it.” There was a laptop computer set up on a table in a customer area with couches and chairs, apparently a place where classes or other groups hung out while waiting. The owner tapped the touchpad and the screensaver gave way to a beautiful picture of the Sierra foothills obviously taken from the air. He launched a video program and said he’d be right back after the video, but he had to make a phone call.

Cliff watched the video for several minutes, hoping against hope to spot the man he was looking for, but by five minutes in, he could tell he’d seen everyone in the class. His attention drifted for a moment and he realized that the walls of this waiting area were adorned with scads of photos in cheap frames. Some were of the owner or other pilots, including crop dusters and Air Force fighter pilots. Most, though, were snapshots apparently taken here at this shop, or the associated training area or airport. Satisfied customers, presumably. One corner held sets of posed groups looking very much like the shots of kids’ soccer teams, all smiling at the camera. Someone would be holding a sign with a date and a legend: “CERTIFIED UAV OPERATOR CLASS #3” or whatever the number was. He knew from his Google investigation that UAV stood for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Cliff pulled out his reading glasses and scanned these photos carefully. The classes were given only quarterly, he was able to determine from the dates, although he was sure they would become more frequent as the popularity of drones rose. There were only five of these photos, and he didn’t spot the face he wanted in any of them. The classes were small, only six or seven people in a class. Then he noticed that there were candid shots surrounding the graduation photos. These showed the students flying the drones, or shots from the drones of the class below. That’s where he spotted who he was looking for. A tall man wearing a ball cap and sunglasses. He was clean-shaven, had a buzz cut, and his hair was jet black, so he looked nothing like the wanted poster, or how Cliff remembered him, but he was almost certain it was the man he was looking for.

When the owner came over again Cliff pointed out the photo. “Hey, I see you have shots of the students flying the drones.”

“UAVs we call them. Yes, just look at the big smile on that gal. This is serious business, mind you. Don’t get me wrong, but it’s also a lotta fun.”

“Right, right. I’m sure it is. But this guy here,” he said, pointing out the tall man. “I don’t see him in the graduation photo.” Cliff pointed to the frame with the man’s classmates lined up for the final shot. “Did he flunk out? It looks like it’s not that easy, maybe. I don’t want to spend my money for a class and still not have a solution.”

“No, no, he didn’t flunk out. In fact, he was the best student we had in that class. Maybe the best I’ve ever had. He picked it up right away and graduated. I think he had to leave early the day the photo was taken, but he got his certificate. Noel’s just camera-shy, I think. He rented the same unit I was showing you a few times, in fact. Believe me, we’ll get you through. If you don’t get it the first time through, we’ll put you in the next class for free. That’s only happened once.”

A feeling of calm engulfed him. Noel. Noel Clifford. That was the name the man had used in Turlock, a clever twist on Cliff’s own name, Clifford Knowles, when he had worked at the storage locker facility and broken into Cliff’s storage locker. Now there was no doubt. The trail of Kurt Leaming, a.k.a Charles “Chaz” Price, a.k.a Noel Clifford, had finally been picked up. The hunt was on.

“Really!? Did he have coyote problems, too?”

“No, he was a reserve police officer and wanted to become a full-time officer, if I remember right. He said he thought the department would be buying one of these soon to hunt for pot fields. They do thermal imaging at night just like you want to do. So he reckoned if he got certified he could get on full-time. You ask me, he didn’t really need the practice. He was that good. But he rented them a couple of times to practice his night flying. We don’t do that as part of the basic course.”

“That’s perfect. I think this is going to work out. I’d like to get a testimonial from someone who’s used these things before I sign up, though. Not that I doubt you, but you’re obviously an expert pilot. I’d like to hear it from this guy Noel since he’s doing the same kind of flying and the same UAV. You know, the pros and cons.”

“Well, I probably shouldn’t be giving out anyone’s personal information without their permission. I could ask him if it’s okay, I suppose. I think I have his contact info here. How about I get back in touch with you after I –”

“No, no,” Cliff quickly interjected. He didn’t want Leaming warned. “That’s all right. Do you remember what department he was with? I can check with them about their UAV program and see what they like about this model.”

“I don’t see the harm in that. It was a sheriff’s department, I think. Somewhere over in the North Bay. Around Clear Lake maybe. The department never contacted us, so I don’t know if they ever bought one. They could’ve got one from the manufacturer.”

“Right. Hey, do you have any literature on that unit you showed me? I’d like to study up on it. I may even want to buy one.”

“Lemme look in back. What’s your name, by the way? You haven’t told me.”

“Cliff.”

“Hi, Cliff, glad to meet you. I’m Marion. With an O. That’s like John Wayne’s real name, not Marian.”

“Likewise, Marion.” They shook hands.

While Marion stepped into a back office, Cliff pulled out his smart phone and set it on macro. He focused on the picture of “Noel” and took a shot. Fuzzy. He looked back and Marion was still out of sight. He quickly snapped off a couple more photos until one of them looked good on his phone. Not great, but it would probably do.

Marion re-emerged and handed him a brochure. Cliff wanted to ask him if he had any more photos of that class, but that would be too obvious. He had a lot to go on already, and he had a plan. He decided to stop while he was ahead. He thanked the man and returned to his car. For the first time since the interview, he didn’t feel helpless. He had a chance to control his fate. He put the convertible in gear and took off.

Chapter 17

As soon as he got back to the office, Cliff called the sheriff's department in Lake County and asked to speak to Deputy Clifford. The receptionist said there was no such deputy. He said he thought the fellow was a Reserve Officer, not a regular deputy, and he wanted to commend him for helping him change a tire. The answer was the same – no such person in the department. This didn't surprise him, but it was a setback. Leaming no doubt had lied to the instructor. There is no way he would join a police force of any kind since that would involve a background check and photos and fingerprinting.

But when he signed up for the UAV lessons, he probably had to show a driver's license and that presumably matched the name he had given: Noel Clifford. That was the same name he had used the last time Cliff had seen his trail. That was probably an established identity by now, although Cliff doubted it was the only one he was using. The next step was obvious enough. As a licensed private investigator and attorney, he had an account with the California Department of Motor Vehicles – the DMV – to request license and registration information. He was only permitted to use it for certain recognized purposes – locating defendants or witnesses, serving subpoenas, identifying hit-and-run drivers, and so forth. But all he had to do was check a box that he was trying to locate a witness. He entered the name Noel Clifford into the web form, checked the box, and within seconds the screen displayed a photographic image of the driver's license and a listing of the vehicle registration information for one Noel Clifford. The only vehicle listed was a motorcycle. That fit. Leaming rode a cycle, too.

Both records had the same address along Highway 20 in Lucerne. Cliff looked it up on Google Maps and switched to Street View. It was a bar. Cliff was encouraged. He felt confident Leaming was following his usual pattern. He'd worked at a bar in his previous incarnation. That was a job skill he'd learned over the years. Offenders stick with what works until it doesn't work any longer. In fact, that's true for most people in life. Leaming had been changing identities and working as a bartender or handyman for years without being caught. He liked to live up in the mountains and move around a lot, staying in hunting cabins or unoccupied vacation homes in exchange for doing maintenance and providing security. That was his pattern three years ago, and Cliff hoped it still was.

Lucerne is a sleepy town on the northeast coast of Clear Lake, one of the largest lakes in the state. Situated ninety miles north of San Francisco, it is far enough away to be out of commuting range of that city and other Silicon Valley employers. It sits outside the posh "wine country" of Marin, Napa, and Sonoma

counties but has its share of vintners. The Clear Lake area is a popular vacation region, especially for boaters, fishermen, water-skiers, and hunters, but the economy is largely dependent on an Indian casino and an unofficial marijuana cultivation industry. Lucerne, being harder to get to than the more southerly towns, is deprived of most of the tourist industry wealth and suffers from a high poverty rate compared to nearby communities.

Cliff learned all this from an hour or so on the Internet, although he knew much of it just from being a resident of the Bay Area most of his life. If you ever watched television, you couldn't help but see ads for the casino. He needed to get up there and investigate in person, but he had to think about how to do it. He wasn't sure how he could do so without arousing suspicion in Ellen, yet he couldn't tell her the real reason. On her prompting, he had told her the "whole story" of the Geocache Murders in more detail than ever before, but he hadn't really told her all of it. He hadn't told anyone. Ever. He couldn't do it now. If she knew, there was no way she would marry him. That was something he couldn't risk.

By the time he got home that evening, he had a plan.

"I have a surprise," he said when he walked through the front door.

"Hi," she called from the kitchen. "I'm cooking. The fan's on. I didn't hear what you said."

"I said I have a surprise. How would you like to spend next weekend at Clear Lake? I've rented us a home right on the lake for three days."

"Clear Lake?! Who are you and what did you do with my fiancé?"

"No, really, I decided we need some quality time while the weather's still good. I was lucky to get a spot, but the season's almost over up there and I found something."

"Since when did you become Mr. Spontaneity?"

"Since the world's best mother-to-be agreed to marry me." He came over and gave her a kiss on the neck as she set the table.

"You're sweet. Ooh! I just remembered. Clear Lake, you said?"

She ran into the other room and flipped open her laptop, which was in sleep mode. She pulled up her geocaching database.

"Yes! I knew there was something I needed up there. 'Rock with a View'! It's a 1.5/4.5 and hidden in 2006. That'll fill another Fizzy square. I'll be down to just two."

"Super. It's a date."

"Hey, I do have something I have to talk to you about. Dan Porter called me and asked when you were planning to reschedule the interview. I thought you did the interview. I know you did, in fact."

“I did. That was the day I got food poisoning. I told you about that. But I answered all his questions.”

“So how come he’s asking for a reinterview? He seemed to think you weren’t done.”

“That’s so typical. Look, I did the interview. I answered all his questions. I had nothing to do with QuenMass. He knows that. Doesn’t he know I have to make a living? I’ve got clients. I’m not spending a half day up in San Francisco again just to give him a longer 302.”

“He said he can come down to your office if that’s more convenient.”

“I don’t want him in my office. I don’t want Maeva or my clients or the other tenants on my floor seeing FBI agents treating me like a suspect. I’m done with that.”

“Criminy, Cliff. I’m going to get static from Porter if you don’t finish the interview.”

“I did finish the interview. I just told you that. Who do you believe? Him or me?”

Cowed at the sudden change in mood, Ellen stepped back. This was unlike the Cliff Knowles she knew, the one she loved. After a minute she spoke.

“Alright already. I’ll tell him it’s up to you two to work out. I’m not going to get in the middle of it. You can bark at him, not me.”

This wasn’t going well, Cliff realized. He hated lying to Ellen and realized he was letting the whole situation get to him.

“Hey, hey. I’m sorry I got short with you there. It’s just ... I went through hell being treated like a murder suspect three years ago, and I don’t want to go through it again. I promised you I’d do the interview and I did it. That’s it. Let’s drop it. Just think of how much fun we’ll have at Clear Lake.”

“Fine.” But it wasn’t fine. She’d seen a touch of darkness in Cliff’s eyes she’d never seen before, and she didn’t like it. She didn’t like it at all.

She finished putting dinner on the table while Cliff changed his clothes. They ate in semi-silence, broken only by some polite small talk.

Chapter 18

Jo-Lene Holford, Hector Ruiz, and Karen Delgado spent the next three days reviewing files of exterminators who had received Thanapest batch 51G. Of the twelve that Ruiz had identified as not responding to the destruction request, two were within easy driving distance of Sacramento. Jo-Lene and Hector decided to do the field work personally.

It turned out neither of the businesses still existed. Jo-Lene found the address that was in the DPR records for one of them, but it was no longer a pest control business. It was now a strip mall. By going to the county property records she found the developer, and that company was able to tell her they had bought the land at a bankruptcy auction in the 1980s. A trip to the bankruptcy court in Sacramento produced the name of the bankruptcy trustee, who, luckily, was still working as a trustee, although semi-retired. He had to dig through his personal records, but he was able to find that he had sold the business assets to another extermination business. The list included an inventory of pesticides. He provided that address and a contact name.

From there she and Hector tracked down the buyer, a small company near Davis. The current owner wasn't the same person who had bought the pesticides at the bankruptcy sale, but he had the name and number of the previous owner of the business. He was able to get him on the phone while the agents sat there in the office. Yes, he remembered buying that inventory. Yes, he remembered that there was still some Thanapest in it, even though that was supposed to have been destroyed years earlier. The bankruptcy judge had approved the sale of the pesticides on the condition that they could only be sold to a licensed exterminator who could use or dispose of them properly. Otherwise the trustee would have to do it. The court order included a requirement that the buyer certify to the court that all chemicals were properly handled in accordance with all environmental laws and pesticide regulations. He had bid one dollar for the whole lot, which was a tremendous bargain for him. The trustee, and apparently other potential bidders, wanted no part of the poisons. The trustee would have paid him to take them off his hands, he was sure. He'd destroyed the Thanapest as required by the court order since it couldn't be used. There was a letter to the DPR to that effect, he claimed.

The agents returned to the files and found the letter in question in the buyer's folder. Since it was decades after the original destruction order and came from a different user, it never made it to the original file for a checkmark.

This took them a day and half, and they felt lucky to have done it that fast. If someone in the chain had died or changed a telephone number or moved

out of state, it would have taken weeks of searching property and court records. Even then, they might never have figured it out. They decided not to try to do the field work themselves after that. Instead, they prepared a communication sending out leads all over the western United States for agents to track down what had happened to the Thanapest inventory from the first set of twelve exterminators who had not responded to the destruction request.

In the meantime, Karen Delgado had continued to slog through the records while the agents were out chasing down the first case. She identified twenty-two more cases the FBI might be interested in. They were exterminators who had received the 51G batch and certified it was destroyed or used, but who had been problem cases. These were people or companies with license violations or allegations of unsafe practices, including allegations they were still using Thanapest on crops after 1951. The allegations were never proven, but they were worth looking into. The agents agreed and sent out more leads.

Karen was feeling useful but disappointed. The assignment hadn't turned out to be what she had expected. She was doing nothing but reviewing records. She hadn't strapped on her gun in ages. She knew that this sort of work was important, but it wasn't her style and she thought she wasn't particularly good at it. Her idea of field work was going out on the street and rounding up bad guys. She was kick-ass, not fat-ass. She began to form an impression that the FBI agents were going to be ones who identified the source of the massacre poison and took credit for it. She didn't have a strong sense of interagency rivalry, but it bothered her. She didn't harbor a strong jealousy or resentment about it, but she envied them the ability to go out and chase leads. It could be tedious, too, she knew, as the first case showed, but there was a certain freedom to it she missed.

Chapter 19

Fitzhugh was getting increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress. He and Porter went over the state of the case once again, this time on the phone. Fitzhugh wanted to know if there had been anything developed from the Thanapest pellet found near the dead bird. Porter said no. Both were disturbed by the fact it was so close to the place where Knowles and Kennedy had landed and that Knowles hadn't finished responding to that question.

"But, Trey, Kennedy came through the poly clean as a whistle, and Knowles did fine on that part, too. He was as cool as a cucumber until we got to the question about Thanapest. I don't see how that could connect."

"How close did they get to where the bird was found?"

"We went back over that with the guards. The kayaks were under observation from all the way out into the Bay until they landed, and it was a good twenty-five yards from where the bird was later found. It was months earlier than the massacre. It's aggravating as hell that Knowles won't finish the interview, but I don't see it as a viable lead."

"He's probably still smarting from that Geocache thing a few years ago. I can understand it. Okay, drop that. What else can I tell the director?"

"Nothing, really. Jo-Lene is back. Hector is commuting over to Davis every day to work with the pesticide records. We're starting to get some results back on the initial leads we sent out, but no bonanzas there. The first twelve is down to eight, but it looks like we're going to have to send out leads for every single recipient of batch 51G. That's over three hundred. This approach could take months – years even – and it's not looking good. Based on the first few, it looks like we just aren't going to know what happened to the missing Thanapest in at least a third of the cases. It all happened too long ago. Records are lost. We could still get lucky, but ..."

"That's not what I want to hear. You need to do better. You're replaceable, you know."

Porter bit his lip. Steamed, but intimidated, he waited before responding.

"We're doing everything we can. Tell the director that the other divisions aren't working the exterminator leads fast enough. This is a Major Case. All leads have priority. You can tell him we have those first four cases of missing Thanapest accounted for. That's something."

"It'll have to do."

Ellen gushed like a schoolgirl when she saw the bedroom. Cliff had rented a three-story house right on the shore. Every room had a view of the lake. The sun was out and a stiff breeze was blowing, mitigating the late afternoon heat. She could see windsurfers skitting across the lake surface. She stepped out onto the patio. She could hear children laughing down below, where there was a small beach, private to the three houses on this enclave.

Cliff unpacked and changed into shorts and sandals. He went to the refrigerator and grabbed a Coke. They'd brought an ice chest with them with cold sodas and other groceries, but he'd left the beer behind. He didn't drink alcohol in her presence now, since she couldn't drink until after the baby was born. This solidarity effort was only half-hearted, since he still drank beer when she wasn't around.

Ellen was already planning the geocaching trip for the next day. Bartlett Springs Road, the one up to the target cache, was narrow and unpaved, but her SUV should be able to handle it fine. There wasn't any long hiking, although the cache at the end, with its high-terrain rating, would apparently require a real climb. She still felt fit, but she knew she would have to lay off the strenuous caches soon. At her age, she didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. She didn't know how many more chances she would have at motherhood. The morning sickness hadn't yet hit her, and it should have by now; she knew she was lucky there. This was going to work out, she was sure. This cache was the last one she needed for the challenge that had a high-terrain rating. The other two squares were high difficulty, but low terrain. If she could solve some difficult puzzles that were in easy locations, she should be able to complete the challenge requirements before the baby was born.

Cliff sat musing how he would do the investigation without Ellen realizing what he was doing. He had driven by the bar on the way to the rental house. It looked exactly like it did on Google Earth's Street View. He hadn't seen a motorcycle out front, just some cars and pickup trucks. He was still on plan, and he didn't see any problems with it yet.

The next morning they ate breakfast and dressed for the geocaching trip into the mountains. Ellen drove, as she usually did when they were in her car. The country was similar to the Santa Cruz Mountains where she and Cliff often went caching, but there were noticeable differences. It was a bit more rugged and somewhat drier, definitely more rural. Where there would be hiking trails and fire road gates back home, here there were ATV or jeep trails and no fences or structures of any kind for miles.

They stopped and picked up the first few caches along the route. These were not particularly difficult hides, and the finds were routine enough. The

weather was hot, but bearable. For some reason, Cliff had taken forever to get his act together in the morning, so they'd gotten a late start, but the route was easily doable in two or three hours. It did mean they'd get back later in the afternoon and be searching in the hottest part of the day. They had all day, but Ellen wanted to get back and lounge on the beach or the patio.

They reached the target cache, Rock with a View. It was a spectacular rock with a spectacular view from the top. She had expected a harder climb, but with Cliff's help she made it up. He wouldn't let her go out to the most precarious point, so he ended up retrieving the cache and handing it to her. She signed the log sheet and handed it back. He signed it and replaced it. They climbed down and ate the picnic lunch she had packed, cold cuts, chips, fresh fruit, and sodas. This was life at its finest, she thought.

The drive back down was more adventuresome. It had begun with considerable difficulty, since there was no good place to turn around. It took a five-point turn, with wheels almost over the edge of the dirt road, to get facing back down. Then halfway down, they met a four-wheeler coming up the road fast. They both skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust just in time. There was no room to pass. The car going uphill had the right-of-way. That meant Ellen had to back uphill until they could find a spot wide enough. Backing around the steep turns on the narrow road wasn't easy. Cliff offered to do it for her, but she declined. She was glad to finally reach a spot and edged over onto a small shoulder. The other car squeezed by after folding in its side-view mirror. The driver, a teenage boy, waved a thank you and took off again.

When they got back into town, Cliff asked if she could stop at that little bar they had seen on the way out of town. He was dying for a cold beer.

"I thought you weren't drinking when I wasn't," she complained.

"I know. I'm sorry. So shoot me. I just really need a cold beer. Just this once. You can have a soda or something."

"But a bar? There's a market on the way. You can buy a six-pack there, and we can have it at the house. It's much nicer."

"That'll take too long. Come on, be nice."

"Okay, you big lug. Just this once."

They pulled into the small parking lot in front of the bar. This was the address Leaming used on his "Noel Clifford" driver's license. There was still no motorcycle out front.

Cliff ordered a cold draft and Ellen ordered a lemonade. They sat at the tiny table in the corner, Cliff facing the bar, Ellen with her back to it. Cliff smacked his lips with pronounced gusto after the first big swallow to make sure Ellen knew how much he had needed that beer. All the time he was checking out

the bar and its patrons. There were several male customers at the bar and a middle-aged woman tending it, which seemed to consist of standing behind it and reading a celebrity news magazine. A youngish man who looked Native American sat at a table at the other end of the room with a redheaded woman.

“Hmm, what’s this?” Cliff said as he pulled a ripped piece of notepaper out from under the table. It read “Noel, call Bob.”

“Where’d you find that?”

“It was right here. I sat on it.”

Ellen looked at it, disinterested.

“It could be important. Why don’t you take it over to the bartender,” Cliff continued. “You’re closer. Maybe she knows who Noel is.”

Ellen looked at him quizzically. Cliff had practically raced her to get to the inside seat when they had sat down. This struck her as odd, but she was too tired to think about it. She picked up the note and walked over to the bar.

“Here, we found this note. Do you know this guy?”

The bartender looked at the note skeptically. “Noel? He don’t work here no more. Hasn’t in months. This note looks brand new.” The woman slipped her readers down her nose and looked at Ellen more thoroughly. “Do you know Noel, is that what this is? Did he leave you with that bun in the oven? He’s got another girlfriend now, honey.”

The remark stung. She didn’t think she showed yet and wasn’t pleased to be disabused of that notion. And the gall of the woman to assume that ... but then, the assumption was true, she realized, if not with this Noel guy.

“No, I don’t know him. My fiancé found it on the chair.” She nodded toward Cliff. He looked down at his beer.

The bartender peered over at Cliff, as did the two men at the bar.

“I don’t think so. I clean that off every day and hasn’t been nobody there today till you guys.”

Ellen was feeling uncomfortable about the situation and looked back at Cliff for guidance.

“I don’t know,” he called back. “I just found it stuck to my pants. Maybe I picked it up outside or somewhere. Forget it.”

The bartender shrugged and shook her head like she still didn’t believe it. “Well, you can just stick the note in the milk can on the side porch. We get mail for him every now’n again. He lives up in the mountains somewhere around here – across the lake now, I think, but he comes by every coupla months or so and grabs the mail. He comes early. I never see ’im.” She went back to reading.

Ellen huffed back to the table, handed the note to Cliff, cocked an eyebrow, and waited. The unspoken “Well?” was impossible to miss.

“Geez, I don’t know what that was all about,” he managed to whisper. “I just found the note.” He swigged at his beer, trying to look nonchalant – and innocent.

Ellen wasn’t satisfied. She knew he was hiding something, but before she could say anything, one of the men at the bar walked over to the table. He addressed Cliff, not Ellen.

“I know Noel. Lemme see the note. I can get it to him.” The man was in his mid-forties, had long hair in a ponytail, and wore an army jacket with the sleeves cut off. He leaned over for the note.

Cliff slammed his hand down on the note. “No, never mind. It’s probably not even the right guy. Thanks anyway.”

“No, really. I know him. Rides a motorcycle. Missing a pinkie finger, right?” The man’s stare was boring into Cliff’s eyes.

“How would I know? I just found the note, alright? I have no idea who this guy Noel is. It just says to call Bob. If you see him, tell him to call Bob. Sheesh.”

“Bob? I know several Bobs. Does it have a last name? Or initial? Lemme see it.” He reached again for the note.

Ellen had had enough. She turned around and knocked the man’s arm back. He had been reaching over her shoulder. “Hey, Mac, get your paw outta my face. Just buzz off and leave us alone, okay?”

The man stood back and weighed his options. Cliff was almost twice his size, and even Ellen was bigger than he was. He turned away and muttered in a soft but mocking tone, “Sure thing, Lassie. I hope the litter’s all healthy.” He resumed his spot at the bar.

Cliff flushed with rage at the insult and started to stand, but Ellen grabbed his arm. “Leave it alone, Cliff. Let’s just go.”

His plan had been an utter failure, and he knew things would only get worse the longer he stayed here. He felt ashamed and impotent in not being able to defend Ellen’s honor, but he knew there were bigger stakes. They left their drinks half-finished and hurried out.

Ellen questioned Cliff again when they got in the car. “Are you going to tell me what that was all about?”

“I told you. It was just some stupid note I found. Let’s just forget it and enjoy our vacation.” Cliff’s face was still red, mainly because he was blushing from guilt at lying to her, but he hoped she took it for anger over the man’s cutting remark.

The response didn’t sit well with Ellen. She let it pass at first, but by the time they got back to the rental house, it struck her.

“Missing a pinkie? Cliff, you’re looking for that Leaming guy, aren’t you! You told me he lost a little finger.”

There was no point in denying it any longer. “Okay, I was. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I just happened to hear something about a guy named Noel working up here as a bartender, and I thought I’d check it out. I was sure he wasn’t there today. I just wanted to confirm I had the right bar. It didn’t go the way I expected.”

“Duh! You take me into that dive pregnant with Cliff Jr. to go after a serial killer without telling me!? I didn’t even have my gun with me. What could you have been thinking?”

“It was stupid. All right, it was totally stupid. I’m sorry. Now that I know he’s really up around here, I’ll refer it to the police. I thought that if you were the one asking about him, there was less chance it would raise suspicions. He knows what I look like, but not you.”

“Who’s Bob?”

“There is no Bob. I made that up.”

“How’d you know his name was Noel? That’s not a name you told me before.”

This was getting uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure how much more he could string out the lie. He knew the best way to lie was to stick as close as possible to the truth.

“You remember the other day when I had to go up to the Sacramento area on that drone company investigation I’m doing?”

“No. You never told me that.”

“Didn’t I? I thought I did. I had to check out the distribution network for the drones as part of my due diligence. I went to a school up there – that’s the closest one – to see how they’re used, is there a rental market, and so on. Anyway, I noticed pictures on the wall of students learning to fly the drones, and someone in one of the photos looked like Leaming, although he’d changed his look quite a bit. I asked the instructor/owner, and he gave me the guy’s name and said he was from Lake County somewhere. I ran the name through the DMV and got this address. His only vehicle is a motorcycle, which is what he used to drive, so I was pretty sure it was the same guy. But it wasn’t until that clown in the bar said something about the missing finger that I was sure.”

“You used your commercial account to track a fugitive? Isn’t that illegal?”

“Maybe, but for a good cause. Are you going to narc me out?”

“Of course not . . . not that I don’t feel like it right about now. Why didn’t you just come to me? The guy has a UFAP warrant out on him, doesn’t he? If we

have a federal case then I have a legitimate reason to run DMV – all the databases.” UFAP is the Bureau acronym for Unlawful Flight to Avoid Prosecution.

“I assume it’s still open. When the UFAP case was opened a year later, one of the San Jose agents interviewed me for more details, but I think the case went cold. Then Woody Braswell took it over and reinterviewed me, but I didn’t have any new information. It may not even be open now. Look, I said I’m sorry. I thought this would be a good geocaching trip and a fun vacation, so why not combine business with pleasure. It was a stupid thing not to tell you; I know that now.”

Ellen saw from his expression that he was feeling guilty and embarrassed. She still wasn’t mollified, but she finally let it drop. Cliff heaved a silent sigh of relief when he realized he had sold the lie. But now he had to figure out how to proceed. His original plan was in tatters.

Chapter 20

Rita Lord enjoyed hot weather, which was a good thing, since she was assigned to the Modesto Resident Agency. High temperatures routinely hovered near one hundred degrees this time of year, which was a bit warmer than she really liked, but the office and Bureau car were well air-conditioned. Small R.A. life was much better than in Headquarters City – Sacramento, in this case – and she was more than happy to finish out her Bureau career here. The cost of living wasn't too bad. Her husband had a good job with a construction business.

The case work was varied and interesting, too. Now she was running leads on QuenMass, the first FBI-designated Major Case she'd ever worked on in a twenty-year career. Some agents found these mass leads to be drudgery, but she looked at them more like playing the lottery and being paid to do so. There was always that chance that she'd find the clue that led to a breakthrough and solved the case. She might be the big hero. If not, well, she was getting paid and got to drive around in a government car listening to tunes on the radio much of the day.

So today she drove up to the address on her lead sheet, a farm in Turlock. A quick look made clear that the address was no longer good. The mailbox out front had been knocked down, and the driveway had a locked gate on it covered with cobwebs. Across the street, however, was another farmhouse, and she could see a man on a tractor in the distance. She pulled into his driveway and parked. She didn't feel like trying to chase down the tractor out in the field, so she walked to the front door and knocked.

A girl of twelve or thirteen answered. Rita showed her credentials and badge, said she was with the FBI, and asked if the girl's parents were there. The girl said her mom was "working," which apparently meant somewhere away from the farm, but her dad was "here," apparently meaning out on the tractor. Rita asked if she could call her dad to come to the house and told her it was important. The girl was enthusiastic about this change from her daily routine and happily called her dad on his cell phone. Since it was scorching on the front porch, Rita asked if she could step in while they waited. The girl let her in and closed the door. *Ahh, air conditioning.* The girl's father showed up after a few minutes.

Once again Rita displayed her credentials and explained that she was with the FBI. The man nodded and asked what she needed from him.

"Do you know who owns the land across the street?" She recited the address.

“I do, but that’s not the address anymore. When I bought it, I consolidated the parcels with this one. This is the only address for the whole parcel now.”

“I have a name here, Philippe Heindryckx. He used to have an exterminator’s business here. Did you know him?”

“Sort of. He was old and sick when I took over this farm, and he died soon after. That was years ago. I can’t really say I knew him. I didn’t know he was an exterminator. He just raised turkeys when I knew him.”

“When did you buy that parcel?”

“Almost three years ago. I’m letting it go fallow this year. I can’t get enough water because of the drought.”

“When you took over the property, did you see any records of his exterminator business, or any pesticides maybe?”

“No, it was all cleaned out. You can look for yourself if you want, but there’s nothing there. The farmhouse is still standing, but just barely. The turkey coop is just a turkey coop. I sold the birds off. I’m not in that business.”

She thought about this and decided to take him up on his offer. He seemed to enjoy this diversion from his farming as much as his daughter and went back to get the keys to that gate. He told his daughter to come on and get a ride in a real FBI car. This wasn’t exactly what Rita had in mind, but she decided there was no harm. The father walked across the road and unlocked and opened the gate, then walked back. The two of them climbed in the rear seat of the Bureau car, a Chevy Traverse, and Rita drove the four hundred yards to the other farmhouse. Seeing no one around who would be disturbed in this wide open farm country, she turned on the siren for a few seconds. The girl laughed delightedly at the sudden whooping noise.

They got out of the car and the man let her into the farmhouse. As he had stated, the place was empty. No furniture, no records, no poisons. The turkey coop was huge but bore no fruit, either. They drove back across the road to the coolness of the residence.

Rita asked the farmer if he knew the Realtor who had handled the sale for the estate. He didn’t remember his name but could give her his own Realtor’s name. He might remember. She asked if he had copies of the deed and other documents from the sale. He did. He disappeared into the back of his house for several minutes while his daughter sat grinning at Rita. She was a real FBI agent! And a girl! After a bit she offered Rita a Coke, which Rita gratefully accepted.

The farmer emerged with a thick manila folder full of legal-length documents. He offered it to her. It took her only a minute to find what she was looking for. The closing statement listed the Realtor’s name and address, which

was local, and the name of the seller, an attorney named Knowles in Los Altos, administrator of the estate of Philippe Heindryckx. She had a friend who lived in Long Beach and had visited her once; the buses there said Los Altos on them, so she was pretty sure where that was. She thanked the farmer and headed out to complete her other work for the day.

There was a bank robbery that afternoon on the other side of the county, and she was called over to assist with the interviews. So much for writing up this lead tonight. QuenMass took precedence over other cases in theory, but it was just a routine interview of the Realtor, and a bank robbery was a bank robbery. She'd finish the interview the next day.

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It turned out she was mistaken. The Realtor was still working in the area, but he was on a cruise to Alaska and out of touch. No one in his office knew anything about the Heindryckx farm sale. He'd be back in four days. She thought about whether she should just write up what she had or wait. She figured that if the Office of Origin – San Francisco – had a lead to follow up now, like interviewing the attorney Knowles, she would send the communication now, but if Los Altos was in the Los Angeles Division, it wouldn't really hurry anything to send it off today. She'd wait until the Realtor got back to ask him what had happened to any records Heindryckx had. He was probably the one who cleaned it out anyway. She went to her computer and typed "Los Altos Long Beach" into Google, and sure enough, a Wikipedia entry came up confirming what she thought. Los Altos was in Long Beach. It was on the Internet, so it must be true. She put on her calendar to contact the Realtor next week, the day he was expected. Then she began writing up her FD-302s of her interviews at the bank the previous afternoon.

Chapter 21

Cliff didn't want Maeva to hear the call, so he made it from home. It hadn't been an easy decision, but he saw no other choice. He dialed the number he still had in his cell phone contacts list.

Karen Delgado saw who it was when her cell phone rang. Caller ID was a wonderful thing. She considered not answering it but then relented.

"Cliff, what part of 'Don't ever call me again' did you not understand?"

"Karen. Just listen. I'm not calling about us. I know where Kurt Leaming is."

This quelled her temper immediately. "Are you serious? If this is just you trying to get back with me —"

"No, no. I'm serious."

"You know I'm not working that anymore. We identified the killer. There's an arrest warrant out. No one in DOJ is working that. Why'd you call me? You should be calling Mike Hsiao with the sheriff's department."

"He's up near Clear Lake. He's using another name. I can't go after him myself. I need a peace officer. You of all people should want to find him. To prove to the doubters that he's real, that you weren't making it up."

"My people believe me. I got promoted. I really don't care." She knew as she said it that she was being disingenuous, but she really, really didn't want to get drawn back into that case. The suspicion of her motives and integrity, the tempestuous relationship she'd had with Cliff afterward. It had been a thrilling adventure, but an ugly time in many ways, too. And now she was on QuenMass, the biggest case of her career. QuenMass ...

The lightning bolt struck. QuenMass. The Geocache Murders. Heindryckx. That's where she had heard that name.

"Oh. My. God. Your wife was named Heindryckx. It was all over the papers. 'The intrepid lion-slayer FBI agent whose wife, Stanford Professor Heindryckx, was tragically killed by a drunk driver and daring state drug agent Karen Delgado ... blah blah blah.' Leaming is the QuenMass murderer, isn't he? He got the poison from you."

Cliff hadn't expected her to put it together, but he knew it was hopeless to lie about it now. "No. No, no, no! I had nothing to do with it. Not intentionally, anyway. Leaming stole the poison from me."

"Stole it? That's weak. Okay, so I'll play along. How'd that happen?"

"You remember when he had us handcuffed to the tree and he told us about how the government should mix poisons into the drug imports?"

"How could I forget?"

“And I told him how my wife’s uncle in Turlock was an exterminator and how if I could I’d take all his poisons myself and drug all those stoners? I was trying to get on his good side so he wouldn’t kill us. I didn’t mean it. You must know that I’d never –”

“Okay, okay. I remember that. But how’d he get his hands on the Thanapest?”

“The uncle died. Rickie was his only relative. She inherited everything and was named executor. When she died, I inherited everything from her, so I took over as administrator of the old guy’s estate, which was still open. I cleared out all his pesticide stuff to a storage locker until I could figure out what to do with it. I didn’t know until months later it was stolen. He must have read those articles and looked up the probate records. There could only be one Heindryckx in Turlock. In fact, there were only two in the state: Philippe and my wife. It wouldn’t have been hard to track down the Realtor and find out what happened to the personal effects. The Realtor is the one who drove me over to the lockers. Leaming must have stolen the poisons from there.”

He’d been so wrapped up in defending himself, in answering her question so she wouldn’t hang up on him and call the FBI, that he had missed the significance of what she had said. Then, it dawned on him.

“Wait a minute,” he blurted out. “Thanapest? How’d you know about that? I didn’t tell you the name. And Heindryckx? Why did you bring up the name?”

Karen had to make a decision. She should turn him in to Jo-Lene Holford, she knew. She should not be giving out confidential information. But she knew she’d heard Cliff make that remark about the uncle’s poison to Leaming and never told anyone about that. She’d known Cliff was just spinning Leaming for their sake – to keep them both alive. And he’d saved her life from the mountain lion. Could she turn him in now? But she wondered, could he have been serious back then? Had he bought Leaming’s spiel and gone rogue, poisoning criminals? No. He could be arrogant, God knows, and oh, how she hated it when he corrected her grammar and acted so superior about being an FBI agent while she was “only” a state agent. But he was a man who respected the law. He was not a killer. She wanted to believe that anyway. They been together at one time, and though the affair was too brief to be called love, she had become close enough to know there wasn’t a murderer lurking inside him. These thoughts and emotions and a thousand more ran through her brain in a split second, not enough time for her to sort them out, but the words came flowing anyway. Without making a conscious decision, she made the choice to trust him.

“Cliff, I’m working on the QuenMass case now. With two agents from the FBI, from the San Rafael office. Holford, if you know her. The FBI identified the poison as Thanapest, even a specific batch. We’re looking through records from the pesticide control agency here to see what happened to unused supplies. Heindryckx is one of the first ones they identified who was supposed to destroy his supply and didn’t. They’ve already sent a lead to the Turlock office or wherever it is. They’re going to find out it was you who moved the pesticides any day now.”

Cliff slumped in his chair. He’d assumed he had weeks at least. Now within days he could lose everything. Ellen. His business. His unborn child. If he wasn’t prosecuted, he would at least be disbarred. He sat stunned.

Karen went on, “So how do you know it was Leaming who stole the poison? That’s quite a stretch to assume it was him just from that time you told him about your wife’s uncle. Anyone could have broken into your locker and stolen that stuff.”

It was like pulling teeth without an anesthetic, but it had to come out. The secret that he’d kept from everyone, that had been eating at him for years. “When I read about that cluster of dopers being poisoned around the Central Valley a couple years ago, I got suspicious. I drove up to the storage locker – I had forgotten all about it until then – and found all the pesticides missing. I didn’t remember all the chemical names, but originally there’d been this metal drum labeled ‘Thanapest’ that was open and about half full of these tins, like sardine cans. There must have been twenty or thirty pounds at least. That one I remember. Anyway, the manager was able to determine that the padlock on my locker had been switched by an insider, someone with access to the padlocks they sold. In other words, one of his employees must have done it. I asked if he’d had an employee that met Leaming’s description – tall, the missing finger. He said yeah, someone named Noel Clifford had worked the night shift for a while but had moved on.”

“Noel Clifford! He was goading you. Or trying to make it look like it was you, that you had just switched your first and last names as an alias. Incredible. What did you do?”

Finally. The hard part. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? What do you mean? You didn’t report it to the police – to Mike Hsiao?”

“I didn’t. I should have. I know I should have. But I had been through so much. I’d been under suspicion for months. If I brought this up, they’d just think I was involved in all those drug poisonings. The police and health authorities were attributing the deaths to overdoses or to dealers mixing the hard stuff with

unsafe cutting agents to give better highs. No one knew there was a vigilante poisoner out there. I didn't think anyone would believe me. They didn't believe me before about Leaming, so I just figured screw 'em. And the crime rate was down. With all the dopers falling by the wayside, the burglary rate was halved, bank robberies were down, rapes and murder, domestic violence throughout the Valley. It looked like Leaming was actually right. He was saving lives by killing the criminals. I figured he'd use up the drugs soon enough anyway. He'd been doing it for months by the time I figured this out. Assuming he was really behind that; I still don't know for sure. I see the harm now. Believe me, Karen, if I'd had any idea ..." He trailed off.

"I can't believe this, Cliff. You. And I thought I knew you."

"You do. I don't condone vigilante action. I don't. You have to believe me. I just did not have any idea he'd escalate to something like this massacre. He killed guards, prisoners who had almost served their time and were about to be released. Not just the murderers on death row. I see it now, but then – I just didn't imagine. You know I'm a good person, Karen."

"That's debatable."

"What are you going to do? Will you help me find him?"

Karen realized she could be in trouble either way. She'd heard Cliff mention his wife's uncle to Leaming back then, and that's one detail she hadn't shared when she told investigators what happened. She hadn't wanted to get him in trouble and hadn't seen any harm in omitting that tiny detail. Until now she wasn't even sure there really had been an exterminator uncle. Maybe it was all just spin to keep Leaming from killing them. Like Cliff, she could now be viewed as a silent co-conspirator with Leaming, a co-opted drug agent. On the other hand, if she said nothing now, and it came out that later he had confessed this to her and she remained silent, it would be much worse. She wasn't sure she could trust Cliff not to rat her out if he got caught up in it. The safe thing was to tell the whole story to Holford. But she was tired of sitting around like a file clerk while the FBI got the field work, and, ultimately, the glory if there was any. If there was a chance to catch the QuenMass killer, that was awfully tempting.

"I don't know. I have to think about it. I'll call you in the next two days. If I decide to report this, I'll let you know first so you can get out ahead of it. That's all I can promise for now."

Chapter 22

Spider Web**A cache by Enigmal**

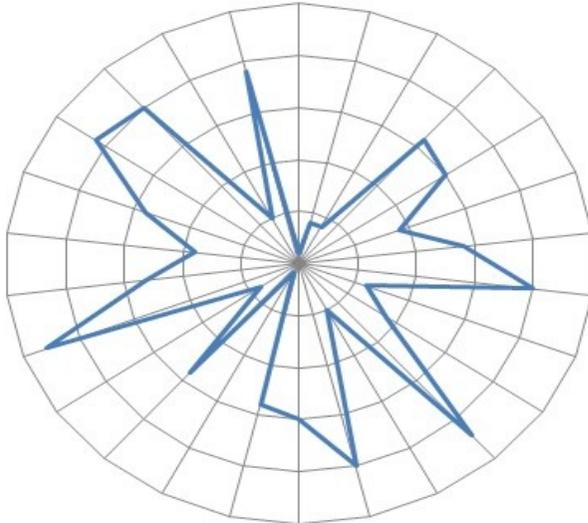
Difficulty: ****

Terrain: *

N 37° 19.041 W 122° 03.274

Geocache Description:

Today I was working in the garden when I noticed a beautiful, symmetrical spider web, perhaps the largest I've ever seen. Then the oddest thing happened. The spider in the very center looked at me – I swear she did – and crawled around the web in a very odd route. I think she was trying to tell me something. I haven't been able to make sense of it. Perhaps you can. Here's her route:

Spider's route

Hint: Where was she again? I think she had a dizzy spell.

“Cliff, can you help me with this? You’re better at these puzzles than I am. You’ve solved a lot of Enigmal’s puzzle caches. This is the last one I need for the Fizzy Challenge. A 4/1.”

He was a nervous wreck, waiting for Karen to call, but he was trying to hide it from Ellen. This was not a good time for a task that required concentration, but he stepped over to her laptop and took a look.

“Enigmal’s puzzles almost always have a cipher involved. That crooked path must be a cipher somehow.”

“A cipher? You kiddin’ me? With no letters or numbers? I don’t see how.” Ellen stared at the screen intently for several long minutes, willing the key to the puzzle to appear magically in her brain. It didn’t.

Cliff watched over her shoulder, but he couldn’t figure it out, either. His mind just wasn’t on it.

“Well, it has to be within two miles of the posted coordinates,” he offered, uselessly. “And it’s a one-star terrain, so it must be wheelchair accessible, so it’s probably on or right next to pavement – a sidewalk or plaza or something.”

“Jeez, Cliff, tell me something I don’t know. It’s posted in the middle of Cupertino. There’re sidewalks and parking lots and strip malls all over the place. I can’t search them all. I need coordinates.”

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Rita Lord called the Turlock Realtor his first day back and set up an appointment for later that day. She conducted the interview at his office. He was a little green around the gills, since the “cruise” had turned out to be in some pretty rough waters and he’d been seasick for much of the last four days.

When the questioning came to the pesticides left in the Heindryckx farmhouse, he wasn’t too groggy to sense something amiss. Toxic chemicals were a real bugaboo with Realtors. They had to certify there were none known on properties they sold, just as the owners did. So far as he knew, all of them had been removed, so he hadn’t broken any laws, but he wasn’t sure whether he should have driven them over to the storage locker in his vehicle. The FBI wouldn’t be asking about them if they hadn’t caused some trouble somewhere.

“There was a metal cabinet in the house. It had a lock on it. If I remember right, it had some stuff in it that could have been related to that.” He hoped vagueness would equate to a faulty memory.

“Did you see any pesticides? They’re toxic as hell. They’d have big skulls and crossbones all over them and warning signs. If they were in that cabinet, you’d know.”

“Hmm, yeah, now that you mention it, that must be what they were.”

“What did you do with them?”

“Nothing. I never touched them,” he lied. “The property owner, the lawyer who was handling the estate, took them. Ask him what he did with them. I told him he couldn’t leave them there.”

“Clifford Knowles? Is that who took them?”

“Right. That’s the guy. Big fellow. Had a fancy convertible.” He realized then that he shouldn’t have mentioned the car. The agent might wonder whether he’d have carried ancient, maybe leaking, pesticides in a fancy convertible, and ask how they got transported. The Realtor had a grubby SUV perfect for the job.

“Are you in touch with him? Is he someone you know?”

“No. I think he just pulled my name out of the yellow pages or off one of my For Sale signs around the area. His contact information should be on the closing documents. I can get that for you.”

“I’ve got it already, thanks. Do you remember seeing anything there on this list?” She showed him a list of seven pesticides that had been prepared for this purpose. Thanapest was on the list. Agents had been instructed to show the entire list so that interviewees would not know of their specific interest in Thanapest, much like a lineup. In fact, the FBI agents weren’t even told that Thanapest was the poison of interest, so they couldn’t give away anything with body language or even intentionally. The name had still not made it into the news reports.

“No. I mean, if they were there, I didn’t notice. Or can’t remember now if I noticed.”

“Okay, I have what I need for now. I’ll call you if I think of anything else. Please call me if you think of anything else that could help. These environmental laws are very important. And please don’t say anything about this interview to anyone else.” The mention of environmental laws was another ruse thought up to distance these pesticide interviews from public connection with QuenMass.

“I sure will. Glad to help.” He breathed a sigh of relief as the agent walked out of the office.

Rita returned to the office and wrote up her interview on an FD-302 form. This report identified Clifford Knowles, an attorney, as the party who took custody of the chemicals, which may or may not have contained Thanapest, and any remaining records of the extermination business. She took his Los Altos

address from the closing documents and included that. She uploaded the 302 into the FBI's Sentinel system so the case agent could read it, and then she set a lead for Los Angeles Division, Long Beach Resident Agency to locate and interview Clifford Knowles.

The 302 said the Heindryckx farm premises had been searched and were totally without any evidence of pesticides or business records, that the exterminator had died years earlier, that his remaining inventory and records, if any, had been part of the estate which had been administered by an attorney in the Long Beach area. It said a lead was being sent to Los Angeles Division to interview the attorney. Below that was written out a lead captioned "Los Angeles Division, at Long Beach, California" and below that a sentence directing that Clifford Knowles, attorney-at-law, at the Los Altos address given in the 302, be interviewed to determine what had happened to the pesticides and records in question. She felt good about having handled a QuenMass lead promptly and efficiently, even if it had turned out to be nothing.

-oOo-

Cliff's phone rang while he was at the office, late in the afternoon. Caller ID showed it was Karen. He'd told Karen to call his cell phone since he didn't want Maeva to take a message, or even see a Sacramento number. He closed his office door and answered it.

"Hi, Karen."

"Cliff. I know you've been waiting. I'm sorry I couldn't decide earlier. But I have to say no. The two of us can't just go up to Clear Lake by ourselves and hope to find him. We don't even have a recent picture. I checked his driver's license photo, and he doesn't look much like his old one as Charles Price. It looks like he disguised himself – hippie glasses, long, curly hair. What are we going to do, just drive around and hope to recognize him on the street? If he's even in the area, he's probably got another name and another look by now. I think it's time to let the FBI know the whole story and leave it to them."

"That'll ruin my life, Karen. I know he's up there. I have a recent photo. We can do this. We don't want to tip him off, but we've got something to show local police. You're a peace officer. You can just tell them you're following a lead on Charles Price, fugitive, and heard he's in the area."

"You didn't tell me you had a picture. How do you know he's there for sure?"

Cliff told her the whole story about the drone school and visiting the bar with Ellen.

“You’re engaged? Really? That’s great, Cliff. Congratulations.” Her sincerity was amplified by the relief she felt at not having to worry about Cliff trying to rekindle their romance. That had been an unspoken factor in her decision not to meet him.

“Thank you. She’s great. I’m so lucky. Look, that’s another reason I have to do this. If we can catch this guy and find evidence – the stash of poison or something – we can solve the QuenMass case and maybe save my ass from prosecution. We can call on the locals for an arrest if we have to, or the FBI for that matter, on the Geocache Murders. We’ve got the Charles Price wanted posters. We don’t have to say anything about QuenMass. All we need to do is pinpoint where he is.”

“You’re not a peace officer anymore. You are NOT going on any arrest.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it?!” A ray of hope crept into his voice.

Karen was wavering again. “Okay, I’ll do this much. I can’t leave this investigation here with the pesticides, but that’s Monday through Friday. Today’s Thursday. I’ll do one weekend scouting the area with you. We’ll touch base with the sheriffs there and any other police agencies during the day. It sounds like he still tends bar somewhere around the lake. I’ll bring my undercover stuff – a blonde wig, my prudish librarian outfit. He won’t recognize me, I guarantee it. We can hit the bars in the evening. How good is that picture you have?”

“Not great. A cell phone photo of a drone picture on the wall where he’s on the ground looking up at the drone. It’s a fisheye lens and not zoomed in, so the resolution isn’t great, but he’s looking right at the camera. He’s wearing a ball cap and dark glasses. It might be hard for others to recognize him. But I’d recognize him anywhere, after what he did to me – to you.”

“Me too.”

“Besides, he’s missing a finger. That’s a pretty distinguishing mark.”

“It’s only a fingertip. A lot of people who knew him never even noticed. I’m worried about warning him, though. What about the guy in the bar you said wanted to get the note? Do you think he’s told him?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. It depends on whether he believed me that I just found the note and didn’t know any Noel or Bob. Or that maybe it was for another Noel. I wasn’t exactly undercover. If he describes me to Leaming, I’m toast. But he’s a lead, anyway. Maybe we could do surveillance on him. He might take us to Leaming.”

“Yeah, you do stand out, with your size. Do you still have the beard?”

“Yep.”

“Not good. Will you shave it for the weekend?”

“No way. Ellen loves it.”

“Ellen, huh. Nice name. So does she know?”

“She knows about the serial killings down here, and about you. About us, I mean. She doesn’t know about the connection to QuenMass and the Thanapest. And I want to keep it that way. She’s very moral. She’d dump me if she knew what I did. Or didn’t do. Not reporting it to the police, I mean. She’s even worked on the QuenMass case, protection duty for the judge who was threatened in the manifesto. She’d probably turn me in and testify against me.”

Karen snickered. “You’d better marry her fast. Marital privilege.”

“I plan to. In three weeks. She’s ... we’re ... expecting, which is another reason I don’t want her upset.”

“Expecting! Why, you dog you! You’re not shooting blanks yet.”

“Not funny, Karen. Look, you and I are the only people who can ID Leaming on sight, unless you want to bring in his old Snake Pit bar buddies or army pals who would lie for him anyway. I just want to take one crack at locating him before he gets spooked and leaves the area – and before I get hauled in when they find out I had the Thanapest.”

“Okay. One weekend, that’s all. We’ll start tomorrow evening and finish by Sunday night. If we don’t find anything by then, I’m going to have to tell Jo-Lene that I recognize the name Heindryckx and tell her where from. You’ll need to come forward Monday if you want to make your cooperation look voluntary. And you can’t tell them about our little DIY attempt at rounding up Leaming.”

“It’s a deal. Mum’s the word.”

“And I can’t run it through my department budget or use government resources. I’ll use my personal car.”

“That’s no problem. I’ll pay for the rooms. Your gas, too, if you want. I saw a motel in Lucerne that had a vacancy sign up. I’ll make the reservations and send you the location information. We can meet there Friday, say 8:00 PM.”

“Okay. And remember, he said he’d never let himself be taken alive. He’s an expert shot and kicked our asses last time. We do not confront him. No going into his secret lair like before. If we find him, or get a solid lead, I get heavy backup. Locals, FBI, BNE, I don’t know who and I don’t care. Let your Hostage Rescue Team take him down. But you go back to the motel or the sheriff’s substation or wherever.”

“Agreed.”

Chapter 23

Friday

When she got into work, Jo-Lene Holford saw the electronic notification of another fourteen serials having been added to the QuenMass file. The volume of material was ballooning out of control. Leads were being covered all over the country. One of these serials was the 302 from Rita Lord. Jo-Lene read the beginning of the 302 and saw nothing exciting. She didn't click the link to read the lead, since it was to interview some lawyer in Long Beach. She knew Los Angeles would let her know what the investigation there showed. As a result, she never saw the name Clifford Knowles or the city name Los Altos. Those both appeared in the lead and on the second page of the 302, which she never bothered reading. There was just too much to do.

In Los Angeles, the supervisor whose squad was handling QuenMass leads saw a lead arrive for an interview in Long Beach. He assigned the lead to the agent in Long Beach who usually handled the QuenMass leads, a young man who now had at least ten interviews to do of relatives of victims of the death row inmates or former guards or other staff associated with San Quentin. That agent, as it happened, was on leave, vacationing with his family until the end of the week, and wouldn't see the lead until the following Monday.

-o0o-

Friday morning, Cliff told Ellen he was going back up to Clear Lake for the weekend to try to find a lead on Kurt Leaming – or Chaz Price or Noel Clifford or whatever he was calling himself now. She told him to leave it to the police. He wasn't armed and had no business chasing a murderer; he was a civilian now, she argued, shouting. He countered that only he could identify Leaming by sight. Time was of the essence; Leaming might relocate if that guy in the bar warned him someone was looking for him. The only thing they agreed on was that there was no way she was going to accompany him this time, not now that she was pregnant. It was too dangerous for the fetus. They argued heatedly, but ultimately, she couldn't stop him. She did get him to promise he would not attempt to arrest or confront Leaming.

Cliff went into the bathroom to take a shower. Ellen was just getting ready to leave for the office when Cliff's phone chimed. She was standing right next to the dresser strapping on her gun and looked down reflexively. It was a

text. “2 ROOMS CONFIRMED FOR KNOWLES AND DELGADO. THANK YOU.”

She marched into the bathroom, reached into the shower, and turned off the hot water. Cliff yelled at the sudden shot of cold water and quickly turned off the other faucet.

“You’re going up with *her*, your old girlfriend, and weren’t going to tell me,” Ellen bellowed accusingly, holding up his phone so he could see the text.

“You’re checking my text messages?” he retorted, just as accusingly.

“I didn’t have to, but maybe I should, you son of a . . . , you liar!”

Cliff had never heard her swear, but he thought this might be the first time. “Look, we’ll be in separate rooms. See, it says two rooms. It’s not what you think. She’s the only other person who can recognize him, and she can arrest him. She’s a peace officer, and there’s an arrest warrant out. You wanted me to get police help. So I did.”

“Liar. You told me you hadn’t talked to her in years.”

“That was true. I hadn’t then, but I had to once I knew Leaming was there at Clear Lake. She’s involved. She almost died when Leaming caught us – we both did.”

“Bull. One woman alone going to arrest a serial killer slash ex–army ranger. I don’t believe it.”

“No, no, no. It’s not like that. She’s going to bring the locals up to date – the sheriffs and so on. Show the picture I got at the drone school, the name Noel Clifford, see if any officers recognize him. This guy’s a bartender. That’s always what he’s done. Karen’s a former undercover agent. She’s going to wear a wig and disguise herself so he won’t recognize her and go around to the bars in the area to try to spot him tending bar. If she gets any leads, she’ll call in the heavy artillery, the HRT. She said she doesn’t want the credit. She just wants to get the bastard.”

“The HRT? What are you talking about? Why would the Hostage Rescue Team be involved? It’s just a local UFAP.”

“Right, the local SWAT team, then. It doesn’t matter who.” He tried to cover his slip, but he wasn’t selling it. Cliff was standing naked, still in the shower, but felt even more exposed by his lies. He realized he had averted his eyes momentarily, so he forced himself to make eye contact again.

“Wait a minute. Just wait a minute. You said HRT for a reason. What are you keeping from me?”

Cliff didn’t answer right away. He was trying to think of a plausible explanation. Ellen didn’t wait.

“You want me to call Karen?” She still held his phone in her hand and had her finger on the call button.

This was the breaking point. His connection to the Thanapest would be coming out any day. His stomach was in knots every night when they climbed in bed, and he was afraid she’d hear from another source. It was time to tell her the rest.

The story came pouring from his lips like a cataract, words jumbling and cascading as he tried to tell the truth, but rationalize and apologize at the same time. He told how tweakers and heroin addicts began falling like flies throughout the Central Valley from poisoned drugs; how robberies, rapes, and other violent crimes dropped as the stoner death toll mounted; how he’d become suspicious because this was exactly what Leaming had predicted would happen if drugs were poisoned. He told how he’d managed the estate of his wife’s uncle, the exterminator, and stored the insecticides. He explained that he went to the storage facility and found the poisons all gone, stolen, and the indications were that it was an employee. He learned that Noel Clifford worked there and met the description of Kurt Leaming. He knew, but he didn’t really know. He didn’t want to *know* know. It must have been Leaming who’d figured out where the poisons were stored, but Cliff never meant for that to happen. It had been a careless remark while Cliff was being held captive, trying to win Leaming’s confidence. He didn’t mean to help Leaming kill druggies, and maybe the increased death toll had had nothing to do with it. She had to believe him.

Ellen was bracing herself against the bathroom vanity, aghast. She clamped her hands over her mouth, not believing what she was hearing.

Cliff choked out the rest. He’d been questioned about Thanapest in the FBI interview and only then realized that it was probably Leaming who’d committed the massacre. Cliff remembered seeing the drum of Thanapest in the cabinet at the farmhouse, but he didn’t know what it was. The odd name stuck in his mind. At that point he couldn’t come forward. He’d had no idea such a thing could happen. He wasn’t a monster. It was Leaming, not him. All he’d done was store the leftover pesticides and fail to follow through on disposing of them, he told her. But he knew it was more than that. He could be charged with negligent homicide or even murder if the police thought he knowingly let Leaming have the stuff. That’s why he had to get Leaming now, before the FBI connected him to the Thanapest, he explained. Karen was the only other person who knew this. She was working with the FBI now on that case, helping them go through the state pesticide records. Ellen had to forgive him. It was just an accident. By the time he finished, tears ran down his cheeks, irrigating his beard.

Ellen buried her face in her hands and cried while neither said a word.

“You knew that stash of deadly poisons was in the hands of a man who was bent on killing drug abusers, then addicts began dying all around, and you said nothing? You just let people die?” she blubbered.

“I, I ... they didn’t believe me. I tried to tell them about Leaming before, but the papers were saying Karen and I concocted the whole scheme, that I was taking justice into my own hands killing the criminals and she covered for me, that we made up this guy Chaz Price, mysterious bartender who disappeared. Even the D.A.’s office didn’t believe me. I knew they’d suspect me again. I was afraid, that’s all. Maybe I was weak. Forgive me. Please. I love you.”

“You said we had a UFAP case. A missing murderer.”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell Woody about the alias Noel Clifford?”

“Uh, no. It would have been hard to explain how I knew it.”

“So you could have prevented QuenMass? You could have given Woody a lead that would have led to his arrest?”

“We don’t know that.”

He reached for her, but she put a hand against his chest and shoved him back. She crossed herself and said a silent prayer. Then she turned away and washed her face. Her eyes were red. She blew her nose, then turned back to face Cliff.

“I’m going to work. When you come home, I’ll be staying at my sister’s.” She took off the engagement ring, set it on the counter, and walked out of the house.

Chapter 24

It took Cliff over an hour to pull himself together. He called Maeva and told her he wouldn't be in at all. She reminded him of a 10:00 AM appointment, and he told her to reschedule it. Say he was sick. He'd planned on taking off the afternoon anyway so he could get to Clear Lake in time, but there was no way he could do any work now.

He pondered his situation. Was Ellen turning him in right now? Would there be a team of FBI agents at his doorstep in a matter of minutes to arrest him? Did she believe him? He was wracked with guilt, a guilt he had suppressed ever since that fateful day he had discovered the poisons gone. His only chance to redeem himself now was to find Leaming, to show he was on the side of the law, not the lawless. Maybe then Ellen would believe him, would forgive him, would stay with him.

He pulled himself together and began packing. He wasn't going to wait to get picked up. He decided he was going to go to Clear Lake now. At least if he got arrested, it would be while he was genuinely searching for the QuenMass killer. He packed his gear and headed out.

Three hours later he was in the city of Clearlake, the largest community at the south end of the lake. He stopped for gas and coffee. Inside the minimart he called Ellen. No answer. He texted her that he was at Clearlake now and that he loved her. He got no response.

He continued on to Lucerne, but it was too early to check into the motel. He grabbed his laptop and headed in for lunch at the McDonald's in town because he knew they would have a wi-fi network he could use. Besides, he liked quarter-pounders and fries all too much. He ate first and decided he couldn't be keying with greasy fingers, but he was in no rush. After he finished the last fry, he washed his hands and began searching online.

The Lake County sheriff's department was headquartered in Lakeport, the county seat, on the west side of the lake. It had two nearby substations, one in Clearlake and the other in Lucerne, covering the east side of the lake. The cities of Clearlake and Lakeport both had police departments, but so far as he could determine, there were no other local police agencies in the county. That meant five stops at three different cities and would require circling the lake, a drive of about an hour without stops, at least double that with all the liaison work. That could probably all be accomplished in the morning tomorrow. They might want to do it twice, once in the morning and again after 4:00 PM to get the evening shift officers. They could be hitting bars the rest of the time, checking out the bartenders.

Cliff hadn't shaved his beard and wasn't about to, but he thought more about the problem of being too recognizable. He had slacks and a blazer to wear when they visited the police agencies, and some dress shoes to go with them, but he needed something for the bars that didn't scream law enforcement. He found a thrift shop and bought some alternate clothes – a pair of used coveralls like a mechanic might wear. It still had the name “Mike” embroidered on the chest. That was good. His hiking boots were grubby enough to be credible with the coveralls. He had big sunglasses and a floppy hat. He probably shouldn't wear those at night, since they'd seem suspicious, but they might help hide his face during the day.

By the time he was done shopping, it was time to check into the motel. He got his room and put up the credit card for Karen's room. The clerk had placed them right next to each other, probably assuming the two rooms were just a subterfuge anyway and only one bed was going to be used. Once he settled in, he called Ellen again. Once again it went to voicemail. He told her he loved her and to please forgive him. Then he gave her the motel name and room number.

He decided to go by the bar again where he'd been with Ellen the previous weekend. He wasn't about to go inside, but maybe he'd see Leaming's motorcycle outside, you never know. He parked around the corner from the bar so his car would be out of sight. He walked around to where he could see the side porch of the bar, where the bartender had told him there was a milk can. He could see the old rusted can just sitting there beckoning to him. No one was around, so he hurried up to it and lifted the lid. Sure enough, there was some mail inside addressed to Noel Clifford, as well as mail for two other people. Apparently the bar served as an unofficial P.O. box for regulars. There was also a handwritten note on a sheet of lined paper from a notebook of some sort. It read:

Noll, a big blon woman come in with a big guy and said they found a note fore you from a Bob. I though it seem funny. Sarge.

Cliff took a quick look around and, seeing nobody, took the note and hurried back to the car. This made him feel good. Cliff's foray into the bar with Ellen apparently hadn't been relayed to Leaming, and now that the note was gone, it wouldn't be. He also felt like his second trip up here wasn't a waste of time. It gave him a feeling of making progress, however small.

Leaming had never seen his car, but he knew it stood out like a sore thumb in this area, so he decided to go back to the motel and wait for Karen. He put the top on the car up so it would be less noticeable and harder for anyone to recognize him as he drove. He wore the floppy hat and sunglasses while driving as an added measure. He stopped at a local grocery and bought some snacks, beer, and sodas. He'd seen from the website that the motel had a mini-fridge, but

not a minibar. He spent the rest of the afternoon in his room doing email and killing time web surfing. He was too wrought up to do any serious work.

By 6:30 he was hungry and bored. He decided to get something to eat. He changed into the coveralls and put on his boots. It was still light outside, so he kept the sunglasses on as he stepped outside. The town was small, so he decided to stay on foot. He walked around the area that passed for “downtown” until he found a pizza parlor, and went in. There was a bar here, but the bartender was a short, fat guy, nothing like Leaming. Cliff ordered a beer and a pizza and paid. He got the beer right away and one of those electronic widgets that buzzes and flashes when your order is ready. He sat at a booth where he could see the big TV on the wall, which was tuned to a sports channel. A baseball game was on, but he didn’t know the teams.

He nursed the beer since he didn’t want to drink it up before the pizza arrived and didn’t want to start drinking a second beer this early if he’d be hitting bars later with Karen. His widget buzzed, and he went up to the kitchen pass-through counter to get his pizza. As he stood there reaching for it, the pizza cook looked up past his shoulder and called out, “Hi, Sarge.”

Sarge. Could that be the guy from the bar who wrote the note? Cliff didn’t want to look around since he might be recognized. He fiddled with getting extra napkins and peppers until he heard the man behind him walk on by. He turned furtively and saw that the man was indeed the same guy who claimed to know “Noel.” He was wearing the same army jacket. Cliff scurried back to his booth with the pizza and sat. He moved to the other side of the booth and scooted over so that he would be out of sight. If Cliff leaned over, he could just see Sarge’s back.

Sarge joined two other men at a table right in front of the TV screen, and the bartender brought him an empty mug. There was already a pitcher of beer on the table. The men seemed engrossed in the game. There was no sign Sarge had noticed him. Cliff ate his pizza and finished the beer. The game was in the third inning, so Cliff figured it would go on past 8:00. He could go back to the motel and confer with Karen. He was more concerned that Sarge would see him and alert Leaming than he was with doing any investigation.

He returned to the motel and waited. There was a knock. Karen showed up right on time for once, something she never did when they were together, and which was one of the many straws breaking that camel’s back. Cliff opened the door and she stepped in. She still looked good. There was an awkward moment when Cliff started to give her a hug and she stuck out her hand to shake. They shook hands.

“Cliff, it’s good to see you again.”

“You, too.”

“So where do you want to start?” She was all business and didn’t want to waste any time.

He told her about seeing Sarge at the pizza place. After some discussion they agreed that Karen would go to the pizza parlor in disguise and see if Sarge was still there. If he was, she’d watch to see if anyone else joined him and if he left, she would follow him. She went back to her room and changed and then came back over to Cliff’s.

He couldn’t believe the transformation. Her raven-black tresses were completely concealed with a curly blond wig. Despite her Hispanic heritage, she was light-skinned and this did not look odd on her. She wore half-lens readers with ugly pink frames and a baggy brown dress that buttoned up to her neck and came down past her knees. It had some kind of padding in it, too, that added thirty pounds to her appearance. Her makeup was gone and she wore a light, home-knitted sweater over the dress. A few minutes ago she was hot; now she embodied frumpiness.

“Cliff, come with me as far as the door and point this guy out to me, but don’t come in with me.”

They left the room together and walked out to the sidewalk. Cliff wondered what the desk clerk thought, seeing Cliff leaving with the blonde woman when the hot brunette had just checked in asking for him. They got to the pizza place, and Cliff did as he was told, pointing out Sarge and then returning to the motel.

Karen ordered a salad and soda and sat watching Sarge and his pals for about half an hour. It was only the bottom of the seventh inning, but the game was called on account of rain, so the men began to finish off their beers and get ready to leave. Karen watched as Sarge drained his glass and stood up. He glanced at her and she looked back at her salad, picking at it casually. Sarge left. She waited several seconds and then looked through the front window. She could see him get into a pickup truck on the opposite side of the street. He headed north out of sight.

Karen returned to the motel and updated Cliff. At least they knew what Sarge’s truck looked like, and he hadn’t recognized Cliff, so they should be able to move around in relative safety. They went back to their original plan. Neither one wanted to change back into regular, professional clothes to hit the local police and then back into their bar-trolling garb, so they decided to go ahead and start the bar cruising. Since Sarge had gone north, they headed south.

There turned out to be more bars, or restaurants with bars, than they had expected. By 11:00 they were still in Lucerne and hadn’t seen any sign of

Leaming. Cliff debated calling Ellen again, but with bar noise in the background and Karen by his side, cowardice won out. It wouldn't improve the situation if she answered.

They thought it would look suspicious if neither one ever ordered alcohol, so they took turns ordering beer. Cliff would order a beer while Karen ordered soda or something harmless, then they'd reverse it at the next bar. Cliff was picking up all the tabs. They never finished the drinks, in order to stay relatively sober, but by 2:00 AM, Karen was more than a little tipsy. Cliff, with twice the body mass, was still doing okay. They'd been driving her car, a Honda Accord, because it was less noticeable than his. It was closing time and time to return to the motel. He convinced Karen to let him drive. By this time they were in Clearlake and had a twenty-mile drive back up to Lucerne.

He was halfway back when a sheriff's deputy pulled him over. The officer came up to the driver's window.

"Do you know why I stopped you?" This question was always the first one asked and for only one reason – to get an admission. The driver almost always says that maybe he was going a little fast or whatever else he thinks he did wrong.

"No, officer. I wasn't speeding, so that can't be it." This answer displeased the deputy.

"Let me see your driver's license and registration."

Cliff produced his license and looked over to Karen. She giggled and started to pull out her badge, but Cliff leaned across her body to block the officer's view and said to her, "I'll get it," as he opened the glove box. Fortunately, the registration was right on top. He handed it to the deputy.

"So this isn't your car?"

"No, sir. It's hers." He nodded toward Karen, who hiccupped at this rather inauspicious time.

"Have you been drinking, sir?"

"Just a couple of beers, officer." Cliff fished in his coverall pocket for one of the bar receipts that showed only one beer. He held it out to the officer, but the officer had no interest.

"Step out of the car, please."

Cliff did so, but he began to wonder if he should have just let Karen badge the officer. If they were going to be hitting the local law enforcement offices tomorrow, he didn't want to start off their visit with a reputation for being a couple of drunks, and they would also have a hard time explaining the costumes. Karen was a little slow on the uptake, but she realized the same thing and stayed quiet.

“Look, officer, she had a little too much, so I took the keys. We’re just going to our motel up in Lucerne.”

“Close your eyes, hold your arm out to the side, and touch your index finger to your nose.”

Cliff did so, then proceeded to go through the entire field sobriety test. He managed to pass.

“Mr. Knowles, I’m not going to cite you, but you were driving awfully slow and you were borderline on the test. I suggest you go directly back to that motel and stay there. Alright?”

“Right.”

The incident ended and Cliff headed back to the motel, staying two miles per hour under the limit and in the right lane. The next day they’d have to change their strategy. This was a close call. He wanted to talk to Karen about it, but she was already asleep. It would have to wait until tomorrow. They got to the motel, and he woke her. They made their way to their rooms and crashed for the night.

So much for Day 1.

Chapter 25

Saturday

Ellen was in a quandary. Cliff had a side to him she didn't know about. This was the man she had promised to marry, the father of her child. She did not doubt that he was innocent of any intentional involvement in QuenMass, or the Central Valley drug deaths for that matter. But she couldn't overlook his decision to turn a blind eye to what was happening when he found out his own pesticides were missing. Even if they weren't used to poison anyone – and there really wasn't any proof of that – the poisons were hazardous materials that had to be disposed of properly. No matter who took them, they posed a danger to the public and he should have reported it. And she should report him.

Now she knew who the QuenMass killer was, the most important case in the FBI, and she was an FBI agent. Of course she should let the agents on that case know – but at the cost of turning in her fiancé? If only he hadn't told her. If only he had gone up to Clear Lake and caught the guy without her realizing why it was so important to him. Of course, it was her own fault for insisting on knowing what was going on with him. She'd been jealous – worried about him hooking up with that Delgado hussy again. Of course he had to bring Delgado into it. He couldn't go chasing a serial killer by himself, and bringing in the FBI was dangerous in another way. She realized that now.

He'd texted her from the motel last night and again this morning. She refused to answer the calls or return the texts, but sooner or later she'd have to talk to him. They were having a child together no matter what. That much was certain. She wanted her child to have a father, a real father who was present, not a convict in a cell somewhere.

She was furious with him, but no less furious at herself. Had she allowed herself to fall for Cliff out of a desperate need, out of a failure of the few previous romantic relationships she'd had? Had she overlooked his flaws, his moral failings? But he seemed so sweet, so tender toward her. He had a fierce moral sense himself – a desire to help the world by protecting it from criminals. That's normal; that's what she and all her fellow agents felt. But had he crossed the line and become what she was trying to protect society against? Someone willing to kill the killers instead of arresting and prosecuting them?

She knew she wasn't particularly pretty, but she didn't think she looked too bad. She and her sister were both tall, but her sister was statuesque, with a stunning figure; Ellen got all the extra muscle and broad shoulders. She was fit, not fat, she told herself. Still, the only men who ever asked her out – and there

hadn't been many in recent years – were big men, like Cliff. Unlike Cliff, they'd mostly been over-the-hill losers, men who thought that a woman her size and going gray would “settle,” and up to now she had, at least for a while. Had she done it again? She'd always wanted to be a wife and mother. Had she subconsciously allowed herself to become pregnant? She knew her child-bearing years were waning.

She was tearing herself up with the introspection. These were questions she couldn't answer. Two things she knew for certain were that she genuinely loved Cliff and he genuinely loved her. She knew also that this fugitive – Price or Leaming or Noel Clifford – had to be captured before he could kill again. She couldn't personally go after him with Cliff, not carrying a baby. She couldn't do hazardous duty anymore and would have to tell her supervisor soon.

An idea occurred to her how she could help.

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Saturday morning Cliff woke up late, having been out late the night before. He grabbed a piece of fruit from the fridge and headed downstairs to the small lobby where the “complimentary continental breakfast” was set up. It must have been a very small continent. The breakfast consisted of a packaged store pastry with an expiration date sometime in the Nixon administration, and fresh coffee. At least the coffee was decent. He couldn't stomach the powdered concoction in the tiny tinfoil packets in the room, not after last night. He needed the real thing.

He managed to gnaw the pastry to death and drank two cups of coffee along with his banana. Karen arrived as he was finishing, so he grabbed a third cup and sat while she tried breaking into her cinnamon roll. If she was hung over, she didn't show it. She was already dressed in slacks and a jacket that covered her gun and holster.

“I thought we'd hit the local sheriff substation here,” she began without pleasantries, “and then move south to Clearlake City. They have a police force there and a sheriff's substation. I brought a dozen copies of Leaming's wanted poster – Price, I mean. Leaming is just an a.k.a. We need copies of your drone school photo, too. Does this motel have a copier we can use?”

Cliff was encouraged by her businesslike manner. “I brought a printout with me. I'm sure the deputies will let us make more copies at the station. I can just email it to them.”

“Good, we're all set. After that we keep going clockwise to Kelseyville, then Lakeport.”

“What’s in Kelseyville? They don’t have police or a sheriff’s substation.”

“Highway Patrol.”

“Oh, right.” Cliff had forgotten about them. He’d only looked up police and sheriffs. Karen was on top of her game. Fortified with coffee and food, he was beginning to feel better about their chances. “Hey, Karen. We’ll be done with those offices by 2:00. We should start with the bars again, but not like last night.”

“You can say that again. I’m still feeling it. We’ll just have to go in and look around and leave. It’ll look suspicious, and we may miss some bartender on break, but we don’t have time to hit every bar around Clear Lake anyway. If we don’t see him in the first five minutes, we move on.”

“Agreed.”

They finished the meager offerings and returned to their rooms, then set off for the day. The deputies at the Lucerne sheriff’s substation were very accommodating. Karen identified herself and then said she was with her “colleague,” Cliff Knowles. They were flattered to have state DOJ special agents come to them looking for a serial killer. The deputies assumed he was a special agent, too, but he was careful not to call himself that. They studied the wanted poster photo with the driver’s license picture of Charles Price. Karen also had a printout of the photo from his Noel Clifford license and Cliff’s printout from the drone school photo. The photos did not look much alike, but there were common features: the prominent dimples and piercing blue eyes. The deputies put those two photos together at the color copier and made a dozen copies for the agents. Karen stapled her card, with her cell number written on it, to every poster.

None of the personnel at the substation recognized him. This surprised and disappointed Cliff and Karen. They knew that “Noel” had worked at the bar in Lucerne where Cliff had seen Sarge. Deputies usually knew all the bartenders in town because they get called to arrest drunks, stop fights, or interview bartenders about drunk drivers all the time. “Noel” must have worked there only a short time. They had thought this was their best shot since he had lived near here, but they now had to assume their quarry lived away from town.

They left copies of the poster and photos with the deputies, thanked them, and drove south in Karen’s car. In Clearlake they had similar experiences at the police station and the sheriff’s substation. Although their “breakfast” had been at 10:30, they were hungry by noon; they stopped at a local restaurant there. Cliff ordered a BLT and milk. Karen went for the trout and iced tea.

“So is the baby a boy or a girl?”

“We don’t know yet. Ellen doesn’t want to know in advance.”

“So where’s the wedding going to be?”

Sticky question under the circumstances. Would there even be a wedding? “We’re not sure. We were planning to do it quickly. You know, with the baby coming and all. Just find a judge or preacher who’s available. Just immediate family.”

“Three weeks away and you’re not sure? That’s cutting it close, isn’t it?”

“Can we not talk about it?” Cliff said, irritated.

“Sorry. I really don’t care,” Karen replied snippily. “I was just trying to make conversation. Pardon me if I’m not that interested in your love life after you dumped me.”

“I didn’t dump you. You dumped me. Remember when –”

“Don’t give me that, Knowles. I wasn’t good enough for you and your fed friends with my degree from San Jose State instead of your fancy-schmantzy Berkeley law degree. State has a better football team than the Bears now. We went to a bowl game last year. Cal went winless.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know I don’t care about sports, and I never put you down. If you felt inferior about your work or your school, that’s on you, not me. You’ve got insecurity issues.”

“Well, this is turning out to be fun,” she growled sarcastically.

The food arrived in time to save them from further unpleasantness. They ate in silence. When the check came, Cliff picked it up showily and produced his card. This just made Karen mad since it served to demonstrate his superior financial position. She started to open her purse and throw money on the table for her share but realized all she had was twenties, and her lunch was only \$9. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of counting out change to her, and it would be even more embarrassing if he didn’t have change. She let him pay and returned to the car in a huff.

They moved on to the Highway Patrol in Kelseyville and then on to Lakeport, the county seat and the site of both city police and the main Lake County sheriff’s office. Posters and photos and contact information were left at all of these, but no one recognized Price or had any record of arrests or incidents involving him in any of his known aliases.

Defeated, they continued clockwise around the north end of the lake and returned to the motel in Lucerne. By the end of the afternoon, the frost between them had thawed and they were exchanging war stories. Cliff told her about a bank robbery he worked back in the days when there was only one camera. The robber brought spray paint with him into the bank and sprayed the surveillance camera – only he sprayed the paint on the red light below the lens, not on the lens itself, so the FBI got the best close-up shot they’ve ever had of a robber, and the

whole robbery was caught on film, too. Karen told him about a new agent and his partner who saw a drug deal go down on the street and made an arrest, seizing both drugs and money. They didn't have evidence bags and tags with them since they weren't planning any arrests. The young agent, a man, was in charge of the cash, about \$3000 in currency. When they got back to the office, he asked his partner for the cash and she told him she didn't have it, that he had it. Then he realized he had put it loose on top of the car as they were getting in and had forgotten it as they drove off. They drove back over their route and found one little old lady standing by the curb dutifully holding a \$100 bill, waiting for them to return. The rest was never found.

Cliff topped that with the story of an agent who identified a robber during a search of the man's apartment and wanted to make an arrest. The suspect was being detained. Procedure dictated that except in an emergency, agents were required to call the United States Attorney's office and talk to the duty assistant and describe the probable cause to get authorization. He'd pulled out the contact sheet that had been recently issued, called the number for the duty AUSA in San Francisco, and identified himself, saying he wanted to get authorization for an arrest. The man on the other end listened as the agent described the evidence, then told him to go ahead and make the arrest. Later, the AUSA chewed him out for arresting the suspect without checking with the U.S. Attorney's office. When the agent said that he had, the AUSA denied authorizing it. Eventually they discovered that the contact sheet had a typo on it for the duty number. The man who had authorized the arrest turned out to be a plumber in Encino. Since there was probable cause, the arrest was still legal and the robber got prosecuted.

They changed into their undercover clothes at the motel and started back the opposite direction, hitting bars along the way. As planned, they didn't drink this time around. They were almost always asked by the bartenders what they wanted to drink, and it was sometimes awkward to just walk out, but no one challenged them. They didn't dare ask for Noel. There was too great a chance someone would tip him off that someone was looking for him. Cliff's run-in with Sarge the previous weekend was proof enough of that.

There weren't many spots in the north lake area, but when they got to Lakeport on the west side again, it was obvious they wouldn't be able to hit them all. They stopped at another restaurant for dinner, and this time Karen insisted on picking up the check. Cliff did not protest.

He was riding in Karen's car to the next bar when he got a text from Ellen: *SEND ME FOTO OF SUBJ FROM DRONE SCHOOL*. He didn't know what to make of this. Was she turning in the QuenMass killer to the FBI? She'd

have to turn him in at the same time, if so. There was no other way to explain how she knew. He texted back: *I LOVE U*. This brought a response: *I KNOW. SEND PIC*. Despair seeped into his very bones when he read it. "*I KNOW*" instead of "*I LOVE U, TOO*." He'd lost her, he was sure of it.

He knew his fate was in Ellen's hands anyway, so he had nothing to lose by sending her the photo. He retrieved it on his phone and emailed it to her. Then he texted her again, asking why she wanted it. She did not reply.

Karen asked him what the texting was all about and he said it was Ellen, without further explanation. Karen assumed it was wedding plans or other mundane domestic matters.

The barhopping went on all evening with nothing to show for it. They ended up back at the motel late again and called it a night.

Sunday

The next morning, Sunday, started just like Saturday – a stale pastry and coffee. At least this time Cliff had the foresight to bring down a quart of milk and bottle of orange juice from his grocery store run Friday. He shared these with Karen.

They still had bars and restaurants in Lakeport, Kelseyville, and points south to hit, but both of them were discouraged by this point. They decided that they would make the rounds there during the afternoon, and then after dinner touch base with all the law enforcement offices again to see if anyone had reported or remembered anything. There would also be late-shift personnel on duty, so they could show the pictures to a different set of eyes.

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Ellen finished reading the last of the articles she could find online about the Geocache Murders. Everything she read confirmed what Cliff had told her, although the papers had some details wrong. Three different bodies had been found near geocache locations. Investigators were looking for a bartender named Charles Price who used to work at a bar in the Santa Cruz Mountains called the Snake Pit. He also did house-sitting and general repairs for homeowners in that area. Price had allegedly overpowered a state drug agent and her boyfriend, a retired FBI agent, handcuffed them both when they had discovered his mountain hideout, and fled. The two agents reported that his motive was revenge against drug dealers and drunk drivers whose activities had resulted in the deaths of people he knew. The agents had further claimed that he was actually an ex-army

ranger named Kurt Leaming who deserted, but the military said Leaming had been killed in Afghanistan, so investigators believed Leaming was just an alias used by Price.

The two agents were both known to local geocaching hobbyists. Geocaching was explained in the article for those not familiar with it. People in that circle reported that the two were romantically linked. This didn't gibe with what Cliff had told her. He'd said they didn't start seeing each until after the incident where Leaming handcuffed them. He had told her that his fellow geocachers had assumed they were a couple when they had seen them together purely on business, on the murder case. The papers played it up as a scary but romantic story – boy and girl in the woods come upon murderer. She couldn't help doubting Cliff's description of his relationship with Delgado.

The articles never mentioned poison. The victims in the case had been shot and strangled, not poisoned. Cliff had told her about Leaming's crazy theory of the government spiking the illegal drugs they find and letting them continue on in to distribution instead of seizing them, that way ridding the world of dopers and all their associated crimes, but it wasn't in the articles. How much had Cliff and Delgado told the police, she wondered. She started searching for articles about the drug deaths in the Central Valley that Cliff said he suspected were due to Leaming using the stolen pesticides. She couldn't find anything. Drug users overdosed or died in violent incidents all the time; it wasn't news, or at least not big news and not recent. No one had ever put the two things together. Could Cliff be innocent? Maybe drug dealers were cutting their drugs with bad stuff totally unrelated to the pesticides. On the other hand, could Cliff's silence have led to the death of some otherwise innocent teenager trying marijuana for the first time? Some cancer patient using medical marijuana?

She'd had to shoot a man in the line of duty once. She hadn't killed him, but she had been trying to. Was that just as bad? No, she told herself, that was different. He had been threatening to take Cliff's life and had already taken other lives. She hadn't felt moral qualms about shooting him, but she had felt an uneasy guilt over the fact that she hadn't felt guilty at the time. It was illogical, but she worried that she had lost her moral compass; she felt guilty for not feeling guilty. She had once been a nun and left the order. She believed in the sanctity of human life. But she wasn't the first Catholic to become a peace officer. Boston and New York were crawling with them. She knew several cops and FBI agents back in New England where she'd come from who had left the seminary. They didn't seem troubled by the notion of having to shoot someone, to kill if necessary. Her case wasn't really unique, but somehow it seemed that

way to her. There were no answers. She went back to searching on the murder case.

Then she saw an article with photos of both Cliff and Karen Delgado. She wasn't prepared for this. Karen's photo was from an awards ceremony a year or so before the murders. She was a bombshell, much more gorgeous than she had expected. A pang of jealousy stabbed at her, but she tried to ignore it. Cliff's picture was unflattering. It was obviously an old one, where he was shown standing behind some FBI official who was making a speech. Cliff had thick glasses and no beard. She hadn't realized how weak his chin was, since the beard now covered it. She'd known he'd had laser surgery on his eyes and gotten rid of the glasses, but until now she hadn't realized how nerdy he had looked before. He looked a lot better now. This was vaguely disturbing, but she didn't love him for his looks. He was a good man, very smart, and would make a good father, she was sure. That's what mattered, but character mattered, too, and she still didn't know how she felt about what Cliff had done. The important thing now was to focus on getting this Leaming or Price or whatever his name was off the streets.

What she was most interested in for now was Price's lifestyle. After the first run of stories, there had been a follow-up about his operation base in the mountains. He'd built a shelter from an old burned-out redwood stump and equipped it with electric power stolen from nearby electric lines. He'd wired a satellite antenna to a tree in a nearby clearing and was able to get Internet access using surplus military equipment. He had devised a concealed shelter for his motorcycle just off the highway so that he could get to and from this post quickly. He was also seen running and hiking at many of the local parks and mountain trails, an obvious outdoorsman and natural athlete. He was a fascinating, iconic figure. Park rangers and geocachers alike had seen the man frequently on the trails, the article said. That's what she was looking for.

She started a search on her computer. She knew geocachers were a sociable group who loved to hold events and discuss geocaches and geocaching. There were several forums in the Bay Area. There had to be something in the Clear Lake area. She searched Facebook, Google+, Meetup.com, Yahoo Groups, and several independent websites set up by users. She found three that looked like they might work.

She tried to log onto the Facebook group but wasn't a member. *Drat!* She clicked the "Join" button and got a message that the group host would have to review and approve her request. The same thing happened at the Yahoo group. At the third site, a local forum created by a geocacher, she had better luck. She couldn't post anything, but she could read all the posts from members. It looked like some had at least cached in the Clear Lake area, and maybe lived around

there. They posted to the forum using their geocaching names. She could find their profiles on the main world geocaching site and email them from there. The forum moderator had a contact link. She emailed him and said she needed to post something right away for the safety of fellow geocachers. She knew some moderators weren't all that prompt in managing such sites, so she began looking up the geocaching profiles of those who had posted recently. She then sent similar emails to those geocachers through their profile contact links.

After an hour, she still had no reply. She began to fret. Why wouldn't people check their email? It was past noon now. Cliff would only be up in Clear Lake for a few more hours. She heard all the time about people on their smart phones texting constantly. They got notified of emails, didn't they? Then she remembered Twitter. She went back and looked at some of the profiles. One of the members had her Twitter handle on her profile page. Ellen tweeted her to check her email right away.

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Cliff and Karen were sitting in their car at a fast food place in Kelseyville when Cliff got a text from Ellen. It was a link to some local geocaching forum site he'd never heard of. He immediately texted back: *MUST TALK. I LOVE YOU*. She replied: *NO TIME SEE LINK YOURE BURNETT*.

Frustrated, he touched the link. It opened to a post from Ellen, using her geocaching name, Ellenwheels.

Help! Man threatens geocachers

An armed man was seen destroying a geocache in the Clear Lake area several days ago. When I approached him about why, he pointed the gun at me and said geocachers were always trespassing on his property, and he was going to put a stop to it. He said he was going to destroy all the geocaches in the entire area. If he caught another geocacher hiking across his land, he'd shoot him. Yesterday I saw this man pass near my business, and he looked up at my security camera. I am posting his picture below. Do NOT approach this man. He is hostile and armed. If you know who he is or where he is, contact Officer Burnett at the number shown below. Please repost this immediately to any geocaching groups or fellow geocachers in the Clear Lake area, but only to geocachers. It is important not to alert this man that police are looking for him.

The picture below was the one from the drone school. Ellen had skillfully cropped out the other students in the picture. You couldn't tell it was taken from a drone, just that it was taken from above. A high-mounted security camera would seem plausible. The number in the post was Cliff's cell number. So now he was Officer Burnett. People might start calling him. He showed the post to Karen.

"That's really clever," she said admiringly. "You've got one smart cookie there. We should have thought of that. Learning lives in the mountains. He probably runs, hikes, or bikes up and down the trails here all the time. Geocachers have probably seen him and would be really motivated to turn in someone who threatens geocachers. It's a way to alert them without alerting him."

"Unless he reads the local forums, or has a buddy who does. Remember his son Bart is a geocacher."

"But not up here. Why would he? Bart's down in Silicon Valley, isn't he? And not even aware his father's alive."

"The last I heard."

"Let's hope that phone rings. I have to be back at work tomorrow."

They didn't have to wait long. Forty minutes later, Cliff's phone buzzed. He didn't recognize the number, but he could tell from the area code it was local. He assumed it was someone who had seen the post.

"Hello."

"Is this Officer Burnett?"

"Yes. Who's calling?"

The man gave his name as Lewis Hoffman and said he had a vacation home in Clearlake Oaks. He had seen the post in the geocaching forum. He brought his fishing boat up to Clear Lake every summer, and last year the man in the picture, a man he knew as Barry, fixed a GPS device for him. He might know how to reach him. Cliff asked for Hoffman's address and said he would be there in a half hour.

They'd had the foresight to bring a change of clothes with them in case one of the police agencies contacted them, so they slipped into the restaurant restrooms to change out of the coveralls and librarian get-up. They had to drive from the west side to the east side of the lake, but they found the man patiently waiting at his vacation home, a cozy two-bedroom right on the water. This time Cliff identified himself as Officer Burnett and said Karen was his fellow officer. She held up a badge as he did so and handed him her card.

Hoffman said a fellow boater had recommended Barry as a whiz with electronics and provided him an email address. Barry had called in response,

gotten the address, come over promptly, and said he could try to fix the GPS. He tinkered for a while and found that the power supply was faulty. He was able to fix it on the spot. Hoffman had paid him, and that was the only time he'd talked to the man. He had no idea that the man was dangerous.

"Do you have an address or phone number for him?" Cliff asked.

"Just an email address. He called me, but that was last year. I don't have the number now."

Karen and Cliff took down the email address.

"Did you get a last name?"

"Hall. Barry Hall. I wrote a check. I looked that up in my check register while I was waiting for you."

"Are you sure it's the same man?" Karen asked.

"Yeah. It's him. He even wore that same cap."

"Did you see a vehicle?"

"He had a motorcycle. I don't know what make. And a kayak."

This made Cliff's ears perk up. "A kayak? How do you carry a kayak on a motorcycle?"

"No, that's not where I saw it. I said that was the only time I talked to him, but I saw him about a month ago out on the lake kayaking. I was fishing – that's what I need the GPS for, to mark the best fishing spots – and I saw him kayaking by and recognized him. He was really going at it. I waved and called his name, but I don't think he saw me. He was concentrating, like he was in training or something."

"Was he by himself both times?"

"Yes. He seemed like a real nice guy when he fixed my GPS. Very friendly."

"I guess you're a geocacher if you saw that post. Have you ever seen him while geocaching around here?"

"No. I only got into geocaching this year. I'm planning to go for some local caches. Is it safe? Do you know where the property is he was talking about?"

"No, we don't. There hasn't been any actual violence against geocachers that we know of. Just this one threat, and we haven't verified that. It may turn out to be nothing. Still, it's best to be cautious if you see him. He's reported to be armed. Did you see him with any weapons those two times?"

"No, but he had his T-shirt off when I saw him kayaking. He was wearing one of those sleeveless kinds – muscle shirts I think they call them. It wasn't until then that I realized how big he was in the chest and arms. He looked

like he didn't need any other weapons. I wouldn't mess with him, that's for sure."

"Okay," Karen said, "that's very helpful. If you think of anything else, please contact us. Also, it's very important that you don't tell him that we're looking for him."

"I won't say anything to anyone."

"Good. Thank you," Cliff said and slipped the notepad he was writing on back into his shirt pocket.

They shook hands and left. Karen headed north to the Lucerne sheriff's substation. The same deputy they had talked to on Saturday was at the desk. She explained to him that they had a lead on their fugitive and needed to use their computer. He asked how he could help, and she asked him to run the name Barry Hall through the DMV database. He did so and several came up. One had an address on High Valley Road in Clearlake Oaks. She asked him to bring up that license so she could see the photo. That was him. There was no doubt. Now he was using the name Barry Michael Hall. His hair was short, in a military buzz cut, like in the drone school photo. He'd changed it from the shaggy look he'd had as Charles Price and the blond wig he'd used for the Noel Clifford license photo. They ran him for registered vehicles, and he had none. Karen told them he had a motorcycle registered in the name of Noel Clifford.

They asked the police to look up in the county tax records who owned that property. It came back to a local rancher. The officers knew the family, as they were major landholders. A debate started about whether to go to that location or contact the owner. One of the deputies knew the rancher personally and vouched for his discretion. Cliff and Karen decided to trust the deputy's judgment and had him call the landowner. Once the deputy had him on the phone, he turned the phone over to Karen. She identified herself and asked if Barry Hall lived there. The man said no, he just used that mailing address sometimes because he didn't have a permanent address. Barry did a lot of work for him, setting up his home computer network and a security system, so he agreed to let him use that address for his mail until he got settled in. He knew Barry had a place farther up High Valley Road toward the Mendocino National Forest – a hunting shack off a jeep trail that peeled off from the main road. Karen put the phone on speaker and asked the man to describe the location of the shack. He did so. The deputies both nodded and said they knew exactly where that was.

Finally. The chase was on. The deputies wanted to go directly there and arrest him, but Karen talked them into taking a more cautious approach. Price was a crack shot and had vowed never to be taken alive. The deputy called the watch commander back in Lakeport, who said he'd dispatch the SWAT team if

they could verify the man was there. They agreed on a plan to send a patrol unit by that shack discreetly. Deputies patrolled that area from time to time or went out there on calls, so a routine drive-by wouldn't raise any alarms, they felt sure. If they spotted his motorcycle or other signs he was there, the patrol unit would radio back he was there. Cliff said he would stay behind at the substation command post to coordinate while Karen would go with the SWAT team. This was because Cliff was an unarmed civilian, but he didn't tell that to the deputies since they still assumed he was a peace officer.

The patrol deputy drove by the location and spotted the motorcycle by the shack. He kept going so as not to draw attention to himself and radioed back it was there. He said there was a light – a bare light bulb – visible through the window, too. The Watch Commander told the deputies not to try to arrest. He would assemble the SWAT team and dispatch them, but it would take at least an hour since most members were on the west side of the lake. They had to assemble their gear at the main station in Lakeport first. The patrol deputy was told to come back down High Valley Road and position himself out of sight, but where he could see if the subject came down the road toward Clearlake Oaks, the southern direction. Another deputy positioned herself at the intersection of Bartlett Springs Road and High Valley in case he left going north.

Cliff pointed out to Karen that they still hadn't checked out of the motel, and this would be a good time to do that. They told the deputies they'd be back in twenty minutes and returned to the motel. They checked out and drove back to the substation and rejoined the deputies. The station was abuzz with anticipation. None of the deputies had arrested a serial killer, and they hadn't seen good action in months.

The SWAT team arrived in Lucerne forty minutes later and devised an arrest plan. They considered a direct entry too dangerous. Instead, they would set up a distant perimeter, far enough away to be out of eyesight and earshot of the shack, and wait for him to emerge. The arrest would take place as soon as he got far enough away from the shack to be unable to go back in and barricade himself or get weapons and ammunition. If he managed to get on the cycle and leave, they could block the road in both directions, even shoot him down if necessary, if he didn't surrender. The area was heavily wooded, so a concealed spotter could be stationed where he'd be able to monitor the front door and motorcycle.

The plan sounded fine to Cliff, but then, as the old Yiddish proverb said, "Man plans, God laughs." He'd never seen an arrest plan that was foolproof, and with Leaming being the subject, he was not about to rest easy until it was a done deal. By 4:00, all the personnel were in place. The shack was surrounded, but at a distance. The spotter had the eye on the door and motorcycle, which was still

there. All they had to do was wait for him to emerge. If he didn't come out soon, they could force him out with tear gas and other methods, since there were no hostages or other innocents. Of course, he could come out shooting with that kind of warning.

By 5:30, there was still no sign of movement. The swing shift deputies were out in the patrol cars doing regular duty. They were told to stay off High Valley Road due to a SWAT operation. Several on the day shift wanted to stay around to see this serial killer brought in. They were starting to call their spouses to say they were going to be late for dinner. Cliff offered to get sandwiches for them. He was hungry, too. He was always hungry. There was a Subway a few blocks away that took phone orders, he was told. Cliff called them and ordered several sandwiches. Fifteen minutes later the shop called to say they were ready, so Cliff went to get them. Normally he would walk, but he wanted to be able to rush back if anything happened, so he took his car, telling the deputies to call him if anything happened. He left his cell number.

As he pulled into the parking lot of the sandwich shop, he saw a Jeep with a kayak on top pull out. Adrenaline surged through every vein and artery as he saw it was Kurt Leaming driving. Leaming hadn't noticed him, so far as he could tell. Cliff made a quick U-turn and pulled out onto the street, making a right onto Highway 20 North. Where was he going? Cliff wondered. The shack was south.

He could see the Jeep half a block ahead, with only one car in between. That was perfect; he'd done enough surveillances to know how to keep back, hidden by other vehicles, but he also knew that trying to follow with just one car was doomed to failure. He'd either lose him or get made sooner or later. He grabbed his phone from his pocket to call the substation. He hadn't owned this smart phone long and still wasn't that handy with it. He was looking down at the phone trying to figure out how to dial one-handed while driving when a big SUV pulled in front of him and then slowed to make a left turn up ahead. Cliff barely had time to drop the phone onto the passenger seat and grab the wheel with both hands to swerve around it on the right shoulder.

Cliff swerved back and saw the Jeep still moving up ahead at a normal speed, with one car in between. He reached back over to grab the phone and realized it wasn't on the seat. He could see it in the passenger footwell. *Damn!* He had to keep the Jeep in sight. He could hope for a stoplight, or maybe Leaming stopping somewhere close. Within minutes they were out of town, still heading north. The phone still beckoned from the footwell.

The car between them made a right turn into a driveway. Now Cliff's car wasn't obscured if Leaming looked in the rear-view mirror. Cliff dropped back

farther. He saw the Jeep make a right turn onto Bartlett Springs Road. This was the same road he'd taken with Ellen the previous week for the geocaches. It connected with High Valley Road. Both were narrow dirt roads, but they were the closest things to main roads up here where gravel driveways and crude jeep trails shot off at odd angles. At least he knew where he was, more or less. His Volvo was a sporty convertible and wasn't really cut out for these dirt roads, but the car GPS unit was showing his location accurately. He knew the Jeep could take any of these rutted shortcut tracks at any time, and he wouldn't be able to follow him.

He kept losing sight of Leaming because of the turns in the road, but he decided he had to stop and alert the arrest team, and he wasn't sure how far away he could get from town and still get a cell signal. He pulled over at a wide spot and reached down for the phone. He had a signal! He called Karen, since he didn't have the direct number to the substation. It went straight to voicemail. She must not have a signal. He spat an expletive and dialed 911. He went on hold. Could anything more go wrong? He started driving again, holding the phone up periodically so he could see the signal strength as he drove. It was still at two bars, so he felt he could chance going farther up the hill without losing it. He got the 911 operator, a Highway Patrol employee hundreds of miles away, and told her to contact the Lucerne substation of the Lake County sheriff's office and tell them that Knowles was pursuing the subject up Bartlett Springs Road. The operator repeated that back accurately, which gave him some confidence. Then she started to ask him more questions, but the phone cut out. At least the message got through. He knew the deputies had radio contact, even if Karen's cell didn't work. They would be warned Leaming was coming from the north, assuming he was headed to the shack. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and stepped on the gas. He had to take a chance on being less discreet if he wanted to get Leaming in sight again.

His Volvo handled the curves like a dream, throwing up huge clouds of dirt and dust, and after a few minutes, he saw the Jeep in the distance. He slowed down. There were so many switchbacks that Leaming must have been able to see the dusty billows below him, he realized. Well, there was nothing he could do about that now. Leaming didn't know his car, and maybe he would think it was just some other ordinary citizen or local resident. The Volvo certainly didn't look like a police vehicle. Then he realized there were no structures around, just forest and scrubland. If Leaming had spotted him, he had to be suspicious. He dropped back further. He couldn't see the Jeep, but he was able to confirm he was still on the Jeep's tail by the lingering dust trail over the road.

When Cliff reached the High Valley intersection, he looked to see if there was any sign of the Jeep's passage. Sure enough, there was still some dust in the air on High Valley Road. Leaming had turned and headed for the shack. There had been a female deputy stationed at this intersection before the SWAT team arrived to make sure the fugitive did not leave this direction, but she had been pulled off once the SWAT team was in position, so Cliff was alone up here. He turned to follow Leaming down High Valley. He could take it somewhat easier now that he was pretty sure Leaming was headed toward the shack and the deputies knew he was coming. He didn't want to be in the middle of a shootout. If only he could communicate directly with someone there.

The cell tower fairies must have heard his wish because suddenly his phone rang. It was Karen. She must have found a spot with reception. He slowed to a crawl while he answered it.

"Cliff, what the hell are you doing?"

"Chasing Leaming south on High Valley. We just turned onto it from Bartlett Springs, so we're still well north of you. He's in a Jeep with a kayak on top."

"How did this happen? You were supposed to stay out of the action back in Lucerne."

Cliff explained about going for sandwiches and seeing Leaming in the Jeep.

"Dammit, we should have realized he had access to another vehicle. You even said it to that guy – how could he carry a kayak on a motorcycle?"

"Karen, don't beat yourself up. You checked registration on both IDs. There was only the motorcycle. He must have borrowed the Jeep or bought it and not registered it or something."

"Cliff, the SWAT team is heading north to intercept him. You should just stop where you are and let us know if he comes back that way. I'll stay here. This is the only spot I've been able to get a signal. I'm with a SWAT officer with a radio, so I'm in contact with the team."

"Okay, sounds like a plan. I'll call you if –"

The bullet shattered the windshield with a thundering crack, passing through the passenger headrest and out the back window. Reacting without thinking, Cliff dropped the phone, slammed on the brake, and wheeled into a hard left. The car skidded in the soft dirt and ended up sideways on the road. The right front fender slammed against a tree, and the rear bumper jammed into the dirt berm that had been on his right. The engine stopped with a shudder.

Cliff tore off his seat belt, opened the door, and dove for the ground, expecting a second shot. It didn't come. He looked under the car and could see

the feet of the shooter coming his way. He was probably fifty yards off. He assumed the shooter was Leaming – who else could it be? – but he couldn't see his face. The man carried a rifle pointing down and in front of him, the barrel just visible. Cliff didn't think Leaming knew who was following him yet, but he would as soon as he got to the car. Cliff wasn't about to stick around and fight, so the only other real option was flight. Staying low and obscured by the dust cloud, he stood up and began running back down the road the way he had come, dodging left and right in case he was being shot at, but no shot came.

The road curved sharply, so Cliff only had to run about twenty yards before he could go left around the bend and be shielded by trees, but he kept going another forty yards or so. Then he stopped and took cover behind a sturdy-looking specimen. He peeked around the tree and was able to see his Volvo through the thick foliage as the dust settled. Leaming had reached the car and was inspecting it, occasionally looking up his direction to see if the driver was in sight.

Cliff cursed himself for letting his guard down. He should have stopped completely to talk to Karen, but he had kept driving. Even though it was only five miles per hour, it was enough to come around the curve onto that straight stretch. He hadn't seen the Jeep stopped in the dark shadows up ahead because of the thick dust on his windshield, the sun's glare, and because he was distracted with the conversation. That would make a good public service announcement, he mused ruefully: "Don't use your cell phone while driving. You might not notice the serial killer ahead waiting to shoot you."

He watched as Leaming walked around the car to the driver's side, then climbed into the seat. At that point he realized his phone was still in the car and probably still connected. If Leaming saw it, he would see Karen's name and picture on the screen. That face and name he knew. He'd know immediately he had police hot on his trail.

As Cliff watched, Leaming closed the driver's door and appeared to be trying to start the car, looking around for car keys in the ignition, then, based on his head movements, down near the pedals. The car had a keyless ignition, the kind that detected the key in your pocket, and the key was still in Cliff's pocket. Leaming would not be able to start the car without him. Leaming's body language told Cliff he was irritated or frustrated, but still calm and unhurried. Cliff worried that Leaming would have an incentive to come after him to get the key if he wanted to move the car, but then dismissed the thought. Leaming had to realize what Cliff did, which was that there was no way that car was going to move on its own. The front end was wedged against the tree, and the rear bumper was wedged against the dirt berm on that side. It would need to be towed out.

Next Leaming leaned over and appeared to be reaching into the glove box. Cliff saw him sit up straight again with a piece of paper in his hand. The car registration or insurance certificate. It would have Cliff's name on it. Sure enough, Leaming's whole demeanor changed instantly. He sat bolt upright and looked around quickly, then got out of the car and assumed a semi-crouch, scanning the road and general area in Cliff's direction.

Cliff ducked down out of sight. Maybe he should have kept running instead of stopping to watch. He was afraid that if he started running now, he'd give away his position. Instead, he began crawling down the hillside quietly. The brush was heavy, and he knew he couldn't be seen from where Leaming had been standing. If Leaming came over to the edge of the roadway and peered down below, maybe then, but with the foliage being so thick, he thought not.

The familiar deep voice boomed, "Come out, Knowles. I know you're down there."

Cliff froze.

"I'll shoot."

Cliff didn't move.

The crack of the rifle proved Leaming wasn't bluffing. Cliff cringed, but then realized the shot hadn't been close. At least he didn't think so. There was no kick of dirt, no ping off a nearby rock, no thunk in the trunk of one of the trees that he could hear. Leaming was bluffing. He was trying to scare him into showing himself. He didn't know where Cliff was. It was a big forest.

Another shot rang out. This one was closer. Cliff did hear the thunk of a bullet into a tree trunk, but it was still thirty yards away. He remained where he was.

"Come on out. I won't shoot you. I'm just playing with you, showing you what I could do. If I'd wanted to kill you, you'd be dead. You know my history. I let you live before. I only kill bad guys. I told you we're on the same side."

Cliff remained hidden and said nothing.

"I put that round through the passenger side, not the driver side. I was just trying to scare off whoever it was following me."

Cliff could hear the increasing frustration in Leaming's voice. Leaming had obviously moved around the curve in the roadway and was now almost directly above Cliff's hiding place. Cliff twisted his neck as far as he could to try to look up and back, but he couldn't see that direction without changing his body position. He was afraid that would make noise that would give away his position. All he could do was sit immobile and hope that if the bullet came, it was a clean kill, quick and painless.

“I just want to know how you found me. Who else is with you? That’s all. Sorry about the car. I didn’t know it was you then. I thought it was probably one of the pot growers around here.”

The voice was now further around the curve, past his position. Cliff realized that Leaming hadn’t seen him and was still searching. He also was pretty sure Leaming hadn’t seen his phone in the car and didn’t know about Karen. Still, Leaming had to be smart enough to know Cliff wouldn’t be chasing him alone and unarmed. The fugitive would assume others were nearby and might be en route now.

Leaming made one more pass and took one more shot, once again wide of the mark, apparently another random shot into the forest. Then Cliff heard his footsteps running. Leaming must have decided to give up hunting Cliff and flee. That had been his pattern back in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and it had worked. Within thirty seconds Cliff heard the Jeep start up, and then its noise faded away. It could only go south since the Volvo blocked the roadway north.

Cliff climbed back up to the road and hurried to the car. He jumped inside and looked around for the phone. He couldn’t see it. Then he heard Karen’s voice yelling at him, asking what had happened. That allowed him to find it wedged under the passenger seat.

“Karen, I’m here. He just shot at me as I came around a curve. My car’s wrecked and blocking the road this way.”

“Omigod. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I hid in the woods until he left. Listen. He’s headed your way, but he went into my car and found my registration. He knows it’s me, so he’s gotta know there are people out looking for him. It’ll be like last time. He’s rabbiting.”

“What’s your exact position? Does your phone have GPS?”

“Yeah. Hang on.” It took him a minute to figure out how to display the coordinates, but Cliff read them off to her.

“Okay, the deputy here is looking on his own system. He says SWAT is about eight or nine minutes from your position. Crap, there’s several jeep trails leading off from High Valley. He could take any of ’em and get lost in the mountains.”

“Maybe I can help. Hang on.”

“You said your car was wrecked. How can you help?”

But Cliff didn’t hear her because he was busy opening the trunk of his car. He pulled out the Acerodon and checked it over. So far as he could tell, it was undamaged. He placed it on the roadway and pulled out the controller and the camera FPV monitor. Everything seemed to be in working order. He could

hear Karen's voice coming from the phone, which was sitting on the roof of his car, but he ignored it. He was familiar enough with the drone that he had it in the air within two minutes. Within another thirty seconds, he had it high enough to scan the whole area and spot Leaming's Jeep. With the kayak on top, it wasn't hard to see from the air. He let the drone hover so he could take his hands off the controls and pick up the phone.

"Okay, you were right. He took a jeep trail going east. It looks like a dead end."

"How do you know this? Did you plant a GPS device on his car?" Her tone was a mix of skepticism and sarcasm.

"No. I'm watching him with my drone."

"You and your jokes. Cliff, we went through this before when we were handcuffed to that tree. You don't know when to be serious."

"I am serious. I had a drone in my trunk. I call him Ace. It's a loaner from a company I'm working with. I don't have time to explain. I can see the SWAT caravan coming up on the turnoff. Radio them to hang a right where the next jeep track comes in. That'll be about thirty seconds, so do it now."

He heard Karen talk to the deputy and then heard a male voice in the background directing the SWAT personnel.

"Cliff, this damn well better not be a joke. I just sent them up the trail you said. They're screaming at me for an explanation. The sergeant refused to go, so we've got the team leader continuing to you. There's all kinds of confusion. Two units are going down the track you said."

"I swear, Karen, I can see him on my monitor. Hold on. Now he's out of my field of view. I need to move the drone."

Cliff returned to the controls and repositioned the drone. Leaming's Jeep reached the end of the jeep trail. He could see Leaming get out, rifle in hand, and walk back down the road. He probably didn't expect anyone to be following him, but it was clear he was going to set up to ambush anyone who might try it just as he had done with Cliff. Cliff took the drone way up; he hoped it couldn't be heard at ground level.

"Okay, I can see the SWAT vehicles on the same track. They're only about two minutes behind him. But you've got to warn them. He's out of the Jeep with a rifle in hand. He's an expert marksman, remember. They need to stop before they get to the big left-hand switchback. It looks like he's setting up behind a big rock overlooking the bend."

Karen relayed the warning, but the SWAT teams continued to roll, though at a slower pace. The second SUV slowed more, leaving a greater space between the vehicles, that driver apparently more cautious than the lead car.

“What are they doing, Karen? They’re going to get themselves killed. They need to stop and send a man up the west side before the switchback. He could get behind Leaming and take him out.”

He could hear staticky radio noise in the background, a sound he took to be the SWAT team arguing with the deputy with Karen, the one giving orders they didn’t like. Cliff surmised that they didn’t understand or believe that there was a drone watching overhead. It was high enough up and toward the sun from their direction that they wouldn’t be able to see it or hear it even if they were out of their vehicles. Karen was yelling at the deputy to tell them to stop before the switchback.

But it was too late. The first SWAT SUV rounded the switchback, and Leaming fired two rounds, killing both deputies in the front seat with pinpoint head shots. The one deputy in the back seat radioed with his shoulder mike that the other two deputies had been shot. He screamed that the second SUV should not follow. The second SUV stopped, still two hundred yards away and out of sight.

“Cliff, you were right. Some deputies have been shot. A third is pinned down in the car.”

“Dammit, Karen, I told them.”

“Not now, Cliff. What do you see? Just tell us what’s happening.”

Cliff suddenly noticed a red light blinking. The battery level on the drone was getting low. It had been up for over fifteen minutes. The camera had limited battery life, too, but its battery was rechargeable and he had no way to recharge it from the car. He needed a wall plug for that. The camera battery was starting to run low, too, but he thought it would hold. The controller/receiver for the camera, the unit that connected the monitor on the ground to the camera through radio signals, was also running low. He didn’t have a replacement for that one. He did have one extra battery in the trunk for the drone, but he’d have to bring the drone back to change it.

“Karen, the drone batteries are low. I just have another minute. Tell the trapped deputy he has to get out of the SUV. Leaming’ll come hunt him down. Tell him if he slips out the right rear door very low, Leaming can’t get a clear shot. He can get over the edge of roadside and find cover.”

Cliff didn’t have time to watch whether this advice was taken. The battery was so low he needed to get the drone back before it fell out of the sky. As it was, he barely made it. Ace landed at his feet in a fast descent. At the same time, a sheriff’s patrol vehicle came to a halt in a cloud of dust on the other side of the Volvo. A deputy rushed over to him as he changed the batteries in the drone.

Cliff heard the sergeant yell into his mike, “It’s for real. This guy does have a drone.” Cliff didn’t bother to talk to the deputy. He switched the battery out expertly and got the bird back in the air in less than a minute. The deputy was asking him questions, but Cliff was too busy concentrating on what he was doing even to listen.

When the drone got back to five hundred feet, Cliff turned the camera back on. He had turned off that controller before bringing the camera back in order to save juice. Now he had to reorient the drone and camera. It was amazing how far he could see from that level; the fish-eye lens took in the whole countryside.

“Just come over here,” Cliff called to the sergeant, who was still on the other side of the Volvo. The man did so, climbing over the hood of the car since there was no room to go around. “They’ve all moved since I brought the drone back. I need to get closer.” The deputy stood by Cliff’s side and looked at the FPV monitor. He recognized the two SUVs and the Jeep, but he wasn’t able to make out the people.

Cliff lowered the drone and moved toward the scene slowly. If he lowered it much more, or moved too much farther from the launch point, he risked losing line-of-sight with the drone, and thus radio control.

Suddenly, Cliff recognized Leaming moving among the trees. He was circling in a clockwise direction to get behind the deputy, who had managed to follow Cliff’s directions and get out of the SUV and take cover behind a tree. Cliff could see that the deputy had a long-barreled weapon. Cliff pointed to the figures on the screen to help the sergeant orient what he was seeing.

The deputy grabbed Cliff’s elbow and yanked it. Cliff finally realized the deputy had been giving him commands.

“Bring that thing over here so we can use the radio,” the deputy repeated for the fourth time, impatience strong in his voice. He climbed back over the Volvo.

Of course! It was much more efficient for the deputy to give radio commands as he watched the screen than for Cliff to relay them through Karen. Cliff grabbed his phone from the hood of the Volvo and told Karen that the deputy was there now and he was going to turn control over to him.

Cliff managed to clamber over the Volvo while keeping the controller steady. Once there, he walked over to the sheriff’s vehicle, where the deputy grabbed the microphone off the dash. It took a few seconds, but soon Cliff and the deputy were working harmoniously, Cliff controlling the Acerodon and its camera, the deputy giving instructions over the radio. The sergeant warned the

deputy being stalked that the subject was coming around to his right. The deputy moved the opposite direction, putting distance between him and Leaming.

“What kind of weapon is that? Your deputy’s?” Cliff asked.

“A shotgun. Why?”

“The subject has a rifle. He’s got the distance advantage. Tell the deputy not to fire if he doesn’t have to. If the subject hears it, he’ll know that and stay out of shotgun range.”

The deputy relayed this information although the pinned-down deputy must have known about the rifle from the shots that killed his partners. Then he saw figures moving behind Leaming through the trees. They were moving toward Leaming’s previous position.

“SWAT 3, stop and wave your arm. I need to identify you from the air.” One of the figures started waving one arm. The other held a long weapon.

“Okay, I see you. The subject is at your two o’clock and moving to your left. He has a rifle, but I don’t think he knows you’re there. If you can get a clear shot, take it.” He turned to Cliff and, with his finger off the mike button, explained, “That’s Harper. He was a sniper in the marines. He’s the best shot and has the sniper rifle.”

Harper acknowledged over the radio. All the figures kept moving through the trees in a slow, circular dance. The deputy with the shotgun reached a point where he couldn’t keep moving away from Leaming without climbing back up onto the roadway, where he would be exposed. He stopped and crouched down behind a large tree. He couldn’t see Leaming, and presumably Leaming couldn’t see him. The Acerodon saw everything.

“He’s coming right toward you at three o’clock,” the sergeant informed him. The shotgun deputy turned to face that direction. There was nowhere to go. If Leaming spotted him first, while still out of shotgun range, he was dead. If he could stay out of sight until Leaming got within shotgun range, the shotgun, loaded with double-ought buck, was a more powerful weapon, and the deputy stood a good chance of killing Leaming with his first shot.

The voice of Harper, the sniper, came over the radio. “I see him now. He’s in range, but I don’t have a clear shot. Too many trees, and he keeps moving.”

Leaming was now only fifty yards from the shotgun deputy and advancing. This was definitely within shotgun range, but the thick trees and low brush prevented either of the two men from seeing the other.

The camera controller started flashing a red light, signaling that the battery level was critically low.

“If he would just stand still, I could take him out,” Harper’s voice came over the radio.

Not only did it come over the radio at the sergeant’s car, it also squawked from the radio on the shoulder of the shotgun deputy. Leaming heard the noise. He couldn’t make out what was said, but he could tell where it was coming from. Now he knew where the deputy was; he headed directly for him, weapon to his shoulder.

Cliff knew he had no more time. He would lose visual contact at any moment. He shoved the pitch joysticks forward and the throttle back to dive directly toward Leaming, who looked up just as he had in the drone school photo. The monitor screen went black. Cliff and the sergeant heard shots ring out in the distance.

Chapter 26

Ellen was still furious at Cliff and wasn't sure about their relationship, but all her hand-wringing wasn't helping. She was soon blissfully distracted from the torturous navel-gazing by a new email message.

She opened it. It was a notification that someone had replied to her message in the geocachers' forum up in the North Bay with a pm, or private message. She clicked on the link that took her to the pm. Another geocacher said she was pretty sure it was the same guy in the photo who surprised her on the trail a couple of months earlier on Bartlett Springs Road. Ellen replied immediately and asked her for coordinates of the encounter. The woman replied with another post that she wasn't sure, but it was between two geocaches she named. Ellen said she'd relay the information to Officer Burnett.

Ellen would have preferred the woman had chosen to call "Officer Burnett" herself, so that Cliff could ask her more details while he was in the region, but she knew that a lot of people didn't want to get involved with police. The woman had made a comment that this was a geocaching matter that should be handled just by fellow geocachers, not the cops. Fine. Ellen would call Cliff herself. Now she had a good excuse, and he might be able to use the information. *This is his last day there, so I'd better get it to him,* she thought.

When Cliff's phone rang, he was looking up at the sky, waiting to see what would happen with the drone. He no longer had a camera view and couldn't see Ace in the sky, but he knew it was programmed to return to its launch coordinates if it lost radio contact with the controller. He didn't know if the drone was still receiving signals from him, but he knew it wouldn't dive into the ground. As soon as the trees blocked the signal, it would go straight up and then come back to him. The camera controller ran out of juice, but the control unit that directed the copter still had plenty of power, and the drone itself had a fresh battery in it. The only question was whether the landscape blocked the signal or if it was too far away. He pushed the throttle forward to make the drone climb straight up. Then he spotted it, just a dot in the sky. He grabbed the phone while still fixing his gaze on the aircraft. He didn't want to lose sight of it again.

"Karen, I lost visual. I'm bringing it back."

"It's me, Cliff," Ellen huffed. "Where's Karen if not with you? I thought you guys were staying together."

"Ellen, I'm sorry. I was watching the drone. I didn't look at the phone." Voices were talking excitedly over the sheriff's radio.

"The drone? You're out flying the drone? What in the world is going on? I heard a police radio."

“I can’t talk now. I’ll call you later.” He hung up. The Acerodon was now almost overhead, and Cliff had brought it down to about two hundred feet. It was heavily wooded here with pines, but the trees weren’t very tall, sixty or seventy feet maximum. These were all second growth, since the original mountainside had been heavily logged the previous century. They were, however, tall enough to cause a problem if the drone got hung up in one of them, so he had to concentrate in maneuvering the bird back.

After he got it on the ground, it tipped over. Cliff realized that it was missing one strut from its landing gear. He removed the video camera from its mount. He could hear more radio traffic in the background and could only tell it was chaotic, with people transmitting over each other.

He stopped what he was doing so he could listen. He caught the phrase “... on the ground ...” then “... shot ...” The sergeant was interrupting every few seconds to order them to stop transmitting so he could direct them to take turns, but apparently they couldn’t hear him because they were transmitting at the same time.

Cliff continued to listen while he pulled his laptop from his suitcase, still in the back seat of the car. He booted up the laptop and plugged the camera into it with a USB cable. He could play the video to see what happened. Even though the radio controller that connected the monitor to the camera had run out of power, the camera itself had its own battery. It had continued to video even after the receiver/controller was no longer directing it or receiving the signals it sent back.

Neither Cliff nor the sergeant could tell what had happened on the ground from the radio broadcasts. There was still too much confusion. Cliff mounted the camera as an external file device and navigated to the folder with the video files. He launched the one with the latest time stamp. The picture was steady, and the shootout scene was centered in view. Leaming and the SWAT deputies were all circling. Cliff hadn’t bothered to mute the microphone during filming. The videocam had a microphone, but most people who used them on drones muted them since all they picked up was the annoying whine of the motors. Cliff had taken video with the drone only once before and didn’t know how to turn that off, so it remained in the default “recording on” mode, recording the annoying buzz. This was footage that he’d seen live as it was happening, before the shootout. He fast forwarded and picked up the beginning of the dive. He saw Leaming look up, bring his rifle to his shoulder and aim directly at the drone. By this point, the sergeant had seen what Cliff was doing and was watching the video over his shoulder, since he still couldn’t get a clear understanding from the radio traffic.

There was a sudden change of scene for a moment, as though the camera had been bumped. A split second later, the crack of the rifle shot could be heard on the recording over the buzzing. Leaming's rifle fired supersonic bullets, ones that traveled faster than the speed of sound, so the impact of the bullet had taken place before the sound arrived. Leaming had shot the Acerodon but only clipped off one landing strut. That had caused a sharp twist in flying direction for a second, but the gimbal on the camera had kept the camera pointed toward the shooting scene as it continued to dive toward the ground. At the same moment that they saw the puff of smoke from the barrel of Leaming's gun, they saw Leaming jerk backward, drop his rifle and clutch his left shoulder. With a surprised look to his right, then down at his hand, blood oozing between his fingers, he picked up his rifle with the other hand and scrambled on a low crouch away from the scene and soon left the view of the camera off the top of the screen.

The sergeant grabbed the microphone again and began yelling, "Cease talking, everyone," repeatedly until finally, between his transmissions, he could tell it was quiet. "SWAT 3, report."

"SWAT 3. I think I hit him, Sarge. He stopped moving to shoot at the drone thing. That was a brilliant move. I can't see him now, though. He dropped out of view. We can't tell if it's safe to enter that area."

"Listen, everyone. The subject appeared to be hit in the left upper chest or shoulder area. He began running in a northwesterly direction. We no longer have visual on him. Repeat. We cannot see him. It's up to you to chase him on foot. Look for a blood trail. He's killed two of our deputies and is still armed. Shoot to kill on sight."

"10-4." The acknowledgment was repeated by the other two SWAT members on the scene.

"Is anyone injured?"

The shotgun deputy reported that he was okay, but, as he had reported earlier, the two men in the front seat had been killed.

The sergeant relayed the situation to the Watch Commander back in Lakeport, who said he would request air support from the Highway Patrol and to continue the manhunt. The sergeant told Cliff he was going to leave to join his fellows on SWAT. Cliff said he'd come along, but the sergeant refused. At first the sergeant had thought Cliff was a state agent, but upon seeing the car, he had begun to have serious doubts. In any event, Cliff certainly wasn't dressed for a manhunt and had at most a handgun, if he was armed at all, and no protective vest.

“I’ll do this for you though,” the sergeant told him. “I’ll get your car out. It looks like it might be drivable if we can get it out of there.” The SWAT SUV had a winch in front. It took ten minutes, but the SUV was able to pull the car free. It had a lot of body damage, but it wasn’t leaking any fluids and seemed operable. The sergeant had pulled it out so that it was pointed back toward Lucerne. He told Cliff to go back to the sheriff’s substation and send the video to the Watch Commander.

Cliff didn’t argue. He had no desire to get in another gunfight, especially without a weapon or protective vest. His offer to come along had been more out of a sense of obligation and a compelling curiosity to see firsthand what happened. He knew he couldn’t be of much use and would just be a hindrance, but he also knew that if Leaming was caught alive, he could sell Cliff out. He wanted to be there if that happened, to spin the words his way.

The sheriff’s people still didn’t know Leaming was the QuenMass killer. They were operating on the basis that he was wanted for the Geocache Murders three years earlier. The best-case scenario would be if Leaming admitted in his dying words that he was the QuenMass killer and said he had acted alone. Worst case would be if he lived and bargained for his life by falsely serving up Cliff as a co-conspirator. Well, worse than that, Cliff supposed, was if he killed more officers and got away. Clever and athletic as he was, Leaming wasn’t *that* good, Cliff thought. He had been shot in the upper torso and was fleeing from three heavily armed SWAT-trained deputies, and those deputies were soon going to be joined by the sergeant and a CHP helicopter.

Cliff heard the radio come alive again. Karen and the deputy with her at the hunting shack were going to join the chase, too. They’d only stayed behind so that Karen could be in touch by cell phone with Cliff and relay information from those phones over the police radio. Karen, of course, was a peace officer and had changed into her grubbies back in Lucerne, so she was dressed for the job and carried her own gun. SWAT loaned her a vest; they always kept extras in the SUV for hostage situations. She’d let the SWAT team take the lead if they got to Leaming, but she’d be on hand to question him and verify his identity. Cliff didn’t know what she might say to the deputies about QuenMass if they got him.

The Watch Commander radioed that he was sending more deputies to secure the shack and to do a crime scene search since Karen and the deputy with her were leaving for the hunt. Cliff heard this and considered waiting for the sergeant to leave the scene, finding a wide spot to turn the car around, and heading on to that shack himself. No, that wouldn’t work. Karen and her deputies would be coming this direction. They’d meet halfway and the jig would be up. Cliff knew that if the relief deputies got there and found the big Thanapest

container, it would have his fingerprints on it. So would any other poisons from that cursed locker. Cliff had moved the pesticides from Heindryckx's farm to the storage unit two years ago. Prints last much longer than that. Once again he seemed to be on the verge of it all coming out. The thought hit him hard, and he felt exhausted. He was tired of fighting it all.

He watched the sergeant leave, then realized he hadn't talked to Ellen when she'd called. Quickly he took out his phone and checked, but she had hung up. Or maybe he had. He couldn't remember. He punched the call button to have it dial the last incoming call number. Oh boy, was she going to be mad.

After a long five rings, she answered. Cliff knew she had to be debating whether or not to answer when she saw it was him. "All right, what's happening, Cliff?" she demanded.

He decided that discretion was the better part of valor in this situation. "Ellen, I'm sorry I hung up; don't be mad. We found Leaming. He's been shot. The sheriff's SWAT team is chasing him now."

Mollified by this unexpected and obviously good news, Ellen was speechless for a moment. "What was all that about the drone? I thought you weren't going to take part in any arrest, but I heard the police radio."

"I stayed back at the substation while Karen and the SWAT team went to raid his shack. He was living up in the mountains just like before. But he turned out not to be there. I just happened to be able to help with the drone when he was spotted. I was standing with a SWAT guy who was directing the others using the drone camera to see the situation. That's why I couldn't talk. It was all going down when you called. There's a manhunt on right now."

This account, though all true, conveniently omitted the part about him following Leaming up the mountain and getting shot at. Ellen heard it, and it didn't make much sense to her. She didn't know much about the Acerodon, but she knew that its range wasn't all that great. If Cliff was in town and the manhunt was in the mountains, how could the drone help? But she wasn't concerned with the logistics right now. She was concerned for Cliff.

"You're okay, then?"

"I'm fine. Look, I have to go. If they get him, I don't know what he might say about me, about the Thanapest. I need to be where I can hear what's happening. They'll be searching his shack and probably find the poison there if he still has some. My prints will be on the drum. I could be in cuffs before the end of the day."

"Oh, Cliff. I don't know what to say. Thank God you're safe. Call me as soon as you know how it comes out."

"I will. I love you, Ellen. I love you beyond words. Please forgive me."

“That’s not easy, Cliff. But I love you, too. Go do what you have to do.” She hung up, too choked up to talk or even hear any more.

Cliff put his phone on the car seat, packed up the Acerodon, started up the car, and began the long drive back to Lucerne. The grinding from the right front wheel area told him he had a serious problem, a ball joint maybe, but the tires were okay and he was moving. He’d make it.j

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By the time he got back, the situation was unchanged, except it was beginning to get dark. The area near where Leaming had last been seen was surrounded. There was a prominent blood trail leading into the thickest part of the forest, but then it stopped. The wound must have clotted, or he had found a way to stop the bleeding.

The CHP helicopter finally arrived overhead. At first it saw nothing. Then it switched on thermal imaging. Bodies on the ground showed up as bright red blotches against a brown mottled background. The pilot couldn’t distinguish deputies from Leaming or anyone else who might be there. He relayed an instruction for all official personnel on the scene to pair up with another deputy. This worked. Soon the blotches became pairs of blotches.

Except for one. The pilot said there was one heat signature that wasn’t paired up. It was near the perimeter the deputies had set up, between two pairs of deputies. After some confusing directions, the deputies eventually were able to home in on the area of the person-sized blotch.

In the end, it was anticlimactic. Leaming’s body was found almost totally hidden under a pile of leaves and pine needles against a fallen log where he’d taken shelter. He was dead from the sniper’s bullet to his chest. There was no one to hear his dying words, but he had been true to his word given long ago to Cliff and Karen – he wouldn’t be taken alive.

He had two sets of identification on him. One for Noel Clifford, the other, a similar set in the name of Barry Hall. The team took photos and then brought the body back in the SUV. They even had a body bag handy.

The morgue, the coroner’s office, and the sheriff’s department were all in Lakeport on the west side of the lake. Everything and everybody was dispatched to go there. It was by this time too dark to do a search of the shack, so it was determined that the search would take place the next day when it was light. One unlucky deputy was assigned to maintain the security of that scene overnight.

Cliff called Ellen and told her the news. Leaming was dead with no further casualties. The shack was secured and would be searched the next day. It

was too late to drive back tonight, and the sheriff wanted him to stay over to be interviewed at length the next day. His car, the Acerodon, his laptop, and the video were taken into evidence, and he had no way to leave anyway. The sheriff found him a motel room at county expense. He'd be gone an extra day. He'd rent a car and drive back tomorrow. She said she'd see him when he got back.

Karen and Cliff met up for the first time since the shooting at the morgue. They both made a positive identification of the body as the man known as Charles Price, a.k.a. Kurt Leaming, a.k.a. Noel Clifford, a.k.a. Barry Michael Hall. The missing fingertip, the snake tattoo, the gap between his front teeth. There was no doubt.

It was then that it hit him. "Barry M. Hall. He played us again. He had a twisted sense of humor, for whatever that's worth."

"What do you mean?" Karen replied.

"Say it fast."

"Barry M. Hall. Oh no. Bury 'em all. He was one sick bastard, but nobody said he was stupid."

Cliff moved her out of earshot of the coroner. "Karen, they still don't know about the Thanapest, about QuenMass. Have you told them anything about that?"

"No, not yet, but Cliff, that's got to come out. There'll be a major investigation with two deputies killed. I can't lie in an official investigation. Sooner or later they'll find the Thanapest."

"Maybe not. Look, I'm not asking you to lie. Just don't give any details. Keep the first statement short and vague, but truthful. If they try to pin you down as to exactly why we came, just put them off. Say you're too stressed out. Let's see what the search turns up tomorrow."

"Cliff, we can't keep the QuenMass connection secret. We can't let the FBI go on searching for a killer we know is dead."

"I know. And we won't. Just one more day. Please. After the search we can figure out what to say and how to say it."

"All right, I'll try to stall until they've searched the shack. If they find the Thanapest there, there's nothing I can do about that."

"I know that. If I have to come out with the whole story, I will. Thanks. That's all I can ask."

Chapter 27

Monday

Monday morning, Woody Braswell arrived at work at 7:00 AM on the dot, a bit later than usual. When he checked his email, there was a message from Angie, the weekend communications clerk. NCIC, the National Crime Information Center, the FBI's database, had notified the system that fugitive Charles Price, with various aliases, had been shot and killed during an encounter with deputies in Lake County. The body had been positively identified by two witnesses. The warrants, both state and federal, should be cleared from NCIC by the originating agencies.

It was Woody's job as case agent on the fugitive warrant to verify the information and clear the warrant out of the system. The local warrant had been entered by Mike Hsiao, the Santa Clara County detective. He would be getting the same notification from NCIC.

He called up to the Lake County sheriff's department and talked to the people there. He had to verify the identity. Could they send him photos? Autopsy photos would be fine. He learned that the autopsy hadn't been performed yet, but good photos were available of the deceased, taken at the scene. There was also the driver's license photo of Barry Hall. Woody thanked them and asked for those crime scene photos to be transmitted to him. He provided an FBI email address. He could get the driver's license photo himself directly from the DMV. He asked who the witnesses were that identified the body and was told it was Agents Delgado and Knowles. He confirmed that those people were knowledgeable witnesses and could be relied on for the identification, although he was confused as to the reference to Cliff as an agent. Cliff was retired. He decided to say nothing about that until he knew more.

He filled in the necessary online form to direct Communications to clear the NCIC warrant, then he called Mike Hsiao, the homicide detective handling the Geocache Murders case. Hsiao was there and said he had seen the NCIC notification but hadn't talked to Lake County yet. Braswell told Hsiao what Lake County had told him.

Hsiao was both happy that they had finally got the SOB, but upset that he had been cut out of it. He had worked with Karen on the Geocache Murders task force and with the FBI. He should have been brought in. Braswell commiserated but said he hadn't been brought into it either. Knowles and Delgado were bound and determined to go after the guy themselves. They were the only ones who knew his face.

“That’s not entirely true, you know,” Hsiao retorted.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s always been that one big mystery hanging over the case: who is Charles Price, really? We verified that the real Price died, so that’s not his real name. Those two kept saying it was this Kurt Leaming guy.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Even if it’s the right guy, the Geocache Killer, we still need a positive ID, a true identity. If it really is Leaming, it should be easy enough to check.”

“How? Leaming’s wife? We’ve tried talking to her in the past. She just slams the door in our face. She got insurance from the army since Leaming was killed in action. If he deserted and has been alive all this time, she’ll have to pay it all back. She’ll never admit that’s him.”

“I think she will this time.”

“Why?”

“Do you have the photos from Lake County?”

“Yep. They’re in my email now, but I haven’t opened them yet. I’ll forward them to you.”

“Good. Come with me and I’ll show you why Mrs. Leaming will tell us the truth. She still works at that liquor store in Mountain View, I believe. Her shift started at noon the last time I tried to talk to her, and she was sober then. Meet me in the parking lot in front at one.”

“Proving this guy Price is Leaming really isn’t my thing. I just had a fugitive to catch and now I don’t. I can close my case.”

“Do it for Cliff. He and Karen are still suspected – by the press anyway – of colluding to make up that story.”

“I suppose you have a point there. I don’t have anything else on my plate for today anyway. I am curious. I’ll see you there then.”

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Hsiao and Braswell walked into the liquor store shortly after 1:00. There was one customer at the counter, so they moseyed around the store like customers until he had left. They approached the counter clerk, Kurt Leaming’s ex-wife.

“Mrs. Leaming,” Hsiao began. “I have news for you.”

“You again,” she muttered. “I don’t want to talk to you. I told you that before.”

“Your husband Kurt is dead.”

“News flash. I know that. He died in Afghanistan.”

Hsiao put printed colored copies of Leaming from the shootout scene on the counter where she could see them. She glanced down. Her expression remained stony, but Braswell thought he saw a flash of recognition in her eyes. She looked up without saying anything, her eyes narrowing to slits.

“I know you know it’s him. He killed two deputies in Lake County. He was killed in a shootout yesterday. It would help us close our case – and get out of your hair for good – if you would identify him as your husband.”

“I want you to get out.”

Braswell flashed his identification. “Ma’am, I’m with the FBI. We’re going to prove it’s him one way or the other. You don’t want to be providing false information in a murder case, especially not the double murder of cops.”

The woman’s eyes began to glisten as she tried to hold back tears. Her lips tightened in an attempt to prevent them from trembling. Still, she said nothing.

Hsiao continued, “If you won’t identify him, we’ll have to get a DNA sample from Bart. That’s the only way to be positive.”

This brought a look of stark terror to the woman’s eyes. “You wouldn’t! That would break his heart. He thinks his father died a war hero.” Tears were running freely down her face now.

A male customer walked in at that point. Hsiao flashed his badge at him and motioned for him to leave. He did.

“Why would it break his heart if it’s not him? He’d be relieved to have proof it wasn’t him.”

The woman hesitated at this, then changed her tone. “Please,” she begged. “I need the insurance to live. You know how expensive it is to live in Silicon Valley. I can’t do it on my pay here. If I identified that body as Kurt’s, I’d, I couldn’t pay it back. I already spent it. It’s –”

“Mrs. Leaming,” Hsiao broke in gently. “Don’t worry about that. We’re not going to go the army. No one else has to know. We just want to close our case. Screw the army. They refused to help us the whole way and ridiculed us for taking seriously the claim that it was Leaming. To them, he’s dead. Your insurance money is safe.”

She looked wary. “What about him?” she said, nodding toward Braswell. “The FBI works for Uncle Sam. They’ll make sure my paycheck stops. It’s coming out of their pocket.”

“No, that won’t happen,” Braswell retorted. “I won’t even put it in my report. The army can shove it. They’d never admit they screwed up the ID even if we told them. You have my word. It’s you or the DNA test. Make up your mind. Bart doesn’t ever have to know.”

All the fight seemed to leave her body in an invisible cloud. Her shoulders fell and her chin dropped to her chest. In a barely audible voice she said, "It's him. That's Kurt. I knew he was still alive. He used to deposit money in our bank account sometimes. Just a few hundred dollars, but it helped. That was when Bart was still in school. Please, please don't tell Bart. Don't put it in the papers."

"We won't," Hsiao assured her. "That's all we need. Thank you."

"Do I have to sign something? Or go see the body?"

"No, I don't think so," Braswell said. "Lake County doesn't know anything about Kurt Leaming, about you. At least they didn't say anything to me about that. They just called him Charles Price, the name he was using here. The agents Kurt held captive in the mountains have identified him, but I think just as Charles Price. I'll talk to them and try to keep it that way."

"Thank you. Please, if the TV people get this, Bart will see his father go from war hero to cop killer. Worse, he'd know his father was alive all these years and never came back into his life. He'd be devastated."

"I can't control the news reporters, but I'll do my best."

The two investigators left. The customer who had been shoed out brushed past them brusquely as soon as they stepped through the door. Braswell called Ellen as soon as he got back to his car and asked for Cliff's cell number. He said he had good news and it was important, but he did not go into detail. She gave him the number.

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Clem Corbett, the sheriff of Lake County, dressed the part. A battered straw cowboy hat topped his head, and a bolo tie with a silver slide hung from his leathery neck. Mother-of-pearl snaps held his shirt pocket flaps closed. The dark tan that had gouged deep wrinkles through his face completed the picture. With a practiced motion he tossed the hat onto the rack behind his desk, gesturing with his other hand to the couch that adorned his spacious office.

Karen and Cliff sat uncomfortably, like two school kids sent to the principal's office. Corbett came back around the desk and sat in an overstuffed chair opposite them.

"We have a lot to talk about," he began. "First off, I want to thank you. That copter thing you had saved the life of at least one deputy, maybe two more, and we wouldn't have caught this sumbitch without it."

Cliff and Karen exchanged relieved glances. He could have taken the opposite tack. If Cliff and Karen hadn't directed the SWAT team onto that dead-

end jeep trail after the fugitive, they'd all be alive today – including Leaming. But no lawman worth his salt was going to blame the reporting party for a botched arrest.

“Here’s the thing, though. You show up here with no advance warning, and now I find out Cliff here’s a civilian. Impersonating an officer is still a felony, even for a retired fed.”

“I never impersonated anyone,” Cliff interjected. “Karen’s a special agent with California DOJ. I’m a witness – the only other person who could identify Price.”

“My deputy said you were both agents.”

“He must have misunderstood,” Karen corrected. “I introduced Cliff as my colleague. Maybe I should have said ‘my witness,’ but that would have sounded disrespectful to him. I’ve worked with Cliff closely on this case for years, and he’s a trained FBI agent, a top-notch investigator. I needed him to be with me on this.”

“Well, we’re all on the same side here,” Corbett drawled. “I’m not trying to get anyone in trouble. But it seems funny I hain’t heard from the FBI or Santa Clara County S.O. on this before you showed up. They had the warrants, but it seems like they didn’t even know you guys were here. I spoke with ’em both this morning.”

Cliff answered, trying to take the heat off Karen. “That’s my fault, Sheriff. I’m the one who started this. See, I just happened to spot a photo of Price by chance while I was doing some of my legal work. I practice law now. So I recognized him, and I asked about him at the business where I saw the photo. He was using the name Noel Clifford then.”

If the sheriff picked up on the similarity of the names Cliff Knowles and Noel Clifford, he didn’t show it.

“The man told me Noel Clifford had told him he was a reserve officer with Lake County S.O., but I knew that couldn’t be true. I wasn’t 100 percent positive that was him in the photo, so I needed Karen to confirm it for me. She’s the only other person who could, and she’s a peace officer with knowledge of how dangerous he is, all his M.O. – hiding in the woods, tending bar, and such. I called her, and she agreed to make one circuit trying to identify him, and we checked in with you all the way, and the police in every city. And I didn’t go out looking for him. I was back in the substation waiting it out. It was just a lucky break I spotted him while I was getting sandwiches.”

“Not such a lucky break for the two deceased deputies. Oh, and the sandwich shop called to complain about them sandwiches not bein’ paid for. I had that taken care of.”

Karen took over. “Sheriff, we can’t express how sorry we are about your deputies. It’s a tragedy. But we warned everyone he was a sharpshooter and vowed never to be taken alive. It was your deputy who said he was in the shack. I understand the motorcycle was there, but he should have waited until he actually saw the person moving around and recognized him from the photo before confirming it.”

“You’re right there, little lady. And that deputy has to live with the fact his mistake got two fellow deputies killed. Like I said before, if you hadn’t had the copter, it might have been worse. So it’s not your fault. But, Cliff, you shouldn’t a been chasing him in your car. This might never have happened if he hadn’t spotted you tailing him.”

“Or he might have come upon the shack and seen the SWAT team surrounding it and gotten away. Or taken them out with his rifle from behind.”

“Well now, the little lady here didn’t say anything when –”

“Would you stop calling me a ‘little lady’! I’m a special agent of the California Department of Justice and a unit supervisor. I’ve arrested more people than you ever have, I’m sure of that. I’ve rappelled from helicopters with an MP5 in hand while drug dealers were shooting at me from the pot field.”

“Whoa there. No offense meant. I meant it as a compliment. You’re on the small side, is all. I can see you’re quite a pistol. I hope that’s politically correct. Pistol hain’t sexist, is it? I got one myself.” He pulled out his Glock, the only incongruity in his outfit. Cliff would have expected a pearl-handled revolver. Karen’s expression made clear she found the “apology” to be pouring gasoline on the fire.

“Okay, okay, everybody,” Cliff said. “Let’s keep it professional here. We’ve all been on plenty of arrests, and we know bad things can happen. It’s a tragedy when we lose one of our own, much less two, but we know that’s the kind of risk a SWAT officer takes. That’s why the word ‘special’ is in ‘special weapons and tactics.’ I’m sure we can all find things we could have done better. That’s always the case. But look at this. You’ve got the video that shows it was a justified shoot. You don’t have to worry about a civil suit or some activist protesters coming out.”

“Well, I’m glad you mentioned that. D’you folks know if this guy has any relatives? Someone who’ll claim the body? Or who might sue us? The coroner and county attorney is both askin’, is all.”

This gave Cliff pause. He and Karen looked at each other for a moment. They hadn’t practiced an answer to this. He answered before she could say anything about Leaming. “No, Sheriff, we don’t. No one knows his real identity. He’s used so many names. Is there any criminal action being contemplated?”

“No, not yet. The D.A. has seen the video you took. He says the deputies are in the clear for that. Like you say, it’s a justified shoot. This Price guy, or Clifford, or whatever his name is, is dead so he can’t be prosecuted. I’ve got the forensic people up at his shack. Unless we find evidence of a co-conspirator to be held accountable for the death of the deputies, there’s nobody to go after. Nobody wants a big lawsuit over this. We’ll make sure the deputies’ families are taken care of.”

Cliff’s stomach was tied up in knots at the mention of the search of the shack. “Have they found anything up there? Weapons, uh, bombs, anything like that?”

“Don’t know yet.”

Karen piped up. “Could you check with them now, before we leave town? This guy killed people in two counties down in the Bay Area and now up here. He may have done more. He was living in the Central Valley somewhere before coming here. We know that. Maybe we could clear some more homicides if there’s evidence.”

“Well, I’ll get a report when they’re done. I’ll let you know.”

“I know that, but it would help us a lot to have an idea now, before we leave,” Cliff added. His whole life could be on the line. If there was a drum of Thanapest in that shack, they would have found it right away. The shack was small. It would have Cliff’s fingerprints all over it, with no explanation of how they got there.

“Well, all right. Hang on.” He moved back around the desk and turned the volume up on a speaker behind his desk. It had been little more than a faint buzz of police chatter before. He picked up the microphone from the shelf. “This is Clem. What’s the status at the search location? Report.”

“This is Sierra 4. We have his computer. He’s got a generator and a whole fancy electronics setup here. Antenna on the roof. It looks like he can go online. We’ll know what’s on it when the computer guys examine it. Another rifle and a hunting bow. That’s about it. He lives pretty spartan up here.”

“Ask if he has any chemicals, you know, bomb-making materials,” Cliff urged.

Corbett thought it an odd request, but he keyed the mike again. “The state guys think he might have been into bombs or something. Any chemicals or gunpowder? Fuses?”

“Some ammo for the rifle, but just one box. No sign of any bomb stuff. There’s a bottle of Tabasco sauce. That’s the most dangerous chemical in this place.”

“Okay, thanks.” The sheriff put the microphone down.

Cliff heaved a silent sigh of relief. It wasn't over, but at least he wasn't dead meat yet. He glanced at Karen, who gave him a curt nod of acknowledgment. She wouldn't say anything about the Thanapest yet.

"Your car's not drivable. The wheel bearing is totally gone, there's no headlights or brake lights. You were damn lucky to get it down off the mountain. I had my people photograph it and take prints from it. You said he got in your car and tried to start it, so we did that, but it don't prove nothin'. We don't need to keep the car. I can have our boys tow it to the local Volvo dealer if you want. It looks like it's all stuff that can be fixed if you have enough money. Do you have a way back home?"

Cliff thought it over. He didn't want to tell them about the broken engagement. "Yeah, tow it to the dealer, thanks. I'll have my fiancée pick me up if she can get off work. If not, I'll rent a car." He actually had other plans in mind.

"Well, you've given your statements and there's no trials expected. There's no reason for you to hang around. You can have the drone, too, and the video. We have photos of everything and copies of the video. We do appreciate that you came here with your information, even though it ended the way it did."

They wrapped up the conversation with the sheriff with handshakes and an exchange of contact information. The sheriff gave them each a coffee mug with the logo of the Cache Creek Casino on it as a parting gift. A sheriff promoting gambling. Odd. But they all knew that the Indian casino was the biggest moneymaker for the county economy, especially for the county government itself.

As soon as they were outside, Cliff asked Karen for a ride to the Volvo dealer, which she was glad to do. In the car, he broached the real topic he wanted to talk to her about.

"Can you stay another day or two? There are no poisons at the shack. That means he's either used them all up or, more likely, he has them stashed somewhere. I need your help."

"Cliff, how are we going to find them? They've got a whole forensic team up there tearing that place apart. They'll probably find them somewhere up there if any are left."

"No, listen. I think I know where they could be. Ellen emailed me last night. There's been another post on the geocaching forum. Someone saw Leaming up on Bartlett Springs Road, way past the cutoff to High Meadow. I contacted them through their profile and got a pretty specific location between two caches. He just emerged onto the road on his motorcycle. The geocacher even heard the cycle start up, so it must have been parked somewhere around

there. Remember how he had that motorcycle hiding place off Big Basin Way before? I'll bet he has something like that here. We should be able to find it. He has to have a mountain hideout somewhere up there, just like he did in Castle Rock."

"We should give that information to the sheriff – or the FBI."

"And we will. After we find the Thanapest. You know that if they find it first and it has my prints on it, I'm doomed. When they search that computer, they're probably going to find the manifesto or some searches about San Quentin or something that ties him to the massacre. Then the pressure will be on. It'll be all over the news, and someone will report about seeing him up there. We need to find it first. Once we find it, I'll touch the container. There's the explanation for my prints. It won't matter after that. We can say we suspected him of being the QuenMass killer because of his plan to poison the drugs, the plan no one believed us about two years ago. They'll be mad we did it on our own, but we'll still be okay. You can take all the credit for solving the case, for scooping the entire FBI."

The idea appealed to Karen more than she wanted to let on. Cliff always knew how to push her buttons. "I'll have to get permission to stay to wrap up the case. I called the AG earlier this morning, and she wasn't happy about me being out here on this 'lark' as she called it instead of working QuenMass, but she could hardly get too mad for me helping catch a serial killer, especially since he's also a cop killer now. I can probably swing it for another day. But it's a big forest. How specific is your info?"

"I think it's good enough to identify the spot where he was hiding the cycle. The hideout shouldn't be too far. I can get more info from the geocacher who posted on the forum, I think. She was with someone else at the time. I can contact that person, too."

"Okay, do that. I have to call in."

They pulled up to the Volvo dealer. Cliff got out and went into the service area. The sheriff had already called and told them he'd be towing it over. Cliff gave them his insurance information and credit card and called the claim number himself in the dealership. They thought it would be covered except for the deductible, so cost wasn't going to be an issue. Since the C70 wasn't a very common model, parts would take weeks to get there. They might even have to come from Sweden. The insurance would cover a rental, so Cliff said he'd handle that part himself. He'd have to drive back up to Lakeport to pick up the Volvo eventually, so he might as well rent the car around here.

When the details were taken care of inside, he came out and Karen was still waiting. She'd gotten approval from the attorney general to stay through

Tuesday but was expected back by Wednesday. By then it was past lunch time and they were both famished, so they started looking for a place to eat. The first place they came to was a Japanese restaurant.

Karen ordered the bento lunch and Cliff ordered sukiyaki. When the food arrived, Cliff asked the ancient Japanese woman who served them, “Tamago ga arimasu-ka?”

Her face brightened and she replied, “Hai. Arimasu.” She scurried off to the kitchen and returned with a small bowl cradling a raw egg. She placed it on the table.

“Domo,” Cliff said. The woman beamed again, bowed, and left.

“There you go again, showing off,” Karen scoffed between bites. “Who the hell are you trying impress? So you speak Japanese. This is America. The U.S. of A. You speakee Englee, don’t you? I’m sure she does, too.”

“She liked it. Did you see her face? It’s called cultural sensitivity. Suki-yaki should be eaten with raw egg. Restaurants aren’t allowed to serve raw egg unless the customer requests it. Like with Caesar salad. It’s some health law. She appreciates that someone knows the proper way to eat Japanese food.”

“Oh, save it. You were just trying to get one up on me. Just like when we were together. You can be a pompous ass sometimes.”

Cliff rolled his eyes. He was tempted to come back with something in the nature of a promise to keep it dumbed down for her so she wouldn’t have to experience his “pomposity,” but he thought better of it. It wouldn’t help and it wouldn’t have been fair, either; he knew she wasn’t dumb.

“Talk about hypocrisy. I’ve heard you speak Spanish to servers and gardeners. You can do it, but I can’t?”

“That’s different. I grew up speaking Spanish around my family. My grandparents were born in Mexico. It’s just me speaking to my own people in our own language. That’s not showing off.”

Cliff’s phone rang before he could make another retort. He didn’t recognize the number. He answered.

“Cliff, it’s Woody Braswell.”

“Woody. Oh, right. You were working the Chaz Price UFAP, weren’t you? I guess you found out he’s cashed out for good.”

“Right. Hey, I have good news, too. Are you with Agent Delgado?”

“I am. What’s the deal?”

“Mrs. Leaming identified the photos as Kurt Leaming. Now there’s no doubt of his real identity. Tell Delgado. Both you guys were telling the truth about the whole thing. I mean, I always believed you, you know that, but ...”

“It’s okay, Woody. I know what a lot of people were thinking. How’d you get her to make the ID? She’ll have to pay back the death benefit when the army finds out.”

“That’s why I’m calling, man. The army won’t find out if you and Delgado don’t tell ’em. I’m with Mike Hsiao and we agreed just to close our cases without mentioning the name. He’s still just unsub, a.k.a. Charles Price, Kurt Leaming, and the rest. Some joker who stole Leaming’s name. The kid, Bart? You met him, but I never did. He still thinks his dad died in action. I promised the mom we wouldn’t do a DNA test if she could make the ID.”

“I see. Bart’s a good kid. Works at Google now, I heard. No need to burst his balloon. I’ll talk to Karen. I think she’ll go along, but there’s going to be press coverage. I can’t promise anything about the sheriff or the press here. As long as you and Hsiao know, I’m cool with it. I have to tell Ellen, too.”

“Understood. Thanks.”

Cliff hung up and relayed the information to Karen.

She was ecstatic. “Finally! They believe us. But you know we can’t contain this, not once they figure out he’s the QuenMass killer. Every picture of him in the world is going to be made public. Bart will see it and recognize him eventually. That photo of yours from the drone school, the photo from his Bury ’em All driver’s license, those make him look military. Some ex-army buddy is going to come out of the woodwork and say that’s Leaming.”

“You could be right. That’s beyond our control. He looks a lot like he did in that photo I saw on Bart’s desk. With the whole Ranger unit. He’s aged some, but Bart’s going to recognize him.”

“Cliff, who else knows about the Thanapest, about your connection to the Heindryckx Thanapest?”

“Just you, me, and Ellen.”

“How did Leaming ever know where it was – to steal it, I mean?”

“We’ll never know for sure, but I know how I would have done it. The name Heindryckx is rare. It’s common in Belgium, where my wife is from originally, but not here. My wife’s uncle emigrated to the U.S. in the ’30s, but his brother, my wife’s father, was much younger and was raised in Belgium. He didn’t come over until the ’60s. Anyway, I told Leaming about my wife’s uncle having been an exterminator in Turlock and having this stash of poisons. You heard that when we were handcuffed to the tree.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that. But how did he find out where the stash was? Did you tell him?”

“No, of course not. I was getting to that. So the newspapers were full of stories about us after we were rescued and Price, I mean Leaming, fled. They

called me the widowed husband of Professor Heindryckx, the Stanford classics scholar who was cut down in the prime of life by a drunk driver. Yada yada. You saw the stories. So the only people in the state named Heindryckx were my wife and her uncle, although by that time he was dead. Price was good with the Internet. Maybe he found an obituary and figured out who he was. Or maybe he just went to the county seat covering Turlock and did a property search. You can search by name. Deeds stay in the books forever so the chain of title can be maintained. Heindryckx. Bingo, you have the address. You could just go out there and track down who's living there, or find the Realtor who handled the sale. It wouldn't be all that hard. A question or two and you learn that everything in the house was cleaned out and put in storage. I think that's what he did. Then he got a job working at the storage facility, looked up my locker number, and one night cut off my lock, replaced it with another one from inventory, and took the poisons. That way he'd get the poisons with no record, no license or forms to fill in, no proof of a legitimate need."

"What about the name Noel Clifford? Don't you think someone is going to get suspicious about that? I mean, it's so close to your name."

"Sheriff Clem Cowboy didn't put it together. It was just another name, another alias."

"Yeah, but I told you they're tracking down the Thanapest shipments. They're going to find that Heindryckx one and track it back to you sooner or later, and then your name is going to jump out. You were here with the QuenMass killer. You can't explain it."

"I can. I just did. You heard it. Leaming figured it out. He stole the stuff. He used it at San Quentin. He dropped it by drone into the air conditioning. I didn't know anything about that. I learned that the pesticides were stolen back then, but I didn't know it was him. I had no idea they'd be used for something like this. I didn't think they had any commercial value, so I didn't file a police report. I didn't even remember what they were, just a bunch of exterminator's supplies."

"Hmm. Good luck with that. If that computer comes up clean, we're still going to have to go to the FBI and tell them. They still don't know Leaming is QuenMass. We can't let them keep looking."

"Which is why we have to find that poison first. If we do, my prints will just be elimination prints. They'll just discard mine as irrelevant, and the rest won't matter. They probably won't even keep looking at Thanapest shipments. They'll just work on whatever other fingerprints are on there, or whatever is on his computer."

"Was your wife's uncle ever fingerprinted?"

“Good question. I doubt it, but if he was, records’d probably be destroyed by now. Look, one step at a time. We find the hideout if we can. Then we go from there. It’s too hard to predict what could happen.”

“Like I told you, it’s a big forest. We could use help. How about Ellen? You said she’s the only other one who knows. We could use another set of eyes.”

“I don’t know. She’s kinda mad at me right now.”

“I’ll bet. Does she know you’re here with me?”

“Uh, yeah. That doesn’t help. She went to live with her sister and left the ring behind.”

“Give me your phone for a sec. I want to see that picture again.”

He called up the picture from the drone school again and handed her the phone. Karen’s request had been a ruse. As soon as she got the phone, she hit the contacts icon and found Ellen’s name and number. She memorized it immediately and then dialed it from her own phone.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Karen ignored him. Ellen answered. “Ellen. It’s Karen Delgado. Don’t hang up. I wouldn’t touch your man with a ten-foot pole. He’s one arrogant pain in the butt, but he’s your pain in the butt. One hundred percent. Now get your ass up here and help the father of your child find the Thanapest before the locals do so he doesn’t end up named as a co-conspirator in the biggest massacre since 9/11. Thanks to you posting that Officer Burnett message on the geocaching forum, we have a head start.”

“Delgado, you ... you’ve got a lot of gall. Where do you come off—”

“I do have a lot of gall. But unlike you, I don’t have a good man who loves me. Now do you want a husband, a father for your child, or not? You’re a geocacher, too, I hear. That’s just what we need. We’ll be searching the forest up here.”

“I don’t take orders from some hottie statie. I’m mad as heck at him and I’ll—”

“Mad as heck’? Oooh, wash your mouth out with soap. What is it with you feds, anyway? So I’m just a statie to you? It sounds like you two deserve each other. Are you in or not? We’re going to head up to that spot the geocacher told you about on Bartlett Springs Road. We don’t have time today, but we’ll start first thing in the morning. If you want to save Cliff, drive up tonight and come with us. I’m hanging up now.”

Cliff had buried his face in his hands at the beginning of the conversation and dropped them only when he heard it end.

Karen smiled at Cliff and said, “That went well.”

“Thanks for destroying whatever chance I had left at a happy life.”

“She’ll be here tonight, mark my words. Did you really call me a ‘hottie?’” Karen’s smile assumed a certain coyness.

“No. More like ‘haughty.’”

The phrasing confused her. “Hottie. I just said that. Are you really dumb enough to tell your fiancée a past girlfriend was a hottie?”

“Not hottie. Haughty. H-A-U-G-H-T-Y.”

“Oh, you’re being witty again. Pardon me if I’m too dumb to get it. If you have to spell it, it isn’t clever, you know. It’s like when you had to explain those stupid Shakespeare quips nobody ever understood.”

The remark stung more than he would have guessed. “My wife did,” was all he could muster as a comeback.

“Your wife had a stratospheric IQ. She was a Stanford professor, for God’s sake, something you never let me forget.” She paused and shook her head. “Look, let’s just eat our lunch. I’m sorry. I was just trying to help, Cliff, really. You deserve some happiness. Everyone does, but especially you. Life has dealt you some pretty hard knocks.” She reached over and put her hand on his.

Cliff jerked his hand away and shook his head. He finished eating his sukiyaki in silence. It was all he could do to keep from pouting. When the meal was over, they drove back to the motel. They had to give personal credit cards to stay over since the sheriff’s office had only paid through the previous night. The motel had been courteous enough to hold their rooms and luggage until they heard from the two of them. Cliff texted Ellen the room number, finishing with one more “I love you.” Before going off to their separate rooms, they decided to get started before dawn so that by the time they got up to the search location, it would just be getting light. They expected it to be a long day’s search, and they wanted as much daylight as possible.

Chapter 28

Monday morning, Dan Porter arrived late at the San Rafael Resident Agency after meeting with Fitzhugh in San Francisco. Oliver Gulick was in his office covering the desk for him while he was gone, and Jo-Lene Holford was there with him.

“What’s going on?” Porter asked. Gulick moved around to one of the chairs on the other side of the desk so Porter could have the supervisor’s seat.

“I missed something last week, and Ollie just brought it to my attention.” She pointed to the computer screen on Porter’s desk. It was open to an FD-302 from Rita Lord.

Gulick spoke with an animated urgency. “I was just reviewing all the results from the first wave of Thanapest investigations. You wanted me to do a summary report and spreadsheet for the Bureau on that. This lead got sent to Long Beach instead of here for some reason.”

Porter sat down and scanned the 302 even before he put his briefcase on the floor. It didn’t take him long to see the significance. “Cliff Knowles. Well, well, well. It seems you were right, Ollie. It was the question about Thanapest that made him go off like that. Food poisoning, my ass. No wonder he hasn’t rescheduled the interview.”

Gulick continued, “And he was kayaking to San Quentin before the massacre. He had to be checking out the security setup. Somehow he must have boated in undetected that night and gotten into the yard and up onto the roof. Maybe he had inside help.”

Porter looked over to Jo-Lene. “What do you think? Something doesn’t compute here. Ellen Kennedy passed the polygraph. It was her idea to stop at San Quentin when Knowles got injured, not his. And the guards’ report says he really had a nasty scalp wound. That seems pretty hard to fake.”

“It would be an awfully big coincidence if the two are unrelated – Knowles having access to Thanapest and visiting Big Q. But there’s no evidence he was ever inside the yard and no evidence that it was this batch of Thanapest that was used. For all we know, there was no Thanapest left at the Heindryckx farm. The Realtor wasn’t very clear. And Knowles may have destroyed it if there was some.”

“I don’t buy it,” Gulick snorted. “You weren’t there when Dan asked him about Thanapest. He about had a stroke. Then he refused to continue. He knew something. There was Thanapest there at the farm, and there’s something he doesn’t want us to know about it.”

Porter added, “You’re right there. But I asked him about his alibi for that night and he said he was home in bed – with Kennedy. And she said the same thing and passed the polygraph.”

Gulick clucked his tongue derisively. “Maybe she’s in on it. She wouldn’t be the first person to beat a polygraph.”

Porter was reluctant to consider this. Kennedy was a fellow agent after all; but all possibilities had to be examined. “When did Knowles get access to those pesticides?” He looked at the 302 on the screen again and found a scan of the real estate document on the closing sale. “Does anyone know when Kennedy transferred in?”

Holford thought about it. “I met her at firearms when she was brand new here. I’m trying to remember. It wasn’t this year. It had to be almost two years ago.”

“The sale of the farm was three years ago. It sounds like Knowles got his hands on the poison before Kennedy was even here, so it doesn’t seem likely they were conspiring on this all along. You’d have to assume he had a plan to use the poison and then talked her into it, then she passed the polygraph – which she had no advance warning of, by the way. Nah, it doesn’t fit. Besides, what’s his motive?”

“Vengeance. The VIO document is pretty clear,” Gulick retorted. “Anyone can go crazy. Why not him? Who better than a frustrated agent trying to prove he’s still relevant. Maybe he manipulated Kennedy into helping him unwittingly. Maybe she thinks that geocache thing was her idea, but he subtly planted the idea in her. Everybody says he’s a lawyer and very sharp. Talking people into things, that’s what they do.”

“Here’s another theory,” Holford said. “Maybe Knowles and Kennedy *were* at home in bed when it happened, but he gave the Thanapest to someone else. Maybe that’s what he’s hiding. She might know nothing about it. That would explain the polygraph.”

Porter turned it all over in his mind. “I’m going to have to run this by Trey, but I think we need to find out more about Mr. Knowles.”

-o0o-

Trey Fitzhugh was putting on his suit coat at 5:15, getting ready to go home early for once, when his phone rang. He cursed his secretary out loud, complaining that he had told her not to put through any calls. He was leaving.

“You’re going to want to take this one.”

“Is it the director?”

“No, but you’ll be calling him next.”

“So who is it?”

“It’s the sheriff of Lake County.”

“Where’s that?” Fitzhugh had been SAC for almost five years and still had little idea of the geography of his division.

“Up north. Clear Lake. Santa Rosa RA territory.”

Fitzhugh walked over to his desk but didn’t shed his jacket or sit down.
“Fitzhugh here. Hello, Sheriff.”

“Good afternoon. And I do mean good.”

“Sheriff, uh, my secretary didn’t give me your name. I’m sorry.”

“Clem Corbett. We met briefly at the North Bay Chiefs of Police Conference in San Rafael last year.”

“Of course, Clem. What can I do for you?” Fitzhugh had no recollection of even attending that conference, much less meeting Corbett.

“It’s what I can do for you. We caught and killed the QuenMass killer. He’s lying out in our morgue right now.”

“Are you serious? Who’s the guy? What makes you think he’s our guy?” Fitzhugh wanted to make clear the QuenMass Killer was under the exclusive jurisdiction of the FBI.

“His name’s Charles Price. At least that’s the name on the wanted poster. He’s got a bunch of aliases – Noel Clifford, Barry Hall. He was in a shootout with our deputies yesterday – killed two of ’em. We searched his cabin, and on his computer is the VIO manifesto. The whole thing, not just the parts that have been on the news.”

“Oh, the shootout on the news. I heard about that. My condolences to the families and the department. So it’s the same guy?”

“Yup. I reckon you’ll want to send some agents to come take the body and his computer and things. But can you hold off until tomorrow? I want to go home, and so does my computer guy. It’s been a long day, and I’ve still got a dozen calls to make.”

“Of course. Me too. But have you told the press? I mean, let’s not make announcements until we verify it’s the guy. What if he’s just part of WikiLeaks, a hacker or something, and got the manifesto?”

“I don’t think he’s just a hacker. He killed two deputies. He’s wanted for that serial killing down there. The geocache thing a few years back. He’s got a federal warrant.”

The name Charles Price finally rang a bell with Fitzhugh. The Geocache Murders. That thing Cliff Knowles was wrapped up in. It had been a public relations nightmare, with an ex-FBI agent suspected of being a vigilante killer

until Price was identified. The memory was now vivid. Conspiracy theorists still thought the FBI orchestrated the whole thing, and the press treated them like they had a credible alternative view.

“Price! Makes sense now. He was a vengeance killer – but just drug dealers back then. How’d you get onto him?”

“A state agent from DOJ and your guy Cliff Knowles were here investigating. Cliff recognized him in a photo somewhere and learned he was from Lake County. They were spreading his photo around, and someone recognized him. They came to us to make the pinch since we had a SWAT team. We set up on his residence, but it turned out he weren’t there. SWAT cornered him up in the mountains. He killed two of ours before we got him.”

“Will there be a funeral or ceremony for the deputies? I want to be there.”

“I’ll let you know. And to answer your question, no, I haven’t made any press release on QuenMass, just on the death of the deputies and killing Price. Our computer examiner and I are the only two that know so far. I sworn ’im to secrecy for now. I don’t want to make any claims until you folks confirm it.”

“That’s terrific. If it pans out, I mean. I’ll have someone there first thing tomorrow. How about the state agent? Who is he? Is the attorney general going to be making a statement?”

“It’s a her. Karen Delgado. Special agent from Sacramento. I haven’t told her yet. She was just searching for him as the Geocache Killer. The AG already made a press release about that earlier today, but she didn’t mention QuenMass, of course.”

“That’s like them trying to take credit. It was your arrest.”

Talk about the pot calling the kettle black, Corbett thought. “Well, Delgado was there. The press release gives us credit, too. We wouldn’t have found this guy without her coming to us.”

The name Karen Delgado struck a chord with Fitzhugh. That was the agent on the Geocache Murder task force, the one Knowles saved from the mountain lion, the one he later hooked up with. He remembered the lurid newspaper stories all too well.

“What went wrong on the bust? How’d the deputies get killed?”

“The deputy that was supposed to verify he was in his residence blew it big time. The subject only had a motorcycle registered to him and that was there, but it turned out he was driving a Jeep in town.”

“Whose Jeep was it? Did he have a partner or girlfriend helping him?”

“Not that we know of. We talked to the registered owner, and she said she sold it to Price on Craigslist for cash. She claims she filled in the form to

send to the DMV to transfer to the new owner and even had the envelope addressed and stamped. Price offered to drop it in the mail for her when he left, which she accepted, and of course he never done it. We verified it had been listed on Craigslist, and we can't find any connection between the two. The seller was a housewife in Santa Rosa."

"That old trick and people are still falling for it. Talk about stupid. She's lucky he didn't kill the deputies with the car. She'd be liable. So then what?"

"The SWAT guys followed him onto a dead-end jeep track. The subject set up an ambush. He woulda got more guys if it hadn't been for Cliff's drone."

"Drone?"

"Oh, right, you didn't hear about that. We decided not to mention it in the press release, what with folks bein' all freaked out about them things. Yeah, it was sumpin'. He flew that thing over the scene so our sergeant could direct the SWAT team. They could view it all right on the screen like a TV camera, then he dived right toward Price and made him look up and stop. That's how our sniper got him."

Incredible. Knowles making the FBI look impotent again. Making *him* look impotent. He solves the case *and* makes the capture with a drone while the FBI – while *his* squad sits around sorting shipping orders for bug killer. "Did you find any poisons?"

"Nope, just guns, ammo, and the laptop. And the Jeep."

"Okay, Clem, I get the picture. You'll have my agents up there first thing in the morning."

They said goodbye. Fitzhugh took his jacket off and sat down again. He called the FBI director at home, something that few in the FBI would ever dare do, and updated him on the situation, mentioning that Knowles was retired FBI and appeared to have been instrumental in the elimination of Price. The director was excited to learn that the case may be solved but was leery of passing the information up to the White House or DOJ until they could verify Price was the right guy. He told Fitzhugh to compare the manifesto on Price's computer with the complete one the NSA had provided, then search the entire area for the poisons or some other physical evidence that would tie Price to the massacre.

These were logical steps and would have been done in any event, but Fitzhugh was impressed, almost astounded, that the director gave him this specific direction. Other than Clarence Kelly and Louis Freeh, both of whom had been FBI agents themselves at one time, this was the only director who had any idea how to investigate a case.

Next the SAC called Porter and filled him in, describing the way Knowles had used a drone to help the SWAT team kill Price. Porter, in turn, told

about discovering that Knowles could have had access to Thanapest and might have been in league with Price. This threw the SAC into a small fit, since he had just made Knowles sound like a hero to the director, and now he was back on top of the suspect list again.

“Dan, we’ll worry about Knowles later. Most important is the Lake County crime scene. We have to get up there and find whatever there is to find – the poison, or whatever is on his computer that ties him to the massacre, or to anyone else. We still don’t know how he got onto that roof, if it’s him. The sheriff said not to bother him and his people today. But get someone up there tonight and rent rooms so they can get started first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Right. I’ll notify the Crime Scene Team and send Gulick up there to work with them. And someone from the computer team.”

“If you get any pushback, tell them this is on orders from me. Call me if you have any trouble.”

“Sure thing.”

Porter spent the rest of the evening calling up the crime scene and computer teams and making logistical arrangements for everyone. By late Friday night, a dozen FBI personnel were in the Clear Lake area, some in Lakeport where the sheriff and the computer were, some in Lucerne or Clearlake Oaks, closer to the shack and shootout locations.

Chapter 29

Tuesday

Karen was downstairs in the lobby tanking up with coffee by 6:00 AM. This place was a lot nicer than the motel in Lucerne. The free breakfast actually had a waffle iron, butter, and syrup, as well as an array of cereals and milk, juice, fruit, toast, and for anyone willing to wait until 7:00, eggs and sausage. She wasn't, so she settled for cereal, toast with jam, fruit, and coffee.

At 6:15 Cliff and Ellen showed up.

"I see you made it," she said to Ellen. "I'm Karen Delgado." She extended her hand.

"Hello, little lady," Ellen said frostily, taking the hand stiffly.

Cliff realized then that he may have gone into too much detail last night when Ellen had arrived. He had just been so relieved Ellen had decided to come.

"Oh, so it's going to be like that then?" Karen retorted.

"Let's be straight," Ellen came back. "I don't like you. I don't see any reason why I should. But we can work together. Why don't we just find this guy's hideout if we can and go home. Then you can get out of our life forever."

Cliff heard only one thing. "Our life," not "our lives." Ellen was using the singular. They had a life together, not separate lives. He still hadn't been sure. She had arrived late last night and still wasn't wearing her engagement ring. She had listened to him tell the story of the day's events in detail but had hardly said a word in return.

"Fine with me, Stilts," Karen shot back. "That was the plan anyway, whether or not you decided to show up. You don't have to be rude about it."

"Ladies, big or small," Cliff interjected. "Just stop it. You aren't rivals. You never were. Ellen is the one and only for me. That's settled. Let's talk about our strategy for today. The site is way on the other side of the lake. We should go in one car so we can talk on the way. Ellen drove up in her SUV, and that's clearly better than your little sedan."

"Makes sense," Karen answered. "I'll pack up and pay my bill but leave my car here. You can drive me back at the end of the day."

Ellen's eyes softened. "Sorry, Karen. I guess I was out of line, but the way you talked to me yesterday ... Oh look, never mind. I apologize. Anyway, I brought Cliff's and my geocaching stuff. He uses a Garmin and I use my phone. I looked at the satellite imagery near the site, and I think I saw a possible geotrail near where the motorcycle was supposedly started up. I loaded the coordinates into both."

Geocachers often looked for small game trails or other unofficial footpaths leading from a main trail. Geocaches were frequently hidden far enough off the main trails so that non-geocachers, “muggles” to geocachers, wouldn’t spot them. Geotrails usually developed from the foot traffic after a cache had been found several times – or, more often, the spot was chosen in the first place because it was accessible by a game trail.

“Good thinking,” Karen commented. “I told Cliff you were smart. That posting you put on the forum was the key to the whole thing.”

It was Cliff’s turn to chime in. “Okay, great. Enough kissyface talk. We’re all on the same page now. Let’s keep it that way. Grab some grub, everybody, and let’s meet at the front desk to check out in twenty minutes.”

Half an hour later they were in Ellen’s SUV driving around the north end of the lake. When they came to Bartlett Springs Road, Ellen turned onto it, familiar with it now since she had taken this road geocaching recently.

Within minutes, they saw a Chevy Suburban ahead of them and a sedan ahead of that. The Chevy had two women in the front seat. The driver was a corpulent African American with a short afro. Beside her was a young white woman. The cars were driving very slowly, apparently because the sedan ahead or its driver was ill-accustomed to a steep, dirt mountain road such as this.

“Pull over, Ellen,” Cliff demanded suddenly.

She did so. “Why? What’s the matter?”

“That’s the FBI. I recognize the Bulky Evidence Clerk.” The evidence clerks had never liked that job title, especially the larger females. Most documentary evidence, like signed statements or original interview notes, were kept in the regular file cabinets as part of the files, but anything that couldn’t be kept in there was considered “bulky evidence” and stored in the Bulky Evidence Room. “Lakeesha. She’ll recognize me. Do you know her, Ellen?”

“No. I’ve only worked with the ones in San Jose. You know what that means. They must have figured out Leaming is the QuenMass Killer. The FBI wouldn’t send evidence teams all the way from San Francisco for a crime scene. No FBI personnel were present at the shootout, and it was just a fugitive case as of yesterday. There must have been something on the computer.”

“Or they found the Thanapest. If she sees me, she’ll tell the agents she’s working with and someone’ll either stop us or follow us to our site to see what we’re up to. They must be going up to the spot where I got shot at or to the final shootout. If they were going to the shack, they’d be going the other way, up from Clearlake Oaks. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to get in back and duck down. That way if we catch up to them and she looks in the rear-view mirror, she’ll just see you two women. Karen, you get in front.”

They rearranged themselves as Cliff instructed.

“That looked like an agent’s car up front,” Ellen commented. “I couldn’t tell who it was, but it might be someone who knows me – or you.”

“Stay well back, then. Drive slow. They’ll turn right on High Valley Road, and then we can pass. We’re continuing straight on Bartlett Springs.”

Ellen did as she was told, but just as Leaming was able to see Cliff behind him whenever they reversed direction on the switchback turns, so the FBI team could see someone coming up behind them. When they got to the intersection of High Valley, the sedan waved the Suburban on ahead and stayed behind, blocking the intersection.

“What do we do now?” Ellen whispered when she saw what was up ahead.

Cliff was lying down on the rear seat, staying out of sight. He grabbed a blanket from the rear cargo area and got down into the footwell area, covering himself up. “Pretend to be two geocachers. Show them the GPS unit. Tell them you’re going straight.”

As they got closer, Ellen recognized the male agent standing by his car. She didn’t know him, but she’d seen him somewhere – maybe at firearms or legal training. She didn’t think she’d ever talked to him, and he might not remember her. “Karen, I’m stopping here. I recognize him. You run up ahead and talk to him. He doesn’t know you. Maybe my sunglasses and the dirty windshield will keep him from recognizing me if I stay in the car.”

Karen grabbed the GPS unit from Ellen’s hand. Karen was a geocacher, but she had gone geocaching, too, during the murder case three years earlier and felt sure she could fake it. She exited the SUV and walked up to the FBI agent. He was wearing a raid jacket with the huge letters FBI emblazoned on the front and back.

“Hi, what’s going on?” Karen said as brightly as she could.

“Police business. I’m afraid you can’t come through here.” He held up his credentials, as though the raid jacket and gun were not enough.

“Which way? We’re going straight through on Bartlett Springs.”

“Are you residents?”

“No, geocachers. That’s like a sport where –”

“I know what that is. If you’re reporters, just tell me now. We’re not going to allow you in, and you won’t like the level of cooperation you’re going to get from our press liaison if you’re lying.”

“No, really, we’re geocachers.” She held up the Garmin GPS unit.

“Do you have your cache locations in that thing?”

“Of course.” She said it like it was the silliest question in the world.

“Show me. If they’re on Bartlett Springs farther east, you can go through, but not onto High Valley.”

Karen smiled. It had worked. Then it hit her. *Oops*. She didn’t know how to work the unit. She had always used her smart phone app. This thing had physical buttons. She’d seen Cliff use his Garmin three years earlier, but there was no way she could recall the right button sequence. The labels on the buttons were so worn and dirty from years of use, she couldn’t even read them.

“Uh, sure. But this is my girlfriend’s GPS and I don’t use this. I use my phone.” She pulled out her smart phone.

“So show me the caches on your phone.”

Crap. She didn’t have them. Ellen and Cliff both had them, but Karen didn’t. “My friend has them, not me. Just a second.” She turned and scurried back to Ellen’s open window. The agent looked at them intensely and started to walk over. Karen handed the Garmin to Ellen. Ellen had heard the whole exchange, but the problem was she geocached with a smart phone app, too, and wasn’t very handy with the Garmin. She grabbed it, slipped it behind her through the gap between the door and her seat, and whispered, “Cliff, make it show the map with the waypoints,” all the while looking down like she was fiddling with it in her lap.

Cliff reached up, grabbed the Garmin, which was already on, pushed the Page button twice, and the map page appeared. Fortunately, Ellen had marked the two geocaches between which the motorcycle had mysteriously appeared. Those two showed up on the page as the default geocache icon, a small treasure chest. The geotrail Ellen had spotted on the satellite photo was marked with another icon, a red circle. He handed it back to Ellen, who quickly returned it to Karen. The FBI agent was almost to the front bumper now. Karen turned from the window and started forward so fast, she literally ran into him, not realizing he had come up behind her so close. He stumbled back.

“Oh. Sorry,” Karen murmured. “Here, see.” She handed him the Garmin.

The agent took the unit but was still staring intently at Ellen. She, in turn, was covering her face with both hands, faking a sneezing fit. Between the sunglasses and her hands, nearly her entire face was covered, but she knew her gray and brown mixed-color hair was rather unique looking. *Let him not recognize me*, she willed. The agent finally looked down at the Garmin screen and saw the geocache icons. They were clearly on Bartlett Springs further east, not on High Valley. He handed it back to Karen.

He took another look at Ellen, who sneezed yet again. “Is your friend there all right?” he asked.

“She’s fine. It’s just the dust, officer.”

“Hmm. Well, you’ll be encountering a lot of it from here on. You can go through, but don’t try to follow us onto High Valley. We’re working with the sheriff’s office, and if we see you sneaking in here, you’ll be arrested for refusing a lawful order. Got it?”

“Absolutely. No High Valley Road for us.”

Karen returned to the SUV and got in. Ellen waited for the agent to walk back to his car. She hoped he’d get in and drive down High Valley, but instead, he just moved the car a few feet so that she could pass by. She drove on past as fast as she dared, kicking up as much dust as she could.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t run your plate,” Cliff said once they were safely past. He sat up again.

“Amen to that,” Ellen agreed.

The three of them drove on until they passed Deer Valley Road, then the first geocache. Ellen had programmed the geotrail location into the car’s GPS system, too, so she turned it on and watched the dashboard screen closely as they got close to that spot. Eventually the little triangle showed them to be right on top of it just as the husky, sensual man’s voice intoned, “You have arrived at your destination.”

“Ooh, I like the voice,” Karen cooed at Ellen. Ellen grinned, despite herself.

The three of them parked and got out. Before anything else, they all put on gloves. If they found anything, they didn’t want any fingerprints. The geotrail was not obvious. It took several minutes of beating the bushes before they spotted the bushy hiding place for the motorcycle. Tire tracks led them to it. Concealed from the view of anyone looking from the road, the cycle could be parked behind a thicket. A scraggly pine stood behind the thicket, and locked around its trunk was a sturdy chain and padlock. From there it was easy to pick up what appeared to be the footpath.

“Over here!” Ellen yelled. “Boot prints.”

The other two rushed over. Sure enough, someone – a male with large feet judging by the boot prints – had walked through here recently. The prints were heading toward the cycle spot. They spread out and looked for more. It soon became obvious which way he had come from. They continued from that general direction. At first the area was dusty and covered with sparse and relatively low shrubs, not the thick pine forest that they’d passed through, so an occasional print was clear. Then they hit a rocky patch and lost the trail. They stopped and marked the spot with their GPS units or apps so they could rendezvous later and agreed to fan out.

The road was more or less due east of them. They had covered that direction already since that was the way they had come, so Karen headed south, Ellen went west, and Cliff went north. They agreed to meet back there in a half hour. They knew their phones wouldn't work to make calls out here in the middle of nowhere, and they had all turned off the call function to save the batteries. But Karen's and Ellen's phones were their GPS units, too, and they all had good satellite reception. They all double checked to make sure they had the spot accurately marked and their batteries were good, then set out.

Karen almost missed it. The shelter was a camouflage tarp, military surplus no doubt, strung between four trees to make a tent-like structure. The tarp hung over nylon ropes; large bushes and small trees surrounded it on all sides, which was the obvious reason the spot had been chosen. She had been lucky to spot the tarp. She pushed through the foliage, testing the tarp's fabric until she found the flap that served as a doorway. The resemblance to the shelter Leaming had built back in the Santa Cruz Mountains was uncanny. The same wooden shelf. Cans of tuna and ramen stored neatly, a pot hanging from a hook. Unlike his other shelter, this one did not have electricity. There were no power lines nearby to steal from.

This was Leaming's hideout, she was sure, but so far she hadn't seen anything incriminating. There was a bucket with a blanket on it in one corner. She walked over to it. Then she saw on the ground behind it an odd, lightweight sleeve of some sort. At one end, the larger end, a plastic cylindrical vessel had been fitted in and secured. A flap at the bottom of the vessel opened when a nylon string, running through a series of rings, was pulled, like a trap door.

She put the sleeve back down as she had found it and picked up the blanket. She realized then that what she thought was a bucket was a small metal drum, squarish with rounded corners. She looked into it and saw what she judged to be two or three layers of small, silvery cans very similar to sardine cans, the old-fashioned kind with the key you twist to peel back the top. The cans had a skull and crossbones imprinted on the label and the word *Thanapest* proudly advertising the brand. So this was it.

She debated what to do. None of them had wanted to come right out and say what to do if they found it. Destroying evidence was a crime, and none of them wanted to exhort someone else to violate the law. Privately she had hoped what the other two probably did, which was that they would find the lair, but no *Thanapest*, or, better yet, *Thanapest* tins without the drum. Cliff had been clear that he had only touched the drum and not pulled out the tins from inside. But how reliable was his memory? Had he possibly touched the tins? She didn't know, but if the drum hadn't been there, it was likely nothing there would point

to Cliff. She looked again into the drum. She could see only the top layer of tins, so she wasn't sure how many there were underneath, but she could see a very marked line inside the drum several inches above the top layer where the clean silver color of the lower part next to the tins changed to a rusted surface. She realized that there had been more layers of tins on top until fairly recently, quite a few layers. The rusted part must have been exposed in the uncle's farmhouse for years. The shiny part must be where the poison tins that were used at San Quentin had been stacked. That meant that even if Cliff had picked up a can or two, it would have been from a top layer that was now gone. The drum was the only thing that could connect him to the Thanapest.

She looked around the rest of the shelter. There were a few innocuous survival items – a pile of firewood under a plastic sheet, some matches in a waterproof container, a can of Spam, and so on. Then, hidden inside a plastic container of oatmeal she found a camera. She recognized it as a night-vision camera; she'd used the same type when she was working drugs and doing flyovers looking for pot fields and grow houses. But no more poisons. If Leaming had taken other pesticides from Cliff's locker, he'd either used them up or gotten rid of them. She looked at her watch. Twelve minutes gone already. She knew she could get back to the rendezvous point in maybe seven or eight minutes. That gave her very little time to make a decision.

If she went back and told them about it, they would come. Cliff would touch the drum, or pretend that he had later when his prints were found. That had been his plan as he had explained it to her. But it had its problems, she now realized. First, it would require them all to report the discovery and sell the explanation about the geocaching forum tip. There would still be suspicion about why Cliff would touch the drum with his bare hands when he was a former agent, and why his two companions, both law enforcement, would stand around letting him contaminate a crime scene. Then there was the drum. She knew a real estate agent had helped him move the materials. Didn't she remember him saying that he had gone to Turlock with another FBI retiree? What if that guy had touched the drum? His prints would still be on file. What if he got identified and remembered where he had touched it? That would lead right to Cliff, then to the three of them. It would be obvious that at a minimum, they had conspired to hide the evidence, and Cliff would be suspected of having given the Thanapest to Leaming.

She felt confident she would be able to talk her way out of any suspicion or problem involving herself. She was already something of a star for catching Leaming the Geocache Killer. Now that he was known to be the QuenMass Killer, she should be golden. Her name was not connected to the geocaching

forum post. She could just claim that Cliff and Ellen had told her about it afterward and she had agreed to check it out, despite being dubious that it was a valid lead. But she didn't see how Cliff and Ellen could. What about Cliff pretending to be "Officer Burnett"? And why was he so anxious to find the hideout once Leaming had been killed? His plan wasn't going to work, she decided. He'd still likely end up being suspected of conspiring in QuenMass.

Cliff drove her up the wall sometimes, but he didn't deserve that kind of grief. He'd saved her life once. Twice, really. It was time to repay the favor. Ellen seemed like too much of a goody two shoes to actually destroy evidence and maybe wouldn't stay silent if she saw Karen do so. It was better to handle this without their knowledge. She carefully lifted the tins of Thanapest out of the drum and stacked them on the ground, then placed the blanket on top. She picked up the empty drum and took it outside. The others were to the north of her, so she hurried south, looking for a place to get rid of the drum. There was no time to bury it and she had no digging tools. She came to a small stream. That was Leaming's water source. But it was little more than a trickle this time of year, certainly not deep enough to conceal the drum.

Then she saw a rock formation on the other side of the stream. She marched toward it purposefully, drum in hand. When she got there, she looked at her watch. It was now nineteen minutes since they'd split up. She was due back in eleven minutes. She peered into the rock cluster and saw what she wanted. Between the large rocks was an empty space big enough for the drum. Big enough, that is, if she smashed it flat. There were plenty of rocks of various sizes lying around on the ground, so she did exactly that. Using a softball-sized stone, she beat the drum into a nearly flat, crumpled mass in a matter of seconds. She shoved it between the two largest stones, and it fell into the earthen depression within the rock cluster. She stepped back and examined her handiwork. From certain angles the silver color could be seen; it even caught the eye. She looked around and gathered stones and pine needles by the armful. These she fed through the gaps in the rock formation until they completely covered the drum. Checking the appearance once again from outside, she was satisfied that it wasn't visible.

Her watch told her she was going to be late getting back. She turned and ran as fast she could over the rough, rocky ground, dodging between trees and bushes, over the stream, and reaching Leaming's hideout just as she heard Cliff calling her name from no more than twenty feet away. Ellen was with him.

"Cliff! Ellen! Over here!" she called out, and then had a coughing spasm since she was so out of breath from the run.

Cliff and Ellen burst through the bushes asking her what was wrong. Then they saw the tarp.

“This is the hideout,” Karen gasped. “Don’t go in. There’s nothing in there that implicates you, Cliff. If you go in, you might leave a hair or something. Here, I’ll do it.”

Karen stepped into the hideout again and snapped pictures with her smart phone, including one of the night-vision camera. Moments later she stepped back out.

“Look. These tins are Thanapest, but only a few small tins. There’s this weird sleeve thing and a night-vision camera hidden in the oatmeal. That drum you were worried about isn’t there. I checked. There’s no other pesticides. Just ramen and tuna, like the other place. You’re in the clear.”

Cliff and Ellen examined the photos.

“Cliff, how sure are you that you didn’t touch the tins?” Ellen asked, worry furrowing her brow.

“Positive. I looked down into it, but I didn’t want to touch those things, what with all the poison warnings.”

“This is great news,” she sighed. “I don’t know what I would have done if the drum had been in there. I just ... I swore an oath when I became an agent. If you grabbed the drum here, maybe we could explain it. I don’t know, but ...” She trailed off. “Anyway, now we don’t have to.”

Cliff still wasn’t sure. He took his flashlight from his pack and stepped to the flap of the shelter. He pushed the flap aside. Peering in from the “doorway,” he satisfied himself that there was nothing there that he had ever handled. The pot concerned him at first, since Leaming had made ramen for him and Karen those years ago, and Leaming had taken the pot and all his other possessions when he split. But Cliff had never touched the pot. Leaming had spoon-fed both Karen and him since they were handcuffed to the tree.

He stepped inside and picked up the sleeve. He instinctively knew what it was. It had to be the spout Leaming had used to feed the Thanapest into the prison air conditioning system. The hinged flap was a trap door of sorts. Leaming must have loaded the Thanapest into the upper, hard plastic part, flown the drone over the intake vent using the night-vision camera on first-person view for guidance, and then activated the servo to open the flap and drop the granules down the sleeve. Since the air conditioning was on full blast due to the unusually hot weather, it would have sucked the granules in like a vacuum cleaner. If some granules fell onto the roof in front of the vent, it wouldn’t matter much. They would begin releasing the cyanide gas, which would be sucked into the system. He didn’t know how much Thanapest would be needed to do the job, but he bet

Leaming had it all calculated. He could make multiple trips with the drone as long as he wasn't detected. He must have waited a long time for the perfect conditions – still air for ease of flying, hot temperature to make the gas release quickly and fully, moon below the horizon so the drone wouldn't be seen, calm bay waters.

Cliff inspected the camera. It weighed only about three pounds. It must have been expensive. Leaming must have planned and practiced for months, maybe years, to be able to kayak up to the shore and launch the drone from there. He had to learn how to open the Thanapest tins quickly and safely to load them into the drone. He had to design and construct the sleeve mechanism and practice attaching it to the drone servo. Cliff already knew how Leaming had learned to fly the drone. Cliff put everything back the way it had been and slipped out. He closed the flap.

“Let's go.” His command voice had returned. He had been hesitant and uncertain, almost passive, since the interview question about Thanapest. He finally felt like his usual, confident self. This was going to work. The women followed without comment or objection. When they returned to the SUV, Cliff climbed in the back seat in case they had to pass by the FBI team again. Cliff instructed Ellen to turn on the radio. They found a news station and the coverage was nothing but QuenMass.

The announcer was interviewing some “security consultant” flack, retired from a military anti-terrorism group. The consultant was saying that the FBI and Lake County sheriff had jointly determined that Charles Price, the shooter who had previously been identified as the man who had killed two deputies, was the QuenMass Killer. This had been determined by inspection of the laptop computer and other evidence found at his residence, including a complete copy of the VIO manifesto. The FBI was still trying to determine how Price gained access to the roof of San Quentin and whether others were involved. The FBI would not respond to questions about whether they had found any of the poison that was used.

The host asked the consultant to explain how the authorities got onto Price in the first place. The consultant said that according to the sheriff, a retired FBI agent who had once been held captive by Price recognized him from a photo he had come across and reported it to a special agent from the California Department of Justice, who had also once been held captive. The two of them learned that the man in the photo, now using the name Noel Clifford, was believed to be living in the Clear Lake region. They came to the area and contacted the sheriff's department. Jointly they identified a probable location for

the fugitive. The state agent and the sheriff's SWAT team had then made the arrest, although, tragically, two deputies had been killed by the fugitive.

"They didn't give our names, Karen," Cliff remarked. "That's something at least. And no mention of the drone, thank God."

"You know they'll drag out all the old stories soon enough. Our names will be out there on TV and the web if they aren't already."

"Quiet, you two," Ellen whispered. "I want to hear."

The host had asked another question, and the response was that the state agent had not known anything about Price being the QuenMass Killer. He had been sought solely for his participation in a series of killings in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties known as the Geocache Murders. It must have been a surprise to all concerned that he turned out to be the QuenMass Killer.

The host asked where the state agent and retired FBI agent were now. The expert replied that the sheriff said he believed they had returned home the day after Price had been killed.

"I think we're in the clear," Karen said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"How are you going to report finding the hideout? You aren't going to name us, are you?" Cliff asked. "There's no need now."

"I wasn't planning to report it. I mean, not as me. Not by name. How could I explain it?"

"The forum posting. A geocacher reported it. You just checked it out."

"To Officer Burnett, not to me. The original post had your number on it, Cliff. That would just lead back to you."

Ellen groaned. "That's right. That's my fault. I'm sorry. But you have to admit, it worked." Then after a pause, "Wait, we can do this. The FBI has an 800 number for people to report tips anonymously on QuenMass. We can report this anonymously. We found this hideout in the mountains recently, and when we heard about the killer being up there we felt we should tell the FBI."

"How are you going to explain how you found the location?"

"Simple. Do you really have to ask? Let me ask you – how far is that spot from the closest geocaches? More than a tenth of a mile."

Cliff and Karen looked at each other and grinned. "Of course. Geocaching! You were looking for a spot to hide a cache," Karen replied.

"Right. And I didn't hide one because we found this homeless guy's tent and decided it was too creepy. But I think I can do it without even having to go that far. I won't even have to lie."

They came to the intersection with High Valley Road, but there was no FBI team or anyone else there. Ellen kept driving down into Lucerne, then all the way around the lake to the motel to take Karen back to her car.

As they prepared to say their final farewells, Karen edged over to Ellen's side while Cliff was getting out of the rear seat. She leaned over and said softly, "Ellen, I meant what I said before about Cliff. Don't throw away a good man like him. I was just a fling and that was long ago. You know the sheriff was right. I'm a pistol – too hot to handle – and we were doomed to failure as a couple from day one. He needs and deserves a new life with a real woman, someone grounded. Like you. He was a devoted husband once and will be again."

Ellen didn't like being lectured to, especially on such a personal matter, but with Cliff now coming around to get in the front seat, she didn't want to respond with him in earshot. Whatever her relationship with Karen had become, it was ending now. There was no point in leaving it on a sour note. She decided to keep it simple and cordial.

"Karen, thank you for all your help. Don't worry about reporting the hideout location. I'll make the anonymous call and give the coordinates. Take care of yourself."

"You, too."

Karen got in her car and headed south. Ellen's SUV followed her out onto the highway but turned off at the next exit to go to the Volvo dealer. Cliff had to get the Acerodon and other personal property. Ellen parked, and the two of them went into the service center. He learned that even though the car would be drivable with just a new ball joint and front and back lights, the body damage was very expensive to fix. The car was six years old, and the parts weren't available locally. The quarter panel, trunk lid, and bumper would all have to be imported from Sweden. The cost would be greater than the blue book value. In short, the car was totaled. That meant the insurance company also wouldn't pay for a rental since it was willing to pay the full value immediately. He could repair it and keep driving it, but it would cost him and take weeks, or he could drive it all beaten up with only the minimal repairs and take the blue book value less the salvage cost, or he could turn it over to the insurance company for salvage and take the full blue book.

"You're too old for a convertible anyway, Daddy," Ellen told him when she heard this. "Time for a minivan." She patted her tummy.

At this Cliff turned and took her hands in his. "Whatever you say, dear," he said in a mocking tone, impersonating a henpecked husband as best he could. He noticed she was wearing the engagement ring again. She hadn't been wearing it when they were searching earlier in the day. He leaned over and kissed her, shyly at first, then he enclosed her in a vicious bear hug, holding her like he was afraid if he ever let go he would lose her forever. She hugged him back just as fiercely. The clerk at the counter stood there slightly embarrassed.

Cliff came up for air and turned to the clerk. "Don't repair it. I'll take the blue book. Send it to the salvage yard." He called the insurance company, told them his decision, and left with Ellen and the property he had cleared out of the Volvo.

Chapter 30

They continued south on 101 until they got to Santa Rosa. Ellen pulled into a drugstore lot and went inside. There she bought a prepaid phone – a burner – and returned to the car. The FBI toll-free 800 number was advertised as an anonymous tip line. She knew the FBI had made assurances that calls would not be traced or identities of tipsters pursued, but there was no point in chancing it, so she dialed using the burner phone. She had been working out just what she would say. She was put on hold for over ten minutes, but finally a young male voice came on the line. This was quicker than she had expected now that the reward was up into the multi-millions.

“FBI San Quentin Massacre tip line. How may I help you?”

Ellen cleared her throat and launched into her best young-twenties-aged voice, with a nasal twang. “Okay, listen. I don’t want to get involved, so I don’t want to give you my name.”

“That’s fine. You can stay anonymous.”

“All right. I heard on the news this morning about this cop-killer guy being the one who did the San Quentin thing. I think I saw a location, like a shelter or something, that he used. I’m a geocacher, and we were up there looking a while back. That guy, I’m sure it’s the same guy they showed on TV. I think the name is Price. Anyway, he was riding a motorcycle up on Bartlett Springs Road. Well, that’s where we were looking. We found this tent or whatever it was. My boyfriend looked inside, and it had some kind of poison there. I can give you approximate coordinates. Are you ready to copy?” She knew the call was being recorded.

“Who else was with you?”

“I said I didn’t want to get involved. I’m going to give you the coordinates now.” She read off a set of coordinates that were about 150 feet from the actual location of Leaming’s hideout. That would give them enough to go on. They’d tramp around the whole area trying to find the actual location and obscure the footprints she and Cliff and Karen had left.

“Okay, got it. Did you touch anything in the –” but Ellen had disconnected.

Cliff had listened to the whole call, astounded at Ellen’s fake telephone persona. “That was impressive. I didn’t know you were a thespian, too.”

“Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in high school.”

“Oberon is a male, isn’t he?”

“Don’t remind me. There were never enough boys going out for drama, so I always got to play the leftover male parts. The cute girls got all the female leads. I was taller than most of the boys anyway.”

“You’re just the right size for me.” He squeezed her hand.

“You’re sweet. Let’s go.” She put the SUV in gear and headed south again.

“Everything you said on that call was true,” Cliff marveled. “You are a geocacher. We were looking there. We don’t want to get involved. Your boyfriend did see some poison there. You were vague but truthful about the timing. ‘A while back’ could be two hours ago.”

“I told you I wouldn’t lie for you. Mislead, yeah. Lie, no.” She smiled as she drove.

Cliff turned on the radio again. The story was still dominating the news. The announcer was saying that sources close to the investigation believed others were involved. Price had to get the poison from somewhere. He had to have inside help to get on the roof. Someone else may actually have been the one to dump the poison into the air conditioning system, but Price clearly was involved in the planning and execution. He was found with a kayak on his Jeep. Authorities believed he paddled to the shore outside San Quentin and somehow got entry or passed off the poison to someone inside.

“They still don’t know about the drone,” Cliff remarked. “They figured out the kayak. The guy back at the drone school will be coming forward next. It won’t be long before they put it all together. This thing isn’t over yet.”

“We’ll be fine. Have faith.”

“You’re the one with faith. I’m the one with the drone. When they put it together, there’ll be a number of threads leading to me. Our misadventure at San Quentin. My balking at the Thanapest question. Me knowing about drones, having access to Thanapest, knowing where to look for Leaming, actually flying the drone at the shootout.”

“That’s all explained. You got the assignment from Google to investigate that drone company. That was *after* the massacre. You went up to the drone school as part of your normal investigation and saw the guy’s picture on the wall. Bingo! You realized it was him. Sure, you could have gone to the FBI then, but you did go to the authorities. It was just Karen instead because she’d been his victim, too. There’s no evidence you knew he was the QuenMass Killer. There’s no evidence the Thanapest at the site was yours.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.”

The next three days saw little change in the investigative posture. More details were leaking out, and speculation had become so rampant that much of what was considered common knowledge was wrong. Ellen and Cliff both returned to work. His name had been brought up in some news reports for his role in recognizing the fugitive and alerting the state, and a number of his clients and friends from his FBI days called or emailed him their congratulations.

The messages that Google had left for him were at first somewhat impatient and even chastising in nature for his failure to report on his progress on the due diligence investigation. When he finally got back to them on Thursday, they had changed their tone. Cliff had obviously been involved in more important matters, helping catch America's number one domestic terrorist, they said. It was all over the news.

Cliff told them how he had used the Acerodon to guide the deputies during the shootout. He said he hadn't told the manufacturer yet. Google was ecstatic. They told him to stop his investigation and not tell anyone about that. As soon as that got out – and they all knew it would – the value of the drone manufacturer would double or triple. They might even decide to go public instead of taking Google's offer. It was dubious as to whether or not Cliff's actions with the drone constituted attorney work product, since he was acting in a personal capacity as a good Samaritan trying to save lives at the time, not doing the due diligence investigation, but he agreed to hold off saying anything about it until it became public. Google made an offer to the drone company, one even more generous than the smaller company had expected, that very day on condition it was accepted immediately. It was. Google immediately called Cliff back and told him he could keep the Acerodon as a "tip."

Ellen had called in sick Tuesday and had said nothing to anyone at work about going up to Clear Lake to help Cliff. She hadn't been mentioned in any news reports since no one in the sheriff's office had met her or seen her. Her coworkers, though, had certainly heard Cliff's name mentioned in the news stories, and they asked her a lot of questions about him, about whether she knew what he had been doing, why he didn't contact the FBI instead of the state special agent. She gave vague but truthful answers about Cliff working with Agent Delgado, who had a lead on the fugitive's whereabouts. She then went to her supervisor and told him she was pregnant and might be needing to take occasional sick days. She hinted at morning sickness without actually saying that was the cause. This forestalled any questions about where she had been the day before. She also said she wouldn't be available for arrest or other hazardous duty until after the baby was born.

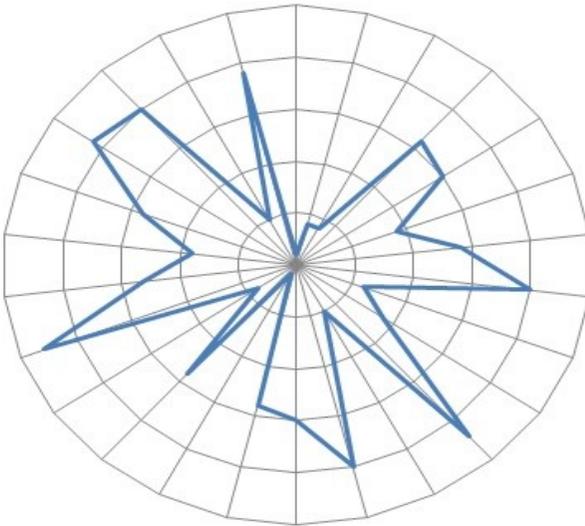
News reports continued to say the FBI was looking for evidence of other VIO members or conspirators. Cliff's anxiety gradually lessened as each day passed and life for them returned to almost normal.

Late Saturday morning, Cliff announced to Ellen, "I've solved Spider Web."

"That puzzle cache? Lemme see." She rushed over, but he had flipped over the piece of paper he'd been working on.

"Nope. If you want to get the Fizzy Challenge, you need to earn it. I'll give you some hints, though. Look at the image.

Spider's route



"Remember the hint about the dizzy spell? I think that's a hint that you're supposed to spell a message. I also saw one of the previous finders say in his log that it was an Excellent puzzle, with a capital E."

"I don't think that log was there before," Ellen commented, getting more enthusiastic now. "So this is from Excel, the spreadsheet program?"

"Yes. I was playing with it. It's called a radar chart. Each data entry creates one spoke on the chart – or web."

Ellen counted the spokes. "Twenty-six. The same as the number of letters in the alphabet. Each spoke represents one of the letters of the alphabet."

"Each spoke does represent one letter. Excel starts the data at the straight up or 12:00 position and continues around clockwise."

“I see. So the first spoke is the letter A, and the next one B, and so on. So that means what? The message has one-fifth of an A and four-fifths of a B? That makes no sense.”

“What if the concentric parts of the web aren’t single units? In other words, not one, two, ... but, say, five, ten, et cetera, or even ten, twenty, and so on.”

Ellen studied the chart more closely. “It looks like the concentric lines have four positions between them, plus one on each line. So it looks like they’re spaced five apart.”

“Very good. You’re getting warmer.”

“That doesn’t really help. So that just means instead of fractions of letters, we have whole numbers. One A, four B’s, four C’s. What are we supposed to do? Anagram them?” Her voiced showed both the impatience and the excitement of getting close to a goal.

“Ah, he fooled you. I was fooled, too, for a while.”

“Come on. I hate that. It’s like saying, ‘You’re overthinking it.’ So many puzzle cache owners send that back as a so-called hint. That doesn’t help solve it. All it does is say my method is wrong, which I already knew.”

“Calm down. You’re getting close. Each spoke represents a letter, but not in the way you meant. Your way, there would be hundreds of letters in the whole message and no way to reconstruct it.”

“What other way is there? You already said each spoke represents one letter.”

“Yes, but not one letter of the alphabet.”

Ellen exploded. “What do you mean, not one letter of the alphabet! All the letters are letters of the alphabet. What else are they going to be letters of – the Zodiac?”

“How about letters of the message.”

“Of the message?! Wha– ...” The anger went out of her instantly. “You mean the message is twenty-six letters long? Oh, that’s sneaky. So it starts one-four-four-sixteen ... that’s A-D-D-P It works. ‘Add point ...’” She finished decrypting the message and did the arithmetic to modify the posted coordinates. “Ooh, it’s close. Let’s get it now. You never know. It could get mugged tomorrow. This is my last Fizzy square.”

Cliff beamed. Making Ellen happy was the most pleasurable thing in his existence. “Sure. We can go now.”

They grabbed their geocaching equipment and hurriedly loaded in the new coordinates. The cache was easy pickings, and they returned within twenty minutes. Ellen logged the find online, completing the Fizzy Challenge grid.

She'd found one cache with every possible combination of difficulty and terrain. She stood up and literally danced with joy.

Chapter 31

Monday morning, the FBI announced that they had found the poison used by Charles Price in a “mountain retreat.” The director himself made the announcement and said the discovery was made through extraordinarily diligent investigation following up literally thousands of leads, including an anonymous tip that led to the retreat. He said the evidence was clear now that Price had used a drone to drop the poison into the air conditioning air intake vent. Further investigation had shown that Price, under other names, had taken lessons flying a drone and had rented one covering the night of the massacre. He was also an avid kayaker. It was now believed that he had kayaked to the beachhead next to San Quentin in the dead of night and flown the drone from there, never entering the San Quentin grounds. The FBI had not ruled out the possibility of inside help, he said, but felt it may only have been in the form of schematics or general information as to where the death row inmates were held, and so forth, rather than help with physical entry. Even though they now felt it likely Price was acting alone, they were still exploring the possibility of VIO having more members or sympathizers who assisted Price. Details of the method of massacre, such as the type of poison, would be kept confidential to protect the investigation.

Cliff heard the news while at the office and called Ellen, reaching her after one ring. “Did you hear the announcement?”

“Of course,” she replied. “We were told it was coming. Everyone was standing around watching the TV in the supe’s office.”

“No mention of the anonymous geocacher.”

“Right. Or geocaching. That’s all for the best in this case.”

“I suppose. We don’t really want them reading the geocaching forum up in Clear Lake about Officer Burnett. I searched the picture of Leaming, the one you edited to look like it was from your ‘security camera,’ and it showed up so many places that the forum post didn’t appear until page 8 of the results. I’ll bet no one checks out hits that far down into the results.”

“They’re still looking for whoever supplied the poison. And they’re still calling him Price, not Leaming. I assume to the FBI, Leaming is still officially dead. But Woody tells me that he’s been asked to have Bart Leaming take a voluntary DNA test to confirm – or disprove – Price is his father. Woody kept out of his 302 that Mrs. Leaming already confirmed it. Woody called him, but he’s refused to take the test.”

Cliff thought about his previous encounter with the young man. “Poor Enigmal. He’s in denial. Which is a good place to be. He’s seen the photos of Barry M. Hall all over the news. He must know.”

“He told Woody he’s taking a job in New Zealand. Google has openings everywhere. Woody told him to make it fast because he’d have to apply for a search warrant when they found out Bart wasn’t going to give his DNA voluntarily.”

“Escape and denial. His caches will probably be archived. It’s a good thing you got Spider Web when you did.”

“Yes, but that’s not important. I would always have found another qualifier eventually. I just feel sorry for the kid. Born with one arm, an alcoholic, pill-popping mother, and now his father’s a mass murderer.”

“He’s resilient. He has a good job and a good future. He’ll come through it okay.”

“I gotta go, Cliff. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay, bye. See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

-o0o-

Later that day, the brand of the drone Leaming had used at San Quentin was reported publicly. It was, of course, the octorotor that Cliff had identified through his research, the one with the servo built in. By the next day, that company was hit with dozens of lawsuits from families of the QuenMass victims. The company announced it would be filing for bankruptcy. Hours later, word leaked out about how Cliff had used the Acerodon to help capture “Price.” Google’s stock shot up another ten dollars a share, which almost no one noticed. Cliff’s picture began appearing everywhere. Fortunately, this time they were using the one from his own law firm’s website, the one he’d had a professional photographer take. No weak chin. No thick glasses.

Cliff began to receive invitations from talk shows asking him to be interviewed about what happened on the mountain with the drone, how he had fearlessly dived at the killer, freezing him in his tracks and allowing the deputies to get him. He turned them all down through Maeva, who could do nothing else but screen his calls all day. The calls were coming in to his home number and cell, too; he had to change his answering message and have them all go to the recording. By this time, Cliff had leveled with Ellen about his role on the day of the shootout, and she had been furious that he had gone chasing Leaming, and

especially that he let himself get shot at, but with the way it turned out, she couldn't stay mad for long.

By Friday, the FBI made another press release. Forensic analysis of the computer found in Price's shack revealed that he had hidden a message by encrypting it in a JPG picture file. It was released in its entirety.

Dear FBI. I know it must be the FBI reading this because you're the only ones who would be examining my computer closely enough to find this message. That means I am either dead or captured. Probably dead since I don't plan to go down without a fight.

If I have killed any police, FBI, or other crimefighters, I apologize, but it was necessary to carry on the real fight. The American justice system is a joke. A total failure. You are all incompetent at keeping innocent Americans safe, which is your only job. That's why I don't feel too bad about any collateral damage I may have caused. That's the nature of war and I'm a warrior against criminals.

I am VIO. No one else. Just like the Unabomber was FC. I am also the Geocache Killer. I have single-handedly eliminated hundreds of criminals who victimize our society: rapists, child molesters, murderers, dealers who turn our children into drug addicts, drunk drivers who kill. In doing so, I have saved thousands of lives, the lives of those who would have been lost or destroyed by the scum I removed. You and the judges who work with you have killed many thousands more by failing at your jobs of keeping the criminals locked up or executed. You are the murderers. I am the protector of the public. By capturing or killing me, you will no doubt be responsible for the deaths of thousands more by keeping me from doing the job you fail at every day. The murder rate will climb. You'll see.

How did I do the San Quentin Execution Ceremony you may wonder. I stole the poison from an unknowing owner and learned how to use it safely. You will find the search history on my computer, I am sure. I learned to fly a drone. The people I learned from had no idea why I was doing so. I practiced my craft. I built a delivery mechanism for the poison. I kayaked to the shore outside San Quentin and flew the drone over the building and dropped it into the air conditioning system. Why am I telling you this now? Because I know how vindictive the FBI, the

army, the entire U.S. government can be. You will try to find someone else to blame, to persecute. I hope others will be inspired by my actions and will follow my lead, but so far as I know, there are no such followers. There have been enough innocent victims, though I have tried to minimize them. I do not want you to create more by making them scapegoats for my actions. I acted completely alone.

I have hidden the instruments I used to carry out the lawful executions. I will not tell you where they are hidden. You may find them, but someone else may find them first and put them to a proper use, making the world safer.

The news media – the whole nation – went crazy. The public began demanding to know what the murder rate was before and after the San Quentin Massacre. The FBI responded only by saying those statistics wouldn't be known until next quarter since the numbers were reported by local agencies on a quarterly basis and took weeks to process. The anti-drone activists demanded that drones be banned altogether, while the military, police, and others who used them, like farmers and photographers, pointed out how a drone had been used to put a stop to the killer. Bumper stickers saying "When drones are outlawed, only outlaws will have drones" began to appear. Late-night comedians suggested a new constitutional amendment be enacted protecting the right to bear drones.

That evening when Ellen got home, Cliff was ebullient. He had fixed broiled salmon, rice, steamed vegetables. No alcohol, of course. They were both drinking lots of milk now.

"There's no way they can come after me now," he said. "Even if they suspect that was my Thanapest."

Ellen was unusually quiet in response. When he finally prodded her as to what was wrong, she came out with it. "Cliff, the director is flying out to congratulate the QuenMass squad for all their work, and the Lake County sheriff's department, too. The memorial service for those deputies is Sunday. The director will be attending; then he'll be in the San Francisco office Monday."

"Okay. You going up there?"

"Yes, I've been ordered to attend, 'cuz of the protective duty. Woody, too. Everyone who participated in any aspect."

"Great. Maybe they'll give you a bonus or letter of commendation."

Ellen hesitated before continuing. "I'm supposed to get you to come, too. The director wants to meet you."

“Me? Look, I’ve never sought the limelight. I haven’t given any interviews. That’s the last thing I want, for obvious reasons. He can send me a nice congratulations letter if he wants.”

“It’s not that. It’s about the reward.”

“The reward? I don’t want a reward. Just tell them thanks but no thanks for me.”

“It’s not that easy. First off, that’s something only you can do. By law there’s a process. Secondly, the SAC said I’d better get you there or I’d be working Korean Foreign Counterintelligence in San Francisco the rest of my career.”

“Fitzhugh?! That pri—ince.” Ellen rolled her eyes at his attempt to cover. “He’s bluffing. Tell him your husband will be glad to bring a civil rights lawsuit against him. Discrimination against a woman, a pregnant one at that.”

“Cliff, just do it for me, please. It would be nice to have you there.” She looked tired, and it was obvious she had been worried about his likely reaction all day.

Cliff gritted his teeth and shook his head but relented. “Okay. I’ll have to move some meetings around. I’ve been postponing things at work too much already. Clients are getting impatient, but I’ll make it. What time?”

“Nine thirty.”

“Ugh. Rush hour traffic and parking in the city. Will you drive me in your Bucar?”

“Of course. Thank you, love.” She gave him a warm smile.

-o0o-

On Monday morning, Cliff and Ellen walked into the SAC’s conference room. The director was there along with his two bodyguards and an administrative aide. Dan Porter and Jo-Lene Holford were seated around the large conference table along with most of their squad. Woody Braswell followed Cliff and Ellen in, and they were all directed to seats. Around the edge of the room were rows of chairs occupied by various supervisors, senior support staff, and other employees. Standing around both inside and outside the room were scores of employees, typical for an “all-employee conference.”

The director was introduced by the SAC and took the microphone. He launched into a politically correct speech laden with effusive praise for everyone involved in the investigation. He called for a moment of silence honoring the deputies killed in the Lake County shootout. Then he called on Cliff to come stand by him.

“I want you all to meet the man who broke the case, who made the capture of Charles Price possible. Most of you know Cliff from his long and distinguished career, much of it in this very office. It will thus come as no surprise to you to hear how his keen observation and investigative instincts allowed him to spot Price in a photograph on the wall of a business and develop information about his whereabouts. He knew this man to be a murderer and a fugitive. Cliff then reported his findings to the state agent who had shared a traumatic experience with Cliff as Price’s captives years earlier. We sure wish you’d come to us first, Cliff. Maybe those deputies would still be alive today. I have no doubt our SWAT team would have taken him without casualties. But I understand the desire to first have your identification confirmed by the only other witness who could do so. As if that were not enough, Cliff spotted Price driving around Clear Lake and conducted a one-man surveillance until he could alert the peace officers on the scene as to his location. You know the rest. It is only fitting that one of our own was instrumental in bringing down the QuenMass Killer. Cliff’s bravery and quick thinking are all the more laudable for the fact he was unarmed and without backup through most of this adventure. Let’s show him our appreciation.”

The director began clapping, and the crowd joined heartily in the applause. But not everyone was so vigorous. Both Porter and Holford were rather lackluster in their efforts, and Oliver Gulick’s hands were at his sides as he stared coldly at Cliff. Cliff was too embarrassed and dazed to notice this, but Ellen picked up on it. Then she noticed another familiar face standing next to Gulick. It was that agent who had been manning the intersection of High Valley and Bartlett Springs Roads. He was whispering in Gulick’s ear and looking her direction.

“Cliff, please give us a few words. Boy, I’ll bet you were surprised when you found out later that Price turned out to be the QuenMass Killer.”

That was a loaded question. Cliff hesitated before formulating his answer. “Who wouldn’t be? Sir, I’m deeply honored by this recognition, but I didn’t do anything that anyone in this room wouldn’t have done in the same circumstances. When I was an agent, the firearms instructors used to tell us to always be armed with our Bureau weapon because you didn’t want to be the one bringing knuckles to a gunfight. I guess I’m just too stupid to learn that lesson. I brought a drone.”

The room erupted in laughter. Cliff nodded his head bashfully and stepped back from the mike.

“Well said, Cliff. Now I want you all to know this office will receive the recognition it properly deserves for the work you’ve all done.” This was code for

“bonuses and raises are on the way.” Grins and murmurs passed through the crowd.

The director stepped back from the microphone, and the SAC stepped forward. “The conference is over. Thank you all. Now get back to work!” More laughter as everyone started to filter out. Fitzhugh turned to Cliff and asked him to step into his office with the director. Cliff knew it was about the reward money.

When they got there the director wasted no time in getting right to the point. “Cliff, as you know, there’s a reward posted for whoever provided information leading to the arrest or capture of the QuenMass Killer.”

“I don’t want any reward.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but just hear me out first. I’ve been in touch with DOJ, and the law requires certain things, certain procedures. First off, the money cannot go to any active duty law enforcement. So the deputies and Agent Delgado are not eligible. It has to be a civilian. Also, it’s complicated by the fact that the money was put in a trust, and there were a lot of private donations and even institutions and organizations contributing to it. It’s an odd combination. Peace officers’ associations and others like that put in quite a bit, but even bigger were the anti-death penalty people. The ACLU, the Innocence Project, and some big-name celebrities and Silicon Valley types who are strongly against the death penalty. We would probably have to do an accounting and give it all back to the original donors, but a lot of it is anonymous and would revert to the U.S. Treasury. Then there’re the tax consequences. You may be treated as though you received it since you have a legal right to it. It’s like winning the lottery then giving the money away. You still have to pay taxes on it. The charitable deduction is limited.”

“How big is the reward now?”

“As of this morning, somewhere close to five million.”

“Let me get this straight. If I refuse the reward, I get taxed on five million dollars of income I didn’t receive, and the ACLU gets the money to help criminals stay out of jail? This is a joke, right?”

“No joke, but it’s not quite that bad. It’s not five million for you, either, but I’ll get to that in a minute. There is a special provision in the law for rewards. If you refuse it outright, you’re close to correct. But you can direct it to a fund for the victims of the crimes committed by the fugitive; then you are not treated as receiving it for tax purposes, and it won’t be returned to the donors or the U.S. Treasury. That’s what the other person did.”

“What other person?”

“Lewis Hoffman. The man who gave you and Agent Delgado the name Barry Hall. He thought you were a police officer by the way, Officer Barnett.” The director winked in what Cliff assumed was a signal that no one at the top cared that he’d pretended to be a cop. “That led to identifying Hall as Price and to his actual location. The DOJ committee of lawyers that decides these things says he’s entitled to half. You’re entitled to the other half. I spoke to him personally yesterday after the ceremony. He was there. He directed his share to the families of the two deputies slain in Lake County. He’s doing it anonymously. He wants no publicity. His name hasn’t come out in the press, and he wants to keep it that way.”

Cliff smiled. “Barnett.” Now he knew that Hoffman had not remembered the name “Officer Burnett” correctly and the FBI almost certainly didn’t know about the geocaching forum posting that had his cell phone number.

“Hoffman did provide that critical tip. I agree with that. So the deputies’ families are well provided for.”

“They are. There was already a fund created for them by the locals, but this will top that off handsomely. We were hoping you would do something similar. It would look terrible if we gave the reward to a retired FBI agent, frankly, especially since Price got gunned down by police. All the liberal donors – the anti-death penalty folks – who wanted to capture the vigilante death penalty enforcer would be crying foul. They already are. They donated to show their support for the ‘misguided souls’ on death row who ‘made mistakes,’ and their money is now going to go to those who helped gun down an alleged murderer without even a trial.”

“I see. That’s a delicious irony I can savor. Can I pick the victims?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d like to direct some of it to the families of the inmates who died in the massacre, say a thousand each. That might help cover the cost of funerals and obituaries at least. Since the inmates weren’t exactly providing for their families, there’s no real financial loss there to them by those deaths, but the families aren’t the criminals. They deserve something for their loss.”

“The state paid for the funerals, but I think there’s a fund already established for those people. That’s right, isn’t it, Trey?”

Fitzhugh mumbled that he’d better double check on that and called Dan Porter into the room. Porter confirmed that what the director had said was correct.

The director continued, “I see no reason why that would be a problem then. But that’s around eight hundred forty thousand. Are you planning to keep the rest? That still leaves over one point five million.”

“No. I want the rest to go to the families of the guards who died or any prison personnel that suffered permanent health effects.”

Porter commented that there was a separate fund for that purpose already set up by the prison guards’ union.

“We’re all set then,” the director said, relieved. “I’ll have DOJ confirm the legality of it and draw up the papers for you to sign.”

“Fine. And I want to be anonymous, too.”

“Absolutely. That’s just what I was hoping you’d say. Trey, Dan, make sure Cliff’s generosity stays in this room. I’ll just make an announcement that all the reward money will be distributed to the victims’ families. Cliff, I’m proud to have had the privilege of meeting you. You’re a true American hero.” He stood and proffered his hand.

“Hardly, but thank you.”

Cliff stood, shook the hand, and walked out of Fitzhugh’s office. Ellen was sitting in the anteroom waiting for him. He left his visitor’s badge with the SAC’s secretary, and together he and Ellen walked to the elevators. As they waited, Ollie Gulick and the agent Ellen had seen staring at her in the conference room walked up to them.

“That was your Thanapest, wasn’t it?” Gulick hissed softly enough so the receptionist couldn’t hear. “You gave that stuff to him. You’re a mass murderer, too.”

The other agent, the one who had seen Ellen and Karen on Bartlett Springs Road, looked Ellen dead in the eye and asked sarcastically, “How was your geocaching?”

Cliff tried to ignore them, but Ellen looked right back and said, “Geocaching’s a great hobby. You should try it some time. And you boys missed it. Cliff isn’t a murderer. The director just called my fiancé a true American hero.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped in. The two male agents stayed behind and glared at them as the doors closed.

Chapter 32

Two weeks later

The ceremony took place atop Buzzard's Roost in Big Basin Redwoods State Park, the location of the Fizzy Challenge cache. The three-mile climb from park headquarters to the top was challenging for Ellen's parents, who had flown out from upstate New York and were jet-lagged, but they were healthy sexagenarians and had plenty of steam left for the wedding. Even Ellen's sister Theresa, the model with the cigarette habit, and niece Ashley made it without too much difficulty. The weather was perfect – mild temperatures, blue sky, a gentle breeze.

Cliff had no relatives there. He didn't know where his sister was living and didn't want to know. He had some cousins somewhere that he hadn't seen since he was ten or eleven. He did, however, get to choose the photographer and the official who would conduct the ceremony, a judge he knew and respected who was also an avid hiker and geocacher. Ellen's parents had wanted a Catholic ceremony, but that just was not in the cards, especially here, outside a church. They were more than happy enough to be getting another grandchild instead. Maeva, Cliff's devoted secretary and dear friend, was the only guest "on his side."

The vows, recitations, and readings had been written largely by Ellen but agreed upon by both. When they said the "I do's," the judge pronounced them man and wife.

"You may now kiss each other and open the cache."

Ashley brought over the Fizzy Challenge cache, a nicely camouflaged army surplus ammo can. When the smoochers broke, she handed the cache to Ellen. Ellen opened it and pulled out the log book. She held it aloft for the benefit of the cameras and the small gathering. By this time a few other hikers had arrived and respectfully watched the wedding. They cheered and applauded along with the wedding party.

First Ellen signed the log sheet, then Cliff. He still had not finished qualifying, so he would not be logging it online to claim the find until he did, but by signing it now, he would not have to return if he ever qualified. Then the rest of the family and friends signed the log book. When Ellen's mother saw Ellen's geocaching name, she chuckled and said, "Ellenwheels. That fits. You always were hell on wheels. Cliff, you've got your hands full with this one." Maeva placed a Travel Bug in the cache.

The geocache log book was passed around for the hikers to sign if they liked. They all did. The cache was closed and replaced in its hiding spot. Ellen's father pulled out a small rectangular gift box from his backpack. He said it had been delivered to his hotel room the previous day with a request that it be opened at the ceremony, not at the reception afterward. He didn't know who it was from.

Ellen and Cliff looked at each other, each assuming the other had rigged this surprise, but their mutual denials finally quashed that idea. Cliff did the honors this time, carefully removing the ribbon and lifting the lid off the box. Inside was a professionally framed article from the *Sacramento Bee* dated three days earlier. At the top was a picture of Governor Brown flanked by Karen Delgado, Clem Corbett, and the members of the Lake County sheriff's department SWAT team. The article described the awards ceremony the governor had held for the intrepid crime-fighters who had put an end to the San Quentin Massacre Killer. Circled in bright red near the bottom of the text was a quote from a statement issued the previous day by the FBI director saying the FBI had determined that the QuenMass Killer had acted entirely alone with no help from anyone else and that VIO consisted only of that single deceased individual. The FBI was closing its case. The public was safe. The card inside was signed "Haughty Hottie." Ellen cocked an eyebrow at Cliff, who returned a rueful smile.

Overhead, the entire scene was captured in high-definition video in a slow, 360-degree sweep by Ace, operated by Gabe, Cliff's Acerodon instructor, in what was soon to become the most scenic, spectacular, redwood-and-mountain-crest-filled, breathtaking wedding video ever made.

Acknowledgments

To be determined. Sentinel guy. Lisa. Doug Heatherly (Lighthouse24).