

PREFACE

The following is verbatim text of an item from the *Presidential Daily Brief* presented to President George W. Bush on August 6, 2001. Redacted material is indicated by brackets.

Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US

Clandestine, foreign government, and media reports indicate Bin Ladin since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US. Bin Ladin implied in US television interviews in 1997 and 1998 that his followers would follow the example of World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef and "bring the fighting to America."

After US missile strikes on his base in Afghanistan in 1998, Bin Ladin told followers he wanted to retaliate in Washington, according to a [--] service. An Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) operative told an [--] service at the same time that Bin Ladin was planning to exploit the operative's access to the US to mount a terrorist strike.

...

Al Qaeda members – including some who are US citizens – have resided in or traveled to the US for years, and the group apparently maintains a support structure that could aid attacks. Two Al Qaeda members found guilty in the conspiracy to bomb our embassies in East Africa were US citizens, and a senior EIJ member lived in California in the mid-1990s.

A clandestine source said in 1998 that a Bin Ladin cell in New York was recruiting Muslim-American youth for attacks.

We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [--] service in 1998 saying that Bin Ladin wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of "Blind Shaykh" 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists.

Nevertheless, FBI information since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hi-jackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York.

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Despite this warning from U.S. intelligence sources, the government failed to act.

Less than one month later, on September 11, 2001, Bin Ladin made good on his threat. He brought the fight to America – and thousands died in its first battle.

Even today, the war continues. Are we prepared?

PROLOGUE

Western perceptions notwithstanding, the Afghan War did not put *Al Qaeda* out of business. And despite American bragging to the contrary, *Al Qaeda* has even conducted successful operations *inside* the U.S. after 9/11.

It is true that western forces have succeeded in thwarting a number of attempted attacks. But from *Al Qaeda's* perspective, even worse than failed operations are the West's unbelievably effective cover-ups. Westerners blame nearly all of *Al Qaeda's* successful offensives on internal malcontents. Gang wars. Freedom Fighters. Drug cartels. Anarchists. Radical extremists. These are the "criminals" who receive the credit for attacks that, in reality, are *Al Qaeda's* victories.

Although the premier international terrorist organization is very much alive, the name of *Al Qaeda* no longer strikes fear into the hearts of the western world. Of what efficacy is a terrorist group lacking the ability to terrorize? *Al Qaeda* faces a serious public relations problem. World fear of *Al Qaeda* is at an all time low.

There is only one solution. To regain global prominence, *Al Qaeda* needs an operation so high profile, and so public, that the world cannot be duped by cover-ups.

It needs something nuclear.

CHAPTER 1

Wednesday, May 6th, at Red Wing, Minnesota.

Tuesday's discovery of a dead body washed up on the Mississippi River shore just north of Red Wing had turned the small town into a press Mecca. Television and print media crews from the Twin Cities and Rochester converged on the murder scene, each vying for the most gruesome, and attention-grabbing, visuals possible.

News helicopters swooped up and down the river valley, past the grassy riverbank where the swollen spring currents at the confluence of the Prairie River with its larger counterpart had deposited the corpse.

The body was that of an older man – in his sixties, the Ottawa County Medical Examiner had estimated. Police hadn't released the probable identity of the victim. And despite photographers' best efforts, the only crime photos that made the nightly news programs were of boaters in small craft, gawking in the river channel, and of four Ottawa County Sheriff's Deputies hoisting a vinyl body bag from the weedy beach into their covered flatboat.

The remaining news footage showcased well-dressed reporters, looking serious, and speaking with concerned voices about the tragic discovery near the small Minnesota town.

But all that was yesterday.

Today was Wednesday and I was at my office. Becker Law Office. James L. Becker, Attorney-at-Law. Nearly everyone who knows me calls me 'Beck.'

I arrived at this lawyering gig via an unusual route. Following my retirement from more than twenty years of *sub rosa* military intelligence operations, my wife, Elizabeth, and I decided to move our family to my childhood home of Red Wing. Beth and I had agreed at the time that the relatively crime-free life in rural Minnesota would be best for our girls. Having me working near home more of the time would reduce my family's justified worries for my safety. And I could blend in seamlessly in my old home town.

Lawyering would be a fairly easy professional transition for me. I already held a largely unused law degree from my pre-Agency days. The segue into small town private practice would not be difficult.

So five years ago, Beth and I, and our two children, Sara and Elise, had picked up our lives and come here to live in Red Wing, a Mississippi River town of about twenty thousand. In this setting, we were able to use our real names. And we hoped to regain for our family a sense of normalcy.

Although being an attorney is not difficult, it can be less than exciting. For the sake of appearances, I maintain the cover – but we really don't need the money.

Our family financial situation is a bit more favorable than most, owing entirely to an invention I had patented during my tenure on 'the Team' – a radically new aerodynamic design for sniper bullets.

A change in the shape of a bullet might not seem like much. But after extensive testing, a government defense contractor had happily purchased my patent for quite a lot of money.

Later, I was pleased to learn that incorporation of my bullet design into new sniper rifles allowed a reliable kill shot at up to a

mile and a half – a significant improvement over the traditional .50 caliber long range projectiles. A win-win for both me and the military.

Of course, the defense contractor got the glory. But that wasn't important. Glory is fleeting and fickle. Neither to be sought nor trusted.

Given our financial independence, my new job is really just my cover. My true vocation really has no proper name. I guess you could say I am professionally wayward. At least, I like that description. It implies a Huck Finn sort of freedom, combined with a military-inspired drive for excellence.

My professionally wayward approach allows me complete freedom to select causes and goals; but once chosen, it also requires me to pursue all such matters with utter commitment and maximum preparedness. This combination of dedication and preparation has, thus far, assured my success in numerous challenging undertakings.

I am most certainly *not* a Jack of all trades. I am, however, a master of many.

At 9:30 a.m. it had already seemed a long morning at the law office. And I wanted to get the inside info on the floater murder. It was time for an informational visit to my friend in local law enforcement.

When I arrived at the Ottawa County Law Enforcement Center, a five minute drive from my office, the atmosphere was electric in the wake of the previous day's disturbing discovery . . . so much so, that I had managed to slip through the usual administrative roadblocks and right into Gunner's inner office.

Gunner is Ottawa County's Chief Deputy Sheriff, Doug Gunderson. He's in his mid-forties, six foot, 180 pounds and in pretty good shape. Though he displays a hint of a belly, his body is mostly muscle. Gunner's round face, light complexion, and short,

reddish-brown hair are not atypical of many fourth-generation Scandinavian immigrants to this area of Minnesota.

Gunner is also one of the very few people in town who has any idea of my true life experiences as a covert intelligence operative during my twenty-year absence from Red Wing.

We had known each other in our youth, and had been casual friends in high school, but we hadn't kept in contact until my return to Minnesota five years ago. On one occasion a couple years back, he had pressed me for details concerning my life after leaving Red Wing.

As a professional investigator, he can be irritatingly tenacious.

At the time, it hadn't been my first choice to let Gunner in on my secrets. But he was persistent. My gut told me I could trust him. And a friend in local law enforcement is not a bad thing. So I had elected to come clean about my government past – minus many details, of course. In return, he'd vowed to keep my confidences – a promise he had faithfully fulfilled.

Since then, Gunner and I had cooperated on a few cases. He operated by the book. I, by my own rules. The differing approaches created some conflict. But we shared common goals, and we understood each other well enough to make it work. As a side benefit, my involvement with law enforcement activities satisfied my desire for more action than mere lawyering could provide.

Gunderson was seated at his desk, deeply absorbed in review of glossy crime scene photographs. He looked up when he heard my voice.

“So what's going on today, Gunner? Things are hopping around here.”

Gunner looked up from his work.

“Becker. Who let you in here? Oh never mind. You know damn well what's going on. Everybody from the Sheriff, to the Mayor, to

the frickin' Press is all over our asses to solve this murder case. Deadline is yesterday.

“And of course, the big wigs've gotta fight over the jurisdictional issues. The States want in on the investigation. The FBI claims it oughtta be in charge because the body was found in interstate waters. “Course, our own department has the best claim to the case, since it appears the murder occurred on our dirt.

“So in short, it's a madhouse. Nobody's in charge. And despite all the activity around here,” – Gunner made an arm motion circling his head – “not much investigating is really gettin' done.”

I looked at him, feigning shock.

I'm pretty sure Gunner could sense my lack of sympathy for his bureaucratic hiccups.

Gunner frowned for a few moments, then lightened up.

“Oh geez. You might as well have a seat,” he said at last. “I need a break anyway.”

Gunner motioned me to one of his side chairs.

It was stacked with manila files.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

He returned the look. But the files didn't move.

So I cleared the chair myself, piling the manila obstacles alongside a similar heap of files already reclining against the wall. Then I sat down.

Commotion continued in the hall outside his office.

With hands crossed over his torso, Gunner leaned back in his 1960s-vintage vinyl office chair, looking at me as if waiting for something to happen.

“So . . . ,” I began. “Do you know who the unlucky fellow is . . . was?”

I could see Gunner was trying to project cool and calm – but the butterflies definitely fluttered in his gut. A murder in Ottawa County was a very big deal. But Gunner wasn't about to let his excitement overtake his professional persona.

“We're pretty sure it was a prof from the U of M Ag Lab at the Ottawa Facility,” he said, locking his fingers behind his head.

I noted obvious perspiration under his arms.

“His wife reported him missing to the Cottage Grove cops early yesterday morning. He hasn't shown up for work the past two days. Car's gone, too.

“Oh yeah.” He paused for dramatic effect. Gunner likes drama. I think he watches too many cop shows on TV. “There's a large amount of dried blood in the Lab parking lot. We're assuming it'll match our victim.”

I paused for a moment.

“Seems logical,” I said, bypassing the drama. “Have you got a name?”

Gunner looked a little wounded that I hadn't been more impressed with the big blood puddle.

He leaned forward, referencing the notepad on his desk. “Donald G. Westerman, PhD. Home address is in Cottage Grove. We'll be invitin' the wife to the morgue to identify the body as soon as we can make it . . . ah . . . presentable.”

The killer had nearly severed Dr. Westerman's head from his body. Some tidying up was prudent before exposing the wife to her husband's corpse.

“Don't suppose you found a weapon?”

“No such luck. The M.E.'s tryin' to get us a description of the blade. But since it's a slash, that'll probably come back 'inconclusive.' With a stabbing, you can maybe get a cast or

somehin'. With a cut, usually it's just whether the knife is serrated, and how thick."

Based on my experience with knives, Gunner was probably right about the forensics.

"And at present, no motive either?"

I had all the smart questions.

"Not really," Gunner continued. "Though it's interesting to note the fellow's lab assistant has also disappeared."

He consulted his notes again.

"One Farris Ahmed. British exchange student in the graduate program at the U of M. Sent a couple deputies by his apartment. No one home. We're workin' on a search warrant."

In my former military career, I had once encountered a radical Muslim *Jihadist* who went by the name of Farris Ahmed. It was a common enough name in Arab countries – but given my past experiences, this name did not sit quietly in my gut.

"What ethnic derivation is Mr. Ahmed?" I asked. "Muslim Brit?"

Gunner raised his left eyebrow in my direction. "Not strictly relevant, Beck. You know there's no racial profiling in this department."

Ah. The company line.

"We don't know Ahmed's story yet. We're a small department. We can't do everything at once, for godsakes. Anyway, we try to save the bigotry assignments for the BCA."

The BCA was the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, the branch of the State Police charged with criminal investigations. They would likely take a lead role in the murder investigation, regardless of any Sheriff's Department protests to the contrary.

The mention of the name 'Farris Ahmed,' and the international background of the lab assistant, had further piqued my interest.

“Gunner. You would probably ask the BCA to do this anyway . . . but would you mind checking for any international phone calls made from the vicinity of the Lab around the time of the murder? I mean, not just the assistant’s phone, or the land lines, but anonymous, throw-away cell phones, too?”

“Why?” Gunner leaned forward in his chair. “You think this thing has got some connection outside Minnesota?”

I didn’t want to get Gunner off track just because my gut had a twinge – especially with no evidence at all of global foul play. But I wasn’t going to ignore my instincts either.

“Well . . . the assistant was from overseas – I knew you’d want to be thorough.”

Gunner leaned back again in his chair. I surmised I was about to receive some wise advice from the seasoned law man.

“You realize, Beck, that the assistant may be another victim, and not at all culpable in this mess?”

“Good word, Gunner . . . ‘culpable.’”

That crack earned me a steely stare from behind the desk.

I continued.

“I suppose that’s true. But can I convince you to accommodate my whims anyway?”

Gunner paused a long ten seconds. He was pretending to think it was a dumb idea. But he has always been a bad actor . . . and a thorough investigator. My concern wasn’t so farfetched that he was going to ignore it.

“All right, Beck. I’ll have the BCA check out the phone deal . . . but just so we’re clear, this is a favor. I don’t take orders from you.”

I nodded and tapped my temple. “Got it.”

“ ‘Course I can’t guarantee the BCA’ll do anything about it. They don’t work for me, ya know.”

Gunner aimed a forefinger across the desk at me.

“And if I catch any crap for making this request, you *will* owe me one.”

I had gotten what I wanted. No point picking a fight.

“You have a deal. Thanks, Gunner. And good luck with the investigation.”

“Right. Well. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Oh, you can count on it.”

And I left

CHAPTER 2

Somewhere in Germany, one year earlier.

Members of an *Al Qaeda* command cell gathered in a secluded European location. It was late at night. Their *Mawlawi* – their leader – had called this meeting. The four cell members sat in a tight circle on hard wooden chairs in the dimly lit, dank-smelling room. They spoke in Arabic. The *Mawlawi* spoke first.

“It is difficult enough to take a nuclear attack against the Americans without that cursed Mullah announcing our intentions to the world. He and his big mouth make our plans only much more difficult.”

“This is true, *Mawlawi*. But at least the fool is well known for making claims which, in reality, are seldom achieved. *In’Shallah*, the infidels will pay no heed to his threats.”

The *Mawlawi* considered the younger man’s statement.

“You may be right, Jamal. The Americans had knowledge, but did nothing to prevent our attack on the pagan towers.” The *Mawlawi* straightened against the wooden chair back. “But regardless of American suspicions, we must proceed with our plan. We are more than a year in progress already. I only wish the overzealous fool would keep his mouth shut.”

Swallowing his frustration with the Mullah's bragging, the *Mawlawi* continued the meeting.

"Jamal." The *Mawlawi* looked, again, in Jamal's direction.

"Yes, *Mawlawi*."

"Tell us of the target you have chosen, Jamal. Will it be visible? Will there be sufficient damage and death to assure international respect for our efforts?"

"There exists in the United States a total of sixty-six nuclear power facilities. Some are better protected than others. We needed to select a target that would be eminently achievable."

The *Mawlawi* nodded his agreement.

Jamal continued. "Although the infidels employ extreme security measures which prevent us from targeting New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, our final target lies close by a dense population in excess of 2,000,000 people – more than sufficient for our purposes.

"Furthermore, the attack will strike the geographical heart of America – where the pagan dogs have always before felt safe . . . and where they will never again sleep deeply. Their misplaced sense of security, of invulnerability, will magnify the psychological impact of our attack, while American overconfidence will simplify our breach of the facility's lax defenses."

The *Mawlawi* allowed a brief grin. "Very good, Jamal. We will trust your judgment in this regard."

The *Mawlawi* now turned to Ali. "Ali, review the means of attack."

Perspiration beaded on Ali's forehead. He spoke haltingly.

"Esteemed *Mawlawi*. The plan is to crash a large airplane filled with explosives into the building where spent uranium is stored." He looked to the *Mawlawi* for acknowledgment. The *Mawlawi* stared into space, his hands praying at his chin.

“Unlike the reinforced reactors,” Ali went on, “these storage buildings are not well-defended from the air, yet they contains even larger amounts of radioactive material than the reactors themselves.”

The *Mawlawi* still gave no reaction.

“An airport is located a mere ten kilometers distant from the target. By Allah’s will, a plane of sufficient size and strength has been delivered into our hands. Better still, the infidels themselves will unwittingly transport the airplane to the airport at the appointed time.

“These final factors have sealed our decision concerning the target.”

Now the *Mawlawi* faced Ali and grinned.

“That is very good, Ali. Very good.”

Now it was Rashid’s turn to report.

“Rashid,” the *Mawlawi* continued. “You have chosen the warriors who will carry out this holy attack. Enlighten us.”

“*Mawlawi*. We have among our number a sympathetic American who is employed at the target site. We recruited him some time ago and have great confidence in both his motivation and ability as regards this operation. His entire family died in a U.S. nuclear accident. He has sought revenge ever since.

“He is smart and innovative, though not highly educated. He also possesses excellent construction skills and has the ability to pilot an airplane. He will be our team leader in this mission.”

The *Mawlawi* frowned. “How can we be certain the American pig will follow through with our plans? It is foolhardy to allow operational control to an infidel. Is it not, Rashid?”

Rashid shifted in his chair.

“*Mawlawi*, your point is well taken. But if I may speak, the Americans have made it most difficult to insert our primary forces

inside their borders. It is my judgment that we must rely on the best personnel available to us in this location and at this time. We have no choice but to make use of the American.

Seeing that the *Mawlawi* remained unsatisfied, Rashid continued.

“But of course, we will have place a loyal observer – someone to ensure the infidel’s compliance and to intervene if the need should arise.”

“Rashid, if we have a trusted fighter to observe, why not let place him in charge of the operation?”

Still seated, Rashid’s palms pressed onto his thighs.

“*Mawlawi*, our Muslim brother holds a respected position in the local community. His work hours, visibility, and responsibilities are such that he *cannot* divert sufficient time to lead the operation without attracting unwanted attention. I beg you. Oversight is within his limitations. But no more can be expected of him as regards this pursuit.”

“I am not yet convinced, Rashid. But tell us the rest of your arrangements. Then I shall decide.”

“Besides the team leader, we have enlisted two American anarchists to provide basic assistance. They will not possess full knowledge of our plans. Instead, we have fed them information aligning with their randomly destructive purposes.

“I have the utmost confidence that these two will not expose our intentions. But their . . . ah . . . utility is limited.”

The *Mawlawi* sighed, placing his head in his hands. He spoke to the floor.

“Limited? I am not pleased with ‘limited,’ Rashid. In what way are they limited?”

“*Mawlawi*. To be blunt, they are rather . . . stupid.”

The *Mawlawi* raised his head and glared at Rashid.

“*Mawlawi*. Allow me to explain. They are stupid like sheep. They blindly accept our money and follow our commands. Their role not require mental ability – merely a strong back and a willingness to do as we say.”

The *Mawlawi*'s cold eyes pierced the darkness, but he said nothing.

Rashid squirmed. After a few moments, he spoke again.

“*Mawlawi*. You know that we require more than one person to mount this attack. These people represent our best options.”

A tense silence filled the room once more. The *Mawlawi* breathed deeply once more, then spoke.

“The involvement of these infidel imbeciles causes me great concern, Rashid. How can you be confident they will fulfill our purposes without revealing our plans to the American dogs?”

Rashid squared his shoulders and spoke with all the conviction he could muster.

“*Mawlawi*. In all truth, their stupidity is an asset. They are not smart enough to question commands, or to inquire as to purposes. From their demeanor, one would not think them anarchists at all. There is no hint of rebellion in them. It is my belief . . . I am confident . . . they are like sheep. They follow the flock.

“I assure you, *Mawlawi*. These two will suffice.”

The *Mawlawi* looked tired, unconvinced, and dismayed at Rashid's report. But he possessed a wisdom born of experience. He had been fighting this war as long as he could remember. He knew that compromise and adaptation were parts of real world *Jihad*.

Many times, the *Mawlawi* had prayed for additional soldiers to execute this particular plan – true followers of the Prophet to carry out this mission. Allah had provided no one else. These infidels would have to do. The *Mawlawi* slowly exhaled a final breath before continuing.

“Very well, Rashid. If you are positive we have no other fighters in the area, we will proceed with your personnel.”

Rashid needed to speak once more.

“*Mawlawi?*”

“Yes, Rashid. What other good news do you have for me?”

“*Mawlawi*, I would be remiss if I failed to mention one other operative in the target’s vicinity – an intelligent and skilled young chemist named Farris Ahmed. He sends us regular technical reports. We are saving his expertise for future undertakings. I do not believe it would be most effective for our long term cause to unveil his presence as part of this operation.”

“Thank you for your thoroughness on this point at least, Rashid. If this young chemist is as valuable as you say, there seems no need to waste his skills performing manual labor now. Is there anything further, Rashid?”

“No *Mawlawi*.” Rashid bowed his head. “Thank you, *Mawlawi*.”

The meeting was over.

The *Mawlawi* stood. He would bestow a benediction upon the assembled faithful.

Raising his right hand, he said: “May the strength of Allah go with you and his blessings be upon you all.”

CHAPTER 3

Thursday, May 7th, at Red Wing.

It was the day after the meeting in Gunner's office. My wife, Beth, and I were enjoying a sunrise breakfast on our front screen porch at 1011 Jefferson Avenue. Bacon, eggs, and toast, with fresh orange slices and coffee. Beth was the cook. I often tried, but seldom succeeded. My heart just wasn't in it.

Jefferson Avenue is a peaceful street, lined with historic homes and sheltered by mature oaks and maples. In the summer, the trees form a fragrant canopy over both avenue and sidewalks. In fall, they release a swirling sea of red, yellow and brown leaves – the kind kids like to rake into piles and jump in. Automobile traffic on Jefferson is close to nonexistent. Pedestrians enjoy walking its shaded length, strolling among the calming aroma of freshly mown lawns. Neighbors push strollers or pull wagons past our home, waving and calling "Hello" as we return smiled greetings from the porch.

"Any big plans today?" I asked Beth as we ate.

"The gals are getting together at Hanisch's Bakery for coffee at 10:00. Then I hope to check the product levels at my art retailers."

Beth has adjusted well to life in Red Wing. So well, in fact, that locals would never guess that, in addition to her top notch artistic talents, she also possesses high level government security clearance

and unique technological skills. In fact, her computer expertise is so highly regarded in Washington that, between beading, sewing and painting, Beth frequently accedes to desperate CIA requests for her encryption/decryption services. To state it plainly . . . Beth is one of the U.S. Government's best code crackers.

"How about you?" Beth asked.

"Nothing special." I finished a last bite of toast. "Gotta get going, though. Miles to go before I sleep. No rest for the wicked. Etcetera, etcetera."

Beth knows me better than I know myself, and tolerates my idiosyncrasies – like this morning's hasty departure from breakfast.

"Don't overdo, Babe," she said.

"Never."

I gave Beth a quick kiss, then steered my dark grey Honda Pilot down the vacant, early morning streets of Red Wing to Becker Law Office, arriving at the door a few minutes after six o'clock.

One of my preferred professional strategies was doing my legal work outside of normal working hours. Prior experience informed that, if I arrived at the office before clients and secretaries knew I was there, I could accomplish quite a lot without interruption.

By the time my legal secretary, Karen, showed up at 9:00 a.m., I had worked my way through substantial stacks of client files accumulated from the previous day and had already decided that my work day at the law office was finished. I wanted to know more about the death of Professor Westerman.

I was also concerned about young Mr. Ahmed. The uneasy feeling hadn't left my gut. And no one in law enforcement had, as yet, displayed any concern over possible terrorism.

My intercom beeped. It was Karen. "Will you be taking any appointments this afternoon, Beck?"

"Sorry, Karen. Can't do it today. Full calendar."

I glanced down at the same blank calendar page that Karen was no doubt observing. “Last minute. Meetings all day outside the office. Forgot to get it on the calendar. Sorry again.”

“When shall I say you will return calls – tonight after midnight? Or tomorrow before breakfast?”

Did I detect a touch of sarcasm?

“Let’s just go for, ‘I’ll tell him you called.’ Does that work for you, Karen?”

“Your wish is my command. Could I get a few signatures from you though, before your . . . ah . . . meetings?”

“Sure thing. I’ll swing by your desk on my way out.”

The intercom clicked off.

So as not to appear too sluggardly, I hung around my office with the door closed listening to jazz and reading online newspapers for another couple hours. When the time felt right, I grabbed my jacket from the back of the door and headed for Karen’s desk, a spring in my step.

A pile of correspondence and a number of bank checks awaited my signature. I worked my way efficiently through the stacks, signing without reading.

I inquired to whom the checks I had just signed were payable. Being satisfied with the responses, I thanked Karen for her good work.

Then I doffed my imaginary hat in her direction and ducked out.

Meetings . . . all day.

CHAPTER 4

Since I had promised to be in meetings ‘all day,’ and it was only 11:15, I had some serious meeting to do. My first meeting was with a sandwich at Smokey Row Café. They baked the best breads in Red Wing. It didn’t really matter what you put between two slices. It was all good.

Today I was motivated by the turkey club on toasted sunflower bread. I sat in a booth by the window and ate my sandwich, washing it down with a cup of Sumatran Dark Roast, black. As I ate, I checked out the local daily newspaper, which hadn’t been available online, to see if it contained any additional info on the obvious murder. It came as no surprise that the paper knew even less than I did.

Fifteen minutes and one delicious sandwich later I was back in the Pilot, headed for the University Ag Lab – the place with the bloody parking lot.

It was about a forty minute drive to Rosland, the entirely rural township which was home to the University of Minnesota Agricultural Research Facility. When I arrived at the Facility, a tan and white Ottawa County Sheriff’s cruiser guarded the driveway entrance, facing outward and ready to greet visitors. Two uniformed deputies occupied the front seat. I recognized their faces from around the cop shop in Red Wing. But we weren’t close.

Turning the Pilot into the Facility drive, I pulled slowly alongside the cruiser – our driver’s side windows adjacent to one another. His window was already down. I lowered mine.

“Can I help you, Mr. Becker?” he asked, stifling a yawn.

He was thirtyish with brown hair, cut close in military fashion. His left arm, from elbow to hand, rested on the cruiser door. His partner leaned forward, looking my way . . . checking out the action. Probably the most they’d seen all day.

“I am doing some private legal consultation for the University about the other day’s . . . ah . . . unfortunate business,” I lied.

I smiled. Highly engaging.

The driver gave me a quick look up and down. I don’t think he figured me for a threat.

“We’ve got a chunk of the parking area, the main entrance, and one of the labs taped off.”

A full yawn this time.

“Stay away from those spots and you should be okay.”

“Thank you very much, Deputy. I’ll make sure to avoid the taped area and stick strictly to my business with the U,” I lied again.

I flashed another smile, then reached my right hand across my body to wave at the cops. Both had already returned to whatever they had been doing before. Without looking my way, the driver did manage to lift a finger from the car door as acknowledgment of my departure.

It was a short driveway. Almost immediately, I could see the boundaries marked with yellow ‘Crime Scene’ tape. Besides the deputies, the exterior of the Lab Facility property was nearly deserted. In fact, the only other person I could see outside was a man wearing a tan groundskeeper’s uniform and a dirty-white panama hat. He was on his hands and knees, spreading wood mulch around shrubs near the building.

I was careful to park the Pilot between the largest blood stain and the cruiser – but not too close to the yellow tape. Maneuvering outside my vehicle, I leaned through the back door, appearing to rummage for some papers. Once below the cops' line of sight, I turned around, contortionist fashion, and snapped a few quick pics of the parking lot blood and the crime tape. There wasn't much to see. But one never knows when a photo might come in handy.

Returning to a normal body position, I withdrew from the back seat. Damn. The groundskeeper was looking my way. He was pushing his wheelbarrow across the parking lot, presumably in pursuit of more mulch for the bushes. I wondered how much of my photography performance he had seen. His face wore a strange expression.

When our eyes met, I smiled and gave him a friendly wave. He looked away, then picked up his pace across the lot.

With the groundskeeper gone, I returned to my planned activities. Reaching back into the Pilot, I withdrew my trial case – essentially the result of mating a briefcase with a steamer trunk. I smiled and waved respectfully at the cruiser as I traversed the space to the Lab's only unblocked entrance.

Just a friendly guy doing his job.

Once inside the Lab building, I located a wall sign identifying the Facility's Administrative Director as one Charles Downing, PhD. I found the main reception area and entered.

The cute co-ed receptionist looked up from her computer. "May I help you, sir?"

"Please let Dr. Downing know that Attorney Becker is here to see him. He is expecting me."

"Very well, sir." She punched a button on her telephone console and announced, "Dr. Downing, Attorney Becker to see you. He says you're expecting him."

There were a few moments of silence during which I examined the aerial photos hanging on the reception area walls. Without exception, they depicted farm fields, all of which looked strikingly similar to one another – at least as far as my untrained eye could discern.

“Yes, sir. I’ll tell him,” the receptionist said into her phone.

Then, turning to me, “Dr. Downing will be out to see you shortly.”

“Thank you very much.”

More thoughtful examination of crop photos.

A minute or two later there was a voice behind me.

“Mr. Becker is it?” The voice belonged to a man.

“Yes,” I said, turning away from the pictorial tillage to face the professor.

Dr. Downing looked just like an administrative PhD should look. Tall, slim, with brilliantly white hair, and a distinguished posture. He wore navy blue dress pants, with an open collar on his light blue, broadcloth dress shirt. No sport coat.

We approached each other.

“James Becker. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” I said warmly, switching my trial case to my left hand, while extending my right in greeting.

Dr. Downing accepted my large hand in his even larger, calloused one. He had a firm handshake. Despite his academic credentials, the man clearly had not spent his life in an office.

“I must apologize, Mr. Becker, but no one notified me that you would be coming today.”

I gave him the perplexed brow, shifted my weight to my left foot and put my right hand on my hip. “I don’t understand,” I said. “The University President called me just this morning and asked that I meet you here at 12:30.”

I looked at my watch. Right on the dot. I shook my head.

When in doubt, it's frequently smartest to say nothing. I continued to shake my head and shift my weight back and forth from one foot to the other.

I remained 'seriously perplexed.'

"Well," Downing said, after considering the situation, "these sorts of things happen all the time in large institutions when the chiefs act outside normal channels. I apologize. May I see your credentials?"

I showed him the laminated card from the Minnesota Supreme Court identifying me as an 'Attorney-at-Law' and backed it up with the photo on my driver's license. He seemed satisfied.

"Fortunately, I have some time. Shall we meet in my office?"

"Perfect." I smiled.

The doctor ushered me through a door, down a white-walled institutional hallway, and into his private office.

"Please have a seat," he offered, as he rounded the side of his desk.

I did. And he did as well.

"Now . . . how may I help you, Mr. Becker?" He rolled his metal office chair closer to the drab-green-topped metal desk.

"Beck, please," I said.

"Very well, Beck. Please call me Chuck."

"Okay. Chuck it is."

I had been holding the trial case on my lap. I leaned over and placed it on the floor on my side of the desk. As I opened the case, I flipped the switch on a small digital audio recorder. There's no substitute for verbatim recollection.

A second later, I popped back up into Chuck's view with a yellow pad. Removing a pen from my shirt pocket, I established a ready position.

"Chuck. First of all, I think it's fair to say that we are all horrified by the apparent murder of Dr. Westerman."

Chuck nodded sadly.

"The President is, of course, devastated by Dr. Westerman's death. But he also has a responsibility to protect the University from potential liability exposures, what with the death occurring on University property and all. Hence, my involvement."

I shrugged and tilted my head to one side.

Chuck nodded.

"I'm hoping I can count on your complete cooperation in this internal investigation. There could be a good deal at stake. If this matter isn't put to rest with the University coming out squeaky clean, who knows the ramifications?"

Chuck shrugged. He didn't know the ramifications.

"Donors might withhold contributions. There could be funding cuts for Ag programs."

No change of expression on Chuck's face.

"Employee positions could be in jeopardy – especially managerial and administrative jobs. And you can imagine who could end up the scapegoat for this whole fiasco."

I looked Chuck in the eye with purpose. That got Chuck's attention.

He rolled even closer to the desk and sat up straight. "I'll certainly do anything I can to assist in your investigation, Mr., ah, Beck."

"Thank you." I paused thoughtfully – my pen and pad poised for action. "Could you please describe your relationship with Dr. Westerman? Were the two of you close?"

“Actually,” Chuck began, “although we’ve worked under the same roof here at the Lab for these past many years, he and I seldom spoke. Technically speaking, Dr. Westerman reported to me as his supervisor. But he had tenure. And he was extremely productive, self-directed, and reclusive. I saw no reason to bother him.”

I raised an eyebrow.

Chuck began fidgeting. “I mean, his written progress reports were all in order. And his work was very impressive, I might add. Very impressive. He really needed no supervision, *per se*.”

Taking advantage of Chuck’s cooperative attitude, I continued with my questions.

“What had Dr. Westerman been working on recently?”

“His last report, filed about a month ago, indicated that he was continuing to make progress toward developing improved agricultural fertilizer compounds.”

My experience with fertilizer was limited to Miracle Gro, manure, and truck bombs. “Can you give me more details? I really have neither a chemistry nor agricultural background.” That wasn’t completely true. I actually knew quite a lot of very specialized chemistry. But I wasn’t planning to share.

“Of course. Where should I start.”

It was rhetorical. I waited.

“Many farm crops require significant amounts of the chemical, potassium, in the soil in order for them to grow. The problem is that these crops permanently remove relatively large quantities of the potassium from the land each growing season. The soil’s natural reserves of potassium deplete quite rapidly.”

“So the crops wear out the soil. And then what?”

“Well. For years, farmers have added potassium compounds to their fields to supplement the depleted soil levels. Typical

supplements might be potassium chloride, potassium hydroxide, potassium sulphate, and potassium magnesium sulphate. There are a few others. But those are the most common supplements, or fertilizers, if you will.”

Chuck continued his speech. I had gotten him into lecture mode.

“The chemical reactions between other soil components, the sun, the rain and the plants themselves, liberate . . . ah . . . separate the potassium from its compounds to make the potassium available for the plants to use as food.

“Are you following so far?”

“I believe so.” Actually, the talk of fertilizer components had taxed my concentration. I needed to refocus Chuck’s monologue.

“What does this have to do with Dr. Westerman’s work?”

“I’m just getting to that.” Chuck’s voice was patient now, and less flustered.

“Until very recently, sources of potassium compounds were plentiful, making them available to agriculture at very low prices. If a farmer needed more potassium, he could afford to just order up a load of potash and spread it on his field.

“But with broad international development of more sophisticated farming techniques, notably in the Republic of China, the global demand for potassium compounds has skyrocketed. There are actually shortages in many parts of the world today.”

This was turning into a longer manure dissertation than I had hoped for.

“Again . . . Dr. Westerman’s role in all this?” I pressed.

“Dr. Westerman was working on new ways to encourage farm soil to retain more potassium, and to ensure that crops could make the most efficient use of lower soil potassium levels, should that become necessary. His latest project involved reducing potassium

fertilizer to pure potassium metal, and then constructing entirely new potassium compounds with the desired characteristics, from scratch. It's a novel approach and has not been tried anywhere else in the world – at least that I am aware of.”

I scratched my head with the end of my pen. I hadn't actually written anything down on the yellow pad. Nothing seemed relevant enough to be noted – and I did have the digital backup.

“Again, I'm no chemist, but it seems like someone else would have considered this approach before. Don't scientists break apart compounds and make new ones all the time? I mean, they take the salt out of seawater. And I remember doing an experiment in high school where we separated hydrogen and oxygen gases out of distilled water. What made Dr. Westerman's work so 'impressive,' as you described it earlier?”

“Well, Beck,” back to lecture mode, “many chemical elements are easily separated from their molecules or compounds – electrolysis of water to produce hydrogen and oxygen being one example. Other elements are so volatile or unstable in their elemental form, that segregating the pure element is extremely difficult. Potassium is one such element.

“Potassium metal is a solid at room temperature, so one might think it would be easy to handle. But in reality, elemental potassium reacts so violently with water, including the water vapor present in all air, that it's not practical to either make, or retain, pure potassium in a small lab. But Dr. Westerman found a way to do it – at least in theory.

“He designed a unique lab apparatus for the process. And then he built it himself! Most chemists would never consider such a thing. But developing innovative laboratory tools and devices was one of his specialties. As of a month ago, he had completed assembly of a reaction chamber that, in my professional opinion, was capable of producing pure elemental potassium metal.

“Once the device was proven, his experiments with new potassium isotopes and compounds could move forward very rapidly.”

Finally, this was getting interesting. Westerman had invented something no one else possessed, and its value to folks with ill intentions could only be speculated upon.

“Can you think of any military or terrorist applications of the doctor’s invention?” I’d spent most of my life thinking like a terrorist. I wasn’t about to stop now.

Chuck thought for a moment. “Actually, no. Elemental potassium can only be manufactured, stored, transported, and I suppose deployed, in an air free and water free environment.

“And if you’re thinking that any potential new potassium compounds might be highly explosive or unusually dangerous, again the answer is ‘no.’ There are many more forceful explosives easily made in much safer fashion than anything anyone might want to make from potassium.

“Any chem student could cook up nitroglycerin in her basement. Dynamite is only one or two steps farther down the same road as nitro. Internet websites even boast recipes for making plastic explosives. I can think of absolutely no reason anyone would use potassium in place of any one of these other, more stable, explosives.”

“What about other uses? Could potassium potentially form an unusually potent acid? Or an exceptionally lethal poison? Could a tiny amount contaminate a large water supply, for example?”

Chuck paused for a very short time, then continued.

“Again, ‘no.’ Potassium hydroxide, also called caustic potash, is corrosive, but not extraordinarily so. And based on the nature of potassium bonds in existing compounds, development of a more highly caustic one is unlikely. In addition, there are already many extremely caustic acids and bases that any chem student could

acquire or concentrate with little risk or expense. Why invent a new one?

“As far as poisons go . . . while some new potassium compounds certainly could be toxic to humans, cyanide, iodine, and arsenic are all more deadly. And the formula for sarin nerve gas is not complex – just four ingredients. I can’t imagine that any potassium compound might be more lethal.

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t think Dr. Westerman’s fertilizer research is useful for military or terrorist purposes.”

Seemed a reach for me as well.

Of course, I knew that Timothy McVeigh had used a mammoth truck bomb made from fertilizer and diesel fuel to blow up most of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. But that was a nitrogen-based explosive. Nothing to do with potassium. Still, one should never underestimate the ingenuity of one’s enemies.

“I’m sure the President will be relieved that the University doesn’t appear to have any liability exposure owing to uses of the professor’s work product,” I said.

I was running out of ideas for things to ask Chuck.

“Is there anyone else at the Facility who may have known Dr. Westerman more intimately?”

“His lab assistant, Farris. But he hasn’t shown up for work since the professor’s death. I can get you his address?”

“Thank you. I’ll take the address and anything else you have on Farris – resumé, job application, social security number, cell number, pictures, whatever. I’ll also need copies of Dr. Westerman’s reports to you for the past three years.”

Chuck didn’t sense my urgency. Academia has its own timetables.

“I’d like to tell the President that I have them in hand *today*?”

That moved Chuck out of the starting gate. “Of course. I’ll have Rita ready them for you right away.” He reached for his desk phone to relay the instructions.

“Thank you very much for your assistance. Shall I wait for the copies in the reception area?” I said, when he’d hung up the phone.

Chuck looked a bit perturbed at my lack of patience, but not perturbed enough to risk irritating the University President.

“The documents will be ready very soon. The reception area is fine.”

“Nice to meet you, Chuck,” I said.

“And you as well . . . Beck!”

There may have been a tinge of unnecessary emphasis on my name. No matter. I didn’t need Chuck to be my buddy.

Departing Chuck’s office, I returned to the reception area where Rita, the cute co-ed, was already efficiently producing the documents I had requested. I admired the photographic fields a while longer.

In a few minutes, the documents were ready. I thanked Rita for her assistance and headed out the office door.

CHAPTER 5

Three days earlier, Monday, May 4th, nearly midnight at the University of Minnesota Ottawa County Agricultural Research Facility Lab.

Farris Ahmed's journey to the University Agricultural Lab in Ottawa County, Minnesota had been a long one. At the age of eleven years, his father enrolled Farris at a *Madrassa* in a remote Saudi village. There he was taught the strict principles of militaristic Islam. In addition to academics, the teachers spoke untiringly of the Great Satan – a foreign entity with immense earthly power to do evil – an entity which Farris later recognized as the United States.

It was every Muslim's solemn duty to fight for Allah in the *Jihad* against the Great Satan. And the teachers at the *Madrassa* made sure each pupil left their care with that message drilled deeply into his brain.

After departing the *Madrassa* at age eighteen, Farris moved to the United Kingdom, where he attended and graduated from Cambridge University with an emphasis in chemistry. During his final year at Cambridge, Farris had been accepted to the postgraduate chemistry program at the University of Minnesota School of Agriculture.

It was there that he had met the professor – the man he was convinced could help him take the next step toward ultimate service to Allah among the infidels.

The same man whose throat he had slit only minutes ago.

It was truly unfortunate that the professor had to die. But he had caught Farris rummaging through the professor's locked desk. Though he felt no pity for the infidel, Farris recognized that he had learned a great deal of creative chemistry from the professor – so his death had, indeed, been a loss of sorts.

Only two months ago, Farris had filed a report with his command cell, describing the new apparatus the professor had designed to isolate potassium metal, and its successful testing. He didn't know if the *Mawlawi* had found this information significant. But Farris, himself, was very impressed.

Now, following the unanticipated need to kill the professor, Farris had to regroup. There were plans for such contingencies. But he wasn't pleased to employ one already, and certainly not for this exigency. Nevertheless, using the prescribed emergency communication method – in this case, a disposable cell phone – Farris had contacted the command cell for direction.

Farris offered some disposal alternatives and the *Mawlawi* had instructed Farris to deposit the body and the professor's car in the Prairie River. Afterward, Farris was to return to the Lab on foot to pick up his own car – the distance from river to Lab was only a few miles. Then he would drive to the designated safe house. On the way, he would receive further information and instructions on his laptop, via its wireless connection to the web.

Farris did as he was told. The professor and his car went into the river. And Farris departed the Lab for the safe house, taking the potassium apparatus with him.

CHAPTER 6

Thursday, May 7th, late afternoon. Location unknown.

The *Al Qaeda* operative needed to report the attorney's Lab visit to his commander. Mr. Becker's presence at the crime scene was troubling. It may be that some action would need to be taken to deal with this unanticipated development.

Encrypted communications were exchanged.

Ultimately, the operative was told that he had done well and should not concern himself further with this situation. He should stay on task. The commander would handle Mr. Becker's intrusion.

CHAPTER 7

Tuesday, May 5th, early morning near the safe house.

After traversing what seemed like a thousand miles of rutted dirt roads through the darkness, Farris finally arrived at the end of the safe house driveway. It was just after dawn on Tuesday . . . a mere six hours after the professor's murder.

He was still driving his own car. He knew there had been some risk in that. But his route had been largely on hardened dirt roadways bordered by farmland. The risk was acceptable.

Farris also knew that, once the professor's murder was discovered, he would be the prime suspect. Besides leaving his fingerprints everywhere, he had no doubt left bloody footprints and all kinds of DNA evidence at the scene. Not to mention the obvious fact that he was absent from work and nowhere to be found today.

Farris didn't really care that everyone would know he was the killer. Actually, he was rather proud of himself. The *Mawlawi* had praised his valor and applauded his decisive action. Farris had already acquired the knowledge and equipment he needed from the professor, the *Mawlawi* had said. Farris's hidden presence in mainstream America was no longer required. From this day forward, his service to Allah would take a new form – one that would take full advantage of his lab skills, and would have an immediate and decisive impact on the Great Satan.

Farris was excited about his new opportunity.

Parked near the end of the driveway, he checked his web connection. The information had downloaded as promised. There was a lot to read. He skimmed for the high points.

Farris should expect to find three 'colleagues' at the safe house. They would not be Muslim. They served Allah's will as unwitting soldiers in the *Jihad*.

Farris had been given complete background information on each of them. All of it was stored, encrypted of course, on his laptop hard drive. He would learn and memorize every detail about his three colleagues later. For now, he had read enough to know how to interact with them without upsetting the council's plans.

Two of his coworkers had come to Minnesota from a remote compound in Idaho. The Idaho group was a collection of *posse comitatus* types, mixed with all manner of vigilantes and government haters. The two here at the farm were of the government hating variety. They held no particular religious prejudices and no strong racial convictions.

They had been told that Farris was an American Indian who had a gripe with the government over tribal land. *Al Qaeda* saw no benefit in disclosing his Arab connection when it was not necessary to do so.

The third member of the group would be a local of Ottawa County. He would know the plan completely, and also of *Al Qaeda's* role. And he would know that Farris was Arab, though he would go along with the American Indian cover story for the benefit of the government haters.

Farris proceeded slowly up the narrow dirt road. A deep ravine paralleled the rutted road tracks to the right. Farris glanced backward as he drove. The curvature of the hills and the thick growth of sumac, prickly ash, bur oak, and box elder trees, totally obscured his view of, and presumably from, the public roadway.

Ahead, dense and unkempt vegetation encroached on the driveway, hiding it completely from the morning sun's rays. Even from inside the car, Farris could smell the fresh moistness of the leafy trees and the dew dampened undergrowth. He thought this remote valley an excellent hiding place.

Proceeding farther up the drive, Farris could see some buildings ahead.

The safe house itself was not much to behold. An 1800s-era, two story farm house with peeling white clapboard siding and dark green trim, it seemed to tilt a bit to one side. The roof ridge displayed a clearly discernable sway back.

Most of the outbuildings were similarly dilapidated – some in a near state of collapse. The exceptions were what Farris assumed to be the former milk house, and two open-sided structures beyond the milk house that were partially blocked from his view.

The milk house appeared to have benefited from some recent reconstruction. The concrete block sides looked substantially repaired. There was a new metal door and the galvanized metal roof shone bright silver. The two open-sided structures looked entirely new.

Farris continued forward into the graveled driveway turn-around. There were no signs of his colleagues. He saw no people and no vehicles. His superiors had prepared him for this eventuality.

He pulled into the turn-around, stopped the car, and put it in park. With all four windows rolled down and the engine off, he honked the horn three times, paused a few seconds, then honked twice more. Now he waited, seated in the car with his hands in plain sight at the top of the steering wheel.

Before long, there was movement to his right. A red-bearded man emerged from behind a barn-red granary building. Drawing on his extensive cultural training, Farris thought the man looked like

the Brawny lumberjack. He was muscular and pretty big – maybe six one or six two, probably 220 pounds – much larger than Farris.

Following closely behind the man was a blond woman. Farris figured her for maybe forty years old, five foot six, and a fairly flabby one hundred eighty pounds. Her face would probably have been attractive without the extra weight.

The two stood motionless about thirty feet from Farris’s car.

“Are you Mr. Eagle Claw?” the man called tentatively.

“Yes, sir,” Farris replied, with equal trepidation.

His name for the rest of his stay in Ottawa County was to be Farris Eagle Claw, member of the Northern Cheyenne Indian tribe. Farris had asked whether his first name should also be altered. But the council had assured him there was no need, so ‘Farris’ it remained.

“Okay if I get out of the car?” Farris asked through the open windows.

The couple moved closer. Though the woman was still a bit behind the man, they both looked more relaxed.

“Sure. Let’s get acquainted,” the man said.

He sounded harmless enough.

Farris got out of the aging white Ford, stepped around the front, and offered his hand toward the man.

They shook. The man had a strong grip. He smiled at Farris, displaying uneven, tobacco stained teeth.

“Urland Umber, and this is my wife, Brenda.” He gestured over his shoulder with his left thumb as he introduced her.

“Farris Eagle Claw,” said Farris, thinking the name sounded absurd.

Now Brenda stepped alongside her husband.

“How!” she said, raising her left hand as if signaling a right turn on a bicycle.

Farris was not quite sure what to do. His indoctrination to western culture had not included viewing 1940s westerns.

He extended his hand toward Brenda. “And how are you, as well?”

Brenda shook with her right hand as she slowly lowered her left, pretending she had never made the ridiculous gesture.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said.

Brenda was bursting to say more.

“I just want you to know how much we respect you Indians and all that you’ve done for this country. You were the first revolutionaries. And you’re still standin’ up to Uncle Sam. Fightin’ for casinos and independence and all.”

She displayed a genuinely warm and admiring smile.

Great! How should Farris respond to that statement?

“Why, thank you, madam,” he managed. “We Indians try to do our best. After all, we cannot let the folks in Washington run things.”

This was a strange conversation.

“That’s for damn sure,” Urland joined in. “Politicians and judges been runnin’ this country into the ground for over 200 years. Time we took it back for ourselves.”

Urland obviously had no appreciation of what ‘take it back for ourselves’ would mean to an American Indian, if he were actually speaking to one.

Farris maintained his pleasant facial expression. Underneath it though, he was deeply concerned. Could these be his colleagues? Not only infidels – but idiots? No wonder it hadn’t been necessary to change his name. These dolts wouldn’t know Arab from Algonquin.

May Allah save him!

As Urland moved alongside the car, he noticed the boxes of lab equipment in the back seat. “I’ll give you a hand with these,” he said, reaching through the back window.

“Stop! Please!” There was a note of urgency in Farris’s voice.

Urland looked chastised. He removed his hands from the car. “What’d I do?”

“Sorry,” Farris said. “Very sensitive. Very dangerous. Please do not touch the boxes. You know I am a chemist, right?”

Urland nodded, still a little confused.

“Very delicate chemicals in there. I am really sorry. You can help me move the boxes when we decide where they need to go. Until then, we are all safest if the boxes stay where they are.”

“Okay,” Urland said, his head hanging. “Just tryin’ to help.”

“How ‘bout somethin’ to eat?” offered Brenda, changing the subject. “We don’t have any wild turkey or corn-on-the-cob or . . . or cranberry sauce. But I could make steaks and eggs?”

She was trying to be culturally sensitive.

Farris became suddenly aware that he was hungry. “That would be most kind.”

Urland was not to be outdone in making his new Indian friend feel at home. “And I can see about maybe gettin’ some venison for tomorrow. I put a salt lick out for the deer up behind the barn. They seem to come by pretty regular. How’ that be?”

“Very thoughtful of you. But please, do not put yourself out for me,” Farris said. He had no idea what deer meat might taste like. And he had no desire to find out.

Better finish reading up on my colleagues as soon as possible, he thought to himself.

“Let’s get on inside now,” said Brenda, shooing the two men along the cracked sidewalk toward the kitchen door.

CHAPTER 8

Tuesday, May 5th, somewhere in Europe.

With the new developments freeing Farris to work on the nuclear project, the *Mawlawi* had decided to call an emergency meeting of his technical advisors. A change in logistics might be in order.

The original plan had called for dynamite to be used as the primary explosive. It could be easily manufactured by non-chemists and the raw materials were readily available. The main disadvantage of dynamite was that it would take a lot of the stuff to accomplish their goal. And even with mass quantities, given the lack of confinement for the explosion, there was no guarantee of success.

When Farris had first reported the invention of the professor's potassium electrolysis device several months earlier, the *Mawlawi* had wondered if a chemical explosion might not accomplish the attack with a higher degree of confidence than dynamite.

Consultation with chemists at his disposal had indicated that a chemical reaction was, indeed, a viable and potentially more effective approach to achieving the goal. But the scientists had recommended sodium instead of potassium. Sodium was substantially more stable than potassium, was easier to isolate, and could be manufactured in a fairly basic lab by any competent lab technician. The American could be given the necessary instructions.

At that time, the *Mawlawi* had taken the decision to use sodium as the explosive. The council directed the American operative to modify the lab facilities to accommodate the additional requirements for sodium production. His chemists had assured the *Mawlawi* that the team in place would be capable of making the sodium bomb without the need of a chemist.

Now, two months later, the *Mawlawi* was convinced Farris's sudden availability was a sign from Allah that the operation should take advantage of the young man's unique talents. The *Al Qaeda* chemists continued to be wary concerning the complexity of processing potassium. But they had to agree that, if processing and delivery could be accomplished, elemental potassium offered significant explosive advantages over sodium.

After considerable prayer and reflection, the *Mawlawi* had made his decision. Potassium it would be. Allah had spoken.

CHAPTER 9

On March 28, 1979, an 'incident' occurred at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Metropolitan Edison owned the facility. But its design and operation were closely monitored, and to a large extent controlled, by the federal government through the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, or NRC.

John Sigler knew the entire debacle was the government's fault. The administration's energy policy had not only driven entire coal mining communities out of work, but had also deposited the American public on the doorsteps of Hiroshima.

It was only a matter of time before something horrible happened. And in fact, it had taken a mere three months after TMI's commissioning for the disaster to occur.

After the total meltdown of TMI Reactor Unit 2, the government and the utility had both assured neighboring residents that there was 'no significant release of radiation.' Everything had been safely contained. Multiple government sponsored 'investigations' had concluded that, although the incident was extremely unfortunate, and TMI's neighbors had suffered substantial psychological distress, the meltdown posed no physical health risks to surrounding communities. Eventually, the government even allowed TMI Unit 1 to resume nuclear operations,

while Unit 2 remained a pile of rubble filling a hole in the ground where the 'incident' had occurred.

But John Sigler knew the radiation leak had not been 'insignificant.' He and his family lived just east of TMI, in the small community of Elizabethtown. When John turned twelve in June, 1979, just three months after the disaster, he had already seen the beginnings the radiation's hellish effects.

His mother was pregnant with his brother, Jacob, at the time. She had lost most of her hair and was frequently so weak she couldn't get out of bed. The doctors assured the family that pregnancy hormones were the likely cause of her hair loss and weakness. She should remain bed bound until delivery, just to be safe.

When Jacob arrived on July 4th, 1979, his family was in shock when the doctors sympathetically told them that Jacob had been born with an unusually small brain. Mental retardation was likely, they said. They were sorry, they said.

Less than three years after Jacob's birth, both he and his mother were dead. Each had died of lung cancer, though no one in the Sigler family ever smoked. The doctors could offer no explanation for the coincidence. But fourteen-year-old John and his dad knew the reason. It didn't take a genius to know that two-year-olds don't die of lung cancer.

TMI was the cause.

A few years later, John's father developed leukemia. Not common for a man his age, the doctors said. But it happens, they said.

The cancer progressed inexorably through his body. Evilly patient. Excruciatingly earnest. John had dropped out of school so he could remain by his father's bedside as the cancer silently ravaged his organs. John's father finally died, after months of agony, in October, 1985.

John was eighteen.

John wished he had died, too. Dying would have been easier than drowning in his family's pain, gasping for a breath of relief.

Even after the shock of the nuclear assault on the Sigler family had subsided, there were the nagging questions. Pursuing him. Unrelenting. Why had he, alone, survived? For what purpose?

John never forgave the United States government for torturing and murdering his family. Ultimately, he concluded there was only one possible reason he had been spared – to take vengeance for his family's suffering.

But John was no fool. He knew he couldn't defeat, or even seriously damage, the nuclear juggernaut by himself – especially not as a boy of eighteen. He needed collaborators, others who hated the nuclear establishment as much as he.

For years he sought out anti-nuclear organizations to aid him in his mission, to feed his pathological need for revenge. He posted his contact information in chat rooms on the rapidly expanding internet. He joined in anti-nuke rallies and attended meetings.

But without exception, these nuclear opponents were far too passive. He wanted to send a serious message. He wanted clear retribution for the death of his family at TMI.

John was patient. John was pragmatic. While he searched for help, he also maneuvered. Years passed, then decades. He attended trade school, served an apprenticeship, and eventually developed a high degree of skill as a metal worker and welder. He earned a good living.

But he never forgave. And he never forgot.

Finally, an opportunity arose for him to infiltrate the enemy. Willing to leave his hometown for this chance, he accepted a job as a Plant Engineering and Systems Repair Specialist at the Prairie River Nuclear Power Plant near Red Wing, Minnesota.

Initially, John was very excited about his new job. He had assumed that his employment with the utility would surely present chances for revenge. But he soon discovered that even his status as a nuclear insider did not afford him the opportunity he sought. The facility's design included too many backup systems, obstacles, countermeasures. For John by himself, assaulting the plant was still impossible. He needed to reach out farther, beyond his comfort zone. He still had to find a co-conspirator to lend him aid.

Then he suffered a devastating setback. Although at the time of the TMI incident John had appeared to suffer no serious radiation effects, he now learned that radiation damage can be subtle and sometimes slow to make itself apparent. At the age of forty-one, with his lust for revenge as great as ever and still unrequited, John was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma.

He underwent radiation treatments and then chemotherapy. After twelve long months of treatment, his cancer was cured. The doctors declared it to be in remission.

But despite his apparent victory over the cancer, John knew his time to take retribution might be running out. He desperately needed to take action soon. The nuclear bastards had to pay!

Then one day, seemingly out of the blue, he had received a telephone call. By the man's accent, John would have guessed the caller to be English, or possibly Australian. Although no one mentioned the organization by name, when the group the caller actually represented became clear, John was taken aback. He had always considered *Al Qaeda* the enemy. But in this case, his interests and theirs aligned perfectly.

What was the saying he had heard during the Gulf War? "The enemy of my enemy is my friend?" After some consideration, John decided he didn't care if they were *Al Qaeda*, Nazis or Martians, so long as they would help him achieve his goal.

Al Qaeda had done its research on John before making contact. They knew his family background at TMI. They knew he wanted action, not passive protest. They assured him they had a plan – a plan that would devastate the nuclear industry. When he indicated an interest, they acted swiftly.

Within days after the initial call, John received a package at his home near Red Wing, Minnesota containing \$250,000.00 U.S. in cash, together with instructions that he should acquire a specific, secluded, rundown farmstead in Ottawa County. The farm would be used as a safe house and bomb production facility.

John felt energized by his new collaboration. There was renewed hope for retribution.

He bought the farm property for less than \$150,000.00 using a commercial money order he had purchased in St. Paul, and titled the land in his name. The rest of the money he put aside for future use. The organization instructed him to take care of the farm, such as it was, and said they would contact him when their plan was ready for implementation.

That was all about a year ago now. It had seemed an eternity to John. To make matters worse, his cancer had returned. He feared that he wouldn't survive to see the plan through to completion.

To be so close and not to finish? The thought was unbearable!

But recently, John had received another message from *Al Qaeda*. Plans for the attack were moving forward. The date had been set. The final act was only months away. Maybe he would yet survive to avenge his family's suffering.

The communication directed John to build a laboratory on the farm property. The initial lab construction plans called for a simple concrete block building, containing only lab tables and basic equipment.

It would be an easy project for a man with his construction and mechanical background. And when it came to beginning the actual

construction, it got even easier. He could use the concrete block milk house already present on the farm as a foundation. He didn't need to start from scratch.

He immediately began work in earnest.

From time to time John's ongoing cancer battle slowed his progress. But his determination for revenge countered the ever-present ache in his gut, and he pressed on.

When he wasn't at his regular job, he was at the farm, building the lab. He was making good progress, too. So he was a bit disappointed when, about two months after beginning construction, he'd received another communication from *Al Qaeda*.

The demands for the lab had become significantly more complicated. He could still use most of the construction he had already completed, thank god. But he would need to obtain additional construction materials, build two more structures to complement the lab, and obtain substantially increased quantities of certain specific lab equipment and supplies.

The changes definitely made the project more challenging. But after the initial letdown, he decided he was up to the assignment. He would have to be.

There were no explanations for the design changes. None were necessary. As long as he was actually progressing toward a conclusion, any approach suited him fine. In his book, the ends amply justified the means.

CHAPTER 10

Wednesday, May 6th at the Ottawa County farm.

Farris knew that John Sigler was supposed to be the head of this group and in charge of operational logistics. Farris prayed John would have the intellect and sense that Urand and Brenda seemed to lack. And hopefully, John would be able to get Farris the materials he needed to perform effectively in the lab. Now that he was free to fight the Great Satan, he had embraced the role and was eager to begin.

When John stepped into the farmhouse kitchen early Wednesday morning, looking more or less like a normal human being, Farris was relieved. Brief introductions were made.

John had been advised of Farris's arrival and knew of his talents as a chemist. The council had also informed John of the change in chemical processing, and that Farris would bring with him both the necessary laboratory apparatus, and the technical expertise, to make the potassium bomb a success.

John had plans for the day all laid out. Farris would begin to set up the lab in the concrete block building. He would inventory the current lab equipment and provide John with a list of any additional items that were needed. If Farris wanted it, John would get it – one way or another.

John also had an assignment for Urland and Brenda. They were going to steal a fertilizer truck filled with potash and drive it back to the farm. John had given careful thought to the whole truck stealing procedure. He knew he needed to explain their duties as simply as possible, so as not to confuse Urland and Brenda. And they were easily confused.

Hopper cars of potash arrived at the Red Wing train terminals daily, mostly from the vast potash mines of Saskatchewan. Urland and Brenda were to select a fertilizer truck after it had filled up with potash for delivery to some small town elevator operation. Then they would follow the truck to a remote location (of which there were many) and relieve the driver of his vehicle.

John explained all of these details, and more, to the Umbers. They seemed to comprehend. This was not unlike some of their operations back home . . . though after stealing a truck, they usually would burn it.

“Looks like we get some action today, Sweetie,” Urland said, hacking tobacco juice into an empty beer can. “I’m takin’ my gun.”

“What do I wear for stealing a truck in Minnesota?” Brenda was serious. “Are jeans okay?”

“Come on Brenda,” Urland said. “You’ll look great whatever you wear. Where’d you put my ammo belt?”

Judas Priest! John thought. Of all the anarchists in the damn country, he had ended up with Snuffy Smith and Daisy Mae Yokum. He hoped they could at least steal the damn truck.

As Brenda and Urland prepped for their mission, John and Farris walked to the concrete building. Farris would survey the lab.

The facilities here were better than Farris had feared. The building interior had been thoroughly power-washed and smelled of industrial cleaner. The ventilation system seemed adequate. Lab tables, beakers, flasks, and miscellaneous lab supplies were present in abundance. The fluorescent ceiling lights provided ample

illumination and multiple electrical outlets were powered by a diesel generator Farris heard rattling behind the barn.

One wall held multiple gas hookups that connected to bulk sources outside the concrete structure. Farris thought segregating the gas supply lines from the lab proper was a wise design decision. There would be much less danger of an inadvertent explosion.

Some of the gas fittings were labeled. Oxygen. Propane. Acetylene. A few spare connections were available in case other gases were required.

“I will need a dozen cylinders of argon gas hooked into the wall,” Farris said. It was more an order than a request.

Little shit thinks he’s in charge.

“Twelve tanks. I may have to be creative getting that much argon without attracting attention,” John said. “But I’ll get it. When do you need it by?”

“The argon is for the last step in the process. It will be at least a few weeks, maybe longer, before we get to that point.”

John took Farris outside and pointed him toward the adjacent facilities, then left Farris to explore on his own. The Umbers probably needed further instruction.

John didn’t like Farris. And Farris merely tolerated John. Each considered the other a necessary evil.

Farris began to explore. Leaving the lab and walking to the side farthest from the house, Farris could see the full extent of the new construction. He noted that the oxygen and acetylene gas lines were connected to a smallish metal shed nearly abutting the lab on one side.

Farris unlatched the metal door. Inside the shed were multiple canisters of each gas. The argon would fit here, too.

Alongside the shed was a steel-framed, tin-roofed lean-to which sheltered four, large cast iron cooking grates with sizeable

gas burners beneath each. Two five-hundred-gallon pressurized gas tanks located a short distance up the hill behind the lab provided propane to these grill burners, and also to the propane wall fixture in the lab.

Hand-adjustable flow regulators – much like the knobs on a backyard gas grill – controlled the propane flow to the grills. On each of the four burners sat an empty, four-gallon, stainless steel, covered cooking pot.

Farris continued his assessment of the premises. Another, much larger lean-to lay perpendicular to the first and opened toward him. This empty structure had a concrete slab bottom and was nearly forty feet in length. Substantial steel poles supported the roof in three locations along the front.

Having surveyed the surrounding facilities, Farris returned to the lab and set about compiling a list of additional chemicals and equipment he would need. Reagents. Buffers. Acids. Bases. Solvents. And some further specific lab tools and instruments.

By now, John had returned from the house. Farris was sitting at a lab table, pen in hand.

“The facilities will suffice,” Farris said to John. “With the items on this list, and an extreme quantity of potash, I can begin.”

He tore multiple sheets off the yellow pad and handed John the list.

John looked doubtfully at the handful of papers. “Sure this is all?”

Farris just stared at him.

John considered slapping the insolent kid – then thought better of it. “I can get most of this stuff for you within the next few days. Will you be able to stay busy setting up ‘til then.”

“I will need to do a good bit of preparation and testing before I can actually begin production. I must *know* that all the equipment

and connections will work flawlessly before I start doing anything dangerous.”

“Good. I’ll be checking in every day to see if you need anything more. In the meantime, good luck with the inbred comedy act!”

John slipped out the metal door, closing it behind him.

Infidel!

Snot!

Alone in the lab, Farris felt a surge of energy and purpose that he had not felt since the incident with the professor. He knew Allah’s will was upon him.

Now . . . where to start?

CHAPTER 11

Friday morning, May 8th at Red Wing.

I had gotten quite the education from Chuck at the Lab. I now knew considerably more about farming and fertilizer than I would have cared to. But the potassium apparatus and its abilities interested me. Exactly how much potassium production was it capable of? And where was it now?

Maybe Gunner would have some answers.

By this time, law enforcement would have completed some of the background investigating – questioning the family members of the deceased, interviewing Ag Lab Facility employees, searching for the decedent’s car – all of the time consuming, and usually boring, services that police perform so well.

The Episcopal Church carillon in downtown Red Wing rang out the hour as I entered the front door of the Law Enforcement Center. Eight o’clock. Time for donuts. I had a large box of Red Wing’s finest pastries in hand.

Approaching the uniformed secretary at the front desk, I asked to see Doug Gunderson. “Please inform the Chief Deputy that I come bearing gifts.”

I smiled.

The secretary gave me a sideways look; but she put my request through to Gunner. “He’ll be down in a bit. If you’d like a seat . . .” She gestured at the uncomfortable looking plastic chairs lining the wall across the lobby.

I had seen alleged criminals sitting in those chairs on many occasions. I had always assumed the rigid plastic was part of the interrogation process. No water boarding. Plastic chairs only.

“Do you need to cuff me before I sit there? Because I can’t part with this box until I am assured it will get to the Chief Deputy.”

She threw me a fake smile and turned back to her computer.

I remained standing.

After a couple minutes, Gunner appeared in the doorway to the inner offices. He first confirmed that I, indeed, held bakery products, which I lifted in his direction. Then, leaning against the open door, he waved me inside.

I led the way down the hall to Gunner’s office, entered, and ceremoniously placed the donut box in the center of his cluttered desk. Paperwork could wait for a few minutes when donuts were within reach.

Gunner poured himself a styrofoam cup from the Mr. Coffee in the corner. He gestured with his thumb that I was welcome to help myself to one also – which I did.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit,” Gunner asked, as he expertly opened the donut box, folding the white cardboard top carefully under the bottom, exposing the entire selection. He chose a cream cheese danish. I took a cake donut.

“I was wondering if you have anything new on the floater murder? The *Red Wing Daily* says you have a ‘person of interest’ in the case.”

Gunner had his mouth full of cheese danish.

I waited patiently for mastication to conclude.

Gunner choked down the danish and cleared his throat with a swallow of coffee. “Never a free lunch . . . or donut, apparently.” There was another throat clearing ‘ahem.’ “Tell me. Why should I tell you about an ongoing investigation?”

“Gimme a break with the ‘ongoing investigation’ shtick. I brought donuts. I asked politely. What do you want from me? Try the eclairs, by the way. Still cool from the fridge. The custard filling is unbelievably smooth.”

Gunner had polished off the danish in record time. He refilled his coffee and topped mine off, too.

“Okay,” he said, after retaking his seat.

“Okay what? Eclair or info?”

“Both,” he said, carefully acquiring the eclair while resuming his position behind the desk. “Here’s what we’ve got.”

He wiped his fingers on a paper napkin.

“The perp is almost certainly the lab assistant. DNA evidence, footprints his size in the blood, fingerprints on the outside wall where the blood trail starts. We got his prints from INS. The Brits conveniently include a thumb in their passport records.

“But here’s the clincher. When we found the professor’s car nose down in the Prairie River, we also found the lab assistant’s prints on the *inside* of the trunk – one was even pressed in the good doctor’s blood.”

Gunner was clearly pleased with himself over this last statement. When I didn’t look impressed, he continued.

“Plus, the assistant’s disappeared and nobody’s got a clue where he went. He didn’t have any friends . . . at least nobody we could identify. And there weren’t other profs he was close with.

“We don’t have the murder weapon. But that’s minor.

“I’d like a more concrete theory of motive. The old man might’ve stolen credit for the kid’s work? Maybe there was a woman

we haven't discovered yet? Maybe the kid was doing the professor's wife – but that's a picture I'd prefer to keep outta my mind.

"I don't know. You got any theories?" He took a bite of éclair.

"Have your science guys reviewed the professor's work activities just before he died?"

"Yeah. Fertilizer research," Gunner said, his mouth still full of éclair.

Gunner's 'Fertilizer' had sprayed me with pastry bits. I wiped my face with a paper napkin.

He sipped some coffee and swallowed. "Sorry about that," he said. "Are you suggesting there's a murder motive in makin' artificial cow dung?"

"I don't know what I'm suggesting."

I paused a moment in thought.

"What about the piece of lab equipment the professor created? What is that like? Does it have any nefarious uses?"

Gunner looked at me baffled. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"Nefarious. If means something the bad guys might use it for." I smiled.

"Hell, I know what 'nefarious' means. But there wasn't any unusual or created equipment in the professor's lab. The BCA science geeks said it's all standard stuff. What makes you think there was somethin' else?"

"Did your guys look at the professor's reports to the Administrator? Chuck Downing? Or interview him? When I talked to Chuck, he told me that the professor was some kind of genius with inventing lab devices. Chuck has drawings of a recent invention in his files."

"You spoke with Dr. Downing?" Gunner looked at me disapprovingly.

“Yeah. We happened to be in the same place at the same time. Anyway . . . what about the invention?”

“The science guys said something about a *theoretical* invention mentioned in the old guy’s reports. But it didn’t seem like something that had ever actually *made* anything. No one told me that it should’ve been in the lab when we inventoried it.

“Are you thinking this missing invention thingy is more than . . . what’s the word?”

“Peripheral?” I offered.

“Yeah. Peripheral.” Gunner took another bite of the eclair.

“Well, the thing is gone,” I persisted. “If your guys didn’t find it in the lab, the assistant must have taken it. Why?”

A pause for Gunner to sip his coffee.

“Lots of possible reasons,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “First of all, maybe the professor decided the gizmo didn’t work right after all and shit-canned it himself – possibly weeks ago.”

I nodded, conceding the point.

“Second, even if the contraption was still in the lab when the professor was killed, it’s hard to guess all the potential reasons why the assistant might have taken it. To sell it? To melt it down for precious metals? To play mad scientist in his garage? To stockpile his own custom manure supply?

“And if it is actually missing, maybe somebody else took it. We’ll look at it some more, Beck. But I doubt it’s relevant.”

Gunner had a point – several, actually.

“You’re probably right. No big deal. It’s just something, you know, anomalous. Why was it there before and now it’s gone?”

“I see what you’re saying,” Gunner said. “And I *will* check into it.”

I knew this invention would haunt me until I had discovered why the thing was missing, and what someone might do with it. Maybe Gunner would figure it out.

We each had another bite of pastry and sip of coffee. The coffee wasn't bad today. Sometimes Gunner's brew will make your lips pucker.

"Can you tell me anything else about the kid . . . the assistant?" I asked after a few moments.

"Well, like I told you the other day, his name is Farris Ahmed. He is a dual Saudi and British citizen here on an unlimited student visa. That's the usual practice with citizens from the U.K. Graduated Cambridge near the top of his class. Started as a grad student at the U of M about three years ago. Twenty-five years old. Arabic descent."

Arabic. Not a surprise. But that feeling in my stomach was becoming more uncomfortable.

"Do you know anything about his education before Cambridge?"

"Lemme see."

I waited patiently as Gunner again wiped his sticky fingers on a napkin, then began digging through a pile of papers. He pulled one sheet from the stack.

"Cambridge records indicate he attended The Riyadh Science Academy. From what I can find out, it's a prestigious school. Supposedly top flight. I haven't got any official records from the Academy itself. His father . . . we are communicatin' with him regularly . . . very concerned . . . confirmed his son's attendance at the Academy. The father claims the high class prep school is what got him into Cambridge in the first place.

"The father also assures us the boy is no radical. Just a normal kid trying to get the best education possible. According to Dad, the

kid's fondest dream is 'to improve agricultural production in the barren Saudi soil.'

"Sort of sad, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sad."

My stomach was churning, and it wasn't the donuts.

"So Dad says he's just a normal kid," Gunner went on. "Life's ambition? To improve on manure. And yet, here we are. No apparent motive. And little doubt about the boy's guilt. The Homicidal Horticulturist?"

"And how about international calls around the time of the murder?" I asked. "Did the BCA have any luck with that angle?"

"I don't know that I would call it an angle, but yeah, there was one international call made from a cell phone off the tower in the area of the Lab around the time of the murder. Not many towers out in the boonies, so it was the only one they needed to check. Even so, the BCA told me I was a pain in the ass because, apparently, they needed to contact each cell phone company separately to get the info. So you *do* owe me one.

"What's the significance of the call?"

"Where did it go to?" I asked, ignoring Gunner's question.

"Somewhere in Germany . . . best they could do. Now . . . why do you care?"

"Just a hunch." I stood. "Thanks Gunner. Got to go. Keep the health food."

Before Gunner could chew and swallow his last bite of eclair, I was out the door.

CHAPTER 12

Friday, May 8th, late afternoon at Red Wing.

Back at Becker Law Office, I was finishing up some legal work that my wayward adventures had delayed. It was about four p.m. when my intercom beeped.

My receptionist's voice announced, "Mr. Becker, it's Mrs. Becker on Line 1 for you."

"Thank you, Debbie," I said, as I answered the call.

"Hi, Beth. What's up?"

"Thank God you were there to answer!"

There was panic in her voice.

"What's the matter?"

"Sara just sent me a text. She thinks someone's following her around campus. I tried to reach her on the video-conferencing setup, but no answer."

Our daughter, Sara, was attending college out of state.

"Beth. Relax. Breathe. It's probably nothing. I'll be home in a few minutes. Try to calm down. We'll figure everything out when I get there.

"Love you. Bye."

I would have stayed on the line with Beth on my way home from the office, but frankly, I was just as likely to cause more distress as I was to alleviate any. Thankfully, there was no such thing as congested traffic in Red Wing and I would be home shortly.

During the brief drive, my mind vacillated. Was this a real threat? Or just a young adult's active imagination. There certainly were those who might seek revenge against me for some of my prior intelligence activities. That is precisely why pains had been taken to hide my true identity while I was on Agency business. It is also why our daughters had received training from the Agency on how to identify potential threats, and what to do if they perceived danger.

Both girls were smart, strong, active, athletic, and trained in self-defense. I had seen to the last part. But there was no way to be sure about the current situation with the little information I had at present.

As I approached Jefferson Avenue, I tried to relax. Clear my mind. Be calm. Help Beth be calm. Panic never helps anything.

The Pilot rapidly decelerated to a stop. I jumped out, raced up our sidewalk and steps, and continued through the front door. Beth was sitting in the living room on the red leather couch with her head in her hands. She looked up at me. I could tell she'd been crying, but she had made herself stop. She knew the same things about clearheadedness and calm that I knew. She was controlling her emotions.

"Thank God, you're home!"

She stood as I entered, ran over, and flung her arms around my shoulders. We held each other for a moment.

"Okay. Let's sit and catch our breath," I said, as calmly as I could muster. My heart was beating in my throat.

We sat together on the edge of the couch, facing each other.

“This is probably nothing,” I said. “But obviously, we have to treat it seriously. I need you to tell me everything you know, everything Sara said in her text, and what, if anything, has changed since we spoke on the phone.”

Beth took a deep breath, holding back more tears that fought for release. Marshaling her resources, she gave me her report.

“First of all . . . what has changed since we last spoke

“I returned a text message to Sara telling her to be extra careful and that you and I would discuss things and get back to her as soon as possible. I didn’t want to cause any panic.”

“Good. She knows we’re in the loop. That knowledge alone should make her feel better.”

“I’m afraid I have nothing else new. But here’s Sara’s text,” she said, handing me her SmartPhone. I accepted the phone from Beth, holding it in my right hand, with my left arm around her shoulders.

As I manipulated the phone with my thumb, the digital screen displayed the following message:

M&D,

Please don’t freak out or worry or anything. But I was told to contact you if I felt uncomfortable about any situation. So that’s what I’m doing. I’m texting because I’m in the library and can’t use the video link. At least I can still use my laptop. If I had to use my thumbs, you would need to decode this message twice. Ha.

Good. She still had a sense of humor.

I’m texting you because I think a man may have been following me around campus for the last couple days. Maybe I’m being paranoid or something. But I have seen him in the caf, at the library and in the fitness center. Whenever I look his way, he pretends to be reading a book, or listening to music, or whatever.

Normally, I wouldn't think anything of it. But the guy doesn't look like a college kid, you know? He has too many rough edges, if that makes any sense. And I can't find his picture in the college snoop book either.

He has a sort of oriental look. But not like my Chinese or Japanese friends. More prominent cheek bones maybe. He could almost be Native American; but I still think probably oriental, because of his eyes. He's maybe five foot ten and pretty muscular, about 190 pounds. Black hair, jeans, usually white shirts, running shoes. Sorry I can't describe him better.

I thought she had given a very detailed description. That would help a lot.

Oh yeah . . . he has a large tattoo on his right forearm. We were both working out and he was wearing a T-shirt. I saw it clearly, even from twenty feet away. Not that some guys here don't have tattoos, because they do. But this looked different. Not typical college guy stuff. Or even fake gangster ink. It contained three letters that looked to me like: capital "O," number "6" and small "r." But they didn't look exactly right – like some sort of archaic script or something.

Below the lettering was an image of a sword with a snake wrapped around it. And it looked as though he had had the tat for awhile. It had bled and faded some. Sorry I can't do better.

It's probably nothing. But just to be safe, until I hear back from you, I'll try to stay with at least one friend all the time when I'm not in a very public place. And I'll be totally careful. So don't worry.

Lots of love,

Sara

I looked up from the screen.

When Beth saw I had finished reading, she asked, “Does this message mean anything to you?” There was a hint of quaver in her voice. “I can’t make any connections with the tattoo or the oriental look.”

I paused a few seconds, assessing Beth’s emotional capacity at the moment. She could handle what I was about to tell her.

“I’m afraid it *does* mean something to me,” I said.

“What Sara interpreted as ‘O-6-r’ on the tattoo, is likely ‘O-B-G’ in Russian, or Cyrillic, lettering. Mongolians have the sort of facial features Sara describes.”

“So you recognize those initials?” Beth asked. “Or a Mongolian connection?”

I looked directly into Beth’s eyes, holding her hands in mine.

“The letters stand for Ovog Borjigin Gansükh. The English translation would be something like ‘Gansükh of the Borjigin Clan.’

“Gansükh used to be a prominent Mongolian gun dealer. At one time, Gansükh headed perhaps the largest private arms brokerage in the world. He had hundreds, maybe thousands, of minions. All of them wore that tattoo. I played a substantial role in putting him out of business. In the process, I probably also made his life a bit . . . uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable? How exactly?” Her expression betrayed her concern.

“My Team commandeered a freighter in the Indian Ocean near the horn of Africa. The cargo consisted of 30,000 crates of small arms, mostly Russian-made Kalashnikov assault rifles and grenade launchers, together with a lot of ammunition. The shipment was en route from the Ukraine, via the Black Sea and Suez Canal, to a ruthless rebel group in Kenya. The Kenyan rebels and Ukrainians were well-established trading partners at the time.

“With regard to this particular shipment, the Kenyans had paid half in advance, with the rest due on arrival. When the ship disappeared at sea, each trading partner suspected Gansükh of making off with the goods. Since my Team had blown up the ship with no witnesses, Gansükh was screwed. He couldn’t recover the arms, and he couldn’t afford to repay the Kenyans or the Ukrainians. Given the reputations of his two trading partners, I would have assumed that Gansükh would be long dead by now.”

“So you’re saying that this Mongolian arms trader may be trying to kidnap Sara?” Tears welled in Beth’s eyes, but once again, she fought them back.

“I m afraid that’s possible. Yes.”

I knew that I, too, wore a look of concern.

“I need to pay Sara a visit to check things out. I’ll book the earliest flight I can. In the meantime, see if you can raise her on video conferencing. Otherwise, texting will have to do.

“Our main message to her is not to worry, but to remain calm, cautious, and vigilant. Obviously, if she sees the man again, she should avoid contact. She should also surround herself with as many fellow students as possible until the man is gone. She must *never* be alone. In addition, please ask her to sleep in a friend’s room tonight.

“Oh yeah . . . tell her I’ll meet her at the caf at 8:00 tomorrow morning. I bet she’ll be thrilled with that.”

She likes to sleep in.

CHAPTER 13

Wednesday, May 6th, at the Ottawa County farm.

Farris had kept busy arranging the existing lab supplies and testing out equipment, gas lines and power circuits. Everything was checking out so far. Apparently, someone other than Urland and Brenda had built this setup. Probably John. The infidel had some uses after all.

About 4:00 in the afternoon, Farris heard a car coming up the drive. He looked out the door. It was John's Chevy. The car made a 'Y' turn on the gravel and backed toward the lab. John parked just outside the lab doorway, turned off the car, and popped the trunk.

As John unloaded additional lab supplies and brought them inside, Farris placed each item in its appropriate location in the lab. They repeated the routine with items stowed in the back seat. John was still missing a few of the more esoteric components and the argon. But for the most part, he had fulfilled Farris's order from this morning.

"I was wondering about this folding army cot and pillow," John said as he passed them along to Farris. "They don't look very scientific to the untrained observer."

"Well, ah, I will probably be keeping long, odd hours out here. Once the chemical reactions start, it is not as though I can just put them on hold and go take a nap in the house."

“Couldn’t stand any more face time with Frick and Frack?” John said. It was half question, half statement.

“If you say so,” Farris said, continuing to unpack the boxes. He had no desire for small talk.

At that moment, they heard the sound of a powerful diesel motor down on the public road. Both men stepped outside the lab and looked in the direction of the sound. The grinding of down-shifting gears and the intermittent revving of the diesel got louder, then changed direction – moving straight toward them.

Presently, a yellow semi-truck appeared, slowly making its way up the dirt drive. Blue smoke blasted from its vertical exhaust pipes. As the truck lumbered closer, they saw that, attached behind the truck, was an equally yellow trailer. The trailer looked like a coal tender – heavily reinforced metal sides with unloading shoots angling to the left along the bottom. Soon, they could make out Urland’s tobacco-stained grin behind the wheel.

Pulling the semi alongside the Chevy, Urland gave the truck’s horn one long blast.

John and Farris both cringed at the sound.

The driver’s window was down. Urland’s elbow rested proudly in the opening.

“How’d it go?” John yelled, over the diesel’s rumble.

Urland shut off the truck.

“Slicker than owl shit, if you’ll pardon my French. When that trucker saw Brenda with the hood up on the Buick, looking all helpless, he pulled right over to assist. Ha! A damsel in distress. She’s real good at that. All I had to do was ring his bell and we had ‘er.”

“I hope you didn’t kill him,” John said, a look of concern on his face.

“Nope. No need. I just gave him a rifle butt to the back of the head. Then I drug him off into the weeds. He’s gonna have a bad headache when he wakes up. But he’ll survive.”

“Sounds good,” John said. “Let’s take a look at your cargo.”

Urland was already out of the truck, strutting around like a peacock. Brenda was just coming up the drive in their blue Buick sedan.

John walked around to the back of the trailer.

He suspected there was a problem as soon as he smelled the ammonia. Farris smelled it, too. They looked at each other. Maybe the smell was left over from a prior load?

John procured the heavy metal crank from its clips on the side of the truck box and climbed the ladder until he could see over the trailer’s top. The ammonia smell was stronger here. Using the crank, he rolled the canvas trailer cover open.

“What the fuck!”

Urland stopped strutting and looked blankly at John. “What’s the matter?”

The Umbers had heisted a load of fertilizer all right. But it wasn’t potash. It was nitrogen. God knows what it was mixed with.

“Uh, Urland?” John said, as calmly as he could manage. “This isn’t the right stuff.”

“Whatta ya mean?” Urland asked. “It’s gotta be.”

“The bulk potash we get around here comes from Canada and it’s either orange or pink,” John said. “This stuff is white. And potash is the consistency of sand. This load is more like water softener crystals.”

Urland was totally deflated – like a boy who had just wrecked his bicycle.

“But this is the same stuff we used out west to make diesel fuel bombs. It worked real good for us.” Urland was whining and it

made John want to spit. Instead, he took a deep breath before speaking.

“Urland, we’re looking for something a little different here. Farris is going to cook the fertilizer up in the lab and we’ll get a real fancy explosion. This stuff you got today just won’t work for what we have in mind. We’re going to need to try for another truck tomorrow.”

Urland seemed to be getting over his disappointment. He was probably used to screwing up.

“Okay. You want pink, we’ll getcha pink.”

“And Urland . . . ,” John said. “Please. Next time . . . just get the potash. Don’t improvise.”

“Absolutely. Yessir!” Urland saluted.

John turned away from Urland and rolled his eyes. *If the Bobsy Twins don’t get it right this time, John thought, I’m going to have to do this myself, too. We can’t just steal a whole convoy of fertilizer trucks.*

Shit!

CHAPTER 14

Friday and Saturday, May 8th and 9th, between Minnesota and Sara's college.

The earliest flight I could catch out of Minneapolis/St. Paul International was at 10:15 that evening. I had booked a seat in first class. From ticketing to baggage claim (I had to check my gun and ammo), the flight took about four hours.

After collecting my luggage, I took the VIP lane to pick up the rental car. I had selected a red Ferrari F430 Spider convertible. Although I knew the Ferrari wasn't a great choice if I planned to inconspicuously tail another vehicle, I expected to acquire my target on campus. The college community was far too small for Gansükh to have an operations center there. So I wouldn't need to surreptitiously follow the mark to home base.

I tossed my overnight bag on the passenger seat, removed the gun and shoulder holster, slapped in a full clip, and strapped the .40 caliber Beretta under my light jacket. Once you get used to carrying a gun, you sort of feel naked without it. I felt better now that I had it on.

I set the navigation system for my destination and peeled out of the rental lot. The drive to Sara's college took another two and a half hours. When I arrived, with the time change, it was 2:45 a.m.

It was too early to do anything else, so I parked in the Visitors' lot, put the top up, reclined my seat as much as possible, and went to sleep.

Being able to sleep under adverse circumstances is a potent weapon. It can allow you to persist while your opposition falls victim to fatigue. I intended to employ all weapons at my disposal to neutralize Sara's stalker.

The night went quickly. When I awoke at 7:00, I had to massage a kink out of my sore neck. I was starting to feel my age. That sucked.

My face was grizzly and my clothes probably looked like I'd just slept in them. I couldn't see Gansükh moving on Sara in broad daylight. So I decided to freshen up before breakfast.

Locking the car behind me, I lugged my duffle down to the men's locker room at the Athletic Complex and made myself at home. I took a long, hot shower, shaved a dark growth of whiskers and brushed my teeth. I raised and lowered my eyebrows in the mirror. Checked out my clear brown eyes, straight nose, and strong jaw, and made sure my thick hair was properly organized. I tried winning smile for confidence. Well . . . good enough.

I was ready to go meet Sara.

The Student Center stood in the middle of the smallish campus. It was an uphill hike of about five minutes from the athletic facility. After ditching the duffle in the Jag, I made my way toward the Center and entered via the main door. A short walk up a wide flight of stairs and I was at the cafeteria level. By the time I had arrived outside the caf, it was 7:50 a.m.

I like being a few minutes early. Having extra time at your disposal can help you deal with unanticipated circumstances.

I took a seat in a soft chair outside the caf and watched and waited. A short time later, I checked my watch. It was 8:00 a.m. and nothing unusual had happened. As I looked up, I saw Sara and two

friends coming through the aluminum and glass front doors. Right on time. Great kid.

Sara is an elegantly athletic five foot nine, with straight blond hair, like her mother's, but a bit lighter.

When she saw me, I subtly waved her ahead into the cafeteria with her group of friends. She caught my motion and continued as if I weren't there. I waited behind to see if anyone was following. There were lots of college students, but no gun smuggling Mongolians.

Fifteen minutes later, having identified no one of interest, I strolled into the caf, scanning the tables for anyone matching Sara's description of the stalker. I saw no likely candidates.

Sara sat at a small table with three other co-eds. I approached them with a smile.

"Sara. There you are. I was afraid I'd missed you."

Sara stood up.

"Hi, Daddy." She gave me a hug and introduced me to her friends. I was cordial . . . charming, even . . . but in a fatherly way.

"Your mother sent a CARE package and I'd like to get it to your room before your classes start. May I steal you from your friends?"

"Sure. See you guys later!"

Sara collected her backpack and cafeteria tray and led me out. On the way, she placed her tray and dishes on a conveyor.

As we cleared the caf door, she tried to turn to me to speak. But I gently guided her near arm forward, keeping her moving until we were outside the building.

Once clear of the Student Center we stopped. I turned to her and asked, "Is there a good place for us to talk privately?"

"How about the Library?"

"Too quiet. And your room might be bugged."

Sara's eyes grew large and the corners of her mouth dropped. I wished I could take that one back.

"Probably not. Just being extra careful," I said, trying to look relaxed.

She thought a moment.

"How about a gym? There are usually basketball games, or dance classes, or both, going on in one gym or the other. The echoes make it almost impossible for anyone to eavesdrop."

"Sounds good. Let's just stroll down there. On our way, I want you to keep your eyes peeled for this guy you think might be following you."

We made our way across campus, along a winding pathway shaded by august oaks and elms, down the hill to the athletic complex. Once there, it was easy to find a noisy gymnasium in which we could privately visit.

The gym was much larger than the portion that was being used for the dance class. We staked out two folding chairs in a corner where no one cared, or even appeared to notice. Under the cover of big band swing tunes, we talked.

"Daddy. I know you wouldn't be here if you didn't think there might be some danger. I also know that if I *am* in danger, there's no one better in the world to watch out for me. I've been a little nervous since talking to Mom last night. I feel safer now that you're here."

Sara appeared genuinely reassured by my presence.

"That's good," I said, "because I promise that I will see to your absolute safety. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Daddy." Sara smiled. "You're the best."

"Okay. First off, I want to get a look at this man you think is following you."

Sara frowned.

“I don’t know how to do that.” Her voice revealed a hint of frustration. “I just see him around every once in a while.”

“If he’s watching you, he knows your routine, your class schedule, when you eat, where and when you study . . . that sort of thing,” I explained. “Then he stakes out places where he can discreetly observe your movements. I’ll follow you at a distance and watch for his hiding spots.”

I could tell the whole idea of someone stalking her, following her every move, felt uncomfortable and invasive to Sara. Who could blame her?

“But I don’t see him very often,” she protested. “It doesn’t seem like very good odds to find him quickly that way.”

Sara didn’t understand how surveillance works. I was glad she hadn’t needed to learn.

“The times you see him are his mistakes. When he’s doing his job correctly, you won’t notice him at all. Trust me. If there’s someone following you, I will find him this way . . . probably.”

She raised an eyebrow at the ‘probably,’ but knew I was most likely right. I did have experience in these sorts of things.

“Okay,” she agreed, a hint of relief in her voice. “I just do my usual thing and you watch out for me.”

“Yes. And now, you should make sure to walk alone, at least sometimes. Seeing you apparently vulnerable, might make him overconfident. He doesn’t want to harm you. He’s only interested in using you to get to me. If he tries anything, I will . . . ah . . . intervene. Got it?”

“Yessir.” She saluted.

We’d have to work on her salute some day.

Even though it was a Saturday, academic classes were in session. Sara’s first class that morning was Modern European History at 11:00 a.m. It was nine o’clock right now. She planned to

take a short nap in her room before class. As I mentioned, she likes to sleep in. Not a morning person.

We walked from the athletic complex straight back to her dorm, remaining separated from one another as we approached the building. She let herself inside with a key card. I walked up to the entryway about thirty seconds later, where a smiley co-ed on her way out of the dorm kindly held the otherwise-locked outside door open for me.

Great security!

I jogged up the stairs to the third floor, two steps at a time. Sara was waiting for me in the corridor. I remained on watch at the far end of the hall while Sara opened her dorm room door. She left it ajar, stepped in, then leaned back out and gave me a thumbs up.

Seeing that she was all set, I went back outside the dorm and found a suitable location from which to keep an eye on both dorm entrances/exits. I chose to recline on a grassy slope, pretending to read a student publication I had glommed onto in the dorm entryway.

Surveillance still felt natural.

For quite a while I saw nothing interesting. A steady stream of college students entered and departed the dorm. Most toted backpacks containing obviously heavy textbooks and laptop computers.

I continued watching, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Then at about 10:45, Sara exited the dorm. She looked around briefly, probably trying to see where I was.

Sorry, Dear. You won't be seeing me. Proper surveillance is one way only.

I waited a few moments more, watching for any suspicious characters in pursuit. No joy. So I stood up with my paper and

struck out after Sara. I could barely see her in front of me, but I knew where she was headed.

He would, too.

Sara had passed the Student Center and was nearing the history building when I spotted him. It was almost too easy. Mongolian features, white long-sleeved shirt, jeans, tennis shoes. He was lurking in an alcove of the Administration Building across the commons from Sara's classroom.

I stepped sideways behind the boughs of a convenient spruce and continued observing the stalker.

As soon as Sara disappeared into the history building, he left the alcove and headed my way. That was helpful. I was between him and his apparent destination.

When he passed my position, I followed. He wasn't expecting a tail and that made him easy to pursue. He continued away from the academic buildings and past the dorms. He was headed for his car.

It turned out to be a long walk. He had parked in an outlying lot, apparently to avoid attracting either unwanted attention, or campus parking tickets. The remote lot would be a great spot for us to get to know each other.

He approached, then unlocked, the driver's door of a green Hyundai. I stifled a chuckle. Gansükh had been reduced from international arms dealer to sub-compact status. I almost felt sorry for him.

As soon as the man opened the door and began to sit, I broke from my latest position in a row of bushes. I had about fifty feet of pavement to cover and arrived at the Hyundai just as the door was closing.

Before he knew what was happening, I had jerked the door open, leaned into the car, and acquired a firm grip on his throat with my left hand.

“Let’s get out and have a little talk,” I said coolly, just as he thrust the heel of his right hand up toward my nose.

I turned my head in time . . . barely . . . but he still caught me pretty hard in the left eye. And the hand to the face had distracted me enough for him to wriggle out of my throat grip.

He was tougher than he looked. Fortunately, so was I.

As I assessed my next move, he dove for the glove box on the passenger side of the dash. I knew he had a gun in there and I didn’t want to have to shoot him. He was just a flunky. I needed Gansükh himself. As he fumbled to open the compartment, I grabbed his belt, yanked him from the car, and flung him onto the asphalt.

He scrambled to a crouch, then tried sweeping my legs with one of his. He made contact, but I had braced myself for the impact and didn’t go down.

I waited for him to get to his feet. He tried a left-footed head kick, which I ducked, landing a firm right fist to his left kidney as he rotated.

He was down again, but not for long.

This time he popped to his feet, jabbing at me with a right. I deflected the punch. He followed with a left hook, which I ducked again, this time using my momentum to drive my left shoulder into his solar plexus.

Churning forward with my legs, I pinned him hard against the Dodge parked two spots over. He groaned. With my head still down, I gave him two quick jabs to the stomach, putting all my weight into them.

Then I backed away – my body poised in a defensive stance, boxing-style. He wasn’t coming any more. I watched as his back slid slowly down the side of the car until he sat on the dirty black pavement, a limp and dusty mess, struggling to catch his breath.

I reached down. Pulling him up by the front of his shirt, I turned him against the car and bent his right arm high between his shoulder blades. He groaned again.

I looked around. Apparently, no one had noticed our scuffle and this remote location seemed as good as any for our chat. With his right arm still pinned against his back, I escorted him into a sheltered area of evergreens, just off the lot and out of sight from everywhere but up.

“Like I said,” I repeated in his ear, “we need to talk.”

CHAPTER 15

Friday, May 8th, late evening at the Prairie River Nuclear Power Plant.

Acetylene torches generate such extreme heat that many metals, including many grades of steel, turn to liquid when the torch is applied. The result is commonly referred to as ‘cutting,’ though ‘melting’ is a more accurate description.

John’s project at the nuclear plant this evening was a cutting job, requested not by his employer, but by his conspiratorial superiors. He pulled the two-wheeled torch cart out of the storage shed and across the concrete pad to the pump house. Opening the door to the metal building, he turned on the interior light and wheeled the cart in behind him. The door swung shut with a clank.

This building held a three dimensional maze of pipes, junctions, pumps, connections, and valves of various types and sizes. Each had a specific purpose. John knew them all.

He moved directly to the valve he would be adjusting tonight. This particular valve controlled the flow in a twelve-inch-diameter water line. John knew why this line was important. It should definitely be properly maintained.

Although there was no water flowing in the line at present, John needed to close this valve before working on it. He knew that if he closed the valve without taking preventive measures, he would

set off an alarm in the Plant Operator's control room. Since he didn't want to trigger any bells or buzzers, he bypassed the remote monitoring system with a short length of wire. With this adjustment in place, the valve would always register as 'open' in the control room, whether it was, in fact, open or not. Now he could proceed with his work without interruption.

Frequently, maintenance of a valve requires removal of its bonnet, the metal housing that holds the valve's parts together. John used a large socket wrench to remove the one inch nuts that joined the bonnet's two sections, then lifted the top of the bonnet from its seat. He would repaint the nuts and bolts when he was done, leaving no evidence of his activities.

Using a fair amount of effort, and steeling himself against the cancer pain that stabbed through his gut, John rotated the two foot diameter wheel at the end of the valve stem clockwise until it wouldn't turn any more. Now this valve was fully closed.

Next he opened the tank valves on his cart – first the oxygen, then the acetylene, which had a left-handed thread to assure that welders wouldn't open this cylinder of highly explosive gas by mistake. He pulled the gas flow trigger on the cutting torch, simultaneously squeezing a hand striker to create a spark. One scratch across the striker was all it took and the torch was lit.

A throaty hiss emanated from the lit torch head – like air jetting from a compressor. John made fine adjustments to the gas flow to assure an optimum combustion mixture. For a moment he looked back and forth between the torch and the water valve.

This project would be evilly satisfying.

Flipping down his shaded welder's mask, he set to work.

CHAPTER 16

Saturday, May 9th, at Sara's college.

Having acquired the location of Gansükh's present hideout from his assistant, I dragged the Mongolian flunky back to his Hyundai.

Damn! No trunk. So much for a nice tidy package.

By this time, the Mongolian was totally passive, having perceived the benefits of submission. I encouraged him to take the Hyundai's driver's seat. Using several sturdy plastic zip ties, I secured his arms around the steering column, then fastened his feet to the brake pedal in similar fashion.

With his arms and legs immobilized, I rolled up his right sleeve to confirm what I already knew. There it was: 'O-B-G' in Cyrillic lettering, together with the clan's sword-and-snake tat. Sara had described it perfectly. Smart kid!

I was quite practiced at using plastic ties for binding captives, but just to be extra sure, I jogged back to the Ferrari and acquired a smallish cloth bag from my luggage. Then I returned to the Hyundai.

Using substantial lengths of grey duct tape, I further secured the Mongolian's hands and legs. With the remainder of the tape, I circled his head and mouth . . . twice. By the time I had finished, he

looked like a handyman had wrapped him for mailing via parcel post. Finally, I removed the Mongolian's gun from the glove box and stuffed it in my belt.

Now I had to make sure the authorities would handle this package properly. I closed and locked the car doors, then using a bold marker, which I had brought with me, and a couple sections of the campus press, which were still folded in my pocket, I made two signs:

DANGER! INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE!

STAY AWAY!

CALL INTERPOL AT

[I gave the number.]

I affixed one sign to each side window.

I was pretty sure Interpol would have a file on this guy. But without some prompting, I couldn't trust the local FBI to find that information before they let him go.

I waved bye-bye to the Mongolian.

No response.

Returning to the Spider, I dropped the top. Comfortably seated in the Ferrari's driver's seat, I needed to make a few telephone calls. I called Beth first, just to give her a status report and ease her mind. After telling Beth the whole story, I asked her to contact Sara to let her know I had solved the problem and that she was safe. I would give Sara more details later.

I had other work to finish here, but I also wanted to get back to Red Wing to continue working the potassium puzzle. The right government authorities could help me out with the Mongolians.

Using a disposable phone, my next call was to the FBI's main office on Pennsylvania Avenue in D.C. It was the private line of Daniel Trew. Dan had one of the longest official titles of anyone I had ever met – 'Executive Assistant Director for National Security

Branch/Associate Executive Assistant Director for National Security Branch, Counter-Terrorism Division.’ I knew Dan from a case in which we had both been involved a few years back, when he was just a ‘Special Agent.’ He wasn’t really an agent at all anymore, but I trusted him, and that meant everything.

He answered his telephone, “Executive Assistant Director Trew.”

“Dan,” I said. “I can’t say who this is. But you probably remember my voice from the ops team in the Bolivar drug bust about ten years ago.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Say: ‘On the ground, Shithead, or you’re dead meat,’ with authority.”

I obliged.

“I’ll be damned! How’re you doing? Never mind. I bet you didn’t call just to catch up, especially since you can’t even give me your name. What’s up?”

I told Dan about the Mongolian guy strapped to the Hyundai in the college parking lot. I told him about the tattoo and the arms dealer connection. I told him the Hyundai guy was dangerous and might still be armed. And I asked if Dan would personally see that this fellow was properly arrested and checked out for international wants, warrants, or alerts.

“There should be plenty,” I said.

“I’ll make sure the gentleman receives appropriate attention. I know the counter-terrorism SAC in the local office out there. I’ll talk to him right away. He’ll do a good job.

“What about Gansükh himself? You got anything on him?”

“Nothing concrete,” I lied. I hated lying to Dan, but he didn’t want to hear my plans for Gansükh. “I’ll let you know if I get anything more. Thanks, Dan.”

“No problem. Be good.”

“Yeah, Dan . . . like always.”

“Right.”

With the Hyundai Mongolian situation covered, I still needed to take care of Gansükh before he heard about the fate of his operative and fled the country. I couldn't take any chances that Gansükh might escape, or even be arrested and then weasel out on some legal technicality. If that happened, my family would be in danger once again.

To ensure that Gansükh didn't evaporate, I called my best contact at the CIA and told him Gansükh's exact location, as extracted from the Hyundai guy. Another favor. He would have some of his people keep an eye on Gansükh for now and leak his whereabouts to the Kenyan rebels and the Ukrainian Secret Service.

After receiving assurances that the CIA would babysit him until his business partners arrived, I was pretty confident I wouldn't be hearing from Gansükh again. My CIA contact would let me know later, just to confirm.

I was troubled that I had no idea how Gansükh had found Sara. I wouldn't rest easy until I had figured that one out.

With the Mongolian job completed in record time, and no flights home until evening, I called Sara's cell from my disposable. Maybe we could go out for dinner before I had to leave.

I was lucky enough to catch her at a time when she could answer.

“Hey, Sara. It's Dad.”

“Hi, Daddy. Mom called and told me that you have 'abolished' the bad guy and all is well with the world.”

I laughed. “That's pretty much true. But I'd like to visit with you before I leave. Any chance we could do an early dinner?”

“Sure. Let’s go downtown to The Dregs. They have the best burgers in town. Can you meet me at my dorm at 5:00?”

“Sure thing. Love you.”

“I love you, too, Daddy. And thanks for everything.”

“No sweat. See you soon.”

* * *

I picked Sara up promptly at five. She was standing in front of her dorm as I arrived in the Ferrari.

“Nice ride,” she commented as she hopped into the passenger seat. “Having a midlife crisis, are we?”

“Ouch,” I said, and headed for the restaurant.

The burgers were all that Sara had promised. But I wasn’t there for the food.

“Sara, Honey. What your Mom told you is true. I located your stalker and have made sure that he will cause you no further consternation.”

“Thanks again, Daddy.”

“But Sara, just because I got rid of this goon, that doesn’t mean we’re completely in the clear.”

Sara listened calmly, showing no undue anxiety.

“I don’t know how this guy found out about me, or you, or where you go to school. So that concerns me a little and I must ask that you raise your alert level a tiny bit – just in case the leak hasn’t been completely plugged.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Sara remained composed.

“I’m pretty sure I get it. You’ve done away with the current threat., but you want me to be a little extra careful until you can find out why it happened in the first place.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Can you do that for me?”

“Of course, Daddy. I’m not worried anymore. But I will, as you always say, ‘remain vigilant’ in case of unanticipated developments.”

“Great.”

We finished off our burgers and fries. It was time for me to head back to the airport to catch my return flight.

When I dropped Sara off in front of her dorm, we both got out of the car. I walked over to her side and we gave each other big hugs.

“Love you lots,” I said softly into her ear.

“Right back atcha,” she said into mine.

I departed for home.

CHAPTER 17

Saturday, May 9th, at the rural Ottawa County farm.

A couple days after their first truck-jacking, Urland and Brenda had better luck. They delivered a truck filled with potash to the farm. (Under John's instructions, they had parked the first truck, the yellow one, out of sight, up a winding field road, between the trees. It was well hidden, even from the air.) Urland pulled the new truck forward until the potash hopper doors were alongside the large, empty lean-to.

The three co-conspirators, Urland, Brenda and Farris, stumbled over each other trying to construct a potash feeding system to transfer the load from the truck-trailer into three sections of the concrete-floored structure – the three sections farthest from the lab.

The result was utter failure.

Fortunately, when John arrived on the scene, he made short work of the project, designing and installing a more efficient feeding system than any of the other three had thought possible.

After solving the potash unloading dilemma, the splinter cell had no further need for John at the farm, so he left to attend to errands elsewhere.

With John's potash feeder in place, Farris and the Umbers made fast work of transferring the pink sand from truck to lean-to. The potash now lay in three separate piles inside three of the lean-to's four bays.

Farris instructed Urand to hide this truck next to the yellow one. Urand complied.

Now, Farris needed to get Urand and Brenda out of his hair. He informed the infidels that, from here on, the advanced chemistry he would be undertaking was very delicate. He could not use their help in or about the lab. Furthermore, their mere presence inside the lab risked contamination of both the chemical processes and themselves.

Urand and Brenda seemed convinced of Farris's sincere concern. As for Farris, separation from the Umbers would make his work, and his life, immeasurably easier.

When the Umbers departed for the house, Farris knew his first order of business was to test the potash to see exactly what he had. Not all potash is the same.

Based on his test results, Farris knew that the predominant ingredient in this potash was potassium chloride. Other compounds he needed to eliminate before processing the potassium were: an iron compound, a fair amount of sodium nitrate, and some lime. He knew how to remove all of these impurities.

Employing the four burner grill in the smaller lean-to as his mass production facility, he set about doing so on a wholesale basis. Using shovels and pots instead of lab spoons and flasks, he attacked the huge mounds of pink sand. He intended to purify as much of the truckload of potash as possible.

This would take a while. But he had learned patience long ago, at the *Madrassa*. Hadn't he already lived among his enemies for more than three years without being allowed to fight?

With resolve and determination born of religious zeal, he set about this first major task.

CHAPTER 18

Around noon, Tuesday, May 12th, at Red Wing.

Ever since hearing of the murderer's Arab connection and the international call, I hadn't been able to get terrorism off my mind. I'd spent most of my life thwarting terrorists. I anticipated a terrorist around every corner and in every situation. Maybe I had developed terrorist paranoia. Then again, sometimes a little paranoia can be a good thing.

I needed to gain some perspective. Sitting outside the office in the Pilot, I pushed a button on my cell. I was calling my friend, Terry Red Feather, aka 'Bull.'

The phone rang twice. Then Bull's voice came out of my earpiece.

"Yeah?"

"You have won a free lunch for one at Fiesta Mexicana – casual dining in an authentic Mexican atmosphere. This offer is good for the next half hour. You may redeem by meeting me there within that time."

"Important?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"Okay," Bull said.

Click. No need for niceties.

I don't remember when I first heard Terry called Bull. But the name fit his six-foot-four, 235 pound muscular frame, and his tendency toward stubbornness as well. So I adopted the nickname and had called him by it ever since – probably more than four years now. He didn't seem to mind.

Bull is a full-blooded Mdewakanton Dakota American Indian. Born on the local Prairie River Reservation, he left his home and family at the age of sixteen to join the army.

At the time, he was required to be at least eighteen to enlist, but documentation of his birth on the reservation was nonexistent. And he was big enough and strong enough, so the army was pleased to have his assistance.

After he left the Rez to 'be all that he could be,' Bull's family and friends heard nothing from him for more than twenty years. Based on Terry's behavior as a teen, they assumed he had been killed in a knife fight at some bar.

Then one day about eight years ago, he had shown up on the doorstep of his parents' home on the Rez. By the time of his return, he had become the imposing figure I had come to know.

Bull never told anyone where he had been for twenty years. After a few altercations, folks quit asking. Based on his military knowledge and the way he carried himself, I'd formed my own conclusions. I might ask him for details some day – probably not soon.

Bull didn't live on the reservation. He owned a recently built, log-style house on a Wisconsin bluff overlooking the Mississippi river valley, together with forty acres of wooded land to spare. A modern day Native.

I drove to the restaurant. It took two minutes – traffic was horrific.

I got us a booth near the back and ordered two Coronas, *con limón*.

As luck would have it, Bull was in downtown Red Wing when he got my call. I had barely settled into the booth when he appeared around the corner of the restaurant entryway. His massive frame hiked down the aisle between tables toward where I sat – his long black hair somehow blowing in the breeze. I pulled the table closer to my side of the booth to make room. Bull sat down across from me just as the beers arrived.

Speaking in Spanish, I told the waitress that we would need a few minutes before ordering. She nodded and left.

Neither of us said anything at first. I squeezed the lime wedge into my Corona and took a pull, taking care to let the lime float out of the way so the clear yellow beer could flow freely. Silence was comfortable with Bull. There was never a need to speak unless you had something to say.

“Well. Other than tacos, why am I here?” Bull asked presently, following the question with a swallow of Corona.

I leaned over the table and spoke quietly. “I think I’m seeing terrorist ghosts.”

“Huh?”

“Here’s the deal. I’ve spent so much of my life chasing terrorists, I think I’m seeing terrorists behind every mystery, even when they may not be there. Does that ever happen to you? Even after all these years?”

“ ‘Course. Terrorists ‘til proven otherwise.”

He took another pull on his Corona, then rotated the bottle on the table a few revolutions.

“You didn’t drag me down here to shoot the crap about the old days. And you sure as hell aren’t looking for any bullshit psychology from *me*. What’s buggin’ you?”

I thought for a moment.

“Do you remember the floater they found on the river a few days ago?”

“Dumb question.”

“Yeah. Well, it turns out the killer is from Saudi Arabia. He was a graduate assistant agronomist at the U of M Ag Lab where the guy was killed. And the cops have looked, but they can’t locate him.”

“Nothing new there.” Bull finished his Corona and waved two fingers at the waitress. *Dos mas.*

“Cops almost never find the doer, ‘cept if it’s the spouse or the lover. Hell, you know that. Kid’s probably in Mexico by now.”

“Another interesting tidbit,” I continued. “There was an international cell call made to Germany, on a throw-away phone, from the vicinity of the Lab, at the same time as the professor’s murder.”

“Hmmm.”

“And one other thing I think might be important. The cops have found no motive, but . . . a novel piece of chemistry equipment the professor had invented disappeared from the Lab the night he died. According to the Lab Administrator, this invention is unique and highly sophisticated. He told me what the apparatus is for, that is, what it does. But he also assured me that it didn’t have any military or terrorist applications.”

I paused.

“So why am I still feeling a terrorist in my gut?”

Bull considered what I had just told him.

“The international call is weird. How many of those d’ya ‘spose get made in the middle of the night from the Ottawa County boondocks – ‘specially from a dime store phone? And the missing lab gadget is interesting. What’s it s’posed to do?”

“It makes elemental potassium metal.”

Bull raised an eyebrow as he finished off the Corona.

“Huh. That is something new. Elemental potassium. Tricky stuff. But I gotta go along with the Lab guy. Doesn’t sound like a weapon of mass destruction.

“Would make one hell of an explosion in the river, though,” Bull went on, thinking out loud. “Reacts with water like a sonofabitch. But you’d have to get the stuff to the target without it blowin’ up in your face. Not easy to transport. Reacts with water in the air, too. Way too unstable to be used as an explosive in any traditional sense.”

I couldn’t remember ever having heard Bull speak so many words consecutively. He usually said little. His interest confirmed that my suspicions weren’t entirely baseless.

“And yet . . . my gut,” I said, as two new Coronas arrived to replace the empties.

We ordered our food. I had *Dos Enchiladas Verdes*. Bull had the *Mole Burrito*. The waitress left to fill our orders.

More silence.

I respected Bull’s opinion in the area of explosives. I knew no one with more knowledge of things that blow up. Bull claimed he’d worked with everything from crude ammonia/diesel bombs, to C4 plastique, to specialty pyrotechnic ordnance. He knew his bombs.

“Cell call to Germany,” Bull said, mostly to himself, shaking his head as he held the second Corona in both hands.

The waitress brought our food. After she left, I restarted the dialogue.

“Okay. Let’s look at this from another angle. If you were a terrorist stationed in Minnesota, and you could pick any target at all, what would you choose?”

Bull washed some burrito down with a swallow of Corona. “Easy. One of the nuke plants – Prairie River or Canton.”

“I was thinking the same thing. And one of those nukes is just a stone’s throw from Red Wing – and from the University Lab.”

Bull thought some more.

I waited.

Bull finished off his lunch before speaking.

“Those plants have pretty heavy security. No idea what weapons are inside that fence.”

Bull thought some more. I waited again.

“‘Course, you might be able to crash a private plane into one of the reactor towers. But they’re built like a brick shit-house. Plane would squash like a bug on a windshield. And no way *Al Qaeda* is gonna get another commercial plane close enough. New rules of engagement since 9/11.”

I nodded my agreement with Bull, but I persisted. “Every target has a soft spot somewhere. If I were going to attack a nuke plant, I’d find it. It might be a challenge without inside information. But there could be an insider.”

“Could be,” Bull conceded. “And that cell call *is* unusual. But you’ve got a lot of question marks.”

“Bull, I need to find out more about the Prairie River Power Plant. It’s right here in Ottawa County. And it’s also the larger of the two nukes. Any ideas?”

“Got some contacts on the Rez. Can maybe find out some that way. But you’re never gonna know nothin’ for sure.”

“Okay. That’ll be my problem to deal with,” I said.

Bull raised his Corona in a toast in my direction. “Good luck with that.” He drained the bottle.

CHAPTER 19

Still Tuesday, May 12th, in Red Wing.

After having lunch with Bull, I told Gunner about my theory that terrorists were planning an attack on the Prairie River Nuclear Power Plant. To put it tactfully, he was skeptical.

I had to admit that hard evidence was scarce. Nevertheless, he did do me the favor of connecting me with Dana Winston, a chemist at the plant. Dr. Winston agreed to meet me for a beer at the Hog and Jowl after her shift ended at 3:30 that afternoon.

The Hog is a Midwestern imitation of a British pub. Lots of dark wood and dim lights. At the appointed time for our meeting, I was seated at the bar, a pint schooner of Bass Ale in front of me.

As I waited, I leaned one elbow on the bar and checked out the terrain. Burgers and steaks sizzled on a metal grill in the back corner. Booths and chairs were tightly upholstered in imitation red leather with rows of brass rivets around the edges. The atmosphere was discreet and comfortable. Even at four in the afternoon, couples groped one another over small round tables in the corners.

I inhaled. The smoky aromas from the sandwiches toasting on the grill completed the ambience.

At five after four the outside door opened, slashing a shaft of light across the smoky room. After the door swung shut, I saw a well

dressed, middle-aged woman standing in the doorway, her eyelids batting at the change in illumination.

I had told Dana I would be at the bar. I turned halfway on my bar stool and gave a subtle wave, the heel of my hand resting on my thigh. Responding to the gesture, the woman headed my way.

I stood.

“James Becker,” I said, offering my hand to Dr. Winston. “Please call me Beck.”

“Dana Winston. And Dana is fine with me.”

After the introductions, the barkeep drew us a couple fresh ales and we sat at a table for four, as distant from other patrons as practical. Neither of us wanted to broadcast the discussion we were about to have.

After we had settled in, Dana spoke first.

“So Deputy Gunderson says you need information about the nuke plant. Obviously, there are limits to what I can tell you. We – that is, the utility company folks – like to keep information about the nukes as close to the vest as possible.”

I decided to play the attorney confidentiality card.

“Dana,” I said. “I am a lawyer and I can assure you that I fully understand the meaning of confidentiality. No one will hear from me any hint of the topics we discuss today.”

Dana had been sitting primly on her chair – back straight, with her hands in her lap. Now she allowed herself to relax into the backrest.

“Okay. So how can I help?” She picked up her schooner smoothly and sipped the ale.

“Let’s start with the basics. Tell me about the plant in general. Give me Nuclear Power Plant 101.”

“Okay.” She replaced her glass on its cocktail napkin. “Let me think a minute.”

I tipped my schooner, enjoying a swallow of the cold Bass, then dabbed the foam off my upper lip with an extra cocktail napkin. While I waited for Dana to organize her thoughts, I watched the bubbles rising in lines inside my glass. Like my terrorist paranoia, they seemed to emanate from nowhere.

“Okay. Let’s start with electric power in general.

“The vast majority of electric power in the U.S. is made with steam. Nearly all electric plants use fuel of one type or another to boil water and make steam.

“The boiling water expands as it becomes a gas. The expansion creates tremendous pressure and forces the steam through a turbine – basically a series of fan blades mounted on a steel shaft – which rotates as the steam forces past the blades. After exiting the turbine, the water cools to its liquid state and is recycled through the boiling process.”

“Got it,” I said. “Water turning to steam spins the turbine. Then the steam is cooled again, like going through a car radiator, and continues through this boil and condense cycle indefinitely.”

“Very good. Now . . . connected to one end of the turbine is a generator. The generator is a device that converts the mechanical energy present in the rotating turbine – the spinning fan shaft – into electrical energy. The generator transmits the electricity through various circuits to substations which meld it with the electricity already in the power transmission lines – the grid.”

I nodded my understanding.

“The main difference between types of electric generating stations is the kind of fuel used to turn the water into steam. Gas plants use methane. Coal plants use mixtures of coal ore. Nuclear plants use uranium, though as soon as the reaction begins, plutonium is also present, and that also ‘burns.’ Obviously, each type of plant needs to burn its fuel in a different way.”

Dana hadn't actually told me anything that I hadn't known for twenty years. But she was being thorough and I appreciated that.

I have always endorsed the theory that a sound understanding of the fundamentals leads to better execution of more advanced skills. That theory applies equally whether you're involved in the military, academics, sports, business . . . just about anything.

Preparedness is next to godliness. Cleanliness isn't actually next to anything.

I let her continue.

"For coal and gas, you light what amounts to a huge barbecue grill and surround it with water pipes. The fire heats the water in the pipes to make the steam. In the case of nuclear fuel, the uranium actually burns itself. So you don't need to light it.

"By the time the nuclear fuel arrives at electric power plants, the uranium pellets have already been formed into rods and coated with a zirconium alloy. The zirconium is strong and reacts very little with the uranium, so it makes the fuel easier to move around. The fuel rods are typically about thirteen feet long and a centimeter or so in diameter. Long and thin.

"Fuel rods are bundled together in rectangular metal frames to give them structure and stability. A bundle might typically contain around 150 to 200 fuel rods. Collectively these framed bundles are called 'fuel assemblies.' A nuclear reactor in an electric plant might have up to 200 of these fuel assemblies in its reactor vessel at any given time."

"Just a moment, please." Now I was learning new stuff and I wanted to get it right. "What is a reactor vessel?"

"The reactor vessel is the oven of the reactor. The fuel assemblies are precisely racked in this oven space to produce maximum heat, with minimum risk that the nuclear reaction will get out of control.

“More terminology here,” Dana continued. “Once placed in the reactor vessel, the collection of fuel assemblies is called the ‘reactor core.’ Normally the reactor core will be suspended in the center of a radioactively insulated space. The core will also have control rods strategically placed to interrupt the nuclear reaction if it needs to be reduced or shut down – like for repair or to adjust power output.”

“I’m sorry. I need to stop you again. How do the control rods affect the nuclear reaction? I understand that they shut the reaction down, but how do they do that?”

Dana thought for a moment. I had another swallow of Bass.

“To answer that question, I need to first explain how nuclear fuel burns. You see, the uranium in the fuel assemblies is inherently unstable and is constantly releasing neutron particles into its surroundings. In the reactor core, the freed neutrons slam into uranium atoms in other fuel assemblies. Every time a neutron-uranium collision occurs, another uranium atom splits, releasing more neutrons, and so on. Every collision releases heat.

“As long as there are unstable atoms like uranium and plutonium in the area, the reaction is self-sustaining. To control the intensity of the reaction, ‘control rods’ are inserted between the fuel assemblies.”

“What are these control rods made of and how do they work?” I asked.

“Control rods are typically encased in stainless steel and contain obscure elements, like gadolinium or hafnium, that will withstand bombardment by the neutrons without fissioning – that is, splitting apart. As the control rods intercept and absorb free-flying neutrons in the core, the reactor cools. The farther the rods are inserted, the more neutrons they absorb, and the cooler the reactor becomes.”

“Okay. I think I understand the basic idea. We may have to come back to this for more details later. Okay?”

“Sure.” She sipped her ale. After wiping excess condensation from the table with an already soggy cocktail napkin, she replaced her drink in the semi-dry spot.

“How are the reactor vessels protected from sabotage?” I asked. “What keeps someone from bombing them or flying a plane into them or something?”

“Well,” Dana continued, “the reactor core is totally enclosed within a theoretically bomb proof containment structure. Many feet of steel-reinforced concrete. More steel. Then more concrete, etc. And no one is allowed in or out of containment except to conduct repairs or to refuel the reactor.”

“You said ‘theoretically bomb proof.’ Only ‘theoretically’?”

“The engineers and the physicists are pretty sure . . . very sure actually . . . that the containment structures can survive conventional explosives, or even an airliner crash. But of course, no one has actually flown a commercial airplane into a containment structure. So their imperviousness remains theoretical.

“I don’t mean to imply that the structures are unsafe or anything. From all the data I’ve seen, the reactor containment towers seem pretty impregnable.”

“Okay. Got it. What happens to the uranium fuel when it’s been burned up, for lack of a better term?”

“About every year-and-a-half, when the nuclear fuel is ‘spent,’ the reactor must be refueled. Usually about a third of the oldest fuel assemblies are removed from the reactor core and replaced by fresh fuel.

“Although the fuel that has been removed is considered ‘spent,’ it remains highly radioactive and the nuclear reaction still needs to be controlled. For this reason, the spent fuel assemblies are placed in a pool and surrounded by circulating water infused with boric acid – the ‘spent fuel pool.’

“The circulating borinated water is a closed loop. The water in the pool absorbs heat from the nuclear fuel, then dissipates it through a heat exchanger, like the car radiator you mentioned before. A continuous supply of river water provides the coolant.

“The spent assemblies remain in the pool until the utility gets government authorization to move them elsewhere. That was supposed to be Yucca Mountain. But there is no permanent storage site for spent fuel at present.”

“Can regular water without boron be used to fill the pool?”

“If ordinary distilled water were the only coolant in the pool, you could keep the fuel cool, as long as the water kept circulating through the heat exchanger, but there would be little margin for error. The boron is the real ‘control rod’ in the pool.

“Boron absorbs the flying neutrons. Plain water wouldn’t slow the nuclear reaction, just carry the heat away. If the water stopped flowing for even a few hours, the pool could boil dry.”

That was interesting.

“So what happens when the spent fuel pool gets full and there’s no more room for fuel assemblies?” I was catching on to the terminology.

“If the spent fuel pool is full, the reactor must be shut down and decommissioned. We were close to that at Prairie River a few years ago. The spent fuel pool at the plant was nearly full. Fortunately, the NRC, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, allowed us to re-rack the fuel assemblies in the pool – basically, packing the fuel closer together.

“Re-racking helped for a while. But you can store the fuel assemblies just so close to one another without risking overheating. If they’re too near each other, there isn’t enough boric acid between them to absorb the flying neutrons.

“A few years after re-racking, the pool was almost full again. At that time, the utility again received permission from the NRC, and the State of Minnesota, to store some of the coolest, least radioactive, fuel assemblies in ‘dry casks’ outside the plant. The dry casks each contain a couple dozen fuel assemblies in a stainless steel container. Every container is encased in tons of concrete.

“The concrete casings of the casks provide nuclear insulation, preventing radioactivity from leaking into the outside world. The older fuel assemblies in the casks are sufficiently inactive that they no longer require water to keep them cool. Simply radiating heat through the concrete shell into the air provides adequate cooling.

“The spent fuel just sits there in these casks on a concrete pad near the plant – waiting for the government to determine a final storage destination.”

“Is there any way the casks could blow up?” I didn’t think so – but I wanted to be sure.

“It is impossible for a dry cask to explode. The nuclear reaction inside the cask has slowed to such a degree that it is, to the extent possible, constantly exploding. The neutrons are interacting with fissionable atoms as rapidly as the depleted fuel will allow. Nothing can make these spent fuel assemblies react more violently.”

I had already done some dry cask research. I knew the casks were huge and massive – typically about twenty feet tall, ten or eleven feet in diameter and weighed in excess of 150 tons each. They couldn’t be stolen, and it would be very difficult to even break one open.

“What secures the spent fuel pool from sabotage?”

Dana looked at me for a long time without responding. “I’d prefer not to say more about the pool beyond what I’ve already told you.”

What she declined to say spoke volumes. I may have found the soft spot I was looking for.

“Just one more question . . . and you don’t have to answer if you’re uncomfortable.”

“Go ahead.”

“What would happen if the water in the spent fuel pool stopped circulating?”

“That’s no secret. The water would eventually boil away and bad things would be the result. But there are backup systems in place to prevent the water flow from being interrupted. And there are backup tanks of both distilled water and boric acid, as well.”

“What kind of bad things?” I asked.

“No one can say exactly. That precise scenario has never occurred. Some scientists theorize that the fuel assemblies could get so hot that they would ignite their zirconium alloy coatings, creating a zirconium fire. That would be one tough fire to put out. Zirconium burns at about 1000 degrees Celsius.”

“Other than fire control, why is burning zirconium a concern? Is it radioactive?”

“It’s not so much the fire that’s the problem – though that would certainly be a localized danger. It’s the lethal elements the fire would release that create the larger concern. Along with the uranium and plutonium, the fuel rods contain at least two other toxic elements in substantial quantities. One is iodine. The second is cesium 137 – a highly radioactive gas.

“Some scientists theorize that, while the fire burns, it would expel large amounts of iodine and cesium 137 into the atmosphere, creating a deadly plume which would expand and travel with the prevailing winds.”

“Exactly how bad would that be?” I asked, fearing that I knew the answer.

“Let me put it this way. In 1986, the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant meltdown resulted in the release of a *maximum* of 2.4 million

curies of cesium 137 into the air. That cesium was still present in the atmosphere at measurable levels over Scandinavia – after circling the globe.

“A typical spent fuel pool in the U.S. today might contain anywhere from 20 million to 40 million curies of cesium 137. The NRC has estimated, in a paper released to the public, that a zirconium fire could release up to 100% of that cesium. You do the math.

“I’m afraid that’s all I care to say about the pools, Mr. Becker. Are there other questions I can answer?”

“Yes. Just one. How comfortable are you living within six miles of a nuclear power plant?”

“Completely comfortable. Safest, most cost effective and environmentally friendly method of electrical production ever invented.”

“Thank you so much for your time, Dana. I’ll make sure to keep this discussion between us.”

We both stood.

“I’d appreciate that,” Dana said. “Have a nice evening.”

Nice evening, indeed.

Dana Winston had certainly given me some interesting questions to think about. But just because the consequences of a nuclear plant attack would be horrific, that didn’t mean a plot to assault the plant was in progress. Those same potential consequences had been present for decades – since the inception of the nuclear age. No terrorist had yet successfully attacked a nuke.

Gunner was probably right anyway. There was no reason to suspect terrorism. As gruesome as it was, the murder at the Lab seemed merely a murder. It wasn’t unusual for a killer’s motive to be unknown. And several experts had already counseled me that the professor’s work, and his potassium machine, did not constitute a terrorist threat. Even if an attack on the spent fuel pool *might* be possible, that did not mean plans for such an attack were underway.

Then again, in the midst of the investigation, the Mongolians had coincidentally reappeared in my life. I have never been a believer in coincidences. And there was still the missing lab device to be considered.

I needed a break. A dinner with my lovely wife.

I was still at the Hog and it was just before five in the afternoon when I called Beth on her cell. She answered the call with exaggerated heavy breathing, stalker style.

“Umm,” I said, “I think that’s supposed to be my line.”

“With caller ID, it works both ways. Catch up with the times, Babe.”

“I am calling to request the pleasure of your presence at a dinner for two this evening at The Norton’s. Fine wine. Gourmet food. Sparkling repartee. And did I mention, fiendishly sinful chocolate dessert?”

“Sounds irresistible. How about 7:30? I’m doing research at the Clothes Horse right now. They’re about to close up shop for the day. Then I need to go home, shower and apply a few breathtaking touches to my appearance before dinner.”

“7:30 it is.”

This time for eating dinner would have once sounded foolishly early. But in a community where most diners hit the restaurants in time for the ‘early bird special,’ seven-thirty is just about perfect. Any later and you risk being trapped inside the restaurant when they roll up the sidewalks.

I had a little time to kill. It wouldn’t take me quite as long as Beth to morph into my dinner persona. A final Bass seemed a reasonable idea. I caught the bartender’s attention with a raised finger. He brought the ale and a fresh cocktail napkin to my table.

Staring down at the frothy schooner, I resolved to put all thoughts of guerilla warfare, terrorist plots and world domination

aside for now. I sealed the resolution with a cool swallow of the Bass, dabbing the foam off my upper lip. A new man.

I nursed the ale in a state of self-hypnosis for the next half-hour, then walked home – six blocks. Small town living has its perks.

When I arrived at the house, Beth was busy trying on various top and bottom combinations, seeking the right *je ne sais quoi*.

I tried to be supportive.

“That looks terrific,” I said.

“I don’t know. The jacket isn’t quite right with the skirt.”

“Now, I really like that choice,” I said.

“I think I might like the last combination better.”

There really was no helping Beth pick out clothes. So while she persisted in her search for the perfect outfit, I showered, shaved, and donned my grey slacks, white oxford shirt, and navy blazer. A grey and navy tie with red accents, a splash of cologne, and my signature oxblood penny loafers completed the look.

I know the loafers aren’t exactly high fashion, but I’ve had my fill of lacing and tying over the last couple decades. I like slip-ons. These loafers look nice – fantastic, even.

It was 6:30 and I was set. Beth had selected her attire, at least preliminarily. While she showered, I went downstairs, picked up the local paper and lounged on the red leather couch, feet up on the old wooden bass drum case that served as our coffee table.

It wouldn’t take long to read the paper. It usually contained twelve pages or less. So I took my time. I read every article and even some of the Classifieds.

One day a month, anyone could post a short classified add for free. Today was the day.

“Lawn mower for sale. Used to run great. \$20 obo.” *I used to run the hurdles.*

“Slightly used queen mattress set. \$10.” *Yuck!*

“Three cross country skis with poles. Make an offer.” *Hmmm?*

I scanned the page of obituaries, traffic accidents, speeding tickets, and miscellaneous items of local interest. Readers fondly referred to this page as “the Briefs” and it was by far the most widely followed, and closely scrutinized, page in the paper. Everyone wanted to know who died, or was in trouble with the law, or had their car window broken. If one didn’t know such things, what would one talk about?

On page two of the paper, next to the editorial for the day (‘Should garbage collection fees increase?’) a short article about a fertilizer truck heist caught my eye. The truck-jacking happened last week. Apparently, the driver had stopped to help a motorist in need. The next thing he knew, his truck was gone.

I pictured a semi-load of manure and wondered how the economy had gotten so bad.

Then I remembered that ‘fertilizer’ might also include the makings of truck bombs. Near the end of the article, the reporter identified the cargo as nitrogen. That’s the bomb making stuff . . . but there was no discernable connection to either potassium or the nuke. A truck bomb would never get close enough to do damage before being repelled, or detonated, by plant security. Of that much, I was certain. The truck-jacking probably was not relevant to my concerns.

After finishing the paper, I went out to our (and by that I mean, Beth’s) garden and cut some early blooming tulips to present to my date. I found a vase and arranged the tulips quite nicely, I thought.

Beth came down the stairs. I met her as she entered the kitchen.

“I brought you flowers, my love.” I held the tulip-filled vase out toward Beth, presentation style.

She looked stunning as always. She had chosen an outfit I can't accurately describe because of my lack of vocabulary in the area of women's attire. But it looked perfect in every way. It tastefully accentuated all the right parts. And her scent was enticing.

"How lovely!" She accepted the vase of tulips, pretending to inhale their sweet aroma, of which there wasn't any. Tulips are not aromatic. "You are my gallant prince."

"Never let it be said that I didn't do the least I could do, my sweet." I motioned toward the front door. "Shall we?"

"Indeed."

I took the vase from Beth, and set it down, featuring it prominently on the kitchen table.

It was a short walk to the restaurant. Almost everything of import in Red Wing is a short walk from our house. As we strolled, we visited about her day. An hour at the law office chatting with Karen. A stop at the grocery store to lay in some staples. A short CIA cyber-decryption project. And an afternoon of serious art, jewelry, and clothing research at multiple locations.

We arrived at the restaurant precisely at seven-thirty and the hostess seated us promptly. The Nortons is my favorite location for fine dining in Red Wing. The decor echoes the roaring twenties, when times were good and dining was elegant. The menu is fairly brief, but it offers something for every discerning palate. The restaurant owners, not surprisingly, the Nortons, had created each recipe themselves and personally assured that every meal was prepared to perfection.

I selected a bottle of Merlot from the wine list and relayed my choice to the waitress. The wine, together with a basket of sliced baguette and a small dish of iced butter patties, arrived at our table shortly. The waitress uncorked the wine, handed me the cork, and poured a small amount in my glass. I sniffed the cork as she poured.

After swirling the wine in sophisticated fashion, I tested its aroma, then tasted a sip.

“This will be just fine. Thank you.”

The waitress poured Beth’s wine, then mine. She left the bottle on the table, and with a bow, departed.

“To soul mates,” I offered, raising my glass as our eyes met.

“And lovers,” Beth added. Our glasses rang a clear tone in the quiet room. We raised them again toward one another and each enjoyed a sip of the Merlot.

“Delicious,” Beth said, placing the wine stem back on the white cloth. She unfolded her linen napkin and laid it gracefully across her lap. “We’ve talked enough about my day. What adventures do you have to share?”

I wasn’t sure if my conundrum was right for dinner conversation. But Beth and I share everything, so I thought I’d give it a shot.

“I’ve got kind of a mess. Are you up for helping me sort through it?”

“Let’s give it a try, shall we.” A slight British accent. She liked to do that to lighten the mood. I found it endearing.

“Here’s what I’ve got.” I relayed the details about the murder, the international cell call, the probable killer, potassium, my visits with Bull and Winston.

“And in tonight’s paper, I read about a fertilizer truck hijacking. A whole semi-load. It was the kind of fertilizer that anti-government types use to make bombs.”

Beth sat watching my eyes intently as I spoke. Her facial expression confirmed that I held her complete attention as I plodded through the details of my quandary. I could be reciting Dr. Seuss and Beth would still give me her undivided attention, if she thought it was important to me. I loved her for that, too.

“You certainly have a lot of dots to connect,” she said when I had finished. “Let’s see . . . you have a murder suspect who your gut tells you may be a terrorist. The nuclear plant, and particularly the spent fuel pool, you think may be his target. Potassium may be part of the means of attack. Mongolians might, somehow, be related. And someone stole a truckload of fertilizer that could be used to make a bomb, but that type of bomb doesn’t appear to threaten the nuke plant.

“Is that about it?”

“Yeah. Oh, and Gunner probably thinks I’m certifiable. Any thoughts?”

Beth looked across the table. She sensed my frustration and would try to relieve it.

“Yes,” she said momentarily. “First of all, in the many years we have been together, I have found your gut to be one of the most reliable indicators in the universe. Don’t ignore it just because nothing makes sense *yet*.

“Secondly, no one is going to take you seriously with the evidence you’ve accumulated so far. It’s all too circumstantial. Crying ‘wolf’ at this point will only undermine your credibility when you do have more evidence. So I wouldn’t share any further theories with law enforcement right now.

“Finally . . . a suggestion. Nobody could possibly be a better terrorist than you. You have fought and defeated terrorist operations for most of your life. Think like a terrorist. Given what you know now, how would you attack the target?”

Beth was right, as she almost always is. I needed to approach this question from the other end. If I could devise my own plan to assault the nuke plant, using the materials and information I already knew about, I could work backwards.

Excellent idea!

Our hands joined across the table. Our eyes held one another's.

"You are as insightful as you are beautiful," I said.

"That might be tough," Beth replied.

"True."

We ordered dinner and dessert, enjoying the rest of the evening without further thought or mention of my dilemma.

CHAPTER 20

Wednesday, May 13th, at Becker Law Office.

It was a Wednesday morning and the law office was in high gear. My eccentric office sharing mate, Frank, was telephoning frenetically. And my second office sharing mate, Bill, had a legal brief due. Between connecting callers to Frank and deflecting them from Bill, our receptionist, Debbie, barely had time to copy and collate the brief.

We three lawyers had devised this office sharing arrangement to save on our collective overhead expenses and consolidate staff personnel. I rented the office space and hired the employees. The other guys rented space and secretarial time from me. It worked particularly well for my practice, because I needed a secretary at the office at all times to deal with clients. I assumed the other attorneys reaped similar benefits.

Beth frequently helps out at the office, too. She was at her desk preparing accounting reports this morning. The journal entries were finished and she was in the process of running trial balances.

I understand accounting fine. But its excitement coefficient is something even less than lawyering. I didn't pay much attention to the credits and debits, though I did kill an accountant once, in the line of duty. He was a very bad man. Probably a bad accountant, too.

Anyway, I was thankful that Beth took on the accounting responsibilities. She had an undergraduate accounting degree and actually enjoyed the symmetry of coaxing the numbers to balance. I allowed her to process the business data uninterrupted.

Alone in my private office, I perched tentatively on my infinitely adjustable, comfy lawyer chair and stared at the piles of legal files. My mind kept drifting back to the terrorist activities I suspected to be in progress.

Although it was early, and I hadn't actually accomplished anything, I knew I'd already reached my maximum legal work potential for the day. Exiting my office, I leaned over the oak-trimmed half-wall toward Beth. "I gotta get out of here."

I twitched my eye, as if in spasm.

She looked up and flashed the smile that made my heart turn to mush. "Have fun, Babe. I'll be through here soon. Then I'm leaving as well. Think I'll hit the Fine Arts Center. See if inspiration strikes."

"Great idea," I agreed. "See you later. I'm heading out."

I made a beeline for the receptionist's desk. "Gone for the rest of the day, Debbie. Please route my calls through Karen."

"Yes, sir. Have a nice afternoon."

I said a quick goodbye to all, then exited the legal miasma in search of investigational enlightenment.

CHAPTER 21

Friday, May 15th, in Red Wing.

Two evenings later, while perusing the paper in our living room, I discovered something very unusual and disturbing. Another fertilizer truck had been hi-jacked later last week – sometimes it takes the news a while to hit the local paper. Two fertilizer trucks stolen within a few days? This *could not* be a coincidence.

What kind of fertilizer was this truck carrying? I read on. Potash. The main ingredient in potash is . . . potassium!

Another star in my constellation. The stolen potash somewhat confirmed that potassium was to play a part in whatever plan was unfolding. But what part? And how the hell was I going to find out?

“Beth. I have to skip dinner tonight and do some work at the office. I need to get a handle on this nuke thing and I can focus better there by myself.”

“Do what you need to do, Babe. You know I’ll be here. Any idea how long?”

“Probably going to be late. Don’t wait up.”

I kissed her on the lips and headed out the door.

Unlike almost everything else in Red Wing, Becker Law Office is not within comfortable walking distance. I took the Pilot.

Once at the office, my ceiling fluorescents were the only sign of life. No Frank. No Karen. No pool. No Pets. I turned to my computer. I needed to do more research.

First, I confirmed what Bull and Chuck had told me. Elemental potassium is highly reactive with water, even water in the air. Although it is the eighth most common element on earth, because of its tendency to react readily with other elements, pure elemental potassium does not exist naturally *anywhere* in the world.

Manmade potassium has a few industrial uses. The potassium isolation processes employed to make large quantities of the element available for industry involved highly complex, technologically advanced, and very large, equipment – not to mention enormous processing facilities.

I reclined in my comfy lawyer chair for a moment. It didn't seem likely that any terrorist group could operate a potassium production facility of such magnitude in Ottawa County and still escape notice by law enforcement.

Yet there was the professor's invention. Might it be capable of isolating enough pure potassium for some specialized purpose? I knew nothing of its production capacities.

Leaning forward into my keyboard, I next researched nuclear power plants. Much of the technological information that had been easily accessible on the web before 9/11 was no longer available. Web links led to blank pages where the juicy design and engineering details had once resided. But I *was* able to find out a few things.

Liberal scientific groups had warned the NRC concerning the vulnerability of spent fuel pools. Many pools, including those at Prairie River, were in fact, located *outside* the heavily reinforced containment buildings. And because Prairie River had not one, but two separate reactors, its fuel pool was larger than most, and contained more of the dangerous fuel.

I also learned something surprising about spent fuel storage pools. Many of them are located entirely above ground. The elevated design was intended to allow plant operators to monitor any leaks that might develop in the pool. In my mind, it also made the pools susceptible to sabotage.

Although the pool walls and floor are usually built of five-foot-thick concrete, such material does not pose the same sort of barrier as the heavy steel reinforcement of the containment buildings. A precisely placed chunk of C4 might well crack the pool, allowing the water to drain out. Even a crude fertilizer bomb could have the same effect.

But you would have to get that bomb to the pool. And direct access to the pool area must surely be guarded – at least from land.

One web article contended that the spent fuel pools were completely safe – including from air attack. According to this author, a well directed airplane crash into a typical, metal spent fuel building would not create enough force to damage the pool. Nor would the resulting fire generate enough heat to boil off the pool's protective water. Since the pools are a minimum of forty feet deep, with only a forty by forty foot surface area, the author argued, there simply wasn't enough surface area for a fire to boil the water off fast enough to cause a problem.

The article went on to say that most of the fuel in commercial planes is stored in the wings. Being made of lightweight aluminum, the wings would most probably peel off the fuselage as the plane penetrated the spent fuel building, leaving the bulk of the burning fuel outside.

My own knowledge of aircraft agreed with the analysis of their structure. I didn't know whether the boiling issue might be a problem.

I broadened my web search to other topics.

I located several conceptual diagrams of nuclear reactors that illustrated what Dr. Winston had told me about their design and function. I read a lot more about potassium. I viewed a short video clip showing a tiny pinch of potassium being tossed into a barrel of water. The pyrotechnic explosion was visually impressive, even given the minuscule quantity of potassium involved.

I leaned back in my chair and checked my watch. It was well past midnight. Trying to absorb all this chemistry and nuclear technology made my head hurt.

Refocusing on the task at hand, I struggled to combine my previous knowledge with the new information I had just learned from the web. It seemed plausible . . . barely . . . that a terrorist might breach plant security from the air, crash a small plane into the spent fuel building, and start a fire. *Maybe* if you had enough potassium aboard, *if* the potassium hit the pool, there *might* be an explosion big enough to crack the pool and make it leak.

That didn't seem like much of a plan. At least, I wouldn't attack a nuclear plant that way. Chances of success seemed slim. How would you get a big enough plane even close to the plant? There must be all kinds of red flags that would go up if a commercial flight were in the air below 10,000 feet. And I *knew* the plant had at least *some* anti-aircraft capability. A small plane wouldn't have a snowball's chance.

Even if you somehow managed to steal and crash a commercial plane, would the lightweight aluminum airframe penetrate the steel building with sufficient fuel aboard to boil away the water? Would potassium make a significant difference? And how in the world would you get elemental potassium through airport security? That was simply not possible on a commercial flight.

Security for cargo flights had become just as strict – not to mention the fact that the potassium would probably blow up when

some forklift operator dumped it onto the plane. 'Fragile' has no meaning to cargo carriers.

I still couldn't make it add up. All I could theoretically accomplish was a nuclear nuisance. I could maybe shut down the plant for a few days while they scraped my charred remains from the building roof.

I checked my watch again. Three-thirty a.m. I would nap in my comfy lawyer chair for two hours. Then I'd go home, make coffee and take my best shot at preparing a nice breakfast for Beth.

Loving husband. Breakfast in bed.