**Here's a sample from THE 19TH ELEMENT:**

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 Laden 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 hijackings 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 Staties 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 somethin’. 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.

(Continued in THE 19TH ELEMENT . . . .)

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