

PROLOGUE

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the Cali and Medellin drug cartels ran a multi-billion dollar marijuana and cocaine business from their fortress compounds in the mountain jungles of Colombia. Cartel influence in their home country was complete. Neither police nor government officials dared challenge them. Outside Colombia, even the Italian Mafia took care not to invade sales territories of the powerful South American cartels.

During the 1980s, all of that changed. The United States declared war on drugs . . . and the DEA had the Colombians directly in its sights.

As American military support for the Colombian Government grew, the Calis and Medellins found themselves having to devote ever increasing resources to dealing with matters at home. This left the activities of their foreign partners largely unmonitored – a situation they feared, but could do little about.

As the 1980s passed, the Calis and Medellins would eventually taste defeat at the hands of the Americans – crumbling under relentless military assaults by both Colombian and American troops. But the decline of the Colombian drug lords gave birth to an ascendance farther north. The era of the Mexican cartels had arrived.

From humble beginnings as flunkies and mules for the Colombians, the ambitious Mexicans would eventually build for

themselves a drug empire more lucrative, and a geographic influence more extensive, than their South American predecessors.

The U.S. observed the developing Mexican threat . . . and in fact, increased its efforts to curtail the drug trade flowing from Mexico across America's southern border. Yet, except for the occasional bust made at a border crossing, American efforts at interdiction remained largely unsuccessful.

Unlike Colombia, Mexico had not yet developed the stomach for fighting the powerful cartels. Since the United States found no partner in pursuing the Mexican drug lords, its cross-border efforts consisted mainly of isolated, clandestine missions of limited scope. Although such attacks did inflict losses on the cartels, in the long run, they would prove ineffective at deterring cartel expansion.

By the twenty-first century, Mexico's drug problems had gotten so bad that its government had no choice but to join the fight. Unfortunately, it was too late. The cartel forces had the Mexican national army out-manned and out-gunned.

Emboldened by frequent victories over the *Federales*, the cartels pressed on to the north, setting up drug operations in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The states pleaded for help from Washington. But politics between the United States and Mexico remained tenuous over immigration issues. Cooperation between the two countries in combating the drug threat faltered. The wheels of politics ground to a halt.

Correctly assessing the weaknesses of their enemies, the cartels continued their expansion farther into the American heartland.

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Today, the battle still rages. With every passing week, new battle lines are being drawn – inside Mexico, at the American

border, in the Arizona desert, and even in seemingly insulated states in the U.S. north.

In 2011, the Mexican cartels are already supplying more than ninety percent of the cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine sold in Minnesota and throughout the Midwest. How long will it be before the cartels are not only selling, but *producing* their illicit wares inside American borders?

Maybe not as long as you think

CHAPTER ONE

August, 1985 – 25,000 feet above northeastern Mexico.

In the rear of the C-141 cargo jet, five servicemen sat strapped onto wooden benches awaiting the order to jump. Their gear was typical for this sort of mission – a HAHO parachute jump. High altitude. High open.

Kevlar helmets fitted with OD oxygen systems would allow them to breathe at the extreme altitude of their release. Insulated jump suits would protect them from the -50 degree cold and 120-knot winds into which they would soon throw themselves. Under the insulation, their uniforms were plain black – bearing no insignia to reveal an affiliation of any kind.

Master Sergeant Juan Fuentes felt a particular unease as he contemplated the mission. Under most circumstances, he would be confident in his abilities, and those of his men, to carry out their assignment. But this mission was different.

His operational orders had come down just ten hours earlier. His team was expecting a training jump over Panama that day. But an opportunity to take out a high-value target had presented. Expediency was required. His team was best suited, so they had drawn the assignment.

In his opinion, the plan was sound. And his men were all Army Rangers like himself. They were squared-away soldiers . . . fully capable of executing on their Ranger training. Still . . . he would

have preferred an opportunity for his team to simulate the particulars of this attack before boarding the transport. That hadn't been possible.

The emergent circumstance that had required this rapid deployment was a meeting of Mexican drug cartel leaders, to be held at a certain secluded mountainside villa. Intel from a local informer had been deemed reliable. The meeting had already begun.

The target was located 400 kilometers northwest of Tampico in Tamaulipas Province, Mexico. The villa compound had been carved into the southeastern slope of a mountain in the *Sierra Madres Oriental* – the geological backbone of northeastern Mexico.

Master Sergeant Fuentes' orders included a notation that the Mexican government had approved the mission. He should not anticipate interference from the Mexican military.

Local Mexican authorities were another matter. The cartels already owned many of them . . . their allegiances having been acquired with cash, or coercion, or a combination of both. Any local police forces he might encounter had to be considered "neutrals" at best, and more likely, "hostiles."

Though Fuentes was an American citizen by birth, Spanish was the language of his family and of his culture. His Mexican roots ran deep. His sympathies lay with relatives in the Tampico area who had suffered first hand the cruelty of the drug cartels. This would be more than a mission for the Sergeant. This would be a crusade of sorts . . . a strike against cartel oppression on behalf of the overmatched Tampico citizenry.

Though he was an American soldier, Fuentes considered his Ranger team a covert element in the larger conflict between the Mexican people and the cartels. This was a war he knew he would be fighting for a long time, whether under the American flag or not.

As the target site approached, the five team members donned their helmets and oxygen masks, strapped night vision goggles

around their necks, and hung their rucksacks between their legs. The huge, rear ramp of the C-141 slowly swung down to a horizontal position.

The Jump Master radioed the team to get ready. A few seconds later, a green light illuminated near the tail of the plane. Master Sergeant Fuentes led and the rest of his team followed – each being sucked from the ramp as he reached the airflow vortex in the plane's wake.

As he fell, Fuentes looked up and to the west to see if he could catch a glimpse of the C-141 above him. Between the plane's lack of lights and the violent shaking of a 120-knot departure from the huge transport, he wasn't able to pick it out. He knew it was still there, though. It would continue circling the drop zone at 25,000 feet, illuminating the DZ with infrared light until Fuentes' team was safely on the ground.

After a few moments, Fuentes' lateral motion, and therefore, a good deal of the air resistance that had buffeted him, subsided. Now he focused on his wrist altimeter. He was in no rush to reach the ground, so he fell in standard spread-eagle position. As the altimeter approached 17,000 feet above sea level, he deployed his chute, knowing that his team had done likewise a few seconds earlier.

No longer descending at 120 knots, and at this lower altitude, he was now able to remove the oxygen mask and strap on his Night Observation Device – in this case, infrared goggles. Harnessing NODs in the middle of a jump was not a routine maneuver. But then, Special Forces were seldom requested to perform the routine. Clear night-vision was necessary for this jump. Their DZ was small, and the surrounding terrain hazardous.

The plan called for an approach toward the drop zone from the west. The five paratroopers would drift with the gentle westerly wind toward the DZ. With his rectangular parachute fully deployed, Fuentes concentrated on maintaining his easterly heading until, at

about 15,000 feet, he could see the glow of the DZ's IR reflection on the mountainside.

"Carpet in sight. Heading North 78 degrees East. Report." Fuentes' English had never been great. His speech was heavily laced with a Mexican accent.

"Mongoose, this is Mud Slinger. I've got it."

"Mongoose, this is Trophy Wife. I have a visual."

The remaining team members confirmed their sightings of the DZ – a small mesa carved into the crumbling shale of the mountainside. No one had had any problems with chutes, and everyone's night vision was online. Fuentes took a cleansing breath. He had envisioned his confrontation with the cartels often. It would end in bloody, hand to hand combat – *mano a mano*. This precision military assault was never what he had in mind.

Tonight's coordinated attack left no room for machete fantasies. He needed to keep his focus on the mission at hand.

Descending to a height of approximately 100 feet above the DZ, Fuentes released the catch on his duffle lanyard. The eighty-pound ruck dropped until it dangled fifteen feet below him. The ruck touched down first, leaving Fuentes to land with his legs free to deal with any terrain issues.

There were none.

Fuentes gathered his chute, clearing the way for other jumpers.

All of the team members wore glint tabs on their jumpsuits and helmets. Through the IR goggles, the glint tabs glowed brightly in the infrared light, ensuring the last jumpers down would not collide with those who had landed earlier.

Upon landing, each soldier shucked his primary and secondary chutes, his oxygen system, and finally, his brown jump suit. The chutes and OD systems fit neatly inside duffle-like "kit bags," enclosing the gear in a tidy package for swift extraction. Even though the Mexican government had approved the strike, the Rangers knew better than to leave clear evidence of American

involvement behind. One never knew when politicians might recant their statements or deny their approvals. The Rangers' gear must depart with them.

Maintaining communication silence, the team members, including the Master Sergeant, stacked the kit bags along one edge of the mesa. Then, gathering near the pinion pines on the uphill side of the DZ, they reviewed their plan of attack.

The target was on the other side of the mountain, some three to five clicks easterly of the DZ, depending upon the approach route each would be taking. Two would round the peak low along the north side of the mountain, gradually climbing the remaining 150 meters to a position just below the villa. Fuentes would lead the others along a higher route on the southern slope. It was a longer hike, but it would allow them prime observational positions above the target and its surroundings.

Each soldier wore a military-precision GPS locator to complement his wrist altimeter. The two pieces of twentieth century technology would guide them unerringly to the target. The infrared NODs would allow them to detect any unanticipated hostiles before they, themselves, could be discovered.

Any team communications from here on would be whispered through encrypted VHF radios inside the soldier's helmets. As an extra precaution, they would use code names rather than given name or rank.

Although the Rangers had cross-trained in multiple tactical and operational specialties, each brought a particular expertise to this mission.

Mud Slinger was the team's machine gunner and carried a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW). His largest and heaviest gear was the ammo box containing 200 rounds of 5.56 mm linked ammunition. The SAW was designed for use in hostile force suppression. In the present operation, Mud Slinger's role would

likely be to facilitate his team's withdrawal from the target area after the objective had been destroyed.

Mongoose (Fuentes) was a sniper. His primary on-person weaponry was a Colt M4 multi-purpose assault rifle, modified with a telescopic sight and sound suppressor. In addition to his own supplies, his ruck also contained extra ammunition for the machine gunner.

Trophy Wife was the team's Forward Observer, also known as a 13 Fox. Forward Observers typically serve to target artillery barrages or to call in close air support. On this night, Trophy Wife's main responsibility would be reconnaissance. He carried an M4 rifle, like the sniper rifle, but with an aim point – red dot – scope and no sound suppression. His rifle also had a grenade launcher attached under its barrel. It was no RPG, but even “lobbed” grenades added to the team's potency.

“Alpha Team,” as these three soldiers would be known for the remainder of the operation, would approach the objective via the uphill southerly route, ultimately establishing a high-ground vantage point well above the target.

“Bravo Team” would take the northerly, down-slope route.

Bravo Team was charged with placing explosives to assure complete destruction of the target. Red Fox was an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist (EOD). His rucksack contained thirty, half-kilogram bricks of C4 plastic explosive, together with a matching number of radio-controlled blasting caps. He carried an M4 rifle, configured identically to Trophy Wife's – an aim point scope with no sound suppression.

The second Bravo Team member was Blue Hawk. He would accompany Red Fox on the lower route. Blue Hawk would assist with placement of the C4 beneath the villa. He carried an additional sixteen bricks of the high explosive. Blue Hawk's rifle was also an M4.

The fact that four of the five team members carried the same make of rifle was no accident. This tactic allowed sharing of ammunition among team members . . . often a detail of critical import.

The riflemen's weapons were capable of single shot or three-shot bursts. It was not practical for them to carry SAWs, like the machine gunner. They had had to pack light for the jump and would need to conserve their ammo supplies.

Thusly outfitted, and eager to accomplish their objective, the team split up and moved toward their respective target positions.

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When Master Sergeant "Mongoose" Fuentes and Alpha Team arrived on station above the villa, they got a pretty clear picture of the scope of the gathering being held there. Twenty-seven black limos and Mercedes sedans lined the edges of the courtyard between the buildings. Some even had to park along the narrow crushed-limestone drive leading to the secluded compound.

Fuentes radioed Trophy Wife to scout the area further east to determine if there were additional hostiles in that direction. Mud Slinger and Fuentes selected well-concealed positions beneath the low scrub pinions, which grew thicker on this easterly, and therefore wetter, side of the *Sierra Madres*.

After choosing a position for his M4's bipod and establishing clear lines of sight around the objective, Fuentes proceeded to assess the target's characteristics.

The villa compound consisted of the main villa – a luxury home of approximately 5,000 square feet – an oversized attached garage, and an auxiliary building that appeared to contain barracks-style accommodations. The latter probably served as housing for drivers, guards, and other personnel who would provide for the safety and comfort of the drug lords and their immediate families.

One of Alpha Team's first duties was to confirm the accuracy of the intel on which their mission was based . . . namely, that this was, indeed, a meeting of drug cartel leaders and not a simple family gathering. Fuentes had memorized the faces of many of the cartel leaders. But everyone was inside the buildings, so that wouldn't help him now.

Reaching into his ruck, he acquired one of the combination communications units which both he and the 13-Fox carried. Observation satellites had not been able to identify the vehicle licenses at this gathering owing to the heat distortion projected by the slowly cooling mountain shale. Fuentes would accomplish that task now.

Using the secure satellite link, he radioed his base asking for confirmation of the license numbers of the cars at the villa. He couldn't see all of them from his position. But with the aid of his sniper scope, he could read and relay many to HQ for validation.

The intelligence operatives in the communications center at Fort Benning, Georgia were expecting his call. They were ready with a previously prepared list of license plates, as well as the information connections necessary to determine ownership of other vehicles. It took them less than a minute to confirm that at least eight of the cars belonged to cartel higher-ups. This information sufficed to green light the attack.

Fuentes was relieved they would proceed with their mission. No sane person *wants* to kill people. But to Fuentes, cartel members were less than people . . . less even than animals.

There was also the adrenaline rush he had felt in planning the attack, the execution of the technically difficult night jump, and now the visual confirmation of his cartel targets . . . it would be a shame if his team's preparations had been for naught. All his training, not to mention his loathing for the drug lords, drove him toward a single goal – completing this mission.

He had his orders. His men were ready to execute them. The American Army had provided him with means, motive, and opportunity. Of course, he would take it!

The radio in his helmet crackled.

“Mongoose, this is Trophy Wife. Over.”

“What you got, Trophy Wife? Over.”

“The lawn is clean. Two guys manning the garden gate. One jeep with a fifty. Over.”

“Copy that, Trophy Wife. Keep watch on garden men. Come home when you hear the party. Over.”

“Roger that, Mongoose. Out.”

Fuentes wasn't too concerned about the men with the jeep at the end of the driveway. He knew from mission prep that the road was at least a klick and a half away. That'd be a couple long minutes before they could be on site with their .50 caliber machine gun. *We should be long gone by then.* And the jeep couldn't follow the path he and Alpha Team would be taking home.

“Red Fox to Mongoose. Over.”

“Go ahead, Red Fox. Over.”

Bravo Team, having the shorter route, had arrived at its position on the slope below the target a few minutes before Alpha. They had assessed the target's structural vulnerabilities and now were reporting to their leader.

“Brick house down here. Need charges up top, too. Over.”

Fuentes understood what Red Fox was saying. In addition to the explosives to be positioned beneath the home, Bravo Team needed to place charges along the villa's front foundation. While placing the explosives, they would be in plain view of anyone in the courtyard, even from many of the parked cars.

“Stand by, Red Fox. Out.”

Fuentes needed to reassess the situation in the villa's front courtyard . . . and do it quickly. He surveyed the area with his scope. Nothing had changed since his report to HQ. There was a single

guard with an automatic rifle strolling idly near the home's entry. No other hostiles were visible.

He checked the house. The drapes had been pulled on all the windows. The cartel's desire for privacy would work against them this time. No one would be able to see Bravo Team at work from there.

It wouldn't be hard to take out the sole guard under the portico. But how much noise would he make when he fell?

He could countermand the plan to rig the front of the house. But his EOD had recommended the additional charges. He wouldn't have made the decision to expose Bravo Team lightly. The charges were almost certainly necessary.

If the enemy discovered Bravo Team in action, how should the team respond? Mud Slinger could provide cover fire until the charges had been laid or until Bravo was forced to retreat. That wasn't a very desirable Plan B. Fuentes hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

The situation required a quick decision.

"Red Fox, this is Mongoose. We got you cover. Advise when you ready to go. Over"

"Acknowledged. Out."

Minutes went by before Fuentes' radio crackled again.

"Go now. Over."

Fuentes already had the guard in his sights when the word arrived. He waited for the best shot, exhaled, and gently squeezed the trigger on the M4. The guard dropped hard. Even up on the mountainside, Fuentes could hear the thud of the body and the rattle of the guard's weapon hitting the limestone. Both he and Mud Slinger scanned the compound for any sign of reaction from the villa or the barracks. When no one appeared, Fuentes was back on the radio to his team.

"Red Fox. All clear. Out."

Alpha Team remained vigilant as it watched Red Fox and Blue Hawk dashing low along the front of the villa and past the dead guard. It only took twenty seconds to place the charges . . . but for this entire time, Bravo Team was completely vulnerable.

Fuentes used a black sleeve to wipe perspiration from his brow.

Even after Bravo Team had rounded the corner of the villa on its way back into the brush and out of sight, Fuentes remained mindful that the hostiles in either building could yet discover the dead guard, forcing him to detonate the C4 before Bravo Team had retreated to a safe distance.

Long minutes passed. Finally, Bravo Team called in.

“Mongoose, this Red Fox. We’re ready. Over.”

“Stand by, Red Fox. Out.”

Everyone had heard Red Fox say Bravo Team was ready to demolish the villa. Hearing no objections, Fuentes gave the okay.

“Execute. Execute. Execute.”

No sooner had he given the order than a young woman in a white dress came running out the front door of the villa. She stooped to check on the fallen guard.

A split-second later, the villa imploded . . . the adobe walls melting backwards and sliding off the mountain to the northeast. Bravo Team’s work had been a success.

When the dust settled, Fuentes could see the woman’s rubble-covered white dress lying draped over the guard, motionless. *Damn.* He hated killing women. *But this was a cartel woman. Was she fair game?*

It didn’t take long for the hostiles to react. Almost immediately, two armed men ran out the barracks door in the direction of the demolished villa. Fuentes picked off the first with his sniper rifle. Mud Slinger got the second with a short burst from the SAW.

More cartel soldiers stormed through the barracks doorway, scattering around the courtyard. Mud Slinger sent those who had emerged running for cover. The lights that had been illuminated

inside the barracks blinked out. Automatic weapon fire sprayed from inside the barracks' windows up the mountain and into the trees. They were aiming too low to endanger Alpha Team.

By this time, Trophy Wife was back with his team.

"Jeep's on the way," he said.

After about twenty seconds of sustained, but poorly directed, fire from the barracks, all fell quiet. Gradually, a few men appeared around the sides of the barrack building.

"Extraction ready, Trophy Wife?" Fuentes said.

"On the way."

Trophy Wife had already radioed the team's extraction element to mobilize. Fuentes' team would depart this mountain via the three "Little Bird" helicopters that had been idling in the desert five clicks west of the DZ. They would already be en route to the extraction point.

"Little Bird" was the nickname for the AH-6 small chopper and its troop-carrying variant, the MH-6. Developed specifically for troop insertions and extractions, Little Bird had proved its worth to the military many times over since its initial deployment in the 1960s.

Two of the three Little Birds on their way to the DZ – now the LZ (landing zone) – were MH-6s that had been outfitted to carry troops and cargo. The third, an AH-6 attack version of the Little Bird, would provide cover fire if needed. With its 7.62 mm machine gun and dual 2.75 inch rocket pods, if necessary, the Little Bird attack chopper could deliver a punch much greater than its name implied.

"Time to head out," Fuentes said. "But we will leave them a present, yes?"

On Fuentes' signal, Trophy Wife fired a grenade into the center of the compound. Then all three members of Alpha Team opened up, blanketing the kill zone with mostly random fire. Their goal was not so much to kill as many men as possible, as it was to deter

zealous pursuit. It didn't take long for all of the hostiles to either fall where they stood, or retreat to the cover of the barracks.

Alpha Team ceased its fire and set off at best pace retracing its route up and around the mountain.

Although Alpha Team had a head start on the cartel soldiers, it didn't take long before bullets were zipping through the brush around them. Further deterrence was necessary.

As the others continued to the extraction site, Trophy Wife stopped to fire more grenades in the path of the cartel fighters. After he had done so and caught up to his comrades, Mud Slinger took a turn, firing his SAW to saturate the enemy's estimated position with machine gun fire. Following this leap and bound retreat procedure, Alpha Team was finally nearing the LZ.

Fifty meters from the mesa, they all stopped a final time. Trophy Wife launched two more grenades and Mud Slinger emptied his SAW to slow the enemy's advance.

By the time they came charging through the scrub pines on the south side of the mesa, they were relieved to see that Little Bird One had already departed with the kit bags and Little Bird Two was ready to take the soldiers onboard.

"Hot on our tails," Fuentes said into his radio. "Let's get out of here."

As the Rangers jumped aboard Little Bird Two, a white light flashed on the mountainside in the direction from which Alpha Team had come. It was followed by a puff of dust and smoke. The chopper engines drowned out any other sound.

"Guess they found one of our trip wires," Mud Slinger said into his radio, as he strapped himself onto the bench. "That should slow 'em up."

In less than ten seconds all five squad members had found places on the seating boards on either side of the chopper. Little Bird Two didn't wait for everyone to get strapped in before it lifted off, sliding sideways to the mountain's edge, then following Little

Bird One downward into the canyon. The Rangers held onto their harnesses until the G-forces abated and they could buckle them properly.

As Little Bird Two headed away from the LZ, Fuentes saw that Little Bird Three, the attack chopper, had remained behind . . . apparently with good reason. While their own helicopter had been diving down the mountain toward the desert valley below, the AH-6 had climbed to a position above the LZ. Its guns were strafing the mountainside. Before he lost sight of the AH-6, he saw the trail of a rocket being launched from its pod. Until the other Little Birds were safely away, the AH-6 would hold its position . . . or die trying.

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Ten minutes and several clicks away from the former villa, Little Bird Three caught up to its companions. The pilot gave the Rangers riding the buckboard outside Little Bird Two a thumbs up as he moved to lead the small air squadron. Fuentes saw the bullet holes in the cockpit bubble as the attack bird passed by.

At first, he was thankful for the brave pilots of the Little Birds and the expert extraction they had coordinated. Then, just as relief was nearly upon him, Fuentes began to feel it again. A churning in his gut. He tried to suppress what he knew was coming.

Growing slowly at first, but building as the minutes passed, it was like a bilious monster rising up in his throat. The same beast he'd fought more and more often lately. Then it was upon him. The unbridled urge to lash out . . . to slaughter . . . to annihilate. He felt the perspiration on his forehead, but knew it would disappear as quickly as it had come in the turbulence of the chopper ride. This wasn't the place or the time to lose control.

Leaning back against the chopper's metal frame, he clenched his teeth and steadied his hands on the seat-board. Was it the cartel

connection that had triggered this visceral response? *Killing those bastards should make it better, not worse.*

Maybe he'd been doing this soldier thing too long. Maybe it had been his team's close call just now. Whatever the cause of his rage, he'd deal with it in his own way. In his own time. Just as he'd always done. Right now, he just needed to breathe.

He inhaled deeply, releasing the air through his mouth.

Too damn close! To what? To death? To losing control? Just too damn close!

Fuentes took one more deep breath. Then, forcing his face into a smile, he turned to the EOD seated beside him. He needed to yell to be heard over the rushing wind.

"Got a spare cig, Red?"

Red Fox smiled.

CHAPTER TWO

Present day near Red Wing, Minnesota.

The meth cooking operation Deputies found smoldering early this morning in rural Ottawa County was anything but typical for southeastern Minnesota.

For one thing, even in its charred state, it was clear that this was a large-scale production facility for our area. Based on the stainless steel and ceramic containers that had survived the fire, the experts from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) estimated that a set-up like this one could produce several pounds of pure methamphetamine crystals per day. Previous meth busts in the Red Wing area had yielded only home-cooking operations where maybe half-a-dozen druggies would collaborate to buy the ingredients, and then they'd combine their stuff to yield less than an ounce per batch – mainly for personal use.

Another anomaly was the fact that the meth cookers, at least those I could see clearly from my location on the periphery of the crime scene, appeared to be of Hispanic descent. Based on my experience abroad, and the facial structures of the men on the premises, I guessed the suspected drug cookers to be Mexicans or Mexican-Americans. Finding twenty or more Mexicans all in one place in Ottawa County was unusual in and of itself – let alone the drug connection.

The other really strange thing about the bust at this meth lab was that, although there were cops everywhere, it was clear who had been making the drugs, and the perpetrators were still on site, no one had been arrested. There was a good reason for this. And that was the fourth peculiarity.

Every single person the sheriff's deputies had found on the premises was dead. Executed. Shot in the forehead at close range.

While you let that picture settle a bit, I suppose I should tell you who you're listening to. The name's James Becker, attorney-at-law. Just about everyone who knows me calls me "Beck." I'm an ex-"military intelligence operative," now retired to my home town of Red Wing, along with my wife, Beth, a CIA code-cracker.

I know that's not much for you to go on. But you can trust me. I'm really a decent guy. I even help out local law enforcement when they get involved in puzzling cases – such as today's drug/murder/arson investigation.

"Beck, thanks for coming out here so fast!" The muted voice belonged to Ottawa County Chief Deputy Sheriff, Doug Gunderson, aka "Gunner." He had seen me and had walked over to where I was standing, just outside the yellow "crime scene" tape.

"No problem, Gunner. I can see why you called."

Gunner leaned toward me so we could speak confidentially.

"Now that you're here, whatta ya make of this mess?"

I gave the grounds a quick once over, just so Gunner knew I was giving serious consideration to his query.

"Looks like there was a fire or something," I said, gazing out over ground zero.

Gunner looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Okay. I get it."

Gunner was pretty quick on the uptake. He knew if I was going to be in on this investigation, I wanted all the way in.

The Chief Deputy is one of only a few people in Ottawa County who know anything about my rather special government background and related skills. I had never planned to let him in on

my secrets, especially because if word got to the wrong people, my entire family would be in mortal danger. But I had known Gunner since we were both kids. He had pinned me down one night and demanded to know where I had *really* been for twenty years of my life.

He can be an assiduous investigator and he managed to get me to cough up a rough sketch of my life story. He'd promised that my secret was safe with him. To date, that was a promise he had faithfully kept.

Anyway, Gunner knows I have some background that can be useful to law enforcement in certain situations – like when he finds a toasted meth house with twenty-odd murder victims lined up outside. And he knows that I often take a different tack in my investigational approach than the one provided in the Sheriff's Manual.

But he also knows we're both pulling the rope in the same direction and have the same goals. So for the most part, we're able to resolve our differing styles in the interest of catching the bad guys.

"Okay," Gunner said. "I guess you're in."

"Thanks."

Gunner moved closer to me. "Here's what we've got.

"BCA says this was a meth factory – or at least it was gonna be one. It may not have started producing yet. These dead guys, I guess, were the cooks."

"So do you think was the arson to destroy the operation, or just to cover evidence of the murders?" I asked.

"No way to know yet. BCA'll analyze all the evidence from the scene. Maybe that'll give 'em a better picture. Right now, I don't think they know any more than I do – any more than you can see from here." He turned toward the burned out house and the lawn full of corpses.

"Grim."

“No kidding,” he said. “So the reason I asked you here . . . do you have any suggestions on how to make heads or tails of this mess?”

Gunner was looking for my gut reaction.

“It’s pretty early to be waving any red flags,” I said, not wanting to ruin Gunner’s day on a hunch.

“Agreed. But if you were going to wave one, which direction would it be pointing?”

On a couple occasions, in my past career, I had, indeed, seen circumstances that were not dissimilar to today’s carnage. I looked Gunner in the eye and lowered my voice even further.

“As improbable as this may sound, I’d say this looks like the result of a drug war.”

Gunner made a face like he’d just bitten into a bad enchilada. “Shit. I had to ask.” He shook his head as he, once again, surveyed the scene.

“Okay. Well, we’ll know more soon. In the meantime, keep this whole thing under your hat, okay? We don’t need a bunch of press and gawkers . . . especially when we’re short on answers.”

“Right.”

CHAPTER THREE

When I arrived home that afternoon I found Beth working at her computer armoire in our dining room.

“Oh hey, Babe,” she said, getting up and walking around the black marble table to greet me.

“Hey yourself.” I gave her a big hug.

“You smell a little like a campfire. What’s up?”

“I just spent the last couple hours at that house fire I mentioned to you on the phone. Turns out it was some kind of drug operation gone bad.” I released her from my smoky grip. “Real bad.”

“Injuries?”

“Yeah. A bunch . . . Listen, I don’t really feel like talking about this right now. I kinda need to clear my head and get this smoke off my body. Think I’ll grab a quick shower and a change of clothes. Then we can talk more. Okay?”

“You got it. Go forth and cleanse thyself.”

“Heh. I don’t think soap’ll do the whole job. Maybe you should have some holy water ready when I come down.”

I excused myself and headed up the central stairway to the bathroom for my shower.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, I jogged back down the stairs feeling like a new man. A good part of this morning's fog of sooty karma had lifted. I smelled better, too.

I found Beth on the back porch swing, nursing a blue aluminum bottle of Bud Light beer in a bottle cozy. I grabbed a bottle for myself out of the small beer refrigerator on the porch, popped the cap, and joined her on the swing.

"You smell delicious," Beth said.

She rested her head on my chest as I curled one arm around her shoulders.

"I use soap," I said. A slight smile showed at the corner of my mouth.

"Okay, you drip. I see you're in no mood to cuddle. So you might as well fill me in on your morning's adventure."

Beth's voice was cheerful. My thoughts were somber.

"Okay. If you're up for it. But you should know . . . I'm gonna change the mood here when I tell you this."

Beth cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. "Okay. Ready."

"I'm afraid my morning wasn't much of an adventure . . . more like a visit to a cemetery. A graveyard where the bodies have leached to the surface."

Beth grimaced.

"Gunner asked me out to that house fire I mentioned. When I arrived, I was greeted by twenty-three young Hispanic men, shot to death execution-style and lined up in the yard. The house had been torched. Inside the burned-out building, according to the BCA, was the largest meth lab anybody has ever seen in Minnesota. We're talking maybe fifty or a hundred times what's normal around here – maybe more."

I paused to let some of this picture sink in.

"Sounds like New York, or L.A.," Beth said. "Like some gang turf war, or . . . a drug war? In Ottawa County? Not seriously?"

“That’s my best guess. ‘Course the cops have a lot of investigating to do yet. They’ll try to identify the corpses. None of them had any ID on his person. And they’ll analyze the lab equipment further. It may turn out that it wasn’t a meth cookery after all. Maybe something else.”

Whether drugs or not, it was hard for me to imagine that the scene I had observed this morning could possibly portend anything but headaches and misery for the residents of Ottawa County.

“But twenty-three dead When’s the last time that sort of mass execution happened in the U.S.?”

Beth stared into space.

“Gotta be when that crazy Hennard guy drove his pickup truck through the front window of Luby’s Café in Texas way back in – what was it – ’91? Long time ago, anyway.”

“This morning’s atrocity looked like something out of Kosovo. Like an ethnic cleansing. Or like the mob sending someone a message. But we don’t have ‘the mob’ in Minnesota . . . just a few rag tag street and motorcycle gangs that shoot each other once in a while.”

I thought for a moment. I could see Beth was trying to make some sense of all this, too.

“I s’pose Hells Angels is the closest we’ve got to any organized crime syndicate,” I said. “But if it was a biker gang, the BCA should find evidence of motorcycles all over the place. I didn’t see any tracks around that house this morning. Still . . . you never know.”

I was out of ideas. Maybe some solid police work would give me new options to consider soon. In the meantime, while ruthless killers roamed loose in or around Ottawa County, I would sleep very lightly indeed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three years ago, not far from Red Wing.

The tiny farming community of Bellechester, Minnesota had fallen on hard times of late. The ag economy was trending to larger and larger producers, who required larger and larger facilities and resources to handle their crops and process their milk. The Bellechester Farmers Elevator had neither the strategic plan nor the resources to compete with the big boys of agriculture in this changing marketplace. Farmers began bypassing the small crop storage and processing facility, instead taking their harvest and milk directly to the large facilities operated by ADM, Cargill, and Central Grain.

Eventually, the small elevator operation went out of business. Expenses exceeded income. It was not an uncommon story in the rural economies of the U.S. Without the customer base the Elevator had provided, many other Bellechester businesses were headed south, too. The General Store. The Ace Hardware franchise. Even the local Farm & Fleet store eventually picked up its bags and moved on.

Coonie's Bar and General Mercantile was the only business left standing when a former Cargill executive had a brilliant idea that would change Bellechester's fortunes forever. Walter Marsden was a native Minnesotan and a long time Cargill employee who was

tired of big business destroying family farms. The time had come for a brainchild he had been nursing for quite some time.

His idea was to find a suitable location, raise the necessary capital, and either build or refurbish a grain and dairy processing facility strictly to support *organic* farming.

The plan was a stroke of business genius. For years, the small time farmers of Ottawa County had been searching for a way to increase their incomes without having to work even more hours or to go even farther into debt to lenders.

Marsden started polling farmers around Minnesota to see if there was enough interest to support an all-organic processing, shipping, and marketing facility anywhere in the state. He found what he was looking for in and around Bellechester.

His first order of business was to pitch the idea to investment bankers and private investors. It took a fair amount of effort – and a number of failed attempts – but eventually Marsden found the funding he needed in an international agri-banking operation know as AgInvest. They were impressed not only by his plan, but by his experience in agri-business at Cargill and his devotion to the plight of the small farmer.

They would lend him the money he needed, provided that he kick in \$250,000 of his own funds. That contribution would stretch Marsden's finances thin. But he made the commitment, and the plan was underway.

Next up was the purchase and development of the facility itself. The owners of the now defunct Bellechester Farmers Elevator were pleased to have an offer of any sort for their property. One can imagine that there aren't a lot of alternative uses for a grain elevator. So they took Marsden's first offer, transferring the elevator and surrounding property to Marsden's venture group for what both parties considered a fair amount.

Now Marsden signed contracts with neighboring farmers in which they agreed to produce only organic crops and dairy products

as soon as they were able to qualify with the USDA to do so. That USDA approval process would take three years for those who had been using conventional pesticides and herbicides in their fields. But many of the farmers had begun the switch to organic years ago. The increased prices they would receive for the “all natural” product more than compensated for the reduced yields and extra transportation costs associated with organic produce.

Marsden and his contractors worked non-stop on preparations for the new Bellechester Organic Elevator and Creamery – known to the locals as Bellechester Organic. Marsden outfitted the old elevator buildings with new grain handling and milling machinery. Larger storage bins were erected. These additions and retrofits went smoothly and quickly.

The more challenging and expensive part of the project was building the creamery and cheese factory. Since the former Bellechester Elevator did not have a dairy facility, these buildings, and their associated equipment – loading docks, refrigeration, and pasteurization areas – would need to be built from scratch.

Soon the project began to fall behind schedule. The world economy was wallowing in the worst recession since the thirties. Construction bills began to mount. Delays meant added costs. Marsden went back to AgInvest seeking additional investment dollars. To his shock and dismay, AgInvest denied his request. Credit was tight all over, they said. They needed to maintain capital ratios to satisfy the Regulators. They were sorry, but Marsden was out of luck.

Marsden had already poured most of his personal savings into this project. He couldn't let it die on the vine.

So he sought a partner. Someone who would inject capital, not more loans. Someone who would share the risk of the project with him and help Bellechester Organic get off the ground.

Finally, he found that partner. The man was a wealthy financier who preferred to keep his name out of the business, his

people said. In exchange for fifty percent of the project, he would pony up the necessary funds.

Marsden didn't relish dealing through a faceless entity, but he had little choice in the matter. So he transferred half of his ownership in Bellechester Organic to his new partner – a closely-held corporation formed as “Bellechester Investors, Inc.”

With the new capital infusion, Bellechester Organic Elevator and Creamery was back on the road to becoming a reality. His new partner had been persistent about some design changes to the creamery building, and expansion of the farm services business – providing custom harvesting, organic spraying, and sales of farm supplies. But since the necessary money accompanied each change, Marsden could hardly complain.

As the day for the Elevator's grand opening approached, Marsden's partner insisted that since Marsden had come up with the plan, had handled all of the financing, and had engaged all the construction contractors, it was the least his partner could do to arrange the hiring of all employees – with Marsden as President and CEO, of course.

Frankly, Marsden was relieved to shed the hiring function. Construction was complete. Product and shipping contracts were in place. The marketing plan for his farmers' goods was working out nicely. Profit projections looked promising. The hard part, at least for Marsden, was over.

As for the Bellechester community . . . construction activities, and the promise of a viable employer in the village, had stimulated its economy significantly. A new General Store had opened. A small Walmart was being discussed among community leaders. And with hungry and thirsty construction crews in town every noon and night, Coonie's was conducting a land office business in beer and burgers.

Finally, the Grand Opening day arrived. Marsden made a speech. Coonie's gave out coupons for a free bag of pretzels with

purchase of a beer. And the first farmers lined up to deliver the beginnings of the fall harvest.

Bellechester Organic was off and running. And no one living in or around Bellechester could be happier.

Their savior had arrived.

CHAPTER FIVE

Present day, somewhere in Tamaulipas Province, Mexico.

Master Sergeant Juan Fuentes, U.S. Army Rangers, Retired, hadn't been honest with his men twenty years earlier when he told them that he was returning to Mexico to care for his ailing mother and to run the family fishing business.

His mother and father had already died by the time of his return to Mexico. It had always tormented him that the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service hadn't seen fit to allow them to remain in the States, even though he himself was an American citizen by virtue of his birth within its borders.

Nevertheless, with his parents' support and encouragement, he had returned to the United States at age eighteen to become an Army Ranger . . . to train to fight with the best. During his service to the American government, he had remained true to his oaths and done his best to be a model soldier.

At the same time, he also strove to be a model son. Each month, he had sent a portion of his meager Army pay to his parents, to help support his family. They needed the assistance not only because fishing had become a lower class endeavor for all who could not afford the large commercial fishing craft, but also because the ever-growing Mexican drug cartels had begun to "tax" the locals "for their own protection."

At least his family was fortunate in one respect. Their fishing boats were small, slow, and of poor quality. These attributes made the boats unsuitable for the drug-running activities in which most larger fishing operations were forced to engage, simply to avoid torture or death.

Ever since the Colombians had lost control of the greater portion of drug trade in Nicaragua and El Salvador, it had become too dangerous for the Colombian opium farmers to transport their crops via the land routes through Central America to the rich drug market in the U.S. So they had turned to the sea for trafficking – using fishing boats to deliver their harvest to Mexico.

A fisherman's private vessel would set sail from a Venezuelan or Colombian fishing port carrying anywhere from twenty kilos to 500 kilos of cocaine in its hold. It would make its way northwest into the Caribbean until it had reached certain designated coordinates. Then it would drop its cargo into the sea – usually with a short range GPS transmitter attached. If the drop was in shallow water, the product might rest on the ocean floor, perhaps contained in a metal box heavily wrapped in protective layers of plastic to keep out both water and inquisitive sea creatures. If the drop point was in deeper water, the whole package might be left to float, with a sea anchor attached to limit its movement with the wind.

In either case, within a matter of hours, a second fishing boat from Mexico would arrive at the prearranged coordinates to retrieve the package, transporting it back to a Mexican port . . . a port whose *policía* were on the cartel payroll. A port where the drugs could safely be unloaded and relocated for repackaging and distribution.

Near the end of Master Sergeant Fuentes' tour in the Army Rangers, his mother contracted cholera and died. After his mother's death, his father no longer feared for his own life. He had seen the corruption, torture, and murder by which the cartels subjugated his community. While he knew that, by himself, he could not seriously

harm the forces of the cartels, he could at least cost them some money.

So late one afternoon, as the fishing boats returned from their long day at sea, Juan Fuentes, Sr. piloted his shabby wooden fishing rig, *El Valor*, out of Tampico harbor, lying in wait for the commercial fishing vessel, *La Esperanza de Dinero*. He had loaded the bow of his boat with barrels and cans of gasoline . . . enough he had hoped, to do the job.

When he saw the drug-carrying craft approaching, Fuentes, Sr. maneuvered the *Valor* so it idled near the *Esperanza's* path to the harbor. When he judged the *Esperanza* to be within his reach, he coaxed the *Valor* to its maximum speed and aimed his weapon just to port of the *Esperanza's* bow . . . a location where Señor Fuentes hoped his *gasolina* could do its work. As he drew nearer, the larger craft blasted its horn and veered to avoid the collision. But it was too late. The cast iron Virgin on the *Valor's* prow pierced the side of the *Esperanza*, launching the petroleum bomb through its hull.

Señor Fuentes never knew whether his attack on the drug cartel's flagship had been a success. But the rest of Tampico gathered along the shore to watch the flaming *Esperanza* founder, and with a final deafening explosion, sink to the sea floor, taking its cargo of nearly a million U.S. dollars worth of Colombian cocaine with it.

When Master Sergeant Fuentes heard of his father's death, and the manner in which he had died, he was both saddened and proud. He knew that soon he, too, could fight the Mexican drug cartels with the bravery and honor of his father. That had been his plan in entering the Army – to train to fight the cartels. Now that his Ranger training had been completed, he was determined to bring the fight to the enemy.

Since repatriating to Mexico in 1989, Sergeant Fuentes had been fighting a guerilla war against the *Los Cinco* (lo-seen'-co) cartel, the single greatest source of misery to his home town of

Tampico. Owing to his U.S.-funded training in stealth warfare, for many years Fuentes was able to keep the cartel completely in the dark as to the source of its constant irritation.

Initially, Fuentes had assaulted small drug convoys as they traversed unpopulated desert roadways. This tactic had been effective, that is until the cartels began varying their routes to avoid his attacks, and enhancing advance security forces to clear a path for the drug convoys.

Then he began sabotaging the fishing vessels that carried the drugs coming from South America into Tampico harbor. Boats would depart port for a pickup in the morning and never return. There were no SOS signals or radio calls for assistance. The boats simply vanished at sea.

When cartel investigations into the areas where the boats' GPS signals had disappeared from the Harbor Master's screen found evidence of the bombings, *Los Cinco* knew it had another unknown threat it would have to address. It began searching its vessels thoroughly with teams of ex-military bomb experts before the boats were allowed to depart for their runs. After the cartel had identified and defused three of his rigged vessels, Fuentes knew he needed yet another means of attack.

This time, he moved into the city of Tampico itself. He let himself be known under the Fuentes name. He even took up fishing with one of his uncles. Now, he knew, he needed to employ extreme caution. Any missteps would rain hellfire down on his uncle and his cousins, not just himself. So he refrained from cartel fighting for a time – enough time to establish his place among his family and the Tampico community.

Meanwhile, cartel killings in his Tampico neighborhood continued. He began to fight back with knife attacks of his own in darkened alleys. His targets were mainly the *policía* who collected cartel payroll and refused to pursue cartel criminals. Occasionally, he would come upon cartel “enforcers” beating men, women, even

entire families in their homes. Despite the risks of being discovered, he was unable to resist intervening in such attacks on innocents. Yet he somehow managed to remain invisible to the cartels.

After those early years, his tactics had become more bold, more elaborate, and ultimately, more effective. He exercised extreme patience. Months and sometimes years would pass between opportunities to take out cartel targets. At times, his positions working for the cartel's businesses had required that he keep silent in the presence of unspeakable horrors.

Though he fought his best to hamper cartel activities, it seemed as though his efforts were always too little. The cartels only kept growing richer and stronger.

His latest plan had pushed the envelope, perhaps too far even for Fuentes. No one had confronted him yet concerning its particulars. Still, he thought it wise that he leave Tampico and return to the U.S. while he contemplated his next move.

It was then that he had contacted one of his former Team members in Minnesota to seek assistance. Red Feather was discreet, honorable, and most of all, capable. He would seek temporary asylum with Red Feather until he could decipher his own next move.

But he couldn't let Red Feather know that he was already in the U.S. That might cast suspicion on his most recent activities. So when he finally made the call, he'd had it routed through an unlisted Mexican number.

For the time being, he would place his trust and hope in his former comrade-in-arms. Then he would decide what to do next.

CHAPTER SIX

The day after the murders, in Red Wing.

I was at Becker Law Office, reclining in my ultra-comfortable, leather, swiveling lawyer's chair, with my feet up on my huge mahogany desk when the telephone intercom beeped.

"Yes?" I responded, without changing my position.

"Mr. Becker. There's a Mr. Bull on the telephone for you. He won't say what it's regarding. And excuse me . . . but he said you'd 'damn well better pick up.' "

The receptionist was a new hire. She hadn't yet learned how to treat some of my regular callers.

"Thanks, Allison. I'll take that call."

"Thank you, Mr. Becker. Mr. Bull sounded sort of scary."

Allison was fresh out of the secretarial program at the technology school in town. She had no idea what an understatement she had just uttered.

I sat up, reached across the desk, and picked up the handset.

"Hey, Bull. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"Gotta meet."

"Is it a big meat . . . like half a cow, or just a burger?"

Bull and I went back a ways. He had a similar history of disappearing from Red Wing for an extended period and returning without a word of explanation as to where he'd been or what he'd been up to. All anyone knew for sure was that he'd been in the

military . . . and they only knew that because his parents saw his orders to report to boot camp. He refused to divulge further details when asked, which no one of even modest intelligence did . . . anymore.

Bull's real name was Terry Red Feather. He was a full-blooded American Indian – a member of the Mdewakanton Dakota tribe – and had been born on the Prairie River Reservation a few minutes distant from downtown Red Wing by car. 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.

"Big joke. Ha ha. When can we meet?" Bull was a no-nonsense kind of guy.

"Can it wait until dinner? We could do Jamaican at the Harbor Bar around 7:00?"

"Be there," he said . . . meaning, I presumed, that he would be there, rather than that I'd better be there, which would have been rude. One was never certain with Bull. I was about to clarify when there was a 'click' in my ear.

He had hung up.

I took a few minutes to ponder the significance of Bull's call.

Bull and I saw quite a bit of each other when I needed his assistance with my *ad hoc* law enforcement activities. He provided an intimidating presence, serious muscle, superb surveillance abilities, and tons of military expertise . . . like his extensive knowledge of explosives, and his ability to sneak up on anybody.

But it was almost always I who called for Bull's assistance. For him to contact me was much more rare – and therefore, more interesting. I wondered if he had gotten wind of the meth lab massacre and had counsel to provide.

Whatever the case, I would see Bull soon enough.

But now that I'd started thinking about the murders again, I couldn't let go of the thought. The only remedy was for me to investigate current developments. A visit to Gunner was in order.

Previous experiences had taught me not to call Gunner in advance of a meeting. He was frequently unavailable if I went that route. A surprise appearance at the Ottawa County Law Enforcement Center (LEC) would be the better approach.

Turning conduct of legal business over to my capable legal secretary, Karen, I headed out the door, hopped into my gray 2004 Honda Pilot, and drove off toward the LEC.

I barely had time to consider my questions for Gunner when I found myself pulling into a parking spot in the LEC lot. It was a five minute drive from my office – door to door.

Inside the LEC lobby, I asked the desk officer if she would please page the Chief Deputy for James Becker. "He's expecting me."

I think I'd visited Gunner here a few too many times for her to believe me. Nevertheless, she forwarded the message to Gunner. I could just about hear his eyes rolling through the phone line.

She hung up the desk console.

"Chief Deputy Gunderson will be out in a moment."

"Thank you very much. I'll just pace here a while." The molded plastic chairs in the LEC lobby were lumbar killers.

Gunner made me wait ten minutes . . . probably to reinforce that I had arrived without an appointment and that he was damn well in charge. Then he appeared at the door to the inner offices and waved me inside.

"Beck," he said, by way of greeting.

"Gunner. Great to see you, as always." I grabbed and pumped his hand enthusiastically as I slipped past him into the hallway. Gunner's participation in the handshake was minimal.

"Let's have a chat in my office, shall we?"

“Absolutely. I’ll lead if you don’t mind following,” I said, to the empty hall in front of me. I could hear Gunner’s eyes roll again.

“Right.”

I turned the corner into Gunner’s private office and grabbed one of the metal and green vinyl side chairs. Gunner took his place behind the cluttered desk and reclined in his matching metal and green desk chair, clutching the arms until the chair’s recline came safely to a halt.

“Anything to report on the out-county massacre?”

Gunner placed both hands behind his head, displaying his tan uniform’s perspiration-stained underarms. He sat like that for, perhaps, 20 seconds . . . not speaking, eyes closed.

“Did I come at nap time?”

Gunner didn’t let my crack disturb his zen. He breathed deeply and exhaled slowly through his mouth. I think maybe Gunner had recently taken a class on how to intimidate suspects and he was trying out some new – and boring – technique.

Finally, the Chief Deputy opened his eyes and sat upright. His hands now lay folded on his slight, but discernible, paunch.

“I don’t really have much to tell you, even if I was s’posed to. BCA has primary jurisdiction on the matter you’re referrin’ to. And in case you haven’t noticed, they’re keepin’ pretty tight lips. Not even a press release regarding the drug connection or the unfortunate victims. Only thing they’re sayin’ is there were deaths in a fire and the Fire Marshall is investigating its cause. The BCA Chief has sworn everybody to secrecy for now.”

“Don’t they think somebody is going to spill the beans about all the dead bodies? I mean, there were a bunch of firemen there. And cops aren’t exactly known for their discretion either. Geez, Gunner, I even guessed about the murders just from listening to police chatter on the radio. What do they think . . . people are stupid?”

“Listen, Beck. I don’t make the calls.” His voice was even. “I am but a humble public servant, trying his best to carry out his appointed duties.”

“Okay. I get it that you’re pissed because BCA has frozen the Sheriff’s Department out.”

Gunner gave me an “I have no idea what you’re talking about” look.

“So do you plan to just mope about it?”

Gunner paused before answering. “Seems a reasonable approach to me.”

“Gunner. You know you want in on this investigation. You can see the Staties are already screwing it up with this press brownout. If I were in your shoes, I’d do a little investigating on my own and prove my worth in this deal. You know what I mean?”

Gunner considered for a moment.

“Well . . . you’re *not* in my shoes. I’m just a cog in this frickin’ chain of command. Sheriff says leave it to the BCA . . . I leave to the BCA.”

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a “what a weenie” stare.

“Don’t give me that look, dammit!”

I could tell Gunner was softening.

“Okay. Well, I’m taking a look at that crime scene again. Whether you come along is up to you.”

Gunner tilted his head all the way back and stared at the ceiling.

* * *

We took Gunner’s cruiser out to the scene of the previous day’s holocaust. There was a State Trooper’s car at the end of the driveway. Gunner pulled over and rolled down his window.

“What’s up, Deputy?” the Trooper asked. “Restricted area, you know.”

Gunner gave him the “aw shucks, I gotta kick the shit off my boots” schtick.

“I know. But I was out here yesterday.” He showed his ID to the Trooper, who checked it against a list of the previous day’s attendees. “And this is sort of embarrassing . . . but I left my walkie in there. It’s not something I’m proud of. But I’d sure appreciate it if you’d cut a local guy a break and let me go fetch it.”

The Trooper noted that Gunner had assumed the appropriate subservient attitude.

“Okay,” he said finally. “You can go in. But don’t mess with anything. Just get the walkie and leave. Got it?”

“Absolutely. Got it. Thanks much, sir. You’re an officer and a gentleman.”

Oh for God’s sake, I thought. Gunner’s acting sucks.

Surprisingly, the Trooper flipped us a friendly finger gun and clucked his cheek – apparently a law enforcement universal sign of good will – and waved us on our way.

I could tell Gunner was tense from all the groveling.

“Good sucking up, Gunner. Couldn’t have done better myself,” I lied.

Gunner grunted and released his shoulder belt. We proceeded up the narrow dirt drive to the building site . . . coming to a stop well before we reached the yellow “Crime Scene” tape.

I’d seen enough of local police procedure to know that, if this place wasn’t crawling with Crime Scene geeks, they had already finished their work. It wasn’t likely we could inadvertently ruin any valuable evidence that hadn’t already been measured, photographed, tested, catalogued, and filed – in triplicate – at BCA Headquarters.

“So what do we look for, Deputy?”

Gunner squinted at me.

“You’re the guy who had the hots for gettin’ out here. BCA will have already done all the stuff I would do. And I’m not exactly a human crime lab.”

“Okay then. Let’s look for stuff you wouldn’t normally look for.”

Gunner put a hand on his hip and raised an eyebrow.

“If I knew what stuff I wouldn’t look for, I’d probably look for it . . . wouldn’t I.”

“All right.” He had a point, actually. “How about I suggest some things and you tell me whether we should look for ‘em. That work for you?”

“Like what?” Gunner remained skeptical of my approach.

“Let’s assume that our initial impressions were correct. This whole mess is part of some sort of gang war or drug fight.”

Gunner looked at me like I hadn’t said anything helpful.

“Wouldn’t the bad guys who did this leave some sign, you know, to send a message to the other bad guys of who they’re dealing with? To scare ‘em off? Like ‘Don’t mess with us or this is what you’ll get’ kind of thing?”

“I’m pretty sure BCA would’ve looked for that sort of sign,” Gunner said, still dubious.

“But there were a bunch of firefighters here before the police arrived. Right?”

“Yeah. I s’pose.”

“So it’s three in the morning. It’s dark. Even so, they probably see the bodies outside. But they still have to fight the fire and make sure there’s no one else inside.”

I surveyed the location where the fire trucks had stood the day before, and the path the firefighters would likely have taken to enter the house and/or extinguish the fire. I could see where the hoses had lain in muddy ruts, and the boot prints of the fire fighters who had been the first to arrive at the scene of yesterday’s “event.” The hose marks and boot prints mostly followed my predicted paths.

One of those paths lay directly between the location of the corpses and the burned out foundation.

“Suppose the guys who did this . . .”

“Or gals,” Gunner pointed out, though I knew he didn’t really think so.

“Or gals,” I conceded, “*did* leave a message to the drug cookers who worked here. But the firemen obliterated it in their first few minutes on site. I mean . . . it was dark and the fire was bright and they had to be in shock after seeing all the bodies. They could have easily trampled on something important.”

I took a few steps toward the area in question.

“So I say, let’s start looking right . . . along . . . here.” I indicated the entire length of the suspect territory as I walked along it.

“Okay. Let’s look. But we gotta pick up the pace. I can’t be searching for that walkie forever.”

I started to walk directly toward the pathway the firemen had taken. Gunner stopped me in my tracks.

“Hold up. Don’t go walkin’ all over where the bodies were layin’.”

“Why not? You don’t think the CSI team collected all the evidence from underneath the corpses?”

“Hell, no. They got their evidence. That’s not it. It’s like in a cemetery. You don’t go trampin’ on a grave site. It’s . . . it’s not right. Bad mojo.”

“Geez, Gunner. When did you start believing in ‘mojo’? You got a voodoo doll in the squad? You do realize that there aren’t actually dead bodies here anymore. We’re not walking on graves. Those corpses are long gone.”

“Yeah . . . well . . . just don’t walk there. Okay? It’s not right.”

Superstition or not, I agreed to go along with Gunner’s directive. He and I circumnavigated the area where the bodies had lain.

As we re-traced the steps of the firefighters, each of us examined the ground for any evidence the crime scene experts might have missed. It seemed a long shot. At one point I thought I saw something unusual. But it turned out to be a spot where some squirrel had tried to bury a nut or something. Anyway, there were lots of squirrel tracks when I looked more closely.

It didn't take us long to examine the questionable area.

Zippo. Nada. Zilch.

Gunner's radio crackled back in the car. Gunner looked up at me.

"Okay. Look around. Take a picture. Dig some dirt or whatever. We gotta go."

Not having any further hot ideas, I conceded defeat and we strode back to the cruiser.

Gunner picked up the radio.

"Gunderson."

"You guys get lost in there?"

"Naw. I guess Crime Scene musta picked it up. I'm sure I'll get reamed out by the boss when my gear turns up in the evidence locker. We'll be right out."

Gunner hung up the radio and closed his door.

"That's it for today, Sherlock. Let's git."

I joined Gunner in the car and we headed back out the drive. It seemed that if we were going to learn more about the perpetrators of this god-awful abomination, it wasn't going to be here . . . at least not today.

"Thanks for coming out with me, Gunner. It was above and beyond the call and I appreciate it."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah."

The Chief Deputy tried not to smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Later that same day, in Red Wing.

“I’m home,” I called out as our back porch screen door slammed unceremoniously behind me. I know it’s old-fashioned to have a spring closer on the wooden door. But it was authentic. And I sort of liked the sound the door made when slamming shut.

The time was about 3:00 p.m.

“Hey, Babe.” Beth greeted me with a quick hug as I entered the kitchen. She wore her straight, sandy-blonde hair pulled in a high ponytail. It felt like satin as it brushed my cheek. The delicate aroma of flowers remained after she pulled away.

Beth opened the refrigerator and held out a can of Diet Mountain Dew toward me. I shook my head. She kept the soda for herself and closed the fridge. Her outfit today was comprised of pleated khaki shorts and a breezy cotton top. Very fetching. But then, I may be biased.

“How was the office today?” She turned toward me, leaning lightly against the counter.

“Oh, you know. A little of this. A little of that.”

Beth gave the soda a single shake and popped the top in my direction, spritzing my face with a light mist. She smiled, then sipped the Dew.

“Hey. What was that for?”

“You didn’t hang around the office very long did you.”

“Not really. First Bull called and wanted to have some super-important meeting for dinner tonight. No further explanation. You know Bull.”

She tilted her head knowingly.

“Anyway, one thing led to another and the next thing you know Gunner and I were headed out to yesterday’s murder scene.”

Beth feigned shock.

“Yeah. I know. I’m not very good at sticking to the lawyer stuff when something more intriguing presents.”

“Really?”

I gave Beth a semi-stern eye posture.

“We weren’t able to stay long at the farm. And we didn’t find anything useful. So the field trip was kind of a bust. I’m thinking on some other possible investigative approaches though.” I can be indefatigable under the right circumstances.

“Of course, you are.” Beth stepped closer. I shielded my face lest I should be sprayed once more.

She laughed, put the can down and embraced me. Despite the carnage, the fire, and my lack of success earlier in the day, I could feel my spirit lifting.

“If you could bottle this stuff,” I said over her shoulder, “you’d make us both rich.”

“No, thanks. I made a promise and I’m stuck with only you.”

“It’s so endearing when you come on to me like that.”

We broke our clasp.

“So exactly when and where are you meeting Bull tonight. Do I need to cook?” Beth was definitely the cook in our household. It’s not a matter of sexism. I just suck at cooking. Actually burned a hard-boiled egg once.

“Thanks for the offer, Beth. We’re meeting at the Harbor at 7:00. I’ll maybe gnaw on some spicy Jamaican pig gristle while Bull is filling me in. I wonder how this ‘meeting’ is going to go. I’m

usually the only one who talks when we get together. Should be interesting.”

“I’m certain it will be *at least* that. You’ll have to share with me afterwards.”

“If it turns out to be worthwhile, you know I’ll give you all the dope . . . mainly so you can keep me from getting into too much trouble.”

“Right.” Beth wore a wry smile.

CHAPTER EIGHT

City of Tampico, Tamaulipas Province, Mexico – July, 1993.

Raphael Santos slouched on a wrought-iron bench on the border of *Plaza de la Libertad* in downtown Tampico, his dusty fedora pulled low across a sun-darkened brow. Smoke from a stubby cigar hung around him like the oppressive summer heat.

Santos knew this place intimately. His family had settled here more than a hundred years ago – before oil had replaced commercial fishing as the region’s largest enterprise. Before the stench of 20,000 tons a day of sewage from Mexico City had polluted the *Rio Panuco*, flowing a scant two blocks from where he sat. And most certainly before the residents of this otherwise prosperous east central Mexican city had succumbed to the tyranny of the drug cartels that now pervaded the city-scape . . . and beyond.

Tampico sat at the southernmost tip of Tamaulipas Province, which stretched to the north, encompassing coastal Mexico from here to the American border towns of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo. Tamaulipas featured some of Mexico’s most beautiful beaches. And in fact, Tampico had, itself, been a popular tourist destination for Americans until the crime rate had skyrocketed, and street murders had become as common as bad tortillas in a cheap cantina.

The perpetrator of all that evil in Tampico was the *Los Cinco* drug cartel. *Los Cinco* had gotten its start purely as a distributor for the Colombian Cali cartel. Through the seventies and well into the

1980s, *Los Cinco*'s predecessors had transported drugs from the Colombians to the drug-hungry American gangs to the north.

Then Reagan's war on drugs began to gain traction. Aid to the Colombian *policía* in the form of tactical advice, high-tech intelligence, and clandestine military fire-power, was proving effective in unseating the brutal leaders of the Cali and Medellín syndicates.

The five founders for which *Los Cinco* is named had observed the Colombian situation with interest. They could read the writing on the wall for the Colombian drug hierarchy. The cartels could control the Colombian government. But when the United States determined to intervene, it was only a matter of time before cartel leaders would be either killed, or captured and tried in U.S. courts.

The time had come for the Mexican flunkies to sever their ties to the Colombians and take hold of their greater entitlement. Drug operations needed to centralize farther north, in Mexico.

Los Cinco transformed from courier to cartel in rapid fashion. They transmitted the Calis' shipments through the usual distribution channels to the U.S and Canada – withholding payment until the Calis threatened open war.

By this time, it was too late for the Calis to mount an effective threat. With the United States killing their leaders, the Calis were running out of chiefs. When Cali loyalists saw their cartel leadership in decline, their devotion to the Cali family evaporated in a mass exodus of former drug mercenaries looking for new work. Many had already found a new home with *Los Cinco* in Mexico – where pilfered Cali drug money paid their salaries.

The venture was well-timed and highly lucrative, especially for those willing to murder the overly ambitious and intimidate the uncooperative. With the decline of the multi-billion dollar per year Cali cartel, and its nearly-as-powerful competitors, the Medellín, coca farmers needed to find new outlets for their crops. Since the Cali couriers were eager to find new work, it hadn't taken long to re-

establish trade routes from Colombia to Mexico. Thus, with supply chains in place, and plenty of *dineros* to hire enforcers, *Los Cinco* was born.

From Tampico, on Mexico's east coast, *Los Cinco* spread its influence and control across east-central Mexico – from the Gulf on one side, to the *Sierra Madres Oriental* mountains on the other . . . and from Tampico ever northward to the United States border.

Now, nearly a decade after the demise of the Colombian drug lords, *Los Cinco* had settled into a comfortable routine. Cocaine flowed freely through Central America, where refugees were happy for the chance to carry product in exchange for a chance to escape their poverty by crossing the U.S – Mexico border.

Marijuana had always grown well in the humidity east of the *Sierra Madres*. And a new product entry – methamphetamine – was proving to be even more lucrative than cocaine. *Los Cinco* soon had its own factories making the stuff in quantity from inexpensive ingredients, once again, for shipment to the drug-craving north.

The single fly in the ointment was that Mexican competition had seen similar opportunities to enter the drug trade across the country. There were now at least half a dozen significant Mexican drug cartels – all eager to expand their influence and territory.

Los Cinco was the first and largest of the cartels. And it held the prime location for distribution from South America to Texas and beyond. For the most part, attacks by the other cartels on *Los Cinco*'s shipments were minimal. When others dared to interfere in *Los Cinco* territory, retribution was swift and effective.

Then business got more complicated when the new Mexican President decided the drug cartels were a threat to his power and had to be eradicated. He sought assistance from the United States. Soon the Mexican military had the tactics and weaponry to present a serious threat to *Los Cinco*'s business enterprises.

In the span of a few years, three of the five original cartel leaders had been killed by raids on well-protected enclaves. And a

fourth now rotted in a Mexico City prison . . . beyond the cartel's geographical influence. Gaining his release any time soon was unlikely at best.

Santos knew the cartels intimately. He had even lost family members at their hands. An uncle two years ago. A cousin last year. Another cousin just last month. Until now, he had maintained a low profile in the hopes that if he didn't cause the cartels obvious trouble, they would leave him and his family alone. That strategy had failed. The cartels were killing his family anyway.

Today was a red letter day for Santos. Today marked the beginning of all out war between Raphael Santos and the cartels. The criminals wouldn't even know the war had begun. But before it was over, they would regret the day they had murdered his kin and subjugated "his people."

Buses belched diesel fumes into the swelter as they rumbled past the bench where he sat. He was waiting. Waiting for the sun to set, so his plan could begin to unfold.

A stream of sweat trickled off his brow and down the side of his grizzled face. To passersby, he was just another out-of-work Mexican, passing the day in idleness. But he knew he was a force to be reckoned with.

Either that, or a fool. Time would tell which.

CHAPTER NINE

I arrived at the Harbor Bar a few minutes before 7:00 and seated myself at a knotty pine booth with a view across the water. A petite, and quite pretty, Jamaican woman took my drink order, then departed into the dimness toward the carved wooden bar across the room.

“The Harbor,” as the bar and restaurant was known to the locals, had been an institution of sorts in the Red Wing area for more than forty years.

Located in Wisconsin on a narrow stretch of the Mississippi’s main channel, and immediately across the river from Red Wing’s historic downtown, The Harbor was situated on prime real estate for entertainment of all sorts. Through the years, The Harbor had gone through a series of incarnations, taking advantage of various business opportunities as they had presented.

When I was growing up, The Harbor was strictly a bar . . . and one that might attract a variety of conflicting personalities. A bouncer was ever-present. Even so, fist fights, knife fights, and occasional gunshots at The Harbor made the newspapers with uncomfortable frequency.

That was many incarnations ago. Today, The Harbor is a place many people bring their families, or their dates, for a unique menu, outside dining, and live music. The Harbor’s current owner has made numerous trips to Jamaica in recent years for the purpose of recruiting native Jamaicans as cooks and waitresses. The Jamaican

menu items are authentic and a pleasant departure from typical Midwestern fare. Reggae music emanates from the juke box, and often, from the outside stage area.

The Harbor has also become a favorite stop-over for recreational motorcyclists from all around the region. These aren't cycle gang members . . . just regular folks who enjoy the wind in their faces and bugs in their teeth. Like all regular folks, some have more rough edges than others. For the most part, The Harbor's biker patrons are mannerly, fun-loving, and free-spirited.

Tonight there were a few tables of bikers munching burgers and quaffing beers out back at wooden picnic tables on the concrete patio overlooking the river. There weren't many other patrons in attendance— probably because it was a steamy Wednesday evening and most people were enjoying their air-conditioned cable TV version of Twins Baseball. All in all, it was looking like a pretty tame evening for our meeting.

Turning my head back from the river view, my eyes needed to adjust to the dimness of the bar interior. I could see just well enough to make out Bull's hulking frame angling between the chainsaw-carved furniture toward me.

He was big. Six-foot-four, with maybe 250 pounds of barrel-chested muscle. His straight black hair hung over his shoulders on both sides of his tree-trunk neck.

As usual, I slid the table a little closer to my side of the booth so Bull could fit in.

He sat down across from me.

"Got beers comin'?" he asked.

"Nice to see you, too."

Bull's face remained expressionless.

"Yeah," I said, after a moment. "Thought we'd go with Red Stripes to start the Jamaican theme off right. That work for you?"

"Long as they get here soon."

The waitress's timing couldn't have been better. She arrived just as Bull concluded his bitching, dropping two, sweating Red Stripes on our heavily lacquered pine tabletop. That was another convenience about The Harbor experience. Pretty much everything was beer-proof. No cocktail napkins or coasters necessary.

I pushed one of the short brown bottles toward Bull. He lifted his my way in an unspoken toast. Our bottles chinked and we each took a big swallow.

"Good stuff," Bull said, after a second pull. "Where'd them Jamaicans learn to make beer, anyway?"

"Columbus brought the yeast and Magellan came along with the wheat and barley. . . . How the hell should I know? And why would you care? You lookin' to get into the Indian beer business?"

I smiled.

No word from Bull. And still no discernible facial expression. I was glad this wasn't a poker game.

"You hungry?" he said finally.

"I could eat. You need a menu?"

Bull was emptying his first beer and gave his head a small sideways shake toward the waitress. I took that as a 'no' and summoned our server.

"Oh, Miss?"

Our waitress came over with menus.

I explained that we both already knew what we wanted. I ordered jerk pork with vegetable rice for both of us. "And two more Red Stripes, please." I glanced at Bull for approval. He didn't object.

The waitress departed to relay our orders to the kitchen.

Just then, four bikers in chaps and full colors came through the front door. They were raucous and foul-mouthed from the get-go. The top patch read "Fishbein Dukes." Their bottom rockers said "Indiana." Out-of-towners on a long ride. They sat beside one another at the far end of the bar and continued cursing at the barkeep as he unwisely served them more alcohol.

Bull had also noted the bikers' arrival, but said nothing.

Each of us had finished our first Red Stripe and were waiting for number two. Bull considered something weighty outside the window. I followed his eyes, but they led nowhere.

The waitress arrived with our second round, placing the fresh bottles on the table, but not clearing the empties. There was still plenty of room on the table after all.

I waited.

Bull had called this meeting. So I spread my arms across the back of the wooden booth, holding a beer in my right hand, and waited some more.

Bull continued staring outside, occasionally sucking on his bottle. I surmised that two more beers were in order. I caught the waitress's eye and waved two fingers at her. She nodded, and soon approached our table with our food and a third Red Stripe for each of us.

"Thanks very much," I said, as she made the delivery. She nodded her appreciation.

"And my friend says thanks, too."

I saw Bull glare and grit his teeth at me. Then he turned and smiled broadly at the waitress. "Yes. Thank you very much. Nice job." He hoisted his beer in her direction.

"Hear, hear!" I joined in the toast with my own bottle.

The waitress looked uncomfortable. She nodded again, then backed away from our booth. Bull has that effect on some people . . . most people, actually.

Bull realigned his grin into . . . into . . . I don't know what, and glared at me.

"Well, what the hell! If we're not gonna talk, we should at least be polite to the young lady."

Bull dropped the glare and gave me an "I-suppose-so" look – at least that's how I chose to interpret it.

"Okay," he said finally. "Here's the deal."

“All right. Shoot.”

“Need to give you some background. So just sit there and shut up. Yes?”

I made a zipper across my lips, picked up my fork, and leaned closer to my food. If I couldn't talk, at least I could eat. I stabbed a piece of jerk-seasoned white meat with an authentic patch of singed pigskin still attached.

Bull looked mostly at the table as he told me his story.

“1985. Mexico. Colombian drug cartels just startin' to move north along the Mexican coast. Some locals buy-in. Gonna be 'made men' on the backs of Cali and Medellin.

“Drug Czar in D.C. get's the word. Gonna be a meeting in the mountains near Tampico. My Ranger Team gets the call to go in.”

“Rangers, huh?” I said, without thinking.

Bull reached across the table and flicked my forehead with his middle finger.

It hurt.

Bull looked at me for a few seconds to make sure I had received his message. I had. So I resumed eating, fighting the urge to rub my sore forehead.

He continued his story.

“So my team's gonna take out this mountain villa. Mexican drug big shots and some Colombians gonna be there.

“We drop in around midnight and blow the place. Big shots are dead. Some flunkies still runnin' around when we left.

“You following?”

I pointed at myself with a forefinger. *Who? Me?*

“Um hmm,” I dared, not looking for another flicking.

“Couple years later, after his stint in the Rangers, Sarge goes home to Tampico to help his family. Mom's sick and dad died. But when his mom dies, instead of moving back to the states, Sarge stays in Tampico. Takes over the family fishing business. Then I

don't hear from him for years. We pretty much lose contact. Ya know?"

It was rhetorical. I kept eating.

Bull stopped speaking and forked some tepid jerk into his mouth, following it with a swallow of Red Stripe.

We sat in silence, eating, until both of us had finished our meals.

After a good long time, I asked Bull, "So does this story have an ending?"

Bull sipped his beer.

"Sorta. But sorta another beginning. Sarge messaged me last night – through command channels, nothing direct, ya know?"

I nodded. All of Bull's communications with his Sergeant would have gone through a government communications facility. It was a security measure employed by all special forces personnel – including Rangers.

"Sarge says he's in trouble with some drug cartel and he needs my help. He wants out of Mexico and needs some place to hide out for a while – like yesterday!"

"So I give him my phone number and he calls me right up. Asks if he can stay with me for a little while."

"Geez, Bull. If there's a drug cartel after him, don't you think that might be a little dangerous putting him up at your place?"

"Just because I was enlisted doesn't mean I'm an idiot. Of course I know that. But I owe him. Learned a lot from the guy. Probably saved my life a time or two."

"Yeah. I get it. So how can I help?"

"I don't need your help."

"What? Then why the hell did you call me over here? Just to tell me this story?" I may have come off as, perhaps, a bit indignant.

Bull flicked my forehead again.

"Cut that out." I grabbed my head this time.

"Quit being so stupid then and let me finish."

“Okay. But no more flicking.”

Bull gave no sign that he had heard me.

“No flicking, okay?”

“You want to hear what I’ve got to say or not?”

I wasn’t so sure I was willing to risk a concussion to hear what else Bull had to say. But it was so unusual for him to say anything at all, I just had to hear it out.

“Go ahead.”

“So I tell Sarge it’s okay. He should come up.

“And then he says he knows who did some mass murder up in Minnesota.”

That got my attention.

“I tell him there hasn’t been any mass murder. But he says yes.”

Bull looked at me for a long minute.

“There aren’t many people I can talk to about this kinda stuff, ya know. So I figure I’ll talk to you. Maybe you know something. Can make some sense of what Sarge is saying.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. *How did Bull’s old Sergeant know about yesterday’s massacre?* The cops still had it under wraps as far as I could tell. Why would he tell Bull about it? And where would Bull’s allegiance lie?

“Geez, Bull. I don’t know what to say.” I needed a second to consider. I’d promised Gunner I’d stay mum.

Bull looked – I don’t know – maybe disappointed? *Damn he’s hard to read!*

“Okay. Listen, Bull.” I motioned for him to lean in towards me. He leaned over as far as he could without shoving the table into my gut.

“There *has been* an . . . incident . . . kinda like what your Sergeant described.”

“What the hell does that mean? What’s kinda like a mass murder?” Bull’s voice was tense.

“It means that, yes, there *has been* a crime in Minnesota where a whole bunch of people died. It happened just yesterday morning. Gunner let me in on it. But the Staties are keeping it under wraps for now. Gunner’ll be in deep shit if you tell anyone.”

“How’s Gunner know about it?”

“It happened right here in Ottawa County, that’s how.”

Bull sat back.

I could tell that my news had completely surprised Bull. I’d have to file his expression away for future reference in similar circumstances. *Yeah. Like the next time I sprang a mass murder on him. Right!*

“Bull, if you’re gonna help your Sarge anyway, I’d sure as hell like to have a sit down with him and see what he knows. If this murder thing has a Mexican connection . . . hell, I don’t know what. But it’d sure be nice to know it.

“So when is your Sergeant coming north?”

“Says he’ll be here ASAP. Hard to say exactly.”

“When he gets here, let me know right away, okay? I’ve gotta find out what he knows about this so called ‘mass murder’.”

“Figured you’d maybe wanna see him. I’ll let you know.” He put his thumb and pinky out like a phone – a really big phone – and shook his hand by his ear. I wondered where he’d picked up that gesture. Not very Bull-like. The man was definitely an enigma.

Just then we were interrupted by a commotion over in the biker corner of the bar. The few patrons who had been sitting elsewhere along the bar had gotten up quickly and were on their way out the door.

The four Indiana bikers were all standing in a semi-circle around something, or someone, at the bar.

“You better get the hell outta here,” the skinny bartender was yelling, “or I’ll bash your heads in!” He was brandishing a miniature baseball bat.

You had to give him credit for balls. One against four. And each of the four bigger than him.

One of the biker thugs climbed over the bar and disarmed the barman, tossing him to the floor. Then I could see what they were standing around. Our Jamaican waitress.

“C’mon. Gimme summa that brown shugga, Baby.” The apparent pack leader drooled, placing his face next to hers.

She kept trying to squirm through their blockade. But they always grabbed an arm or a leg and pulled her back in – taunting her.

The fourth biker had returned from behind the bar, swigging on a bottle of Jack Daniels.

I looked at Bull. He had observed the same spectacle as I.

“Take the door,” I said.

“Got it.”

I stood up as Bull slipped out the main doorway.

Looking around for likely weapons, I settled on the empty Red Stripe bottles. I picked up four and moved quickly toward the bikers.

While I was still thirty feet away, I beamed the lead dipshit with a Red Stripe. It had the desired affect. He turned his attention from the waitress toward me.

“Didn’t your mommas ever teach you boys any manners?” I fired off Red Stripe number two. The lead guy ducked, exposing his buddy for a beer bottle direct to the face.

“We got no quarrel with you, Jack.” It was the biker king . . . or Duke . . . or you know what I mean. “Why don’t cha jus’ get the hell outta here before we throw ya out.” He speech was slurred.

One of them grabbed the waitress by the elbows from behind. The others circled toward me, apparently threatening to make good on the boss man’s offer.

I was nearly at their little group now. “I gotta better idea. How ‘bout you leave the little lady alone.”

Before any further discussion could be had, there was a loud crash and a cursing male voice outside in the parking lot.

“Goddamn pussy bikers!”

Crash.

“Weenie rice-burners!”

Crash.

“Only chicken shits pick on women!”

Crash. Thud. Thud. Thud.

“Oh, oh, Guys,” I said. “Sounds like somebody’s messin’ with your trikes.”

“Get the bikes,” the leader yelled.

Three of them bolted. The one with the wriggling waitress was left behind.

I smashed my remaining two bottles on the floor in front of the last Duke. The distraction was momentary. But as he looked my way I had landed a square fist in the center of his face. His hands went to his nose and the waitress scampered free and out the rear onto the patio. His back had slid down the bar and he now sat, examining his bloody hands.

I bolted for the door. Bull would need help.

When I got outside, Bull seemed to have things pretty well under control. He stood on the far side of their four tipped motorcycles, protected in front by the tangle of handle bars and mufflers, and on one side by his red Jeep Cherokee. He held what looked to be an axe handle in his hands.

One of the would-be gangsters made a move around the open side of the bikes toward Bull. He brought the handle down on a flame-decaled gas tank, leaving a substantial dent. The biker stopped.

“Sorry,” said Bull. “Needed doin’.”

Every time another biker worked up the guts, or more likely the liquor, to make a try for Bull, he smashed another expensive cycle part. I circled wide and joined Bull at his Cherokee.

“Tire iron on the back seat.”

I opened the back side door.

“Got it,” I said.

It was getting to the point where the bikers had little to lose in bike market value.

“You assholes gonna die!” the leader screamed.

He reached into a side bag on one of the bikes and produced a large revolver. Before I knew it, he was doing his best to point the cannon at me.

In the momentary silence, we heard a ‘click’ behind the bikers. Then another ‘click’ and yet another.

We all looked in the direction of the sounds. The waitress had told the guys on the patio what was happening and they had come to join the altercation. Three of them held .357 magnums with the hammers back, and pointed toward the melee.

“Look what these assholes did to our bikes,” the leader whined. “Help us finish ‘em off.”

But the patio crew would have none of it.

“Okay. Toss that gun over here, Junior.” He was an older guy with a beer gut and a wispy beard. “Right now.” His voice was calm.

Everyone froze.

“I said *now*, Junior!” he yelled, pulling another gun from the small of his back and pointing it at the leader of the Fishbein Dukes.

“Junior” relented, sending his gun skidding across the pavement to beer gut.

“I’d kick the shit out of you myself if these guys hadn’t already done some nice work on your scooters. You never treat a lady like that again! You hear me, Dukes?” He spat out the last word.

“Now pick up your scooters and push ‘em out here on the dock.”

The boys from Fishbein complied in silence. One of the cycles had a bent wheel. Its rider pushed it along anyway – all the way to the boat dock that led out into the main channel.

We all followed – the patio bikers, Bull, me, and even the waitress.

When the parade reached the end of the dock, beer gut said, “Okay. We’ll take ‘er from here.”

With that, the rest of beer gut’s cycle crew tossed the Fishbein Dukes into the muddy current of the Mississippi. Their motorcycles followed close behind.

Once we had all made sure there weren’t any slimy Dukes trying to slither back ashore, we returned to the parking lot.

Beer gut walked up to Bull and me.

“That was exciting,” he said with a smile. “I wanna thank you guys for sticking up for Melina. She’s a good friend. I owe you guys one.”

“Does that translate into Red Stripe currency?” I asked.

Beer gut laughed.

“You bet it does. Let’s all head back out on the deck and watch the river go by.”

Melina also came up to us.

“Thank you so much, sirs,” she said with a thick Jamaican accent. “Thank you.”

“Are you okay, Melina?” I asked.

“I’m okay. Come drink some Red Stripes. We’ll celebrate.”

“Those’ll be on the house,” the bartender called from the doorway.

CHAPTER TEN

One year ago, in Bellechester, Minnesota.

It was the second full year of operation for Bellechester Organic, and Walter Marsden couldn't have been more pleased with the little enterprise. His business partner, Bellechester Investors, had fulfilled its commitment to handle all hiring for the facility. As long as they had taken care of that, Marsden had thought they might as well handle all the bookkeeping, payroll, and accounting. He received a report each week of the business cash flows, expenses, and routine operational data. And he liked what he saw.

Bellechester Organic had enlisted 80% of the area's farmers into its organic production program. The dairy was producing not only milk, but yogurt and some high quality young cheeses as well. About 50% of the farmers engaged Bellechester Organic to handle field application services – both organic and traditional. And hog, poultry, and dairy services operations were drawing the attention of an increasing number of farmers with each month that passed.

Best of all, Bellechester Organic was already turning a decent profit. Loan payments to AgInvest were current. Salaries – including his own – were generous. His organic brain child had turned into a healthy lad with a promising future.

Then some unusual things started to happen. They weren't bad things, *per se*. Just unusual.

Despite a relatively stable national market price, profits on sales of organic corn meal began to climb. Slowly at first. Then at a more brisk pace. Furthermore, expenses for the farm services arm of the business were rising rapidly. But there was no corresponding increase in farm services revenue.

Marsden suspected some sort of a change in the manner in which such things were being reported to him. He spoke first with his onsite accountant. There hadn't been any changes in accounting reports of which he was aware. But Marsden should speak with the IT folks to see if the data they were inputting had changed somewhere along the line, or if the accounting programs might have a glitch.

A check with the IT manager didn't provide any greater clarification. As far as he knew, the accounting programs were operational, and there hadn't been any changes on the data entry front.

Perplexed, Marsden called his contact at Bellechester Investors to find out what was really going on. The man on the other end of the phone call was an attorney named Albert Dosedall. He was located in Chicago, Marsden thought, though Marsden had never visited Dosedall's offices.

"Hello, Walter. How are things in sunny Minnesota? Going well, I trust?"

"Oh, yeah. Things are looking good. Really good." Marsden's voice was higher than normal, and his breathing mildly panicky. He always felt this way when he had to talk to Dosedall. He didn't know why. Dosedall was nice enough. He was just so . . . decisive. So . . . intimidating.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this call, Walter? Are the workers we hired not living up to expectations?"

"Ha. I suppose I'd hardly know if they weren't. Your management team seems to have everything well in hand. I barely

need to do anything around the place. Just collect my checks and monitor reports.”

“Yes, indeed. And that’s the way it should be, Walter. This whole operation was your idea from the outset. You made your contribution by providing the strategic vision, not to mention a sizeable chunk of personal capital. Now you can just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“Well . . . I suppose. Yes. That’s very kind. But . . .”

“But what, Walter? Spit it out, man. What’s on your mind?”

“Well . . . all the management reports are looking real good. And we’re turning a nice profit for our first full year of operation.”

“I’d say an outstanding profit. So what’s the problem?”

“I guess I’ve just got some questions about income and expense changes I’ve noticed lately. The accountant and the IT manager don’t seem to be able to explain them to my satisfaction. So I thought maybe . . . ?”

“Say no more, Walter. You know I’m not the accounting guy for the investor group. But I sure as hell know their top accounting guy. I haven’t been up there to Minnesota in quite a while. Why don’t I grab the bean counter and pay you a visit? Maybe next week? Can it wait that long?”

“Oh . . . of course. But maybe I could just get it resolved on the phone if I could speak with the right person?”

“Nonsense, Walter. You want answers and you’ll get them right from the horse’s mouth. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ll coordinate our schedules and we’ll see you sometime next week. Okay?”

Walter didn’t know how he could refuse.

“Okay . . .”

“All right then, my secretary will give you a jingle when we’ve got the details all set up. Sit tight, Walter. We’ll have all your questions answered before you know it. Guaranteed.

“Be seeing you soon.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Dosedall.”

Marsden hung up the phone. He always felt like a child at the principal’s office when he spoke to Dosedall. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it – but something about the guy just made him nervous.

In any case, there was no stopping Dosedall’s visit now. And the accounting questions could certainly wait until he arrived next week.

Maybe he’d call it an early day and go to Coonie’s for a burger and a beer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Years earlier, outside Tampico.

The sun had set and Raphael Santos was in position beneath the mountainside villa belonging to Enrique Calderon, godfather of the *Los Cinco* cartel, by far the most powerful and feared crime syndicate in all of eastern Mexico.

From prior surveillance, Santos knew a mine field guarded this approach to the villa. The terrain was steep and covered with sandy rubble from the mountain slate. There would be a security guard on the back balcony from time to time. But other than the intermittent guard and the mine field, this avenue to the villa was largely unprotected.

Armed only with his World War II vintage dagger, he began his approach. Crawling on elbows and knees, being careful not to dislodge a landslide of rubble, he probed in his path for the buried mines. He knew that the mines in this field were old-style claymore land mines – the kind used by the Americans in Korea and Vietnam. They were fully capable of killing a standing man . . . let alone one crawling with his face practically on top of them.

Inserting the dagger slowly and methodically, always at a shallow angle to the crusty surface, Santos probed for mines in his path. When he reached a mine, as he did with every few feet of progress toward the villa, he would carefully remove the rubble covering it, dig it out with the dagger, and then disarm it in the

manner he had learned in military action years ago. Once they had been disarmed, he placed the claymores in his backpack for later use.

The work was tedious. It required complete focus to locate and disarm the mines in the darkness, while still avoiding the telltale giveaway of dislodged rubble. Twice the security guard appeared on the balcony. He did not see Santos lying motionless on the shale.

Eventually, Santos reached the place on the upper side of the mine field where a wire fence and metal signs warned those outside of its presence. He had made it through the field in less time than he had feared. And his pack now contained more claymores than he had hoped for. It was time for stage two of his assault on the villa.

The guard's presence on the balcony, together with the laughter and music emanating from the villa, made it clear that the master was entertaining guests. The noise inside would make it easier for Santos to spring his surprise assault, so long as the guard didn't make an untimely appearance.

With his dagger back in its sheath, Santos climbed the support pillar on the most remote corner of the balcony – the one farthest from the sliding doors that led to the revelry. Reaching the level of the balcony floor, he grasped the iron railing and swung over and onto the balcony. From there it was mere seconds before he had climbed the water spout and edged across the tile roof to a dark, second floor window.

He lifted the unlocked sash. The occupants of this home did not anticipate entry from this direction. If he had a minefield for a back yard, he probably wouldn't either. He placed his pack of mines inside first, then stepped over the sill. Once inside, he knew he would have to move quickly.

He opened the pack and removed one of the claymores. Rather than re-arming it, he attached a small chunk of C4 explosive and a remote detonator cap to its side. Then he replaced it in the pack with the rest of the mines.

Finally, he stepped out onto the tile roof once again, and flung the pack of mines as far down the mountain as he could manage. Rubble skidded. And the pack clanked and rolled several meters to its resting place, about 25 meters from the house. He listened to see if anyone had taken notice. He heard nothing out of the ordinary.

Re-entering the room and exiting into the well-lit hallway, Santos knew the danger of his operation was at its peak. If he was seen now, he'd be caught with nothing but a dagger to defend himself against the automatic weapons he knew bristled in the arms of security guards downstairs.

As he approached the top of the steps to the main level, the laughter and revelry grew louder. Descending first one step and then another – slowly . . . purposefully – the main room gradually came into view.

As Santos had already anticipated from prior reconnaissance, Enrique Calderon, master of this villa and leader of *Los Cinco*, sat in a wingback chair directly beneath the steps on which Santos stood. Cigar smoke streamed upward to the ceiling from his long, stout *Cubano*.

Now would be as good a time as any, if Santos were to have hope of success. With his right hand, he silently withdrew the dagger from its hilt. At the same time, he prepared to thumb a button on the remote detonator with his left. He steadied his breathing. The villa around him slipped into a slow motion vignette.

A firm press on the detonator set off the claymores with a deafening explosion. Calderon stood. All others rushed to the rear balcony to see what had happened. The response was practiced – not panic. Rifles were at the ready. Security formed a half-circle around Calderon, defending him from the direction of the claymore “attack.”

As soon as Calderon stood, Santos seized his opportunity. He jumped down the last few steps before the landing and vaulted the railing, landing directly behind Calderon. Operating on well-worn

instincts, Santos grabbed Calderon from behind, laying the cold blade of the dagger across his neck with one hand, while holding his head still with the other.

As the last chips of slate from the explosion clicked down on the tile roof of the villa, and before the soldiers could respond, Santos held Calderon at his mercy.

Calderon cleared his throat loudly. All in attendance turned toward him. Soldiers aimed their rifles at Santos. But Calderon made an effective shield. And the stairway gave Santos a decent defense from the rear . . . at least for now.

The warm night air hung thick in the villa's great room. Neither side dared to move.

Then Calderon, cigar still in hand, began to cough. Santos loosened his grip just enough so as to not inadvertently slit Calderon's throat. Calderon coughed again, a phlegmy hack that worked its way into a laugh. Santos could feel Calderon's body relax under his grip.

With Santos still holding the dagger at his throat, Calderon raised his cigar to his lips, taking a long pull on the *Cubano*. He exhaled a smoke cloud into the midst of the scene.

"You have gotten yourself into an interesting position." Calderon had ceased laughing and was now speaking to his captor.

"You can kill me. But how do you plan to escape with your skin? Eh, *caballero*?"

"It is not my intention to kill you, Señor Calderon. Far from it. I want to join your party . . . to partake of the fruit only *Los Cinco* can enjoy." Santos' voice was steady. "I want to become a *Los Cinco*. But not just a footman, *Jefe* (hef' - ay). I want your hand to direct my actions. I would be a captain among your soldiers."

Calderon again laughed . . . a deep smoker's laugh.

"And tell me, *caballero*, why should I give you such a position, if I were able? There are many men who have served me long and

well. Why would I not make them my captains instead of you, an invader of my home?"

"Tell me, *Jefe*, which of your 'captains' has saved you this night? The man who laid your mine field, which I have easily defeated? One of these soldiers who hold their guns pointing at *your* head? A member of the security who guarded you from a harmless explosion, while leaving me free to hold you at my pleasure? You wish to make one of these your captain?"

Santos paused to allow his words to sink in.

"Señor Calderon. I could have killed you with the explosives which I threw down the mountainside from your very roof. *Your* explosives. Had I chosen to bring a gun, I could have shot you dead from outside your window. And now, I hold your life a third time, attacking your fortress with only a dagger as my weapon.

"I ask you, *Jefe*, would not this man who has penetrated your defenses and three times spared your life . . . would not this man be a worthy captain among men?"

Cigar smoke continued to sift its way around the room from Calderon's *Cubano*. The metallic clicks of rifles meeting shoulder slings and ammo belts were the only sounds.

"Put down your weapons," Calderon waved to his men. "Put them down, I say."

Weapons were lowered with reluctance.

Now Santos removed his knife from Calderon's throat and gently released him, so he would not lose his balance. The knife returned to its sheath as Santos stepped out from behind Calderon.

Santos knew this might very well be his death. But he no longer cared about his own life. Only revenge for his family and freedom for his people.

Calderon motioned with his hand toward the security forces to keep their rifles lowered. He turned to face Santos, looking him up and down. Under the dusty fedora, cotton rags, and cloth-covered feet, Calderon could see the strength he had felt around his throat

only moments before. But he also saw in Santos' eyes something he had not seen in many years – since the death of his brother, Emilio. He saw the soul of a fighter, a flesh that knew no pain in combat and a heart that was true to its convictions.

“Take off your sombrero.”

Santos complied.

“What is your name, *muchacho*?”

“Raphael Santos, *Jefe*.” Santos was careful to return the studied look of the older man. He stood with his back straight and shoulders square. There was no sign of a quiver in his gaze or his hands.

“Raphael Santos.” Calderon rolled the name over in his mouth with another puff of the big cigar.

“Raphael Santos . . . you have one big set of *cojones*!” He laughed again.

With his shoulders relaxed and head shaking slowly side-to-side, he returned to the high-back chair by the stairs and resumed his former seated position. All others were still and silent.

After yet another puff on the cigar, Calderon motioned Santos toward a chair nearby.

“Come. Sit with me and we will talk.”

Santos bowed as he accepted the chair.

“*Si, Señor Calderon. Gracias. Muchas gracias!*”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Present day, in Red Wing.

When I returned home from our post-activity celebration at the Harbor Bar, it was nearing 11:00 o'clock. I climbed the stairs silently, only to find Beth reclining in bed, reading.

"Hi, Beth. I'm home."

"Oh, hey, Babe. Have fun at Bull's dinner?"

She hadn't lifted her eyes from the book.

"I guess there was some fun. Lots of other interesting stuff, too."

She closed the book and waved me from the hallway into our bedroom.

Beth slid over to make room for me, sat up against the cushioned headboard, and patted the coverlet for me to sit down. I obliged.

"Based on your breath, I'd say you encountered a couple beers during your outing. Do I smell onion in there, too?"

"That'd probably be the jerk pork. Sorry about that. Shall I get cleaned up before we chat?"

"Nah. Just teasing. Fill me in on what Bull had to say."

I gave Beth a complete run down on the events at the Harbor Bar, saving the mention of Bull's old Sergeant until last.

"So after the weenies went into the drink, Bull and I pretty much just sat around visiting with the nice biker gentlemen. You

know . . . talking Harleys, engine modifications, fork extensions, etcetera, etcetera.”

“Well. It sounds like you really enjoyed yourself. Dinner. A bit of action. You get to help save the damsel in distress. And share a few beers. Not to mention some manly smart-talk. What could be better?”

“Actually, I haven’t told you the best part yet.”

“Wow! Now that’s hard to believe. What could possibly put the icing on an evening like that?”

“You’re forgetting the reason Bull asked me to come over in the first place.”

“I hadn’t forgotten. I’d just assumed that his subject turned out to be trivial compared to the flying beer bottles and the swimming motorcycles. What did he want?”

I told her the story of Master Sergeant Fuentes, what he’d been up to since retiring from the service, and that he wanted to come visit Bull. I didn’t mention that he might be bringing half a Mexican drug cartel along with him. It didn’t seem necessary to worry Beth about that circumstance just yet.

“But here’s the thing that’s got me really interested. This Fuentes guy told Bull that he knew something about a ‘mass murder’ in Minnesota. The cops have kept a pretty tight lid on that scene of bucolic country life gone wrong. If Fuentes is talking about the same murders . . . and how many mass murders are there, really? But if he’s talking about the crime in Ottawa County, how does he know about it?”

“I assume you’re asking the easy questions first. There must be a Mexican connection to the drug killings. Right?”

“Well . . . yeah.” Beth has a way of bringing the big picture into focus more quickly than I do. It irritates me sometimes.

“Yeah. That’s the big point all right. But the next question is, does he know about it because he knows a victim . . . or a perpetrator?”

Beth closed her eyes in contemplation.

“That is the sixty-four dollar question. Isn’t it?”

“I suppose if you’re Jack Paar, it is. Otherwise, most of us younger folks would call it the million dollar question.”

Beth leaned forward and backhanded me with a book to my abdomen. I was ready. I deserved it. It didn’t hurt.

“I’m sorry,” I offered with complete sincerity . . . at least as much as I could muster at the moment.

“Keep talking,” Beth said. “I want to know more about Bull’s Sergeant and the Mexican connection.”

“I’m not sure there’s more to tell. Fuentes will be here when he gets here. Probably soon – within a week or so, I suppose. Bull says I can meet him and then . . . hopefully . . . I’ll know more.”

“Bull’s connection with the Rangers certainly explains a lot about where he learned all that stuff about explosives. Maybe he was an EOD.”

Beth was referring to a specialist in Explosive Ordnance Disposal. The name was a bit misleading. Most of the time, they disposed of the ordnance by blowing something up.

“That’s certainly a possibility. I’ll make sure to pump Fuentes for further info about Bull if I get the chance. That’ll be a lot easier than going the direct route. I got flicked tonight,” I said, rubbing my forehead. “Twice.”

Beth laughed and mussed my hair.

“Okay. Now go get cleaned up. Maybe swallow some mouthwash to deal with the jerk odor emanating from your innards.”

I had my marching orders. And I was ready for bed anyhow. I tossed my bar-exposed clothing down the laundry chute and headed for the shower.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Despite his dramatic entrance into the Calderon villa, Raphael Santos knew that he would still have much to prove before *El Jefe* would entrust him with the authority he sought. After all, Calderon did not become one of the wealthiest men in the world by being a fool. He would suspect Santos to be a government spy . . . or perhaps, a member of a rival cartel. Santos would have to establish himself by carrying out cartel business – and most likely, some of its dirtiest.

Calderon did not disappoint.

After their extended visit at the villa that first night, Calderon sequestered Santos in the villa compound's "holding facility" – a concrete block building with a steel door and barred windows. Armed guards attended. He was not allowed to leave his quarters, even to use the latrine. He was given a bucket for this purpose. Guards brought him tortillas and water once a day.

He made no complaint, rationing the food & water to replace fluids lost to perspiration. He conserved energy through meditation and biofeedback . . . techniques taught him by his former employers. His solitary existence continued for seven days.

Then one night, just after sunset, the sound of keys turning in the lock aroused him from his semi-slumber. A cartel soldier dressed in black opened the door, and without a word, beckoned him to follow.

At the soldier's direction, a somewhat disoriented Santos climbed into the back of a covered army truck along with a dozen cartel soldiers. Each soldier carried an American-made Colt AR-15 automatic rifle.

"Que pasa? Where do you take me?"

"No talking. You will find out soon enough." The man spoke with a voice of authority. He was in charge of this operation – whatever it might be.

The truck rumbled down the villa drive. Santos bounced on his wooden bench, as did the others. The rank odor of the unwashed stung his nostrils. The same canvas enclosure that kept prying eyes out, also kept the sweat and stench of the men in.

After a kidney-punching hour or more on the road, the truck came to an abrupt stop.

"Stay here," the commander directed, as the soldiers piled out. Santos knew his obedience at this juncture was crucial to his larger plan. He waited.

Presently, Santos heard the shouts of the soldiers, then the sounds of women screaming and men pleading for their lives. Bursts of automatic gunfire punctuated the outcrying until all that remained was a single, sobbing whimper.

Santos heard boots outside. The commander pulled back the canvas flap at the rear.

"Out."

Santos complied.

The captain clasped Santos' elbow and guided him roughly around the truck to the scene of the bloodbath. The truck was parked outside a modest home in a working-class neighborhood, presumably somewhere in or near Tampico. Lying dead along the front wall of the home were three men and a woman. A father, mother, and two nearly grown sons – all covered with blood and riddled with bullet holes.

Santos was a hardened man. He had witnessed worse.

As he took in the scene, a soldier appeared in the home's doorway, dragging with him a young girl, certainly under ten years of age. She screamed as he thrust her by her hair onto the ground beside her mother. Crying uncontrollably, the girl crawled to her mother's side and hugged her dead body.

"Santos," the captain said in a loud voice so all neighbors could hear. "Raphael Santos. Come here."

Santos knew what was coming. He had expected a trial by fire. But now that he had arrived at the moment, could he do it? Could he pull the trigger that would end this girl's life?

The captain handed Santos a 9mm pistol and motioned to the girl.

"Finish it."

Santos showed no emotion or hesitation. He took three steps closer to the girl lying prostrate on the ground before him, raised the handgun, and pulled the trigger a single time. The girl slumped, blood oozing from the back of her head, where playful curls had once swung free.

Santos turned toward the captain . . . his face without expression. A few steps forward and Santos returned the weapon to its owner. The captain was clearly searching him for some reaction. He stared the captain in the eyes. Santos' face showed no emotion but resolve. No smile at his achievement. No revulsion. No quiver in his stare. Finally Santos spoke.

"Esta bien?" Good enough for you, you cold-hearted bastard?

"Si." The captain waved the men back into the truck. Several gunmen surveyed the surrounding homes, rifles ready to cover their departure.

Santos followed the men back to his bench in the truck bed. His guts churned, but his expression and manner remained unreadable.

He had passed the first test. He had committed ruthless murder of an innocent, while the captain proclaimed his name to

countless witnesses. This was only the first test, Santos knew. There would be more. Perhaps not as shameful. But more. Many more. He would pass those tests as well. And one day, he would bring *Los Cinco* to its knees, and it will all have been worth it. He will have saved thousands of innocents from the cartel. To sacrifice one this night was acceptable collateral damage. It had to be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Present day in Red Wing.

Thursday morning arrived early with a call from Bull.

“Hello?”

“Says he’ll be here Saturday.” *Click.*

“Huh?” But it was too late. Bull had hung up.

Saturday was in just two days. I’d better start figuring out what I wanted to ask Fuentes when he arrived. I certainly didn’t want to be unprepared. I hate being unprepared. And I hate it when others are unprepared. Lack of preparedness wastes valuable time and opportunities. People who are *never* prepared make me want to spit.

“Who was on the phone, Babe?” Beth’s voice was sleepy.

“Wrong number.”

Beth rolled onto her stomach, her spaghetti strapped, white cotton top bunched a bit on her back. I rolled onto my side and smoothed out her pjs. When the last hint of a wrinkle was gone, I lay there and petted her back softly. She exhaled an “mmm” of approval, then drifted back to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One year ago in Bellechester.

The arrival of Albert Dosedall's golden Mercedes E550 sedan in Bellechester represented more than a visit from the investor's emissary. German-engineering met galvanized metal corn bins. Soft leather dress shoes walked in the dust that covered working class boots.

The locals didn't know who drove the gleaming sedan, or what their business might be in Bellechester. But they felt immediate disdain toward the car's occupants. A distaste that the bourgeoisie by nature reserve for the privileged. An emotion prompted by both hatred of extreme success and a hopeless dream to achieve it.

The Benz idled slowly into Bellechester Organic's gravel parking lot, as though trying not to raise dust onto its pristine finish. Eventually, it came to a stop near the rear of the lot, far from the danger of middle class door dings.

Walter Marsden had seen them arrive – Dosedall and his accountant. He couldn't miss them. Marsden's desk faced his office's "window on the world" that *was* the Bellechester cityscape. He watched them cross the parking lot toward his door . . . two tall men in dark suits. Probably the only two power suits that would cross his threshold this month. The accountant carried a black leather brief case. Marsden's gut tumbled uncomfortably as they neared.

When the bell of Marsden's office door tinkled, he turned in his chair and stood to greet the visitors.

"Good morning, Mr. Dosedall. Nice to see you as always." It was all he could do to calm the quaver in his voice.

"Walter. Nice to see you as well." A smiling Dosedall crossed the office in two steps, grasping Marsden's hand in a firm shake.

"And this is Mr. Ashcroft. Mr. Ashcroft . . . Walter Marsden, president and CEO of Bellechester Organic."

Marsden and Ashcroft exchanged greetings.

Ashcroft was a large man, broad-shouldered, with a hand that swallowed Marsden's as they shook. An odd name for a Latino, Marsden thought. But who was he to judge?

"Well, Walter. Let's get started. Shall we sit at your conference table?" Dosedall gestured at a metal table with a green Formica top occupying the opposite half of the room from Marsden's desk.

The city men dusted off their chairs with handkerchiefs, then took seats with Dosedall behind the table, facing both the door and the window. Ashcroft and Marsden sat next to each other, across from Dosedall, ostensibly so they could review reports together.

"Okay, Walter. You had some questions about the management reports. Let's hear your concerns and I'm sure Mr. Ashcroft and I will be able to resolve them to your satisfaction."

There was something about Dosedall's persona that made Marsden cower.

"I've noticed that our costs for the Farm Services Division seem to be increasing unusually quickly. I don't have a detailed report. Maybe you could help me understand?" He spoke to Ashcroft.

Ashcroft produced his briefcase and removed its contents of files and file folders onto the table.

"Mr. Marsden. Here are the journal entries showing expenses for the Farm Services Division." He placed the briefcase back under the table, returning his attention to the reports that lay in front of Marsden.

“If you would like to take a moment to review them, perhaps that will resolve your issues?”

Ashcroft spoke perfect, unaccented, Midwestern-American English.

Having worked for many years at Cargill, Marsden was no stranger to accounting reports. Marsden picked up the stack of financial printouts. After flipping through several pages, he indicated a number on the report.

“Am I correct that this is the amount we paid for anhydrous ammonia over the latest quarter completed?” His voice was tentative.

Ashcroft glanced at the figure Marsden had indicated.

“Yes. You are correct.”

“And this is for the iodine?”

“Yes.”

Marsden laid the expense report aside.

“And would it be possible for you to show me receipts from sales of anhydrous and iodine?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Marsden. The Farm Services revenues are consolidated. I have no way to break out sales of iodine or anhydrous from general Farm Services sales.”

Marsden was disappointed, but not surprised. He knew that farm services were often marketed to farmers as packages of goods and contract labor. Organic would use whatever amounts of chemicals necessary to fulfill its obligations under the “package.” It was certainly plausible that, in the process of fulfilling its package obligations, its employees would use varying amounts of chemicals, equipment, and labor.

“I can understand why you might not account for iodine and anhydrous sales separately . . . but doesn’t it seem like we purchase an awful lot of those chemicals for an *organic* elevator operation? Our organic farmers wouldn’t use anhydrous on their fields at all. I suppose livestock operators might use a fair amount of iodine for

disinfecting facilities and such. But we still seem to go through an awful lot of it.

“Don’t the quantities of these chemicals seem high to you, Mr. Ashcroft?”

“First of all, we do provide farm services to both organic and traditional farm operations. The anhydrous could, perhaps, go to the traditional farmers? In any case, my office simply pays for the chemical orders you issue from this facility. I wouldn’t have any way to know how your operation is using them, or whether the quantities are in line. That would have to be a management decision.”

Marsden looked nervously across the table at Dosedall.

Dosedall spread his arms, palms up.

“It is what it is, Walter. I’m afraid we’ll have to accept the numbers for what they represent . . . unless you have not been receiving the chemicals at the facility. That would be an entirely different matter.”

Marsden felt helpless.

“The general manager *did* receipt for these quantities,” he said. “So short of following every anhydrous shipment and every iodine delivery, I don’t know how I might learn anything further.”

“Very good, then.” It was Dosedall. “You have further questions?”

“If I might see the details of the cornmeal sales, please. These have skyrocketed in the past operating quarter.”

Ashcroft produced another stack of accounting documents.

“Cornmeal sales begin on page ten,” he said, handing the reports to Marsden.

Marsden reviewed the figures.

“How can we possibly be selling this much cornmeal? This report shows more than 150 truckloads delivered per month. That means five trucks a day would have to leave this plant . . . every day, seven days a week. I can’t ever remember seeing more than two.”

Ashcroft turned toward Marsden.

“I can see why this would cause you concern. But I believe I have your answer.

“Because Bellechester Organic has developed a reputation for high quality cornmeal, we have chosen to leverage our goodwill by amplifying the supply.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Marsden was a plain-spoken man who detested double-talk. “Amplifying the supply?”

“Please calm down, Mr. Marsden. It simply means that, because Bellechester Organic has more demand for its cornmeal than it can meet at this facility, we have contracted to purchase cornmeal from other organic suppliers, reselling the commodity to our customers at a profit.

“There is nothing unusual or improper about this practice. We test the cornmeal we buy to insure that it meets our quality standards. We sell more cornmeal. Our customers receive what they require. And the third party sellers also make a margin on their sales to us. Everyone wins.”

Marsden’s irritation made him uncharacteristically bold.

“Dammit, Mr. Dosedall. Shouldn’t that sort of major decision come across my desk at some point? After all, I *am* the CEO.” Marsden was standing now.

“Walter, Walter. Please sit down.”

Marsden took a deep breath and retook his seat.

“I must apologize to you, Walter. The decision to leverage our goodwill was mine. I was approached directly by entities related to Bellechester Investors. I should have consulted you. Of course, you are right.

“But I can assure you that all transactions have been at market prices and all dealings at arm’s length. I am a man who is most sensitive to fiduciary responsibilities. There were no improprieties in this matter. I give you my word.”

Marsden was still not happy. But Dosedall *had* apologized. That was more than he had ever expected to hear from the man. And the explanations given for the vastly increased sales were plausible. In fact, they made sense. He would probably have approved them himself, had they crossed his desk. It was beginning to appear that this entire issue was nothing more than a misunderstanding after all.

“Now that I have made my apology about circumventing your authority, do you have further questions about accounting matters?”

Marsden was flustered. But he had nothing more to ask. He was relieved that operations appeared to be aboveboard and that creative accounting didn't seem to have created Organic's substantial profits.

“I don't have anything more, Mr. Dosedall. You and Mr. Ashcroft have satisfied my questions.”

“Very well, Walter. Then we will take our leave. But if you ever have any further questions or concerns of any type, please bring them to me first. I am confident that we will always resolve them as easily as today's concerns.”

“Mr. Dosedall?”

“Yes, Walter.”

“Would it be okay if I hung onto these journal entries? I'd like to pore over them when I have more time . . . maybe take a bit of pride in the success of my baby.”

Dosedall glanced at Ashcroft, who responded with a slight nod.

“Of course, Walter. What information could there be that should be withheld from the company's own CEO? I only ask one thing. If you have further questions, please call me directly. That will keep lines of communication open and minimize misunderstandings. Agreed?”

Marsden didn't see that he had any choice at the moment.

“Agreed.”

* * *

When the Chicagoans had returned to their car, there were unresolved matters to be discussed between them.

“If he looks at those reports hard enough, Albert, he will have more questions.”

“If that is the case, my friend, we will be able to resolve his concerns. I have confidence.”

“I don’t share your faith in Marsden’s pliability, Albert. He’s no fool. Sooner or later he will realize that he’s operating the largest meth factory in the United States. No amount of accounting explanations will satisfy him.

“It is my opinion that we should explain matters to Marsden now . . . and in a way that will silence further doubts. That is the recommendation I will give to my superiors.”

“I really wish you would just let me handle Walter. This isn’t Mexico. Some of your methods of explanation will not work so well here.” Dosedall shifted his body behind the wheel.

“People are people, Albert. Our methods will be effective. But we shall allow *El Jefe* the final decision.”

The community of Bellechester breathed a collective sigh of relief as the Mercedes sedan turned onto County Road 2 and headed out of town.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By December 31, 2009, Raphael Santos had been with the cartel an amazing fifteen years and had long since passed Calderon's tests. He had become not only a captain and a leader of men in the cartel, but also a trusted aid and confidante to *El Jefe*.

Beyond his wildest imaginings at the beginning of his assault on *Los Cinco* those many years ago, this past year he had actually married Enrique Calderon's only niece, Elena. It was no mystery why it had taken Elena thirty-five years to find a husband. She was greedy, easily angered, and selfish in every respect. But he had married her, nevertheless.

Enrique Calderon had no children of his own. So the marriage made Santos the closest thing Calderon had to a son. And as Calderon's *hijo* (ee'ho), he assumed prime position to succeed the old man as head of the cartel. He had already consolidated support for his succession to the mantle of leadership. He had firmed up his allies in the cartel. And ideally, he would receive Calderon's blessings as his successor very soon. The time to act was approaching.

But it was not yet time.

The New Year's Eve celebration at *Villa Calderon* featured all the *Los Cinco* leadership. Mariachis played. The younger folk danced. Calderon sat in his usual high-back chair near the stairs. Santos, now in his mid-forties, sat in a similar chair to Calderon's left.

“It has been a good year for *Los Cinco, Jefe*.” Santos offered his bottle of *Dos Equis* in a casual toast.

Calderon lifted his Agave in acknowledgment.

“Indeed, *hijo*. A time of growth and prosperity. And a time of peace in our home.”

Calderon took a draw on his *Cubano*, rolling it between his fingers as he exhaled.

“How long must I wait for you and Elena to bless me with a grandchild, ? It has been six months already since the wedding and I hear no news of a baby. I am not so young as I was yesterday, you know. You should get busy.”

Santos had no desire to bring a child into this world of drugs, murder, and corruption. He was sterile by virtue of an operation performed years ago . . . a fact he had no intention of disclosing to anyone, especially his wife.

“*Jefe*, you insult my efforts.” Santos smiled at Calderon, then turned away to face the room. “I assure you, I am not to blame for your waiting. Look to God for your delay. Have you not been faithful in attending Mass of late?”

Calderon coughed out a laugh.

“Ah, . You make me laugh. If I must wait on God for a grandchild, I should just die now and have it over with.” He laughed once more and sipped the tequila. The conversation paused while Calderon raised the *Cubano*, inhaling the cigar smoke deeply.

Santos wanted to change the subject back to cartel business.

“Would you agree, *Jefe*, that our new arrangement with the *Zetas* (say’ -tahss) has saved us millions of dollars in lost shipments . . . not to mention freeing our personnel to police the core of our lands. We no longer must defend the northwest with such zeal.”

“I must confess that I did not think it possible for *Los Cinco* to reach accommodation with the *Zetas*.” Calderon turned to the younger man. “But you have made it so. And it has, indeed, proven to our great benefit. The tolls we pay in exchange for free trade to

America are much less than it would cost to fight the *Zetas* at every corner. They are bastards . . . but they have many trained fighters, and have forever been dogs at our heels.

“And how is your other plan proceeding, ? Is it yet showing signs of profit?”

“*Si, Jefe*. The legitimate elements of our business are profitable in themselves. We are about to expand the scope of this enterprise, as we have earlier discussed with such anticipation.”

Santos leaned toward the old man.

“I am honored, *Jefe*, that you have accepted your nephew’s guidance in this matter in the north. Continue to have patience with me and an ample reward will soon be yours. I am anxious to reveal additional details of our progress. Shall we discuss this further this evening?”

Calderon laughed once more.

“Do not let your ambitions outpace your foot-soldiers, . Tonight is for celebration. I will hear of your plan’s success soon enough. For this night, enjoy your beautiful bride.”

Calderon nodded at Elena, chatting with a group of wives across the room. In truth, she was quite beautiful on the outside. It was her soul that was ugly.

“*Si, Jefe*. I have neglected my Elena for too long already.”

Santos rose from his chair and once again raised his *cerveza* in a toast.

“*Un próspero año nuevo, Jefe*. And may many grandchildren know the wisdom of your counsel.”

“*Gracias*, . Now, go to your spouse.” Calderon dismissed Santos with a wave of his *Cubano*.

Santos left his beer on the lamp table, and buttoning his smoking jacket, made his way through the crowd to Elena’s side. He squeezed her elbow to let her know he had arrived.

She turned her head and kissed him on the lips.

“May I steal your attention for a moment, my dear?” His voice was a whisper in her ear.

“Please excuse me, my friends. My valiant warrior desires my presence. And you know how I hate to deny him that which he desires.”

The women giggled at the off-color remark.

Santos led Elena to the library, just off the great room, where he opened the heavy wooden doors and led her inside. The doors clicked closed behind him.

Pulling her towards him, he embraced her, caressing her body as his kiss melted her hardened soul. He clutched her bottom in both hands and squeezed. She giggled, pulling her face back from his kiss.

“Here? Right now?” Even in the dim light of the library, he could see she was blushing.

“Why not? We will lock the door. No one will know of our adventure.”

He placed his mouth on the nape of her neck and bit it gently. Her moan of pleasure reverted to an objection.

“No. Raphael.” She pushed on his chest. “Please. Not during the party. Afterwards. As much as you want, I will give to you. Only not at this moment. I would be too . . . uncomfortable.”

Santos acceded to her decision, ceasing his falsely impassioned advances and instead, leading her to the love seat. He left her there momentarily while he opened the balcony’s white French doors, exposing the moonlit valleys and desert mountains of the *Sierra Madres* to the north.

Returning to her side, he picked up her hand and gazed into her eyes.

Behind his loving expression, Santos continued plotting against the cartel. He knew that, while Elena certainly loved him as much as she was able to love another, she loved material wealth, and the comforts and luxuries it could buy, at least as much. He needed her

support in the endeavor he was about to undertake. He had to be certain he would have it in full measure.

It was time for him to bring Elena in line behind him . . . to sever her allegiances to her uncle. She was of a favorable mind to hear what he now needed to say. Her response would determine his next step.

“My love. You know there is no one else in the world with whom I should choose to spend my days. You are my life and my breath. If that is enough for you, that is everything I need to sustain my soul.”

His eyes still held hers.

“We could run away from the fighting and danger of the family enterprise, the worry of incurring your uncle’s wrath, the tireless hours I spend laboring for *Los Cinco*.

“If that is your wish, tell me now and I will leave the riches and status of this business behind and we will live in safety and bliss for all of our days. But we must give up the ways of the cartel if we make this choice. We must flee from your uncle, who will fear that we would betray him. We must depart this home with all haste. You will become an outcast in your own family – an orphan once again.

“You must tell me, my love, of your hopes for the future. Where do you see us and our children living out our days?”

Elena was bewildered.

“Why must we decide these things tonight, my dear Raphael? Can we not postpone such talk for a less festive time?”

“I have been speaking with your uncle this evening, Elena. He has plans to give up leadership of the cartel, to abdicate his responsibilities to *Los Cinco*. He intends to do so within the year. He will name as his successor, Manuel Conchito, his longtime friend and first captain of the security forces. He does not intend to pass leadership of the cartel to us, as we had assumed . . . as through your blood and my faithful service we rightfully deserve.

“As you know, Manuel is not so favorably disposed to me as is your uncle. Though I have been faithful to the Calderons and *Los Cinco* in all ways for many years, Manuel does not trust me. He still considers me to be an outsider. And he most certainly places no value on your family ties to cartel leadership, or on the sacrifices of your father and cousins on the day of devastation. The fact that, without the brothers Calderon, there would be no *Los Cinco* for him to lead, matters not a gnat to him.

“If your uncle extends his blessings to Manuel Conchito, our lives will never be the same. We will only be guaranteed safety as long as your uncle lives. Our home will be taken from us. It is the heirs of the Conchitas who will rule *Los Cinco* for generations to come.”

Her face flushed white and her hand shook in his.

“So you see, my love, now is the time that we must choose. Do we flee from this place, this lifestyle, this family? Or do we stay and claim what is rightfully ours? As I have already said, you are my life and all that I need. It is not my family that will be lost, for I have no kin. So you must choose. What course shall we follow?”

Elena stood, leaving Raphael’s hand to fall on his lap. She walked through the open French doors onto the balcony and leaned on the railing, surveying the lands her family controlled. She thought of her hand maidens, her cooks, her servants, and all the others who cared for her every desire. She recalled the respect that even the security forces showed to her because she was a Calderon. The thought of losing all of these necessities was unbearable.

Furthermore, she did not fear for her life as a respected part of one of the most powerful drug cartels in the world. She knew the extent of *Los Cinco*’s security forces – an army to rival that of many nations.

Damn her uncle! How could he disinherit her in this way!

She turned back to Raphael. Her face was drawn. Her greedy eyes betrayed what she had been thinking.

“Raphael. I do love you with all my heart. You are most important of all things to me. But the thought of leaving my family and friends, of departing my home and lands forever You mustn’t demand an answer of me this night. I need time to consider.”

“I understand, my love. It is indeed a decision of great consequence and should not be made lightly. But time does not favor us. Your uncle has set no specific date for his retirement.

“May I have your decision by tomorrow evening at sunset? I have considered a plan that will ensure our position of authority if we choose to stay. But time will pass, and with it, all hope of retaining your birthright.”

Elena walked slowly to Raphael, her eyes wet with the tears she fought to withhold. She embraced him, as a ship embraces safe harbor in a storm.

He was certain he had convinced her. A final decision could wait until tomorrow.

“Dear Elena. Speak nothing of this discussion to anyone, especially your uncle. For if he is made aware, all will be lost.”

Elena began to sob into Raphael’s chest.

“All . . . cannot . . . be . . . lost.” Her breaths were shallow and panicked. It was as he had hoped.

“We shall not speak of this, even to one another, until tomorrow evening.” He placed his strong hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her away from his chest. Again, their eyes met.

“Now, retire to your bedroom directly. No one should see that you have been crying. I will make your excuses with the guests. Until tomorrow, beautiful Elena.”

Walking with head hung low, Elena made her way through a side door and upstairs to her bedroom.

Santos poured some scotch from the library bar into an empty lowball glass. Then, moving through the open doors to the balcony, he leaned lightly on the black iron railing.

That went far better than I could have expected. Her greed is my ally. By tomorrow, it will overtake her love for her uncle, and with her blessings, I will act.

Santos swirled the scotch around the glass and sampled its aroma. In it he savored a fragrance he had not known for decades – the sweet smell of revenge. He raised a toast to the skies and downed the scotch in a single swallow.

* * *

As the sun set on January 1, 2010, Elena and Raphael returned to the library. As he had expected, she was ready to do whatever it might take to hold onto her life of privilege and luxury.

“What must then happen, dearest Elena, to preserve our status, and to prevent Conchita from stealing your birthright . . . what is absolutely unavoidable to occur . . . is that your traitor uncle must die.”

Her face did not show the shock he had expected.

She grasped both of his hands in hers.

“Then that is what must happen.”

She was an even more cold-hearted bitch than he had anticipated.

“I will make it so. When your uncle dies, we will all mourn him.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Several hours after Bull's call advising that Sergeant Fuentes would be arriving on Saturday, I decided I should probably fill Gunner in on a few of the particulars. I knew I couldn't tell him anything about Fuentes without violating Bull's trust. But I *could* tell him someone had heard about the killings and he might want to let the BCA know.

At 10:15 a.m., I called Gunner on my cell. He was at the LEC as usual.

"Chief Deputy Gunderson."

"Good morning, Gunner. Just calling to check in. How's tricks?"

"Ya know, everything was goin' pretty smooth . . . till just now."

Gunner does this thing where he pretends he doesn't want to hear from me. I'm used to it. I think it gives him a feeling of control.

"I've got some news about you know what. Can I stop down?"

"What kinda news?"

I had piqued Gunner's interest.

"Sorry . . . not on the phone. See you in a few?"

"Okay. C'mon down. Nothin' much goin' on here anyway."

I needed to say goodbye to Beth before I headed out. I called all around inside the house – all four levels. No answer.

When I finally located my lovely wife, she was on her hands and knees tending to some kind of purple flowers in the backyard garden.

“There you are.” I crossed the back porch and stepped out through the screen door.

Slam.

Beth rolled onto her seat to face me. She was wearing cloth gardening gloves and wielded a trowel.

“Oh, hey, Babe. Wanna come dig in the dirt? It’s good for the soul.”

“Aw, c’mon. You know I got plenty of soul food digging potatoes in Dad’s back-forty-of-a-garden in my youth. The mere thought of gardening strikes terror in my soul.”

Beth shrugged.

“It’s too bad. But I guess too much of a good thing can ruin it for you.”

“Not to worry. I’ll be happy to contribute shoulder rubs, back rubs, accu-pressure on those tight glutes . . . I’m a veritable fount of bodily blessings for the gardener who has overdone.”

I smiled.

“Promises. Promises.” Beth returned her attention to the flowers.

“Have fun in the garden, Bo Peep. I’m headed down to the LEC for a meeting with Gunner.”

“Bo Peep’s got the sheep, you do realize?”

“Yeah . . . but I wasn’t about to call you ‘quite contrary.’ So what were my choices?”

“Better to remain silent and be thought a fool . . .” Beth said to her garden.

“Ha. Ha. Ha. I should be back by lunch. Carry on.”

“Bye. Tell Gunner I say ‘Hi’.”

“Will do.”

I backed my gray Honda Pilot out of the garage into the alley, then made for the LEC.

The trip took four minutes from “will do” to “I have an appointment with the Chief Deputy.” But then, pretty much

everything in Red Wing is about that far away. Folks in big cities don't realize how much time they waste just getting from here to there and back. I certainly had the time for extracurricular activities. I credited short commutes for at least some of the bounty.

Gunner appeared in the doorway to the inner offices.

"Hey, pal! Long time no speak."

I grinned at him.

"Quit talkin' Comanche and get in here."

Gunner was downright cheerful.

After we reached Gunner's office, he spoke first.

"So what's your big news?"

"I didn't actually say it was 'big' news."

I took a butterscotch from the bowl on Gunner's desk and began to unwrap it.

"So you plan to make me beg? If so, I've got the time today and I can wait you out." Gunner leaned back in his chair and put his feet on his desk – well, actually, on a pile of papers that sat on his desk. "I'm conducting my own little work stoppage to protest being frozen out of the big case by the BCA."

"Good idea. I'd probably do that, too . . . except I don't want to stop doing what I'm doing. You just go right ahead without me though." I popped the butterscotch into my mouth.

We sat like that for a while. I scanned the bookshelves, the desktop, the coffee machine.

"Mind if I pour a cup?" I asked.

"Be my guest."

I did so and returned to my chair.

"So what I was about to say is that I heard about the massacre from someone outside law enforcement."

Gunner sat up.

"A fireman?"

"Nope."

"Press?"

“Nope.

“Okay. I give up. Who’d you hear it from?”

“That doesn’t really matter.” I was hedging. “The point is that, if I heard it on the street, then other people are going to be hearing it, too.

“Do you think this is something you might want to report to the BCA? So they don’t end up with egg on their faces?”

“Hmm.” Wheels were turning. “I s’pose if I was BCA, I’d be appreciative of some local law man who gave me that info. I mean it’s not much. But like you say . . . hmm.

“Guy or gal?”

“Guy,” I said.

“If you heard from one guy, it won’t be long before everybody, including the press, is onto it. Best for the BCA to get out front with an improvement on their current lies. It’s not much. But I’d say that’s worth telling. Thanks.”

At least Gunner had recognized the inter-bureau value of this tidbit. I wasn’t ready to share yet that my informant also claimed to know who had done the deed. That would have to wait for an approval from Bull.

“Thanks. Thanks again. That sorta makes my day.”

“Sounds like you’re easy today, Gunner. Can I sell you some swamp land in Florida?”

“Nope. Even your weirdo sense of humor isn’t gonna get to me right now. But if you’d leave my office, that’d be great. I’ve gotta phone call to make.”

“Absolutely.” I doffed my imaginary hat in Gunner’s direction. He waved awkwardly in response.

I left Gunner to his law enforcement politics. On my way back to the Pilot, I wondered what story I might read in the metro area newspapers tomorrow about the mass killings near Red Wing. Something better than a mere house fire with unnamed deaths, I should think.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“So what came out of your meeting with Gunner this morning?”

Beth and I were enjoying a chilled, whole wheat pasta and tuna salad at our front porch dining set. The midday sun had not yet made its way past the poplar trees in the side yard. With a light breeze from the west, the front screen porch proved a comfortable spot for our luncheon for two.

“Mainly, I just threw Gunner a bone to take to the BCA. They’re still locking him out of the investigation. I told him that word of the killing had leaked.”

“So Gunner’s going to bring that news to the BCA in hopes of getting into their good graces?” Beth sounded doubtful.

“Yeah. I know. It sounds like a long shot to me, too. But I couldn’t say anything about Sergeant Fuentes or his claiming to know who was responsible. I’ve gotta clear that through Bull.”

“Of course. It’s probably better for you to meet Fuentes in person first anyway. It may turn out that he’s some kind of PTSD case with a need for attention. Better that you assess his statements in person before Gunner gets blamed for bad intel.”

I forked a bit of the penne, tuna, and peas into my mouth while I considered whether to tempt Beth to join the team.

Washing the salad down with a swallow of ice water, I opted to dive in.

“You know . . . I could probably better prepare for my meeting with Fuentes if I could somehow know more about the forensic evidence.” I lazily stabbed at a single piece of penne while glancing under my brow across the table at Beth. She was gazing out through the front screen at two young boys riding their bicycles past on Jefferson Avenue.

“Like if there were some way . . . and I don’t know how . . . but some way to find out what the BCA has in its files on this case, that would help out a bunch.”

Beth turned back to her small bowl of salad and picked at it before responding.

“So are you asking me something here? Or what?” She put down her fork on the place mat and dabbed her mouth with a cloth napkin.

Head-on it is.

“I’m trying to decide whether I should ask you something and you’re not giving me much in the way of clues as to whether you want me to or not.”

“Part of my allure, even after all these years.”

Beth smiled.

I laughed.

“Yes. I suppose it is . . . not that your allure has any deficit of components even without psychological impenetrability. But I digress.”

I took another sip of water from the perspiring glass, dripping condensate onto my shirt.

“Then there’s me, on the other hand.” I gestured to the spotted front of my shirt. “I can use all the allure I can muster.”

Beth laughed.

“Okay. I want to help out if I can. Do you want me to hack into the BCA system and see what I can find?”

“You could do that?” I asked, feigning shock.

“Minnesota law enforcement is not known for its world class cyber-security. I might be able to plant a Trojan Horse on someone’s computer. I should be able to at least give it a try with minimal risk of detection.”

“Okay. Let’s do what you said.” Computing is not really my forte.

“Sounds like fun. Help me clean up these dishes and we’ll get down to business.”

“Right, my computer goddess.”

* * *

A few minutes later, we were at Beth’s computer. Actually, she was at the computer and I was looking expectantly over her shoulder.

“Here’s the BCA website,” Beth said, after a few keystrokes. “Whose computer should I hack?”

“How do I know?” Disbelief. “Don’t you hackers know those things, like, innately or something?”

Beth turned away from the keyboard to face me.

“I need to know who at the BCA would have access to the information you are looking for. Ideally, it would be someone working the case . . . someone who has full access to all the files and records. I’ll only be able to see the things he or she has access to.” Her voice was patient with my computer ignorance.

“Any suggestions?” Beth asked.

“Ah. I see. Let me think.”

I considered the hierarchical command structure of the BCA, the highest ranking agent I had noticed at the scene, and the level of bureaucracy at which decisions would likely be made.

“Hold on a sec. I’ve gotta make a call.”

A few moments later, Gunner answered his phone.

“Hey, Gunner. A quick question for you. Who do you suppose is in charge of the hands-on investigative work on this . . . this matter, at the BCA?”

“Probably Special Agent Lewis. But why do you want to know?”

“Doesn’t matter. Hey. Did you have any luck piercing the BCA’s bureaucratic veil with that tidbit I left for you earlier?”

“Hard to say. I ran the flag up through channels. God knows if anybody’ll salute.”

“Okay. Thanks, Gunner.”

I could hear Gunner saying something into his phone as I hung up on him. No point getting the “play it by the book” guy in trouble if I were to get caught cutting corners.

“Special Agent Lewis,” I told Beth.

“There are two . . . but it looks like one works in white collar crime. We’ll go with Lewis number two.”

“Great. What will we be able to see?”

I was anxious and expected instant results.

“Sorry, Babe. It’s going to take a bit. First I’ve got to plant the virus. Then it has to start gathering information for me. I probably won’t know for a few hours whether we’re getting anything useful.

Drat. I really hate computers.

“Okay. I get it. I’ll go fidget somewhere else. Maybe I can even find some way to make myself useful. Who knows? It could happen.”

Beth swished me away with her hand as computer gobbledygook flew by on the monitor.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Heir apparent to the *Los Cinco* cartel leadership, Raphael Santos was alone in the library of the Calderon family's mountainside villa in Tamaulipas Province, Mexico. Seated in a formal, upholstered chair, a robust Cuban cigar in one hand, and a Glenlivet, neat, in the other, he awaited the arrival of Enrique Calderon, sole remaining founder of the *Los Cinco* drug cartel.

The heavy wooden door to the library opened. Santos snuffed out the cigar and stood to greet his uncle.

"Please sit, Raphael," the elder said, as he moved through the cigar smoke toward Santos.

"Greetings, *Jefe*. I am honored to be in your presence once more."

The old man hugged Santos, patting his back with both hands. Then both sat.

"Heh. You flatter an old man to curry his favor. And you are wise to do so. Do you enjoy the *Cubanos*? I have a new farmer. It is said that his soil is the most fertile in all of Cuba."

"*Si, Jefe*," Santos said. "Your farmer's reputation is well-earned."

"That is good to hear, . You know how wasted money disturbs the old man."

"*Si, Jefe*. But I tell you truly," he held the stub of his cigar toward Calderon, "this was one fine *Cubano*. The best I have tasted."

“We must have another then. Take a box when you leave, . I would consider it a favor.”

“*Gracias, Jefe.* You are too kind to your servant.”

“Heh. Heh. If you don’t pull your head out of my ass I might have to shoot you, eh?”

“*Si, Jefe.*” Santos smiled. “I can think of no other by whom I would rather be shot.”

Santos selected two cigars from the humididor on the coffee table, clipped their ends, and handed one to Calderon. He waited as the old man produced a stick match and lighted the smoke. Santos flamed his cigar with a butane torch lighter.

“A drink, *Jefe.*”

“*Si.* But none of that Yankee swill.”

Santos knew what Calderon wanted. He fixed the drinks at the bar and returned with Calderon’s tequila and a fresh scotch for himself.

“*Muchas gracias,* . I do not partake of the agave as often as I should. I have the stomach of an old man.”

“Ah. But you have the heart of a lion and a will of steel, *Jefe.* I will trade my stomach for one-tenth of your wisdom.”

“Heh.” Calderon took a puff on the large black cigar, exhaling a plume through pursed lips. He placed his tequila on the table for later.

“So, tell me, Raphael . . . what progress have we made on our new endeavor to the north.”

“All goes as planned, *Jefe.* We have acquired the facilities and materials. Production of the methamphetamine should begin within weeks.”

“And distribution? Is all in place?”

“*Si, Jefe.* Gringo gangs in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee hunger for our product. And transport will pose no issue. As you know, with our production facility in the States, we

have no borders to cross or inspections to evade. Product will move freely . . . once all is ready.”

“*Muy bien*, Raphael. I am fortunate to have your knowledge of the Yankees to assist me in this . . . expansion.”

“You know that I live to serve, *Jefe*.”

“And I am the Holy Virgin. Heh. Heh.” Reclining in his chair, he took another pull on his cigar. After he had exhaled, he reached for the shot of tequila and downed it in a single swallow.

“I must get a new batch of tequila, . This one has gone bitter.”

“This is why the young horses drink the Gringo swill, *Jefe*. It tastes of money, not of old meat gone bad.”

Calderon looked at Raphael. What he recognized in Santos’ face was betrayal.

Calderon’s eyes rolled back into his head and his body convulsed violently. In a matter of seconds it was over. Calderon lay slumped in his chair. Santos finished his cigar and scotch before summoning help.

CHAPTER TWENTY

While Beth continued her illicit hacking activities, I killed time by mowing the lawn, waxing the cars, cleaning the bathrooms, washing down the porches, and adding a few hooks and shelves to the garage walls. I'd covered almost every legitimate husbandly duty I could think of. Just as I was about to begin setting footings for a garage addition, Beth's voice called from the back porch.

I stuck my head out of the garage door.

"What's up?"

Beth's face pressed against the screen of the porch door.

"I believe I may have something useful," she said, with all the clarity that a pair of screen-smooshed lips could achieve.

I launched my sweaty, dusty, smelly body out of the garage and flung open the porch door.

Beth retreated a step.

"What have you been doing while I was at work anyway?" Beth asked, assuming a defensive posture.

"Pretty much rolling around in the neighbor's sand box. Why? Is there something unsavory about me?"

"I'd say you're pretty much out of savor. Now go get cleaned up so I can show you what I found."

With a bow and a doff of my imaginary cap, I was off to the shower. I knew Beth thought the cap thing was stupid. But hey . . . as far as vices go, a quirky doff isn't so bad.

* * *

When I descended from my scouring on the second floor, Beth was waiting for me on the red couch. She held her laptop computer on her . . . well . . . laptop. She patted the leather beside her. I sauntered over and made an “is this seat available” gesture. When Beth gave me a fake smile, I knew the spot was open. So I sat down, leaning over to kiss her neck.

This time her smile was real.

“What has my computer goddess acquired from cyber-space today?”

“As it turns out, Special Agent Lewis was a very helpful selection concerning the ‘Mexican Massacre,’ as the BCA has dubbed this case. He has been on his computer most of the afternoon, accessing all sorts of stuff. Medical Examiner’s Reports. Crime Scene analysis. Missing Persons databases. I didn’t stop to read much. But I’m pretty sure you’ll find something informative in all this data.”

Beth handed me a jump drive.

“Doesn’t look like much.”

“Shut up and go find your own computer. I know you can at least open these files. Use the clicky thing.”

She smiled.

“Thanks. You’re the best! I’ll pole your barge any time.” I stood up.

“Is that a Cleopatra reference? Because otherwise I don’t think I appreciate the ‘barge’ thing.”

“Of course, my queen. Watch out for the asps and you’ll be just fine.”

I grabbed my laptop from behind the sofa and carried it and the jump drive out to the front porch. The sun was just falling behind the elms along Jefferson Avenue as I settled myself on the wicker settee.

In a matter of minutes, I had fired up the computer – which Beth keeps in top operating condition. Her motives aren't entirely altruistic. I whine and get impatient when technology fails me . . . which is often enough, even with Beth's helpful maintenance.

I inserted the jump drive into a slot that fit its shape and started clicking.

There was lots of good stuff here.

Based on footprints, positioning of the bodies, and other clues, the Crime Scene team had concluded that the fire was set after the men had been murdered. I wasn't sure that really mattered.

The Fire Marshall had identified traces of accelerant in multiple locations throughout the burned-out house. From this he had leapt to the incredibly obvious conclusion that the fire had been intentionally set. The arsonist had employed a "hydro-carbon based" accelerant. I assumed that was forensic terminology for gasoline, or maybe diesel fuel. There was no estimate of the quantity of accelerant that would have been required to obtain the "observed result."

Crime Scene investigators had provided the Fire Marshall with a charred five-gallon gasoline container that "may have been" the source of the accelerant.

Enough about the fire. What did the ME have to say about the bodies?

The "apparent cause of death" in all twenty-three cases was a "GSW to forehead. Final determination pending." I thought about that one, then read further. The ME had concluded from "stippling" and "gun-shot residue" that the fatal wounds were fired at point-blank, or near point-blank range.

Pausing again to consider what I had read thus far, I gazed into the space beyond the porch screen. The waning sunlight squeezed through the elm leaves, an occasional shaft of brightness stabbing me in the eye. I repositioned myself on the settee. When I looked

up, I noticed that, if I let the screening slip in and out of focus, the sunlight would float rainbows across the black aluminum.

Hmm.

Twenty-three full grown men . . . all shot in the head at point-blank range. Now how would someone manage that?

If the perpetrator was a single person, how could he get the last twenty-two victims to stand, or lie, still to await their turns? That just wasn't possible.

Were there multiple killers? Maybe. But there'd have to be at least twenty-three of them to commit the simultaneous execution. Wouldn't there? And even if there were fewer, how would a whole gang of killers avoid detection by the Crime Scene folks?

I went back to the Crime Scene findings. They had to have done ballistic analysis on the bullets.

There it was. The ballistic markings on all intact bullets indicated a single murder weapon. So there was no gang after all. A single assailant. That would be fairly typical for most murders. Murderers don't tend to travel in packs – except for gang bangers. But the “single gun” evidence tended to rule out a gang attack.

How, then, had the killer managed to shoot twenty-three, apparently able-bodied men, at point-blank range, in the centers of their foreheads?

The answer was suddenly clear. The men were already dead – or at least drugged – at the time they were shot. Where were the bullets found?

“In each case,” the forensic report read, “the perpetrator shot the victim in the forehead with a nine millimeter round, which penetrated the cranium, damaged the victim's brain tissue, and exited the cranium at the rear. A single slug, or fragments of a single slug, were found in the ground beneath the head of each victim.”

So the killer had somehow disabled or killed the victims before he'd laid them out on the lawn. This was something I needed to

discuss with Gunner, if he was willing. I made plans to stop in on him in the morning.