

## CHAPTER 1

To avoid security, he entered the building through a service door. Accompanying him were two, broad-shouldered men in denim jeans, navy jackets, baseball caps, and leather gloves. They were hired muscle. He wasn't the type to dirty his hands with this sort of business.

The threesome climbed the back stairs to the seventh floor. After a quick check for anyone who might be present in the hall, they exited the stairwell and proceeded to her apartment. He extended his gloved hand and rapped on the brass knocker.

Inside the condo, a middle-aged woman slept. It had been a difficult day at the office. She'd left work early with a headache and was hoping a short nap would help her shake it.

Awakened by the knock on her door, she glanced at her watch . . . 6:30. *Who would come calling, unannounced, at this time of evening?* She arose and left the bedroom. At the entrance door, she pressed her cheek against the cool wood . . . checking the peephole.

She hadn't expected to see *him* tonight.

Nevertheless, after a short pause, she unchained the door, unlocked the deadbolt, and turned the knob to allow him inside.

No sooner had she cracked the door than the two thugs shouldered their way into the apartment – shoving her roughly to the hardwood. The fall left her unable to catch her breath. Moving quickly, the men jammed a terrycloth rag into her mouth, stifling her feeble attempts to scream.

She had never dreamed that her caller was capable of physical violence. Yet there he stood . . . looking down at her with satisfaction.

She gagged as the rag brushed the back of her throat.

The hirelings picked her up by the arms and dragged her farther inside the apartment. Being slight of build, and knowing the limits of her own physical abilities, she did not resist.

He secured the door and followed behind.

When they were all well inside her home, the two henchmen stood her on her feet and released their grips. They continued to block any hope of escape.

She reached to pull the cloth from her mouth, but one of the thugs jerked her hand away, then secured the rag in place with lengths of broad, grey tape.

Now the man spoke to her. His voice was calm, but cold . . . cold in a way she had never heard any voice sound before.

He advised that she leave the rag in place and cooperate fully. He didn't intend to do her permanent harm, he said. But she must do as she was told.

She saw little choice in the matter.

He directed her to sit at the dining room table – which she did – then produced a pen and some linen stationery, placing them on the table in front of her. She was going to write a note.

As he watched over her shoulder, she began to write. Her mind began processing the situation like the algorithms she

knew so well. *Could she include some subtle clue in the text?* She wrote slowly, pausing after every sentence to rub out a "kink" in her writing hand.

She had chosen her words with care. Would they pass his scrutiny? He was no fool, after all. Even if he approved the note as written, would anyone understand the sub-text of the message?

She could only hope.

When she had finished writing, she signed at the bottom and put down the pen. He removed the paper from the table, and with a further brief perusal, pronounced it, "just fine." The man nodded toward one of his accomplices.

The man grasped her from behind, closing a muscular arm around her chest and shoulders, then clamping a chemical-soaked cloth over her rag-stuffed mouth and nose.

She recalled a momentary and futile struggle before blackness took her.

\* \* \*

When she awoke, the blackness remained, but she wasn't blind. This place lay in utter darkness.

Getting up from the cold, damp cement floor, and with her arms extended for balance, she turned in a circle. In one direction she could barely make out a thin line of light . . . and she stumbled toward it.

## CHAPTER 2

*Saturday, October 17th, 7:45 a.m.*

The navy blue Mazda 6 had been following at a distance of about two hundred yards ever since I made my swing past the Red Wing YMCA and onto Levee Road. This was my usual running route for a Saturday morning, and anyone with an interest would know that. I kept my eyes forward, maintaining the steady seven-minute-per-mile pace that had proven appropriate to providing a good aerobic workout for a forty-something man in my condition.

Ten years ago I would have been running five-minute miles. You do what you can.

With the river on my right, and the city to my left, my feet pounded a steady rhythm on the gravel road shoulder. I continued past the main barge dock and the Consolidated Grain terminal. These two structures marked the hub for commercial traffic on the Mississippi River at Red Wing. As I ran by, wafts of coal dust from empty barges gave way to the dusty-sweet smells of early harvest that filled the air around the terminal. Eighteen-wheelers spewed acrid blue plumes of diesel exhaust as they lined up to dump their loads of shelled field corn, adding variety to the aromatic smorgasbord.

I chanced a quick glance behind me. The Mazda was still there, but it kept its distance.

It was a beautiful morning for a run. Sugar maples and aspen were just beginning to show a bit of yellow foliage. The sun shone brightly from the southeast, its rays barely clearing the tree-covered bluffs of town, too early in the day to brighten the roofs of the stately, turn-of-the-century homes closer to the river.

At this latitude, the highest temperature the weak, October sun could encourage was a damp forty-five degrees Fahrenheit. But it was warm enough for me to wear my black jogging shorts and a red T-shirt, and cool enough for me to stay comfortable, even at this pace. It would be a shame for an intruder to interrupt my exercise routine on such a day.

A couple hundred yards farther along, I passed the boathouse village on my right. The village was a sheltered harbor where garage-like structures, made mostly of red or silver metal, floated up and down on poles sunk deep into the river bottom. The boathouses were buoyed by empty, plastic fifty-gallon drums, situated strategically beneath their floorboards. The poles, called "gin poles" by the locals, kept the houses aligned along several stretches of wooden dock. Each boathouse-lined dock extended about 250 feet from the shore into the harbor bay.

The boathouses were quaint, but I imagined the local artists who painted watercolors of the boathouse village were better able than I to appreciate its artistic character on this particular morning. Having an unknown vehicle on your tail heightens awareness of many things, but bucolic beauty isn't one of them.

Another hundred yards along, I left the roadside, continuing onto the concrete running path that led away from Levee Road and toward Baypoint Park. The right-angle turn in the direction of the park proper provided another

opportunity to surreptitiously check the status of my pursuer.

Still there. Still keeping his, or her, distance.

Baypoint Park was originally a landfill for the City of Red Wing, Minnesota. The entire area was located below the flood plain, and nearly surrounded by the waters of the Mississippi. Accordingly, it had seemed the perfect spot for a dump – it never filled up. Every ten years or so, a flood would come through and carry the landfill's contents away downstream.

That was before the world became aware that not everyone lived upstream, and before people had begun to consider the environmental impact such activities had on the river, and on the communities down its course. When the fog of egocentrism lifted, the City removed the remains of the potentially friable dump contents, and established the spacious and lush recreational area toward which I now ran.

The jogging path through the park formed a circuit around its perimeter. Three laps of the circuit equaled two miles.

Continuing into the park and onto the lap circuit, I knew my follower would either need to remain on Levee Road, some seventy yards distant, and watch from there, or pull into the Baypoint parking lot, conceding me a closer look.

As I rounded the downstream end of the park path, I saw that the Mazda's driver had chosen to park in a spot about twenty feet from the far side of the jogging path. I guessed they were going to wait for me to come to them, instead of the other way around.

Continuing along the river side of the loop, I overtook two women exercising their dogs at a more leisurely trot. The park was otherwise deserted.

Looking over my shoulder to offer the two joggers a "Good Morning," I grabbed another quick peek at my tail. The Mazda had darkly tinted windows. I couldn't tell if it held one or more occupants.

I had three choices. I could jump into the river and swim downstream, evading my uninvited pursuer entirely. I could keep on running as I had been, waiting to see if the Mazda's occupant would take the initiative. Or I could face the situation head-on.

I elected the last option.

Leaving the concrete trail, I cut across the thick, dewy-wet grass, past the children's play area and the sand volleyball court, and directly up to the Mazda driver's window. The car engine was turned off and the windows were up.

I stood there for a moment.

Nothing happened. No gunfire. No descending car window. No door locking or unlocking.

*Hmm.*

Facing the rear of the car with right hand on hip, breathing steadily despite my run, I rapped the knuckles of my left hand against the driver's window – three times.

I gazed into the distance and waited.

Presently the window slid silently down into the door frame.

"Gunderson!"

It was Ottawa County Chief Sheriff's Deputy, Doug Gunderson. He and I were friends – more or less. I mean, he was a good guy and all, but his rigid adherence to rules and regulations, and my penchant for regularly ignoring them, created some friction. Most people knew the Chief Deputy as "Gunner."

"How d'ya like the new car?" Gunner asked with a grin on his face that implied more than the question he had just asked.

"You're lucky I didn't just shoot first and ask questions later," I said, turning to look the smirking deputy in the eye.

Gunner knew that I had good reason to be cautious of suspicious activities, and that the world harbored a number of individuals, gangs, corporations, and even countries who might want to do me harm. He also knew that, despite my attire, I might be wearing a gun, but he trusted, correctly, that I was not the sort to shoot first and regret later.

"So, besides being a prick, is there some reason you've been following me since I passed the YMCA?"

"A prick? I'm hurt." His face still wore the grin.

"Yeah . . . so sorry to bruise your tender ego."

Gunner paused . . . his smile fading.

"Actually, there is a reason I've been on your tail." His face turned a deeper shade of serious. "Can we grab a park bench and have a chat?"

Now he had piqued my interest. Gunner was not the type to want to chat. Usually when we had a visit, it was I who interrupted his routine – not the other way around. This situation presented an anomaly, and anomalies interest me.

"Sure. Let's grab one on the other side of the park, facing the river," I said. "More peaceful and more private."

"Sounds good."

I stepped away from the car door allowing Gunner to climb out. Reaching back inside the car, then withdrawing and turning toward me, he produced two convenience-store coffee cups, complete with napkins, and offered one in my direction. I nodded my thanks and accepted the steaming cup.



Gunner was about my age, six feet, 180 pounds and in pretty good shape. Though there was a hint of a belly, his body was mostly muscle. Gunner's round face, light complexion and short, reddish-brown hair were typical of many fourth-generation Scandinavian immigrants to this area of Minnesota. He was not in uniform this morning. Instead, he wore soft-soled deck shoes, tan khaki shorts, and a black-patterned golf shirt covered by an open, black cotton jacket. I knew he also carried a gun in there somewhere.

Neither of us spoke as we trod the thick, wet grass toward the river.

Eventually, having reached an appropriately secluded, green wooden park bench, we stopped. Using the tiny paper napkins that had come with our coffees, we each wiped the dew off our portion of the bench before sitting.

We sat quietly for a long while. Gunner was taking his time starting this conversation.

I waited.

The sun continued its ascent in the sky behind us. The occasional late-season pleasure boat idled through the vapor rising from the main channel of the river, observing the "No Wake" zone adjacent to the park.

While I continued to wait for Gunner, I thought about the Mississippi. The river here – the river Gunner and I were watching flow by our feet – was not the expansive "Father of Waters" that rolls past St. Louis and on toward New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. Near Red Wing, a half-decent golfer could hit a three-iron across the Mississippi's main channel.

Had Congress not committed the Army Corp of Engineers to maintaining a minimum channel depth of nine feet for the entire length of the river, it wouldn't have been possible for powerful tow boats to push great flotillas of

barges from the Gulf port of New Orleans all the way to St. Paul. Even at this corner near Red Wing – the narrowest on the navigable length of the Mississippi – the main channel was wide enough to accommodate a raft of fifteen barges and its tow.

It is true that, on occasion, the barges did get stuck on the mucky river bottom while attempting to negotiate the Red Wing corner. It was, after all, a devilish challenge pushing a thousand feet of barges, more than a hundred-fifty feet wide, safely around this narrow bend – especially headed downstream, and in the dark. But groundings happened rarely, and only when the tow's pilot strayed outside the colored channel marker buoys. (Red – Right – Returning from the sea. Green was the other side.)

In many ways, the river slowly slipping past the green wooden park bench accurately mimicked life here in Red Wing – a relaxed meander. Not the east coast hustle and bustle and always-late-for-something that I had once considered the norm.

Now that I had stopped running and was sitting here on this damp bench, patiently awaiting the beginning of Gunner's "chat," the morning chill had begun to penetrate my perspiration-dampened jogging attire. I decided to move things along.

"Grabbed any new parking violators lately?" I offered, as a conversation starter.

He didn't seem amused.

We both continued to gaze out over the water.

"Aw hell! I need to ask you a favor," Gunner finally choked out, still eyeing the water below.

"Now, now. That wasn't so bad was it?" I patted him on his near shoulder.

"Okay. Enough!" He shrugged off my hand and turned his gaze my way. "This is serious . . . at least it might be. So if you can stop crackin' wise for two minutes, I'll try to bring you up to speed." Having confirmed the severity of the matter, Gunner again faced the river.

A sip of coffee staved off a bit of the cold while I waited for the Chief Deputy to organize his thoughts. Eventually, I began to wonder whether the chill I was experiencing was entirely due to the temperature.

"Beck," he began, "my wife has this friend from college. A guy named George Whitson. Lives in Minneapolis. She hasn't seen or heard from him since her last class reunion, maybe three years ago. And they're not really that close. But she knows him, right?"

Gunner glanced my way and I nodded.

"Anyway . . . Whitson calls Connie last night and wants to know if she can get me to help him with a problem."

"What sort of problem?"

"Geez! Give me a minute to tell the story, will ya!" A steely stare.

"By all means," I said, hands up, palms out. "Please proceed."

"According to Connie, it seems that Mr. Whitson's wife has gone missing."

"Left him?"

Gunner gave me an impatient look. I gave him one back.

"Unsure at present," Gunner replied, shifting to his law man persona. "Last time Whitson saw his wife was two days ago when he left for work. Says she was at their condo and everything was hunky-dory. The next thing he knows, he's comin' home after work and his wife is gone. She left a note saying she'd had enough and was bailin' on the marriage."

"That's too bad, but not all that rare," I said.

"Yeah . . . but here's the weird part. She also left her cell phone, keys, and credit cards behind."

"Now that is weird," I agreed.

"By the time a wife calls it quits, she's usually already emptied the bank accounts, and she takes the car, the credit cards, the family jewels, and anything else worthwhile, with her. I've never heard of a spouse of either gender leavin' the car, the money, and the credit cards behind.

"Anyway . . . Connie feels sorry for this guy and wants me to do somethin' to help him out."

"Okay," I said, for lack of anything better.

"Look . . . I tell her it's not my jurisdiction and that Minneapolis isn't going to help me out. I tell her the Twin Cities cops are gonna think I'm a small town shit-kicker who oughtta mind his own business and not tell 'em how to do their jobs.

"But she still wants me to try to do somethin'."

Gunner paused for a moment, allowing me an opening.

"Is this the part where you ask me for the favor?"

I smiled.

Gunner looked down and shook his head. "I know I'm gonna regret this . . . but I'm bound by loads of bureaucratic baggage like jurisdiction, legal procedure, chain of command, and all that stuff. You, on the other hand, are hampered by no such burdens."

He had been watching the river the whole time, but now turned my way. I was still smiling.

"It's probably just what the wife's note says it is," Gunner went on. "She probably just left him. But as a favor to my wife . . . as a favor to me . . . would you mind looking into it?" A pause. "Please?"

When he said the "please," I knew I had to do what I could. From Gunner's perspective, he was groveling, but that didn't mean I had to let him off easy.

"Gunner," I said. "I've always been a sucker for a love story. You're trying to honor your wife's special request, even though you think it's probably silly – which I do, too, by the way.

“But for the sake of marriage and chivalry – and because I am an altruist at heart – I shall accept your challenge and take on your quest, relieving you forever thereafter of its onerous responsibility.”

I was on a roll.

"Therefore, never send to know for whom the lawyer works – he works for thee. And even though we stand here on an island – or almost an island – no man is an island. Every man's death diminishes us. As if . . ."

"All right, all right! Enough!" Gunner looked a bit as though he wished he' kept silent about the whole affair. "I s'pose I'm gonna owe you forever for this."

I ignored the statement.

"How about I go home and shower and we meet for breakfast at Smokey Row in an hour? Then you can give me the whole scoop – at least what your wife has told you so far."

"That's good by me." Gunner sounded relieved.

I wasn't sure if his relief stemmed from my agreement to help, or from the cessation of my soliloquy.

"See you at . . ." he checked his watch, "9:15."

We both stood. Gunner didn't wait for me as he started back across the park toward his car. After a few steps, he stopped and turned back toward me. "And Beck?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"Never let it be said that I didn't do the least I could do,"  
I replied.

### CHAPTER 3

An hour later, Gunner and I had ordered our breakfasts and were seated in a booth by the front window at Smokey Row, my favorite morning and noontime restaurant in Red Wing. Smokey Row is equal parts bakery and coffee shop. The atmosphere oozes fresh bread and Colombian Dark Roast. Each of us held a bottomless cup of gourmet coffee on the Formica booth-top in front of us.

The run home, and a warm shower, had erased all memory of the dampness and chill I had begun to feel in the park. It was a beautiful day and I was actually excited to have something interesting to do.

"So what do you make of the 'Dear John' note?" I asked. "Is it legit?"

"Husband swears it's her handwriting."

Gunner blew on his coffee.

"Did he report her, ah, absence to the police?"

"He told Connie he tried to file a missing persons report. But the local cops, Minneapolis that is, seemed pretty convinced that she'd just walked out on him and would eventually turn up looking for some of the money and plastic she'd left behind. They told him to hold off another couple days before filing a report. She'd likely check in at home by then."

"Sounds logical. Any kids?" I sipped my freshly ground, French Vanilla.

"No kids," Gunner said. "Both husband and wife work all the time and apparently never got around to startin' a family."

"How much do we know about Whitson and his wife? What's her name, by the way?"

"Sorry . . . Katherine," Gunner said. "She's got some big shot computer job at an international tech company named ComDyne, out of Eden Prairie. She's got a bunch of education – has a couple PhDs in somethin' or other."

"So she would be *Dr. Whitson*?"

"I guess," Gunner replied. "Oh, yeah . . . she's supposedly kind of a big deal in computer circles. Other than that, I'm afraid I haven't got much."

Gunner paused for a moment, rotating the coffee mug in his hands.

"I was hoping you and I could maybe mosey up to the Cities and pay Whitson a visit this afternoon?" he asked finally.

"Without Connie?" I suggested.

"She'll probably want to come along, but I'll do my best to convince her otherwise. We'll have to see how *that* goes."

I knew that sometimes Connie could be . . . what's the best word . . . determined.

Our food arrived.

Gunner had a fried egg sandwich on wheat with a side of hash-browns. I had opted for the oversized pecan caramel roll, which I intended to drench in butter – maybe not a healthy choice, but I'd just finished a run and deserved a reward.



## CHAPTER 4

Driving my dark grey Honda Pilot home from Smokey Row, I wondered what I was getting myself into. Even though my law practice didn't include divorce work, I had been around enough of my clients' family disputes to know that marital issues were likely to be messy and unpleasant. I worried a little about what Gunner and I would find out, and how that information would affect Connie.

That was all the thinking time I had in the ten block trip home from breakfast to my Jefferson Avenue home. I know . . . I should have walked, but I had just finished a run after all.

As I entered our kitchen through the sliding glass door from the back porch, the outer wooden screen door slammed shut behind me. I really should update the screen door closer with something more twenty-first century, eliminating the slam. But there is something sort of authentic, and small-townish, about the old-style spring approach. It makes you want to call out, "Honey, I'm home."

"Honey, I'm home," I called as I passed through the kitchen in search of my wife, Elizabeth.

Beth and I had been married for nearly twenty-one years and were parents of two grown daughters – Sara and Elise. Both girls were living away from home, attending separate colleges out of state.

We had come to Red Wing upon the occasion of my retirement from twenty years of *sub rosa* military and intelligence operations. At that time, Beth and I had decided that the cessation of bullets, hand grenades, and rocket launchers provided an opportunity for more settled lives for ourselves and our then-teenage daughters. So about six years ago, we had all picked up our lives and come here to live in my childhood hometown.

Hearing no response to my greeting, I surmised that Beth might be working in her attic studio, and therefore, would be out of earshot of my call.

I wasn't the only Becker family member to have a secretive government past. Beth had done a variety of sensitive computer work for the CIA during our time in Washington. I didn't know all the details. But the Agency still contacted her occasionally on a consulting basis. So I knew she had skills that folks on the Agency's current payroll lacked.

Even though it was my hometown and not hers, Beth had actually made a better adjustment to small town life than I. She'd gotten more involved in the community, church, fine arts organizations, book clubs, and coffee groups. I liked Red Wing well enough, but from time to time, I craved the adrenaline rush of international intrigue. There was a definite dearth of that in Red Wing.

I jogged up the stairs, two-at-a-time. I had some caramel roll to burn off.

Two-and-a-half flights up, my head emerged just above attic floor level. Beth was working at one of her sewing machines, creating art from cast-off attire. The stairwell in which I had paused was behind her, so I took a moment to appreciate the view through the spindled railing.

She sat with impeccable posture on the wooden sewing stool, her sleek lines pleasantly silhouetted against the light from the arched dormer window. She wore a black cashmere top that clung nicely to her trim shape. Fine, sandy-blond hair hung loosely across her shoulders. The faintest touch of her perfume hung in the air. I breathed deeply. I could just stand here on the steps and watch her indefinitely.

Dragging myself out of my reverie, I called cheerfully over the hum of the sewing machine, "Hi, Beth. How goes your morning?"

She stopped sewing and rotated to face me.

"Oh, hey . . . you're home? I thought I heard the screen door."

I climbed the rest of the steps to the attic and entered Beth's studio. Approaching my lovely wife, I bent over and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips. When I pulled away, her eyes were closed, and her full lips formed a satisfied smile.

"Care to chat?" Her voice bubbled over with chipper.

"No thanks. I'm just here for the view. You keep on working. I'll sit and watch a while. It always amazes me how you can do that stuff – rags to richness."

"I think it's 'riches.' But suit yourself, Shakespeare." Beth returned to her clothing work.

My word had correctly described Beth's activities. She was just being playful.

I took a seat cross-legged in a smallish, tan club chair.

Besides creating unique clothing pieces, Beth also designed jewelry and painted with colorful acrylics on canvas. The studio held an area for each of these activities. The attic was Beth's artistic sanctuary. I always tried to respect the separateness of this space – to insulate it from

distractions of our daily lives. I didn't want to talk about Gunner's problems here.

After I'd watched Beth work for a few minutes, I asked, "What's your timetable for creativity today?"

"Actually," Beth replied, while still maneuvering a denim jacket around the sewing machine, "I was about to finish up here and see what you were up to."

"Okay. I'm going down to the back porch to read the paper. I'll catch you when you're through up here."

"See ya in a few."

I uncrossed my legs and stood up. "Love ya."

"That's what they all say." I believe I saw a wink with that statement.

About half an hour later, as I sat on the back porch swing reading the local and metro newspapers, Beth's face appeared in the sliding doorway from the kitchen. "Do you want anything on my way out?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

I put the papers on a wicker chair and Beth joined me on the swing.

I could now see that, to complement the black cashmere, she was wearing slim-fitting denim jeans and black boots with moderately spiked heels. Her legs looked a mile long.

"I saw Gunner this morning on my run," I said, looking directly at my wife. "He's got a new car. We had breakfast. Connie's good."

She knew there was more and waited patiently.

"Uh, Beth. Gunner asked me to do him a favor."

"What sort of favor?" she asked, giving the swing a small push with her feet.

"It's kind of a long story. But in short, he'd like me to check out a runaway wife situation in the Twin Cities. It

involves some guy Connie knew in college, and he's not getting any help from the metro cops."

"Are you thinking it's something more than a family in distress?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure what to think yet. But Gunner asked for the favor, and I'd like to accommodate him. It'll probably involve a few trips to the cities, asking some questions, being told some lies – the usual stuff. I will need to impose on some of our personal time to help Gunner out. But of course, I'll use office time for any heavy lifting."

Beth waited patiently.

"Anyway, I think I'm gonna take this thing on and see what happens. Maybe it'll spice things up a bit . . . get some juices flowing. Do you have any opinions?"

"If it's what you want to do, I think you should go for it. When do you start?"

"This afternoon?" I offered, smiling apologetically.

"Of course." Beth returned my smile across the swing. "Go do your thing."

"Thanks, Beth."

We leaned together and exchanged a quick kiss.

"Gunner is making arrangements for a meeting time and place. I'll call or text you when I know the details."

"Got it." She picked up the newspaper and waved me on my way. "See you later."

Beth abandoned me on the swing, gathered her purse and car keys from the kitchen, and headed for the garage. A moment later, Beth's silver rag-top Mitsubishi Spyder pulled out of the driveway and purred down the alley.

Beth was always supportive of my extracurricular activities. She knew that small-town lawyering was never going to meet my need for adventure.

## CHAPTER 5

*Saturday, October 17th, 1:30 p.m.*

Gunner had arranged for us to meet with Mr. Whitson at the Whitson's condo in downtown Minneapolis. He and I had driven separately in case I wanted to start working on the “case” right after our visit.

I located the address and parked in a pay lot nearby.

The condo was a recently-renovated space in an ancient brick building in the warehouse district – two blocks from the heart of the city. It was a seriously upscale development. I would probably need to trade three of our homes on Jefferson to buy a one bedroom flat in this joint. No wonder the Whitsons worked so much. They had to make the mortgage payments.

There wasn't a doorman. I announced myself to the uniformed security guard manning the desk in the entryway. He said Mr. Whitson was expecting me and directed me to the Whitson residence.

This building had seven stories. The Whitson apartment was number 701. I took the elevator and got off on seven. Arriving outside Unit 701, I rapped twice with the brass knocker on the heavy oak entry door. A thin man with salt and pepper hair answered my knock. He was about five feet ten, 170 pounds. He wore a day's growth of beard and a

solemn expression on his pallid face. His manner was as stiff as the collar stays in his shirt.

"Mr. Becker, I presume?" he said, offering his hand in my direction. His voice and face were both sad. There was liquor on his breath.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Whitson," I replied, accepting the handshake.

His hand and wrist wilted as I tried in vain to get a grip. It felt like I was trying to hold onto something slippery. I shook hands the best I could, given his weak participation.

"Please come in," he said.

As I entered, I could see that this had to be one of the premiere units in the building. It was a corner, three-bedroom apartment with an open design that merged the spacious kitchen with a living/dining area so large, and a ceiling so high, that it seemed as though it would be hard to avoid an echo.

In all, I estimated the condo held, perhaps, 3,500 square feet. But I hadn't actually seen all the rooms, it could be bigger. The price tag on this home would be well into seven figures, even in Minneapolis.

The whole place smelled of pine cleaner and furniture polish. There wasn't an un-dusted flat surface anywhere. No magazines or newspapers were evident. It looked like no one lived here.

Gunner and Connie were already seated on one of the leather sofas in the great room. Mr. Whitson beckoned me toward the Gundersons with a wave of his arm. "Please have a seat anyplace that looks comfortable. May I serve you a beverage?"

His manner struck me as oddly formal. Maybe the liquor.

"No, thanks," I responded as I crossed the vastness and sat in a formal upholstered chair in the general vicinity of Connie and Gunner. I waved hello to the Gundersons who were seated on the couch to my distant right. For me to have detoured over there just to shake hands would have made Connie and Doug feel like they were part of a funeral receiving line.

Apparently, Gunner hadn't been successful in persuading Connie to stay home after all. We would have to work around her presence a bit – but we should still be able to get enough information for a solid start.

Mr. Whitson followed me into the room and sat to my left in a chair matching mine. He was holding a crystal lowball glass filled about halfway with brown liquor, no ice. From the odor on his breath in the doorway, I guessed it to be scotch.

As soon as Whitson was seated, Gunner started the discussion.

"Mr. Whitson . . ."

"Please call me George.

"Very well, George. Now, if you could fill us in on the details of your wife's disappearance, beginning with Thursday morning, the day she, er, vanished, if you don't mind."

Whitson relayed the same story he'd already told Connie, and that Gunner had passed on to me. Things were fine that morning. She was gone when he returned home after work. The note, phone, credit card, and keys had been left, arranged neatly, on the bed.

"And what have you done so far to try to locate your wife?" I asked.



"She doesn't have any family. Her parents died a while ago. She is an only child. So I tried contacting people from her work. Her supervisor, co-workers, other names I recognized from Katherine's discussions of her work day. Her only real friends are at work. We both work at least sixty hours a week. There's not much time for a social life outside of business gatherings."

He took a large swallow of the scotch and stopped talking.

"And what did they say?" I prompted.

"Oh. Yes. Of course." Another swallow of liquor and the glass was emptying fast.

"Her supervisor, a gentleman named Dr. Allister, told me that she had been at work until around five Thursday afternoon. She told him she was leaving for home a bit early with a headache. One of her co-workers, Jim or Sam or Don or something like that, also said she had been at work Thursday. He had left work before five, and Katherine was still in the office when he left."

Whitson paused for another drink of scotch, draining the glass.

"Would anyone care for a beverage?" George asked as he started to rise from his chair.

"Mr. Whitson," I interrupted, "if we're going to find your wife, we need you to be coherent to help us. Would you mind postponing a further drink until we've finished our visit?"

Whitson sat back down. "Of course. It's just been . . . well, I'm not quite myself today."

"I think we all understand," I said.

"So if I'm hearing you correctly, your wife was at work until five Thursday and left with a headache. Had anyone else seen Katherine on Thursday besides her co-workers?"

"There's no one that I know of."

"And what's the next thing you know about Katherine's whereabouts on Thursday?" It appeared I was going to need to pry the information out of him.

"The next thing I know is that I came home about 7:30 that night and she was gone. When I went into our room to change clothes, I found the note and the other things on the bed."

"Are any of her personal effects missing? Jewelry? Clothing? Makeup? Perfume? That sort of thing?"

"I didn't think to look. I'm sorry."

"How about suitcases? Any of those gone?" I continued, trying to remain pleasant.

"I . . . I didn't check that either." Whitson's head was hanging and he stared at the floor.

"But you *did* contact the Minneapolis Police," I said. "When and how did you do that?"

"I called them Friday morning," he said. "I had hoped Katherine was just upset about something and would come back on her own Thursday night."

His head was back up and he was trying to focus his attention on me.

"I asked for Missing Persons. They connected me to a man who said I shouldn't worry and she would probably show up soon. He wouldn't accept a formal report." Whitson looked at the ceiling. "At least, I think that's what he said."

He was fading.

"And on Friday night when Katherine was still missing, did you call the police again?" I asked, fearing that I already knew the answer.

"Why, no. I didn't think it was right to bother them again so soon." Whitson sounded surprised at my suggestion.

"So you called your old friend, Connie, who you knew had a cop for a husband. Is that right?"

"Yeah. I couldn't think of who else to call . . . what else to do. I don't really have any friends. She said she would get her husband to help."

His gaze had, once again, dropped, but now, he looked up from the floor and across at Connie on the couch. "Thank you so much."

I could see why Connie wanted to help this guy. He was totally lost and he had no clue what to do about it. I could also understand why his wife might want to leave him.

Connie spoke up. "I know these guys'll find Katherine for you. It'll all work out okay."

I knew Gunner had some experience with runaway spouses, but those hadn't resulted in happy endings for the couples involved. Neither of us had any experience at all in kidnappings. They just didn't happen very often in Ottawa County. And even if one should occur, jurisdiction for such matters would fall either to the FBI, if the kidnapping was interstate, or to the BCA, if authorities believed the victim remained in Minnesota. The BCA is the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension – in other words, the state cops.

With her sunshine and roses outlook, Connie had written a check to George Whitson that Gunner and I might not be able to cash.

"Thanks again, Connie," Whitson managed before hanging his head on his chest.

"Don't worry, George. It'll be okay." Connie may have been comforting to Whitson, but she was making me nervous as hell.

I was going to ask Whitson some more questions, but I could see his eyes had closed and his breathing was slow and even.

He had fallen asleep.

## CHAPTER 6

As long as we had access to the Whitson apartment, I couldn't see why we shouldn't have a look around. Maybe something would jump out at us. It happens.

I motioned to Connie and Gunner with right forefinger at my lips to indicate that Whitson was asleep. Then I rose and waved for them to follow me into one of the adjacent rooms.

As luck would have it, I had entered the master bedroom. I recognized it because the note, Katherine's keys, credit cards and cell phone, were neatly arrayed on the bed. The Gundersons followed me in. Gunner closed the bedroom door behind them.

I turned to Connie. "I'm very sorry your friend is in this situation. And I will do everything I can to help him find his wife. But you need to understand a few things about what might happen.

"First of all, it is entirely possible that his wife may have left him voluntarily, in which case, the best outcome here is that we find her, and George realizes that she really *does* want out of their marriage. There's nothing your husband and I could do to make that scenario any happier for George."

Connie nodded.

"But worse yet, we may find out that George gave her good reason to leave, or even that he's been involved in some

illegal or immoral activities. Once we start digging, there's no way to know what we will find.

"Do you still want us to do this – to look into Katherine's disappearance?"

It was obvious to me that Connie hadn't really given thought to these possibilities, and especially not that George, himself, might be in some way culpable.

She paused before answering.

Finally, Connie looked me in the eye with resolve and said, "I hadn't thought of all that stuff. But if there's any chance of you helping that poor man out, I hope you'll still try."

"Okay," I said. "But prepare yourself for whatever may come."

Connie nodded again.

I turned to Gunner. "Okay, Deputy. We need to give this apartment the once-over."

"Right. But don't wreck any evidence – just in case this thing starts to look hinky."

"Of course," I said. "You check for missing personal items. I'll take a closer look at what's on the bed."

It was clear that Gunner wasn't used to taking direction – especially from me. But he had invited me into this mess. So he swallowed his machismo and set to work, starting with the closets.

I began with the "Dear John" note. It had been placed in the exact center of the white cotton bedspread and was written in a woman's cursive hand on linen stationery. I leaned over the foot of the bed for a closer look, reading the note without touching the paper:

*George,*

*I am leaving you forever. Our marriage has been broken for a long time and I can't fix it. Whatever we once had is over.*

*My keys, cell phone and charge cards are here on the bed because I don't want anything from you and I don't want you to even TRY to find me. So please, don't bother to look.*

*I have what I need. You take the rest. It's yours.*

*Goodbye.*

*Katherine*

Not very eloquent . . . but fairly direct.

I also looked at the cell phone, keys and charge cards. They were perfectly aligned across the bed, with the note in the middle. Either he had rearranged the items, or she too, was compulsively organized. I removed a small camera from my right front pants pocket and took a bunch of photos of the unusual display across the bed – both from a distance and close-up.

Messing with evidence or not, I knew I needed to look at the phone more closely, and to explore its contents. Fortunately, since "Be prepared" is not only the Boy Scout motto, but mine as well, I had brought with me some basic supplies.

Withdrawing a ziplock sandwich bag from my left front pocket, I turned it inside out. Wearing the inverted baggie like a mitten, I scooped the phone inside and zipped the bag shut. The phone would remain safely uncontaminated in the bag. And while the cell remained protected inside the baggie, I could still operate it without worry of getting my own prints all over it. I would examine the contents of the phone later.

I couldn't immediately identify anything significant about the other items on the bed, or their placement. My

photos would probably work fine for closer consideration, if necessary. Given that he hadn't seemed to disturb the room yet, I doubted that Whitson was going to move anything around without our permission at this point.

I started taking more pictures of everything I could think of. The master bath. The medicine cabinet and its contents. The toilet – inside and out.

I continued taking pics around the master suite, then moved to each room in the apartment, in turn. I even got a shot of George asleep in the chair and one of Gunner sorting through Katherine's unmentionables drawer.

Connie stood quietly in a corner throughout the entire search process.

When I was done photographing, I checked with Gunner to see how he was doing.

"How are you coming with the panty raid?"

"If I ever see that picture at my cop shop, you're dead meat," Gunner said. He looked pretty serious.

"Don't worry. You know you can trust me."

Gunner gave me the raised eyebrow. I don't think he trusted me.

"Okay. I'll delete it as soon as I'm sure underwear isn't relevant to the case."

He didn't look convinced.

"On a more serious note," I said, "I'm interested in the results of your search – all of it, not just the undies," I added quickly.

"We'll have to confirm some things with Sleepy in there," Gunner tossed his head in Whitson's direction, "but I found some stuff I think might be probative."

"Probative?"



"Yeah. It means it's important stuff." Gunner looked offended.

"I know what it means," I said. "It just sounds weird coming out of your mouth."

Gunner gave me the eye roll. He does that a lot.

"Do you want to hear this or not?" Gunner asked.

I was stretching the limits of his patience.

"Please, proceed," I said, with a sweeping right-handed flourish in Gunner's direction.

"Here's what I've got."

He had made some notes and referenced them now.

"First of all, it looks like some of Katherine's clothes are gone from the hanger bar in the master closet. There're still plenty of her clothes in there. The hangers in most sections of the closet are all a uniform one inch apart. But in this one section, it looks like some clothes have gone missing. The hangers aren't spaced the same."

I nodded my understanding.

"The medicine cabinet's also short some stuff. And this is weird," Gunner said. "There's a nearly full prescription of diazepam, with Katherine's name on it, still in there."

"Ah, mother's little helper."

"Huh?" Gunner looked perplexed.

"It's a lyric from a Rolling Stones song."

Gunner still looked blank.

"Diazepam is generic Valium – mother's little helper?"

Still no recognition.

I took a moment to mourn the death of contemporary culture.

"Never mind. Please go on," I said.

"And like in the closet, there's some of Katherine's stuff missing. But there's also some that's left behind. And there's no rhyme or reason to it."

"For instance . . ." I said.

"Well. Her toothbrush is gone, but her eyelash curly deal is still there. Contacts are in a contact case, but no contact solution anywhere. It's as though somebody grabbed random items, and left the rest."

"Hmm," I offered.

"I can't find a wallet, or purse with anything in it. So she must've taken one with her. But all of the shoe compartments in her closet are full, except for one. And the empty one is in the 'business section.' The closed I so organized it's freaky."

"Sometimes organizing gives one a sense of control in an otherwise anarchic environment," I said.

"Now who's been reading the dictionary . . . anarchic environment. Geez!" Another eye roll.

I wondered if he could roll one eye at a time, or if it would always be both.

"I'll give you a list of other stuff after we leave. I'll email it to you. If I'm stuck here with you in charge much longer I might have to shoot you." Gunner looked serious again.

Better wrap this up for now.

"Okay," I said. "I'm done with the photos and the note. Just one more thing before you go?"

"All right," Gunner allowed. "Shoot."

"Did you find out where they both work?"

Gunner left the room for a moment. When he returned, he had two slips of paper in his right hand. "Here's a pay-stub for each of 'em. Best I can do for right now. Maybe we can ask Hubby sometime when he's not blotto."

"Thanks, Gunner." Then, turning to Connie, who appeared a smidgen shocked at the multiple invasions of Whitson's privacy she had just witnessed, I said, "I will do everything in my power to get to the bottom of this matter. Please try not to be concerned. Your worries won't help George's situation at all. You've done your part. Let us do ours."

Connie looked reluctant to let go.

"All right," she said, finally.

"Now, you guys run along. I'm going to finish up one or two things before I go. Gunner, I'll be watching for that email."

A brief goodbye and the Gundersons left me alone with the now-snoring Whitson.

As soon as they were gone, I retrieved the baggie-encased cell phone from my pocket. Sliding it open while it was still inside the plastic, I powered it up and searched the autodial list for George's cell number. I found it and pressed the call button. Almost immediately, the sound of classical music emanated from the vicinity of the liquor cabinet. The phone was lying next to a bottle of Glenlivet. I turned George's ringing phone off and put it in another pocket.

Maybe Whitson should get another chance to contribute to the investigation.

I approached the sleeping man. His head still rested on his chest. His hair needed washing and he smelled as though he hadn't showered recently. His hands on the chair arms were thin and bony, their skin a bluish-white.

I placed my hand on Whitson's shoulder.

"George."

No response.

I shook his shoulder gently. "George, we need to talk."

Whitson slumped sideways under the light pressure of my hand, but didn't awaken. He was worthless for now.

I moved around Whitson's chair and hoisted his limp form over my shoulders in a fireman's carry, depositing him like a bag of potatoes on the sofa. He slept on. I found a cotton blanket and pillow in a guest room and situated Whitson on the couch. I looked at his face. His countenance as he slept hinted at his mental state – helpless, vulnerable, afraid, and tormented.

I left him on the sofa.

Locating a pen and pad of paper in a kitchen drawer, I wrote George a message: "Had to borrow your cell phone. I'll get it back as soon as possible. Beck."

I doubted he would even remember who 'Beck' might be. But it mattered little.

With husband and wife phones in my possession, I departed Apartment 701 and headed for the elevator.

## CHAPTER 7

*Later Saturday evening.*

Beth and I were seated on our red leather living room couch, sharing a bottle of Australian Cabernet, when our phone rang. The caller ID showed that it was Ottawa County calling. I pushed the button to receive the call.

"Hello?"

"Beck . . . it's Gunderson," the voice said.

I knew Gunner wasn't calling just to chat.

"What's up?"

"Can you come down to the cop shop right now? There's been a new development we need to talk about. I'd prefer face-to-face."

"No problem," I said. "I'll be there in five."

I turned to Beth. "Gunner's got something urgent. It probably won't take long. I'll be back soon."

Beth had already retrieved a novel from atop the ancient wooden bass drum case that doubles as our coffee table, and flipped the book open. "Take your time. I'll just hang out here and relax."

As I was driving to the Law Enforcement Center, a journey of exactly eight blocks, I wondered what new development had occurred since this afternoon. I hoped no one had been injured . . . or found dead!

Gunner was waiting for me when I walked through the main doors to the LEC.

"Thanks for coming," he said, and waved me through the door he was holding – the entrance to the investigators' office area.

He didn't sound panicked or particularly sad. Those were good things.

When we reached Gunner's office, he sat behind his metal desk. I took the only available side chair.

"So fill me in," I said. "What are the 'new developments'?"

"About an hour ago, Connie got a phone call."

Damn! I thought. What now?

"Whitson?"

"No. Some man's voice she didn't recognize. Caller ID was a No Name, too."

"Is Connie okay?"

"She's kinda shook up. I think the whole thing scared her."

"Let's hear it," I said.

"The man told Connie that she'd better butt out of the Whitsons' business, or she'd wish she'd never known the guy."

Gunner looked at me with resolve. I could tell he was pissed. I waited for him to continue.

"After the call, I managed to calm her down. Told her that it just meant that George was right to call us into this thing. And that she should try to not let it bother her." Gunner paused.

"So I got a squad out there to watch the house. 'Course I didn't tell Connie that. She shouldn't have to worry any more than she already is.

"Then I came straight down here and tried to trace the call. All I could get was that it came from a disposable cell phone and had bounced off a few towers in downtown Minneapolis.

"But dammit . . . now I'm worried for Connie."

I could see the concern in his face.

"Geez, Gunner," I said. "I'm sorry that Connie is taking the heat on this. What can I do to help?"

"I appreciate the offer," Gunner said. "I really do. But if I can't keep my own wife safe in my own freakin' County, I'm not much of a law officer. Connie's safe. And I'll keep her that way. I just thought you'd wanna know about the call."

"Yeah. It makes it pretty clear that Katherine Whitson didn't simply leave her husband of her own volition. Somebody took her, or did something to her."

"But we don't know who," Gunner replied. "So I guess that's how you can help. Get to the bottom of this Whitson business as quick as you can."

"Absolutely! I've got my whole day tomorrow free to work on this thing. And I hate to ask you now, but I'll need your emailed report to get the whole picture. Can you still get me that tomorrow?"

"Damn straight! In fact, it'll be on your computer when you get up. I can't sleep tonight anyway."

I rose to leave.

"Gunner," I said. "Objectively . . . you and I both know that the phone call was just a scare tactic, and that no one has any reason to screw with Connie for real."

He nodded.

"So you just keep her protected, to be extra sure. And I promise I'll get to the bottom of this mess."

"Thanks again," he said. "Look for my email in the morning."

"Got it. And Gunner?"

"Yeah?"

"You watch your own backside, too. Okay?"

"Right. Now I've got work to do."

I made my exit, leaving Gunner at his computer.

Now I was fully invested in the Whitson case. Whoever decided that they should mess with Connie had made a big mistake. There was no way I was going to let go of this thing now. Somebody needed to answer for the angst they had caused the Gundersons! I was determined to make that happen.



## CHAPTER 8

*Sunday, October 18th, 7:00 a.m.*

As promised, early Sunday morning, Gunner's crime scene summary arrived in my email "In Box." I was impressed with its length and detail, especially given the lack of Whitson's assistance, and the turmoil Gunner was going through as a result of last night's phone threat.

With a bagel masquerading as breakfast in one hand, and my computer in the other, I moved to our front porch on Jefferson Avenue. I now had Gunner's notes, the Whitsons' cell phone contents and my photos, all on my laptop.

As I opened the front door and stepped onto the porch I could feel the cool stillness of the October air on my face. In the distance, a flock of migrating Canadian Honkers echoed their namesake through the otherwise quiet river valley. A neighbor had mowed her lawn that morning. Grassy aromas from, perhaps, the last cutting of the season scented my screen porch. I paused for a moment, breathing in the serenity.

Today, my mission was clear. I needed to find out who had killed or kidnapped Katherine Whitson – and as expeditiously as possible. But I also had to be thorough. Not reckless. I wanted this case solved as badly as Gunner. But sloppiness in my attempt to resolve it was not going to help.

I made the cushioned rattan loveseat my workspace. Leaning back with computer on my lap, I rested my feet on the glass-top wicker coffee table.

I would read Gunner's email first.

Even at a quick glance, it was obvious that Gunner had been thorough. I first read the email in its entirety, trying to get a sense of the overall picture. He had observed the scene at the condo with the illuminating perspective possessed only by professional investigators.

After completing an initial read-through, I sat for a minute with my eyes closed, absorbing Gunner's view of the scene. I pictured the impeccably-organized closet, with the single, less organized, clothing section, and only one pair of business shoes missing. Katherine's dresser drawers had appeared mostly filled with crisply folded garments – impossible to tell if any were absent.

There were no obvious fingerprints on the medicine cabinet mirror. While at the apartment, I had observed that opening the cabinet required a finger pressed against the glass to release the catch. Had someone wiped it down? Probably.

The Whitson recycling bins held three empty bottles of Glenlivet and two daily newspapers. Nothing else. In the dishwasher were two, pre-rinsed cereal bowls, two juice glasses, a few pieces of flatware, and four low-ball glasses. The waste baskets throughout the apartment were empty, except for their recently-replaced, white plastic liner bags.

Gunner had located the closet area in one of the spare bedrooms where the Whitsons stored their luggage. There were no large bags present, but a number of smaller ones were lined up precisely on shelves. Empty spaces on the shelving implied the absence of one or two sizeable suitcases.

Gunner made a special note that both male and female toiletry kits were still present, and stocked with the usual personal items and travel accessories.

Who takes their suitcase and not their travel kit? Nobody.

In the master bedroom, the bed was freshly made. No one had so much as sat on the spread, and the pillows were fluffed to symmetrical perfection. I had noticed that, too.

Gunner had already mentioned to me the odd assortment of toiletries and personal hygiene products either present or absent from the master bath – toothbrush, contact solution, and some makeup gone, but Katherine's diazepam prescription, eyelash curler, and contacts still remaining.

There were no computers anywhere in the condo. There were, however, several neat containers of software disks, encased in original jewel boxes or jackets, in a small desk in the third bedroom. Indentations in the carpeting and marks on the wall outlet near and under the desk indicated the earlier presence of a power strip, and possibly an external backup drive or other small peripheral device. There was no other trace of wires or computer components anywhere.

Nobody has *no* computers at all in the house. It's the twenty-first century, for god's sake. And Katherine *works* with computers. Her computer was obviously missing.

There was more. But most of the additional information pointed to the same conclusion. Katherine had been taken from the condo against her will. Whoever was responsible for Katherine's kidnapping had done a sloppy job of trying to cover up his or her crime.

Those were my conclusions, but I would consult with Gunner to get his take as well. Such matters were really more his forte.

I picked up my cell from the seat cushion beside me and called Gunner. He answered on the third ring.

"Gundersons."

"Gunner, it's Beck. How're you guys doing?"

"We're doin' a little better today. Connie is still shook. But I managed to get my pants on straight. So what do you think about the case?"

"Your report was very thorough," I said, sincerely. "And I've come to some tentative conclusions, but I was hoping for your professional input. What does your trained eye tell you?"

"Somebody took her from the condo and did a lousy job of covering up," Gunner said, then waited for my response.

"I had come to the same conclusion. Anything else? Is the husband still a suspect?"

"I think it's too soon to say. The spouse is always the first place we look. My gut says he doesn't have the gonads to do anything violent. But he could maybe hire somebody. Hard to tell right now.

"We should get some fingerprints, analyze the cell phones and talk to Whitson again. Maybe you can catch him at work and sober. Then we can see where that leads us."

I noticed the '*you can catch him,*' but didn't say anything.

"I'm pretty sure we won't get any prints," I said. "I noticed that the bathroom mirror seemed to have been wiped down. No prints at all. Plus they were probably wearing gloves. Are any crooks stupid enough to kidnap someone barehanded these days?"

"I s'pose you're right. But I'll see if I can get my hands on a print kit and make my own inspection today. Let's just hope Whitson's in shape to let me in."

"I'd call ahead. Maybe tell him to leave a key with the guard."

"Good thought. What else have you got going today."

"I've got plenty of phone records and follow-up to occupy me for now," I said. "But tomorrow, I'll be paying Mr. Whitson a visit at his office and trying to get the Minneapolis cops engaged."

"Tell Connie I'm working on this thing in earnest."

"Anything else I can do?"

"Yeah. There is. Whitson's called Connie a couple times already today wondering if we've got anything new. He sounds at least half in the bag when he calls. It's a real pain. Of course, I'll tell him to knock it off when we talk, but maybe you could reinforce that a bit."

"I was planning to call Whitson as soon as I hung up with you anyway. I need to know if he's heard from Katherine, or from any kidnapers. I'll suggest he call me instead of Connie. No need for her to suffer further aggravation. She did her part when she handed this off to us – er – to me."

"I'll keep you in the loop. We'll talk later."

"Thanks, Beck."

"My pleasure," I said, and disconnected the call.

I looked at Gunner's notes, and finding Whitson's home land line, punched up the number. The phone rang six times before Whitson picked up.

"Hello?" The voice sounded slurred and whiney.

"Hello. Whitson. This is Beck. We met yesterday at your condo with the Gundersons. Do you remember me?"

I was doubtful.

"Beck?" A pause. "Hey, you're the guy who took my cell phone. Who the hell do you think you are?" His voice was

still slurred and whiney, but now tending more toward belligerent.

"That's me. Are you sober enough to talk?" I asked matter-of-factly.

"Sober? Of course, I'm sober. Who the hell are you again?"

This was a waste of time.

"Okay, Whitson. Listen up! Stop calling Connie Gunderson or I'll break your dialing finger. Got it?"

"Huh? . . . Okay."

I disconnected Mr. Whitson.

## CHAPTER 9

*Monday, October 19th, early a.m.*

Monday morning arrived with a cold, steady rain drenching the turning trees and imparting a splashy black sheen to Jefferson Avenue. Beth and I were just heading out our front porch door, dressed in wet-weather jogging gear. I was still resisting the urge to abandon running shorts for long pants, but conceded a semi-water-proof wind-breaker to the October chill. Beth had pulled her hair back into a pony tail for the run. She wore purple, silky-looking running shorts over some sort of black hi-tech stretch tights. A black and purple Gortex jacket, black gloves and purple Puma running shoes completed her look.

Beth led the way along the concrete sidewalks past the nineteenth-century homes, keeping a steady eight-minute-mile pace. She ran a bit more slowly than I did when I ran alone, but her company was well worth the more leisurely jog.

At first, as our heart rates and breathing adjusted, and our bodies warmed despite the rain, we remained silent. I let Beth choose our speed, and lagged only a bit behind her on the narrow neighborhood sidewalks. Beth's Pumas floated in silence over the wet concrete.

As we reached wider walkways, I pulled up alongside Beth on her streetward side, which I had learned was the

mannerly position for a true gentleman out for a stroll with his lady-friend.

The history of this man-toward-the-street positioning was interesting.

Several hundred years ago, the gentleman walked nearer the buildings, so he would take the brunt of any wash water or garbage that might be flung from second-story windows. These days, given the lack of flying garbage, the greater danger to the damsel was the splash from a passing car. Hence, the gentleman stayed closer to the roadway than his lady companion.

"So what do you have planned for your day?" I asked as we made the turn from Levee Road toward Baypoint Park.

"I was thinking of maybe some indoor activities today." Beth's breathing was steady as she spoke, with no hint of exertion. "Maybe running to a fabric warehouse to see if they've got any inspiring options to spice up my clothing designs. I might check out a bead shop.

"Did you have something planned?"

"Actually, I need to make a run to the Cities to visit with this Whitson guy again. The longer his wife is missing, the less chance of locating her unharmed."

I wiped the dripping rain water from my brow with my left palm as we continued along the path near the river. "I thought I might catch him at his office. In addition to increasing the chances of finding him sober, I could maybe find out something from his co-workers or his work environment."

"Then it's settled," Beth said matter-of-factly. "You go your way and I'll go mine. I'll find the fabric while you solve the crime."



She smiled as if she had just said something tremendously clever.

"A bit of a slant rhyme," I remarked. "But all-in-all, quite fine poetry, indeed."

Beth slapped me in the stomach with the back of her right hand. "If you've got the time, I've got the rhyme."

More of Beth's smile.

"Now, I can't argue with the artistic maturity of that one," I said, with only a hint of friendly sarcasm.

Beth increased her speed, leaving me behind for a moment. I soon caught up.

For the rest of the run we spoke of nothing in particular – the beautiful bluffs, the quiet river, late-migrating ducks paddling in the harbor. As we made the final turn for home, the rain began to let up. A small shaft of sun pierced the clouds and then was gone.

Back at 1011 Jefferson, the morning paper had arrived on our front step, protected by a clear plastic bag, sealed with a rubber band. I picked it up on our way in. Once inside the front screen porch, we sat for several peaceful minutes in wicker chairs.

The outdoor scene viewed through the screen and the light rain reminded me of a Monet painting – slightly out of focus, yet eliciting the perfect impression.

As we sat on the porch, watching the rain, Beth broke the silence. "I s'pose we'll need to bring the Ficus inside for the winter soon."

"Of course," I said. "The Ficus."

We turned our faces toward one another and laughed.

## CHAPTER 10

At eight-thirty, it was still raining steadily as I drove the Pilot northwest along U.S. Highway 61 and then I-494 toward the southwestern Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie.

Gunner had already reported the utter failure of his fingerprint investigation. Other than those belonging to the Whitsons, the Gundersons and me, he had found no prints at all. Not even from a cleaning lady, a casual acquaintance, the Maytag Repairman. Nobody.

The absence of other prints was, in itself, a confirmation of foul play. Someone had wiped the place down. But that fact didn't help me rule out George Whitson as a suspect. He could have hired a thug to do away with Katherine, then eliminated any stray fingerprints himself. He was certainly fastidious enough to have done a professional cleaning job.

The corporate headquarters of Equinox Advertising Specialties, Inc. was located in an office park development containing about half-a-dozen, 1980's-vintage, six-story, metal and glass commercial buildings. According to Gunner's information, this was Whitson's place of business.

I parked the Pilot on the middle level of a three-story parking ramp adjacent to the Equinox building in an area marked "Visitors." It wasn't raining on this level, owing to the third level parking slab above. Judging from the number

of empty "Visitors" parking slots, Equinox didn't appear to be doing a lot of entertaining today.

Entering the building on the second floor, I took the steps down through the white, concrete stairwell to the doorway marked "Main Level." Leaning against the opener bar of the metal door, I entered the office building proper. Signs directed me to the Reception Area, just ahead down a carpeted hall lined with offices.

The receptionist's workstation was one of those metal-trimmed, teak jobs that looked sort of like a bunker. There was a wooden counter-top overhanging the workstation on three sides, including the side toward me.

I leaned on the counter.

"Could you direct me to George Whitson's office, please?" I asked the bored-looking, young female receptionist.

The phone rang and she said to me, "One moment, please."

It baffles me why someone calling on the telephone inevitably takes priority over a live person awaiting service.

After redirecting the call, the receptionist turned to me again. "I can connect you to Mr. Whitson's office if . . . excuse me. I have another call." She again answered the telephone.

I pulled my cell out of an inner pocket and dialed Whitson's work number, as provided by Gunner. Whitson's secretary answered.

"This is James Becker," I said. "Please tell Mr. Whitson I am on the line and it is urgent."

"And what is this regarding?" she asked, professionally screening Whitson's calls. The receptionist was giving someone on another line driving directions to the Equinox HQ.

"Personal business. And please, it really is urgent."

"Very well," the secretary replied. "I will see if the Director is available." An instrumental rendition of the Beatles' "Penny Lane" filled my handset.

The receptionist turned back in my direction. "I have the Human Resources Department on the line for you sir," she said, holding a telephone receiver toward me.

"Would you please ask them to hold?" I asked politely. "I'm on another call."

The receptionist looked a bit flustered. I doubt that she had encountered this situation before.

"Well . . . ah . . . yes, of course. I will let them know," she finally managed.

"George Whitson," my phone announced in Whitson's voice, as "Penny Lane" suddenly disappeared.

"Mr. Whitson," I said. "I need to speak with you immediately. Shall I come up? Or will you be coming to meet me at Reception?"

The receptionist looked confused.

Whitson gave me directions to his office and told me to come up.

I said, "Thank you. I'll be right there."

Then to the receptionist, I said, "Please tell Human Resources that I will be unavailable for the rest of the day. If they wish to call again tomorrow, that would be lovely!"

"Yes sir," she said automatically. Her face wore a strange look as she reached for the button to connect to HR with my message.

Human Resources was on the second floor, but Whitson's office was on the sixth. I guessed 'Director' was as high as one could get in the HR Department at Equinox.

I located the heavy wooden door to the 'Executive Offices,' turned the brass knob, and let myself in. The

waiting area was plush, even by corporate standards – overstuffed chairs and sofas, with glass and marble side tables. A professionally dressed, middle-aged woman was standing at the far edge of the room, waiting for me as I arrived.

"Mr. Becker, I assume?"

Her greeting was warm and professional.

"The same," I said.

"I will be happy to escort you to Director Whitson's office. He is expecting you."

"Thank you," I said, as she turned to lead the way.

After a short walk down a stately hall, trimmed with dark oak base and crown molding, we arrived at Whitson's office. The woman knocked twice, then without waiting for a response, opened the door allowing me to enter. I thanked her again, and proceeded inside.

The man seated behind the desk was a sober version of the George Whitson I had met two days earlier – slim, pale, withdrawn. He rose, and stepping around the near side of his large, oak desk, he offered his hand. I took it firmly in mine, once again feeling his squish limply as I tried to get a grip.

"Mr. Becker, please have a seat," he offered, waving a thin arm toward one of his comfortably-upholstered side chairs.

"Beck, if you don't mind," I responded. "Nobody calls me Mr. Becker." Whitson nodded as he took a seat in his high-back leather chair.

Whitson spoke again.

"Beck. I'm afraid I need to apologize for my behavior the other day at my apartment. I've been quite distraught over Katherine's disappearance, and I haven't dealt with it very well." He sounded sincerely apologetic, but retained his

tenor of formality. "I hope you won't judge my character on that unfortunate performance."

"Mr. Whitson, I understand that you're operating under difficult circumstances. Your actions the other day mean little to me other than their delaying my search for your wife. So if we might get down to that issue . . . ?"

I could see Whitson's expression turn somber, and his face flush white, at the prospect of discussing Katherine's situation.

"Of course." He swallowed and tugged his suit coat. "How can I help?"

"Let's start at the beginning. When did you and Katherine meet?"

Whitson leaned back slightly and focused on the ceiling.

"We met a little over eight years ago at a social function put on by the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. It was a mixer at a downtown hotel – cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, that sort of thing. At the time, she was working as a computer person of some type at IBM in Rochester, and I was an accountant at the Winters firm in the IDS tower, downtown Minneapolis. We ended up at the same table and just sort of hit it off."

Whitson looked down from the ceiling and in my direction.

"And then . . . ?" I asked patiently.

"We dated for a while. Neither of us was a kid, you know. I was in my mid-thirties and she was about ten years my senior. So after a few months, we decided that we liked each other well enough and we should get married."

Whitson made it sound so romantic – almost like a business merger.

"We bought the apartment in the Warehouse District just before the wedding and had the new furniture delivered while we honeymooned in San Diego. When we arrived back home, our accommodations at the apartment were all set."

I was thinking how glad I was that I was not part of the Whitson marriage. Their relationship seemed less like lovers, and more like roommates – at least to hear Whitson tell it.

"So how did you come to work here at Equinox?"

I needed to change the subject away from their personal lives. That avenue of questioning didn't appear productive. And Whitson was depressing me.

"Two summers ago, Equinox was having some business difficulties. Of course, this was true of many businesses at that time. Anyway, it hired the Winters firm as business consultants to get some ideas as to how Equinox might remain viable and economically competitive. When a business needs to downsize, it's not uncommon to hire a consultant who can be blamed for recommending all the necessary job cuts.

"My part in the consulting job dealt with the Human Resources function. When I analyzed the HR Department, it was obvious that Equinox was operating on a 'staffing-based' model. They had been trying to manage existing personnel as a business asset – fostering a positive work environment, encouraging teamwork, bestowing lots of warm fuzzies on everybody.

"In lean economic times, a financial model for HR makes much more sense. That is, you should run your HR Department just like your operating divisions. Expect productivity. Expect it to be lean and efficient. That's the recommendation I gave to Equinox at the time.

"When the consulting job was done, Equinox approached me to come in-house as Director of HR, to implement my recommendations. Even though my former firm could have prevented me from taking this job, they chose to allow me to make the move. So here I am."

He spoke the last sentence with a two-armed flourish, indicating not only the expanse of his physical office, but the sweep of his authority over HR at Equinox.

"Can you think of anyone here at Equinox who might want to harm Katherine?"

"Oh, my god! Do you think someone here might have taken Katherine?" He sounded astonished that such a thing might be possible.

"I'm just trying to be thorough," I said. "Anyone here that harbors any ill will toward her at all?"

"No. Absolutely not! Why in the world would they? They hardly know her."

"How about someone who might want to hurt you by hurting Katherine?" I persisted.

"No one likes their boss," Whitson said. "But kidnapping? I can't believe it of anyone here. No. Not possible."

He was clearly flustered at the thought.

"Okay. You're probably right. But just to be on the safe side, could you provide me with names and contact information for all your reports? How many people report to you anyway, maybe half a dozen?"

I figured he was far enough up the food chain to have only a few people he needed to manage directly.

"Good guess. There are exactly six, excluding Margaret, my secretary, of course. I'll have Margaret put that



information together for you right now." He picked up his phone and pressed the intercom button.

While he spoke with Margaret, I took the opportunity for a quick glance around the office. There were a number of framed degrees and professional certifications. His desk held only one picture, and that was a closeup of Katherine. It was oriented for his viewing only – not a display piece. His desktop was clear of any sign of paperwork.

I took a second look all around. There was really no sign that any work at all was being accomplished in this office. No piles of papers. No reports showing on the computer screen – in fact, the screen was turned off, and it was presently . . . I looked at my watch . . . 10:30 a.m. No dictation equipment was in evidence.

Whitson hung up the phone. "All right," he said. "Margaret will have your information when you are ready to leave. She is very efficient."

"Okay. Thanks."

Time to try a new line of questioning. "Can you think of any reason why Katherine might leave you?"

Whitson looked irritated at the implication, but didn't seem to have the gumption to object.

"None whatsoever," he stated emphatically.

"No recent quarrels? No declarations of dissatisfaction? No suspicion of infidelity?"

Whitson was still irritated and still lacked the *cojones* to say anything about it.

"No. None of those things. We were very satisfied with our relationship. We never even fought." Then . . . "This line of questioning is not going to help find Katherine. She did not leave voluntarily."

"In the face of her goodbye note to the contrary, why do you believe she was taken against her will?" I continued. Even though I had already concluded that Katherine had been kidnapped, George didn't know that. Sometimes suspects will divulge important details under pressure. So I wanted to keep him on edge.

"Because I know her!" He thought some more. "And even if she ever decided to leave me, she would *never* leave her job. She is absolutely devoted to her work. She loves it more than life itself! And she has been absent from work as well." Whitson folded his arms across his chest.

"You've checked recently with her employer and she still hasn't reported in?" I asked.

"Just this morning, about two hours ago."

I couldn't think of anything else to ask Whitson. This session had really been more of a character assessment in the first place. Whitson's performance had done a pretty decent job in raising his character quotient from abysmal to somewhere in the vicinity of mediocre.

I concluded my interview, assuring Whitson that I would do everything possible to find his wife. I also advised that he stay around home when he was not working, just in case any kidnapper might call.

And I directed him to lay off the sauce. For his own good, and for Katherine's, I needed him to be sober and coherent.

As I turned to leave, I stopped. Reaching into my right inside sport coat pocket, I produced Whitson's cell phone. I turned halfway back toward Whitson and tossed it to him.

"Here's your phone. Make sure I can reach you when I need you."

Whitson fumbled the phone onto the carpet as I walked out the door.

While I was retracing my steps to the executive office suite exit doors, Margaret tracked me down with a business-size envelope in her hand.

"Mr. Becker. I believe this is the information you requested."

"Thank you very much for your assistance," I responded. "It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance." I bowed, doffing my imaginary cap, and backed out the door.

Now to interview some of Whitson's reports.

I took the elevator to floor number two – Human Resources Department – and started looking for people matching the names on Margaret's list. A few employees looked at me sideways as I tried to appear as though I belonged there.

The first name I located was Jan Tyler, Employee Benefits Manager. She was in her office. I knocked gently on the open door. Jan looked up from her desk. "Yes?"

I gave her a big smile. "Hi. My name is Beck and I am an attorney doing some confidential work for the CEO concerning one George Whitson. May I come in for a moment?"

I pulled out my wallet and displayed my laminated lawyer's license from the Minnesota Supreme Court.

Jan examined the license closely. "Do you have some picture ID?" she asked. I withdrew another card from my wallet. Upon comparing my smile to my driver's license pic, Jan was satisfied. She returned the documents to me and beckoned me inside her office.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Beck?"

"Just 'Beck,' please."

"Okay."

"As I mentioned, this is strictly confidential. So please don't mention our visit to anyone."

"Of course," said Jan, somewhat tentatively.

"George Whitson," I said. "Tell me about him."

Jan looked perplexed. "What do you want to know?"

"What kind of a boss is he?"

"You're sure this is confidential?" she asked.

I crossed my heart with my right forefinger.

"Okay. In all honesty, I think Director Whitson is probably a decent enough guy. But as a boss, he's extremely rigid. Everything needs to be his way."

"How so?"

"He wants everything done in a certain specific format. He's not at all flexible in that regard. It makes him very hard to work for."

That seemed consistent with Whitson's OCD personality. Both his condo and office had exhibited signs of an occupant compulsively obsessed with order for order's sake.

"And when he first came here a couple years ago, he completely reorganized the HR personnel into new areas – so we needed to start our learning curves all over again. For example, I used to manage the staffing function – hiring, firing, interview and grievance protocols, that sort of thing. Now I'm trying to sort out the regulatory jungle of employee benefits. Qualified plans. Health insurance. Disability and maternity leaves. Vacation policies.

"The laws, rules and regulations I have to deal with in these areas are myriad and conflicting. I'm lucky that the old head of Benefits is still working here so I can go to him for help."

Jan's perspective was understandable in the context of a corporate reorganization. When a company has just

undergone massive layoffs, the person who does the reallocating of personnel, in this case, George Whitson, was going to be the natural object of negative perceptions, possibly even fear, in the eyes of remaining employees.

"Any other complaints?"

"Once you get used to his quirkiness, you can learn to live with him," she said. "He's not the worst boss I ever had."

"Do you think any employee here might dislike Whitson enough to do something criminal to harm him or his family?" I asked finally.

Jan looked genuinely shocked.

"Oh, my god, no! He can be very frustrating to work for. But someone harming him – that's a whole different thing. I don't know anybody here who might do something like that."

"Are you sure you can't think of anyone at all? Maybe someone who was fired when Mr. Whitson came on board?"

Jan thought harder.

"You know . . . ." She held up a finger as she thought. "Arthur Trample used to have Director Whitson's job. He got canned to make room for Director Whitson. Maybe he . . . ." Then she changed her mind. "No. I can't see even Trample stooping to something criminal. He was a dink. But not evil."

At least Jan had given me another name to think about. I concluded my interview with her, reminding her to keep it confidential.

I found two other names on Margaret's list of reports to interview that day. Both told me basically the same thing I had just heard from Jan. George was a pain to work for. Nobody would hurt him physically – even Arthur Trample.

I had heard enough George Whitson info for the day, so I departed Human Resources and took the elevator down to

the first floor. On my way past the receptionist's station, a point needed to be made.

Walking behind her desk, I noted the general number for Equinox and silently punched it into my phone. I did not hit the dial key.

I continued around to the front of the station while the receptionist was fielding a call. I stood and waited for her to finish.

"May I help you sir?" she asked politely.

I pushed the dial button on my cell as I held it by my hip. "Yes. I was just wondering . . ."

The receptionist's phone rang.

To me, she said, "Could you hold one moment please?" It was more a direction than a request.

"Equinox Advertising Specialities. How may I direct your call?"

I put my phone to my mouth. "I just wanted to say, 'Have a nice day.' " I flipped the phone closed, waved a cheery goodbye, and headed back for the parking ramp.

Glancing behind me, I noted that the receptionist's blank visage, and smiled to myself.

On the way out, I opened the metal door to the parking ramp stairwell and jogged up to Level Two.

The Pilot was visible as soon as I was two steps outside the building door . . . and I could see something was wrong. Both back tires were flat.

Most people would probably just go survey the damage, curse a bit, and then call the auto club. But in my experience, coincidences like getting two flat tires while investigating a possible crime, were not likely. Someone had intentionally flattened my tires. And that someone might have something else in mind as well.

Since I had already started off toward the Pilot, I continued in that direction, swinging my keys around my forefinger and whistling as I went. But I didn't stop at my vehicle. Instead, I kept going down the line of cars and around the large concrete pillar at the end of the row. Whoever it was that had punctured my tires might still be here. And he or she may not know exactly what I look like.

Maybe I could gain an advantage.

As I disappeared behind the pillar, I ducked low, then backtracked alongside the last car in my row. Slipping in front of the car, along the cable ramp supports, I maneuvered into a crouching posture between two vehicles. I'd roughed up my clothing a bit in this process. But at least my position was now hidden from most angles.

I could wait here and watch for further developments. But eventually, all the cars would be gone, and I'd be stuck out in the open. I needed to do something more proactive.

After about five minutes crouching behind the car, I had made a decision. I wormed my way back to the far side of the pillar. Still hidden by the concrete post, I stood upright. I took off my sport coat and stashed my shoulder holster in one pocket. Holding my .40 caliber Beretta short barrel under the sport coat, which I had draped over one arm, I lurched awkwardly toward the elevator.

If a stalker hadn't recognized me before, he wouldn't now. Without the sport coat, the happy whistle and my usual walking gait, I appeared to be a quite different person from the one who had emerged from the stairwell just a few minutes before.

Manufacturing an improvised disguise was a skill I had learned in my previous trade. It worked well for this situation, too.

Once I was safely back inside the building, I trotted down the stairs and placed a call for assistance. I had a friend who would occasionally help me out in similar situations. And if someone was, indeed, stalking me, this might be my first and best clue to Katherine's whereabouts. I didn't want to blow the chance by being impatient.

The friend I had called was Terry Red Feather – aka "Bull."

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 had adopted the nickname. He seemed fine with it.

Bull is a full-blooded Mdewakanton Dakota Indian. Born on the Prairie River Reservation near Red Wing, 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'd assumed he had been killed in a knife fight at some bar.

But one day about eight years ago, he had shown up at his parents' home on the Rez. By the time of his return, he had become the imposing figure whom I had come to know. Bull never told anyone where he had been for twenty years. And after a few altercations, folks quit asking.

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 mostly wooded land to spare. A modern-day Native.



Based on Bull's knowledge, temperament and physical dimensions, I had some ideas about where he had been and what he had been doing during his absence. I would pursue them with Bull at the appropriate time. But that time had never yet presented itself. Maybe it would one day.

After speaking with Bull on the phone, I needed a place to kill some time. I consulted the building directory and located an employee cafeteria. I waited there, at a small café table, nursing a cup of coffee and an oatmeal raisin cookie, for the better part of two hours.

By the look of pedestrian traffic in the hall outside the cafeteria, some employees were starting to head for home. I hoped my assistance would arrive before any stalker decided to skedaddle.

Just then my cell vibrated and I answered the call. It was Bull.

"Beck," I said.

"Ready," the male voice replied. The line went dead.

I chuckled and shook my head. People have their idiosyncrasies – some people more than others.

I pocketed the cell, and with my jacket on and gun holstered, I made my way back to the second level of the parking ramp. This time I headed straight to the Pilot.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed histrionically at the flat tires. All four were airless.

As I walked around the Pilot, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him coming toward me from the back side of the ramp. Most of the visitors' cars were gone by now. So there was a lot of open concrete for him to cover before reaching me. As he got closer, I saw him raise his arm. I was pretty sure it held a gun.

Pretending to bend down for a closer look at the front tire, I used the Pilot as a shield. My action forced the man to either wait and keep his distance, or to keep coming and try for a nearer shot. From my crouching position, I couldn't see which option he had chosen.

When I next saw the man, he was lunging around the back of my truck and leveling a black 9 mm pistol at my chest.

His face held a look of supreme confidence . . . for a moment. Then the expression changed abruptly to surprise and confusion. Before he could get off a shot – or say a word – a large American Indian had lifted him from his feet and thrown him flat on his back on the concrete. The man's gun went skittering across the ramp floor, as a strong brown hand closed like an anaconda around his throat.

"I was wondering if you were going to make it in time, or if I was going to have to shoot him," I said to my Indian friend.

"Well . . . now you know," Bull said, his eyes on the attacker.

The squirming man on the concrete was maybe six feet tall, 190 pounds. Bull had tossed him one-handed, as though he were a rag doll.

He was Caucasian with long, greasy brown hair and a bad complexion. He had the stringy look of someone who takes most of his nourishment from a liquor bottle.

He was choking for air and trying to scream at the same time. Both his hands pulled as hard as they could at Bull's arms, struggling to obtain release from the viselike grip. His torso and legs thrashed violently – and ineffectively.

"Should we give him some air?" I asked Bull nonchalantly as I walked closer, looking the rapidly fading man in the eye.

"If you say so," Bull said.

Balancing on one knee and one foot beside the man's head, Bull loosened the throat grip slightly.

His windpipe made a hissing sound as the man sucked air into his lungs.

"What's your name?" I asked politely.

The man tried to spit at me, but Bull tightened his grip in time to abort the attempt.

"No name?" I said. "Okay. We'll call you 'Buffy.'"

"So Buffy, who hired you to shoot me?"

Buffy tried to say something, but it was indistinguishable.

"Loosen his air a bit please, Bull. I can't quite hear him."

Bull didn't say anything, but again loosened his grip.

Buffy tried to speak. "Jesus. I don't even know," he managed. "A guy paid me a lousy \$500 bucks to scare you off."

"What guy?" I pressed, my hands casually tucked in my front pants pockets. "Scare me off from what?"

"I told you I don't know."

Bull placed Buffy's right hand flat on the rampway and knelt on it. Buffy winced and let out a squeal.

"Listen, Buffy. We're in no hurry. And you've got lots of fingers and toes and arms and legs and other stuff we can damage. But we would prefer you just answer my questions. Right Bull?"

I looked in Bull's direction.

He didn't move his steely gaze from Buffy.

"Um hmm. You say so."

"Geez," Buffy squeaked, his air flow still constricted. "I can't tell you what I don't know. This guy got my name from somebody – I don't know who – and gave me the five. Told me where you'd be and what your truck looked like. I was thinking I might just rough you up with a club, but you looked kinda big, so I was planning on shooting a leg.

"Honest to god! That's all I know."

"Honest to god, Bull," I said, sarcastically. "He was only planning to shoot me in the leg. I guess I got his motivations all wrong."

"Hmm," said Bull.

"All right," I said to Bull. "Seems we mistook old Buffy's intentions, so we can maybe cut him some slack."

Bull shrugged.

"Okay, Buffy. Are you listening?"

"Yeah," he wheezed.

"If it weren't for our charitable natures, you would be dead right now. And not peaceful dead – painful dead! Understood?"

Buffy tried to nod.

"Good. Now you go back to whoever hired you, or not. But if I ever see your ugly face again, we won't be so charitable next time."

I looked into Buffy's eyes to make sure he understood completely. The terror I saw there made it appear that he did.

"Okay, Bull. Please release the worm."

"You say so," he said, rising to his feet and lifting Buffy by the throat – holding him until he could stand on his own.

"You'll be donating the gun to us," Bull said. "Now git!"

He released his grip.

We watched as Buffy ran and stumbled down the ramp.

"You want I should follow him?" Bull asked.

"Naw. Waste of time. Strictly a first line flunky. We'd have to dig through eight different layers of crap bags before we could trace him to a real human being. He doesn't know anything."

"But we do," said Bull.

I nodded.

"Somebody wants me off this case."

## CHAPTER 11

I thanked Bull for his able assistance and sent him on his way. I hung around the ramp until the tire repair truck arrived. Fortunately, Buffy had just cut the valve stems and I didn't need to buy all new tires. A relatively minor inconvenience, all things considered.

On the drive home, I had some things to think about. Who had hired Buffy to intimidate me? And did that person want to scare me away from the investigation of Katherine's disappearance? Or was there some other bees' nest I had inadvertently poked? And how had Buffy located my car at the Equinox lot? How did his employer know I drove a grey Pilot? And how could he guess I would be visiting Whitson's office this afternoon?

There were certainly a lot of questions. But of one thing I was certain. Now that I was confident that Katherine had been taken from the condo against her will, we needed to convince the police to assist with the search. Time was of the essence.

I would need Gunner's help. I didn't know how much he could do himself. But I was sure he would tell me his boundaries. And at a minimum, he could direct me toward the right bureaucratic compass point.

By the time I finally got home to Jefferson Avenue, it was almost eight o'clock in the evening. I had called Beth earlier so she wouldn't worry, and because, well, it's the polite thing

to do. The garage door opened obediently. I parked the Pilot, closed up the garage, and went inside through the back porch into the kitchen.

Slam!

"I'm finally here," I called.

"I'm in here," Beth answered from the living room.

As I cut through the dining room and foyer to the living room, I could see Beth reclining on the red leather couch, reading her novel. She looked up at me as I entered the room.

"You've looked better," she commented.

"Thanks," I replied.

"Seriously. What have you been up to today? Your jacket's all dirty and rumpled. Your pants look like you've been playing in a sand box. And your hands are pretty black."

I looked at my palms. They were covered with black rubber from my attempts to assist with the tire changing regimen.

"Sorry 'bout that. But you know what they say about dirty hands . . ." I waited.

"Sorry. No clue."

"Okay. I thought maybe there was a clever saying in there somewhere. But I guess not."

Beth smiled, even though my joke wasn't funny.

"I'm going upstairs to hit the shower and change clothes. Will you wait for me?" I asked.

"You know I will."

"Okay. Back in a flash."

I jogged up the broad central staircase to the second floor, taking two steps at a time.

Before showering, I called Gunner's cell. I hoped we could get the cops working on the Missing Persons case yet today. No joy. I got his voicemail and left a message.

I gave him an update on my day's activities. I asked him to look into the background and current whereabouts of one Arthur Trample, former Director of Human Resources at Equinox Advertising Specialties. I also requested that he contact me as soon as possible about obtaining further police involvement in the investigation.

I'd done all I could. Might as well relax for now.

After my shower, I went to our bedroom and put on some clean, tan khakis and a burgundy golf shirt. Then I made my way barefoot back downstairs and into the kitchen, being careful not to disturb Beth's enjoyment of her novel.

The fridge held a couple nice cheeses and a bottle of California Merlot. I prepared a variety of cheese cubes, with individual toothpicks on a small plate, and uncorked the wine. Carrying cheese, wine and two oversized wine stems, I returned to the living room, setting the plate and glasses on the bass drum case.

Beth was now watching me, still reclining, holding her book, folded upside-down, on her firm mid-section. I poured some wine into each glass and set the bottle on the coffee table. Kneeling beside the red couch, I presented one of the wine glasses to my wife.

Beth sat up and placed her book on the library table behind the couch while I maintained my kneel/bow position. Accepting the wine stem in her right hand, she used her left as a royal blade, placing it regally on each of my shoulders in turn, karate-chop-style.

"I hereby knight thee, Sir Suck-up-a-lot," she said.



It was fortunate I had not yet sampled my wine, because my laughter would have caused me to spit it out.

"You really know how to kill a mood," I laughed.

"That was a mood? Sorry. I guess I haven't seen one in a while."

Beth smiled.

After that, I joined Beth on the red leather couch. We sampled cheese and enjoyed wine and conversation.

Eventually, I had to report the events of my day. Which I did. Beth listened intently to every word. When I had finished the story, I felt much lighter somehow, and totally refreshed. Maybe Beth has magical empathic powers. I hadn't thought of that before. I usually got distracted by her beauty, kindness, charisma and many other wonderful attributes before I got to questioning the issue of magical powers.

When the wine was drunk, and the cheese had been eaten, it was time to retire for the evening. I placed our dishes in the dishwasher, and the wine bottle in the recycling bin, while Beth waited at the foot of the steps. When I returned, she took my hand and led me upstairs.

## CHAPTER 12

*Tuesday, October 20th, 7:30 a.m.*

Tuesday morning, as I enjoyed a bite of fried egg on wheat toast in our kitchen, I wondered how I had let myself get involved with helping George Whitson. Despite his decent performance during the office interview, I didn't like or trust the man. Apparently, his co-workers didn't either. The Gundersons' involvement with him had earned them an upsetting phone call. And on top of that, somebody was now seeking to do me bodily harm.

Oh yeah, and I had totaled my favorite chinos squirming around a parking ramp floor!

I looked at my face in the wall mirror across the room. Oh, god! Civilian life was turning me into a whiner!

Getting back to my principles, I knew why I had taken the case, and why I would see it through.

One important reason was Gunner. My friend had asked for a favor. It was my privilege to comply. I wasn't about to let him down – especially not in the eyes of his wife.

Another reason was Katherine Whitson. She appeared to be in serious trouble, and clearly, George wasn't competent to help her.

A nefarious caller had turned the Gundersons' lives upside down. And that pissed me off.

The final reason was Buffy. I didn't like people messing with me. That confrontation was an unresolved issue that needed resolving. I wanted Buffy's boss – if for no other reason, to wreck his favorite pants.

As internal conflicts go, I had resolved this one fairly quickly, I thought. That was good. But thinking only gets a person so far. Action is also required.

The first action for my day was a contact with the Minneapolis Police. Gunner had called me late last night and told me how Ottawa County would handle a Missing Persons report. He didn't know Minneapolis procedures. So I looked online.

Upon viewing the MPD website, I found it exceedingly confusing, and decided to call the universal "non-emergency" number. I picked up our land line and made the call.

"Minneapolis Police Information," a male voice said. "How may I help you?"

"My name is Attorney James Becker. My client, George Whitson, filed a Missing Persons report this past Friday, and I'm calling to check on the status."

"Which Precinct did he file the report with?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. He lives downtown." I gave the address for the Whitson condo.

"That'd be the First Precinct. Please hold."

The man's voice was replaced by a public service announcement of some sort relating to neighborhood safety organizations. In a moment, a female voice came on the line.

"First Precinct, Mitchell," she said.

I repeated my identification and the reason for my call.

"One moment. I'll check our records for Friday." There was a pause. "I see no Missing Persons report from Mr. Whitson. What is the missing person's name, please?"

"Katherine Whitson," I replied.

"Sorry. No Katherine Whitson listed as missing."

"I know that he *did call* to report her missing. In fact, I saw a record of his call to 911 on Friday morning. And I have confirmed that your precinct is the correct one for his report," I said, trying to keep the irritation I was feeling out of my voice.

"Is the missing person a minor, incompetent or incapacitated?" she asked rather robotically.

"No."

"Is she a threat to herself or to others?"

"I'm pretty sure not. She may well be in danger *from* others, though." I was getting more irritated by the minute.

"Well, if none of those conditions is met, Department policy in Missing Persons cases is not to take a report. So if your client answered those questions the same way you just did, we wouldn't have any paperwork." She recited all of this matter-of-factly.

I was irritated at the nonchalance with which Minneapolis PD had handled this situation.

"It now appears that she was most likely kidnapped," I said. "With whom may I speak about that?"

"Is there evidence of foul play?"

I could see where this was going.

"Yes. Ample evidence."

"Any note explaining her disappearance?"

"No," I lied. "What if there were?"

"Then it wouldn't be considered a kidnapping, and procedures would not allow us to take a report."

"Okay," I said. "No note. No explanation. Lots of blood. Whom do I talk to?"

"I will transfer you to an investigator," she said. "Please hold."

If Whitson had called asking for help with a "missing person," he had no chance of penetrating the myriad defenses inherent in this bureaucracy.

"Detective Blakeley," a man answered.

"My name is Attorney James Becker. I'm calling to report a probable kidnapping. Are you the guy I want to talk to?" I asked.

"That depends," he said.

It figured. He was going to see if this was, in reality, not a kidnapping, but a Missing Persons case.

"On what," I asked, as politely as I could muster.

"Did the victim leave a note?" he continued.

"Look. I don't want to take this out on you. But I just answered all of these questions with someone in Missing Persons. There is a very high likelihood that Katherine Whitson has been kidnapped. Can I prove it?" I continued. "No. Isn't that what you guys do?"

"Did the victim leave a note?" Blakeley repeated, a bit of impatience showing in his voice.

"Yes, damn it!" I exclaimed. "But there is also plenty of evidence that it was not a voluntary note. If you would please come out to look at the scene, I believe your keen investigative observations would lead you to the same conclusion."

"What evidence is there of a kidnapping?" he continued. "Any blood at the scene? Any evidence of a struggle?"

"No," I said. "But Dr. Whitson departed without her car, her key ring (including home, car and office keys), her cell

phone, and her credit cards. She has not shown up for work – which, according to her husband and co-workers, is entirely uncharacteristic. Furthermore, I was assaulted by a man with a gun yesterday at her husband's place of business."

I took a breath.

"Did you file an assault report?" he asked.

"No. Damn it! This isn't about me. It's about the kidnapping of Katherine Whitson."

I was about ready to pull my hair out.

"But she left a note. Correct?"

This guy was determined to be difficult.

"No, actually," I lied. "I was mistaken about that part. Can I file a report and get some assistance from Minneapolis's finest in locating Dr. Whitson?"

"We'll see who is available and send an investigator around to see Mr. Whitson in the next couple days," Blakeley said.

"A woman has been kidnapped and you're going to wait a couple days to investigate? What the hell is this? Keystone cops?"

I knew I wasn't making friends with that crack. I just couldn't help it.

"The kidnapping is your opinion," he said. "But based on certain evidence conveyed to me a moment ago, she left a note. So it's not a priority item for this Department."

"Katherine Whitson is not an 'item' at all." I was fuming. "Connect me to your superior officer."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Blakeley said.

"Why not?" I asked, mad as hell.

"Because all I'm going to do is take the contact info for Mr. Whitson, and then I'm going to hang up."

There comes a time to admit defeat. I learned long ago that you cannot convince a particular person of any fact, regardless of your evidence, if that person refuses to be convinced. Possessing this knowledge had saved me a lot of wasted breath through the years.

I gave him the info and begged him to investigate.

Then he hung up.

This wasn't over. Katherine Whitson deserved better. I hung up the phone as well. Going back to the dining room computer, I looked up the address of the First Precinct and the name of its Commander on the MPD website.

Beth was in the kitchen reading the morning edition of the Metro newspaper when I walked in. "Hi, Babe." She looked up at me and smiled.

"Hi, Beth. Listen. I've got a serious case of intractable institutional density to deal with at the Minneapolis Police Department. I need to go up there and see someone in person. I'm gonna head right out."

"Jousting at windmills, are we?" She smiled again. More melting of my innards. Then, with a shooing motion, she added, "Go for it! If not you, then who? I've got gobs of stuff to keep me busy."

"See ya as soon as possible," I said, grabbing the Pilot keys and striking out for the garage.

The First Precinct was located at 19 North Fourth Street in downtown Minneapolis. Fourth Street is a one-way headed south. I had to circle the block a couple times in search of a legal spot to park. But about an hour and fifteen minutes after leaving home, I had located a parking spot and was on my way up the steps into the Minneapolis First Police Precinct. It was 10:00 a.m. A male uniformed officer was

seated at an elevated wood desk in the foyer – just like in all the old cop shows on TV.

I strode up to the desk and smiled.

"May I help you?" the officer said, returning the smile.

I have very frequently found that one smile gets you another. It's a good thing to remember.

I identified myself. Then I said, "I need to meet with Commander Reichert." I continued smiling.

"Do you have an appointment?" he asked, still friendly.

"No. Actually I don't," I admitted apologetically. "But it is a matter of utmost urgency. I fear the Press will be involved if it's not dealt with swiftly. And I had really hoped to help the Commander get in front of this thing."

I gave another smile. A good citizen trying to help the local police department.

"I'll call Inspector Reichert and see what I can do. Please have a seat," he said, motioning to one of the upholstered chairs lining the sides of the foyer. Red Wing could take a tip from Minneapolis on waiting room furniture – Red Wing's was molded plastic. I thanked the officer and took a chair.

After a bit of discussion on the phone, the desk officer hung up and told me, "The Inspector will be right down."

"Thank you," I said.

I hoped he didn't get in trouble for what I was about to do. He seemed like a nice guy.

About five minutes later, a small, slender woman in an olive business suit with black, medium-height pumps appeared out of the elevator. Seeing that I was the only customer in the waiting area, she approached me and I stood.

"I am Inspector Reichert," she said, extending her hand.



"Attorney James Becker," I replied as we exchanged a firm handshake.

"You have something to tell me?" she asked.

"I think a bit of privacy would be a good idea," I said.

"Very well. Please follow me."

She turned primly and headed toward a doorway at the left side of the foyer. It turned out to be a tiny conference room. She wasn't going to invite me to her office. No matter.

Once we were both seated at the small conference table, she asked again, "What do you wish to tell me?"

"My client's wife has been kidnapped," I began. "I have tried to make a formal report to your investigator, Detective Blakeley, but he refuses to take any action. I was hoping you could help."

I smiled.

She looked irritated.

The smiling thing doesn't always work.

"I understood that you wanted to speak with me about keeping a police matter out of the Press." She didn't look happy at my deception. "How does this situation apply?"

"Well," I said. "If the Minneapolis Police Department refuses to properly and promptly investigate the kidnapping of my client's wife, my next stop will be the Editor's desk at the *Pioneer Press*. They love a story where the police shirk their responsibilities to the great detriment of the helpless victim.

"And I assure you, Inspector," I said, locking my eyes on hers, "that I will write that story myself, if necessary."

Now she looked even less happy.

"So what is it you want, exactly?" she said through clenched teeth.

"For the Department to investigate my client's kidnapping – nothing more, nothing less." I leaned back and rested my hands on the dark green linoleum table top.

After a moment of thought, she must have decided it was easier to give me what I wanted than to risk having to deal with a public fiasco, warranted or not.

"I will direct Detective Blakeley to proceed with the kidnapping investigation. Satisfied?"

I wasn't. Blakeley would probably still give the Katherine Whitson case short shrift. But it was the best I was going to get.

"Katherine Whitson," I said.

"I beg your pardon?" The Inspector looked confused.

"The case you are going to ask Detective Blakeley to work on is the kidnapping of Katherine Whitson."

"Of course," she said, standing.

I stood up as well. Never hurts to display good manners.

"Here's my business card." She accepted it reluctantly. "Please keep me informed."

"Goodbye," she said, making an inhospitable exit.

"Right back atcha," I called from my side of the conference table as she crossed the foyer.

## CHAPTER 13

The entire fiasco with MPD had taken a big chunk out of my Tuesday. I didn't know if it had been worth the effort or not. In any case, it was now after noon, and with or without police assistance, I needed to move forward. The clock was ticking and Katherine's chances of a positive outcome to this abduction were lessening by the minute.

Gunner had been able to provide me with detailed background information on Katherine's education and employment. Seated at our granite kitchen table on Jefferson, I reviewed that info now.

To say that Katherine's educational background was impressive would be a serious understatement. She had earned her BA, *summa cum laude*, from Berkeley in mathematics and electrical engineering in 1976. Then proceeded to obtain Doctoral degrees – first from MIT in Electrical Engineering in 1978, then from Stanford in Mathematics three years later.

I had known some PhDs from MIT while at the Agency. They were, without exception, unbelievably intelligent.

Moving along to employment history, I noted that Katherine had worked at Control Data Corporation in St. Paul as a systems programmer and systems analyst until the company's demise in 1989. Then IBM hired her to work in Quality Assurance and Testing at its Rochester, Minnesota facility, home to the manufacture of IBM's flagship

supercomputers. In 2005, ComDyne Integrated, a new player in the world market for networking components, headquartered in the northwestern Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove, hired Katherine away from IBM to head its own Quality Assurance and Testing Design Department – her present job.

I knew enough about the technology industry to recognize Katherine as one of its shining stars. She would have an IQ over 160 and a relentless drive for perfection. That explained some of the compulsive organization at the condo – arranging something as simple as an apartment layout might have been a form of relaxation for her. That her husband also appeared compulsively organized would be a plus.

I now knew what the documentation of Katherine's career could tell me. A visit to ComDyne was next. It was just before two o'clock Tuesday afternoon. I could probably still catch Katherine's co-workers at their jobs, if I hurried.

I tracked down Beth in her studio, explained the situation, kissed her goodbye and made a hasty exit.

As I headed back toward the metro area behind the wheel of the Pilot, I wondered if I should've asked Bull to join me. I didn't yet know the precise reason for the attack at Equinox yesterday. But since I hadn't told anyone of my planned visit to ComDyne, I felt reasonably safe acting alone today.

The ComDyne World Headquarters was a huge office complex on the edge of Maple Grove. Its campus must have covered twenty acres. The buildings were a more twenty-first century design than the Equinox offices. Less exposed metal. More obvious eco-efficiencies – insulated glass, solar panels on the building roofs, even a sizeable wind generator in the back corner of the lawn.

I parked near the rear of the huge, open parking lot, and hiked the hundred or so yards to the entrance to Building 100. The office building was a secure environment. In order to gain entrance, I needed to contact Katherine's department for permission to enter.

Rather than using the wall phone with its intricately-labeled button panel, I elected to try the old-fashioned approach and called Katherine's office number on my cell.

"Dr. Whitson's office," a male voice answered. "How may I assist you?"

"This is Attorney James Becker. I am Dr. Whitson's attorney and need to meet with her supervisor immediately. It is quite urgent, I'm afraid. I am at the front entrance to your building. Could you permit me access, please?"

"Could you hold one moment please?"

"Certainly. No problem."

As he placed me on hold, an electronic version of "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" replaced his voice. Hearing sixties classics filtered through contemporary music generators grated on my sense of music as art. Yesterday, the Beatles. Today, Otis Redding. What next? "Smoke on the Water" on the autoharp?

"Mr. Becker. I can come down and escort you to Dr. Allister. He's in the conference room. Please wait where you are. I'll be there in just a couple minutes."

"Thank you," I said, grateful that the music had ceased.

After about two minutes, a young man appeared at the glass door. He wore navy blue cotton chinos and a white cotton button-down oxford shirt, open at the collar. There was a pen in his shirt pocket and a cell phone in a leather holster on his belt. He opened the door and motioned me inside.

"Mr. Becker," he said. "I'm Dr. Whitson's intern, Sam. I'll show you to Dr. Allister's office. He's expecting you there."

"Thank you." As we walked down the corridor toward the elevators, I asked, "Does Dr. Whitson have a secretary or administrative assistant?"

"I'm probably the closest person to that category," Sam said. "Dr. Whitson doesn't really require traditional secretarial or administrative assistance. She's quite self-sufficient in her position. I help out whenever there is some routine code to be written, or if time-consuming data collection is needed. Dr. Whitson is very efficient with her time."

We took the elevator up to the third floor of six. Apparently, the top floors were reserved for the business types, who valued the status a high-level view confers. Exiting the elevator, we proceeded straight ahead into an open office area where men and women, mostly under forty, worked in and around their cubicles. The workers, who I assumed to be programmers or software engineers of some type, appeared to wear whatever attire they chose. All looked comfortable.

Although workstations were divided into typical office cubicles by five-foot-high office dividers, there were several informal meetings taking place with participants leaning arms on the divider tops, or standing in aisles, to facilitate face to face conversation. Some groups were laughing. But none seemed to be wasting time. I wasn't sure how that was possible. But from all appearances, productivity did not suffer from either the casual dress code or the informal meeting arrangements. I found this all very interesting, though probably not relevant to my concerns.

I followed Sam along a winding path through the maze of cubicles to a glass-walled conference room in a back corner. A slender white man with salt-and-pepper hair was sitting at the wood laminate conference table, typing furiously on his laptop computer. When he saw me approach, he hit a key on the computer and the screen went dark. Unlike almost everyone else in the place, this man's attire was corporate formal. He wore a black power suit, white shirt, solid red tie and shiny black dress shoes.

He stood to greet me

"Mr. Becker, is it?" he asked, coming around the table and offering his hand. At the same time he subtly motioned at Sam to depart. Sam complied, silently disappearing into the maze of cubicles.

"Beck, please," I said, shaking his hand firmly. He had a strong handshake and looked me in the eye as we shook. "I hope I'm not disturbing you unduly. But there is a rather urgent situation involving your employee, Katherine Whitson. I am her husband's attorney and have been asked to inquire into her sudden disappearance."

"Oh, dear," Allister said. "When Katherine didn't show up for work Friday morning, I was concerned. She never misses work. And then when her husband called later that day looking for her . . . well, I didn't quite know what to think. Of course, I'll help in any way I can."

"I appreciate your cooperation," I said. "Although originally, we weren't quite certain whether Katherine had left her husband of her own volition, we are now convinced that she has been forcibly abducted."

"Oh my! How horrifying!" Allister seemed sincere, in a distant sort of way.

"So I'm pursuing any possible leads that might explain why someone would want to kidnap, or even possibly kill, Dr. Whitson."

"And you think there might be some connection at ComDyne?" Allister seemed dubious.

"Well. I'm trying to be thorough. And she did spend most of her waking life in this office."

"Yes. I suppose that's true," Allister allowed. "Katherine works many hours. Still it seems unlikely that her work here would be connected. But please, ask your questions and I'll do what I can."

He motioned me to a chair at the table and took one for himself.

"To start off with, it would help if I understood Katherine's job a bit better. Could you describe her position for me?"

"Certainly." There was a pause as Allister organized his thoughts. "To understand her position, you need to know something about our business here at ComDyne. ComDyne is a world leader in the manufacture of end-user computer networking components. We make smart switches, routers, connectors, hubs, control interfaces . . . . If it has to do with networking hardware, we probably make it."

"Okay," I said. "I don't know what all of those things are. But we can come back to them later if necessary. What's Katherine's role in your company?"

"I was just getting to that." Allister tried not to show arrogance and impatience, but it was seeping through, nevertheless. "Katherine heads up ComDyne's Quality Assurance and Testing Design Department."

I opened my mouth to ask what that entailed, but Allister raised a finger, and I waited.



"In layman's terms, Katherine is in charge of making sure ComDyne's products work reliably and according to their specifications. Of course, there are many employees who assist her in this responsibility. But Katherine designs the methods by which the testing is conducted, and makes sure those methods ensure a quality product for our customers."

I raised my hand, like a school kid requesting the opportunity to speak.

"Yes?" Allister allowed.

"When you said Katherine is responsible for the methods of testing, what are we talking about here? Does she prescribe certain mechanical tools – like circuit testers or ammeters? Or does she compose software for the tests? Or what exactly does she do?"

Allister's impatience with my obvious technological stupidity was growing more pronounced.

"Mr. Becker . . ."

"Beck, please," I interrupted.

Allister took a breath.

"Mr. Becker," he continued, "suffice it to say that Katherine's responsibilities would encompass use of both hardware devices and complex software programs. She is quite adept at utilizing both to fulfill her job duties."

I could tell Allister's patience with my mere mortality was about to run out. I needed to get as much information as I could, as quickly as possible.

"Dr. Allister, could you explain your responsibilities and how they relate to Katherine's – in layman's terms, that is?" I tried to express 'humble' and 'sycophantic' at the same time. It was a stretch for me. It seemed to please Allister enough, though.

"I am the Systems Architect for all of ComDyne. There is only *one* Systems Architect. I alone bear complete responsibility for the ultimate design and technical implementation of every product we sell. I write the specifications for all hardware. I direct the creation of all software and firmware functionality. I personally select all component vendors to meet my high quality and performance requirements.

"Without me, Mr. Becker, there would be no ComDyne."

An image of North Korean President, Kim Jong Il flashed through my mind. Allister was the poster child for egomania.

"And Katherine's small part – what's the word – 'interfaced' with your responsibilities how?"

"Katherine is one of many at ComDyne who carry out their mundane secondary responsibilities. In Katherine's case, she reports all quality assurance issues to me for resolution."

"For instance . . . ?"

His patience was just about gone.

Allister took a breath before answering. "If her product testing revealed shoddy manufacture by one of our departments, or by a subcontractor, she would report her findings to me, and I would handle the problem. Is that simple enough?"

"One final question, if I may?" I tried to look as though I might kiss his ring.

"Very well. What is it?"

"How would you describe Katherine's abilities as an employee?"

"Average."

That was all he was going to say.

"Well, Mr. Allister . . ." I had dropped the "Dr." on purpose. I didn't like the man.

"It's Dr. Allister," he corrected.

"Yes. Well. Thank you for your time. I'll be sure to let the Whitsons know you wish them well."

He could tell I was getting cocky.

"Goodbye," he said, as he returned to the laptop.

"And a lovely afternoon to you also." I smiled. He didn't look.

"SAM!" he called loudly.

Sam appeared immediately at the conference room door. "Please follow me, sir," he requested with a small bow.

"Thank you, Sam," I replied, and followed him out through the cubicles.

While we waited for the elevator, I asked Sam if Dr. Whitson took a laptop home from the office.

"Of course. She never goes anywhere without her computer. She told me that she might have a creative revelation at any time and she wanted to be ready when it happened."

"That makes sense," I said. It was taking the elevator a while to arrive, so I took advantage of the opportunity. "How would you describe Dr. Whitson as a boss and company employee?"

Sam turned toward me.

"Oh, she's amazing! I graduated top of my class at Stanford in electrical engineering. Her thought processes are so far advanced beyond mine, it's actually scary. If she wanted, she could be the Systems Architect at nearly any company in the world. But she likes it here at ComDyne. She wants to stay in the Cities area, and most options for promotion would either be in Silicon Valley, or overseas."

We boarded the elevator and started down.

"Can you tell me, Sam . . . who is Dr. Whitson's second-in-command? Who is covering for her during her absence?"

"That would be Dr. Sustain – Julian Sustain. He's the Associate Director of Quality Assurance and Testing Design. He's been under a lot of stress with Dr. Whitson's absence. But he's doing as well as anyone could expect, under the circumstances."

The elevator doors opened and we walked toward the exit. I stopped just before we reached the doors.

"And your impressions of Dr. Allister?" I inquired.

"Oh. Of course, he is quite something as well," Sam managed, looking more at the floor than at me.

Quite something. Yes, indeed. Dr. Allister was certainly quite something.

## CHAPTER 14

*Tuesday, October 20th, 5:45 p.m.*

I find driving to be a great time for reflection – provided, of course, that one is capable of competent driving and reflection simultaneously. Now that I was safely on the way home from ComDyne, having evaded any potential would-be attackers, I reflected on my day.

I now knew of three more persons in Katherine Whitson's inner circle. Her assistant, Sam. Her boss, Dr. Allister. And her able replacement, Dr. Sustain. They were all close enough to Katherine to have possible motives in her kidnapping. The most obvious one was Sustain's right of succession to Katherine's job. I wasn't sure what the others might be yet. But I would find out as quickly as I was able.

Besides the three new suspects, I had precious little to show for today's efforts. I'd taken a tongue-lashing from Minneapolis Police. I'd sucked up to a loathsome computer asshole. I knew a lot more about the law enforcement system, about ComDyne and about Katherine Whitson. Yet I couldn't identify any tangible progress toward finding her.

On the other hand, my attire was intact, and no one had tried to shoot me in the kneecaps. Could've been worse.

I slipped my cell out of an inner coat pocket and called home. A friendly voice would be nice.

Beth answered after three rings. "Hey, Magnum P.I., what's your e-t-a?"

"I'm just heading across the I-494 strip toward the airport. Depending on traffic, I should be home in about an hour. How about I whip us up some gourmet Tuscan cuisine for dinner?"

There was a pronounced gagging sound on the other end of the phone connection. So much for the friendly voice.

"Excuse me," Beth said presently. "I thought I heard you say you were going to cook. I experienced a sort of . . . ah . . . a visceral reaction. Were you wondering if I might make us some dinner?"

Beth was right, as she almost always is. I'm a lousy cook. I get distracted with other things and inevitably screw something up. I actually burned boiled eggs once. Seriously. I put the eggs into the boiling water. Then I took a phone call in the next room. By the time I remembered the eggs, the water was all gone and the egg shells were black on the bottom and smoking up the kitchen.

Anyway, Beth is the chef in our household – for painfully obvious reasons.

"If you would be so kind, I would be deeply in your debt," I replied with contrition. "Or I would also be delighted to have the pleasure of your company at a restaurant of your choosing."

"I'll throw something together on an appropriate timetable. See you soon. I love you."

"Love you, too. Bye bye."

\* \* \*

Dinner turned out to be fettuccine with portions of broiled walleye pike, all smothered in Alfredo sauce. A nice

bottle of California Chardonnay complemented the meal – medium dry, rich and fruity, with just a touch of oak.

As we dined opposite one another at our black marble dinner table, we caught up on recent events.

"How was your day, my dear?" I inquired, following the line with a small forkful of Alfredo-drenched walleye.

"Really delightful. Lots of variety."

"Tell me more."

"Susan and I got in a workout at the 'Y' this morning." Susan was a neighbor on Jefferson Avenue. "Then we dawdled over coffee and scones at Lily's for more than an hour. It was so nice to catch up."

"That does sound fun," I said sincerely, sipping the Chardonnay.

"When I got home there was an email from my old work." She was referring to her top secret work for the CIA. "They had an encrypted file they wanted me to take a stab at. It's always fun having an opportunity to dust off the computer skills." Beth truly enjoyed her computer work.

"I bet. Were you successful?"

"In record time. They want me to come back to work in Washington."

"And what did you tell them?" I asked, nearing the end of my Chardonnay.

"I told them that if they could find me a better husband, I'd be right there." She smiled.

"So you're staying then." I said, taking a stab at some fettuccine.

Beth dipped a thumb and two fingers in her water glass and flicked a few drops at me across the table. I pretended to shield my face.

"Actually, I told them I had been thinking you were getting a bit long in the tooth and I would definitely consider a younger, more masculine spouse, if one became available."

She stuck out her tongue at me.

I stuck mine out back.

We are highly sophisticated folks at our house.

"Care for another splash of wine?" I asked. Beth's wine stem was still half full.

"No, thanks. Given your impish mood, I should probably keep my wits about me."

"Always a wise choice," I agreed, pouring the last of the Chardonnay into my glass. "By the way, if it would be okay to begin a new subject, you might be able to help me out with the mysterious disappearance of Katherine Whitson. Are you willing to give it a shot?"

"What's mine is yours. Fire away."

"Katherine's disappearance is almost certain to involve foul play," I began. "I haven't been able to track down any leads through her husband, though I was assaulted at his place of business. . . ."

Beth waited patiently.

"There's one guy who used to have Whitson's job and might have an axe to grind. But I would think if someone wanted to get at George by using Katherine, we would have seen a ransom note, or some claim of responsibility, by now. Anyway, Gunner is checking this guy out to see if he's a plausible suspect."

Beth sipped her wine.

"Today, I paid a visit to Katherine's workplace, ComDyne Integrated, in Maple Grove, and had a chat with her supervisor."



"Is that the same ComDyne that makes all the computer networking gear?" Beth asked.

"Yes, indeed. So you've heard of them?"

"They are one of the largest, if not *the* largest, network equipment manufacturers in the world. They certainly make more network routers than anyone else."

"That's the company. Katherine's job there was . . ." I glanced at a note from my pants pocket . . . "the head of Quality Assurance and Test Design. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Yes. She's probably incredibly brilliant. And she lives and breathes computer technology. You don't get that sort of a position at a company like ComDyne without earning a doctorate or two, maybe in math or double E. Then you've got to work your way zealously up through the ranks. You need to become more knowledgeable, more creative and more thorough than anyone else when it comes to your systems. In other words, you've got to be something of a computer god – or in this case, goddess."

"Wow!" I said. "That's impressive. How impressive do you need to be in order to be her boss, the Systems Architect for ComDyne?"

"At Katherine's level, whether she could be the Systems Architect for ComDyne would not be a question of how impressive, or intelligent, or hard-working she was. It would be determined either by seniority at the company, or by specific knowledge of ComDyne's particular hardware and software systems. In other words, she could have the Systems Architect job, unless there was another, very well-qualified genius already occupying the role – which I assume there is."

"He certainly thinks so. The guy's name is Allister and he's pretty confident he's god's gift to mankind – or maybe god is his gift to mankind – it could go either way." I continued. "So is there anything you could think of about Katherine's job at ComDyne that might place her person in peril?"

"Is money a motive for peril?" Beth asked, knowing the answer.

"Is that the refined version of 'does a bear shit in the woods?'" I asked.

"Um hmm," Beth said into her wine glass, then replaced it on the table. "ComDyne is a multibillion dollar business. Katherine's job is to make sure internal quality control is maintained. There are probably a thousand ways she could piss off someone badly enough to place her life in jeopardy."

"For instance?" I inquired.

This was great! My own personal computer expert – and an awesome cook and lover to boot.

Beth thought for a moment.

"Suppose that your company supplies a billion dollars per year of a particular part for ComDyne's smart switches. Katherine discovers that your company's product isn't meeting required specs. If ComDyne drops your company as a supplier, you go out of business. Is that enough motive for foul play?" Again, she knew the answer.

"Why yes, I believe it would be. And you say that there are potentially thousands of such scenarios that might create perils for someone in Katherine's position?"

"Yes," Beth stated. "Without a doubt."

"I wonder why Allister didn't mention any of this potential risk," I said it out-loud, but was really talking to myself.

"You're the guru on abnormal psychology," Beth reminded me. "I'm sure you can come up with a few theories." She was helping guide my thoughts in a direction they should have already gone.

There are no quick and dirty answers in psychology. I would need to let this issue course through my cerebral cortex a few times. Sleep is good for that. I'd be able to pursue this line of thought more effectively tomorrow.

"Beth," I said, looking across the marble at my wife, "you are one amazing chick."

"True."

## CHAPTER 15

*Still Tuesday, October 20th.*

Before I could retire for the evening, I had to make sure I was simultaneously pursuing as many leads as possible. Besides Arthur Trample, whom Gunner would be researching, and whom I considered a low-value target, there were four additional suspects that I knew of.

George Whitson was still among their ranks. But he wasn't going anywhere. And if he had done something to Katherine, it had probably been murder. Why . . . and how . . . would he kidnap her? Besides, George didn't strike me as enough of a mastermind to invite Gunner and me to investigate a crime that he, himself, had committed. I could put George aside for the time being.

There was Dr. Julian Sustain, Katherine's understudy at ComDyne. Someone should be checking him out. He would have the most to gain, from a professional standpoint, with Katherine gone. How cutthroat was the rarified air at very high levels of technology employment?

And Dr. Allister was certainly an unlikeable enough person. Plus his entirely narcissistic view of the world made him a strong candidate for psycho-social deviancy. No one could predict the level of behavior to which he might stoop if he felt that his ego was threatened.

And finally, there was Sam – last name presently unknown – Katherine's intern. What might he have to gain from her disappearance? He had seemed a very nice young man. But then, appearances can be deceiving.

I picked up the phone to call Bull.

"Watcha need?" he answered.

"It's Beck," I said.

"Got Caller ID."

"Right," I said. "I've got three guys I need to tail, and there's only one of me. Any chance you could help me out?"

"When and where?"

I gave Bull a description of Julian Sustain, which I had procured from his picture on a tech website. Apparently, he spoke at a lot of conferences. I also told Bull where Sustain lived and worked. And I explained why I needed him watched. Bull needed to know what level of danger he might be getting himself into. I asked if Bull could start tomorrow morning and we would see where it went from there.

He was on board.

I had two unmarked suspects left – Sam and Allister.

I chose Allister. I had liked Sam when we met, and Allister was a jerk. If I had to spin a bottle for surveillance choices, it was definitely going to wind up on Allister.

With Gunner tied up at work, and doing background work on Trample, surveillance on Sam would have to wait.

Field investigations would continue in earnest tomorrow. Now it was time for sleep.

## CHAPTER 16

*Wednesday, October 21st.*

It was Wednesday morning around eight o'clock. Beth and I had completed our morning workouts and I was sitting on the red couch holding a large ceramic cup of steaming black coffee between both hands. It had been a brutally cold run – high winds and a temperature near twenty degrees Fahrenheit. It's pretty easy to dress properly for temperature. Wind is another matter. The coffee tasted, and felt, wonderful.

Beth had received another computer assignment from Washington and was cheerfully clicking away at her keyboard in the dining room. In the working world, it is a verifiable fact that the better you perform at your job, the more work you get. That would seem a negative incentive to exemplary job performance to some. But to Beth, since she loved her work, the additional assignments were like getting an "atta boy" from corporate. From Beth's hummed rendition of George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun," I surmised that she would be happily occupied on her project for at least a while.

Unfortunately, the clock was ticking on Katherine Whitson's absence. I knew the statistics. The longer she remained missing, the worse her chances of survival. I needed to work efficiently.

My job today was to put eyes on Allister. So as soon as I had finished my coffee, I showered, dressed and headed off to Maple Grove, and the ComDyne office complex.

Gunner had given me makes, models and license numbers for two vehicles owned by Allister – one was a gold Cadillac, the other, a black Lincoln. I circled the main lot until I spotted the Lincoln. It was parked in a choice spot near the main building entrance. The spot was clearly marked for ‘Dr. Allister,’ and was at least twice the width of typical parking slots.

Since I was in no hurry, I drove around the rest of the ComDyne parking lots, just to make sure that his Caddy wasn't also on campus. It wasn't. I returned to the main lot and parked near the rear, backing into my spot so I could make an expeditious exit if necessary.

At least it shouldn't be difficult keeping an eye on Allister's car.

I knew how tedious long-term surveillance could be. So I had brought some other work along with me. Maybe I could multi-task Katherine's case. Perhaps that would give me a chance for quicker resolution.

As I worked in my car, I would regularly peek at Allister's Lincoln, to make sure it didn't escape the lot without my notice.

Sliding my computer from its case on the front passenger seat, I opened it on my lap. I had decided to revisit the downloaded phone records first. I had only given them a quick once-over before. I started with Katherine's detailed phone information.

As is true when examining most large data sets, no patterns or anomalies jumped out at me immediately. But the longer one looks, the more the mass of data becomes an

intricately woven fabric. Designs repeat. And oddly-placed stitches stand out. After absorbing Katherine's phone data for the better part of an hour, I had found a few items of interest.

The only speed-dial numbers she had bothered to enter were: George's cell and work numbers; her home land line; and several numbers I recognized as ComDyne telephone extensions.

Two of the ComDyne numbers were for Sam and Allister. I had no idea to whom the others might belong. Maybe Sustain was among them?

I also noted that, every weekday, she would call George on his cell between noon and 1:00 p.m.

Sam called Katherine several times a week – usually on weekends or evenings. Sam had also called multiple times after her disappearance. Obviously, those calls went unanswered. Was he unaware of her kidnapping? Or just trying to make himself look innocent?

Even though Allister had made the short, speed-dial list, she hadn't telephoned him at all during the time period stored on the phone – which was roughly the past two months. He hadn't called her cell either. Apparently, they conducted their voice communications, if any, at the office. That seemed normal to me given Katherine's reported extreme competence and Allister's grating personality.

It was interesting, though, that Allister hadn't made an attempt to reach Katherine on her cell when she failed to show for work Friday. Maybe he had delegated that duty to Sam. That would be in character for Allister – too important to deal with missing employees himself. Or maybe the call from George on Friday had been all the notice he cared to have. He was a very busy and important man after all.



I would file this failure to call in my mind for future consideration.

There was one phone call from George early Friday morning. That was peculiar. Why would he call Katherine's cell when he knew it to be lying on their bed? Drunken desperation? Possibly. But early morning didn't seem a likely time for that.

Had Whitson been fibbing about coming home Thursday evening? Did he have something to hide? I would definitely have to confront Whitson about this call. Either he was lying about being home Thursday evening, or . . .

I couldn't complete the sentence. It made no sense. Why would he call her at a time when he knew she was already gone from the apartment and had left her phone behind – and he had already admitted as much to Gunner and me? He had to be lying about something.

Damn it! I hate being lied to.

And if he'd lied to me once, that called everything he had told me into question. I would, indeed, have another chat with George. I had to get to the bottom of this discrepancy, but carefully, and soon.

I flicked another glance through my windshield at the black Lincoln. Still there. I'd been looking out the window every few seconds. My pupils had established a rhythm.

Finding nothing further of interest in Katherine's cell records, I turned to the download from Whitson's phone.

His speed-dial list was as sparse as Katherine's. Home. Katherine's cell. Work (only one number – presumably his secretary). And an entry labeled 'BA.'

His list of sent and received calls was longer than Katherine's. He'd called Katherine almost daily, but not at any consistent time. His incoming calls recorded the daily

noontime visits with Katherine. And there were multiple call exchanges with "BA."

Maybe I had been focusing too much on Katherine's life and needed to home in a bit more closely on George's. I added identifying "BA" to my mental to-do list for George's interrogation.

More complete telephone records might also reveal further important information. My next call was to Gunner's cell.

"I'm in a meeting," Gunner answered quietly.

"Then why the hell did you answer my call? That's what voicemail is for, Gunner. Sheesh! Call my cell when you get the chance." We both disconnected the call without a goodbye – at least I think it was both of us.

Ten minutes later Gunner's name appeared on my ringing cell phone.

"Geez, Gunner! I'm in a meeting. What the hell do you want?"

"Oh, cut the crap. You called me. What do you need?"

"So now that the coffee klatch is dispersed, you have time for me? The donuts all gone?"

"Spit it out or let me go." Gunner was in no mood for humor.

"All right. I need to get more complete phone records for the Whitsons. Can you get me a year's worth of everything on all of their cell phones, their home land line, and maybe their office extensions?"

"The personal cells and home phone won't be a problem. But I am doubtful about the work info. The employers would have to consent – unless you can give me probable cause?" Gunner offered.

"That would be a 'No' to the probable cause," I conceded.

"Are you finding anything interesting in the on-phone data?" Gunner asked.

"Maybe. But only question marks so far."

"Isn't that the way of the world? More questions than answers." A brief pause. "Anything else I might find for you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. Can you get me a name and address to go with this phone number?" I relayed BA's number to Gunner. "He may be what you cops call 'a person of interest,' so please don't let him catch on that you're looking."

"Gosh, it might be tough to be sneaky about it." His voice was a pretty decent impersonation of the Disney "Goofy" character. "But my assistant, Barney Fife, and I will do our best."

I ignored the remark.

"Anything new on Arthur Trample?"

"Nothing yet. Still waiting for some feelers to come back in."

"Okay. Thanks a million, Gunner. Shoot me an email with the Whitsons' telephone records, if that's okay?"

"Sure thing, Boss. Good luck and keep me posted. Connie is pressing for nonstop updates. I tell her it takes time. But that doesn't seem to console her much."

"In that case, I'll work as quick and sloppy as possible. Thanks again. Bye."

Still no movement from the Lincoln.

Back on my laptop, I took another look at the photos of the impeccably-organized Whitson home. The less-organized space in Katherine's closet. The cubby where the sole missing pair of business shoes should have been. I zoomed in on the medicine cabinet. Miscellaneous makeup and toiletries

missing, but Katherine's anxiety medication bottle and contact lenses still present.

I zoomed in farther. There was another bottle of something I didn't recognize. On closer examination, it turned out to be a jumbo bottle of over-the-counter sleeping pills. I wondered if they belonged to Katherine or George.

I looked again at the pictures of the items on the bed. Katherine's phone had been turned off when I borrowed it. Why weren't there "missed call" notifications beeping at me when I'd fired it up? George and Sam had both called after Katherine's supposed disappearance. George must have turned it off at some point after the last call had arrived.

That sonofabitch was really pushing my buttons. And my list of questions for him was growing longer.

The photos of other rooms showed the lack of computer equipment and not much else of interest. Of course, the photos taken collectively, *did* seem to show the absence of a struggle. Had Katherine known her abductor? Had the abduction taken place elsewhere? Was the note truly in her handwriting? I had taken George's word for that one.

I wished I had a team from television's CSI to comb the apartment, looking for fibers, microbes, bodily fluids and such. "If wishes were horses," my father used to say, "beggars would ride." A metaphorical horse would be nice about now. Or maybe some assistance from Minneapolis PD!

I still had more of Gunner's report to revisit. I pulled that up on my screen.

Wow! George Whitson made close to \$200,000 a year for shuffling paper. Maybe I should have been an accountant. I looked for Katherine's income information. Her salary was nearly double George's. That didn't surprise me, but it did explain how they could afford the nice digs.

The Whitsons kept their investments in separate accounts. George had some funds in his name and Katherine had a larger sum in hers. Only their checkbook and the condo were joint. This wasn't the way Beth and I handled our finances. But it was common enough. Nothing earthshattering.

Gunner had also come across a couple life insurance policies. Each of the Whitsons held a three million-dollar policy on the other's life – payable to the survivor. The insurance money would provide a motive for George to kill Katherine. But her substantial income was also a motive to keep her alive – unless she planned to leave him . . . .

As far as financial obligations went, neither of the Whitsons appeared to have any debt problems. They owned the condo free and clear. There was no evidence of gambling or other unusual cash flows in the check registers or bank statements. George used a fair amount of cash compared to Katherine. But it was not an extraordinary amount, given the sizeable funds available. All-in-all, there were no smoking guns to be found in the Whitsons' finances.

Gunner had also located copies of Wills for the Whitsons. Each left everything to the other, with various charities being the contingent beneficiaries upon the last spouse's death. The Wills also had provisions to allow the survivor to "disclaim," that is, to refuse to accept, some or all of his/her inheritance. I knew from my legal background that such provisions were designed to avoid paying more estate taxes than necessary upon the death of the last surviving spouse. Given that neither a surviving spouse, nor the charitable beneficiaries, would need to pay estate taxes anyway, these provisions appeared superfluous. But they certainly didn't hurt anything either.

I scanned through the remainder of Gunner's document report. Nothing leapt out at me. I closed my laptop and returned it to its case. Leaning back against the leather seat, I again reviewed my list of suspects.

George Whitson's apparent deception, Katherine's life insurance proceeds, and her Will leaving everything to George had moved him farther up the list. As Ricky Ricardo would say, he definitely "had some 'splainin' to do."

BA was an unknown quantity, and therefore, had to be considered a possible evildoer.

Allister, Sustain, Trample and Sam were all still in play as well. I hoped we could weed some of them out soon.

And then there were the "thousand or so" people or companies who might want Katherine gone because of some aspect of her job. I also needed to try to get a better handle on this mega-group and whittle it down to a manageable number.

Maybe Bull and Gunner would come up with something definitive. One could hope.

I returned my undivided focus to the black Lincoln.

## CHAPTER 17

Gunner, or Barney, or whoever retrieved telephone records for the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department, excelled in efficiency today. It was barely 1:00 p.m. when I received the cell call from Gunner that the email he had promised was ready. Still stuck in the ComDyne parking lot, I fired up the laptop again and downloaded the email, together with a large attachment containing very detailed information concerning the Whitsons' phone usage over the past year.

The identity and particulars for one Bruce Adams, aka BA, were in the message body. Apparently, Gunner hadn't been able to get the Whitsons' work telephone info, at least not yet.

Scanning the phone records for specifics I had been missing in my previous data, I found some additional information about the lengths of calls, and the period of months over which they had been made, that was most helpful.

Now I needed to speak with Whitson. Since my clone was unavailable, I would have to abandon surveillance of Allister. It couldn't be helped.

A surprise appearance at Whitson's office would have the best chance of success. But given the reception I had received in the parking ramp during my last visit to Equinox, I decided to ask Bull to join me.

Bull agreed to drop his tail on Sustain, but indicated that there was something he would need to discuss with me later. He had piqued my interest. But Bull had hung up before I could delve deeper.

We rendezvoused at a shopping center parking lot and rode together in the Pilot to Eden Prairie. I didn't want to miss out on a chance that my truck might bait the bad guys into action, as it had on the last occasion.

"Good to see you again," I said to Bull as he climbed into the front passenger seat of the Pilot.

"Uh huh," was his reply.

"Care to reveal your secrets about today's surveillance?" I asked, as we pulled out of the lot and onto I-494 South.

"Nope." Bull was looking out his side window.

Bull was not one to make small talk. He was perfectly comfortable sitting quietly. Maybe it's an Indian thing? I don't know.

"Have anything tasty for breakfast?" I goaded.

Bull turned his head toward me, his long, black hair appearing to move in slow motion as his face arrived directly over his left shoulder. He raised his brows as his eyes pierced mine. He wasn't smiling. But he wasn't upset either. He was just letting me know to shut up unless I had something to say. I could live with that.

"Guess not," I answered for Bull, turning my attention back to the road ahead.

Bull resumed looking out his window. I wondered what he was looking at. For all I knew, he was making faces at vehicles as we passed them on the four-lane. That could be either very frightening, or very funny – depending on the faces.



As we eventually approached Equinox Headquarters, I pulled over and let Bull out. He would walk the last half-mile, to be certain we weren't observed together. It was his idea. "Stop here," he had said, then jumped out of the truck.

I watched for anyone acting in a suspicious manner as I rolled slowly through the ramp to the Visitors section of Level Two. Nothing unusual. I parked in nearly the same spot as before, then continued into the second floor building entrance. This time, since I knew where I was headed, I just kept going straight through the second floor doorway and down the hall to the elevators. I pushed the "Up" button and presently an empty car arrived. Boarding the elevator, I punched the button for the sixth floor.

As I entered the Executive Office Suite, I found the entryway unguarded. Apparently, most visitors call ahead. So I proceeded unimpeded to Whitson's office. I checked my watch – 3:00 p.m. Good time for a nice cordial chat. Without knocking, I opened Whitson's door and strode through.

Whitson was seated at his oak desk, but facing the matching credenza behind it. There was something on his computer screen that he clearly preferred I not see. Panicked at my abrupt entry, he fumbled for the monitor's power button and clicked it off. I waited. Then he rotated the chair toward me and stood.

"Becker! What the hell! Don't you knock?"

"I pay respect to those to whom it is due," I responded enigmatically.

Whitson tried to settle his nerves. I'm sure he could see from my expression that I was not happy.

"What the hell does that mean?" he mustered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, not sounding very

intimidating. In fact, his voice was nearly a whole register higher than at our previous meetings.

"It means," I said, "that you have been lying to me and I don't like it."

"What are you talking about?" Whitson stumbled into his chair and sat. "I have been completely honest and up-front . . ."

I interrupted him.

"Bull shit!" I said, stepping closer and leaning forward, my knuckles on his desk.

Whitson's nose was about two feet from mine. He didn't like it.

"Where were you the night Katherine disappeared?"

"I've already told you" he said, fidgeting with his hands. "I got home around 7:30 that evening and was at work until then."

"In that case, I'm sure you can explain to me why you were calling Katherine's cell phone Friday morning from the home of one Bruce Adams, Hampton Greens Condominiums, Apartment 407, when you already knew damn well that her cell phone was unattended and lying on your bed?"

I leaned a bit closer. He scooted his chair backward defensively. He knew he was caught.

"How did you know I was at Bruce's Friday morning?" he asked sheepishly.

"You just told me," I said. "Now . . . can we have a discussion where you tell me the truth and no more BS, because your wife's life may very well depend upon it?"

"Yes." Whitson's appearance reflected guilt, contrition and a substantial fear that I was going to jump over the desk and smack him. "Of course."

"Okay then," I said. I closed the door and occupied one of Whitson's side chairs. "Tell me what you really know about Katherine's situation."

"Katherine really did disappear on Thursday night, sometime. I know because, when she didn't answer her cell early Friday morning, I went to the apartment and the bed had not been slept in. And there were no Friday breakfast dishes in the dishwasher."

"How do you know that she hadn't made the bed and eaten breakfast elsewhere, or not at all?" I pressed.

"Katherine and I have our routines. And we have divided the household responsibilities. I am very particular about how the bed is made. Katherine can never get it right. So I know it wasn't slept in, because she wouldn't have made the bed. And if she had made it, it wouldn't have been done right – and it was right."

That Whitson was OCD about how the bed was to be made was entirely believable.

"Go on," I said.

"And Katherine always has raisin bran and orange juice for breakfast and puts her dishes in the dishwasher. There was no bowl, no glass and no spoon in the dishwasher from Friday morning breakfast," Whitson continued.

"So the 7:30 time is made up?" I confirmed.

"Yes."

"But she did not sleep at the apartment Thursday night?"

"Yes. I mean, true."

I sensed that I was getting some candor from Whitson at this point. We would see how long it continued.

"So, tell me your actual whereabouts from the time you left work Thursday at . . . ?"

"7:00 p.m."

. . . at 7:00 p.m., until you called the police Friday morning," I said.

"After work, I went right to Bruce's place. He can confirm that for you. We had dinner there and I . . . I . . . ah . . . spent the night. I left Bruce's right after Katherine failed to answer my call Friday morning and was home ten minutes later."

Whitson's drawn, tired face showed signs that he was telling me something he had held inside for a very long time. His hands no longer twitched. His shoulders sagged.

Again, I believed him. That he had been hiding this same-sex relationship from the world was, once more, very plausible.

"So you are Bruce's alibi and he is yours," I noted. "Isn't that a bit convenient for two lovers to be the only ones to vouch for one another during the commission of a felony against one of their spouses?"

Whitson looked panicky again. Then he had an idea.

"Listen! Bruce's building has security cameras and everyone needs to log in and out. The building security tapes should confirm what I am telling you." He appeared a bit relieved. "That should help. Right?"

I knew it was possible to circumvent any security system, having done so myself on many occasions. But it wasn't an easy thing to do without certain expertise and training, depending of course, upon the security system. Still, I would check the security tapes if I didn't get satisfaction from Whitson in today's conversation.

"Did you handle any of the items left on your bed?" I asked, switching topics.

"I picked up the note to read it," he said. "Then I put it back where it had been. Otherwise, I don't think I touched anything."

"Then how come I have irrefutable evidence that you turned off Katherine's phone Friday morning?"

I leaned forward in my chair, looking intimidating.

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry. I forgot. The phone was beeping, like when you have a missed message. I opened the phone, saw there were no messages from Katherine or any possible kidnapper, and then shut it off. I forgot I did that. I'm sorry, Mr. Becker. I really forgot. Honest."

This guy was too much of a wimp to be a violent felon. Again, I believed his tale about the phone. When you have experienced interrogation as much as I have – from both sides of the table – you develop a sense for when someone is lying, and when they are just clueless. Whitson was the latter.

"Okay. So tell me about Bruce. You met him about three months ago." I started the story for him.

"Yes. How did you know?" Whitson really was naive.

"Your phone records. Now, tell me about Bruce," I persisted.

"Bruce and I met at a gay bar on Hennepin Avenue, The Rainbow Bar-Fait. I go there often, but had not seen Bruce there before."

"Keep going," I said.

"Bruce was really cute. I was sitting at the bar and there was an empty stool beside me. Bruce came over and offered to buy me a drink. Things sort of went from there and I spent the night at his hotel."

"His hotel? Was he new in town?"

"Actually, yes. You are incredibly intuitive, Mr. Becker. I don't know how you know these things."

"Let me try a few more guesses," I offered. "After a few dates, Bruce, who is temporarily out of work while attending

school of some sort, mentions that he doesn't have the money to stay in Minneapolis, and he will probably need to go back home soon. You kindly offer to put him up in an apartment at the Hampton Greens Condominiums, which offer he humbly accepts.

"How am I doing so far?"

"He was studying cosmetology," Whitson replied, his mouth hanging a bit open.

"Anyway, you had plenty of cash and were looking for a long-term, same-sex relationship. Bruce seemed to provide hope of that developing. So you paid the rent, bought the groceries, paid for the utilities and cable TV. You even fronted Bruce some spending money from time to time, just to help him along with his education."

By this time, even Whitson could tell this was not a new story.

"What do you know about Bruce's background before two months ago?" I asked. "I mean, what do you *really* know about Bruce that hasn't come directly from Bruce himself?"

Whitson's jaw dropped even farther. He was silent for a moment.

"I guess . . . really . . . nothing?" he managed.

"Okay. So are you still sure he was with you the whole time from Thursday evening until you left for home Friday?"

I watched Whitson's eyes for veracity.

"Yes. We were definitely together that whole time."

"You're positive?"

"Yes. And again, I'm sure the security footage will confirm as much."

Damn it! I believed him again. Oh well. It is what it is. If neither Bruce nor Whitson kidnapped Katherine, someone else did.

"Okay," I continued. "Where do you suppose Bruce is right now?"

"Probably in class."

"Hold that thought for a moment," I said as I produced my cell from a jacket pocket. I punched a speed-dial key and waited for an answer.

"Any news?" I asked. "Okay. Thanks." I closed my phone and put it away.

"Please call Bruce on his cell and let him know you are coming over to his place in half an hour."

Whitson looked reluctant.

"Do it!" I insisted.

Whitson reached for his cell phone and punched up BA's number.

A moment later Whitson said, "What the hell? Who is this? Who is this?" He looked at me in bewilderment.

"Let's take a walk," I said, gesturing toward the office door.

Whitson was too dazed to do anything but my bidding. We headed out of the Executive Offices, down the elevator to the second floor, and out the door to parking Level Two.

Standing behind my Pilot was a very large American Indian, and in his grip, a wriggling twenty-something man with highly-coiffed blond hair.

Bull held a cell phone out toward Whitson.

"It's you," he said matter-of-factly.

Bull had found Bruce sneaking around my car and intervened before I would have need of further tire repair.

"Mr. Whitson," I asked, "does this happen to be Bruce?"

Whitson could hardly speak. "Yes," he said finally.

The boy continued to squirm in vain. At one point, he tried to punch Bull in the face. Bull caught the swinging fist in his left hand and squeezed until Bruce stopped squirming.

"So, Bruce," I said, turning to the captive con-man. "You don't happen to know a guy named Buffy who tried to damage my kneecaps here yesterday, do you?"

Bruce remained silent.

Using only his right hand, Bull lifted Bruce by the shirt and shook him once, then put him back on the concrete.

"Okay. Yeah. Yeah. I didn't know his name, but I did send somebody over here to keep you away from George," Bruce admitted.

"Why?" I asked.

More silence.

Bull started to lift the boy again.

"Wait. Wait," he squealed.

Bull returned Bruce to terra firma.

"I was afraid you were going to find out I was a scam and that I was milking Georgy for all I could get. And by the way," Bruce asserted in his own defense, "it appears I was right to be concerned."

I laughed. "Apparently so."

"Mr. Whitson," I said, turning to George. "Would you care to press charges against Mr. Adams?"

Whitson lacked the energy to even decide the question. "Let him go for now," Whitson said. "I'll think about charges later." Whitson's head hung in utter embarrassment and fatigue.

"Well, Bruce," I said. "Mr. Whitson is willing to let you go for now. But I'm not so forgiving."

Bruce looked frightened.



"I had to fork out 450 bucks to get my tires fixed yesterday. And my friend needs to be reimbursed for his efforts. An even thousand should do it."

"Where am I going to get that kind of money?" Bruce whined.

"You blew \$500 yesterday on a lame hit-man. I'm betting you're holding enough cash right now to satisfy your obligations. Shall I ask Mr. Bull to help you find it?"

"God, no!" Bruce dug through his wallet and then his pockets. "Here's your grand," he said. "Can I go now?"

"One more thing," I said. "When you depart here in about sixty seconds, you will clear out of Hampton Greens, leaving behind every single item that was bought with Mr. Whitson's money, but no trace of a mess. And if you do so, you may not have to deal with my friend and me again. Got it?"

"Okay. Okay." A recognition of defeat.

I nodded at Bull and he let go of Bruce's shirt. Bruce took a final wild swing at Bull, who grabbed Bruce's hitting arm and flung him skidding across the concrete.

"Ouch!" I said. "That road rash is a bitch. Make sure to clean all wounds thoroughly with warm soap and water."

Bruce scrambled to his feet and stumbled off down the ramp-way.

I turned to Whitson. I actually felt sorry for him.

"Did Katherine know about Bruce?"

"Yes. And the others before him." Whitson was on the verge of tears. "Please find her. You have to find her."

"We will certainly do our best," I promised. "Maybe you should knock off for the rest of the day. Catch a nap. You look exhausted."

"I'm sure you are correct. I will take your suggestion."

\* \* \*

Back in the Pilot and on the way to his vehicle, Bull was, again, silent.

"Now, what is this issue we need to discuss about your surveillance?" I demanded. "Let's hear it."

"Saw Sustain and Sam together at lunch," he said, looking out his side window.

That was a development I had not anticipated, though it might not be unusual for co-workers to lunch together.

"What do you make of the meeting?"

"Don't know. But they was in the restaurant for an hour-and-a-half."

"Something else to think about," I said.

Bull continued staring out his window.

Just before we arrived at the lot where Bull's truck was parked, I asked him, "So . . . did you have any fun today?"

Bull turned toward me, as he had when we were heading for Equinox. But this time, after staring stonily at me for a moment, his face broke into a broad smile.

## CHAPTER 18

There was still a little time before most of the employees would be heading home from their work day at ComDyne. If I were to have any hope of finding Katherine soon, I was going to have to back one horse against the others. My gut told me that Sam could be trusted.

But I needed to find out about his lunch with Sustain. The more I thought about it, the less routine it seemed for an intern to eat lunch with his high-powered superior. I needed to resolve the inconsistency.

I called Sam's extension on my cell.

"This is Sam," he answered.

"Sam," I said. "It's James Becker. Do you remember me?"

"Dr. Whitson's attorney. Have you found her?"

He sounded sincerely concerned.

"I'm afraid not. But Sam, I need to meet with you privately – as soon as possible. And it can't be at ComDyne. When and where can we meet?"

I held my breath, hoping he would agree to my request.

"Absolutely. There's a bar and grill called Dooley's two exits south of ComDyne off 494. I can meet you there in an hour . . . if that's okay?"

"Perfect. See you then. And Sam, please don't tell anyone that we're getting together."

"Got it."

So far so good. I would meet with Sam, and then go with whatever my gut told me was right. My instincts were usually good. I would need to trust them now if I had hopes of finding Katherine soon.

\* \* \*

I found Dooley's right where Sam said it would be. Procuring a booth in a back corner, I waited for the intern.

Precisely at the appointed time, I saw Sam come through the door. I walked over to the entry, greeted Sam, and showed him to my booth.

I offered to buy him dinner. We could eat while we talked. But he graciously declined, professing to have dinner plans with a young lady later that evening. Instead, we ordered iced tea with lemon.

After the waitress left our table, I took a deep breath and dove in.

"Sam," I said. "I need someone I can trust to help me find Dr. Whitson – someone who knows the people at ComDyne. I think you might be that person."

Sam blushed. It is difficult to fake a blush.

"If I can help Dr. Whitson," he said, finally, "just tell me how."

"Great! But I have one question I need to ask you before you can help me."

"Go ahead," Sam said. "You name it."

"I understand that you had lunch with Dr. Sustain this afternoon. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Do you lunch together often?"

"No," Sam said. "Never."

"How did you happen to end up eating together today then?"

I felt embarrassed even asking these questions. Sam seemed such a great kid.

"Dr. Allister asked us to both meet him at the restaurant."

"Dr. Allister? Was he there, too?"

"You know, that was really weird," Sam said. "He told each of us separately to meet him at the restaurant. But then he didn't show."

"Dr. Sustain was really mad. He had lots of work to do with Dr. Whitson out of the office. He said he couldn't afford to take a lunch break for no reason."

Allister! I should have stayed with his Lincoln in the first place. The arranged lunch between my other suspects was a diversion.

"I see. Did Dr. Allister later explain his absence?"

"No. And we wouldn't have expected him to either. You don't just question Dr. Allister."

I supposed that was true.

I had heard enough. I was convinced of Sam's loyalty to Katherine. And I was now focusing in on Allister.

"Thank you, Sam," I said. "I apologize for having to ask these questions. But it is all very important to ensure Dr. Whitson's safe recovery."

"I understand," Sam allowed. "What can I do?"

"As soon as I know, I'll be in touch," I said. "But maybe I should get your cell number, so we don't have to go through the ComDyne phone system."

That seemed good enough for Sam. And he happily provided me with his private number.

We finished our tea and went our separate ways.