

Ultimato

by
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Books in the Cliff Knowles Mysteries

Held for Ransom

Cached Out

Fatal Dose

Death Row

Gut Shot

Behead Me

A Will to Die

Cliffhanger

Double Eagle

Cold Case

Ultimato

Part One

Chapter 1

It was 1:00 PM and the haze-covered sun was to the south-southwest, over the tops of the Santa Cruz Mountains. I turned to face that direction and attached my GoPro to the selfie stick. I started the video rolling, cleared my throat, and began speaking.

“This is Hardkorps talking to you from the trailhead of the South Butano Fire Trail near Pescadero, California. This is day one thousand ninety-five of my quest for the First to Find or FTF of the Ultimato Challenge. If you’ve been following my vlog, you know that this is the big day. I’m going for my last D/T grid square today, a four point five slash five. For those of you who are new to it, this is hardcore geocaching at its best. I’ve seen my view count rise dramatically in the last few weeks, so I know I’ve got a lot of new folks watching. So here’s the scoop.

“Geocaches are rated on a one to five scale for difficulty and one to five for terrain. With half-steps included, that’s eighty-one possible combinations. I’ve completed eighty of those. The target cache for today is rated four point five in difficulty, since it’s a bear of a puzzle, and a five in terrain because it’s a long hike from the road to here and even farther up the hill requiring some tough tree climbing at the end.

“There are several challenges out there that require you to find all eighty-one combinations, but the Ultimato is in a class beyond that. The late, great Yellowdawg, creator and original cache owner, added was the requirement that it be completed within a three-year span. Those attempting it must log their intention on the cache page before starting. That marks the beginning date. Any caches found prior to that don’t count. But on top of that, to claim the find, you also have to find a cache every day for the entire three years. It hasn’t been easy, but I’m one day away. Once I get the target cache today, I only need to find one cache – any cache – tomorrow to qualify. No one has done it despite the fact the cache is now three years and one month old. I’m going for the FTF. Why, you ask? Because it’s there.”

I played it back. It was fine. One take, not too long. Good. I hated having to redo intros. I took the camera off the stick, turned it on

the trailhead sign, so viewers could see I was where I said I was, and filmed it. Then I turned it off, collapsed the stick, and mounted the GoPro on my headstrap. It was set on Wake on Voice, so it would sit idle until I started talking. It'd take me a couple of hours to get to the target cache, I knew. I'd pick up the three caches that are on the trail en route, drive home to the city, edit the video and post it tonight. I started hiking.

I was cutting it close. If I couldn't find this cache, I'd have only one more day to find a 4.5 difficulty/5 terrain. I had one in mind if it came to that, but it was a lame ass way to do it. I had found a couple other 4.5D/5T caches before I started this challenge. Those finds don't count and they're the only other ones within three hundred miles of me. But the rules don't say you're prohibited from finding a cache during the three-year challenge period that you'd found previously. Yellowdawg had clarified that in a note log on the page when it looked like no one, including him, was going to qualify. Then he went and drove his four-by-four off a cliff trying to get to a high-terrain cache in the Sierras. He became an iconic figure at that point, a hero of sorts, although I question whether he deserves that appellation. Like so many obsessed people, geocachers among them, he was an idiot in pursuit of meaningless goals. He was nominated for a Darwin Award, but didn't place because vehicle accidents are too common. I've been more careful, and with good reason.

I wasn't entirely honest in my recorded intro. Or, more accurately, not completely forthcoming. I'm not just doing this challenge because it's there. Okay, sure, maybe I was at first, but when it began to look like I was the leading candidate for getting the FTF, I was contacted last year by Garmin. They said that if I got the FTF, they'd hire me at six figures to endorse and promote their GPS products. They started providing me with several products that I placed in my vlogs for a fee: the handheld GPS unit, of course, and a hat, some patches. The North Face, Eddie Bauer, and REI have also started paying me for product placement – boots, backpack, poles, etc.

I needed the money. Like, I *really* needed it. It's what I live on now. That, and the money I get from YouTube for the ads on the vlog. I was a sous chef in a restaurant in San Francisco until the pandemic killed the restaurant business. Geocaching was a part-time thing until

then. I took it up big time and started this challenge since I had all this time on my hands and needed to do something besides sit around watching TV. I lived with my parents or mooched off my friends for months while I looked for another job, but the business climate hasn't been the same since. I have a degree from the Culinary Academy. I should have been a quick hire but when the coronavirus pandemic hit, chefs were getting laid off all over. There was no work. I realized I'd have to change careers permanently. That's when I started this vlog thing. It only paid nickels and dimes at first, but then, it became my sole source of income. I was able to move out of my parents' place.

As I hiked along, I noted the darkening sky. It was late spring, and unusually hot inland, but a foggy overcast rolled in off the ocean here near the coast which can often turn to drizzle in the higher altitudes. That was fine with me. An overcast sky gives even lighting for photography and the stiff breeze may mean I'd have the trail to myself on this weekday afternoon. It was a tad chilly for hiking. With the lockdown orders over, most people are back at work.

I reached my first cache location and started talking to turn on the camera. It didn't matter what I said, as I knew I would probably record over it during editing. I found the cache in short order. It was a full-sized ammo can full of swag. These are pretty uncommon these days. It made for good video, too. I pulled out the logbook, a yellow spiral bound one, and flipped to the first empty page. I took a whole page to write a note about the good swag in the cache. I switched the camera to manual, videoed the log, leaving it on long enough for people to read what I wrote. Next I pulled out a plastic bag with some sew-on geocaching patches. A note inside said "take one only." Somehow there were still four in the bag even though at least fifteen people had signed the log. In my experience, there's always at least one jerk who disregards the cache owner's request and takes everything of value. They probably sell them. The cache soon becomes full of nothing but rubber bands, pebbles, and torn stickers. I took a patch out and put a Hardkorps token in. I knew my token was now more valuable than the patch, so the cache in effect had traded up.

I went through the rest of the swag in the cache, filming it, but knew I'd edit out most of it tonight. Then I moved on, camera back on my headstrap. The next cache was a hanging bison tube. It took me a

long time to find. Bison tubes are little waterproof cylinders originally designed to hold pills and other important items in outdoor environments. There was no swag inside, just a rolled up log sheet stuffed in tightly. This is normal, but brought me a shock even so. The last name on the log sheet was joblob. And the date was today. My main competitor had already been up this trail today. He might even be on the trail ahead of me. I mentally kicked myself for not noticing it on the previous cache; I'd flipped directly to the first blank page without looking at the previous logs.

Chapter 2

I became aware of joblob about a year ago. He'd posted his intent to begin the Ultimato Challenge three days after me, but several others had posted several notes around that time, so it was no big deal. I hadn't paid any attention then. When I got a year and a half into it, I went back and looked at all the names of those who had started on it about the same time I had, including four who had posted before me. All four of those eventually had to miss a day of caching due to illness, work, or some other reason and thus couldn't possibly complete the challenge before me, although two reposted later that they were going to start over. Of the ones who posted in the week or so after me, only joblob and a guy in Germany were left.

I researched his profile to try to find out more about him, but there was almost nothing there. The profile photo was a shot of a male torso displaying incredible sixpack abs. There were no photos of him posted in his gallery although there were plenty of other shots. When I looked up his cache finds, all the logs appeared to be solo. There was no reference to "we" and for many of them, no one else logged on the same day. So he was a solo cacher. His initial finds had been in Southern California, so I assumed he was from around there, but later ones were all over the western U.S. or Canada, so he could be anywhere now.

Like me, he'd started a vlog chronicling his effort at the Ultimato. He took a different approach, though. He took no selfies and never spoke. It was just video and music, with occasional sounds of snapping branches, huffing and puffing, and nature sounds. All the narrative was in the written descriptions on YouTube and on a personal text blog. The viewer never saw any part of him, other than the boots, gloved hands, and long shirtsleeves, and never heard his voice, although occasionally he added movie clip audio. I had a lot more total followers, but he had almost as many in Europe and Asia where there are fewer English speakers. I noticed that he carried a Magellan GPS unit, Garmin's chief competitor in the handheld GPS market. That unit and his cap were often displayed in the videos next to the cache or its swag. A Black Diamond trekking pole also featured prominently in many of them.

I knew that he had completed all his difficulty/terrain combinations and only needed to find a cache a day for the next five days, but I had thought he was somewhere in Oregon. I'd seen some vlog posts up there recently. I'd assumed he'd finish off his requirements up there and that it wouldn't matter since I'd be done by then, already claiming the FTF. But I also knew that he already had a 4.5D/5T cache. So what was he doing here? Why take on the difficulty?

We were sharing this trail. I wasn't looking forward to meeting him, frankly. I hoped he'd already have come and gone. Some of his posts in his vlog were taunting toward me. My main worry, though, was that he'd figured out that this was the cache I really needed and he'd sabotaged the cache somehow, so that I wouldn't be able to find it today. That was strictly prohibited and considered outrageous by geocachers, like a golfer kicking his opponents ball into a sand trap. But in geocaching, unlike golf, no one would know. I figured Magellan was probably making the same offer to him that I was getting from Garmin and big money made people do nasty things.

I signed the log sheet right below his name, rehung the cache, and went on up the hill.

The third, and last before the target, was another hanger. This one was on a wire fence. The last one had been in a tree. I found it pretty quickly and signed the log, videoing the log sheets, which consisted of two thin strips of paper. Like the last one, joblob had signed it earlier today, taking the last slot of the first strip. I signed the first slot on the next one and placed the two strips next to each other for videoing. The two names, joblob and Hardkorps together, would make for great suspense. Our viewers were well aware of the competition between us. Page views should go sky high on both. I narrated a few lines of shocked outrage that he'd in effect thrown a gauntlet down this way.

The target cache, called Butano Hilltop, lay ahead a half mile. It was a hard half mile, too, with the final section off the trail straight up to the summit. It was steep, rocky, and dangerous. Hence the five-star terrain rating. The rocks were overgrown with weeds. Weeds over rocks is the worst combination. You can't see the rocks. The weeds are often very slippery when dry, making for treacherous footing, and if you fall, you aren't landing on a soft bed of weeds or dirt in a meadow, but on

the hard, sharp rocks underneath. I fell once and cracked my shin on a rock. No bones were broken, but I knew I'd have a nasty bruise by tonight. I was sweating and grunting like a feverish longshoreman when I crested the final ridge. The copse of trees harboring the cache was fifty yards ahead. I could see the silhouette of a figure moving about in the trees. It had to be joblob.

I could tell from the movements of the shadowy figure that he was looking for the cache. So it was going to be a head-to-head competition for this cache, too. I said "testing..." to start the GoPro videoing. I approached slowly, camera running, narrating in the most suspenseful voice I could muster. I was no more than ten yards from the edge of the trees when a voice greeted me.

"So, we meet at last. Hello, Hardkorps." Joblob stepped from the shadows.

My jaw dropped.

Chapter 3

“Joblob ... I thought ...”

“I was a man? Good. My videos are working as intended.”

She was an imposing figure, tall and heavily built. I’m five eight (I hate it when people say “only” five eight) and a lean one fifty. Joblob was two inches taller than me and probably fifteen or twenty pounds heavier, but she wasn’t fat. Her shoulders were a weightlifter’s shoulders and she was what my mother would have called “chesty.” Her arms appeared thick, too, although it was hard to tell through the long sleeves. She wore a Patagonia windbreaker over a Columbia hoodie, brands I’d seen on her vlog. In her right hand was a Magellan GPS receiver and in her left a Black Diamond trekking pole. She wore no makeup. Her short, frizzy hair was a mousy brown. Her venti-sized nose had to have been the subject of some childhood teasing. I’m probably more sexist than I think I am or mean to be, but vlogging is a visual medium and there’s no doubt that sex appeal, especially for women, matters in collecting views and followers ... and dollars. She just didn’t have it and was probably smart to use the “mystery cacher” ploy instead. Her vlogging camera, like mine, was a GoPro, strapped on her chest just above her boobs.

“Christ. You’re a dumber shit than I thought you were,” she chided.

“Nice to meet you, too. Hey, it’s not dumb to think you’re a man if that’s what you intended.”

“Not that. The way you said my name. You don’t even get it.”

“Get what?”

“The joke. You pronounced it like a rhyme to hobnob. The first name is supposed to be Jo.”

It took me several seconds before I got the Spoonerized sex reference. I blushed visibly once I did, and I know this because joblob laughed at me. “What? You never had one?” she taunted.

“You’re a regular comedian,” I retorted. “So have you found this cache?”

“Not yet. It looks like we’re going to have a little competition here. And before we go any farther, let’s be clear. You don’t get to post a picture of me. I’ll fucking sue you. I do not consent to being recorded.

Got that? It's illegal to record someone without their consent in California."

"I think it would make great video – for both of us."

"No way. No one knows I'm a woman and I'm going to be the one to make the big reveal when I collect FTF on the Ultimato. If you reveal it, they'll think we set it up and have been working together all along for this moment, like pro wrestling or something. I think it'll be a big turnoff. We'd both lose eyeballs big time. Maybe even sponsors, and don't tell me you don't have any. The ones you turned down for conflict of interest came to me."

"So you have my sloppy seconds. Figures." Okay, I know that was beneath me, but she started it. "Fine, whatever. You don't want to be in my vlog, you won't be. Let's just find the cache and get out of here."

She snorted contemptuously as though victorious and turned back toward the trees. I strode right next to her, looking at my Garmin. The arrow was pretty steady, pointing to a pair of coast oak trees on one edge of the cluster. Most of the trees in the park are redwoods, but those are virtually impossible to climb without serious gear. We both made our way to the trees and began looking up. The cache description said it required tree climbing, but it wasn't very specific. Sometimes that could mean just taking one step up into a fork, and other times it could be up dozens of feet, at dangerous levels. Based on the prior logs, this one was somewhere in between, not requiring all that much expertise or risk.

When you're under a tree looking up into the canopy, the brightness of the sky makes the leaves and branches seem like black silhouettes. It's hard to make out detail above. We both paced around underneath for about ten minutes trying to spot something suspicious. Our GPS units disagreed with each other, but both of them at times said it was the left one, and at times the right. It's normal for GPS units to vary by a few feet in their readings due to the movement of the satellites and reception problems.

Finally, I decided just to pick a tree and climb. I dropped my pack and stick, then I hauled myself up into the first fork of the right tree and scanned the immediate area. Seeing nothing, I made my way up one level higher. She began climbing the other tree, although I could see it was difficult for her. Then I spotted it. It was at my level but on the

other tree. It was a fairly good size for a tree cache, a fat six-inch cylinder wrapped in camo tape. It had a stiff wire wrapped around a branch base, right against the trunk. It was impossible to see from below. I'm sure my GoPro got a good shot of it from my vantage point.

"I see it," I called out. "It's above your left hand another five feet." My left arm was wrapped around the trunk of my tree, but I had put my GPS unit in a belt pouch, so my right hand was free. I pointed. It didn't matter that she signed it before me. This wasn't a race for an FTF on this cache.

She heaved herself up three levels and grabbed the cache. "Got it." She videoed signing the log, which was a small booklet. As I mentioned, she wore gloves so the viewer couldn't tell she was a woman. I hadn't thought about it until now, but I realized she always wore long sleeves, too, even in summer, at least in her vlogs. That must be because you could tell she was a woman from her forearms.

She started climbing down, cache still in hand.

"That's okay, leave it in place," I called out. I wanted to get a shot of signing it up in the tree. If we were caching together in normal circumstances the considerate thing to do would be to bring it down so that I could sign it on level ground instead of scrunched precariously up on a branch, but this is show biz. She ignored me and continued down.

She picked up her stick, stuffed the cache in her jacket pocket, and started walking back toward the trail. What the hell?!

"Hey, where are you going? I haven't signed the cache log yet. You aren't taking it are you?"

She didn't reply. She picked up her pace, striding quickly now.

I clambered down awkwardly and took off after her. She started to run, but it soon became obvious I was faster than her. I ran track in high school. She stopped running and faced me when she realized I was going to catch her. She had something in her hand. Pepper spray.

"Christ, what is this? You can't just take the cache. C'mon. You're a geocacher, not some scumbag vandal. Gimme the cache. I'll replace it right where it was."

She stood her ground. "Only one of us can get the FTF on Ultimato. It's going to be me. You need this cell in your grid. I don't. And I have video proof that I signed it today and your name wasn't on the log. The only other 4.5D/5T within a hundred miles that's active is

missing, too. I know. I have that one, too. Besides, you found that one already.”

That was my backup cache she was talking about. It was called Take a Dip and was in a dangerous cliffside spot near Sutro Baths in San Francisco. She’d stolen the two possible caches I needed to complete my difficulty/terrain grid in order to keep me from completing the challenge before her.

“This is ridiculous. You aren’t *that* girl. You’re a decent human being. Just give it over. I won’t say anything about it. Besides, I have all this on video.” I tapped my GoPro.

“Which, like I said, is illegal for you to record me without my permission. You can’t use it.”

“You recorded me.”

“And I won’t use it. I can use the video of the log sheet – the log showing my name and not yours.”

“Now you’re pissing me off. Just give it to me or I’ll have to take it.”

“You and what fucking army?” She raised the pepper spray up again. She’d lowered it while we were talking.

I took a quick sidestep and grabbed for the pepper spray, but she was too quick for me. She got off a squirt right in my eyes. I stopped and clutched at my eyes which were experiencing a thousand lasers piercing from every direction. My nose was feeling a searing rush of pure pain and reacting with a torrent of snot in defense. I blinked open for a split second, just long enough to see her running away. As she did so, she yelled, “What a wuss.”

I knelt down on the trail rubbing my eyes with the balls of my hands. The pain was indescribable. I was totally blind. I knew I needed to get to my water. I rose and stumbled back to where I’d left my pack, blinking open for a split second every now and then. Fortunately, I knew exactly where my water was in the bag. I retrieved it by feel and started splashing it in my face. After two minutes I was better. My nose and mouth still burned like Beelzebub’s barbecue, but my vision was slowly returning. It was blurry, but I could keep my eyes open.

I had to make a decision, and had to make it fast. There were several options, none of them ideal. Come on, think! Think! I couldn’t concentrate but I began to itemize in my brain. First, I could put a

replacement cache up in the tree. I had something in my bag that would work. I had video proof that I had spotted the original, and that joblob had taken it. But that had problems. First, replacement caches by finders were specifically prohibited by the terms of the challenge. You had to find the one the cache owner had placed. Otherwise it was too easy to cheat and say the cache was missing when in fact you just didn't find it. This one might count since I did find the original, but I hadn't signed the CO's log. The challenge was now owned by a pair of geocachers who had taken over the Ultimato after Yellowdawg's death. I didn't know whether or not they would allow that, and if they didn't, I'd wasted three years of work and lost a hundred grand.

Second, I could give up on this one and go for my backup at the other location, Take a Dip. I already had finds today, so I didn't need this one to fill the calendar day. I only needed it for the D/T part. That, too, had problems. If she'd told me the truth, she'd taken that one, too, which meant it would have to be a replacement cache by me, with the same problems as this one. I knew the cache owner for that one, and maybe I could prevail on him to check on it and replace it tomorrow morning himself. As long as it was a replacement from the CO, that was not a problem, but that's a big ask and I had no idea whether he'd be able or willing to do it. It was extremely difficult to get to that one. I'd have to change my original find to a Note or delete it in order to claim the find again, but that was legal.

I knew of yet one more that would fill the grid, only two hundred miles away up near Springville in the Sierras. I could drive there tomorrow and find it, but the difficulty part was a puzzle you had to solve to get the coordinates and I hadn't solved it. She had probably checked the puzzle solvers list and knew that I hadn't solved it and wasn't counting that one. I knew some people who had, and maybe I could cadge the solution from them, but that was frowned on and if the word got out that I hadn't solved it, my whole FTF on Ultimato would be tainted, maybe disallowed. Besides, I might not find that cache. There were no guarantees.

The only practical option was to complete this one. I had found it. I had proof, and all I had to do was sign the log. I could find any cache tomorrow and be done. I had to catch up with joblob and get the cache from her. What she was doing was basically theft and it was

keeping me from a hundred grand. I needed to get going because there were several trails that intersected the trail we were on. I hadn't seen another car at the trailhead where I'd parked, which meant she'd come a different way. My only chance was to get to her before she peeled off onto one of those other trails. I figured I had about three minutes to catch up with her.

I left my pack and stick on the ground and started running down the hill. If I took a tumble at that speed downhill over this bed of hidden rocks, it could mean serious injury, broken bones and total immobilization. And my phone was back in my pack, so if I couldn't get to it, I could die of exposure. People only came up here for the cache, and that was maybe once every six months or so.

Somehow I made it down the slope onto the groomed trail without injury even though I could barely see. I knew that the trail looped, a sort of elongated oval, and we were near the far uphill end of the loop. In other words, whether I went left or right, I'd end up back at the downhill junction point in about the same amount of time. But if I went the wrong way, then I wouldn't know whether I ended up there behind her or ahead of her, and I wouldn't know whether to wait there or keep going. I stopped to examine the trail. It became obvious from the bootprints that someone had been running on the left side recently. I took off that direction.

Two minutes later I spotted her. She'd slowed down, clearly out of breath. She was more fully loaded than I was, still wearing a backpack and carrying her trekking pole, but she was walking briskly. I went from a fast jog to a sprint. She heard me in time to turn around and pull out her pepper spray again, but not in time to spray me. I charged right into her at full speed and tackled her to the ground.

We wrestled for a few seconds and I succeeded in wrenching the spray from her and throwing it aside. She was bigger than me and put up a good fight, smacking me on the lip with her clenched fist but I began to get the upper hand. I got a hold of her hair and yanked her around until I got her face down in the dirt and me on top. I had my arm around her neck in a carotid hold.

"Enough already. Give me the cache, Clydesdale. That's all I want. I'll put it back and we can forget this whole thing happened." I

knew which pocket she'd put the cache in, but I couldn't reach for it without letting go of my carotid hold.

"Okay," she croaked, and moved her free hand to the pocket. She pulled out the cache.

I removed the carotid hold and sat up. As I reached for the cache, she rolled over and brought her knee up into my groin, crushing my balls. I rolled off her in agony, groaning. She shoved the cache back in her pocket and scrambled to her feet. She tried to run, but at the last second I was able to grab her toe and trip her. She fell flat on her face, hard. I was still mostly immobilized, but I crawled up on top of her again.

She punched me again, this time in the eye. I grabbed a rock that was lying there in the dirt next to us and swung hard, aiming for her chin. I missed because she tried to sit up. The point of impact was her temple. I heard the bone crack and saw the upwelling of blood under the skin. The magenta mushroom swelled to the size of an heirloom tomato, but it didn't burst through the skin. Then the swelling stopped and she fell back, immobile. I felt for a pulse in her wrist. I thought I felt something, and then I couldn't. Her thick gloves and long-sleeved shirt made it hard to tell. I put my ear to her chest. I heard a faint heartbeat and pulled back, hopeful, but then I realized I was hearing my own heartbeat because I could still hear it. I was so amped up that I couldn't distinguish between mine and hers.

I thought about giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but something inside stopped me. If she was dead, I didn't want to leave any DNA on her. Mouth-to-mouth wasn't going to help her if she had no brain function. I lifted her arm and let it fall. It was the proverbial limp noodle. It landed with a thud on the ground. I opened her eyelids, first one eye, then the other. There was no reaction by the irises. I tried shading them and got no reaction. She was dead, dead, dead.

I stood and looked around, panicked. I hadn't seen anyone else on this trail all day but that didn't stop the paranoia. I took stock of what had just happened. I had just killed a woman. She'd started it. She'd sprayed me with pepper first. She'd kneed me in the balls. I was just defending myself. I wasn't a murderer.

Or was I?

Chapter 4

My uncle was a criminal defense lawyer. I'd worked in his office two summers and picked up bits and pieces of the law. Now it was serious. I had to think this thing through the way the police would. First, I knew it was legal, if foolish, to make a citizen's arrest if there's probable cause. She had stolen the cache, so maybe I was making a legal arrest. But then I remembered that wouldn't work. It had to be a felony. That meant the geocache had to be something worth over two hundred dollars or something like that. To me it was, but to the police it wouldn't be. Geocaches are considered abandoned property by the authorities. It's not possible to steal them once they're put out there in public for anyone to find. Legally, it's a piece of litter.

I knew that it was legal to use deadly force to stop a fleeing felon. Only she wasn't a felon. She wasn't even a criminal, at least not a thief. But she had sprayed me first. Maybe that was assault and ... but no. She was running away from me. I had reached to grab the cache from her. At that point, under the law, the cache belonged to her. No geocacher would see it that way, but the police would. It was like she had picked up a discarded soda can and I was chasing her to get it. She had the right to defend herself.

She'd punched me and kneed me in the groin. She was bigger than me. It was self defense. No. I tackled her. That was the first physical attack and her response was proportional and non-lethal. I had been sprayed and punched in the face as I was assaulting her and then when she used non-lethal force, I had used lethal force to retaliate. That sounded like murder. You just don't get to kill someone for punching you, even if they started it, which, under the law, she hadn't. Besides, under the law if you can make a safe retreat, you are required to retreat rather than kill an attacker, and in this case, I clearly had a safe retreat.

I hadn't meant to kill her. I just wanted her to stop struggling and let me have the geocache. It was an accident. I'd thought if I smacked her on the chin with the rock, I'd knock her out, take the cache, make sure she was okay and then go back and finish the find at the cache site. At least that's what I told myself. That wasn't going to fly, either, though. I'd intentionally hit her in the face with a rock. That's an assault with a deadly weapon and it didn't matter under the law whether

I'd intended to kill, only whether I had intent to commit a crime. Maybe I really had intended to kill her. I don't know. I was furious and in the middle of a fight ... well, maybe that made it second degree, not first, but it was still murder.

I have no criminal record. Nothing. Not even a traffic ticket. My uncle once got a guy off with twenty-eight months after he killed his girlfriend. He and she had gotten into a fight. She was the aggressor there. She threw a coffee cup at him first; even her own sister, who was present, admitted that. He then went to her and smacked her hard with an open palm. It was hard enough to knock her off her feet. She fell on their flagstone patio and her head smashed against a paving stone, killing her instantly. The judge was lenient because the defendant had no record and was the sole support for his elderly mother. He didn't even serve the twenty-eight months. He was released after four months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He wasn't considered a risk.

I could do four months, sure, but ... I mean, no one wants to be a convicted murderer. But I can't count on another pandemic springing me free. My case sounds a lot like that one, but maybe the judge wouldn't see it that way. It would be a different judge, too. I could get twenty years. I don't deserve that. It was her fault. She didn't follow the rules. She probably had a big ticket deal in the works, too. For all I know Garmin offered her the same deal if she was the FTF. And there was the hundred grand and endorsements to think of. My entire career would be gone.

All these thoughts ran through my brain at warp speed, jumbled together. When I'd digested them it was clear what I had to do. I had to avoid getting caught. Another thing I learned at my uncle's office is that most stranger murders are never solved. I could do this. The first step was to get the body out of sight. It was unlikely anyone would come by soon, but it was possible at any second. I looked around. The trail ran along a ridge next to fenced off property. I'd noticed the barbed wire earlier, but hadn't paid much attention. Almost all the land around here is the public park, Butano State park. I walked over to the fence. It was only waist high and had four strands of barbed wire. There were metal signs posted on it every hundred feet or so reading "No trespassing. Property of the USGS." The USGS is the United States Geological Survey, the federal agency that studies earthquakes and other things

dirt-related. They have a big center in Menlo Park and earthquake monitoring stations throughout the Bay Area, which is earthquake central. This must be one of those. I figured no one would be coming here often and the body would be obscured by the foliage from the trail. I really had no other choice. The body was too heavy for me to carry or drag very far.

I went back to her body, took off her pack, windbreaker and hoodie, and tied her hoodie under her armpits. With her arms bare, I could see she had tattoos covering both arms from shoulder to wrist. I dragged the body the thirty or so yards to the fence. I had to muscle it up the hill a bit. I pulled off her boots and jeans. The bottom strand of the fence was about eight inches off the ground. I propped it up a little more with sticks, then I began to roll her under the fence. The barbs snagged her T-shirt several times, ripping it open and revealing her bra, but I didn't care about that.

It took almost half an hour, but I got her under the wire. Next I broke off branches from the nearby shrubs and piled them on top of her so that she wasn't visible even from a few feet away. I knew that eventually animals or weather would disturb the cover and she'd be visible up close, but I figured this should hold for several days at least, and probably weeks since it was such a seldom-traveled area. She might never be found. It wasn't close to the trail and was heavily shielded from the USGS structures on the other side of the foliage, assuming there were any structures. I couldn't see any, the growth was so thick.

I returned to where we'd fought. I scoured the area looking for any items I might have dropped or that had come off me. I didn't see any. My GoPro was still strapped on my head, and my pack and stick were back at the cache site. My Garmin was securely in its belt holster. There was, however, all her gear to deal with and the rock I'd smacked her with. I'd had to take her pack and camera off in order to get her under the wire. She'd be a Jane Doe when found – if found. I remember hearing once that in any homicide the victim and the murderer exchanged something – DNA, hair, fibers, blood. Fortunately, she'd been wearing heavy gloves when she punched me, and heavy clothing, so there would be nothing of mine on her body, only on her clothes. I stuffed her clothing in her pack after removing anything that would

identify her. We'd wrestled around. I'm sure they had plenty of my skin cells and hairs all over them. Fortunately it all fit in the pack.

I inspected the rock. It didn't have any blood on it. This is because it hadn't broken her skin. All the bleeding was subdermal. Still, it no doubt had plenty of her skin cells and DNA on it, so I tossed it deep into a pile of rocks about a hundred yards from the site. I didn't think anyone would ever think to check it. Since I had gloves on, it wouldn't have my DNA or fingerprints, either.

I went back to the fight site. If all her gear was gone and she was eventually identified, I decided that the cops would probably think she'd been a robbery victim. She had some valuable stuff, like the GPS and iPhone. So I put on her pack, with her camera inside and headed back up to the cache site. I was exhausted when I got there what with all the hiking, fighting, and body-hauling. It was four-thirty by then.

Chapter 5

I now had a new set of decisions to make. What was I going to do about the challenge? The first two obvious options were both fatally flawed. I could log this cache just as I normally would, or I could abandon the challenge and give up one day before the end just to avoid being associated with this site.

Either one would make me an instant suspect when her body was eventually found. I posted on yesterday's vlog that I would be going for my last D/T cell today and this is the obvious candidate, although I didn't actually name this cache as today's target. What possible excuse could I have for not continuing one day before completing it? I was chased by robbers, probably the ones who killed Joblob? And if I went on as normal, pretending I had no idea she'd been murdered the same day, no one would believe it. I'd seen her name on all the log sheets. It would be obvious from the log sheets that she'd been on the same trail right before me. I had no obvious motive since I was clearly about to win the challenge, and after all, who would kill over a silly geocaching game, right? But I'd be the only person the cops could put in the same place with her the same day and had a connection of sorts to the victim.

My only real option was to erase all evidence I was here. But what about the challenge? If I couldn't complete it here, how could I? No one would believe I just gave up and didn't come here today. She said she'd taken the other cache, Take a Dip. That gave me an idea. I went through her pack. Sure enough, there were several cache containers in there. All of them were empties except for one. I opened it. Yes! It was the original Take a Dip geocache and the logsheet was still inside. There twenty spaces above the first empty slot was my name from four years ago. Joblob had found and signed this cache a year ago. She had not signed it again. She was probably planning on replacing it after she'd won the Ultmato Challenge and didn't want any evidence she'd removed it to thwart me.

I lived in San Francisco, and was planning to drive back there tonight, but there was no way I could video a find at Take a Dip tonight. It was just too crazy dangerous to venture out on those cliffs at night. But it should be doable tomorrow. I had another day. I'd have to make

up some excuse for my vlog today, but that's easy enough. I'd pretend I was teasing everyone on yesterday's vlog and decided to make the last find the one high difficulty cache I needed on the very last day to build up suspense.

So I had a plan. I had to remove all evidence I was ever on this trail, do a vlog on one of the caches I'd found in Half Moon Bay during the morning, and do Take a Dip tomorrow. I had never been here before today, but I had signed three logs already along this trail. I'd have to replace this cache without signing it, and then remove my signature from those three caches. I took my GoPro off and replayed the video so I'd know exactly where and how the cache was placed. I took the cache up the tree and attached it the way it had been before.

I got down from the tree, packed up my gear and inspected the area. The problem now was all her gear. It would be awkward carrying hers, but if I left it where it might be found, that could bring a quick search for her body. I figured the safest plan would be to take it with me and dispose of it elsewhere. That would be consistent with the robbery scenario I envisioned. I strapped her trekking pole onto her pack. Next I took her camera and deleted all the footage she'd taken. Obviously I didn't want any evidence showing me here today. Then I opened up the camera and removed the memory chip just to be doubly sure. I'd bury it somewhere away from here.

I pulled her iPhone out of the pack. It was still on. I should have turned it off earlier. I wanted to check to see if she had a geocaching app on the phone, but it was locked. Some geocachers log a find immediately upon finding a cache. There are apps that will log the single word "Found" automatically at the push of a button. The finder can always edit the log later. I thought about what I'd seen in the past on her other logs. I followed her to some extent on her geocaching profile because she was my closest competitor. I recalled that she sometimes logged one-word logs and then edited them later. That meant she might have done the same today. In other words, there was possibly a record already on the geocaching website of where she'd been today. If so, I couldn't delete or destroy her signatures on the geocaching log sheets without eventually arousing someone's suspicions. I wanted to check the website on my own phone to see if she'd logged them, but my phone was off to save battery power. I use the Garmin GPS, not a phone app,

for navigation, and the GoPro for video. This was good, because if the police checked where my phone was, they would only find where I last had it on, which was Half Moon Bay when I called Nicole. I couldn't chance turning it on here to see if she'd logged these caches already. I turned her phone off and removed the battery just to make sure.

I slung her pack over my shoulder and took one last look around. Nothing was left. I started the long hike back to the car, making my way slowly and carefully down the slippery slope once again. After a bit on the main trail I came to the last cache I had found, the one on the fence. I grabbed it again, opened it and pulled out the log sheet. She had signed the last open spot on the first strip and I had signed on the first slot on the second sheet. That made it easy. I removed the second sheet. I thought about replacing it with a similar strip. I carry spare log sheets as a matter of courtesy to supplement full sheets like this. But then I feared it might be identifiable somehow. If the cops ever checked, they'd find that my second sheet was from different paper and was slightly different width. I'd read somewhere that they could identify any piece of printed paper with the printer that printed it. Not only that, but I had prepared the sheets at home and no doubt handled them with my bare hands. My prints and DNA would be on them. I just couldn't chance it. The next finders might complain in their logs that there was no room to sign on the log sheet, and the cache owner might be ticked that the second sheet got taken, but that kind of thing happened all the time. He might not even know a sheet had gone missing. Geocachers are used to finding full log sheets. The next finder would probably just add a blank sheet or squeeze a signature in along a margin. Nothing would point to me. I replaced the cache.

I continued on hiking, then stopped after fifty yards. I found a clearing about twenty feet off trail and buried the memory chip from her camera deep, and covered that with a rock and loose leaves. Then I realized I was carrying incriminating footage in my own GoPro. I took it off my head strap and deleted all the footage from this trail. I kept the earlier footage that showed me picking up a few caches in Half Moon Bay that I'd made en route to Butano. I could use any of those as my find of the day for the challenge. I needed something for today's post on my vlog.

Further down the trail I stopped at the second cache I'd found, the bison tube in the tree. I pulled out the log sheet. On this one our names were together on one sheet, the only sheet in the cache. My signature was in ink, so I couldn't erase it. If I took this sheet, then I again faced the question of whether to replace it. For the same reason as before I felt I couldn't chance it. Here, though, the cache would be without any log. That would seem suspicious to a geocacher. No one hides a cache with no log sheet. In addition, it was a new cache with only six signatures on the sheet which had room for twenty on each side. Unlike the last cache, the CO and other geocachers would know someone had taken the log sheet. But that probably would never come to the attention of the police and wouldn't point to me. Anyone might have done it. Again, the next finder might just replace the log sheet and say nothing about it. I replaced it empty and put the log sheet in her pack.

At the final cache, the big one with the spiral bound log book, I made quick work of it. Thankfully, it was a simple matter to rip out the one page I had used and replace the book. Unless someone actually counted the pages, no one would know there had been a sheet removed. There ... all the evidence I was ever here was gone. I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

Chapter 6

I continued downhill to the trailhead. When I got there, I noticed a pickup truck parked near my SUV. There was a wide two-car pull-out area where the trail meets Cloverdale Road. The cache is actually in a state park, but I'd wanted to avoid the entrance fee, so I'd parked here instead. It meant a longer hike, but then I'm a hard core outdoorsman; hence my name. That also had the advantage that there was no record of my entrance, although of course that hadn't been an issue when I'd parked. There had been no one here when I arrived and on a gloomy workday the pull-out wasn't likely to be used much if at all, but I had no way of knowing whether anyone had noticed my car during the time I was up the trail. Clearly, whoever was in the other car had. I looked around and didn't see anyone.

I pushed the button on my remote to open the rear and walked up to my car. Just then I heard something to my rear. A man about thirty came out from behind a tree, zipping up his fly. He spotted me and looked embarrassed. "Nature called," he said in an apologetic voice.

"No problem," I mumbled. I turned back to my car so as to avoid eye contact. This was awkward. I was planning on stripping off my own outer clothing before getting in the car for the same reason I had stripped off hers. I knew her cells and hairs would be on mine. But I didn't want to strip in front of this guy. I fiddled around shuffling things in my cargo area.

"You camping up here?" He asked. "You can drive right into the park."

So he was a local. He might have noticed a car that didn't belong. Fortunately, my gray SUV was very common looking, very dusty and didn't have a personalized plate, so it didn't stand out as out-of-place and wasn't very memorable. I hoped he didn't recognize the geocaching sticker on the rear window.

"No, just gee...hiking." Shit. I'd almost said "geocaching."

I ignored him and kept stalling. I stripped off my fleece vest and shoved it into a shopping bag I keep in the cargo area. Finally he drove off. No one was on the road, so I took off my boots, socks, and shirt, a long-sleeved flannel. The boots and socks went into the shopping bag. So did my gloves and shirt. I couldn't very well go without my pants so

I just brushed them off as best I could. I was naked above the waist and couldn't go public that way in this weather without attracting attention. Under the seat I had an old T-shirt I used as a rag. It was gross, but I put it on. I wouldn't miss any of the clothing. My sponsors were always giving me stuff to wear. My closet was loaded with it. I put on the sandals I kept in my car. I was so stripped down, I was shivering. That's when I noticed a tiny scratch on one wrist. The blood had dried and left a red-black line. Where had I done that? Probably at one of the cache sites, but what if it had been during the fight? Or on the barbed wire when I stashed the body? I couldn't worry about that now. I slammed the rear shut and climbed in the driver's seat. I started up and drove off.

I still had to get rid of her gear, but I didn't want to put it in my car and get her DNA and hairs in it. It's a good thing I keep a roll of trash bags in my car. I pulled out a fresh plastic bag, opened it, and stuffed all her gear in it, all except the trekking pole, which wouldn't fit. I put that in my SUV, closed up the car and headed north.

I drove a few miles and realized I was low on gas. I could make it back to Half Moon Bay okay, but would have to stop before I got home. I headed north on Highway 1 until I got to the outskirts of Half Moon Bay. I was running on fumes. There was a no-name self-serve gas station here. I pulled in and drove up to the pump. I didn't want to use my credit card here and create a record. This was five miles south of where I had made the morning finds, the ones I'd use for tonight's vlog. I was probably being paranoid, but if anyone ever checked my credit card records, it would be hard to explain why I'd headed south, directly opposite of where I lived, if I was not going to Butano, the one nearby cache that would fulfill the logging requirement for a 4.5D/5T cache that I needed.

I opened my wallet to see how much cash I had. I don't usually carry much. Everything is credit card or PayPal or Google Pay these days. I had twenty-two bucks. I decided to just put in enough to go farther north a few miles, then fill up with a credit card. It would be consistent with filling up en route home after those caches. I went inside with my hat pulled low and sunglasses on, slipped a tenner on the counter in front of the clerk, a young Mexican woman, and mentioned my pump number. I went outside and ran the ten bucks off the pump, then left.

I continued until I got to Pillar Point. I pulled into the public lot and parked where my car would be visible from the jetty there. I removed joblob's camera, phone, and Magellan GPS unit from her pack and locked the car. I took out a spare geocache container I had in my pack, a small plastic Lok 'n' Lok. I put her phone and paperwork – driver's license, credit card, and medical ID – in it along with the geocache log sheets, then filled the rest with sand from the beach. It was heavy and would definitely sink. Still wearing my hat and sunglasses, I walked out to the end of the jetty, checking the car frequently to make sure no one messed with it. No one was around and no one who was in the distance was looking my way so far as I could tell. It was getting dark and I couldn't imagine anyone could identify me. At the end of the jetty I threw the camera, GPS, and Lok 'n' Lok out into the bay as far as I could. There was no way they could wash up. They were the only parts of her gear that might be identifiable with her. They also were sure to sink and stay down. Her bag, pole, clothing, and other stuff might float and wash in or be picked up. I had different plans for that stuff.

I returned to the car. There was a dumpster in the lot. It was stuffed to capacity, which was good, since that meant it would be emptied soon. I drove over right next to it and tossed her bag into it, or, I should say, on top of the pile. It was good quality gear, new-looking and probably all supplied by her sponsors. I knew someone might retrieve it, but it had nothing that identified it with her or me, not unless it somehow ended up with the cops and they did DNA or fingerprints. Even then it would still only be identifiable with her. They would assume the robber dumped it there. Most likely, it would all end up in a landfill, never to be seen again.

I left, drove north and stopped at a national brand gas station where I filled up and paid with my credit card. I dumped my shopping bag full of my own clothes in that rest room trash can. I headed home, arriving a little after nine. I pulled into the underground parking garage of my building. I still had my pants to dispose of but I didn't want to walk through the building in my underwear. I pulled off my pants and wrapped myself with a beach towel I keep in the car. You couldn't tell whether I was wearing shorts or a bathing suit underneath. I stuffed my pants in the dumpster located in the building trash area and then went upstairs to my apartment. No one saw me arrive so far as I could tell. I

hadn't eaten since lunch, so I was starved. I made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and scarfed it down with corn chips and a glass of milk. I was tempted to have a stiff shot of something stronger to calm my nerves, but I needed to stay focused. I still had to post a vlog for today's run.

Chapter 7

“Hey there, geo-fans, this is Hardkorps posting on my penultimate Ultimato day. Tomorrow is the final day for this incredible adventure, except, of course for the day I sign the log on the Ultimato cache itself. Now if you’ve been following me, you know that as of yesterday I still had one square on the difficulty/terrain grid to fill. I didn’t have a four-point-five difficulty, five terrain cache find during the three-year period although I had one before that. I told you yesterday I would get that today.

“Well, surprise! I decided to wait one more day. That’s right, I still haven’t chosen which one to do. I know it’s last minute and if I can’t find it, I’ve wasted three years. Well, you want suspense? You’ve got it. You’ll have to watch tomorrow to see if I succeed. This afternoon I picked up some easy caches in Half Moon Bay. That’s about thirty miles south of here. You may have seen me grab some caches there several times over the last one thousand ninety-five days. The area is beautiful, scenic, and fun to visit any time even if not geocaching, so here we go.”

I cut in the footage of me next to the Quarry Park sign. I couldn’t use the audio from this part because I’d made mention of going for the Butano cache later. I recorded a new audio narration and rambled on as I used a bunch of uninteresting footage of me hiking in a little ways and finding a mundane cache. It was pretty lame and no doubt disappointing to my fans, but I was out of options.

I’d found one other cache in the area and included that in the vlog. I don’t log my finds in real time, as I mentioned earlier. I wait until I get home. This practice was a life-saver today, because if I’d logged my finds real time, there would have been no way to have distanced myself from joblob. So I still had to write online logs on the geocaching site. I decided this was the twist I’d use today. Of course vlogging is a visual medium, as I said earlier, and a video of writing a log on a website seems stupid at first, but I turned it into a lesson. I wrote an effusive log for both Half Moon Bay caches, describing the cute container one had and oohing and aahing over the boats in the bay. At the same time, I narrated an audio that this is the kind of log every

cache owner appreciates and how you too can write great logs. I had a screen grabber capture the whole process and saved the video.

It took about fifteen minutes to edit it all together. It wasn't my best effort, but the suspense was still running, so I didn't think my fans would mind all that much. I uploaded it to YouTube and tweeted a link to it, then posted that link on my own WordPress website and Facebook. I watched as the page views on YouTube shot up into the hundreds within ten minutes. My sponsors would be happy.

Comments appeared immediately on all the media. Most were of the nature "You devil. You're going to make us wait. You better fill that last square tomorrow. [frowny icon]" I decided not to reply to anyone. I was done for the day. I looked at my watch and it was almost eleven.

Exhausted as I was and glad to finally have it all taken care of, I realized that I was feeling a lot worse. I'd been so focused on covering my tracks and posting the vlog that I hadn't really thought about what I'd done, only what I had to do. Now it hit me. I'd killed a woman. A human being. I was a murderer. I looked at the phone, somehow expecting it to ring and a gruff voice on the other end would say, "This is the sheriff. Come out, son, and face the music," or words to that effect. I felt sick to my stomach. Now I did want a stiff shot. I poured myself a bourbon and seven and drank it in three swills. I was contemplating pouring another when the phone rang.

I about jumped out of my shorts at the sound. It turned out to be my girlfriend, Nicole. She was out of town on business. We didn't live together, but it was getting close to that stage.

"Hey, babe, how'd it go today? You get that one down in Pescadero?"

Nicole's not a geocacher, but she knows how important my vlog is to me. It's my living, and she understands that. I've intentionally kept her out of the videos and never mentioned her. The reasons should be obvious. I had a different girlfriend when I started. That one was in a few of the early videos. Then she wasn't. Some commenters asked some uncomfortable questions, like who dumped who? Fortunately, she'd been cool with the breakup and never jumped in to any future video comments or social media elsewhere. She just faded away nicely. So I didn't want to go through that again, and Nicole understood. Also, it

was clear that I had some female fans who liked me and thought I was hot. Well, most said “cute,” but I prefer to think of it as hot. Some did say that, too. I got some pretty racy offers in the comments. I wanted the page views and if I had a girlfriend in the videos, that might turn off some of those geogroupies. She understood that, too, and sometimes pointed out some online follower who’d probably give me a good time. “Hey, this one’s pretty cute. You should hook up with her,” she’d tease.

“No,” I answered in response to the Pescadero question. “I decided not to do that one. I picked up a couple other caches in Half Moon Bay.”

“Really? I thought that was the only one left with the right rating or whatever.”

“No, there’s another one I can do. I’m doing it tomorrow. I wanted to keep the suspense up.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, things went well for me. I went through the training, or I should say endured the training session. I’m certified now. I can take on clients up to two million in assets now.”

“That’s good,” I mumbled.

“ ‘That’s good?’ That’s all? You sound like a robot. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Sorry, just tired. *That’s great!* Is that better?”

“Much. I saw Mike and Sherry. We had dinner at a neat Bavarian place near the hotel. They said hi.”

“Hi back.”

“I’ll be flying back tomorrow. Don’t bother to pick me up. I’ll get an Uber. I know it’s your big day. Get that last cache.”

“I will.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Nicole knows I get product placement deals and make good revenue from the online ads, but she doesn’t know about the hundred grand promotion tour offer from Garmin. I don’t think it’s in my best interest to let her or anyone else know about it now. If we were married, or even living together, it would be impossible to keep it a secret.

The next morning I got up early, before daylight. I grabbed a slice of bread and drank some juice, then headed out. I wanted to get out

on the cliff as soon as light allowed. I packed up my gear, checked the camera memory and battery level, cleaned the lens, and set off.

Every couple of years people fall from the cliffs to their death at Sutro Baths or the other nearby cliffs and beaches. The whole area is geologically unstable. A few years ago two women were sunbathing on towels at the base of the cliffs and a big section just collapsed on them. Both were buried alive. One managed to crawl out. The other didn't. It took almost a week to dig out her body.

The cache location was in a stable spot, but getting to it was the trick. I parked my car and set out as the sky was just turning from black to gray. I had done this cache and others on the cliffs here and knew the best route. I turned on the GoPro, said some portentous-sounding words, and began inching my way out. I huffed and puffed louder than necessary. It added suspense to the video.

The weather was foggy with a stiff breeze off the ocean, so the rocks were wet. I was halfway to the cache when my foot slipped and I slid down about ten feet. I yelled "shit!" but managed to stop the slide before falling very far. Like to my death. I got a big scratch on my arm. This was actually good. It made the video real. I pulled up my sleeve to show the blood running down my forearm and added more ominous dialog. It was genuinely scary, but I knew I could make it. That didn't stop me from hamming it up in the video.

I reached the Take a Dip site finally. Of course, the cache wasn't there because joblot had taken it, but I had it in my pack. I placed the cache where it was supposed to be. I remembered exactly how it had been placed four years earlier. Then I backed up a few feet and approached the site again as though I was just coming on the scene. I reached in to the nook where the cache was, pulled it out, and opened it on camera.

"Thank god. It's there," I said with relief. I planned to edit out the part where I first placed the cache, of course. It would look like I discovered it *in situ* as it were, not knowing if I'd find it or have wasted three years of my life. I had to do a little acting.

I extracted the logsheet and unrolled it. The last signer was someone I'd never heard of and the date was over a month ago. I signed right below that and rerolled the sheet. I took off the GoPro and verified that I had good video of the whole scene, then replaced the camera. I

placed the log back in the cache and sealed it tight. It had to be waterproof.

Done! I'd officially qualified for the Ultimato Challenge. I was the only person in history to do it. It was like breaking the four-minute mile or two-hour marathon. I knew that I had legitimately met the requirements. Not only had I actually found the Butano cache yesterday, but this one was totally on the up and up. I was physically in the place where the cache was and I signed the original owner's log sheet in that location. The fact that someone else had taken it away and I had to bring it back was irrelevant. So was the fact I'd found it once before. Here, on this day, I was at the cache and signed the log. It's a find. Period.

I still had to find the actual Ultimato Challenge cache, but there was no time limit on that. Today's find merely cemented my right to sign that cache log when I found it. I could string out some videos to build more suspense and keep the ad revenue going a bit longer, but I couldn't wait too long. There were some locals not too far behind me. They'd be qualifying in a month or two, assuming nothing went wrong. The last I looked, the closest one was only four days behind me, one day behind where joblob would have been, but he was in Germany. I'd have to check his finds online and see if he was still on track. If I didn't find the cache in the next few days, it was possible he could fly out and get the first to find. If he was a good sport, he'd leave the honor to me even if he qualified before I found it, but I couldn't count on that.

I made my way back to my car and drove home, which was only ten minutes away. I treated myself to an IHOP pancake platter – three pancakes and bacon and added a side of sausage along with milk and coffee. I deserved it. I sat and savored a second, then a third cup of coffee. I tipped the waitress – excuse me, server – handsomely and went back up to my apartment. I logged a terse “Found – more later” log on the cache page. This alerted everyone watching this cache, or those watching my finds, that I had completed the qualifying and would be posting a cache log and a YouTube vlog.

I won't bore you with the details of my vlog, but suffice it to say it was masterful, over an hour long. I started by recapping the whole challenge journey, inserting some of the highlights of previous videos, then recounted some personal stuff I'd never told before, including some baby photos of me, and finished with the Take a Dip find today

backed by very stress-inducing violin music (screechy dissonance in increasing tempo) with a cymbals crescendo right at the point of my fall, changing to triumphant orchestral music at the find. I inserted many lengthy thank you plugs to my sponsors, praising their products as essential to completing the quest and making sure I got my bonuses from each.

Whatever I said yesterday about last night's vlog, quadruple it. My completion of the Ultimato was lighting up the entire geocaching world. My inbox went crazy and so did my personal Facebook message box. My separate Facebook Ultimato quest page went absolutely berserk. I maxed out my incoming message limits in every single digital media. Surprisingly, my phone took a few minutes to ring. It was my mom. My mom followed my vlog? Who knew. She thinks geocaching is stupid and no career for a twenty-something man. She congratulated me and wanted to make sure I was okay. I told her I was fine and had hammed it up to make it look worse than it was. Two calls came in while I was talking to her, but I touched the ignore button and they went to voice mail or hung up.

I didn't hear from Nicole right away, but I knew she was still airborne. I ignored all the stuff on Twitter and Facebook and YouTube and started scanning my email. The one I was looking for was from Min, my Garmin contact. He said congratulations and asked me to call him. I did.

"Hardkorps! You made it, man. Major props."

"Thanks, Min."

"We need to talk."

"I'm listening. You like how I held up your unit for over two minutes right at the site?"

"Right, right. Love it. We meant what we said. I've authorized our attorney to extend you a formal offer."

"I thought your offer, the hundred grand, was a formal offer." I stiffened.

"It is. It is. But that's for being first to find on the Ultimato. You haven't found the final yet. You've only qualified."

"But --"

"Relax, you'll get your money. I'll authorize a wire transfer of an advance tomorrow for a quarter of that as a down payment. That's

yours to keep. But to get the rest you have to do what we talked about. Complete the final before anyone else and then agree to promote our products and not our competitors. We haven't gone over the particulars of what that promotion entails. You know, how many TV appearances, tours, vlog posts, all that. We may even come out with a Hardkorps branded geocaching unit. You'd get extra royalties for that. That's what the lawyers have drawn up. There's nothing there you'll have any trouble with."

"Right. Okay. Yeah, I knew I had to do that stuff." In fact, I was looking forward to it. I wanted to be famous, to be interviewed by Letterman or ESPN or whatever. But I didn't want to let him know I'd do it all for nothing. Business was business, after all.

"So I already have your bank information. The wire will go through tonight. The contract will be emailed to you today to review. If you agree, print it out, sign it at a notary public, and mail it back. Sorry, the lawyers say it has to be U.S. Mail. Make it certified."

"Sure, okay." I was tempted to say something to jack up my price, play hard to get and all that, but I knew I didn't have the guts to play hardball with a big company. I'd sign whatever they sent me as long as the money was there.

"All right then. You go out and celebrate. Just don't go getting yourself locked up for DUI or something. We need you to complete the challenge."

"No worries. Thanks."

I hung up and logged onto my YouTube account page and checked. I'd already earned over four grand from all the page views and I knew there was a lag time. I expected to pull in close to fifty grand over the next two or three days. I also knew that these things didn't last. Most of the hits came in the first three days. After that, it's a trickle. More to the point, once I found the final cache and the quest ended, my viewership would dry up. The run would be over. My only real revenue stream after that would be Garmin and the other brands I promote. No one else had offered me a guaranteed deal, only royalties based on sales of their products linked to my videos or links on my media pages and those would disappear as fast as the page views.

My phone started ringing after that. A local newspaper reporter called for an on camera interview which I did via phone app. Although

that's old school – a print medium – they all have websites with video now. Other calls came in while I was doing the video, so when I finished that I scrolled through looking for Nicole's. Sure enough, she'd been one of them. I called her back. She was at her office. She'd had to go straight from the airport there, but she was planning to get off early due to the time lag from the east coast.

“Hey, babe, super job! You okay?”

“I'm fine. What doesn't kill you ...”

“Maims you for life. I know. Jesus, it looked bad on the video.”

“It was just a flesh wound,” I crowed in my best Black Knight from Monty Python voice.

“Well, you did it. All you have to do now is the final. That's supposed to be easy, right?”

“Right.” She'd obviously been paying attention to my ramblings, maybe because she was really into it, or maybe just because she was hoping I could start paying more attention to her now that the end was near.

The reason she knew the final was supposed to be easy was because other geocachers had found it and signed the log already. The comments made clear it wasn't difficult. Now that sounds confusing if you don't know geocaching. How can I get the FTF, the First to Find, if others have found it already? I'd explained it to her. On challenge caches like this one the owner often allows geocachers to find and sign early, before qualifying, as long as they leave the first slot, or often, the first three slots, open for the first person or first three to qualify and find it. That's so that a geocacher from Japan, say, who happens to be in the San Francisco area and is not likely to return any time soon, maybe never, can sign it now, and then go back and finish qualifying in Japan or elsewhere. Online they only are allowed to log a note, not a find, indicating that they plan to finish the challenge and will edit the log to a find when they qualify. Of course, the date they qualify is the earliest they would be permitted to claim the find, not the date they physically signed the log. In this case there had been at least a half dozen notes logged, but no official finds.

“So, you going for the final tomorrow?”

“No, I’m going to wait a day or two. Builds suspense, keeps page views going longer. Once I find it, that’s all going to drop off a cliff. As it were.”

“So what’s Hardkorps 2.0 going to do?”

“I’m getting some serious interest from Garmin. I think I can swing a tour – podcasts, some TV maybe, endorsements. I can be a reviewer on outdoor gear, whatever.” I still didn’t want her to know about the Garmin offer that predated the incident with joblob. That’s how I thought of it now, as an “incident.” The offer gave me motive.

“You can’t play professional geocacher forever. You can cook forever. People will always need to eat. The pandemic’s over. There’s a vaccine. Restaurants are booming again. You should think about that.”

“I’d have to start over as sous chef, chopping vegetables. Glorified KP duty.”

“Get the money from Garmin, then start your own restaurant. You’re a great cook.”

“Yeah, maybe. You coming home?”

“Soon. It’s one o’clock. Too late for a nooner. Maybe a twofer?”

The tease in her voice made me, well, ... Hardkorps. I was really looking forward to seeing her. “I’ll be ready. Hey, I’m getting tons of calls and emails. I need to respond to some of these.”

“Okay. Love ya. See ya soon.”

“Bye.”

Chapter 8

The next morning Nicole and I slept in. We'd celebrated the previous evening with a nice meal out – no cooking by me, for once – and champagne. I'd also spent hours going over all the emails and voice mails. It may be old school, but all the serious business is done by phone. When people really want to get in touch, they call. I don't know how some of them got my number, but I'd entered it on a zillion websites for verification texts and many other reasons. I'm sure it was for sale out there in byteworld.

It was a good thing I went over all the voice mails and made a list before returning any of them. It turned out there were three from Hollywood agents. If I'd called back the first one, I'd have jumped at his deal. Instead, I played them off against each other. They all said the same thing: they could get me on the television show *Survivor*. Apparently the producers of the show heard of my popularity through YouTube views and had been looking for my agent.

None of the agents knew anything about geocaching or how popular it was, but they knew a hot prospect when they saw one. They'd all done some quick research. One, Sherri, had a staff person who was also a geocacher on the phone when she'd called. She made me the best deal. When she found out about the offer from Garmin, she agreed to look over that contract and get me a better deal, and not even include those royalties in her cut, at least not for the first year. She'd only take her share of residuals and whatever else after that. I didn't understand all the lingo, but she seemed convincing and warned me that the Garmin contract might interfere with the *Survivor* deal, so she needed to see it anyway. Plus she seemed to have done the best job of educating herself on geocaching. I gave her a verbal commitment.

I was tempted not to find a cache today. Frankly, I was sick of geocaching. I'd gone out every single day, rain or shine, freezing cold or blazing hot, sick or well to keep the streak going for three solid years. The challenge didn't require me to find any more now, other than the challenge final. Once I'd qualified, I'd qualified. But I knew my fans would want another video and I wanted as many views while I was hot property.

I called two of my geocaching buddies and asked them to help me today. Both agreed to accompany me on a local geocache hunt. One of them knew of a new cache nearby that was pretty clever and would make a good video. I hadn't found it before, so I agreed. We planned to meet right after lunch. He'd be cameraman today.

Nicole went off to work as usual. It was Friday and she'd be there all day. Once I had the privacy, I decided to check on joblob's YouTube channel. I didn't want to show unusual interest, but it would be natural for me to check. Her last vlog was two days ago. There were a lot of comments on that one asking why she hadn't posted yesterday. Some were giving her a hard time for not congratulating me on qualifying. I say "her" and "she" because I know she was a woman, but the commenters were using "you" or "guy" and so on. Several were asking where he was. One asked why he went to Butano.

That comment brought me up short. How did they know? I checked her finds on the geocaching site, something obvious I should have done earlier. She had logged all four finds at Butano, including the final one we fought over. As I mentioned earlier, many geocachers log immediately on finding, using a phone app. She had a popular geocaching app where all you have to do when finding a cache is push a single screen button and it logs a generic "Found." That's all she'd posted. There were no pictures, no video, no text other than the default app one-word text. I'm sure she planned to edit the logs later. Thank god she hadn't mentioned me.

My stomach seized up like I'd swallowed cement. Eventually someone would report her missing and this series of logs would be found. They'd discover where she was last known to be, and her body would probably be found. She obviously had predicted I'd be there which was why she'd gone there, but she hadn't said anything in her log finds or on her vlog about it. Had she told anyone in person about it? A spouse, boyfriend, roommate? I started worrying and lost track of the time. I almost missed my appointment to go for the cache today.

I met up with my friends and recorded my intro. We got some good scenery shots walking into Golden Gate Park where the cache was. I revealed that I would be going for the final tomorrow and today just wanted an easy day of casual geocaching like the average geocacher, just for the fun of it. The cameraman had already found this cache and

guided us right to the area, but I pretended to be using the Garmin GPS all the way and pointed to it prominently as we walked along, making comments about how reliable it was. My other buddy went along with it as he knew full well I was getting endorsement deals. He even wore a North Face fleece since he knew that was one of my sponsors.

At the cache site he spotted it first, but pretended like he didn't. I could tell from his body language that he'd found it and was sneaking away from the immediate area to avoid giving me a clue. I rambled on about this hide was a stumper and avoided the area where I knew it was to draw out the video a little longer. I didn't want to overdo it, so I turned back to that area and made a show of spotting it. The CO had made a custom container on a 3D printer. It looked like a miniature fire hydrant stuck in the middle of a bed of ivy. I gave it a thumbs up on camera and signed my name to the log. I said I was giving this one a favorite point. Then I declared it was time for a beer and we headed off to O'Dooley's.

Back in the apartment I logged the cache online and edited the video. I didn't take my usual care to do it right, but it didn't really matter. Everyone would watch it just to see if I found the final. That's all they were interested in now. I uploaded it to YouTube and set the links on all the other media sites.

Sherri called me right after and told me the video was great, although she was obviously puffing it, and said she had the casting director from Survivor on the line right now and could I join the call with her. I said yes. Suddenly I was talking on a conference call. We made the deal on the spot. Shooting would start in six months. My agent told me she'd cleared it with the Garmin people already. There would be some scheduling issues to work out with their planned tour, but overall they thought it would help them, too. She told me to check my email, download her contract, and sign it. I did that next.

In addition to the contract, her email said she could help me get my image in shape and suggested I get in touch with this guy down in L.A. I hadn't expected that. I thought my image was fine. Was I going to have to learn makeup tips and get a new hairdo? Get more buff? I was pretty skinny. Maybe this fame thing wasn't going to be as fun as I thought, but suddenly I was flush with cash and that felt good. I signed the contract and emailed back an image of it with my signature, which is

how she wanted it. Everything was happening so fast I was in a sort of daze.

By then it was almost four. I was getting a little nervous about the Butano logs joblob had made, and wondered whether anyone had reported her missing. I turned on the four o'clock TV news. The top stories were about the political races and a local fire that had spectacular video. Then there was a short item about the state park police requesting anyone with knowledge of a hiker named Jocelyn Boylan who may be missing in Butano State Park to call them. Joblob's driver's license picture was shown on the screen. A number was given to call, but there was no further explanation.

Without the picture, I wouldn't have been sure, but it was definitely her. Jocelyn could be shortened to Jo. She had reached the trail from a different direction from me, so she had probably driven into the park. The rangers would have found her car parked overnight in the day camping area. She wouldn't have rented a campsite or paid whatever overnight fee was required. But it didn't sound like she had been reported missing. No actual police were mentioned. There was no mention of geocaching, either, which was important. If they didn't know she was a geocacher, they wouldn't think to check the logs on the geocaches. There were plenty of other caches on other trails, too, so even if they thought of it, they wouldn't know which direction to go and might spend a lot of wasted time looking for other caches and examining irrelevant log sheets.

I checked my different media sites for messages, comments, and views, but soon got tired of that. The "incident" was gnawing at me and I couldn't concentrate. I went back to her YouTube channel and started checking out the latest comments. A lot of speculation was going on there now, mostly about joblob being a poor sport who's gone off in a pout. I switched to her Facebook page, which had similar comments on her post from two days ago. Before I knew it Nicole walked in the door. She doesn't live here, but she does have a key.

"Hi. How'd it go today?" she cooed, walking to the kitchen to get a beer from the fridge.

"Fine. I found a cache over in the park just to keep the streak going. Hey, guess what. I'm going to be on Survivor."

"No way!"

“Yes way. I signed with Sherri and the casting director was in her office. We start filming in six months.”

“Awesome. My boyfriend’s a TV star.”

“Hardly. Not yet, anyway. I’ll probably get voted off the island the first episode.”

“Pfft. Hey, what’s that you’re looking at? Is that that hobgoblin guy?”

I realized I still had joblob’s Facebook page up. Nicole had a vague idea that joblob was my nearest competitor, but like me, she’d always thought joblob was a guy, probably because I’d always referred to “him” that way. Looking at the page again, I realized why I had. There was no photo of joblob on the page. The profile picture was a shot of a muscle-bound man’s torso, showing only from neck to hipline.

“Uh, yeah, joblob.” I pronounced it the way I always had, like hobnob. I closed the tab on the browser and my home page, Gmail, took its place on the screen. “So I didn’t know you were coming over.”

“What, you want me to leave?” This was accompanied by a fake pout.

“No, of course not. I love having you here. I just lost track of time. Everything’s happening. Garmin, Survivor, money from the ad links.”

“The Garmin deal came through, too? That’s great. Hey, you need to learn how to navigate out in nature.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like without a GPS unit. You’re going to be expected to be the navigator when you get on Survivor. They won’t give you a Garmin there. You’re the champion geocacher, the guy who finds his way in the forest, yada yada. You need to learn how to navigate by the stars or build a sextant out of bamboo or something.”

“Oh. Right.” She had a point. Maybe not exactly right, but the fact was I was an excellent geocacher but not a good woodsman. I never did have a good sense of direction and couldn’t build a fire or find food in a forest. I was very dependent on gear. More importantly, other than cooking, I had no real world skills to speak of. I was a big fish in the geocaching pond, and I wasn’t sure how quickly my light would fade in the vicious Hollywood Sea. I was likely to be a flash-in-the-pan, but *c’est la vie*. I’d be happy with my flash.

“So tomorrow, right? You’re going for the final?”

“Yeah, tomorrow. The Garmin people and ESPN are filming the whole thing. I’m supposed to meet up with them in the morning at ten.”

“Where? You want me there? It’s Saturday. I’m off.”

“The cache is in the East Bay. We’re meeting at a parking lot where the trail starts. You’re welcome to be there, but they don’t want you in the video. You’ll get edited out. Sorry.”

“No, I get it. You need the groupie demographic. You’re available. Maybe you can get on *The Bachelor* next.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No. I still want to be there, though.”

“Fine. Come along.”

Chapter 9

The next morning I woke up early, too wired to sleep in. When I took my phone off silent mode, I saw I had a voice mail. It was from one of the Sticklrs. After Yellodawg bit the dirt (quite literally), the challenge cache ownership was taken over by a husband-wife team that cached under the name Sticklrs. They dressed alike and had fancy matching custom hiking sticks they'd acquired in Switzerland or some place. They were also sticklers in another sense – purists in the ethos of geocaching.

The message said that they knew I was coming today and had guarded the cache overnight to be sure no one signed in my FTF slot. Everyone who had signed it up to that point, only five or six geocachers, had left those slots open. They would also bring a replacement cache and log just in case.

I knew them mainly through email, although I'd run into them a few times at events. We'd all been interviewed by ESPN last year during the pandemic. That's one thing good about the virus. ESPN was so desperate for sports news that they started looking for new events to hype and fill their content. They heard about geocaching and did a special on this challenge cache. My YouTube vlog went from a couple hundred followers to over twenty thousand after that aired. Now it's over a million.

My morning routine was surprisingly normal. Shower, breakfast, feed the cat. I selected my clothing and gear for the final in accordance with my sponsorship and endorsement deals. I turned on the morning news while I ate breakfast. There was no mention of the missing Jocelyn person, which helped settle my mind down. Nicole hadn't stayed over, so I texted her to make sure she was ready. She was.

I picked her up and we headed across the Bay Bridge. It was Saturday so the traffic wasn't bad. We arrived at the parking lot and I was astounded to see a crowd there. I'd expected the camera crew and the Garmin rep, but there must have been at least fifty fellow geocachers or fans, too. The coordinates for the cache are posted on the page, so anyone who wants to can go there.

We got out of the SUV and a cheer arose. Min, the Garmin rep, shook my hand. This was the first time I'd actually met with a large part

of my fan base face-to-face. I have to say, it felt pretty good. Nicole was impressed, I'm sure. She kind of preened like "that's my guy." Finally, my three years of hard work were paying off.

I chatted a bit with the camera and sound people and checked my own GoPro settings just to make sure everything was hunky dory. Then I set out on the trail to find the final. Nicole dropped back out of camera view like the loyal girlfriend she was. A crowd followed me and they, too, mostly stayed back out of camera range. I could edit them out, or not, as I chose later. The same for ESPN. The crowd shots may have been what they wanted.

There were other caches along the trail, but I had found all of them already, so I didn't stop for any. In fact, I'd actually found the final before, too, but I didn't sign the log sheet at that time. I just wanted to be able to find it without trouble when the day came to officially find and log it. I'm glad I had done that. I would have looked pretty foolish if I'd taken half an hour to locate the thing or gotten a DNF – Did Not Find.

As I approached the spot where the final was hidden, on top of a hill, I stopped and filmed the whole area in a slow panoramic sweep. It was sunny and clear, so the view of the bay and San Francisco was spectacular. Then I made my way to the area of the cache, making sure the camera could see me checking my Garmin frequently. I had learned how to hold it so that the logo was visible. I made a big show of looking in not quite the right places just to stretch out the suspense. The Sticklrs were both there watching me, shaking their heads in dismay when I went the wrong way, grinning when I started getting closer, but they didn't say anything.

I decided not to milk it too much, and made my way over to the cache, pointing to the GPS unit as though it had pinpointed it to the foot. In fact, it read 33 feet away, but I didn't want that on camera. I'd edit that out later. The cache was a medium size plastic box, nothing special. Inside was a nice clean log book and something I hadn't expected: a classy gold-and purple geocoin labeled "First to Find Ultimato Challenge." I picked it up and took it out of the clear plastic sleeve. The ESPN crew zoomed in. I held the coin up for them to see. Then the Sticklers rushed in on both sides and held up my arms in the traditional victory signal. The crowd cheered. Nicole beamed.

I still hadn't signed the log book, so I opened it up and sure enough the FTF slot was open waiting for me. I used my own trusty gel ink pen to write "Hardkorps" in a bold script. The second and third slots were still open, too. Other signatures appeared below those.

One of those was from the German guy I mentioned. It turned out he was present. He came up to me and introduced himself and congratulated me. That was a really magnanimous gesture to fly all the way from Germany to see your rival achieve your goal.

"Var ist joblob?" he asked me. "He shoold be here." He rhymed it with hobnob, too.

"I .. I don't know," I stammered. I was thrown off by the question, in part because of the pronoun. I forgot that the world still thought she was a man.

The ESPN reporter elbowed her way in to interview me. She was the typical female sports reporter: athletic-looking, gorgeous, heavily made up. Her questions were the usual inane stuff: "How does it feel ... etc." I gave the usual pat answers and put on the usual false modesty, thanked everybody and so on for about fifteen minutes. When the camera crew thought they had enough at that location, I headed back down the trail. The crew followed and continued to film at points. Nicole joined me at my side and linked her arm in mine, which actually was a bit annoying because it's hard to hike that way on the steep winding trail.

Arrangements had been made for a reception for me at a sports bar, yet another surprise. I'm not really a big drinker, not before lunch certainly, but it was all part of the promotional stuff so I just let Min lead me for the rest of the morning. There was another crowd at the bar, fellow geocachers who gave me another cheer when I walked in. Someone gave me an opened beer, my favorite brand, which I'd shown on previous videos although I didn't have a sponsorship with them.

I toasted and clinked bottles several times and answered the same questions over and over with my friends and strangers but managed not to drink more than half the beer. Everyone wanted to see the geocoin. When the festivities finally died down, I made my excuses, thanked everyone again, and went out to my car. Nicole and I drove back to my place. Min followed me there. Waiting on my doorstep was Sherri, my agent. This was our first in person meeting, but I'd Zoomed

with her before, so I recognized her. She congratulated me, too, and we went upstairs.

I wasn't really prepared to entertain, although I had straightened up. They didn't care. Sherri and the Garmin rep started right in with business. It was all about scheduling and money and image. Nicole looked miffed at being shoved aside, figuratively speaking. I sat down with Sherri. She presented me with a draft find log to put on the website, but it wasn't my style. I started to negotiate with her what I'd write. This celebrity is what I had wanted and now I had it, but I wasn't sure I was going to like it.

By the time they left I had had it with geocaching and excitement. Nicole was still miffed. I found her in the bedroom watching ESPN. The reporter was interviewing the German guy.

Reporter: "So you plan to claim the Second-to-Find?"

Man: "Ja, well, now maybe STF. I was planning t'ird."

Reporter: "Why? What changed?"

Man: "Someone was ahead of me for second. But he didn't log a find yesterday."

Reporter: "That's joblob you're talking about, right?"

Man: "Ja, right. But that doesn't mean he haven't make a find yesterday. He can still log one today for yesterday. Maybe I get third."

Reporter: "That's the first time in over a year joblob hasn't logged a find on the same day. What do you think that means?"

Man: "I don't know. Maybe disappointment for no FTF."

Reporter: "Maybe we should have a head-to-head competition with Hardkorps, joblob and you. What do you think?"

Man: "No, not me. Maybe for them. I promise my wife to lay off after tis one."

Reporter [laughs]: "Okay, you gotta keep the wife happy, I get it. Did you bring her out on this trip?"

Man [pointing]: "Oh yeah. No way she give me permission otherwise."

[Woman in crowd waves as the camera pans over to her.]

Reporter: "Well that's it from the site of the Ultmato Challenge in the foothills overlooking San Francisco Bay. Back to you in the studio."

Nicole turned off the television. “That is odd about joblob, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Nah, he’ll probably post something today for yesterday’s find. No one gives up a three-year streak just because someone else got the FTF. Come on. Sorry about all the hubbub. Let me take you out to dinner. We have a lot to celebrate.”

Part Two

Chapter 10

Monday morning Ellen Kennedy sat at her desk filling out her time sheet for the preceding two-week pay period. It was supposed to show her time on duty and off for each day, but the times were fictitious. There was no way for an FBI agent to keep accurate track of when she's on duty, but she dutifully filled it in. Agents get work calls and emails and texts at home at all hours and on weekends. Often they have to come in. They are paid a fixed amount for overtime anyway, so the numbers are meaningless except as a tool to convince Congress that they deserve the higher pay scale compared to other federal agents.

Her supervisor, The Senior Resident Agent or SRA of the Palo Alto office, walked out to her desk. She looked up.

"Pick up line one. You got a new case. You'll need help. Pick someone and let me know what else you need." He turned and went back to his office.

She picked up the phone. "Ellen Kennedy."

"Agent Kennedy, this is Morris Bloom. I work for the USGS. I found a dead body. They told me to call the FBI."

"Where are you?"

"At the Butano Earthquake Monitoring Station. We're on federal land so ..."

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Quite sure. At least a few days. Animals have been at her ... it. I think it's a woman."

"Who told you to call the FBI? We don't normally handle dead bodies."

"The park ranger. Access to our station is through the state park. When I found the body I called the ranger. He came up here and is examining it now. He said it looks like a murder and since it's on federal land the FBI had to be notified. He's already called the coroner's office and the sheriff's office. I called the FBI 800 number and when they found out where I was, they put me through to you."

"Where is that exactly? Somewhere up the Santa Cruz Mountains?"

“Yes, near Pescadero except up into the mountains. Butano State Park. If you come in the main entrance, the ranger can guide you to the private road to our station.”

“Is the ranger there? Can I talk to him?”

“He’s outside. Securing the crime scene, he said. The sheriff’s office has been notified, too. They should be here soon.”

“Why does the ranger think it’s a murder? Did he say?”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious the body was stuffed under the fence and her clothes were missing.”

“Okay, stay there. It will take me at least an hour to get there. Go ahead and answer any questions the deputies or rangers ask. I’m afraid you’ll have to repeat it for us when we get there.”

“Okay.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m a little shaken up.”

“Is there anyone with you ... a co-worker?”

“Well, the ranger.”

“Okay, Mr. Bloom, hang in there. I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Ellen disconnected and stood up. She walked across the office to the desk of Matt Nguyen. Her choice of a fellow agent to assist was obvious. She and Matt had been working cases together for years. He was smart, experienced, and resourceful. He was also the one who had introduced her to her husband, Cliff. Matt and his wife Gina had known Cliff when he was a senior FBI agent and they were rookie agents. Cliff retired soon after his wife was killed in a car accident. After he retired Ellen transferred in and Matt and Gina decided to play cupid. It hadn’t worked out so well at first, but love worked its way and now Ellen and Cliff have two children. Cliff is the senior partner in his own investigative agency, Cliff Knowles Investigations.

“Matt, you’re up.”

“Up?”

“A murder case.”

“Murder? Since when ... what, killing of a federal officer?” The FBI rarely worked murder cases because in general it is not a federal crime, but there are exceptions. Murder of a federal officer is one of them.”

“No, CGR – Murder.” Crime on a Government Reservation. “USGS earthquake station. Get your stuff. It’s over in the Santa Cruz Mountains.”

“Right now? I was ...”

“Talk to the supe. He said to take whoever I need. The body is still there. The coroner hasn’t even arrived. We need to move. Chop chop.”

“All right. I’ll grab an evidence kit and camera.”

“Fine, but we aren’t equipped to do a full murder crime scene. The sheriff’s office is already en route.”

“Is that Santa Clara County or San Mateo?”

“San Mateo I think. It may be on the county line and in a state park.”

“Wonderful. That’s all we need, four jurisdictions fighting over the case.”

Matt hooked his pistol onto his belt and went to the closet where a basic evidence kit was kept in a cardboard box. Likewise, Ellen returned to her desk and armed herself and put on her jacket. She told the supervisor she was taking Matt and was heading to the crime scene. When she emerged from his office, Matt was standing ready with the kit, texting on his phone.

“I’m letting Gina know,” he said. “This could go late tonight.”

“I’ll call Cliff from the car. You drive.”

Matt finished his text, picked up the kit, and led the way downstairs to his car, a four-year-old Chevy Malibu. Ellen strapped into the passenger seat and pressed the icon on her phone to speed dial Cliff. He didn’t pick up, so she left him a voicemail that she was working a CGR-Murder and would be late. She knew that would pique his interest. They’d have something to talk about later when he asked her how was work.

Matt was a fast driver and the road over the hill was curvy and treacherous, but they made it to the crime scene in a little over an hour without incident. There was already a full sheriff’s forensic team set up. The lead deputy sheriff was standing talking to the state park ranger, both middle-aged fit-looking white men, as Ellen and Matt walked up, showing their FBI credentials.

“You must be the feds,” the deputy declared.

“Hi. Ellen Kennedy and Matt Nguyen.”

“Hi. Bill Walton, sheriff’s homicide.”

“Jerry West,” said the ranger and reached to shake hands. “And no, we aren’t forming a senior pro league.”

Ellen looked puzzled.

“Same names as retired NBA players,” Matt said to her, seeing her confusion. Neither man was particularly tall nor old enough to be a retired anything.

“Good to know,” Ellen said with a forced chuckle.

“We’re almost done,” Walton said. “We’ve left the body in place for you because we figured you’d want to take your own photos. There’s not really anything for you to do beyond that. We’ve got it covered.”

“Have you identified the victim?”

“Yes, although it’s tentative for now. Jocelyn Boylan, female, age twenty-five.”

“Her car’s been in the day use parking lot since Wednesday,” West added. “We put out a public announcement the second day, but no one responded. The car’s still there if you want to examine it. We ticketed it, but we don’t tow unless the lot’s too crowded or it goes more than a week. The hiker may be lost or disoriented and will usually try to come back to the car so it’s important to keep it there for visual reference.”

“We’ve already covered it,” Walton said, clearly wanting to head off any further delay. “We’re about to tow it. You can send a team to our lot to examine it later if you want. This is a sheriff’s case. The crime took place in the park, not the federal land.”

“It’s a federal crime to dispose of a body on federal land.”

“That doesn’t make you lead. She was murdered out here on the trail.”

“Fine. I’m sure your people have done a good job with the forensics. We aren’t really set up for homicide, but I still have a case I have to investigate. Let us get some pictures and so on and we can get out of your hair. You’ll share all your reports, I assume?”

“Of course.”

“Have you done any interviews besides Jerry here and the guy who called me, Bloom?”

“No, not yet. No one else here. None of the park visitors here now were here then. They usually turn over on the weekend. It’s not a widely used trail by hikers, especially on weekdays.”

“Have you contacted relatives?”

“We haven’t been able to find any yet. Her car registration and license are for an address down in Morro Bay, but we don’t have a telephone number. We’ve asked the sheriff there to make an in person call. They haven’t gotten back to us yet. We haven’t found a phone or purse.”

“So you think it’s a robbery?”

“That or a rape. We’ll have a rape kit done if it’s possible. Her clothing is missing except for her underwear. That’s odd if it’s a rape. Or a robbery, for that matter.”

“Okay, Matt, why don’t you get photos of the car and the body. I’ll go interview Bloom. Jerry, are you doing a written report?”

“Yes. I’ll provide you a copy. The state DOJ will open a case, too, but they usually leave these things to the local authorities unless state assistance is needed. So does the Park Service”

“Got it. So take me to Mr. Bloom.”

“It’s Dr. Bloom, actually,” West said, and he led the way for Ellen. Nguyen went with Walton to take shots of the body. When they got to the USGS building the ranger peeled off to go guide the coroner in.

The building was little more than a shack, but it was large enough to house various electronic instruments and a small desk and folding chair. In the chair was a gangly bespectacled man in his thirties. Next to him, standing, was a beefy deputy. They were chatting casually. The deputy was probably just there to keep him calm and comfortable until the FBI arrived, Ellen figured.

Ellen identified herself and the deputy excused himself. Bloom stood to shake her hand. She told him to sit as he was obviously somewhat shaken up. The story he had to tell wasn’t much. The shack was automated and did not normally have people in it. It was there to monitor activity on a spur of the San Gregorio fault. The electronic instruments transmitted their data in real time to the Menlo Park headquarters, so no one needed to be there. However, one of the instruments had stopped sending data, so Bloom had been dispatched to

take care of it. He was a hardware guy, an engineer. When he arrived he could smell something foul. He dug his way through the thick bushes and saw the body, all torn up by animals. He got back out and called the ranger at the entrance. That number was posted on the wall over the desk. West told him that he would take care of calling the sheriff and that Bloom should call the FBI since it's on federal property. While he waited, he fixed the machine that was malfunctioning. He really had no idea who it was or why that place had been chosen to dump the body. He said that it would have been nearly impossible to carry the body through or over the thick bushes on the USGS side of the fence, but not difficult to push or roll it under the bottom strand of barbed wire from the public trail side. He'd identified the body as a woman only by the fact he could see the brassiere. He'd turned away almost instantly. He hadn't been to the site in six months or so. Ellen gave him her contact information and took his, thanked him, told him he could leave if he wanted, and went back to join Matt.

Matt approached when he saw her coming and began, "I got some photos, but the sheriff's office already retrieved and logged everything of interest which was pretty much nothing. Some soil and bug larva samples were spread out in evidence bags and I shot those, but other than the position of the body, the scene had already been changed. They took some swabs of what looked like blood on the fence barbs, but those are probably just the victim's."

"Murder, you think?"

"Yep. I didn't see any obvious signs of violence like a gunshot wound, but animals had been chewing on parts of her and there was considerable decomposition. No blood pools."

"Clothing?"

"Still wearing bra, T-shirt, and panties, but everything else was missing. Did you get anything from the scientist?"

"No. He smelled something, saw the body, called the ranger. Is the body still there?"

"No, in the medical examiner's van. That's it leaving now. You can look at my photos of the body if you want."

"That's okay. Back at the office. I believe they towed her car already, too. The ranger, West, gave me a pretty good rundown. Here are my notes."

Ellen's phone rang. It was her supervisor. "Kennedy."

"What's the status there?"

"The sheriff and medical examiner are pretty much done, and so are we. It looks like the woman was a day hiker out on the state park trail and something bad happened. Her dead body was found stripped except for underwear and stuffed or rolled under a barbed wire fence onto USGS property. Several days ago, but no TOD established. She entered the park last Wednesday in her own car, which is described as a large SUV. It wasn't moved that night, so it probably happened that day. She could have been killed by someone or possibly died from natural causes or accident and then the body moved, but it must be a federal crime to dump a dead body on federal land either way."

"Okay, so we have jurisdiction. You think she was murdered?"

"We both think so and so does the sheriff homicide detective."

"Sexual assault?"

"At first I thought so when I heard she was stripped, but the bra and underpants were still on. That seems unlikely. I think the outer clothing was moved and discarded or destroyed to conceal evidence."

"The medical report will help us on that score. How about a name? I want to get a case started in the system."

"It's not official yet, but assuming it's the owner of the car, Jocelyn Boylan of Morro Bay." She spelled both names.

"Okay, I'll open the case and assign it to you on that name. You can change it later if it turns out to be someone else. You and Matt need to get back and do 302's and inventory any evidence or photos tonight. Has the family been notified?"

"The sheriff sent his counterpart down south over to her listed address. The ranger said that it looked like she may be living out of her car. Sleeping bag, hotplate, plenty of camping gear visible. They towed it before we had a chance to examine it."

"Christ! That's not exactly my idea of cooperation."

"But they've got the body, the evidence and the car, and the murder, if it was one, wasn't on federal land."

"Yeah, yeah. So don't push. Just ask nicely to see it all."

"Okay. We're about to head back. Anything else you want us to do here?"

“No. Use your own judgment. If you think you’re done, get on back.”

Chapter 11

“A murder case, huh? How’d it go?” Cliff asked when Ellen dragged herself in at 9:45.

“Okay, I guess. Not really that much for us to do. The SO had it covered by the time we got there. No witnesses other than the ranger who could tell us about the car and the guy who found the body.”

“Have you had anything to eat?”

“A candy bar.” She went into the bedroom and locked her gun in the gun safe. Cliff followed her.

“I fed the kids. They’re in bed. It was just fish sticks and fruit salad. I could heat some up for you.”

“No thanks. There’s some leftover fried chicken. I’ll grab some in a minute. What have you been doing?”

“I didn’t want to watch the next Netflix episode without you, so I’ve been fiddling around on the computer. I just watched the final few YouTube posts from Hardkorps. I thought that challenge would never be completed.”

Cliff and Ellen were both geocachers. He cached under the name CliffNotes. She was Ellenwheelz. They were both too busy now with jobs and parenthood to make it a passion, but it brought them together when they were both single. That was the factor that had led Matt and Gina to set them up.

Cliff had been avid about the hobby when he’d first retired from the FBI. He’d been recently widowed and needed something to fill the days, something to take his mind off the tragic death of his first wife. A drunk driver had killed her. The insurance money and lawsuit along with his pension had brought him enough money that he didn’t have to work. Geocaching had filled the void for a while, but eventually he’d learned that he needed to do something meaningful. He’d started his own detective agency, Cliff Knowles Investigations. He’d hired an assistant, Maeva Hanssen, who had proven so valuable that he’d made her a partner. Then late in life Cliff remarried and Ellen blessed him with two children. He split his time between work and home now. Ellen was the more avid geocacher now, but her full-time job as an FBI agent didn’t allow her the time to pursue it much.

“Hardkorps isn’t posting those anymore?”

“Oh, maybe he is. I only watched the last few up to where he signed the log on the challenge final. I think any posts after that would be anticlimactic.”

“For sure. I watched the challenge final on Sunday. It’s great to see him get the recognition from his peers. All eighty-one D/T squares and not a missed day all within three years including a year and a half of Covid lockdown. It’s simply amazing. That German cacher is going for the final today, I think.”

Ellen pulled some cold chicken from the fridge and sat down with a beer and a bag of chips. Cliff joined her at the kitchen table.

“So what’s the next step on the murder case?”

“For us the car. They towed it before we could examine it. It may hold some clues. The identification is tentative at this point, but we think it’s a woman from Morro Bay. And of course we need to hear from relatives and friends, but it looks like a stranger killing. A robbery of opportunity.”

“Butano State Park, you said in your text.”

“Right. I have a list of all the overnight visitors there the day she arrived. Day use people aren’t registered by name or car plate; they just pay a fee and get a sticker. The ones we know about are spread all over the state. A few out of state.”

“That’ll mean leads for a bunch of AO’s.” An AO was an Auxiliary Office in FBI lingo, distinguished from the OO or Office of Origin. Unlike what movies and television depicted, FBI agents didn’t usually travel around the country on a case. They sent leads to other offices to cover in their territory.

“Right. I may go down to Morro Bay myself. I’ll have to see what the sheriff’s office turns up. They sent someone to find next of kin.”

“That’s too long for a day trip.”

“Not if I get up really early and get back late.”

“Don’t do that. If you decide to go, let’s both go. Your sister can watch the kids. We’ll get a nice room near the beach and stay over.”

“We’ll see. I can certainly use your help on this case. This is my first murder case. You’ve handled several.”

“Each one is different, but I’ll help you however I can. Is there something I can do now?”

Ellen wiped her hands on a paper napkin and swallowed the last of her beer. "You can massage my neck."

Cliff massaged her neck. A husband knows what's optional and what's not.

-o0o-

The next morning Ellen and Matt met Walton at the Sheriff's Office in Redwood City, the county seat. He ushered them into the detective bay and they clustered around his desk, which was a surprisingly attractive wooden job, unlike the steel gray abominations in the FBI office. Walton had a framed photo of a beautiful woman and two gorgeous kids prominently placed on the desk, his family, presumably. Either that or professional models which they certainly qualified for based on looks.

"We couldn't find a relative," he began. "The deputies in Morro Bay said that's not a good address. The man living there said he rented it through an agency and never met her, Boylan, but once in a while some mail for her ends up in the mailbox by mistake. He assumed she was a previous tenant. She's actually listed as the owner in county records."

"Have you contacted the rental agency?" Matt asked.

"I called them when I first got in, but it went right to voice mail. I'm waiting for a call back."

"The ranger said it looked like she lived out of her car," Ellen said.

"Yep. Could be. Do you guys want to see the car?"

"We do. Is it here?"

"No, it's at our impound lot. I can take you over."

"Before we do that, can we get copies of all your paperwork?"

"It's being copied now. By the time we get back, it should all be ready for you. We can talk on the way."

The three of them went downstairs and got into Walton's car, an unmarked Dodge Charger. They drove out of the police garage. "What's your next step?" Ellen asked.

"We have to get a positive identification. I'm hoping something in the car might help us with that. She had a computer. I sent two

uniforms out to the park to walk the path from the day parking area to where the assault took place. Maybe whoever removed her clothing discarded or dropped something. We were in our vehicles yesterday and didn't really examine the trail area closely."

"There's no record of her in CLETS," Ellen said, referring to the computerized system California law enforcement uses.

"No. No arrests, no fingerprints, DNA, nothing we can use."

"No phone, no wallet?"

"No. Not in the car either."

"What kind of computer did she have?"

"You'll see it. The evidence tech is there now inventorying everything. It's a laptop. An Apple, I think."

Matt and Ellen cast uneasy glances at each other. If her hard drive was encrypted, or password protected, it was unlikely the FBI would ever get access to the data on it. Apple was notorious for being unhelpful to law enforcement.

They arrived at the impound lot and drove in. Walton led them to a garage area where a gloved woman was pulling items from a 2003 Ford Expedition that was once white. The vehicle looked like it had lived a full life. The paint was chipped and pitted and half a dozen small dents or scrapes could be seen as they approached. Laid out on the floor was a sleeping bag and foam mat. In a corner was a folded tent. A duffel bag lay empty next to an array of clothing – socks, shirts, underwear, jeans, shorts, Nike shoes. The woman was pulling out bottles of water and making notes on a clipboard.

Ellen recognized the sleeping bag as an expensive down model. She moved around to the other side of the vehicle. Inside she could see a camping stove and fuel canisters. Next to those was a camera of some kind and a tripod. Perhaps the victim was a nature photographer. She pointed those items out to Matt, who nodded.

"Where's the computer?" Walton asked the evidence tech.

The woman pointed to a work bench. "It's been dusted. You can touch it now," she replied. "I haven't tried to turn it on. I'm not allowed."

"Well, I am," Walton answered. "Let's see what we have." He pressed the power on button and the machine began to come to life.

“Macbook Pro,” Nguyen whispered to Ellen as they watched over Walton’s shoulder.

The screen lit up and a user icon labeled “Jo” appeared on the screen. He clicked on it and a password box appeared. It was blank. He tried hitting return, but that resulted in an error message to re-enter the password.

Walton turned to Ellen, whom he had intuited was driving the bus. “Do you have any easy way to get in?”

“No. We could remove the hard drive And try to read what’s on it, but it’s probably encrypted. Apple doesn’t help law enforcement.”

“Don’t I know it. I can have our own computer forensic team try. I was hoping it wouldn’t be password protected.” He powered off the computer.

“How about the camera? There’s one in the vehicle. It may have pictures that will help. If she travels with someone else, for instance...”

“Good idea.”

They moved back to the car. The evidence tech was dusting the camera for prints. They waited for her to finish, then she tagged and logged it. Once again, she did not turn it on but instead handed it to Walton. He powered it up and waited. “That’s a video camera,” Ellen pointed out. She didn’t recognize the brand, but she could tell from the buttons.

“All the better.”

When it was up, the only image on the screen was the car and garage as he moved the camera around, just like looking at a smart phone camera screen. There were, in addition, various icons. The pale grey hollow circle indicated that it was not filming. The battery level icon showed it had 44% power left. There was another icon, a label really, that said MEM 100%.

“Crap!” Ellen said. “It has all its memory left. There must not be any photos or videos saved on it. Push the replay button, or menu.”

Walton did as she suggested and the camera responded with a message that there were “0 recordings.”

“So much for that,” Matt snorted.

The three of them continued to examine the contents of the SUV as the evidence tech allowed them to. The car registration paper in the glove box was current and showed the same Morro Bay address that had

already been checked. There was a proof of insurance form as required by law, but it had expired three months earlier. There was no way to know whether it had been renewed. A lot of people fail to put the new form in the car even though they paid up the insurance. The investigators could contact the insurance company and try to find someone who dealt with her face-to-face, but they all knew the chances were slim that would pan out. She'd probably signed up online.

"You should check the garbage bag," the evidence tech said to Walton. She pointed to a plastic bag on a plastic sheet on the floor. Around it were various items like fast food wrappers. "There's food in the cooler, too. What do you want me to do with it?"

The cooler had water in the bottom of it, no doubt melted ice. The food was mostly soda cans and fruit. The apples looked okay, but the banana was going black. "If you can lift any good prints from the apples, do it, but then throw out the fruit. Same with the cans. You can dump the water."

Ellen looked at the items from the trash bag. It had all been inventoried, tagged, and bagged. One item was a receipt from a McDonald's in Santa Cruz dated the day the car had entered the park, the probable day she died.

"One breakfast burrito and a cup of coffee," she read from the receipt. "It looks like she was traveling alone."

"And coming up from the south. She probably stayed overnight in that area in her car and then headed on up when the park opened up."

"Has there been any report of a missing person down in Morro Bay?" Matt asked.

Walton shook his head. "The sheriff there said no, other than a teen girl who showed up the next morning. She was out past curfew and stayed with her boyfriend."

Ellen turned to look at the windshield of the victim's vehicle again. "That's funny, don't you think?"

"What?" both men said in unison.

"She has a lot of good quality camping gear and was in a state park. There should be something else."

"And that is ..." Matt said.

"A state park pass. If she visits state parks with any frequency, it's much cheaper to buy the annual pass, or maybe a season pass. And I

don't see a county or U.S. park pass sticker either. West said she paid the day pass fee, right?"

"Right. I suppose that's true, but I don't know that it helps us," Walton replied. "Maybe she didn't frequent the state parks or any parks. Her car looks like she lived in it. Maybe she was just living on the streets, traveling around."

"Okay, point taken, but why did she choose to alter the pattern this time? Was it important for her to visit this park? And why now? I'm trying to get a picture of her. I can't tell if she's rich, poor, working, unemployed, on a nature pilgrimage or what."

Matt rubbed his chin before replying. "She owned a house and was presumably getting rent, and her equipment is good quality. It doesn't look like she was struggling financially."

"But why live on the streets if she owned a house unless the rent was her only source of income? And she eats at McDonald's. Not exactly high on the hog. Her car's a junker. If she'd had a job, you'd think an employer or coworker would have reported her missing by now."

Walton's cell phone rang. He recognized the area code and answered.

"Hello, this is Detective Walton."

It became clear from his end of the conversation that it was the rental agent from Morro Bay returning his call. They talked for several minutes. When it was over Walton summarized the conversation.

"So this guy never met her, but he had the file. Another employee who's now gone signed her up. Boylan inherited the house when her mother died and she wanted to rent it out. That was three years ago. Boylan had been living there with her mother, it seems. The title at that time was in the name of Elizabeth Henderson, the mother. They had to wait for Boylan to get the title changed before they could take the account."

Ellen's ears perked up. "So Boylan isn't her maiden name. She's been married. Maybe we can find the husband."

Walton shook his head again. "Or maybe the mother remarried and changed her name. The vic wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Anyway, the guy said the rental money is direct deposited in a Bank of America account every month. But here's the most helpful thing. He

gave me a telephone number for her and a new mailing address. It's a P.O. Box in Watsonville. Also an email address. He's putting it all in an email. I'll forward it to you when it comes in."

Matt said, "Boylan's only twenty-five. How old was her mother when she died? Must have been pretty young. And where was the father? I'm wondering if there was some foul play going on."

"I didn't get into that with the rental agent. I've got my own suspicious death to work here. I'll leave San Luis Obispo County to handle its own. Oh, and one other thing: he said that on her form she listed her employer as 'self.'"

"So no employer to check with. We still need a positive identification." Ellen mulled this over for a few seconds. "It sounds like Watsonville is her home base for now. I can go down there tomorrow and check with the post office and local stores for video. Maybe someone remembers her."

Walton looked down at his phone. A text had come in. "It's the phone number," he said. "He told me he'd text that first." Walton showed the number to Matt and Ellen, both of whom took a picture of the phone. Walton called the number but it went right to voice mail. "Probably in the ocean by now," he said. "Whoever took the clothes would be a fool to keep the phone."

The three investigators continued to examine the items from the car and discussed the case for another hour, but then Walton had to leave. He was due at a performance review. Ellen and Matt went back to the FBI office, stopping for lunch on the way.

Chapter 12

Back at the FBI office Ellen called Cliff at work. He'd offered to help and she thought they needed some. As she'd told him, he was more experienced as a homicide investigator than she was. He took the call and listened patiently as Ellen went over the entire morning's events. When she'd finished, he told her he'd do some brainstorming and give her his thoughts at dinner.

Cliff did think about it. Business was slow and he needed something to work on. That morning he and Maeva had spent half an hour in a contest throwing wadded papers at a wastebasket at the other end of the office. Maeva had trounced him thoroughly. They were both waiting for Google to let them know if their bid for background investigation work would be accepted.

Ellen had told him that Boylan had inherited the house from her mother. To a lawyer, which Cliff was, the term has a specific meaning, one that may be different from common usage by non-lawyers. Property can only be inherited by virtue of a will or by intestate succession, that is, by following the rules in the probate code when there is no will, trust, or other dispositive document. In either case, there should be a record in the probate court. If the house was transferred during the mother's lifetime, or if it was held in trust, which was common, it would pass by virtue of the deed or trust document. He called the office of the court clerk in San Luis Obispo, the county where Morro Bay was located. He identified himself as an attorney from out of county and asked for the procedure to obtain a copy of a will on a probate case. He'd found that court personnel were always more helpful when he identified himself as an attorney.

"Is the case open?" The clerk asked. "We can fax it if you're willing to pay the per page fee."

"I don't know for sure, but it's probably closed."

"There's a separate fee to search for a closed case and then a per page fee for either faxing or mailing a copy. What's the name of the deceased?"

"Elizabeth Henderson, a Morro Bay resident. Died about three years ago, I think."

“Give me a minute to check our index.” There was silence on the line for a long minute. “Okay, I found it. It was filed and probated. Looks routine. You want a copy of just the will? The court order closing it is available, too. Since it’s closed, that’ll take about a week.”

“That’s okay. Is there an attorney’s name who filed the petition?”

“Attorney of record ... let’s see ... Clark. Oh, she’s good. She’s a regular here.”

“What’s her first name?”

“Marilu. L U, no O”

“Super, thanks.”

“So you want the will or not?”

“I haven’t decided. I’ll send a written request with a check if I do. I see your fee schedule on the website.”

“Okay. Bye.” She hung up without waiting for Cliff to respond.

Cliff looked up the office number for Marilu Clark. The secretary who answered asked what it was about. Cliff again identified himself as an attorney and said it was about one of her clients and it was very important. The secretary put him on hold for a few minutes and then came back and said he’d have to be more specific. She also asked who the client was.

“Tell her that Jocelyn Boylan is deceased and that there may be a probate case in it for her.”

If the secretary was offended by the implication, she didn’t say anything. Cliff was put on hold for another minute. The next voice on the line was that of Marilu Clark.

“Hello, Mr. Knowles? This is Marilu Clark. You’re representing the estate of Jocelyn Boylan?”

“No, I’m not. Ms. Boylan was found dead in a probable homicide. At least the police are confident the body is Ms. Boylan. Her car was abandoned nearby and she seems to be missing. I’m assisting the authorities in trying to find a relative to identify the body.”

“I see. So what is your connection to the matter exactly?”

“I’m a private investigator and attorney. It’s actually a federal homicide matter. My wife is an FBI agent here in the Bay Area. She asked for my help in locating legal records because I’m an attorney. I’m just trying to expedite the matter and it occurred to me you might know

of a relative. And I wasn't kidding about the probate matter. She owns a house in Morro Bay, I understand."

There was an awkward pause before Clark replied, "I'm always happy to assist the police consistent with my attorney-client responsibilities. You don't need to bribe me with business opportunities."

"My apologies. I was having trouble getting past your secretary."

"Mr. Knowles, I would prefer it if the police or, in this case the FBI, contacted me directly. I really can't verify ..."

"Let's cut this short. All I'm asking for is the name of someone who might be able to identify the body. Perhaps you'd like to do that, but I assume you wouldn't, so if you know of a relative or someone else who could do that, why don't you just let me know. The will is a public document. I can get it, but it will take a week and may not be of any help. Does it name anyone besides Jocelyn?"

Another awkward pause. "Very well. I remember Jo. She was a sweet girl. Took care of her mother to the end. I think there was a sister named in the will. Give me a minute. Oh, here's the file now. Thanks, Wendy." Cliff could hear the rustle of pages. "Yes, here it is. Monica Gallo of San Fernando, California."

"Do you have an address or telephone number?"

"Mr. Knowles, I'm only providing what is in the will since you're right, it's a public document. There is no address or telephone number in the will. I'm sorry I can't do more."

"You've been very helpful. I'm sure the FBI can find Jocelyn's sister from that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't clear. Monica is Elizabeth's sister, not Jo's. ... Uh, can you tell me how she died? She was so young. It's a shame. And her mother was only sixty-one."

"The body was found partially unclothed on federal land adjacent to a state park. Her car was in the park's day use lot, so she was probably hiking or camping. That's about all I know." Cliff knew considerably more, but then he knew that Clark was withholding information from him, too. Despite her protestations, she no doubt had the telephone number of Monica Gallo in her file and Cliff suspected

she would call her immediately after this call was over in the hopes of getting the probate case since Gallo was probably the next of kin.

Cliff hung up and immediately called Ellen at her office number. When it went to voice mail, he texted her on her personal phone that Jocelyn had an aunt in San Fernando named Monica Gallo. Ellen had let the call go to voice mail because she was in her supervisor's office. But she had her cell phone with her. When she saw the text notification she read the text, at first irritating her supervisor, but when she told him she had just identified a family member to identify the body, he gave her a curt "Good work. Get on it," and waved her out of his office. The first thing she did was call Cliff. He gave her the full version of his conversation with Clark.

Ellen walked over to Matt's desk and told him about Monica Gallo. He started searching the name online and she did the same at her own desk. She was the first to come up with a telephone number, but Matt found some useful social media stuff which he brought over to her. Gallo was married to a Hollywood lighting technician. She had a Facebook page with a picture of her, her husband, and two kids who appeared to be high school age, although the picture could have been old.

"You going to call her or let Walton do it?" Matt asked.

"I might as well make the call. Maybe he'll treat us as real investigators if we scoop him on this. Can you get on the line, too, and take notes? It may get emotional."

"Sure." Matt returned to his desk.

Ellen dialed the number for Monica Gallo. It rang four times and went to an answering machine. Ellen began leaving a message, "Mrs. Gallo, this is Special Agent Ellen Kennedy of the FBI. I'm calling about your niece Jocelyn Boylan. Can you please ..."

"Hello. This is Monica Gallo. Is this really the FBI?"

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Ellen Kennedy. I'm in the Palo Alto office."

"I'm sorry I didn't pick up at first. There are so many robocalls, you know. I wait until ..."

"I understand. No problem."

"You're calling about Jo? Is she in trouble?"

“Have you been contacted by anyone else about her in the last few days?”

“No, why?”

“Have you been in touch with her recently?”

“We’re not very close. I helped her out when Liz died, but we’ve only spoken two or three times since then. What’s this about?”

“I’m sorry to tell you that she’s dead. At least a body has been found that we believe is Jo.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“There was no identification on the body, but her car was found abandoned nearby. One of the reasons I was calling was to find out if you could identify the body.”

“You mean ... how? From a picture?”

“The coroner in San Mateo County has the body. I imagine they’ll want you to come in person, but I’ll leave the procedure to them. I’m just trying to locate a relative or close friend who can do it. Is there someone else who’s closer?”

“No. I’m the only one. The closest relative, I mean. I don’t know about her friends. How did it happen?”

“We’re treating it as a possible homicide for now. The body was found near a state park hiking trail. We’re waiting for the autopsy results. Do you know where she was living or working? Did she have a roommate or boyfriend, perhaps?”

“She lost her job during the Covid crisis. She was working at a movie theater and it went under. She was just working at the snack bar, but she was learning to be a projectionist, but now the theater is defunct. I don’t know if she ever got another job. She owns a house in Morro Bay, her mother’s house from before. I can give you the address. Hold on.”

“We have that address, but it’s rented out now. We were hoping you knew where else she might be. She has a post office box in Watsonville.”

“I don’t know anything about that. I thought she was still in Morro Bay.”

“Her name is different from her mother’s. Is she married?”

“No, single. She had a husband for a while, some loser of a boy, but she never took his name. The marriage didn’t last long. Poor girl.

She was so homely, you know. I think she leapt at the first guy who gave her the time of day. Boylan is her maiden name. It was Liz who remarried then divorced. So what should I do? Am I supposed to come up there?"

"I'll have the sheriff or coroner's office call you and you can work out the details. I don't know if she had a will. Most young people don't. If you're next of kin you'll probably inherit the house. Were you administrator of Liz's estate?"

"Yes, although there was a lawyer. She did all the work. I just signed some papers."

"The lawyer hasn't contacted you then? I think she's been notified."

"No."

"What about Jo's father? Is he alive?"

"A short, failed marriage right out of high school. He disappeared when Jo was a toddler. Ended up in prison. I don't know where he is now. He could be dead. I hope so anyway."

"What's his name?"

"Bruce. Bruce Boylan. Everybody called him Brucie Boy back then. That probably stopped when he went to prison."

"What did he go to prison for?"

"Drug possession, I believe. Big quantity. He was in Folsom, I heard."

"Very well. You've been very helpful. Thank you for your help. Expect a call from either the coroner or the sheriff soon."

"All right. Thanks for letting me know. I guess. This is so sad."

They exchanged goodbyes. Ellen hung up and started to dial Walton. Before completing the call, she stopped and decided to check something. She ran the name Bruce Boylan through the California prison locator database. He wasn't currently incarcerated. She tried the Department of Motor Vehicles and found he was alive and had a driver's license. She pulled up a copy on her computer. From the photo it was obvious they were father and daughter. She had his unfortunate looks: huge nose, weak chin, heavy unibrow. He lived in Watsonville, or at least that's what the records said. This posed a problem. If Gallo was right, Boylan was actually the next of kin, not her, but also hadn't seen his daughter since she was two. He might not recognize her and

couldn't make an identification. On the other hand, Jo had a P.O. box in the same city as her father. Maybe they had reconciled or reconnected in some way. She talked it over with Matt who said they'd have to let Walton know of both relatives. She agreed and placed the call, putting it on speaker. Matt stood by.

"Walton."

"Bill, it's Ellen and Matt. I have the name and number of Boylan's aunt. She's agreed to identify the body."

"That was fast work. How did you locate her?"

"My husband got the name from the estate attorney."

"Your husband? What ..."

"He's a private investigator. A good one. That's not important. The thing you need to know is that her father is also still living. He has a criminal record and lives in Watsonville."

"Now that is interesting. What's his name?"

She gave him the name and date of birth as well as the address and driver's license number. He copied it all down. She summarized the conversation with Gallo. Walton gave a low whistle when she'd finished.

"So who gets the house?"

The question took Ellen by surprise. "The house in Morro Bay? I don't know. Gallo said she was the closest living relative, which may be true in terms of ... what would you call it, intimacy? She knew her niece and cared about her, which allegedly her father didn't, but in terms of blood relationship, it would be the father. Maybe she had a will."

"I tell you what. Why don't you contact the estate attorney and find out. I'll check out the father. If he gets the house, and he knew it, that would be motive."

"Yes, well, we don't even know if he actually knew her."

"We don't know that he didn't. What was his offense – for prison?"

"I haven't run his rap sheet. The aunt said it was drugs. She said he was in Folsom."

"That's hard time. He could be a tough customer. Like I said, I'll check him out."

“Okay. That’s worth pursuing. I’ll call the attorney and see what I can find out. Are you going to call Gallo? At least we know that she knows Jo. I think she’s the one to make the ID.”

“Who’s Joe?”

“Jocelyn. She went by Jo.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, I think you’re right on that. The aunt is local?”

“L.A. area. That’s a day trip by air for her.”

“Okay, I’ll call her. Good work on that.”

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch”

Ellen hung up and looked at Matt to get his take on the conversation. He gave a thumbs up and said he’d go check out Bruce Boylan’s criminal record. Just because Walton was doing it didn’t mean they shouldn’t. They still had a federal case. He returned to his desk and his computer.

Chapter 13

Cliff heard the garage door open and went in the back yard to light the barbecue. Two thick tri-tip steaks sat marinating in a plastic bag on the kitchen counter. He told the kids it was time to go inside. They weren't allowed in the back yard unattended while the barbecue was going. He went in the house.

"Hi. I started the barbecue."

"I'm in the closet," Ellen called back.

"How'd your day go?"

She emerged dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. "Good. We're making progress on the murder case. I talked to the lawyer that you told me about."

"Yeah? She help you out?"

"I think so. We may have a suspect in the murder case. It turns out the victim's father is estranged, but he's next-of-kin for inheritance, so he has motive. And we think he lives in the same area where the victim did. Plus, he has a criminal record. We still need to verify the addresses and get a positive ID on the victim, but the aunt has agreed to fly up to identify her tomorrow."

"That's fast work. You'll be snapping the cuffs on him before the funeral."

"Hardly. This is the FBI, remember? How about you? What've you been doing?"

"Watching ESPN. The German guy just got STF on the Ultimato."

"Good for him. I'll bet that's the last national TV coverage of any geocaching event. Now that the major sports are back, the network will drop interest. The pandemic gave geocaching its one chance in the limelight and the Ultimato was our first and last Superbowl. And the other guy, joblob? He never made the find?"

"No. I guess he gave up when he didn't get the FTF. His vlog has stopped. The last video was in Oregon two days before Hardkorps qualified."

"Anyway, thanks for the tip on the victim's aunt. Now put those steaks on. Your coals are ready and I'm famished."

-o0o-

The next day Ellen and Matt made a plan to split up the work. Matt was going to work with Walton and the sheriff's office on Boylan's background and whereabouts. Ellen would talk to as many of the park users as she could find to see if any of them saw or remembered anything. The ranger, Jerry West, had compiled a list for her of all the names and license plates for the overnight campers. Rangers regularly drove through the overnight areas and verified that all the vehicles there were paid up and in the right sites. They did not keep names or plate numbers for the day use cars. They just issued passes to be placed on the dash. Those were color-coded, but any car there after closing of the day use area was ticketed which resulted in a record of a license plate. Records showed that a dozen or so day use passes had been issued, but the only one ticketed was Jocelyn Boylan's, so no other plates for day use hikers were recorded.

None of the overnight campers were still in the park. Ellen had no way to find the telephone numbers of all the campers. Most had cell phones and no land lines and cell phones aren't publicly listed. Most people don't answer numbers they don't recognize anyway. This was no television drama where the FBI can get any electronic record they want in an instant. In real life she had one option and that was to run the plates through DMV and get that addresses of the owners and then go pay personal visits. In person interviews were better anyway. It was too easy for someone to say they didn't see anything and hang up, but it wasn't so easy to slam the door in an agent's face.

Some of the campers were local residents. People from the Bay Area, especially the San Jose area or the East Bay where it gets hot during much of the year, like to drive over to the ocean side of the Santa Cruz Mountains where it's cool and foggy. There are state and local parks along the beaches and some in the mountains like Butano. Ellen was able to identify four vehicles that fell in that category. Two were in San Jose, one in Cupertino, and one in Walnut Creek. Walnut Creek was in the East Bay, so Ellen cut a lead for an agent in the Concord Resident Agency – an FBI branch office – to locate and interview those car owners. There were seven other vehicles that were registered to places

in other FBI Divisions, including three out of state. She sent leads for interviews to all those divisions.

The other three Bay Area ones were within easy driving distance so she set out in her trusty Bu-steed, FBI lingo for a Bureau car, to cover those leads herself. It was the old-fashioned shoe leather work that was the bread and butter of investigators and she loved it. The closest one to the Palo Alto office was in Cupertino, the city known for being Apple's World Headquarters. From the Palo Alto office she drove down US 101 and took Highway 85 to the De Anza exit, then took a right on Rainbow Drive. This took her into a residential area. She turned left onto Poppy drive. The palm trees lining the street overtopped the oaks and Chinese elms. When she pulled up to the address she was looking for, the license plate on the recreational vehicle in the driveway told her she was in the right place. She parked and walked to the front door. Several rounds of knocking and doorbell ringing brought no response. The doorbell was a Ring product with a camera and microphone, so she rang it again, holding her FBI credentials up to the camera and called out "FBI" in the hopes that the residents were there but reluctant to answer to a stranger. If they were monitoring the camera and audio in live time, maybe that would spur them to action. She waited, but nothing happened.

The RV owner's names were Chen Li and Suzanne Ng. She pulled a business card from her purse and wrote across the front "Mr. Li, please call me." She always wrote across her name, not on the back, so that someone who picked up the card couldn't use it to pass themselves off as her. That had happened to her once and as the saying goes, once burned twice shy. She also personalized it with the name of the person she was trying to reach for the same reason. She didn't consider herself sexist but she chose Li instead of Ng figuring that if they were traditional Chinese, the man would be more likely to take charge of dealing with authority. She wedged the card tightly in the crack of the front door at eye level. She realized that it was possible for the residents to enter through the garage, but decided against sticking another card there. She reasoned that both man and wife, assuming they were married, worked and probably took separate cars. Although the garage was a double one, the RV partially blocked one side, so that only one car could enter it. That meant at least one of the cars would have to

park in the driveway or at the curb and the driver would probably come through the front door and see the card.

She got back in her car and headed to San Jose. She found the next vehicle owner there at home. His name was Peterson and he was very cordial. He offered her a cold drink since it was a hot day. She declined, but he was very insistent, so she relented and asked for a diet soda. When it arrived in a glass with ice cubes and a coaster he explained that his wife was at work, but since the pandemic his employer, the city of San Jose, allowed him to work from home. He processed applications for various types of benefits and it was mostly data entry, so he could do that on his home computer. His two boys were in school so he had no distractions. Ellen sipped and listened politely until he finally got curious enough to ask why she was there.

“Mr. Peterson, I understand you were overnight camping at Butano State Park last week. A woman died there under suspicious circumstances and we’re contacting everyone who was there.”

“Yes, I heard about that. It was just on the news. I watch the noon news while I eat my lunch. They showed her picture.”

This surprised Ellen. She hadn’t heard of it being on the news yet. She pulled out a copy of the DMV photo of Jocelyn Boylan. “Is this the woman on the news?”

“Yes, yes. That’s her. People were asked to call the sheriff’s office, not the FBI.”

“Yes, we’re working with the sheriff’s office.” She was silently cursing Walton as she said this smiling. She needed to know what was public information when conducting an interview. “So did you happen to see her while you were there?”

“No. I don’t remember her at all. They said on TV that she was believed to have died on Thursday. We were there Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. On Thursday we arrived around noon and went right to the campsite. We picnicked first, then spent that afternoon setting up the tent and the campsite. It was nice and cool. It just felt good to get out of the heat. We didn’t start hiking until the next day. We did the Goat Hill Loop, I think it was.”

“Did you go into the day use parking area at all?”

“No. Only our own campsite and the public rest room. There was another family in the campsite next to ours, an Indian family. They

were very nice. Those were the only other people we saw besides maybe some other hikers, but I don't remember any."

Ellen pulled out a park trail map. Together they worked out that he and his family spent the entire time south of the main park road while Boylan appeared to have spend her time to the north on the Fire Road. His campsite was a long distance from the day use parking lot, but Ellen showed him a picture of her car, as well. Again, he knew nothing. She asked if his wife might have met anyone, perhaps at the women's rest room. He felt sure she had not, but said he'd text her to find out. This he proceeded to do as she waited. Instead of a reply text, his wife called him. He explained what was going on. She said she had used the rest room but never met anyone in or around there.

Ellen asked to be put on the phone with her. Her own attempts at eliciting more information produced nothing more fruitful and she finally gave up. The fact was this family just hadn't seen or met with Jo and could not help. That was likely going to be the result with all the others, but you had to do the basic footwork. She thanked them both and returned to the car.

She needed to stop for lunch and she especially needed to talk to Walton. She found a shady spot to park the car and pulled out her phone. She was about to call him when she saw that Matt Nguyen had texted her to call him. She did.

"Ellen, where are you?"

"I'm in San Jose. I just left Peterson's. He says the sheriff's office put it on the news. What the hell?"

"Yeah, that's why I texted you. I didn't want to interrupt your interview, but I felt you needed to know right away. It's a positive ID. The aunt flew up this morning and made the identification about an hour ago. I was there. Walton felt we should get the name and picture out right away while memories are relatively fresh. We need witnesses."

"Did you get any better pictures? That driver's license photo is hideous."

"Yes, as a matter of fact. She emailed one to both of us – Walton and me, I mean. I'll forward them to you. They aren't very recent, so they may not be an improvement."

“Okay. I have one more spot to hit over in East San Jose and I haven’t had lunch yet. Would you tell Walton to coordinate with us before making announcements from now on.”

“Okay, well, I can ask, but you know we can’t stop him. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Ellen found a café and took her time eating lunch, followed by a cup of coffee. Then she headed to East San Jose. The next address was in an area of town that was mostly Hispanic, primarily people of Mexican ancestry. Ellen didn’t speak Spanish, but she didn’t expect it to be a problem. Nearly everyone spoke English, too. There would always be someone to translate if necessary.

She pulled up to the house, got out, and walked to the front door. A young black-haired Latina answered the door. Ellen identified herself as FBI. A look of terror appeared on the woman’s face. She tried to close the door, but Ellen stopped her with a strong hand on the door. “I’m not with ICE. I just want to talk. You’re not in trouble. Please, I just have a few questions.” It was scenes like this that made it obvious why telephone interviews don’t work.

A boy of about ten came to the door behind the woman. “She’s afraid of the police,” he explained in perfect English. “Are you really FBI?” She got that a lot. All agents did.

She showed the boy her FBI credentials and badge. “Why aren’t you in school?” The school year was almost over, but it wasn’t summer break yet.

“I’m home sick. Estella is my cousin. She’s babysitting me.”

“You don’t look sick.”

“Yeah. ‘I have a stomachache. Can I stay home?’ It works every time.”

Estella stood there silent the entire time listening to the conversation but with her eyes fixed on Ellen. Ellen decided to stick with the boy. He was cooperating and sounded intelligent.

“So did you and your family go camping last week ... over in Butano State Park?”

“Yeah. It was kinda boring, but it was nice and cool. We don’t have air conditioning here.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Working.”

“Estella, did you go with them?”

“No.” The word came from Estella.

So she talks. And understands English, too. “Look, we’re investigating the murder of a woman in that park last week. Did you hear about that?”

Estella and the boy looked at each other and then back at Ellen. Both shook their heads no.

“Who killed her?” the boy asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out. Can you help us? Did you see this woman?” She displayed the best photo she had of Jocelyn Boylan.

The boy shook his head, said something in Spanish to Estella, then disappeared back into the house. She continued to hold the door open but said nothing. A few seconds later an older Mexican man appeared with the boy.

“This is my grandpa. He was with us. He doesn’t speak English.”

“Can you translate for me? Ask him if he recognizes this woman.”

The boy explained to the man. The grandpa shook his head, then started talking in Spanish. When he was done talking, the boy translated. “He says the family went to stay over there because it’s too hot here. It gets over 95 here at night sometimes. We can’t sleep. The landlord is too cheap to put in air conditioning.”

“What about the girl or the car?” Ellen showed a picture of both to the older man.

More Spanish. “He says he doesn’t recognize them.”

“Do you know where the day use parking is at that park?”

“Yeah. We’ve been there before. I’ve seen it. It’s on the other side.”

“Did you go there last week? Did you notice any other vehicles there?”

“We weren’t near there where we camped. No one went over there this time. We just stayed at the camp at night. During the day we drove down to the beach. That’s where we wanted to be. We would have camped at Seacliff or one of the other beach places, but they’re all booked up for the overnight spots. Butano is the closest place.”

“Every day you were down at the beach all day?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, can you do this for me. Give this card to your parents and ask them to call me if they saw anything or remember anything that could help us.” Ellen made the same marking on the card as before and handed it to the boy.

“Yeah, okay.”

Ellen thanked them all and walked back to the car as the door closed behind her. She didn’t expect a call and didn’t think it would be of any help. She believed the boy. He had no reason to lie and his responses were quick and seemed unrehearsed. The family was at the beach during the critical time frame.

She drove back to the office where she and Matt briefed each other and their supervisor on the day’s developments. The only one of significance was the positive identification of the body.

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Cliff was shutting down his computer and getting ready to go home when his secretary told him he had a call on line one. He picked it up.

“Hello, Mr. Knowles, this is Marilu Clark. We spoke yesterday.”

“Yes. How can I help you?”

“I just wanted to thank you for the referral. Mrs. Gallo flew up and identified the body today. When she got back, she called and retained me as counsel for the estate.”

“That’s good. I hope it goes well.”

“I wanted to let you know I did *not* call her and solicit the case. She called me. You seemed to think I was some sort of ...”

“No, no. There’s no need. I never meant to insult you. My apologies if I came across wrong. I’m glad you got the case. The clerk at the court said you were very good. I’m sure you are.”

“She said that? That’s nice to know. Thanks for telling me.”

“There’s one other thing you should know. Bruce Boylan is still alive. He’d be her next of kin.”

“What? That’s crazy! My client is the rightful heir. Elizabeth made her the contingent beneficiary of the house and she left her some valuable furniture pieces. She cared for Liz and helped Jo with the estate. Bruce Boylan was nowhere around.”

“Did Jo have a will? Or maybe the house was in a trust?”

The long silence told Cliff that Clark didn’t know. “My client is the rightful heir. I’ll see to it that she gets what’s due her.”

“I’m sure you’ll do a great job for your client. I’m sorry, but I have to run.”

“All right. Thanks again for the referral.”

“You’re welcome. Good bye.”

“Good bye.”

Chapter 14

"Tommy, help me set the table," Ellen said as she popped the pizza in the oven to keep it hot. She didn't trust him with the china, but he liked to put out the silverware and napkins.

"Something smells good," Cliff said as he walked in the door.

In another twenty minutes they were all seated at the table eating pizza, salad, and for the adults, cold beer. Ellen told Cliff she'd been out shagging leads all day and he in turn told her about some work-related headaches he had. He mentioned the conversation with Marilu Clark at the end.

"Can we get ice cream?" Tommy asked in his most polite voice when they'd finished eating. He knew that if he whined the answer would be no.

Cliff and Ellen looked at each other. Cliff made the decision. "I think that's a good idea. We haven't done that in a while. They had ice cream in the freezer, of course, but a trip to the Baskin-Robbins was an entirely different animal.

"Yay!" Tommy and his sister Mia chorused.

After the basic kitchen cleanup was done, Ellen told the kids to go to the bathroom and wash up so they could go. As they were doing that, she called the office phone to check her voice mail. There was a message. A woman's voice said that they had found her card in their door and wanted to know what it was about. That had to be the family in Cupertino, Ms. Ng, presumably.

They piled in the family SUV and Cliff drove them to the Baskin-Robbins with its comforting pink and blue sign standing tall as though guarding all 31 flavors. They got out and headed inside, but before they reached the door, Ellen told Cliff to go ahead with the kids. She had a work errand to run. An interview subject had called, but they were only a few blocks away and it would probably be very fast since she didn't expect them to know anything.

"Coward!" Cliff protested, knowing that handling two small children in an ice cream store was a daunting challenge. "Hurry back."

"It won't take long."

She had her own keys. She drove to the Li-Ng house. She wasn't armed, which was a violation of Bureau rules, but she had her

credentials with her as she always did when out and about. She knocked. Mr. Li came to the door. She introduced herself and showed her identification. He invited her in. His wife joined them in the living room.

“Is this about the woman who died?” He asked before Ellen had a chance to ask any questions.

“Yes, it is. How did you know about that?”

“It was on the news. On TV.”

“We’re hoping you can help us. Did you see that woman?”

Ng answered. “Yes, I chatted with her for a few minutes in the ladies’ room. She seemed nice. It’s a shame – someone that young.”

“Was she with anyone?”

“No. Hiking by herself, she said. Something about it being a challenge but I didn’t quite understand what she meant.”

“What else did she say?”

“She was going to hike on the fire trail, I think she said.”

“Yes, that’s where she died. What day was this?”

“Wednesday. She’d just pulled in and needed to use the rest room.”

“What else can you tell me?”

“That’s about it. She asked about us. I think I did most of the talking. I told her this used to be a favorite spot when the kids were young. Stuff like that.”

“Can you describe what she was wearing?”

“Regular outdoor clothes: black sweatshirt, jeans, hiking boots, I think. She could have had more in the car. She had her gloves off so she could wash her hands, but then she put them back on. I thought that was odd.”

“Why?”

“It wasn’t that cold. It was a little chilly with the fog and breeze, mitten weather I’d call it, but she had heavy gloves.”

“Did she say anything about anyone else?”

“No, that’s all I remember.”

“How about her car. Did you see it? It was parked in the day use area.”

“I don’t know. What did it look like?”

Ellen showed her a picture of the SUV. Ng seemed uncertain. Ellen turned the phone toward Li.

“Yes, I remember,” he said. “I only remember because it was parked next to an old Subaru Outback. We used to have one, a 2002, same color. I remarked about it. Remember?” This latter comment was directed to Ng, who lit up with recollection.

“Oh, right. It looked like Kermit. That’s what the kids called our car. The woman’s car was next to it?”

“I’m almost sure,” he said. “Remember, I stopped and pointed at the Outback and you said ‘Hey that’s our car.’”

“I remember that, but I don’t remember what was next to it. I think there were cars on both sides.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. White, kinda dinged up.”

Li had just seen a picture of the car and might be describing what he had just seen, but he’d only glanced at the image for a second or two, so Ellen assessed the recollection as being from the actual event. “That’s great. That’s very helpful.” Witnesses always like to be told they were helpful, so it’s a requirement, even if their information is useless. “What color was the Subaru?”

“Green over silver. That’s why the kids called it Kermit. Like the frog.”

“That’s just super. Did you remember anything else about the Outback – license number, parking stickers, things in the window – anything.”

“No. It was old and dusty. No one was in it. I didn’t notice the license plate at all. It might have had stickers, but I don’t remember. There were other cars and pickups in that lot, but I couldn’t give you a description of any of them. The Subaru was the only one parked next to that white SUV. The SUV was at the end of a line of cars.”

“You mentioned kids. Were they with you?”

“No, they’re grown and gone. It was just the two of us.”

Further questions brought no further useful information. Ellen collected contact information from both. When she looked at her watch she realized she’d been gone twice as long as she’d thought she’d be. She said a hasty goodbye and drove back to the ice cream store.

“‘Won’t take long?’ I believe you said,” Cliff chided as Ellen entered the store. Tommy’s hands were sticky and all over the chair.

Mia was crying. He didn't hide his irritation in his voice or his expression.

"Sorry. I didn't expect them to have any information." She pulled out a wet wipe from her purse and cleaned Tommy's hands, then picked up Mia as they all left the store.

"So you got something?"

"Well, not much, but every bit helps. The victim was alone, according to a witness, planning a challenging hike. I got a description of the clothes she'd been wearing." As they drove away Ellen realized she'd never gotten any ice cream, but she was content getting some information from the interview. It was the only one of the three that produced anything.

Back at the house she watched the local news which she made a point to record every night on two different channels. She also read newspaper accounts in the local papers. It was important to stay abreast of what was public in a case like this. Both channels had a short segment mentioning the case and asking the public to contact the San Mateo County Sheriff's Department if they had any information. Both showed a picture of Jocelyn, but only one showed a picture of a 2003 Ford Expedition; however, it clearly was a picture pulled from the Internet since it was brown, not white. The other channel gave the wrong date of when the murder occurred, giving the date the body was found as the date of death. It wasn't until Ellen became an FBI agent that she discovered how much inaccuracy there was in news reporting at all levels.

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The next morning as she entered the office, her supervisor told her he'd gotten a call from the Special Agent in Charge or SAC, Marisa Cortez. The SAC was responsible for the running of the entire division, but individual cases were managed by case agents and squad supervisors, or in rare cases, an Assistant Special Agent in Charge or ASAC. The SAC was more concerned with administrative and political side of things. Ellen's case had appeared on the news and the FBI had been mentioned. The U.S. Attorney had asked her about it. She wanted an in-person briefing from Ellen.

Ellen didn't want to waste the time. She could brief Cortez over the phone, but she knew better than to object. Face time with the boss was a good way to get resources for a case when needed, and in any event, an order was an order. She called the SAC's office and the secretary said that she wanted the briefing this morning and to come right up.

Right after that Matt told her that the autopsy was being performed that morning. Suspected homicide cases are expedited. He asked her if she was planning on attending. She told him she wanted to, but couldn't. He'd have to go by himself. He nodded.

Ellen checked her email and phone messages for anything urgent but there was nothing that couldn't wait. She grabbed her jacket, told her supervisor she was leaving, and headed up to San Francisco. The drive took about an hour, Bay Area traffic being what it is, and she had to park in the FBI area of the Civic Center Garage, which entailed a few blocks walk. Ellen was told to go on in to the SAC's office.

"Hello, Ellen," Cortez said from behind her massive desk. "Please, have a seat."

Ellen sat in a chair facing Cortez. "Hello, Marisa." Ellen was senior enough to use first names. Ellen was still considered to be a little bit of an untouchable by the brass. Her sister had been married to a Congressman before he died; he'd been the best friend of the then FBI Director. Ellen's niece, Ashley, who now worked in Cliff's office as his secretary, was that former Director's goddaughter. That director, though, had since retired under fire, so she didn't have quite the umbrella of protection she'd once had. Even so, she wasn't intimidated by the SAC. They come and go.

"The media has been quoting the sheriff's detective on this murder case," Cortez began. "We haven't said anything. We should be out front on this." This didn't surprise Ellen. SAC's were concerned with public image and status. They need to have the FBI look like they're doing the job. This meeting was about media coverage.

"Yes, I've been seeing that, too. They aren't coordinating with me. Have you been talking to the sheriff there?"

"I have a call in to him." This told Ellen the call had not been returned. That was a bad sign.

“Well, what would you like to know? I can brief you on where we are.”

“Yes, please go ahead,” Cortez continued.

Ellen ran through the basics of the case for about thirty minutes. Cortez asked a few pointed questions, but mostly let her tell it her way.

“Is there anything we’ve learned that the sheriff’s office doesn’t know?”

Ah, Ellen thought, this was about being able to one-up the sheriff. Well, she could play the game if she needed to. Walton wasn’t being obstructionist, but he wasn’t coordinating like he should. She knew his boss, the sheriff, was doing the same thing as the SAC.

“I did a witness interview last night that I haven’t had a chance to write up or tell them. We have a description of the victim’s clothing from someone who saw her the day she was at the park. I got a description of a car that parked next to hers, but I don’t know if it had any connection. It probably didn’t.”

“Give me a description of the clothing,” Cortez said. Ellen did so. “That’s good work. Thanks, Ellen. I’ll have the media rep announce a press conference for eleven. We can catch the noon news cycle.”

Ellen looked down at her phone and saw that she had a text from Matt. She told the SAC this and Cortez told her to call him back. The tentative results from the autopsy were in. A detailed formal report would be forthcoming in a couple of days but word from the medical examiner was that it was a homicide. She died from a blow to the head and resulting subdural bleeding. He couldn’t pinpoint the time of death, but said it probably wasn’t instantaneous. He guessed it took several minutes or even an hour before she was dead. There was no evidence of sexual assault.

“So that means she could have been alive when she was dumped on federal land,” Cortez said. She looked at Ellen for confirmation. Ellen shrugged.

“That’s good,” Cortez said. “If she died on federal land, the U.S. Attorney is more likely to prosecute. We could be primary on this. Ellen, head on back to Palo Alto and get a full briefing from Matt on the autopsy and anything else he learned while he was there. Let me know immediately of anything big. I’m going to appear in that press briefing at eleven and don’t want to be caught flat-footed.”

“Should I let Walton know about the interview I did last night ... the clothing and car?”

Cortez hesitated. “Of course, but there’s no rush. Do your 302 and give him a copy the next time you see him.” Ellen knew this meant not before the press conference at eleven; Cortez wanted to scoop the sheriff’s office. “Have you presented it to the U.S. Attorney’s Office yet?”

“No. We don’t have much yet.”

“Do it now from here on the phone if you can. I’ll be making a press conference and they always want to have someone there.”

“Sure. Okay, I’ll let you know of anything else that I find out.” She rose and left. She called the San Jose office of the U.S. Attorney and made an appointment to present a case to her favorite Assistant USA. It was critical for success in the FBI to know which AUSA to go to. She’d stop by that office before going back to Palo Alto, although it meant a longer trip.

Chapter 15

I was becoming a news junkie ever since the incident in Butano. The body had been discovered sooner than I had hoped, but I supposed it wasn't all that surprising. Her photo was being broadcast all over now, but the coverage has been fairly subdued. Until now, that is. I'm watching the local news and the FBI is having a news conference about it. I didn't expect the FBI to get in on it. When I shoved the body under the fence, I was just thinking to get it out of the public park area so it wouldn't be discovered soon if at all. Now this FBI woman is saying that she may have died on federal land, making it a federal case.

The good news is that no one is calling her a geocacher or mentioning her geocaching name of joblob. I thought about going back to the park and removing those log sheets altogether, but I've heard too many stories about killers or arsonists getting caught because they returned to the scene of the crime. My name and fingerprints are not on any of them, that's the main thing.

My sponsors are paying me just as they're supposed to and the payments stretch out for a long time. It can take months for royalties to be paid. But I'm getting worried. My YouTube and Facebook views are way down, like ninety percent or more. I haven't lost that many followers, but they just aren't actually looking at the vlog posts. The advertisers pay me for views, not followers.

I'm getting some good sponsors now. My agent is better at the merchandising than I expected. Some of joblob's old sponsors are coming to me, at least the ones that aren't in direct competition with my existing sponsors. Sherri is getting them into a bidding war. I even switched brands on my sunglasses because she got a better deal from another sponsor. Now she can use that as leverage for the ones who are trying to reduce the rates due to my shrinking following. She's telling them about being signed for Survivor and that I may switch to another brand to appear on that show if they make reductions.

I'm still getting hundreds of views, mostly reviewing products online, and by making personal appearances. I'm writing a book, too. Or someone Sherri came up with is writing it based on my vlogs, but it will have my name as an author. I always thought that was a ripoff, using

ghost writers, but honestly, I have no time to write a book. I'll make sure the content is honest and worth reading.

So the FBI woman is saying that "Ms. Boylan" didn't die instantly, that she may have been dumped on federal land while she was still alive. That's bullshit. She was dead. No pulse. Her pupils had no response. It sounds weird to have her called Ms. anything. I still think of her as a male half the time and only as joblob. Maybe it's not such a bad thing the FBI is involved. The sheriff's office probably has a lot more experience investigating murders than a small FBI office in Palo Alto. Maybe the two agencies will get into a turf war and keep information from each other. I see that on TV shows all the time, like Bosch.

"She was last seen wearing a black sweatshirt, jeans, and hiking boots," the lady on TV said. How'd they know that? The hoodie was black, although I don't know if I'd call it a sweatshirt. Why didn't she mention the windbreaker? Maybe someone saw her before she put that on. This time the phone number on the screen was for the FBI, not the sheriff. That's good. People are not all going to be calling the same place. Some are going to call the FBI, some the sheriff. Probably no one's going to call both.

"Hey, babe," Nicole said between bites of a candy bar as she walked in the apartment. "Whatcha watchin'? You been watching the news a lot lately. Hey, isn't that the park you were going to go to?" The graphic on the screen was showing the sign at the entrance to Butano State Park.

"Yeah, I was thinking about doing that one. That woman who got killed could have been me. I'm glad I changed my mind." I turned off the television.

"She was raped wasn't she? I think you're safe from that, sweetie. Although I might have ideas ..." She came over and sat next to me on the sofa then began nuzzling my neck and stroking my thigh.

"No, they say she wasn't."

The stroking moved up a few inches. I don't need to tell you what that led to.

Later, I showered and changed clothes. It was my turn to buy dinner. I realized I was going to have to be more discreet about my news obsession. If Nicole had noticed, maybe others could, too. Maybe the

cable companies tell the FBI who watches stories like that the most. They can do that, can't they?

I picked a Thai place I knew Nicole liked. We got seated. She began telling me about some stock purchase she made for a fund. She thinks it's a good buy, yada, yada. I totally zoned out.

"Hardkorps! Nicole! Hey guys, how've you been?" The speaker was the fellow geocacher who had served as my cameraman on that local cache in Golden Gate Park. He was with a girl.

"Hi, Jamie," Nicole said before I did. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Nothing fancy about it, but the food's good. Hey, congrats again on the challenge win. That was awesome, dude."

I feigned modesty. "Aw, shucks. I couldn't have done it without you." That was a lie.

"Right. And I set you up with Nicole. You owe me big time." He was laughing. He hadn't even met Nicole until after I'd been dating her for two months. "So what about joblob? He just dropped off the map. I can't believe it. Who gives up one week before finishing a challenge like that – after three years? Just because you beat him to it?"

"Maybe she-it ..." I almost said "she." "...shit happened. It does, you know. He's old news." I stuttered as I spoke. Why did he have to bring up joblob? It makes me nervous. Time to move on, bro. His girlfriend was tugging at his sleeve. There was only one open table, and she wanted to get it before it filled up.

"Yeah. Okay, see ya around. And stop doing all those product reviews. Get out there geocaching again."

My mouth was full, so I nodded and waved my fork in acknowledgment. He was right about that. I needed to get out again. My viewers needed something besides highlight reels.

Chapter 16

Ellen picked up the phone. She recognized the number and wasn't looking forward to the conversation.

"Hello, Bill."

"Ellen. So what's the deal? I just saw your boss say you got a description of the vic's clothing. When were you planning on telling me?"

"I just got back. I found a witness – one of the overnight campers – who was available late. So I went to their house. First thing this morning I was going to call you and fill you in, but I got summoned up to the city to brief the boss. I've been up there the whole time. I was just writing it up now when you called."

"I should have been the first call. You could have left me a message before you drove up. You have blue tooth in your car? You could have called me en route."

"Bill, relax. I didn't even have a chance to tell Matt. I was given my marching orders so I marched. The sheriff has been making public announcements without clearing them with our boss or media people. The brass are going to play their games. Don't let that get in the way. We both just want to catch the killer."

"Okay, so what else did you learn?" He didn't sound completely mollified.

"You'll get my 302, but basically a woman chatted briefly with Boylan in the ladies' room. Boylan said she was planning on hiking the Fire Road. If you heard the news conference, then you heard the description of the clothing: black sweatshirt, jeans, boots, gloves. They also saw her car in the day use lot. The car next to it was an older model green over silver Subaru Outback, but that's the only other vehicle they remember. They didn't get a plate or any other identifying info on it. They didn't think it was related to her SUV."

"Okay, that's something. Next time, let me know right away."

"So tell me about the autopsy. I haven't had a chance to talk to Matt."

"She died from a blow to the head. The bleeding was all internal, so the killer probably got no blood on him. There was a lot of dirt and plant matter in her hair. That could have been from beginning

dragged post-mortem, but the examiner didn't think so. The crime scene looked like she'd been dragged headfirst, probably lifted under her arms, with the feet dragging, not the head. So the debris might have been from a struggle, rolling around in the dirt. It was in all parts of her hair, not just one spot like it would be from just falling straight down."

"Matt texted me that it wasn't immediate."

"That's bullshit, what Cortez said. She didn't die on federal land. The medical examiner said she probably was rendered unconscious from the blow, and the bleeding would probably have caused death within a minute or two, possibly a little longer. Those were his words. It would have taken a lot longer than that to strip the body and haul it to the USGS fence, at least if the encounter took place on the trail, or near it."

"Look. It doesn't matter jurisdictionally. We're in the case and I'm going to work it, but this isn't a competition. We should work together. Even if one of us found the killer all by ourselves, you know that the bigwigs are going to hold a joint press conference and talk about how their teamwork made the difference and we all share the credit, at least publicly. Privately is another matter."

This seemed to cool Walton down. "Fine. Have you found out anything from the other campers?"

"No. The other ones in the South Bay had nothing. There are some leads out to other RAs and other divisions. Those will likely take weeks or months to come back. What have you been doing?"

"Mostly working on the forensics. We found a couple of gas receipts in the car. There was one in Marin County the day before she showed up in Butano. It looks like she filled up there Tuesday evening and drove down to the Butano area either that night or early the next morning. We have her credit card number from the receipts. We're in the process of getting those records. We should trace her whereabouts and activities for the days leading up to the killing."

"You don't think it was a crime of opportunity?"

"Oh, I do. But we have to cover all possibilities. I have someone looking at Craigslist and eBay for someone selling hiking gear or a cell phone, but without a good description of what she was carrying, that's a shot in the dark."

“She had an Apple computer in the car. She probably had an iPhone. Apple buyers tend to be very brand loyal. That’s your best bet. No one’s going to be selling a dirty sweatshirt and jeans.”

“Good point. Still, the killer would be an idiot to sell whatever he stole, now that the case is high priority.”

“You know what they say – we only catch the dumb ones.”

Walton went over some of the other forensic stuff from the vehicle, but nothing he mentioned struck Ellen as very helpful.

She wrapped up the call and went over to Matt Nguyen’s desk to check on his progress.

“Have you found anything good on Bruce Boylan?” she asked.

“Just what we already knew. He did two years in Folsom for drug possession. That was twenty years ago. Nothing recent. I have an address for him in Watsonville. I don’t know what he’s doing there or what jobs he may have had during the last twenty years.”

“What kind of car does he own?”

“Why? Do you have a lead on a car?”

She told him about the Outback parked next to Jocelyn’s car.

“I have his car registration here. Just a sec.” He riffled through some papers. “A Ford F-150, four years old.”

“Okay. We still haven’t figured out what the victim was doing in Watsonville, either, or where she lived. You feel like taking a day trip down there?”

“Let’s see, would I prefer to sit at a computer screen all day reading messages from the Director, updates on recent court cases, and sort through thousands of records with a boss looking over my shoulder or take a drive to the beach listening to good tunes on the radio? Tough choice. I guess if you need me ...”

“I need you desperately ...” she laughed.

“You’re on. Let’s get out of here before some BS assignment drops on our desk.”

They grabbed their notes, guns, and coats and walked down the stairs to Ellen’s car. Ellen pulled out into busy freeway traffic and headed toward Santa Cruz. The fastest route from Palo Alto would have been U.S. 101 all the way to Highway 152 in Gilroy where you cut west to Watsonville, a total of about seventy miles, all inland. Although a bit shorter in distance, the alternate route taking state highway 17 over the

mountain and then south on highway 1 along the coast is usually slower, especially during summer when beach traffic jams the roads. But there was no question which way they'd go.

Ellen began the climb up 17 through magnificent evergreens. The area was originally covered with redwoods, but lumbering had destroyed most of those. There were still many redwoods, but they were second growth and relatively small. Spruces and pines now dominated the forest on either side at higher elevation, coast oaks in the foothills. At the summit Ellen got off onto prosaically-named Summit Road and headed south. This took them along the ridge line for several miles, then she cut down Soquel-San Jose Road. This was a fairly major route for the locals, but was a winding two-lane road through residential areas. Kids waited at bus stops during the school year here, and stops signs and oddball turns made it slow going. With big band swing music (Ellen's choice) playing on the radio, this wasn't a bad thing.

The homes here were mostly small and relatively inexpensive, but had redwoods growing in their yards and offered good living in a rain forest. There were no stores, so residents were mostly self-reliant DIY types who had no trouble driving winding roads in heavy winter rains for twenty miles to get groceries.

Suddenly the Bureau radio squawked her call sign. It was her supervisor asking where she was. Matt grabbed the mike and answered that they were headed to Watsonville to cover leads.

"We have a resident agency there. You should send the leads to them" the radio voice chastised.

"Roger that, but these are time-critical," he lied.

Everyone in the FBI knew that agents never covered leads quickly on cases assigned to other agents. It all had to do with caseload. As long as the lead was still pending it counted on your caseload total. If you never covered anything your caseload would reach astronomic levels and you looked like you were fully assigned or overassigned. If you covered the lead immediately, you'd just get another one assigned since your caseload would be smaller than the agent who didn't. Which is not to say agents are lazy. They had plenty of cases of their own and those took priority in their own minds.

"What's your exact twenty?" "Twenty" is cop-speak for location, from the police 10-codes: 10-20.

“We’re almost there.” Another lie.

“All right, you may as well finish up there. Disregard.”

Ellen grinned at him as he hung up the mike. They were pulling into the small town of Soquel, a cute little touristy town a mile from the beach. She turned onto highway 1 south toward Watsonville. A couple of miles later she made a move that surprised Matt. She exited the highway and headed down toward the beach. She stopped at a convenience store and told Matt she was going to grab something to eat. It was almost one. He followed her in. They both selected premade sandwiches from the refrigerator case – a bold choice, but agents are fearless – and soda and chips.

They got back in the car with their paper sacks and Ellen headed down further to the entrance to Seacliff State Beach. She showed her badge to the ranger at the gate. He asked what she was doing there.

“We’re working the murder case up in Butano. You hear about that?”

“Yeah, Jerry West’s case, right?”

“Right. We think some of the campers here now were there last week. We want to do some interviews.”

“No problem. Have at it.” He waved them on through without payment.

She drove in and found a place to park. Arrayed before her was a sea of Winnebagos, Airstreams, Jaycos, Entegras, and Coachmen crammed into every slot for almost a half mile. All looked out directly onto the beach and beyond the sand, Monterey Bay. The campers had erected elaborate awnings and there were picnic tables at most sites. Some had barbecues. In some, people in shorts and bikinis sat around on lawn chairs watching the surfers and volleyball players, drinking wine and chatting.

“Grab your lunch,” she ordered Matt. She took her sack and started walking along the promenade. Matt followed.

She kept going until she found a senior couple sitting under an awning watching the waves and drinking wine. They had a small table set up between them with chips and dip. There were two extra beach chairs.

“Hello, I’m agent Kennedy with the FBI,” she said, showing her credentials. “May we join you?” She and Matt looked totally out of

place in their suits. Since both were armed they couldn't take off their coats.

"Sure," said the man and gestured toward the empty chairs.

"Oh my." The woman said. "What did we do?" This was accompanied by a nervous giggle.

"Oh, nothing. We just need a place to sit and eat our lunch and you looked like a nice couple. The shade is good, too."

The man and woman looked at each other and laughed. "Be our guest. You want some wine?"

"Another day," Matt said. "On duty. But thanks." Matt and Ellen sat.

"Are you really FBI?" the woman said. There was that question again.

Ellen had already opened up her sandwich and chips. "Yep. We're investigating a murder."

"My my. A murder. Well, have you solved it yet?"

"Not yet. You haven't been to Butano State Park recently have you?"

"No. We stayed there three years ago, I think it was," the man answered. "We buy a season pass to all the state parks every year."

"Okay, well, at least now we can say we covered a lead here." Everyone laughed.

They continued eating, drinking, and chatting until Matt and Ellen had finished their lunch. When they were done the couple offered to take their lunch trash and they exchanged friendly farewells. Ellen started walking south on the promenade, to Matt's surprise.

"Where are you going now? The car's the other way."

"This won't take long. This is something you should see."

She led Matt at a leisurely pace along the cement promenade parallel to the shore until they reached the nearby pier. Seagull cries and children's laughter filled the air as they walked. They reached a visitor's center and Ellen walked up the steps to the wooden building. She pulled out her phone and read something, but didn't explain to Matt what it was. Next, she went inside. A friendly matronly docent gave them both a quick tour of the place. Ellen explained what she wanted to know and the docent chuckled since she had been asked these same questions many times. Matt heard the term 'virtual cache' pass between them.

Ellen then led Matt out onto the pier as far as they could go, which was only half its length. The far end was old and unsafe and had been fenced off. She snapped a picture with her phone.

“So what exactly is a ‘virtual cache’?” he asked.

“Well they’re all different. Some geocaches don’t have a physical cache with a log to sign. Their numbers are limited, but this one, *Forever Facing South*, is a really nice one. In order to log it, you only need to go there and answer some questions about the place. You learn a lot of history from these.”

“How did you learn about this one?”

“I’m a geocacher. You can just look on a map and find caches all over. But Cliff grew up in the Bay Area and has told me about this cement boat. He said I should visit it and pick up the find. You know he used to go all the way out onto the boat when he was a little kid. They used to have a snack bar and bait shop.”

“People still fish here.” He motioned around and indeed a dozen or so people, all men, had lines cast into the ocean, but only from the pier, not the cement boat. From the look of them, Matt guessed that at least half depended on the fishing for much of their food.

“Of course, but fishing was much better out at the end, he said. Then the cement boat began to crumble and tilt. It wasn’t stable. They had to block it off. Then the pier itself started collapsing where it was attached to the boat.”

“Who would have thought to build a boat out of cement? It seems counterintuitive.”

“An empty tub will float, even a cement one, and back in World War II steel was in short supply. Cement boats were cheap to make and practical.”

“Yeah, I heard the docent’s talk.”

“It’s all on the cache page, too. Well, we’ve covered our lead here,” she chuckled. “Maybe we should do some real work.”

“Ten-four.”

They walked back to the car, buckled in, and headed south on the highway toward Watsonville. The first stop was the main post office in downtown Watsonville. They entered and walked to the wall of boxes. They found Boylan’s box quickly. It had some mail visible through the small window. Then they went to the main counter,

bypassing the line of customers, several of whom grumbled objections. Ellen showed her credentials to the clerk and said "FBI. We need to talk to the postmaster. Official business." This quieted the murmurs and grumbles. The counter clerk went in the back area and moments later returned with an Asian man in tow. The man opened a door for them and led them into his office area.

"I'm the postmaster," he said. His name tag said Wong.

Ellen and Matt displayed their credentials. "We're investigating a murder case. The victim had, or still has, a box here. We need to see the contents."

"We can't do that. We need proof they're dead and authorization from the executor."

"There is no executor yet, and time is of the essence. It's a murder case so the first forty-eight hours are critical. We're already behind the curve."

"What's the name or box number?" Ellen gave it to him. "I can verify that she has a box here. I still need official notification she's dead."

"I'm an official and I'm notifying you. So now you have it."

"I mean a death certificate."

"I don't have one yet."

Wong turned to his computer and typed something in a search box, then clicked on a link. Ellen craned her neck to see. He was looking at a popular local news page.

"Okay, I see she was murdered up in Santa Cruz area." He rose and went to the box, then returned with the mail. Most of it was useless junk advertising, but Ellen took it all in hand. Wong made no objection, so she slipped it into her purse. She told him she needed to see the registration information Jocelyn had given at the time she rented the box. He showed her the screen and she took notes.

"Do you have security camera video of that box area?"

"Yes, but it only goes back fourteen days. I can see from the postmarks that no one has picked up the mail for at least three weeks."

"Do you recognize this person?" Matt asked, displaying a photo of Jocelyn Boylan. Wong examined it and said no. He displayed another shot of her and the result was the same.

“All right, thank you,” Ellen said, then turning to Matt said, “Let’s canvass the patrons. Maybe we’ll get lucky.” They stepped out into the lobby.

Matt whispered to Ellen, “He’ll believe whatever he reads on a webpage headline but won’t believe two FBI agents. Boy, the world has sure changed.”

“Explains a lot about today’s politics, doesn’t it.” Then in a loud voice, “Everyone, attention. We’re with the FBI and we’re investigating the murder of a young woman who regularly used this post office. She may live near here. We’d like you to look at some photos and let us know if you recognize her.”

Matt walked up and down the line of patrons displaying the photos while Ellen went to the desk clerk. There were two on duty. The customers at each stood aside to let Ellen show the photos to the clerks. Everyone was cooperative, but no one recognized her. Several customers thanked them for their work.

When they got outside, they split up and started canvassing stores and businesses on either side. Ellen went into the police department, which was right across the street from the post office, and showed them the photo. A detective came out and talked to her. She told Ellen that she didn’t recognize Boylan, but she’d take the photo and show it around. Ellen continued in the opposite direction from Matt. After an hour of that work, they met up again at the post office. Neither one had found anyone who recognized her or had any useful information.

“We’ve struck out so far,” Ellen said. “But we’re here. Let’s check out the father.”

“You want to interview him?”

“We’ll have to at some point, but it’s too soon. Walton considers him a potential suspect, I think. I don’t want to piss Walton off again. We should gather more evidence.”

“If he has an alibi, it’s not fair to wait. He’ll forget where he was and so will anyone who can corroborate, and any video evidence will get lost due to being overwritten.”

“That’s a good point. Let’s just go by and see what we get.”

They drove to the address for Bruce Boylan on his driver’s license. There were no cars in the driveway but the F-150 was parked

directly in front. There was nothing obvious to do without going up and knocking, but Ellen wasn't ready for that.

"Look," Matt said, pointing to the house across the street. "On the eaves. The security camera."

Ellen scowled. "They might know Boylan. I don't want to tip him off we're looking at him."

"We won't. Leave it to me."

"Okay, go ahead, but be careful."

Matt scowled back and replied in a fake whine, "Yes, mommy."

They walked to the front door and rang the bell. A middle aged white woman with green hair and a nose ring came to the door. They showed their credentials and Matt asked if they could come in and talk to her for a minute. She let them in without hesitation.

He told the woman, whose name was Naomi Horowitz, that they were investigating some recent crimes in the area that had been associated with a white Ford Expedition. He showed her a photo of Jocelyn Boylan's vehicle. He asked if she'd seen that vehicle in the area.

"I don't know for sure," she said with some hesitation. "That kind of looks like a car that used to park across the street."

"Oh, really? How long ago?"

"Oh, last year, maybe longer. It only did a few times. It would park overnight. You could ask the people who live there. But there are lots of cars like that. I don't know if it's the one you mean."

"Probably not, not if it was so long ago. I notice that you have a security camera out front. Can you see the passing traffic on that?"

"Oh, sure, but there's not much passing through except local residents. The street dead ends on the next block."

"Is there some way we could review the security footage for the last couple of weeks?"

"Right now?"

"No, not necessarily. Is it stored with a security company like Ring? Maybe we could review it with them."

"Oh, of course. I'm signed up with the police. They have a program where you can authorize them to see your outside security cameras that cover public areas. You could do it at the police station. I forgot about that. I've never had them use it. They're only authorized to do it if there's a crime reported."

“So just to be sure, you’re authorizing us to review the recordings from that camera for the last two weeks?”

“Absolutely. You can review everything they have so far as I’m concerned. Am I in danger? What did they do?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s white collar stuff. Money laundering and embezzling.”

“Around here? In that car?”

Matt realized he hadn’t thought that out so well and didn’t have a convincing reply. Ellen tapped him on the shoulder and held up her phone, “Sorry to interrupt, but our office is directing us to respond to another matter. Thank you again, ma’am. We have to go. We’ll contact the police to view the video feed.”

“Oh, okay.”

They left hurriedly and took off in the car. “Thanks for the rescue there,” Matt said.

“Yes, son,” Ellen whined in her best imitation of Matt’s earlier one.

“Okay, okay, you got me. But that was worth it. It looks like the vic may have stayed here with her dad sometimes. Stop by the police and let’s see what they have on video.”

Ellen drove back to the police station and the woman detective she’d spoken to earlier put her in contact with the IT person who handled those video feeds from residents’ cameras. They said it was no problem, but they’d have to verify the homeowner’s consent directly first. Once they got that, they’d send a link and a password that would allow viewing access to the police feed. After an exchange of contact information, Ellen and Matt took off for the office.

It was late in the day when they arrived in Palo Alto. The squad supervisor had gone home already, which Ellen considered a blessing. She wouldn’t have to brief him on the day’s work. She dumped Boylan’s mail in a pile on her desk, then checked her email. There was a message from Watsonville P.D. They had contacted the green-haired woman and verified her consent. There was a link and a password. Ellen didn’t have time to start reviewing videos tonight and she was going direct to firearms qualification tomorrow, an all-day affair, so it would have to wait two days. Matt told her he was going to firearms tomorrow, too. It was the only day it was being held in the South Bay. In some

offices, some agents had to drive hundreds of miles and stay overnight to qualify in firearms at least four times a year.

Chapter 17

Cliff huffed and puffed as he walked up the stairs to his office. He'd finished a workout with weights at the gym and it had taken more out of him than he'd expected. He walked in and saw Ashley, his niece, on the phone saying "Oh, here he is now. Let me see if he's available." She should know better than that, he thought. The caller knows that he's there and apparently not tied up with another call, so is certainly available. If the call is not put through, it will be seen as some sort of insult. "Cliff, it's that woman lawyer from yesterday. Can you take the call?" Of course he had to take it now. He went into his office, closed the door, and pressed the button for line one.

"Cliff Knowles."

"Hi, it's Marilu Clark again."

"Hello, Marilu. What's up?"

"Well, there's been a development and I wasn't sure whether to tell someone. I won't beat around the bush. I learned that Bruce Boylan filed a petition to administer the estate of Jocelyn in Santa Cruz County, claiming that's her residence. I filed a petition here in San Luis Obispo County before I found out about his. Ms. Gallo is the rightful heir and the house is here. That's the only property of value I know of. Under the Probate Code the petition has to be filed either in the county of the decedent's residence, or where the bulk of the estate property is located."

"Competing petitions. That sounds like a mess. I'm glad I'm not in your shoes. Why are you calling me?"

"You said your wife was investigating the murder. I thought maybe she'd want to know that this ex-con of a father, someone who lives in the same area where she was murdered, was trying to get his hands on her property."

"Hold it. Your client had as much motive as he did, at least if she thought she'd inherit the house."

"My client! You don't seriously think she'd kill her own niece, whom she loved ..."

"Hold it! I don't think anything. It's not my business. I don't want to be in the middle of this. If you think your information is of value to the investigators, you should talk to them. I'd give you the

number for the sheriff's detective, but I don't have it handy. I'll give you my wife's work number. She wouldn't take your info secondhand from me anyway. I'm sure you know about hearsay. Call her, and please don't call me on this matter again."

"I helped you when you were looking for someone to identify the body."

"And thank you again for that, but I'm not going to get involved in a probate dispute. It sounds like you're trying to sic the police and FBI on a civil opponent. Here's my wife's number. Call her." He read off Ellen's office direct line.

"I will. Thank you." Her tone was icy.

After the call Cliff thought about calling Ellen to warn her, but decided against it. First of all, he realized that Ellen was at firearms and wouldn't be reachable all day. Clark would have to leave a voicemail and wait until tomorrow. The information might be of use to Ellen, but it's the kind of thing that would be looked into in any unsolved murder. Anyone who inherits, or who might inherit, a large amount from a decedent automatically becomes a suspect in that person's suspicious death, at least until they can be eliminated. Clark would no doubt call Ellen who would handle it appropriately.

Ellen got home early. As often happens on training days, she qualified early and was released at four. Those who didn't shoot as well had to stay until they were able to qualify. She liked these days because she was able to cook for her family, something she rarely did on weekdays. Before that, though, she checked her office voicemail. She could do that remotely still, although she couldn't check FBI email from home for security reasons. Nothing there needed immediate attention, so she showered, changed clothes, and began cutting up fresh strawberries to top the pancakes she planned to make. The kids loved breakfast dinner and it was one of the few ways she could get them to eat fresh fruit.

Cliff arrived home and kissed her on the cheek as she sliced. "Good day?" he asked.

"I shot a ninety-two."

"Good shootin', pardner."

"I checked my office voicemail. That lawyer from Morro Bay left a message saying you told her to call me. What's that all about?"

"Oh that. She called me and said Bruce Boylan filed a probate petition in Santa Cruz for Jocelyn's estate. She claimed it was to help out your investigation, but it sounded to me like she was trying to get you on his case for her own purposes. She's filed a competing petition down in San Luis Obispo."

"Hm. That is interesting. He's already heard about her death and is after the money. I thought the aunt said he was totally out of Jo's life. I'll talk to Matt. He's working with the SO on the Bruce Boylan angle. We were by his house two days ago when we were down there."

"You didn't interview him? He might know something about her whereabouts and activities, and if he's really a suspect, you want to pin down his story early."

"We thought about it, but I thought we should gather a little more. It's not like we had information he was in close contact. Quite the opposite, really. And he's had a week to put together his story, if he needs one."

"Yeah, okay, it's your case."

"So, lawyer-man, tell me who gets to probate the estate when there are two competing petitions in different counties?"

"Excellent question."

"You have an excellent answer?"

"I do not. It's anyone's guess. There is a maxim in law, First in time, First in right. So it might be whichever petition was filed first, which is an unknown at this point and would be only a matter of minutes. Then the petition is supposed to be where the decedent lived."

"We don't know that yet. We think she was nomadic, living in her car. She had a post office box in Watsonville."

"That probably favors the father's claim. He's also the closest relation by blood. However, a parent who has abandoned a child or failed to make child support payments in the past is usually precluded from inheriting from the child or administering the estate. That's what Clark claims happened. That would favor her client."

"And the house or other assets?"

“The petition can also be filed in the county where the estate is located. If that house is the only substantial asset, then that’s normally the favored venue. That favors Clark’s client, Gallo.”

“She died in San Mateo County. What about that?”

“Probably irrelevant, unless she lived there. Another factor for deciding venue is the convenience of the litigants. The father lives in the county where he filed, while Gallo lives in neither. The Watsonville court might decide it should be heard there so that at least one litigant can avoid distant travel.”

“That seems unfair to Gallo. She’d have to travel up north, or pay her lawyer to do so.”

“Or hire a local lawyer she can’t meet with often, which she has already done. Which is why the San Luis Obispo court is likely to rule that they have proper venue because of the house and the fact that it is equally convenient, or inconvenient, for both litigants.”

“You’re not helping. So if both courts think they’re the best venue, which one makes the final decision?”

“Sounds like a good bar exam question.”

“Sheesh! Lawyers!”

“Relax. It’s Friday. You’ve got the weekend to look forward to.”

Chapter 18

Monday morning Walton drove down to Palo Alto to meet with Ellen and Matt. This was the first time he'd been in that FBI office. He was unimpressed with the drab surroundings: off-white (very off) walls scarred from moving file cabinets, safes, and other heavy furniture, exposed wires for the alarm and camera systems, stained acoustic ceiling tile. There was a single interview room, but it was too small for all three investigators, so they met in the open bullpen area at Ellen's desk.

"I called you Friday," he said to Ellen. It was obvious he had pegged Ellen as the alpha.

"We were at firearms all day," she replied, trying to make clear she and Matt were a team.

"All day? Why don't you use an indoor range? You could qualify in an hour."

"We take firearms seriously in the FBI." In fact FBI firearms day included classroom instruction in self-defense, review of recent shooting incidents, and so forth, as well as fitness testing and shooting hundreds of rounds on an outdoor range.

Walton frowned at the implicit putdown, but let it pass. "Bruce Boylan called me."

"What!?" Matt exclaimed.

"That's what I was calling about. He says he learned of Jocelyn's murder and is heartbroken. He wants to know why he wasn't notified immediately and what we're doing to find the killer."

"How did he find out?"

"Television news, he said. He said that no parent should learn of a child's death that way."

"Well, I suppose he has a point, but Gallo said he abandoned her as a child and has had no contact since then."

"I told him that and he said it's a lie. He was in jail back then. After that he was working overseas and sent money when he could, he claims. He said they reconciled in recent years and she would stay with him from time to time. Gallo always hated him and would say anything."

“Did you interview him about the day of her death and the days around that?”

“I didn’t want to so early, but it really couldn’t be avoided. He insisted on driving up to our office, so I sat down with him. He says he hadn’t seen her for a couple of months. She liked to travel around. She lived in the car or camped most of the time. That’s his version.”

“Where did he say he was the day she died?”

“At home. He got laid off during the pandemic and hasn’t been able to find a job since. He has a girlfriend who stays with him off and on, but she was working that day and has her own place, so no way to corroborate.”

“Maybe there is,” Matt broke in. He told Walton about the interview of the neighbor and the permission to view the security video.

“Did she send you the link to log on?”

“Yes,” Ellen replied. “I’ve got it in my email. I tested it and I verified we can see the coverage, but it’s limited. The camera is motion activated and only as far as the street. We can see any car that drives by or parks right in front, but not movement in the driveway or garage of Boylan’s place. It’s too far. If they pull out into the street, we can see that. I haven’t had time to review more than a few minutes just as a check.”

“Send me the link and any password or whatever I need to view it. I can help.”

“Okay. We should divvy up the job. Each of us take a different day to review. I’ll draw up a schedule. Did Bruce tell you he filed a petition to probate his daughter’s estate?”

“No. That’s interesting. So he does want the house. That was fast, too. It’s almost like he already had the lawyer signed up the day she died.” The implication was clear to everyone.

“We should check on that,” Matt said. “Did he say why she was in Butano Park that day?”

“No. Like I said, he claims he hadn’t seen her for a while.”

“If she lived with him, why did she have a P.O. Box? She could have saved money by using his mailbox.”

“We didn’t get into that. I asked him if she got mail there, and he said no, but I didn’t want to tell him that we knew she had a box there in Watsonville. I’m trying to keep details out of the public

knowledge. If he was truthful about the reconciliation, you'd think he'd know that and volunteer it when I asked about mail."

"He must know her phone number and email address if they're reconciled like he said."

"He says he doesn't use computers, so no email address. He said she called him a few times, and he returned the calls. He couldn't remember the last dates she called. He looked up her number in his contacts and it matched what the rental agent gave us."

Ellen added. "We talked to the postmaster down in Watsonville. She had the registration record for Jocelyn's box. We got the phone number there, too. It's Verizon but I haven't requested her records yet. No email in the postal. I haven't had time to follow up."

"I've already put in the request," Walton replied. "That's actually pretty routine for us on homicides. I should have it in two days. You have to give a physical address when you rent a P.O. Box. What did she give?"

Ellen shuffled through the papers in her file folder until she found the note she'd written at the post office. The address she gave turned out to be the office address of the rental agent handling her Morro Bay house. It became clear that they all had some tedious work ahead of them: reviewing video from Boylan's neighbor, looking up phone numbers and interviewing the people whose numbers showed up. They also had to trace the locations revealed by her phone history to determine her whereabouts and contacts near the end of her life.

Matt had already taken the initiative and mapped out the area around Bruce Boylan's house. The street he was on was like the stem of a cross. One end led to a through street that led to a major thoroughfare, but the other was a dead end after the next block. On either side was a short cul-de-sac making the arms of the cross. So there were four separate blocks of houses and all of them had to exit past Boylan's house to get to the through street except for those few closer to the through street. He had made a list of all the addresses and done a vehicle registration search to get car descriptions. California DMV records don't give the color, but he had gone on Google Street View and found the color and body type of almost all the vehicles on the list. Most people in temperate parts of California park in the driveway or on the street, using the garage for living or utility space, so this was not surprising. None of

the vehicles was a white Ford Expedition or a Subaru Outback. It made the job of reviewing the video a lot easier.

The investigators continued bringing each other up to speed for another hour, sharing the FBI's surprisingly good coffee and a few war stories. Walton said he'd provide an official copy of his interview report of Bruce Boylan when he finished writing it up. He took a copy of Matt's vehicle list and returned to the sheriff's main office in Redwood City. The chitchat over, they buckled down to the tasks at hand. Matt volunteered to review the Boylan video for the day Jocelyn went to the park, the presumed day of death. He started right away.

Ellen made up a schedule for reviewing that video for fourteen days before and all the days after that date. Walton had another detective working with him part-time, and Jerry West, the park ranger, was also brought into the loop to share that workload.

At the end of the day Ellen walked over to Matt's desk. "You find anything on the video?"

"I've made a log of the cars going past from down the street. None of them of interest. It's hard to tell the makes, especially in the morning. After dark, it's impossible. The garage faces due east. The camera is looking directly into the sun in the morning between six and seven or so. The one car of interest is whatever came out of the garage at six twenty."

"What was it?"

"Like I said, the camera is looking at the sun and Horowitz's car was parked in the way. All I can really see is the basic silhouette and the backup lights for a second. It looks like an SUV or minivan. Fairly big and boxy. The resolution isn't good enough to get the plate number. It did come back that evening, after nine, but by that time Horowitz had parked her car in the way again and it was too dark anyway."

"Probably the girlfriend's car. Walton said it was off and on there. She supposedly has another place. Could you tell who was in it?"

"No. Could be Boylan, a woman, or both. We should have gotten her name and 10-28."

"We'll get it from Walton's report."

"The pickup just sat there all day."

"He was probably telling the truth. I checked the previous day and I saw that car arrive around nine like you said, and I had the same

problem with darkness and Horowitz's car. I didn't see it leave in the morning like you did, so I guess she didn't stay overnight that previous night. The pickup moved a couple of times and it was a man driving. I couldn't really tell if it was Boylan, but I assume it was."

"You think we should be spending so much time on Boylan? There isn't much evidence pointing to him besides motive."

"He's our only suspect at this point. Until we get those phone records this is probably the most productive thing we can work on."

"But it looks to me like it was a chance encounter on the trail, a robbery or crime of passion. Shouldn't we be looking at other day use hikers?"

"Like who? West said they don't keep names or license plate numbers for the day use people. We have leads out to the other overnight campers like Li and Ng. They're scattered all over. We'll get interview results back eventually and maybe get lucky with another person who saw her."

"What about the aunt, Gallo? She had as much motive as Bruce. She thought she was going to inherit. Maybe she found out Jocelyn was going to make a will out in Bruce's favor or something. How do we know she wasn't riding in the car with Jo and smacked her with a rock when they had a row. We should get her alibi at least. If it doesn't check out, then get her DNA and fingerprints."

"You saw her Facebook page. She's hefty and at least fifty if the picture is recent, older if it isn't. That trail is pretty steep and rugged. Not to mention, she lives in Southern California but Bruce lives close. It should be pretty easy to rule her out. Besides, women almost never kill other women."

"You're an expert on homicide statistics now?" Matt said it with a grin.

Ellen cocked an eyebrow at him in response. You didn't mess with Ellen in cocked eyebrow mode. "Careful there, boy. You really think the aunt is the killer?"

"No, but I'm just saying we shouldn't feel compelled to focus on Bruce just because we don't have anyone else. That's how innocent people get convicted. Some cops feel pressure to reach an arrest."

"Now who's the expert on homicide stats?"

Chapter 19

Over the next two days the investigators continued reviewing video of Boylan's house. They established that he would leave some days in his pickup truck, usually for a trip to the store. The purposes and destinations of other trips were unknown since there was no physical surveillance. The other vehicle which came in and out of the garage from time to time was finally identified as a new model Mercedes GLS 450 registered to a Margaret Whisman. A Google search revealed her to be the widow of the founder of the local recycling company and active in local charities. She lived in a posher part of town, so it wasn't surprising she wouldn't choose to live with Boylan. The question was why he didn't move in with her.

Some of the leads from the East Bay, interviews of other overnight campers, came in, even one from Los Angeles Division, but no one had seen or heard Jocelyn or anything useful. This was relatively fast work, but agents had expedited interviews because it was a murder case and because memories fade quickly. Any leads remaining out after that were unlikely to produce anything better.

Walton produced the CDR (call detail record) list of telephone numbers in contact with Jo over the weeks preceding her death. Bruce Boylan's number was not on the list, nor was Monica Gallo's. She made and received few phone calls, which Ellen thought was unusual for a young woman, but she had high data usage, so she may have communicated largely on social media. The number contacted the most often (four times) was the rental agent for her house. Another (twice) was to Black Diamond corporate. Ellen called that company, but without an extension or name, the operator there didn't know whom to connect her with. Ellen assumed it was likely some issue over a product. The other calls, all incoming, looked to be telemarketers and other spam. Almost all were unanswered, and the ones that were answered were very short. Unanswered calls had been coming in until the previous day when the account was terminated. All voice mail messages were deleted, lost to investigators before they'd listened to them. Ellen learned that a special master had obtained letters of administration from the court and had terminated the account, supposedly to save money.

The other value the phone records could bring was the victim's location around the time of her death, but that would have to wait. The carrier was still compiling it. That dataset was a two-edged sword, too. It's voluminous since cell phones ping the tower every five minutes even when not in use as long as they're turned on and not in airplane mode. It's also not rendered in a convenient form. It's just a list of tower numbers and a map of tower locations along with times associated with each ping or call. That requires a tremendous amount of tedious work plotting a route on the map. These records, however, had the potential to pinpoint the time of death since the last ping would be when the phone was turned off or otherwise disabled.

By Friday, the fifth work day after discovery of the body and eight days after the date of death, they had made no significant progress. The local television stations featured an interview with Monica Gallo, who claimed the FBI and sheriff's office were doing nothing on the case. Cortez increased the pressure for some results, and presumably, similar pressure was placed on Walton by the sheriff.

The breakthrough came the following Monday. Walton called Ellen with the news. "We're ready to make an arrest."

"Arrest? You found something?"

"Yes. It's Bruce Boylan."

"Based on what?"

"Whisman owns a second car. Guess what it is."

"No time for guesswork. Tell me."

"A 2002 Subaru Outback, green over silver. Not only that, but over the weekend I went down there with a team and we found a neighbor on the block with camera coverage. Boylan's seen driving away in the Outback on the morning of the murder. He must have stayed over at her house the night before."

"So he lied. He told you he was home all day."

"Right. And your witnesses place that car next to hers. We figure he met up with her somewhere that morning and they drove together to the park and hiked up there where he killed her. Then he returned to his car and left with her clothing to remove forensic evidence."

"Why would they take two cars? They'd have to pay two fees and couldn't talk to each other in the car."

“Because he planned on killing her? He needed to leave her car there so that she could be identified. He couldn’t inherit if she was unidentified.”

“But he had to give her an explanation. That’s not what he’d tell her.”

“Of course not. He could make something up like he could only go partway and had to leave early. Or maybe he followed her to the park without her knowledge and trailed her until they reached a spot well out of range of anyone else. We can’t be sure.”

“You’re sure that was him in the Outback?”

“Very sure. Neighbors even recognize him as a regular at Whisman’s. Not only that, but we found his fingerprints in the victim’s car.”

“Outstanding work. So the D.A. is willing to charge based on that? It seems thin. There’s no forensic evidence tying him to the crime. The prints could be there from long ago.”

“There’s no forensic evidence tying anyone to the crime, but somebody did it. He had motive and lied about his whereabouts at the time of death. We’ve asked him to come in and we’ll interview him again. If he lies again and we can prove it, the D.A. says he’ll prosecute.”

“When’s that scheduled for?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“I’d like to be there.”

“Sorry. The sheriff says no one but us in the room. I’ll send you the tape, though. It’ll be videoed.”

“Not good enough. I at least have to be watching live from outside the room. You’re planning to arrest based in part on our investigation. I need the stat and need to be present at the arrest. The SAC will be livid if the FBI isn’t credited.”

“All right, I suppose that’ll be okay. Be here by 9:30. He’s coming in at 10:00.”

Ellen harrumphed at this, but said nothing. After a long thirty seconds of silence she said, “We’ll keep on working on the phone records. We’ve got the location data now on both Jo and Bruce. Her phone went dead at 2:43 PM a week ago last Wednesday. That should give a pretty good time of death.”

“Good. The D.A. will want the timeline.”

“His phone was in his house all that day according to the data.”

“So he left it home intentionally so as not to create a record, or he took a burner phone we don’t know about.”

“I’m going to have to present this to the U.S. Attorney’s office now that an arrest is imminent.”

“This is a local case. There’s no way the D.A. will let them take it away.”

“All right. I suppose that’ll be okay,” Ellen said, parroting his words. They both laughed.

As soon as she hung up, she told Matt of the news and together they went into the supervisor’s office. He, in turn, called the SAC to let her know.

Her next step was to call U.S. Attorney’s Office and let them know about the arrest. The AUSA took her call and listened.

“That’s not enough. They’ll need a confession or some blockbuster new forensic evidence like DNA.”

“Yeah. So you aren’t going to try to pull rank and take the case are you?”

“I can’t try it on that. It’s better off in state court. If they blow the local prosecution, maybe by then you can bring me something I can actually take to grand jury on federal charges.”

“Roger that.”

-o0o-

The next morning Ellen was sitting at a monitor looking in at the interview of Bruce Boylan with Detective Walton and a female detective she had met only that morning, the person who’d helped review video from Horowitz’s house. Boylan was by himself. She listened as the interview audio feed was played into her headset.

WALTON: Bruce, thanks for coming in again. This is detective Kassab. I know you wanted to be kept apprised of all developments, and there have been some.

BOYLAN: Absolutely. Thank you for keeping me in the loop.

WALTON: Can we get you anything – coffee, soda?

BOYLAN: No thanks. I had coffee on the drive up here.

WALTON: All right then. Let's get right to it. Just so you know, we're working with the FBI on this. We've been looking at the phone records. You gave us permission for yours, you recall.

BOYLAN: Sure, I did.

WALTON: And you'll be happy to know that we've been able to confirm that you were in contact with Jo by phone three months ago like you said. So we know you were telling us the truth about that. [*This is information Ellen knew came from her.*]

BOYLAN: Okay, good. Like I told you, we reconciled.

WALTON: And we saw a neighbor's video that confirmed your truck was at your house all day on the day Jo died.

BOYLAN: I told you the truth.

WALTON: We'd like to talk to any other relatives or friends she may have had in the area, or even people she interacted with like at stores, beauty shops or whatever. Do you know of any?

BOYLAN: No, I really don't. I'm the only relative in Northern California. You already know about her aunt and cousins down near L.A. She only visited the house a few times and we didn't talk about her mom's family because, well, they don't like me. It's a sore spot. I don't think she knows anyone in Watsonville besides me. She mostly lives in her car or camps, like I told you. She stayed overnight twice at my house, I think it was. She's really into camping and hiking. She has one of those camera things that strap on. She posts videos online, she told me.

WALTON: Okay, that's very helpful. You mentioned that you had a girlfriend who stays off and on there.

BOYLAN: Yes, but she wasn't there the day you said she died.

WALTON: Did she ever meet Jo?

BOYLAN: No. I'm pretty sure. I think I would have remembered that.

WALTON: Can we have her name, please. We may need to talk to her.

BOYLAN: Margaret Whisman. She's pretty busy. She's an attorney. You'll have to make an appointment. Can you let me know that you'll be contacting her first? I don't want her to freak out. Here's her phone number. [Boylan writes it on a pad.]

WALTON: Sure. There's no rush with her.

BOYLAN: I told you that she couldn't confirm where I was that day.

WALTON: Is she handling the estate for you?

BOYLAN: Yes, as a matter of fact, she is. That's what she does is wills and stuff like that.

WALTON: Oh, was there a will?

BOYLAN: No, but I'm next of kin. I inherit the house. Except her aunt filed some objection or something. It could take some time to get it all straightened out.

WALTON: I'm glad you mentioned about her not being there that day. I know you told us this already, but I want to go over everything again for the record. As you probably know, we always have to eliminate family and close friends in cases like this, so I'd like to record this interview. Is that okay with you?

BOYLAN: Sure. I have nothing to hide.

[Walton pushed a dummy button to make him think the recording was just starting.]

WALTON: Okay. So we're recording now. Just for the record, can you confirm that you came in today voluntarily and that you are not under any duress or pressure from us.

BOYLAN: Absolutely. I wanted to be here. You offered me coffee, too.

WALTON: Yes, we did. [Both detectives grin] And you know that you're free to go if you like. You're not here in custody.

BOYLAN: Yeah, that's right.

WALTON: So please tell us where you were all day on Wednesday two weeks ago, the date Jo went into the campground.

BOYLAN: I was home all day by myself.

WALTON: At your house?

BOYLAN: Yes.

WALTON: Did you go out at all during the day, even for a walk, or to go to the store?

BOYLAN: No. I remember, because someone called me the day after she went missing and told me that she had seen a news announcement about Jo being missing, so it was fresh in my mind then. I was thinking that I wished she'd come to visit since she was in the area and I'd been home.

KASSAB: Who called you? You said no one else knew her.

BOYLAN: Oh, well, it was Margaret. She never met Jo, not regular, I mean, but she knew that I'd seen her and knew the name, so when the park people announcement said the car had stayed overnight and she might be missing, she called me.

KASSAB: Why didn't you call the ranger number or the police then?

BOYLAN: I didn't have any information. I hadn't seen her for months.

WALTON: Do you have any other vehicles besides your Ford truck?

BOYLAN: A bicycle.

WALTON: No other cars or trucks or motor vehicles?

BOYLAN: No.

WALTON: How about your girlfriend's car. What does she drive?

BOYLAN: She has a Mercedes. Sometimes I drive that, especially if we go out.

WALTON: Does she have any other vehicles?

BOYLAN: No.

KASSAB: She doesn't own a Subaru Outback?

BOYLAN: [nervously] Oh, that. That's her son's car. He uses it sometimes when he comes in from back east and stays with her. Why are you asking about that?

KASSAB: [shows him a still photo from a security camera video] This is a picture of you driving that Subaru the day of the murder. You lied to us.

Boylan studied the photo a long time and began sweating profusely. Walton then read him his Miranda warnings and told him he was being placed under arrest for the murder of Jocelyn Boylan. Boylan said he wanted a lawyer. That cut off the questioning. He was asked if he wanted to call Whisman, and he said he did. After searching him and taking away his keys, they let him make the call in private, and then took him away for processing. The arrest was made.

Ellen called Matt and told him to set the ball rolling uphill. The squad supervisor, ASAC, and SAC would need to know. The sheriff's department would probably make an announcement. She stuck around

to get mugshots and other booking information and to debrief Walton and Kassab. Before the day was over, a criminal defense lawyer named Schuler contacted the sheriff's office demanding to see his client, Bruce Boylan. He was allowed an attorney-client visit at the Redwood City jail.

Ellen returned to the Palo Alto FBI office and was congratulated by her supervisor and fellow agents for the quick solution and arrest on the murder case. She filled in the statistical accomplishment form claiming the arrest. She went home glowing and told Cliff, who added his kudos. When the conviction would later take place, she would get another accomplishment stat and maybe a performance award.

Part Three

Chapter 20

Cliff was in his office arguing with Maeva, his partner, about whether to put Ashley on part-time. When Cliff had opened the agency, it was just he and Maeva. She was then an assistant, not an investigator. He'd promoted her to investigator and later hired his niece Ashley as secretary. The work had expanded in volume and since Cliff's kids were born, he'd been spending less time on case work. He'd made her partner. But when the pandemic hit, work dropped off dramatically. He paid no attention to the phone ringing. That's what Ashley was there for.

"Cliff, it's a phone call for you," Ashley said over the intercom. "Len Schuler." Ashley expected him to tell her to take a message, but he punched a button on his desk phone to answer.

"Len! My man! It's been too long. You want to grab lunch?"

Len Schuler had been the Branch Chief at the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Jose when Cliff had been in the FBI. Len had been the best AUSA he's ever worked with, a principled attorney and skilled in the courtroom. He was also a bulldog. He and Cliff had become close friends and remained so even after Cliff retired and Len went into criminal defense, although their paths hadn't crossed much in the last couple of years.

"Hello, Cliff. It has been too long and I do want to grab lunch. How about in an hour at Café Vitale?"

"You're on. So what else is new? Grandchildren?"

"My daughter is expecting."

"That's wonderful."

"How are your kids? Tommy must be a terror now."

"Terrific, more like it. Hey, I'm in the middle of something. Let's catch up at lunch."

"Okay, see you there in an hour."

Cliff found a parking spot in the Loyola Corners lot and entered the cozy bistro, known for its excellent food and Italian wines. Len was already seated at a table in the back. He stood to greet Cliff and shake hands.

Len was tall and lean, with a mushrooming shock of white hair. He wore an expensive dark suit offset with an outrageously wacky brightly-colored tie. Although the same height, Cliff outweighed Len by fifty pounds, mostly hard muscle, although his waistband size had gone up by the same amount his chest size had gone down in the last few years. In contrast to Len's white hair, Cliff's hair was still dark, although gray hairs slithered into the open here and there. Not expecting any meetings today, he wore only slacks and a polo shirt. They sat and the waiter came by with menus and water.

"How's the practice?" Cliff asked.

"Well. I'm considering hiring a third associate and Amy is now a partner. We just got a really interesting new case."

"Super." Cliff didn't like the way that last sentence had been delivered. Len knew that Cliff and Maeva didn't do criminal defense work. Their practice was mostly corporate personnel vetting, work for civil lawyers over corporate espionage, copyright violations, and similar work. Len had put a tease into the sentence like he wanted Cliff to ask about it, which is why Cliff didn't.

"You always liked a good case," Len continued.

"Hmm. The food here is excellent. The lasagna is especially good."

"You're not going to ask?"

"Len. C'mon. You know I don't do criminal defense. Didn't you once tell me that eighty percent of your clients tell you a guilty story and at least eighty percent of the rest are lying to you?"

"I did. You were a math major before law school, weren't you?"

"Good memory. I'm sorry but I can't do differential equations for you, if that's what you're after. There's a reason I switched to law."

"Do the math. That's maybe four percent who are innocent."

"Len ... let's just have a good lunch. Don't spoil it by making me turn you down."

Schuler sat quietly for a few moments, then picked up the menu.

"Okay. You recommend the lasagna?"

"It's very good. So is the Tuscan Chicken sandwich if you want something lighter."

The waiter returned and the conversation devolved to food and drink. Schuler ordered the lasagna and a glass of chianti. Cliff went for the Tuscan chicken and a beer.

“So, have you heard from any of the old gang from the Fischer case?”

Cliff’s most intense week in the FBI was during the kidnapping of Carl Fischer, the president of a local high tech company. He’d been taken at gunpoint and held for ransom. Cliff had been the first responder. Len had been the legal advisor on the case before the district attorney took it over. The story had been turned into a novel and Cliff had achieved some notoriety.

“Not lately. You’re pretty much the only one left. All the agents moved out of the area after retirement. It’s so much cheaper elsewhere and none of them were from here originally, unlike you. The AUSA’s are now all in big white shoe firms doing civil work.”

“Yeah, that’s how it is with me. I miss working with you, though. You really covered my ass back then. I didn’t exactly follow orders.”

“So you’re saying you owe me big time?”

“Now now, don’t go there again.”

The drinks came and then the food. The two old friends caught up and exchanged war stories for the next hour, some of them actually true. Cliff, his tongue loosened by the food and beer, and feeling secure since Schuler had dropped the subject, finally succumbed to his innate curiosity.

“So what is so interesting about this case you mentioned?”

“My client is accused of a murder he didn’t commit.”

“And you know he’s not part of the ninety-six percent how?”

“He has a rock-solid alibi.”

“So tell the police and get the charges dropped. If it’s rock-solid, that’ll be the end of it.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he was committing another crime at the time. He’s an ex-felon. To prove the alibi I’d have to prove he’s a drug dealer. He’d go back to prison for what’s essentially life.”

“What was the other crime?”

“Drugs, but it’s not as bad as it sounds. Look, can I make this attorney-client?”

“Okay, you’re hiring me for a dollar as a consulting investigator for this hour, and you’re buying lunch, but that’s all.”

“His partner had surgery and ended up addicted to fentanyl. When the doctor cut her off after surgery she turned to heroin. That was before she got together with my client. She’s a respected professional with no connections and was buying off the street at great personal risk and cost. Then she met my client. He’s been clean since he got out but he had connections, so when they got together, he began picking up heroin for her at near wholesale. He doesn’t use and he doesn’t make any money with this. She’s supporting him and paying my bills because he lost his job during the pandemic and she’s wealthy, but that’s not why he’s doing it. He’s just a good guy helping his girlfriend. But he was picking up heroin for her on the day of the murder. To reveal that would not only send him back to prison, it would also ruin her. She’d at least be suspended from practice, maybe disbarred.”

“So she’s a lawyer.”

“Yes.”

“It’s a sad tale, Len, but really, you know I’m a hard ass law-and-order guy. This guy may be clean now, but he’s still a druggie breaking the law and you’re asking me to help him. Legally he should be in jail anyway for the drug trafficking, so I can’t get behind this being such a big injustice. He should have helped her get into rehab, not buy drugs for her. I’m out, I’m afraid.”

“Look, I’ve had hundreds of clients over the years and never asked you to help on any because I know that’s your view, even though I think you’re the best investigator out there. Those clients were guilty. But this time is different. He’s being charged with a murder he didn’t commit. Just meet with Bruce once. You’ll change your mind. You’ll see he’s a decent person.”

“Bruce? You’re not representing Bruce Boylan, are you?”

“Yes, how’d you know?”

“Hell, that’s Ellen’s case.”

“Ellen? It’s being prosecuted locally, in San Mateo County. What does the FBI have to do with it?”

“He stashed the body ... or somebody stashed the body on federal land. Ellen responded with Matt Nguyen. You remember him from the Fischer case, don’t you? She’s getting credit in the FBI for solving the murder case.”

“I’m sorry to tell you, but she got it wrong. He’s innocent.”

“How do you know that this story is true? Maybe he’s lying ... or his girlfriend is or both.”

“He told me the name of his supplier. He’s a former client of mine. Call him Mr. X. I didn’t tell Bruce that, but I called him to check out the story. We’re still in an attorney-client relationship, Mr. X and me, I mean. So I asked him if he knew Bruce Boylan. He said he did. I asked him if he had dealings with him recently. He said he gave him heroin in exchange for services two weeks ago, the day of the murder. Boylan was his backup when he went to meet the Mexican guys who brought it in. They met up in Visalia. They left the Watsonville area around seven A.M. and weren’t back until after ten at night. I asked what car they drove. He said it was a green Outback Boylan borrowed from his girlfriend. Mr. X didn’t want to use his car because he’s on parole and can’t go out of the area without permission from the PO. If he got a ticket or even just had his plate run it would pop up in the system. They took mostly back roads to avoid traffic cameras and highway patrol. This all matches up with Bruce’s story.”

“Can you get him to testify about it?”

“No chance. As his lawyer, I wouldn’t let him. He’s not supposed to leave the Santa Cruz area without notifying his parole officer and he’s not supposed to associate with known ex-felons, like Boylan. Either would send him back to prison for a long stretch.”

“Jesus, Ellen would be devastated if she helped send an innocent man to prison for murder.”

“I know she would. She’s got a conscience. You can prevent that.”

“How? What do you expect me to do?”

“Find whoever killed Jo. The victim was his own daughter. He’s not just being charged with a crime he didn’t commit; he’s also heartbroken over the death of his daughter. Don’t think of him as a druggie or a dealer. Think of him as the father of a murdered child.”

“I have to tell you I spoke to the probate lawyer who handled the victim’s mother’s estate. I was helping Ellen locate someone to identify the body. She says that Bruce was an absentee father, basically a scumbag.”

“Maybe he was when she knew him, I don’t know, but he’s a decent guy now. Judge him harshly if you want, but at least think of Ellen.”

Cliff was thinking of Ellen. He was thinking a lot. He was also thinking of a case he’d had early in his career in the FBI where he’d worked with the local police on a bank robbery case. They’d caught the robber on one case and confirmed through photos and forensics that he’d done three other earlier robberies in the area. Then he’d learned that the robber was being charged with a fifth robbery in the same area. Cliff had found that to be a closed case in FBI files. He pulled out the file and saw that the robber in that one looked a lot like the guy they caught this time, but it wasn’t the same guy. Reading the file he discovered the robber in the closed case had been caught in Texas and confessed to the California robbery along with ones in Texas. He was sitting in federal prison, but the California police didn’t know about it and thought that fifth robbery was unsolved. They were charging the new guy, the wrong guy, with it. The FBI case agent at the time should have told them of the confession and conviction, but somehow the lines of communication didn’t work. When Cliff had told the local police about it, that the current robber hadn’t committed that fifth robbery, they said they didn’t care. They had an open case and they’ve now solved it with this latest arrest. They could close it with a conviction. Whether this guy went to prison for four robberies he did or five including one he didn’t, the sentence would be the same. They needed the stat and the defendant wouldn’t be hurt. That was when Cliff had learned how easy it was with some police to get charged with a crime you didn’t commit. He had not been able to convince the police to drop that fifth case and the robber was convicted of it even though the actual robber was in prison in Texas. That case had gnawed at Cliff for a long time. He didn’t want Ellen to go through that, and it would be a lot more serious in a murder case. Ellen was a former nun. She would be wracked with guilt.

“Let me think about it.”

“All right. I won’t pressure you anymore. Get back to me by the end of the week. If you still say no, I’ll need to find someone else. And you can’t tell Ellen anything I told you today. It’s privileged.”

“I know.”

Len pulled out a dollar and handed it to Cliff. “Here’s your fee. I’ll catch the bill. It’s great seeing you again, whatever your decision.”

“You too.”

Back at the office Cliff contemplated telling Maeva about the offer from Len. He wanted her advice and perspective. A murder investigation was very time-intensive. He’d be putting in a lot of hours for certain, and it would actually mean she’d have to carry more of the load since he couldn’t do the regular corporate work. Right now the workload was light, but they had some prospects pending. Maeva would also be able to help him look at it from Ellen’s viewpoint, from a woman’s perspective. These were important issues, but she wasn’t covered by attorney-client privilege, not until he agreed to take the case. The situation gnawed at him all afternoon. He went home without telling her a thing.

At home he waited until after the children had gone to bed. He decided to try to get an idea of what her reaction would be without revealing anything. Ellen sat at the kitchen table eating a late dessert – rocky road ice cream topped with whipped cream from a spray can. She appeared to be enjoying every minute of it.

“How’s the case going, the murder case?”

“Fine. I spent all day putting together a timeline from cell phone records.”

“Of the subject or the victim?” The word “subject” in FBI-speak referred to the main suspect once he is confirmed as the target of the investigation.

“Both. I thought my eyes would fall out of my head by the time I was done. The numbers were all blurring together by the end. I never knew there were so many cell towers. Maybe you can help me proof it later. I think something’s off. There’s this weird backtrack at the end.”

This took Cliff by surprise. If he took the case for Len and he’d seen her investigation product outside of legitimate discovery, that would be unethical and illegal. It could put Ellen at risk of losing her

job, or at least severe discipline, like a transfer to Bozeman. “Uh, no, I really shouldn’t. You should get Matt to do it with you.”

“You ‘really shouldn’t’? Since when are you so particular? You’re ex-FBI. It’s just a bunch of numbers and place names on a sheet. It’ll take twenty minutes. It’s not like we haven’t bent the rules before.”

“What do you think about this guy Boylan?”

“What do I think of him? A man kills his daughter for her property and you have to ask? He’s a scumbag. He used to be a doper, too.”

“So there’s no doubt in your mind he’s the killer?”

“The case is thin, I’ll grant you. The AUSA wouldn’t authorize on it. But it’s a local case prosecution. They made the decision to go on it.”

“You might have to testify. How would you feel if he’s not the killer?”

“What is it with you tonight, all existential? It’s my case. It’s my job to investigate. I’m investigating. Look, he has the motive; he lied about his whereabouts. He was seen in a car meeting the description ...”

“Whoa, hold it. I don’t need to know all the evidence. You shouldn’t be telling me.”

“Well, excuuuse me. You started it.”

“Never mind. I shouldn’t have asked. I just worry about you sometimes.”

“Well, right now I’m worried about you. You’re acting all weird. Is something going on?”

“Let’s just watch TV.”

“Fine. I’m done with dessert.”

Chapter 21

As Shakespeare observed, sleep knits up the raveled sleeve of care, and that night it did for Cliff. He awoke with a clarity he'd totally lacked the night before. He had to find the real killer for Ellen's sake. Maybe it was Boylan, but he believed Len. It was possible Boylan knew Schuler had represented Mr. X, anticipated that Len would call him to check out his story, and briefed him on every possible question Len might ask and have him memorize the answers, but Cliff knew that was so implausible as to be nearly impossible. He felt sure Len had done a good job of verifying Boylan's story.

He said nothing to Ellen in the morning about his decision. After the kids were off to school and the nanny set to pick them up, he headed to the office. Maeva was there ahead of him as usual, working on background investigations for new hires at a client. He walked straight to her desk. Ashley wasn't there, which was all for the good.

He cleared his throat as she looked up. "I have to let you know. I'm going to take another murder case."

"What!? We can't. While you were lollygagging with your buddy, I got a call. Google accepted our bid for vetting new hires. They said they're sending over fifteen candidate names tomorrow. The Klein case was fun, I know, but we can't afford another murder right now. You have money. This firm is your toy. It's my livelihood. If we renege on Google, we're going to lose some major clients."

"So don't renege; and don't fall behind."

Maeva sighed heavily, but she was in no position to argue. Cliff was the senior partner and could do whatever he wanted. She had to trust he'd protect her.

"I won't be able to help you on this one. I'll have to do my regular work and the new Google stuff, too. Why are you doing this, anyway? You keep saying we don't do criminal defense, but then you agree to one."

"It's not criminal defense. It's innocent person defense."

"Oh, for Criminy sakes. Criminal. It's just a word. I heard that somewhere recently So what's the case? Who are you defending?"

"Bruce Boylan."

"Boylan? That's Ellen's case, isn't it?"

“It is. I can’t let her send an innocent man to prison for life. It would destroy her when the truth came out. I’ll get the contract signed today and brief you on it when I get back.”

In Schuler’s Palo Alto office Cliff obtained the necessary signatures and a hundred grand advance. This meant Boylan’s girlfriend must have given him at least twice that as an advance. That guaranteed a free hand in the investigation at least for a while, and would keep Maeva happy, but it wouldn’t last all that long. A major murder case would cost around a million dollars to defend right, much of it on investigations and experts.

Once the formalities were over, Len told him more about his client and his daughter. In plain unvarnished fashion he related the following biography. Bruce was dyslexic and a slow learner. He managed to graduate from high school, but barely. He was a big kid and played offensive lineman on the high school football team. In after hours he hung out with some guys with a garage band and learned how to set up the equipment. He also got into drugs, mostly just marijuana, but some pills and LSD, too. His high school girlfriend, Liz, was a year younger. She was a good student. She waitressed during high school in the evenings and still got good grades. When she graduated from high school, she started full-time in the restaurant and she got pregnant. By then Bruce was more heavily into the rock music scene. She and Bruce married right away and were delighted with Jocelyn’s arrival.

But according to Boylan, Jo had a hard life. Bruce and Liz both dabbled in drugs when they were young. Liz gave them up when she got pregnant with Jo, but took up heavy drinking after the birth. Bruce had a good job as a roadie for a successful rock band. He lugged sound equipment and doubled as security. He was gone most of the time. The drugs were plentiful there and so was the sex. He helped the band members get the drugs they wanted through his connections. Liz divorced him when she’d had enough of his touring and cheating. Bruce got picked up in a drug raid and did almost ten years hard time.

For a while he did make child support payments as he was supposed to. Of course the child support payments stopped when he went to prison. Fortunately he owed no alimony since his wife made more money than he did, as a manager at a restaurant. He got religion in prison, gave up drugs and got out clean, but with no job and limited

skills. He took a job on a cruise ship handling audio equipment for the bands there. That lasted several years. By that time his wife had remarried. Henderson, the new husband, was a wealthy businessman who treated both Liz and Jo badly, but he died young and left Liz the house. The rest went to his kids from a prior marriage. According to Bruce, Liz was no prize as a mother, berating Jo mercilessly when she'd been drinking.

Bruce bounced around from job to job, mostly within the music scene: bartender, sound tech at a nightclub, bouncer, and so forth. He met his girlfriend, Margaret Whisman, at a club. She'd been a big Nirvana fan and there had been a tribute band playing, at least that was what she had said. Bruce stayed clean after prison. Whisman had been drug-free until she'd had an operation for breast cancer. That was prior to meeting Bruce. Her chronic post-operative pain was treated too aggressively by the doctor and she became hooked on fentanyl. When the doctor cut her off, she turned to heroin or a mix of both, buying it on the street. That's when she started frequenting rock clubs, knowing that there were usually drug sources there. She approached Bruce and that's how it started. Although he was clean, he knew who the connections were. Margaret was younger, richer, and better looking than he could possibly have hoped for, and he genuinely felt sorry for her. He became her supplier and eventually her boyfriend. He never supplied anyone else with drugs after his conviction, nor did he make any profit from the drugs he brought Margaret.

When the pandemic hit, the work in the clubs dried up, but probate work increased at a steady clip with all the deaths, and Margaret's firm expanded. She became very wealthy, largely due to winning a contingency fee on a hundred-million dollar will contest. She has continued to support him since then, but held him at arm's length since he doesn't exactly fit in with her legal circles.

Liz died early in the pandemic from the coronavirus. Jo inherited the house in Morro Bay. This happened right after she lost her job in the movie theater. There were still mortgage payments due on the house and she had no way to pay for them except to rent the house out. The loan was over twenty years old, so the principal was nearly paid off and after refinancing, the payments were very low. Rents, on the other

hand, had skyrocketed during that time, so she could easily live on what was left of the rent after paying the taxes and mortgage.

That was when Jo started a new phase of her life. She began driving around the country exploring. She did some research and found Bruce living in Watsonville. He was delighted to reconnect, but was embarrassed about his unemployment and his modest surroundings. She told him that she liked to hike and make videos and upload them to YouTube. She had a lot of good camping gear and mostly lived out of her car. She didn't have a boyfriend or any close friends, she said. She would visit every few months, but then go off again driving all over the western U.S. and Canada. Her last visit was about three months ago. Then Margaret called him and told him she saw that Jo had been found dead. He knows nothing about who killed her or why. The story of where he was that day had already been explained; he was buying heroin for Margaret.

Cliff recorded the whole tale as Len related it. He digested it for a moment then asked, "Do you have a link to her YouTube account?"

"No. Bruce doesn't use a computer. He has a flip phone and knows how to text, but that's the extent of his tech knowledge. Frankly, he's not very bright. He's never seen one of her videos. I typed her name into the YouTube search box myself but got nothing related to her. I don't know what name she uses for that."

"What's your theory on the killing?"

"I think it was a random encounter with another hiker, a crime of opportunity. It might have been an intended rape, but more likely a robbery. All her stuff disappeared."

"Do you have any idea what she had with her? It might be possible to find someone trying to sell it on eBay or someplace."

"No. I haven't received any discovery yet. From what I'm hearing, nothing was recovered. Unless Bruce can tell you, or you find those videos, I don't know how to find that out."

"I'll need to interview him. Can you arrange that?"

"He's in jail, but a bail hearing is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. Whisman says she'll put up the money, assuming bail is granted. If you can wait a few days you'll be able to get some privacy and more time with him."

“Okay, I can get started without that, but if bail is denied, I’ll need to get in to see him fast. You have his phone number. Records should show his location if it was turned on. You should be able to show him traveling to Visalia. You don’t have to say what he was doing there.”

“I thought of that. He left his normal phone home on the charger. Mr. X brought along a burner phone. That’s all they used.”

“You can argue he was home all day with that.”

“No. He told the detectives that’s where he was, but the affidavit for the complaint said that he was observed and recorded on video driving Whisman’s car during that time.”

“Ah. Lying to the police will get you probable cause. How about Jo’s phone? He has her number, so the police must have it, too, even if they don’t have the phone itself. They’ll have gotten the CDR and cell tower data. I need that. You aren’t hiring me to prove he wasn’t capable of doing it. You’re hiring me to investigate her and how she got killed. Can you get that first off?”

Cliff of course knew that Ellen had those phone records and had tried to get him to look at them. Now he was going to have to hope Len could pry them from the D.A. Ellen had spent hours mapping out the victim’s route but she couldn’t share that with him now. He’d only get the raw data from the carrier, not the mapping work Ellen did. He’d have to do the exact same work she did. That’s how litigation worked. Make the other side expend as much money and resources as possible.

“I asked the judge to order expedited discovery at the initial appearance. She didn’t order those records specifically, but the D.A. said he’d provide police reports by the end of the day today.”

“That’s good, and I’ll need them, but I already know a lot of that from Ellen. That’s mostly going to be stuff that points to your client. You need it more for your defense preparations. For me, those phone records are the most important thing to start on, at least until I can talk to Bruce.”

“Let me call right now. Maybe I can get those added to the package. The D.A.’s a decent sort.” Schuler picked up the phone and called the Assistant District Attorney handling the prosecution. They’d faced off before so he had his direct line number. He dialed. On the fourth ring, it was answered.

"Toki." Thomas Toki, great-grandson of Japanese immigrants, had inevitably been called Tom Turkey in elementary school.

"Tom, it's Len Schuler."

"So the screen on my phone tells me. You calling about the discovery?"

"I am. I was hoping you can include the phone records on the victim, both the CDR and the cell tower data."

"I don't know if we have that. I'll have to call the detective."

"I've got an investigator and he needs that to get started. I know the sheriff has it. If he doesn't, I know the FBI agent helping on the case, Ellen Kennedy, does."

"How do you know that?"

"I was an AUSA. I have my sources."

"If you're trying to impress me, it's not working. Your man is guilty. If he comes forward, we'll ..."

"Save it. He's innocent."

"So where was he at the time of the murder? And don't tell me at home. Has he concocted another lie yet?"

"Sometimes people just don't like the police prying into their personal affairs, so they fudge."

"Fudging? That's what you call it? You do know, don't you, that if you're going to claim an alibi defense, you're required to tell us where he was well in advance so we can check it out before trial."

"We won't even get to trial. Charges will be dismissed before we get that far."

"Dream on. "

"What about the phone records?"

"Let me put you on hold. I was just talking to the detective. I'll try to get him back."

"Okay."

While they were waiting for Toki, Schuler asked Cliff how he was going to explain to Ellen that he was now working for the defense. Cliff owned that he had no idea. Schuler apologized for putting him in a difficult position.

"Len, you there?"

"I'm here."

"I got the detective. He'll include the call detail and cell tower data in the packet. It'll be messengered over to your office by the end of the day."

"That's fine. I appreciate it."

"See you in court."

"Until then."

Cliff left Len's office and headed directly to the bank to deposit the retainer check. From there he returned to his own office. He showed the deposit slip to Maeva, who beamed, then gave it to Ashley to enter the data into the ledger.

There wasn't much he could do until he got the packet, so he helped Maeva with some of the paperwork on her personnel investigations. She asked if he'd told Ellen that he was taking the Boylan case yet and he told her no. At five o'clock Schuler called him and said he had the discovery packet in hand and was having a copy made for Cliff. He asked if he could drop it off on his way home.

"Can you drop it off at my house? I'm getting ready to head out."

"Sure. Same address as before?"

"Yes."

"Have you told Ellen yet?"

"No. I'll tell her tonight, after you leave."

"Okay. That's not a place I want to be when you do."

Chapter 22

My deal for the *Survivor* show was now signed. Sherri, my agent, said I needed to get more buff. She had a doctor who could sculpt my abs with lipo or even implants, but I wasn't ready for that. I did get a personal trainer and started hitting the gym regularly. I also ate like a grizzly to convert the calories to muscle. My trainer provided the necessary diet details.

After taking a few days off, I realized I had to go back to geocaching, too. My fans were posting comments which could be taken as ribbing or a shiv in the ribs depending on how you read them. Basically they were asking if I was a real geocacher and why wasn't I still out there finding caches. Of course the views dropped considerably after the challenge, but that was expected.

I saw on the local forums that a new cache over in San Jose was getting a lot of favorites, so I figured that would make a good vlog target. It was a two-stage multi. The first stage was in north San Jose. The hint said having to bring a friend was a good idea, but I'm hard core. I knew I could find a way to do it myself. A few cachers had already done so.

I gathered up my stuff, drove to the trailhead site and recorded a short intro, acting really excited to be out geocaching again. I talked about the buzz this cache was getting and the favorites points it had already accumulated. The trail led north along the east side of the Guadalupe River. The west side of the river was Santa Clara. I hiked for about a mile and arrived at the site of the first stage. The cache was hidden in a clever box, no doubt printed on one of those 3D printers, that resembled an old style transistor radio. It was in the bushes next to the river, and not hard to find. Knobs and dials were painted on the outside. My parents had one of those radios. Of course I filmed it from all sides and showed the craftsmanship, praising the owner's cleverness. When I opened it, I was in for a surprise. There were laminated instructions for Stage Two. The coordinates were given, of course, but there was also a widget attached with a cord to the instructions. The second stage was only three hundred feet away, which had been stated on the cache page. But what had not been stated was that it was on the other side of the river.

I examined the widget. It was a radio transmitter, similar to a car's key fob or garage door opener. There were also spare batteries. According to the instructions, if the cache on the other side was brought to the river's edge in the open, and the same for the transmitter on this side, it would work to open the radio-controlled locked cache, but the range wasn't sufficient to open the cache itself in its current position. If you didn't have a partner walking the other side able to bring the cache to the river's edge, you had to take the transmitter with you, cross to the other side somewhere, use it to open the cache, then bring the transmitter back to this side. That's evil.

The nearest footbridge over the river was about a mile and a half away. That meant I had to go three miles just to find the cache, three miles back to return the opener widget to Stage One, then walk the mile back to the car. I'd been expecting a two mile out-and-back cache and ended up with a seven-miler. The joke was on me, but it was actually great for the vlog. I acted all chagrined and embarrassed that I'd been fooled, but I knew the video would be awesome.

I made the trek, went home and showered, then put together the video. I threw together dinner then went over to Nicole's. Her place was nicer than mine. After a roll in the hay, she suggested I move in with her. I was of two minds about it, but I was jazzed that she'd asked. I told her I'd have to see how that would work with my public appearance schedule, training for *Survivor*, and all the rest, but that I thought I could make it work.

We watched some Netflix and then the late local news. We turned on in the middle of a story about the Boylan case. The announcer said that Bruce Boylan had made his initial court appearance yesterday. His lawyer was standing on the courthouse steps saying he was looking forward to proving his client's innocence. I don't like to watch the news anymore because of these stories. I never wanted someone else to go to jail for what I did. I just didn't want anyone – especially me – to go to jail for it. It was totally her own fault. How incompetent are the cops that they arrested her own father for it? And the FBI, too. I wish there was some way I could let the cops know they have the wrong man without implicating myself, but I couldn't think of any. Thinking about this made me queasy. I changed the channel.

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Ellen got home from work earlier than Cliff for once, so when he came in, she greeted him with a big hug and a kiss. This cast a blanket of guilt over him since he knew she was going to feel betrayed very soon. He reciprocated as best he could and headed for the kitchen where the kids were already eating dinner. Tonight was leftover night and they were playing more food shuffleboard than actual eating. He grabbed a beer and waited. He knew Len couldn't be far behind, and he was right.

The doorbell rang and he rushed to answer it before Ellen. He opened the door. Schuler stood on the welcome mat, thick packet in hand. Ellen was only a step behind Cliff.

"Hello, can we help you?" she said.

He handed the packet to Cliff, who interjected, "Ellen, this is Len. He's a lawyer I'm working with."

Schuler retired from the U.S. Attorney's office a few years before Cliff retired from the FBI, so Ellen had never worked with him. He'd been to the house once before Cliff and Ellen had married, at a housewarming party when Cliff and his first wife had moved in, but he'd never met Ellen.

"Hello, Ellen. It's a pleasure to meet you. I admire the FBI tremendously."

"Oh. Thank you. Won't you come in?"

"I'm afraid he's in a rush," Cliff blurted.

"Cliff! Don't be rude."

"No, Ellen, he's right," Schuler replied. "I really don't have time. I just needed Cliff to get this tonight. It was nice putting a face to the name. Bye." He gave a little wave as he turned and walked back to his car.

Ellen stood perplexed for a moment, watching him go. "Well, that was awkward. You should have at least invited him in. He could always beg off if he was in a hurry. You didn't have to make him feel unwelcome."

"He told me he didn't want to be here."

"What? So he's the rude one?"

“No, he just didn’t want to be here when I told you about the case we’re working on.”

“Oh no. Don’t tell me you’re working on another criminal case. You get all obsessed and don’t have time for us or your other work. You travel all over and I have use my vacation days to take care of the kids when the nanny’s off. Tell me it’s not a murder case.”

“It is a murder case.”

“Hell’s bells. Cliff, ... not again.”

“It’s the Boylan case. I’m working to defend Bruce Boylan.”

“Kidding around isn’t helping. I don’t want you running off to ...”

“I’m not kidding,” Cliff broke in. “I’m really working to defend Boylan. He didn’t kill his daughter.”

Ellen froze in disbelief. When she recovered enough to talk, she sputtered, “You don’t have to do this. We don’t need the money. You’ve made a very good living and been a great provider. I don’t think he even has much money.”

“I’m getting paid well, but I’m not doing it for that. I’m doing it for you.”

“For me! What in God’s name are you saying? You’re accusing me of railroading an innocent man? That’s your idea of a kindness to me?”

“Ellen. I love you. I believe in you. But you can make a mistake just like anyone else. Based on the information you have, Boylan does look guilty, but I have information that convinces me otherwise. If it were ever to come out, you’d suffer immeasurably from guilt and self-doubt. I know you. You have too much of a conscience.”

“Or maybe you have too little. You don’t mind undermining your own wife?”

“I’m not undermining you. I’m saving you from a grave mistake. You told me yourself the evidence was thin. If the AUSA wouldn’t prosecute, didn’t that tell you something?”

This gave Ellen pause. She’d had her qualms when Walton said they were ready to arrest. She’d been there when Boylan had lied about being home, then he clammed up and asked for a lawyer when confronted with the picture of him in the Outback. Those were not the actions of an innocent man.

“He didn’t think the evidence would be enough to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt, but he didn’t think Boylan was innocent.”

“He said that?”

“Not exactly ... look, what do you expect me to do? I may have to testify. You expect me to hedge or lie?”

“Of course not. I don’t expect you to do anything. Anything except your job, that is. I’m just going to do what I have to do and that is try to find the killer.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “You do that. And while you’re at it, you can try to find your dinner. And don’t even think about using my work product.” She stormed out.

At least she didn’t say “and try to find a place to sleep tonight,” Cliff thought. He said nothing and returned to the kitchen where the kids had already left a mess. He wiped up the worst of it and pulled some barbecued ribs from the refrigerator. Along with the beer, a raw carrot, and a leftover dinner roll, he’d made himself a serviceable dinner. Ellen hid out in the bedroom until he was out of the kitchen. All in all he was satisfied with the way it had gone. He’d expected a row and gotten a spat.

After dinner he took the evidence packet and sequestered himself in his home office. He didn’t use any of Ellen’s work product because she had already provided him the clue he needed to get started. She’d mentioned something about the telephone records showing a weird backtrack at the end. That was what he wanted to focus on. It was the only evidence anyone had about the last few hours of Jo Boylan’s life.

He spent two hours typing all the cell tower data into a spreadsheet. It had all been provided in paper form. The process was painstaking. On the first sheet he looked at the date column until he found the day she entered Butano State park. The first record of the day was at 7:15AM. Next to it was a number, actually a combination of letters and numbers. That was the cell phone tower that registered the ping. He had to look up that number on a separate sheet. Once he found it in column one of that sheet, he read the description field in column two. It was an abbreviation that he couldn’t understand. So he then had to go to the third column which contained the latitude and longitude of

the tower. He plugged that into GoogleEarthPro. The spot was in central Santa Cruz. Jo must have slept somewhere near there and turned on the phone when she awoke. There was no way to know if she was in a motel or in her car or on the beach. The location was only of the tower, not her phone.

He knew that the phone records ended somewhere in Butano, so he brought up GoogleMaps and scrolled the size slider until Santa Cruz was on the bottom of the screen and Butano's northern edge on the top. Then he did a print screen and printed out the makeshift map. He found the location on the printed map that corresponded with the location of the coordinates on GoogleEarth. He circled it with a dark blue pen. Theoretically she could have been anywhere within several miles of the tower, but in urban areas the providers space towers closer and lower the power to avoid interference, so she probably had to have been within a few hundred yards.

He did the same for the second entry, a ping which turned out to be the same tower ten minutes later. Since it was the same cell tower, he needed only to put in the new time and copy everything else from the first row. After several more pings exactly like this there was a long duration entry, a data usage. She'd logged into something on the Internet on her phone. The tower location was the same, but there were other symbols indicating the connection type. This told him she had probably not stayed in a hotel or motel since they would have had free wi-fi and she likely would have used that rather than her phone data plan.

After that the pings moved to a different downtown Santa Cruz tower about a mile from the first. Cliff circled that. He knew that cell towers often switch calls from one tower to another, especially if the closest tower is busy. Thus, she may not have moved at all. However, she stayed at the second location for an hour or so. He guessed that she ate breakfast somewhere during that time. Then she headed up the coast. The trail of circles was clear. When he plotted the pings ten minutes apart and the tower locations, it was obvious she was traveling at driving speeds.

Then the pings stayed put in Davenport for about forty minutes. Davenport is a quaint little town on the coast about ten miles north of Santa Cruz. Cliff had been there on a geocaching trip once. It had a big

cement plant, a few galleries and antique stores, and not much else. Why had she spent forty minutes there? Maybe that was where she had eaten breakfast. Or maybe she had picked up some food in a market for her lunch to pack in.

She continued up the Coast Highway to Butano State Park, but Cliff noticed something. She'd passed Ano Nuevo State Park without stopping. If she'd wanted to hike in a state park, why not choose the closer one? It also arguably had more scenic hikes since it was on the coast. He had no answers.

He was getting tired of the data logging so he decided to read some of the police reports. The most interesting one was the FD-302 interview report Ellen had provided of her interview with Li and Ng. They were probably the last people other than the killer to have seen Jo alive. They had been re-interviewed by the sheriff's office, but all the important details were in Ellen's report.

They had told Ellen about the Green Subaru parked next to the victim's SUV. They had not provided a license number or other positive identifying information. That was a gaping hole. Maybe there was a log at the ranger's station of plates that could prove it belonged to someone else, but he suspected they had already checked and plates weren't recorded for day passes. Cliff figured he'd find that out in some of the other documents. The woman had called the trail the "fire trail," which was slightly inaccurate. Its correct name was the South Butano Fire Trail, but may have been the term Boylan had used when talking to the woman. That sounded like she wanted to hike in the mountains, maybe to get above the fog or because of the redwoods. That could explain why she passed up Ano Nuevo. The description of the clothing wasn't unique or specific enough to be of much use.

Cliff returned to the phone logs. He'd already spent over an hour and hadn't even gotten to her hike. The next few pings showed that she'd continued steadily all the way into Butano State Park. There was a tower on the coast highway south of the entrance designated eNB ID 31291 and she stayed within range of that for a long time, for hours. When she first arrived, there was some more data usage using that tower. She must have logged onto something. Maybe she was viewing the park website and examining the trail map or something along those lines.

Unfortunately, there were no other cell towers up along the trails or in the park. She'd spent hours pinging or using that one tower. She could have been almost anywhere in the park. Several times her phone records showed data usage, not just pings. She'd logged onto the Internet for some reason, probably while hiking. Maybe she was looking at points of interest, looking up a flower or bug on a site. It wasn't until the afternoon that something changed. Her phone pings were for a different tower, one designated eNB ID 31187. He looked up the designator and mapped it. It was to the north, on Bean Hollow Road, a road outside the park boundary. Had she gone back to her car and driven around to that street? Had the tower software just switched her to another tower for some technical reason? Looking at the map, it seemed possible she had reached the northernmost point on the Fire Trail and was closer to that tower. If so, it had taken her an awfully long time if she had started out right away in the morning. Of course she could have spent the whole morning around the visitor center.

Her phone continued to ping regularly at that northern tower for well over an hour, then the pings reverted to the south tower, the one south of the park entrance. Again, this could be due to some technical reason, but it looked to me that the simplest explanation was that she'd gone to the top of the mountain, stayed there or near there hiking or resting for over an hour and then headed back down the mountain. The pings on the south tower lasted about forty minutes then again the phone started pinging the north tower, where she'd been before. That's where they stopped. Cliff assumed that's where they found the body, but couldn't be sure. The USGS property wasn't shown on the map or on GoogleEarth. It wasn't publicly accessible. This must be the weird backtrack Ellen had mentioned. Had the victim gone back up the mountain after descending for some reason? Had she been killed lower down and the killer taken her phone up the mountain? That didn't make sense. One would expect the killer to get out of there as fast as possible, which meant going downhill to the entrance. But one could never predict what a killer would do. Maybe he took her clothes and phone uphill to a hiding place he knew of to hide it from police well away from the crime scene. Her phone and other property might still be up there.

Cliff decided he was going to have to go there and test out how the phone pings worked. Boylan had carried a Verizon phone and so did Cliff. If he hiked the entire trail and put tracking on his GPS unit, he could match his exact physical location with the tower locations. He didn't see how he could do this in real time, though. How would he know which tower he was pinging as he hiked along? He'd have to do the whole trail with tracking on then request his tower data afterward and compare. Then a thought struck him. Ellen had already been there. She was on the same phone account he was. He could request her data, but that would raise some sticky domestic problems.

Cliff knew from experience that the FBI and police could get cell tower history data, but the consumer could not, at least not without a court order. He considered sending an email to Len that they had to subpoena Verizon for the data. First he decided to do some research. One Google search and he found cellmapper.net. It provided crowdsourced cell data for Verizon. He checked the map. Sure enough, eNB ID 31291 and eNB ID 31187 were shown right there. He could register on the site, download the app, and get real-time tower data as he hiked. He should be able to map out her route, not with great precision, but at least enough to explain the backtracking data.

He decided that was enough for the evening. It was already after ten. Ellen hadn't said a word to him since dinner. He didn't know whether she was just being considerate by letting him work or was giving him the cold shoulder. He walked out to the living room. The kids were in bed already. Ellen was reading. He sat down next to her. She gave him a sidelong glance but didn't talk. He put his arm around her shoulder. For a moment she didn't react, but then she leaned her head on Cliff's shoulder. He leaned his cheek against her head. The world was right again.

Chapter 23

The next morning Cliff emailed Maeva and Ashley that he was going to be out all day on the new case. He didn't tell Ellen where he was going, although she'd find out eventually. He just didn't want to remind her of the fact he was working to prove her wrong.

Ellen left for work and the nanny arrived. Cliff waited for Ellen to be gone before changing into his grubbies. As an experienced geocacher, he had good boots, poles, backpack, and a GPS unit. He made sure his phone was fully charged up and downloaded the cellmapper.net app. He tested it and found it to be working fine. He was determined to retrace Jo Boylan's route on her final day.

It took him an hour to get to the park entrance. The app showed his phone to be logged onto the southern cell tower, eNB ID 31291 as he had expected. At the entrance he paid the ranger for a day use pass. The ranger was Jerry West, a fact Cliff noted from the name tag.

"Hi. I was wondering if I could talk to you a second about the Jo Boylan case."

West looked at him skeptically. "You're blocking the entrance. If you want to talk to me you'll have to pull over to the side."

This was not a good start, but Cliff did as instructed, then walked back. "I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Cliff Knowles. I'm working with Ellen Kennedy on that case."

"Cliff Knowles?" The ranger took a moment to look him over keenly. "You're the guy who saved the state special agent from the mountain lion. I recognize you now from the news coverage. You should have told me before you paid. I would have waved you through."

Cliff's reputation apparently preceded him. "Guilty as charged. And a state park ranger rescued both of us. You guys are the heroes." A little buttering up never hurt.

"Yeah, that was quite a case." West's manner was much warmer now. "How can I help?"

"I want to retrace the route the Boylan woman walked. I need to know exactly where the body was found." He held up his GPS unit so the ranger would understand that he wanted exact coordinates if possible.

West wasn't able to give him coordinates, but he pulled out a detailed map and drew an arrow to the spot on the trail. He described what to look for. The sheriff's forensic team had left a red marker on the barbed wire fence so they could return to the right spot if necessary. He also marked where the car had been. Cliff thanked him and headed for the day use parking.

He had said he was working with Ellen so he wouldn't have to say he was working for the defense. Law enforcement officers are under no obligation to assist the defense and rarely do so voluntarily. If Ellen found out, there might be hell to pay later, but he'd deal with that then.

He turned on his GPS unit and checked to make sure the phone app for the towers was still working, then set off on the trail. He hiked at a moderate pace, partly because he was getting on near sixty and carrying more weight than he should, and partly because he stopped frequently to make a written note of his exact position and the tower he was connected to. Under other circumstances he might have looked up any geocaches along the trail and taken the time to look for them, but it was important to hike at what he thought would be a normal hiking pace to replicate what Boylan would have done. The client was paying him to work, not play.

He had no difficulty finding the marker on the USGS fence. He was still connected to the south tower. Interesting. He wanted to examine the scene, but felt it was more important to keep going at a normal hiking pace. He could examine it better when he came back down. He knew he was going to have to continue north until he connected with the north cell tower. He was sure now that whatever happened to Boylan, it had happened here after she'd gone up farther and come back down.

Cliff continued hiking for over an hour and a half before stopping to rest and drink some water. It was a fairly warm day despite the haze overhead, what's called the marine layer by local weather reporters. He was almost at the northernmost point on the trail and he still hadn't connected with the north cell tower. This puzzled him. He examined the map. After another fifty yards, the trail looped back down and headed south again. Boylan's iPhone had locked onto the north tower for over an hour, yet the trail didn't go farther north.

He mulled this over. There was a sort of barely visible game trail, or what geocachers call a geotrail, leading to the top of the mountain due north. He had no choice but to take it. The way was steep and treacherous, with dried, slippery weeds covering sharp rocks, but he'd traversed worse going for high terrain caches. After twenty minutes, he was at the top. He looked at his phone. The app showed he was logged onto the north tower. Boylan must have come up here to the top of the mountain. He could see why. On a clear day you could see the ocean from here, although it had been foggy the day she was here, he knew that much. There was an open area that would be perfect for sitting and eating a bag lunch. There was also a shady copse of trees. He was huffing and puffing and understood how someone could say that it was a challenging climb.

He made a note of the time and tower information along with the coordinates. He also computed how long he had taken to get here, over three hours, a distance of around four miles. That was a slow pace, but it was tough terrain. Someone younger and fitter should be able to do it in two and half hours, he figured. Boylan had been in the park for almost six hours from the time she entered to her death, or at least until the phone stopped, but it was not clear how much of that was on the trail. Obviously one hour of it was on the hilltop. Still, there wasn't much to do down at the entrance and the Ng interview suggested she was getting ready to head out on the hike. That meant she must have taken quite a bit more time than Cliff had to get to the top. He considered what had delayed her. Was she hiking with someone else? Her murderer? He had only questions, no answers.

He looked around for some evidence she or anyone had been there, but twenty minutes resulted in nothing. Some of the grasses looked a bit trampled, but that could be just animals or even windblown effects. He gave up and headed back down to the trail, and from there down to where the murder had taken place. It was a lot faster going downhill. He examined the scene. There was nothing special about this spot on the trail that he could see. Why had it taken place here? The trail was wider and flatter than in other sections, but there nothing of particular interest here. The barbed wire fence to the USGS property was visible, but certainly not enticing in any way he could figure. The logical conclusion was that this was where she had encountered

someone by chance on the trail and been killed. Without fingerprints, DNA, or other forensic evidence, stranger murders were very difficult to solve. It was too early to despair, but he was not optimistic.

The phone app had confirmed that as soon as he'd come off the mountaintop the phone had switched back to the south tower. It had been remarkably consistent. There was probably little phone traffic out here so the towers had no reason to shuffle people from one tower to another other than the geographical location of the phone. He was confident Boylan had gone to the mountaintop then returned here. That much made sense. But why return to the mountaintop? If she had been killed up there, how could anyone carry her body all the way back here? And more importantly, why? She must have been killed here and her phone carried up to the hilltop by the killer; of that he was sure. The very last tower entry for her phone had been on the north tower.

He sat on a log and ate the banana and cold chicken leg he'd brought, washed down with a bottle of water as he mulled over the facts. He broke out the packet of cookies he'd treated himself to for dessert. Mull as he might, he could not figure out what had gone on. He packed the lunch detritus in a bag and headed back downhill to the parking lot. The drive home was uneventful. It was mid-afternoon by the time he got home. He showered and changed his clothes, then entered all his notes into his case file. He didn't consider the day wasted, but he didn't feel any closer to a solution.

He called the office to check in with Maeva. She gave him an earful about taking off and leaving her there to handle everything. "I'm swamped with these Google cases. Are you going to help?"

"A lot of the records checking is simple. Show Ashley the ropes on that. She's smarter than she acts sometimes."

"You really trust her for that?"

"I trust you to teach her."

Cliff sent the nanny home and called Ellen. She was just getting ready to leave work. It was his turn to cook, but he hadn't prepared anything. The day at Butano had taken too long. He told her to meet him at the kid's favorite hamburger joint. She told him she was ready for that. It would also mean she didn't have dishes to clean up after.

After the kids were in bed he was ready to broach the subject. “I went to Butano today.”

Ellen was sitting on the sofa with the remote in hand getting ready to relax in front of the television. She looked at him wearily. “Oh? And?”

“I can explain that weird backtrack thing you asked me about.”

This perked her up, but a cloud of suspicion crossed her features. “Are you supposed to be telling me this?”

Cliff had given this considerable thought. There was no secret defense strategy. They had no ace up their sleeve to be sprung as a surprise at trial. The strategy was to find the real killer and the resources of the police and FBI were much greater than anything they could muster. He wanted to provoke them into doing as much of his investigative work as possible.

“It’s fine. We’re all on the same side here.”

“Not hardly.”

“You want to find the person who killed Jo Boylan. So do I.”

“We want to convict the person who killed Jo Boylan. The finding part is over.”

“Fine. You told me your case is thin. Maybe I can give you some more evidence. It sounds like you’ll need it.”

“So are you going to tell me or what?”

Cliff explained about the cell tower locator app and what his hike had shown. The skepticism slowly dissolved from her expression. She was a very competitive person and hated to be outsmarted by anyone, but she had to admit to herself that this was a clever technique she hadn’t thought of.

“So whoever killed her must have taken her phone, and maybe all her stuff, up to the top of the mountain,” Cliff concluded. “I did a short search, but her stuff could still be up there. It’s too big an area for me to do alone. We’d both like to know what’s in her phone and camera. I think a forensic team should be sent up there to do a thorough search.”

What she’d admitted to herself wasn’t something she wanted to admit to Cliff. “That’s not very convincing. Cell phones switch from tower to tower all the time, I hear. It may have nothing to do with where the phone was.”

“It was very steady and consistent the whole day. South tower all the way until I got to the top of the mountain.”

“So, suppose you’re right about the phone. It doesn’t mean the killer took it up there. Maybe it was dropped or lost during a struggle. Another hiker could have come along and picked it up from the trail, not knowing about the body and taken it to the top of the hill, then realized they couldn’t use it without a PIN or password.”

“Unlikely, and so what. Even if true, you’d still want the phone wouldn’t you? It could have the killer’s fingerprints or DNA on it. That’s the last place we know the phone was. It could still be there. And if it is, the clothes and other items could be, too.”

“Your phone’s not an iPhone. You have an Android. Maybe they react differently to the towers.”

“So try it yourself. Take an iPhone. Take ten different phones. See if they switch back and forth from the two towers. The sheriff’s forensic team probably searched mostly downhill, assuming the killer would have hightailed it out of there right after the killing. I doubt they searched along the sides of the trail up to the mountaintop. A good search needs to be done with a team.”

Ellen didn’t have a counterargument for this. “I’ll talk to the SO about it.” Although Ellen was curious now, she knew Walton would be totally against the idea of going back to search. It would cast doubt on the quality and reliability of the previous search. Maybe she’d check out the tower reception herself if she had time, but there was no rush. She definitely was NOT going talk to the sheriff’s office about it.

Chapter 24

Ellen no longer had to report to the SAC on the case. The locals had scooped the FBI, but they'd also given the FBI credit. When the conviction would come, the SAC would be standing there in the press conference next to the sheriff getting the public recognition, so she didn't see any need to follow the case any further.

Even so, Ellen still had a case assigned. It was normal to continue investigation after a defendant had been charged. In fact, not investigating would be unusual. She talked it over with Matt, explaining what Cliff had found. She hadn't told Matt about Cliff working for the defense until now. Once he recovered from his astonishment, he agreed with Ellen that the search on the mountain might be a good idea, but neither of them thought the supervisor would go for using FBI resources for it. It would mean pulling evidence clerks from San Francisco or San Jose; Palo Alto was small and had none. They'd also need half the squad to do the searching. Since the SAC considered the case solved, the supervisor wouldn't want to expend much effort or manpower. Matt also agreed that Walton would object to the idea strongly.

They called Walton. Ellen put the phone on speaker. "Bill, it's Ellen and Matt."

"Yeah, hi. Thanks for the timeline and map; that was great."

"Sure. Hey, I noticed something on the timeline. You have it in front of you?"

"Hang on, let me dig it out. Okay, I got it."

"Flip to the last page. See those tower designators? That 31291 is located to the south of the park. Most of her time in park she was connected to that one."

"Yeah, okay, I see that."

"Then her phone connects to 31187 for an hour or so before going back to 31291. So she went north up the mountain, then down again."

"Okay."

"But the odd thing is, the phone went back up north again and stopped there. But at the location where her body was found, that's closer to the south tower. She should have been pinging that tower."

“Oh, I don’t know. Those cell phones switch towers all the time. They aren’t that accurate as to location.”

“Well, I have it on good authority that you can only log onto that north tower from the mountaintop, up at the end of the loop.”

“On what good authority?”

“Well, I had someone with access to the park check it on his phone. You need to have a Verizon account. There’s an app you can download that will tell you in real time which tower you’re on.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I think it’s possible Bruce killed her at the lower location where the body was found, then took her stuff up to the mountaintop.”

There was silence on the other end for twenty seconds before Walton replied. “I don’t know. That doesn’t make sense. Why would he take it uphill to hide it? I can think of other explanations. Maybe she went up top, then started down, realized she forgot something or dropped it somewhere and decided to go back up to look for it. Up at the top her battery died or she just turned the phone off. Then she came down and was killed the second time down. We don’t have a definite time of death. We’re only assuming it was when the phone died.”

Matt replied, “That’s possible, Bill, but let me ask you something. Did your forensic team search on the trail, both sides all the way to the mountaintop? What if the killer took her stuff up there and buried it or threw it off a cliff. It might be there.”

“What do you mean ‘the killer’? Are you doubting that it’s Bruce Boylan?”

Matt realized his faux pas. “Oh, no. I’m not saying that. Is the D.A. satisfied with the forensic evidence? I’m just saying that it would be nice to find a GoPro camera with a video of Bruce Boylan approaching her.”

“Yeah, you’re right. He’s all over my ass to get something solid that ties Boylan to the crime scene. We don’t have a positive ID on the Outback. It could be anyone’s car, at least theoretically. We didn’t search up the hill very far, only on the way down.”

“What do you think about sending a forensic team up to the top of that mountain?”

“Are you out of your mind? There’s no way I could get authorization for that. We’ve done our search. We don’t want to hand

the defense any sign we missed key evidence. Anyway, I've got other things to worry about. I'm going in to the judge for a search warrant in a few minutes. Assuming the judge grants it, we're going to search Boylan's house tomorrow."

"Were you planning on telling us? We need to be there." Ellen's voice carried a sharp note.

"Yeah, sorry. It's been crazy. You're welcome to come, of course."

"Call us when you have the warrant and let us know when and where to assemble. It's a long drive to Watsonville."

"Okay."

When the call ended, Ellen and Matt exchanged looks. The search of Boylan's house was on. The one of Butano was off.

Cliff was in the courtroom when the judge granted Boylan bail of five hundred thousand dollars. Toki was flabbergasted when Margaret Whisman came forward and posted a bond for the full amount. Boylan was ordered released, but Cliff had to wait for him to be processed out of the jail. The judge ordered that he surrender his passport (which Len had had the foresight to bring) and be restricted to a two-county area: Monterey and Santa Cruz, the two counties Watsonville straddled. He was to wear an ankle monitor.

It was afternoon by the time Cliff got a chance to talk to him. They sat in Bruce's house as Bruce described his relationship with Jocelyn. He admitted it wasn't a close relationship, but it was genuine. She had contacted him three years ago or so. He didn't remember the date. It was out of the blue. She just showed up on his doorstep. She had been cold and accusatory at first, but he had been contrite and apologetic for not being a better father. He explained that he would have done more except he was in jail or working on cruise ships. He'd asked for forgiveness and told her she could stay in his place if she wanted. She did stay that first night, but then left the next day. After that she would come back from time to time. She was a big, rugged girl who liked the outdoors. He was six four and she took after him. She had a lot of good hiking and camping gear, although he wasn't familiar with the brands. She had a camera that strapped on her chest so she could make videos.

Cliff bore in on this topic. He explained that it was important to try to identify what clothing and property she had with her when she was killed. The killer probably stole that stuff and it might be possible to identify him by recovering it. Bruce told him that she had left some equipment at his house.

“Really? That could be important,” Cliff said. “I’d like to see it. The police haven’t searched your house have they?”

“I don’t know. I been in jail. It looks the same as when I left.”

“That’s a good point,” Len added. “That’s something they could do at any point. We should take a look at it before they search. Let’s do it right now.”

From the outside the house was unremarkable but pleasant enough. The lawn was well tended but there were no flowers or decorative landscaping. They learned the lawn care was paid for by the landlord. Inside the scene was not so welcoming. The house was small, a two-bedroom, and Boylan was obviously no housekeeper. Margaret had dropped him off and gone home, and it didn’t look like she had lent the house a woman’s touch.

“We gotta get this cleaned up,” Len declared upon entering. “If they do a search, they’ll take pictures and try to make you look as bad as possible. We want you to look like a model citizen. Get those liquor bottles out into the trash and dump the ashtrays. Pick up the dirty clothes and put them in the laundry. Better yet, do the laundry.”

He made a quick survey of the whole house. When he came to the bedroom he snorted, “Get that damn thing off the wall.” There on the wall across from the bed was a full-size poster of a naked bikini model, if you could call her that when the bikini was missing. Boylan started removing the tacks holding the poster in place. “Do you have a picture of Jocelyn?”

“I got some baby pictures of her in a shoebox somewheres.”

“Nothing of her as an adult?”

“No. She took one of us, but I don’t have no computer to see it on.”

“Find the baby pictures. Cliff, I want you to run over to the nearest Kinko’s and get it copied and printed so it fits in a picture frame we can display prominently. I’ll help clean up this mess.”

Boylan found the pictures and Len picked out what he considered the best one. He handed the old print to Cliff.

"Where's her stuff? Jo's," Cliff asked.

"In the other bedroom."

Cliff looked in for a few seconds and saw a stack of outdoor gear in one corner, mostly on a chair. "Don't touch it. It probably has her fingerprints on it. If they search, they'll dust and we don't want Len's or my prints on it. Just leave it until I get back." He headed out to find the nearest Kinko's.

Two hours later the place had been transformed. The bathroom in particular morphed from a third-world horror to something out of Better Homes and Garden. Jo's baby picture was prominently displayed both in the living room and on the hall wall.

"You gotta keep it this way," Len commanded. "It worked for O.J." The reference, of course, was to the instance when the jury was taken to O.J. Simpson's house where his lawyers had replaced the near-pornographic life-size picture of his blonde girlfriend with a portrait of his mother, among many other changes. "Cliff, take photos of everything. I don't want the police trashing the place and using the after photos as evidence he was a slob. More importantly, if they do trash the place, I want to be able to show how abusive the search was." Cliff made a walk through and took snapshots of the entire house.

"Absolutely no illegal drugs, either. Anything you may have used to carry or store the drugs in has to go. Warn Margaret, too. They could search her house. You have a drug record and they know you stay there sometimes. They could show up with drug dogs. You don't still have the burner phone do you?"

"No, he wouldn't let me keep it. I'm clean, Len. There's nothing here," Boylan replied.

"I need to examine Jo's stuff," Cliff said, glad finally to direct some of the activity toward investigation.

"This is hers," Bruce said, pointing to the neat pile in the corner of the spare bedroom. There was a high-end down sleeping bag still in the original bag, apparently never used. Two GPS receivers, Magellan models still in sealed boxes, and one opened Magellan box sat lined up together. The shrink wrap was still on the first two. Presumably Jo had had the other one with her. Stacked neatly on a chair was outdoor

clothing from several manufacturers: a fleece vest, ski gloves, glove liners, cargo pants, boots that appeared to have been only lightly used if at all. A trekking pole leaned against the chair.

"This must have cost a fortune," Cliff murmured. "Why would she buy so many and not use them?"

"She gets 'em free, she told me."

Cliff had heard that social media "influencers" often received products free from manufacturers for promotion. So Jo must have had a substantial following online. If only they knew what media site it was and what name she used. They'd already struck out using the name Jocelyn Boylan on YouTube. He'd have to work on that at some point.

"That pole was new, she said. It's Norwegian or something. Not out on the market. She took the other one with her. She said she only uses one."

Cliff knew also that Europeans, especially Germans and Scandinavians, typically hiked with two poles. He saw them at Rancho San Antonio all the time in groups looking almost like they were cross-country skiing. Many Americans did, too, but more often, they used only one pole, needing the other hand free for their phone, camera, or, in the case of geocachers, for the GPS receiver. Trekking poles were almost always sold in pairs, but Cliff knew of geocachers who had split the cost of one pair and each used one of the poles.

Cliff took a closer look at it. It wasn't Norwegian. It had the Black Diamond name and logo on it. Black Diamond was an American manufacturer located in Utah. But the model name on it was Ekspert. Cliff didn't have to be a linguist to figure out that was Expert in some Scandinavian language, obviously some marketer's idea of a selling point. If the company had sent it to her for promotion, it was probably a new model.

"This is great," he said. "This is the first thing we know of that the killer took that might be identifiable." He pulled out his phone and took a picture of the entire pile of goods, then a close-up of the pole showing the brand and model. As he was taking more pictures, the phone rang. It was Ellen. He looked at his watch and realized it was almost six. He was in the doghouse for sure.

"Where are you?" she demanded.

"Working."

“You didn’t call me or home. We’ll have to pay the nanny overtime again.”

“We can afford it.”

“That’s not the point. She’s hopping mad. She has a family to get back to, too. If she quits, that’ll be the third one in two years. We’ll never be able to get another one if this keeps up.”

“Sorry. I lost track of time.”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. I told you not to take on that case.”

There was no point in telling her once again that he was doing it for her. “I know. I really am sorry. I’m going to be awhile. I’ll see you in an hour or two. Love you.”

“You better eat there, wherever you are. I’m not cooking.” The line went dead.

Cliff turned to Len. “It’ll be at least an hour to get back. Are we done here?”

“I think so. Bruce, keep this place neat. Hire a housekeeper if you have to, but like Cliff said, don’t touch Jo’s stuff.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Chapter 25

The following day Cliff began with a simple Google search for Black Diamond Ekspert trekking poles. The first page turned up ads for other model Black Diamond poles and other brands as well. In between the ads were reviews of the best trekking poles and one blog entry about hiking in Norway. The second page brought up more ads and an outdoorsman blog site that mentioned that Black Diamond was going to bring out a new top end trekking pole called the Ekspert that was fully adjustable for people of all heights from 1.4 meters to 2.0 meters. Cliff popped those numbers into a converter to find that covered four and half feet to six foot six. They also had carbon shafts and special angled cork handles. They were expected to be available in Europe in June and in the U.S. in the fall and would be their most expensive model, but prices weren't set yet.

He continued to read several pages deep on Google and repeated the search on Bing and Dogpile. That one article was the only entry specific to the Ekspert model. He next searched the Black Diamond site itself. He was surprised to see many of their models cost over one hundred fifty dollars a pair. He knew good poles could be bought new for seventy dollars or so a pair.

So Jo Boylan had owned poles that weren't yet available for sale in the U.S. She must have been an influencer sought out by the company and received promotional models. He reviewed the inventory sheet of the search of Boylan's SUV. There were other outdoor gear items, but no pole. That meant she had had it with her when attacked.

He decided to call the company. He looked up Black Diamond and called. He asked for the head of security. As a retired FBI agent and former security manager himself, he found it was usually easiest to find someone in security willing to talk to him. He was connected to the phone of a Steve Payne, but only got his voice mail. He left a message for Payne to call him back.

His next step was to search eBay for trekking poles. There were no Ekspert models listed, but there were several other models, usually sold in pairs, but a few were single poles. Two of those had no brands listed. He used the message interface to contact both owners to ask for

the exact brand and model of those. Neither returned the email immediately.

He did the same search on craigslist.com. There were only four trekking pole ads there, and two could be quickly dismissed since they were pairs. One single pole was a Black Diamond, but a different model. The third ad, however, looked promising. It was for a single Black Diamond “Expert” pole. The seller was in Half Moon Bay. The spelling was different, so he couldn’t be certain it was the Ekspert model, but it was worth pursuing. The pole was listed for \$85. He called the number in the ad. The caller didn’t pick up, but Cliff left a message that he was interested in the pole and asked for a call back.

It’s frustrating for anyone to have to wait for people to return calls or emails, but especially so when you think you’re onto a productive lead and it’s time-sensitive. But that’s the nature of investigation. Cliff had been through this many times in his career.

His research was interrupted by a call from Len.

“I need you to get back down to Boylan’s house,” he said. “They’re doing a search. Your wife is there. I’m on my way, but if anything happens, I can’t be the witness. You have to be there.”

“I’ll head right out. Did you remind him not to touch Jo’s stuff?”

“Of course.”

“Is he still inside the house?”

“No, he stepped outside so he could talk to me in private.”

“Damn. They probably won’t let him back inside. That’s the way it usually works. You can stay and watch as long as you don’t interfere with the search, but once you leave, they don’t normally let you back in until it’s done. We won’t know what exactly they looked at other than what’s listed on the inventory sheet at the end, or what they said about the case.”

“What’s done is done. I’ll see you there.”

Once at Boyle’s house Cliff parked across the street. Len was haranguing the sheriff’s deputy at the door assigned to protect the search scene. Cliff knew this was for show, so he put his phone on video and approached. The deputy seemed unfazed as Cliff stood there filming and Len screamed about being kept from his client’s house. A deputy with a

dog on leash exited the house and put the dog in a van marked as a K-9 unit.

After a few minutes of that, Len stopped. He'd made the show, which was more for the sake of his client than for anything else. Cliff put the camera away and looked around for Ellen. She must be inside since he couldn't see her outside. Her Bureau car was parked in front of Boylan's house. A couple of neighbors were standing around watching the search, but nothing much else was happening.

After an hour or so Cliff saw some deputies carrying out some of Jo's gear, including the Black Diamond pole. He snapped a picture of the woman with the pole. At least she was wearing evidence gloves. Cliff continued to document the search from outside in the front yard. It took until almost noon for the search to be over.

At that point he saw Ellen emerging from the house. She was removing her cotton evidence gloves. He started toward her, but when she saw him, a startled look and quick shake of the head warned him off. He surmised that she hadn't told the sheriff's office people her husband was helping the defense. He didn't want to embarrass her in front of her colleagues, so he stepped back and said nothing. He looked over at Len Schuler who had been watching them with amusement. Then Matt Nguyen emerged and spotted Cliff. Cliff didn't wave or say anything to him, for the same reason. Matt just rolled his eyes when Cliff caught his eye.

Boylan, Schuler, and Cliff all went back into the house once the law enforcement personnel were gone. The place was in a bit of disarray, but not too bad. Having a lawyer there helped deter any unnecessary trashing. Cliff had been on searches where the scene was left a shambles. This was especially common where the defendant was a suspected drug dealer or into child porn. Searchers had good reason to tear the place apart because such contraband was often deviously hidden.

Cliff took the after photos and then the three of them put the place back together. Margaret was not there as she was working that day. When they were done, Cliff and Len went to lunch together. Cliff explained what he had found about the trekking pole. Schuler told him that was a good lead and suggested Cliff call the office to see if any of his calls had been returned. He dialed in. Ashley answered.

“Ashley, it’s Cliff. I’m still down in Watsonville. Did I get any calls while I was out?”

“Yes, someone named Steve Payne. He said he was returning your call. He left a number. I don’t recognize the area code.”

“Anything else?”

“No other calls for you. I’ve been helping Maeva. Thanks for giving me a chance. It’s kinda fun. Not as boring as handling the billing and answering the phone and mail.”

“Okay, great. Remember, Maeva’s the boss. Do things exactly the way she tells you and when she tells you. Our reputation depends on your work. What’s Payne’s number?”

She gave him the number and he called the Black Diamond security man. Payne turned out not to be a security manager but the Facilities Manager. His main job was keeping the place running, fixing clogged toilets or broken light switches, or hiring vendors for those jobs. His security duties included badging, door locks, and parking lot patrol. It must be nice to work in a Mormon community where those were the only security issues. Payne knew nothing about what Cliff wanted, but he was happy to provide the direct number for the head of marketing. He thought they might be able to help. Cliff called that number and left a voice mail there for the woman to call him back on his cell number.

After lunch Len left, but he had Cliff take the inventory list left by the search party to the Kinko’s he used the previous day and make a copy for Cliff and one for himself, then return the original to Bruce. It could help shed light on the case to see what the prosecution team thought was important evidence. It was a relief to see that they did not take any heroin or other drugs. Most of the rest of it consisted of two categories: Jo’s outdoor equipment, and Bruce’s financial records such as credit card statements, bank statements, and bills. Also included were telephone bills.

Cliff got home in time to let the nanny off early, with pay, of course, which went a long way toward reparations for the overtime incident. He even had a pot of spaghetti sauce simmering by the time Ellen got home.

“Hi, honey,” he called. “How’d it go in the search?”

“You saw the inventory, I’m sure. Mmm ... That smells good.”

“Did you find what you were hoping to find?”

“Leave it alone. Let the lawyers duke it out.”

Cliff’s phone rang. The area code was 650, the same as Cliff’s ... and Half Moon Bay. He answered.

“Hello, this is Cliff.”

“You called me about a hiking pole.”

“Yes. I’m very interested. I have a question, though. The ad said the model was Expert with an X. Can you double check and tell me if it’s actually spelled E-K-S-P-E-R-T?”

“Yeah, it is spelled that way. I typed that in the ad but autocorrect changed it to an X. It’s supposed to be top of the line”

“Usually they’re sold in pairs. Can you tell me what happened to the other pole?”

“I don’t know. I bought it at a garage sale last weekend. It was being sold cheap and I knew it was underpriced, so I bought it. I know a lot of people buy pairs but only use one. I figured this was the extra one.”

“Okay, I want it. I’ll pay the asking price. Can I pick it up tomorrow?”

“I work during the day and I’m going out with my girlfriend tomorrow evening. I’m sorry, but it’s first come, first served. I can’t reserve it. If someone comes by tonight...”

“Okay, no problem. I’ll come pick it up tonight. Give me the address.”

The caller gave Cliff an address in Half Moon Bay.

“Okay, I’ll see you in about an hour. Do me a favor, though. Don’t clean it or touch it in the meantime. Just leave it wherever it is in whatever condition it’s in.”

“Uh, okay, I guess. Why?”

“Doesn’t matter. One hour.” He hung up.

“You’re leaving? As soon as I get home?” Ellen almost whined.

“I have to. Hot lead. I may be able to find your killer.”

“Your killer, you mean. Where are you going?”

“Half Moon Bay.”

“What about dinner?”

“Here, I’m putting it on simmer. The longer the better for spaghetti sauce. I’ll finish when I get back.”

“It’s an hour each way. It’ll take you over two hours. The kids can’t wait that long. I can’t either. I’m hungry.”

“Okay, you’re right, but I really have to do this tonight. I already made a salad and garlic butter. You can just do the noodles and the bread while I’m gone. Feed the kids. I’ll eat when I get back.”

He kissed her on the cheek, went to get his gloves, a large garbage bag, and some twist ties, and disappeared into the garage. Ellen heard the garage door open and then shut. He was gone.

He met the pole seller, a tall, blonde, and very tan young man named Kyle, at his apartment. True to his word, he had left the pole untouched. It had looked clean and new when he bought it, so he said he had not cleaned it or spiffed it up. As he had said on the phone, he assumed it was newly bought as part of a pair, and sold as an extra. Cliff pulled out his wallet and gave Kyle eighty-five dollars, then carefully picked up the pole by its tip, placed it in the plastic garbage bag he’d brought, and sealed it with a twist tie.

“Where exactly did you get this?”

“At a garage sale down the street. I told you on the phone.”

“I know. I need the address.”

“It’s the house on the corner, across the street and down to the right. I don’t know the address.”

“Show me.” Cliff pulled out his phone, pulled up Google Maps, and zoomed in on Kyle’s neighborhood. Kyle pointed out the exact house.

“What was the seller like? Did you know him?”

“No. It was a woman. She said her daughter found this in a parking lot by the beach. The money was going to the girl.”

“Did you extend it to its full length?”

“No, not all the way, but I can show you ...”

“No, that’s not necessary. I just need to know if your fingerprints might be on the shaft where it’s not exposed.”

“My fingerprints? What’s going on?”

“This could be stolen. It’s a valuable prototype and was being beta tested. I’m working for the company to get it back. We think an employee may have stolen it. Where do you work?”

"I didn't steal it. I bought it. I'm a mechanic at the Ford dealership."

"You work every day on a regular day shift?"

"Yeah."

"Including two Wednesdays ago?"

"Yeah. I haven't missed a day in months. Are you some kind of cop?"

"Private investigator. I'm sorry to grill you like this, but it's important." He pulled out a business card. "The sheriff's department is also working on this case. It's possible they may ask you to be fingerprinted, just so they can eliminate your prints from any on the pole."

"They already have my prints. I interned with the sheriff's office. I had to get printed."

"That's great, Kyle. You've been a big help. Again, I'm sorry if I alarmed you."

Cliff left without asking more questions. He had Kyle's telephone number and address. He knew he could get any other data he needed like last name, vehicles he owned, and criminal record through other means. He didn't want to make Kyle paranoid. Kyle was theoretically a murder suspect, but Cliff was sure he wasn't the killer. The killer who had taken so much trouble to strip the victim and dispose of the clothes wouldn't sell the pole. Besides, he wouldn't have reacted so calmly when Cliff started asking questions about fingerprints and his whereabouts if he'd been the killer.

Cliff left the apartment and walked down to the house Kyle had pointed out. There was a car in the driveway. Cliff felt the hood. It was still warm, so someone had just arrived home. He went to the door and rang. At first no one answered. He rang again, three times. Finally he heard a man's footsteps coming to the door. A balding middle-aged man wearing overalls opened the door a crack.

"We're eating dinner," he said crossly and started to close the door.

"Wait, please. I'd like to reward your daughter for finding our missing property." He held up the garbage bag proving he had the pole. "I recovered it from the man who bought it at your garage sale last

weekend.” Cliff pulled a fifty from his wallet. A good investigator keeps cash on hand for occasions like this.

The homeowner was of two minds, but told Cliff to wait there a minute. He returned with a slim, gangly teenage girl to his side as he opened the door again. The girl was wearing cutoffs and a T-shirt that said UKISS. It was clear dad wasn’t going to leave Cliff alone with his daughter.

Cliff looked directly at the girl, who seemed rather enthusiastic at this out-of-the-ordinary event. He suspected they would not want to involve themselves in a murder investigation so he had an alternate story ready just as he had with Kyle. “Hi. My name is Cliff Knowles. I’ve been hired to investigate the loss or possibly theft of a valuable prototype hiking pole, the one you found. I was able to track it down and buy it from the man who bought it at your garage sale. He told me you found it. I’d like to offer you a reward.” He offered the fifty. The father took it. “I was hoping you could tell me exactly where you found it.”

The girl eyed the bill. “Hi. It was over at Pillar Point. In the parking lot. It was in the trash.”

“Did you see who put it there?”

“Um, I’m not sure. There was a car that drove away as we were driving in. It might have been them.”

“Them? How many people were in the car?”

“No, I mean I don’t know if it was a man or a woman. They drove off and I couldn’t see who was in it. I think it was one person.” Cliff was a grammar Nazi and hated the singular “they” but that ship sailed long ago.

“Can you describe the car?”

“It was big and dark, I think. Maybe it was a truck, like a delivery van or something.”

“Did you take anything else at the same time? Other stuff that they threw out?”

“No. There were some clothes, but I didn’t want used clothes that had been in the trash. The pole looked new, though, and was sticking out of the dumpster, so, like, Brad said I should take it. I didn’t know it was stolen.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t. When was this?”

“A couple of weeks ago. I don’t remember what day it was.”

“Who is Brad? A friend?”

“Yeah, my boyfriend.”

“You think he might remember more?”

“Our dinner’s getting cold,” the dad said sharply.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. I have a few more questions, but why don’t we do this. If you give me Brad’s full name, I’ll call him and see if he knows anything more. I shouldn’t have to bother you anymore.”

The girl did something on her phone and she held it toward Cliff. It showed the contact information for Brad. Cliff took a picture of her phone with his. “And could I get your name?”

The father closed the door before the girl could answer. Cliff knew he could find the girl’s name, so he didn’t bother to knock again. He photographed the license plates of the cars in the driveway, then pulled out a small notepad from his shirt pocket and began writing down everything he could remember from the interviews, that of Kyle and the girl, an old habit from his days in the FBI.

Cliff wanted to interview Brad before the girl had a chance to warn him off, although he hoped that if she did call or text him, she’d tell him about the reward. Since she was at dinner, that probably wouldn’t happen until later. He was now certain Kyle was telling the truth and clearly the girl wasn’t the killer, nor was Brad. He called Brad’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Brad?”

“Yeah.”

“Hi. My name’s Cliff. I’m calling from Black Diamond Equipment. We want to thank you and offer you a reward for recovering our stolen prototype trekking pole.”

“What?”

“You and your girlfriend found that stolen pole over at Pillar Point. That’s an experimental model, and very important to us. We have recovered it thanks to you. She said it was your idea to pick it up. Can I come by and ask you a few questions about it? As I said, we have a reward for you.”

“Right now?”

“No time like the present. I’m at her house now and would like to take care of it while I’m here in town.”

“Just a second.” Cliff heard Brad yelling to someone in another room. “Mom, some guy wants to come by and give me a reward or something. Is it okay?”

A woman came on the line. “Hello, who is this?”

“Hello. My name is Cliff Knowles. I’m a private investigator hired by the Black Diamond Equipment Corporation to track down a prototype piece of outdoor gear that was stolen. Your son and his girlfriend found it and I want to give him a reward. I just gave one to her.”

“You gave Olivia money?”

“Yes.” Now he had the girl’s name. “Call her and verify it if you like. They found a prototype hiking pole over at Pillar Point that we were beta testing. It was lost or stolen and we’d like to get more details from Brad about what they saw. May I come by? I’m in town now.”

“Well, all right. I suppose so. Do you have the address?”

“You better give it to me. I’m not sure where I wrote it down.”

She did.

Five minutes later Cliff was at their front door. This time he was invited in and Brad’s mother offered him cookies and milk. There was no sign of a father figure, although he might just have been out. Brad was a good-sized kid and his older brother, who had joined them in the living room, was even larger, so the mother had no need of further male protection. Cliff sat and took a cookie.

He went through the same spiel he’d already gone through about investigating a prototype and immediately offered Brad a fifty. His mother told him he couldn’t accept it. He had returned stolen property to its rightful owner and honesty was its own reward. Cliff didn’t sense that Brad agreed, but he put the fifty back in his wallet. If Brad’s information turned out to be worthless, it would stay there. If it was good, he’d find a way to leave it.

“Did you see who left the pole in the parking lot?”

“It was in the dumpster. There was a car right next to it as we drove in, and then it drove away. I’m not sure if they’re the ones who left the stuff.”

“When you say ‘they’ do you mean more than one person?”

“No. I never saw how many. They drove away ... it drove away before I could get a good look. We didn’t pass directly by them because they went around the other way out of the lot.”

“What did the vehicle look like?”

“Black, I think, or maybe gray. An SUV or something like that.”

“And did you get any idea whether it was a man or woman driving?”

“No. Sorry.”

“How about other equipment, like outdoor gear or boots?”

“Boots! Yeah, I forgot about that. We were wondering what the car was doing by the dumpster, so we drove by and saw the pole sticking out the top. There were some boots there, too. There was a big plastic garbage bag full of stuff right on top, but it had torn open. We could see boots, so I pulled it open more. They looked pretty new, not all beat up, but they were used. There were some burrs in the laces. We didn’t want to touch the clothing because maybe it had ticks or was contaminated or something. The pole was nice and clean, though. I told Olivia to take it.”

“Anything else? Clothing?”

The older brother interrupted. “Why are you asking about clothes? I thought you were from Black Diamond.” Cliff realized the brother was sharp and not just there as a bouncer.

“We have a description of who we think took the pole, of their clothing at least. I’m trying to see if it matches what Brad saw. I want to be sure the one who dumped the gear is the same one who stole it.”

“There was a black sweatshirt, I’m pretty sure,” Brad answered.

“Very good. Thank you. Anything else?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Is there more than one parking lot or more than one dumpster there?”

“Yeah, several lots. I’m not sure if they all have dumpsters. There was only one in that lot. It was the one near the breakwater on the south end.”

“Can you show me?” Cliff pulled up the local map again and zoomed in on Pillar Point. Brad took Cliff’s phone, scrolled the map to the right spot, and told him that was it, then handed it back. Cliff had

covered the pole, the clothes and other gear, the vehicle, and the location. He couldn't think of anything else to ask and knew he could always call if he thought of anything else. He rose, pulled the fifty out of his wallet again. He put it on the coffee table. "My client wants you to have this. If you can't accept it for yourself, then donate it to an environmental charity of your choice." He finished off the cookie and swallowed the milk as he rose. "Thank you so much for your time."

The family all stood as Cliff made his way to the front door. The usual pleasantries were exchanged and Cliff left. He looked at his phone; it was after eight. There were no calls or texts from Ellen. He could only hope this pole could be connected to Jocelyn Boylan. If not, it would have been a waste of time and money. He headed home.

Chapter 26

Ellen spent the next day at the sheriff's office evidence room examining the haul from the search. She had the same thoughts as Cliff about the expensive goods. Why so many unused ones? Boylan must have been an influencer such as an Amazon top reviewer with a lot of followers.

Walton and Nguyen focused mainly on the financial records. Bruce didn't use a computer so he got all his bank statements in paper form. Nguyen noticed semi-regular deposits in round amounts – two thousand here, three thousand there. These were probably cash infusions from Whisman, Matt thought. There were also smaller deposits in odd amounts with notations, usually personal names: Lanny, Smitty, Brisco's. Some online sleuthing revealed that Brisco's was a local auto repair place. A call there found a helpful manager who told him that Boylan had been paid to take a load of hazardous waste, oils, batteries, and the like, to the county hazmat disposal facility. They learned that he regularly did hauling gigs. Further records searches located likely candidates for the other names. In his contact book were a Bob Landwehr and another number helpfully listed simply as Smitty.

Ellen continued searching through the outdoor items presumed to be Jocelyn's. Walton urged her to hurry it up because he had to get it dusted. The body had been too deteriorated to get fingerprints. The victim had no criminal record and had never been fingerprinted. He wanted to get her prints from the items she had presumably touched, especially the opened Magellan box.

This brought Ellen's attention more closely to those boxes of GPS receivers. She noticed that they were three different models, but all Magellan. This made sense if she was being sent those for purposes of reviewing them by the manufacturer. Compare and contrast, like a high school essay. Something about the open box struck her as familiar. They were all eXplorist models, Magellan's standard brand name for handheld units, but the first two had alphanumeric model names after that. The empty box was an eXplorist GCX.

Ellen remembered that Magellan had tried to muscle in on Garmin's dominance in the geocaching market with a GC model, but that failed and the model was discontinued. It looked like they were

making another stab at it. The other models were designed for hiking and off-road biking or motorcycle trails, with preloaded maps showing those trails. If she was just a hiker, she probably would have taken one of those. Choosing the GCX model meant she was probably a geocacher!

Ellen now had something she could sink her teeth into. This explained what the victim was doing in Butano that day. It also meant she should be able to identify Jo's geocaching name, which is probably also her regular online name for all purposes. That in turn should lead to her email and her videos. What if she had uploaded a video of her geocaching with her father that day!

Ellen was ecstatic. She could check all the geocaches on the route and see who had signed the logs. They may even have to take the caches and dust them for prints or swab for DNA. Before that, though, she could look up the caches online to see who had logged finds on them. Ellen had her cell phone with her and there was a geocaching app on it. She logged into the geocaching site, went to the local map view, then scrolled over to the Butano area. She zoomed in on the trail Jo had taken. There were four geocaches along the trail including the one on the mountaintop. This was beginning to make sense. That's why she was going to the top of the mountain – to get that final geocache.

She scrolled down to see who had logged a find online recently on those four. There were no logs on any of them after the date Jo went missing. It was not a popular trail. On that day there was only one geocacher who had logged any of them: joblob. Joblob! The man who had been trying for the Ultmato Challenge. He had logged simple "Found" logs, the default message from the phone app. He had dropped out of sight about that time; his vlog had stopped. She'd have to check the date, but that could explain a lot of things. Joblob might have logged all four caches and encountered Jo along the route back down. Somehow they fought and she was killed. Had it been a sexual assault? He took her stuff to protect himself from being identified. But then why did he go back up the mountain? Maybe the search on Monday would answer that.

The more she thought about it, the more holes she saw in it. If he was the killer, why hadn't joblob deleted his logs? He had to know he would be a suspect. He might have panicked and simply forgotten.

His videos stopped so he may have fled the area, even the country. Or maybe she had the timeline wrong. Maybe joblob encountered Jo on *his* way up but on *her* way down. He killed her, hid the body, took her stuff, but wanted to finish finding the last geocache so he went up to the top of the mountain after that. Then he realized her phone was still on and turned it off or destroyed it. That explained the backtrack, and might have been a good ploy. If he had gone home afterward and edited the geocache logs to be full-length like normal and posted a video, he could have said he never saw her that day. He might not even know she was a geocacher. There was no geocache near the USGS property where she was killed.

Ellen began to doubt her own theory. Maybe Jo wasn't a geocacher. She might have just chosen that GCX GPS unit at random, or might have been asked or paid to review it by Magellan. Maybe she was a geocacher and had signed all the log sheets but didn't log them online because she'd planned to do it when she got home. There were too many possibilities. The only way to determine which was right was to walk that route and check the log sheets on the caches.

Then there was the question of Bruce Boylan. Was he joblob? Or did he kill Jo and joblob both? She was nearly certain he couldn't be joblob. He didn't even own a computer, must less be able to make and upload the fancy vlog videos that joblob had. It would be easy enough to check his whereabouts against the hundreds of videos joblob had uploaded. But Bruce killing both joblob and Jo made more sense.

She walked through the scenario in her mind. Jo started out on the trail hiking, probably geocaching, maybe not, but she was alone according to the witness. She goes to the top and heads back down. That explains the first lock onto the north cell tower. Perhaps joblob passes her as he heads up to the top. While he is up on the mountaintop Bruce kills his daughter near the USGS property. He could have stalked her from behind. He starts to strip her body after killing her. Maybe he puts her phone in his pocket. As he's dealing with the body, joblob comes down the mountain and spots him. Bruce has Jo's phone on him as he pursues joblob back up the mountain. Bruce is a big guy who could overpower most men. He kills joblob up at the top of the mountain and conceals that body up there somewhere. That explains why the phone went back up. Joblob would never have a chance to edit the logs or

delete them. His vlogs would just stop without explanation, which solves another mystery. Bruce could have turned the phone off then, or the battery might have died. In any event, he would then have come down and finished stashing the body and cleaning up the clothes and gear.

That made sense, but it had holes, too. How did Bruce kill joblob? Jocelyn had apparently been killed with a rock, not a weapon. From what she remembered of joblob's videos, he was pretty young and muscular, at least judging by his forearms. She'd only seen two or three of them. He certainly had conquered some pretty tough geocaches. You'd think he'd have put up a good fight. If he was really built like the torso avatar, he should have been able to handle himself. He could have armed himself with rocks, poles, maybe a knife in his pack. And Cliff had hiked the trail without finding or smelling joblob's body.

She decided not to tell Matt or Walton her theory – or theories. They were too speculative. What she felt sure of was that there was a high likelihood that the victim had gone on that trail intending to geocache, and that her geocaching name could be written on those log sheets in the caches there. She was sure now that the killing was somehow related to joblob's dropping out of sight. Either he'd gone into hiding, or he was dead. She had to walk that trail herself and examine the geocache logs. That would tell the story.

Cliff finally reached the woman at Black Diamond in charge of marketing. She confirmed that the company sent prototype products out to social media influencers. She also confirmed that the Ekspert was a new product not being sold in the U.S. yet. But she said she only dealt with strategy. The details of beta models sent out was left to the ad agency they used. She just sent them a batch of twenty sets to distribute for that purpose. She gave him the name and number of the agency and name of the account manager.

Cliff's next call was to the ad agency. He was connected right away.

"Hello, my name is Cliff Knowles. I just spoke with marketing over at Black Diamond and they said I should talk to you."

"I see. How can I help you?"

“I understand you distribute the promotional models of some of their products to media influencers, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s my responsibility.”

“They told me they provided you twenty pair of the new model trekking pole, the Ekspert. Can you confirm that?”

“That sounds right. What’s this about?”

“I’m an investigator in California working on a murder case. The victim, Jocelyn Boylan, had in her possession one of those Ekspert poles at the time of her death. We believe the killer took it. We’re trying to determine if the poles are identifiable in any way, so that if we find one, we know it belonged to the victim.”

“The poles are all identical. What department are you with?”

“I’m a licensed private investigator assisting the FBI on the case. Can you tell me how many pair you have distributed?”

He spent a minute looking up the data. “Eleven pair so far, eight in the U.S.”

“May I have the names and addresses of those recipients, so that we can account for those?”

“I can’t give out names or information like that, not without a court order.”

Cliff was afraid of something like this and didn’t want to argue the point. He knew he was lucky to have gotten as far as he had. “I understand. We’ll do that if necessary. We already have Miss Boylan’s name. Can you at least tell me this: how many pairs went to people in California, especially northern California, including her?”

“Well I, uh, ... I suppose that would be okay. One moment.” A minute later he came on the line. “Two others in California besides her. One in Reedley and one in Carpinteria. I’m not sure if those are in Northern California.”

“Are they paid for promoting your products?”

“Not directly.”

“I find that hard to believe. We’re told by relatives that Miss Boylan posted popular videos. I’m sure you chose your influencers very carefully, so you would know her videos. We think there could be some valuable information about her contacts in them, but we haven’t located her videos. I believe she must use an online name or avatar. Can you tell me how to find them?”

“I actually can’t. We pay YouTube and Taboola and other companies to place our ads on videos or websites or blogs that are product related and to identify the individuals owning those who have opted in to sharing with advertisers. Our ads are placed automatically on those sites by those companies and we send our promotional products to the owners of the sites where the most clicks for our products originate. We never actually view the pages or sites. For all I know they could be Looney Tunes or pornography. We judge solely by the number of clicks or sales they generate. The site or video owners get paid based on views or clicks or in some cases, a commission on sales. If they want the revenue, the reviewers, bloggers, or other influencers can plug the products but nearly all are careful to seem objective for their own credibility. They don’t want to be seen as shills for corporations. These products are given out in the hope they’ll use them in videos or review them, but it’s not the quid pro quo you seem to think.”

“So you can’t tell me how to identify her videos? Do you have her email?”

“I’ve never spoken to Miss Boylan or corresponded with her by email. If I were you, I’d contact YouTube or Facebook or Taboola first. They should be able to connect her real name with the videos, assuming that’s where she posted.”

Frustrated, Cliff thanked him and hung up. He called Len Schuler to let him know what he found out.

Schuler wasn’t happy. “Damn, Cliff, we have to prove that pole is the one she had with her. That’s the only way to show the possible existence of another person as killer.”

“If her fingerprints are on it, we can.”

“True, but if not, we have to show that there are no other Ekspert poles out there that it could be.”

“Do you want me to try to identify the people in Reedley and Carpenteria? It would be difficult and expensive. The quickest way would be to subpoena the ad company for the names and addresses. It would still involve interviewing everyone and asking them if they still had both poles. Then what if they don’t cooperate or they say they sold the poles? We’d only serve to prove that it could be someone else’s pole. And what about the other eight sets in the U.S.? I don’t even have cities for those.”

“And a subpoena would tip off the prosecution we have her pole. If we knew it was hers we’d have to produce it for them, but at this point we don’t.”

“Our only real hope is for her fingerprints to be on it. I was careful not to touch it and I asked the seller not to handle it. Do you know if the sheriff even has her prints?”

“No, but they should be on her seized property if they weren’t able to recover them from the body. I’ll request them. They certainly have her DNA. They may push back or ask why I want them. They’ll probably ask if I have any evidence she may have handled, but I can finesse that. If I hand over the pole before testing, and it turns out not to have her prints on it, it hurts us. I can’t use the pole at trial if that happens. That would make us look desperate if we could even get it into evidence. Once we get her prints, I can have our own examiner dust it and compare. If he finds a match, then we turn it over. Then we’ve just proved the stranger in the dark truck in Pillar Point could have been the killer.”

“Brad called it an SUV which is exactly what an Outback is,” Cliff pointed out. “That vehicle also may not have been whoever dumped the stuff there. I’m not sure how much that helps you.”

“Okay, well I’ll try to get those prints from the D.A. so we can have the pole tested. We’ll worry about the rest after we get the results. It’s a waste of money until we know that’s hers. What’s your next move?”

“I’m going to contact the Pillar Point authorities, and see if it’s possible to identify where the contents of that dumpster went. For all I know it hasn’t been emptied yet. Her stuff could still be there. If it’s in a landfill somewhere, maybe they can tell us where and we can dig it up.”

“What about the house in Morro Bay? It might have her prints in it.”

Cliff thought about it for a moment. “That’s possible. It’s been rented for three years or so and has probably been professionally cleaned several times, but she might have left some stuff there. She may very well have left all the furniture and appliances at least, but I’d prefer to find something none of the renters or cleaners would ever have touched. Maybe a box of photos in the attic or something like that. I’ll contact the rental agent.”

“All right. We have a plan. I’ll send the pole to my fingerprint guy.”

Cliff called the county harbor district that owned and managed Pillar Point Harbor. He quickly determined that the dumpsters were emptied twice weekly. Another call to the garbage collection company revealed that they use more than one landfill and that there was no way to match whatever truck emptied that dumpster with a specific location in a landfill. There was no chance of finding the clothing the teenagers had seen.

He called the rental agent for the Morro Bay house. He found the number among the police reports that had been turned over. He introduced himself and explained what he wanted, but the agent told him he couldn’t give him access. That was up to the tenant. He also wouldn’t provide the tenant’s name or telephone number, but Cliff had the address and it was an easy online search to get those.

Cliff decided he was going to have to drive down there in person. He called the tenant, a single mother of teenagers, and explained that he was working with the father of the young woman owner who had died. The father wanted to see if there were any personal items she had left there from when she had lived in the house. The woman agreed that he could come by on Sunday afternoon; today was Friday. It would be an all-day trip.

Chapter 27

Ellen returned from the sheriff's office and spent Friday afternoon watching geocaching videos by joblob on her phone. She was convinced he was connected to the killing somehow. She began with the last video in the series. It was of a search in Marin County, north of San Francisco, two days before the killing. It was frustrating to Ellen that joblob never showed himself in the videos and never spoke, but she was determined to get an idea of his age and size at least. In this video he rented a paddle boat to go out on a small lake in order to access the geocache. When joblob was talking to the man at the rental booth, it was clear he was looking at joblob at a slight upward angle. So joblob was a bit taller than that man, although of course she didn't know how tall the boat booth guy was.

The audio was mostly music, especially movie themes or appropriate snippets of classical music. Occasionally, though, there were bits of dialog from movies. For the Marin lake one, for example, when joblob's camera took in the tiny paddle boat, the audio blurted the famous "You're gonna need a bigger boat" line from *Jaws*.

Although the videos could be viewed on YouTube alone, the written commentary was in joblob's blog, so that's where Ellen logged on. The YouTube video was always at the top of the post, but there would be a narrative below. Joblob wrote on the final video that qualifying for the Ultimato challenge was nearing. All the difficulty/terrain square were filled. It was just a question of finding at least one cache a day for another week.

Ellen pulled up video after video. In one it was necessary to lift a sizable chunk of concrete to find the cache underneath. In the blog commentary joblob had written, "This sucker was heavy. My days as a shot-putter in high school did me some good here." In another one you could see a hiker across from the cache location calling over to him, probably asking what he was doing, a common event for geocachers. The audio dubbed in was DeNiro's iconic line "You talkin' to me?" from *Taxi Driver*. In the blog joblob claimed to have told the hiker to get lost, not exactly good public relations for geocaching. Clearly, joblob was trying to project a public persona as a tough guy. Maybe he was, but Bruce Boylan was a big guy and prison hardened.

After three hours of that she'd had enough. It was Friday and she was going home, but she was determined that the key to solving the case was inspecting the geocache logs on that Butano trail.

When she got home, Cliff was there playing with the kids. She waited until almost bedtime to broach the subject. "Honey, tomorrow you're going to have to take the kids for most of the day. Mia has a play date in the morning with Britney but you'll have to mind Tommy."

"Why? What're you doing?"

"I'm going to hike that trail in Butano to verify what you said about the cell phone towers." Ellen wasn't ready to share what she suspected about Jocelyn being a geocacher or about joblob. She still thought Bruce Boylan was the killer and didn't want to help the defense.

"Tomorrow? That's not urgent, and it's work related. Why not do it Monday on the uncle's dime? You're always saying you wish you had more time with the kids."

"I have other things at work next week."

"Did you get an iPhone to bring along?"

"No. I'll use my Samsung. I still need to install the app you used. Can you send me the link."

Cliff gave her the name to search in the Google Play Store. He watched as she found the app and installed it. She left to go to her desk computer as Cliff cleaned up the kitchen. He was loading the dishwasher when he realized he needed to tell her something about the app. When he stepped up behind her he noticed that she covered something with her hand. It was her Garmin GPSr.

Why was she covering it, he wondered. Of course she would want to document the exact position where the north and south cell towers switched just as he had. She had also minimized the browser as he'd walked in. What was going on? He looked at the task bar at the bottom of the screen where the title of the web page was shown. It was a geocache ID! She was looking up geocaches on the route and loading them into her Garmin. She was going to geocache en route.

"So, you're planning to sneak in some geocaching," he said with a fake accusatory tone.

"Well, why not, as long as I'm there."

"Hey, that's a good idea. Britney's mom can take Mia for the day. The girls are easier to care for together than separately anyway. We

took Britney last month. Tommy loves geocaching with us. The three of us can go ... make it a family outing.”

“Cliff, that’s not a good idea. I’ll be setting a quick pace. You wouldn’t be able to keep up with him in tow.”

“What’s the rush? Just go slower. He’ll be fine. Maybe not at the very last one. It’s too steep. I can stay with him on the trail.”

“No, really, I’d have to watch him all the time when I should be watching the app or my footing.”

Her excuses weren’t making sense. Cliff knew something was off. Why had she been so secretive? Cliff had grabbed geocaches while working many times. There was nothing wrong with it. Then it hit him.

“Waiiiit. You think the victim may have been a geocacher. You want to go see if she logged those caches.”

Ellen couldn’t lie to Cliff, not now that she’d been found out, but she could mislead. “It’s just a theory. I mainly want to check the cell tower data, but I figured it was worth checking. She had a GPSr with her, we think.”

“That makes sense, actually. Maybe her killer’s name will be right next to hers on the cache logs.”

“I don’t think Bruce geocaches. He doesn’t even know how to use a computer.”

“I agree, but I bet the killer does.”

“Funny. Fine, if there are two names together on all those caches, we’ll have a suspect. For now, we don’t even know her geocaching name. If nothing else, we should learn that.”

“Okay, I’m going with you. Tommy, too.”

“I can’t stop you. You better call Britney’s mom to make sure it’s okay.”

-o0o-

The three of them parked in the day use lot right next to where Jocelyn Boylan had parked weeks earlier. The weather was cool and overcast, but expected to be sunny once the marine layer burned off. Ellen slathered another layer of sunscreen on Tommy and they set off on the trail.

The “trail” was a wide, dirt fire road, well-groomed and easy hiking. It was popular for mountain bikers, at least among those not looking for the most challenging rides. The trio reached the first cache location and Tommy immediately found the cache. It was a full-sized ammo box, so not difficult to find. Cliff opened it up and handed the logbook to Ellen. It was a spiral-bound notebook the size of a large cell phone. She opened it to the last written log. She smiled smugly and turned it toward Cliff. There on the page was a lengthy log from joblob dated the day of Jo Boylan’s death.

Cliff stood there agape. “joblob! You think he killed Boylan.” He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the page.

“Actually, no. I’m thinking more that he and Jo Boylan were both killed at the same time by Bruce Boylan.”

“So where’s his body?”

“Good question.”

“So that’s why we’re really here.”

“I wanna sign,” Tommy pleaded, reaching for the book. At five years old, he’d only mastered writing his name a few months earlier.

Ellen lifted it up out of his reach. “This is now evidence. I’m afraid you can’t sign it.”

Tommy pouted.

“But you can sign this one. You can be the first one to sign it!”

Ellen produced a similar small note book from her backpack. Having read the previous logs, she’d known this cache held a logbook, not just a log sheet, and had come prepared for this eventuality.

Tommy laboriously printed his name in the log book and handed it to Cliff, who wrote the date and his own geocaching name CliffNotes. Ellen signed the new logbook Ellenwheelz, then got out a plastic bag and pulled out an evidence sticker.

Before she had a chance to package it all up, Cliff asked to see the original book. Ellen hesitated. If it was seized evidence, he had no right to see it until it was produced during discovery, but she hadn’t yet officially logged it into evidence. She watched as he put on gloves and reluctantly she handed it to him. He examined it closely. Although joblob’s log was the last thing written in it, he noticed tiny shreds of paper in the binding, the kind that occur when a page is ripped out of a spiral notebook. He pointed these out to Ellen.

“So joblob was here that day and then dropped out of sight,” she commented. “You think the killer ripped out the page with Jocelyn’s geo-name?”

“Hard to tell when or where that page was ripped out. It could have had her log or maybe the killer’s, too. Or maybe she wasn’t a geocacher after all and it’s irrelevant.” Cliff examined the trade items in the cache. “A Hardkorps token. Those are trading for quite a bit these days. They cost twenty bucks or more to buy online. The ones numbered under 0010 are going for hundreds.”

She was about to seal up her evidence bag when she decided to take another look. She flipped through the pages and didn’t see a log from Hardkorps. “It doesn’t look like Hardkorps signed it.”

“One of the previous finders must have put the token in. That’s a nice piece of swag.”

Ellen finished sealing and tagging the evidence bag with the logbook inside, then placed it in her pack. The trio continued up the hill. As they hiked, the terrain changed from relatively open and mostly coast oak trees to densely packed redwoods. These magnificent sentinels never ceased to inspire awe in both Cliff and Ellen. Tommy was more interested in looking for lizards and bugs.

They stopped at the next geocache location. Ellen had been taking notes of the cell phone app as she hiked. Her phone was still logged onto the south tower. She recorded this once again in a separate notebook. She’d have to do separate FD-302s on Monday for the phone tower logs and the geocaches.

Tommy was looking around at ground level, but Cliff knew it was a bison tube hanging in a tree. He spotted it before Ellen was done logging her phone data. Cliff knew he was lucky to have spotted it. It was well-camouflaged. He said nothing, waiting for Ellen to give it a try. Ellen began staring into the branches and checking her GPSr trying to get a bead on it. She was having no luck.

When Tommy began to complain that he couldn’t find it, Cliff lifted him up and took him over to the branch that held the cache. “I think it’s somewhere around here in the tree.” It took Tommy more than thirty seconds to spot it, even though Cliff had brought him right to the cache. The camo was that good. Cliff’s arms began to ache.

"I see it!" Tommy cried and grabbed the cache. Cliff put him down.

"Cliff!", Ellen yelled, "Don't let him grab it. It could have the killer's prints on it."

"Too late. Sorry." Cliff was still gloved. He took the bison tube from Tommy. He opened it. The tube was empty. "Nothing in it."

"What?" Ellen said. "I know joblob signed it. I checked online."

"You already knew about joblob being on this trail the day of the murder?"

"Of course I read the previous logs before going out. Why didn't you?"

"I didn't know we were doing this until late last night. You didn't tell me. Then I had to send you the name of the phone app and contact Britney's mom. We were lucky she was still up."

"Well, anyway, now we have another missing log. You think the killer took this one, too?"

Cliff murmured something unintelligible. He pondered the situation. Geocache logs go missing sometimes. Maybe the last one got waterlogged or too full to be of use so someone took it. Geocachers rarely do that, though. A full log sheet normally just stays in the cache unless the cache is too small for another sheet, and then someone replaces it with a new one.

"Maybe it got waterlogged and someone threw it out," Ellen offered.

"Bison tubes are waterproof. You're all wet. Your theory doesn't hold water."

"Oh, we're being witty now, are we?"

"There's nothing to connect this to the victim or to joblob or to any killer."

"It's still evidence. We know joblob signed the log. He's a pro doing a video. He would have replaced a full log or left it there. Somebody came along after he was here and removed the log. I'm taking the cache."

"You going to replace it?"

"I don't have a bison tube. Do you?"

"No."

“We’ll just have to leave it missing. We can log a DNF or Needs Maintenance online.” She packaged up this cache and marked it for evidence just like the last one.

Tommy was frustrated that he didn’t get to sign the log sheet, but Ellen mollified him with a piece of candy. He was being well-behaved and deserved it. Farther up the trail they stopped in a shady spot for water, a snack, and a rest. Ellen’s phone still showed she was pinging the south tower.

The third cache was hanging on a wire fence. Ellen spotted it first and subtly guided Tommy to the right area. He cried out joyfully when he found it, but Ellen snatched it with her gloved hand before he could mess up any prints on it. She opened it carefully and pulled out the log sheet. It was full; the last name on it was joblob. She showed the log to Cliff. He nodded.

“No second sheet?”

“Nope. Nothing else.”

“I wanna sign it,” Tommy whined.

“I’m sorry. The paper is all full. There’s no room for you this time or for any of us. But you found it! You did a great job as a finder.” He stomped around exasperated until he saw a butterfly that caught his attention. His pique was over.

Cliff pulled up the geocaching app on his phone. He rarely used it since he usually just used his Garmin GPS receiver and then logged online later at home. But now he wanted to know something the app could tell him. He searched for the cache they had just found and examined the previous logs. The last finder was joblob with the one-word log “Found.” But the one before that said “Log sheet getting full. Put in a second sheet.” That confirmed it. Someone had removed the second sheet. Not someone. The *killer*.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Cliff asked.

“Yeah. It had to be the same guy removed all three. It’s got to be joblob. He must have signed all the cache logs on the way up the hill, then met Boylan on the way down as she was coming up and found out she was a geocacher. Something happened, an argument, maybe, and he killed her. Then he hid the body and realized he had to remove evidence that she’d been there. He went back to the caches and removed her logs.”

This made sense, but it wasn't what Cliff was thinking. The part about all three logs being removed by the same guy was right, but the rest didn't quite work. "Why would he leave his own logs then? He could remove his, too. No one would ever know he was here. That would be safer."

Ellen clung to her theory. "Maybe he couldn't. Maybe he livestreamed his finds so his followers would know he was here. He could have felt that the body wouldn't be found for a long time and never be connected to the day he was here."

"Wait a minute. You already knew joblob had been here before we started. You must have checked his recent videos online."

"Yeah, I did. Nothing was live streamed or put on YouTube. That doesn't work. But he did log immediate finds with the app. He could delete those, too, but even if he did, there would still have been people, his followers, who knew that he had been here."

"So maybe both the killer's and the victim's logs were on the missing sheets. Joblob may have come and gone before the killing happened, so the killer didn't bother with those earlier logs."

"No, Cliff, that doesn't make sense either. Why didn't joblob finish logging the caches online? Why did he stop making videos? He must have been killed the same day. So why didn't the killer delete his logs, too?"

"Then where's joblob's body?"

Cliff and Ellen had been brainstorming out loud for several minutes and Tommy began to complain. The butterfly had long since disappeared. "I'm bored."

Cliff hoisted him up on his shoulders. He knew the whining usually signified he was getting tired. "Okay, we have one more to go. Let's go get it. It's called Butano Hilltop."

When they got to the high point in the trail, the end of the loop, Ellen's phone app told her that she was still connected to the south tower. Cliff had been right. The final cache was at the top of the mountain a short distance away, but there was no trail there.

"You want to stay here with Tommy until I go for the cache? That climb is not safe for him," Ellen asked.

Tommy was still perched atop Cliff's shoulders. He had fallen asleep for much of the last ten minutes, jerking awake when he started

to slump too far one direction or another. Now that he was almost at the cache site, he was beginning to perk up. Cliff put him down, exhausted himself and glad to be free of the burden.

"No, you'll take that into evidence. I want to see it and photograph it, too. I have to be there."

"You could have done that yourself when you were here before."

"I didn't know about the geocaching connection then. I didn't even know there was a cache there. You should stay with Tommy and I'll go back up and get it and photograph it and come back and then you can go up."

"Where is it?" Tommy asked.

"Up on top of the mountain in the trees," Cliff answered. "I'll bring it down for you to sign."

Ellen objected, "No, if you go up first without me watching, the defense could claim the chain of evidence was broken. They could say I allowed you to go up and plant evidence throwing suspicion on someone else."

"I wouldn't do that."

"But the lawyer might suggest it when cross-examining me on the stand. Yikes! Tommy, no. That's too dangerous for you." Tommy was already halfway to the top.

Cliff and Ellen both started up the hill after him. By the time they got to the top, he was already on the hilltop and running toward the copse of trees. Neither Cliff nor Ellen had the guts to accuse the other of failing to watch him because they both knew they had each been derelict. Cliff was huffing and puffing and began to lag behind Ellen as they crested the hill. She caught up with Tommy at the edge of the trees. He was already looking around the bases of the tree trunks.

Cliff stuck with Tommy while Ellen read the cache description and previous logs. This one required climbing a tree, so she started peering up into the canopy. There were two possible trees based on GPS readings. After fifteen minutes of taking turns looking up for the cache and watching Tommy, Cliff lifted Tommy up onto the lowest branch of one of two trees and told him to look for the cache. Cliff stood directly below him ready to catch him if he fell. Tommy scampered around the branches like a lemur. Within two minutes he called out that he saw the

geocache. It was in the other tree, as it turned out, but he pointed to where it was and guided Ellen in climbing to where she could reach it. She retrieved it without great difficulty, carefully avoiding leaving fingerprints.

Back on the ground, she pulled out the log. It was a booklet, but unlike the previous looseleaf book, this one was bound with glue. She and Cliff looked at the last signature: joblob. It was dated the same day as all the other joblob's signatures – the day Boylan was killed. One thing made this one distinct, however.

"There's space below her signature on the last page," Ellen noted aloud.

"Let me see. The next page isn't ripped out." Cliff added. "If you tried, the page would rip near the binding. We'd be able to see the stub."

"Yeah. So whoever removed the other log sheets didn't touch this one. He must not have known joblob got this far."

"Or it was joblob and he knew Boylan didn't get this far, so he didn't have to. Her body was found between here and that last geocache we found. He was on his way down from here and encountered her on the way up when it happened."

Tommy was clamoring to be able to sign the log, so Ellen gave him a blank log sheet and a pen from her pack. He set to work writing out his name. She checked her phone app. She was connected to the north cell tower for the first time.

"Cliff, that doesn't work. I'm on the north tower. Boylan's phone was here twice, remember? She must have gotten here at least the first time."

"True. So she made it here and then something happened here before she could sign the cache log. Maybe she showed up with her video going and joblob was, uh, you know," his voice dropped to a whisper so Tommy couldn't hear. "... exposing himself or something. She fled, but joblob caught up to her where the fight happened. Then for some reason, he brought her phone back here. Maybe he hadn't found the cache here yet and wanted to finish the job so he hid the body and hauled her stuff back here. At some point he realized her phone was still on and turned it off."

Ellen thought about it for a couple of minutes. “That makes sense, but I’m not convinced. It makes more sense to me that joblob was a victim. If he was the killer, he would have removed his logs on all the caches and would resume his normal life of geocaching and vlogging. Suppose Bruce hiked with Jo the whole time. He killed her on the trail there near the USGS site and hid the body. He was trying to figure out what to do with her clothes and gear when joblob came down the mountain, already having signed the log sheet up top. He sees Bruce, blood on the trail, all the extra gear, and realizes what happened. Bruce chases him uphill. Bruce already had Jo’s phone in his pocket or pack. He catches up to joblob up on top of the mountain, kills him, leaves the body for the time being, and goes back down to finish taking care of the crime scene where there’s more foot traffic. Then, when he’s finished taking care of that, he comes back up here to dispose of joblob’s body and realizes he still has Jo’s phone. He turns it off. Then he goes back to remove her signature from all the geocaches down the trail on his way out.”

“That makes sense, too, but it has one big flaw. Where’s joblob’s body?”

“Well, maybe it’ll be found. Or here’s an even easier explanation. Joblob did the whole route, signed all the geocaches and left before the killing. He never saw anything or had anything to do with it. He simply dropped out of circulation because Hardkorps was going to beat him. Bruce was here with Jo but before they could find the cache, something went wrong and she fled down the mountain. He chased her, killed her and stashed the body. Then he realized he’d dropped his own stuff up here, so he packed up all her clothes and gear, came back up here to clean up this scene and retrieve his stuff. He turned off her phone here, then went back down and removed all her logs, probably his own logs, too.”

“That makes more sense, except I know Bruce didn’t do it.”

“So you keep telling me.” Suddenly Ellen spotted Tommy poking at something in a bush with a stick. She hurried over there. The object of Tommy’s assault was a rattlesnake. “For God’s sake, Cliff, we’ve got to get Tommy out of harm’s way. Let’s get back down on the fire road. It’s dangerous up here.”

Cliff took Tommy by the hand and started back to the spot where they climbed up. “Come on, we’re going back now, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kiddo,” Tommy complained, but he followed along obediently.

The trio got down safely and made the long way back to their car. Tommy got tired halfway down the mountain and Cliff carried him on his shoulders again. Cliff and Ellen thought about all these what-if scenarios, but said nothing more about them. They were all possible. The only way to know was through hard evidence. Maybe Bruce’s fingerprints would be found on the geocaches. Maybe Jo’s wouldn’t. Maybe they’d find a witness. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

The one thing Cliff was now sure of was that the killer was a geocacher. Only a geocacher would know how to remove the evidence in the geocache logs. That meant it wasn’t Bruce Boylan. Bruce was dyslexic and could barely use a smart phone. He’d spent the years in prison when geocaching was invented and became popular. But was the killer joblob? Or was joblob a victim?

Chapter 28

Ellen took Sunday off from working the case, but Cliff had to drive down to Morro Bay to try to get a sample fingerprint from Jocelyn's personal items. He told Ellen where he was going, but not his exact mission. She was less than pleased.

Cliff arrived at the house a little after one. The woman of the house was cordial and invited him in. She had heard from the rental agent that the owner had died and that someone from the family might want to come by to see if she had left anything. She offered him something to drink, but he declined and asked to see anything left behind by the owner. The woman told him there was an attic, but she was told not to touch it, so it might have some personal things. She showed him to a trap door in the hallway. He pulled down on the short cord attached to it and a set of rickety stairs unfolded. He took a few steps up and spotted a single cardboard box near the door. He brought it down.

The woman's kids were teenagers and had no interest. Both were busy out of the house with sports or friends. The woman, however, was somewhat interested. She watched quietly as Cliff put on cotton gloves and opened the box. Inside were some music CDs, a packet of letters, and a shoebox full of photographs along with various other items that were likely valuable only as memorabilia. He opened the shoebox and spread out some of the photos on the tabletop in the living room. The woman asked him why he was wearing gloves.

"Some of this stuff may be very old and fragile. I just want to make sure I don't hurt anything." This was a lie, of course, but he didn't think it would help garner her cooperation by telling her he was protecting fingerprints that might be evidence in a murder case.

He picked up one photo by the edges. It was an old 35mm print of Jocelyn with her parents when she was very young, maybe three or four. He turned it toward the woman. "This is her." He looked at a few more and then replaced them in a stack on the table. The entire box was clearly Jo's belongings, so he would take it all and sort through it later.

The doorbell rang. As the woman headed to answer the door, Cliff accidentally knocked the stack of photos over. Most of them fell

on the floor next to his foot, but one slid under the sofa. He picked up the others and placed them back on the table.

"Stop what you're doing!" a voice rang out from the doorway. "I have a court order."

Cliff, still leaning over to retrieve the last photo, pulled it out from under the sofa, slipped it in his sock flat against his ankle and pulled his pants leg over it. He rose as a female deputy stepped into the living room. Right behind her were two more women.

The second woman was middle-aged, tall and slim. She wore slacks, a shirt like a man's dress shirt, and an officious air that marked her as the boss. "My name is Veronica Harmon. I'm a special master appointed by the probate court," she announced. "I have an order to take possession of any and all items of personal or real property belonging to the estate of Jocelyn Boylan. The deputy is here to assist me in enforcing that order."

The tenant was flustered and astonished at this interruption, and Cliff was, too. "What's going on?" he asked. "I've been authorized by Jocelyn's father to take her personal belongings to her home in Watsonville. I've been engaged by his attorney."

"You're Cliff Knowles." This statement came from the third woman through the door, a petite brunette with scarlet lipstick and a beauty mark under her left eye. She wore distressed jeans and a silky-looking blouse, probably a name brand. Cliff assessed her age as late thirties. The statement was delivered with undisguised disgust. "You're working for the murderer now? Unbelievable!"

"This is Marilu Clark," Harmon said. "She represents the deceased's aunt. I'm here to see that the property of the estate is preserved until the court decides the proper heir." She held up what must have been the court order.

"He's no murderer. He's her father. He only wants a few photos of his little girl. He took many of them originally. They have no financial value. Surely you can ..."

"No exceptions!" Harmon barked.

"Step away from the table," the deputy ordered. Cliff did so reluctantly. Clark came over to the table with Harmon and the two of them examined the contents of the box.

“This all belongs to the estate,” Harmon announced. “I’ll take it.” Cliff watched in horror as she began picking up all the items and tossing them into the box with her bare hands.

“Empty your pockets,” the deputy ordered Cliff.

Cliff was wearing slacks and a polo shirt. There weren’t many pockets to deal with. He pulled his wallet and keys out of his pants pockets, handed them to the deputy, and turned the pockets inside out. The deputy gave them a cursory examination and handed them back. She then looked at his briefcase lying open on the table and began to riffle through the papers in it.

“Those are my notes for the father’s attorney. They’re attorney work product. You can’t read those.”

Clark glanced at them anyway, then shook her head no. The deputy closed the briefcase and handed it to Cliff. There was a minute of silence while Harmon finished putting the items back in the box.

“Why are you still here?” Clark said to Cliff.

Much as he resented the supercilious manner in which it was delivered, he knew the comment made sense. There was no reason for him to hang around any longer. He thanked the tenant and walked out the door. As soon as he got in the car, he opened his briefcase, found an envelope, and placed the photo hidden in his sock into the envelope. He then placed the envelope into the briefcase and closed it.

Cliff’s headed up Atascadero Road and merged onto U.S. 101 north.

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Ellen had finally gotten the children down for their afternoon nap and was now online, reviewing joblob’s blog, the text one on WordPress, not the vlog on YouTube. There had been no posts since the one in Marin County, days before the killing. She clicked the “Follow” icon so that she would be notified if anything new appeared.

She examined the page differently from before. When she had first looked, she had paid attention mostly to the videos themselves, trying to get a view of joblob or his companions. Now she paid more attention to other details. The title graphic caught her eye. It featured the

shirtless torso of a well-built man with killer abs. His head wasn't shown, nor was anything below the top of his gym shorts. He had extensive tattoos on his arms and chest. He looked like a model posing, and Ellen doubted it was joblob himself. A quick image search turned up the original. The picture was of a Ukrainian bodybuilder and model. It had been cropped to fit the banner, but was otherwise unmodified. Her impression was that joblob was trying to project an image of more of a stud than he really was. She momentarily envisioned him as a nerdy little guy with thick glasses. He probably was no match for Bruce Boylan physically.

Ellen read more of the text accompanying the videos. She flipped through dozens of pages trying to find something useful. It was clear that he wanted to keep his real appearance secret, giving Ellen confidence her assessment was right. He was probably an unimpressive-looking fellow, although some of the videos of difficult cache retrievals proved he was quite athletic. His hands and arms, although always covered, looked thick enough and some videos had him lifting cement blocks off cache hiding places. He was no ninety-seven pound weakling.

She stopped at one particular video from three or four months earlier. The caches joblob was targeting that day were situated along a trail in the East Bay. The trail was fairly busy, judging by the number of cars in the parking lot near the trailhead. At the third cache location, joblob had just found the cache when the camera turned to a figure approaching on the trail. A perky blond woman in a snug tank top and running pants stopped and walked up to joblob. As she got closer, it was clear she was friendly and ridiculously good-looking even without makeup.

As usual, the only audio on the video was music and dialog clips from movies. As the woman approached, the audio clip was a loop of the young boy in *Parenthood* repeating what Steve Martin's character had just taught him to say when meeting a pretty girl: "Hubba hubba." The loop repeated it six times. The text in the blog explained the encounter as follows:

Julie came up to me and asked what I was doing. She said she jogged on that trail almost every day and had seen others poking around in that spot. I explained geocaching to her. She said that was cool. She told me

she was twenty-two and I noticed she wasn't wearing a ring. Hey, guys, here's a hot one for you. Geocaching with benefits. Hubba hubba indeed!

Ellen noticed something when joblob turned ninety degrees to point out where the cache had been. He and Julie appeared to be standing side-by-side with the sun behind them. Ellen noticed that joblob's shadow was longer than Julie's. She paused the video and pulled out a tape measure. As far as she could tell from her measurements, joblob's shadow was about twelve to fifteen percent longer than Julie's. His shoulders were much wider than Julie's. too. If she could identify this Julie, she could get joblob's height at least. If they found her and interviewed her, maybe even a solid description. The East Bay park wasn't all that far away, but there was no way she could stake out that trail day after day or send a lead to someone else to do it. So far as the FBI was concerned, the case was solved. Maybe Cliff would do it. She emailed him a link to the blog post and explained that if he could find this Julie, they might be able to identify joblob and resolve some issues.

Chapter 29

Monday morning Cliff met with Len Schuler. He explained to Schuler that he felt the killer was a geocacher and might be this mysterious person using the name joblob. Schuler had never heard of geocaching, so Cliff had to explain that to him first. Schuler was a little slow at first in grasping the concept, but he caught on. Cliff explained about the missing log sheets and how only a geocacher would know to remove those and how that was evidence that it couldn't be Bruce since Bruce wasn't capable of using a computer.

Schuler nodded politely but said that wasn't useful. He didn't think he could explain to a jury in a convincing way about the sport or its significance. He asked Cliff about the property in Morro Bay. Cliff told him about the tenant being helpful. Cliff withdrew the envelope containing the one photo he had obtained. He opened it and pulled out the photograph using cotton gloves. Len said he would send it to a forensic lab along with the pole to see if they could find prints on it. This wasn't going to be helpful unless they could not only find usable prints, but find a way to verify those prints were Jo Boylan's and find those same prints on the trekking pole. But it was a necessary first step.

"How was the drive down?" Len asked out of politeness more than interest.

"Fine. I got kicked out of the house by a court-appointed special master. I couldn't get the rest of her stuff."

"Boo hoo. Tiny violin. What's your next step?"

"I have to identify this joblob guy. He's almost certainly either the killer or another victim. If not, then a probable witness who's gone into hiding only days before qualifying for a three-year-long challenge. He had a huge presence on YouTube and other media and suddenly dropped off the media planet. I'll be watching his videos to try to pick up a clue as to who and where he is. Can you get the victim's prints from the prosecution so we can match? The photo may not have any."

"I have a request in, but the D.A. said they don't have prints. The corpse was too deteriorated. They're printing some of the property, but I can tell they don't want to speed that process up."

"Why?"

“It will only benefit us at this point. They’ll only need her prints for elimination purposes if a murder weapon is found, which is unlikely at this point.”

“Ellen took the geocaches as evidence. They might have her prints on them if she wasn’t wearing gloves.”

“One of the witnesses said she was wearing heavy gloves. If they print those and there are no prints on them identifiable with her, that hurts us. Hurts your geocacher theory anyway. Unless her signature is on those logbooks you told me about.”

“Yeah. Good point. The signatures probably were on them, but ripped off by the killer.”

“Okay, see if you can find joblob, preferably alive. If we can raise a reasonable doubt about Bruce, a suspicion that joblob was the killer, that could be a winning defense.”

“I’m on it.”

Cliff closeted himself in his office and told Ashley to hold all calls. He sat at his computer and logged onto joblob’s personal blog. Joblob’s blog was a standard WordPress blog with a subject line, some text and a video, making it a vlog. Some of the posts did not have videos, but those were few and far between.

He started with the most recent posts and worked his way back. There were no references to Butano State Park or any intention of going there. He had verified that joblob had posted finds on the Butano caches, but they were only the automated “Found” posts generated by the app. Those were the only ones related to Butano. He continued backward in time through the posts.

In one post, joblob had donned a wetsuit to swim across a small lake to an island in the middle where the cache was hidden. He admitted in the post text that he wasn’t a very good swimmer. When he got to the island, the cache was out in the open on top of a rock, but was still hard to spot. That was because it was a lifelike model of a turtle.

He went back another week in the chronology. In that post joblob celebrated finding the last square of the difficulty/terrain grid. He found a difficulty 4, terrain 1 cache, completing the eighty-one squares. His only task to finish qualifying for the Ultmato challenge was to find at least one cache a day for the next few weeks. Cliff wondered why

joblob continued going for difficult caches after that point. Then he thought about it. He'd reviewed all the vlog posts from the latest back to the day of completing the grid. That one where he'd swum to the island was the only difficult one, and even that wasn't very hard. Anyone could swim or kayak over to the island and the turtle was obviously plastic once you got close. So if joblob stopped doing hard caches, then why did he decide to do Butano Hilltop? Did he just want to spice up the vlog? There was no way to know what the video would have looked like.

Ellen had sent him a link to one of his videos, the "hubba hubba" one where a girl was supposedly identifiable. He decided to click on that one. He watched it through. The girl was definitely a cutie and friendly to joblob. His written text made it clear he was taken with her. He watched it through again. Just before the camera turned to show the girl approaching, the camera showed the cache and some swag from inside the cache spread out on the ground. Many of joblob's posts did that. He targeted caches that were reputed to have interesting contents. But it wasn't the swag that caught his eye. It was what was lying next to it: a bright blue Black Diamond trekking pole. It only appeared for two or three seconds in the corner of the frame. He paused and rewound. Then he expanded the video to full frame. The video camera had been good quality, so there was good detail. It was an Ekspert model.

Cliff's mind reeled. He looked at the date on the video. It was three months before Butano. Was joblob one of those other people who had the promotional Ekspert poles? Had Boylan known joblob and cached with him, maybe given him the pole? That would make sense that they were caching together in Butano if they were friends. But she hadn't appeared in any of the other videos.

Or had she?

A germ of an idea was forming in Cliff's brain. Could Jo Boylan be joblob? Jo B – jo blob? But every voice on the videos was a male voice, a voice from a movie, of course, not joblob's, but still. The graphic on the page was of a male torso. All the talk about hot girls. Was she a lesbian? She'd been married, but it had failed. But what if she intentionally tried to make people think she was a male? That could explain why she always had her arms and hands covered, why she never showed her face.

Cliff fast forwarded to where the shadows appeared together. Joblob was taller and broader than Julie. Looking at their interaction again, he realized that there was no visual sign they were flirting or even that joblob was attracted to her. That was all in the written blog post, not in the video. He pulled out the police report with the victim's statistics. Jocelyn Boylan had been five foot ten inches tall and over one sixty in weight according to her driver's license. Bruce had said she was a big gal, taking after him. She liked to make videos and post them. Yes! Of course. How could he have been so blind? Jo Boylan had to be joblob. When she was killed, joblob's videos stopped. The witness had said that she had talked about a challenge. It all made sense.

At least it made sense to an ordinary person. It explained everything on the surface. But it raised some questions, too, especially for a geocacher. If the killer had known enough to remove his own logs from the geocaches, then why didn't he remove hers, too? Why not remove the geocaches entirely? He must have known that she would eventually be identified and investigators would find out she had been geocaching here by her one-word find logs on the cache page and come looking here. Maybe he'd hoped they'd find her logs and assume she'd come and gone and then gone missing elsewhere. In any event, it must have been someone who was with her at the time or who knew something about how she logged caches. Unfortunately, that didn't eliminate Bruce. The prosecutor could argue that he was with her the whole time and she explained to him about geocaching. It could have been a father-daughter outing gone bad, they'd say. He could have signed all the logs right below hers, then gone back later to remove his own signature.

Then there was the question of why she was killed. She wasn't killed with a weapon like a knife or gun, so it looked like a spontaneous thing, not preplanned. It wasn't a robbery. The killer threw away all her gear. It must have been an argument of some kind. But over what, and why here of all places? There wasn't even a geocache at the spot where she was killed.

Cliff went back to her very first video. It was all about her attempt to complete the Ultimato challenge. She had started three years earlier. She would have had the requisite three full years of finds only a few more days after her death. He checked her statistics page and

confirmed that she had also completed all eighty-one D/T squares. He went to a separate geocaching page created by fans of the challenge itself. There was a leaderboard. Hardkorps was on top, of course. He'd already completed it. Next was the German cacher. He'd completed it, too. Third was a geocacher from San Jose. He'd qualify in another two days. Joblob was shown in fourth place but with a strikethrough font, meaning she could no longer qualify, at least not unless she logged some more caches dated several weeks back to fulfill the three year requirement.

Had her killing been related to that? What possible reason could anyone have for killing her because of the challenge? Did the German kill her so he could get second place? That didn't make any sense. Why kill over second place? There was no prize or even significant bragging rights. As Dale Earnhardt said, "Second place is just the first loser." Hardkorps had first place locked up, so what was the point? Besides, Cliff thought, wasn't the German still in Europe at that time? He'd have to check what day he arrived in the U.S.

Cliff searched the German man's profile page. There was no indication that he had a blog or video presence. He posted his progress on the fan site with the leaderboard and occasionally posted notes on the cache page itself showing his progress, but that was it. He wasn't cashing in. Joblob was receiving free merchandise, and pulling in some advertising revenue from the ads on her blog and YouTube pages, but so far there was no indication that she was making big bucks from those. In any event, those would soon dry up once she completed the challenge, or even before. When Hardkorps completed it, the fan following would probably plummet. Mainstream pro sports were now back after the pandemic. The only person who might get some financial benefit from it was Hardkorps. She had started the challenge days after him. She was no threat to him.

Unless ...

Unless he was prevented from completing the challenge. Could it be possible? Cliff had watched the ESPN coverage. He remembered something about a surprise change of location for his final caches.

Cliff found Hardkorps' vlog and started watching. He began with the post three days before Boylan's death. Hardkorps posted daily by that time. Much earlier it had been only once every week or so. But

at that time, anyone interested in the challenge would know exactly what he needed to do to finish on a day by day basis. He had announced his intention to get a 4.5/5 cache, a cell he still needed. He said he was planning to do it on ... let's see ...the same day Boylan was killed. Cliff looked up the cache at the top of Butano Mountain. It was a 4.5/5! Cliff quickly launched the video from that day. Hardkorps had made no mention of Butano, but he had found caches in Half Moon Bay, only forty miles away, and very close to Pillar Point where the hiking pole had been found!

This was far from proof but Cliff's detective instincts told him he was onto something. Some more research established that Hardkorps had never found the Butano cache. He lived in San Francisco. The only other nearby cache with that difficulty rating was Take a Dip, the one near the Sutro Baths. But he had found that cache once before, four years earlier. Several comments on the video chided him for going for a cache he'd already found instead of another one. Several comments said they had been sure he was going to try for the Butano one.

It was coming together in his mind. If Hardkorps had tried to find the Butano cache that day and discovered joblob had sabotaged it, that could certainly have enraged him. Clearly, the killer had signed the logs after Boylan. Boylan had made it all the way to the top and signed the Butano Hilltop cache. That cache had been in place and the log sheet had not been torn or removed. If Hardkorps had been following joblob up the mountain and discovered she had signed the log and then taken the cache so he couldn't sign, what would he have done? Confront her? Fight over the cache? That didn't seem likely. He still had Take a Dip as a plan B. It would be infuriating for her to do that, sure, but worth killing over? The next cog in the gear turned. What if joblob had not only taken Butano Hilltop, but also Take a Dip? What if she'd told him that?

He answered his own questions silently. What would have happened was Hardkorps would have no longer been able to complete the challenge. Joblob would have taken over first place. His three-year quest would have been over unless he could find another 4.5/5 cache somewhere within traveling distance. He would have been desperate and probably seen fame and glory ... and riches ... being pulled from his grasp.

He replayed the scenario in his mind several times. There were problems with it. He and Ellen had found the Hilltop cache in place exactly as described on the cache page. If Hardkorps had been between the third cache and Hilltop when joblob took the cache, how would he have known? He would have passed her on the trail and probably not realized who she was. Everyone thought joblob was a man. She could have identified herself and taunted him, but if he'd killed her then, how would he have known how to replace the cache? And why take her gear, or her phone at least, up to the top? The smart thing would have been to head back down the hill as fast as possible after hiding the body.

The only thing that made sense was if he had been up at Butano Hilltop the same time as joblob. He must have seen her find the cache. But if she pocketed the cache there, he would have seen that and confronted her there, not down the hill. Her body would have been found up there, if at all.

Then Cliff remembered when he and Ellen had found Butano Hilltop. He had put Tommy up in the tree – the wrong tree. What if Hardkorps had done the same? The branches were tightly spaced, so to climb it he probably would have had to take off his pack and drop his pole if he had one. He would have spotted the cache just as Tommy had, and probably told her where it was. Boylan would have climbed the other tree, signed the cache and climbed down. But suppose she'd just taken off running with the cache. He would have yelled at her to bring it back. If she kept running, he'd be in a quandary. He wouldn't have time to gear up again. He would have left his pack on the ground and run after her.

Cliff could almost taste victory. This explained almost everything. If Hardkorps caught up to her on the trail near the USGS site and they'd fought, he would have had to dispose of the body there. He couldn't carry it back up the hill. She was too heavy for that and the terrain too tough. He would still have had to go back for his own gear, though. He would have had her pack including her phone with him, which would explain why it locked onto the north tower the second time.

As the pieces fell into place Cliff became more and more certain that this is what had happened. Yet something nagged at him. The body was found too far down the hill. If the scenario was as he'd envisioned

it, Hardkorps should have caught up to her before she'd even gotten off the hilltop. What took him so long? Had they fought twice? Maybe she decked him the first time and then taken off. He looked pretty skinny in his videos and she obviously wasn't. If she'd attacked him first, disabled him somehow, it may even have been self-defense.

He churned through these thoughts and it held together. He sent an email to Len Schuler. "I think I know who killed her. I don't have any evidence yet. It's just a theory. I'll fill you in after I know more."

Cliff had a plan. First, he created a fake geocaching profile. He picked the name Avenge Jo and created a new email address. It was an anonymized account with an IP address in Hong Kong. He logged onto Hardkorps' vlog site. He was still posting almost every day. Whoa! Someone had just posted a comment congratulating Hardkorps on appearing on the cover of Sports Illustrated. There had to be big money in that.

Cliff posted in the comment section as user Avenge Jo: "Hardkorps, what happened between you and joblob on Butano Hilltop? Did you kill her?"

The post appeared immediately. Within seconds more posts began appearing in response.

"Dumbass, joblob is a guy. Quit trolling."

"Avenge Jo. Who the f*** are you? Zero hides and zero finds? You aren't a real geocacher. Go peddle your conspiracy theories on 8chan."

Several more comments like this appeared over the next five minutes. Then suddenly his comment disappeared and so did everything after it. He tried posting again but this time nothing appeared. He watched for another ten minutes and no further comments from anyone else appeared. The owner, Hardkorps, had obviously disabled comments. Finally, Hardkorps posted a comment himself in the section usually used by followers:

"Sorry, fans. Due to spam, I have had to suspend all comments on my site. I will reopen it to comments when the security problem is fixed."

Good, Cliff thought. He'd gotten Hardkorps' attention. He'd started the ball rolling. Next he turned to joblob's vlog site. There hadn't been a comment in the last two days. People had apparently given up on

“him” as being a quitter. Cliff posted on her page using the identity Avenge Jo, “Jocelyn Boylan, aka, joblob, was killed after finding Butano Hilltop. Wasn’t that the day and the cache Hardkorps was going to fill his 81st D/T square with?” He included a link to the local television newscast reporting the finding of Boylan’s body.

Now he would wait.

Part Four

Chapter 30

The gorge rose in my throat when I read it. I almost got sick. Who was this Avenge Jo? Someone had figured it out. My precautions hadn't been enough. The only good thing was that it wasn't the police. It must have been another geocacher.

Sherri, my agent, was the one who had alerted me. I don't sit around reading my own blog comments all day. I check the comments once or twice a day is all, but apparently Sherri, or someone in her office, does. She'd sent me a 911 text to look at the site.

"Sherri, I saw it," I croaked, trying to sound normal.

"You have to take that down. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I have control over the comments."

"Delete them all. Now. And give me your password. I need administrator control."

I went to the blog dashboard and clicked on the comments section controls. I deleted the one from Avenge Jo and all the others that referred to it. Then I locked the site to comments. People could still comment, but the comments wouldn't appear on the site unless I approved them. Or, I guess, now if Sherri approved them.

"Okay, I deleted them. I locked the comments."

"Make me an admin."

"Sherri, I don't think that's a good idea. I..."

"I said make me an admin. Just do it. I just got you on the cover of SI, didn't I?"

I created a new user and gave it admin privileges. I sent her the link to the admin login page with the user ID and the password.

"So what's that all about, anyway? Do you know this Avenge Jo or joblob?"

"No. Never met either of them."

"Where were you that day? We have to squelch this if it goes any further."

"Half Moon Bay. You can check my vlog."

"Christ, don't give me names. I don't know where friggin' Half Moon Bay is. Or Butano. I'm in L.A. How far in miles?"

“I don’t know. Thirty or forty I guess.”

“Too close. Not good. Were you with anyone?”

“No, I solo cache. You know that, except for the final day for the cameramen. Why are you cross-examining me? You think I’m a murderer?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. What matters is what the public thinks. Or the sponsors. I’m working on a deal to get you on the Wheaties box. Magazines, too. They won’t touch you if this spreads any further. Look, it’s time for a reality check. Geocaching isn’t the NBA or NFL. It’s only because of the pandemic and no pro sports that ESPN was desperate enough to cover your challenge. Your vlog had enough followers that they took a chance on you, but that’s over now. This is your one shot. You have to milk it. You’ll be nothing but a trivia answer in a couple of years unless I can get you into other media streams.”

“Okay. So what do I do if the press asks me something? And my fans ... should I respond to this in my videos or posts?”

“Absolutely not. If you get stuck in public, like an ambush by a reporter in a restaurant, just laugh it off or scoff like nutjobs will say anything. I looked at the vlog site for this joblob person. He’s got a good sixpack, but I suppose that’s not really him in the header. You don’t think it could really be this dead woman in the article, do you?”

“No way. Everyone knows he’s a man. He’s always leching after the girls in his videos.”

“Whatever. Just keep a low profile for now. Maybe this will die down.”

“Yeah. Okay.” We hung up.

It’s a good thing she couldn’t see me. I was pale and sweaty. She might have been a lot more suspicious. I noticed I had a message in my voice mailbox. I checked it. It was from one of my geocaching buddies, one of the guys who went with me to that cache in Golden Gate Park the day after I qualified. I didn’t return the call. I knew he must have seen the post. Then I saw he’d texted me, too. He said to check out the Ultimato Challenge fan website.

I pulled that up on my computer. There was another post by this Avenge Jo troll. My heart sank. There was nothing I could do about this one, at least not directly. But I’d gotten to know the guy who ran the website. We emailed for several months before I finished qualifying. He

was at the final, too, and we'd talked some then. That was our first face-to-face meeting. He's from Sacramento.

I realized I didn't have his personal phone number, just his email, so I sent him an email asking him to remove the post. I told him it was tantamount to an accusation of murder and was slanderous. I asked if he knew who Avenge Jo was.

I was surprised when he replied right away and said he'd taken it down. His email contained some colorful names and acronyms for Avenge Jo but he didn't know who it was. He closed by congratulating me on the magazine cover. I realized that I had allies, not just fans. Maybe this would turn out alright.

Now I had to figure out who this Avenge Jo was and how they'd figured it out. Was it one person or several people? They even seemed to know the encounter had occurred at the Butano Hilltop cache, not where the body was found. It was probably someone who went geocaching on that trail and saw joblob's signature on the log sheets. I logged onto the Butano Hilltop cache page. There was no activity shown since joblob's "Found" log. I put it on my Watchlist so that any future logs there would trigger an email alert. I did the same for all the other caches on that trail. None had any activity shown since that day.

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"Ellen, you better take this," Matt said from his desk "I'm forwarding it over to you." He pushed some buttons and her desk phone rang.

"Kennedy."

"It's Walton. Hey, Matt said you're a geocacher. Is that true?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You haven't gotten any press inquiries, then?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"We just got a call from a reporter. She said there was some rumor that Jo Boylan was a geocacher called Job Lob and was killed by someone named Hardcore. Do you know who those people are?"

"That's crazy! I don't know them personally, but I know who they are. First of all, joblob is a man. He and Hardkorps are ... were ...

the two leading competitors for this geocaching challenge. It was on TV for awhile, the Ultmato Challenge. You know about it?"

"Is that the thing on ESPN during the pandemic?"

"Right. They posted video blogs, vlogs, about their progress. But, well, I didn't say anything about this to you yet, but I think joblob may be involved. I think he may have been another victim. We were back on that trail over the weekend and joblob signed the geocaching log sheets on the day she was killed. He dropped out of sight after that. No more video posts or geocaching activity. I don't have any proof. It's just a theory. We didn't find any body."

"You took a forensic team?"

"No. It was me and my husband. He's a geocacher, too. And our boy. I wanted to check out the cell phone tower stuff I told you about. The phone records show that her iPhone went up to the top of the hill where there's a geocache, then down again, then back up where it stopped. That's the only spot where it connects with the north cell tower. I seized three of the geocaches on the trail and an additional logbook as evidence. I've got them here now. There could be prints or DNA on them. I was just writing up my 302's. I was going to talk to you about it tomorrow."

"What about the Hardcore guy?"

"I don't know where that came from. He was the one who completed the challenge. He's sort of a media star now. But I don't know why anyone thinks he's involved. There was no evidence he was geocaching there that day."

"You say joblob posted videos. What does he look like? Can we get his real identity?"

"Uh, no. That's the thing. He's concealed his identity. The camera is mostly attached to his body at chest level although sometimes it's held in his hands. We only see what's in front of him. His shadow sometimes and arms, but he always wears gloves and long-sleeve shirts. It's sort of his shtick."

"Could he be Bruce Boylan?"

"No way. The videos are pretty slick with sound clips from movies and good editing. Boylan didn't even own a computer other than his smart phone which he can barely use. Besides, was he still on parole

three years ago? He wouldn't have been allowed to travel all around the U.S.”

“Perps violate parole all the time, but, no, his parole was long over by then. Maybe he's smarter with computers than he lets on.”

“I can't see it. Anyway, what are you going to say to the reporter?”

“We already said it. Same as always. We can't comment on a pending investigation.”

“Fine. Which reporter was it? I better notify the SAC in case they contact us.”

“Channel seven, the ABC one.”

“Thanks. I'll get you the 302's on the geocaches. Do you want to process them or ...”

“No, don't. We'll have to turn over to the defense anything you give us. Let's keep that geocache theory on your side. Like you said, there's no real evidence there. I don't want the 302's either.”

“Okay.”

As soon as she hung up, she called the SAC's office. Cortez wasn't in so she left a voice mail for her. She left a message for her to call when she got back.

That business out of the way, Ellen stopped to think about the rumor. Whoever started it had to be mentally off. Joblob was obviously a man. And where in the world did Hardkorps come into the story? He wasn't there that day. At least there was no evidence he was. And anyway, why would he kill her even if somehow she was joblob? The rumor must be about the challenge. He was in first place. No one could catch him no matter what, so what would be the point? She dismissed the thought.

Chapter 31

Cliff watched the comments come in on Hardkorps' vlog site. Suddenly his comment disappeared. That didn't take long, he thought. It was a good sign. Someone was scared. He went to the fan site and watched as his post there disappeared, too. That one did surprise him. Hardkorps must have some friends protecting him. It was time to ramp things up.

Using his new ID of Avenge Jo, he joined or applied to join several Facebook groups of California geocachers up and down the state. Most were closed groups, so he couldn't post until someone approved him on those, but a couple allowed him in immediately. He posted on those:

Jocelyn Boylan was a courageous geocacher known as joblob. She was killed by another geocacher while geocaching in Butano State Park. That killer removed the log sheets with his name on it. Was it Hardkorps, her bitter rival?

This would stir things up. He kept both group pages open on his browser in separate tabs, waiting for a response. They started coming in.

Where did you come up with this? Have you seen the geocaches there?

You can't be making accusations like that. It's against the posting rules.

They weren't bitter rivals. He was in first place. She couldn't catch him.

Then came what I was hoping to see.

I just checked out joblob's videos. Maybe it was a woman. You really can't tell. The hands and arms are covered. And no real voice. WTF.

I met Jo Boylan a few years ago on the trail. She geocached under the name Morrogal. I just looked at her profile. She stopped logging caches just about when joblob started the challenge.

Eureka! This was confirmation of his theory. Jo must have shed her prior geocaching identity for a new one to start the Ultmato Challenge anonymously. Cliff looked up Morrogal's profile. It was Jo Boylan all right. There were some selfies posted in her gallery. He checked her finds. They didn't stop the exact same day joblob joined.

For two days Morrogal posted finds on the same caches the same days as joblob. She must have signed the log sheets twice, once as Morrogal and once as joblob. She would have realized that there was no way to keep her identity, including her sex, secret if she continued to do that, so she must have given up her Morrogal caching identity although she didn't delete the account.

This was a step in the right direction, but was no home run. It didn't prove that Bruce wasn't with her that day, that he didn't kill her. He had to go after Hardkorps. He went to the Sports Illustrated website. No pay wall. Great. He read the cover article about Hardkorps. It gave a lot of the basics. True name: Clark Stafford. Height and weight: Five seven, one forty-two. Lives in San Francisco. He ran track and cross country in high school. Occupation before becoming a professional geocacher: chef at La Paloma in San Francisco. There was a picture of him.

That was more than enough to start a deep dive. Cliff logged onto Lexis-Nexis and pulled up the address and phone number, even the email address, for Clark Stafford. It was too early to pay him a personal visit. He needed more evidence. He ran the name through DMV. Stafford owned a small motorcycle, probably a dirt bike, and a Honda Pilot. It didn't say the color. DMV records never did because people can change the color too easily and it could mislead the police. Could it have been the one at Pillar Point, the car that drove away from the dumpster? A Pilot is a bit small to meet the description the girl had given, but her boyfriend, Brad, had described it as an SUV, which a Pilot is. It was definitely a possibility.

The next step was to start a timeline on Hardkorps. Cliff went back to Hardkorps' blog to where he posted his Difficulty/Terrain grid three months before he qualified. At that point he still needed four squares in the grid. One of those was a 4.5D/5T, the combination for Butano Hilltop. Cliff searched the geocaching site for all 4.5/5 caches centered on San Francisco to see what his options were at that time.

There were more than he thought. It looked like eighteen possibilities within a hundred miles. Cliff began to examine those caches to see whether Hardkorps might have used those to fill his square. He could eliminate four of them that were Wherigo caches. Those weren't allowed for the Ultimato Challenge since that required a

special app. Similarly, Virtual caches weren't allowed since those didn't require a log signature, which knocked out another five. That reduced it to nine. Five of those were challenge caches themselves. That meant Cliff had to examine the requirements for each of those to see if Hardkorps qualified to find those. One of them he had found, but it was before the three-year challenge period for the Ultimato. It was also 90 miles away and Hardkorps' log indicated he couldn't have found it without the help of the cache owner accompanying him. The other four all had requirements he couldn't have met during the time frame he had, such as finding a cache hidden in the month of July every year since geocaching began. He would have had to fly all over the world to pick up some of those.

So it was down to four caches, all of them puzzles for the difficulty portion. They all had certitudes links that allowed anyone to check and see who had solved the puzzle. When Cliff checked those, he saw that Hardkorps had not solved two of them, the two farthest away. One of those was on a snow-capped mountain and would be buried under snow until late summer, so it wasn't really available even if he solved the puzzle.

That left only two: Take a Dip, the one at Sutro Baths, and Butano Hilltop. Take a Dip was the closest to where he lived, but he had found it once before the three-year challenge period. That didn't disqualify it for the challenge, but it seemed unsportsmanlike to go for one you've previously found. It was the safe play, not what someone who prided himself on being hardcore would do. Butano Hilltop was thus the logical target. Yet he had ended up going for Take a Dip.

Why? Had he tried to get Butano Hilltop and run into a small difficulty – like having to murder a competitor? He would have had to change his plans at the last minute. This wasn't the kind of evidence you could explain to a jury, but Cliff was a geocacher and was all the more convinced Hardkorps had been there that day. He's the one who had removed the incriminating logs. He was the killer.

He checked Facebook again and several more geocaching groups had allowed his alter ego, i.e. Avenge Jo, to join. Several others had refused. That was interesting. Without anyone knowing what happened, it seemed people were already beginning to take sides.

Hardkorps was a hero to many geocachers, but others were taking the insinuations seriously.

Cliff posted the same messages in the new groups that he had earlier in the others. He also created a Twitter account using the same name and posted the same message using the hashtags for the Ultimato Challenge, joblob, and Hardkorps. He looked up the Twitter names for several local crime reporters for both television and newspaper and sent the same messages to them.

Cliff called Len Schuler and laid out what he'd found. Len's response: "It's time for a press conference!"

Ellen was at her computer in the Palo Alto FBI office when her phone showed a new notification on her personal email account. She took a quick look. It was from the official geocaching website. Like Cliff, she had put all the geocaches from that trail on her Watchlist. That meant any time anyone logged on those caches, she would get an email notification. Since her geocaching account was tied to her personal email, it went to her phone, not her FBI email.

The owner of one of the seized caches, the second one they'd found, had gone up the trail and discovered that his geocache was missing. He said he'd replaced the cache, but also mentioned that the logbook for the first geocache on that trail was also missing. He pointed out that the caches on this trail were the last finds for joblob. This did not surprise her, since she had seized the caches herself. She knew that there would soon be a slew of other geocachers coming through the area out of curiosity or to place new caches.

Her phone rang. It was the SAC calling her back.

"Ellen, Marisa returning your call."

"Oh, hi. I wanted to let you know that you may get a press inquiry on the case. A reporter from channel 7 is following up on a wild idea someone posted online."

"What's the wild idea?"

"Well, the victim, Jo Boylan, very likely was a geocacher. That part's not wild. But someone posted that she was this guy calling himself joblob. He made videos about this challenge he was pursuing.

More than that, the post hinted that another geocacher named Hardkorps may have killed her.”

“Geocaching? That challenge thing? My husband watched that for a while during the pandemic.”

“Yes, that’s the one. Joblob was in second place, he dropped out of sight when Hardkorps took first place.”

“So, I’m confused. If he was male why do they think it’s our victim?”

“Joblob never showed his face, only his hands and arms in the videos. In theory, he could be a woman, I guess, but from the images on his website and size of his shadow, it sure looks like a man. He dropped off the grid once the challenge was won. Over the weekend I confirmed that joblob was there in Butano the day Boylan disappeared. I think he could be another victim although we haven’t found any direct evidence of that. The sheriff’s detective thinks Bruce Boylan could be joblob. Personally, I don’t buy it. He’s not tech savvy enough.”

“And what about the hard core guy? Was he there?”

“There’s no evidence of it. He was in Half Moon Bay that day which is not too far away. Besides, he was in first place and couldn’t be passed for the challenge. It was a fixed three-year thing and he started before joblob. All the evidence points to Bruce Boylan. He had motive, access, and a car like his was seen in the same lot with the victim’s, plus he lied about his whereabouts.”

“Okay, keep me informed.”

An hour later it was Ellen who called Walton. She’d been keeping an eye on the Geocaching forums. A post there had said that there was going to be a press conference on the Boylan case. She’d checked with the press relations agent in San Francisco and they hadn’t scheduled anything. When Walton told her they hadn’t either, she asked if Toki, the D.A., had called one. He checked and called back with a negative. Who could have called it? A minute later she found out. The FBI press liaison agent called her back and told her to watch the ABC channel website. The press conference was about to start. She pulled up the site and there on screen was Len Schuler, standing on the steps of the county courthouse. Next to him stood Cliff.

“Thank you for being here. As you know, my client, Bruce Boylan, has been charged with the murder of his daughter Jocelyn. I’m here to tell you the Sheriff’s office has arrested the wrong man. Moreover, I can show you proof. They haven’t even identified the victim correctly. Mr. Boylan’s daughter, unfortunately, is the victim, and for that much they are correct, but what the D.A. isn’t telling you is that she was killed while participating in a geocaching challenge, the one called the Ultimato Challenge. She used the name joblob while participating in this challenge and had a large online following. She previously used the name Morrogal, but changed it to participate in the challenge which has been covered by ESPN recently. We believe that she was killed by a jealous competitor in that challenge. What we do know is that the killer took one of her trekking poles, a model called a Black Diamond Ekspert, that’s spelled with a KS, not an X, and discarded it along with other gear taken from her at the time of the killing, in a dumpster in Pillar Point, Half Moon Bay. We have that pole here.”

He nodded to Cliff, who produced a black trash bag. Cliff slowly and dramatically donned white cotton evidence gloves and opened up the bag. With fingertips he lifted the pole out far enough for the cameras to see the model name and logo. In addition to the ABC and CBS television reporters and cameras there were some radio reporters and two print reporters. Cliff turned left and right a few times to ensure everyone got a good look. Then he put it back and sealed the bag. Schuler had engaged a fingerprint expert to examine the pole. Dozens of prints were on it, but they didn’t know which, if any, were Jocelyn Boylan’s.

“Members of the press, I announce to you now that we are offering this evidence to the sheriff’s office unconditionally so that they can pursue the real killer, someone driving a dark SUV. We have the names of multiple witnesses which we will also provide to the prosecution. I’m sorry I can’t take any questions. Thank you.”

Reporters peppered them both with questions anyway, but they went unanswered. Ellen closed the browser.

“Holey moley!” Matt Nguyen said, having watched over her shoulder. “I guess Cliff’ll be sleeping on the sofa tonight, eh?”

Ellen gave him a glare that could freeze a cauldron of lava.
“Your cursing could use a serious upgrade.”

“Did you know about this?”

“Of course not.” Ellen was already keying in morrogal’s name in the Geocaching query box. Sure enough, the gallery photos proved that morrogal was Jocelyn Boylan. Her logged finds had stopped three years ago, just about the time joblob started the Ultimato. That didn’t prove morrogal was joblob, although it was suggestive. Matt watched as she pulled up the records.

“How did Cliff figure that out?”

“I said I don’t know anything about this. I can’t tell him what I’m doing and vice versa. What part of that is unclear?”

“Cool your jets. I didn’t mean anything.”

“Sorry. It’s not you I’m mad at. I should have had this.”

“We were told to leave it to the sheriff’s office.”

The phone rang. It was the SAC for Ellen.

Chapter 32

"I thought you told me Job Lob was a man!"

Sherri was hot under collar to say the least. I hadn't seen the press conference, but it didn't surprise me that the cops had finally figured out Jo Boylan was joblob, so I wasn't too alarmed. "Chill, Sherri, okay? So she's a woman. So what? Look at the videos and her blog yourself. Everyone thought joblob was a man. That was obviously her intention."

"Did you see it? The conference?"

"No."

"I'm sending you the link. We need to get out ahead of this. This doesn't look good. You were in Half Moon Bay that day."

That queasy feeling crept up my esophagus again. "Yeah, so ..."

"The hiking stick. The one they found there."

Now I *was* alarmed. I was bat-shit crazy alarmed. "The cops found a hiking stick?"

"No, the defense lawyer and that big name detective guy Knowles found it, but they're handing it over to the cops. Watch the video. What kind of a car do you drive?"

"A BMW X3. I just bought it."

"What about back on the day you were in Half Moon Bay?"

"My Honda Pilot."

"I don't know cars. Is it a dark SUV?"

"Yeah, sorta."

"Holy Christ! And you got rid of it right after!"

"I didn't 'get rid of it,' I just traded it in after I got paid. I'll call you back after I watch the video." I needed to make another bathroom run. I hung up on her.

When I watched the video my heart sank. This Knowles guy had gotten too close. Sherri called me back but I didn't answer. I had to think. The lawyer had mentioned witnesses. That had to be a bluff. There was no one near me when I dumped that gear at Pillar Point. There's no way anyone could identify me or my car. Maybe someone saw a dark SUV, but that could be anyone's car. But the pole? How in the world could they have tied that to joblob? I wore gloves, so it

couldn't have my prints on it and I tossed the gloves weeks ago. I can't be tied to that pole either. I should still be in the clear, but I was getting worried. It must be the lawyer or Knowles who's been posting those messages on the Geocaching boards.

Now the mental blame game started getting me. Why did I dump that stuff in Half Moon Bay, near where I was that day, near where my vlog put me? I should have driven it back to the city and dropped it off near one of the homeless camps or off some remote country road. Somebody must have rescued it. Why hadn't I broken it into pieces? Then no one would have taken it. It would be deep in some landfill along with the rest of her gear.

I knew this was pointless, but I couldn't help it. Woulda, coulda, shoulda. After driving myself crazy for another twenty minutes, I calmed down. There really wasn't anything I could do about it now. Anything I did out of the ordinary would just make me look guilty. I called Sherri back.

"Sherri, look, this killing is just bad luck, but it's no big deal. They didn't mention me. I really wasn't her rival. I was several days ahead of her. It was physically impossible for joblob to complete the challenge ahead of me."

"Is that what you think? You want to explain why I just got a call from a local TV reporter asking for comment?"

"They're asking about me?"

"Damn right."

"Just tell 'em that. That I had nothing to do with it. I was miles away. That joblob wasn't a threat, that I was ahead of her in completing the three years. It made no sense."

"No, I'm just going to ignore them. When you start denying accusations that haven't been made, it just makes you sound guilty. 'The lady doth protest too much.'"

"What? Doth?"

"It's Shakespeare. Look, never mind. You're scheduled to fly out to New York in two days for the late night shows. Meyers and Colbert. You need to act like you never heard of it. I don't think they'll ask you about it, but if they do, just tell 'em that people make crazy allegations all the time about celebrities like sports champions. The

more you present yourself as a celebrity, the more the allegation seems like phony tabloid fodder.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.”

“Do you keep all your video?”

“Some. Not all. Most of what doesn’t show up on my vlog gets deleted.”

“Do you have the whole day at Half Moon Bay recorded so that you can prove you never went to Butano?”

“No. Why would I leave it running all day? No one would do that unless they were trying to establish an alibi. That would just make them look guilty. And it could be faked anyway. Just change the date in the camera settings.”

“Yeah, I guess. And you’re sure no one was with you or saw you that day?”

“Well, people saw me in Half Moon Bay. I probably bought gas or food or something, but no one who could prove I was there all day.”

“All right. We’ll just have to wait and see where this goes. Don’t take any calls from reporters.”

“I won’t.”

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That evening, upon arriving home, Ellen was an iceberg to Cliff. He had anticipated that and ordered Chinese takeout from Chef Chu’s, Ellen’s favorite Chinese spot. The hot and sour soup and Hunan Beef melted the ice a bit.

You could have given me a heads up, at least,” she finally said.

“It was Len’s call to make it a surprise.”

“You made me look like a fool to the SAC.”

“That was the point. I mean, not you personally, but the whole prosecution. The idea was to make the whole prosecution’s case look incompetent, to sow distrust in the jury pool.”

“Where’d you get the pole?”

“From witnesses who saw someone in a dark SUV dump it there along with a bunch of other hiking gear from Jo Boylan.”

“How do you know it’s hers?”

“We can talk about that after you test her seized property, including the pole, for prints and DNA. Len made an appointment to turn it all over tomorrow at the D.A.’s office.”

“I don’t think we have Jo Boylan’s prints. The body was too degraded and she’s never been arrested.”

“You seized all her stuff and her car. You should be able to pull up enough samples. Besides, the pole is a model that’s not for sale in the U.S. She got a promotional pair from Black Diamond since she’s a media influencer in her joblob role.”

“You’ve confirmed that? Black Diamond says she’s joblob?”

Cliff was on touchy ground. Neither Black Diamond nor anyone else had yet officially confirmed Boylan was joblob. He couldn’t make this weakness known to the prosecution. “I did my job, now it’s your turn to do yours. You’ve got subpoena power.”

“The D.A. does, not the FBI.”

“I mean you the prosecution team. You can interview them if the D.A. doesn’t pursue it. The company’s not hostile to law enforcement. I’m sure if you ask, they’ll tell you.”

“Bruce drove a green Outback that day. That’s a dark SUV. Even if you’re right, it doesn’t prove anything. It could have been him.”

“You sure about that? One person we know who was in Half Moon Bay is Hardkorps. And he owns an SUV.”

“You’re the one posting those rumors, aren’t you? Avenge Jo.”

“Rumors? Questions, you mean. Whoever posted them is asking good ones.”

The conversation did not go better the rest of the evening. A melted iceberg in bed is just a wet mattress.

Chapter 33

The next morning Len and Cliff appeared at the District Attorney's office with the trekking pole and the names and addresses of the two teenagers who recovered it. They arrived on the dot with a trail of TV and radio reporters in a posse behind, although the reporters were not let in past the lobby. A sheriff's evidence tech was there to take possession of the pole. Toki, the Assistant D.A., almost scoffed, his way of indicating that their case was solid and this was just a stunt by the defense of no relevance, but he issued a receipt for the property.

Back at Schuler's office Len asked Cliff, "So what's your next move?"

"I'm going to pursue this Hardkorps angle."

"You're convinced he's the killer?"

"Convinced? No. Strongly suspect? Yes."

"I don't need proof. I just need enough for reasonable doubt."

"Are you willing to subpoena his credit card and phone records?"

"Yes, but that's expensive and slow, especially if the institutions resist. Are you willing to sit and analyze them?"

"Yes, but that's expensive and slow."

"Is there an echo in here?"

"...in here?"

"Wise ass. So, you need to identify his phone carrier and credit card issuers if you want that."

"Just do a credit search. You don't need me for that. I need those records. Subpoena them."

"In the meantime?"

"In the meantime, I'm going to do a little physical surveillance and see what shakes out. That's also expensive and slow."

"Don't ever go into sales."

As Cliff left Len's office, a reporter approached him just outside the lobby. "Mr. Knowles, who do think killed Jo Boylan? Who's the owner of the dark SUV?"

"No comment."

Cliff returned to his office. Ashley and Maeva were both working on the Google background investigations.

“How’s it going on the cases?”

“Ashley’s doing great,” Maeva said. “We’re getting through them faster than I thought. Google has done a pretty good job of culling out the problematic cases already.”

“Good, then Ashley can handle it for a few days. I need you on the case.”

“What!? No, I didn’t say she can handle it all by herself.”

Ashley bristled. “I can handle it. Besides, they have these things called cell phones. You dinosaurs can carry them with you and I can call you on them if I need something.”

Cliff smiled triumphantly. “There you go. Just a couple of days. You know you like good old fashioned leg work.”

“Oh, all right,” Maeva said. “I’m in. Who’s the target?”

“A new suspect,” Cliff answered. “I think I’ve identified the real killer.”

“Now we’re talking.”

Cliff explained the details of the case to Maeva, naming the main players and what their roles were. Up to then she’d only had a general idea of what Cliff had been doing. The plan was to set up on Clark Stafford’s residence in San Francisco and follow him around. One goal was to get a photograph of his car so it could be shown to the teenagers who had seen the SUV in Pillar Point. Another goal was just to get an idea of what he was now doing and how nervous he was, to see if he was betraying any signs of guilt.

“So Stafford is this Hardkorps guy and you think he killed this Boylan woman with a rock?”

“Pretty much. Her head was cracked open. There was no sign of a weapon. It was probably a spontaneous thing. But Bruce Boylan, the father is the one on trial.”

“So we aren’t going armed?”

“No need. He doesn’t have a gun permit.”

“How big is this guy?”

“Not much bigger than you.” Maeva was petite with an eye-catching figure and red hair.

“When do we start?”

“Tomorrow morning oh dark thirty. You’ll drive the van and set up on the residence. I’ll drive my car. I’ll email you the details.” Cliff took the surveillance van keys from his desk and tossed them to her.

Stafford lived in the Inner Sunset District of San Francisco, just south of Golden Gate Park. Parking wasn’t too much of a problem on a weekday morning, so the next day Maeva found a spot with a good view of the subject’s apartment. She set up at 5:30 and got in the back of the van watching through the periscope, which was disguised as a vent.

Cliff arrived a few minutes later and parked down the street. They didn’t know if the subject would exit on foot or in his car. Both had studied the many photos of Stafford available online to be sure they’d recognize him. It can be surprisingly hard to recognize someone you don’t know out “in the wild” when you’re used to seeing them on television or media or on a driver’s license photo. They’d also looked at photos of Honda Pilots ahead of time so they could recognize his when it came out. You typically had only two or three seconds to make an ID before the subject was out of sight.

“That’s him!” Maeva called out suddenly. “Coming your way.” They both had their cell phones on speakerphone mode and plugged into the USB ports of their cars to keep the battery up.

“I don’t see ...”

“In the Beemer, white, not a Honda.”

Cliff had been slow to react since he’d expected a Honda Pilot and ignored the white BMW. His car was also facing the wrong way so he had been unable get behind the car. This is one reason why a decent surveillance team requires at least three people, one as a spotter and one in vehicles ready to go both directions, or sometimes as many as four directions. The surveillance van, however, quickly passed Cliff’s position. Maeva had somehow gotten to the driver’s seat and started after the BMW before Cliff could get turned around.

“Are you sure that’s him?” Cliff asked.

“Pretty sure. Ninety percent.”

Misidentification is a common problem in surveillance work, but Maeva’s experience gave Cliff faith in her skills. Cliff was able to catch up with both vehicles at the first stoplight.

“I ran his name again last night and it only had the Pilot,” Cliff said.

“The Beemer had a dealer plate. It’s brand new. Not in the system yet.”

“It looks like he’s getting on 101 south. I’ve been behind him for a while. You want to take lead?”

“Yeah, once we get on, I’ll move up between you.”

All three vehicles merged onto U.S. 101 southbound. Cliff moved up through light traffic to get behind the white BMW. He still didn’t know for sure if he was following the right person. It could be hours before they got a good look at the driver.

“He’s moving right. It looks like he’s going to the airport.”

The BMW pulled onto the ramp for SFO, the San Francisco International Airport. It proceeded to the Domestic Parking garage and drove in. Both Cliff and Maeva followed it in. The BMW showed no signs of being aware of the surveillance. The white car went to the third level before finding an open spot. It parked. Cliff drove past, around the corner to the next level up. This was because Cliff thought Stafford might recognize him since he’d been televised at the press conference. Maeva pulled the van in three slots away from the BMW and on the opposite side of the ramp. She waited there until the driver got out.

“It’s him. I’m sure. Should I follow?”

“Give him space at first, then follow on foot. If he gets in line, get in behind him and see if you can tell where he’s going. Don’t engage with him, though. As soon as you’re done, meet back at the office. We can’t hang around waiting for him to return. No point in racking up short-term parking charges. I’ll do a drive-by and head back now.”

“10-4”

Hardkorps got out of the BMW with only one carry-on bag. He was going to stay only the one night, at the network’s expense, of course, and return in the morning. He walked to the elevator. Cliff pulled out of his spot and drove back down the ramp to get a good look at him. Maeva had made a good ID. Hardkorps had changed his hair style since making his videos, but it was him. He’d obviously been glammed up by some stylist. Cliff drove on down the ramp and out. As he was twenty minutes down the freeway to his office he got a call from

Maeva, who said that Stafford had gotten in the First Class line at American Airlines and had a reservation to New York.

“Okay, good work. If he’s flying to New York first class, he’s staying overnight and on someone else’s dime. He went for short-term, not long-term parking. Must be a sponsor or network picking up the tab. See you at the office.”

“He looked me over when I got behind him. I gave him my most menacing glower but didn’t say anything.”

When Cliff got back to his office he let Ashley know that Maeva was on her way back and could help with the Google work again. He went into his own office and logged onto one of the Geocaching fan sites as Avenge Jo. He posted the message, “*Why did Hardkorps dump his dark SUV and get a white Beemer right after the news said it was a dark SUV that placed joblob’s pole in the dumpster?*” Cliff didn’t actually know the color of the Honda, but that wasn’t a big concern for him at that moment. The point was to raise Stafford as a suspect in the mind of the public.

He tried to log onto joblob’s own fan site as Avenge Jo but found he’d been blocked from posting. He posted on the Ultmato Challenge site a similar message. People started replying, mostly with hostile posts, and within ten minutes his post had been deleted by the admin. He turned to the various Facebook geocaching groups and posted there, too. Then he went to the Twitter accounts of several of the reporters, both print and broadcast, who had been at the press conference. He posted messages directly to them and also on his own new Avenge_Jo twitter account, which now had over two hundred followers and was growing daily.

Not long after, Maeva showed up at the office. Cliff congratulated her on spotting Stafford even though he’d been in a different car. The morning’s work was done. The pressure on Hardkorps had been cranked up a notch.

Chapter 34

"There's good news and bad news." The voice was that of Bill Walton. "Which do you want first?"

"The good news," Ellen replied.

"We've recovered a usable partial palm print from the victim. We haven't been able to recover her fingerprints directly from the corpse due to deterioration, but we've been able to recover enough good prints from the gear at her father's place and the stuff in her car and the Morro Bay house that we're sure we have her prints. We don't have an examiner who'll swear they're hers because they weren't taken from her. In theory they could be from someone else. There's also some DNA on the pole the defense turned over."

"Okay. And the bad news?"

"The palm and fingerprints on the pole match. We don't have the DNA results yet, but we're pretty sure they're going to come back a match."

"Have you told the defense yet?"

"No."

"So the pole tossed in the trash at Pillar Point is Jo's. You've got to find a way to match Bruce to that place at that time and maybe eliminate Stafford and anyone else."

"Yeah."

"What records do you have on Boylan for that day? Cell? Credit Cards? Security cams?"

"The only video we have is of him leaving his girlfriend's house. He could have gone anywhere after that. We have his cell records, but it shows he was at his house all day, so we know he left it behind. That's evidence of guilt. I'm sure he had a burner phone. We just got his credit card usage in today. Unfortunately, he didn't use it until the evening after eight. He could have used his girlfriend's if he needed gas or anything. Or maybe someone else was with him at least part of the time."

"You know we're going to have to interview the teenagers who found the pole. It should be a joint interview. When do you want to do it?"

"I'll call and try to set it up for tomorrow. You free?"

“I’ll make time.”

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Cliff looked up the dealer identified on the plate holder of Stafford’s BMW. It was located in San Mateo, not far up the peninsula. Knowing it would be unlikely he could get the information he wanted over the phone, he got in his Tesla and drove there. A young man, dressed in what was probably his first suit, an ill-fitting affair off the rack from Sears, approached him as he entered the showroom.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, a friend of mine recently bought a car from you. He owned a Honda Pilot that he traded in. I had talked to him about buying that for my daughter. He apologized for forgetting about it. It was perfect for her. Do you still have it on the lot?” It was only a guess that the Honda was a trade-in, but Stafford didn’t have anywhere to store another car at his apartment, so he thought there was a good chance.

“We don’t keep them on this lot. We sell pre-owned BMWs on this lot, but the other makes go to the lot across the street. It’s still our company. I can check to see if it’s still in inventory. Do you know when he traded it in?”

“Within the last week, I think.”

Cliff followed the salesman over to the desk of a young Asian woman with heavy makeup and a grouchy look. The man hovered while the woman looked up Stafford’s transaction. Once she found the identification of the car he traded in, she had to re-enter it in another database. It had not yet been sold. The salesman thanked her and picked up the phone to call over to the other lot. He was obviously trying to cement a piece of the commission as he told the party on the other end he was referring someone over. He paused and asked Cliff’s name. Cliff gave it to him, as he wasn’t hiding anything. The salesman told Cliff to ask for Mickey when he got there.

Cliff thanked him and walked over to the lot across the street, although that required an interminable wait at the crosswalk. When he got there he was greeted by Mickey, an older, pot-bellied, balding, fast-talking man who looked like nothing other than a used-car salesman.

“You must be Cliff.”

“I am.”

“We have the car you want right over here. It’s a beautiful specimen for a car with high mileage. It’s not old – only four years. The previous owner must have done a lot of driving.”

“Yes, he did. I knew him.”

They arrived at the car, a gray Honda Pilot. Yes! This was a dark SUV. If it had turned out to be white like the Beemer, he and the whole defense would have felt foolish. It had obviously recently been through a car wash.

“This just came out of our cleaning shop. It’s immaculate inside.”

This was not something Cliff wanted to hear. He was hoping a forensic exam would reveal some proof that Jo Boylan’s gear had been in the car. Cliff walked around it looking for any obvious signs of significance, but there was nothing. It still had his previous license plate on it, so at least there was evidence it was his car. He pulled out his phone and began snapping pictures from all angles. He noticed that there was a geocaching sticker in the rear window.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m thinking of buying this for my daughter. She’ll want to see pictures of it.”

“Go ahead, sit in it. Take some shots of the dashboard and seats. They’re in good shape. It’s comfortable, too.” Mickey opened the door.

“No, that’s all right. She’s much smaller than me. It wouldn’t mean anything. Hang on. I’m going to text her a photo.”

Cliff texted one shot of the Honda to Len with the comment “I found Stafford’s car. Dark SUV! Do you want me to buy it? Call me.”

Cliff was surprised when Schuler called him right back. He held up one finger to Mickey to indicate he had to take the call. Mickey was delighted, of course, since he assumed it was Cliff’s fictional daughter giving the go ahead to buy it. He stepped back a bit to give him privacy for the call.

“Cliff, good work. What are you thinking about the purchase?”

“If Stafford had stowed Boylan’s gear in this car, there could be some evidence in it. It’s on a used car lot now.”

“Has it been cleaned?”

“Yes. It looks spick and span. I didn’t get in it. I figured that if I did, any evidence found in it could be explained away as planted or as some contamination by me since I’ve had access to Boylan’s property.”

“Smart thinking. But if you were to drive it anywhere, that same thing would apply.”

“Yeah, I’d have to have the guy put a sold sign on it and keep it here.”

“How much is it?”

“Over twenty grand.”

“No way we can buy it. It wouldn’t work from an evidence standpoint. Once we had ownership, we’d have access, and anything found inside later would be alleged as planted. Plus, the cost. We have to get the police to seize it directly without us touching it. Tell him it’s part of a murder investigation and not to sell it. Maybe he’ll hold it.”

“I’ll try.”

Cliff showed Mickey the Mouth his private investigator’s license and told him the car was part of a murder investigation and needed to be kept until the police showed up. Mickey said he’d need the police to tell him that. Cliff hinted that selling it would be considered evidence tampering. Mickey said he’d keep that in mind. Schuler held on the line while this confab took place.

“Len, I told him, but I wouldn’t count on it. You need to get the sheriff’s people out here. There could still be a hair or skin particle or something of hers in there.”

Cliff walked off the lot calling back a stern warning to Mickey not to sell the car.

By the time he got back to the office he had an email from Len saying that the prosecutor, Toki, refused to send investigators to inspect the car. He said Toki’s attitude was “Why should I help the defense sow doubt? There’s no probable cause, or even a bit of hard evidence to implicate Clark Stafford.” Schuler asked Cliff to see if he could get Ellen to have the FBI seize it. Cliff told him there was no chance of that. The FBI wasn’t going to undermine the sheriff’s case and Toki was right about the lack of hard evidence to justify it.

Chapter 35

Ellen and Walton's interview of Kyle, the man who had sold the trekking pole to Cliff, provided no surprises. He confirmed what Len Schuler had told Toki, which was the same as what Kyle had told Cliff. Kyle had bought the pole at a garage sale and he identified the house as the one where the girl, Olivia, lived. When they went to Olivia's house, her father refused to let them interview her. He didn't want her dragged into a murder investigation. When they asked why he had let her talk to the defense, he replied that he didn't know it was a criminal defense investigator. The man, Knowles, had just said he was investigating a lost prototype product. There was no way to compel her to talk to them, so they left.

Brad, Olivia's boyfriend, was more cooperative. Like the interview with Cliff, Brad's mother and older brother were present. She served cookies and coffee while the investigators asked their questions.

"Brad, we really appreciate you talking to us," Ellen said. She'd been designated lead for this interview. "As we told you on the phone, we're investigating the killing of a young woman, the woman who owned the hiking pole you recovered in Pillar Point."

"I heard about it, but I didn't know until yesterday that it was the same pole we found."

"Can you tell us everything you remember about that. Start from the beginning."

"Me and Olivia, she's my girlfriend, were going to take a walk by the harbor and wanted to be alone. That lot, the Pillar Point one, is pretty empty that time of day when the weather's crummy like that day. It was overcast and windy. You know how it gets that way when there's heat inland. I was driving my car. So we pull in from the highway and head toward the breakwater and I noticed this car by the dumpster."

"Can you describe it?"

"An SUV. Maybe black or gray. Dark, anyway. Someone must have been in it because the car drove away just as I noticed it, but I never saw who it was."

"Could you tell how many people were in the car?"

"No. The glare was on windshield so I couldn't see inside. I don't even know if the driver was a man or a woman."

“Okay, go on.”

“So Olivia says we should see what they were doing there. The SUV drives away the opposite direction, out of the lot, down the other side of the lot, so we never got close. I drove up to the dumpster and we could see the shiny pole on top, so I decided to stop and check it out.”

“Did you see anyone, from that car or anyone else, put the pole in the dumpster?”

“No.”

“Go on.”

“I tore open the bag a little and saw the boots and some clothing, but like I said, we didn’t want to take it. I told Olivia to take the pole, so she did. It looked clean and expensive. We put it in the trunk, then we took a walk. The SUV was gone by then.”

“Did you see which direction it went?”

“North on the highway. I was standing by the dumpster watching it drive off when it turned. Oh! I just remembered one more thing. There was a sticker in the back window. It was too far away to really see it. I don’t know what kind.”

“Do you remember what color it was, or what size?”

“Small. Lower left corner of the rear window. Light colored is all I could see.”

“Can you remember anything else about the car?”

“No.”

“Who else have you told about it?”

“Just the guy from Black Diamond. And my family.”

“Guy from Black Diamond?”

“Mr. Knowles was his name,” Brad’s mother interrupted.

“He’s not from Black Diamond,” Walton chimed in. “He’s an investigator for the defense attorney.”

The mother seemed outraged. “He’s working for the killer? He didn’t tell us that. I wouldn’t have let Brad talk to him if I’d known. At least we didn’t take his money.”

“He tried to pay you?” Walton persisted.

“He offered to pay Brad to tell him where he got the pole. He said it was stolen property. I told him Brad couldn’t take money for helping catch a criminal. It was our civic duty to cooperate. He left a

fifty on the table when he left but we gave it to our church the next Sunday. I think he paid Olivia.”

Ellen didn’t like the way Walton was allowing the woman to characterize Cliff as helping a killer. She still thought Bruce Boylan was the killer, but she didn’t think it right to assume every accused person was guilty. “You did the right thing in providing this information. There’s nothing wrong with talking to an investigator for either side. The pole is important information and we wouldn’t have known about it if you hadn’t. They turned the pole over to us. A second ago you said that you just remembered about the sticker. Did you tell Mr. Knowles about it?”

“I didn’t tell him about the sticker,” Brad said. “I just remembered that now.”

Ellen and Walton exchanged glances. They both realized that this gave them a bit of an advantage over the defense. Walton started scrolling through photos on his phone. When he found the one he wanted, a rear shot of the Subaru Bruce Boylan drove that day, he showed it to Ellen. It had a sticker in the rear window, but it was on the lower right side.

“Are you sure that sticker in the window was on the left side, not the right?” Walton asked sternly.

The tone of voice and the way Walton looked at his phone and whispered to Ellen made the young man lose confidence. “Well, I think so. I’m pretty sure. I’m not positive.”

They concluded the interview with the usual exchange of cards and thanks. Outside, Ellen and Walton sat in the deputy’s car to hash over what they’d found.

“That’s got to be Boylan’s Outback he saw,” Walton declared too defensively.

“I don’t think so. That car’s green. The boy said gray or black.”

“He said dark. That’s what I heard.”

“And the sticker’s on the wrong side.”

“He said he wasn’t sure.”

“Not positive. He said he wasn’t positive. He was pretty sure.”

“People make mistakes. He saw that weeks ago. You can’t trust anything he said and besides, we don’t know if that car was even related to the pole.”

“You just said it must have been Boylan’s car and now you say you can’t trust what the boy said. Which is it?”

“Whose side are you on?”

“C’mon. Don’t give me that. Have you run Stafford for vehicles?”

“No. Why should I?”

“I did yesterday. He owns a Honda Pilot. That’s an SUV. You better hope it’s not black with a sticker in the lower left back window. I guarantee you the defense will be looking for it.”

“Christ, that’s all we need. The D.A. can tie this kid in knots on the stand. I’m not worried about him.”

-o0o-

The late show appearances went great. The hosts didn’t ask me anything about the jobloss rumors. I was a little ticked that they put me last on both shows and the segment was only, like, five minutes. Am I really second banana to a former Secretary of Commerce?

When I got back, Nicole was on my case for not taking her with me. I don’t get it. What’s the big deal? She gets to travel to New York pretty often for her own job. I admit this one was nice, the network paying for a five-star hotel instead of her usual. I think for her it was more about being seen with a celebrity. Maybe she should date a Secretary of Commerce. I’m getting tired of her clinginess. Maybe it’s time I moved up a notch in the girlfriend department. You should see some of the photos girls are emailing me now.

I didn’t see anyone around me in New York or when I got back. I was a little spooked by the redhead behind me at the airport when I left. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I could swear she was tailing me. She gave me a dirty look, and when I went to the counter, she got right up behind me where she could overhear. I watched after and she never even presented a ticket or a bag or anything. She just returned to the exit. But who would follow me? Police? I think if they suspected me of anything, they’d have interviewed me by now, or at least asked me to come in. None of my friends have had any inquiries. They’d have told me.

From now on, I'm going to be more watchful. I've gotten some death threats from fans of joblob. Sherri says it's all meaningless, that celebrities get that kind of thing all the time, but it's not her life on the line. It only takes one wacko to pull out a gun and start shooting.

I've got more things to worry about than that. My fan base is shrinking already. It ballooned when I found the final challenge, but the numbers are dropping now. I haven't had time to go geocaching so I haven't posted new vlogs lately. I'm going to start going out caching again. Sherri got me a video guy who can class up the videos, make them look more professional, but I need to generate the raw content. I sat down at the computer and started searching for suitable caches.

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Days passed. Len Schuler called Cliff with the news. He'd made and won a motion to allow his defense fingerprint expert to examine the hiking pole. Toki had fought it, but once the ruling came down, he admitted that they had done that testing and that Jo Boylan's prints and DNA were on the pole. That obviated the need for the defense expert. They now had solid evidence that whoever had killed her had dropped her gear off in Pillar Point. What they needed now was evidence tying someone else to that pole.

Cliff was up early. He had continued to follow Hardkorps online and post as Avenge Jo. Hardkorps was geocaching again and posting videos. Last night's video caught his attention. At the end of the video Hardkorps posted that he was going to try for some hard caches on a trail in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Cupertino the next day. The caches he named were on the Waterwheel Creek Trail and Montebello Road, which is actually a service road and hiking trail, not a public road once it gets into the park. Cliff knew that trail. It was rather difficult to get to the trailhead and there was no legal parking, although the Ridge Winery there had a public parking lot for its tasting room customers and didn't enforce the restrictions. He knew he could catch Stafford alone on that trail. It was time for more pressure. Maybe he could get Stafford talking, catch him in a lie.

Cliff dressed in his geocaching clothes and put his Garmin and geocaching bag in the car along with several water bottles and some

snacks. It would be hot today on the mountain and that trail had little shade. He drove his Tesla to the foot of Montebello Road where it joined Stevens Canyon Road and parked on the shoulder. He didn't know when Stafford would arrive, so he'd just have to wait.

Stafford's BMW made its appearance in mid-morning. When it turned up Montebello Road, Cliff followed. Montebello Road was four miles of steep, twisting, narrow pavement with virtually no shoulders or places to turn out. It would be impossible to stay discreet very long, but Cliff wasn't worried about that. He was planning on confronting Stafford anyway and there was nothing Stafford could do about it except turn around and leave, which would be hard to explain on his vlog. Cliff was glad to see Stafford was alone in the car.

Stafford was unfamiliar with the road and drove slowly, which was a good idea for everyone. The road was cut into the side of a steep mountainside. On the left the land rose almost vertically in places, and on the right the dropoff was equally daunting. After a mile or so of staying back, Cliff pulled up close behind the BMW but left a safe distance. He could see Stafford look in his rear-view mirror repeatedly. The BMW slowed down to a crawl. Cliff wasn't sure what Stafford had in mind. Was he trying to get him to pass? There was no safe place to pass here because the many switchbacks meant a car could be coming around the bend the opposite direction at any moment.

Cliff slowed to stay the same speed as the BMW. He refrained from honking or making any sign. It was obvious he was getting on Stafford's nerves without doing anything. So be it. Suddenly Stafford accelerated, putting more distance between them. Cliff decided to let him get ahead for the sake of safety. Stafford was going too fast for the conditions and would have to slow down.

Cliff's Tesla rounded a switchback and the sight before him sent a shock up his spine.

What the hell!?

Chapter 36

I don't know when it picked me up, but I noticed the Tesla behind me as I was driving up Montebello. At first I thought it was just another vehicle, but then I recognized the car. It was one of the cars I saw tailing me in the airport a few days ago. I couldn't get a good look at the driver, but I could tell it wasn't the redhead who followed me in to the ticket counter. It was a big guy, a white guy. I thought it might be that Knowles guy.

I slowed down to let him get close. Sure enough, he rode my bumper for a while. It's Knowles, for sure. Why is he following me? Even if he suspects me, what's the point? Is he just trying to scare me? I could probably get a restraining order or something, but I'd have to get a lawyer and that would make me look like a suspect. It would also cost money.

I sped up again to see what he would do. He stayed back a fair distance. I slowed again until he got close, then sped up again, faster this time. I have an idea. I'd heard about this from a buddy. I'm not afraid of Knowles or anybody else. I'm not called Hardkorps for nothing. If he wants to play the intimidation game, I can put a scare into him, too.

I waited until the distance was right between us and a switchback was ahead. After making the hairpin turn, I drove up about fifty yards, stopped, put it in neutral, and took my foot off the brake. The BMW started rolling backward. He'll have a big surprise coming for him when he comes around the bend. If he swerves, he'll either hit the cliffside or go over the edge. If he rams into me, he'll be liable for rear-ending me. If he manages to stop in time, I will, too, but he'll need to change his underwear, I guarantee you. This should be fun.

Here he comes!

Cliff saw the BMW rolling backward toward him, picking up speed quickly. This was absolutely crazy on this road. He knew about the technique. He had worked a case in the FBI where a gang of Vietnamese devised a plan to bilk the insurance companies. Matt Nguyen, a rookie agent at that time, had helped with some translation work. The gang would drive along the freeway in a relatively

uncrowded corridor looking for an expensive-looking car with a signal light blinking to exit. They'd speed up to get ahead of the car and pull onto the ramp ahead of them, then slam on the brakes. They'd pop out the taillights ahead of time so that the brake lights didn't show, which would fool the car behind long enough to be unable to stop. They'd get rear-ended and claim enormous damages. They'd usually have friends in another car who'd pull up and provide false eyewitness supporting statements to the police.

The scheme had worked, reaping several six-figure settlements, but it fell apart when one of the drivers' wives had been killed in the resulting crash. The FBI had found the car had had no bulbs in the rear brake lights. Examination of phone records and similar accidents by the driver's contacts revealed a coordinated scheme. Several of the gang members were charged with murder since the wife's death was the result of a felony. Two of them turned government witness in exchange for non-felony charges. The driver whose wife died was convicted of murder. The scheme stopped.

The case flashed through his mind in an instant, but he had no time to think about it. He slammed on his brakes and prepared for the impact. As he watched, the BMW started rolling slightly to the outside. The driver corrected, but the car swayed and threatened to roll over, and he overcorrected the opposite direction then jerked the wheel the opposite direction to correct yet again. Its speed picked up just as the right rear wheel slipped over the edge of the pavement. Cliff's Tesla had now stopped. The BMW driver hit his brake, but rather than stopping, this caused the BMW to overturn and roll off the road down the hillside. All of this occurred within two or three seconds.

Cliff leapt from car and ran to the edge of the road. He looked down. The BMW was about fifty feet down on its side lodged against a scraggly tree. Flames could be seen in the engine area. He saw no sign of movement by the driver. He ran back to his car and pulled it forward a hundred feet and as far to the side as he could, then put on the emergency flasher. Otherwise, the next car coming up the hill would rear-end him. He grabbed the small fire extinguisher from his trunk and went back to the edge.

Surveying the scene, he saw no safe path down. The soil was loose scree and it was too steep. If he tried to climb down, he'd go into

an uncontrolled slide. Worse, he saw no way back to the roadway once he was down. Then he saw movement. Stafford was trying to crawl out the driver's side window. For a moment Cliff considered doing nothing. After all, he was sure Stafford was a murderer and had just tried to stage a rear-end collision to pin on him. An immediate pang of guilt made him shake off that thought. Not only would that have been wrong to let him die, it would also make it harder to prove he was the killer and save Boylan. He yelled down to the BMW.

"Stafford, get out of the car. It's on fire."

The car was on its passenger side. The driver's side was on top and badly dented, but the car was surprisingly intact. Stafford's arm was visible and moving slightly. Cliff got on his phone to the 911 operator. He requested police, fire, and medical. He also requested a rescue team. He made sure to say in the recorded call that the BMW had begun rolling backward when it went out of control over the edge. He didn't trust Stafford to give an honest account.

He couldn't wait for them to arrive, however. He told the 911 operator that he had a fire extinguisher and was going to go down to try to put out the fire and save the driver. He put his phone in his pocket and began to crawl over the edge, holding the fire extinguisher in one hand. As he had feared, he began to slide downhill feet first. He had made sure to start directly uphill from the car, hoping it would stop the slide. His feet hit the BMW hard. For an instant Cliff feared the impact might dislodge the car and everyone would go tumbling farther down the hill, but the tree held the car fast. He stood, leaning heavily on the car.

Stafford appeared to be semi-conscious. Cliff felt his wrist and there was a strong pulse. Extracting him would have to wait. The flames were creeping around the bent up hood. So far as he could tell, they were confined to the engine compartment, but he knew they could spread quickly. The grass and trees on the hillside were bone dry and a fire here could spread to the multi-million dollar homes in the canyon and beyond. He pulled the pin on the extinguisher and aimed it into the flames, then squeezed the handle. Foam shot out.

It took a few seconds before Cliff could see the effect. Then he could tell most of the flames were out, but he could still see some flickering. He applied another dose of foam, then another. After two

more, he was satisfied the flames were out. The metal inside had become highly heated, though, and he was aware that their heat could ignite the grass and weeds under the car. He had to get Stafford out.

He stepped back to check Stafford's pulse again. Stafford moved his arm when Cliff took it. He was regaining consciousness. Cliff spoke to him again, urging him to get out, but there was no response. Cliff tried the driver's side door, but opening it was a monumental task. Since the car was on its side, the door had to be lifted directly upward by someone standing on the side of the car. The door was bent beyond recognition, too, and hopelessly jammed. Stafford was going to have to be pulled out through the driver's side window which was now completely missing, scattered into shards among the rocks and shale.

Cliff lay on his stomach on the top, which is to say, side, of the BMW and reached down through the window to try to unlatch Stafford's seat belt, but he couldn't reach it. Suddenly Stafford awoke and shook his head. His face was covered in corn starch from the exploded air bag, giving him a ghastly, ghostly visage. He was bleeding from a cut on his forehead.

"What happened?" he mumbled.

"You rolled backward over the edge. You overcorrected." Cliff refrained from accusing Stafford of trying to ram him. There was no point in it. "Undo your seat belt. Your car's on fire. You need to get out."

Stafford made some sort of movement with his left arm and winced. "I can't. My arm isn't ... it must be broken or something." His right arm was pinned under his body against the center console.

Without warning the car started to turn over further onto its roof. Cliff clung onto the door frame to keep from being pitched off the car and sent tumbling downhill.

Chapter 37

Ellen walked over to Matt Nguyen's desk. She was disturbed by the interview with Brad. She had gone back to her computer to review more videos that Hardkorps had posted. It took her hours before she found what she was looking for. In one of his videos he highlighted his geocaching gear, including his car. There in the video, plain as day, was a dark gray Honda Pilot with a light colored geocaching sticker in the lower left corner. She'd also pulled out the photos of the Outback Boylan had driven which the sheriff's department had also seized with a search warrant. It had a sticker in the lower right corner.

She explained all this to Matt and asked what he thought she should do.

"The SAC doesn't want you mucking about in the sheriff's case."

"Ours isn't closed yet."

"Only because you're waiting for the conviction so you can claim the stat."

"I don't care about the stat. I don't want to send an innocent man to jail for murder of his own daughter."

"You really think he's innocent now?"

"No, not necessarily, but think about it. Whoever killed her knew about geocaching. The log sheets on two of the caches had been removed and one had been torn to remove the signature below joblob's. Stafford knows geocaching and had a motive to go to that caching trail that day. Bruce Boylan didn't."

"Look, I don't know geocaching. I know Bruce Boylan is in line to inherit the victim's house. That sounds like motive. But if you have your doubts, I think you have to keep digging. Just be careful about who you tell. No one above you in the chain is going to want you upsetting the apple cart."

"I've told Cliff he's crazy and ridiculed him, but he might be right."

"I've known Cliff longer than you have. He's not going to lord it over you if it turns out he's right. Have you told him about the sticker?"

"No."

“Are you going to?”

“Maybe. Not yet. The prosecutor should be the one to turn over all investigative reports. I’ve done my 302 and provided a copy to the sheriff. I put the mention of the sticker in it.”

“Did you get Walton’s write-up?”

“Yeah. He’s just emailed it over.”

“And?”

“He just says a dark SUV with a sticker in the rear window. He doesn’t say left side and he doesn’t say gray. From his report, it could be the Outback.”

“It sounds like he’s playing fast and loose with the facts. You have to tell Cliff. Or get the D.A. to tell Schuler.”

“I can’t. Toki will give Schuler Walton’s report which doesn’t say anything throwing doubt on Boylan. I doubt he’s going to give him my 302. He doesn’t consider me part of the prosecution. I could get fired for sabotaging the case.”

“So do additional investigation to resolve it.”

“Are you willing to help me?”

“Of course.”

“Saddle up. We’re hitting the road.”

Ninety minutes later they were at the entrance station at Butano State Park. Jerry West was manning it. He greeted them warmly in recognition and they returned it.

“Jerry, we’re doing follow up on the case. We’re trying to find additional witnesses who may have seen people or cars associated with the victim.”

“I thought you guys found a witness who saw the Outback.”

“We did, but there’s no proof that was Boylan’s Outback. You don’t keep records of license numbers or names of the day use cars.”

“True.”

“So we’re going to talk to your day lot users hoping to find another witness.”

“Good luck with that. It’s been weeks. How is anyone going to remember vehicles from that day in particular?”

“It was the day and place of a murder that made the news. Someone might.”

“Okay, well, good luck.”

“Um, do you recognize this car?” Ellen pulled up a screen shot she’d made of Hardkorps’ Honda Pilot from that one video.

West looked at it intently. “No. We get dozens of cars like that every month. Is that a geocaching sticker?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we get geocachers sometimes, but a lot of them don’t come inside because of the fee. They like to pop in and grab a cache or two and leave, not hang around.”

“Is there another entrance?”

“That trail Boylan was on ends at Cloverdale Road. There’s a pullout there and sometimes they park there and hike up the trail. I think the coordinates for that spot are posted on one of the geocache pages for the cheapskates.”

Ellen wasn’t thrilled about the use of the term cheapskates since she regularly took advantage of such coordinates herself when geocaching. Why pay a fee to park in a lot when you can park right at the trailhead for free. “Okay, thanks.”

“What does this SUV have to do with it?”

“Maybe nothing. It’s just someone who might have been in the park that day.”

Ellen thanked West and drove on into the day use parking area. For the rest of the afternoon they approached everyone they saw and asked about cars or people they may have seen back on the day of the killing. No one they approached had been there at that time. They called it a day and returned to the office late.

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The fire and rescue team was the first to arrive on the scene. The BMW was hanging precariously upside down. Cliff was hanging onto the doorframe, his feet dangling in the leaves of the scraggly tree, but unable to gain a purchase on any stout branch.

One firefighter immediately hooked a rope to himself and gave the other end to a partner to belay him. That partner secured the rope to the engine as the first man slid down to the BMW. With some difficulty the firefighter got Cliff back up over the car and on the uphill side. The crew up above tossed down a rope with a harness on the end. Cliff

harnessed himself and began climbing up as the fire crew hauled on the rope to help him up. The first rescuer was trying the extricate Stafford who was now hanging upside down inside the cabin. He called for some sort of tool.

By the time Cliff got up on top, two sheriff's deputies had arrived and so had an EMT vehicle. The EMT insisted on checking Cliff over, but there was nothing worse than a couple of scrapes from the slide down the hill. Those were cleaned and dressed and the EMT declared him treated. The two deputies were talking to him even as the EMT did her work. Cliff told them exactly what he'd seen, but they were skeptical. Cliff had told them only that he was driving behind the BMW, not that he was following him. He said nothing about the investigation.

"You're telling me it was rolling backward with no backup or brake lights?"

"Right. He must have put it in neutral and taken his foot off the brake."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thought I was following too closely and was pranking me or whatever you call it, like when people slam on the brake on the freeway to make the car behind back off."

"Were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Following too closely?"

"No. Of course not. I stopped in time. He was rolling toward me, but lost control and went over. Look at my car. Not a scratch on it."

Cliff thought the deputy was going to go uphill and check on his Tesla, but instead walked over to the edge and looked down. By this time Stafford was out and being harnessed. Another firefighter was getting ready to go down and help secure the vehicle. The deputy asked him to check on the position of the gearshift indicator, but to tell him quietly, not call it out loud.

With the help of the first rescue man, Stafford arrived up on top of the roadway. That firefighter went back down to help with the vehicle. They had to make sure it didn't tumble down or set fire to the tree. The engine was still hot and gas could still be smelled.

The second deputy began questioning Stafford as he got treated by the EMT. It soon became clear he was going to be taken to the hospital. Stafford told him that he was a celebrity and the man behind him was a stalker who had run him off the road. Stafford didn't say anything about Cliff being an investigator. He didn't think it was to his advantage to tell a peace officer that he was suspected as a murderer.

When the EMT vehicle carted Stafford off, the two deputies conferred. They looked at the tire tracks at the edge and then talked to the second rescuer who had gone down to look at the gear shift. The first deputy came back to talk to Cliff.

"The car is in neutral and the tire tracks show he was traveling downhill when he went over the edge, not uphill like he said. It looks like you were right. I'm not going to cite you. You're free to go."

Cliff told him he was former FBI and asked for a copy of the report when the deputy finished it. Then he headed to the office. His first act was to call Schuler and update him. Schuler was none too happy about it, as it could look like he'd sent a goon to intimidate someone he'd ginned up as a suspect. Cliff reassured him that the deputies had confirmed his account and discounted Stafford's.

Chapter 38

Over the weekend Ellen and Matt took turns at Butano. One would stay in the day use lot and question people while the other parked at the Cloverdale entrance to the trail. On Saturday Ellen was inside the park, but on Sunday she took the outside post. There was only one car that stopped at the Cloverdale pullout that day. Two women geocachers got out and Ellen hailed them. They confirmed that they knew of the spot because it was posted on the page of one of the geocaches and were preparing to hike in on the fire road trail. Unfortunately, they said this was the first time they had been there and didn't know anything about any cars that might have been there on any other day.

"So you're really an FBI agent?" the taller one asked. The usual question.

"I am. And a geocacher."

"Cool. So is it true about Hardkorps, what they're saying? He killed joblob?"

"Her father has been charged with the crime. We're doing additional follow up. That's really all I can say."

The two women looked at each other and shrugged. Ellen thanked them and they headed up the trail. At the end of the day, she got together with Matt.

"This isn't producing anything," Matt said. "I've given you the weekend, all unpaid overtime, but I can't keep doing this. Gina will kill me if I do it another weekend and I have cases all during the week."

"You're right. I tell you what. Give me one more day. The killing happened on a Wednesday. Let's do it this Wednesday. Maybe someone comes regularly on Wednesdays."

"Okay, but that's it. And you take Cloverdale. I get to be here by the rest rooms and shade."

"Fair enough. You're a pal."

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Tuesday:

“What the hell were you thinking?” Schuler demanded. “Now we’re accused of running this guy off the road in an attempt to divert attention from Boylan to him as a suspect.”

“I didn’t run him off the road and ‘this guy,’ as you put it, is the murderer, I’m convinced. At the very least he’s a viable suspect and our best shot at getting your client acquitted.”

“What did you think you were going to accomplish by following him?”

“I thought I’d try to talk to him out on the trail where we’re both alone. Maybe he’d say something that I could prove was a lie. Maybe he’d actually want to confess. He’s not a hardened criminal. He has no record. By most accounts, he’s a nice enough guy if a bit full of himself these days. If I’m right, he’s wracked by guilt and might just be glad of the chance to tell what really happened. I’m a fellow geocacher. If the scenario I imagined is what actually happened, joblob provoked him mightily, threatened him in some way, threatened to ruin his challenge completion. I would understand that as a fellow geocacher. She was bigger than he was and by most accounts was a tough bird. It might even have been a physical threat. It might have been self-defense. He might have spilled his guts to me.”

“Might, might, might. Might doesn’t make right.”

“Different kind of ‘might’.”

“Whatever. Have you seen the headline?”

The headline Schuler referred to was in the San Jose Mercury and on two of the local television station news websites. It read “Did Private Eye Run Hardkorps Off the Road?” The article went on to print a statement from Stafford’s publicist stating that Hardkorps (the article used only his geocaching name as though he was a rock star) had been the subject of constant harassment, wild accusations, and physical threats by high-profile private eye Cliff Knowles who is now working on the side of an accused murderer in an attempt to shift suspicion to someone else. Similar headlines and articles appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, and Schuler told him that Sports Illustrated had called him for comment on the story. He expected an article to come out in the magazine about it in the next issue.

“Yes, I’ve seen it. They’ve called my office, too. I’ve made no comment.”

“Okay, well, I issued one. I told the reporter that Mr. Stafford – I always referred to him that way, not as Hardkorps – drove his car off the road with his reckless driving and was very fortunate Mr. Knowles was there to extinguish the fire and save his life.”

“Don’t you think that’s laying it on a little thick?”

“You do your job and I’ll do mine. Now go out and find me evidence tying Stafford to the victim’s pole.”

Cliff left Schuler’s office with every intention of doing exactly that. The problem was, he was out of ideas on how to do it.

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Wednesday:

Matt Nguyen finished interviewing his eleventh visitor to the day use parking area and wished them a pleasant hike. Nobody he’d interviewed had been there the day of Boylan’s killing. This was turning out to be another wasted day. It was only 10:30 but he was considering calling Ellen to see if she was ready to give it up. He had work back at the office. He texted her instead with a single word: “anything?”

She texted back, “No one yet, but I see a guy pulling in. I think he’s going to park. TTYL.”

She watched as the Chevy Bolt jiggled around and parked on the shoulder across the fire road entrance from her. A young man in hiking boots and other outdoorsy clothing exited the car and went around to the trunk. She’d expected him to pull out a backpack, but instead he had some sort of bulky kit. She walked over to him.

“Hi.”

He looked at her with curiosity. “Hi.”

“Excuse me. I’m with the FBI. Can I ask you a few questions?” She displayed her credentials.

“Sure.” He stopped fiddling with his gear now and stood more erect. The FBI name still carried some weight.

“Do you come here regularly?”

“I do, in fact. I’m a post doc at the university. I’m doing research on invasive species. The native species of insects are being supplanted by Asian invaders or killed off by foreign predatory species. In particular, *Polyphylla barbata*, that’s the Mount Herman June Beetle

to you, is now endangered. Perhaps you've heard of it. Wednesdays are my day off teaching so I do my research here. The Zayante Band-winged Grasshopper is also ..."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid I'm not here about insects or your research. By any chance were you here five weeks ago. That's the day ..."

"Is this about the girl? The one who got killed?"

"Yes, it is. You know about that?"

"Yes, I called the sheriff's department when I heard about it."

"You did? Why?"

"That was when I heard an arrest had been made. Someone in my department knew I came out here for my research and mentioned it to me. I remembered that I'd been there that day. Right here, I mean. There was a guy acting hinky and I thought I should tell somebody. They told me the sheriff's department was investigating."

"Acting hinky how exactly?"

"Well, he looked nervous about someone seeing him. I'd just come out from behind those trees there. I'd had to relieve myself. He was taking off his fleece vest, which I thought odd because it was a cold windy day. Then he just kind of fiddled around like he was waiting for me to leave. He had a plastic garbage bag out and I thought he going to put the vest in it, which also seemed strange, although maybe it had gotten spoiled somehow, you know like sprayed by a skunk or something."

"Then what did he do?"

"I don't know. I left."

"Can you describe him?"

"Small. Short and not heavy. Mid-twenties."

"White? Black? Asian?"

"He was a white guy. He was a geocacher. You know what that is?"

"Yes. How do you know he was a geocacher?"

"His car had a geocaching sticker on it. I noticed it when I first parked. Geocachers are the only other people who take this spot. It's a bit of a pet peeve of mine because there's not really room for two cars. I didn't know about geocaching until I talked to one of them a year or two

back. They're nice people, I'm sure, but I sort of think of this as my parking spot on Wednesdays."

"Sure. I guess I'm in your spot. Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Maybe."

"How about his car? Can you describe that?"

"A Japanese make. Honda, I think. Gray. I told all this to the sheriff's department weeks ago. You should talk to them."

"I will." Ellen was flushed with both embarrassment and excitement. She knew immediately that Cliff had been right, that Hardkorps was the killer. She was embarrassed that she'd been refusing to accept his conclusions and being so dismissive toward him, but excited that they finally had some solid evidence on the real killer. This could be big at the office. She was also angry that Walton hadn't told her about this. She seen the entire sheriff's case file and this man's report wasn't in it.

She had a decision to make. She could pull up Hardkorps' picture and ask this man to identify him, but that wouldn't be admissible and would taint any future identification. It had to be a proper lineup with at least five other people. But the car, that was the key. She needed him to identify it so she could get a warrant. On her phone she pulled up the video she'd seen where Hardkorp was showing off his gear. She forwarded it to where the car was visible and he wasn't.

"Was it a car like this?" She said, turning the phone so he could see.

"That's his car. I remember the number."

"The number?"

"The license plate. The last three digits. They're my birthday."

Ellen looked at the picture. The license plate ended with a 116. "January sixteenth?"

"November sixth."

"How about the letters?"

"There was a B in there somewhere, but that's all I remember. My name is Boris."

"Boris, this has been extremely helpful. I'm going to need your full name and contact information."

She took all of Boris's information and thanked him profusely. Time was now of the essence. She had to get her hands on that Honda. She had probable cause to seize it, but she didn't know where it was or what had been done to it. She remembered reading in one of the geocaching chat sites that Avenge Jo person had accused Hardkorps of dumping his car.

She called Cliff.

"Ellen, hi. What's up?"

"Look, you were right. Hardkorps was here in Butano that day. I think he's the killer. I have an eyewitness."

"You're in Butano?"

"Yes. I need to get my hands on the car, the gray Honda. You know where that is, don't you? You're Avenge Jo."

"Yeah, it's in a used car lot in San Mateo. Unless it's been sold."

"Can you call them and see if it's still there? Call me back." She hung up.

Cliff called the dealership and asked for Mickey. He got him on the line and told him he'd decided to buy that Honda after all and asked if it was still on the lot. Mickey told him that he'd made a dealer trade, exchanging that car with a wholesaler in Nevada. He said he didn't want it tied up in a police case. The other car, the one he traded it for, was coming that afternoon. If Cliff really wanted it he'd better come cash in hand, full price within two hours. It was going to be off the lot after that en route to god knows where.

Cliff called Ellen back and relayed this information. She thanked him and called Matt.

"Matt, forget what you're doing. I have an eyewitness who saw Stafford here the day of the killing and he was acting weird. I think Cliff was right. We need to get up to a car dealership in San Mateo where his old car is now. It's about to be transferred to a wholesaler. We don't have time for a warrant. I'll pick you up." Ellen and Matt had ridden together in her Bureau car and she had dropped him off in the Butano lot.

Ellen had Matt drive her car as they headed up the peninsula. She needed to make some calls. She considered calling Walton and telling him she'd found an eyewitness who'd placed Stafford at the

crime scene, but decided against it. She didn't trust him. He'd already kept from her the report Boris had made weeks earlier and he wouldn't be happy that she was about to go after the Honda. He was a lot closer to the car lot than she was right now and he might even go over to the dealer, or send a deputy to block them from getting the car.

Instead she called Cliff back.

"Cliff, where are you?" She could hear background noise.

"In my car. I'm going to meet you at the dealer's."

"That's not a good idea. It looks like the defense and prosecution are working together."

"We are working together. Do you have a warrant?"

"No. No time."

"Oral authorization from an AUSA?"

"No."

"You'd better call over to the U.S. Attorney's office. Explain the deal. Tell whoever the duty AUSA is that you need to make an emergency seizure based on plain view."

Ellen knew that Cliff was both a lawyer and a former Legal Instructor when he was in the FBI. She was intelligent and attended the mandatory legal training every agent goes through every year, so she understood the rule. A peace officer can legally seize any evidence in plain view. It was simple, but few agents ever took advantage of it. FBI procedures said you should get authorization from an Assistant United States Attorney first, and AUSAs were loath to grant authorization. They always liked warrants because they were easier to defend in court. A judge has already decided there was probable cause. Prosecutors were mostly timid and lazy. Police, on the other hand, seized evidence all the time, mostly during traffic stops. No warrant is legally required, a fact many civilians didn't understand. You see it, you take it.

Ellen called the U.S. Attorney's office in San Jose. She asked for the AUSA she'd spoken to earlier about the case, the one who wouldn't authorize prosecution on Boylan. She got him on the line and explained everything, she asked for his authorization to seize the Honda based on probable cause and the plain view rule. After a lengthy explanation by Ellen, he told her no, he wouldn't authorize based on a phone call. He wanted to see all the police reports and evidence against Boylan and her evidence against Stafford. He said it was a big leap to

start a case against another defendant when someone else is already charged with the same crime.

Ellen was in a near panic when they arrived at the dealership. As they pulled up, she saw Cliff talking to a middle-aged man. She hurried over to him as Matt parked the car directly behind the Honda so it couldn't be backed out of its spot.

"Hey, what's going on?" Mickey said.

"Ellen Kennedy, FBI. I need you to hold this car. It's part of a murder investigation."

Mickey stared daggers at Cliff. "This was you, wasn't it? You bull-shitted me about buying it to delay me." As he said this, a semi with a car carrier pulled into the lot. It had three cars on the lower level and two on top. "That's my dealer trade now. The Honda Pilot on top. I had to trade down to an older car to get this thing gone fast. So you have a warrant?"

"She doesn't need a warrant," Cliff said. "She can seize any evidence in plain view."

"Bull shit. I'm calling my lawyer." Mickey started to dial a number.

"Hold on," Cliff said, then turned to his wife. "Ellen, what did the AUSA say?"

"No go."

"Shit. He's a pansy. I shouldn't have told you to call him. If you'd just have seized it without calling, he'd have to back you up."

"I could get fired for seizing it against his orders."

"I know." Cliff turned back to Mickey and pulled out his checkbook. "So twenty-four eight, I believe it was?"

"Plus taxes and registration. I prepared the invoice when you called." He pulled out a piece of paper from a folder he was carrying.

Cliff looked at the number and filled in the amount on the check. He handed it to Mickey.

"How do I know this check is good? I haven't done a credit check on you yet."

"It's good," Ellen said and pointed to her name on the check. It was a joint account.

By this time both Matt and the driver of the semi had joined the party. Matt pulled out his credentials and showed his badge to Mickey. He added, "If it's bad, I'll arrest the guy for check fraud myself."

"Hey, what about me?" the driver said. "I'm supposed to trade for this car."

"Get lost," Mickey said. "I told your boss if I sold it before he got here it was no deal. You came too late."

"That's not what I was told. A deal's a deal. The car is already sold. I have a car here you're supposed to take in exchange."

"I'm not taking it. It doesn't meet the description."

"You haven't even examined it."

Matt took the man by his arm and moved him away. "Just drive off. This is an FBI matter. If there's a contract breach the bosses can settle it later. Until you have the pink slip in hand and signed it's not yours."

The driver scowled but stormed back to his semi cab mumbling obscenities.

Mickey handed the pink slip and keys to Cliff. Cliff handed them to Ellen. She put on evidence gloves that she kept in her purse and got in the car. She drove off the lot. Matt and Cliff returned to their cars. Mickey returned to the car lot office holding Cliff's check and sporting a big grin.

Ellen drove the car directly to the FBI's garage where seized vehicles were kept. This vehicle wasn't seized, of course. She told the techs there that it was voluntarily surrendered by the owner as evidence and would have to be returned. She told them not to do any examinations on it until directed to do so.

Matt followed her to the garage and picked her up. Since it was her Bucar which he'd driven, he handed back her keys and she drove them back to the FBI office in Palo Alto. There she called the AUSA again and told him that she had not seized the car but persuaded the owner to voluntarily surrender it to the FBI for forensic examination.

He wasn't happy hearing this. "What am I supposed to do now? I can't prove a murder case against someone while the D.A. is prosecuting someone else for the same crime. There's a little something called beyond a reasonable doubt. I told you this."

“I’m not asking you to prosecute anyone, at least not yet. I’m just giving you a head’s up. I’m going to have a forensic exam done to see if we can find any trace of the murder victim in the car. If we do, I think you’ve got your case. I have an eyewitness he was there, proof that he lied about his whereabouts, eyewitnesses who saw someone in a car like his dispose of the victim’s property, and then whatever we find in his car.”

“And the D.A. knows all this?”

“No, not all of it. I’m not sure how much Walton has told him. Walton doesn’t even know we have the car, and of course we haven’t found anything in the car yet. He doesn’t even know about the eyewitness placing Stafford at the scene. The car’s been cleaned by the dealer, so I can’t guarantee we’ll find anything. I have a question for you. The actual killing almost certainly took place on the trail in the state park, not on USGS property. It was only the stashing of the body that occurred on federal land. Can you prosecute for CGR-Murder on that?”

“I researched that when you first told me about the case. That’s not a problem, actually. Disposal of the body is considered part of the crime of murder, at least if it’s by the actual killer and all in one continuous sequence of events. If any part of the crime takes place on federal land, it’s Crime on a Government Reservation.”

“Hold on. Matt’s telling me to pick up line two. The SAC is calling for me. I’ll keep you informed.”

Ellen punched the blinking button on her desk phone. “Hi, Marisa.”

“Ellen, what’s this I’m hearing about the FBI seizing the car of another suspect in the Boylan case?”

“No, we didn’t seize anything. Where did you hear that?”

“The defense lawyer is giving another press conference right this minute. He just said the FBI – that means you, I take it – took custody of a Honda belonging to another suspect.”

Ellen didn’t know whether to kiss Cliff when she got home or kill him. She hadn’t expected to be blindsided with this. “Marisa, I didn’t know about that. I did take in a Honda, one that used to belong to that guy Hardkorps I told you about, but it was voluntarily surrendered by the owner, not seized. He’d traded it in for another car right after the

defense said they had witnesses who saw a gray car by the dumpster where the victim's pole was found. That's not all. I found an eyewitness who saw him at the scene that day, at least parked at the trailhead leading to the scene. I think I was wrong. I think Stafford, that's Hardkorps, is the killer."

Marisa Cortez could have thrown back in Ellen's face her previous assurances that Bruce Boylan was the killer, but she wasn't that sort of boss. She was a law enforcement professional above all else. Like everyone else in the FBI, she knew the I in the FBI motto stood for Integrity. If the wrong man was being prosecuted, it was her responsibility to fix it.

"Okay, I need to call the sheriff. Call your contact there, this deputy Walton, and tell him what you told me. Tell him I'll be calling the sheriff first thing tomorrow morning. That will give him time to get there first with the bad news. You can also tell him that we're going ahead with the forensic exam of the Honda. Do you know if the victim's DNA was uploaded to CODIS?"

"It was. We've got DNA and fingerprints in the system."

"Good. We can do our own matching if we find anything. We don't have to trust them. I don't want to give them a chance to contaminate it or do an intentionally bad search in order to save their case on Boylan. Call the evidence techs and tell them to go ahead."

"You got it."

Ellen hung up and dialed Walton. She avoided the usual pleasantries and started right in by chewing him out for not providing to the FBI the report of Boris, the eyewitness who called in the sighting of Stafford's car on Cloverdale Road, and then went on to warn him that the SAC was going to call the sheriff first thing in the morning. After a five minute monologue she stopped, giving him a chance to speak.

"You say you found an eyewitness placing Stafford in the park that day?"

"Yeah. He told me he called in a report to you guys the day you announced the arrest."

"What's his name?"

"Boris Shukov. He's a biologist at the university. He researches there regularly."

"Which university? U.C. Santa Cruz?"

“Yes. Are you telling me you don’t know about his report?”

“I’ve never heard of him. Which sheriff’s department did he call? A lot of people think that area is in Santa Cruz County. If he lives and works in Santa Cruz that’s where he’d probably call. I would never have discounted any report like that or hidden it.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that. Sorry if I ...”

“Okay, okay. Let’s skip the recriminations. How do you know it was Stafford he saw?”

“He described him well and his car, the Honda I told you about. He mentioned the geocaching sticker. I didn’t even prompt him. He brought it up himself. He already knew geocachers park there. I showed him a picture of the Honda and he positively identified it. He even remembered the three digits on the plate because they matched his birthday and one of the letters.”

“Shit. We have to find that car and do a search. If Stafford did the deed, there could still be some of the vic’s DNA or hair in the car.”

“I have the car. Stafford traded it in and I went with another agent to the dealer and got possession. We’re doing a forensic search now, or will be by tomorrow.”

“We should do it.”

“The SAC’s orders. FBI techs. Sorry.”

“Did you show him Stafford’s picture?”

“No. I didn’t want to taint any lineup.”

“Good girl.”

“I have to let the sheriff know of all this. Toki, too. And I have to see if Santa Cruz has that report from Shukov. I’ll have to interview him myself, too. I’ll need your 302. Toki’ll have to give that to Boylan’s lawyer.”

“Speaking of which, he’s doing another press conference right now.”

“No! The idiot! Is he identifying Stafford?”

“I doubt he named him, but he said we took custody of a Honda. If Stafford hears that, he’ll know it’s him we’re closing in on.”

“Okay. I gotta hang up and find out what the lawyer said and then make the calls. Let me know what your lab people find in the car. Do you still have those geocaches you seized? Send those to your lab, too. Maybe Stafford’s prints are on them”

Walton hung up and called the sheriff's detectives in Santa Cruz County. He quickly determined that Shukov's report had been made there and forwarded to the homicide unit. The clerk who'd taken the information had misheard the name of the victim and thought Shukov was talking about a victim named Pohlman which had recently been solved there, or Shukov may have mispronounced or misremembered Boylan. The detective hadn't read the details carefully because the defendant in that case had already plead guilty and they hadn't needed any more evidence, so he hadn't realized it pertained to a San Mateo case. The report had just gone into the Pohlman file. They'd found it only by searching the caller's name in the caller index. The Santa Cruz detective agreed to forward the report to Walton.

Walton went on to call Toki and the sheriff, neither of whom was a happy camper. Toki refused to provide any information to Schuler, until Walton interviewed Shukov and showed him a photo lineup with Stafford in it. Even if Shukov identified him, Toki said he wouldn't drop the charges against Boylan without forensic proof against Stafford. He still thought Boylan was guilty because he had the motive and the size advantage in addition to the lying about his whereabouts. He didn't find it credible that someone would kill over a "geocache game."

Chapter 39

I was lucky not to have serious injuries from the crash. I can't believe I lost control and totaled my new car. It's that damn backup camera. I'm used to looking out the back window when reversing, and it's reversed in the camera view. Or maybe I thought it was, but it wasn't. Whichever is right, I turned the wheel the wrong way. Anyway, I've got bigger problems now.

Sherri called me and told me she blamed the crash on that Knowles guy in a press release. I'm nervous going down that road. I never wanted to hurt joblob and now my agent is blaming Knowles for something he didn't do. If he hadn't come down there to help, I could be dead. I could end up looking like a real scumbag if the truth about the accident comes out. Someone's going to ask me for a statement, I'm sure. I guess I can just say I don't remember anything.

The bigger problem now is what I'm going to do about this request from the sheriff to come in to give fingerprints and DNA. I've never been fingerprinted or given DNA to anyone. I guess they can't match me if I don't. The call was routed to Sherri's office and she said she'd relay it to me. She also told me she knew a good criminal defense lawyer, so I called him and met with him this morning. I'd use my uncle if he was still alive.

I told him the whole story, the whole truth. He said it looked like I was in real jeopardy of a murder or manslaughter conviction. He told me to comply with the request because if I refused, they could get a court order to make me, and I could get picked up and hauled in in front of cameras just to get printed. He also said if I get charged, it would cost me about a hundred grand for him just to bargain down to a guilty plea of a lesser offense than murder. If it went to trial, it would be probably be in the range of a million dollars. I don't have that kind of money. I don't even have the hundred grand. I'm getting good money now, but the initial bonus from Garmin went mostly for taxes and the BMW. I've been living pretty high on the hog, too.

I thought about delaying it, asking for another date, but I didn't see the point. It would just make me look guilty. I seriously thought about wearing my GoPro and making a video of this. It would be awesome and get a million views, but there's no way I want my fans to

think I'm a real suspect. My lawyer did one thing for me. He told the police that I'd cooperate only if they agreed not to release my name to the press or public. So I'm supposed to just walk in and ask for a detective Walton without giving my name.

My lawyer said he'd come with me, but I'd have to sign an agreement hiring him and put down a twenty grand deposit just for starters. I decided to go it alone. He told me not to answer any questions, just to do the tests.

I walked in with my hat visor pulled down. There was no press. I asked for Walton like I was supposed to, and he showed up right away. He took me back to a processing area, a small private room. It had a machine to take the prints. There was a tall blonde woman tech there named Ellen, wearing a smock. I thought there would be ink, but this machine just has a glass plate you put your fingers on and a light shines from underneath. It's all inkless now just like my cell phone. Walton started asking me questions about my old car, but I told him on advice of counsel I wouldn't answer any questions. He told me I wasn't in custody and he could still ask me questions, but I told him my answer was the same. He got all mad and said Ellen would finish up taking the samples. He left the room.

She turned out to be a fan. She told me she was an avid geocacher and a big fan of the Ultimato challenge. She said my winning was an awesome accomplishment. I thought maybe she was a ringer, so while she was talking and preparing the DNA kit, I looked her up on my phone. She gave me her geocaching name, Ellenwheelz, and she was legit. She had over two thousand finds and dozens of hides. She told me she thought sure I was going to get that cache in Butano for the last difficulty/terrain square I needed. I told her no, I decided to go for the one near the Sutro Baths, Take a Dip. I told her it was a good thing I decided not to go to Butano because I might be a suspect now in joblob's killing. She said maybe if I'd been there I could have saved her from the killer. I decided not to talk any more about that. She seemed like a legit fan, and I need them to stay on my side. Maybe she could even be my source inside as to what was going on with the case, but I took the safe course and apologized but said my lawyer told me not to talk to anyone about it.

She finished up taking the DNA sample with some swabs of my mouth and also some hair samples. I hadn't expected that, but what could I do? She even pulled two out by the root. Those hurt. She thanked me and said to keep on caching. She called Walton back and he showed me out. It was pretty simple and less stressful than I'd thought it would be.

After I got back home I told Nicole about the whole day and she got pretty upset. She wanted me to swear to her that I never went to Butano and didn't kill Boylan. I told her she had no right to ask me that and if she thought I was a murderer then she should move out. She pointed out that I was now living in her apartment. Of course she was right. We both laughed, the first light moment of the day. I told her I was no murderer, but said my lawyer had insisted I not talk to anyone about the case, even her, so I told her not to ask me any more questions. She said okay.

That evening I got to thinking about it. I went to the geocaching website and sent a private message to Ellenwheelz. I asked her if I was really suspected by the cops. She replied right away. She said that Detective Walton had said something about having to do the DNA and fingerprints because the "G*****n defense lawyer," as she put it, was desperately trying to create an alternative suspect theory, and "the D.A. made us take the samples" because he was sure the defense was going to raise me and my car in their case in court. The D.A. had to be ready to say they had thoroughly checked for my DNA and prints at the murder scene and on the trekking pole that the defense claims is hers and found nothing.

I thanked her again and asked if they really had my old Honda like the lawyer said in the press conference. She said they did, but not to worry.

Her last message was, "They can't find any of her DNA in the car since you weren't even there, right?"

I replied with a thumbs up. I couldn't be rude and refuse to respond if I wanted to keep her as a source, but I didn't want to reply with actual words. I was still thinking of my lawyer's warning and told her that. She asked me who the lawyer was, so I gave her the name. It's better he do all the talking anyway.

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It went as planned, Ellen told Walton, although he had listened to the entire DNA sampling process remotely and knew it already. “We have him lying on a recording,” she continued. “He claims he wasn’t at Butano that day but we have an eyewitness. He thinks I’m a geocaching fan of his and took my geocaching name.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t the end game yet. Remember, Toki won’t believe it was Stafford unless we get the forensic proof. This only proves that he was at the park that day and lied. It doesn’t place him near the victim and we don’t know how convincing the witness would be at trial. Cloverdale Road is miles away from the crime scene.”

“But how is Toki going to get past this? At the very least it makes Stafford a viable suspect and that creates reasonable doubt about Boylan.”

“Yeah, that’s a problem all right. Let’s just hope your lab can come up with something.”

The FBI Lab did come up with something. Ellen was notified the next day that there was a single hair of Jocelyn Boylan’s found in the seat of the Honda, deep between the driver’s seat cushion and the seat back. It was probably transferred from the driver’s pants to the seat. They also matched Stafford’s DNA to a speck of blood on the barbed wire fence where the victim’s body had been found. The lab matched a lone fingerprint on the Hardkorps token left in one cache with Stafford. As if that were not enough, Walton had done a photo lineup with Shukov, the biologist, and he had picked out Stafford immediately with certainty.

The news was passed to Matt Nguyen, to the SAC, to Walton, and then to Toki. He agreed to drop the charges against Bruce Boylan. He notified Len Schuler, Boylan’s lawyer, that charges were being dropped, but he asked that no public announcement be made until they made an arrest on Stafford. Schuler agreed.

Toki wanted more proof before authorizing an arrest of Stafford. The evidence proved he was at the crime scene and lied about it, but he could have come across the body and taken her pole and other equipment. That could be why he acted suspicious in front of Shukov.

The optics were terrible for Toki. He'd already charged Bruce Boylan; that made it harder to convince a jury that someone else was the murderer. He told Walton and Ellen that he was going to call Stafford's lawyer and ask him to bring his client in. He'd dangle a reduced sentence in exchange for a confession. If Stafford refused, he would present the case to the grand jury and he wanted the eyewitness to testify there as well as the lab experts. If the grand jury bought it, he'd go forward with the prosecution.

Walton and Ellen both argued against that idea. They felt Stafford should be arrested first, but they were powerless to keep Toki from calling the lawyer. They stood by in Toki's office while he made the call. Toki laid out the case against Stafford. He said if Stafford came in voluntarily and confessed, he'd drop the charge to voluntary manslaughter. Otherwise, he'd charge him with murder. The lawyer said he'd talk to his client and get back to him.

Chapter 40

It's over. My lawyer called and said they have my blood at the crime scene and an eyewitness who saw my car on Cloverdale. It must have been that damn guy taking a leak. Worse, they found joblob's hair in my car. I should have taken off my pants, too. He said they were offering me the chance to come in and admit what I'd done in exchange for a charge of voluntary manslaughter, eleven year sentence. He recommended against that. He told me they were certain to get an indictment for murder and that I needed to prepare my defense. He said he thought he could get it down to involuntary manslaughter and as a first offender I'd probably get no more than four years. He also wanted a hundred grand for that.

I made a mistake. I accept that. No, I shouldn't say that. I hate it when lawyers say that about their clients on TV. It wasn't a mistake, it was a crime. I'm not ready for prison. I don't think I ever will be. When they catch me, I'll come clean, but I'm not going in. I'm going to keep geocaching until they do.

I've had my eye on the granddaddy of all hard-core caches. It was just called Farallons. The Farallon Islands are a set of rocky outcroppings thirty miles outside the Golden Gate. They're treacherous and not open to the public because they're a protected wildlife refuge. They also go by the name Devil's Teeth Islands, which tells you how dangerous they are. Geocaches are not allowed there, either by the government or by the geocaching people.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a station on one of the islands, the south one. In the earliest days of geocaching an employee of that service took a boat from there, went to the northernmost island, which is little more than a rock spire sticking up, and did a bird survey. It was on an exceptionally calm day according to the cache description, which is the only time it's possible to land there. While he was there, he placed a geocache in a protected spot. It was legendary as the most difficult geocache to get to in the world.

Since geocaching was brand new and without any sort of central authority at that time, there were no rules or laws about it. There were no more than a dozen geocachers worldwide. So the first person to try for it was a scuba diver and sailor who fancied himself an adventurer.

His boat crashed on the shoals around the island and he drowned before ever setting foot on land. After that, the listing was removed and the cache owner was fired for having placed the cache there and enticing someone to his death. Although it's not officially listed anywhere, the original cache description and coordinates have been preserved and reposted in various rogue geocaching sites. The cache has never been found. I'm going to be the first.

Some people say I'm the best geocacher in the world because of the Ultimato, but this is proof of it to any doubters. Once the truth comes out about joblob, my day in the sun will be over. I'll be reviled. If I have to go out, I'm going out on top.

This is going to take some planning. First, I checked the weather forecast. It's supposed to be mild weather and calm seas for the next two or three days. Good. I had to get all my stuff and pile into the car, the loaner the insurance company got me. I don't think the cops have that plate or description. I need to get away from my apartment and find a safe base of operations. I have the entry code to a powerboat one of my buddies owns and knew where he kept the spare key. We'd gone for some shoreline caches before.

I got to the boat at the Marina and checked the harbor's wi-fi signal. It was strong. I started live-streaming my video. I didn't script anything. I just started off adlibbing it, telling my fans I was going for the legendary Farallons cache. Right off the bat I was getting hundreds of viewers. I started up the boat and cruised out of the harbor into the bay. First I had to pass out of the Golden Gate. Fortunately the tide was going out. Fighting an incoming tide at the Golden Gate is nearly impossible in a small boat, although this is a pretty big boat as personal craft go. I knew I would lose my signal, so I told the viewers to stay logged on to the site. If my feed dropped off, I swore I'd be back by nighttime with the First-to-Find prize. Before I left the range of the land, I called my lawyer and told him to take the deal. Joblob's father shouldn't be facing a murder charge. I'm the one who killed her. I told him I had some business to attend to and would be in touch about turning myself in. He tried to talk me out of it, but I hung up.

When the signal died, I cut the feed. I eased out into the Pacific waters and headed west. The boat had a full tank so I should have no trouble getting there and back. With GPS navigation, it was easy to

navigate to the cache island. It's going to take a few hours to get there, so I'm going to stop recording for now.

Chapter 41

Ellen was on the phone with Walton. “You’re telling me Stafford’s coming in to confess?”

“Yes. His lawyer called Toki and said his client was responsible and will cooperate.”

“When is this going to happen?”

“The timing hasn’t been arranged.”

“What if he flees? I don’t like this. Are you going to get a warrant?”

“Toki says he has to give him a chance to turn himself in. It’s a professional courtesy thing between lawyers.”

Ellen’s phone chimed as a text came in. She was talking on her office landline, but she stole a glance at her cell. It was from Cliff and consisted of three words: “Call me! Urgent.” She made her excuses to Walton and called Cliff. He told her about the live video feed Hardkorps was streaming. He knew the legend of the Farallons cache, but Ellen didn’t. He explained that it was a suicide mission and he needed to be stopped. She pointed out there was no arrest warrant for him and he was already at sea, but she’d see what she could do.

She called the AUSA she’d been dealing with. Luckily, she got him immediately. She explained the situation as quickly as she could. She asked him to authorize an arrest based on probable cause. She thought the Coast Guard might be able to intercept him. He said he wouldn’t authorize an arrest for murder since the local case hadn’t been dismissed officially yet, but he’d authorize an arrest for attempting to enter a protected federal wildlife refuge. Maybe they could stop him from killing himself.

That was all she needed. She called the local Coast Guard station which was on Yerba Buena Island. She explained the situation. The commander told her that they’d send a boat to try to intercept him, but said it would be unlikely they could catch him before he got to the island.

“Is he cooperative? If he wants to be rescued, we can airlift him out with a helicopter.”

“I doubt he’d cooperate with you, but I know him. I think he trusts me. I’ve developed a rapport. Is there any way I could go with

them? Maybe I could talk to him by radio and get him to stop and cooperate.”

“Where are you?”

“Palo Alto.”

“How long would it take you to get to Moffett Field?”

“Ten minutes, maybe fifteen.”

“Be there in fifteen minutes. Do you know how to get to the airfield?”

“Yes, I’ve been there.”

“Okay, I’m dispatching a chopper now. You can make the arrest if we pull him up into the bird. There’ll be a rescue diver in case he gets in trouble. You can bring another person if necessary.”

“I’ll be there.”

She called Cliff and told him what she was doing.

“I’m going, too.”

“No way. You’re a civilian, remember.”

“I also saved his life once before. He might listen to me if he won’t listen to you.”

“Okay. I don’t have time to debate. Meet me at the Moffett airfield hangar.”

Twenty minutes later they were in the air westbound for the Farallons. Ellen explained the situation to the pilot and rescue diver. The diver told Ellen that if he had to make the rescue, she would need to operate the winch. He showed them both how. It was simple: push the lever one way for down, the other way for up, leave it vertical to be stationary.

It’s not easy to find a small boat in the open sea. It took them over an hour of searching before they caught up to Stafford. He was approaching the north island where the cache was. The cutter was still twenty minutes away. The helicopter hovered directly over the boat.

The pilot opened a radio channel to the marine band and handed it to Ellen.

“Hardkorps, this is Ellenwheelz. Remember me? Do you read me?”

No response.

“Hardkorps. This is awesome what you’re doing, but it’s illegal and dangerous. I don’t want you to get hurt. Please respond.”

“Ellen. You’re not really an evidence tech are you?”

“No, I’m an FBI agent. But I really am a geocacher and I appreciate the skill, determination, and toughness you demonstrated for the Ultmato Challenge. But this is foolhardy.”

“This is the third cache ever to be placed in California, and it’s never been found. I’m getting the FTF.”

“Don’t try it. It’s not safe to try to land. There are shoals all around that island. You’ll sink the boat and drown. The waves are running twelve feet.”

“I’ll anchor a good distance out. There’s an inflatable dinghy for the landing and the weather’s nice. I can make it.”

Cliff tapped Ellen on the shoulder and motioned for the mike. She handed it to him.

“Hardkorps. This is Cliff Knowles, the man who rescued you on Zinfandel Road. I’m sorry for whatever part I may have played in causing the accident. I didn’t mean to intimidate you. I want you to live. I came down and put out the fire. You’d be dead if not for that. You owe me that much. I’m a geocacher, too.”

“Forget it. It’s over for me. I wouldn’t do well in prison. I’m going out on top.”

“What does that mean? What are you planning to do?”

But there was no response. Nothing Ellen or Cliff said made any difference. There was nothing but silence.

They all watched as Stafford anchored the boat and launched the dinghy. With surprising ease he navigated it to the only spot that permitted entry onto the island. He tied the dinghy to a rock and began climbing the steep, wet, slippery rocks. He fell once and was clearly injured, but he started up again, blood running down his arm.

Stafford made it to the center of the island. He referred to his GPS unit multiple times, but it was not hard to spot the geocache once he got near the right spot. It was a large surplus ammo box chained to a rock spire. They watched as he opened it, pulled out a log book, and opened it. He wrote something in the book and held it up for the helicopter audience to see, then put it back. They watched as he took out

a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ball cap. He put something in the cache.

“What’s that he put in?” Cliff asked Ellen.

“I think that’s his GoPro. Yes, it is. Why is he putting it in there?”

But the question didn’t need answering. The reality dawned on all of them. He wanted someone to post his achievement, and he knew it wouldn’t be him. Ellen looked away, but Cliff watched as Stafford pulled a small revolver from his bag, put it to his head and pulled the trigger. His body crumpled.

“Can you retrieve the body?” Cliff asked the diver. The diver and pilot conferred over their headsets and agreed they could. “Bring up the geocache, that ammo box, too.”

The diver was lowered on the cable along with the litter for the body. He strapped Stafford’s body into it and signaled for it to be raised. Ellen brought it back up. Cliff helped bring it in. The geocache was strapped in with it. The cable was lowered again and the diver hooked himself to it and was brought up.

The Coast Guard cutter was within sight now and the pilot radioed to them the status. It was agreed that the helicopter would fly back to Yerba Buena with the body and the cutter would put someone on the boat Stafford stole and take it back to San Francisco.

Cliff opened the geocache and pulled out the log book. He turned to the first page and read it. He handed it to Ellen. She read it, too, and nodded. Cliff pulled out his phone and snapped a picture, then replaced the log book in the cache and closed it.

“Thank you, honey. I love you,” Ellen said, leaning over and planting a kiss on Cliff’s cheek.

“What for?”

“If you hadn’t taken the case, I’d have helped convict an innocent man. That would have shattered me if I ever found out.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You knew that and took the case for me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder all the way back.

Epilogue

The case against Bruce Boylan was dismissed with prejudice. His ankle monitor was removed and he received an apology from Toki and the court. He inherited his daughter's house. Monica Gallo got nothing. His girlfriend, Margaret Whisman, went through rehab and no longer needed him for the drug connection. She broke off the relationship but paid his legal bills as promised. Len Schuler's business got a boost from the publicity and he hired a new associate out of law school to handle the extra business.

Tom Toki was demoted for authorizing prosecution of someone, an innocent man, without sufficient evidence. He ended up resigning and taking a low-stress job doing labor arbitrations with the local water district.

Cliff got paid on time and gave Maeva and Ashley bonuses. Ellen and Matt both received incentive awards for their work, although they were small ones since they never made an arrest or obtained a conviction. She was given statistical credit for recovery of the stolen boat.

Hardkorps' video of his Farallon find was never shown outside of the FBI. Ellen posted still pictures of the cache itself on various geocaching sites along with an explanation that the cache had been seized for being both unauthorized and dangerous. She had the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service do the same on their site. This information was also made part of a joint press release by the FBI, Fish and Wildlife and the Coast Guard. It warned that there was no longer anything there to find and that two people had died trying to get there. Hardkorps had actually made it to the cache, of course, but the press release made it sound like he'd died in the attempt.

Mysteriously one night, identical posts appeared on the Ultmato Challenge forum site, on Hardkorps' fan blog, on joblob's fan site, and on several other geocaching sites. The poster was someone new, using the name Justice for Jo. The post consisted solely of a photograph of a geocaching logbook page. It read:

FARALLONS
Hidden 9/16/2000

FTF: Hardkorps
I killed joblob. I'm very sorry.

Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks go to everyone who helped me write this book, most especially my fans. Not all of you are geocachers, and for you, this book may be too esoteric or heavy on the geocaching. For that, I offer my excuses, but I do not apologize for it is the geocaching community that has supported my writing and kept the Cliff Knowles Mysteries series alive. I'm glad to be able to promote the sport to the prominence it receives in this story. I hope it provides some much-needed diversion during the pandemic.

Four geocachers in particular deserve special thanks, for they are my beta readers and proofreaders. Deanna Dickman and Diana Wahler, and Jeff and Bonnie Little all provided yeoman service and many valuable insights. Thank you, all.

My family has supported my writing over the years, too, or at least tolerated it. For that I am eternally grateful. I dedicate this book to my newest granddaughter, Ember.